Long Live the King

Long Live the King:
A Genealogy of Performative Genders

by

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SCHOLARS**

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The idea of writing a book on drag kings first emerged while I witnessed some drag kings' performances in the summer of 1999, when *The Drag King Book* (Volcano and Halberstam 1999) was presented in Brighton. I then realized that the Butlerian mantra, which cites and recites the performative character of gender, was being indeed embodied by those "women" on stage in really astonishing ways. Since then, and, in spite of a span of almost a decade in which queer theory has reached its peak, hardly a few books have been written on the drag king phenomenon while, on the other hand, there has been a growing interest in studying different representations of masculinities, other than hegemonic ones. To approach these oblique genders within queer theory has accordingly brought to the fore discussions on the concept of masculinity as embodied by gays, lesbians, and female-to-male (FTM) transgender and transsexual persons. Yet, while the study of male and gay masculinities has become normalized in academic *fora* and publications drag kings' varied performances of masculinity together with other forms of female masculinities (Halberstam 1998) have not been equally discussed and/or written about. Paradoxically, the increasing number of drag king performers all around the globe has not resulted in a growing visibility of their acts either. My work, though critically engaged with some of their premises, must be seen then as another attempt to envisage drag kings' performances of masculinity as a valuable part of gender studies; one which apart from enacting a rearticulation of gender categories also encodes an ethical stance from which to position oneself. Not coincidentally, the book's most innovative ideas are based on my own location as an outsider to drag king culture. While not certainly a drag king, I am nevertheless an insider to non-heteronormative identities, familiarized with Other-ed ways of belonging and being. As the reader will hopefully realize, it is precisely this in-between positioning that has allowed me both to trace the origins of the drag king phenomenon keenly and to contest the so-called subversive nature of their on and off stage gender acts passionately.

With the same enthusiasm that I have written this book I would like to thank all those persons who have been supportive in one way or another throughout these years. First of all, I want to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Constanza del Río for believing in this project and for her useful

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, the appearance of drag kings in wider cultural circuits has stimulated an exciting interchange of ideas among drag king performers, queer activists, scholars, and the intended audience. However, although drag kings have become more and more visible, they are still subject to theoretical, cultural and social discrimination. This cultural and institutional oblivion can be best appreciated in the few literature which has dealt thoroughly with the drag king phenomenon; namely, Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) and *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005); Volcano and Halberstam's *The Drag King Book* (1999); Hasten's *Gender Pretenders: A Drag King Ethnography* (1999); and Troka, Lebesco and Noble's *The Drag King Anthology* (2002). Overall, these works have highlighted that the agenda of drag kings' performances of masculinity is to appropriate hegemonic masculinity, to parody its layers of sexism and homophobia and to redefine it, thus bringing to light the subversive nature of their acts. In this sense, it is interesting to note that most critics, apart from theorizing on or taking photographs of drag kings, as is the case of photographer and activist Volcano, have performed masculinity as drag kings themselves. The fact that most interpretations and analyses of drag kings' acts have been embodied by insiders within the drag king phenomenon may suggest certain lack of critical distance, and this is precisely what the present research intends to counteract. Thus, one of the aims of this book is to approach the drag king phenomenon as it was born and then further developed in the United States and the United Kingdom from the mid-1990s onwards. This study is carried out from an analytical and critical perspective and, significantly, it takes place outside an Anglo-American context, thus giving rise to a certain cultural translation and interpretation of the object of analysis which, in turn, will work as a double-edged weapon: namely, while it can offer new perspectives on drag kings' performances of masculinity, it can also show how in an era of globalization, cultural, national and linguistic differences still act as impermeable frontiers that are not always easily trespassed. Or to put it in other words, whereas my own position as a researcher of Anglo-American culture is very influential in the scope of this work, it can also offer a certain distance from the drag king phenomenon.

While acknowledging the utmost significance of the above-mentioned works for rescuing drag kings from the realm of cultural invisibility, the present research will foreground the ambivalent character of drag kings' acts. On the one hand, this book aims at demonstrating that drag kings' performances of masculinity dislodge the notion of "masculinity" from the domain of biological men, thus disrupting the "sex/gender binary" traditionally in force in most spheres of academic research, culture and society. On the other hand, my analysis also points out that drag kings' acts cannot be univocally read as subversive. They can also be seen as the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity, so that the taken-for-granted gender subversion that all drag kings are said to represent becomes questionable. This is so because of the inherent ideological instability and ambivalence of many of the strategies they use, such as stereotypes, camp aesthetics, irony, parody and carnival. The present study puts forward that the latter interpretation mainly originates when the queer codes and signs through which drag kings' masculinities are enacted fail to be read as such. Then, in order to fully assess whether drag kings' performances are politically effective or not, a careful consideration will be given not only to the content but also to the context in which these queer performances emerge and to the theoretical discussion of the above-mentioned strategies.

In this sense, another interesting aspect that will be considered here, and which has not been thoroughly analyzed so far, is the type of audience to whom these performances are addressed. This is especially relevant because readers/viewers are constituted according to their gender, race, class, sexuality and personal experiences, all of which matters when negotiating the process of meaning-transfer in any given cultural product. Also important will be the scrutiny of drag kings' personal self-identifications and self-conscious strategies in their purpose of destabilizing normative gender identity. In other words, my analysis will dwell on the implications of drag kings' sexual and racial identity, as well as on their self-reflective use of tools like parody or camp.

As for the corpus selected as my object of analysis, I have first chosen a series of still pictures that I consider representative of the drag king phenomenon in its different locations. The choice of filmic texts has been determined by their availability and/or uniqueness: MilDred's performances are not on sale, Baur's *Venus Boyz* is the only documentary feature film on drag kings, and the mainstream TV series analyzed here are the ones which most explicitly have included the presence of drag kings in their plots. This corpus will be mainly analyzed under the lenses of queer theory, especially because the resignification of hegemonic masculinity embodied by female-born persons is a recent cultural

phenomenon that from its birth has maintained close links with queer theory, a field of studies whose main exponent is Judith Butler's first and best-known work *Gender Trouble* (1990).

In order to expose the mechanisms through which the female masculinities embodied by drag kings are revealed, this book will devote its first chapter, entitled "Theorizing Queer", to providing a conceptual context for queer theory, precisely because it is the essential discursive frame for the drag king phenomenon. Since the last decade of the twentieth century, the representation of gender categories has found in queer theory a subversive site from which to contest normative formations of identity. One of the central tenets of queer theory is its resistance to binary oppositions, such as male/female, masculinity/femininity or heterosexuality/homosexuality, while also stressing the discursive nature of any identity category. In this sense, the analytical agenda of queer discourse has been most prominently based on the destabilization of those binary terms and, consequently, queer encompasses all those non-normative identities that are not included within the traditional binary terms defining normative identity politics. Due to the complex and sometimes intricate discourse that queer theory uses, it is convenient to trace the historical and semantic evolution of the term "queer". Thus, the first part of chapter one will outline its genealogy, starting from canonical definitions which regard it as a pathological embodiment of homosexuality – and therefore link it to homophobic insult and aberration – to its positive resignification in the early 1990s, carried out by activist groups of queer people who wanted it to become a weapon of self-representation and self-expression. Then, the chapter will highlight the main – and sometimes controversial – meanings of the term "queer" as used inside and outside the academia.

Since queer theory is first and foremost characterized by the problematization of identity categories such as "gender", "sex" and "sexuality", this first chapter will also focus on the most relevant definitions that these concepts have received by different feminist theories, gay and lesbian studies and cultural studies. Besides, the last section of this chapter will clarify the main differences between the concepts of "transgender" and "transsexual" since, although both terms are included within the rubric of "queer" and sometimes their meanings can overlap, they cannot be used as synonyms to refer to many drag kings who explicitly identify as female-to-male (FTM) transgender persons while rejecting the notion of "transsexual". Although tracing the genesis of queer theory may be axiomatic for some readers, most works and theorizations on queer discourses paradoxically ignore its very origins as well as the fact

that queer theory has developed differently in the two sides of the Atlantic, particularly in the USA and the UK.

The second chapter, "Defining Drag Kings", will first highlight the historical and cultural context in which drag kings emerged. The contextualization of the drag king phenomenon within the last decade of the twentieth century constitutes a key element for distinguishing drag kings from previous representations of masculinity performed by women in earlier decades and centuries. The first part of the second chapter will also offer the standard definitions of what a drag king is, as well as an account of the most relevant (men's) studies on the concept of "masculinity" – a key element when defining the term "drag king" – as a social and cultural construction. In this regard, this section will not merely enumerate the different theories that put forward that hegemonic masculinity cannot stand for diverse masculinities – i.e. other than Western, white, middle-class and heterosexual – but will as well stress the importance of "conceptualizing masculinity without men"[1] so that drag kings' acts can be seen as the expression of a type of female masculinity historically dismissed and forgotten.

This chapter will then center on the analysis of the most representative performances of drag kings as portrayed in still photographs, one of the fundamental vehicles for the visibility of canonical drag kings. In Susan Sontag's words, the use of photographs provides us with "a new visual code […], with an ethics of seeing" queerly.[2] Then, the selection of photographs is meant to offer, on the one hand, a three-fold taxonomy of drag kings – i.e. the butch, the female-to-male (FTM) transgender, and the femme or androgynous drag king – that is based on their self-defined gender identities. On the other hand, the choice of the different figures that will be analyzed attempts to reflect the most representative stereotypes of masculinities located in the cities of New York, London and San Francisco. In fact, these three cities were the cultural shelter for the so-called "canonical drag kings", that is to say, the first and best-known drag kings within – and currently also outside – queer contexts.

Lastly, the second chapter will offer an overview of what I have called "second wave drag kings", a new and younger generation of drag kings who have come to the fore mostly thanks to the Internet and its state-of-the-art video site "You Tube". Born at the threshold of the twenty-first century in the US, this new generation is also characterized for having spread drag king culture to cities like Columbus (Ohio), Washington, San

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[1] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*.
[2] Sontag, *On Photography*, 3.

Diego or Chicago. Special emphasis will be laid on how the virtual media in which second wave drag kings are (re)presented can work ambivalently: while the Internet helps them portray and divulgate their performances of masculinity, it also prevents the display of varied stereotypes of masculinities, since they tend to perform homogeneous representations of masculinity either in solo performances or in troupes.

Chapter three, "Drag Kings in Motion: From Queer Rave to Fashionable Mainstream", will analyze different live performances and filmic representations of drag kings. Firstly, the chapter traces the differences in drag kings' performances when portrayed in different kinds of texts. The analysis moves from the sub-cultural home-made video of MilDred Gerestant's *D.R.E.D.*, a drag king show performed all over the world since 1998, to the documentary feature film *Venus Boyz*, directed by Swiss filmmaker Gabriel Baur[3] in 2001 and released within queer circuits, to drag kings' presence in trendy US mainstream television series like *Sex and the City* (Season 3, 2000) and *The L Word* (Season 1, 2003). The choice of these visual texts is also relevant because, as this chapter will attempt to demonstrate, they posit a set of questions that can only be appreciated in live performances. Some of these questions are related to the use of self-conscious strategies, such as camp humor, as political weapons to denaturalize gender ideals. Another important issue in this chapter will be the role that a collective audience plays when watching a live performance like *D.R.E.D.* As will be seen, drag kings' performances can stimulate an array of feelings and identifications which serve to underline a sense of queer/lesbian camaraderie and community.

Besides, this chapter will highlight the main features that make MilDred's gender performances different from other drag kings'; namely, not only the fact that MilDred's performances explicitly address the issue of black masculinity and black stereotypes, but also because, unlike most drag kings, she performs queer femininity. Her gender bending is not the only novelty in her theatrical piece, since she uses drag performance as a teaching and healing tool as well. All in all, then, MilDred's performances will offer a fruitful perspective to my analysis of the drag king phenomenon. Similarly, Gabriel Baur's *Venus Boyz,* which she defines as "a journey through a universe of female masculinity",[4] was the first documentary feature film to approach the drag king phenomenon. Apart from divulgating drag king culture and introducing us to the most

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[3] Although Baur's first name is Gabrielle, she changed it into Gabriel when she filmed *Venus Boyz.* Thus, for reasons of coherence, I will use her masculine name throughout this work.

[4] Baur, *Venus Boyz.*

representative canonical drag kings, this film is particularly interesting because it also portrays other types of queer female masculinities which are not necessarily identical to the ones enacted in drag kings' performances, but rather, can be seen as core identity choices in the lives of some FTM transgender people. Also revealing for my analysis will be the appearance of drag kings in two of the most popular US television series of the twenty-first century. Drag kings have made their entrance to the mainstream media only recently, thus paradoxically becoming a new queer "kick" with which to fuel the capitalist market. As I hope to demonstrate, their presence in mainstream culture, rather than disrupt the sex/gender system, acts as a marketing tool to gain more popularity and increase the series' audience rates.

Last, but not least, chapter three includes a brief overview of Leslie Feinberg's last novel *Drag King Dreams* (2006), mainly because it is the first work of fiction which explicitly refers to drag kings. Although this part differs from the rest of the chapter in that it focuses on a novel and not on drag kings' live performances, I consider it necessary to approach it here, if only because *Drag King Dreams* constitutes an essential vehicle for vindicating the political and activist commitment that has always been part of queer cultures and that is somehow vanishing nowadays.

As this work will attempt to demonstrate, despite its relatively short cultural life, the drag king phenomenon has experienced important changes since it was first created in the mid-1990s. Apart from signaling these changes and the different interpretations that drag kings' performances of masculinity can convey, the present research will also point out the relevance of the different textual means – i.e. photography, the Internet, videotapes, films, TV series or narrative fiction works – in which drag kings have been represented, and how these texts have all contributed to opening the drag king culture a bit more. My final aim in writing this book is to approach drag kings tentatively as controversial paradigms of queer politics while foregrounding certain features of their performances that have been overlooked so far.

CHAPTER ONE

THEORIZING QUEER

> The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist enquiry.[1]

The present chapter attempts to contextualize the emerging academic field of queer theory and to point to its most relevant and sometimes controversial theoretical contributions to the formation and analysis of identity categories. First of all, the scope of the term "queer" needs to be defined, due to the varied and different meanings that it has received both within and outside the academia. The fact that queer theory is not easily categorized within a specific academic field has led to its classification as a cross-disciplinary tool which has transformed the study of gender and sexuality in the fields of culture, history, literature, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, cinema, science, etc. As will be shown in this book, drag kings' performances address contemporary queer discourses and the way(s) they potentially challenge the existing gender identity binary hierarchies. Thus, in order to document drag kings' distinctive gender identity features, this chapter will also include the most relevant scholarship concerning gender, sex and sexuality, as well as the main conceptual influences, debates and controversies that queer theory has maintained with other theoretical paradigms, such as feminism, postmodernism, gay and lesbian studies, and cultural studies.

For a start, in order to contextualize the term "queer" and consider its linguistic and cultural evolution, one should briefly refer to its genealogy and etymological roots. The word "queer" emerged in the Anglo-Saxon academia as a discursive site that crossed the boundaries defining stable notions of gender, sex and sexuality. Despite the variety of meanings attached to the term "queer", its trespassing character is evident from its very origins. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has noted:

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[1] Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 27.

> Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, troublant. The word 'queer' itself means *across* – it comes from the Indo-European root *twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart … queer …* is multiply transitive. The immemorial current that *queer* represents is antiseparatist and it is antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange.[2]

The term "queer" is "relational and strange" because, at least in its initial stages, it explored non-normative sexualities intersected with other identity categories such as race and class, calling for a positive resignification of homosexual identities and practices. Because the definitions of queer identities are often troubled by uneasy embodiments of gender, sex and sexuality, it is these non-normative gender categories that "queer" purports to reveal.

Since its appearance in the English language in the sixteenth century, the term "queer" has generally meant "strange" or "unusual". The usage of "queer" to define sexual deviance especially that of male homosexuals was first recorded in the late nineteenth century. Thus, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), something that is queer is "unexpected, unnatural, or strange [...]; in very informal, old-fashioned English, a queer is a homosexual man; an *offensive* use".[3] This definition of "queer" underlines the pejorative use of the term to name male homosexuality; in fact, to be named "queer" is to be positioned on the margins of normative sexualities as defined by the dominant heteronormative matrix. "Queer" goes hand in hand with sexually perverted and abnormal behavior; it speaks out a language of monstrosity, often attached to "moral weakness, mental sickness or personal inadequacy".[4] In this sense, the meaning of the term "queer" overlaps with that of "homosexual" which was introduced in Western discourses at the end of the nineteenth century.[5]

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[2] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, xii.
[3] Simpson, 1,489, emphasis added.
[4] Dyer, *The Culture of Queers*, 2.
[5] Foucault describes the invention of the modern homosexual in the following terms: "the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature [...]. The sodomite had

What was new about such terms is that they allowed the crystallization of male and female disturbing sexualities. In this manner, *the* "homosexual", *the* "queer", were defined as *the* "Other" of heterosexuality, and the creation of a binary acted as a catalyst to pigeonhole sexuality either as heterosexual or homosexual. Like the binary of gender and sex (i.e. male vs. female), the heterosexual/homosexual one outlined the superiority and hegemony of the former, therefore relegating the latter to "notions of pity, cure and toleration, as well as resignation and defiance".[6] In relation to heterosexuality, homosexuality was considered a stigmatized category that worked as a marker of individual differences from the norms that defined health and sexuality. Besides, a sense of social and cultural aberration was inherently linked to the term "homosexual" in all institutionalized discourses, ranging from sexology, medicine and biology up to psychology and sociology. Foucault (1990) stressed the importance of medicine and psychiatry in the creation of sexual identities and their authoritative effects upon discursive identity formations. Labels such as "homosexual" and "queer" signaled an inborn and pathological quality which gained its identity through submission to medicine. [7] Like contemporary queers, homosexuals embraced the label that medicine imposed upon them. In Foucault's words:

> There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty and "psychic her-maphrodism" made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of "perversity"; but it also made possible the formation of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturalness" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.[8]

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been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (*The History of Sexuality*, 43).

[6] Dyer, *The Culture of Queers*, 3.

[7] The work by sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), written for scientific and medical experts, already discussed the process through which sexuality became medicalized. It also put forward the relevance of sexuality in the formation of identity and demonstrated "both the ways in which sexology imposed identity on individuals and the ways in which those individuals made use of sexology for their own purposes" (Tobin, "Masochism and Identity", 33).

[8] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 101.

Overall, from the mid-nineteenth century and up to the mid-twentieth century, the offensive term "queer" has been deployed to define effeminate gay men, as well as homosexual practices which have been considered "morally, medically, socially problematic".[9] While the concept of "queer" remained subject to pathologization, there was, however, a slow but growing acceptance of the term "gay" as a substitute for "homosexual". The first visible and collective reaction for the neutralization of homosexuality's stigmatized meaning took place in 1969, when many homosexuals grouped together to fight the repressive measures exerted by the police at the Stonewall bar in New York. The Stonewall events constituted the germ of a new era for homosexual people; one which vindicated and celebrated the term "gay" as a definitional pattern for their homosexual identities.[10]

This is not to say, however, that the recognition and legitimization of homosexual identities have been unproblematic. What seems clear, though, is that a majority of gays and lesbians preferred the word "gay" over that of "homosexual" to define themselves.[11] At the same time, the term "queer" was still linked to "accusation, pathologization, insult".[12] In spite of the fact that "queer" signaled degradation and an aberrant sexuality, the term also became subject to positive resignification some decades later. Thus, in 1990, a leaflet entitled "Queers Read This" was distributed from the back of a float in the New York gay pride parade with the purpose of contesting the widespread pejorative connotations of the term "queer". This anonymous publication was instrumental in shifting the cultural, social and pragmatic delimitations of the concept "queer":

> Well, yes, "gay" is great. It has its place. But when lots of lesbians and gay
> men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So
> we've chosen to call ourselves queer. Using "queer" is a way of reminding
> us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It's a way of telling

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[9] Dyer, *The Culture of Queers*, 1.

[10] It is interesting to note here that the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Transgender community (hereafter LGBT) started its own campaign of positive visibility out of the Stonewall events.

[11] According to Sedgwick, "there is no satisfactory rule for choosing between the usages of 'homosexual' and 'gay', outside of a post-Stonewall context where 'gay' must be preferable since it is the explicit choice of a larger number of people to whom it refers. Until recently it seemed that 'homosexual', though it severely risked anachronism in any application before the late nineteenth century, was still somehow less temporally circumscribed than 'gay', perhaps because it sounded more official, not to say diagnostic" (*Epistemology*, 16).

[12] Butler, *Bodies,* 226.

ourselves we don't have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world [...]. Yeah, QUEER can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon that we can steal from the homophobe's hand and use then against him.[13]

The term "queer", then, gained momentum in gay and lesbian communities and claimed its space as a legitimate word to name a new identity. By appropriating the term "queer" and giving it positive and different meanings, those who labeled themselves under this rubric attempted to include other identity categories, such as bisexual, transsexual and transgender people, within the social practice and existence of "queer". Furthermore, the queering of the gay and lesbian community brought about the widespread awareness of queer as both a tool of political mobilization and a homosexual identity revisited with irony. In this manner, the last decade of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a newly developing field of studies in almost all academic disciplines within Anglo-Saxon countries.[14]

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[13] VV.AA., 1990.

[14] Since queer studies entered the academia, this field of studies has prompted a proliferation of queer cultural representations and sexual practices in different literary genres and visual domains, such as films, videotapes and photography. These representations challenged the negative stereotypes of homosexual people and focused on their differences in terms of race, culture, class, etc. Some of these representations can be seen in the work of Isaac Julien, the director of *Looking for Langston* (1988), Pratibha Parmar's documentary *Memory Pictures* (1989), Cindy Patton's work on the representation of lesbian sex and pornography (1991) and a series of videotapes that explored gay safe sex in order to diminish the HIV/AIDS epidemic, among others. These representations have been partly the merit of diverse activist groups – i.e. AIDS activists such as ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) – which was organized in 1987 by the gay community to demand, among other issues, greater visibility of HIV-infected gay men. What is interesting in the creation of ACT-UP was their adoption of subversive visual practices in an attempt to effect social and political change; that is to say, rather than portray HIV-infected homosexuals as victims, their activism was targeted at the gay community in particular with the aim of promoting a counter-visibility which directly subverted the politically-correct and homogeneous representations of the white and middle-class gay community. For further information, see the work by Bad Object-Choices (1991), a reading group formed in New York in the spring of 1987 to address questions of gay and lesbian theory. Among the group members who edited the proceedings of a conference entitled "How Do I Look?" were Martha Gever, Bill Horrigan, Amber Hollibaugh, or Douglas Crimp.

The inclusion of queer theory in the academia first took place in Arts
departments, like literary and film studies; soon, queer analyses expanded
to a variety of disciplines such as history, anthropology, or political
science. The theoretical impetus of queer studies first focused on the
analysis and problematization of heterosexuality on the one hand, and on
the visibility and inclusion within homosexual identities of non-white,
working-class, and "unhealthy" LGBT people on the other. Afterwards,
queer theory has paved its way as a site of struggle and contestation for the
articulation of those non-normative identities that disrupt the binary space
of heterosexuality and homosexuality, while also questioning the
functional scope of categories such as gender, sex, sexuality, race or class.
Teresa de Lauretis (1991) was one of the first theorists to provide a useful
account of the genesis of the label "queer" as a defiant, transgressive and
postmodern articulation of sexual identity. As she put it:

> Today, we have, on the one hand, the term "lesbian" and "gay" to
> designate distinct kinds of life-styles, sexualities, sexual practices,
> communities, issues, publications and discourses; on the other hand, the
> phrase "gay and lesbian" or more frequently "lesbian and gay" (ladies first),
> has become standard currency. […] In a sense, the term "queer theory" was
> arrived at in an effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive
> protocols, not to adhere to any of the given terms, not to assume their
> ideological liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend them –
> or at the very least problematize them.[15]

The very creation of queer studies has called into question the idea that
identity categories, such as gender, sex or sexuality are monolithic and
stable. In this sense, queer is continually skeptical of normalized identities;
queer has become an umbrella term for encompassing unstable
homosexual identities and/or socially rejected sexual practices, thus
bringing together a variety of practices, cultural representations and gender
transgressions conceived as the source of political engagement.

In the realm of theoretical criticism queer theory has been defined by
its resistance to identity categories and labels. Unlike the term "gay",
which nowadays connotes a politics of assimilation and tolerance within
mainstream culture, the notion of "queer" is adopted by those who resist
assimilation, and by those who believe that their experience of sexual
oppression requires a total revolution of sexual structures of society.
"Queer" remains an unstable and unfixable mark of identity and, as such,
it has been defined as a free-floating signifier which eschews stable

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[15] Teresa De Lauretis, "Queer Theory", v.

identity formations (Spurlin 2001). In this sense, "queer" has been the target of highly controversial debates, for example between non-academic LGBT people and their counterparts in the academia, since it is used respectively as synonym of homosexual and as a theoretical weapon to challenge and deconstruct any sign of stable identities, be they homosexual or heterosexual.

The use that most scholars make of "queer" allows for a postmodern theorizing of identity that refers to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically".[16] Accordingly, "queer" is used by critics (Butler 1990, 1993, 2004; Sedgwick 1990, 1993) that are interested in drawing attention to the disruption of stable identity categories by insisting on their contingency and volatility on the one hand, and to the social and cultural layers of heteronormativity that underline any process of identity formation on the other. The interrogation of a stable binary definition of gender and sex, as well as the refutation of the heterosexist prejudice to which many queers have long been subjected, will constitute two main axes of analysis for queer studies. Moreover, in the complex archeology of the term "queer" there is a further sense in which it is conflated with activist politics, and works as a mobile force for social and cultural change, for example in some of the strategies deployed by the activist group ACT-UP. Although for activist groups such as ACT-UP and "Queer Nation" the term "queer" was not meant to be related to the political left or right, capitalism or socialism, but rather it functioned autonomously only when it was activated individually, the evidence shows that it has been used and discussed mainly under leftist political adherences which promote a constant disruption of hegemonic gender identity categories.[17]

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[16] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 8.

[17] Apart from the strategies developed by ACT-UP, other organizations, such as "Queer Nation", took up other tactical weapons to question and examine not only the hegemonic establishment but also individual actions within culture and society. According to Chris Woo, "Queer Nation used queer politics of transgression, radicalism, disruption, deconstruction and post-structuralism (a multi-faceted inclusivity of subjectivities, but ironically, rejected heterosexuality). However, it backfired, and the liminality of queer was too unstable for an organization to be permanently in use and still function. Like all organizations within discourses of popular culture that seek to exist through capitalist agencies, it will not survive using queer politics" (In *Queer Studies List*, QSTUDY-L@LISTSERV.BUFFALO.EDU, 2002).

As inclusive as the term "queer" may be, what is true is that it is always used to appeal to, resist or mobilize stable formations of identity politics. The notion of "queer", then, endorses a resistance to stabilize the semiotic and cultural relations between gender, sex and sexuality. As Butler has remarked:

> The term will be revised, dispelled, rendered obsolete to the extent that it yields to the demands which resist the term precisely because of the exclusions by which it is mobilized […]. The political deconstruction of "queer" ought not to paralyze the use of such terms (lesbian and gay) but, ideally, to extend its range, to make us consider at what expense and for what purposes the terms are used; and through what relations of power such categories have been wrought.[18]

Accordingly, what defines "queer" is its permanent linguistic and cultural contestation, thus always expanding the identity categories that it seeks to define. The resignification of "queer" has resulted in the multiplication of meanings linked to the notions of gender and sexuality. In this way, there is no longer a stable axis of gender/sexuality; rather the separation of sexuality and gender produces other identity positions that question the very notions of "gay or lesbian".[19]

The political force of the term "queer" also derives from its allegiance to the concept of "gender as performance" (Butler 1990, 1993). This Butlerian mantra states that, conceived as a fabrication and as an effect of discourses of identity, gender is stated through "bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds"[20] which are not expressive but performative (i.e. there is no original or true pre-existing identity). Such a formulation will constitute the basis for the articulation and analysis of drag kings' performances of identity categories such as gender, sex, sexuality and race. By questioning essentialist identity politics, the project of drag kings unveils the performative condition of gender and sex, thus revealing the concept of "masculinity" as a free-floating signifier that can be detached from a biologically-male born referent. As will be shown in the next chapter, drag kings' portrayal of gender deviance through

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[18] Butler, *Bodies*, 229.

[19] As will be seen later on, some of the challenging discourses that queer theory addresses are best exemplified by female-to-male (FTM) transsexual and transgender persons who are gay-male identified. The queering of these trans-identities conveys a higher complexity in the definitions of a stable "gay" or "lesbian" gender, sex and sexuality, since there are gays who are not male-born and lesbians who are not female-born.

[20] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 140.

practices of "drag", "performance" and "parody" can operate as an empowering signifier for queerness, hence opening up new paradigms of gender definition.

Nevertheless, at the threshold of the twenty-first century, the resignification of "queer" has also given rise to the following paradox: whereas "queer" was initially used as an all-encompassing term because it named the most marginal queer identities – i.e. black, HIV-infected, working-class, transsexual, transgender – within an Anglo-Saxon context it has ironically come to signify male capitalist-inspired individualism.[21] This is so because the capitalist marketplace and the process of globalization have stressed queer's promotion of individuality as being all about expressing individual and supposedly non-regulated personal desires. It is in this sense that "queer" has also become a socio-cultural and political type of libertarianism and anarchy which calls for a critique of sexual normalization. Besides the multi-faceted meanings attached to the term "queer" as an adjective and as a noun, I will also stress here its essential connotations when used as a verb. Hence, for some scholars (Sedgwick 1990; Butler 1990, 1993), "to queer" refers to a constant process that contests the sedimentation and stability of meanings, identity formations and sexual practices, while also being a useful theoretical tool to fight homophobia and sexual marginalization.

Having outlined the most important meanings of the term "queer", – i.e. a synonym of homosexuality, an activist political weapon to fight the exclusions that gay and lesbian communities have experienced, and a discursive site to deconstruct heteronormative, hierarchical and totalitarian formations of identity –, I would also suggest that queer politics can be

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[21] The term "queer" has been used differently outside Anglo-Saxon contexts. In Germany "queer" (*quer*) does not so much contest heteronormativity as is used as a weapon to fight globalization and to "think and act in unusual manners, of reading and acting against the grain, of quarrel and trouble-making" (Hark, 99). Likewise, in Spain "queer", which has not been translated into Spanish, refers to identities that "are based on respect and a permanent construction of difference. Our aims are different from those of assimilationalists: we are different and our difference helps us to challenge the discourses, practices and laws that want us not to be different" (Saéz, 135). Besides, "queer" is increasingly deployed by radical anti-system groups (i.e. Radikal Gay or Queeruption) to denounce consumerist practices such as the "pink euro", the profits made at the expense of gay men who, as one of the upper income groups, spend more money in clothes, eating out, traveling, etc. The problem with these radical groups is that they sometimes use violence and beating (Otero, 39), thus building a bridge between the term "queer" and "violence", something which is very distant from queer theory and queers' aims.

positioned as an ephemeral space of difference where no one can permanently reside and where there are no fixed cultural or ideological constructs of identity. Queer strategies, in this manner, point to an anti-identity formation, which in turn have fueled a dynamic poststructuralist critique of identity configurations; that is to say, "queer" attempts to move beyond, or transgress, or embrace the fluidity of sexual and gender identity categories. Before moving on to a more detailed account of what "queer" can mean in contemporary academic discourse and of how it disrupts the functional space of gender, sexuality or race, it is my intention in the following sections to offer an account of the main theoretical influences that have contributed to the formation and development of this controversial field of study. The task of theorizing "queer" necessarily asks for a delineation of the complex and interwoven relationships between gender, sex and sexuality, among other identity categories.

Feminism: The Sex/Gender Binary

The emergence of queer theory cannot be isolated from the enormous impact of the study of the category of "gender" by women's studies from the late 1970s onwards. [22] As will be seen, the relationship between feminism and queer studies has been quite slippery, since the primary divergence between them lies in how they have conceptualized the notions of sex, gender and sexuality. In short, whereas queer scholars aim to distinguish between such categories, women's studies have "tended to conflate the three constructs", [23] overlooking the importance and complexity of sexuality in the formation of gender identity. Queer studies have reversed the tendency; that is to say, queer rhetorics can be said to privilege the category of sexuality over those of gender and sex. Yet the contribution of certain feminist critics (Butler 1990, 1993; Sedgwick 1990; de Lauretis 1991) for the configuration of queer spaces has been of utmost importance, and so I would like to sketch, in what follows, the main concepts that have worked as analytical tools in the account of queer identity formations.

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[22] Although the present work analyses the category of gender identity as traced by feminism from the late 1970s onwards, I would like to note that Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, and more specifically, her statement that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (130) has been essential for both canonical and deconstructivist revisions of the categories of "gender" and "sex".

[23] Corber and Valocchi, 6.

If something has been a constant in different feminist theories throughout more than three decades, this is their focus on the category of gender and how it intervenes in all spheres of life, both private and public. Up to the early 1990s, what seems to be the common denominator in all feminist approaches is the belief in a "universal oppression of women" founded on the basis of gender. From this perspective, the category of "woman" is considered as a collective subject vulnerable to history and historical changes. Overall, interest in the concept of gender originated after the Second World War (Haraway 1991), at the threshold of women liberation movements that developed out of specific social and cultural conditions in the whole of the Western world.[24] According to Donna Haraway, the concept was introduced by the *Gender Identity Research Project,* which was created in the Medical Center of Los Angeles (California University) in order to carry out research into intersexuals and transsexuals. Psychologist Robert Stoller, an outstanding contributor to this project, related the concept of "gender identity" to both biology and culture in 1963. He then postulated that "the project of culture with special emphasis on biology had as its result, the gendered person".[25] It was this version of gender identity, embedded in socio-cultural and biological causes that became known and famous at US universities. Accordingly, in spite of the years passed by, Stoller's conception, which was mainly based on biological determinism, is still widely used and supported by many critics, especially by anthropologists and scientists (Fisher 2000).

To be more precise, the analysis of culture and society through the lenses of gender became more evident from the late 1960s onwards and was articulated differently by US and French feminism. In the United States the emphasis was placed on how women were subjugated to social and cultural patriarchal structures, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) being one of the major books of feminist thought to encourage their liberation and emancipation. While in the United States, the notion of

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[24] The capitalist system allowed women's lives to be reformulated by considering women a collective subject. Out of economic necessity, capitalism let women enter the public sphere of work with the subsequent corollary of women's contribution to changing the existing gender and sexual roles. In its origin, the notion of "gender" was meant to challenge the naturalization of sexual difference from different perspectives. On the one hand, gender became a theoretical tool useful to analyze different historical systems as well as to bring into light their fundamental inequality and, on the other, the use of gender as a category of analysis manifested the necessity of changing the existing hierarchical configuration of identity which marginalized women in culture and society.

[25] Haraway, 225.

"gender" was taken as a cultural construction that manifested women's patriarchal oppression, in France, the concept of "gender" was mostly analyzed within intellectual circles and it mainly referred to biological differences. So, Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1969) was the first book to define female creative autonomy – and more specifically a lesbian one – as a mode of *l'ecriture féminine*. French feminism was further developed by Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, and their outstanding remarks on the role of gender in writing had an important impact upon male French intellectual circles.[26] Not coincidentally, the feminist concern of these authors for the study of language was also conceptualized within various post-structuralist discourses, such as those of Lacan, Derrida and Barthes, all of which would have a remarkable influence upon postmodern and feminist reconfigurations of gender identity.

The first feminist criticism evolved differently depending on diverse cultural and political scenes; namely, in the same way that there existed relevant divergences between French and US feminists, so were there within Anglo-American feminist criticism. Unlike in the United States, where the analysis of gender was mainly deployed to expose the widespread misogyny of society and culture, in Great Britain the study of gender was often seen through the lens of class, thereby effecting a cooperation with other social or cultural institutions which were interested in studying the conflation of gender, social class, race, or sexuality and their impact upon culture. In any case, the common denominator of all these feminist approaches was to use the notion of gender as a category of analysis with which to manifest the necessity of changing the existing hierarchical configuration which marginalized women in culture and society because of their distinct gender.

In this respect, and right from the decade of the 1970s, almost all feminist branches (i.e. socialist-marxist feminism a.k.a. egalitarian feminism, US feminism a.k.a. cultural feminism, French feminism a.k.a. feminism of difference, and lesbian feminism) have emphasized that

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[26] By concentrating on women's relation to language, French feminists have described *l'ecriture féminine* as a practice of writing in the feminine while also remarking that "*l'ecriture féminine* is not necessarily writing by women; it is an avant-garde writing style like that of Joyce, Bataille, Artaud, Mallarmé, or Lautréamont" (Showalter, 9). Because of biological differences, they observed, women were more prone to using a disruptive and subversive writing which imitated the rhythms of the female body. For Kristeva, "female discourse that breaks with tradition is a political act of dissidence, a form of feminist activism. For Cixous, women's writing has genuinely revolutionary force" (in Showalter, 9).

whereas sex is a given, fixed and natural category, gender is a social construct, precisely structured on the basis of a stable sex, of genital and reproductive sex. As Toril Moi puts it,

> the sex/gender distinction provides the basic framework for a great deal of feminist theory, and it has become widely accepted in society at large [...] Considered as an essence, sex becomes immobile, stable, coherent, fixed, prediscursive, natural and ahistorical: the mere surface on which the script of gender is written.[27]

Gender, in this way, depends on a biological materialization and naturalness which is situated as a previous given in culture. Sex becomes an impregnable and aseptic stratum resistant to cultural malleability; that is, sex is the original element upon which different individuals and societies are built in patriarchy. Thus, although it may seem paradoxical, gender and sex are two closely interrelated concepts – i.e. gender provides sex with meaning and vice versa: a "masculine" or "feminine" gender needs a male or female sex as the stable basis for normative or "normal" identities – and it is in this sense of normalcy that in order to define gender identity, the concept of gender becomes dependent on a stable and natural sex.

The distinction, yet interdependence, between gender and sex historically set the grounds for the establishment of biased sexual differences – i.e. women are biologically weaker than and/or inferior to men – through which women's oppression has been maintained in different cultures. Such a dual system is at the root of sexist and patriarchal structures that have incorporated the idea that while "sex" belongs to the realm of medicine and biology and requires scientific description, "gender" pertains to the realm of culture and social norms. In her highly-influential essay "The Traffic in Women", Gayle Rubin considered that "a 'sex/gender system' is the set of arrangements through which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied".[28] For this author the "sex/gender system" is always oppressive in the sense that it is grounded on a biased social production system by which "the biological raw material of human procreation is shaped by the human, and social interventions are satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be".[29] Feminist-anthropologist Rubin conceives social structures as primarily related to legitimate forms of

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[27] Moi, 3-4.
[28] Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", 159.
[29] Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", 165.

heterosexual kinship, designating proper gender and sex models in order to keep patriarchal organizations intact.

In spite of historical and social progress, the notion of "sex" has remained inherently linked to that of "nature" and the binary definition that supports that gender is to culture as sex is to nature[30] has proven to be a primary framework for the articulation of gender and sex categories. Although different feminist discourses challenged patriarchal definitions of gender and rendered women's rights visible, they did not fully undo the binary distinction gender/sex; that is, there was no attempt to do research on concepts such as "sex",[31] "body" or "sexuality". Instead, they mainly focused on the notion of gender, since the important issue was to be able to determine what features configured the category of "woman" and where to locate them. Once this was defined, feminists could accordingly question traditional patriarchal notions that legitimated a social and political inequality based on sex. Whether such inequalities had social, economic or cultural sources, there were indeed two realities corresponding to two distinct gendered identities: *the* feminine and *the* masculine. The difference between masculine and feminine culture would be that feminine culture was still a counterculture in the sense that it had not yet reached cultural visibility and social value. The task of liberation was firstly oriented towards the critique of androcentrism, secondly to recapture forgotten histories, lives and texts by women, and lastly to reclaim a different perspective, that is, a necessarily feminine perspective.

The challenges to these universalizing tendencies and responses grounded exclusively on biology came out in the 1980s with the demands of other oppressed groups of women, such as "black feminists" and "lesbian feminists". Although these groups mainly focused their research on the category of gender as intertwined with those of race and sexual orientation respectively, their contributions to the analysis of gender identity cannot be overlooked. Among the most influential works on the intersections of gender, race and sexuality, one can remark Barbara

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[30] Ortner, 419-508.

[31] In his study *Making Sex*, Thomas Laqueur writes a thorough analysis of how the concept of "sex" has been defined and constructed in rather different ways in several historical contexts, from Ancient Greece to Sigmud Freud. Interestingly, his account of the history of sex traces the conceptual shift from a "one-sex model" (from Antiquity to the Middle Ages) to a "two-sex model" (from the eighteenth century onwards) of sexual difference. Besides, as he puts it, the notion of gender preceded sex: "In these pre-enlightenment texts, and even some later ones, *sex*, or the body, must be understood as the epiphenomenon, while *gender*, what we would take to be a cultural category, was primary or 'real'" (8).