Drag, most simply defined, is the act of performing a gender identity other than one's own. At its core, doing drag involves the manipulation of bodies and identities through performance. Drag has been a fixture in gay and lesbian subcultures since the mid-20th century. Drag has provided a safe space for gender creativity; has offered an outlet for protest against homophobia and heteronormativity; and has been used to raise money and attention for LGBTQ causes and communities, specifically during the AIDS pandemic. This entry discusses the existing research on drag performance, details the major theoretical debates about drag, considers how drag is racialized, and concludes with a description of drag in a global world.

Historically, although as recently as World War II drag was performed by presumably straight men as substitutes for female actors, by the mid-20th century, lesbians and gay men began to adopt drag performance as a method to safely enter public homophobic spaces. Historians have records of effeminate gay men and butch lesbians cross-dressing in public as an attempt to avoid violence when with their partners.

Whereas in the 1960s drag provided a safe public space for sexual minorities, today many drag performers are queer public figures. The two most common types of drag are drag queens and drag kings. Drag queens are gay men who dress and perform as women but do not want to become women or have a woman's body. Drag queens publicly perform femininity for an audience that knows they are male bodied, regardless of how convincingly female they might otherwise appear. Drag kings, somewhat newer in terms of popularity than queens, are women or sometimes trans men who perform masculinities. Drag kings are often more focused on the deconstruction of gender and sexuality than on the impersonation or illusion of presenting as a man. There are some critical gender distinctions in drag performance. Drag queens typically rely on camp, vulgarity, and shock value, while drag kings tend to keep a strong focus on artful protest. Although drag kings and queens are the most popular, drag is exceedingly diverse in that multiple genres of drag have recently gained popularity, such as women performing hyperfemininity, transwoman queens, or bearded drag queens.

Some scholars of gender and sexuality argue that contemporary drag can be seen as a political and social protest that coincides with many of the other goals of gay and lesbian social movements. Drag can potentially disrupt gender and sexual dichotomies because drag performances illuminate the fluidity of gender and sexuality. Femininity, masculinity, and queerness often circulate freely in drag performance settings, and through a parody of gender, drag performance can expose the artificiality of both femininity and masculinity. Thus, when viewed through this lens, drag can be both transgressive and subversive.

Others, however, assert that drag reproduces gender norms by reinscribing traditional hierarchies of gender and sexuality and reifying the dichotomous gender system rather than dismantling or critiquing it. Much of this criticism has been directed at drag queens more than drag kings. As drag queens embody femininity, they further encourage the pursuit of a hyperfemininity rather than multiple femininities.
Others critique drag queens for their ability to rely on their male privilege. Drag queens are in a unique position in that, even as they perform as women, they can still claim a male body and identity, and use their male and cisgender privilege to disassociate from transwomen.

Some argue that drag kinging, more so than queening, contests the idea of a heteronormative gender system through subversive protest. Whereas drag queens are almost always gay men (with the exception of a small, emerging transwomen queen circuit), drag kings are straight women, queer women, cis women, trans men, and masculine-gendered women. Some argue that because of the wider range of gender diversity, drag kings utilize drag performance as a way to critique gender more than drag queens do. In addition, drag kings lack the male privilege of the queens, creating a power dynamic of female bodies disrupting gender rather than male bodies appropriating femininity.

Some scholars have identified patterns within drag and race, suggesting that White drag focuses on camp, Latina drag focuses on the impersonation of artists, and Black drag focuses on dance. Drag performances are also racialized to the extent that White performers frequently adopt and perform Blackness. Some scholars suggest this desire to identify with and rely upon the imagery of blackness is to position oneself as defiant to mainstream culture. However, the practices of racial drag are far less disruptive than the performances of gender and sexuality because White performers most often do these performances. It is far less common for performers of color to be rewarded for pursuing Whiteness. White drag performers may embody Blackness for a desired number, but they can always reclaim their White privilege once off the stage.

Local queer communities across the globe use drag performance for protest and entertainment. Western-style drag has a complex relationship with types of local and traditional drag in that it enforces Western queer identities, fashion, and dance styles while also allowing the local queer communities to affirm their identities within the larger, international gay rights movement. Although Western-influenced drag enables communities to disrupt gender, it has been criticized for identifying with colonial ideas of racial and ethnic oppression.

See also Gender Spectrum; Genderqueer; Transgender Identities

Further Readings

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