

**The Haus of Frau: Radical Drag Queens  
Disrupting the Visual Fiction of Gendered Appearances**

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THE HAUS OF FRAU: RADICAL DRAG QUEENS  
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(ABSTRACT)

This research considers the connections between appearance and identity apparent in the social experience of five gay male drag queens. Appearing at variance with gender norms that underwrite male appearance in mainstream society and among gay men prompted social consequences that impacted their identities and world views.

One aim is to apprehend the experiences of difference that drag appearance manifest and expressed. Another aim is to gain a new perspective on the social construction of gendered appearances from marginalized persons who seem to look from the “outside” in toward mainstream social appearances and relations.

Qualitative analysis relied on interview data and occurred using grounded theory methodology. However, analysis gained focus and intensified by engaging Stone’s (1970) theorizing on “Appearance and the Self,” Feminist articulations of “the gaze” and poststructural conceptions of the discursively constituted person as “the subject.” This research especially emphasizes the points of connection between Stone’s theorizing and more recent feminist theoretical advancements on the gaze as they each pertain to appearance, identity and social operations of seeing and being seen. Yet there is also consideration of the manners in which gendered appearance norms circulate in discourse and permeate the individual psyche.

The research findings also locate social consequences of transgressing male appearance norms. These drag queens’ interviews revealed that they used appearance to visibly portray gendered identities. Manners in which they related their drag appearances to the self were suggestive that gender identities are states of consciousness stemming from one’s imagined connections to mass cultural conceptions of male and/or female. Where most people seem to commit themselves exclusively to male or female appearance repertoires and identity sets, these men indicated that they made both male and female identifications. These mixed identifications, which could have remained hidden, materialized when they did drag. In a sense, by doing drag, they performed their gender ambivalence. Their drag appearances were meta-performances that referred both to their own ambivalence with the gender binary, and to how appearance assists in constructing, maintaining and communicating (i.e., performing) status quo gendered identities.

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## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

*Depending on how you see a thing, you cage your mind or you free it — Dee-Lite*

This dissertation considers the social experience of five Baltimore-area gay men who participated in a radical drag performance troupe, the Haus of Frau between November, 1992 and December, 1994. These men created appearances at variance with the gender code that prescribes male appearances under most circumstances. In doing so, these five men gained social experiences of difference that impacted their identities and their world views. The Haus of Frau have disrupted the cultural imprinting of heterosexual masculinity on their bodies not only by donning feminine gear but also by disallowing viewers to read their bodies as “female” when they used feminine gear to construct their appearances. By contrast, the female impersonation idiom so prevalent in Baltimore’s gay bars is a performance context founded on a tacit collusion between the theatrically cross dressed male and his audience. This collusion is manifest when the female impersonator and his audience alike pretend the female impersonator is a “real” female and a “star.”

### **Constructing an Alternative Approach to Research Marginal Subjects**

Both gay experience and male cross dressing are marginal to American society and frequently misunderstood. It is from these intersecting marginal positions that I am invested in the project of bringing to light experiences of difference that are under-represented in American society and in academic discourses. This kind of analysis requires providing readers with contexts for understanding gay and drag queen experience. It requires questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions that compose belief systems and social order. Some people take serious offense when the belief systems they embrace or the assumptions and values that they

take for granted are called into question. However, such questioning is indispensable to creating new contexts for awareness and understanding.

Probing assumptions occurs at numerous points in developing the theoretical framework and analyzing the interview data Haus of Frau provided, particularly, around sex and gender norms that underwrite social appearances and behavior. The discussion often speaks of sexuality in explicit terms and some Haus of Frau members use street language that appears in blocks of interview text that are key to analysis. The words Haus of Frau choose reflect their experience. In an effort to preserve the voices of research participants, I do not alter their words.

In aiming to create new contexts for understanding I also turn the focus back toward gendered appearances as they operate under ordinary circumstances in everyday life. Haus of Frau's drag queen experiences often relegated them to the "outside" of ordinary social relations. I set sights toward retrieving what Haus of Frau perceived about gender and appearance when they looked "from the outside in" upon dominant society. This retrieval opens additional contexts for "seeing otherwise" that can accommodate diversity and provide opportunities for people to grasp the importance of manufactured appearances to America's taken-for-granted gender order.

I presume that people do not ordinarily think about how they look upon others and what learned interpretive responses they engage to identify others and make sense of their interpersonal exchanges. Since people are likely more concerned about what they see than how they see, these operations of perception and interpretation innate to social exchange might be taken for granted. This work interrogates how people see by tracking down the personal and collective meaning structures that function as a "cultural lens" through which they process visual aspects of interpersonal experience. I explore the connection between the visual information people convey and their establishing and communicating identities, including how people respond to others on the basis of visual information. In sum, I seek to apprehend the

personal and cultural narratives that inform visual appearances and how people interpret them. At the heart of this project is an analysis of how gender operates through appearance, since appearance is the primary means by which gender divisions are produced and communicated in a culture most profoundly insistent to distinguish visually women from men.

Haus of Frau discussions offer insights into the functioning of gender as a form of power that is wielded by various social and cultural forces to define people and confine them to “appropriate” behavior. The gender power effect is apparent as Haus of Frau members discuss their personal, social consequences of disrupting the gendered appearance code. They also illustrate how being socialized into gendered identities is a disciplinary process that requires self regulation in emphasizing one’s visual appearance. Their discussions show the relations between appearance, the body and identities. Perhaps most importantly, their drag narratives trace the connections between appearance and identities.

In tracing the connections between appearance and identity that Haus of Frau discussions reveal, I argue that elements of fantasy were necessary to their identities, both as drag queens and as men in everyday life. Silverman (1992) suggests that people construct their identities through a process of making identifications with others. However, she proposes that “identity is not ‘real,’ although it has a powerful hold on belief” (p. 353). She asserts that people do not apprehend their identities directly, but that it is through cultural mediation that people come to identities. That is, people imagine their similarity and affiliations to categories of identifying traits such as sex, race and age, which position them in cognitive proximity to some, while separating them from others. Silverman theorizes that people make these determinations by engaging with “repertoires of culturally intelligible images.” I presume that the identifying categories to which people ascribe are composed by these culturally intelligible images which define appropriate appearances and action for certain types of people. Thus ascribing to an identity involves engagement with culturally intelligible images and fashioning oneself into conformity with specific social categories.

Engagements with culturally intelligible images is an imaginative process that also demonstrates one's level of participation in collective fantasy. Fantasy often stems from desires. It is at this point where fantasy stems from desires that I draw a connection between the repertoire of culturally intelligible images and gender norms to illustrate how fantasy might operate in composing social order. Gender norms prescribe acceptable appearance and behavior according to sex. I propose that gender appropriate appearances and behavior *are* the culturally intelligible images people refer to in constructing their identities according to sex. Moreover, gender norms reflect cultural values which gear society toward outcomes deemed collectively desirable. Value systems reflect desire where they indicate how people wish things to be. Hence one might see gender norms as a means of guiding people toward what is deemed collectively desirable, rather than toward what might otherwise be construed as "natural." It is also important to recognize that what is collectively desirable might be in direct conflict what one deems personally desirable.

However, in guiding people toward what is collectively desirable, gender norms compose social scripts that one can appreciate for their functioning as fictional devices that program the social drama. In the social drama, I propose that gender norms compose male and female archetypes which stand as figures of mythic proportion. When one is socially distinguished as male or female, the entire repertoire of culturally intelligible images or gender norms associated with that archetype seem to overwrite the person. This overwriting people according to gender archetypes amounts to stereotyping and indicates the importance of fantasy and imagination to composing and performing gendered identities. Imagination operates at the individual level where people ascribe to the norms composing gender archetypes and the astute observer notices that gender norms portray fantasy because they are not universal. American male and/or female appearance norms change over time and differ dramatically from those in other cultures. Butler (1990) stated that where gender norms are culture bound and socially communicated, they reveal the gender code's fictional nature.

Much of what the cultural observer can ascertain about the gender fiction, (s)he retrieves in locating the implicit values that gendered identities and appearances indicate. The Haus of Frau's discussions reveal that they, as individuals, engaged gender fictions to compose their own identities and that they were compelled by personal and social values in this process. The Haus of Frau members reveal the role that imagination plays in constructing and communicating gendered identities. Generally, these men imagined their connection to male gender norms in creating and communicating socially acceptable identities in everyday life. However, they also imagined their connection to female gender norms in creating and communicating gay and drag queen identities. This cultural contradiction, where these men did not identify with and perform masculinity to the exclusion of femininity, showed the importance of appearance to creating and communicating credible, socially acceptable identities. In effect, this emphasis on appearance and its reliance on imagination in constructing identities suggest that identities form in one's consciousness and then one represents or performs identity using appearance. It is hard to overestimate the importance of appearance to identity. American culture emphasizes visual appearances as the primary means by which people bring into physical being and approximate the persons they imagine and/or wish themselves to be. With specific regard to gendered identities, Butler (1990) suggested that people use appearance to portray themselves *as if* they were the "real thing."

I emphasize the importance of imagination to gendered identity construction because it is consonant with my standpoint that all socially constructed realities contain elements of fiction. That is, most tangible social realities are founded on intangible concepts and values which people contrive and invest with value and authenticity through mental processes. This standpoint is not out of line with symbolic interactionist theorizing on the social construction of reality (e.g., Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Moreover, second wave feminists have located and analyzed fictional elements of gendered social realities (e.g., Butler, 1990 1993; Silverman, 1992).

With this research, it is my aim to locate and analyze the social and personal implications of gender's functioning through appearance. The research participant's discussions illustrate the process of forming gendered identities as one requiring people to imagine their similarity to, or difference from, American culture's respective male and female gender archetypes. These gender archetypes pertain not only to sex type but also to sexuality and power. Current gender archetypes reflect a social order in which sexuality and power are intertwined. However, discourses emerging in mainstream American culture suggest that it is ill equipped to comfortably speak about sex and power together or separately in explicit terms. Following Foucault, I propose that Americans live under democratic pretensions that obscure the manners in which they command or submit to power. Additionally, Rich (1980) and Irigaray (1975) suggest that western societies are characterized by exclusive heterosexual imperatives that favor men. Rich (1980) terms these taken for granted social relations "compulsory heterosexuality." I propose that compulsory heterosexuality and the male privilege it contains are so pervasive and taken for granted that they often preclude discussion because they function at the level of common sense in most social transactions. This taken-for-granted basis for social order rarely calls attention to itself in verbal transactions. Yet it repeatedly refers to itself as it is reproduced in the gendered appearances that Americans use to distinguish male from female in our culture (Paoletti and Kidwell, 1989). In addition, Garber (1993) and Silverman (1992) propose that the visual fiction of appearance narrates sex and power relations and that appearance tangibly constitutes and reproduces these relations on the body.

It is also at the bodily site that disruptions can occur which represent resistance to discursive intrusions and create situations that demand explicit verbal narration. Drag appearances are such bodily appearances which disrupt the visual fiction of exclusive heterosexuality and its male privilege. Thus drag queens shake the gender narrative informed by compulsory heterosexuality from the realm of common sense, and verbal discussion becomes necessary. This dissertation is a testament to that necessity.

Radical drag performers offer an important and very powerful set of discourses on gender that proceed most immediately from their appearances and how they manipulate their bodies' external surfaces. Appearances that individuals engage are composed of clothing and personal grooming choices that we more broadly term "dress" (Roach, Eicher & Johnson, 1995). Many scholars maintain that one's appearances are a socio-cultural symbolic equipment by which gender relations are established and reproduced (Garber, 1993; Kaiser, Lennon & Damhorst, 1991; Cahill, 1989; Kaiser, 1989; Paoletti & Kidwell, 1989; Stone, 1970a, 1970b). It is no surprise then, that some gay people choose to "renegotiate gender precisely at the level of spectacle" (Silverman, 1992, p. 354). Here spectacle means the "something to be seen" that we use appearance to convey to others. This notion of spectacle is tied to the gaze, a culturally constructed way of seeing. Silverman (1992) conceives the gaze as the cultural means by which people visually apprehend themselves and others to establish identities.

Appearance can be used to create a "something to be seen" that heterosexually configured dominant social relations aim to keep out of sight, regardless of how powerfully contradictory gender meanings inform an individual's consciousness. There is a compelling connection between the body, clothing, sex, gender and oppression that remains ripe for exploration. Appearance is simultaneously intimately related to identity and the body. In effect, appearance is a medium by which the intangibles one associates with the "interior" of one's being can possibly be brought to the surface. These intangibles include past experiences, sentiments, desires, identifications and affiliations. Once these intangibles surface on the body, they become subject to social scrutiny and impact how one is perceived and treated by others (Stone, 1970b).

Through dress, one's "heart" might be worn on one's sleeve. Clothing can be used to reveal or conceal the illusory desires that create identities. Regardless of intent, personal appearances always represents the negotiations between the inner and outer person, the private

and the public selves, the individual and the social, the personal and the political. The very act of doing drag involves the same operations of revelation and concealment that dress always does.

Doing drag, or being in drag comprises any number of manipulations on the drag performer's body (adjusting appearance, posture, gait, and sometimes voice) to confound the spectator's perceptions of his biological sex. Traditionally, the performative intent of doing drag is to come as close as one can to "passing" as a "real" woman. In Baltimore's gay bars, those who perform drag on stage with this intent are called female impersonators. Radical drag is another form of drag that does not intend to create a "successful" feminine illusion on the male body, but rather to subvert the current gender arrangements and attendant social relations. Ekins (1997) locates "genderfuck" as radical drag's performative intent, a personal and political statement written on the body which is manifest in a "deliberate mix of masculine and feminine presentation of self" ( p. 41).

### **Contextualizing Frau's Drag Queen Experience**

Although it has been years since Haus of Frau performed together, its core members still identify themselves as "Frau" and consider themselves drag queens. Baltimore's gay community has not forgotten them. People in the gay community continue to ask when the Haus of Frau will perform again, and a buzz circulates from time to time that they will have a reunion. I entitled this work "The Haus of Frau: Radical Drag Queens Disrupting the Visual Fiction of Gendered Appearance." I chose this title because Frau's radical drag appearances disrupted the visual fiction of appearance that reproduces gender in everyday life. Performing this disruption prompted social consequences that became drag queen experience and impacted their identities.

The experiences Frau narrated to me revealed life and identities as "works in process,"

containing the intangible past experiences and personal meanings that condition how people go about their lives--lives framed by the dominant social arrangements to which most are subject--in a society obsessed with maintaining an artificial but seemingly intractable boundary of difference between male and female. This difference is constructed and maintained as American society conceives its heterosexual relations as engagements with the "opposite" sex.

Sex is a biological term, representing genetic expression manifest in male and female beings. Gender is the social appearances and behaviors that we associate with people based on their sex. In American society, sex and gender are conflated. Note that often, on applications, people are asked what gender they possess when the information sought is biological sex.

There are gender contradictions and identity conflicts attendant to being a gay man that are further complicated when one does drag and performs in drag. In American society appearances seem more important than actualities. These appearances over-emphasize the presumed natural differences between men and women and emphasize heterosexuality. Therefore, drag appearances are socially problematic and have implications for drag performers because one's appearance indelibly marks social transactions. Indeed, in everyday life, when a drag performer is in his "civvies" and others possess knowledge that he does drag, it influences the way people perceive and treat him.

Male identity in dominant society is especially fragile as it is based on exclusion and renunciation of anything deemed feminine (Frietas, Kaiser, Chandler, Hall, Kim and Hammidi, 1997). Gay men admitting their erotic inclinations negate their status as "real" (heterosexual) men. However, segments of the gay community attempt to occupy the status and privilege of "real men," seeking their "place at the table" by insisting that they are just like the heterosexual "majority" except that they choose men as their sexual partners. These gay men often embrace politics of assimilation and integration, much as liberal feminists do. They believe that by working within the system, they will achieve equality for gay men. They often charge gay

drag performers with undermining their goal of gay rights because they undo the conception of gay men as "just like everybody else." These assimilationists most often choose gendered appearances closely approximating the presumed visage of the heterosexual man in dominant social relations by meticulous adherence to the strictures of (white) middle-class masculine dress and grooming. Notably, in Baltimore, these assimilationists are usually college-educated, upwardly-mobile, professional, middle class, gay men, while drag performers are usually not college educated and usually have working class origins.

In gay bars, gay men openly present themselves to each other as possible sexual partners. Conventionally masculine/straight appearances and hyper-masculine, butch-real appearances are the preferred symbolic equipment gay men use to visually locate potential sexual partners and simultaneously, to attract erotic interest from others. Currently, straight-looking appearances are a leisure-time look that typically involve reasonably new Levi's and a solid-colored, or striped button-down shirt, and some sort of heavy oxford shoes. Butch-real appearances make one appear as a laborer. These appearances usually involve faded jeans, work boots, and plain T-shirts in white or dark colors, or flannel shirts in colder weather. It is an interesting contradiction that gay men may appear as laborers to go out in the evening when they are just as likely engaged in much more "genteel" occupations.

The straight-looking and hyper-masculine butch-real appearances preferred in gay bars makes the gay drag performer's visage even more perplexing. While gay male sexual attraction is based on masculine appearances, what motivates drag performers to engage feminine appearances and why are drag performances so popular in gay bars? I use this dissertation to explore what motivates these gay men in the Haus of Frau to do drag and publicly perform drag in and out of gay bars. I seek the personal and political implications of doing drag in the gay community as they impact identities and how one goes about everyday life. Drag performers are at variance with the gender order among gay men and larger society by choosing on occasion to publicly appear not-masculine. The social, political and erotic

implications of the drag performer's rule-breaking lead to consequences that condition drag performer's experience, identities and strategies for presentation of self in various social settings. Drag performers decide for themselves where and when to do drag and to whom they disclose their gay, and drag identities.

Drag performers initially face challenges in doing drag that vary with social context, economic circumstances, body types and performative intent. Acquiring the clothing, accessories and grooming aids necessary to generate the desired appearance requires time, money and access to goods and services--not to mention lots of practice, working on oneself to achieve the desired appearances. Social support, access to information on what to wear and how to wear it, are usually important in a drag performer's early career. Most drag performers indicate that it takes practice to gain the expertise and the critical eye necessary to accomplish a well put together look. Since most drag performers do not grow up using make-up, they must learn elsewhere how to use it or have someone else apply it. Moreover, what a drag queen seeks to accomplish with make up may differ dramatically from how makeup usually appears on women in everyday life. If one wears wigs, he must learn to style the wigs or get someone else to do it, whether a friend or one contracted for this service. Depending on one's courage and body size, shopping can pose some obstacles. Some men do not feel comfortable trying on women's clothes, shoes and wigs or buying make-up in public retail outlets. Further, men are often larger and generally have figures different than women. For these reasons, they might have trouble finding desired garment or shoe size and fit.

One might see becoming a drag performer as a metaphorical birth. Once born, one is cared for and learns from mother. The new drag performer is in a vulnerable place, lacking information and experience, like a child. Rough appearances and awkward performances are part of the process in becoming a drag performer. Many people cringe when viewing photographs of themselves in early adolescence, taking those first assertive steps toward independence, inexperienced but insistent on picking one's own clothes and hairstyles. Drag

performers often express similar trepidation when viewing photographs from their earliest drag forays. Interesting too, doing drag sometimes involves "identity work" similar to that psychologists associate with adolescence, when people make transitions toward autonomous selves.

I choose the term, "becoming a drag queen," to represent one's status as and identification with drag and to indicate that it is processual and in constant flux. As with all of life, the constant ebb and flow of experience changes self perceptions and inclinations to act. In becoming a drag queen, there are underlying conditions in the larger social structure and the gay community that inform experience. Race, class and gender certainly come into play. Gender seems easiest to investigate because its effects are most tangible to drag queen experience. However, race and class also mark the drag performer's experience. For example, in Baltimore there are at least as many people of color doing drag, if not more than whites. However, the most powerful and well know drag performers in Baltimore are white, just like the owners of the most popular and well-established gay nightclubs. Moreover, gay men closely identified with white middle class values are most likely to disdain drag performers.

### **Discursive Intersections that Informed this Research**

Traditionally, the philosophical underpinnings embraced by social science valued the impersonal by pursuing an epistemological stance requiring objectivism. Scientists embracing objectivism believed that the natural world of all phenomena could be ascertained and represented transparently, untainted by personal desires if researchers detached themselves from the phenomena under investigation (Lather, 1991). In contrast, this research values the personal. I am not dispassionate, cool and aloof from the people I research and their experiences. I do have personal experiences and desires that cause me to do this research. These experiences and desires impact how I go about this research.

My locations in discourse certainly inform the research questions and conduct I engage. I extrapolate from feminists insistence on the relation between the personal and political the relation between the personal and the theoretical. Therefore, I highlight the personal experiences which inform my theoretical stance in the next section. Within academic discourses, theories compose the explanatory narrative foundation from which investigations into phenomena are launched. I maintain that as a researcher, my personal experiences related to the phenomena under investigation also compose a foundation from which the research is launched. This assertion reflects my understanding of "theoretical sensitivity" that Strauss and Corbin (1990) assert is necessary to the successful execution of qualitative research. Theoretical sensitivity comes from one's understanding of the technical literature about the phenomena under investigation and from the researcher's personal experiences with these same phenomena.

My feminist position and personal experiences both locate me at intersections of discourse and are crucial to this study. The ways I ask questions and conduct the research reveal the philosophical tension between postmodern positions and traditional social science. While at the same time traditional, positivist social psychological theories and my postmodern feminist positions both deem research a social product. This research takes place where my specific personal experiences intersect with the generalities that theory offers to explain experience. This intersection is rife with complexities and contradictions. There is no resolution to the contradictions. However, postmodern epistemologies embrace complexity and contradictions over parsimony.

Postmodern social scientists argue that realities of human experience are better represented by complexities and contradictions than by parsimonious generalizations that ignore contradictions in order to conduct variable analysis with statistics (Lather, 1991; Maines, 1993). My personal experiences and theories coming from sociologists, psychologists, feminists, postmodernists, performance theorists, linguists and philosophers come together

complexly, weaving a tapestry of questions, responses, and interpretations that become this dissertation.

I offer a personal narrative inflected with theory that locates me in dominant social relations and foregrounds important personal experiences that lead to this research. Please note however that this narrative reflects how I made sense of my life at one point in time. What I deem important, how I give experience meaning and how I am poised to act in the future continues to evolve and change from the frozen moment in the summer of 1997 that this narrative tries to capture and convey.

### **Key Experiences in My Life Leading to this Research**

I had seen run of the mill female impersonators in gay bars since 1982. However, at Baltimore's Gay Pride celebration in June, 1991, I saw someone special and very different in his approach to doing drag. This tall thin, very pale white man appeared in the most outrageous drag I had ever seen! He seemed to be seven feet tall, sporting a huge black, early 1970s style afro wig, a bare midriff peasant blouse made from an American flag, a silver, sequined, hip-hugger micro mini skirt that revealed buttock cleavage, black fishnet stockings and black combat boots. He had on the largest pair of mirrored sunglasses with bicentennial red, white and blue striped frames. His face was painted garishly with huge red lips thickly outlined in black. He also wore enormous earrings. I didn't get to meet this outrageous drag queen, but my first experience

witnessing a radical drag queen stayed with me. Before this point, I had no real awareness of radical drag queens. I had only experienced female illusionists or female impersonators. Please note also that I had no awareness of radical drags queen until I had read Sex Gender and Cross Dressing by Bullough & Bullough (1993).

My second encounter with a radical drag queen came in February, 1992 at a special expanded version of the 14K Cabaret held at the Maryland Theater Project, which seats 200-300. The 14K Cabaret, is usually in a small basement club seating about 75, with a postage stamp stage. At Maryland Theater Project, Laure Drogoul presented her extremely ambitious production, "Workshop of Filthy Creation." The piece is about gender, science and medical technology. Borrowing from Foucault, Laure Drogoul metaphorically explored the "technologies of the self" and the "regimes of truth" germane to the creation and reproduction of male and female bodies in our culture. In the opening scene, a twisted "Birth of Venus" transpired. From the huge clamshell emerged a tall, almost emaciated, pale white androgyne, void of all body hair and hair on "its" head. I looked in amazement at the completely nude figure. I could not detect a penis. The character's body appeared so smooth, its flesh so supple, with a rounded (read feminine) abdomen. At first, I couldn't tell if I was seeing an incredibly emaciated woman without noticeable breasts, or a soft, hairless man who had somehow concealed his penis. What seemed to be an ultrasonically imaged fetus going through the trimesters of pregnancy was projected onto "Venus" smooth round abdomen with a 16mm projector. Meanwhile, Drogoul broadcasted a very clinical, disembodied narration in a female voice outlining the changes in the fetus through each trimester. In subsequent scenes, this drag queen became a nightmarish, Vanna White-styled, game show hostess with a burned-up bleach blonde wig and red sequined dress. Later, he appeared as a "winning" game show contestant who had her head caged, her thoughts confined and her voice erased to achieve the cultural ideal of wedded, domestic bliss. Thus this game show contestant became the "Queen of all Eternity." The performance knocked me out!

During the Spring of 1992 I became interested in a man who worked at a vintage clothing store in the neighborhood where I lived. This man became and remains my life partner. On our first date in late May, 1992, I learned that this man, known in drag as John Flowers, was the remarkable performer and astonishing drag queen I had seen first at Baltimore's Gay Pride '91 and again in Drogoul's "Workshop of Filthy Creation." I had seen John on these two different occasions but did not know that the drag queen and performer I had seen were related to each other. I was surprised to find that such a performer and outlandish drag queen was initially very shy.

John was refreshed that I was not turned off because he did drag. In Baltimore, many "straight looking/straight acting" gays swept along by the AIDS backlash, were into the butch-real, "health and fitness" appearances of the late 1980s and early 1990s. They couldn't handle John's threats to the straight looking status quo--both inside and out of Baltimore's gay community. I guess too, neither of us knew when we met that John found in me another drag queen.

Through my partner John, I became acquainted with members of a radical drag performance troupe named Haus of Frau during the autumn of 1992, right when they were formally establishing themselves as a social and performance entity. I established friendships with some members of the Haus of Frau that endure. While living in Baltimore, I attended as many Haus of Frau performances as I could. On occasion, I performed supporting roles in Haus of Frau performances and always had privileged access to their backstage milieu. Haus of Frau performed at Baltimore's foremost performance art venue, the 14K Cabaret, and at many gay bars in Baltimore and Washington, DC. Usually, Haus of Frau performed at the 14K Cabaret, or at trendy warehouse district dance clubs featuring house music parties that lasted until dawn. But Haus of Frau also performed in gay bars, sharing the bill for the evening's entertainment with traditional female impersonators.

My immersion in radical drag culture with John led me to embrace and deploy the “genderfuck” trajectory, which Ekins (1997) defines as the intentional blurring of visual distinctions between male and female. I do not do drag to look like a woman. I wear women's clothes, shoes and make-up to blur the boundary between male and female in attempt to subvert the male/female binary manifest in dominant society. I have very hairy arms and a muscular male physique. I do not shave my legs nor do I try to hide my genitalia when doing drag.

At first, I wished for my drag to shock people and put queer with a capital Q in their faces. I had not been out for very long and had much anger for dominant society. I felt like heterosexuality had been and continued to be shoved down my throat by dominant society. I believed that my friends who died of AIDS were partially victims of malicious neglect by our federal government. During the early 1980s, the Reagan Administration ignored the AIDS crisis because it initially seemed confined to gay men. I was picked on and bullied the entire time I spent in public school because I was "different." I knew I did not have equal protection under the law because of my sexual orientation. In 1992, I saw the store front of Lambda Rising, Baltimore's gay and lesbian bookstore vandalized, its windows smashed in, while gay bashing was on the rise in Baltimore's gay neighborhoods. A friend of mine was beaten in the head with a brick and left for dead at a "gay friendly" beach resort. Meanwhile, the hegemony within Baltimore's gay community seemed to prefer straight looking/straight acting over queer. I couldn't understand why gay men wanted to appear like their oppressors. Why didn't they take an activist stance using personal appearance?

My critical analysis of social relations was overly simple. Coming out had released a floodgate. Emotions that I had suppressed for 15 years poured out. My anger and confusion prevented me from more thoughtful examinations into the complexities of the American social situation. Like a religious zealot, I wanted people to know and understand the world as I did. My standpoint was fascist and logically flawed. I now realize I cannot expect others to know

and understand the world as I do because everyone's experience is different.

I realize now that one performs not just complicity and resistance in social arrangements. There is also ambivalence. Social settings swarm with ambiguity (Davis, 1987; Kaiser, Nagasawa & Hutton, 1991). I also recognize how difficult it is to communicate and sustain subversive content in our fragmented, mass mediated social world. Millions of constantly shifting images bombard us. The traditional analyses considering the form and content of imagery are much more difficult to engage in a culture that seems to emphasize surface at the expense of underlying and/or intrinsic meaning. The primacy and pervasiveness of image over essence makes it difficult to make or take any stand for argument or political action. I have come to the conclusion that each individual must do what works best for him or her. I hope in doing so that people will be thoughtful and honest with themselves and others. I realize that openly stating my position is important; but that being tolerant of others' positions at the same time is the best political practice I can hope for.

I am currently much less inclined to do shock drag. Moreover, I do not feel that I can only express my "feminine side" through doing drag. But I do use the 1940s drag I now explore to express my identification with the oppression that women experience. I feel a deep sense of connection with the women in my family. Their desires were sometimes thwarted and sometimes beautifully and powerfully expressed in the face of bleak circumstances associated with urban working-class housewifery and child rearing. I have on occasion experienced the devaluation and foreclosure of possibilities similar to what these women faced. I recollect what I witnessed my mother, aunts and grandmothers bear. I have seen the family photographs and heard the stories that convey the joys and sadness of these women's lives.

I now read their efforts to appear beautiful through dress on special occasions like Easter Sunday or going to the Saturday Night Dance at the American Legion as representing their desire to transcend their mundane existence. They all kept spotlessly clean houses, mostly in rough neighborhoods composed of extremely small brick row houses built after World War

II. I believe that these women kept spotlessly clean houses and used their personal appearances to express something about themselves that their dreary socio-economic circumstances might have refused. I identify with what I perceive as their desire to be something other than their social circumstances allowed.

Likewise, I feel that my 1940s drag expresses a desire for connection with a grandmother I never knew. My mother, born in 1945, was raised by her paternal grandmother. She was cut off from her mother and any connection to her mother's family. All the information my mother's remaining family shared with her about her biological mother was negative. When I was a child, my mother would describe to me her faint recollections of her mother during the 1940s. As I child, I became well acquainted with my mother's sense of loss and separation. In recalling her mother, my mother shared with me her grief and desire for connection.

Like my mother, aunts, and grandmothers, I do take pleasure in wearing women's clothes and shoes that I find aesthetically pleasing, yet it is not an erotic pleasure many heterosexual men attribute to cross dressing. I am particularly fond of clothing from the time period 1938-1946. I have been very successful in acquiring clothing from that time period which actually fits me! I have grown my own hair longer than shoulder length and am glad to forgo wearing wigs because I find wigs very hot, scratchy and generally uncomfortable.

Although I do not strive for realness in doing drag, people tell me that I look like their mothers and aunts when I am done up. I am delighted that people make this connection. This is the kind of identification with women that I try to make. Interestingly, two different friends have told me that I looked like their respective "Aunt Rose" when I do '40s drag. Coincidentally, my maternal grandmother's name is Rose.

In doing 1940s drag, I realize that I express many aims and my own engagements with fantasy. I am expressing connection with my mother, grandmothers, and conceptions of glamour from the World War II era. I conceive the WWII era as a time when the men were

off to war and women were on their own. As a child I perceived males as mean, rough and often abusive. When I was a child, I saw the romanticized version of the WWII Era delivered to me through mass media as a "world without men." As a boy, I thought such a world would be a good thing. I thought the world would be a kinder, more compassionate and caring place without men. Now, I realize the problem was not with men, but how we socially conceive and construct them. But getting back to discussion of the tangible effects of masculine absence and female autonomy during WWII, consider the fact that most dresses from this era opened in front or zipped at the side seam. A woman's self reliance was even supported through garment design. These garments allowed women to totally dress themselves instead of seeking help with back buttons and back zippers.

I understand World War II as a time when white working class women like my grandmothers looked to movie stars for guidance in dress and grooming. They did not read Vogue magazine. The world created by movies on the silver screen was pure fantasy, an escape from the harsh realities of World War II. I speculate that Women might have invested in this fantasy by dressing and grooming as movie stars did. On some level I too invest in a fantasy by doing drag. I seek escape from the harsh realities of the gender war wrest by compulsory heterosexuality. I express the desire for something that our current cultural arrangements would deny me--an existence without social limitations that devalue and erase my experience.

During World War II, Scarlet O'Hara's hair style and netted snood were very popular. I wonder how we would remember Gone with the Wind had it not been for World War II? Scarlet's autonomy, grit and determination were characteristics that women on the home front could relate to and emulate. The scene in Gone with the Wind where Scarlet O'Hara makes a dress out of curtains foreshadows the scarcities and hardships of war on the home front in a remarkable way. Even though Scarlet was well turned out in her dress made from green draperies, her hands revealed her hard life, doing men's work. During WWII, with the men off

to war, white women who would have otherwise been at home, were in the factories, doing "men's work." Fabric and leather were hard to come by, not to mention, butter, beef, sugar and coffee. In spite of these unpleasant circumstances of war, the desire to appear beautifully dressed and well groomed remained. This leads me to what I find most interesting about the social construction of feminine appearances.

With so many men gone and women doing the men's work, what purposes did fashion serve for women during World War II? I argue that even though the shorter skirts of the earlier 1940s were supposed to remind the boys of what they were fighting for, that the short, modestly flared skirts also represented female autonomy because they were practical and provided for increased mobility. But even more, I think that women's involvement with fashion in the 1940s represented something that women wanted for themselves more than it represented a vehicle for the male gaze. Fashion's connection to cinema during the 1940s emphasizes fantasy--the desire to transcend dreary and sometimes harsh realities and to express something about the self that refuses oppression and other adversities.

I hope my radical drag appearances using '40s fashion will emphasize my identification with women's lives more so than any anger I might have for dominant society. At the same time, I hope my cross dressed appearances make people question the presumed natural order of gendered appearances we associate with men and women respectively. I choose personal appearance as a method toward political change because personal appearances contain and reproduce gender oppression.

Over the years that I have been seriously involved with doing drag, my personal style has evolved from a very scary/ugly shock drag to the more subtle but also disturbing 1940s drag that I do today. The emotions, theoretical understandings of oppression and technical expertise in applying make-up that I call on in doing drag have evolved. These changes over time are apparent as I manifest a more refined and cohesive drag persona. Yet I still find it difficult to come up with a "drag name" for myself, perhaps because I see my drag as

integrated, a part of the "me" that people call John.

Since becoming involved with performance studies and performance theory, my feelings about my own drag queen enactments have changed. I now feel that doing drag just for the hell of it is a lot of work! It takes a long time to "get in 'em." Close shaving my face, putting on a dress, applying make-up and fixing my hair can take up to an hour! I dress as a man for all occasions in no more than 20 minutes. I do have something that I want to say about sex and gender when I do drag, so why not perform? The seeds of knowledge I wish to scatter are more likely to take root among a cognoscenti in performance art venues than in straight or gay bars. Moreover, my drag enactments within the context of performance art will allow for richer play of meaning that I can achieve in just wandering around in a gay bar or any other place in drag.

My partner John and I plan to do collaborative performances at the 14K Cabaret. I am crossing the boundary from radical drag queen to radical drag queen performer. I expect to learn things about performance that will help me in conducting this research and to understand better the connections between performer and performance.

I have an insider's perspective on doing drag. Although I was not an active, core member of the Haus of Frau, I was seriously dating one of its members and I was privy to the Haus of Frau's most intimate sphere of interaction behind the scenes. As well, I was able to observe them in their most public interactions during nights out on the town and when they performed. The ethnographic term participant-observer seems quite apt to describe my location in Haus of Frau dynamics even though I did not realize that I would be conducting this research until I moved away from Baltimore. I called on many rich memories and discussions with Haus of Frau members to recollect and recreate the Haus of Frau as a research subject. Several Haus of Frau members shared their enormous collections of photographs, videos and other memorabilia documenting the Haus of Frau. My partner and I share similar documents. These documents assisted me greatly as I conducted this research. An interesting categorical

tension emerged that defies clear-cut resolution. This research is simultaneously a contemporary cultural, social-psychological investigation and an historical investigation into a recent past to determine why things "were the way they were" and how this past influenced the "present" contemporary with data collection. I now move from my narrative of personal experiences underlying this research to a more academic discussion of theoretical perspectives which also underlie this research in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER II. REPRODUCING GENDERED SOCIAL REALITIES**

In this chapter I critique, analyze and synthesize theory and research from the perspectives of social science, post-structural feminism, performance theory and the substantive domain of clothing and human behavior to forge and communicate the position from which I conducted my investigation into the radical drag experience of the Haus of Frau. This position is characterized by an emphasis on the importance of appearance to social realities, including identities and culture.

### **Composing and Performing Social Realities**

As a foreword to this chapter, I articulate a synthesis of theoretical perspectives on identity and social order. This discussion emphasizes the “constructedness” of human experience and social realities. I offer this discussion as a means to further emphasize a specific take on human experience and social reality that promises to accommodate gay and drag queen experiences central to this research. Following this discussion, more detailed discussions delve into the “nuts and bolts” of theoretical perspectives and summarize research findings that pertain to sex, gender and appearance.

#### **Identity: A Socially Scripted Performance**

Personal performances are an ubiquitous feature of social life. Following Goffman (1959), I maintain that people perform realities and that realities emerge as people interact. In all social settings, symbolic systems such as language, appearance, gestures, posture and gait communicate meaning. Such symbolic discharges in social settings amount to performance. If one acknowledges the social scripts that guide people through the various interpersonal exchanges composing an ordinary day, social exchange is decidedly performance. These social scripts, as norms, define people and regulate their behavior. These social scripts or

roles, such as parent, student, teacher, or citizen, delineate the bounds of propriety according to context. However, people are not automatons. People may disavow certain roles that are socially imposed or only grudgingly fulfill a role. Further, individuals may feel pressured by the conflicting demands of the overlapping social roles and torn between those they cherish and the ones they feel otherwise compelled to observe. Although the purpose of social scripts is to diminish ambiguity and facilitate interpersonal exchange, there is no perfect understanding between individuals as to what social roles can or should contain. The roles one chooses and the roles one is assigned by others are nonetheless key components of identity and reality performances.

Identity is most basically the who, what and where one is in terms of social relations. As Stone (1970b) noted, identity joins an individual together with some people while separating him or her from others. Identity is also self-knowledge based on life experiences and participation in the overlapping social arrangements to which one is privy and/or subject. Further, identity is part of a negotiation process, a struggle for meaning that takes place within specific contexts where the individual and macro-social forces intersect. Identity is personal since it is associated with meanings that an individual holds about the self. Simultaneously, identity has political implications because one may embrace subversive or dominant social narratives in forging and communicating identity. Individuals bring their identities, or the meanings they hold about themselves, to interpersonal exchanges in social settings. These meanings they contribute to discourse. What people contribute to discourse impacts social and political narratives. Social and political narratives, in turn, condition our behavior and experiences by delimiting the bounds of propriety, possibility and indeed, perception.

### **Identity and the Discursively Mediated Subject**

People are subject to discourse where the norms it communicates define individuals and compel them into conformity. However, where multiple, intersecting discourses impact experience and existence, one might also see identity as a collection of multiple subject

positions. This conception of subjectivity stems from the manners in which theorists like Bové (1998) and Butler (1998) conceive discourses to permeate the individual psyche. The effect of this permeation is that the individual becomes a socially disciplined “subject.” Furthermore, one comes to locate him or herself in relation to the social positions that discourse constitutes and communicates (Bové, 1998). In this sense, socialization is the disciplinary process of limitation that regulates behavior when the numerous discourses by which people define themselves and others become internal to the subject. Legal discourse define citizens by underscoring their rights and responsibilities. Medical, psychological and sociological discourses define normal behavior. Religious codes define morality. From these various discourses in American society, the imperatives are that one should be, or at least appear as if a normal, moral and responsible citizen. These defining mechanisms represent the disciplinary forces of discourse. The power that circulates in discourses not only disciplines people but effectively constitutes social reality. As people assume subject positions, they limit their inclinations to act. These limitations focus social interaction and establish the possibilities for interpersonal exchange according to context. It is from location in these multiple subject positions that one is poised to act in manners that will validate definitions of people and situations and harmonize with the narrative content of discourses. In this sense identity itself is intangible; one can only ascertain its effects on behavior as people take action--as we constitute and materialize it performatively in social settings.

Identity is further complicated by the recognition that it is multiple, shifting and part of an on-going process of awareness informed by daily personal experiences and their interpretation (Baber, 1994; Lather, 1991), so much so, that to some theorists, the individual has as many identities as there are different contexts in which an individual must present a self (e.g., Sullivan, 1954). Yet reality performances during social exchange represent identities. These identities or representations indicate states of being, one's affiliations, location in various social relations, sentiments and inclinations to act.

I labor to distinguish between one's identity (self definitions) and the experience of being identified (socially marked, portrayed or represented ) where one is defined by others . In the process of identification, an individual is socially "marked" and assigned subjective value when (s)he is identified by others. Social and political systems emerge and sustain themselves through this process of marking individuals and assigning subjective value.

### **Discursively Negotiated Identities and Realities**

Drag performances, like all performances (both artistic and day-to-day), are framed by a symbolic order within which performers communicate information generally *intended* for the present audience. Communication is achieved through the use of symbols. Symbols are deployed as carriers of meaning. Symbols are used to represent sentiment, identify socially stratified locations, assign and communicate subjective value. The cultural system is, and at the same time, dictates the means of expression and appropriate terms of exchange in specific contexts where action or inclinations to act in a certain manner are dramatized through a symbolic performance. As a point of clarification to my way of thinking, the symbolic order is framed by social narratives, which are used to order our thoughts, actions and therefore, society.

The emergent normative attitudes and behaviors contained in social scripts stand as collective expectations that persons observe. Thus social order is reproduced. Social scripts reflect social narratives. For this research, social narratives are the interpretive structures people collectively employ to define and make sense of human experience, their relations to each other and nature. Because of the imperfect fit between personal narratives and social narratives, there is discourse. Discourse is the discussion or actual telling of stories in which aim at persuading others to conform to some version of reality. Discursive negotiation is often necessary because some semblance of consensus or cooperation is necessary for social order to exist. This negotiation establishes a dialectic

relationship between narratives and discourse. Narratives are central to discourse; however, discourse surrounds and impacts the form and content of social narratives.

Generally, I see discourse as distinct from social narrative, although they are in reciprocal relation. Discourse is the discussion, whether macro-social, interpersonal, or within the solitary individual, that is germane to the narrative. Like electrons circling the nucleus of an atom, discourse represents the state of flux--both the shifting opinions and sentiments surrounding the narrative in which value and meaning structures are embedded. Discourse also indicates the likelihood that the narrative itself can shift and change as the discussions surrounding it impact its form and content. The reciprocity of social structure and individuals in creating and circulating narratives is important to consider. Individuals engage in discourse when they are impacted by and respond to narratives that shape and reflect society.

Social arrangements are founded on explicit claims like "we hold these truths to be self-evident," and more covertly, by cultural assertions about the natural. Naturalizing narratives create unquestioned states of being when the content of a narrative is widely taken for granted. Establishing unquestioned states of being allows narrative content to be taken for granted. Narrative content is thus submerged beneath the cultural practices which use it as a base. However, through intentional dissent and unintentional misunderstanding the submerged narrative might re-surface to discourse because such occurrences disrupt the ordinary, well established flow of social exchange.

Narratives about what is natural and normal are crucial to cultural conceptions of reality and social order. Cultural assertions of *the natural* color normative expectations that delimit propriety and what is deemed possible, perceptible and understandable (Butler, 1990). Legitimizing narratives compose the natural and lend credence to cultural assertions by maintaining certain phenomena as irreducible and innate. The physical and social sciences, medicine, religion and philosophy put forth discourses on the natural. However, these discourses sometimes fail to acknowledge how pre-existing narratives about the natural frame

discourse, inquiry and critical analysis (Butler, 1990). For example, Butler critiques Levi-Strauss' (1969) anthropological work, The Raw and the Cooked, arguing that this framework is logically flawed because it presumes nature as a "singular and prediscursive" state. Much academic work engages Levi-Strauss' framework where the natural is presumed to be a "raw," objectively manifest reality untainted by human desires. However, Butler (1990) argues that our very conceptions of the natural are already "cooked." She asserts that this structural anthropological model is an impediment to analysis because

The analysis that assumes nature to be singular and prediscursive cannot ask, what qualifies as "nature" given the cultural context and for what purposes (p. 37)?

Cultural conceptions of the natural are social constructions, not irreducible facts. The culturally constituted natural most often reflects the human desires for order, the diminishment of ambiguity and the resolution of conflict. Further, a will to power is apparent in the circulation of naturalizing narratives. Foucault coined the term "regimes of truth," to describe the way naturalizing narratives seem to reinforce the privilege of some over others. Moreover, bell hooks (1989) proposes that in as much as knowledge is power, the way that knowledge is constructed and circulated in academia also creates privilege and oppression.

### **Heterosexuality: Discursively Constituted Reality and Resistance**

I propose that the symbolic order in America's heterosexually configured society composes a gender narrative. This gender narrative distinguishes male and female as polar opposites. There are words, appearances and behaviors more often associated with those considered male while a different set of associations and expectations are set for those considered female. The gender narrative reflects beliefs about what is natural and as well about how things *should* be. Ideology and mythology are reflected in social narrative. Both help structure collective conceptions of reality (Cerny, 1994). The ideological and sometimes

mythological components of the heterosexual gender order often function in a capacity that Judith Butler (1990) calls a "naturalized fiction": The beliefs implicit in the symbolic ordering of society have a "natural" and taken for granted quality that can foreclose alternative meaning production and communication possibilities. The symbolic order is the structure within which communicative utterances and gesture are permitted and rendered intelligible.

However, it is important to recognize that although sex and gender meanings in American society are over-determined, there may exist the possibility for personal resistance to dominant social imperatives and the possibility for social change, however rigidly dominant society maintains these meanings. Following symbolic interaction theory, I recognize that individuals have some degree of power in constructing their personal meaning systems. People construct, maintain and modify and sometimes dismantle personal meaning structures as personal experiences and resultant changes in awareness impact their consciousness. Participation in emancipatory movements such as women's liberation, African American civil rights, and gay liberation are projects for social change that might exact and reflect such changes in personal meaning for individuals, while these individuals in turn, potentially effect social change by virtue of their membership and participation in larger social groupings. Here, the symbolic interactionist concept of individual and society in reciprocal relation is apparent.

Although dominant societal views seem fixed, conventional sex and gender meanings become mutable terms of exchange in the communication between drag performers and their audiences: The drag performance (reliant on personal appearance) opens a liminal space where macro-social conceptions of male and female and their seemingly irreducible connections to sex and what is natural become problematic (Butler, 1990; Garber, 1992). I use the term human agency in referring to the power of the individual to accept, reject, maintain or modify personal sex and gender meanings, regardless of dominant societal views. Here, in the symbolic interactionist tradition, I see the discursive negotiation between macro-social imposition and human agency is an ongoing, interactive, dynamic "conversation" where individuals

communicate with their internal selves and others in a process of creating and sharing sex and gender meanings fundamental to identity. The concept of negotiation is poignant because it emphasizes the possibility for personal and social change.

The balance of this chapter materializes from the standpoint summarized above. I am resistant and perhaps hyper-critical of heterosexuality as a basis for establishing social order. However, in constructing a theoretical position that can accommodate gay drag queen experience, I deem that the taken-for-granted assumptions that marginalize this experience must be located and dismantled if knowledge is to transcend the realm of the already known. Furthermore, I experience a nearly constant stream of reminders that gay experience is marginal to American society: I do not have the same legal rights as the majority, and I pose some risk to my professional life and physical being when I am honest about who I am. Yet I speak from my position in social relations, as all people do. Indeed, it seems all the more important that I do so. From my position in social relations, I supplement my discursive analysis of the literature with a feminist critique of knowledge and traditional practices in social science. I follow symbolic interaction in seeing knowledge as an emergent social construction given to change. These stances inform the way I read and interpret the cross-dressing literature and understand the social construction of sex and gender. The next section more thoroughly considers the intricacies of symbolic interaction, the key theory base from which I draw.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

Blumer (1969) contends that the self and social structures are composed of "objects," produced through symbolic interaction. Definitions forming the self, the social structure and other material, social, or abstract objects, result from social exchange (Blumer, 1969b). Objects such as attitudes, expectations, identity and social setting are created, maintained or modified through discursive negotiation: Definitions emerge as individuals interact with each

other and with their internal selves, while exchanging information.

### **Society as a Set of Meanings**

Blumer (1969) notes three premises fundamental to symbolic interactionism. First, "human beings act toward "objects " on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them." (p. 2) Second, "the meaning of such things is derived from or arises out of the social interaction that one has with others" (p. 2). Third, meanings are "handled" and possibly altered in a process of interpretation occurring when the individual tries to make sense of what is encountered. Meanings emerging from social interaction determine subsequent action. Often, meanings determining action reflect larger social structures, and simultaneously, a cohesive body of meanings collectively forming narratives and ideology.

Shared meanings are reflected in a common language and other cultural forms such as indigenous art and typical dress. Ideology is the meaning structure of a culture, the way people view themselves in relation to the world. This "world view" includes what people assume, mythologize, and as well, what they value and wish for (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 1980).

### **Presentation of Self**

Goffman (1959), a symbolic interactionist, asserts that all social interactions are performed and that many are staged. He maintains that people rehearse "backstage" for the social roles which they perform in "front regions." It is also Goffman's assertion that reality is performed and that it is through the respective performances of individuals that reality is created and maintained. For Goffman, personal appearance is part of the "sign equipment" individuals employ in dramatizing their daily performances of reality. These performances either contain or refer to social positions and one's inclination to act in the immediate context and possibly across many settings. These symbolic portrayals allow social actors to exchange "definitions of the situation." These definitions are deployed to establish and/or maintain social settings and related roles. The symbolic imagery contained in one's presentation of self is part of the

meaning that is shared between individuals in their mutual creation and maintenance of social settings. The reciprocal relationship between individuals as social actors and the social setting is apparent. The social setting is contingent upon the meanings created and circulated as people interact. Likewise, the individual is assigned social roles contingent upon the social settings in which (s)he participates.

One's reality performance is what one contributes to the social drama. Social drama is the negotiation of meaning to arrive at consensus and resolve conflict (Schechner, 1987). The social drama is located in the social setting, the context framing social exchange. This setting is swarming with ambiguity, conflicts, and misunderstandings because people bring their desires and unique personal meanings to social exchange. The social drama is played out as individuals perform realities. They represent their personal meanings using "identity documents" like appearance and verbal declarations to indicate where they are (or wish you to believe they are) socially located. In this reality performance, the individual has options. (S)he may honestly represent those identities consonant with current sense of self, affiliations and sentiment, or (s)he may chose to conceal personal meanings and identity to achieve any number of desired results like professional survival or preserving energy that might be lost defending one's subversive position. Whatever the individual represents through reality performance, there is a political implication. The personal meanings one contributes to discourses surrounding the social narrative might either maintain the status quo or potentially alter the narrative if new awareness and shared meanings are generated and otherwise permitted. But where at least nominal consensus exists and such consensus is reinforced through repetition, norms or predictable patterns of social interaction comprising acceptable attitudes and behavior emerge (Stryker, 1981).

### **The Individual as a Set of Meanings: Reciprocity of Individual and Society**

Stryker (1981) credits George Herbert Mead (1934) with conceptualizing the social world as a factor contributing to the emergence of the individual. Symbolic interactionists claim

that there is no self without society and suggest a reciprocal relationship between the individual and society in their respective creations. There is no self without a social structure because meaning is tied to language and language is a social product. Likewise, society is made of meanings individuals contribute and/or reiterate.

Meanings that individuals hold about themselves and others compose identities. Identity is a product of internal conversations individuals engage within their "inner forums" to interpret their experiences of themselves and others, in effect constructing their inner and social realities. There is an emotional component to this internal process since interpretation involves our feelings about our past experiences and those we anticipate in the future (Denzin, 1984).

Stryker (1981) proposes interaction between individuals communicating with themselves and with each other, while being influenced by the larger social structure in assigning meaning to objects and situations. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes a rational human--actively aware, knowing and making judgments--to explain the emergence of norms and the social structure. In spite of this emergent dynamic, the more often certain meanings are assigned, the less likely meanings are to change, forming paths of least resistance, e.g. norms. Thus, behavioral expectations and social structures become predictable patterns of interaction, reinforced by repetition. As well, people come to possess "personalities" that represent the sum of their collective, predictable attitudes and behavior. Definitions become internalized, somewhat subconscious, requiring little thought. Meanings are given to change through discursive negotiation but are also subject to previous cultural inscription.

Macro-structural forces impose meanings that seem inescapable. Meanings are often merely reiterated, taken for granted, serving the end of efficient communication and social order. Yet, simultaneously, a remarkable dialectic occurs. Individuals negotiate meanings among themselves and possibly construct personal meanings very different from those generally held. As individuals bring personal meanings to discourse, social change is possible. For example, the interaction of structurally determined meaning with subversive narratives is

indicated in feminist and queer discourses where gender norms are deconstructed, contested and reassembled in iterative permutations indicating dissent (Jacobs & Cromwell, 1992).

### **Appearance in Social Relations**

In this section, I discuss research investigating the role of appearance in social interaction and its relation to sex and gender. First I consider definitions of clothing and appearance in social context then review Stone's (1970b) research and theorizing on appearance since his work is fundamental to my research. I then consider the contributions that researchers from the field of clothing and textiles make toward understanding appearance in social context.

Clothing is used to cover the human body. It is a cultural product resulting from transformation processes involving raw materials, technology and the exchange of goods and information (Bublolz & Sontag, 1988). Clothing also functions symbolically to represent or disguise one's identity and one's affiliations (Gurel, Wilbur, & Gurel, 1972; Richards, 1988). Regardless of veracity, the clothing symbolic indicates cultural arrangements (Craik, 1994; Hamilton, 1987). Clothing and grooming are encompassed by the broader category of appearance management (Kaiser, 1990), a logical extension of Goffman's (1959) symbolic interactionist concept, "impression management" encompassed by the "presentation of self." Moreover, Goffman sees this presentation of self as a performance stemming from social scripts.

### **Appearance as Communication**

Appearance is an encompassing term that includes clothing and grooming. Stone (1970a) claims that appearance is "a very *real* behavioral matrix of meaning" (p. 228). For Stone, the "universe of appearance" like other forms of communication is "simply a system of

common or social meanings" (p. 230). Following the general framework of symbolic interactionism, Stone sees symbols as carriers of meaning. Appearance is a matrix of meaning that employs symbols. Therefore, it is a form of communication.

However, Stone (1970b) sees appearance as a form of communication *separate* from discourse, which he defines solely as verbal exchange. He distinguishes appearance and discourse as two distinct "phases" of social transaction. Perhaps it is of conceptual importance to separate appearance from discourse, in the most literal sense, where Stone defines discourse as "the text of the transaction-what the parties are discussing" (p. 397). Here, however, I depart from Stone. I argue that appearance is itself a form of discourse, because indeed it deploys symbols as vehicles of meaning. In my estimation, appearance is a communication channel used to *narrate* facets of social experience that are usually not verbalized. Appearance is performative in the sense that it often brings into being that which it signifies. Appearance is a discursive channel in which bodies stand as narrative productions that reproduce and reinforce culture. Appearance can be read like a text and analyzed as such (however, textual analysis is not a focus of this research). Yet it is of certain importance that Stone posits appearance as re-emerging in *verbal* discourse when there are changes in the direction of social transaction and that "uninterrupted discourse" (I would call dominant narrative) is "likely to be submerged in appearances."

I agree that dominant modes of thought (dominant narratives) can become submerged in personal appearances: This submergence is one way in which the content at the heart of discourse, the (social) narrative, if you will, is naturalized and taken for granted. Conversely, when appearances become the topic of verbal discussion, it might be

because the diverging appearances indicate shifts in social/personal meaning and possibly represent subversive sentiments.

### **Appearance and the Self**

Stone's (1970b) analysis of appearance is easily linked to Goffman's concept, presentation of self. He finds all assertions that he makes about appearance on the fundamental tenet of symbolic interaction that the self is "established, maintained and altered through communication" and that appearance is as crucial in "every stage of development of the self " (p. 394). What he finds so crucial about appearance to the self is that it establishes identifications of participants in a social transaction (p. 397). Indeed Stone proclaims that "appearance *means* identifications of one another" (p. 397). On the tail of this claim, however, Stone rhetorically asks whether these identifications follow any "ordered pattern" (p. 397).

These identifications do follow an ordered pattern that Stone breaks down into operations of seeing and being seen. He alludes to appearance as part of a social performance and provides the ground work by which to link appearance to feminist's formulations of the gaze. Feminist formulations of the gaze (e.g., Silverman 1992) emphasize that engagements with repertoires of images residing in our culture's collective consciousness are necessary to the process of identifying ourselves and others. However, Stone (1970b) more simply analyzed the role of appearance in establishing identities for those participants in a social transaction. Yet he notes the affective responses appearance can elicit during the non-verbal phase of social transactions in the following passage. It is in this passage that Stone conjures a less sophisticated notion of the gaze, but even so, it is one that helps us link his theorizing on appearance to more recent feminist conceptions of the gaze:

One's appearance commands the gaze of the audience. An eyebrow is lifted. There is a smile or frown, and approach or a withdrawal. One

blushes with shame for the shamelessness of the other's appearance or with embarrassment at one's own (p. 397).

Stone emphasizes that appearance elicits responses from the "audience" of those who gaze

upon the one who appears and that there are consequences for social interaction that stem from how others apprehend one on the basis of appearance. He suggests a non-verbal process that executes operations of seeing and being seen to establish one's place in social relations.

**Program and review.** Stone (1970b) did research on appearance using clothing as the appearance variable that he manipulated to elicit responses from his research participants during interviews. From this research and analysis, he noted that appearances always call out response from the social audience. Conceptually, he divides these responses into two categories that are necessary to completing what he calls the "appearance phase" of social transactions from which identifications emerge. He analyzes the appearance transactions in terms of *program* and *review*. Stone defined program as the responses that one who appears, whom he called "the wearer" made about himself/herself. He defined review as the responses "made about the wearer of clothes by others" (p. 398).

Stone logically allows the responses of his research participants to illustrate the program and review processes. These processes of program and review appear in a reciprocal relation to each other. For Stone claims that when the program and review tend toward agreement, "the self of the one who appears is validated or established (p. 398). However, he notes when there is disparity between the program and review, that "the self of the one who appears is challenged," and that "conduct may be expected to move in the direction of some redefinition of the challenged self" (p. 398). Thus Stone conceives the negotiation process by which identifications are made to construct social selves, selves that allow social interaction to move beyond the phase of identifications. Stone illustrates even further that program and review are in reciprocal relation by noting that along with program and review, that those who appeared *imagined* other's responses to their appearances. How these imagined reviews figure in composing appearance programs will become more apparent as this discussion continues to develop. Here, I emphasize that we can see program as a narrative that guides self regulation and review as surveillance that checks persons for their compliance with social

regulations or norms. This "redefinition of the challenged self" that Stone notes indicates that the individual apprehends and/or anticipates how (s)he is being apprehended by others.

One's appearance is necessary to constructing the self as a social object. Appearances more or less proclaim "this is me" to the others who review such communications. Stone's analysis locates specific meanings about the self fundamental to social exchange. He stated that appearance functions to establish "identity, value, mood and attitude for the one who appears by the coincident programs and reviews awakened by his appearance" (p. 398).

**Identity, value, mood and attitude.** Identity is qualified by value and mood which in turn allude to the attitude of the one who appears. As Stone noted,

... identity establishes what and where the person is in social terms. ... when one has identity, he is *situated*--that is, cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgment of his participation or membership in social relations (p. 399).

Stone found in his research that four types of words were used to identify people according to their appearances:

(1) universal words designating ... humanity such as age, gender and community; (2) names and nicknames; (3) titles, such as occupational and marital titles; (4) "relational categories," such as customer, movie goer, jazz fan and the like (p. 399).

Stone emphasizes that identities are necessary for one's entry into social transactions (p. 399). He separates these social transactions into categories of social relations by showing which identities fit with each category. For example, he states that "human relations are those requiring the placement and announcement of such universal identities such as age, gender and community" (p. 399). He proposes that "interpersonal relations may only be entered by the exchange of names or nicknames" while structural relations require substituting a title for a name (p. 399). As well he notes that one may enter mass social relations such as those in which one is merely identified as citizen or shopper anonymously (p. 399). However, it is important to

note that these distinctions between the four categories of social relations might be mutually exclusive but that they often occur simultaneously. Multiple identities are likely established for each individual in a social exchange, reflecting the multiple social orderings to which a person is subject. That is, multiple social relations are often performed in a single social transaction. In the workplace for example, social transactions are often interpersonal and structural at the same time. One is also located in universal categories such as age, race and gender. People might be on a first name basis, perhaps even consider each other colleagues, but the nature of their relationship is often conditioned by their relative positions in stratified institutional power structures and by their age, race and gender. Stone suggests that "interpersonal relations probably provide an important social basis for the continuity of identity" where "structural relations on the other hand are more discontinuous and changing" (p. 399). This makes sense since life is characterized by structural identity shifts reflecting change of job, marital statuses and so on while interpersonal relationships are those shared with family, friends and regular acquaintances that usually span time periods in which people change structural titles.

Further, Stone stated that identity is qualified along the axis of value in structural relations and along the axis of mood in interpersonal relations. Mood and value represent assessments of a person based on identifications of the one who appears. Stone found that the predominant "response to dress was the assignment of value words on to the wearer" (p. 398). Stone stated that value represents one's conformity or deviance in relation to universal rules or social codes and that value is "legitimated by appeals to the appraisals of others" (p. 402). But value is also apparent in the universal categories. Stone noted that people often gain or are refused entrance to specific social relations on the basis of universal identifications such as age, race and gender. On the other hand, mood communicated an individual's relative comfort regarding his or her location in social relations and mood is "legitimated by appeals to expressions of the self" (p. 402). Yet, Stone remarked "Value and mood so patently distinguishable in discourse, merge together inextricably in experience" (p. 401). Social

experience is registered in human consciousness where it is not a neutral historical record. Instead, it is represented by sentiment. Stone cites Cooley's (1902) "looking glass self" to bolster his argument that it is not how one is valued in social relations that one remembers, *per se*, but how one *feels* about how they are valued. Thus sentiment is the convergence of "felt values" or "value feelings." For example, Stone indicates that the "sentiments of pride and mortification are expressive responses to the judgments and appraisals of others" (p. 402). Then, one is prone to action according to these sentiments. With specific regard to appearance, these sentiments, reflecting the individual's experiences of value in social relations, mobilize appearance styles. Appearance styles reflect one's attitude or inclination to act in certain ways within specific social contexts. Viewers impute attitude to individuals by virtue of the appearance program perceived coming from the one who appears. Stone succinctly summarized appearance's pivotal role in lending continuity to the wearer's experience by suggesting that it symbolically functions to mark a person's place in time and in social relations.

Attitudes are anticipated by the reviewers of an appearance, proposed by the one who appears. Appearances substitutes for past and present action and at the same time conveys an incipience permitting others to anticipate what is about to occur (p. 402).

Appearance makes a person's temporal and social locations tangible to the one who appears and to reviewers. Thus appearance is a proxy for the experiences that compose identity, while it poises one to act in the present and allows others to anticipate what might occur in the future.

At this point it is important to consider how appearance functions in the operations through which individuals apprehend themselves. Stone proposed that "the self is any validated program which exercises a regulatory function over other responses of the same organism, including the formulation of other programs" (p. 405). However, the self can only be

understood in terms of its relation to social others. Foote (1970) invokes Cooley (1902) with this assertion: "the individual and social are two sides of the same phenomena ... One has no identity apart from society; one has not individuality apart from identity" (p. 489). Thus the self can only be apprehended as a collection of identifications that persons understand and use to compose their unique social experience. Yet these identifications are generally committed to consciousness as they are qualified by the convergence of value and mood in the form of sentiment. One does not understand social locations apart from how those locations are valued by others and how those evaluations from others make one feel.

Emotions are easily linked to sentiment and feeling as both are affective responses to experience that demarcate the metaphorical positions from which one is poised to apprehend subsequent experience and act. As Denzin (1984) states, emotions move people to action. It seems then that it is affective response to experience that programs attitudes and actual behavior, that indeed, affective responses to experience regulate one's appearance by gearing it toward outcomes that one either wants or expects from future social exchange.

**Appearance, imagination and identifications.** Stone's (1971b) research and theorizing about the importance of appearance to the self raises questions that were likely passed over due to constraints on time and publication space. In particular, there are issues regarding his concept of program that leave one hanging; the array and depth of the complexities characterizing program, related to meanings that persons hold about the self need more thorough consideration. Stone merely conceptualized program as the one who appears' responses to their own appearances; i.e., "identifications of the one who appears by that one" (p. 404). Specifically addressing responses people make regarding their own appearances, Stone noted "A third mode of response is relevant, but will not be considered here --the wearer's imagination of others' responses to his dress" (p. 398). Stone did connect program to the self by stating that programs regulate attitudes and behavior. But there is need to consider how program is both social process (action) and product (object) while distinguishing one from

the other. In one sense appearance represents a program if one deems program the arrangement of appearances according to the qualified identifications that people hold about themselves. These qualified identifications, characterized by mood and value, converge in consciousness to form sentiment and program appearance. However, appearance does not represent the programming process but rather alludes to the state of being that made the appearance in question possible. The programming process is only apparent in adjustments to appearance that come from what Stone terms "re-definitions of a challenged self" where program and review are disparate. It is important to consider this juncture where a person determines the coincidence or disparity of appearance program and review and how one makes such determinations.

The appearance phase of a social transaction where identifications emerge is primarily nonverbal because it relies on visual cues. Thus it must be that apprehending the other's review relies heavily on imagination. Indeed, apprehending another's review of *one's own* program depends on how one reviews *their* program. Importantly then, all of these apprehensions require shared conceptual structures by which experiences are stratified along value axes and inflected by shared sentiments within groups. Stone makes but slight mention of how imagination figures in the reflexive processes of program and review. The only in-depth consideration that Stone offers to imagination pertains to instances of child's play in which he defines appearances as *costume*. Stone construes costume as misrepresentation of the self (p. 411). However, imagination is always a crucial element in making identifications of others and with others. It is through imagination that one gains access to the collective conceptual and perceptual structures that effectively program social realities and give meaning to individuals as social objects. Interestingly, Stone cited Sullivan (1954), embracing the latter's concept of "parataxic distortion" to illustrate how imagination figures in costumed play. Whereas I argue that parataxic distortion, as Sullivan defined it, is a phenomena that figures in most interpersonal exchanges. Sullivan proposed that interpersonal relations involve not only tangible people, "but

also somewhat fantastic constructs of those people are involved" (pp. 25-26). As well, Sullivan suggests that even in "relationships of the most commonplace kind ... distortions exist;" indeed it can be that " the *real* characteristics of the other fellow might be of negligible importance to the interpersonal situation" (pp. 25-26). I follow Sullivan's lead and also maintain that fantastic constructs (such as contemporary American conceptions of male and female) are key to interpersonal relationships and overall social reality. Indeed, I see the gender archetypes which define appropriate male and female social appearances and behavior as fantastic constructs that have the power to diminish the importance of the actual person in social relations.

It is apparent in parataxic distortion that the individual who appears is having qualities and expectations projected on to them. Even though Stone (1970b) conceives appearance to proclaim information about the one who appears to the audience of reviewers, it is clear that appearance also casts the one who appears as a *screen* on which these "somewhat fantastic constructs of those people involved" are projected by the audience. Man and woman are such constructs. Butler (1990; 1993) and Silverman (1992), for example, conceive the constructs of man and woman as cultural engagements with fantasy. Actually, the parataxic distortion that Sullivan (1954) refers to, can more simply be seen, especially in terms of gender, as an overwriting of the bodies that appear. The projections an audience makes on to the one who appears inscribes that person with value and qualities that in turn generate expectations about how that person will behave and apprehend their experiences. This overwriting of the bodies that appear is where it is most important to recognize the reproduction of gender as a work of fiction. The people visually apprehended in the appearance phase of social transactions become enplotted in a heterosexualized gender narrative (Rich, 1975; Butler, 1990) when their bodies are overwritten by means of projection and parataxic distortion.

Overwriting people and consequently enplotting them in the gendered social order takes place mostly without the exchange of words. Therefore, perceptual structures requiring extensive use of imagination are necessary to identify others and ascertain how they are

identifying us in the appearance phase of a social transaction (Silverman, 1992) . Once the social transaction moves beyond the appearance phase, identifications one makes and those one perceives coming from others are confirmed, negated or adjusted on the basis of the additional information contained in the social transaction proper (Stone, 1970b).

Stone's work, "Appearance and the Self, " is a landmark work for researchers who take a symbolic interactionist stance in researching people's social appearances. Many contemporary clothing and textiles researchers working in the substantive area termed "clothing and human behavior" refer to Stone in constructing the theoretical bases for their work. The broad area of inquiry named clothing and human behavior encompasses investigations and theoretical formulations about the many relations between people that are expedited and expressed using appearance. Within this area, there is a sub-area called "social cognition" where there exists extensive research concerning the role of appearance in "person perception" and "impression formation."

### **Social Cognition and Person Perception**

Lennon and Davis (1989) state that "social cognition researchers study the cognitive processes which are the bases for the perceptions and cognitions individuals use to make judgements about people" (p. 41). They first outline the social perception perspective. Most social cognition research engages a social perception theoretical approach that over-simply divides social perception transaction into three neat variable categories to facilitate experimental investigations. In a table, Lennon and Davis show the social perception transaction conceptually divided into these areas of possible variable manipulation:

1. Perceiver variables (sensitivity to appearance cues)
2. Object variables (effect of visual characteristics of the social object)
3. Situational variables (context dependence) (p. 42).

Damhorst (1990) reports that 1980 through 1986 there were 57 studies published which manipulated object variables (p. 3). There is not a clear distinction between person perception

as it is encompassed by social perception perspectives and impression formation. Impression formation has its basis in symbolic interaction theory. Forming an impression is what the perceiver does. Reciprocally, the person being perceived is engaged in the act of impression management or "presentation of self." Other social cognitive research approaches include the engagement of attribution theory, as well, theories about categorization and stereotyping.

Whatever theories engaged, the majority of social cognition research in the 1980s focused on the manipulation of object variables in the form of "stimulus person" photographs, slides and sometimes live models. Questionnaire and interview instruments were used to collect data from research participants serving as perceiver. Social desirability, physical attractiveness, professional competence, intelligence and personal character were constructs most frequently measured for differences alleged to vary with the experimental manipulation of stimulus person appearances (Damhorst, 1990, p. 4). The research in this area revealed statistically significant findings indicating that there are specific appearances most desirable to achieve desired effects, such as conveying professional competence and appearing physically and thus socially attractive.

However, the generalizability of findings within the social cognitive framework is very limited for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the majority of this research was collected using convenience samples of primarily young college-aged women taking clothing and textiles courses. Secondly there were class, temporal and regional cultural effects that certainly impact the research participant's perceptions. What a researcher of person perception found in Ames, Iowa in 1985 might not be reproducible in Minneapolis, Minnesota at the same time, or even two years later. Given the usual time lapse between data collection and research publication, fashion, social climate and mores can change. These inherent fluctuations render many studies useful only as much as they illustrate that dress does affect person perception or impression

formation. Thirdly, much of this research also used questionnaire instruments with forced-choice items with Likert-type scaling. This approach allowed data to be collected at the ordinal level of quantification; therefore, researchers could employ at the time more prestigious statistical analyses than open-ended questions and interviews allowed. However, logical dilemmas are associated with translating human experience into forced choice responses that are stratified according to arbitrary numerical scales.

Damhorst (1990) concludes her review article of impression formation research between 1943 and 1986 by stating that "there is no longer strong need for simple demonstrations that dress affects impression formation" (p. 8). She suggests that scholars may need to "develop their own theories of dress as a form of communication" by synthesizing and applying theories from psychology, sociology and semiotics. She further recommends the use of inductive approaches to leap beyond borrowed theories in developing a more comprehensive theory of dress as communication.

Although I agree with Damhorst (1990) that there is no longer a need for simple demonstrations that dress affects impression formation, I argue that numerous theoretical and interpretive bases already exist that can help develop a comprehensive theory of dress as communication. Her admonishment that we "leap beyond borrowed theories" I fear may lead some to discount the wealth of interpretive tools available across many disciplines. Clothing and textiles is an applied field. The problem is not in borrowing theory from other fields but in failing to make connections and creatively synthesize theories from various fields to meet our very specific needs. The shame lies in privileging theory from the social and behavioral sciences over theories circulated in the humanities. Likewise, the shame lies in privileging quantitative research over qualitative research.

With this research, I address issues that social cognition researchers have approached. I differ where I more thoroughly consider the processes of cultural meaning production that underwrite the appearance phase of social interaction. Stone's (1970b) theorizing on the

appearance phase of social transactions in terms of program and review encompass the notions of "person perception" germane to social cognition and more complexly theorizes the interactions between people as they are enmeshed in value-laden social systems. I supplemented Stone's theorizing with feminist theorizing of the gaze because it was at first analogous to Stone's (1970b) conceptions of program and review where Stone noted that "Appearance means identification of one another" (p. 397) and Silverman (1992) noted that it is through the gaze that we establish identifications.

### **Symbolic Appearances and Social Organization**

Most contemporary qualitative investigations into appearance engage symbolic interaction and consider the role of appearance in constructing identities and maintaining social structures. The theoretical formulations underlying this body of research rely on earlier work by Stone (1970b) using his notions of program and review and Goffman's (1959) notions of presentation of self and impression management. Appearance management is a more recent clothing and human behavior based substantive area that encompasses fashion and the dialogue between individuals and social organizations in creating appearances that represent personal and collective realities. Researchers may engage, macro-social or micro-social analyses at once or separately and consider an individual's internal interpretive processes and those cultural interpretive structures that program appearance and delimit perception according to context. There seems to be a cultural shift occurring within the area of clothing and human behavior as researchers use methods that facilitate exploration into the negotiation of ambiguity and contradiction as forces mobilizing appearance programs.

Davis (1989) states that identity ambivalences "lie at the heart of much communicated by clothing and fashion" (p. 337). He cites many identity status polarities such as gender, age and wealth as being riddled with ambiguities--ambiguities that are fuel for the fire of constantly changing fashion. His argument is intensified by Nagasawa, Hutton and Kaiser (1991) who claim that in the postmodern marketplace, that there is possibility not only for ambiguity within

identity status categories, but as well, that individuals possess *multiple* and possibly conflicting identities. These multiple identities one constructs and portrays through purchasing accouterment and assembling them into desired appearances.

The big question that none seem to answer with certainty focuses on the "truth" of what appearance communicates. At least in the 20th century, there seems to be an ironic relation between one's appearance and who one is. Davis (1989) considers the identity status ambivalence that appearance articulates and helps negotiate. As well, he considers issues related to social class and the ways in which those with cultural capital, the privileged status stemming from wealth and being "in the know" about matters of taste are manifest in appearance. He refers to the "disingenuous mistakes" one can make with appearance that establish one's privileged status as one who knows better. He cites Nino Cerruti's assertion that "for a man to be elegant he must dress simply with some mistakes" (p. 346). Davis also proposes that understatement versus overstatement appearance sequences also refer to the cultural capital one possesses. Regarding this assertion, Davis quipped "it may fairly be said that vulgarity is often more sincere than reticence" (p. 343). It seems that a cunning associated with wealth, and familiarity with its status markers lead some to conceal or play down their wealth and status rather than reveal it using conspicuous display. Davis conceives the play of status markers pertaining to wealth as a game of "To be Me or Not Me," where wealth has its prestige, while it is tempered by deeply embedded Judeo-Christian sentiments. These sentiments program western social interaction by favoring modest, reserved behavior and appearance.

Freitas et al. (1997) studied how people use their clothing to construct appearances that communicate identity. By eliciting discussions from research participants about articles of clothing from their respective wardrobes, they discovered the importance of clothing in maintaining the tenuous boundaries between the self and others. Explicit discourses on appearance from research participants elucidated the importance of establishing who one *is not*

to appearance programming. Individuals' internal processes regulate appearance with any number of "not me" prescriptives that motivate people to appear unlike those that they conceive as their cultural others. For example, college students expressed concern that they not look "too old" by dressing like their parents or otherwise appearing "too serious." African American men sought to express appearance styles that would make it clear that they did not ascribe to white middle class values. Young straight men were very concerned with not appearing too feminine or gay, whereas some gay men expressed their disavowal to straight society through appearance.

Michelman (1997) conducted interviews with Roman Catholic women religious who experienced the transition from the strict uniforms, or habits of their respective religious orders, to secular appearances when the Roman Catholic Church implemented the 1962 mandates of Vatican II. She employed symbolic interaction and Stone's theories on appearance to facilitate analysis. The interviewees' discourses on appearance illustrated the tensions between personal and social identity construction and the pivotal role of appearance in negotiating this tension. Michelman claims that identity embracing and distancing were communicated using appearance as nuns performed their responses to social change. She cites the transitional "modified habit" as tangible expression of

cultural ambivalence as nuns responded to Vatican II, their changing roles in the church and their new relations to the secular community.

Arthur (1997) considers the importance of appearance to role embracement and salience of sorority pledges. She maintains that clothing, jewelry and perhaps even tattoos bearing the initials of the sorority to which young women recently joined illustrate Wicklund and Gollwitzer's (1982) concept of "symbolic self completion." Arthur summarized Wicklund and Gollwitzer's thesis by stating:

The symbolic self-completion model proposes that persons who feel incomplete with regard to their self-definition or social roles, may use props such as clothing to foster a sense of completeness (p.3 64).

Arthur also offers an interesting discussion on the role of appearance in what Coser (1974) terms a "greedy" social organizations, those exclusive groups that dominate members' identities and restrict their roles by establishing "symbolic boundaries between members and non-members" (Arthur, 1997, p. 365). Greedy organizations are very consuming of individuals in that they wind up structuring many aspects of member's personal lives including their appearances.

Sorority pledges are usually college freshmen experiencing new social roles that result from their being away from home for the first time. As well, pledging to a sorority involves new social roles that require very deep commitment. Expectations are that inductees appear and otherwise function as actualized members of the group *before* they could have gained the social experiences necessary to inculcate such commitment and savoir faire. Sororities apparently compensate for this gap between experience and expectations with an elaborate series of induction rituals. Arthur asserts that individual members compensate for their personal gaps between experience and the expectations stemming from the new roles that they embrace by using identity documents such a clothing, jewelry and perhaps tattoos bearing their sorority's insignia to represent their allegiance and status as sorority members.

Michelman (1997) and Arthur (1997) conducted investigations into the role of appearance in greedy organizations that partially subsume individual identities and used appearance to negotiate tensions between group membership and individual autonomy. Sorority pledges experiencing transitions into sorority life and nuns experiencing the social changes associated with the implementation of Vatican II used appearances that could be described as "quasi-uniforms" to negotiate their identities during transitional phases. Michelman states that

Uniforms reveal and conceal statuses, acting as totemic emblems that embody the attributes of a group, suppress personal identity and certify the legitimacy of the group (p. 353).

Uniforms serve to diminish identity status ambiguities. While most appearances do not involve uniforms, quasi uniforms regulate appearance in many social settings, perhaps indicating that identities are works in progress, always composed of statuses in transition due to one's movement through life and social change. However, appearance does not communicate in a clear cut manner, Davis suggests:

Clothing's code is more ambiguous and systematically indeterminate ... it usually alludes, suggests and insinuates much more than it denotes, thereby bringing it closer to music and poetry than to declarative speech or prose (p. 338).

Therefore appearance seems subject to aesthetic codes and social scripts. Appearance emerges from social relations that employ inherently ambiguous identity formulas to construct persons as social objects. Yet one important purpose of appearance is to establish identities and diminish ambiguity to the extent that social interactions move beyond the phase sociologists term "definition of the situation" where participants establish who they are, what they are, and where they are. It is sufficient to say that researchers come closer to the heart of what appearance accomplishes in social settings and what is at stake for persons constructing their individual appearances by investigating the systematic indeterminacy of the clothing code and its relation to identity formulas that mass culture, social organizations and individuals respectively negotiate.

Symbolic interaction is crucial to the theoretical compositions scholars use to investigate and discuss the meaning of appearance. But other theories are useful also depending on what and how researchers explore the meaning of appearance. Symbolic interaction is an

accommodating theoretical base that both anthropologists and social psychologists use in considering human behavior and social organization. Symbolic interaction meshes nicely many postmodern explanations of culture since it posits the individual as an active participant in the relations that construct him or her as a social being. With specific regard to appearance, Kaiser, Nagasawa and Hutton (1991) state:

Symbolic interaction, like more utopian applications of postmodernism, invites attention to issues of human agency for purposes of creating novel appearances as well as ways of seeing, interpreting and understanding these appearances- ultimately, resulting perhaps, in new cultural constructions (p. 168).

Several utopian applications of postmodernism call attention to issues of human agency and mesh with symbolic interaction to inform my investigation into the novel ways of seeing and appearing that radical drag queens very existence suggests. In particular, I bring feminist critical theories of gender and performance, performance theory and poststructuralism into my social psychological investigation of drag queen appearances and identity.

### **Discourse, Power and the Subject**

Over the past two decades, researchers and theorists have come to blur the boundaries between the humanities and social sciences by taking up the project of poststructuralism (Bové, 1998). The key term in poststructuralism is discourse. However, discourse is a term that preceded poststructuralism. Among literary critics, for example, Bové (1998) suggests that discourse "refers to an organized, consistent, professional, institutionalized language used to produce and reproduce knowledge" (p. 5). Within poststructuralism, discourse also comes to signify an important phenomenological social process that consolidates power and effects social control through communication channels. Altheide (1993) suggested that "the essence of power is the ability of one person to define the situation for others" (p. 53). However, this

power of persons to define the situation for others can only be achieved through discourse--by telling persuasive "stories" that compel others to "believe" and take actions that represent such belief. Discourse authorizes and legitimates the truth claims that constitute the powers by which we govern people. Governance involves defining people, their situations and regulating their behavior. The aims of governance are accomplished largely through discursive channels that signify and constitute social order by invoking a normalizing language and logic (Foucault, 1977). Discourse consolidates power by producing and reproducing knowledge and the norms that organize and steady human behavior, perception and thought.

Bové (1998) suggested that poststructural discursive analyses "set an eye on the present to trace systems of power which have come to constitute being human in our world" (p.15). These systems of power are most evident in the organization of human behavior into regular, predictable patterns i.e., the norms that represent and produce socialization. Socialization is basically a disciplinary process that involves learning how to act and often what and how to think. Socialization sets limits on all sorts of perceptual and expressive possibilities. It is through this process of limitation (and imitation) that people subject to power. When people become subject to power, they become governable members of society--people who can have their situation defined for them and told what to do. Foucault (1977) suggested that the net effect of being disciplined into social, governable beings is that one becomes more and more prone to discipline. The facets of human life subject to discipline increases. For example, not only social behavior but also sexual desires, thoughts, feelings and even one's dreams are disciplined through psychological discourses. Discipline establishes the categories normal and abnormal to regulate as many facets of human experience as we might conceive. Paramount to these disciplinary processes is that subjects internalize various regimens and police themselves. Even if people resist the intrusion of hegemonic disciplinary forces, they still regulate their behavior but according to subversive scripts. There is always discourse and its power effects in the construction of identities and their signifying behaviors. Frank (1993) usefully summarized

the relationship between power and the self in this passage:

the self is an abstract construction, one continually being redesigned in an ongoing discourse generated by imperatives of the policing process. In accord with Foucault's emphasis on the positivity of power, this policing is done by the self itself, using various technologies, among which the bathroom scale might be the most mundane (p. 49).

These technologies by which people construct and attempt to gain mastery over the self are the same by which they subjugate themselves to dominant social relations. Agency is the state of personal empowerment which arises from resisting that which marginalizes one's existence.

Thus it is a compelling contradiction that one gains agency or personal power by subjecting the self to discipline. One embraces subject positions that regulate behavior and limit perception.

There seems to be no position but that of one who is subject to power. In this respect, people are even subject to those discourses they embrace as "their own." The reciprocal relation between discourse and subject is analogous to the reciprocal relation between the self and society put forth in symbolic interaction theory.

Bové (1998) noted that analyzing discourse "provides privileged entry" to poststructural inquiries because discourse is the object and process he described below:

it is the organized and regulated, as well as the regulating and constituting functions of language that it studies: its surface aims are to describe the surface linkages between power, knowledge, institutions, intellectuals, the control of populations, and the modern state as these intersect in the functions of systems of thought (p. 6).

Poststructuralism engages discursive analyses to theorize power, action, agency and resistance (Bové 1998, p. 14). These theoretical aims are tied to the sentiments central to the poststructural project. Bové described the poststructural standpoint as one conditioned by political suspicion of "all rhetorics of leadership and all representational institutions" (p. 15). Poststructuralists engage their discursive critiques with emancipatory aims. Bové cited these

mobilizing sentiments central to poststructuralism:

It gives priority to the politics of local struggles against defining forms of power and for marginalized identities; and it speaks for the difficulty (not the impossibility!) human beings face in trying to make their own "subjectivities" within given sets of power relations (p.15)

These priorities are also central to my research. With this research, I traced systems of power that attempted to marginalize radical drag experience, located personal struggles against defining forms of power, and investigated some difficulties that these five drag queens faced in constructing resistant subject positions while seeing how their appearances functioned in these struggles.

### **Narrative Schemes and Human Experience**

David Maines (1993) agreed with G.H. Mead (1934) and assumes that "our self referential experiences are known to ourselves largely through social conventions and their variations" (p. 27). What are these "conventions" but the norms that reproduce social order. Yet knowing the self and social arrangements requires interpretive schemes to process experience. Toward the end of social and self control, one must know what is important, appropriate and desirable. Certainly this knowledge is communicated through the discourses which define our situations. However, the interpretive schemes in which these imperatives are embedded are narrative. Maines and Bridger (1992) conceive narrative in various ways. They summarized some theoretical approaches to narrative and considered some practical distinctions (and similarities) between narrative and discourse:

...the structuralist approach, exemplified by the work of Barthes, Todorov, and Genette, tends to separate narrative (story) from discourse (talk conveying a story), while transactional approaches combine the two terms (narrative discourse) and theorize narratives as social acts. In still other cases,

postmodernism joins with deconstructionist procedures and assumptions and emphasizes local situated interpretations that cannot be eternally fixed and which contain elements of fiction that are overlaid and glossed by global homogenized version of western culture which are reproduced through electronic media (p. 365).

I say that discourse and narrative are everything the theoretical approaches outlined above might suggest and more. It is not a clear cut distinction between narrative and discourse, but it is useful to make conceptual distinctions for a richer investigation into human experience and meaning production. For the purposes of this research, discourse is the production and reproduction of knowledge and social norms through communication channels, with all of the power implications that the earlier discussion of discourse explicates. Whereas I deem narrative the interpretive schemes by which we understand ourselves and social reality. Although it is not a tidy distinction, I see discourse as communication and narrative as interpretation. Indeed it becomes complex because it is through communication from others that we learn how to interpret or narrate our own experience. Nonetheless the distinction between discourse and narrative is important to entertain within the context of this research.

I embrace the structuralist notion that discourse conveys a story but add that this story, or narrative might be taken for granted, composing *implicit* assumptions that form a foundation or backdrop against which social transactions take place. Yet, I also see narrative production and communication as a social acts. As well, my data analysis emphasizes local, situated interpretations of experience that contain elements of fiction overwritten by a hegemonic, global, homogenized version of western culture that Butler (1990, 1993) proposes to be characterized by an oppressive heterosexual narrative that governs appearance and other expressive possibilities. This version of western culture simultaneously produces and discredits difference. Irigaray (1975) proposes that it is a law of One, that archetypically privileges the (usually white) heterosexual male. Additionally, Mulvey (1975), DeLauretis (1990) and Dolan

(1990) all emphasize the role of electronic media in this cultural production. I investigated the novel appearances of the Haus of Frau as they serve to mobilize identities and form this small social group. I investigate the identity status ambivalences they negotiate with appearance and especially analyze their respective discourses on appearance to determine what social narratives program their drag queen appearances, stage performances, individual and collective identities. Although there are literal discursive systems that communicate appropriate gender performances to mass culture, I could not ignore the importance of *visual* discursive systems to our appearances, performances and perception of gender. Feminist articulations of the gaze are crucial to locating and analyzing the functions of appearance and perception in reproducing our gendered social order.

### **The Gaze: Disciplining Appearances and Perception**

In this section, I consider the gaze as mass cultural “lens” by which one visually apprehends people and “interprets” them. One interprets people by checking them for their conformity with gendered appearance norms that compose male and female archetypes and condition social experience. These gender archetypes delineate the boundaries of propriety, acceptability, and relative social worth for people. In addition, other distinctions such as race and social class are also apprehended via the gaze. People use norms as an imaginative referential system by which to define themselves and others. Although the gaze functions largely in perceptual and interpretive capacities, it also has a marked coercive function. This coercion is especially manifest when the gaze operates as a means of surveillance by which we police ourselves and others for conformity. As well, a power function is manifest any time people and situations are subject to definition.

I begin this discussion by summarizing the gaze as it was first articulated in feminist theory and pertained almost exclusively to women's bodies and the hegemony of male pleasure

in cinema and by analogy, everyday life. A key term in this discourse is *representation*, what it is that women's appearances before the privileged male gaze in mass culture signify.

### **Representing Lesbian Subjects**

Many feminist performance theorists speak from a position of lesbian experience. They consider how the lesbian subject is, or fails to be, represented in a specular economy informed by compulsory heterosexuality. In this specular economy, as evident in popular movies, advertising and television, the heterosexual male's privileged position as spectator/viewer/voyeur is constructed and reproduced. Particularly in cinema, the gaze is defined as a socially constructed apparatus by which women are portrayed and represented as objects enlisted in the service of male pleasure (Mulvey, 1975; DeLauretis, 1990). The camera looks at women differently than it looks at men. It is more likely that the camera will scan a woman's body and zero in on her body parts than vice versa. Likewise, the gaze reflects the specular economy apparent in everyday life, where it is a social imperative that women expose more of their bodies than men on most occasions. For example, the maintenance of skirts as that which women should wear in many business settings, on formal occasions, and at religious ceremonies indicates a non-reciprocal social relation (Paoletti & Steele, 1989). For in these same settings, men usually wear a business suit or tuxedo; both conceal a man's entire body save his face and hands.

Feminist performance theorists have considered how lesbian representations succeed or fail to communicate difference and indicate experiences and ways of being "outside" compulsory heterosexuality. De Lauretis (1990), Phelan (1993) and Dolan (1988) all suggest that the challenge for lesbian representation is to articulate lesbian experiences in a manner that will somehow escape erasure and re-inscription under compulsory heterosexuality. As outlined earlier, people generally view and interpret representations according to the ideological and mythological underpinnings that frame their world view. According to Butler (1990), socially dominant interpretive structures subject all representations to the heterosexual assumption

hence assert and foreclose alternative meaning production and circulation.

### **Sexual Indifference**

Luce Irigaray (1975) sees the gaze and its attendant interpretive structure not as sexual difference but as sexual *indifference*. It is her assertion that there are not separate male and female sexual practices under compulsory heterosexuality but only one sexual practice--that of the male. This assertion is based on her observation that "the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects" (p.86): Correlative to the gaze then, the feminine and by analogy, woman are constructed and thus represented in a manner that reproduces and reinforces a (heterosexual) male subjectivity. This subjectivity erases women's experiences and beings. Irigaray posits that women exist culturally and sexually only when and as they are seen by heterosexual men. Here, hegemonic portrayals of women and femininity are a reflection of culturally constructed heterosexual male desire. Therefore this line of reason goes that woman, as constructed and seen in dominant social relations, is more or less a fantasm, or figment of a particular mind set and desiring. As Butler (1990) suggests, woman is a copy without an original.

Lesbian critical analysts consider the location of lesbian (and gay) sexualities in the paradoxical social relations of sexual *indifference* that afford subjectivity only to the (usually white) heterosexual male (De Lauretis, 1990). As Dolan (1988) notes, the contemporary paradox is that assertions of difference and social projects for pluralism and valuing diversity remain trapped in representational economies that reflect and reproduce male privilege. The challenge for those desiring change is to represent that which is not culturally visible, to speak a language that is culturally unintelligible in dominant socio-cultural settings. The dilemma of representation is more than a double bind. Phelan (1993) suggests that representation is an attempt to make the invisible empirically real. Symbolic systems are employed to represent that which is not otherwise "present." However, symbolic systems are ideologically and mythologically framed in a manner that sets boundaries around what can be considered "real"

or even perceived. A cultural vantage point is established that is monocular. Butler (1993) proposes that peripheral to this vantage point, is the margin, a vast zone of cultural unintelligibility, encompassing experiences and possibilities that exceed what can be seen and understood in hegemonic discourses.

### **Visually Apprehending Ourselves and Others**

I wish to re-emphasize the importance of feminist gaze formulations and how I relate them to Stone's (1970b) theorizing and the self by noting that where Stone suggests that appearances mean identification of one another and that these identifications "subsume at least two processes: identification of and identification with" (p. 396). It is key that Stone proposes that in these identification processes we socially join with some and depart from others (p. 399). Hence identifications engender dividing practices by which people communicate and maintain difference. In the following discussion Silverman also considers the dividing practices that making identifications engender, whether these identifications are ones individuals make for themselves or are the ones individuals make of one another.

Silverman (1992) takes the concept of the gaze and notions of representation necessary to identity a step further in considering the gaze not just the divisive mechanism by which people heterosexualize bodies, but also, the means by which they understand themselves and others. Silverman (1992) proposes that this "metaphoric apparatus" that "Lacan calls the gaze," is the "camera" through which people apprehend themselves and others (p. 353). This apprehension does not convey the object of the gaze directly to the spectator. Rather, the person as object is processed "through the repertoire of culturally intelligible images" (p. 353). Silverman laments the social relations that the gaze mediates when it interprets people according to those images in the culturally intelligible repertoire:

Unfortunately, all such images are ideologically marked in some way; at the very least, they are carriers of sexual and racial difference, but they also project values of class, age, and nationality onto those who are seen through them (p. 353).

It is important to note that Silverman conceives the gaze to perform multiple functions in culture. First of all it establishes self/other relations as it locates and establishes differences among people . As well, Silverman notes that in this construction of difference, people "project value" on to others. The gaze functions in all dividing practices. However, it is important to recognize that the earlier conceptions of the gaze emphasized its role in establishing sexual difference and privileging heterosexual men as spectators to the female spectacle that represents their culturally approved sexual desires.

It is important that I see the gaze as a symbolic interactive mechanism and that the gaze itself is a product of symbolic interaction. People learn, contribute and sustain the meanings that the gaze relies upon. Appearance is what people use to be seen. It relies on engagement, both as social performer and spectator, with culturally intelligible images that are negotiated and circulated in culture. Silverman (1992) articulates the complex nature and role of the gaze, as it functions collectively:

Since the gaze is unlocalizable and radically exceeds any individual human look, it, too, must be apprehended through visual and discursive fictions. Traditionally, those fictions have insisted not only upon the masculinity, but upon the heterosexuality of the "camera" that "pictures" us for ourselves and others, thereby situating gay men, with women, decisively on the side of the spectacle (p. 353-354).

The ideological markings that delimit the gaze carry all the dividing practices that Silverman notes in her passages above. With this research, I seek to apprehend the visual and discursive fictions attendant to the gaze and their impact on drag queen experience. The compulsory heterosexuality narrative is a primary constituent to the gaze. Elaborating on points that DeLauretis (1990) and Irigaray (1975) make about the primacy and privilege of culturally constituted heterosexual male desire in the gaze, I concur that the social dynamics of sexuality, desire and body politics reveal sexual difference as sexual indifference. As Irigaray proposes, there is only one law of desire in this system--that of the culturally constructed, idealized,

heterosexual male. It is this collection of images, composing the ideal heterosexual male, that regulate his appearance, behavior, emotions and desires. Women are similarly regulated but cast in the service of appropriate male desire. They are sexually important only to the extent that they adhere to the fantasy script comprising their hegemonic sex role. Both men and women are confined by the expectations that they appear and otherwise behave in accordance with their exclusive identity sets. These identity sets represent one's engagement with a collection of culturally intelligible images, the gender norms that compose the male/female binary .

The gaze, appearance, and identity dynamics under compulsory heterosexuality compose body politics and the body itself as a social object. In the symbolic interactionist sense, the meanings that the body as a symbol contains, effectively create the body. In American society they compose male and female bodies quite differently. The role of appearance in constructing these bodies and identity is undeniable. The fictions that underlie gender roles according to the gaze rely more on appearance-- that which is *on* the body--than the actual body itself to construct and maintain difference. Much of this construction takes place through the interactive processes of seeing and being seen. The gaze is important to the construction of bodies because bodies apprehended by the gaze are understood in terms of the (culturally intelligible) gender images that mediate interpretation.

The issues of cultural intelligibility are marked by social values. When one is subjected to the gaze, one is subjected to social scrutiny. One is put under investigation by the gaze. People are assessed for their compliance with norms. In effect, norms are culturally approved images, ideals that compose gender archetypes in the collective consciousness. Stone's concept of appearance communicating value is important here. One's appearance conveys a position in relation to the values that frame gender expression in immediate social settings and larger society. Social control mechanisms work to guarantee that people appear and behave in accord with those images culturally approved for their sex identified bodies. People can be

legally punished, ostracized, insulted, or physically abused when they fail to conceal their departures from culturally approved images deemed appropriate to their sex. When an image apprehended by the gaze is subversive, it might be erased or over-written. As Butler (1993) theorizes, erasures occur when images are rendered unintelligible so that the status quo, a fantasy composed of culturally approved images, can remain unaltered. As well, subversions are adjusted in dominant social relations when a potentially subversive image is appropriated and over-written with culturally approved meanings. Although this example does not pertain directly to gender, I offer the case of American punk culture of the late 1970s and early 1980s as an illustration of a radical movement's amelioration: Its radical appearances and music were appropriated and commodified for circulation in mass culture thus stripping the movement of its subversive power and meaning.

Gay and lesbian experiences lie outside the gaze. Queer utterances are sometimes acknowledged but not really permitted. This expurgation of the queer is an authenticating function of sexual indifference that permits only the heterosexual male his desire. However, the drag queen's male body, when intentionally marked by trappings of feminine appearance, disrupts the gaze with a spectacle that cannot be ignored. However, the spectacle is usually overwritten in manners indicating that the status quo refrains from adjustment.

The previous discussion on the gaze touches on issues of social and aesthetic performance by considering the manners in which perception is limited by compulsory heterosexuality and other dividing practices such as race. There is a reciprocal relation between what actions and appearances we can possibly perceive and perform. The bounds of propriety and possibility are limited according to the discursive systems that define people and their social locations. Our very subjectivities result from these processes of definition, imitation and limitation. In turn, it is my assertion that we *perform* our subjectivities, or multiple subject positions using verbal declarations, our behavior and participation in social realms, and by constructing the appearances by which one portrays the self to others. Further, I propose that

through individual involvements with the gaze, people apprehend and discipline themselves into social subjects. They portray identities as they present the self to others.

With specific regard to appearance, the operations of seeing, being seen and interpretation that are germane to constructing and portraying identity and subjectivity are akin to Stone's notions of program and review. These operations are also saturated with the dividing practices which construct and convey privilege and oppression to people according to the social locations they come to occupy. I emphasize the importance of performance to constructing identities and subjectivities in social arenas. Performances always involve representation, the symbolic gestures by which people try to convey information that is not immediately visible to a social setting. In the specific context of this research, I am most concerned with the intangible states of mind and states of being that most presume to reside *inside* a person, in their consciousness as these mobilize appearance and behavior. Sexual orientation, for example, is such a state of mind and state of being that individuals portray in their social performances. Such states of mind and being are also the subject of representation in *aesthetic* performances. Where Goffman (1959) offered analyses of social performances in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Schechner offers analyses of aesthetic performances. Schechner provides additional insights into the nature of performance as it occurs in "special" events set apart from everyday life. However, he does address performance in everyday life. Moreover, one can draw analogies from his insights about ritual and aesthetic performance to performances in every day life. Yet, the key reason for considering Schechner's (1987; 1988) work is because the Haus of Frau did engage in aesthetic performances, those representations before an audience of spectators who paid money to be in a special place, at a special time to be entertained.

## **Performance Theory**

Richard Schechner (1987) defines performance as an "activity done by an individual or group in the presence of and for another individual or group" (p.30). Performances occur in everyday life and in settings contrived to set the performance activity apart from everyday life. In his essay "Approaches," Schechner (1988) discusses elements basic to performances set aside from everyday life, including the performer's use of time, objects and space as they are all governed by rules that characterize a conventional performance within its particular genre. Schechner states that performances distinguished as something intended to be outside the realm of everyday life encompass activities such as games, sports, theater and ritual (p. 10). Rules or conventions govern performance activities. Rules not only tell performers what to do; they also "*defend the activity against encroachment from the outside*" (p. 11). Defending an activity from outside encroachment is a way of maintaining a status quo, the separateness of the activity from everyday life and the relative privilege of participants as "insiders." For example, religious rituals require specific codes of behavior, sometimes even outside the religious event to distinguish the chosen from "the unwashed." Note the specific dress of Amish and Mennonite communities. Schechner thinks of performance activities as "social counterparts to individual fantasy" (p.11). He contends that the social function of performance activities is to "stand apart from ordinary life both by idealizing it (in these activities people play by the rules) and criticizing it (why can't *all* life be like a game?)" (p. 11).

Regarding performance as the social counterpart to individual fantasy, it is well to consider the functions of fantasy for the individual and for cultures. Fantasy elicits emotions and programs behavior because fantasies represent and contain unfulfilled desires, the want for things to be different or better than they are. For their part in mobilizing behavior, note that fantasies are scenarios that implicitly refer to unfulfilled desires. Performance, as the social counterpart to individual fantasy, represents the negotiations between people with possibly disparate desires in a social process of proposing and/or creating contexts in which desires can be satisfied for a few or many. Some desires are sacrificed to fulfill others, and indeed the

desires of some individuals are deemed more important than those of others. This might be true for performance and as well in other social settings where behavior is organized. It is always a question of prioritizing desires to determine which are most important to survival of the group and maintaining (or changing) the social order in question.

With regard to performance settings, the use of space is an element that separates many performance activities from everyday life. Special buildings and/or areas are set aside for "special" performances. Theaters, stadiums, and churches are such special places that transport participants out of the ordinary upon their entrance. Often as well, events in these special places are scheduled. Thus, people have to be at a special place at a special time to participate.

Considering aesthetic performance, it is important to ponder what it is that transpires in these special places at special times. In other words, a more elaborate definition of aesthetic performance is needed here. Aesthetic performances involve dramatization, some sort of story-telling. Schechner (1987) makes a distinction between social drama and aesthetic drama. He maintains that aesthetic drama "separates the audience from performers" whereas in social drama, "all present are participants" (p. 171). He emphasizes that although all present participate in a performance, only those playing roles in the drama (the performers) participate in the aesthetic drama (p. 171). Thus the distinction between aesthetic drama and performance is clarified: Performers and spectators are all participants in performance. However, the aesthetic drama is *nested* in the performance. Only performers usually participate in the drama or story-telling. However, there is a convergence that occurs in the theater where aesthetic dramas are usually performed. Social narratives come face to face with the aesthetic narrative by virtue of audience participation in the performance. Schechner proposes the theater as a model of "experimentally controlled" human interaction and as well,

a reflection of, or mediation among, these interactions, freed as they are by theatrical convention from being "really real." Instead, actions are segregated

"in the theater" where through exaggeration, repetition, and metaphorization they can be displayed and handled. The interactions played out in the theater are those which are problematical in society, interactions of a sexual, violent, or taboo kind concerning hierarchy, territory, or mating (p.213).

At the heart of drama is conflict, social conflict. Here, there is another relation between the social and aesthetic dramas. It is in the way that conflict is played out, resolved or left problematic, without closure in the drama that aesthetic relations to the social serve to re-affirm or challenge the status quo.

Transformations should be considered as part of and a possible outcome of aesthetic performance. The performers alter their appearance, being and location in time and space in preparation for and possibly during the actual engagement with an audience. Performers might don makeup and costumes and engage various transcendental strategies ranging from intoxication to meditation, chants and yoga to "psych themselves up" for a performance. The performer's attempts to transcend everyday life reflects her/his desire to exact some change(s) in the spectator. Schechner suggests that changes in the mood or consciousness of the spectator is possible. However, such changes are usually temporary but can be permanent (p. 170). With specific regard to drag performers as those engaged in aesthetic performances, it is important to engage a vocabulary germane to the mimetic and consider the ways in which cultural imperatives saturate such performances and their reception by spectators and critics.

### **Representation**

Interestingly, representation comprises various operations of substitution and persuasion. With specific regard to performance, representation offers images that stand in the place of human experience. It is the performer's task to convince spectators. Performers lure spectators into an engagement where reality is the question: The spectators' conceptions of reality (truth claims) are either reaffirmed, or perhaps, spectators may be transported to a psychic space where their world view is challenged and potentially altered. Although Webster's Dictionary, in specific regard to how representation functions *in law*, states

"representation is a statement or implication of fact oral or written, as made by one party to induce another to enter into a contract," I suggest that in performance as well, one party seeks to induce another into a contract: The performer seeks to enter into a contract with the spectator, one in which the spectator becomes an accomplice in constructing realities. I emphasize realities in the plural because meaning is subject to the interpretation of individuals in an audience--each of whom are likely to see the world differently. There is inevitably a gap between what a performer intends and what a spectator grasps. It is axiomatic that representation at once exceeds and falls short of intent. As with all symbolic transactions, meanings exceed the intended boundaries and fail to meet the desire for perfect understanding. World view, or reality base, is culture bound and contingent on personal experience. The same performance, a representation employing symbolic equipment such as personal appearance, gesture, and language, will effect people differently.

Peggy Phelan (1993) states that "a believable image is a negotiation with an real" (p. 3). She continues this argument by stating

As a representation of the real the image is always, partially, phantasmatic. In doubting the authenticity of the image, one questions as well the veracity of she who makes and describes it. To doubt the subject seized by the eye is to doubt the subjectivity of the seeing "I" (p. 3).

For example, consider the hackneyed expression "I can't believe my eyes." Thus the spectator is also implicated in constructing reality even though the performer is providing the representation. The image maker and viewer are both implicated in constructing the "real" or believable representation. Although the artist is charged with convincing the viewer of an image's authenticity via its technical execution, the spectator may remain "blind" to an image. A portrayal may "fall on deaf ears" as if in a strange language--unintelligible. People say "I don't get it." Artistic innovation is potentially revolutionary when people are offered a way to see

things differently, gaining access to experiences they had not. Some people do get it and some do not.

Although I labor to distinguish aesthetic from day-to-day performances, it is also important to consider the similarity between social transactions in everyday life and the transaction between performers and spectators. As Goffman (1959) suggests, all social transactions involve the exchange of information using symbols as a proxy for personal meaning. People use symbolic equipment, such as appearance, gesture and language, to "dramatize" their lives and experiences through "reality performances." Here too, it is the job of performers, albeit in a social transaction, to persuade the spectators of their symbolic executions' veracity and almost consequently, the authenticity of the being or statuses that performers claim to occupy. The difference that especially separates the social transaction from the aesthetic performance is the amount of repetition involved in everyday performances. Identities and identifications are established, altered or preserved as people continually interact. As with all communication, repetitions usually lead to some semblance of consensus. Ostensible consensus--some degree of shared meaning--is a condition necessary for social order. Paths of least resistance form where people hardly think about who someone is or what is going on when the appropriate (seemingly agreed upon) symbols have been deployed.

John Molloy's book Dress for Success (1977) is an example suggesting how personal appearance symbols can be manipulated to convince potential employers of competency and trustworthiness, i.e. authenticity in the white-collar working world. Manipulating appearance in such a manner seems to be a way of "greasing the board" so that one may more easily slide into desired employment. Molloy's contention is that there are generally understood appearance repertoires that one may invoke to better gain access to desired employment in the business world. Molloy instructs that one should appear as "the real thing" perhaps before the fact. That one may appear to be something one is not yet, or perhaps may never be, demonstrates the malleability of personal appearance symbols. With all symbolic systems, people use

perception and interpretation of symbols to construct, verify, authenticate and validate realities; they use symbols in attempting to make intangibles "real." For example, personal qualities such as competency and trustworthiness cannot really be seen. It is only their manifestations that a person demonstrates over time that one may ascertain. Even then, it is possible that such qualities may go unnoticed. Conversely, one may gain inflated evaluations of competency or trustworthiness from others if one performs these qualities correctly, in the right place, at the right time before an audience that is able to perceive and understand their performances as such.

### **Realism**

Since traditional theater is mimetic, presumably an imitation of life, realism is one of its aims. Realism is the quality of being consistent with reality. Realism is also the pursuit of artistic expressions consistent with reality. Reality is defined as "the quality or state of being real" (Websters, 1979). Real is defined as

1. existing or happening as in fact ...
3. the quality of being true to life; fidelity to nature ...
6. in philosophy, existing objectively; actual (not merely possible or ideal), or essential. absolute, ultimate (not relative, derivative, phenomenal, etc).

For something to exist objectively, it must exist "independent of the mind" (Webster's, 1979). However, I argue that nothing exists independent of the mind. The mind processes perceptions, assigns meaning and facilitates communications that indicate understandings of what is "real." Since reality is constructed for individuals through the cognitive narrative structuring of experience, it seems that there is no reality as it is defined in western philosophy. Reality and truth cannot be pinned down. Instead, people rely on a "goodness of fit" between perception and personal narratives (subjectivity) to authenticate (or reject) the truth claims implicit in a symbolic representation. Ideological and mythological assertions inform narratives, inquiry and thus perception too. Reality can only be verified through subjective means. Thus one asks, if something is "true to life" then, to whose life is one referring? Most directly, if the

spectator/critic deems a representation "real" then it apparently rings true to life for that individual.

Schechner (1987) offers a raw/cooked analogy to distinguish art from life. He suggests that life's experiences are the raw material, that is "cooked" and thus transformed into palatable artistic forms (p. 38). I interpret Schechner's discussion on the relation between art and life to mean, more directly, that it is one's personal experiences of life, as composed of active forms that one imitates in art. Thus art takes on the active qualities of vital forms in imitating life. However, experience is reliant upon perception and interpretation. Both perception and interpretation are culturally framed. People learn what and how to see, feel, interpret and evaluate, and then represent their experiences. To dislodge oneself from traditional notions of an objective reality germane to science, western philosophy and aesthetics, one must acknowledge that narratives constitutes "life" and saturate our portrayals of the "real." Hence culture relies on a natural or "raw" that is already cooked as a point of departure and basis for discussion (Butler, 1990).

Dolan (1988) claims that employing realism in subversive performances undermines intent because realism is merely an ideological frame that confines representation to hegemonic narratives. It is her contention that there is little new to be seen or learned within a specular economy that erases and renders so much invisible and unintelligible. She maintains that representations with subversive power, when contained in an ideological frame such as realism, are stripped of subversive content and re-inscribed to mesh with socially dominant ideological and mythological assertions. That is, realism is a culturally inscribed form that functions merely as an ideological tool to affirm and validate dominant social narratives. Realism constrains representation to a symbolic code of the already-known, understood and generally agreed upon by failing to "let in" that which will challenge dominant cultural assumptions and assertions. Anything that potentially threatens the "realistic" status quo is re-inscribed so that it may be confined and understood in a manner that does not threaten the social order. For example,

there are two ways in which drag performances are stripped of subversive content by the socio-cultural institution of compulsory heterosexuality. First, the drag performer is read as a freak, an aberration. The drag performer is labeled deviant and possibly mentally ill to strip their representations of subversive power. The drag performer is constructed as an outcast in dominant social relations (and often in the gay community as well) so that they are not taken seriously. In effect, they cannot be heard; they are rendered mute. Secondly, the drag performer is re-configured as "not male" and therefore equated to female so that their position in society is articulated as one that reinforces the male/female binary rather than revealing the binary as an oversimplification.

Another example illustrating the way in which cultural arrangements under compulsory heterosexuality strip subversive acts of their power is illustrated in its mandatory misunderstanding of gay male and lesbian sexualities and relationships. It is not uncommon for self-identified (out) gay male or lesbian persons to be asked if they perform the "male" or "female" role in their sexual relations. Here, male and female homosexualities are erased and re-inscribed with compulsory heterosexuality to maintain the status quo. People in dominant society who portray a comfortable identification with compulsory heterosexuality have what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) terms "the privilege of un-knowing." The embrace of dominant social narratives allows people to overlook and misunderstand that which does not conform with their world view.

Considering what people do or do not "get" or understand from a performance as it represents a performer's experiences and/or intentionalities is an investigation into a social relation characterized by gaps in communication and understanding. The transaction between performer and spectator and its content is the subject of much analysis and debate. This exchange between performer and spectator is framed as a site of political action by feminist theorists of performance (see Phelan, 1993; Dolan, 1988, 1993). As Stone (1970b) indicates, when symbolic transactions occur, the response called out in the spectator is never quite what

the performer anticipates. However, there is better chance for shared meaning among people with similar experiences and cultural attachments. As Phelan (1993) proposes, performance art portraying an urban lesbian experience is better understood by an audience composed of people sharing similar cultural experience. She proposes that spectators better understand subversive performances when lived experiences provide basis for recognition and understanding.

### **Realness vs. Reality**

Within drag performances, performative intent and spectators' appreciation often hinge on cultural notions of "realness." When a drag performer seems to convincingly portray women, he is said to be "giving much realness." Realness is contingent on portraying oneself as possessing social and/or economic statuses, and attendant experiences that dominant social relations prevent one from having in actuality. In Jenny Livingston's movie, Paris is Burning, this realness is a concept not necessarily confined to drag queen performance. There are competitive drag balls in New York that go beyond the domain of female impersonation, although convincing illusions are

always the performative intent. These drag balls comprise all sorts of constructed appearances that do not represent the performing persons' statuses and positions in everyday life.

There are all sorts of "drag." These drag balls show that it is not just gender that people put on. We also don social class, ethnicity and kinship through appearance. For example, in the drag balls an unemployed African American man might present himself as a Wall Street financier, complete with an expensively designed "power suit" and an alligator attaché. Gay men who dominant social relations might confine to "sissy boy" statuses, can subvert that paradigm by giving "banji realness" appearing like young street tough and street smart hoodlums. The power of realness depends on the performer not *really* being what they portray in their drag performance. The power of the performance implicitly relies on the

audience knowing that the performers are not what they appear to be. Where it is theorized that traditional western theater is premised on a mimetic that entices the spectator into an imaginary world where it is usually unimportant what the actor is in everyday life, drag performers intending realness, make constant reference to personal realities that contrast sharply with the realness they give. Performing realness is subversive in the respect that it breaks down appearance codes specific to race, class and gender. However, as Dolan (1988) suggests, this subversion partially undermines itself. In some respects, realness flagrantly ascribes to dominant social relations, referring the spectator back to the status quo of social arrangements that institute and maintain invisible walls that seem much more intractable than the one traditionally conceived to separate stage performers from their audience. The sex and gender narratives that compose social order in American society seem also to be an invisible wall dividing people into mutually exclusive categories: male and female.

## **Sex and Gender**

*Tell me if you can, Tell me if you can, What makes a man a man? -- Mark Almond*

In this section, I consider discourses that some contemporary theorists and researchers offer to explain American society's gendered social order and its relationship to sexuality. It is especially apparent in these discourses that there is a tension between conventional gender meanings and the meanings produced by those contesting the status quo. This tension reveals a struggle for control of meaning and its production. Here, the gender struggle appears more self-conscious than much symbolic interaction, yet it is the same process of communication where meanings are created, imposed, modified, and suspended according to individuals in

particular contexts. It merely occurs here within academic contexts.

Unresolved difficulties surround theoretical distinctions between sex and gender. It is conceptually important for some analyses to separate sex and gender by seeing sex as the "raw," natural pre-cultural state of being and gender as the "cooked" artificial social constructions based on the foundation of "natural" biological sex differences. In essence this argument states that the body is a blank slate inscribed by culture. More radical, Foucault (1980) argues that the body, like gender, is not prediscursive. Bodily parts are grouped into male and female beings, determined by genitalia, ignoring other ontological possibilities. Thus, Foucault argues that the blank slate is both given content *and* form through discursive practice. Ways of being and knowing are limited as the body is constructed for and constrained to gender scripts.

Butler (1990) also states that construction of the "natural" renders the construction process invisible. She proposes that the construction process occurs in a manner that constitute an unquestioned state of being that seems to precede legal and linguistic imposition. Whereas, Foucault (1980) argues that governments espouse ideology defining what is natural; then science is employed to validate its assertions. I extrapolate from Butler and Foucault's theorizing above, this theoretical advancement: that the constructed "natural" order of heterosex, grouping bodily parts into male and female beings, forecloses alternative groupings of bodily parts and possibilities for identity based on qualities other than particular genital possessions and "secondary sex characteristics." Therefore, the distinction between sex based on anatomical "facts" and gender, which prescribes appropriate behavior for sex-specified bodies, falsely presumes a "natural" body.

Discussion of sex and gender are further complicated by linguistic purpose, employing the word sex to designate action and simultaneously, ontological status. Sex is derived from the Latin word, *seco*, meaning to cut, (Webster's Dictionary, 1983). *Seco* is an appropriate root word, recognizing male and female categories are divisive. Further, the categories are

established on the basis of potential reproductive functions, presuming heterosexuality. As Butler (1990) suggests, heterosexual division of humans into male and female categories is the primary, constitutive cultural act from which numerous regulatory practices elaborate.

### **Compulsory Heterosexuality**

Rich (1980) proposes that sexism and heterosexism underlie the division between male and female and create respective boundaries or rules that men and women are not to transgress and that these boundaries inform thinking, perception and existence. Men and women are expected to remain within social boundaries dictating appearance and behavior even though these expectations perpetuate inequality. Connell (1992) claims that "the gender order itself is a site of relations of dominance and subordination, struggles for hegemony and practices of resistance" (p. 735). However, I propose that the body is the site of conflict with the gender order: Gender expectations impose appropriate sex object choice, appearance and behavior. Rich's (1980) summary of these relations as "compulsory heterosexuality" is apt. One must be heterosexual in action and appearance; no other option is given. Note that gay and lesbian couples are not portrayed in mainstream culture. Rights guaranteed to heterosexuals do not uniformly apply to lesbians and gays. Davis (1982) suggests that prohibitions against transvestism and homosexuality evidence desire to maintain social boundaries. Hence the heterosexual norm serves to constrain and penalize persons not conforming.

Butler (1990; 1993) proposes that compulsory heterosexuality is the regulating mechanism, rendering bodies and related identities "culturally intelligible" and I construe it to underlie the gender narrative. Michelman (1991) surmised that the gender narrative exacts an over-simplified dichotomy between male and female. To this way of thinking, it seems that culture conceives male and female polar opposites and mutually exclusive categories. The dominant gender narrative maintains discrete sets of attitudes, behaviors, social roles and attendant physical appearances for males and females respectively. This narrative is based on presumed genital possession and one's corollary role in the heterosexual reproduction of our

species. Butler proposes that identity portrayals that defy this strict dichotomy cause individuals to be relegated to "zones of uninhabitability ... the site of dreaded identification," the abject other to dominant society (1993, p. 3). Yet Butler also argues that these uninhabitable zones are "nevertheless densely populated" by those rendered abject, e.g., transsexuals, transvestites, lesbians and gays (1993, p.3).

I theorize that socially acceptable sexual desires emerge from a very specific heterosexual reproductive model that asserts a monogamous married couple and the nuclear family. This gender narrative seems to be given currency through representations in popular culture and is apparent in legal privileges such as tax breaks afforded to married couples with and without children. Non-heterosexual desires and expression are under-represented in popular culture or are flatly erased (Dolan, 1993). Legal sanctions punishing alternative sexual expressions exist. Medical and social scientific discourses relegate alternative sexualities to the categories of deviant (not normal) and disordered (unnatural). However, Jacobs and Cromwell (1992), state that "it should be very obvious that lesbians, gays and transsexuals have ideas about their identities that contradict dominant ideology." Those living in contradiction often embrace ideologies valuing a range of acceptable sex and gender possibilities. Even so, the heterosexual imposition results in a very tight fit, a social cage, constraining persons to the categories of sexual behavior and gendered appearances acceptable to "the straight mind" (Wittig, 1992).

Also within this heterosexual gender narrative, the relative privilege of (white) heterosexual men is contained. Goffman (1979) observes that economic privilege and prerogative in most matters is afforded to men through the social institution of patriarchy. Moreover, Daly (1973) asserts that in academia men have traditionally been the universal subject, the canon by which all is known and understood.

### **Gendered Identities: Performativity and Citationality**

The preceding discussion, which summarizes the dominant sex and gender narratives

and the power implications of these narratives in social practice, leads me to consider more thoroughly how individuals incorporate their experiences of sexual difference into the personal interpretations they use to construct their identities and then mobilize behaviors that represent these identities. Butler (1993) offers a citation metaphor to assist her in critically analyzing how the norms that effect uniform sexual differences between men and women operate collectively and at the level of individual perception and behavior. She begins by defining performativity as a set of actions made in reference to norms. Specifically, she refers to performativity as reiteration that is made in reference to a norm or set of norms (p. 12). In specific reference to what she calls "speech act theory," Butler notes that a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names" (p. 13). She offers this illustrative anecdote to the performative functions:

According to the biblical rendition of the performative, i.e., "Let there be light!," it appears that it is by virtue of *the power of a subject or its will* that a phenomena is named into being (p.13)

Although, as Butler noted, this illustrative example refers to an "originating will," she concurs with Derrida's (1988) theorizing that the performative "is always derivative" (p.13). These intellects conceive performativity as a "citational practice" that mobilizes and distributes power according to the regulating norms that it both refers to and reproduces (p. 13).

Butler (1993) used her understanding of the performative as an analytical tool focused on deciphering the regulatory norms that materialize sexual difference as something that western cultures implicitly presume to be innate and irreducible. She stated

...the norm of sex takes hold to the extent that it is "cited" as such a norm, but it also derives its power through the citations it compels (p. 13).

It seems that all socially regulating practices rely on a citational performative that generates

power as it compels people to assume norms. When people assume norms, they both refer to edicts--the often implicit, idealized abstractions--that compel behavior and simultaneously materialize those coercive edicts within social realms. Indeed, persons become *subjects* in social relations as they are *subjected* to social regulations by others, and likewise, when one *subjects* the self to regulation. In this respect, identity can be seen as the product of a collection of regulatory practices (what Foucauldians might term "technologies of the self") that one assumes then materializes through appearances and behavior. Moreover, in this manner, bodies become "citational markers" when they refer to sexed subject positions (Butler, 1993).

In American culture, subjectivity is premised on the assumption of a sexed position, a social location with boundaries that limit material possibilities. One can only assume this location through an identification which requires one to imagine "the possibility of approximating the symbolic site" (Butler, 1993, p. 97). These symbolic sites are either "female" or "male."

Based on thinking that Butler (1990, 1993) and Foucault (1980) put forth, I come to the theoretical position that discourses on sex define humanity as they function to regulate behavior and establish identities for populations. I follow Foucault and Butler in proposing that this regulation takes place as discourses mark the boundaries within which it is socially appropriate and possible to exist as a person. The role of the person as a social actor is prescribed and confined through discourse. Hence one performs identity as a citation process through which one refers to and approximates cultural fantasies of ideal, "normal" sex specific archetypes considered appropriate to one's genetic expressions. But as Silverman (1992) notes, these sex specific archetypes are also qualified by age, race, social class and other factors.

What I find important about Butler's (1993) propositions on citationality is that sex discourses and the "genders" it reproduces in western culture rely on a groundless citational logic that gains its power, authority and legitimacy only through referring to itself. She argues that there is no original state of being or other basis to which the heterosexual norm can refer

outside of itself. Sex, with its regulating norms of heterosexuality and the rigidly specified gendered appearances and behaviors that it compels to materialize on bodies, functions like a "law" in American society. Certainly, there are laws "on the books" which seek to regulate sexual behavior. Yet my aim here is to investigate sex as law in a metaphorical sense and to further articulate the concepts of citationality and performativity according to Butler (1993). For example, the regulations that discursively constituted sex convey and imply are sometimes referred to as "the laws of nature." However, Butler considers literal legal practices which place a judge in a position of authority to trace the legal discursive power system to its source. By analogy, Butler (1993) also generalizes the genealogy she performs below to the laws of sex:

...the judge is citing the law, he is not himself the authority who invest the law with its power to bind; on the contrary; he seeks recourse to an authoritative legal convention that precedes him. His discourse becomes a site for reconstitution and resignification of the laws. And yet the already existing law that he cites, from where does that law draw its authority (p. 107)

Within sex as a metaphorical law, social participants assume the position of judge. Appearances and behavior cite this "law" to authorize the appearances and behavior that materialize and authenticate identities before the panel of judges in the social setting. Thus in visually signifying identities, appearances and behavior cite the laws of sex to legitimate sexed positions and allow one to communicate both visually and verbally with authority from those positions. Thus, as Butler (1993) proposes, in using appearances to visually signify identities, the body becomes a citational marker referring to the laws of sex.

### **Gendered Appearances: Representing Sexual Relations**

Butler's (1990, 1993, 1998) theorizing on gender and identity suggests that gendered appearances perform multiple social functions and are component to the cultural operations that

inculcate humans into communities and discipline them into governable social beings. I propose that appearances reside in a visual discursive system that has gender narratives at its base. I argue that gendered appearances are representations that at once portray individuals as "real" men and women while verifying the social order from which such representations emerge. Cahill's (1989) research findings suggest that people pursue and forge sexual difference through personal appearance and teach their offspring to do the same. Thus I generalize that dress emphasizes and represents sexual difference. Perhaps this difference is emphasized through appearance because, as Butler (1990) suggests, determining and representing biological sex is fundamental to identity. Since people do not usually display their genitals publicly, dress is the primary symbolic equipment by which male and female social beings are created and performed. Note as Paoletti and Kidwell (1989) do, that generally, women's most socially important clothing is

body revealing, colorful, and kinetic while men's most socially important attire reveals only face and hands, generally hides the physique and is somber in color and fabrication.

Kaiser (1989) suggests that managing gendered appearances (i.e., the presentation of self, a performance) and the ability to interpret the appearance of others is learned. She also notes that sophistication in interpreting gender meanings increases with experience. Moreover her research findings suggest that flexibility, willingness and ability to consider many contextual factors in

assigning gendered meanings suggest comfort with one's individual gender identity and as well, comfort with one's working knowledge of pervading gender ideology.

Where Kaiser (1989) shows that gender performance and expectations are learned, she does so by conducting a cross-sectional, longitudinal study of girls aged 2 to 10 years initially, then again in 5 years. She integrates symbolic interactionism with social cognition theory to investigate and explain how gendered meanings are learned and interpreted

throughout childhood. Comparing girls between different age groups and over time, she reveals the developmental process by which these girls progress from dichotomous filing system for processing clothing symbols, to more complex and "elaborate webs of meaning" where context, behavior and other information are integrated with the clothing symbols to determine gender.

Cahill (1989) states that children are invested with gendered identities. Citing others' empirical findings he indicates that from birth, children are treated differently according to sex. In this manner, the social reproduction of gender is achieved by fashioning males and females into

masculine and feminine social entities, respectively. Importantly, what children learn as acceptable behavior and appearance for themselves, they also expect of same-sex others.

Cahill (1989) uses ethnographic research methods, keeping field notes and conducting interviews while volunteering 18 months at a parent-cooperative pre-school. He finds

boys and girls treated differently, behaving differently and having well defined expectations of appropriate gender performance.

Cahill (1989) observes that girls have more leeway in appearance. Their gender prescriptions are more flexible, allowing "tomboy" appearances and play. Girls are not ridiculed for wearing boys clothes or appearing masculine. However, boys are ridiculed for feminine appearances. A boy at the pre-school wearing a headband is severely censured by his male peers. Although girls are not ridiculed for tomboy appearances, they are given more positive reinforcement from adults when appearing feminine, wearing dresses. However, boys are to establish their masculinity by renouncing any deemed feminine behavior or appearance. More often, boys choosing feminine appearances and behavior are chided. Boys not ceasing are taken in for "professional help" to reinforce or re-enforce their masculinity.

Socially constructed gender indicates "two categories" and no middle ground (Michelman, 1991). Kaiser, Lennon and Damhorst (1991) assert that culture differentiates

between masculine and feminine in an oversimplified manner." (p. 49). Constructed difference between men and women is succinctly summarized by Kaiser, et, al (1991) in their synopsis of gender codification as an "artificial dichotomy" of "doing versus being" (p. 51). Masculinity, with expectations and attributes of doing assigned to men, emphasizes achievement, action, and aggression, all characterized by physical, emotional and intellectual strength (p. 51). By contrast, femininity with the expectations and attributes of being emphasizes appearance, seduction (i.e., attracting others to act upon you), emotionality, sensuality and a generalized passivity and weakness manifest both in thought and deed (p. 51). Men "wear the pants" which also is a metaphor for authority. women wear the skirts and are sometimes called "skirts." When women are called skirts, it lays bare their role in heterosexual attraction.

The cultural emphasis on appearance as the means for establishing gender identity and sexed subject positions demonstrates the disciplinary procedures necessary to creating and maintaining social identities. Moreover, Cahill's (1989) research findings illustrates how intolerant socially constructed masculine identities are to ambiguity and contradiction. The following section considers academic discourses on male cross dressing, a behavior that physically portrays identities contradicting mainstream identity formulas.

### **Male Cross Dressing**

*They're not sick, they don't need to heal, It's about as natural as ... oatmeal.  
See, right, it's natural -- Taboo*

Rich (1980), Butler (1990), and Dolan (1988) just to name a few, propose that the gender order is founded on compulsory heterosexuality and the patriarchy. Butler (1990) and Foucault (1980) argue that such value-laden narratives frame the medical and social scientific discourses on normal and natural genetic expression with regard to sex, sexual behavior and gender performances. Contemporary investigations and theorizing that reproduce the

heterosexual norm prompts most medical, social and psychological literature on transsexuals, gays, lesbians, transvestites and hermaphrodites to be characterized by oversimplification. Gay and cross dressing men defy sex/gender categorizations that traditional discourses put forth. Although medical and scientific discourses traditionally conceive heterosexual male and female beings as the only normal, natural categories, these categories of heterosexual/homosexual, male/female and masculine/feminine prove neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive to human experience. This oversimplification is apparent in the very literatures attempting to impose such mutually exclusive categories. Moreover, discourses on male cross dressing reproducing the heterosexual norm help constitute the stigmatized subject positions for men who dare to publicly cross dress.

In the following section, I review the male cross dressing literature. Traditional social science methods, particularly survey data collection and variable analysis were employed to generate most findings in this area. There are exceptions. Esther Newton's (1979) ethnographic work on female impersonators and Richard Ekins (1997) grounded theory approach to male cross dressing are important works that I discuss in this section.

It is relevant to consider the "social construction of the cross dressing literature" just as it is my aim to investigate the social construction of drag queen experience. Much of the cross dressing literature is a product whose inquiries and subsequent interpretations are informed by sex and gender norms. The ways that heterosexuality and patriarchy are socially constructed and naturalized are rarely acknowledged in these discourses. Contextual factors framing human experience are overlooked. Cross dressers' abject status is reinforced by those in "helping professions" who label them "deviant and disordered." Ironically, the realities of abject status are glossed over and meanings pertinent to individuals are seldom discussed. Traditionally, scientists researching male cross dressing do not consider the stigma and violence that publicly cross dressing men face. Continually, these discourses impose the form and content of

culturally inscribed forms onto subjects defying the very structure that discourses imposed.

Furthermore, much of this research fails to acknowledge that cross dressing men might belong to communities of cross dressing men and that social systems exist for men who wish to do drag publicly. Cross dressing communities offer alternative social definitions, suggesting that doing drag is not "sick" and that doing drag is okay. An array of magazines and newsletters circulate for male cross dressers, whether they are heterosexual or gay. Much of this literature serves to educate "cross dressers and sex changers in the art and technology of 'passing' " as women (Ekins, 1997, p. 40). Other magazines such as Dragazine cater to a gay audience not interested in passing or sex changing but merely wishing to have fun with wigs, makeup and other traditionally

feminine accouterment. The tone of Dragazine is high camp, engaging the ironic humor containing social comment for a select community of those "in the know."

Most academic cross dressing literature is based on data collected from those in psychotherapy or receiving medical treatment (Bullough, Bullough & Smith, 1983). That known about cross dressing is shaped not only by doctors, clinicians and distressed patients, but as well by ideology defining what is natural/normal. The traditional discourse on male cross dressing reveals how fragile masculine identities are. This perils of maintaining masculine identities are apparent in the arbitrary distinction drawn between the "seriousness" of male versus female gender transgression. Bullough (1974) notes a dearth of literature on "female cross dressing as if to imply that the phenomenon does not exist, or that if it does, it is not a problem that can be defined in terms of psychopathology" (p. 1381).

### **Nature versus Nurture: Discourses on Masculinity and Femininity**

Discussions of cross dressing and homosexuality give rise to the nature versus nurture debate. Hormonal imbalance, prenatal or otherwise, is investigated as possible cause of cross-gendered behavior in children and adults, although tests are inconclusive (Pauly, 1990; Pillard

& Weinrich, 1987). However, gender is a social product, therefore, socialization is an important consideration.

Pillard and Weinrich (1987) propose a "periodic table of gender transpositions" where biology and socialization are both considered (p. 435). They propose biological processes of masculinization and concurrent defeminization that males undergo to counteract presence of the X (female) chromosome. As well, masculinization and defeminization are posited as social process where male is defined in opposition to that considered female. Pillard and Weinrich's untested model states that heterosexual males are masculinized and defeminized; cross gendered males result from "unsuccessful" biological and/or cultural defeminization. In this model, heterosexual transvestites and gay

males are masculinized but not effectively defeminized. Transsexual males are neither successfully masculinized nor defeminized.

Pillard and Weinrich's model partially reiterates the male-active/female-passive paradigm. It seems that women neither require biological nor social feminization and demasculinization. Here, femininity is the prediscursive state of being and masculinity requires work. In terms of socialization, Pillard and Weinrich do not advance thinking far beyond psychoanalytic permutations emphasizing a mother/daughter bond where female identity is not completely distinct from mother. They reiterate an essentialist position where female passivity is contrasted by active males necessarily forging identity in opposition to mother. In this paradigm, homosexual men unsuccessfully break with mother. Psychoanalytic explanations of gender identity formation presume a traditional nuclear family with the birth mother as primary caretaker. In contemporary society, this narrative fails to explain the persistence of male-active/female-passive equations. Changing family arrangements and gender expectations challenge the presumed context of male/female imprinting.

### **Heterosexual/Homosexual Distinctions**

The majority of cross dressing literature focuses on males. This literature is based on assumptions of a heterosexual norm and implicitly portrays cross dressing as a disorder threatening male identity, heterosexual orientation and the larger social order. These biases stem from notions of sex and gender "normality" held by the doctors, psychologists and patients who are distressed enough to seek treatment.

The heterosexual/homosexual male cross dressing clinical model evidences several misconceptions. Sexualities are not easily categorized in a gay/straight binary. Kinsey (1948) suggested that sexualities are better understood and represented by continua. Hence, investigations which conceptualize cross dressing according to a heterosexual/homosexual binary are overly simple and disregard Kinsey's (1948) definitive study on male sexuality. The complexity of sexual desire, experience and identity are down played in the cross dressing literature. Bisexual men are most often not considered and researchers most often do not consider the implications stemming from evidence that some "heterosexual" transvestites fantasize about having sex with men (Buckner, 1971; Ekins, 1997; Garber, 1993).

Many social and psychological models portray transsexualism as the only gay male cross dressing possibility. Again, type and degree of male cross dressing behavior are limited and do not accurately represent extant possibilities. The cross dressing literature does not usually consider motivations for cross dressing other than transsexual identification. Nor does it address the spectrum of cross dressing manifestations apparent among gay men.

Cross dressing definitions are lacking (Bullough, Bullough, & Smith, 1983). The main distinction drawn between male cross dressers is by sexual orientation. Many researchers distinguish between the homosexual-transsexual and the heterosexual-transvestite (Bullough, et al., 1983; Bullough & Bullough, 1993; Pauly, 1990; Freund, Steiner, & Chan 1982). These two types of male cross dresser are usually found in medical and psychological treatment situations and amount to a convenience sample. Thus external validity is dubious.

Blanchard and Clemmensen (1987) investigated differences between heterosexual and

homosexual men's gender dysphoria--defined as the degree of unhappiness with one's sex or the social expectations attached to one's sex. They administered a gender dysphoria survey. According to the authors, cross dressing and homosexuality indicate gender dysphoria. The researchers concluded that it is more accurate to conceive the basic division of gender dysphoric types as homosexual and transvestitic rather than homosexual versus heterosexual. They assume that *all* gay men, regardless of cross-dressing proclivity, are gender dysphoric and that only cross dressing heterosexuals are gender dysphoric.

Blanchard and Clemmensen (1987) conceptualize gay gender as an unhappy heterosexual identity. They evidence a cultural blind spot that seems to pervade the traditional male cross dressing literature. Most researchers in this area presume that normative heterosexual masculinity is natural and desirable to all men. These same researchers fail to acknowledge or understand how the cultural imperatives for heterosexuality and uncontradictory masculinity have permeated their own consciousness and tainted their investigations into male cross dressing phenomena. Likewise, they fail to entertain the possibility that gay men have access to alternative gender meanings that might affirm their experience. As Jacob and Cromwell (1992) note, gay men may have access to ideological constructs other than compulsory heterosexuality. Therefore, there is possibility that gays can be content with their sexual orientation and male identity, rather than merely unhappy with heterosexuality as Blanchard and Clemmensen suggest.

### **Transvestites**

According to the literature, transvestites are heterosexual men with a sexual fetish for clothing of the opposite sex (Bullough et al., 1983). Talimini (1982) also suggests that the male transvestite is not denying the male role but merely "distancing himself from conventional total embracement of it" (p. 4). He states that "many are married, have children and have served in the military" (p. 4).

Buckner (1971) analyzed a survey conducted by Transvestia magazine. Transvestites report almost exclusively heterosexual orientation; 66% are married and 66% are fathers. Buckner suggests several stages that a man passes through in becoming a transvestite: (a) association of feminine apparel with sexual gratification (p.87); (b) perception of heterosexual difficulties, (e.g. a weak male identity/fear of inadequacy in male roles) while possessing the goal of a heterosexual life (p. 88); (c) absence of the homosexual option due to "socialized aversion" or "lack of opportunity" (p.88); (d) "elaboration of masturbation fantasies into development of a feminine self" (p. 89); and (e) the integration of the feminine self into the personality.

Buckner suggests that like gays, transvestites are alienated from "normal" masculinity (p. 89). However, in the absence of homosexual options, a split personality develops where a female alter persona is incorporated. A fantasy courtship takes place with the female alter within the imagination. Thus courtship, ordinarily linking one to the social order, is internalized by enacting social and erotic overtures alone.

The transvestite has a salient heterosexual male identity. Perhaps transvestites are strongly invested in their heterosexual male identities because social status, economic favor and privilege are bestowed upon heterosexual men. Even though transvestites experience "gender dysphoria," the rewards they perceive coming from heterosexual male role enactment prevent them from publicly threatening their social status and consequently, the social order. Unlike the transvestite, the transsexual does not enjoy the perks of male status. However, Buckner's (1971) analysis, outlining "the transvestitic career path," portrays a very extreme scenario, suggesting implicitly that the split male/female personality inevitably comes in logical progression to the cross dressing heterosexual male.

### **Transsexuals**

The transsexual is portrayed as a gay male feeling that he is a woman trapped in a man's body (Bullough & Bullough, 1993). He is disgusted with his male genitalia and

secondary sex characteristics and seeks sex reassignment surgery (Bullough et. al., 1983). Pauly (1990) suggests that the transsexual syndrome is characterized by a lifelong preference for the "opposite" gender role. Bullough et. al. (1983) find that the transsexual is unsuccessful in male roles and therefore has little to lose by sex reassignment.

Generally, the male transsexual experiences the social pressure to think and behave as male through childhood and adolescence. Acquiring a transsexual identity usually occurs in late teens or early twenties and requires information that larger society does not provide (Bullough et. al., 1983). Bullough et. al. (1983) state that unsure young men apparently seek the help "of transsexual support groups during their decision-making process concerning identity" (p. 252). Social expectations which deem homosexuality unacceptable purportedly contribute to transsexual outcomes (Ross, 1983). Ross (1983) suggests that opposite-sex gender identity in homosexuals is sometimes a function of believing that a heterosexual lifestyle is the only acceptable choice.

### **Male Femaling**

Richard Ekins (1997) shares research findings from his longitudinal ethnographic studies of British men who cross dress. His grounded theory data analysis produced the most encompassing term, "male femaling." He suggests that repeated involvement with male femaling reaches a point where the male femaler must "make sense of their behavior and experience by seeking and constituting personal meanings for who and what he is in relation to his cross dressing" (p. 107). He suggests that most happen "upon media references to 'people called transvestites (or transsexuals),' with whom he can identify" (p. 107).

The two predominant categories of men engaged in the male femaling process are "cross dressers" and "sex changers." Sex changers are usually men who feel they are women trapped in a man's body. They usually seek other men as sexual partners and want to become "full-time" women rather than confining their male femaling to the pursuit of leisure. Whereas

cross dressers are predominantly heterosexual men who generally begin cross dressing as an erotic event done in private. Some never progress beyond this point, yet their involvement can be extremely elaborate, with secret rooms or attics full of feminine accouterment and account for all of their sexual behavior. Other men may seek female partners who understand and support them in their cross dressing.

Men who share their cross dressing with a female partner are more likely involved in social groups for male cross dressers. These groups are most often explicitly and vehemently non-sexual in asserting that their members are heterosexual. These groups provide opportunities for men to cross dress publicly. Some of these groups permit sex changers, men who engage medical technologies in becoming "women." However, these sex changers are only permitted with the explicit understanding that cross dressers are sexually off limits to all but their female partners.

However, Ekins reports that some "heterosexual" cross dressers fantasize about sex with other cross dressers, some masturbate while watching videos of cross dressed men and some do actually have sex with men. In some instances, men leading outwardly conventionally straight lives progress from cross dressing to sex changing into "women" who date men. The line between heterosexual and homosexual, cross dresser and sex changer is blurry. It seems that life contradicts the sexual taboos that serve to maintain a social order. What one can find in life also confounds the categories social scientists seek to establish and/or uphold.

Although Ekins does seek and report the personal meanings that his male femalers constitute for themselves, his research does not transcend the gay/straight binary relegating all cross dressers to a category analogous to the transvestite and sex changers to a category analogous to that of the transsexual. His research informants report behavior that contradicts these categories, yet he does not explicitly address the contradictions rife in establishing and maintaining the gay/straight binary among men involved in male femaling.

Yet Ekins' work is important in many respects. He articulates a progress narrative for

male femaling that is contingent on the meanings that individuals constitute for themselves. He cites male femaling as an evolutionary process that begins with acknowledging one's desire for and actual involvement with feminine accouterment. This beginning stage is followed by the "constituting male femaling" stage where male femaling individuals seek information and possibly social support in making sense of their non-mainstream experience. The constituting phase is followed by a consolidating phase which indicates incorporating a male femaling self into one's person. What sorts of constituting and consolidation take place are apparent in the many possible "stopping off points" where individuals might draw the line with respect to their levels of involvement with male femaling, disclosure of male femaling to others and levels of participation in social worlds both imaginary and actual that include the male femaling self.

Ekins work is also provocative in outlining practical difficulties that individuals face in male femaling--finding time, (safe) space, and the actual accouterment necessary to male femaling and how these difficulties are addressed by individuals. I borrow Ekins notion that cross dressing poses problems for men that require processing and too, that in processing the problems associated with cross dressing, variations occur that account for different identities and courses of action that either create new communities or establish an individual in communities that already exist.

### **Female Impersonators**

In contrast to the medical, psychological and sociological literature which mostly portray all gay cross dressing men as transsexual, anthropologist Esther Newton (1979) conducted an ethnographic investigation of female impersonators. In her book, Mother Camp: Female Impersonation in America, Newton investigates a type of gay male cross dresser, possibly very different from a transsexual. Female impersonators are traditionally associated with the stage (Bullough & Bullough, 1993; Garber, 1993; Newton, 1979). Bullough and Bullough (1993) outline the history of female impersonation in "legitimate" theater and link the practice to its contemporary manifestation in gay bars. The Bulloughs (1993) see the growth of

gay female impersonation in gay bars as coincident with the rise of gay communities in larger cities.

Newton's (1979) work is the most thorough investigation of female impersonation to date. This ethnographic work is based on extensive field research conducted between 1965 and 1966 predominantly in mid-western cities. Newton interviewed female impersonators, spent time with them in their everyday lives and attended their performances in gay bars. In gay bars she alternated between spectator positions when she watched performances and participant/observer positions when she assisted performers and documented their interaction backstage. Newton finds that female impersonators are professional stage performers with varying degrees of talent, but all are concerned with creating a convincing illusion of womanhood. These female impersonators only cross dress to perform on-stage. They wear no makeup off-stage and usually keep work separate from their personal lives.

Newton (1979) states that female impersonators have low status in the gay community. They are the lowly of the low. Gay men wishing to fit into "straight" society sometimes shun female impersonators because they visibly represent the homosexual stigma and consequently, embrace the lower status appearances of women (Newton, 1979). Esther Newton deconstructs drag, considering the intersecting sex and gender meanings confounded in the cross gendered performance. She states that drag is a "double inversion" revealing appearance as an illusion. The drag appearance conveys conflicting information. Either the outside appearance is feminine but the essential being is male, or the essential being is female but the body is male.

### **Drag Queens and Radical Drag**

I am familiar with contemporary gay male cross-dressers I call radical drag queens because of similarities their appearances bear to radical drag of the early gay movement. Indeed these contemporary enactors evidence a 1970s nostalgia which makes the connection more apparent. Polyester clothing, shag-cut wigs, platform shoes, Qiana disco wear and glitter

make-up are popular among contemporary radical drag queens. However, drag queen is traditionally a derisive term associated with street-walking "she-males" not meticulous in their gender crossing (Garber, 1993; Docter, 1988; Bullough & Bullough, 1993). These street-walking drag queens were noted for their outrageous behavior and are associated with drug abuse and prostitution. Bullough and Bullough (1993) briefly discuss radical drag as a phenomena coincident with early gay liberation, 1969-1976. Ekins (1997) also makes reference to radical drag offering terms such as "gender fuck," "spit drag," "half drag" used in Great Britain, and he notes that "still others" call it "a form of insanity" (p.41). In radical drag, gender is politicized through "gender bending" and cross dressing not in the traditional sense where one portrays the opposite sex but rather to challenge traditional notions of gender and suggest ambiguity (Bullough & Bullough, 1993). Radical drag queens do not necessarily attempt to completely conceal their male bodies. They may appear in drag with visible facial hair and genital bulge. They may or may not wear false breasts. The aim is not to convincingly portray the illusion of woman but to call attention to gender contradictions (Ekins, 1997, p.41). Radical drag appearance is characterized by "she-male" manifestations similar to drag queen prostitutes but tend to be more theatrical over the top glamour parodies. Radical drag queens might don ridiculously huge wigs in vibrant colors. Their makeup tends to be outrageous, including glitter and paste gems on the face. Where many female impersonators take exception to being called a drag queen, those performing radical drag usually do not mind being called a drag queen.

I wish at this point to offer a brief historical digression into the etymology of the word "drag." Drag refers to male cross dressing and stems from a time in western history when women's skirts were so long, that they dragged the floor while men's garments usually did not (Bullough & Bullough 1993). Hence the term signified male cross dressing as it made reference to an exclusively feminine characteristic of women's garb: skirts that dragged the floor. One can thus understand male cross dressing as a social phenomena steeped in tradition.

Street walking drag queens started the Stonewall Riots on June 26, 1969, the day after Judy Garland died. Many gay men seem to forget this historical event when they disparage drag queens. Numerous active counter-cultural movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s, socialists, anarchists, pacifists, women's liberationists and Black Panthers, were working for dramatic change in the dominant social and political landscapes. All sorts of alliances, intersections and conflicts emerged within and between various groups of those who were working for change.

Drag queens in the early gay liberation movement found themselves at remarkable intersections of politics and spirituality. Mark Thompson's (1987) essay, "Children of Paradise: A Brief History of Queens" describes a radical drag performance troupe founded in 1970, the Cockettes. In making the connection between drag, politics and spirituality, I will discuss the Cockettes as a cultural phenomena and precursor to the current Radical Faerie movement and The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Thompson (1987) introduces his essay by stating that in western culture,

few figures are held in greater contempt, or considered more useless or perverse, than the drag queen. But in many non-Christian and pre-industrialized cultures, those who bridged the genders were placed in a position of honor and ritual purpose (p. 50).

Thompson's statement emphasizes that cultural practice is capricious in constructing realities and assigning statuses and worth to individuals. He laments that the "religious role of those who bridge gender has been reduced to a tragic and trivial cypher" (p. 50). He notes that although guilt and shame surround male cross dressing, drag queens wear their accouterment as "public celebration" (p.50).

**Radical drag movements.** Within the context of gay liberation's first few years, San Francisco was a hot bed for any number of underground movements. Gay, hippie, drug

culture, anarchy, and socialist sentiments intersected when the Cockettes performed. Thompson (1987) interprets the Cockettes and their audience as an underground movement of "bizarre decadents" (p. 51). He recognized the people composing that movement as representatives of an "entire generation flipping out from a lifetime of popular culture" (p. 51). Outrage was apparent as the Cockettes mocked popular culture. Parody marked their forays into nostalgia, appropriating songs and appearances from earlier decades. Nostalgia soaked the popular imagination during the early 1970s. The forty years between 1920 and 1960 were recycled in fashion, at the movie box office, in TV and pop music. This mass mediated nostalgia was a commercial appeal to popular sentiment proposing that the good old days were a better time to be alive, when the distinctions between right and wrong, and the polarities of gender seemed easy and clear cut. Like Archie and Edith Bunker sang at the beginning of All in the Family: "Girls were girls and men were men ... Those were the days." However, one former Cockette, Martin Worman incitefully reflects on that the mass mediated 1970s nostalgia send ups as "an insidious tool used by mass marketers to cover up the shortages of spirit, imagination and raw materials in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate bankruptcy" (p. 51)

The Cockettes were men in dresses, wearing beards, dusted with pounds of glitter (Thompson, 1987). They performed for free before a gender bending audience of men and women who liberally passed joints and cheap wine among themselves in the theater (p. 50). The Cockettes themselves were explicitly androgynous, performing in painted face and with much nudity. Their performances, including sets and costume, were makeshift. The sets were flimsy cardboard or a painted sheet. They gleaned costumes from thrift stores. As one former member remembers, glitter was about the only thing they purchased outright. According to another Cockette, John Rothermel, these drag queens used glitter to signify their inheritance as children of paradise in the Age of Aquarius -- it was an hallucinogenic allusion to the magic of their aura and

their magnetism. They exuded these in the descent of white light, not unlike the flames reported to dance on the heads of Christ's disciples at the Pentecost (pp. 56-57).

The Cockettes gained international notoriety, were covered in the press and performed in New York and Europe. But they gave their last performance in autumn, 1972. Thompson (1987) attributes their demise to the fragility of their magic. He states that the "harsh glare of hype and expectation" were their undoing (p. 57). As well, Worman states that the "time, the mood, the people were changing," and that "the camaraderie started to deteriorate into dish" (Thompson, p. 57). It seems that Haus of Frau's drag experience paralleled that of the cockettes in this respect. Frau's deterioration also reflected the demise of camaraderie as time, and people changed.

Thompson (1987) discusses the Angels of Light, another radical drag performance troupe that surfaced in the wake of the Cockettes demise. But he emphasizes how the spirit of radical drag was carried forward by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in the early 1980s. Sister's of Perpetual Indulgence has splintered, but continues to exist with members nationwide. Thompson credits the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, who combined their black and white nun's habit with facial hair and garish makeup, with "applying spiritual purpose to cross-dressing" (p. 60). Thompson asserts that "keeping whimsy, mockery and outrage alive was probably the Sister's most significant accomplishment." Sisters explained to Thompson that,

Humor and sexuality are at the roots of spirituality ... They are the transcendental experiences that take us beyond morality ... [to] realize visions and feelings beyond everyday life. The truest religion in the world is theater, or ritual ... Being nuns is a practical application of our spiritual feelings as gay men (p.61). When the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence splintered, new movements emphasizing androgyny and pagan spirituality, especially the Radical Faeries were gaining followers.

Thompson (1987) defines Radical Faeries as "a nationwide, grass-roots movement of

gay men seeking alternatives within their own subculture and society at large" (p. 261). Remarkably, many faeries see little difference between gay subculture and mainstream society. Faeries charge that the preponderance of gay middle-class assimilationists have prevented "deeper inquiries into the [oppressive] predominant structures of state and spirit" (p. 261.) Faeries advocate the need for a new spirituality, reflecting a vision that affirms gay experience. Some have constructed alternative lifestyles in communes that contest consumerism and propagate a variety of sexually expressive and spiritual bonding patterns among men, not excluding monogamy. Faeries emphasize the spiritual and assert that "the only revolution worth having is the one that begins inside" (p. 269). They assert the link between personal and political and see cultural transformation hinging on the transformation of individuals.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and Radical Faerie movements continue to this day, while radical drag performance burgeoned, especially in New York. Internationally renowned performance artists like Ethyl Eichelberger, Klaus Nomi, Joey Arias and Leigh Bowery appealed to the avant garde art community in New York, an important cultural center for the contemporary western world. It seems that this rarified environment is

necessary to support continuous, multiple opportunities to do performance art and consume it. Of these performers, all but Joey Arias are now passed away. All of these artists blurred the boundary between performance art and drag performance. The same performers would perform in drag venues and alternately in performance art spaces.

**Contemporary drag performance.** In the contemporary context, a powerful drag performance elite emerged in New York that seems coincident with the ascendent popularity of Wigstock, the enormous day-time drag gala that was held every Sunday before Labor Day, from 1983 to 1995. The festivities were first held in Thompkins Square Park in the East Village but had to be moved to The Piers at the end of Christopher Street in 1994 because the event became so large. Lady Bunny was the organizer and the event's official spokesperson. A clique of New York's drag elite gained access to perform on Wigstock's stage. Drag careers were cemented for the fortunate ones that Lady Bunny selected to perform on her Wigstock stage. Ru Paul, Lipsinka, Mistress Formica, Candis Cayne and Varla Jean Merman are a few of the celebrities that owe much to their Wigstock tenures. Indeed, Lady Bunny herself owes her career to Wigstock. The general movie release, Wigstock: The Movie also helped, as did the recent HBO movie, Dragtime. Both Wigstock: The Movie and Dragtime were quasi-documentaries with interviews and "slice of life" behind the scenes footage.

The whole Wigstock scene and its attendant celebrities were important to Baltimore's Haus of Frau. Certain Haus of Frau members attended numerous Wigstocks. Their conceptions of doing drag bore much closer resemblance to what New York drag performers did than to the female impersonators in Baltimore. There are also remarkable similarities between the Haus of Frau and the Cockettes, even though the Haus of Frau knew nothing of the Cockettes. The Cockettes were at their height when the Haus of Frau were young children, living on the other side of the continent, twenty years before the Haus of Frau emerged.

## **Chapter Summary and Rationale for this Study**

My symbolic interactionist stance prompts me to understand that reality is constructed and performed using symbolic repertoires such as language and appearance. Through appearance, a symbolic repertoire, gender distinctions are learned and transmitted (Cahill, 1989; Stone, 1970a, 1970b). Moreover, appearance is the primary means by which sexual difference is narrated (Butler, 1990). Appearances that dominant social relations expect of men exclude the trappings most associated with the appearance of women. Men have less leeway in gender performance than do women (Cahill, 1989; Kaiser, 1989). Drag queens and other male cross dressers challenge the male/female distinction by compromising the broadly conceived gendered appearance(s) considered appropriate to their sex. Cross dressers violate norms and are labeled deviant (Davis, 1982).

The medical and psychological literatures were first to address male cross dressing. However they predominantly discuss male cross dressing as psychopathology and emphasize distinctions between male cross-dressers based solely on sexual orientation. According to the medical and psychological literature, heterosexual male cross dressers usually cross dress in private and are categorized "transvestites" (Bullough & Bullough, 1993). Gay cross dressing men, who do so publicly, are categorized transsexual. The transsexual is at some stage of surgical, hormonal and psycho-therapeutic treatment to change from male to female (Bullough & Bullough, 1993). However, not all gay male cross dressers are transsexual. Furthermore, male-to-female transsexuals expressing sexual desire for women are evident (Garber, 1992; Levine, 1994; Taylor, 1995). These current cross dressing categories are often forced and indicate oversight of complexities apparent in life's experiences.

Forcing gender categories to facilitate analysis limits thoughtful investigation and understanding of gay male cross dressing. Gay male cross dressing is distinguished by phenomena other than sexual orientation and transsexual identity. Self-perceptions, level of commitment to and understanding of traditional gender arrangements, characterized by the

imposition of a heterosexual norm, with its separate social roles for women and men also influence cross dressing behavior.

This investigation does not force gender categories to facilitate analysis. Instead, it focuses on the social experience of the Haus of Frau, who publicly presented themselves at variance with the gender norms that prescribe male appearances in American society. Where this research is so much about the connections between gendered appearances, identity and their relation to social realities, I was led to consider the operations of seeing and being seen that condition social experience and to consider how people look upon themselves. In presuming that socialization situates persons and gears their perceptions toward consensus, I was compelled to ponder what learned interpretive responses people engage to identify others and process visual aspects in interpersonal exchange.

Two key works informed my theoretical analysis of gendered appearances as they function in the visual component of social transactions: Stone's (1970b) symbolic interactionist take on appearance communication in "Appearance and the Self" and Silverman's (1992) contemporary articulations of the gaze. These works seem compatible where they both consider social operations of seeing and being seen and acknowledge that social identifications and evaluations stemming from one's appearance are means by which a person's social worth is determined. Stone theorizes the visual phase of social transactions to involve program and review. Conceptually, program is what Stone conceives to regulate a person's appearance, and review is the process and product of one being evaluated on the basis of appearance cues by others. Importantly, program and review involve mental processes. Stone suggests that persons use appearance to propose their identity to others and that communicating identity is key to programming and mobilizing one's appearance. Indeed, Stone proclaimed that appearance means identification of the person in social settings. Moreover, he asserts that in establishing identities, people are joined with some while parted from others. Hence in the process of establishing identities through appearance, Stone recognizes a dividing practice.

Where people seem connected to some social categories, groups or statuses while separate from others, the relationship of appearance to social values in attributing social worth to the individual surfaces. Thus I propose that social values also program appearance.

Stone (1970b) conceives the appearance phase of social transactions to be nonverbal. Therefore, it seems that people make identifications of each other and attribute social worth to one another by engagement with socially learned interpretive structures which require considerable use of imagination. Stone does not thoroughly consider the importance of imagination and learned interpretive structures to his concepts of program and review. However, his conceptualizations are important, provocative and provide a symbolic interactionist basis for considering the cultural meanings and realities that socially constructed appearances mediate.

Stone's (1970b) focus was on how people construct and manage appearances and on how evaluations from others figure in the maintenance or alteration of appearance programs. Whereas, Silverman (1992) is more focused on the role of imagination and collectively learned interpretive structures to making social identifications on the basis of visual stimuli. Silverman emphasizes that these identifications might be those one makes of the self, or they might be those one makes when regarding others. Nonetheless, Silverman considers the social identifications that appearance mediates in terms of the gaze. She theorizes that people are not visually apprehended and conveyed directly to the viewer, but instead that this visual apprehension occurs through a "metaphorical camera" (p. 353). I surmise that in effect, the socially learned, collective interpretive structures which mediate visual experience are the metaphorical camera that Silverman proposes. Thus I propose that the learned collective interpretive structures function as a "cultural lens" that intervenes where it seems to reside metaphorically, between the seeing eye and the one who appears: Thus visual apprehensions take form and focus toward interpretations that conform to social norms and values. Moreover, Silverman theorizes that the gaze is "unlocalizable and radically exceeds any

individual human look” (p. 353). However, she proposes that it is through “visual and discursive fictions” that the gaze may be apprehended (p. 354). I aim toward apprehending such visual and discursive fictions that compose the gaze by analyzing the social operations of seeing and being seen as they relate to identity and social order.

Butler (1990) theorizes that identity emerges from the primary constitutive act of determining and communicating biological sex type. I likewise theorize that sex type, determined by genital possession is fundamental to identity. Hence, creating and communicating sexual difference is a primary to apprehending identities. Where establishing and communicating identities relies on operations of seeing and being seen, it seems then that sexual difference is forged and communicated through appearance. Thus sexual difference *programs* appearance. Where Silverman proposes that visually apprehending another only occurs through the cultural lens constituted by the gaze, then interpretation and identifications take place through engagement with “repertoires of culturally intelligible images.” I propose that gender norms, which define appropriate appearances and behavior for men and women respectively, are such repertoires of culturally intelligible images, and that such imagery composes gender archetypes residing in the American collective consciousness. I also propose that it is through engagements with repertoires of culturally intelligible images, composed by gender norms, that people make the fundamental identification based on genital possession. Therefore, the cultural lens that mediates visual identifications, marks the boundaries of sexual difference according to gender norms. Moreover, I follow Butler in proposing that it is through appearance that people “cite” gender norms. Since one’s genetic sex type is communicated and understood by others through gender norms and such identifications take place primarily in the visual realm, then appearance is indispensable to social identity.

The importance of appearance, which relies on dress and grooming to communicating or citing sexual identity, implicates social participants in visually reproducing a gender narrative.

Following Bové (1998) and Butler (1998) I propose that this reproduction takes place in the individual's consciousness, through imagination as the gender narrative permeates the individual psyche. The gender narrative then materializes visually in the social realm as people construct and manage their appearances. Then again, by imagination, one's social appearance is appraised and interpreted by others to make identifications and attribute social worth. Where interpreting appearances relies on evaluations of one's conformity or deviation from gender norms, the gaze is also implicated as a means of surveillance. Where social value is attributed to individuals on the basis of this surveillance, then their gaze functions coercively, and social appearances are disciplined into conformity with the social values that condition the gaze.

Silverman (1993) notes the social values that condition the gaze (and by implication, the gender order as well) "traditionally insisted not only upon the masculinity, but upon the heterosexuality of the 'camera' that 'pictures' us for ourselves and others, thereby situating gay men, with women, decisively on the side of the spectacle" (p. 353-354). Thus Silverman conceives the gaze to authenticate and reproduce heterosexuality in social relations. Where women are traditionally the spectacle, the something to be seen that simultaneously constitutes the heterosexual male identity according to his place "behind the camera," it also establishes a protocol for sexual desire in which women are objects to the heterosexual male subject. Dolan (1988) theorizes this heterosexual male subject position as that of the privileged "ideal spectator," for whom the feminine spectacle is performed. Furthermore, one can extrapolate that in emphasizing heterosexual male pleasure in visual transactions, his authority is established. This heterosexual male authority can be inferred to social transactions that exceed the visual. Theorists like Irigaray (1975) and Daly (1973) argue that the entire social order is based on male pleasure and authority, and that under this heterosexual male privilege, women only exist as they pertain to his desires: In Butler's (1993) terms, women are only culturally intelligible as they authenticate heterosexual male desire.

It seems to me that it is through the cultural authentication of heterosexual male authority

that compulsory heterosexuality is also reproduced. Since power and authority are theorized to traditionally stem from a heterosexual male subject position, then gay male desires relegate him, as Silverman proposes, “decisively on the side of spectacle” (p. 353). A fascinating allusion to the patriarchy can be derived from Silverman’s proposal: Where heterosexual men are in the position of authority, likened to the father, then women and non-heterosexual men are likened to the position of child. This dynamic calls to mind another ghastly adage, “children are to be seen and not heard.” Where women and non-heterosexual men are likened to children under compulsory heterosexuality and the patriarchy, women and gay men “are not heard” because it is from the heterosexual male subject position that one gains authority and voice. I propose then, that in tradition, when one appears decisively on the side of spectacle, it causes one to be disqualified from authority and voice. Therefore, gendered appearances stand as the basis for erasure, discrimination and stigma.

Theorists like Phelan (1993) propose that male appearances function socially as “non-appearance,” that men are delivered to American culture un-marked, in the sense that visual interpretive structures underlying the gaze focus on women and emphasize feminine appearances. Freitas et al. (1997) suggest that this un-marked quality of male appearance can be construed as femininity-not: Thus men are motivated to confirm masculine identities by refraining from conventionally feminine images in constructing their appearances. Silverman (1992) also argues that men’s position “behind the camera” assists in creating the feminine spectacle. Likewise, Paoletti & Kidwell’s (1989) observations regarding gendered appearances are suggestive that appearances reproduce social relations that the gaze seems to mediate. They also proposed that a power

imbalance favoring men seemed to be communicated through contemporary gendered appearance norms.

With those theoretical propositions in mind, that it is through the gaze that culture

reproduces male authority and authenticates heterosexual male desire to the exclusion of women and gay men, I draw the connections between appearance, identity and social order. In drawing these connections, I construe compulsory heterosexuality and the patriarchy as visual and discursive fictions by which the gaze can be apprehended. I aim to locate these visual and discursive fictions as they were perceived by the Haus of Frau and determine how they impacted their consciousness, appearances and identities. I construe Haus of Frau's perceptions that allude to these visual and discursive fictions to represent each individual's grasp of gendered social reality. In so doing, I presume that the values inherent to America's gendered social reality impacted how Frau perceived and valued themselves as individuals and as a group. In addition, I presume these same values impacted how they were perceived and valued by others who recognized them as gay men and drag queens.

In sum, this research illuminates the complexities of lives lived in contradiction to a basic assumption underpinning society: the mutual exclusivity of male and female and the expectation that one is heterosexual in deed and appearance (Rich, 1980). To locate and understand the research subjects' gender meanings and cross dressed identities and identifications, I conducted in-depth interviews and carefully transcribed and analyzed the recorded interviews. I propose that marginalized ways of knowing and being are revealed more faithfully and powerfully in this manner than in current cross-dressing research based on clinical and survey data coming from the medical and psychological communities. Further, the investigation and analysis of drag performance emphasizes the importance of sex and gendered appearances to the manufacture of the cohesive, non-contradictory images that American culture seems to deem necessary for successful communication. In

this sense, successful communication is the display of symbolic equipment, which can be read efficiently, unambiguously and usually in support of the status quo.

The significance of this research is related to my abilities as a researcher at this historical

and cultural moment. Drag performers do not fit the categories delineated in the psychological and medical literature. The most sensitive and thorough investigation of drag performers to date, treating research subjects as humans rather than data, is Mother Camp: Female Impersonation in America, an ethnographic study by Esther Newton (1979). However, Newton conducted her investigation in 1965 and 1966, before the Stonewall Riots on June 26, 1969, the presumed catalyst sparking the gay and lesbian liberation movement. Given the thirty-year time lapse, contextual factors framing the drag performers experience have changed. Likewise, radical drag did not exist before gay liberation (Bullough & Bullough, 1993). Although Ekins (1997) conducted a qualitative, contemporary and longitudinal study of "cross dressers and sex changers" in England, and essays about radical drag exist, no thoughtful research investigation has considered radical drag in the United States. In this research, I address both temporal and categorical gaps in knowledge. Through a qualitative research approach informed by postmodern feminism, I offer insights about drag queens that are currently missing from academic discourses.

## CHAPTER III. METHODS

My initial experiences with the Haus of Frau and its members suggested a tension between personal and social narratives concerning dominant society's discourses on sex and gender identity. I noticed that this tension became tangible in drag queen appearance. It was apparent that these men did not conform to gender norms dictating male appearance, and their appearances caused conflicts in Baltimore's gay men's community. I asked if these drag queens pose difficulty to gay men, how much more so to American society at large? I turned then to investigate the Haus of Frau experience. I wanted to know what socially composed this experience and what it meant to its members. I sought to retrieve the personal experiences of difference that their drag appearances represented and to learn how the challenges that their drag appearances posed to society figured in their own identities and consciousness.

In this dissertation, I cite these chief aims in retrieving and analyzing Haus of Frau's social experiences of difference: (a) to locate members' perceptions of gendered social reality that pre-figured their doing drag; (b) to locate their respective and collective perceptions of value or social worth coming to them from others who regarded them as gay men and as drag queens and how these perceptions impacted their identities and feelings about the self; (c) to apprehend their motivations for doing drag; (d) to apprehend how they constructed and valued their individual drag queen identities and appearances; and (e) to gain understanding of what caused the group to emerge, flourish and then dissipate by considering how individual and group identities, drag appearance, drag performance and social experiences of difference figured in the life of the group.

These questions guide my investigation:

1. What motivated Haus of Frau to do drag and perform?

2. How do drag and drag performance figure in each research participants conceptions of identity?
3. How much and with what awareness did these drag performers engage critique to locate themselves in gendered social relations and how does this awareness impact their doing drag and stage performances?
4. What are the social consequences of doing radical drag and identifying oneself as a drag queen?
5. What made Haus of Frau coalesce, reach a peak in their involvement with each other and performing, then disperse?
6. What distinguished Haus of Frau performances from Baltimore's female impersonation idiom, i.e., how and why were they special?

Overarching social narratives surfaced as research participants talked about how they saw themselves in relation to the larger gay community and dominant, heterosexually configured society. The personal meanings research participants held about their cross dressing and their perceptions of how they were valued in the community of gay men and larger society revealed a tension between dominant social narratives and personal narratives as they collided in social discourse. I sought to determine how these respective narratives and each person's perceptions of evaluation coming from others translated into drag queen appearance management strategies and manifestations by which these drag queens portrayed identities. I also sought to determine how perceptions of evaluation from others impacted the respective Haus of Frau members' identities and inclinations to do drag. This translation of personal meaning into appearance manifestations demonstrates the individual's tendentious relation to social narratives, which in turn, prompted discursive negotiation .

Some negative definitions of drag queens come from factions in the larger community of gay men, from some feminists and from heterosexual society. Finding out how Haus of Frau handle definitions coming from others in the process of creating and communicating identities,

and to what extent, and in what ways the characters they portrayed during stage performance coincide or diverge from the performers as a people in daily life were crucial to this study. I also sought to discern under what circumstances the individual was ambivalent, complied with, or resisted dominant social meanings and practice--the norms that discourse communicates and produces. I look for the personal consequences of ambivalence, complicity and resistance to dominant social practice for these drag performers in specific contexts related to the drag stage performance and daily living. In so doing, I was able to apprehend subject positions from which these people were poised to interpret their experiences and take action in everyday life.

Embracing phenomenology rather than objectivism, I sought to ascertain realities as they were constructed in human consciousness, both individual and collective. This research was not my attempt to obtain and report "truth," but rather, my attempt to obtain and share a revealing glimpse of the personal meaning systems that underlied the appearance management strategies of radical drag stage performers. Further, the purpose of this research is to examine Haus of Frau's appearances and stage performances as these were informed by and represented the tension between gender expectations circulated in dominant social narratives and the respective personal meaning systems of the research participants. It was at this tense and shifting intersection between personal meaning and dominant social narratives that the individual presented a self--deliver a symbolic message by which he/she communicated identity and was simultaneously identified.

### **Research Subjects**

I conducted this research in accord with human subjects guidelines at Virginia Tech. I used purposive sampling in selecting research subjects. I interviewed the Haus of Frau's entire membership. A demographic description of the members opens Chapter VI. I used Haus of Frau's stage names in referring to them as drag queens and male pseudonyms in referring to

them as men in everyday life. I did this to assure the anonymity of each research participant. Visual materials portraying the research subjects are here only with signed consent of research participants. I interviewed a Roanoke, Virginia-area female impersonator and one from Baltimore, Maryland to refine my interview techniques in a pilot study.

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

Methodologically, it is important to emphasize that I had personal connections to the Haus of Frau and was emotionally invested in their social entity. I consider its members my friends. Another member is my life partner. These connections afforded me privileged access to the community. Likewise, my historical ties to these people allowed me to call on my recollections of their doing drag and construct myself as a participant/observer. When my partner and I returned to Baltimore in November 1997, so that I would have better access to the Haus of Frau in completing this research, we came back with hope that the old connections could be re-established. However, time and the respective lives in question had moved on. Everyone was gracious to me and generous in sharing their views and feelings, but many of the social connections proved to be limited. Things were not like they used to be. Although some of the one-on-one, interpersonal connections were easy to re-establish, the group connections were not.

I collected interviews from August, 1997 through February, 1998. I conducted initial and then follow up interviews. Initial interviews lasted about two hours on average and follow up interviews rarely exceeded an hour. I interviewed my partner in our home and we also had numerous discussions about Haus of Frau and the theoretical implications of Frau experience throughout the conception, data collection and data analysis phases of this research. However a different approach characterized my interaction with the other four members during this research process. As circumstances permitted, I completed the interviews by "mixing

business with pleasure." I either interviewed the research participants after serving them dinner with my partner and I in our Baltimore home, or I interviewed the participants in their homes, then took them out to dinner. My partner always retreated from the interview scene so that interviews were a private discussion between my self and the interviewee. Interview sessions usually ended with a "trip down memory lane." We shared scrap books and photo albums recording the Frau experience. There was a lot of laughter and awe for the what Frau did and who we all used to be. Initially, it seemed that the social connections would be re-established, with the recognition that we were all different people. However, time proved different. My partner and I had to re-assess our emotional investment in the Haus of Frau. We came to realize that we had to more fully commit our thoughts and feelings about the Haus of Frau to the past, seeing that Frau would not revive. It was then that I found myself re-conceiving this research as a recollection and re-creation of an important and heady moment in Baltimore's gay history, one that had sadly and much too quickly evaporated. But at the same time, I acknowledge the ways in which this disappearance was good for individuals that had been the Haus of Frau. I will discuss "what happened to Frau" in another chapter. Here, it was important for me to acknowledge my emotional investment in the Haus of Frau and how this affected data collection and how I conceived the research.

The research was conducted using an in-depth interview format containing open-ended questions. I employed additional probing questions intended to elicit information for data analysis as needs became apparent during interviews. Data analysis was partially coincident with collecting the interviews. The interview schedule evolved and I refined it as each interview transpired. Issues I had not anticipated arose and as I began coding the interview data, it started to become clear what the story was and where the gaps were that new questions could fill. Specifically, interviewee discussions raised issues I had not considered prior to their interviews. As new issues emerged, the interview instrument increased from 11 questions up to 31. I used grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and narrative analysis

(Reissman, 1993) to analyze the interview data. I investigated the historical archive of photographs and videos documenting the Haus of Frau's social milieu, including their backstage regions and their front region performances in drag. In recalling my experiences with the Haus of Frau, I was a participant/observer. I analyzed my participant-observations using grounded theory methodology augmented by performance theory.

Prior to data collection, I reviewed the personal consent form and discussed the implications of the interview and its analysis. I insured the research participants anonymity and assured them that no visual media portraying them would be used without their written consent. However, no one in the Haus of Frau was concerned with issues of confidentiality and anonymity regarding their drag experiences. After gaining subject consent and signature, I audio taped in-depth interviews asking the interview questions found in Appendix I. I asked questions like "can you tell me more about this" or "what do you mean when you say such and such" to probe for depth into personal and gender identity meanings, shared meanings among Haus of Frau and perceptions about themselves in relation to Baltimore's female impersonation and gay communities and to society at large. Following a preliminary interview with each participant, I did data analysis on the preliminary interviews so that I could hone in on important issues that surfaced. Then, I could clarify and probe these issues when I did follow-up interviews. Further, I looked for discursive negotiation in the ways in which these men made their own gender meanings and/or accepted hegemonic gender norms.

I recalled Haus of Frau performances I attended in Baltimore gay bars and at Baltimore's performance art venue, the 14K Cabaret, and used these recollections as observations about the participant's characterizations and performance style, including appearance, subject matter and levels of audience interaction. I also had a wealth of audio-visual materials documenting the Haus of Frau to assist me in this endeavor. I considered the personal appearance and performance styles of the research participants as drag performers

especially in relation to how the research participants prepared for doing drag, and went through the transformation to drag queen, and what they intended to communicate through drag.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

I transcribed the taped interviews line-by-line. I indicated pauses, non-lexicals, laughter, emotional emphasis and intonational shifts. I combined narrative analysis (Reissman, 1993) and grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin 1990) to analyze the interview data. These techniques were compatible where they both aim to locate and analyze discrete happenings in the data. Since my data were primarily interview text by which research participants were narrating their experience, narrative analysis seemed appropriate. Where the interview data were fractured and coded to make theoretical sense of the narratives, grounded theory methodology was useful.

I transcribed the interviews in a stanza form noted by Reissman (1993) to more closely approximate the speaking styles of my research participants, rather than sanitizing their speech and transforming it into innocuous prose. I made notes after each interview, considering its tenor and my approach with each research participant. I made notes during interview but kept them to a minimum to prevent interviewer and interviewee distraction.

Employing narrative analysis (Reissman, 1993) from transcription or translation of audio-taped interviews to the written word, I then indicated each illustrative segment of narrative, as representing discrete happenings to make sense of participant discussion and to facilitate analysis and interpretation. I present the illustrative segments intact, within the research findings section. The purpose of presenting these segments of narrative in their stanza form was to partially preserve the voice of each research participant by offering the discussion as closely as possible to how they spoke it.

Using grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I fractured and coded the interviews to reduce data, form categories and establish phenomenological relationships within and between established categories. In fracturing the data, I coded the transcriptions, line by line, labeling every discrete happening that the interviewees reported. Participants reporting experiences from their personal histories and their sentiments about these personal experiences composed the discrete happenings apparent in the data.

A process of constant questioning was necessary. The main questions were initially "what's going on here?" As enough happenings emerged, the question became, "how are these discrete happenings related?" In this way, I could develop sets of data that seemed to compose a category. Once the categories were solid and distinct from one another, the question was "how are these categories related?" Finally, the question became "what story do these related categories of discrete happenings tell?"

In discovering this story, I used Strauss and Corbin's (1990) "paradigm model" (p. 99) to consider causal conditions, the specific phenomena, context, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies and consequences. The paradigm model helped me see that the personal experiences research participants reported were set in social contexts that were impacted by intervening conditions, like culture and economics. The sentiments the Haus of Frau expressed about their personal experiences were emotionally charged and programmed their inclinations to actual behavior with social consequences that became new experiences for yet more cycles of interaction. The paradigm model was especially important in linking the historical audio-visual records and my recollections of the Haus of Frau to the participants' expressed sentiments. The audio-visual data recorded actual behavior and represented inclinations to act or appearance/behavior programs suggested in the interviews.

Both grounded theory methodology and narrative analysis techniques reveal me as researcher and person with various agenda. It was important to this research that I was an insider to the Haus of Frau. My personal meaning structures and the meanings that I shared

with the Haus of Frau preceding this research informed my translation and interpretation of each participant's story. However, to protect the integrity of each subject's narrative, I employed the available checks and balances including self reflection, consideration of the interview dynamic and acknowledgment of the assumptions and other politics framing research questions and methods. I made mental and verbal notes about how I was influencing the research process. After an interview was completed and I departed from the interviewee, I made notes to characterize the research participant responses to questions and the general tone of the interview, e.g., comfortable, tense. I considered how my particular locations in discourse and the interview rapport with research participants impacted the interviews and how I interpreted them. For example, my analyses of gender and social relations involved a critical vocabulary of terms and concepts foreign to some of my research participants. I had to phrase questions in a manner that they could understand. As well, issues that I thought were important seemed unworthy of discussion to some participants.

The following chapters are the product of this investigation. The data collection, analysis and interpretation were predominantly focused on interviews with my research participants. However, I also included my personal observations and recollections of Frau experience and critical analysis of their actual performances where such endeavors were important to discussion. The chapters are ordered in a manner that reflects my approach to this research.

Chapter IV., "Apprehending the Gaze as it Disciplines Appearances and Constitutes Bodies," locates the Haus of Frau's perceptions of gendered social reality that pre-figured their emergence as drag queens. These perceptions of gendered social reality also stand as the social context within and against which these drag queens materialized. Haus of Frau discussions in this chapter emphasize social operations of seeing and being seen and the importance of appearance to establishing gender identities and maintaining social order. Their discussions illuminate connections between the appearance, the body and identity construction.

Chapter V., “Apprehending the Drag Queen Self,” considers what motivated Haus of Frau members to do drag and how they created and valued their drag queen identities and appearances. I pursue this aim to locate the connection between appearance and identity. Corollary aims are a) to determine how and why these drag queens’ drag identities and appearances changed over time and b) to determine the impact of conventional gender norms on their identities, feelings about the drag queen self and drag queen appearances.

In Chapter VI., “The Haus of Frau: Group Appearances, Identity and Social Dynamics,” I locate factors that caused to group to emerge, flourish and then dissipate. I follow this purpose by considering how individual and group identities, drag appearance, drag performance and social experiences of difference changed over time and figured in the life of the group.

## **CHAPTER IV. APPREHENDING THE GAZE AS IT DISCIPLINES APPEARANCES AND CONSTITUTES BODIES**

This chapter focuses on the Haus of Frau's perceptions of a gendered social reality. This gendered social reality is the back drop against which these drag queens emerged and acquired social experience. Discussion highlights how the Haus of Frau perceived gay and drag experience to be valued in key social contexts. These contexts become more clear as interview passages reveal how appearance helps to constitute conventionally gendered bodies and drag queen bodies in American society and in Baltimore's community of gay men. These key social contexts stand as cultural contexts that impacted drag queens' appearances and experiences. Cultural contexts are composed by value-laden meaning sets that people access and use to define social settings, themselves and each other. These value-laden meaning sets compose collective consciousness. In keeping with symbolic interaction, one may note how this collective consciousness also impacts individual consciousness.

Nonetheless, when people aim toward defining social settings, themselves and each other, they are making identifications. Silverman (1992) proposed that it is through the gaze that people make such identifications. Analyzing the discussions on gender and appearance that the Haus of Frau offers helps reveal the functioning of the gaze and its reliance on appearance to construct social realities. The interviewees provided narratives in which I located discursive visual fictions that are, as Silverman (1992) notes, the means by which one can apprehend the gaze's functioning in the manufacture of a gendered social order that imparts value to some people and devalues others.

### **The Heterosexual Body**

Judith Butler (1990) proposes that in American society persons establish gendered identity founded on the primary, constitutive act of distinguishing people according to their

genital possession. A complex situation emerges where individuals perform their genitalia. This tropic representation of the body standing in for the genitalia, usually hidden, is accomplished primarily through the social grooming of males and females into virtually separate species. Social grooming is a disciplinary process that relies heavily on the construction of gendered appearances in proximal relation to ideal male and female archetypes (Butler, 1990, Silverman, 1992).

These archetypes fit into the compulsory heterosexuality narrative that underwrites society and overwrites the body. Foucault (1981) suggested that the government and the mass media enlist medicine and science to naturalize heterosexuality. He also proposed that these institutions collude in maintaining and reproducing fiction as reality by approaching those who do not fit in with the heterosexual narrative as deviant and disordered. The narrative is naturalized in personal and social identities through discursive channels. When people present themselves to others, they portray identity and implicitly declare their regard for the limits of social propriety. Essentially, in those social performances where people present themselves to others, they implicitly declare how things should be by virtue of the relations their appearances establish between themselves and propriety.

Yet overwriting the body with heterosexuality limits both the internal experiences that people might represent and the external experiences that they might attain (Butler, 1990; 1993). Over writing the body in this manner reflects value-laden expectations that prescribe how bodies should appear, what actions they should perform and what sentiments they should experience. In this respect, these expectations establish the boundaries that delimit ideal appearances and actions and become norms. Where expectations delimit ideal appearances for male and female social beings, they also compose gender archetypes. Furthermore, these delimitations function like an exoskeleton to give the human body conceptual form that differentiates between inner and outer selves. As the exoskeleton forms male and female social beings, it assists in mapping the personal interiorities where memories and emotions reside. The

exterior contains the interior and seems to define and limit the specific qualities and depth of experience exclusive to male and female sexes, respectively.

Hence, cultural conceptions of identity are very much tied to specific (interior and exterior) features of the body. According to Butler (1990), people use the body to make identifications as they look for what genitalia seem apparent. In cultural terms, the male body is an ostensible fact defined by external genitalia. However, any part of the body's exterior surfaces can easily be manipulated to construct and transform appearance.

Each member of the Haus of Frau occupies a male body. Their male bodies serve as mediums between their inner selves, where experience resides, and the outer world, where the body is currency in social transactions. Their experiences in everyday life and as drag queens are conditioned on this male physical state that society imbues with expectations, which in turn generate social consequences. Many social expectations pertaining to male status refer also to sex and gender. These same expectations reproduce the compulsory heterosexuality narrative. This gender order under compulsory heterosexuality relies heavily on appearance to establish male and female bodies as mutually exclusive categories that limit one's appropriate desires and sexual performances to very specific engagements with the opposite sex. This narrative is value-laden and consequently impinged on the self-esteem of Haus of Frau members as they found themselves able (or unable) to meet gender standard that society puts forth, but only to the extent that they ascribed to these standards. However, whether the Haus of Frau resisted these standards or not, gender imperatives composing the compulsory heterosexuality narrative were a point of reference they used in making sense of themselves, sorting out their identities and understanding the world.

### **Ascribing to the Heterosexual Body**

The following interview passage shows the relationship of the male body to identity and the importance of heterosexual norms in composing that identity. Hermaphrodite broke the compulsory heterosexuality narrative down to its most basic terms below. There he articulates

his experience and understanding of the heterosexual narrative that inscribed his experience growing up. This heterosexual inscription impacted his identity, self-esteem and his inclinations to act as he summarized:

**I had the idea that  
a boy hooked up with a girl  
and you had kids**

Hermaphrodite felt compelled by this narrative even though he had come out to himself and others.

**Even when I came out at 15  
I found myself with a girl in less than two months  
because  
I couldn't take**

**I was strong enough to come out  
and say it's how I felt to my family and friends**

**but  
being with a girl was much easier**

**I had this idea that if I was with a girl  
I could give it a go with a normal wife  
and and and  
you know  
do the nine to five thing  
and you know  
get a decent job  
and a white picket fence  
with the house  
and be a good person**

Even though Hermaphrodite had come out to himself and others, he was influenced by a heterosexuality narrative that was not accommodating to his personal realities. The coercive power effects of this narrative is apparent as he continued using it to define himself even though he was gay. He showed in the previous passage that through socialization, he had internalized disciplinary regimens which aim to limit sexual desire and its expression while also limiting the social roles one ideally performs in everyday life. It is important to note that Hermaphrodite became subject to this narrative and it was possible for this narrative to impinge on his realities and sense of self because he was a biological male. Hermaphrodite's discussion, e.g., "I had the idea that a boy hooked up with a girl and you had kids," indicates the male genetic expression apparent on his body was the means by which his body was heterosexualized in American society.

The life-course script that Hermaphrodite recited above also reflects a cultural nostalgia, a yearning for a past that never was. Mass mediated images of home life, such as those apparent in light-hearted movies and television programs from the postwar era, inflect the discursive fiction of compulsory heterosexuality while showing through Hermaphrodite, how these images impacted a boy in the 1970s. He was growing up in an inner-city, poor, working-class neighborhood characterized by social and material realities quite different than those portrayed in old, mass syndicated TV programs like "Leave it to Beaver." However, the fantasy was recast as a reality that did not itself materialize but rather, proposed how things should be to inscribe the discursive life-course fiction that he related above. This discursive fiction, declaring how things should be is apparently value-laden as Hermaphrodite's passage emphasizes that one is valued as a *good* person if he can fulfill this middle class prescription for a happy, successful life. This notion that heterosexual marriage is unconditionally good implicates gay life choices as inherently bad.

### **Resisting the Heterosexual Body**

In the previous section, Hermaphrodite discussed what impacted his male identity

growing up, how he managed the contradictions of gay identity and ascribed to

heterosexual norms. In this section, members of the Haus of Frau indicate their resistance to the gender order under compulsory heterosexuality.

In the following passage, Barbie Star relates his awareness that culture conceives male and female bodies as mutually exclusive. However at the same time, Barbie Star shows resistance to heterosexualized bodies and deconstructs gender with this statement:

**I guess I think  
um  
that men and women really aren't that different  
and it's just society sort of  
this is a woman  
this is a man  
and the  
but I don't think it's really all that different  
we all have both**

Meduza makes specific reference to the role of imagination in composing the fiction of sexual difference. When asked the question, "How do you think your drag and drag performances fit into our societal notions of real men and real women," Meduza just chuckled and stated that the distinctions between real men and real women were "all an illusion." Miss Piss demonstrated resistance to the dominant gender order by choosing to see himself as just "in the world" rather than contained by a "straight world." Below Nonami Flowers flatly disavowed the compulsory heterosexuality narrative. He did not identify with it. Instead, he made light of it, even though he did indicate that it was coercive. When I asked him what being a man meant to him, he offered this response:

**oh**

**not much**  
**I think its really stupid**

**it means you have to take out the trash**  
**uh**  
**it means you have to work on cars**  
**it means**

**you know**  
**it means that you can go to the men's room and not the women's**  
**stand up and pee**

**it really doesn't mean a whole lot to me**  
**it means there's a whole lot of boundaries**  
**is what it means**  
**it means there's a nice big boundary that you are forced to say in**

Nonami's response reveals more of the discursive fiction programming expectations and behavior, according to a relatively unimportant distinction, that he notices American culture to make between men and women, i.e., "you can go to the men's room and not the women's, stand up and pee." He shows resistance when he takes sex *out* of the dividing practices that establish male and female beings and reduces the importance of difference to negligible variations in the location of a person's urethra relative to the body cavity and hence execution of basic bodily functions. Nonami shows how arbitrary it is that the world is ordered according to this distinction, a single genetic expression that is relatively minor in relation to the whole body. Yet he shows how deterministic this arbitrary distinction is where he notices that possessing an external urethra socially predisposes one to physical exertion, e.g., "it means you have to take out the trash ... it means you have to work on cars."

Evidence to support the notion that the body is constituted through cultural means, rather than a prediscursive biological fact, is apparent in the ways the Haus of Frau talked about gender. American society construes genitalia as distinctive, defining and primarily

important to being. However, it is by engagement with gender norms (which represent repertoires of culturally intelligible images) that the body becomes sexed. Importantly, using appearance to manipulate the body's surfaces is how people materialize the sexed body and represent their engagements with culturally approved gender images.

Culturally approved gender images establish the limits of bodily propriety regarding appearance, behavior, and consequently, perception. In effect, the culturally approved images are therefore the culturally intelligible images. Furthermore, the culturally intelligible body becomes, as Nonami stated, that “nice big boundary that you are forced to stay in.” Gender coercion is apparent where the definitions of male and female that circulate in discourse limit appearance, behavior and other perceptual and expressive possibilities. The body as a social object is inscribed with and contained by what actions are deemed acceptable and possible to its being. Hermaphrodite shows how compelling discursive definitions of male and female are when he noted, that in spite of his gay orientation and identity, that he “was strong enough to come out ... but being with this girl was much easier.” Notably, staying within the boundaries that define appropriate sexual desires and gender performance, as Hermaphrodite alludes, constitutes a “good” person. Stepping out of this nice big boundary is to be culturally disembodied as one is cast into the zone of cultural unintelligibility where you are a “bad” person and your alternative experience and actions are purposefully misunderstood, erased or otherwise devalued. Yet those who were able to deconstruct the gender order and/or find it humorous, in effect, resolved an identity conflict and deployed a psychic survival tactic, allowing them to deflect negative evaluations of gay and drag experience coming from dominant society.

### **Ambiguities of the Heterosexual Gaze as it Figures in Drag Queen Experience**

Heterosexual gender norms compose a means of interpretation that people engage when they visually apprehend others. Making identifications of those people under scrutiny is a primary aim. According to Silverman (1992), the gaze is a culturally laden perception that people use to identify each other. The identification process determines the social value of persons being viewed. In terms of gender, people gain value according to their relative consonance with male and female archetypes within the compulsory heterosexuality narrative. This evaluation process draws upon appearance as people consider each individual's convergence with the ideal and positions his/her social status according to priorities of the immediate social setting and of society at large.

I am suggesting that these ideal appearances are phantasms, mythical images conjured by a hegemonic society. Communicated as ideals, these phantasms serve as a means of social control; they propose and represent what is desirable for maintaining social order. Correspondingly, people discipline themselves and others to conform. Cahill (1989) suggests that people are "fashioned" into male and female social beings as they are "invested" with gendered identities. His research findings show that children learn to police others to conform with gender norms and that this policing continues into adulthood, especially through child rearing practices. It is through this policing practices that people communicate and maintain gender norms. Butler, (1993) proposes that communicating gender norms is a citational process that refers to gender norms. Yet she concedes that these normative citations are always approximations; humans can never attain and indefinitely maintain the ideal.

Nonetheless, American society places the highest social value on those gendered appearances which most closely approximate the ideal, i.e., the cultural notion of perfection. Value operates on a continuum ranging from zones in which one is afforded social status, welcome and affirmation to zones of devaluation in which one must relinquish humanity and civil rights. The further one moves from the ideal, the less social value one's appearance commands for the individual. Indeed one might be subjected to ridicule, ostracization, violence or legal

sanctions for not conforming with expectations that they appear within proximity to gender ideals.

Dominant gender norms idealize male and female appearances according to specifics of a compulsory heterosexuality: man as voyeur and woman as object of the gaze. Although more recent understandings of the gaze have defined other parameters (e.g., age, ethnicity) for ascribing social status, gender is pronounced in its privileging heterosexual male desire and authority. Women are oppressed when they do obey the gender code that the gaze constitutes and reproduces. This privileging of the heterosexual male gaze also impinges on gay male experience.

### **Women and the Imagery of Femininity**

In this section, Haus of Frau members convey their perceptions of femininity as it emphasizes women's place as a spectacle that American culture constructs for male pleasure. Nonami offered this observation of inequity and male privileges as they are written upon and constitute the female body, confining her to the gaze.

**...I see what women must endure  
in this male dominated society  
and this craziness**

**you know, everyday life  
where women are constantly told to be thin, be pretty, be blonde  
you, it's  
it's somehow we strap all of these agendas  
on the the woman's  
on to a woman's body**

**that doesn't get really attached on the males  
although it is more in modern culture now  
because men work out in the gyms and all that**

**you know**

**all the gym stuff that goes on  
right now is also  
I think  
I  
it's not as heavily enforced**

Nonami notes that “we strap all these agendas on to the woman’s body.” He intuitively registers one of the gaze’s disciplinary functions. This discipline is manifest where the viewer projects desires upon those being visually apprehended, i.e., “women are constantly told to be thin, be pretty, be blonde.” These desires are imperatives that assist in composing an archetype of the appropriate, acceptable female. In turn this female archetype makes reference to heterosexual relations. In American society, these heterosexual relations constitute the heterosexual male as the ideal spectator (Dolan, 1988, 1993). Reciprocally, these relations also emphasize women’s role as “something to be seen,” a spectacle geared toward heterosexual male pleasure (Paoletti and Kidwell 1989).

Hermaphrodite shares his perceptions of these heterosexual social relations and their consequences below. There he considers how his doing drag might be insulting to women because of the ways

**it plays into that whole stereotype of what women should be  
you know**

**paint with makeup for man’s approval fake tits for man’s gratification  
dress to the nines  
you know**

**I mean these are things that I am kind of jealous of in women  
they can do that and everything**

**but I am not a woman**

**what if I were trapped behind  
that that  
expectation every single day of my life?**

Hermaphrodite's discussion in this passage reveals how appearance functions during engagements with gender archetypes. In particular, Hermaphrodite articulates features of an extremely narrow female archetype specified by the heterosexual male gaze. Hermaphrodite's description alludes to an implicit value system that cordons off the territories appropriate to the female body when he refers to the "whole stereotype of what women should be." Woman, as a master status, seems conditioned by her place as the object of the gaze. Whereas the same specular economy attempts to deliver the male body to culture un-marked since he is supposed to be situated *behind* the metaphorical camera that captures people as objects of desire.

### **The Appeal of Feminine Appearances**

I use discussions from the Haus of Frau to apprehend the gaze through the visual fictions that compose bodies as objects intelligible to the gaze. Within the gaze paradigm, women are the something to be seen that authenticates heterosexual male desire and elicits men's socially prescribed sexual responses. However, men too are expected to engage stereotypes and present themselves in appearances that confirm their social status. If they fail to confine themselves to the restrictive masculine identity, then they find themselves equated with women. As Silverman (1992) proposed, femininity is much more resistant to contradiction than masculinity. For the Haus of Frau, it seems that the gender order is more articulate in demarcating feminine appearance than male appearances. They noted that feminine appearance vocabulary contains greater expressive possibilities relative to masculine appearance vocabulary.

The following analysis considers how feminine appearances appeal both to heterosexual men and to the Haus of Frau. In this analysis, the ambiguities of the gaze in structuring drag queen experience surface. In the following discussion, it is noteworthy that the Haus of Frau

were steeped in the dominant gender meanings which male and female appearances communicate and contribute to social order. However, their responses to feminine appearance are in drastic contrast to those heterosexual men perform. Feminine appearances seem just as compelling to the Haus of Frau as they are to heterosexual men, but for different reasons. These reasons are apparent in the ways Haus of Frau mobilized their responses to social experiences of femininity. The Haus of Frau found feminine appearances compelling because these appearances permit so much more creative expression. In his discussion on why he did drag to perform, Meduza noted that socially acceptable male appearance repertoires are stunted. He stated that it is easier for him to construct feminine appearances because:

**it opens up a whole  
world of anything  
I mean you can pull anything out**

**and uh  
put anything together  
it is much more easier  
you know than say  
dressing like an animal**

**it's a lot easier  
um  
and you can be very creative**

**where with like  
and if you were doing male drag  
it would be very limited**

Hermaphrodite also refers to the limitations of male appearance he perceived in American society as he explains why it was that he did drag to perform. Hermaphrodite observed that it was much harder when he performed to present himself “as a boy” because there was much

less he could work with in constructing a masculine appearance:

**because as a boy performer  
I had to live up to the stereotype of what a boy is**

**I didn't feel I had the tools to exaggerate  
what I could have done as a boy  
is maybe**

**was stuff my leather pants to make it look like I have a big dick  
but that's what a boy represents to me**

Hermaphrodite's discussion hints that this penis represents the narrow range of heterosexual male expression in contrast to women who "have fashion." With his focus on the penis, Hermaphrodite's discussion reveals that masculine appearances function as a phallic trope. Yet this tropic function requires men to observe strictures that define masculinity more by what men must refrain from in constructing their appearances, e.g., fashion.

Freitas et al. (1997) interviewed men about their least favorite garments. These men indicated that they disliked garments which might make them appear feminine (p. 328). This evidence suggests that masculinity seems to be understood by men as a series of restrictions that prevent them from appearing feminine, i.e., a femininity-not mobilizes male appearances. The authors extrapolate from this evidence that men refrain from visual imagery that may be construed as feminine when they construct their appearances to portray masculine identity.

Moreover, Hermaphrodite indicates his cultural understanding of fashion as the domain of women. Similarly, Freitas et al. (1997) suggest that men generally refrain from demonstrating too much concern for style when they construct their appearances. Indeed, the authors note that the concern for style (which fashion indicates) is likened with femininity (p. 329). Therefore, constructing conventionally masculine appearances with identity documents

indicating femininity-not also seem to indicate fashion-not. Where fashion involves a concern for style and personal expression on the part of wearers, men's culturally enforced retreat from fashion indicates that men should (seem to) be less concerned with style and appearance (Davis, 1989).

### **Feminine Appearances Mobilizing Desire and Sexual Response**

In this section the Haus of Frau discussions show how feminine appearances call attention to the body and elicit reactions from heterosexual men. These discussions also reveal a relationship between appearance, the gaze and sexual response. The analysis first considers how these relationships generally work under ordinary circumstances when a woman is engaging feminine appearances. The analysis then moves to consider how these relationships manifest when drag queens such as those in the Haus of Frau did the same.

Most generally, men's appearances evidence restraint where women's are expressive. This surface restraint on the part of men encourages the cultural focus on women as the preferred object of the gaze. In general, women's appearances render them much more observable. Women are more likely to reveal their bodies by baring flesh and by donning clothes that reveal their figures (Paoletti & Kidwell, 1989). In addition, as Hermaphrodite noted "women have fashion, makeup and choices of material." These cultural arrangements that render women more visible to the gaze emphasize men's privileged position as spectator of the feminine spectacle. However, they also indicate that women have more opportunities for aesthetic expression and sensuous experience through appearance. Perhaps this is so because women's relationship to their bodies is more explicit in social arrangements due to their conflation with sex. In heterosexual narratives, e.g., to *have* sex, a man must *have* a woman. Men are expected to confine their bodily pleasures to their penetrating sexual gaze and its attendant fantasies of sexual gratification that one either acts upon, or defers to more convenient and/or appropriate contexts. Yet Barbie Star suggests that women might be personally motivated to appear feminine for reasons other than male pleasure:

**I think a lot of guys see women  
as um  
they're dressed up for them  
and it's not really that way at all**

Barbie probably understands that women are motivated to appear feminine for reasons other than male pleasure because of his own engagements with feminine appearance and his association with the Haus of Frau. Haus of Frau's drag queens noted that it was pleasurable to construct their appearances with feminine gear. I will discuss these pleasures in more specific detail in the next chapter. However, it is important here to recognize that attracting sexual attention from men was not what motivated the Haus of Frau to mark their bodies with femininity. Yet receiving unwanted sexual advances from some men is a social consequence of donning feminine gear that the Haus of Frau report. It is implicit in American culture that when men move on a body marked by femininity, they presume the feminine appearance that they register is somehow for their pleasure and that this appearance stands as an invitation for them to make advances.

Some possible connections between sex and feminine appearance and the implications of feminine appearance on the male drag queen body in American society surface in Miss Piss' discussion below. Miss Piss remembers when his mother discovered he did drag and explains how his mother first interpreted his cross dressing when she discovered feminine gear in his bedroom:

**my mom began to figure things out  
she's a snooper  
and she snooped  
and uh  
of course there would be the occasional picture left out or something  
you know she'd find something  
and she began to think I was a prostitute**

**well at this point a lot of people thought  
and I don't mind people thinking that  
I think it's kind of funny**

**but I cared what my mother was thinking  
because nothing was further from the truth**

**I had a hard time convincing my mother  
because her son was doing this  
um**

I interjected to Miss Piss at this point in the interview that his mother was tapping into the experience from a place that she understood. Then he retorted:

**yeah, from the talk shows she watched**

Thinking of prostitutes usually calls to mind women performing that service. Miss Piss's mother equated his involvement with women's attire and therefore him as well, with a type of "bad girl" that resides in the cultural imaginary. Miss Piss's mother drew conclusions that reveal how appearance articulates sexual identity. Moreover, his mom's conclusions illustrate how the trappings of appearance prompt viewers to assign identity and social worth to the wearer. The special relationship that women's clothing has to sexuality and its necessity to the gaze surface where Miss Piss's mother perceived his engagement with feminine accouterment as overtly sexual and couched it in terms of a transgressive, very dangerous, commercial sexuality.

It is notable that Miss Piss's mother initially equated him with street walking, she-male drag queens because he was a young man dressing in women's clothes. In Baltimore City, there are grounds for such an assumption. For over a mile, on Calvert Street, a major northbound thoroughfare one might travel departing from Baltimore's famous tourist attraction, the Inner Harbor, becomes dotted with drag queen prostitutes from just after dark until well into the wee hours of the morning. For suburbanites, these street walking drag queens are a tourist

attraction in their own right, something to be seen but certainly not touched. Miss Piss reports how the Calvert Street strip appealed to suburban people he knew:

**people are afraid  
people are scared to death  
I mean  
People I know in Glen Burnie  
it's common for them to ride down Calvert Street  
to see the girls working for money  
because they're afraid of it  
and it's entertaining for them of course  
roll up the windows and lock the doors  
not that anything would happen**

Miss Piss' discussion suggests that some people are afraid of exotic sex, yet completely fascinated at the same time. The street-walking drag queen is a visual marker so saturated with sex in the American popular imagination that his appearance virtually means sex. How is it that the contradiction of feminine garb on the male body is conflated with sex in a predominantly heterosexual culture? Perhaps this contradiction reveals the importance of clothing and feminine appearances as they help establish sexual relations. It is also possible to surmise that feminine appearances are so important to sexual relations and male sexual response that they function almost magically in reproducing American society's particular strain of the heterosexual order.

In her book Fetish, Valerie Steele (1996) conducted an historical analysis of western sexual fetish as a cultural phenomena where predominantly heterosexual men require, or at least prefer, that particular items of usually feminine clothing be included in their autoerotic and/or sexual exchanges. She partially accounts for the almost exclusively male preponderance to fetish as a vestigial biological imprinting that marked men as more keen to visual stimulation because of their primordial role as hunter. The hunter role is expressed in current social relations as women are seen and acted upon by men. However, the hunting metaphor alone is

inadequate to account for the heterosexual male's keenness for visual stimulation. His role "behind the camera" is also socially inculcated. Moreover, the gaze is necessary to visually apprehend objects of desire. Fetish might likewise be explained as a pronounced pleasure with the trappings of appearance that mark one as an object of desire, a celebration of the parts that might, in any combination, stand in for the whole. Nonetheless, within the specular economy that the gaze delineates, feminine appearances function like a red cape waved before the bull. These appearances prompt the heterosexual man to charge. In some cases, the feminine appearance is more important than what lies beneath it.

Generally, feminine appearances overwrite the body and render it intelligible to the gaze in a manner that elicits sexual attention from heterosexual men. Furthermore, when the male drag queen body, overwritten with femininity commands the sexual attention of heterosexual men, it reveals the importance of appearance to constructing the female body. These trappings of feminine appearance wind up constructing the drag queen body in terms of male femininity. What this implies is that some men seem more responsive to particular strains of femininity than they are to woman proper. The following anecdotes relating experiences of "heterosexual" male responses to drag queen bodies illustrate this point.

Miss Piss recounts her experiences as a "stripper" in a trendy downtown dance club in the very early 1990s:

**for awhile when we were doing Orbit parties  
we sort of made that our house when we didn't have one**

**I would strip and that was a large heterosexual clientele  
and when they get drunk and drugged  
they act as we do  
they let their guards down**

**you know the people that were most fascinated by me  
were the straight boys who would probably fag bash me at 12 noon in Patterson**

**Park**  
**they were standing in awe**  
**because I convinced they**  
**um**  
**to a certain point**  
**when I took off the bra and tits they were amazed**  
**they were amazed**

**I captured them**  
**I had their eyes**  
**they were looking at me as if they would**  
**as if they wanted to sleep with me**  
**and that was a good feeling**  
**not that I would sleep with them**  
**but it was nice**  
**to be the object of their desire for 20 minutes**

On the stage Miss Piss was protected by the conventions of performance that restrict the audience from penetrating the invisible wall that separates the performer from them. Miss Piss also points to the power one possesses when one commands the gaze. However, this power is very limited and hard to sustain because men usually desire to replace visual penetration manifest in the gaze with more invasive intrusions on feminized bodies.

Barbie Star reports that such invasive maneuvers were common to his experience in “mixed” crowds where straight boys presumed too much. In discussing the problems that doing drag might pose, he stated:

**there were problems**  
**not from society**  
**but there were some straight guys**

**just um**  
**being you know**  
**attacked**

**not harmfully  
but just like  
like almost sexually abused**

**just [at] parties  
stuff like that  
and guys would just come on a little too strong**

**yeah and  
get trapped in a bathroom with somebody  
and stuff like that  
but I don't see it as a problem  
it was a problem for them**

[they were]  
**yeah grabbing  
and**

I asked Barbie if they were fondling his genitalia or looking for his penis, Barbie responded

**I guess or something  
(Barbie giggled here)  
lookin' for lovin'**

Tisha Holiday, the Baltimore-area female impersonator that I interviewed as part of my pilot study stated that when he was a full-time, professional drag performer in Orlando, Florida, he would receive a lot of attention from married, closeted, bisexual men. This female impersonator stated that he liked the attention but was disappointed to find out that these men “were usually bottoms” meaning that they predominantly wanted to explore receptive sexual roles that they were excluded from in their marriages. Hermaphrodite stated that he received two basic responses from heterosexual men concerning his drag queen enactments, both of which made him uncomfortable. In reference to these specific experiences, Hermaphrodite recalls:

**I don't like talking about it [drag]  
with heterosexual men  
it really makes me nervous**

**cause the  
cause the few experiences I've had that have been like**

**well you're a faggot  
or I want to do you in drag**

**I don't get it**

Indeed, it is a perplexing contradiction of terms that “heterosexual” men are moved to act on drag queen bodies. However, it is apparent at once that there is a link between appearance and desire that relies on clothing and grooming to situate the gaze. Moreover, the drag queen, just like women, by virtue of appearance, becomes a vehicle to satisfy desires contained in the heterosexual male fantasy script. Apparently, the feminized body is simultaneously the object seized by the camera and the screen on which the viewer behind the lens projects his desires. Woman and drag queen are conflated where and when they share the status of the screen. This conflation maintains the validity of the gender order under compulsory heterosexuality. In these instances, the drag queen is apprehended by the gaze then cast in symbolic terms that lend credence to the compulsory heterosexuality narrative. This casting represents the drag queen's involuntary ascription to heterosexual male pleasure. In recognizing this operation, it becomes easier to see one of the cultural mechanisms that keeps the compulsory in compulsory heterosexuality. The viewer feminizes the drag queen's male body to erase contradiction and render drag queens culturally intelligible. They implicitly become virtual, auxiliary women.

### **Gay Stigma Under Compulsory Heterosexuality**

Heretofore, discussion has focused on how the gaze operates in American society and how it figured in drag queen experience. However, members of the Haus of Frau were also members of Baltimore's community of gay men. It is important to consider how gay identity figures in the drag queen experiences of the Haus of Frau.

I begin this discussion by following up on a point that Hermaphrodite made, when he noted that he felt compelled "to live up to the stereotype of what a boy is" when he performed "as a boy." I use this quote to segue into the gay man's dilemma in dominant social relations, where they are simultaneously defined as male by virtue of their external genitalia and discounted from this status quo identification because their desires diverge from the heterosexual male fantasy script that naturalizes the male body.

Compare living up to something with the operations attendant to "living something down." Usually, what one must live down are others' perceptions that he or she has failed to live up to expectations. Unfavorable evaluations are levied against those perceived as offering poorly or improperly executed social performances. Stigma represents what one has not or cannot live down.

Although the male position is one of relative privilege with specific regard to the gaze, men are trapped behind a different set of expectations. They are penalized when they break with their privileges by becoming too visible or otherwise declare variance with the heterosexual gender order.

There are stigmas associated with being gay and with cross dressing. Stigma represents a cultural aversion reflex response to that which challenges its values and truth claims. It is irrational and borne of fear. For those bearing stigma, their humanity is suspended, thus permitting discrimination protocols and violence where they are cast as ghastly others. This section considers the ways in which gender norms in American society condition gay experience and renders it unintelligible. The Haus of Frau elucidated individual perceptions of how gay experience is valued. They related their perceptions of gay stigma and all feared

violence when in drag. Miss Piss offered this illustrative anecdote of gay stigma from his mother's workplace, a United States Post Office:

**they come from a place  
where fag bashing goes on  
at least verbally  
they work at the post office**

**my mother would be so petrified  
because she would hear people say things  
like you know**

**well why don't we load up a car load of us guys  
with baseball bats  
and and  
take a ride down to that Gay Pride**

When I interviewed the female impersonator, Tisha Holiday, he noted that "being a target of abuse is part of gay experience" and that "it caused a lot of insecurities" in the gay community. Hermaphrodite revealed another source of insecurity that gay men must reconcile. Hermaphrodite's narrative shows that dominant cultural narratives can compose "a little voice" in one's head that might be associated with conscience, a means of self-regulation. Where Hermaphrodite acknowledges this little voice, he alludes to consciousness where experience is organized along emotional lines. Hermaphrodite spoke of his "little voice" as a promulgator of homosexual guilt in these terms:

**I say that I'm out  
and I have no problem with it  
but...  
I definitely have guilt issues about my homosexuality**

**because there's this little voice inside me**

**that says  
yeah what you're doing is wrong  
and that little voice is inside me  
and it feeds a lot of my insecurities and fears**

Hermaphrodite alludes to a socially inculcated value that somehow resided “inside” his body, representing an unresolved conflict between himself and the social order. It was a conflict between his personal desires and experiences with compulsory heterosexuality.

Esther Newton (1979) proposed that female impersonators bore the visual stigma of homosexuality. I presume this visual stigma resulted from those appearances that female impersonators constructed that effectively marked their male bodies with femininity. Drag queens certainly share this stigma in Baltimore’s gay community where female impersonators are also referred to as drag queens. Every drag queen in the Haus of Frau acknowledged that there were safety concerns attendant to doing drag. These safety concerns were completely associated with gay bashing and the recognition that doing drag was as visible representation of male homosexuality where few others so effectively mark the male body as queer. Nonami Flowers remarked in reference to male appearance that:

**you don't get beat up on the street if you're in a business suit  
you do if you are in a dress**

This threat of violence against the *visibly* gay drag queen effectively limits the drag queen’s appearances in everyday life. Drag queen appearances are usually limited to the night time, when their male bodies are less detectable beneath feminine gear and are much more likely in gay neighborhoods that support gay bars. It is a fair generalization that those drag queens not plying the sex trade on street corners are only seen outdoors when in transit to and from gay bars. The drag queen is more or less restricted to the gay ghetto.

It is a paradoxical social arrangement that the gay ghetto manifests. Ghettos emerge

when a geographic location in the city collects people of similar minority status. Although the ghetto functions restrictively in containing those devalued persons, the safety in numbers effect allows a culture to emerge. Yet merely living in a gay area marks one and threatens his existence. One is subject to the threat of capricious acts of violence when marauders from the outside fail to find other ways in which to engage with people they find so exotic and compelling.

In discussing the drag queen's restriction to the gay ghetto and the dangers she braves in transit, Nonami suggested that the drag queen was an "endangered species." He makes an interesting connection illustrating how the drag queen body is colonized, as in a nation where safaris take place. The exotic animals are hunted, nowadays more to be photographed and seen in their natural habitats than to be taken as trophies. Although many merely wish to gawk at drag queens, others like poachers, wish to take drag queens by force. The social construction of sexual difference composes and contains a troublesome connection between sex and violence. Both represent the presumed vestigial imprinting of male as predator. In American culture, violence and socially approved sexual conventions both assign heterosexual males an active role premised on perceptions that there is an exotic other to be had.

### **Contradictions of the Gaze in Gay Men's Culture**

Each member of the Haus of Frau is gay. Therefore, it is important to investigate them in relation to this community. The Haus of Frau's discussions give form and focus to this section as they share their experiences in Baltimore's community of gay men. Notably, many of these experiences reside in the context of gay bars. Gay bars are an important social forum since they are the primary public context in which gay desires and identity are permitted and expressed. The gay bar is also important because it is the predominant social context in which drag queens appear.

Social dynamics in Baltimore's community of gay men that Haus of Frau relate indicate that gay men adjust the gaze to include their homosexual desires. However, these gay men belong to larger society and do not escape the sex and gender meanings that are imposed in dominant social relations. The following interview text and analyses investigate how compulsory heterosexuality is managed in gay male contexts. One focus is to determine what the hegemonic gaze's maintenance and gay male adjustments to this gaze imply for drag queens.

### **Drag Queen Stigma**

Drag queens are outcasts in Baltimore's community of gay men. The Haus of Frau relate their experiences with gay men that conditioned their understandings of what it means to be a drag queen in Baltimore. Among gay men, social relations are founded on homosexual desire. In general, Baltimore's gay men discount drag queens from their male status and therefore strip them of their social and erotic currency in a community that defines itself in homoerotic terms.

Where some heterosexual men are aroused by drag queens, gay identified men are often sexually repelled by drag queens. Miss Piss recalled that one of his ex-boyfriends required him to refrain from doing drag in order to maintain their dating relationship. Miss Piss recalls the explanation that this boyfriend offered to justify these stipulations below:

**We're gay and we like men  
and  
you know  
I I have heard a lot of that you know  
actually my first boyfriend  
you I thought  
if I wanted to date a woman I'd be straight**

**he was conservative  
from New England  
didn't want a drag boyfriend  
and**

**we would go out on our first and second dates  
and I was known  
in and out of drag  
you know I would be at a bar with him  
I would be out to dinner  
people would come up and say “Hey Piss”**

**and he would say  
at first he’d say “What did they call you?”  
so I had to explain**

**and when he figured out he was dealing with a drag queen  
it was hard and I thought I was gonna lose him**

**so I think that’s sort of what  
started the end of drag for me**

Although the specular economy founded on gay male subjectivity seems to uniformly focus the gaze on male bodies, it bears striking similarity to spectatorship in dominant social relations. Marking the male body with the trappings of femininity, also negates its ontology. However, the drag queen is more of an untouchable because he does not represent the “real-masculine man” that gay men seem to desire. The conflation of drag queen with woman among gay men denotes the drag queen’s social castration in a community where identity and social coalitions hinge on mutual penis desires. As Hermaphrodite perceived about doing drag:

**that within the gay community it’s almost suicide  
unless you surround yourself with other queens  
or a man who wants a queen  
it’s very rare that you find people who are secure**

Not only is the drag queen a homosexual enigma in erotic terms, he is also a gay social outcast. To chart the implications of the drag queen’s second class citizenship within the gay community,

it is necessary to assess the dominant social relations there that facilitate the casting of drag queens as the detestable other. Meduza notes this about his relations in Baltimore's gay community:

**I feel like I'm on the fringes  
basically  
and being a drag queen  
um  
in Baltimore has its limitations too  
because**

**people tend to look down on you  
they tend to discriminate**

I noted earlier that the gay men's community, like heterosexually configured larger society, can be organized by erotic designations. Although penis desires are nearly universal to gay male subjectivity, there are numerous variations on this theme that compose a diversity of erotic styles and communities. Nonami addresses this gay diversity in the following passage, which I prompted by stating "I had gotten the impression that in dating situations, that for some people, your being a drag queen was a problem:"

**I mean if you want me to talk about gay culture  
you have the straight looking/straight acting and  
you have you know people who like obese people  
and you have young boys who like old men  
and old men who like young boys  
I mean you know  
there's all these little fringe groups in gay communities**

Nonami explains that gay men discriminate against each other based on erotic preferences. It

seems implicit in the prior discussion and in the one that follows, that drag queen appearances somehow undermine a spectrum of gay erotic and social protocols. In the following passage he tells how important erotic designations are to gay identity and partially accounts for why some men he dated were troubled that he did drag. To summarize his point, Nonami offered this explanation for why dividing practices might be so powerful and pervasive within Baltimore's community of gay men:

**because gays are so looked down upon anyway  
...a lot of your gay community gay people  
especially when they're younger I think  
and just developing who they are anyway  
in your early twenties, mid twenties  
you know don't want to draw attention to the fact [that they're gay]  
some people do  
but a lot of people don't  
and in Baltimore I think a lot of people didn't  
so far as dating or having boyfriends  
and things like that it was a lot more difficult  
because they never gave you a chance to get to know you as a person  
because they were too concerned with what their friends might think  
or maybe they just didn't like you**

Nonami's discussion points to an ironic institution in the gay men's community, the straight-looking/straight-acting hegemony. A majority of gay men in Baltimore disdain the visible queer. Nonami implies that the drag queen is this visible queer, whose appearances "draw attention to the fact." Nonami's analysis also suggests that the discrimination gay men experience in American society might make them insecure and extremely dependent on peer approval. They need the support of alternative social networks in which their sexual identity is affirmed. They would rather not threaten their status in the alternative community by getting mixed up with drag queens. Tisha Holiday also noticed that drag queens were "shunned by the average gay man." In Baltimore, the average gay man is straight-looking/straight-acting. Meduza stated that the

people who seemed to have the greatest difficulty with his doing drag were:

**first of all it's usually like gay men  
gay men who are very straight  
who don't appreciate it for what it is  
that's where I get most of my problems from people**

Hermaphrodite most explicitly assessed the dynamics of the straight-looking/straight-acting hegemony and its importance to political agendas comprised by gay liberation in these passages:

**...there's always been that hier  
hierarchy in the gay community  
you know  
we're a responsible gay person  
we're tryin' to change things  
we think drags are  
are detrimental to our cause**

**you I'm mad  
I'm mad at gay Republicans  
tellin'  
sayin'  
that you know  
every diverse section of life is wrong if we expect to get anywhere**

Hermaphrodite cast all gay assimilationists seeking to fit in with dominant society as Republicans. However, I am certain that some gay men professing affiliations to the Democratic Party express the same apprehensions about people who make the queer visible. In Baltimore, there is an entire brigade of (perhaps a little too well groomed) gay upwardly-

mobile professionals who would impose their voluntary confinement to the strict appearance repertoire of wealthier, white, middle class men upon the entire community of gay men. Here the dividing practices of the gaze seem more oriented toward politics than the erotic. In part the straight-looking/straight-acting hegemony represents an assimilationist political tactic. It seems these men couch their erotic appearance style in terms of political action. They attempt to appear normal, i.e., not queer, so that mainstream America will not “get the wrong impression” of gay people. This appearance strategy on the part of some men attempts to make gay identity invisible under ordinary circumstances. However, below, Hermaphrodite notes two gay stereotypes that seem to make the queer visible:

**you’ve either got a leather  
a leather guy butch-real or a screaming drag queen  
you know  
those are the two stereotypes of gays**

The assimilationists seek to erase difference, rather than “celebrating diversity” or creating “unity through diversity” as popular slogans in the gay liberation movement proclaim. Some gay agenda strategists seem to think that if gay men appear to be “just like everyone else” then gay men will have an easier time gaining equal rights under the law. However, the erotic component of straight-looking/straight-acting appearances seems much more powerful in organizing gay men’s appearances than any political project that engages exclusionary practices to attain “liberation.”

### **Appropriating Heterosexual Male Imagery to Compose the Gay Erotic**

The erotic operations attendant to the gaze involve projecting one’s desires on the object seized by the seeing eye. For gay men, this projecting of desire requires an assessment of other men as appropriate “screens” on which they can project their desires. Gay men are steeped in compulsory heterosexuality through social interaction and their engagements with

mass mediated popular culture. Therefore, they might engage the same gender images in constructing appearance that heterosexually oriented men do. However, same sex desires subvert the paradigm. Gay men can take their place behind the erotic “camera” but point the lens toward other men.

Under compulsory heterosexuality, the heterosexual, masculine male’s appearance is a trope for his genitalia. Straight-looking gay appearances appropriate this trope and basically use it to represent their desire. However, it unfortunately implicates gay men in a fantasy script that casts them as collaborators with the despot. Perhaps this collusion is unavoidable in a dominant culture that circulates the macro-social, universal phallus to represent absolute power and simultaneously conflates it with the localized penis that gay men desire.

Some gay men inadvertently subvert dominant cultural meanings of straight-looking appearances by carrying their symbolic display to excess that is only apparent to those in the know. Their effort in constructing the culturally ordained male-masculine appearance becomes obvious when they are fastidious in their adherence to the strictures of white middle class male appearance. They show too much concern for their appearance when their khakis and oxford shirts are extremely well pressed and their barber shop hair cuts are severely precise. Their image is contradictory because nothing is out of place; Davis (1989) notes in citing Nino Cerrutti, for a man to be well dressed he must dress simply but with some mistakes. Obviously what Cerrutti is referring to is male appearances that exude a jaunty quality that, however contrived, indicate the regular (read not gay) guy’s “natural” disconcert for his appearance.

Other gay men turn the working class machismo of the physical laborer into a queer hyperbole that demonstrates the same excessive penchant that those ascribing to upper middle class, straight-looking appearances engage. The “butch-real” gay macho appearances that the leather-Levi’s community prefer reveal the male body and subject it to a queer gaze that zooms in on the crotch and buttocks as they are packed into tight Levi’s or leather pants. Even more severe, the gay macho man may display his body in a leather cod piece and chaps that

emphasizes his genitals and reveal his buttocks. In Baltimore's only leather-Levi's bar, the Baltimore Eagle, every full moon is celebrated with a Full Moon Party where some attendees check their pants at the door and parade around in the most profoundly masculine of garments, the jock strap, a knit mesh pouch that contains the genitalia while revealing their size and shape. The same garment puts the buttocks on prominent display. The jock strap, or athletic supporter presumably protects the physically active male from injuring his sexual equipment while he demonstrates his male prowess on the playing field or court. In the leather-Levi's community, it seems like the athlete is conflated with the laborer in conjuring their ideal image of man as a supremely physical being. In this very specialized specular economy, the male becomes the object of the gaze as its sexually important parts are literally displayed for consumption. Whereas, the middle class straight-looking erotic protocol portrays the penis by trope, evidencing a restraint associated with the white middle class.

The Baltimore Eagle is a "cruise bar," explicitly a pick-up joint that features gay pornography on small video monitors hanging above the back bar. The leather-Levi's community seem much more explicit and honest in representing queer desires by creating a body for their gaze that is extensively objectified, like women's bodies under compulsory heterosexuality. Yet, this honesty in representing desire is complicated by the reality that most men in the Baltimore Eagle are neither laborers nor athletes. They are more likely white collar workers, professors, writers, artists and hairdressers. Moreover, this butch-real subversion becomes its own tyranny as it conditions social interaction in the Eagle. Although advertisements for the Eagle in the Baltimore Gay Paper state that there is no dress code, hardly anyone goes into the Eagle not wearing combat boots or work boots and denim or leather jeans.

Most importantly, drag queens are strictly excluded from the scene of this macho masquerade. The Baltimore Eagle is the last place one would expect to see a drag queen with

his body marked by male femininity. It is probably the most prominent gay bar in Baltimore that does not have regularly scheduled female impersonation performances. However, the Eagle supports a different sort of pageant system. They sponsor competitions to select “Mr. Eagle” as a preliminary to competing in the “International Mr. Leather” contest. This competition generally celebrates a leather clad, muscular, hairy physique and seems to require at least a moustache while preferring fully bearded contestants.

Silverman (1992) suggests that macho erotic styles within gay culture wind up turning in on themselves. She proposes not only that this erotic style is not subversive, but that it effects a troublesome affiliation with the status quo. She states:

since homosexuality turns on “same sex desire” or what Freud calls “narcissistic object choice, the gay macho style encourages not only an erotic investment in traditional masculinity but an *identification* with it (p. 345-346).

The ways that appearance negotiates the space between the person and the political is apparent here. Erotic styles convey very personal information, while at the same time, these appearances are contained within representational economies that are inscribed with the same dominant values that compose social order. Silverman (1992) follows others in making the point that marking the gay male body with femininity is a representational strategy that does make the gay male experience visible, although it is likely viewed with contempt. Whereas, when the gay male body, is “untheatrically masculinized” it becomes unmarked, like heterosexual masculinity and “simply disappears” (Silverman, 1992, p. 346). In essence, the straight-looking/straight-acting tyranny in Baltimore’s community of gay men is an erasure, as they eroticize the oppression that inscribes their identities. They police themselves, maintaining a code of appearance that keeps the queer out of discourse and outside their own erotic gaze. Unfortunately they impose this code on others. The drag queen represents the much too visible queer that most of Baltimore’s gay men repudiate in their attempts to be “normal.” The drag

queen seems to be a “not me” that many gay men agree upon in helping themselves to voluntary incarceration under the auspices of the (heterosexual) male privilege they seek to possess.

### **Drag Queen Exploitation in Baltimore’s Community of Gay Men**

The male privilege that straight-looking gay men appropriate, mobilizes exploitation trajectories against drag queens and female impersonators as they perform their social functions in Baltimore’s community of gay men. The Haus of Frau discuss his exploitation as it operated in gay bars. Importantly, drag performances compose the majority of live entertainment that gay bars offer to the community. The discussion and analysis that follow illustrate how the drag queen stigma operates to permit this exploitation.

Initially, I was perplexed as to why female impersonation performances were so popular in gay bars where sexual attraction seemed to mandate masculine appearances. I asked each research participant for their take on female impersonation’s functioning in gay bars. Hermaphrodite suggested that it was a release for gay men.

**you know**

**you go to the nine to five job and try to play it straight**

**you get off the job and you camp it up**

Hermaphrodite suggests that the drag show provides an opportunity for gay men to release from the strictures of masculine performances they engage in everyday life. His discussion implies that there is something inside the gay man that he might have to hide on the job from nine to five. Both Hermaphrodite and Barbie Star seem to suggest that what gay men appreciate in the drag performance is having another man perform male femininity for them so that they can enjoy it vicariously. Barbie Star implied that Baltimore’s community of gay men recognize their own unexpressed femininity in drag performances and that this recognition constitutes much of the drag performance’s appeal:

[gay men enjoy female impersonators]  
**trying to be women in some sense  
and being entertained by seeing it  
I guess I think**

**and perhaps  
its more comfortable for some people to get  
to got to that side  
and feel that safe being a woman**

**and for some  
I think they feel comfortable enough  
um  
just seeing it  
they feel more comfortable**

**that's what I'm saying  
they don't feel comfortable enough to do it  
but they enjoy seeing it  
because they don't have the balls  
or the self realization  
right**

The gay male spectator watching a drag show can identify with the performance of male femininity without having to suffer the stigma of performing his own. In this sense, the gay male spectator reaffirms connection to a part of himself that is necessarily severed so that he can succeed under the gender stipulations in everyday life. Regardless of vicarious enjoyment and other overt and subliminal recognitions that it entails, gay men most often construct their potential male femininity as something “outside” themselves through disavowal and repression.

The conflation of the drag performer with femininity and hence woman, seems to be the basis for social stigma and the justification for the economic exploitation of drag performers in Baltimore's gay bars. Those performing male femininity become the cultural other. Therefore, discrimination and economic exploitation are possible to drag queen experience within the

alternative, gay community to which they belong. The Haus of Frau share their insights into the plight of drag performers in the next few passages.

I asked Nonami why he thought drag shows were so popular in Baltimore's gay bars. He suggested that economics had much to do with female impersonation acts composing the majority of entertainment found in gay bars. He stated below:

**I mean if we're talking about Baltimore basically  
then  
it [drag's popularity] definitely has some ebbs and flows  
I think it's used more in gay bars  
as a form of making money through  
some kind of low cost entertainment method  
and it also gives the queens a chance to do it up  
so it's also kind of social**

Notably, most drag shows occur in gay bars on "off nights" like Sunday and Monday and therefore attract people who do not usually go out to bars on those nights. The bars charge admission and maintain their expensive drink prices. Drag shows make money for bar owners, sometimes a lot of money compared to what drag performers receive in compensation for attracting people to the bar and entertaining them once they get there.

Drag performers are exploited both by bar owners and gay organizations seeking to raise money. Concerning the money transactions between bar owners and drag performers, Hermaphrodite spelled out the terms of exchange below:

**paying the performers exactly  
it is very rare in the gay  
in the gay scene  
where you were like  
I mean this is how it usually goes**

**maybe 20 bucks for the number  
and drink tickets  
maybe two or three drink tickets  
and the tips**

Hermaphrodite does note that paying drag performers outright is rare. Gay bar owners seem to collude with many gay organizations in promulgating this exploitation. Where bar owners exploit drag performers on their own, the drag shows are slated as “preliminary competitions” so that the female impersonators, as competitors, were not really “employed” by the bar. Where the bar owners colluded with gay charitable organizations, they joined forces to produce “benefit shows.” Miss Piss talked some about the economics of some shows billed as benefits or fund raisers:

**I don't know whether I'm answering the question  
but I did a lot of benefits  
in fact I felt that I was doing too many benefits  
it seemed like everything was a benefit  
and um**

**you know  
I soon figured out that everything wasn't a benefit  
and a lot of times you'll hear  
all the tips that the drag queens take tonight are going to so and so such and  
such  
that's just not necessarily true  
I think that that's sort of  
sort of a bad thing to disclose for Baltimore  
just from what I've seen**

**I've seen a lot of that happen  
just to get more tips for the drag queens  
because they don't make a lot of money  
a lot of times they don't make any money  
and it's [doing drag]**

### **it's an expensive habit**

The bar owners sometimes lie to bar patrons, and steal money they claim will go to charity. It seems they will go to great lengths in escaping their just responsibility for paying drag performers. Unfortunately, drag performers are so eager to perform that they wind up perpetrating their own exploitation. In a community composed almost entirely of gay men, these drag performers are conflated with women and function in a specular economy that reinforces male privilege. The economic exploitation of drag performers in gay bars is a social issue that never seems to be taken up in public forums such as Baltimore's two gay newspapers. Drag performers are enlisted in the service of the gay community, as their primary fund raisers and their chief form of live entertainment. However, the economic arrangements surrounding this service amounts to colonizing the drag performer's body as an "unnatural resource" exploited for profit by bar owners. Moreover, it seems that this casting of the drag queen body as an exploitable resource relies on a very peculiar operation in the specular economy conditioned by the queer gaze. It seems that the spectacle gay men retrieve when they visually consume drag performances function like an expedition to retrieve what they have expelled from themselves and their erotic culture—much as heterosexual men register and project femininity to incite their desire for what they must otherwise refute.

### **Authenticating Gay Male Privilege**

The Haus of Frau discuss their perceptions of the boundaries placed on doing drag in Baltimore's community of gay men. I propose that the social relations that confine drag queens to very specific contexts within the larger gay men's community stand as a means by which gay men appropriate heterosexual male privilege and authenticate their gay male privilege. Drag queens are stigmatized by gay men, and drag shows stand as exploitative circumstances from an economic standpoint. The drag shows also demonstrate the coercive power effect that gay

men reproduce when they regard drag performers as feminine and conflate them with woman. This coercion is apparent in the following discussions where Haus of Frau note the stipulations that the gay community place on drag queens. In the later 1990s, female impersonators are a rare sight in Baltimore's gay bars when there is not a drag show offered as doing drag's *raison d'être*. Meduza remarked that gay men will shun him or give a hard time if he appears in drag on a Saturday night in gay bars. Drag queens are contained by the implicit restraints that gay bars and their patrons put on them. As Barbie Star notes, gay bars send up drag shows as the time and place when it is okay to do drag:

**I think the gay community is a little too serious about it all  
they sort of um  
um  
they have their drag nights or whatever when it's okay to be a drag queen**

The economic exploitation of drag queens and their confinement to specific "drag nights" relegates the drag spectacle to the status of a very specific carnival side show, well off the midway, where the bearded lady contortionist can be found. Moreover, this confinement can be likened to the traditional place of women, as the ghastly old adage goes, "barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen." Meduza's passage lends further credence to this assertion:

**gay men now are very conservative  
and look down on drag  
unless it's a show of some sort  
even then it's something for them to look down on**

Hermaphrodite illustrates the social dynamics of the female impersonation spectacle as he related the perceptions of female impersonators that he learned from gay men when he was an adolescent, exploring Baltimore's gay night life and watching drag shows:

**I tell you when I was the observer  
at the drag shows  
when I was 15  
or whatever  
way before I did drag  
I would look down on the performers**

**I didn't see them as equals  
didn't see them as men  
I saw them  
as  
as  
a lower form  
of of**

**I just felt like  
they were  
they weren't good people  
but they weren't right**

**they made me feel valid about being fucked up  
they were even more fucked up**

The social construction of the spectacular other establishes the gay man as a privileged spectator. Even though he is not moved to sexual arousal by what he sees, it establishes his position as superior, if only by virtue of his surface verisimilitude to the ideal spectator in dominant social relations. Some gay men seem to take a great deal of comfort in possessing their second place trophy as it certainly affords more prestige than bearing the external markings of stigma as women and drag queens do.

In emancipatory projects like gay liberation and feminism, it cannot be other than well to forge identities as one sees fit, given the value these projects place on subjective agency. However, when gay men professing a gay rights agenda impose values and stigmatize those cast as others, they merely demonstrate their homesick longing for inclusion within the

oppressive status quo.

The drag queen body represents the queer as it is marked with femininity. It is one of a very few courageous male bodies that *publicly* contradicts the constructions of male and masculinity as femininity-not, no matter what re-inscriptions this body undergoes as it circulates in discourse.

### **Apprehending the Gaze as it Focuses on Drag Queens**

This chapter served to outline the key social relations and gender meanings that conditioned the Haus of Frau's drag queen experiences in Baltimore. It focused primarily on the evaluations that these drag queens perceived coming from others as a result of their gay and drag queen presentations of self. I presumed that the evaluations coming from others indicated the viewer's engagements with the gaze and that it was through that gaze that viewers determined identifications and conferred value to the Haus of Frau. Importantly, I understand these identifications and the assignment of value to take place as viewers assessed the Haus of Frau for their relative conformity to American society's gender norms. In calling on gender norms to evaluate members of the Haus of Frau, people engaged with repertoires of culturally approved gender images that constitute social reality. The importance of these images to social reality is apparent where drag discourses showed how people use these images to program appearance and guide the perceptions by which they interpret what they see.

The drag queen body bears the visible markings of femininity without disguising the male body. Interview passages highlighted the social construction of the drag queen body in social relations conditioned by the heterosexual gaze and the gay male gaze. Essentially, drag queens disrupt the mass cultural imprinting of heterosexual masculinity on their bodies. The drag queen body, as it performs this disruption through male femininity, becomes a visual commodity in social transactions that specify a male viewer. In these transactions, this body is

consumed by all males but marked by different abuses according to the sexual orientations that men acknowledge. The distinctions lie in how men relate the drag queen to their desires. Yet gay men and heterosexual men converge in establishing the drag queen as an other, “not me.” This operation distinguishes the drag queen from “real” men because he has departed from the culturally approved gender images that compose most gay and straight men in their own imaginations. Regardless, feminine markings on the male body seem to be the means by which men conflate drag queens with women and justify discrimination and exploitation .

Haus of Frau discussions help illuminate connections between appearance, the body and identity as they reside in both individual and collective consciousness. Butler (1990) proposed that one’s genitals are fundamental to identity and social order in American society. Yet, the social identity that genetic expression presumably determines is largely understood by means of socially constructed appearances and other outward behaviors. Asserting genitalia as the natural, bodily basis for establishing social identifications is a contradiction. Drag queen discourses illustrated that there are social instances in which it is more the donning of appearances, than the body itself that establishes the fundamental identifications which naturalize and authenticate people in society. This revelation also raises the prospect that appearances are more important than actual bodies to establishing identity in ordinary social transactions.

This chapter focused on how members of the Haus of Frau saw themselves perceived by others. A key purpose here was to locate key contexts and social meanings that conditioned drag queen experience and stand as the backdrop for the drag queen’s emergence in social settings. In the next chapter I will discuss how the Haus of Frau constructed themselves as individual drag queens and made sense of this experience.

## CHAPTER V. APPREHENDING THE DRAG QUEEN SELF

In this Chapter, the Haus of Frau discuss themselves and their respective doing drag in manners that reveal personal meanings such as those I presume everyone uses to narrate experience and compose consciousness. Yet their individual consciousnesses do not seem possible without their engagements with American culture's collective consciousness and its discursive systems of meaning. These systems of meaning produce social order by programming social expectations and therefore behavior. In one respect consciousness seems to be an entity that can be revised, expanded and in some sad instances, suspended or denied. Nonetheless, consciousness is subject to change with human experience. The drag narratives that follow give evidence to this assertion.

This chapter focuses on how the Haus of Frau knew and understood themselves as drag queens, that is, how they apprehended their respective drag queen selves. These apprehensions represent drag queen consciousness. Such consciousness is a social product in the sense that it resulted from interactional sequences in which these people first learned about gendered appearances, then later, from sequences in which they presented themselves as drag queens. Consciousness also appears as a social product when one notes that these drag queens engaged socially inculcated and mass mediated gender images of men and women from the collective consciousness of American culture. They used these images to construct themselves as men in everyday life and to construct their drag queen presentations of self. Yet even though all members of the Haus of Frau had similar access to our culture, doing drag and becoming a drag queen occurred differently and meant something different to each person.

Locating ways in which these individuals apprehended their respective drag queen selves, I focus on identity and feelings about the self that emerge from gay and drag experiences where the body is currency in social transactions. I seek in this chapter to illustrate how appearance is a manifestation of one's consciousness. I accomplish this aim by using

respective personal drag discourses to articulate the relationship between the intangible memories and feelings residing within these drag queen's consciousnesses and the appearances which materialized on their drag queen bodies. I sifted through the drag discourses to locate identity documents and feelings about the self that might have emerged, been reinforced or complicated by doing drag.

Stone's notions of program and review were useful to this analysis. I used these concepts to break drag queen experience into *program*, the discursive, disciplinary dynamics leading to a performative, citational drag queen presentation of self, and *review*, (which I first construe, then ascertained as) the consequences of presenting a drag queen self to others. The social consequences that signify review remained as sentiments residing in the consciousness of research participants. These sentiments were a conflation of social value that was placed on them by others and how these evaluations made Frau members feel about themselves and society. Feelings about the self are tied to identity since people do perceive evaluations coming from others and maintain their own evaluations about who, what and where they are socially located. Stone's (1970b) assertion that value and mood, which are conceptually separate in theory, are virtually inseparable in actual human experience is applicable here. Stone suggested that sentiments were felt values or value feelings. Thus there is an intimate connection between social value/worth feelings (coming from others) and one's feelings about the self. Both serve to program appearance, behavior and perception. Therefore, value and mood, taken together, relate one to social structures both affectively and in terms of self definition. One's self definitions also compose the positions from which one is poised to act, which Stone defined as attitude.

In the previous chapter, discussion focused on the ways that Haus of Frau perceived gay and drag experience to be valued in dominant social relations. The values circulated in dominant social relations stand as a context within and against which drag queens materialize. This chapter focuses more on how drag queens valued their own experience and what exactly

prompted them to materialize in the face of imminent stigma. The stigma was completely avoidable if one chose to refrain from doing drag. Thus this chapter aims to locate motivations for doing drag in the face of stigma and also to locate progress narratives for how each of these individuals became drag queens and how they managed drag queen identities over time. These progress narratives stand as personal drag histories, representing how the Haus of Frau make sense of their drag experience over time and how they are poised to do drag and understand this experience in the future.

None of the Haus of Frau were “full-time” drag queens. They had everyday selves that often contrasted with their drag queen selves both in terms of appearance and behavior. However, the Haus of Frau at some points became so involved with doing drag that although they were not full-time drag queens, doing drag seemed like a full-time job. In many cases, the everyday self seemed confined to backstage regions since their drag selves were intensively their public selves for periods of time. When Haus of Frau’s notoriety and popularity were on the rise, this prompted increasing demands on the drag queen self by others. These demands at times required some to sacrifice the selves they had constructed in everyday life. Tensions arose for some who had difficulty managing the conflicting demands related to these separate selves. For others, the more they perceived their drag self to be a part of who they really were and wanted to be, the less difficulty there was in managing the conflicts.

I structured this chapter with sections that portray each research participant as an individual. It seemed especially important in a chapter dealing with identity and feelings about the self to preserve as much as I could of each person as an individual. I worked toward this aim by analyzing and writing about each person’s drag discourses and portrayed identity and feelings about the self separately, as if each respective interview was my only source of data. Therefore, the first five major sections of this chapter focus on each member of the Haus of Frau separately. At the end of the chapter, I will note

similarities and differences among the Haus of Frau in the ways they created and maintained their drag queen selves in their respective consciousnesses.

### **Hermaphrodite: The Boy Performing as a Girl**

Hermaphrodite's drag discourse articulates a gender conflict that he perceived to reside "inside" himself. He describes this conflict in terms that illustrate how his consciousness was informed by common gender meanings that circulate in American society. He shows how these common gender meanings compose male and female images and that these color his perception and guide his behavior. These mass cultural images of male and female pose conflict to Hermaphrodite when they do not accommodate his gay and drag queen experiences and stemmed from his adherence to the mass cultural insistence on heterosexuality as the basis for authenticating and affirming male and female identities.

Hermaphrodite was in his mid 20s when he started doing drag. His discussions show how he conflates his drag experience with the realm of woman and associates gay male experience with the feminine. He referred to his everyday self as "a boy" and his drag self as "a girl." Referring to his everyday self and drag selves in this way demonstrates that he divided the selves along the traditional gender binary. Even though his drag discourse explicitly proclaims that there was "never" separation in his mind between the drag character and "the boy" in everyday life, his word choices indicate recognition on some level that doing drag created a self incompatible with the "boy" self he sought to establish and maintain in everyday life.

Although he chose monikers that represented the divisive binary in recounting his drag experiences, his performative intent in doing drag seemed more to portray an in-between that exceeds either of the gender binary's exclusive categories. The contradiction between his word choices to portray his experience and the actual performative intent that

he reports, shows that for Hermaphrodite, doing drag was a complicated experience. As we move through these selections of drag discourse and analysis, the complications surface.

Hermaphrodite related the thought process behind how he came up with his drag name to illustrate how he felt about himself in his earliest doing drag:

**my name Hermaphrodite  
when I decided to do the cross dressing thing  
I was asked by a friend to do a benefit [show]  
I'd never performed as a girl before  
or a boy dressed as a girl**

**and uh  
I  
I decided that name because  
I was um  
a hermaphrodite is a combination of both sexes**

**and I've always felt  
a closeness to uh  
the female side of my**

**of of my uh  
personality**

Hermaphrodite notes this closeness to the female side of his personality as germane to male homosexuality. Thus in terms of dominant social relations, he sees himself as “a combination of both sexes” because of his homosexuality. In recognizing his place somewhere in between the two poles of the gender binary, Hermaphrodite uses his name to make a literal connection between the gender blur that he experienced in everyday life and the gender blurring operations that composed his doing drag. Interestingly, Hermaphrodite’s name and performative intentions demand an “in-between” that the gender binary does not accommodate. Within the gender binary, cross dressing and male

homosexuality both prompt the metaphorical castration of men under compulsory heterosexuality, thus relegating such male gender transgressors to female statuses.

### **Performing “Gender Fuck”**

Contemporary gender theorists, such as Bullough & Bullough (1993) and Ekins (1997), define “gender fuck” as an appearance strategy for publicly blurring the boundaries between male and female. Gender fuck may be manifest across a gamut ranging from mildly androgynous to the most outrageous radical drag (Bullough & Bullough, 1993; Ekins, 1997). Regardless, the political and performative intentions of gender fuck are to appear as both male and female, while at the same time, neither. In performing gender fuck, one exceeds the limitations of the gender binary by refusing strict conformity to either category. In this way the gender order is discredited by showing that there are possibilities outside the strict dichotomy.

Hermaphrodite’s drag discourses show how he perceives American society to perform its own gender contradiction by first establishing social order according to one’s genitals then discounting one from that identification because his desires do not conform to the fantasy script that culture imposes for “natural” sexual behavior. In the following passage, Hermaphrodite acknowledges a female side to his being and the contradictions attendant to gay experience. He makes these acknowledgments as he explains why he thinks drag performances are the most common form of live entertainment in bars catering to Baltimore’s community of gay men:

**to me  
its obvious to me that a lot of homosexuals have a greater perception of their  
female side  
okay  
but  
I don’t know if society says [doing drag is] okay because you’re less of a man  
but  
I always thought**

**that it was because  
it was such a gender fuck to be who we are  
that we needed to laugh about it**

This passage is structured in a manner that alludes to his perception that this gay-female connection is promulgated in dominant social relations where he acknowledges that society says “if you are homosexual, you are less of a man.” As a consequence of this gender order, which asserts genital possession as the “natural” foundation for distinguishing individuals but then disqualifies one’s claim to this distinction if he admits same sex desire, with the quote “its such a gender fuck to be who we are.” Hermaphrodite makes the connection between the gender contradictions attendant to gay experience and his doing drag as he outlines his performative intent. It is as though these gender contradictions that society perpetrates but fails to acknowledge, is what he seeks to represent.

**yeah I wanted a major  
what I wanted was mind fuck**

**I just wanted to represent a major gender fuck  
like Boy George did in the ‘80s  
except I was  
I felt like mine was more hard core**

In this way, Hermaphrodite brings the naturalized fiction of heterosexual gender arrangements, a submerged narrative, back to discourse. However, let us not presume that Hermaphrodite’s sole or founding motivation for doing drag was as political as his gender fuck trajectory might suggest.

### **Gaining Notoriety**

The passages indicated below have to do with Hermaphrodite’s primary motivation for doing drag. Ultimately, he wanted fame. In the interim one can see that Hermaphrodite was

attention hungry. When Haus of Frau was at its peak, members would joke about Hermaphrodite being a “media whore” because of his flagrant, unapologetic ploys to capture headlines in the Baltimore Gay Paper and find himself somehow on television news programming or merely the topic of conversation in Baltimore’s gay community. Hermaphrodite wound up forming an alliance with a photographer from the mainstream newspaper The Baltimore Sun, who extensively photographed and videotaped Hermaphrodite’s drag forays, both in front and backstage regions.

Most recently, Hermaphrodite was on CNN news coverage of Sotheby’s auction of Princess Diana’s gowns (the proceeds of which went to charity). This auction occurred just a month or so before Diana’s untimely death. Hermaphrodite had won tickets to the auction from a random drawing conducted by Sotheby’s. Hermaphrodite donned a red plaid kilt and red high-topped platform sneakers. He carried and attached to his garments all sorts of Diana collectibles, such as dolls and shopping bags bearing the Princess’ image. He stated in retrospect that he knew such outrageous appearance would gain him coverage in the papers and on the news. He was right.

Hermaphrodite was primarily motivated to do drag by his desire to perform, which in turn, was motivated by his fundamental desire for attention. It turns out that doing drag was an expedient means to the end of getting attention. The following passages illustrate Hermaphrodite’s motives for doing drag:

**I’d say that I was always a person  
who  
always strived for attention**

**I wanted  
I wanted the attention as  
as a boy  
you know**

**it's kinda back to the Boy George thing  
he got all this attention by dressing up  
and being a male singer of a rock and roll band  
but being outrageous**

**and that's  
that's basically who I used as my role model**

In these passages Hermaphrodite indicated that he might have preferred to perform and attain fame “as a boy:” Referring to himself as a boy demonstrates that his desires to perform and attain fame have their roots in his childhood. Hermaphrodite attended Baltimore’s High School for the Arts. There he studied voice. Also in adolescence, he performed with punk bands. I think also that he refers to himself as “a boy” in the specific context of performance, even though he was a grown man when he started doing drag. There is an unresolved conflict going back to his late adolescence, when he was still a boy in actuality. This unresolved conflict stems from his dropping out of the High School for the Arts. At the time, he wanted to circumvent the process that most people go through to become successful, professional performers by throwing himself head first into Baltimore’s earlier ‘80s punk scene.

As an adult, Hermaphrodite had the desire to perform. But in retrospect, he recognized that he lacked the discipline to approach performance through more traditional channels. To an extent, he allowed the power of his drag spectacle to compensate for the shortcomings that he perceived in other facets of his performance.

**I wanted to perform  
I basically had this inner desire to perform  
but I didn't have the dis-discipline  
or the get go to do it as a boy  
that's major major hard work  
not that drag isn't  
but you get dolled up  
you get immediate attention**

### **whether you perform or not**

Notably, within the context of performance, Baltimore's gay male spectators seem to favor a feminine visage. It attracts their attention and more quickly prompts them to engage with performers. The politics of getting to perform within venues catering to gay men virtually required the male-feminine spectacle. In turn, the attention drag performers receive is more or less an institution that helps structure the gay community and manage this much derided male femininity by relegating its "legal" expression almost exclusively to well-established performance contexts. As Hermaphrodite notes,

**well actually I felt like drag was the  
the only way to get my message across  
it was a quick spontaneous  
way to do it  
in the gay community**

### **Selves in Conflict**

What follows are series of stanzas that reveal the tensions between Hermaphrodite's drag self and the person he wanted and conceived himself to be in everyday life. Remarkably, the divisions fall along the gender binary and reveal that Hermaphrodite's engagement with American gender archetypes. These images had inscribed his consciousness virtually unaltered from their content in dominant social relations. It seems that much of the conflict that Hermaphrodite experienced with regard to these separate selves resulted from the ways in which he strove to conform to dominant gender narratives in larger society and within Baltimore's community of gay men. Yet another interesting tension emerged where it was apparent that Hermaphrodite suggested that he perceived himself as a solitary, cohesive person, even though his drag discourse suggested in a lot of ways that there was much separation between his drag self and the male self that he presented in everyday life.

In the next passage of interview, Hermaphrodite discusses how he conceived and managed his drag self in relation to himself as a person in everyday life. In general, Hermaphrodite states that he made no separation between his “boy self” as Tim and his drag queen “girl” self, Hermaphrodite. He recognized how his identity strategies differed from more famous performers. He noted during the interview that most successful, professional performers separated the stage persona from their persons. He recalled that when he met Lipsinka, she stepped off stage and became John Epperson once again. I cannot know why John Epperson and Lipsinka seemed so separate. However, I can make assumptions about drag performers in a community I know about. I once approached Tia Chambers, perhaps Baltimore’s most prominent female impersonator, about providing me an interview. I was never able to set up that interview. However, Tia didn’t know me and emphasized to me that he was “an actor” and that doing drag represented nothing else for him. Here I emphasize the interaction between this female impersonator and Baltimore’s community of gay men in creating a reality. Perhaps drag’s confinement to performance contexts in Baltimore’s community of gay men led Tia Chambers to see himself as “an actor” and use that symbol to contain and carry his drag experience as something very separate from woman and apart from his everyday life as a gay man.

Hermaphrodite’s resistance to the stipulations that Baltimore’s community of gay men placed on drag are apparent in his self-definitions that seemed to integrate his drag self into his larger conceptions of self:

**I  
really don’t  
there was never a division of Tim  
who whatever  
there was never a difference between me as a boy  
and me dressed up  
in female  
in female drag**

**you know  
even though I was scared to death  
of of the Hermaphrodite persona  
it was still  
it was always Tim under that wig**

**my voice didn't get high  
my accent didn't change  
if anything it was emphasized  
I emphasized the  
I mean**

For me, the most striking line in this passage is the one where Hermaphrodite indicates that he was “scared to death” of the Hermaphrodite persona. In other passages it became apparent that what terrified Hermaphrodite about his drag persona was that it was so powerful and threatened to overtake the person that he conceived as himself in everyday life, the boy named Tim.

**it's just really strange to look at what my thought process  
was at the time  
and how I went about getting it out of me  
things that I didn't even recognize  
you know**

**you know  
it's a major mind fuck  
It made me relate to how transgenders feel  
in a really warped way  
you know to be a man and feel that you're a woman  
trapped in a man's body**

**I felt like I was a boy  
who had this woman trapped inside his body that he wanted to get out  
but once it got out  
it made the boy not valid anymore**

**so I was struggling with all these identity issues**

**It was really strange  
because I'd never want to get a sex change  
but  
because I'm comfortable as a boy  
but yet  
I'm not comfortable**

It is important to note, in terms of Stone's framework for analyzing appearance and the self, that Hermaphrodite cited a woman on the "inside" that the boy wanted to get "out." His drag appearance program contained identity components that he construed as "a woman." Doing drag, constructing a male-feminine appearance communicated something that he perceived "on the inside." He put makeup, wigs and clothing *on the body* to get those feelings *out of the body*. In this way, he gave the feelings form and expression. Although this may not have been communicated directly to reviewers in the interaction sequences that Hermaphrodite experienced, one can make a more direct connection between his inner self and appearance when one analyzes the identity documents that emerged from his literal drag discourse.

The passage reveals the power and complexity of Hermaphrodite's drag experience. Apparently, he conceived his male body as a container that somehow trapped and isolated the feminine side of himself that he associated with woman. Through his doing drag, this "woman" came out. Even though Hermaphrodite acknowledged that gay men are in better touch with their femininity than heterosexual men, it is apparent that the heterosexualized male body had enveloped his consciousness. He clearly illustrates this male body as a closet that contained and isolated his feminine identifications when he stated, "I felt like I was a boy who had this woman trapped inside his body that he wanted to get out." Here, feelings about the self were denied expressive possibility in the dominant social relations that conditioned Hermaphrodite's

ordinary social experience and constituted his male body and identity.

Hermaphrodite provides us with an interesting metaphor and remarkable illustration of the performative operations that materialize the gendered order. Where Hermaphrodite notes that he “felt like ... a boy who had this woman trapped inside his body that wanted to get out,” he helps us see clothing’s dual functions of revelation and concealment that discipline the body according to the status quo by restricting alternative identities and expressive possibilities to the “inside” of persons. Gay and drag experiences are often “closeted.” In declaring gay and drag identities, the person “comes out of the closet,” the place where we store our clothes. We rely heavily on clothes, which we take from the closet to construct appearances, which in turn, portray identities. Our appearances construct a social skin that both envelopes the body and contains the self and identities. Appearances portray some identities and disqualify others.

One can ascertain some of Hermaphrodite’s engagements with his personal and mass cultural imaginative structures from the declarations he made. Hermaphrodite cites a woman trapped in his body. Moreover, Hermaphrodite seems to conceive his male femininity as the domain of woman and as a “not-me,” an alterity that threatened to explode his male identity. His male identity is firmly based in his perceptions that his culturally constituted male body (a phallic trope) was the absolute truth of his being. In this respect, doing drag seemed to threaten the gay male self that Hermaphrodite had already negotiated. The issues of identity and ontology were jumbled anew as this “woman” got out and “made the boy not valid anymore.”

Here, the interaction of personal meaning structures with dominant gender narratives might have conditioned experience. Certainly, Hermaphrodite’s conceptions of himself as “a boy” conflicted with the drag self that he conceived as “a woman.” However, the ways in which this emergent drag queen/woman made the boy not valid seemed more the product of the immediate social sequences in which Hermaphrodite presented himself as a drag queen. Whereas, the rupture that occurs when the male being is marked with femininity was more a

condition of dominant social narratives that frame gender performance. Male femininity seems to discount the male body as social currency. The male body marked with femininity results in stigma. To a certain extent, Hermaphrodite had internalized this stigma:

**... at 8:00 there's a transgender meeting  
and  
they they pull up in their cars  
and they hide in their cars  
until its time for the meeting**

**and  
there's this  
I don't know  
It's just this  
I almost feel like**

**my god  
they feel exactly like I felt in a dress  
they're ashamed  
I was ashamed to be in a dress**

The shame the Hermaphrodite felt when he was in a dress stemmed from the violation that feminine garb manifests upon the culturally constructed (heterosexualized) male body. His shame indicates a manner in which he was policing himself. There was obviously something telling him that it was wrong to don a dress. It was his socialization. Hermaphrodite perceived the ways in which male femininity is negatively coded in social interaction and he had incorporated that coding into his own personal meaning system to the extent that his merely donning a dress inspired him to shame.

However, there were many ways in which Hermaphrodite's drag self was well received by others. There was a lot of positive reinforcement for Hermaphrodite to present himself as a drag queen:

**for Hermaphrodite, doors got opened  
free alcohol  
free drugs  
constant publicity**

Yet, as Hermaphrodite noted in the earlier passage, as far as he was concerned and stated, “it was still me under that wig.” He emphasized this point by stating :

**the weird thing about it though is everybody knew it was Tim  
as  
Hermaphrodite  
It wasn't like a bunch of people went around and called me Hermaphrodite**

But there was another way in which Hermaphrodite's presentation of self in drag made the boy not valid anymore. It seems that Hermaphrodite was what people wanted, not the person that perceived himself “under that wig.”

**people wanted that excitement  
and I thrived off it too  
but it got to the point where  
what if I got invited to a party  
and just wanted to come as Tim**

**well Tim wasn't gonna be paid  
to show up as Tim  
Tim was just gonna be one  
of a hundred people**

**whereas as Hermaphrodite  
It was like Barbie in the solo  
solo spot light  
I was the center of attention**

**I became trapped by what was expected of me  
and it flipped me out**

**it really flipped me out**

It is an arresting contradiction that in the process of releasing this woman that Hermaphrodite perceived to be trapped in his male body. Tim, the identity he preferred because of its consonance with his male body, became trapped behind a new set of expectations--those that *Hermaphrodite* had negotiated for "herself." Tim's struggle with Hermaphrodite leads me to ask, if it was so much fun being Hermaphrodite, what was the problem? Why was Tim so threatened if it was really Tim "under that wig" and "everyone knew it was Tim" anyway?

**I went from being a boy who wanted attention  
who said okay he'll do drag to get that attention  
to when I was out of drag being upset about not being in drag**

**cause I wasn't comfortable back to not being comfortable with who I was as a  
boy  
so it was a really  
it was a very strange vicious cycle  
and as a result  
of all the attention I got**

**and uh  
the performances  
I really went through a major identity crisis  
about who Tim was offstage**

There are several identity issues that emerge in this passage where Hermaphrodite articulated the threat that "she" posed for Tim. His thoughts and feelings about himself revealed the body as a container, but also that this container is partially constructed by the appearances that define it. Even though Tim stated that "There was never a division of Tim, who whatever, there was never a difference between me as a boy and me dressed up in female, in female drag," it is apparent that, at least in terms of social interaction, there was a

pronounced division.

This division was one that effectively separated what Goffman (1959) termed the backstage and front regions of social interaction and also represented a fault line between Hermaphrodite's inner and outer selves. Tim was ambivalent about Hermaphrodite.

Hermaphrodite became a notorious public self. However, Hermaphrodite overshadowed the backstage, private inner self Tim felt need to protect and nurture.

In effect, when Hermaphrodite materialized, her appearances and behavior redefined Tim's body in manners that displeased him. Here the relations between appearance, the body and identity as they work in tandem to establish social and personal realities, is plain to see. Tim felt that he had compromised himself in doing drag. He admitted that he was "ashamed to be in a dress" and that his doing drag represented a concession that he had executed in order to perform and get attention. Tim was classically trained in music and had identified with standards for excellence in performance that he sacrificed because, as he noted in an earlier passage, he "didn't have the discipline or the get go to do it as a boy."

Tim was confused by conflicting selves. Managing the relationship between selves is necessary to establishing personhood within one's consciousness where personal meanings are structured to make sense of experience and give one's life value. Tim possessed a boy self and a drag queen/"woman" self that he named Hermaphrodite. It is apparent that these selves were in conflict. The source of the conflict seems to stem from Tim's preference for his boy self and the ways in which he perceived Hermaphrodite to discredit his boy identity. It almost seems like a sibling rivalry, or an unhappy marriage, where Hermaphrodite was getting everything that Tim wanted for himself and Hermaphrodite wound up eclipsing Tim in the process. But again, if Tim and Hermaphrodite are the "same person," as Hermaphrodite asserted, there is still need to offer some account for the conflict and where it resides.

At this point I must allow the interviewee his own definition of the situation and accept

that Tim and Hermaphrodite are very much the same person. However, I also embrace postmodern epistemologies that allow me to entertain some contradictions as intractable without paralyzing or nullifying logical investigations. Therefore, it is possible to consider the ways in which Tim and Hermaphrodite are the same and *not* the same person. I have already pointed to drag discussion that shows how Tim and Hermaphrodite are distinguished from one another in social interaction sequences.

### **Apprehending the Erotic Self**

Hermaphrodite's privileging of his boy identity was motivated primarily by erotic concerns for who and what he really wanted to be--a sexually attractive gay man. The importance of the penis to gay erotic protocols compelled Hermaphrodite to privilege appearances and social transactions in which he most directly portrayed his penis. Therefore, doing drag and the metaphorical castration functions it performs were especially problematic for Hermaphrodite. By investigating identity documents apparent in Hermaphrodite's discussion, I will illustrate that Tim had indeed segregated himself from Hermaphrodite because he privileged and preferred his boy identity.

**I didn't get dressed up  
and put makeup on to become a character  
even though Hermaphrodite  
Hermaphrodite was my name**

**I was still this boy  
in fe-  
in makeup  
to represent a girl in female clothing  
but I was adamant about being a boy dressed up like a girl**

**I didn't want to be treated like a girl  
and and  
the people who  
who like you know**

**found me sexually attractive dressed up  
it always blew my mind  
because I couldn't understand why they were interested in a boy dressed like a  
girl**

**because I'm attracted to boys  
if a guy is dressed like a girl  
that doesn't turn me on  
now if he took his makeup off  
and was a boy  
I could relate to him in that way**

Gay identity hinges on same-sex desire. Hermaphrodite is much invested in his gay male identity and refutes the erotic potential in any man's doing drag. Apparently, Hermaphrodite's erotic vocabulary is contained within a straight-looking gay specular economy that the gay male gaze specifies. Hermaphrodite seems to conflate straight-looking with a "male thing" in this passage:

**at this point  
I don't want to be defined by cross dressing  
you know I want to be defined as an individual  
but it's on a male  
it's  
it's  
on a male thing**

In his follow-up interview, I asked Hermaphrodite what this "male thing" was and why it was so important for him to be defined by it:

**sexuality and how I perceive myself  
is what I think it's about  
I really do  
I've never felt attractive**

**you know**

**people tell me I'm attractive  
people are attracted to me  
but I'm basing it on  
society's idea of what's an attractive male**

**I'm thinkin' okay so I'm not GQ  
so I'm not worthy  
I'm ugly  
nobody's gonna love me**

**so so  
that's  
as twisted as that is  
I recognize it  
I'm coming to terms with it**

**I could not  
the dressing up  
which started out to get attention  
because I was a performer  
turned into a nightmare**

**because  
not only was I an ugly unattractive boy at the time  
my life became based on a character  
dressed as a woman**

Here it becomes clear that Tim's problems with Hermaphrodite were more Tim's problems with Tim. It is especially apparent here that Tim was only able to apprehend himself through a queer gaze that was conditioned by compulsory heterosexuality and conspicuous consumption. Tim had naturalized the straight-looking narrative that underwrites the gay specular economy and subjected what he perceived as his "actual self" to the abuses of a mass mediated ideal self.

He wanted to be a conventionally, commercially beautiful man with “GQ” looks. In addition, Tim believed that he was neither lovable nor a satisfying sexual partner because he perceived his body to deviate from the ideals of male beauty that saturated his cultural experience. His body/self image was effaced by his own visual appraisal. Then, Hermaphrodite, who was supposed to be “still Tim under that wig” wound up stealing the show and further diminished Tim. Hermaphrodite’s recognition that it was “still Tim under that wig” was especially problematic because as Hermaphrodite notes,

**when I did start at doing the drag stuff  
and dressin’ up  
I never  
I loved the attention**

**but it was short lived  
and when I would go home  
and take the makeup off  
I’d really feel bad about who I was as a boy**

**So it almost became a bad thing in my mind**

**because I couldn’t  
I didn’t want to separate myself from the character that got all this attention**

### **Drag as a Vehicle of Escape**

Hermaphrodite alludes to his escapist tendencies in the final line of the previous stanza. He “didn’t want to separate from the character that got all this attention” even though he perceived the one getting all this attention as a character rather than himself as a person. Earlier discussions about his “boy self” reveal that drag was a temporary escape from the deficiencies that Hermaphrodite perceived his boy self to occupy. Yet there are other seriously unpleasant circumstances in Hermaphrodite’s everyday life that doing drag allowed him to avoid. Hermaphrodite noted how doing drag represented an avoidance behavior, one that allowed him

to vent anger without confronting his issues:

**David was on his death bed  
and he  
I asked him if he thought it was a good idea [to do drag performance]  
and he said go for it  
and**

**I did I really pursued it  
and then my father O-D'd  
and it it was  
it became the great escape**

**you know  
I was taking all my personal rage  
and Jesus Christ  
you know  
going every direction with it**

**I found out that that  
I can't focus on one aspect of my life that's pissin' me off  
I have to do it about everything in the whole world**

Hermaphrodite marked his appearance and performances with outrage and excess. What was inside definitely came out during his performances. Hermaphrodite recalled that he attended a therapist who had seen him perform. That therapist remarked to Hermaphrodite that rage was apparent in his performances. Hermaphrodite made this recollection when I asked what fueled the rebelliousness that he recognized as the trademark of his performances. He replied that it was his anger. I asked Hermaphrodite what he was angry about and he replied:

**society  
how I was fucking raised  
the norms**

**the gay world  
I'm very angry  
and I didn't realize how much anger I had in me**

**one of my therapists  
and I think I mentioned this on the other tape  
said that he saw me in one of my performances  
and said  
this person has a lot of rage**

Hermaphrodite was a vent for Tim's rage and an escape from very unpleasant realities that he had not confronted when "she" brought the recognition and opportunities to perform

that Tim had always wanted. It is also apparent that what else goes on in one's life plays into his doing drag.

Doing drag usually requires a fantasy script. This fantasy script represents an individual's desire to transcend the mundane and sometimes unpleasant realities he perceives in everyday life. Every member of the Haus of Frau expressed this desire for a tangible change of person, however temporary, as a motivation for doing drag.

Hermaphrodite's engagement with fantasy is apparent as he noted how he thrived on the attention and enjoyed the perks of drag queen fame in Baltimore's community of gay men. This fantasy was manifest in a chaotic revery, part outrage and part substance abuse. The substance abuse seemed aimed toward numbing the brain to psychological pain. The outrage was in Hermaphrodite's estimation a means to vent his anger. The net effect was that Hermaphrodite performed over the top and in excess. For example, one time Hermaphrodite sang a karaoke version of Cher's hit, "Half-breed." He changed the lyrics to fit a story with a similar social outcast theme as he sang his own verses with the refrain,

**Drag Queen, that's all I ever heard,  
Drag Queen, how I love to hate the word  
Both sides tried to fuck me since the day I was born.**

As remarkable as his impressions of Cher's vocal style were, what was most remarkable was his outrageous appearance in this number. He had made a pair of enormous platform shoes that used red plastic milk crates as their base swathed with cut-out foamcore silhouettes to convey the impression of the shoe to the viewer. His "hair" for this performance was a waist length pink and silver Mylar wig with a mohawk-styled crown. This performance was quintessential Hermaphrodite, heavy handed and laden with humor, shock value and a set of scarcely manageable costume props. The performance appeared as if it could fall apart at any moment, but it did not. What made this performance (like so many others) succeed was the enormous energy that Hermaphrodite could muster toward the end of juggling so many heavy elements. He was able to whip up a frenzy which he could then convey to the audience.

Hermaphrodite was like a tornado. The substance abuses to his body combined with the chaos and outrage of his drag appearances and performances to generate a frenzied vortex that captured himself and some others who thrived on the excitement. The component that seemed to add the necessary combustion to these circumstances was the social encouragement of his compadres, the Haus of Frau. They encouraged each other in mayhem and became very likely "partners in crime." This passage illustrates the bacchanalia that Hermaphrodite's doing drag had become:

**the whole Frau thing was a major reality escape  
a major reality escape  
and I think  
you know**

**I can honestly say that for everyone involved  
you know**

**um  
the people who supported us  
were totally into it**

**I mean it was a sea of drugs  
and booze**

However, Hermaphrodite sorely felt the party was over every time he washed off the makeup and found Tim underneath the facade. He somehow felt short-changed and bereft: Hermaphrodite was always fleeting, and Tim perceived the loss and neglect of that “boy self.” The boy had apparently failed to adequately negotiate his space in the drag experience, both in front regions and backstage where one often constructs and

evaluates the self. This disconnection was especially pronounced when Haus of Frau was at its peak because, as all Frau members noted about this time, it seemed like they were doing drag constantly. Their entire lives were revolving around drag. Some reported that it began to feel like a job that did not pay very well.

### **Crash Landings**

Hermaphrodite’s drag experience was marked by the same identity conflicts that composed his life as Tim. Yet the power that the drag persona commanded in social exchange seems to have been marked by an intoxicating euphoria. As with most euphoric sequences, the subsequent sensations of the hangover represent an adjustment to reality where either physiological stimuli, psychological stimuli, or both, remind us that we had experienced too much too fast. For Hermaphrodite, this hangover began as soon as he washed his face. Hermaphrodite’s transition back to being Tim represented a backstage crash landing from the euphoric flight in front regions that contained his doing drag. It was complicated by the chemical substance abuses to his mind and body. These abuses were integral to his drag

experience. These abuses also probably made it difficult for Hermaphrodite to mentally process his experience and make a smooth transition back to “being a boy” when he returned home. Doing drag seemed to intensify the identity conflicts and substance abuse habits that were in place prior to Hermaphrodite’s drag nascence. Apparently, Tim was not prepared to manage Hermaphrodite’s fame. This unfortunate set circumstances led to Hermaphrodite’s demise and disappearance from the social relations that helped create her.

### **Miss Piss: The Complete Drag Queen Woman**

Miss Piss conflated drag queen with woman and declared that when he was in drag, he *was* a woman. He indicated that it was through the transformation of appearance using makeup, wigs and clothing that he created a “complete drag queen woman.” This identification with woman reflects Miss Piss’ engagement with the cultural imaginary and his own imaginative processes. As well, this identification with woman seems to stem from mass cultural understandings of femininity as they are related to beauty and glamour. In Miss Piss’ drag discourse it is apparent that his engagement with femininity at the level of fantasy represented his desires to be something other than what he was at the time he began doing drag. Yet his doing drag was conditioned by discovering drag performers, who by virtue of their very existence, suggested a possibility for transcendence that Miss Piss had not previously entertained.

#### **Drag Epiphanies**

Miss Piss’ drag talk portrayed a progress narrative for becoming a drag queen that begins in late adolescence. In this time of intense identity construction, he had very interesting motives for doing drag that started with what I call a drag epiphany. Drag epiphanies are discrete historical experiences one pin-points as fundamental to one’s drag awareness. Prior to data collection, I conceived drag epiphanies as those founding experiences that spur one to entertain the possibility of doing drag. I had presumed these drag epiphanies would be

common to everyone's drag progress narrative, where each person would cite their witnessing a drag performer or performance as opening a door to possibilities. However, Miss Piss was really the only Haus of Frau member for whom publicly doing drag seemed to be premised by such a revelation, one immediately founded on his experience of another's doing drag. Yet, I concede that this drag epiphany was a seed of knowledge that had fallen on fertile ground in Miss Piss's imagination. He had been primed for this experience by other factors in his life at the time. I begin Miss Piss' narrative with recollections of his earliest exposures to drag:

**I was first exposed to drag through Meduza  
who wasn't Meduza back then**

**uh**

**I at 17 started going to straight clubs**

**The Depot, the Club Charles things like that  
just in a group of friends**

**uh**

**I knew**

**you know**

**I knew that I was uh gay**

**hadn't accepted it**

**hadn't come out**

**hadn't done anything**

**and he uh**

**was my first gay friend**

**and um**

**he and I became close friends**

**and we would pop over**

**after the bars would close**

**we would pop over to 1722**

**which was right next door**

**and um**

**drag queens were there**

it was great  
I was fascinated

I remember meeting Angela Lansbury  
I don't think that was her stage name  
but that's who she was dressed as  
and she did a pretty good Angela Lansbury

I played with the drag queens  
and I'd say  
you know  
can I touch your breasts

and some I'd say  
what are your breasts  
and they'd pull out socks  
I learned that from them

and um  
we just talked for hours and hours and hours

and I thought god  
I don't know why  
I would just love to do that  
love to do that

Miss Piss was at an impressionable age and the female impersonators he calls drag queens made an impression on him. Doing drag was also connected to gay experience for Miss Piss because he commits his first experiences with drag to memory and associates these experiences with his first gay friend, Meduza.

### **Exploring Identities**

Miss Piss tells much about a younger, former self in the following passages. This younger self was marked by feelings of inadequacy associated with the flaws he attributed to

his appearance in everyday life. As well, Miss Piss felt inadequate as an adolescent due to his naivete and lack of social experiences as a gay male. Miss Piss relates what was going on in his life at the time he started his drag involvement. These stanzas illustrate how drag fit into his life and demonstrates how he has made sense of his drag experience, as he accounted for the what and why:

**you know  
I was a little boy with a face full of acne  
just had a horrible acne problem  
and**

**You know  
I even started wearing makeup as a boy to cover up the blemishes  
and that from there went to eyelashes and you know and --  
see what it led to**

Miss Piss is alluding to the position he perceived himself to occupy as a late adolescent. This position was highlighted by his self-perceptions of himself as incomplete. He notes this former self who became involved with drag as a “little boy with a face full of acne.” His acne was a drawback to perceiving himself as attractive in an age bracket that places supreme importance on appearance. The narcissistic component of male same-sex desire also places much importance on appearance. He perceived a shortage of the social currency stemming from conventional good looks requiring a clear complexion. Yet there is more to it than that. It seems that drag was a way for Miss Piss to create, express and apprehend himself during this awkward phase in his life. Miss Piss explicitly declared how drag fit into his life in the following passage:

**It fit into my life in this way  
I wanted to be an actor**

and uh  
I acted in high school

and from there I wanted to go to college  
and and work in theater  
my parents didn't want me to go into theater

bad idea  
as far as supporting myself  
um  
so they and

they also said that they couldn't afford to put me through school  
if I went to community college and did the regular courses  
that they would pay for a four-year university when I finished  
community college

so I started that and I wasn't doing too well  
and I wanted to drop out of college  
but I still wanted to act  
and I never got involved with the theater

and I wanted to get head shots of myself  
I was gonna get head shots done  
found out that it was expensive  
and decided to take a course in photography

and that that  
was what lead to my career as a photographer  
um  
because once I picked a camera up  
I never put it down

I was  
you know  
when I first started seeing the drag queens  
I wanted to photograph them  
and never really did photograph too many of those back in that day  
because I was

**I was naive and shy  
and didn't know how to approach**

**uh so  
I also wanted to do it for myself  
I wanted to do pictures of me  
and um  
that's when I started putting on make-up  
at home  
and playing around with it a little bit**

**and uh  
and I was always a photographer  
through the drag days  
always had my camera with me  
but not always  
um  
there were times that I wished I did but didn't**

**but when I left drag  
I felt this more  
finished my degree in photography  
and now I'm back  
seeing what I can see  
and photographing what I want to photograph  
the question was the process**

It is interesting how Miss Piss's drag self is interwoven in the experiences that led to the person that he has become in everyday life. It is also interesting how his relationship to the camera, constructing himself as the one behind the lens seems to have eventually won out over the spectacular drag queen self. Certainly, it is easier for a man to gain social status and income behind the lens than to mark himself with femininity and appear before the lens. Moreover, it seems that he used an actual camera as a method for apprehending himself. This narcissistic penchant is common to drag queens. Their relationship with the mirror is notorious. Miss Piss took this relationship to its logical end by materializing the metaphorical relations to the self that the gaze typifies in capturing himself on film.

The relation between appearance and identity is also apparent in these operations of apprehending himself on film that Miss Piss reports. Miss Piss played with appearance to explore identity. He created images of himself that he then related to the repertoire of culturally intelligible images by which we identify others and construct ourselves. As Miss Piss noted earlier, his experiences with make-up started with his desire to conceal his serious acne problem. In the meanwhile, he was exposed to drag queens and was learning photography. This experimenting with appearance was a creative pursuit that when paired with his creative explorations in photography, generated a fledgling drag queen. However, Miss Piss initially confined himself to more or less private, at-home forays into transgressing traditionally gendered appearances. He, as most drag queens do, gained experience in private before presenting himself in public. The initial phase of drag queen performance is always confined to the backstage where rehearsals and refinements are practiced until the point where one feels confident enough to plunge into front region drag social interactions.

Miss Piss was not prompted by his growing appreciation for his drag appearance alone to do drag publicly. Miss Piss reported always wanting to be an actor when he was a child and was eager to take the stage. However, economic realities associated with gaining a fine arts education in theater and familial pressures that he choose a profession that was more of a “sure thing” prompted Miss Piss to defer his desires for attention and fame that acting represented for him. But at the same time, there was a venue for drag performance. He took the opportunities to perform that drag allowed. As a result, he gained the sort of experiences he had always wanted. As he noted, because of doing drag, “You know, I got a little taste of fame.”

Notably, fame usually imparts a specularly to those who enjoy such notoriety. I propose that in American culture, people construct fame through a reciprocal relation where the famous person is really a medium by which the culturally intelligible images that mark fame are communicated to the masses. In turn, the masses collude in constructing fame by accepting those images communicated to them as authentic. Moreover, the audience authenticates the

images of fame that the famous person communicates by expressing desire for more. Fame comprises a desirability characterized by the mass audience's seemingly insatiable appetite for images with which to engage in constructing and validating their own fantasies.

### **Engagements with the Beautiful and Glamorous**

Miss Piss associates fame with glamour and beauty, which American culture usually associates with womanhood. Especially on the part of gay men, it seems that the desire for images of glamorous women are not for their erotic engagement but rather, that they wish to identify with these images. They establish the connection between themselves and the feminine often through the most spectacular of the feminine apparitions, pop and movie stars. Miss Piss makes a literal connection between pop stars and woman in the following passages where she suggests and describes the gay fascination and identifications with glamour. He also showed how glamour is conflated with women according to the structure of this text. The following passages were in response to my question, "why do you think drag performances are so popular in the gay community?"

**and I think that  
the drag queens  
you know  
I think that it's an attention thing for a lot of them  
we want to be stars um**

**some of us are talented  
some of us aren't  
um  
I mean you don't have to be talented to be a drag queen**

**um  
I just  
don't know**

**and it is a perplexing question**

**why do we want to do it?  
why are we obsessed with it?**

**well you know we are obsessed with the Judy Garland  
the Liza Minelli  
everything that's glamorous and beautiful  
Madonna**

Miss Piss focuses primarily on the drag queen's preoccupation with gaining attention to account for drag's popularity among drag queens. However, he also accounts for drag's popularity among its gay audiences when he discusses "the Judy Garland, the Liza Minelli, everything that's glamorous and beautiful, Madonna." I think it is important that Miss Piss put the article, "the," in front of Judy Garland and Liza Minelli's names, as if to turn them into concepts, rather than recognize them as actual people. Indeed, they are concepts in the cultural imaginary, where they stand as containers in which various images comprised by the glamorous and beautiful reside. Such images are what is projected back to the viewer when he or she conceptually engages the famous person.

It is also remarkable that all three stars Miss Piss mentioned were singers. The Chanteuse and Diva are archetypes residing in the cultural imaginary as those able to command a magical, captivating power over their audiences. What connections might there be between the gay man, the drag queen and the chanteuse or diva? One cannot help but assume that there is some sort of identification with woman that takes place in donning of feminine gear. Miss Piss spells out his engagement with a cultural imaginary in which these female vocalists embody and project beauty and glamour. This connection is rather explicit. Whereas, there are metaphorical connections that might explain the gay fascination with drag, as it engages female stars, American culture's human embodiments of glamour and beauty.

Glamour and beauty represent fantasy. They portray human desires for perfection and a "higher" existence. Throughout western civilization, discourses on the beautiful connect the

qualities that beauty comprises with human perfection and the divine. Essentially, these discourses spell out how things should be by specifying what *is* beautiful and how it is that the beautiful transforms experience and ultimately, people for the better.

Perhaps in such a materialistic, consumer driven culture, Americans place a value on stars that was once reserved for deities and human spiritual mediums. I propose that the beauty, wealth and power that stars possess might be culturally understood as the ultimate accomplishments of self actualization—perfection—that deify one’s incarnation. Some look to stars and believe that everything would be perfect if they had beauty, wealth and power as stars do. Note also people whose physical attributes closely approximate cultural ideals, such as stars usually do, are referred to as gods and goddesses. Stars are people just like everyone else, but by successfully generating their star image, they manage to accomplish stardom when masses of people project star qualities back to the star.

Gay men’s engagement with stars on one level might represent their engagement with popular culture’s most accessible fantasmatic engagements to what it *really* conceives as divine. Gay men might invest in the star fantasy to establish connections with a transcendent reality that transports one out of mundane, everyday circumstances, often characterized by discrimination. They recognize and identify with the sentiments that Judy Garland expressed when she sang “Over the Rainbow” in The Wizard of Oz

Somewhere, over the Rainbow, skies are blue  
And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true

Someday I’ll wish upon a star and wake up where the clouds are far behind me  
Where troubles melt like lemon drops away above the chimney tops  
That’s where you’ll find me (Arlen & Harburg, 1939)

Furthermore, the star fantasy might be so compelling because people know that stars are really like everyone else but that it is through hard work and good luck that some are able to rise

above the ordinary. This gives some people hope. Yet, at the same time, one cannot ignore that especially in the case of Judy Garland and Liza Minelli, that they are in actuality quite tragic figures. Perhaps there is recognition that it was expectations coming from others that helped destroy Judy Garland. Gay men are subject to gender expectations in everyday life that might destroy their identities and self esteem.

On a different level, the fascination with beauty and glamour in a culture that conflates the beautiful with woman, it might be that drag might represent personal desires for a beautiful gay body that can withstand the heterosexual specular economy that renders gay male bodies either unintelligible or contemptible. I emphasize here that it is through the gaze's reliance on gendered appearances that visibly gay male bodies are either unintelligible or a contemptible spectacle.

Another interesting connection that I might make between drag queens and the chanteuse or diva has to do with the human voice and women's conflation with emotionality in the cultural imaginary. The chanteuse pours her heart out. Rarely do male vocalists express the range of emotions or the intensity of feeling that accomplished female vocalists convey. In a sense, the connection between drag queen and chanteuse or pop diva might stem from our cultural assumption that the voice is something from the inside of the body container that comes out. Thus the voice is the medium by which we express thoughts and feelings which also somehow reside inside the person. Drag appearances represent thoughts, feelings and desires (residing inside the body) that exceed the culturally constituted male body under compulsory heterosexuality. Perhaps the drag queen identifies with the diva's mastery of the female voice, through which the greatest sorrows and the most profound ecstasies are rendered intelligible. Perhaps this is so because the chanteuse represents a great range of expressive possibilities that are foreclosed to the male body in the cultural imaginary that composes dominant social relations. For Miss Piss, the chanteuse/diva archetype seems to be the conduit through which he makes his gay, drag queen connection and conflation with woman. He noted that he wanted

to *be* Madonna when he was younger:

**I think as a child I always wanted to be famous  
I just wanted to be Madonna  
I grew up in the Madonna years**

### **Concealing the Awkward Boy**

Miss Piss initially used makeup and otherwise engaged feminine appearances in a manner that more or less enveloped his male form and visage. This hid his appearance flaws while he gained notoriety in gay social circles. Like Hermaphrodite, his doing drag was a vehicle to escape realities that he perceived in everyday life. The drag queen compensated for the lack of confidence that he had in his male appearances. The drag queen also compensated for the absence

of romantic love by substituting the attention that he received from those social transactions in which he did drag for the more personal attention that he ultimately craved.

In exploring the expressive possibilities of appearance that doing drag afforded him, Miss Piss chose the word, woman, to signify what he was by virtue of how he thought, behaved and appeared in drag. In earlier passages, he associates Madonna with everything beautiful and glamorous. In the following passage, he seems to connect drag queens to glamour and conflate glamour with woman. In effect, he implicitly and explicitly conflates drag queen with woman in these following passages.

**As a teenager when I had acne  
I started to become more and more androgynous with the makeup  
trying to cover it up  
then starting to get a little more glamorous with it  
then just falling off the end  
and becoming a complete drag queen woman  
or what I thought was a woman**

**and uh**

I asked Miss Piss here, “So did you kind of feel like a woman when you did drag?” He responded:

**yeah  
yeah  
yeah I didn’t  
when I’m Miss Piss I’m a woman**

It seems that Miss Piss, the total drag queen woman, was about as far as he could go in taking a psychic vacation from “Mark” that unsure little boy that he perceived himself to be back when he started doing drag. Miss Piss noted several times during his interview that he was young and insecure when he started doing drag. He made numerous references to the devastating effect that his acne problem posed to his earlier self esteem.

Miss Piss had a lot of strikes against the possibility of feeling well about the boy self he presented in everyday life. He also recalled a lack of maturity and the savior faire we associate with adult experience in his late adolescence when he referred to that former self as a “little boy.” He was gay but had not figured how to come out to others. The perceptions he had of himself as “a little boy,” refers to his vulnerability and a lack of personal agency. For these reasons, Miss Piss experienced diminishment in everyday life. As he noted,

**I was 17, 18, 19 and I was a child and no one wanted me  
and uh  
you can’t have a relationship with a child  
and I feel lucky that I wasn’t taken advantage of**

Miss Piss had the long-term goal of achieving a loving partnership with another man. However,

he recognized in retrospect that he was not ready for the commitment. There was an apparent motivation to “step out” of who he was, to transcend the realities of his everyday life so that he could satisfy his need for attention and validation that would later come from romantic involvements. He noted that his motivation for doing drag was:

**maybe the feeling of stepping out of what I was  
and becoming something completely different  
and seeing**

**I was just curious  
and to see how other people reacted to me as this other person  
I really liked that  
you know**

**I was  
you know  
attention  
I think that was the main issue for me  
I got *so* much attention  
just tons of attention**

### **Denying the Queen for Love**

Miss Piss drag queen enactments compensated for things missing from his sense of self in everyday life. What Miss Piss gained by doing drag substituted for what he actually wanted more. In this following passage, Miss Piss makes sense of what his tenure as an actively involved drag queen meant to his sense of self and to his life in retrospect. He notes doing drag “filled a niche” where something he wanted much more was missing.

**Because I had discovered a relationship  
and it was my first relationship  
and it was a really good, strong relationship  
and that was**

**that became more important than drag  
drag filled a niche for me three-four years  
and then when I eventually found love (*snaps hat again*)  
I left drag for love (*his voice gets very quiet*)**

In re-telling our lives to ourselves and others, past experience is always seen and related through the lens of the present. The lens of the present is always conditioned by subsequent successive experiences that lead us to our presently preferred mode of meaning construction and maintenance. However, in telling a story, our body language and intonational shifts may indicate our recognition that alternative interpretations of past events might also reside within our consciousness and represent less comfortable definitions of the situation. In relating this last passage, Miss Piss took off his baseball cap and repeatedly snapped and unsnapped the plastic fasteners that adjust the circumference of this hat. As well, he began speaking softer and softer, to the point that he was practically whispering by the end of the passage where he made the declaration, “I left drag for love.” It was as though Miss Piss was making a discovery about the narrative that he used to condition and explain his experience while he was putting it into words.

For the better part of the six years prior to this interview, Miss Piss was in committed romantic relationships that his respective partners conditioned by asking that he refrain from doing drag. Miss Piss was single when he granted me an interview, just a couple months out of his most recent and very serious relationship. I suppose that not having a relationship at stake made Miss Piss more ready to acknowledge what of himself he had sacrificed to be in romantic relationships. Even though Miss Piss had not done drag in four or five years, he made the following declaration. This identity document reveals a conflict between what romance had required and Miss Piss’ conceptions of self:

**and you know I’m still a drag queen  
I’ll always be a drag queen  
I guess that could fit**

**I'll always put a dress on  
I'm sure I'll never stop  
I mean it's in my blood**

Miss Piss declared that the drag queen was an inexorable and inscrutable component of his inner being. Declaring that drag is “in my blood” illustrates this drag queen as she resides inside a body, mixed in the blood. As well this declaration also suggests that Miss Piss perceived himself as *naturally*, perhaps genetically predisposed to drag proclivities.

### **Resolving the Queen's Location in the Person**

Under the circumstances that Miss Piss proclaimed, where the notes that he will “always be a drag queen,” that it is in his blood, I logically ask, then where did Miss Piss stow his drag queen self and what operations did it require when he “left drag for love?” In the following passage, Miss Piss responded to the question, “What's the relationship between your drag and who you are?” I look here first for clues about where the drag queen goes when Miss Piss left drag. He noted that there was some vacillation between alternative meaning structures he might choose to contain his drag experience:

**um  
its that has also  
fluctuated back and forth  
in my life as a drag queen**

**I think that drag made me become closer to who I am as a person  
really uh**

I asked then, “In what way?” He responded:

**well um  
I didn't know where I was going  
I didn't know what I was doing  
and I  
um**

fell into drag

and I knew that was not what I wanted do  
or that was what I wanted to be for the rest of my life  
I didn't want to be a famous drag queen  
I didn't want to be what Ru Paul is today  
so it made me take a look at what I wanted to be

It also made me accept drag  
I sort of became a poster child of sorts for people who do drag  
not just for people who do drag but for a diverse community like we have  
uh so

you know  
nothing surprises me  
and when people are surprised  
I think that they need to understand  
it helped me understand myself and other people  
um I don't condemn anything  
pretty much  
--well there are some things  
but you know  
I'm open to a lot more than the average person

I that I would have sort of shunned drag six years ago  
when I went into a relationship with my boyfriend because he did  
and wanted no part of it  
and my second boyfriend was the same way  
and he said

you know  
he used to say to me  
I know if we ever broke up  
that you'd do it again

and you know  
I left it at that  
I didn't say yes or no  
maybe I will

### **maybe I won't**

There is a lot going on in this passage that reveals the complexity of lived experience and its relation to constructing identities and maintaining personhood. I want to break this passage down by issues that are apparent in Miss Piss' discussion that reveal the importance of drag to his self contemporary with the interview. I will move through the issues in order, from stanza to stanza.

In the first stanza, Miss Piss related his perception that he "fell into drag" at a time in his life characterized by general uncertainty. The passage indicates that when Miss Piss first started doing drag, he didn't really know what he was getting into. Miss Piss pairs uncertainty with the metaphor of falling to represent his perception that at the time, he was confused and being moved by external forces. Apparently, for one to have personal agency, one must know what one is doing and be relatively deliberate in his or her actions. Even though Miss Piss reported a drag epiphany in an earlier passage where he stated that he decided that he "would love to do" drag, it is apparent that his recognition and resolution to do drag was contained in a bigger life scenario characterized by his self-perceived lack of personal clarity and volition. However, where he notes that drag "made me become more of who I am as a person." it might also be that doing drag comprised a set of gestures that represented Miss Piss' first assertive steps toward constructing an autonomous self. He was establishing his own authority as he noted in the second stanza, drag "made me take a look at what I wanted to be."

In the third, fourth and fifth stanzas, Miss Piss refers to the ways in which his drag experience made him a more tolerant person. Doing drag had effectively put Miss Piss "in the shoes of another." He was literally cast as the other in Baltimore's community of gay men. It might be that learning what it is like to be "different" gave Miss Piss social experience in negotiating for affirmative alternative identities. Perhaps he was able to generalize his experience to others and appreciate their experiences representing diversity.

In the last three stanzas, Miss Piss indicates that he had been in relationships with gay

men that were *not* “open to more than the average person.” Indeed, Miss Piss successively became involved with gay men who seemed very average in the respect that they were intolerant and derogatory toward drag queens. “Mark” is the gay man that Miss Piss portrays in everyday life. Mark shunned Miss Piss to please his suitors. Miss Piss disappeared because boyfriends “wanted no part of it,” even though the latter boyfriend acknowledged that Miss Piss still resided within Mark by stating, “I know that if we ever broke up that you’d do it again.” Miss Piss indicated in the earliest section of his response to the question about the relationship of drag to who he is that this relationship had been characterized by fluctuation. Miss Piss’ discourse indicated that he had not come up with a sustainable, clear cut solution to the contradiction that his drag self posed when Mark presented himself to romantic interests.

I indicated to Miss Piss that I was perplexed at how he had negotiated his romantic relationships. I noted that it seemed like drag was a big enough part of Mark for him to keep performing Miss Piss. Yet, it seemed that he had developed relationships with people who were basically not accepting a part of him. Miss Piss replied:

**yeah, they weren’t**

I interjected, “Well I mean how do you---.” Before I could ask more, Miss Piss quickly related the passage below. He defended himself rather than actually accounting for his actions and the ensuing implications that erasing Miss Piss to satisfy his romantic partners suggested. His interruption allowed him to avoid my line of questioning. Had I completed that question, it would have required Miss Piss to account for what it meant that in these two relationships he had valued profoundly, he was involved with men who demanded he pretend to be someone other than whom he actually was. The complicated passage below illustrates how denial is an avoidance behavior and how this denial discourse becomes its own avoidance of another issue, how he was valued by his lovers.

**well it caused a big problem in my relationships  
and I had to convince them and myself that it wasn't a big part of me  
and I think I did a pretty good job of that  
but it was**

**so I-I  
think that  
I have been in denial for awhile that it was a part of me  
and I always said  
that you know  
I never  
I'm never  
(sigh)  
my Rolodex isn't flipping right**

**I'm never ashamed of anything that I've done  
I've always done everything with a punch  
and I have created this person that I am--Mark**

I was going to ask Miss Piss how he reconciled these mandatory erasures from his being, that could be perceived as devaluation coming from his lovers. Miss Piss acknowledged his complicity in the erasure that denied the importance of drag to his being. While at the same time he demonstrated how a “new” Mark emerged from his coupling transactions.

Romantic relationships demonstrate that human relations are rarely clear-cut in their power dynamics. Miss Piss locates his agency in the recognition that it is through his choices that he has created the person that he is. However, his Miss Piss was denied recognition in Mark's romantic relationships by his partners. Therefore, Mark denied Miss Piss a place of importance in his tangible life: Miss Piss was repressed in the name of love. A collusion is apparent where Miss Piss and his partners created and shared meanings about who Mark was and *should be* that denied the drag queen. However, Miss Piss occupied a big part of who Mark was on the inside, drag was “in his blood.” Therefore, an unresolved conflict resided

within Miss Piss while he engaged with his

respective significant others as Mark. Mark made active choices but was compelled by other's opinions, perhaps out of fear that he would be denied love if he did not capitulate.

Where Miss Piss denied himself, it was a concession he was compelled to negotiate in a stringent romantic bargain--the type in which two aim toward "becoming one." But at the same time, Miss Piss implicates himself as a conspirator in authorizing drag denial as conditional term in his relationships. However, he defends his personhood and asserts his agency in stating "I'm never ashamed of anything that I've done. I've always done everything with a punch and I have created this person that I am--Mark." Apparently, Miss Piss had conceived denying his drag queen self not as a sell out but as a gesture representing his desire to give his all in making his romantic relationships work.

### **Growing Up and Out of Drag**

To this point I have emphasized the role of Miss Piss' lovers in dissipating this drag queen. Yet it is possible to see ways in which Mark might have recognized that it was the right time and that he was in the right place to give Miss Piss a rest. It might be that Miss Piss, in her earliest incarnations, was the product of teenage rebellion, a phase. I have saved the final stanza of the response to the question about the relationship between "your drag and who you are" that I posed to Miss Piss to open a section on how it might be plausible that Miss Piss had run her course before Mark turned his thoughts to love.

**and you know I've done these things in the past  
and I'm not embarrassed by anything that I've done  
and you know I'll do it again  
if if if  
need be  
if I have something to say**

This stanza alludes to possibility that Miss Piss had said all that she needed to say. Miss Piss sees no point to doing drag if there is not something to say. At the time of his interview, Miss Piss was a fine art and commercial photographer and had made a couple films. He would like to pursue film-making more vigorously. Miss Piss is busy giving form and focus to his ideas in creative outlets that allowed him to earn a living and operate beyond the boundaries of the gay ghetto. He had to acquire education, work experience and professional connections to be where he is today. Doing drag as intensively as Miss Piss did at her peak would have prevented Mark's present success. There are ways in which doing drag can and did conflict with Miss Piss' larger goals in life. For example, doing drag was a fast and furious lifestyle that paired substance abuses with the very late hours apparent in these following passages. With specific regard to the Haus of Frau, Miss Piss made this observation:

**it was big for Frau  
that we were drunkards  
and we took advantage of all the libations that were out there**

And with specific regard to the fast and furious night life, he noted:

**I remember doing shows at Numbers  
then going out to after-hours  
and then having to work the next day at five o'clock  
so I would be out until four and have a dress on  
and uh  
drive home to Brooklyn Park where my parents were just getting up  
and sneaking into the basement window  
jumping right into bed with my hair, make-up and dress still on**

Sneaking about is fun for teenagers. Half the fun is running the risk of getting caught doing things you are not supposed to do. However, as Miss Piss got a little older, the novelty

apparently wore off. It was no longer enough to step out of the character he portrayed in everyday life and accept “tons of attention” as the only real compensation for his efforts in drag performance. The following stanzas reveal Miss Piss’s perceptions that he was not adequately compensated for what the gay community expected from him in the way of drag performances and how this short changed his everyday life.

**I I just think that as a drag queen I did a lot of benefit shows  
and then I stopped  
and didn’t want to do any shows  
I wasn’t making any money  
that’s not what I set out to do  
but that’s what it had become**

**um  
but you know it became a job  
it became  
you know  
every weekend going out in drag  
and um  
I started to miss my life as Mark**

A conflict emerged for Miss Piss because what Mark wanted conflicted with the social demands placed on Miss Piss. Perhaps this is due to the fact drag queen appearances are confined to nightclubs. Daytime schooling and work are compromised when one regularly keeps late hours. In addition, it is difficult to date when one commits to doing drag during the hours that most people use for dating. As well, drag queens are not a hot commodity in the gay men’s dating game. Therefore, even though Miss Piss positively values his drag experience and continues to see and maintain the drag queen as a part of himself, he is much more concerned with what he wants for Mark in everyday life and focuses his attention and energies there.

It is an interesting double-edged sword that drag queen fame represented for Miss Piss in Baltimore’s community of gay men. Apparently, there was tremendous demand for Miss

Piss. When Miss Piss acquiesced to the mounting expectations levied around the Miss Piss persona, he recognized the ways in which Mark was sacrificed as fuel for the fire. I gain an appreciation for what it is that celebrities lose when they captivate the public. The domain in which they can really be themselves becomes confined by expectations that people project on them. Pop stars have their wealth and power connections as compensation for this public invasion. Miss Piss, being a drag queen in Baltimore, was not adequately remunerated for what people wanted from him. Furthermore, drag queens are also held in contempt within Baltimore's community of gay men. Thus their local fame really amounts to an indentured servitude. Yet one must acknowledge how drag queens authorize that inequitable contract. However, it seems the only retreat from that contract is to stop doing drag, as Miss Piss chose to do.

### **Meduza: In a Glamorous Stage**

Meduza stated that he usually does glamour drag. He associates glamour with beauty and power. There seems to be a connection between his desire to be a glamorous drag queen, his self-acknowledged identification with "strong straight women" that have that "bitchy edge" and his self-perceptions that he's "always been on the effeminate side." Meduza makes explicit connection between his homosexuality and femininity and offers it as a possible explanation for his becoming a drag queen. His drag discourse indicates his engagements with the culturally reproduced gender binary and how this male/female dichotomy figures in his consciousness. In some ways, Meduza was able to resist the strict gender dichotomy. However his discussion also illustrates manners in which he conceived himself and subsequently constructed his appearances according to dominant gender narratives. For instance, he noted that he had a "feminine side" that was implicitly separate from his "masculine side." Hence the gender binary seems to be reproduced in his consciousness where he draws on images from the masculine side to compose himself as a male in everyday life and he draws from feminine images to

construct himself as a drag queen. I highlight these connections between femininity, gay male identity and women with a “bitchy edge” by starting with an analysis of Meduza’s proclamations about his male femininity.

### **On the Effeminate Side**

Meduza associates his feminine side with his fascination for feminine accouterment. He locates this fascination's origin in his early childhood. In this discussion of Meduza's drag realities, I lay out the connections between being gay, femininity, identification with women, and doing drag as they seemed to resonate in Meduza's consciousness. For Meduza, as with Miss Piss and Hermaphrodite, however, there was a split between his drag persona and the person that he perceived himself to be in everyday life.

In some ways, Meduza seems to imagine his femininity, not as integrated into his whole person. Rather he conceives his femininity as a "side" that he "has always had," or has "always been on." In the following passages, Meduza relates the "feminine side" to his being gay and doing drag.

**I've always had a feminine side  
um  
I used to wear  
I remember wearing my mother's shoes  
I could fit into her like size 7-1/2  
you know she had this fabulous shoe collection**

Meduza makes the connection between his "feminine side" and his fascination with feminine gear as something innate. Where Meduza asserts that he "always" had a feminine side, this implies that this femininity is natural to his being. However, this identification with femininity that he holds about himself doesn't seem possible without being socially marked as feminine by others. Meduza's discussion reveals this interactive process where one comes to see oneself as others do:

**well I am the way I am  
but in other people's eyes**

**they see me as very feminine  
you know  
not real masculine**

**although I think I'm more masculine now than I have been  
since I came out  
where before  
I never really thought about it  
it wasn't a question**

**although growing up  
I mean growing up I was teased  
I was always called sissy and fag  
all those**

**so I mean  
I've always been on the effeminate side  
I mean I was just born with that  
always quiet  
reserved  
thin  
um  
I don't know**

Meduza also makes specific reference to gender archetypes where he notes qualities that American culture deems feminine, i.e., “quiet, reserved, thin.” He registered the meanings that other people assigned to him when they apprehended him through the gaze. He noted, “but in other people’s eyes, they see me as feminine, not real masculine.” However, Meduza alludes that coming out was a process that made him investigate the way he was defined in dominant social relations. His coming out process allowed him to construct and cultivate a personal masculinity in resistance to the dominant cultural assertion that gay is exclusively feminine. He does not disavow his femininity but has opened a space for himself where his masculine possibilities are not superseded by the dominant social conceptions of gay males as feminine.

### **Material Trappings of Femininity: From Mother to Son**

In the opening passage, Meduza conflates his fascination with femininity with being feminine. However, in terms of the gaze the following passage shows that fascination and identification are two different things but are complicated when they overlap as they seem to in Meduza's consciousness. The scopophilia that Meduza reveals in recalling his mother's appearances from his childhood seems to locate him decidedly in alignment the ideal spectator, a culturally intelligible male behind the lens of the gaze's metaphorical camera. Meduza revealed

how profoundly prone he is to visual experience and its propensity to mark his consciousness.

**well  
my mother  
and my father used to go out all the time  
my father used to buy her outfits from Frederick's of Hollywood down on  
Broadway  
so she always had these really fierce outfits that nobody else had  
and she was really pretty**

**you know  
she like always wore lots of jewelry  
and she always painted her face and did her hair big**

**you know  
she always looked good when she went out  
and it was just kinda like**

**you know  
waiting to see what mom was gonna wear  
wow look at her**

**she was the youngest in the neighborhood**

**and all the other women were older  
you know  
she was like the youngest and prettiest  
you know my father basically dressed my mother up to show her off  
pretty much  
my mother loved it**

**I mean its funny  
my mother wore lots of thick heavy makeup and she still does  
she wore her hair really big  
and she had all these fabulous clothes and jewelry  
you know  
it sounds just like a drag queen to me  
(chuckles)**

The following passage reveals the importance of connection and identifications with one's mother in formative experiences where some drag queens first learned femininity. It is a fine line that biological males raised by their mothers must negotiate in dominant gender relations. For it is certainly difficult for a young male child to know the difference between learning about femininity as opposed to learning femininity. However, Meduza's reports of early fascination with feminine gear focus more on the visual and tactile pleasures of the accouterment rather than explicit means to reinforce identification with his mother. In this respect, these formative experiences seem decidedly "male" or masculine in the respect that the visual component of pleasure is purportedly more pronounced in biological males. Identification with his mother almost seems like a "side effect" of his fascination with the physical trappings of femininity that his mother commanded. It appears that he came to see his mother as an agent and purveyor of this fascination. For Meduza, as a young boy, it is as though his mother's collected appearance tools represented an alternative toy box full of playful possibilities, as when he would try on her shoes. I offer this passage from my pilot study with Brandi Chanté, a Roanoke-area female impersonator, because it is so compelling

and illustrative of the points I just made:

**when I was I child I've always liked things that were meant for women  
such as jewelry furs**

**um  
gloves hats that sort of thing**

**and growing up by myself and spending a lot of time by myself  
I spent time too with my mom and my grandmother  
and uh  
lots of times just to entertain myself  
my grandmother would give me an old box of jewelry to play with  
you know some old hats or gloves  
or something she had packed away**

**I was always real fond of that type of stuff  
but I never could understand why there was something that I liked and was  
attracted to  
why I couldn't wear it without having this ridicule from society**

The feminine gear that these budding drag queens experienced through their mothers was perhaps the initial source of feminine identification, because this ridicule that Brandi notes meant that there was often need to enjoy feminine gear vicariously. Associating these inanimate objects that provide sensuous pleasures with women might have lead to identifications with their moms, who seemed to have such an extensive battery of aesthetic capital at their disposal. Meduza's discussion reveals the feminine spectacle as a profoundly visual experience. Apparently, he wanted to possess beauty by performing it rather than consuming it. Yet, his experimentation with feminine accouterment was furtively limited to safe times and spaces within his family home. Likewise, as he noted in an earlier passage, this experimentation was restricted to his earlier childhood when he could fit into his mother's size 7-1/2 shoe.

However, as an adult Meduza was freed to experiment with feminine appearances further and made discoveries about himself and his identity in the process. In this first passage, Meduza makes the identification with his mother explicit through the recognitions that came to him through doing drag.

**sometimes when I'm dressed up and in drag  
I look like her  
you know  
I really look like her**

Meduza makes an explicit connection with his mother through doing drag in this last passage. It is an identification with his mother that men are supposed to deny. Yet, according to psychoanalytic theory, all children, regardless of sex when raised by their mothers make their first identifications with her (Chodorow, 1978). This identification with mother/woman seems less subversive than other identifications that Meduza makes with women.

### **The Bitch Archetype**

The identifications that Meduza makes with women all involve engagements with femininity to construct his drag persona. He seems to find socially problematic femininities most compelling in his identifications with women and constructing his drag queen self. These problematic femininities are “female trouble” that must be negotiated in the dominant social relations that they threaten. I will go into a deeper analysis of these problematic femininities and their connection to drag after Meduza’s drag discourse provides more footing. Meduza begins to articulate his connections to the bitch archetype in the following passage where I asked if actual women had inspired his drag performances and doing drag. He responded:

**oh absolutely  
Joan Collins**

**she's an inspiration to my pieces  
Cruella de Ville who is my idol (chuckles)**

I interjected at this point, "Villainesses." Meduza responded:

**I really like that bitchy edge**

I then asked "What is it about bitchiness that appeals to you?" He replied

**Well I'm really fascinated with strong women  
you know very strong women  
and um**

**I find that a lot of strong women are very gay friendly  
straight women are very gay friendly**

**um  
and I think goes back to your really big icons like Joan Crawford  
I'm really fascinated by strong women  
I don't know**

**also  
women with problems  
drinking problems  
drug problems  
mental problems  
you know uh physical problems**

Meduza speaks in this passage about types of women that appeal to him. However, these women are not "actual" women, but types of women that seem to reside in the cultural imaginary. It seems safe for us to construe this fascination as identification if we generalize from Meduza's fascination with his mother's appearance as an identification with a strain of

femininity. Here as well, strains of femininity pose “a problem.” Indeed, femininity is big problem for men in dominant social relations. It causes problems for men when they recognize it in their own beings and even more problems if they dare perform femininity before others. Femininity is a problem for gay men and drag queens in particular because people use it as a justification to stigmatize them. However, Meduza relates to “female trouble” where women’s femininity is problematized in dominant social relations. Femininity becomes a problem when it is complicated by women who are not demure. It is also a problem for women who by choice or default, depart from the picture perfect images of femininity as they are associated with beauty and domesticity in culture. Perhaps Meduza conceives the drag queen as another sort of “woman with problems.”

Meduza seems to understand the term, bitch, as an epithet levied against women who do not defer to men. Although bitch is usually a misogynistic term, the apparent appeal of the bitch archetype to Meduza stems from his understanding of the bitch as a powerful woman. It is important to understand Meduza’s appropriation of the bitch archetype in relation to his socially devalued feminine side. In doing drag and expressing his femininity, Meduza obviously found appeal in feminine images that were strong rather than demure. He expresses an ironic identification with the bitch archetype as it is manifest in characters like Cruella DeVille and as it is portrayed by actresses who epitomize the archetype like Joan Crawford and Joan Collins. Meduza is in the company of many gay men where he is fascinated by strong women and notes his attraction to the “bitchy edge.”

What is it about the bitch archetype that appeals to Meduza, drag performers and other gay men? First for drag queens in terms of appearance, the bitches that Meduza cites, are all very glamorous. On the one hand these bitches possess the power by virtue of their ability to captivate men. Yet, as bitches, their power neither begins nor ends with appearance. They break the rules of femininity and the gender order by wielding other sorts of power. In the cultural imaginary, not only can the bitch make men move upon their bodies, they can also

make men do practically anything by virtue of the spell they cast on them using their “feminine wiles.”

Meduza sees himself aligned with “strong women” because he perceives them as gay friendly. However hospitable strong women might be toward gay men, I think the connection Meduza makes with strong women and those with a “bitchy edge” also functions at the level of recognition that both the bitch, the gay man and drag queen as archetypes in the cultural imaginary, are all outcasts. They don’t fit the hegemonic narrative that scripts gender performances in our society. The bitch effaces her femininity by commanding power over men. She usurps their masculinity as she executes a metaphorical castration upon them, since American culture does conflate the male genitalia with power and authority. Whereas, gay men efface their own masculinity by expressing desires that metaphorically castrate them in dominant social relations. Therefore, perhaps Meduza’s perception that strong women are gay friendly stems from the fact that gay men are already castrated in dominant social relations and have nothing to lose in affiliations with such women. Perhaps even more, the gay man and the strong woman may share a mutual contempt for the hegemony of the heterosexual male. I speculate that what gay men find so delightful about the bitch is the ways in which she undermines male authority and deteriorates the boundaries that confine us to gender. Drag queens are usually quite aware of these boundaries.

While American culture conceives the bitch to use allure, trickery and backstabbing to usurp power and efface masculinity, the drag queen effaces his own masculinity using appearance to declare gay desires. He uses the same trappings of femininity that the bitch might. Indeed, the drag queen does stir desire in some men who identify themselves as straight. However, where the bitch seems calculated in taking power away from men, the drag queen executes his damage to male power by performing a subversion on his body that discredits American culture’s conflation of the penis with (phallic) power and traditional masculinity.

The drag queen reveals the gap between the macro-social phallus that stands for absolute power and authority as it is circulated in most social transactions and the individual, micro-social penis that men find between their legs. The metaphorical castration that drag queens perform upon their own bodies by performing male femininity dissolves the conflation of the phallus with the penis. They show that they *do* possess a penis. But in their disavowal of the phallus which requires un-contradictory heterosexual masculinity, they reveal how the phallus is usually naturalized to men in dominant social relations. They reveal the phallus' conflation with those who find a penis between their legs as a mere projection on the male body. In this operation, the phallus and all that it connotes is snapped on to men like a nose that one would attach to Mr. Potato Head. Here it is apparent that men are also subject to the gaze.

Men are assessed for their compliance with culturally intelligible gender images. If men are found in compliance with cultural images of masculinity, they then become a screen on which the phallus and all that it contains and represents might be projected. What the drag queen does is invoke a transgressive femininity, much as the bitch does to disrupt the assumptions that underlie projection of the phallus upon men. Nonetheless, Meduza makes feminine identifications with the feminine as all drag queens do.

### **Same Gaze, Different Expectations**

In this section, what I mean by the "same gaze" is that the gaze which originates in Meduza's consciousness is solitary but projects different expectations on the respective drag queen and everyday male selves. He apprehends these selves with the help of mirrors and photographs. Yet his individual consciousness apparently gained its form and content through engagements with the collective consciousness and its repertoires of gender images. He conceives his drag appearances as feminine in a way that seems to reiterate the gender binary in dominant social relations. He reveals the connection between his imagination, the cultural imagination and the gender performances by which his drag queen self materializes. How he

understands femininity conditions his drag performances. As he illustrates this thought process, he demonstrates the citationality of gender. His drag appearances cite femininity as it is understood and maintained in the cultural imaginary. As well, when Meduza wishes to present himself as a man, he engages and cites masculinity as the cultural imaginary reproduces it.

There were times when the male person Meduza presented in everyday life was in conflict with his drag queen self at the site of bodily appearance. Interestingly, the conflict had partially to do with his desire to present a sexually attractive body to other gay men and to present a less contradictory, visually cohesive male self in everyday life.

It is apparent in the following passages that Meduza was visually apprehending his everyday male and drag queen appearances through the gaze. He alludes to an evaluation process through which he appraised his respective appearances for their consonance with conventionally gendered appearances. Meduza separates his everyday male and drag queen selves by programming his male appearances by the strictures of conventional masculinity. Likewise he programs his drag queen appearances by conventional images of femininity. This separation requires negotiations on Meduza's part at the site of his body.

Meduza is hirsute. For him, creating a visually appealing, cohesive drag appearance meant shaving his body. However, he had equally exacting appearance standards for himself as a male in everyday life. He expressed concern for those times that his male body would be marked by razor stubble and fall under scrutiny in everyday life. Thus his body hair posed conflict between the drag queen self and the everyday male self. In both instances, Meduza considered how he would be perceived by others. This shaving discourse emerged when I asked Meduza what the pitfalls were to doing drag for him:

**the other big downfall is shaving  
because I have a really hairy chest  
and I really hate**

**I don't mind shaving under my arms  
but  
but I really hate shaving my legs and shaving my chest**

I asked Meduza here, if he felt that he had to shave in order to do drag and he responded:

**no but if you're going to do it right  
and really look good  
and it's a really big special event  
you've gotta do it  
you know**

**I'm really picky now  
with like you know  
I don't wanna be shaving for the summer  
because that just doesn't look right**

**you know  
it's not very masculine**

Meduza illustrated concern for appearing masculine in everyday life. His desired masculine appearance would be compromised by revealing a body, scantily dressed for summer, covered in razor stubble. He feels that it “doesn’t look right.” His concern for what does or does not look right illustrates his engagement with culturally approved gender images that condition the gaze. As well he shows that he uses the gaze to apprehend himself when he cites certain appearances that he might produce as not looking “right.” Gay men are very concerned with appearance. As well, masculinity is premium erotic capital for most gay men in Baltimore. By implication, Meduza’s concern for “looking right” and appearing masculine are social and erotic concerns.

In this last collection of stanzas on shaving, Meduza tells us what it means for him to remove his bodily hair at skin level. As well, he shows the on-going negotiations that occur between his drag queen and everyday life, male selves. A deliberation takes place, where

wants and needs that reside “inside” Meduza. He takes these wants and needs into account before he takes actions on his body that will effect his appearances as a drag queen and as a male in everyday life. It reveals that Meduza must think before doing drag about what events are coming up in which he might reveal his male body to others. These concerns impact Meduza’s decisions as to what body parts and how closely he will shave to create a drag queen body. Thus these concerns program his appearance.

**I keep my chest hair trimmed  
and  
shave  
I shave my armpits sometimes in the summertime  
um or  
at least shave it down**

**but um  
if I shave it completely off  
or clipper it all the way down,  
it takes three months to grow the chest hair back  
and it takes two months before it looks kinda normal**

**so that really kinda freaks me out  
that’s why I wouldn’t shave before I went to Key West  
I had shaved in the beginning of November  
no  
the beginning of December**

**and  
by the time I went to Key West  
in the beginning of February  
it was like  
it was just looking okay  
and  
my leg hair  
is just starting to look okay  
its just starting to look full**

**it just takes so long**

**and I really hate  
I really hate being hairy  
I really do**

Meduza declared that he would rather not have to manage the conflicts that his hirsute body poses to making smooth transitions back and forth from his drag queen to everyday male presentations of self. Donning make-up as well poses conflicts for Meduza. It seems that bodily razor stubble and makeup residue on the face compose tell-tale “drag lags” that remain for periods of time on a male body.

**the down side to doing drag for me is makeup  
you know  
I hate  
having all that residue makeup on the next day  
having to come home after being out all night  
and wash that shit off**

**you know  
it just ruins your face  
it just wrecks me  
that’s my biggest problem**

**also  
I get in moods  
or  
where  
now I mean  
before drag was like a big part of my life  
now it’s not**

Most drag queens apply a very heavy base of theatrical panstick, which is quite oily or

heavy duty concealing makeup foundations like “Dermablend” to cover their faces and create a blank slate on which they can paint a drag queen face. Especially after heavy applications, it is difficult to remove all traces of makeup from the face. These heavy makeups become embedded in one’s pores and one winds up with pore-sized polka dots

of foundation all over the face after scrubbing off the makeup. It almost has to wear off and out of the pores as one secretes oil.

### **Doing Drag Less**

Meduza is employed by the state of Maryland. He has a serious job that he has invested in for many years. He can’t afford to jeopardize his status at work by having people think of him as a “cross dresser” or drag queen. The drag lag associated with makeup residue would give him away to people for whom he wishes to keep unaware of his doing drag.

Meduza stated elsewhere that generally, if he did drag on a night before he was scheduled to work at his job the next day, he would plan to take a personal day off. He did this so that he would not have to present himself at work the next morning with makeup residue still showing on his face. Furthermore, Meduza indicated that concern for the appearance of his facial skin in everyday life made him uneasy about the effects that makeup might have on his face.

The consideration that Meduza gives to his male appearance in everyday life conflicts with his concerns for appearance when he is in drag. He notes that drag is not as big a part of his life as it used to be. Therefore, perhaps he is now more concerned with how doing drag will effect his male appearance in everyday life. This appears to be because the male self that he presents in everyday life is most salient. Now it seems that he only does drag when the mood strikes, rather than doing drag on a regular basis, as he did at an earlier stage in his drag involvement.

In the next two passages Meduza talks about how his levels of involvement with doing drag have changed over time. Meduza offered this passage as explanation for how his doing

drag in general related to his drag performances:

**there was a time when I would get dressed up  
with Tim or something and just go out in drag  
um  
but I don't do that anymore  
um  
it's for a performance of some sort  
yeah  
it's for a performance**

I asked Meduza why he stopped doing drag just to go out. He responded:

**well mainly because  
at one point  
that was the thing to do  
you know like  
a bunch of us got dressed up and went out  
and now its like  
now that period has passed  
there was a time for it**

**I mean  
it could be fun  
and I would do it again  
if it was a big enough deal  
you know like going to a club  
and there were a lot of other people there**

**you know what I mean  
like goin' to New York and they were having some big drag festival  
you know  
a big drag night or something  
I might consider doing that**

**but um  
so I guess there's nothing to warrant it  
other than performing there's no reason to go out in drag**

### **other than Halloween or Wigstock I guess**

Where Meduza stated about doing drag that “at one point it was the thing to do,” he alludes that there was a social context in which his drag was welcomed and in which he felt validated as a drag queen. Actually, this time when drag was the thing to do coincided with his most intense involvement with other members of the Haus of Frau. His involvement with drag was curbed somewhat as Haus of Frau dissipated.

### **Drag Involvement in the Present**

When Meduza gave his interviews, drag was then primarily confined to performance contexts. He remarked that there did not seem to be any other reason for doing drag. As he noted in the last chapter, “very straight” gay men will hassle you for doing drag. Consequently, there are hassles associated with makeup and shaving that seem to make doing drag physically uncomfortable and socially risky as men stand to lose status in doing drag or even having others figure out that they do drag.

For Meduza, as with the other members of the Haus of Frau, it seems that keeping pace with the march of time moved him to a place in his life where drag is less important than it used to be. However, his drag queen experience has left an indelible mark on his consciousness. Involvement with drag is not limited to one’s actual presentations of self in drag. Apparently, drag involvement also reflects a mind set, a sensibility, or indeed, a consciousness that one acquires and develops over the period of time that one does drag. This consciousness seems to continue growing and evolving although one’s actual presentations of self in drag might become sporadic. Meduza seems to conflate his drag sensibility with being gay where he includes a stanza

about the perceptive abilities one gains “just being gay” in response when I asked him, “Did doing drag change the way you see the world?”

**absolutely**

I asked, “in what ways?” He responded:

**um  
well doing drag  
kinda like  
made me see things  
especially performing  
like more artistically  
you know**

**you look at everything differently  
let me think about this  
you get to see how people react to you  
with performing you get to push buttons  
and see how people react**

**um  
you’re always  
spotting a potential outfit (chuckles)  
you always see something that you like  
you take notice  
of people**

**I mean just being gay  
you kinda take notice of people more  
cause you’re always clocking somebody**

**and it’s just  
I think drag is taking it a step further  
yeah it kind of um  
I don’t now  
every song is a number  
every piece of clothing is a potential outfit  
(laughs)**

**you know  
you're always looking at how people are painted  
you're always looking through glamour magazines to see people are dressed  
and what the current fashions are  
it definitely gives you a better fashion sense**

I interjected at this point, "Even though you don't do it as much as you used to there's an involvement with drag where you're still thinking about it." Meduza responded:

**yeah in some ways  
well I mean now  
drag is a part of my life  
it's  
another facet  
of who I am  
so  
its gonna have some input  
I think in everything I do**

What Meduza reports in these last two passages suggests that drag experience seems to reconstruct the gaze. The gaze performs a naturalizing function in our culture. People, as objects seized by the gaze, are authenticated "as if" they were the real thing when they appear in compliance with gender images that dictate appearance according to sex. Meduza notes that "just being gay you kind of notice people more, cause you're always clocking somebody." "Clocking someone," is a gay idiomatic expression that refers to picking up on queer vibes and making a determination that another person is gay. Often, gay men refer to this perceptive ability as "gaydar." I draw connections between gaydar and radar in the following paragraph.

State troopers point their radar devices at motorists to determine whether or not they exceed the posted speed limit. It is interesting that in slang, this process of clocking motorist's rate of speed is sometimes referred to as "taking pictures." Those with gay experience point their "gaydar" at people in everyday life, taking their picture to determine whether or not they

exceed the limits of culturally constituted bodies. The radar/gaydar metaphor is apt in another way too. With the naked eye, we cannot “see” speed as it is conceptualized and expressed using interally quantified, numeric signifiers. As well, we cannot really see gay desire and identities unless they are performed on the body. However, the male body in particular is closeted in dominant social relations and most gay men choose to comply with appearances that the closeted male body requires. Therefore, “gaydar” seems to be a queer gaze that requires special cultural equipment in order to see the invisible. This special equipment is a form of knowledge that allows the cognoscenti to see what others cannot with the naked eye. The gaze seems intensified with gay experience and as Meduza notes, this intensification is taken “a step further” by the drag queen, who knows even better the extent to which appearances are artificial, regardless of how they function to naturalize bodies and identities.

Moreover, Meduza’s experiences as a drag performer reveal the dynamics of social interaction as they are sharply focused in performance contexts. He noted that with performing, “you get to push buttons and see how people react.” Schechner (1988) proposed that performance contexts provide a socially controlled environment in which interactions that are problematic in everyday life are given a forum for expression and contemplation. Meduza is allowed by the conventions of performance in our culture to push buttons that it may not be socially acceptable to push in everyday life. As a performer, he gains access to the privilege of seeing how people react to stimuli that they may not usually confront day to day. In this respect, Meduza turns the table on the gaze. The spectator becomes the object of the performer’s gaze. Perhaps as well, Meduza gains a special understanding of what the buttons are and what responses they elicit in everyday life, by seeing how they function in the controlled performance setting.

All in all, Meduza’s drag discussions on identity and feelings about the self show how drag experience intensified his own engagements with the gaze and as well, how this experience lead to recognitions that American culture relies on constructed appearances--pure artifice--to

locate what it conceives to be real and natural. Furthermore, his perceptions of audience reaction during drag performances highlight the dynamics of interpersonal exchange in everyday life where we learn which buttons to push and which buttons should not be pushed. For example, most people know that they must be careful about where and when they push the sex and gender buttons that interrogate compulsory heterosexuality and its gendered appearances. How people react to such stimuli can be very risky to the social performer who dares push these buttons, especially in every day life.

### **Barbie Star: Performing a Borderline**

Barbie Star makes identifications with femininity similar to others in the Haus of Frau. He perceives his drag persona to be quite womanly. He also makes a literal connection between drag appearances (on the body) and how he feels, an experience most presume to come from within. Barbie acknowledges feeling “very comfortable” in drag and suggested that constructing a drag queen appearance did not seem much different to him than constructing his appearance as a male in everyday life. Perhaps this is so because his involvement with feminine gear stems from early childhood.

Barbie Star locates his involvement with feminine accouterment, including clothing and makeup as beginning in his earliest childhood. However this was “playing dress up” as opposed to doing drag. The difference between doing drag and playing dress up required consciousness resulting from social experience. We can distinguish Barbie’s drag as something separate from playing dress up. It was when Barbie emerged as a drag queen with a separate name to signify him as someone separate from the boy he presented in everyday life that he stopped playing dress up and started doing drag. Barbie first emerged one Halloween as Anti-Barbie, a protest against commercial beauty. By this time Barbie had so much experience and

skill with makeup that he was able to create a borderline “between pretty and scary” that “wound up looking pretty good.” This borderline between pretty and scary is an aesthetic transgression that mirrors another transgression that Barbie made. Drag queens like Barbie perform this transgression, a borderline in between male and female. I analyze Barbie’s drag discourse at first according to chronology then I analyze the discourse according to issues.

Barbie Star’s involvement with drag started as an involvement with feminine accouterment and generating feminine appearances through playing “dress up” in his early childhood.

**oh when I was a kid  
I used to dress up  
so**

I asked Barbie “Did you think of it as drag then?” He said:

**no it was just dress up**

To the question, “So what kind of dressing up did you do?” he gave the following reply.

**women’s clothes  
stuff like that**

I asked Barbie what was it about women’s clothes that he found so compelling. He noted:

**um  
just the change of character  
just be able to change appearance**

His involvement with makeup and feminine clothing were not a problem in his home. Therefore, it was not until he was approaching adolescence that he came to understand that his dressing up in feminine gear and painting his face were socially taboo. It was not until he understood these taboos that he conceived his involvement with the trappings of feminine appearance as doing drag. Barbie, as a separate drag persona with a name, emerged sometime after his recognition that our culture requires males to express masculinity in exclusion of femininity.

### **Anti-Barbie and Commercial Beauty**

Barbie’s special awareness of how gendered appearances were manufactured made him also aware of the ways that women’s beauty is also manufactured. Barbie Star possessed remarkable cultural awareness as an adolescent . His astute observations about feminine beauty lead him to create “Barbie” in the first place. Barbie still sees the appearances that he generated as Anti-Barbie to be a borderline between conventionally beautiful feminine

appearances and a scary, “Bride of Frankenstein” visage. Moreover, he saw how insane it was that Mattel’s Barbie doll was a representation of the female body that American culture offers to young girls. The Barbie doll is a form of monster. The Mattel Barbie’s physique with its large, upturned rigid conical breasts; elongated legs; tiny feet permanently bearing the rise of a high-heeled shoe; broad, square shoulders; and an unreasonably tiny waist bears no real similarity to the proportions of the human body.

**I first came up with Barbie  
as um a Halloween  
um  
Halloween one year**

**guess I was 14 or 15  
and it was the Anti-Barbie  
the exact opposite of the Mattel or commercial beauty  
and all those things**

**and I found  
by doing it  
that I was  
actually looking pretty good**

**you know  
and not not  
not so much scary  
like I could do this scary look**

**but I could also do sort of a real thing  
at the same time  
and get away with being  
um  
borderline**

To get at what Barbie meant by “borderline,” I asked Barbie to tell me what Anti-Barbie looked like.

**um**  
**dark dark eyes**  
**runny black make-up**  
**smearred red lipstick**

**yeah**  
**really fucked up**  
**but pretty**  
**you know**  
**not**  
**not too garish**

**but um**  
**you know**  
**a good balance**  
**it was a good balance between**  
**pretty and scary**

Barbie demonstrated a very sophisticated engagement with aesthetic rules when he created his “borderline” appearances. What is a borderline but an “in-between?” Barbie’s engagement with aesthetic borderlines of feminine appearance are quite remarkable for their relation to the gender borderlines that he crossed in creating his drag appearances. It is as if he did surface damage to the conventional feminine beauty that he could materialize on his body to open up a space within which he could make cultural sense of his gender crossing. This borderline that Barbie performs, as an in-between--a limen showing how aesthetics and gender are mixed up in a culture that conflates beauty with the feminine.

Anti-Barbie metamorphosed into Barbie Star. I have many recollections of the more refined glamour that Barbie Star conjured. However, I have one recollection of the Anti-Barbie as she reappeared for a Christmas party at Hermaphrodite’s home in 1992. Barbie was no more than 21 at the time and arrived wearing a very short, cut-off, un-hemmed, micro-mini

kilt in a Catholic school-girl plaid. He teamed this rough mini kilt with black leather motorcycle jacket, Dr. Marten's combat boots and fish net stockings--sort of a post-punk look. He looked like a teenaged "bad girl" with an extraordinary sense of personal style. The net effect of this visage was astonishing and quite beautiful. His wig was teased into frizzy, short ponytail puffs, one behind each ear. The part was set in his wig using multiple bobby pins that contrasted with the wig. He kept these bobby pins, which stylists conventionally hide beneath hair, visible on the surface of his coiffure. Yet his make-up was absolutely flawless, bearing the sheen and finish of an haute glamour 1930's movie siren. Barbie achieved his face with expensive cosmetics. He had bright, shiny red lips painted with Christian Dior's red lipstick, named "Tres Tres," the French for "very, very." His eyes were lined with Shishedo's black, peel-off eyeliner. He used equally expensive foundations and face powder. His eyebrows were plucked off and re-drawn in the thinnest of eyebrow pencil lines.

### **Makeup and Giving Face**

Barbie bought the highest quality makeup and probably demonstrated the most expertise of any member of the Haus of Frau in painting faces. He believed that the better the makeup tools and the makeup itself, the better the possible finished product. Currently, he prefers Mack cosmetics. But indeed, who would know better than he about makeup? By the time I had met Barbie in 1992, he had been doing drag in public for seven years and had been experimenting with makeup since before he reached puberty. He was permitted to use makeup in his home. I had remarked to Barbie about his Anti-Barbie look, "It sounds like you had enough skill at doing the real [making up like women] that you could play around with it." I asked then, "Had you had a lot of skill with makeup by that point?" Barbie replied:

**yeah  
I've always done makeup  
and played with it**

**when I was little kid  
I was always allowed to express that**

**you know  
in my family  
it was always okay**

**to um  
to paint my face**

**and I would get ready right next to my mom  
you know she would be getting ready to go out  
and I would dive into the makeup**

For Barbie, makeup is the visual thrust of his appearance. For him, it is all about giving face. Drag queens recognize the importance of their appearances and behavior to social interaction by referring to their appearance and behavior as what they are “giving.” I recall Barbie in a quandary about how he would appear for one particular night on the town when he exclaimed, “What am I going to give tonight?” Certainly he was thinking about makeup as this is his primary concern with drag appearance.

**um for me  
its all in the make-up  
and once the makeup goes on  
then the character comes out**

**its not really the clothes  
or shoes  
or even so much the hair  
because I wear wigs all the time  
its definitely the makeup**

Barbie notes that there is a character who “comes out” when he puts makeup on his face. It is a magical transformation that takes place when he performs aesthetic operations on his facial surfaces. Barbie seems to understand the character as residing within him, but the character gains expression after he marks his face with femininity. I asked Barbie Star, “How he felt when in drag?” He responded:

**um**  
**um**  
**(laughs)**  
**pretty cunty**  
**(chuckles)**

**um**  
**I definitely feel**  
**different**  
**just by seeing myself in the mirror**  
**I feel different**

**even like looking at those pictures (of himself in drag)**  
**its different**  
**it’s a whole different thing**

**um**  
**I like myself in drag**  
**I feel really comfortable in drag**  
**its um**

**I feel like I can express a part of me that I can’t express**  
**in this drag (he is referring to his everyday male appearance)**  
**it’s all drag**

This series of stanzas that begins with Barbie claiming that he feels “pretty cunty” in drag illustrates functions of the gaze through which Barbie Star apprehends himself. He chooses a term that refers to women’s genitalia to signify his perceptions of a feminine self. Thus he

conflates his drag experience with sex organs that he does not possess and understands these feminine feelings as difference--difference from the self he has come to present in everyday life.

The role of the gaze in these operations where Barbie recognizes difference is important. He noted that when he is in drag, he feels “different” just by looking in the mirror or seeing pictures of himself in drag. Drag seems to figure in Barbie’s consciousness along the lines of the gender binary where he is a male in most social transactions composing everyday life. When in drag he is something different that makes him feel feminine. Thus through doing drag, his feminine feelings emerge as a part of himself that he cannot otherwise express.

Barbie’s drag consciousness is unique where it is so much about makeup. The face performs a tropic function in the substitutions, transfers and equations that transform him into something different. This difference is manifest as the face is visually transformed. With this transformation, something “comes out” that he is not otherwise able to express, something that causes him to apprehend and understand his drag experience as a comfortable identification with woman through that which is undeniably feminine, her genitalia. Therefore, it seems that in making up his face, Barbie turns his face into a metaphorical vagina. However, this conflation does not seem possible were it not for the mass cultural associations of makeup with women.

Barbie makes an explicit identification with women when he puts on makeup and does drag. Since Barbie did drag from earliest childhood, I sought what distinguished his playing dress up from doing drag and what the implications of these distinction might hold for identity. Barbie obviously made an identification with his mother when he was right beside her making up his face. He also made identifications with women by virtue of the appearances he would construct to get into clubs when he was underage, as young as 14. In the following passage, Barbie tells us about when it was that he began to understand that his “playing dress up” had become doing drag. I asked Barbie when he first perceived what he was doing as drag. He answered:

**well  
that would have been when I first started going out to clubs  
I would get into drag to get myself in  
Signals stuff like that  
um  
guess that**

**yeah I was definitely underage 14-15  
trying to get into a club**

**I had a fake ID of a Puerto Rican girl**

I asked here, “So you were going for realness?” He continued:

**yeah  
realness in a sense  
Well I had my own hair  
and I was really smooth  
I didn’t have too much facial hair at that age**

**and I had friends who were girls  
so I borrowed their mini skirts and what not  
put on a little lipstick  
and hit the street**

Barbie essentially impersonated the woman on his fake ID. As well, in donning the garb of girls he knew growing up, he made identifications with them as well. To get into nightclubs, Barbie marked himself with femininity so that he would be identified as female by others. In adolescence, Barbie used appearance to “pass” as a woman and as a young adult rather than a boy too young to enter an after hours nightclub. So initially, it was that Barbie did drag to gain admittance to clubs that he otherwise could not.

### **Feminine Exaggerations**

Barbie identified with women and was inspired to do drag by their appearances and

behavior in everyday life and on television. Barbie makes another interesting identification with women and further illustrates his unique take on drag in response to my question, “How did you learn to do drag?”

**um  
watching Carol Burnett  
Lilly Thomlin  
not so much  
I guess that not really  
I mean that’s drag in a sense  
but  
and not watching any men do it**

Barbie doing drag was inspired by comedienne. There was no drag queen that inspired him or figured in his becoming a drag queen. What appealed to Barbie about Carol Burnett was the same thing that appealed to Hermaphrodite about Cher. Cher and Carol Burnett both had variety shows in which they played numerous characters weekly. These comedienne changed wigs, costumes and created very different characters with funny ways of walking and talking. While at the same time, the viewers knew that it was still Cher or Carol Burnett performing her comedy sketches; there was usually a spill-over effect where the character was marked by the actor’s persona. In doing drag, Barbie was inspired by humor and beauty. I asked what sort of women inspired him to do drag and he offered the following response:

**comedic women and really beautiful women  
you know  
yeah I guess Carol Burnett inspired me as a child  
the humor of it**

**but no woman really seriously  
I see a woman and I think I could pass as her  
or I could be do that better than her  
but I mean that’s too easy**

**you know I guess  
fashion models too**

**really  
really beautiful women  
you know but that's just a surface beauty  
that sort of thing**

Barbie's drag is inspired by women performing femininity in everyday life and by the exaggerated slapstick spoofs of femininity that Carol Burnett performed on her weekly variety show. As well, he was inspired by fashion models who performed an exaggerated femininity. Barbie makes a connection with this exaggeration also through his identification with the Mattel Barbie doll. Barbie recognizes the exaggerations that compose femininity in the cultural imaginary and used these exaggerations to compose himself as Barbie Star. For example, Barbie acquired a pair of false breasts rather late in his drag career. Yet his discourse about these false breasts shows his understanding of ideal femininity as artifice and the extent to which this artifice relies on exaggeration.

**... I get no thrill from women's under things  
well if I don't need to wear a bra  
why would I  
when I can just tape those titties on  
or glue them on  
eyelash glue will hold anything up for a night  
yeah I've never worn women's under wear or anything like that**

**yeah  
just those breasts that Nonami gave me  
they are perky**

**yeah  
they're off a blow-up doll  
so I thought that tied in with the Barbie thing**

**they were cut off a blow up doll**

**they are inflated  
a rubber sculpted  
cut off**

**I still have them  
they're sick  
I never wore titties until them  
'til I got those**

### **It's All Drag**

Barbie's understanding of all appearances as constructed is apparent where he referred to the appearance he was performing at his interview as "drag" and proclaimed that "it's all drag." Barbie plays with appearance regularly when he portrays himself as a man in everyday life; he often wears wigs, dons a little makeup and has at least two facial piercings. Sometimes he puts rings or studs in his piercings, other times he chooses not. His tongue is also pierced. His own hair is cut short, but he often works hair pieces into the longer hair on the top of his head. He can appear to have ash brown dread locks one day or a short fluorescent green mohawk the next.

There is a connection between Barbie's perception of all constructed appearances as drag and his career in cosmetology. He is a hairdresser and a commercial stylist, doing hair and makeup for fashion photo shoots. He makes the connection between his doing drag and doing hair and makeup for others as a way of putting others in drag.

**by doing drag and doing makeup  
really got me into  
you know doing the hair and makeup  
that's what really got me into doing hair and makeup**

**I guess I'm just um**

**outside of doing drag  
just um**

**I do a lot of hair and make-up  
um  
be creative  
uh so**

**its pretty much  
put a lot of people in drag  
pretty much  
when I'm not doing it myself**

Finally, it seems that Barbie's career in hair and makeup has become more important than doing drag himself. As well, this following passage reveals how Barbie is more recently making sense of his drag experience.

**And I really got it all out  
not so much by doing drag**

**just like  
okay I have this talent  
so  
I focused all this time on myself  
let's see what I can do for other people**

**that really sort of relieved  
I didn't need to get in 'em and paint my face**

**I can  
do someone else  
and make them  
and by doing them**

**make them feel prettier  
or whatever**

**office women or secretaries  
or whoever my client is**

This last passage suggests that at one time, Barbie really needed to do drag but that it relieved this urge when he began to focus his attention on making other people up professionally. Thus it seems that Barbie found a more socially acceptable way to express or “let out” his femininity, one that can help him earn a living. Doing drag for Barbie was the manifestation of an aesthetic drive that he merely shifted in focus to create a professional career for himself.

### **I See You Seeing Me**

Barbie’s concerns for appearance resulted in a special understanding of how appearances are constructed and function in social transactions and were apparent throughout his drag discourse. This final passage from Barbie Star summarizes how he understands the role of appearance in social transactions. I asked him if doing drag changed the way he saw the world. He responded:

**uh  
in a sense yeah  
I’d say  
being able to change the way you look  
definitely changes the way you see things  
just by people seeing you differently and behaving differently around you**

The role of appearance to the gaze, and the gaze’s functioning in social relations is apparent. The reciprocal social relations that people find themselves in with others is emphasized where Barbie notes that it “definitely changes the way you see things, just by people seeing you differently and behaving differently around you.” Barbie recognizes that in drag he is seen differently and that as a result, people behaved differently around him. The chain of social interactions surrounding doing drag ended up changing the way Barbie saw the world. He

recognized that changing appearances changes how people see you and behave around you.

### **Nonami Flowers: No Pain, No Pretty**

Nonami used the adage, “no pain, no pretty” to express his perceptions of the physical and psychological discomfort that conventional gender roles and appearances place on women. He identified with the plight of women in American society every time he constructed his drag queen appearances due to the physical discomfort it caused him. It seems that his recognition of women’s oppression in American society preceded his donning feminine gear. However, as he began developing his drag persona, his perceptions became more astute.

In developing his drag persona he called upon the images of Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. Where he invoked images of Dietrich and Garbo in his own imagination, Nonami perceived these women to embody the elements of a particular female archetype he calls the “tortured goddess.” He understood the tortured goddess to reside in a gilded cage. The gilded cage is a metaphor for the social position that women come to occupy when they successfully conjure feminine allure to the point that it winds up confining them. Dietrich and Garbo’s star images became more important than who these women might have been in actuality. Their respective mythic personae trapped them behind public expectations.

Similarly, Nonami’s drag discourse emphasizes his perceptions that people become trapped behind gender expectations in everyday life. Based on this perception, Nonami asserts that the demands for gender conformity in American society do not “allow people to be people.” Nonami expressed feelings of alienation and contempt for American society because it fails to value women, gay men and differences among people. He wound up using his drag performances to call attention to some failures of the explicit egalitarian project that Americans

presume to underlie their society.

Analyzing Nonami's drag discourse begins by tracking down the origins of his involvement with drag. As with the rest of the Haus of Frau, I asked questions trying to

locate what made Nonami aware that doing drag was possible. Nonami tells where and when he was first exposed to drag:

**Dear God  
I can't remember back that far  
um  
I have no idea  
I mean nothing that I can say  
it was [not] some sort of apexical  
kind of illuminating experience  
where some sort of bubble went off  
and said oh drag  
you know I  
I can't recall or pinpoint anything like that**

**I mean I always wanted to try dressing up in women's clothing  
when I was younger  
before I even knew I was gay  
Bugs Bunny would probably be the first thing  
you know Bugs Bunny putting on dresses and kissing Elmer Fudd  
but**

**you know  
real like  
other male dressing drag queen type people  
you know I'm sure I've seen it somewhere along the line  
either on MTV or television or some magazine**

**I don't know where  
you know  
cause I didn't really go out to clubs a lot  
I didn't really go out to a club until I was in my early 20s  
and I think I had done drag prior to that  
I guess you know just on television**

Nonami first did drag alone, at home, in his late teens or early 20s. Nonami did not

have a drag queen name until his involvement with the Haus of Frau began at age 29. Until then, he billed himself as “John Flowers” using the pseudonym that he came to use in everyday life. When he began performing in Baltimore’s gay bars, there was pressure to have a “drag name” that would convey a womanly identity to the audience. Nonami, or “No-namey” indicated his refusal to be named or marked by the conventions of drag performance within Baltimore’s gay bars. Without a name, one is not a social object; he is disconnected, alienated, cut off. There is an isolation theme that streams through Nonami’s drag discourse. This isolation becomes clear as this analysis unfolds.

An important social consequence of Nonami’s refusal to take a “real” drag name is also represented by this name, which is not a name. In the French language, *non ami* translates to the English for “no friend.” In this context, Nonami’s moniker alludes to the outcast status that radical drag queens occupy among female impersonators, Baltimore’s community of gay men, and in heterosexual society. Nonami learned the meaning and importance of *non ami* from his then roommate Laure Drogoul. Laure’s father is French and she speaks French fluently. It is also remarkable that Nonami is nearly anagrammatic and phonemically related to *anomie*, a word representing a state of lawlessness. Indeed, Nonami’s drag did break many of the implicit and explicit codes that condition gendered appearances in everyday life and drag performances within Baltimore’s gay bars. We can make the connection here between experiences causing lawless/friendless states of being and the performative intentions of the drag queen that Nonami cultivated.

Nonami’s earliest forays into drag were a solitary experience. These early experiences were characterized by alienation because he knew no one else doing drag, and he perceived himself at variance with the heterosexual code that would focus his desires toward women. For Nonami, his first doing drag was a way for him to express and understand his sexual desire for men. When I asked him what first made him want to do drag and perform he answered:

**I just always wanted to do drag  
I don't know  
um**

**there was never a big plan behind it  
it was just something that I wanted to experience  
and see how I would look as the opposite sex  
maybe  
as a kind of young and unknowledgeable homosexual  
I associated it  
my homosexuality more with being a female  
than with being a gay male  
you know what I mean**

**so I guess I wanted to look more like a woman  
so I would be more appealing to men  
because men were who I was attracted to  
and growing up in dominant society and culture  
I thought oh I should be a woman not a man  
because I liked men so**

Nonami reveals his earliest thought process concerning doing drag as a means to represent his desires. Although Nonami acknowledges that when he was younger he was an “unknowledgeable homosexual,” his observation that our appearances establish sexual relations was very astute. Although he initially associated his sexual desires for men with being a woman, there are other ways in which he identified with women that were likely to influence his doing drag. When I asked what the relationship was between his cross dressing and who he was, Nonami Responded:

**it is who I am  
I am in touch with my feminine side  
I grew up with three sisters and a mother  
and even our German Shepherd was a girl**

It seemed easy for Nonami to locate and recognize his “feminine side” with so many women around. Spending so much time in the company of women, Nonami seems to have recognized his similarities to them in terms of gender relations where women are sex objects for men. In making cultural sense of his earliest recognitions of sexual desire for men, Nonami equated himself with women. Later, identifications with women became more sophisticated as they became inflected with cultural critique.

### **No Pain, No Pretty**

I had not known Nonami very long before he shared this adage that seemed to program his drag appearances in the early 1990's. “No pain, no pretty” is also his synopsis of women’s gendered appearances under compulsory heterosexuality. This synopsis is embedded in a drag discourse where Nonami discussed what he was trying to tell people when he did drag and performed. Nonami explicates his doing drag and drag performances and emphasizes his difference from Baltimore’s community of traditional female impersonators in telling about his drag:

**when I started performing I was almost doing it in a mockery of what is known  
as female impersonators men who dress as women or famous women  
like somebody who is doing Cher or Diana Ross directly  
and they have a tendency that culture to take themselves extremely serious  
trying to look and be like women**

**and that always just struck me very odd  
that you know these are men trying to  
who are very strict about trying to be very female  
and they take themselves very seriously  
and it’s just like I never really got that because it’s just like you are a man in a  
dress**

**and the way that women are subjected to in society  
I guess I don’t know I just found it a very twisted thing  
so when I started doing drag it was sort of in a mockery of that**

Nonami puts forth Baltimore's female impersonation community as a context against which his doing drag and drag performances emerged. Nonami implicitly recognizes female impersonators as "others" composing a "not me" that helps him articulate and understand himself as a drag queen. Every member of the Haus of Frau constructed female impersonators as a "not me." The distinctions that Haus of Frau drew between themselves and female impersonators function as an identity border construction that I will talk about in greater detail in the next chapter when I discuss Frau aesthetics. It seems that the most tangible differences between Frau and female impersonators were aesthetic differences. Nonetheless, Nonami demonstrates a political awareness and engages a feminist critique that seems absent from female impersonation performances. Nonami begins to speak of the inequities that women suffer in dominant social relations and how gendered appearances reinforce these inequities.

**but then I realized I was almost mocking what women have to put themselves through  
and then I had a saying "no pain no pretty" which really and then I applied that  
really actually came from myself torturing myself to do drag  
to do my performances you know putting on ..**

**well, putting on several corsets or girdles  
inch long eyelashes that are glued to lids of your eyes so you you know  
and a lot of people who do drag or radical drag or you know  
what I would consider an individual expression of art  
of you know of part of yourself uh**

**people who dress in that manner  
which is referred to drag or radical drag  
you know they all I think a lot of people do that**

**high heels I mean you know that's a torturous device even for women  
but you know because men don't wear them  
they don't really even you know it doesn't even cross a man's mind**

**about what it would be like to have to wear a pair of high heels all day  
and the depending on the style of the shoe it can be very distressing to a person**

(sort of laugh)

Two important points surface in the previous passage. First Nonami emphasizes his doing drag as art. He locates the source for doing drag as part of himself that comes out, an expressive gesture that gives form to desires and makes reference to his understandings of the world. Secondly, Nonami made a connection between what he “put himself through” in doing drag and what women put themselves through to appear attractive and approximate the ideals of feminine beauty in American culture. Here, although his intentions are ironic, Nonami uses the same symbolic terms as women might in their ordinary gender performances. Moreover, Nonami illustrates that it is no great leap from the wiles of art, to the artifice of gender. As he notes:

**so I guess I you know I would hope that people get some sense of irony  
and sarcasm and cynicism from what I am doing  
It’s sort of like a tortured goddess  
I think is what I my overall**

**you know yeah its great  
look here I am  
I am very tall I am very thin  
I am you know I’ve got these great bone structures in my face  
I got the big long hair you know it’s a wig**

**and it’s also about applying all this stuff to say  
that what you are dictating to women  
is also sort of creating a monster  
you are not allowing people to be  
you are not taking people for people**

**I mean you know you see deodorant commercials  
and toothpaste and mouthwash commercials on TV that are like  
well if you don't use a mouthwash you can obviously not be a part of society  
so it's attacking or bringing into the realm of discussion or making people a  
little more aware of  
the over commercialization of society  
and the torture it places upon women for you know most, mostly**

Nonami's discourse outlining the message he intends to bring to people who see him do drag and perform is saturated with his awareness that American culture places supreme importance on appearance. Mass marketing intervenes in macro-social experience by deploying discourses that dictate proper appearances and olfactory emissions from the body. Nonami alludes that women are extensively commodified through the products that commercials encourage them to consume so that they might become or maintain themselves as desirable social/sex objects, that in turn can be used to sell other products. Note how often an attractive woman is used in advertising to sell products.

The commodity metaphor seems quite apt since it is that ideally, women are completely packaged in American culture. Nonami stated that the operations that he performed on his body to create drag appearances were aimed toward creating an awareness of the coercion that is apparent in women's gendered appearances and the physical discomfort this packaging requires. As well, Nonami notes that society seems to require much less discomfort of men in constructing their daily appearances. In the previous stanzas as well, Nonami illustrates how culturally imperative gender images circulate. Mass mediated advertisements seem to be a primary disciplinary force that promulgates the culturally required images by which one adjusts and maintains personal images. One does this to appear as a real, acceptable person. Yet this engagement with culturally acceptable images, when taken to the extreme creates a monster.

Especially on the part of women, the ideals of feminine beauty require so many operations on the body, that one might ultimately perform a "Bride of Frankenstein" metaphor.

Wonder Bras, breast augmentation, face lifts, extensive, liposuction, collagen lip implants, punishing diet and exercise regimes, tanning beds, bleached hair and heavy makeup are popular operations performed on the body to bring one's appearance in accord with the culturally approved images of ideal feminine appearance. Many of these procedures are quite painful and they are mostly expensive.

### **The Tortured Goddess Archetype**

The tortures manifest as women discipline themselves in accord with culturally ineligible images of feminine appearance is two-fold. As Nonami noted, there is much physical discomfort involved in creating these appearances. But there is also a torture associated with emphasizing appearance at the expense of the person. Nonami stated that embrace of these social imperatives is “not allowing people to be.” Embracing these imperatives precludes “taking people for people.” Nonami seems to allude that the importance American society places on constructed appearance ignores people as thinking, feeling organisms. Likewise, his discourse in the previous stanzas suggests that people may have thoughts, feelings, desires and therefore, identities that do not conform to the sex and gender narratives. Nonami located the tortured goddess archetype and discussed how the social expectations projected on to women, when followed to their most extreme and logical end, winds up isolating and confining the tortured goddess to a gilded cage. This cage becomes more corrosive and limiting over time. He describes the drag character he portrays in the following passages. He shows in these passages how he engages the tortured goddess archetype in creating his drag character. In the course of analysis on this tortured goddess discourse, I draw connections between the tortured goddess archetype, drag queens and gay men.

Nonami describes his drag persona:

**Well the character that I do**

has a tendency to be like I said earlier to be a tortured goddess  
uhm  
you know I I  
can you know I uhm

I'm attracted to the uhm  
the mythology of Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich  
and you know their performances  
and you know their stories

about how even when they were on their death beds  
and I think Garbo was on dialysis  
and she was having like a fifth of vodka and a fifth of gin  
sent up every day  
or something like that

you know there's just something very appealing  
about  
because that's sort of the hilt of of  
what women are --- kind of subjected to

you know here you have these great beauty queens  
these silver goddesses  
and their  
the ends of their lives  
are spent locked up in these little New York apartments  
gittin' wasted (laugh)

because you know  
because what the hell else are you gonna do?

you can't go out on the street  
you can't be a person anymore  
you've given that up for this this being a character

and  
so  
my character  
draws from that

**I like I'd like I'd you know  
I'm touched I guess a lot by that sort of position**

**being in that sort of position  
uhm  
you know its very bittersweet in a way**

Nonami offers the life courses of Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo as the logical progress narrative for women who epitomize cultural ideals of feminine beauty and appearance. It is apparent that these women were more or less confined by what was projected upon them by those who apprehended them via the gaze. The more intensely people project their fantasies on another that they gaze upon, the less leeway there becomes for a person to perform personal realities that might exceed the limits of that fantasy. When one becomes the screen on which people project their fantasies, these fantasies more or less contain that person. The gendered social being becomes a screen on which people project their personal and culturally reproduced fantasies. These fantasies envelops one and establishes the boundaries of the body and one's being. These fantasies establish people as tangible social objects in the eyes of others. Note here that the repertoire of cultural images residing in the cultural imaginary are indeed fantasy, having as Silverman (1992) notes, only virtual existence. In the case of Garbo and Dietrich, their gender performances were so consonant with the culturally intelligible images composing an archetype, that they became the archetype. Popular culture abstracted them to such an extent that they de-materialized. In effect, they became more virtual than actual. Therefore, there was no room in the public imagination for them to be human. Their personal expressions, which might discredit or conflict with that archetype, were erased in discursive reproductions that portrayed them to mass culture.

The way that Nonami understood the dilemma that Dietrich and Garbo faced in becoming the ideal, show that women occupy a location in social arrangements that stands as a "no win situation." Women might engage feminine archetypes in creating their personal

images and gain approval for doing so. However, they are then discounted from other possibilities by those who gaze upon them and project a whole sex kitten or sex object persona upon them. This projection makes little or no room for intelligence or subjectivity. For example, Marilyn Monroe was well read, had political views and sang quite well in her musical pictures. However, she noticed that her body and its appearance were all that concerned the public (Time-Life Publications, 1969-70).

The tortured goddess archetype which captured Nonami's imagination really summarizes the plight of women in dominant social relations. Presuming that advertisements across the mass media, movies, and television programming present culturally intelligible thus culturally approved images of women to our culture, it seems then, that women are first and foremost the object of male desire in procreative paradigms. Thus they are merely a screen on which heterosexual men project their desires and their bodies and hence become mere receptacles for male pleasure. Women's appearances isolate women and place them "upon a pedestal" that men might reach when they "get it up." But women are confined to that pedestal in the cultural imaginary, regardless of their thoughts, feelings and desires to the otherwise. When stepping off the pedestal, women fall into what Butler (1993) terms the zone of cultural unintelligibility.

Where Garbo and Dietrich seemed larger than life, so too were the social dynamics that conditioned their experiences. Garbo and Dietrich seem to be hyperbolic manifestations of women's location upon a pedestal. The mass public projected their desires on them. They became confined by a desiring public who demanded more than one person can possibly provide. As these women aged, they went more and more into seclusion to escape the public's demands for the women they once were, or more convincingly seemed to be in their youths. I extrapolate from these most extreme circumstances that the gaze mediates, the dynamics of the gaze as it conditions women's experience in everyday life. Additionally, I draw the connection to gay experience when gay men like Nonami identify with the tortured goddess.

### **Identifying with the Tortured Goddess**

In this complicated relation to the gaze, gay men exceed the bounds of cultural intelligibility. In dominant social relations, the apparent gay man fails to perform his genitalia as they are culturally conceived. Yet in many situations, gay men must submit to the demands of compulsory heterosexuality and portray their genitalia *as if* they were geared toward vaginal penetration. When gay men do not portray themselves as if they were geared toward vaginal penetration, it is then that a different type of fantasy is projected on them. Instead of an archetype, the gay man is characterized by stereotypes that permit the viewer to overlook gay men as individuals with valid, unique thoughts, feelings and desires. The stereotype stigmatizes gay men and confines them like the pedestal confines women. It seems almost impossible to represent gay men outside of images composing the stereotype that people engage when they perceive a man as gay. Due to stereotypes in dominant social relations, gay men are more virtual than actual. Therefore, gay men are often conflated with the drag queen in the culturally imaginary, perhaps because drag queens are the most visibly queer of gay men. It is by visual discursive systems that one apprehends gender and sexual orientation. For the drag queen in particular, his failures to engage visual tropes referring to the heterosexual penis results in social circumstances similar to those of the tortured goddess, i.e., isolation.

The drag queen, like the tortured goddesses Dietrich and Garbo, become “things” in the cultural imaginary, rather than people. Social demands that men appear masculine and portray heterosexuality in their everyday appearances are overwhelming. To do otherwise is to be dehumanized. For this reason, many gay and bisexual men in the entertainment industries mostly conceal their sexual identities and do much to encourage the public presumptions that they are straight. The anonymous individual is every bit as subject to the demands of his public as a movie star. The drag queen, however, in breaking out of the confines of stodgy male performances, finds himself perhaps even more confined by a marginal social existence where people project negative values and meanings contained by drag queen/gay stereotypes to him.

There is an even more compelling connection between the tortured goddess archetype and the drag queen. The tortured goddess and the drag queen bear striking similarity by virtue of their relations to men. I presume a lot in speculating on Garbo and Dietrich's relations with men. I cannot guess what they really wanted out of life or from men. But I engage the compulsory heterosexuality narrative with its ideal of monogamous wedded bliss to show in metaphorical terms the connection and identifications that a drag queen can make with the tortured goddess archetype. Garbo and Dietrich died after several decades of seclusion and solitude. These women, who expertly constructed themselves as screens on which men projected their desires, became intimidating and somehow untouchable, perhaps by virtue of their perfection. The issue becomes who the person *really* was beneath the persona that was circulated by the public at large.

The drag queen might engage the tortured goddess since he, like she, is more or less removed from sexual transactions under ordinary social circumstances. The goddess becomes cordoned off from men when she most closely approximates the characters that she was expected to be. The drag queen becomes cordoned off due to other expectations. As Nonami noted in the last chapter, when gay men found out he was a drag queen, few would take the time to get to know him as a person. Their conceptions of a drag queen precluded further inquiry. Stigmatizing drag queens in this manner seems odd since drag performers have a scripted social role in the gay community. The drag queen's outcast status leads to low self-esteem and often, substance abuse within the gay community, which already has those problems due to its devaluation in larger society. The drag queen seems to be the distilled, focused spearhead of gay stereotypes and as Newton (1979) noted, the visible manifestation of gay stigma. Whereas, the tortured goddess is the distilled, focused spearhead of the woman archetype and one of the most visible manifestations of the expectations that confine women.

### **A Song of Suffering and Substance Abuse**

Nonami's identification with the tortured goddess is intersected with the chanteuse.

This intersection seems likely as it was that Marlene Dietrich was both movie star and chanteuse. The following passage illustrates how Nonami conceived the tortured goddess/chanteuse and located her in dominant social relations. It is fascinating in his previous discourses on the tortured goddess and in this following passage how elaborate his own fantasy is in conceptualizing these feminine archetypes and performing his identification with them. After Nonami related his belief that Marlene Dietrich and Greta

Garbo were alcoholics at the ends of their lives, I asked him, “So you think the persona you portray most of the time is somebody who is kind of a heavy drinker? He answered:

**yeah,  
a heavy drinker a heavy smoker  
a real boozy broad  
old smokey kind of cabaret chanteuse**

**who you know  
married a bottle of gin instead of a good man  
so uhm and that's that's you know  
that's what I like my character to be  
when I did my solo performances  
up until the Haus of Frau was formed that's pretty much what I did  
It was this boozy cabaret smokin' broad  
You know she was like this saggy stripper  
you know kind of worn out deadbeat stripper  
who you know  
really is not the type of person you want stripping in front of you  
with an open drink or anything**

**and you know my songs my chanteusian attempts  
where I use my own voice and use this very bad Euro-trashy kind of  
monotone voice to sing with  
with you know this horrible accent  
and a glass of booze  
you know booze or beer whatever in one hand and a cigarette in the other hand**

**and just sort of soft shouldering up there  
singing my all  
even though it was all god-awful**

**uh  
so that's what my character was more or less  
and who  
but it still had an air of glamour  
and you know there was still a sense of  
you I-I-I carried myself with my either  
like my head held high  
like you know I'm not beaten down so  
it wasn't just this drunk slumped over person that I was doing  
It was somebody who still had who's gutsy and still had you know still their  
edge**

**It was still a very you know  
its just that's they sort of chose  
to numb themselves to that  
you know  
that they were stuck in this basement dive singing  
and [that they were] a character [instead of a person] I guess**

In his own mind Nonami conceived his drag persona in an interesting way. He makes reference to a type of woman, “married a bottle of gin instead of a good man.” It is probably safe to assume that this type of woman married the bottle of gin by default. The bottle was there when a “good man” for whatever reasons, was not. The drag queen’s position in Baltimore’s community of gay men seems analogous. By performing an exotic femininity, the drag queen also becomes isolated from the “good men” among whom he might find a long term romantic partner. Alcohol abuse is common to drag queen experience.

As a drag queen, Nonami became and performed a “character,” much as he understands the chanteuse to be a character rather than a “real” person. But at the same time, he conceives this character as “a part of him.”

**I mean you know its yeah  
because the creature is a part of me  
you know  
somewhere deep down inside  
I'm this drunken smoky broad**

**I mean that's  
that's you know when you perform  
you always draw on things within  
to project or create that character  
so everything you, at least I feel  
everything you do is you  
you know**

In the following stanzas, Nonami explains how the alcohol consumption that accompanied his earlier doing drag meshed with his drag character.

**well my character  
that I've done  
or the staple, the root of my character  
I guess my character  
if it was like a tree  
there's one major trunk  
and there's a lot of branches coming off  
so it depends**

**you know  
the one I guess solid character that I am  
that all these other little characters  
come off of Uhm**  
[is the heavy drinking tortured goddess/chanteuse]

### **It's Just Me, or Is It?**

Nonami proclaims that donning and doffing gendered appearances have little bearing on

who he conceives himself to be. However, just as in Hermaphrodite's case, Nonami recognizes that there are tangible effects that result from his presentations of self in drag. The net result of these effects separates the drag queen from the person in everyday life. The consequences of social interaction that Nonami anticipates impel him to refrain from donning feminine garb except in those places where it socially permitted and expected. Nonami recognized the social pressures that required him to keep his male femininity hidden from many social transactions in everyday life. Therefore, the "just me" that Nonami proclaims is repressed. This series of passages begins with Nonami proclaiming his "just me" that resides in his consciousness, regardless of his appearance. However the power and influence that social interaction has over the self that one portrays is apparent as we move beyond this first passage. Nonami reveals how intimately appearance is related to his "feminine" self. He alludes that the social demands that he refrain from feminine appearances effectively prevent him from enjoying the power of honest self expression. He suggests that in some ways this repression is crippling. Whereas, his discourse shows how he is empowered by doing drag.

Nonami's identifications with women neither go beyond the tortured goddess/chanteuse archetypes. In earlier passages he located his femininity in his relations and identifications with women in his everyday life. Below he articulates his perceptions of similarity to them in thought processes and even down to the way he apprehends others via the gaze. I asked Nonami what the relationship was between his cross dressing and who he was. He responded:

**My relation between my cross dressing --**

**Um**

**it is who I am**

...

**I am in touch with my feminine side**

...

**I see my self in a relation**

**it's just a part of me  
being cross dressed is  
sort of like if I put on a business suit  
how does that um relate to who I am?  
it's just me in a business suit, it's just me in a dress**

Nonami makes important declarations that stand as identity documents in this passage. First, he relates his cross dressing to himself in a fundamental way when he declares “It is who I am.” He then goes on to clarify for himself and for me who indeed this cross dressing man is by proclaiming his connection to his “feminine side.” Thus he suggests his doing drag is his way of performing and expressing his “feminine side. But then, he seems to discount the importance of drag as a means of performing his femininity by stating that the relation of masculine or feminine garb to his being are “the same” in his eyes by stating “it’s just me in a business suit, it’s just me in a dress.” However and perhaps most importantly, the syntax in the last line of this last stanza stands as an equation that demonstrates how Nonami apprehends himself as a cohesive entity that remains unfazed by the donning and doffing of gendered garb.

Yet there are many ways in which Nonami’s recollections of interaction sequences in which he was performing a drag queen illustrate that the drag queen is very different from the “just me” dressed as a male in everyday life. When I asked Nonami how he saw himself in relation to the characters that he portrayed on stage, he stated:

**well I mean I do see myself a lot different  
um  
when I’m a character on stage or even  
you know just in drag or whatever its called  
um  
I’m a lot more outgoing  
I’m a lot more bawdier  
you know I’m more  
I would do things in drag that I would never think about doing not in drag**

I asked here, what kind of things? Then Nonami responded:

**just approach people  
total strangers  
um  
in almost uh um  
what's that I can't think of the word  
I wanna kind of uh  
only word I can think of is brutal**

Then I asked, during the performance? His reply was:

**no just in general  
I mean if you're wanderin' around or whatever  
I mean just the  
the transformation of going from being me in my house  
or my apartment to being me as a drag on stage**

**there are you know  
I just it because  
you are letting down certain inhibitions  
you're also gaining certain  
you know those inhibitions  
kind of give you make you something that you aren't normally  
does that make sense?  
or maybe its even the disguise that gives you some sort of**

Transforming one's appearance to perform male femininity through drag is revelatory. It makes claims about the male that are usually hidden and/or denied. Yet at the same time, there is the social psychological protection that altering appearance and disguising one's identity affords. In the traditional sense, disguise allows one to perform whatever actions presumably incognito. However, Nonami states in the next passage that people in Baltimore

knew who Nonami Flowers was and as well, that many knew who he was as a male in everyday life. Here I want to emphasize that for Nonami drag was not a disguise in the traditional sense because people knew who he was. Instead, it appears that donning wigs, makeup and feminine garb functioned like a psychic armor. The materiality of the drag accouterment and the actual “putting on” of wigs, makeup, false breasts, corsets and so on, enveloped Nonami’s body and formed an added protective barrier between himself and others.

But as well, the role of that appearance plays in projecting internal realities to the social viewer cannot be ignored. In the following passage it seems that Nonami locates his femininity as a source of strength and a dominant component of his psychic being. In this sense, doing drag allows him to project a “force field” that derives from his feminine side. Notably, he conceives this feminine side to have more power and volition than the male being that he is socially required to perform in everyday life. I presume Nonami’s male being was weak because it was culturally effaced. I also presume that Nonami’s discourse which equates drag empowerment with feminine power stem from drag’s protective disguise functions. Although Nonami acknowledged how appearing in drag loosened his inhibitions, he also remarked that everyone recognized him as the person he portrayed in everyday life. In fact ,for several years, he used the same name whether in drag or not. Doing drag did not make him incognito because people recognized him.

**yeah,  
but I mean people know who you are**

**well no I mean  
if people know me as Nonami Flowers  
and I’m in a purple wig with a red dress on  
they’re gonna know me as Nonami Flowers in that outfit  
just as well as they would know me as Nonami Flowers  
in a sequin gown with a long blonde wig**

**and you know  
I mean  
unless you're going into a strange bar or a strange area  
where you're not really known  
but in most cases  
Baltimore being having being a small community  
it's easy to be a big fish  
and therefore it was easier to be known  
a lot of people knew me in and out of costume  
so**

**you know  
a lot of people when they see me as a boy  
they think I'm very sweet and very nice  
and when I'm a drag queen  
they probably think I'm very obnoxious and very brassy  
because I'm not when I'm a boy**

**well you know and its probably different for everybody.**

**that's just for me that's the way it works  
I express the things that I don't  
you know I feel  
I have almost  
I have a lot more confidence in myself  
as a you know in drag**

**you know I feel  
my female sense is much more dominant than my male sense**

**like you know if I were a woman  
I'd probably be you know  
a real tough business woman  
but as a man  
I'm sort of this wishy washy artist person**

The complexities of drag experience are apparent in this last passage. These complexities have

much to do with one's relations to others. There were people who knew him as a drag queen and as a male in everyday life. Then there were people who might have known he did drag but really only knew him as the "sweet, nice boy" that he presented in everyday life. His presentation of self is necessarily fragmented according to varying zones of permissiveness and familiarity even though Nonami perceived himself as a cohesive entity, "just me in a dress." However, Nonami perceived the "just me in a dress" as more confident than the "wishy washy artist person" that he identified to be himself in everyday life.

### **Drag Evolutions**

Nonami noticed changes in his drag appearances and his feelings about doing drag over time. Much of his discussions about his core character as a "boozy smokey broad" stem from his drag performances in the late 1980s and early 1990s when his drag involvement was at its peak. He was in the process of re-evaluating his drag self when these interviews took place; Nonami was taking stock of his drag appearance and questioning who this drag queen was that he had become since the Haus of Frau dissolved. I asked Nonami what it was like when he first started doing drag. He replied:

**scary  
because you know  
I mean it was fun  
in a  
I guess exciting  
cause I think a lot of it I did at home  
and left [it] at home**

**I guess I didn't do a lot of drag from the house  
until I moved out  
I dressed strange  
but I wouldn't dress  
like you know  
with big tits  
and big wigs**

**and lipsticks and eyelashes  
because I lived rather far from the gay area to travel  
through the city that way**

**yeah  
and being that young  
it's not a catch a cab or ride a bus kind of an ensemble  
for me  
personally**

Once Nonami moved away from his parent's home, he relocated in Baltimore's gay ghetto and started going out in drag frequently.

**so it was  
you know you walking the streets  
even though it's a couple blocks  
you're still walking the streets  
and in way it was empowering  
I remember moments  
I remember walking home at 3 in the morning  
or something  
you feel kind of tough and invincible  
in all that regalia  
at least I did**

**you know walking through dangerous neighborhoods  
and you're drunk  
usually I was  
just  
but um  
it was fun  
it was exciting  
it was experimental**

**you know**

**I look back on it  
and the way that I first did drag  
and its  
really changed a lot  
and I don't necessarily know if that is good or bad  
but see it as I've grown  
I just see it as a different place  
maybe parallel to it  
but just different direction or something**

Nonami notices specific elements of his drag appearance which changed as he gained more experience constructing drag queen appearances:

**oh  
makeup and attitudes became more defined  
and refined and  
uh**

**less of a schleppe kind of appearance  
not necessarily more realistic  
but maybe more structured**

I asked, what do you mean schleppe - sloppy? He replied:

**sloppy  
due to  
in the sense of skill  
and refining my makeup techniques and things  
and as well as  
just the awkwardness of you know  
the transformation**

**I don't think you can just start getting in drag and automatically  
you're  
like**

**I don't know  
its just a growing process**

**so it all  
kind of unfolds  
as you do it**

Nonami tells us that a man just doesn't achieve what he wants the first time he does drag. It is a growing process that unfolds as one continues his drag involvement. It seems that the fun and excitement of doing drag stems for phases in one's life where doing drag is experimental. Once one does a certain amount of exploration, the novelty wears off. Just like new romances or moving to a different part of the country, drag is exciting at first. But as we become acquainted and master the idiosyncracies, we must find other ways to keep ourselves from boredom. Sometimes this works, other times it does not. Maintaining compelling interest and involvement in doing drag is complicated not only by fleeting novelty but also by factors that impact one's everyday life. When Nonami was giving his follow-up interview in February 1998, he expressed feeling at a loss for what to do with his drag because he no longer felt sure of *who* his drag queen self was. His intense involvement with doing drag had evaporated and in this lapse, his sense of who he was as a drag queen and what he wanted to express in and through doing drag were stymied. In the following passage, Nonami expresses his sense of disconnection for his drag persona, his seeming inability to locate his drag self contemporary to this interview.

**right and I think that's maybe one of the problems I'm having  
you know that I haven't really done it**

**you know you have these big time in the spotlight drag queens  
like Lipsinka and RuPaul and Lady Bunny  
and they seem to be very caricature  
and they do the same thing**

**and they've been doing the same thing for 10 years  
and I just don't feel**

**you know I'm not doing a character  
I'm not  
it's more of an um  
you know  
amoeba-ie kind of  
the surrounding is very soft and malleable  
so I don't know where it goes  
and I don't have a specific  
oh I'm going to be this one  
I'm going to be that redhead**

**so it's hard  
I don't know  
I'm like losing the character  
maybe  
or redefining**

Nonami proposes that it might have been easier for him to keep a handle on his character if he repeatedly engaged a solitary persona when he did drag. Earlier, Nonami conceived his “boozy, smokey broad” character to be the main trunk of his former drag persona, but that numerous characters he engaged branched off from this core persona. This multiplicity made it difficult for him to know who he was. In turn this drag queen identity confusion made it difficult for him to appear. He was not sure where the character was coming from, therefore he had difficulty materializing a drag queen self. I asked Nonami, “do you think if there was a character that you had a handle on it would be easier [to do drag]?” Nonami answers:

**right  
maybe  
I'm thinking  
I don't know**

**you know maybe if I said  
well it would give you something to develop**

**well maybe if I said  
I should do Carol Channing  
my character would be a Carol Channing-esque  
and every time I get dressed and go out  
wear some sort of little blonde wig and you know  
some sort of gaudy outfit**

**You know I'm not necessarily an impersonator  
but a caricature**

I then pointed out to Nonami that he had said there is a character that he identified with, a  
boozy smokey broad. He responded:

**yeah  
and I look back on that conversation**

**and like I say  
it just evolves  
I think that's what I was**

**but that's not  
because I don't drink like I used to  
and I shouldn't smoke**

**so  
those things  
I really did drink and smoke  
when I was that character**

**...**

**experiencing the realness of being drunk and smokey  
and in dress and high heels  
really throws you into that  
so it's almost real life experiential character**

**as opposed to I am an actor  
and I'm going to act like a boozy smokey broad  
I was a boozy smokey broad**

Nonami notes that he does not drink and smoke like he used to and that these actions were integral to the drag persona that he had cultivated. Several factors contributed to his retreat from heavy drinking and smoking. Nonami is my life partner. In November 1993, he moved from Baltimore to join me residing in a small Appalachian town in Virginia. He moved from the social circumstances that seemed to permit doing drag and from the people with whom heavy smoking and drinking were so important. In addition, Nonami developed diabetes in January 1995. Therefore, added health concerns also contributed to his diminished involvement with smoking and drinking.

Economic circumstances also contributed to Nonami's retreat from his most intense involvement with doing drag. In Baltimore, his financial concerns were minimal while he shared an apartment with Laure Drogoul. The rent he paid toward their apartment did not increase over the 10 years that Nonami lived there. His share of the rent was minuscule. He did not have to pursue full time employment to survive. Therefore, he had much discretionary time and money with which to pursue drag. In the late 1980s, he also worked at a costume shop where he had virtually unlimited access to borrow rental costumes and extremely liberal discounts in acquiring fabric and makeup. The costume shop owners also permitted Nonami to construct his personal creations using their sewing and finishing equipment in his free time. Nonami explains:

**I worked in a costume shop  
I mean I could borrow anything  
out of 100s of 1000s of costumes**

**you know  
I could have been Little Bow Peep**

**or a Mermaid  
or Marie Antoinette  
or a Goldfish  
or a Gopher  
you know so**

**I don't know  
I'm sure there was some financial expense  
buying like trims that I didn't have  
cause you I**

**yeah makeup wigs  
but even there at the costume shop I could get wigs and makeup**

**and I got my makeup free cause I used theatrical makeup  
I could just walk over and take whatever I wanted**

**as far as you know  
colors and powders  
they never charged me  
it was a really sweet set up  
and they were really good to me when I worked there  
so  
you know  
resource wise  
I don't think it was as straining  
you know**

Along with the material resources which Nonami could mobilize toward doing drag, he acknowledges that time was also an issue. During his peak involvement with the Haus of Frau, doing drag consumed so much time that full time employment would have been impossible. Below, Nonami discusses the time commitment necessary to his peak involvement with doing drag along with the Haus of Frau.

**Time was constant  
cause  
if you were doing something that frequent**

**I hated being seen in the same thing twice  
and I would whip something up in the period of a couple hours  
and wear to a party or whatever it was  
and toss it in the closet  
and cut it into something else  
or give it to somebody else  
so I spent a lot of time sewing and styling wigs  
between gigs**

**and in a way it was kind of fun  
because it forced you to be creative  
forced me to be creative  
because it was like okay  
I have to have a new outfit next weekend**

**we're going to this party  
or doing this gig  
so**

**you know so  
it was  
I feel like  
as far as time  
that there was a lot spent  
in the high point of it**

I asked Nonami, "What made that cool down?" He answered:

**I moved out of state**

One final blow to Nonami's sense of self as a drag queen stems from his engagement with repertoires of culturally intelligible images that compose acceptable feminine appearances. Fashion is virtually equated with women's appearances in American culture and "fashionability"

stems from one's ability to appear in sync with the march of time. Nonami's fashion involvement was integral to his being, both as drag queen and as a person in everyday life. He purchased and read Vogue, Bazaar, Elle, W and other fashion publications. He designed and constructed feminine garb for himself, women, and other drag queens. He created lines of hats and apparel that he sold on consignment in fashionable Baltimore stores. However, when he moved away from Baltimore, he lost that urban connection to fashion. As well, his men's size 13 foot prevented him from keeping up with fashion. As he notes:

**with the kind of drag I did  
for the longest period of time  
it was in fashion  
so I wore these patent leather combat boots  
you know I got at Sunny Surplus for 12 bucks  
and I wore that with an evening gown or a circus costume  
whatever the costume of the time was  
I could wear those boots and they really worked  
because I always wore fishnets and it gave it that Chanel militant kind of a feel  
it has changed now  
at that point shoes were not that big of a deal**

As the 1990s progressed, the post-punk influenced combat boots gave way to high heeled platform shoes and sandals as fashion's choice footwear. Nonami has difficulties procuring such footwear at a reasonable price because his feet are so large. When he can obtain shoes this large at a reasonable price, he is still concerned about foot injuries because he now has diabetes. Nonami finds his shoe dilemma daunting in his efforts to construct cohesive, fashion forward, drag queen appearances that were his trademark. Further, Nonami's physique changed with age and the dietary adjustments that were necessary to restore and maintain good health. Drag queen appearance strategies which worked for him in the early 1990s no longer satisfy his own visual appraisal.

In sum, Nonami's retreat from his intense involvement with drag reveals how people change as times change. The impact of one's everyday life on doing drag seems to set the terms and conditions under which doing drag either flourishes or flags. Even more, the connections between social and economic circumstances and identity become clear as they impact doing drag. Nonami makes it clear that his retreat from doing drag represented a lost sense of self. His estrangement from the social, cultural and economic realities that made his doing drag possible caused him to no longer "know" who the drag queen Nonami was. The reciprocity of self to social reality in their mutual creations is apparent. Moreover, it reveals how appearance represents identity. Without identity, there is no position from which to appear.

### **Knowing and Understanding Drag Queen Experience**

The Haus of Frau performers discussed themselves and their respective doing drag in manners that revealed personal meanings. Yet their individual consciousnesses do not seem possible without their engagements with American culture's collective consciousness and its discursive systems of meaning. These systems of meaning produce social order by programming social expectations and therefore behavior. The disciplinary force of these social expectations was apparent as the Haus of Frau acknowledged the gender expectations that guided their appearance programs as men in everyday life. The disciplinary force of these gender expectations was also apparent in their discussions of femininity and the social demands they perceived American culture to place upon women. The Haus of Frau's drag discourses showed their engagements with gender archetypes that originate in America's collective consciousness. However, their discussions also revealed that consciousness is not static although it seems that it can be confined (and perhaps confounded) by preexisting personal and cultural desires.

The drag narratives that I presented from each research participant show how these men integrated drag identities into their broader senses of self. The process by which these men resolved the drag queen's place in their being showed that meanings and consciousness change with time. Doing drag meant something different when these men provided their interviews to me than it did when they were actively involved with the Haus of Frau in the early 1990s. Looking at this recent past through the "lens of the present" contemporary with their interviews provided me (and often the interviewees as well) with insights that could not have emerged otherwise. The potential for every moment of life to inform experience is revealed in how quickly these men evolved from who they were just five years ago!

Importantly, in the process of doing drag these men simultaneously unseated gender from its taken-for-granted position in most social arrangements but reciprocally they unseated themselves from status quo gendered identities. Because status quo gendered appearances function to establish identities by representing intangible attitudes, or inclinations to act such as sexual orientation, doing drag shatters ordinary social identities. It is possible to see the ways in which these research participants' earlier, much more intense involvement with doing drag represents a dismantling of status quo identities. One can see this dismantling as a phase, one of working through and coming to terms with their male femininity. Doing drag portrayed the identity work that they were going through in their respective consciousnesses. Doing drag less in the present suggested that their respective personal issues related to male femininity had been resolved or at least explored to an extent that the time and energy that once went into doing drag could be comfortably invested elsewhere. Yet these five men all continue to possess and maintain drag queen selves. For the Haus of Frau, one can assert "once a drag queen, always a drag queen" regardless of the time that lapses between one's subsequent experiences with doing drag. Part of what makes each of these men henceforth "always a drag queen" is the outsider's point of view, the consciousness they gained as the cultural "other." They gained a unique cultural perspective on gender by exploring possibilities that American culture aims to

keep “outside” dominant social relations. I gained privy to this consciousness where they shared their experiences in interview. In sum, Haus of Frau helped us understand them and ourselves in our respective, conflicted relations to American culture’s gender order.

### **Gazing at Gendered Identities**

Haus of Frau members’ respective discourses revealed the ways in which their consciousnesses were influenced by and sometimes mirrored American culture’s collective gender consciousness. The symbolic orderings that compose this gender consciousness relies on repertoires of approved (thus intelligible) images that stand as expectations for appropriate, authentic appearances and behavior. While at the same time, these images are used by individuals to compose their identities and likewise to determine the identity of others.

One’s identity is a form of consciousness about the self. However, Silverman (1992) notes that identity is not “real,” although it has a powerful hold on belief” (p.353). This “powerful hold on belief” that identity seems to occupy was apparent among most members of the Haus of Frau, especially concerning gender. Whether by choice, social demand or some combination of both, they were expressly invested in their identities as men in everyday life. But, numerous “virtual images” of femininity captured the imaginations of the Haus of Frau and became signifiers by which they came to understand themselves. Every member of the Haus of Frau directly acknowledged having a “feminine side,” except for Barbie Star, who noted that as humans, we all possess both masculine and feminine characteristics. Further, Meduza, Miss Piss and Nonami Flowers each cited specific feminine archetypes such as the bitch, diva and tortured goddess in constructing their respective drag personae.

Each research participant’s drag discourse revealed that Haus of Frau’s identifications with femininity were the product of two distinct socio-cultural forces. The first of which was social interaction in which some experienced the stigma of being labeled feminine by others. The second of which was their personal engagements with the cultural imaginary in which femininity is articulated in virtual images. It is apparent in both of these, socio-cultural forces

impacted the consciousness of these drag queens and were the means by which they constructed whom they believed themselves to be. Especially in terms of the drag queen self, this process first involved seeing one's self feminine, as social others did. Then, the process required cultural hijacking operations by which these men appropriated femininity (as it pertained to women) and used it in their construction of gay drag queen identities and appearances. These men incorporated feminine self definitions that stemmed from seeing themselves as they presumed others did. However, doing drag prompted them to see femininity (and gender proper) differently than they are conceived in American society.

A tension surfaced where the drag queen understands femininity the same, but simultaneously, differently from its constructions and circulations in mainstream culture. This tension stood as an identity conflict for most members of the Haus of Frau and was probably the reason that the drag queen self was maintained as something usually quite separate from the person each research participant portrayed in everyday life. Where they apprehended their femininity according to dominant cultural narratives, they kept it separate, on a particular "side" of their being that they could only express at appropriate times, in particular places. Where they constructed their own understandings of a subversive, *male* femininity, they were more inclined to proclaim that it was a part of themselves as an integrated whole by saying "it's just me," rather than something that was confined to a "side" of their being. Yet the "feminine side" stood as a zone of intelligibility to which they assigned their mainstream feminine identifications and by which they made sense of their experience.

Perhaps most important to the thrust of this research, however, is the role that clothing and appearance played in materializing femininity, as it is performed by women or men. Gendered appearances authenticate identities when people don clothing and otherwise groom themselves in manners that refer people to the repertoires of intelligible images that reside in the cultural imaginary, i.e., collective consciousness. Haus of Frau illustrated their engagements with virtual gendered images as a process by which they visually constructed themselves,

apprehended themselves, and apprehended others. In the process of apprehending themselves they used the mirror and photographs to visually assess their appearance. To construct their identities and evaluative feelings about themselves, they engaged the social meanings of male, female, gay and drag queen that circulate in discursive channels. Each research participant's feelings about the self were revealed as an interaction between the evaluations they registered coming from others and their own evaluations, where these drag queens compared themselves to ideal images residing in their own imaginaries and the cultural imaginary. These interactions, which generated feelings about the self, were further complicated. The Haus of Frau members often possessed their own, subversive ideal images by which to assess themselves. However, their drag queen and everyday selves were usually quite separate due to the demands they felt obliged to meet in everyday life where they presented themselves as men. Notably, the drag discourses here seem to indicate that for some of these drag queens, a primary concern for presenting themselves *as* men in everyday life had to do with their desire to be sexually attractive to other gay men.

### **Drag Queens and Gay Sex**

The erotic figured prominently in these drag discourses. The connection between appearance and sexuality arose as important issues in the discourses about the selves that Hermaphrodite, Meduza, Miss Piss Barbie Star and Nonami shared. They made direct connections between their male appearances and sexual desirability while showing that gay men (and drag queens) discount the erotic potential of drag appearances and that gay men in general discount drag queens as objects of gay desire. Indeed, the drag queen's expulsion from mainstream gay erotic protocols carries over into everyday life where the drag queen, even though presenting himself as a male, can be disqualified as a sexual partner because he sometimes wears feminine garb. This status quo disqualification impacted feelings about the self that Hermaphrodite reported and caused Miss Piss and Meduza to sacrifice their doing drag in order to preserve and maintain the type of male self they wished to present to potential sexual

partners in everyday life.

### **The Feminine Side and Aesthetic Drive**

Many members of the Haus of Frau talked about their feminine side as something that “came out” when they did drag. Indeed, one can construe their doing drag as an expression of their feminine side. The Haus of Frau valued doing drag for the creative possibilities it opened. Each person noted that doing drag allowed them to step out of their everyday lives and enjoy a tangible change of person. The drag queen had social circumstances and personalities quite different from those that characterized their everyday lives.

In the arts, the aesthetic drive is associated with inventiveness--an imaginative process by which the artist creates something new, by which those who experience the aesthetic object gain an opportunity to see things from a new perspective, or provocation to think about mundane things in a new way (Schechner, 1988). Each member of the Haus of Frau did performances. Performance in and of itself is an aesthetic form. However, each member also had other aesthetic pursuits and interests ranging from fashion design, to photography, film making, music and cosmetology.

In American culture, people generally believe that aesthetic expressions draw on reserves that reside *within* the individual. For the Haus of Frau, their femininities stood as a wellspring of creativity, based on experiences and understandings of the world that they carried with them. Such experiences and understandings reside in the consciousness that people believe to be contained inside the body. Therefore, when the Haus of Frau engaged in aesthetic operations using feminine appearance, they composed drag queen experience by representing information about their inner selves on their bodies.

The aesthetic and feminine sensibilities that each of these drag queens possessed in their individual consciousnesses were intermingled to create a micro-social collective consciousness that characterized that Haus of Frau in their heyday. In the next chapter I will investigate the Haus of Frau as a social phenomena with its own collective consciousness that was manifest in

unique social dynamics, idiomatic expressions and aesthetic expressions. As well, I will touch on what it was that made Haus of Frau emerge, flourish for a brief period, then dissipate.

## CHAPTER VI. THE HAUS OF FRAU: GROUP IDENTITY AND GROUP DYNAMICS

Haus of Frau was a community with a distinct culture based on visual difference apparent in their unique drag appearance and performance styles. The group affirmed their respective drag queen identities and helped consolidate subject positions from which their drag queen appearances were possible and all the more likely. These subject positions were composed by their collective and individual recognitions of difference and their desires to express and affirm male femininity as an alternative to status quo male masculine equation.

The Haus of Frau were gay men. They donned feminine gear to create their drag appearances and performances. Under ordinary circumstances, these two characteristics would be enough to classify them as female impersonators and consider them members of that community. However, Haus of Frau did not ascribe to conventions of the female impersonation idiom, nor did they mix well with members of Baltimore's female impersonation community. Female impersonators aim to appear as if they are real women. Whereas, Haus of Frau were motivated to construct appearances representing an "in-between" gender which represented their male femininity and disrupted gender assumptions founding mainstream social reality. The difference is chiefly one of intent; but these varied intentions did manifest in visual difference. Haus of Frau discussions provide basis for understanding this difference.

Haus of Frau's perceptions of difference from female impersonators were key to their collective and individual drag queen identities. It was in the company of female impersonators that the Haus of Frau visually located each other as similar to one another and simultaneously different from Baltimore's drag establishment. Although they visually located each other as potential allies by virtue of their difference from female impersonators, it was not until the group formed and solidified that its members came to understand their drag as means to perform an "in-between" gender. I argue that it is by connection to one another that they found ways to locate, define and positively integrate their respective male femininities. This chapter will focus

on what constituted Haus of Frau's sense of difference from female impersonators, how it figured in their conceptions of group identity and how conceptions of group identity impacted their doing drag

over time . By tracing Haus of Frau history I consider how member's conceptions of group identity figured in the life of the group as it evolved.

The Haus of Frau was composed of five gay white men, all of whom came from urban working class origins. When the group was viable, none of its members were college educated although one member was attending college sporadically and the entire membership were in their twenties. Miss Piss and Barbie Star were in their early twenties, Hermaphrodite and Meduza were were in their mid-twenties and Nonami was in his late twenties. At least three members of the group were only minimally employed because their living arrangements did not require their full time employment. Before the group formed, all participated in the gay men's community, where social interaction centered on night life in gay bars. Nonami and Hermaphrodite also had social ties to Baltimore's art community prior to Frau's formation.

The group was formally established in November, 1992 and survived less than two years. However, they were such a visible force in the gay community during this time that their rapid demise and irrevocable disappearance left those who enjoyed Frau performances bewildered. Haus of Frau performances occurred in gay bars, performance art venues and at huge dance parties held in urban warehouse districts. In gaining opportunities to perform across these three venues, Haus of Frau seemed perpetually involved in performance preparations, including rehearsals and putting together costumes. Moreover, when the group was at their peak, evenings and weekends were predominantly committed to doing drag, whether to perform, or promote their upcoming performances.

### **Pre-Frau Moments**

Before Haus of Frau members formed alliances with one another their drag forays into gay bars were less frequent. Some members were performing in performance art venues and at what were termed “alternative” dance clubs. The alternative clubs catered to clientele of varied age, race and sexual orientation in the earliest 1990s. Only Miss Piss had experience performing in gay bars prior to Haus of Frau but he did perceive himself to be on the fringes of the female impersonation community.

Initially, Miss Piss seems to have set out trying to be a female impersonator. Female impersonators fascinated him and inspired him to do drag. Miss Piss initially wanted to be “beautiful” in the same way that the most successful female impersonators were. He refers to this type of beauty as that of the “candy box beautiful drag queen.” However, Miss Piss wound up becoming something else. His individuality prevented him from conventional female impersonation appearances and performances. Miss Piss talks about a performance he gave that was also his bid to win contest at a “Strap on Your Pumps” new talent night at a gay bar called “Numbers.”

**I very much wanted to be a candy box beautiful drag queen  
that’s what I was setting out to do  
although I had  
I had seen a lot more  
I had brushed up against some New York things**

Numbers was a working class gay bar. It was located in a blue collar neighborhood on the water. Baltimore’s shipyard and steel industries were visible across the harbor. Numbers closed after several gay bashing incidents outside the club diminished the bar’s patronage in the early 1990s. Miss Piss’ description of his early performance renders important characteristics of his performance and distinguishes him from female impersonators.

when I performed at Numbers  
I didn't lip synch  
because you know  
I had practiced and practiced and practiced lip synching  
but no matter how much I practiced  
it never turned out  
I always forgot  
I wasn't good at lip synching  
and never liked the whole whole lip synching aspect  
because

it just  
wasn't  
I I  
it was never entertaining for me  
and I don't think its entertaining for a lot of people  
but  
there are those who call it entertainment  
so  
let 'em

um  
so I didn't  
so I came out and did a little skit and danced  
and  
um  
STRIPPED  
and uh  
it was something that they weren't used to  
and um  
gosh I'm going back  
its fun

I did  
I came out and I stripped  
I spread a blanket on the floor  
and this was all to "Love to Love You Baby"  
um  
stripped and uh

**of course I was carrying a Lunch box at the time  
which was nothing new for people in New York  
but we weren't in New York**

**I brought the lunch box out  
and set down  
did my little strip act to “Love to Love You Baby”  
uh  
there was a climax to the song  
where I started smearing myself with the jelly  
and during what I tried to make the orgasm part of the song**

**I had Barbie  
who was [not going by that name] at the time  
just throw glitter on to me  
you know  
nothing big  
but it was big to them**

I interjected, “because they’d never seen anything like that.” Miss Piss continued:

**Never  
Never  
which surprised me  
because  
I thought I’d seen things like that before  
it was nothing outrageous to me  
but  
I guess to to  
Fells Point Numbers queens it was quite an event**

Miss Piss’ drag performance at Numbers was very unusual to the audience for a number of reasons. Female impersonators rarely used props in their performances, except during pageant competitions. Miss Piss desecrated his glamorous visage by smearing himself with fruity jelly and having the soon to be “Barbie Star” throw glitter upon his sticky body. Female

impersonators usually choose more contemporary music for their performances. Miss Piss' music choice, "Love to Love You Baby," was a mid 1970s disco hit by Donna Summer. Miss Piss did not lip synch. Doing drag performance without lip synching was completely unheard of in Baltimore's gay bars. Finally, most female impersonators *never* strip. By stripping, Miss Piss made his male body explicit to the audience and performed a male femininity instead of female illusion which requires many temporary body modifications concealed beneath clothing.

Barbie Star and Miss Piss were friends prior to the Haus of Frau. This is important to remember as I sketch out group dynamics leading to forming the Haus of Frau. Miss Piss was a key figure in the group dynamics leading to Frau's formation,. He was the link between all members of the group. He was acquainted with every member; they had all seen him perform, either in gay bars or in the performance art venue, the 14K Cabaret. Miss Piss relates his understanding of how the group started to form. Assisting in performances and/or attending performances were means by which the Haus of Frau established their friendships. This is important to remember as I sketch out group dynamics that led to forming the Haus of Frau.

**I was eventually invited to a show here and there with the upper  
upper crust  
drag queens  
and uh  
fund raisers  
a lot of fund raisers**

**and that's when Hermaphrodite came on to the circuit  
... Hermaphrodite was also starting to be asked a little bit more**

**I think  
at one time I remember getting dressed  
one of our first times getting dressed together  
and Hermaphrodite saying you know I could never do this alone  
at first he was petrified at doing it alone  
by himself**

and uh

you know  
he wanted to do it together  
he was asking me for  
advice and you know  
how do you do it  
what do you do

...

Wherever  
you know  
when he performed he wanted another me there  
When I performed I wanted another him there  
Barbie eventually popped up  
then and  
if one of us was doing a show  
we would come to support one another  
and I would be in the audience  
or Hermaphrodite would be in the audience

and you know  
it's  
it would be a show in itself  
you know  
people would hang around us  
to come see us  
to to  
whatever  
and it started to become a club

and Joe Meduza  
was also  
part of the early entourage

Joe Meduza  
I would have to say was  
was

**my right hand from the beginning**

**uh**

**he got me in drag at Maryland House**

**went with me**

**supported me**

**um**

**helped me with wigs, makeup**

**and you know**

**learning while he's doing**

**and you know**

**eventually he got in 'em [started doing drag]**

These men were providing social support to one another as they started doing drag and performing. As Miss Piss noted, Meduza was his “right hand from the beginning...went with me, supported me,...helped me with wigs, makeup.” In the beginning, doing drag is a little scary. Presenting oneself to others publicly in drag at first means entering social contexts without experience. The experience can be likened to a second adolescence; it involves new social settings, identity work and experimenting with appearance. Socialization becomes problematic when one breaks the gender rules that compose social order. It is remarkably awkward to enter a social role that runs counter to an entire life’s social training and experience. For example, it takes considerable practice for men to construct drag appearances they find pleasing. As Meduza noted about his earliest drag, he wanted to create a glamorous appearance and wound up looking like a little old church lady. Furthermore, Miss Piss recalls Hermaphrodite asking his advice and explicitly asking for his support as he started doing drag. He recalls Hermaphrodite could not do it alone. Thus these budding drag queens require social support and assistance to create drag appearances and enter social relations.

As Miss Piss, Hermaphrodite, Barbie Star and Meduza all started doing drag more frequently, Miss Piss recalls that they all showed to support one another in their respective

performances. A social network formed around doing drag and attending drag performances. Indeed, those in this early clique would sometimes don drag just to attend

performances. For this reason and others, the clique's attendance at performances "became a show in itself" as others started gravitating toward them.

Miss Piss was "eventually invited to a show here and there with the upper crust, upper crust drag queens." Miss Piss referred to Baltimore's most well-established female impersonators as "upper crust drag queens." The upper crust drag queens had power and prestige in the female impersonation community and maintained the standards of appearance and performance there. It was on one of these occasions performing with upper crust drag queens that the Haus of Frau truly began to coalesce. That night in July 1992, Hermaphrodite gave his first drag performance ever and sought Miss Piss' advice in putting together his performance. Hermaphrodite also included Miss Piss, Barbie Star and Meduza in that performance to support him. A coalition emerged as they gained backstage experience, all together in the female impersonator's domain. They changed clothes, transformed their appearances and prepared to perform in the company of each other, while under the scrutiny of the female impersonation community. The occasion was also momentous because it was the first occasion in which all five members participated together in backstage social dynamics. Miss Piss recalls:

**he [Hermaphrodite] had his own style and he had his own show  
but I think he was asking me  
I can't remember specifically what he was asking me  
but he  
he  
wanted to do it  
and he wanted to do it [perform] together  
  
so that started to form some sort of**

**um**  
**troupe I think**  
**even though that wasn't the legitimate beginning**  
**of what came to be [the Haus of Frau]**

Meduza recollects this night as the night when he gave his first drag performance:

**Hermaphrodite had**  
**the first time that I ever did drag and performed**  
**Hermaphrodite did a show at the Hippo with Bang-Bang**

**and um**  
**everybody else was doing it**  
**and everyone else was gonna be there**  
**and I was like**

**well you know I've gotta be a part of it too**  
**so I did that**

When Hermaphrodite recalls that evening, he also explains why he involved Miss Piss, Barbie Star and Meduza in his performance:

**The Haus of Frau**  
**um**  
**my first performance**  
**um**  
**was that fund raiser for Bang-Bang LaDesh**  
**and I was scared to death of doin' it solo**

...

**I couldn't go on stage**  
**I was too nervous about performing**  
**and I couldn't go on stage without**

**a cast to support me**

**so I asked Miss Piss**

**I asked Roxy Vegas**

**I asked Barbie Starr**

**and Meduza**

**to be my background people**

**and we had a really really good time doin' it**

In the previous passage, Hermaphrodite associates his first performance with the beginning of the Haus of Frau, even though the Haus of Frau did not formally establish itself until four months later. It is notable that Hermaphrodite mentions Bang-Bang LaDesh. Bang-Bang was the reigning “Miss Hippo,” when he invited Hermaphrodite to perform in July, 1992.

Bang-Bang was a powerful support base for the Haus of Frau within Baltimore’s gay venues. No one else in the female impersonation community was so powerful. Possessing the title “Miss Hippo” puts one in a position of relative power in Baltimore’s female impersonation community. Miss Hippo usually wins the “Miss Gay Maryland” crown and goes on to compete in national pageants. As well, the Hippo is Baltimore’s largest, most popular and oldest gay dance bar, operating since 1972. Even more, possessing the title Miss Hippo gives one the power to pick and choose much of the live entertainment offered by the Hippo over the next year. It was an opportune moment that Bang-Bang was Miss Hippo when the pre-Frau clique were beginning to perform for Baltimore’s gay community. Bang-Bang was one of very few female impersonators who appreciated the Haus of Frau and was not threatened by what they did.

In contrast to the welcome and respect the early clique gained from Bang-Bang, many female impersonators found the Haus of Frau’s drag ugly and offensive. Hermaphrodite recalls how their differences from female impersonators created an “us against them” scenario that seemed to characterize the majority of Haus of Frau’s experience in that community.

**so there was a bond that was formed that night**

**because it was us against them  
because it was all these normal drag queens  
or booger drag queens  
doing their numbers in their sequined gowns**

“Booger” is a derisive term usually used by female impersonators to describe anyone whose drag appearance they perceive as awkward and ugly. Usually, “booger drag” is associated with the neophyte. Haus of Frau appropriated this term levied at them, and used it in referring conventional female impersonators. Hermaphrodite explained when I interjected, “now what you’re calling booger queens are traditional female impersonators?”

**serious impersonators  
yes exactly**

**Then there was us  
who were going out with plastic masks  
crazy wigs  
you know John's piece involved fake butcher knives  
and tying Jim up**

**you know things that were just  
they were there for comedy  
they were there for entertainment**

**it wasn't serious  
It wasn't I'm pretty look at me**

**it was like  
we're a bunch of twisted queens  
who are out to entertain  
and that's what happened  
and as a result of that  
um  
I guess**

**you know  
we all just got together**

Hermaphrodite distinguished the Haus of Frau from female impersonators. The intentions that he perceives to underlie female impersonation performances differed from those of Haus of the Haus of Frau. Haus of Frau performances were not female impersonation. “It wasn’t serious; It wasn’t I’m pretty, look at me.” Frau intentions focused more on producing comedy and entertaining the audience differently. Haus of Frau put a twist on drag performance: “Then there was us who were going out with plastic masks, crazy wigs; you know Johns’ piece involved fake butcher knives and tying Jim.”

Hermaphrodite appeared that night in a space suit that revealed breasts genitals of both sexes. Thus he portrayed an in between gender. Hermaphrodite’s performance opened with an alternative rock song called “We Can Pretend that We’re Dead.” and segued into a finale involving Van McCoy’s 1976 disco hit, “The Hustle.” For the finale, Hermaphrodite was joined on stage by a cast of radical drag queen extras including Miss Piss, Barbie Star and Meduza.

This same night at the Hippo, Miss Piss and Barbie Star did a performance dressed in matching lavender bridesmaid’s dresses. During the course of the song, “Enough is Enough (No More Tears)” by Barbara Streisand and Donna Summer, they tore off each other’s dresses to reveal their torsos corseted in silver duct tape. This performance deconstructed female impersonation performances: They revealed a body modification technique by which female impersonators create feminine illusion.

The Pre-Frau performers communicated enormous excitement and exhilaration to the audience that night at the Hippo. These radical drag queens stole the show away from the traditional female impersonators. Haus of Frau popularity continued to grow throughout summer and fall, 1992. They began to think of themselves as group. However, they did not come up with a name for the group until November that year.

## Coalescing Group Identity, Feelings and Action

Humans use names to identify each other and represent themselves. It seems there can be no more authoritative acts than those by which people choose and confer names to themselves. Butler (1993) proposes that naming is a performative act which relies on the signifier to bring the signified object into being. Her proposition is in line with the symbolic interactionist assertion that objects are created when they are given meaning through social interaction (Stryker, 1981). A self-chosen name declares “This is who I say I am; this is how I choose to be identified.” Indeed, naming oneself also suggests, that “these are the words I like to hear when others refer to me or address me.”

Each member of the Haus of Frau conceived a “drag name” to distinguish themselves as individuals. When they came together, they also chose a name to represent their group. I emphasize that it was in this naming that the group became real and was conferred with value by the members. Hermaphrodite summarizes the naming event and explains how Haus of Frau devised their name:

**we were sitting around one night drunk after a show  
and John had just met you  
so he was a house wife**

**I was with Jim  
so he was married  
I was married  
and Barbie had had a boyfriend too at the time  
and he was livin' with him**

**so I just thought  
and we were making fun of the serious houses  
and  
so I just decided**

**why not be Haus of Frau  
Which is house of housewives  
so  
that's that's how that kind of started**

**it was just a bunch of  
it was a bunch of us clinging together  
because we needed each other  
and we were different  
to survive we needed each other  
you know  
we were  
in numbers we had power  
you know  
so that's how that came along**

Hermaphrodite's characterized the Haus of Frau as very playful; they joked about their romantic relations and their relations to each other in agreeing upon the name Haus of Frau to represent them. Haus of Frau is a pun on the German word, *hausfrau*. One can scarcely imagine anything less glamorous than the *hausfrau*. The name Haus of Frau connotes a mocking relationship to glamour and therefore to those in Baltimore's female impersonation community who take their glamour so seriously.

Hermaphrodite remarked that they were "making fun of the serious houses that night." These "serious houses" were various female impersonation collectives. The drag house social institution provided instruction in how to do drag and compete in pageants. Houses also provided social support and a sense of belonging to their members. For example, In Baltimore, there existed the "Maryland House." Miss Piss stated that Maryland House members took interest and helped him with his makeup and gave him a safe place to do drag when he started. In the 1991 movie, Paris is Burning. Jenny Livingston portrayed the drag mother tradition in female impersonation. Drag mothers were well seasoned in the technologies of feminine illusion and conveyed their knowledge to the less experienced. Often those belonging to a house

would take the last name of the drag mother. In Livingston's movie, Pepper LaBeija was the drag mother and leader of the House of LaBeija.

Haus of Frau made joking reference to the "serious houses" in naming themselves. Ironically, their need of connection and social support in order to continue doing drag and performing in Baltimore's gay community was no joke. As Hermaphrodite stated, "it was

a bunch of us clinging together; because we needed each other and we were different. To survive we needed each other...In numbers we had power."

Just days after Haus of Frau named themselves, they met for an organizational dinner at Hermaphrodite's house on a Tuesday night. Barbie Star had spent the day with Hermaphrodite shopping for food and preparing the meal for that night's gathering. I was invited to attend this event since I was then dating a member of the Haus of Frau. On that evening, I became privy to Haus of Frau's most intimate sphere of backstage interaction. They talked about who they were, where they wanted to go and what they wanted to do as a group. In this planning session, they talked about performing all over the east coast. There was tremendous optimism for what the Haus of Frau could be that night. The enthusiasm was contagious. What impressed me most was the drag queen lingo that these people shared which reflected their own culture by making specific references to their unique understandings of gender, being gay and doing drag. They talked about doing drag as "gettin' in 'em," putting on makeup as "beating one's face" and they referred to traditional female impersonators as "booger queens." I also noticed that they addressed each other as "girl" and "Miss Thing" while they spoke of each other in the third person as "she."

In establishing group identity, members conveyed positive value to their drag queen experience. The "power of positive thinking" is apparent in the social dynamics that emerged after the group named itself: It was by sharing positive regard for their drag queen experiences that they gained confidence to appear and perform drag queen selves more frequently. Valuing

drag queen experience positively helped them deflect negative evaluations of their drag appearances and performances coming from female impersonators, the gay community and from larger society. This bolstered their drag queen self esteem. In Stone's (1970) terms, the positive value feelings that Haus of Frau shared about their drag queen selves helped construct their attitudes, the positions from

which they were poised to take action in social settings. In Haus of Frau's case, this positive drag queen attitude made doing drag more likely and more fun.

Although sharing positive meanings of drag queen experience was crucial, it seems equally important that the Haus of Frau became a visible social force in Baltimore's gay community because they were so often seen in each other's company. The social support they offered each other helped them deflect negative vibes coming from others and give them a sense of belonging in the face of stigma, which often causes one to feel disconnected from others. As Haus of Frau appeared more frequently together in public settings, their group solidarity evolved into an intimate camaraderie.

Camaraderie was what the Haus of Frau liked best about their group experience. Haus of Frau share their feelings about the group and descriptions of group experience below. I begin with Meduza. When I asked, "How do you feel about the Haus of Frau?" He responded:

**... I really enjoyed working with everybody  
I thought it was really great  
we all pretty much got along and had  
um**

**were able to do things where we had our own thing to do  
what we wanted to do  
um**

**and  
it was like  
the best time  
you know  
in recent  
in recent history for me**

**um  
it was a lot of fun  
you know**

**working with the group  
and having people do the same thing you do**

According to Stone's (1979) version of symbolic interaction, people take specific courses of action according to personal and collective meaning structures which program and mobilize appearances and behavior. I emphasize that collective action, e.g., "having people do the same thing you do" indicates shared meanings concerning drag appearances and performances. Moreover, this doing the same thing expressed male feminine identities through gender bending appearances. Their collective behavior indicated the shared meanings which composed their social group.

Meduza notes that it is fun working on performances with those whom he shares much in common, such as their difference from female impersonation. Therefore, I presume that this "having people do the same thing you do" was a social manifestation which demonstrated the "power in numbers" effect Hermaphrodite noted when he was explaining that group members "needed each other." I also presume that the element of fun that members attribute to their drag experience stemmed from the pleasure of sharing an electrifying experience with others who understand and value it similarly. Therefore I propose that it is through shared meaning that the group emerged and was able to provide social support and opportunities for having fun, noting that Barbie Star and Meduza both recall that it was not fun to do drag alone. Barbie Star

valued his interactions with Frau because it gave him a sense of connection that he recalls below:

**I really didn't enjoy it too much just being alone  
and being in drag**

**but  
to get together  
you know with  
Piss and John  
to do it  
the Frau Thing  
that was the most fun part of it**

**and have all these people that were doing it on their own  
and then when we came together and started doing it together  
you know I really didn't see any point in doing it really  
I mean I did it and went to parties**

**but  
that whole thing  
you know the family thing was the best part of it**

Although Barbie stated in the last chapter that doing drag was a means to express a part of himself, it was not so rewarding an enterprise when he appeared in drag alone. Perhaps doing drag alone was like speaking a language none understood. Without people to share meaning and positive value, there is less opportunity for enjoyment outcomes from drag experience. Barbie noted that everyone in Frau had been “doing drag on their own.” But that when they came together, they formed a family of sorts. That social support system validated each member of the group and gave them a compelling reason to do drag. The net result was that their associations with one another created a sense of belonging that made doing drag more fun and more likely.

Meduza and Barbie Star's discussions show how sentiments mobilize action in the explicit connections they draw between group identity and appearance. Group identity was a means by which positive value was conferred to their drag queen appearances. With access to this positive value, doing drag became fun. Indeed, sharing this positive value and having fun became a reason for doing drag that compelled members to do drag more frequently. In terms of Stone's theorizing on appearance and the self, one can make the connection between group identity, value feelings and appearance: Positive evaluations that the group conferred to their style of doing drag, programmed their appearances and established their attitudes, as an affective position from which they were poised -- or in this case, encouraged -- to do drag.

### **Frau Appearances as Female Impersonation - Not**

In this section, I draw upon the work of Frietas et al., 1997 in which they emphasize appearance management as a process of identity border construction which proclaim who one is not perhaps as much as appearance serves to claim who one is. The implication of Frietas et al.'s work is that people program their appearances in part, by avoiding appearance imagery which would contradict the identities they wish to portray. Haus of Frau discussions specifically regarding their appearances seem to conform Frietas, et al.'s propositions.

Haus of Frau needed each other because they were different. This difference is a visual marking that Haus of Frau recognized when they compared themselves to Baltimore's female impersonators. Haus of Frau invariably compared themselves to female impersonators as a point of reference. In the process of telling me about his drag appearance, Meduza offered this observation:

**I'm not trying to look conventional  
you see these drag queens out there  
in like they try  
I mean**

**I don't know if they know it or not  
but they look like they just went to Lane Bryant and bought their outfit**

Meduza implies that there was nothing special, imaginative or particularly fashionable about female impersonator's attire. Meduza touches on an aesthetic distinction that separated female impersonators from Frau. This distinction pitted conspicuous consumption against art. Frau demonstrated much more inventiveness, adding an element of surprise to their appearances.

The Haus of Frau constructed appearances that blurred male and female. They also combined different garment types, such as lingerie and blue jeans or used garments in unusual fabrications. Appearances such as those shatter the gender binary and other appearance norms by combining different garment types that might otherwise be considered incompatible. Female impersonator's outfits appear as if purchased in malls or from formal wear retailers. These garments were formal "special occasion" garments that some women use to distinguish themselves and the important events they attend. The net effect to the appearance of female impersonators is that they appear to be a prom queen or mother of the bride. Frau's inventiveness could not be matched when female impersonators purchased and donned garments that appeared to be purchased from conventional retail outlets.

Moreover, where Meduza indicted female impersonators for appearing as if they had purchased their garments at Lane Bryant. In Baltimore, Lane Bryant is a women's clothing store that offers very conventional, mainstream styles to larger women. One might see such styles as frumpy as they often conceal so much of the body and are not geared toward body types that American culture usually deems fashionable. Indeed, many female impersonators in Baltimore are quite large in stature and girth.

Initially, Miss Piss was more or less tolerated by Baltimore's female impersonation community but explains how his differences in appearance were causing a rift. Perhaps female perceived that Miss Piss had the potential to become a successful female impersonator and they attributed his renegade appearances to naivete. However, as Miss Piss notes, there was intense pressure from that community that he start conforming to their culture:

**um**  
**I knew that it was just going to be a matter of time**  
**um**  
**you know**  
**I felt pressure**  
**I felt intense pressure from the drag**

**the institution of drag that was already set up**

**you know I was trash  
I was GOODWILL you know  
all about everything that they weren't  
I didn't have beaded gowns  
I didn't have someone doing my hair makeup  
I was doin' it myself**

**and you know  
getting pretty good at it I thought**

In articulating his difference from female impersonators, Miss Piss simultaneously marks his connections to the Haus of Frau and to the Baltimore art community. Rather than engaging conspicuous consumption as female impersonators did, Frau employed funky second hand clothing from thrift stores to achieve a bohemian and artsy appearance. When Miss Piss stated that he was “Goodwill” he was referring to the thrift stores where he shopped for drag apparel.

Connections between appearance, performance style, drag queen identity and a sense of community gain substance; Hermaphrodite articulates his sentiments about the pageant competitions that stand as the female impersonation community’s reason for being in Baltimore:

**if I entered a contest  
it would be to upset the whole thing**

**it would be to say fuck you to this whole institution  
of  
of what's been laid out**

**it's ridiculous  
it's all money and politics  
no matter how talented you are  
if the people on the panel don't like you because of whatever  
you're fucked  
you know**

**so I already had that chip against me  
why not play it for all it was worth?  
you know**

Hermaphrodite articulated his position as an outsider to the pageant system and the institution of female impersonation. His critique continues and articulates his dismay and contempt for the financial expenditures female impersonation pageants require.

**the idea  
you know maybe if I had the money**

**you know but  
thousands of dollars on gowns  
and all these pageants down south  
one thing that um**

**a friend of mine  
a performer named John Flowers taught me  
is that poverty is the mother of invention  
and I've always felt that way**

**whenever I was gonna do a show  
it was with a ratty wig that I did something with and made it spectacular  
and outfit made of bubble wrap**

**you know  
little bits and pieces  
thrift store pieces  
you know**

**I don't need a dress to do my talking for me  
now it does pay  
you know**

**of course I love an outrageous fashion  
you know**

**and having friends in the community  
who make the dresses like Nonami  
and**

**and swapping crazy dresses  
and stuff like that  
and thrift store creations  
was how we did it  
there was no money  
there was no budget**

Resources available to Frau members for doing drag precluded extensive retail shopping as female impersonators did in constructing their appearances. These drag queens were mostly marginally employed at Frau's nascence. Where Frau did not conform to conventional drag appearances in Baltimore, it solved a financial dilemma and opened a series of creative possibilities. They often made and altered garments to create the drag appearances they wanted. Creating these appearances was experimental and experiential. There were no algorithms to direct their appearance play. Often, they did not know what they would look like until they were finished putting the appearance together. In cases where they had no specific aim in mind beside gender bending, the appearance became a work of art, the product that materialized from a discovery process. They constructed appearances like pulling rabbits from

a hat. These magical happy accidents became the appearances that they presented to others in public settings. As a result, Haus of Frau members rarely if ever appeared the same way twice.

Postmodern aesthetic expressions are characterized by playful, ironic juxtaposition of varied, sometimes conflicting elements in composing the aesthetic object (Wilson, 1992). In postmodern architecture, stylistic elements characteristic of several time periods combine. For example, one might see a skyscraper with Doric and Ionic pilasters with Georgian pediments. Humor and the element of surprise are important to successful execution of a such design. Where aesthetic forms once conveyed a cohesive overall impression, usually true to conventions of one particular style such as modernism or neo-classical, postmodern aesthetics permit an eclectic borrowing and assembling of diverse elements into novel forms. Concerning appearance, Kaiser, Nagasawa and Hutton (1991) propose that plethora of clothing and accessory options available in the postmodern marketplace also facilitate eclecticism and novel appearances. Frau appearances and performances were characterized by the eclectic, playful inventiveness of the postmodern aesthetic. A special element of the assemblage that typified Frau appearances can be traced to the actual design and construction of garments. Haus of Frau made and altered garments. Nonami in particular had extensive sewing and apparel design skills. He would make wearable art garments for himself and shared these garments with others in the Haus of Frau. He would use unconventional fabrics such as window screen and multi-colored braided hat straw to construct garments. Nonami expressed distinctive characteristics of his own appearance and how they related to Frau appearances and his deconstruct aesthetic:

**cause even with Frau  
when everybody was wearing some sort of strange  
you know  
baloney covered breasts or cigarette signs stapled to the front of a tutu**

**I was wearing a little rayon crepe naked lady dress  
something that was fashionably tasteful  
but at the same time quirky kooky  
um**

**which I really  
I really  
I am very deconstruct  
because I really like that whole thing**

**and maybe  
that's just a time  
a period of time  
for some reason I really liked that niche  
the whole deconstruct concept**

**as far as fashion  
and the aesthetics of it**

**I like the exposing aspects of deconstruction  
and I think that that is what my drag is about sort of maybe**

Japanese designers with the deconstruct penchant such as Yoshi Yamamoto, and Comme des Garçons were Nonami's greatest contemporary inspirations. Nonami's garments often intentionally appeared to be inside out and falling apart, as if hanging by a single silk thread. Philosophically, there is a connection between Nonami's fashion sense and his doing drag that he acknowledges with the statement, "I like the exposing aspects of deconstruction, and I think that is why my drag is about sort of maybe." The exposing aspects, revealing what is usually concealed is a hallmark of deconstruct fashion. The hidden operations used to create conventionally finished garments in western culture come to the surface in deconstruct. Nonami's drag appearances often revealed the methods by which both drag appearances and the garments involved were constructed. In terms of drag queen appearance, he accomplished this deconstruction by leaving appearances "unfinished" and allowing the male body to remain

apparent. Nonami's apparel design process was usually experiential. He used no patterns but just started cutting into fabric and sewing the pieces together. He would interact with the design and construction problems that surfaced as he put a garment together.

Other members of the Haus of Frau did not possess the sewing and design skills that Nonami could mobilize. However, they were not daunted. They would use stitch witchery, the iron-on seam adhesive, to join fabric pieces. They also cut pieces from existing garments and left raw edges showing on their "finished" creations.

Their drag costumes reveal inventiveness and a willingness on the part of the Haus of Frau to take aesthetic risks that further alienated them from female impersonators. The Haus of Frau were informed by different values than female impersonators. Where female impersonators valued appearance conformity and a conventional glamour associated with conspicuous consumption, the Haus of Frau placed their value on creativity and individual expression. Moreover, as Hermaphrodite's discussion suggests, the group swapped garments and shared with each other the creation of their respective drag queen appearances. They pooled resources and shared creative input figured prominently in what doing drag meant to the Haus of Frau. Indeed, doing drag in this manner established one's membership in the Haus of Frau.

### **Conventions of Frau Performance**

Nonami picked up on the difficulties that female impersonators faced in creating a convincing feminine illusion according to their rigid notions of glamour and femininity. Earlier discussion by Meduza alluded that many female impersonators were quite large in stature and girth. However, they sometimes used their extra body fat to good effect. With corsets and duct tape, they could re-arrange their soft excesses into more conventionally feminine

silhouettes. When the waist cinches in, flesh moves up or down away from the indentation. The excess moving upward becomes cleavage when one tapes the breasts together below the décolletage. That excess moving downward can help create rounded hips. Yet female impersonators (regardless of size) sometimes looked more like awkward “cross dressers” than the glamorous female impersonators who could convince the audience to pretend it was seeing a “real woman.” It is a sort of sad and touching experience to see these men who wish to appear glamorous and beautiful according to an extremely exclusive beauty myth do their best in trying to live up to that impossible ideal.

In critiquing female impersonation, Nonami does not dismiss the value of doing drag, but rather the value of doing drag according to the strictures of such an exclusive beauty myth. Nonami makes this dismissal as he explains the performative intentions that guided his drag performances to contrast with those of traditional female impersonators:

**When I started performing**

**I was almost doing it in a mockery of what is known as female impersonators  
men who dress as women or famous women  
like somebody who is doing Cher or Diana Ross directly  
and they have a tendency that culture to take themselves extremely serious  
trying to look and be like women**

**and that always just struck me very odd  
that you know these are men trying to ...  
who are very strict about trying to be very female  
and they take themselves very seriously  
and it's just like I never really got that  
because it's just like you are a man in a dress**

Nonami stated in his drag discussions from the last chapter that he cannot locate any particular experience with drag performers that told him doing drag was possible. However, in an ironic way it seems that female impersonators inspired him to do drag: “when I started

performing I was almost doing a mockery of what is known as female impersonators.” Nonami locates his sentiments toward doing drag as what distinguished him from female impersonators. He notices female impersonators’ seriousness in their attempts to look and act like “real women,” and expresses dismay at the entire project, i.e., “I never really got that, because it’s just like you are a man in a dress.” Nonami also seems to be drawing on American society’s conventional understandings of a man in a dress as something humorous. Men donning dresses is a stock gag in 20th century comedy. Comedians like Bob Hope, Milton Berle and Paul Lynde epitomized this comic drag genre.

This mockery of female impersonation indicates comic irony. Such comic irony is apparent as Haus of Frau performances are juxtaposed to those of Baltimore’s female impersonators. In the following passage, Nonami continues to elaborate on how Frau’s use of comedy distinguished their performances:

**when I performed and performed with the Haus of Frau  
it was very well received  
even by uhm  
what’s more of a straight-laced edge or fringe of the gay community**

**you know because what I was doing was very humorous  
so I think even people who didn't care for female impersonators ..  
can accept what I do or what people who perform in my manner do  
because its all its so satirical its comedy**

**so its sort of like watching Carol Burnett almost  
you know its kind of that sort of entertainment  
as opposed to lip synching to Whitney Houston**

**which is you know why do you want to look like a real woman  
and you know that’s bad I think in a way for  
or that’s seen as a bad thing as well so  
you can always ease a situation by comedy**

Nonami attributes Frau's popularity to their use of humor. Furthermore, he recognized that people who might usually have trouble with men doing drag, are appeased and better entertained when the approach to drag is humorous rather than serious.

Hermaphrodite stated earlier that Frau performances were not serious, that their intent was not conveying this message to the audience: "I'm pretty, look at me." Instead, he stated that it was about using comedy to entertain people. Additionally, their intentions were to call attention to the mainstream gender order and to spoof the female impersonation tradition. Hermaphrodite begins by telling what happened when Haus of Frau did their first official performance after they had named themselves. It was a Christmas show at the Allegro in 1992. Hermaphrodite classifies Frau performances as madness as he stated what happened to the stage during this performance:

**... we trashed the entire stage  
and you know,  
I think people have a desire for the madness  
but they want it at a distance  
you know what I'm saying**

**...**

**it's all fun at the time  
but when that stage was trashed after our number  
and somebody has to sweep it**

During this performance at the Allegro, Hermaphrodite tore open "Christmas presents" and threw them all over the stage. Wrapping paper, ribbons and torn boxes were everywhere. Although there was humor in the performance, there was also an element of chaos as boxes and paper went flying and the stage became a mess. This passage below further reveals characteristics of Frau performances, and Hermaphrodite's particular penchant for audience

confrontation and abuse. The audience confrontation and abuses such as throwing bananas and dousing people with milk provided shock value. These elements also gave the Haus of Frau reputation as pranksters. The net effect of including shocking pranks in their performances was chaos. They were breaking down rules that governed drag performance in gay bars. However, I do not wish to make it appear as if Hermaphrodite was alone in breaking the implicit rules of the female impersonation performance. Similarly, Miss Piss challenged conventions when he smeared himself with fruit jelly and Barbie threw glitter on him. Such excesses shattered the glamorous pretensions and decorum that female impersonators established and maintained in their performance community. At first he did not care about the repercussions of his performances to others until he had to follow another performer who left a messy stage:

**... quite frankly  
I got off on saying  
thinking fuck you  
until it happened to me**

**in my own show  
where I had  
I was doing a parody of commercials  
well Meduza took a giant thing of water  
and dumped ten Alka-seltzer in it  
as a result the entire damned floor was wet**

**and I had to go out and do my number  
and I slipped and busted my ass  
now that was funny  
ha ha**

**but  
you know  
it's kind of funny when you get a taste of your own medicine**

...

**I was over it  
I was completely over it**

**and this was coming from a person who had thrown bananas at people  
and taken enemas filled with milk and doused the audience**

**you know  
it's really quite an education  
to get a dose of your own medicine  
it really is**

Both Miss Piss and Hermaphrodite seemed to relish the gadfly position they had negotiated for themselves among female impersonators. As Hermaphrodite stated, he got off on saying “fuck you.” Below Miss Piss expresses his opposition to female impersonators in more genteel terms; however his aims seem similar:

**Well I I  
I don't think I was necessarily trying to make a statement at first  
it [doing drag] was just something that I wanted to do  
um**

**I think that what happened  
was I I  
found out that  
I found a weak spot**

**I found out that I was getting on people's nerves  
or getting under under  
the regular drag's skin**

It is easy to see how Haus of Frau quickly depleted any possible welcome they might have enjoyed among female impersonators. It seems that where Frau members perceived

female impersonators to look down on them, some like Hermaphrodite and Miss Piss took the offensive. However, the female impersonators would have taken offense without direct provocation. Haus of Frau's performances were in such contrast to female impersonation performances that it seems like conflict was unavoidable.

Frau's collective difference from female impersonation performances can be largely credited to Nonami and Hermaphrodite. Initially, Nonami collaborated with Hermaphrodite in conceiving performances and working through performance logistics. Nonami had been performing for years. Nonami also tended bar at the 14K Cabaret and witnessed a numerous performance art pieces. Nonami appropriated elements of avant garde performance, contributing to Haus of Frau's quirky ironic style; in conjunction with Hermaphrodite the performances also became intentionally excessive. Hermaphrodite was Baltimore's Busby Berkeley of drag performance. For him, more was better. It seemed that he tried to see how much he could possibly cram into a performance. Once Hermaphrodite and Nonami worked out the basic conventions of their performance style and thoroughly understood their performative intentions, Frau group performances went from five minutes or less up to almost twenty minutes long. These performances had truckloads of props, there were costume changes, singing and choreography that went with elaborately pieced sound tracks. Interruptions were built into the soundtracks. Speaking voices would stop a song before it was over, record skips and scratches, horns, whistles, belches and flatulent noises also interspersed the soundtrack. Frau sampled popular tunes, opera, Bugs Bunny cartoon soundtracks, television show themes and even jingles from television advertising in their soundtracks, much because Hermaphrodite had an enormous collection of recorded music and sounds.

### **Feeling at Home with the Art Community**

Feeling at home has implications for identity. I presume that people establish many self

identifications and a sense of belonging where they feel at home. Feeling at home in the art community prompted the Haus of Frau to conceive themselves as artists and understand their performances as performance art. Identifying themselves as artists came about as Haus of Frau interacted with Baltimore's art community at the 14K Cabaret. It becomes apparent that through their tenure in this venue, that Haus of Frau came to see themselves as others did. Moreover, it was through their self-identifications with other performance artists that Frau came to understand what they did as art. When Frau found themselves in backstage regions with other performance artists, they could make these identifications: Close proximity in such an intimate sphere provided the context for Haus of Frau to conceive themselves as artists. It is also important to recognize that in the 14K Cabaret, Haus of Frau were well received and respected.

In the early stages of Frau, they were taking every opportunity to perform, regardless of venue. However, there were opportunities to perform outside Baltimore's gay bars but the 14K Cabaret became their home-base. Miss Piss and Hermaphrodite make comparisons between performing at the 14K Cabaret and performing in gay bars. It is through these discussions that they illustrate their sense of belonging to Baltimore's art community. Discussion also reveals that they gained welcome and appreciation from an audience that seemed to understand what they were doing. Below Hermaphrodite compares the backstage milieu at the 14K Cabaret to being in dressing rooms at the Hippo:

**but you know  
being backstage at the Hippo in comparison to being backstage  
at the 14K Cabaret  
is a whole 'nother story**

**the 14K cabaret was so laid back and  
so many things were going on  
that we were just another act  
there wasn't the threatening issue**

**of like we're gonna upstage them**

**or we're gonna  
you know what I'm saying**

**we were ENCOURAGED  
it was absolutely encouraged  
you know  
but there wasn't no drink tickets**

**it wasn't a clean environment  
it was an art crowd**

The cabaret operated on a shoestring budget in the basement of a publicly funded art gallery. There were not many amenities. The dressing rooms had no running water. Performers walked through the club to use bathrooms. The bare concrete floors dirtied performers' feet when they changed costumes. Lighting was also poor in the dressing room and makeup tables were makeshift. Therefore, applying makeup was challenging. Although the cabaret lacked amenities, it compensated by being a warm, welcoming, permissive place for artists to make ready and perform. As Hermaphrodite noted, there were encouragement and no rules dictating performances or backstage behavior. Hermaphrodite illustrates how things were when the tables were turned, and female impersonators were performing at the 14K Cabaret:

**but you know  
there was a fund raiser for Gay Pride  
that was held at the Cabaret  
and all the normal drag queens performed  
and it was really amusing to the Frau Crowd  
to have all these booger drag queens laid up  
in a dirty basement**

**a dirty club that we called home  
that we called home**

**they were on our turf  
is what it came down to  
it really comes down to turf  
the Hippo's their turf  
they made a point of being as gracious as they could  
but put it this  
you had to play by their rules**

Hermaphrodite summarized the distinctions between his backstage experiences in various venues and identifies the Haus of Frau as artists to distinguish them from female impersonators:

**if you are with an art crowd  
you are treated  
and I  
I never thought I wanted to be treated this way  
but you are treated like everyone else  
there's no hierarchy  
you know  
it's just a bunch of fucking artists presenting their shit  
you know**

**where at the Hippo  
it was backstabbing  
this one was talking about that one  
you know  
and you had to worry about what got clipped [stolen]  
and  
just the whole**

**you really had to  
you had to behave  
and I was used to being myself and getting away with it**

**you know  
we had to walk on tiptoes there  
and that says a lot**

The interactions between the Haus of Frau and female impersonators were mutually created. Haus of Frau did incite contempt from female impersonators. However, Frau was antagonistic in response to some female impersonators' negative regard. Miss Piss talks about how he came to perform at the 14K Cabaret and how he felt there:

**my name started to spread around a little bit  
uh**

**I knew John Flowers through a friend  
and he was doing a cabaret  
I knew nothing about the cabaret  
never been  
and uh**

**He asked me if I'd be interested  
I said sure sure  
sure I'd be interested  
and uh**

**Laure [Drogoul] actually called me  
and said we want you this weekend  
and I didn't know anything about it**

**and she said  
you'll be playing with the Motor Morons  
and I was a little bit scared  
because I had never been**

**I didn't know what kind of club it was  
you know  
what kind of band is this**

**should I feel threatened  
I mean**

**and she said  
oh, no no no  
no no  
nothing to worry about  
you're fine**

**boy was I  
you know  
I had found the most comfortable place of my whole tenure in drag**

The following narrative by Miss Piss further illustrates how the distinction between gay bars and the Cabaret was manifest and figured in group dynamics leading to Frau's formation:

**I went to the cabaret and he [Hermaphrodite] came to see me  
and uh  
what I liked about the cabaret is that I was  
I felt that I was communicating to a group of people that receive me a lot better  
This was  
this was my audience**

Hermaphrodite elaborates on this point by stating how the Haus of Frau were perceived in gay bars and where they found their place:

**Not only were we frightening to look at  
but we were all a bunch of drunks  
causing a scene  
that no one understood  
except the art crowd**

Hermaphrodite makes allusion to two distinct recognitions about the Haus of Frau's interaction with female impersonators above. First, he acknowledges that they "were frightening to look at." The visual offense that he refers to was most troubling to female impersonators. Where he notes that Haus of Frau were "all a bunch of drunks causing a scene," he is referring to Frau's poor behavior and rule breaking in the female impersonator's domain, the gay bars. Finally, he states that no one understood the scene they caused "except the art crowd." Hermaphrodite's statement implies that where Frau were understood by the art crowd, that was where they belonged. Hermaphrodite finished the statement I presented above with this hindsight observation about Frau:

**we should have kept it to artistic venues  
that's the way that I look at it  
to think that we would have been  
accepted  
in mainstream gay lifestyles is really like**

In retrospect, Hermaphrodite acknowledges that they might have been better to focus on performing solely in artistic venues. It is implicit in Hermaphrodite's last two passages that he, like Miss Piss, felt a better sense of belonging in the art community than he did among female impersonators. Where the Haus of Frau felt at home in the 14K Cabaret in the company of artists, they came to identify themselves as artists and their drag performances as art.

Below, Nonami shares his perceptions of how performance art differs from female impersonation and implicates himself along with other Frau members as performance artists. In the discussion below, Nonami distinguishes lip synching (the staple female impersonation performance) from performance art. His discussion was prompted by an observation I made during the interview: "So what I am gathering is that you are making a distinction between lip

synching in gay bars and when you do performance art.” Nonami replied:

**well yeah  
they're two separate things  
Its like doing one act from a Shakespeare play,  
or doing the entire play**

**being that lip synching is like a one act thing  
you usually sing one or two songs  
so all you have to do is remember the words to those songs and dance around  
and I don't think that's terribly taxing on one person  
unless you are doin' a lot of acrobatic dance moves  
or you have back up dancers or something like that  
which I never did  
so my experience with doing that lip synching to pop songs in gay bars  
is that it doesn't just, it just doesn't take a hell of a lot to do**

**as opposed to PERFORMING  
you generally are working on a piece  
which could be as long as one song**

**however  
you are you you are attempting to express  
or evoke more or at least I am  
which is maybe why I am not a good female impersonator**

**because I don't care to evoke  
or present that that particular facade  
as I do with a performance art piece or something  
I guess performance art just is a little more INTELLIGENT  
or something**

Haus of Frau conceived themselves more as performance artists than as the type of drag performers usually found in gay bars. However, at their peak, Haus of Frau frequently performed in gay bars. Hermaphrodite stated that back then, he wanted to earn his living doing

drag performance. Therefore, he was very aggressive in procuring gigs for the group. He did not discriminate where there was an opportunity to perform. As a result, Haus of Frau became very busy and a strong visible force in the gay community. The contradiction that their self-conceptions as artists posed when they performed in gay venues did not seem to be discussed by the group. No Frau member indicated that they actively discussed the dilemma of performing so much in gay bars.

Haus of Frau had created a momentum that seems to have swept them along. The Haus of Frau quickly gained notoriety and popularity. They peaked very quickly and the entire year 1993 was their heyday. In the following section, Frau discussions will focus on group dynamics that characterized each member's peak involvement with doing drag and Haus of Frau's heyday.

### **Cresting the Peak**

In this section, Frau discussions will illustrate the group dynamics that characterized their performances and the group's social life. Members' recollections are informed by how the members felt about the group. Notably, when I asked each member how they felt about the Haus of Frau, most responded by making it clear that they were speaking of the time when Frau seemed to be at their peak. It is also notable that most felt like their drag involvement at this time was practically constant, that they were always in drag or preparing to do drag.

In the last paragraph, I mentioned that Hermaphrodite was aggressively seeking gigs for the Haus of Frau. In the following passages, Miss Piss credits Hermaphrodite with managing the Haus of Frau's business engagements and organizing performances. Miss Piss stated:

**I think that if anyone  
if anyone deserves the title of organizer or whatever  
I think that Hermaphrodite played that role in bringing us together**

**and getting the shows  
he even had us meet at the house  
and a lot**

**and we wanted to put together  
and we did somewhat  
you know  
we weren't as professional as the pros that do it  
but we really wanted to get together a troupe**

...

**A troupe that actually got together  
he he was interested in making this  
the Haus of Frau a troupe**

Miss Piss's discussion makes it clear that Hermaphrodite was a driving force behind the Haus of Frau. Hermaphrodite contributed tremendous time and energy to Haus of Frau's performances. However, peak involvement with the Haus of Frau was demanding on the others' time also. Nonami recalls:

**Well the peak involvement was with Frau  
the Haus of Frau  
I swear it seemed like we did it every weekend**

**but it just  
it seemed at the peak it was like that  
I mean  
we had a show  
or there was a party  
or there was a pageant we were gonna go to  
and we were just in 'em [in drag] constantly  
at least that 's the perception I have now**

I mean it was at least every other weekend  
it was  
there was a period of time when it was pretty intense  
very zany

Time commitments were not limited to actual performances. Nonami discusses other time commitments necessary to his peak drag involvement along with the Haus of Frau.

time was constant  
cause  
if you were doing something that frequent  
I hated being seen in the same thing twice  
and I would whip something up in the period of a couple hours  
and wear it to a party or whatever it was  
and toss it in the closet  
and cut it into something else  
or give it to somebody else  
so I spent a lot of time sewing and styling wigs  
between gigs

and in a way it was kind of fun  
because it forced you to be creative  
forced me to be creative  
because it was like okay  
I have to have a new outfit for the weekend

we're going to this party  
or doing this gig  
so

you know so  
it was  
I feel like  
as far as time  
that there was a lot spent  
in the high point of it

Nonami's discussion illustrates some of the intensity that typified the Haus of Frau's peak drag involvement. It was a lot of work. Rehearsals, putting together costumes, and styling wigs kept everyone busy. Furthermore, performances required Haus of Frau to transport props, makeup, wigs and costumes to clubs. This was a challenge since most members did not own cars. Once Frau arrived at clubs with all their paraphernalia, they had to organize props, costumes and don makeup for their performances. These preparations were very consuming. I cannot begin to estimate the time and energy that went into performances usually lasting 15 minutes or less! However, the performances were possible because Haus of Frau enjoyed what they were doing. The preparations were a social event. Although Haus of Frau did not provide me with a specific discussion that thoroughly articulates the fun they had preparing performances, Miss Piss provided a discussion that illustrated what it was like when Haus of Frau prepared together for a night on the town. This discussion captures the fun and excitement the group shared. It is safe to generalize the social dynamics that Miss Piss summarizes to Haus of Frau's performances. I recall Frau performances where preparations were characterized by the same sense of fun and excitement that Miss Piss recalls:

**it was more fun in a group  
usually what would happen  
okay**

**usually it would be spontaneous  
um**

**Hermaphrodite would call up and say hey  
this is a really good example  
hey  
Tim Potee told us  
that uh**

**he wants to load a van up with a bunch of drag queens and go to DC for the**

night  
come on in  
and we'll get to pick out an outfit

so we would go to Dreamland [a vintage clothing store owned by Tim Potee]  
and all go through the outfits and find an outfit  
then we'd eat

go up to Hermaphrodite's house and start drinking  
and smoking and laughing  
and listening to music  
dancing around  
really getting  
[psyched]

yeah  
start putting on makeup  
we'd all shower together  
you know  
you've been there  
you've seen it  
it's common to see a room full of naked guys putting on makeup  
it was really common

you know  
I was self conscious when I started doing it  
but you know as I did  
you know  
my clothes were off more than they were on  
while I was in the process [of getting in drag]

we'd all just be sitting around naked after we would shave  
we would shave a lot  
some would shave more [of their bodies] than others  
depending on what you were into  
and you know

sit around and all do our makeup  
and of course Hermaphrodite

**was extravagant and took a long time  
a lot longer than most**

**and me I had it down to a science  
you know  
base, powder, eyes  
then the last thing the went on was my lipstick  
because I didn't want to get any on the beer can**

**and uh  
you know it was an event  
it was an event to go out and buy the outfits  
it was another event to party with a room full of five or six people  
gettin' in 'em [getting in drag]**

**then we would be picked up and chauffeured to DC  
we would be crazy and they [the club crowd] would love us  
and you know  
it would get to the point where we were so drunk  
and fucked up  
that the only sober person was Tim Potee at that time  
he would have to scrape us up off the floor  
and say come on it's five in the morning  
I'm taking you girls home**

**The more I talk about it  
the more I miss it  
but you never chew your cabbage twice I've heard**

Miss Piss fondly recalls the excitement and the party atmosphere that Haus of Frau created when they were together. I wish to point to a few aspects of the interaction he summarizes above as they related to group identity and social reality. Many of the details Miss Piss recollects portray the Haus of Frau as members of an exclusive club, a collection of intimates. I liken this experience to members of a sports team in some respects. Getting in drag together comprised activities that one can equate to the male bonding that takes place when young men

change in and out of their sports gear. When men change into their sports gear, they usually don garments that express their affiliation to a team; thus group identity is expressed. In the locker room, they dress and undress and often engage in horseplay. These activities place men in an intimate sphere. They are naked together and let down their guards and become playful. At the same time, in the clothes changing ritual, they begin turning their focus toward the activity in which they will participate collectively. Miss Piss relates similar experiences with the Haus of Frau. She recalls a clothes-changing ritual that involved nudity and horseplay. The clothes changing ritual established intimacies and simultaneously functioned to turn their collective thoughts toward their respective participation in a group event. Where team sports usually create group identities in terms of “us versus them,” Haus of Frau was also similar. They were adversarial to female impersonators. Their “game strategy” often involved shock value. Under ordinary circumstances, the Haus of Frau’s gay identities prevented them from traditional male bonding such as that which sports teams foster. However, they created a social reality for themselves that involved alternative male bonding, thus affirming their identities and reinforcing their connections to the group.

I emphasize that the affirming experiences Haus of Frau associate with their group helped establish and maintain group cohesion. These affirmations impacted the individual’s drag identities where doing drag was more compelling when they did it together. Meduza’s discussion below implicates the Haus of Frau experience as a reason

for doing drag where he emphasizes the importance of companionship to appearing in drag publicly:

**it’s always nice to have somebody to do drag with  
for me its always fun to be out with somebody else  
you know and if you're in drag  
you know**

**you know  
it took**

**for me to go out by myself in drag  
to a club  
or to a show  
is dull**

**I like to have somebody  
you know  
a companion  
somebody to talk to  
somebody to dish with  
or whatever**

**I mean  
um  
its always fun to be out in a group  
and um**

**you know  
depending on where you go**

The Haus of Frau experience is remembered fondly by its members. Their discussions reveal the pleasure they shared in doing drag together and how importantly this group connection figured in composing their drag identities and mobilizing their drag appearances. On the most basic level, it seems that their connection to one another was a basis for their social existence as drag queens. However, even though there are many

ways in which Haus of Frau's group experience was rewarding to its individual members, the group only managed to sustain itself about two years.

### **The Diaspora**

It is a truism that all good things must come to an end. To this point, I have emphasized what was good about the Haus of Frau for its members, how it affirmed drag queen experience. However, there were intrinsic flaws to group cohesion. In retrospect, Haus of Frau associate the damage to group cohesion with individual personality clashes. Some also recognized ways in which the momentum and popularity that Haus of Frau generated were its own undoing.

Miss Piss begins this section by telling that Haus of Frau coalesced and gained momentum rapidly. He also makes reference to personal issues that respective members might have been working through at the time:

**Haus of Frau clicked and there was not stopping us  
and uh  
of course we all had our little  
demons  
that we were all dealing with  
we were having fun  
  
and coping  
I was coping**

Where Miss Piss makes reference to everyone having “their little demons” and “coping,” I presume he was acknowledging that peak involvement with the Haus of Frau diverted attention away from personal issues from everyday life. Miss Piss’ earlier description of a Frau night on the town depicts a fast and furious lifestyle. Substance abuse and late hours made coping with little demons more difficult and probably helped create new ones. In the last chapter, Miss Piss recalled arriving home at four a.m. and jumping into bed with his wig, makeup and dress still on. Although Miss Piss lived in his parent’s home then and there was need to keep his doing drag a secret, that anecdote suggests that doing drag had spiraled a little out of control. I

presume also that in part, what Haus of Frau were coping with was how consuming of time, energy and resources doing drag became. As Miss Piss also noted about his peak involvement with drag in the last chapter, he began to miss his life “as Mark.”

In this passage, Nonami recalls how he felt about Haus of Frau at their peak. He seems to acknowledge the “little demons” as Miss Piss did. However, Nonami is more specific about the nature of these demons.

**Well back in its heyday it was really great  
and I had a lot of really high hopes  
because it would have been a good way  
if everyone wasn't so mentally insane  
as we all were in our own ways  
to meld together  
and you know  
put some effort into making it something real and substantial**

Nonami acknowledges that he had high hopes for the group. He stated that it “would have been good in a way ...[for the group] to meld together and ... put some effort into making it something real and substantial.” In terms of making the group “something real and substantial,” Miss Piss acknowledges that the members were aiming to form a credible performance troupe. However, he acknowledges that self-interests undermined group solidarity. Below, Miss Piss makes these revelations as he tells how he perceived Hermaphrodite to figure in Haus of Frau’s formation:

**he [Hermaphrodite]  
wanted to do it [drag performances]  
and he wanted to do it together  
so that started to form some sort of  
um  
troupe I think**

...

**A troupe that actually got together  
he was interested in making this  
the Haus of Frau a troupe  
and I think that we were too**

**but I think that you know  
we all  
wanted you know  
our piece of the pie  
wanted our fame**

At the initial Haus of Frau dinner and planning session that in 1992, everyone seemed to have similar hopes for the group. They talked about trying to book performance gigs up and down the entire east coast, from Boston to Atlanta. However, factors such as those mentioned by Miss Piss and Nonami intervened. Self-interests seemed to undermine group solidarity and manifest in unpleasant exchanges that Nonami and Hermaphrodite termed insanity. Below, Hermaphrodite specifies the nature of this insanity:

**to survive we needed each other**

..

**so that's how that came along  
but it led to all sorts of in-fighting and jealousies and madness**

**you know  
that was just as common among the regular female impersonators  
it's it's  
just an insane  
jealousy**

**it's madness  
fucking madness**

**control issues**

Apparently, Miss Piss shares Hermaphrodite's observation that group dynamics had started to mirror those he perceived among female impersonators:

**we also started to compete with one another  
and it really started becoming vicious  
and it started becoming exactly what the Baltimore booger drag was about  
which was what we were against  
you know we were becoming them  
and I think that's why it disbanded**

I interrupted to ask Miss Piss: "Do you think that's something natural that happens when people get a certain amount of notoriety?" Miss Piss responded:

**I think so  
I think so  
you know  
everyone wanted more more more for themselves**

**and you know  
I guess I can't speak for everyone  
but I definitely felt like I was becoming vicious  
under-after drinking  
and this and that  
you know**

**I also felt bad because I was leaving it and I didn't want to leave it  
and um  
you know  
I would go down and see Meduza perform  
you know I really wanted to be up there doing that  
and um**

**you know  
so I started losing it  
and I think other people were losing it too**

Several Frau members offered recollections indicating that self-interests manifest in conflicts that shattered group cohesion. Miss Piss stated that he and others were “losing it.” I presume that what they were losing was a sense of connection and commitment to the group. Perhaps they were also losing interest. Their involvement had been so intense that it could only be a matter of time before the novelty wore off. Some may have grown tired of the intense routine that included interpersonal conflicts among Frau members. In some instances, the conflicts seemed to create personality clashes that escalated into the “insanity” that Nonami and Hermaphrodite mentioned.

However, the adversarial relations that ensued were not all that undid Frau. Miss Piss perceived another way in which Frau’s enormous popularity contributed to their undoing. Many people wanted part of the Frau experience. People wanted to bask in Frau’s limelight and gain group membership. Below, Miss Piss recalls a conversation that he had with a pushy avid partygoer known as Johnny Bodacious. Johnny asked Miss Piss “Do you think I could be ‘honorary Frau’?” Miss Piss replied to him, “Well sure there’s not a lot you have to do.” Miss Piss reflected on this conversation with Johnny Bodacious after I interjected:

“Yeah well Frau didn’t really draw lines. Whoever wanted to perform with the group just did. Whoever wanted to infiltrate the group just did. Some people who performed with the group were seriously borderline booger queens, like Rodney. I thought he was pretty damned booger. But Frau never said “no, you can’t perform with us; you’re not one of us.”

Then Miss Piss responded:

**Right  
anyone could be Frau  
and that’s what eventually wound up happening**

**and it got  
it got so watered down**

This watering down effect that Miss Piss recognized had implications for group identity. It seemed easier to know who Frau were and what the group stood for when the membership was small. However, Haus of Frau were not hierarchical and did not establish boundaries around their community. They were inclusive because they did not want to replicate the dividing practices they perceived among female impersonators. However, it seems that Haus of Frau were not able to make the distinction between being inclusive and being indiscriminate when it came to social practice. The wants and needs of so many outsiders infiltrating the group were interruptions to the patterns of interaction that had established group cohesion and identity. Miss Piss indicates that the end result of these interruptions to group solidarity was confusion. It was no longer clear who Frau were:

**Frau was getting old a little bit**

...

**you know**

**who was Frau**

**no one knew who Frau was**

**no one knew**

**you know**

**but there were a lot of people who became Frau**

**and then all of a sudden no one wanted to be Frau**

It is hard to sustain social connections and identifications with a group when one is no longer sure what the group represents. At the beginning, the Haus of Frau were like a family. They understood their connections to each other and recognized the importance of that connection to their drag identities. However, the Haus of Frau's intimacy was disrupted as outsiders were

permitted to perform with the group and/or gained admission to the backstage dressing rooms. The commotion that backstage visitors generated made it hard for Frau members to maintain their connections to each other and concentrate on their performances. It is not hard to see how demise befell the Haus of Frau. Interpersonal conflicts were undermining group solidarity at the same time whatever sense of group identity that remained was being interrupted and appropriated by others wishing to be “honorary Frau.” Yet one incident in particular seemed to sound the death knell for the Haus of Frau.

In retrospect, Meduza and Miss Piss pinpoint Nonami/John Flowers’ departure from Baltimore as the final blow to the group’s tangible existence. Miss Piss recalls that the group was already showing the signs of demise when Nonami left:

**it eventually started to crumble  
and I think what actually made it crumble for all of us was John Flowers’  
leaving  
that sort of ended it for us all**

Meduza recalls interpersonal conflicts and varying levels of group commitment in a discussion that leads him to summarize and explain the group’s demise. . I asked Meduza, “So what do you think happened?” He replied:

**Well I think John leaving was a major part  
in  
Haus of Frau going their own way  
  
you know  
I do think he was kinda the one that got along with everybody  
right  
you know  
I got along with him**

**yeah**

**I mean for me John and Hermaphrodite were like  
I felt like were on my side**

**Piss you couldn't count on  
and Barbie was you know  
had no time for me**

Meduza's passage illustrates how complicated interpersonal relations were in the Haus of Frau. In retrospect, Nonami stated that he did not realize it at the time, but now he realizes that he was the only member of the Haus of Frau who got along well with all other members. It seemed that everyone else had contentious relations with at least one other person in the group. Nonami sees now how he played a diplomatic role in the group as he finished telling how and why his most intense involvement with doing drag lapsed:

**I moved out of state  
that's what made it cool down for me  
a lot because I moved out of state**

**for everybody else I think  
it was very difficult for the Haus of Frau  
for the group to meld together**

**I think that was one of the key roles I had within the group  
was kind of  
uh  
uh uh  
a diplomatic role  
keeping everybody evenly keeled  
because when you have that many creative people  
I think the creativity was  
kind of in a very mental way with everybody**

**I mean  
everybody was very quirky  
and they had their own set ways  
and it was really difficult to get everybody  
to you know  
give and take as much as they needed to give and take  
to get an actual performance done**

**and I think that was the role I played a lot  
cause Hermaphrodite came up with a lot of the ideas  
then everybody else wanted to feed their idea into his idea  
and getting everybody to get together  
and make it work out in a very compromising way**

Nonami was the oldest member of the Haus of Frau and had the most experience doing drag performances prior to Frau's nascence. His performance experiences included working collaboratively. He knew what it was like to work with other artists in creating a performance. He knew that give and take were necessary to keep people interested and working together. Nonami also had an easy going manner where others might have been more aggressive or high strung. Without Nonami's calming influence and his ability to negotiate everyone's ideas into performances, the group completely fell apart. Meduza laments the group's passing and makes these observations about the Frau's fragile existence below:

**unfortunately things  
you know  
not everybody got along**

**you know I mean  
you know things happen  
nothing lasts for ever  
and you change  
and everybody else changes**

In pinpointing specific features of Haus of Frau group dynamics that seem detrimental to group longevity, I might have down played the impact that the march of time has on life. Meduza is more philosophical in his discussion above and provides an additional insight into Frau's brief life where he acknowledges that "nothing lasts forever" and that "you change and everybody else changes." Perhaps one can generalize that Haus of Frau came together at stages in their respective life courses and personal development where change was rapid; hence the fleeting Haus of Frau experience. It was as if these five men bumped into each other as they were in transit. They coincidentally found each other engaging similar vehicles of personal expression which represented male femininity and indicated their working through identity issues. This coincidence bound them to each other and their drag identities only so long as these connections and identifications remained salient to respective individuals. In metaphorical terms, they shared the ride until each found their stopping points.

In the wake of Nonami's departure from Baltimore, some interpersonal connections remained, others failed. Nonami maintained regular phone contact and visited Meduza and Hermaphrodite on his occasional visits to Baltimore. Nonami also exchanged phone calls with Barbie Star occasionally. Even so, within a year or so of Nonami's departure, Miss Piss and Barbie Star disappeared from Baltimore's night life. Hermaphrodite and Meduza continued to perform together. However, Meduza began to seek outlets for developing and expressing his own performances rather performing solely in collaboration with Hermaphrodite. Meduza recalls this development below:

**After Haus of Frau  
I did a lot of drag with  
Hermaphrodite  
and then when Hermaphrodite  
then Hermaphrodite  
we kinda got  
not tired of working with each other**

**but we were always working with each other**

**so then it was kinda like  
I started hanging out at the Cabaret  
then it was like  
well I'm gonna do my own thing  
so I was doing my own thing**

Meduza's passage implies something about Haus of Frau performances that Miss Piss also alluded: Hermaphrodite's influence on Haus of Frau performances was overwhelming. Although Hermaphrodite was very ambitious, scoring gigs for the group, conceiving performances and putting them together, he was not always accommodating to other people's ideas or constructive criticism. Miss Piss recognized that Hermaphrodite could be credited for organizing and managing Haus of Frau. However, alone, Hermaphrodite did not possess the diplomatic skills necessary to keep everyone agreeable to his ideas of what a Frau performance should be; he was more inclined to be a director rather than a collaborator. If I might read between the lines a bit, it seems that where Meduza recalled that he decided "well, I'm gonna do my own thing," he is suggesting that he had ideas for drag performance which did not gain expression when collaborating with Hermaphrodite.

Speaking of Haus of Frau in the present, Nonami also laments Haus of Frau's disappearance. He is dismayed that people seem so invested in their bad feelings toward each other, even after four years apart. It is a compelling contradiction that most Haus of Frau members recall their peak involvement with the Haus of Frau as one the high points, the best times of their lives, yet some members continue to harbor bad feelings toward each other. I suppose it illustrates that good and bad exist simultaneously in most situations. Nonetheless, in the passage below, Nonami seems to be expressing his realization that Frau is *really* gone:

**and I guess now  
after being gone for four years**

and coming back [to Baltimore] and  
you know  
the impossibility of everybody getting back together  
even  
in  
just to like have dinner  
or  
something like that  
it's just like you know  
it's no longer realistic  
and that's really strange

you know just for being gone for four years  
and certain people can't deal with other people  
and  
just I don't know  
they're all at different places  
and  
you know definitely performing is out of the question  
and that's sort of very sad

and I communicate with everybody in it  
but everybody else in it doesn't necessarily communicate with each other in it  
you know what I mean

yeah  
so it's very sad and sort of  
I also feel at the same time  
you know  
I know it's not something that's ever going to be able to be reconciled  
so it's something that  
it's sad  
but at the same time it's not really something to dwell upon  
because it's not  
there's no point in that either

so it's just time to kind of  
suck it up and move along

**but it is sad about Frau  
but  
you know  
maybe it can become something else  
maybe with other people  
or maybe I will be Frau alone**

Nonami's passage demonstrates a sense of loss at the recognition that Frau is really gone. In the final stanza of this passage, it seems like Frau's absence has created a void in his life that he seeks to fill with some other drag experience, i.e., "maybe it can become something else, maybe with other people, or maybe I will be Frau alone." Perhaps the most dubious of these prospects for drag experience in the future is his suggestion that he might "be Frau alone." During his interview, Nonami made some observations about doing drag in the present that suggest he will not "be Frau alone." In the next passage Nonami expresses that he is at a loss to know *who* his drag persona is as of February, 1998. He began telling me how he learned to do drag. In the process of explaining how he does drag, Nonami indicated that he was "losing the character."

**still I guess  
I don't know  
I mean  
I've never really learned to do drag  
It think it's more you just do it  
and it evolves with you  
as you  
you know develop  
the format of what you are trying to present**

**... and I think that's maybe one of the problems I'm having  
you know that I haven't really done it  
you know you have these big time in the spotlight drag queens  
like Lipsinka and RuPaul and Lady Bunny**

**and they seem to be very caricature  
and they do the same thing [present themselves repeatedly the same]**

**and I just don't feel  
you know I'm not doing a character  
I'm not  
it's more of an um  
you know  
amoeba-ie kind of  
the surrounding is very soft and malleable  
so I don't know where it goes  
and I don't have a specific  
oh I'm going to be this one  
I'm going to be that redhead  
so it's hard  
I don't know  
I'm like losing the character  
maybe  
or redefining**

Nonami did not experience this dilemma when he was doing drag constantly. It is only now that he is only doing drag sporadically that he seems unsure who his drag persona is. I propose that his connections to the Haus of Frau nourished the drag queen identity sufficiently to mobilize drag queen appearances and performance. Perhaps the character that Nonami feels he is losing, is the drag queen identity that connections to the Haus of Frau activated. With his acknowledgment that Haus of Frau is over, the need for redefining who his drag character is seems all the more likely. Although no other member specifically addressed the sense of identity loss that Nonami recognized, all members of the Haus of Frau did drag less once the group dissolved. Some members stopped doing drag almost completely. Miss Piss and Barbie Star have only done drag once in the past four years. Hermaphrodites only began doing drag and performing again at the end of 1998. Remarkably, for Miss Piss, Barbie Star, and Hermaphrodite, their return to publicly doing drag, however brief, was marked by the presence

of Nonami Flowers.

In January 1998, all members of the Haus of Frau except Hermaphrodite went to a drag party in Washington, DC. Miss Piss, Barbie Star and Nonami all got into drag together at Barbie Star's apartment. They joined Meduza at photographer Cameron Wolf's house to take photographs before attending the party. There was a lot of enthusiasm for this reunion. However, the event did not live up to expectations and Frau

members drifted apart once again after this event. It seems the glare of expectation and the march of time were too much for the fragile magic that was once the Haus of Frau to survive.

### **Critical Observations on Frau's Emergence and Longevity**

Indubitably, Haus of Frau became a signifier of radical drag identity for its members. Where traditional female impersonators use appearance to appropriate conventional femininity through female illusion, Haus of Frau were more intent on using their radical drag appearances to create and communicate an "in-between" that both accommodated and represented their masculine and feminine identifications. The visual appraisals by which they identified themselves and located each other were the means for establishing this group. In establishing this group, the Haus of Frau were able to construct and convey positive value to their radical drag experience where such affirmations might not have existed otherwise.

At its inception, the group members were exuberant about their connections to one another and the possibilities for expressing drag queen identity that their small community afforded. However, it seems that most were ill prepared to manage the social demands that their rapid escalation to popularity in Baltimore's gay community required. For example, in

Chapter V., Hermaphrodite, Miss Piss and Meduza each discussed identity conflicts that emerged between the drag queen self and the gay male selves they wished to present in everyday life. There was much demand for the Haus of Frau's radical drag queens. However, it seems that there was not always adequate social reward to compensate for what of everyday life was sacrificed to doing drag.

Frau were performing together regularly and appearing together in drag frequently. Most members recall that during Haus of Frau's heyday, they seemed to be in drag constantly whether to perform, go out to a show, or just to circulate in night clubs. Their nights on the town when not performing became opportunities to promote themselves and their performances. Therefore, nights on the town became not just about having fun.

The social demands that Haus of Frau had helped create were also complicated by the personalities of its individual members. They were all very artistic, creative people. Among the membership were a photographer, hair and makeup artist, classically trained vocalist, and a costume/fashion designer. Some members had performance histories that preceded Haus of Frau. Every member had very strong opinions about how Frau performances should materialize and be executed.

As Frau started to escalate, inherent problems surfaced. Barbie Star did not like performing on stage even though he was a very talented performer and a spectacular visage. Some members were put off by Hermaphrodite's preponderate influence on most performances. Yet some members lacked to commitment to performance that Hermaphrodite possessed. These members were less likely to show for rehearsals and do what they were supposed to when the Haus of Frau actually performed. This made the already chaotic Frau performances even harder to execute for those wanting to give a professional performance. Performing is stressful to begin with. Introducing the unknown by performing with those unrehearsed (and somewhat unconcerned) added more stress.

Frau's conventions of appearance and performance might also have contributed to their

undoing. Group performances became unwieldy because of a penchant for excess. The planning and energy that large, involved production numbers required started taking the fun out of performing. What is more, Frau performances relied heavily on shock value. As Madonna learned with her book, Sex, outrage can be taken only so far before it reaches saturation, folds in on itself and becomes the same-old, same-old. In a recent phone conversation with Hermaphrodite on this very subject, he stated that the only thing left that Frau could have done to take their shock value to a new level would have been to kill a person or have someone commit suicide on stage.

Taking appearance as a proxy for identity, Haus of Frau were each multiple and shifting. None of the individual members called upon a clear cut persona in constructing their drag appearances; therefore, they rarely appeared the same way twice. In a sense, some members came to a point where they did not know who their respective drag characters were supposed to be. There was no soundly formed foundation on which they could construct a drag character that could sustain itself. They were paralyzed by the possibilities, experiencing the same ennui and sensory overload many postmodern theorists attribute to contemporary existence. The multiplicity and fragmentation was not limited to aesthetics. For some, the fragmentation and multiplicities were spilling over into everyday life. Their drag personae were becoming so powerful and important, that they started to overshadow who they thought they "really were" or wanted to be in everyday life. The Haus of Frau also contained various more intimate relations and conflicts within its core, contributing further to fragmentation.

There were sub-groups of two's and three's that coalesced within Frau. Only Nonami got on extremely well with every member of the Haus of Frau. He was very important to group cohesion. Every member cited John Flower's departure as key to Haus of Frau's demise. Nonami became less and less involved with drag while away from the Haus of Frau and the Haus of Frau disintegrated within a year of Nonami's departure. However, other problems also contributed to Frau's exhaustion.

Serious substance abuse habits developed among some Haus of Frau members. Drunkenness often accompanied their doing drag and some became quite sloppy. This drag/substance abuse equation contributed to Frau's undoing as a few members became involved with more illicit substances. Substance abuse accompanied doing drag for a number of reasons. Doing drag was a party for the Haus of Frau and recreational substance abuse characterized the gay night life to which Frau were privy. Substance abuse also helped the various members loosen up and overcome their inhibitions about

doing drag and performing. For some members as well, there was a lust for peak experiences and substance abuse seemed to make doing drag all the more fabulous.

Substance abuse and addictions are common in Baltimore's community of gay men. Perhaps self-esteem problems sometimes accompany being gay and doing drag because of the negative meanings those experiences receive from mainstream culture. Personal problems such as these and others sometimes underlie substance abuse trajectories. One Frau member's substance abuse problems required time in rehabilitation. He so strongly links substance abuse with doing drag that he refused to drag for several years. Another member of the Haus of Frau became diabetic and could no longer drink to excess and smoke cigarettes like he usually did when in drag. Other members have simply curbed their substance abuses in order to focus on aspects of their lives they deemed more important than partying. Today, every member of the Haus of Frau is much less involved in substance abuse and less involved with doing drag. It seems that many other things became more important than doing drag.

When Haus of Frau were at their peak, doing drag it was very consuming . It took precedence over other concerns and required lifestyle adjustments. Drag is primarily a night-time activity. Psyching up for performances and actually performing can leave one wired. Frau often found themselves trying to wind down well into the wee hours of the morning. Doing drag can therefore interfere with one's ability to function at school and work in the morning.

Therefore, one often chooses a schedule that permits doing drag and this for some precluded regular employment. For others, it meant slogging through Mondays, barely getting by at work and desperately anticipating their going to bed right after work in the early evening. Doing drag can also interfere with gay men's romantic lives: Doing drag occurs evenings and weekends at night, the peak times for dating. Moreover, many gay men do not want their identities and prestige diminished by intimate association with drag queens.

In spite of the lifestyle adjustments doing drag requires, many female impersonators maintain doing drag as the most important thing in their lives for periods of time that exceed the Haus of Frau's existence. Perhaps the willingness of female impersonators to sacrifice so much of their everyday lives to doing drag accounts in part for the survival of the female impersonation community in Baltimore while the Haus of Frau flagged.

Haus of Frau did not succeed in maintaining its community. There were several structural reasons why Haus of Frau failed to sustain itself. Haus of Frau did not have the institutional support of gay bars and they were not connected to the burgeoning female impersonation pageant system. These two institutions consistently provide opportunities for female impersonators to perform and a reason to do drag. As well, many female impersonators find other employment in gay bars that allows them to continue pursuing their doing drag. Female impersonators get in drag to attend performances at gay bars even when they are not performing. Likewise, a regular following consisting of the female impersonator's friends and female impersonation aficionados also attend drag performances in gay bars. A social world surrounds doing drag for Baltimore's female impersonators. There is racial diversity(although African America female impersonators are under-represented among pageant winners and as paid performers in Baltimore's gay bars) and female impersonators range in age

from late teens, upward toward sixty. Some of Baltimore's female impersonators have drag careers lasting two or three decades. Notably, Baltimore's female impersonation community has its roots in the pre-Stonewall era. Thus they have historical roots to ground them.

Perhaps the Haus of Frau were too

small and void of history to survive. They were very inclusive of others because they did not want to be like female impersonators. Perhaps Frau wound up subverting themselves in the ways they reacted against the female impersonation community.

As Schechner (1988) states, rules not only tell participants how to participate but also to protect the activity from "outside encroachment" (p.11). He states that rules persist because activities requiring special rules are something apart from everyday life, that activities like sports, theater and ritual are social counterparts to individual fantasy (p.11). Thus rules preserve the "specialness" of doing female impersonation. Female impersonators have rather strict rules governing their drag appearances. They also have very predictable conventions of performance that function as implicit rules. The rules also allow those regular spectators of female impersonation performances to know how they should behave as spectators and what to expect from performers. Spectators can evaluate female impersonation performances based on the established conventions of performance and appearance. There is little wonder that the whistles and bells started sounding for female impersonators when the Haus of Frau tread their territory. It was very threatening to the established social order of drag performance in gay bars when the Haus of Frau appeared intentionally incomplete in their gender crossing and performed in manners that female impersonators did not understand. But the female impersonation community continues to survive much more tangibly than the Haus of Frau. The female impersonation community succeeds in preserving itself with social tactics that were antithetical to Frau. Frau had neither explicit nor implicit rules governing appearance and performance saving their omnipresent use of humor and irony.

In retrospect, Hermaphrodite reflects that perhaps the Haus of Frau spent too much

time and energy trying to perform in gay bars and that they should have focused on performance art venues where they were always welcomed and better respected. Indeed, the female impersonators functioning as mistresses of ceremony would sometimes jeer the Haus of Frau before their audience. Perhaps the resources spent trying perform in gay bars, where the audience did not always understand what was going on and in a performance venue dominated by hostile female impersonators also helped lead the Haus of Frau to a dissipation.

Now that I have discussed the Haus of Frau as a community with a distinct culture based on visual difference, I emphasize that Frau culture continues to impact each member's current conceptions of self and world view even though Frau has already been defunct four years. Their appearances were identity documents functioning as social currency during personal interactions. Their appearances were the means by which they proclaimed their social realities and relationship to other people. These men conceived themselves as gay, artists, performers and drag queens all at once. They located themselves and constructed their male feminine identities at the intersection of these multiple subject positions. Mobilizing themselves from these multiple positions, they created a community and conflict but also possibilities for the future.

Contemporary with this writing, the Haus of Frau maintain drag queen identities. However the specific location of these respective drag queen identities and the magnitude of their importance within each person is diminished from that time in the recent past when the Haus of Frau seemed unstoppable. Consequently, these drag queens materialize now only on occasion. The drag queen no longer composes a presentation of self that could be considered routine to their social lives. The connections between appearance, personal identity and social identity is apparent in the drag queen experience that unfolded here. The experience Haus of Frau related shows that without social identity, personal identity becomes perilous and the social appearances which represent identity dissolve. Hence I argue that appearances materialize from the position of personal identity and that it is by appearance that personal

identities are socially performed.

## **CHAPTER VII. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This investigation to located key social contexts framing drag queen experience, the personal and collective meanings that composed drag queen consciousness for the Haus of Frau, and considered the connections between drag appearance, identity and social realities as they were revealed in the interview text. A secondary aim was to consider what caused the Haus of Frau to emerge, flourish briefly, then disappear and how the group impacted individual drag queen appearances and identity. Apprehending the socially constructed meanings that compose social order, identities and the subject positions from which these drag queens were poised to perceive reality and take social action was key to fulfilling these aims.

### **Impact of Gendered Social Relations on Individual Consciousness**

In mainstream American society, a wealth of information regarding appropriately gendered appearance and behavior are communicated to the individual through interpersonal exchange in immediate social settings and through mass communication channels. In these manners expectations are communicated to the individual which aim at regulating male and female populations into distinct social groups with separate social roles. Although this assertion about gender norms is an abstraction that aims to explain many intangible experiences residing in consciousness, I demonstrated the connections between gender norms, self regulation and social order by referring back to the interviews that Haus of Frau provided.

Haus of Frau perceived a gendered social order which proffered separate appearance and behavioral expectations to men and women, respectively. These separate expectations created and maintained differences that go far beyond the presumably basic biological difference that distinguishes women from men. However, the manners in which women and men are culturally conceived and socially perform their difference from one another

authenticates a social order in which male ontology and masculinity (the behaviors, appearances and other qualities associated with the biological male) are socially understood to be performed in exclusion of anything deemed feminine. This mandatory male renunciation of the feminine is the basis of many male privileges that found the American social order. From Haus of Frau's perceptions of the gendered social order, I draw the conclusion that it is primarily through appearance that mainstream society accomplishes its specific *version* of sexual difference and the promulgation of heterosexual male privilege. Where women's fashionable and socially acceptable appearances create more visual sensation and more readily convey their bodies to the social viewer, their appearances disproportionately place focus on women as objects of visual pleasure to men. Silverman (1992) asserted that men's place behind the lens of this "metaphorical camera" was socially constructed and positioned heterosexual men, like Dolan (1988) proposes, as privileged spectators to the feminine spectacle.

Haus of Frau interviews revealed their perceptions of a gendered social reality in manners which seem to confirm Silverman's (1992) assertion that American culture's way of looking at people presumes heterosexuality and male privilege. In Chapter IV., both Nonami and Hermaphrodite conveyed their impressions that women were often trapped behind the social expectations that women's appearances serve male pleasure. However, the chief implication of this inequitable visual contract for Haus of Frau's social experience stemmed from the mass cultural expectation that men do not displace themselves from their position behind this heterosexual "camera" by becoming too visible.

In the abstract, gay identity removes men from the ideal spectator's position due to mass cultural understandings of the gay male as "feminine." Thus as Silverman (1992) asserts, gay men join women, decidedly on the side of spectacle. However, doing drag makes this cultural abstraction by which gay men are disqualified from male privilege visible and tangible in social relations. Hermaphrodite made allusion to the social operations that disqualify gay men and drag queens from mainstream male identity where he surmised that publicly donning

feminine gear was somehow more permissible to gay men because society deemed them somehow less than “real men.”

These socially communicated assertions that gay males and drag queens are somehow less than real men revealed a series of cultural beliefs and values that compose male gender norms and a social order which devalues any male experience other than heterosexual masculinity. This devaluation of alternative identities and alternative gender performances have been the basis for stereotyping, stigma, discrimination and violence against gay men and drag queens. It is of great importance that in cultural terms that it was by their conflation with woman and the feminine that gay male and drag queen experience were devalued: By implication, women’s place in social relations and their social worth to mainstream society also appears subordinate to that of heterosexual men. It is from Haus of Frau’s locations in this conflicted social position where gay men *are* biological males but disqualified from their presumed birthright to male status and identity that they offer an outsider’s point of view which illuminates the importance of appearance to identity and social relations.

The Haus of Frau portrayed social experiences of difference stemming from gay drag queen appearances and identity. In the process of analyzing these portrayals, much taken for granted cultural baggage was not only located but unpacked. Haus of Frau’s recollections of social interaction in which they portrayed difference lead me to this recognition: In visual transactions, people are usually much more concerned with what they see than *how* they are seeing. Therefore, I propose that investigating visual transactions from a marginal position facilitates apprehensions of the cultural meanings that inform visual interpretation because the marginal position often uncovers what is taken for granted in the mainstream. I make this proposition because when one achieves fluency and comfort in mainstream social relations, one often becomes complacently entrenched and unquestioning. From this comfy position, alternative interpretations of reality, or even understanding that reality is socially created are often foreclosed to the individual. Haus of Frau recognized that gay and drag queen

experiences were marginalized and misunderstood by people strongly affiliated to the mainstream and deeply invested in their status quo identities. There was much misunderstanding as to what Haus of Frau's drag queen appearances meant among people invested in mainstream culture. Even though Haus of Frau's drag queen appearances rarely came close to creating a completely feminine illusion, their partial engagements with the trappings of feminine appearance obviously provided enough information for viewers to overwrite the drag queen body, desires and identity according to a conventional script: a male-masculine/female-feminine binary which demands masculinity be performed to the exclusion of any trait deemed feminine. No mainstream possibilities or options seem to exist outside the poles of this binary.

Nonetheless, the Haus of Frau did emerge, first as gay men, then as drag queens. However, the mainstream gender binary and status quo definitions of the gay male and drag queens impacted their consciousness. Haus of Frau did gain access to alternative, possibly affirming definitions of gay identity by their membership in Baltimore's gay men's community. But no sensitive, affirming definitions of drag queen identity were readily available to the Haus of Frau outside their individual and group consciousnesses. Haus of Frau did construct affirming drag queen identities. However these identities were not without conflict. The subject positions that they came to occupy in the dominant social relations of mainstream society and Baltimore's community of gay men reflected status quo social identities. Whereas, their personal identities reflected socially marginal alternatives. Therefore, Frau's drag queen identities pitted personal identities against socially acceptable identities: male against female, masculine against feminine, visibly queer against the ostensibly heterosexual.

This identity conflict permeated each individual's consciousness and the conflict materialized in social relations when these individuals did drag. Although members of the Haus of Frau acknowledged having both masculine and feminine characteristics, it seems that most recognized these dual characteristics as a source of conflict and made sense of the possible

gender confusion by cognitively dividing themselves according to the masculine and feminine “sides” that they suggested to compose their beings. They ordered their consciousness and constructed their identities according to the gender binary even though it was neither accommodating nor affirming to their experience. Perhaps this was unavoidable since the gender binary is at the basis of social order and heterosexual gender norms saturate the cultures these men accessed in their formative years. They were steeped in a gendered world view and it permeated their consciousness. They learned the cultural ways of seeing and interpreting themselves and others according to the heterosexual norm and its male privilege. For example, Hermaphrodite noted that homosexual guilt composed a “little voice” in his head that told him being gay was wrong. Hermaphrodite had similar misgivings about appearing in feminine gear and admitted feeling ashamed to appear in a dress. But at the same time, Hermaphrodite stated that he felt like he had a “woman trapped in his body that wanted to come out.”

Although other Frau members may not have felt as though a woman was trapped in their bodies, all noted that their feminine side gained expression through doing drag. For some like Miss Piss and Barbie Star, they professed feeling like they *were* women when they did drag. Moreover, Miss Piss, Meduza and Nonami each specified their cognitive engagements with particular female archetypes e.g., the pop diva, chanteuse and bitch in constructing their drag queen identities. I extrapolate from this process of using *imagined* connections to female archetypes to construct drag queen identities, that imagination is also necessary to construct status quo gendered identities. The identifications Haus of Frau made with stock types of women that exist in the cultural imaginary suggest that it is by imagination that all people construct gendered identities and that such identities only become verifiably “real” when they materialize through social appearances and are confirmed by visual appraisals.

To emphasize this point I return to Meduza’s discussions on body hair and how he preferred not shaving his body hair in summer because it “doesn’t look right, you know, it’s not very masculine.” Meduza had learned how to visually appraise his male appearance from

culture and his male body failed visual appraisal if razor stubble publicly showed. He perceived that razor stubble rendered him less credibly masculine, thus less convincingly male during visual transactions. Hence Meduza's visual appraisal of the male social self involved his incorporating expectations for proper masculine appearance from mainstream culture. This self appraisal seems contingent on how he anticipated his body would be visually appraised by others. Furthermore, we might see this anticipatory self-appraisal as a means of self regulation by which Meduza disciplined his male appearances into conformity with the social expectations for conventional masculinity that had permeated his consciousness. Additionally, it seems that it was by imagining his connection to conventional masculinity that Meduza regulated his appearance to portray a personally desirable and socially rewarding masculine identity.

Meduza was very calculated in constructing both his drag queen appearances and male appearances in everyday life. The physical reality of his hairy male body required him to ponder where, when and how he would adapt his male body to drag queen appearances that pleased him because physical evidence of his gender crossing might remain on his body and cause social consequences. For Meduza, the identity conflicts associated with drag queen experience were manifest on his physical body and showed how the body is currency in social transactions.

However, the identity conflicts that drag queen identity posed often resided in consciousness, where mainstream culture provided no clear cut solutions to these men with mixed gender identifications. Where mainstream gender consciousness is constructed in strictly heterosexual male/female terms, it does not accommodate gay or drag queen experience. Therefore, the Haus of Frau experienced identity ambivalence. There seemed no place to locate themselves according to the terms of gender identity put forth in mainstream culture. Because they understood themselves (most simply) as masculine by virtue of being male, and feminine by virtue of homosexual orientation, they were marginal to a dominant culture that does not acknowledge possibilities that lie in between its mutually exclusive male and female poles.

Yet Haus of Frau forged and communicated their own in-between. Their appearances were testimony to a possibility that seemed to fall outside the mainstream imagination: that one could be both masculine and feminine. In sum, the verbal identity documents and discourses on drag queen appearance that Haus of Frau shared allow me to make the proposition that it was through their gender bending appearances, that they performed their gender identity ambivalence.

### **Theoretical Implications of this Investigation**

Stone's (1970b) symbolic interactionist version of appearance as communication and his suggestion that the visual component of social transactions can be understood in terms of program and review were indispensable to this research. Stone emphasized the importance of appearance to the social operations of seeing and being seen that establish social identities and reproduce social realities.

From a Symbolic interactionist standpoint, I emphasize that the impact of pre-existing socially defined reality on individuals is inescapable and undeniable. Although persons might embrace alternative definitions of reality, they are subject to reality as it is socially defined in mainstream culture. Through this subjection, people come to see themselves and the world as others do. Acknowledging the preponderant influence of mainstream gender stipulations on Haus of Frau's alternative identities, it seems then that there was only one signifier (however inadequate) that could render their alternative experience visible and culturally intelligible to others: Haus of Frau's drag queen identifications came to reside under the sign of femininity even though their self perceptions and drag queen appearances represented something in between masculine and feminine. Therefore, they explained and understood their drag queen identities by virtue of their connection to femininity. In so doing, they inadvertently reproduced mainstream gender divisions, both in their respective

psyches and in social relations. Yet to do otherwise, they would have disappeared because femininity was the only vehicle by which they could communicate their sense of difference.

Stone (1970b) and Silverman (1992) both assert that the social operations of seeing and being seen in our culture aim toward establishing identities for the self and others that one might visually encounter. Silverman proposed that establishing such identities relies on visual appraisals by which persons are assessed for their verisimilitude to fundamental social categories (such as gender and race), which in turn, as Stone proposes, determine one's prestige and social regard from others. This research confirmed the importance of appearance to establishing identities. Moreover, it seems that masculine appearances which confirm the male identity conveyed higher prestige and social regard to men. Whereas any appearance that contradicted the male-masculine equation stripped men of the automatic privilege traditionally associated with heterosexual male identity and relegated the transgressor to the feminine realm where stigma is possible.

Even though stigma was imminent to drag queen social experience, the Haus of Frau were nonetheless compelled to do drag. Their respective senses of self were sufficiently strong to resist social mandates that they confine their visible identities to mainstream status quo appearances. I draw the conclusion that indeed, something more compelling than mainstream culture's punitive gender restrictions programmed their drag queen appearances. Their identities, composed of masculine and feminine identifications, demanded expression and gained this expression through drag queen appearance. Thus I assert that appearance is a physical manifestation of identity, which in turn, indicates a state of consciousness reflecting personal desires, values and one's imagined connections to fundamental social categories such as male and female.

In other terms, I conceive the Haus of Frau's mixed bag of male and female identifications to compose the marginal gay and drag queen subject positions from which they

came to discourse. These subject positions indicate the impact of previous discursive intrusions on the psyche. In this respect, the discursively constituted male and female identifications that Haus of Frau were compelled to observe saturated their respective psyches. However, the social contradiction of establishing male identity on the basis of genital possession, then disqualifying one from this fundamental identification on the basis of appearance (which is pure artifice) or sexual orientation (which is intangible under ordinary circumstances) became a personal contradiction for the Haus of Frau. As Hermaphrodite noticed in speaking about gay experience and referring to the gay community, “it was such a gender fuck to be who we are.” This gender ambivalence that mainstream culture produces, also saturates individual psyches through discursive intrusion and impacts individual identities. In this manner, the marginal gay and drag queen subject positions, from which one is poised to take action and perceive the world materialize. There seems no more tangible expression of these marginal subject positions than drag queen appearance.

Although the individuals that composed Haus of Frau were able to resist some of the discursive intrusions by which negative value is conferred to gay drag queen experience and had courage to appear as drag queens, it does not seem that an individual’s solitary resolve is usually sufficient to sustain drag queen presentations of self long term. As Haus of Frau discussions illustrate in Chapter VI., there was need for an alternative community to affirm and convey positive value to doing drag in order for the drag queen self to gain social importance in the individual psyche and in social settings where the drag queen appears. Moreover, it seems that connections to the Haus of Frau afforded individual drag queens not only positive value but also a heightened sense of identity, a better sense of who they were, what they stood for, and what made them special. These clarifications fortified the individual drag queen identities. Thus the position from which the drag queen was prone to appear was bolstered, making drag queen appearances more frequent and more likely. The connection between appearance and identity is abundantly clear where Haus of Frau discussions showed group identity to figure in their

individual drag queen identities and condition their appearances.

In sum, the classic symbolic interactionist scenario which emphasizes the self and the social structure in reciprocal relation is applicable to this study. On the micro-social level, the Haus of Frau was a small group that was composed by its members while simultaneously, the group helped compose the identities of its individual members. However, the scenario gets a little complicated as there were other larger social groupings, such as the gay community and mainstream society in which Haus of Frau also participated. From mainstream society, Haus of Frau learned to see themselves as “feminine” because they were gay and seemed to reproduce this meaning of gay experience in their social relations. Haus of Frau were more resistant in Baltimore’s gay men’s community. It was there that they refused their conflation with women, perhaps because gay erotic protocols demand a male body. However, general consensus was that by and large, Baltimore’s gay men’s community did not always understand what Haus of Frau were trying to communicate. This lapse in understanding made it difficult for Haus of Frau to sustain positive gay male identities. The desire for positive gay male identities impacted drag queen experience and caused conflict for some individual Haus of Frau members.

Finally, the impact of Baltimore’s female impersonation community on the Haus of Frau’s radical drag queen experience was profound. Because Haus of Frau did drag, the gay community related them to female impersonators. The opportunities for drag performance in Baltimore’s gay bars placed Frau in social relations with female impersonators. Indeed, there are many ways in which the female impersonation community’s existence made Haus of Frau’s existence possible. Although Miss Piss and Nonami Flowers possessed different motivations, they were both prompted to do drag and recognized that doing drag was possible through their exposure to female impersonation performances. Additionally, it was by means of female impersonator’s invitation that Haus of Frau first found themselves in backstage regions of female impersonation performances and recognized both their difference from female

impersonators and the possibility of creating an alternative performance community. It is in relation to Baltimore's female impersonation community that Haus of Frau defined themselves and one final proposition seems justifiable: The manners in which Haus of Frau describe and explain their drag appearances and performances also stand as a critique of female impersonation. Thus I construe Haus of Frau drag queen appearances and performances as *meta-impersonation*. They were impersonating the female impersonators. Upon cursory visual examination one might ask how the Haus of Frau can be impersonating female impersonators when they bore so little resemblance to that community. However, it is better to understand this relationship in terms of the cognitive operations attendant to the gaze.

Female impersonators appropriate the feminine spectacle. Yet they rely on exaggeration to create a convincing feminine illusion on their male bodies. Writing femininity on their bodies in upper case, bold face type is necessary to conceal the male body. In a sense, these exaggerated appearances magnify mainstream femininity to override possible detections of the male body. Thus female impersonators relied on feminine appearances and the conventional gaze to create their illusion. However, Haus of Frau appropriated the female impersonation spectacle and turned the magnification up another notch, intensifying the gaze beyond its conventional interpretive means. Where the gaze and appearances are in reciprocal relation, Frau took the exaggeration to another level, making their appearances even more spectacular and outrageous. Hence in magnifying their appearances, they also magnified the gaze. It is as if in this higher resolution where the spectacle is magnified, visual scrutiny is also magnified and the male body became apparent beneath the feminine gear. Where the masculine and feminine

became simultaneously apparent, there was contradiction to mainstream gender norms, and social critique of gender became a possible outcome of drag queen experience and performances.

## **An Assessment of this Multidisciplinary Research Approach**

The complexity of drag queen experience and my own desires for an accommodating, affirmative research approach required devising a theoretical approach that seemed as complex as the experience I sought to apprehend. Symbolic interactionism was a likely starting point for developing this approach because it is an accommodating theory base and encompassing framework by which to analyze and understand human experience. Stone (1970b) advanced this theory base by considering the visual component of social transactions and their import to identity and social reality. However, more contemporary social theories put forth by feminists and poststructuralists more thoroughly consider how identities are socially defined, permeate individual consciousness and compel individuals into conformity with social order. Even more, these more contemporary social theories also acknowledge that the conflicted social positions in which persons reside represent multiple identities which are prone to change with social experience. Thus they note the complexity and fleeting nature of human experience.

Where this research focused on the social operations of seeing and being seen germane to appearance and identity, a thorough consideration of gender was necessary since it is that gender divisions are pervasive in mobilizing American social appearances. Feminist theories of the gaze were most helpful toward this aim. Where this research considered the social experience of gay men, a social critique of sex and gender in America society was also necessary to apprehending their experience. Feminist theorists provided the basis for analyzing sex and gender arrangements in dominant society, and

postructural interpretations of the discursively constituted person provided theoretical explanations of how people acquire gender identity from their social experiences.

In sum, I concur with Kaiser, Nagasawa and Hutton (1991) where they stated :

Symbolic interaction, like more utopian applications of postmodernism, invites attention to issues of human agency for purposes of creating novel appearances as well as ways of seeing, interpreting and understanding these appearances- ultimately, resulting perhaps, in new cultural constructions (p. 168).

I propose that it is because symbolic interaction “invites attention to issues of human agency” and provides opportunity for the researcher to locate “novel appearances” and “ways of seeing” that it was so compatible with the utopian theory bases I also engaged. Symbolic interaction provided a basis for making connections between performance theory, feminism and poststructuralism necessary to conduct this research. Joining these diverse theory bases provided opportunities to unearth the taken for granted and provide the thoughtful reader with opportunities to see the social construction of gender and drag queen experience from a new perspective. In this manner I hoped to create ways of seeing and knowing which are currently under-represented in academia.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

There are innumerable possibilities for investigations into the social construction of gendered appearances. Investigations might focus on personal and collective meanings that mobilize appearance in immediate social settings or consider how these meanings function macro-socially. Clothing and textiles researchers are well positioned to advance theory on the relationships between appearance and the person and do well to engage Stone’s (1970b) theorizing. However, I argue that Stone’s propositions are merely a point of departure, a theoretical launch pad, not the last word on social appearances. There is continuing need to advance this theory beyond Stone’s original propositions, which were first published in 1962! The field of clothing and textiles would benefit from studies that more thoroughly investigate the link between appearance and identity, leading to more elaborate understanding and revision of Stone’s propositions regarding “Appearance and the Self.”

I also argue that there is strong need for researchers to conduct investigations that create rather than reproduce knowledge: With specific regard to social appearances, there is continuing need for basic research into gendered appearances which will carry knowledge beyond the realm of the taken-for-granted. Moreover, I presume that the innumerable projects for valuing diversity which currently exist in academic institutions represent an imperative that the 21<sup>st</sup> century academy be more inclusive and compassionate. It is the responsibility of those working within the academic institution to put these inclusive social values into professional practice. This practice at the very least requires conducting research and engaging theories that will create new ways of seeing and understanding. This inclusive imperative also requires that the academy lend institutional support and credibility to such pursuits.

**APPENDIX I.**  
**INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

1. Tell me about yourself as a person outside of your cross dressed performances?
2. When and how were you first exposed to drag?
3. What made you first want to do drag and perform?
4. What are you trying to tell people when you do drag and perform?
5. Tell me about the process you go through in cross dressing and preparing to perform?
6. How do you feel when you are in drag
7. How do you acquire what you need to do drag
8. How did you learn to do drag
9. What is the relationship between your drag and who you are?
10. How do you see yourself in relation to other drag performers?  
--belonging to community, role models, inspirations etc.
11. How do you see yourself in relation to the larger gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered community?
12. How do you think this alternative community values you, your drag performances?
13. Why do you think drag stage performances are so popular, especially in gay bars?
14. How do you see yourself in relation to heterosexual society?
  - a. in relation to real, biological women
  - b. in relation to real, biological men
15. How do you think heterosexual society values your drag and drag performances?

16. How do you see yourself in relation to the characters you portray on stage?
17. Do you do drag on occasions other than stage performances? If so, how does this relate to your stage performance?
18. Does doing drag pose any problems for you?
19. How open or "out" are you about doing drag? e.g., family, friends, co-workers, etc.
20. Is there a down side to doing drag for you?
21. What kind of woman do you identify with
22. What sort of woman fascinates you?
23. How does your drag persona relate to or differ from your male being?
24. Do you have any safety concerns when doing drag?
25. Did doing drag change the way you see the world?
26. How does doing drag fit in with the rest of your life?
27. How important are clothing and makeup to doing drag?
31. In the best of all possible worlds, would you do drag more frequently than you do now?

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