

## “What We Mean When We Talk About Drag”

Reflection on the 2021-22 Jewish Gender Performance and Drag Working Group

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Over the last eight months, I have been invited to think far outside my own areas of expertise, both in terms of content and methodology. Fellow group members challenged me to think more theoretically, which, as a historian currently working on dress and material culture, I am admittedly sometimes reluctant to do. The six of us unpacked taken-for-granted terms like gender, performance, queerness, woman, Blackness, trans-ness, and Jewishness. We considered the utility, histories, and consequences of these often politically-loaded ideas. Along the way, I read about homo-nationalism in Israel, crypto-Judaism in Spain, and fashion designers, poets, memoirists, and performers with whom I was utterly unfamiliar.

However, as I reflect back on our time together, the notion that continues to beat the loudest in my brain is *drag*. In my own work, I have written about drag in a very specific context, the American vaudeville stage in the early twentieth century. At this particular time and space, headlining artists fashioned themselves professional female and male “impersonators.” But this working group has encouraged me to interrogate what we *mean* when we talk about drag across many contexts. It has also prompted me to rethink across the ways we can productively examine drag, and what kind of cultural, social, and political work it does in different spaces and times for myriad performers and audiences. In particular, we asked ourselves how drag has been coupled with queerness and how it has intersected with Jewishness and Blackness. Clearly, a singular focus on drag risks ignoring important intersections around class, race, religion, and sexuality and the ways in which drag is sometimes as much or more about performing these identities as it is about gender.

In pouring over works by Marjorie Garber, Toril Moi, Eve Sedgwick, Jack Halberstam, and Esther Newton, we parsed through multiple theories and distinctive types of drag performances. We screened an independent short film called *Make Me a King* (2021), about a young Jewish drag king named Ari. And we even had the pleasure of speaking with the writer, director, and drag consultant who worked on the film, who cheekily referred to herself as a “gender clown.”

We also discussed contemporary performers and I am particularly grateful to the group for introducing me to Vaginal Davis, a Latinx, Jewish, Black performer who became famous in the 1980s and whose moniker was inspired by the Black Power politics of Angela Davis. José Esteban Muñoz’ article, “The White to Be Angry,” described Davis’s provocative performances as “terrorist drag,” which offered a “send-up of masculinity and white supremacy.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Davis used drag to perform “the nation’s internal terrors around race, gender, and sexuality.”<sup>2</sup>

This approach is shaping how I conceptualize gender presentation and dress in my current book project, a social, cultural, and political history of the purse in America. I am currently at work on a chapter that examines how gay men, lesbians, and people who identified as “TVs” or “cross-dressers” used purses to both “pass” and unapologetically announce their identities in the 1960s through the 1980s.

What has emerged quite clearly from all these discussions is that there is no (and has likely never been) a stable meaning of the term “drag.” Even in one particular place and time, two performers likely understood their work very differently, and their audiences applied their own understandings to these performances as well. Indeed, it is a thorny task for anthropologists, literary scholars, ethnographers, historians, and scholars of performance and popular culture studies to analyze the various phenomena to which the appellation “drag” has been attached. As Betty Hillman asked of late 1960s America, for example, “was drag a cultural marker of gay community, to be used as a ‘caricature’ at private events or in stage productions? Or was drag something else – a marker of ‘femininity’ and a sign of the inherent gender deviance of homosexuals?”<sup>3</sup> More likely, its meaning was always in motion, even in 1960s America.



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Of the many theoretical approaches we encountered, Clare Sears' approach to "trans-ing analysis" offered me space for interpreting a wide range of practices and performances we might (or might not) call drag. In her book *Arresting Dress*, Sears offers "a new interpretative approach that can reinvigorate and open up cross-dressing histories, without embracing every cross-dressing trace as indicative of a lesbian, gay, or transgender past."<sup>4</sup> Though the term 'cross-dressing' certainly comes with its own ambiguity and baggage, a broad approach to fluid "sartorial systems" has the virtue of linking subjects that are typically separated – from stage and street performers, gay men, lesbians, feminist dress reformers, and transgender folk.<sup>5</sup>

As Esther Newton has argued, drag has functioned as "a strategy for a situation," a means through which individuals and communities have negotiated private and public space.<sup>6</sup> Examining drag ultimately pushes us to examine the ways in which "boundaries are produced, policed, resisted, and deployed."<sup>7</sup> Analyzing drag on its own terms necessitates considering the multiple nuances of drag on the stage, the television, the home, the criminal justice system, the theater, the night club, and the street. Ultimately, these discussions have pushed me to "trouble" my understanding of drag in fresh ways. I am deeply grateful for having been a part of this invigorating group and very much look forward to maintaining the relationships I have cultivated. Likewise, I am eager to apply these insights to my own research.

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<sup>1</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, "The White to Be Angry: Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag," *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997), 87.

<sup>2</sup> Muñoz, 91.

<sup>3</sup> Betty Hillman, "'The Most Revolutionary Act a Homosexual Can Engage In: ' Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972,'" *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 20, no. 1 (2011), 164.

<sup>4</sup> Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Crossdressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth Century San Francisco* (Duke University Press, 2014), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Sears, 101.

<sup>6</sup> Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1979) 105, quoting Burke.

<sup>7</sup> Sears, 8.

