



Contemporary drag practices and performers: drag in a changing scene volume 1

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BOOK REVIEW

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Contemporary drag practices and performers: drag in a changing scene volume 1, edited by Mark Edward and Stephen Farrier, London, Methuen Drama, 2020, xxxii + 209 pp., £81.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-3500-8294-6

Contemporary Drag Practices and Performers (2020), the first volume in a two-part series edited by Mark Edward and Stephen Farrier, responds to recent developments in drag culture and discourse following the widespread popularity of American reality television series *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009–) and aims at making space for underrepresented voices in drag studies. Its gambit is simple but effective: to show, first, that drag is not synonymous with or limited to cross-dressing, cis gay male drag queens or what viewers see on *Drag Race* and, second, that drag can and should, for this same reason, be researched from equally diverse perspectives. The reconsideration or broadening of the term *drag* and consequently of drag studies' horizons could in fact be seen as the book's main objective. Although much of the research on drag, especially before the 2010s, has focused on cross-dressing acts and theories of gender, *Contemporary Drag Practices and Performers* presents a selection of artistic and scholarly works that strive to challenge these dominant narratives. Notably, Edward and Farrier dispute the notion that 'to look at drag is to study gender', instead arguing for 'a much-needed turn away from theory' (9), towards an understanding of drag as a protean performance practice.

The volume's fourteen chapters follow no particular order and, as the editors themselves note in the preface, form no coherent whole. Edward and Farrier's introductory Chapter 1, 'Drag: applying foundation and setting the scene', briefly addresses and sums up key issues in current discussions and debates in the field, while the rest of the chapters deal with more specific topics, such as theoretical and practical rethinkings of drag performance and contributors' personal experiences of trans, nonbinary, ethnic and religious identities in relation to performing drag. The decision to forgo themed sections or an apparent narrative thread is ultimately a felicitous one and aptly reflects the editors' wish to replicate the structure one might expect at a drag show – a string of short-form performances that 'cohere because they are presented on the same bill' (xxiv) – and the multiplicity and plurality of voices that the volume offers.

The book's determined resistance to singularity can be seen as a direct response to drag's recent shift 'from underground and counterculture to mainstream culture' (6). As a result of this newfound visibility and interest, the number of drag performers has exploded in the past ten years and with it the questions of whether drag is exclusively the artistic property of cis gay male drag queens, or whether anyone, regardless of assigned sex, gender identity or sexual orientation, can participate in the performance form. Consequently, what forms of artistic expression can be called 'drag' has become the subject of heated discussion among both performers and scholars alike (see, for example, Stokoe 2019). In their bid to challenge these exclusionary definitions and dominant forms of drag performance, Edward and Farrier have committed to presenting a wide selection of performers and artistic practices instead of holding 'one form of drag as a yardstick' (xxiii) for measuring others. Drag kinging and queening, for instance, have not been separated as distinct phenomena in the volume, as has been common in previous research, but are simply regarded as two forms of a wider phenomenon.

Indeed, the book's overarching argument appears to be that all manners of cultural production can, if so willed, be understood and thus studied as drag. One such example is Rosa Fong's discussion of *chinoiserie drag*, the parodic performance of East Asian people, in Chapter 4. Building on Sieg's (2002) concept of *ethnic drag* and Butler's (1990) discussion of drag and gender performativity, Fong examines the performance and performativity of race through an analysis of her documentary film *Deconstructing Zoe* (2016). Working with and through the concept of *chinoiserie drag*, Fong describes how the film's eponymous protagonist is able to author her own identity as an East Asian trans woman by performing 'an essentialized Western image of the Orientalized other' (55). Yet, in applying the term *drag* to a subject matter and context rarely explored in drag studies, Fong's concept is such a radical departure from the discipline's status quo and conventional notions of drag performance that it is likely to compel the reader to question whether or not it really is drag. That the reader may question certain works' inclusion in the volume is, however, by no means a sign of failure or lapse of judgment on the editors' part. On the contrary, it is perfectly in line with the book's objective and one of its main strengths. Edward and Farrier point out that they 'have not insisted that contributors agree about drag' (xxiii). Rather than imposing a fixed meaning, context or form to drag performance, the book invites readers to challenge their own preconceptions: if all these instances can be regarded as drag, then which acts and by whom am I willing to recognize and accept as such?

The significant majority of the book's chapters are not explicitly aimed at such conceptual innovation but examine the phenomenon from more conventional, albeit no less intriguing perspectives. Several contributors offer novel insights on drag performance through their own experiences as performers; Raz Weiner's autoethnographic account of his monodrama *Life and Times of Tilda Death* is one of the volume's truly outstanding contributions. In Chapter 6, 'Of hills and wheels: Tilda Death drags memory', Weiner explores the complicated relationship between a queer performer and their largely uncongenial audience by recounting the time he performed his drag-mockumentary in Beit Halochem, a leisure centre for disabled Israeli army veterans, on Holocaust Memorial Day in 2016. Detailing his own apprehensions before, during and after the performance and the audience's reactions to the mockumentary and its potentially controversial subject matter and material, Weiner demonstrates how sensitive issues such as cultural trauma can be effectively addressed in drag performance. Weiner concludes that drag, as a performance that may confuse the audience in varying and unforeseeable ways, can act as 'a vehicle and an ally to subversive multidirectional interventions in hegemonic discourses of memory' (83). In doing so, he shows how drag always conveys meanings besides and beyond gender or sexuality, making it a truly powerful art form.

Although *Contemporary Drag Practices and Performers* succeeds in making room for new and previously underrepresented perspectives in drag studies, the volume could have benefited from a more critical overall approach. The 'traditional' cross-dressing definition, for instance, remains a premise that, though contested, still cannot be entirely overcome, neither in theory nor in practice. A telling illustration of this tension is that while Nick Cherryman (Chapter 11: 'The tranimal: throwing gender out of drag?') explores the question of whether there can be drag without gender and without the viewer assigning a sex and gender to the performer (be it consciously or unconsciously), the book itself practically opens with the designation of drag queens as 'men in dresses' (xviii) in Mark Ravenhill's foreword. Yet more unfortunate than the offhand reiteration of a problematic definition is the volume's notable lack of engagement with an intersectional framework. While some contributors do consider factors besides gender and sexuality in their analyses, the general understanding among the authors seems to be that drag only involves the (deliberate) performance of gender – as though factors such as race, class and ability only had significance to drag performers as

marginalized individuals rather than as performing *artists*. In Chapter 13, entitled 'Drag publique: the queer spectacle, the emaciated spectator and the public secret', for instance, Allan Taylor does not consider how race, ability and gender all shape queerness and affect his *drag publique*, that is, 'the performance of drag identities and genderqueer interventions in public spaces' (173), the ways in which his more or less unwilling spectators react to these so-called interventions or the sense of shame that the spectators' reactions inflict on him. Instead, Taylor assumes a universal queer subject devoid of differences, as if all queer bodies or 'overt performances of sexuality' (178) would incite the same reaction from the inherently hostile audience that 'the public' is taken to be.

Such oversights and contradictions are, however, not unique to this particular book or any of its individual chapters. Rather, they can be seen more broadly as symptomatic of our era overshadowed by all things *Drag Race*, as both seasoned and novice performers are learning to navigate the rapidly expanding drag industry, while what could be called traditionalist and revisionist factions clash over identity politics. Although the former issue is examined from different perspectives (see, for instance, Chapters 2, 3 and 7 by Joe Parslow, Kalle Westerling and Kayte Stokoe respectively) and touched upon throughout the volume, it is ultimately the latter that defines *Contemporary Drag Practices and Performers*. In refusing to assign a fixed meaning or subject to drag performance, it encourages readers to consider the many possible forms – both present and future – that drag may take. The book offers a nuanced cross-section of drag studies at a watershed moment when drag is increasingly being assimilated into mainstream Western visual and popular culture, and finding new homes in various cultural contexts, media and academic disciplines. As such, it is a valuable contribution to the literature in the field.

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