Female-Femmeing: A Gender-Bent Performance Practice

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ABSTRACT

It is common for female-identified individuals to perform feminine acts—what I term “female-femmeing”—at contemporary drag king and queer drag shows. Although some scholarship has acknowledged the presence of these acts, a woman’s onstage (and offstage) femininity is frequently considered nontransgressive, nonqueer, and not gender-bending. This article first interrogates why femininity is often presumed to mean social alignment, and then demonstrates how some femininities actively contest this. Pairing Muñoz’s characterization of disidentification with ethnography from drag shows in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland (2008–2012), I illustrate several ways female-femmeing bends or expands hegemonic femininity. These acts not only add complexity to a queer counterpublic drag space, but also, I suggest, encourage the consideration of all identities, including femininity, as potentially queer. The acceptance of female-femmeing as queer, and the expansion of drag narratives to meet these practices, is an important step toward a queer world ideology.

Minoritarian performance labors to make worlds—worlds of transformative politics and possibilities.¹

Around 11 p.m., Mr. Luxe walks onstage. He is dressed in a rust-colored zoot suit and is wearing a black fedora over short brown hair. After taking an exaggerated swig from a flask, Luxe begins to swagger and dance. He removes his jacket. Then his fedora comes off. Suddenly his shirt and tie are gone; he is wearing a bubblegum-pink bra. Luxe pulls off his brown wig and a white-blond ponytail...
cascades down his back. After unhooking his pink bra to what has become a fast-paced cymbal beat, Luxe swings his breasts (marginally covered with silver tasseled nipple pasties) in a circular motion. Turning his back to the audience, Luxe pulls down his trousers to reveal satin panties and fishnet stockings. The now nearly naked Luxe is not quite done, though. As the music climaxes, Luxe turns forward and reveals his large erect phallus, which then shoots a stream of liquid over the heads of the audience below. Luxe presents a body that is simultaneously marked with feminine and masculine attributes, and can be readably female and male. The crowd explodes into whistles and applause. They expect nothing less at The Fifteenth Annual Drag King Contest.²

As I watched Luxe from the audience, I recalled similar acts I had seen in Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Francisco. It is quite common for female-identified individuals to perform masculine-to-feminine, feminine, burlesque, or strip numbers at drag king shows and other queer drag events. Sometimes these acts are called “faux queening” or “bio-queening” but, most often, they go unnamed and are considered “window-dressing” to the main drag show. In an effort to acknowledge the importance of naming, I refer to any contemporary theatrical act wherein a female-identified performer consciously constructs and deploys femininity as “female-femmeing.” Furthermore, I assert that female-femmeing aligns with the intents, methods, and goals of the progressive contemporary drag practices it is so often performed alongside of.

Despite this, female-femmeing is not generally classified as a drag practice for two important reasons. First, an expression of femininity by a female-identified person is rarely contextualized as a bending of gender. Second, theatrical gender-bending acts, also referred to in this article as “drag,” are traditionally defined as performances of gender that contrast with the “realness” of the performer’s bi-sex body. For example, Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood explain that drag queens “publicly perform being women in front of an audience that knows they are ‘men’ regardless of how compellingly female—‘real’—they might appear otherwise.”³ From circumscribed definitions of the genre, drag queens have become popularly known as men who perform femininity and, likewise, drag kings as women who perform masculinity.⁴ Many gender-bending practices, including some drag queening and drag kinging, extend far beyond this definition. However, this characterization remains a largely unquestioned yet frequently deployed rubric for gauging which performative expressions and which performing bodies are queer, and which are not.

I argue that the presence of female-femmeing at drag events necessarily challenges taken-for-granted assumptions about what gender-bending is and is
not. Thus, a critical consideration of these acts, in particular their queer engagement with femininity, illuminates the necessity for rethinking gender-bending performance narratives. In other words, female-femmeing motivates us to acknowledge first that femininity can be queerly expressed by a woman, and second that the way we have been measuring queerness in performance practices is not really that queer. I see this consideration as an important step in queer world-making. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner characterize a queer world as one that is not subject to the authority of mass majoritarian (and minoritarian) ideological practices.\(^5\) It follows that queer worldmaking actions would embrace multiple and contradictory expressions of selfhood, and contextualize these differences as equally legitimate and valuable. Acts of female-femmeing demonstrate how any intentional performance of gender, including ones that are often taken as conformist, may be queer. These acts illustrate why we should expand the narrative of drag, and also how we might begin to refashion the social methods we use to define and rank gender expressions.

Although some scholarship has acknowledged the presence of female-femmeing at drag events, these acts are usually framed as nonqueer practices in an otherwise socially radical drag lineup. In fact, female-femmeing has most often been defined as the opposite of drag. For example, in J. Halberstam’s taxonomy of 1990s drag kinging acts, Halberstam identifies the “femme pretender” as a woman who appears onstage as a butch male but “blows her cover by exposing her breasts or ripping off her suit in a parody of a classic striptease.”\(^6\) Although Halberstam positively mentions Dred and Bridge Markham—two drag artists who employ striptease transformation—Halberstam concludes that the display of readably female body parts dissolves the gender-bending portion of the performance. Likewise, 1990s drag king Mo B. Dick asserts “it takes great concentration to stay in [male] character and keep it convincing . . . it’s too easy to strip and be a girl, for God’s sake, you’re a girl every day.”\(^7\) In this characterization, a strip component that reveals readably female body parts ends the drag element of the act because it visually reestablishes the performer’s “real” cisgender status as both female and feminine, or “the girl.”

In contrast to these opinions, I argue that a female-identified individual’s feminine expressions or physical appearances should not automatically be assumed to be cisgender. Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook characterize cisgender individuals as having “a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity.”\(^8\) Cisgender is often comprehensively applied to individuals who are both female assigned and feminine presenting. But cisgender also signifies how an individual’s gender aligns with hetero-patriarchal social expectations and organization. So a cisgender woman is
not just a feminine woman, but one whose femininity identifies within or reflects dominant ideas of beauty, comport, and sexual conduct. Both Jane Ward and Lisa Walker assert that even if a woman identifies as sexually queer or as a lesbian, her femininity is often interpreted as cisgender, and therefore as her allegiance to hegemonic normality and even heteronormativity. Although there are many feminine lesbians, Ward and Walker conclude that these women are routinely categorized as allies or even as women toying with same-sex sexuality, but not as queer women in their own right.

Yet theatrical acts of female-femmeing present femininity in a variety of queer ways. Not all feminine expressions by female-identified individuals (either onstage or off) are female-femmeing. Rather, female-femmeing is a specific type of theatrical act that consciously bends relational identities attached to femininity, and does so by evoking femininity via specific performance methods. In an offstage context, Laura Harris and Liz Crocker suggest that women can do femininity in conscious ways if they choose, and that an actively cultivated and "sustained gender identity," what they call "femme," does not acquiesce to hegemonic standards of feminine comport and behavior. On the contrary, Harris and Crocker's anthology illustrates many ways femme women do femininities that are not "properly or conventionally feminine," are not heterosexual, and do not reflect the femininity assigned to them at birth. In this article, I draw on and extend Harris and Crocker’s concept of femme as a cultivated and sustained gender identity. Whereas they use femme primarily for the queer femininity of lesbians, I use female-femmeing to characterize performed feminine expressions that are consciously chosen, actively sustained, and intended to bend hegemonic femininity.

The effect female-femmeing can have is contingent on the environment it is performed in, and the understanding and interpretation of its spectators. Yet I suggest that the potential of these acts can be gauged by the articulated intentions of their performers, and the innovative performance methods they employ. According to José Esteban Muñoz, disidentification is a way for individuals to strategically express and therefore refigure oppressive attributes of their social racial, gender, or sexual identities. In this article, I demonstrate how women who theatrically perform femininity use disidentification to navigate and manipulate hegemonic representations of selfhood. In Gaga Feminism, Halberstam considers cultural practices that present femininity via "crazy, unreadable appearances" to be a potentially effective form of social critique. Although performers of female-femmeing may engage with some appearances and trappings of femininity, their efforts do not replicate hegemonic feminine scripts such as sexual passivity, heteronormativity, or hegemonic beauty. In fact, I argue that this
performative doing of femininity can be a vehicle for recycling femininity into a “powerful and seductive site” of queer self-creation.¹⁴

In this article, I illustrate how female-femmeing engages with disidentification strategies to contest narrow conceptualizations of femininity. In doing so, I argue that these acts exhibit the contestational and queer attitude of genderfucking. June L. Reich defines “genderfucking” as a deconstruction of the “psychoanalytic concept of difference without subscribing to any heterosexist or anatomical truths about the relations of sex to gender.”¹⁵ Rather than being grounded in either majoritarian or minoritarian identifications (gay, straight, male, female), genderfucking upends the essentialism built into group divisions by deploying identities in contradictory, multiple, and new ways. A genderfucking practice not only grows the number of identifications within communities, it also builds up a space where identifications are encouraged to complicate and overflow group affiliations.

This article extends from my larger project that compares the breadth of gender-bending performance practices to the reductive discourses used to catalogue and analyze them. I argue that the way we conceptualize these performances has impeded our ability to properly acknowledge and assess gender-bent practices such as female-femmeing. My discussion is grounded in ethnographic research and interviews I conducted at drag king and queer drag shows in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland, California (2008–2012). I also draw from an online archive of performance videos recorded at venues I attended at least once. In cases where events or performers are on hiatus or defunct—for example, the International Drag King (Community) Extravaganza—I rely on first-hand descriptions in published testimonials and in the documentary A Drag King Extravaganza. As Ward notes, a cross-section of data sources illuminates numerous aspects of production and thus permits a more effective transdisciplinary analysis.¹⁶ My diverse data set allows me to gauge commonalities and differences in audience reception at these venues, as well as holistically evaluate the intentions and methods of those who perform in them.

A closer exploration of female-femmeing illuminates its potential to bend feminine gender in as-of-yet unaccounted for ways. I first interrogate why femininity is so often presumed to mean social alignment, and then illustrate how female-femmeing actively contests this. Next, I discuss the disconnect between traditional gender-bending performance definitions and drag practices, exemplified by contemporary drag kinging. Although other forms of gender-bending can be similarly expansive, I turn my attention to kinging specifically because of its close physical proximity to female-femmeing. Drawing evidence from Bent events in Los Angeles and The Drag King Contest in San Francisco, I show that female-femmeing performances are intended to genderfuck concepts
of gender, and I demonstrate how performers use contestational methods to do so. I suggest that the environment built around these acts is critical for encouraging audience members to read female-femmeing as queer; moreover, I see this interpretation as supporting an inclusive queer counterpublic. I conclude by discussing how the expansion of drag analytics to meet these performances can potentially extend queer worldspace beyond the micro-environment of the drag show and into mass public ideologies.

**Queer as Femme**

Female-femmeing bends gender in at least three significant ways: acts are “bent” away from the performer’s self-figured identities; acts twist or reimagine relational ideologies among femininity, beauty, body, and sexuality; and/or performers express femininity as a multiple and shifting site of possibility. Yet too often these acts go unnoted in programming materials at drag events, or are advertised as titillating background entertainment. Femininity can be expressed consciously and queerly on the drag stage, and off it. But, unfortunately, a preeminent ideology in mass publics and in some queer communities is that femininity layered over a female body is not gender transgressive.

As the dominant Western cultural narrative goes, a woman who is feminine is both the social norm and a social ideal. Karin A. Martin and Emily Kazyak’s study of G-rated films released between 1990 and 2005 illuminates how children learn this by viewing female protagonists who are always hegemonically feminine; in fact, their feminine qualities increase their social value and snag them coveted male attentions. Likewise, some lesbian groups have contextualized femininity as intrinsically cisgender and heteronormative. For example, the Radicalesbians argued that femininity was enmeshed with women’s stratified relation to and sexualization by men. In their estimation, “woman” was a product of socially prized and (hetero)sexually desirable femininity, and so was incongruous with lesbianism. In a related vein, Ward documents how some transmen describe their gender or sexual queerness by explaining how unhappy they were “being the girl.” Again, the assumption is not only that femininity acquiesces to hetero-patriarchy, but that feminine women endorse this system through their femininity. Ward concludes that femme partners are often treated as allies to lesbian and trans communities, but not often as sexually or socially queer individuals in their own right.

The notion that homosexual desire is marked on the body via gender transgression harkens back to late nineteenth-century Euro-Western sexology. In...
Psychopathia Sexualis, Richard von Krafft-Ebing described same-sex desire as one symptom of a larger pathological condition called “gender inversion,” wherein an individual wanted to be the opposite sex (and fulfilled that need through specific gendered appearances and interests). According to Krafft-Ebing, female gender inverts not only desired women, they also desired the occupations, hobbies, dress, appearance, and social roles of men. Their same-sex sexual desires were, in fact, just another aspect of masculine behavior. As for those anomalous feminine women who had same-sex desires but were not interested in masculinity or being men, Krafft-Ebing concluded that their homosexuality was due to confusion, brought on by the trickery of masculine-presenting female gender inverts. In this regard, a woman’s femininity served as convincing evidence that she was not (intentionally) homosexual.

Although gender inversion is no longer an accredited medical or social theory, the connection between same-sex desire and readable gender transgression remains salient. Walker calls drag queening “perhaps the quintessential performance of [queer] visibility” because queens are popularly contextualized as proudly wearing their sexual orientation on their gender-bending bodies. And feminine women are not thought of as visibly queer or proudly homosexual in this exact same way. So to be seen as “‘real’ lesbians within lesbian communities,” some feminine women “wear” their romantic pairings with butch lesbians. Sue-Ellen Case argues that if the butch/femme lesbian couple appears at first glance to replicate binary masculine and feminine roles, their same-sex bodies quickly indicate how these gender expressions are a queer form of erotic role-play. That is, the butch/femme romantic tableau visually highlights how femmes are queer both in their desire for butch women and as objects of butch desire. Walker talks about how her own partnerships with butch women—publicly visible through handholding and other signs of romantic affection—allowed her access to and acceptance in lesbian circles that had previously been wary of her.

Although the butch/femme paradigm is a viable method for feminine women to visibly mark themselves as sexually queer, not all femmes have or want a butch by their side. Instead of (re)creating femininity as queer in its own right, this model foregrounds femme as unquestionably queer only while in the orbit of butch. And whereas a butch woman’s gender presentation allows that she will likely be assumed sexually queer until otherwise proven, “a femme’s not queer without her butch.” These minoritarian identities are built via a closed narrative of self, where queerness is only readily understandable via hegemonic formations of gender, sex, and sexuality. So without the butch, femmes risk becoming what Harris and Crocker refer to as “apparitional lesbians”: frequently
taken for heterosexual, or assumed to fall into heterosexual relationships. Although exclusive identity affiliations based on static conceptions of inborn sexuality can be a rallying point for group solidarity, this type of queer counter-public is not the same as an inclusively expansive queer worldspace.

Femmes are assumed to be socially or sexually unqueer (until proven otherwise) because of how femininity reads as hegemonic femalehood. Yet hegemonic femininity is not only about appearance, but also about conforming female bodies and the achievement of “stability and coherence” among expectations, behaviors, sexual desires, and practices. Walker explains how her personal enjoyment of aesthetic femininity did not stop her from feeling estrangement from heterosexual desire and traditional body and behavior expectations. In fact, her current feminine identity evolved from what she names as a type of gender dysphoria, or “that confusion we feel when we experience our bodies as incoherent in relation to a socially instituted norm.” This dissonance is why some femmes do not “appear properly or conventionally feminine,” or why they embody a femininity that does not acquiesce to all social ideals. Furthermore, any feminine expression must be negotiated with contexts such as sexual identity, class, race, age, body size, and ability. So although a feminine woman may conform to some gender standards, she may also resist ideas about how feminine women are supposed to act, and about what makes a female body normal.

If femininity can be a consciously done and sustained, then it follows that it can be done queerly, and without the presence of a butch to signal departure from hegemony. Disidentification is useful for understanding how a feminine expression from a female body can be transgressive or disruptive. Muñoz characterizes disidentification as a form of identity negotiation that “works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously.” That is to say, the embodiment of socially acknowledged identities is not the equivalent of accepting the whole of their oppressive or limiting parameters. Instead, individuals can claim power over the identities assigned to them by doing them in ways that do not fully gel with the “pathetic or abject spectacle that [they] appear to be in the dominant eyes of heteronormative culture.” Female-identified individuals, if they so choose, can do femininity in ways that may be feminine but do not reinforce larger cultural stereotypes about feminine women.

Performers of female-femmeing consciously choose, actively cultivate, and performatively sustain femininity using a range of disidentificatory methods. And although a few studies have hinted at this potential, those scholarly analyses have been limited by the definitional parameters of our dominant gender-bending narrative. Take Esther Newton’s account of Joan Van Ness, the first woman crowned as Cherry Grove’s drag “homecoming” queen. Van Ness
almost lost the competition because of the circulating attitude in Cherry Grove that drag queens are men, and women dressing femininely are “dressing grandly or in costume rather than . . . in drag.”

According to Newton, Van Ness’ triumph was ultimately because she was a butch lesbian who worked as a volunteer firefighter in the community and felt “awkward as hell” in dresses and makeup. Although Van Ness was a woman, her lived masculinity formed a recognizable bi-gender contrast to her feminine stage persona. Newton calls Van Ness’ act “compound drag,” which she defines as a drag act that stretches beyond traditional bi-sex and -gender contrast to include “representations of conventional masculinity by a ‘nellie’ gay man or . . . or of femininity or nelliness by a ‘butch’ lesbian.” Newton’s conclusions demonstrate how a woman’s theatrical presentation of femininity can be visibly queer—so long as her lived reality is known to align with masculinity.

“Compound drag” is a type of female-femmeing that still takes place at drag events. At a holiday show I attended in Oakland, California, a female performer in a leather corset, blond wig, high heels, diamond jewelry, and elbow-length gloves lip-synced to Madonna’s “Material Girl.” This performer chose to reveal her butch identity during the curtain call, which immediately illuminated how her feminine stage act contrasted with her lived masculinity. Compound drag is readable as gender-bending when the performer has an opposing offstage gender identity and also chooses to reveal it to the audience. Although Newton’s theory of compound drag does expand the scope of gender-bending practice and does illuminate an important form of female-femmeing, this theory fails to displace drag’s narrow definitional parameters. That is, the acknowledgment that gender is being queerly presented remains contingent on the visibility of binary and dichotomous oppositions. And the queerness of acts that do not replicate this exact formula remains unanalyzable.

Queer was, at first, an adjective in the Euro-West, a description for the odd or the out of sync. In the twentieth century, homosexuals were dubbed queer because their existence was seen as contrary to social organization, their practices indicative of perversion or pathology. Because compulsory heterosexuality is still the norm and the ideal, many gays and lesbians continue to remain out of sync and even contrary to social organization. Yet Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz’s characterization of “queer liberalism” and Lisa Duggan’s discussion of “homonormativity” delineate how some gays and lesbians—for example, those who are wealthy, white, and with domestic priorities—fit well into current social values and valuation. It is no longer a given that individuals with minoritarian gender or sexual identities are queer in the descriptive sense of the word (although they may use it as shorthand for their self-identification).
Likewise, our current drag analytic leaves little space for those acts that do not replicate traditional bi-gender and -sex contrasts but nonetheless are queer because they present gender oddly or out of sync with social organization. As I demonstrate below, female-femmeing invites spectators to consider a variety of queer femininities. For some audience members, this will be easy to do; for others, even those in LGBT communities, this will be a critical step toward queer worldmaking. Ideally, a queer world is comprised of identities (and expressions without labels) to the point of overflow; this diversity of identities and expressions is, in fact, a positive contribution toward building a different type of world. I propose that a critical step in this process—at least within the context of performance—is to expand the definitional boundaries of drag to meet any act that consciously does relational identities in “not quite straight” or “slightly bent” ways.\textsuperscript{41} In these terms, the queerness of an act is not simply measured by sex and gender contrast, but must be extrapolated by what performers intend to do and how they go about doing it. Although audiences are not always privy to a performer’s intentions and methods, this redefinition of drag, and its liberal application to a variety of acts, may prompt audiences to assume that any conscious identity act may be queer (until proven otherwise).

\textbf{Drag as King}

Despite its limiting definitional parameters, many actual gender-bending practices complicate bi-sex and -gender beyond simple contrast. For instance, Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor illuminate how the drag queens at the 801 Cabaret in Key West, Florida, plan their acts to confront ideas about gender, sex, sexuality, and race. The 801 girls’ contestational methods take different forms, but are generally intended to dispute, disrupt, or otherwise trouble dominant social systems. Although not all drag queening is progressive in this way, Rupp and Taylor conclude that cultural entertainment such as this “expands and problematizes identity” in a way that “promotes resistance to domination.”\textsuperscript{42}

In spite of Rupp and Taylor’s excellent study, drag is rarely characterized according to the intent or methodology of the performer. Instead, the most historically visible and commonly evoked characterization juxtaposes bi-gender play to bi-sex realness. This is why Halberstam defines a drag king as “a female (usually) who dresses up in a recognizable male costume and performs theatrically in that costume.”\textsuperscript{43} Likewise, Laurence Senelick identifies drag kinging as mimetic to the more established theatrical tradition of “the adult male decked out in seductive feminine frippery.”\textsuperscript{44} In contrast to these representations,
contemporary drag king practitioner Dante DiFranco articulates the belief that “being a drag king only takes saying that you are one.” In other words, a drag king is actualized through intent and declaration rather than a specific body or gender act. Likewise, a note in *The Drag King Book* foregrounds performer intentions and methods by cautioning spectators to “assign no biological sexes . . . in fact, realness or authenticity is not the best measure of Drag King status, and we can only measure realness in terms of each king’s investment and each audience’s response.” My own ethnographic experiences at drag kining events have taught me similar lessons: to unequivocally use individuals’ self-identifications, and to accept the domain of those who choose not to identify. I suggest that this is a queer worldmaking practice, and one that should extend across queer spaces and into larger cultural domains.

I do not mean to imply that every drag king act is progressive, or that every performer wishes to contest bi-sex. Yet it would be inaccurate to assume drag kings identify themselves or their acts in any one specific bi-gendered or -sexed way. And without these binary points of contrast, the gender-bending component of the act flies open. Some kings present as genderless or gender androgynous. Some kings create male personae that are nonheteronormative or nonmasculine. One of my favorite acts, which I call “body breaking,” is when a king performs in a hegemonically masculine way while exposing what are typically interpreted as female sex characteristics (breasts). Performer and drag scene aficionado Kentucky Fried Woman surmises that the only common thread among these acts is an overarching devotion to “intentional gendered performance” that confronts “normal” by offering different versions of selfhood. Likewise, scholar-performer Kathleen LeBesco characterizes drag kining by its creation of a “corporality that mark[s] an individual [as] somehow different from culturally determined norms.” I likewise assert that drag kining is most accurately delineated by its intent to queer norms, and most accurately analyzed through its methods of doing so.

Illustrated by ethnographic data from *The Drag King Contest* and *Bent*, the next section illustrates some ways female-femmeing bends femininity. In measuring the efficacy of these kinds of acts, Rupp and Taylor suggest we look at how they advance attitudes of acceptance and collectivity. This can be measured on the individual spectator level—what each audience member takes from the performance—or on the larger level of a queer worldmaking project. Although performers cannot fully control individual interpretations, they can measurably affect the tone of the space they perform in. That is, they can influence or support an atmosphere that discourages the discounting, excluding, or ranking of self-expressions. And analysis of the affect of female-femmeing in micro performance...
spaces can lead to a richer understanding of how the consideration of all expressions as queer until proven otherwise might be "disruptive, truly troubling" to macro systems of thought.\textsuperscript{51}

( ) ) ) ) Gender-\textit{Bent} Femininity

The act by Mr. Luxe that began this article is but one example of practices taking place at contemporary drag king and queer drag events. I saw Luxe at The Fifteenth Annual Drag King Contest, an event in San Francisco for competing amateurs and featured professionals that includes solo masculine and feminine acts, group song-and-dance numbers, specialty talents, strip artists, transformation performers, and cameos by The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Many individuals (such as myself) attend the event in various forms of drag, and are pulled onstage or otherwise integrated into the acts. Bent, an event held several times a year in Los Angeles, is also a broadly construed drag show. An event I attended called "Drag in the Name of Love" began with a James Dean-esque performance of "The Wanderer" by drag king emcee Landon Cider. The drag king troupe The Beauty Kings put on a choreographed musical number, the queer femme troupe The Miracle Whips led a sing-along about STI transmission among lesbians called "Showdown against Shame," a male belly dancer executed a sword dance, and young performers competed in a "baby drag king" contest.\textsuperscript{52} Bent shows also incorporate audience participation and usually end in a massive dance party. Female-femmeing was performed at every Drag King Contest and Bent I attended, and I viewed many more in video and photo archives of Drag King Contest and Bent events.

Female-femmeing employs contestational methods of disidentification and, consequently, adds to an atmosphere of genderfucking. Unlike counteridentification, wherein individuals' identification practices directly oppose dominant oppressive systems, disidentification works within the system, but always toward the goal of "recycling and rethinking" it.\textsuperscript{53} So female-femmeing might include some feminine aesthetics or qualities of beauty, sexiness, and desirability, but will express them strategically, in ways that expand or refashion them. For instance, at The Fifteenth Annual Drag King Contest, a troupe called The Diamond Daggers performed a dance number in vintage swimsuits, high heels, red lipstick, and pin-curled hair.\textsuperscript{54} The Daggers' choreography and aesthetic evoked iconic "pin-up girl" images, and they even included a strip to the waist. This act also echoed the historical performance genre of US burlesque, a taboo form of entertainment centered on the sexual display of unclothed female bodies.\textsuperscript{55} On a
surface level, The Daggers’ act could be a similar type of sexual “eye candy” entertainment, or “skin show” commerce of sex for sexual titillation.

Disidentification is useful here for investigating how this act actually bends connections among beauty, femininity, and sexual titillation. In their study of children’s films, Martin and Kazyak demonstrate how femininity, represented via a cartoon woman’s beauty and exposed body, is significant “in the construction of heteronormative sexuality.”⁵⁶ They argue that a female character’s femininity is portrayed in tandem with her sexiness, and her sexiness is established when male characters desire her. If a female character is not feminine (for example, she is fat, ugly, or old), then she is not sexually desirable; on the other hand, if a female character is feminine, her femininity marks her as beautiful and also available for male desire. Martin and Kazyak term the relationship among beauty, femininity, sexiness, and desire as “heterosexiness.”⁵⁷ Certainly The Daggers’ act might solidify their place within this matrix. However, some Daggers are thin with small breasts; some are curvy with large breasts, thighs, and bottoms; some do not shave their underarms or legs; some have large tattoos; and one Dagger had visible facial hair. In spite of not having hegemonically beautiful or sexy body shapes and grooming practices, all The Daggers presented themselves as sexy desirable women. In other words, The Daggers presented their nonidealized bodies as objects that could (and should) be sexually consumed. By staging their diverse bodies in sexually provocative ways, The Daggers confronted the connection between sexiness and hegemonic beauty standards.

Practices such as these expand the objectifying-yet-prized identification of “sexy” to include different types of female-identified people. Disidentification theory is able to acknowledge how some women become women by being sexually objectified. Eli Clare argues that adult disabled women are treated like children or asexual beings, so becoming objects of sexual desire can be critically important to their social value and self-worth.⁵⁸ In a related vein, Kentucky Fried Woman argues that thinness is built into the idea of feminine sexiness in heterosexual communities, and also in some homosexual ones. According to her, this is why “so many of the representations of queer desires can easily be found in the pages of any heterosexual magazine.”⁵⁹ Even if Martin and Kazyak’s “heterosexiness” were translated into “homosexiness”—where beautiful women were sexy objects for female desire—the sexy quality of femininity remains linked to those majoritarian standards of body and ability. But The Daggers’ act is sexy in ways that bend the exclusivity of feminine presentation, and refigures which bodies should automatically trigger desiring gazes. Likewise, Kentucky Fried Woman—known for wearing corsets, miniskirts, fishnet stockings, high heels, wigs, and makeup—says her acts are inspired by the perception that fat bodies are not feminine.⁶⁰ Her
“fat femme” strip act is “shocking” and “subversive” specifically because she presents her unclothed body as aesthetically pleasing and sexually titillating.\textsuperscript{61} Both The Daggers and Kentucky Fried Woman render fat, hairy, or differently shaped bodies as beautifully feminine and therefore already sexually desirable.

Other female-femmeing acts might reproduce hegemonic standards of body and beauty, but bend relationships between femininity and sexual roles. Take The Miracle Whips, a self-defined “queer femme” and “feminist collective” troupe, and regular performers at Bent.\textsuperscript{62} At Bent’s “Holidays Are a Drag” show, The Whips performed a number in tight blue wrap dresses, fishnet stockings, high heels, red lipstick, and erect strap-on dildos. They began by introducing themselves as flight attendants aboard FUCK Airlines (an acronym for “Femmes Use Cock, [OK!?]”). Talking to the audience as if we were airline passengers, The Whips delivered preflight announcements such as “other carriers assume that, if femme, no strapping. We’re here to kick that notion in its sorry little ass.”\textsuperscript{63} Other announcements likewise articulated an assumed disparity between women who are feminine and women who use strap-on dildos. The Whips then performed a routine to Ricky Martin’s “She Bangs” with choreography that simulated both penetrator and enveloper sex positions. All performers presented themselves as highly aesthetically feminine throughout the number, even as they took turns in both simulated sex positions. The routine ended with their post-flight message: “We recognize it’s your choice whether to strap or not to strap.”\textsuperscript{64} By enacting penetrator sexual roles without compromising their feminine identities, The Whips confronted and reimagined the relationship between femininity and sexual receptivity.

The “bent” component of The Whips’ performance (also evident in Mr. Luxe’s act) was not in its sex and gender contrast, but in its queer pairing of hegemonic femininity with a nonfeminine sexual role. That is to say, these acts disidentified from traditional feminine gender scripts by doing them in tandem with nonfeminine sexual scripts. Luxe and The Whips could have stripped into male personae after revealing their dildos. But, by not compromising their feminine presentations while wearing and using strap-ons, they negotiated rather than acquiesced to sexual gender ideologies. In doing so, these acts encouraged a rather queer reading: that penetrator sex acts can be feminine acts, and the feminine women who enact them will continue to be feminine. I suggest that The Whips’ decision to perform this number in a queer-identified space such as Bent demonstrates the need to, at times, prompt even those who identify within the LGBT spectrum toward queer thinking. As The Whips put it, “The sting means it’s working!”\textsuperscript{65} In this case, what “stings” is the way femininity is bent away from gendered sexual scripts, and the lingering mark this may leave on
spectators who have been automatically organizing certain bodies within sexual relationships.

Like The Daggers and Kentucky Fried Woman, The Whips often end their performances by stripping down to nipple pasties and panties. Martin and Kazyak’s theory of heterosexiness signifies how a feminine woman’s unclothed body leads to her sexual objectification by the desiring male gaze it quickly attracts. This form of sexual objectification can hold true in nonheterosexual spaces if individuals who desire women have the opportunity to gaze at women’s naked bodies. As I have previously argued, sexual objectification is the point of many female-femmeing acts that feature fat, differently shaped, or hairy bodies. Even if this is the goal of the performer, the act still exemplifies Martin and Kazyak’s larger point: unclothed female bodies are foregrounded as sexually consumable products. Yet in her study on contemporary “neo-burlesque,” Lynn Sally argues that a consciously constructed and carefully performed striptease can work to “dismantle (or, at least, to question)” singular meanings ascribed to women’s unclothed bodies.66 Female-femmeing that includes a strip component may inspire an expansive array of objectifying desires, or it may inspire an alternate form of desire in those who watch it.

At Bent’s “Drag in the Name of Love” show, The Whips performed a cooking segment called “Whip It” wearing aprons, nipple pasties, panties with a keyhole cutout in the back, and little else.67 The number ended with them drizzling honey down their semi-nude bodies. The audience went wild with shouts and applause, a reaction I interpreted as a verbalization of sexual pleasure derived from gazing at honey-drenched bodies. Reinforcing my interpretation, emcee Landon Cider took the stage to proclaim that The Whips made him “want [to eat] honey.”68 It is not surprising that Cider’s butch drag persona (and potentially Cider’s own self) enjoyed sexually gazing at and fantasizing about eating honey off The Whips’ feminine bodies. But then Cider also proclaimed that the performance made him want to wear “nipple tassels and [have] baby butt crack.”69 Certainly his sexual desire was objectifying—he desired sexual access to The Whips’ bodies. But his desire was also inclusive and personally embodied—he found it exciting to think of himself in The Whips’ sexy clothing. A desire to wear nipple pasties and feminine panties, and a desire to be sexy in those items, did not mesh with Cider’s masculine stage persona. In this case, The Whips’ act triggered two distinct forms of desire, which inspired Cider’s queer sexual reaction. Reinforcing my interpretation of this moment, Bent co-founder Richelle South explains that although some Bent spectators might gaze at feminine artists and “desire that body to sleep with,” others might “desire that body for myself.”70 In these terms, female-femmeing presents sexiness in ways
that not only extend across bodies and expressions, but complicate desire paradigms too.

As demonstrated by the acts routinely showcased at Bent and The Drag King Contest, female-femmeing expresses femininity in multifarious and queer ways. Rather than counteridentifying from femininity, these acts do bent versions of the beauty, sexiness, and sexuality built into hegemonic feminine ideologies. If an act consciously intends to and actively engages in methods that present femininity as queer, then, I argue, it is enacting a public “resistance to domination.”71 Female-femmeing adds complexity to the queer counterpublic space where it is performed, and it also encourages us to consider how a range of identities, including femininity, can be powerfully queer.

() ) ) Genderfuck It

Attendant to the overarching structure of queer theory, my analysis of these gender-bending practices must extend beyond majoritarian categories of sex and gender, beyond stable minoritarian LGBT identities, even beyond a delimited queer counterpublic space. Queer theory is, at its core, the study of power: who has it, how it defines proper or deviant behavior, and how these social regulations stratify individuals. I mentioned that queer was once an adjective for the socially odd, and then later a label for people deemed contrary to social sexual organization. Yet queer is also a verb: an action of making odd, of upending or ruining. So queer theory is the study of the power structures that mark individuals as queer, and also a mode of investigating how individuals ruin or dismantle those structures. Not all those who express same-sex desires or do gender differently are interested in queer goals of social resistance or revision. Yet The Miracle Whips clearly describe their acts as taking “on gender and social issues” by modeling “progressive femininity,” creating “radical erotic possibilities,” and disrupting “conventional notions of sexiness.”72 These statements describe their performance methods—their ways of doing femininity—and also their goal of fostering a space where femininity would automatically be considered for its queer properties.

At many drag events, a specific term is attached to performances that aggressively deconstruct relational identities. The same term can also indicate the atmosphere of the event: its dedication to acceptance and its celebration of identity expressions, including those that are culturally unintelligible. That term is, of course, “genderfucking.” Genderfucking is both an adjective for acts that present relational identities in queer ways, and a verb for the action of these acts:
the building of queer space and possibility. It should come as no surprise that Bent is promoted as a “genderfucking mind-altering experience!” and “a night of drag, burlesque and genderfucking.” Genderfucking marks Bent as an event where performers and audience members play with identity in “whichever way” they wish.74 I contend that a genderfucking community will furthermore foreground ideas such as, for example, that a feminine woman’s expressions are as queer as a butch woman’s. As evidenced by Ward and Walker, not all minoritarian communities embrace this belief. In fact, one of South’s reasons for co-creating Bent was to build a space she was having trouble finding: one free from exclusive judgments about who did and did not belong. As a result, South always includes feminine acts at Bent because they are big crowd pleasers and also because she believes they are an important part of the queer spectrum. South’s philosophy is that all are welcome at Bent as long as they support Bent’s inclusive and accepting mission. When I asked South about individuals who identify as heterosexual, she stated that they too are welcome at Bent because Bent is resolutely dedicated to “inclusivity rather than exclusivity.”75

I believe that South’s unequivocal inclusion of female-femmeing at Bent de-ranks canonical gender-bending standards. But the acts themselves are just one component of this queer space. At Bent, performers frequently descend from the stage and interact with the crowd, sing to individual audience members, hand out sexy favors, or solicit call-and-response. This interactional structure is what South refers to as a “community stage show” without the metaphorical “fourth wall” that would divide the queerness happening onstage from the community in attendance.76 Marlon M. Bailey’s work on the Detroit, Michigan, drag ball scene likewise illuminates how stage practices merge with the community atmosphere in the ballroom. Bailey describes how many poor queer people of color live in a constant state of precarity and, as a survival tactic, try to blend into the dominant culture while in public. The ballroom, therefore, is a space for them to express gender and sexual identities without facing the same degree of censure or violence.77 Muñoz asserts that “performance’s power of critique and its vision of transformative politics” is loaded with worldmaking properties.78 Ballroom and Bent events are ostensibly all about the drag show and its queer possibilities. Yet the formation and maintenance of the space around the performance are intrinsic to growing this queer world.

One of the most visible aspects of this is in Landon Cider’s “get to know your neighbor” segment. Around the halfway point of Bent shows, the house lights go up and Cider asks everyone to introduce themselves to each other, shake hands, and talk about their foremost “passion.”79 He explains that describing a passion is more intimate than the usual identity classifications of employment or sexual
orientation. At Bent’s “Holidays Are a Drag” show, an individual discussed their love of riding motorcycles with me, and I described my passion for life-long learning. South explains that “get to know your neighbor” is important to Bent because it creates space for people to verbally interact, and gives them social permission to physically connect. These actions encourage familiarity, and hopefully cultivate a community atmosphere where individuals feel more compelled to accept, defend, and celebrate each other. Ideally, a queer space is one that is inclusively queer and unwaveringly supportive of difference. Female-femmeing plays an integral role to this space because it discourages audience members from assuming they can identify what is and what is not queer. Female-femmeing also offers up new possibilities for self-expression, thereby supporting a space dedicated to the overflow of identifications. Thus, female-femmeing practices, coupled with their inclusion in queer drag forums, build toward a queer world ideology. And it sits well with me when South says that Bent shows are hard to get back on track because, once invited to connect, audience members will not stop connecting.

)))) Queer Words

If we accept that drag is, at its definitional core, a projection of bi-gender that contrasts with bi-sex, then a feminine presentation by a female-identified person is not drag. In fact, that feminine presentation by that female-identified person would be an expression of cultural normativity. As such, femininity is easily read as a sign of acquiescence to rather than resistance of sexist stratified gender regulations. Yet the problem lies not just in the reductive definition of drag, but also in how we use it as a rubric for queerness, an assessment for which expressions bend gender and which do not. Most acts of female-femmeing do not mirror these bi-sex and -gender definitional parameters. Yet I have illustrated how female-femmeing acts do bend, twist, and stretch femininity. Not all feminine expressions are intentionally contestational or bend femininity. But those theatrical acts I have characterized as female-femmeing work to break the threads of cisgender regulation, and present the feminine body as something other than heteronormative. Performers intend to do these things, and actively engage in methods they feel will accomplish their goals. Our recognition that these acts are, in fact, queer identity practices—and our analysis of them as such—is critically important. And I suggest that a simple way to nudge both micro performance spaces and larger mass publics into framing female-femmeing as queer is to call it drag. In referring to female-femmeing as drag, we expand the
parameters of the drag analytic and also foreground the queer potential of this practice.

Just as our current definition of “queer” may describe sexualities, political beliefs, cultural stigmas, and academic theories, the words “drag” and “gender-bending” should also stand for a broad swath of practices. Doing so moves us away from a definition complicit in identity “abjection,” and toward one that can be used to analyze the potential in an array of conscious acts of nonconformativity. Although disidentification techniques do not unilaterally reject social identities, they nonetheless serve as an important “point of departure, a process, a building.” Female-femmeing actively bends limiting identity parameters, so it adds to the scope of queerness and contributes to a world filled with things not quite straight. I further suggest that the process of terminologically expanding and critically applying drag definitions to identity acts such as these advances the capacious conception and space of queerness. If we assume all bodies and expressions are capable of queerness, then we can investigate how those embodied expressions—and those bodies—may contribute to a queer world. My hope is that this model will overflow from the micro space of drag events and into mass publics and queer counterpublics via our discourse. In this way, female-femmeing—and our linguistic framing of it—is one step toward changing ways of thinking about, expressing, and interpreting queerness.

NOTES

Many thanks to my insightful reviewers and to the editors of QED. Special acknowledgments go to others who supported this project: Rose Elfman, Paul Jagodzinski, and Maxine Heller.


2. Dee Dee Luxe, The Fifteenth Annual Drag King Contest, The DNA Lounge, San Francisco, CA, August 17, 2010. To the best of my knowledge, Luxe was a featured performer that year. This performance has been archived and can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CH4yp75jbA.


4. For example, see Esther Newton, Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Jill Dolan, “Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles,” Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory 2, no. 2 (1985): 5–11; J. Halberstam,
5. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” Critical Inquiry 24, no. 2 (1998): 548. I use the term “majoritarian” for mass publics, dominant social groups, or the group that socially represents normality. I use “minoritarian” to refer to clearly delineated and organized counterpublics, in particular in this essay, a contemporary Western LGBT community.
6. Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 249.
11. Ibid., 3.
17. Performer Kentucky Fried Woman speaks to the marginalization and disavowal of “faux queens” at events like The International Drag King (Community) Extravaganza (late 1990s–early 2000s) in “Fat . . . Femme . . . Fierce . . . Kentucky Fried,” in Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities, ed. Del LaGrace Volcano and Ulrika Dahl (London: Serpent Tail, 2008), 175–9; and A Drag King Extravaganza, directed by Clare Smyth and Meaghan Derynck (Toronto: Frameline Productions, 2008), DVD.
21. Ibid., 248. Ward refers to this as the “labor of alliance.”
27. Ibid., 200.
31. Ibid., 3.
34. Ibid., 3.
36. Ibid., 172.
37. Ibid.
41. These are phrases Bent co-creator and organizer Richelle South uses to characterize her own event. In an interview with the author, December 18, 2011.
46. Unattributed note, possibly by Volcano or Halberstam (eds.), *The Drag King Book*, 36.
Although I use drag kinging as my example, the same argument can extend to some other forms of theatrical gender-bending.

*A Drag King Extravaganza.*


52. “Drag in the Name of Love,” Bent, Mr. T’s Highland Bowl and Club, Los Angeles, CA, April 16, 2011.


54. The Diamond Daggers, The Fifteenth Annual Drag King Contest, The DNA Lounge, San Francisco, CA, August 17, 2010. This performance has been archived and can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BAKYqcF28Q.


57. Ibid., 328.


59. Interview by Eve Ilana Shapiro, included in “The Disposable Boy Toys: Identity Transformation in a Drag King Community,” PhD diss. (University of California Santa Barbara, 2005), 175.

60. Ibid., 200.

61. Ibid., 179, 175.


63. The Miracle Whips, “Holidays Are a Drag,” Bent, Mr. T’s Highland Bowl and Club, Los Angeles, CA, April 16, 2011.

64. Ibid.

65. The Miracle Whips, Facebook.


68. Landon Cider, “Drag in the Name of Love,” Bent, Mr. T’s Highland Bowl and Club, Los Angeles, CA, April 4, 2011.

69. Ibid. “Baby butt crack” refers to the part of the bottom visible through the keyhole cutout in The Whips’ panties.

70. South, interview.

The Miracle Whips, Facebook.


South personally prefers the term “gender-bending” and feels that genderfucking and gender-bending have similar meanings. Genderfucking is more heavily used in Bent advertising because South feels it is an attention-grabbing word. South, interview.

Although the inclusion of particularly heteronormative heterosexual people might conflict with South’s “not quite straight” philosophy, I suggest that her statement further reflects Bent’s commitment to inclusivity. South, interview.

Ibid.


Muñoz, Disidentifications, 189.

Landon Cider, “Holidays Are a Drag,” Bent, Mr. T’s Highland Bowl and Club, Los Angeles, CA, April 16, 2011.

South, interview.


Muñoz, Disidentifications, 200.

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