Down-under Drag

Inside Australia’s Drag King and Drag Queen Communities

Evan James Smith

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Evan Smith
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Abstract

*Down-Under Drag* is an ethnographic exploration into the lived experiences of Australian drag queens and drag kings. Drag is a unique performance art that hinges on the notion of cross dressing – where a performer’s presentation of gender, in drag, is not aligned with his or her biological sex. This performance style is predominantly undertaken by gay, lesbian and transgendered individuals as a form of entertainment in gay and lesbian communities and usually involves the adoption of a hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine disguise by the performer. Through methods of interviewing and observation, this thesis offers first-hand information into the experiences of a range of Australian drag performers, undertaking a thematic analysis of a variety of key concepts as emerged from those experiences. Through a grounded theory approach, the analytical exploration of such concepts has informed the theoretical material used to better understand those experiences. Namely, through the application of Butler’s post-structuralist theory of gender performativity (1990), this thesis views gender as social construct, created and maintained through the repetition of various stylized acts. With the help of Butler (1990, 2004) I will argue that drag performers take up multiple, shifting and contradictory gendered subjectivities. As most academic literature available in this area of study deals primarily with drag king and queen cultures in isolation, the aim of this thesis is to analytically compare these performance cultures and the roles their performers take up as entertainers and socialisers within Australian gay communities. I will demonstrate that these performers use the medium of drag most frequently as a tool for critique - particularly concerning normative constructs of sex and gender- and also as a tool to pay homage to those constructs. This thesis will argue that practices of drag create a
persistent and productive tension between the forces of subversion and the forces of normativity.
‘We’re born naked, and the rest is drag.’

- RuPaul
Introduction

Since the mid-20th century, drag has been a defining symbol of gay and lesbian communities in Australia and around the world. Through its unique aesthetic, drag is a mode of performance that has the potential to challenge normative categories of sex and gender by exposing them as constructs. Largely, it is considered a form of entertainment that centres on the notion of cross-dressing, particularly the adoption of a hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine disguise by a performer. It manifests itself as a form of critique, parody and satire of gender norms, but also pays homage to those very norms. Through an ethnographic enquiry into contemporary drag sub-cultures in Australia, this thesis aims to highlight how practices of drag subvert and reconsolidate the gendered norms which they take up.

Drag operates most frequently within spaces catered towards and constructed by gay men and lesbian women, usually within what’s known as ‘the scene’. In this thesis, I understand the ‘scene’ to be the most social environment of a gay community, usually located in busy urban areas of most capital cities. These ‘scenes’ usually come alive at night and are identified by the centralised strip of pubs, clubs and bars that appeal to the tastes of homosexual and lesbian people. Such spaces also include the participation of other individuals of alternate gendered and/or sexual identities. This thesis is primarily concerned with two main aims, firstly to identify how practices of drag function in Australian gay sub-cultures and secondly, how drag performers experience and understand themselves in relation to the contexts in which they perform and socialise.
Through a research-led investigation into the lives of Australian drag performers, this thesis focuses on a thematic analysis of the broad concepts as emerged from the interview data obtained from those investigations, in conjunction with observational research conducted into drag sub-cultures. Here, a comparative analysis of the performance art of drag queening and drag kinging will be presented with the aim that a greater understanding and awareness of these performance cultures will be realised.

The Importance of this Research

Very little academic research has been conducted, concerning a comparative analysis of the lived experiences of drag kings and drag queens and this thesis therefore marks an important and necessary contribution to this area of study. While practices of drag queening have been investigated in significant detail over the last half century (Newton 1979, Tawksbury 1993 & 1994, Baker 1994, Tyler 2003, Langley 2006, Brown 2008) the same cannot be said of drag kinging. Having emerged more recently in the history of gay sub-cultures as a performance phenomenon, research into drag king cultures is still in a stage of academic infancy. As a result, both forms of drag have typically only been examined in isolation from one another. This thesis brings the experiences of drag kings and drag queens together in order to better understand the complexities and nuances of the Australian drag landscape.

The performers interviewed for this thesis occupy what might be considered as marginalised and vulnerable positions in society, identifying themselves as either homosexual, lesbian or transgendered. The experiences of these groups of people tend to reflect stories of oppression due to their expressions of non-normative gendered and/or sexual identities.
This study will highlight some of those experiences in the hope that these findings will help better the lives of people experiencing discrimination due to their sex or gender. Through the incremental production of new knowledge into the lives of gender ‘outsiders’, there is the potential for increased awareness, understanding and positive development for these GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered) communities.

This thesis will demonstrate the ways in which drag performers occupy difficult and sometimes contentious positions in mainstream society, but also in the gay and lesbian communities. Typically, these communities are the primary places in which drag performers work to make a living, and socialise. This project seeks to shed light on the complexities of these experiences and the tensions surrounding the relationships formed by drag performers - who often hold the contradictory position of ‘celebrity’ and ‘outcast’ - in relation to gay and lesbian spaces. Drag has been portrayed through screen and television as a significant and unique part of Australian culture (take for example ‘Priscilla Queen of the Desert’, (Padva 2000, Phillips 2006)) and has remained resilient in the face of opposition and survived as a cornerstone of gay and lesbian communities around the country (Nicoll 2001). There is a need therefore to ensure the documentation and analysis of the lived experiences of the people who comprise this culture and who continue to perform despite the challenges they may face as gender and/or sexual outsiders.
Literature Review

Throughout this thesis, a variety of theories will be employed to help make sense of the themes that emerge from the experiences of the performers interviewed. An outline of the literature on the concept of drag and the main theories which are used to frame and support this analysis will be introduced. This thesis primarily uses the work of queer theorists who aim to interrogate and deconstruct heteronormative ideals of sex, sexuality and gender. This thesis uses these theories to help expose how common categories of identity exist as fabrication. In so doing, it adopts the position of Judith Butler (1990, 2004) that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon sustained through performative bodily acts which work to reiterate heteronormative ideals of sex and gender. Through this theoretical framework, I aim to demonstrate the role drag practices play in exposing and unsettling these norms, but also its role in reinforcing them.

Drag

In the context of this research, drag is understood as the adoption of a disguise through the medium of performance that projects a gender not typically aligned with one’s biological sex. Such performances usually operate in spaces where the audience is aware the performer is not a biological woman or a biological man – thus the performance of gender exists as performance. In contemporary Australia, drag performers who identify as either cisgender homosexual men or women (individuals whose gender matches his/her biological sex), occupy the most visible positions in drag sub-cultures. There is however, a smaller minority of drag performers who identify as either pre or post-operative transsexuals.
(individuals whose gender does not match his/her biological sex). This research differs from other analyses of drag that exclude post-operative transsexuals from their examinations. One such study by Schacht and Underwood (2008, p.4) considers ‘drag’ to include drag queens, female impersonators and ‘some’ pre-operative transsexuals but ‘does not include transvestites... or postoperative transsexuals’:

At the root of this conceptualization is the explicit recognition that the individual publicly performing femininity and being a woman is also simultaneously acknowledged to be a man and not a woman (Schacht and Underwood 2008, p. 4).

This research includes the experiences of post-operative transsexual women and men in Australia, who identify themselves as active drag queens or drag kings and therefore undermines Schacht and Underwood’s position as outlined above. Historically, post-operative transsexuals have played a crucial role in the emergence of drag in Australia. In the heyday of drag, particularly during the early 1960s, it was once expected that a drag queen would surgically or hormonally modify his body to become a drag queen (once known as a female impersonator). The scholarship of Perkins (1983) and Langley (2006) indicate that pre and post-operative transsexuals once occupied the most prominent positions in Australian drag sub-cultures, as evidenced most clearly in the iconic Australian drag troupe, Les Girls. The cabaret club that hosted these performers opened in 1963 in Sydney’s red light district, Kings Cross. Carlotta, a transsexual male-to-female, whose sex change operation took place in the early 1970s, was among the first to be publicly recognised and was the most famous Les Girl. Despite evidence to suggest a decrease in the visibility of
transsexual drag performers in Australian drag sub-cultures in more recent times (to be discussed throughout this thesis), a number of pre and post-operative transgendered drag queens (and kings) still remain an integral part of Australian drag sub-cultures and as such, must be included within the definition of ‘drag’ as used in this thesis. Despite surgically ‘aligning’ their sex with their gender, transgendered performers still project a gender/s on the surface of their body not aligned with their biological sex.

A Quick History of Male-to-Female Cross-Dressing

Male-to female cross-dressing has existed throughout history in a variety of forms and in a wide range of societies and cultures, with drag being one of its more recent manifestations. In examining the history of this phenomenon, Baker’s work is useful for a general genealogy of the female impersonator (1994). He seeks to highlight the changing role of female impersonators, whom he believes were once viewed as quasi-religious figures in earlier societies. He describes ‘her’ participation in the high drama of the Roman Empire and Ancient Greece, where her role was to facilitate ceremonies of rebirth and fertility (Baker 1994). He suggests that in contemporary drag communities female impersonators have, however, come to occupy a more secular performance role. Through this, Baker seeks to mark the trajectory of the female impersonator, demonstrating that these historical incarnations were clearly different to that of the modern drag queen (1994).

In this argument for a broad historical transition of the female impersonator, Baker focuses on the Berdache of Native American Indian tribes to suggest they were once:
institutionalised as an awesome representation of a third sex, one gifted with magical powers and invested with divine authority, uniting male and female into the undifferentiated sexuality of the primal creative force (1994, p. 23).

Transgender researcher Leslie Feinberg, (a self-identified white female-to-male transsexual) further elaborates on the role of the Berdache to show the important positions they held in the tribal structure, often referred to as ‘two spirited’, they were believed to possess divine powers. Feinberg argues the Berdache is an example of how ‘such ancient and diverse cultures allowed people to choose more sex/gender paths’, a ‘diversity of human expression ...honoured as sacred’ (1996, p. 23):

Our earliest ancestors do not appear to have been biological determinists. There are societies all over the world that allowed for more than two sexes, as well as respecting the right of individuals to reassign their sex. And transsexuality, transgender, intersexuality, and bigender appear as themes in creation stories, legends, parables, and oral history (Feinberg 1996, p. 43).

By tracing these cultural changes in the acceptance of gender variation, I seek to draw attention to the positive cultural values once placed on such earlier incarnations as argued by some scholars. Hines (2007, p.1) explains that transgendered identities, and non-normative gender identities were, in more recent times, medicalised, arguing that concepts of the pathology had ‘come to occupy a dominant position that has significantly affected how transgender is viewed and experienced within contemporary Western society’. In the
second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, transgenderism and other forms of gender variance and/or sexual diversity had come to be portrayed in a seemingly negative light whereby individuals who expressed such an identity were assumed to have a psychological disorder (Hines 2007). Despite this transition from a spiritual to a medical view of gender variance, transgenderism has historically, and in contemporary times, occupied an important place in a wide range of cultures both ancient and modern.

What can be gained from Baker’s earlier description of the historic role of the female impersonator is a glimpse of the different meanings and values placed on modern examples of gender variance compared to past religious representations. Baker explains that this figure has become less familiar to modern day audiences due to the secularisation of the female impersonator in Western culture. The contemporary cultural expectation is that the drag queen will take on a more ‘comic’ role, while simultaneously challenging the laws of society and the boundaries that separate male from female (Baker 1994, p. 23). Baker explains the political power of this more ‘secular’ performer:

\begin{quote}
Drag is about many things. It is about clothes and sex. It subverts the dress codes that tell us what men and women should look like in our organised society. It creates tension and releases tension, confronts and appeases. It is about role-playing and questions the meaning of both gender and sexual identity. It is about anarchy and defiance. It is about men’s fear of women as much as men’s love of women and it is about gay identity (1994, p. 18).
\end{quote}
Drag’s ability to problematize certain cultural norms and understandings of gender and sexual identity is an aspect that will be explored in-depth throughout this thesis. I aim to analyse how drag operates in gay and lesbian communities, and the tensions it creates around notions of gender and sexual identity. Drag, as demonstrated through Baker (1994), exists in a variety of forms and uses, and it is my desire to demonstrate the complexities and nuances of drag sub-cultures in an Australian context.

Esther Newton’s *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (first published 1972) is one of the most well-known studies of modern female impersonators. It provides a detailed description of drag sub-cultures and social contexts during the era of drag’s modern transition into American gay male communities. Newton (1979, p.5) defines female impersonators as ‘men who perform exclusively, or principally, in the social character of women’. With a specific focus on the United States, her work explores the tensions that exist between the different ‘sub-groups’ of female impersonators that occupy gay male communities. She argues that ‘female impersonators are an integral part of the homosexual subculture, and yet collectively they are a separate group within it’ (Newton 1979, p.20). This thesis agrees with this position and aims to better understand the roles drag performers adopt in Australian gay communities as being provisional and contingent. Drag performers often exist parallel to ‘homosexual’ and ‘lesbian’ discourses that operate in the spaces in which they work and socialise. As a result, drag performers (as a minority group in gay sub-cultures) are seen to occupy ‘gay’ space, rather than ‘gay’ people occupying ‘drag’ space. Commonly, drag is viewed as operating alongside gay life purely as a form of entertainment, particularly for the gaze of gay and lesbian patrons. As a result, the way drag functions aesthetically, culturally and socially in gay sub-cultures is largely determined by the values and norms that dominate those spaces.
Newton’s work further articulates the complex relationship drag has with gay identity:

...not all gay people want to wear drag, but drag symbolizes gayness. The drag queen symbolizes an open declaration, even celebration, of homosexuality (1979, p. 64).

While this research acknowledges there may be drag performers who do not identify as homosexual, lesbian or transgendered, all the performers interviewed for this thesis identified as such. Drag, as understood in this context, has a rich history in gay cultures and operates as an important sub-cultural practice in public gay life.

Perkins (1983) provides a snapshot of the early years of Sydney drag. Specifically, her work examines the interrelationships between transsexual women, drag performers and gay men in Sydney’s gay scene. As this thesis looks at the contemporary experiences of drag queens and kings, it is important to acknowledge the conceptual and cultural changes in the years since. Female impersonators were once often transsexual women, and included very few performers who identified as ‘cross-dressers’ or homosexual men. Perkins (1983) suggests that most of the ‘showgirls’ as they were once known, were transsexual women who usually had breast implants and hormones to change their appearance. This trend of performers modifying their body has reversed in recent times with most drag queens and kings being either cisgender (people whose gender matches their biological sex) men or women. As a result, the term ‘female impersonator’ is no longer used as readily in an Australian context (and abroad), and has most frequently been replaced with the term ‘drag queen’.
Perkins provides a definition of the drag queen in Australia during the 1980s as being:

Any male who ‘cross-dresses’ and appears in public, regardless of whether they are transsexual, heterosexual transvestite, homosexual transvestite, or female impersonator (1983, p. 2).

Perkins (1983, p.52) suggests that for these individuals, ‘the ultimate transformation is a sex change operation’. She argues however that many of these impersonators risked losing their jobs once they transitioned because they were no longer seen to be ‘gay’ (Perkins 1983, p. 52). Perkins’ work reveals the politics surrounding the gender identity of drag performers, and the important role gender plays in social conceptualisations of drag. This thesis will discuss some of the tensions surrounding the role of pre and post-operative transgendered drag performers in Australian drag sub-cultures and how gender operates as an important concept in the lives of such performers.

In a recent examination into Australian drag, Langley (2006) focused on the lives of ten Sydney drag queens. Among the images in Langley’s book, there is a black and white photograph of each of the featured performers ‘out’ of drag. For nine of the ten drag queens, Langley introduces this photograph with the clear aim of showing readers the ‘man’ behind the mask. After viewing an assortment of images where the featured performer is depicted in drag, the inclusion of this image of the performer in his ‘natural state’ creates a strong contrast between performer and character. Through the photographic processes inherent in Langley’s book, she ultimately desires to ‘reveal’ and reinforce to readers the ‘masculine’ nature of the drag queen. Her text exists as a powerful tool, constructing not
only the ‘image’ of the drag queen, but also reiterating the fabrication of their gendered performance/s in drag. Langley’s work is but one example reflective of the changing trends in Australian drag, moving away from the ‘transsexual’ to the ‘homosexual’, where drag is seen to be purely performative and not ‘reflective’ of one’s offstage identity. Drag in this sense is seen to have a clear purpose, to create tension between the gender being performed, and the gender of the performer.

Langley’s work is helpful in outlining the important position which drag queens occupy in Sydney’s gay and lesbian scene. She argues that Sydney is a ‘metropolis where drag queens are an integral part of the city’s fabric’ (Langley 2006, p. xi). Langley (2006, p.1) argues that historically, the term ‘putting on drag’ first pertained to the act of slowing down coaches in order to rob them. From here, it is believed the term passed from the slang of thieves to homosexuals when it referred to the dragging of the train of a woman’s gown worn by men to accost men for sex. Langley (2006, p.7) suggests that the first ‘true’ drag club to appear in Sydney was ‘The Jewel Box’ which opened in Kings Cross in 1961. Subsequent to this, the launch of Les Girls in 1963 ‘opened up drag to mainstream Australia’, which attracted a large population of ‘heterosexual’ visitors who were in awe of its performers, unable to comprehend that the female impersonators were not ‘biological’ women (Langley 2006, p. 11). From here, drag expanded its reach beyond just existing in ‘gay’ communities (such as Kings Cross and Oxford St in Sydney) to becoming increasingly visible in more traditionally ‘straight’ environments such as RSL clubs. This ‘opening’ up of drag reflects the gradual – and still partial - acceptance of gay identity and gender variance in Australia. The final chapter of this thesis will have a greater focus on the historical emergence, and changing role of drag and gay sub-cultures in Australia.
Langley’s work tracks the major social and aesthetic changes that drag has experienced in Australia. She suggests that in the 1970s ‘glam drag’ was the prevailing Australian genre and that the 1980s was a transitional period where drag went from having ‘masculine delineators’ to now having a ‘spacey flavour’ where drag became more androgynous in nature (2006, p. 17). Ultimately she argues that drag ‘never stands still’ and that the early 2000s saw the emergence of gender illusionists who promoted diversity in drag (Langley 2006, p. 22). Nonetheless, Langley (2006, p.25) acknowledges that drag has been received differently by people in the gay community, where attitudes towards drag range from disapproval to acclamation, ‘to some, drag stereotypes gay men as flamboyant cross-dressers and impedes their acceptance by mainstream society’. These tensions and complexities sparked by the presence of drag in gay communities is a key focus to be discussed throughout this thesis, particularly regarding how these tensions are created and resolved. Drag not only has the ability to confront ‘mainstream’ or ‘heteronormative’ society, but also pressures the very society in which it is most frequently found.

A Quick History of Female-to-Male Cross Dressing

The large majority of academic scholarship on drag has focused only on the drag queen. At the time of Perkins’ research into Sydney transsexual sub-cultures in 1983, she argues that:

no equivalent transsexual community appears to have developed for female-to-males as has emerged in many cities for male-to-females, and so far as I am aware there is no equivalent to the term ‘drag queen’ (1983, p. 5).
Female-to-male cross dressing is not a new phenomenon, however drag kinging is new. Schacht and Underwood (2008, p.4) suggest that ‘females who cross-dressed throughout history often did so to undertake behaviours and pursuits allowed only of men’, citing the most well-known historical example, Joan of Arc. Examples of female-to-male cross dressing have existed for many thousands of years. However, it is only in recent decades that female-to-male transsexualism and drag kinging have become visible. Hanson (2007, p.62) defines drag kinging as ‘the practice of female-to-male ‘cross-dressing’ and performance’ that is ‘predominantly practiced by lesbian/dyke and queer identified women’. Drag kinging is understood in this thesis to be predominantly about the portrayal of masculinity or ‘male identity’ through performance by those not born biologically male and drag kings – like their drag queen counterparts - include both pre and post-operative transsexuals.

Halberstam’s extensive work on masculinities and drag king cultures is the key application of theoretical work on the concept of female masculinity to the drag king phenomenon. She suggests the drag king has ‘been an unexpected late-comer to the scene of drag and gender bending’ (Halberstam 1999, p. 32) and argues that ‘in all the articles and studies and media exposes on drag queen culture, very little time and energy has been expended on the drag queen’s counterpart, the drag king’ (Halberstam 1998, p. 231). Researcher Vicki Crowley (2008, p.288) elucidates the difficulty that drag king sub-cultures have faced not only in failing to gain adequate recognition in academic literature, but also in their own communities, ‘kinging has not been uniformly embraced or celebrated in Adelaide and other Australian cities. In Sydney some performers have been booed off the stage’ (2008, p.288). Although drag kings and drag queens are similar in many respects, they are aesthetically and culturally vastly different, as the thesis will argue. This analysis will demonstrate that drag queens and kings occupy different and complex social and cultural positions in gay and
lesbian communities and must therefore be examined in their own right. This research modestly hopes to provide insight into the performance of female masculinities through drag king cultures, filling the void in Australian literature on this topic. As a result, this analysis relies heavily on the available literature in this area, mainly those studies with a focus on American drag king cultures.

Halberstam’s work (1999, p.36) is useful as it provides a detailed description of female masculinity and drag, defining the drag king as ‘a performer who makes masculinity into his or her act’. Compared to other conceptualisations of drag, this definition is inclusive of performers who express transgendered identities. Halberstam (1999, p.36) argues that drag king cultures are largely an urban phenomenon that emerged in the 1990s. Her work focuses on the roles that transgendered female to males (FTMs) have played in these cultures, particularly that of the ‘butch’ drag king who, she argues, performs masculinity as its appropriation, ‘a celebration of her masculinity’ (Halberstam 1999, p.36). The other type of drag king Halberstam (1999, p.36) discusses is the ‘femme’ (alternative spelling to ‘fem’), who assumes masculinity as an act. Overall, she suggests that drag kinging centres on the idea of parody, particularly the parody of white masculinity. This is achieved by exposing the structures of masculinity through theatricality, ‘rehearsing the repertoire of roles and types on which such masculinity depends’ (Halberstam 1998, p. 239). Through this process Halberstam (1999, p.62) argues the drag king takes what is so-called ‘natural’ about masculinity and reveals its workings; ‘the tricks and poses, the speech patterns and attitudes that have been seamlessly assimilated into a performance of realness’. Halberstam (1999, p.41) acknowledges however that like drag queening, some performances of drag kinging are ‘neither essentially rebellious nor inherently transgressive’ and that while some ‘confront us with the limits of gender, others confirm the intransigent nature of categories
that we would like to wish away’. This thesis will explore the nuances of these performances and will highlight drag kinging as being a unique and new performance culture in Australia.

Theoretical Framework

Queer Theory

Queer was a recurring theme as discussed in the experiences of drag queens and kings interviewed for this thesis, used mainly as a tool for self-identification and description. Any attempt however to define the term queer potentially undoes its ability to be just that. The concept of queer is at risk of becoming ‘un-queer’ through the process of theorisation. It is important however to try to make sense of this term, particularly for its significance to the lives of drag performers. Jagose (1996, p.1) suggests that queer’s ‘definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics’. The term itself was essentially born out of gay and lesbian studies, where it was once considered to be used as derogatory slang to describe ‘homosexual’. In more recent times however, ‘queer’ has been championed by gays, lesbians, transsexuals, bisexuals and their friends as a term used to describe their community in a more positive and inclusive light. Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon (2002 p.95) argue the term ‘queer’ was ‘reappropriated’ by ‘communities of sexual dissidents’ who refused to identify themselves through the use of an available label. For them, queer is a term which became used by such persons as a banner under which such ‘dishomogeneity and differences could be claimed’ (Alsop, Fitzsimons & Lennon 2002, p. 95). Through this process of reappropriation, ‘queers’ were able to use the word ‘queer’ as a
means of self-empowerment, lobbying for an increased acceptance and recognition of their identities, individually and collectively.

Deconstructing this concept more specifically, Jagose (1996, p.3) believes that queer ‘describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire’. Meyer (1994, p.1-2) agrees with this and suggests the term itself poses ‘an ontological challenge to dominant labelling philosophies, especially the medicalization of the subject implied by the word ‘homosexual’’. Although queer has often been associated with lesbian and gay manifestations, Jagose (1996) recognises that it covers topics including cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Queer then, as understood in the context of this thesis, is considered an ‘umbrella’ term for all individuals whose sexual and gendered identities work to challenge dominant and essentialist categories of identity as fixed and biologically determined.

Halberstam (2005, p.1) takes a similar position on the concept of queer, suggesting the term encompasses ‘sub cultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment and those forms of representations dedicated to capturing these wilful modes of being’. Drag then, as a subcultural practice which predominantly operates within gay and lesbian cultures, is undoubtedly queer in this sense. Its essence challenges common heteronormative understandings of sex and gender by parodying them. Men dressing as women and women dressing as men are subversive queer acts. Drag through its very propositions, is queer, calling into question what gender is and how it operates in society.

Michele Aaron further shapes the term queer, suggesting it is:
...the resistance to, primarily, the normative codes of gender and sexual expression – that masculine men sleep with feminine women - but also to the restrictive potential of gay and lesbian sexuality - that only men sleep with men, and women sleep with women. In this way, queer, as a critical concept, encompasses the non-fixity of gender expression and the non-fixity of both straight and gay sexuality (2004, p. 5).

These definitions of queer suggest it is characterised by its ‘resistance’ and ‘wilfulness’ to gender norms. Queer is deliberate, where its main aim is to actively destabilise common conceptions of sex and gender. This thesis explores the tension between the ambition of drag to critique and destabilise gender norms and its desire to reproduce and pay homage to those same norms. Hennessy argues that queer is ‘widely perceived as calling into question conventional understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, oppositions and equations that sustain them’ (Hennessy in Jagose 1996, p 97). Jagose (1996, p.98) agrees with this position, suggesting it ‘marks a suspension of identity as something fixed, coherent and natural’. Therefore, while this research aims to demonstrate the queer nature of drag identities, it also explores the complexity of gender play. The predominant concern of this thesis is how queer has been understood by drag performers and its influence in shaping their gendered and drag identities. Queer was considered to be a positive term by these participants and was used largely as a word to define themselves or others in their community as ‘different’ or ‘non-normative’.
Gender Theory

This thesis adopts the position of Judith Butler (2004, p.42) who theorises gender as ‘the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalised’ but also the ‘apparatus’ through which such terms may be deconstructed and de-naturalised. Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon (2002, p.97) suggest Butler’s intention is to reveal, as illusion, the apparent essential unity of biological sex, gender identification and heterosexuality. Butler’s theory of gender performativity realises gender as part of a wider social performance where ‘the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author’ (2004, p. 1). By this, Butler (1990) suggests that gender norms are created and reproduced throughout all components of society. Our participation in this process begins from birth; there is no ‘body’ in existence prior to its cultural inscription. This sex/gender distinction is critical to Butler’s theorisation of gender believing that gender is not the result of biological sex but rather something that is culturally constructed (1990).

Butler (1990, p.10) suggests that society operates on the idea of a binary gender system where gender mirrors or is restricted by sex. Dozier (2005 p.298) shares this position, arguing that ‘generally, gender is defined as the social constructed correlate of sex’. Butler (1990) therefore suggests that sex is considered prediscursive, that it is assumed to exist ‘prior’ to culture as something politically neutral, a site on which ‘culture acts’. Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon (2002, p.97) elaborate on this point believing that Butler ‘no more accepts sex as a natural category than gender itself’. Gender does not follow from biology, but rather, from the gender norms created and ‘performed’ by society. Through this, Butler
contends that society has the potential to structure biology - the biological is perceived through a cultural lens.

Judith Lorber (1994, p.1) agrees with Butler’s positioning, suggesting that gender is a social institution. Her work examines the social impact of gender discourses, believing they establish patterns of expectations and ‘order the social processes of everyday life’ (Lorber 1994, p. 1). These processes affect all major organizations of society including economy, ideology, family and politics (Lorber 1994, p. 1). Like the work of West and Zimmerman (1987), Lorber (1994, p.13) also suggests gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction. To West and Zimmerman (1987, p.126) gender is a ‘routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment’ achieved by a ‘complex of socially guided perceptual, interaction, and micro-political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’’. They highlight the social aspect of gender and its ‘achievement’ through the interaction we have with others. For them, gender is understood as an ‘activity’ based around the management of ‘situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category’ (West and Zimmerman 1987, p. 127). Gender then is a repeated social performance, sustained through the interaction we experience between ourselves, others and our social worlds.

For Butler, gender is something that is socially constructed and maintained through the body. Her work has sought to elucidate the constructive nature of gender, demonstrating how we maintain particular gendered identities through the repetition of various stylised acts:
...words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body...such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (Butler 1990, p. 185) [emphasis Butler’s].

Butler suggests gender is the repeated performance that maintains the illusion of a ‘gender’ as something that is natural. She contends that the construction of gender (and therefore the illusion we maintain) is for the purpose of the regulation of sexuality in the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality. She argues the reason we participate in this framework is due to a ‘strategy of survival’ where ‘gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences’ (Butler 1990, p. 190). Many of the participants interviewed for this thesis (particularly those who identified as transgendered), experienced the need to fit into highly heteronormative constructions of masculinity and femininity in order to ‘pass’ as a coherent gendered entity. This thesis will specifically analyse those experiences and how gender is understood differently by transgendered drag performers compared to the majority of participants interviewed for this research. Most of the participants, however, through their professional or personal understandings of gender, participated in practices of reproducing and sustaining normative gendered discourses.

Butler’s work does not suggest that individuals ‘choose’ their gender, but that the terms which influence the way we perform gender is predetermined. We perform these genders in relation to ‘the script’, a regulatory framework that imposes itself on how individuals ‘do’ gender. Salih (2002, p.56) articulates this point by stating that ‘the subject has a limited
number of ‘costumes’ from which to make a constrained choice of gender style’. Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon (2002) suggest that through these performances, and the performances of others, we become ‘subjects’. These performances ‘provide us with ideals of masculinity and femininity which render certain behaviour appropriate and others not’ (Alsop, Fitzsimons & Lennon 2002, p. 99). Drag then, and the types of gendered performances which are on display through these ‘acts’ also take place within particular regulatory frameworks. While drag has the potential to destabilise such gendered ‘norms’, it is also bound by certain expectations and discourses at play in the spaces in which it occurs.

Butler (1990, p.12) argues that gender functions as a part of discourse or rather, ‘hegemonic cultural discourse predicted on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality’. Butler (1990, p.14) however also acknowledges that these discourses change over time and therefore considers gender to be a ‘shifting and contextual phenomenon’ that is influenced by particular historical and cultural sets of relations. Gender then is influenced by one’s positionality, varying in its form and understanding in relation to intersections of ethnicity, class, sexuality, social interaction and so forth. Salih (2002, p.57) suggests that Butler claims there is ‘no doer being the deed, no volitional agent that knowingly ‘does’ its gender, since the gendered body is inseparable from the acts that constitute it’. This thesis therefore adopts the position that individuals do not hold an innate or ‘true’ ‘gendered identity’, but rather, produce and maintain identities in relation to situational contexts.

Through the use of drag as an example, Butler’s work seeks to reveal the constructive foundations of gender, arguing that ‘[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself, as well as its contingency’ (1990, 187). This thesis modestly contributes evidence to Butler’s contention, with an emphasis on how
performances of drag, and therefore the types of ‘genders’ which are performed in these contexts have the potential to undo certain gender norms. There are, however, aspects to these performances which I argue, reconsolidate or ‘re-idealise’ rather than challenge these norms. By aiming to expose such ‘genders’ as construct, it first requires the performer to acknowledge their very existence. Colebrook suggests that:

Butler’s answer to the politics of representation is not to judge between good and bad representations, dividing the authentic from the imposed. Rather, the conditions of representation themselves will yield a politics in which one can be a self only through the repetition of a norm, at the same time as that very repetition is essentially queer (Colebrook in Nigianni and Storr 2009, p. 15).

Thus Butler believes that although the ‘repetition’ of gendered norms are essential to the formation of one’s identity, or self, this repetition is also the self’s undoing. The effect is that heterosexuality is normalised by these performances, particularly repetitions of normative gendered stereotypes. In arguing this however, Butler (1990, p.186) recognises drag has the potential to ‘…mock both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity’. Drag then, accentuates the tensions that arise from the concept of ‘gender’, playing upon ‘the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed’ (Butler 1990, p. 187). Salih (2002, p.58) suggests that performances that do not try to conceal their genealogy, but rather accentuate it, ‘displace heterocentric assumptions by revealing that heterosexual identities are as constructed and ‘unoriginal’ as the imitations of them’. This thesis supports Salih’s argument that ‘there are some forms of
drag that are definitely not subversive, but serve only to reinforce existing heterosexual power structures’ (2002, p. 58).

Theorising Transgender

This thesis acknowledges the shared history transgendered people have had with gay and lesbian communities, but also makes clear the differences in these experiences. The research provides a specific contextual example of how transgendered and gay/lesbian performers have mutual experiences through drag sub-cultures. Susan Stryker, in Transgender History (2008, p.1), suggests the term ‘transgender’ is still under construction, and heavily contested. She nonetheless demonstrates the modern historical links between the transgender and gay and lesbian movements:

the emerging transgender politics in the late 1950s and early ‘60s can’t be cleanly separated from the history of official persecution of homosexuals. It needs to be understood as part of an overarching set of struggles and privacy, censorship, political dissent, minority rights, freedom of expression, and sexual liberation (Stryker 2008, p. 52).

In arguing for the current significance of transgender, Stryker (2008, p.123) maintains that at the end of the 19th century the term acquired its current definition as ‘a catchall term for all non-normative forms of gender expression and identity’. The term ‘transgender’ has been widely coined by academics as an umbrella term to encompass a wide array of
gendered identities which blur the lines between traditional gendered stereotypes (Monro and Warren 2004, Hines 2006, Feinberg 1996). Hines (2007, p.1) suggests that the term ‘relates to a diversity of practices that call into question traditional ways of seeing gender and its relationship with sex and sexuality’. More specifically, Feinberg (1996, p. x) explains that transgender has two colloquial meanings; firstly it has been used as an umbrella term to include everyone who challenges the boundaries of sex and gender and it has also been used to distinguish between those who reassign their biological sex and those whose gender expression is considered inappropriate to their sex. Butler’s (2004, p. 6) definition of transgender is inclusive of those who ‘cross-identify or who live as another gender, but who may or may not have undergone hormonal treatments or sex reassignment operations’. It is commonly accepted that the term transgender therefore incorporates ideas on transsexualism, transvestism, cross-dressing, drag, androgyny and intersex and is therefore a term that can theoretically be used to describe most of the performers interviewed for this research.

Monro and Warren’s (2004) contribution to this area of study helps to highlight the issue surrounding the changing definition of ‘transgender’ and therefore the contingent nature of GLBT identities, arguing the term itself has become a specific area of contention. They suggest that:

Initially it was developed to include and foreground people who transgress gender binaries without necessarily having surgery. However, some transsexuals are now claiming it as a term for transsexuality, because transsexuality primarily concerns gender rather than sexuality (Monro and Warren 2004, p. 346).
Monro and Warren examine these ‘ongoing tensions’ concerning the social and cultural space of transgendered lives and the ways in which the inclusion of transgendered individuals in gay and lesbian communities is contingent and provisional. They maintain that the ‘inclusion of transgender under the lesbian and gay banner is still heavily contested in some circumstances’, and when such individuals are included within the gay ‘umbrella’ ‘issues directly pertaining to transgender people are often marginalized’ (Monro and Warren 2004, p. 352). This idea is supported by Stone’s (2009) examination of gay and lesbian activists’ attitudes towards the political inclusion of transgender. She argues that ‘transgendered individuals who join a social movement because of their marginalization in society also run the risk of being marginalized within the social movement’ (Stone 2009, p. 335). Monro and Warren (2004, p.352) maintain that despite tensions permeating these relationships, ‘gay space has been crucial for the development of transgender and transsexual culture’. In this thesis I foreground the experiences of transgendered persons, particularly transsexual men and women who identify themselves as drag performers. Although transgendered people share a history with gay and lesbian communities, their experiences and understandings of gender must be given its own investigation to adequately comprehend the subtleties in the gender identification of all the participants involved in this research.

In relating transgender theory to the other concepts already outlined in this chapter, the experiences of transgendered people can be understood through a queer lens. With the basis of ‘queer’ being the intention to denaturalise gendered and sexual norms, queer then has often been used by trans people as a way of making sense of their own lives as gender outlaws. However, not all transgendered people are supportive of queer theory or more
specifically, Butler’s (1990) notion of gender performativity; Most notably, Jay Prosser contends that:

there are transgendered trajectories, in particular transsexual trajectories that aspire to that which this scheme devalues. Namely there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be non-performative, to be constative, quite simply, to be (1998, p.32).

This argument is in strong contrast to Butler’s idea of gender constructionism, suggesting that transsexuals work to surgically modify their body in search of a ‘real gender’. Prosser desires to point out that gender is not simply ‘conceptual’, but also ‘real’ and experienced through the body (Dozier 2005, p.300). What Prosser does, however, is assume that all transsexual trajectories are similar, and therefore, so are all gendered identities, ignoring the idea of gender as a shifting and contextual phenomenon. Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon (2002, p.207) discuss Prosser’s criticism suggesting that ‘what is unclear is what could constitute such gendered realness’. Even though Prosser suggests the existence of an overarching transsexual narrative that desires simply to ‘be’, in order to ‘be’, one must ‘become’. The identities of transsexuals are still negotiated and performed in relation to a set of unavoidable normative sex and gendered ideals that operate in society. Butler responds to Prosser’s critique in her later work, Undoing Gender where she claims:
one only determines ‘one’s own’ sense of gender to the extent that social norms exist that support and enable that act of claiming gender for oneself. One is dependent on this ‘outside’ to lay claim to what is one’s own’ (2004, p. 7).

Viviane Namaste also critiques Butler’s argument that drag works to ‘expose’ gender as construct, suggesting that she:

fails to account for the context in which these gendered performance occur. The drag queens Butler discusses perform in space created and defined by gay male culture. Although Butler locates these spaces in relation to heterosexual hegemony, she refuses to examine this territory’s own complicated relations to gender and gender performance (2000, p. 10).

The identities of drag performers must therefore be understood in relation to various discourses which operate in gay communities. These communities, like ‘heterosexual’ communities, have strict codes concerning the types of gendered identities that are considered coherent and acceptable. Transgendered drag kings and queens, for example, hold special (and often difficult) relationships to gay life. This thesis then adopts the position of Halberstam who argues:

on the one hand, transgenderism expresses the detachment of sex from gender and signifies the production of new forms of embodiment; on the other hand, however, as many transgender men begin hormones and start to live as men,
transgenderism seems to confirm the dominance of gender binarism (1999, p. 127-128).

Through my examination of drag sub-cultures, I hope to unravel the complexities in the experiences of gender in the lives of Australian drag performers and the role which gay communities play in the formation and understanding of those identities.

**Overview of Chapters**

This thesis has been organised thematically into five chapters. Before the first of these chapters, a methodology provides a discussion of the approaches taken by the research project as a whole, the theoretical position of this thesis in relation to the methods chosen, the processes undertaken to obtain data and, finally, the processes used to analyse that data. Following this, Chapter One will be the first of the main data analysis chapters, exploring the concept of gender as lived by the participants. I will specifically investigate how gender is understood and performed in the onstage and offstage lives of Australian drag kings and drag queens. Through the use of a detailed case study format, this chapter seeks to demonstrate how drag performers challenge and reproduce heteronormative ideas of sex and gender through the multiple and shifting gendered subjectivities they take up. This chapter will be framed using the theories already outlined in the introduction, namely Butler’s (1990) theory of ‘gender performativity’.

Chapter Two will provide a deeper discussion of the tensions surrounding the onstage and offstage lives of drag performers. This will include a discussion of the spatial limits of drag
and how the personal and professional boundaries relating to the lives of drag performers are negotiated. I will explore how these participants make sense of their offstage subjectivities in relation to their drag personas, and how they construct their identities as drag performers. These experiences will be understood through the application of Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical metaphor for human interaction. Goffman understands identity to be similar to a performance, whereby an ‘actor’ alters his ‘front’ in order to guide the impression others may form of him. Identity in this sense is understood as situational and transactional, reliant on the spaces in which it occurs, and those with whom it occurs. This chapter will highlight the fluid and changing role of drag in recent times, occupying an increased visibility in a variety of offstage contexts in contemporary Australian gay communities.

Chapter Three will examine a range of onstage drag king performances as described to me by the research participants, and as informed by my own observational research at drag events. The aim of this chapter is to uncover and analyse the types of masculinities (and femininities) performed by Australian drag kings through the characters they embody and their stage performances overall. With the help of Halberstam’s (1998, 1999) research into drag king cultures and female masculinities in America and the UK, this chapter aims to investigate how Australian drag king cultures compare to those international examples, examining what they might reveal about men, masculinity and power more broadly. This chapter will also touch on the types of femininities (and masculinities) produced through drag queen performances and how those performances contrast to the performances of masculinity and femininity as produced by drag kings.
Chapter Four focuses on the concept of ‘camp’ and how the term was used discursively by drag queens and kings during throughout the interviews conducted with them. This chapter will suggest it was most commonly used as a tool for self-description (or as a description of others), and as a tool to describe a particular performance aesthetic as over-the-top, exaggerated and stylized. The performers interviewed saw camp as a way of expressing their queer identities (as theorised by Meyer 1994) particularly as lesbian, gay or transgendered individuals. This chapter will explore the changing role and importance of camp in contemporary Australian drag cultures, particularly its increased alignment with drag king performance cultures.

The final chapter of this thesis (Chapter Five) will examine the concepts of community and nostalgia, particularly the changing role of Australian gay sub-cultures in recent times. Many of the performers interviewed spoke of the social, cultural and economic changes they had observed throughout their drag careers, particularly concerning a gay ‘scene’. This ‘scene’ was once considered to exist as part of the ‘Golden Era’ of Australia’s gay history. This chapter will highlight those changes with a discussion on the impacts they are believed to have made on the role of drag in gay communities in recent times. The insights provided by these participants will be analysed to suggest what was and is now valued by drag performers, drag sub-cultures and gay communities more broadly.
Methodology

Introduction to Conceptual Design

This thesis is the outcome of an ethnographic study conducted into the lives of Australian drag queens and drag kings during 2010 and 2011. According to Angrosino (2007, p.1), ethnography is primarily about the description of people, dealing with them ‘in a collective sense’. This research was qualitative in its approach towards the collection of data which included interviews and observation. These techniques were used to generate first-hand information on the experiences of the participants, gaining a better understanding of their role as performers and socialisers in Australian gay and lesbian communities. This chapter will discuss the methods employed in the collection of this data and the relationship these approaches have to the theoretical framework applied to this thesis.

Theoretical Framework

The use of theory alongside the interpretation and analysis of the data in this thesis has been used to provide a framework through which the experiences of the participants can be better contextualised and examined. A grounded theory approach was used, which included the coding and analysis of the research data into themes or concepts. These themes then informed and generated the type of theories which would be used in order to articulate and make sense of this data (Charmaz 2014). This study then is inductive in its approach; it does not have an established ‘hypothesis’ (as seen more commonly in scientific or quantitative research) but rather, uses the accumulation of data obtained from interviews and
observational research to build towards general patterns, narratives and theories relating to
the experiences of the participant groups (Angrosino 2007, p. 15). This method was chosen
to avoid forming pre-conceived ideas concerning the experiences of the participants. It
aims, instead, to allow the data to generate theoretical thought. The main focus of the
thesis is to analyse the data obtained from this research, using theory to help support and
build on that analysis.

These experiences have been conceptualised through the use of a post-structuralist
framework of analysis, largely informed by queer social theory. Post-structuralism has been
understood as part of the postmodern movement in intellectual and cultural thought that
emerged from the mid-20th century, significantly reconceptualising how ‘identity, the
subject (the self), power and difference are theorized’ (Robinson and Jones-Diaz 2006, p.15).
Post-structuralist thought is therefore critical of modernist perspectives which view the
world largely in a structuralist light. Post-structuralism takes the approach that there are no
facts or ‘truths’ but rather, perspective and opinion where meaning is not a given but is
‘socially constructed across a number of institutional sites and practices’ (Robinson and
Jones-Diaz 2006, p.15-16). Kvale (1996, p. 41) suggests that there is ‘no longer a stable
foundation to support a universal and objective reality’ and suggests that ‘the subject and
the situation cannot be defined except in and by this relationship’ (1996, p. 44). The
deployment of post-structural theory in this thesis therefore allows for a close reading and
analysis of the experiences of these participants. It is hoped that through this approach,
these experiences may reveal more about the operations of power (vis a vis normalising
forces of sex and gender) in different social and cultural contexts and how these forces
continue to exert themselves oppressively (if subtly) on those whose sexed and gendered
subjectivities are lived in public and private ways that trouble those norms. This research

Evan Smith – University of Western Sydney
views the experiences of these participants individually and collectively and will be analysed in relation to one another, and their social contexts, to build towards common narratives concerning these lives.

A key area of theoretical consideration for the research, as emerged from the data, is the subject of gender, particularly in relation to the gender subjectivity and identity of the participants (both in and out of drag). This theme resulted in the theorising of gender, in this thesis, using a constructionist approach, whereby gender and sexed categories are considered socially shaped. Schrock and Reid (2006, p.76) suggest that a key benefit to adopting this approach to understanding identities is that ‘it can open a window into the relationship between identity work and the wider culture’. Therefore, this approach has been understood mainly through the application and analysis of the work of Judith Butler (1990, 2004) who uses drag as an example to contend how normative categories of gender are created and sustained through our very performance of them. Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity is useful to understanding how gender is practised in the lives of drag performers, created by the repetition and maintenance of various stylised acts. Gender is understood in this research as a contextual and shifting phenomenon where practices of drag reveal gender categories as construct. Other themes of enquiry that emerged from the interpretation and analysis of the data included queer subjectivity, operations of power, camp performance, community, masculinity, femininity and identity construction. All of these themes were interrogated with the use of relevant theory. It is hoped the research will provide a more nuanced and critical understanding of the shared beliefs, customs and experiences of Australian drag performers in recent times. Angrosino (2007, p.14-15) suggests that the point of ethnographic research as a whole is to discern ‘predictable patterns’ in the lived experience of human participants, particularly its ‘institutions,
interpersonal behaviours, material productions, and beliefs’. This chapter will discuss the methods involved in the collection of data and will then discuss the approaches made to the interpretation and analysis of that data.

**Collection of Data**

**Interviews**

This research has taken a multi-faceted approach to the collection of data, including conducting a series of in-depth, semi-structured one-on-one interviews and secondly, participating in methods of observational research. Charmaz (2014, p.84) suggests that ‘intensive interviewing and grounded theory fit together well as complementary data collection and analysis methods’. She argues this is because interviewing serves as an effective means of opening up enquiry for theoretical analysis (Charmaz 2014, p.84).

Charmaz (2014, p.85) helps to elucidate why this particular approach was taken to this research project, believing that both interviewing and grounded theory methods are ‘open ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and placed yet unrestricted’. This approach to the collection of data therefore provides depth and rigor to the understanding and analysis of the experiences of the participants interviewed for the thesis. May (2001, p.120) helps to elucidate the effectiveness of conducting interviews suggesting they ‘yield rich insights into people’s biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings’.

Through this method, the research has been able to obtain original and detailed data pertaining to the experiences of a range of Australian drag performers. This section will now
explore how participants were recruited for these interviews, and the areas of investigation explored in the gathering of this data.

**Recruitment and Sampling**

Potential participants were identified through a range of networking methods, aided largely by my knowledge of some of the more high-profile drag queens in Sydney (having been an infrequent participant in the Sydney gay community over the years). These performers were known to me only by their stage name. Initial contact was made with them via the Internet, through email or Facebook message. The gathering of participants relied extensively on snowball recruitment, whereby participants were identified and contacted through word-of-mouth, particularly from those performers who had already agreed to participate. After being interviewed, a level of trust was created with the participants who, consequently, forwarded my name to other potential participants.

Overall, 16 interviews were conducted, 15 face-to-face, and one via email communication (due to an inability to meet face-to-face). Six participants identified themselves as drag kings and nine as drag queens. One transsexual male-to-female who was not a drag performer was also interviewed. The data obtained from this interview was not used for analysis due to a narrowing of focus regarding the scope of the research. Originally, transsexual female-to-males and transsexual male-to-females were to be interviewed alongside drag kings and drag kings. Upon conducting these interviews however, it became evident that some performers identified as belonging to more than one of these categories. As a result, it was decided the research would focus instead on the experiences of drag performers regardless of their gender and/or sexual identity. Interviewees were not selected on the basis of class,
ethnicity, gender or sexuality and were selected only on the basis that they identified as either a drag queen or king. The intent of dividing the participants into two groups was necessary to fulfil the aims of this research, to investigate the different experiences of drag kings and drag queens and their respective relationship to the communities in which they exist. Usually, in an Australian context, drag queens and drag kings perform in spaces that are separate from one another. Drag queens often perform for the entertainment of homosexual men and drag kings for lesbian women. The cultures in which these performances occur are therefore very different, leading to a need for the research to examine these spaces in their own contexts. The data gained from the interviews could then be weighed and analysed against one another to provide a thorough and comparative analysis of these experiences.

As this research examines these lives through a ‘gendered’ framework, there are those participants who consider their everyday representations of gender to be vastly different to the types of genders which they perform through drag. This group comprised the majority of the participants interviewed for this thesis, identifying as gay men or lesbian women (performers whose gendered representations in their everyday lives match their biological sex). Within these groups however emerged a smaller group of performers who identified as either ‘transsexuals’ or ‘transgendered’ performers, (persons who had undergone or were in the process of undergoing sexual reassignment surgery). In total, there was one pre-operative transsexual female-to-male (FTM) drag king and two post-operative transsexual male-to-female (MTF) drag queens interviewed for this research. In this thesis, pre-operative transsexuals refer to those individuals who have not surgically modified their bodies to appear as their desired sex (although may be considering it), and post-operative transsexuals refers to those who have undergone sex reassignment surgery. Both pre and
post-operative transsexuals, however, may or may not undergo hormone therapy and other such medical treatments to enhance their desired appearance. A limited number of performers interviewed also identified as either ‘queer’ or ‘androgyrous’ (such discussions on gender identity will be discussed in more detail in Chapter One). Using a post-structuralist approach to the examination of these experiences will reveal how there is no ‘true’ gender identity, but instead, that ‘gender’ is a concept constructed and maintained throughout all levels of social discourse. Such an analysis, using the help of Butler (1990, 2004) will aim to highlight how gender is performative, demonstrating how the identities of drag performers are shifting and contextual.

The cultures under investigation in this thesis are Australian drag sub-cultures which operate largely in the context of gay and lesbian metropolitan communities, usually as a form of entertainment. This research recruited performers from a range of cities including Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and the Gold Coast. A potential gap in this research is the absence of performers from regional and remote areas of Australia, including the north and west coasts. Due to time and financial limitations, my research has focused on those cities in close proximity to Sydney. One area of study future researchers might consider is the differences in the experience of ‘urban’ based drag performers compared to those living in rural or remote locations. Such an investigation may shed light on the different ways gay identity operates in different social and economic settings. As this thesis views gender as fluid and contextual, a study which also adopts this argument, and which focuses on other GLBT communities may add deeper insight into this assertion. The researcher might examine what types of ‘gender’ are performed by rural drag performers as opposed to urban drag performers (as interviewed in this research). What forces, both politically and socially, shape these identities? Are these forces different across locations? The
development of this type of study would be important for the improved understanding of GLBT lives in Australia and the needs of their respective communities. Such research may ensure that GLBT communities and drag subcultures in Australia continue to thrive in a vast number of spaces and regions around the country.

**Interview Process**

Before the interviews commenced, an information sheet detailing the specifics of this research project was forwarded to the potential participants during first contact. Once a participant read through the information and agreed to participate, a suitable time and place was arranged. Performers were met at a location where they felt comfortable and that best suited their schedules. Before each interview, participants were given a consent sheet to sign and were again provided with the same information sheet outlining the aims of the research project. The participants were then given the opportunity to ask any questions or express queries about the project before consent was given. Once consent was obtained, the interviews commenced. These were recorded digitally and usually took between 45 minutes to two hours to complete.

All interviews conducted were one-on-one in nature, apart from one which was conducted between myself and two participants who identified as a ‘drag king duo’. Individual interviews were selected in preference to other styles of interviewing such as group interviews or focus groups due to the intimate nature of Australian drag sub-cultures. Members of these communities often perform with or socialise alongside other drag performers and it is plausible to presume the participants would potentially be aware of, or know, other participants. To allow participants to speak openly and freely about their
experiences, it was deemed necessary to select this style of interviewing. The choice of conducting one-on-one interviews also supports the aims of this research to establish and analyse, in-depth, the experiences of Australian drag performers. Group interviews would not allow for this type of depth and rigor due to the public and more impersonal nature of this style of interviewing.

The interviews were largely semi-structured in nature, designed specifically to encourage discussion around certain areas of interest pertaining to this project. This format provides the interviewer with the tools to seek clarification and elaboration on the answers given, allowing them to record qualitative information about the topic, giving them ‘more latitude to probe beyond the answers and thus enter into a dialogue with the interviewee’ (May 2001, p. 123). Although these interviews were semi-structured, many became more open-ended as the interviews progressed. Participants were not restricted in their responses, bringing out a range of different issues and experiences which could then be explored further. This open-ended approach ‘flows conversationally and accommodates digressions, which may well open up new avenues of inquiry that the researcher has not originally considered’ (Angrosino 2007, p.42-43). The structure and nature of the questions were designed specifically to generate an in-depth conversation between the participant and interviewer.

The questions posed to each participant at the start of each interview were aimed at establishing basic demographics. The interview then progressed to discussing how they began performing in drag. The interviewer then asked the participants more specific questions relating to their experiences with gay and lesbian communities and drag subcultures, to better understand how they interpret their experiences regarding the broader
spaces in which they work and socialise. Topics included for discussion were the gender identification and personal lives of the performers, their relationship towards other drag performers and members of gay and lesbian communities and the aesthetic composition and style of their drag performances (see Appendix). These topics are what Angrosino (2007, p.47) calls ‘domains of interest’. Some ‘follow up’ interviews were also conducted to seek clarification on particular issues.

Participant Groups

The number of drag queens involved in the study outweighs that of the drag kings. Although this could be considered an imbalance in this research, I consider enough data was collected from both subject groups to complete a tentative analysis of their experiences. Other reasons for this imbalance include (as outlined in the introduction) that drag queening and drag queen sub-cultures have existed much longer than those of drag kinging. Therefore, there are more commercial venues which cater for the performances of drag queens compared to drag kings (who often perform infrequently at designated ‘lesbian’ nights). Although there is an imbalance in the scale of drag queen and drag king sub-cultures in Australian gay communities, the researcher aims to treat both subject groups with equal value and analysis. Due to my experiences as a participant in the Sydney ‘gay male’ scene prior to starting this research, it must be noted that my familiarity with drag queen sub-cultures was greater than that of drag kings. Consequently, my ability to contact and recruit drag queens in comparison to drag kings was more successful. I already knew of many drag queens by the stage names, and felt a greater level of confidence in asking them to participate in the project (many of who were already acquaintances on my Facebook page).
As a result of my exposure to drag queen cultures as a young adult, I was spurred on to find out more about other lesser known drag cultures such as drag kinging. The interest and intrigue I felt towards both drag kings and queens therefore provided the inspiration for this research.

**Drag Queens**

Nine drag queens were interviewed for this thesis, with all but one born in Australia. Six of these performers identify as being white Australian. One identifies as being Australian but also having Greek grandparents and an English mother. Another identifies as being both an Australian and ‘Kiwi’, born in Australia but having parents of New Zealand origin. This performer indicated he lived a significant portion of his life in New Zealand but that he was in the process of trying to become an Australian citizen. Another participant identifies as being Australian, but also as having an Anglo Celtic ethnicity. Australian born, he lived with his family in Hong Kong for most of his early life, adopting Cantonese as his first language. The one drag queen not born in Australia identifies as being an ‘English’ transsexual male-to-female from Manchester in the United Kingdom. This participant could not meet face-to-face, therefore an online interview was conducted. The participant was sent the same questions asked of the other participants and sent her answers back by filling in her response under each of those questions (see appendix). The age distribution of the drag queens ranged from 20 to 61, with the median age being 40.6 years old. One of the performers identifies as being of a poor economic position, five as either average or comfortable and three as average to above average. Six of the performers are from Sydney, two from Adelaide and one is based on the Gold Coast.
Drag Kings

Six drag kings were interviewed for this research, all born in Australia. Compared to the drag queens, these performers seemed to have much more ‘mixed’ ethnic backgrounds. Four identify as being of white Anglo background, which included one performer who describes herself as ‘Anglo Irish’, another as ‘English, Irish and Norwegian’, and two as ‘Aussie’ (one whose family ‘came over on the boats’). One drag king identifies herself as being part Papua New Guinean (having lived there for most of her life), but also considers herself to be part Jewish, Irish and of Australian Aboriginal background. Another drag king identifies as being a first generation Italian, whose parents migrated from Sicily. Overall, five of the drag kings identify as cisgender lesbian women, and one as a heterosexual pre-operative transsexual female-to-male in the process of transitioning genders. The youngest drag king is 28 and the oldest 47, giving a median age of 38.6 years. Concerning the economic position of these participants, four identify as either ‘below average’ or ‘just getting by’, with one of the participants unemployed. Two identify as being of ‘average’ economic position. Compared to the drag queens, none of these participants identify themselves as being above average financially. Two performers live in Wollongong (an hour south of Sydney), two in the Sydney metropolitan area and the remaining two in Melbourne.

Observational Research

To build upon the data obtained from interviews, I also undertook intensive observational research in drag sub-cultures. Charmaz (2000, p.35) suggests that ethnography means ‘recording the life of a particular group and thus entails the sustained participation and
observation in their milieu, community or social world’. As a result, I decided to become a ‘participant-as-observer’ who was ‘more fully integrated into the life of the group under study and is more engaged with the people; he or she is as much a friend as a neutral researcher’ (Angrosino 2007, p.55). These observations occurred only in public places, particularly the nightclubs, clubs and pubs located in the ‘scene’, or commercial ‘heart’ of gay metropolitan communities around Australia including Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and the Gold Coast. These observations occurred around the same time as the interviews were conducted between 2010 and 2011. Each observation took between 2-3 hours. Following this, the researcher would take field notes in regards to the life of the venue in which he was immersed in, and the types of drag performances witnessed there. These notes would be recorded once the researcher returned home and usually reflected upon the researchers experiences as ‘part’ of the venue in which these drag performances took place. The field notes taken typically described the types of performances viewed, focusing largely on the nature and the aesthetics of those performances. The intent of using this method as a means of obtaining data was to gain a greater insight into drag king and drag queen sub-cultures and how drag performers and drag shows typically function in these spaces. Through observation of these drag performances (either onstage or off), I gained a better knowledge of their aesthetic composition, style and the types of gendered performances they facilitated. I was also able to observe the role and function of drag performers in relation to their audiences and their social contexts more generally. During the analysis of this research, these observations were used to better understand the data obtained from the interviews, providing a more rounded picture of the performers’ experiences. The purpose of these observations were solely to provide a context to this research, and to
provide a framework for better understanding the interview data. These observations will be described intermittently throughout this thesis (particularly in Chapter Three).

**Interpretation and Analysis of Data**

The interviews obtained for this research were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. Before the analysis commenced, a copy of the interview transcript was sent to each participant for their approval and checking. All identifying features were removed, with their names replaced by pseudonyms. Each participant as discussed in this thesis is described using this pseudonym and referred to using the gender pronoun with which they identify in their everyday lives (i.e. out of drag). The analysis of the interviews began by locating common trends and patterns in the data. These were then grouped into overarching themes which formed the basis for the chapters to follow. These themes were then conceptualised and analysed through the use of the relevant theories and literature pertaining to these fields of enquiry (as discussed).

The interviews conducted, and the analysis of the data obtained from them, has been used in this thesis to confer common narratives concerning the experiences of drag performers. Riessman suggests that individuals and groups construct identities through storytelling, citing Yuval-Davis’ argument that ‘identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)’. Yuval-Davis’ work helps to highlight why the gathering of such narratives is useful, claiming that identity is fluid ‘always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong. This duality is often reflected in narratives of identity’ (Yuval-Davis in Riessman 2008, p.8).
In the approach to analysing this data, I used a similar method as employed by ethnographer Ruth Wajnryb called ‘unitisation’. Wajnryb (2001) employed this technique specifically during her research into the power of silence and trauma inflicted upon children raised in the homes of holocaust survivors. In her methodological discussion, Wajnryb (2001, p.328) explains that this technique involves the carving of interview transcripts into smaller components or units; ‘The unit of analysis was a meaningful, topic bounded, stand-alone chunk of text, irrespective of linguistic structure or size’. Wajnryb suggests these segments were awarded a particular descriptive code in order to interpret the data and for the purpose of theory-building. After all the interviews were read for this research project, and common themes and patterns were identified, the transcripts were then coded using a similar method as employed by Wajnryb. I assigned each theme a particular colour, which was then placed over the relevant sections of the transcripts (in hard copy) that reflected this theme/s. Once this process was completed for each transcript, a digital spreadsheet was created. This ensured there was a backup of information, and also to improve the efficiency with which the data could be located and incorporated into the thesis. In the spreadsheet, each theme occupied a separate column with its heading at the top. The coded bits of data were then digitally pasted from the electronic format of the transcripts into the relevant columns. This was repeated for each participant as tracked from the hard copy format of coding. During this process it became evident that quite often, some sections of data crossed over into multiple themes. As this was hard to convey through the hard copy, the spreadsheet proved more useful for this purpose, able to showcase these sections as existing under more than one theme. Each unit of data was then assigned a particular number, which was entered into the spreadsheet and again into the digital copy of the
interview transcript. This was done to ensure that the section of data could be easily located in the context of an interview.

Following this, each chapter of the thesis was developed using these overarching themes and patterns as located in the data. During this process however, multiple themes merged to create larger chapters. During the writing stage of these chapters, each theme was first brainstormed, identifying potential sub-themes and areas of interest which were to be discussed (as emerging from the data). Following this, each chapter was structurally planned and broken down into the order in which the relevant sub-themes would be addressed. A detailed outline of the thesis was then created, providing a type of ‘blueprint’ to refer back to during the writing stage. Each chapter followed a similar format, first having an introduction, followed by an exploration of the relevant theoretical concepts to be used in the chapter, the analysis of the data and a conclusion. Combined with the relevant theoretical concepts used to better interpret the participant experiences throughout the analysis, other ethnographic studies pertaining to the relevant areas of enquiry were also used to compare the findings from this research to other studies conducted in similar areas. This approach was taken to contextualise and strengthen the overall line of argument for each chapter and to identify how this thesis makes an important and original contribution to the research.

**Reflections/Gaps in Research**

Throughout the course of this research, some issues were opened up which could not be fully explored. These issues, while relevant, did not fit the scope of this research. One theme particularly which stood out were the concepts of ‘tribes’, ‘families’ and ‘drag mothers’
evident most clearly in the drag queen sub-cultures as investigated in this research.

Interestingly, it appeared that the drag queens used concepts of family and kinship to describe their relationships with other drag performers. I would have liked to explore the nuances of this communication and culture of initiation in more depth, particularly the role of a ‘drag mother’ in teaching her ‘drag daughter’ how to be a drag queen. What is the role of a drag mother and a drag daughter? How does this relationship work to position and value certain performers in drag sub-cultures and gay communities more broadly? I look forward to a future researcher pursuing this challenge and exploring the idea further.

There were some gaps identified in the methods of this research as explored throughout this discussion. Such gaps included the sample size of the participant groups being unbalanced and the location of all participants being metropolitan based. Due to the nature of the people and/or sub-cultures being investigated, as people and communities who often experience marginalisation due to their gendered and/or sexual identities, obtaining participants proved difficult. Some performers interviewed were initially difficult to contact or hesitant to participate. One performer in particular agreed to meet only at very short notice. At the end of my interview with her she revealed that she was originally hesitant to participate due to her dyslexia, believing that as a result of her disability she has difficulty putting into words “what she does”. The performer therefore needed to be given enough time to build her courage before she could participate in the interview. Another reason for the hesitation of some performers to participate was due to logistical issues such as work and family commitments. Most performers held full time jobs during the day, and performed as either drag kings or drag queens night. It was therefore difficult to find a suitable time to conduct the interview with some participants.
Due to a long history of persecution and marginalisation of gay sub-cultures (in Australia and globally), it was important that the research consider the ethical implications of undertaking a study into individuals who comprise these communities. Garry Wotherspoon (1991, p.21) argues that historically, three institutions have played a key role in setting parameters for controlling homosexuality in Australia and conditioning wider society’s attitudes towards homosexuality and gay people — ‘they are the law, the Christian churches, and the medical profession’. He highlights that homosexuals have often been viewed as deviants due to their gendered and/or sexual identities and that it was not until 1984 that the decriminalisation of male homosexual acts took place in New South Wales (Wotherspoon 1991, p.22). Most of the research participants, identifying as homosexual, lesbian or transgendered have experienced social oppression, or its aftermath, particularly the ongoing tensions and difficulties GLBT persons endure (including higher levels of violence and discrimination in their everyday lives compared to the general population). Wotherspoon (1991, p.25) suggests that ‘homosexuality has obviously existed in all societies and over all of human history. But attitudes to homosexual behaviour have varied markedly across different cultures and through various historical periods’.

This research also acknowledges the specific hardships drag performers have and still face in gay communities. As articulated in the work of Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010, p.160), drag performers face ‘threats of verbal and physical cruelty; a world of drug and alcohol abuse; lonely romantic lives; and for the most, little financial gain in the long run’. Having an awareness of these issues in contemporary gay-subcultures (including transgendered and drag sub-cultures), it was important to consider the implications before beginning the
research. A National Ethics Application Form was initiated by me and those supervising this research on the June 18, 2009. Appropriate research was conducted into counselling services and other community-based organisations (such as the Aids Council of New South Wales and the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service) which could assist gay, lesbian and transgendered people, should a participant request it. The design of this research was to provide participants with a way of freely expressing their experiences and to give them a voice through which they could communicate to the researcher their role as participants in gay and lesbian communities. It is hoped the research will produce new knowledge into the lives of Australian drag queens and drag kings, with the potential that the findings will be used in future publications and other modes of communication, resulting in a raised awareness of the needs and lifestyles of this minority group. Ultimately, a wider understanding and acceptance of alternative forms of gender and sexual identities can only improve such lives. Once the National Ethics Application Form was completed it was forwarded to the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00314) where it gained approval (H7670).

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the conceptual planning, methodological approaches and its relationship to the theoretical framework implemented in this study. The ethnographic research aims to shed light on the experiences of Australian drag queens and drag kings in relation to broader gay and lesbian communities. It is hoped this has been achieved through the collection of original qualitative data into these lives, as derived from conducting one-on-one, semi-structured interviews and in combination with observational work into drag
and gay cultures. Through an analysis of data obtained from these methods, in combination with post-structuralist literary theory pertaining to the relevant fields of enquiry, it is hoped the research will contribute to this area of study. This thesis will now introduce a series of data analysis chapters that aim to interrogate the themes and patterns that emerged from the experiences of the participants interviewed, to build towards common narratives in the lives of Australian drag queens and drag kings.
Chapter One: Performances of Gender in the Personal and Professional lives of Drag Queens and Kings.

This chapter will explore the ways in which drag queens and kings understand and negotiate gender in a personal and professional context. Through a case study format, I will investigate how these participants ‘do’ gender offstage and through their drag performances using the work of Judith Butler (1990, 2004). Butler’s theory on gender performativity is useful for framing this discussion, highlighting how gender operates as part of a wider social performance, constructed and maintained through the repetition of stylised performative acts. Largely, the individual subjectivities of the participants were shaped by and understood through an array of discourses on gender, perpetuated in their home lives and the social environments in which they perform. A contextual analysis of how gender is performed differently in these spaces will highlight the shifting nature of drag identities and the complexities that emerge from their adoption of multiple subjectivities. Despite challenging normative constructs of sex and gender in some instances, there was also evidence to suggest that such normative reproductions of gender were also re-idealised by the participants in and out of drag. This analysis will also examine the different ways in which the gendered subjectivities of these performers are constructed and maintained through intersections of class, ethnicity, sexuality and social interaction.

Rupp, Taylor and Shapiro (2010) explore the role gender plays in the lives of a selection of American drag queens and drag kings. Their investigations focus specifically on ethnographic research they conducted into a drag queen troupe based in Key West, Florida, and a drag king troupe from Santa Barbara, California, between 1998-2001 and 2000-2004. In their
comparison of these drag sub-cultures they argue that ‘in their performances both drag queens and drag kings embody resistance to the gender structure and heteronormativity’ (Rupp, Taylor & Shapiro 2010, p.277). The key suggestion of their work is that drag performers ‘play’ with gender in a way to underscore the social construction of gender and sexuality (Rupp, Taylor & Shapiro 2010, p.287). They believe their participants mostly used drag as a political tool to challenge audiences and raise consciousness regarding the boundaries of gender and sexuality (Rupp, Taylor & Shapiro 2010, p. 289). In comparing these findings to this research, the level of ‘drag politicism’ which Rupp, Taylor and Shapiro note in their work was not as evident in the experiences of the drag performers I interviewed. Despite evidence to suggest that some of these performances (onstage and offstage), challenged normative constructs of sex and gender, they mostly also re-idealised and reproduced such norms. Through an analysis of gender, as experienced and understood by these participants, this chapter will demonstrate that while the gendered subjectivities of the participants at first appear to ‘queer’ gender norms, they simultaneously acknowledge and depend on such norms in this process. To begin this analysis, the focus will be on gender in the lives of drag queens, with subsequent discussion of these findings in relation to the experiences of drag kings.

Drag Queens and Their Identification with Gender

Offstage, most of the drag queens interviewed for the research identify as homosexual cisgender men who are markedly different from their drag characters. This ‘difference’ to them is most clearly evidenced in the way they present themselves as differently gendered
in different contexts. For all but two of the drag queens (who identify as post-operative transsexual women), these gay men (or gay ‘boys’) believe their offline gendered subjectivities are not the same as those which they perform through drag. I will investigate how and why these participants ‘do’ gender in particular ways, in these different contexts, and what these performances might suggest about normative gender structures generally. It will be argued that despite these participants occupying more marginalised and precarious positions in mainstream society as ‘queer’ people (for their representation of an alternate gendered or sexual identity), there are aspects to their performances of gender that work to ‘mainstream’ or normalise them. While some participants used drag as a vehicle to critique normative structures of gender, others seemed to reproduce dominant stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity and femininity on and offstage. I will discuss some of the broad findings on gender identification in the lives of drag queens focusing on two case studies, Babushka and Amber.

**Babushka: The Gender-fuck**

Babushka (pseudonym, aged 39), identifies himself as a ‘veteran’ of the Sydney drag and gay ‘scenes’. Living in the inner city eastern suburb of Paddington, he describes himself as being ‘average to better than average’ in terms of his economic position, but suggests that that ‘in Paddington that doesn’t necessarily mean much’. Paddington is perceived to be an affluent, wealthy area of Sydney. Despite Babushka’s downplaying of his position in this class structure, his background and experiences lean towards a more privileged upbringing. Coming from a white, upper class background, he had the opportunity to live overseas for a significant portion of his early life and stated: ‘By the time I was ten I’d seen all of Western
Europe, India, Africa and parts of Asia.’ Although of Anglo Celtic background, his first language was Cantonese, having attended school in Hong Kong for some years. Babushka’s mixed cultural background seemed to make an important mark on his sense of belonging, particularly around normative structures of identity. His view of himself is: ‘I’ve been that immigrant, I’ve been the person who belongs, I’ve been the outsider, I’ve been the insider…I’ve been everything.’ This cultural diversity in Babushka’s life plays an important role in the formation of his own identity and his positionality concerning his various social worlds. The cultural kaleidoscope of Babushka’s life complicates his ability to exist comfortably in normative discourses of identity.

This tension surrounding Babushka’s ability to ‘belong’ was mirrored in his discussions and experiences on gender identity. In response to a question on how he began doing drag, he recalled earlier moments in his life where he experimented with his appearance: ‘I used to mix and match my kind of gender clothing; I was a bit out there.’ This suggests that for Babushka, certain markers of one’s gendered identity are socially embedded in clothes and therefore how they present themselves towards others. People are ‘read’ by others and understood to belong to a certain gender category due to how they perform gender. Butler (1990, p.23) argues how one’s gender becomes ‘legitimate’ through the performance of a socially coherent gender: ‘Intelligible genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relation of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.’ Butler (1990, p.23) maintains that most individuals operate in such regulatory practices of gender in order to be considered acceptable social subjects and to avoid being called into question as either an incoherent or discontinuous gendered being. Babushka’s desire to challenge the perceived naturalised relations between sex, gender and sexuality
shows a willingness to exist outside of such normative structures of sex and gender that govern much of society.

During his adolescence, Babushka identified as ‘gender-fucked’. When researching this term, it became apparent that little literature existed regarding the phenomenon. The word itself is often used in association with ‘gender-bending’ to describe various forms of gender experimentation such as drag, androgyny and transsexualism. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1994, p.454) argue that gender-fuck is a ‘key queer strategy’ that is predominantly about ‘parody, pastiche, and exaggeration’. Cameron believes that such displays are about ‘subversive play with gender distinctions’ (Cameron in Wodak 1997, p.30). This type of gender play produces ‘meaning in a symbol-performance matrix that cross through sex and gender and destabilizes the boundaries of our recognition of sex, gender, and sexual practise’ (Reich in Cleto 1999, p.255). The effect of gender-fucking is that it transgresses and exposes the artificiality of traditional gender roles (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1994, p.454).

During the interview, Babushka did not appear to be wearing clothing typically associated with the ‘male’ gender, but instead presented as more androgynous or gender fluid. By appearing as neither male nor female suggests that the vestiges of this ‘gender-fucking’ are still very much on display. From Babushka’s self-reflection, there is recognition that his ‘mixing’ of clothing is a deliberate attempt to position himself outside of more normative gender categories. His gendered performance therefore does not match his biological sex, and his intention to disrupt normative gendered categories gives him a ‘queer’ identity. Jagose (1996, p.3) believes that queer signifies a denaturalisation of gender norms which ‘dramatize the incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire’. Using this framework provided by Jagose, most of the
participants involved in this research would be considered ‘queer’ as they express non-
normative, marginalised sexual and/or gendered subjectivities on and offstage.

When I was younger I was very what we call back in the late ‘80s early ‘90s,
gender-fucked. Basically...I was tall...I was skinny, because I’ve got broad
shoulders and broad hips and a narrow waist, an hourglass figure, and I had long
hair as well (Babushka).

Babushka describes his identity here as ‘fucked’ because his performance of gender does not reflect a level of conventional masculinity that is assumed to follow naturally from the sexed male body. He instead embodies a physicality that is arguably quite feminine and is at odds with his biological sex. The type of gender profile he describes however is not just ‘feminine’, it is an extremely idealised or normative typecast of femaleness and femininity. Although his identity is queer, in that his gender does not follow naturally from his sex, the type of femininity he describes is one that is significantly stereotyped. Being thin rather than fat, having long rather than short hair and having the perfect ‘hourglass figure’ are all social constructs of dominant hegemonic femininity. Despite envisioning himself as ‘gender-fucked’, this gender-turn which Babushka engages in works also to normalise his identity and reconsolidate certain societal constructs of conventional gender appearances.

In this instance, Babushka’s performance of gender affords him a certain level of acceptance in some social environs. Later he stated this ‘gender-fucking’ opened doors for him in the modelling world. The clothing stores which he visited had subsequently asked him to model for them. Following this, he was approached by high-end fashion labels to catwalk model in
their latest women’s collection. His attempts therefore to position himself as a gender ‘outlaw’, resulted in him becoming the opposite. Although his ‘queerness’ is perhaps what made him interesting to the modelling profession, Babushka’s performance of femininity in this context reinforces a particular stereotype of conventional womanhood, an idealised or glamorised portrayal of femininity played into by the fashion industry and that which is perpetuated repeatedly by mainstream media outlets.

His appeal however, as a ‘female model’ had its complications. Babushka described how at one particular event, he was banned at the ‘last minute’ for not being an ‘official woman model staple’. Although his identification and performance of gender, in some respects, denaturalises normative constructs of sex and gender, his desire to be an ‘official woman model’ indicates a willingness to perform and therefore reproduce such gendered stereotypes. While Babushka commends himself on having transgressed the social boundaries of his own biological sex, he unwittingly reproduces the gender norms which he strives to challenge through his engagement in performances of conventional and highly idealised femininity. Babushka’s gender-fucking nonetheless draws attention to the incongruences between sex and gender, revealing the ongoing negotiations he experiences between his own subjectivity and the various discourses that work to maintain normative sex/gender categories. Gender, as experienced by Babushka, is not fixed but something that is fluid, contextual and dependant on multiple intersectionalities such as class, ethnicity and social interaction.

Such contradictions in relation to gender were also carried over into the drag characters as performed by most of the interviewees. A number of drag queens described characters which reflected normative or traditionalised views on femininity. These characters were
mostly ‘flat’ or ‘one dimensional’ in nature, lacking a certain degree of uniqueness (or queerness) to their physical or emotional profiles. For example, Sydney drag queen Ditzy Bombshell (pseudonym, aged 43), describes his drag character as the ‘gorgeous blonde bimbo’ who is ‘dumb but not really that dumb’. During most of the interviews with drag queens, I gained a sense that many felt compelled to ‘sugar-coat’ or ‘downplay’ such descriptions they had provided of their drag characters. For Ditzy, drag was about ‘looking fabulous’, which essentially meant, ‘looking beautiful’. These characters were often typecasts or moulds of conventional womanhood, being either ‘pretty’ or ‘dumb’, or sometimes both. The typecasts performed by the drag queens work to reconsolidate sex, gender and sexuality as heteronormative.

Babushka describes his drag character as being quite ‘kooky’ but at the same time ‘very proper’:

She is the classic straight woman who actually happens to be the funny one, if you know what I mean. She’s often victim but unwittingly and stupidly, but at the same time, she’s also quite powerful.

Even through drag, Babushka is torn between being queer and being gender normative. Negotiations of gender in Babushka’s personal life are also experienced in the space of his drag performance. He attempts to provide some ‘redeeming’ features to an otherwise gender typecast of conventional femininity, believing that her comedic elements make her seem ‘quite powerful’. His description is telling as it acknowledges the existence of the ‘classic straight woman’, a particular social and sexual identity that society views as being
the natural profile of a woman. For Babushka, this typecast is positioned as a ‘victim’, professed as being ‘weaker’ and less intelligent compared to her male counterpart. This view of femininity, and therefore its performance, arguably reproduces normative discourses on sex and gender, that women are somehow ‘inferior’ to men. Babushka’s experiences indicate the complex nature of drag identities, and the negotiations which occur between their onstage and offstage lives (to be discussed in further detail in Chapter Two). Drag queens, such as Babushka, adopt and experience multiple gendered subjectivities that are contextual and shifting in nature. Gender is therefore constructed and maintained in different ways, at different times and in different contexts. Drag performers therefore must also be considered as shifting and contradictory subjects.

Earlier Babushka described himself as being ‘tall, skinny, having broad shoulder and hips but a narrow waist’. Later he acknowledged that ‘being young and very skinny and very androgynous cannot last forever when you’re a man’. Butler’s work theorises that gender is constructed and maintained through the repetition of various stylised acts enacted on the surface of our bodies (1990). The ‘effect’ of gender is produced through what she calls the stylization of the body (Butler 1990, p. 191). These words, acts and gestures are essential for the production of a coherent and ‘discreet’ gendered identity in what she calls the heterosexual matrix, where heterosexuality is considered to constitute the natural order of things (Butler 1990). For Babushka, he believes his body frustrates, or complicates his ability to maintain the appearance of an ‘authentic’ woman as being young and beautiful. Richard Handler (1986, p.2) suggests that ‘authenticity’ is a cultural construct of the modern Western world that is ‘closely tied to Western notions of the individual’. Citing the work of Trilling, he argues that authenticity has often been equated with the concept of sincerity which is ‘the absence of dissimulation or feigning or pretence’ (Trilling in Handler 1986,
The concept of authenticity however is problematic as it assumes that a ‘true’ or ‘original’ prototype exists. However, such models of identity, in this discussion, only exist as social construct. Desiring to appear as an ‘authentic’ woman, Babushka’s body must act as a site upon which normative cultural understandings of femaleness and femininity can routinely be inscribed. Babushka’s process of aging ultimately complicates this and exposes his performance of gender instead as queer.

A number of drag queens interviewed expressed a desire to appear as ‘real’ women onstage. Amateur Sydney performer Kourtney (pseudonym, aged 20), considers himself ‘average’ looking as a boy, but ‘hot as a girl’ in drag. Although he admits to being quite feminine out of drag, Kourtney feels drag acts as a vehicle that enables him to look and feel like a ‘natural’ woman. To achieve this, Kourtney believes there needs to be ‘a moment of feeling beautiful’. Desiring to present as a ‘real’ woman in drag means appearing as ‘normative’, which to him, is something beautiful rather than ugly. He explained he didn’t like the idea of looking like a ‘lesbian’, saying: ‘You would never catch me doing anything lesbian, like how those people do lesbian short hair, no girl! I just like to have natural [emphasis mine] coloured hair’. He went on:

...I don’t want to look like a clown, I don’t find it attractive. I think it works for people to do massive drag makeup and I adore some of the queens that do amazing massive make-up, but I don’t think it will suit me. I don’t want to look over the top; I want to look natural, like a woman. Because I need to feel beautiful, you need to look beautiful and I think that’s what looks beautiful.
His experience demonstrates that some drag queens, like Kourtney, uphold fixed ideas about what drag should be and what women ‘should’ look like. This ‘fixing’ of drag undoes its ‘queerness’, hindering the ability of these drag performances to effectively critique or challenge gender norms. Although Kourtney admits to being open to evolving his look to fit with the dominant hegemonic ideas on the aesthetics of drag (as operating in the Sydney drag scene), he nonetheless expresses a deep desire to momentarily appear as an ‘authentic’ woman in this professional context. Looking like a ‘lesbian’ woman would potentially compromise this in Kourtney’s eyes, because ‘lesbian short hair’ does not fit the glamorous heteronormative mould of femininity which he (and society at large) accepts as routine. Kourtney sees drag not as a vehicle through which he can challenge gender stereotypes, but as one that reproduces or upholds them.

Certain drag queens (particularly those in their late 30s to 40s) felt their ability to maintain a particular gendered performance onstage was ultimately ruled by the biological. Drag was not something these performers felt would ‘last forever’, and instead would only remain for as long as their bodies would allow. Returning to Babushka’s experience of this, he feels that ‘ageing’ as a natural process is something men and women experience differently. Not only does he claim that being ‘young’ and ‘skinny’ cannot last forever as a man, but he also believes being gender neutral or androgynous is compromised by the ageing process. Babushka equates ageing with becoming increasingly ‘male’ or ‘masculinised’ and therefore less able to effectively portray ‘femaleness’ and femininity as a drag queen. When asked if there was a time limit imposed on being a drag queen, Babushka responded: ‘Yeah there is, because essentially your body does start going through its secondary sexual characteristic development, you become phenotypically male I suppose.’ Babushka continued:
Your body does change, and like it or not it kind of solidifies. I’m not saying I’ve gotten fat or anything like that, but it really changes in its substance and structure. I can remember very distinctly thinking ok in drag I’m no longer a girl, I’m becoming essentially, drag wise, a woman if you know what I mean. Your body matures and I was a bit confronted by that when that happened. Because you have to dress, well not necessarily dress accordingly, but you can [change your ‘drag’ style to accommodate the ageing process]. Drag doesn’t mean that you have to, but you kind of revise, I suppose, and edit.

By describing his body as ‘solidifying’, Babushka suggests he is no longer able to transform and manipulate his body in the way he once could. With his body ‘solidifying’ it ceases to exist as a tangible object, becoming something that is instead ‘fixed’. Babushka implies that the ability to do ‘drag’ or to effectively portray ‘femaleness’ is hindered by age. His words demonstrate how performances of gender, through drag, are created and maintained through the body (Butler 1990). The way gender is enacted through drag is therefore in accordance to the performer’s ability to construct and repeat certain gendered performances on the surface of their bodies (as understood through Butler’s work, 1990). Drag queens view ageing (which changes their bodies) as something of a burden, personally and professionally, as it hinders their ability to effectively ‘repeat’ these acts. Interestingly this fear of ‘ageing’ or of vaporizing youth was not as prevalent in the experience of drag kings. Masculinity seemed to be ‘exempt’ from such processes of ageing. This suggests drag queens mimic cultural understandings or assumptions that successful femininity must always remain young and beautiful. In the case of Babushka, there is productive tension in
the performance and understanding of gender offstage and onstage, influenced by the forces of subversion and normativity.

Amber: The Transsexual Showgirl

Gold Coast drag queen, Amber (pseudonym, aged 49) identifies herself as a post-operative transsexual woman who lives full time as the gender which she ‘performs’ in drag. Unlike the majority of drag queens who identified as ‘men’ in their personal lives, and ‘men-being-women’ in drag, Amber sees herself as a ‘woman’ and a ‘drag queen’. Amber’s identification as a transsexual woman problematizes the very definitions of drag that exist in a contemporary Australian context. As outlined in the introductory chapter, historically, Australian drag queens were once viewed predominantly as pre-operative or post-operative transsexuals (known as ‘showgirls’ or ‘female impersonators’). Now however, drag queening is largely considered a performance art undertaken by homosexual men, and not transsexuals, who see drag as the performance of a gender not aligned with one’s ‘offstage’ identity. Amber’s gender positions her as ‘other’ in the context of contemporary Australian drag cultures, supporting Butler’s argument that gender exists as a shifting and contextual phenomenon (1990). Having performed for a number of decades, Amber has experienced acceptance and rejection in drag sub-cultures based on her gender identification.

I interviewed Amber in her dressing room at a popular nightclub in the heart of one of Australia’s busiest beachside tourist destinations, Surfers Paradise, in Queensland. She considers herself to be a post-operative transsexual during the day but a drag queen at night. Coming from a mixed cultural background, with an English mother and a Greek father
and grandparents, Amber was born and raised in Sydney’s western suburbs (largely considered a low socio-economic area). When I asked her to elaborate on how she identifies concerning her gender, her immediate response was: ‘Ok, so it’s a complicated situation.’ Amber instantly set the premise that her gender subjectivity could not easily be understood through a normative sex/gender lens but rather was something which needed to be unpacked through a deeper discussion of her life experiences regarding her various social worlds.

Amber stated that ‘everyone in the ‘drag circuit’ or ‘transgender world’ categorises themselves differently’. She suggests that the gender subjectivity of drag performers is individual and contextual. Each performer occupies different positions in the drag and gay communities in which they work and socialise and must therefore be analysed in relation to their positionality to those spaces. In order to physically change her biological sex from ‘male’ to ‘female’, Amber began hormonal treatment at age 20 and had a range of cosmetic treatments to further enhance her femininity, saying: ‘I think I had my teeth fixed first, and I had my nose and eyes done, that was in 85’. Following this, Amber had gender reassignment surgery (a sex change operation) in 1990 and a few years later had her ‘boobs done just because I didn’t have big boobs’. Amber’s physical transformation is what defines and separates her from other drag queens. Changing her body, and therefore her sex, reveals the effort she has made to ‘fix’ the relationship between her sex and gender. Going to these lengths indicates a desire to ‘break free’ from the gender constraints imposed upon her as a result of being biologically ‘male’. Such a transition however also reveals a desire to strive for gender fixity, where Amber feels the need to re-align her ‘gender’ with the correct ‘sex’ – reaffirming the ‘naturalised’ link between the two. This is articulated in Amber’s reasoning for undergoing a sex change operation, which she states: ‘The way I was half-half,
I found that was a little weird. I ended up having the sex change just for comfortable reasons, comfortability that’s the best reason I had it.’ Amber’s sex reassignment challenges the ‘stable’ appearance of normative sex and gender categories; however, upon the completion of such surgery, it also reconsolidates them.

Amber mentioned that her daytime occupation was managing an Asian inspired home ware store where she took comfort in being ‘plain as poop Amber’. She added: ‘No matter how many shows you’ve got you need to have a balance, it’s a good reality check to go and just be Amber selling stuff.’ This experience indicates a tension between Amber’s desire to be a drag queen, and her desire to fit into roles associated with conventional femininity. There is something significantly normative and traditionally ‘feminine’ about working in a home ware shop. Being ‘plain as poop’ Amber and taking on a sales role enables her to effectively blend into ‘mainstream’ society, a space which enables her to ‘fly under the radar’ to pass as a ‘woman’. Different social contexts therefore provide different discourses on the construction of gender identity. In one context (the stage), Amber is the hyper-feminised ‘drag queen’, and in another she is the ‘everyday’ woman. Shapiro’s early research on transgendered lives argues that:

while transsexuals may be deviants in terms of cultural norms about how one arrives at being a man or a woman, they are, for the most part, highly conformist about what to do once you get there (Shapiro in Epstein and Straub 1991, p. 253).

Although Amber complicates ‘gender’ norms by not adhering to the sex/gender distinction she was assigned at birth (either onstage or off), her everyday performance of gender is
largely traditionalised. Kessler and McKenna agree with Shapiro suggesting that ‘in theory, transgender is a challenge to the social construction of gender. In practice, it usually is not’ (Kessler and McKenna in LaFont 2003, p.223). Thomas Kando also agrees, observing that:

unlike various liberated groups, transsexuals are reactionary, moving back toward the core-culture rather than away from it...with these individuals, the dialectic of social change comes full circle and the position of greatest deviance becomes that of the greatest conformity (Kando in Epstein and Straub 1991, p.255).

There was something about being ‘unremarkable’ in her offstage life that allowed Amber to fully construct and realise her gendered self as being traditionally feminine. There is a constant negotiation then in relation to tensions that permeate Amber’s understanding of identity, revealing how, through her gendered subjectivity (on and offstage), she creates and releases that tension.

It is clear from Amber’s experiences that there is complication in the way she understands and experiences her gender subjectivity in her private and professional life. When I asked if she went by a different name in ‘drag’, she responded ‘the same name during the day, the same at night’. However, her ‘daytime’ self was ‘a lot plainer and a little bit quieter’. She believed that ultimately, there are ‘two Ambers’, ‘one’s as plain as poop during the day and the other one’s a bit more glamorous’, ‘it depends on how you look at it’. Amber’s performance of gender is situational, dictated by her social environments, where she presents herself as being differently gendered in different spaces. The type of femininity Amber performs in drag is different to her performance of femininity out of drag. Being
‘glamorous’ suggests she sees herself as a more beautified version of herself onstage compared to when she is off. She negotiates gender in complex and difficult ways, experienced differently across time and space.

Despite occupying more normative gendered subjectivities in their offstage lives, some transgendered drag queens such as Amber struggle to exist comfortably in the gendered framework imposed by contemporary Australian drag cultures. In a recent study on gender spatiality, Tyler and Cohen (2010) examine the different ways in which gender (particularly women’s gender) is played out through organizational workspaces. Their findings indicate why such performances of gender matter, particularly in terms of ‘who and what is valued within organizational life’ (Tyler and Cohen 2010, p.131). They argue that gender is understood in work environments as being the ‘materialisation of power relations’ (Tyler and Cohen 2010, p.131), where women often perform their gendered identities in accordance to the heterosexual norms as outlined by Butler (Tyler and Cohen 2010, p.191). They suggest that women in these spaces resigned themselves to a degree of spatial constraint and spatial invasion, imposed largely by men (Tyler and Cohen 2010). Their study is useful as it highlights the ways in which people perform gender differently in different contexts, exemplifying the situational and shifting nature of our gendered selves.

During my time with Amber backstage, she appeared comfortable revealing her naked body to me while changing into her drag costume. Amber was proud to showcase her artificial breasts and hourglass figure. Her body is what sets her apart from most of the other drag queens interviewed for the research. The body, to Amber, is what constitutes being a woman. Having ‘breasts’ is the normative cultural marker of womanhood, and a mark which Amber wears proudly:
...during the day I would be a post-operative transsexual, at night when I’m performing I consider myself to be a drag queen because to me a drag queen is a person that dresses in women’s clothes who performs onstage. The only difference is that I’ve had a sex change and that I live as a woman because it’s a comfortable situation but I’ve always been happier being a drag queen in shows, so I’m a combination. I’m a postoperative transsexual that does drag shows, and there’s not that many of them around anymore.

From the interviews conducted for this research, and from my observations of gay and lesbian ‘scenes’, transgendered drag performers have experienced diminishing importance and marginalisation in Australian drag sub-cultures in recent times. In an ethnographic study on drag queens and female impersonators in Virginia, USA, Hopkins (2004, p.141) suggests that ‘transsexual performers are often viewed as ‘cheaters’’. He argues this is largely due to the fact that post-operative transsexual performers surgically modify their bodies to live full time as the gender which they perform onstage. They are perceived by other drag queens (largely homosexual men) as having ‘cut corners’ (Hopkins 2004). In the above excerpt, Amber discusses her gendered subjectivity in relation to the more dominant discourses of gender as operating in contemporary Australian drag cultures. Her gendered identity as a ‘post-operative transsexual’, to her, is discarded when she is performing. She is for the duration, a ‘drag queen’ instead of a ‘transsexual’. This can be read as an attempt by Amber to legitimise her role as a drag queen, but also to regain a level of importance in a culture that works to marginalise people in similar situations.
This anti-transgendered rhetoric was also reflected in the opinions of non-transgendered performers interviewed for this thesis, who mostly downplayed the importance of performers like Amber. Babushka for example, refers to transgendered drag queens as being ‘trans showgirls’ who are ‘old school’ and only ‘interesting on the RSL circuit’. When I asked him to explain why he thought they were no longer ‘interesting’ he responded:

In the beginning the tranny showgirls were like ‘oh wow how amazing, could you believe they were once boys?’ And so all they needed to do was parade in fabulous costumes and look gorgeous and they would be a marvel. Now that trans showgirl is becoming a bit anachronistic because there’s no skill in it.

This view was echoed among most of the interviews I conducted with non-transgendered drag queens, who conceptualise ‘drag’ as a momentary gendered transition which takes place ‘onstage’. Performers such as Amber, who had transitioned permanently from one sex to another, were viewed as ‘frauds’ who went to ‘less effort’ to assume their drag identities. With the use of hormone therapy, breast implants and with the surgical removal of their male genitalia, it is believed that transgendered drag queens like Amber do not have to adopt as heavy a ‘disguise’ to become a drag queen.

Amber’s above description of the drag queen is not specifically a man who dresses in women’s clothes who performs onstage, but rather a ‘person’. She deliberately omits the gendered term ‘male’ in this description, opting instead to use the more gender neutral term, ‘person’. Amber sees drag not as something based on gender, but instead, about ‘people’ who perform. Amber’s position in the drag community, and wider gay landscape for
that matter, is a difficult one. Referring to drag as being about a ‘person’ is her attempt to legitimise the position of people like herself in the drag community. This is justified through the words, ‘the only difference’ (assuming she means in relation to other drag queens) is that she has undergone a sex change and lives full-time as a woman. During the day she believes she ‘would be’ a post-operative transsexual, but when describing herself at night Amber decides not to use the same language and instead uses the phrase ‘I consider myself to be a drag queen’. Here there is a discursive shift from ‘would be’ to ‘I consider myself’, indicating that she (rather than the drag community) has bestowed the label of ‘drag queen’ upon herself. Amber’s gender subjectivity highlights the precarious position of transsexual drag performers in Australian drag subcultures and the important role that gender plays in the conceptualisation of drag in these contexts. Amber ends by suggesting there is a diminished visibility in the drag scene of people who share a similar identification with gender. This issue of the marginalisation or ‘decrease’ in transsexual performers in Australian drag communities highlights the ongoing need for performers like Amber to negotiate their own gendered identities in complex and challenging ways.

Australian drag subcultures appear to have fixed ideas on what constitutes being a drag queen. As reflected in the experiences of these performers, the gender of a performer is paramount to the acceptance they experience (or lack thereof) in these environments. It must be noted in light of this however that transgendered drag queens are not a ‘new’ phenomenon. According to Baker (1994, p.12-14), performers whom he describes as ‘hormone adjusted’ or ‘hormone modified’ first appeared in the specialist clubs of Paris and New York in the 1950s. During the earlier years of Australian drag, Amber suggests that such performers were called ‘showgirls’ who ‘had to have tits to be in a drag show’. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, it was once considered odd to find a boy who dressed in
Transsexual performers once occupied the most prominent positions in Australian drag subcultures, as evidenced in the long-running female impersonator troupe Les Girls, comprised mostly of pre and post-operative transsexuals. Now however, this trend of drag performers surgically modifying their bodies appears to have reversed in Australia, with homosexual cisgender men occupying the most prominent positions in the drag queen subcultures investigated in this research. Amber’s identification with gender appears to have once given her acceptance in drag subcultures but now works to position her as an outsider. Butler (1990, p.14) contends that ‘as a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations’. This view is articulated by Amber, who claims there are hardly any transgendered ‘showgirls’ left, adding: ‘It’s just the way of the world, it’s just changing, who knows in 20 years’ time what drag will be.’ Amber discussed her hopes that the drag of the ‘future’ would once again ‘include trannies’. ‘Drag’ itself, as a performance art, is an unstable and changing phenomenon where the rejection of transgendered drag performers, in an Australian context, indicates the shifting and contextual nature of gender across time and space.

Amber’s role in drag cultures, and gay and lesbian communities more broadly, is therefore contingent and provisional. Despite her gender positioning her as marginalised in the space of drag performance, it has afforded her acceptance in other contexts. When asked about her home life and relationship towards her parents, she explained her mother always attended her shows on the RSL circuit. In recent times, transsexual drag performers have experienced increasing acceptance in more ‘heteronormative’ environments such as straight clubs, pubs or RSLs. Amber’s gendered identity has gained her acceptance in her family and more mainstream heteronormative contexts. Having her mother attend her
shows, Amber feels she is extremely ‘lucky’ compared to other transgendered girls whose ‘parents have never spoken to them in 20 years’. Amber credits this acceptance to her physical appearance, believing she has effectively been able to pass as ‘female’. She acknowledged that because she didn’t ‘look like a truck driver or anything’ she was quickly accepted by her family, admitting ‘I think if I didn’t look as good maybe it would have been harder for them to accept’. It is the sexed body, and the successful performance of femininity that positions Amber as having a coherent and intelligible gender in this context.

Drag Kings and Their Identification with Gender

In comparison to the drag queen sub-cultures examined in this thesis, the way gender operates in drag king cultures appeared significantly different. Most drag kings seemed to reproduce normative ideas of sex and gender in their personal and professional lives but compared to drag queens, many participants also demonstrated a strong desire to be ‘queer’. These queer influences mostly began during the participants’ childhoods, with many describing particular queer discourses in their home environments that promoted non-normative expressions of gender. For these performers, these spaces opened up different ways of doing gender. Despite the presence of a ‘queerness’ during their early lives, for most of these performers this queerness disappeared over time. Regardless of some participants categorising their drag king performances as belonging to ‘queer entertainment’ (to be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three) for some, this was not the case. Similar to the drag queens, there was a trend among the drag kings to engage in the reproduction of gender norms through drag. This will be discussed again in the form of two
main case studies, with reference being made to other performers throughout. All but one of the drag kings interviewed described themselves as cisgender lesbian women who were in stable, monogamous relationships. One performer however identified as being a pre-operative transsexual female-to-male who was still in the process of his gender transition.

Similar to most of the drag queens interviewed, the drag kings also presented characters reflective of normative discourses on sex and gender. These characters appear as both hyper-masculinised and sexualised in nature, reiterating heteronormative ideals of women as sexualised objects to be dominated by men. Many of these characters embodied a downtrodden or ‘failed’ type of masculinity, often men who ended up on the wrong side of the law (to be explored further in Chapter Three). A number of participants described their drag characters as ‘bad boys’. For them, the ‘meaner’ and more sexually explicit these characters, the more ‘masculine’ they appeared. Demonstrating that their personas had sexual power and dominance over women was a reoccurring theme in the interviews conducted with drag kings. These characters, despite existing as mediums through which such dominant discourses on masculinity could be critiqued through parody and satire, also worked to maintain and reproduce such normative structures of gender. Like the ‘dumb’, ‘pretty’ suburban housewives seen in the performances of drag queens, many drag kings paid homage to characters including cowboys, gangsters and prison inmates who reflected dominant hegemonic constructs of masculinity as rough, tough and sexualised. I will discuss how gender is understood personally and professionally, and the ways in which gender operates in the lives of two drag king performers, Slick and T-Dino.
Slick: The Quintessential Italian, Male, Love God

Offstage, Melbourne drag king, Slick (pseudonym, aged 39) has the appearance of a ‘cute’ boy/girl. Despite identifying as a woman, and a lesbian, Slick seemed ‘androgynous’, appearing as ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ at the same time. From the beginning of the interview, Slick spoke at length about her cultural heritage, identifying herself as a ‘first generation Italian’ born in Sydney’s inner west area. While the area has acquired a more affluent profile in recent times, the inner west was once considered to be a working class, lower wealth area of Sydney, which became home to many migrants following the Second World War. Slick came from this working class background, with her parents being immigrant factory workers from Sicily. As the interview progressed, Slick’s ethnicity shaped a large part of the discussion. I will explore how her cultural heritage plays an important role in her ‘offstage’ identity, but also its influence in shaping her drag identity.

During her childhood, Slick considered herself to be a ‘tomboy’ who would frequently experiment with drag. She recounted how, at age five, she enjoyed playing dress-ups with her brother:

When no one was at home I would dress up in my father’s suits and get my mother’s make-up and just put a five-o-clock shadow on and stand in front of the mirror with the video on and mime.

Gender experimentation was a common occurrence in the childhood experiences of many drag kings (and queens) interviewed for this research. Robinson and Davies’ recent work on
childhood ‘tomboyism’ define the term as being a ‘heterogeneous, unstable and complex phenomenon, where girls’ desires and interests are located in performances of gender that incorporate more traditional masculine behaviours and a negotiation of femininity that challenges heteronormativity’ (2010, p. 3). They recognise there exists not just ‘one type’ of tomboy, but rather that it is a fluid category containing multiple subjectivities. In this conceptualisation of ‘tomboyism’, they acknowledge the contradictions surrounding this particular performance/s of gender which appear to both challenge and reproduce normative constructs of gender categories. Nonetheless, by being a ‘tomboy’, Slick performs a type of masculinity on the surface of her body that is at odds with her biological sex – thus appearing queer. According to Halberstam (1998), masculinity has largely been viewed as belonging to the domain of ‘white’, ‘privileged’ men and not of women. Despite this ‘challenge’ to normative gender constructs through her childhood experimentations, the ‘types’ of gendered performances Slick engaged in were reflective of traditional, hegemonic masculinities. Slick said her brother would often refer to her as ‘John’ because she always wore ‘boyish clothes’. When I asked her to describe how she would look, she elaborated: ‘I would have a little moustache, had a little hat and a cigarette.’ This type of imagery suggests a type of rough, ‘bad boy’ interpretation of masculinity. Similar to her experiences as a drag king, Slicks embodied multiple gendered subjectivities during her youth. The fact that ‘John’ would only exist when her parents were not home, and in the presence of her brother, indicates how gender is a contextual, shifting and complex phenomenon experienced by these participants.

In a recent study on gendered performances in childhood, Robinson and Jones Diaz (2009 p.129) suggests that cultural binary systems relating to gender are linked to hierarchical power, resulting in some performances of masculinity and femininity being considered
powerless in comparison to others. They maintain that ‘normalizing discourses of gender work powerfully on individual subjects, greatly influencing how they perform their gender’ (Robinson and Jones Diaz 2009, p. 130). In terms of childhood experiences of gender, particularly in school environments, they believe the ‘consequences of getting one’s gender wrong can be severe and result in social isolation, teasing and bullying, as well as other forms of violence and regulation’ (Robinson and Jones Diaz 2009, p.130). Like the study on gender in organisational space conducted by Tyler and Cohen (2010), Robinson and Jones Diaz’s research is helpful in exemplifying how gender is heavily regulated through discourse, and therefore the forces of power that operate in the different environments in which people exist. These operations of power influence and shape the types of ‘genders’ that are deemed socially coherent and acceptable, exerting themselves powerfully and oppressively on those whose gendered and or sexual identities appear at odds with gendered norms.

As she was growing up, Slick felt she was free to do ‘anything’ but only ‘under a watchful eye’. Slick explained how her cultural identity weighed heavily on her ability to express herself through her gender subjectivity. This intersection between her ethnicity and gender came to the forefront during the following discussion:

I remember picking up a book that she (mother) was reading and I was like
‘what’s up with this, what’s this person?’ and it was a book of Quentin Crisp, The Naked Civil Servant...he’s from the ‘70s I think. He was really queer, really eccentric, camp as, so he wrote a few books and I don’t know what he wrote about because I couldn’t read back then but he was really flamboyant had a red scarf, painted nails, long black hair, the hat with the feather, I don’t know if he had anything to do with the Queen or English literature or something. She
mother] had this album that I loved listening to which turned out to be a German transsexual singing, she (mother) had a lot of queer things hanging around the house, like Germaine Greer books. I remember having a photo with her and she’s got this t-shirt ‘women’s lib’ she was such a feminist, she would always say ‘men are bastards, don’t listen to your father’...and then she wants me to be this pretty, little, Italian girl with children and all I’ve grown up with is all these queer images and women’s lib.

This experience suggests a complex negotiation of Slick’s identity, being influenced by normative and queer discourses on gender. Slick discusses a range of differing discourses on ‘doing’ gender. Firstly, Quentin Crisp’s performance of masculinity is described as one that is significantly feminised. Describing him as ‘camp’, ‘eccentric’ and ‘flamboyant’ suggests a type of gendered performance that aims to go beyond the limits of normative gender boundaries, exposing the very fabrication that is gender. Through this queer imagery, Quentin Crisp stands out as intriguing and memorable to Slick, a figure who later perhaps played an important part in the formation and understanding of her own subjectivity.

Being dyslexic, Slick’s experience with gender in this instance is heavily signified and communicated to her through the visual. The gender-variant people she describes are those who go against normative constructs of gender expression through physical transformation. Slick’s exposure to these queer influences during her childhood opened up to her different ways and discourses on doing gender. These influences are positioned in opposition to her cultural heritage, which also played an important role informing the creation of her identity. Slick believes her mother wanted her to be a ‘pretty, little Italian girl’, and remembers a time when her mother gave her a range of ‘Dolly’ and ‘Smash Hits’ magazines.
aimed at teenage girls) because she was acting ‘too much’ like a tomboy. Ironically however, this opened her eyes to even more non-normative displays of gender, with Slick stating her mother made ‘a big mistake’. Slick believes this exposed her to the ‘pop world’ where she was introduced to artists including George Michael, Wham! and Duran Duran, whom she idolised and impersonated through her early experimentations with gender and drag. Despite Slick’s mother being described as quite ‘forward-thinking’ in some respects, the pull of her family’s cultural heritage complicated Slick’s ability to freely challenge gender boundaries. This intersection between ethnicity and gender has created ongoing tension concerning Slick’s understanding and performance of gender, which has been both experimental and conformist. What could be taken from Slick’s experience is that gender is an ongoing and complex negotiation which cannot be cleanly separated from one’s positionality in relation to other factors such as ethnicity, class and social/interpersonal relations. Slick ‘releases’ or resolves the tension she experiences in her offstage performance and understanding of ‘gender’ through her drag characters.

As the interview progressed, discussion moved towards Slick’s drag king character who she described as being her ‘alter ego’. The first description she provided of this character was during the earlier days of her drag career. Here, she aims to articulate the professional transformation of her alter ego from earlier, less ‘developed’ manifestations to more ‘polished’ contemporary ones:

Originally I had no name, I didn’t pack, I managed to put a fake moustache on with eyeliner but had my breasts out and both of us as drag kings were the
backups, we didn’t bind at all, we were just like normal girls acting all blokey with the painted on moustache.

Despite an intention to portray her early experiences as a drag king as ‘amateur’, what is actually revealed is something far more important. What is described here is a ‘queer’ or ‘gender-fucked’ character performed by Slick who has no visible ‘penis’ (packing), but does, however, have facial hair and acts ‘blokey’ (Australian slang term for masculine). This ‘mixed-gendered’ or androgynous subject however is complicated through the use of ‘make-up’, and more importantly, the presence of breasts. There is a blending of masculine and feminine signifiers in Slick’s drag performance, which undoubtedly challenges the institution of the heterosexual gender binary. The description provided of her character is not one that is fixed in the heterosexual matrix that Butler (1990) describes but rather one that breaks free from such polarisations of gender and complicates or exposes the nature of gender as fabrication.

This queerness in Slick’s earlier drag performances seemed to lessen in more recent incarnations of her alter ego, who she describes as ‘the quintessential Italian, male, love god’:

He’s a rock ‘n’ roll love god, really popular among the ladies and the boys. Suave, smooth as silk, a Casanova, tall, dark and handsome and also with that wog boy element that I grew up with.
This signifies the performance of gender, through drag, is something which changes across time and space. In contrast to the previous description, there is a solidifying and fixing of Slick’s drag character as one that is extremely gender normative. Described as the master of ‘love’, and fitting an idealised physical stereotype of conventional masculinity as ‘tall, dark and handsome’, shows a reproduction of a masculine stereotype, attributed to more conventional or normative understandings of sex and gender. Thus, while Slick’s drag kinging has evolved aesthetically, it has also transformed from being host to ‘queer’ discourses, and therefore existing outside of normative gendered structures, to becoming a vehicle through which such normative discourses on gender are reproduced and mirrored.

T-Dino: The Mischievous Drag King

Amateur Sydney drag king, T-Dino (pseudonym, aged 31), identifies as a pre-operative female-to-male transsexual who had been doing drag for approximately six months. Regarding his ethnicity, he stated he was ‘Aussie’, but when asked where he was born he responded ‘Bankstown, does that still make me Aussie?’ T-Dino grew up in a multicultural, low socio-economic area of Southwest Sydney. Unemployed and living in a small government housing unit in Sydney’s Sutherland Shire, T-Dino is of a much lower economic position compared to the other participants interviewed for this thesis. He describes himself as a ‘serial monogamist’ who lives happily with his cat and girlfriend, the latter who he refers to as ‘the wife’. His relationship status is complicated, however, due to his gender currently being in ‘transition’. He explained he was waiting to receive his official male birth certificate from the New South Wales government which would legally recognise him as
belonging to the ‘male’ sex. Once this occurred, he would be recognised as being in a heterosexual relationship. According to T-Dino: ‘it will be like a normal hetero marriage because I’m going straight.’ T-Dino believes that when his ‘sex’ is officially changed (and legally recognised), the social reclassification of his relationship will naturally follow suit. His experience of gender reflects Butler’s (1990) argument of the existence of a binary gender system that assumes and maintains the seemingly natural relations between sex and gender. Butler (1990, p.9) argues that such a system ‘retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it’. T-Dino’s comments reveal a desire to be ‘normal’, to fit in and therefore to assimilate into such heteronormative discourses of sex and gender.

Much of the way T-Dino experiences himself as a gendered subject is understood through a heterosexual lens. Once he is ‘recognised’ legally by this system, T-Dino believes he will no longer be viewed as a woman, or as a lesbian, but as a heterosexual male. T-Dino’s ‘queer’ identity will essentially be replaced by one that adheres to the norms of this heterosexual matrix. Butler elaborates, suggesting that it is through such a system where one’s gendered identity becomes intelligible. For her, this system:

requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’ – that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender’ (1990, p.24).
T-Dino’s personal identification and experience with gender reveals just how entrenched such normative discourses are on sex, gender and sexuality where each is understood and assumed to follow naturally from one another.

T-Dino’s discussion of his relationship continued to reinforce his desire to become normalised adding: ‘The wife wants a baby, that’s the deal.’ T-Dino’s gender transition therefore has much wider implications in his personal life and concerning his relationship with his wife. The idea that a deal has been made upon the completion of his transition reveals that the relationship is perhaps contingent and provisional. By becoming ‘hetero’, he must then give his wife a ‘baby’. Until his sex reassignment surgery however, T-Dino exists in a time and space where he is not socially or legally recognised as male or female. Upon completion of this transition, T-Dino desires to uphold the institution of reproductive heterosexuality that governs much of the way our society operates, and the way sex and gender is most commonly understood.

The complications surrounding T-Dino’s gender and his inability to ‘belong’ were further expressed in his search for employment:

...at the moment I can’t put Mr on my application form because I’m not Mr until next month, so that makes it a bit difficult. I’ve got the voice but if I don’t have the beard I can’t exactly go into the men’s because they are all going to go ‘what the hell are you doing in here?’ Centrelink said give it six months, let the beard come in, let the voice change and you’ll pass as a male and then you’ll get a job and have no problems in the bathroom and stuff like that.
This suggests that T-Dino’s experiences with gender directly intersect with issues of class. Wanting to change his sex therefore has wider social and economic ramifications for him. T-Dino will only be considered a ‘Mr’ once he has undergone sex reassignment surgery where the physical markers of his femininity will be removed. In this excerpt, T-Dino suggests that due to his current lack of facial hair, others may not read him as belonging to the male gender. This inability to effectively ‘pass’ socially as a man has major implications for his economic position, reducing him to a marginal living. T-Dino’s experiences can be understood in light of Halberstam’s (1998) theory, titled ‘The Bathroom Problem’. She uses the institution of the ‘bathroom’ as an example of society’s inability to move with changing attitudes towards gender fluidity, where there remain only two sexes, hence reinforcing gender binarism. Halberstam (1998, p.21) suggests that ‘passing as a narrative assumes that there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self and does so successfully’. Halberstam (1998) considers the bathroom to be the place where one’s ability to ‘pass’ as a desired gendered identity is most heavily tested. Individuals who fail to ‘pass’ as either male or female in this context face the real possibility of punishment, called to answer for themselves as being ‘queer’. Transgender researcher Kate Bornstein (1994, p.125) highlights the impact that ‘passing’ has on the lives of transsexuals, arguing it occurs as a result of ‘the cultural imperative to be one gender or the other’, where ‘passing becomes the outward manifestation of shame and capitulation’ in which ‘passing becomes silence. Passing becomes invisibility. Passing becomes lives’. The institution of gender, and the desire to maintain ‘discreet’ genders, has real implications for the way people, particularly transgendered or gender queer individuals, understand and experience themselves in relation to their social worlds.
T-Dino explained he was awaiting chest reconstruction surgery, scheduled to occur within a couple of months. Through his hormone treatment, and in combination with many surgical procedures to follow, T-Dino hopes to artificially conform to the idealised image of masculinity and manhood. His desire to conform to such a ‘masculine’ stereotype was also reflected in his discussions around his previous employment. He states: ‘My resume reads like a bloke’s resume, it goes from the army to security to the fire brigade.’ Being a ‘bloke’, or being a ‘man’ to him, equates to being employed in hyper-masculinised professions. Although T-Dino has arguably gone beyond the limits of his biological sex, his performance of gender thus challenges and reaffirms heteronormative ideas of sex and gender.

In comparison to transgendered drag queens such as Amber, the acceptance of transgendered drag kings in drag king sub cultures was very different. Despite some discussions with T-Dino that alluded to the presence of social prejudice towards transgendered drag kings, there were also comments during the interview that hinted at the acceptance of performers like T-Dino. When asked why he decided to transition at age 31 he responded: ‘I need to be myself, why I waited so long, why I waited until I was 31, because I didn’t realise that there was an accepting community out there and I thought no one would love me.’ He went on:

I didn’t realise that lesbians were attracted to transmen, I thought if I transitioned I’d be lonely for the rest of my life because no lesbian wants to date a bloke. I didn’t understand there was a sub-culture of lesbians who think transmen are really hot. I didn’t realise that until this year or last year and also I’ve got a very supportive partner who finds transmen attractive so that makes it easier to be yourself.
T-Dino’s experience of transitioning genders has been directly subject to factors relating to class, sexuality and social acceptance. His transition was only undertaken on the proviso that he would find inclusion and acceptance in lesbian and drag king sub-cultures. Gender then must be understood through these case studies as being experiential and subject to an array of external factors, highlighting how we ‘do’ gender differently in different contexts.

Unlike in Amber’s case study, which discussed a decrease in the presence of transsexual drag performers in drag queen sub-cultures (as discussed in the interviews with drag queens), there were drag kings interviewed for this research such as Spike (pseudonym aged 47), who noticed a differing trend in the Sydney drag king scene where she believes ‘a high percentage of people are transitioning’:

> One of the things that I’ve been hearing murmurs about is whether or not, for instance, people who are transitioning can continue to be drag kings. I want to say absolutely, fucking of course they can continue because it’s not about being the masculine. It’s not about whether they are men or not, it’s about portraying it and they’ve been mastering the art of masculinity as drag kings. To suddenly lose them from the drag king community would be an absolute crying shame.

This degree of support for transgendered performers came across much more strongly in the interviews with drag kings. Through my observations of drag shows in Australia, it was evident that among lesbian audiences, there seemed to be a much higher population of transgendered FTM’s (female-to-male) participants in comparison to the presence of MTF’s
(male-to-females), in gay male spaces. This suggests the level of acceptance experienced by transgendered people appears to be much stronger in lesbian and drag king sub-cultures. However, this acceptance in relation to T-Dino’s experiences was not without complication. He discussed the tensions surrounding his gender subjectivity in drag king cultures, and the problems he foresaw once he was fully transitioned:

...I got lucky, I think it’s because I was born looking the way I do. I’m very masculine-looking, even before taking the T (testosterone), I was very, very masculine looking, always have been masculine-acting my entire life. So for me being a drag king, I don’t actually have to act, I just get up there and be me and I come across as more masculine than all of them put together and that’s something I was born with so I think that’s why it’s easy for me to get booked because I’ve got the look. I don’t know if that will change once I’ve transitioned because there are things bouncing around with the whole label of drag king and can a transman be a drag king and all that sort of crap. I think leave your labels at home and stop being so bloody prejudicial against your own community, but that’s my opinion I won’t expand upon that.

During the interview, T-Dino described his drag character as being slightly tongue-in-cheek who loved to engage in ‘naughty stuff’. When clarifying this, he said that he loves to be a ‘naughty boy’, a ‘cheeky fuck’ and a ‘big-mouthed, arrogant prick’. In the above excerpt, T-Dino repeatedly emphasises his ‘masculinity’, or rather his successful performance of masculinity through drag. Despite producing the appearance of a man onstage, T-Dino’s acceptance in drag king cultures has perhaps been more easily achieved due to his offstage
identification and performance of gender. Although he claims to be ‘lucky’, being born ‘masculine looking’, he repeats the word numerous times, suggesting how transgendered performers like T-Dino feel the need to justify their gendered subjectivities. Like Amber, T-Dino does this by comparing himself to other drag performers in the performance cultures in which he exists. Despite evidence of a trend towards some non-transgendered performers distancing themselves from drag kings such as T-Dino, he in turn repeats a similar process of alienation, confidently claiming: ‘I come across more masculine than all of them put together’ and ‘I’ve got the look’. Through this, T-Dino gives importance to himself over other drag performers. Although not specifically mentioning non-transgendered drag kings, his words indicate the ongoing striving for validation and acceptance that transgendered drag performers experience concerning drag sub-cultures.

Despite acknowledging how his gender positions him differently in comparison to other drag performers, T-Dino, like Amber, uses this difference as a means of empowerment. Both performers were also acutely aware of the difficult positions they hold in drag communities. Thus, like drag queens, drag kings in the context of this thesis ‘do’ gender, onstage and off in ways which challenge normative constructs of sex and gender. These challenges however, are also met with contradiction. These gendered subjectivities were often reflective in one way or another of more normative hegemonic structures of sex and gender. The gendered subjectivities of these participants were often influenced through a range of other factors relating to class, ethnicity, sexuality and social interaction. I have analysed the particular ways in which drag performers take up multiple and often contradictory and shifting gendered subjectivities, highlighting how gender is fluid and contextual. This chapter has aimed to shed light on the difficult and complex negotiations which drag performers must
engage in, in order to understand and make sense of the complex and difficult positions they occupy in Australian drag communities.

**Conclusion**

Through this discussion, I have hoped to highlight the different ways in which gender was performed by a range of participants involved in this research in a personal and professional context. Many of these performers felt that either their drag or their personal identification with gender was ‘queer’, in the sense that it challenged or denaturalised normative understandings of sex and gender. With the help of Butler (1990, 2004) I have aimed to demonstrate how such identities are constructed and maintained in relation to gendered norms, where sex, sexuality and gender are considered to flow naturally from one another. While some participants felt they challenged some gendered norms, many appeared to also conform to these norms on and offstage. Some performers recounted moments of gender experimentation through their childhood, adolescence or during their drag careers. These experimentations however, ultimately seemed to mirror rather than challenge dominant gender stereotypes. Despite these performers living outside social norms either through their sexual or gendered orientation (being gay, lesbian or transgendered), beyond this, the experiences discussed in this chapter reveal that normative gender constructs are always being maintained and reproduced. Whether these participants view such performances as ‘parodying’ gender, these parodies nonetheless work powerfully to reinforce and perpetuate the original stereotype they aim to critique. Thus the ‘queering’ of gender stereotypes first requires the performer to acknowledge and reproduce them. The data
analysis of this chapter therefore reveals a persistent but productive tension in relation to the forces of subversion and normativity in the performances of gender in the lives of Australian drag queens and drag kings. The performance of drag, and the performance of gender identity through drag subjectivities (onstage and off) work to unsettle and complicate gender norms.

Through an analysis of the lives of transgendered drag performers, a stronger sense of their willingness to conform to idealised heteronormative constructs of masculinity and femininity in comparison to non-transgendered performers is gained. In order to pass as their desired gender, these participants adhere to highly traditional lifestyles offstage. This chapter has also demonstrated the ways in which such performances of gender are subject to intersections of class, ethnicity, sexuality and social interaction. The lives of drag performers must therefore be understood in light of these other factors which strongly contribute to the formation of these identities. These intersections reveal insights into how and why these performers ‘do’ gender in particular ways in particular contexts.

In Chapter Three I will analyse a range of onstage drag performances to better understand the role of masculinity, femininity, and gender in those performances. This chapter however has focused on the function of gender more broadly in the offstage and onstage lives of drag performers. To better understand the nuances of the onstage and offstage experience of these participants, Chapter Two will discuss the spatial limits of drag. Where does drag begin and end? How do these performers negotiate the space between their onstage and offstage identities? I will discuss how drag performers make sense of their lives in contrast to their drag personas. I will investigate how much control (or lack thereof) these participants experience over their drag characters. I will also introduce the concept of ‘social
drag’, and how drag performers negotiate their position of celebrity and outcast in relation to the wider gay and lesbian scenes in which they work and socialise.
Chapter Two – Onstage and Offstage Drag: ‘I am Babushka and Babushka is Part of Me’.

The previous chapter examined the ways in which drag performers ‘do’ gender, in a personal and professional context. Here I will investigate the complex negotiations of identity that occur between the onstage and offstage lives of these performers. While some participants consider their drag to be ‘show business’, in the sense that their drag characters only exist in an entertainment context, others demonstrate a much closer connection between their personal and public lives. This chapter asks where does drag begin and end? Is there a space that exists between the public and private lives of these performers and how can we begin to measure it? This analysis will be framed using the work of Erving Goffman (1959) who applies a dramaturgical metaphor to the analysis of the face-to-face social interactions humans have with one another. For Goffman, the formation of identity is considered a situated accomplishment, where people ‘perform’ differently in certain settings in order to influence how others come to perceive them. In combination with Goffman’s work, this chapter will use data gathered from the interviews conducted and will also draw upon my own observations and involvement in gay and lesbian communities, particularly their social ‘scenes’. Other ethnographic analyses of drag cultures such as those of J. Jack Halberstam (1998, 1999) and Berkowitz, Belgrave and Halberstein (2007) will also be discussed to further elucidate how drag cultures are fluid and contextual. Here I argue that the spatial boundaries of drag, in an Australian context, have become increasingly blurred where practices of drag are no longer associated with only the ‘stage’ but also exist in and between a variety of offstage contexts in which these performers work and socialise.
Goffman: The Performance of Identity

Goffman’s work is useful to understand how the formation of identity is achieved through situated accomplishment (1959). He elucidates this through use of a dramaturgical metaphor, where the face-to-face interactions and behaviours people have with one another is analysed, by him, using a theatrical analogy, with individuals likened to actors, or ‘performers’ on a stage. He suggests that such performances are usually ‘for the benefit of other people’, arguing that our identities are dependent on those whom we ‘perform’ to (Goffman 1959, p.17). Goffman highlights how the ‘self’ is established through the social exchange individuals have with one another – considering such a process as being ‘two-way’. He defines ‘performance’ as ‘all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influences on the observers’ (Goffman 1959, p.22). During such an exchange, Goffman suggests that a performer attempts to direct the impression their audience may form of him. Likewise, Goffman suggests audiences will attempt to form an impression of the individual/s performing to him/her by obtaining certain information about those performers. Goffman’s work will be referred to in this chapter to help elucidate how one’s subjectivity is inextricably linked to the society/ies in which they function, where performers and audiences constantly engage in processes of identity formation. These interactions ultimately influence how individuals experience themselves as social beings in relation to the various social worlds in which they exist.

Goffman suggests that when performers engage with one another, they put on what he terms a ‘front’. This ‘front’ is one aspect to a ‘performance’ that operates most frequently in
a regular and fixed fashion in order to ‘define the situation for those who observe the performance’ (Goffman 1959, p. 22). Goffman (1959, p.22) clarifies ‘front’ as being ‘the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance’ created through the alteration of one’s setting, appearance and manner. Goffman (1959, p.22) defines setting as supplying ‘the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it’. During this discussion Goffman highlights how identity is a situated accomplishment, whereby the setting in which such performances take place, stay put. By this, he suggests that a particular act can only occur once an individual has brought themselves to the appropriate location. This performance is terminated once the performer leaves this specific space (Goffman 1959, p.22). Ultimately however, Goffman (1959, 28) argues that fronts are not created but are instead ‘selected’. Goffman’s theory can be understood in light of Butler’s theory of gender performativity, whereby individuals are given a cultural ‘script’ on how to appropriately ‘do’ gender, a gender that is ‘aligned’ with one’s biological sex (1990). Such a script can only be altered by an individual with the tools made available to them. Goffman (1959, p.35) suggests that ‘a performance is ‘socialized’, moulded and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented’. Performances of gender and identity are always subject to one’s positionality in relation to the social worlds in which one exists. These settings provide the means through which individuals construct and make sense of their own subjectivities.
Halberstam and Drag King Sub-Cultures

Halberstam and Volcano’s (1999) ethnographic research into drag king sub-cultures highlights the difficulties researchers have faced in defining where drag begins and ends. With a primary focus on drag king communities in the United States and United Kingdom, they argue that both culturally and academically, there has been much difficulty in distinguishing between the terms ‘butch dyke’ and ‘drag king’ (Halberstam and Volcano 1999, p. 35). Halberstam maintains that drag kinging is ‘continuous’, a performance that extends upon the offstage female masculinity of the performer. She sees drag kinging to be a ‘celebration’ of the performer’s ‘natural’ masculinity which he/she experiences in their everyday life. Halberstam acknowledges that not all performers identify as being ‘butch’ in their everyday lives, referring to other drag kings as ‘femme drag’. She considers these performers to be more androgynous, who assume ‘masculinity as an act’ – ‘S/he leaves her masculinity behind when she takes off the fake hair and the boxers and the chest binding’ (Halberstam 1999, p. 36). Halberstam and Volcano’s research elucidates the complex nature of drag identities and how the distinction between performer and drag character is a difficult one to negotiate.

As discussed in the previous chapter, offstage, most of the participants interviewed for this research consider themselves to be differently gendered to the characters which they perform in drag. Some participants, however, demonstrated a much closer connection between their personal and professional subjectivities, particularly in the gender roles they take up across both contexts. During the interviews, the latter group of participants often slipped in and out of referring to themselves as either their offstage or onstage identities – the boundaries were blurred for some. I will further investigate this shifting, supporting
Halberstam’s argument that it ‘seems important to try and mark where the theatre ends and where reality begins’ (1999, 36). Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010, p.179) support this view suggesting that the metamorphosis of drag ‘does not simply entail physical and body labor but includes a degree of identity work’. In untangling the complexities of these shifting and multiple subjectivities, this chapter will shed light on the difficulty drag performers face in separating their public personas from their private lives. Finding such a ‘reality’ has not been an easy task regarding the Australian drag sub-cultures studied in this research. With an increased offstage visibility of drag practices (particularly drag queening) in contemporary Australian gay ‘scenes’, the boundaries of drag have become increasingly difficult to assess in the context of this thesis.

Halberstam and Volcano (1999) undertook a comparative analysis of drag sub-cultures in London, San Francisco and New York - noting a significant difference in the way drag is understood, performed and received across these contexts. They argue that the presence of drag kings and cross-dressers in London audiences far outweighed those in New York, where they suggest drag kings are mostly confined to the stage. Halberstam (1999, p.68) noted that in London, most of the drag ‘action’ took place offstage where, ‘at least three quarters of the audience arrive at the club in drag of some kind or another’. Halberstam highlights her own experiences as a researcher in these sub-cultures, claiming to have been identified or ‘read’ by others in such contexts as being a ‘drag king’ even though she did not identify as such. In Female Masculinities (1998 p.224) Halberstam writes: ‘Although I have never performed as a drag king, I always attend the club in what is received as ‘drag’. I have been photographed and interviewed at the clubs as a drag king despite my nonappearance onstage.’ Halberstam found while researching these cultures that ‘blending of onstage drag and offstage masculinity suggests that the line between male drag and female masculinity in
a drag king club is permeable and permanently blurred’ (1998, p.244). This research will also highlight the contextual and shifting nature of drag sub-cultures in an Australian context. The ‘stage’ upon which practices of drag are often played out encompasses a much larger area than one may originally conceive. Oxford Street in Sydney, for example, is itself a kind of stage - an ‘extension’ of the literal stages found in its gay pubs and nightclubs. As the data for this research suggests, the physical space of a gay venue and its ‘external’ surroundings are important to the facilitation and continuation of Australian drag identities. It is here where such performances of drag begin and often where they continue into the early hours of the following morning. This chapter hopes to illustrate how drag functions as an important part of Australian gay ‘scenes’ and the wider impact it has beyond its presence on a nightclub stage.

**Slick: It’s *Their* Drag Identity...Or Is It?**

To begin the analysis of interview data relating to the ways in which drag performers contextualise their identities, it is first important to understand how the concept of ‘identity’ has been theorised in recent times. Childs and Peachey (2011, p.14) suggest the term relates to a person’s conceptualisation of self and the ways in which they perceive and experience themselves as individuals. Snow, Oselin and Corrigall-Brown (2005, p.390) suggest that ‘identity’ exists within a social context, defining it as ‘the cover term for the names humans impute and avow in the course of interacting with others and orienting themselves to their various social worlds’. The three types of ‘identity’ recognised most frequently by social scientists are - social, personal and collective where each is usually
found to overlap with one another (Childs and Peachy 2005, p. 390). This was found most clearly in the experiences of the participants interviewed for this thesis, who struggled to distinguish their personal lives from the social and collective identities they experienced in the course of their professional and social activities. Snow, Oselin and Corrigall-Brown elucidate how personal identities are often grounded in social identities which are formed by self-designations and other attributions which individuals both accept and reject (2005, p. 390). Childs and Peachy (2011, p.15) support this theory, arguing that our identities are informed by the social roles or groups to which we belong. People live in many different milieus and, as a result, experience many different roles and identities across those contexts. This analysis will highlight how subjectivity is a multiple and shifting phenomenon as experienced in the lives of the participants interviewed and the implications this shifting has on those individuals who experience it most profoundly.

As discussed in Chapter One, Slick identifies herself as a lesbian woman offstage and her drag king character as being her alter ego, the ‘quintessential Italian male love god’. Slick’s drag ‘creation’ derives from her own cultural identity as a second-generation Italian, whose parents migrated to Australia from Sicily. With Slick’s cultural or ‘offstage’ identity forming an important part of her drag persona, the discussions which followed suggest that the subjectivities she experiences offstage and in drag are closely related. Slick explained she would rarely go out on the ‘scene’ when she was not performing, but when she does she prefers to ‘hang out the back’. Describing herself as not much of a ‘club’ type, Slick associates her presence on the Melbourne lesbian ‘scene’ being mainly due to ‘work’ - being a drag king. This decision to separate her private life from her public persona was directly influenced by her desire to keep certain aspects of her private life separate from her drag identity:
I don’t go out in drag because that drag character only lives when he’s got a show going on. I’m in a relationship so I don’t want that character to be in the relationship and my girlfriend is really sensitive to what I do and the amount of time I spend on doing my drag stuff, so I’ve got to balance it. So Slick only comes out at the moment, once a week, and has another gig coming up soon.

Slick gives the impression that she selects how, when and where her drag identity exists with ‘Slick’ being the identity she assumes for ‘performance’ purposes only. By describing this process as a ‘balance’, Slick indicates the difficult and complex negotiations experienced by drag performers as public figures in gay and lesbian communities. Slick desires to separate her private life from her drag persona in order to protect the relationship with her girlfriend. This was a running theme throughout the interviews with drag kings and queens, who told of the difficulties they experienced in finding and maintaining lasting relationships, and will be discussed throughout this chapter.

During the interview with Slick, it became evident that the distinction between her public and private life had become increasingly complicated. Childs and Peachey (2011, p.15) suggest there are separate parts that comprise one’s identity which are ‘usually defined in terms of the role one adopts in the group or in terms of the social group with whom one interacts’. Most of the performers interviewed for this thesis considered their role in drag communities as being akin to ‘quasi celebrities’, a status attributed to their identities by their audiences and communities. This however has multiple ramifications for the participants who articulated an inability to ever fully escape this ‘public’ role, often being
'read' and addressed by others as their drag characters despite not ‘presenting’ as such. The most ‘social’ aspect of Australian gay and lesbian communities, the ‘scene’, plays a major role in the construction and maintenance of the identity of a drag performer. This was evidenced most clearly by Slick when discussing what her friends thought about her drag identity:

They kind of look beyond my drag character, I think they just see me and just see the friend, the Slick that they know out of drag because for some reason everyone just called me Slick, and I feel comfortable with that.

Slick acknowledges that a certain blurring between her drag persona and her everyday ‘self’ takes place. Although she is out in drag, interacting with ‘friends’, she is not viewed by this particular audience as actually being ‘in’ drag, but is instead read as her ‘offstage’ identity. This however becomes complicated, as signified in the second half of the sentence where she states that ‘everyone’ has come to address her as ‘Slick’. Have her offstage and onstage identities become one and the same? Although she admits to ‘hanging out the back’ when not performing, her attempts at distancing her private life from her public persona is problematized by those with whom she interacts. Slick attempts to put distance between herself and her drag identity, detailing the strict conditions under which this character exists but also accepts that both identities have become mutual and expresses a level of comfort in this. Despite attempting to maintain a ‘desired’ identity, the setting and audience which she describes in the above example illustrates how the processes of identity are forged in relation to our social contexts. Drag performers such as Slick exist as part of the very fabric.
of gay and lesbian social life, which often act as metaphorical stages for the continuation of drag identities.

At the end of the interview with Slick, there was further evidence to suggest that a slippage between her private self and her public persona sometimes occurs:

...my family and my mum and my Sydney friends call me (birth name), but since I’ve been in Melbourne everyone knows me as Slick and I kind of stuck with that. They come up to me and go ‘so what’s your real name?’ [and I answer] ‘Well my name’s Slick, that’s real isn’t it?’ So I never give away what my real name is and what my real age is either.

Slick’s response to those interested in finding out more about her ‘private’ identity again indicates a desire to maintain a distance between her private and public life. What is revealed however through this described interaction is that identity is both shifting and contextual. Slick suggests that in Sydney she was regularly referred to as her birth name, but upon moving to Melbourne, her identity took on a new meaning. In this new setting, she actively plays a role in the construction and maintenance of that identity, stating ‘I kind of stuck with that’. Slick gives permission for her private and public identities to become mutual. By stating that she does not give away her ‘real’ name, and instead chooses to use ‘Slick’ in this public capacity suggests that the confines of her drag is much looser than first understood. By responding to her inquisitors ‘well my name’s Slick, that’s real isn’t it?’ suggests a willingness on Slick’s part to play with those boundaries. Goffman considers this type of affect as ‘manner’, regarding it as ‘the stimuli which function at the time to warn us
of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation’ (1959, p.24). By this, he suggests that performers attempt to establish what position they will take up within their social interactions, albeit an initiator, follower and so on (Goffman 1959, p.24). Slick attempts to guide her audience on the impressions they may form of her, by taking a leading position in the interaction with her audience. Her drag persona then extends outwards from the stage and into the sociality of the lesbian social scene which assists in the construction and performance of Slick’s identity.

Slick’s personal relationship to the identity socially ascribed to her can be categorised by what Snow, Oselin and Corrigall-Brown call ‘self-concept’, a term used to:

explain the negotiation or compromise that is reached between an individual’s ideal conception of the self and the information they receive from the social world, with the resulting negotiation capturing the tension that often exists between an individual’s social and personal identities (2005, p. 391).

Slick’s discussions suggest a level of compromise on her part, actively accepting the identity which has been attributed to her by others, but she also influences the limits of that identity. Snow, Oselin and Corrigall-Brown (2005, p.392) would describe this process as ‘identity consolidation’ whereby individuals merge two identities into a single salient one which ‘involves the blending of two relatively congruent identities’. Her experiences as a drag king therefore raise questions of autonomy. How much control do drag performers experience over their own subjectivities? Although Slick attempts to distance herself (and her girlfriend) from her drag identity, this separation is only partially achieved. The analysis
of this data highlights that the distinction between a drag performer’s ‘everyday’ subjectivity and their drag identity is a complex and difficult one. Slick’s performance of her personal and professional self highlights the negotiations drag performers experience in making sense of their subjectivities in relation to the friendships, relationships and the roles they play in different social settings. This reveals the powerful role society plays in the shaping of the identities of these drag performers.

Chloe: Discursive Slippages: Me, her, he and I

Referring to himself as a ‘gender illusionist’, Chloe (pseudonym, aged 28), describes his drag persona as ‘a girl plus 25 per cent’. This character usually takes the form of a blonde, and from Chloe’s point of view, beautiful ‘woman’. Although Chloe identifies as a gay man offstage, his aim in drag is to create the ‘illusion’ of a ‘real’ woman. When I asked how his audiences usually responded to this character, he stated – ‘most people find it almost unbelievable sometimes’. Throughout the interview, Chloe often referenced moments when his audiences did not know that he was a drag queen, and thought he was a biological woman. Born in Brisbane, Chloe moved to Sydney in 2001 and his first experience in drag was going to nightclubs selling chewing gum, Chupa Chups and glow sticks. He recalls: ‘Every Friday and Saturday night I’d walk up and down Oxford St in white, thigh-high boots and a white pvc nurse’s outfit with my tray of chewing gum for hours on end, and I think I’d make $150 for the night.’ These early experiences on the Sydney gay scene highlight how Chloe’s drag functioned as a mobile performance, operating predominantly in the outside surrounds of gay social venues.
Chloe’s drag however did not remain solely in a ‘social’ context and eventually developed more of a ‘stage’ role. This transition led to him becoming recognised as a rising star of the Sydney drag scene. As a result of this move to stage performances, and his subsequent appearance on a high-rating Australian television show in 2003, his drag persona gained widespread national recognition. Chloe now lives in a Woolloomooloo penthouse apartment overlooking Sydney Harbour, owns and runs a wig company and is the performance manager for a major Oxford St nightclub. This change of fortune partly indicates the fluid nature of drag and the shifting positions which drag performers experience in gay communities and drag sub-cultures. Chloe’s lifestyle and economic status directly changed due to his transition from a socially based performance of drag to a more ‘onstage’ one. Chloe’s experience provides insight into the social structure of drag sub-cultures and how drag performers gain recognition and acceptance of their identities through their contextual shifts.

When I asked Chloe to describe the relationship between himself and his drag character, his response seemed to indicate the distinction between his personal and professional life was complex:

...it’s definitely an extension of who I am, people describe [me] and Chloe as two different people, which is interesting, because I don’t feel that that is so. I am always seeing through my eyes, so I always feel like I’m the same person. Just as if you worked in a bank you would put on your teller’s outfit and then at night-time you would be in your normal clothes. For me it’s like that, you’re always the same person, you’re just projecting a slightly different persona depending on what’s required.
Chloe’s discussion demonstrates a willingness to accept the intimacy between his ‘offstage’ identity and his drag persona, with the basis of his drag character being shaped by his offstage or everyday identity. He believes that people perceive him and his drag persona as ‘two different people’. Chloe however resists such a positioning, claiming to be the ‘same person’ only aesthetically different depending on the setting. In the final line of the above excerpt, Chloe suggests that his ‘front’ changes depending on what is ‘required’ – like a bank teller switching from a work outfit to a social outfit upon the completion of his/her work day. Goffman (1959, p.24) would consider this process to be ‘appearance’, which is ‘the stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer’s social statuses’. By this, Goffman suggests the appearance of the performer works to inform his audience on what sort of ‘performance’ they will engage in, albeit work, social, recreational and so on. Chloe’s above discussion acknowledges how identities are grounded in and subject to the different locations in which they exist. Certain discourses function in these settings, influencing how identities are performed and subsequently received by those with whom we interact.

Such processes of identity negotiation in the lives of drag performers, I argue, draws similar parallels to those formed in online worlds where avatars have become virtual drag characters for some. Although the formation of drag identities occurs largely in the ‘physical world’, both experiences are about occupying multiple subjectivities, and negotiating those subjectivities in different settings. Childs and Peachey’s recent work on online mediums suggests that virtual worlds such as Second Life are predominantly about social interaction between people. These online ‘worlds’ provide platforms for users to create ‘digital representations’ of themselves, enabling them to experience and adopt new identities (Childs and Peachey 2011). The idea that users of ‘Second Life’ adopt and construct new
identities makes these online avatars akin to virtual drag characters, becoming ‘extensions’ of an individual’s every self.

Childs and Peachey (2011) explain that virtual worlds have been around since the mid-1980s and are primarily used for social networking. They describe them as ‘computer-generated environments in which participants adopt an avatar to interact with each other and with the virtual environment around them’ (Childs and Peachey 2011, pg. 1). The term avatar is understood by Allbeck and Badler to be ‘a graphical representation of a user within the environment which is under his or her direct control’ (Allbeck and Badler in Childs and Peachey 2011, pg. 1). Users of this program can create identities which are male, female, androgynous or non-human. It is up to the user to generate and maintain a particular identity of their choosing. Childs and Peachey (2011, p.21) argue that virtual worlds offer an opportunity for people to express the self they feel they ‘truly’ are and also provide an opportunity to experiment with different identities. Similar to drag names, they explain that the names of avatars ‘usually remain constant, conferring a persistent identity upon regular users’ (Childs and Peachey 2011, p.2). Therefore, although the look of drag characters and avatars frequently changes, performers usually select a name by which they are henceforth in their community. Despite being identified by this name, their appearance and the way they project themselves towards their audience changes with great frequency. Drag performers will often appear ‘onstage’ two to three times a night, each time with a new costume, wig and make-up. These performers therefore embody and project numerous ‘characters’ over the space of a few hours. The formation of drag identities therefore appears similar to the formation of identities that occur in online worlds:
Second Life has male or female shapes for all of its users that can be personalised by manipulating approximately 150 different metrics. Clothes can be added and more sophisticated skin and hair acquired to create a more individual look, and also demarcate users as more experienced in (and more prepared to spend money on) their inworld lives. In addition, looks can be more radically adapted by adding extra objects to parts of the avatar’s body, and changing the underlying shape, to create appearances that range from simple inanimate objects (such as cardboard boxes) to detailed recreations of figures from mythology or popular culture (Childs and Peachey 2011, p.18).

The idea that users of Second Life ‘create’ their avatar through the selection of different clothes and hair is strikingly similar to the experiences of drag performers in this research. Avatars, like drag characters, are only created by their users through the tools made available to them, as understood in light of Butler’s (1990) argument of a cultural ‘script’ as previously outlined. Performers are provided with a limited number of costumes with which they can adopt and change during their experimentations with identity. The ways in which drag performers (and avatars) socialise and present themselves is limited by the contexts in which they are created, influencing how such individuals are perceived and ‘read’ by those around them. An obvious example that Childs and Peachey make in their argument is the concept of individualism and demarcation created through class. The more money one has, the more idealised in-world social identity they are said to experience. The more money one spends on his/her avatar character, the more individual and ‘special’ their identities become socially. A similar status hierarchy can also be seen in Australian drag communities (to be discussed shortly). Drag performers who perform for money often experience a higher
degree of celebrity in gay and lesbian communities compared to social drag queens (who largely do not perform for money) and in turn, experience a higher level of economic fortune. As a result of this economic fortune, drag performers are able to purchase or make higher quality garments and accessories, in turn, providing them with greater social status in their communities (onstage and offstage). Identity then must be considered contextual and transactional, where the ways in which individuals present themselves towards others directly impacts on how they experience themselves as individuals and as community members.

During my interview with Chloe, it became increasingly evident that the degree of separation between his personal and public identities became difficult to quantify, even to himself. This was most evident in the way he spoke about himself or Chloe objectively:

...she, I still swap in and out. Sometimes I refer to her as she, sometimes I refer to her as I and because we’ve just been doing the film clip at the moment, I think it’s when I’m trying to articulate different points, like if I want to speak about the thing objectively I’ll say ‘well this is where Chloe will be doing this’ and ‘then I did this’ and ‘that one where I’m looking like this’ It’s strange there seems to be no consistency.

Chloe refers to his drag persona using the third person ‘she’, but then switches to first person ‘I’. He attributes this shift to wanting to articulate and express different points regarding his drag character. His ‘drag’ character only exists then in particular contexts, which change across time and space. Chloe consciously analyses a ‘subconscious’ act, admitting there is ‘no consistency’ in the way that he identifies. This experience highlights
the blurring effect that occurs between some performer’s everyday self and their drag characters. Being ‘self-aware’ regarding the above discursive shift indicates Chloe’s attempt to make sense of the complex and puzzling phenomenon that is identity. The analysis of his experiences demonstrates the complex negotiations which take place between a drag performer’s personal and professional identities. Chloe’s experience indicates the difficulties many performers face in differentiating between the two.

A Taking Over of One’s Identity: The Social Permanence of Drag

In this section I will analyse the experiences of drag performers who expressed a close connection or identification with their drag characters. Given the slippage between self and drag personas, these participants seem to embody multiple subjectivities at once. Some drag queens, however, noted negative impacts on their lives as a result of this experience. These participants are frequently read by others as their drag characters despite not identifying as so. As some of these case studies have already shown ‘drag characters’ are often ascribed to the offstage or social identity of a drag performer. Some interviewees told of moments when they were socialising on the gay scene, not dressed ‘in’ drag, but were still addressed as their drag characters. What difficulties do they face in attempting to resolve this kind of positioning? As most drag queens portray hyper-feminised characters onstage, this performance of femininity is assumed by audiences to carry over to the performer’s social identity. This has significant implications for the personal lives of drag queens, who often lament at being ‘single’ and unable to exist socially as ‘gay men’. Femininity is something which is enjoyed as spectacle by gay men in an onstage context, but
'de-valued' once it exists in an 'offstage' setting. Drag inevitably becomes a 'lifestyle' for these performers rather than just a momentary 'performance' which occurs in an entertainment context. The social acceptance of these participants in gay communities is therefore conditional and subject to the audiences which occupy the most prominent positions in these spaces - 'gay' men. I will attempt to analyse such experiences to better understand the tensions that plague a performer’s negotiation of ‘self’ and the ways in which they make sense of their own subjectivities in relation to their social worlds.

**Babushka**

Babushka (pseudonym, aged 39), as described in Chapter One, is a veteran of the Sydney drag scene who identifies (particularly during his youth) as ‘gender-fucked’. Babushka ‘plays’ with gender norms in his everyday life and his involvement in drag. His relationship to his drag character, who he describes as the ‘kooky’ and the ‘classic straight woman’, was articulated in a nuanced way:

In a sense they are symbiotic, because if you think about it, Babushka is a construct, but Babushka is a construct from different parts of me, so essentially she’s an autobiographical extract if you like. So you take little bits and pieces of yourself and put them there. But you know it’s not like when I get up onstage I’m exactly who I am now. Of course there are elements of that but my friends, [my] very close friends, if I happen to be going out when I’m Babushka they just want to be with the other person, me. Then they might go ‘you’re too much, Babushka’. It’s not something that I do consciously, but it’s something that
happens, it’s transformative. But as far as I’m concerned, I am Babushka and Babushka is part of me, so they are fused. We’re identical twins, we’re the same and yet we’re quite different.

For Babushka, one identity cannot live without the other, they are symbiotic. By relying on one another in order to ‘co-exist’ suggests a much higher degree of identity consolidation between him and his drag persona compared to other performers interviewed for the research (Snow, Oselin & Corrigall-Brown 2005, p. 392). The processes behind the creation of this drag character then are similar to Slick’s, both drawing from aspects of their ‘everyday’ lives in order to create a drag persona, or ‘alter ego’. Slick’s ‘Italian male love god’ is derived from her childhood experiences coming from a family of Italian immigrants. Babushka’s drag character is also described as being derived from his own life, a construct - an autobiographical ‘extract’. At the end of the excerpt Babushka acknowledges that the slippage he experiences being ‘in’ and ‘out’ of his character is not something he does consciously but rather it ‘just happens’. This reveals the transformative ability of drag and the fluid nature of drag identities. Navigating the space between a performer’s own identity and their drag persona’s is difficult and complex. Given that most performers struggle to quantify these experiences, making sense of these lives analytically is extremely problematic.

Returning to the negative social consequences some participants face as a result of being a ‘drag queen’, Babushka recounted a time when he experienced rejection due to being read as his drag character while flirting with another male when he was out of a drag:
I remember one time in the old barracks which used to be under the Taylor Square Hotel, I was dressed as a boy and I was in leather shorts and leather army boots, and I think a ‘cammo’ top. There was this leather queen who was chatting, chatting, chatting with me and he told me later that he got into huge trouble for being seen talking to a drag queen, even though I wasn’t even in drag, because how ‘un-but’ how ‘un-masculine’. Meanwhile they’re all whipping themselves to Kylie and talking about the latest recipes in *Women’s Weekly*.

By describing himself as having been dressed in ‘leather shorts, army boots and a cammo top’, Babushka attempts to provide an image of himself as being ‘masculine’ during the encounter. Babushka aims to establish that he is out of drag, and therefore not belonging to a female gender/s. Following this, he labels the other person involved as being a ‘leather queen’ who was ‘chatting with him’, rather than the other way around. Babushka describes a situation where he is ‘sought out’ and desired by another gay man. ‘Leather queen’ is a colloquial term used by gay people to describe other ‘gay’ people, particularly men, who wear leather clothing. This description suggests that the ‘leather queen’, like Babushka, is engaging in a particular type of gendered performance, projecting a particular type of masculinity (a fetishized, homosexual one). Both participants are ‘performing’ an identity which they hope will gain them social acceptance.

During the interaction, although Babushka is dressed as ‘male’ he is not read as such by another person occupying this setting. Babushka’s potential ‘mate’ is then reprimanded for having been caught socialising with him and Babushka has been punished for being a drag queen. In this social performance of identity, it is the drag queen that compromises something for the identity of his audience. Being seen to socialise, or more importantly, flirt
with a drag queen threatens the masculinity of the admirer. Perhaps seeking retribution for rejection, and for the stigma directed at him, Babushka describes his admirer as also being a ‘queen’, emasculating and ‘feminising’ this person, the way others have done to him. In the final line of the excerpt, Babushka suggests there are certain contexts in which a gay man or drag queens are socially accepted for being ‘feminine’. This acceptance of the ‘feminine’ however does not extend to the sexual lives, or sexual performances undertaken by those in such contexts as the one described by Babushka. Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010, p.161) suggest in their research into drag sub-cultures in the United States that ultimately ‘even the most revered and celebrated drag queens’ have ‘difficulty finding men who would take them seriously as a lover and partner, a pattern that underscores the marginality of drag queens in the larger gay community’.

As part of his description, Babushka repeats the word ‘chatting’ to provide duration to the interactions he had with this ‘leather queen’, portraying the conversation as lengthy and satisfying for himself and his admirer. Although Babushka is not dressed in drag, he is still perceived by others as being so. This extract indicates how the identity of a drag queen extends beyond the limits of the ‘stage’ and essentially, attaches itself to a performer’s social or ‘everyday’ identity. Identity then is situated within a much wider sociality which constrains the types of performances which are tolerated among its participants. Drag performers must therefore experience contradictory positions of celebrity and outcast, manoeuvring between feelings of alienation and rejection to support and admiration.

These contextual negotiations of identity, and the blurring effect which often occurs between a drag performer’s personal and professional life, complicates the very definitions
and spatial conceptualisations of drag. Babushka described how drag queens are often viewed as ‘outcasts’:

We’re treated as other, so most drag queens are single because gay boys just don’t read us as gay boys. They read us as our characters and there’s a lot of stigma about going out with a drag queen, so they don’t want to do it. A tranny once said it, and I thought it encapsulated it perfectly that ‘everyone wants to be seen going out with Babushka, no one wants to be seen going home with her’ [laughs].

Babushka’s experience indicates that the feeling of being an ‘undesirable’ is due largely to the social indelibility of the femininity produced through performances of drag. Here, it is the feminine which is being dismissed, devalued and looked down upon. The idea of being ‘undesirable’ was not as common in the interview transcripts of drag kings, whose performances rarely include the ‘feminine’ but rather the maintenance of a ‘masculine’ identity. As Babushka’s experience suggests, it is the ‘masculine’ that retains his social value. Because Babushka’s drag identity is considered by others to extend beyond the ‘stage’ and into his social environment, his ‘feminine’ performance is still also considered to be on display. Throughout the interviews with drag kings, they spoke of how they were socially ‘accepted’ for being ‘masculine’ (to be discussed in Chapter Three). The risk of being labelled an ‘undesirable’ was almost non-existent in the experiences of drag kings interviewed. Although the identity of drag kings has also been shown to extend into their social or more ‘everyday’ environments, they are not rejected for being ‘masculine’.
Babushka speaks on ‘behalf’ of other drag performers, believing they are treated as ‘other’ and not as ‘gay boys’. He suggests it is due to the stigma produced through flirting with a drag queen in combination with the vanity of other ‘gay boys’ that hinders them from finding lasting relationships. Ironically Babushka uses the words of another transsexual, or ‘tranny’ (who, as a group, express even deeper tales of marginalisation within drag cultures) to convey the idea that despite the existence of drag queens as ‘noted’ people on the gay scene, this popularity is not carried over into their sexual or ‘offstage’ lives. The analysis of this data reveals how the relationships drag performers experience with gay communities are conditional and tentative, where admiration for their drag often turns into dismissal and rejection in various sexual and social contexts.

**Kath Day Knight**

Sydney drag queen Kath Day Knight (pseudonym, aged 39) - born in Western Australia but having lived most of his life in New Zealand - describes his drag character as being similar to a ‘clown’. Kath lives in a small apartment in the heart of the city and considers himself to be ‘poor’, studying at university to become a teacher. Being over-the-top is the purpose of his drag which he believes is about acting, entertainment and comedy. Referring to himself as a ‘thespian with a wig on’, his understanding of drag is significantly different to Chloe’s, seeing it as the taking on of a role onstage. Kath claims that he does not try to look like a ‘woman’ in drag, and that his character’s femininity is ‘hideous’ rather than glamorous. Of all the performers interviewed, Kath provided the most detailed description of his drag persona, even giving her a home address, (Aston Park Rail). Kath describes her as ‘a working class housewife from the suburbs’ who wears a wig which is akin to a ‘mangy old mop’. He prides
himself on the cheapness of his drag character’s look and the fact that his character portrays a grotesque embodiment of femininity rather than a ‘glamorous’ one. There is complexity surrounding the potentially non-normative nature of Kath’s character who strives not to fit the mould of ‘glamorous femininity’. At the same time the drag character attempts to be mediocre by establishing herself as a dowdy ‘suburban housewife’.

Throughout almost the entire interview with Kath, it was difficult to navigate the complexities of the relationship he experiences between himself as the ‘thespian’ and his drag persona. Often, I had to judge whether he was talking about himself, his drag identity or perhaps both at the same time. The way he discussed his drag character suggests a real ‘slippage’ of identity:

We’re chalk and cheese [laughs]. It’s funny because I am very sporty and as a result Kath has been using my body as a conduit and has demonstrated that she has a bit of sporting prowess as herself, so I think at night she takes my body without my consent and goes for runs and does a marathon or she swims across the Tasman in a shark cage. So I wake up to go to work and I’m exhausted. In terms of personality, [me] and Kath, we’re both extrovert although with [me] I can actually be quite introvert and I go under the radar. I think I can, I think I do, whereas with Kath she’s not so much like that, she’s a little bit more out there.

Throughout the interview I was puzzled as to whether Kath was referring to himself or his drag persona and at times he would often have to pause and clarify this by saying ‘because I’m talking about myself rather than the character’ or vice versa. This excerpt highlighted
the moment when this slippage reached its pinnacle. Although he was most likely joking in
this instance, it must be analytically noted that the way in which Kath describes his
character ‘taking over’ suggests that the boundaries of identity, as experienced by Kath, are
unclear. Was Kath imagining that his drag character ‘used’ his body in a spiritual sense, or
did he complete sporting activities dressed as his drag character? By suggesting that his
body is a ‘conduit’, allowing his drag character access to ‘invade’ his body, suggests that his
offstage identity (like other drag performers interviewed) is experienced strongly in relation
to their drag characters.

Experiencing a taking over by his drag character implies that instead of Kath deciding the
confines of his drag character, his drag character essentially controls him. He has become
the avatar. While my intention is not to medicalise my interviewees, I couldn’t help but
consider that Kath’s discussion of his identity sounded similar to how split personalities are
often discussed, as a ‘taking over’ of the body by an additional personality. The way Kath
describes himself and his drag character is indicative of a much deeper association between
the ‘onstage’ and ‘offstage’. Despite conceptualising drag as an ‘act’, with him as the
thespian and Kath as the ‘character’ or the ‘performance’, Kath’s phrasing reveals the
inconsistencies and complexities drag performers experience in the maintenance of a drag
persona, and the relationship to that public identity.
Social Drag

I will examine the ‘social’ role taken up by Australian drag queens, with a particular emphasis on the concept of ‘social drag’, a term used by most of the participants interviewed for this research. ‘Social drag’ has been a relatively new phenomenon in Australian gay and lesbian communities, so this discussion marks a new and important contribution to this area of study. I will adopt a ‘looser’ case study structure by referring to a range of participants in order to give a rounder analysis to this emerging phenomenon.

What this analysis hopes to illustrate are some of the more recent changes that have occurred in Australian drag king and queen scenes and the impact these changes appear to have on the identity of drag performers, and the conceptualisation of drag in these contexts.

Most of the performers I interviewed noted two main groups of drag queens functioning within the ‘scenes’ in which they performed and socialised; ‘performance queens’ and ‘social queens’. Those who did not ‘perform’ onstage were still considered by them to be drag queens, however they were not ascribed the same level of importance as performance queens (who comprise the majority of the participants interviewed for this project). Most of the latter performers held regular paid gigs, placing them within this particular category.

One seasoned Sydney drag queen, Felicia Furious (pseudonym, aged 42) suggested ‘there is a bit of a dividing line between the venue queens and the performing queens’. Intrigued by this distinction, I asked him to elaborate and he responded: ‘A venue queen is someone that goes out for fun and a performing queen is someone who is paid to do their job’ (emphasis mine). Felicia’s distinction is an example of the ongoing politics that exist in Australian drag communities and exemplifies the tensions and complexities in the relationships between
the performers who occupy these spaces. This tension is largely between those drag queens who function primarily ‘onstage’ as opposed to those who adopt more of a social visibility.

Drag queen Ditzy Bombshell (pseudonym, aged 43) describes the emergence of ‘social drag’ in the Sydney gay scene: ‘Before drag queens would do the show and then they’d all take their makeup off. But now the drag queens that you see today, they party all night.’ Ditzy suggests there is now an ‘expectation’ that once a performer is in drag audiences are focused on them, adding: ‘You switch into performance mode the moment you are in drag rather than onstage because when you’re in drag, you perform, you’re already onstage without being onstage.’ Ditzy’s analogy complicates aspects of Goffman’s (1959) theory of social interaction. In opposition to the concept of a ‘front’, Goffman suggests there exists a ‘backstage’ relating to the social performance of identity. This backstage however, is considered by Goffman to be a space that audiences are not privy to (1959, p.112). This backstage is defined by Goffman (1959, p.112) as ‘a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course’. Ditzy’s suggestion that drag is always about being ‘onstage’ complicates Goffman’s theory about the existence of a ‘front’ and ‘backstage’, particularly in relation to practices of drag and the formation of social identities. If a drag performer is, as Ditzy suggests, the focus of the audience the moment they are in drag, the line between the front and backstage has become increasingly permeable and blurred in such contexts.

‘Social drag’ was discussed differently throughout the interviews I conducted with drag kings. Sydney performer Hellfire Angel (pseudonym, aged 28), who performs in a drag king duo, touched on the phenomenon of ‘social drag’. She discusses how the physical boundaries of drag practices differ significantly between Sydney and Melbourne:
... drag’s very performative, so while we know some drag king performers who after the performance will only appear in drag, we don’t do that because part of our point is about the transformation so we don’t feel the need to keep the drag on after the performance. We do sometimes, but it’s not a hard and fast rule for us. So people particularly in this performance community and around these audiences are used to seeing us both in and out. Whereas when we first performed in Melbourne where there’s quite a strong culture of keeping your drag on after you’ve performed. When we came out with mostly bare faces in our street gear after the show there were a lot of quite shocked glances from audience and performers because that wasn’t their particular performance culture.

By considering drag as ‘performative’, an ‘illusion’ enhanced by appearing as ‘herself’ after a performance, suggests a strong level of delineation between Hellfire Angel and her drag personas. Hellfire Angel desires to maximise the impact of her drag characters’ presence ‘onstage’ by constraining its ‘offstage’ existence. By appearing as ‘herself’ after the performance, Hellfire Angel wishes to guide the impressions that her audience may form of her, and her drag character. This is a deliberate act to clearly distinguish for audiences what is ‘drag’ and what is ‘self’. For her, the performance of ‘drag’ does not continue from an onstage to an offstage setting. These insights suggest the social framework of Australian drag sub-cultures changes across time and space and that drag queen and drag king cultures are in this respect, different. With drag expanding beyond the location of the ‘stage’ (in
some instances) into more social ‘stages’, the line between the ‘onstage and ‘offstage’ subjectivities of drag performers have become increasingly difficult to ascertain.

The concept of ‘social drag’ and the social division created between performers who perform ‘onstage’, as opposed to those who do not, appear to create certain hierarchies in the drag sub-cultures under investigation for this thesis. Both the drag queens and kings made reference to the idea of a ‘pecking’ order in their communities. The key characteristic required to be considered a ‘performance queen’ is that he or she would ‘perform’ for a paying audience, rather than performing for ‘fun’. These performance queens are therefore considered to be ‘doing a job’, suggesting their drag is of a high enough quality to receive payment. A recent study by Berkowitz, Belgrave and Halberstein (2007 p.11) on the relationship between drag queens and gay men in Miami Beach, Florida, found that ‘the spatial distance between the drag queens and the mainstream gay men is dependent on both the social context and the level of professionalization of the drag queen’. Their theory of spatial separation is based on observation describing it as ‘the distance observed between the gay men and the drag queens at each location’ (Berkowitz, Belgrave & Halberstein 2007, p. 20). They note in their research that at ‘amateur’ drag nights there is virtually no spatial separation between gay males and drag queens. It was observed that when the drag queens were not performing, there was close contact with gay patrons (Berkowitz, Belgrave & Halberstein 2007, p. 20). They observed that during these nights (particularly during drag performances), interactions between the performers and the audience was high compared to more ‘seasoned’ drag nights. They suggest however that these exchanges are usually vulgar, sexually charged and demeaning towards performers (Berkowitz, Belgrave & Halberstein 2007, p. 21). It could be suggested that the lack of ascribed value given to these drag queens was highlighted through these demeaning
interactions. Berkowitz, Belgrave & Halberstein discuss the concept of spatial distance in relation to more ‘professional’ drag performers and their audiences, arguing that within these spaces (usually dance clubs), the spatial separation is different:

Here, the drag queens were designated performers and had very little contact with party-going gay men. At most places, the drag queens danced very professionally on elevated platforms at least five feet above the dance floor. This elevation, coupled with the height of the drag queens’ shoes and wigs, made them almost completely separate entities from those on the dance floors (2007, p. 21-22).

In my own experience as a participant-observer in gay clubs, ‘production shows’, as they are colloquially termed in Australia, are considered to be the big and more expensive shows usually performed by more ‘established’ drag queens. There were times when fellow club goers were invited up onstage after these performances, usually to acknowledge his or her birthday, or for their help in contributing to the show. Frequently, the drag queens would ask the audience to sing along and wish the person invited onstage a ‘happy birthday’. Although these performers are usually on elevated platforms, high balconies often overlook the areas so patrons can look down on the action on and off stage. This suggests a different audience/performer relation among Australian gay scenes, where club goers could choose whether to look over, or up at their drag queens. I also noted that some drag performers frequently positioned themselves close to the edge of the stage in order to engage with the audience members who would take photos of them ‘in action’. ‘Professional’ drag
performers also ‘mingle’ and chat with patrons, particularly in-between these large production shows. Babushka commented on this type of interaction during his interview:

They get people in the door and they keep them in the door. Because essentially if you have a few shows over a night, and people know those shows coming up, they’ll stay and in between shows you drink and the more you drink and the more you stay, the better it is for the venue. Also instantly if you walk in and there’s a drag queen there, you’ve got colour, you’ve got movement you’ve got a bit of excitement going on and so who wants to go into somewhere quite dreary? You want to go somewhere where there is fun and stuff going on and a drag queen, whether onstage or not, is a walking performance. So there is ultimate entertainment really.

Kath also noted a similar view on the increasing social role of a ‘performance’ queen:

....the idea behind getting a drag queen to host a night or perform is to get people there to drink and to get them there to drink for as long as possible. So you start the shows early and you have them as late as possible, so that’s why when you’re asked to perform at anything it’s never go in two minutes, race off go.

These statements suggest that in comparison to the study conducted by Berkowitz, Belgrave and Halberstein (2008), Sydney gay male ‘scenes’ are perhaps less rigid regarding the spatial
separation between drag queens and audiences. Although these ‘performance queens’ are potentially doubling up as ‘social queens’ they are still being paid to do this socialising.

Babushka does not speak of this interaction as pleasurable or voluntary on his behalf, but instead describes the benefit for the ‘venue’, where he is the hired entertainment. Babushka’s comment about the drag queen as a ‘walking performance’ recalls the experience of Chloe, who was paid as a drag queen to walk around selling goods to patrons during the early days of her career before becoming a ‘performance queen’. Perhaps due to this increased social visibility of ‘drag’, in these contexts, the boundaries between ‘drag’ and ‘audience’ have become difficult to define. Practices of drag have become longer lasting, in the sense that performers ‘embody’ their drag identities for longer periods of time (all night and into the early hours of the next morning). This prolonged ‘experience’ in drag could play a part in the blurring of identity of these performers, as seen in some of the experiences discussed throughout this chapter. Drag has become increasingly ‘social’, increasingly ‘public’ and therefore progressively permanent for the subjectivity of the performers ‘behind’ these characters. Drag identities are continuous and increasingly occupy more of an ‘offstage’ position in the social frameworks of contemporary Australian gay male cultures.

Despite there not being as much of a discussion, or distinction between onstage and offstage forms of drag, some of the drag kings I interviewed touched on this topic. T-Dino, a pre-operative transsexual female-to-male drag king (as introduced in Chapter One), indicates a personal prejudice against those performers who consider themselves drag kings despite not having performed onstage:
...now you’ve got a bunch of people out there thinking they already are drag kings, they’ve got themselves Facebook pages and they are yet to perform. That pisses me off really badly. So there are a lot of wannabe drag kings out there that haven’t performed and we’ve actually said ‘if you get your shit together we will get you a booking’ and they’re like ‘it’s in my head I’ve just got to get it to my feet’ and they’ve been saying that for three months. To me, you should take down your Facebook page until you’ve performed.

This example highlights how ‘drag’ has evolved to the point where individuals ‘access’ and ‘perform’ as their drag personas through virtual mediums. In this sense, and as described in Childs and Peachey’s (2011) work on virtual mediums, these performers are using their drag characters as ‘avatars’ through social networking sites. Performers exist socially as drag kings or queens without having to leave their homes. The continuation (or beginning) of drag within online mediums further highlights the shifting and fluid nature of drag practices and their sub-cultures. The ‘way’ drag is performed, and the way performers embody or experience their ‘drag’ characters is contextual, changing and highly complex. T-Dino suggests that such forms of drag (online mediums) should only be accessed by performers once they have first established their drag identities in an ‘onstage’ performance context. To him, being ‘onstage’ socially legitimises the identity of a drag king, allowing them entry into the wider drag community and other forms of drag performance. T-Dino believes an ‘offstage’ or ‘online’ identity can only exist once an onstage one has been created.
Conclusion

Extending upon the themes introduced in Chapter One, this chapter aimed to highlight the complex nature of drag identities and how they are understood and experienced in Australian gay and lesbian communities. Through an examination of a range of case studies, in combination with my observations of Australian gay and lesbian nightclub ‘scenes’, Australian drag sub-cultures reveal themselves to be fluid and contextual. Through an investigation of how performers make sense of their everyday ‘selves’ or ‘offstage’ identities, in comparison to their drag personas, we can begin to make better sense of the complex negotiations that occur between the public and private lives of drag performers, and the difficulties they experience in adopting shifting and multiple subjectivities.

To begin this chapter, I analysed a range of performers who described themselves, or their ‘offstage’ identities as ‘different’ to those which they take up through drag. These participants attempt to demonstrate control over their drag identities – considered to be personas - created and performed by them. Such assertions however were shown to be problematic with many of these participants describing and experiencing what Snow, Oselin and Corrigall-Brown (2005) term as, a process of identity consolidation. The divide between the onstage and offstage identities of these performers appears to be permeable and blurred. Such performers slipped discursively when referring to themselves or the drag personas and many also experienced being addressed as their drag characters by others in their social scenes despite not identifying or ‘presenting’ as such. Through an examination of how these performers’ identities exist within a wider sociality or setting, Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor for human interaction (1959) helped to frame this analysis. His
work was useful in demonstrating how subjectivities are contextual and transactional, in the sense that performances of our identity rely on the places in which they take place, and those to whom we perform. The analysis of this data has shown that gay communities have a profound impact on the way drag performers experience and therefore ‘construct’ their identities in their everyday lives. The discourses which influence the operation and performance of gender, and the performance of identity within gay communities, work in ways to subtly oppress and marginalise those whose representations of ‘self’ do not signify a compliance to these norms. As a result, drag performers often experience and negotiate feelings of acceptance and rejection contextually, taking up the position of both celebrity and outsider in the communities in which they work and socialise.

The final half of this chapter sought to examine the social role drag plays in Australian gay and lesbian communities. The analysis of this data marked an important contribution to this area of research, demonstrating some of the more contemporary shifts in the nature of Australian drag sub-cultures. Despite some performers considering their drag as an ‘extension’ of their everyday self, these performers discussed how the changing nature of gay communities, and the changing nature of drag practices, impacts on how they experience and perform their identities (on and offstage). Although they perceive themselves to be ‘similar’ yet ‘different’ to their drag characters, the social contexts in which they work and socialise continue to position and receive them as their drag characters. I have argued that Australian drag performers are increasingly fulfilling the function of a ‘social’ queen, one that interacts with audiences before, during and after a show, blurring the line between drag as performance and drag as ‘social’ activity.
This chapter has touched on how conceptualisations of drag change across time and space and therefore is not a phenomenon that remains fixed, but evolves and transforms. As the role of ‘drag’ changes, so too does the identity and understanding of a performer’s subjectivity and ‘self’. The next chapter of this thesis will return to the gendered performances of drag queens and kings, with a particular focus on how masculinity and femininity are understood and constructed within particular onstage performances. Through this analysis, a more detailed look at the performances of drag in an Australian context can be gained, with a focus on how femininity and masculinity are understood and performed differently in drag king and drag queen sub-cultures, and the operations of power that influence those performances.
Chapter Three: Masculinity, Femininity and Power in Drag Performance.

This chapter examines a range of ‘onstage’ drag performances as described by the participants and my witnessing of those performances. With a focus on drag kings, I will demonstrate how such performances challenge and reproduce dominant hegemonic ideas of masculinity and femininity. In comparison to the drag queens I interviewed and observed, the performances of drag kings desired strongly to critique a range of social discourses relating to sex and gender. Throughout this analysis, I will explore the notion of ‘power’ and its role in the types of performances produced in drag sub-cultures. To provide a theoretical framework to this discussion, I will examine how power is thought to operate within social spaces, focusing on the work of Foucault (1978). I will also incorporate the work of Halberstam (1998, 1999) and her notion of ‘female masculinity’ to investigate how masculinity has been theorised in relation to gay and lesbian cultures. With masculinity having most frequently been associated with ‘men’ and ‘power’, this chapter explores the subversive capabilities of the drag king movement and offers insight into queer performances which provide an alternative way of viewing ‘masculinity’. As much work has already been written on the performances of drag queens (Newton 1979, Perkins 1983, Langley 2006 for example), this chapter hopes to make an important contribution to the lesser known performance cultures of drag kings.
Theorising Power

As discussed in previous chapters, the way we ‘do’ gender, and the types of identities we perform, varies across time and space. The construction and maintenance of our identities, as understood in this thesis (and as demonstrated through the participants’ experiences), is a shifting and contextual phenomenon. As a result of various social discourses that operate in society (particularly those relating to sex and gender), it is often conceived that people should act and behave in certain ways, in particular that ‘men’ should perform their identities differently to ‘women’ (and vice versa). Power then, operates in these discourses to preference certain individuals or groups over others. How then do the types of masculinities and femininities at play within drag sub-cultures, and the performance of these, impact on those dominant hegemonic discourses relating to sex and gender? To understand how power operates more generally in society, it is important to first recognise that the concept has theoretically been difficult to define. Overbeck claims ‘theorists have tried and failed repeatedly to create an all-encompassing definition of What Power Is’ (Overbeck in Guinote and Vescio 2012, p. 32). Foucault’s early work on power suggests the word itself has often led to misunderstandings regarding its nature, form and unity (1978, p. 92). For him, however, the key feature of ‘power’ is that it is constantly being produced in every social relation from one moment to the next, theorising that power ‘exists everywhere’ (and therefore nowhere specifically) (Foucault 1978, p. 93).

Power must be understood....as the multiplicity of force relations imminent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation; as the
process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them...(1978, p. 92-93).

By theorising that power exists ‘everywhere’, Foucault realises its operation throughout all discourses in society which work to maintain and perpetuate certain ideologies. Masculinity has most frequently been associated with power, and masculinity with men (Connell 1995). Dominant discourses then relating to sex and gender are one such example of how ‘men’ historically have socially, culturally and economically been privileged over women. For Lorber (1994, p.32), gender is a ‘stratification system’ or social institution that ‘ranks men above women’. She believes that as a result of gender comprising a major component of structured inequality ‘the devalued genders have less power, prestige, and economic rewards than the valued genders’ (Lorber 1994, p.34). Practices of drag kinging then, and the performance of a ‘female’ masculinity demonstrates a resistance to this positioning, challenging the very foundations of dominant hegemonic masculinity altogether.

Foucault (1978, p.94-95) suggests ‘there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives’ and argues that power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared but is something which ‘is exercised from innumerable points, in the inter-play of non-egalitarian and mobile relations’. Although Foucault (1978, p.95) suggests that power in this sense is ‘intentional’, he argues ‘this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject’. Therefore, individuals do not have complete control on the effects of their decisions. Instead, these effects are subject to other cultural factors at play within one’s sociality. Foucault (1978) considers power to extend upwards through society, crossways and back down again, rather than being held in one centralised place, group, or organisation. He suggests that power permeates throughout all social structures,
moving away from Marxist theorisations of power as existing in particular states and economic structures (to oppress and control people), to instead, operating within a wider sociality that is influenced by the interactions between individuals rather than just institutions. In Marxist models of economic status, power extends from the top of the social hierarchy downwards where people are divided into two classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In this sense, it is the former who own the means of production, influence rule and domination over those (the proletariat) who don’t, thereby maintaining capitalist relations of power. Power, as theorised by Foucault, is in opposition to this model, in the sense that it is not considered a ‘right’, possessed as a commodity by people but rather something that functions throughout the social body, at the micro level of all human interaction. Power for Foucault is not considered a ‘thing’ but rather a relation, something that is inescapably experienced and ‘done’ by all:

> power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society (1978, p.93).

Therefore, Foucault argues that power affects the way individuals understand and experience themselves in relation to one another and their social worlds.

Wrong (2002) adopts a similar theoretical position to Foucault, suggesting that power is coupled with social interaction and social control where ‘people exercise mutual influence and control over one another’s conduct in all social interaction’ thereby believing that, ‘...social control is inherent in all social interaction – at least, in all recurrent or ‘patterned’
social interaction’ (Wrong 2002, p. 3). For Wrong, power then is created specifically in the interaction between people:

...actors nearly always belong to a larger group or community, the norms and values of which they share. Even if it is often overemphasized, the influence of group norms in shaping individual conduct is a basic assumption of [the]modern social scene (2002, p. 3).

Wrong comments on how power functions, suggesting it has three distinct usages (most of which overlap with one another). He believes its most common use is as a near-synonym for influence, control, rule and domination. Secondly it is thought of as an attribute or quality possessed by individuals (often something sought after), and lastly as power distribution among groups, encoded in all modes of activity and expression (2002, p. xi). This chapter will focus on the latter understanding of power as described by Wrong (2002), and as understood and articulated through Foucault’s (1978) writings in relation to drag king cultures and the performances of gender they produce.

So why is there a need to analyse the role of ‘power’ within the types of performances that are displayed by drag kings? Guinote and Vescio believe heavily that ‘power matters’ suggesting that ‘the fundamental nature and importance of power derives from power’s ability to satisfy core-self and group-serving needs’ (2012, p. 3):

At the individual level, having power facilitates, whereas lacking power decreases the ability to secure desired resources and outcomes. Power, therefore, matters
at the individual level because it is related to one’s ability to satisfy this core self-need (Guinote and Vescio 2012, p. 3).

Using a case study format, I will investigate how masculinities and femininities are shaped in a range of onstage drag performances and what these performances might indicate about the ways in which masculinity and femininity is understood and shaped by gay and lesbian sub-cultures more broadly. Through a deconstruction of these performances, this analysis will highlight how drag performances work to challenge and reinforce dominant hegemonic discourses on sex and gender. As highlighted in the work of Hobson on American drag king sub-cultures ‘drag performances, like all performances, are formed in the social and cultural systems of power in which they are made, and not all expressions are valued to the same degree’ (2013, p.49). This chapter will also analyse how power operates in drag performances (specifically as operating in the gay and lesbian sub-cultures as investigated in this thesis) and how the concept of ‘power’ affects the ways in which these participants ‘perform’ and understand their identities through their drag characters.

Therorising Masculinity

This analysis will focus on the performance of masculinity in drag king sub-cultures sharing the position of Brittan that ‘we cannot talk of masculinity, only masculinities’ (1989, p. 1). Dowsett et al (2008, p.10) suggest that ‘masculinity is usually understood as ways of organizing maleness and practising manhood on personal, interpersonal or social levels’. In relation to the performance of masculinity by ‘female’ born individuals, Halberstam (1998,
p.2) argues there is no ‘universal’ representation of masculinity within ‘femaleness’ and that there are many understandings of masculinity and maleness in a variety of lesbian and transsexual sub-cultures. She suggests it was not until the emergence of drag king performances in the 1990s that masculinity has, in part, been recognised as construction, performed by female, as well as male born people (Halberstam 1998, p. 13). Masculinity then, until recently, has not been viewed as achieved theatrically through overt signifying practices. However, the advent of drag king cultures signals a historical moment when this is more generally foregrounded. I will explore the ‘masculinities’ that are on display in a range of onstage drag king performances following Brittan’s insight that ‘what has changed is not male power as such, but its form, its presentation, its packaging’ (1989, p. 2).

Drag kings create tension by thwarting the concept of ‘real’ masculinity through theatricalisation. This insight is true of the performers interviewed for this thesis, and can particularly be applied to most of the drag kings of this study. Largely, these participants are lesbian-identified women who perform different masculinities through drag. The representation of ‘masculinity’ by women (and those of other gendered identities) has always existed, in various cultural and historical circumstances (Joan of Arc for example), however I argue that female masculinity has been made increasingly visible via drag king cultures. Drag kings make masculinity part of their performance, and in turn, desire to adopt the ‘power’ that is usually ascribed to ‘male masculinity’ or masculinities successfully performed by men. Halberstam argues:

> the difference between men performing femininity and women performing masculinity is a crucial difference to mark out: the stakes in each are different,
the performances look different, and there is a distinct difference between the relations between masculinity and performance and femininity and performance (1998, p. 238).

What types of ‘masculinities’ and ‘femininities’ then are on display in the performance cultures under investigation in this thesis? What is valued about masculinity and femininity in these performances, and what do they suggest about Australian drag sub-cultures more broadly? Using the descriptions provided by these performers, and through my own observations, I will examine the different types of masculinities and femininities displayed in the performances.

Halberstam (1998, p. 232) suggests ‘masculinity’ is the core element of drag kinging: ‘the drag king performs masculinity (often as parody) and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of her act’. For her, masculinity and drag kinging are inextricably linked. She argues that ‘masculinity, of course, is what we make it; it has important relations to maleness, increasingly interesting relations to transsexual maleness, and a historical debt to lesbian butchness’ (Halberstam 1998, p. 144). Halberstam’s work focuses on how representations of female masculinity offer insight into how ‘masculinity is constructed as masculinity’. ‘In other words, female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing’ (1998, p. 1). Halberstam (1998, p.2) argues this is the result of society’s unwillingness to acknowledge female masculinities, and she adds the widespread indifference towards such performances ‘has clear ideological motivations and has
sustained the complex social structures that wed masculinity to maleness and to power and domination’.

Addressing the relationship between masculinity and power, Halberstam (1998, p.2) argues that masculinity inevitably conjures up ideas of legitimacy and privilege, meaning it ‘symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth’. She also argues it extends outward into patriarchy, family, inheritance and social privilege (Halberstam 1998, p. 2). Masculinity for Halberstam is synonymous with the white male middle class body. Discourses on masculinity are just one example of how society affords people (particularly men) greater social power over those who fail to produce (or have access to) the performance of masculinity. This argument is shared by Carrigan et al who describe hegemonic masculinity as a question of how particular groups of men ‘inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimise and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance’ (Carrigan et al in Adams and Savran 2002, p. 112). This thesis shares the premise put forward by Halberstam’s work, that masculinity does not only belong to men, and is not only produced by them but that it ‘has also been produced by masculine women, gender deviants, and often lesbians’ (1998, 241).

Examining the specific relationship that the performances of drag kings have with masculinity, Halberstam argues that:

...the appearance of the drag king allows for an unusual confrontation between male and female masculinity and provides a rare opportunity for the wholesale parody of, particularly, white masculinity. The drag king performance, indeed, exposes the structure of dominant masculinity by making it theatrical and by
rehearsing the repertoire of roles and types on which such masculinity depends.

(1998, p. 239)

Throughout Halberstam's research she examines the difficulty drag kings have faced in performing masculinities onstage, arguing that in society, masculinity ‘just is’, whereas femininity ‘reeks of the artificial’ (1998, p. 234). Murray (1994, p.343) shares this position, terming this phenomenon ‘the naturalization of the masculine’, where ‘men try not to exaggerate the external symbolic supports that make them men, trying to make their social and political power seem entirely a result of their ‘natural’ power’. Due to the artifice that is paired with conventional representations of ‘femininity’, drag queens are provided with a greater opportunity to perform ‘femininity’ through the momentary adoption of a drag character. However, the performances of drag kings are markedly different to that of drag queens. The cultural forces that shape the meaning behind drag king performances are also different to those of drag queens. The normative force of masculinity exists as the unmarked and authentic centre of gender, whereas the formation of femininity/ies is already considered to be achieved, in part, through theatricalisation and camp (the process of making the real through signifying systems). Therefore, theatricality inevitably exists as part of femininity’s authenticity. The performances of drag kings create tension in relation to the social and cultural meanings surrounding the institution of masculinity, desiring through performance, to expose it for what it is - construct. This is achieved through their performance and overplaying of masculine stereotypes. Halberstam (1998, p.8) asserts that masculinity and maleness ‘are profoundly difficult to pry apart’ resulting in female performances of masculinity being scrutinised. Masculinity in this sense is perceived to be
something ‘natural’, something that exists and therefore cannot be ‘enacted’ or accessed by those for whom it is not ‘meant’. Halberstam argues that as a result of this:

white men derive enormous power from assuming and confirming the non-performative nature of masculinity. For one thing, if masculinity adheres ‘naturally’ and inevitably to men, then masculinity cannot be impersonated (1998, p. 235).

Halberstam (1998, p.9) believes that hetero and homo-normative cultures view such representations of female masculinity as a ‘pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach’. This analysis will bring to light the performances of such people, who through their adoption of masculinity/ies, attempt to challenge the foundations on which masculinity, maleness and power have been built.

This analysis will aim to answer the following questions; does the representation of female masculinities through drag king sub-cultures challenge dominant hegemonic forms of masculinity? Do these performances resist such discourses on sex and gender that work to privilege men over women through critique and satire, or do they simultaneously reproduce such norms by paying homage to them? I will deconstruct these performances to investigate what they might say about ‘masculinity’ in general, and how masculinity has been understood and produced through the drag king cultures investigated in this research.
Grind: Worshipping the Masculine

Grind (pseudonym, aged 47), is a Melbourne drag king whom I interviewed in a small pub in Brunswick (a bohemian, ‘gay friendly’ inner city suburb of Melbourne). She is of Anglo background, born in the Victorian industrial, working class town of Traralgon and lives in the city suburb of East St Kilda. Grind said she was just ‘getting by’ in life, working casually in administration for a circus school. She identifies herself as being a ‘fem’ lesbian, who is in a long-term relationship with her boyfriend, a transgendered female-to-male. Grind’s involvement in the Melbourne drag king scene is extensive, having founded the first major ‘drag king night’ about ten years ago. As a result, she considers herself to be a visible and well-known member of her community. When asked about her role in the Melbourne lesbian scene she responded:

Well people do know me, but because I’m feminine and stuff as well...I think people give a lot more hero worship to someone who’s more masculine in the scene, unless they are super-duper high fem and really, really glam all the time... but that’s a bit tiring.

Grind gives the impression that the lesbian ‘scene’ in Melbourne ascribes a higher cultural value to performances of masculinity compared to femininity. Because she identifies as ‘fem’, and as she later described herself as ‘a very girly...a wafty, girly sort of person’, she feels as though she is not ‘worshipped’ in the same way as other drag kings. Although she claims to ‘transform’ in drag, ‘I think I become really masculine’, her offstage subjectivity,
being feminine, affects her ability to successfully perform ‘masculinity’ in these contexts. The research of Surkan (2003, p.171) into American drag king cultures suggests that ‘the bias toward privileging masculine kings situates them not only as more authentic but also as more transgressive’. Therefore, drag kings are believed to be celebrated, in onstage and offstage contexts, for their ability to perform ‘successful’ hegemonic masculinities, but also for their ability to successfully thwart or ‘invert’ those masculinities.

Grind, however, acknowledges some forms of femininity as being valued in the context of this particular lesbian ‘scene’ but only when it is ‘high fem’ or ‘glam’. This description suggests a type of ‘hyper’ femininity, one that theatrically glamorises what ‘femininity’ should be. Grind’s comments indicate that performers who become accepted in this context are those who produce and maintain successful performances of hyper-masculinity or hyper-femininity. The advantages, according to her, are that such performers are ‘worshipped’ and accorded celebrity status in their communities. Foucault (1978, p.94) theorises that ‘power comes from below’, emphasising how people, groups and institutions experience power and privilege as a result of the most micro processes of human social interaction. The successful performance of ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’ in drag sub-cultures then, is attributed its value by those watching the performances. These individuals are rewarded for performing acceptable types of masculinities or femininities, subsequently becoming figures heralded as exemplars of drag.

Grind discussed some of her drag performances, labelling them as comedic, but also as having ‘a message behind them’. She described a recent performance as ‘quite political’, involving her dressed in ‘blue worker’s overalls and a hard hat’, jack-hammering a globe of the earth. During this performance, Grind lip-syncs to the Easybeats song ‘Made My Bed
Gonna Lie in It’, miming the words ‘tried so hard to be a man, a man, a man, I made my bed now I’m gonna lie in it, seems instead like I’m gonna die in it, where did I go wrong?’ At the end of the performance Grind describes how the ‘globe’ gets up, grabs the jackhammer out of her hand and chases her offstage. She says the intent of this performance is to send the message ‘they can’t wreck the planet’. Despite the performance being a critique of man’s ‘treatment’ of the earth, her choice of song also suggests a critique of men and masculinity generally. During this performance, Grind portrays a type of masculinity that is ‘unsuccessful’, as her character fails to live up to his expectations of what a ‘man’ should be. This character openly admits to having ‘made mistakes’, questioning his decisions, and resigning himself to a sad fate. In the end he is chased away. Through this portrayal of masculinity, Grind uses drag as a vehicle for critique, a critique achieved through satire.

Does Grind’s performance also have the potential to reinstate, or reconsolidate other norms regarding men and masculinity? Dressed as a ‘man’ in a hard hat, blue overalls and holding building equipment, arguably perpetuates stereotypes of men as ‘strong’, ‘tough’ and as rulers of the ‘outdoor’ domain (as opposed to the domestic). Drag king performances, such as Grind’s, demonstrate an ability to critique and challenge dominant discourses relating to sex and gender. These performances however, also verge on the side of reproduction, reconsolidating the original concept they are critiquing. Such performances depend on the existence of the stereotypes to achieve their critique. Drag, in this sense, has the potential to momentarily destabilise and reflect dominant discourses of sex and gender that operate throughout society, creating and releasing tension in relation to forces of subversion and forces of normativity.
As the interview progressed, Grind mentioned that not all of her performances are political in nature, and that she would often do ‘strange’ shows. She described one of those performances:

I found a really creepy version of [the Elvis Presley song] Blue Suede Shoes so I made these huge big, blue suede shoes and then I had two sexy girls in bikinis beside me and I was sort of stomping around being a monster and they stepped on my shoes in their stilettos and smashed them and all that sort of stuff, things like that, just silly. But I rely on props, because other people rely on their charisma and sexiness and I maybe don’t put that across, so [my act is] much, more strange or weird or funny.

The lyrics to ‘Blue Suede Shoes’ examines what might be styled as female masculinity with such phrases as ‘you can knock me down, step in my face’ and ‘you can burn my house, steal my car’ (the appropriating of male violence and domination by a female). Ultimately, the song speaks of how protective a man is of his ‘blue suede shoes’ and that his ‘honey’ cannot step on them. If we are to assume that the ‘honey’ is a female, she is represented as being violent and aggressive - traits which are often ascribed to a type of dominant hegemonic masculinity. The power of the ‘honey’ is achieved through the emasculation of the ‘man’ who is presented as being ‘overprotective’ of his shoes. When translated onstage, the power is exuded by the ‘girls in the bikinis’ rather than Grind himself (who becomes emasculated).
Grind describes how she wears ‘big shoes’ (phallic, no doubt) and is ‘stomping around being a monster’ but this female representation of ‘masculinity’ is markedly feminine in nature. Stomping around, feeling upset that his ‘shoes’ are destroyed, suggests a level of vulnerability, childishness and femininity on the part of Grind’s character. Although Grind is producing a type of masculinity on the surface of her body, it is not a masculinity that would typically be considered ‘successful’. Again it is a portrayal of a ‘failed’ masculinity. Is there intent by Grind to strip her character of the social power and domination that is frequently achieved through the performance of successful masculinities? The display of ‘masculinity’ onstage during this performance is through the ‘honeys’. The ‘emasculaton’ of Grind is further enhanced through the overt sense of femininity in the way these ‘honeys’ are ‘styled’ (in their bikinis). The performance of a ‘female masculinity’ as glamorized and hyper-feminised further satirises the position of Grind, and masculinity in general.

The behaviour of the girls in bikinis suggests they are in control in the performed situation. Grind’s performance is able to critique certain social discourses through this inversion of traditional gender roles. Grind later explained that during her performances, she always prefers to include, ‘strippers, girly strippers, crazy shows, lots of bent, filthy stuff’. For Grind, her drag king characters (particularly in the latter performance), are linked to overt representations of sex and sexuality (through the girls in bikinis) and also to forms of male aggression. Halberstam’s (1998, p.30) research into drag king sub-cultures in the United States and the United Kingdom found similar performances, which she argued ‘turn dominant masculinity around by parodying male superstardom and working conventional modes of performed sexism and misogyny into successful comedy routines’. Grind’s performances are just one example of how Australian drag kings actively seek, through drag, to critique and challenge dominant ideas of masculinities and femininities through satirising
them. This challenge then creates tension (and releases that tension at the conclusion of the performances) in relation to operations of power, reversing or destabilising such discourses which work to provide men with privilege and power over women.

T-Dino: Failed Masculinities

The types of onstage ‘masculinities’ that were evident in the Australian drag king subcultures investigated in this thesis often appear to be those that represent a ‘failed’ type of masculinity. Such masculinities usually involve the portrayal of men who have lost a certain level of ‘social’ power and dignity. Through such performances, these drag kings desire to critique more conventional representations of masculinity by ‘undoing’ them onstage. Largely, these characters are not men who exert power over their situations, but instead, demonstrate a loss of autonomy over themselves and/or their social worlds. I will examine these emasculated characters (as already discussed in Grind’s experience), and the ‘flaws’ that position these characters as ‘failed’ men. These characters ranged from being alcoholics, to prison inmates, to abusers. I will focus on the experiences of transgendered FTM (female-to-male) drag king T-Dino and his representations of masculinity through onstage performance. Green (2005, p.291) argues that ‘Female-to-male (FTM) transsexual people are the least studied group of all when it comes to masculinity’. This case study highlights a necessary and important contribution to this area of academic literature, to understand how masculinity is understood in the lives of transsexual men, and how these performances differ from other drag kings in their performances of gender on and offstage.
As introduced in Chapter One, T-Dino is a newcomer to the Sydney drag king scene, and identifies himself as being in the final stages of his gender transition to become male. He repeatedly emphasised his masculinity throughout the interview, claiming to be ‘more masculine than all of them put together’, compared to other drag kings on the Sydney scene. This level of ‘hyper-masculinity’ which he exuded appeared to be complicated, however, regarding the types of performances he described (and which were shown to me on his computer). I had also seen some of these performances while out on the Sydney scene, one of which was ‘Prison Bitch’. During this performance, T-Dino and his drag king ‘cell mate’, (the ‘prison bitch’) are dressed in bright orange jumpsuits. Although fully clothed, this performance is highly sexualised, with both characters simulating acts of sodomy and giving ‘blow jobs’ to one another throughout the show. Both characters are positioned as ‘social outcasts’, established through the lyrics of the song ‘Prison Bitch’, with lyrics including ‘they tell us we should be ashamed’ because ‘we’re not husband and wife’. These words emphasise the social marginalisation the characters experience in prison due to their acts of homosexual sex. During the performance, T-Dino asserts his sexual dominance over his ‘prison bitch’. At one stage his character says ‘I can’t escape the way I feel now, as long as I am doing you, I don’t mind doing time because you’re my prison bitch, my prison bitch’. The other character (who is extremely ‘feminine’) attempts to resist these sexual advances singing in an effeminate, high-pitched voice, ‘they sentenced me to seven years, not seven times a day’ and ‘god I’m tired of picking up the soap’. This character states that when he is eventually released from prison, he will be ‘going straight’. During the interview, T-Dino seemed to enjoy emphasising the point that he dominated the other drag king ‘the whole time’ throughout the performance. This was reasserted at the end of the show when T-Dino sings – ‘you’re not like all the others, too bad they had to die’ to which
the cell mate replies ‘on second thought, I think I’ll stay if you want me to, your prison bitch is never leaving you’. The type of masculinity on display from T-Dino is one that is sexually charged, dominant and aggressive, but one that is also ‘failed’ or undermined by its effeminacy.

By ending up in jail and engaging in homosexual sex, the type of masculinity displayed through T-Dino’s character is both a ‘failed’ and feminised one. These characters, as performed by both drag kings, are men who have lost a significant level of social power and autonomy. Is T-Dino’s performance a general critique of masculinity achieved through its overt feminisation and sexualisation? Or does this performance reinforce common stereotypes about prison life and perhaps gay male homosexuality more broadly as ‘camp’ or ‘effeminate’? Halberstam (1998, p.253) considers this type of drag kining as ‘fag-drag’ where performers ‘base their masculinity and their sex play on gay male models’. Through this type of performance, she suggests that drag kings mimic a type of gay male aesthetic. Although these critiques can be surmised from T-Dino’s performance, he never articulated explicitly a desire for his performances to appear as such. Despite the performance’s ‘purpose’, what can be gained analytically are the common threads that emerge in the ways drag kings portray men and masculinities through their onstage performances as ‘failed’, ‘sexualised’ and ‘flawed’.

Another performance which T-Dino described and which I observed at the Oxford Hotel in Sydney featured his depiction of a depressed, alcoholic man, married to his ‘bottle’. During this performance, T-Dino sits alone on a park bench, dressed in a white button-up shirt, black pants and a blue tie - a middle-class professional. During the song, he moves slowly across the stage, emanating sadness. The song begins with him singing about having ‘blood
shot’ eyes in the morning and ‘coming alive’ only through ‘the hair of the dog’ which he claims to ‘revive’ him. Although he finds his situation ‘hard to swallow’, ‘it’s a marriage made in heaven between me and the bottle’. The song ends with T-Dino taking the bottle of liquor in his arms, dancing and singing, ‘if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take, then I could rest and never wake again, in sorrow it’s a marriage on the rocks between me and the bottle’. This character is depicted as a ‘failed’ man, becoming undone because of his addiction. He fails to live up to being a ‘good Christian’ (as alluded to via the lyrics ‘I pray the Lord my soul to take’) or at being able to maintain a lasting relationship, other than to ‘the bottle’. There is a common thread in the types of characters T-Dino portrays; they represent ‘downtrodden’ men. Through the behaviours of such characters, T-Dino undermines and questions their masculinity – and perhaps the institution of masculinity more broadly.

Douglas claims that most lesbian feminists ‘agree that characteristics that have been socially constructed as masculine, such as aggression, competitiveness, arrogance, and dominance are ‘undesirable and highly destructive to humanity’ (Douglas in Nguyen 2008, p. 668). These ‘traits’ of white hegemonic masculinity, as described by Douglas, were extensively represented in the performances of drag kings interviewed for this thesis. T-Dino provides insight into his experiences portraying these types of characters, particularly in ‘The Bottle’:

...it’s about finding the right song as well which suits my character. Even though my character has broad range, I still like it to have a certain element that is T-Dino, the song has to have something about T-Dino in it. [It has to have] some sort of element that T-Dino can identify with or else I just won’t do it. There’s no
point me trying to do a love song, it won’t work. It doesn’t suit my character, as sensitive as I get is when I did ‘The Bottle’ that’s as about as theatrical and sensitive as T-Dino gets, because he’s just a bad boy, he’s a mongrel. That’s his persona and you’ve got to be true to your character. It’s got to have some sort of comical element or bad, naughty, naughty element.

T-Dino suggests his performances are not designed to directly ‘critique’ masculinity as such but are performances created on the basis of what he enjoys. The level of ‘politicism’ as discussed earlier in Grind’s performances (and as discussed in Rupp, Taylor & Shapiro’s 2010 research into American drag king and queen sub-cultures) is not as evident in the performances of T-Dino, whose representations of ‘masculinity’ are largely for the purposes of entertainment and comedy (and perhaps homage). T-Dino expresses a lack of interest in performing love songs, suggesting that ‘The Bottle’ pushed him further than he might have liked, forcing him to expose a ‘softer’ more ‘sensitive’ side. This ‘softness’ is in direct contrast to his own ‘offstage’ performance of masculinity, which as previously mentioned, he sees as extremely ‘masculine’. ‘The Bottle’ challenged his own understanding of ‘self’ and performance of masculinity. This performance depicts a level of vulnerability from T-Dino, one which he was perhaps not entirely comfortable with performing himself. Avoiding the performance of love songs, the masculinity T-Dino desires to portray is a type of ‘bad boy’ image, one which is sexually explicit, naughty, cheeky, dominant and perhaps representative and reinforcing of dominant hegemonic ideas of masculinity. There is a productive tension created between the desire or intent behind T-Dino’s drag king performances, and the meaning or power created by those performances (as understood through Foucault’s (1978) idea that power does not always result from the choice or decision of an individual subject).
The type of masculinity T-Dino wishes to portray is an invulnerable one, a great refuge from the vulnerability of the feminine. The analysis of the data, however, reveals that the characters that exist in T-Dino’s performances appear in clear contrast to this.

**Texas Trey: Sexualised Masculinities**

I will analyse more deeply the sexual overtones in the performances of some of the drag kings interviewed. Although such performances usually took the form of parody or critique, the sexuality portrayed in these representations are usually demeaning, particularly in their domination of women (and gay men), reinforcing hegemonic ideas of femininity as subordinate to masculinity. In order to portray themselves as ‘masculine’, these drag kings diminish the feminine, usually achieved through the sexualisation of the female. This sexualisation of the ‘feminine’ is also evident in the performances of drag queens, who essentially ‘sexualise’ themselves – often appearing onstage with minimal clothing. Why then is masculinity (or dominant understandings of masculinity) exempt from similar processes of domination and sexualisation? As this chapter has already highlighted, drag performances have the ability to challenge certain social discourses, particularly relating to sex and gender. However, through such critiques, these performances also have the potential to inadvertently reinforce such stereotypes.

Texas Trey (pseudonym, aged 40), is a veteran of the Sydney drag king scene. She identifies herself as being a fifth or seventh generation Australian whose distant relatives ‘came over on the boats’. Trey is in a lesbian de facto relationship and lives in the inner west suburb of Marrickville in Sydney. Born in Sydney’s Sutherland Shire, she describes herself as ‘uneducated’ but ‘street smart’. At the time our interview, Trey was working in a call centre,
living pay cheque to pay cheque, and feeling that she was only just getting by. Nonetheless, she considers herself to be ‘very happy’, transferring this into her onstage performances which usually take the form of comedy. Trey described her love of ‘old stuff’, particularly ‘show tunes’ from the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s. As she prefers to sing ‘live’ during her drag performances, she selects material that includes ‘fun sway/swing stuff’ which she believes enables her voice to ‘stay nice and low’. Throughout the interview, she provided descriptions of some of the characters she loves to perform:

I wear this great, big, purple suit with a red vest and matching purple pants and I wear big, chunky shoes and big hair and all the rings and blings. I try to go more like [a] Puff Daddy sort of gangster; I’ve got this really awful black Mohawk with the curly hair on the top and straight down the bottom. It’s just awful but it goes with the whole wogboss thing and I walk in and go ‘hey ladies how you doing?’ and they all laugh, so it’s more comedy...

Trey emphasises the word ‘big’, she wears a ‘great big purple suit’ has ‘big chunky shoes’ and ‘big hair’. By repeating these words, Trey aims to bolster the impact and presence of her drag character. Describing him as being like a ‘gangster’, the type of character on display through Trey is one that would stereotypically be considered ‘dangerous’. However, Trey’s representation of such a figure is geared towards being comedic. By calling one of her characters a ‘wogboss’, Trey creates the image of a sleazy and macho ‘underworld’ figure. Through Trey’s ‘cheesy’ or over-the-top daftness in her representation of this gangster, she is parodying a type of ethnic ‘masculinity’ (exemplified through her use of the word ‘wog’).

Although the character is presented by Trey as ‘ridiculous’, or ‘unattractive’, it is through his
mannerisms and social confidence (‘hey ladies how you doing’?) that the ‘wogboss’ gains social attention, particularly ‘female’ attention in the context of this interaction. This drag character has an overt sexual confidence, but one that is tempered by the comedic. Both T-Dino and Trey perform characters that have a certain sexual prowess and social power over their subjects, albeit women or men. The ‘masculine’ is valued or positioned by them, in these contexts, as above the ‘feminine’. However, Trey’s overplaying of such a character also works to undermine, or confront the perceived naturalness of masculinity altogether by exposing it as construct.

During the interview, Trey sang one of the songs from a recent performance:

I did a song called ‘Vagina’ it’s hilarious and it goes [sings] ‘some of them are hairy, some of them are bald, some are kinda scary but this is what they’re called, vagina, vagina’. It’s really fun, I can wear a full cow-print cowboy suit, with chaps and a vest and a black and white cowboy printed hat.

Despite this performance being described as ‘fun’ by Trey - a humorous and comedic song about the differences in women’s anatomy - there are more serious undertones at play. This cowboy sings openly about the different types of ‘vaginas’ which have been on offer to him. By describing these vaginas as being ‘bald’, ‘hairy’ and ‘scary’, the cowboy is describing female genitalia using negative rather than positive descriptors. Although Trey’s intent performing this song is to be light-hearted and ‘funny’, it depicts a ‘cowboy’ (a normative stereotype of conventional masculinity) as being the holder of ‘knowledge’ over the most private parts of a female’s body. By making fun of the different ‘vaginas’ he has
experienced, the cowboy demonstrates his sexual domination of women. The cowboy gives the impression that he has ‘had’ these vaginas, knows all about them and so has the privilege to sing about them. Such performances of masculinity, as produced by Trey, demonstrate a level of sexual power and domination as perpetrated by the masculine. Despite describing her performances as ‘comedic’, such portrayals also pay homage to and reconsolidate dominant discourses about men and masculinity as dominators of the feminine. There is tension then in these drag king performances to momentarily subvert gender norms, particularly concerning masculinity, but also to release those tensions, largely by their comedic interpretation and reproduction of those norms through theatricality.

**Babushka: The Performances of Drag Queens**

In comparing these performances to those of drag queens, there was a significant lack of drag queens interviewed who desire to ‘challenge’ or critique dominant discourses on power, femininity or masculinity in the same way as the drag kings. Most drag queens were vague in the descriptions relating to their performances, and instead spoke more generally about the types of characters or songs they liked to perform. As described in Chapter One, these characters are usually stereotypes of femininity, being ‘beautiful’, ‘blonde’, ‘dumb’ and so on. However, a small range of performers described some of their onstage performances in detail, although compared to the drag kings, this was not as common. Sydney drag queen Babushka (pseudonym aged 39), as mentioned previously, describes his drag character as ‘kooky’ but also the classic ‘suburban housewife’ who is a victim, and often, unwittingly stupid:
...I also do other things like installations, happenings and crazy things like dressing up as Elizabeth Taylor and bathing in a kiddy pool full of pasta and Paul Newman’s tomato sauce or latexing my face and then putting on tiny corsets and pretending I was a punk rocker shooting up on stage. I wasn’t really shooting up of course, but [I do] that kind of stuff which is a bit more out there. So it wasn’t the Albury [Hotel] two pretty girls, looking exactly the same, doing the same stuff.

Babushka sees his performances as marking a departure from mainstream styles of drag queening, positioning his act as ‘different’. By stating that performances at the Albury Hotel (a famous Sydney gay ‘male’ venue in the 1980s and 1990s) were about ‘pretty girls’ doing ‘the same stuff’, suggests that he views such drag queens as lacking individuality, reproducing dominant ideologies of femininity as ‘pretty’ and homogenous. Babushka’s attempts, through her ‘kooky’ performances, to challenge the very types of femininities that are more frequently reproduced in Australian drag queen sub-cultures. The image which Babushka portrays during his characterisation of Elizabeth Taylor is one of sultry sexuality. In the ‘bathing’ performance, the described scene is highly sexualised, providing a glimpse at the ‘private’ and symbolic scene of intercourse between Elizabeth Taylor and her lover Paul Newman, symbolised through the ‘pasta sauce’. The colour red also alludes to menstrual blood and therefore, to the biological female. Although this performance is considered ‘kooky’ by Babushka, in that its ‘style’ or delivery is different from other dominant forms of drag queening, it still projects a rather hegemonic idea of femininity and femaleness as sexualised, heteronormative and one that is dominated by the masculine. Murray (1994, p. 357) agrees with this type of pattern among drag queen performances, suggesting that ‘gay
male drag takes femininity seriously (if not women), and attempts to redeem it’, resulting in them being ‘objects of desire and display on stage, dramatizing their sexual availability, taking on the sexual power and often the emotional power and vulnerability that conventional femininity grants women’. Drag queens like Babushka emphasise how women gain their social identity through the sexual and social relations they experience with ‘men’. This analysis reveals the existence of a tension between the perceived intent of a drag performer’s articulation of masculinity or femininity and the actual effect or power of that performance.

The second performance Babushka mentions in the above excerpt is the ‘punk rocker’. By being a ‘tough’ punk rocker, Babushka projects a masculinised, female impersonation. The idea that she pretends to ‘shoot up’ drugs reflects the concept of a failed femininity, or a failed woman (much like the failed men as seen in the drag kings’ performances). The type of femininity portrayed is not a ‘pretty’ or ‘conventional’ representation, rather it is cracked or ‘flawed’. These types of performances were not common during the interviews with drag queens, with most of their performances aimed at being significantly non-political compared to those portrayed by most of the drag kings. These drag queens did not usually see their performances as a way to ‘comment’ on particular social issues and viewed drag instead as a way to access or reproduce common ideas on femininity. These femininities, as performed through their characters were largely normative, in that they maintained and reproduced dominant assumptions about conventional femininity and womanhood. It can be concluded that the performances of drag kings and drag queens operate around different cultural and social relations of power. However, the effect of those performances and the way they can be read analytically appears to contradict or problematize the way such performances were originally conceived by the performers. Like the identities of drag

Evan Smith – University of Western Sydney
performers, drag performances themselves are often contradictory and subjective, appearing to confront and appease common ideas on sex and gender.

Spike and Hellfire Angel: Drag as a Weapon to Critique Power

Sydney drag kings Spike (pseudonym, aged 47) and Hellfire Angel (pseudonym, aged 28) spoke extensively about power and masculinity during their interview, claiming that their drag operates in a way to challenge such discourses relating to sex and gender:

I think that doing drag king is a really good way to have a go at the patriarchy. It’s really good to be able to take the piss out of where the power is and the power is usually with men (Spike).

Hellfire Angel and Spike began performing as a drag king duo in 2006, describing their performances as ‘fetish burlesque’ which are both dark and comedic. Spike clarified that the pair formed a stage partnership after they were ‘driven out’ of a women’s circus group with which they both had previously performed. They believe their work was considered ‘filthy, pornographic and disgusting’, which led to ‘a massive outcry, lynching and a bad reaction’ (Spike). Having watched some of their performances on the Sydney gay ‘scene’, it became evident that the central element to most of the performances was the exposure of the naked body. These performances included explicit nudity, where their breasts were usually revealed, and the rest of their bodies covered only by minimal clothing. During these
performances, both performers would simulate sexual acts, which often included some degree of BDSM (bondage and submission). These performances were also political in nature, commenting on social institutions including the Catholic Church. Both performers used techniques including nudity, shock value and symbolism to enhance the impact of their performances, hoping this would help communicate their message during a show.

Throughout the interview, Spike revealed her views on the concept of ‘power’, believing it resided with ‘men’. She expressed a desire to challenge this, using drag as a vehicle to comment on, and destabilise that power through symbolism, parody, homage and critique.

Born in the Eastern Sydney suburb of Paddington, Spike grew up in Papua New Guinea and returned to Australia in her 20s. She identifies as being an Australian with mixed cultural heritage, having a Jewish grandmother, Irish grandparents, and also being of Australian Aboriginal decent. She describes herself as a ‘starving artist’ who lives with her girlfriend Hellfire Angel in Bulli near Wollongong, an hour south of Sydney. For most of her life, Spike felt she was androgynous, becoming annoyed when people would identify her as ‘butch’.

She expressed a desire to expose her ‘femininity’, which she felt could be achieved through drag. She describes her ‘fem’ characters as being ‘powerful’ and ‘warrior like’. After becoming a drag king, however, Spike believed she had the label of ‘butch’ imposed upon her more heavily. Although she admits to some discomfort in this labelling, she accepts this positioning, believing she must ‘own that butch side, and own that butch side proudly’.

There appeared to be a running theme among the experiences of the drag kings interviewed, who believe that drag king-subcultures, and lesbian ‘scenes’, value drag kings who are overly ‘masculine’, rather than ‘fem’. As a result, Spike describes how she feels compelled to focus on this ‘butch’ side and downplay her more ‘fem’ characters, despite her opinions that these characters have the potential to be ‘powerful’ and masculine in their
own right. Although Spike demonstrates a resistance to the way she has been ‘read’ and consequently positioned socially in drag king sub-cultures, the perceived value that these cultures place on masculinity overrides this individual self-need. The types of performances then which are produced and maintained through drag king performances (and drag queens for that matter) as investigated in this thesis, must be considered to be both contextual and shifting. The characters performed by Spike are influenced and shaped by the social and professional circles in which she exists and the power forces at play in those circles.

Born in Mudgee, in rural New South Wales, Hellfire Angel lived in country Australia for most of her life. She identifies as being of ‘mostly English and Irish’ heritage, but also ‘Norwegian and bohemian’. She describes her drag king performances with Spike to be about ‘drag politics, strip circus and fantasy’ but like Spike, Hellfire Angel also spoke about the concept of power and its role in their performances. She says there is always intent or a point they try to make during their shows:

One of the things that really attracted me to drag was taking on that power role and I’m someone who isn’t transgender in any sense but has always been really drawn to putting on that masculine gear, putting on the facial hair, [and] dressing up. One of the things we do is step-by-step peeling it off, so I think that in a lot of ways, in the trans sense it’s really empowering. I don’t really want to say [it’s a] sort of conduit, because I don’t know if its necessarily facilitating transitioning, but it’s also really powerful for people who aren’t, to look at a woman taking on all these aspects of masculinity and male culture and miming with a male voice. For us particularly one of the things we love is peeling all that back, taking off the
men’s clothing or the facial hair, or the strapping or the binding or the cock and in a female body still showing the same masculinity.

Hellfire Angel believes that a ‘power role’ is gained through the adoption and subsequent removal of a ‘masculine’ appearance. What is empowering for her is that with this removal, what is left is the unadorned female masculinity. This extract suggests that for Hellfire Angel, masculinity is not about props (as articulated in the construction of femininity, (Halberstam 1998)). By performing ‘masculinity’ through the ‘adoption’ of a male appearance (and then taking this appearance away to reveal the female body), her performances demonstrate that masculinity does, and has the ability, to manifest itself on the surface of any ‘body’, not only a ‘man’s’. It is the act of then voluntarily giving up this performance that is ‘powerful’ for Hellfire Angel. She demonstrates that masculinity in this situation is something that can be performed and enacted. For Hellfire Angel, she argues that this performance of ‘masculinity’ enables her to take on a ‘power role’. Power in this sense is understood by Hellfire Angel not as something that can be acquired (Foucault 1978), but something that perhaps can be ‘performed’ or duplicated through the practice of drag kinging. This critique of gender lies at the heart of many drag king performances and exposes masculinity (through theatricalisation) and the power that is normally ascribed to the successful performance of masculinity, as fabrication.

Academics including Nguyen (2008) strongly suggest that representations of female or butch masculinity have come under accusation for being perceived to reinforce normative ideas on masculinity and male power, rather than destabilizing it:
...butch women have come under attack for their adoption of masculinity and their perceived alignment with men. Butch women have been accused of being complicit in maintaining the oppression of women through their masculine-like behaviour (2008, p. 667).

Hellfire Angel and Spike’s experiences, as touched on in this case study, reflect some of these sentiments described by Nguyen (2008). By going against the norms and regulations operating in the ‘women’s’ circus in which they originally performed, both performers were subsequently ‘expelled’. They believe that the circus, as discussed during the interview, considered the use of costumes and props as mandatory in their performance and representation of ‘masculinity’ through drag kinging, and that the performance should not involve the exposure of the ‘naked female body’. Both performers believe they were driven out and forced to find refuge in other performance or queer sub-cultures to continue their drag, and more importantly, their performances of masculinity. Thus, the types of masculinities we perform, and which are deemed ‘acceptable’, are subject to the cultural and social values created and maintained in the particular spaces in which they are performed.

Despite having received mixed acceptance of their drag throughout their careers, Spike spoke at length about why it was important for her to continue to critique ‘power’ and masculinity through her drag characters:

I think for me that’s one of the real reasons drag king performances are important because the power is with the masculine in our society. It is the men
who still hold the power despite the fact that we’ve got a female queen, a female prime minister, a female governor general, [both correct at time of interview] the power still is with the men in society so I think it’s really important for women to continue to portray that side of masculinity in performances.

Believing that power resides with ‘the masculine’ in society, Spike deliberately avoids using the term ‘male’, believing that masculinity is not only associated with being a ‘man’, but also that of other gendered identities – it is not ‘gender’ specific (as explored in Halberstam’s theories 1998, 1999). Despite Australia having multiple female heads of state, Spike still believes that power, in this context, is still considered a ‘male’ privilege. Spike could perhaps be gesturing to all the heads of state roles that she mentions as being performances of ‘power’, but performances which ultimately do not take the ground of ‘effective’ power.

Does she consider these performances of masculinity by prominent women to be failed representations? Spike’s views on ‘drag kinging’ are much more overtly or analytically political than any of the other participants interviewed. She describes drag as a ‘weapon’ or ‘tool’ she can use to attack power, specifically abuses of power, whether that be religious, political or social power. For Spike, the performance of drag, and the performance of masculinity has much wider ramifications for herself as a lesbian woman, and as a drag king performer. Drag kings (and women for that matter), through the course of their everyday lives, exist in wider heteronormative structures that work to privilege men over women. Drag is used as a vehicle by Hellfire Angel and Spike as a means to express and comment on those experiences.

Hellfire Angel regards most of her characters as being quite ‘horrible’, in that they symbolise certain dark aspects of society. She feels she has ‘quite a few characters that are these
absolute screaming fucking bitches’ who are ‘murderous, nit-picky, selfish, arrogant paradigms’. Throughout their performances, it became clear that the characters portrayed by Spike and Hellfire Angel were very different. Largely, Spike embodies characters that are ‘masculine’ or ‘butch’ compared to Hellfire Angel, whose characters are ‘feminine’. Despite her characters being quite ‘fem’, Hellfire Angel still feels drag is a way for her to access the ‘masculine’ onstage. During these performances, there is a lot of what she calls, a ‘dom/sub dynamic’, where she is often ‘flogged’ by Spike with a ‘stockwhip’. When I asked her to explain this, Hellfire Angel said they would sometimes ‘switch’ roles. She also mentioned that some audiences would ask her why she would not take the whip back and flog Spike, arguing that ‘the whole point is that it’s done with love, it’s two characters fulfilling exactly what they want and need from this dynamic’. The voluntary nature of the performance shows a level of power in terms of the ‘submissive’ drag king, who is able to ‘take the whipping’. Hellfire Angel believes that when the positions are reversed, the key is that it is a ‘consensual switch’. ‘Power’ is understood in these performances as something voluntary, but also as something shared. Hellfire Angel discusses this further:

For me drag’s a way of saying, ‘I’m a woman but I can have all of that’, I can put on a cock, it doesn’t make me any less of a woman and it shows the amount of power that I actually have, that I can wear that cock, I can take it off, I can suck it, I can wave it around my head and I’ve still got that same power. It’s a taking back and a celebration of that masculine power that’s been denied for so many years.

Hellfire Angel believes that drag specifically provides her with a forum through which she can ‘speak’ to her audience about a particular issue. Drag allows her to critique common
understandings of power and masculinity. It is also a medium that allows her to momentarily appear as a ‘male’, signified through the adoption of a highly gendered, male ‘costume’ and more explicitly, the male genitalia which she attaches to herself. What is more important however is the removal of this costume at the end to prove to audiences how masculinity and ‘power’, can be performed by the feminine. This is also shown through the ‘sucking’ and ‘waving’ around of the male phallus, symbolising an act of control, doing what she likes to the ‘cock’. The ‘cock’ is an object that she can attach and detach at will, an object that can ultimately be manipulated. By ‘sucking’ the cock, and ‘waving’ it around, Hellfire Angel, arguably, pokes fun at the male anatomy, emasculating and diminishing the ‘biological’ symbol of ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ masculinity. Hellfire Angel resists the position ‘women’ have most frequently been reduced to in society (as subordinate to men) and instead, attempts through struggle and confrontation (Foucault 1978), to resist, transform and reverse such operations of power.

Carrigan et al’s work expands upon the relationship between women, men and masculinity explaining that ‘hegemonic masculinity is centrally connected with the institutionalization of men’s dominance over women’ and that it ‘embodies a successful strategy in relation to women’ (Carrigan et al in Adams and Savran 2002, p. 113). The drag performances of Hellfire Angel and Spike exemplify this struggle for power in a particular social, cultural and performance context. Through her showing of female masculinity and explicit control of the male phallus, Hellfire Angel’s ‘drag kinging’ attempts to break down these common conceptions of masculinity and sexual dominance over women, inverting gender roles and reversing such sexual power plays. Spike and Hellfire Angel’s drag kinging highlights the clear challenge some drag kings embrace; to critique and comment on discourses of masculinity and femininity operating in society. They are an exception compared to most of the drag
performers interviewed for this thesis, who perform mostly for ‘comedic’ purposes. The performances of Spike and Hellfire Angel, as described to me (and as I observed), were more overtly political (or queer). Despite these performances posing a challenge to common discourses relating to sex and gender, there were significant aspects to other drag king performances, as discussed throughout this analysis, which rely heavily on the successful reproduction of gendered norms to achieve this challenge. There are tensions created then concerning the performances of Australian drag kings, who adopt and potentially critique dominant forms of masculinity. This tension is subsequently released at the cessation of the performances when the drag king re-assumes his or her ‘offstage’ identity.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which masculinity (and femininity) are understood and constructed in the onstage performances of drag kings. The types of performances described to me, and which I observed, included those that critiqued common discourses on sex and gender, particularly ‘maleness’ and ‘masculinity’. This was achieved largely through critique, employing techniques including satire and parody in order to challenge, destabilise and potentially ‘emasculate’ the stereotypes they performed. These drag characters were often caricatures of dominant typecasts of men and masculinity. Other performances were less politically orientated or explicit, based instead on being comedic or paying homage to such gendered stereotypes. These performances demonstrate a potential to reinforce and reconsolidate certain stereotypes of dominant masculinity rather than critique them. Nonetheless, most of these performances established the important role ‘power’ plays in the performance of identity. As Foucault (1978) theorises, power operates throughout all
levels of society. Thus power exists in common discourses that, in turn, work to value certain individuals and groups over others. Through an examination of a range of onstage performances, I have provided a glimpse into the types of ‘masculinities’ that are produced in the drag king sub-cultures under investigation for this thesis and how these performances attempt to perform and destabilise the ‘power’ that, as Halberstam (1998, 1999) has shown, is often perceived to belong naturally to the white, biological male. The emergence of drag kinging offers up new avenues of critiquing masculinity, through theatricality, as construct.

The types of characters which are performed by the drag kings interviewed appeared flawed to a degree, often being alcoholics, sexually abusive or ‘failed’ men who lack a certain level of social power and autonomy over themselves and their social worlds. The masculinities on display through such characters, I argue, are not representative of ‘successful’ masculinities but instead, appear both problematic and marginalised. In comparison to the drag queens, most drag king performances were much more overtly political or queer in nature, deliberately using their performances as tools to destabilise common discourses on sex and gender. I have demonstrated through the analysis of this data that performance and construction of masculinity through practices of drag kinging operate differently to the performance and construction of femininity through practices of drag queening. A drag king’s ‘performance’ and theatricality of male identity unsettles the very foundations of gender, where ‘masculinity’ is assumed to be the normative and authentic ‘core’ of gender that is unable to be ‘impersonated’ or ‘performed’. The emergence of a drag king movement marks a period where this model, and the power that is believed to be derived from such models, is most clearly exposed as fabrication. The next chapter of the thesis will explore how the concept of ‘camp’ creates or enhances this theatricalisation of gender.
norms through drag king and queen sub-cultures, and how camp is understood and created by drag performers.
Chapter Four: Which Camp Are You In? A Performance Aesthetic of Drag Queening and Drag Kinging.

Camp emerged as a key theme throughout my interviews with drag kings and drag queens. This chapter will examine how the concept was understood and practised by them in their private and professional lives. During the interviews, camp was used discursively by the participants in a number of ways. Firstly, as a way to describe a particular mode of performance that aesthetically, was ‘exaggerated’. In this usage, camp was understood to present itself as artifice, something distinct from the ‘authentic’. Secondly, the performers used camp as a descriptive tool to articulate how they identify themselves or others. In analysing these usages, I will explore how camp functions as a sign of ‘queerness’, manifested through drag performances and also the role camp plays in the formation and understanding of queer identity. To begin, I will examine how camp has been theorised, with a focus on Susan Sontag’s essay ‘Notes on Camp’ (1964) and Moe Meyer’s ‘The Politics and Poetics of Camp’ (1994). Following this, I will compare how the data gathered for this research confirms this theory, particularly concerning the way camp is experienced by the performers interviewed. This analysis will suggest that in recent times ‘camp’ has experienced a changing importance in Australian gay male communities and drag queen sub-cultures and has gained increased significance and alignment with lesbian and drag king sub-cultures.
Camp: In Light of Theory

In ‘Notes on Camp’ (1964) Sontag provides examples of what she believes camp is and what camp is not. Although this essay is brief, her notes provide a starting point for analysing this concept. Her position is that camp is a sensibility, a particular mode of aestheticism. By this, Sontag suggests that individuals adopt a view of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon – able to view particular objects as ‘camp’. She identifies camp to be a postmodern ‘style’ characterised by its high degree of artifice. She suggests however that camp is not only a ‘taste’ (a tuning in to the ‘exaggerated’) but also a ‘quality’ found in objects and people. For her the ‘essence’ of camp is ‘its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration’ (Sontag 1964, p. 275). As a result of camp’s emphasis on stylization and artifice, Sontag believes that nothing in nature can be ‘campy’ and therefore all camp objects, or persons, are shaped by ‘a large element of artifice’ (1964, p. 279). Camp is about people ‘being-what-they-are-not’ (Sontag 1964, p. 279).

In the following section of the essay, Sontag positions camp as being more aligned with mass culture than the space of gay homosexuality. Despite acknowledging that camp has an affinity to, and overlaps with ‘homosexual taste’ (with homosexuals being the most articulate ‘audiences’ of camp), she believes that camp is more than this, existing throughout all culture (Sontag 1964). She provides some examples of what she considers to be ‘camp’ including Tiffany Lamps, ‘Swan Lake’ and female attire from the 1920s (Sontag 1964). These objects are considered by Sontag to be part of the ‘canon’ of camp.

Sontag’s lack of emphasis on the role of camp in homosexual cultures has come under criticism from academics such as Moe Meyer (1994). He suggests that camp exists most
importantly as queer practice, not just as ‘style’ as Sontag (1964) suggests. He argues that because camp ‘gains its political validity as an ontological critique, and because its reconceptualization was initiated by observations of queer activist practices, the term ‘queer’ may be the best descriptor of this parodic operation’ (Meyer 1994, p. 2). Meyer offers a definition of queer as being based on ‘an alternative model of the constitution of subjectivity and of social identity’ which:

- displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts (1994, p. 2-3).

Meyer (1994) argues that queer identity emerges as the result of one’s own self-consciousness and knowledge of their gay and lesbian performativity and that camp then is the production of a queer social visibility.

Meyer (1994) believes ‘camp’ to be an embodied experience, playing a crucial role in the formation and performance of queer identities. Camp is ‘informed’ particularly by queer identity and emerges through queer performativity. He defines camp as ‘the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility’ (Meyer 1994, p. 4-5). For Meyer, camp is specifically an aesthetic manifestation mobilised through gay identity. Through the performance of queer identity, Meyer suggests that such individuals express opposition to essentialist notions of identity as fixed and biologically determined. Meyer’s theorisation of
camp performance takes the position that it is utilised ‘by queers’ ‘for queers’ to destabilise heteronormative understandings of sex and gender. Unlike Sontag, Meyer’s work focuses on the articulation of how camp operates or functions rather than an emphasis on what camp ‘means’.

Ware’s work provides a more specific analysis of camp’s historic emergence, suggesting the word first entered the dictionary as late-Victorian slang, meaning ‘actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis’, ‘used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character’ (Ware in Cleto 2002, p. 9). He argues that the word gained its use in theatricals, high society, fashion circles, showbiz and underground city life (Ware in Cleto 2002, p. 9). Rayter also provides a more detailed look at the term’s etymology:

A number of critics argue that the English word "camp" comes from the French se camper, meaning "to take a stand," "to flaunt," or "to pose," and it is the latter that turns up in one of Wilde’s more famous epigrams (from his play An Ideal Husband, 1895): "To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up." This type of camp ethos destabilizes the "natural" and is connected to aestheticism, with which camp is often equated (Rayter in Stein 2004, p. 188).

Camp has also been used by academics including Butler (1990) and Newton (1979) to articulate how camp operates specifically in homosexual and drag sub-cultures to expose and critique common notions of gender as socially constructed. The action of camp ‘destabilising’ the ‘natural’ as suggested by Rayter can also be viewed in light of Butler’s theory of gender performativity (1990). Butler uses drag and manifestations of camp to
exemplify how gender exists as fabrication. She argues that with the repetition of various stylised acts, individuals work to maintain coherent gendered identities in what she calls the ‘heterosexual’ matrix (1990). This heterosexual matrix sees gender as binary, where one’s gender is considered to follow naturally from the sexed category he/she was assigned at birth. Such a system then is based on and around the idea of heterosexual reproduction. Butler (1990) sees camp as highly political, most often manifested through performances of drag which aim to debunk the ‘myth’ of a true gender identity. Rayter expands on this argument suggesting that camp, as drag, ‘is not simply an imitation of fixed ideas about male and female, but instead draws attention—through theatricality—to the concept of gender as a sustained and repeated performance’ (Rayter in Stein 2004, p. 189).

Willox (2003) examines this historical relationship between camp and gay and lesbian cultures, suggesting that camp’s function was traditionally parodic, humorous and ironic. He argues it began as an ‘internally incongruous or self-contradictory sensibility that is used to disrupt traditional categories, usually though not exclusively gender, through over conformity, parody and/or caricature’ (Willox 2003, p. 267). Camp was originally used as a metaphorical ‘weapon’ by queers to challenge ‘straight society through a defensive, offensive strategy that disarmed the insults and labels thrown at them through appropriation’ (Willox 2003, p. 265). With the historic marginalisation and vilification of homosexuals, camp then was once extremely relevant and important to the lives of homosexual men and other queer-identified people, including drag queens. Meyer (1994, p.1-2) suggests the term ‘queer’ presents ‘an ontological challenge to dominant labelling philosophies, especially the medicalization of the subject implied by the word ‘homosexual’.

Rayter agrees, suggesting that ‘a queer articulation of camp challenges the supposed universality of a subject that is typically assumed to be straight, white, and male’ (Rayter in
Camp, for ‘earlier’ gay communities was political, a way to make visible a group of oppressed and socially marginalised people.

Like Meyer, Cleto also highlights the important link between camp and queer, claiming that ‘the two terms have in fact shared the critical stage, we might say, since their very coming into (discursive) being’ (2002, p. 12). He believes that ‘queer’ entered the English language through the Elizabethan underworld meaning ‘oblique, bent, twisted, crooked’ and has been equated with the demystification of cultural constructions (Cleto 2002, p. 12-15). Rayter’s work also touches on the negative consequences of camp’s challenge to normalised ‘gender codes’:

by celebrating drag and ‘gender-fuck’ and revelling in the theatricality and play of identity, queer camp often upsets those who desire assimilation for gays and lesbians, especially at the expense of others they label as ‘too queer’ (Rayter in Stein 2004, p. 190).

Camp, despite being an important political tool utilised by early Australian gay communities (and worldwide), has not found universal acceptance and ‘use’. With greater tolerance of gender diversity in contemporary Australia, including a greater acceptance of homosexual identities, this chapter suggests that camp no longer operates as strongly as intervention in the drag queen sub-cultures examined in this thesis. Although camp is still performed in drag queen sub-cultures, this chapter will highlight how the role of ‘camp’ has changed in those spaces as told through the experiences of drag performers. For many young drag queens, camp has become associated with an older, more activist ‘gay community’ that is
now passé. By contrast, now more than ever, camp has found increasing relevance and importance in the performances of drag kings, and the identities of those performers.

One of the first examples for contextualising the term ‘camp’ in relation to drag or homosexual communities is Esther Newton’s *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1979). Newton (1979, p. 105) argues that drag queens concern themselves with ‘masculine-feminine transformation’ while camp concerns itself with ‘a philosophy of transformations and incongruity’. She believes that drag queens express incongruity while camp is used by them to achieve a higher synthesis (Newton 1979, p. 105). Newton suggests camp is not a particular thing but something which signifies the ‘relationship between things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality’ and that ultimately ‘camp is in the eye of the beholder’ (1979, p. 105). Through this, Newton positions camp as something subjective and not easily ‘defined’. This chapter will show that in Australian drag sub-cultures, the concept of camp is tangible, complex and changing. Cleto (2002) highlights this conceptual difficulty arguing that in language, ‘camp’ and ‘queer’ work in all aspects of speech and have no static grammatical functioning, meaning they are often used interchangeably as adjectives, nouns and verbs. Newton (1979, p.106) describes what she views as the three most recurrent characteristics of camp; ‘incongruity’, ‘theatricality’ and ‘humour’ and that ‘incongruity is the subject matter of camp, theatricality its style, and humour its strategy’. This chapter will now examine how these theorisations of camp play out in the experiences of a range of drag performers interviewed for this thesis, focusing on the different ways camp was used discursively by those performers.
Camp: An Analysis

The performers interviewed for this research spoke of ‘camp’ in a number of ways. It was most frequently used to describe a particular performance style and as a label to describe others. This analysis is primarily concerned with the discursive deployment of camp. Although ‘camp’ featured more prominently in the interviews of drag kings, the drag queens used camp inferentially, describing various ‘qualities’ that index it. I will focus on a range of case studies where performers made reference to camp, unpacking how it was understood and experienced by them, and what meaning/s were attributed to it. This analysis hopes to gain a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which camp operates in Australian drag sub-cultures and gay communities and what it might tell us about the changing nature of these cultures more broadly.

Camp as an Exaggerated Performance Aesthetic: Spike and Hellfire Angel

Spike and Hellfire Angel (aged 47 and 28, introduced in previous chapter), are a Sydney drag king duo who describe their drag performance as ‘strip fantasy’. Their performances are highly political and sexual and aim to challenge dominant hegemonic understandings of sex and gender. Both performers spoke at length about the concept of ‘power’ during their interview, discussing how they use drag performance as a means of accessing and critiquing ‘power’. They deem ‘power’ to reside most commonly with men. Throughout the interview,
they also made reference to the concept of ‘camp’, making regular use of the term when describing the style of their drag performances:

We love fantastic, showy costumes, we love using strip elements, we really like melodrama and really enjoy using camp and that’s something that I think we’ve gotten into a lot more (Hellfire Angel).

This excerpt was the first direct mention of ‘camp’ in the interview. Hellfire Angel sees camp as a specific performance style or aesthetic. Camp however, is not the main feature of their performances, as shown through Hellfire Angel’s use of the word ‘love’ when discussing the ‘showy costumes’ and ‘strip elements’ but only, ‘really like’ and ‘enjoy’ when discussing ‘melodrama’ and ‘camp’. As introduced in this chapter, camp has historically (by theorists such as Meyer 1994) been associated with the space of homosexual men, usually manifested or exemplified through the drag queen. The place of camp in Australian lesbian sub-cultures however has become increasingly visible, particularly through practices of drag kinging. The above excerpt sets up a relationship between Hellfire Angel (as performer) and camp (as a particular performance mode). The idea that camp is something they are just ‘getting into’ suggests camp may not be a traditional aspect to their performances or to drag king performances more generally. What can be understood are the ‘elements’ that comprise Hellfire Angel and Spike’s performances – elements that use exaggeration. By employing ‘strip elements’ and over-the-top performance styles such as camp and melodrama, both performers ultimately use drag as statement:
Hellfire Angel: I think it ties in a little for me with melodrama; it’s a kind of highly showy...

Spike: Exaggerated.

Hellfire Angel: Exaggerated aesthetic that acknowledges that the audience is completely there with you, it’s not trying to put anything over on the audience, it’s saying ‘we know you know what we’re saying here and we’re all along for a ride’.

Spike: I also think that spending a lot of time in regional areas, we are fed up to the eye balls and beyond, we’ve been told to tone it down. So camp for me is the epitome of not toning it down, it’s taking it to the rafters and beyond.

The previous excerpt identified ‘camp’ as a particular type of performance style; in this excerpt, Hellfire Angel explicitly discusses the effects of that mode. The ‘effect’ is that camp, for both performers, is something that is ‘exaggerated’. Again, Hellfire Angel repeats the words ‘showy’ and ‘melodrama’, emphasising camp as something over-the-top and stylized. ‘Kind of highly showy’ also suggests there are varying degrees of ‘showiness’ and perhaps varying degrees of camp itself. Through Spike’s assistance in suggesting that ‘camp’ is ‘exaggerated’, indicates that for both participants, camp is not easily defined.

Hellfire Angel’s suggestion that camp acknowledges that an audience is ‘completely there with you’ indicates that for her, camp fashions a particular relationship between drag performer(s) and their audience. In this context, camp is something collaborative. By claiming that it is ‘not trying to put anything over the audience’ Hellfire Angel also suggests it is a relationship based on equality, a relationship where the performer/s and audiences
understand or are in agreement with one another. Through the use of the word ‘completely’, Hellfire Angel reinforces the idea that for these audiences, there is no doubt that what they are witnessing is artifice. Sontag (1964, p.283) discusses a similar relationship between camp and those who ‘view’ camp arguing that ‘persons...respond to their audiences’ who in turn ‘begin ‘camping’’. Hellfire Angel however places a higher emphasis on both the audience and performer working together to create camp. Camp in this instance is not born out of a ‘reaction to audiences’, as suggested by Sontag, but is mutually shaped.

Hellfire Angel’s view that camp has the ability to ‘speak’ to audiences, (‘it’s saying something’) supports Meyer’s (1994) argument that camp is frequently used as a vehicle by queers for political comment. Camp is used by Hellfire Angel and Spike as a means to make visible their identities as queer individuals. Both performers describe their drag kinging to be ‘queer performance’, a manifestation of their offstage subjectivities as lesbian-identified women. Drag kinging for both participants is performative, viewed as a means through which they can critique and break down dominant hegemonic models of sex and gender. One way they achieve this is through their use of ‘camp’ stylization and its emphasis on exaggeration. Through their ‘overplaying’ of certain gender roles in their drag performances, Hellfire Angel and Spike parody particular stereotypes of dominant masculinity and femininity, making them humorous. This over-exaggeration works to reveal these stereotypes as construct, indeed, weakening their ability to appear as ‘naturalised’ or ‘hegemonic’.

Hellfire Angel’s articulation that camp infers both performer and audience are ‘along for the ride’ still shows camp as ‘fun’ (as understood in light of the characteristics of camp as
described by Newton (1979)). Going ‘along for the ride’ implies that both audience and performer are *accepting* of camp as being a journey of exaggeration and artifice. The audience is willing to partake in this ‘showiness’ and ultimately agree to the pretence that is coupled with ‘camp’. This high degree of ‘artifice’ was further exemplified through Hellfire Angel’s reference to camp during a discussion on the specifics relating to their drag appearance:

...we don’t wear facial hair in a sort of bristly sense, we wear it as make-up rather than the stuck on facial hair so it’s quite obvious and one of the aspects of the campiness that we really like is that it’s make-up and it adds to that sense of suspension and disbelief.

Here we are provided with an example of how camp is usually created in the drag duo’s performances. By choosing to use make-up to produce the appearance of facial hair rather than using ‘stuck on’ hair (arguably more realistic), they are opting for a higher degree of artifice. Being deliberately ‘obvious’ in their adoption of this disguise (or lack thereof), Hellfire Angel and Spike use make-up as a way of exposing masculinity as fabrication. A drawn on ‘beard’ brings attention to the aims of both performers not to appear as ‘real’ men onstage, but rather, as ‘women-dressed-as-men’. Camp is cleverly used to highlight the incongruences between the sex and gender of these performers.

In her discussion of drag king sub-cultures in the United States, Halberstam (1998) provides a taxonomy of female masculinities usually on display in drag king performances. Hellfire Angel and Spike’s performances would be considered what she terms ‘femme pretender’,
drag king shows which often appear to be more like drag queen shows ‘not simply because the disjuncture between biological sex and gender is the basis for the gender act but because irony and camp flavour the performance’ (Halberstam 1998, p. 248). This style of drag kinging is in opposition to other drag king performances such as those Halberstam considers ‘butch realness’. In these performances, Halberstam suggests such performers are normally ‘convincing of their masculinity’ where the drag king could easily pass for being biologically ‘male’ (1998, p. 246). Hellfire Angel and Spike ultimately desire their audiences to ignore their knowledge of what is and what is not reality (‘suspension’) and to go along with the artifice of their drag performances which work to expose masculinity, through ‘camp’, as an ‘act’.

Later in the interview, Hellfire Angel and Spike discussed more broadly the significance of camp regarding the Sydney drag king scene and how they believe camp style has transitioned into the performances of some drag kings. Camp is discussed in relation to its cultural and social context:

...one of the main drag king pioneers in Sydney took so many of the cues from the drag queens, was originally performing as a drag queen and coping a shitload of flack for it and eventually moved into drag king performance and took so many of the aspects...like the massive hair, the wigs, the make-up, the glamour, the glitter, that really exaggerated sense of camp and put all that into being a drag king. Some of the drag kings, who consider themselves traditional [and] who were doing more along the lines of male impersonation with a mimed male vocal starting telling **** ‘that’s not drag king’. So it seems really weird to start compartmentalising it all and saying ‘no, no you’ve got to keep them all separate’
because they merge in so many ways and they take cues from each other and we
perform with a lot of drag queens at the Sly Fox and my make-up has been
inspired by a lot of drag queens. They’re pioneers in both senses and to start
putting up walls is doing them all a lot of disrespect I think (Hellfire Angel).

Camp is contextualised in the specific locale of the Sydney drag queen and king
communities. ‘Camp’ is described as a borrowed aesthetic, one that traditionally belongs to
the performances of drag queens. Hellfire Angel uses the word ‘camp’ to directly reference
practices of drag queening and suggests how this particular performance style made its way
into parts of the Sydney drag king scene. Camp is, once again, considered to be something
which is ‘exaggerated’ and we have specific examples of what makes ‘camp’ camp; the
‘massive hair’, ‘wigs’, ‘make-up’ and ‘glitter’ of the drag queen. Such features reinforce the
idea of camp as artifice, a disguise that is ‘put-on’ by the drag performer. This understanding
of camp, as being an ‘act’ supports Sontag’s suggestion of camp as ‘people-being-what-they-
are-not’ (1964, p. 279). Camp in this instance is performative. The phrase ‘sense of camp’
used by Hellfire Angel also reiterates Sontag’s suggestion of camp as sensibility (1964). Here,
camp is something an audience (and performer) may feel and experience, but may not be
able to describe or articulate.

Hellfire Angel’s above description also reveals the extent to which camp has typically been
associated with drag queen sub-cultures. By suggesting a level of resistance by drag kings in
their adoption of a camp style of performance, the transition of camp into Australian drag
king cultures has perhaps been a difficult one. Hellfire Angel describes how ‘camp’ is not
considered a legitimate form of drag kinging in the view of other drag kings who desire
instead to portray a level of ‘realness’ through their performances. Those performers, who ‘mime’ to a male vocal, consider themselves to be ‘male impersonators’. Camp then is positioned in opposition to such styles of drag kinging which work instead to pay homage to dominant forms of masculinity rather than to expose them as construct. That the performer, mentioned by Hellfire Angel, was once a drag queen is perhaps indicative of how camp may have found its way into the performance styles of some Australian drag kings. It is hoped this case study has highlighted that camp, as a style of performance, is not isolated solely to the experiences of drag queens and has become increasingly visible in Australian drag king performances and the spaces in which they exist. Spike and Hellfire Angel use camp as a mark of resistance and resilience, providing them with an opportunity, through performance, to comment on various social discourses (particularly those created and sustained by heteronormative ideologies), and to express themselves as queer individuals.

Camp as a Tool for Self-Description: Texas Trey

Texas Trey (pseudonym, aged 40), introduced in the previous chapter, is a Sydney drag king who describes her performances as being mostly ‘comedic’. A fan of old show tunes, Texas Trey loves the ‘exaggerated’ style that these types of performances embody. Despite her performances being aesthetically ‘camp’, she also uses the term as a way to describe herself:

Since I was little, I used to get dressed up in my brother’s clothes all the time and mime to songs, it’s funny, I’ve always been camp. **** [drag queen] says I’m the
campest lesbian she knows, a gay man trapped in a lesbian’s body. I’ve always loved performing and I’ve always loved doing stuff in singing and dancing and anything.

The act of dressing in her brother’s clothes and miming to songs is flagged by Trey as being markers of ‘camp’. Camp is the artifice of being someone other than herself (dressing in her brother’s clothes). Through the phrases ‘since I was little’ and ‘I’ve always been camp’, Trey attempts to establish herself as always having been a ‘camp’ person. Camp, for Trey, is an embodied experience, something which plays a role in the understanding and performance of her identity. Trey is not intentionally being camp, but rather is camp. This is a contrast to the previous case study where Hellfire Angel and Spike describe camp specifically as a particular performance mode. Although there are elements of this in Trey’s childhood experimentations with gender - dressing up in her brother’s clothes miming to songs, her use of the term ‘camp’ is different. She, like Hellfire Angel and Spike identify camp (or its effects) as belonging to the space of theatricality and performance - ‘I’ve always loved doing stuff in singing and dancing’ however for her, camp is not only a ‘performance’ - but also a lived experience.

How do Trey’s experiences relate to Sontag’s suggestion that camp is about people ‘being-what-they-are-not’ (1964, p. 279)? Although there are aspects to Trey’s experimentation with gender that are based on exaggeration and artifice, there are also parts of her that she considers to ‘be’ camp. Sontag (1964, p.283) argues that ‘camp is either completely naive or else wholly conscious’. How do Trey’s experiences fit into this suggestion of camp as theorised by Sontag? Is it possible for her to exist somewhere in-between? Trey’s
experiences indicate the tension and complexity that exists between understandings of camp as self-identification and lived experience and the theatricality or performance of camp as something that is intentional and artificial.

When Texas Trey describes how a drag queen labelled her as ‘a gay man trapped in a lesbian’s body’, she articulates her identity in relation to gay male culture. This process of identity negotiation minimises Trey’s individuality, implying that her ‘campiness’ originates or belongs to the space of male homosexuality. Not only is she seen as ‘a gay man trapped in a lesbian body’ by another drag queen, but by mentioning this characterisation during the interview, Trey accepts that positioning. Is camp then, a standard of measurement that belongs to gay male life? The possibility of being the ‘campest lesbian’ again suggests there are varying degrees of ‘campiness’, one can essentially be a ‘little bit’ or ‘quite a bit’ camp. Camp then cannot be defined as homogenous but is a concept that is shifting and contextual, playing multiple roles in the understanding and performance of queer identity.

The context of Texas Trey’s ‘campiness’ overlaps with the space of gay men and drag queening more generally; she cannot just exist as a ‘camp lesbian’. In telling her that she is a ‘gay man in a lesbian body’, the drag queen implies there is something abnormal about the way in which Trey identifies. By professing that Trey’s campiness is ‘trapped’ in a lesbian body, the drag queen suggests there is something ‘wrong’ or unnatural about this pairing. Trey’s account is one of many examples (discussed throughout this thesis) of how drag performers construct and understand their identities in relation to their social worlds. Trey makes sense of and articulates her identity by referring to how others perceive her. References to camp as belonging to gay male culture demonstrate the strong connection the term has traditionally had with the identity of gay men and drag queens more broadly.
Texas Trey discussed the differences she saw in the performance aesthetics of drag queening and drag kinging:

...the big thing is that drag queens have been around for a very long time, they've got their foot in the door; they are camp. It’s easier for men to look like women, whereas the other way around it’s very hard...I see drag kings, and some of them get up and I just think ‘it’s a girl in men’s clothing’ but you look at some drag queens and you just think ‘wow that’s gorgeous, that’s a beautiful-looking woman’. You’ve got all the make-up and you’ve got layers and you’ve got the corsets and as a drag king, all you can really do is strap your chest and draw a beard on.

Trey uses camp as a tool for demarcation between ‘us’ (the drag kings) and ‘them’ (the drag queens). She attributes the cultural success of the drag queens to their having a ‘foot in the door’ for longer and secondly, their successful representation of a camp performance aesthetic. Comparing this to drag kings’ performances, she thinks these performers are ‘just’ girls dressed in men’s clothing. When talking about the drag queens, the language she adopts is kinder and more flattering; ‘gorgeous’, ‘beautiful’, ‘wow’. For Trey, the ability of the drag king to maintain the illusion of being a ‘man’ is less convincing than the drag queens’ ability to maintain the illusion of being a ‘woman’. There are more ‘layers’ to the drag queening process. The disguise of drag queens is aided by the ‘putting on’ of make-up, costumes and other performance enhancements, rather than containing or ‘strapping’ down the body. In Trey’s view, drag kings do not have the ability to be as ‘gorgeous’ or
‘beautiful’ as drag queens because there are ‘less layers’ and ‘less ingredients’ in the drag king recipe. In this view, camp belongs to the world of drag queening and its aesthetics.

For Trey, drag queening and camp is about looking like a ‘woman’. In this sense, she links the desire of some drag queens wanting to portray ‘realness’ to the ‘artifice’ that is produced by camp. If camp exposes the theatricality of gender, and therefore its existence as construct, how can these two concepts be intertwined? For Trey, the make-up, layers and corsets all add to the image which she believes create ‘a beautiful-looking woman’. Drag for her is not the challenging or exposing of the theatricality of gender, but rather, the creation of a unified and normative ‘image’ of what a woman should look like (beautiful and gorgeous). If drag kings fail to appear as ‘real’ men onstage (according to her), should not these performances then be considered successful representations of camp, as understood in the subversive queer sense? Ironically, Trey views camp, in the context of drag queen sub-cultures, as aiding the perpetuation of gender stereotypes rather than exposing them as fabrication.

Drag kings have often used camp as a tool to differentiate between the performance aesthetics of drag queening and drag kinging, and therefore as a way for them to understand and position themselves in relation to their social worlds. Texas Trey discussed this distinction concerning her experiences as a drag king:

It’s not like drag queens, it’s all make-up, it’s all lashes and hair whereas I can’t put on this huge hair so again I go the comedy angle. **** (drag queen) just gave me this gorgeous foam wig, it’s so cool, it’s like a blue Elvis one and it’s about this tall off my head and the other one I’ve got this big, pink Mohawk, so I don’t try to
make it look like I’m a guy, cos I’m not going to pull it off, with these double Ds it ain’t going to happen. So I try and do the funny angle and try the comedy songs, and it’s just trying to make them laugh. The difference is that drag queens have been around longer and they can do it a lot more serious. I find it easier for men to be women, like I said when **** (drag king) gets out there on stage, she’s cute and she can sit there and do those really cute boy numbers cos she’s flat anyway and she’s got this skinny, little, bony ass and no hips but the problem with women is you’ve got hips, and you’ve got a tummy and you’ve got boobs and it’s really hard to mask all that whereas it’s easier to put on things.

Earlier in the interview, Trey described herself offstage as being inherently ‘camp’. Here however she discusses how she is camp onstage. Her body ‘frustrates’ her ability to present a degree of male ‘realness’ through her drag and she instead relies on ‘camp’ as an alternative style of drag kinging. ‘I can’t put on this huge hair’, suggests there are restrictions on her ability to access camp stylizations. These restrictions reflect the discussions by Hellfire Angel regarding a resistance to camp in Sydney’s drag king sub-cultures. Trey alludes to the idea that practices of drag kinging maintain strict performance codes and that putting on ‘huge hair’ (or other more obvious markers of camp) is likely not encouraged by some in the wider drag king community. By describing how she is given wigs and songs to use in her performances, specifically by other drag queens, again highlights the degree to which ‘camp’ traditionally belongs to the domain of drag queening and gay male culture. Texas Trey accepts the difficulty she experiences in portraying ‘male realness’ onstage, articulating that a humorous or camp angle to her performances enables her to laugh, along with audiences, at this inadequacy. Camp intentionally exposes and
exaggerates these ‘flaws’, exposing this disjuncture between Trey’s sex and the gender she attempts to portray through drag.

Trey’s opinion that it is easier for drag queens to present themselves as ‘women’, compared to drag kings presenting as ‘men’ suggests men do not face as many limitations in being able to achieve a desired drag aesthetic. In this statement (and the previous) she says ‘I find it easier’ and ‘it’s easier I find’ for men to be women, giving herself authority to evaluate and comment on the experience of drag queens, despite not being one – a view based largely on observation. Trey juxtaposes the concepts of ‘masking’ and ‘enhancing’, where drag kings have to ‘hide’ certain aspects of their body in order to pass as ‘men’. Drag queens on the other hand, have to ‘add’. In this view it is easier for a drag queen to ‘enhance’ rather than to ‘mask’ certain physical characteristics to successfully maintain a desired appearance onstage. This again highlights the role camp plays in exposing gender, as performance.

Melbourne drag king Slick (pseudonym, aged 39) also identifies the aesthetic differences she sees between the performances of drag kings and drag queens. Slick, who describes herself in drag as being ‘the quintessential Italian male love god’, produces a type of performance that is aesthetically very ‘real’, or as Halberstam terms ‘butch realness’ (1998). Her character is derived from her cultural identity, being from an Italian migrant family. Her drag character has strong connections to her ‘offstage’ identity. Although she does not use the word ‘camp’ directly, Slick discusses the elements of camp outlined in this chapter. She does so to articulate how she sees herself in relation to the wider gay and lesbian community in Melbourne:
The older generation of drag queens are very melodramatic and they like to do their ballads, anything that's Celine Dion, and even some of the young, good, drag queens will stick to the stereotypical Britney Spears or Katy Perry kind of number, whereas the drag kings have always had this edgier, underground sense about them. They don’t go for songs that are known...they go with alternative things but then again some of them would do really awesome classic songs, so I find that when the girls choose the music, they really get into the song and there’s maybe something about that song that means something to them whereas the drag queens, they tend to focus on their outfit or their dance moves.

This use of the word ‘melodrama’ echoes the concepts of the theatricality of camp as an over-produced and exaggerated aesthetic (‘they like their ballads’). In describing the type of music she believes drag queens usually use in their performances, she mentions well known divas (arguably ‘camp’ themselves) including Celine Dion and Britney Spears, individuals whose performance of femininity relies heavily on its theatricalisation. Drag queens, to Slick, are ‘obvious’ (and camp) and drag kings underground and ‘edgier’. Drag kings choose music which ‘they really get into’ suggesting those choices are meaningful and therefore tied more closely to the performer’s identity. For Slick, the performances of drag kings are deemed to be more genuine compared to those produced by drag queens. The performance of the drag queen is focused instead on the ‘artifice’ and the campiness that is produced through displays of hyper-femininity. Here, the melodrama and the artifice of camp are juxtaposed to the real or the genuine. Texas Trey, Spike and Hellfire Angel desire to be ‘camp’, however Slick demonstrates a desire to be ‘real’. The drag kings interviewed for this research therefore express varying degrees of affinity towards camp. While it can safely be said that
all of the drag kings agreed on the aesthetic proposition of the term as being over-produced and exaggerated, their use of the word, and the value they ascribed to it, varied significantly.

Camp as a Way to Devalue Others

The final section of this chapter will deal primarily with interview data from drag queens to further explore how the concept of camp has been practiced differently by these performers. Although most of the drag queens did not mention the word as frequently, they certainly referred to the attributes of camp already identified in this chapter. Due to the obliqueness of their references, this section will follow a much looser case study structure. Many of the drag queens saw camp as a concept associated with an ‘older’ generation of drag queens; performers who understood camp as subversive, or queer. I will analyse how camp was used discursively by drag queens and will discuss why there appears to be a move away from a camp style of drag queening in recent times.

A significant portion of younger drag queens interviewed (aged in their 20s), suggested a decreased visibility of ‘camp’ as a gay performance aesthetic. As introduced previously, Sydney drag queen Chloe (pseudonym, aged 28) describes himself as being a ‘gender illusionist’. Chloe refers to his character as being one that is ‘beautiful’, often mistaken for being a ‘real’ woman (onstage and off). Chloe’s drag aesthetic, as portraying a level of ‘realness’ was in natural opposition to the performance style of camp. As performance manager at a popular nightclub on Oxford Street in Sydney, Chloe was able to comment on the changes he perceives in how camp (and drag) operate in gay sub-cultures:
...your traditional old school drag as we call it, nobody really does it anymore.

**** was doing the camp stuff at the Imperial but even she kept evolving her stuff .... a lot of the traditional kind of style of performance isn’t as accessible to 18-year-old-kids, they don’t have the same appreciation of drag...they don’t get it. I remember when I came out, that’s what you did, you watched 30 or 40-year-old men dancing around miming to songs and you loved it, it was entertaining and it was great. Now if you put one of those shows on that I watched when I was 18 to an 18-year-old kid, they just don’t get it, they’re just like ‘what is this?’ I guess maybe society has changed, entertainment’s changed, social networking, television, cable television, the Internet, I guess it’s all different now.

Camp is used by Chloe to describe a particular performance mode, but there is also a devaluing of that particular mode. Camp is seen as being outdated, ‘nobody really does it anymore’, and something that was considered ‘traditional’. The camp performer Chloe mentions is deemed only ‘relevant’ because ‘she kept evolving her stuff’. Camp and drag are therefore a shifting and changing phenomenon in Australian gay sub-cultures. These changes are influenced by the shifting demographics of gay (and perhaps non-gay) audiences. This is in opposition to Spike and Hellfire Angel’s experiences of camp: stressing that camp is about an audience/performer interaction. With Chloe, we have the opposite implication, that there is a breakdown in the way camp translates from stage to audience, because ‘old school drag’ (or camp drag), ‘isn’t accessible to 18-year-old kids’. This also suggests it is not ‘camp’ as such which has caused this fracturing between performer and audience but rather that younger audiences ‘don’t have the same appreciation of drag’.

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Drag, according to Chloe, has been devalued and has had to adapt and change in order to suit the shifting face of Australian gay communities. Chloe discusses how he hires gay and straight performers in his nightclub to ensure he provides ‘different’ forms of entertainment to ‘younger’, less ‘gay-identified’ audiences, rather than only hiring drag queens (to be discussed in the next chapter).

In a recent study, Aymar Christian argues that the origins of ‘camp’ (in gay bars) was ‘public yet impersonal’ (2010, p. 352). Camp then was about artifice and exaggeration that ‘masked’ a performer’s identity. With the advent of YouTube and other online ‘vlogging’ sites, Christian argues that camp has become increasingly personal, ‘infusing sincerity, emotion, and deeper meanings of selfhood into ‘camp’’ (2010, p. 352). Christian interviewed and observed a range of ‘vloggers’ on YouTube, a virtual medium through which people post videos or ‘blogs’ in order to communicate with one another. These ‘vloggers’ were not only ‘homosexuals’ or drag queens but included singers, actors and other entertainers who considered their ‘performances’ (albeit skits, commentary, miming, dancing and so on) to be ‘camp’. Christian (2010, p.352) suggests camp was once known as a ‘style of communication, a social glue within a subculture, or political position’ and believes this newest manifestation of camp is different to those from the past. Christian (2010, p.353) argues that vloggers challenge traditional ideas of camp as ‘artifice’ and as ‘detached’ and instead style it as ‘more harmonious with emotional and personal expressions’. Camp, once rooted in concepts of queer identity and community, is now (within online manifestations) about expressing individuality. The way camp has come to be articulated and produced through these online mediums is seen by Christian to be more ‘genuine’ in nature due to the use of camp as a tool for ‘self-expression’. Like the drag queens interviewed for this thesis, Christian documents generational shifts in understandings of camp. In Australian drag
queen sub-cultures, camp is now seen as a performance aesthetic characteristic of ‘older’ drag performers. Christian also believes that ‘gay’ has essentially ‘gone from the margins’ and has become mainstreamed:

The YouTube videos I saw and the interviews I conducted suggested a historically specific shift in young people’s relationship to new media, camp, and queer history, marking the move from marginal, ironic, community-forming Camp to more mainstream, earnest, personally inflected forms online (2010, p. 357).

Christian’s findings on gay identity and camp in online spaces are supported by similar findings in this thesis. With the need for gay ‘only’ identity diminishing in recent times, so too are the forms that produce and make visible those identities. Christian (2010, p.359) argues that gays have historically been positioned as ‘separate from normative society’, resulting in ‘deviance’ as the organizing concept behind early manifestations of camp. Camp then came to be the way in which homosexuals were historically portrayed in mass culture and media. With camp originally associated with ‘queer’ identity - a medium through which performers and queer individuals could challenge heteronormative constructs of sex and gender - Christian suggests this critique and seriousness of camp has been diluted in online spaces where people instead ‘express one’s self-ownership and personal identity’ (2010, p. 360). In this context, camp has moved from being the face of a particular community, to being a personal reflection and expression of one’s own individuality. Similar to Sontag’s view on camp (1964), Christian’s participants did not see camp as belonging exclusively to ‘gay’ life (2010, p. 360). Ultimately Christian argues that camp ‘emphasizes difference, camp
online emphasizes the self’ and that ‘in style, Camp 2.0 downplays artifice in favour of sincerity’ (2010, p. 362-364). Christian suggests there has been an increased turn towards camp being aesthetically presented as realist:

Younger performers, who make up the majority of vloggers I saw on YouTube, are more casual and more sincere about their vlogging. Their aesthetics - costumes, set design, and scripts – are more spare and less calculated; many of them film them in one or a few takes, do not write out scripts or spend hours in makeup (2010, p. 365).

While there were similar findings regarding camp as ‘self-expression’ in the discussions with Texas Trey, there were other findings in Christian’s work in contrast to those in this study. Christian believes that within online spaces, the interaction between performer and audience has diminished. Christian agrees with Meyer (1994) that historically, the language of camp has been shaped ‘by and for gay peers’ but suggests that now, with an increasingly heterosexual or mainstream audience, online performers do not camp ‘with’ audiences, but rather ‘to’ audiences (2010). This is in contrast to Spike and Hellfire Angel’s discussion about the strong relationship they see as being created by camp between performer and audience in face-to-face interactions. Ultimately Christian (2010, p.368) argues it is a ‘camping to, not camping with’ for online forms of camp entertainment, where the primary focus of users is to firstly reveal their vision, and secondly, glean the opinion of others. Unlike Spike and Hellfire Angel who see camp as collaborative, Christian sees camp as individual. Although this thesis acknowledges the differences in face-to-face and online forms of ‘camp’
entertainment, Christian’s study is helpful in elucidating the changing nature of ‘camp’ and the nature of performance cultures in contemporary times.

In returning to the experiences of camp in the experiences of the drag queens interviewed for this research, Sydney performer (and gay scene veteran) Felicia Furious (pseudonym, aged 42) describes how his drag aesthetic changed in order to keep pace with these shifting understandings of gay identity and drag:

Well once upon a time, I thought the only thing you could do was be a freak to be a drag queen, that you had to be this over-the-top kind of ridiculous...so we changed my look and we evolved it into this old time movie starlet.

Born in Sydney and adopted at birth, Felicia was raised in the affluent north Sydney suburb of Pymble. He describes his economic position as ‘comfortable’ and lives in a small apartment in Redfern in Sydney’s inner west. Felicia no longer stars in any regular ‘production’ shows in Sydney (due to what he perceives as his significant weight gain), but runs a range of successful ‘trivia’ nights across the city. As a drag queen trivia hostess, Felicia’s performance of drag exemplifies how the medium of drag has changed. In this extract Felicia explains not only how his drag appearance shifted but also how his views on drag have changed. Felicia believes drag was originally centred on the idea of camp as exaggerated, melodramatic and theatrical. That his character transitioned into an old time ‘movie starlet’ suggests a toning down of Felicia’s drag aesthetic and its existence as a manifestation of ‘camp’. Originally believing he had to be a ‘freak’ or ‘ridiculous’ suggests it was not Felicia’s desire to be so, moulding his drag to suit the expectations of drag sub-
cultures in the earlier years of gay Sydney. By stating ‘we changed my look’ suggests it was not only Felicia who decided on this change but that his ‘aesthetic evolution’ was possibly a result of others in the social context at the time. Turning himself into an ‘old time movie starlet’ connotes class, poise, beauty; making respectable the ridiculousness of camp. Felicia’s experiences highlight the move of drag queens away from camp towards performances of ‘realness’ that aim to represent normative forms of femininity in contemporary drag queen sub-cultures.

South Australian born Adelaide performer, Red Sparkle (pseudonym, aged 45), was the only drag queen interviewed who overtly used the word ‘camp’ to describe his performance aesthetic. With gold rings on each of his fingers, Sparkle describes himself as being ‘above average’ financially, owning his own dance/acting school and talent agency in the heart of Adelaide. Originally a circus performer, he transitioned into doing drag in the mid-1980s. He first mentioned the word to describe how he felt about dressing up in drag for the first time and what it meant to him:

...I’d worked for Disney for quite some time in character suits, so I was familiar with working as a suit character and for me it was just taking on another one, and I was a trained dancer. I just took on the role of this drag queen thinking it was a bit of fun, bit of campiness and to me it’s always about performance. I’m a true drag queen in the sense that I do it for performance.

Camp is paired with the words ‘fun’ and ‘performance’, invoking the idea of camp as light-hearted and theatrical. Likening the idea of drag to being a ‘Disney suit character’ again
reinforces traditional understandings of camp as an exaggerated disguise. Unlike Texas Trey who felt as though she lived as camp, Red Sparkle sees camp as something that can be adopted and removed at will. He considers himself to be a ‘true’ drag queen because drag to him is about performance, with a ‘bit’ of fun and a ‘bit’ of campiness. Camp is used as a tool of demarcation. In his view, performers who adopt camp in the spirit of fun and performance are ‘true’ drag queens. Other performers who desire to present themselves as ‘real’ women, it can be inferred, would not be considered real performers in his eyes. He feels it is important to explain that naturally he is not camp and is only so during his onstage performances.

Although the drag queens did not use the word ‘camp’ as often as the drag kings, most described themselves as using ‘markers’ of camp, as previously identified. Drag queens saw themselves as being ‘fabulous’, ‘glamorous’ ‘humorous’ and ‘over-the-top’. Like Chloe, Red Sparkle described the changes he saw in the way ‘camp’ was positioned in the Adelaide ‘gay scene’:

> We primarily use all the latest top hits on the charts, songs on the charts, Britney and all of those sorts of people, Lady Gaga, and the shows are pretty much costume and dance shows, so there is a choreographed dance show. There’s not a lot of campiness in them anymore. We used to do a lot of campiness, but with the scene changing, it’s a nightclub, we’re interrupting their night, they love having the show there because it’s an anchor in the night, and it keeps people because they think “oh we will wait for the show” or it breaks the night up a bit for them but apart from that we keep the shows fast-moving. It’s modern, it’s something they can all relate to, we get a really good response, and they love it.
This excerpt indicates a re-positioning or re-interpretation of drag by Red Sparkle to value the idea of being ‘modern’ over being ‘camp’. As his shows are now ‘dance shows’ which are ‘choreographed’, this suggests his performances are regimented, controlled and perhaps ‘tamed’ rather than ‘exaggerated’ and ‘over-the-top’. Sparkle mentions the important role audiences play in influencing the types of ‘shows’ he would produce in contemporary times. This reinforces the idea that camp (or drag) is a contextual and shifting phenomenon in Australian gay sub-cultures. Without the want for exaggeration, or for audiences to engage in a ‘suspension of reality’, camp is aesthetically difficult to use by Red Sparkle (and for most drag queens). He suggests the Adelaide gay scene has changed and that drag queens are perceived to be ‘interrupting their night’. With the sequestration of ‘camp’ from gay life, the relationship between audience member and drag performer has shifted. As this thesis has already discussed, the expectations of club goers has changed, and so too have the types of performances that occur in those contexts. Although most drag kings viewed camp as belonging to the aesthetic code of drag queening and gay male culture, drag queens are disavowing that very aesthetic. The analysis of the data suggests drag has increasingly found itself as becoming part of the fabric of the drag king aesthetic/s, indicating the shifting and contingent nature of the term camp in gay sub-cultures and in Australia more broadly.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how camp was discursively used by the drag kings and drag queens interviewed for the thesis. Camp was used primarily as a way to describe a particular performance aesthetic. This aesthetic was considered to be exaggerated, mirroring Sontag (1964) and Newton’s (1979) theorisations of camp as stylisation and artifice. With camp
understood in this light, it is used then as a tool (particularly by drag kings) to expose gender as construct. With camp being ‘over-the-top’ and exaggerated, performers who use this type of aesthetic do not desire to present themselves as ‘real’ men or women onstage, but instead, as caricatures of such normative gender constructs. Camp however is also used as a tool for self-description, or as a description for others. Drag performers use camp to articulate and perform their identities as queer individuals, as understood in light of Meyer’s theory on camp as ‘queer’ visibility (1994).

This chapter has found that camp, as a performance aesthetic, was once strongly associated with gay homosexual identity. In recent times camp has been seen (particularly by drag queens), as becoming increasingly irrelevant in contemporary drag queen sub-cultures and gay male communities more broadly. With an increasing number of younger drag queens wishing to portray more normative, or ‘real’ forms of femininity onstage, camp then is positioned in opposition to these representations. I have argued that camp has gained more acceptance and value in drag king and lesbian sub-cultures to theatricalise and expose masculinity as fabrication. The next chapter will further explore these changes that have occurred in Australian gay scenes and the nostalgia many drag kings and queens expressed for an ‘old gay community’ or Golden Era in Australian gay life. I will examine how these performers expressed nostalgia, particularly regarding the broad changes they feel has occurred in Australian gay ‘scenes’. These changes will be discussed in relation to the perceived impacts they are believed to have had on the role of drag in gay communities.
Chapter Five – What Happened to the ‘Golden Era’? Drag Performers, Community and Their Sense of Nostalgia.

When comparing the themes that emerged during the analysis stage of this research, one stood out as having the most profound impact on participants’ lives. This theme was the concept of ‘community’ and the sense of nostalgia that performers expressed for a ‘Golden Era’ in the history of Australian gay life. As most performers interviewed were in their late 30s to 40s, their attitudes towards ‘gay community’ had experienced significant change throughout their careers. These changes were discussed in relation to the political, economic, social and cultural function of gay life. This chapter will explore the connection these discussions had to an overarching sense of nostalgia, categorised by feelings of loss and displacement. This ‘Golden Era’ of Australian gay life was understood by the performers as being socially cohesive, sexually liberating, subversive and distinctly ‘gay’. These features were now thought to have disappeared, leaving only fragments of the idealised ‘Golden Era’. Through this analysis, I will demonstrate how the concepts of community, identity and drag were perceived to have shifted, over time, in the participants’ views. This discussion also provides an insight into what was and is now valued by Australian drag performers and their communities, and the effects of these changes on the place of drag in recent times.
Community and Nostalgia in Light of Theory

This thesis has examined a range of themes as emerged from the experiences of Australian drag performers interviewed for the research. One focus has been the ways in which the participants experience themselves as entertainers and socialisers in gay and lesbian communities. While drag queens and drag kings are highly visible in these spaces, it has been demonstrated that they occupy complex positions vis-à-vis their communities. Drag queens especially adopt the contradictory position of celebrity and sexual ‘outcast’ who, out of drag, may not be considered sexually appealing to gay men, but are enjoyed onstage. Transgendered performers also experience marginalisation and are often perceived as ‘cheaters’ by other drag performers for having surgically modified their bodies. These are just some of the difficult and complex positions which drag performers experience in their everyday lives, thereby problematizing the notion of a hegemonic definition of ‘drag’.

Community is important to these participants in understanding themselves as social beings. What does community mean and how is the ‘gay community’ and ‘gay scene’ contextualised by them? To begin this chapter, I will theorise ‘community’ and ‘nostalgia’ and will then examine how these theorisations occur in the experiences of Australian drag performers.

Conceptualising Community

Community derives from the Latin word ‘com’, meaning with or together and ‘inus’ referring to singularity (Delanty 2010, p. x). Delanty (2010, p.4) argues that ‘community exerts itself as a powerful idea of belonging in every age, and as such its reality consists of its persuasive power as the most social aspect of society’. This conceptualisation of
community, as discursive, is fundamental to the experiences of most of the drag performers interviewed for this research. These performers expressed a sense of disconnection between their own subjectivity (largely as gay-identified performers) and their positionality in relation to gay communities. These feelings were accompanied by an immense desire to recover this severed connection. Through an analysis of these discussions this chapter will uncover how drag performers have understood community and more specifically, how it has been characterised and experienced specifically in relation to ‘gay community/ies’.

Delanty’s (2010) work discusses classical conceptualisations of community suggesting that for the Ancient Greeks, community was directly found in the immediacy of public life (known as the ‘polis’) which continuously produced and supported contractual ties between all of its citizens. For Aristotle, the city, or ‘polis’ was believed to be at the heart of ‘community’ (Delanty 2010). In this light, community is understood to be dependent on social contact, created and sustained by the direct physical interaction of its citizens. How have these earlier conceptualisations of community changed? With the development of technology, specifically the Internet, this thesis has already indicated how the functionality of community (and drag) has transformed. As the social manifestation of ‘gay identity’ and ‘gay community’, ‘the scene’ was originally created through the physical interaction of gay and lesbian people. The ‘scene’ as it is known colloquially by such people, was categorised by the centralised strip of clubs, pubs and sex-on-premises venues created by and catering towards their tastes. These places existed predominantly for the social activities of gay people, thereby becoming the most visible aspect of a gay community. With such technological advancements as the Internet however, the role of the ‘scene’ is changing with gay identity increasingly becoming understood and shaped through virtual mediums.
Block’s (2008, p.63) work provides a definition of the ‘modern’ citizen, suggesting it is ‘one who is willing to be accountable for and committed to the well-being of the whole. That whole can be a city block, a community, a nation, the earth’. Block (2008) takes a similar position to Delanty (2010) whose argument focuses on the concept of community as formed through the unification of individuality and togetherness, arguing it is an ‘interdependent human system given form by the conversation it holds with itself. The history, buildings, economy, infrastructure and culture are products of the conversations and social fabric of any community’ (Block 2008, p. 30). He believes this formation of community occurs partly as a result of ‘the mental models we bring to our collective’ (Block 2008, p.29). The idea that a ‘community’ is defined by the ‘collective’ outlook of its citizens has become complicated in the context of contemporary Australian ‘gay communities’. With changes to the way young homosexuals have come to identify themselves (as perceived by the drag performers interviewed), this ‘collective’ underpinning of a ‘gay community’ has instead been replaced by a strong sense of individualism. Delanty (2010, p.16) suggests that ‘modernity destroys community which must be recovered and realised in a new form’. In this sense, he argues that community, or communities, are in a constant state of change, never able to be fully realised in their original form/s.

The participants’ discussions on community were accompanied by a profound sense of nostalgia. This was expressed in the reflections and memories of older drag kings and queens I interviewed regarding a ‘Golden Era’ of gay community. This was an idealised or glorified time in the history of Australian ‘gay life’, one they viewed as being absent of imperfection. The performers who expressed this nostalgia desired to revive the ideals and practices of a lost gay community which they believe would again foster a greater sense of belonging between themselves as queer individuals and a gay community. Block (2008, p.1)
argues that ‘the need to create a structure of belonging grows out of the isolated nature of our lives, our institutions and our communities’. He suggests that individuals work to overcome this ‘fragmentation’ through an involvement with ‘community’ which in turn, forces them to acknowledge a level of interdependence on others (Block 2008, p. 2-3). Bauman’s (2001, p.1) view exemplifies this aspect of community, suggesting it is something that is often romanticised and always associated with ‘good’ rather than ‘bad’. He argues the word itself inherently sounds ‘sweet’, evoking a sense of everything people miss or lack as being secure, confident and trusting; ‘community stands for the kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us – but which we would dearly wish to inhabit and which we hope to repossess’ (Bauman 2001, p. 3). This feeling was strongly reflected in the experiences of most of the older performers interviewed, who drew on their memories of a lost ‘gay community’ to make sense of their more recent experiences in gay social life. Their experiences will highlight the possible changes in the practices and ideals of the communities in which they operate, and what impact these changes have had on their roles as drag performers in contemporary Australia.

**Conceptualising Nostalgia**

Boym (2001, p.xiii) suggests the term nostalgia derives from the word *nóstos* (meaning to return home) and *algia* (meaning longing) suggesting it is a ‘longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy’. Boym (2001) suggests the term is linked to one’s imagination, which has the potential to embroider memories. This conceptualisation of nostalgia was evident in some, but not all, of the expressions of nostalgia that accompanied
the participants’ discussions on community. Some of the performers who were interviewed acknowledged that the ‘gay community’ which they conceptualised may never have existed in actuality. The changes they perceive to have occurred in the ‘scene’ were often understood in greater reference to personal changes. Many performers described themselves as becoming older and more ‘self-aware’, suggesting the transformations they perceive to have occurred in their gay community may also be attributed to retrospect. They describe the ‘gay scene’ as once being a place where they could be carefree and not have to consider any potential ‘risks’ to their safety. They also acknowledge this absence of danger may have been because they were less able to adequately assess risks due to their youth.

Although this chapter will discuss these feelings of nostalgia in relation to community, the analysis will be tentative, treating such recollections with caution. Nonetheless, what can be gained from the memories provided by the participants is the way in which drag performers experience community, and more specifically, how community (and gay community) has been conceptualised by them.

Boym (2001, p. xvi) suggests that nostalgia is also about ‘the relationship between individual biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory’. This conceptualisation is useful when making sense of the following memories provided by the performers who spoke about their personal sense of community and nostalgia. The performers made the assumption that their views regarding a ‘decline’ of gay social life were universally shared by others of a similar age and position in the gay community. By situating their nostalgia in a collective framework, the participants attempt to redirect this sense of disconnection into solidarity, trusting that their feelings of loss are experienced by others in their community.
A ‘GAY’ Community: Chloe

The ‘Golden Era’ of ‘gay community’, as described by most of the older participants of this study, identify and describe this community as being distinctly ‘gay’. In this sense, the physical spaces in which these performers work and socialise were once considered to be used largely by those who identify as either gay or lesbian. The historical development of such places from the mid-20th century has been documented in the work of Casey who contends that:

geographers and social scientists began to observe that gay men and lesbians were creating distinct social, political and cultural landscapes, then dubbed ‘gay ghettos’ now more commonly referred to as ‘gay villages’, in a number of major western cities” (2004, p. 447).

The development of such spaces was critical in the facilitation of networks necessary for the development of gay rights and for the advancement of gay social life. Holt (2011, p.859) suggests the gay communities which emerged in Australia during the 20th century ‘were achievements that provided a contingent anchor for gay identities and the gay liberation movement’. Historian Garry Wotherspoon (1991, p.152) suggests such communities began to emerge in Australia more prominently during the 1960s detailing a ‘larger-than-usual homosexual clientele’ attracted to the coffee shops and restaurants in Sydney, mostly along Market and King Streets and places in the city that emerged as venues for occasional homosexual parties (Wotherspoon 1991, p.152-153). However, the main attraction during this era became the bars of several old inner-city hotels (Wotherspoon 1991, p. 153).
Following this, a range of commercial venues catering specifically towards homosexual men began trading in the inner city suburb of Kings Cross which existed largely as a red light district. Wotherspoon (1991, p.155) suggests Kings Cross has always had a bohemian reputation but from the 1950s to 1960s it ‘increasingly became the focal point for the commercial venues of the homosexual sub-culture. While it has always had a homosexual ambience, this became more apparent in this period’.

Emerging alongside the homosexual sub-cultures was the drag, or female-impersonation sub-cultures of the 1960s. Drag performers became the symbol or face of the ‘camp’ side to homosexual life. Wotherspoon (1991, p.155) suggests the emergence of drag clubs in Kings Cross during this period offered homosexuals a way of expressing their gendered identities. He notes however that the emergence of such clubs at this time was ironic, as police harassment of the homosexual sub-culture was still rife. Nonetheless, drag performers and ‘drag clubs’ were directly linked to the emergence of a homosexual sub-culture or ‘gay community’ in Sydney. Drag performers became exemplars of community, socialising and performing alongside other homosexual men. Wotherspoon (1991, p.151) suggests that ‘while it is true that there has been drag artists and drag shows previously, these paled into insignificance compared to the developments of the 1960s’. Venues which housed early drag shows included the Jewel Box, which opened in 1961, followed by “Les Girls” soon after, which became an iconic, long-running, female impersonation club in Kings Cross.

Oxford Street also emerged as an attractive place for homosexuals to visit in the 1960s and was another inner city ‘scene’ that was as an alternative to Kings Cross due to its cheap rent and building availability (Wotherspoon 1991, p. 158). By the early 1980s, Oxford St became known as the ‘Glitter Strip’ or the ‘Golden Mile’, growing in reputation and venue number, ultimately becoming the main focus of the Sydney gay sub-culture with its surrounding
areas dubbed ‘the ghetto’ (Wotherspoon 1991, p. 191). With the increase in the number of commercial gay venues opening around Sydney, drag shows became more elaborate, resulting in an increased number of drag performers. This analysis will highlight the close connection drag performers have and still experience with gay cultures through a discussion of the changes they consider to have occurred concerning the life of the venues in which they work and socialise.

Chloe (pseudonym, aged 28) is a high profile drag queen and performance manager of a major nightclub located in the heart of Sydney’s ‘gay scene’, Oxford Street. He described this ‘new’ nightclub as catering towards the ‘younger generation’ of gays which was then ‘the most happening place on Oxford Street on a Friday and Saturday night’. After moving from Brisbane, Chloe arrived on the Sydney ‘gay scene’ around the year 2000, feeling like ‘a kid in a candy store’. His relationship with the gay community at this time was important to the development and understanding of his homosexuality, as Chloe felt as if he ‘lived and breathed ‘Oxford Street’’. Although this heavy involvement in the ‘scene’ was important to the construction and understanding of his identity, Chloe indicated that such ‘coming out’ experiences had changed in recent times:

The reason for identity has reduced so much; you don’t need to be gay anymore.
Before you were either in the closet, and you were discreet or you were gay and I think that these kids go to school, some of the come out in school, it’s ok, it’s acceptable. When they finish school they end up going to wherever they go with their friends and they’re gay there and it’s a traditionally straight environment.
Chloe suggests a shifting importance of gay community in the lives of young homosexual men. In comparison to his own experiences in which the gay community became paramount to the negotiations of his own identity, he suggests now there are other types of ‘communities’ that play a more important role in the realisation and performance of homosexual identities. Chloe’s view suggests two things, firstly, that the concept of ‘identity’ is less fixed in recent times and secondly, that sexuality was once viewed as being either ‘gay’ or ‘straight’. Sexual identity, for him, is considered to be more fluid in the lives of younger Australians, with previous polarisations of sex and gender being watered down.

With an increased recognition and acceptance of gay-identified people in what could be considered traditionally ‘straight’ environments, Chloe suggests being ‘gay’ is no longer perceived as unusual. With the increased visibility and acceptance of homosexuals in mainstream Australian society, the importance of the ‘gay community’ and more specifically the ‘gay scene’ has tapered in recent times.

Many of the participants interviewed suggested gay youth no longer felt a strong sense of allegiance to a ‘gay community’. Whittle observes how gay communities once functioned as an important aspect to the lives of gay-identified people, suggesting it allowed those who accessed them to openly come out as being gay, and more importantly, to develop their sexuality/ies. He argues that these places acted as a ‘community and economic base for urban gay men and lesbians’ (Whittle in Casey 2004, p. 6-7). An important feature of these communities was the ‘scene’, providing a social space for gay and lesbian individuals to feel safe, often becoming the only spaces in which they could truly be ‘out’. Whittle suggests these spaces were developed specifically ‘by others, for others, not unlike themselves’ (Whittle in Casey, p. 2004 6-7). The function of ‘gay’ communities then, in Australia and
abroad, was overwhelmingly important to the improvement of gay life and essential to the
development and encouragement of alternative sexual and gendered identities.

Chloe believes that gay spaces no longer ‘inspire’ ‘young gay kids’. He feels they often
consider gay venues which operate within the ‘scene’ as places which are ‘dirty’ and instead
attend venues that would typically be considered ‘straight’ (outside places such as Oxford
Street). The notion that gay venues might be perceived as ‘dirty’ reflects how gay venues
might struggle to maintain their importance for Australian gay youth. These spaces,
particularly nightclubs, pubs and sex-on-premises venues, were once crucial to the lives of
gay men and women, particularly in their search for sexual gratification. Chloe’s use of the
word ‘dirty’ can be read in two ways; firstly in its literal reference to the lack of ‘cleanliness’
in these venues, or secondly, as a comment on the sexual activities which are known to
occur. As this analysis will discuss, part of the essence of this older ‘gay community’ as
described to me was its open and frank display of sex and sexuality. These places facilitated
the sexual liberation of its citizens and acted as one of the few spaces where gay men and
women could publicly display their affection for one another. With an increase in modern
technology, particularly the Internet, this ‘aspect’ of the gay community has changed
dramatically. The way people find sex and the places in which it is practiced has increasingly
been transferred from the immediacy of gay public life to the privacy of the home.

Chloe also noted there was a new ‘movement’ occurring in the social interaction between
‘gay’ and ‘straight’ people, suggesting that ‘everyone has come together a bit more’. He
feels that young gay men and women are happy to socialise outside of ‘gay’ space, unlike a
time Chloe recalled when he attended a friend’s party and stood in the corner speaking only
to three other gay men present because he was ‘too afraid’ to talk to ‘the straight people’:
I remember a straight friend said gays were segregationists and I didn’t understand what she meant and then I realised that we are now because of what went before. We didn’t really have a choice [then] but now we do.

Chloe’s experience reflects how previous societal polarisations of gender and sexuality once created division and complication in his own life. He attributes this process of self-segregation to ‘what went before’ and to the history of Australian gay communities as places which appeared distinctly ‘gay’. Although Chloe admits gay people are now provided with more choice on where they can openly socialise, his apprehension about doing so is hindered by his previous experience as having ‘lived and breathed Oxford Street’. In this situation, Chloe’s prior dealings with gay community complicate his ability to truly overcome the societal barriers that he suggests are no longer as present in the lives of ‘gays’.

Chloe began his drag career in the year 2001, selling chewing gum and glow sticks along Sydney’s Oxford Street dressed as a drag queen. In 2009 he and his friend were involved in the opening of a new venue on Oxford Street where he became events manager for the nightclub, coordinating the performance side of the venue. In responding to the changes he saw occurring in the gay scene, particularly among gay youth, Chloe intentionally hires not only drag queens to perform but also what he calls ‘straight’ performers, including singers and dancers. Chloe felt the need to stress that he was not ‘anti-drag’, but that he wanted to provide Oxford Street with a variety of entertainments to match the demands of what he called the new ‘gay generation’. As both a drag queen and a venue manager, Chloe has effectively been able to respond to the changing gay community and scene, adapting the role and function of ‘drag’ in his venue to work alongside other, more ‘mainstream’ forms of
entertainment. What can be extrapolated from the analysis of this data is that community directly affects how practices of drag operate in gay life and in the lives of drag performers themselves.

The concept of a reduced importance on ‘gay’ identity was also discussed in the interviews conducted with drag kings. Slick (pseudonym, aged 39) described a similar change taking place in the Melbourne lesbian ‘scene’:

It’s so dispersed, it really is dispersed. The scene is dispersed and it could be because Melbourne is a smaller city...the people in Melbourne they don’t go out and go to the gay clubs because they’re gay, they go out because they want to drink, they go to the public bar.

The emphasis Slick places on the word ‘dispersed’ highlights the degree of loss she feels for a ‘gay community’. Although she suggests that the dispersal of the scene could be due to the smaller geographical size of Melbourne compared to Sydney, she ultimately believes it is because of the lessening importance of gay identification among gay men and women. Slick feels being ‘gay’ is no longer a compelling enough reason for gay people to actively socialise in these spaces. These observations support the idea that ‘gay only’ spaces have perhaps lost their appeal to younger gay men and women. Suggesting that gay people now visit a ‘public’ bar for the purposes of drinking provides indirect evidence that homosexuality has, in fact, become more accepted in the wider community. Being openly ‘gay’ in a public bar indicates the shifting nature of ‘gay identity’ and its move from the ‘private’ to the ‘public’. Therefore, the forces which shape ‘identity’, particularly ‘gay identity’ have changed, and in
doing so have displaced the foundations upon which practices of drag and gay community were originally built.

Sydney drag queen, Babushka (pseudonym, aged 39) similarly touched on the diminishing importance of gay identification among gay youth:

...young, gay people don’t feel like they have to hang out at gay community events, or venues or bars, they are happy to go out with their straight friends, their straight friends are accepting, possibly even find it interesting that they have gay friends, so they’re not as identified.

As previously mentioned, the importance of visibly maintaining a gay identity was once paramount to the lives of gay men and women in search of acceptance and equality in the eyes of mainstream heterosexual society - and also as a retreat to their own spaces for socialising. Babushka suggests that because this ‘acceptance’ has perhaps occurred (to what degree remains unknown) an involvement with the ‘gay community’ has become optional rather than necessary in the views of gay youth. The ‘gay community’ has become a place where people choose to go rather than a place where they feel they have to go. Suggesting that ‘straight’ people now find gay people ‘interesting’, indicates the continuing ‘difference’ of homosexuality but what’s changed is that such difference works for gay people rather than against them. Homosexuality is linked to being exotic, making gay ‘cool’. With gay people being considered ‘interesting’, heterosexual people (and others) desire to know more about the lives of their ‘gay friends’, again indicating a shift from the private to the public. The concept and value of a ‘gay community’ therefore operates differently in the
lives of younger contemporary Australian gay men and women compared to their ‘older’ counterparts.

Babushka connects these developments in the acceptance of ‘gay’ identity in mainstream Australia to the impact he believes this has had on understandings of a ‘gay community’:

...people complain now that the gay scene is dying a bit of a death but I think that even though it kind of is, and it’s not the exciting, glamourous, subversive wonderful thing that it was, we’ve got what we’ve asked for. So it’s ‘beware of what you ask for’ I suppose. So with growing inclusion within the mainstream community and with growing acceptance of gay and lesbian people we have essentially become normalised, absorbed into the mainstream culture so you lose a lot in that but at the same time you gain a lot.

Babushka’s description of the ‘gay scene’ as ‘dying a bit of a death’ suggests the erosion of such a community is not yet complete. These words leave hope that part of this ‘gay community’ lives on. Babushka however takes responsibility on his own behalf, and others, for the changes that have occurred in the gay scene, linking the personal to the collective (Boym 2001). The very foundation this ‘community’ was once built on has worked to slowly change the functionality and essence of that community. Reynolds’ work specifically examines the history of queer/gay culture in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s and discusses the fragile link gay men and woman once experienced with heterosexual populations:

...male homosexuality remained a criminal offence, lesbians and gay men suffered regular discrimination across the public sphere, and everyday life for the
homosexual meant living in a world saturated by heterosexuality. For many gay and lesbian activists, most perhaps, achieving equality with their heterosexual counterparts was the main game (2002, p. 3).

A community which once flaunted itself as being ‘fun’, sexually ‘free’ and subversive has become normalised through the performance of those practices. The practices and performances of homosexual identities have arguably become increasingly absorbed by mainstream cultures. With a watering down of gay identity, and the lack of young gay people participating in ‘gay’ scenes, the need for venues to ‘entertain’ such people has also declined. Drag performers are now forced to find new ways to remain the visible and important exemplars of gay community that they have historically been.

A Place for Sex: Felicia

This chapter will examine the ways in which drag performers expressed nostalgia and how they once conceptualised the gay community. Most of the older drag performers interviewed expressed a profound sense of nostalgia for a gay community they described as once openly and highly ‘sexualised’. In this sense, the gay ‘scene’ was understood to facilitate and celebrate sexual relations and the vibrancy of gay sexual sub-cultures. Many of these performers suggested that with the introduction of the ‘Internet’ and other virtual mediums, those who used gay space for sex retreated to their homes to find sexual gratification. With the increasing use of ‘online’ mediums as a tool to find sex, this function of gay community has shifted from the physical to the virtual. The act of finding sex has
become increasingly anonymous and solitary in nature. The pursuit of sex as facilitated through technology influences a direct shift in the way gay men and women participate in the immediacy of gay public life. Felicia Furious (pseudonym, aged 42) articulated a sense of nostalgia for a ‘gay scene’ that once celebrated this open sexualisation. He discussed these transformations, shedding light on the direct impact he believes postmodern ‘connected’ cultures have had on the role of community in the lives of gay men and women:

A lot of the stuff that we’ve been fighting for has come true, we’re welcomed into the wider community, we don’t have to hide, and we can meet for sex online, or on the telephone or anywhere. We don’t have to go to clubs specifically to get laid anymore which is great but it’s shit for the scene.

Felicia, as previously discussed, is a veteran of the Sydney drag and gay scene. Although he no longer performs in any regular ‘production’ shows, he hosts (in drag) successful trivia nights across the city. When he began his drag career, the clubs in which he worked and socialised originally functioned as spaces gay men (and fewer women) would frequent for sex, or to meet potential sexual partners. Felicia’s suggestion that gay men could now meet ‘anywhere’ to arrange or have sex supports the notion that ‘gay’ identity has become increasingly normalised and increasingly visible. Gay men no longer have to find refuge in the gay scene to find sex. Gay interaction is no longer limited in where it could be found but has been made increasingly accessible in and through a multiplicity of locations. The fact that the gay scene was once frequented by people in order to ‘get laid’ highlights the important function it once played in the sexual lives of gay men.
Sydney drag queen Ditzy Bombshell (pseudonym, aged 43) also feels the Internet has affected the ‘gay scene’ and believes Gaydar (a global online gay dating website) is directly responsible for the gay scene’s ‘demise’:

Gaydar had a lot to do with the scene dying in terms of what I know as the gay scene for boys and drags...when the Internet came out, boys didn’t need to go out to pick up, so the volume of people dropped.

Like Felicia, Ditzy considers the ‘scene’ (as it was then) as one of the few places that allowed gay men to openly meet for sexual interaction. Seeing the scene as having ‘died’ or as ‘dying’ reveals the magnitude of the perceived change. Like other performers, Ditzy personifies the gay community, describing it as being a ‘living’ entity, providing insight into just how important the concept of community was and is to their lives. These experiences can be understood in light of Boym’s conceptualisation of nostalgia as something often linked to the ‘collective’ (2001). Ditzy’s sense of loss is connected to the ‘wider’ community, which he assumes also takes up this position of defeatism. Felicia also connects his own experiences to others in the community, evident through his repetition of the word ‘we’.

There is a common pattern in most of these experiences and expressions of community and nostalgia as being ‘universally’ experienced. With the introduction of the Internet and similar mediums, gay men and women undoubtedly no longer had to leave their homes in pursuit of sex. Sex has now become much easier for gay men and women to encounter when, where and how they like.
In his recent work *What happened to Gay Life?* (2007) Reynolds highlights some of the changes discussed throughout this chapter. Specifically, he analyses the impact the introduction of online dating websites have had on Australian ‘gay life’:

To call Gaydar a dating service is to overstate the case; it is most frequently used to titillate, tease and facilitate immediate ‘hook-ups’. In other words, it is a virtual gay bar which cuts to the chase, although the chase can still be protracted and the quarry may vanish at the click of a mouse (2007, p. 148).

Reynolds’ description of Gaydar as being akin to a virtual ‘gay bar’ highlights a transformation in how gay people search for sex, once largely facilitated by their face-to-face interaction with one another. The Internet provided a new way for gay men to connect virtually. The ‘gay bar’ is no longer found in a physical manifestation but is increasingly located in and through a vast network of online chat rooms, forums and message boards that work to connect people in different ways. One thing however that has perhaps not changed is the motive behind the use of such ‘bars’, albeit physical or virtual. Reynolds (2007, p.149) suggests places such as Gaydar cannot truly be considered a ‘dating service’ and are instead, created and used purely with the intent of finding sexual gratification. He argues that if Sydney gay men are renowned for being ‘ruthless’ in ‘real’ sexual encounters (not found online) then the high level of anonymity that websites such as Gaydar provide might exacerbate this condition (Reynolds 2007, p.149). Although this chapter has discussed a move from a private to public recognition and ‘acceptance’ of homosexuality, how does this ‘privatisation’ of gay sex complicate this view? On the one hand, gay identity has become mainstreamed through its normalisation in broader society but on the other
encourages the more solitary pursuit of sexual activities expressive of that identity. Does a 'gay' scene still exist and if so, in what form/s? The Internet, and other technical advancements in contemporary culture has shifted the way people discover and practice their sexualities and the way they participate in the immediacy of gay public life, much the same as drag identities are increasingly practiced and realised through online mediums (as discussed in Chapter Two).

Reynolds further highlights the impact the emergence of online cultures has had on the performance of gay identities:

There were those who thought the Internet was part of the problem of the decline of a distinct gay life in Sydney: instead of availing themselves of the social scene, gay men were at home in front of computer screens, dashing off sweet nothings to paramours in San Francisco, Berlin, London, or Tempe. More likely, as we shall see, they were organising a quick shag with the bloke(s) around the corner (2007, p. 6)

This discussion demonstrates there has been a significant shift in modern conceptualisations of the ‘gay community’. Although these changes are noted and felt by the drag performers interviewed, Reynolds suggests a willingness to actually ‘recover’ this old way of life is often not followed through by those who complain about it. Nonetheless, Felicia and Ditzy, with over 20 years’ experience as drag performers provide insight into the changing role of the gay community/ies, particularly in the sex life of gay-identified people. With the increasing adoption of the Internet as a culture of communication and identity, the function and importance of the ‘gay scene’ has significantly changed. Boym’s (2001, p. xvi) work suggests
this mourning of displacement is at the core of the ‘modern condition’, ‘nostalgia and progress are like Jekyll and Hyde: alter egos’. The lived experience of the interviewed drag performers and the nostalgia they expressed towards a lost ‘gay’ community is therefore connected to wider processes of globalisation and the wave of social change they trigger.

**HIV/AIDS and Community**

The emergence of the HIV/AIDS virus in the early 1980s has had a devastating impact globally. One of the groups most heavily affected in the developed West has been gay men, with a flow-on impact on the gay community. The sexual identity and sexual practices of gay men were put directly under the spotlight in the prevention of the HIV virus. In this sense, the gay community united to educate its ‘citizens’ on how to practice safe sex. Gary Dowsett (1996) analyses the impact of HIV/AIDS on gay communities in Australia. He suggests that gay communities ‘have responded to the HIV/AIDS magnificently, making Australia one of the few places on the planet where it can be said with some confidence that the epidemic is under control’ (Dowsett 1996, p. 4). Strategic responses were initiated with the first case of AIDS being diagnosed in Australia in 1982. Dowsett (1996, p.61) suggests the strategies implemented by health professionals was timely, leading to an astute response and awareness among Australian gay communities on what was to come. Australian gay men in particular had been discussing the emergence of the illness, first noted among populations of gay men in North America. Dowsett (1996, p.5) documents the different ways in which the virus affected gay communities across the globe, suggesting places such as Europe (especially France) failed to effectively mobilise their gay community in a collective response to the epidemic. By taking a collective experiential approach to the construction of
homosexuality in the lives of Australian men, Dowsett’s work is helpful in uncovering how and why ‘community’ acted as an important social concept to gay men and to other members of the GLBT community (including drag performers) during this time. Preventative education programs were aimed specifically at homosexual men and were developed and delivered by non-government, gay, community-based agencies:

These preventative education strategies involve much that is familiar in health promotion on other issues: information distribution through pamphlets and posters; community newspaper advertisements; information and support activities, usually involving group processes such as seminars, conferences, and discussion nights; promotional activities geared to special events. (Dowsett 1996, p. 69).

Dowsett suggests the astute response of Australia’s gay communities in fighting against the spread of the epidemic was due to an already existing culture of openly discussing sex (as mentioned in the experiences of the drag performers above). Direct strategies could then be targeted in ‘image, style, language, and meaning that could be sure of direct effect particularly on gay-identifying men’ (Dowsett 1996, p. 69). The interventions were undeniably influenced and implemented by the existing culture of gay communities. These experiences as documented by Dowsett were reflected in Felicia’s own recollection of a ‘gay community’ which he described as having banded together to fight against the HIV epidemic. For him, the gay community’s formation and importance during the start of his drag career was strengthened by the rapid spread of the HIV/AIDS virus in the mid-1980s: ‘We lost a whole generation to HIV and AIDS, all the party boys, all the boys who love to
fuck, well they’re all dead’. Felicia’s recollections not only demonstrate the enormity of the impact of the HIV/AIDS virus on the gay community but also the ‘types’ of people the disease claimed. Felicia pairs the devastation of the virus with nostalgia for a generation of ‘fun’ gay men he once knew, who through their participation in gay life publicly celebrated and flaunted their sexualities. Felicia uses the devastation of the HIV virus to detail the changing role of community in the lives of gay men suggesting that ‘the community all came together for the HIV plague and they seem to have drifted apart again’.

Holt’s (2011, p.862) research noted a recent ‘ambivalence’ towards community in a range of interviews he conducted with Australian gay men (both HIV positive and HIV negative) in 2006, suggesting there exists ‘a tension between wanting to belong and identify with gay community while also remaining at arm’s length from it’ and his participants showed they were ‘unsure whether they wanted to belong to it’. Holt (2011, p.863) argues that the ‘galvanising’ effect that HIV had on gay men and their sense of community was viewed by his participants to be ‘located in the past’. Kirsty Machon (whose experience in HIV activism dates back to 1992) takes a similar position, discussing the changing social response to the HIV/AIDS virus around the turn of the century:

You hear this sort of thing a lot these days. No-one’s dying any more. No-one gets AIDS, or very few people anyhow, and the crisis is over, and we’re over the crisis. And that ‘young people’ don’t have a sense of the holocaust that went before. And so on. Occasionally these days, as if from some dimly remembered past, you hear echoes of a call for a new activism around HIV. A call to ‘rally the community’, re-invigorate the activist moment. Such calls sound bizarre;
anachronistic. They sound increasingly shrill, bilious, hollow (Machon in Johnston and van Reyk, 2001, p. 130).

Machon’s views on the complacency of the gay community concerning HIV in modern times are confronting. She clarifies her position:

The days of wall-scaling, of flares and pseudo-militancy are over. We can’t expect the ‘community’ to mobilise in such a way again around HIV/AIDS. Why should we? The bottom line is, HIV treatments have changed lives and saved lives (no, not for everyone). We should not be mourning the romance of an activist past. The point of that activism, after all, was to change things (Machon in Johnston and van Reyk, 2001, p. 132-133).

With a decrease in activism surrounding HIV/AIDS in Australia, as discussed by Machon and the participants of this research, many of the battles and issues that united and galvanised the gay community have either been resolved or partially resolved. The devastation of the HIV/AIDS virus forced gay men to unite to develop strategies to counteract the social stigma and oppression it created. As Machon points out, with advancements in medical technology to combat the disease, the urgency surrounding the ‘virus’ and therefore the urgency of gay men to maintain such defensive and strong ties of community has tapered in recent times. This chapter has demonstrated through the experiences of drag performers that a tension exists around their desire for change and a longing to maintain more traditional and perhaps unrecoverable conceptualisations of gay community.
Generational Divides and Shifts

Performers like Felicia noted that the gay community in Sydney had experienced a type of ‘rejuvenation’ in recent times which resulted in the devaluing of older gay men and women in the ‘gay scene’. With venues marketing themselves towards a younger ‘generation of gays’ (as discussed by Chloe), older drag performers like Felicia feel a generational divide has emerged. Older performers interviewed consider the gay community to be ageist in its collective outlook, feeling like they are longer welcome to participate in the immediacy of public gay life. Felicia spoke candidly about his age and the impact he believes these changes have had on the position of older gay men in the ‘scene’:

…I am like Moses now, luckily everybody knows me. I’m treated very well in the gay scene, which is a surprise because the gay scene is famous for neglecting their ancient, not that 42 is ancient, but compared to these kids, the scene is now 18-27. That little clique is much younger than it was when I started doing drag.

Likening himself to the Prophet Moses, Felicia described himself as a trailblazer, having ‘paved’ the way for gay people and drag queens alike in the early days of the ‘gay scene’. Just as Moses parted the Red Sea and led the Israelites from racial persecution, Felicia uses this analogy to discuss his own position and role regarding the increased acceptance of gay people and the emergence of drag as performance. Felicia’s experience is indicative of the wider acceptance found by gay people, who were once heavily vilified by institutions such as the Catholic Church. Likening himself to a biblical figure discursively represents a breaking down of walls and perhaps a collapse of the barriers which once sequestered gay
communities from mainstream society. Felicia acknowledges that 42 is ‘not ancient’, but in relation to this new gay community – typically comprising ’18-27’ year olds - he is significantly older than most of its (visible) members. With a change in demographic, and the scene becoming ‘younger’, Felicia attributes the luck of his acceptance to being ‘well known’ through his involvement in drag. Felicia suggests that gay people are creating what he considers to be ‘mini specific scenes’. With this, the gay community dispersed, and the increasing ‘cliqueness’ of a ‘young’ gay scene created negative impacts on the lives of older homosexual men:

There is almost no time where they (gay people) come together, have you noticed that? You go to Stonewall and the four men who are over 40 in the room look like these Jurassic freaks...even if they’re quite good looking guys, they look like paedophiles. It’s so weird to me, a group of 40-year-old guys coming to Stonewall on a Saturday night to have a drink [and] they’re herded out of there by these ‘twinkettes’, it’s weird isn’t it? (Felicia Furious)

Felicia describes what he sees as the marginalisation of gay men who attempt to participate in the immediacy of gay public life. Older gay men, and perhaps women for that matter, are considered as ‘other’ in modern gay life. Their value and role in gay communities is under the direct threat of their own aging. To be ‘openly gay’ and therefore to openly participate in the immediacy of public life, it is now expected that one must be young. Felicia explained that historically, the role of the drag queen in the gay community was once to act as the ‘epicentre’ of the scene, bringing together all the different ‘groups’ of gay people in harmony. Echoing the thoughts of Slick, Felicia now considers the Sydney scene to also be
‘very dispersed’ and ‘very sad’, a place where these different groups of queer people no longer ‘come together’. During our interview Felicia noted that as a researcher, I had ‘come in at a really sad time in gay history’. Felicia, like many other drag queens and kings interviewed for this project, spoke of the different ‘tribes’ and ‘groups’ that operate separately in ‘gay scenes’. Dispersal and fragmentation has become the order of the day.

In line with these generational divides which Felicia discusses is also the notion of gender divisions within the scene. Some performers spoke of how the ‘old’ gay community was more inclusive, with lesbian women and gay men openly socialising with one another. Sydney drag king, Texas Trey (pseudonym, aged 40) noted that most of her good friends are drag queens. Describing herself as a ‘camp lesbian’, Texas Trey started drag directly as a result of the encouragement she received from her drag queens friends (who even ‘christened’ her with her drag name). During the interview, Texas Trey reflected on a recent encounter when a young gay man abused her for going to a bar considered to be a gay male preserve:

...we were sitting there and I went to the bar and I came back and the show was starting so I went to take my seat. A little drunk poof grabbed my chair and sat down and sat in front of me and I said ‘sorry that’s my chair, sorry we’ve been sitting here’ and he saw us sitting there all night waiting for the show and he goes ‘piss off love, this isn’t King Street, fuck off back to Newtown’ and just had a go at me and I’m like ‘excuse me?’ I was going to say ‘do you know who I am?’ Like that would never happen in my day. In my day, gosh I sound so old, you know what I mean. Everyone kept saying there used to be this men versus women thing, there never was, I was always welcome in poofter bars, always. Now ‘no ladies allowed
in here thank you very much’. We are not allowed into certain parts of Oxford Street now, Shift, if you go to the Shift there’s certain places where girls aren’t allowed; upstairs at the Shift, they have boys only nights and girls aren’t allowed in. What am I going to do? I don’t want it. So yeah, it has changed a lot.

Trey verbalises her disgust at the person who ridiculed her by calling him ‘little’, ‘drunk’ and a ‘poof’. Trey perhaps attempts to minimise the impact this person had on her by using equally derogatory expressions. The fact this person told her to ‘fuck off back to ‘Newtown’ (a ‘bohemian’ gay friendly area of Sydney’s inner west) suggests he believes there are places which lesbian women should socialise, separate to those where gay men meet. This separation of ‘lesbian women’ from ‘gay men’ indicates a rupture in Trey’s previous conceptualisation and experience of community. Throughout this excerpt, Trey expresses a sense of entitlement, displayed through her revelation that she was going to tell the ‘poof’ who ‘she was’. There is tension between her perceived status as quasi celebrity (as facilitated through her drag kinging), and the community which once viewed her as such. Trey contends these changing attitudes towards the gendered and sexual diversity in the gay scene is not only displayed by young gay men but also by the remarketing of commercial gay venues to ‘boys’ only nights. This observation is indicative of how the social changes in the ‘gay scene’ have had many flow-on effects to the cultural and economic survival of gay venues. These intersections highlight the degree to which the concept of a gay community is constantly changing in the lives of gay men and women. At the end of Trey’s excerpt, we gain a sense of her despair as evidenced through the words ‘what am I going to do?’ Trey exhibits a sense of powerlessness and expresses the degree of isolation she experiences in relation to her community. Trey, like many other ‘older’ participants interviewed for this
thesis resigned themselves to these changes and focused instead on finding ways to remain ‘relevant’ as drag performers in gay communities. The analysis of the data illustrates that most of the drag performers interviewed now experience feelings of loss and displacement in relation to community, having to negotiate their personal and professional identities to respond to the forces of change.

The ‘Invasion’ of Others

This chapter has touched on the notion of an increased ‘acceptance’ of homosexuals in mainstream Australian society. Rectifying the indifference between homosexual sub-cultures and mainstream heterosexual society however, is very much an ongoing issue. Mason and Lo (2009, p.12) suggest that ‘homosexuality may no longer be demonized to the extent that it once was but it is still refused the kind of moral and social respectability that is taken for granted by most heterosexuals’. While it is problematic for Mason and Lo to assume that ‘most heterosexuals’ take their social acceptance lightly, their work demonstrates that the wider acceptance of homosexuals in recent times has its limits. Texas Trey considers the ‘old’ gay scene - specifically Oxford Street - as being the ‘Golden Mile’ and recalls, ‘I remember we used to walk down there and you could be naked and everyone would go ‘you go girl’ and ‘woohoo’; it would be fun’. However, Trey now views Sydney’s Oxford Street as being increasingly dangerous due to the perceived influx of non-gay or lesbian-identified people:

Oxford Street is homeless and everyone’s got their hand out, and it’s so straight.

You know where Nevermind is and Stonewall, there’s that club in the middle, I
always get rude remarks whenever I’m dressed up, no matter what I do. I was
dressed as a zombie for Halloween...and it was ‘who the fuck do you think you
are?’ You get hostility so much; it never used to be like that. We need to take the
strip back and I don’t know how we’re going to do it, one drag king at a time or
drag queen. It’s awful, people being beaten up and chicks with those really short
skirts throwing up in the gutter and you just think ‘love, go home’. It’s just
because they know we have a great time there and everyone goes ‘you should go
to Oxford Street, it’s so cool I went there last weekend’ and then everyone starts
coming out and then they take it over and they wonder why it turns to crap
(Texas Trey).

According to Trey, the ‘contamination’ of the gay scene is a result of it being overrun by
homeless and straight people. The expression ‘Oxford Street is homeless’ is telling. Oxford
Street, as a location, has itself become ‘homeless’. This ties in directly to Boym’s (2001)
argument that a sense of displacement and a loss of home accompany a sense of nostalgia.
The expression that ‘Oxford Street is homeless’ can also be interpreted that Oxford Street
has become a place for the homeless. Trey suggests the scene is no longer used exclusively
by gay men and woman searching for ‘home’, but is also populated by homeless people who
have lost their ‘home’ or perhaps never found such a comfort. By suggesting that straight
people see Oxford Street as being ‘cool’ also supports Babushka’s statement that straight
people now find gay people to be ‘interesting’ and show increasing acceptance of gay
people, and a desire to align themselves with gay life. Casey elaborates on this:
one of the most recent developments that not only reflects the commercial success, but also the continued fluidity and fragility of spaces within the ‘gay village’, is their increasing popularity among heterosexual visitors and tourists, acting as attractive spaces to enter and consume (2004, p. 7).

By demanding that the strip needs to be ‘taken back’, Texas Trey indicates a sense of frustrated ownership of having been disposed. Oxford Street has thus become dangerous, and ironically most dangerous – and abrasive – to the people for whom it had once been haven and home.

While the performers interviewed for this thesis suggest many of the issues which the gay community once fought for have, to a degree, been resolved there have been significant backlashes and consequences as a result. The following sense of nostalgia for a gay community, as expressed by Sydney drag queen Ditzy Bombshell (pseudonym, aged 43) demonstrates a direct relationship to the concept of ‘fantasy’ as discussed by Bauman (2001) and Boym (2001) as outlined at the beginning of this chapter:

Maybe when I was young I just didn’t give a rats but back in the ‘90s you could walk from the Albury hotel which was up near St. Vinnies, all the way down to the bottom of Oxford street and it would just be like Mardi Gras night, it was the Golden Mile, it was just fabulous...but after so long I’ve just lost my nerve to do it because I think now that I’m a bit older I can see with clearer eyes, the dangers that can happen...so it’s not worth the risk anymore.
Ditzy believes that the gay ‘scene’ is no longer as safe as it was but also believes – in contradiction – that it wasn’t ever safe, it was just that he was ‘young’ and didn’t care about the possible risks. As Boym (2001) suggests, nostalgia is often linked to one’s own ‘fantasy’, a ‘fantasy’ of a place that perhaps never really existed. Ditzy’s sense of nostalgia could therefore be understood in relation to both external social changes and that of his own personal growth and development as a result of his age. What Ditzy’s experience highlights is the fragile (and perhaps dubious) nature of memories, and how the concept of ‘community’ presents itself as a problematic and contradictory phenomenon.

This type of self-reflection displayed by the older drag queens interviewed was also expressed by some of the drag kings. Melbourne drag king Slick (pseudonym, aged 39) also made sense of her memories of an old gay community by considering the changes she believes have occurred in herself:

I don’t know if it’s the older I get the more aware I’ve become of myself and I get really uncomfortable...I’ve walked down the street with a drag queen and she’s gotten lots of attention and that’s cool by me because no one looks at me anyway, but they look at me and they go ‘what the hell are you?’ and so I just don’t risk it.

These two accounts suggest the perception of an increase in the threat of violence could perhaps be attributed to a greater level of self-awareness. The threat of violence may always have been there but time, change and increasing age make these dangers more evident. Reynolds’ view of ‘gay Sydney’ in the first decade of the 21st century expands upon the idea of a loss of the ‘Golden Mile’:

Evan Smith – University of Western Sydney
Clearly, something had been happening to gay Sydney in the 2000s, and, on a first glance, it wasn’t anything good. There was a malaise settling upon gay life; the collapse of Mardi Gras was simply its most evocative example. Oxford Street, once a brilliant thoroughfare of gay Sydney, reeled from dazzling to dazed, with venues closing and shops shuttered. Gay commentators’ worries about the ‘de-gaying’ of the strip, summed up when the legendary gay pub, the Albury, closed its doors in late 2001 and reopened as a Puma superstore. ‘The “Golden Mile” is now like a “Shabby Mile” nightmare’, wailed one correspondent to a local gay newspaper (Reynolds 2007, p. 5).

Reynolds’ work encapsulates the overall sentiments of the views discussed throughout this chapter, with the strip now seen as being ‘homeless’, ‘overrun’, ‘straight’ and increasingly dangerous by the participants interviewed. Melbourne drag king Grind (pseudonym, aged 47) described how she moved from Sydney to escape this ‘escalating violence’. Having started up and maintained a successful drag king night in Melbourne for the last decade, she elaborates on her reasons for moving away from Sydney:

I’ve been bashed three times, twice in Sydney just for being a lesbian. So no, it’s not that safe. I left Sydney because of that, I lived there for ages and I just got sick of it...and it was bad luck, I know that people don’t get bashed all the time in Sydney but after it happened another time I was like ‘ah’.

Grind undoubtedly believes she was bashed for being a lesbian. At the same time however, she attributes the violence (or perhaps diminishes its impact) by considering it ‘bad luck’.
These stories highlight the real threat of violence and oppression that gay people (and drag performers) still face in their everyday lives. Sydney drag kings Spike and Hellfire Angel (pseudonyms) also spoke about the violence they encountered while out on the ‘scene’, particularly in relation to the different dangers encountered by drag queens and drag kings. Recounting a particular incident while doing a guest performance in Melbourne, Spike described a situation when she encountered potential violence:

...we had been doing the Fetish Expo, there was a drag queen who was dressed to the nines and we were still in our drag king outfits and we were leaving and waiting to get a taxi and we were standing with [drag queen], as another pub on the corner was closing, a straight pub. Despite the fact that [drag queen] was standing a good seven foot tall, [drag queen] was being seriously harassed by the straight guys who were coming out of the club in Melbourne, we were in full drag. We put [drag queen] in the first taxi, despite the fact that [drag queen] is an extremely athletic man, we put [drag queen] in the first taxi because at that moment, [drag queen] dressed as a woman was at more risk than we were dressed as men, and we’re tiny, we’re both tiny. They gave us a bit of a weird look, a sort of ‘what are you?’ but they weren’t willing to take us on, they were giving [drag queen] a very hard time.

From Spike’s account, it can be suggested that although the drag queen they were accompanying was tall, athletic and essentially ‘masculine’ in these respects, his appearance and performance as a drag queen socially erased his masculinity. Spike and Hellfire Angel, although physically smaller (emphasised by Spike’s repeated use of the word ‘tiny’), were both dressed as ‘men’ and that shielded them from danger. The drag queen is marginalised
and vilified for not being ‘masculine’ in the hegemonic or heteronormative understanding of the term. The result of this threat meant the drag queen was not welcomed in this ‘straight’ environment. Spike and Hellfire Angel, despite also being in ‘drag’ had their performance of masculinity read in a way that was considered acceptable. Through these accounts, it can be understood that the experience of violence, marginalisation and oppression as experienced by drag queens and kings is contextual. These experiences are just some of the many ways in which drag performers, despite experiencing an increased ‘social’ acceptance in recent times, still occupy difficult and complex positions in mainstream society (and gay society) for the representation of their gendered and sexual identities.

Babushka also recounted an experience when he was marginalised and belittled by those who he considered to be ‘straight’ heterosexual men. Babushka’s experience demonstrates how drag performers, and gay men and women, still experience homophobic abuse:

I remember a time when I did think I was going to be raped and murdered and killed on the spot. I did a gig at Town Hall and it was midweek and basically the organisers were ridiculous and hadn’t organised transport for me back. I was half in half out, so I was in boys’ clothes but I had a drag face on and I had lots of drag bags and I was stuck on the Town Hall steps waiting for a cab at a time when midweek no cabs were going by. So this big group of homies zeroes in and they were exuding aggression, homophobia...and they were saying horrific things, had surrounded me and I think ‘right this is it I’m going to be raped and murdered right here on the street’. As they moved in they said ‘so what are you supposed to look like’ and I thought, ‘well if I’m going to go down I’m going to go down cheeky’, and I said ‘well I think I’m supposed to look pretty damn fabulous’, [They
said] ‘oh we’ll be the judge of that…what are you supposed to be?’ and I said ‘well I’m supposed to be the queen of this scene honey’ and they were like ‘we’ll be the judge of that’ and you know closer, closer, closer and then ‘so what are you?’ and I said ‘more fabulous than you’ and [they said] ‘what’s your name?’ and I said ‘well Babushka’ and one of them just looked and said ‘Babushka?’ I said ‘yes’ and he said ‘Babushka Doll from MTV?’ and I said ‘yes’ and then the mood [clicks fingers] …changed and they were like ‘oh my god, oh my god can you request Tupac Shakur ‘Until the End of Time’ and I said ‘well if I can find it in the library I will’. They all got very excited, very excited and then true to form, the next program I did find Tupac Shakur so I went ‘ok this is to such and such and such and such my homies on the Town Hall station steps, Tupac Shakur Until the end of Time’. So I thought, you know if one can bridge that gap, one can almost be raped and murdered and have a little connection there.

Babushka begins his story by claiming he thought he would be ‘raped’, ‘murdered’ and ‘killed’, emphasising the instant fear (and perhaps pre-judgement) he has towards the ‘homies’ who had approached him. Being half ‘in’ and half ‘out’ of drag meant that when the altercation occurred Babushka appeared half ‘masculine’ and half ‘feminine’. The question posed to Babushka ‘what are you supposed to be?’ clearly exposes the particular issue at the heart of the incident. Being androgynous in nature, and half in and out of drag meant he was essentially perceived as ‘other’. Babushka does not fit neatly into the gender binary and fails to have a coherent and legible persona which Butler theorises as being fundamental to the ‘acceptance’ of one’s gendered identity (1990). Babushka’s physical appearance challenged or destabilised the ‘homies’ understandings of gender normativity. Instead, Babushka appeared confusing and intriguing to them. By saying ‘I’m supposed to be
the queen of this scene’, Babushka projects entitlement and asks for recognition of his ‘celebrity’. By claiming he is the ‘queen’ he pulls rank, suggesting that to attack him would be too much, too out of order. At the same time, by stating he is the ‘queen of this scene’ draws in and includes the ‘homies’. Babushka being on prime time television showed that others had accepted and embraced him as drag and that demonstrated acceptance gave permission to the homies to do the same. Having a persona meant Babushka was no longer unrecognisable and ‘confusing’ to the homies. Babushka has become the ‘familiar’ or the known, welcomed by the homies as if he was an old friend; fame shielded him from the potential of violence. By directly addressing the group during his television program and playing the song they requested, Babushka makes that acceptance mutual. Not only do the homies accept him but by addressing them as “my homies” Babushka suggests acceptance, possession – and re-possession of the ground of his own difference.

To end this chapter, I will turn to the experiences of the youngest participant I interviewed, amateur Sydney drag queen Kourtney (pseudonym, aged 20), who had a different view on the concept of violence and fear in his everyday experiences as a drag queen:

I have no fear, I catch nightriders [buses running at night] home to Blacktown in drag all by myself, I’m fine. I have no fear whatsoever and I don’t even look behind my shoulder, I know a lot of people have fear but I’m not going to live my life in fear, hell no. I’m going to do what I want, when I want, I don’t care. If someone wants to hit me then it’s their own fault, it’s their own insecurities I’m totally fine so I really don’t care.
Perhaps Kourtney keeps alive the ‘wonderful’ and romantic view of community as theorised earlier by Bauman (2001). Although he presents himself as being overly confident and ‘fearless’, Kourtney’s repetition of the word fear indicates an acute awareness that acts itself like fear. Nonetheless, while most performers felt a great sense of sadness and nostalgia for a time gone by, performers like Kourtney strike a note of the old boldness. At the end of the interview, I envisioned Kourtney as a younger version of Ditzy or Babushka, throwing caution to the wind and hitching up his skirt as he jumped on his bus home.

Conclusion

Nostalgia and a sense of loss of community was a strong and overarching theme which emerged from the data. It was therefore important to end this thesis with an examination of the changes in the conceptualisation of drag, identity and community as revealed by that. The gay scene was once understood as a place distinctly ‘gay’, in this sense it was created for ‘gays’ by ‘gays’. In recent times however there has been a noted decrease in the identification of gay youth, who no longer feel the need to participate and socialise exclusively within the immediacy of gay life. Along with this watering down of ‘gay identity’, online cultures and virtual sites have transformed the way gay men and women socialise with each another. With the pursuit of sex increasingly being initiated in the homes of gay people, the use of gay venues as places to find sexual gratification has declined in recent times. With the ‘gay bar’ now also found online, there has been a shift in the conceptualisation of gay space from the ‘physical’ to the ‘virtual’. In tension with these changes is the expressed sense of generational and gendered divides. As the ‘scene’ has become increasingly ‘youth’ focused, older gay men and women no longer feel a sense of
value in these spaces. The increased sequestration of gays from lesbians, drag kings from drag queens and old gays from young gays has seen the overall conceptualisation of a ‘gay community’ change from being a place once known as the ‘Golden Era’ to one that has become increasingly associated with fragmentation and danger. Analysis of this data has highlighted how these changes have had a profound impact on the way drag performers participate in gay communities, and ultimately, the role of drag in those places.
Conclusion

*Down-Under Drag* is an ethnographic investigation into a variety of drag sub-cultures from around Australia. The primary aim of this research has been to better understand how drag kings and drag queens experience themselves as performers and socialisers in gay and lesbian communities, and the exploration of differences between the performance cultures of drag kinging and drag queening. As a cornerstone of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) communities in Australia and around the world since the mid-20th century, drag queens exist as an important visualisation of queer identity, fighting on the ‘front line’ for the recognition and acceptance of gay people. As a result, I felt it important to undertake an analytical exploration into the nature of the relationships formed by drag performers to those communities. As drag kinging has emerged relatively recently as performance culture, Australian research into these sub-cultures is in its infancy. It is hoped this thesis makes a much needed contribution to the study of contemporary drag cultures.

The gathering of first-hand data into drag sub-cultures was made possible by conducting a series of in-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The themes that emerged from the data were analysed using a post-structuralist approach, an approach informed largely by existing queer theory. This enables us to probe beyond ‘essentialist’ notions of identity and to rigorously examine how the subjectivities of the participants challenge normative discourses on sex and gender. The use of post-structuralist theory facilitated discussions on how identities are situational; created and maintained through operations of power. This research was necessary as part of the ongoing social, economic and cultural struggles gender variant people still experience as part of contemporary society. There is a need to
pay vigilant attention to how operations of power (particularly normalising forces of gender) still exert themselves oppressively on those whose gender or sexual subjectivity does not ‘fit’ within such normative discourses. The lives of the performers interviewed for this thesis trouble these structures in many ways - publicly and privately - creating and releasing tension through practices of drag and through their lives as gendered and sexual outcasts.

Chapter One provided an introductory case study exploration into the gendered subjectivities of four participants interviewed for the research. The aim of this chapter was to better comprehend how gender is understood, constructed and performed by these participants offstage and through their drag characters. The use of Butler’s theory of ‘Gender Performativity’ (1990) was helpful in elucidating how gender is a sustained and repeated performance, where ‘desired’ gendered identities are created through the repetition of stylised bodily acts. The analysis of the data found that although the gendered subjectivities of the participants appear to ‘queer’ heteronormative structures of sex and gender through the taking on of alternate gendered identities in drag, such performances also demonstrate a reliance on, or reflection of such normative structures, ‘reinforcing’ as well as challenging dominant discourses on gender. Drag performers particularly adopt multiple and contradictory gendered subjectivities shaped and maintained relative to the situations in which they are performed. These gendered subjectivities also intersect with issues relating to class, ethnicity, sexuality and sociocultural experience, resulting in a persistent yet productive tension between the forces of subversion and the forces of normativity in the lives of Australian drag performers.

Extending on the argument that drag performers experience shifting, multiple and contradictory gendered subjectivities, Chapter Two examined the processes behind the
identity formation of drag performers, as experienced onstage and offstage. These experiences were better understood in light of Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical metaphor for social interaction. He suggests that individuals can be likened to ‘actors’ on a stage who ‘perform’ to their audiences. Goffman suggests our identities are therefore situational, created through the alteration of a ‘Front’. Drawing upon the interview data, and from my own observations at gay venues, I found that drag performers experience unclear subjectivities, whereby their ‘offstage’ and ‘onstage’ identities often become blurred. I suggest that these indistinct identities were partly due to the changing nature of drag and gay cultures, specifically the increased ‘social’ characteristics of drag in contemporary Australia. Drag performers are increasingly expected to socialise with patrons before, during and after their onstage performances. As a result, I argue that the delineation between the identity of the ‘performer’ and ‘character’ performed has become increasingly difficult to quantify. This discussion has revealed that while most drag performers express an aim to keep their onstage and offstage lives separate, the changing nature of Australian gay communities, and the changing nature of drag cultures, complicates this desire.

The analysis of Chapter Two found that drag performers now exist, more than ever, as part of the ‘fabric’ of gay social life, partaking in what is colloquially considered ‘social drag’. The social spaces of gay venues are increasingly operating as metaphorical stages for the continuation of drag identities. Within these spaces however, drag queens particularly were found to occupy the contradictory positions of celebrity and outcast in gay male communities. The femininity of a drag queen (as performed onstage) left an indelible mark on their ‘offstage’ identities as gay men (or transgendered women). Drag queens in particular, are not considered appropriate ‘sexual’ subjects, and are often rejected for attempting to participate in gay public life as ‘gay men’. The experiences discussed in this
chapter highlight how discourses on identity still work in ways (inside and outside gay communities) to subtly oppress and control those individuals whose subjectivities fail to fit within these norms. Unlike drag kings who are enjoyed both onstage and off for their performances of ‘masculinity’, the femininity produced by the drag queens forces them to manoeuver between feelings of support and admiration to alienation and rejection. Drag performers are required to continually engage in complex negotiations of identity, which are shaped and re-shaped in relation to the forces of normativity which operate within their social worlds.

With a lack of Australian literature on drag king sub-cultures, Chapter Three marks an important and much needed examination into the performance cultures of Australian drag kings. This chapter explored the concept of ‘masculinity’ and the social value that is attributed by drag king sub-cultures to the successful performance of ‘masculinity’ on and offstage. The analysis of this data found that the cultural forces which shape drag performances differs significantly between drag queens and drag kings. With masculinity viewed as the ‘authentic’ or normative core of gender identity, as unmarked or ‘natural’ (and which cannot therefore be impersonated), the emergence of drag king cultures marks a period where this model is most visibly thwarted and exposed as fabrication. Through the adoption of their drag characters, drag kings confront the perceived naturalness of ‘masculinity’ through its theatricalisation. This is in contrast to the performance of femininity, as imitated by drag queens, which already relies on a high degree of stylization and artifice. Culturally, femininity is already perceived to be highly performative, in contrast to masculinity that appears intrinsic to the identities of ‘men’. In this sense, the stakes involved in ‘performing’ masculinity and femininity are very different, and therefore so too
are the ways in which the performances of drag kings and drag queens work to challenge, or reinforce such cultural stereotypes.

With the help of Halberstam’s (1998, 1999) research into drag king cultures in the United States and United Kingdom, I was able to argue how drag king performances offer up alternative forms of ‘masculinity’ and therefore, alternative ways of viewing discourses on gender. The analysis of the data obtained for this research found that drag kings, in comparison to drag queens, utilise the medium of drag in a more ‘queer’ sense – as a vehicle for comment. This was achieved largely through satire and parody, performance styles that allowed the drag kings to critique dominant heteronormative structures of ‘male’ masculinity, and the power that is normally attributed to such performances of identity.

Common to most of these performances were characters who represented what I termed ‘failed masculinities’, such as abusers, alcoholics, effeminate men and sexual dominators. Analysis of these onstage performances revealed that while the subversion of traditional gender roles through drag king performances work to queer such normative structures of identity, these performances also acknowledge and frequently reconsolidate male stereotypes, with some drag kings opting to pay ‘homage’ to such typecasts. Nonetheless, this chapter articulated common patterns observed in the styles of a variety of Australian drag king performances, and the tensions or challenges created by such performances in relation to concepts of gender and identity.

Chapter Four was an examination of the concept of ‘camp’ in the lives of Australian drag performers. This chapter extended on the discussion of Chapter Three, highlighting how such normative structures of gender identity were challenged through their ‘theatricalisation’, achieved largely through the use of a camp performance aesthetic. Camp
was shown to be used most frequently by the participants as a tool for description and as a particular performance style, characterised by its focus on over exaggeration and stylization (Sontag 1964). The data analysis found that camp was received differently by drag kings and drag queens. Most of the drag queens articulated ‘camp’ as being associated with an ‘older’ style of drag performance that were aimed at being queer. As theorised by Meyer (1994), camp has often been perceived as the visualisation and performance of queer identity, exposing the incongruences between the sex of the performer and the gender being performed. Drag queens particularly once relied on a camp aesthetic to expose gender as construct, over exaggerating certain gendered stereotypes through theatricality and humour (Newton, 1979). Camp however, as I have argued, has come to occupy an increased visibility and importance in drag king cultures, whose performers use ‘camp’ to articulate themselves as queer people, onstage and off. The analysis of this chapter elucidates the changing nature of Australian drag sub-cultures, particularly the way in which camp has transitioned from once belonging almost exclusively to the domain of ‘drag queening’ to becoming increasingly popular via the drag king movement. Drag queens are progressively disavowing a camp aesthetic and desire instead to portray femininity, through drag, as ‘realness’. These performances then are positioned in opposition to performances of camp which aim to destabilise such normative gender constructs. Camp then, works as an appropriate tool for drag kings in their quest to deconstruct and destabilise gender norms, particularly white male masculinity and the power normally attributed to such identities.

The final chapter focused on the notion of a changing gay ‘community’ and the transient and shifting nature of drag practices in those spaces. This was the most recurring and prominent ‘theme’ to emerge from the interview data; I highlighted how community, particularly ‘gay’ community, was and is conceptualised by the participants. Many older
participants referred to past decades as the ‘Golden Era’ in gay public life. Oxford Street in Sydney, for example, was once known to many drag performers as the ‘Golden Mile’, characterised by its distinct ‘gay’ feel, subversiveness, open celebration of sex and its inclusiveness of all gendered and sexual minorities. In recent times however, the participants felt this ‘gay community’ had changed, becoming increasingly unsafe and fragmented, less ‘gay’ and increasingly unpopular with gay youth. The analysis of these experiences found that the changing nature of gay communities, as perceived by the performers, seemed to parallel changes in drag sub-cultures, and the way drag operates in gay life. Many participants described themselves as once being the ‘epicentre’ of the gay community, the ‘glue’ which held such communities together. With the advent of online dating, many participants felt the gay ‘scene’ transitioned from the public to the private, suggesting that gay men no longer needed to participate as readily in the immediacy of public life. With an increase in online cultures of communication, the way drag is practised and experienced by drag performers has also changed. Drag has also become increasingly realised via online spaces and within other environments which would traditionally be considered as ‘straight’. Drag performers now exist alongside more ‘straight’ forms of entertainment in gay venues, remodelling themselves to appeal to the wants and desires of the audiences who view such performances. With the increased absorption of ‘gay’ identity by mainstream society, drag performers feel that gay communities are no longer used as places for refuge, or as political platforms for the oppressed but are instead increasingly becoming environments normalised by its own longing for assimilation and equality. This chapter wistfully highlighted the nostalgia drag performers expressed for a time gone by, and the impact such changes were believed to have had on the changing role and importance of drag performers in GLBT communities in contemporary Australia.
Through the research developed in this thesis, it is hoped readers have gained a better and broader understanding of drag, its performers and the relationship these sub-cultures have to gay life. Although this research is by no means exhaustive, it provides a glimpse into the lives of a range of Australian drag queens and kings in contemporary times. There is still however, much to be learnt about drag cultures. It may be fruitful for future researchers to explore other aspects of drag performance in Australia; perhaps focusing on more ‘rural’ or lesser known cultures of drag (as discussed in methodology chapter). What I have hoped to achieve through *Down-Under Drag* is to preserve and analyse the role of drag in Australian gay life and the shifting nature of these sub-cultures in recent times. In future research, I am looking to focus on other performance styles within Australian GLBT communities. As this research has shown, there are a variety of ‘sub-cultures’ within gay life, and I look forward to investigating in more detail the lives of other performers that exist alongside drag queens and kings (such as queer/burlesque entertainers, go-go boys and girls, backup dancers and DJ’s). Research into these sub-cultures will continue to add depth and insight into the nuances of the Australian GLBT landscape and provide a voice to those performers who belong to lesser known performance cultures found within these spaces.

As this thesis has demonstrated, drag performers exist as the superstars of gay public life however such stardom often brings sacrifice. Behind the disguise of a drag character is a performer who must negotiate his or her queer identity in difficult and complex ways. Celebrated for their ability to appear onstage as the opposite gender, drag performers are revered for their portrayals of hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity. However, once the lights go down and the make-up is removed, drag kings and drag queens are forced to navigate their way through the dance floors of gay clubs and the sociality of public gay life, where they still exist as ‘drag’. Drag performers therefore adopt shifting, contradictory and
multiple subjectivities in their everyday lives, not only as drag queens or kings, but also as gays, lesbians and transgendered men and woman. They are all seeking acceptance and approval not only in mainstream heterosexual life but also in gay and lesbian communities. I have shown that such communities still work in ways to exert themselves oppressively on its participants, particularly in relation to the normative forces of gender identity. The performance of drag and its performers work in ways to subvert yet reconsolidate certain discourses on gender. Such displays of identity are continually being negotiated and renegotiated by drag performers and the spaces in which they shine.
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Appendix

Interview questions for participants involved in research project: Down-under Drag: Inside Australia’s Drag King and Drag Queen Communities.

Principal researcher: Evan Smith – PhD candidate University of Western Sydney.

Date of interview:

What is your age?

Where were you born?

What is your nationality/ethnic background?

Do you have any children?

Are your single or in a relationship?

What is your economic position (on a broad scale – well off, just getting by, average etc.)?

Do you have a daytime occupation?

How long have you been performing/doing drag for?

What is your drag performance name and how did you come up with it?

Is there a particular type of persona or character you like to portray in drag?
How did you first start doing drag?

How do you feel when you perform/dress in drag?

How do you identify in terms of your gender identity?

How closely related do you feel you are to your drag/performance persona?

Is there a particular style of performance you prefer to stick to in drag?

Do you change your performance style/look?

What is it like performing with other drag queens or kings?

Is the drag scene competitive?

How closely related do you think transsexualism is to drag performance?

How are transsexual drag kings or queens viewed by drag performers or vice versa?

Are there any cliques in the gay/drag scene?

What is the difference between drag kings and drag queens?

Are drag kings and queens treated the same in the ‘scene’?

Have you performed with any people of the ‘opposite’ drag (i.e. a drag king with a drag queen and vice versa)?

How are you treated by venue staff/owners?
Do you feel safe when you are out in drag on the scene?

Do you hang out on the scene when you’re not performing?

Are there benefits to being a drag performer?

Do you see yourself as a role model for the gay community?

Do you perform at any charity events?

How do you think you are perceived by members of the gay community as a drag performer?

How do drag performers fit in with the wider gay scene?

How do you find maintaining relationships?

What changes would you like to see for the gay/drag scene?

What is your relationship like with your parents?

What advice would you give to an up and coming performer?

Where do you think you will be in 10 years’ time?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience?