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The Most Positive Form of Human Expression: A Study of the Relationship between Peak Experiences and Drag Performance

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Preface

In the middle of the night while I was in Argentina, I had an epiphany. Well, this is one word I could use to describe what happened. Really it was, as Abraham Maslow would describe it, a "peak experience." In *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, he writes:

> The term peak experiences is a generalization for the best moments of the human being, for the happiest moments of life, for experiences of ecstasy, rapture, bliss, aesthetic experiences such as creative ecstasies, moments of mature love, perfect sexual experiences, parental love, experiences of natural childbirth, and many others. I use the one term--peak experiences--as a kind of generalized and abstract concept because I discovered that all of these ecstatic experiences had some characteristic in common. Indeed, I found that it was possible to make a generalized, abstract schema or model which could describe their common characteristics. The word enables me to speak of all or any of these experiences in the same moment. (105)

Maslow uses the term "peak experiences" to reference the happiest, most blissful, and ecstatic experiences in our lives. The term also can reference the climactic sensations that can bring us to peak experiences which he calls "mature love, perfect sexual experiences." In fact, there are many ways in which a peak experience can happen, and so, by generalizing all of these experiences into one abstract term, he can define all these types of experiences in two words. To do so, he created a "generalized, abstract schema or model" which took the common characteristics of certain people's descriptions of what peak experiences are. With this, he was able to formulate the term "peak experiences" and have it mean "all or any of these experiences in the same moment." Although "peak experiences" is a general definition, it allows for an infinite list of these kinds of experiences to exist and be accounted for.

Each peak experience is unique but are all very similar in their effect. I use the term "peak

experiences" in the same fashion throughout this work. I, too, want to demonstrate the uniqueness of each peak experience yet simultaneously desire to demonstrate their fundamental similarities. And as Maslow did not want to limit the definition of peak experiences but rather present the construction of them, I will do the same.

In Maslow's eyes, my "epiphany" was really a peak experience. I had what he would call a "profound aesthetic experience such as creative ecstasy." That is to say, in the middle of the night, I bolted up from my sleep and had an enormous and creative explosion in my head; it was so powerful, I had to write down what I was thinking. At the time, the electrical power was out in the house, so I did not have any light to write by, so I wrote in dark. I wrote in my notebook for about thirty minutes before I felt I had written enough, and what I had just written was the inspiration for my senior project. More so than that, these were thoughts that had been swimming around in my head, begging me to write them down and explore them. I was not too surprised by this creative burst, however, because this is how my brother, funnily enough, created his thesis as well. Thus, following my instincts, I went back to read what I had written when there was enough light to read later that afternoon.

Although very difficult to decipher, I had written enough to be able to figure out what I needed to write about, and the place where I was to begin was at the origins of language. There, I was looking for where language went wrong. That is to say, I believe that language is too restrictive in its current usage. The inaccuracies in our language is a product of societal restrictions and serve to perpetuate those restrictions. In other words, societal restrictions block our vocabulary to speak accurately. I do not think our language is as clear as we wish it to be when we speak, write, and perform. And so through a countless multitude of communications and miscommunications, we possess the language we have today: one that is restricted, feared, and often inaccurate. This was one of the reasons I went to Argentina; I love studying languages to see

how others speak, to learn how others think, and ultimately, to clarify my perception of what language is. I have found that my own personal language has been constructed by the many that I have learned, and it is often easier for me to use certain terminology from, say, Japanese, to express my hunger than it is in English. Thus, my idea stemmed from wanting to find where and when language became controlled by societal restrictions, and as a result, blocked our language.

Alongside this concept, I wanted to find something that demonstrated the most positive aspects of the human existence that would be connected to this idea. In other words, I wanted someone to demonstrate to me how we can break the restrictions around language, and therefore, the cultural and societal restrictions that are embedded in it as well, in order to reach a happier state of existence. This is what a peak experience became to me: a need to break society's restriction on language, gender, class, race, sex, and sexuality, and the way to do that for me was through drag queening. I will explore this later, but before we can even begin discussing what drag queening is, I must first articulate my thoughts on the origins of language.

In Merritt Ruhlen's *The Origin of Language,* she gives a popular theory of how language began: "with gestures, to which grunts and other sounds were later added..." (2). Through these "grunts and other sounds," humans realized that communication was possible. Although Rousseau's *On The Origin of Language* was long before Ruhlen's time, he complements her idea while simultaneously giving a reason for the development of language: "It seems then that need dictated the first gestures, while the passions stimulated the first words" (11). As Rousseau calls it, a "need" for a more developed language arose, something more profound than rudimentary gesticulations of the body, and, initially, Rousseau argues "passions" were what stimulated the first words. The way in which Rousseau uses "passions" here I believe is synonymous with the word excitement, meaning that it was the thrill and joy of attempting to articulate our thoughts through spoken language that produced the first words.

Rousseau claims, "As soon as one man was recognized by another as a sentient, thinking being similar to himself, the desire or need to communicate his feelings and thoughts made him seek the means to do so" (5). What Rousseau means is that as soon as one man saw another and recognized him as a thinking being, he had the desire to communicate verbally to this other man. And the result of these kinds of advances in verbal communication were that the human could become more powerful than any other species. And, in order to advance our civilization, we needed a way in which we could articulate our feelings and thoughts while simultaneously separating ourselves from the rest of the animal kingdom: spoken language. Rousseau concurs: "Conventional language is characteristic of man alone. That is why man makes progress, whether for good or ill, and animals do not" (10). Thus, language was born as a tool that could be used for any means to advance human society.

This newly discovered tool needed to be honed, however: with the birth of language came a need for greater accuracy in the definitions of words. As language developed, "proper meaning" for words, as Rousseau called it, became a necessity. I believe that Rousseau's "proper meaning" is the need for language to become more solidified; in other words, language needed words, words with definitions and proper meanings in order to articulate our feelings more accurately. He writes, "To the degree that needs multiply...that light is shed, language changes its characters. It becomes more regular and less passionate. It substitutes ideas for feelings. It no longer speaks to the heart but to reason..." (16). The necessities of language began to multiply, so when at first there was only one "need," which was the need for the abstraction of rudimentary gesticulations to the development of language, more and more needs sprouted, such as "proper meaning."

Rousseau uses light as a way to show how as words became more rational, we began to adapt language not only to our ideas but to our feelings as well: a way to shed light on the moment of enlightenment when we learned how speech could connect to thought, creating a way to express

our feelings more effectively than with simple gesticulations. And in order to express our feelings more accurately, we needed to develop our thoughts towards reason; thus, although words were once based on passions, as they developed, they began to rely mostly on reason. I believe that Rousseau uses "reason" to describe how as the mind continued to develop, language became more particular. He writes: "articulations increase. Language becomes more exact and clearer, but more prolix, duller and colder..." (16). Reason, according to Rousseau, is what made language more about precision, rendering it further away from the raw emotions is once came from. "This progression to me seems entirely natural," Rousseau says, so reason was the natural progression to make language more precise and less passionate (16).

What, then, would express our ideas now that gesticulations of the body were no longer accurate enough? Rousseau's answer is speech and writing: "Writing, which would seem to crystallize language, is precisely what alters it. It changes not the words but the spirit, substituting exactitude for expressiveness. Feelings are expressed in speaking, ideas in writing" (24). He believes that, contrary to popular belief, writing changes the spirit of spoken words due to the necessity of "proper meaning": it plays a more valuable role than expression in writing. This, he claims, is what completely separates writing from speaking. I disagree with his belief that the dichotomy of speaking and writing is a separation of feelings from ideas, for I believe they influence one another significantly. One cannot exist without the other in order to maintain a language.

Rousseau's ideas of the origins of language are often seen as outdated, and with the above example, I believe he was wrong. We certainly do try to express our feelings in writing through biographies, letters, and so on, and we also try to convey our feelings while speaking via speeches, conversations, etc.. The writer and poet Heinrich Von Kleist, in his short essay "On the Gradual Formation of Thoughts While Speaking," would agree with me, for he writes:

Language is...no shackle, no brake-shoe, as it were, on the wheel of intellect, but rather

a second, parallel wheel whirling on the same axle. It is something else altogether when

intellect is done thinking through a thought before bursting into speech. For then it is

obliged to dwell on the mere expression of that thought, and far from stimulating intellect,

this has no other effect than to let the steam out of excitement. (260)

Kleist initially creates a metaphor with (what would appear to be) a two-wheeled cart in this

example in order to demonstrate the necessity of the balance between both intellect and language

when producing thoughts and feelings. Once excitement has created a thought, Kleist states that

we want to "burst into speech" so we can express that thought and liberate it through verbal

language in order to give life to the "mere expression of that thought."

This is vitally important for us because without this verbal liberation we would not have

verbal communication. Kleist's point is that if we dwell on the intellect of the thought for too long,

we will lose the excitement of it. This is because, at the core of the essay, Kleist claims that speech

is, in fact, an extension of thought, that they are not separate and we would be disillusioned to

think otherwise. If we actively speak while we think, then this creates active thinking: after a

thought bursts into our head, Kleist would argue that we should speak that thought as soon as

possible to extend it into verbal language, even if we do not necessarily know where that thought is

going. Excitement and passion will create a thought that we should actively verbalize in order to

express ourselves. Kleist writes that it is necessary to "see how essential a certain excitement of the

mind is...." This excitement is essential for Kleist in order to articulate thoughts. Kleist believes, as

do I, that it is wrong to withhold these thoughts from verbal communication because by

withholding them we will end up thinking too heavily on the thought and fear its articulation

through our voice. Ultimately, this will render the thinker's speech inarticulate.

Consequently, then, I disagree with Rousseau that an excitement is not necessary in writing

and would argue that it is just as necessary in speech as in writing. Furthermore, I disagree with Rousseau's claim that "The art of writing does not at all depend upon that of speaking," because after the passions that created the first words were lost, the need for "proper meaning," or greater accuracy, matured with both spoken *and* written language; one cannot separate the two due to the fact that language, in both these realms, became about practicality and reasoning rather than only an ardor for expression (19). In other words, they evolved around each other and neither would exist without the other.

Percy Shelley would agree with this notion. He offers us a continuity in the development of speech to writing, a natural progression from verbal communication to the necessities of written language as means to create another, more articulate way of dialogue. He writes in his essay, "A Defence of Poetry":

> In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry; and to be a good poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression...the copiousness of lexicography and the distinctions of grammar are the works of a later age, and are merely the catalogue and the form of the creations of Poetry. (841)

Shelley argues that at the beginning of language, every person who tried to speak was a poet because at that moment, language itself was a poem. This means that the rudimentary grunts that we have theorized as the first "words" were poetry and their speakers poets. The reason Shelley argues this is because he believes that language was so raw and unadorned with "proper meaning" that the grunt was the pure expression of the self. Essentially, the first people to make these noises were, as Shelley would say, poets because they were apprehending the true and the beautiful by simply expressing their thoughts without any sort of lexicon; these primal humans were existing,

perceiving, then expressing their thoughts and feelings without fear of structure.

It was not until later, Shelley argues, that lexicography and grammar were formed, which created the foundations and structures for poetry. Thus, the passions and excitement that prompt expression were not instantaneously turned into reason: the development of writing, grammatical structure, and proper meanings came later than the first poets. Briefly coming back to Rousseau, he claims: "The languages develop naturally on the basis of men's needs, changing and varying as those needs change" (72). Essentially, the development of man's language was natural, meaning that language changed as the needs of man changed. For example, "when persuasion played the role of public force, eloquence was necessary..." and this would be the case with any other rising linguistic necessity (72). It was therefore our prerogative to feel these needs to change that Shelley and Rousseau have described, for they are part of what make us human: continual striving to improve our depictions of our feelings and thoughts in language in order to express ourselves more accurately.

Shelley would argue that the natural progression of language was a continuous one from speech to writing while Rousseau claims that the natural progression of language was to dichotomize speech from writing, passions from reason. This means that, according to Rousseau, written language replaces passion and excitement with ideas. Kleist argues against this thought because he claims that we need that passion and excitement in order to speak our thoughts out loud. However, Rousseau does further his argument, "and it is only then that they speak, and that they have any incentive to speak" (39).[1] From Rousseau's perspective, it is only once our needs change (for example, the sudden need for eloquence as a form of persuasion) that we have a stimulus to speak differently. However, I would disagree that this stimulus is our *only* incentive to speak because I believe that curiosity also causes a stimulus to speak. To clarify, there are

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[1] To clarify, *necessity* is when (and only when) we have incentive to speak, so Rousseau claims.

thousands of different ways to say the same thing in thousands of different languages, meaning that we are induced to speak not only by a need for greater clarity and precision, but also by a need to fulfill our curiosity. One example of this is the study of different languages, which can spark one's curiosity, rather than one's feeling of necessity, to know how to say something in a different way.

As language evolved, it became more and more rooted in the culture and society that surrounded it, so the development of language became both a function of necessity and curiosity. Therefore, with Shelley's ideas of the origins of language and Kleist's idea of a kind of passionate reason necessitating speech, I disagree with Rousseau's dichotomized idea of speech and writing and the idea that necessity alone is our incentive to express how we feel. Furthermore, I would like to add a third method of communication that needs just as much passion as writing and speaking: performance. I will speak of this method further in this work, but I want to give the notion that performance, like speech and writing, demands a higher level of accuracy as well.

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Preface

Introduction

Since its birth, language has changed and been greatly affected by the people who use it, and conversely, people have changed and been greatly affected by the language they use. I would like to present the idea that the development of language advanced our species to the most powerful in the animal kingdom: it was a tool to gain leverage. Additionally, it had (and has) the capacity to restrict what could (and can) be expressed. Specifically, I am referring to how language, like the human, has been affected by ideas of class, race, sex, gender, and sexuality. Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* provides great insight as to how this happened. He begins back in the seventeenth century. He says, "And the sexual cause--the demand for sexual freedom, but also for knowledge to be gained from sex and the right to speak about it--becomes legitimately associated with the honor of a political cause..." (6). Thus, as we supported the "Victorian regime," as he calls it, they began to try to control sex and the right to speak of it, thereby making sex political. Once this happened, there was no turning back. He writes, "[b]ut for decades now, we have found it difficult to speak on the subject [of sex] without striking a different prose: we are conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are being subversive..." (6). We have literally changed the way we speak when talking about sex, becoming more submissive to the "higher authorities" who ironically took control of it through the use of our own language. Foucault writes, "The seventeenth century, then, was the beginning of an age of repression emblematic of what we call the bourgeois societies, an age which perhaps we still have not completely left behind..." (17). Consequently, through our submission to the Victorian regime and their dominance over how and when we can use the word "sex," we entered an era Foucault argues we still have not left entirely: centuries followed by centuries of sexual repression.

As alluded to before, language is what made this submission possible. Foucault writes,

As if to gain mastery over it [sex] in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at

the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that

were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present...Without even

having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not

speak of sex...instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence.

Censorship. (17)

In order to dominate and control sex, Foucault argues that its discourse must have been the first

thing that needed to be controlled. To extract the verbs he uses above, "subjugate," "control,"

"expunge," and "extinguish," demonstrates how mastering sex was possible through controlling

what was being said in order to secure a future of societal sexual subordination. Prohibitions were

created to fear its name; the incapacity even to enunciate it was accepted in order to make people

feel more prudish, and a total muteness was formed as a means to silence it forever, rendering sex

completely and almost irrevocably subordinated to society.   Essentially, by censoring the language

that surrounded sex, the Victorian regime was able to gain mastery over sex and its discourse to

this day.

       As time progressed, "a control over enunciations...where and when it was not possible to

talk about such things became much more strictly defined; in which circumstances, among which

speakers, and within which social relationships" (18). We have been taught where and when to

speak of sex, to whom we can speak of it, and in which social situations it is acceptable. This is

what Foucault calls a "Policing of sex: that is, not the rigor of taboo, but the necessity of regulating

sex through useful and public discourse" (25). To make sex taboo would not have been enough:

after the control of sex and its discourse took place, the necessity to preserve this control begot the

necessity to continually regulate its discourse publicly and, I would argue, privately as well.

Regulation of sex has been, and still is, successful today.

This regulation is heavily controlled, so it is helpful when Foucault clarifies one of his points: "we are dealing less with *a* discourse on sex than a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms and operating in different institutions...and multiplied in an explosion of distinct discursivities which took form in demography, biology, medicine..." (33). Discourses of sex erupted into all fields of study under a heavily regulated regime. Foucault would argue that these discursive regulations did not produce the exact effect they were hoping for due to the fact that there were so many restrictions placed around sex and its public and private discourses that, subsequently, these regulations made "the question of sex a constant preoccupation" (27). To clarify, this was not the intended effect: we were and are constantly thinking about sex and therefore speaking of it at all times, whether we were and/or are conscious of it or not. Foucault writes, "What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the* secret" (35). Thus, the attempt to restrict the language of sex ironically yielded the obsession to speak of it again and again while claiming it to be the largest and most feared secret of them all.

Sex is not the only subject matter that people have tried to restrict societally within language: gender follows suit, and arguably, we obsess over the ideas of gender as much as sex, both the biological and explicitly sexual kind. Gender controls us as well as language; like the human, language has been so greatly affected by regulated ideas of gender that language itself has become gendered. What this means is that men and women have come to use language differently: we have distinctly different speech styles due to the fact that many people follow societally-constructed gender norms. For instance, the perceived typical, Western male voice is one of a very low, tonal quality, and men's speech patterns are typically rougher, cruder, and deeper than women's. Perhaps one example of appealing to masculine gender norms is for one

man to call another man "sensitive," attempting to emasculate him.[1] These and more are very common examples of appealing to a contemporary masculine image. As a result, it is remarkably difficult to express ourselves when our speech, behavior, and overall daily social appearance is restricted to our gender. It is not a surprise, then, to see how gender affected the development of language in our modern culture.

It is crucial to further investigate the effects of gender from an historical perspective as well as a linguistic one because, in the past and present, it has never been easy to define gender. For whatever reason, gender has always been a vitally important method to distinguish human beings. In Tey Meadow's essay "'A Rose is a Rose': On Producing Legal Gender Classifications," she gives a fascinating account of a court decision that, essentially, legally ordered someone to cross dress at all times:

> On April 8, 1692, T. Hall appeared before the General Court of the Colony of Virginia...wearing typical clothing of a manservant, Hall had committed no crime nor become party to a dispute with any individual person. Hall appeared, instead, to settle a dispute among members of the community about whether Hall was a man or a woman. Alternately using the names Thomas and Thomasine, Hall had at various times donned both male and female attire. Raised female, Hall was skilled at the delicate crafts associated with women's work but moved freely through the world, as was the purview of men, performing military service at home...Under direction from the court, three women scrutinized Hall's body to determine the correct gender assignment. The women all

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[1] For more information, see: White, Landon. "Card College Rugby: Breaking the Gender Image," *Sociology of Gender*, 2011. (After researching a rugby team, I found that "sensitive" was one of the many ways in which team members could emasculate one another. This, ironically, sheds lights on their own insecurities about what is means to be a "man" in our culture.) [For further investigation in this matter, see also: Pascoe, CJ. *Dude You're a Fag*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007.]

declared that Hall was not one of them. When community members remained skeptical, the court mandated further inspections. Some were performed in stealth while Hall slept; others were compelled by physical force. Unsatisfied that it could make either a male or female designation the court found Hall to be both a man and a woman and ordered Hall to dress at all times in the garments associated with both genders...Gender is perhaps the most pervasive, fundamental, and universally accepted way we separate and categorize human beings. (814-816)

The curiosity that Hall sparked amongst his community was so gargantuan that rather than having Hall come to the court, the court ordered people to go to Hall to discover Hall's gender, and often secretly or by force. Although Meadow does not explicitly say this, I have come to believe that in order to maintain a psychological stability, the people of the court eventually ordered Hall to dress in both men and women's clothing, hoping that this would solve their dilemma. This, essentially, was a direct order from the court to have Hall dress as both male and female on a daily basis. This means that Hall was given legal jurisdiction to cross dress everyday, but this only holds true if Hall identified with a gender classification in Hall's private life. It is my belief that Hall probably did not identify with a particular gender, however. Perhaps Hall decided to be many genders, or even perhaps genderless. Regardless, because Meadow claims that gender is the most fundamental means to classify humans, it seems almost comical, although not entirely unexpected, that such extreme necessities were taken to attempt to define Hall's gender. It would seem that psychologically we cannot see a human body without instinctually trying to gender it.

I need to clarify how we can define gender in order to expose the linguistic restrictions that surround it, and the sociologists Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman give a definition of gender that is almost universally accepted. West and Zimmerman, in their essay "Doing Gender," give three ways to define gender: "sex," "sex category," and "gender." "Sex" references the biological

categorization that occurs at or before birth; "sex category" institutionalizes one's gender identity, whether it is male or female; "gender" manages oneself within societally constructed, gender norms. Within West and Zimmerman's construct, gender is made omni-relevant, meaning that we perform gender on a consistent basis. At the heart of their argument, we are always "doing" rather than "being" gender, making gender context dependent: the self (the individual) develops through the contrast of others in given contexts. This motion is very circular because, essentially, we orient ourselves based on how others react to how we orient ourselves. Thus, within these given contexts, we have what West and Zimmerman call a gender "accountability" to hold to: we are forced to enact and display certain gender norms to apply and thereby conform to in order to be socially acceptable. These gender restrictions are applicable to language in that one can change their language in order to sound more masculine or feminine; and people can play around with, and even break, such restrictions.

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, writes about how it is possible to break such restrictions. She sets up her argument by asking: "Gender appears in this or that form, and then a normative judgment is made about those appearances and on the basis of what appears. But what conditions the domain of appearance for gender itself?" (xxii). She questions the institutionalized ideas of gender normativity, asking how can we judge gender on appearance alone. She later argues that we cannot do that, and her specific example is through her critique of drag queens and their culture. However, before she expounds on drag, she speaks of cross-dressing:

> If one thinks one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the 'reality' of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks 'reality,' and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance...In such perceptions...we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere...illusion...Perhaps we think we know what

the anatomy of the person is...Or we derive that knowledge from the clothes that the person wears...This is naturalized knowledge, even though it is based on a series of cultural inferences, some of which are highly erroneous. (xxiii-xxiv)

Initially, Butler states that when we see a man dressed as a woman or the reverse, there is a lack of "reality" in this person's appearance. In other words, the gender they are performing may not be the gender they actually are. In these instances, Butler says, we are often mistaken to believe that we know which gender is being performed, falsely thinking that an illusion is covering a "reality." This is wrong to believe because Butler says that these perceptions are based on the idea that the anatomy of the person or the clothes they are wearing is an appropriate method to identify their gender; however, that is, as she says, "naturalized" knowledge: these are old gender constructs that have been often erroneously embedded in language and therefore culture to try to help us solve the ever tantalizing question of correct gender attribution. Butler's point is that we cannot simply answer that question because it is far more complicated than only a question of anatomical structure or the kinds of clothes people wear. To further her point, she questions the entire scaffold of what society tries to deem male or female when she writes: "Drag is an example that is meant to establish that 'reality' is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be..." (xxv). Thus, according to Butler, gender "reality," or rather, people's perspectives of a gender "reality" can be played around with, and even broken, through the performance of drag: it breaks society's gender restrictions and mocks the fundamental, heteronormative concept that a "real" gender exists.

The time before language existed was a time when restrictions were not omnipresent; however, as we see from Rousseau, as reason developed within our language, so did restrictions on our thoughts. These restrictions became stricter, and, as we learn from Foucault, in the seventeenth century, a particular attention was paid to restrict the language of sex, and as Butler demonstrates, on gender as well. As time progressed, people wanted to break those restrictions;

striving to get back to a time when experiences were when unmediated language, the experience itself, and expression were all unified. Additionally, disagreeing with Rousseau, Kleist argues that the unity of passion and reason can still exist within our language if we immediately extend our thoughts into speech; thus, it is arguable that we can go back to unmediated expression. In fact, Abraham Maslow has proved through his idea of peak experiences that moments like these can and do still happen.

Maslow speaks of the hundreds of descriptions he received during and/or after someone's peak experience. He writes,

> My own boiling-down and condensation of this multitude of words, and these many descriptions of the way the world looks to them, from perhaps a hundred people during and after peak experiences would be: truth, beauty, wholeness, dichotomy-transcendance, aliveness-process, uniqueness, perfection, necessity, completion, justice, order, simplicity, richness, effortlessness, and self-sufficiency. (106)

These terms are the condensed and compressed list of words people have used in the past to describe their peak experiences. Maslow makes it clear that these terms are "highly abstract," but demands, "How could it be otherwise?" (106). These are abstract experiences and therefore require abstract terminology. This is because, as Maslow writes, "Each word has the task of including many kinds of direct experience under one rubric or heading" (106). Thus, to put one's own peak experience into words would be challenging because a peak experience goes beyond that which language can explain. And this is because it is an *experience* rather than knowledge one might acquire from a book.

Thus, peak experiences are real moments of transcendence and clarity. Maslow writes:

> I want to stress that these are claimed to be descriptive characteristics; the reports say they are facts about the world. They are the descriptions of what the world appears to be, what

it looks like, even, they claim, of what it is. They are in the same category as the descriptions that a newspaper reporter or a scientific observer would use after witnessing some event. They are not 'ought' or 'should' statements, nor are they merely projections of the investigator's wishes. They are not hallucinations; they are not merely emotional states, lacking cognitive reference. They are reported as illuminations, as true and veridical characteristics of reality which previous blindness has hidden from them. (106)

The list of descriptive words from above is a factual list of how people feel during these moments; it is the list of adjectives that people use to describe how the world appears to them, what it looks and perhaps feels like, or maybe even what it "truly" is. They are descriptions that could be used by anyone after "witnessing some event," such as a reporter, educator, student, observer, or so on. They are not descriptions of how things should or ought to be, but rather, simply depictions of someone's perceived reality. It would be wrong to regard them as "hallucinations," so instead Maslow uses "illuminations" to illustrate how peak experiences are enlightening because they have validity as experienced-based knowledge. The above list describes how those who have had a peak experience now can see the world more broadly and clearly, as if they had been blinded from this before.

And this is the draw for me to drag queening: that is, by breaking so many restrictions on language in speech, writing, and performance, and therefore gender, sex, class, race, and sexuality as well, we have the hope of attaining peak experiences through our performances. This is not to say that I cannot find a way to have peak experiences in any other fashion, but rather, I find drag queening to be the most fun and exciting way to do so. Thus, through the art of drag, I am able to challenge heteronormativity, gender-binaries, racism, class-structure, skepticism, and ignorance.

Chapter 1

Drag Queens: Harmony between Miseducation and Reeducation of Gender through Performance

1

Before we can further our discussion on drag queens and the way in which they can break society's restrictions, we must first look into performance theory. It is essential to have an historical context of performance, and to start, Richard Schechner's book, *Essays on Performance Theory 1970-1976*, gives us the insight we are looking for. Without this background information, we would not be able to fully comprehend what it means to be a drag queen.

Schechner starts his book by trying to define 'art' by extrapolating ideas from Book X of Plato's *The Republic*: "Art is an imitation of life and life merely a shadow of the ideal forms" (5). He develops his argument further by referencing Aristotle. He writes,

> Plato's student Aristotle agrees that art is mimetic but asks precisely what does art imitate and how? Art does not imitate things or even experiences, but 'action.' Action is a problematic idea and, at best, I can only sketch an interpretation of what Aristotle might have meant. Art imitates patterns, rhythms, and developments. In art, as in nature, things are born, they grow, they flourish, they decline, they die. Form, which is crystalline in Plato, is fluid in Aristotle. Each organism (animate, natural, artistic,) conceals a determining pattern-factor that governs its development. This DNA-like factor determines the growth rate, shape, rhythm and life-space of every organism. Everything has its own life plan, its own 'indwelling form.' It is this form which art imitates. (5)

Following along the lines of Aristotle, Schechner initially poses the question of what is it that Plato says art imitates and how it does so. He follows Aristotle's logic: art mimics action, as opposed to things or experiences, and that 'action,' as well as 'art,' is hard to define. Thus, he explores how Aristotle would define 'action,' which is by patterns, rhythms, and developments in all things in

life. Structured similarly to a piece of theatre having an initial action, rising action, climax, denouement, and conclusion, all things in nature and in art go through this same process. He believes that everything in this world has a life plan, a destiny to fulfill. In fact, he describes destiny as a "pattern-factor" within the construction of every organism, whether it is animate, natural, and/or artistic. In fact, he calls this pattern-factor a "DNA-like factor," exemplifying his belief that destiny must be scientifically attached to every organism. It is this life plan, this destiny, that art imitates.

> Schechner furthers his argument:
>
> Aristotle's idea is sublime. It imparts to everything--from thought to the slow unwinding of a galaxy to the lives of men to the grain of sand--a living, intrinsic and dynamic participation in creating, being, becoming and ceasing. From the Aristotelian perspective 'individuality' is seen in its original meaning: not divisible. Things are integral both inherently and in their relationships to their environments. Destiny is the interplay between what is inborn and what is met. Every acorn is an oak-in-process. But between acorn and oak is sun, rain, wind, lightning and men with axes...What has a 'beginning, middle and end' is the artwork. (5)

Everything has a beginning, middle, and end, and this is the part destiny plays and what art imitates; in other words, it is like the inner-workings of a play. This means that the original meaning of 'individuality,' which is 'not divisible,' stands true, meaning that things are inherently integral in their relationships to their environments. There is a unity within things and their surroundings, and destiny is the actions that lie between a thing's birth and death. He uses the metaphor of "[e]very acorn is an oak-in-process" to demonstrate how destiny acts during the in-betweens of a thing's life, so if art imitates a thing's destiny, then the "sun, rain, wind, lightning and men with axes" will be the artwork of the acorn's life (5). Ergo, Schechner makes the

argument that "[a]t the deepest level a play is about itself," because the play's inner-working (the beginning, middle, and end) is the artwork that replicates the playwright's life experiences (5). This is the case with every artist's artwork, and so it is the case with drag queens': on the deepest level, a drag queen's performance is about herself and the unification she has in her surroundings.

Schechner makes clear the duality of an Aristotelian artwork. He writes, "Thus an Aristotelian artwork lives a double life. It is mimetic in the Platonic sense, but it is also itself...Art always "comes after" experience; the separation between art and life is built into the idea of *mimesis*" (6). An Aristotelian artwork serves two purposes: it mimics its own destiny as well as existing as its own thing. This needs further clarification in order for a better comprehension of what Schechner means. He expounds:

> An analogy will make clear exactly what I mean by 'coming after.' Cooked food 'comes after' raw food. Cooking is something that is done to raw food to change it...All cooked food was once raw; all raw food is cookable. There is no way for raw food to 'come after' cooked food. So it is with art and life. Art is cooked and life is raw. Art is the process of transforming raw experience into palatable forms. This transformation is a mimetic one, a representation. (7)

Through this analogy, we see that only after we have experienced something in our lives can it be represented through our artwork; we need to have the 'raw' experience before we can have a final, 'cooked' product. This is essential to performance theory because it demonstrates how one's artwork is a continuous development from one's birth, and that each artwork is unique to its owner. Ergo, all drag performances, and in fact, all cultural performances, events, books, and/or artworks in this world will be unique because the creator of these things will have had different (although perhaps similar) life experiences. The creator will base his/her art off of these raw life experiences, and will perform these experiences in his/her own unique and artistic way. Subsequently, it is safe

to say that performance is intrinsic to human expression and the human condition.

   And Schechner agrees:

   The phenomena called either/all 'drama,' 'theatre,' 'performance' occur among all the

   world's peoples and date back as far as historians, archeologists, and anthropologists can

   go. Evidence indicates that dancing, singing, wearing masks and/or costumes,

   impersonating either other men, animals, or supernaturals, acting out stories, presenting

   time 1 at time 2, isolating and preparing special places and/or times for these presentations

   and individual or group preparations or rehearsals are co-existent with the human condition.

   (36)

Performance has been around as long as humans have been, if not even before us. Humans thrive

on the performance of the self and/or others, whether through theatrics, dancing, singing, sports, or

so on. We live to see others perform, and I will argue that we live to see ourselves and others

perform at each other's highest level. This will be necessary to discuss later, but it is my belief that

humans have a desire and need to perform at their highest level. And according to Schechner, we

have been doing this from our creation: performance has been a basis and foundation for the

human condition.

   Schechner writes that "ancient performers," can date "as far back as 25,000 years ago..."

and, more impressively, they were "unliterate," a term he uses to describe "non-literate cultures"

(38). We were performing even before we had language, and as I have argued in the introduction,

these performances were unmediated during their time. Shechner uses dancer-shamans of the

Paleolithic temple-theatres as an example to explain that the shaman's dance "took a persistent (or

'traditional') shape which was kept from one event to another; that this shape was known by the

dancers and by the spectators (if there were any), and that the shape was taught by one group of

dancers to another" (37). These dances were ritualistic, passing down the steps from one group of

dancers to the next, as to preserve the dance; it was very important to maintain the integrity and tradition of it. The way in which they would pass down the steps of the dance were through what Schechner calls "scripts," which means "something that pre-exist any given enactment, which act as a blueprint for the enactment, and which persist from enactment to enactment" (37). These 'scripts' were not written but rather enacted in order to preserve the dance. With this in mind, he writes, "the script was important: maintaining it contributed to the efficacy of the rite; abandoning it endangered that efficacy. Even more: the efficacy was not 'a result of' dancing the script but 'contained in' dancing the script. In other words...the doing is a manifestation more than a communication" (37-38). The script was a sort of blueprint that maintained the integrity, as mentioned before, of the dance. It was not a written text but rather an enactment that one supposed to replicate. As Schechner says, it was a manifestation, not a form of verbal or written communication. The point is that the doing of the dance is the most crucial; the here-and-now feeling of the experience of the dance was what was meant to be passed down from generation to generation.

A question that comes to mind is: why pass down these scripts? Schechner poses a good answer when he quotes from Mircea Eliade's, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*. Although Eliade is speaking of a puberty initiation in Eastern Australia that is highly performative, I find this quote to relate to all forms of performance. Schechner quotes:

> 'the repetition of a ritual founded by Divine Beings implies the reactualization of the original Time when the rite was first performed. This is why a rite has efficacy--it participates in the completeness of the sacred primordial Time. The rite makes the myth present. Everything that the myth tells of the Time of beginning...the rite reactualizes, shows it as happening now, *here and now*.' (12)

The desire to repeat and perform a traditional dance, ritual, ceremony, or so on, is the desire to go

back to the time when that dance, ritual, or ceremony was first performed. The original conception of that performance would be the time when it was most raw: an experience yet to be cooked by the imitations of art, without any preexisting interpretations of it yet; it simply was. To give an example, the desire to learn a traditional dance, say Flamenco, is the desire to go back to the moments when it was first performed. Flamenco's primordial Time is unknown, but what is known is what I will call the 'Schechner script' of Flamenco. This dance is still taught today, and the desire to learn these steps through continuous and often strenuous work and repetition demonstrates many desires: 1) the desire to dance as the first performers of Flamenco danced: uninhibited and rawly; 2) the desire to bring the myth of its conception back to the present; and 3) to show the mystical nature of the dance as happening right here, right now. To learn a dance like Flamenco, of the puberty initiation in Eastern Australia, or of any preexisting performative experience is the making present of a (perhaps sacred) past time or event. This is the foundation for human performance: the yearning to recreate the past in the present. It is the mystery of the beginning that pushes us forward; there is something in a thing's origination that is unreachable, perhaps unspeakable and unknowable. And it may be that through performance we are looking for a primal self that feels, rather than knows, the mystery of a thing's creation.

Now that we have taken a look at the history of performance and how it relates to the human condition, we can move on to drag. However, similar to performance theory, we will need an historical account of drag queening before we can move on to Butler's readings. Steven P. Schacht with Lisa Underwood given an historical context of drag in their *The Drag Queen Anthology: The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators.* They write:

> Female impersonation realistically began when clothing started to take on gendered
> meanings in cultures as a form of cross-dressing behavior. Important cross-dressing figures

are found in the mythology of all the earliest known cultures, many of which held festivals

and rituals to celebrate such behavior...Contemporary examples of institutionalized

cross-dressing events are found in Halloween and Mardi Gras celebrations...Some cultures,

however, created special third gender categories, such as the 'winkte,' 'bote,' and 'nadle'

found by the European colonizers of North America and the hijras of present day India,

wherein cross-dressing individuals were, and still are, widely accepted and, in some cases,

held in high regard. (5)

Schacht and Underwood's argument is that as soon as clothing became gendered, which is another

way of saying that as soon as we started to perform gender as a means to classify ourselves in

society, it was possible for anyone to cross-dress or dress in drag. They make it known that this

type of behavior (at its beginning, I might add) was and still is celebrated and highly regarded. In

fact, a special, third gender category was added by European colonizers where in cross-dressers

were able to identify themselves and still be accepted by their society. To further their argument,

they show how cross-dressing has become institutionalized within our culture, giving Halloween

and Mardi Gras as examples.   Additionally, Schacht and Underwood write, "Because of various

prohibitions against women appearing in public places, some cultures dictated that men played the

role of women in theatrical productions..." and the most famous example in history of this

(amongst hundreds) is when the men would play the women's role in theatrical performances

during Shakespearean times (5). We learn from Schacht and Underwood that performances of

gender date back from around the thirteenth century, and therefore it is baffling to see those that

think cross-dressing, female impersonating, and drag queening hold no place in contemporary

culture.

Schacht and Underwood quote from Roger Baker's book, *Drag: A History of Female

Impersonation in the Performing Arts*, to give an etymological explanation for the term 'drag.'

They write, "In fact, Baker reports that 'it was during the middle years of the nineteenth century that the word 'drag' was coined to describe the petticoats worn by men playing female parts" (5). In Lady Gaga's "Born This Way" she sings, "don't be a drag, just be a queen," to attempt to re-appropriate the term 'drag queen.' Ironically, however, she must have thought that the term 'drag' was an inappropriate one, more than likely believing it to mean something along the lines of "to become tedious or slow" or "to go somewhere reluctantly." Unbeknownst to her, in the case of 'drag queen,' there is no etymological negativity within the term 'drag,' but rather it was a way to describe the lengthiness of the petticoats worn by men playing female parts. Currently, the term 'drag' is used to describe the acts that involve drag queening, such as performing one's gender and/or breaking society's restriction on gender and language. Thus, to entitle oneself as only a 'queen' does not imply any sort of gender reconstruction, and therefore it takes away from the foundations of what makes a drag queen. Thus, to strip the 'drag' out of 'drag queen' would be like taking the eggs out of an omelet: one cannot have an omelet without using eggs just as one cannot be a drag queen without performing in drag.

> Schacht and Underwood present a contemporary view of drag queens:
>
> Others treat drag in the context of the gay community as more a transgressive action that destabilizes gender and sexual categories by making visible the social basis of femininity and masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, and presenting hybrid and minority genders and sexualities. (115)

This is the way in which I see drag: as means to destabilize and question society's beliefs of how we should see and perform gender and sexuality on a daily basis. This, of course, makes drag queening subversive and political: it is a rebellious act that attempts to subvert falsely naturalized social norms regarding femininity and masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality (and everything in between), and our contemporary usage of language. Additionally, drag queen

communities are often fearless in making people aware of other racial, gender, class, and sexuality minority groups.

Drag queening as a whole incorporates many minorities, and I believe that is due to the fact that in order to become a drag queen, one must become aware of not only the restrictions on oneself but on others as well. An example of the different potentials different drag queens have is to look at drag in South Africa. Schacht and Underwood use Amanda Lock Swarr's article, "Moffies, Artists, and Queens: Race and the Production of South African Gay Male Drag" and Jennifer Spruill's, "Ad/dressing the nation: drag and authenticity in post-apartheid South Africa," to

> demonstrate how drag can be used to create definitions of whiteness, blackness, and identities of authenticity in South Africa. More specifically, Swarr explores the ways in which urban drag produces and reifies that whiteness is not only inherently different but superior to Blackness while she finds those doing township drag have created their own unique, largely accepted identities--*moffies*, *skesana*, and *istabane*--within the sex-gender-sexuality systems of these localized contexts. Spruill shows us how a style of drag that features "traditional African" clothing is used to reify personal identities that embrace both being gay and what is increasingly seen as a more culturally authentic African way of being. (10)

According to both Swarr and Spruill, drag queening can be used as a method of defining one's race and authentic identity in South Africa. Swarr explains that "'urban drag'" reinforces the inherent difference between whiteness and blackness in South Africa, regretfully reinforcing the idea that whiteness is superior to blackness. But, Swarr's argument is that drag queening performed in the smaller towns of South Africa offers a positive space for drag queens to be unique and widely accepted. As seen above with European colonizers and hijras from present day India,

those who live in smaller towns in South Africa have added a third gender category to incorporate those who dress in drag (*moffies*, *skesana*, and *istabane)*, demonstrating a wide acceptance for drag queens. Thus, consequently, those who perform on a smaller scale in South Africa are often more accepted and, in fact, have several different identities to choose from. There is even a specific kind of drag that uses traditional African clothing, giving, what Spruill argues, an even more authenticated African identity and way of being.

This is one example of how drag queening has helped people to feel more comfortable with their genders and sexualities, especially in small town environments. Drag, by its nature, tries to incorporate people of all races, sexes, genders, sexualities, and other differences. Schacht and Underwood explore such an idea. They write:

> Other social identities that the performer brings to the stage, such as gay male versus transgendered, combined with the contextual expectations of the audience, seem to play important roles in whether the drag queen is transgressive or subversive. While most drag queens today appear to be more focused on being transgressive, in both image and practice, they nevertheless do suggest many subversive possibilities for performing gender, race, sexuality, and 'equality drag.' (14)

One's social identity will determine the way in which he/she will perform in drag. Theoretically, each individual would give a different performance in drag due to his/her unique upbringing. Combined with the audience, the performance will undoubtedly be seen as transgressive and, depending on the drag performer, subversive as well. The idea of 'equality drag' is one that is essential because, in order not to be hypocritical, drag performers should be open to every type of race, gender, sexuality, class, sex and so on; it is essential to our drag-beings to be the ones who can demonstrate to society that we can accept people in all their forms. For me, one of the main elements of performing in drag is to have the possibilities to transgress and subvert wrongly

established gender, race, sex, class, and sexuality norms, and I believe this should be imperative in each drag queen. If we are performing gender, race, sex, class, and sexuality at such a high level, we must be aware and accepting of all forms of being in order to educate and develop our society as positively as possible.

> Schacht and Underwood explore other ways in which drag queens are subversive: Perhaps key to understanding the subversive potential of the given drag performer are the identities that she/he brings to the stage. The majority of drag queens we have met over the years strongly self-identify as gay men, so it is perhaps not that surprising that their performances are often more sexist and masculine than subversive in intent when it comes to issues of gender. However, as the Taylor and Rupp article and the Blazer article[2] both insightfully illustrate, when some performers embrace a transgendered identity that is neither explicitly male or female but rather their own complex genders, then the potential for their performances to subvert sexist ideals appears to increase significantly. (12)

Schacht and Underwood's claim is that the best way to understand the "subversive potential" of a drag performance is based on the drag performer herself. They start out by stating that, because so many drag queens tend to be gay men, drag performances have a likelihood of being sexist and hyper-masculine in their performance; however, when a performer embraces a transgendered identity while on stage, that is to say, if the performer does not explicitly define his/her gender as male or female while performing, he/she has a much greater potential for subverting social sexist ideologies. This is the way in which I like to perform drag. I try to subvert any socially constructed ideology that I believe has been wrongly situated in society. To be a drag queen is an

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[2] Blazer, Carsten. "The Beauty and the Beast: Reflections About the Socio-Historical and
        Subcultural African Gay Male Drag." Germany: Free University Berlin, 2004.
 Rupp, L.J., Taylor, Verta. *Drag queens at the 801 Cabaret*. Chicago: University of Chicago
        Press, 2003.

act of political and sexual transgression and subversion, and in my case, to use this transgression and subversion as a form of public education.

In addition to Schacht and Underwood's claim above, they further their argument by stating, "Similarly, drag kings, often self-identifying as lesbian women, and men and women of color who are drag performers represent yet additional personal social identities with often very different, subversive limits and possibilities" (12). Each drag queen and king will be different in their potential for subverting societal constructions due to the fact that each performer will have had their own unique life experiences in regards to his/her race, gender, sex, class, and sexuality. Thus, all drag performances are going to have different transgressive and subversive potentials based off the unique life of the performer. Quickly going back to the discussion of performance theory, the reason each drag performance will be different is because, at the deepest level, the performance will be about the drag queen herself and the representation of her unique life through her drag performance.

Now that we have an understanding of where drag queening comes from and what it means to be a drag queen, I would like to make a clear definition of what I mean when I use the term 'drag queen.' To take from Schacht and Underwood, "To clarify, what we mean by 'drag queens,' it is important to point out that not all men who dress as women are drag queens. Other categories include transvestites or cross-dressers, generally straight men who wear women's clothing... " (114). They go on to say that drag queens "are gay men who dress and perform as but do not want to be women or have women's bodies..." (115). I would disagree with this definition for I do not believe you must be gay or a man to be a drag queen. To be a drag queen means to be someone who wants to challenge the established notions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and sex and subvert these notions through performance. Additionally, drag queens are people who will use heavy make-up, fabulous costumes, and their own unique performance style in order to break such

notions. Thus, one's sexuality and gender do no need to be gay and male, they can be straight and female, gay and transgendered, bisexual and non-gendered, or so on. It is my belief that anyone can and should do drag in order to experience a part of their self that they are told never to express. Therefore, I believe that it is imperative for any human to become aware of the fact that society has fabricated his/her very existence in order to reach a greater understanding of one's self.

There is a definition of 'drag queen' that Schacht and Underwood borrow from the 801 Girls, a troupe of drag queens from Key West, Florida, that I particularly like. They write,

> For our purposes, the most important distinction is one the 801 Girls make between 'female impersonators' who generally do celebrity impersonation and keep the illusion of being a woman, in contrast to drag queens who regularly break it in order to accentuate the inherently performative nature of gender and sexual meanings. Drag queens create their own-often multiple-personae and, in the case of the 801 Girls, adopt an 'in-your-face' style.' (115)

A 'female impersonator' is someone who adopts the caricature of an already established female celebrity while maintaining the illusion of being female, while, in contrast, a 'drag queen' is someone who breaks the illusion of being a female regularly in order to show the performative nature of gender and sexual meanings. Typically, a 'drag queen' will adapt characteristics of a famous, female performer in order to create their own, often fierce and fabulous, drag persona(e). Although this is not always the case, as we will see with one drag performer, World Famous *BOB*, this is often the path contemporary, up-and-coming drag queens choose above others.

It is necessary to distinguish the difference between 'female impersonator,' 'cross dresser,' and 'drag queen' because this type of terminology only exists in queer communities, and vary from group to group and individual to individual. It is also important to note that when I say 'drag queen' I may also be referring to 'drag kings,' although I will not explicitly state this; it is not my

desire to undermine drag kings, it is simply a choice to use one term over the other. Thus, with these terms now defined, we can finally progress to Butler's articles where she illustrates the ways in which drag queens can break society's restrictions on gender and language.

<p style="text-align:center">2</p>

Judith Butler, in her *Gender Trouble*, presents the idea that gender is, in fact, a fabrication of society. With this in mind, Butler writes, "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (186). According to Butler, if we accept that society has constructed our thoughts of gender through language and that a true gender is actually a societally fabricated concept, then gender can only exist in discourse; gender is only produced through the communication of one's principal self, i.e. how they discuss their own gender. Consequently, this means that we never know someone's "true gender" and Butler's argument is that there is no "true", "stable," or "primary" gender identity to begin with.

Butler furthers her argument by introducing drag queens. She writes, "I would like to suggest...that drag...effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (186). She claims that through the production of drag, we are capable of breaking society's restrictions of gender, both in the way in which people express their gender and in the way in which people believe that there is a "true gender." To use a personal example, by dressing in drag, I can completely confuse people because although I look like a man, I am adorned in female attire, thereby destroying any concept of gender that person might have had. Drag queens are capable of breaking down these restrictions and forcing people to see that assuming a gender binary is, in fact, incorrect: drag queens would not exist if this erroneously naturalized and dichotomized definition of gender were true. Thus, simply by existing as something that would

otherwise be undefinable within society forces people to re-question what gender is.

> Butler then extends her argument to the performative aspect of drag. She writes,
>
> The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer
>
> and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three
>
> contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and
>
> gender performance. (187)

Butler breaks down what exactly happens during a drag performance. To begin, drag queens play with the idea of distinct anatomies, so if a man dressed as a woman wears a bra while simultaneously accentuating his crotch, this would be one clear example of a gender performance. In fact, drag is a performance of gender, and to perform gender identity means accentuating what culture tries to define as male or female. For instance, instead of using a minimal amount of make-up, drag queens use a heavy amount; instead of short high-heels, drag queens will often use incredibly bright, loud, and extremely high high-heels. With this defined, we can safely say that performers such at Britney Spears, Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and so on, are, in fact, drag performers as well. Similar to drag queens, they accentuate that which is feminine when they go on stage. Then, to perform gender means that a drag queen can choose which gender they want to impersonate while on stage. They do not have to follow any rules or regulations on what gender they can perform; they are free to choose whatever they desire.

> Butler helps to break down these different dimensions of performance when she writes, "If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and gender, and gender and performance" (187). An example of what Butler means will be best to help understand what she argues. If a woman impersonates a man then impersonates a woman while on stage, then the gender is distinct from the performer while

simultaneously being distinct from the gender of the performance itself. This ultimately suggests, as Butler says, a dissonance between sex, gender, and performance which perhaps alludes to the idea of fluxing identities by separating all three "dimensions of significant corporeality." Thus, by performing in drag, one can break multiple layers of societally constructed concepts of sex, gender, and performance all at once.

> Butler furthers her argument,
>
> [I]t [drag]...reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself--as well as its contingency. (187)

Drag, she argues, uncovers the dichotomized aspects of gender which have been naturalized through the "fiction" of heteronormativity. To perform in drag means to enlighten the audience about the slavish structures that surround gender. Essentially, drag reveals the walls that have been established by society to restrict gender into a falsified binary. She continues to say, "Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of casual unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary." The pleasure of performing in drag is the awareness one has while on stage of the radicalness of the performance: one can disembody the assumed unities of gender and use this deconstruction as a means to perform. As a result, to be a drag queen takes an immense amount of courage in order to perform a multiplicity of previously established societal standards.

Arguably, one of the most commonly accepted societal standards is heterosexuality. Butler says, "In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of

their fabricated unity" (187-188). I understand the "law of heterosexual coherence" to be the "laws," or restrictions, that standardize heterosexuality in our culture; in other words, it is when one (often incorrectly) believes that it is safe to assume another's sexuality to be heterosexual. And what Butler says is that drag denaturalizes the "law of heterosexual coherence" through the performance of their recreated sex and gender on stage. Essentially, to perform in drag is the demonstration of a breakage of the heterosexual apparatus that constructs naturalized ideas of sex and gender. And how one breaks these heteronormative contingencies is what individualizes a drag queen.

Thus, Butler deems this act to be a "gender parody," and she is correct in saying so because drags are imitating an established regime and deliberately exaggerating it for entertainment. She writes further, "so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect--that is, in its effect--postures as an imitation" (188). Drag copies that from which there is no original: a simulacrum of gender. To be more accurate, drags take society's idea of a "true gender" and then copy and dramatize it in performance. According to Butler, the irony is that there is no "true gender" to begin with, so drags are copying an idea without the substance or qualities of an original. Butler claims, "[t]his perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggest an openness to resignification and recontextualization..." (188). Drag performance is the constant change of character and identity, ultimately to demonstrate an allowance for sex and gender "resignification and recontextualization." Fundamentally, this means that drag queens try to make us aware of the idea that we should redefine how we look at sex and gender and try to become more accepting of flexible and fluxing identities. However, this makes some people feel uncomfortable. Butler writes, "parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities" (188). Butler's claim is that through this

process of "gender parody," drags deny the cultural standard of a "true gender," which would give reason for some people not to want to go to a drag show: they do not want their seemingly comfortable, hegemonic world to be deconstructed.

Butler furthers her argument: "As imitations which effectively displace the meanings of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself" (188). So drag not only effectively copies the idea of a gendered self but mocks the very notion of its theorized originality as well. Butler explains how drag queens are capable of mocking the myth of a gendered self. She writes,

> In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction. (188)

To understand drags, we need to be aware that instead of accepting the idea of an "original identification" of a gendered self, drag queens have redesigned themselves through personal and historical influences based on the surrounding society, which were, at one time, subject to copied practices of other copied practices within society. There is no denying that drags are as subject to society's standards and practices as any other person; however, instead of following them blindly, they copy them and then recopy them. And after all these copies of different societal practices are combined, the result is that they then can construct an illusion, as Butler says, of a singular, gendered self or parody the very concept of such a construction in their performance. I would argue that they can do both: it is essential that drag queens first know societally accepted standards and practices of sex and gender so they can adopt them in order to construct their illusory image while simultaneously exploiting them. Fundamentally, drag queens need restricted thoughts on sex and gender in order to mock them to be a successful performer. A drag queen's situation in society

is a harmony between the miseducation of sex and gender and the reproduction, and arguably, a reeducation of them through performance.

Butler then goes on to explain how and why drag is a form of entertainment. She begins by citing Fredric Jameson's essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" where she explains that he thinks, "the imitation that mocks the notion of an original is characteristic of pastiche rather than parody." So Jameson's argument is that instead of parodying the idea of a gendered self, drag queens are only imitating, rather than mocking, that idea. She cites his essay, "'Pastiche is...a neutral practice of mimicry...without that [parody's] still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost it humor'" (188-189). Jameson argues that without the realization of one's hinging feeling for normalcy when something is being imitated, parody would not be comical. Jameson believes that pastiche is blank parody, parody without that feeling of normalcy, ultimately meaning that the comedy is lost. However, Butler responds to this by saying,

> The loss of the sense of 'the normal,' however, can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when 'the normal,' 'the original' is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one can embody. In this sense, laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived. (189)

Butler disagrees with Jameson's claim that with the loss of the feeling for "the normal" parody loses its charm because she claims that this sense for the loss of "the normal" is itself comical, especially when "the normal" is revealed to be a copy, a derivative. This is what happens in drag performance: the revealing of the fact that it is a false ideal to be capable of embodying "the normal" because there was no such thing as "normal" in the first place. Butler argues that it is with this realization (that gender was derived from a copy of which there is no original) that "laughter emerges" and the audience cheers.

Chapter 2

Peak Experiences and their validity as knowledge

1: What is a peak experience?

There does not exist any easy way of explaining exactly what a peak experience is. I would like to begin with the man who introduced this term to me, Abraham Harold Maslow (April 1, 1908 – June 8, 1970). He was an American professor of psychology at Brooklyn College, Brandeis University, New School for Social Research, and Columbia University; he created his famous hierarchy of needs, which stresses the importance of focusing on the positive qualities in people as opposed to treating them as a "bag of symptoms."[3] At the top of his hierarchy of needs and one his most famous theories is self-actualization. In order to understand peak experiences, we must first explore his theory of self-actualization.

In his most famous study, "Self-Actualizing People: A Study of Psychological Health," in Richard J. Lowry's book, *Dominance, Self-Esteem, Self-Actualization: Germinal Papers of A.H. Maslow*, Maslow states the goal of his paper. He writes:

> It [this paper] seeks to make three quite distinct points: (1) that there are real, observable, flesh-and-blood persons in the world who can be described as 'self-actualizing'; (2) that these self-actualizing persons are the most psychologically healthy specimens of humanity to be found; and (3) that it is they who best reveal what human nature truly is. (175)

"Self-actualization" refers to people who want to use their full potential. These people are not only real, but they live healthier lives and try to reveal the best in humanity through their actions. He argues that they are the healthiest specimens in the human race, and that is because they are more courageous, ambitious, and unafraid.

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[3] Hoffman, Edward. *The Right to be Human: A Biography of Abraham Maslow*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

With this said, Maslow then gives us a definition of self-actualization. He writes:

[S]elf-actualization, as yet a difficult syndrome to describe accurately. For the purposes of this discussion, it may be loosely describes as the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities, etc. Such people seem to be fulfilling themselves and to be doing the best that they are capable of doing. They are people who have developed or are developing to the full stature of which they are capable. (178)

Maslow begins, as do I, with explaining the difficulties of defining what "self-actualization" is exactly. The definition he provides us with is people who look to perform at their highest possible level; they feel the necessity to fulfill themselves through the full use of their talents, capacities, and potentialities. Above all things, they are looking for self-fulfillment. Robert Frager and James Fadiman write in their book, *Personality and Personal Growth:* "Most commonly, self-actualizing people see life clearly. They are less emotional and more objective, less likely to allow hopes, fears, or ego defenses to distort their observations. Maslow found that all self-actualizing people are dedicated to a vocation or a cause" (342). Self-actualizers are people who are aware of where they are, what they are doing, and how they are affecting those around them. They are often heavily immersed in their community and are dedicated to a certain cause, and one example is drag queens. Although this may seem like a generalization, many artists, including drag queens, want to be in a society that accepts and celebrates them, so they go looking for that kind of community. As we will see with World Famous *BOB*, who is most certainly a self-actualizer, she heavily immersed herself within the New York drag community in order to become better at her art. Additionally, according to Maslow, self-actualizers are more objective and live with less fear and anxiety in their lives. Often, they see the difficulties of the world simply as a part of their existence, never stressing over them too heavily.

Maslow then explains the benefits of living as a self-actualizer. He writes,

This [that self-actualizers are people who have developed or are developing to the full

stature of which they are capable] connotes also either gratification past or present of the

basic emotional needs for safety, belongingness, love, respect, and self-respect and of the

cognitive needs for knowledge and for understanding or, in a few cases, "conquest" of

these needs. This is to say that all subjects feel safe and unanxious, accepted, loved and

loving, respectworthy and respected.... (178)

He states that self-actualizers still look for basic comforts: safety, food, sex, water, and so on. They

openly seek out knowledge, understanding, and self-fulfillment. If these basic needs are present,

then the result is that self-actualizers feel more safe and less anxious, accepted in their community

and by themselves, and loved and capable of loving. Essentially, they are more grounded and

secure with who they are.

In order to gain a better understanding of self-actualization, we must turn to the Maslow's

hierarchy of needs. A visual aid will be best to further our understanding of his hierarchy (see next

page). Maslow created a pyramid depicting the levels of human needs, psychological and

physical. At the bottom of the pyramid are the "Basic needs or Physiological needs" of a human

being (food, water, sex, and so on), but when a human being ascends to the top of the pyramid, he

reaches self-actualization.
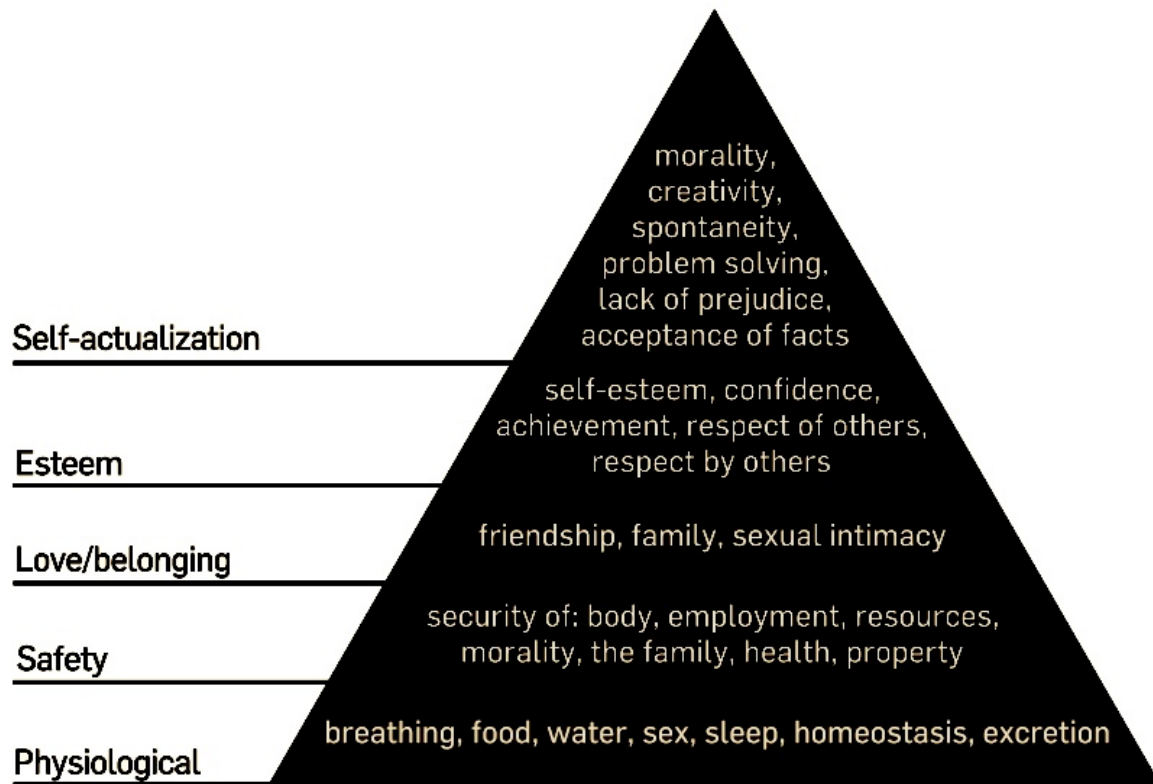
The "Need for Self-actualization" occurs when individuals reach a state of harmony and understanding. Once a person has reached the self-actualization stage, they focus on themselves, trying to build their own image. This may be accomplished by pursuing their own goals or by expressing themselves creatively, spontaneously, and/or happily.

For even further clarification, it is important to explain the type of creativity self-actualizers hold. Maslow writes,

> The creativeness of the self-actualized man seems rather to be akin to the naive and universal creativeness of unspoiled children. It seems to be more a fundamental characteristic of common human nature--a potentiality given to all human beings at birth.... (196)

The creativity Maslow speaks of is more along the lines of a "naive" or "universal" creativity,

meaning that it is a knowledge that, perhaps, we all know but are too afraid to confront (due to society, culture, so on). He claims that it seems to be more "fundamental," meaning that their creative work is fundamental to themselves: a creative and unashamed expression of the self. This is intrinsic to all human beings, but only those who actively seek out self-actualization will be able to perform at such a high level of creativity.

> According to Maslow, this creativity is humble because it is self-reflective:
>
> This creativeness appears in some of our subjects not in the usual forms of writing books, composing music, or producing artistic objects, but rather may be much more humble. It is as if this special type of creativeness, being an expression of healthy personality, is projected out upon the world or touches whatever activity the person is engaged in. In this sense there can be creative shoemakers or carpenters or clerks. Whatever one does can be done with a certain attitude, a certain spirit that arises out of the nature of the character of the person performing the act. (196)

Maslow claims that this unashamed creativeness is of an atypical nature, that is, not what society might see as "normal." Thus, although it is perfectly possible to express oneself unashamedly through writing or music making, the artistic outlet self-actualizers usually seek is not of these sorts. Maslow argues that it is a "special type of creativeness," one that healthfully expresses one's personality through their creative work. Additionally, this creative work will touch the world, more specifically, the community that this person is immersed in. Thus, Maslow claims that "[i]n this sense there can be creative shoemakers or carpenters or clerks" or, as I would like to add, drag queens as well. This is because at the deepest level, a drag queen's performance is about the expression of herself, thus instantaneously making her a self-actualizer. Maslow argues that whatever one does can be done with a "certain attitude," perhaps even a fierce and fabulous attitude, and should be done with a "certain spirit" of the performer, perhaps one of the desires to

shatter society's restrictions regarding sex, gender, race, class, and sexuality.

With self-actualization now defined, we can progress to peak experiences. In order to reach a peak experience we must first be self-actualizers. Frager and Fadiman give a very good reading of what Maslow means by "peak experiences." They write:

> 'Peak experiences are transient moments of self-actualization'...We are more whole, more integrated, more aware of ourselves and of the world during peak moments. At such times we think, act, and feel most clearly and accurately. We are more loving and accepting of others, have less inner conflict and anxiety, and are better able to put our energies to constructive use. Some people enjoy more peak experiences than others, particularly those Maslow called transcending self-actualizers.

They start by citing from Maslow's book *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, where he defines peak experiences to be "transient moments of self-actualization." Frager and Fadiman explain that this means that during peak experiences we feel more whole, integrated with our surroundings, self-fulfilled, and worldly-aware. It is during these moments when we can think more clearly, performer better, and feel less anxious or nervous, thereby allowing us to be more accepting of others, happier and more expressive, and constructive with our energy. Some people enjoy these moments more than others, but regardless, Maslow believes, as do I, that they are necessary to see the validity in life.

Maslow does not believe this to be a new concept that he created; in fact, it is the complete opposite. He claims in his book, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*,

> It has been demonstrated again and again that the transcendent experiences have occurred to some people in any culture and at any time and of any religion and in any caste or class. All these experiences are described in about the same general way; the language and the concrete contents may be different, indeed must be different. These experiences are

essentially ineffable (in the same sense that even the best verbal phrasings are not quite good enough), which is also to say that they are unstructured.... (72)

Maslow argues that these moments that he entitles "peak-experiences" have occurred time and time again, not restricted to a certain culture, class, religion, race, or any other kind of group. They can happen to anyone, anywhere. Maslow says that although these experiences are described differently, that is because every peak experience will differ from person to person, society to society. In fact, they will always be described differently because, at the heart of his argument, peak experiences are impossible to describe in words. It is like trying to describe a color to someone who has never seen color before; an experience must be lived rather than written for full comprehension. Thus, with language's incapacity to define them accurately, peak experiences are left unstructured. This is the magical part about them: they are uncontrolled and uncontrollable yet perfectly attainable.

Maslow furthers his claim by stating that it is not a surprise that since we must *experience* a peak experience, its description will be heavily reliant on the language we speak, the time we are in currently, and the culture we live in. He writes:

Small wonder it is then that the mystic, trying to describe his experiences, can do it only in a local, culture-bound, ignorance-bound, language-bound way, confusing his description of the experience with whatever explanation of it and phrasing of it is most readily available to him in his time and in his place. (72)

Because a peak experience is so dedicated to the time, place, and person, we are restricted within the confines of our culture and language when attempting to describe how we felt during this peak experience. In other words, as Maslow says, the description of the peak experience will be bound by our limits of culture, language, and knowledge, ultimately losing the validity of the experience. Maslow therefore claims, "I have, therefore, paid no attention to these localisms since they cancel

one another out. I take the generalized peak-experience to be that which is common to all places and times" (73). Maslow does not dwell on the multitude of different descriptions of peak experiences, but rather, decides to speak of them as a whole rather than individually.

If we look back on Schechner's *Essays on Performance Theory 1970-1976*, we see that he agrees entirely with Maslow; however, instead of calling them "peak-experiences" he refers to such moments as "Shamanic experiences." His definition of this is: "Among primitive peoples the creative condition is identical with trances, dances, ecstasies; in short, shamanism" (8). He later refers to these moments as "ecstatic moments" (9). We see how similar Schechner's "Shamanic experiences" are to Maslow's "peak-experiences." Schechner writes:

> Shamanic experiences are real and whole. Our interpretations diminish and fragment them--we want to make the experiences 'other worldly,' 'transcendental,' or 'fantasies.' But these experiences are the result of something which Cassirer notes about primitive thought. 'By a sudden metamorphosis everything may be turned into everything. [There is] the deep conviction of a fundamental and indelible *solidarity of life* that bridges over the multiplicity and variety of its single forms.'[4] Everywhere there are overlaps, exchanges, and transformations. (10)

As with Maslow and myself, Schechner feels the need to emphasize the actual existence of shamanic experiences. After asserting their realness, Schechner's claim, like Maslow's, is that by attempting to put these experiences into words (such as "other worldly," "transcendental," or "fantasies") diminishes their unique value. The quote he chooses from Cassirer reveals the essential point of peak experiences: we feel a oneness with our surroundings, as if everything around us is a part of us, that everything is connected to everything and we are all a part of a greater whole that we were incapable of seeing before. It is, in fact, a transformation of the self

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[4] Cassirer, Ernst. *Language and Myth*. New York: Dover Publications, 1920. Print.

into a smaller singularity, a sort of focusing and "zooming-in" of the self: after we have a peak experience, we know that a "*solidarity of life*" does exist, that death comes to all things and there are moments that are more valuable than others. Everywhere there are these kinds of transformations taking place, perhaps there are even transformations overlapping others' transformations, and this is because virtually everyone has had a peak experience.

I must speak of a peak experience's validity as knowledge. Maslow writes:

There is no doubt that great insights and revelations are profoundly felt in mystic or peak-experiences, and certainly some of these are, *ipso facto*, intrinsically valid as *experiences*. That is, one can and does learn from such experiences, e.g., joy, ecstasy, and rapture do in fact exist and that they are in principle available for the experiencer, even if they never have been before. Thus the peaker learns surely and certainly that life *can* be worthwhile, that it *can* be beautiful and valuable. There *are* ends in life, i.e., experiences which are so precious in themselves as to prove that not everything is a means to some end other than itself. (75)

There is no denying the immense impact of peak experiences. The "insights," as Maslow says, are so profound we cannot claim them to be otherwise because, by definition, they are real events that actually occur. Thus, we will, without fail, learn something from them: how to feel joy, ecstasy, rapture, and so on, even if we have never felt these emotions before. Through this knowledge, the experiencer learns that life is, in fact, worth living because moments like this can abruptly end. Peak experiences are so powerful because they prove that there are moments in life that are directed at making us understand that there may not, in fact, be anything beyond this very moment that we are currently experiencing: they force us to see that some moments do not have a greater meaning than for us to be fully present in the community that surrounds us, in whatever part of the world we may be, in any point in history. Peak experiences teach us how to live by seeing the

ends and therefore the beauty in life.

> Maslow pushes for another point: that we use these experiences to survive. He writes: My feeling is that if it were never to happen again, the power of the experience could permanently affect the attitude towards life...It is my strong suspicion that even one such experience might be able to prevent suicide, for instance, and perhaps many varieties of slow self-destruction, e.g., alcoholism, drug-addiction, addiction to violence, etc. I would guess also, on theoretical grounds, that peak experiences might very well abort 'existential meaninglessness,' states of valuelessness, etc., at least occasionally. (75-76)

Even if were never to attain a peak experience again, it would affect our attitude towards life permanently. If peak experiences help us see the rarity, uniqueness, and beauty in life, then they give us great positivity. So, then, if we were in a self-destructive, negative state, a peak experience could be a kind of cure; if we were to experience even one peak experience during moments of self-destruction (like suicide, alcoholism, and so on), it could alleviate the pain from negative thought. He goes even further to state that peak experiences could, theoretically, alleviate the pains of "'existential meaninglessness'" or personal feelings of "valuelessness," even if only temporarily. It is my belief then, and more than likely Maslow's as well, that peak experiences are a part of the human condition: we need them in order to survive. Additionally, not only do we need them to survive, I believe that humans strive to attain these moments continuously throughout our lives; they are a means for our continued existence.

2: How can we achieve peak experiences?

With self-actualization and peak experiences now "defined," in so many words, I would like to present two interviews I conducted with two fabulous drag queens. The first is Brian Mateo, who is Fuchsia Elegante when on stage, and the other is *BOB*, who is World Famous *BOB* when on stage. I have performed with both of them and they were more than happy to be

interviewed. I gave them three questions about drag queening, which I will address in the next chapter, but the fourth question was specifically about peak experiences and if they ever had one.

I will start with Mr. Mateo, who answered my questions in an e-mail as well as in an interview. I have both forms here. To begin, here is how I worded the question:

4) **For this question, I would like to ask: Have you ever had a Peak Experience? I am writing about Peak Experiences and Performances (originally conceptualized by Abraham Maslow) in my project, relating it to the idea that we want to come back to these moments again and again because they are so powerful.[5] If you have had one of these experiences, would you mind giving me a short summary of how you felt and what your thoughts were (if you were even thinking at all) during this moment? And finally, do you feel like you continue to strive for these types moments in your life?**

Written:

I've actually had two peak experiences. The first experience was when I did drag for the first time and had an amazing time. I felt good about the whole process, but when I saw pictures I started feeling remorse for what I did. Later I came to terms that this is something that I do to promote awareness and performance, and not something I do for people to mock me. If people did mock me it was because of their insecurities and they needed to be more educated around drag culture.

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[5] I defined a peak experience similarly to how I defined it in this chapter: 'Peak experiences are transient moments of self-actualization' [Maslow loosely defined self-actualization as 'the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities, etc.' Self- actualization is not a static state. It is an ongoing process in which one's capacities are fully, creatively, and joyfully utilized.]. A Peak Experience is when we are more whole, more integrated, more aware of ourselves and of the world during peak moments. At such times we think, act, and feel most clearly and accurately. We are more loving and accepting of others, have less inner conflict and anxiety, and are better able to put our energies to constructive use. Some people enjoy more peak experiences than others, particularly those Maslow called transcending self-actualizers.

The second actualization was last year at Bard when I performed drag during L&T for the First-Year Students. It was one of the first times where I saw it in my audience's eyes that this is something that they've been wanting for such a long time. Til this day students come up to me and tell me how much that performance meant to them because it helped them understand who they were and how to express themselves without anyone caring what they thought.

Oral:

The first peak experience I can recall was the first time I ever did drag. One of my friends was in law school and he was sort of like my big brother, my role-model, and he did drag and I made fun of him for that because I was so insecure about drag and of drag culture. I was like, 'Why do you do drag? Why do you want to be dressed as a woman and stuff?' With that kind of rationale, exactly with what you were saying about breaking [gender] binaries, I was like, that's my vision too. So, I had to do it. I did the performance. I enjoyed it. I loved it. When I got home the next day and I was looking at pictures of myself, I had a huge shock because I loved what I did. I wasn't ready for it, you know? I had to understand who I was there as a performer versus who I am as a person. And understanding that didn't mean I was going to be transgender, that didn't mean that I was trying to change who I was in terms of anything. I didn't want to be m-to-f, you know, this is a performance space. So, I started doing a little more research about that. I just did drag and there's a ton of people out there that are afraid of this idea, this peak experience, that I love what I did and people are complimenting me about it, but for some reason I feel some sort of remorse, because I know society is going to back-lash on me. And some of the issues I had with it was trying to land a job, trying to continue my reputation as a professional, parents finding out, anything that essentially would diminish who I was as an individual. So, it kind of reverted back to when I first came out, that I didn't want my sexual orientation to be my end-all-be-all for people

to see me and be like, "Oh, he's gay," without being like, "Oh, he's Brian, he's going to college, he's striving to be someone, he's Latino, he's a male." I didn't want this one experience to set in to saying that's who I was. So it took a lot of self-reflection for me to understand that I was okay with it. It took some time until I took the floor again and after I did that I was fine with just performing as Fuchsia Elegante.

The next peak experience was when I entered Bard, and I was helping to plan L&T last year, and it just happened to be that thing, you know, I did drag because I kind of just did a solo. So, they wanted me to do a drag workshop, and I was like, "Whoa! You want me as a professional doing what? What the hell is going on here?" I was also scared because with drag cultures comes campiness and if I am going to do it right, I am going to do it all. I also was scared of what is going to cross the line here and there. Bard, being a place of general acceptance and expression, I was given the freedom, and obviously, I was professional enough to educate and do what I had to do without using anything over-sexualized to get my point. I did me in a professional manner.

Me: It shows that being a drag queen can be done at a professional level.

Mr. Mateo: Exactly. It's about the art. There're different types of drag queens. There's drag queens that love choreography, there's the ones that dress up in these overly extravagant, beautiful outfits that I know won't be me because I can't afford those outfits, you know? And then there's those drag queens that are drag queens as activists, and I had to find my niche and what was great for me. That's why when you see me perform as a drag queen, I'm more of a choreographer, I'm more, "Hey, I'm going to wow you with my moves rather than look at what he's wearing." I noticed that after I did the show, I remember I did Lady Gaga's "Alejandro" and Christina Aguilera's "Vanity," I gave a little bit about drag culture, I explained a lot of being your self and self-expression, and that sometimes we have to have a little vanity in order to own our experiences but never be too cocky. Students were so acceptive of that in the end, and they really appreciated

the message I gave, and that, open doors if they needed to come to me and try to work on something that they wanted to accentuate, that they wanted to get more confidence, they wanted to learn how to be more themselves or explore different things. It showed me that not only am I doing a performance but I am also serving as an educator. So I would say, those are my two peak experiences: the coming to terms with what I was doing, and after I came to terms with it, understanding my role and my responsibility as a drag queen.

End.

Mr Mateo's first peak experience is unique because he had it after he had already done his show. Until I heard his story, I was thinking that in addition to breaking so many of culture's restrictions on language, sex, race, gender, class, and sexuality, drag queens will reach an even higher level of performance while on stage. Thus, doing the performance is part of the process to reach a peak experience, or at least that was my idea. According to Mr. Mateo, he did not have the peak experience until after he had done the show; it was not until he realized what he had done after he saw the pictures from his show that he was then elated to a peak experience. In other words, what drove him to reach his first peak experience was the realization of all the cultural and societal restrictions he broke while performing as a drag queen. For him, this realization was so intense the day after that it made him have a peak experience, and with that came the desire to want to do it again.

His second peak experience came after he came to terms with what he had done; it happened when he realized the great responsibility a drag queen has to her audience. He saw, as I have, that people absolutely love these kinds of performances because they are intensely self-expressive, and often it feels like people want to be performing along with you. Mr. Mateo realized that if he is going to perform as a drag queen, which he can do on a professional level, he must be an educator as well. Steven P. Schacht writes in his essay, "Beyond the Boundaries of the

Classroom: Teaching About Gender and Sexuality at a Drag Show,"

> Like most of the general public, the vast majority of my students strongly hold dichotomous, essentialist outlooks about what the categories female and male/gay and straight are supposed to represent and be. One way that I have found to challenge these oppressive worldviews, and also to queer my classes in the process, is to take my course participants to drag shows.... (225)

What Mr. Mateo realized was exactly what Schacht speaks about when he takes his students to drag shows. Mr. Mateo recognized that he needed to be a leader and an educator if he were to continue in drag; this is why he told his audience during L&T to come find him if they had any question or needed any help. It is imperative that drag queens raise awareness of the "dichotomous, essentialist outlooks" most people have and then positively exploit them. Schacht writes, "equality will not be realized until nondichotomous, truly new ways of relation to others are envisioned and acted upon" (226). Mr. Mateo, myself, and any other effective drag queens must teach our viewers to try to stop dichotomizing gender, sex, and sexuality and learn to see people for who they are, not how we would define them culturally. The lesson I look to teach is: we are all attracted to one another in some way, shape, or form, and therefore, we should not be afraid of expressing these attractions; thus, avoid trying to identify someone based on gender, sex, and sexuality because they are societal constructions that are too arbitrary and materialistic to define a person honestly. Obviously, this is very difficult to do, but that is the "homework" I assign people after my shows: if we are all attracted to each other, why be so afraid and/or ashamed to express it?

The second interview I conducted was with World Famous *BOB*. She was unable to answer the questions in an e-mail (she is a very busy drag queen), so instead I did the interview entirely over the phone. This is her response to the fourth question:

> So I feel really fortunate that I have a continuous string of peak moments in my life. I'm

not surprised by their presence because I am constantly looking to increase my actual

self-awareness, my participation in the universe, and the results, the effect that has on myself and

the people around me; so I'm someone who is openly seeking these experiences. I've found that

peak experiences, even though they're extremely enjoyable to me, can't be forced, that's the

magical part of them, and a peak experience that I can give an example of...also, on a side-note, I

always feel like I refer to these moments as 'historical moments.' What I mean by that is there's a

popular belief that as a human being dies, there is a very quick slideshow of certain moments in

your life that occurs, that flashes by, and that's a term some people use, I like 'flash by before my

eyes,' and then near-death experiences and so forth (clearly we haven't talked to anyone who's

died and come back), but I take that concept and when one of those peak experiences is

happening, I think to myself, 'save this moment,' like there's just a little side-note to myself to save

this moment, and then I go right back to the peak experience. And my hope is that as my spirit

leaves my body, I can watch all those peak experiences one after another. So, there's two parts to

this: one, I really thrive on these peak experiences and the second part is as an artist, I'm hoping

that I am mentally collecting, cause in my heart I am collecting those peak experiences, I feel like I

am trying to edit the film that flashes before my eyes before I exit my body. And that concept

came to me in my late twenties. I was watching the Butoh Rockettes, and I was in a show, it often

happens when I am heavily immersed in my community, which is when I am working with other

artists. And I was performing, and it was a really great show, and I was having a really great time,

then I stepped back and watched the next act from the audience. They are called The Butoh

Rockettes and they do Butoh performance in a glamorized nightclub setting, and they do this

extremely beautiful slow motion movement, which is signature to Butoh dance style, but there was

something about the atmosphere, who I was with, the love in the room, and this actual, visual

presentation: the perfect combination of all those things, and I just turned to the producer of the

event and I said, I had tears in my eyes, and I said, "This is one of the most beautiful moments ever. Is this what it looks like when you die?" And I didn't mean that in a morbid way, that's when I realized: "Oh, I'm collecting these moments. These moments of beauty are so great," and it's more than a beauty, "Oh look at that sunset, I'm going to collect that," it's an actual transformation that's taking place in the room that I'm essential to, that I'm apart of, that I'm involved in. And, I feel like that is the peak experience for me. It happens a lot when I step back from what I am involved in and I become a viewer, and that's when I realize the transformation that's actually occurring in the room.

And another peak experience I would like to give an example of is the first time I performed at Wigstock[6]. That was out on the piers and there was a crowd of, I'm assuming, it was about 10,000 people, but the reason why I had that peak experience was because of my desire to be in that spot, my desire to be amongst the people who have inspired me for so long. My dream when I moved to New York City was to be included in Wigstock, but I found that peak experiences often happen not as a bi-product of a goal finally being accomplished, but the spiritual wealth that's waiting for me there. So sometimes it's not about checking something off a list, it's about the actual moment of walking amongst my legends, the legends I admire, and feeling that mass community, feeling community in that large of a number, and being on stage and contributing, instead of asking something from it. There's just this flash in my mind, this is an historical moment in my personal story and my personal story is connected to all of these people's personal stories. So I feel like the peak experiences that I have are always an expression of how connected we are.

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[6] Wigstock was an annual outdoor drag festival that began in the 1980s in New York's East Village that took place on Labor Day. Traditionally, the festival would act as the unofficial end to the summer for the gay community of New York City. The name references the 1969 Woodstock Festival.

End.

It became obvious to me after reading Maslow that *BOB* is a self-actualizer. She continuously seeks to self-actualize and reach peak experiences, a term she equates with "historical moments." What is incredible about *BOB*'s peak experiences is that while they take place, she is capable of realizing that this experience is exceptionally unique and that it is vital for her to collect them. Her thought, as she explained it, is that before she dies, she will get a "slideshow" of all her peak experiences in her life before she leaves her body, a commemoration of what it meant for her to have been alive.

BOB's experiences happen when she has heavily immersed herself in her community. This is often how performance based peak experiences happen, although, as we saw with Mr. Mateo, this is not always the case. When *BOB* was at Wigstock, she was in front of ten thousand or more people, and she was the emcee. I have never performed in front of that many people, nor do I think I truly know how many people that is, but I imagine that the exhilaration would be remarkable; and it was, for it allowed *BOB* to reach a peak experience. I think the best way to describe it would be from Shechner's book *Essays on Performance Theory 1970-1976*. Schechner writes,

> [I]n a way that is difficult to explain but which I have experienced, 'by a sudden metamorphosis everything may be turned into everything.' That is, the director finds himself deeply and personally enmeshed with the performers and their problems; the environmentalist recognizes that action shapes space and space shapes action; the writer sees his text signify things he never intended; the audience is plunged into the difficulties of the performance so completely that their reactions regulate the tone and flow of the action.... (31)

Schechner also writes how difficult it is to explain a peak experience. He uses the phrase, "by a

sudden metamorphosis everything may be turned into everything," meaning that, during these moments, we become aware of the space and people around us and how we affect them; we see that we are part of their lives, their problems, and their existences, and realize that we have become, almost intrinsically, connected to them. As Schechner writes, "the environmentalist recognizes that action shapes space and space shapes action; the writer sees his text signify things he never intended." Peak moments allow us to see the deep connection we have to our space and our audiences. *BOB* was so deeply involved with Wigstock (it was a dream of hers after all) and she became so a part of her audience's lives that in that moment she was able to reach a peak experience. Her belief is that "the peak experiences that I have are always an expression of how connected we are," which correlates perfectly with Schechner's concept that "the director [*BOB* in this case] finds himself [or herself] deeply and personally enmeshed with the performers and their problems...," so much so that "their reactions regulate the tone and flow of the action." The kind of peak experience Schechner and *BOB* speak of is one of a heightened awareness of the connections we have to ourselves amongst our audience and the artists (and/or legends, if we are lucky) we work with.

In a performer's world, there are two types of people: ones that entertain and ones that observe, and both are necessary in order to achieve moments like peak experiences. That is not to undermine the peak experiences one can have without an audience, but my argument is that the unique way a drag queen experiences a peak experience is directly related to her audience. She needs a crowd, and therefore a society, in order to perform; ultimately, without society's restrictions and (perhaps) restricted people, a drag queen could not perform to her highest potential.

Unlike an athlete in a sports game, where one must abide by the rules in order to perform at one's highest level, a drag queen in her performance needs to break the rules in order to perform at her highest level. Thus, the drag queen's peak experience offers a different model for peak

experiences: the implicit, interpersonal communication that occurs during the performance is spiritual, moral, educational, social, ethical, and political. A drag queen's peak experience intensifies as she takes on all of these aspects during a performance because she expands what the self is and/or can be. Ultimately, a drag queen, through individual self-realization, can theoretically reach social-realization through her performance, making her audience aware of their (perhaps) too heavily restricted way of living and thinking. Therefore, if the performer is good enough, she could, theoretically, not only attain a peak experience for herself but for her audience as well.

Chapter 3

Ms. Vanilla Puddin' and her purpose

I had a peak experience as my alter ego, Ms. Vanilla Puddin' (MVP), while I was in Mendoza, Argentina. I found a small gay bar where I asked if I could perform and they told me that I could. I was thrilled to think that, having already performed in New York, I was now going to perform in another country. However, before I expound on my life as a drag queen, I would like to present the rest of the interviews with Mr. Mateo and World Famous *BOB*. This will provide wonderful insight into the drag culture I am part of.

I chose these two drag queens because of my close friendship that I have with both of them. Additionally, they both are incredibly intelligent and I knew they would be very helpful with regards to this chapter. I would like to mention that World Famous *BOB* is my drag mother. And a drag mother is someone who teaches someone else how to do drag. I am so proud to have such an intelligent, beautiful, and fabulous drag mother to help me out when I need it the most.

Here is the first interview with Mr. Mateo:

1) **What is your drag name/persona? Do you live as your drag personification in your everyday life?**

My drag name/persona is Fuchsia Elegante. She was born on May of 2010 because I wanted to show everyone that I can perform drag and be a professional (in the euro-centric way) without compromising one or the other.[7] I do not live as Fuchsia in my everyday life, but I incorporate her in my personal and professional career as often as I can.

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[7] Remember that he did this because he was insecure about expressing himself through drag initially. Afterwards, however, he realized his own potential and subsequently fell in love with drag and its culture.

2) **Do you consider what you do as a drag queen a political act?**

I do consider Fuchsia to be a political act because I want people to understand that they can be who they want to be without compromising one identity over another. Fuchsia is also a feminist, and the songs that I do mostly center around empowering other individuals.

3) **Can you think of an instance when breaking gender norms changed the way you or someone involved used language? For instance, did you or someone involved appear to be held back, more open, very restricted, and so on, when approaching you in drag?**

When performing drag, it is sort of an expectation that anyone can say anything as long as it's witty. Drag queens have to have that "cut throat" wittiness in order to gain the respect from their peers. If you want to wear those heels, you have to show that you can wear them with attitude. I have not had an instance where someone disrespected me for doing drag. I try to use my other abilities (choreography) to stun the crowd and show them that I am more than just a guy wearing a wig up on that stage. You have to build up your own street credit in order for people to understand [that] they cannot mess with you and [to] respect your performance.

End.

Mr. Mateo's drag side, Fuchsia Elegante, was born because she had the desire to express herself through drag performance while maintain professional; in other words, Mr. Mateo wanted to do drag as Fuchsia Elegante while maintaining his career at Bard. He does not live as his drag persona all the time; however, he does not mind bringing in personality traits of Fuchsia Elegante into his everyday life, such as female empowerment, progressive thought, fearlessness, and so on. By doing so, he wants to demonstrate to his colleagues, friends, and even family that he does not privilege one identity over the other; essentially, he is unafraid to perform as an employee of Bard and as a drag queen.

Mr. Mateo finds security performing in drag while being an employee for Bard (and that

could be said for myself, except as a student not an employee), and this is partly because Bard is such an open and progressive institution; it is almost as if Bard asks us to express ourselves freely, regardless of race, class, sex, gender, sexuality, and so forth. However, even if Mr. Mateo were not working at Bard, I am sure he would search for a place where he could perform drag and still have a steady income. This is a common occurrence, and World Famous *BOB* speaks of why this is the case in her interview, which I will present shortly.

Mr. Mateo gives a great explanation of how a drag queen can successfully survive in society: wittiness. If we do not have that "'cut throat'" sense of humor combined with impeccable timing, the point of our performance could be lost. Essentially, we must be good at the art of drag queening in order to teach our audience effectively. And Mr. Mateo believes that we need to have sharp, witty, and big personalities, and then, combined with good choreography or other means of performance, we can stun the crowd. Thus, with a fierce attitude, a drag queen can build up her reputation in order to gain more supporters and fans to follow her.

Mr. Mateo's desire to create a drag persona, therefore, came from the desire to express himself unashamedly, and, equally important, to teach others as well. He spoke of allowing ourselves to be vain enough to the point of understanding our self-potential but not too much where it becomes campiness. Thus, a drag queen must undertake a balancing act: if we are too obsessed with *ourselves* and *our* appearance, we will forget that we are trying to teach *other* people while we are performing. Thus, although at the heart of any performance is the performance of the self, it is through the understanding of the self that we can then comfortably teach others.[8] I concur with this thought: it is necessary to be unashamed of the self in order to perform effectively. And one's drag persona is a part of the self: a flamboyant, rule-breaking extension of it.

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[8] This is a reference to chapter 2.

The next interview with World Famous *BOB* explores her life as an artist, and the challenges she has overcome. Here is what she said:

1) What is your drag name/persona? Do you live as your drag personification in your everyday life?

My drag name is World Famous *BOB*, and I actually legally changed my name about 6 years ago now, so my first name is World, my middle name is Famous, and my last name is *BOB*, legally on all of my documents. And the reason why I did that is because I do live with my drag persona 24/7, but I have levels. My drag persona is exactly that: it's a persona. It's a shiny, lacquered, glittered version of myself. So, it's a high intensity version of the person I already am, and a lot of times drag queens, kings, or anybody in the drag industry, will have a character. And then when they are out of character, for example: my drag mother is Jackie Beat, and Jackie Beat is this amazing character she's created based on her real personality, but it's also a character. And when Jackie's not in drag, she isn't Jackie Beat; her humor is recognizable, but she doesn't live as that persona, it's a character. So there's drag characters and there are people who have personas, and I did develop a completely different character of myself but I've done it as a super-sonic version of myself, which is more persona based. So, how I like to distinguish the difference between my on-stage persona and who I am off stage is: on-stage I'm World Famous *BOB* and off-stage I'm *BOB*. And what that does is that just gives me a little bit of separation so that I don't feel really [like] I have to be on all the time, and I'm able to connect to people in a more genuine way when I am not on stage.[9] And then, it also gives me the function of being a superhero when I am on stage, and one of the benefits of that is, say I have a drag show

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[9] Just to clarify, what she means is that by separating her on and off-stage personas, she was able to have more genuine relationships with people because she was not exhausted from trying to be World Famous *BOB* all the time. In this way, she conserved her energies and was able to have better experiences both on and off-stage.

and I am not feeling well: well, you know, *BOB* might be a little under the weather, but World Famous *BOB* can do anything. So it's just really tapping into that superhero version of myself, and I've found that that's really, for me, convenient to actually live with my persona but to have different levels of that persona. In my twenties, I was World Famous *BOB* 24/7; it was a lot to hang out with me, it took a lot of energy.

Me: That sounds like so much fun!

World Famous *BOB*: Yeah it was really fun, but I got to a point where I wanted to hone my craft more, but when you do that, you need time off as well.

2) **Do you consider what you do as a drag queen a political act?**

Yes, I consider being an artist of any type in the United States of America a political act. I feel we live in an environment that only supports the very mainstream, politically-approved arts, for example classical music, ballet, and even then, those are types, those [are] functions of art: the support for them is even unique at best. In the United States of America, it's a very difficult decision to decide to become a full time artist, whether it's in the performing arts, visual arts, or even a writer, any type of creative expression: unless you're making money, it's frowned upon. You can ask any parent, "Oh, do you want your kid to be an artist?" most of them will say, "That'd be great, but they need a back-up plan." So there's this underlying fear of not being able to live off of your art in the United States of America, and that's based on the fact that there's very little funding to the arts' scope. So I feel like if anyone takes a stand and becomes an artist or performer, the further they are from the mainstream acceptance version of that [the harder it will be to support yourself], and drag has become more mainstream and acceptable with the help of people like Ru Paul and his hit show "RuPaul's Drag Race," but it depends on where you live. It's still a very confrontational choice in the arts [to be a full time artist], and [so] I feel like being an artist is a political act and being a drag queen is a radical political act.

3) Can you think of an instance when breaking gender norms changed the way you or someone involved used language? For instance, did you or someone involved appear to be held back, more open, very restricted, and so on, when approaching you in drag?

I have a funny example of that, actually. When I was about twenty-two years old, I was living in San Francisco and I identified as a male during the day and a drag queen at night (a hyper-version of a female that I created). I was out clubbing one night, and I was approached by a gay male, and he hit on me. I took it as him being really friendly because I didn't know what his assumptions were, and he assumed because of the level of my drag and my speech, and how I carried myself, and where I was, that I was a biological male. It has made a difference in the fact that I used to actually date gay men, not a ton of them but a handful of them, because when they first approached me they were under the assumption that I was male as well.

Me: It was the way in which you changed your language that changed their way in which they approached you.

World Famous *BOB*: Absolutely, I was performing language in such a way that they actually thought I had the opposite gender. In the specific incident I'm thinking of, we dated for a couple months even after, clearly, the statement was made that I [was] the opposite gender. It was after a couple months that he was so confused by the situation that he could not remain in that relationship because he was so confused. I don't think it was so much about his own sexuality either; he came to me and it was that he identified me in such a male-gay way and [it was] the fact that I wasn't actually. That was the reason for the break up. What are you going to do?

End.

When asked the first question, *BOB* gives us a very clear idea of how she views her drag persona. That is, during her twenties, she was World Famous *BOB* all the time, meaning that she was the "lacquered, glittered version of" herself all day, everyday, but this exhausted her;

she decided to create different facets or "levels" of herself, and in this way, she began to distinguish who she was on stage versus off. This is a psychological distinction, and it was so strong that even if *BOB* were sick, World Famous *BOB* could still perform. In fact, she was just in a show I saw where *BOB* fell remarkably ill before a dress rehearsal but World Famous *BOB* was impeccable while rehearsing on stage. *BOB* has honed her level of performance so craftily that regardless of whether one "character" is sick, the other is not: she is flawless when she switches from one to the other.

BOB says that we create characters and hyper-versions of ourselves so that when we are onstage we can shine and when we are offstage (although we can still shine) we can cease performing at such high levels. Essentially, by switching "characters," we can have more genuine relationships with people off-stage, and, I will argue, on-stage as well. By understanding the complexities of ourselves on *and* off-stage, we can enhance both these understandings of ourselves even further. Once *BOB* separated herself from World Famous *BOB* back in her twenties, she was then able to become more relaxed and comfortable while not performing on-stage; this separation allowed her to "hone my craft more." Drag forced *BOB*, as it does anyone who wants to perform it, to understand that performance on-stage is separate from off-stage, and that in order to perform at our highest level, we must understand the complexities of both.[10]

In regard to the second question, *BOB* makes a very intriguing examination of our society. She claims that to be an artist in the United States of America is, in itself, a political act; moreover, to be a drag queen in the United States of America is a radical political act. This is because the further we are from mainstream culture, the harder it is to make money. And as *BOB* observes, if we do not make money, we are frowned upon by society. So, if living as a full-time artist often means living in fear of a non-stable income, living as a full-time drag queen

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[10] Remember that Mr. Mateo had this realization as well.

would mean living in fear, practically all the time, of a non-stable income combined with societal non-acceptance. Thus, as we see with Mr. Mateo, it is easier to have a job where we are accepted both as drag queens and professionals, yet this is difficult to come across; however, if it does, it is can be wonderful. The ultimate goal though, as *BOB* argues, is that it would be better if we could live as self-supportive drag queens or artists of any kind. For me, I would like to begin my career as a drag queen alongside a well paying career in order to ground myself. *BOB* currently lives as a full-time artist in New York City, and she acknowledges the immense difficulty of this, yet recognizes that the self-fulfillment and happiness that comes from it are worth the difficulties.

BOB then recounts an experience of how her language changed others' outlooks on who she was while she was in drag. In her twenties, she identified specifically with gay men because those were the individuals she felt the most safe with and who understood her the most. By identifying as a gay male, *BOB* actually started to date gay men because they thought she was a gay man. Even when it was clear that she was not a biological man, some men continued to date her. Eventually, though, they broke up because they were too confused as to why she would identify as a gay male when she was not biologically male. I would like to present a possible explanation for why her ex-boyfriends were so confused.

BOB could identify with her gay male friends with the same linguistic and cultural standard; however, the issue that arose was the dissimilarity of gender and sexuality. I would like to quote from Schacht's *The Drag Queen Anthology*, once again, to clarify. He writes in the essay, "Beyond the Boundaries of the Classroom: Teaching About Gender and Sexuality at a Drag Show," "Because of my drag experiences, I believe I am starting to truly develop an intuitive understanding that there are as many genders and sexualities in the world as there are people" (227). I also would agree with Schacht's implication that gender and sexuality should not be so severely restricted within society, and that our genders and sexualities can and should be seen on

an individualistic level. There are definitely similarities in the ways in which we can identify

ourselves in our culture; however, the currently placed gender binary, and similarly, the restricted

idea of a "normative" sexuality continue to be inappropriately enforced. Thus, instead of

restriction, we should come to terms with the fact that we are all unique and need not to be defined

so forcefully.

Although Schacht speaks of "drag experience" from only an observational perspective, I

am certain that these thoughts align with what *BOB* must have been coming to terms with in her

twenties due to her experiences in drag, as well. When she came to realize the potential of

breaking society's restrictions on her gender, sex, and sexuality, she began to identify with gay

men because they were the people who were most similar to her: she is misunderstood in

contemporary culture if she is to be placed in the norms of heterosexuality and "womanliness," just

as a homosexual man is misunderstood in contemporary culture if he is to be placed in the norms of

heterosexuality and "manliness". With this stated, we can begin to see why *BOB* was

identifying as a gay male: she was in alignment with every level of identification I have explored

thus far (linguistic, cultural, gender, sexual orientation [queer as opposed to heterosexual]), except

for sex. *BOB* has always been a biological female, yet after coming to understand that the rules

of society can be broken, I believe she thought that because she shared so many similarities with

gay men, she did not have to be so concerned about the anatomical aspect of identity in order to be

a gay male. Thus, *BOB* transgendered to a male in order to subscribe to the identity of a "gay

male."[11] This was the identification that was the most similar to *BOB*'s lifestyle in San

Francisco, but when people do not see the complexities of identification, they become confused, as

did the gay men she dated. In the end, however, the biological difference was too overwhelming

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[11] To clarify, transgender is defined as "a person appearing or attempting to be a member of the opposite sex, as a transsexual or habitual cross-dresser." ("Dictionary.com")

for the gay men, so they broke up with her.

BOB has ceased identifying as a gay male and, I believe, she presently prefers the term "drag queen" and/or artist above others. In truth, there is not an adequate categorization for who she is, or for who I am, or for whoever is reading this for that matter. Our identities cannot and should not be summed up into one or two simple words; these are linguistic mechanisms to attempt to categorize us easily in society. The truth is that we are all unique: we all have a unique gender, sexuality, sex, race, class, religion, or any other societal categorization. It is my belief that society does not like people who do not use its terminology because that marks those people as different; and in many cultures, "different" is not good. To be "different" is to be "weird," but this to me is evidence of blatant prejudice. Instead, it would be for best for us all to embrace our unique genders, races, classes, sexes, religions, and so on as opposed to attempt to overgeneralize them on a daily basis. We are all unique; this is part of what makes our world so beautiful.

I would now like to bring the discussion back to my life as a drag queen. Truthfully, I do not wish to identify myself under any "societally appropriate" identification. Yes, I am a drag queen, yes, I am male, and yes, I am queer, but I would rather people learn who I am as opposed to trying to define who I am. Thus, a part of who I am is a drag queen, a part of who I am is male, and a part of who I am is queer, but there are more complexities, as with any human being. I have already argued that with the creation of language came the creation of civilization. With civilization and language comes culture, and, furthermore, with language comes the necessary means of identifying ourselves within that culture. Once identified within that culture, we often become fond of it. I am speaking of national identity. I have lived abroad in Japan, France, and Argentina, learning and studying all three languages and cultures. Each experience was unique and eye-opening; I learned more abroad about people and their cultures than anywhere else. Specifically, I learned that no culture is "better" than another: rather, they are all uniquely different.

And, I learned, as stated above, with every culture comes nationalism. This was true in every country where I lived. People, often, really do hold a tremendous amount of pride for their home town and country. In fact, it was rarer to find people who did not like theirs, and these people were often other students studying abroad with me; however, do not think I do not love where I am from, which is Colorado, because I do love it very much. My point is that people who often do not like their home eagerly seek other places in the world to explore. I have always actively had a natural inclination to seek foreign people, places, and experiences in order to expand my own thoughts and perspectives. This is why I chose to study abroad a third time, and this time in Argentina.

My trip to South America is unforgettable to me, and mostly due to the fact that I had a peak experience while performing in drag at a gay club, La Reserva, in Mendoza. This performance was particularly exceptional for me because of the unique situation I placed myself in. I was not from Argentina, so I immediately was breaking the national "non-marked category," which is a concept I learned from Pierre Bourdieu in his book, *Masculine Domination*. A non-marked category is something that is assumed; for instance, as North Americans, the non-marked category for gender is male. Bourdieu writes, "It has often been observed that, both in social perception and in language, the masculine gender appears as non-marked, in a sense neuter, in opposition to the feminine, which is explicitly characterized" (9). The masculine image is assumed because of its opposition to the feminine. Thus, we assume men to be those we speak of if we are uncertain of the gender; in other words, it is men we "naturally" revert to when the gender is unspecified.[12] To put this on a national level, I was a marked category in Argentina

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[12] According to Bourdieu, "It is remarkable...that one finds practically no myths justifying the sexual hierarchy...and the myth aimed at rationalizing the 'normal' position of man and woman in sexual intercourse..." (9). Thus, even to have a non-marked category is irrational because nowhere in history can we find a rational explanation as to why we normalize the position of a man above a

because I was not Argentinian, and this was the first societal expectation that I was breaking.

Mendoza, Argentina is a very small town in a very rural part of Western Argentina surrounded by

desert. That is to say, it was a very different culture for me to immerse myself in. Additionally, I

am non-heterosexual, very white (I most certainly stood out because of how white my skin is), a

native English speaker, and North American. Essentially, I was remarkably different from

everyone else.

Thus, my identification while in Argentina was unique to the typical Argentinian because I

was dissimilar linguistically, culturally, nationally, and in my sexual identification as well.

However, I must say that in La Reserva my sexuality was pretty similar to many of the audience

members there. So, on top of the many boundaries a drag queen breaks normally that I have

previously discussed, I was transcending linguistic, national, cultural, gender, sexuality, and even

race and religious norms when I chose to perform at La Reserva. My argument from my last

chapter is that the more norms a drag queen can break, the more intense a peak experience she can

have. This was the case.

I danced to Lady Gaga's "Lovegame" on a Tuesday night at 2:30 in the morning. The

majority of my study-abroad program, about 25 people, showed up, and the bar was packed with

about 75 others.[13] After my performance, I spoke in front of the entire crowd in Spanish for

several minutes. However, I was so overwhelmed during that conversation that I barely remember

having it. Immediately after I stopped talking with the drag hostess, I walked backstage and

realized what I had done: not only had I broken the many gender and sexuality norms inherent in

drag performance, I also had broken national, cultural, and linguistic ones as well. I was so proud

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woman in the sexual hierarchy. Additionally, we cannot find a rational explanation as to why we
repeat this train of thought with regards to sexual intercourse as well. Therefore, it is simply
irrational for the human to do what it has done in the past centuries.

[13] Attached to this project is a DVD with all my performances, including this one.

of myself and my achievement that I was elevated to a feeling that I would describe as a peak experience. Honestly, it was so overwhelming at the time I could hardly recognize what I had just done in its entirety. When my friends came running up to me screaming, "Oh my god, Landon! We are so proud to be your friend," I still was deep in shock. Their hugs helped bring me back to my physical state at the bar, back in Argentina once again. Those few minutes between the end of the show and getting the hugs I do not really remember. I was so elated that I had mentally detached myself from Argentina and flew into a greater understanding of who I was and what I am meant to do while I am on this planet. In essence, I want to break the irrational and enigmatically naturalized restrictions on societal identification, globally. Part of my duty as MVP is to unbalance societal equations. And the more erroneously placed equations there are, the more intense of a peak experience I can expect.

Chapter 4

What it means to be human, a response

It would be beneficial to the reader to have a better comprehension of the man who brought us evidence for peak experiences and their validity as knowledge. I have come to realize that it is not easy to introduce any human, really, and it would be a hypocrisy for me to try to identify Abraham Maslow in a simplistic way. So rather, I will have Henry Geiger introduce him via his introduction in Maslow's *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* because he starts at Maslow's gender, which I am not entirely opposed to because Maslow did identify as a man. Geiger writes, "[H]e [Maslow] must first be thought of as a man, and then as one who worked very hard at psychology, or rather, who rendered his growth and maturity as a man into a new way of thinking about psychology...he gave psychology a new conceptual language" (xv). Geiger initially identifies Maslow as a man, then he describes him as a man who was able to change the language of psychology. This is something equivalent to commentary we hear with regards to the works of Freud, Jung, and others who have greatly influenced the language (and therefore) the fundamental thoughts behind modern psychology. However, dissimilar to Freud, Maslow decided to branch off to a more positive aspect of psychology. Maslow writes in *Toward a Psychology of Being*, "To oversimply the matter somewhat, it is as if Freud supplied to us the sick half of psychology and we must now fill it out with the healthy half" (5). Maslow declared that the "usual Freudian picture" was, quite simply, the negative aspects of the human being and that he would begin his research in positive studies of human psychology.

For Maslow, instead of following, as many have and still do, Freud's studies of psychology, he chose to explore the more positive depths of the human instead. This is where he discovered peak experiences. He writes, "Perhaps this healthy psychology will give us more possibility for controlling and improving our lives and for making ourselves better people. Perhaps

this will be more fruitful than asking 'how to get *unsick*'" (5). This is to say that perhaps if we

study the positive quality of the human being and learn to trust our intuitions regardless of our

insecurities and weaknesses, we will come to embrace a different perspective and way of

becoming self-fulfilled and happy. If we do not regard people within our communities as "sick,"

then perhaps that word will become extinct, and a different, more understanding set of definitions

will replace it. As Geiger writes, "This sort of research, he [Maslow] often pointed out, gives us a

fresh and encouraging view of mankind. It shows you what *can* be" (xvi). This way of positive

thinking toward the human condition opens up endless possibilities for what it means to be human;

that is to say, there are endless definitions of what it means to be human.

So where did Maslow's inspiration come from? Maslow writes:

My investigations on self-actualization were not planned to be researched and did not start

out as research. They started out as the effort of a young intellectual to try to understand

two of his teachers whom he loved, adored and admired and who were very, very

wonderful people. It was a kind of high-IQ devotion. I could not be content simply to

adore, but sought to understand why these people were so different from the run-of-the-mill

people in the world. These two people were Ruth Benedict and Max Wertheimer. They

were my teachers after I came with a Ph.D. from the West to New York City, and they

were most remarkable human beings. My training in psychology equipped me not at all for

understanding them. It was as if they were not quite people but something more than

people. My own investigation began as a prescientific or nonscientific activity. I made

descriptions and notes on Max Werthiemer, and I made notes on Ruth Benedict. When I

tried to understand them, think about them, and write about them in my journal and my

notes, I realized in one wonderful moment their two patterns could be generalized. I was

talking about a kind of person, not about two noncomparable individuals...I tried to see

whether this pattern occurred elsewhere, and I did find it elsewhere, in one person after

another. (42)

Maslow found his inspiration from two of his old professors. In them, he discovered the

microcosm for his radical idea of the existence of self-actualizers. In other words, he studied these

two professors and saw how happy and fulfilled they were compared to the "run-of-the-mill

people," which I took to signify those citizens who never question, but rather abide by, mundane

and pre-established societal norms. He began to see through his own descriptions that he was

describing more than just two people, but rather, a surprisingly substantial portion of the

population. And so he decided to further his research. He did studies with students at several

different Universities, never even using the term "peak experiences," but rather, "happiest moments

in your life" to study how language affected their descriptions.[14]

Through all this research, he found a certain group of people. Geiger writes, "'Healthy

People' is the way he described these subjects, and later spoke of them as embodying

'full-humanness'" (xvi). His two professors he found illuminated an entirely new and identifiable

group of people within the human spectrum: one that was focused on self-fulfilment and happiness,

self-actualization and peak experiences, but he had not yet found this language for them. What he

discovered was a group of people dedicated to a happy and healthy existence within their worlds

as opposed to a decrepit and deteriorated one. He found the opposition to negativity and was eager

to explore what he was thinking would be uncharted territory. However, as he discovered, this

group of people has already been described in many ancient texts[15], so it was not completely new

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[14] For further research into his numerous experiments on how to get peak experiences from childbirth, classical music, or other ways, see: Maslow, Abraham. *Toward a Psychology of Being.* New York: Von Nostrad Reinhold Company, 1968. Print.

[15] One example is Schechner's discussion in *Essays on Performance Theory 1970-1976* regarding the *shaman* and shamanistic culture, where "shamanistic experiences", an equivalent terminology to "peak experiences," occurred often.

material he was working with. That said, in our current culture, it was new material, or, perhaps instead of "new," it was forgotten material. Maslow resurrected the positive qualities in the study of human psychology.

> These studies were to prove the limitlessness of human potential. Geiger writes,
>
> There is no neglect of weakness, badness, or what used to be called 'evil,' in Maslow's work. It was natural for him to reach a Socratic position--the view that most if not all the evil in human life is due to ignorance. His principles of explanation--developed from the 'givens' of self-actualization and the peak experience--were useful for understanding weakness, failure, and meanness, and he had no inclination to ignore these realities. (xvii)

By reconstructing the positive side in the study of human psychology, Maslow found a way to banish ignorance, and therefore, the hatred and evils that follow alongside it as well. Ironically, it sounds as if he found a "cure" for the "sickness" Freud put us in. This, however, would not be the appropriate terminology Maslow would use; from his perspective, we were never "sick," we were, more than likely, simply ignorant in one respect or another with regard to whatever our "sickness" may have been. Maslow's writings on education and discipline of the self were some of the most influential pieces I read by him because he never sought to run away from any sort of situation, but rather, to face it head on unashamedly. We were not to fear the self or its mysteries but to trust them.

Maslow was a challenge both to psychology and sociology. He wanted to see every individual and their unique potential; believing that a better psychological understanding of the self will help the human to better interact socially with others. John F. Glass quotes Maslow in his essay "Toward a Sociology of Being: The Humanistic Potential." Glass writes, "*This psychology* [humanistic psychology][16] *is not purely descriptive or academic; it suggests action and implies*

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[16] "During the 1950s, humanistic psychology began as a reaction to psychoanalysis and

consequences. It helps to generate a way of life not only for the person himself within his own

private psyche, but also for the same person as a social being, a member of society" (192). We

must learn from our mistakes in order to gain personal knowledge which will help us to understand

who we are in a social and private space. And the more understanding, independent, and

grounded an individual is, the more secure he/she will be when placed in a social scene. This,

then, will bring comfort to others because to see and talk with someone who is secure with their

insecurities is rare and often highly regarded. The point is that people who are unafraid of

themselves act as models: they show people how not to be afraid of the self, that it is possible to

live peacefully and happily with oneself. Maslow's principle point is that the closer we are to

understanding ourselves, the closer we come to holding a greater respect and understand for our

surroundings, humanistic or otherwise. In other words, if we understand and accept ourselves, we

have a better chance at becoming more respectful, open minded, and understanding of other

people, cultures, and differences, as well as creating a deeper awareness of the effect we have on

our planet, personal environments, and works spaces. Ultimately, this would lead our civilization

and its citizens to become more globally responsible for their actions. This, of course, is the ideal.

The question Maslow asked is, as Glass writes, "Where are our studies of the healthiest

individuals, organizations, and institutions?" (193). The question is basic and plain enough: why

do we not study the cases of the healthiest people in our societies and seek their guidance? If we

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behaviorism, which dominated psychology at the time. Psychoanalysis was focused on
understanding the unconscious motivations that drive behavior while behaviorism studied the
conditioning processes that produce behavior. Humanist thinkers felt that both psychoanalysis and
behaviorism were too pessimistic, either focusing on the most tragic of emotions or failing to take
into account the role of personal choice...Humanistic psychology was instead focused on each
individual's potential and stressed the importance of growth and self-actualization. The
fundamental belief of humanistic psychology is that people are innately good and that mental and
social problems result from deviations from this natural tendency."

could address this issue head on, Glass argues, as does Maslow, and, "[i]f we redefine normality as what is ideal for man our theories of society must change" (193). That is to say, if we could redefine cultural standards to be what would be ideal for man, as opposed to what is the "cure" for man, our negative theories of society would have to change; however, this kind of change would be gargantuan and therefore would take much time. What does that matter, though? We have lifetimes to change and shape around each other. Time is not really an issue in the grand scale of things as long as we accept, embrace, and celebrate that the human is adaptable and has the capability to change.

Maslow's influence was and is still massive, having affected over hundreds of thousands of people to this day, perhaps millions I imagine by now. Geiger writes, "Maslow's books would sell fifteen or twenty thousand in hardcover, and go a hundred thousand and more in paperback. People who read him understand why. He has a psychology that applies to *them*" (xvii). His ideas have spread throughout our nation. He has influenced the business world by teaching how to change terrible working conditions in office spaces into productive and efficient spaces; his ideas on education are remarkable and innovative, and, in fact, resonate with Bard's practiced theories on education: do not fear your thoughts but accept them and experiment with them. Geiger writes on one of Maslow's principle arguments: "How a man thinks cannot be separated from what he is, and the question of what he *thinks* he is, is never independent of what he is in fact, even though this, intellectually, may be an insoluble problem" (xix-xx). In other words, if how we think defines who we are, how we think should not be separated from who we are, even if the question of "who we are" cannot be answered intellectually or academically. Essentially, we must trust ourselves by questioning ourselves, constantly trying to improve our self-understanding. And the better we know ourselves, the better we know how everything around us relates to us, thereby giving us a better understanding of who we are in this vast universe. With that large of a perspective, we start

to see the small yet still significant role we play in the universe. The way we treat ourselves and our environments must, therefore, be with respect to the great vastness and mysteries held within this universe. Although we may not have the answers to these mysteries, we can at least come to appreciate our own existence, no matter how small. We are all connected to one another and our surroundings, expanding all the way out to the great universe; so we should not fear this greatness, but rather live each day with it, unafraid of the spontaneity and unclarity that may come with it.

I would agree with Geiger when he says, "What he [Maslow] wanted to write was not easy to express" (xviii). In fact, it is never easy to express anything in language, and that is why Maslow wrote so many books, notes, essays, and so on in order to discover what it was he was trying to say. I would also agree with Geiger when he writes, "Maslow was more than anything else a philosopher of science" (xx). This is where peak experiences were born. It took him several tries to land upon this term that has influenced me to write everything that I have written. It is that precise language that attracted me to discover what it was I felt in Argentina and at other moments in my life. Maslow helped to clarify knowledge that I knew must have existed as well: a study of the positivity in the human condition, not just the negativity. "Peak experiences" was the terminology I had been looking for, and once I found it, I discovered an incredible philosopher of the arts and sciences.

I have thus far taken the focus of drag queens to bring understanding to what peak experiences are. I want to reiterate that I took the *unique* focus of drag queens to do this, but *any* human *anywhere* can have these experiences. In fact, I believe that we all do. They are undeniable, but they are not always pleasant. As Maslow says, it is essential that sometimes we must suffer, feel angry, get upset, scream, yell, cry and so on in order to learn. If through all the suffering and anger we can develop a better knowledge of the self, so be it. Maslow would reinforce that life is not all about suffering and anger, however, but also ecstasy, bliss, and pure joy

to accompany it. Extreme patience is therefore required when it comes to learning ourselves.

Undoubtedly, we learn from these moments. As Maslow puts it, "peak experiences often have consequences" (177). This is why they are so addicting: they are knowledge gained from experience, as opposed to knowledge taught rather than learned. In other words, we can gain wisdom from these moments. And because they are so powerful, we want to reach these moments again and again. In fact, they are a driving force for our existence: a means to our continued existence is through attaining these moments again and again because they are so educational and fulfilling. Maslow writes,

> We may be able to use those experiences that most easily produce ecstasies, that most easily produced revelations, experiences, illumination, bliss, and rupture experiences. We may be able to use them as a model by which to re-evaluate history teaching or any other kind of teaching. (178)

That is to say that we can use peak experiences as education. In fact, that is precisely how we should use them, Maslow argues. They will change the negative outlook we are given from birth as well as broaden our understanding of history and its teachings, and will allow us to gain a greater appreciation for the knowledge we can learn from the past. Maslow's ideal is to live in a society that is more fulfilled, understanding, and respectful of itself and its past; however, most importantly, a society that does not live in ignorance.

Additionally, he believes that self-fulfilment should be the main focus of every educator, and "classes" that accomplish this goal are "education in music, education in art, education in dancing and rhythm...," and these classes are "intrinsically far closer than the usual 'core curriculum' to intrinsic education of the kind that I am talking about, of learning one's identity as an essential part of education" (178). These ideas, that learning to know yourself is the best kind of education, are not, in fact, radical but rather responsible. Maslow exposes the irony of

contemporary school curriculums in their incapacity to teach effectively. His most convincing point, that is, the essential study of the self, derives from his positive perspective regarding the human condition:

> Education is learning to grow, learning what to grow toward, learning what is good and bad, learning what is desirable and undesirable, learning what to choose and what not to choose. In this realm of intrinsic learning, intrinsic teaching, and intrinsic education, I think that the arts, and especially the ones that I have mentioned, are so close to our psychological and biological core, so close to this identity, this biological identity, that rather than think of these courses as a sort of whipped cream or luxury, they must be become basic experiences in education. (178-179)

The best education is the one that will help us to distinguish a good choice from a bad one, wanting something from not caring to want something. Additionally, it allows us to grow positively and at our own pace. The "courses" he lists again are all in the arts, and that is because Maslow believes that from the beginning humans were artists and poets. Thus, it is inherent in human nature to want to be creative and therefore we should not think that art, music and dance classes are any less challenging than any other course. Regrettably, in many schools, these kinds of classes are often "electives" or "extracurricular activities," meaning that they are not regarded to be as important as say English, History, and Math, and therefore should be taught after or outside of school. Maslow's demands that we look back to the very beginning of human history to see where we went wrong educationally: if we began as artists, then our identities are biologically rooted in the arts. Thus, to subordinate art, music, dance, or any other class centered around self-expression is a hypocrisy, a blatant denial of human nature. Instead, Maslow would make these classes the most important ones, stressing the fact that we will be able to discover ourselves better through artistic creativity than through sitting down in a classroom for the majority of a day.

To learn from our mistakes and to express ourselves artistically and creatively is what Maslow believes should be the most "basic experiences in education." He writes, "Such experiences could very well serve as the model, the means by which perhaps we could rescue the rest of the school curriculum from the value-free, value-neutral, goal-less meaninglessness into which it has fallen" (179). If there were schools that focused on an education through arts, then these schools would be able to surpass the "value-free" educational systems that are currently placed on many elementary, middle, and high schools across the United States. Luckily, there are. This is where liberal arts colleges get their reputation. Bard, specifically, has combined arts and sciences, demonstrating how art can be (and is) scientific and science can be (and is) artistic, but Maslow's focus was more so on lower education. He loathed how ineffective the majority of both public and private schools' educational systems were and sought to change that. I believe he has, as we will see shortly.

Maslow heavily influenced a discussion that is in an essay entitled "Cultural Evolution as Viewed by Psychologists," written by an impressive group of scholars such as Henry A. Murray, B.F. Skinner, Abraham H. Maslow, and others. In it, they discuss the ways in which culture has constructed man and his capacity for knowledge. L.K. Frank writes,

> May I suggest, however, that man created culture because he became bored with food, fighting, and copulation, and sought to make human living more meaningful and fulfilling than sheer organic existence. We may then think of culture as an artistic creation, the product of the gifted imagination of poets, artists, dramatists, prophets and the proto-scientist, who created art and religion, the beliefs and the assumptions...and techniques whereby man could transform nature, according to his hopes and fears, his beliefs and expectations, into a symbolic world for human living and purposive striving. (579)

Out of the necessity to give more meaning to our existence, humans sought artistic expression.

Once found, Frank argues that the first scientist discovered art and science, and that to this day we

do not know the depths of our artistic capacities. Thus, endless possibilities for artistic expression,

all of sudden, became (and still are) available. The human, then, could transform nature and make

it adapt to him, which is not necessarily a good thing but is nonetheless true. Man began to

understand nature via art and science. Nature, then, became symbolic, and so, a symbolic world

for the human was born. We were able to construct ourselves and our societies within this

symbolic world as well as manipulate it. Thus, we constructed civilization in collaboration with

our artistic endeavours, so such things like architecture, paintings, songs, and so forth mimicked the

symbolic world these first artists lived in.

     This is where culture comes in again. Frank writes,

     We may think of culture as controlling human behavior by building into the young

     impressionable organism these perceptions and patterns of conduct according to the

     symbolic world in which the child learns to live. From another angle we might consider

     culture as a cognitive map of the world, as expressed in the basic concepts and assumptions

     of culture, or we may consider it as a master code for decoding and interpreting the many

     messages received from the external environing world and from his own internal organic

     environment. (579)

Now that humans live in a symbolic world created through their artistic expressions, their cultures

have become controlling and limiting: what *could* be done artistically? what *can you not* do? what

is culturally "acceptable" for you to do artistically? However, Frank offers a different perspective

that we can chose to adopt: instead of purposefully attempting to restrict the human, we can view

culture as acting as a kind of "grand translator" for the human. That is to say, since there is so

much that goes on within the span of a single day, we need a way in which we can process

everything without becoming too overwhelmed. This is culture's job: a way to interpret and process all kinds of information. This does not mean, however, that culture has not made mistakes.

      Frank quite easily finds examples of where culture can and has gone wrong. He writes,

> Each cultural group has selectively recognized, cultivated, and rewarded only some of man's potentialities, and it has ignored, denied, and often rigorously suppressed other potentialities in rearing the young. Thus the child is partially freed from the coercion of his own organic needs, functions, and impulses; but he pays a price for this emancipation by becoming subject to these cultural symbolic controls and to those who can and do manipulate these symbols and invoke various symbolic sanctions for ordering and controlling people. (579)

Frank makes it clear that culture has placed arbitrary restrictions on man's potentialities by regarding some potentials as better than others. This is not the case. Regrettably, this kind of construction heavily, and often unfairly, restricts some over others. And, again regrettably, this often takes place during childhood. Thus, although culture frees us from the very basic needs of the human, for instance water, shelter, food, so on, he now faces a new task: where Frank uses "cultural symbolic control" I use "modern advertisement and materialism." This is because they both do the same thing, which is: they both "can and do manipulate...symbols and invoke various symbolic sanctions for ordering and controlling people" (579). A chewing gum commerical will use the body of a semi-naked, probably white, typically blonde, and/or any other societal standards for whatever makes a "hot woman" to convince us to buy their gum. The woman, more than likely, has no standing on the gum whatsoever; she probably has never even chewed a single piece. Thus, Frank's point is to challenge these symbols and not to let them manipulate and control us so easily. And to do this, we need to find our non-materialistic selves through arts and sciences.

      Frank explains how the individual can manipulate culture so that he/she never has to

conform completely. He writes,

> The long accepted dichotomy of culture versus personality may be resolved if we recognize
> that culture is a statistical concept emphasizing the recurrent regularities and persistent
> relations exhibited by members of a group, while personality is a clinical concept for the
> unique, identified individual who may participate in maintaining these group regularities
> but never fully conforms, always utilizing these cultural patterns in his idiomatic way for
> the goals and purposes he individually seeks to attain. (579-580)

If we recognize that humans created culture, a mechanism that is used as a means to keep social
order, an individual can then participate in any way he wants because he has the capacity of
choosing which ones he may like more than others. Culture is a bendable system where man has
the potential for anything, really, because the rules are even breakable. In this way, the individual
can pick certain goals to attain and achieve them at his own pace, thereby using the system that he
was forced into to his advantage. This is what I feel I accomplish when I do drag; however, before
I can expound on that, I must address more from this essay.

> Frank provides further insight on the basic problems with our culture today. He writes,
> We can say...that the basic problem facing the peoples of the world today...is to renew their
> culture, utilizing our growing scientific and artistic resources not only to reconstruct social
> order but also to pattern the behavior of the human organism and to foster the kind of
> personalities who can live in this new symbolic world and participate in a world
> community. (580)

Frank advises that we "renew" our cultures by using art and science not only to reconstruct the
existing social order but to further our understanding of the human condition positively. Most
importantly, however, we must produce children who will be capable of attaining such individual
personalities, and will therefore be capable of responsibly living and participating in the world

community. This is, essentially, our duty, and I do believe this task has and is being fulfilled

presently[17]. The dilemma these children face, as well as Frank and his peers, is that "each of us has

to function as an organism while living as a personality in a symbolic cultural world and

participating in the social order" (580). Essentially, we must be aware of our own individuality at

all times to ground ourselves in order to know where we socially stand amongst our peers; or, in

other words, if we are unafraid of our individuality, it will be easier to participate in social realms.

"This means replacing the many self-defeating patterns that have been used for ordering,

controlling, and rationalizing the non-rational human organism" (580). In order to gain a sense of

security of the self, culturally, we must drop all restrictions on the human, especially those that are

related to over-simplistic categorizations and generalizations. It is very easy to become

overwhelmed with societal demands, such as adhering to the social creation of gender binaries,

defined sexualities, appropriate sex, and so on; all these are social constructions that are meant to

attempt to identify us in an over-generalized fashion. But since we are all individuals and unique

already, then culture and society need not to be so restrictive with its means of trying to define our

identifications so generally and simply. Rather, we should ask people to accept and embrace our

uniqueness. Therefore, I refuse to abide by cultural and societal definitions of who or what or how

I am. Instead, Frank, as well as Maslow, would say: if culture were more accepting of unmediated

self-expression, we could freely experience and express ourselves without fear of humiliation

because everyone else in our social realm would be doing so as well. Since we are all on this

planet together, we should know how to work well with one another, regardless of how society

wants, and perhaps sees, us to be. And this is because, more often than not, society is

tremendously wrong when it comes to identifying who we are.

　　　With this stated, to be happy with ourselves means that we must be unafraid of ourselves. I

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[17] I am referencing a liberal arts education.

am unafraid to do drag, and this means that with every performance I seek to perfect my art form in order to perform better. And I do this to reach more moments of peak experiences. That is not to say that in every performance I am or any other performer is going to attain a peak experience, but rather, we seek peak experiences with every performance[18]; it could be through our writing, drawing, singing, or any other art form that we love. If we trust our work, and therefore ourselves, we will be able to perform at our highest levels. As we saw with *BOB*, she was trying to perform at her highest level every day of her life in her twenties, but this became too exhausting. Instead, she found that breaking up her energy for when she is onstage versus off helps to reserve her focus for when she must perform at higher levels when she becomes World Famous *BOB*. Through this method of building and performing the self, she was able to have better experiences both on and offstage. I believe that if we can effectively follow this idea, our peak experiences will be that much better. If we work hard enough for something that we really want, once we get it, we feel free. These moments of freedom are essential for our existence because they give us reasons to live. When we see how well we have done something, it is not only inspirational for us but for others as well. My goal as a performer is to elevate not only myself but my audience as well. Hopefully, one day I will be a good enough performer to elevate my audience to have peak experiences simultaneously with me, but this, I think, will come further down the drag road.

Thus, part of what it means to be human is to have peak experiences and to want to experience them more than once. This is a driving force for why we want to live. Maslow writes, "The discovery of identity comes via the impulse voices, via the ability to listen to your own guts, and to their reactions and to what is going on inside of you. This is also an experimental kind of education that, if we had the time to talk about it, would lead us into another parallel educational

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[18] And performance here is a performance on stage, for example, not a gender performance.

establishment, another *kind* of education" (177). It is vital for us not to be afraid to listen to what

we feel in our guts, the voices that help us along when we do not know what to do; in other words,

our instincts. If we trust ourselves, we will achieve greater happiness and self-fulfillment. These

kinds of teaching are often said to be "experimental," and I am very appreciative for that: a

freedom to explore oneself in a safe community is the kind of "parallel educational establishment"

Maslow speaks of. Honestly, if he had done an ethnography at Bard, I am certain he would have

found what he was describing. Bard has a very similar view of education in that it feels that we

will best understand ourselves through an artistic and scientific focus, and whatever we find out

about ourselves is always worth finding out. So from my perspective, if we see beauty and rarity

in life from peak experiences, it will give us a better understanding of who we are and what we

should do with our lives.

> Here, I would like to present the best piece of educational advice Maslow gives. He writes,
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> If grief and pain are sometimes necessary for growth of the person, then we must learn not
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> to protect people from them automatically as if they were always bad. Sometimes they may
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> be good and desirable in view of the ultimate good consequences. Not allowing people to
>
> go through their pain, and protecting them from it, may turn out to be a kind of
>
> overprotection, which in turn implies a certain lack of respect for the integrity and the
>
> intrinsic nature and the future development of the individual. (8)

Humans hurt and grieve and cry and scream and yell and love and hate and the list goes on. We

have to suffer, but we also get to experience great happiness from whatever we think might be

beautiful, whether that is a child's birth, a particularly beautiful sunset, a moving dance piece, a

drag show, a dinner with a group of our greatest friends, again the list goes on. We cannot focus

all of our studies on the negativity of humanity; we must have its opposition, the positivity of

humanity as well, in order to maintain a balance and harmony in this field of study. In fact, it is

imperative, as Maslow argues, in order to have a greater understanding of what it means to be human.

I have been raised in a society where people have told me that I should go to preschool, elementary school, middle school, high school, definitely college and maybe graduate school. An education is what I was told to seek because it would enlighten me in ways I could not imagine. Although it was not legally a choice for me until I was 18, I did enjoy the process of schooling and decided to go to college to get an even better education. At times, it was horrible, but at others, it was unmistakably some of the best moments in my life. I have built up my entire existence based on education, and now, finally, I am about to go into a different kind of world. Perhaps a world that is not so full of open-minded, progressive people like those at Bard, but as I stated earlier, part of my purpose is to educate. I feel as if I can help people understand themselves better simply by talking to them for five minutes. I have found that when people get the attention they deserve, and some really only ask for five minutes, they can open up their thoughts on how they feel about the world, who they are, what they are doing, and, although often it does not really matter, where they are from. What I mean by this is not a dishonor to the place where they were raised, rather, people I have met in my travels have told me that they are from many places, peoples, societies, races, classes, or any other way we can identify who we are based on where we are from that you can think of. Thus, although where we are from does, in fact, define many of us, for others, it only functions like a preface in a book that has many chapters and words and thoughts and peak experiences and friends and lovers and stories....

Life is worth living because there is so much beauty to be appreciated and experienced in it that, even though sometimes it may take more effort than we expected it would take to appreciate and experience this beauty, it is worth seeking. Often times, however, we lose ourselves because it is easy to get overwhelmed with what our cultures and societies ask of us. From what a professor

at Bard taught me: we must not fear who we are, and therefore, we must challenge and train ourselves everyday of our lives not to be afraid of the self. We are, as she says, the ones who hang out with ourselves the most; you are the one who has to spend the most time with yourself everyday, so enjoy it! This, of course, teaches us that we should, at all times, be unequivocally ourselves, no matter what that entails.

This is what Bard has taught me. I hope you enjoyed it.

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