

Degentrifying Drag

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I am only able to speak for myself as a participant in drag culture and identity, as drag is a complex and expansive subject. However, I feel it is important to share some observations I have made in this capacity and identity. There are a lot of misconceptions about drag as a concept that are actively contributing to erasure of the culture, and its contributions in helping queer folks navigate cisheteronormative optics and spaces.

According to Kathleen B. Casey, Ph.D, author of *The Prettiest Girl on Stage Is a Man: Race and Gender Benders in American Vaudeville*, drag should not be tied down to a “stable definition”. She adds, “Drag is about race, class and sexuality as much as it is about gender. If we focus exclusively on only one of these intersections, we fail to see how drag performances are layered across time and space and can have multiple meanings for different audiences.” As a drag performer, on and off-stage, I fully agree.

Clothing exists to protect human beings. It protects us from the weather, objects and environmental injury, among other things. Clothing also serves as a form of nonverbal communication. It can tell others about our emotional state, our beliefs, our hopes, and interests. It can also be used as a tool to enforce systems of oppression, such as the gender binary. Drag, in its broadest sense, is a cultural tool that uses clothing as one form of visual code-switching that serves as a tool for gender and sex diverse cultural coding.

In a June 21st, 2022 interview for Fast Company magazine, Porter Braswell, founder of 2045 Studio, explained that, “culture coding describes the ability to assess a situation, understand what it will take to survive and/or potentially thrive within it, and then decide how to engage (or not). Nobody should have to culture-code to feel like they fit in or to get ahead, but many of us end up doing it.” As such, drag is a tool that both queer and cisheteronormative folks use to this end. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that a style of clothing, no matter how normative, will never keep anyone safe in all circumstances. Similarly, no style of clothing should ever be used to justify violence against another human being. But most importantly, simply wearing clothing that doesn’t align with assigned birth gender, isn’t necessarily drag.

Gendered clothing is a social construct, that one can choose to accept as assigned by society, or reject in a way that is affirming. Drag is one tool folks use to fight against this social construct. Drag, unlike affirming clothing, does not necessarily conform to one's identity. Affirming clothing represents who a person is, whereas drag represents how a person navigates and performs in a specific space. Affirming clothes can be drag, but wearing drag isn't necessarily affirming.

For some folks, drag becomes inseparably enmeshed with their identity, either by enthusiastic choice and/or social coercion. As a non-binary person, unless I am lucky enough to find clothing items that are labeled as unisex, adult or juniors, without any additional gender modifiers, chances are that I won't have any choice but to be in drag. Because of my cultural background, I embraced drag as part of my identity. As an experienced professional drag performer, I am keenly aware of how one tiny accessory change can make the difference between feeling more confident navigating a hostile space, and feeling vulnerable.

Being a person from Borikén, (the original name of Puerto Rico), who speaks Spanish, I would label myself as a “*transformista*” when talking about drag as identity in that language. *Transformista*, doesn't actually have a direct English translation, although it's frequently and incorrectly translated as, “transvestite” (“*transvestizo*” is the actual Spanish word for that.) The closest words to *transformista* in English are “shapeshifter” or “drag performer”. It is a word that captures both the transformative reality of biological processes in nature, and the reflection of this truth in the art of drag. Antonio Pantojas, a Boricua born and raised *transformista*, is considered by many, including celebrity Drag Queen, RuPaul, to be a pioneer of modern drag performance. Drag is an integral part of my culture that brings me great pride.

In my family's variant of the Taíno-borikenáiki language, I would be a "*yamoká-ju*," or "dual wind" in English. *Yamoká-ju*, is a very broad term that can serve as an umbrella term similar to the word "queer", and can include many acts of gender nonconformity, of which drag as a survival strategy and an art form, falls under. In my personal vocabulary, I take this concept one step further with the label, "*yamoká-jurakán*," which means "dual hurricane" in the literal sense. It can also be translated as, "queer agitator," or, "troublemaking drag performer." As such, drag is an integral part of my political consciousness, my reality as a nonbinary person, my artistic expression, and my natal cultural identity as a Boricua fighting against detribalization and cultural erasure. Nevertheless, I will also acknowledge the diversity of Drag identities and the reasons people seek out drag, are so much larger than just my experience.

People who use drag for creative expression and social commentary are known as drag performers. Although popular media disproportionately hyper-focuses on Drag Royalty, and specifically Drag Queens, other forms of drag performance exist. Drag performance should not be pigeonholed into lip-syncing and flashy presentations full of glittering glamor, but even these expressions must be embraced with full solidarity. The Usonian concept of Drag Royalty, and especially Drag Queens, was an inherently Black and Queer act of resistance from its inception.

Former slave, William Dorsey Swann, was an African-American activist, the first person to lead a Gay resistance movement in the United States, and the first person to self-identify as a "Queen of Drag". Although Swann had little support at the time, this pioneer paved the way for Gay Black men, drag as an art form, later activists such as Marsha P. Johnson, and ultimately the queer community as a whole. Although it is important to recognize that queerness and drag are not a monolith, and no one person can serve as a representative for either community, Drag history is absolutely integral to Queer history.

To this day, Drag Queen performance's aesthetics and lingo are heavily influenced by African-American beauty standards for femininity and slang. Similarly to Black urban displays of femininity, Drag Queen aesthetics, even at their mildest, are often denigrated as being "hypersexualized," "problematic," "offensive," "over the top," "cartoonish," "tasteless," and "tacky" without any sense of irony. For this reason, efforts to minimize or erase drag from queer discourse and outreach, should be regarded as cultural gentrification and fought against with the utmost vigor and intersectional zeal.

Corporate interests and people looking for easy targets to demonize, are the ones most likely to benefit from the erasure of the full diversity and/or history of what drag identity and a drag performance can be. Gatekeeping and tone-policing for drag may seem protective, but it ultimately only serves to gentrify and disempower drag. Even worse, respectability politics that actively exclude "flamboyance" may embolden opponents that seek to divide and conquer queerness as a whole. We must never forget that at its core, drag is an act of subversion against gender norms, even at its most subtle.

Drag performances can be as mundane as someone simply trying on a new identity as they search for their authentic self without an audience. Other drag performers engage in deliberate and revolutionary acts of political protest and social subversion. Some folks simply want to entertain others, and if they're lucky, they might find a new career. Most commonly, drag performance tends to be the subconscious and mundane application of clothing as

code-switching into the everyday lives of folks who do not or will not fully assimilate into a dominant culture's gender norms. All of this ultimately feeds into our sense of culture coding.

Sometimes, code-switching and culture coding can be used as tools for oppression and forced assimilation. We harm ourselves when we don't acknowledge the truth that toxic drag performance has been used throughout history to harm people who don't fully adhere to gender norms. When simply being in drag is the punchline, a drag performance becomes toxic. When being in drag is portrayed as deceitful, evil, or gross for the sake of showing the alleged immorality of queer folks, it can also turn a drag performance into something toxic. People who support gender binary enforcement use drag to ridicule and harm queer folks. This includes drag performers who dedicate themselves to punching others down.

Folks who include drag as part of their identity, as well as their accomplices and allies, should seek to deplatform and delegitimize these forms of toxic drag. Even when it seems superficially funny or entertaining, at first glance, toxic drag can cause real long-term harm to multiple groups of people, including queer folks, and marginalized people. It's okay to make mistakes, but we need to learn from them. There is nothing wrong with a sense of humor, and even poking fun at the absurdities of life can be cathartic. However, when we start noticing patterns of harm and punching down, we need to take action. If you see someone laughing at this kind of humor, don't join in. Instead, ask why they're laughing.

When I describe something as being drag performer-led, I am not talking about centering specific types of drag performance or adhering to a single aesthetic. When something is drag-performer led, I am talking about a presentation, group, organization that is led by people who consciously engage in drag performance, understand why they are engaging in drag performance, and would like to wield any privilege earned from that conscious participation in drag to mitigate harm, as well as give back to the greater queer community in an act of solidarity.

To say that drag performers representatives of the entire queer community is not only disingenuous, it can also be dismissive and harmful. Drag performers may or may not be queer. Queerness is not a monolith, and no one person can claim to represent it. But, speaking for myself exclusively, as a former Drag Queen, Drag King, burlesque performer and current drag satirist, I acknowledge the socioeconomic privileges that drag has provided me. I want to do my best to correct any harms that my attainment of said privileges have given me. I also seek to acknowledge my roots within the queer community, and help others benefit from the cultural knowledge that I've gained over the years. Mutual aid is a fundamental part of creating a transformative community.

It is my hope that by introducing a new generation of folks to a lot of the knowledge that has been systematically erased or forgotten in regard to Queer Drag Culture, and drag adjacent movements and identities such as glam, gender-bending/fucking, Butch, Femmebois, its role in gender fluidity, and so much more. I also would like for society to move away from the idea that drag is cross-dressing or transvestism. Ideas such as clothing having an assigned gender, or that drag is somehow an intersection between male and female clothing, should be abandoned. Likewise, the idea that one can transition simply by changing clothes independently of identity, as implied by the word "transvestism", seems unhelpful and misleading.

One hypothesis of where the English slang, "drag" came from was that it was a shortened version of "dressed as a girl". Later, it expanded to include, "dressed as a guy." The

most widely accepted and verifiable story about the origin of drag refers to “grand drag,” an obsolete term for costume party. Regardless, both of these origin stories go back to the reality that drag is about fashion. It is my contention that we expand that definition to mean, “dressing for adventures in gender,” because ultimately that's what we are doing, as drag performers whether professional, or simply trying to survive hostile spaces. We are exploring a world of gender expansiveness through the language of clothing through a lens that is inherently pro-Indigenous and pro-Black. It's about time we dragged the spectrum of drag identity and performance back into our social consciousness and the historical record. “Nothing about us without us,” applies to queer drag when it comes to discussion and representation of gender and sex diverse folks.

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