

TOWARD AN AESTHETIC OF GAY CULTURE

A DISSERTATION

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

OF CORNELL UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

STEPHEN ANDREW LOW

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ABSTRACT
TOWARD AN AESTHETIC OF GAY CULTURE
Stephen Andrew Low, Ph.D.
Cornell University 2016

Toward an Aesthetic of Gay Culture analyzes various gay cultural phenomena to argue that the aesthetic of theatricality distinguishes contemporary gay cultural practice in the West. By identifying theatricality, a concept studied in both performance studies and cultural studies, as the central aesthetic feature of gay cultural practice, my dissertation disrupts the assumed correlation between gay identity and gay culture. Extending the analysis provided by David Halperin's *How To Be Gay*, my project argues that the aesthetic structure of theatricality is inherent in the process of recoding heteronormative cultural phenomena to express queer meanings. In this process of recoding, the heteronormative meaning of phenomena is maintained while new meaning are simultaneously produced and communicated. My research builds on the performance theory of Richard Schechner, and defines theatricality as exhibiting a double negation. For example: The interpellation "Girl" commonly used in gay social worlds does *not* describe its intended audience as belonging to the female sex or the gender "woman," but because this act of interpellation maintains the socially authorized meaning of the word "Girl," the subject being hailed is *not-not* a "Girl" in so far as feminization has haunted gayness over the course of the twentieth century. By providing an analysis of the dramatic literature and persona of gay icon Oscar Wilde, the style of femininity embodied by transgender artist and gay community darling Nina Arsenault, the erotic masculinity in the artwork of Tom of Finland, and the paradoxical privacy of cruising and public sex, *Toward an Aesthetic of Gay Culture* surveys an array of artistic and social practices and identifies theatricality as the common aesthetic feature of gay cultural phenomena.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Upon the submission of this document, Stephen Low will receive a PhD in Theater Studies from Cornell University, having previously received a Master's in Theater Studies from Cornell University, a Master's from the University of Texas at Austin in the Performance as Public Practice Program, and his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Toronto majoring in English Drama and Sexual Diversity Studies. He also holds a Diploma in Musical Theatre from the Randolph Academy. His scholarly interests include queer theory, sex and sexuality, gender, race, musical theater, dance, and gay culture. Stephen's writing will have peer reviewed essays published in *Theater Research In Canada* and *Modern Drama* in 2016 and 2017 respectively. Alongside his scholarship, Stephen is a theater director and actor.

This dissertation is dedicated to Mikhail Sorine, with my love and appreciation.
And to Dr. J Paul Halferty, the greatest friend and mentor anyone could ask for.

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I sincerely thank the members of my special committee, Ellis Hanson, Jason Frank, and in particular, the chair of the committee and my advisor, Nick Salvato. With their astute comments and criticism, these scholars guided me in crafting this dissertation. Their invaluable engagement with the ideas presented here will continue to shape me and my scholarship for years to come. I would also like to express my gratitude for the guidance and support offered by J. Ellen Gainor, Sara Warner, Kym Bird, and Lucinda Ramberg. These women, along with the members of my special committee, have been instrumental in my development as a professional scholar and academic over the past five years. The graduate students in the Department of Performing and Media Arts during my time at Cornell, especially Erin Stoneking, Jayme Kilburn, and Ozum Hatipoglu, provided the collegial support and friendship necessary to produce this document, and for that I want to express the most heartfelt gratitude. My parents, Margot and Robert Low, as always, deserve thanks for their continuing support. I want to express thanks to J. Paul Halferty who has been my friend and mentor since undergrad. Without his critical eye, unyielding support, patience, sense of humor, and friendship, none of this would have happened. And lastly, I want to thank my partner, Mikhail Sorine, whose love and support has sustained me since I began graduate studies over seven years ago.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction: Hey Girl!	1
Chapter One: Theatrical Iconography	47
Chapter Two: Theatrical Femininity	93
Chapter Three: Theatrical Masculinity	133
Chapter Four: Theatrical Space	168
Conclusion: “We Are Family”	207

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction: Hey Girl!	1
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Chapter Two: Theatrical Femininity	93
Chapter Three: Theatrical Masculinity	133
Chapter Four: Theatrical Space	168
Conclusion: “We Are Family”	207

INTRODUCTION: HEY, GIRL!

“Hey, girl!”

This salutation is a kind of hailing, a “Hail Mary” we could say, which identifies the speaker as familiar with gay cultural modes of address.¹ Whether as a greeting (“Hey, girl!”), or an exclamation of astonishment or judgment (“Girl...”), the use of the word “girl” and other markers of female identity such as “Mary,” “Queen,” “She,” and “Her” have been commonplace in gay culture over the past hundred years. Such language is not meant to be a comment on its addressee’s gender expression, but rather, it is a mode of welcoming a person into a gay cultural scene.² If the greeting “Hey, girl!” is meaningless to you, then you are likely not familiar with gay culture. If you immediately register the cultural milieu in which the phrase “Hey, girl!” is commonplace, then you are likely well-acquainted with the practices of gay culture. In any case, it is only appropriate, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, to begin an examination of gay culture with the salutation: Hey, girl! Now that you’ve been invited into the world of gay culture, we can continue.

As evidenced by the popularity of mainstream television shows that feature gay characters such as *Will and Grace* and *Modern Family*, much has changed in LGBT communities over the past hundred years.³ Indicative of a larger media trend that

¹ As will be elucidated later in this introduction and developed over the course of this dissertation, recoding the phrase “Hail Mary” to both reference its Catholic origins but also to communicate an alternate, queer meaning is a theatrical gesture that is indicative of gay culture.

² In Neil Bartlett’s study of Oscar Wilde, he notes how both at the *fin de siècle* and in the 1970’s and 1980’s, gay men often referred to each other as “girl,” or “her.” (85).

³ In “Is There A History of Sexuality?” David Halperin, following from the work of Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction Volume I*, argues that sexuality, as it is understood to be a term that describes an identity, is an social invention constructed in the mid to late nineteenth century. Gay culture, as a distinct subcultural milieu, emerged alongside the rise the concept of sexuality that emerges in the mid to late nineteenth century. That being said, even as it emerged as a distinct subcultural milieu, especially in

capitalizes on depictions of gay men, the retailer Nordstrom has exploited representations of gay men in their advertising for the most heteronormative of holidays, Christmas: As a recent article from *GayTimes* notes, “Well here’s another one to add to the list. Retailer Nordstrom have released a holiday homecoming advert featuring a same-sex smooch, and [...] they are a genuine couple” (<https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/culture/20178/same-sex-couple-christmas-advert/>). The suggestion that this couple is “genuine” tacitly declares that they are monogamous, loving, and, overall, “normal.” Recent access to the right to marry or openly serve in the military also evidence a general trend in which gay men live “normal” lives that are much closer in practice to heterosexuals than the gay men of the past. The increased visibility of “normal” gay men in the media and the recent passing of laws and policy that allow, and some argue encourage, gay men to live (hetero)normative lives is evidence of what Lisa Duggan calls “homonormativity,” a term that describes the practice of identifying as a homosexual while simultaneously living life in a way that is almost identical to heterosexuals (2003).⁴ Yet despite the increase in gay men who live homonormative lives, gay culture still thrives in the Western World: *RuPaul’s Drag Race* maintains a devoted fanclub after eight seasons, with the former contestants selling out performances in gay clubs across North America; leather and fetish organizations,

contrast to mainstream heteronormative culture, gay culture was never solely the domain of men who identified as gay. The first chapter, on Oscar Wilde, examines this more closely,

⁴ In *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Lisa Duggan critiques a new wave of gay activism in terms of representing “the new homonormativity” (50). She describes this homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized, gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (50). The conception of gay culture outlined in this study doesn’t disavow homonormativity wholesale. In fact, the conception of gay culture here argues that gay culture is, and always has been, invested in upholding and sustaining socially authorized – in other words, heteronormative – meanings, assumptions, and institutions. The conception of gay culture outlined here stops there and argues that gay culture extends beyond the heteronormative, even though it upholds and sustains it, to produce alternative non-normative meanings, assumptions, and institutions. Furthermore the conception of gay culture offered here adamantly disavows privatization and the reduction of culture to the domestic sphere.

businesses, and events continue to thrive and proliferate, with gay websites listing dozens of events for the first three months of 2016 alone (<http://seasonsofpride.com/leather-bear-calendar/>); and despite the prophesized death of public sex with the advent of the internet, such websites as squirt.org list popular sites of public cruising alongside online platforms to arrange anonymous hook-ups in your own home. It seems that the increased presence of gay men on the public schools PTA has not taken the wind out of the sails of sexier, deviant gay cultural practices.

The cleavage between a demographic of gay men living normative lives and a gay cultural milieu that is outside of the domain of such normativity indicates that gay cultural practices are not and can not be an extension of the lived practices of men who have sex with men. Because of the migration of some gay men from the communities and lifestyles in which cultural practices identified as “gay” find their home, most obviously evidenced in the migration of gay men from historically gay neighborhoods where drag bars, leather bars, and bathhouses are located, gay culture, now more than ever, includes people who aren’t men who have sex with men. The foundations of gay culture have undoubtedly shifted. Since gay culture has been welcomed into the mainstream, people of any and all genders and sexual orientations may be familiar with gay cultural practices, such as addressing a person as “girl,” no matter her or his gender and sexual identity.⁵ In our contemporary moment, some out and “proud” gay men might very well find being hailed with “Hey, girl!” as offensive, while heterosexuals who love *RuPaul’s Drag Race*

⁵ Amy Villarejo’s *Lesbian Rule* begins from a similar point of departure: Villarejo “takes *lesbian* as a modifier, not as a noun but as an adjective” and consequently her study concerns phenomena that is described as lesbian but does not necessarily represent women who express same-sex desire, Villarejo offers an examination of how and when a term assumed to signify both a sexual orientation and gender signifies a particular constellation of cultural production.

might be honored with such a salutation. In other words, anyone can be interpellated into gay cultural practice in our contemporary moment.⁶

In fact, people who are neither gay nor male have always participated in gay culture since it emerged in the early twentieth century. Nick Salvato and Maria F. Fackler chart the existence of the fag hag, a term that describes women who have intimate and affectionate bonds with gay men and are consequently frequent patrons of gay bars, nightclubs, drag shows and other gay cultural events. In their essay, they examine the figure of the fag hag as necessarily marginal to the figure of the gay male. Yet, if gay culture is conceived of as constituted by factors other than gay male identity, the fag hag can be rescued from obscurity and be treated as a fundamental figure in gay cultural spheres. Salvato and Fackler allude to the potential for gay culture to be freed from being defined as the domain of gay men when they quote comedian Margaret Cho, a gay cultural icon: Cho declares, “I am a fag hag. Fag hags are the backbone of the gay community. Without us, you’re nothing” (63). Judith Butler also expands the purview of gay cultural practice beyond that of just gay men in her examination of the documentary about drag ball culture in New York City in the late eighties, *Paris Is Burning*.

Countering arguments that claim all drag is misogynistic, Butler writes, “The problem with the analysis of drag as only misogyny is, of course, that it figures male-to-female

⁶ I employ the word “Interpellate” which first appears in the work of Marxist political theorist Louis Althusser who argues “*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*” (117). Althusser describes a scenario in which a person turns when he (and Althusser specifically uses the male pronoun) hears a police officer yell “Hey, you there!” (118). The scenario that I performatively describe above enacts the same effects as those depicted in Althusser’s scenario: an individual, whether they are meant to be the audience of the salutation, are subjected as subjects in responding to a hailing. The difference, of course, between the scenario I performatively describe and Althusser’s scenario is that my scenario is a scene of cultural interpellation and his is of ideological interpellation. As a scene of cultural interpellation, there are two responses possible: one in which the subject is aware of the cultural meanings by which they were hailed, and the other in which the subject is ignorant of the particular cultural meaning that attended that instance of hailing. In the instance of ideological interpellation, as Althusser argues, that, for the individual, there is no outside of ideology (118-119)

transexuality, cross-dressing, and drag as male homosexual activities – *which they are not always* (86 italics added). Butler mentions both Julie Andrews' performance in *Victor Victoria* and Dustin Hoffman's performance in *Tootsie* as examples of drag performance, which are performances of gay cultural phenomena that are neither produced nor solely consumed by gay men in gay male spaces (85).

If not gay men, then who, or what, is the basis for gay culture? In his monograph *How To Be Gay*, David Halperin has shown that the process of decoding normative cultural artifacts and then recoding them with queer meaning is unique and distinctive of gay culture. Halperin writes, "male homosexuality involves a characteristic way of receiving, reinterpreting, and reusing mainstream culture, a decoding, and recoding of the heterosexual or heteronormative meanings already encoded in that culture, so that they come to function as vehicles of gay or queer meaning" (12). Specifically, Halperin charts how such cultural phenomena as *Mommie Dearest* and *The Golden Girls* are cherished as gay cultural phenomena only because they are recoded to mean something other than what their heteronormative characters and plot lines would indicate.

In *Who Was That Man?*, gay writer and theater artist Neil Bartlett also identifies gay men's investment in recoding conventional phenomena to carry alternate, "queer" meaning. He divides his study of Oscar Wilde and his lasting influence on gay culture into chapters with titles such as "History," "Flowers," "Words," and "Evidence." For Bartlett, the history, flowers, words, and evidence that he examines in these chapters require a particular style of "reading" that involves interpreting a code in order to better understand Wilde's influence on gay culture. Bartlett writes that in gay culture, we "speak more or less in code" to "create areas of meaning that are open only to the

initiate” (80). When Bartlett writes that speaking in this code is done when we “need to talk amongst ourselves,” the language “we” speak (though the “we” that Bartlett refers to is, as I am arguing, no longer based on an identity determined by sexual orientation), must and does “constantly acknowledge and play with the fact that there is and cannot be a language that is ours alone” (83). This is to say that Bartlett’s study also evidences how gay culture has involved the activity of recoding phenomena to include meanings that are hidden from the heteronormative mainstream. For example, “Hey, girl!” to a straight person is understood as a means of hailing of person through reference to a normative gender category, while for gay culture, it is an act that interpellates a person, no matter their gender, within the alternate sphere of a non-heteronormative culture.

The process of recoding heteronormative phenomena to function as vehicles of new and “queer” meaning exhibits an aesthetic of theatricality. In an era when we are able to recognize that the participation of gay men can no longer be assumed as the basis for gay culture, an aesthetic of theatricality emerges as the organizing principle of gay culture. The fact that contemporary gay men have been afforded the opportunity to lead heteronormative lives has brought to light the fact that gay men were never the sole arbiters, producers, and consumers of gay culture, and that certain practice have always coalesced under the label of “gay” because they exhibit an aesthetic of theatricality. The following study examines a collection of diverse phenomena that are celebrated in gay culture – Oscar Wilde, camp, drag, particular styles of masculinity and femininity, and public sex and cruising – to illustrate that the common aesthetic feature to each of them is theatricality. By identifying theatricality as the definitive feature of gay cultural phenomena, this study disqualifies identity as *the* factor that distinguishes gay cultural

phenomena. In other words, to quote Madonna, a popular and enduring gay icon, “It doesn’t matter if you’re black or white, if you’re or a boy or a girl;” identity does not determine whether or not whether an individual can produce or participate in gay culture.⁷

Theatricality

The aesthetic of theatricality that is the distinguishing feature common amongst an array of activity that is recognized and understood as gay culture is informed by Western theater and conventional theater practice. Theatricality, as a feature of gay cultural phenomena specifically but also as a characteristic of an array of phenomena outside of gay culture, is not merely a feature of a certain set of practices that include a superficial application of theater-oriented activities such as playing a character, dressing in costumes, and being “over the top.” The specific aesthetic structure of theatricality appealed to here builds upon, and specifies, what performance studies scholar Richard Schechner describes as an aesthetic of double negation, or the “not-not” character of performance. Schechner writes,

During workshops-rehearsals performers play with words, things, and actions, some of which are ‘me’ and some ‘not me. By the end of the process the ‘dance goes into the body’. So Olivier is not Hamlet, but he is also not not Hamlet. The reverse is also true: in this production of the play

⁷ Including Madonna’s famous lyrics here should not be read as absolving her from appropriating queer black culture, as she does in *Vogue*, for her own gain. I do believe that, as an icon of contemporary gay culture, Madonna’s inclusive message does speak to gay culture as determined by a shared aesthetic characteristic.

Hamlet is not Olivier, but he is also not not Olivier. Within this field of frame of double negativity choice and virtuality remain active. (110)

Schechner's structure of the "not-not," or double negation, does not apply to all performance, but distinguishes between performances that exhibit the concept of theatricality from instances of performance that do not. Theatricality does not merely exist as a kind of double negation, but is a kind of double negation that specifically maintains a quality of excess: The actor who plays Hamlet in *Hamlet* defies the standard logic of negation in that he *doubles* the negation, and is *both* not and not-not Hamlet, a state of being doubled, which is excessive in contrast to the assumed reduction or absence that attends negation. Through this excessive double negation, the aesthetic structure I propose relies on the presence of the live actor in conventional theater practice, while simultaneously maintaining a negation: Hamlet, the character, is not present – Hamlet is always and already a fiction - while the actor, the person who is playing the character of Hamlet, is present. Even though the character of Hamlet is a negation insofar as he does not exist, he is present(ed) through performance by the actor playing Hamlet. The aesthetic of theatricality is excessive in that it is negation, or in other words an absence, that also is simultaneously a presence.

Phenomena that exhibit the aesthetic of theatricality defies the logic of negation by being presented in an over-the-top, larger-than-life, grandiose way. In contrast to the logic of negation, which requires reduction to the point of annihilation, theatrical phenomena capture its audience's attention by being excessive in comparison to the normative objects, acts, or utterances that it recodes. Theatrical phenomena do not counter normative objects, acts, or utterances by evacuating them of substance, but rather,

theatrical phenomena are excessive in structural ways; multiple meanings are communicate in theatrical phenomena. When theatrical phenomena recode normative objects, acts, or utterances, they tend to be larger, ornamental, and grandiose versions of those objects, acts, and utterances.

Theatricality does not merely exist as a kind of double negation in opposition to representation as presence or merely by bridging the particular and the categorical in the body of a single actor. The structure of double negation I've outlined so far is already excessive: theatricality exhibits not just singular negation, but double negation. If theatricality requires negation, where negation connotes *without existence*, then the act of doubling that, in the form of the not-not, is excessive: there is nothing more negative than being without existence. Through the excessive double negation, the aesthetic structure I propose relies on the presence of the live actor in conventional theater practice, while simultaneously maintaining a negation. Because Hamlet is fictional, he does not exist, and is once negated. Hamlet then is doubly negated when an actor takes on the role because the actor must not-*not* be Hamlet when playing the role in Shakespeare's play. In other words, when playing the role of Hamlet, the actor is not-not being someone who already doesn't exist. The same holds in the interpellative utterance "Hey, girl!": the addressee is not a girl, at least not a "real" girl as understood by normative society, but the addressee is present as a subject to and in gay culture.

The aesthetic of theatricality requires a spectator to differentiate between reality and fiction, between character and actor, and consequently implies a public that necessarily recodes a particular object, act, or utterance as theatrical. For something to be described as theatrical, a spectator must be able to decode the event or object as framed

outside of quotidian and “real” experience. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewaite in their introduction to an anthology titled *Theatricality* write, “Theatricality is thus located both on the stage and in the perceiver” and “Theatricality is [...] a way of describing what performers and what spectators do together in the making of “the theatrical event” (230). This point is also made by scholar Josette Féral when she writes, “At the heart of it there is always the duality of the gaze, a perception or a word that recognizes this gap between reality and fiction where theater takes place” (11). The recognition that Féral speaks of implies the necessity of a spectator, or public. She ends her “Foreword” to a special issue of *SubStance* devoted to theatricality by claiming that theatricality “is the result of a perceptual dynamics linking the onlooker with someone or something that is looked at. This relationship can be initiated either by the actor who declares his intention to act, or by the spectator who, of his own initiative, transforms the other into a spectacular object” (105). Following from Féral and Davis and Postlewaite’s observations, theatricality is embedded in one object or act merging two distinct concepts – like the actor and the character being merged in “Hamlet” for example. In a theatrical object or act, an audience reads the code of that object or act, and recodes it as belonging to the world of theater.

Theatricality is a feature of the greeting “Hey, girl!” insofar as the person being hailed may not be a girl, but is, through the interpellative act of hailing a person with this phrase, not-not a “girl” in the sense that “girl” in this utterance functions as a vehicle of particular, non-normative meaning within gay culture. The act of hailing a person with the phrase “Hey, girl!” relies on mis-identifying the subject as a girl, which requires that the standard meaning of “girl” is understood. Simultaneously, “Hey, girl!” provides an

alternate meaning to the word *girl* that requires, but contrasts, the standard understanding of the word *girl*. Similar to theatre practice which recodes signifiers, the phrase “Hey, girl!” is recoded to act as an interpellated utterance in gay cultural practice.

The necessity of a spectator in the dynamic that allows for a particular performance or phenomenon to be recognized as theatrical is outlined by Michael Fried in his book on eighteenth century painting titled *Absorption and Theatricality*. In *Absorption and Theatricality*, Fried outlines how Diderot, a philosopher and art critic of the eighteenth century, praised what he calls the characteristic of absorption in painting over its opposing character, theatricality. Fried examines Diderot’s critical writing to conclude that Diderot “used the term *le theatral*, the theatrical, implying consciousness of being beheld, as synonymous with falseness” (100). Fried quotes Diderot: “It is the thing, but the thing itself, without the lease alteration. Art is no longer there” (100). Fried suggests that, for Diderot, the act of being aware of being seen fundamentally alters that which is being looked at. Following from this, according to Fried, Diderot celebrated painting that “rested upon the supreme fiction that the beholder did not exist, that he was not really there, standing before the canvas; and that the dramatic representation of action and passion, and the causal and instantaneous mode of unity that came with it, provided the best available medium for establishing that fiction in the painting itself” (103). Fried contrasts the principle of theatricality in painting with that of absorption: “In Diderot’s writings on painting and drama the object-beholder relationship as such, the very condition of spectatordom, stands indicted as theatrical, a medium of dislocation and estrangement rather than of absorption, sympathy, self-transcendence” (104). That is to say that, according to Fried, paintings that did not recognize an audience, such as those

that depicted individuals either performing solitary activities or engaged in scenarios in which the figures' attention is intensely directed to other figures in the painting, exemplified the principle of absorption, and was celebrated by Diderot. It is clear here that Diderot's elucidation of theatricality is, rightfully, borne from the practice of theater during his time, in which direct address to the audience was commonplace. In fact, Fried quotes Diderot who, centuries before his time, advocates for a central feature of realist and naturalist drama – the fourth wall: Diderot writes, "Whether you compose or act, think no more of the beholder than if he did not exist. Imagine, at the edge of the stage, a high wall that separates you from the orchestra. Act as if the curtain never rose" (95). In direct contrast to the characteristic of absorption, theatricality, for Diderot and Fried, is dependent on a relationship between the beholder and the beheld that is explicit and direct. This feature of theatricality theorized by Fried, an art historian, is apparent in gay cultural phenomena precisely because the beholder of a particular phenomenon in gay cultural practice actively and consciously alters, or in other words recodes, the phenomenon being beheld to function as a vehicle of new, non-normative meaning to a public. Hence, in gay cultural practice, we would revise Diderot's phrase "It is the thing, but the thing itself" to read "It is not the thing, *and* not-not just the thing itself."

Robert Pippin's description of Fried's conception of theatricality points to how theatricality evades evaluation within a rigid true/false system and consequently resists being deemed less worthy than the characteristic of absorption. In "Authenticity in Painting: Remarks on Michael Fried's Art History," Pippin summarizes Fried's antitheatrical prejudice as follows: "Theatricality of a certain sort, after all, is another way of saying that a work is a dramatic failure and is so because it merely typifies a type,

instantiates a set of expectations, makes things too easy for the appreciator, or simply manifests conventions that by mere repetition have gone stale” (587). According to Pippin, Fried assumes a congruity between the pose, gesture, or expression of a figure and whatever that pose, gesture, or expression is socially accepted to signify. In other words, the painting of a figure in a heroic pose is meant to express the heroism of that figure. Thus, as Pippin notes, Fried understands theatricality in painting as merely “instantiating a set of expectation” which “makes things too easy for the appreciator.” The appreciator here, in Pippin’s formulation of Fried’s concept of theatricality, is normative, which is to say that he (and I use this pronoun specifically) is the generic audience who knows the vocabulary of socially accepted meaning of codified poses, gestures, and expression. But, as we are well aware, not all “appreciators” are the same, and nor do they share the same vocabulary. In fact, some “appreciators” speak two languages. The theatrical quality of a painting may not be reductive and repetitive, but rather, may offer a new, alternate meaning, that is not false at all, but actually true, and authentic. In other words, the space between the pose, gesture, or expression and its socially accepted meaning may not merely “manifest conventions that by mere repetition have gone stale” and are somehow “false,” but in fact, offer a “true,” authentic expression of something that exists outside of the vocabulary of our normative “appreciator.”

By establishing that a spectator is necessary to determine whether an event, object, or act is theatrical or not, the difference between theatricality and performativity becomes clear because the effects of performative acts are accepted to have consequences in reality, while the effects of theatrical acts do not follow from their enactment.⁸ Féral

⁸ Here again, Richard Schechner’s definition of performance as double negation falters. Schechner claims that ritual performance is efficacious because a performance of a ritual aims to have results in the real

declares in the special topics issue of *SubStance* that “the opposition between performativity and theatricality is purely rhetorical, and that both are necessarily enmeshed within the performance. Performance is indeed inscribed within theatricality, and is an important component of it” (5). Féral implicitly marks a difference between performativity and theatricality later in this same essay:

Theatricality is the result of these two simultaneous cleavages: between everyday space and representational space, between reality and fiction.

[...] It creates disjunction where our ordinary perception sees only unity between signs and their meaning. It replaces uniformity with duality. (11)

Féral highlights this distinction (and consequently further contradicts her own effort to subsume performativity to theatrical) when, writing about theatricality, she notes, “By watching, the spectator creates an “other” space, no longer subject to the laws of the quotidian” (105). Performativity, as will be evident in what follows, belongs to “everyday space,” while theatricality marks an “other” space.

As is the case when a person is hailed with the greeting “Hey, girl!”, the interpellation of the person whom that salutation addresses doesn’t make him a girl. The greeting “Hey, girl!” contrasts the performative effects of the phrase “It’s a girl!” (or “It’s a boy”) uttered by the doctor at the birth of a child. In the former instance, “girl” does not reflect the accepted circumstances of the encounter, the addressee is not a girl as

world (120). In order for a ritual to be efficacious, according to Schechner, the audience must “believe” (120). By requiring that an audience believes in the ritual they are witnessing, they cannot maintain that the performer is *not actually* the role they are performing: They must believe that that performer *is* what they are embodying. For example, the Catholic taking communion, following official doctrine, must *believe* that the wafer *is* they body of Christ. Schechner’s definition of ritual requires that rituals are performative for it to have results. Conversely, if an audience does not believe, as they are required to do in ritual, but rather they are encouraged to “appreciate” the performance they witness, as Schechner claims is a feature of modern theater, then they are able to maintain that the actor is not the character they are playing, and not-not that character (120). The aesthetic structure of theatricality is double negation, and not of all performance.

understood in normative contexts, while in the latter instance, “girl” has real effects and consequences insofar as the utterance medically and legally describes the sex of the baby. Yet, the greeting “Hey, girl!” that is responded to with an affirmation establishes the addressee not as a girl, but as initiated into gay cultural practice: this “Hail Mary” does have effects, just not the performative consequence that the meaning of the utterance indicates. In other words, the effects of a performative phrase are congruous to the socially accepted meaning of the words used in that phrase – “It’s a girl!” identifies the sex of the child as female, for example – while the effects of a theatrical utterance are incongruous to the socially accepted meanings of the words used – “Hey, girl!” doesn’t identify the addressee as female, but merely as a subject of gay culture.

Linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin, who coined the term performativity, never uses the word congruity to describe the relationship between a speech act and its effects, but such a relationship is apparent in his theory. In *How to Do Things With Words*, he outlines a general definition of the performative utterance when he writes a performative utterance “is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing, or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it” (6). The equality, or congruity, of the performative as defined by Austin can be expressed as follows: The utterance equals the act. “It’s a girl” uttered at the birth of a child by a doctor functions as a successful performative according to Austin insofar as the phrase which describes the gender of the baby simultaneously determines the gender of the baby. In contrast, the phrase “Hey, girl” is not performative but theatrical because the utterance “Hey, girl” does not perform the act of identifying the addressee as a member of a normative gender category, but rather interpellates them as a subject of gay culture.

Because theatrical utterances do have effects in the world, but effects that are not indicated by the words that make up that particular theatrical utterance, an alternate set of terms that describe the nature of these effects from the language Austin uses to describe performative utterances are needed. According to Austin, performative utterances that have effect in the world are felicitous, and consequently, performative utterances that fail to have effect, because “something goes wrong,” are infelicitous (14). For example, if an individual does not have the authority to “pronounce you man and wife,” then the two people being addressed do not become “man and wife” and the performative utterance is infelicitous. Austin specifically singles out utterances that are performed onstage to clarify “a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage” and that when performative utterances are used in such a context they are “*parasitic* upon its normal use” (22). When an actor does utter an utterance that Austin would qualify as performative onstage, such as when Hamlet tells the ghost “I swear” in order to promise to avenge his father’s death, those words do not, of course, mean that the actor who plays Hamlet is swearing to the actor who plays The Ghost that he will avenge his own father’s death. Austin is correct in excluding such instances in his discussion of the felicitous and infelicitous character of performative utterances. Yet, as a theatrical utterance, in this case an utterance performed within the context of the theater, the utterance is not rendered “null and void” but does have effects *just not effects that are indicated by the words that produce those effects*. Specifically, the words are uttered for a particular effect but one that consciously deviates from what the words indicate those effects could be. For example, when Hamlet tells The Ghost “I swear” the audience is effected, and probably more accurately, affected. That is to say

that the words do produce an effect on the world in the form of offering insight into the character of Hamlet or heightening the suspense for the audience. In fact, the intended effect of the words “I swear” could be meant to create suspense, or express commitment or determination. Austin misses the fact that a performative utterance onstage is rarely if ever “null and void,” but in fact can and most often does have effects. Under this formulation, Austin’s terms, felicitous and infelicitous, can not work here – the utterance is successful insofar it is not rendered null and void, but does not produce the effects that the words would indicate. The term “incongruity” can describe theatrical utterances. The effects of a theatrical utterance are incongruous to what the words of that utterance would indicate: “I swear” does not equal I swear, but rather “I swear” produces other effects or affects. Performative utterances are congruous when they are felicitous, and so those terms can be interchangeable, but because the difference between performative utterances and theatrical utterances are at issue here, I do not use the term felicitous but rather the term congruous.

Theatrical utterances, when uttered off stage and outside of the context of the theater, still function the same way – theatrical utterances have effects that are incongruous to the words included in that utterance. As Austin points out, such theatrical utterances are “*parasitic*” insofar as they accompany the normative meaning expressed by that utterance, but also carry with it, an alternate meaning. The word “parasite” carries a less than favorable connotation, but in any case, the concept of “parasite” accurately describes those utterances that are not performative but rely on the socially accepted meanings of certain words or phrases.

Toward the end of *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin acknowledges that all utterances have performative force, but the performative force of these statements on stage fail to produce effects congruous to what the performative language indicates they should enact. In terms of utterances that are statements, or what Austin calls constatives, the performative language of “I state that...” is not uttered. For example, Austin suggests that an utterance such as “The cat is on the mat” carries with it the performative force of the statement “I declare that the cat is on the mat,” only that in everyday speech we do not include the words “I declare.” Even in the statements that Austin identifies as being both constative (descriptive) as well as performative on stage, the double negation that divides the actor and the character renders the statement null and void in terms of its performative effect: For example, when Hamlet says “Get thee to a nunnery,” which Austin would understand as Hamlet uttering “I implore you, Ophelia, go to a nunnery,” the performative force of the statement is attributed to a fictional entity, Hamlet, and therefore fails to have performative force in the real world.

The feature of congruity attributed to performative acts, in contrast to the character of incongruity attributed to theatrical acts, extends beyond just speech acts. Judith Butler’s theory of gender which claims that gender is performatively constituted, that is to say, that gender is produced on the body through a series of repeated stylized acts and gestures over time, suggests a congruity between acts and gestures that indicate a particular gender subjectivity and the gender subjectivity that is made apparent through executing those acts and gestures. To put it simply, acting like a man, doing the things that men do, wearing clothes that men wear, etc... makes one a man. Even if one fails to performatively constitute a normative gender, the failure is performative insofar as the

series of repeated stylized acts and gestures that fail to produce normative male-ness or female-ness produce a non-normative gender, even though such a gender styling may be unintelligible. In the theater, or performing any act that can be described as theatrical, that one-to-one relationship, the doing that makes the being, isn't the case.⁹ Highlighting the feature of congruity attributed to the performativity of identity, offered by Butler's theory of gender, further differentiates performativity from theatricality. Not only is gender performative, but all of the identity categories that are identified in social life by anthropologists that employ the metaphor of theatricality in their work are performative. In all cases, repeating certain acts and gestures constitutes the criterion by which an individual can be identified in any particular social role. In the case of theatricality, the acts and gestures that constitute identifiability in any particular social role (and to various degrees) *do not* make an individual the thing: No matter how many times an actor does the things Hamlet does, he will never *be* Hamlet, because Hamlet is always and already a theatrical construct.

In "Signature Event Context," Jacques Derrida engages with Austin's theory of the performative speech act to locate the necessity of citationality, or what Derrida calls iterability, in all speech acts, which, by introducing the problem of intention into the event of a speech act, complicates, but doesn't disqualify the congruity of performative speech acts. Derrida counters Austin's claim that "a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy" when he writes, "For, ultimately, isn't it

⁹ The only way in which "the doing makes the being" occurs in the theater is the in the act of theater itself. That is to say that "doing" theater, acting in front of the audience and all the attending practices that support that activity, brings theater into being. Note that this act of "doing" theater happens in the "real" world and not within the fiction of the theatrical act.

true that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, ‘non-serious,’ citation (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy), is the determined modification of a general citationality – or rather, a general iterability – without which there would not even be a ‘successful’ performative?” (17). Here, Derrida draws attention to the fact that for any performative utterance to have effect, such as the declaration “I do” in a wedding ceremony for instance, that utterance must be recognizable as being able to have that effect. This recognition is a product of a history of usage and a general agreement that this utterance does and can produce those effects. Derrida draws our attention to how the performative utterance spoken in a play relies on the recognition demanded of the performative utterance spoken in real life. Derrida does concede that the characteristic of iterability that he attributes, not just to performative speech acts, but to all speech acts is “[not] of the same sort as in a theatrical play” (18). This concession opens up space in which we can differentiate the iterability at the heart of the performative sign and the iterability of the theatrical sign.

As I’ve argued above, this difference lies in the relationship between the speech act and its effects: the performative speech act intends for its effects to be congruous to the self-indicated effect within the speech act itself, while the theatrical speech act intends for its effects to be incongruous to the self-indicated effect of the speech act itself. In describing performative speech acts, Derrida admits that “the category of intention will not disappear [in any given speech act]: it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterances” (18) and that “given that the structure of iteration, the intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and to its content” (18). This is what Derrida names

différance: “the irreducible absence of intention or attendance to the performative utterance, the most ‘event-ridden’ utterance there is, is what authorizes me, taking account of the predicates just recalled, to posit the general graphematic structure of every ‘communication’” (18-19). In other words, Derrida’s term *différance* refers to how the intention of any speech act, including performative speech acts, is never completely present in the utterance itself. Despite the absence of intention, Derrida admits that “I [don’t] draw the conclusion that there is no relative specificity of effects or consciousness, or of effects of speech [...], that there is no performative effect, no effect of ordinary language, no effect of presence of discursive event (speech act)” (19). The “real” possibility of these effects that Derrida concedes do exist is the exact point of difference between performative acts and theatrical acts, and contrasts the sort of iterability that Derrida gestures to when he admits that the feature of citationality he is concerned with is not of the same sort that functions in a theatrical play (18).

Though the context of a performative speech act cannot be known or determined in advance, the context of the theatrical act must be identified as such. Janelle Reinelt summarizes Derrida well:

Derrida [...] insists that the general condition of language is iteration, “iterability,” which makes theatrical utterances not an exception but an instance of the general condition of all utterances insofar as they are an iteration of a prior linguistic structure. The force of the utterance is its structural break with prior established contexts. Iteration means that in the space between the context and the utterance, there is no guarantee of a

realization of prior conditions, but rather a deviance from them, which constitutes its performative force. (204)

Though, as I've shown above, the key difference between theatrical acts or utterances and performative utterances is that the theatrical act or utterance is denied the power to have effects aligned with what the utterance is recognized to have the power to enact, Reinelt does outline how Derrida illustrates that the context of a performative utterance is insufficient to secure its meaning or effects. In contrast, the frame that limits the effects of an act that is proper to the theater must be acknowledged when identifying theatrical activity to be such. That is to say that, as I've identified in much of the critical literature on the subject of theatricality and performativity above, spectators and actors must acknowledge their roles as such and that the activity that is contained by this framing will have incongruous effects to what similar activity would produce outside of such framing. This would mean that, an individual who passes by a scene on the street in which two actors stage an emotional dispute between lovers, for example, identifies that scene as performative insofar as they would believe that all the speech acts executed in the course of the scene would have congruous effects. In contrast, if the passerby identified the scene as staged, they would understand that all activity within the scene would have incongruous effects to what such speech acts would self-indicate. Taking account of the need for conscious recognition of the context, the subject uninitiated in gay cultural practice would think the phrase "Hey, girl!" meaningless beyond a generic and neutral act of hailing, especially if they were male, or at least odd if they were female, insofar as it is relatively unusual in our contemporary moment to address a person by their gender. In

the case of gay cultural practice though, the phrase “Hey, girl!” is recoded with alternate meaning that is interpreted by those initiated into gay culture.

These three definitive features of theatricality, as a structure of double negation, as excessive, and as necessarily available for an audience/public to recode with alternate meaning, are the three aesthetic features of gay cultural practice. Not all phenomena that exhibit an aesthetic of theatricality belong to gay culture. For example, theater itself is theatrical, but not always gay. The actor who plays Hamlet, as Richard Schechner points out, is not Hamlet, but not-not Hamlet, but also not necessarily gay in any sense of the word. Black face is another example of a theatricality that is not gay. Black face, or other racist performances of race or ethnicity, is theatrical insofar as the performer marshals physical and cultural features that were socially authorized and accepted to signify a particular racial identity but fails to embody that racial identity – in black face, a performer is not performing blackness, but according to the racist ideas concerning black people at the time that black face was popular, such a performer was not-not performing blackness.

The aesthetic of theatricality that constitutes gay culture is necessary oppositional to the socially authorized meaning of signifiers that are in dynamic play in gay cultural practice. In *How To Be Gay*, David M. Halperin notes that gay culture is predicated on transforming heteronormative phenomena to function as vehicles of gay or queer meaning. Gay culture exhibits a specific aesthetic of theatricality that maintains the social accepted meaning of certain signifiers and phenomena in order to contrast it with a deviant gay meaning. The next section outlines how the aesthetic of theatricality emerged over the course of the development of gay culture in the twentieth century.

Gay Culture and the Public Sphere

Even though gay culture is not, nor ever was solely the domain of gay men, public and visible gay culture has developed in a domain historically dominated by men over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The division between the public sphere, as the domain of men engaged in rational critical discourse for political ends, and the private sphere, as the domain proper to women who saw to the needs of sustaining life, was instrumental in determining the character of gay cultural practice. That is to say that men's access to the public, access that assumed their public selves were a reflection of their private selves, along with violence that was often enacted on men who were publicly known to be homosexual, encouraged men who engaged in sex with other men to live double lives. The doubleness that often determined these men's lives provides an explanation as to why gay culture embraced an aesthetic of double negation.

Furthermore, the fact that men had greater access to the public sphere than women distinguishes gay culture from lesbian culture for the most part. Because woman's domain was culturally determined to be the domestic *private* sphere, any deviant behavior was always and already hidden from public scrutiny, and consequently women need not navigate double lives in the same way men were required to. Though our current moment in history no longer requires that gay cultural practice adhere to the cultural division between public and private, partly because there have been progressive shifts in the gender power dynamics of the public and private spheres, gay culture is no longer predicated on gendered, or sexual, identity categories. Yet, having emerged during an era

in which men's access to the public sphere was unrestricted while women's access was limited, gay culture, as necessarily public, was largely the domain of men.

Hannah Arendt's theorization of the concepts of public and private provides a framework in which to explain why the historical development of gay culture was dominated by men. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt distinguishes the public sphere, as the domain of political activity, from the private, domestic sphere. Arendt explicitly identifies the private sphere as being synonymous¹⁰ with the household when she writes, "The distinction between a private and a public sphere in life corresponds to the household and political realms" (28). The division between the public sphere and the private/domestic sphere for Arendt is understood as "the division [...] between the sphere of the *polis* and the sphere of the household and family, [...] between activities related to a common world and *those related to the maintenance of life*" (Italics added 28). Arendt defines the activity that satisfies the needs to create and sustain life as labor, and labor, for Arendt, is confined to the private sphere. She writes, "Public life, obviously, was possible only after the much more urgent needs of life itself have been taken care of. The means to take care of them was labor" (65). The survival of the species belonged to this category of labor for Arendt as well: "Labor assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species" (8). She explicitly includes reproduction of the species as a result of heterosexual sex under the category of a life sustaining need (30). Heterosexual sex is tied to necessity, according to Arendt, and thus belongs to the private sphere of the

¹⁰ Seyla Benhabib notes that Arendt also defines the public as any space in which "men act in concert": "But a private dining room in which people gather to hear a samizdat or in which dissidents meet with foreigners public spaces" is a site in which "men act in concert" in private (78). For the purposes of this essay though, when I refer to what Arendt calls private I am referring to spaces, the home in particular, which is the sole site of labor. Though the domestic space can be opened up to the public, public spaces are never intended to be spaces where labor takes place.

domestic home (30).¹¹ Arendt's formulation of the division between the public and the private spheres implicitly places women, who have historically been tasked with the labor associated with the maintenance of life (cooking and cleaning) and the survival of the species (child birth and rearing), in the private sphere and men, who have historically been those who occupy political positions, in the public sphere.

Jürgen Habermas's theorization of the public sphere also contributes to a better understanding of why the historical development of gay culture was dominated by men. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas summarizes his conception of the public sphere:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules of governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's use of their reason (27).

Habermas specifies that "The public's understanding of the public use of reason was guided specifically by such experiences as grew out of the audience-oriented subjectivity of the conjugal family's intimate domain" (28). Habermas identifies "the conjugal family's intimate domain," or in other words the household or domestic sphere, as being

¹¹ Gay sexual practices, as not necessary in terms that same-sex sexual practices do not result in reproduction, for Arendt, do not have a place in the private sphere. Hence, gay culture includes gay *sex* culture that occurs in the public sphere.

fundamentally private because the domestic sphere is the site in which life sustaining needs are met. Habermas writes, “The reproduction of life, the labor of slaves, and the service of the women went on under the aegis of the master’s domination; birth and death took place in its shadow; and the realm of necessity and transitoriness nature remained immersed in the obscurity of the private sphere” (3). Habermas echoes Arendt’s definition of the private sphere as the site where life is sustained, and also where the potential consequences of heterosexual sexual activity, birth and the reproduction of life, are meant to take place. Though it is unclear exactly what Habermas means when he mentions “the service of the women,” the services he gestures to are likely ones concerning the reproduction of life, the rearing of children, and taking care of the sick and dying, which he locates as being appropriate to the private domestic household.

Both Habermas and Arendt appeal to Greek models and conceptions of the public/private divide in order to outline a theory that explains the public/private conceptions in the modern era. Other scholars appeal to ancient Greece in order to examine how public/private conceptions function in our present day as well (Warner 2005, Henaff and Strong 2001). Though the Hellenic model is problematic in terms of the roles it attributes to women and the necessity of slaves, the model is unavoidably influential in how we conceive of the public/private divide today (Ortner 22). As Habermas suggests, “Since the Renaissance this model of the Hellenic public sphere, as handed down to us in the stylized form of Greek self-interpretation, has shared with everything else considered ‘classical’ a peculiarly normative power” (4). The Greek conceptions of the public/private divide offered to us by Arendt and Habermas that place men in the public sphere and women in the private domestic sphere provide an

explanation as to why men were the dominant constituents of gay cultural practice as it emerged as a distinct milieu in the public sphere.

Sociologist Richard Sennett, who does not appeal to the Hellenic model but instead examines the history of public culture in London, Paris, and New York in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, offers a concept of the private sphere as the domain of the institution of family, which then also provides an explanation as to why men were the dominant demographic of gay culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sennett describes, in a similar way as Arendt, the private sphere as the realm of the natural and the family as “the seat of nature” (90). In a very similar vein as Habermas, Sennett’s conception of the private sphere as family-oriented echoes rhetoric that considers homosexuality as “anti-family,” and is a (mis)conception produced from associating sex practices with an end goal of reproduction, a conception promoted aggressively by Judeo-Christian ideology. Yet, for the most part, the logic that subtends Sennett’s concept of the private sphere is evident in how the concept of public/private has functioned over the majority of the twentieth century and, consequently, denies homosexuality, and homosexual sex acts, a place in the private domestic sphere.

Sexual activity in general, and heterosexual sexual activity in particular, is socially acceptable only if practiced in the private sphere, which is often conflated with the domestic sphere in so far as the private sphere is the site where the life sustaining needs of a person are fulfilled. Much of the scholarship that articulates a theory of the public/private dichotomy or responds to such theories identifies the private sphere as the proper site of sex and sexuality (Arendt 1958, Habermas 1989, Benhabib 1992, Fraser 1992). Yet the language used to establish the private domestic sphere as the site of sex

and sexuality implicitly privileges heterosexual sexual activity as that which has rights to privacy. Based on the same normative forces that determine heterosexual activity as private, and confine it in the household, homosexual sexual activity must find its “home” in the public sphere.

Gay public sex practices disrupt the normative concepts of public and private, but also challenge the status of the body as private in two distinct ways. In his essay “Public and Private,” Michael Warner identifies two ways in which the body is conceived of as private when he writes: “Clothing is a language of publicity, folding the body in what is felt as the body’s own privacy. Some bodily sensations – of pleasure and pain, shame and display, appetite and purgation – come to be felt, in the same way, as privacy” (23). In the first case, gay public sex practices “unfold” the body from the privacy afforded to it by being covered in clothing – a man’s private parts become public in gay male sex practices. Secondly, gay public sex practices indulge in pleasures, displays, and appetites experienced on, in and through the body that are normatively reserved for the private sphere. The private nature of the body, as mostly hidden from public view and as the site where certain sensations are relegated to the category of the private, is disrupted by participating in public sex.

Even though gay male sex does not qualify as labor in so far as it does not help in meeting the needs of sustaining life, and consequently does not belong to the private sphere of the domestic space like heterosexual sex does, the pleasure of gay male sexual activity as experienced in, on, and through the body, locates gay male sex within the category of the private as well. Arendt notes:

Locke founded private property on the most privately owned thing there is, “the property [of man] in his own person,” that is, in his own body.

“The labor of our body and the work of our hands become one and the same, because both are the ‘means’ to ‘appropriate’ what ‘God... hath given... to men in common.” And these means, body and hands and mouth, are the natural appropriators because they do not “belong to mankind in common” but are given to each man for his private use. (111)

By appealing to Locke, Arendt describes the body as private because the body is necessarily not under the autonomy of “mankind in common,” but rather, is proper to each individual who controls it. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt also writes,

Nothing, to be sure, is more private than the bodily functions of the life process, its fertility not excluded, and it is quite noteworthy that the few instances where even a “socialized mankind” respects and imposes strict privacy concern precisely such “activities” as are imposed by the life process itself. (111)

Just as the activity of labor belongs to the private sphere, Arendt identifies the body, which requires the fruits of labor to maintain itself, as private.

Here we face a contradiction: Gay sexual activity is not necessary for life sustenance, and therefore does not belong to the private or domestic sphere, yet, because gay sexual activity, like all sexual activity, centers around the body, it remains in some sense private. The difference between these two seemingly contradictory senses of “private” is between private space and privacy as “personal, concealed” and “related to the individual, especially to inwardness, subjective experience, and the incommunicable”

(Warner 29,30). Gay sexual activity does not belong to the private space of the domestic sphere, but even when practiced outside of the home, maintains a sense of privacy by being the domain of the body and sensual experience. These competing senses of “privacy” in terms of public gay sex practices exhibit the structure of double negation that I have identified as theatricality: Gay public sex is not-private, in the sense it is practiced in public space, but it is not-not private, in the sense that sexual activity concerns the private nature of the pleasures of sensual experience.¹²

Gay public sex, a dominant motivating factor that encouraged men who sexually desired other men to leave their homes seeking like-lusted companionship in bars, parks and on street corners, required leaving the domestic private sphere for the public sphere, which was easily accessible to men, and consequently explains how and why gay men were central to, but not the sole arbiters of, gay culture. Gay men leveraged their access to the public sphere to engage in same-sex sexual activity in such semi-public spaces as molly houses, bars, and particular semi-public spaces such as secluded bushes in public parks, stalls in public toilets, and dark corners of alleys and streets. In contrast to these spaces and practices, spaces and practices that were the foundation for what eventually emerged as a distinct and visible cultural sphere, lesbians often took advantage of the privacy afforded to them in being relegated to the domestic sphere – the “Boston Marriage,” a term that names the intimate relationship between two women who live in the same household, a term that does not have a gay male equivalent, emerged in the early twentieth century. The semi-public sphere of gay men was the site in which a semi-public, and consequently a semi-visible, gay culture emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Over the course of the twentieth century, especially in the post-

¹² The theatricality of public sex practices is further examined in the last chapter.

Stonewall era of LGBT activism, this semi-public became fully visible and public on the social landscape.

Gay men were encouraged, if not forced to, lead double lives because they lived within both the at-first semi-public, and later fully public gay social sphere and the larger heteronormative social world. Because gay men lived, and still to some extent still do live, in a homophobic world, many gay men were forced to conceal their homosexuality in order to live, work, socialize etc... Gay men, as men, had to adhere to the logic of the public sphere, as outlined by Jürgen Habermas, which demands that a man enter the public sphere on behalf of his household in order to represent himself and his family in the rational-critical debate that was nurtured and facilitated by the public sphere. The gay man, or at least the man who had sex with men, was assumed to be heterosexual, insofar as he entered the public sphere acting as a representative of his household, but was often engaging in homosexual sexual activity.

The double life is essentially a theatrical construct, not only because it encourages the playing of a role, but because it renders the subject living the double life as, at least in front of the indeterminate audience of the public sphere, both himself, and not himself; or from the perspective of the subject himself, his public persona is not himself, but not-not himself. The theatricality of a “double life” was a reality for most men who had sex with men in the twentieth century at one point or another. This is all to highlight how the aesthetic structure of theatricality that has come to determine gay cultural practice in an age when many gay men have the freedom to live open “single” lives, especially now that they are allowed to marry, has historical precedent in the lives of the gay men who forged gay cultural practices over the course of the twentieth century.

The conception of gay culture described in this study appeals to critiques of the sexist elucidations of the public/private divide as a point of departure and makes space for women in the public sphere. In an essay that traverses both Arendt and Habermas' theories of the public, Seyla Benhabib clearly identifies the sexist problems of the Hellenic model:

In the tradition of Western political thought and down to our own days, these distinctions have served to confine women and typically female spheres of activity like housework; reproduction; nurture and care for the young, the sick, and the elderly to the 'private' domain. These issues have often been considered matters of the good life, of values, and nongeneralizable interests. Along with their relegation, in Arendt's terms, to the "shadowy interior of the household," they have been treated, until recently, as "natural" and "immutable" aspects of human relations. (90)

In her criticism of Jürgen Habermas's description of the public sphere of rational critical debate, Joan Landes also points out that Habermas's theorization of the public sphere necessarily excluded women and consequently gendered the public sphere as male and the private sphere as female. Yet, as Habermas notes,

on the one hand, the society now confronting the state clearly separated a private domain from public authority and because, on the other hand, it turned reproduction of life into something transcending the confines of private domestic authority and becoming a subject of public interest, that zone of continuous administration contact became "critical" also in the

sense that it provoked the critical judgment of a public making use of its reason. (24)

That is to say that because of the propagation of the species, especially in terms of the continual production of workers and consumers that fueled the industrial/post-industrial economy of the Western world, the public has usurped the power of women as rulers of all that happened within the domain of the private sphere and co-opted reproduction, and women's bodies as a consequence, as a public matter. Inspired by these feminist critiques of public sphere theory, the description of gay culture offered in this study frees gay culture from the monopoly of gay men and makes it available to a person no matter their particular identity.

Gay men, obviously, have a particularly strong tie to gay cultural practices, but they do not, and should not, have a monopoly over them. In other words, gay men are not the only subjects who can enjoy public sex, camp, drag, and particular styles of masculinity and femininity celebrated in gay culture. Even though men who identify as straight or bisexual practice public sex in ways and in locations in which gay men have been practicing public sex throughout history, the particular identities of these men do not have to be subsumed under the identity category "gay." Because gay men now have the opportunity to be "normal," disaggregating gay identity, as defined by same-sex desire and sexual activity, from gay culture allows gay culture to thrive rather than face erasure because some gay men would rather live hetero-normative lives with their legally married spouses. In other words, gay culture can live on even without the participation of all those who live out and proud as gay men.

Community and Culture

In an era in which gay men can be freed from the closet and live open, normative lives, gay culture is unanchored from both a specific sexual identity category and from the group of people who come together because of having that specific sexual identity category in common. In other words, gay culture is no longer synonymous with gay community. In this formulation, community is defined as a group of people who share a geographic location, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, or politics.¹³ Though often formed because a group of people share a similar identity, communities can also coalesce around shared characteristics that can be, though not always are, expressed as an identity category: An individual may, after living in a particular city for sometime, belong to the community of that municipality, but still not express their identity as such. For example, I have lived in Ithaca on and off for five years, and feel that I belong to the Ithaca community, but I do not identify as Ithacan. Culture, in contrast, is a term to describe a set of practices or objects that are produced by a group of people who share a geographic location, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, politics, or *a particular aesthetic*. Though most forms of culture correspond to certain communities and the identities that coalesce in these communities, there are certain cultures, gay culture in this case, that are defined by a particular aesthetic.

Considered in this way, culture functions akin to the concept of a “public.” In his book *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner defines a public as “a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself” (67) that is addressed to an indefinite number of strangers (74). Following from this conception of a “public,”

¹³ Identity can fashion itself to an individual, while community emerges when a *group of people* come together.

cultural practice can be understood as a “space of discourse” that is constellated by a common feature that coalesces into a recognizable and distinct milieu on the social landscape. Culture, as conceived here, differs from Warner’s concept of the public insofar as the discourse that is central to his conception of a public does not consider how the interpretation or engagement with a particular discourse differs from addressee to addressee, and these differences can organize subjects into a particular social unit. For example, the public of the phrase “Hey, girl!”, according to Warner, would be anyone who heard or read that phrase. Considering the phrase “Hey, girl!” as a cultural practice requires recognizing that the reception of that phrase is different for those who belong to a particular cultural sphere and those who do not: If not initiated into the discourse of gay culture, the person who is interpellated by the phrase “Hey, girl!” may (mistakenly) think that they are being addressed as a member of the female gender, while the person familiar with gay cultural discourse understands that the phrase “Hey, girl!” is not to be understood as a description of their gender.

There is a distinction between the subjects who come together to form community and the discourse, or culture, that that community engages in. As Warner points out,

A public might almost be said to be stranger-relationality in a pure form, because other ways of organizing strangers – nations, religions, races, guilds – have manifest positive content. They select strangers by criteria of territory or identity or belief or some other test of membership. One can address strangers in such contexts because a *common identity* has been established through independent means or institutions. [...] A public,

however, unites strangers through participation alone, at least in theory
(75).

In Warner's definition of a public as stranger-relationality in a pure form, a public differs from community because community demands a common identity based on particular criteria. The difference between a public and culture is that culture refers to the discourse that addresses the indefinite number of strangers who coalesce into a particular public and their consistent interpretation of that discourse. The concept of culture includes both the set of practices that constitute a "space of discourse" and how that discourse is interpreted and understood. The criteria that determine gay culture then are not predicated on the criteria that found identity in the public that gay culture addresses; rather, the criteria that bind a variety of phenomena into a distinct cultural sphere can form a common aesthetic character, which, in the case of gay culture, is the aesthetic of theatricality.

Though the gay community is and has been the primary participants of a public and visible gay culture, not all activities that are oriented to the gay community constitute gay culture. This is to say nothing of the less public and purposefully invisible practices of male-male public sex that include many men who do not identify as gay.¹⁴ In any case, even though gay men come together in a public and visible way to form sports leagues, hold film festivals, and even participate in gay-only rodeos, these activities should be recognized as wholly different from the cultural activities that distinguish gay culture from straight culture. If someone just happened to stumble in on a hockey game that was

¹⁴ Both Laud Humphrey's controversial study *Tearoom Trade* and George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World 1890-1940* include examples across the history of the twentieth century in which men who do not identify as neither gay nor homosexual engage in public sex with other men.

a part of a gay hockey league, there would be no immediate factors intrinsic to the practice of playing hockey that could allow that person to distinguish whether it was a gay cultural event or not. Such activities, which have been mostly the domain of heterosexuals and straight culture, cannot and should not be conceived of as gay cultural practice, despite how gay communities may coalesce around such activities. The objects themselves may feature gay content, but in reception, by both the participants and any possible audience, they do not differ from heteronormative culture. As gay men increasingly live heteronormative lives, it is imperative to distinguish gay cultural practice from activities popular within the communities of men who have sex with men. By distinguishing gay culture from gay community, gay culture evades being subsumed by the hegemonic force of (homo)normative culture.

The disaggregation of the assumed correlation between identity, and consequently community, from culture is not unique to gay culture: Professional sports in North America has also recently been untethered from its assumed correlation with a particular identity category, and has, much in the same fashion as gay culture, come to be defined by a particular aesthetic. Professional sports, especially in North America, have long been assumed to be the domain of straight men: professional athletes were assumed to be straight men, and straight men were assumed to be the primary fans of professional sports (Kruger).¹⁵ Yet, recent controversies in the world of professional sports in North America have exposed the assumption that professional sports are the domain of straight men as false. First, the influx of professional athletes who have come out as homosexual in the recent past evidences that the assumed constituents of professional sports are straight

¹⁵ The assumed correlation between straight men and professional sports in North America is evident in the fact that there are no major all-female sports leagues in the United States or Canada.

men, while simultaneously revealing this to be untrue. Michael Sam, a professional NFL player who was drafted by the St Louis Rams in the seventh round in the 2014 draft and later played with the Montreal Alouettes in the Canadian Football League, came out as homosexual to much fanfare, being the first openly gay player in the NFL. Sam was named “Sportsman of the Year” by *Sports Illustrated*, the leading professional sports magazine in North America, and also named “Man of the Year” by *GQ*, arguably a leading men’s magazine in the U.S. and Canada. Jason Collins, a professional basketball player with the NBA, came out as gay in 2013 and was named one of *Time Magazine*’s “100 Most Influential People of the Year,” becoming only the second gay man to be openly gay in one of the four major professional sports leagues in the United States and Canada. Other athletes, such as Kwame Harris, also have come out, shaking the assumed heterosexual and heteronormative foundations of professional sports culture in the United States and Canada. These declarations of sexual orientation cause much surprise in the world of professional sports in North America and have warranted so much attention precisely because they attest to the assumed heterosexuality of professional sports. At the same time, these declarations of sexual orientation in professional sports suggest that the assumed correlation between professional sports culture in the U.S. and Canada and heterosexuality is a lie. Sports culture, like gay culture, has been unanchored from its assumed correlation to a specific identity category.

There is, of course, overlap between community and culture. This overlap, though, does not necessarily mean that by participating in cultural activity one becomes a member of a community. Yet, especially in regards to cultural practices that are assumed to correlate to privileged identities, such as the complementary relationship between

homosexuals and gay culture or heterosexual men and professional sports culture in North America, it is important to unanchor the identities and communities assumed to be the producers and consumers of a certain set of cultural phenomena. After all, the constituents of sports culture are not all straight men, and gay culture includes many more people than just gay men. By unanchoring identity from culture in these cases, dominant and privileged identities are evacuated of their power to marginalize less privileged identities and communities that are already participating in, producing, and consuming mainstream and popular cultural phenomena. By distinguishing between community and culture, my aim is not to be the arbiter of what constitutes or qualifies as culture, or community, but rather, I hope to offer a specific conception of gay culture that is liberated from the increasingly normative demographic of gay men.

Gay, Not Queer. Yet Still Coalition Politics

By identifying theatricality as a constitutive feature of gay culture, gay culture can be distinguished from queer aesthetics. Though there is often overlap between the two, queer aesthetics in general, and the political aims of queer aesthetics more specifically, attempt to *undo* and challenge the stability of identity categories and normative social and political systems. Conversely, be it such regimes as language, gender, or the concepts of public and private, gay cultural practice *maintains* the normative, socially authorized meaning of such phenomena, while *simultaneously* offering a new, non-normative meaning that positions the recoded phenomena as theatrical.

In contrast to queer aesthetics, gay cultural practices such as the unique expression of femininity in drag, or the depiction of masculinity in Tom of Finland,

situate legal, social and cultural regimes, such as gender, as stable, but constructed. That is to say that, unlike queer aesthetics, gay culture retains the coherence of distinct gender categories such as male/female, and masculine/feminine, while simultaneously subverting the socially authorized meanings of those categories. Queer aesthetics produce gender identities that are neither male/female, nor masculine/feminine, but rather attempt to chart new terrain to establish new ways of expressing gender, or to evade exhibiting an intelligible gender as gender in the first place. Conversely, gay culture requires that gender identity remain stable in its production of theatrical masculinity and theatrical femininity.

Public sex commonly practiced in gay cultural spheres exemplifies this difference between gay culture and queer culture. Public sex practices have erotic appeal precisely because the social, and often legal, definition of “public” is maintained, even though a set of activities that is determined to be private occur in public space. That is to say that, the sense of publicness is not erased, nor is a new “queer” space that can be described as neither public nor private created. Public sex practice, like other gay cultural phenomena, demands that the socially authorized meaning of particular phenomena is maintained, even though these phenomena are recoded to offer a second non-normative meaning as well.

By situating theatricality as a constitutive feature of gay culture, and consequently shifting the basis for inclusion from identity categories to aesthetic characteristics, new forms of coalitional politics are possible. Though gay culture is now determined by aesthetics rather than identities, identity politics are not necessarily left at the door, but rather, entry into gay culture in the first place is not predicated on how one identifies. The

aesthetic of theatricality that determines gay culture includes the communities that coalesce around drag ball culture in New York City in the late eighties, as seen in Jenny Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning*, as well as the witticism and theater of Oscar Wilde. Though the class and racial identities of subjects in *Paris Is Burning* contrast with the class and racial identity of Oscar Wilde so much that viewing them as culturally similar would seem impossible, conceiving gay culture as determined by an aesthetic of theatricality allows for cross-class and cross-racial coalitions to coalesce in the activity of gay cultural practice.

Chapter Breakdown

As difficult as it is to define what constitutes culture, it is also difficult to determine a comprehensive collection of phenomena that constitutes a particular cultural sphere. For this study, I have chosen a collection of phenomena that have been, and continue to be, prevalent in gay cultural spheres. The phenomena examined here are not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather a collection of phenomena that is celebrated, though it may not originate, in gay culture in the twentieth century. Specifically, the phenomena examined in this study – iconography, language, masculinity, femininity, and space – are also found in a mainstream heteronormative culture but are expressed or enacted in such a way in gay culture that they express a common aesthetic, theatricality.

The first chapter, "Theatrical Iconography," offers an investigation of Oscar Wilde, the most prominent gay icon associated with theater and theatricality. Through an analysis of Oscar Wilde's plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*, his particular style of wit and humor, and the details concerning his personal life brought

forward when he was prosecuted for acts of gross indecency, I highlight how “theatricality” is an aesthetic structure exemplified by the public persona of Wilde, his dramatic literature, and his distinct literary style. This chapter begins by highlighting that Wilde’s iconic status in gay culture has little to do with his particular sexual practices, but rather, with the unique theatrical style he exhibited in his work and lifestyle. Specifically, this chapter argues that Wilde’s aesthetic of theatricality is apparent in both his effeminate persona and his status as a dandy. Through an examination of Wilde’s “performance” during his infamous three trials and a survey of the scholarship that examines Wilde and his work, this chapter argues that Wilde specifically exemplified a theatrical aesthetic insofar as he disrupted the assumed congruity between a celebrity’s domestic life and their public persona, a doubleness that is apparent in both Wilde’s plays *The Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Whether specifically defined as theatrical, or described as artificial, failed seriousness, juxtaposition, paradox, role-playing, or excessive, in this chapter I expose how camp demonstrates the features of theatricality, an aesthetic found in the witticisms of Oscar Wilde. This chapter argues that Wilde is positioned as a model of the modern homosexual because he exhibits the aesthetic structure of theatricality, an aesthetic that later comes to define gay cultural practices themselves.

The second chapter, “Theatrical Femininity” examines Nina Arsenault, a celebrated trans performance artist and media darling in Toronto’s gay community, who encapsulates the social and cultural construction of a particular form of femininity that, borne from drag performance, is unique to gay cultural practices. In this chapter, I analyze the artistic work of Nina Arsenault to outline the theatrical aesthetic that is a feature of femininity produced in gay culture. First, I begin with a critical engagement

concerning the theatricality of drag performance in general. I then move on to consider how Arsenault's production of femininity qualifies as theatrical insofar as it merges two contrasting theories of gender identity: the performative constitution of gender and gender as an expression of a psychic truth. I appeal to Arsenault's two solo performance pieces, "The Silicone Diaries" and "I W@a B*rbie," as evidence of her theatrical construction of gender. Specifically, I consider how Arsenault recodes markers of normative femininity, from physical features such as breasts, hips, and hair, to iconic symbols of femininity like Barbie, to highlight her theatrical aesthetic. Through an examination of the solo performance work, photography, and media appearances of Nina Arsenault, I then move on to identify how this concept of theatricality in terms of the social construction of gender is inherent to Arsenault's artistic and quotidian self-presentation.

The third chapter, "Theatrical Masculinity" argues that masculine gender presentation in gay culture presents a particular model of masculinity which is constituted by an aesthetic of theatricality. To draw attention to the theatrical character of gay masculinity, "Theatrical Masculinity" examines erotic art such as the work of *Tom of Finland* that portrays hyper-masculine figures alongside the sartorial and sexual practices of the leather community. Through consciously constructing a particular image of "man" by performing certain behaviors, the model of masculinity outlined in "Theatrical Masculinity" deviates from (hetero)normative conceptions of "being masculine" which require that manly qualities appear natural, authentic, and effortless. Similar to "Theatrical Femininity," this chapter identifies how gay culture recodes signifiers of normative gender, in this case masculinity, to produce a style of gender that is intelligible

as normative, but as deviant at the same time. “Theatrical Masculinity” highlights how artistic representations of masculinity that emphasize and accentuate certain eroticized body parts and sexual scenarios both determine and are determined by embodied gay self-presentation.

The last chapter, “Theatrical Space,” outlines how sex, thought of as an inherently private act, transforms public space into “theatrical publics” when performed in public. In other words, when practiced in toilets, cinemas, and parks, public sex establishes such spaces as both not-public and not-not public. From tearooms to cruising in parks and toilets, public sex has been a prominent practice in gay culture since anything that could be called a “gay” culture has existed. In the first essay in *Times Square Red Times Square Blue*, Samuel R. Delaney chronicles how a public has flourished in and around sex practices performed in the porno cinemas located around 42nd Street in New York City. Gay public sex practices, such as the ones Delaney chronicles, confound much of the scholarship that addresses the public/private dichotomy. In contrast to the canonical scholarship that marks the domestic sphere as the domain of the family, and subsequently relegates sex as a feature of reproduction, Delaney and others draw attention to how men who participate in gay public sex practices have particular access to the public sphere as a site of sexual activity.

At first glance, the collection of phenomena included in this study may seem to be merely a collection of phenomena that was and is celebrated by gay men. Gay men, undoubtedly, have been the most visible and active participants of such culture activities over the course of the twentieth century, especially in the past forty years in which LGBT activism fought for, and demanded, visibility of gay people. Yet as I will illustrate in the

following chapters, the particular phenomena included in this collection are not *solely* the domain of gay men, but rather, have over the course of the history of gay culture, been celebrated by people who do not identify as gay nor male.

Through its examination of phenomena extending from the late nineteenth century to the present day, this study records how gay men have not been the arbiters of gay culture since gay culture emerged and developed over the past hundred or so years. Even though such instances of gay cultural practice, such as the particular linguistic stylings of Oscar Wilde or the masculinity depicted in the artwork of Tom of Finland and the autobiographic stories of public sex in New York City in the sixties and seventies, are historically situated, the influence of these practices are still apparent today: the structure of Wilde's wit is emulated in RuPaul's drag race, the masculinity captured in the fantastic artwork of Tom of Finland is made real in contemporary gay pornography, and the kind of cruising examined in Samuel R. Delaney's autobiography is still practiced by all kinds of men who have sex with men today. The inverse is also true: the contemporary work of Nina Arsenault is exemplary of theatrical femininity that has been an integral part of gay cultural practice over the past hundred years, and new technologies that allows us to show our private parts to a indeterminate public merely make digital what glory holes have allowed gay men to do over the course of the twentieth century. This collection of gay cultural phenomena is not, nor cannot be exhaustive. That being said, each chapter explores a particular gay cultural phenomena that has a far reaching impact.

CHAPTER ONE: THEATRICAL ICONOGRAPHY

He Has Become What He Said, and What He Said He Wasn't

Oscar Wilde has been a gay icon over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Despite how he has been celebrated as *gay* in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Wilde's sexual identity does not explain how he was installed as a gay icon, but rather, his theatrical aesthetic, both exhibited in his personal life and in his dramatic literature, is the basis for his celebrated position in gay culture. The fact that Wilde adamantly refused to identify as a homosexual in the public sphere of Victorian England despite how he engaged in same-sex sexual activity exemplifies the aesthetic structure of theatricality. After his death, Wilde emerged as a mythic figure in gay culture. Wilde's public persona, specifically the details of his double life exposed during his infamous three trials, and his dramatic and artistic work, especially *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Ideal Husband*, which dramatize the theatrical doubleness that structured his life, merged to form the mythic figure gay culture celebrates today. His theatrical public persona and the particular theatrical literary style of his plays and aphorisms coalesce into what I describe as theatrical iconography.

Wilde is not just iconic, but he is *iconographic*. Iconography, as I conceive of it here, describes a person or phenomenon whose iconic status is not just based on their mass appeal, but whose particular linguistic style is an integral feature of the public's appreciation of that icon or phenomenon. The Bible and Shakespeare are examples of iconography because their iconic status in the popular imaginary cannot be disassociated from their particular literary and linguistic style. This definition of iconography deviates from the definition of the word as "the branch of knowledge which deals with the

representation of persons or objects by any application of the arts of design,” in that it privileges the literary and linguistic, and not just the visual (*OED*). In the formulation of iconography I conceive of here, iconography merges two phenomena: Iconography incorporates an icon - “a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol, especially of a culture or movement” - with a “graph,” whose etymological root is “to write,” (*OED*). In the neologistic construction of iconographic, “graph” also refers to how the particular linguistic style that is a central feature of a particular icon is a kind of signature, a particular signifier that marks that figure as unique.

Wilde and his legacy, as exemplary of theatrical iconography, cannot be divorced from his particular wit and humor, a style of wit and humor which exhibits an aesthetic through the recoding of normative phenomena in order to express double, if not multiple, meanings in a single utterance. The iconographic character of Wilde’s celebrity is particularly important when examining gay culture. In contrast to an icon that is often central to specific distinct cultural spheres, Wilde as an *iconographic* figure provides a model of a particular style of language for the individuals who participate in gay culture to emulate. Wilde’s public persona, especially his performance on the stand when he stood trial for gross indecency, the aphorisms that littered both his literature and his presence in public, and his dramatic literature cohere to establish Wilde as an iconograph of gay culture. Wilde as a theatrical figure has become what he said in public and in print, and he has become what he said he wasn’t, a gay cultural icon.

He Wasn't a Gay Man, But Is a Gay Icon

Oscar Wilde *is* gay.

Oscar Wilde *was* gay.

Only one of these statements is true. Though by today's standards, Oscar Wilde exhibits the qualities and characteristics that are stereotypically associated with a certain milieu of gay men, to say that Wilde identified as "gay," or was identified by a larger public as "gay," is untrue. After all, "gay" as a term to describe a particular sexual orientation did not emerge until the middle of the twentieth century (Chauncey 20).¹⁶ Michel Foucault has persuasively illustrated that sexuality in general, and consequently the sexual orientation that became associated with the term "gay," was invented around the time of Wilde's life. Even though the concept that a person who experiences and indulges in same-sex desire could be, and should be, categorized as homosexual emerged just before the height of Wilde's literary career, the characteristics that are stereotypically associated with men who have sex with men were not then recognized as attributes to suggest that a particular person was a homosexual.¹⁷ As Alan Sinfield writes in *The Wilde Century*, "For us, it is hard to regard Wilde as other than the apogee of gay experience and expression, because that is the position we have accorded him in our cultures. For us, he is always-already queer – as that stereotype has prevailed in the twentieth century" (2-

¹⁶ According to George Chauncey in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World 1890-1940*, before the middle of the twentieth century, the word "gay" was a code word, a word likely chosen for its "apposite connotations" (17). When the term first emerged, likely in the 1920s, the term indicated a flamboyant lifestyle, rather than specifically a same-sex sexual preference. Later, as Chauncey notes, "In calling themselves *gay*, a new generation of men insisted on the right to name themselves, to claim their status as men, and to reject the "effeminate" styles of the older generation. [...] Young men found it easier to forget the origins of *gay* in the campy banter of the very queens whom they wished to reject" (19).

¹⁷ In the *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Dr Richard von Krafft-Ebing, one of the world's first sexologist, compiled case studies of men who sexually desired other men. This was one of the first attempts to categorize men who had sex with men as a *kind of person*, but did not base this categorization on social or cultural characteristics.

3). Sinfield draws attention to how the stereotype that establishes Wilde as gay is a construction of gay identity that emerged in the mid to late twentieth century and is not likely how homosexuals were understood or identified while Wilde was alive. Sinfield moves on to note:

Wilde's typicality is after-the-effect – after, I believe, the trials helped to produce a major shift in perceptions of the scope of same-sex passion. At that point, the entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism, which Wilde was perceived, variously, as instantiating, was transformed into a brilliantly precise image. (3)

It is only in retrospect that we consider Wilde and the qualities that he exhibited as “gay.” “Oscar Wilde was gay” is not true – at the time Wilde was alive, he wouldn't have self-identified or been identified as gay.¹⁸ But “Oscar Wilde is gay” is true today, we identify him as paradigmatic of gay identity.

Wilde, as a model for gay identity, has been and continues to be a pervasive icon of gay culture. By the year 1920, Wilde was the most read English playwright in Europe after Shakespeare (Kaufman 130)¹⁹. Rupert Everett, an out gay actor, brings his celebrity status and gay identity to bear on a new hit production of David Hare's *The Judas Kiss*, a play that tells the story of Wilde's decision not to flee Britain after being convicted of

¹⁸ Wilde was identified by new sexual terms to describe a sodomite such as uranian and invert, but these terms, and their particularities are rarely used starting in the second half of the twentieth century (Hanson 106). This chapter focuses on how Wilde is maintained as a gay icon despite how not being identified as an ur-figure in gay culture until later in the twentieth century.

¹⁹ This statistic is included in the Epilogue of Moises Kaufman's play *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*. The dialogue of the play is taken from historical accounts, an interview, and other “facts” concerning Wilde's trials. These are not cited, and therefore cannot be traced nor verified. Even if this fact is indeed *not* true, the fact that it could be *thought* to be true, and accepted as fact, is telling of Wilde's prominence in the Anglophone social consciousness at the time of this play's production and publication.

“gross indecency” and the fall-out from his decision to stay in Britain. Stephen Fry also conjures his status as an out and proud gay man in the popular film *Wilde* (1997), further sustaining Wilde as a gay contemporary icon at the end of the twentieth century. The poster for *Wilde* further merges contemporary understandings of homosexuality with Wilde by picturing Fry in a pink suit in the center of a black and white background, highlighting both Fry’s homosexuality and Wilde’s homosexuality. Many gay establishments across the Western world also sustain Wilde’s status as a gay icon: a gay bar in Galway, Ireland is called “Wilde’s Bar” (though it closed in 2012), a gay bar in Toronto was called “Wilde Oscar’s” (though it closed shortly after the beginning of the century), a gay bar in Chicago is called “Wilde’s Bar,” a gay bar in New York City is called “Oscar Wilde” (though it is also now closed), and a gay publishing collective took the name “Stein-Wilde.”²⁰ Wilde is also still associated with sexual deviancy: a sex shop in Ottawa, Ontario is called “Wilde’s.” Though Wilde was not “gay” when he was alive, he is undoubtedly conceived as gay and associated with gay culture today.

Even though Wilde has been installed as a gay icon today, he was not considered a gay icon while alive. Claiming that Wilde was not gay is not to say that he didn’t engage in same-sex erotic practices. As is evident in the testimony the young men Wilde likely had erotic encounters with presented during his trials, Wilde was certainly “guilty” of “gross indecency.” Though it is true to claim that “Oscar Wilde was not gay,” by the end of his infamous three trials, it was evident to the British public and the world at large that Wilde was a homosexual.

²⁰ The fact that all these establishments closed is not indicative of a waning interest in Wilde, but rather, merely a reflection of the high rate in which gay bars close all over North America partly due to gentrification in major cities (New York, Chicago, Toronto).

This paradox, Wilde as a man who engaged in sexual activity with other men but not properly categorized as a “gay man,” situates him as an exemplary figure of gay culture, as well as the mythic prototype of gay identity. Oscar Wilde did not prescribe to a particular identity, but, as an icon in the popular imaginary, Wilde was attributed with a sexual identity that he likely would have disavowed. As Martha M. Ertman argues, Wilde inaugurates gay identity, but also disavows identity categories. Ertman notes that “Wilde’s story invokes numerous identity categories, suggesting that post identity intersectional analysis brings more clarity to understanding Wilde’s trials than an essentialism that highlights sexual contact with other men as the most (or only) important feature of his life” (157). Ertman draws attention to the contradictory elements of Wilde’s biography that make a holistic description of Wilde as either “gay” or even as “homosexual” impossible. Ertman appeals to *Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* to provide an analysis that illustrates how Wilde, as singular entity, paradoxically reflects what she outlines as “the three stages in the way twentieth century law and society have understood sexual orientation:” the first stage as pathologizing, the second stage as normal variation, and the third stage as post-identity (155). For Ertman, Wilde’s sexual orientation was first depicted as a moral and physical sickness (especially by his prosecutors), then understood as a normal variation of love (as expressed in the phrase “the Love that dare not speak its name”), and lastly as post-identity (in the sense that Wilde’s heterosexual love for his wife does not seem to contradict his homosexual love for Lord Alfred Douglas). Embracing the analysis of Wilde as a figure who encompasses all three stages of the legal and social understanding of homosexuality in the twentieth century offered by Ertman, Wilde is positioned as an ideal icon not only of a mythical

origin to gay culture, and why gay culture emerged from and alongside gay identity, but also to situate gay culture as unanchored from sexual identity.

Wilde, as an icon of gay culture, does not anchor sexual practices to a sexual identity nor does he tether that sexual identity to a particular set of cultural activities. Rather, *despite* his actual sexual practices, Wilde emerges as an icon of gay *cultural practices* because the interpretation of him in the second half of the twentieth century as a historical icon exhibits an aesthetic of theatricality. Wilde's sexual identity cannot be the locus for a connection between himself and the gay men of the mid to late twentieth century and today.²¹ After all, many other gay men, and gay men in the theater and the arts, did not achieve the iconographic status in gay culture that Wilde did in the twentieth century. In other words, it is because Wilde was not "gay," but is not-not "gay" today that situates him as a theatrical icon in both senses; he exhibited the aesthetic structure of theatricality as an icon, but was also an icon of the theater. Specifically in this study of gay culture, Wilde is an icon celebrated by gay culture primarily because he exhibited the aesthetic structure of theatricality.

Wilde as the poster-boy for gay identity while simultaneously disavowing identity categories is paradoxical in other ways. Much scholarship on Wilde notes his contradictions, inconsistencies, and paradoxes. The aptly titled *The Paradox of Oscar Wilde* by George Woodcock recognizes that attempts to conceive of Wilde and his work as consistent have failed. In his study of Wilde, Woodcock writes "there will appear the evident duality that existed in Wilde's personality and gave his work both its richness and its at first baffling inconsistency and irregularity" (13). Woodcock claims in order to

²¹ As I go on to show later in this chapter, Neil Barlett's book *Who Was That Man?* tracks how the activity of re and decoding Wilde, through the act of "reading," illustrates fundamental differences between contemporary men and Wilde.

understand Wilde, it is necessary to “unite the various conflicting strains in such a way as to give a clearer picture of Wilde’s real achievements and the true nature of his work”

(13). In her book *The Idylls of the Marketplace*, Regenia Gagnier appeals to an examination of his Victorian audience to understand his “contradictions,” and make sense of his “self-contradictory” art and “paradoxical” persona (3). In another aptly titled study *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*, Michael Patrick Gillespie argues “a sense of multiplicity always exists within the quotidian stands out as a fundamental assumption in Wilde’s art” (2). Recognizing Wilde and his work as inconsistent, irregular, and essentially paradoxical situates Wilde as exemplary of gay culture, while making it impossible to reduce him, at least in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, to a gay cultural figure only because he engaged in homosexual activity. Any attempts to situate Wilde as exemplary of gay identity requires conceiving of gay identity as a unified and coherent identity in the first place. Nonetheless, Wilde was able to become a gay cultural icon, a position that goes far beyond merely indulging in same-sex erotic practices, because he continually refused such coherency and instead exemplified an aesthetic of double negation. By exemplifying an aesthetic structure of double negation central to theatricality, Wilde embraced the expression of multiple and often contradictory meanings, such as being not gay and not-not gay simultaneously.

After all, even before Wilde was put on trial and convicted of committing acts of gross indecency, there were other prominent public figures that were associated with same-sex eroticism in the public consciousness of Victorian England. The infamous “Cleveland Street Affair” in London, England, in which several prominent, well-connected and high-status men patronized a male brothel, filled the pages of newspapers

in late 1889 and throughout 1890. The many men scandalously rumored to be engaging in sex with telegraph delivery boys were of such public prominence that these scandals “led to speculation that members of the royal family itself might be involved” (Kaplan 167). Many, but not all, of the men at the center of these scandals were tried for “gross indecency” like Wilde was several years later. The marked differences between these early trials based on charges of “gross indecency” and Wilde’s trial should be noted: First and foremost, as Morris B. Kaplan notes in his study aptly titled *Sodom on the Thames: Sex, Love, and Scandal in Wilde Times*, “Two aspects of Wilde’s case distinguish it from the earlier scandals involving love between men: his memorable writing and his extraordinary celebrity” (226). These two aspects, which distinguish Wilde’s scandal from earlier trials of men accused of “gross indecency,” are also the foundational features by which he is established as iconographic of gay culture. Furthermore, Wilde’s trials differed from earlier similar scandals such as the three legal proceedings centered on the “Cleveland Street Affair” because the accused in these cases either plead guilty, or escaped to France – two things Wilde refused to do in the course of his three trials. As Neil Bartlett in his study of Wilde and his influence on modern gay culture writes, “But if the trials were such a scandal, if the revelation of hitherto hidden aspects of a famous man’s life was such a surprise to the newspaper-reading public of London, then why did Mr Justice Wills comment, in his summing up of the third trial: ‘I have tried many similar cases.’ What were those cases? Why were they so conveniently forgotten? So that the papers could sell their story as an expose, the history of a unique monster?” (29).²²

²² One can assume that the “similar cases” Justice Wills speaks of were either other trials in which men were accused of gross indecency, or cases in which prominent public figures were on trial for scandalous behavior.

Despite the differences between the earlier trials and Wilde's three trials, these details fail to account for how Wilde retroactively became the paradigmatic figure of gay culture.

The appeal of much scholarship to the historical context in which Wilde lived is an attempt to explain how and why he became the "apogee" of gay identity in the twentieth century is misguided (Powell 2009; Powell 1990; Cohen 1993). Gay men in the mid-twentieth century, as well as gay cultures in the late twentieth century, would have no reason to be intimately acquainted with the meanings of gender, sexuality, and class at the *fin de siècle*. In *Who Was That Man?*, Neil Bartlett meditates on the symbolic meaning of certain kinds of flowers, the green carnation in particular which was coded as evidence of a man's homosexuality, both in Wilde's *Salome* as well as in Wilde's own life. Bartlett writes, "This is not a code I would normally understand. The little green flower, the narcissus and the hyacinth would have no perfume, no significance for me if I had not read my way through the library as determinedly as someone cutting and arranging a bouquet of out-of-season flowers. The details of my story have become very particular; I had supposed that this history would be more ordinary, would reveal ordinary men, that is, men like us" (56-57). Bartlett then rhetorically asks, "How is it that we load so much meaning into such delicate signs? Does any of this (1890-1894) mean anything to me, now (1981-1988)?" (57). Bartlett, of course, has already answered his own question: without rigorous research in the British Library, the details of "delicate signs" from the *fin-de-siecle* would not mean much of anything to a gay man in 1981, or 1991, or 2001. Though the social, cultural, political, and economic context in which Wilde rose to fame and experienced his tragic downfall surely explains how and why he became paradigmatic of homosexuality at the end of the nineteenth century, this fails to

explain why he remained an icon of gay culture throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Often the scholarship that examines Wilde's historical moment in an attempt to explain his appeal to gay culture simultaneously situates Wilde as exemplary of post-modernism (Powell 1990). The tendency to situate Wilde as both a product of his own time while simultaneously positioning him as the model of late twentieth century theory and philosophy further indicates that his appeal cannot and should not be located only in the past or the present. Bartlett suggests this when he writes, "But if the signs themselves are transient, the excitement and importance of collaborating in secrecy is not" (54). Bartlett couches the determining feature of gay culture in "collaborating in secrecy" in this moment of his text; the "secrecy" that he situates as constitutive of gay culture is the secrecy of being able to read and interpret certain codes²³.

In order to determine how and why Wilde maintained currency in gay culture throughout the twentieth century and twenty-first centuries, it is necessary to examine the common understandings of Wilde's life and persona as presented during the infamous three trials, his dramatic work, and the phrase best associated with, though not authored by, him: "The Love that dare not speak its name."²⁴ These three points of reference act as a constellation that outlines a mythic figure of Wilde. The icon of Wilde outlined by these three points of reference has sustained gay cultural interest. Together they describe a figure who exhibited an aesthetic of theatricality.

²³ Bartlett also situates the "collaboration in their secrecy" as "a step in the formation of [gay] self-identity" (54). As mentioned earlier, in an era when some gay men decide to live lives much closer to their straight counterparts, the appeal to identity as the grounds for culture is no longer stable.

²⁴ As I discuss later, this phrase did not necessarily originate with Wilde.

Theatrical Living

Beyond the fact that the three trials were theater-like, which is to say that they provided a stage and an audience for Wilde to display the wit and charm that was featured in his dramatic literature, the trials revealed a structure of double negation in Wilde as a public figure. Wilde's life was divided between leading the life of a well-educated, socially elevated, married British citizen, and leading a sordid disreputable life which included seducing seedy, lower-class boys, and maintaining an on-going sexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. Even though it would be inaccurate to describe Wilde as "gay" in his own historical context, he presented a persona in public that was sexually normative, but in private was sexually deviant. During the trial, Wilde was revealed not to be the normative British citizen he was thought to be, but also to not-not be that figure. The first of his trials began with a declaration of Wilde's marital status and ends with a verdict declaring him guilty of same-sex erotic encounters.²⁵ Furthermore, despite how Wilde is currently recognized as always and already gay, the general public was rumored to not believe that Wilde was in fact guilty of engaging in acts of "gross indecency." Frank Harris, editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, spoke with Wilde about his strategy during his trials – the following dialogue, though not necessarily historical fact as Sinfield concedes, anecdotally suggests that the assumption of Wilde's innocence was plausible.²⁶

Oscar Wilde: You talk with passion and conviction, as if I were innocent.

²⁵ In the record of the trials compiled by Wilde's grandson, Merlin Holland, Wilde begins as follows: "Charles Humphrey's opened the case by saying that Mr Oscar Wilde was a married man living on the most affectionate terms with his wife and family of two sons" (3). The record of the trials edited by H. Montgomery Hyde does not immediately begin with these details, but these details are included in the opening speech given by Wilde's prosecutors.

²⁶ Sinfield describes Harris as "not altogether reliable." (1)

Frank Harris: But you are innocent.

Wilde: No. I thought you knew all along.

Harris: No. I did not know. I did not believe the accusation. I did not believe it for a moment. (Sinfield 1)

Wilde's trial reveals a double negation at the heart of his life that in the twentieth century became identified with living in the "closet." Most LGBTQ individuals have the experience of being closeted: They are not-straight - they are homosexual - while simultaneously presenting themselves as heterosexual, or not-not straight.

Wilde's trial effectively disrupted the assumed congruity between the public and private lives of male persons, particularly upper class male persons, in late Victorian society. Jürgen Habermas elucidates how a public/private congruity establishes a structure of social and political representation for male citizens. Habermas summarizes his theory: "The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules of governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without precedent: people's public use of their reason" (7). Habermas suggests the need for congruity between the private life of each citizen and the public persona of each citizen when he writes, "The public's understanding of the public use of reason was guided specifically by such private experiences as grew out of the audience-oriented [...] subjectivity of the conjugal family's intimate domain" (28). Wilde's dramatic literature mines humor by subverting this established social and

political understanding of public presentation, as I will specifically show in an analysis of *An Ideal Husband*. But in regards to Wilde as a public icon, outside the confines of the fiction of theater, his own life betrayed the congruity between public and private life that was central to Victorian society. Wilde's private and semi-private deviance interrupted the required extension of a heterosexual married life into public presence.

Because our contemporary moment considers Wilde the prototype of a member of gay culture, his dramatic work is also somehow identified as gay. Identifying his work as gay further confounds any seamless congruity between an artist's private life, his public representation, and his artistic work. Sinfield notes that Wilde's drama is consistently concerned with heterosexuality. Sinfield writes, "Many commentators assume that queerness, like murder, *will out*, so there must be a gay scenario lurking somewhere in the depths of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. But it doesn't really work. It is convenient to think of Algernon and Jack as a gay couple, but most of their dialogue includes bickering about property and women; or of Bunburying as cruising for rough trade, but it is an upper-class young heiress that we see Algernon visiting, and they want to marry" (vi). Yet, as Wilde reminds us when he quips, "The man who could call a spade a spade should be compelled to use one," we should not take everything as literally as Sinfield. Wilde's drama's relentless appeal to narratives and conversations concerning heterosexual marriage doesn't mean that his work upholds the normative congruity between public life and private, domestic, family life. Rather, Wilde's drama, like Wilde himself, confounds the assumed normative seamless congruity between public and private.

The process of decoding normative cultural artifacts then recoding them with queer meaning is unique and instrumental to gay culture. As David Halperin outlines in his recent monograph *How To Be Gay*, it is the same practice that current gay culture enacts to celebrate the retrospective gayness of Wilde. Halperin draws attention to the ways in which “male homosexuality involves a characteristic way of receiving, reinterpreting, and reusing mainstream culture, a decoding, and recoding of the heterosexual or heteronormative meanings already encoded in that culture, so that they come to function as vehicles of gay or queer meaning” (12). Especially because Wilde himself has a historical association with homosexuality established by the very public nature and tragic outcome of his trials, we cannot dismiss the “gay reading” of Wilde’s dramatic work any more than we can dismiss the gay-ness of Noel Coward, or even of a gay cultural treasure like *Mommie Dearest*.

Wilde’s double life that was exposed in the courtroom mirrors the themes of duplicity and double identity that are common in many of Wilde’s most famous pieces of literature – a sense of duplicity that mirrors the nature of being in the closet that most LGBTQ people experience in their lifetime. Wilde’s masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the hit of London’s West End during Wilde’s trials, invented “bunburying,” the act of having an alter ego in the public sphere of the city that allowed one to evade the responsibilities of one’s domestic life in the country in order to indulge in debauchery and pleasure. In this example, one persona bears the burden of responsibility or moral accountability in order that another persona can have access to other hidden pleasures. In the trials themselves, Wilde performs this doubled self – the respectable married British patrician, and the sexually deviant decadent. It is this sense of

duplicity that carves out the space in which the modern homosexual as an identity category emerges.

This double-life does not distinguish Wilde from the previous public scandals that prosecuted other prominent British figures for similar same-sex erotic encounters during the “Cleveland Street Affair.” Rather, Wilde’s theatrical self-presentation, in terms of his camp aesthetic and dandy persona, establish him as the paradigm of gay identity in the twentieth century. Sinfield identifies Wilde’s effeminacy as the singular feature that positions him as the “apogee of gay experience.” Upon closer examination, Wilde’s effeminacy exhibits an aesthetic of theatricality that then can be found in other gay cultural practices. Sinfield writes, “Wilde and his dandy characters were perceived as ‘effeminate; - that was widely said – but not as queer’ (3-4). This effeminacy is also predicated on a structure of double negation, and explains the camp appeal of Wilde, and how he has retroactively become paradigmatic of gay culture. As Sinfield argues, Wilde embodied a sense of effeminacy in his self-presentation. Yet, at least retrospectively, we identify Wilde’s style of self-presentation as “dandyism.” The dandy is first and foremost thought of as a masculine identity. In the dandy, two paradoxical identities merge together to form something that is theatrical: the dandy exhibits a sense of femininity, but dandyism is reserved for masculine subjects. The dandy, as effeminate, is not masculine, but is not-not masculine. Wilde as dandy occupies a self-styling that exhibits an aesthetic structure of double negation that characterizes theatricality.

Theatrical Effeminacy

In *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment*, Sinfield argues that effeminacy was the characteristic that established Wilde as paradigmatic of gayness (vii). Sinfield argues that effeminacy exhibited by cis-gendered men is associated with queerness as it is today, and corresponds to our interpretation of Wilde as gay “is retroactive; in fact, Wilde and his writings look queer because our stereotypical notion of male homosexuality derives from Wilde, and our ideas about him” (vii). In other words, it is only in retrospect that we consider Wilde, and the qualities that he exhibited, as being “gay.” Despite how Sinfield offers a well researched account of effeminacy through examinations of the work of Marlowe and Shakespeare, to the literature of Wilde’s contemporaries, and contends that only with Wilde did effeminacy come to denote homosexual identity, another characteristic underlies the popular conception of homosexuality: theatricality.²⁷

Sinfield illustrates how effeminacy played an integral role in how certain individuals understood themselves as queer. Sinfield writes, “only a portion of the people who engaged in same-sex practices self identified as [homosexuals]” (139). Class, as well as gender style, was instrumental in determining whether an individual self-identified as queer in Sinfield’s account. Sinfield notes, “From the working class point of view, for the most part, queerness was identified with leisure-class privilege” (140) Sinfield’s account is persuasive in terms of charting how gay identity functioned in the early twentieth century, but Sinfield’s argument does not account for the emergence of gay culture borne from same-sex sexual activities and the communities coalescing around same-sex passion

²⁷ Effeminacy could only come to represent homosexuality during Wilde’s lifetime, and not before, because, as noted earlier, homosexuality was only invented in the second half of the nineteenth century.

and desire. Masculine, often lower class men saturate Sinfield's account, not just referring to the lower class boys who testified at Wilde's last trial leading to his conviction, but in his analyses of E.M. Forster's *Maurice*, the writing of Jean Genet, and biographical accounts from the period. Sinfield fails to account for how such men, although they likely did not identify as gay, were an integral part of a gay culture emerging at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

By situating theatricality as the common feature of gay cultural practice, including the idolatry of Oscar Wilde and his continued place of prominence in gay culture, both activities that are perceived as effeminate *and* masculine are accounted for. Sinfield's description of Wilde as coalescing "a vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism" adequately describes such gay cultural practices as drag, diva-worship, and investments in the arts and fashion. Yet, such gay cultural activities associated with masculinity, such as sex in public toilets and parks, as well as the artwork of Tom of Finland, are not described by Sinfield's laundry list of adjectives. Though the association of public sex practices and the hyper-masculine gender expression in Tom of Finland only emerged in the sphere of gay culture in the second half of the twentieth century, their place in gay culture didn't negate the prominence of Wilde as prototype of the modern gay man. In fact, the feature of theatricality as the common denominator of gay cultural practice can account for how a diverse array of practices can be categorized under one label: Wilde can participate in gay culture just as blue collar men receiving oral sex in rest stop bathrooms do, which is to say that often both Wilde and blue collar men participate in same-sex sexual practices without identifying as gay, albeit for very different reasons.

The Dandy, and the hyper masculinity in the artwork of Tom of Finland discussed in the third chapter, both exhibit a theatrical sense of masculinity, which is markedly different than the masculinity exhibited the blue collar workers that also participated in gay culture. Both the dandy and the hyper-masculine figure featured in the artwork of Tom of Finland are invested in appearance, and consequently have very little use value in terms of accomplishing the work necessary to sustain life. In contrast, the masculinity of the blue collar worker is derived from the labor that their class position demands they do as part of both their own survival and for the maintenance of capitalism. Masculinity, though not necessarily an expression of a particular gender or sexual identity, is a prerequisite for inclusion in certain gay cultural spheres, especially those that involve sex. But, the kind of masculinity that offers a point of entry in a particular gay cultural sphere influences the way a person navigates that space. Although Wilde and the blue collar boys who he had sex can both be described as masculine, their masculinity is fundamentally different.

The aesthetic structure of theatricality underlies Sinfield's account of how Wilde as a dandy became paradigmatic of queer identity. In an analysis of Wilde's last trial, Sinfield writes, "The queer is the leisure-class man, and in so far as he commissions the lower-class boy he is superior, in the masculine position. In so far as he is by definition effeminate, and may take the 'passive' sexual role, he is allowing himself to become inferior – in the feminine position" (122). Sinfield implicitly outlines a double negation in his description: Wilde is masculine, in terms of belonging to a "superior" class by virtue of his socio-economic position as well as by virtue of his gender, while simultaneously being feminine, assuming Wilde as effeminate would prefer the receptive role in sex. (I

caution us not to conflate effeminacy with the receptive sexual role.) Sinfield implicitly gestures toward a hierarchy of age that also suggests the aesthetic structure of theatricality. Sinfield designates the young men whom testified against Wilde in his last trial as “boys,” in contrast to Wilde as a man. Wilde’s status as a man, in contrast to his boyish sexual partners, was a factor in his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas as well – Wilde repeatedly addressed Douglas as “My own dear boy.”²⁸ Sinfield could include the fact that Wilde’s age positions him as masculine in terms of having more power than the young men as young as sixteen years of age with whom he was engaging in sex with, thus establishing Wilde as not effeminate, he is the dominant partner in the sexual encounter, yet not-not effeminate, as he is a dandy, aesthete, and potentially the passive sexual partner .

The term effeminacy also suggests a structure of theatricality. As Sinfield notes early in *The Wilde Century*, “The function of effeminacy, as a concept, is to police sexual categories, keeping them pure” (26). Sinfield situates effeminacy as a characteristic that only male-bodied subjects can exhibit. The term “effeminacy,” which is often directed at men who exhibit fey, feminine qualities, especially if these men seem to be gay, is exemplary of the aesthetic of theatricality precisely because it merges that which is not masculine, feminine characteristics, with the not-not masculine, the male identified subject. Effeminate men are theatrical in so far as they are not masculine (they are feminine by definition), but simultaneously not-not masculine: their biological sex demands that they exhibit masculinity, which is assumed to be natural to them.

²⁸ See Moises Kaufman’s play *Gross Indecency*, which is compiled of letters and trial transcripts, and includes the recitation of one of Wilde’s letters to Douglas (27).

Effeminate men are not-not masculine because effeminacy as a concept only exists under the hegemonic assumption that all men are masculine.

The identity of the “dandy” can also be described in terms of theatricality. Especially in light of recent styles of dandyism that have emerged within queer woman communities, the dandy necessarily maintains a doubleness in terms of gender identity. The dandy “represents the over refinement and moral laxness the middle class hegemony ascribed as one way of stigmatizing upper class pretensions” (Sinfield 69). The dandy as invested in “over refinement” in terms of style and fashion, often associated with one of its primary progenitors Beau Brummel (1788-1840), has not only been embodied by men, such as Oscar Wilde, but can be seen in such figures as Radclyffe Hall, and other lesbian identified women throughout the twentieth century. What is consistent across genders is an investment in styles and fashions oriented toward the male body, such as suits and tuxedos. The dandy exhibits an aesthetic of theatricality in that the dandy merges the masculine, in so far as the “uniform” of the dandy is the suit and the appropriate necessary accessories, with the “feminine” qualities of refinement. As James Eli Adams notes, “Wilde rejuvenated the stance of the dandy, which had long vexed the middle-class imagination as an emblem of idle, unproductive existence and *thus of effeminacy*” (Italics added 220). The dandy exists as “unproductive,” or as Sinfield notes, as idle and useless suggesting that the role of the dandy must belong to a subject who was supposed to be active and productive, and consequently masculine (68). The dandy’s inherent masculinity is rendered feminine in so far as it repudiates labor and agency. The dandy is consequently not masculine, while simultaneously not-not masculine. The opposite can be said and remain true: The dandy is not feminine, while simultaneously not-not

feminine. The dandy evokes the aesthetic of theatricality in so far as the dandy does not intend to have the effect on the world that exhibiting characteristics of idleness and uselessness normally would effect. That is to say that masculine dress, which consequently evokes the masculine characteristics of power and activity, is employed to create an impression of passivity. Lastly, the lush fabrics worn and abundance of ornaments and accessories evidence the excessive character of dandy style, which has no practical use.

When Sinfield describes the role of Lord Alfred Douglas in Wilde's life in the trials he gestures toward the aesthetic structure of theatricality again. As Sinfield writes, Douglas was "only present figuratively, because the idea of pillorying a real aristocrat was too awful for anyone to entertain;" Douglas is absent, or in other words, negated (123). Sinfield goes on to claim that, despite Douglas' absence, queer identity emerged from "a composite: *Wilde + Douglas*" (123). The merging of Douglas and Wilde as the composite identity that established queerness for the twentieth century is doubly negated: doubled, the composite is not Wilde – who represents a single entity – but not-not Wilde, in so far as the name "Wilde" is the name that comes to stand in for the composite identity.

Theatrical Silence

The central charge against Wilde during his trials was never made explicit. As Ed Cohen remarks in the "Prologue" to *Talk on the Wilde Side*: "at no point did the newspapers describe or even explicitly refer to the sexual charges made against Wilde" (4). In *The Wilde Century*, Sinfield remarks, "New constructs are improvised or made-

up as *ad hoc* response; we catch that process at work when the *Evening Star* invites the reader to fill in the blank in the sentence “Oscar Wilde posing as _____” (11). Though never explicitly describing the actions that Wilde is “guilty” of, “sodomite,” “gross indecency,” or “the Love that dare not speak its name” function as the vague and indeterminate descriptions of what he did. Yet, in our popular consciousness, the “crimes” committed by Wilde are all too clear. The conception of Wilde’s crimes, which contributed to his iconographic status in the public imaginary, is theatrical insofar as it is unspeakable while simultaneously speaking volumes. The crime of “gross indecency” is not vague, insofar as the transgression it refers to is clear to those familiar with the trials; the crime of “gross indecency” though is not-not vague, insofar as the physical activity that constitutes the crime Wilde committed is not directly stated.

The accusation that Wilde was “posing as a sodomite” (sic) that is associated with his iconographic status also exhibits an aesthetic of theatricality. Wilde undoubtedly was invested in the act of posing. Wilde celebrates posing, a superficial appearance of being, in his most famous aphorisms: “to be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up” (487)²⁹, and, “It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances” (32). Wilde’s appreciation of posing is also evident in his public persona. The accusation that he was “posing as a sodomite” (sic) is true: Wilde was arguably posing as everything he was. Yet, as history has revealed, Wilde was not *just* posing – Wilde was in fact a sodomite. Consequently, in the popular understanding of Wilde, he was not posing – he was indeed exactly what he was accused of – and he was not-not posing – Wilde claimed

²⁹ This aphorism appears in the play *An Ideal Husband* and will be examined more closely later in this chapter. When quoted as an aphorism, it most often appears as it does here, but in the play, the aphorism appears as follows: Sir Robert Chiltern: You prefer to be natural?

Mrs Cheveley: Sometimes. But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up.

that any social identity and exhibition of any particular characteristic, even being “natural,” was merely a pose. Furthermore, the fact that the accusation Wilde was “posing as a sodomite” was spelled incorrectly situates this iconic anecdote and important event in his life as theatrical. Wilde was not a “sodomite”- no such thing exists, but Wilde was not-not a “sodomite” – insofar as the misspelling is, of course, understood to accuse Wilde of being a sodomite.

Theatricality is present in Wilde’s own self-indictment. When Wilde remarks that he participated in “the Love that dare not speak its name,” he simultaneously announces and silences the nature of the crime he is accused of committing. The language used to describe same-sex affection and/or eroticism is theatrical insofar as it declares itself while simultaneously “not speak[ing] its name.” The ambiguity of the word “love,” as both noun and verb, contributes to its paradoxical nature: Wilde could be speaking about a feeling, which then cannot be criminalized, or he could be referring to an act, which then can be situated as a criminal offence. In this case, love, as a feeling of affection, is not a crime, but love, as a euphemism for sex, and in this case homosexual sex, is not-not a crime.

Moises Kaufman’s *Gross Indecency*, a verbatim play which collages court documents, newspaper articles, and other historical sources to tell the story of Wilde’s three trials, provides insight into how Wilde was understood as iconographic at the time of its production in the 1990s. Because the script is not an attempt to reenact the historical fact of the trials, Kaufman’s play highlights the elements of the modern mythology of Wilde. The play ends with Wilde himself being forced into silence. After Wilde is found guilty of committing acts of gross indecency, the character of Oscar

Wilde in the play pleads, “May I say nothing, my lord?” Considering that Wilde describes homosexuality as “the Love that dare not speak its name” earlier in the play, the “nothing” that Wilde could say here, if permitted, could be an admission of his homosexuality. An audience infers from Wilde’s earlier speech regarding “the Love that dare not speak its name” an indictment of homosexuality’s forced silence and invisibility. If permitted to say “nothing” Wilde would express *something*. Wilde is in a position to outright declare and defend homosexuality in the public sphere now that he has nothing more to lose because he has been found guilty. Though he never explicitly claims that he is homosexual, Wilde silently comes out as homosexual and defends homosexuality over the course of the trials. Unlike other men charged with the same crime, Wilde does not flee England to avoid prosecution. Wilde’s willingness to defend himself in court is a silent declaration of the innocence of homosexuality. As is evident in the phrase “the Love that dare not speak its name,” Wilde never speaks the name of the love he is speaking of, but he silently defends it. Yet, by “silently” defending it in a speech given in court, he is not silent, and by never specifically “speaking its name,” Wilde is not-not silent.

Wilde’s plays, in particular *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, dramatize the unspeakable in a theatrical way. That is to say that, both plays involve characters having “secrets” which they cannot speak, but, by virtue of being performed in the theater, these characters speak ad nauseam of what they cannot and should not share with anyone else.

Ideal Theatricality

An Ideal Husband dramatizes a crisis in representation that is indicative of Wilde's life and work in general. Examining the plot of *An Ideal Husband* via the theoretical framework of public and private, attending to Habermas's elucidation of public and private in particular, situates the conflict of the play as driven by an incongruity between what the play's central character, Sir Robert Chiltern, represents in his public life as a Statesman and the truth of his private domestic life. The conflict of *An Ideal Husband* emerges when Chiltern's wealth is revealed to be generated from selling government secrets to make a profit, thus situating Chiltern's private domestic circumstances as mired in corruption, which contrasts his public life as a Statesman and his recognition as the paragon of morality. The conflict of *An Ideal Husband* centers on Chiltern's efforts to maintain the illusion of his moral and ethical reputation, not just in the public eye but in the eyes of his wife, Lady Chiltern, in light of revelations he acquired his wealth illegally and unethically. In essence, a seamless congruity between private life and public life would make Sir Robert Chiltern an ideal husband, at least in the eyes of his wife. *An Ideal Husband* mirrors the life of Wilde himself: The leading characters in both *An Ideal Husband*, Sir Robert Chiltern, and Wilde's life, Wilde himself, have activities that would damage their reputations in the public eye and that would expose an incongruity between their public selves and how those public selves are meant to reflect their private domestic life. The incongruity between public persona and private life dramatized in both *An Ideal Husband* and Wilde's life establishes a crisis of representation that comes to determine the sense of theatricality that defines gay cultural practice in the modern era.

This crisis of representation is inherent to theater practice itself, as the standard division between an actor and a character. By dramatizing a crisis of representation that mirrors conventional theater practice, *An Ideal Husband* functions as a metatheatrical nexus between representation in theater practice and representation in public life. *An Ideal Husband* highlights that the private life of a public figure is rarely, if ever, accurately reflected in the public persona. This came into focus in the public's perception of Wilde because his public persona was associated with theater practice.

Though the binary of public and private has been criticized as crude, messy, and incoherent, and does not have the totalizing power to order the political and social world, the categories of private and public maintain ideological force to influence, if not determine, our understanding of the social, cultural, economic, and political world. As literary theorist Caroline Levine points out, specifically in regard to the division between the private and public in Victorian England along gendered lines, "If we cannot do away with ideology, or with crude binaries, we can understand the cultural-political field as shaped by a web of competing attempts to impose order" (630). Levine goes on to claim, "Crude binary ideologies – such as separate spheres – can dominate the social, cultural, and economic world at some moments, while at others, pressed by alternative and competing political alternatives, they also falter, are transformed, or even temporarily disappear" (630). Rebecca Stern in her study *Home Economics: Domestic Fraud in Victorian England* notes, "Although Victorian England is famous for revering the domestic realm as a sphere separate from the market and its concerns [...] the Victorian ideology of separate spheres was precisely that – an ideology, one that operated alongside, and crucially depended for its popularity on, a reality that offered no such clear

separation” (4). As is evident in the drama of Oscar Wilde, specifically dramatized in his play *An Ideal Husband*, the division between public and private at the end of the nineteenth century was a dominant ideology, and even if it was not totalizing in its accurate description of social, cultural, and political life, it was a powerful mode in which to understand society. The categories of public and private undoubtedly continued to have power in determining how individuals navigated and understood the social, cultural, and political world over the course of the twentieth century, when the nuclear family and suburban home rose to prominence after the Second World War.

The plot of *An Ideal Husband* focuses on Sir Robert Chiltern, who is blackmailed by Mrs Cheveley when she reveals that she has in her possession a letter in which Chiltern wrote to Mrs Cheveley’s benefactor, Baron Arnheim, informing the Baron to buy shares in the Suez Canal three days before the English Government announced it would purchase the canal. Mrs Cheveley, who has purchased shares in a similar canal project in Argentina, one that Chiltern will advise the government not to invest in, blackmails Sir Robert Chiltern into, against his better judgment, recommending that the government invest in the Argentinean canal. Over the course of his career, Chiltern has become a paragon of political ethics and morality, which in turn has proved him to be an invaluable asset to the prosperity of England. The revelation that Chiltern is not the upstanding moral citizen and statesman he is believed to be would utterly destroy an otherwise impeccable reputation.

The revelation would also destroy his marriage. In the first act, Sir Robert Chiltern tries to persuade Lady Chiltern that he can be the upstanding moral citizen in private, even if he does morally and ethically questionable acts in public:

CHILTERN: Besides, Gertrude, public and private life are different things. They have different laws, and move on different lines.

LADY CHILTERN: They should both represent man at his highest, I see no difference between them. (500)

Here, Lady Chiltern is ventriloquizing Habermas's theory that public self-presentation "was guided specifically by such private experiences as grew out of the audience-oriented [...] subjectivity of the conjugal family's intimate domain" (28). In other words, Lady Chiltern claims that a person's public voice, especially in the realm of politics, is a direct reflection of his conjugal domestic life. The fact that Sir Robert Chiltern's past positions him not as the paragon of morality and ethics that his reputation as a Statesman has made him out to be disrupts the neat congruity assumed in Habermas's theory.

A division between public persona and private self is foreshadowed early in *An Ideal Husband*. In the first act of the play, when Lady Markby quips, "Indeed, as a rule, everybody turns out to be somebody else," she foreshadows the revelation of Chiltern's misdeeds, as well as pointing toward Wilde's own double life (486). Later in the first act, Mrs Cheveley echoes the Marquess' accusation that Wilde was "posing as a somdomite" (sic), but more importantly, indicates that the public presentation of the self is not merely an extension of an individual's private life. When Chiltern asks Mrs Cheveley if she prefers to appear "natural," Mrs Cheveley responds, "Sometimes. But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up" (487) Mrs Cheveley suggests that the assumed "natural" self at home in the domestic sphere can only be a public reality if it is consciously presented as the "natural" self in the public sphere. According to Mrs Cheveley, the public self can never be a congruous extension of the self that is nurtured in the private, domestic sphere.

Ironically, Mrs Cheveley knows very well that Sir Robert Chiltern's private circumstances corrupt his pristine public persona.

Mrs Cheveley's knowledge of the truth of Sir Robert Chiltern's private situation contrasts with Lady Chiltern's knowledge of her husband, and identifies a stark contrast between his domestic life and public self-presentation. Speaking to Lord Goring, Lady Chiltern declares, "No one, except myself, knows Robert better than you do. He has no secrets from me, and I don't think he has any from you" (510). Lady Chiltern assumes that her intimate knowledge of Sir Robert Chiltern's private life aligns with Sir Robert Chiltern's public persona. Yet, Mrs Cheveley, moments after Lady Chiltern declares she knows her husband better than anyone else, notes that wives often are unaware of the true nature of their husbands, despite the fact she shares a home with him. Responding to Lady Markby who remarks "modern women understand everything, I am told," Mrs Cheveley quips, "Except their husbands. That is the one thing the modern woman never understands" (516). Central to many of Wilde's social comedies, the division between the public and the private, mirrors the facts of Wilde's own life, and exhibits a structure of the aesthetics of theatricality.

The disjunction between Wilde's domestic life and his sexual life establishes *An Ideal Husband* as a metatheatrical text. The incongruity between a character and the actor who plays that character mirrors the difference between the public persona of Sir Robert Chiltern and the truth of his past. The public persona of Chiltern is analogous to the character in a play, a fiction presented to the general public, and Chiltern's private life is analogous to the actor, a private person whose domestic life is much different than the character he plays onstage. Chiltern is recognized by the end of the first act of *An Ideal*

Husband to be not only what he represents himself to be as a political figure, but also a different man outside of the political realm. A twentieth-century audience that is familiar with the iconography of Wilde as a gay man that was closeted and married would identify the language of *An Ideal Husband* as code for the incongruity between Wilde's domestic life and his sexual life. The language of "posing," of "being someone else," and of the necessity to mask one's "true" identity both describes the central conflict of *An Ideal Husband* and reflects acting in modern drama.

Furthermore, *An Ideal Husband* extends its metatheatrical reach beyond commenting on the art of the theater to the life of its author as well. *An Ideal Husband* contributes to Wilde's iconographic status in gay culture in the twentieth century by providing a code in which the initiated audience member is able to see, not just Wilde's insight into the art of acting, but a coded declaration of the true circumstances of Wilde's own domestic/sexual life. *An Ideal Husband*, as a play written for a public audience, then is a public, albeit coded, representation of the incongruity between Wilde's public life as a happily married monogamous heterosexual man and his sexual life that included frequently having sexual encounters with a variety of different young men from differing walks of life. *An Ideal Husband* simultaneously is a private expression of Wilde's actual life circumstances insofar as its codification was only exposed after certain private details of his life were revealed in the course of the trials. Consequently, *An Ideal Husband* is not a public, but not-not public description of the complexities of Wilde's actual life circumstances.

The Importance of Being Theatrical

The Importance of Being Earnest is inundated with references to doubleness.

Wilde's play is invested in binaries such as men/women, town/country, business/pleasure, sincerity/insincerity, authenticity/artifice, truth/lies, and others. The doubleness of such oppositions, incompatible by definition, are never resolved, but rather, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, are sustained simultaneously. Consequently, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is exemplary of the aesthetic of theatricality that situates Wilde as a gay cultural icon.

The central paradox of the play is the fact that Ernest is and always has been Ernest, but is not Ernest throughout most of the play, and that this contradiction means that Ernest is never, but always, earnest. "Ernest" is an identity that Algernon and Jack have in common. In the case of Jack, the identity of "Ernest" allows for Jack to escape his responsibilities in the country to pursue a lifestyle of debauchery in the city. Jack is exposed to be Jack/Ernest in the opening moments of the play after Algernon discovers a cigarette case Jack claims as his own with the name "Jack" engraved inside. Jack confesses that his name "isn't Ernest; it's Jack," to which Algernon suggests, "You're the most earnest-looking person I've ever seen" (257). Jack then explains, "Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country" (258). The identity of "Ernest," which Jack assumes while in town, functions as an opportunity for Jack to escape his domestic life and pursue debauchery and immoral behavior without the obligations of familial duty or reputation. Because the scandal of Jack's dishonesty to his friend Algernon comes early in the comedy, an audience would expect the doubled figure of Jack/Ernest to resolve into a single self-same identity by the end of the play. Yet, in the final moments of the

play, the Jack/Ernest figure remains double, and Algernon merges two identities as well. In the second act, Algernon arrives at Jack's estate posing as Ernest in order to woo Cecily. In conversation with Algernon in Act Two, Cecily blatantly draws the audience's attention to the concept of a "double life" when she asks Algernon, "I hope you have not been leading double life, pretending to be wicked and being good all the time. That would be hypocrisy" (277). In effect, "Ernest" permits Algernon to lead a double life as Cecily describes: one a life of familial duty and obligation, and another of immoral pleasure and freedom.

In the concluding moments of the play, the double nature of Jack/Ernest is consolidated, and consequently the dual persona of Algernon/Ernest is also established as true. Jack discovers, with the help of Lady Bracknell, that being named after his estranged father following family tradition, his first name is indeed Ernest. Jack, in his "bunburying," claimed he had a brother named Ernest. Consequently, Algernon discovers through the revelation of Jack's true birthright that he is indeed Jack's brother. Therefore, by being Jack's actual brother through blood, and Jack's claim that his (albeit fictional) brother is named Ernest, Algernon becomes Jack's brother "Ernest" as well. Jack and Algernon both discover that they are who they were "posing" to be all along: Ernest.

There is a parallel between the characters and plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the emergence of the homosexual as a visible social identity. According to Michel Foucault and later David M. Halperin, sexual identity, either heterosexual or homosexual, did not exist before sexuality was given attention by medical and legal authorities. As Halperin argues in his essay "Is There a History of Sexuality," sexual

identity (not to be confused with acts of sex) are a “uniquely modern production” (Halperin, 471). In the late nineteenth century, sexologist Dr. Richard von Krafft-Ebing included a series of case studies of men who pursued sexual acts with other men in his treatise on sex, *Psychopathia Sexualis*. His findings laid a foundation to establish a common identity determined by same-sex desire. In an analysis of Krafft-Ebing’s work, Harry Oosterhuis points out, “although Foucault himself stressed that sexuality was shaped rather than repressed by the scientific will to know, several historians have associated the emergence of science of sexuality with a deplorable medical colonization, replacing religious and judicial authority with a new form of medico-moral tyranny” (Oosterhuis, 68). In other words, homosexual identity was invented when medical authorities treated sexuality as an object of knowledge. Oosterhuis adds, “By publishing letters and autobiographies and by quoting statements of his patients *ad verbatim*, Krafft-Ebing enabled voices to be heard that were usually silenced” (Oosterhuis, 80). Later in his article Oosterhuis points out again that “‘perverts’ who wanted to make their voices heard in public depended on sympathetic physicians like Krafft-Ebing because medical science was the only respectable forum available” (Oosterhuis, 82). With their voice being heard in the public sphere of scientific discourse, common characteristics shared by men who participated in same-gendered sexual acts began to emerge, providing foundation for the birth of a homosexual identity.

The name of Ernest was given to Jack and Algernon in the play in the same way that the term “homosexual” was employed to describe men who had sex with men by the juridico-medical authorities in the late nineteenth century. Lady Bracknell metaphorically functions as the juridico-medical establishment when she performatively bestows the

name of Ernest upon Jack in the same retroactive fashion in which the term “homosexual” was applied by the juridico-medical establishment to describe men who had sex with men. As a figure of authority in the play – she holds the fate of Cecily in her hands, which subsequently places the fate of Jack, Algernon, and Gwendolyn in her hands as well – she can be interpreted as mirroring the juridico-medical establishment. Just as the term homosexual reached back in time to describe any and all men who had sex with other men, Jack/Ernest and Algernon/Ernest become what they always were – or rather, for our purposes, they become what they always were not: both Ernest and earnest.

Situating Wilde as the prototype of a member of gay culture, and consequently establishing him a gay icon, also performs a retroactive nomination in the same fashion as the establishment of the homosexual as a kind of person. During Wilde’s life, and after Wilde’s trials and subsequent death, Wilde was vilified, and was not immediately positioned as the icon of gay culture that he became in the twentieth century. Only after the fact, as Sinfield argues, does Wilde become the gay cultural icon he was throughout the mid to late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Just as Lady Bracknell succeeds in retroactively naming Jack and Algernon, gay culture retroactively establishes Wilde as a gay cultural icon. Consequently, Wilde was not gay in his lifetime, but Wilde was gay over the course of the twentieth century, and *is* gay today.

Lady Bracknell’s retroactive naming of Jack and Algernon is both theatrical *and* performative.³⁰ As outlined above, the retroactive christening of Jack and Algernon is

³⁰ Though Lady Bracknell is not responsible for naming Jack (and consequently Algernon) as Ernest, she is situated as the authority with the power to confirm and legitimate the process of determining Jack’s (and consequently Algernon’s) identity in the final scene of the play. Upon discovering that he is the child that Ms. Prism left at the train station, Jack turns to Lady Bracknell and asks “would you kindly inform me who

theatrical insofar as Lady Bracknell merges the identity of “Ernest,” which, as a homonym for earnest, is incompatible, or incongruous, with the identities of both Jack and Algernon. Lady Bracknell’s retroactive naming of Jack and Algernon is performative in that, like the examples J.L. Austin gives when defining performativity in *How To Do Things With Words*, the declaration that Jack and Algernon are Ernest makes them Ernest. Her act is socially authorized by finding the name of Jack’s father in the military records. The (re)christening of Jack and Algernon then is doubly theatrical. In the first sense, it is theatrical because it merges the incongruous identities of Ernest and Jack/Algernon. This theatrical element is doubled insofar as Lady Bracknell’s act merges the theatrical and the performative, which, relying on incongruity and congruity of effect respectively, are necessarily incongruous. In other words, the final moment of the play is doubly theatrical because it merges its established theatrical elements with an act of performativity, which is inherently incongruous to theatricality.

The Importance of Being Earnest is an important point of reference in the constellation that outlines the twentieth and twenty-first century iconography of Wilde because the play can be interpreted as a dramatization of an aesthetic of theatricality that is a structural feature of gay men’s lives. The paradoxical maintenance of two contradictory truths saturates Wilde’s play: the pose is revealed to be authentic and lies turn out to be truths. *The Importance of Being Earnest* exhibits of structure of double negation insofar as Jack and Algernon are not posing as Ernest, but not-not Ernest, are not lying when they claim to be Ernest and not-not lying when they take that name. As an

I am?” And later, when determining what his proper Christian name is, Jack turns to Lady Bracknell again to ask “what name was I given?” That is all to say that, even though Lady Bracknell did not perform the Christening in the first place, in the final scenes of the play, she is the figure that is bestowed with the socially authority to confirm and legitimate Jack (and consequently Algernon’s) identity.

instance of gay culture, the play itself is not about homosexuality, but is not-not about homosexuality.

The Theatricality of Camp

Susan Sontag dedicates her famous essay “Notes on ‘Camp’” to Oscar Wilde, and litters Wilde’s epigrams throughout her enumerated notes. Sontag claims that there is a strong affinity between homosexuals and camp, and consequently, by situating Wilde prominently in her “Notes,” positions Wilde as a gay icon (64). Sontag writes, “While it’s not true that Camp taste *is* homosexual taste, there is no doubt a peculiar affinity and overlap. [...] homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard – the most articulate audience, of Camp” (64). Because Wilde as a gay icon would have been assumed and unquestioned at the time at which Sontag published “Notes on Camp,” Sontag does not strongly develop her sense of Wilde’s relationship to gay culture in general and camp more specifically. Though Wilde is mentioned several times in the enumerated notes themselves, Sontag never explains why the epigrams she includes are either examples of camp or why they further elucidate the elusive concept of camp. Applying the definition of theatricality as an aesthetic of double negation to Wilde’s epigrams included in Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” elucidates the particular character of camp while also further positioning Wilde as a gay icon in the twentieth century. Specifically, by associating the figure of Wilde with camp aesthetics, an aesthetic that is often expressed through language, Wilde is exemplary of gay cultural iconography.

In much of the scholarship on the term, camp is explicitly or implicitly described as theatrical. Sontag explicitly describes camp as “theatrical,” though she does not offer

an explanation of what she means by “theatrical,” when she writes “the theatricalization of experience [is] embodied in the Camp sensibility” (61); Jack Babuscio lists theatricality as one of the four constitutive components of camp, alongside irony, aestheticism, and humor (1993, 20-1); Harvey describes camp in terms of “parody” and “performance,” a concept that evokes both the theater and a kind of theatricality (1149); and in her ethnographic study of drag queens titled *Mother Camp*, Esther Newton claims, “The double stance toward role, putting on a good show while indicating distance (showing that it is a show) is the heart of drag as camp” (109). Whether the literature specifically defines camp as theatrical,³¹ or describes camp as artificial, failed seriousness, juxtaposition, paradox, role-playing, or excessive, most scholarship concerning camp understands it as demonstrating the features of theatricality. Employing the definition of theatricality as an aesthetic of excessive double negation reveals that theatricality is the structural foundation of camp and situates it amongst other gay cultural practices.

The quality of “being-as-role-playing” is a definitive feature of theatricality, and one of the characteristics of camp. David M. Halperin claims that when Sontag notes “‘Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp;’ not a woman, but a ‘woman’” that “It is camp’s alienated queer perspective on socially authorized values that reveals Being to be a performance of being (“Being-as-Playing-a-Role”)” (195). Halperin gestures toward “socially authorized values” as the basis on which camp

³¹ Jack Babuscio lists theatricality as one of the four features of camp in his essay “The Cinema of Camp (AKA Camp and the Gay Sensibility)” where he relies on a concept of theatricality as role-playing. The role-playing that he outlines as a common feature of camp employs incongruity and double negation along the same lines as the concept of theatricality.

aesthetics are constructed.³² In other words, Halperin implies that camp maintains the socially authorized meaning or understanding of an object, person, or phenomenon alongside the “queer perspective.” Similar to the operation of a theatrical aesthetic, which demands that an audience treat an object, person, act, or phenomenon as both what it is not and what it is not-not, “Gay male culture typically operates in two social registers at once [...] relying on the irony fundamental to camp to hold aristocratic and egalitarian attitudes together in a delicate, dynamic equipoise” (Halperin 183). The two social registers can be conceived as the not and not-not, an aesthetic of double negation, or of a thing being that thing, while simultaneously being what it’s not.

The character of role play, or in other words, “of-things-being-what-they-are-not” central to camp aesthetics is also apparent in the feature of peripety that is a common characteristic in Wilde’s drama, and specifically in his epigrams. As Joesph Bristow claims in “Dandies and Dowdies: Wilde’s Refashioning of Social Comedy,” Wilde’s dramas often include “the dramatic reversal in fortune – where a given structure is rapidly turned upside down and back to front,” and that “[f]or everywhere we look in Wilde’s works, we encounter an arresting changeover of familiar devices into things that often seem completely unanticipated - sometimes by hilariously testing the limits of dramatic plausibility” (Bristow 1994). Peripety in Wilde’s drama and epigrams can also be understood as “of-things-being-what-they-are-not.” When a dramatic reversal that tests

³² Babuscio situates an incongruity central to camp aesthetics in terms of deviating from social norms of gender and masculinity/femininity. He writes: “At the core of this perception of incongruity is the idea of gayness as a moral deviation. Sex/love between two men or two women is regarded by society as incongruous – out of keeping with the ‘normal,’ ‘natural,’ ‘healthy’ heterosexual order of things” (120). Even this incongruity seems to be doubly negative: pairing two men or two women seems to depict congruity – categorically “man” mirrors “man.” Yet, in terms of the “normal [...] heterosexual order of things,” this formulation is somehow not congruous. Consequently, the sexual pairing of two members of the same-sex is both camp and theatrical in that it is not incongruous, but not-not incongruous.

the “limits of [...] plausibility” occur, the thing produced in the reversal becomes that which it was not, such as when Cecily describes her diary as scandalous and she transforms herself from diary author into diary reader. The charm of this reversal, and often the source of the humor, depends on the maintenance of original assumption that Wilde exploits and its juxtaposition with a contrasting meaning.

The line from *An Ideal Husband* that Sontag includes in her “Notes on ‘Camp,’” “To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up,” exemplifies the “of-things-being-what-they’re-not” character of camp. Though merely a short quip, the meaning of “natural” that is assumed at the beginning of the line is overturned by the end: “Natural” is assumed to be synonymous with “authentic,” and the suggestion that “natural” is a pose, as a conscious act that is associated with being inauthentic, reverses the assumed authenticity of the word. In order for this short quip to have its clever and humorous effect, the concept of “natural” is not authentic, after all that is what the quip suggests, but is primarily assumed to be not-not authentic, mirroring the aesthetic structure of double negation.

Later in “Notes on Camp,” Sontag includes another peripetian epigram that exemplifies theatricality: “Life is too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it.” Here, the assumption that *important* matters are synonymous with *serious* matters is reversed: Wilde divorces “important” from its association with “serious.” Again, for this epigram to maintain its charm, the concept of “important” is rendered not serious, while simultaneously maintaining the socially accepted association of “important” with seriousness that it is not-not serious. When Halperin notes that camp “call[s] into question the conventional scale of values that determine relative degrees of social

dignity,” he gestures toward a peripetian reversal of the socially accepted meanings of such values as seriousness, a reversal that is a common feature of camp and exhibits the aesthetic of double negation (194).

Infusing the concept of seriousness with double negation also appears in one of Wilde’s epigrams in Sontag’s “Notes on ‘Camp:’” “One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.” Nell is the tragic character in Charles Dickens *The Old Curiosity Shop* who dies after heroically rescuing her grandfather and bringing him to safety. Because Nell is exemplary of tragic heroism, Wilde’s epigram capitalizes on the assumption that Nell’s death should elicit tears. But by suggesting that there is something humorous in Nell’s death, Wilde suggests that that which is serious, not just death itself, but the death of a child, is not serious. Or in other words, as expressed in Wilde’s epigram, Nell’s death is paradoxically not serious and not-not serious.

The incongruity between the socially expected effect or purpose of a certain object and its actual effect or purpose, as often suggested by Wilde’s epigrams, exhibits the aesthetic structure of excessive double negation. Cecily’s clever quip in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, “I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train,” is exemplary of this incongruity. The conceit of this epigram is predicated on the incongruity between the socially expected purpose of a diary to be a record of one’s own life and the suggestion that, even though the reader/author is familiar with its contents, the diary is a source of entertainment and scandal. The incongruity is found in the contrast between the socially accepted assumption that one can’t be scandalized by the details of one’s own life and the diary as

equivalent to gossip or tabloid journalism. The incongruity is a peripetian reversal: the diary is presumed to function as a private document, but then is described as a public document. This incongruity suggests a paradox: the diary has the effects of both a private record and a public document, which is also a feature of camp, and of the aesthetic of theatricality.

The characteristic of paradox³³ is evident in Wilde's epigram, "I adore simple pleasures, they are the last refuge of the complex," which Sontag also includes in "Notes on 'Camp.'" This epigram reverses the assumed association between "simple" and superficial, self-evident, or shallow. In this epigram, Wilde rejects the accepted understanding of simplicity, and positions simple pleasures as the opposite: complex. This paradox is theatrical: simple pleasures are not-complex, by definition, but according to Wilde and his refined taste and intellect, simple pleasures are not-not complex. The paradoxical incongruity between the socially accepted character of a certain object or person is also the source of the charm and humor of this epigram: "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 26). Here, the socially accepted character of a "shallow person" is precisely the kind of person who *does* "judge by appearances." Yet, in Wilde's overall philosophy, and explicitly articulated in this epigram, the wise person, who is socially accepted to not be shallow, knows that the surface is where all meaning is to be located, but because the definition of being shallow is assumed to include the superficial, seeing only the surface of things, then this wise person is not-not shallow. The socially accepted activity of a shallow

³³ In an essay titled "Describing Camp Talk: Language/Pragmatics/Politics," Harvey lists "Paradox *through*" as a verbal strategy for producing camp (243).

person is incongruous to the definition proposed by Wilde's epigram, which consequently exhibits the aesthetic of theatricality.

The character of theatricality as a feature of camp, as outlined by Babuscio, is evident in Wilde's epigram, "To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up," found in Sontag's "Notes on Camp." In this epigram, theatricality is evident in the suggestion that everyone is "posing" as "natural," countering the assumption that "natural" is the *tabula rasa* of being. Wilde's quip exposes the assumption that "natural" is the foundation upon which anyone who wishes to act, role-play, or pose. Hence, even the most basic and assumed feature of a person, being "natural," is determined to be role-playing. Everything for Wilde, as made evident in this epigram, is role-playing. Exposing "nature" as role-playing, establishes that it is not natural, but also, by definition, the natural is not-not natural, which consequently positions it as theatrical.

The dynamic of play between an excess³⁴ of meaning is central to Wilde's style, and evident in many of his epigrams. When Wilde writes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about," he exploits multiple meanings of what it means to be talked about. The first assumed meaning Wilde invites his reader to consider is being talked about as a kind of gossip concerning the particular subject's scandals or misdeeds. The second meaning evoked in Wilde's epigram is that being talked about can also mean being celebrated for one's achievements. (But for Wilde, an achievement could be a scandal or misdeed.)

³⁴ Alongside double negation, a quality of excess is an essential element of theatricality, and also a feature inherent to camp aesthetics. In her "Notes on Camp," Sontag evidences the extravagance of camp in the figure of "a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers" (59). The glamour evoked in camp is also suggested when Sontag cites the camp character of opera, ballet, and other "high" culture artifacts that are associated with wealth and luxury today.

Both colloquial meanings of the epigram are evoked and maintained in order for the quip to have charm and comic effect.

The excess of meaning at play in Wilde's epigrams, and central to camp, often takes the form of a paradox, but not a paradox that demands to be resolved.³⁵ The paradoxes that are campy, and consequently exhibit an aesthetic of theatricality, are charming, humorous, and pleasurable precisely because *multiple* paradoxical meanings are maintained. The paradox of the diary as both private record and public record, being talked about as being both good and bad, simple pleasures being complex, and being natural as a pose, require that both the primary meaning and a secondary meaning are maintained. The primary meaning, or more specifically the socially authorized meaning, of the diary, of being talked about, of simple pleasures, and of being natural is maintained, when a secondary meaning is evoked, usually a meaning that opposes the primary socially accepted meaning and contradicts the first.

³⁵ In his study of camp utterances, Harvey notes that double entendre and puns are camp: two linguistic practices that demand an incongruity is identified between two distinct meanings emerging from a singular utterance (243). Harvey argues that double entendre and puns belong to a semiotic strategy of ludicism: "The ludicist is a speaker who not only delights in intentionally exploiting the proliferating possibilities between signifier/signified relationship, but also opens himself or herself – passively, we might say – to the processes of instability, indeterminacy and multiplication (of senses and sounds) that are inherent in language" (247). His description of "ludicism" abounds in language of excess: "exploiting," "proliferating," "possibilities," and "multiplication." Furthermore, Harvey associates ludicism as engaging in a heightened awareness of language, again evoking a sense of excess (247). Similar to the excess apparent in Harvey's explanation of ludicism, Babuscio notes that camp "is also a method whereby one can multiply personalities, play various parts, assume a variety of roles – both for fun as well as out of need" (121). Here, both Harvey and Babuscio echo the multiplication of identities that camp encourages, especially when attempting to pass as heterosexual. Like the multiplication and heightened state evoked in Harvey's examination of camp utterances, Davis and Postlewait note that theatricality "has also been used to describe the 'heightened' states when everyday reality is exceeded by its representation" (6). When Harvey describes puns as "the co-presence of two meanings entwined by the grammatical re-analysis of (part of) a syntagm with retrospective effect," he once again highlights *excessive* meaning beyond the standard intention to communicate a singular thought.

Wilde's epigrams demand that his audience differentiate between two distinct entities encapsulated in one phrase or word.³⁶ Wilde's epigrams are charming and humorous because they encourage his audience to interpret the diary as both private record and public record, to appreciate that being talked can be both good and bad, and that being natural is also a pose. In Wilde's epigrams, the audience is positioned as an interpreter: they must acknowledge a multiplicity of meanings in a singular word or phrase, and cannot be satisfied with the primary, socially authorized definition of a thing or person. This echoes the necessary dynamic between an audience and an act, object, or utterance to determine whether that which is being encountered is theatrical or not. Furthermore, the audience is required to both accept the primary and privileged meaning of an act, object, or utterance as the socially accepted value of that thing, and then *recode* that act, object, or utterance with an alternate meaning that contrasts the socially determined one.

Scholars who argue that camp is mere style and devoid of content miss the ways in which camp necessarily maintains two contrasting meanings in a single entity, utterance, or phenomenon. That is to say that, camp *requires* content to function. Camp cannot be abstract, or contentless, because camp necessitates, as Halperin notes, a "resistance to received mainstream values" (179). Hence, camp requires that its audience acknowledge both the mainstream, or socially authorized, meaning *as well as* the recoded gay value attributed to it. Camp, as I have shown, exhibits the aesthetic of theatricality, insofar as it is both doubly negated *and* excessive. The multiple contrasting objects, acts,

³⁶ Another feature of theatricality common to the critical literature on the subject is the necessity for a spectator to differentiate between two distinct entities, be it reality and fiction, or character and actor. This is elucidated in greater detail in the introduction.

or phenomena merged in camp do not cancel each other out, no matter how incompatible they are socially assumed to be. Rather, the multiple contrasting or oppositional objects, acts, or phenomena are held aloft, are maintained, and are invited to participate in a perpetual dynamic of play. There isn't a dearth of content, but rather an excess of content that is maintained despite exhibiting an aesthetic of double negation.

Wilde is iconographic of camp insofar as he offers exemplary instances of camp expressed through words and consequently is the celebrity figure that anchors Sontag's seminal formulation of camp aesthetics. Camp aesthetics are prominent in gay culture, but should not be conceived as the constitutive aesthetic structure of all gay cultural phenomena. Camp is merely one of many gay cultural phenomena that exhibit the aesthetic structure of theatricality. The aesthetic structure of theatricality is apparent in both the life and work of gay culture darling Nina Arsenault and the much-celebrated gay erotic artwork of Tom of Finland, the focus of the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER TWO: THEATRICAL FEMININITY

Stereotypical Signs that Point in a Different Direction

With teased hair, large perky breasts, and an hourglass figure, she is obviously feminine. But there is something excessive, almost *aggressive*, about her femininity. With large bulging muscles, broad shoulders, and a military buzz cut, he is obviously masculine. But his masculinity seems to be merely a façade – strength and power reduced to aesthetics. The stereotypical signs of masculinity and femininity exhibited by bodies like these, bodies found in nightclubs, drag clubs, pornography and other gay cultural sites, exemplify normative masculinity and femininity but also express a non-normative gender aesthetic. Gay cultural practices deploy the qualities and characteristics of gender stereotypes to produce gender styles that can be understood as conventionally masculine or feminine, but disrupt the expectations that are established in the narratives that attend stereotypical concepts of gender. In other words, gay cultural practice recodes normative gender categories to produce styles of *theatrical* femininity and masculinity. In order to understand how gay cultural practice produces theatrical styles of gender by recoding normative gender categories, an explanation of how conceptions of gender coalesce into stereotypes, and how stereotypes function in general, is necessary.

In *The Matter of Images*, film scholar Richard Dyer offers an explanation for what a stereotype is, and how stereotypes organize society. Following from the work of journalist and political commentator Walter Lippman, Dyer understands stereotypes as “(i) an ordering process, (ii) a ‘short cut’ (iii) referring to ‘the world,’ and (iv) expressing ‘our’ values and beliefs.” (11). Describing how stereotypes function as an “ordering process,” Dyer writes,

Stereotypes as a form of “ordering” the mass of complex and inchoate data that we receive from the world are only a particular form – to do with the representation and categorization of persons – of the wider process by which any human society, and individuals within it, make sense of that society through generalities, patterning, and “typifications” (12).

The stereotype of femininity allows for society to differentiate a category of person, in this case masculine persons (usually men), from feminine persons (usually women) by identifying a certain set of qualities and characteristics. A stereotype, such as the stereotype of femininity or masculinity, provides a “very simple, striking, easily grasped form of representation [that is] none the less capable of condensing a great deal of complex information and a host of connotations,” or in other words, stereotypes function as “short-cut[s]” (Dyer 12). According to Dyer, “stereotypes are a particular sub-category of a broader category of fictional characters, the type,” and, “The type is any character constructed through the use of a few immediately recognizable and defining traits, which do not change or ‘develop’ through the course of the narrative and which point to general, recurrent features of the human world” (13). As a subset of the type, the stereotype refers to a “general, recurrent feature of the human world” by relying on the fantasy of social consensus. Dyer writes, “Stereotypes proclaim, ‘This is what everyone – you, me, and us – thinks of members of such-and-such a social group are like’” (14). Key to the disruption of masculine or feminine stereotypes practiced in gay culture is how “stereotypes always carry within their very representation an implicit narrative” (15). The stereotype of masculinity presents an image of a man that is strong, active, virile, and

natural to contrast the weak, meek, passive and unnatural image of a feminine woman³⁷.

As is evident in the analysis of the particular styles of femininity or masculinity performed in gay culture, theatrical femininity and masculinity exhibit the qualities and characteristics of normative femininity and masculinity while disrupting the social expectations attending the narratives of these stereotypes.

The characteristics and qualities of normative gender categories coalesce to form stereotypes performatively. As Judith Butler has illustrated, gender is socially constructed through the performative repetition of stylized acts (Butler 191). The stylized acts that constitute normative gender categories crystallize to produce socially accepted ideals of femininity and masculinity that are then mapped on the corresponding bodies determined to belong to either the female or male sex. The qualities and characteristics exhibited through the execution of the stylized acts that constitute normative gender categories allow society to differentiate between women and men. As a form of stereotype, the stylized acts that constitute normative gender categories can be understood as a part of a larger, implicit narrative that attends the stereotype of femininity and masculinity. Specifically, positioning masculinity as the active and penetrative partner in the implicit narrative of sexual activity maps masculinity on male bodies (equipped with a penis to allow for penetration) and distinguishes itself from femininity, which is consequently positioned as passive and penetrated.

The social construction of gender that conflates sex, gender, and desire has social consequences. As Butler has illustrated, the performativity of gender norms constitutes a subject who involuntarily performs stylized acts that produce the illusion of gender in and

³⁷ Women are often depicted as “unnatural” because of the presence of make-up and cosmetics, which directly contrasts images of masculine men which efface any use of make-up or cosmetics.

on the body (Butler 1990, 1993). The illusion of gender that emerges through the performative repetition of certain stylized acts necessarily exists in relation to the stereotypes of feminine and masculine ideals. After all, these stereotypes of gender norms are mere crystallizations, “short-cuts,” of categories of different groups of people, in the case of gender, men and women. The stereotypes of normative gender categories and the narratives attending them include certain activities that are conceived of as “natural” insofar as they are thought to extend from the “biological” distinctions between women and men. Butler gestures toward the appeal to “nature” and “biology” to legitimate the illusion of gender norms when she writes, “Consider that a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a ‘natural sex’ or a ‘real woman,’ or any number of prevalent or compelling social fictions, and that this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another” (191). We can conceive of Butler’s “sedimentation” as similar to the crystallization of “complex and inchoate data” that constellates to form stereotypes.

The features of femininity and masculinity that accompany the social construction of gender norms extend from the assumption that activities required to create and sustain life are discreetly divided between the stereotypical categories of men and women. The qualities and characteristics of the stereotypical conceit of masculinity, such as strength, power, capacity to work, virility, and command over nature, are associated with the responsibilities that attend the role of normative masculinity in the production and sustenance of life. The assumption that the characteristics and qualities that define the stereotype of masculinity are inherent to men because they have use, because they are

required for the maintenance and production of biological, “natural” life, is instrumental in the next chapter’s analysis of the art work of Tom of Finland. Conversely, the qualities and characteristics of the stereotypical conceit of femininity, such as sexualized beauty and domesticity, are associated with the responsibility that attends the role of normative femininity in the production and sustenance of life. This chapter examines the life and art of gay cultural icon Nina Arsenault, who is exemplary of a style of theatrical femininity that employs stereotypical signifiers of femininity to embody and express non-normative conceptions of femininity.

Meet Ms. Arsenault

With a surgically altered body that exhibits unreal proportions—large breasts, hourglass silhouette, large lips, chiseled cheekbones, shaved brow—Nina Arsenault, a celebrated transgender icon in Canada’s gay community, paradoxically succeeds in challenging oppressive gender norms by embodying them. Arsenault unabashedly declares that her particular style of femininity has been influenced by Mattel’s Barbie, a figure—both as a popular icon and as a bodily form—who has been criticized for establishing unreal standards of feminine beauty. Ironically, Arsenault has been lauded for embodying the very standards of femininity that Barbie has been criticized for promoting. She has been awarded the Toronto Pride award for “continuing to challenge and illuminate her community’s constructed notions of sex and beauty” (website), as well as the Bruce Bryden “Redefine the Possible” Award from the York University Alumnae Association for her contributions to LGBTQ publications (such as the once popular but now defunct *Fab Magazine*), appearances in nightclubs, sold out performances at many

LGBT or LGBT-allied theater companies across the world, and overall contribution to the gay community. Evident in the many striking and provocative images she produces in collaboration with photographers, in her contributions to queer publications, as well as in her performance art and theater work, all of her artistic endeavors, one way or another, express her unique gender identity. Arsenault's theatrical gender identity is the distinguishing feature that establishes her as a gay cultural icon.

Nina Arsenault is a striking vision of familiar, yet unfamiliar, feminine attributes. Unable to alter her "masculine" stature of six feet, which is often propped up in stiletto pumps, Arsenault is an unavoidable imposing presence in public. In the media and on television, when her height cannot be discerned, Arsenault teases her wig and weaves, and so her excessive appearance is apparent. She always wears her bangs over one eye, leaving her other eye, which is always covered in eye liner and eye shadow, visible. Over the course of her sixty plus cosmetic surgeries, Arsenault has chiseled cheek bones that float above a fine and angular jaw line. Her pouty lips are, as she often tells an audience eager to hear about her transformation, a result of telling her plastic surgeon "make them as big as you can. Then make them a bit bigger. Then make them *a lot* bigger" (Arsenault, Aldridge). Her silhouette, also drastically altered through many cosmetic procedures, is a perfect hourglass shape: a dramatic hip to waist ratio, underneath a large, ample bust. All these attributes, described on their own, would suggest that Arsenault exhibits a standard, ideal femininity seen in the likes of Barbie. Yet, Arsenault's particular style of femininity, despite being built by marshalling these stereotypically feminine traits, evades, or exceeds, socially acceptable femininity. Evident in her general physical appearance on-stage, on screen, and in everyday life, *as well as* consciously

expressed through the narratives she shares about herself in all these forums, Arsenault is not normatively feminine, she is obviously unique, but she is also not-not feminine: Arsenault's femininity is theatrical.

Arsenault is not the only hyper-femme person who is celebrated in gay culture. Arsenault belongs to a club of celebrated hyper-femme figures that includes Amanda Lepore, the hyper femme model, actress, socialite trans-woman, and Mandy Goodhandy, Toronto based activist, nightclub owner, and trans-woman. Arsenault, Lepore, and other transgender women have consciously constructed a hyper-feminine gender identity through sartorial and medical technologies, and exhibit their self-consciously constructed genders in media and nightclubs and through other art practices. Arsenault is exemplary of a *theatrical* aesthetic of femininity that is exhibited by many transgender feminine icons in gay culture.

Arsenault marshals stereotypical images and qualities of femininity to construct a hyper-femme body and persona that is theatrical. Through both performance in conventional artistic contexts and activity enacted in her day-to-day life, Arsenault "represents the relationship between the female self and the constructed, personally designed feminine body she inhabits" (Rudakoff 3). The distinction between theatricality and the concept of performativity specifies the particular structure of the aesthetic of theatricality and provides a theoretical lens in which to explain why Arsenault's femininity is best understood as a *theatrical* expression of gender. Though her gender identity does not have performative effects that are congruous to the femininity that she exhibits, by living day-to-day as a woman her gender identity is unavoidably and necessarily constituted performatively. Yet, she also challenges performativity as the

dominant theoretical framework in which gender can be understood insofar as she also appeals to, and challenges, the conventional trans narratives that often legitimate or authorize trans identities. She appeals to theatrical and artistic endeavors both to understand and validate her unique gender identity and consequently challenges Butler's theory of gender performativity, which disqualifies art practice, and the stage in particular, as a site to construct and exhibit authentic gender. By merging two contradictory theoretical frameworks that explain how gender emerges in and on the body, she is socially accepted as a feminine woman, but also paradoxically denied a claim to socially accepted, authentic femininity. In other words, Arsenault is simultaneously not feminine and not-not feminine: She is exemplary of *theatrical* femininity.

Drag, Trans, and Other Theories of Gender

Nina Arsenault lives day-to-day as a woman. Her quotidian life includes most of the same activity that a cis-gendered woman would perform over the course of her day. "I Was B@rbie," "The Silicone Diaries," photographs, and her media appearances, gesture toward a day-to-day life that is similar to anyone who lives their life as biologically born and raised female. Arsenault's body of work both on and off stage involves such acts as wearing makeup, wearing dresses, wearing long hair, and myriad other gestures or movements that are stereotypically and socially accepted to produce authentic femininity. Yet, understanding Arsenault's feminine gender through the concept of performativity, as established by J.L. Austin and evolved by queer theorist Judith Butler, establishes

Arsenault as authentically feminine yet paradoxically disqualifies her from being authentically feminine, thus positioning her as theatrically feminine.

For Butler, a socially acceptable set of repeated acts constitutes the performative construction of gender. Butler claims that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” and that “[t]his repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experience of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (191). In other words, for any set of acts to produce a culturally intelligible style of gender, there must be general social agreement that that *particular* set of acts can successfully constitute what is recognized as gender. Often, these acts and characteristics coalesce to form stereotypes. We, for instance, can conceive of certain stylized acts repeated over time that *do not* constitute gender, nor gender stereotypes, if they constitute anything at all. Gender stereotypes are a useful crystallization of certain acts and characteristics that are socially agreed upon to constitute gender performatively. This is not to say that *only* normative gender styles are socially accepted as intelligible gender, but rather, that certain stylized acts repeated over time are socially accepted to produce gender that is intelligible as gender in the first place.

Arsenault’s performance and performative construction of gender is theatrical insofar as it employs a set of stylized acts that are socially accepted to successfully constitute intelligible, if not normative, gender, but does not successfully, or “felicitously,” enact the performative effects expected when enacting and repeating those acts. That is to say that the effects of Arsenault’s performative gender construction are not congruous to the expected effects of embodying and executing those stylized acts.

Arsenault appeals to gender stereotypes to produce a theatrical gender identity. In other words, Arsenault's performativity of gender would be like uttering the words "I bet" but being understood as saying "I promise." In fact, Arsenault refuses to participate in the social norms that would demand that her deployment of gender stereotypes produce the illusion of normative femininity (Arsenault interviewed by Kurt). Arsenault's performative constitution of gender produces non-normative effects despite how the set of stylized acts she embodies produces normative femininity in other instances. Hence she exhibits a gender that is fundamentally incongruous to the effects that such a stylized set of acts should produce.

Differentiating theatrical performances of gender from performative constructions of gender clarifies a distinction between performativity and theatricality, which explains the cultural capital of drag aesthetics in gay social spheres in general, and Arsenault's hyper-femme gender identity specifically. The performance of drag, on the stage and in the club, is theatrical rather than performative because it does not have the same congruous effects that the reiteration of the same repetition of acts involved in doing drag have in an everyday context. By embodying a stylized repetition of acts that constitute femininity in everyday contexts, such as wearing feminine clothing, wearing make up, walking in a feminine way, etc., drag queens do not constitute normative femininity. Drag is theatrical precisely because the acts involved in drag do not have congruous effects to what these same acts would have in everyday life: the appropriation of a stylized set of acts essential to standard drag practice does not produce socially accepted authentic femininity. Conversely, a person executing a "stylized repetition of acts" day-to-day over the course of time constitutes themselves as exhibiting a culturally

intelligible gender *through* the execution of these acts. Consequently, drag is theatrical precisely because the acts involved in such a performance do not have effects congruous to the ones these same acts would have in everyday life: these acts do not produce normative femininity. Following from Butler's theory, gender is performative insofar as the stylized repetition of acts, even though they could conceivably be the same acts repeated by a drag queen, constitutes authentic femininity.

Distinguishing the difference between drag as theatrical representation of gender and gender as performative explains why drag is a celebrated phenomenon in gay culture. Because the effects of drag are not congruous to the performative act that executing such a stylized set of acts would entail, drag fails to constitute the actual construction of feminine gender: drag does not produce *authentic* femininity, but merely the signs of femininity that consciously, and often barely, conceal the male body performing them. Conversely, drag requires the same set of acts to produce the illusion of feminine gender on the body that the performative constitution of gender does, and so we can say that drag performance does not-not produce femininity. Drag thus is not a method of constructing feminine gender and not-not a mode of constituting femininity. Conceived this way, drag exhibits an aesthetic of theatricality that situates it as a cultural practice that is foundational to gay culture.

Arsenault challenges Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity specifically because she participates in a style of femininity reminiscent of drag in the quotidian realm where Butler contends authentic gender is constituted. Arsenault consciously employs the signifiers that constitute stereotypical femininity to construct a feminine gender identity that is, in a similar fashion to drag, consciously crafted. In "The Silicone

Diaries,” Arsenault recounts a pivotal moment in her development as a hyper-femme transsexual when, upon deciding to wear a three-pound weave day-to-day, Arsenault reminds herself that “People say, ‘Don’t do that. Don’t do that. You won’t look like a real woman if you do that. You’ll look like a drag queen if you do that’” (215). When Arsenault rejects that “It has to be enough. You have to accept yourself. You have to accept your body. Just be proud. Be a proud transgendered woman” and declares “This is the most I will ever look like a normal, natural woman,” because “It’s not enough” to be natural and normal, she refuses the off-stage space of the real world where legitimate, socially accepted femininity is performatively enacted and ushers the on-stage space of the drag queen into the day-to-day (216). By bringing drag queen aesthetics, which Butler dismisses as mere gender “performance” and consequently cannot qualify as a successful performative constitution of gender, into the day-to-day, in a context in which the subject claims to be expressing an aspect of their soul, Arsenault bridges both performative constitutions of gender and trans-narratives to construct her feminine gender identity.

After appealing to “drag” as an example of gender performativity, Butler clarifies that gender is *not* a theatrical construction (Butler xxiii 2011). Butler writes:

Performativity is thus not a singular “act,” for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical: indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (xxiii).

Butler claims that gender is not, and can never be, “conflated with voluntarism or individualism, much less with consumerism, and in no way presupposes a choosing

subject,” and consequently disqualifies drag as an authentic performative construction of gender (xxiii). Butler distinguishes drag from *actual*, everyday constitutions of gender when she says that drag “demands its stage and its club” (*Judith Butler in Conversation: Analyzing the Texts and Talk of Everyday Life* 239). Arsenault, as the following account will illustrate, constitutes her femininity through everyday life, the stage, the club, the photograph, and the media, consequently challenging how Butler distinguishes performatively constituted “real” gender and self-consciously constructed genders.

Arsenault differs from Butler’s theoretical elucidation of masculine “butch” identities that some lesbians embody in their day-to-day life. Butler theorizes that the “butch” identity is contingent upon recognizing the female sexed body as the “ground” upon which the butch aesthetic is figured (167). Arsenault differs from this formulation because the supposed “ground” of her anatomical body is confused – she is a surgically altered woman with a penis, but no testicles. Furthermore, Arsenault’s style of femininity, though exhibited by similar iconic figures with similar gender aesthetics, has not coalesced into an identity category recognized by a sub-cultural community as the butch has been. The butch and Arsenault do construct their respective genders in similar ways: both “resignify” normative gender stereotypes (the butch recodes masculinity and Arsenault recodes femininity); both performatively constitute their gender queer identities; mirroring the aesthetic structure of Arsenault’s theatrical femininity, the butch’s gender is not masculine in terms of masculinity being reserved for men, and not-masculine in terms of exhibiting the necessary characteristics required to constitute masculinity. Arsenault’s gender differs from that of the butch insofar as it is celebrated in

gay culture because of its excess, which betrays its double negation, especially because it embraces the aesthetics of drag.

Arsenault complicates this elucidation of drag and gender in a way that maintains an aesthetic of theatricality, but merges theatricality with the everyday. In other words, Arsenault brings the underlying conceits of drag off the stage, out of the club and onto the streets and into the home, the domain reserved for the performative constitution of gender. Even though Arsenault blurs the boundary between performance, as voluntary and self-conscious, and the involuntary necessity of the performative constitution of gender, she maintains an aesthetic of theatricality. It is important to note that Arsenault's femininity is not theatrical because she appropriates a fictional identity that embodies an excessive femininity when on stage, screen, or page. In fact, Arsenault always "plays" herself in her artistic practice. Because Arsenault employs theatrical and artistic means to construct her gender, consciously and voluntarily, she does not qualify as feminine under Butler's theory. Yet, because her theatrical and artistic practices extend beyond the stage, photography, painting, and performance space into "real" life, Arsenault successfully constitutes a performative gender identity, and thus *is* feminine, or at least the image of femininity is written onto her body, which embodies Butler's theory of the constitution of gender.³⁸ Hence Arsenault is not-not feminine. Arsenault's femininity is thus theatrical.

³⁸ Even though Arsenault appeals to consciously and deliberately crafted artistic practices to express her gender identity, I do not claim, contra Butler, that somehow Arsenault is a subject that precedes her expression of gender. Rather, this chapter aims to show how that Arsenault both refuses *and* relies on multiple methods of constructing gender that positions her gender as theatrical.

Arsenault and Trans Narratives

In contrast to Butler's theory of gender as performative, Arsenault appeals to consciously and deliberately crafted narratives to validate her gender identity. For many trans subjects, narrating their lived experience to doctors and psychologists was required in order for them to undergo plastic and sex re-assignment surgeries. Arsenault, who was told by medical authorities she "would be happier just living as a gay man," refuses to legitimate or validate her gender identity through recourse to medical authorities. Rather, Arsenault turned to art practices to authorize, in both senses of the word, her specific style of femininity. Arsenault capitalizes on "the embodied experience of the speaking subject, who claims constative knowledge of the referent topic, to be a proper – indeed essential – component of the analysis of transgender phenomena" to validate her gender identity (Stryker 12). By including storytelling, in theatrical and literary contexts, as a part of her gender expression, Arsenault refuses to constitute her gender solely as a performative act. Despite the theory of gender performativity's incompatibility with constructing gender identity through narrative, Arsenault, not just as (re)presented in her artistic work and day-to-day life but because of the congruities between her artistic work and day-to-day life, merges these theories to construct a specifically theatrical style of femininity.

Arsenault's transgender gender identity is theatrical in terms of how she both does not embody and does not-not embody Butler's theory of gender. Arsenault does embody Butler's theory of gender performativity insofar as Arsenault does not define her gender on her anatomical sex. Arsenault says, "I believe I am a woman inside, there's no doubt about that. But I don't have that relationship with that part of me that it grosses me out.

It's more important to be socially accepted as a woman and look like a woman. At this point, my body is so different anyways. I just think I'm a woman with a very unique body" (Rankin). Arsenault refuses to let her anatomy determine her gender, rather, she *performatively* constitutes her gender through her day-to-day life. But Arsenault also claims that gender is a psychological fact when she claims she is "a woman inside."

Arsenault's claim echoes a counter-example to Butler's claims, and critiques of Butler's totalizing theorization of gender as always a "doing" and never an expression of a psychic or anatomical truth. Arsenault's claim that she is expressing a psychic attachment to a gender established early in childhood parallels a study of an anatomical male, David, who was given sex reassignment surgery and various other medical interventions to "make" him a woman but "always had the experience that something was odd about his assigned gender" and decided to become a man again (Gherovici 140). This case study, which shares many similarities with Arsenault's experience, counters Butler's theory that gender is always a "doing" (Gherovici 2010). Like David, Arsenault lived with the strong inclination that the gender she was assigned at birth, which she was performatively embodying until she started cross-dressing, was not a reflection of her "true" gender. Whether it was David's "gendered brain," biological hormonal balance, or the penis he was born with that was the basis for his maleness is immaterial. Despite the pressure and medical interventions that coerced him to be a woman, David was compelled to live as a man,. In any case, and as is the (partial) case with Arsenault, the impulse from within to express a gender counters Butler's theory that gender is only an illusion and has no root in the psyche.

Arsenault's investment of "self portraiture" also counters Butler's theory of gender performativity. Arsenault describes her surgical alterations of her own body as a form of self-portraiture, just like her conventional art practices:

Traditionally, self-portraits are the artist making an image of them self, and this is what I do. I create images of how I see myself and how I want to see myself, in the world, in the theater, in photography, in writing... For me, the differences between my surgeries, the way I present myself on the street, a memoir or visual self-portrait are very blurry and actually not very helpful. I think of myself as a self-portrait of the author. It's the medium that's different. (Arsenault qtd in Halferty, 29)

The way Arsenault is both subject and object of the artwork is key to her description of her practice of self-portraiture: In the words of scholar and dramaturg Judith Rudakoff, "Arsenault *is* her body of work" (3). Arsenault's practice of self-portraiture counters Butler's theory of gender performativity insofar as, for Butler, there cannot be a subject that actively performs gender. In Arsenault's practice of self-portraiture, the artist, Arsenault, conceives of her gender, her body as an art object, as material that is manipulated and crafted with artistic aims. As Benjamin Gillespie points out, "Theatricality, then, allows Arsenault to present the feminine image of herself she wishes the audience to see; however, rather than covering up the cracks that mark this femininity as constructed, she draws attention to them, making them a part of her overall, inherently theatrical, image and presence." (143). The gap between Arsenault as artist and Arsenault as art-object is made apparent by Arsenault marking her gender as constructed: She highlights the construction of her femininity by embracing the label "transsexual," which

necessarily draws attention to the fact that her hyper-feminine gender is not an expression of her biological sex; by drawing attention to her cosmetic surgeries through her work in the theater, photography, and appearances in the media; and in “The Silicone Diaries” specifically, by removing her wig in the final moments of the play to symbolically perform the deconstruction of her femininity. This “performance” of the construction of her femininity through continually exposing her gender’s construction suggests that, contrary to Butler’s theory of gender performativity, for Arsenault, there is a subject who voluntarily and consciously performs her gender.

Biddy Martin articulates a challenge to the totalizing force of postmodern queer theoretizations of gender, such as the one offered by Judith Butler, to reposition the body and psyche as influential sites that have the power to determine the constitution of gender. Martin argues that the postmodern, queer shift in feminism that dismisses “interior essences or normative, disciplinary assumptions of a gender core” is restrictive and establishes a new regime of postmodern gender theory (105). Martin concludes her article “Sexuality Without Genders and Other Queer Utopias” by claiming “that the opposition set up between conventional understandings of gender as stable core and postmodern conceptions of identity as the effect of discursive practice needs to be displaced, not decided in one direction or the other.” (119). Martin suggests that under the new regime of postmodern gender theory, “Surfaces, then, take priority over interiors and depths and even rule conventional approaches to them out of bounds as inevitably disciplinary and constraining.” (106). Paradoxically, Arsenault, through her theatrical femininity, embodies both Martin’s critique of postmodern queer theorizations of gender *and* those post-modern queer theorizations of gender.

Arsenault embodies Martin's call to displace, but not dismiss, the postmodern queer theorizations of gender. Because Butler's conception of gender situates both gender and sex as necessarily discursively produced, Arsenault's incorporation of multiple, contrasting if not incompatible conceptions of gender, is theatrical. Arsenault's femininity is performatively constituted, but not reducible to that mode of constitution. Conversely, Arsenault's femininity is an expression of an "interior essence," but again, not reducible to that mode of constitution. From both sides of the debate Arsenault's femininity is disqualified from being authentic or true.

Jay Prosser's monograph *Second Skin* positions narrative as an integral force in constituting transgender identities, and consequently offers an alternate theory of the constitution and expression of gender to Butler's theory of performativity. Prosser writes, "For transsexuality is always narrative work, a transformation of the body that requires the remolding of the life into a particular narrative shape" (4). Prosser's theory contrasts Butler's insofar as he allows for gender to be constituted through conscious and agential narration while Butler claims that gender cannot be voluntary. Prosser argues against the theory of gender performativity offered by Butler: he claims "the transsexual reveals queer theory's own limits: what lies beyond or beneath its favored terrain of gender performativity" (6). Consequently, Prosser's analysis of transsexuality does not "shift the subject away from the embodiment of sexual difference but more fully into it" (6). Prosser counters Butler's claim that gender is constituted through physical action, or in Butler's words "repeated gestures," and locates the origin of (trans)gender expression in the matter of the body. For Prosser, the truth of the material of the body is made manifest through narrative. In other words, Prosser argues that narratives authorize and legitimate

gender *in* as well as *on* the body, rather than a psychic illusion that emerges only after the execution of a certain set of stylized acts.

Arsenault resists the legitimating power of the medical establishment, which has authorized, in both senses of the word, most transsexual narratives shared in the public sphere. As Prosser notes, “The overwhelming tendency in work that does address transsexual bodies is to isolate medical discourses to the exclusion of subjective accounts and to emphasize the transsexual’s construction by the medical establishment. The transsexual appears as medicine’s passive effect, a kind of unwitting technological product: transsexual subject only because subject to medical technology” (7).

Furthermore, as Prosser notes, the reliance upon the medical establishment to legitimate trans- identity precludes “a discussion of transsexual agency: that is, the subject’s capacity not only to initiate and effect his/her own somatic transition but to inform and redefine the medical narrative of transsexuality”(8). In terms of conventional and accepted trans- identities, as Prosser writes, “The transsexual’s capacity to narrate the embodiment of his/her condition, to tell a coherent story of transsexual experience, is required by the doctors before their authorization of the subject’s transition” (9).

Arsenault subverts this conventional logic, and authorizes her (trans) gender through narrative, but to a greater public rather than just to the medical establishment.

Though Arsenault offers a paradoxical merging of the performative construction of gender and the validation of transgender through storytelling on stage, consequently offering a conception of gender as the illusion of a psychic core on the surface of the body that exists alongside the idea of a gendered soul, Arsenault also embodies and enacts these two concepts in her non-artistic life practices as well. In fact, it would be

unfair to call Arsenault's day-to-day life fundamentally different from her artistic practice: On her website, Arsenault, in her "Manifesto of Living Self-Portraiture (Identity, Transformation, and Performance)," declares: "I see all my creative work – documentary photographs, reality tv, autobiographical storytelling, video art, staged photography, literary memoir writing, costumed nightlife appearances, voice/breath/body training, cosmetic surgery and *the daily presentation of my femininity* through make-up, fake hair, exercise, and diet – as a continuing practice of self-portraiture." (Italics added for emphasis, Arsenault). Arsenault situates her work on-stage, which Butler disqualifies as grounds to construct a gender identity, on a continuum with her quotidian life. Furthermore, Arsenault notes that the practice of crafting, staging, and performing the play "The Silicone Diaries" connected her with her gender identity more than the quotidian practice of living as a hyper-feminine woman: In an interview for "The Silicone Diaries," Arsenault says, "Doing this play has helped a lot. Training as an actor is all about getting back into the body and experiencing sensation, having breath move into the deepest parts of you. I think that I was performing an image of myself for a while. As a trans woman, you can think that a woman is sort of outside of you. But, strangely enough, it was the theatre and acting training that has been redemptive for me, that has put me back in my body, gotten me back in touch with the animal side of myself" (Thomas).

Despite how Arsenault's artistic works are integral in her construction of femininity, she also understands her gender identity in terms of the performative construction of normative gender identities. Echoing Butler's dismissal of sex as the basis, or matter, of gender identity, Arsenault claims, "I certainly never walk around

thinking, 'I've got a dick,' like that means anything. [...] Listen, when I first started to transition, I thought, 'I want to be a woman. I'm going to have a sex-change operation. I'm going to have a vagina.' And then, as I did the surgical procedures, I began to reevaluate what a woman can be" (Thomas).³⁹ Arsenault, like Butler, dismisses the genitals as the ground upon which gender is determined (146). Arsenault also suggests that her understanding of gender is developed in terms of performative social roles when she claims, "As a child I never had dreams of being a domestic woman who cooks and cleans [...] The choice to turn my kitchen into a closet is definitely symbolic of the kind of beautiful, sexy, fashionable woman I always wanted to be" (Arsenault qtd in Dupuis). Here, Arsenault dismisses domestic activity as a set of performative acts that constitute a particular gender identity and in their place positions fashion as the site where she can performatively construct her gender identity.

The merging and blurring of voluntary and self-conscious artistic acts such as storytelling and the physical crafting of her body and identity along with a quotidian and performative construction of her gender are central to Arsenault's construction of gender. Arsenault's work in the theater, as well as her collaborative self-portraiture in photography, includes acknowledging and recognizing that her gender in such works is an extension, no more or no less constructed for an audience, than it is in her everyday life. When Arsenault is on-stage, she is playing herself, and this role is in no way any different than her day-to-day self presentation. Consequently, she exhibits a theatrical femininity, a femininity that is not qualified to be "real" because it is not performative;

³⁹ By drawing attention to the fact she still has her penis, Arsenault insures that there is no ambiguity about her genitalia, which then encourages her audience to "reevaluate what a woman can be" on grounds that are not determined by genitalia.

but simultaneously it is not-not real in the sense that it is her lived experience and is accepted to be feminine.

Silicone and Plastic: Performative Trans-narratives in “The Silicone Diaries” and “I w@s B*rbie”

“The Silicone Diaries” and “I w@s B*rbie” are exemplary of the merging of performative theories of gender and the construction of transgender identity through narrative. Through conscious and deliberate artistic acts that belong on the stage, acts that Butler contends cannot be a site for the legitimate constitution of gender, Arsenault’s autobiographical monologues include descriptions of her day-to-day existence, which exhibits the necessary conditions for the performative constitution of her (trans)gender, but also allow her to embody her performative constitution of gender for a public. Alongside descriptions of the quotidian minutiae of performative gender constitution, “The Silicon Diaries” and “I w@s B*rbie” are trans-narratives that are *about* validating Arsenault’s own particular gender identity. By merging competing and contrasting theories on the social constitutions of a hyper-feminine transgender identity, “The Silicon Diaries” and “I w@s B*rbie” evidence the theatrical aesthetic of Arsenault’s femininity.⁴⁰

Both “The Silicone Diaries” and “I w@s B*rbie” are solo performance monologues that are confessional. “The Silicone Diaries” is comprised of a series of short monologues that tell the story of Arsenault’s cosmetic surgery transformation.

⁴⁰ Arsenault is not the only trans gay cultural icon to appeal to storytelling, and the theater in particular, to authorize her theatrical femininity. Mandy Goodhandy wrote and starred in a similar one-woman show called “Tranny: The Musical” which does not narrate the story of her gender transformation but still acts as a site in which her gender is both constituted and expressed. Though not a conventional mode of storytelling, Amanda Lepore has constituted and expressed her gender publicly through music.

“The Silicone Diaries” begins with Arsenault sharing her childhood memories that explain the origin of her obsession with mannequins and porn stars, which come to serve as models for her own transformation. After offering an explanation of the origin of her obsession with plastic femininity, Arsenault shares anecdotes that explain the process in which she worked for, and eventually underwent, the many plastic surgeries that transformed her body into what it is today. A key monologue, described in more detail below, describes Arsenault’s encounter with famous rocker, Tommy Lee, who mistakes her for a “real woman,” at a popular Toronto night club. In “The Silicone Diaries,” Arsenault appears on stage with a white screen behind her and a white floor beneath her. There is a modernist white chair and glass coffee table. Images of Arsenault, and sometimes even video of her plastic surgery, are intermittently projected on the screen behind her. In the play, Arsenault says, “On an interior screen in my mind’s eye, I’m visualizing. I believe in the power of visualization. I see an image of me so clearly” (216). The stage space can be seen to function as the interior space of her mind, a site where consciousness, and therefore identity, can be said to exist, which consequently situates the stage as the materialized space where an audience can access Arsenault’s inner life.

In “I w@s B*rbie,” which is less of a confession but still offers the audience access into her inner life, Arsenault recounts her experience being hired to “be” Barbie at a fashion show organized by Mattel to celebrate Barbie’s fortieth Birthday. “I w@s B*rbie” begins with Arsenault explaining how she was hired to perform the role of Barbie at this event, and then goes to detail her experience at the fashion show. Because “I w@s B*rbie” is less technically developed, as it just involves Arsenault on a bare

stage, with minimal lighting, and no set, “I w@s B*rbie” is more akin to a stand-up set rather than a play.

“The Silicon Diaries” and “I w@s B*rbie” include many instances of the “stylized repetition of acts” that constitute the performative construction of femininity. In both solo performances, Arsenault appears as she would if you saw her in the street or a nightclub. In “The Silicone Diaries,” Arsenault appears as she would if seen at a nightclub: Her hair is teased, and as always, draped over one of her eyes, and she wears a plastic translucent black dress, that reveals her bra, panties, and fish net stockings underneath, with a set of black sleeves on her arms made of the same material as her dress. In “I w@s B*rbie,” Arsenault wears a pink tutu-esque cocktail dress, again, with her weave teased large and her bangs draped over her one eye, but this time with a pink bow in her hair. Arsenault’s “costumes” in both solo performance pieces disrupt the clear demarcation between the stage and the street, a boundary that is required if the voluntaristic artistic practice of the stage is disqualified as a site for the performance of gender construction.

Despite how these two monologues are works that are represented in the context of conventional theaters, Arsenault does not put on a “character” but “plays” herself, which consequently includes her representation of a gender identity as a part of the long list of other “stylized acts” she enacts day-to-day to performatively constitute her femininity. When Arsenault concedes in the concluding section of “The Silicone Diaries,” that she’s “built a perfection onto [her] face that needs make-up and hairstyles to complete it,” she gestures toward such quotidian acts as wearing her hair long and wearing make-up, acts that surely performatively constitute feminine gender (224). In “I

w@s B*rbie,” which begins with Arsenault spritzing herself with perfume, mimicking the aesthetics of a commercial, Arsenault participates in feminine “stylized” rituals of cosmetic quotidian routines (2). “I w@s B*rbie,” recounting a story primarily set at a fashion show, positions Arsenault as a participant in social acts deemed feminine, and consequently qualify as performative acts that have the power to constitute female gender. Beyond just the feminized setting of a fashion show, Arsenault notes that the event in which she has been hired to “play” Barbie features domestic activity: Arsenault writes, “Amidst the Barbie displays there are real women, blonde women, demonstrating household appliances like irons and steamers” (8). In one of the key anecdotes of “I w@s B*rbie,” Arsenault serves cupcakes to the audience of the fashion show, which establishes Arsenault as the domestic hostess of the event, performatively legitimating her feminine, domestic status. Along with the assumed and explicit details in her anecdotes, and her appearance in front of the audience at any live production of “The Silicone Diaries,” Arsenault also exhibits the “stylized repetition” of such acts as wearing feminine clothing in her day-to-day life to further situate her transsexual feminine identity as performatively constituted.

“The Silicone Diaries” also resists the concept that gender is performatively constituted through the incorporation of video from Arsenault’s many surgeries. The often graphic images of her surgeries are projected between monologues on a screen behind Arsenault and show her in the hospitals where she underwent her cosmetic reconstructions. The audience sees Arsenault bruised and bloodied, scars barely healed as she lies prone in a hospital bed. These images are contrasted by images of Arsenault, before any cosmetic procedures, as Rodney. The transition from Rodney to Arsenault that

is depicted in the videos and projected images ends with the real life body of Arsenault in the (silicone) flesh, in the live present of theater performance. These videos and images that mark Arsenault's transition remind the audience that Arsenault's gender is a result of material construction. These images contrast the performative constitution of Arsenault's gender established by recognizable stylized repetition of acts that constitute femininity.

Furthermore, the transition that is made visible through these videos and projected images renders the literal plasticity of Arsenault's body theatrical. That is to say that as a body that has been sculpted, crafted, and shaped through injections of silicone, Arsenault's body is plastic in the adjectival sense: that which can be molded. Arsenault has a plastic body insofar as her body is constructed of silicone and her body has been shown to be malleable. In "The Silicone Diaries," Arsenault describes the process of directly injecting silicone into the body, which, when not contained in an implant, has the capacity to be molded in the flesh until scarring occurs to hold the silicone in place. Arsenault tells her audience, "The effect is not like a breast implant, which you can usually tell. Once inside the body, Simone can sculpt the silicone into almost any shape" (212). After some time, Arsenault tell us, "Scar tissue is going to form to hold everything in place" within twenty-four hours (212). The process begins with the body being made malleable through the injection of silicone, but ends with it being settled and fixed. Because of the chemical and inorganic character of silicone, Arsenault describes herself as mostly "inanimate" (Arsenault interviewed by Kurt). Hence, Arsenault's body is both not plastic (when silicone is held in place by the dead tissue of scarring she is no longer capable of being sculpted or molded), yet, by having shown her body to be capable of a drastic transformation that relied on the injection of silicone into her body, Arsenault's

body is not-not plastic. Arsenault's body is animate and living, inanimate and plastic, plastic and not plastic.

"I w@s B*rbie" merges the "ideal" of modern womanhood and femininity, the famous Mattel doll Barbie, with Arsenault herself, which consequently positions Arsenault as representing the "ideal" woman but also establishes Arsenault as the "real" woman who embodies the doll. Arsenault recounts her first encounter with Deborah, the Mattel representative who approached her to play Barbie at Toronto's Fashion Week: Deborah tells Arsenault, "The Mattel Corporation got David to design a Barbie-inspired fashion line, but it's for *real* women" (2). The "real" that Deborah speaks of is not meant in terms of authenticity, but rather, in terms of Arsenault as an actual person in contrast to the doll, which is an inanimate object. Arsenault notes: "Me as Barbie. I can do that. I can be a hollow, plastic, digitized body. I am very good at being a representation. In fact, I'm better at being a representation than almost anyone I know. And I know some very good representations" (5). Arsenault merges the act of embodying Barbie, of "being" Barbie, with representing the ideal that Barbie is meant to represent. Arsenault mentions the irony that a transsexual is playing Barbie when she arrives at the event and exclaims, "Oh my God, it's hitting me. There's not going to be anything ironic about me being Barbie tonight. There's not going to be anything jokey about it. I'm going inside Barbie. Inside the concept of Barbie" (6). Arsenault consequently, in her day-to-day life, has performatively constituted a gender identity that is so feminine, so close to the feminine ideal that Barbie represents, she has been asked to play, to embody, to *be* the ideal. Arsenault recounts a moment with a photographer: "'Look this way, Barbie!' a photographer yells. Flash! No one had to tell him that I'm Barbie. He knew just from

looking at me.” (6) Furthermore, even at the event itself, her public presentation is treated as quotidian in such a way that her transexuality is either ignored or unacknowledged because her femininity positions her as suitable to embody Barbie. This seemingly impossible feat, to be a feminine ideal, to embody it in the quotidian domain where performative acts can legitimately constitute gender, to achieve what Butler asserts is impossible, situates Arsenault and her gender identity as both participating in a performative gender construction and registering her femininity as an exception.

“I w@s B*rbie” is a much less mediated and technical production, situating it on the border between stand-up and theater. Unlike in “The Silicone Diaries,” there are no projections or lighting changes in “I w@s B*rbie.” Rather, “I w@s B*rbie” is a pared down monologue that, because it is more often than not comic, can be seen as a stand-up routine. Stand-up doesn’t usually involve the performer taking on a character to tell a particular story. In fact, stand-up is premised on the assumption that the stories and observations made by the performer are stories and observations of their own life. Stand-up, then, can be said to be a public presentation of a life off stage. By following the generic conventions of stand-up - story-telling that includes comic moments and often is punctuated with punch lines - “I w@s B*rbie” permits Arsenault to appeal to the stage once again to constitute her unique style of theatrical femininity that she embodies in her off-stage life.

Arsenault continually evokes the impossible “fantasy” of woman that Butler cites as a model or source that compels a person to performatively constitute feminine gender in “The Silicone Diaries” (208). Most of the anecdotes in which Arsenault recounts the plastic surgeries she underwent to construct her (hyper)feminine body include mentions

of the “fantasy” of femininity that Arsenault is trying to achieve. The evocation of a fantasy echoes the impossible ideal of a particular gender that Butler contends is the drive that compels certain individuals to involuntarily, performatively enact a feminine gender (Butler 1990). Arsenault mentions female mannequins as a model for femininity that inspired her as a child: upon seeing a mannequin at a local department store Arsenault declares the object is “one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen” (206). In an anecdote in which Arsenault recounts the evening she flirted with famous rocker and ex-husband of blonde bombshell Pamela Anderson, Tommy Lee, Arsenault describes sex-icon Pamela Anderson as “a caricature of a woman” and that on that particular evening she was a “caricature of her. An imitation of an imitation of an idea of a woman. *An image which has never existed in nature*” (219). Arsenault echoes Butler’s claim that, “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself, as well as its contingency” (187). Arsenault performs a key difference in her act of imitation: she, a feminine person, is imitating another feminine person, in a way that embraces drag aesthetics. So rather than exposing the imitative structure of gender by performing the “stylized acts” that constitute the opposite gender, Arsenault imitates femininity particular to a specific feminine icon, and consequently undermines the “naturalness” of her femininity by exposing it as a construction. Arsenault reveals that she is not feminine, in terms of femininity being a characteristic of certain performative constitutions of gender, but she is not-not feminine, because her body is socially accepted to embody femininity.

In this particular anecdote, Arsenault situates her femininity in the gender-sex matrix Butler outlines in *Gender Trouble*. By positioning herself as a woman who has a

sexual interest in men, in this scenario when a general public seems to validate her femininity as normal, Arsenault embodies Butler's definition of an "intelligible gender:" Butler writes, "'Intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain social relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (23). Though Arsenault does not, in fact, meet the requirement of having her "sex," as defined by her anatomy, cohere to her gender, sexual practice, and desire, her gender is *read* by the patrons of the restaurant as being "intelligible" in so far as they accept her gender as being normative. Arsenault, in competition with "real" women, validates her femininity as legitimate when she is invited by Tommy Lee to his table, and not the other "natural" women vying for his attention. After deciding that "it's a huge ego boost to be hand-picked out of a pack of posing, real women" (218), Arsenault muses, "I can't believe this is happening to me. I'm the person who was always told she would never be accepted as a woman." (219). Note that Arsenault situates the "real" women as "posing," which is ostensibly exactly what Arsenault is doing appearing in a straight night-club trying to attract the attention of a man who, were we to assume, is only attracted to biological females. While enjoying the sexual attention of one of the world's most famous and most masculine rockers, Arsenault projects herself into a future fantasy sequence in which she shares a celebrity life with Lee in which she declares, "I love you, Tommy. Because you love me. I love what that must mean about my beauty" (220). Arsenault loves that the sexual and emotional attraction she has inspired in Lee validates her beauty as feminine, considering that Lee is famous for his sexual and emotional attraction to hyper-feminine Pamela Anderson. Though this is just a fantasy sequence, and Arsenault is eventually exposed to be a transsexual, Tommy Lee's reaction

nonetheless validates Arsenault's beauty: Upon realizing that he has been flirting with a transsexual, Lee exclaims, "You really *are* beautiful..." (221). Arsenault projects that the ellipses, which she undoubtedly intuited in the actual moment of her encounter with Lee and consciously included in the text of "The Silicon Diaries," expresses the sentiment "... for a man." Or if he just likes the way I worked the whole encounter," in either case, her femininity passed, even though only momentarily, and situated her as a viable subject in the gender-sexual matrix that helps constitute the performative construction of gender.

"I wa@s B*rbie" also mentions several instances where Arsenault validates her femininity and gender identity through the gender-sex matrix. When considering to take the job to be Barbie at Toronto's LG Fashion Week, Arsenault muses, "Canadian athletes will be there to pick up models," and so will "Canadian hip-hop stars who can't be down with the tranny because they're so hip-hop. The New York City executives from Mattel" (5-6). Arsenault's implicit interest in people with power and/or fame, who are implicitly masculinized, suggests a sexual interest that, alongside her anecdote of her encounter with Tommy Lee, would legitimate her femininity even more than being asked to play Barbie has done.

Alongside Arsenault's embodiment of the performative construction of gender as elucidated by Butler, much of her gender identity as a feminine transsexual resists Butler's requirement that gender is constituted *over time*. The origin story of Arsenault's identification with femininity situates the mannequin specifically, and Arsenault herself, out of time, which consequently refuses the repetition of stylized acts that situate performative constructions of gender *in time*. Butler writes that because "the action of gender requires a performance is repeated," gender is constituted in a "*social*

temporality” (191). Arsenault situates the mannequin, her actual and metaphorical model of femininity, as “frozen in time,” or, in other words, outside of time (208). When Arsenault goes to Mexico to undergo a series of plastic surgeries, her caretaker, Ms. Nancy Bianca Valentino’s “face is so tight” that she seems to defy aging – she too is frozen in time. In “I w@s B*rbie,” Arsenault mentions several moments that resist the necessary temporality of gender performativity: Arsenault writes, “Behind the Thin Face?? I have no past and no future. I have only this moment” and “Barbie is...still” (6). Again, the plasticity of Arsenault’s gender is rendered theatrical: She continually draws attention to her transformation *over time*, while simultaneously describing her body as “inanimate” and out of time.

Arsenault continually evokes a sense of interiority, a soul gendered as feminine, throughout her monologues. The epigraph of “The Silicone Diaries” reads, “When the soul wishes to experience something she throws an image of the experience out before her and enters her own image” (204). Citing the soul as the catalyst for her compulsion to construct a feminine gender identity, explicitly contradicts Butler’s performative construction of gender. While performing “Shemale porn” online, Arsenault remarks to a client with whom she is becoming intimate “how hard it is being a woman inside a man’s body who looks so male, still” (209). Later, when she is commenting on the rather extreme procedure of having silicon injected directly into her flesh, not contained by an implant, Arsenault notes, “What I do know is that we have put it all on the line for who we had to be, and that means what we had to look like” (214). Evoking the language of compulsion through the imperative of “had to be,” in a manner of consciously constructing a hyper-feminine body, Arsenault rejects the compulsion of gender

performativity outlined by Butler, and instead situates her feminine gender as voluntary, and consequently situates the compulsion as an avoidable “truth” or “fact” of her psyche. In “I w@s B*rbie,” Arsenault expresses dismay that she will be rendered domestic when she is asked to serve cupcakes to the attendees because “I have an inner child, a little girl who grew up in a little boy’s body, in a trailer park, who wanted to be Barbie. This inner child needs to be acknowledged at the epitome of perfect plastic beauty. Let’s not make her serve hors d’oeuvres” (16). Despite how Arsenault also executes the required acts that performatively constitute gender, Arsenault maintains that part of her gender identity is a product of a gendered soul. Hence Arsenault, in terms of gender performativity, is not-feminine, but, in terms of narratives that express the compulsion evoked by a gendered soul, Arsenault is not-not feminine.

In “I w@a B*rbie,” Arsenault is exemplary of exhibiting theatrical femininity insofar as she exhibits drag queen aesthetics, while not *being* a drag queen. Arsenault recounts this exchange on the phone with Deborah when she is offered the job to play Barbie at L’Oreal Fashion Week:

Deborah: “Who could *be* Barbie except a drag queen wearing padding here, here and here (*indicates breasts, hips, thighs*) to give him that incredible Barbie body?””

Arsenault: “Oh, well, Deborah, I’m not exactly a drag queen.”

It is not despite of, but *because* Arsenault exhibits drag queen aesthetics, that she is hired to represent an icon of femininity. In this exchange with Arsenault, Deborah remarks ““All my gay BFFs said that we had to get you to *be* Barbie. I was like, ‘What a great idea! It’s classic!’ Because who could be Barbie except for a man, right?” (3). Again,

Arsenault is positioned as an icon of femininity, a particular aesthetic of *theatrical* femininity, precisely because she lives her life as a woman, in a manner that embodies Butler's theory of gender performativity, but also because her quotidian and performative gender identity evokes the excess that is found on stage in night clubs.

Both "The Silicon Diaries" and "I w@a B*rbie" offer us insight into Arsenault's quotidian existence, in which she fully participates in Butler's theory of the performative construction of gender, while also supplying evidence of Arsenault's gendered soul, which directly contrasts performative theories of gender. Furthermore, as monologues performed in the theater, both plays position Arsenault as legitimating and validating her gender identity through narrative, further contrasting Butler's contention that gender identity is not constituted through such voluntary and conscious acts as storytelling.

Living Life As A Doll

Arsenault has collaborated with Hamish Kippen in a series of photos in which she is posing amongst several mannequins. These photos include Arsenault lying amongst the limbless, life-size, plastic models. One photo depicts Arsenault's face close to that of a mannequin as if she is about to kiss the life-las face, or just has. The striking effect of these photos is that, only upon closer examination, does the viewer realize that these figures are not alive, or rather, that the figure on the right is Arsenault. Arsenault's skin is as smooth and flawless as the mannequins she is posing with. The shape of her face is also almost identical to the figures she shares the photographs with. Knowing that Arsenault, like the mannequins she is posing with, is made of plastic, this photo series

exhibits the aesthetic of theatricality insofar as it presents Arsenault as mannequin: as not-plastic, but not-not plastic, as not a model or doll, but not-not a model or doll.

Arsenault has embraced the icon of Mattel's Barbie as a part of her identity and body construction. Arsenault claims her adoration for dolls when, upon seeing a naked mannequin in a department store, she exclaims, "A life sized doll!" and deems it "the most beautiful woman I have ever seen" (206). She goes on to declare, "She's more beautiful than Barbie" (206). Later, when on the phone with a representative of her Mexican plastic surgeon, Arsenault demands to have "a nose like a Barbie doll" (217). By incorporating Barbie as an influence that has shaped her identity construction, Arsenault's femininity is further established as theatrical.

Arsenault's theatrical femininity can be seen as an extension of what Mary F. Rogers calls "emphatic femininity" in her book *Barbie Culture*. Rogers extends what R.W. Connell calls "emphasized femininity," which is defined as the omnipresent style of looking and acting feminine that is demanded by society today. Rogers' "emphatic femininity" is akin to theatrical femininity insofar as "it takes feminine appearances and demeanor to unsustainable extremes" (14). Rogers locates "emphatic femininity" in how Barbie, even when dressed as such a masculine icon as the "police officer," appears feminine (and, concomitantly, no matter what she is doing as determined by how she is dressed.) Arsenault extends "emphatic femininity" into theatrical femininity in a couple of key ways. First, as Rogers notes, "emphatic femininity" is unsustainable. Despite how Rogers implies that only a doll, as lifeless, immutable, and static, is able to sustain such hyper-femininity, Arsenault, through the surgical transformation of her body, is able to sustain the unsustainable. Thus, Arsenault's femininity is not sustainable, but not-not

sustainable. Second, despite how, as Rogers notes, Barbie is a “fantastic icon” that “contributes to a culture by exaggerating what is actual, possible, or conceivable,” Arsenault has made the impossible possible (3). Arsenault directly articulates this when she declares that her femininity is the “imitation of an idea.”⁴¹ Arsenault takes that which is not material, an imitation and/or idea, and makes it not-not material. Conversely, when that idea of ideal American femininity is made material in the form of Barbie, it is lifeless. Thus, Arsenault makes the static and lifeless idea into a living embodiment of theatrical femininity.

Insofar as she embodies the iconographic figure of Barbie, Arsenault functions as a fantastic icon. Rogers defines an icon as “a point of recognition widely shared with other members of one’s society” that provides a point of “commonality amidst diversity, shared interests amidst conflicting ones, and participation in the same broad culture amidst many subcultures” (2). Rogers specifies that a fantastic icon is an entity that “contributes to a culture by exaggerating what is actual, possible, or conceivable. Such an icon invites fantasy by taking the as-if or the fictive toward its outer limit. Barbie is such an icon, as are Superman and *Playboy* centerfold” (3). Arsenault embodies an exaggeration of the “actual, possible, [and] conceivable” in her extreme, hyper-feminine surgical body alterations. Yet, as is implied by Rogers’ examples of the fictional and impossible Superman and the hyper-mediated *Playboy* centerfold, Arsenault makes *actual* and *possible* and *conceivable* in flesh what can only be imagined or mediated.

Arsenault also participates in the repurposing of Barbie that Erica Rand describes in her book *Barbie’s Queer Accessories*. Rand notes that the meanings of Barbie

⁴¹ Arsenault literally embodies Roland Barthes’ description of nature after the invention and proliferation of plastic. Barthes notes that, in a world of plastic, “the age-old function of nature is modified: it is no longer the Idea, the pure Substance to be regained or imitated” (98)

generated and scripted by Mattel are embraced and celebrated by some, but also resisted and subverted by others. In essence, Rand's book explores the ways in which Barbie is coded with social meaning, and how, over the course of her existence, Barbie has been recoded by children and adults, fans and critics, to express alternative, theatrical meaning. In the introduction of her book, Rand tells the story of being inspired by a series of photos in the lesbian porn magazine *On Our Backs* that featured a Barbie being used as a dildo. This is one of many instances that Rand examines in which Barbie is subverted to express alternative values or challenge the normative values that Barbie symbolizes. Arsenault participates in a similar re-purposing of Barbie for her own pleasure, albeit not in such a literal way as the mode Rand describes in her book. Arsenault has appropriated those meanings of Barbie both determined by Mattel and in the possible queer applications of the doll to the construction of her theatrical femininity. Arsenault has appropriated the literal figure of Barbie in the surgical construction of her feminine body, and consequently embodies an acceptance of Mattel's continued investment in Barbie as exemplary of western, white femininity. Yet, Arsenault has queered Mattel's investment by embodying Barbie's femininity in a trans body. Furthermore, in opposition to Mattel's investment in Barbie as non-sexual, Arsenault explicitly deploys the femininity of Barbie as sexual, and a source of sexual pleasure for both herself and for the men she has sex with.⁴² Arsenault, like Barbie, does not have a vagina, yet, unlike Barbie, whose absent vagina is meant to render her non-sexual, Arsenault's lack of a vagina, because that part of her is still occupied by her penis, positions her as sexual. Arsenault theatricalizes her embodiment of Barbie insofar as she is not-not similar to Barbie, she is feminine yet without a vagina, but not like Barbie in how she is hyper sexual and queer. Arsenault thus

⁴² Rand notes when describing the relationship between Ken and Barbie, Barbie is meant to be non-sexual

performs as one of Barbie's queer accessories. Rand's description of "Barbie's queer accessories" is theatrical insofar as it recodes a normative phenomenon: Rand writes, "Barbie interpreters often function as Barbie's queer accessories, in either or both senses, in two ways. They act as accessories to the crime of helping Barbie escape from the straight world in which Mattel has tried to enclose her; they queer Barbie's intended meanings by giving her queer artifactual and narrative accessories. Alternatively, or sometimes simultaneously, they act as queer accessories in the sense of unlikely allies; in the process of queer Barbie, they sometimes become unwitting allies in Mattel's attempt to make her go straight" (12). Rand describes Barbie's queer accessories as queer in terms of sex and gender representation, as well as queer as in irregular. Arsenault reappropriates the meanings of Barbie to construct her queer gender identity as well as appropriate it in an unusual way, by attempting to literally embody Barbie's corporately authorized femininity.

Nina Arsenault embraces and extends the drag aesthetics common and celebrated in gay culture. Despite how theatricality is well-suited to expressing an extreme form of femininity, Arsenault has noted that her over-the-top aesthetics can be applied to exhibiting forms of masculinity. Arsenault has remarked that the muscular men found in fitness and body building competitions, and especially the men who use steroids and other medical technologies to unnaturally beef up, are also embodying a similar over-the-top aesthetic, an aesthetic I've identified as theatrical. The corporeal aesthetic of these muscular men has been appropriated by men found in gay clubs and gay porn. Tom of Finland, an artist who produced a prolific body of erotic artwork, celebrated this corporeal aesthetic. His artwork did not only reflect this corporeal aesthetic, but, because

he was primarily a cartoonist, his artwork inspired men to embrace fantastic, cartoonish corporeal aesthetics. The following chapter moves on to examine the model of this style of masculinity exhibited in the erotic artwork of Tom of Finland.

CHAPTER THREE: THEATRICAL MASCULINITY

To Dream the Impossible Dream: The Masculine Homosexual

Tom of Finland was able to depict in his drawings what had been previously thought of as counterintuitive, if not impossible: the masculine homosexual. That is to say that masculinity and homosexuality were thought to be incompatible in the mid to late twentieth century when Tom of Finland was producing artwork. By depicting men who exhibited the qualities of stereotypical masculinity in the twentieth century indulging in homosexual sexual activity, Tom of Finland merged two distinct, and seeming oppositional identity categories. Tom of Finland's artwork often depicted men who exhibited the qualities of masculinity while also occupying and enjoying the penetrated sexual role in a homosexual erotic scenario. By positioning a masculine man as the bottom in a sexual scenario, Tom of Finland's artwork disrupted the gendering of sexual dynamics that organized gay life in the first half of the twentieth century. Tom of Finland's artwork rejects the established notion in the gay community in the first half of the twentieth century that men who preferred to have sex with men and most often embraced the penetrated sexual role were feminine. Tom of Finland himself has often suggested that an aim of his drawings was to demonstrate "that all gays don't just need to be 'those damn queers,' that they could be as handsome and strong and masculine as other men" (qtd in Forbes, Preface, *Tom of Finland: A Retrospective*). Tom of Finland's artwork was an inspiration to gay men and encouraged them to counter dominant and ubiquitous associations between homosexuality and effeminacy, associations that did and still attend conceptions of gay identity today. Tom of Finland's artwork shifted those assumptions and offered a type of masculinity that was compatible with same-sex desire

for gay men to embrace. As Dennis Forbes and Fred Bissonnes, the curators of *Tom of Finland: A Retrospective*, write in the introduction to their book, “When the definitive cultural history of the late twentieth century’s Gay Liberation Movement is written [...]one individual is certain to be acknowledged therein as having almost singlehandedly evolved an iconography of modern male homosexuals” (2).⁴³

Conflations of gender and sexuality that have determined homosexual sexual activity to be feminine are well documented and theorized. Early sexologists, such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Richard von Krafft-Ebing, describe male homosexuality as being defined as a “female soul enclosed in a male body” (Silverman 340). In *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* Michel Foucault notes how the feminine has been situated in history as a constitutive characteristic of the homosexual when he writes, “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul” (43). Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble*, outlines “The Compulsory Order of Sex/Gender/Desire” as a matrix that positions sexual object choice as an extension of gender which is an extension of biological sex (8). Butler claims, “The metaphysical unit of [sex/gender/desire] is assumed to be truly known and expressed in a differentiating desire for the opposite gender – that is in the form of an oppositional heterosexuality.” By locating heterosexual desire as the grounds in which both biological sex and gender are confirmed, Butler formulates the following: If a man loves a woman, he is truly masculine and is assumed to have a male body (31). Homosexuality, consequently, cannot be associated with masculinity because it refuses heterosexual desire. Therefore,

⁴³ This claim is, of course, hyperbolic. Though obviously overstated, this claim is indicative of Tom of Finland’s celebrated status, and influence, in gay culture.

as sociologist R.W. Connell points out, “Gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity” and consequently “Gayness is easily assimilated to femininity” (78). Following from the theorization of gender elucidated by Butler and others, male homosexual activity was rendered abnormal and unnatural. Sociological, medical, and psychoanalytic accounts of normative gender that position male homosexuality as incompatible with masculinity persist to this day, and provide the framework in which Tom of Finland represented a unique aesthetic of masculinity that belonged to gay culture. Tom of Finland’s artwork reacted against the homosexual’s exodus from the realm of masculinity as elucidated by this scholarship and theorization of gender and sexuality and consequently “destroyed the image of the third sex” (Pohjola).

The artwork of Tom of Finland represents a style of gay theatrical masculinity that is a feature of gay cultural practice. The style of gay theatrical masculinity exhibited in the artwork of Tom of Finland is theatrical insofar as the qualities and characteristics of theatrical masculinity articulate narratives that deviate from the expected purpose of the qualities and characteristics that constellate to form stereotypes of masculinity. That is to say that the expected use of the strength, virility, and ability to perform labor depicted in the artwork of Tom of Finland are not intended to maintain or produce (heterosexual) life. Rather, the masculine codes depicted in the artwork of Tom of Finland are intended, both within the works themselves and between the artwork and the viewer, to incite desire, specifically homosexual desire, which is essentially antithetical to the production (and maintenance) of biological life. In other words, the style of masculinity exhibited in the work of Tom of Finland, and celebrated in gay culture, is

theatrical because its effects are not congruous to the expected social consequences indicated by the signifiers of normative masculinity. The style of masculinity exhibited in gay culture that is directly influenced by the artwork of Tom of Finland not only recodes normative masculinity, specifically the qualities and characteristics that produce the illusion that normative masculinity is “natural,” but does so in a way that renders the style of masculinity exhibited in gay culture as theatrical rather than *performative*. In the following analysis of Tom of Finland’s artwork, the style of masculinity depicted in his drawings, a style of masculinity that is celebrated and embodied in gay cultural practice in the later half of the twentieth century, is distinct in its theatricality insofar as it deviates from the assumed and expected consequences of normative gender categories.

Tom of Finland’s depiction of theatrical masculinity was eagerly embodied and performed in the gay community as his drawings became increasingly popular and well known, and still is prominent in gay culture today. The fervor and consistency in which gay men appropriated the style of masculinity depicted in Tom of Finland’s drawings in the sixties and early seventies led to Tom of Finland being nominated the creator of the “gay clone” image (Tom of Finland 1998 6). An anonymous voiceover in the documentary titled *Daddy and the Muscle Academy* notes that Tom of Finland captured a “perfection of type” in his drawings (Pohjola). In an essay titled “Tom’s Men: The Masculinization of Homosexuality,” Guy Snath points out, “A new masculine identity in the image of Tom’s hypermasculine fantasies was being forged. The recurring refrain between the sections of the film *Daddy* is ‘I’m a Tom’s Man/I’m one of Tom’s Men’” (80). Gay erotic artist Etienne, a contemporary of Tom of Finland, noted that gay men “started to dress and comb their hair and take stances and attitudes that are in his

drawings” (Snath, 79). Tom himself called his men “prototypes,” and as Snath notes by the mid 1970s Tom of Finland “was witnessing gay men turning his original visions from fantasy into reality” (80). Though the gay clone that mirrored the aesthetics and sartorial choices of the men depicted in Tom’s drawings was most prominent in the late seventies and early eighties, the continued influence of Tom’s drawings and the aesthetic of theatrical masculinity depicted in them is evident today, as seen in the continued use of Tom of Finland drawings to advertise for the International Leather Competition, and other gay cultural establishments and institutions. Beyond being celebrated in gay leather culture, the influence of Tom of Finland’s erotic aesthetic can be seen in the muscled bodies that have become an ideal for gay men in most all genres of pornography and everyday life. From the height of its popularity in the seventies, even till today, the aesthetic of masculinity celebrated in Tom of Finland’s art work is unique and important to gay culture.⁴⁴

Recoding Masculinity: *Jack in the Jungle*

The art of Tom of Finland employs masculine codes and symbols to incite erotic pleasure, while simultaneously subverting the codes by disrupting the assumed indivisible link between masculinity and heterosexuality. Tom of Finland’s drawings employ codes that suggest hegemonic masculinity is always assumed to be heterosexual while simultaneously exposing how, by deploying these codes and symbols on male bodies involved in homosexual sexual activity, masculinity is constructed. Tom of Finland’s oeuvre offers a comprehensive archive of twentieth century masculine

⁴⁴ The strong influence of Tom of Finland’s masculine male bodies is most prevalent in pornography, and can be seen in/on the bodies of Matthew Rush and Zeb Atlas.

iconography: blue collar construction workers, sailors, cowboys, business men (589), street punks in the mid 80s (582), athletes, lumberjacks, pilots, bikers, military, Canadian Royal Mounted Police (536), mechanics (371), rock stars (124), explorers, “Tarzan” like jungle dwellers, lifeguards, and so on. Although his most popular work includes images of blue collar and working class men, Tom of Finland has drawn middle-class office workers, and upper-middle class management when he features suit-clad business masculinities. “Accentuat[ing] authority” was a central feature to Tom of Finland’s drawings, but never with the aim of situating authority as stable and immutable, but rather, to eroticize the potential for power to shift between figures despite their social role (Pohjola). By depicting codes, symbols, and iconography of heterosexual masculinity in homosexual erotic encounters, Tom of Finland recodes them, a process that is both theatrical and culturally gay.

A comic series called *Jack in the Jungle* exemplifies Tom of Finland’s subversion of masculine iconography (Tom of Finland 1998 282-287)⁴⁵. “Jack in the Jungle Part I: The White Hunter” tells the story of a typical buff young man wearing a pith helmet and standard safari khakis exploring the jungle. Typical of Tom of Finland’s drawings, *Jack in the Jungle* employs a technique called chiaroscuro to illustrate figures and environments realistically by creating an illusion of three-dimensionality with shading and minute details. By using the technique of chiaroscuro, a technique that is not common in comic artwork, Tom of Finland creates more realistic scenarios and figures than standard cartoonish figures in other comics. The shading and fully realized backgrounds in *Jack and the Jungle* add a sense of realism to the otherwise fantastical

⁴⁵ In this comic, Tom of Finland problematically appeals to racist imagery and narratives to depict masculinity as “natural” and aggressive. *Jack in the Jungle* is anomalous in how it exploits racism to exhibit codes of normative masculinity.

scenario and hyperbolically masculine and muscular figures depicted in the plot. In *Jack and the Jungle*, the setting for the action covers the entirety of each comic cell, and is given equally detailed shading and nuance as the figures in the foreground. From afar, the young man is observed urinating by a crowd of black natives, and the man whom we are meant to identify as Jack, the Tarzan character who is featured on the cover of the comic. The young explorer is then captured by the indigenous inhabitants of the jungle and, after being forced to fellate one of the male members of the tribe, is held aloft and forced to penetrate the grotesque Queen of the tribe, identifiable by the crown atop her head. Right as he begins to penetrate the queen, he is rescued by Jack, who escapes with the young explorer after fighting off the indigenous tribe. Jack brings the explorer to what appears to be a tree-house dwelling, where Jack is willingly fellated, and is later fucked by, the young explorer. This narrative subverts such conventional icons of masculinity, a Tarzan-like hero in this case, by placing this masculine figure as the receptive partner in the sexual act. Such masculine characteristics are equated with homosexual sex in one cell in which Jack, while fighting against the indigenous tribe, uses one hand to punch a tribe member, and the other to hold onto that tribe member's large cock. The finale to the sexual act in this scenario epitomizes the subversion of masculine iconography as Jack utters the trademark yell of Tarzan ("Yeeehoooo"), punctuated by the beating of his chest as he orgasms with the young explorer's penis in his rectum. The icon of the explorer, who established his masculinity early in the story by peeing outdoors, is also subverted by being rescued and, in one cell of the comic, holding Jack in his arms as he passionately kisses him. Both masculine icons, the explorer and "Tarzan," are subverted

by simultaneously maintaining their masculinity, while positioning them, figuratively and literally, as enjoying homosexual sex acts.

Furthermore, the homosexual scenes, which over the course of the twentieth century were condemned as “unnatural sin,” are imbued with an aura of the “natural” in Tom of Finland’s *Jack in the Jungle* series. As film scholar Walt Morton observes in “Tracking the Signs of Tarzan: Trans-Media Representation of a Pop-Culture Icon,” “Tarzan on film is always muscular, fit, and (wearing animal skins) connected to nature, suggesting that fur and muscles are biological, hence natural, whereas language and literacy are not natural but acquired through culture” (108). Jack, as a Tarzan-like character, wears the animal skin loin cloth and consequently is positioned as natural, in contrast to the explorer, who embodies “civilization” in the world of this comic strip. Yet, in “The White Hunter,” Jack rescues the explorer from a “natural” sexual encounter with a woman, in order to perform “unnatural” homosexual acts with him. Conversely, the explorer, who as the embodiment of civilization in the fantasy of the comic strip is assumed to necessarily refuse “uncivilized” homosexuality, ends the story with willingly engaging in such acts. Jack in the scenario is both not natural, in his eagerness to indulge in homosexual sex, and not-not natural, as a leather clad muscular man at home in the jungle. The explorer is not civilized, he too is eager to get fucked, but he is not-not civilized, as the embodiment of European civilization who contrasts the jungle community.

Jack in the Jungle, as well as Tom of Finland’s use of iconography such as boots, uniforms, and leather, expose masculinity as a set of codes that can be subverted, situating Tom of Finland’s artwork as engaged in recoding heteronormative codes or, in

other words, as exhibiting the aesthetic of theatricality. Tom of Finland recodes the figure of Tarzan from the conventionally masculine rescuer of Jane into an unconventional figure who, though maintaining masculine qualities of strength and aggression and through rescuing not Jane but a man, is not just homosexual, but the receptive partner in the act of penetration. Furthermore, he is the active participant in the act of penetration in that he is atop the young explorer, and consequently in control of the sexual activity. Jack in the scenario is not hegemonically masculine, he is both homosexual and the receptive partner during the act of penetration, but he is not-not masculine, he still maintains hegemonic qualities of masculinity and instigates the sexual encounter.

Jack in the Jungle employs colonial imagery and stereotypes to access and subvert hegemonic masculinities. Specifically, *Jack in the Jungle* exploits the metaphorical equation of the colonial project of Empire with sexual violence, and, in particular, with rape. Post-colonial literary scholar Sandeep Bakshi points out, “imperialism and sexuality were intimately connected in the colonial imagination, wherein the fantasy of the homosexuality of South Asian natives coincided with the threat of the non-European (heterosexual) rapist” (Bakshi). Bakshi identifies the double bind of the sexualized colonial subject: He is both the eager and willing subject of deviant homosexuality, but also the aggressive and violent rapist. bell hooks has argued the rape of the colonized other is premised on patriarchy, and that the assumed subject of the violence, the emasculation and castration, that occurs in the colonial encounter is male. The explorer in *Jack in the Jungle* literally disrupts the rape of the white colonizer, and transforms it to a pleasurable consenting sexual encounter. Furthermore, the eager

and willing homosexual subject is not the “deviant and uncivilized savage,” but the civilized colonizer.

In the second *Jack in the Jungle* comic, titled “Rape of the Jungle Giant,” the colonial encounter, which at first seems to represent the deviant homosexuality of the savage, turns into orgy of homosexuality that does not qualify rape. The comic begins with Jack being captured by the non-white natives. He is tied up and carried off. While hog tied to a pole to transport him, Jack’s face is in the butt of one native, with another native’s penis in his asshole. This “rape” scenario continues as he is tied upside down, as if on a St. Andrew’s cross, between two vertical poles. The “rape” of Jack continues as he is forced to perform analingus and fellate the non-white natives, while being penetrated by them. Jack eventually breaks free of his ties, but instead of fleeing this rape scenario, the natives line up facing away from Jack, eager to get fucked. Jack’s willingness to continue participating in the sexual scenario, even after breaking free, suggest that he was enjoying it from the beginning. The narrative of this comic strip ends with the participants of the sexual scenario consenting to sexual activity, hence suggesting that the scenario was not rape. Conversely, the sexual excitement of the scenario is borne from the capture of Jack, his consequent bondage, and the power dynamics involved in such a capture, and consequently imply that it was not-not rape – Jack maintains an erection despite how the violence of the sexual scenario would indicate that this is rape, and not consequently not erotic.⁴⁶ Furthermore, this comic strip ends with the non-white sexualized colonized subject not as rapist, as is a common trope of the threat of the

⁴⁶ This scenario could also be read within the conventions of BDSM in which the paradox of consensual “rape” is a common practice. I would argue, following from the conception of theatricality I articulate in this study, that the BDSM practice of consensual “rape” exhibits the aesthetic structure of theatricality as well.

colonized subject, but also not-not a rapist. Considering the second comic in relation to the first appearance of Jack, the non-white “savage” is depicted as no different as either Jack or the explorer. When the “rape” scenario that is the catalyst for the sexual encounters in the second comic strip the non-white “savage,” like the white “heroes” of the story, are exposed to be primarily interested in same-sex sexual satisfaction. This series of comics does not dispel racist stereotype of blackness or the racial colonized other, but rather situates the sexuality of these stereotypes as being identical to the white “heroes” of the story.⁴⁷

Tom of Finland theatricalizes masculinity by depicting men with masculine characteristics, a description that is seemingly so obvious that it is redundant, while simultaneously exposing the concept of masculinity as constructed.⁴⁸ As Herbert Sussman mentions in the opening of his book *Masculine Identities*, “Manliness is an unmarked category, an area that is seemingly so self-evident in its meaning that we seldom think about it” (1). In the introduction to *Troubled Masculinities: Reimagining Urban Men*, Ken Moffatt states, “In spite of the notion that multiple masculinities are not only possible, but perhaps even preferable, one troubling legacy of masculinity is its tendency to be socially constructed as a singular, irrefutable, and unchangeable entity” (7). In his book titled *Masculinities*, R.W. Connell notes, “Arguments that masculinity should change, often come to grief, not on counter-arguments against reform, but on the

⁴⁷ There is a third comic strip in the *Jack in the Jungle* series, but it does not offer any further evidence of the theatrical masculinity exhibited in the artwork of Tom of Finland. It does, though, end with a lion scaring off the natives who’ve captured Jack and a Sailor who has washed up on shore, who starts licking Jack’s testicles.

⁴⁸ It may seem obvious and necessary that men exhibit masculine characteristics. The figure of the “sissy” is exemplary of male bodies that do not display masculine characteristics. At the time in which Tom of Finland began drawing homosexual erotic art, most out and proud men displayed in varying degrees of feminine attributes, and were often considered to be sissies or faeries. In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*, George Chauncey outlines plenty of historical evidence of men, known as faeries and sometimes as sissies, who were exhibited feminine characteristics.

belief that men *cannot* change” because “Mass culture generally assumes there is a fixed, true masculinity beneath the ebb and flow of daily life” (45). R.W. Connell surveys the scholarly literature that attempts to reify the concept of “natural masculinity” that has been made popular by sexist policies and the mass media. Connell’s research shows that attempts to establish sexual difference, either sociologically, biologically, or culturally reify a binary opposition between men and women, and masculine and feminine, and consequently maintain and perpetuate gender dichotomies that determine women to be weak, soft, and caring in contrast to men as strong, aggressive, and violent. The rhetoric of fixity, immanence, and self-evidence employed by sociologists and scholars who study masculinity expose the assumption that masculinity is a natural disposition insofar as nature is also ideologically represented as trans-historical and immutable. Being the powerful, strong, rough, and tough man that hegemonic masculinity demands is a by-product of attaining goals that are associated with the natural, trans-historical, and “true.” The point here is not to determine the “truth” of masculinity, but rather to outline the socially accepted character of masculinity, made evident by the particular language that is used to describe masculinity in the social sciences and humanities. The artwork of Tom of Finland appeals to these socially accepted characteristics of masculinity only to subvert them.

Along with depicting such iconic masculine figures as “Tarzan” and the explorer, Tom of Finland appeals to many other icons that represent masculinity, only to subvert them. Tom of Finland presents an erotic of masculinity that deviates from the use-value associated with masculine traits. Tom of Finland included the natural figure of the cowboy in order to expose the constructedness of masculinity (83-85, 119, 328). In

Deconstructing Men and Masculinity, Michael Atkinson notes that the scholarship on masculinity depicts the masculine as “a throwback from a John Steinbeck or Harper Lee novel. He is John Wayne. He’s a frontier ‘man’s man’ who embodies control, confidence, self-importance, and strength through his very swagger” (33). Atkinson’s mention of Steinbeck and John Wayne, suggest the icon of the cowboy, a masculine archetype that is in and of nature in the Wild Wild West, must be strong and aggressive to survive in the lawless, unconquered terrain of the West.⁴⁹ Yet, in one of Tom of Finland’s comic series, the Wild Wild West becomes a site where men take advantage of the freedom from social laws and find sexual pleasure in other men, and consequently subvert the assumption that the rough and tough cowboy who is able to survive in the wilds of the uncharted terrain of North America is necessarily heterosexual. Tom of Finland appeals to the Wild Wild West, an unambiguous allusion to the mythological American Frontier, as a site where the fulfillment of manhood is achieved through survival and violence (Greenberg). Yet, in his construction of theatrical masculinity, Tom of Finland subverts the hegemonic narratives that attend the mythology of the Wild Wild West and positions homosexual sexual activity, rather than violence, as the rite of passage into manhood. In other words, in the Wild Wild West to be a man, you have to take it like a man.

The figure of the cowboy represents the ideals of Manifest Destiny, symbolizing the colonial settler logic of bringing civilization to the New World Indians. Tom of Finland subverts this iconography by illustrating cowboys whom, rather than bringing

⁴⁹ There are, of course, Western’s made outside of the context of Hollywood and the United States. As Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer note, there are Spaghetti Westerns from Italy, Sauerkraut Westerns from Germany, Paella Westerns from Spain, Camembert Westerns from France, Chop Suey Westerns from Hong Kong, amongst many others. And not all male characters in Westerns, they note, are white and heterosexual. Yet, despite these variations, “The myth of *the* Western does not lend itself to such diversification” (61). As is evidenced by subverting the hegemonic iconography of masculinity, Tom of Finland is invested in “[t]he myth of *the* Western” that is most dominant in popular culture.

law and order into the lawless West, take advantage of the freedom afforded to them by this unsettled terrain to indulge in same-sex sexual activity. This contrasts the ways in which the West was a site in which a person establishes and proves their manhood through violence. As Jeffrey Gross notes in his essay “Boyish Play And Manifest Destiny: The Transition From Civilizer To Killer In America And Abroad,” “The causes and trajectories of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century and American imperialism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries vary, but the process of masculinization, an assertion of martial manhood through and act of individual violence, remains” (Gross 64). In Tom of Finland, the act of violence is not a mode in which to establish one’s masculinity. Rather, to put it crudely, to become a man in Tom of Finland’s West, a person has to take it like a man. In Tom of Finland’s Wild West, a man is rough and tough enough to sacrifice himself for the pleasures of another man’s aggressive, often violent, sexual desires. Thus, the sexual encounter becomes the primary mode in which a cowboy’s masculinity is established.

The iconic Kake character makes an appearance in a comic titled “In the Wild West,” and embodies the theatricalization of masculinity common in Tom of Finland’s oeuvre. “In the Wild West” is exemplary of Tom of Finland’s comic style, with realistically drawn figures illustrated with careful, detailed shading, though in this series, Tom of Finland does not fully realize the details of the setting of the story, often leaving the background in each cell empty. The Wild West in this comic is a mythic geography: Kake is adorned in his leather gear, despite being in a Western town. In the town, Kake walks into the local saloon, a male dominated space where no women are to be found. The saloon is already a sexualized space: before the “action” of the plot begins, one of

the saloon patrons has his erect cock exposed. Once inside, Kake is quickly fondled, and then has his pants immediately pulled to his ankles, so the other cowboys in the saloon can greedily fellate and rim him. Shortly after this activity begins, a dark, hairy, handsome figure enters with his gun drawn, forcing the patrons of the saloon to put their hands up, except for a Kake hiding behind the bar, who continues to fellate the Bartender. This antagonist fondles the disrobed patron's buttocks, forces one at gun point to lick his testicles, and eventually penetrates another. Kake comes from hiding and disarms the antagonist, upon which, the saloon patrons tie him by the testicles, and take him outside, where they tie him to a tree by his testicles. After "forcing" him to fellate Kake, Kake and the saloon patrons return to the saloon. The last cell of the comic strip includes an Indian, exposed erection in hand, smiling, as if he had watched the entire outdoor sexual episode. Rather than an act of violence being the central feat that establishes masculine dominance, Kake establishes his masculinity by both being the giver and the receiver of fellatio. Following the logic that the penetrator is masculinized and the penetrated is feminized, this scenario positions Kake as not masculine, he is a cock sucker, and not-not masculine, he saves the day and has his cock sucked by the man whom he defeats. The figure of the Indian, who only appears in the last cell, is positioned as viewer, like the "civilized" homosexual reader of the comic, thus, once again, establishing racial difference as secondary to a common homosexual desire assumed of all the characters in the comics, as well as of the reader.

Other "natural" environments, such as the Wild West, are also often a setting in Tom of Finland's drawings. His early drawings often depicted young men in what could be the Finnish hinterlands, working as lumberjacks – the Taschen collection of his

artwork categorizes Tom of Finland's work from the 50's as the "The Lumberjack Years" (63-67, 127). Later, even when he was inspired by what we now recognize as gay leather culture, Tom of Finland appealed to "natural" landscapes by depicting men having sex outside: He set a comic series starring Kake in "Pleasure Park" (324-329), he drew men having sex on the beach (183), and men fucking while boating in a canoe (178), and often depicted sexual encounters while men were out camping (180-181). Tom of Finland also has a comic set in Canada featuring Kake, where the assumed stereotypical "naturalness" of the Great White North is exploited again to position same-sex desire as just as natural as a bear or a beaver. "Kake in Canada" begins with Kake encountering a lumberjack in the middle of a forest, an encounter that turns from friendly to explicitly sexual very quickly (but predictably). Tom of Finland subverts these "natural" landscapes by situating sexual activity, which is usually practiced in the "civilized" confines of the home, in them. Considering that the homosexual sex acts depicted in these landscapes were, and for some still are, thought to be "unnatural," Tom of Finland subverts both the "natural" environment, that is denaturalized by a site of unnatural activity, as well as the "unnatural" act of homosexual sex, by situating it as "at home" in the natural environment.

Soldier and Sailors: Masculinity as Drag in the Art of Tom of Finland

The aesthetics and sartorial choices commonly featured in the art work of Tom of Finland were influenced by larger cultural phenomena. The appearance of soldiers and sailors was most likely due to the increased presence of the military and navy in Finland, Helsinki in particular, during World War II. Nazi-esque aesthetics, as represented in

military uniforms in Tom's work, are often included as a result of Tom of Finland "having had his first sexual experiences with German soldiers during the occupation of Helsinki" (Ramakers 165). It is worth noting that the circumstances in which Nazis influenced the formative years of Tom's life in Finland was much different than the context in which Nazis are understood in North America and most of Europe: Nazis were stationed in Finland to help Finland defend itself against the threat of the Soviets, and hence are seen not as an occupying force, but rather a liberating one (Ramakers 165). Sailors also became omnipresent in European coastal cities, such as Helsinki, during World War II and also undoubtedly inspired Tom of Finland.

The inherent masculinity of the sailor and soldier, especially during the first half of the twentieth century, was a result of the gendering of sexual dynamics between men who had sex with men. As George Chauncey outlines in *Gay New York*, soldiers and sailors were most often called "trade" because they would accept the sexual advances of other men as the penetrative partner, but were assumed to be primarily interested and invested in heterosexual activity (Chauncey 81). The uniforms worn by sailors and soldiers also highlighted the masculine features of those who wore them: the tight fitting khaki and leather highlighted physiques that accommodated the masculine characteristics of power, strength, control.

The stereotypes of masculinity that emerged from World War II and its aftermath were represented first in Western subcultures, and later in popular culture, often with homoerotic undertones. Specifically, the films of Kenneth Anger included images of sailors and soldiers that were often in homoerotic encounters, coded with sexual imagery.

Ramakers describes a scene in Anger's *Fireworks* (1947) that evidences the homoerotic presence of sailors on film:

In this film, the main character, called the Dreamer (played by Anger himself), is attacked by a gang of sailors. They tear off his clothes, and once naked, he is subjected to their violence. After the attack, which is followed by images of milk flowing over his body (their orgasms?), the Dreamer is seen on the floor of a urinal (which appeared earlier in the film). He is wearing a sailor's hat. (152).

The figure of the sailor, as unanchored from any social responsibility, specifically from any permanent romantic or sexual ties, situated him as desirable and accommodating of male sexual advances and activity.

The figure of the biker in both popular and underground film also influenced Tom of Finland. Specifically, Tom of Finland was likely inspired by Marlon Brando in the film *The Wild One* in which he plays a biker, clad in a leather jacket, blue denim, cap, and riding a motorcycle. As Ramakers notes, the biker “emerged as *the* personification of freedom, rebellion, and masculinity in Western pop culture, his world ruled by its own code of honor that rejected all that was considered socially desirable” (134). The biker as rebellious implicitly evokes the qualities of power and control (over one's own life) that is a celebrated characteristic of masculinity. Yet, as Ramakers notes, the power and control exhibited by the biker allowed him to refuse “all that was considered socially desirable,” which had particular appeal to men who had sex with men as considering that homosexuality was considered socially undesirable.

Unnatural Masculinity

Tom of Finland exposes the qualities and characteristics exhibited by these masculine icons, such as strength, power, control, virility, ability to labor, etc... which fulfill the assumed requirement for a man to produce and maintain “natural” life, as a social construction, rather than a natural fact. Tom of Finland himself acknowledged how his work challenged the concept and purity of “the natural.” In an interview, Tom of Finland claims “It’s difficult to say what is natural and what isn’t” in response to how his artworks were encouraging gay men to embody the “prototype” of a particular socially constructed identity. From the hyper-realistic bodies presented, to the incorporation of leather and machines into the erotic scenarios depicted in his art, Tom of Finland’s artwork challenges the boundaries between the assumed “natural” character of gender and sex, which is an ideological basis for hegemonic conceptions of sexual activity, and unnatural sex, which includes non-corporeal objects such as machines, tools, and clothing. The representation of masculinity in the artwork of Tom of Finland situates masculinity not as something that is assumed to be “natural,” but as something that is constructed through the deployment of technologies and signifiers that are socially constructed to indicate normative masculinity.

The appropriation of codes and symbols of masculine stereotypes expose masculinity as a social construction that can be employed for intended purposes that not just deviated from the social expectation of masculine behavior, but directly contrasted those expectations and narratives. As Shaun Cole remarks in his study of gay men’s dress in the twentieth century *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel*, gay men treated uniforms, and the masculine appeal of them, as costumes that they could wear to drag balls, and in the

privacy of their home for sexually related activities (21-22). By wearing uniforms as “costumes,” by exposing the social construction of masculinity that accompanied wearing military and navy uniforms, the masculinity that was produced was theatrical. Military uniforms had use-value: they were designed to allow the men wearing them to perform all the necessary activities that a soldier or sailor needed to perform. In the gay cultural context, the effects and use of military uniforms were sexual, and related to the production and experience of pleasure. Consequently, the effects of the utilitarian features of military uniforms were incongruous to their intended use.

In contrast to the viewers of Tom of Finland’s artwork who are encouraged to recognize the social construction of manliness, the men (and women) in the world of Tom of Finland’s drawings blindly accept the codes and symbols of masculine stereotypes as “natural” characteristics of masculinity. The viewer, which Tom of Finland assumes to be a gay man living in a homophobic world that denies homosexuals the opportunity to embody authentic masculinity, is shown that the codes and symbols of masculine stereotypes function as technologies that can be appropriated to create the image of masculinity. This theatricalizes the artwork of Tom of Finland. His artwork depicts the codes and symbols of masculine stereotypes as “natural” within the context of the artworks themselves, which simultaneously encourages his intended audience to recognize the socially constructed, or not natural, character of masculinity. From the point of view of the viewer, the characteristics of masculinity are not natural because they are depicted as not-not natural within the world of Tom of Finland’s artwork.

Sailors and soldiers are not the only useless bodies that exhibit the characteristic of theatricality in Tom of Finland’s drawings. The use of the muscular bodies in the

drawings of Tom of Finland is incongruous to the use in which the muscular bodies are positioned to enact. The construction workers are not shown to be adept laborers, but rather horny, virile gay men. Likewise for the sailor, police officer, cowboy, and lumberjack. Furthermore, the job these figures are assumed to perform is not the job they are depicted performing. In the comic strip “The Threesome,” rather than uphold the law, both in the legal sense, as well the sense of patriarchy, the police officer plays a willingly part in the crime; he not only joins in on the public sex that has been brought to his attention, but he defies the assumed dominance of heterosexuality by dismissing the woman by offering his baton as a substitute for the sexual pleasure she was annoyed and offended she was not receiving.

Along with the incongruity exhibited by the useless bodies in Tom of Finland’s drawings, the figures in Tom of Finland’s drawings are excessive in the hyper-virility they exhibit. That is to say that the bodies are useless insofar as they both fail to perform the manly demands of protecting women and children and propagating the species, as well as the work that the drawings suggest they should engage in, but they find “uses,” or at least are eagerly exploited by themselves or by others, in providing pleasure to other men. The bodies of the figures in Tom of Finland’s drawings are imbued with an excessive virility, even though such sexual appetites are not “useful” and distract the figures from successfully performing the work they are supposed to do. The term “useful” in this context refers to both meeting the socially expected application of such qualities as strength, courage, and virility, especially in terms of how these qualities can produce either offspring, food, shelter, or successfully complete other forms of necessary work. Their uselessness exceeds itself by becoming excessive in how these bodies are

used for pleasurable ends (pun intended).⁵⁰ Consequently, they are excessively not useful/not-not useful in terms of use as defined by being productive.

Useless Masculinity

The aesthetic of masculinity in the drawings of Tom of Finland counter conceptions of hegemonic masculinity that is borne from assumptions that men must be strong and virile in order to protect and propagate the human species. Consequently, the strength and virility depicted as theatrical masculinity in the art work of Tom of Finland is not associated with any use value, but rather, is bestowed with aesthetic value as an image of masculinity. As Snath writes in “Tom’s Men,” “Ultimately, it is all show: it is ‘muscles as a masquerade of proletarian masculinity’, for such muscles are not the result of hard manual labor on farms, or in construction, or out in the woods. Such bodies have no use in our sophisticated urban culture; the only purpose they serve for gay men is to attract other men, a perversion of what the male body is meant for according to compulsory heterosexuality” (83).⁵¹ The physique magazines, such as *Physique Pictorial*, were a fitting home for Tom of Finland’s drawings, as such magazines also celebrated the muscular body, not as engaging the use value of its own strength, but as image that was meant to incite desire, specifically in other men.

⁵⁰ Even if sexual pleasure is bestowed with value in terms of exchange value, the economic outcome of the sexual encounters depicted in Tom of Finland’s artwork is not productive. In the world of Tom of Finland, no profit is made nor anything produced, because both men get off. Tom of Finland’s sexual economy is a zero-sum game.

⁵¹ Snath does seem to include a stereotypical conception of gay men as necessarily belonging to a “sophisticate urban culture.” But considering how gay culture largely emerged in urban centers, where there was a critical mass to support gay cultural practice, most gay men, who are the intended audience for Tom of Finland’s work, existed in a social sphere that often stereotyped gay men with such feminine-inflected adjectives such as “sophisticated.” So even if not *all* gay men belonged to a “sophisticated urban culture,” they were often living in a world that assumed they did.

One of Tom of Finland's images from the cover of *Physique Pictorial* exemplifies muscles as an image of masculinity that does need to engage in the use of strength that such muscles designate. On the cover of this particular edition of *Physique Pictorial*, a rather buff male figure clad in a leather cap, leather trousers, and a plaid shirt done up by only the bottom two buttons exposing his muscular chest stands at what appears to be a circus or fair. The figure in this drawing is about to "Test His Strength" by swinging a hammer down on a pad that then measures the force his swing impacted the pad. The image shows the man *before* he has swung the hammer, rather than showing the point of impact, or the resulting measurement of his swing. The drawing has appeal to the viewer, not because the figure is shown to *be* strong, but rather, the figure merely *looks* strong. The apparent appeal of the central figure's physique is apparent by the sailor and other "blue collar" men looking upon him with a smile. These figures are already indulging in the pleasure of the mere *image* of the man's strength.

Despite not being "useful" in terms of how the characteristics of masculinity are determined to be useful, the aesthetic of theatrical masculinity depicted in Tom of Finland's drawing have affected visibility for gay masculine men. As Marti Lahti mentions in an essay titled "Dressing Up In Power," the men in Tom of Finland's drawings

transform their bodies (the private) to the public on which the image of gay identity, modeled after Tom of Finland's drawings, is inscribed. Thus they use their bodies to make gay identities visible, simultaneously calling into question the boundary between the private and the public and stressing the strategy of the "corporeal is political." Furthermore, this process of transforming representations

to material bodies underlines not only fragility and pliability and performative nature of our identities, but also malleability of our bodies (188).

As Lahti points out, despite how the muscular bodies that became the basis for theatrical masculinity embodied by living and breathing gay men did not have use value in terms of their strength, the bodies of men in Tom of Finland's drawings became useful, and celebrated, as a marker of gay identity, and was nominated as the influential "gay clone" image. The muscular body in Tom of Finland's drawings is theatrical insofar as it is not useful – we never see such bodies doing the work that the bodies are situated and expected to do – and are not-not useful – the body is assumed to have been produced by the masculine "blue collar" labor such as construction work, being a lumberjack, or sailing the high seas.

Paradoxically, the "useless" masculine body in the drawings of Tom of Finland is theatrical insofar as his drawings depict a body that merges unnatural technology with the natural flesh. The drawings of Tom of Finland negate the use of both the body as an instrument of labor, and technology as a mode to alleviate the body from the burden of labor. In the drawings of Tom of Finland, technologies can be merged with the body in order to produce new kinds of erotic pleasures. For example, in the drawings of Tom of Finland the use value of denim and leather, as tough material that withstands the wear and tear of labor, no longer is valued for such uses, but rather, is valued for its aesthetic and sensual qualities. As Tom of Finland says in *Daddy and the Muscle Academy*, "I don't think leather is worn so much for practical purposes, but for the contact between the leather and the skin" (Pohjola). The masculine body also displays a theatrical sense of use in the artwork of Tom of Finland: the masculine body is "useless" in terms of refusing its

role as father, hunter, and defender, while simultaneously is not useless in so far as that it is a “machine for fucking.”

“Natural” Sex

Tom of Finland’s artwork counters the hegemonic conception of sex as a natural phenomenon, and disrupts the expectation that reproduction is an integral element of the normative narrative of masculine sexual activity. Normative conceptions of sex assume sexual activity involves the “natural,” naked body acting on its “natural” desires in an effort to procreate in a “natural,” biologically determined fashion. Gayle Rubin outlines normative, “natural” sex in her groundbreaking essay “Thinking Sex.” Rubin describes “Good” socially accepted sex as “natural” in contrast to “Bad” sex which is “unnatural” (Rubin 1984). Though rarely, if ever, is actual sex between any two (or three or four) people a purely natural act (whatever that would mean), the hegemonic conception of sex, and the rhetoric that circulates this conception, assumes that sexual activity is a biological, natural activity. Tom of Finland specifically indulges in the erotic appeal of sex that involves such non-natural elements as leather, denim, uniforms, motorcycles, and other technologies. The implementation of a variety of technologies in sexual practice in the artwork of Tom of Finland is evidence of how gay culture celebrates sex that has been “exploding the boundaries” between “natural” sex and “unnatural” sex for some time now. Such binaries as natural and unnatural, the body and technology, and man and woman, have been blurred through the artwork of Tom of Finland.

The role of clothing in Tom of Finland’s artwork blurs the boundary of the “natural” by situating the clothed body as an erotic object, in contrast to the assumed

“natural” naked flesh as the focus of sexual desire. Micha Ramakers, art historian who has written extensively on Tom of Finland, notes there are rarely completely naked bodies in Tom of Finland’s drawings, suggesting that Tom of Finland was “acutely aware of clothes erotic power” (121). Ramakers goes on to note that because most of Tom of Finland’s figures are in the midst of a state of undress in his drawings, “An opposition is nevertheless present, but it is not situated in tension established between dressed and undressed bodies, but rather between dressed and undressed body parts” (122). Dividing the sexualized body into parts, rather than treating it as unified whole, challenges the conception of the body as a natural indivisible entity, but rather considers the body as a machine, or collection of instrumental parts. An image that most explicitly depicts the body as divided into parts for the purpose of sexual pleasure shows a man, clad in leather boots, jeans, a cap, leather cuffs, with a belt fasten over his shoulder, sitting in what appears to be a vandalized basement (there is graffiti on the wall that reads “Suck My Shitty Asshole” and “Fuck Me In My Suckin Mouth”), looks down upon a scene of erotic submission. In this drawing, one man who may have his hands tied behind him is depicted from the waist up with what could be his own thigh or penis also barely included in one corner of the frame, and another figure whose ass (with a dildo penetrating his anus) and legs (which are chained together with the chain extending to his testicles) are in the other corner of the drawing. Because these two bodies in the scene are not shown in full, and alongside the dildo that the man in the center of the frame is holding, the two half-bodies can be rendered as mere tools used for the dominant man’s sexual pleasure. In this piece, Tom of Finland doesn’t consider the whole body of the two submissive participants necessary for the drawing to have erotic appeal. Only the licking tongue of

one of the submissive participants, and the plugged ass and chained testicles of the other, are necessary for this drawing to have erotic appeal. This image evidences Blake Nayland's remark that Tom of Finland's "'men' are machines for fucking" (37). By dividing the body and equating it as a collection of mechanical parts that can be used for pleasure, the other machines and tools that often appear in Tom of Finland's drawings, such as motorcycles or a policeman's baton, become prostheses for sexual activity. In a drawing that depicts a motorcycle placed amongst the pile of bodies engaged in a variety of combinations of fellatio and anal intercourse, the motorcycle is situated as in an equivocal place as the natural body (Tom of Finland 1998, 136). In another drawing, a naked figure (still wearing boots) is tied to a motorcycle, suggesting that both the body of the man and the machine are merged into one erotic object (Tom of Finland 1988, 19).

The use of prostheses, such as dildos and batons, are a common theme in Tom of Finland's erotic drawings, and further situate his work as exhibiting theatrical bodies that oscillate between exhibiting "naturally" masculine characteristics and depicting a sexualized cyborg relationship to technologies. In a Kake comic titled *The Threesome*, one of the few moments in which Tom of Finland includes women, a prosthesis, in this case a police officer's baton, is situated as a technology of sex that is an extension of the body (Tom of Finland 300-305). In *The Threesome*, a woman who, after being fucked momentarily by a sailor in a park, is dismissed by the sailor in order that he can fuck a buff leather man who has been cruising for sex, goes to a police officer to demand justice. (The logic in the world of the comic seems to be such that the police officer is assumed to be aligned with maintaining a hegemonic heterosexual order in which women are situated as the proper sexual object of men.) The police officer positions his police baton at the

level of his own penis, and has placed it between the women's legs, while the woman is pointing to the scene she just has left with mouth agape to indicate the injustice she has suffered. The police officer follows the women to the scene she had just left and starts fucking her with the baton so that he can free himself to participate in the man-on-man action occurring between the sailor and the leather man. The woman, seemingly content with the baton as her instrument of pleasure, masturbates while the police officer joins the sailor and leather man, thus completing the threesome referenced in the title. In this scene, the police officer's baton is used as prosthesis, and specifically as the instrument that performs the "natural" task of penetrating the woman's vagina. The police officer's baton is not just phallic, but also almost the same size and shape of the men's penises.

The erotic appeal of leather in the work of Tom of Finland also blurs the boundary between the natural "naked" body and unnatural sartorial adornments. Often in his work, the leather worn by the figures is so tight it appears as a kind of second skin. In an interview, gesturing toward such a common sartorial effect seen in his drawings, Tom of Finland notes "There's something alive in leather. It's the skin of an animal, and there's a sense in the touch, the feel, the smells that is opposite of plastics and rubber, which are too mechanistic" (Tom of Finland qtd in Reed CITE). In *Daddy and the Muscle Academy*, Tom of Finland describes leather as "living material" and "organic" images of a naked male body covering himself up in lotion or oil is shown on screen. By superimposing Tom of Finland's description of leather over shots of a naked man oiling his own body, *Daddy and the Muscle Academy* implies that both leather and flesh are equivocal in the sexual economy of the world of Tom of Finland (Pohjola). Despite how Tom of Finland describes leather as contrasting the "mechanistic" qualities of other

technologically developed fabrics, leather blurs the boundary between the natural, the skin of an actual animal, and the unnatural, a material that is treated and manipulated to make clothing. There is something “alive” in leather, but also something about it that is obviously “dead.” The boundary blurring of leather, between the natural and the unnatural, between the living and the dead, is theatrical insofar as it is paradoxically not living/natural and not-not living/natural, but also because, being fetishized and imbued with meaning beyond that which is normally attributed to it, it is also excessive.

The denim worn by the blue collar workers in Tom of Finland’s drawings function in a similar fetishized manner as leather does in his drawings. The denim in his drawings “emphasizes the contours of the body,” and situates the fabric as a kind of second skin for these figures (Ramakers 142). In a more realistic, less exaggerated portrait from 1984, the shape of the man’s penis can be seen as the tight denim stretches across his tumescent member (Tom of Finland 1998, 267). In a drawing depicting a group of construction workers wearing jeans and hard hats (one still has his tank top on), the denim stretches across the round buttocks of two figures whom have their back turned to the viewer in such a way that, if such details as belt loops and pocket seams were absent, the denim could be mistaken for the skin of the two buff construction workers (Tom of Finland 1998, 255). For the viewer of Tom of Finland’s drawings, the items of clothing and the particular fabrics from which they are made are indistinguishable from the skin and appendages of the figures in the erotic encounters. The erotic appeal of Tom of Finland’s drawings demands that the non-corporeal, the leather and denim, be treated as a part of the sexualized natural body.

Femininity in Theatrical Masculinity

Though Tom of Finland is obviously invested in the erotic power of masculinity so much so that he has theatricalized a style of masculinity that is unique to gay culture, his drawings also still include traces of femininity. These traces come in two forms: the curvaceous line of the hyper-muscular male figures, and the inclusion of women, who always exhibit masculine traits and features, in the drawings themselves.⁵² The male figures in Tom of Finland's drawings are theatrical in the ways that I've illustrated above, but are also theatrical in the ways that, through their exaggeration, they are represented by curves, especially in their pectoral muscles, that exhibit feminine qualities. The rotund pectoral muscles that are a feature of most Tom of Finland's male figures are round and curvy to the point of appearing identical to women's breasts. If, when looking at Tom of Finland's drawings, you cover all but the pectoral muscle of a figure with your hand, you can see how much the exaggerated musculature of his male figures mirrors the female anatomy. Even in the abstract sense that the quality of a hard line is commonly associated with masculinity in contrast to the curved line that is associated with femininity, the musculature of Tom of Finland's male figures is so exaggerated, they begin to approach the curvy character of such celebrated feminine bodies as Marilyn Monroe. In a comprehensive compilation of Tom of Finland's artwork, Camille Paglia notes, "Tom's dashing ephebi, with their ripening pectorals and swollen buttocks, have internalized the fertility principle which is normally the province of women" (Tom of Finland 1998 520).

⁵² Tom of Finland rarely drew women, but when he did, both Tom of Finland and his critics have noted they appear more masculine than the average "realistic" woman. Tom of Finland confesses that he is not able to draw women because he "lack[s] feminine sensuality" (Pohjola). Art critics have also criticized his female figures as exhibiting similar facial features, strong jawlines and angular bone structures, as the men he drew. The women in Tom of Finland's drawings are theatrical in the way they appear as women, but exhibited masculine features: Tom of Finland's women are not masculine, by definition of their role as women in his drawings, but they are not-not masculine, insofar as they maintain masculine physical traits.

As Snath notes, there is a good reason why gay men call their pectoral muscles “tits:” Snath writes, “As In bodybuilding, gay men play with the boundaries of masculinity pushing male gender characteristics to the nth degree. Such physical ostentation is wasteful, extravagant, excessive; it offers up the male body as spectacle; it is also ambiguous. It is telling that in bodybuilding circles ‘pecs’ are called ‘tits’” (83). Even though, unlike women’s breasts which are used for feeding their infant child, men’s “tits” are just for show and end up being useless.

Similar to the male bodies in the artwork of Tom of Finland, Nina Arsenault and her oeuvre in the theater, photographs, and media presents a theatrically feminine body. The previous chapter notes that Arsenault’s style of femininity exceeds the bounds of the performative constitution of gender. In other words, Arsenault, like the masculinity depicted in the artwork of Tom of Finland, exhibits codes of normative gender identities, but also recodes such characteristics and qualities to present a style of gender that is non-normative. Just like the useless musculature exhibited on the bodies of the men in the drawings of Tom of Finland, Arsenault’s feminine qualities align with normative femininity, but are exhibited in such a way that Arsenault fails to qualify as normatively feminine.

Theatrical Female Masculinity

As was illustrated in the study of Arsenault, the theatrical femininity celebrated in gay cultural phenomena can cross gender lines – both men *and* women (cisgendered women, or women-identified women) can embody the style of theatrical femininity. The same is the case for theatrical masculinity, but with some qualifications.

The artwork of G.B. Jones recreates iconic scenes from the work of Tom of Finland, and instead of muscular, masculine men in the images, she depicts masculine punk rock women. In one illustration, an almost identical recreation of one of Tom of Finland's illustrations, G.B. Jones illustrates two punk rock girls embracing each other with rifle in hand behind a tree, while watching a police officer in the distance. As is common in the illustrations Jones decided to recreate, the masculinity of the women illustrated is evident in how they either resist or disobey the authority figures, which are also depicted. In another recreated illustration, G.B. Jones depicts a punk rock woman with her pants at her ankles getting a tattoo from another, with a third punk rock woman watching. The process of getting a "tattoo," a narrative feature in the original Tom of Finland drawing as well, further establishes the masculinity central to both Tom of Finland's artwork and G.B. Jones' appropriation of it. Yet, the female masculinity in G.B. Jones' artwork is not theatrical, as I've outlined here, because theatricality requires employing particular signs that then incorporate meanings that are not socially authorized while maintaining their original socially authorized meaning. When the female bodies in G.B. Jones's artwork, which are obviously female, employ signs that are associated with masculinity, they already deny socially acceptable application of these signs. In fact, the socially authorized meanings of the signs embodied in female masculinity maintain their socially authorized meanings. In other words, female masculinity is not feminine – it is not the socially authorized expression of female gender – and not feminine – it is masculine. Female masculinity fails to be double negated, but simply negated in two different ways.

Along with porn stars such as Zeb Atlas and Matthew Rush, the aesthetic of theatrical masculinity is embodied by Buck Angel, a transgender porn star. Buck Angel, born a woman, still has a vagina but no longer has breasts. Angel has also undergone dramatic body reconstruction, through a heavy muscle building regime and likely other hormonal treatment. Angel, much like Arsenault, is a trans person who embodies a theatrical style of gender that dramatically differs from the gender he was assigned at birth.

Angel's particular style of masculinity, as a transgender identity, is theatrical. Angel is known, and self-proclaimed, as the "straight man with a pussy" (Ginsburg). As a public persona, and an advocate for human rights and sexual freedom in the public sphere, Angel's private parts are not private, but rather, they are an open secret. Even the status of Angel's genitalia, then, is theatrical: His private parts are not private. Conversely, his private parts, by definition, are private – they are not-not private. Angel's genitalia, like Arsenault's, further situate his style of masculinity as theatrical. He is, if we follow the socially authorized regime that determines an individual's gender by their genitalia, not a masculine because he has a vagina. Yet, because his visible body appears masculine, and he consequently is treated as a masculine subject, he is not-not masculine. Most importantly, though, both these seemingly contradictory and paradoxical understandings of Angel are maintained and celebrated in his public persona. And not only is Angel's masculinity theatrical along these line, but his masculinity is theatrical insofar as he exhibits similar aesthetics as those depicted in the artwork of Tom of Finland.

Buck Angel, when not completely naked, is seen wearing similar items of clothing and accessories that are found in the artwork of Tom of Finland. On the cover of a documentary about Angel, titled *Mr. Angel: He's a Man Like No Other*, Angel is seen wearing a leather cap, an item that is often sported by Tom of Finland's Kake. Similar to leather gear in the work of Tom of Finland, Angel's leather cap gestures toward the male icons of the films of Kenneth Anger and the über-masculine persona of Marlon Brando. By having a vagina, Angel is not masculine, but by sporting a leather cap that evokes the masculine icons of the past, from Brando to Kake, Angel is not-not masculine. Angel was also immortalized by artist Marc Quinn, which captured Angel's naked body shimmering in gold, with him sporting a cigar. In this artwork, though it is clear Angel is lacking a penis, the cigar stands in for the phallus, but also evokes resemblances between Angel and the figures feature in the artwork of Tom of Finland

[http://www.artnet.com/artists/marc-quinn/buck-with-cigar-a-](http://www.artnet.com/artists/marc-quinn/buck-with-cigar-a-TfpXf4eW0zmzoFDxZL2kow2)

[TfpXf4eW0zmzoFDxZL2kow2](http://www.artnet.com/artists/marc-quinn/buck-with-cigar-a-TfpXf4eW0zmzoFDxZL2kow2)).⁵³ Again, Angel is not masculine, insofar as he lacks a penis, but he is not-not masculine, with his lack of penis replaced by a phallus of a cigar. Beyond his sartorial adornment, Angel's body evokes the muscular figures of the men in the artwork of Tom of Finland. Angel's body is undeniably muscular. His broad shoulders, large biceps, and defined abs are reminiscent of the muscular men in the artwork of Tom of Finland.

Although there are far fewer non-male bodies exhibiting masculinity in gay culture than there are non-female bodies embodying femininity, Angel is exemplary of how the particular biological gender of a person is not a determining factor of their

⁵³ Though he appears gold, according to the art catalogue website [artnet.com](http://www.artnet.com), the sculpture is, in fact, made of lacquered bronze. <http://www.artnet.com/artists/marc-quinn/buck-with-cigar-a-TfpXf4eW0zmzoFDxZL2kow2>

capacity to express a particular gender theatrically. The same lack of gender parity is the case in the next chapter, where I examine public sex practices. Because men have had a privileged access to the public sphere, more men than women have engaged in public sex activities. But, as Samuel R. Delaney notes in his study of public sex in the porno theater in and around 42nd Street in New York City, there is no reason why woman shouldn't, or can't, participate in public sex practices. The lack of women participating in public sex, or exhibiting theatrical masculinity, does not mean that these practices are somehow determined by, or rooted in, a particular identity category.

CHAPTER FOUR: THEATRICAL SPACE

Public Sex is (Theatrically) Private Sex

The practice of indulging in sexual activity in public, which has been a part of gay culture over the course of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, transforms public space into *theatrical* spaces. Appealing to the definition of theatricality as the aesthetic structure of excessive double negation that is a central feature of gay cultural practice, sexual activities occurring in public spaces are not private – they are socially and often legally determined to happen in public space. Conversely, because sex is commonly understood as a private act, these sex acts are necessarily not-not private. In other words, public sex, commonly practiced by men who have also been active participants in gay culture, recodes spaces that are socially and legally determined to be public to function in ways that simultaneously contrast these social and legal characterizations, while never wholly jettisoning these social and legal determinations. Public sex occurs in a wide definition of public spaces that includes public toilets, parks, streets, docks, piers, and also digital platforms like Craigslist and Grindr, and includes a wide range of sexual activity that may occur in those spaces, such as cruising, masturbation, fellatio, and intercourse. Each of these sites, through various sexual activities, is transformed into a theatrical public by recoding what is socially accepted to be a public space into a site for sexual activity, which is socially and often legally determined to belong to the private sphere.

Everywhere and Anywhere

Various scholars and researchers have documented the prevalence of public sex practices by men who have sex with men in gay culture (Chauncey 1994; Chauncey 1996; Dean 2009; McGlotten 2013; Lindell 1996; Warner 1999). Laud Humphreys's sociological study of men who frequent public toilets looking for sex with other men, *Tearoom Trade*, is a landmark study of this phenomenon of gay culture (Humphreys 1970). Humphreys claims that approximately five percent of the adult male population in the metropolitan area he studied participated in sex in toilets (9). This five percent, though a mere approximation and only, to use his word, a "guesstimate," does not account for the men who frequent other locales, such as parks, movie theaters, streets and alleys, docks, and piers, to have sexual encounters with other men (Humphreys 9).

Historian George Chauncey describes several different sites of public sex in New York City in the first half of the twentieth century. In an essay aptly titled, "Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public: Gay Uses of the Streets," Chauncey claims that "[m]en used public spaces to meet their friends and to find potential sexual partners. But they also used them for sex" (248). In his study *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World 1890-1940*, Chauncey notes that toilets were also a popular site of public sex: "Of all the spaces to which men had recourse for sexual encounters, none were more specific to gay men – or more highly contested, both within the gay world and without – than New York's public comfort stations and subway washrooms" (196). Chauncey also notes that parks were a popular site to cruise for sexual encounters. Chauncey writes that men "found the city's parks particularly useful" to engage in public sex: "They were dark at night, and the larger ones offered numerous secluded spots in the

midst of bushes and tree where couples could find privacy even in so public a space” (196). Many of these sites are still popular for public sex today.

Gay spaces and institutions, specifically porno shops and bathhouses, in New York City have come under aggressive attack from the municipal government in the recent past. In *The Trouble With Normal*, Michael Warner charts how new municipal policies have eroded the once vibrant public sex culture that was particularly popular amongst gay men in New York City (Warner 1999). Beginning in 1998, New York City Mayor Rudolph Guiliani implemented a set of policies that targeted “adult businesses.” These policies demanded that adult establishments be five hundred feet away from “family- oriented” institutions such as schools, churches, and hospitals, and five hundred feet away from other adult businesses (Warner 1999). The definition of an adult business was expanded and made purposefully vague and so the power for determining what constituted an adult business was left to the powers that enforce these new policies.

The porno theaters in and around Times Square, specifically on 42nd Street, are some of the many sites of public sex that have been destroyed in New York City.⁵⁴ Samuel R. Delaney describes various personal experiences meeting men for relatively anonymous sexual encounters in his book *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*. Delaney offers an in-depth look at the thriving public sex scene in porno theaters that showed both heterosexual and homosexual pornography in the second half of the century. Following from almost exactly where George Chauncey left off in *Gay New York*, Delaney provides evidence of the continued popularity of public sex in gay culture over the course of the twentieth century.

⁵⁴ With the advent of the internet that allows viewers to access a wide array of pornography in their own homes, porno theaters everywhere have been closing. Despite the potential to access pornography in the privacy of one’s own home, small iterations of the porno theater, the viewing booth, still remain open.

Even today, despite how both the internet and new applications for smartphones have inspired some cultural critics to predict its doom, public sex remains a popular practice, especially amongst gay men. One popular gay hookup site, squirt.org, offers a section in which users can post where the best sites of public sex and cruising are in a given locale. Even in the small college town where I write this, Ithaca, New York, squirt.org has catalogued one location (at a campus library) where men go to have sexual encounters with other men. Users are free to comment on these sites. Some users rate them, as now is the custom with applications and websites that help users find the best restaurant or hotel in a particular neighborhood. Other users merely post that they are heading to that particular location and are eagerly waiting for strangers to have sex with. In any case, in cities large and small, public sex practices, especially amongst gay men, have remained a popular activity.

To better understand how the practice of sex in public spaces theatricalizes these spaces, an examination of the concepts of “public” and “private” is required. The following section engages scholarship that attempts to parse out these terms. The work offered in this scholarship provides a better understanding on how spaces that are socially authorized for public use can be recoded and consequently become theatrical, through engaging in cruising and public sex.

Defining Terms: Public and Private

In his collection of essays *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner offers a gloss of the varied and often conflicted meanings of public. Warner lists the following contrasting forms in which the concepts of public and private can be understood: public

as open to everyone, impersonal in terms that the public is the site of encountering strangers, in physical view of others, outside the home, and common in terms of being shared—in contrast to private defined as restricted to some, personal, concealed, domestic, and special in terms of being accessible to only a select group of people (29). Following from Warner’s useful outline of the contrasting understandings of public and private, the public space that is the site of sexual practice common in gay cultural practice is open and accessible to an indefinite amount of people, and a space that allows strangers to congregate and connect, in opposition to the domestic sphere. Though not included in Warner’s list, it is necessary to include the definition of public as a site where strangers congregate. This definition of a public contrasts with the intimate relations that are deemed private. These binary, but essentially arbitrary, oppositions allow an examination of how sex in public transforms public spaces into theatrical publics. The features that are socially accepted to define the public provide the grounds in which sex recodes public space into theatrical private spaces.

Along with Warner’s elucidation of the concept of “public,” especially as defined in contrast to the concept of “private,” philosopher Hannah Arendt offers a distinction between public and private that is also useful in an analysis of public sex practices. Arendt defines the private domestic sphere as the site where human needs are met and life is maintained, referring to the home as the site where an individual customarily eats and sleeps, explicitly including reproduction of the species as a result of heterosexual sex under the category of a life-sustaining need (30). In *The Human Condition*, Arendt identifies the private sphere as being synonymous⁵⁵ with the household when she writes,

⁵⁵ Seyla Benhabib notes that Arendt also defines the public as any space in which “‘men act in concert’”: “But a private dining room in which people gather to hear a samizdat or in which dissidents meet with

“The distinction between a private and a public sphere in life corresponds to the household and political realms” (28). The division between the public sphere and the private/domestic sphere for Arendt is understood as “the division [...] between the sphere of the *polis* and the sphere of the household and family, [...] between activities related to a common world and *those related to the maintenance of life*” (28, emphasis added). Arendt calls the activity that satisfies the needs to create and sustain life as labor, and labor, for Arendt, is confined to the private sphere. She writes, “Public life, obviously, was possible only after the much more urgent needs of life itself have been taken care of. The means to take care of them was labor” (65). The survival of the species belonged to this category of labor for Arendt as well: “Labor assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species” (8). For Arendt, the private, domestic sphere is the proper site of sexual activity. Though Arendt does not mention homosexuality at all, her theoretical elucidation of the differences between the public and private, and how they are assumed to be necessary distinctions for civilized society, provide ground on which to conceive of how public sex practices recode normative public spaces into theatrical spaces.

Even though gay male sex is not labor in so far as it does not help in meeting the needs of sustaining life, and consequently does not belong to the private sphere of the domestic space like heterosexual sex does, the pleasure of gay male sexual activity experienced in, on, and through the body, locates gay male sex within the category of the private as well.

foreigners public spaces” is a private space in which “men act in concert” (78). For the purposes of this essay though, when I refer to what Arendt calls private I am referring to spaces, the home in particular, which is the sole site of labor. Though the domestic space can be opened up to the public, public spaces are never intended to be spaces where labor takes place.

Locke founded private property on the most privately owned thing there is, “the property [of man] in his own person,” that is, in his own body.

“The labor of our body and the work of our hands become one and the same, because both are the ‘means’ to ‘appropriate’ what ‘God... hath given... to men in common.” And these means, body and hands and mouth, are the natural appropriators because they do not “belong to mankind in common” but are given to each man for his private use. (111)

Via Locke, Arendt describes the body as private because the body is necessarily not under the autonomy of “mankind in common,” but rather, is proper to each individual who controls it. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt also writes:

Nothing, to be sure, is more private than the bodily functions of the life process, its fertility not excluded, and it is quite noteworthy that the few instances where even a “socialized mankind” respects and imposes strict privacy concern precisely such “activities” as are imposed by the life process itself. (111)

Just as the activity of labor belongs to the private sphere, Arendt identifies the body, which requires the fruits of labor to maintain itself, as being private.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas also identifies the household as being fundamentally private because the domestic sphere is the site in which life-sustaining needs are met. Habermas writes, “The reproduction of life, the labor of slaves, and the service of the women went on under the aegis of the master’s domination; birth and death took place in its shadow; and the realm of necessity and transitoriness remained immersed in the obscurity of the private sphere” (3).

Habermas echoes Arendt's definition of the private sphere as the site where not only is life sustained, but also where the potential consequences of heterosexual sexual activity, birth and the reproduction of life, are meant to take place. Though it is unclear exactly what Habermas means when he mentions "the service of the women," the services he gestures to are likely ones concerning the reproduction of life and the rearing of children, which he locates as being appropriate to the private domestic household. Like Warner and Arendt, Habermas distinguishes the private from the public by recognizing that historically it has been the site of sexual activity.

In their essay "Sex in Public," Lauren Berlant writes with Michael Warner to specifically address how the privatization of sex prohibits public sex practices. They gesture toward the work of Arendt and Habermas glossed above when they write that the "conventional spaces" of sex "presuppose a structural differentiation of 'personal life' from work, politics, and the public sphere" (193). They go on to write that "the normativity of heterosexual culture links intimacy only to the institutions of social reproduction, the accumulation and transfer of capital, and self-development" (193). The "structural differentiation" they identify and the institutions of normative heterosexual culture they list describe particular and recognizable sites that are legally, socially, culturally, and politically coded that then provides a foundation for participants in public sex to recode by performing activities that are socially determined to belong to the private sphere. The act of recoding spaces through the execution of certain activities is, as I show in the following section, a performance act that transforms space.

It's How You Use It

Although I describe the sites of public sex as theatrical spaces, their theatricality is in part determined by the activities that happen there and the social roles of the individuals who use these spaces. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau differentiates the concept of “place” from that of “space.” According to de Certeau, a place is the phenomenological location that is constituted by “an instantaneous configuration of positions” of distinct elements (117). In contrast to place, space⁵⁶

occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present (or of a time) and modified by the transformation caused by successive contexts (117).

In other words, space is how a place is determined by its use.⁵⁷ De Certeau writes, “In short, space is a practiced place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers” (117). A space is continually constructed, transformed, and negotiated by human use.

⁵⁶ It would seem that the words “place” and “space” could be interchangeable. The word “space,” I think, is more appropriate a term to describe what happens to a place when it is a site of action because space means both a location, but also physical area in three dimensions and a period of time. These two meanings attending the word place both are necessary preconditions for action. In other words, one can not act without acting in a physical three dimensional area and over the course of a period of time.

⁵⁷ George Chauncey makes a similar argument, appealing to Michel De Certeau, in an essay “Privacy Could Only be Had In Public: Gay Uses of the Street.” Chauncey claims “There is no queer space; there are only spaces used by queers or put to queer use. Space has no natural character, no inherent meaning, no intrinsic status as public or private.” (224). Though this is true in some sense, it ignores the legal and socially imposed distinctions and classifications of space that both determine the use of any particular space, and also determine what activities in particular would qualify as a “queer” use of that space.

Following from de Certeau's distinction between place and space, public sites are constituted, at least in part, performatively. That is to say that it is the repeated, embodied activity within a particular place over time that transforms it into a space. Though legal force has particular power to determine the public or private character of any particular space, the use of it also can determine whether the users understand any particular space to be either public or private. For instance, imagine a small park, owned and maintained by the city, that is secluded and hidden from view from both vehicle and foot traffic by a private home. Though the park can be accessed by walking along the side of the private property that hides it from view from the public street, the only people who use the park are the residents of that private home. After some time, the residents of that private home treat the park as their private space, only because they are the only people who use it. In this instance, despite how legal force has determined this park to be public, the residents, the only users of the site, have performatively constituted the site to function as an extension of their private property. The point here is not that the residents are required to make any claim, legal or otherwise, to this space, but rather, that it is through the use of the space that the park becomes a site which they can consider as "theirs" insofar as they have learned over time that they are the park's only users. This site doesn't qualify as a *theatrical* space, even though it has partially been performatively recoded from being public, because the residents who use the park as they would use their private property do so with no regard to finding pleasure in its contradictory status as both public *and* private.

In contrast to this example, public sex recodes spaces that are legally determined to be public into theatrical publics by maintaining the public character of these spaces, while privatizing them through sex acts. Shaka McGlotten, author of *Virtual Intimacies*:

Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality, recognizes the potential of recoding public spaces through sex when he writes that “sex was a kind of background hum, that every space might become a queer space, if only I paid attention to the sometimes faint but almost always present erotic frequencies: gazes held a second too long, subtle and not so subtle movements and gestures (a casual grope or a hand resting near a crotch), alert lingering in gym showers or saunas, or the peculiarly intense studying that goes on near some university toilets, especially out of the way ones” (4). McGlotten goes on to claim, site of gay public sex “were spaces where normal rules of social intercourse were suspended, especially those defined by hetero-normative ideals that permitted homosociality but discouraged homosex and emphasized sexual propriety” (4). McGlotten specifically suggests that the “normal rules” were suspended not erased, and hence implies that these “rules,” or in other words the public nature of these spaces that determine the rules, was maintained, while deviant public sex activity occurred. The activities McGlotten describes are necessary in order to transform the *places* where public sex happens into *spaces* of public sex that are theatrical. This performative transformation though is not complete; the public character is both maintained and exploited in scenes of public sex despite how this activity, as socially determined to be suited to private places, recodes the space from a public site to a theatrical public. Hence, the performative constitution of public places into spaces for public sex is performative only insofar as that these spaces are constituted through human activity. These spaces do not meet the requirement of performativity insofar as they fail to have effects congruous to the socially determined character with which they are endowed.

Public sex in gay culture transforms particular places that have been determined to be public by normative use into *theatrical* spaces. Individuals who engage in sexual activity in spaces that have been coded as public through a particular kind of use – a use that demonstrates the features of the concept of public listed by Warner above – recode them through the theatrical force of practicing activities that are socially determined to require privacy. The spaces of public sex are open to an indeterminate number of people while also easily allowing for a sense of privacy in terms of limiting wide and unfettered access: the stalls and urinals of public toilets are designed to shield one’s private parts from full exposure, but still function as public spaces; bushes in parks provide secluded spaces for illicit activity by being literally off the beaten path, but still are socially and legally determined to be public places; alley ways are less travelled thoroughfares with dark, badly lit corners that allow for sexual activity, but also include the possibility of a stranger or strangers to walk past. The act of recoding these public spaces through engaging in acts deemed to require privacy does not void their public character. Rather, the practice that establishes such spaces as public is maintained in relation to the practice of sex that normally demands privacy. The practices of sex that demand privacy fail to performatively recode the public space as private, and hence are theatrical insofar as such acts transform the space to exhibit an aesthetic of double negation. Like Nina Arsenault, spaces of public sex are both performatively constituted – following from de Certeau’s distinction between “place” and “space” – but exhibit the aesthetic structure of theatricality. Sexual activity demarcates the public space into a space that is not public by performing within it an act deemed private, while simultaneously maintaining the

features of the concept of the public articulated by Warner, Arendt, and Habermas above and consequently sustains the space as not-not public.

Most importantly, public sex has appeal because the public character of the space is maintained. The excitement and danger of being caught, or the potential for an indeterminate number of unknown individuals that can potentially flow through a public space, often have erotic appeal for those people who practice public sex. For example, in *Tearoom Trade*, Humphreys claims, “Participants assure [him] that it is not uncommon in tearooms for one man to fellate as many as ten others in a day” (10). This detail of Humphrey’s research suggests that part of the appeal, for at least some participants, is the volume of men who pass through these spaces. The erotic appeal of being able to encounter an indeterminate volume of sexual partners evokes Warner’s definition of public as an indeterminate and open number of participants. The not private and not-not private character of public sex practices maintain both the socially authorized character of the space, its publicness, while recoding it as private – the sustaining of both characteristics situate these spaces as *double*, and therefore excessive.

The sites of public sex function in a similar way to the way such sites would function in a play, which consequently position these sites as similar to the settings of plays in actual theater practice. In several instances in plays where sexual or erotic encounters occur, a play is not set in a particular location because the action that is mostly commonly executed at the location is integral to the plot. Rather, in these plays, there are other features of that location, secondary features that are important for the drama. In *The Toilet*, a play set in the toilet of a school, the secondary feature of the toilet, as a space that is only accessible to men, is the important narrative feature of the

setting. Rather than being a site where men come to relieve themselves, the privacy of the toilet in *The Toilet* is exploited to allow one gang of students to bully another without having to risk the interference of any adults. If a toilet is defined only as a toilet when it allows the space to fulfill the functions that a toilet normally fulfills, that toilet is not theatrical. But when the toilet, as in Jones' *The Toilet*, is a place in which its primary and conventional purposes become secondary to other realities that accompany these purposes, the toilet is theatrical.

This illustration of the concept of theatricality follows from the work of Josette Feral, who identifies a gap between a fictional world and the “real” world inherent to any event being characterized as theatrical. She writes:

Theatricality is the result of these simultaneous cleavages: between everyday space and representational space, between reality and fiction. [...] It creates disjunction where our ordinary perception sees only unity between signs and their meaning. It replaces uniformity with duality (Feral 11).

Considering this division that is recognizable in conventional theater practice, Feral identifies the dual nature inherent in theatre practice. In the case of the toilet in *The Toilet*, the latrines are identified as toilets while simultaneously understood as *representations* of toilets. The bathroom setting itself, then, is recognized, in its everyday sense, as a bathroom, but because it is not assumed to meet its function, the bathroom is understood only as a representation of a bathroom. When sex in public happens in a bathroom, the bathroom is recognized as a bathroom, just as it is in *The Toilet*, but because the bathroom is not used as a bathroom (usually) in the activities required for a

sexual encounter, the “sign” or meaning of the bathroom, though not necessarily recognized as a mere representation, is doubled, or in other words, understood in a dual sense – it must remain the bathroom as a private space for private activities, but it *becomes* a public space for private activity at the same time.

Not Just For Gays Anymore?

Gay male sexual practices have traversed into the public realm to such an extent and with such frequency that such practices can be seen as a feature of gay male culture. Yet, heterosexual sexual activity and lesbian sexual activities, which are also practiced at times in the public sphere, have not established themselves as a definitive cultural practice associated with either of these communities. The canonical scholarship on the public/private dichotomy outlines why men in general and gay men in particular are afforded particular access to the public sphere, which consequently allows them to transform certain public spaces into spaces for sexual activity.

Even though this chapter considers man-on-man sexual activity that is common in gay culture, this activity should not be thought of as only practiced by men who identify as gay, but rather, this activity should be thought of as a practice of gay *culture*. By outlining how public sex practices transform spaces into theatrical publics, public sex understood as a gay cultural practice challenges what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner identify as a “hegemonic public” that situates sexuality as “a property of subjectivity rather than a publicly or counterpublicly accessible culture” (200). That is to say that, this chapter dismisses the role that sex plays in determining subjectivity, or in other words, identity, and argues that sex in public is, as it had been during moments in

the early twentieth century in New York City, an accessible culture that included participants from all genders and sexual orientations. The practice of gay public sex cannot be couched as a particular activity enjoyed by only gay men because, as Samuel R. Delaney points out in his memoir of frequenting the porno cinemas at 42nd Street and 8th Avenue in Manhattan from the sixties to the eighties, and as Laud Humphrey mentions often in his study of gay public sex in toilets in *Tearoom Trade*, many of the men who frequented the sites of public sex *do not* identify as gay. In *Gay New York*, Chauncey notes that both homosexuals and heterosexuals practiced public sex, probably for the same reasons: lack of privacy in their homes (183, 195). As Chauncey tells us, many men lived in very close quarters with families or their neighbors in the tenements that housed many of New York city's poor (1996, 253). Chauncey does note that not only poor men enjoyed sex in public (199). Chauncey claims that professional and often married men, who wanted quick sexual release on their way home to their families, frequented subway washrooms, which were conveniently located on their commute home, to meet other men for sex (Chauncey 197). Practices associated with gay men (from public sex in cinemas, to camp, to drag) have become *cultural* practices, not practices that necessarily define or determine identity, and therefore can be unanchored from particular identity categories.

According to Arendt, because sexual activity is considered to be tethered to reproduction, women's sexual activity has a place within the private sphere of the domestic household, and need not seek a place elsewhere. Arendt writes, "Hidden away were the laborers who 'with their bodies minister to the [bodily] needs of life,' and the women who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species" (72). Here,

seeing the productive results of the labor of sex as the “survival of the species,” Arendt implies that the private domestic sphere is best suited to accommodate women’s sexual practice. In contrast to the benefits of labor as sustaining and maintaining life, Arendt argues,

The remaining three ways of life [the ways of life experienced once the needs to maintain life have been met] have in common that they were concerned with the “beautiful,” that is, with things neither necessary nor merely useful: the life of enjoying bodily pleasures in which the beautiful, as it is given, is consumed. (13)

Despite how Arendt’s sexual and gender politics outlined here are outdated insofar as she wrongly assumes that women’s sexual activity is practiced only for the purposes of reproduction, she outlines a general socially accepted understanding that sex practiced for purposes other than reproduction is a sensual and pleasurable activity that is, fundamentally, neither necessary nor useful. Gay male sex, or any homosexual sexual activity, is not useful, in terms of sustaining life, and outright fails to create life. The only purpose of homosexual sexual activity is pleasure hence homosexuality sex had access to life outside of the private/domestic sphere.

The fact that, until relatively recently, women were denied the right to own property contributed to relegating women, and consequently women’s sexual activity, to the private domestic sphere. As Joan Landes notes in her critique of the Habermasian model of the public sphere, the requirement for property, to have a place of one’s own, made “[t]he bourgeois public sphere [...] for the most part a restricted male preserve” (141). Not having the right to property, which was necessary for the maintenance of life,

also disqualified women from public life in the Arendtian model: “but the fact that without owning a house, a man could not participate in the affairs of the world because he had no location in it which was properly his own” (29-30). Arendt is often criticized as being anti-feminist because she fails to note that women had limited access to property ownership throughout much of history, and consequently had limited access to the public sphere.

The almost unavoidable fact that most gay men grow up closeted for some time in straight households also implicitly suggests that the home is not a place for homosexual activity. Because men who desire sexual activity with other men have been stigmatized over the past century, many men choose to get married and have children, as was expected of them. The homes that these men then lived in were not, and could not be, spaces of homosexual activity.⁵⁸ Hence, many of these men found public spaces where they could engage in homosexual activity that was thought to be, and in fact usually was, free of traceable consequences: no credit card receipt or witnesses at the local hotel, and any witnesses of the act were likely to be people as guilty as the perpetrator, so their silence was considered to be reliable. The history of homophobic stigma that encourages many men to get married despite their homosexual desire, alongside a conception of the public/private divide that demanded women’s sexuality to be at home in the domestic realm, has encouraged gay male sex to find a place in public.

Because they practice same-sex sexual activity in public, the men who maintain heterosexual relationships elsewhere do not consider themselves to be “gay.” If the private domestic sphere is the normative space for sexual activity, and if the sexual

⁵⁸ Because I am arguing that gay culture, specifically the gay cultural practice of public sex, should be distinguished from (gay) identity, the particular modes of identification for men who have sex with men in public does not impact the theatrical nature of the public sex practices.

activity that is practiced within the private sphere is that which defines public sexual orientation, then only the sexual activity practiced in the privacy of the home is constitutive of producing a socially accepted public sexual identity.

After much progress in the long fight for women's liberation, women's sex practice does not always have to be tethered to the aims of reproduction. As Delaney notes in "Times Square Blue," there is no "reason that a woman (or women) couldn't take any (or every) role already described or will go on to describe for any (and every) male theater patron" (31-32). Delaney does concede that public sex and the behavior that accompanies public sex, such as the exposure of genitals in the anecdote I outlined above, "does unmitigated violence to the West's traditional concept of 'women'" (32). This "concept of 'women,'" produced and reproduced by the gendered divisions of the public/private dichotomy, is examined by scholars such as Arendt and Habermas. But, as Delaney argues, "it is only by inflicting such violences on the concept that we can prevent actual violence against women's bodies and minds in the political world" (32). After all, the respect for another person and his autonomy over his own body and personal space is common etiquette in gay public sex sites such as the porno cinema. Delaney, for example, quotes a seemingly straight patron of the porno cinemas: "Yeah, it's okay. Guy's don't crowd you here – I mean, if you ask them to leave you alone. [...] No, this is nice here. These guys in here, they're nice" (25). The historical association between women's sex and reproduction helps explain why public sex practiced by women is given much less publicity and seems much less common. But as Delaney points out, modern women can and should have access to public spaces that

accommodate public sex. In this light, gay public sex practices could and should no longer be monopolized by men.

Though most frequently practiced by gay men, especially in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the historical precedent of men who do not identify as gay and heterosexual couples enjoying public sex remain a gay cultural practice because it recodes public space for socially determined “private” activity. As Chauncey notes, the public space of the street was recoded insofar as the “men who sought homosexual encounters [...] were participating in and expanding a street culture already developed by working-class youths seeking freedom from their families’ supervision” (Chauncey 202). Chauncey goes on to imply that public space was recoded through the practice of public sex when he writes, “The fact that these couples met in unsupervised public places and even had sex there was more shocking still to middle-class reformers, in part because it challenged the careful delineation between public and private space that was so central to bourgeois conceptions of public order” (Chauncey 203). The shock felt by middle-class reformers that Chauncey describes is a result of the deviant recoding of public space for activity socially determined to belong to the private sphere. Chauncey also situates the act of recoding public space for private purposes in terms of challenging the normative, and in this case hetero-normative, socially authorized definitions of such spaces: “Gay men’s strategies for using urban space came under attack not just because they challenged the heteronormativity that ordinarily governed men and women’s use of public space, but also because they were part of a more general challenge to dominant cultural conceptions of those boundaries and of the social practices appropriate to each sphere” (204). The practice of public sex is a gay *cultural* practice because it exhibits an excessive double

negation in how it recodes public space as not-public, it is a site of private activity, but as not-not public. And although a common practice for many gay men, it is not solely the domain of gay men insofar as an indeterminate number of a wide variety of kinds of people can access public space for private, sexual activity.

A Word On Bathhouses

Bathhouses have been a popular site for social and sexual encounters for gay men over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As George Chauncey notes in *Gay New York*, “The safest, most enduring, and one of the most affirmative of the settings in which gay men gathered in the first half of the twentieth century was the baths” (207). Even though the baths can be classified as a public space, because they were open to an indeterminate amount of a wide variety of kinds of people, they do not allow for a performative recoding that would situate them as theatrical spaces. Chauncey goes on to note, “None of the other open spaces or commercial establishments appropriate by gay men – streets, parks, speakeasies, restaurants – were theirs alone. In each of them, gay men had to contend with outsiders, who might ignore them, accept them, attack them, or turn them into a spectacle, but in any case had a direct and powerful influence on the way they carried and saw themselves” (207). Gay men had to contend with “outsiders” in these spaces because these spaces were socially authorized to be accessible by any and all kinds of people. The baths, on the other hand, were, tacitly at least, accepted to be socially authorized homoerotic spaces. Because Chauncey’s historical research suggests that straight men would meet other men for sex in parks, toilets, and alleyways, but not in the baths, the baths seem to be socially understood to be

spaces for gay men. Because they were socially authorized to be homoerotic sites, both before and after Stonewall, they can't be recoded for these purposes.⁵⁹ Current research has identified bathhouses as sites targeted by public health officials in order to promote prevention and other public health initiatives that target gay men (Holmes, O'Bryne, Gastaldo 2005). Rather, because they are sites where men, specifically gay men, congregate for both social and sexual purposes, bathhouses are institutions of gay communities, rather than sites of gay cultural practice.⁶⁰

Cruising

Cruising is a sexual activity that, despite being practiced mostly by gay men, should not solely be understood as the domain of gay men. Like masturbating while watching pornography, cruising is an act that indulges in fantasy. Part of the pleasure of cruising involves the excitement experienced *while* searching for a potential sexual partner. The excitement of the potential for sex echoes the appeal of public sex practices for those who find the undetermined number of potential sex partners erotically exciting. Like pornography, which can offer the experience of pleasure by imagining oneself as a participant in the sexual scenario playing out before the viewer, the pleasure of cruising involves imagining what will potentially take place once one has found a suitable sexual

⁵⁹ They may not have been built as sites that encourage gay sex, but bath houses were performatively coded to be sites of gay sex because the gay sex which occurred there was socially accepted, if not encouraged.

⁶⁰ As articulated in the introduction, communities, though often form because a group of people share a similar identity, can also coalesce around shared characteristics can be expressed as an identity category, but not always – an individual may, after living in a particular city for sometime, belong to the community of that municipality, but still not express their identity as such. For example, I have lived in Ithaca on and off for five years, and feel that I belong to the Ithaca community, but I do not identify as Ithacan. Culture, in contrast, is a term to describe a set of practices or objects that are produced by a group of people who share a geographic location, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, politics, or a *particular aesthetic*. Though most forms of culture correspond to certain communities and the identities that coalesce in these communities, there are certain cultures, gay culture in this case, that are defined by a particular aesthetic.

partner. Unlike pornography, which presents a scenario of sexual activity that is distant and impossible, the fantasy of a sexual encounter that motivates cruising can be immediately made a reality through actual flesh on flesh sexual contact.

Though Jose Munoz in *Cruising Utopia* doesn't explicitly associate the act of cruising for sex with Agamben's elucidation of the potentiality, Agamben's concept of potentiality as understood by Munoz can be applied to cruising. Locating potentiality as a constituent feature of cruising situates it as an erotic activity akin to watching pornography. The element of fantasy that attends cruising is articulated when Munoz glosses Agamben's distinction and writes, "potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense" (9).

Though cruising may not include sexual contact or activity, sexual contact and activity is always present and possible, especially in zones where cruising is known to happen and be fruitful. The potentiality of sexual activity that underlies the act of cruising is also a source of pleasure. In fact, in our contemporary moment when an individual can "cruise" online in the comforts of his own home, cruising in public spaces, where the potentiality is a much more potent source of pleasure than it is online, is still a common feature of gay culture.⁶¹ Potentiality often includes the excitement of possibility, and this is a central feature of cruising.

In *Unlimited Intimacy*, Tim Dean asks the question, "Why should strangers not be lovers?" as the point of departure for his chapter titled, "Cruising as a Way of Life." Part of Dean's articulation of cruising as a way of life, which includes an ethics concerning "how one treats the other and, more specifically, how one treats his or her own otherness"

⁶¹ There are recommendations for good cruising sites on squirt.org, along with recommendations for good places to have public sex.

is how cruising can and should allow for intimacy with strangers (177). Though not explicitly articulated by Dean, this concept of cruising, which merges the contradictory concepts of intimacy and strangeness, is one way in which cruising, and the sexual activity that cruising allows, becomes theatrical. The person with whom an individual has sex while cruising is most often a stranger, yet, by engaging in intimate acts with this person, they necessarily become familiar (in some respects) and consequently not strange. The erotics of potentiality central to the appeal of cruising requires public space that is recoded to allow for the private act of sex. When elucidating cruising as a way of life in *Unlimited Intimacy*, Tim Dean writes that the “potentiality” for two strangers to engage in sexual activity or contact “depends on the existence of public spaces in which strangers can interact freely and attain a modicum of privacy if they so desire” (184). Note that Dean suggests that the concepts of public and private merge in the act of cruising, consequently establishing sites of cruising as theatrical: they are not private because they must be open and accessible to strangers, but they are not-not private insofar as the space becomes recoded to accommodate sexual activity that almost is always sanctioned off from others.

Cruising also is a theatrical activity insofar as it is simultaneously both open and closed to a larger public. Dean appeals to Jane Jacobs’s praise of the stranger in her book *The Death and Life of American Cities* to note that cruising requires embracing the potential for an indefinite amount of people to be involved, or in other words, that cruising is open to anyone who might be passing through a public space. Yet, when the sexual encounter happens as a result of cruising, the sexual activity is often practiced by a limited number of those involved. Though others may watch as two or more people

engage in sexual activity, often the participants of an instance of sexual activity are set and exclusive. Hence, cruising, and the public sex that often results from cruising, is both not open and not-not open, and is consequently theatrical.

Hide and Seek

Even when gay male sexual activity is practiced in a public space, attempts to hide it from the full view of others are made. These attempts can be understood as a bracketing of private space within the public sphere. Arendt again provides a framework to consider how gay male public sex is theatrical insofar it is not private and not-not private.

It means, first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead an uncertain shadowy existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance (50).

The fact that gay public sex practices capitalize on public spaces that allow one to hide from view, such as public toilets, or public spaces that literally offer a “shadowy” atmosphere through low lighting, such as dense bushes in public parks or pornographic cinemas, keep gay public sex from appearing with the “widest possible publicity.” Yet,

by happening in a public space, which allows for indefinite observers, gay public sex is always available to be “seen and heard by others.”

In “Times Square Blue,” Delaney recounts how the sanctity of cordoning off public space reserved for sexual activity must be maintained even in a porno cinema: “My own adventures,” he writes, “kept me in the orchestra, so that an hour and a half later when, thinking of leaving, I wandered into the lobby [where] in his orange T-shirt and khaki slacks, the same young man ambled lackadaisically down. When he was third of the way, however, I saw – with some shock – his fly was open. His uncut penis, along with both testicles, hung free” (22). This flagrant display of private parts in the lobby, a liminal space between the public street and the theatrical public sex space of the porno cinema, was met with demands from the proprietors that he “[p]ut [his] fuckin’ dick away” (23). The exposed man in his orange T-Shirt responds to this demand by asking, “Why do I gotta put *my* dick away? [...] Everbody in the movie’s got his dick out of his pants, beatin’ off. Or somebody suckin’ on him. Or *something*”(23). The proprietor’s response evidences how the public sex space of the porno cinema is different from the theatrical public space of the street: “Look [...] people can see you, man. From outside. Come *on*, now!” (23). Even though such practices happen in public space, they remain private in some ways as they are often hidden from appearing in the widest sense of publicity, while still being practiced in a public space.

Gay public sex practices, though hidden, are also meant to be *seen* in some respects, which consequently further establish gay public sex practices as theatrical. Because the practice of gay public sex most often involves the meeting of strangers in a public space, the parties intending to participate in public sex practices must be visible to

others also intending to participate, as well as being available to be identified as willing participants. In their introduction to *Public Space and Democracy*, Marcel Henaff and Tracy B. Strong identify three characteristics that define public space: “it is *open*, an *artifact*, and *theatrical*” (6). The first two criteria have subtended the discussion thus far; “open” as available and accessible to anyone;⁶² and “artifact” in terms of being a human construct. The last criteria, “theatrical,” employs the concept in terms of being analogous to theater practice, and not necessarily exhibiting an aesthetic structure of double negation. In any case, Henaff and Strong identify the theater-like character of public space’s use, which for our purposes emphasizes public space as “a place which is seen and shows oneself to others” (5).

This establishes what would seem to be a paradox: those who participate in gay public sex practices must be visible to each other while not “appearing.” Immediately proceeding exposing himself in the lobby of the porno cinemas, the flasher that Delaney writes about commented, “‘You wanna sit around and watch, I don’t give a fuck about that. I mean sure, sometimes, guys stare – you know. I don’t like *that*, either. You know, just *staring*. [...] But these guys are ok.’ He looked around at the other men a seat, a row, or three seats away. Two glanced at him. One smiled” (24). The subtle, but distinct, differentiation between “watching” and “staring” highlights the ambivalence of the kind of seeing that is practiced in gay public sex practices. It is in fact not theatrical, in the

⁶² Delaney claims that during the years he frequented the porno cinemas in and around 42nd Street and 8th Avenue he encountered all kinds of men and women from different classes, races, ethnicities, occupations, and sexual orientations. He claims he “met playwrights, carpenters, opera singers, telephone repair men, stockbrokers, guys on welfare, guys with trust funds, guys on crutches, on walkers, in wheelchairs, teachers, warehouse workers, male nurses, fancy chefs, guys who worked at Dunkin Donuts, guys who gave out flyers on street corners, guys who drove garbage trucks, and guys who washed windows on the Empire State Building.” (15). The diverse mix of patrons of the porno cinemas were “incredibly heterogeneous – white, black, Hispanic, Asian, Indian, Native American, and a variety of Pacific Islanders” (14). Delaney also cites several instances in which these men also engage in sexual activity with women (25, 28, 29, 44).

way that Henaff and Strong use the term: the theater demands the kind of attention that accompanies staring. And yet, part of communication involved in gay public sex practices is to see, not with concentrated attention necessarily, but with a glance.

The bracketed character of gay public sex practices is theatrical in that the separation between public space and a theatrical public mirrors the division between the “real” world and the “fictitious” work of theatre practice. It is worth drawing attention to two claims important to Arendt’s theory of the public/private divide again: “For us, appearance – *something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves* – constitutes reality,” and, “In the public realm, *where nothing counts that cannot make itself seen and heard*, visibility and audibility are of prime importance” (199). In the case of theatre practice, which is the practical foundation for the concept of theatricality, what happens on stage is *seen* but is denied the power to have effect outside of the world of the play. In the fictitious world of a play, *Hamlet* for instance, Hamlet, whose existence is confined to the “representational space” of the theater, does not produce effects in the “real” world. Because gay public sex is bracketed from unadulterated publicity by certain social conventions even though it is also meant to be seen and heard by those within that bracketed space, the activity of gay public sex does not, or at least is not intended to⁶³, produce any effects outside of the theatrical public space it engenders.⁶⁴

⁶³ Gay Liberationists in the 1970s argued that public sex practices could be a site of political activism aimed to challenge normative understandings of sex, sexuality, and gender. I am inclined to see gay public sex practices, which straight men often participated in, as apolitical. The straight men who populate both Laud Humphrey’s account of gay sex in public toilets in *Tearoom Trade*, and the straight men who appear in Delaney’s anecdotes, are evidence that gay public sex practices were not sites of political action, but were cordoned off from having political effect. More historical research should be done to support this claim, but the evidence offered by Humphreys and Delaney suggests this is the case.

⁶⁴ The porno cinemas offered a sense of safety during the era in which Delaney was a patron from the late fifties to the mid-nineties. There were no, or at least very few, police raids of the porno cinemas. The case of public sex in parks and toilets were much more risky, as noted by Laud Humphrey’s in his ethnographic study *Tearoom Trade*. But this study ended in the early seventies. Since then, police have been much less

Gay public sex is theatrical because it relies on, but is not reduced to, the presence of spectators and actors: The spectator is a necessary figure that differentiates between reality and fiction, between character and actor. For something to be described as theatrical, a spectator must be able to decode the event or object (the sign) as being framed as outside of quotidian and “real” experience. In terms of gay public sex, the economy of gazes that make gay public sex practices possible in such sites as porno cinemas, parks, and toilets parallels the role of the spectator in the theater. As theater scholar Josette Feral highlights, “By watching, the spectator creates an ‘other’ space, no longer subject to the laws of the quotidian” (105). The gazing⁶⁵ that makes gay public sex possible transforms the public space into the “other” space of theatrical privacy. In his ethnographic study, Humphreys notes how a “watchqueen” is stationed on the lookout in order that they can alert the participants of an incoming figure hostile to public sex practices (49). These “watchqueens” also participated in the action insofar as they would take pleasure in being a voyeur. The convention of the “watchqueen” creates the “other” space, and consequently brackets the space as not belonging to the “laws of the quotidian” that Feral determines is necessary for an act to be theatrical. Because gay public sex practices are public, they are bracketed off from the domestic sphere, and, because normative conventions demand sex belong in the domestic sphere, they do not

interested in policing public sex practices. Queens Park in Toronto, for instance, is a well-known and often quite obvious site of public sex practices, even though the police and community at large tend to be aware of it. Because my larger project is in essence a contemporary one that wants to untether gay culture from gay identity in an era where gay men can look a lot more like heterosexuals than some heterosexuals do, what I attempt to describe is the contemporary moment, in light of the cultural history that has produced this contemporary moment. That is to say that, from the late fifties, through the sixties and seventies, and then culminating in the eighties during the AIDs crisis, homosexuals and gay public sex were policed and persecuted. Today, especially in urban settings, that policing and persecution is not as prevalent.

⁶⁵ In *Tearoom Trade*, Humphrey notes that out of fifty sexual encounters he observed in a public toilet, only fifteen included spoken utterances. Body language, and the gaze, undoubtedly were the preferred methods of communication in gay public sex practices

belong to the category of the quotidian. Though spectatorship is not sufficient to make gay public sex theatrical (after all, any public space allows the possibility to watch others), the mere presence of the participating spectator transforms gay public sexual activity into a theatrical private sphere. The act of witnessing activity socially accepted to be private in public space also theatricalizes the space of public sex. The act of seeing is participatory insofar as, for some public sex participants, it is not only the potential to engage in sexual activity with an indeterminate number of people that is exciting, but the potential to *be seen* participating in sexual activity by an indeterminate number of people has erotic appeal.

Not only does gay public sex practice transform public *space* into theatrical (private) spaces, but the “public,” in reference to an indefinite group of individuals bound together, also becomes theatrical.⁶⁶ In *The Public and Its Problems*, John Dewey’s elucidation of the public would also disqualify gay public sex practice from belonging to the public sphere not only because it is intended to be hidden from “appearing,” but more importantly because it does not have political consequences.⁶⁷ Dewey describes the Public as that which comes to existence when “[t]hose indirectly and seriously affected for good or for evil form a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name”

⁶⁶ The theatrical public I outline here is different from Michael Warner’s “Counterpublic.” Michael Warner writes “Counterpublics of sex and gender are teaching us to recognize in newer and deeper ways how privacy is publicly constructed. They are testing our understanding of how private life can be made publicly relevant.” And “in a counterpublic setting, such display often has the aim of transformation” (62). Gay public sex practices accommodated men who identified as straight precisely because gay public sex practices did not involve becoming part of an identifiable group that aimed to challenge or transform hegemonic and normative definitions of public and private.

⁶⁷ There are, of course, effects of any sexual encounter, but these effects are not the same as the consequences which affect an indefinite amount of other individuals in unforeseen ways. The effects of gay public sex do not inspire those that participate in them to bind themselves into a Public. As Delaney notes in “Times Square Blue,” “They were encounters whose most important aspect was that of mutual pleasure was exchanged – an aspect that, yes, colored all their other aspects, but that did not involve any sort of life commitment. [...] These relationships did not annoy or in any way distress the man I was living with – *because* they had their limits.” (56-57).

(35) and as that which “consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (16). For Dewey, the Public refers to a group of people who are affected by the actions of others and specifically are interested in having the indirect consequences of certain activity “systematically cared for.” Yet, if any married man or closet case was exposed as participating in gay public sex, they would never want the consequences of their actions resulting in political action: the effects of shame and stigma that would be leveled at these men would lead them to wish that these whole affairs were quickly forgotten and dismissed. Dewey later clarifies that “[f]or the essence of consequences which call a public into being is the fact that they expand beyond those directly engaged in producing them” (27). Because homosexual sex cannot end in reproduction, and until the AIDS epidemic in which slow-to-react governments let the consequences of an unknown disease wreak havoc on an uninformed population, gay sex practices bracketed in the not public, but not-not public, hidden spaces of porno cinemas, toilets, and parks, homosexual sexual activity did not produce consequences⁶⁸ which would call a public into being.⁶⁹

Theatrical Sex Acts

Gay public sex becomes theatrical by virtue of the fact that these spaces are bracketed from other public spaces and are intended to evade having affects on others.

⁶⁸ The risk of getting caught in the act is an appeal to many men and women, straight and gay, who participate in public sex. Yet, rarely, if ever, do those who practice sex in public *want or intend* to get caught. The appeal of the risk, if that is a part of the practice, is to enjoy the potential for the unexpected, getting caught, but not to actually get caught. Hence, though many men have been prosecuted for public indecency or the like, the culture of public sex wants the sexual practices to not have any consequences above or beyond the act itself.

⁶⁹ The Bathhouse Raids in Canada in 1981, often cited as Canada’s Stonewall, galvanized political action precisely because the police invasion into the baths unbracketed the bracketed space of public sex.

Habermas defines the public sphere in such a way that would exclude the sexual activity happening in the public spaces of porno cinemas.

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason. (27)

Even though the men who participate in public sex practices do “come together,” they do not do so in order to “use their reason” publicly. In fact, the affective dimensions of sexual practice can be said to be *unreasonable* – sex often eludes the capacity to be cerebrally understood because it is most often appealed to for the sensuality of the experience. Or, as Richard Sennett writes of sexuality: “We uncover it, we discover, we come to terms with it, but we do not master it” (7). Yet, men who come together to participate in public sex have “claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves” insofar as sexual activity in such places is in most cases illegal.

The refusal to engage in political discourse is a source of appeal for many of the men who participate in public sex at such sites as porno cinemas because, by being bracketed and hidden from appearing in public, they are thought, and most usually are, immune to having direct and traceable consequences. If, as Seyla Benhabib points out, “The public sphere comes into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general

social and political norms of action engage in a practical discourse, evaluating their validity,” then the site of public sex remains outside of the public sphere by the fact that those who enter such sites and participate in public sex do so without the intention of challenging or evaluating social or political norms, but rather engage in public sex merely to engage in sexual activity that is denied to them in their (heterosexual) homes or to indulge in the excitement and risk offered by engaging in a private act in public (87). In *Tearoom Trade*, Humphreys notes that the character of the sexual encounters is often impersonal, and, in contrast to both women’s and LGBT movements at the time that were declaring the “personal is political,” the impersonal nature of these encounters was embraced in the hopes that such activity would remain apolitical. In fact, the straight men who take advantage of gay public sex do so precisely because they are free from the consequences of their activity. Both straight men and gay men who practice public sex leave the hegemonic and normative power of heterosexuality, family, and marriage in place – institutions that afford them privilege as men in the public sphere.⁷⁰

Digital Public Space

Digital platforms have quickly been developed to accommodate the search for sexual activity. In fact, online platforms such as Grindr, Scruff, Recon, and other internet dating sites have become the most popular sites for cruising for anonymous sex, mostly because they allow cruising to happen anywhere at anytime and don’t require traveling to

⁷⁰ Gay culture, unlike queer culture, is politically ambivalent. That is to say that the maintenance of the socially accepted meanings of phenomena alongside a socially deviant meaning in gay culture doesn’t challenge the status quo of that which is socially accepted. Furthermore, despite how a particular demographic who share a similar sexual orientation have coalesced around gay cultural practice, and that this demographic has fought for specific political goals based on their sexual orientation, gay cultural practice was not a necessary factor in this political fight. Because culture conceived here is defined as a set of practices, culture is not political in terms of being oriented toward the rights and standard of living of living subjects.

a specific site at a specific time. The popularity of these online platforms prompted a (discontented) journalist, editor of the online magazine HIV Equal and contributor to *The Advocate*, Tyler Perry, to write, “Whether we like it or not, social media is on a fast track to being the primary way in which we communicate with one another.” (Perry, <http://www.advocate.com/love-and-sex/2015/9/22/grindr-dehumanizes-gay-men>) Though Perry is hyperbolic in his dystopian assessment of the prominence of these online platforms in the lives of gay men, his claim does speak to the ubiquity of such technologies used primarily for cruising for sex.

Like cruising in real time and space, cruising on digital platforms also establishes theatrical publics. These digital platforms are more or less public, they do not cost money to download or join as members, but they do require expensive, but ubiquitous, technologies such as smartphones. Yet, despite functioning as a public digital space, the users often attempt to maintain a sense of privacy by hiding their faces. As Warner also includes in his conceptual elucidation of the public/private binary, clothing functions as a mode in which we cover and hide the body, creating a sense of privacy (23). In direct contrast to maintaining a sense of privacy by keeping their faces hidden, users commonly reveal other more private parts of their body on these public platforms. Grinder users bemoan the far too common “faceless torso” of most profiles, and other sites like Dudesnudes not only demand that skin below the neck is included in each profile, but often profiles include pictures of the user’s “privates” – their penises or butts – but don’t include a picture of their face, the most public part of the body. In other words, these sites are filled with “privates” but are also not-not private, insofar as these are sites of public digital space.

Digital sites used to search for casual and anonymous sex function in a similar way to cruising outlined above; both involve the excitement engendered in the process of searching for a potential sexual partner. Though he is writing about sex clubs and bathhouses and the activity of cruising that happens in such spaces, John Lindell could be writing about Grindr and Scruff and other apps and online platforms used to search for casual and/or anonymous sex when he writes, “Darkly painted and poor lit, public sex spaces can be seen as *projection rooms where actual people function as screens for our imaginations*, allowing us to interpret and embellish information gleaned from appearance” (Emphasis added 74-74). Lindell’s description of public sex spaces as metaphorical “screens for our imagination” have been digitized by smartphone apps like Grindr and Scruff. Because the bodies required for actual sexual activity are more distant, searching for casual and/or anonymous sex on such digital platforms is less likely to result in sex than cruising for sex at a bathhouse or sex club, or other public sites like parks or toilets.

The excitement engendered through the use of online hook-up apps is the result of imagining both the potential of an actual real-time sexual encounter, but also *fantasizing* about what *could* be possible. In “Profile as Promise: A Framework for Conceptualizing Veracity in Online Dating Self-Presentation,” Nicole B. Ellison, Jeffrey T. Hancock, Catalina L. Toma note, “Given the impossibility of translating an embodied self into a relatively brief and static self-description, some discrepancies between one’s online and offline presence may be expected – and even accepted – while others are definitely not” (46). This discrepancy encourages users to imagine a fantasy inspired by the clues and cues offered by an online profile. In “Seeing and Being Seen: Co-situation and

Impression Formation Using Grindr, a Location Aware Gay Dating App,” Courtney Blackwell, Jeremy Birnholtz, and Charles Abbott note, “profile construction affords some flexibility in self-presentation, though manipulation of attributes is constrained by the likelihood of a physical meeting. Thus, there is an incentive to present in an attractive, but plausible, light” (1122). Again, this discrepancy, or “flexibility in self-presentation,” allows for a user to imagine a pleasurable, and often idealized, sexual encounter. Like pornography, which encourages its viewers to imagine themselves in the scenario being presented, the discrepancy between reality and digital self-presentation encourages online hook-up app users to imagine themselves participating in a fantasy. After all, the “accepted” “flexibility in self-presentation” encourages a user to imagine what their sexual partner, and consequently the sexual encounter, will resemble in reality.

Scholar and porn star Coner Habib has made the connection between online hook-up apps and pornography explicit. Because often the search for casual and anonymous sex doesn’t result in actual sexual encounters, Habib notes, “these apps are geared not specifically toward sex but toward stimulation, masturbation, and desire. Put another way, hookup apps are pornography—*individualized, participatory* pornography” (Habib). Habib recognizes that a prominent part of the pleasure of cruising indulges in fantasizing about a potential encounter, in the same way that porn involves imagining participating in the sexual activity that is being performed on the screen in front of you. Habib makes this explicit when he notes, “Some features are even optimized for the pornographic experience. The Global feature on Scruff, for example, allows you to engage in chatting and [picture] sharing *without* the promise of an encounter. If the person you’re talking to lives in Papua New Guinea and you live in Chicago, you’re probably not getting it

anytime soon. In other words, the Global feature presents a more realistic expectation of what's probably going to happen when we sign on" (Habib). In a search for casual and/or anonymous sex on these online platforms, smartphone hook-up apps encourage an extensive and thorough fantasy world. Habib notes, "The ability to chat with the person whose image you're getting off to amplifies the individualization of the experience. While I'm looking at someone's dick, I'm also wondering: Is he a top or a bottom? Does he like the same sexual acts as me? But it goes further than that—everyone on the app has access to what turns them on about personalities, too. Does he like the same movies? Is he into comic books? Will he wear that Thor helmet in his pic when he fucks me?" (Habib). These questions, encouraged by the potential of actually meeting this person is real, are a form of fantasizing that extends beyond what can be offered by porn. Furthermore, these online platforms allow for each user to participate and consequently, as Habib notes, "the best thing is—unlike porn on the computer—we *get to be on the screen, too*, displaying ourselves to the other player." (Habib). Despite how there is a sense of self-display included in the interactions that happen on these online platforms, this sense of self-display, though public, often maintain a sense of privacy insofar as users may choose to, and often do, keep their identity, in the form of their face, hidden, once again maintaining an aesthetic of theatricality.

These platforms also theatricalize phenomenological space. As Habib notes in passing, "With apps, we create living pornography on the spot; they embody exhibitionism and voyeurism par excellence. They're portable, they're accessible when we want them to be (in your office! In the Starbucks bathroom!), they're not one-way like much live cam porn, they're not expensive, and everyone who signs up is agreeing to the

same basic premises” (Habib). Once again, the use of these online platforms to search for someone to meet one’s private needs carves out a private space in a public location (“your office,” “the Starbucks bathroom!”) and consequently theatricalizes that public space.

In his critique of cruising for sex online in *Unlimited Intimacy*, Dean gestures toward how casual and/or anonymous sex found online and enacted in the home transforms domestic space into theatrical privacy. Examining the testimony an HIV positive man in San Francisco gives to the director of Sexually Transmitted Diseases Prevention and Control Services in the city’s Department of Public Health, Dean argues that online cruising doesn’t allow for meaningful contact in contrast to the connection and relationships established by cruising for sex in the porno theaters outlined in Delaney’s *Time Square Red, Times Square Blue*. Dean specifically takes issue with the man’s assertion that ““I don’t have to talk to anybody to do it. I don’t have to go out of the house’” (194). Dean does not consider that the man offering his testimony transforms his domestic, private space, into a public space, or in other words, a space that is the site of strangers interacting. The characteristic of a stranger is maintained in the private space of the home because there is no meaningful conversation or interaction that would transform that stranger into a friend or acquaintance. The domestic private space is by definition not public, but is also not-not public.

Cruising for sex online or in real time and space, and the sexual activity that can result from cruising, transforms spaces that are socially determined to be either public into sites that are the opposite of their socially determined character while maintaining the socially determined character of those spaces. The act of transforming a public site, a

place, into a space for sexual activity establishes it as theatrical. A space exhibits an aesthetic of double negation by maintaining the socially determined character of that space, while simultaneously maintaining the opposite to what that socially determined character is – that space is not public, while it is simultaneously not-not public. Similar to the theatricalization of language in the literature of Oscar Wilde, and of gender in the art of Nina Arsenault and Tom of Finland, gay public sex practices transform normative places into *theatrical* spaces.

Conclusion: We Are Family and We Will Survive

Muccassassina is a gay cultural institution. Every Friday night, Qube, a night club in Rome, hosts a Muccassassina party. The aesthetic of theatricality saturates these parties. Each party has a theme that guides the costume design of the gogo boys and drag queens who perform on one of the many stages on every one of the four floors of the club. Previous themes include “High Society,” which featured gogo boys wearing monocles and top hats and drag queens with headdresses reminiscent of crystal chandeliers; “Espana,” in which gogo boys were decked out as bullfighters and drag queens performed bastardized forms of Flamenco dance in tiered skirts; and a “Spring Party,” whose gogo boys wore plant-like cod pieces that resembled fig leaves. Each of the gogo boys embodies a theatrical masculinity; their muscular bodies have a striking resemblance to the men featured in Tom of Finland’s artwork. Each of the drag queens, who might very well be trans or cis-gender women, exhibit a theatrical femininity; Nina Arsenault could very well be one of the many women who host the party each week. Most themes recode normative iconography and make it sexy: the “Circus” party included clowns and harlequins, but these Pierrot clowns, with iconic white faces and red cheeks, pointy hats, and billowing sleeves, were bare-chested; the Ring Master of this “Circus” sported a red coat with square tasseled shoulders, a tall hat with a feather in the center, but no shirt on top and just a jockstrap. Theatricality is evident in all of the gender and iconography at Muccassassina, making it the dominant aesthetic. The theatricality of Muccassassina is evident not just in the costumes determined by each week’s theme, but by the fact that Muccassassina is not for gay men and not-not for gay men. Muccassassina generates myriad performance practices that have been celebrated by gay

male communities across the twentieth century – the hyper-muscular masculinity of the gogo boys and the hyper-femininity of the drag queens. But Muccassassina is clearly not just for the gay community because the organization that produces each weekly party (who also produce a party called Kemical) has begun to host a party called “Gentlemen Only.”

As is evident in its name, and made explicit on its Facebook page, “Gentleman Only” is a party that caters only to men who are looking to have sexual encounters with men. Unfortunately, Samuel R. Delaney’s utopian hope that women could participate in public sexual activity just as men do has not come to pass, and so a party that not only seems to allow but to encourage sex in public has to be restricted to “Gentlemen Only.” What such a party does indicate, though, is that women seem to have become such a large constituency of Muccassassina’s parties that each Friday night at Qube is not just for gay men anymore.

Outside of Rome and Muccassassina, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, the hit reality television series that features drag queens competing to be the next drag superstar, also has a large following of women viewers. In a post on reddit titled, “Just another straight girl that claims to love Drag Race,” a user asks, “[D]oes Drag Race having a large following of straight females bother you?” The question itself assumes, sincerely and without a sense of being either controversial or unusual, that RuPaul has a large following of straight women fans. The many commentators on reddit show support for women’s love of *Drag Race* and dismiss the assertion that, because drag has been an important performance form for the gay community over the course of the twentieth century, that there is nothing at all wrong with someone who is neither gay nor male

loving the show. Recently, when I attended a performance by a former *Drag Race* contestant at one of Toronto's gay clubs, I was not surprised, but happy, to see that many women had come out to a place that was usually only popular with gay men to see their *Drag Race* favorite. Gay culture is not just for gays anymore.

Just because gay culture is not just for gays anymore has not prompted it to wither and die, despite how many critics have suggested it would. Daniel Harris's prophecy in *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (1999) and Bruce LaBruce's declaration that "Gay culture is dead" in an online article for *Vice* in 2011, have not come to pass, even as many gay men migrate out of gay neighborhoods where gay culture was a major part of their day-to-day lives. Recognizing that gay culture was and is much more than the activities and practices of gay men outlines a conception of gay culture that is more inclusive than the narrower idea of gay culture on which is premised arguments that such culture will wither and die.

Two disco anthems, which will undoubtedly be blasted at Muccassassina's "Disco" themed party this Friday, describe the inspiration for this project: "I Will Survive" and "We Are Family." Prompted by discussions within the gay community concerning the effects of gay marriage on the lived experiences of gay men, those who wanted to get married and those who adamantly resisted such a normative institution, this project is invested in conceiving of gay culture in a way that allows for gay men to live their lives in any way they see fit, normative or deviant, while also allowing for gay culture, as necessarily non-normative and deviant, to thrive. In essence, this project proclaims that gay culture, like Gloria Gaynor does in her disco hit, will survive. By decoupling gay identity from gay culture, this project offers a more inclusive conception

of gay culture, one that declares that, no matter what your identity, “We Are Family.” But the family at the heart of this conception of gay culture is neither patriarchal nor matriarchal, but rather encourages a radical sphere where mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and even those who resist these metaphors of co-sanguineous family are all equal.

My hope is that, as a cultural sphere that is neither hetero nor homonormative, gay culture can continue to become an inclusive space where difference is acknowledged and celebrated, but not the basis for exclusion, disenfranchisement, or marginalization. Gay culture can be a cultural sphere that can move past its past in spaces dominated by men, and most often white men, to become free from exclusion determined by identity. Because gay culture was largely the domain of gay men over the course of the twentieth century, often effacing the participation of women (such as those who were derogatorily called “Fag Hags”) and the black, Asian, and Latino men whose racial difference was either ignored or fetishized, nothing is lost when gay culture is no longer predicated on a particular identity. After all, white men have no need to claim a cultural space that is uniquely theirs. My hope is that, with the dethroning of the white gay man as the assumed arbiter of gay culture, the divisions between the particularities of black gay culture and Latino gay culture can be blurred, and a coalition between these communities can come together in and through gay cultural practice. Gay culture can be a practice in which anyone can greet a friend or stranger with the words, “Hey, Girl!” and celebrate deviancy, not apart, but together.

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