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**A look at ‘fishy drag’ and androgynous fashion: Exploring the border spaces beyond gender-normative deviance for the straight, cisgendered woman**

**Abstract**

This article seeks to re-explore and critique the current trend of androgyny in fashion and popular culture and the potential it may hold for gender deviant dress and politics. In order to do this, it will discuss the way in which a popular version of male drag has monopolized a vision of gender subversion that has marginalized ‘straight’ cisgendered women’s transgressive challenge to gender norms. Although not misogynistic in itself, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (Logo 2009-2017) brings to the surface the misogyny inherent in femininity – the performance underscores deeper asymmetrical power imbalances which are embedded in women’s daily lives. Recent unisex fashion collections with their subsequent campaigns have sought to address this imbalance; however, this is not a problem with an easy fix. This article looks at the way in which particular performers such as Grace Jones and Harnaam Kaur have ad(dressed) their gender resistance without camouflaging and thus losing sight of a feminist history of gender inequality which still strongly resonates.

**Keywords**

drag

androgyny

cisgender

straight women

gender-deviance

misogyny

## **Introduction**

It has become fashionable to challenge gender binaries. The popularization of drag, of terms such as ‘gender fluid’ and the commodification of unisex or androgynous clothing, demonstrate this. There are now 58+ gender options on Facebook. Younger generations are more informed about the complexities of gender, sex and sexuality than ever before and are using clothes as part of their protest. However, there is a danger that the current trends of drag and androgyny are celebrated unwittingly. For these methodologies of gender-normative deviance have been traversed before and continue to marginalize the straight, cisgendered woman. Where is she within this discourse, and can she hold her own agency?

This article seeks to re-explore and critique the methodologies of drag and androgyny as means of gender-normative dissonance, given their current popularity in fashion. It will discuss this trend in relation to a specific oversaturated identity – the ‘straight’ biologically-born woman. It will contend that the mainstreaming of male drag has monopolized a vision of gender subversion that has overshadowed biologically-born women’s heterosexual resistance. It will also discuss the way in which this has come about. The television show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race (RPDR)*, for example, arguably does this by putting a particular subversive ‘queer’ male performance of female bodies and femininity centre stage. Within this parodic performance, a saturated and privileged ideal of cisgendered visibility becomes a vehicle for performing marginalized identities otherwise. However, as Katie R. Horowitz (2013) argues in ‘The trouble with “queerness”’, male drag performers focus predominantly

on the glitz of celebrity and a socio-economic privilege of white femininity and heteronormative female subjectivity in order to reflect and perform their own material conditions as marginalized gay, or queer, men. The Drag Queen's subversion of gender, sexuality, class and race is thus contingent on their own set of economic and social determinants and disadvantages.

Male-to-female drag creates a distance yet also an ironic affiliation between 'straight' biologically-born women and gay men. It highlights the parodic, subversive and indeed entertaining qualities of the masquerade of femininity; however, it does so, we want to argue, by reappropriating heteronormative and heterosexist misogyny as a frame for the flamboyantly defiant retort of its own group's interests.

Another method of deviance is androgynous or unisex clothing. Through three case studies, this article will explore and problematize commodified unisex fashion. These case studies demonstrate that unisex clothing is not always as visually exciting as their potential for politics of gender-deviance might suggest, and nor do their marketing campaigns truly seek to create a space for a third sex. Similarly, the unisex trend is problematic for the cisgendered woman's deviance, as she is, as in drag, taken for granted and marginalized.

A 'straight' female scholar, who desires to assert her own resistance and indeed her solidarity with queer resistance, yet also believes it important and necessary to challenge such stereotypical and limiting heteronormative gender assumptions, can find herself cast into a difficult position. Positioned as already having too much privilege, therefore as not being marginalized, not being disadvantaged, such a female scholar can find herself perceived as at the centre of normalcy, not deviant at all, and thus without any legitimate claim to resistance or critique. If such female scholars recognize themselves in the 'queer' performances they write about and want to endorse the political resistance and assertions that these present, what are they to do?

It is clear that some feel a guilty need to qualify their own identities. Postscripts or defensive footnotes have been included in essays as an attempt to disarm this accusation, which undermines any claim to resistance by white or cisidentified women and their self-recognition as also not 'normal'. Halla Beloff (2001), in her essay on 'Lesbian masks', for instance, wrote at the end of her argument: 'I must admit that I am a straight woman [...] I have wanted to emphasize my sameness not my difference, which does not come in a spirit of colonising nor romanticizing, but comes of solidarity, because I recognize myself in "others"' (Beloff 2001: 71). Similarly, in a recent article which explored 'trans-' visibilities by way of black, lesbian and transsexual Montreal-based artists, the authors Marie-Claude G. Olivier and Audrey Laurin felt the need to disclose their identity as a side note:

[w]e want to mention that we are both white ciswomen. While transwomen and non-white individuals are always marked as the 'other', we want to recognize that white cisgender identity is a political identity, and, in this case, a privileged one. (Olivier and Laurin 2016: 111)

Cisgender is a term that refers to people who feel their gender identity matches their sex as assigned at birth. This article would like to explore a particular idea of 'queerness' in relation to the material conditions and consequences of living in a heterosexual, biologically-born female's body. This is not a side note but is our focus as we consider the current trend and interest in drag and androgynous fashion. We want to understand what this specific 'deviance' might mean. This article would therefore like to open up new ways of reading gender-normative deviant dress which allow for other resistant female identities to emerge.

### **'Fish/Fishing' (RPDR)**

We have recently seen a rise in the celebration of a third gender coming from within fashion that articulates a reaction or response to gender binaries. In popular culture, television shows

such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* are a visible example of this, serving to popularize gender deviation, but also, we maintain, needing a deeper interrogation to really evaluate its agency for women. At a superficial level, the show uses fashion, make-up and performance to problematize heteronormative gender constructs in a humorous and accessible way; this seemingly celebrates a third gender. However, mainstream presentations of drag highlight still-present misogynist and asymmetrical notions of 'woman', which are dominated by men and continue to bar women's own resistance.

*RPDR* premiered on Feb 2<sup>nd</sup> 2009 on Logo TV in the US; Season 9 began 24<sup>th</sup> March 2017 on VH1. It is an exuberant parody of *America's Next Top Model* contest but with Drag Queens – who are predominantly of black, Hispanic or Latino American origins and gay. Contestants are given tasks such as creating their own DIY costumes out of junk, choreographing and styling their own girl band, or transforming themselves, dolls or veteran gay men into Drag Queens. At the end of each show, contestants undertake a catwalk to impress the panel of celebrity judges and one is eliminated after a lip-sync battle – 'sing for your life'. This popular show has forwarded a challenge to restrictive ways of viewing gender and sexuality through dress and has legitimized as mainstream an important intersectional defiance.

However, notions of 'feminine' dress and the flamboyant celebration of key terms within the Drag Queen arena, such as 'bitchy', 'fishy' and 'cunty', are also problematic from a feminist perspective. To be 'fishy' or 'serve fish' is a compliment reserved for those Drag Queens who have 'passed' as a beautiful, biological woman. The term is, of course, also a derogatory informal adjective used to describe the smell of a woman's vagina. For this reason, the term can feel incendiary and insulting to women when appropriated within drag discourse. The gender deviance performed in *RPDR* – albeit playful and humorous – ultimately relies on a perpetuation of misogynist stereotypes.

*RPDR*'s gender deviance is complex – it is an incisive parody but also a camp celebration of *America's Next Top Model*. It idolizes a particular 'successful' heteronormative femininity, thus perpetuating and reiterating limiting stereotypes, and yet it also imagines these identities otherwise by inserting other male, gay, black or Hispanic, socially and economically excluded bodies into this framework. 'Passing' as a beautiful biological woman is the aim of the contest.

Figure 1: Manilla Luzon, who featured in Season 3 of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, photographed at the Nashville 'Queens for the Cure' drag show 2017 by Patrick Finnegan on Flickr. Uploaded 22 March 2017. Creative Commons licence (CC BY 2.0).

If we think through Judith Butler's ideas of performativity, then the contest on this show is still reliant on the enactment of culturally gendered identities; one could therefore argue that RuPaul's drag deviance sits within a traditional understanding of gender. (RuPaul's full name is RuPaul Andre Charles. He rose to fame as a drag queen, recording artist and later became the first male model for MAC Cosmetics. He is a recognised television personality, the host and main judge of *RPDR*). Indeed, the contestants always appear dressed as men before the drag tasks take place, reasserting their transition, and RuPaul's own regular appearance as a 'man' in a suit allows for the audience to feel assured of his standing as a 'real' man who is dressing up as a woman for the purpose of entertainment. In one episode, when this 'real' man, workroom Ru, is parodied by the contestant 'Milk', some of the judges are insulted, declaring this drag not 'drag', which underscores the clearly expected rules of the game (Season 6, Episode 5).

When in drag the male-sexed body is camouflaged – the penis is 'tucked' down with tape or held between the thighs; if the sex is 'unveiled', then the contestant is exposed to

comic, humiliating or vulgar effect. For example, RuPaul exclaimed with a wry smile in regard to one contestant whose ‘tuck’ was not discreet enough that he had never before seen such a ‘beautiful woman’ with such a ‘big cock’ (Season 1, Episode 3). This comment about its unwieldy size continued into the next episode as an ongoing problem – ‘still a lot of snakes’. Similarly, the judges criticized the contestant ‘Nina Flowers’ when her costume revealed too much of her manly chest and arms, which ‘gives away the man’ (Season 1, Episode 4). However, the reference to a large penis on a beautiful woman does radically challenge and destabilize gender-sex-sexuality assumptions and opens the possibility of gender being reimagined. Discussing the shocking disclosure of the penis in the film *The Crying Game* (1992: Dir. Neil Jordan), van Lenning et al. (2001) argue that even with this unveiling, ‘the feminine appearance’ continues to be ‘fully respected’ and not a figure of fun, unlike traditional Hollywood transvestite plots such as *Tootsie* (1982: Dir. Sydney Pollack) and *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993: Dir. Chris Columbus) (2001: 89–90). For van Lenning et al. (2001), humour and notions of the grotesque have been used within the Hollywood canon to defuse and thus sanitize any potential subversion. The more traditional plotlines develop expectantly to the climax – ‘the coming out’, reveal or abandonment of disguise – which clearly resolves any apparent gendered confusion and thus confrontation.

However, the subversion in *RPDR* comes sharply dressed in wit but never pretends to be safe. It is both popular and radical because it deals with very knowable mainstream aspects of the feminine masquerade. While we might understand this with reference to Riviere’s (1929) ‘Womanliness as a masquerade’, in which the cisgendered woman performs femininity to appease and transgress the borders of patriarchy, *RPDR* demonstrates a more obvious play with femininity, acting out stereotypes of the ‘housewife’ or embracing the perceived glamour and theatricality of women like Cher or Joan Collins. This is combined with quite dangerous sexualities; deviantly gendered bodies (for instance, by Season 5 there



is a transgender woman contestant – ‘Monica Beverley Hill’); and pointed politics through HIV and AIDS awareness. The *Drag Race* performs a different conception of an embodied performance of being a feminine ‘woman’ in a male-born body. It does this by bringing social and cultural stereotypes and perceptions about the female body and about femininity as an interior experience into both the various characters or personas enacted in the show and in comments from judges. Words that are commonly used derogatively or as expletives about women are translated into terms of endearment: for instance – ‘C.U.N.T.’ (Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent) and B.I.T.C.H. (Being in Total Control of Herself). Thus, cultural appropriation becomes a way of distancing these ‘bitches’ over here from those ‘bitches’ over there. *RPDR* is therefore also a parody of the policing of women by women and the stigma of failing femininity or indeed losing what is coveted (Tseelon 1995: 88). Women are pitted against each other and we see this echoing in childhood tales – for instance, stepmother against stepdaughter in *Snow White* (Akass and McCabe 2004: 178–79). And this subsequently plays itself out by way of insecurity, bitchiness and rivalry between women, as very clearly dealt with in the popular mainstream film *Mean Girls* (2004: Dir. Mark Waters).

RuPaul’s catchphrases that kick-start the contest and tasks each week – ‘Let the best woman win’ and ‘Don’t fuck it up’ – grow out of this female culture. However, the use of particular terminology by male drag is linked into the criteria or judgements operated within drag culture regarding participants’ representations of ‘womanliness’ and the ‘authenticity’ of their performance. It is part of the ‘catty’ pecking order where the girls ‘throw shade’ on each other within their own staging of man-to-woman drag in this ‘beauty’ contest.

The contestants in *RPDR* often model themselves on women who are inspirational to them, such as black celebrity host Oprah Winfrey or the model Tyra Banks. Yet there are other favoured role models that might well appear problematical or even uninspiring to many

straight women; for instance, Courtney Love or Liza Minnelli. What is it about these women that appeals? Perhaps it is precisely because of their vulnerability and their apparent failure to achieve the happy ending that successful femininity is 'supposed' to guarantee. Some of these favourite models themselves appear to have let their own masks slip, sometimes tragically, revealing heterosexual love trauma, loss, addiction and the pathos of becoming, in some instances, caricatures of what successful womanhood is supposed to be. The masquerade or mask of womanliness donned by the drag acts can also therefore register the false promise of happiness offered by fairy tales of the 'straight' heterosexual world, as played out in the stories of such celebrity victims. The drag performances link into the drag performer's own situation as outsider with their own need for love and recognition. This is supported at the end of each show by RuPaul's mantra – 'If you can't love yourself, then how the hell you gonna love somebody else'. This is a drag version that uses the aggression inherent in misogynistic language that is aimed at women and the violent stigma inherent in the feminine masquerade as a weapon to fire back in relation to its own group's parallel but different inequalities such as homophobia, racism and HIV and AIDS intolerance.

*RPDR* is therefore not misogynist and drag is not misogyny. One could say that this embodied stylization of 'womanhood' is not about women at all – it is, on the whole, about gay men's own intersectional subversion of gender-sex-sexuality assumptions, hierarchies and privileges, as well as their own life-affirming performance in the face of HIV and AIDS. However, what male drag does demonstrate is that even within subversive discourse the performance of femininity cannot help but reveal its own failure in relation to gender and sex resistance, for it preserves within itself traces of misogyny.

### **'Drag Kinging'**

What are the options, then, for the cisgendered woman to deviate from the suffocating

demands of rigid binary dress norms? We have a legacy of cultural icons and artists who have offered us some alternatives in relation to drag kinging. These are not limited to but include a spectrum of women – straight, lesbian, queer and genderfluid – who have used traditional male dress to denote their own sociological and cultural subversion, from Frida Kahlo to Hannah Gluck, Claude Cahun, Patti Smith and Lady Gaga. However, we could argue that drag kinging equally perpetuates notions of gendered dress, much like some of the contestants on *RPDR*.

A Drag King is a performer who makes masculinity into his or her act (yes, there can be male Drag Kings). The Drag King may make costume into the whole performance, or s/he may lip sync or play air guitar or tell crude jokes about ‘girlies’ and ‘homos.’ S/he often sports facial hair: sideburns, moustaches or even a goatee and s/he’ll wear slick-backed hair or a pompadour or a short back-and-sides or some kind of hat. (Halberstam and Del LaGrace 1999: 36).

Drag kinging has since become popularized, or at least more, visible and thus slightly less taboo. In 1995, London hosted its first Drag King competition. From a feminist perspective, deliberately masquerading as a man is an inherently critical act. As Tseëlon argues, masquerade ‘calls attention to such fundamental issues as the nature of identity, the truth of identity, the stability of identity categories and the relationship between the supposed identity and its outward manifestations (or essence and appearance)’ (2001: 3). Drag acts and competitions are largely staged among the queer community. While they are a source of entertainment, they are also, as we have argued, a means of disrupting gender. What is problematic about the Drag King, however, is that it perpetuates myths of masculinity in the same way that *RPDR* does with femininity. Competitions might involve categories such as ‘YMCA construction worker’ or ‘Hispanic Soul Daddy’, for example, much like the stereotyping tropes of the ‘Banjee Girl’ in *RPDR*. The Drag King category of ‘sissy boy’, for

example, complicates the predominantly butch/male drag performance but, while we must not forget that drag competitions are also about having fun, there is room for more nuanced acts that address the complex and undefinable nature of gender, as opposed to creating more categories or boundaries.

Female celebrities such as Demi Moore and Natalie Portman have since appeared in drag, sporting facial hair for mainstream publications, and we have seen a rise in women embodying masculinity – Playgirls with ‘dicks’. More often than not, however, these acts are superficial media stunts or they conform to sexualized ideas of women with penis envy. The masculinity supposedly portrayed in these ‘acceptable’ media images is considered ‘palatable’, deliberately superficial and not too jarring, least of all really subversive. More shocking, perhaps, was the genuine growth of bodily hair by actress Julia Roberts, photographed in 1999, presented as a ‘true life’ phenomenon.

Throughout the twenty-first century, the hairless body has come to connote perfected femininity, yet, as Anneke Smelik argues, it simultaneously betrays a cultural (and patriarchal) fear of adult female sexuality (Smelik 2015: 233). So, while Drag Kings have been featured in mainstream popular culture, and there is certainly a historical legacy of representations of women in male attire, the Drag King is still largely met with fear, disgust or confusion in comparison to the humour and warmth offered to the Drag Queen. As such, the Drag Queen, or queer male, is still able to dress with more agency than the cisgendered woman.

Figure 2: Lady Gaga at the GMA (Good Morning America) Concert 2011, New York, by TJ Sengel on Flickr. Uploaded 27 May 2011. Creative Commons licence (CC BY 2.0).

In light of this, perhaps it is not ‘male’ fashion that the gender-deviant woman should

be appropriating. A contemporary example we might analyse for her elaborate use of dress is Lady Gaga. From adorning herself with several Kermit the Frogs to clothing herself in meat, Lady Gaga's own dress, or performance art, could be read as an employment of the grotesque as defined by Bakhtin. Her 'meat dress' was visceral and a reminder of the common body as matter: 'something universal, representing all the people' (Bakhtin 1984: 19). Bakhtin conceives of the grotesque and the carnival as ways of puncturing authoritarian structures. Perhaps we can think of Gaga as the clown or jester, a central role in the subversive carnival; so outlandish might her fashion-sculptures be considered that they detract from gender altogether. Indeed, faced with the problem of merely perpetuating gender norms through the use of 'drag', Joshua Williams presents 'transspecies drag' as an alternate solution. 'Transspecies drag is the performative face of simian feminism, the practice by which women artists test the limits imposed on their political selves by moving 'crabwise' across categories of gender, race and species' (2016: 70). He suggests that for feminists to get 'around' the problematics of drag we might first move sideways (Williams uses the animal pun of the crab) by adopting the dress of an alternate species rather than gender, before moving 'forward'.

Gaga's Kermit the Frogs costume is thus far more than comedy – not only does she wear another animal, it is a fictional male one. Her deviance is to question fashion, beauty and gender. However, while dressing as an animal might be a provocative statement and a useful tool for performance artists, it is not an everyday practical solution for the layperson. Gaga's androgynous appeal is undeniably a large part of her success and continues to attract more 'Monsters', the term she uses for her fans. Ironically, her least imaginative attempt to subvert gender norms was her 2011 Drag King performance as Jo Calderone at the MTV Video Music Awards, where she embodied stereotypical male traits and physiology, from quiffed hair and sideburns to a blazer and holding poses and a gait that would imply a large

penis.

The problem with some of these much celebrated subversive icons is that they have been almost fetishized – desired or worshiped, sometimes sexually, for their difference – further marginalizing them from the ‘norm’. What makes their deviance stand out has remained relatively unique and thus Other. For example, while artists like Kahlo or Cahun have been posthumously embraced, they remain a part of the subaltern – social outsiders – unable to speak for themselves (Spivak 1988). Similarly, while Lady Gaga is considered a mainstream icon of popular culture, her use of the grotesque renders her almost monstrous, as celebrated by her ‘monsters’, her exuberant performances dismissed as flamboyant and as just that – a performance. What cisgendered women need, therefore, in order to challenge heteronormative dress, is a line of clothing that sits somewhere in between the ‘masculine’ Drag King and the exaggerated performances reserved for pop-music arenas. We need a lifestyle change. It is partly this call which has motivated the turn towards current trends in unisex fashion and androgynous styles. These are attractive solutions precisely because they visually eliminate the unequal status attributed to a female, sexed body, which has become ingrained within its symbolic presentation of the feminine.

### **Unisex fashion trends: Commodifying safe androgyny**

A cultural turn towards this desire to visually eliminate gendered difference is commodified in recent contemporary unisex fashion trends with Selfridges’s *Agender* collection; Rad Hourani’s *Unisex* range; and Diesel’s 2015 gender-neutral advert. How though can we conceive of and read unisex clothing, androgyny and dress beyond binaries in new ways when these articulations only result, as Francette Pacteau argues, in the inevitable unveiling of difference? To quote Pacteau on the androgyne: ‘[i]t can only exist in the shadow area of the image; once unveiled, once we throw a light on it, it becomes a woman or man’ (Pacteau

1986: 78)

Rick Owen's *Sphinx* show in 2015 also emerged from the same desire to visualize new ways of imaging fashion beyond binaries by provocatively sending 'feminine'-looking men down the catwalk whilst displaying their penises. The male models were feminized in the way that their bodies were presented as passive and vulnerable. The unveiling of a sexed yet feminine man on the runway may have revealed an anatomical difference but, as Alison Bancroft argues, this did not succeed in moving fashion beyond binaries. Regardless of how many male bodies and penises you send down the runway, fashion will automatically default to the feminine, for the culture of fashion always feminizes the object of its desiring gaze (Bancroft 2016: 2). Historically, the submissive position of being looked at has been female. Fashion does not operate in a vacuum. The show provoked a strong reaction – not simply because the penis is rarely seen, whereas the sight of a naked female body on the runway is taken for granted – but because to display the male body in such a feminized manner is to take a step down in terms of power hierarchies. It did not dislodge male privilege but cemented the asymmetrical material realities of living in a male- or a female-sexed body. This display was seen as ridiculous, funny and silly, with Owens himself stating afterwards that it was 'puerile' (Bancroft 2016: 20). Giving the male body the same submissive status as a female body was to undermine or at least highlight in quite a startling manner its privilege. How therefore can fashion move beyond this impasse to allow the sexed body the validity to express a full range of gender attributes and positioning? Do current unisex fashion brands create a space for women to deviate from rigid, normative, gendered presumptions?

Selfridges's *Agender* fashion line claims gender neutrality as its concept – 'fashion without definition'. The promotional film 'He, She, Me' (2015) is described by Kathryn Ferguson (co-director with Alex Turvey) as 'a subtle push and pull between masculinity and femininity', with the film coming 'at a time when important conversations about gender

fluidity and non-binary ways of being are finally getting a lot of attention'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the film, campaign and collection situate themselves firmly within a burgeoning move towards openness as regards transsexual and transgender rights and visibility. The years 2015 and 2016 in particular saw an explosive interest, from within both popular culture and academia, in all ideas relating to 'trans-' 'androgyny' and unisex (for instance, the fascination with Caitlyn Jenner, the press accounts of transphobia in prisons and hospitals, *The Danish Girl* [2015: Dir. Tom Hooper], Jo B. Paoletti's *Sex and Unisex* [2015] and the *On Trans/Performance* [2016, 21: 5] edition of *Performance Research* edited by Amelia Jones). Also noticeable at this time was the proliferation of young male fashion students at Central Saint Martins in London (a leading global fashion brand in itself), fashioning themselves in dresses and skirts.

The *Agender* campaign situated itself therefore within a clear desire for change. The promotional film – 'He, She, Me' – images a wide spectrum of body types and gendered/queer variations as the lead transgender character moves from room to room dancing with and around these differently gendered bodies to a soundtrack written by Devonte Hynes and Neneh Cherry. Although a valiant effort has been put into choreographing an inclusive array of fashioned identities and non-normative looks, what the film ends up doing is fetishizing the subaltern in much the same way as was discussed in relation to Lady Gaga's 'monstrosity'. This is a tableau which features queer identities and taut muscular male bodies but offers up a limited palette for the cisgendered woman. The film ends up emphasizing non-normative difference rather than agendered non-difference. These are 'the unwanted' of patriarchal norms – which include a disabled woman, an old woman, a large woman, a lesbian 'femme' and the queer, fetishized and trans-body. By revealing what is usually culturally hidden or undesired – the excess, the grotesque, the debauched or strange – the film only emphasizes and reiterates their outsider status as non-



normative 'Other'.

From a feminist perspective, we already understand the problems of creating an alternative or parallel *herstory*. For example, in the art world, the ambition to reinstate the visibility of women artists initially resulted in a series of decontextualized and gendered monographs and encyclopaedias: '[i]n the attempt to make art history take notice of women artists, we have submerged them once again in a slightly reformed but still traditional notion of history' (Parker and Pollock 1981: 45). This separation or highlighting of 'woman' only sets her further apart. It also fails to critique the infrastructures that defined women as such, because it employs the same language and historical methodologies that once wrote women out of history. This is a principle we can apply to any minority.

A different approach is demonstrated in the *Unisex* range by Rad Hourani,<sup>2</sup> which is a richly executed and thoughtful collaboration of photography, staging and design. This imagery hints towards a promise of androgyny; however, the binaries still remain intact. There are masculine dioramas equating to the public domain with models of both sexes dressed in sharply tailored suits and concomitant attitude. In these images the young female models sit in traditional male poses with legs open and muscles protruding. The garments are exquisitely tailored in blacks and greys, with the models set against windows looking out towards urban backdrops. And then there are feminine dioramas equating to the private world of emotion and passivity, where young male and female models recline in domestic, windowless backdrops. Both sexes are draped in soft white lines, arms wrapped around each other, with ethereal long-haired beauty foregrounded. However, although these images push towards immersing both sexes in both genders they are not challenging, for they still reiterate the cultural significance of each binary code. The imagery continues to naturalize the material realities of gendered difference and therefore the sexed, embodied, sociopolitical implications of that inequality for the female or male citizen.

Both the *Agender* and *Unisex* campaigns set about creating aesthetic sartorial solutions to the social and cultural problems presented by gendered difference. But they also hit upon the same problem, a problem that has been consistently associated with androgyny. The desire to harness both male ‘andro’ and female ‘gyne’ powers was put forward by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) as a way for women to widen their scope for ‘being’. To this end, Carolyn G. Heilbrun in her 1973 text, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, held Woolf up as an icon for her own age in its push for a freer androgynous imagination. However, Woolf’s stance on androgyny has been criticized – her aesthetics of empowerment seen by some to represent a ‘male-humanist concept of an essential human identity’ (Moi 1985: 9), which was predicated on the repression of the female body (Rado 1997: 150). In a focused discussion of Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), Lisa Rado argued that there is ‘an elaborate series of veils which serve to distract and deflect our attention from Orlando’s biological sex in order to preserve his/her androgynous subject-position from the imposition of patriarchal norms’ (Rado 1997: 153).

The push to ‘be’ more fully a woman or a man beyond limited sex roles through gender play is indeed undermined when one’s sex is revealed. For that sexed body is situated within a patriarchal culture which insists on imposing heteronormative hierarchies, binaries and inequalities of status on that body, regardless of what that particular subject desires. Unisex fashions cover up the sexed body in order to strengthen the assertion of its androgyny, but its androgynous aesthetic is steeped in masculinist systems which reiterate heteronormative binary rules. The extent to which androgynously spirited expression is undermined or indeed reappropriated reveals a certain dread that androgyny may contaminate safe, assured heteronormative masculinity or femininity for the cisgendered woman and man. ‘Gender-bending’ fears are averted, suppressed or depoliticized in fashion imagery by either maintaining feminine sex appeal (an example being the iconic fashion image of Natalie

Portman in a suit with her hair slicked back, accessorized with a moustache, that appeared on the Jan/Feb 2008 cover of *Flash Art*) or by ridiculing, humiliating and stressing the ‘funniness’ of transvestite behaviour for men. All of this indicates that Mary Ann Doane’s oft-quoted point from 1982 still holds true in some quarters: ‘[m]ale transvestitism is an occasion for laughter; female transvestitism only another occasion for desire’ (Doane 1982: 81)

Similarly, the threat to heterosexual norms is averted in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as the idea of being ‘gay’ is constantly referred to (although ‘drag’ is not necessarily synonymous with ‘gay’). Male muscular models often appear on the show, with RuPaul and the contestants making the size of the penis an exciting point of reference. However, as well as assuaging the fear of ‘drag’ being linked to heterosexual men, the persistent reference to the ‘tuck’ is the assurance for a mainstream audience that this is a man in drag and he will return to masculinity after the show. Drag kinging, because of the imposition of patriarchal norms on a female body, is possibly more threatening to the status quo – especially if the performers are not lesbian themselves. Historically, women who have rebelliously cross-dressed, such as Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich (adding to those discussed above), have also been assertively assigned a lesbian identity as exotic ‘Other’ in film and popular cultural histories, distancing this subversive sartorial behaviour from their heterosexual counterparts. This therefore neutralizes or directs attention away from the feasibility that heterosexual women may also offer up radical alternative gestures.

The apolitical aesthetic of androgyny – its camp potential – is not a threat, but the embodied material application of this androgynous desire – its political potential – is dangerous. This moves the discussion on to the third example of the unisex fashion trend – Diesel’s *Gender Neutral* advert,<sup>3</sup> which presents another aspect of the problems that have arisen in current unisex trends. Diesel’s *Gender Neutral* advertisement images a young male

and female model holding onto each other and staring directly into the camera – hair shorn short, wearing the same jeans and khaki-styled jumpers and sporting nude make-up. There is a catchphrase to the side which reads ‘this ad is gender neutral’. However, this uniformity betrays its purpose as the khaki styling is modelled on a predominantly male military form of camouflage. Therefore the ‘neutrality’ of this advert needs to be explored further.

Jo Paoletti has pointed out in *Sex and Unisex* (2015: 6) that for the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, “‘unisex’ meant more masculine clothing for girls and women. Attempts to feminize men’s appearance turned out to be particularly short-lived’. Unisex clothing was appealing for women during this brief time because, as Joan K. Peters argues, ‘gender blending was twinned with sexual equality’ (Peters 2004: 67). This feminist excitement in the political potential and idyll of androgyny and unisex soon faded with the onset of economic austerity, when high inflation and high unemployment made the symbolic impetus for social change within unisex fashions look dated. The actual material economic and social realities increased the working day for men and left women with all the home- and child-care as well as a 50+ hours job. Women therefore had a choice between the male role of work or adding this role on top of their traditional female role as housewife/mother. Unisex ideals were therefore shown to be a political illusion. To camouflage woman under masculinity was not to become equally free but actually masked real material inequality via an illusion of equal non-difference.

Sybil Goldfinger (2011; 96), CEO of feminist fashion brand Comme Il Faut, has argued that in considering gender subversion in fashion one needs to take into account both the ‘symbolic’ and the material ‘pragmatic’ realities. Her company’s 2010 campaign, which sought to challenge gender binaries by way of androgyny, failed both in terms of its subversion and its appeal, because the advertisement featuring masculine female models and feminine male models alienated their target audience who felt that this did not speak for, or

to, them. The campaign did not increase awareness as to the gender-binary master narrative; it just made female clients angry at the perceived policing of how a feminist should dress. Like the short-lived unisex trends in the politically tumultuous 1960s and early 1970s, camouflaging the feminine is not a failsafe way of extricating oneself from all the hallmarks of that mask. To disavow femininity and disguise the female body is just a superficial and ineffectual papering over of the cracks. The symbolic presentation of equality and ‘neutrality’ fails to acknowledge women’s actual, embodied, material conditions and situated-ness as regards the surveilling gaze; it masks both the pleasure of femininity as a signifier of sexual attraction and neoliberal capitalism’s continual need for gender inequality in relation to the home and care economies. Consequently, it once more ends up in an unsatisfactory impasse.

How, therefore, can gender disruption and androgyny become an enabler that articulates and accounts for ‘straight’ cisgendered women’s desire to play with femininity in relation to self-presentation and the rituals of sexuality, whilst giving them leverage to critically resist patriarchal oppression and inequality? Is there another way of looking at gendered positions which challenges masculine and male-dominated binaries and positions? The last section will seek to explore this dilemma further in order to come to a clearer understanding of our position vis-à-vis androgynous dress and gender-deviant border spaces.

### **Androgyny as enabler**

This article does not pose a resolution to the trappings of gender. We have examined the possibilities of drag and unisex clothing, but this has only opened up further questions and so we do not conceive such a resolution as being possible. What we do pose, however, is a fashioning of androgyny that acknowledges the impossibility of overcoming heteronormative binaries and which complicates these through image and body-image. We believe the following case studies serve as examples of an androgyny where the body or dress have been

problematized as part of their imaging. They are self-conscious examples of gender resistance – knowing and witty. They literally wear or embody a history of gender deviance and its trappings, and as such, their fashioned bodies are empowered and their imaging empowering.

The model and musician Grace Jones is often celebrated for her confrontational persona and androgynous fashioning. Historically, her role as being one of few black models in high fashion has meant that she has been styled and directed in problematic sets and shoots, performing and perpetuating the trope of blackness as aggressive or primitive, or homogenizing what it is to be black. Today, she is more autonomous and less of a muse, performing her own music and representing herself in interviews. Her body is used less as a tool for others and more as a means of resisting another bar placed on women: age. In December 2016, *Billboard* magazine ranked her as the 40th most-successful dance artist of all time. She released a compilation album in 2015; continues to perform at festivals; and wears suitably outlandish costumes as part of her own masquerade. Significantly, this is not a masquerade of womanliness, but rather an exaggeration of all attributes – loud, proud and often controversial for the sake of it – demonstrating that she is as defiant and subversive as ever, if not more so, now that she works for herself.

Figure 3: Grace Jones at Carriageworks, Sydney, as part of Vivid Festival, 1 June 2015, by Bruce kingArthur\_Aus on Flickr. Uploaded 1 June 2015. Creative Commons licence (CC BY 2.0).

However, there is no denying that her experience of modelling means she is better able to view her body as a tool or device, rather like a hanger that serves a purpose, and less preciously than those of us whose bodies have not been publicly displayed or utilized. As such, Jones is better able to play with dress and androgyny, casting aside embodied notions of

gender, because she has spent a career distancing herself from the material body. Her body is a blank canvas, a site for contestation. At 68, she remains muscular and keeps her hair short. Moreover, she almost dismisses gender codes with her flippant irreverence about undressing in public, literally discarding any trappings of gender.

The artist has come a long way since her first single in 1975 titled ‘I Need a Man’. Her album covers perhaps demonstrate a third-gender trajectory. *Nightclubbing* (1981) concentrates on Jones as confrontational, her gaze meeting the viewer with suspicion, while her chiselled features and haircut defy a reading of either sex. The blazer reveals a flat-chested torso while the powerful shoulder-padding tapers into a suggested waist, only to accentuate her square shoulders. *Slave to the Rhythm* (1985) addresses Jones as aggressive: this person has to be reckoned with. The collaged effect emphasizes her open mouth as if screaming, and her hair, still with short back-and-sides, is higher than before, also suggestive of power. *Bulletproof Heart* (1989) presents the artist as otherworldly – her eyes are yellow and her skin tone ambiguous – and here gender is forsaken altogether. In *Warm Leatherette* (1980), Jones wears what appears to be a wrestling costume, where the body’s contours are given a genderless silhouette. In 2016, her touring poster takes dress-up to another level. Gender is forsaken for fashion: a silver glittering bowler hat and cosmic make-up dominate the picture. Her metallic eyebrow is painted on in a straight line, to defy the arching of a female brow, as is her cropped-out neck, so we cannot use the (absence of an) Adam’s apple as an index. This leaves a shaved head and, once again, a confrontational, reciprocated gaze. Jones is often seen publicly wearing flamboyant fashions, altering the silhouette of her figure and, much like Lady Gaga, this overshadows the otherwise prevalent fascination with her androgyny or sex and sexuality.

The fact that Jones invariably acknowledges the camera and reflects our gaze empowers her gender-normative dissonance. Being highly staged and photographed, Jones’s

album-cover portraits demonstrate a knowingness that this is performance. It is an imaging of an ambiguous border space which is aware of its position as trans and playful. Her gaze is self-conscious and challenging – why is Jones’s gender-ambivalent image or persona provocative, if it does not merely emphasize how misogynist other portrayals are?

While we have included Grace Jones as an example of androgyny, this implies a combination of both sexes. It might be more useful to think of it as a defiance of both, while recognizing how these are historically represented. As Jackie Stacey points out, there are ‘failures of feminist and queer language to articulate the nuances of affective registers; androgynous, butch, tomboy, trans, and genderqueer designate styles of gendered and sexual embodiment, but these do not extend satisfactorily to aesthetic moods and atmospheres’ (Stacey 2015: 243). Jones’s imaging is nothing if not an aesthetic, which she has continued to fashion on and off-stage. It might be more useful, then, to consider Stacey’s proposed term of ‘off-gender’ when considering historically understood images of androgyny, which we believe inherently recognize their own problematic hybridity and temporal nature. ‘To be off-gender would be less the in-between-ness of androgyny and more the capacity to move across, to embody the mobility of temporal flux’ (Stacey 2015: 267).

On the other hand, we have another mode of androgyny that embraces the indexical traces of the traditionally gendered body through hair. With a long beard, West Londoner Harnaam Kaur wears her facial hair with pride. This is different from Stacey’s sense of ‘off-gender’, because it plays, less ambiguously and more directly, with gendered bodily tropes. This is still considered provocative, startling, which may be why she was chosen to walk the runway and open the show for Marianna Harutunian at the Royal Fashion Day Show in London in February 2016. She has since established a successful (‘verified’ with a blue tick) social media profile and works on body-positive imaging. Kaur does not blur the lines of gender or sit within its border spaces; instead, she knowingly occupies both its ends. Her



beard is silky and groomed, and very long by any gender standards. This contrasts with her often colourful, otherwise ‘femme’ outfits, or traditional cultural attire – Kaur is Sikh and sometimes wears a turban; her Instagram account @harnaamkaur often depicts her in lavish traditional dress.

Figure 4: Harnaam Kaur’s Fixers ITV broadcast shoot. By Fixer UK on Flickr. Uploaded 20 May 2015. Creative Commons licence (CC BY 2.0).

Her beard is only problematic to the extent that it was not originally intended; she has had polycystic ovaries since a teenager, a condition which changes hormones and usually results in women having more body hair than ‘normal’. That she now chooses not to conform to societal pressures on women to render their bodily hair invisible is what makes her personal circumstances and choices political. Because she is a woman, this can be seen to make her more transgressive than the facial hair of Tom Neuwirth, for instance, who won the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest in his drag persona of Conchita Wurst. Moreover, her beard is real – unlike Demi Moore’s or Natalie Portman’s, who wore deliberately artificial facial hair; its ‘removability’ and therefore status as ‘drag’ was encoded as part of the image. In the case of Moore and Portman, any ‘hair-fear’ – the fear of this hair contaminating safe, assured, heteronormative masculinity or femininity for the cisgendered woman and man – was neutralized.

Kaur, like Grace Jones, takes control of her image but through her online profile of selfies and self-fashioned images. She reciprocates her own gaze in the act of photographing herself (the extended arm and mirrored camera-phone) and edits her own image, output and communication, thus subverting the traditional surveilling gaze or pleasures of femininity offered as signifiers of sexual attraction. The selfie is an inherently knowing genre of self-

portraiture that, in this case, generates an added political potency to Kaur's confronting gaze and androgynous self-consciousness. Kaur has subsequently been recognized by Guinness World Records (March 2016) and embraced for her Otherness. What is progressive about her body-image is in danger of becoming fetishized, and what was political about Grace Jones's image still remains, leaving us asking whether enough has changed.

## **Conclusion**

The current popularization and mainstreaming of drag and androgyny as a means of defying heteronormative dress is problematic because it assumes a culture of gender progress or mission accomplished. It was therefore important to traverse examples of these assumed challenges to gender and fashion – from *RuPaul's Drag Race* to Diesel's marketing campaign – to demonstrate that the cisgendered, straight woman is still marginalized. These are not viable methodologies of dress for her resistance to society's inherent misogyny. Her sexuality and womanliness are taken for granted and assumed as privileged yet she is parodied, mocked and left redundant, still searching for her own battleground within which to challenge gender-norms.

As we have demonstrated, there are various pitfalls to the act of drag. While it is an important component of gender deviance and an inherently subversive political act, often also serving as fantastic entertainment, binaries and stereotypes ironically remain largely intact. More extreme and challenging versions of drag are possible and potentially more successful, such as carnivalesque or transspecies performances. But these become fetishized and monstrous, they are one-offs and often render the artist as an Other, as marginalized or as a superstar. They are not really an affordable or practical vehicle for resistance. The recent turn to asexual or unisex clothing is promising because it indicates a re-emerging interest in cisgendered feminist dress, but it is not particularly progressive because, as we have argued,

either gender binaries remain evident or the models are exoticized and thus further marginalized. These campaigns also posit a sense of resolution, that the problem has been solved, which is not true and does not register the significant and ongoing struggle for gender equality – an integral part of progression.

It is understandable that several women, or any minority group that has fought to be heard or seen, should embrace their inclusion without the caveat of being named by their gender or what previously rendered them invisible and unheard. Several women artists or women writers do not want to be categorized as such, or patronized by being included in women-only shows and anthologies; they want to be considered artists and writers on a par with dominant, hegemonic (and heteronormative) groups. However, regarding the cisgendered, dissidently fashioned body, it seems essential to recognize one's otherness or to claim the bodily epithet and its problematic historical fashioning because, in this special case, the content is also the form. As Nancy Miller argues, it is important to emphasize the differences produced by the 'asymmetrical demands generated by different writing identities, male and female, or, perhaps more usefully, canonical or hegemonic and noncanonical or marginal' (Miller 1986: 105). Here, it is important for the woman to recognize her complicated sex and gender, her position as an 'asymmetrical' or 'noncanonical' subject, or else she may be in danger of camouflaging the problem, and thereby perpetuating and repeating it, rather than achieving desired change.

We have discussed a few cases where we think gender deviance has been problematized and acknowledged through androgyny, and others where the body or dress is flawed but open-ended because it does not pretend that the long history of gendered stereotyping and heteronormative positioning has been overcome and is past. We appreciate that gender-washing might just be another marketing strategy that employs androgyny for the purpose of commodification. But knowledge is power for change and that must be reflected

in attempts at resistance. We cannot expect every straight cisgendered woman to dress in a way that will both embody and resist the cumulative weight of historical discourses of sex, gender, sexuality – for who can wear a moustache, ironic femme attire and unisex clothing all at once? But we contend that for gender-deviant dress to retain agency it must reflect self-awareness and conscious decisions and choices that make resistance visible. This is the only way history can be *addressed* and *redressed*.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> 'He, She, Me', [http://www.selfridges.com/GB/en/content/agender-film/?cm\\_sp=Campaign--AgenderLandingPage--TheFilm](http://www.selfridges.com/GB/en/content/agender-film/?cm_sp=Campaign--AgenderLandingPage--TheFilm). Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.radhourani.com>. Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2017.

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