Is she he? Drag discourse and drag logic in online media reports of gender variance

Meredith Heller

To cite this article: Meredith Heller (2016) Is she he? Drag discourse and drag logic in online media reports of gender variance, Feminist Media Studies, 16:3, 445-459, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2015.1114004

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2015.1114004

Published online: 30 Nov 2015.

Article views: 374

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Is she he? Drag discourse and drag logic in online media reports of gender variance

Meredith Heller
Women’s and Gender Studies, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ, USA

ABSTRACT
This article investigates online entertainment news, magazine, and gossip reports that use canonical terms and ideas attached to theatrical gender-bending—“drag discourses”—to identify gender variant bodies and expressions. Drag discourse pervades the coverage of female-identified menswear models Elliott Sailors and Casey Legler, and female-identified pop stars Lady Gaga and Beyoncé Knowles. I first investigate why media texts use drag as descriptor, especially when it rarely aligns with public figures’ own expressions of identity or intentionality. I then investigate what I term “drag logic,” or how publics engage with drag discourse to inform or support their interpretations of embodied “realness.” I argue that drag logic is an open-ended analytic: a method of meaning making that is unpredictable and subject to individual processes. While drag logic has led to some reductive conclusions about gender variant people, I suggest the pervasive online rumor that Gaga is male-bodied demonstrates the creative potential of this analytic. Drawing on the concept of radical queerness, I conclude by proposing that drag logic is a semiotic with the potential to dismantle the ideological stability of the “real” body.

Annie Hindle smoked, swore, and dressed in men’s attire—both on the variety theater stage, and off. This was not acceptable for most White, middle-class women in the nineteenth-century US. But Hindle’s lived masculinity was contextualized via her work as a male impersonator. The New York Clipper and The Sun characterized her masculine comport as true gender-bending professionalism and commitment to performance realism. However, in 1886, Hindle married her female dresser, Annie Ryan; from Grand Rapids to New York, newspapers demanded to know “is she he?” (The National Police Gazette, July 3, 1886). The media again drew on theatrical gender-bending ideas to explain the situation. This time, the papers reasoned that a man (read Hindle) could very well pass as a woman for the purposes of working as a male impersonator. The media’s employment of ideas associated with theatrical gender-bending, and also the way they used those ideas to form seemingly logic-based conclusions about Hindle’s “real” bi-sexed self, first established Hindle as a star, and then ruined her career.

CONTACT Meredith Heller Meredith.Heller@nau.edu
© 2015 Taylor & Francis
Contemporary Western online entertainment news, magazine, and gossip reports often use theatrical gender-bending to characterize variant expressions and the bodies that do them. For example, many media texts tag Lady Gaga and Beyoncé Knowles as drag queens. Reporting for National Public Radio’s music site The Record, Zoe Chace declares “there are some pop stars right now who look a lot like drag queens—Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, Katy Perry, even Ke$ha” (2010). Stories about professional menswear models Casey Legler and Elliott Sailors also use theatrical terms and ideas to describe them. The Daily Mail ran: “Casey Legler, the first female to be signed as a male model, on her knack for gender-bending” (Margot Peppers 2013) and The Guardian described Legler’s work by referencing Judith Butler, who “wrote about gender as performance” (Eva Wiseman 2013).

This article illuminates ways “drag discourses”—canonical terms and ideas attached to theatrical gender-bending—are used to identify public gender variance. It also investigates what I term “drag logic,” or how individuals engage with drag discourse to inform or support their interpretations of public figures’ embodied “realness.” I show how drag discourse is tied into the historicized and popular notion of gender-bending as a structured theatrical act. But I argue that drag logic is an open-ended analytic: a process of meaning making that is creative, unpredictable, and subject to individual perceptions and interpretations.

Gender variant individuals and phenomena are popular topics for online entertainment news, magazines, and gossip sites. Many journalists write about these subjects in fairly courteous ways or with uplifting, positive stories. For example, many online articles about international model Andreja Pejić described Pejić’s pre-transition androgyny as both innovative and career-savvy. Guillermo Avila-Saavedra discusses how these types of frequent, non-derisive media depictions are popularly perceived as cultural progress (or at least cultural liberalism) (2009, 5–6). Yet his study on homosexual TV characters demonstrates how visibility is not unequivocally progressive. White, affluent, masculine gay characters are usually respectable and successful. However, queer individuals—those with bodies, expressions, and lifestyles outside or in contrast with hegemonic norms—are not characterized in such respectful or inclusionary ways. Similarly, while some “homonormative” celebrities are treated with social deference by the media, this does not necessarily mean the markedly queer are as well (Lisa Duggan 2002, 179).

This article considers some seemingly liberal words and ideas used to characterize gender variance in online media texts. Specifically, I argue that “drag discourses” are deployed to build ideological equivalence between expressive gender variance and theatrical gender performance. As Richard J. Gray II notes, connecting public figures to formalized performance practices could impel important discussions about reality and representation (2012, 9). However, John Sloop argues there are a “limited number of medical and institutional terms with which to describe one’s body,” so new or creative forms of bodily ambiguity are often linguistically disciplined into “particular heteronormative understandings” of bi-gender, sex, and sexuality (2004, 23, 21). Many public figures complicate or transgress the heteronormative matrix (and many gender-bending performers do as well). However, I assert that linguistically connecting these public figures to theatrical gender-bending likens their bodies and expressions to a particular historicized and canonical discourse on drag performance.

This article also explores how publics utilize drag discourses as tools to help them think and reason though gender, embodiment, and realness. Stuart Hall’s theory of decoding is useful for outlining the process of informed yet subjective reception that I identify as drag logic. In some cases, drag ideas help individuals to articulate reductive inferences about
bodies and expressions—for example, that public figures are “playing at” rather than living gender variance. In other cases, drag creates space for individuals to form pluralistic or queer deductions about public figures’ embodiments. For instance, Gaga identifies as a woman, is called a drag queen by the media, and is persistently followed by online rumors that she is male-bodied. I suggest that the media’s constant application of drag discourse to Gaga has given some publics the tools to formulate conclusions about Gaga’s “real” body that neither she nor the media outlets originally intended to convey.

In this article, I first outline canonical discourses associated with theatrical gender-bending: specifically, words and ideas that characterize this practice as a fictive gender performance that contrasts with the performer’s “real” body. This discourse does not accurately describe all theatrical gender-bending performers or practices; nevertheless, it dominates in scholarly works and popular descriptions of the genre. I then illuminate the use of these discourses in media discussions of gender variant individuals, specifically female-identified menswear models Elliott Sailors and Casey Legler, and female-identified pop stars Lady Gaga and Beyoncé Knowles. Next, I demonstrate how individuals use drag discourses as a tool in the drag logic process of reasoning through ideas about embodiment and forming conclusions about the realness of public figures. While drag logic has led to some reductive conclusions about gender variant people, I suggest the pervasive online rumor that Gaga is male-bodied demonstrates the creative potential of this analytic. Drawing on the concept of radical queerness, I conclude by proposing that drag logic is a semiotic with the potential to begin dismantling the ideological stability of the “real” body.

**Drag as discourse and logic**

Theatrical gender-bending, also called drag in this article, has been historicized and canonically defined as an illusionary or artificial performance of selfhood. In the scholarship, drag is often characterized as illuminating gender in opposition to the performer’s “real” sexed self. For example, the editors of *The Drag Queen Anthology*, Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood, define drag queens as those who “publicly perform being women in front of an audience that knows they are ‘men’ regardless of how compellingly female—‘real’—they might appear otherwise” (2004, 4). Likewise, in *Female Masculinity*, J. Halberstam identifies a drag king as a “female (usually) who dresses up in a recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume” (1998, 232). Others who have attended drag shows will attest to a broader and less cisgender range of drag bodies and bending practices. Yet as these definitions demonstrate, canonical or dominant drag discourses do not always reflect this performance scope.

Most forms of acting are characterized by what performers do onstage—they are noblemen, ingénues—but few are also defined by what performers are offstage. We probably would not describe an actor as publicly performing as a nobleman to an audience that knows he is not a nobleman despite how noble he appears. Yet Schacht and Underwood identify drag queening via specific reference to the “explicit recognition that the individual publicly performing femininity and being a woman is also simultaneously acknowledged to be a man and not a woman” (2004, 4). Certainly this characterizes some gender-bending performers and performances, but this discourse cannot accurately represent many other gender-bending practices, including some forms of drag queening (Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor 2003). Nevertheless, discourses that reference the bi-sexed body as a stable reality...
for theatrical gender performativity are frequently employed by scholars and the general public to outline drag.4

While drag acts can (and many do) deconstruct or refashion bi-sex, I argue that the words and ideas predominantly used to characterize these acts—drag discourses—link to the idea that gender play is both fictive and separate from the “real” performer, generally designed by bi-sex. Again, this might characterize some gender-bending acts, but excludes or misidentifies others. And because drag discourse is so tied to the essentialized body, a solution might be to avoid engaging it as explicative for any (or all) embodied expressions. Yet as the next sections demonstrate, public figures have little control over how the media characterizes their bodies or genders. And because drag is so widespread and recognizable, it may be impossible to fully remove it from its current position of cultural and descriptive authority. My larger research develops a (re)definition of theatrical gender-bending that does not reference bi-sex as a reality, or use it as a direct means of characterizing the bent quality of the act. In this way, I have taken up Judith Butler’s call for term re-signification, or the expansion and addition of meanings that do not necessarily “retain and reiterate the abjected history of the term” (1993, 223). However, as it currently stands, the primary language used to characterize drag foregrounds “recognition that the person behind the mask is really another gender” (Pamela Robertson 1999, 273).

Drag discourse, specifically the online media community’s use of drag terms and ideas to characterize celebrity gender variance, can be a disciplining speech act. That is, the naming of a figure or an act as drag can equate it with “discursive regulation of the boundaries of” normative gender and sexuality (Butler 1993, 223). Therefore, it is critical to consider not only how these terms function as equivalence, but also what role they may play in larger meaning making processes. In line with feminist cultural studies, I ask: how exactly do publics engage with drag terms and ideas as they decode variant embodiments? And what might occur if a body is decoded in queerer ways than either the performer or the media producer originally intended?

This article serves as a starting point for a broader investigation of drag discourses circulating in television, advertising, and other online and print media. For this study, I have selected key examples from online entertainment news, magazine, and gossip sites. Tabitha Freeman notes that, because “popular culture generates an ever-expanding source of data,” drawing from more than one source can “generate a holistic impression” (2003, 7). Using a multilayered mode of analysis, I first consider “surface or literal” uses of drag terms and ideas. In many cases, drag is a means of quickly illustrating or identifying equivalence. I then consider some “deeper meanings” connected to drag, and compare these to performers’ own statements of intent and identification (Gayle Letherby 2003, 52). I also trace three cases of drag logic as a meaning making process: two from online journalists and one from the social media community. This approach allows me to illuminate how gender variance is linguistically represented, how those terms are received and utilized by the public, and how this combination both forms and affects public ideas about embodied realness.

Modeling like drag kings

In 2013, a multitude of online news and magazine sites published stories on Casey Legler and Elliott Sailors, and the majority utilized drag discourses. Both Legler and Sailors self-identify as female and both primarily work in menswear, although each occasionally models women’s
or unisex clothing pieces. Legler, a former Olympic swimmer, signed with Ford Models in 2012. According to Legler, her everyday masculine demeanor was of high appeal to Ford; Wiseman reports that, after seeing photos of Legler, Ford instantly signed her to their men's board (2013). The following year, Sailors, who had been exclusively working in womenswear, signed with Milk Management under an agreement that she would now consistently model menswear. Most online media reports about Sailors and Legler focus on how their masculine gender presentations have led to significant modeling successes.

To do so, these reports repeatedly engage drag terms and ideas to characterize Legler’s and Sailors’ looks, careers, and bodies. For example, Kelsey Garcia begins by explaining how “Sailors made headlines [...] for her gender bending modeling work” (2013). The Cut called Legler “Ford’s Gender-Bending Model” (Hilary Moss 2013). And The Daily Beast printed: “despite the gender-bending that is seemingly associated with Sailors’s decision, she does not identify with the opposite sex other than when she is behind the camera” (2013). On a surface level, the term “gender-bending” could be a simple descriptor: Legler and Sailors publically identify as female and they model menswear, thus both are “bending” the gender rules most closely associated with their sex. In this simple representational context, gender-bending might not even be in reference to the theatrical performance genre.

However, I argue that “gender-bending” is revealed as drag discourse in its proximity to other theatrical and performance mentions. For example, after meeting for a casual drink, Wiseman describes Legler as an “awkward,” “cheery,” “soft and earnest” woman. Wiseman’s depiction of Legler-as-model takes a different tone: “in front of the camera, edges appear. Spikes. She juts her chin; she becomes a boy” (2013). Although Legler designates herself as similarly masculine in her personal and professional life—this is why she was signed to a men’s board—Wiseman’s words suggest that Legler takes on the persona or performance of “boy” while modeling, a contrast to her “real” soft, tentative, and earnest self. Even the term “boy” rather than “man” alludes to Legler’s lack of continued or authentic adult masculinity. Wiseman continues to build a relationship between theatrics and Legler’s “front of the camera” work by mentioning drag queens, and explaining how gender is both performance and play. These drag mentions are discursive tools for characterizing Legler’s masculine presentation, and also for creating distance between her real “offstage” self and the fictive persona of “boy” she does for work.

Media reports also deploy drag discourses via direct (although sometimes inaccurate) reference to classic performance scholarship. For instance, Garcia prefaces an interview question by explaining how “gender theorist Judith Butler famously said, ‘Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original’” (2013). Heidimaier, a journalist for Same Same, writes about Legler by first explaining how queens “drag up” and then citing both Butler’s Gender Trouble and Bodies That Matter (2013). References to Butler and drag queening locate Sailors and Legler within larger traditions of theatrical gender-bending and theories of gender performativity. In Gender Trouble, Butler does consider the possibilities in clearly performative gender expressions. Her very brief mention of drag queening in this regard led to scholarly assertions that theatrical gender-bending was a wholly effective subversion of gender. In Bodies That Matter, Butler squarely clarifies her position: rather than permanently troubling gender, sex, or race, drag simply highlights and exposes them, which can, in fact, lead to their “reidealization” (1993, 231, 125). Butler’s stance on gender-bending performance is not that it always dismantles gender, but that it creates ideological separation between consciously performed identities and “real” embodiments. So while these references might
help journalists articulate how gender can be done, they are also drag discourses. That is, they imply that the doing of gender—in this case, Sailors’ and Legler’s masculinity—is not an embodied quality of their “real” selves.

Drag discourses may have limited ideological scope, but are not disciplining in their own right. In other words, these comparisons do not harm a public figure who intends to replicate a canonical drag style, or desires to highlight their gender as “done” separately from their embodied bi-sex. However, I have found no statement where Sailors or Legler identify as drag artists, individuals who “perform” masculinity, or refer to themselves or their jobs as gender-bending. In fact, primary-source statements (found in their personal writings as well as in unaltered parts of interview transcripts) tell a very different story. Legler explains that she personally identifies as masculine and feels that her gender exists in harmony with rather than muddles her female identity (Wiseman 2013). Sailors states that her masculine embodiment, which she utilizes for her career and has also integrated into her daily life, is “clear and comfortable” and “more me” than her previous feminine presentation (qtd. in Britt Julious 2013). In a self-authored piece for The Guardian, Legler writes how her high profile female masculinity represents a “wider angled discourse” on embodied difference, one that extends beyond the bi-sex and gender parameters of the modeling world (Casey Legler 2013). Sailors similarly asserts that her career proves how gender is “not limited to what you were at any point in time,” and that models like her can “continue to transform, and to find new forms of self-expression” (qtd. in Cara 2013).

Rather than gauging the efficacy of Sailors’ and Legler’s above statements, my point is to show lacuna between their personal ideologies and the characterization of them or their jobs as drag. Though the scope of actual drag practice is vast, drag discourses link to narrow notions of gender play and sex realness. In this specific regard, the pervasive framing of these models as gender-benders—contrary to their own iterations—does discursively filter their embodiments into undesired “heteronormative understandings” of body or identity (Sloop 2004, 21). Case in point, Sailors states her belief that gender is “expansive; it can include many things” and cannot be used to identify sexual preferences or sexual identities (qtd. in Julious 2013). In spite of this public statement, many articles refer to Sailors as a beautiful “blonde bombshell” and post her old bikini and lingerie modeling photos (Erin Cunningham 2013; Garcia 2013; Tara Palmeri 2013; Sadie Whitelocks 2013). The Daily Mail also ran a huge image of Sailors and her husband on their wedding day. These combined references to femininity and heterosexuality emphasize how, although “she and her husband now get mistaken for a ‘gay couple,’” their sexual relationship actually fits a cisgender binary (Whitelocks 2013). As Cara at Autostraddle astutely notes, this media coverage—specifically coupling Sailors’ past femininity to her marriage—negates the potential queerness of masculine heterosexuality; it contextualizes Sailors’ current embodiment as incongruous with her sexual orientation, and thus more of a performance-based career move (2013).

Drag discourses link to a particular drag rubric that may be at odds with figures’ self-identified expressions. However, individuals employ these drag ideas in various ways as they work through and form opinions about embodied “realness.” An example is how Slate journalist Katy Waldman (2013) draws on canonical drag kinging discourse to help her define Sailors’ “true” embodiment. Waldman writes that Sailors’ “unconvincing James Dean’ impression bore out a co-worker’s theory that impersonating men (drag kinging) is harder than impersonating women.” That is, Waldman argues that Sailors is an “unconvincing” drag king because she “still reads as female.” In classic drag discourse fashion, Waldman first equates Sailors’ masculine
presentation to fictive performance, or what she terms a “stunt.” From this point, Waldman reasons that Sailors’ masculinity, analogous to a theatrical gender illusion, should be measured by how well she passes for “a guy.” According to Waldman, if Sailors does not identify as “trans/transition” and her performance of maleness is “unconvincing,” then her masculine embodiment is not really embodied transgression, just “playact[ing] a different gender for the camera.” Rather than concluding that Sailors embodies a variant, non-conforming, or queer gender, Waldman’s path through drag logic leads her to make two conclusions: first, Sailors is trying to pass herself off as cismale (as drag kings supposedly do) and, second, Sailors fails because of her “real” cisfemale self. In the words of Waldman: “you are a woman who wears man garb to work, not a dude” (2013).

Drag might seem a valid descriptor for Sailors and Legler in that it easily highlights why these models’ jobs and embodiments are unusual. Yet closer analysis reveals that these particular terms link embodied variance to concepts of unreal performance and real sex. According to Sailors and Legler, they are doing gender in ways that confound traditional binary understandings of cisgender or transgender embodiment. Yet, in cases like the one above, drag discourse is a tool an individual can use to negate professed identity and solidify personal interpretations about bodily realness.

Femme like drag queens

Online reports between 2010 and 2012 consistently use a particular “drag tag” to describe female pop stars that embody aesthetic or exaggerated femininities. Gossip site Celebitchy announced, “Lady Gaga looks like an angelic drag queen” on Vanity Fair (2010), while Beyoncé looked like a “tweaked drag queen” on Harper’s Bazaar (Kaiser 2011). Parlour Magazine’s Hillary Crosley (2012) agrees with Gawker’s Rich Juzwiak that “Beyoncé is a Drag Queen,” but Juzwiak also notes that the title is “a supreme compliment” (2012). On a surface level, this drag queen moniker could be basic equivalence: Beyoncé and Gaga present themselves as hyper-feminine, as many theatrical drag queens do. Certainly femininity is a social construction produced by and for all individuals, regardless of body. Yet the dominant Western cultural narrative is that female bodies naturally align with femininity (as noted by the term cisgender), and hyper-femininities do not reflect the seamlessness implied in “natural.” The concept of the “unnatural” also comes up in Susan Sontag’s characterization of camp, which she describes as “artifice and exaggeration” (1964, 515). Robertson illustrates camp in the self-conscious presentations of femininity in “gay men’s […] drag and female impersonation” practices (1999, 267). So “drag queen” is not just simple equivalence: it is a drag discourse that links these female pop stars to canonical or historical drag queening methods of gender presentation.5

Lynn Sally terms the overly stylized, campy, or otherwise self-conscious doing of femininity as “horrible prettiness” (2009, 6). Her term is drawn from Robert C. Allen’s description of women in nineteenth-century burlesque, whose brazen sexual displays were branded by larger society as both unfeminine and unnatural (1991). However, Rosalind Gill asserts that popular Western culture no longer frames women’s public bodily displays as either brazen or unfeminine (2007). When Sofía Vergara wears a body-hugging dress with plunging neckline to the Emmy Awards, she might be called sexy or beautiful, but probably not unfeminine or unnatural. In contrast, when Gaga shows more skin (in a bikini) and wears higher heels (towering platforms) to the Los Angeles airport, she is characterized as both. This is because
Gaga presents femininity as horrible prettiness: not a seamless or natural part of her body, but rather as an aesthetic object. Likewise, when Beyoncé performs in a sequined leotard with nipple details, her display of horrible prettiness garners her the title of drag queen.

“Drag queen” is a discursive link between Beyoncé’s and Gaga’s horrible prettiness and theatrical or fictive gender performance. I do not believe that, in general, journalists call these figures drag queens because they believe them to be male-bodied. On the contrary, reports often mention Beyoncé’s heterosexual marriage to male rapper Jay-Z and her biological child, Blue Ivy. Furthermore, I do not think these reports use drag tags to intentionally chastise Beyoncé or Gaga for their overt gender practices. To again reference Juwiak, drag queen is meant as a “supreme compliment” (2012). And both women have identified as using onstage or public personas (Sasha Fierce and Lady Gaga, respectively), so this might be a fairly apt comparison. However, it is important to note that drag discourse associates gender with role-play and also frames this persona as disparate from a “real” or “non-performing” self. And this idea can then be used to help individuals formulate ideas about realness in terms of the body’s “natural” gender associations.

Case in point is Chace’s investigation into why pop stars like Gaga and Beyoncé “look a lot like drag queens” (2010). To answer this, Chace consults RuPaul’s Drag Race winner Bebe Zahara Benet. Benet’s reply is, at first, a nod to femininity as camp aesthetic: exaggerated wigs, sky-high stilettos, and “dresses that look like lampshades made of lollipops.” That is, pop stars look like drag queens because both groups theatrically present femininity in ways that do not reflect everyday femininities. Benet then articulates how these particular “drag” presentations allow female pop stars to access social power “even if that’s not who they are in their daily lives.” Chase then engages with these two drag ideas—that femininity is done as separate from the self and also is a tool to become what one is not—to think through her own question. Chase reasons that the figures most aesthetically akin to drag queens are also the ones that exude a type of aggressive sexuality, artistic prerogative, and public authority that is not typical for women. In other words, pop stars that do femininity as artifice are more able or more free to embody other non-natural qualities of self, specifically those R. W. Connell identifies as hegemonically masculine (1998). Chase’s conclusions reflect a unique yet specific form of drag logic: first, qualities such as assertive sexuality and economic power are not embodied by these women but rather are part of their non-embodied drag queen “alter egos.” Second, these “outsized” gendered personae look aesthetically feminine but actually represent a salient form of social masculinity. Thus, Chace’s final query is whether these female stars are actually in control “or just enabling everyone’s inner drag queen to come out” (2010)?

One of the exciting aspects of drag logic is that it can inform or support unique inferences about a figure’s embodiment. And Chace’s summation that a hyper-feminine public persona denotes social masculinity is an interesting take on “bi-gender normativity” (Sloop 2004, 2). Yet it is important to note how this particular idea conflicts with some performers’ self-articulated intentionality. Gray’s anthology The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga (2012) and the technological journal Gaga Stigmata have explored the complexities of Gaga’s gender presentations (2015). And Gaga scholar Amber L. Davisson has documented many of Gaga’s own expressed intentions with these presentations: to engender solidarity with LGBT and queer communities, and to alter heteronormative structures of gendered desire (2013). That is to say, Gaga often intends to present her femininity not as social masculinity but rather as an expansive feminine sexiness. Karin A. Martin and Emily Kazyak characterize
“heterosexiness”—a critical element in “heteronormative sexuality”—as constructed via the male gaze’s sexualized attention on the feminine, cisgender body (2009, 330). I argue that Gaga is, in fact, soliciting this particular sexualized gaze but expanding it beyond the contingency of cisfemininity. Or, in Gaga’s own words: “I’m not trying to make your dick hard the way other girls are. I’m trying to teach your dick to get hard when it looks at other things” (qtd. in Davisson 2013, 54). In this regard, Gaga does not intend to parody cisfemininity or replicate heterosexiness but rather to embody a different formation of feminine gender that will still inspire hetero-male desire. Again, I am not gauging efficacy—whether or not Gaga actually alters gendered desire—but rather illuminating a divide between her articulations of her gender embodiment and Chace’s drag logic conclusions.

Embodiments that visually highlight the relationship between gender and desire, or present this relationship in variant ways, can be a socially powerful thing. Rupp and Taylor brand visible actions, including drag entertainment, as socially contestational when it “subverts rather than maintains dominant relations of power” (2003, 217). This action can also be sketched through “gaga feminism,” a term J. Halberstam applies to gender representations, actions, and ways of living that confront and thus critique hegemonic power structures (2012). These two theories share a common thread: they do not identify representational practices as theatrical play detached from the realities of the self, but rather investigate representations as alternative ways of living and being. And while this potentiality may very well exist in what Gaga is doing, drag tags can easily be used to support the reductive inference that queerness is spectacle layered over the conforming body. But herein also lies its creative potential.

Is she he?

Drag logic is a process of ideological struggle and negotiation to form an opinion about who variant public figures “really” are. Yet “realness” is not and has never been a very stable category of self. Nevertheless, the canonical definition of drag is grounded in realness, or at least the “good faith” assumption that gender performance is illusion rather than reality. To again reference Schacht and Underwood, the drag queen appears feminine but is “acknowledged to be a man and not a woman,” even if audiences cannot see this bodily reality (2004, 4). I have demonstrated how drag discourses link variant bodies and expressions to this particular bi-sex and gender citationality. I have also illustrated how some journalists use these ideas to form conclusions about the “realness” of public figures. Yet I have also demonstrated that drag logic is very much an open-ended analytic: variable in that it is subject to individual reception and interpretation. Hall’s theory of decoding illustrates how some audiences interpret media messages in unforeseen and pluralistic ways. Similarly, Nikki Sullivan’s theory of the “gay gaze” refers to the agency audiences have to read queerness into heteronormative media scenes (2003). And if audiences do not decode media the way producers intended (either because of an active choice or because of the subjectivity of reception), both theorists contend that these interpretations are as valid as any original intentions. I have shown how individuals come to differing yet logic-based conclusions about embodied realness. Sometimes these conclusions are reductive, and sometimes they are markedly queer.

Most feminine women do not have to constantly publicly identify as women because their feminine gender displays are readable markers of embodied sex. Yet Gaga has repeatedly had to publicly identify as a woman because, although she displays her body and persona
in highly feminine ways, she is not always decoded as female-bodied. For instance, a basic Google search yields results such as “Is Lady Gaga a Man? A Woman? A Hermaphrodite?” (David Emery 2009) and “Does Lady Gaga Really Have Man Parts?” (Leslie Gornstein 2009). Several user-generated blogs and social media sites discuss whether Gaga is a “man” or has male physiology. For instance, at ladygagasaman.com, readers are asked to gauge whether Gaga’s face and body connote ontological masculinity (“Gaga and Gossip”). Likewise, Twitter users hashtag video clips and images of Gaga’s body with ladygagasaman. Tweets often include descriptions such as “I promise I saw a penis!!!” (@KingJustinCole, August 25, 2013) or tags such as #Imconfused (@Danileigh, July 23, 2014).

Some scholarship connects this public reception to Gaga’s own varying articulations of her body and sexuality (Mathieu Deflem 2012, 19). Moreover, Gray notes that Stefani Germanotta never truly drops the Gaga persona but rather presents it as both performative and authentic (2012, 8). This is to say, Gaga is not easily located in cisgender or heterosexual matrices and is, at times, a culturally unintelligible figure. I argue that the media so often uses the drag queen tag because it is a seemingly sensible characterization of Gaga’s aesthetic feminine presentations. Yet what user-generated media sites demonstrate is that some publics form their own conclusions about Gaga: namely, that Gaga’s aesthetic feminine presentations belie a male body. And I argue this conclusion is the result of a drag logic process.

This is not the first time the public has arrived at such a conclusion. Remember that Hindle’s male impersonation career tanked after the media declared her to be male. Newspapers used a form of drag discourse to illustrate how “male” Hindle was able to fool the public into thinking she was a woman. And public acceptance of this sentiment is evident in the sharp decline of Hindle’s popularity. I argue that because theatrical gender-bending is so often popularly, canonically, and “culturally associated with crossing sex lines,” drag discourses can become evidence for how a figure’s “real” sex opposes their outward gender presentation (Davisson 2013, 55). Although the public cannot visually access every part of Gaga’s or Hindle’s bodies or read their medical information, they can draw upon terms and ideas associated with drag to decode their bodies.

If Gaga identifies as a “real” woman but many publics form logic-based conclusions that she is “really” a man, then what exactly constitutes realness? Questions about realness have been raised in scholarly work on identities that are both part of the body and also socially constituted. For instance, Robyn Wiegman (1995) reflects on histories of race passing in the US and asks what specific quality of race makes it real: embodiment or popular interpretation? That is, if a Person of Color is visibly read as White, why aren’t they White? Wiegman surmises that race only constitutes a “real” embodied quality of difference if it can be publicly categorized as such. Thus, realness is not necessarily a physical or inborn truth but rather a socially built truth laid over or inlaid into the distinct body. Wiegman refers to the constitution of raced bodies via the public perception and agreement of racial difference as an “economy of visibility” (1995, 4). That is, embodied “truth” is actualized when publics make logic-based conclusions from available public information. And public information about bodies comes from circulating popular knowledges, individual “readings,” and also recurrent discursive characterizations.

Public agreement about what is and is not real is an intrinsic part of the actualization process. As Louis Althusser’s “little theoretical theatre” demonstrates, bodies gain identity though public differentiation (you/me/another), acknowledgment (I am “you”), and response (I react to “hey you there”) (1971, 174). Butler makes the point that individuals can choose
to self-identify, but social meaning is only accomplished when the words that self-name are publicly recognized as aligning with the individual’s body (1993, 228). Marlon Bailey (2011) takes this idea of publicly materialized realness further in his study of queer individuals of Color who participate in the Detroit drag ball scene. Bailey defines realness as any practice (onstage or off) that enables queer people to be perceived as cisgender or heterosexual. For the individuals in Bailey’s study, being “real as hell” is being read and acknowledged as a cisgender man or woman (often evidenced by the ability to safely move through dangerous public spaces) (2011, 374). So realness does not necessarily point to any ontological quality of the body but rather to how people are read and responded to. And the more people that see the same thing, the more that perception becomes a lived reality.

The example of Gaga’s social media characterization demonstrates how representational practices are highly subject not just to media mediation, but to public reception, interpretation, and decoding. Without displacing any individual’s authority to self-identify, I find it critically important to inspect those moments where self-identification and public presentation merge with discursive frameworks and public interpretations. When this drag logic process does not align with the expected or the intended, it can constitute what I am calling a radically queer semiotics of the body.

**Radically queer semiotics**

I believe drag discourses are mostly intended as broadminded, liberal characterizations of variant individuals. Within queer theory, one important goal is to illuminate those bodies and identities that are marginalized or rendered invisible by the dominant culture. These media texts make variant people visible, and the majority of reports I have referenced in this article do so without direct condemnation or degradation. Every time a report mentions Legler’s work or Gaga’s outfits, it combats queer erasure by promoting public awareness of queer people and phenomena. But media texts are not just mirrors of reality; they re-present reality via highly mediated words and ideas. And I argue that the specific words and ideas used to characterize gender variance really do matter: they are not only a primary source of public information, they also have the power to “bring about what they name,” or interpel late the variant body (Butler 1993, 224). Yet what I find most interesting about the cases in this article is that drag speech acts “bring about” the variant body only after going through individualized drag logic reception and decoding processes. Therefore, drag logic should be considered in terms of semiotics, specifically the radically queer meanings of embodied realness it could potentially produce.

The “queer” political issues that dominate contemporary US politics tend to foreground what Cathy J. Cohen calls a “single-oppression framework” (1997, 441). In other words, these political goals reflect an “us” versus “them” division along clear and singular sexual identification lines. And Cohen argues that this presupposes that all those “within” are similarly marginalized. While many queer political issues are important to many people (for example, national marriage for gays and lesbians), they cannot be called radically queer. Cohen clarifies that radically queer acts do not “focus on integration into dominant structures but instead […] transform the basic fabric and hierarchies that allow systems of oppression to persist and operate efficiently” (1997, 437). Mainstream queer activism might help many members of the LGBT community but, in its lack of attention to intersectionality and its engagement with hegemonic institutions, it will
inevitably fail to fight for all who are marginalized by sexual hierarchies, or against all oppressive systems. Cohen’s example of poor Black single mothers, or “welfare queens,” demonstrates how some heterosexual, cisgender women are also marginalized for sexual choices and lifestyles. Thus, a radically queer action aims to break down all such structures that rank and value.

I cannot claim that drag logic is always a radically queer meaning making process, or even that the public figures I discuss have radically queer agendas. On the contrary, when drag logic helps the public to identify variance as non-real play, or as slightly non-standard bi-gender normativity, it does not foster a radically queer notion of embodiment. But drag logic is an open-ended analytic based on, among other things, subjective individual reception of drag discourse. Butler says that “power acts as discourse,” and we might likewise consider how certain discourses act as a form of power (1993, 225). That is to say, certain discourses could be effective in altering hegemonic understandings of embodied realness. I have demonstrated how drag logic is a process capable of ideologically shifting realness away from institutionalized classifications of the body and toward perceptions of the body. When it does this, it is, in fact, a radically queer semiotic.

The ideological meaning making process I have set forth can be analogized to a children’s game of “telephone.” A child communicates something concrete and socially meaningful to the child next to them (via a whisper in the ear). As the message goes down the line, it undergoes a series of translations, mediations, misunderstandings, and, sometimes, intentional deformities. The transformation of that concrete meaning is, in fact, the point of the game; children take joy in their alterations of the original speech act. Sometimes they laugh at how queer the meaning gets. But most important to my analogy is that the phrase each child hears is an original, and is as real to them as the first one uttered by the first child. In each iteration, the phase becomes new but no less authentic. My point is this: when publics consider Gaga to be a man because of their interpretations of her gender expressions, their readings of her body, and their engagement with drag discourses, this affect should perhaps be considered an ideological reality. In other words, what is seen can also be what is authentic. And Gaga’s own engagement with these rumors—for example, her willingness to integrate them into her music video for Telephone—continues to produce queer readings and new meanings of her body. A shift toward affective embodiment and away from structures of ontology and historicity builds up this radically queer form of realness.

Notes

1. See “Amusements” (October 24, 1968; September 16, 1976), “Music Halls” (December 19, 1868), and “Variety Halls” (December 16, 1876) in The New York Clipper; “Stranger than Fiction” (December 27, 1891) in The Sun.
2. I use gender variance to describe embodiments or expressions that do not conform to hegemonic shapes and relations among gender, sex, and sexuality.
3. Some individuals use queer to identify their same-sex sexuality. Without displacing their right to do so, this article employs queer specifically for types of gender, sex, or sexuality that are askew from or at odds with hegemonic (including homonormative) social frameworks.
4. For examples from the general public, see A Drag King Extravaganza (2008).
5. Rupp and Taylor (2003) contradict this particular canonical definition by demonstrating a range of drag queen bodies and practices at the 801 Cabaret.
Acknowledgements

A portion of this essay was presented in the Gender and Media Area of the Popular Culture Association (2014). I wish to thank FMS editor Radha Hegde, my anonymous reviewers, and my project supporters: Ryan Bowles Eagle, Paul Jagodzinski, Rose Elfman, and Maxine Heller.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Meredith Heller is Faculty Lecturer in Women’s and Gender Studies at Northern Arizona University. Her research areas are critical identity studies and queer theory, with specializations in performance, US popular culture, and media. Her book manuscript, What a Drag: (Re)Defining Gender Bending as Discourse and Practice illuminates the limiting nature of drag definitions, and develops an alternate mode of theorizing about gender-bending theatrics. E-mail: Meredith.Heller@nau.edu.

References


Sally, Lynn. 2009. “‘It is the Ugly that is so Beautiful’: Performing the Monster/Beauty Continuum in American Neo-Burlesque.” *Journal of American Drama and Theater* 21 (3): 5–23.


The Sun. 1891. “Stranger than Fiction.” December 27.


