Declaration of Originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work.

This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Kerryn Drysdale

30 June 2016
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Parts of this thesis are published as the following:


These publications are wholly the product on my own research design, intellectual analysis and written work.

Kerryn Drysdale

30 June 2016
Abstract

Drag kinging refers to a consciously enacted masculinity by women (and sometimes other gender diverse individuals) within the recognisable context of a performance. While drag king culture has links to a longer tradition of live performance, drag king events were significant within the local lesbian social circuit in Sydney, Australia. Functioning as a site for a range of social activities generated in the vicinity of the performances, a series of drag king events between 2002 and 2012 provide the opportunity to explore the connection between social experience and collective consciousness as it becomes an intelligible cultural phenomenon.

My research represents a departure from existing literature on drag king culture that works within the analytic categories of performer and audience. Instead of using the established framework derived from performance studies on one hand and a theoretical account of gender performativity on the other, I deploy cultural studies methodologies to reframe Sydney’s localised version as a scene. Analysing the interactive narratives between research participants in a series of focus group discussions, alongside my own experiences as a scene participant over a five year period, I offer a close examination of how everyday encounters coalesce around drag king events. From this data, I demonstrate the relationship of the individual to the collective, triangulate embodied intimacy to social, sexual and political configurations, and reveal the scene’s constitutive and representative dimensions.

Whereas I was initially drawn to the scene’s charged particularity, in the end I had to confront its passing. Sydney’s drag king scene has all but disappeared in comparison to its vibrancy when I began my study. In offering the perspective of a scene ethnographically captured in the moment of its demise, my research reveals the complex process by which a contemporary social moment becomes layered with historical investment. In doing so, I bring together the theoretical tradition of scene studies with recent work on the affective potentialities of the archive. Overall, this research offers insight into the lifecycle of scenes: their emergence, to their expansion or contraction and, inevitably, their fading.
Acknowledgements

Much like Sydney’s drag king scene, this thesis only exists by virtue of a number of people who participated in it. While it would be impossible to chart every contribution made by others, a few stand out in need of mention. First and foremost, this study could not have been done without the generosity of the thirteen individuals who comprised my research sample, and the numerous drag king performers, promoters and fans on whom the scene depended. I hope I have done justice to the stories they shared with me and the time they devoted to their telling.

Of utmost importance to the production of this thesis is my supervisor, Associate Professor Lee Wallace. I thank her for showing me, by way of example, the importance of good writing and for her unwavering patience through multiple drafts as part of the process that shaped the thesis into what it is now. My sincerest gratitude also goes to Dr Jennifer Germon, my associate supervisor, who was instrumental in overseeing the ethnographic work I conducted and the conclusions drawn from it. Her constant confidence in my ability helped transform a jumble of ideas into argument and in the process she has become a good friend. Thanks also go to Dr Anna Hickey-Moody, who helped shape the original research design and whose advice continued to resonate throughout the project.

The Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney is a wonderful place to do a PhD. For their supportive collegiality I make special mention to Professor Meaghan Morris, Professor Elspeth Probyn, Associate Professor Natalya Lusty and Dr Ruth Barcan. I am also very appreciative of the postgraduate community and especially to Dr Kate O’Halloran, Dr Jessica Kean, Dr Sophia Johnson and my ‘finishing buddy’, Paul Priday, for their generosity in providing editing assistance and the much-needed opportunity to debrief throughout my candidature. The professional staff in the School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry are a godsend, especially Nikki Whipps and Sophie Ellwood. Likewise, thanks go to the School’s librarian, Rena McGrogan, who saved me countless times by responding calmly to panicked emails about databases and resources.

Finally, this thesis was an investment equally borne by my exceptional friends and family. Thank you to my best friend, Erica James, for always giving me the support I need and for being there at all the right times; to Andi Klein, a kind friend and a super computer guru, for saving my thesis from my technical incompetence; to Nikki Stevens for being a sounding board for all my thesis-related frustrations and for the kind provision of Frank the dog; and to my sister Jacquelyn Holmes for putting up with my scholarly vagaries and frequent familial absences. Last but by no means least, I thank my partner Julia Hickman for being the best person in the entire world.
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Introduction

“After all, this is the Sly Fox, on a Wednesday night”.
(Lisa, personal communication, 22 October 2008)

My first encounter of a drag king performance was on a Wednesday night late in 2006. I was with my flatmate Lisa who, despite recently arriving in Sydney from the UK, lost no time seeking out all the lesbian-oriented events in the area. It was at her suggestion that we went to ‘the Sly’ on that hot summer night. We would have walked up from the King Street entertainment precinct towards Enmore Road around 10pm, following what I now know would have been a seemingly endless trail of women making the same journey. The space inside the venue would have been dark, noisy and almost filled to capacity with women, as it was almost every Wednesday night. I doubt we would have been able to see the stage clearly over the heads of all the people jammed in front of it and most likely we stood near the bar, which would have been the furthest we could navigate through the crush of people. But I can still recall the palpable sense of excitement in the air as we craned to see what was happening amid the surging sounds of wolf whistling, laughter and cheering that filled the space to the point where conversation was impossible. I remember being entranced by the visual stimulation of the drag king performance, though I can’t recall the performer all these years later. But my strongest memory is standing there with Lisa, beer in hand, hemmed in on all sides by the heaving mass of bodies. I don’t know what time it was when I left after all the drinking, dancing and talking that went on that night, but it would have been very late when I stumbled home and crawled into bed. But I did know that I’d be back next week. My five year long engagement with the drag king scene commenced that night, precipitating a slow immersion that eventually shaped my academic interest.
Drag kinging can be loosely described as a cultural practice in which individuals (usually women but can include other gender-diverse people) consciously enact masculinity within a context that is recognised as a performance. For over a decade, attending events featuring drag king performances had proved a popular and committed pastime for the lesbians of Sydney, Australia. What stands out most to me now was the charged promise of a night that animated an otherwise ephemeral encounter, and moreover, one that brought me back again to relive that experience. My experience suggested that while drag king performances were engaging, even titillating, they also signified a range of social dynamics established by the atmosphere generated in those hot, crowded spaces. As I aim to present in this thesis, drag king events functioned as a site to connect individual experience with collective investment, which establish them as an intelligible cultural phenomenon.

**Locating drag king events in Sydney**

In this thesis, I explore a localised version of drag king culture in Sydney, Australia, circa 2002 to 2012. Sydney’s local drag king culture revolved around a recognisable social network with specific spatial coordinates. Sydney possesses two notable gay and lesbian precincts (McInnes 2001, Gorman-Murray 2006). The first is Oxford Street in the inner-east area of Sydney, also known as the ‘gay golden mile’, which is internationally recognised and celebrated as the site of the city’s famous *Sydney Mardi Gras Parade* (Markwell 2002, Mason and Lo 2009). The second precinct is a small cluster of suburbs collectively referred to as Newtown in the inner-west of the city centre, also known by the name of its main drag, King Street. This area is often represented in gay and lesbian media as Oxford Street’s hip “alternative” or “successor” (Gorman-Murray 2006). Both Oxford Street and Newtown are

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1 Formerly known as the *Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*, the change to the name of the parade to *Sydney Mardi Gras Parade* and the associated events to *Sydney Mardi Gras Festival* in 2011 generated a significant amount of opposition from Sydney’s gay and lesbian groups. In doing so, critics claimed that the parade is over-commercialised, and that it is increasingly disassociated from its history of LGBTIQ activism.
designated gay precincts by the “intensity” of visible economic, political and cultural investments in “gayness” (McInnes 2001, 170). In John Birmingham’s popular history of Sydney, *Leviathan: The Unauthorised Biography of Sydney* (2000, 357), the transformation of Newtown from a derelict inner-city zone to a vibrant neighbourhood is credited to a “renovating class” led by “fearless lesbians”. Newtown now forms part of what Peter Murphy and Sophie Watson (1997, 137) refer to as a “lavender triangle”, a term that references those inner-west suburbs that have a strong history of lesbian settlement and activism. Despite the process of gentrification that has gradually pushed non-professional residents out of the area, Newtown still acts as a social beacon for urban subcultures.2

In the decade under consideration, drag king events played a significant role within Newtown’s lesbian night-time economy. Every Wednesday night, Newtown hosts what is colloquially referred to as ‘Dyke Night’ (also known as ‘Lesbian Night’, ‘Ladies Night’ and ‘Wednesgay’). As there are few explicitly lesbian venues in Newtown, these vernacular references endorse a number of established venues that host lesbian-targeted events one night a week. Promoted through alternative media outlets and spread by word of mouth as events for lesbians, Wednesday night’s popularity is evidenced by the groups of women who can be seen weaving their way through the congested sidewalks that link the numerous bars and pubs that cater to female patronage. As well as being recognised as home to a large gay and lesbian demographic and a growing number of LGBTIQ community organisations, Newtown is the site of a robust night-time economy that operates as a drawcard for same-sex attracted women from elsewhere.

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2 It is also important to acknowledge that Newtown has a longer history, and this short review does not do justice to the fascinating shifts the area saw from earliest indigenous land caretakership of the Cadigal band of the Eora people, to its development as a farming area in the 19th Century, its subsequent decline into a working class slum in the early 20th Century and revitalization as a student and bohemian mecca from the 1970’s onwards.
The local drag king culture emerged around a series of events that hosted and promoted drag king performances. There were one-off performances prior the period under review, but the earliest regular drag king shows were originally associated with regularly occurring nights that featured other forms of entertainment. Some of these events included *Drag King of Sydney Quest* (commonly referred to as DKSY), a drag king competition held as part of the line-up of entertainment at ARQ nightclub between 1999 and 2000. *Gurlesque*, a burlesque-themed “women only (trans inclusive)” strip night that began in 2000, was also billed as “unabashedly dyke” in content and following (‘Gurlesque’ 2002, 14). More recently, *The Pussycat Club*, a monthly event run by performance duo Fancy Piece from January 2010 to September 2011 at The Supper Club, on Oxford Street, promoted its particular style of drag kinging amid a range of other queer performances.

It wasn’t until performer Sexy Galexy established a weekly event in 2002 called *Kingki Kingdom* that drag king performances were given top billing in their own right. *Kingki Kingdom* was hosted by the Sly Fox Hotel on Enmore Road and scheduled on Wednesday in order to draw on the established popularity of Dyke Night. With the departure of Sexy Galexy in 2005, *Kingki Kingdom* was renamed *Queer Central* and continued to run at the Sly Fox under the direction of a range of alternative event producers. *Kingki Kingdom/Queer Central* was one of the first series of events to become associated with a specific venue and although as its rebranding suggests the event was advertised as a queer performance night, the Sly Fox Hotel was widely acknowledged as the place to go to see drag kings. Other exclusively drag king-oriented events further contributed to the scene, such as promoter Nash Hill’s more elaborate cabaret-style productions between 2009 and 2012 that variously took place at The Oxford Hotel (Oxford Street) and The Vanguard and The Imperial Hotel (Newtown). The Sly Fox Hotel also hosted the annual *Smutty Salsa*, billed as a night of
“political drag” run as part of Mardi Gras in 2006, 2008 and 2009 (Jessica Lopez, personal communication, 8 July 2013).

It is impossible to provide an account of Sydney’s drag kings that could capture the diversity of performance styles and costumes. Some drag kings ‘strap and pack’ (a colloquialism referring to the practices of binding breasts to give the appearance of a flat chest and wearing a dildo or other similarly shaped object to give the impression of male genitalia), while others wear exaggerated makeup to parody beards, manly eyebrows and chest hair. Some drag kings are known for their sexy, smooth dancing style, some for their realistic impressions of masculine walk, posture and gesture and yet others for their comic renditions of laughable masculinity. Some drag kings provide for more politically-motivated critique in their performance in which masculinity may be only alluded to, while others just want to get up on stage and have a good time. While a large and rotating cast of amateur and professional performers, producers and promoters around the various sites of Sydney contributed to the development of an overall drag king culture, the Sly Fox Hotel stands out as its singularly enduring fixture and is most readily associated with drag king performances in Sydney. Much of my subsequent analysis centers on the Sly Fox as embedded within the social context of Newtown’s Dyke Night.

It is worth noting that the terminology around drag king culture, especially in relation to how the events that included drag king performances were publicised, shifted throughout the period. For example, despite being known colloquially as drag king events, in advertisements these events were promoted as “queer performance nights”, “queer nights” and “ladies nights” (MySpace n.d., Saphic Sydney 2010, Sapphic Sydney 2012, Time Out Sydney 2012, Lonely Planet 2013). As a result, keyword searches or media analysis of drag king cultures in
Australia tend to return professional profiles of well-known drag kings rather than details of the overall events that supported them (Fox 2011, Moses 2005, *A girl can be a king* 2011, i.t.a. 2013, Caceda 2015, Morgan 2015, Moss 2016). By decontextualising drag king performers from the events that hosted them, media can inadvertently separate the performances from their socio-cultural meaning. Interestingly, this tendency was not reflected in comparative searches for drag queen scenes, with greater attention given to the wider social, economic and historical contexts (Perkins 2013, Riley 2014, Wotherspoon 2015, *What a drag!* 2015).

Accordingly, a socially-attuned account of Sydney’s drag king culture requires a different methodological approach, beginning with questions of discovery. Drag king events need to be identified as distinct from, though arguably influenced by, Sydney’s contemporary queer performance culture. Other performance events, even those billed as “queer” or “alternative”, take place in different locations, attract different attendees and provoke different investments from those events that exclusively hosted and promoted drag king performances. In Sydney, queer culture can include such diverse phenomenon as live music and DJ’d dance nights, formal and ad-hoc performance events, and organised activities such as those associated with *Sydney’s Mardi Gras* and *Sydney Festival*. Drag kings may have been a part of those events, but they were likely to be seen more supplementary to a broader entertainment line-up than its focus. Moreover, not all lesbian-identified women in Sydney participated in drag king cultures, and some held strong aversions to what they saw as an apolitical parody and “vulgarity” in the performance of masculinity (O’Halloran 2010). While many participated in a range of events across the social spectrum, routine attendance at drag king events marked certain people out as ‘regulars’. This represents a form of social organisation that designated a distinct cultural context.
Second, a distinctive drag king culture should not be conflated with larger projects that trace lesbian community in Sydney. Though my research participants variously describe Sydney’s drag king events or their position in a wider LBGTVIQ context via the term community, I am reluctant to deploy the concept uncritically. As Kate O’Halloran (2015, 29) argues in her doctoral thesis on queer collectives in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia, romanticised notions of community are often subject to “paranoid/schizoid in-fighting, schism and misery” in practice. O’Halloran’s work suggests that any “call to community” should be analysed for competing claims that might work to alienate and disenfranchise the notion of a shared culture. This claim reveals a more complex relationship between cultural practices that community development, which is supported by other published oral histories. For example, in their oral history project Boot of Leather, Slippers of Gold that documented the 1940s and 1950s working class lesbian bar cultures in Buffalo, New York, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis (1994, 3), claim that “community is key to the development of twentieth-century lesbian identity and consciousness”. However, Rebecca Jennings’ (2015) account of Sydney’s lesbian history from the 1930s to 1970s contradicts a direct association between practice and identity, arguing that the private networks of socialising that characterised Sydney in the twentieth century limited the scope for the development of a distinctive lesbian community. While my analysis has been influenced by many insightful empirical and historical studies of lesbian cultures, I do not intend to use drag king events as a case study through which lesbian community can be claimed. Instead, I focus on how local drag king culture is derived from points of interaction consistent with the characterisation of a scene.

**Defining drag king culture**

Drag king performers argue for the uniqueness of their practice as distinct from other
traditions of performance and transgenderism, including theatrical conventions of male impersonation (Drorbaugh 1993, Senelick 1993, Senelick 2000), the presentation of masculine lesbian sexual styles such as mannish, butch or stone butch women (Mushroom 1983, Newton 1984, Rubin 1992, Feinberg 1993, Kennedy and Davis 1994, Maltz 1998), or non-performative strategies that involve women passing as men (Maltz 1998, Torr and Bottoms 2010). Far from providing a universal definition that covers all drag king practices and their various historical antecedents, I remain attentive to the vagaries in drag kining as they play out in both theoretical and everyday contexts.

Perhaps the most theoretically influential account of drag is Judith Butler’s conceptual work on gender performativity, in which drag is conceptualised as a subversion of dominate social gender norms (Butler 1990, Butler 1993). Alongside cross-dressing and lesbian butch/femme identities, drag “mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” in a parody of gender performance (Butler 1990, 186). Drag, Butler suggests, is one way to draw attention to the contested political terrain of gender and to the recognition that gender and sexuality, produced through repeated acts and statements, are implicated in relations of power. In contrast to drag’s potential for undoing gender normativity, radical feminist critiques have tied drag to transsexualism in the reinforcement of patriarchal norms (Frye 1983, Jeffreys 2014). These include arguments that male-to-female impersonation is an attempt to dominate women (Raymond 1979), a manifestation of power inequalities (Jeffreys 1994), a product of misogyny (Jeffreys 1993, Jeffreys 2003) or inherently anti-feminist (Wittig 1992). Yet, all of these discussions share Butler’s tendency to theorise normative or

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3 However, Butler’s use of drag has been take up in ways that inadvertently simplify her argument. For Butler, drag is not exemplary of performativity, a paradigm for subversion or a model for political agency. Butler is clear that drag’s failure to approximate gender norms does not necessarily equal the subversion of norms and as a parody of gender, drag is not in and of itself subversive.
non-normative implications of drag untethered from the specific social framework and performance context in which it appears.

The term drag queen can be traced back to 1930s underground male gay culture where it referenced “a gay man dressed as a woman for purposes of entertainment” (Rupp and Taylor 2003, 180). This context led Judith Halberstam (1998, 233) to claim that “the truth is that as long as we have known the phrase ‘drag queen’, the drag king has been a concept waiting to happen”. Just as definitions of drag queens rely on the ‘real’ male body beneath the performance of femininity, drag kings are often defined within a binary framework of gender. At the same time, informal recognition of drag king performers stretches to include other gender-diverse people, such as genderqueer and transgender individuals. The flexibility demanded in accommodating these exceptions complicates any easy conflation between drag practices and gender and sexual identity.

At the same time, it is not possible to definitively determine drag king culture’s rise in popularity from a single event, performer or place. Rather, drag king culture took root simultaneously from the 1990s onwards in major urban centres within established night-time economies that featured lesbian-targeted events (Halberstam 1998, Volcano and Halberstam 1999). To date, drag kings have not received the kind of mainstream recognition that drag queens have achieved as a ubiquitous presence at pride festivals and as a form of entertainment in theatre, music and movie industries for both gay and heterosexual audiences (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001, D'Emilio 2002). This leaves drag king culture relegated to a subcultural phenomenon in comparison to gay male drag culture. Perhaps for this reason, it has yet to receive equivalent scholarly attention that has been given to drag queens (Newton 1972, Murray 1994, Halberstam 1998). Accordingly, many scholarly works that do engage
with drag kings do so as a comparison to drag queens and gay male culture (Schacht 2002, Willox 2002, Ruchti 2006, Rupp, Taylor and Shapiro 2010, Barnett and Johnson 2013), as a component within wider queer cultures, sexualities or practices (Shiller 1999, Taylor 2007, Stone and Shapiro 2016), or in relation to other art forms (Torr and Bottoms 2010, Mayhew 2015). While drag is widely spoken about as part of a non-normative cultural tradition, not all drag performers identify as gay or lesbian. However, just as drag is generally perceived as an indicator of gay male culture, drag kings are broadly associated with lesbian cultures. Yet, this association is beset with challenges, not least of which is that there is nothing about drag kinging that necessarily corresponds to a universal lesbian practice.

The rising popularity of drag king cultures coincided with a time of heightened debate around identity, especially evident in the rise of ‘queer’ to extend or replace ‘lesbian’ as a marker of non-normative heterosexual desire in women. The advent of queer theory made important contributions to the destabilisation of binaries between gender and sexuality that some forms of feminism inadvertently reinforced (Butler 1990, Sedgwick 1990, Butler 1993, Jagose 1996). Indeed, one of the aims of queer theory has been to question the trans-historical and cross-cultural conflation of same-sex practices with assumptions of sexual identity. Queer theory has taught that sexual identities are both historically and geographically specific (Foucault 1978, Halperin 1989, Falderman 1991, Falderman 1992). Equally important to consider, however, is that the practical implications of the umbrella term ‘queer’ are vigorously contested and constantly in-flux (Browne and Nash 2010). Queer can be deployed epistemologically, methodologically, theoretically, or conceptually. Kath Browne (2009) challenges the use of the term queer as synonymous with a gay and lesbian identity and David Halperin (1989, 343), while championing its theoretical usefulness, admits that queer is often abstracted from the quotidian realities of people’s experience. Moreover, human
geographers have pointed out that work that identifies as queer can focus inadvertently on gay men in ways that fail to recognise the specific lived experience of women (Browne 2004, Browne 2006, Ford 2015), leaving Julie Podmore (2006) to lament that the lesbian often vanishes or is subsumed within the queer. Within this field, the term ‘lesbian’ has been rejected as an outdated identity category and a mode of collective organisation (Ford 2015), at the same time as being subject to constant revision and renewal within and against the term ‘queer’ (Podmore 2013, Podmore 2015). The lesbian, it seems, refuses to go away in theoretical and empirical debates.

These debates on terminology have prompted renewed focus on the gendered differences in the production and consumption of LGBTIQ cultural phenomenon (Lo and Healy 2000, Nash 2011, Ford 2015). For this reason, attention needs to be kept on the specific time and place in which cultural identities are claimed (Browne 2004, Browne 2009, Nash and Bain 2007, Nash 2011, Podmore 2013). Recent cultural research has highlighted how lesbian and queer cultures are created through social activities and the more mundane aspects of everyday life. These practices can recast the presumed heteronormativity of everyday places and practices—like the street (Valentine 1996), the bar (Probyn 1995), sport (Caudwell 2007), music (Valentine 1995) and television (Cefai 2014)—as temporarily sexed and gendered. These everyday activities often downplay individual expressions of sexual identity and political activism in favour of collective practices.

organisation and lived experience. Taking these works on drag queen cultures as models, I similarly argue that drag kings should not be subsumed within a universal theoretical analysis of drag. Rather, drag king performances should be located as a distinctive cultural context in their own right.

As a cultural case study, drag king cultures can be considered a queer performance practice although that term alone does not account for the ways it is often colloquially marked as lesbian. At the same time, the term ‘queer’, in its expansive cultural and political imaginary, suggests more diversity that typically can be found in drag king culture. In this thesis, I keep open the description of drag king cultures to maximise the scope for exploration of this localised version of a contested global phenomenon. In doing so, I avoid getting mired in definitional contradictions that might compromise how, and by whose criteria, individuals can lay claim to involvement in them. While the terms of reference implied in lesbian may not accommodate all individual investments in identity and politics, I have opted to use it as a socio-cultural marker throughout this thesis. As I go on to demonstrate, as a social practice rather than a theoretical object, drag kinging is located at the convergence between performance and lesbian culture, without being synonymous with either.

**Researching Sydney’s drag king scene**

My research is guided by the following primary question: How did the series of drag king events in Sydney generate, mediate and represent relations between individual participants as a scene? Above all I am concerned with the process by which scenes come into being through everyday forms of sociality that intersect within, and form the basis of, a recognised social entity. While my approach is predominately guided by scene theory, it also encapsulates recent work from the disciplinary and conceptual fields of human geography and affect
theory in its analysis.

Further questions are concerned with how drag king events operated as a specific site in which different investments to drag king culture were articulated and practiced, and how those investments intersected to produce meaningful modes of engagement for its participants. These secondary questions prompt a threefold line of inquiry that addresses the connections between social desire and social meaning. First, how was desire within social entities materially manifest as a condition of coming together? Second, how did those charged singularities of perception and impressions animate ephemeral encounters, giving unity and meaning to everyday life? Third, how did forms of investment become or remain meaningful beyond their original inception in spectacular moments of intensification, such as drag king performances provide? These three questions signal a shift towards an alternative direction in the study of drag kinging in its consideration of relationality. This shift enables me to map a flexible theoretical framework onto the site of drag kinging as a cultural form, rather than as a performance practice in isolation.

These research questions are formulated within the broad purview of critical cultural analysis. I draw on Meaghan Morris’s (1993) study of shopping centres in which she argues for a critically differentiated understanding of cultural sites. Looking at the differences between shopping centres, Morris (1993, 393) argues that cultural analysis “involves the predication of a more complex and localised affective relation” to research material. I follow Morris’s imperative that this requires an emphasis on the productive interactions between people, places and practices. As such, cultural analysis provides the means of revealing and interrogating often taken-for-granted aspects of cultural entities (Wuthnow and Witten 1988) and the meanings that are the core of social dynamics (Lichterman 1998). Rather than review
Sydney’s drag king scene as just one instantiation of a wider global form, I explore the ways that localism within drag king events produced social meanings as they intersected with a collective consciousness of drag king culture.

My own participation in local lesbian cultures in Sydney necessarily influenced how I approached the local drag king scene. As the descriptive account at the beginning of this introduction implies, my exposure to drag king culture was initially mediated though pre-existing social relations; I attended such events to experience the company of friends rather than for the sake of the performance itself. Accordingly, my interest in drag king cultures emerged from social practices that preceded my interest in performances as a research object. The “localised affective relation” that Morris describes is also reflected in Kennedy and Davis’s (1994, preface) approach where the lesbian bar was both the site of a personal social practice and an erotic space that became the eventual focus of their collaborate study.

This research model is also supported by longer tradition of feminist epistemologies (Oakley 1974, Gluck 1977, Stanley and Wise 1983, Scott 1991, Reinharz 1992). At the core of their research design, feminist researchers accept the validity of other people’s experience. In their manual on feminist methodology, Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1983, 28) provide the basis for this type of critical cultural analysis by suggesting that feminist researchers must avoid fitting women into existing theories, identities and concepts. This might mean that, as a researcher, I should be concerned with developing new criteria for what counts as knowledge. In Joan Scott’s now canonical paper on experience as evidence, she argues that experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward. The historian, Scott (1991, 797) claims, should avoid depending on or reproducing categories of knowledge and instead analyse the production of knowledge that is inevitably tied to her stake in its experience. Reflecting on this argument in
developing cultural models, oral historians Alessandro Portelli (1991) and Graham Dawson (1994) have suggested that personal narratives are valuable by virtue of their partial subjectivity; a position that goes against the presumption of empirical evidence demanded of conventional studies. In privileging a “feminist consciousness”, research “grounded” in subjectivity cannot be divorced from the perspective other people bring to research events and situations (Stanley and Wise 1983, 161).

I combine critical cultural analysis and feminist epistemologies to form the core of my methodology to Sydney’s drag king scene. By privileging local context as the starting point of analysis, I am able to access insights from those who experienced and shaped how Sydney’s drag king scene came to be. Obviously, this study can never be an exhaustive account of every stakeholder claim to this decade-long scene and instead reflects my experiences along with my research participants who came to the study. Indeed, the collective aim of this research is to trace the myriad forms of participation that coalesce around scenes in ways that allow everyday investments to surface as a form of recoverable knowledge. Crucially, the type of participatory research I engage in makes explicit the relationship between the researcher and the researched by understanding that any resulting knowledge is product of that relationship, rather than observation. For this reason, I use the term participant, rather than respondent or informant.

The ephemerality of social life
As Terry Castle argues in The Apparitional Lesbian (1993), most lesbian historiography published over recent decades has the implicit or explicit aim of bringing the lesbian back in focus. These histories have been influenced by the gay liberation emphasis on visibility and the personal and political investment made in transforming cultures of silence to affirmation.
The rhetoric of visibility motivates many gay and lesbian history projects that sought to preserve oral histories and personal accounts as part of the demarcation of a newly liberated world against what it meant to be gay in those earlier “twilight” years of “shameful desires” (Clark 2005, 156). For this reason, many accounts of lesbian social cultures focus on those decades before gay liberation (Kennedy and Davis 1994, Johnson 1996, Thorpe 1997, Chenier 2004, Jennings 2015). However, rather than presume lesbian cultures now are capable of voicing, and making heard, their own lived experience, I suggest that forms of erasure continues to be a defining force in lesbian social life. These forces tend to leave the “apparitional” rather than institutional trace.

Silence, as Rebecca Jennings (2015, xiv) remarks, is at once “a methodological problem, a conceptual paradox, and a definitional premise”. Capturing ephemeral experiences lies at the heart of this study. This focus is the product of both design and circumstance. First, there is little material evidence generated by Sydney’s drag king scene. In recognising this absence, I had to consider how the scene could be documented and analysed, which was my starting point in undertaking this doctoral research. Second, at the time of commencing my research, I had no idea that in just three years this scene would all but disappear. The decline in popularity of the scene cut short the process of collation and archiving I had originally intended to do. Adapting to this decline meant a shift in focus from documenting social engagements taking place in the present to addressing a social phenomenon in the process of disappearing. This shift in design forced me to confront the theoretical and practical considerations of ephemerality. How, for example, do I trace the desire for sexual and social intimacy that might be implied, but not necessarily expressible, at drag king events? How do I follow these traces as they intersect within everyday impulses that dissipate not only with the close of each day but also at the end of an era?
It is recognised that minority social cultures can be especially ephemeral if they lack the mainstream attention that guarantees their external existence in formal institutional archives. At the same time, the impermanency of lesbian social sites lends an urgency to the archival process. The “never forget” determinations that Ann Cvetkovich (2002, 110) identifies in the motivation that often accompanies archival practices is complicated by the difficulty in recording and preserving a culture already exacerbated by the invisibility that often surrounds intimate life. José Esteban Muñoz’s work on the ephemerality of queer cultures is especially relevant to the social characterisation of Sydney’s drag king scene. Muñoz (1996, 6) calls the fundamental indeterminacy of images arising from subcultural practices as “profoundly queer”. For Muñoz (1996, 6), queer subcultures have never been available as established evidence, but instead operate on the register of the ephemeral as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility.

Because traditional archive structures rely on evidentiary procedure grounded in materiality, they are unable to work within the more fleeting, makeshift or random organisational practices demanded by queer cultures. Rather, Muñoz (1996, 10) finds the archival possibilities of ephemera in alternative modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things.

This provides Muñoz with a way to reformulate ephemera as evidence that closely follows the reworking of evidentiary claims in feminist methodologies. For Muñoz (1996, 11, 9),
“writing that re-makes rigor and questions what an archive is” facilitates the conceptual openness so that the “presentation of anecdotal and ephemeral evidence grants access to those who have been locked out of official histories”. I follow Muñoz in seeking alternative ways to “write” the ephemerality of lesbian sociability in ways that do not flatten it into institutional form.

Judith Halberstam likewise extends recognition of the ephemera of queer cultures as necessitating specific archival practices. Echoing the lifecycle of Sydney’s drag king scene from its early emergence and peak to its eventual demise, Judith Halberstam’s queer archive (2003, 316-317) is a method of preservation committed to archiving, celebrating and analyzing queer subcultures before they are dismissed by mass culture or before they simply disappear from lack of exposure or what we might call ‘subcultural fatigue’.

Her commitment to preservation is justified by the role she sees academics play in the construction of archives dedicated to queer memories, due to the nature of their participation in the cultures they research (Halberstam 2003, 318). Here, the queer archive is marked as an intellectual record, distinct from institutional methods that might overlook the theoretical implications of their inclusion. The archive provides researchers with the opportunity to theorise their cultural construction in a much more reflexive register. As Halberstam (2003, 326; my emphasis) writes:

The archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory and a complex record of queer activity. In order for the archive to function, it requires users, interpreters, cultural historians to wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making.
For Halberstam, the archive is not simply the method through which lesbian social lives are preserved, but provides the methodology that positions them as viable and revitalised objects of research. In particular, Ann Cvetkovich (2002, 2003) recommends that the fan should be the model for the academic archivist. The fan-archivist has a relationship to their research object that is “fetishistic, idiosyncratic and obsessional” (Cvetkovich 2003, 253). This attachment acknowledges how objects are not meaningful in themselves but only in their significance to the participants of a distinct culture. I write as a fan-archivist who is drawn to drag king events alongside other participants.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this thesis, I offer a broadly chronological narrative of my participation in Sydney’s drag king scene, divided into three sections that mirror my engagement. The first section, *Encounters*, in which I approach drag king cultures as a critical object, provides a review of the literature on drag king performances before offering an alternative approach informed by scene theory. The second section, *Immersion*, documents the forms of participation with the scene that contribute to its constitution, and its corresponding intelligibility as a site for social investments. The final section, *Passing*, reflects on the ways that the ephemerality of lesbian social life is countered, reviewing the ways my research participants spoke about the scene in both their everyday lives and as part of the ethnographic encounter.

I conclude this introduction by acknowledging the weight of responsibility that falls on me in collecting, analysing and disseminating other people’s experiences of Sydney’s drag king scene. The narrative accounts of the scene my research participants shared with me were not collected as disembodied data but as deeply personal stories about a meaningful part of their
lives. Participants in this study were invested in both the scene and the research that sought to
describe it. In gathering and presenting these stories of scene sociality, I remain mindful of
the generosity and trust demonstrated by my participants. It is my hope is that my participants
will continue to recognise themselves and their experiences as I now recount them.
Encounters: Drag King Culture as a Critical Object
Chapter One: Drag King Literature

“In word and image, Del LaGrace Volcano and I have tried to convey the humor, beauty, strength and the queer pleasures of the Drag King performance” (Volcano & Halberstam 1999, 152).

The first major anthropological research into the practice of female impersonation in gay camp culture was published by Esther Newton in 1972. In this landmark study, Newton’s consideration of drag kings occurs within a single mention in a footnote. Newton (1972, 13; footnote 13) notes

There are also women who perform as men: male impersonators (‘drag butches’). They are a recognised part of the profession, but there are very few of them. I only saw one male impersonator perform during the field work, but heard of several others.

The relative scarcity of male impersonation presents important theoretical problems. Little had changed two decades later insofar as scholars analysing drag king culture are still presented with theoretical challenges. Sarah E. Murray (1994) argues that the different ways in which gender identity is predicated on sexual orientation for gay men and lesbian women means that drag kings occupy a space of relative social invisibility and cultural power compared to drag queens. Robin Maltz (1998) positions drag kings within a spectrum of performative queer female masculine subjectivities to argue that, compared to the “realness” of stone butch subjectivities and the “misread realness” of passing lesbians, drag kings do little to critique normative sex and gender expectations. In 1996 Newton returns to the question she first posed in 1972 in order to locate “drag butches” within the predominantly male performance culture of Cherry Grove. Newton (2000a, 65) presents lesbian drag as a cultural practice that “has been and continues to be mediated through the fact of its primary production in the particular suffering, creativity, and social networks of gay men”. The
theoretical observations offered by Newton, Murray and Maltz suggest that drag king cultures can only be analysed in terms of its comparative value as a lesbian derivative of gay male cultural heritage or against other forms of gender presentation.

Judith Halberstam’s discussion of female masculinity and performance effectively pioneers scholarship of drag kinging as a cultural practice in its own right. A brief survey of Halberstam’s scholarly body of work serves as an introduction to the field. In her article “F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity” (1994), Halberstam first made mention of drag kings. However, this reference was made in relation to sexual and gender implications of female to male transgenderism, listing it as one of the many queer identities that exceeded the simple binary of heterosexuality/homosexuality. Halberstam’s earliest publication that focused exclusively on drag kings was her article “Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene” (1997) in which she specifically explores the intersections between masculinity and race in drag king events. Parts of this article were reproduced and expanded in her monograph Female Masculinity (1998) where she devoted a chapter to drag kings and the performance of masculinity. Female Masculinity’s critical success facilitated Halberstam’s entry into trade publishing with an illustrated guide to drag kinging, The Drag King Book (1999), a collaboration with photographer Del LaGrace Volcano.

Halberstam’s scholarly attention to drag king cultures continued into the next decade. Halberstam published ‘Oh Behave: Austin Powers and the Drag Kings’ (2001), which explored circuits of influence between drag king culture and mainstream cinematic aesthetics of masculinity. The article later appeared as a chapter in In a Queer Time and Place (2005), a monograph documenting the types of counter-publics modelled on queer renderings of time
and space. Whatever her other interests and the scope of other texts she encounters, Halberstam’s sustained interest in drag kings across the period from 1997 to 2005 legitimated drag kining as an object of scholarly attention.

Halberstam’s body of work can be read as a discursive act that effectively generated the field of drag king scholarship. If Halberstam’s academic work on drag kining can be said to provide the framework in which the field was constituted, *Female Masculinity* remains its core. The importance of this pioneering work on drag kings cannot be overstated. The academic and popular interest in drag king culture generated in the wake of *Female Masculinity* elevate it to representative status in the field of drag king scholarship, which serves to intensify its influence in facilitating cultural and political investments in the figure of the drag king. In this chapter, I survey Halberstam’s investments in drag king culture across this seven year period, tracing the theoretical evolution in how drag kings are contextualised in her work. I then consider how this foundational body of work provides for further academic engagement. In doing so, I present an overview of the field of drag king scholarship that looks at the performances as its critical focus.

**The Foundation of the Field**

In part motivated by her own identification as a “masculine woman” (Halberstam 1998, xii), *Female Masculinity* addresses masculinity as an attribute of women, and locates the performative practice of drag kining within this context. Halberstam (1998, 232) recounts the emergence of drag king culture in queer clubs in New York, San Francisco and London in the early 1990s when it was becoming “something of a subcultural phenomenon”.

Halberstam’s (1998, 232) account of this subculture begins by defining the drag king broadly as “a female (usually) who dresses up in recognisably male costume and performs theatrically
in that costume”. She is careful to differentiate drag kings from first, male impersonation and second, butch subjectivity. Where male impersonation aims to produce a plausible performance of maleness, the drag king exposes the theatricality of masculinity as part of his performance. Unlike the butch lesbian who utilises male clothing and accoutrements as part of her everyday lived identity, the drag king performer highlights the incongruence of masculinity on stage (Halberstam 1998, 232).

While Halberstam’s work is primarily focused on defining and describing the drag king, considerable space is allocated to contextualising the location in which drag king culture emerged. Halberstam takes care to distinguish between drag king and gay male cultures and their differing politics on drag performance. At the same time, she does not conflate drag kings and lesbian identity by presuming the gender or sexuality of the drag king performer. Despite maintaining this careful analytical separation, there are points in which drag king and lesbian cultures converge. Halberstam (1998, 233) acknowledges drag kinging’s historical and cultural connection to lesbian identity as part of a longer tradition of “politiced female masculinity” within an “emergent community of masculine-identified women”. This connection is reinstated by Halberstam’s (1998, 242) explicit reference to “dyke drag king culture” that she locates in her ethnographic fieldwork. Moreover, Halberstam notes the implications of her own position as a participant in the lesbian bar culture she is researching, recounting how she is often photographed as an audience member. Though she is not performing on stage, her ‘suit and tie’ attire is seen by others as ‘drag’. In providing this anecdote, Halberstam (1998, 244) draws attention to what she terms “the blending of onstage drag and offstage masculinity” and suggests the uniqueness of drag kinging from other theatrical practices that keep intact the distinction between performer and audience.
For Halberstam (1998, 242), drag king performances are neither inherently radical nor conservative but involve myriad motivations and transgressions that intersect within drag king cultures. Halberstam’s (1998, 242, 244) “symptomatic” reading of drag kinging is informed by the theoretical framework of performativity, intertwined with an ethnographic account of her first-hand experiences in the field and enriched with information obtained from interviews with drag king performers. Halberstam’s draws on her experiences at Hershe Bar and Club Casanova in New York in 1995 to 1996 to make the claim that drag king culture can be partitioned into two arenas: contests and performances.

Contests: Presenting Masculinity

Contests, Halberstam argues, provide a forum for women to exhibit their masculinity through presentation of their bodies on stage. Halberstam (1998, 245) notes that the contests were a “big letdown in terms of the performative” because “drag kings, generally speaking, seemed to have no idea how to perform as drag kings”. In this context, non-performativity refers to the perception that male masculinity is innate and naturalised in contrast to the artificial construct of femininity: “if masculinity adheres ‘naturally’ and inevitably to men, then masculinity cannot be impersonated” (Halberstam 1998, 235). The difficulty of drag kinging, as opposed to drag queen traditions that coattail on the broad acceptance of the artificiality of femininity, involves locating the aspects of masculinity that can be divorced and appropriated from maleness (Halberstam 1998, 234-245). Halberstam (1998, 245) argues that the “drag king contest is a difficult scene to read because we need a taxonomy of female masculinities to distinguish carefully between the various types of identification and gender acts on display”. The five resulting types of female masculinity are described in detail and accompanied by photographs designed to be representative of each form: “butch realness”, “femme pretender”, “male mimicry”, “fag drag”, and “denaturalized masculinity”.
In presenting categories that correspond to degrees of innate masculine characteristics, Halberstam’s taxonomy assumes the direct or indirect engagement with the notion of the *presentation* of masculinity as the basis of drag king contests. Halberstam’s implied emphasis on embodiment is reinforced by the pictorial representation of drag king taxonomic categories. These photographic images convey an overall sense of similarity between contestants, reinforced by the identical photographic techniques. The four photographs of drag king contestants, taken by Betsy Gallagher, are reminiscent of studio portraits photographed from mid chest upwards. Against a neutral background, each drag king is positioned in a similar angle towards the camera and all sport a similar configuration of facial hair and an unsmiling expression. Accordingly, this process of representation constitutes an epistemological framing and in this instance, these categories have been formulated based on their overall adherence to Halberstam’s larger project of showcasing female masculinities. By including a photograph of herself in the same aesthetic style, Halberstam is also explicitly positioning herself within the alternative masculinities of the contestants she analyses.4 However, the photographic techniques used to illustrate Halberstam’s taxonomic methodology may inadvertently fetishize each drag king category in stasis through the inference of timelessness and its dissociation from the social context in which the contests occur.

*Shows: Performing Masculinity*

Having detailed the taxonomic categories within the drag king contests, Halberstam turns to the second arena of drag kinging – the drag king shows. Halberstam notes that there are race and class differentials in place between the Hershe Bar and Club Casanova in New York as

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4 This photograph is taken by Del LaGrace, rather than Betty Gallagher, however it features the same neutral background and angle towards the camera.
well as between the audiences drawn to the contests and shows. Contests attract more non-white and non-middleclass participants and audience members. Non-white contestants can embody a convincing form of masculinity that accords with wider lifestyle aesthetics because, as Halberstam (1998, 257-258) argues, non-white forms of masculinity are more visible than normative white maleness. In contrast, the white middle class drag kings are required to actively perform masculinity, rather than simply present an innately visible form. Accordingly, drag king shows are explicitly more aligned with performance than presentation. By contrasting who and how participants engage in contests and shows, Halberstam can make a distinction between the two arenas and subsequently generate a more complex account of the various forms drag king practices represent.

Shows are not relevant to Halberstam’s taxonomy because performers in drag king shows employ the characteristics and accoutrements of maleness in order to theatrically perform masculinity, relying on the explicit artificiality of masculinity rather than its implicit embodiment. Drag king performers employ masculinity to produce acts designed to “parody, imitate, appropriate, and remake male masculinity” (Halberstam 1998, 266) and as such, drag king shows can be more closely compared to drag queen performances. Despite this apparent similarity, Halberstam makes the clear distinction between the camp of gay male theatre and the effects of what she terms ‘kinging’. Halberstam’s (1998, 259) assessments of the various performances tends to endorse those that engage in creative parody, as they overcome the difficulty of “performing non-performativity”, or the manifestation of male realism. Halberstam details three of the techniques used to ‘king’ an act: understatement, hyperbole and layering. Throughout she retains focus on how drag king performers construct alternative masculinities in their performance.
Like her description of contestant categories, Halberstam selects three photographs to convey images of drag king techniques. However, in contrast to the previous stylised studio images involving the presentation of female masculinity, each of these photographs are ‘action shots’ of a solo performer taken in different times and places by different photographers. By presenting images of the one performer in a variety of drag king guises, these photographs convey the dynamism of the drag king shows. Rather than employing a methodology that assists in classifying the forms of masculinity into like categories, as she did when analysing the contests, Halberstam’s emphasis on techniques clearly locate drag king shows within the overall discourse of performance. Put simply, drag king shows operate as the temporary performance of masculinity, rather than a reflection or static presentation of enduring masculinity.

The distinction between contests and shows allows Halberstam to highlight the difference between the presentation and performance of masculinity. Drag king contestants present bodies that demonstrate innate masculine characteristics while drag king performers demonstrate the constructed nature of masculinity. As contests and shows rely on two different methods of conveying masculinity, different methodologies are required to identify the forms at work in each. Yet these differences are not absolute as this summary makes them appear. Halberstam (1998, 244) recognises that contests and performances are not autonomously separate arenas, stating “there are multiple sites of interaction and overlap between the kings who participated in the contests and the kings who perform in the clubs”. By pointing to areas of overlap, Halberstam (1998, 256) allows for how the contests set the stage for the proliferation of drag king culture in New York, where drag king shows were borne from the success and popularity of the contests. In Halberstam’s account of the chronology and influence of the contests, contests are the genesis for the performances and
the performances grew as an embellishment or elaboration of the contests. Indeed, it could be argued that Halberstam’s account of New York drag king culture inadvertently implicates that the performance of masculinity central to drag king shows is built on the presentation of masculinity central to the contests. This privileges the display of innate or embodied forms of masculinity over other forms. While Halberstam presents the symbiotic relationship between the two, her primacy of taxonomic methodology may constrain performers’ productions of masculine performativity to those forms of female masculinities he embodies. Despite her strong assertions of geographic and cultural particularity of her sample, her analysis has been treated as representative of other urban drag king cultures and thus generalised to drag kinging as a whole. Yet, this dynamism highlighted by overlap between contest and performance, between taxonomic categorisation and technique, prompts me to consider how each drag king performance is received in Halberstam’s various critical encounters.

**Contextualising the Field**

Whatever its theoretical implications, *Female Masculinity* documents the emergence of drag kings as a subculture in the 1990’s via the in-depth case studies of two clubs in New York. Two additional texts from the late 1990's by Halberstam can be considered part of the process of generating the field of scholarship, though they are less explicitly spoken of by other scholars in the field: "Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene" (1997) and *The Drag King Book* (Volcano and Halberstam 1999).

In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam (1998, 242) writes

I have no desire to force drag king representations into ‘an already determined theoretical agenda’, but I have also become aware through the interview process that
many performers are not necessarily that interested in the theoretical import of their acts or even in identifying a larger context. This performers’ indifference in interrogating their own motivations for participation justifies Halberstam’s methodological approach of blending the interviewee responses with her own observations and theoretical framings (Halberstam 1998, 244). The tension between Halberstam’s critical investment in her larger project of female masculinity and the ethnographic emphasis of her encounters with the drag king scene is made apparent when I compare her three texts published within a similar timeframe. The frames of reference she develops within each reveal a shift in relation to the overall aims and focuses that might match Halberstam’s own historically shifting approach to drag king research.

In “Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene”, Halberstam places a greater emphasis on the intersections between gender, race and class that are located within the spatial configurations of a segregated drag king culture. Halberstam (1997, 104) initially defines a drag king “as a performer who pinpoints and exploits the (often obscured) theatricality of masculinity” but this basic definition is expanded considerably through her subsequent discussion. The drag king “can be male or female; she can be transgendered, she can be butch or femme” or the drag king might “make no distinction between her off-stage and on-stage persona or she may make an absolute distinction”. Halberstam has always been careful to avoid theoretical simplification relating to gender, but she also invites consideration of how different modes and receptions of drag kinging in different contexts might also be related to the racial segregation of lesbian scenes. Halberstam locates the persistence of segregation in contemporary drag king culture as a legacy of the dual histories of African American nightlife (1997, 119) and African American theatrical male impersonation (1997, 113-114), and at the intersection of broader African American
contemporary rap music culture (1997, 123-124). In particular, Halberstam (1997, 117) locates the participation of women of colour in 1990s drag king culture with a far longer tradition of African American lesbian male impersonation when she asks

Did the cross-dressing performances of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith and Gladys Bentley in the 1920s and 1930s and the male impersonations of Storme DeLavarie in the 1940s spill over into a drag king scene in African American lesbian communities from those eras?

Accordingly, the drag king is defined in relation to his role as a performer, in order to provide synthesis with the theatrical history of male impersonation.

In contrast to race, there is a greater emphasis on gender politics in Halberstam’s work published the following year. While Female Masculinity reasserts the racial segregation between the clubs presented in “Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper”, Halberstam’s ethnographic material emphasises the distinctiveness of drag king productions. This distinction is further enhanced by Halberstam’s prioritisation of contestants over performers, who command double the page length of analysis. The overall intention in Female Masculinity is to highlight the way in which drag kings produce alternative forms of masculinity that are embedded in the broader existence of female masculinity. The drag king taxonomy is thus predicated on the need to distinguish drag king traits and characteristics from the same theatrical male impersonation history proposed in her 1997 article, and from the lesbian subjectivities that are the sustained focus of her 1999 book. Reflective of her own political investment in drag king culture’s production of alternative masculinity, Halberstam (1998, 266) concludes that drag kings now have their own candidate. Murray Hill [drag king performer] is running for mayor, and female masculinity is on the ticket.
In *The Drag King Book* (1999) Halberstam defines a drag king as a “performer who makes masculinity into his or her act (yes, there can be male drag kings)” (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 36). This definition is further enhanced by the sub-categories Halberstam articulates, in which the butch drag king persona is an elaboration or continuation of the performer’s innate masculinity, and the androgyny or femme drag king who utilises masculinity for the temporary purposes of performance only (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 36). Indeed, Halberstam’s particular emphasis on identity lies in her suggestion that “it seems important to explore whether Drag Kings continue to develop their personae off stage or whether they are only interested in being kings for a day” (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 35). This suggestion complicates Halberstam’s previous delineation between categories of male impersonation and female masculine presentation by extending the framework of apprehension beyond the drag king event. *The Drag King Book* combines photography with a much more personalised review of drag king culture, evident in the images used to accompany the text, which range from portrait or studio shots (1999, 3), to staged and stylised shots (1999, 50-51), to candid shots taken in the clubs (1999, 20), and of drag king performers on stage (1999, 46-47). Indeed, *The Drag King Book* is designed to record the expanding scope of drag king cultures at the height of their popularity (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 152). This approach to the wider contexts of drag king cultures may be the result of Halberstam’s collaboration with Volcano, a well-known photographer of queer scenes. Both the text and the accompanying photographs serve to showcase the diversity of drag king culture, which is different from the textual reading more evident in *Female Masculinity*. Both Halberstam and Volcano recount their own experiences, engagements and reactions to the drag king culture they set out to document. This personalisation is further referenced by the drag kings that they chose to analyse, with Halberstam (1999, 41) stating
It is only fair to say that Del and I privilege, or at least seek out, the kings who find some material investment in their costumes. We actually went out searching for butch kings who wear their masculine clothing as part of an identity.

Halberstam acknowledges her own predisposition to find those kings that reflect her own critical and personal preoccupations.

This process of documenting the range of drag kings differs from the more situated ethnography and localised reading of the New York scene apparent in “Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper” and *Female Masculinity*. This shift to a focus on cultural context is perhaps a response to the very success of *Female Masculinity* that freezes drag king culture forever within a theoretical taxonomy. *The Drag King Book* contains a much more explicit reference to the differences between drag king scenes around the world, and hence represents a challenge to the trend towards theoretical generalisation. The book is an attempt to “counter the mainstream media representations of Drag Kings as supermodels in moustaches” (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 2), and refocus drag king practices within the cultural context in which they thrive. From 1997 to 1999 Halberstam moves towards the local rather than the general, embraces variety rather than essentialist types, and emphasises the personal rather than the political. This shift in emphasis therefore requires a discussion of drag kings that speaks to their place within established lesbian and emergent queer cultures. It is within this particular shift towards contextualisation that I situate my own research.

**Expanding the Field**

The movement away from drag king theory to drag king practice is further emphasised in Halberstam’s later work that interrogates dominant discursive constructions of time and space to argue that drag king culture is a manifestation of queer affect. In "Oh Behave! Austin
Powers and the Drag Kings” (2001) and In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives (2005), she approaches drag kinging practices in terms of the culture in which they reside. While her earlier work is primarily concentrated on the content and identity of the drag king performer, Halberstam is now concerned with the affective potential of drag king events. Her later publications do not attempt to define a drag king, but rather describe drag king acts as “wilfully eccentric modes of being” occurring within lesbian and transgender subcultures (Halberstam 2005, 1).

The shift in how drag king culture is framed by Halberstam correlates to a wider movement in queer theory away analysis of aesthetic forms to the interrogation of affect and subcultural belongings. This is particularly apparent in her analysis that links lesbian drag king subcultures and hetero-male comic movies (Halberstam 2001, 425). By identifying drag king culture as a subcultural practice, Halberstam is able to map out the relations of power and affiliation that flow between the dominant and marginal cultures of masculinity. This argument is an extension of Dick Hebdige’s (1979) well-known account of the one-directional flow of power through which subcultural practices become co-opted to mainstream commodity markets and thus lose their potential for uniqueness and resistance to social norms. Through her analysis of the transmission between drag king culture and mainstream cinematic aesthetics, Halberstam reworks Hebdige’s influential reading of subcultures to one that involves a more complex textual play. King comedies, as defined by Halberstam (2005, 127-128), are those comedies that “exploit not the power but the frailty of the male body for the purposes of generating laughs that come at the hero’s expense”. In doing so they also “capitalize on the humor that comes from revealing the derivative nature of dominant masculinities, and so they trade heavily in the troupes of doubling, disguise and impersonation” (Halberstam 2001, 426). Yet, as subcultural representations of masculinity
are not explicitly referenced by mainstream comedies about masculinity, Halberstam (2001, 427) suggests that “we have to re-create and actively imagine the possible routes of transmission that carry drag-king humor from the queer club to the mainstream blockbuster movie”. Both The Full Monty and Austin Powers owe their success to their portrayal of the vulnerabilities of the English male body and psyche—which Halberstam (2005, 127) terms abject masculinities—using the techniques she has already discerned in drag king culture.

According to Halberstam, drag kings have developed modes of performing masculinity that invoke a sensibility, much in the same way that “camp sensibility” (Sontag 1964) invokes. Halberstam (2005, 150) uses the term ‘kinging’ to reference the production and affect of a sensibility “through indirect and mediated influence”. ‘Kinging’ also references the distinction between drag queen acts and drag king shows, a distinction within which “we can recognize a genre of cultural work in drag-king performances that is not exactly commensurate with what we call ‘camp’ and yet has similar effects” (Halberstam 2001, 427). By articulating this distinction, Halberstam can distinguish between the effects of gay male-derived ‘camp’, and lesbian and transgender subculture-derived ‘kinging’ on various mainstream representations of masculinity. A ‘kingy’ affect is found in mainstream portrayals of masculinity in which the normative forms are critiqued and transformed through the process of “exaggeration, parody and earnest mimicry” (Halberstam 2005, 132). Halberstam references four methods by which this “kingy” affect is achieved: de-authentication, masculine supplementarity, doubling, and indexical representation. These four “kingy” techniques are designed to convey how masculinity is performed, rather than presented, highlighting the performative element of all seemingly naturalised gender. All four methods are commensurate with the performative techniques attributed to drag king shows first described in Female Masculinity.
Halberstam (2005, 136) notes that drag king culture has “revealed in the humor of male mimicry and the power of male parody”, which reflects the increasing interest and popularity in comedic drag king performances over sexy and tributary homage to the embodiment of female masculinity. The reasons for this shift are located outside of drag king culture in a wider performance culture and reflects mediated routes of transmission and influence between dominant and marginal cultures. Despite the fact Halberstam (2005, 136) reiterates that drag king culture is not appreciated outside of the “lesbian club circuit”, she suggests that drag king audiences, like the audiences of mainstream male comedies, are seeking practices that playfully deconstruct maleness rather than simply celebrating masculinity in either its male or female declensions. However, an additional reason for this switch from form to affect may lie in the extension of Halberstam’s strategic investments in drag king culture. By analysing drag king practices in terms of their location within broader lesbian and transgendered subcultures and the transmission of its aesthetics to mainstream culture, drag king cultures can be strategically positioned as one form in which queer aesthetics gain currency in the mainstream. While this shift reflects Halberstam’s changing critical investments in drag king culture, it also has the effect of widening the frame of reference in which the drag king is articulated as an object of research.

**Consolidating the Field**

Halberstam’s work on drag king cultures, especially those shifting emphases from embodiment to performance, and from the general to the local, has informed my own approach. These shifts better accommodate the particular interests I hold in documenting Sydney’s drag king scene in terms of its affective relationality. I now turn to map the ways subsequent scholarship has engaged with Halberstam’s original approach to the drag king phenomenon that works to inadvertently consolidate it. In the wake of Halberstam’s work, a
number of other scholars engaged with the bodies, identities and subcultures involved in drag king performances. The most substantive contribution to the field is *The Drag King Anthology* (2002a), simultaneously published as a special edition to *The Journal of Homosexuality* edited by Donna Troka, Kathleen LeBesco and Jean Noble, which contains varied analyses of drag king practices by a range of academic and activist contributors. In their introduction to *The Anthology*, Troka, LeBesco and Noble express the aims of contributing to the field of scholarship by seeking alternative theoretical sources, expanding their focus to include race, class and geographical differences, and introducing a consideration of desire and gender roles. Even as they further consolidate Halberstam’s reputation in the field by recognising their debt to Halberstam’s 1998 work, they observe that the exposure of drag king culture her work precipitated “came at the expense of the fluidity of identity many of her subjects had worked hard to achieve” (Troka et. al. 2002b, 4).

In addition to *The Anthology*, there are also a handful of journal articles and dissertations that specifically take drag kinging as their primary focus of analysis. These similarities in motif and critical analysis confirm that subsequent drag king scholarship continues to engage, either explicitly or implicitly, with Halberstam’s foundational work. Two discursive frameworks can be traced within this now expanded field. The first framework denotes a methodological approach that derives from an analytic focus on the symbolic construction of the drag king and is predicated on the performer’s bodily form and gendered identity. The second framework involves the analysis of the social consequences of drag kinging and is predicated on the transgressive and transformative effects of the drag king performance.
Drag King Form

Within *The Anthology*, essays by Thomas Pointek (2002), and Colleen Ayoup and Julie Podmore (2002) provide the most explicit responses to Halberstam’s scholarly legacy. Pointek (2002, 126) states that Halberstam’s work assumes a “highly representative character, so that anyone who writes about drag kings must engage with her work”. He revisits Halberstam’s ethnographic description to critique the limitations of her study as part of his own ethnographic observation on Columbus troupe, H.I.S. Kings. Likewise, Ayoup and Podmore’s (2002, 51) study of Montreal collective, The Mambo Drag Kings, serves to further highlight “locally specific codes of dress, performance styles and forms of masculinity”. Both essays address what they perceive as deficiencies in Halberstam’s taxonomic and theoretical models by highlighting variances thrown up by their own ethnographic research.

In the first section of *The Drag King Anthology*, a number of drag king performers give first hand narratives of their experiences. k bradford (2002, 29) explicitly draws on Butler’s theory of performativity and Halberstam’s analysis of ‘kinging’ to personify the “new erotics, new genders, and new forms and modes of power” that drag kinging produces. bradford’s first-person narration is interrupted with statements in the voice of her drag king persona Johnny T so that it performs the work of gender variance. Likewise, the contribution by Jay Sennett and Sarah Bay-Cheng (2002, 40) references Halberstam in order to critique her implication of drag kings being reliant on the notion of a stable, definable body underneath the performance. The authors describe the genesis and execution of their drag king performance piece “I am Man” to demonstrate how the bodies of drag king performers destabilise the notion of real or true bodies. Sennett and Bay-Cheng (2002, 42) argue that bodily form rests on the causal relation between trans-bodies and trans-identities, hence they approach drag king performance “as a cross-identity piece instead of the more conventional cross-dressing”.


Neeve ‘Amy’ Nevel’s engagement with Halberstam is more implicit than explicit. Nevel (2002, 33; original emphasis) analyses her own body in order to conclude that “my personal consciousness and my personal inclinations collude in one destiny: drag kinging”. In this account, Neeve’s trans-identity is played out through embodied drag king performances. In all three essays, gender and trans identities are argued to be actualised through the drag king form.

The emphasis on subjective experience can also be found in the work of Eve Shapiro and Donna Jean Troka, both of whom had undertaken ethnographic studies of drag king performers. In her article “Drag Kinging and the Transformation of Gender Identities” (2007), Shapiro examines the process of gender and sexual identities through an in-depth case study of The Disposable Boy Toys (DBT), of which she was a performing member. The members of DBT, which contained a number of variously gender-identified individuals over almost five years, provide her sample through which transformations in identity can be measured. While Shapiro (2007, 263) concludes that “the opportunity for enactment [DBT provided] was a significant collective mechanism for gender identity shifts”, her analysis remains centred on the primacy of performer, rather than performance or wider cultural context. Like Shapiro, Troka (2007) also centred her doctoral research on drag kings in three Midwestern US cities through her role as a performer. Troka’s project involved recording and analysing oral histories of the HIS Kings in Columbus, the Chicago Kings in Chicago and the Metro Kings in Minneapolis/St Paul. Oral histories provide the methodology through which she can “interrogate how drag kings think through and theorize their performances or gender, race, and sexuality” (Troka 2007, 8). While her research aims to “investigate the context in which these drag king cultures emerged”, and specifically to explore how “a focus on Midwestern drag king collectives change contemporary drag king discourse”, Troka’s
investigation is conducted through the collation of histories, identifications and politics of individual performers.

Alba Barbé i Serra (2014) similarly provides an ethnographic approach to drag king performances although she focuses exclusively on a conversation with a single drag king performer based in Barcelona, Spain. Barbé i Serra traces the everyday itinerary of Elena as she becomes performer Urko to demonstrate forms of discursive, somatic and corporeal resistance. Barbé i Serra’s own relation to the research field is offered amid rich ethnographic description of the context in which this transformation takes place but ultimately, the voice of the performer is privileged—transcribed from Spanish to English and centred in italics on every page—that provides the evidence for destabilisation for gender and sexuality. As with the first person accounts, the ethnographic-based studies by Shapiro, Troka and Barbé i Serra privilege the drag king performer as the authoritative representative of drag king culture. This approach continues to “centralize the voices of the performers” over other sources of potential informants, such as alternative participants in the drag king scene (Troka 2007, 8).

Also within The Anthology, Alana Kumbier (2002, 193) recounts her experience as both drag king and drag queen to argue that drag performances engage gender technologies to support the denaturalisation of gender and desire. Her explicit intention as a performer is to extend Halberstam’s project of deconstructing the binary system of gender and sexuality through the application of material and social gender technologies (Kumbier 2002, 197). Material technologies refer to the accoutrements of drag performance, such as lighting, costume, facial hair and ‘packing’, and social technologies are those practices which challenge the normative gender systems. Kumbier’s (2014) later monograph on ephemeral materials contains a chapter on how to archive drag king communities “from the ground up”. Kumbier’s
experience as an “ardent fan” (2014, 122) in a local drag king scene provided the genesis for her performing in her own drag king troupe. Upon hearing about changes in local drag king scenes, Kumbier (2014, 124) was “amazed that the history of such a small, local scene could fade so quickly”. This realisation prompted Kumbier to create a historical record of drag king performances. Recognising the lack of archival documentation to date, Kumbier (2014, 124) proposes working with members of lost cultures to document and preserve a record of it for the future, a call my own research responds to. Kumbier’s practice of archival recovery nonetheless continues to be centred on members of drag king troupes and the organisers of the annual International Drag King Extravaganza.

In contrast to this continued emphasis on the performer and their bodily experience, Vicki Crowley (2002) approaches drag kinging from the perspective of the non-corporeal forms which emerge from the physical body of the drag king performer. As a member of an Adelaide drag king troupe, Crowley bases her research in participant observation and interviews conducted with members of the troupe around questions of persona, identity, identification and the meaning of gender. Through an examination of the process of naming, Crowley (2002, 295) identifies how drag kinging “becomes an evocation around which certain practices can be hinged”, including those relating to race and ethnicity. Following Derrida, Crowley insists that naming is performative insofar as the subject is constituted in language. Yet, while the performative process of naming allows for the constitution of the non-corporeal form, Crowley (2002, 291) notes that the centrality of the body is impressed and gestured towards through the drag king performance. In Crowley’s account, the process of naming is routed through the bodily performance of the drag king, which symbolically constructs him as the central effect of that embodied enunciation.
Je Hye Kim’s (2007) doctoral thesis likewise places emphasis on the body through which drag king practices are based but, in contrast to Crowley, she reasserts the primacy of the corporeal body. Kim (2007, 3) provides an exploration of how “butch lesbians and female-born gender variants embody and represent their masculinities and multiple queer genders” in drag king culture. While Kim bases this exploration on Butler’s performativity and Halberstam’s female masculinity, like Crowley, her aim is to “extend their work with a further emphasis on class, race and ethnicity” (Kim 2007, 12). Underpinning her project, however, is the presumption of a female body through which masculinity can be made performative at these various intersections, with Kim goes as far as to argue that female masculinity can only be made intelligible through the deployment of a pre-existing female body. The primacy of the female body is made evident in her argument that diversity and differences in drag king performances “point not to a mere variety of styles or forms of masculinity, but to their differences in material reality and within the representational system” (Kim 2007, 259).

Replicating Kim’s return to the corporeal, Julie Hanson (2007) introduces the notion of reading drag king performances through the context of exclusively female bodily enactments and embodiment. Citing personal frustration that the current literature on drag king cultures could not account for the “powerful bodily effects drag kining can and does have on the women that engage in its practice” (Hanson 2007, 62), she instead offers speculative analysis of the drag king as a ‘sexed’ body. The female body of the performer, Hanson argues, is already culturally sexed and so performers must strategically employ their femaleness for the purposes of securing a masculine performance. In doing so, Hanson (2007, 62) widens attention to the contextual dynamics in which these performances take place, noting that the lesbian or queer sociosexual setting facilitates a specifically “female bodily mode” with little
difference discernible between material and immaterial changes. Hanson already notes the transformative effects of drag kinging for those who practice it, but suggests that it is the body itself that is undergoing an “ongoing and changing process of ‘becoming/s’”: the drag king “body takes it/self as its own object of creativity and becomes a literal metaphor” (Hanson 2007, 63, 65). This argument represents a departure from prior attention to transitive gender or sexual identity and instead insists that an “active, conscious form of corporeal specificity” is central to the dynamics of drag king performances. Hanson anchors a largely theoretical argumentation of Karen Barad’s post-humanist elaboration of performativity with empirical evidence offered by the first-person accounts of the drag king performers she interviews. In doing so, Hanson (2007, 103) privileges the drag king performer’s body over any other body as “the driving force of female desires and their quest to materialize and reveal themselves”.

Kim Surkan (2002, 161) provides another analysis of Midwestern drag king communities to suggest that these represent a “new wave” of drag king culture, “a new consciousness and enactment of gender theory through artistic praxis”. Surkan’s methodology involves the dual task of academic theorisation of drag kinging and tracing the historical evolution of Columbus and Minneapolis drag king communities. The forms of “new wave” participatory drag king culture that Surkan (2002, 171) discusses are contrasted with Halberstam’s distinction between butch and femme drag king subjectivities, and the attendant notions of authenticity with which she underpins those distinctions. In an astute recognition of the potentially distorting influence of Halberstam’s work, Surkan (2002, 182) notes that the contemporary drag king “is a figure emanating from a specific cultural history, which has shaped both audience response and the critical readings surrounding king performances”. Looking at a range of specific contexts, Surkan (2002, 163) suggests that drag kings are
“responding to and testing the limits of the conceptualizations of gender” that are produced in academic discourse. Participatory drag king performances, she argues, “are complicating the equation of butch authenticity with drag realness from earlier contest days” and, with many participants being conversant in gender and queer theory, they are “bridging the gaps between the academic, the artistic, and the ‘man’ on the street (Surkan 2002, 172, 183).

Like Surkan’s interest in drag kings who can theorise their own gender experiences, Leslee Grey’s (2011) primary interest is in self-narration and the creation and circulation of drag king pedagogies. Grey (2011, 171) reviews the pedagogical significance of drag kinging through an examination of life story interviews and participant observation to examine the “ways in which drag king performers construct, take up and perform multiple subjectivities”. On evidence of the drag king narratives she has analysed, Grey (2011, 182) argues that the stable subject that the education field takes for granted is challenged by how individuals learn and unlearn “knowledge of the multiplicities of identities and subjectivities”. Drag king narratives are illustrative of pedagogical space that encourages “individuals to question their social practices and historical learnings” (Grey 2011, 183). Grey (2011, 172) ultimately concludes that drag king performers’ life narratives provides a positive model for the conduct of broader pedagogical practices within what is essentially an “informal learning community”.

While each of these works represent an evolving culture of drag king practice, the insights on gender, sexual and racial subjectivities they contain are offered from the perspective of the drag king performer. In so doing, these accounts reinforce the primacy of the performer as the representative figure of drag king cultures and in this sense can be considered continuous with Halberstam’s work, despite their various methodological and theoretical critiques of it.
Yet, they also offer scope for combining drag king form with subcultural affect in the ways that variously attempt to measure the success of drag king performances. This scope is extended in further work that seeks to locate drag king performances within precise cultural contexts.

**Subcultural Context**

While the essays discussed above focus on the performer, others address drag kinging in terms of its strategic potential as a form of cultural critique. Using the theoretical frameworks provided by Butler and Halberstam, Shelia “Dragon Fly” Koenig (2002) examines the inherent potential of drag king performance as a transformative device for deconstructing gender. The success of deconstruction, she argues, is reliant on the paradoxical failure of drag king performances to appropriate the naturalness of maleness. Instead drag king performances can be aligned with female-to-male transgender practices that similarly function as “acts of resistance that are subversive in their failure to fully approximate heteronormative gender categories” (Koenig 2002, 156). Jean Bobby Noble (2002) also locates drag king practices as the medium through which transformative space is accessed. The effects of drag kinging are the result of the tensions produced at the juncture of performance, performativity, gender and race, most notably in the “way a few of the kings racialised whiteness and queer masculinity (Noble 2002, 253). The transformative potential lies in the space created by drag king’s meta-theatrical acts, defined by Noble (2002, 253) as “performances about performing where lights, music, body language, dance, all make the man” and meta-performative acts defined as “performances which are at once conditioned by the identifications but which also enact or enable further identifications”. These spaces are ideologically noisy or, in a Bakhtinian sense, dialogical: they are where the meaning of white masculinity “is made and confused, reduced and complexified all at the same time” (Noble
This suggests that there is further dynamism in the way that drag king performances constitute extended practices that extend from consideration of the drag king form. Noble privileges the creation of performative spaces created by drag king performances over any other as capable of actualising re-articulations of masculinity and whiteness.

Ashley Baker and Kimberly Kelly (2016) similarly argue for the importance of context in order to understand drag king culture. Like several other ethnographic studies mentioned in this chapter, Baker and Kelly review drag king cultures occurring within non-urban US sites to argue against the easy conflation of drag, urbanism and a universal subversion of male masculinity. Through qualitative interviews with 27 drag kings in South Carolina, Kelly and Baker (2016, 47) find that “Southern drag kings gain a better understanding of gender through performing drag”. While these drag kings might take this understanding of gender “out into the world and help expand its meaning” (Baker and Kelly 2016, 61) this is an incidental, not intentional, result of the performances. The emphasis stays not on political effectiveness but on the safe haven drag kinging provides for the exploration of masculinity.

Jennifer Lyn Patterson (2002, 99) likewise considers the context of drag kinging as providing safe and supportive environments in which participants can “celebrate and explore their relationships to female masculinity”. Her central argument is that drag kinging fulfils the emotional and social needs of the lesbian community because drag king performers locate those same “investments in their characters” (Patterson 2002, 100). Yet, despite her commitment to documenting the context in which these needs are met, Patterson’s methodological framework relies on the symbolism of the drag king as the manifestation of female masculinities to facilitate the connections to community identities (Patterson 2002, 100). Kathryn Hobson (2013) likewise takes drag kinging’s presumed subversive
characterisation to task by offering an auto ethnographic narrative from the site of a drag king performance. Confessing that she both “dreaded and loved attending drag shows” (Hobson 2013, 35), Hobson seeks out those performances that offer the “liminal space” for “queering gender, race, racial and class expressions”. This is because a performance, Hobson (2013, 36) claims, is always an ideological message. In her observational experiences, Hanson (2013, 37) finds that performances are sites of tension that can also produce misogyny, racism, classism and the white middleclass privilege so that “queer drag king performances do the work of oppression and social justice simultaneously”. Written from her perspective as a feminine-presenting queer audience member, Hobson’s account is novel in providing both a rich description of the performance site and an account of her own response to the content of a drag king performance, both elements previously missing in the scholarship on drag king culture.

Though the diverse accounts of the cultural context of performances provided by Koenig, Noble, Baker and Kelly, Patterson, and Hobson remain centred on the drag king as the central figure through cultural affects are mediated, they offer potential in considering the affective relations between the drag king and other cultural participants. In contrast to this shared emphasis on a distinction between the drag king world and the world outside of it, Jana Evans Braziel (2005, 162) points to “what has been obscured or rendered opaque within these analyses: race as performative”. In a close study of drag king Dréd’s performances, Braziel argues that the existing drag king literature demonstrates how racialised differences are presumed fixed and stabilised, while gender and sex are allowed greater fluidity. Rather than locate the performative element of drag kining in either Dréd’s body or identity, Braziel (2005, 160) suggests that the performative operates through the machine-désirante, a term borrowed from Deleuze to describe the desire, repulsion and repression that are imbedded
within US constructions of race and sex. The mechanics of this process lie in parody—an act of both distancing and intimacy—which allows Dréd to pay homage to black male artists at the same time as deploying satire. In another article that looks specifically at Dréd, Maite Escudero-Alias (2011) compares the ethics and authorship of drag king performances with mainstream depictions of the same. Escudero-Alias (2011, 257) argues that subcultural queer sites, such as those in which Dréd performs, feature “self-conscious paradigms of gender configuration” that can act as teaching tools for gender instability and subversion, while accounts of these performances in mainstream popular culture “suggest that performing masculinity is just an alternative entertainment site of gender experimentation”. While the image of the drag king can exist in these two sites, the way in which the transformative potential is read and actualised differs across them. For example, while the transformative effects ascribed to drag kinging are presumed within subcultural sites, Escudero-Alias (2011, 271) argues that the performer’s political commitment to destabilisation has little consequence as their images proliferate in wider contexts. She concludes that drag king culture, particularly as it portrayed in mainstream media, does not constitute any threat to established normative configurations of gender.

**The Drag King Audience**

Like the subcultures that are their object of study, academic cultures are historically and geographically situated and have the capacity to shift and reform, acquiring new shapes and meanings across time. Over fifteen years on from Halberstam’s most influential publication on drag kings, it seems pertinent to ask if new readings of drag king culture can now be identified. Amid the sustained focus on the performer and the performance that characterises much of the field, my question is: where is the audience? Although audience presence is presumed in much of the literature on drag kinging, limited scholarship explicitly addresses
the role of the audience in performance cultures. In this section I review alternative readings of drag king culture that focus predominantly on the audience and the types of social and sexual desires that it collectively manifests, a focus that aligns more closely with my own critical investments.

In the first person accounts of performing by Bradford, Neveil, and Sennett and Bay-Cheng mentioned above, the audience is associated with desire. Bradford (2002, 26) considers the audience as part of the “rich, steamy world of excitement and desire” that is provoked by the subversive “genderfuck” of the performance. By specifying the “safe, queer context” of drag king shows, Bradford (2002, 27-28) conflates the audience with a LGBTIQ “community” whose “histories, realities, meanings and fantasies” provides the means that “recognizes, validates and celebrates” performances. Neveil (2002, 36) states that the greatest compliment to hir performance is an audience member saying “you made me wet”, which is taken as evidence of a subversive “gender-bend-over”. Sennett and Bay-Cheng (2002, 40) are also interested in the subversiveness of their attempts to “deny the audience knowledge of which one of us had what body, or even the assurance that a definable body existed”. In this account, the audience is conceived as the reflective surface through which to assess the success of “transgender drag”. Similarly, for Surkan, the subversiveness that attaches to the drag king performance is dependent on the audience sharing a collective identity as lesbian. Lesbian desire “complicates” the masculinity/male entity, and the ambiguity of drag king performances “makes the king available as an object of lesbian desire” (Surkan 2002, 176). In all these accounts, the audience is presented as a collectively uniform reflection of the political desires of the drag king performers.
Other contributions are more specific in detailing the forms of participation that the audience engages in. Pointek (2002, 129) describes the audience as performing for/to the performers in their “extremely feminine and sexy outfits” so that the “femininity of the fans and their stereotypically female behaviour accentuate the masculinity of the performers”. In Crowley’s account, the audience is responsive to the air of excitement palpable at drag king shows. Crowley (2002, 287) describes the audience reaction as an “intense shared public pleasure” that becomes a “wildly ecstatic engagement between audience and Drag King performers”. Within their study of The Mambo Drag Kings, Ayoup and Podmore (2002, 60-63) briefly discuss differences within the audience general demographic that breaks down into lesbian, gay male and heterosexual spectators. The drag king performers they interviewed recount the varying reactions received within and across these differing subsections of the audience. As these three groups are distinguished by their sexual identities, the receptiveness of the audience is configured in terms of their variant desire for the performers and the masculinities produced within the performances.

Extending her analysis of technologies of gender in drag king performances, Alana Kumbier introduces the drag king fan to describe the “doubled desire” of the audience. Audience’s desire is defined through her own experience as a fan where Kumbier (2002, 197) writes that she “simultaneously wanted to be them and fuck them (or, be fucked by them)”. The technologies of gender that Kumbier initially specifies as a key component of drag king performance are transferred back to the audience who “become the performing subjects of our desire” (Kumbier 2002, 198). Kumbier configures gender technologies as the method to invoke desire, which is the process through which broader gender and sexual identity politics are actualised in process of cross-identification between performer and audience. Audience desire is deployed in relation its formulation as a staging ground where the audience
ultimately becomes performer. Jennifer Lyn Patterson likewise discusses the investments between performers and audiences as one element of identification within a broader lesbian community. The primary goal of the drag king performer is to satisfy the fantasies held by the audience, which in turn fulfils the emotional and social needs of the performer. Similarly, the audience’s desire is a manifestation of a social, rather than a strictly personal, fantasy. Indeed, Patterson presents a strong case for the way drag king performances allow audience members to safely experiment with fantasy on a collective level: “we audience participants demonstrate our gratitude to the kings and encourage the sexually volatile performances” that “foster a sense of lesbian community” (Patterson 2002, 120). This review of works that ostensibly focus on drag king performers reveals the potential for ‘reading’ the audience into analysis.

The Audience’s Perspective

In a section titled “Desire and the Audience” in The Drag King Anthology (Troka, LeBesco and Noble 2002a) two essays explicitly deal with the character of the audience in drag king culture. Kathryn Rosenfeld (2002, 201) positions drag king performances within the context of “queergirl desire”, which requires drag kings to “perform/become the Other”. This trifold otherness—as women, as queers and as subcultural members—is implicated in structures of desire that are likewise triple in their orientation “for ourselves, for one another, and for the figure of masculinity” (Rosenfeld 2002, 204). Rosenfeld (2002, 210) argues that these embodied forms of otherness, the varied ways a “queergirl” can be, also encompasses “the equally volatile aspects of identity with which gender intersects”. Using Victor Turner’s theory of liminality and Michael Taussig’s writing on mimetic performance, Rosenfeld (2002, 215) categorises drag king performances as either liminal (those “drag king

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5 I have analysed the first contribution in the section on “Desire and the Audience” by Kumbier in the previous section of this chapter. A final contribution is a short poem by Ann Tweedy not reviewed here.
performers [who] consciously float in a nether-region between states of (gendered) being”) or mimetic (those who occupy the “charged gray area between masculinity and femininity, the site of gender’s slippage and indeterminacy rather than gender itself”). In becoming “the Other”, the drag king forces a confrontation with the queergirl’s desire, which functions on two levels of longing: the “visceral, sexual, sometimes elusive longing for sensory satiation and complex beauty” and “the socioeconomic longing for power, agency and self-definition” (Rosenfeld 2002, 208). Rosenfeld’s account of the drag king as Other invests him with strategic political purpose: both liminal and mimetic drag kings can “negotiate a transformative power exchange with the powerful male other by representing, performing, becoming him (Rosenfeld 2002, 216). In this way, the audience’s engagement with the performer is framed as a political desire that, not coincidentally, matches the author’s investment in the subversive potential of the performance.

Tara Pauliny (2002, 244) also argues that performers’ relations to their audience challenges “the sex/gender binary and displays its incoherencies and instabilities and, at times, revises racist and homophobic discourses”. Pauliny considers a single performance by drag king performer Dréd that took place on 21 October 2000 at the Second International Drag King Extravaganza. Pauliny makes the distinction between the addressed audience (“the actual people who watch the show”) and the invoked audience (“the audience called upon, imagined, or made possible by the performance”). This distinction allows Pauliny (2002, 222) to examine performances as an ideological discourse, one that “studies the shape and force of the performance’s argument” in an “interactive encounter between a performer, her performance and an audience”. Though Pauliny recognises that the gaze of the ‘real audience’ is suggestive of a more corporeal manifestation of desire, she is clear that her interest lies in the responses of the ‘invoked audience’ as consumers of the textual
performance. In her account, the success of the performance does not lie in the “intentionality of the drag king” but rather in the “discursive forms of power enacted by the drag king performance” of which the audience is an active, not reflective, presence (Pauliny 2002, 226). However, this suggests that the invoked audience is hailed, or brought into being, for the sole purpose of producing the performance as a mode of critique that can only be apprehended from the positon of an ideal viewer who stands outside that discursive operation.

The primacy of the performer’s position is made more explicit in Pauliny’s later article “Politics and Play: Mediations on Rhetorical Bodily Performance” (2013), in which she investigates the rhetorical function of another drag king performer, Christie Whisman. Unlike the previous chapter’s sustained focus on a single performance, Pauliny shifts attention to a number of performances by the same drag king from 1999 to 2001. Using techniques that echo Halberstam’s original formulation, Pauliny (2013, 181) describes Whisman’s rhetorical performance of masculinity as “layering” material and ideological constructions of identity through “mimicry”. In this article, the performer’s body is much more strongly asserted in the articulation of political outcomes in which the rhetorical force of the performance is derived from the performer’s own strategic agenda. In both these arguments, the desire of the audience is constrained to the passive, though enthusiastic, reception of performance-as-transgression.

Outside of The Anthology, Genevieve Berrick (2008, 208) has attempts to provide a more complex account of the role of the audience in drag king performances. She considers her own experiences as an audience member in finding that in her search of the existing scholarship she found “nothing that did it justice, that said the things I felt, when I, as audience, participated in a Drag King performance”. Berrick considers herself, like any other
member of the audience, an active and embodied stakeholder who is capable of articulating her own investments in the performance and the culture that exists around it. Berrick’s desires, however corporeally presented at first, lie in the performative transgressions that drag king performers represent. Invoking Butler, Berrick (2008, 209) suggests that the audience, as a “gendered subject”, will always be “invested in the relative success or failure of performances of masculinities and femininities”. The remainder of the article presents clear argumentation for the inclusion of drag king performance genres into the category of “camp” (defined as a “gay sensibility”) in order to identify its “subversive and resistant action” as a form of “dark play” (Berrick 2008, 210-219). Audience desire, then, is a response to the “always implicitly erotic/eroticised charge” of the performance that stems from the risky or dangerous play associated with the “performative violence” experienced “at the boundaries of bodies” (Berrick 2008, 218, 219). In this sense, the transgressive nature of drag kining is predicated on the dual participation of performer and audience member where audience members “constitute a crucial, intertwined, productive and occasionally buffering part of his performance” (Berrick 2008, 219). However, the corporeal body is subsumed by the political body: these boundary encounters indicate that drag kining occurs at the margins of the incoherently gendered body and this experience is magnified in subcultural spaces that are reflective of social marginalisation.

In Rosenfeld, Pauliny and Berrick’s arguments, desire is applied to the context of drag king culture to describe the interdependent relationship between the performer and audience. In all three accounts, desire is considered dynamic in terms of the attention it forces onto that relationship. Accordingly, desire is positioned as necessary: it acts as the essential bridge between the drag king performance and the political investments it is presumed to support. Despite the potential for a deeper engagement with the manifold ways that desires might
operate at the site of the embodied audience member, any expressions of it are curtailed by the authors’ methodological focus on performativity. Indeed, the audience has no meaningful corporeality in these accounts. The specific forms that this desire takes are not considered, nor are the ways that desire might operate at the level of embodied pleasure. By leaving audience desire so tightly tethered to the political value of the performance, these authors reinstate the performer as the central figure through which culturally mediated affects are considered.

In contrast to this continued emphasis on performativity, “The Bois of King Vic” by Roberta Foster (2011) provides an empirical account of audience experience and is the only text in the current literature on drag king cultures to include transcribed statements from interviews with “patrons”, not just performers. Foster’s account of the Melbourne drag king scene centres on King Victoria (King Vic) drag nights, which are considered in the context of both the “queer lineage” of Australia’s colonial history and as a “central component” of Melbourne’s lesbian community (Foster 2011, 156). Like other works that locate the subversive potential in drag performances, Foster applies the concept of gender performativity in order to measure the success of a “translesbian subjectivity”, a term developed by Bumpy, organiser of the nights at King Vic (cited by Foster 2011, 165; endnote 4). In addition, Foster (2011, 161-162) provides an account of “the desiring audience” in a subsection spanning only a page and a half. First, the audience’s sexual desire for the body of the drag king is evident in her account of patrons’ responses to “Melbourne heart-throb” performer Rocco D’Amore. This corporeal desire derives from the “lesbian/queer subjectivity” of the audience and the “double body” of the drag king in presenting both masculinity and femininity. Second, the audience transcends its corporeality when it inhabits the body of the drag king through its “consumption of the show”. In making this second claim, Foster draws on the work of Alana Kumbier on the
transference of subjectivity where she simultaneously wanted “to be them and fuck them”. In order to consider the connection between these two aspects of audience desire, Foster departs from her theoretical speculation to offer an implied third empirically-based consideration of the relationship between the performer and audience. Foster rejects the “hegemonic” arrangement of active-male/passive-female “gaze” and instead argues that the audience members at the King Vic shows transcend the traditional subject-object division of spectatorship. Rather, this new imbricated relationship of spectatorship can be productive of a “new economy of desire” in which a translesbian community is instantiated (Foster 2011, 162). Limited to a single paragraph, Foster nonetheless opens opportunity for the relationship between performer and audience to be reconfigured in drag king cultures.

While Foster does not extend her argument, her interviews with audience members offer a perspective missing in the other texts. When taken together with the three previously cited works, these authors recognise the potential in locating the productive capacity of the wider relationships conferred by drag king performances. Whether it be political, rhetorical or playful as in the case of Rosenfeld, Pauliny or Berrick’s argument respectively, desire is considered productive of the interdependent and mutually constitutive relationship between performer and audience. This productive potential, then, opens up the context through which drag king culture can be analysed beyond the success or otherwise of the performances. In doing so, they gesture at the potential to re-examine the role of the audience as an alternative to the previously dominant visible form of the drag king performer, instead positioning them as equally important in constituting drag king culture.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined the critical role played by Judith Halberstam in establishing the field of drag king scholarship. In opening up the possibility of drag king culture to analysis, Halberstam’s studies were primarily responsible for identifying and categorising a phenomenon that had until then been invisible to academic and mainstream audiences. Halberstam’s approach to drag king culture, and her subsequent influence on the field of study, arose as part of a wider intellectual project that situates drag kinging within the broader politics of normative gender destabilisation. This reflects Halberstam’s overall project of illuminating the ‘gender-ambiguous’ figure as a symbol through which promote and celebrate non-normative identities and practices. The drag king is one of the forms that the non-normative body takes, hence is politically invested with strategic purpose from the outset.

Halberstam’s original shift in emphasis from performance to subculture has found traction in a field that now reflects on a wider scale the two phases of her interpretative approach. At the risk of oversimplification, the field can be divided into those scholars who consider the practice of drag kinging as representative of gendered or sexual identity and those who concentrate on the subcultural context in which drag kinging is experienced. These two approaches tend to divide analysis between performer and audience in order to assess the success, or otherwise, of the performance. While potentialities can be located within this literature, especially in terms of how the relationship between performer and audience can be considered mutually constitutive, the existing genre of drag king criticism retains a primary focus on the performance itself, whether that is conceived in the context of wider histories of camp performance or in the theoretical context of gender performativity. The dual emphasis on performativity and gender destabilisation is remarkably consistent across the field and
manifests in the continued reliance and repetition of certain critical motifs and methods that are now due for revision.
Chapter Two: Scene Theory

“In everyday life we speak regularly about scenes, and it is in such ways that the scene first appears to and for us” (Blum 2003, 165).

But you have to open yourself up in ways you’re not in ordinary life” (Goffman 1989, 128).

In this chapter, I argue for an alternative approach that extends analysis of participation in drag king culture beyond the established dynamism between performer and audience. Namely, how does a researcher approach the ways in which the audience participates and the desires that are introduced, enacted and transformed, without subsuming them to the more dominant concept of the drag king performance? My interest is in displacing the primacy of the drag king performer and reviewing the myriad everyday interactions generated in the vicinity of the drag king event. In order to do this I begin by framing Sydney’s local version of drag king culture within the coordinates of scene theory. I then present a research methodology that is capable of tracing the meaningful relations between stakeholders in what I now identify as Sydney’s drag king scene.

Scene Theory

In order to sidestep the now entrenched division between performer and audience evident in drag king scholarship, I approach drag king cultures outside of either performance studies or queer theory. Within the theoretical tradition of cultural studies, scene theory provides a conceptual framework through which I can specify drag king culture as a social phenomenon rather than a performance or subcultural practice. While the general concept of ‘scene’ has a long history in the social sciences, having been originally developed in the study of youth and alternative cultures (Becker 1963, Irwin 1977), I harness the concept as redeployed in the
recent work of Will Straw (1991, 2002, 2004). In a number of influential essays, Straw employs ‘scene’ to characterise the transformations of popular music cultures in specific locales. While the concept of scene maintains a strong association with popular music studies (Hesmondhalgh 2005, Hesmondhalgh 2007), Straw (1991, 380) sees scenes are capable of including any a range of practices occurring within a “bounded cultural space”. Scene is thus a transferable concept that can be used to describe the participatory nature of any “social and cultural activity” that involves “mobile urban sociability” (Straw 2004, 412, 413).

The usefulness of the concept lies in its flexibility and capacity to capture the peripheral energies and relationships that exist around the social production of lived experience. Scenes are imbued with forms of intimacy that reference their communitarian dimension and the coalescence of cultural energies that constitute collective identities. At the same time scenes signal their dynamism where sociability fuels ongoing cultural innovation and experimentation. Scenes, then, operate as highly localised and spatialised forms of sociality at the same time as they give unity and meaning to globalised practices. These dual dimensions justify the use of scene in cultural analysis as the concept “gives depth to the theatre of urban sociality” and provides opportunities for mapping the spatiality of the myriad interactions that comprise it (Straw 1991, 373). Therefore, the conceptual framework offered by Straw can accommodate both the continuity and transformation of social relations that form around cultural activity, yet is also sensitive to the particularity of historical and institutional settings that give it local meaning. Moreover, a scene does not prioritise production or consumption, as seen in the sustained analysis of drag king performances in the field of literature, but instead recognises that both are constituted through specific cultural contexts. Accordingly, Straw (2002, 248) contends that the value of scene is “usefully flexible and anti-essentializing”, as all it requires of those who use it is “no more than that they observe a hazy
coherence between sets of practices or affinities”. Indeed, the very haziness of the term scene has contributed to its critical success, particularly in relation to its comparative value to other theoretical formations such as community, subculture and neo-tribe.

The concept of ‘scene’ has more recently been deployed as a perspective rather than object. In a recent special edition of *Cultural Studies*, editors Benjamin Woo, Jamie Rennie and Stuart Poyntz (2015, 286) revisit the concept of scene to showcase “the concept’s utility across a range of domains of social life”. Advancing an analytical stance they call ‘scene thinking’, the editors use the case studies submitted by contributors, my own work included, to argue for the type of social inquiry and cultural analysis the concept can be put to. The “idea” of scene, Woo, Rennie and Poyntz (2015, 289) argue, can lead to new ways of thinking about cultural activity that exceed questions of terminology. Instead, they present scene as a “sensitizing concept”, taking the term from Blumer’s definition of a concept that only gives “the user a general sense of reference or guidance in approaching empirical instances” (Blumer 1954, 7 cited in Woo et. al. 2015, 291).

The concept of scene persists in descriptions of everyday practices—and the academic theories that follow to explain these descriptions—because it is a fundamental part of the “social imaginary of urban life” (Woo et. al. 2015, 288). The value of ‘scene thinking’ is that it represents a perspective that reflects the everyday encounters and relationality of the world people live in. As the opening epigraph suggests, the idea of a scene is often encountered in everyday contexts and they take on significance through the mundane or ordinary ways in which they present themselves to their participants. Accordingly, a scene ‘perspective’ can accommodate how scenes function as social relations in which shared experiences, affects and identities are generated through the process of participation. Scenes occupy an
entrenched form in everyday life but crucially, they also function as an imagined alternative to the mundane.

Scene Infrastructure

Straw’s account of scenes provides a workable theoretical framework for analysing Sydney’s drag king scene. The emphasis Straw places on the instrumental role of investments for a scene’s emergence and vitality immediately suggests the importance of mapping the movement of material resources within the space of any scene. Straw (2004, 413) argues that investments in physical spaces are required to imbue urban culture with “a set of institutions and textures” that marks the presence of a scene. These scene-related investments in place produce complex infrastructures that generate ongoing engagement with economic interests, urban planning and policy. In his example, everyday commercial activities within the popular music scene produced a “particular continuum of activities” that aren’t necessarily dictated by the playing of or listening to music (Straw 2004, 414). The expansive quality of commercial investments that see the introduction of new sites, clientele and practices simultaneously give scenes their social dynamic as they intertwine with forms of cultural history. Rather than scenes being dependent on spaces for their existence, the emergence of scenes inscribe social forms “upon the geography of the city and its spaces” (Straw 2004, 414).

While there were certainly commercial investments made in Sydney’s drag king scene, these very rarely extended to financing long-term commercial real estate opportunities. This can be read as a legacy of the longer history of lesbian spaces. As described in Kennedy and Davis’s historical account of North American lesbian bar culture in the 1940s and 1950s, gay male sociality was firmly lodged in commercial leisure establishments. In contrast, lesbian bars
were “hidden and short-lived”, the product of business enterprises in which lesbians negotiated, directly or indirectly, for temporary use rather than exclusively for lesbian patronage (Kennedy and Davis 1994, 31, 34, 40). Kennedy and Davis’s observations are echoed by Jennings’s (2015) review of lesbian bars and social spaces in postwar Sydney. Jennings presents evidence to suggest that lesbians only began to frequent bars and clubs from the 1960’s onwards. Prior to that period, most socialising was conducted with private friendship networks forged in sports clubs, through certain occupations or a part of artistic circles, with only a “limited lesbian presence within a larger, predominately male, camp scene” (Jennings 2015, 52). With the rise in commercial venues in the 1960s and 1970s that catered predominately to gay men, an emerging lesbian bar scene was established within these venues rather than separate from them (Jennings 2015, 58). Lesbian occupancy of commercial spaces designed for a gay male clientele led to rising tension between lesbians and male patrons, leaving some lesbians feeling unwelcome (Jennings 2015, 55). Jennings (2015, 66) further notes that any bars or clubs that were open to lesbian patronage were “relatively secretive and enclosed”, requiring a system of introduction by other women. As such, women’s use of new public spaces continued to be shaped by private networks and patterns of socialisation, where they simply “extended the location of their social activities as new spaces became available to them” (Jennings 2015, 67).

However, Jennings account also points to significant differences between Sydney’s lesbian social scene and those documented in literature that predominately focused on British and North American cities. More so than other Western urban centers, Sydney lesbians lacked the commercial infrastructure that allowed the British and American lesbian bar scenes to eventually develop. As a result, Sydney’s lesbians’ use of public commercial spaces lagged behind their counterparts in those other cities (Jennings 2012, 816). These broader trends of
commercial investments in lesbian spaces in Sydney continued in the 1980s onwards, leading Murphy and Watson (1997, 139) to comment that there remains “a world of difference between provisions for lesbians and for gay men”. In their account of LGBTIQ spaces, lesbians were fitted into non-lesbian bars “as a gesture” or as a way to boost trade on quiet nights. Any dedicated women’s spaces, they further note, were the product of commercial property rented on a per-night basis. These temporary spaces were often subject to disputes with commercial real estate owners, so that the lack of secure tenancy and insufficient capital often inhibited further commercial development. The historical characterisation of social spaces for lesbians in Sydney continues into the decade in which Sydney’s drag king scene can be located.

Despite Newtown’s designation as a gay precinct, the area hosts two established LGBTIQ venues, The Newtown Hotel and the Imperial Hotel, among its 600-odd commercial sites. Both of these sites have been subject to long closures and extensive renovations and now, post renovation, the Newtown Hotel is now more widely regarded as a mixed patronage venue. This is in contrast to Oxford Street, with its highly visible concentration of leisure venues and business established explicitly (and even exclusively) to gay male patronage from at least the 1960s (Wotherspoon 1991). Accordingly, lesbian spaces in Sydney continue to

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6 The designation of the Newtown Hotel now as a LGBTIQ venue is debated, however, its reputation is largely based on its history of ownership. Notable lesbian Dawn O’Donnell acquired the Newtown and Imperial Hotels in the 1980s, generally credited as the first move in transforming Newtown into a gay precinct rivaling Oxford Street. On her death in 2007, The Newtown Hotel closed down due to a dispute between then building owners Newtown Colonial Hotel Pty Ltd and licensee David McHugh. It reopened briefly in 2010 as Freaky Tiki before undergoing a more sustained renovation. When it reopened on 31 October 2012, there was speculation as to whether it would actively court gay and lesbian patronage. Apart from a Wednesday event listing, its website does not indicate gay or lesbian-specific events and popular consensus is that The Newtown Hotel is now recognised as a mixed patronage space rather than dedicated gay space. The Imperial also closed in 2007 for renovations but did not reopen until 2010, following a protracted and expensive licensing battle with the local council. At the time of writing it is now closed again after a change of ownership and subsequent police investigations into illicit drugs sold on the premises. Many critics speculate that this is the result of a disproportionate police focus on LGBTIQ venues in Sydney.

7 Indeed, Garry Wotherspoon (1991, 158) attributes Oxford Street’s rejuvenation as a site for gay entertainment when Ivy’s Birdcage, a major drag queen venue, opened in 1969.
be most notably characterised by instability and transiency. Instead of direct promotion and marketing to a lesbian clientele, venue management would turn their spaces over to autonomous promoters who, for a fixed rate or a percentage of the bar-takings, organised what are publicised as ‘ladies’ nights. As such, the lesbian night-time economy in Newtown is identifiable through networks of event promotion, rather than a territorial model of commercial occupancy.

Straw’s account of the reciprocal investments made between sites and sociability is evident in the development of Sydney’s drag king scene, positioned within the longer history of lesbian social networks in the city. Drag king performances were a part of a night-time economic arrangement, drawing women into those venues temporarily hosting drag king events. As such, particular pubs were designated LGBTIQ-friendly by virtue of promoting and hosting drag king events but these associations are a result of incidental rather than direct investment in lesbian spaces. Organisers would advertise drag king events through social media networks, lesbian media outlets and by word of mouth, taking on the costs of publicising events with venue management rarely financially contributing to these promotional campaigns. While the Sly Fox Hotel (2012) does not promote itself as a LGBTIQ venue and hosted drag king shows only once a week, it nonetheless appeared in local and international guides to gay and lesbian nightlife in Sydney (Sapphic Sydney 2012, Time Out Sydney 2012). Rather than being the result of lesbian-specific venue management and promotion, the emergence of the Sly Fox Hotel as a drag king venue can be viewed as the result of a collateral investment in social space made by the participants in the drag king scene.

As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998, 563) claim in their consideration of queer sociality, “Urban space is always a host space”. Their comments directly correspond to the
development of Sydney’s drag king scene as a product of venues’ temporary hosting arrangement of events. Obviously, investments in scenes and the returns given to participants are not solely economic or commercial. Straw (2004, 414-415) insists that non-commercial investments in scenes are as important as commercial ones because scenes are not solely an “economic spin-off” within established patterns of consumption that allow institutions to flourish. Highlighting the existence of non-commercial investments provides an opportunity to argue for the value of an ethnographic approach to scenes as “points of assembly” that “gather together cultural phenomena and endow [it] with a coherence” (Straw 2015, 479).

The challenge, then, is to see this domain as its participants do: “beginning from the lived experience of a complex but coherent whole, and understanding how that whole comes into being” (Woo, et. al. 2015, 289).

**Scene Methods**

The dual dimensions of scenes—their double-faced orientation to intensified experience and the mundane as well as their simultaneously local and global nature—present challenges for cultural analysis. How, for example, do I investigate Sydney’s drag king scene without flattening it into a single dimension? As Erving Goffman (1989) suggests in the epigraph to this chapter, ethnographic approaches require the researcher to open themselves up in non-ordinary ways, much the same way as I argue that the design and conduct of ethnography must remain attentive to the processual nature of knowledge production within research itself. Ethnography provides a means of tracing the myriad forms of participation that coalesce around scenes in ways that allow the everyday knowledges that arise within them to find expression.
**Ethnographic Participation**

The first ethnographic technique I employed involved reflecting on my participation in the drag king scene over a sustained five-year period. Though I recognise the various roles (Flick 2006, 114-5), phases (Spradley 1980, 26-35) and features (Jorgensen 1989, 13-14) of what constitutes the broad field, I commenced from Goffman’s (1989, 125) simple entreaty that participant observation is a technique of

subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation.  

I find that participant observation is, above all, a participatory technique. Gavin Brown’s (2007, 2008) method of “observant participation”, for instance, allows for the recognition of the researcher as a social actor within the researcher/researched relation. In my case “observant participation” represented an immersed form of participation that took shape over the course of my involvement in the drag king scene. Immersive participation invariably promotes an affective response since it is underpinned by an embodied economy through which the researcher penetrates and is penetrated by the field (Evers 2006). Such affective interaction may better enable the researcher to access the materiality of practice, or the “embodied thrill”, that accompanies direct involvement in the social aspect of scenes (Brown 2007, 2686).

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8 Goffman’s comments on fieldwork were taken from a transcribed and edited tape-recorded talk given by him during the 1974 Pacific Sociological Association Meetings, where he was on a panel discussing data collection and analysis. He subsequently asked that his remarks be removed from the resulting special issue journal published in 1974. However, a number of illicit recordings were made of these talks and his wife granted permission for them to be later transcribed and published after his death in 1982. This is Goffman’s only published words on the topic of fieldwork (refer to the editor’s introduction in Goffman 1989).
Immersive Participation

As part of my formal ethnographic research, I attended most drag king events held in Sydney between 2010 and 2012. These events included the weekly Wednesday nights at Queer Central, irregular but more elaborately produced cabaret events at The Vanguard, The Imperial and The Supper Club, drag king shows as part of Sydney’s Mardi Gras’ line up of events, a one-off drag king workshop conducted by promoter and performer Hans Sparrow, and the numerous other ad-hoc or unaffiliated drag king performances billed as entertainment within larger organised events.

The pattern and depth of my attendance broadened in this period. I often arrived earlier than the advertised performance time and stayed after the show. I participated in the full range of activities engaged at drag king events, including socialising, drinking, gossiping and dancing. As I have documented in the previous chapter, ethnographic research conducted on drag king cultures to date has tended to be from the perspective of the performer or the audience participant facing the stage. The immersive practice of observant participation offers an alternative perspective: the researcher is facing towards the stage, certainly, but also in other directions to take in broader patterns of engagement across the site of the performance and its wider duration.

My research and social life became increasingly blurred across this period. I interacted with people I recognised from drag king events in chance encounters on the street or at the other venues in which lesbians tended to congregate and socialise in Newtown. I introduced participants to my friends and partners, and invited them to join me at drag king events and other functions. At the same time I became increasingly caught up in participants’ day-to-day lives, their work, social situations and sexual partnerships. The depth of my participation over
this period, coupled with my existing affiliation with Newtown’s lesbian social circuit, led me to assume the position of what other ethnographers describe as an “insider researcher”. This was made patent when I was introduced to others as “my friend who is doing this PhD on us”. Characterised by “significant levels of initial proximity between researcher and researched” (Hodkinson 2005, 132), this position centres on three key tenets: knowledge, acceptance, and identification. Proponents of insider research in scene or subcultural studies argue that the researcher’s relationship to the field of study shapes their deployment of research methods. In my case, my methods were shaped in the following ways. First, I was able to utilise my direct experience of, and familiarity with, this particular scene as a “way in” (Bennett 2003, 186, 189). Second, I was largely able to circumvent the often intense suspicion towards “outsiders” (Hodkinson 2005) or “inauthentic attendees” (Thornton 1996) that is a demonstrated corollary of scene coherence and stability. Finally, I could demonstrate the necessary “cultural competence” (Hodkinson 2005, 138) or “subcultural capital” (Thornton 1996) required to practically affiliate with the everyday and symbolic lives of participants (Hodkinson 2005, 137). Put simply, insider research provided me with the means to negotiate access to research settings, establish field relations and facilitate data collection.

Of course, the notion of insider research is inadequate to explain the full complexity of identification, affinity and relationships with social groups. For one thing, I commenced my ethnographic research at age 32. My age marked me as visibly older than the predominantly early-twenties demographic attracted to the free mid-week events at the Sly Fox Hotel, though this difference was lessened or removed at events that attracted an older crowd, such as those on weekends or public holidays or those with a higher admission charge (see, for example, Thornton 1996, 2-3, Macdonald 2001, 58 for discussion of the importance of age in insider research). While claiming an insider position in an absolute sense can be misleading
(Davies 1999, 182 cited in Hodkinson 2005, 133; see also Valentine 2002), the term nonetheless draws attention to the way the researcher is consciously united with the distinctive characteristics, practices and values within a scene. My being recognised as ‘one of us’ meant individuals were more willing to engage with me as both a regular scene participant and consequently as a researcher. One clear advantage of this dual recognition meant that I did not have to rely on covert means of observation or undercover forms of participation. As a result, event promoters and performers would regularly contact me with information about upcoming events and other participants often volunteered their knowledge and experiences of the scene knowing that it would contribute to my body of research material. The pay-off they expected was that this research would work to promote drag king performances and events, but it also helped to contextualise these investments in the scene across various performers and promoters. Furthermore, my own increasing sense of belonging in these spaces corresponded with my growing awareness of the changing specificity of the drag king scene at any one moment.

Tracking Involvement

My immersive participation within drag king events in Sydney depended on extending my broader social networks. I actively pursued connections on Facebook by making ‘friend requests’ to drag king performers and venues. These connections informed me of upcoming events and provided access to photographs and other documentary sources that exist in the ephemeral space of social media at the time. Drag king performers generally had a public

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9 A classic example of covert ethnography is Laud Humphrey’s well-known study into “deviant” sexual behaviour in public restrooms, or ‘tearooms’, in which he circumvented access issues by clandestinely assuming the role of ‘watch queen’, or voyeur-lookout, “under the guise of being another gay guy” (Humphreys 1970, 24). See chapter on “Methods: the Sociologist as Voyeur” in Humphreys (1970). A more contemporary example is Paul Routledge’s work on tourist development in Goa, India, where he engaged in deliberate deception of developers as part of his cooperation with local NGOs (see Routledge 2002). While these are extreme examples of covert ethnography, they clearly highlight some of the ethical issues associated with strategies I was not willing to engage in my study.
profile under their performance name that I could easily find using the search function in Facebook. As I became more integrated into these online networks, I was increasingly invited to ‘friend’ their more private personal profiles under their real names. This more privately networked capacity was useful as I could identify potential connections by viewing the ‘newsfeed’ on existing friends and other users ‘tagged’ or commenting on status updates and photographs. This virtual method corresponds to the conventional ‘snowball’ approach (Noy 2008) in which ‘friend-of-friend’ connections are made with potential participants. At the same time, I regularly contacted promoters and venues through Facebook to ascertain factual and historical information about the scene, often using the ‘private messaging’ function as a means of communication. Such an approach enabled potential informants to view our mutual scene connections and identify me as an active participant in both Sydney’s drag king scene and the broader lesbian community in Newtown. I believe this led them to be more comfortable in disclosing information (see Song and Parker 1995, 253).

To facilitate this level of contact, I changed my Facebook privacy setting to public, which allowed my profile to be found in the search functionality, synced with existing email contacts and made publically viewable. I included the following statement in the ‘About Me’ section

Currently researching the drag king scene in Sydney, including using Facebook for contact and research purposes.

Such a disclosure highlights the blurred personal and professional aspects of ethnographic participation (Driscoll and Gregg 2010). Concomitant with my participation in the real-world scene was my growing participation in the online community. I participated through ‘liking’ and commenting on other participants’ photos and status updates, ‘joining’ events that notified the online community of upcoming drag king events and posting my own status
updates relating to drag king culture.

The combination of face-to-face and mediated participation allowed me to capture detail that might otherwise have remained hidden. In both modes of engagement I was concerned with recording details of phenomenological experiences of the scene. During the formal phase of ethnographic participation that occurred in 2012, I kept a fieldwork journal (see Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2001) in which I recorded my experiences and reflections on the scene. Initially I attended drag king shows with a notebook to record details of my observations. I used a proforma matrix to record dates, times and locations of events, performances (performers, styles of performance and costuming) and attendee behaviours (interactions with the performer or each other, receptions to the performance, and anticipatory or post-performance activities I was able to observe). I also noted my own enjoyment levels, the specific practices I engaged in and my interactions with others. However, like Bennett (2003, 191), I found that spaces “impose their own limits on the kinds of research which can be carried out there”. The venues tended to be dark, thereby making legible handwriting difficult and the task of recording disrupted my experience of the events. Further, visible note-taking had the potential to mark me as ‘outsider’ to those participants who did not know me personally. In one instance, an individual confronted me aggressively about why I was taking notes and asked whether I was an undercover police officer.

In a second version of taking field notes, I recorded my emotional state immediately prior to events then my recollections of the shows, the people and my experiences immediately after returning home. This method of journaling allowed me to experience events in-situ unencumbered by the need to take notes throughout and to produce an immediately retrospective account that focussed on subjective affective details. However, this method
presented its own challenges insofar as it is likely to have led to some oversights with respect to objective particulars of events. However, I was able to use the detailed descriptions of my observations recorded through the first method to contrast with the more reflective account documented through the second. This allowed me to trace my own sense of scene participation as it took shape in line with the research I was conducting. It became apparent that the more immersed I became in the scene, the less I depended on the quantitative details of the performance and the audience reactions and more on the qualitative aspects of a range of social experiences that took the performances as their pretext. My note-taking traces the process of my becoming a researcher-participant and my developing relationship to the field and its participants (Agar 1996, 163).

*Participant Narration*

I next invited individuals to participate in group discussions to allow me access to other subjective accounts of Sydney’s drag king scene. My use of participant narration is a valuable method of data collection that sits alongside my own participatory experiences. This second technique draws on the recognised practice of oral history where stories serve as primary sources. This practice has a strong tradition within LGBTIQ-based research, especially in relation to lesbian cultural and historical projects (see for example Marcus 1992, Kennedy and Davis 1994, Johnson 1996), as well as having an historical foundation in feminist epistemologies (Gluck 1977, Gluck and Patai 1991, Reinharz 1992). Indeed, as Nan Alamilla Boyd (2008) notes, there are few empirical works in the field of gay, lesbian and queer studies that do not depend on oral history methods influenced by feminist ethnographers.

Oral histories can be harnessed to ethnographic techniques to explore the variance of experience generated in association with particular cultural sites. Michael H. Agar argues for
the distinction between encyclopaedic and narrative ethnography as a way to identify variance. According to Agar (1996, 8-11), encyclopaedic ethnography is based on the notion of culture as shared knowledge. This form of ethnography presumes that shared cultural meaning can be transmitted from the researched to the researcher to the reader. Narrative ethnography, in contrast, complicates this notion of shared knowledge by introducing multiple perspectives available through “stories”, including the researcher’s own. Agar (1996, 10) suggests that narrative ethnography acknowledges how individuals complicate and contradict shared knowledge of culture in their implementation of it in everyday practices. While the contingent nature of memory and perspective challenges notions of shared knowledge, participant narration alleviates other kinds of issues around limited representation and distortion.

Participant narration is also useful for tracing the phenomenological affects at work in scene participation, especially its sensorial dimensions. Accordingly, my research practice warranted the incorporation of expansive forms of ethnographic attention, which necessitates reworking the encounter as multisensory in excess of the privileged ‘watching and listening’ dynamic at the heart of more conventional forms of participant observation. As Sarah Pink (2009) has theorised, the negotiation and articulation of meaning between research participants and researcher involves the reflexive emplacement within social experience and its sensory dimensions.

Recruitment

I recruited participants for the study using existing social relationships, direct approaches at events, and contacts via social media. The scope and selection of participants was intended to be broad. Individuals were invited to participate in this phase of the study though self-
selection on the basis of attending drag king events in any capacity and holding an interest in drag king culture. Moreover, I made no mention of gender or sexuality in the recruitment of research participants despite my assumption that most, if not all, would be same-sex attracted women (a presumption evidenced as mistaken by the sole male research participant who participated in the study).

The process of self-selection, however, contains inherent limitations. First, those who wished to participate tended to hold strong views about drag king culture and a corresponding wish to have those views heard. Regardless of whether those views were positive or negative, they reflected strong connections to drag king culture. Second, some people may not have felt that the call for self-selection spoke to their subsidiary forms of participation in the scene more generally. This sense of exclusion may have been exacerbated by the wording used in the recruitment documentation, which called for “participants” in “Sydney’s drag king scene” (Participant Information Statement 2012). This terminology is implicitly a form of advocacy for an object presumed to matter in the same way for everyone (see Kumbier 2014, 136 for a similar discussion). Third, those who were available for recruitment might reflect the demographic who have accessed tertiary education and see value in university-led forms of research. Finally, due to the ephemerality of scene participation and the attendant difficulty of following-up scene members, participants tended to be those already in loose affiliation with other would-be participants, which potentially restricted the demographic reach of the study to those in similar class, race and ethnically constituted circles of acquaintance (for a similar analysis see Kennedy and Davis 1994, 24-25).

The first strategy of recruitment was aided by my own immersive participation in the scene. I developed friendships with participants with whom I interacted regularly. Many of these
friends had previously indicated their interest in participating in my research so it proved the easiest method of obtaining a commitment to participate by way of signed consent forms. The second strategy involved attending drag king events with written documentation about the study. I approached people I recognised as regular attendees, provided them with information about the study and requested that they contact me should they wish to participate. Additionally, drag king performance duo Fancy Piece promoted the study during their MC spot on 4 April 2012, pointing me out in the audience and urging their fans to participate. While these approaches generated momentary interest, this interest didn’t always culminate in formal research participation.

The third strategy was by far the most successful in obtaining a broader range of interest in the study. I posted regular status updates on Facebook advertising the recruitment phase. With permission, I also posted the advertisement on drag king performers’ profiles. Some individuals offered to ‘share’ the request on their own page or suggested potential participants through their existing Facebook networks. This strategy precipitated an expanded reach that one-to-one approaches could not and allowed me access to people in social networks outside of my own immediate contacts. It also enabled individuals to contact me easily through the ‘like’ function, which allowed me to follow them up directly. The public nature of the request and my profile additionally allowed potential participants to vet me through their own networks prior to committing to the study.

While the initial level of interest generated through Facebook was high, converting expressions of interest into signed consent proved more difficult. Two reasons may account for this low rate of conversion. First, Mathias Detamore (2010, 177) suggests that some demographics have a broad distrust of formalised studies where consent forms operate as
legal documents and imply potentially protracted bureaucratic entanglements. This distrust may have led many of the targeted early-twenties demographic at events to decline to participate once I sent them the mandatory Participation Information Statement and Consent forms. Second, the recruitment phase of my study coincided with a gradual decrease in the vibrancy of the scene and a corresponding drop in weekly attendance. Interest in the study may have declined in parallel with declining interest in the scene more generally.

Of twenty-five initial expressions of interest, fifteen people signed consent forms with a final tally of thirteen participating in the study. One male and twelve females attended the group discussions, ranging in age from nineteen to thirty-four. Of these, nine resided in the inner west of Sydney at the time; the remaining four lived in other areas of Sydney. One participant was attending a non-university tertiary institution full time, two were higher research degree candidates at universities and one worked in a research capacity at the university having attained doctoral-level education. Of the remaining nine participants, eight held down full employment and one was currently unemployed. Four individuals had participated in the scene as both performer and attendee, while the others had experience of the scene as attendees only. Five participants characterised their engagement with the scene as new or emerging in the previous three years, while the remainder indicated a more prolonged engagement. Owing to the limitations with the recruitment strategy already outlined, there is a clear lack of ethnic and racial diversity represented by the white middleclass participants in the study. At the time of conducting the research there was no scope for alleviating this bias, but any further study conducted should seek to address this imbalance. While the demographic constitution engaged in my study cannot be considered representative in any statistical sense, I suggest that these thirteen participants go some way in reflecting a form of localised experience and practice within the scene.
Group Discussions

Over May and June 2012, I conducted three focus group sessions. One group of five and two groups of four met for discussions lasting between one-and-a-half to two hours. The first group comprised Amy, Leonie, Gerald*, Lisa* and Katie.10 The second group included Ruth, Robin, Eliza* and Brooke*.11 The final group was attended by Gillianne, Samantha, Holly and Cate*.12 These groups drew on pre-existing social alliances connected with the scene itself. The first group was comprised entirely of participants who socialised regularly with each other. The other two groups included participants with more limited degrees of social familiarity with each other from the scene. This social proximity is in no doubt a result of the snowball recruitment methods that facilitated participation based on existing social networks though the scene and Facebook, and could never be entirely avoided. Chaim Noy argues (2008, 329; original emphasis) that as snowball sampling “partakes in the dynamics of natural and organic social networks”, it forms the link between data access and data collection. This link is highlighted in the process through which participants came to hear about and consent to participation in the study and the established social proximity of participants during the group discussions. But it also reflects the tightly imbricated nature of the scene.

The site for the group discussions was selected to harness feelings of proximity. First, the group discussions were in spatial proximity to the drag king scene since one of the regular venues, the Sly Fox Hotel, could be viewed from the room where the discussions took place. On two occasions the group discussions were held in temporal proximity to the scene since they were scheduled immediately prior to the weekly drag king show. At certain points in the

10 The first group discussion was held on 16 May 2012. First names introduced in this section with an asterisk are pseudonyms as participants opted to be identified anonymously or by their initials only.
11 The second group discussion was held on 30 May 2012.
12 The third group discussion was held on 25 June 2012.
three discussions, participants would reference shared experiences or incidences from the scene by pointing to the venue to illustrate their stories. Some participants immediately went on to attend the performances when the discussion had concluded. This proximity was designed to deliberately allay some of Bennett’s (2002, 459) concerns about empirical studies that rely on data collated from questionnaires and interviews that spatially, temporally and socially divorce narration from the context of scene involvement.

Social proximity to the scene was also enhanced by the relaxed environment in which the group discussions were held and the provision of food and drink in accordance with known dietary requirements and preferences, including the provision of alcoholic beverages. The discussions were held in the evening (the first and second at 7.30pm and the third at 8pm) around a large rectangular table, at which all participants had the potential for eye contact considered necessary to facilitate discussion (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990, 88). Helping each other access food and drinks further increased the opportunities for interactions between participants, which led to an informality that belied the presence of the tape recorder and my furious note-taking. This setting also reflects the proximity of ethnographic research to the field of study. For example, Alison Rooke (2010) disputes the temporal and spatial dimensions of “normative ethnographic time” as “the fiction of the field”. Rather than keeping the field of observation at an illusory distance, Rooke (2010, 30) states that ethnography requires a constant crossing between the ‘here’ and ‘there’, between the past, present

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13 I did not monitor the specific amount of alcohol content consumed by each individual, but I do not think that anyone presented excessive inebriation. Where my assistant and I felt that alcohol consumption had any role in the opinions expressed or exchanges conducted, we noted this in the transcripts, and we noted where some of the participants only consumed non-alcoholic beverages. Only one participant appeared to have consumed alcohol prior to the group discussions, however I am unable to verify this. For this reason, I felt that the benefits in providing small amounts alcohol in replicating scene sociality outweighed any negative effects. All participants were over the legal drinking age of 18.
and future: from being ‘in the field’ while thinking about the future point of writing up, to the point of writing and revisiting the ‘ethnographic past’.

Her argument suggests that the experience of any scene is never entirely separate from the ethnographic process of discussing it.

My use of discussions was modelled on conventional focus group formats that highlight individual and collective dimensions of narration. Focus groups are an established approach in which participants focus collectively on a topic to “explore a specific set of issues” (Kitzinger 1994, 103). Additionally, focus groups offer closest proximity to the social processes and everyday interactions that scene participation likewise involves. Sue Wilkinson (1998, 120) points out that researchers often use focus groups to maximise this proximity by studying pre-existing social groups (see also Kitzinger 1994, 105). Finally, focus groups are an implicitly collaborative venture, often generating a “synergistic effect” (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990, 16) by allowing participants to react to and build upon the responses of others. This format is useful as participants often helped to fill in information for each other while comparing recollections, thereby providing additional empirical data. The benefits of this type of ethnographic approach lie in both the quality of the data generated (see Merton 1987, Kitzinger 1994, Wilkinson 1998) and the use of groups’ interactions to generate that data in the first place (see Morgan 1988, Kitzinger 1994). These dual dimensions emphasise “the construction of meanings and knowledges through interaction” (Wilkinson 1998, 111).

Crucially, however, the discussions departed from conventional focus group techniques in terms of my involvement. As well as occupying the position of convener, I was a participant in the discussions. Song and Parker (1995, 244) argue that the way researcher and participants position themselves in relation to each other is an important component of in-
depth interviewing. My use of the focus group format was intended as a means of conducting research with my participants, rather than on or about them. My dual positioning enabled participants to see me as equally invested as both researcher and scene participant. This precedent puts “mutual desires, affects, aspirations, and investment” at the heart of the research encounter, working to “blur the boundaries between the researcher and the researched” (Detamore 2010, 177), and diffusing the differential power relations between researcher and researched that are endemic to encounters premised on research expertise. Rather than embodying specialist knowledge, the researcher-participant facilitates a relaxed atmosphere conducive to open conversation and disclosure, establishing rapport through shared anecdotes, gossip and observation (Hodkinson 2005, 139). In this context bodily movements and gestures function as prompts or stimuli as well as evidence. As Goffman (1989, 129) writes, the participant-researcher “should be able to engage in the same body rhythms, rate of movement, tapping of the feet, that sort of thing, as the people around” them (see also Stoller 1997 and Pink 2009, 40-65). Owing to these deviations in my role as convenor from those found in traditional focus groups, I have termed these research encounters “group discussions”.

Of course, there are a number of limitations inherent in this approach. First, there is the potential for complacency as identified by Hodkinson (2005) and Bennett (2003). Familiarity between the researcher and researched can result in too much assumed knowledge being taken as a given. Over-complacency may also result from privileging the researcher’s own experiences in the process of analysing the discussions, interpreting ambiguous responses and gestures based on how the researcher themselves might have responded. Second, this method also risks skewing data towards the experiences of those participants who dominate the conversation (Wilkinson 1998, 119). Distortion can also be produced from what is known as
the ‘desirability effect’ where participants tailor their responses to what they believe is the
dominant position within the group (Wilkinson 1998, 119) or to what they believe the
researcher wants to hear (Song and Parker 1995, 252, Hodkinson 2005, 140).

I attempted to ameliorate these potential problems by introducing a research assistant to each
group discussion. This person had limited exposure to the Sydney drag king scene and its
established social networks. Ostensibly present to take additional notes throughout the
discussion, the assistant also asked questions where the information offered by participants or
myself was unclear and prompted those who had not yet spoken on particular themes to
participate. My research assistant and I debriefed at the conclusion of the discussions to
compare notes on the behaviour of participants and interactions between them and to agree on
moments of discomfort or unease that might signify nonverbal dissent. The notes from these
debriefing sessions were then added to the transcripts. I am confident that the presence of an
external person helped to assure the reliability of my observations (Stewart and Shamdasani
1990, 99) and, in effect, minimised any potential problems that could have arisen from the
group discussion structure.

The verbal discussions were recorded on a digital recorder while non-verbal gestures and
interactions were manually noted at the time and later added to the verbal transcriptions.
Additional notes were added to the transcripts to indicate tone and volume used by
participants as confirmed by the recording. The finalised transcripts offered a rich description
of the group discussions, including an account of what Agar (1996, 48) calls “the structure of
the conversational music”.

In order to take advantage of the full range of verbal and non-verbal data, the transcripts were
coded with NVivo software using two simultaneous approaches. The first coded thematically, identifying recurring patterns in the content of the discussions. The second approach coded relationally, identifying points where individuals interacted with others during the discussions. This second approach attended primarily to non-verbal cues. The existing literature on focus group methodology has identified that non-verbal cues are important to the analysis of group dynamics. To date analysis of non-verbal cues has tended to concentrate on the part they play in achieving group cohesiveness required for empirical consensus (see, for example, Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). Instead, I am interested in how non-verbal cues contribute to the relationship of stories to people’s everyday encounters with one another.

The participants’ gestures, postures and expressions—their bodies and the interactions between them—provided another form of conveying meaning and in some instances contradicted the meaning being verbally articulated at the same time. The dual focus on verbal and non-verbal meaning allowed me to locate the points where

the physicality of cultural politics (vocality, tactility, touch, resonance) exceeds the

rationalized clarity of ‘system’ and transcendent understanding” encouraged by

conventional coding. (Stewart 1996, 130)

The two coding approaches were then compared in order to isolate differences between individual group dynamics. This dynamism might also be understood to reflect the variance of experiences of participation within the scene, thus emphasising the multiplicity of situated understandings of social worlds, even for those designated as ‘insiders’ (Wolcott 1999, 137).

Data from the group discussion was further analysed against my fieldwork notes, which allowed for some degree of empirical testing. My intention in performing this additional step was not to judge the validity, significance or applicability of participants’ statement. That is, this was not a strategy of confirmation or process of measurement (Webb et. al. 1966).

Rather, I used these notes to identify points of difference or tension between my account and
the accounts from the group discussions. That is, I used multi-triangulation as a strategy of completeness (Denzin 1978, Denzin 1989). This prompted an ongoing reflexive process as to how I was positioned in relation to both scene participation and the research process itself.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was given by the Executive Committee of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Sydney (Protocol number 12800). Throughout I adhered to the principles of ethical research as established by the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). In compliance with the procedures established by the Committee, Participation Information Statements and Consent Forms were distributed to potential participants prior to the commencement of the group discussions. This documentation outlined details of the study and participants’ rights and agreement in respect to it, the conditions of which were also verbally reiterated at the beginning of each group discussion. Anonymity of participants was respected, if they chose, by allowing them to select from disclosure options on the consent form. Two participants opted for complete anonymity, another three asked to be identified by their initials only (and these participants were provided with pseudonyms in the transcription process), while the remaining eight elected to be identified by their first names. Completed transcripts of the group discussions were provided to participants for their review but no participants opted to amend it. However, I followed up with participants directly whenever possible when I was unsure of their meaning or intention in any statement made within the discussions, as almost all participants

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14 Denzin specifies four types of triangulation: data, investigator, theory and methodological, and, within the methodological type, he distinguishes between ‘within-method’ and ‘between-method’ (Denzin 1989, 234-237). However, most contemporary uses of triangulation tend to refer solely to methodological triangulation, specifically referencing mixed method; that is, as a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. This may simplify the purpose of triangulation as a strategy of empirical verification (and indeed Denzin (2012) critiques this simplification). Instead, my use of triangulation is based on my understanding of his original intention; an expanded use as an implied function of participant observation to avoid the presentation of only one interpretation of a phenomenon.
remained in contact with me via Facebook.

I found that the forms of immersive participation employed in the study presented ethical considerations not wholly covered by the established protocols I have mentioned (see Lincoln and Tierney 2004 and Detamore 2010 for a longer discussion of the limitation of bureaucratic institutions on qualitative research). Ethical protocols are generally concerned with issues of consent and the avoidance of harm to participants. That is, they serve as minimum standards for ethical research. Yet, the University-mandated ethical standards for research do not anticipate the particular interactionist norms and values of immersive research. Brown’s account of observant participation offers guidelines appropriate to such situations. As Detamore (2010, 175) notes in her personal communication with Brown, observant participation “is primarily concerned with acknowledging and respecting ethical norms of those sites and their users”. Indeed, imposing University-led norms of research onto the field may deny potential productive entanglements and obfuscate the complexity of interactions between research participants.

Certainly the structure of the scene, and the degree of my social participation in it, directed my ethical conduct as a researcher. Research on human subjects is inherently concerned with an ethics of disclosure. For participants, their willingness to disclose how everyday relationships are practiced and negotiated risks misrepresentation and distortion. In detailing the social and sexual elements of scene involvement, participants are opening their personal choices to outside scrutiny. Tensions are further compounded by the intimate relationship that develops between participants and researcher. There is consensus in the literature that it is inevitable that the participant researcher will experience a confluence between personal and academic endeavours (Green 1993, cited in Bennett 2003, 193). The more I become
integrated in the everyday practices of participation in the scene, the more I became entangled in the lives of others. Some of these entanglements form the basis of accounts used in subsequent chapters to emphasise aspects of scene participation.

Other encounters presented challenges in negotiating the social and sexual politics of a close-knit lesbian culture. In their ethnographic research into lesbian bars, Kennedy and Davis (1994, 18) outline the pitfalls of managing their personal lives and research so as not to become involved in wider tensions. In my case, tensions became evident in a number of ways. Two participants withdrew from the study due to developing conflicts with others and one asked to be moved into a different group discussion due to a romantic history with another participant. In other instances, knowledge of intimate sexual and social details of participants led me to develop preferences for working (or not working) with certain participants (see Newton 2000b for an expanded example of how erotic dimensions intersect with lines of social enquiry). As these preferences suggest, I did establish and sustain strong emotional connections with participants. Such friendships have the benefit of encouraging deeper participation in the field, yet present challenges in negotiating the double role of friend and researcher (see Taylor 2011). As Bennett (2003, 195) notes, despite the intimacy of relationships developed in the field, the researcher needs to ensure that strict ethical protocols are managed even when they could “dampen the initial enthusiasm of research participants” for the project. Accordingly, I sought explicit permission from those involved as to whether I could use our shared experiences as data and respected the wishes of those who did not give their permission.

Intimacy also presents risks to the researcher as well as to those who are researched. How much of myself do I expose to my participants? How do I negotiate the emotional aspects of
entanglement and attachment to living research projects? Indeed, ethical research requires me to be the vulnerable observer (Behar 1996). The benefits of reflecting on my own vulnerabilities meant considering my emotional investments in both the scene and the research I was conducting. Throughout the entire writing process, I was guided by Behar’s (1996, 14) entreaty that vulnerability has to be “essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake”. For this reason, I use only those personal experiences that outline investments in relation to scene participation and avoid those that do not serve any empirical purpose.

Nonetheless, as Bennett (2003, 193) has identified, this method of immersive participation risks unethical representation based on my own investment in seeking to preserve and promote drag king culture. There is a risk of being so ‘caught up in the experience’ that researchers assume the role of the cultural spokesperson. Further, such research can slide into what McGuigan terms “cultural populism”, where research becomes “an uncritical celebration of mass culture which, like popular journalism, claims knowledge through an ability to identify with the ‘street level’ sensibilities of particular scenes and audiences” (McGuigan 1992 cited in Bennett 2003, 193-194). The risk is that the primary researcher can selectively use or disregard accounts of participation to avoid those that are critical of, or contradictory to, their own perspective on the scene. Yet, all research is inevitably selective. As Emerson (1995, 3) states:

Moreover, it will often be the case that relationships with those under study follow political fault lines in the setting, exposing the ethnographer selectively to varying priorities and points of view.

The solution to potential research bias is to be aware of the potential for unethical selection and where it lies. In the example provided by my study, there were instances where some of
the negative aspects of the scene articulated in the group discussion made me feel uncomfortable. But these moments also presented opportunities to identify and reflect on the sources and implications of the discomfort. As I hope my findings will demonstrate, there was room in this research “for both affirmation and self-critical scrutiny” (Dahl 2010, 147; original emphasis).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have reviewed how a cultural studies approach to drag king scenes can bypass entrenched categories of analysis that dominate the literature on drag king theory to date. Much of this chapter has been devoted to presenting the methods by which I explored Sydney’s drag king scene: immersive participation and participant narration. The methods engaged sought to capture the processual nature of both scene sociality and research. I have detailed how the research conducted was a collaborative effort between the thirteen individuals who consented to be part of the study of a particular drag king scene. In the next section I seek to provide an “unadorned, first-order account of behavior” (Love 2013, 403) of scene participation in the tradition of Goffman’s (1983) “interactionalist ethnography”, a form of microanalysis that attends to socially situated interactions involving two or more individuals in public environments. Interactionist ethnography is often referred to as ‘thin description’ and is often contrasted with Geertz’ (1973) “thick description”. However, Heather Love (2013, 409; footnote 6) argues that cultural analysis can employ thin description to great effect, suggesting that Geertz’ model of interpretation is “not opposed to practices of observation and description but rather to the anatomizing gaze that splays culture in order to reveal its working parts and to a science that sidelines meaning”. Love, then, is suggesting that thin description, as a method, offers empirical value to thick description.
Therefore, I am concerned with the presentation of both the interactionist and affective economy within which these forms of knowledge were produced and presented.
**Immersion**: Participation in Sydney’s Drag King Scene
Chapter Three: Small Worlds

It’s something you can participate in without having to be directly involved” (Katie).

“And the world is really, really, really small. That helps” (Leonie).

In the previous chapter, I outlined the research design crucial to analysing scenes. I now present the data collected through those methods. The two epigraphs above suggest the individual and collective qualities of the scene that I will I go on to detail. On one hand, these quotations from my participants highlight the collective pleasures of participation and their connection to wider social relations as part of a small world. On the other hand, they gesture towards the importance by which participants anchor their individual experiences as related to the scene. The overriding emphasis in this chapter has been guided by Katie’s statement of “participating” without being “directly involved”. I take this to indicate the flexibility with which my participants positioned themselves within, against and around drag king culture.

This flexibility is inherent in the concept of scene as it has emerged in the literature outlined in the previous chapter. Throughout the discussion that follows, I have attempted to remain open to the diversity of relationships and arrangements that Sydney’s drag king scene might encompass to better engage with how participants characterise their experiences as scene participation.

On the basis of the information given to me by my participants, I have broken down Sydney’s drag king scene into the following constitutive components: the mode by which people encounter the scene, the sites in which those encounters take place, and the activities that occur in connection to either mode or site. Silver and Clarke (2015) likewise structure scene
analysis around four key components, “persons”, “activities”, “neighbourhoods” and “physical structures”, that work together to determine the experience of scenes. In breaking down Sydney’s drag king scene, I explore the relationship between people, practices and places to participation in its composition as, paraphrasing Leonie, a ‘small world’.

People

I trace the social relations of the first discussion group as evidence of the tightly wound nature of Sydney’s drag king scene. I purposefully organised the first group discussion around an established clique; of all the participants in the study, I was most familiar with their conjoined biographies. Leonie, Amy, Lisa, Katie and Gerald were a newly constituted circle of friends. At the time of the group discussions Leonie and Katie referred to each other as “best friends”. Only months earlier, Amy and Leonie had moved into an apartment together with another friend, Cecelia. Amy and Lisa were recently engaged. I had initially met Leonie and Amy after they both performed shows on the same night in January 2012. Leonie immediately friended me on Facebook and I was introduced to Katie soon after.

I was also present at Gerald’s first introduction to the group in early 2012 when he accompanied a mutual friend, Christine, to a Wednesday night show at my invitation. Christine and Gerald both quickly became part of the group, and Christine began dating Cecelia, Leonie and Amy’s flatmate. As the only male in the study and someone who identified as heterosexual at the time of the group discussion, Gerald stood out at drag king events attended predominately by women (and some gay men), and consequently the others often teased him by calling him a “gay man” or “pseudo-lesbian”. However, Gerald was

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15 Gerald clarified his sexual orientation in later communication with me, stating that while he does not wish to employ “labels”, he now identifies as bisexual (Personal communication 3 May 2014).
clear that despite the anomaly of his presence, his attendance at events was not due to an interest in drag. Rather it was how he could pursue his developing friendship with the rest of the group, to the point that his first encounter with the group “changed and improved” his life overall (Personal communication 3 May 2014). Tracing these lines of connection between these research participants reveals how this group’s participation in the scene is implicated in how they broadly understand their entwined social lives.

Attending drag king events was a key element in structuring this friendship group. Seated around the table, the group laughed as they recounted shared outings and memorable experiences. At one point it struck me that this discussion about their participation at drag king events was just another occasion for them to get together socially. I asked when they were last all together and there was some confusion as to whether the question specifically referred to drag king events or broadly to any social get-together. Amy clarified the source of confusion as, for them, going to drag events was synonymous with how they socialised:

The last [social event] I went to was at the Midnight Shift […]. We just, not really do much, we just hang out normally.\textsuperscript{16}

“Hanging out”, then, is understood by this group as the form of social interaction they engaged in primarily within the context of drag king events. Likewise, Amy and Lisa’s romantic partnership was intertwined within these social encounters; they had met at a drag king event and subsequently felt it fitting to announce their engagement to me at one of the regular Wednesday nights. Having met at the weekly drag event \textit{Queer Central} at the Sly Fox Hotel, Lisa attributes her increasingly intensified experiences at events to her lover:

I’m not a very social person so I didn’t do much else until I met you. Yep, and then

\textsuperscript{16}Tora’s Drag Race is conducted at The Midnight Shift on Oxford Street, Darlinghurst as a drag competition. However, its main focus is drag queens and very rarely drag kings perform, and as such, this event is not one of my nominated ethnographic sites. Only this first group mentioned Tora’s Drag Race as an event connected to the drag king scene.
you introduced me to the whole world of drag shows [...] and it’s just insanely, amazingly cool.

In describing these connections between each individual, this group is representative of the tightly comprised, yet messily entangled, friendships that take place within the scene. At the same time this group highlights the fragility of these friendships. Within twelve months of my meeting this group many relationships had irrevocably broken down: Amy, Katie and Gerald were no longer friends with Leonie, Lisa and Amy had moved away from the area, and an ongoing conflict suspended Cecelia and Christine’s relationship with Amy and Leonie. These shifting terrains of friendship support Straw’s (2004, 412) contention that the expansive sociability of scenes fuels their ongoing cultural energies within and against the rituals of everyday life. This also includes those intersections I originally considered tangential or insignificant to scene participation, such as the research groups I conducted. Along with Christine and Cecelia’s withdrawal from the study owing to personal issues with others, another research participant, Ruth, also asked to be rescheduled to avoid being in the same discussion as Amy. Accordingly, it is impossible to segregate scene participation from the social networks it implicates. As I go on to discuss, those modes of engagement are key to how drag king events enhance the sociality of the friendship networks of which constantly evolving and devolving relationships are a part. Otherwise, as Leonie suggested, “We’d just invite everyone else round to our place and put on a drag king show”.

Social Networks

Most participants in my study had no awareness of a distinct drag king culture prior to their introduction to Sydney’s drag king scene. For example, in the first group discussion Gerald was hesitant in stating that he “didn’t even know that side existed” when questioned about the first time he’d heard about drag kings. His tone indicated to me that Gerald was
uncomfortable that his only prior knowledge of drag was of queens, not kings, as if this somehow delegitimised his self-selection as a research participant. But immediately Leonie affirmed his account, suggesting that limited knowledge was common among all of them. For Amy and Kate, their first actual experience of a drag king performance occurred at the same time they encountered drag queens. Katie explained:

I knew [drag kings] were out there and I assumed they were the opposite [of drag queens] but before I started coming out my first drag shows were at the Sly Fox. And there would have been queens and kings on the same night. So I was exposed to both at the same time.

This group’s experiences resonated with experiences recounted in the other discussion groups, revealing that a broader familiarity with drag, as a genre of performance, did not necessarily predate an individual’s exposure to drag king cultures.

Only two of the thirteen participants in this study expressed knowledge of a globally recognised culture of drag kinging before gaining first-hand experience of Sydney’s localised scene. Both Eliza and Robin in the second group immediately pointed to the influence of Judith Halberstam’s work in prompting their interest in seeking out shows in Sydney. Although Eliza nominated Halberstam’s monograph *Female Masculinities* as her first encounter with the phenomenon of drag kinging, she went on to describe how her reception of the book was mediated through her wider participation in local performance cultures, adding that in addition to exposure to performance studies at University, she was “really just wrapped up with the Sex and Glitter *Gurlesque* shows”. In making these extended connections, Eliza recognised her interest in drag kings was facilitated by established networks in Sydney she was participating in at the time.
Similarly, Robin’s introduction to Halberstam and Volcano’s publication, *The Drag King Book*, occurred through her involvement in online sexual networks, which gave her the motivation to access the scene. Mockingly referring to herself as a “lost and lonely lesbian”, she told us about her date with a theatre director she had met on *Pink Sofa*, a dating website for lesbian, bisexual and queer-identified women, who introduced her to the book. Robin suggested that her interaction with the woman subsequently gave her “a lot more confidence to be more of a performance artist or to perform masculinity”. In Eliza and Robin’s subsequent exchange over drag king literature, however, it seemed to me that they were more interested in using Halberstam’s body of work to retrospectively date their entry into Sydney’s scene rather than to demonstrate their knowledge of wider global cultures occurring at the time. This interest was made patent in the short debate between Eliza, Robin and myself as to the dates of publication, resolved only by my reaching to the book shelf behind us to extract both books.

No matter whether they were initially exposed to the scene within the last twelve months (Lisa) or over the past ten years (Eliza), all participants in this study were introduced to the local scene through patterns of participation in other established networks. For example, Ruth was the first to respond to what initially interested them all in drag king shows, exclaiming proudly, “I dated a drag king!” Those seated around the table laughed, indicating that they recognised Ruth’s experience as both a frequent (and possibly fraught) experience. Since the drag king Ruth was referring to is Amy, a participant in the first group, this example reiterates the role of personal relationships within these localised networks. Others recounted similar experiences: Cate shared a house with drag king performer Sneakers, referring to herself as “a bit of a groupie” in following her housemate around as she performed. Brooke suggested her “very queer group” of friends enabled her first exposure. Brooke’s
relationships also highlight the role of geographical proximity as she went on to explain:

I’ve always lived in the inner west of Sydney, so I suppose that in some way, [I] would have a lot more access to some kinds of, I dunno, queer-ish stuff than other people.

For Samantha who was in the third group, it was a chance encounter that highlighted the importance of the wider social context in which drag king events take place. She initially said that “I just fell into a club and one day there was a drag king, you know?” Yet, when pressed as to why she decided to go to the Sly Fox Hotel that night Samantha explained that she had “picked up a woman first, on King [Street] or something”. Samantha’s story was abruptly interrupted by Holly and Cate’s laughter and teasing commentary, which indicates their acknowledgement of the potential for casual sexual hook-ups offered by Wednesday nights’ Dyke Night. Adding Samantha’s account to the list of others’ experiences detailed above, participants revealed that their developing knowledge of drag king culture was in line with more complex social arrangements that predated their introduction to the scene.

Participants’ entry into the scene indicates that drag king cultures cannot be simply considered “taste cultures” as other literature on scenes and subcultures suggest. As defined by Sarah Thornton (1996), taste cultures are those in which social groupings form on the basis of a pre-existing taste that motivates them to then seek out others with similar tastes to theirs for the purpose of securing pleasure in their shared consumption. Thornton’s use of taste is based on her reworking of Bourdieu’s work on cultural capital (1984), or knowledge accumulated through an individual’s lifestyle that confers status in social worlds. Taste operates as a system of distinction in which preferences for and acquisition of cultural products correspond to social hierarchies. In her study of club cultures, Thornton (1996, 11-12) uses taste as “subcultural capital”, defined as an embodied form of knowledge, which
confers social capital onto its members by being “in the know” about club cultures and their subsidiary products. For Thornton (1996, 8), a theoretical engagement with taste within subcultural studies facilitates examination of how individuals seek out and accumulate cultural goods to strategically position themselves within their social worlds. As such, Bourdieu’s concept of capital (and Thornton’s extension of it as a subcultural good) define the relationship between social spaces and lifestyles on the basis of distinctive groups oriented within different cultural practices.

As Chatterton and Hollands (2003, 81) argue in their broad analysis of youth culture and urban nightsapes, Thornton’s approach can be considered over-deterministic in her separation of subcultural groups and mainstream life. Applying this observation to my study yields the following insight: if Sydney’s drag king scene were to operate as a taste culture, former knowledge of drag king culture would have to exist that compel people to come together in a process of shared consumption, which in turn would build further affinities and social relationships within a pre-existing scene. Effectively, this requires Sydney’s drag king scene to be recognised as a distinctive social formation outside of the day-to-day social lives of its participants. That is, participants would need to express an individual awareness of drag king culture and a corresponding desire to either perform or view drag king acts before they became socially implicated within the scene. Because Thornton’s study commences from her interests in the attitudes and ideals of those involved in dance cultures, her intention is not to determine how these tastes came to be formed. Indeed, club participants may well have been introduced through existing networks and friendships already involved in that musical genre. However, this remains unclear in her argument as this is the starting point on which her research into forms of participation is conducted. In contrast, I sought to identify why my participants came to be involved, not just how they participated once introduced
The application of taste to Sydney’s drag king scene is further complicated by its subcultural characterisation and, consequently, the information about the scene that was publically available. Due to its relative obscurity in mainstream cultures, advertising for events tended to be limited to alternative media targeted to lesbian readerships, such as *Cherry* and *Lesbians on the Loose*, and, more predominately, through word-of-mouth and interpersonal forms of communication, including an increasing reliance on personal connections and event invitations facilitated by social media, such as Facebook. Furthermore, events were rarely established or promoted with the terms ‘drag king’. Rather, drag king performances were often described as ‘queer performances’ in press and on the events’ own publicity pages. Therefore, exposure to Sydney’s localised scene was only possible through participation in those wider social practices that brought individuals to events.

These socially facilitated introductions further mediated the way participants responded to the scene once introduced. When asked to recall the first drag king show they watched, participants were generally unable to offer specific details of the performance. “It’s hazy, isn’t it?” Brooke affirmed to Robin when she struggled to remember. Samantha went so far as to suggest that she was not “too interested” in the performance taking place but rather, “it was the first time so more curiosity” motivated her to go in and watch it. Instead, participants keenly recalled the broader social interactions that framed their introduction to the drag king scene itself. For Samantha, the drag king performance held less importance than the sexual encounter that brought her to the Sly Fox Hotel that night. In contrast, while Brooke had difficulty naming the first performers she had seen, she recollected how she felt about the performance in great detail:

> And [I] was blown away by the, I don’t know. By how sexy it all was. It was just extraordinary and I hadn’t…Well, at the stage I really, I guess, I felt pretty lesbian and
really confused about finding explicit masculinity on stage attractive. It was really
disturbing to my eighteen year old sense of, you know, sexuality. So yeah, it was at
the Sly Fox and it was very, very sexy and me and the friend both talked about it for
quite some time afterwards and felt very confused and personally addressed by the
drag kings.

Brooke’s recollection pointed to how her queer-oriented friendship circle not only facilitated
her access to the scene, but enabled her to interrogate her experience of her first drag king
performance. While Brooke’s memory contrasts to Samantha’s more dismissive account,
both are able to recall these introductory experiences through the wider networks that brought
them there. That is, Brooke and Samantha’s first encounter was bound within the sociality of
the moment that gave it particular resonance.

In this section, I have used the detailed account of one group’s emerging and deteriorating
friendship as engaged by drag king events alongside other participants’ narrated experiences
of their encounters with the scene to highlight how people’s exposure to, and subsequent
interest in, Sydney’s drag king scene is predicated on the social context in which it occurred.
Already actively engaged in wider relationships—whether through broader queer
performance or activism, developing or existing friendships, brief or enduring sexual
encounters—participants’ established networks directed their encounter to the culture of drag
kinging. These accounts indicate that participants’ existing relationships with people is the
primary mode through which they frame their entry to drag king events in Sydney. The
emphasis on social relations in that precise moment over the substantive content of
performances is central to how Sydney’s drag king scene operates as a ‘small world’ rather
than a distinct cultural lifestyle.
Places

Drag king events offered a localised space for this small world to be animated and enacted. The venues that hosted drag king events were not simply empty containers in which those social interactions take place. As previous literature has explored in detail, there is an intimate connection between non-heterosexual cultures and the spaces they carve out (Beemyn 1997, Browne et. al. 2007, Bell and Valentine 1995, Duncan 1996, Ingram, et. al. 1997, Browne and Ferreira 2015). Indeed, analysis around the predominately lesbian demographic of the drag king scene, and the socialised relations they supported, is entangled in perceptions of space: safe spaces in which lesbian identities can be performed without fear of reprisal, social spaces that provide opportunities to interact with other same-sex attracted women, and sexualised spaces where women can meet up and hook up with other women away from the often discomforting attentions of heterosexual men. Attending drag king events week after week meant that my research participants engaged with the particular places that also comprised the scene.

I follow Bruno Latour (2005) in suggesting that places, too, are mediators that shape the practices and encounters they enable. Latour makes the distinction between intermediaries, which transport meaning or force without transformation, and mediators, whose influence is not predictable in that they have the potential to modify any accounts attributed to their role. By this account, the specificities of places need to be taken into consideration given their capacity to “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry” (Latour 2005, 39). Thus, the way in which the drag king scene is constituted is in part reflected by how people negotiated the spatial specificity of the venue. This requires ethnographic description of the literal retracing of steps in the encounter with its spaces. In what follows, I trace these spatial negotiations as people enter, move within, and
leave the primary site of my ethnographic research, the Sly Fox Hotel. I focus on this venue for three reasons. One, it is arguably recognised by participants as the singularly most enduring fixture on the drag king circuit as it hosted weekly drag shows for over a decade. Second, participants themselves referred to the venue far more frequently than they did any other place in association with the scene. Finally, many other venues offered near-identical construction in small crowded performances spaces, makeshift dancefloors and associated outside areas. So while other venues were recounted as part of Sydney’s drag king scene, the Sly Fox Hotel stands out as the most representative of the places that comprised the scene.

Routine Spaces
The Sly Fox Hotel is an imposing building standing in three-story majesty at the corner of Enmore Road and Cambridge Street, Enmore; its time-worn, yellow frontage visible on approach from over 500 metres away. At the height of Queer Central’s popularity the sheer mass of women making their way to the venue was a sight to be seen. Watching from my apartment situated diagonally opposite the Hotel, the column of bodies seemed to stretch the whole length of Enmore Road from the main intersection where it met King Street. My appreciation of this visual spectacle was enhanced by the sound of excited chatter and laughter that pierced the otherwise stillness of the night. This onslaught of sound penetrated the relative isolation of my sole-occupancy apartment, instilling in me a growing excitement for the night ahead. As my own ethnographic immersion in the scene intensified, my Wednesday nights increasingly followed a set routine. Unless I had indicated that I had plans with other people, Leonie would text me around 9.30pm, letting me know that the group was en route or she would ring me when they were outside my apartment so I would go

17 King Street is Newtown’s main entertainment street where the majority of venues and bars are situated. The relative isolation of the Sly Fox on Enmore Road, approximately 750 metres away, discounts any possibility that people were making their way in such numbers to anything other than the event Queer Central.
downstairs and cross the road to the venue with them. Joining this mass of women on the street, I’d be swept up and carried along by their collective charge to the front entrance of the Sly Fox Hotel.

Two male bouncers stationed at the double-doored entrance performed dual roles as door security and ID-checkers, casually inspecting the contents of patron’s bags before allowing them to make their way in. This was a requirement that reminded me of nightclub protocols that seemed immediately at odds with a pub venue midweek in Sydney. Yet, this indicated that the venue management expected maximum occupancy, thereby requiring strict adherence to the law. The security’s presence also contributed to the sense of overlap between local pub and popular nightclub through which events gain significance in night-time economies. To facilitate a quick entry, I would have my bag already open as I walked up to the doors, smile and nod acknowledgement of the bouncer’s greeting. In Lucy Watson’s (2012) first-hand account, such encounters signal the visibility of routine attendance set within the broader social circuit of Dyke Night:

It’s Wednesday night. The ladies of the inner west are making their weekly pilgrimage, from The Bank, The Courthouse, or (a new addition to the Wednesday family) Birdcage at the Zanzibar, up Enmore road to The Sly Fox. The bouncer waves through the familiar faces, they were here last week, they’ll be here next week. Two girls with bubblegum coloured hair are refused entry; one too many beers at The Courthouse. The bouncer stops me, I’m not regular enough to be recognised.

Stepping through the double-doors, the street-front space was dominated by a pool table in perpetual use; the room’s perimeter dotted with stools and high tables. Measuring approximately three metres by five metres, this space also held an entrance to a smaller
square room off to the side behind an automatically closing door that housed the ‘pokies’, the Australian vernacular for individual gambling machines. A long rectangular bar dominated the second section of the venue. Its shorter side closed off the pool table area, while the other side opened up to the much larger third space. The longer side of the bar created an elongated corridor approximately three times the length of the first space, its width further hampered by the regularly placed small tables, stools and wooden ledge running the length of the wall opposite the bar. This narrow corridor served the dual purpose as a passage way between the first and third sections and as the bar area where patrons crowded up against each other to order drinks from what always seemed like too-few bar staff. The third area was designated as the performance space. This space was the largest of the three areas—almost three times the size of that first space—and was ringed by tall tables and stools, leaving the front and centre sections facing the stage empty. The stage itself was an elevated platform, accessed by three steps to its left side, and the DJ booth located on its far right. Behind the steps is a small dark alcove that by some unspoken yet universally recognised rule was reserved for the performers and their friends.

The shows tended to follow a routine format. Each Wednesday in the month was allocated to an MC, who commonly performed a number, plus two or three additional performers who comprised the standard ensemble. Two sets were performed each night, with each performer providing two numbers. However, variances for special nights were also common, especially during Sydney’s Mardi Gras Festival, when the Wednesday night falls on or is directly before a public holiday thereby guaranteeing a larger crowd, or if Australian ‘drag royalty’ (well known or pioneering drag artists) were in town and a special performance organised. Invariably people had their favourite performers. Such regularity provided comfort: people knew when to expect to see performances and who they expected to see perform. The first
group indicated that they were discomforted when this regularity was interrupted as this was interpreted as a disruption to their Wednesday night routine. For example, Gerald complained about the lack of information around the line up on the night of the group discussions, stating, “I have to say it would be nice to know what actually is coming up”. Amy agreed, for her the lack of regularity was unsettling: “it kind of throws me off”.

The shows were advertised to commence at 10.30pm, though this seemed to be at the performers’ discretion based on whether or not a critical audience size had been achieved. Most nights the shows usually commenced around 10.45pm. Newer performers would often be seen mingling in the open spaces in the performance area or corridor that runs the length of the bar. The tight confines of this space meant that in turning around from the bar, it was likely people came into face-to-face contact with a bearded drag king. The presence of kings in this space contributed to the sense that this was not just any pub in Newtown in which lesbians congregated, but one especially designated as a drag king venue. More established performers remained out of view in the ‘green room’ off the bar until the start of the show, a routine that reflected in part pre-performance nerves but also shrouded the upcoming characterisation and costumes in mystery. A show was about to begin when the performers moved through the audience to take-up their position in the alcove by the left hand side of the stage, a move that never went unnoticed owing to their elaborate costumes. At this point the MC mounted the stage and moved across to talk to the DJ, presumably to arrange the music for the performances and indicate readiness or perhaps simply to increase the audience expectation for the upcoming show. Invariably, it was only when the DJ stopped the music that the show would begin.

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18 The Green Room is a small, cramped change room. It is located behind a small door, reached only from behind the bar, which is not easily accessible without invitation from the venue management or bar staff. I have never seen the interior of this room.
**Practiced Spaces**

On popular nights, the cessation of music signalled the moment when the crowd transformed the empty expanse of the third area into a congestion of bodies pressing up against each other in order to get a good viewing position of the stage. The way people responded to this last sequence of movements indicated a familiarity of the spatial dynamics of the scene. Some sat down on the cleared dance floor near the front of the stage; others rushed off to get a drink refill or to use the bathroom. Regular attendees would usually anticipate this crush and ensure they had claimed one of the coveted tables ringing the room. My preferred table was located to the left of the performer’s alcove, which gave me an unimpeded view of the performance on stage as well as access to the reactions of the other kings as they stood waiting to perform.

Those individuals who perpetually resided around the pool table didn’t stop playing when shows commenced, putting more stock in the outcome of their game than the performances taking place. Holly referred to those who exclusively occupy this space as “pool table dykes”, who she went on to characterise as “intimidating” because they “won’t let you have a go”. People’s position within each of these three separate spaces visibly designates how they are perceived by others. Leonie considered the pool players wholly separate to those constituting the audience. Katie extended this categorisation to all individuals not directly oriented to the stage in the performance space, including “the girls who are at the side of the bar there” because “they’re not part of the dancing, show-watching audience. They are a different group”. In my participants’ minds, these other areas are physically and socially disconnected from the performance taking place on the far side of the venue. This suggests that even while the venue overall is considered indicative of the scene by virtue of its association, there are more tightly stratified practices that constitute its internal spaces.
Participants’ negotiation of space further signalled how they recognised audience hierarchies in relation to the performances. The first group, for instance, always sat down in the front of the third space when the show was on. As Amy explained, their position distinguished them from other less interested audience groups:

It’s kind of split into two different people, two different groups. There’s our group where we are down the front, enjoying, getting into it.

She went on to proclaim their identity as a specific type of participant by chanting, “We’re the hyper kids! We’re the hyper kids”. By Amy’s enthusiastic enactment, audience participation was not a quiet, sit-down affair with polite clapping at the end of each set. Rather, the audience responded—often loudly—as a way of signalling their appreciation for the performances. Brooke recalled the wolf whistles that accompanied the more conventional sounds of audience participation, while Ruth added laughter to her auditory recollection. A bad performance, participants implied, is characterised by a lack of audience laughter. As much as the presence of drag king, Brooke and Ruth’s comments suggest that audience participation was also what designated the venue as a drag king site rather than any other venue on the lesbian social circuit. Amy commented, “If the audience doesn’t participate as much as the drag king does, then the king won’t give back as much as they can”. This suggests a symbiotic relationship between the performance and the engaged audience contingent. As Amy suggested, “the louder they [the audience] are, the more hyper the king gets”. This meant that the audience reception was essential for the performance to “work”, and in some ways justified how individual audience members saw their regular participation as just as important for the scene to thrive.

Samantha, too, recalled the sounds of audience participation, describing it as “lots of unanimous things from the crowd, or sometimes like that random ‘Woo!’ or like there’s
cheering, jeering”. Struck by the term “jeering”, I asked Samantha if this indicated a negative audience response, but she was quick to disagree. “I don't think I’ve ever heard a negative ‘Boo!’” she said, sounding almost offended by the suggestion, “I don't know what I’d do actually in that situation, but if I hear that I’d probably go like, ‘Are you serious?’” Samantha’s response indicates the regulatory function implicit to audience participation. Even on those nights when the performances weren’t particularly good, an underlying level of positive audience engagement was expected. As Cate explained, “There's still a great, like, vibe coming out from everyone, because I think everyone's quite, umm, can't think of the word, everyone's…”. “Supportive?” Samantha offered instead. Describing this support as “quite uniform”, Cate confirmed the expectation required of the audience across the scene:

And even, like, between all the venues that I’ve been to, all the crowds have been quite different but everyone is, sort of, has got the same sort of intention and the same sort of outlook.

Despite the differences in audience composition between nights and venues, good and bad performances, these accounts demonstrate norms of engagement in being part of a drag king audience. For Amy, acknowledgment of these norms translated into responsibility for enhancing other’s enjoyment: “If they’re not [enjoying the show] I’ll sing along, [...] get them into it myself until they’re interacting as well”. Leonie expanded on how this responsibility directly related to collective participation: “Like, there’s been a break down in the song where the audience is clapping and no one is clapping”—at this point she turned to face Amy—“so Amy will start clapping and then that will start, excuse the pun, ricochet”. Leonie is interrupted by laughter; Amy’s drag king name Rick O’Shea. In these accounts, individuals saw their participation in the space reflected through the practices of others via those same spatialised hierarchies that dictated their own behaviour.
This account of individual positioning and behaviour highlights the normative aspects of negotiating scene spaces. As scenes increasingly partake of a ritualised regularity, constant negotiations over relations between people and space intensify. As such, ethical protocols are elaborated over time and generate norms of behaviour that are integrated within mundane forms of everyday sociality (Straw 2002, 255-256). Repeated week after week, Wednesday night attendance took on a compulsive character, which highlighted the ritual nature of scene participation. In some cases attendance is directed by entrenched social protocols of mandatory attendance. For example, Lisa explained that sometimes she’ll attend events when she didn’t “really want to go out but this person is going to be there”. For many of my participants, it became increasingly difficult to imagine doing anything else on Wednesday nights.

Yet, the same norms that designated social practices were not confined to performances and its viewing. Arrival at events was directed by social practices developed in relation to established social networks. Amy described how at “the beginning when we first get there” the first experience is that “you hear a lot of talking”. She went on to describe this as a protocol: “Occasionally you pay attention to the music in the background, but that’s your social time when you get to the Sly Fox”. Similarly, the post-show period was the time set aside for developing or maintaining social relationships. After the performances had finished, I observed that people turned to each other and mimed their private post-show rituals: hands curved around an imaginary glass and a nod to the bar; arms taken and bodies pulled into the crush of the dance floor; or two fingers held up to pursed lips with a gesture towards the outdoor smoking area. At this point in the evening the venue was transformed from performance space to nightclub. The stage lights were dimmed and dance music started, pounding out of the two massive speakers flanking the stage. The DJ booth was equipped
with controls for a smoke machine positioned at the front of the stage at ankle level, which, when activated, sent out bursts of smoke that reduced visibility on the dance floor to a metre or so. Some people used the low-lit, smoke-filled air and the sweaty close conditions to initiate contact with potential lovers or to simply have a good time with new friends. Others used the occasion to catch up with people they hadn’t seen for a while, often repairing outside to quieter locations for conversation.

Such ancillary practices often kept participants at the venue later than intended. The first group pointed to the opportunities for further sociality not framed by the performances. Lisa offered: “It may be many things. New people, having a great time”. Amy expanded, “If you are having a good dance with somebody, getting along with someone more than you should or catching up with people, then you want to stay. You don’t want to leave”. Or, as Leonie suggested, “Oh, yeah, if you meet a really cute girl you’re not going home”. In the third group, Samantha similarly pointed to the music as a reason for staying on later, however the way that she articulated this suggested that dancing formed part of the event itself rather than simply supplementing the performances: “Well I like to dance, so for me […] I’ll be there usually until the end of it”. Here “the end of it” related to the full range of practices that take place within the venue, not just the drag king performances. Such practices extend the event so that post-show practices become associated with the wider potentiality offered by the event itself. In the second group Brooke lamented that she often leaves early, suggesting that she might be missing out on those later activities that formed part of the event as a whole. “That's often a lasting impression”, she explained, “or disappointed in that night, that I didn’t stay and dance forever and make out with some babe”. These comments on the pre-and post-show aspects of participation highlights the temporal extension of drag king events to include social interactions not immediately directed by the performance set times. To participate in
the scene, then, is to recognise the nature of the space and how these rituals are practiced, where such recognition is the product of repetition.

*Socialised Spaces*

Drag king venues, then, are the product of specific kinetic negotiation between people, practices, objects and arrangements. Traversing the cramped, crowded spaces of the Sly Fox Hotel involved an economy of movement: the twisting and turning of bodies against each other to slip through the gaps between the bar, furniture and other people. In that narrow corridor, especially, sweat-slicked shoulders touched as people jostled at the bar and drinks, when purchased, were held firmly aloft lest they, already wet with condensation, were knocked from grasps to spill into the sticky, smelly, carpeted floor. “Excuse me! Sorry!” was the more polite refrain I proffered in these spaces as cold drinks slopped onto the shoulders and clothing of others. Hampered by the noise created by so many bodies in such a small space that required interactions either to be conducted at high volume or wordlessly transacted, others simply expressed apology through a raised eyebrow or shrug of the shoulders, if anything at all.

“Space”, as Elspeth Probyn (1995, 81) notes, “is a pressing matter and it matters which bodies, where and how, press up against it”. Bodies coming into contact with other bodies and objects in confined spaces hold the opportunity for mapping the meta-sociality of the scene. Yet, movement within this space is also subject to subjectivised interpretation that give those encounters meaning. Crucially, the same accounts that detail the scene’s social function also demonstrate how these encounters are generated by the space itself. How people responded to these spaces, and the encounters with others these spaces produced, were often driven by the established social and sexual networks in play as well as those traceable to
seemingly spontaneous encounters within the environment alone. The process by which spaces become socialised is most evident in how drag king events trespass into a series of locations alongside the venue. Each time the entrance door of the Sly Fox Hotel opened noise would spill into the neighbouring residential area, widening the event’s auditory impact. Living across the road from the Sly Fox Hotel on Enmore Road, I had firsthand experience of the reach of music, shouts and laughter from the event, often lying in bed until 3am unable to sleep due to the noise.

One evening I overheard two raucous male voices outside my kitchen window commenting on the movement of people around the Sly Fox Hotel. “We’ll see some lesbian tits”, said one as they settled in on the benches diagonally opposite the venue. I find this last statement significant in how these two individuals recognised this space around the venue as ‘lesbian’. As Gill Valentine (1993, 1996) points out, lesbians can contest and negotiate heterosexual norms by using time-space strategies. For example, the “heterosexual street” can be appropriated through coded practices, such as dress and body language, ‘dropping pins’ (that is, referring to lesbian cultural icons) or engaging in lesbian lexicon that rework the meaning of that space for a limited duration. But Elspeth Probyn (1995, 79) takes this negotiation further, pointing out that the presence of lesbian desire “may change structures of spatiality, and be changed within different spatial structures”. Under the title “Bar Talk”, Probyn commences her analysis with the equivalent ‘two women walk into a bar’ joke. The enactment of desire as the two women kiss sets off a process in rearticulating the space of the bar from a masculine homosocial site to a “momentarily sexed lesbian space” (Probyn 1995, 81). I use this characterisation of lesbian space to show how otherwise unambiguous public space around drag king events was inscribed as ‘lesbian’ by “the relational movements of one

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19 This conversation was documented in my field notes on 30 January 2012.
lesbian body to another” (Probyn 1995, 81). These relational movements supplement the spatial specificity of events via the expansive itineraries of its patrons. Whether or not ‘tits’ were on display, for these men the presumption of male heterosexual entitlement to public space was suspended on this night of the week by lesbian appropriation, and they recognised that they could only observe, not participate, in this dynamic recoding of place.

Despite regular neighbourhood complaints, the areas surrounding the Sly Fox Hotel became appropriated as scene spaces. Leonie expressed concern for the seventy-year-old woman who lived next to the car park two streets over from the Hotel, making the connection between the event and the wider practices it designated. “She shouldn’t have to move house just because the lesbians on Wednesday night decide to have fights in the car park”. The “lesbians”, as she explained, connected these spaces to the venue’s responsibility: “And now we’ve got a security guard patrolling that”. Taken together, these two examples emphasise how people both within and outside the scene consider these extended spaces of events by virtue of their association with a dominant demographic, wherever that demographic may circulate on any given Wednesday. Such considerations designate these external sites as spaces of public sociality associated with the scene and its lesbian notoriety in effect blurring the distinction Silver and Clark (2015) make between physical structures and neighbourhoods as component parts of scene analysis.

The spatial trespass of events echoes Straw’s (2004, 416) view that scenes are not bounded by location but take place in relationship to “the assemblages of things, places, technologies and artefacts along which people move and live”. On one hand, pre- and post-show activities supplemented the scene, following the tracks of participants as they entered, milled around and left drag king events. On the other hand, the expansive sociality of the scene also can be
read as offering the potential for social and sexual encounters generated by the space itself. Accordingly, participants developed ways to reappropriate areas within and around the venue as specific functional sites.

One of the most revealing examples of this process is how the designated smoking area outside the venue was a recognised site for social and sexual interaction. In order to comply with council restrictions, bouncers at the Sly Fox Hotel were engaged to contain the crowd within an area to one side of the hotel, in effect creating a bounded area outside, yet within the purview, of the venue. As smoking was banned inside the venue, this became the designated smoking area of the drag king events. Amy described this area:

> It’s a great time if you go out and smoke, it’s also a good time to sit and interact with everyone. […] Or you meet people out there. And because it’s easier to talk to them, greet them, meet, because after a while it’s too loud to talk to people. So it’s mainly the main social area.

As such, this area’s social draw operates in excess of its function as a containment area for smokers. Katie confirmed, “Yep, even if you’re not smoking. I’m a non-smoker and I will always go out and talk to people outside”. Not surprisingly, objects associated with particular practices become indicative of social protocols, and strategies were developed to facilitate encounters. Katie recalled her efforts to meet new people when she first arrived in Sydney and attributed her success to the prop of a cigarette lighter. Possessing one is the best way to meet people because, as she claimed, everyone “is always after a cigarette lighter”. I too started to carry a cigarette lighter when I was trying to recruit participants to the study in that space. Subsequent conversation became much easier when someone has leant over my hand, their head inches from my own, in order to light their cigarette. After this intimate exchange, it was generally considered polite to stand talking with me while their cigarette burned down.
This smoking area-cum-social space was one where non-verbal practices preceded conversation. For instance, contact could be pursued with someone who caught another’s gaze inside by gesturing to an unlit cigarette, with its implication of “Do you have a light?” Likewise, demonstrating visible discomfort from the chill winds that accompanied the winter months could prompt an invitation to huddle up, and subsequent vocalisation, “Aw, you look cold, come over here and keep warm”. Conversely, confrontations could ensue when the partner of another sensed a potential threat—perhaps from that same gaze that otherwise could have resulted in a shared cigarette—culminating in the frequently overhead statement, “Stay away from my girl, bitch”. As such, unspoken forms of sociality can result in both collegial and confrontational encounters.

As Joan Nestle reflects in her collection of erotic essays, the lesbian public bar often operates as a privately coded place. As evocatively described in “The Bathroom Line” (1988), Nestle argues that practices are developed that rearticulated specific spaces according to participants’ requirements in “lesbian time and place”. The bathrooms at The Sea Colony, a lesbian bar in New York in the 1950s, were overseen by a female attendant who imposed strict rules on bathroom use. In response, the “toilet line was born, a twisting horizon of Lesbian women waiting for permission to urinate, to shit”, becoming a site reworked for the playful enactment of lust and love. As Nestle (1988, 38-39) writes:

The line awaited all of us every night, and we developed a line act. We joked, we cruised, we commented on the length of time one of us took, we made special pleas to allow hot-and-heavy lovers in together, knowing full well that our lady would not permit it. […] We lived on that line; restricted and judged, we took deep breaths and played.
Like Nestle’s bathroom line, the smoking areas of the Sly Fox Hotel are constructed through prevailing participatory networks embedded within the social fabric of lesbian cultures. In Nestle’s (1988, 37) account, the literal experience is augmented by a practical knowledge borne of scene participation itself: for those “who lived there knew the steps”. Following the movement of participants into and through this space reveals the inscription of space by codified practices. As Pepper G. Glass (2012, 696) puts it, “members, through their everyday interactions, collectively produce these setting”. As in Glass’s analysis of punk space, participants “do” scene participation through their manipulation of its “spatial building blocks”. “Doing” a scene is an ordinary, practical accomplishment of movement, but one that produces sites of the scene. Facilitated by the material conditions of the drag king venues, participants developed codes that turned places into functional spaces: spaces to meet up, to pick up, and to make out. In this sense, the places of the scene can be understood as routine and practiced, but they are also socialised in that they allow participants to appropriate space to further the conditions of the social context in which the scene resides. Such an account of place cements the relationship of localised networks and socialised practices to the drag king scene as a small world.

**Practices**

Participants’ interest in drag king performances are entangled within existing participatory networks through which the places associated with drag king events become ‘the scene’. But how are these relationships upheld or enhanced by drag king events in their function as small worlds? Following Straw (2002, 247), I am interested in tracing how sociality is altered when the diverse practices associated with scenes—he lists by way of example “public eating, drinking, dancing and talking”—involve ongoing negotiation over the appropriate ratios that designate some elements the foreground and others the background. As seen in this section, I
use participants’ accounts to reveal the wider possibilities of engagement the scene offers them. Such attention allows me to trace the relationship of people to practices as they unfold around various activities not directly implied by the term drag king.

Drag king events structured social practices developed in association with routine attendance. Primarily, participation was seen as a social occasion. Holly, for example, described a weekly ritual in how her “whole household used to go to the Sly, back in the day”. Different pre-show routines were recounted by each participant. Amy relayed how “everyone” would come to their shared flat to get ready with “pre-drinks”, a meeting Leonie described as “kind of like a party before a party”. In contrast, Cate used alcohol before an event to highlight the specialness of the evening as in “we got all dressed up and had cocktails before […]. Like we were going to see My Fair Lady or whatever”. Samantha pointed to the role alcohol played in her solo preparation for events because having a “few wines” gave herself time to prepare for the night ahead. When framing attendance as a social event, participants included their pre-show routines because they considered them as an essential component of the overall night. Just as existing literature on young women’s drinking practices demonstrates the link between alcohol consumption and sociability (Guise and Gill 2007, Rúdólfsdóttir and Morgan 2009, Waitt et. al. 2011), I use these accounts to emphasise how the consumption of alcohol at alternative sites was associated with drag king events. Whatever the reason given, that participants readily understood these pre-event scenarios as an integral part of scene participation. As Cate proclaimed, “Fuck yeah, I don’t think you can go to the Fox [without drinking beforehand]”.

Drag king events, then, offered an expansive site in which broader social relations essential to the formation of small worlds could be enacted. Cate suggested that attendance was often
motivated by the opportunity to catch up with friends and acquaintances:

You’ve got your friends in the community that you don’t necessarily see all the time, and you see them at those kinds of events.

Event organisers utilised these existing networks on social media to promote events. However, users need to have ‘liked’ or ‘friended’ the venue’s Facebook page before receiving the venue’s updates in their newsfeed. This step further highlights the importance of pre-existing connections that are in turn reflected in their virtual versions, which is consistent with many studies that suggest that Facebook users utilise Facebook to browse their existing social connections rather than searching for new connections (Cheung et. al. 2011, Pempek et. al. 2009). For my research purposes, I found that maintaining online networks on Facebook proved an invaluable resource as I could access information on performer line-ups, view the number of ‘likes’ to promotional posts and, in the case of Facebook events set up to market specific drag king shows, could view the number of expected attendees by their Facebook RSVPs.

However, my participants also revealed that Facebook extends to more socially-oriented uses. Rather than using it to garner information on events, Cate described her use of Facebook as determining who she expects to see and how this heightened her anticipation in attending:

So yeah, definitely a place to go when I haven’t seen a lot of people in the community for ages, and you do sort of meet up. And you would have known from Facebook earlier that day that they were going to be there.

It was apparent, though, that not all participants utilised social media to determine social information within events the same way. Gillianne’s suggestion that for “the bigger events I’ll see which of my friends are going but for the Sly Fox, you just rock up” highlights how regular attendance invokes wider social networks. Gillianne confirmed, “There is always
somebody that I know, I guess”. Indeed, as my own attendance intensified, connections were deepened through my regular patterns of participation and the networks I pursued online so that it was increasingly rare to attend drag king events and not know anyone there.

*Performance Dynamics*

Participants’ accounts of the role of drag king performances in furthering the social occasion offered by drag king events was contradictory. For Amy, post-show practices were enhanced by the performances, extending the shared pleasures of watching to the potential for related social interactions. The first group were adamant that social networks were animated simply on the basis of shared presence in the audience. As Amy stated, the “talking point” that drag king performances provide can be acted on if people choose to stay on after performances at events:

> I find that there is more of a connection with [people] afterwards. You are more likely to talk or interact with them about a show or have a dance with them afterwards.

But she was also enthusiastic in describing the impact of the shows to other related practices, describing how “drag kings pump me up for the rest of the night”. She described the context in which this impact takes place:

> Like, because after the shows, they’ve got music and it goes on for hours and so it gets everyone in the mood to dance and party.

Other participants gestured towards the inconsistency of drag king performances in providing opportunities for furthering social interactions. As seen in an exchange between friends Gillianne and Samantha, who were both in the third discussion group, people had different orientations to the centrality of the performances in the overall night:
Samantha: Like, you never really have an intent to go, 'Oh yeah there's a drag king show', like how you were speaking, Gill, about going to particular nights. I've never done that. I don't think I've ever gone, ‘I have an intent to go to that night’. I just happen to be there, and there's a drag, drag kings on the stage.

Gillianne: See, for me I would never have gone to the Sly unless I knew there was a show. I would go for the show otherwise I would probably hang out somewhere else.

Many participants instead suggested attendance was motivated by a number of factors other than specific performers or performances. These diverse accounts recall my earlier use of Straw’s contention that analysis involves ascertaining which elements bear relevant relations to the scene. As seen here, drag king performances are either foregrounded or backgrounded in the way participants frame their role in the provision of social interactions. This different emphasis points to the dynamic position that the performances occupy in relation to broader social practices of “hanging out”.

Recognising these different relations to the scene means paying attention to how people engage with the performances taking place in front of them. For instance, all participants offered examples of looking away from the performer to other audience members, as seeing how much they were enjoying the performance provided pleasure and enhanced their own enjoyment of the performances. Yet by looking away from the stage, other practices can take priority over performances. This happened for me at the one-off King for a Day drag competition in 2012 in which both Leonie and Amy were competing.20 On the smoking

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20 This event held at The Supper Club on level one of The Oxford Hotel in February 2012 as part of the lead up to Sydney’s Mardi Gras.
balcony one floor up, I entered into a lively discussion with someone writing on drag kings in the U.S. So keen was I to discuss the differences between our research contexts, I inadvertantly missed Amy’s performance, much to her disappointment. This scenario revealed to me that drag king events can support multiple modes of engagement that can take precedence over drag king performances and other pre-determined commitments.

Not surprisingly given the theorisation of scenes as complex social entities, the precise scenario participants invoked remained inconsistent across the group discussions. For example, some participants referred to the broader gay and lesbian context while others limited references to the performances of drag only. In some cases, the vernacular term ‘scene’ was deployed strategically in relation to themselves and other people to indicate a sense of belonging through participation (as in Robin “found the scene” and would “hang out and check out the scene” while Eliza held “seniority within the scene” and “comfortability with the scene”). It was also deployed to indicate negative aspects characteristic of the dramatically charged sexualised politics around same-sex attraction (Leonie used the phrase “on the scene” to indicate sexual availability and predatory practices) and the cliques and alliances that build up around the romantic entanglements of women (Cate referred to the inevitability of ensuing drama in that “the scene does get a bit ugly and a little bit dirty”). ‘Scene’ also extended to the pressures of conformity to the clothing and stylistics as a mandatory component (Holly made reference to events as a “sort of trendy dykey scene”) and finally, it was used as a derogatory reference where “scene’ lends itself as a type of insult (Leonie gently teased Amy and Lisa, calling them “scene brats”).

Rather than an indication of my participants’ recognition of a pre-determined taste culture (or lack thereof), the seemingly inexhaustible quality of these examples suggests the relevance of scene theory to the case study of Sydney’s drag king culture.
Scene Dramas

From some of the examples cited throughout this chapter, it is clear that drag king events can facilitate both positive and negative social engagements. Brooke, for instance, offered a specific example of how social and sexual norms played out within the venue:

Like, sometimes I’d go into that space with a friend who looked much more like a dyke had a shorter, sharper haircut, and you know, and wore really big, baggy pants and we'd walk in and like, and all of the women would look at her in a particular way and they’d have these little ‘butch-offs’ with the women at the pool table where there was like a little appraisal.

As the participants passed through, the pool room operated as a kind of staging area where appearances were appraised and silent judgments passed. Expanding on the experiences of her friend, Brooke was indignant that the spatiality of the venue promoted sexualised harassment:

And also a whole lot of other women would approach her or like, brush past her and ‘Sorry, it’s crowded so I’ll just grope you on the way past!’

Cate was especially vocal about the way in which friendships animated around the scene can have the potential to turn into “drama”. Cate’s use of the word drama is recognised lesbian parlance that refers to the negative interactions between people owing to the entangled social and sexual practices within a close-knit world. As Esther Newton (2000a, 65) acknowledges, lesbian social groupings have “a dramatic side”. Group responses to Cate’s admission of her involvement in “drama” reveals how participants viewed this as an inevitable part of how lesbian worlds evolve, going so far as to laugh at a cliché come to life. Reflecting on these encounters prompted a litany that indicated the usual causes of drama. “Who was there, who said what, who ignored who”, Holly offered. “Who they made out with’”, Cate added.
Gillianne clarified the source of most drama, “It’s always over girls”. The anecdotes told within the group discussions repeatedly demonstrated to me that participants were well aware of the dramatic potential offered by the scene both socially and sexually, although, as in Newton’s landmark account, these dimensions were increasingly hard to keep distinct.

Gillianne’s identification of “girls” as the cause for scene conflict made me reflect on the connection between wider lesbian sociality and the small world of the drag king scene. Here I offer an account of my own experience as an example of how drag king events have the capacity to restage social encounters borne from romantic relationships that occurred outside the scene. While attending a regular drag king event, I caught sight of an ex-girlfriend and my immediate reaction was to feel compromised by her presence within the space.21 My field notes document my anxiety when I first became aware of her, however, this anxiety quickly turned to anger at what felt to me a trespass: an outside relationship had disrupted what I had proprietarily presumed to be “my scene”, so much so that my next comments were written with such force that the pen ripped through the next three pages of my notebook. My notes expanded on how this encounter affected my participation at the event in that I felt the night had been “hijacked” by her and now “ruined”. However, this outside relationship also drew my scene-specific friendships into the encounter. On one occasion, as I stood talking to my ex-girlfriend, I felt Leonie stand close behind me and place her hand on me: literalising the sentiment of “I’ve got your back”.

On reflection, what this experience highlighted for me is the role that these dramas played in the solidification of this small world. Similar to the well-known adage that all social relations can be circumscribed within six degrees of separation, lesbian social connections are often

21 This occurred at the weekly Queer Central event at the Sly Fox Hotel in April 2012.
considered to demonstrate even fewer degrees between current and former lovers. As a result, drag king events operated as a microcosm of wider lesbian social interactions within urban queer centres. Rather than fragmenting this small world, these dramas emphasised how the proximity of social relations was enhanced by drag king events, where all of one’s exes could be in the same room at the same time. The potential for dramas to intrude into the scene provided a unique opportunity to mitigate or resolve conflict that is essential for the ongoing functioning of the scene. To return to my example, months after this fraught encounter with my ex, I attended another event and saw her dancing to the music and chatting with friends during breaks. She looked comfortable within the space she’d made for herself and her companions. Driven by a feeling of post-show congeniality, I approached her. As we chatted about the performances we had just seen, I felt my tension over her presence dissipate. Soon afterwards we were friends again, at least on Facebook. In this example, dramas work to solidify small worlds by accommodating, and perhaps even facilitating, the interactions that are endemic to establishing and maintaining lesbian social relations. Part of the attraction of the scene is its capacity to stage these dramas alongside the more formal shows that are their explicit entertainment rationale.

Overall these accounts reveal how the practices of participants at events are directed by the potential for encounters animated by the social relations engaged around a scene. Pointing to the dynamism of drag king events, I also highlight the specific context in which broader social networks can intersect and interact. These relationships in turn extend the range of practices associated with the event as occasioning social interactions outside the immediate temporal structure of the staged performance. In this sense, drag king events support a full

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22 This event was the *Women in Uniform* party was hosted by The Imperial as part of the Anzac Day celebration where drag performances occurred within a wider entertainment line-up across the entire day.
range of practices that might seem peripheral to outsiders. This expanded scope allowed
Katie, for example, to claim her place as a scene participant without being “directly involved”
in drag king performances at all.

Given the diverse forms of sociality that drag king events support, it is not surprising that
drag king performances hold less dominance in participants’ accounts of their experiences of
the scene. As Straw (2002, 255) notes, “the spectacular loses visibility, dispersed within
multiple sites of encounter or consumption”. That is, as the scene absorbs disparate social
energies, the drag king performances lose their primary emphasis and encounters become
dictated by the full range of social interactions supported between people and practices within
these venues. The “excesses of sociability” (Straw 2004, 412) detectable in the scene suggest
that Sydney’s drag king scene functions as a small world, rather than a performance culture
as conventionally understood.

**Conclusion**

Throughout my thesis I have used ‘drag king scene’ as a place-holder term for the wider
networked relationships that are galvanised in the vicinity of drag king events. I have argued
that, when applied to drag king events, the concept of scene designates “particular clusters of
social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which
circumscribe them” (Straw 2004, 412). Looking at how participants relate their everyday
experiences of the scene allowed me to review the potentially unlimited range of social,
sexual and spatial experiences that occur in connection to drag king events. This approach
mitigates the risk of assuming a core basis or commonality that might work to presume or
pre-define what counts as experiences of participation. Scene, then, offers an umbrella term
that stitches together seemingly diverse activities and supports analysis of multiple
components and processes.

At the same time, the concept of scene allows me to consider how existing networks are consolidated within drag king events. Despite the commitment to the scene borne from past attendance, which in some cases constituted a decade, participants would no longer go if drag king performances were not a part of the event. This is evident in Amy’s comment: “The only thing that would stop me going is if they stopped the drag kings”. Returning to my opening example, I suggest that part of Gerald’s discomfort in admitting his lack of knowledge around the phenomenon of drag kinging prior to his first show is evidence of the importance attributed to the performances as a means of justifying ancillary or supplementary forms of participation. Scene participation is made viable both practically and symbolically by the drag king performances that are ostensibly the key function of events. This suggests that wider social networks are understood by participants to be authorised and reanimated by virtue of comprising an audience for drag king performances. The spatial and temporal reach of the drag king events is cemented in association with the performances that give them their raison d’être. Earlier theorisations of drag king performances tended to accept this second-order rationalisation as a first-order political strategy, whereas I would emphasise that drag king events entrench and reanimate already established social itineraries of participants. As I will go on to elaborate in the next chapter, drag king events are continuous with everyday social experiences of my participants in manifold ways. The drag king scene is a small world brought into being by the routinised itineraries of its participants. What remains to be considered is how the connective sociality generated around drag king events support a “social imaginary” (Woo et. al. 2015, 289) that can outlast otherwise ephemeral social encounters.
Chapter Four: Social Imaginaries

“Like I want to grin the whole time and be like, ‘Isn’t this nice? Look at us all! Yay us!’” (Brooke).

“And it's totally this whole desire thing” (Eliza).

As described by my research participants in the previous chapter, Sydney’s drag king scene facilitated a diverse range of participation, including those at the mundane level of everyday life. At the same time, the epigraphs I have used to introduce this chapter suggest that scene experience came to mean much more than simply being there, echoing Straw’s (2002, 253) contention that scenes come to mean much more than the “busy fluidity of urban sociality”. In this chapter I investigate how the act of ‘being together’ in Sydney’s drag king scene connected participants to each other in an everyday way that simultaneously registers as a cultural phenomenon. Put another way, this chapter explores what Kathleen Stewart (2007, 21) calls “ordinary affects”, the everyday relations that “frame the importance of making implicit things matter”. As Straw (2015, 484) notes, an emphasis on relationality within cultural analysis can pull the concept of scene towards an interest in affect where scenes might be considered spaces for containing and stabilizing affectual relationships to cultural practices or forms, or for embedding such relationships in behavioral routines or ways of being together.

Stewart argues that ordinary life exerts pressures defined by a capacity to affect and be affected. Stewart’s work is associated with a more general “affective turn” (Clough and Halley 2007) in the humanities and social sciences. In this chapter, I utilise two dominant strands of affect theory in my analysis of Sydney’s drag king scene. The first uses affectus as derived from Baruch Spinoza’s Ethics (1677) where the mind’s power to think and the body’s
power to act corresponds with the power to affect and be affected. Gilles Delueze (1988) took up *affectus* as one of the modes by which bodies can be defined as an intensive state of becoming. A Spinozian-Deleuzian use of affect sees Sydney’s drag king scene in the productive transmission of force or intensity in the encounter between bodies. The second strand of affect theory looks to the work of Silvan Tomkins (1962) who reinstates the biological implications of affect in his concern with identifying discrete human affects—each with its own neurological profile and physiological responses—that play a role in the subsequent cognitive organisation of experience. According to Tomkins, the translation from bodily affect to emotional cognition orders experience into familiar patterns, or ‘affective scripts’, that direct ongoing responses to the world. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995, 34) take up Tomkins’ work to argue that affects operate as “the primary motivational system in human beings” and are crucial for social responsiveness. This second perspective suggests that bodily affects amplify the social experiences of drag king events. Taken together, these two strands of affect theory are useful for thinking about how Sydney’s drag king scene facilitates affective experiences that are both individually intimate and collectively social.

In this chapter, I explore the quality of investments that my research participants made in the drag king scene through the ways they laid claim to participation within it. For the purposes of this study, I consider investments to be affective relations of constantly negotiated interests within the wider process by which small worlds are enacted and substantiated. I demonstrate this process through two interrelated dimensions of affective engagement: relations between... 

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23 Baruch Spinoza is considered the source, either directly or indirectly, of most of the contemporary work in the field of affect studies (see Hardt 2007).

24 Tomkins lists interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, fear-terror, shame-humiliation, disgust-contempt, anger-rage and dissmell as primary bodily-based affects.
participants that have the capacity to coalesce into material form, and how those relations in turn organise alliances that bind people to the scene.

**Relations**

In its characterisation as a small world, Sydney’s drag king scene is first and foremost a social entity founded on relations of proximity. Participants in the group discussions articulated their experiences of drag king events in terms of the intensity of participation, relating the pleasure of being pressed up against one another in a small, dark space while all around women roared their approval for the drag king on stage. At an elementary level, this press of bodies was the material condition of ‘being together’ at drag king events. But in their recollection of these events, the discussants spoke of how that bodily condition coalesced into a singularity of experience that lingered beyond the moment.25 Above all, they were adamant that desire was so intensely felt at the time that it continued to permeate their subsequent encounters with the scene. One such example recounted was the crowded performance area, which facilitated the pleasures of touch. With bodies literally pressed upon other bodies in a confined space, Samantha described how “a lot of people cuddling, lots of people giving each other kisses, or giving each other, like, touching each other” contributed to more tactile encounters. The spatial dynamics of the room in which people were forced into close proximity with each other was often held as the justification or excuse for couples to openly display affection. With the often sexually explicit performances taking place on stage, the combined effect of tactile audience engagement produced a sexualised atmosphere, enhanced

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25 I use the term singularity throughout this chapter as loosely derived from Heidegger’s definition of singularity as a tendency, rather than a specificity or actuality. Probyn (1996, 13) uses the term singularity in reference to lesbian desire as what “emerges after we have enumerated our differences—moments and movements that establish contact across a geography of division”. A singularity of experience, then, is not sameness. Rather, it is the process towards attachment and belonging, where specificities we inhabit come together.
by the venue’s ready characterisation as a lesbian space. But precisely how drag king performances facilitated this experience was debated throughout the discussions.

Singularity of Desire

The first group discussed whether the feelings of desire generated in the scene were sustained through a performer’s engagement with the audience. Katie summed up the group’s preference for performers who “connect” with the audience, describing the “I’m looking at you” performance technique as essential for a successful connection. Leonie likewise reiterated the primacy of the performer-audience relation when she reminisced over a past performance, speaking of the bond between herself and performer Jayvante Swing:

I know that when he looks at me, that I feel really special, because he just looked at me. And you sing that live to me […] so I feel really special. And then that might make me go, ‘You know what, that king’s really hot!’

Leonie’s grammatical slide from the impersonal “he” to a personal “you” reveals her interpretation of this address as an interpersonal relation. This in turn made her “want to give a response” to the individual performer as one that acknowledged the performer as “hot”. This response signals how the relation between performer and audience operated as a circuit of feedback or, as Leonie characterised it, “It’s like a give-give sort of thing”. For these participants especially, drag king performances forged an individual connection between performer and audience generated by the perception of interpersonal desire.

However, members of the second group treated interpersonal desire as something that was not restricted to the performer-audience dynamic but potentially connected audience members with each other. Eliza, for example, claimed that “as an audience member, I have a much more vested interest in the rest of the audience”. By turning her attention to those
around her, not just the performer on the stage, Eliza was able to gauge their reaction. This allowed her to see desire manifest as a collective response. Eliza then re-characterised the connection the first group articulated as a “call from the performer” to “the lesbian audience who were like, ‘Yeah, I want you’. Or, ‘we want you’”. Similar to Leonie’s pronoun slide, Eliza’s movement from the singular to plural emphasises her perception of this response as a unified sentiment. Brooke, too, suggested that the personal address between performer and audience produced a shared force of desire:

That sometimes [this] really exciting thing of sexual energy for that performance or whatever can be really good, or it can feel like a ‘we’, or that we’re all engaged in some shared desiring thing.

For this group, a moment of collective desire is experienced that connects individuals to others, allowing participants to generalise the experience of desire.

At the same time participants recognised that any collective feeling of connection was not derived from a uniform expression of sexuality. In accounts provided by the group discussions and in private correspondence, participants variously used to the terms “lesbian”, “dyke”, “gay” and “queer” to refer the identities and practices that participation within the scene encompassed. The diversity of these terms suggest that drag king performances produce tensions between competing or contradictory forms of desire. Brooke explained:

Yeah, I'm always surprised by exactly what I can manage to find sexy when I'm at drag king shows, and it’s just like, all different kinds of things that I never... Like originally, the masculinity itself was amazing and then, but then, since then, all kinds of strange things I've found attractive just because someone's kinging.

This comment suggests that the collective address between performer and audience is not the result of an identical response to the performance content. Indeed, the performance can be
experienced by some as a negative address where, as Brooke went on, it can feel “sexually aggressive to some people”, “objectifying” or “a symptom of the glorifying of particular masculinities” depending on the night or performer. Nor is the collective address predicated on the assumption of the sexual orientation of either the lesbian/masculinised performer or audience member. In the third group, Cate and Holly mused over their mutual attraction to “butch or boyish women”, yet Cate was firm in qualifying that “I don’t get attracted at all to drag kings”. Cate was adamant that her enjoyment of drag king events was not based on attraction to the performers but rather to other investments amplified in their vicinity.

Holly and Cate were the only two research participants who were disparaging of drag kinging, a sentiment that stood out from the otherwise positive expressions voiced across the groups. Holly, for instance, didn’t “prioritise drag kings” because she didn’t think “generally they’re very good” while Cate was critical in her characterisation of the majority of performances as “karaoke in drag” and “lip-sync in drag”. But Holly and Cate’s self-selection as participants in my study suggests that even while critical of performances, the events themselves exercised a draw over them. The issue of bad or weak performances came up in the other group discussions, which indicates further contexts for the flexibility of feeling desire. For example, the first group had started by defining a bad performance as one where, as Leonie said, “you don’t feel that connection”. Katie elaborated that when the performance failed to secure a successful interpersonal bond, people “look for a connection with something else that’s going on in the room”. Otherwise, she suggested, the potential to participate as an audience at events is suspended when “you’re just going to sit there with nothing to do for three or four minutes”. So while this group initially posited the performer-audience relationship as the primary mode of interpersonal desire, their claim of looking for alternative connections amongst audience members contradicted the primacy of the performer
in maintaining that relation. Taken together, these accounts suggests that drag king performances occupy a dynamic position in relation to the perception of desire sustained within the scene.

Individual attempts to attribute how, or in relation to whom, desire might manifest suggests that while feelings of desire remain central to the experience of ‘being together’ those feelings are relatively untethered or unanchored within the scene. Certainly by these accounts, the drag kings themselves were not the phenomenon by which desire was singularly established. Just as entry to the scene was framed by wider social relations, expressions of contradictory or displaced desire likewise suggest that these scene-specific modes of relationality may result from a more complex response to the context in which the performance takes place. Standing in for a range of stimuli and response, this ambiguity would position performances at the dynamic juncture of interrelated components rather than the product or producer of those relations. Samantha summarised this flexibility when she said that perhaps performances just “catch us all in”. I interpret these expressions of desire as derivative of multiple modes of engagement made possible by the scene, however tenuous those connections might be. Moreover, the expansive nature of scene participation enables participants to claim a generalised perception of a collective experience of desire without demanding they account for precisely how it manifests within themselves.

**Affective Transmissions**

As much as the hot sweat, cold beer, pounding music and raucous audience appreciation are experienced sensually, so too was the sensation of togetherness articulated as a physiological phenomenon. Amy related this feeling to how she felt as a “happy little kid” in the playground, where she was “very hyper and [would] sit there bouncing”. Samantha felt
watching performances was erotic, using words such as “turned on”, “switched on” and “buzzing” to describe the experience. As such, attendance at events was considered an embodied form of participation, rather than a simple experience of ‘being there’. These physiological responses were described variously by participants as a form of contagion. Tomkins’ (1962, 296-297) work on affect is useful in conceiving of the bodily engagement with others being described by my participants where feelings are communicated through facial expression. Amy made this engagement clear:

If [other people are] enjoying it, you’re going to enjoy it, get along into […] their own little world of fun. […] If they’ve got a smile on their face, it’s going to inspire the smile on your face.

Clifton Evers’ (2006) extension of Tomkins’ argument in his work on surfing cultures is an example of how sensorial economies binds individuals as “bodies-in-relation”. In Evers’ (2006, 235) account of bodily interaction, a feeling of fear in one person when a new set of waves appear on the horizon can “leap from body to body”. The process by which feelings of excitement and pleasure was communicated from person to person is what Tomkins (1962, 297) refers to as social contagion. Following Tomkins’ argument, Anna Gibbs (2002, 339) contends that affective transmissions work as “the primary communicational medium for the circulation of ideas, attitudes and prescriptions for action”. Pleasure is communicated between individuals by their bodily comportment, which in turn directs how individuals relate pleasure to participation. Individuals need not like the performances themselves to get caught up in this affective rush. Indeed, the very process of describing this transmission had an immediate physical effect in the first discussion group: they all sat up, their gestures towards each other became more expansive as a shared feeling of excitement enlivened all those seated at the table.
The transmittable quality of affect is evident in what Adam Yuet Chau (2008, 490) terms “a rite of convergence” (rather than the more recognisable term “rite of passage”). Researching the “red-hot” sociality of religious activities of the temple dedicated to the Black Dragon King, Chau argues that active participation is as much the production, as it is the consumption, of charged sociality. In making this argument he employs Emile Durkheim’s 1965 study on the religiosity of Australian Aboriginal tribal gatherings. Described by Durkheim as “collective effervescence”, Chau emphasises how the massing of bodies converges in a form of intensive sociality. Citing Durkheim, Chau argues that the dispersed state of a group is “unremarkable” but when a group comes together “everything changes”, in part because the “very fact of the concentration acts as an exceptionally powerful stimulant” (Durkheim 1965, 246 cited in Chau 2008, 498). Chau demonstrates that this affect is not simply produced through a quantifiable increase in people at events. Crucially, the sensation of collective togetherness is the product of a highly specific, lived experience between people at events.

These observations confirm that there is a complex interplay between sociality and physiology that underpins scene participation. Teresa Brennan (2004, 3) makes this interplay clear in her argument that affect is “social in origin but biological and physical in effect”. For Brennan, affects are not biologically intrinsic to or wholly contained within the individual waiting to be ignited by a social event. Rather, they are material, tangible modes of socially-derived relationality that can be felt and taken on by others. Transferred to others, affects then feed back into the sense of self that is generated in these encounters. In much the same way as Leonie positioned herself within a directly organised “give-give” relationship with the performer, wider scene participation is also experienced as an affective force that grounds
one in relation to others. In effect, these affects organise diverse social relations into the sense of ‘being together’.

Brennan’s work is important in drawing attention to the environment in which this interplay takes place. As she writes in the preface to The Transmission of Affect, “Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere’?” Brennan (2004, 6) argues that it is through embodied responses that individuals understand themselves as socially related to others, an observation that runs counter to the assumed relation between individuals and environment. Certainly this is borne out by my participants’ reflections on the scene. As Amy made clear, “You become this massive crowd. It’s that one connection base, that one point in time when everyone is so into this”. Amy’s comment recalls in a vernacular register Brian Massumi’s (2002, 71) broader philosophical question, “Is it possible even to conceive of an individual outside of a society? Or a society without individuals?” Massumi disputes the idea that individuals and society are discrete entities that enter into extrinsic relation to one another. Rather, their relationship is characterised as a continual process of becoming and belonging or, more poetically phrased in his terms, in “becoming is belonging” (Massumi 2002, 76). That is, the environment is not constituted prior to the individual modes of participation that instantiate it. In my example, the environment produced by the drag king event secures an individual perception of desire as collectively experienced. This relation allows Amy to account for “everyone” in a way that elides the differences in individual responses to performances.
Atmospheric Attunements

The dual modes of productive and embodied affect work to enhance sensations that are otherwise experienced as ephemeral, generating a social atmosphere that is continually sought out by individuals who immerse themselves in the scene. The vibrancy and longevity of scenes are dependent on what Stewart (2010a, 2011a) has theorised as “atmospheric attunement”. Stewart argues that attunement is the process by which relations between experiences, bodies and arrangements are animated within everyday encounters at the level of atmosphere. Atmospheres, or what we think of as scenes, are “the direct materiality of people’s shared senses” (Stewart 2010a, 3). Brennan’s account of ‘environment’ is reworked by Stewart into a productive relation. The condition of ‘being together’ is first a social experience (as in how it felt in the scene) that is then bestowed a tangible form (as in how it felt as a scene). As one regular drag king aficionado described it, the charged atmosphere in those hot, crowded spaces was one where desire circulated with such force that “you can smell it in the air”. Put another way, Sydney’s drag scene is the process by which the singularity of individual desire is reworked into a collective socialised experience.

Crucially, this affective atmosphere is not an inert context in which people find themselves. It is better understood as a “force field” of lived experience that “pushes a present into a composition, an expressivity, the sense of potentiality and event” (Stewart 2011a, 452). This composition is evident in how my research participants characterised events as discrete social worlds, such as Amy’s wanting to be “part of a different world that you can just drown yourself into for that night”. Amy’s sentiment echoes Stewart’s claim that atmospheric attunement takes place within the everyday experience of a wider social context but is itself a generative of its own small world. These worlds, which Stewart also terms “matterings” and “worldings”, are the complex emerging events of everyday life that sustain their own unique
qualities, rhythms and forces. For Stewart (2010a, 4), this capacity manifests in the “sense that something is happening” and compels “an attachment to sensing out whatever it is”. Attunement, then, is an investment in sensing the ‘singularity of the situation’ of everyday relations and giving it form.

Framed by Stewart’s (2011a, 447) perspective, drag king events are “happenings” with an affective capacity that “does not yet have its form”. At the same time, the drag king scene is a small world constituted by the compulsion of repetitious participation that must add up to something. Stewart’s work reinforces my shift of emphasis from the spectacle of performances to the atmosphere of events. The concept of atmospheric attunement provides the bridge between the materiality and the potentiality of small worlds. Participants saw Sydney’s drag king scene as characterised by the experience of desire that might never be fully articulated and stabilised beyond its immediately felt impressions. At the same time, the group discussants confirmed that Sydney’s drag king scene is constituted as an intelligible cultural phenomenon by the perceived singularity of experience brought into being by the affective relations between people at events. If this were not the case, drag king events would be nothing more than a bar full of people drinking, talking and dancing while being provided with live entertainment in a social arrangement that has no manifest difference from any other scene in Sydney’s expansive night-time economy.

*Intimate Attunement*

If, as my research participants conveyed, desire is key to the social relations sustained by drag king events, what more can we make of the experience of ‘being-together’ in this or any other scene? More precisely, why does desire matter as a condition of participation? In reviewing the implications of desire as a collective endeavour, I turn to the work of Lauren
Berlant to engage with the possibilities of non-heterosexual modes of being in the production of the small world that is Sydney’s drag king scene. Intimacy, as Berlant (2000, 1) tells us in her introduction to a special journal issue on the subject, “involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared […] set within zones of familiarity and comfort”. Yet, as Berlant (2001, 1) goes on, “the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness”. For Berlant, public spheres are affective in that they attach people to each other, to institutions and to ideologies. But a public sphere can also be intimate when it “promises the sense of being loosely held in a social world” (Berlant 2009). Intimate publics thus links “the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective” (Berlant 2000, 3). Berlant’s movement between public spheres on one hand, and intimate publics on the other, accounts for how relations between people can facilitate an affective register of belonging that “produce the sense—if not the scene—of a more livable and intimate sociality” (Berlant 2009). Following Berlant, I suggest that what is central to expressions of desire asserted by my research participants is the desire for intimacy, the effect of which is a small world.

Participation in Sydney’s drag king scene is both an inward-facing orientation towards meaningful and intimate interpersonal relationships and an outward-facing demonstration of the affective register of collective desire. Accordingly, participants’ accounts demonstrate the desire to connect with others and the worlds brought into being through that connection. As Brooke qualified, “It’s not just the kings that are sexy – we all are” (personal communication 11 October 2012). In short, individual desire for intimacy is collectively productive, an affective encounter that organises experiences within the scene into ‘public intimacies’. The outward orientation returns us to the importance of specific lived experience between individuals. Taken together, the concepts of ‘public intimacy’ and ‘atmospheric attunement’
produce what I call an *intimate attunement*. That is, an attunement to the highly contextual intimacies of a specific social phenomenon.

With this idea in mind, I consider the particularity of wider social and sexual cultures circulating within and around drag king events. In order to do so, I offer three different examples recounted by participants of individualised investments in drag king events. In the first example, Robin read the masculinised practices and presentation on stage as reflective of her own gendered identity as an audience member. She suggested that the performances by drag kings reflected “how I perceive myself at that particular point” and were “an extension of my own subconscious mind”. Reading herself as a masculinised woman, drag kings were “a backup or validity” of her identity and watching performances allowed her to feel that a part of herself was “fulfilled”. In the second example, Leonie attested that she attended drag king shows because they were representative of a universal lesbian culture. Talking about the recent dominance of drag queens at the Sly Fox Hotel, she expressed disappointed that it lacked representation of “our side” on the stage, stating unequivocally that there was no “lesbian representation. There’s no girl representation”. In contrast to the first two examples, Brooke saw events’ representational capacity as deriving from “a broader sense of queer performances”. For her, the combination of kings and queens in a performance set constituted “a beautiful array of queerness” in “the context of the community spirit”. This suggests that Brooke saw drag king events as exercising a form of community ethos rather than having to reflect a balanced political representation. While participants used a variety of identity markers (such as “masculine”, “lesbian”, “queer” and so on) to distinguish between the specific constituency in which they saw themselves broadly engaged, these examples are alike insofar as they emphasise the capacity of drag king events to hold loosely aligned constituencies in something like a public sphere.
The drag king event’s representational fluidity allowed participants to put aside specific iterations of sexual identity within a cultural context generally affiliated with a lesbian demographic. Berlant and Warner (1998, 558) suggest that “we have developed relations and narratives that are only recognized as intimate in queer culture”, and I wish to extend this observation to the lesbian-inflected world generated around drag king events. The following exchange between Katie and Lisa echoes Berlant and Warner’s point when they imply that a successful drag king performance is inextricably caught up in the capacity for the scene to hold and transmit social knowledge:

Katie: I like it when there’s something like an in-joke about being a lesbian.

Lisa: The audience has to pay attention.

Katie: The audience has to be a part of it.

By drawing on memories and past personal experiences inherent in membership of lesbian cultures, drag king performance hold an appeal for people already participating in those cultures. The centrality of shared queer histories to the appeal of queer performances provides a useful entry point to considering how not just drag king performances, but also the physical sites in which they take place, become associated with historical practices that preceded them.

As I have argued, Sydney’s drag king scene can be understood as an “affective world” where the desire for intimacy encompasses a wider range of social aspirations and inclinations than those usually attributed to performances alone. While the terms ‘public sphere’, ‘intimate publics’ and ‘small worlds’ reference discrete theoretical entities, they are useful in combination to illustrate how relations of ‘being together’ in culturally specific ways produce symbolic and material movements between them. The shifts between the individual specificity of interpersonal desire on one hand, and the collective perception of desire on the
other, works to highlight the ever-shifting contours of what comes to be Sydney’s drag king scene. Indeed, the tenuousness with which discussants attempted to articulate desire derives from the possibility of multiple modes of engagement the scene offers its participants. Participation might then be better understood through its imbrication in wider imaginaries of lesbian social life of which sexual desire is considered an essential part. In short, participants’ sense of intimate potential within the drag king scene transforms into an attunement of the scene and the small world of lesbian social life of which it is but a temporary part.

Precarious Intimacies

Week after week, Queer Central drew women to the Sly Fox Hotel and the drag king performances it hosted. On a good night the combined effects produced what participants recognised as “the drag atmosphere”. This was recounted as one in which non-verbal interactions on the dance floor segued into conversations conducted outside, with the potential for a protracted engagement culminating in an offer to spend the night or even an enduring relationship that outlasts the ephemerality of the moment. In other accounts, kisses on the dance floor or deep and meaningful conversations over beers and cigarettes dissipated in the early morning light, leaving people wondering if they’d see that girl again and thereby pinning hopes to attending the next week’s event. Despite those varied interests in what the night could potentially return, all participants felt compelled to stay dancing and drinking until the night had turned to early morning and the cabs lined the street beside the venue to take exhausted, drunken women home.

As my participants described it, the expectation built up around a night’s potential could just as easily twist into dismay. Brooke described how routine disappointment occurred when the expectation of a good night failed and the not-so-routine did not manifest:
Like, if I’ve tricked myself into the idea that this is going to be a big party night for me and I’m going to go and have a great dancing night.

A bad night was variously characterised by the sparseness of the crowd, performances that didn’t “work” and nights that ended early. Above all, a bad night was one where that failed to live up to its potential: “the magic”, as Eliza put it, just didn’t happen. “Yeah”, Brooke elaborated, her tone ominous with warning, “No one’s going to pick up”. Women simply finish up their drinks and go home alone.

Paying attention to the potential of routine attendance in a scene reveals the way everyday sociality “engenders attachments or systems of investment in the unfolding of things” (Stewart 2007, 21). Drag king events hold in tension the anticipatory quality of the evening against the disappointed realisation of things not panning out. These are the intimate promises of engagement that the scene offers to its participants within the broader context of their everyday lives. But this is at best a precarious intimacy, a reference I take from the term precarity used by Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart more generally to index not merely the state or condition of precarious existence but existential and social conditions of a life that feel risky, uncertain and unstable (see also Butler 2003, Butler 2009). Desire that at first seemed bold and adaptable in the group descriptions also has a sense of fragility to it, as something that can be easily disrupted. Perhaps this precarity drove participants to demand acknowledgement of desire and its significance lest it somehow dissipate and along with it the justification for their ongoing attendance at drag king events. What matters, then, is how the scene can stabilise an essentially ephemeral desire as a quality associated with a durable small world.
Attachments

How, then, does attunement to the intimate potential of drag king events mitigate the sense of desire’s precarity that it simultaneously engenders? Straw points out that a certain kind of labour is required to produce the social cohesion of scenes with their shared associations to place and time and unified relations of purpose. In his formulation of ‘scene’, Straw cites Lawrence Grossberg’s point that scene-making involves an investment in the idea of a connective phenomenon between the diverse participants (Grossberg 1984 cited in Straw 1991, 374). In his original analysis, Grossberg, suggests that this connection is generated through a process of participation that simultaneously realises “affective alliances”. For Grossberg (1997, 31), affective alliances are

an organization of concrete material practices and events, cultural forms, and social experience that both opens up and structures the space of our affective investments in the world. Affective alliances are established through participation that aligns individuals to the scene, which in turn organises the scene as a small world. This process simultaneously organises relations between the sociality of drag king events and the shared perception of lesbian desire. Adding Grossberg’s notion of ‘affective alliances’ to my formulation of ‘intimate attunement’ allows us to see how participants secure an attachment to the scene.

Affective Alliances

In my analysis of my research participants’ discussion of their experience of the drag king scene, I have traced how affective alliances produce the sense of “one of us” or ‘we’ that is essential to the substantiation of a small world. This sense was predicated on regular attendance, an easy visible indicator of recognisable participation that produced congeniality with others in the scene. Participants recounted how non-verbal gestures, such as a head-nod
from across the room or a welcoming smile upon arrival, were greetings that demonstrated recognition of another’s regularity. But, as Thornton (1996, 22) notes of club cultures, the limited access to knowledge about scene events works to deliver “pre-sorted and pre-selected” crowds to venues, in effect enhancing its characterisation as a certain kind of place. Gillianne suggested that people knew of drag king shows’ characterisation as lesbian events, based on the fact that “most people wouldn't go to a queer venue unless they know what it is, you know?” And if other people did walk in by accident, the implication is that they would know they were out of place. Participants often used a mocking tone to describe the “lost little sheep” who wandered into drag king events and then realised they didn’t belong.

Yet as previously described, the mass of women making their way up to and milling around drag king venues often served as a visible indicator to outsiders that ‘something’ was going on. Like any urban movement that sees people flock to a place because of its evident popularity, there is often outsider interest in finding out what drew such masses of women to venues week after week. If, as Thornton (1996, 22) further suggests, access to information failed to segregate the crowd, door policies were a last resort. As drag king events were conducted in commercial establishments in Sydney, the venue and its patrons were protected in part by legally required security. Bouncers at the door can restrict admission to those who they don’t recognise by citing excessive drunkenness or any other legal excuse to deny admittance. They also circulated inside the venues to prevent harassment or to break up fights.

Brooke recounted an instance when she and her sister brought their little brother along one night, characterising him in jest as a “poor little straight guy” who “often feels left out”.

Brooke recounted the subsequent exchange between the bouncers and her brother at the door:
The bouncers stopped them and were like, 'Do you know what the night is tonight?'

[…] And the bouncer said, 'Well that's fine and I'm going let you go in, but if anyone says anything, that you've been hassling them, or if anyone has a problem with you at all, I'm not even going to listen to your side of the story. You're just going to have to leave'.

By this account, the bouncers were seen to engage in overt policing and protection of lesbian patrons. For Grossberg (1984, 228), affective alliances are mapped out by the scene “apparatus” (of which bouncers can be considered a part) based on the organisation of “affective investments”. In the above case, the bouncer could be perceived to be acting in mutual interests in keeping others out of the venues, but which could be as simple as aiming to minimise potential conflict and making his job easier. Yet, this individualised investment aligned him to “us” in protecting lesbian patrons from harassment.

Strategies in maintaining these “affective alliances” could easily twist into negative exclusionary practices predicated on perceived difference. The risk, of course, was that gay men or ‘femme’-presenting women might be misread as not belonging and be subject to the same patrolling scrutiny. As Brooke suggested:

I guess a lot of my history with the Sly involved some […] more femme friends feeling really isolated and rejected by the space and like, people look at them as if they shouldn’t be there.

Therefore, the intimate attunement of Sydney’s drag king events is implicated in how participants carefully managed their appearance to give the impression of an affective alliance through which the overall atmosphere of events was maintained. In a confessional tone, Holly said that being an active participant at drag king events meant “dressing a certain way”. Recognising that “there’s a particular kind of woman who goes to” drag king events,
Holly suggested that “if I go in my normal clothes, I don’t fit in”. Instead, she makes “a point of dressing more conservatively dykey” so that “the regulars […] identify me that way”. As such, the enactment of affective alliances was as much about “the way that you present”, which dictates how “people seem to respond to you in that space”, as Brooke said. Quite a few of the participants recounted instances where they were misrecognised because of their “non-dykey” haircut or that they were “wearing dresses”. This misrecognition, they suggested, was because patrons perceived stylistic presentation as characteristic of a more general lesbian culture.

As Leonie suggested, “lesbians see a certain thing as being lesbian”. Participants’ concern in looking the part is entangled in a more crucial investment in the importance of intelligible stylistics in the intimacy of lesbian sociality. This links scene participation with Goffman’s notion of “impression management” (1956, 1959) in which individuals seek and obtain information about one another based on appearances within any social interaction. Using the analogy of the stage, Goffman (1959, 251) suggests that the process of gaining impressions of one another involves the self as both “performer” and “character”. Rather than an individual allowing an impression of themselves as an incidental by-product of being observed, they can “reorient their frames of reference and devote their efforts to the creation of desired impressions” (Goffman 1959, 250). For instance, Eliza argued that attending drag king events “was totally about dressing up, being queer or being lesbians”. Taken together, these comments suggest that participants performed themselves as lesbians, recognising this representation as the quality by which alliances were made and stabilised. Structured by the wider conditions of visible lesbian cultures, the emphasis was on ‘who’ as much as ‘how’ you look to others. Alongside bouncers, stylistic strategies and people’s response to personal presentation were part of the apparatus that worked to maintain the affective alliances.
between participants that give the atmosphere of social cohesion to the scene.

*Affective Differences*

However, it is not simply relations of social belonging and cohesion that gives the scene its culturally intelligible form. I could similarly interpret the gate-keeping role of the bouncer as part of the apparatus that draws the line between “us and “them”. Participants use the bouncers as part of the process by which they inscribe a boundary between their world and the outside world. “Affective differences”, according to Grossberg (1984, 227), are the product of the constant inscription of borders on which affective alliances depend for their effectiveness. Of course, the demarcation between participants and outsiders is a common feature in any scene or subcultural formation, such as the differences maintained between “clubbers” and “mainstreamers” (Thornton 1996), or between “goths” and “trendies” (Hodkinson 2002). In my participants’ accounts of the Sydney drag king scene, external and internal gate-keeping involved the demarcation between gay-, lesbian- and queer-identified, and heterosexual others. Like all binary formulations, the affective alliance “one of us” simultaneously implies difference from “them”, collapsing any further differences into a simple distinction between “us” and “straight” people.

Grossberg’s point is borne out by the fact that, despite the efficacy of bouncers and door-policies operating at the venues that hosted drag king events, participants were adamant that danger was present in the figure of the “straight man”. All participants suggested that unaccompanied heterosexual men were unwelcome at events, with participants using words like “threatening” and “unsafe” to characterise their presence. By far the majority of participants saw straight men as sexually predatory, connecting male heterosexuality to sexual menace. As Holly suggested:
There've been a lot of guys who don't seem to be with dykes and it's like, 'Oh my god! Do you not know this is a queer venue? Are you going to start picking up? Are you going to start hitting on me and being offensive?' I don't want to deal with this shit! However, the concerns voiced by my participants are in contradiction to much of the empirical work conducted in gay spaces (see Casey 2004 for a review of this literature). These studies found that heterosexual men are less likely to access gay spaces than heterosexual women, possibly reflecting their limited need of ‘safe spaces’ and their lack of desire to consume lesbian and gay venues, lifestyles and brands. Over the course of my five-year research engagement with the drag king scene, I never witnessed overt conflict between predatory straight men and lesbian patrons in venues. In fact, any encounter between the two was considered more a case of mild annoyance or mistaken identity in that, as Lisa recalled, “you get random people [who] are so drunk that they don’t realise [the event] is gay”. This suggests to me that the symbolism of the straight man operated in excess of the disruption any individual man might cause. This observation is key to understanding how “affective differences” enhance the social imaginary of a scene built on tightly compressed “affective alliances”.

As I documented earlier, the minimal infrastructure reflected in the Sydney drag king scene highlights its commercial precarity in that there was no dedicated space allocated to drag king performances. Combined with the quick turnover of event promoters and venues, this lent an air of unreliability to the scene (which, as I’ve suggested, is not inconsistent with the longer history of lesbian spatial tenancy). But, as I argued in the last chapter, any space can become “momentarily sexed” (Probyn 1995) by the relational movements of lesbians. The perception of precarious temporality is emphasised in how events became “our spaces”, “our venues” through a process of belonging where participants construct “affective differences” over
territory. Events became characterised as lesbian sites, which meant everywhere else was necessarily categorised as straight. As Ruth demonstrated in an imagined argument with heterosexual patrons, maintaining a venue’s characterisation as lesbian is essential “because you've got the whole of the city and we've got a couple of venues”. Yet, the characterisation of a venue as lesbian was often conflated with the political legacy of ‘safe spaces’. Katie made this conflation evident when she suggested Sydney’s drag king scene was an investment in “a sense of you are here in a safe queer space”. Ruth and Katie’s comments coincide with the outcome of empirical studies that emphasise the perception of safety that ‘women only’ spaces offer lesbian populations to mitigate the threat of homophobic violence perceived in mixed or heterosexual spaces (see Valentine 1993).

It seemed to me, however, that the perceived safety of drag king venues was not about these women’s capacity to engage in same-sex practices protected from the threat of homophobic violence. Rather, the unspoken assumption behind the fears explicitly expressed by my research participants was that, regardless of any actual threat of violence, the entry of straight men into these spaces would render those venues ‘straight’. My participants’ unspoken fears are indeed confirmed by research that has documented the continuum between heterosexual access to lesbian spaces and heterosexual appropriation (Casey 2004). For instance, as Stephen Whittle (1994) points out in his study of the gentrification of Manchester, when an urban area’s night-time economy evolves, the desire to consume the ‘next’ place may increasingly override any prior sexual characterisation of a venue and its patrons. As such, Chatterton and Hollands (2003, 169) contend that gay spaces can be perceived as “too straight as the heterosexual population rush to join the fun”. The figure of the straight man, then, operates as a threat to those sites that have the potential to sustain non-heterosexual forms of collective intimacy. These comments concentrate the threat of territorial takeover on
heterosexual men despite the fact that gentrification or subcultural absorption by the mainstream is rarely so gender-specific, and indeed empirical evidence suggests that heterosexual women poses more of a threat to gay spaces. This suggests to me that the ‘safe spaces’ the drag king scene represents are gendered so that anxieties can only be attached to the straight man, and consequently the need for protection from him, in the form of an affective difference.

Especially for those participants who classified themselves as long-term members of the scene, the affective difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ harnessed itself to a history of gender politics. This meant that “finding a specifically queer or lesbian space” was considered by Eliza a “feminist issue”. Participants’ comments mirror Kennedy and Davis’s (1994, 81) broader argument that social practices within lesbian bars carved out by working-class lesbians in Buffalo in the 1930s and 1940s manifested a strong sense of common culture. In paying attention to the participants’ narratives, it is clear that the Sydney drag king scene served a similar fashion by instituting a common culture in the networks that intersect within it. This echoes Straw’s (1991, 373) contention that a scene gains its intelligibility when it is recognised as a site in which contemporary social activities takes place in association with a heritage of practice. The values of contemporary scenes are transplanted through political temporalities in which forms of recognition create a sense of bounded cultural and social space. The connection between the pursuit of interests in the present and the historical trajectory from which those practices derive instils a sense of collective affective purpose (Straw 1991, 373). Without this political legacy, there would be no capacity to maintain the characterisation of certain spaces as lesbian. Thus, these contemporary comments about safe spaces are instructive in how alliances and differences pivot on the imagined space of the scene against a meaningful historical backdrop.
However temporary as they might prove to be, drag king events always involve a process of site-marking. It is hardly surprising, then, that the potential threat implied in straight men’s presence was recounted as a war over territory. Robin suggested it was a continuation of a “sort of small war going on for the territory that goes on in these bars” while Lisa suggested that “the straight guys who come in” are “a bit threatening in our area” because it feels to her like “they’re trying to take over”. The perception of lesbian spaces as hard-won has historically created the consciousness necessary for defending those spaces (Kennedy and Davis 1998, 81). With the stakes of safe spaces so high for participants, they felt compelled to act if straight men entered a drag king venue. Robin saw her role as safeguarding this space. “Like, if I see any straight men in there”, she said with a raised voice to impress upon us how strongly she felt, “I’ll watch them like hawks because I don’t want any of them taking advantage, and I feel like it’s my responsibility”. These spatial politics were so engrained that animosity was expressed towards even tangential male figures. Robin extended her exclusionary stance as she grew more incensed at any sense of spatial appropriation, stating “I don't like sharing with drag queens. I think they've got enough space”. Such a stance echoes the separatist impulse long associated with lesbian feminist histories. But it might also point to how mainstream drag queen performances have often provided straight people with an opportunity to participate in sexual subcultures from the safety of their position in the audience (Newton 1972). However, it is impossible to separate Robin’s protective stance from her expression of butch or masculinised lesbian identity. “This is our space. These are our people. These are our women”, Robin asserted dramatically, revealing how, for her, protectiveness and possessiveness went hand in hand.

Yet other participants who admitted to “new” or “emerging” association with the scene echoed these territorial claims with the same level of passion as Robin. Expressions of
localism (Evers 2004, Evers 2008) solidified participants’ characterisation of space whether or not they were new or veterans to the scene, as in Amy’s proclamation: “That’s my local club!” Localism in newer participants likewise compelled suspicion of those who don’t look like they belong as Samantha made clear:

If I walked in and saw a group of people that didn’t fit, fuck I’d be curious. I’d be like, ‘what are you doing here’?

There is a connection between how participants perceived the threat of the straight man as a threat to other processes of recognition and validation of lesbian space.

Affective Identities

If the ‘straight man’ is a product of affective differences imagined as a disruption to the potential for lesbian intimacies, then the sense of a scene is stabilised when participants articulate an attachment to preserving the lesbian characterisation of spaces. The link between the affective sociality of a scene and the space with which a scene is associated is evident in how participants’ articulation of desire went hand in hand with their proprietary and protectionist stance on scene territory. This is evident in Robin and Brooke’s contrasting accounts of “sleaze”, which they interpret as forms of “sexual aggressiveness” between same-sex attracted women at events. “Aggression?” Robin challenged Brooke when she complained that the scene could be experienced as “sleazy”. “You haven't seen any kind of aggression!” she went on, dismissing Brooke’s more contemporary experience as perhaps justified by their ten-year age gap. Robin’s earlier participation in sexualised lesbian subcultures in the 1980s lent her the authority to adjudicate expressions of physical aggression:

If you went around in the 80s and you were coming out [then this is different to] I think […] the late 90s and the early 2000s [which were] the softest part of our queer
community. It's all just so gentle now and [has] none of the fights and full-on brawls of the 80s. I've heard some full on stories.

For Robin, recognising the sleaze of lesbian spaces was concomitant with acknowledging the sexualised nature of the space:

I think it’s more about […] how long they’ve been out for, how long they’ve been used to the culture of the community itself. So it depends on whether or not they actually walk through the door and go, ‘this is my scene' or they don't.

However, I don’t see Brooke and Robin’s disagreement as solely the product of generational perspectives or experiences. As Grossberg (1997, 14) makes clear, scenes becomes the “crucial sites of both the appeal to authenticity and the construction of authority”. Here, Robin used the authority bestowed by her longer participation in the scene to mitigate the potentially destabilising effect of sexual aggression. I read these exchanges as a product of the social imaginary of the scene in which lesbian sexuality serves as, on one hand, a site in which diverse interests can be momentarily anchored and, on the other, justification for the ongoing perception of the lesbian bar as under threat from outsiders. This sense of precarity allows participants to put aside inconsistent or contradictory desires as well as the dubious reality of straight men picking fights at drag king events in order to bring to bear collective alliances in maintaining the scene. Tensions that exist within the scene, such as those dramas discussed earlier, are minimised by displacing hostility onto the symbolic straight man. For instance, the “meat market vibe” generated as part of the sexualised conduct between participants at events that Holly and Brooke were so concerned about is pinned on the

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26 Interesting, the above exchange followed not long after an incident between Brooke and Robin that highlighted potential differences in education between the two. Talking about performativity and other theories, Robin interrupted Brooke to mock, “Yeah, your gender studies career”. This gestures at the implications of gender, race, class and other intersectional concerns that feed into the development and maintenance of any affective alliance.
straight man within events. This allows participants to see him as the threat to the scene’s stability at the same time he underscores the sexual dimensions of events.

At the same time, presumptions of sexuality and identity made of heterosexual otherness are actively resisted by some within the scene. “I hate that question where people are like, ‘so what are you?’”, Cate claimed with no apparent sense of irony, “And it's like, 'I don't really know you. Do I have to define who I am to you?’” Participants consistently insisted on their own internal differentiation while at the same time denying that differentiation to outsiders. Such differentiation is consistent with other empirical studies that found participants tended to assert their individuality over collective conformity despite their apparent affiliations (Thornton 1996, Muggleton 2000). Yet assertions of individuality are not always contradictory to group identification or consciousness. For instance, in her study of dance cultures, Thornton found that participants are reluctant to classify their own crowd while eagerly identifying others as those who don’t belong. Muggleton (2000, 59-60; original emphasis) also suggests that the promotion of “diverse unity” in subcultures is based on the “almost immediate recognition of the negative, sectionalist implications of being involved in too specific a conception of the group”. Therefore, what Grossberg (1984, 235) calls the “politics” of scenes is not so much acceptance of a common identity but rather the “constant struggle against such identities […] even as it creates and politicizes them”. These structures of disavowal are exemplified by Robin’s assertion “I don’t choose a scene. I don’t care”. This allows scenes to retain their internal heterogeneity while participants while sustain an affective difference from non-participants (Grossberg 1984, 233).

Grossberg’s point about the politicisation of identity returns me to Berlant’s formation of intimate publics. Lesbian identity is broadly conceived in the connection between the
sociality of drag king events and its potential for collective intimacy. In *Heroic Desire* (1998), Sally Munt traces how being a lesbian is both an ontological statement of insurgency and an enactment of desire. By linking practice with identity, participants used pronouncements of desire to signal the non-normative sexuality that marked them as distinct from heterosexuals. As Munt (1998, 4) identifies, being a lesbian serves as “a radical emplacement in a culture of effacement”. This is a proclamation of a place in a world that has historically been the source of erasure for some. Of course, my participants’ contemporary experiences were hardly comparable to say, Kennedy and Davis’s depictions of lesbian bar culture and the escalation of violence against lesbians by straight men in the 1950s. But, just as the “participation in physical violence had significant implications for the development of lesbian community” and “engendered feelings of lesbian solidarity” then (Kennedy and Davis 1994, 92), the imagined precarity of this space generates a collective sense of a performative lesbian identity. Immediately after rejecting the idea that she had to “choose a scene”, Robin asserted the legitimacy of claiming a lesbian identity:

> You know, say they want to call me a lesbian? Lesbian’s a power word. It’s like, everyone walks around going, ‘There’s no labels anymore’. It’s, like, there are fucking labels. Labels are actually power, so you can call yourself something, that’s what you are, you know?

The way Robin articulated her attachment to the word ‘lesbian’ is representative of how she saw herself as dual outlaw/hero figure in an otherwise hostile world.

On the whole, participants’ comments tended to echo broader debates around the threat of the term ‘queer’ to ‘lesbian’ recognition (Case 1997, Falderman 1997, Jeffreys 2003, see also Nash and Bain 2007 for a nuanced discussion of these issues). I found this was true even of Brooke and Holly, who consistently referred to themselves as ‘queer’ rather than lesbian. For
instance, Brooke equated her experience of same-sex desire as one of the modes by which affective alliances were linked to her queer identity:

Like I think that [if] there's some desire here, […] it signals your belonging in the space but also yeah, I guess the potential of you to be a desiring queer kid.

Holly was the sole dissenting voice of the thirteen participants, suggesting that “me and most of the group split” on the issue of affiliation because “my community is more the queer community as opposed to the gay community”. “I don’t identify with them at all”, she said of drag kings, because she considered them more likely to be in “a dyke bar”. Yet Holly also claimed that “it's just a part of the queer culture for me, being at events and someone being in drag and performing”. Rather than being an exclusive property to the “gay community”, drag king events were synonymous with what she considered queer culture’s capacity to support wider cultural engagements. While this contradiction cannot be wholly resolved, I suggest that it might be a productive tension within the scene. In justifying her attendance at drag king events, Holly claimed that her support of “women performances” overrides her dislike of the practice because “the queer/gay scene is dominated by men and drag queens”. Holly’s motivation was prompted by an obligation to support women in the performance arts, regardless of the context in which it took place. Rather than fracturing the sense of social cohesion within the scene, Holly’s justification reinforces the scene’s capacity to generate an inclusive social imaginary.

Munt (1988, 171) argues that “gays and lesbians still wish to protect ‘their’ space of homosexuality”. Space comes to mean so much in terms of how these participants envision the symbolic outcome of ‘being together’, so much so that a longer history of identity politics is made to play out in a small square meterage. The affective alliances put in place to protect the scene were dependent on preserving that affective difference between participants and
outsiders. The recourse to lesbian identity as both outlawed and heroic is a response to the precarity that characterises the scene. Moreover, valorising a lesbian identity in this way has the ancillary effect of supporting tolerance for internal tensions and contradictions in the face of the external threat posed by either homophobia or heterosexual takeover.

**Conclusion**

Stewart’s (2007, 5) ethnographic approach to locating “pressure points and forms of attention and attachment” in the mundane experience and “contact zones” of everyday life has guided this chapter. In her own work Stewart (2007, 4-5) presents “an assemblage of disparate scenes” that build an “idiosyncratic map of connections between a series of singularities”. If, as Stewart (2010b, 340) suggests, “affect is the commonplace, labor-intensive process of sensing modes of living as they come into being”, then the mundane acts of everyday sociality are “the rhythms of the present as a compositional event—one already weighted with the buzz of atmospheric fill”. Keeping this in mind, I suggest that the articulations of desire recounted by my research participants have two functions. First, desire is used to indicate the presence of a same-sex eroticism that is characteristic of lesbian cultures. Second, desire becomes the platform on which ‘being together’ is enacted as a phenomenon that matters. Moreover, the two functions of desire cannot be disentangled from the other. Participants’ affective investment in desire works to bind the social imaginary of Sydney’s drag king scene together and keep it together long after the event has passed. Specifically, the elaboration of a scene identity is the product of how the boundaries of a scene are actively shaped by the convergence of diverse cultural interests, tastes and affiliations, at the same time as serving as the basis for its self-perpetuation (Straw 2015, 480).
According to Stewart (2007, 2), the intensive and embodied dimensions of everyday sociality produce the sense that *this matters* “in forms of persuasion, contagion and compulsion”. At the same time, attunement to the precarity of a scene raises the stakes of investments. But as Stewart (2011b) points out, sometimes precarity is not “metaculturally marked” and instead takes the form of a “darkening atmosphere”. As she describes it, there is an almost imperceptible sense that something grasped in an instant can slide out of being in that next moment. Historically, precarity characterises lesbian sociality, especially where a lack of commercial infrastructure in lesbian venues has seen events surface in short-lived bouts. In comparison, the relative longevity of *Queer Central* at the Sly Fox Hotel is simultaneously a cause for celebration and a prompt to consider the inevitability of it to succumb to hostile economic conditions. Sydney’s drag king scene takes its form as a small world due to these conditions of precarity. Like affect, the sense of precarity does something: it can make attachments to things matter. There is value, then, in considering the connection between different critical literatures on the composition of a scene with the public feelings it can engender. Bringing together the theoretical tradition of scene studies with recent work on the affective potentialities of the everyday, I argue that the material condition of ‘being together’ keeps the precarious ephemerality of lesbian sociality in balance.
Passing: The Ephemerality of the Scene
Chapter Five: Scene Stories

“And actually, this opportunity to think and talk about drag kings, I find myself being able to talk about myself as a performer and a lesbian performer” (Eliza).

In recent years Newtown has been gentrified to the point where its once-thriving live-entertainment culture is now under pressure. A succession of million-dollar developments has steadily transformed formerly iconic local public houses into themed gastro-pubs that, combined with the trendy fusion-food outlets that line the main drags of King Street and Enmore Road, attract increasingly large numbers of non-residents to the area. These developments have arguably refocussed the direction of the area’s commercial sustainability. In September 2012 the Sly Fox Hotel ceased hosting weekly drag king performances. According to the venue’s manager (personal communication, 9 November 2012), increased competition from newly established club-style events (such as Birdcage, hosted by Zanzibar Hotel approximately 500 metres away) meant that the amount spent at the bar was insufficient to cover the fees paid out to the performers. In 2014, the Sly Fox Hotel closed its doors and ceased all operations. After a prolonged closure and change of ownership, the hotel is now operating again but while lesbian-targeted nights have been re-established, at the time of writing drag king performances do not feature in the weekly line-up of entertainment.

Queer Central’s diminished popularity is mirrored in the broader decline of drag king events elsewhere in Sydney across the same period of time. Performance duo and event managers Fancy Piece ceased running their monthly event The Pussycat Club in September 2011 due to a dispute with venue management at the height of the event’s popularity (Sim, personal communication 31 March 2015). Drag king promoter Nash Hill announced that Kaleidoscope
of Kings, a drag king cabaret-style show on 11 October 2012, would be her last production due to her declining health. While these two occurrences bear no relation to the gentrification of the area, it is nonetheless the case that in a comparatively short time after Queer Central’s cessation drag king performances were no longer taking place in Sydney. It would be difficult to pinpoint a single explanation or common source behind the scene’s demise, though it is clear that a combination of internal and external factors made the scene unsustainable in the current cultural economy.

In the previous chapters, I moved from analysing drag king events as a small world to considering their function as a social imaginary, a shift that captures the dual dimensions of the scene as an intelligible cultural phenomenon. I now consider how those analytical conclusions intersect with my methodological approach. The opening epigraph underscores the value that many of my research participants placed in the opportunity to talk about their experiences of the scene. In this chapter, I approach the material provided by my participants not as a resource to be mined for data but as a product of a narrative process. First, I consider the relationship between feelings and consciousness activated by storytelling. Second, I analyse the interactional structures of stories that invite discursive contestation or consensual agreement. Third, I demonstrate the role of sensory detail in socially substantiating recollections of the scene. By theorising the process of narration, I can better specify the complex temporal conditions through which the scene is experienced.

**Structures of Feeling**

When asked about their recollections of the scene, participants often struggled to articulate their memories of events in the form of first-person testimony. For instance, when describing a ‘good night’, Robin concluded that she doesn’t “often remember what it is I'm
remembering”. Instead, she talked about her impressions as a “feeling”, or more precisely, “the impression of feeling that thing”, rather than an account of what she precisely saw or did. I foreground Robin’s response as it reflects the general way that participants concentrated their recollections of drag king events into intensely felt impressions. The “feelings” and “impressions” articulated within the group discussions corresponded to the same strongly asserted but tenuously connected perceptions of desire spoken of the scene. Rather than moments of lived experience being recovered with ease, participants often articulated the difficulty they had in accessing conscious memories of the scene.

Rather than thinking of this difficulty as a failure of memory, Raymond Williams’ concept of ‘structures of feeling’ (1977) offers a way of understanding the often inexpressible nature of scene impressions. Williams (1977, 128) claims that in most description and analysis cultural phenomena are habitually expressed in the past tense where social experience is taken as finished and finite. Only after experience has been rendered “articulate and explicit” are social forms available for objective thought and analysis (Williams 1977, 130). However, Williams’ (1977, 131) point is that such expressions reduce the social to a fixed form of ‘consciousness’ that recognises only “what it is thought is being lived”. This limited conceptualisation of social experience cannot accommodate unfinished experience not yet available for cognition, such as those impressions my participants struggled to express.

Experience as a formative process falls outside of the parameters of formally held or systematic thought. Williams (1977, 131) suggests that there is a distinction between “practical consciousness” that operates in embryonic phases and the “fully articulate and defined exchange” more commonly recognised as social consciousness. Practical consciousness is a social formation that is not yet recognised as ‘the social’, but exists at the
edge of “semantic availability” awaiting retrospective recognition (Williams 1977, 134).

Structures of feeling, in Williams’ classic formulation, define a social experience that is still in process: “not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (Williams 1997, 132). The experience of what Williams expresses as “an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency” (1977, 130) is evident in the inability or reluctance of my participants to describe precisely what constitutes a good night. This reluctance perhaps reflects the tension between participants’ emerging “practical consciousness” and their subsequent interpretation of it as a form of “social consciousness”. Yet, it also suggests their resistance to defining their experience as a finalised social moment. Considering Robin’s difficulty in describing good nights within this context, I speculate that her experience of the drag king scene was not yet complete, but remains an ambiguous configuration of thoughts that precedes articulation in the past tense associated with critical cognition.

Eliza also used phrasing that related to the felt impressions the scene left on her. She specified that a ‘good night’ was one where she would “come home and think about it all the time”, by which she meant not only performances but also social interactions. For her, the evening was also “about the people I’ve talked to; it’s all very – for me – really a social event as well”. Eliza’s comments highlight that there was a reflexive process involved in rendering those impressions retrospectively significant. This perhaps corresponds to Williams’ (1977, 129) theorisation of emergent social experience and the drive for its “completion”. In my sample, emerging social consciousness was apparent in how each participant utilised social interactions to “process” their feelings about an event. For instance, all participants discussed how they would talk about the events in order to make sense of what they had experienced. For Holly, a good performance prompted discussion “with friends from that night or the next day” and Samantha likewise confirmed that she would do the same if “something stood out”
over the course of the evening. These and other participants sought out friends present at particular events in order to reflect on the feelings or impressions generated around them. In this way participants’ individualised reflections and disparate social experiences were retrospectively and collectively rendered into social consciousness after the event that prompted them.

In his take up of Williams’ later work, *Politics and Letters*, Lawrence Grossberg (2010, 317) contends that structures of feeling concerned with the “emergent” can be understood as the “surplus” or “excess” that exists between discursive production and its final signification. Grossberg is interested in how these structures of feelings provide an opportunity to work with additional discursive material that remains beyond cognition but is nevertheless lived. This suggests to me that there is a need to attend to how collective reflection reworks and reorders intimate feelings into recognisable social experience, including, as in my sample, the consciousness of lesbian social life.

*Sociology of Stories*

To explore the connection between social experience and its articulation, I draw broadly on the sociology of stories. Kenneth Plummer’s *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995), which originally started as an empirical study of sexual diversity, is particularly useful in its analysis of structures of narration. “Story telling”, Plummer (1995, 20) claims, “can be placed at the heart of our symbolic interactions”. Using a symbolic interactionist frame, Plummer argues that storytelling can be seen to comprise joint actions—called “story actions”—that are social experiences in and of themselves. Such social story actions are evident in the way my participants sought out others within the drag king scene to “process” their experiences. Furthermore, the meanings generated around scene experience relied on a shared social
context of familiarity. That shared context allowed participants to use generalised terms like “cool”, “hot” or “magic” to indicate general agreement about an impressionable experience that could not be articulated in more concrete terms, or at least not at that moment. According to Plummer (1995, 17; original emphasis), this order of discursive place-holding “sees stories as social actions embedded in social worlds”. This further suggests that the movement between individual feelings and group consciousness identified by Williams may take place within the inherently social process of storytelling.

Plummer’s insistence on reviewing the conditions of narration as well as its content has been take up in those gay and lesbian studies that broadly work within the genre of oral history. For instance, in Same Sex Intimacies (2001), Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan conclude that it is through “the stories we tell each other” that meaning is given to everyday intimate experiences. In their study of non-heterosexual families, storytelling emerged as a valuable process of reflection and legitimisation of the lifestyle choices engaged by their research participants. Accordingly, these authors underscore what Plummer terms the “pragmatic connection” (1995, 172) that stories provide between individual lives and social order. In addition, their qualitative study extends Plummer’s notion of pragmatic connection into something that is constantly being reworked. Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001, 6) argue that the narratives offered to them through in-depth interviews and group discussions provided important evidence for the development of new narratives through which everyday experience is being reordered and new meanings emerge.

Accordingly, their emphasis is on the process by which individuals negotiate narratives to revise their everyday experiences. This approach suggests that stories are never autonomously narrated reflections of a lived experience but are rather a dynamic process that
allows new meanings to emerge. The interactionist process of narration—of being asked questions, of having responses supported or contradicted by others—actively shapes the story and, crucially, the interpretation of the social experience itself. This recognition requires less focus on analysing stories for their ‘truth’ or ‘meaning’ than analysing stories in the interactive context of their telling. Understanding storytelling as a process, rather than a singular discursive event, offers a theoretical context to explore the process by which social feelings that precede articulation nonetheless the opportunity to emerge in social context.

**Narrative Structure**

A sociological approach to stories that includes attention to the conditions of their telling has led me to concentrate on the social dynamics of the group discussions. As participants recounted their experiences at previous drag king events, they were sorting through and making sense of what they felt, putting nameless impressions into words that could be understood by, and tested against, other people’s perspectives. Re-listening to the audio recording gave me the opportunity to compare narrative content between the groups and I realised that each discussion generated its own conditions of consensus and conflict mediation.

As Horacio N. Roque Ramírez and Nan Alamilla Boyd point out in the introduction to the edited collection *Bodies of Evidence* (2012), the analysis of oral narration as a face-to-face encounter must capture multiple sensory modalities, such as tone-of-voice, gesture and posture. Rather than privileging the verbatim content of oral histories, they argue that oral histories can operate as a non-normative conduit for experiences other than those being described. This realisation directs attention to the ways in which story actions are often unspoken or implied. In my own study, consensus and moments of shared association were
evident in the increased congeniality of the group, verbally indicated by exclamations of agreement and laughter, coupled with non-verbal actions that promoted closer group dynamics, such as when one participant would touch another for emphasis or turn to directly include them in their response. In contrast, moments of conflict were demonstrated by the presence of verbal forms of disagreement or silence from other participants following particular statements. Conflict was also reflected in participants’ body language, such as drawing back from the table or from other people, head shaking or finger tapping, and in the raised or defensive tones participants used with each other at times.

Displays of consensus and conflict within the group discussions were not surprising as the discussions were designed to harness social proximity to the scene itself. Despite the artificial structure of the group discussions, the interactions between participants were as close to the real-life conditions of the scene, including the provision of alcohol as social lubricant. Reviewing the interactions between research participants revealed the topics around which consensus or disagreement was registered. Over the course of the discussions, relations between participants oscillated and the changing alliances and dissolutions of consensus confirm that collective alignments did not necessarily precede the discussions but were the result of ongoing negotiations between participants at the time. In this sense, the scene, with its attendant cliques and dramas, took shape through equally intense conversations being had around my kitchen table.

*Definitional Conflict*

Negotiations played out most vociferously around the definition of a drag king. It is useful to begin with the first group since they had an existing friendship dynamic and I had therefore assumed they were the most socially cohesive. As the participant with the most experience as
a drag king performer, Leonie quickly assumed the role of “self-appointed expert” (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990, 97) and the others often deferred to her knowledge and expertise of the scene. Leonie’s undisputed claim to authority tended to influence how the others spoke of drag kings, as evident in the example that follows.

When Gerald cited the founder of Kingki Kingdom, Sexy Galexy, as one of his favourite style of performers, Leonie disputed Sexy’s classification as a drag king by stating:

I think Sexy Galexy is great as a performer although I have gone on record to say that she is a drag queen with a beard on her face.

Leonie’s use of pronouns in this statement is significant. Up until this point in the conversation, all participants had been using the male pronoun when referring to particular drag kings, which is the politically correct convention in both local and global drag king culture. As Eliza, a member of the second group, made clear:

We were very conscious about a drag king is a ‘he’, and ‘he’ is performing as male and masculine characters and so you should afford him those masculine pronouns.

Leonie’s statement represents an isolated departure from accepted cultural convention. By using female pronouns, Leonie withheld recognition of Sexy’s self-identification as a drag king, perhaps as an intended professional slight. More significant, however, was the way her perceived authority on the matter held sway. Amy, for instance, immediately followed Leonie’s use of the female pronoun when agreeing with her. Others, including Gerald, then referred to Sexy as “she” throughout the remainder of the discussion.

This is just one of the instances in which Leonie led the group’s take up of scene-specific terminology. However, a clear moment of disagreement occurred near the end of the two-hour conversation. The group had been discussing what types of performances they’d like to
see at the weekly Wednesday night events and Katie put forward performance duo Fancy Piece. Leonie immediately interrupted in order to dispute the criteria by which they could be classified as drag kings:

And that’s another thing: with drag kings I find if you’re a drag king – yes, you’ve got a moustache on your face – but you’re being a gender illusionist. You don’t bring out your boobs. I’m sorry, but that’s my opinion, and I know that Fancy Piece have moustaches. Yes, they’re drag kings. Until they take their shirts off and they’ve got boobs.

Leonie’s forceful pronouncement immediately halted the discussion. A short silence ensued and it took me some time to restart the conversation on another topic. A palpable sense of unease had descended on the table. Katie appeared taken aback by the response and when I reviewed the transcript later, I found that she didn’t contribute anything further. Likewise Amy, who had supported Leonie’s assertions previously, seemed to be made uncomfortable by this dismissal and instead turned to fill her girlfriend’s wine glass. This suggests to me that while consensus was derived from established social hierarchies in this friendship, particular topics were still open to disagreement.

The second group likewise provided evidence of conflict over drag king definitions by disputing Fancy Piece’s inclusion in the category of drag king performers. Brooke used Fancy Piece to illustrate how nudity in drag king performances was relevant when it imparted “some sort of political vibe” that would distinguish it from heterosexual “titty bars”. At this statement, Eliza nodded at Brooke thoughtfully, which I interpreted as her reflecting on this distinction, before Robin interrupted the conversation by hitting the table and saying:
Drag performance needs to not be showing skin. Like, there needs to not be stripping, because that's not drag kings. That's burlesque. Burlesque is its own category. That's stripping!

Again, I registered a sense of disquiet amongst the members of the group at this overt display of conflict. Brooke let Robin finish and then said quietly, “I dunno, I think I disagree”, before detailing her perspective on gender performativity and queer theory. Brooke was smiling as she expressed disagreement and tapped her face with her fingers as she tried to find the words to convey meaning, which signalled to me that she was self-consciously managing her speech so as to not reject Robin’s objection out of hand. Brooke ended by referencing Fancy Piece’s “extraordinary”—she drew the word out tantalisingly—“range of dildos”. Robin burst out laughing and tilted her head to look at Eliza’s expression, perhaps to judge her acquiescence to this shift in topic. At this point congeniality was restored and the conversation moved on to the use of dildos as an agreed-upon component of drag king performances.

Comparing these two exchanges from the first and second groups over Fancy Piece’s categorisation as drag kings demonstrate how conversations operated as socially-mediated negotiations of the scene. First, there is a striking disinclination by any participant to offer an absolute account of how a drag king can be formally defined. Rather, it seemed only possible for someone to point out what a drag king is not. This indicates that while points of disagreement over aspects of drag king performances hold the potential for conflict amongst participants, these were restricted to taxonomical points of distinction. “Stripping”, “burlesque”, “drag queen” and “gender illusionist” are all descriptors employed to make sense of the various performance techniques and presentations that may or may not count towards drag kinging. As a researcher, I had not anticipated the interpretative flexibility by
which people who watched, and presumably enjoyed, Fancy Piece perform in designated events over the years nonetheless resisted their classification as drag kings.

The potential for disagreement was not restricted to drag kings, but applied to any instance where formal agreement over terminology was warranted because, as Eliza said early in the discussion, “You know, there’s always argy bargy around terms”. Indeed, this type of definitional conflict might account for the disparate ways Holly, especially, used “dyke’ as a disparaging term to distance herself from aspects of the scene she found incompatible with what she identified as “queer”. Far from indicating irreconcilable differences, taxonomical differentiation is perhaps endemic to any process of categorisation, even one as broad as who or what counts as ‘lesbian’ in any given context.

This contestation over definition took place despite the visible identification and promotion of Fancy Piece as drag king performers within the scene. Fancy Piece confirmed that they interpret their performances as a conscious performance of masculine theatricality (personal communication 24 June 2010). Their granting permission to be included in this study is further evidence of their self-selection as drag kings. These contestations underscore my earlier argument that Sydney’s drag king scene cannot be considered a phenomenon based on the primacy of drag king performances. The discussions I was analysing took place despite the absence of any strict agreement over what constitutes drag kinging. Significantly, the group’s negotiation of semantic differences presented an opportunity to fine-tune what were essentially differences of opinion, as most evident between the precision demanded by Robin and Leonie, and the more expansive definition articulated by Brooke. These differences of opinion, and how they were voiced in the group discussion, correspond to Straw’s (2002,
contention that scene definitions are just “one resource in the elaboration of a grammar of cultural ordering”.

Second, the negotiation and resolution over definitions was dependent on the particular social context provided by each group. These arguments only took place when one participant expressed preference for a particular performer or performance style. Significantly, I had not asked participants to define drag kings as part of a strategic line of questioning. Differing opinions, and thus the capacity for new social formations, emerged through a process of conversing around topics I had originally thought were closed or insignificant. In the first group, I surmised that Katie was offended by Leonie’s assertive dismissal of her preference, and the congeniality of the group was temporarily suspended. Although participants in the second group held differing, and in Robin’s case strongly articulated, opinions, they continued talking past their initial disagreement. This was possibly because established social hierarchies did not exist among this group of people but were put in place as participants sounded each other out as the conversation progressed. Accordingly, Brooke and Robin’s earlier conflict over “sleaze” within the scene could be read as another negotiation of hierarchical positioning rather than any irreconcilable difference in perspective (in this case Robin’s appeal to her longer involvement in the scene as the source of her authority on the scene). In general, however, when conflict arose the second group sought out points of common agreement—in this case, the role of dildos in drag king performances—that would restore collegial social engagement to the group discussions.

Reviewing these instances of conflict within the group discussions enables me to point to how individual interests in terminology gave rise to social negotiations that allowed different perspectives on the scene to emerge and be tested against each other. The retrospective
process of consolidation might not be possible within the normatively structured practice of drag king events themselves and their dependence on other social economies. However, the ongoing dissent generated within the discussions about the scene reveals both its anti-essentialising tendencies and its capacity for social revision. The ongoing social labour of the scene, with its attendant capacity for conflict and resolution—much of which occurs outside the specific sites associated with drag king events—is nevertheless necessary for its ongoing dynamism and vitality.

Anecdotal Consensus

In contrast to the above examples where definitions provoked disagreement, consensus often emerged around individual recollections that took anecdotal form. Stories about experiences of the scene tended to be historically framed accounts of particular moments or events: nostalgic recollections of experiences connected to specific venues, performances or songs; or indications of regret around social behaviours, often in connection with other people. It is not surprising, then, that the requirement to “process” scene experiences with others in order to make sense of those experiences often took a storied form rather than an assertion of opinion. Telling anecdotes about Sydney’s drag king scenes revealed a process through which individual experiences took on a collective profile that added nuance to social consciousness and the sense of scene it supported.

Meaghan Morris’s (1988) argument for the theoretical use of banality is applicable to how group discussants used anecdotes to sort through their experiences. As they weaved across disparate topics of conversation, anecdotes did not necessarily work to elicit an empathetic connection with the speaker. Rather, in the examples I go on to provide, anecdotes worked to produce what Morris (1988, 7) terms *mise en abyme* or an “allegorical exposition of a model
of the way the world can be said to be working”. As Morris (2006, 8) later elaborates in her account of anecdote and its relation to the formation of national identity, there is a cumulative process central to their telling and collective exchange where

one particular incident may well be detached from a larger narrative, but another will initiate a longer narration, link two or more stories and arguments together, or enable […] the elaboration of another, non-narrative discourse. The point of an anecdote depends on its content as well as its telling and the contexts in which it is told and taken up; a pointless anecdote is one in which nothing works to give the incident itself a meaning or a resonance for us.

In Morris’s account, anecdotes operate on two levels. First, they work as a refining mechanism that brings the complexity of social experience down to a manageable scale. In this process details about lived experience come to light that might otherwise remain unacknowledged in a more objective or specialised approach, such as theoretical or historical accounts. Second, by remaining open, or in Morris’s (1988, 7) terms “oriented futuristically”, anecdotes simultaneously suggest a wider context for interpretation. In much the same way that I argued that any ‘intimate attunement’ of the scene was the product of the specific lived experience between people at events, my participants’ anecdotes about drag king experiences cannot be detached from a wider, specifically lesbian, social life.

This dual orientation to the immediate drag king scene and lesbian sociality is evident in the following exchange. When I asked her to recall audience responses to performances, Gillianne responded, “Does gossiping count?” Momentarily confused by the question I asked her to elaborate, which I retrospectively see had validated her impression of gossip as a legitimate social experience of the scene. Yet, my inadvertent focus on this single question yielded a fruitful exchange for subsequent analysis that might not have taken place.
Gillianne’s subsequent description of gossip overheard at The Pussycat Club around some people’s dislike of a particular drag king prompted Cate to offer her own anecdote about sharing a house with the same drag king years ago and watching him rehearse for performances. This connection of temporally disjointed experiences provided the basis for further social interaction as the two participants traded stories about the individual they knew in common. The ease and familiarity with which everyone subsequently took to what I now recognise as a newly inclusive ‘gossip session’ within the group discussion highlights how anecdotes operate as an established medium for distilling and disseminating scene experiences. These were conversations that, up until that point, I had been unable to access as part of my ethnographic observation within the scene. I can only speculate that my formal presence as a researcher did not allow for the specific social context that made such spontaneous trading of gossip possible.

Morris’s description of the processual nature of anecdote also highlights the political dimensions that arise from seemingly banal or insignificant modes of communication. I found that many pertinent discussions about identity, terminology and cultural practice took place around anecdotal exchange. According to Morris (1998, 7; original emphasis), anecdotes work to convey a “precise, local and social discursive content” that captures a particular historic and political moment by speaking to the broader power relations at play. Melissa Gregg (2004, 364; original emphasis) has taken up Morris’s theoretical framing to identify how anecdotes are demonstrations of “what counts as politics, to whom as the basis of its everyday” in “mundane” encounters. Within the gossip session generated around the lack of preparation by one particular drag king, the discussion turned to the commercial conditions of performance and payment. This conversation progressed through anecdotal material to a more serious discussion about the established practice by which performers were expected to
work for free in return for exposure. At once I was reminded of my own more formal conversations with promoter Nash Hill about the imperative that drag kings get “paid for their craft” as a way of legitimating the performance practice (Nash Hill, personal communication 23 August 2014). Here, anecdotes provided a way in to a discussion about ethics that ran ahead of my own formalised research in this area.

This example connects Morris’s account of anecdote as a means of generating new knowledge with other scholarly framing of gossip as a cultural resource. Esther Madriz (2000, 839), for instance, promotes gossip as a valuable methodological approach, and draws attention to how marginalised groups, especially women of colour, “have historically used conversation with other women as a way to deal with their shared oppression”. While my predominately middle-class research participants might not necessarily meet the criteria for shared oppression set by Madriz, they do demonstrate how gossip facilitates a deeper political discussion of practices endemic to their lived experience within lesbian cultures. In telling their stories in the context of orchestrated focus groups, my research participants were nonetheless speaking about the localised politics of lesbian identity and its associated economic conditions as they responded to my prompts about everyday social encounters within the scene. Their localised yet politicised responses and ensuing discussion allowed me to draw the conclusions that it was only through the idea of protecting ‘safe spaces’ that a shared lesbian identity could emerge, despite the internal differentiation of its participants.

Trading anecdotal material also allowed participants to mediate their individual political orientations. For example, Brooke and Robin’s anecdotal exchange over clothing worked to broker an understanding of how identity politics were practiced within the scene. Brooke used a recent experience of being judged as straight as she entered a venue in the company of
her more “dyke-looking” friend to maintain that her clothing choices were a conscious political strategy to promote other ways of determining non-normative sexuality. She insisted that “watching a show becomes part of performing your queerness”:

I think there is a bit of an element there of ‘I’m not someone’s buddy’. Like, I’m not here to watch the freak show. I’m here because I’m part of the freak show!

Brooke’s statement reveals that she saw scene participation as a practice that activated her queer identity, rather than bearing a direct relation to the on-stage drag king performance. Her sense of her ‘freakiness’ as a same-sex desiring woman was not constituted by her appearance since she said she did not rely on visible stylistic cues to validate her identity. Yet in the same conversation, Robin offered an anecdote about the care she took in dressing appropriately for drag king events. She likened the visible codes of presentation, such as her carefully crafted quiff, to “the butch and femme dynamic in a gay bar”. Far from being concerned solely with physical appearance, Robin saw drag king events as holding in place the tradition of butch-femme stylistics. Robin’s comments harness a longer history where masculine and feminine presentation makes visible the model for structuring intimate relations between women (Nestle 1981, Nestle 1992, Munt 1998). Unlike Brooke, being judged on sight as ‘butch’ validated her identity as a same-sex desiring woman.

By exchanging anecdotes, Brooke and Robin could mitigate any potential tension that differences between their various orientations towards the scene might provoke. Given the antagonism expressed in earlier discussions between them, it was surprising that these two contrasting accounts did not result in any overt disagreement. I interpret this to mean that political discussion could take place via the telling of personal anecdotes in a way that did not alienate individuals or shut conversation down. So while the previous conversation around drag king definitions tended to polarise participants into a debate where one had to take a side
(as in, you agree or you disagree), the anecdotes told of personal preparation for drag king events allowed for a much more nuanced discussion of stylistics aesthetics that extended from what I had originally assumed a need to ‘look the part’. Despite their different personal positions, they colluded on the point that butch/femme stylistics remained an unavoidable and defining aspect of public lesbian interactions.

Taken together, these examples from the group discussions demonstrate how recollections of the everyday sociality of the scene assisted the construction of political identity and practice. Moreover, the stated importance of a performed lesbian identity was only made discernible to me through the socially-mediated group discussions between participants, and not as a result of a direct line of questioning from me as a researcher. Relayed as personal stories, these anecdotes helped articulate collective political outlooks while still acknowledging differences internal to the scene. Consequently, the capacity to hold and disseminate narrative diversity is what enabled the expansive range of claims in their self-selection as scene participants.

**Sensory Evocation**

It is not just emergent social consciousness that arises through telling stories. The group discussions also generated a sensory rendition of the scene. To some extent this was a result of the research design. By specifically asking questions about sights, smells and sounds, I encouraged participants to supplement their anecdotes with sensory recollection. This approach mirrors the importance attributed to the role of the senses as a fundamental medium for social experience and cultural expression. In the introduction to a special journal issue on “The Senses and The Social”, Elizabeth Hsu (2008, 433) summarises the position of the contributing authors as one built on the assumption that there is a “‘mutuality’ between social relations and the material world”. This understanding confirms that small worlds will have
their own sensory landscapes, including “soundscapes” (Porteous and Mastin 1985) and “smellscapes” (Porteous 1985).

The connection between social consciousness and sensory perception works in two ways. First, Hsu (2008, 437) argues that we “generally can only perceive of those sensations that are socially and culturally patterned”. That is, what makes sensations meaningful is dependent on social context. Second, “a particular social situation often elicits specific sensory experiences”. Put another way, sensory experiences are highly social, and sociality is highly sensory. Following on from these two points, Hsu claims that a focus on sensory experience can provide “ethnographers with new perspectives on sociality”. This is consistent with the foundational premise of the Sensory Formations series edited by David Howes (Bull and Back 2003, Howes 2004, Classen 2005, Korsmeyer 2005, Edwards and Baumik 2008, Howes 2009, Drobnick 2006), individual volumes of which offer compelling empirical arguments for how each of the senses enhance the ability to grasp social experience. Using the insights provided by this prior work on the social significance of the senses, my strategic line of questioning about sights, sound and smells was an oblique way of eliciting information about the sociality of the drag king scene. Sensorially motivated questions supplemented those such as ‘what did you do?’, ‘what did you feel?’, and ‘what do you remember?’ that had up to date dominated the discussion.

I found that smell was by far the most recalled sensory experience in participants’ accounts of Sydney’s drag king scene. One of Holly’s lasting impressions revolved around the Sly Fox Hotel. She complained, “You could always smell the boys’ toilets”, wrinkling her nose as if the smell of them had revisited her at the table. In justifying the prevalence of this sensory evocation, she provided an explanation as to how this smell was encountered: frequently
patrons were forced to use the boy’s toilets because of the managerial neglect of the women’s. Holly recalled with exacting precision the material conditions of the women’s bathrooms:

Only one of them had a door that shut. One of them didn't have a door, and the other one was always out of order.

Holly’s sensorially-framed account offered a conduit for additional detail to emerge in the form of an anecdote. This is an example of where “exemplification activates detail” (Massumi 2002, 18) or “a means of picturing through concrete sensory details the basic scenes, settings, objects, people, and actions” that are observed (Emerson, et. al. 2001, 359). This detailed level of sensory recall prompted others in the group discussion to relate to their own experiences of the Sly Fox Hotel’s housekeeping standards. Together, these anecdotes formed a comprehensive review of the material environment that constituted the venue.

Jim Drobnick (2006), editor of The Smell Culture Reader, puts forward that smell is the sensation most strongly linked to memory. For my participants, not just memory but historicity was often connected to olfactory recall. For example, Brooke said of the Sly Fox Hotel:

It’s the beer, the mixture of fresh beer, newly spilt beer, but also old beer. They had old beer in their carpets and it also used to smell like cigarettes.

Brooke is implicitly gesturing toward the historical moment in 2007 when legislation was introduced across New South Wales that banned smoking inside leisure venues. Brooke’s temporally-nuanced account of the different smells in the carpet corresponds with Clare Brant’s (2008, 552-553) contention that
scent often joins narrative to point to the past, because one of smell’s cultural functions is to act as a memory bank and a means of accessing memories in that bank, which need not be olfactory.

In telling her anecdote about the smells she associated with the contemporary Sly Fox Hotel, Brooke was also engaging in historical storytelling that gave those odours social meaning. Even when smoking regulations were in place, Brooke still associated the smell of cigarettes with the sociality of the events:

When [smoking] moved to outside, there was this thing of, ‘It's too hot and crowded in here, let's go outside and sit with the smokers'.

The presence of cigarette smoke indicated a social context that could not be disassociated from its odour, hence Brooke followed the smell of cigarettes outside in order to seek social interaction. Taken together, these seemingly disparate anecdotes are representative of how participants used sensory recollection to mediate between materiality and remembrance.

Brooke’s recollection also gestures towards the connection between on one hand, memory and narrative expression, and on the other hand, its metaphorical deployment. This connection is evident when I consider how Brant’s emphasis on the narrative format of culturally retrievable sensory recollection works alongside Madalina Diaconu’s (2006, n.p.) argument that the senses “make inevitable the use of metaphors, while their essential temporality is most accurately reproduced in a narrative manner”. The link between sensory expression and metaphor can be seen to function whenever participants invoked the senses as a surrogate for the sociality of the scene. This surrogacy is best represented by Robin’s account of how her experience as a performer was amplified by her sense of smell:

And you can smell two things, I think, before you go onstage, which is sweat and cold fear.
Robin’s conflation of pre-performance nervousness with smell indicates how readily the senses act as a metaphor for social experience. Yet, smells can be more than a metaphor for social activity when they take on significance in and of themselves. In her work on the materiality of aromatherapy oils, Ruth Barcan (2014, 151) makes the claim that smells are experienced as “intensities”, much like joy or pain. If the original experience of odour facilitates an intensive or productive connection with the smell-object then, Barcan argues, when the smell is recalled it is likely that it would trigger the same affective responses associated with the original experience. In Robin’s description, her recollection of “cold sweat” triggered her nervousness about the experience of performing and, to an extent, admitting this role to the group. When she confessed that her performing days were over, she was quick to specify that “there was love there” as well as “cold fear” but, even as she said this, her voice betrayed a renewed nervousness.

In a later contribution to the discussions, Robin described how the smell of alcohol was part of the atmosphere in the room:

I think because I’m feeling that and you smell like you're attuned to the feeling of the room. You feel that people are looking at you and you can tell that some of them are intoxicated, so you can smell what's breathing out of everyone's alcohol fumes, you know.

Extending Ramírez and Boyd’s argument about the sensory modalities inherent in oral histories, I suggest that the remembrance of touch, smell and sounds further stimulate the interactive process of collective narration. As if to pre-empt this theoretical point about collective recognition based on a shared sensory experience, Katie remarked at one point, “Hey, it smelled like a party in there!”
Yet these intense sensory recollections only function as forms of collective evocation within the wider context of the social relations made possible by drag king events. Just as territory was upheld by my research participants as emblematic of the potential for intimacy, so too sensory evocation was harnessed to construct a sense of place. Almost all the recollections of scene participation were made in connection with venues rather than the people and, with few exceptions, the sights, smells and sounds were associated with the Sly Fox Hotel. The only exceptions were Gillianne’s recollection of the sound of “gossip” (made in connection to The Pussy Cat Club held at The Supper Club) and Cate’s reference to the smell of food (made in relation to the dinner-and-show format of Hans Sparrow’s Kaleidoscope of Kings at The Vanguard).

How participants recounted the smells of the scene corresponds to Drobnick’s (2002, 2006) account of “toposmia”, a field of inquiry that investigates the spatial location of odours and their relation to perceptions of place. Odours, in Drobnick’s (2002, 33) framing, produce “affective responses to place-specific smells that extend beyond the mere fact of noticing its identification in a certain location”. For example, the smell of old beer in the carpets of the Sly Fox Hotel was deployed in reference to the ritual consumption of alcohol that took place before and during drag king events. This olfactory recollection supports the recognition that drinking was a necessary aspect of participation. Brooke made this connection clear in her following anecdote:

I’ll give you an example because this evening, my housemates and I were discussing whether or not to go to the Sly. So usually for me, going to a drag king event involves either convincing other people or somehow managing to be convinced to go out, to go to the Sly. Tonight we were talking about, we've got some friends up from Melbourne
and one of my housemates actually said, 'There's no way I can walk through the doors of that place without being drunk.'

While this anecdote inspired resigned laughter, it also prompted collective agreement about the Sly Fox Hotel having a “drunk” energy. While being drunk may not have been a literal condition of participation, the lore of the scene characterises it as a place of excessive drunkenness.

The characterisation of venues that emerged via anecdotal exchanges promoted many of the same recollections that made the scene memorable in the first place. Recalling Cate’s earlier comment on the potential for drama within the tight, confined spaces of the Hotel, such physical confrontations produced a sense of the inevitability of conflict in association with events. “But you’ve seen when fights break out at the Sly, and you know, there’s always a bitch fight”, Cate complained, going on to suggest that these dramas made the Sly Fox Hotel “very messy and a bit ugly sometimes”. Other participants reflected that a negative sexual energy meant “a bit of a filthy connotation with the Sly” (Brooke) and that the venue had become “seedy” (Holly). These generalised perceptions of the venue feed into the shared characterisation of the scene, imbuing certain sites with a particular quality borne from repeated description. In doing so, these sites appeared to take on the characterisation prescribed of them.

Yet, these same accounts also demonstrate how this process of inscription works in two ways, generating an account of the material qualities of the scene and direct how participants come to think of it. The power of sensorially rich anecdotes organises and normalises experiences into an experience that is both singular and shared. Accordingly scene stories are not the property of individuals but operate collectively as a roadmap to social memory. As Jerome
Bruner remarks in his article “Life as Narrative” (1987, 31):

I believe that the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them becomes so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future.

The dual implications of sensory narration supports Straw’s (2004, 412-413) insistence that scenes must be theorised as both productive “units of city culture” and as “the city’s infrastructures for exchange, interaction and instruction”. In sensory renditions that promote the evocation of the scene, my participants were simultaneously determining its representational capacity and adjusting their own reflections in order to fit in with its prescribed characterisations.

*Narrative Temporalities*

Although *Queer Central* was still running at the time I conducted the group discussions, there was already resigned acknowledgement of the scene’s decreasing popularity. In this respect, my ethnographic research captured the thoughts and feelings of participants in a scene that they reluctantly recognised was fading from social view. The eventual cessation of drag king events propelled me to re-examine the temporal structure of the group discussions and pay close attention to how shifts between past, present and future subtend the lifecycle of the scene as it was narrated by my participants.

The temporal conditions inherent in storytelling are evident in the use of the present tense in my participants’ affective recollections of the scene. For example, Samantha used the present participle in her description of past phenomenological experiences of watching performances (“feeling” and “buzzing”). Katie also recalled “dancing to that song” but then said she “will
want to dance” with people she would make a connection with at future events. Brooke likewise used the present tense to reflect:

Sometimes it’s just a really lovely, lovely feeling of, ‘Man, how great is this that there’s this space where all these people can do this, can do these things and enjoy each other, enjoy each other’s company and can experiment with different kinds of performance and can have different expressions of gender and can have different expressions of sexuality.

Despite their recognition of the scene’s slow decline in popularity, these quotes illustrate how the process of narration allowed my participants to explore those past moments as if the scene continued in a moment of its own making.

By using the present tense, these stories reanimate social energies produced in otherwise ephemeral moments. When participants spoke of their excitement or pleasure at drag king events, there was a corresponding increase in animation at the table. For example, Lisa described walking into the Sly Fox:

And you get to the bar, and everyone at that time is jumping, screaming, jumping, hugs you, and jumps at you. It’s a massive thing.

Lisa’s story is supplemented by her demonstration of the excited screaming that takes place as part of this encounter, and the table descended into a hum of indistinguishable chatter and laughter. In her subsequent description, Amy offered a similar account of how immersive sensory experiences enhanced the social occasion of the scene:

Yeah, it gets you ready for the night. If you walk in and you’re in a bad mood and everyone like that just jumps at you and wants to see you and is happy that you’re there, it gets you in a good mood.

The way the group participants responded to both the auditory simulation and its subsequent
interpretation is significant. The groups took on the mood being described, which is
generative of a social experience in and of itself. In describing the mood of past drag king
events, Amy was simultaneously inviting a repetition of the same affective experience in the
social present. After the discussions were over, Amy’s group crossed the road to attend the
regular Wednesday night event at the Sly Fox Hotel, their “good mood” already established
by the social experience of recounting stories of the scene. As I debriefed with my research
assistant that night, I fielded a constant stream of texts from Leonie and Amy telling me to
“get over here!”

This interest in shared social mood prompts me to return to Williams’ ‘structures of feeling’.
As Mitchum Huehls (2010, 420) notes of Williams’ formulation, a crucial feature of practical
consciousness is “not the presence of feelings” in lieu of recognisable thought, but the way
the “presence of the present and our compromised perspective of it” intrudes on our capacity
to render it as recognised experience. Williams’ distinction, then, is not so much between
feelings/thoughts, subjectivity/objectivity or the particular/the universal as between the
immediate and the historical, or the present and the past. Grossberg (2010, 317) likewise
interprets this tension as fundamentally a relation between the liveable and the articulatable,
emphasising that there is necessarily a temporal disjuncture between these two states. By
using the present and future tenses in describing past scene experiences, participants were
signalling that the social feelings generated by the scene were not yet at the stage that they
could be completed.

From the capacity of the scene to be lived (and relived) through emerging feelings applied to
it, I conclude that anecdotal storytelling provides historical continuity in the face of a
declining scene. Despite attributing amateurism to some performances, Cate hypothesised
about going back to the Sly Fox “in five years’ time” and how “it might be, like, 'oh I saw her at the Sly Fox when she was just starting out’”. This anecdote reinforced her identity as a long-term scene participant but it also provides Cate with a sense of ongoing continuity, both “a history” and a “motive for the future” in Plummer’s terms (2005, 173). This future-proofing is a crucial function of storytelling, providing order to the seeming disconnection of the present by reanimating the past in the service of the future. Participants’ attempts to mark out a role within the scene as active and ongoing also contributes to the ongoing process of constituting themselves as eligible and significant social participants. This observation corresponds with Plummer’s (1995, 172) conclusion that people tell stories to assemble a sense of self and identity. In this way, the stories told by my research participants’ correspond to their self-selection in the study: they are another means of reiterating their performance as scene participants. By refusing to relegate such experiences to the past, my research participants are implicitly avowing that these social feelings continued to be felt and, moreover, hold the capacity for future feelings.

Stories told within the group discussions, I argue, operated with a similar political emphasis to ‘coming out’ stories insofar as they are individualised accounts of a collectively understood phenomenon. Plummer argues that coming out stories are powerful mediums bound up with the making (and marking) of collective identity. Analysing their narrative structure, Plummer (1995, 84) points to how coming out stories activate ventriloquism—“the “mouthing of others’ stories in the absence of [one’s] own”—because they indicate awareness of an identity made possible by a wider cultural context. Because they need an appropriate context to be successful, such stories activate and facilitate their own audiences, gathering people around who become storytellers themselves (Plummer 1995, 74).
The cumulative effect of the collective activation of storytelling is a social culture that continues to proliferate new stories and an audience keen to hear and recirculate them as well as incorporating similar content into their own personal anecdotes. Stories, then, create a quiet “catharsis of comprehension” (Plummer 1995, 175) in which the process of reflection converts embryonic social feelings into a retrospectively positioned social consciousness. Narratives work as a process of pragmatic connection for individuals and their social networks, but they also serve the symbolic order endemic to social meaning. As Plummer (1995, 178) goes on to note, stories take on a crucial symbolic role – uniting groups against common enemies, establishing new concerns, mapping the social order to come. Stories mark out identities; identities mark out differences; differences define ‘the other’; and ‘the other’ helps structure the moral life of culture, group and individual.

To this I would add that Sydney’s drag scene is only recognisable as a scene through its collective narration. Moreover, this process binds social experience to social feeling in an ever-circulating relation that is not dependent on the continuity of drag king events more conventionally thought to comprise the scene.

**Conclusion**

As Adrienne Rich (1978, 34) famously wrote, “The story of our lives becomes our lives”. Stories are fundamental to how people construct and participate within small worlds. In this chapter, I have documented how the group discussions facilitated narrative recollection and sensory evocation of the scene. In my examples, definitions gave rise to contestation, negotiation and resolution, processes essential to scene vitality or what Straw (2004, 419) calls scenes’ “own restless, creative quests for opportunity”. Anecdotal content provided for a more expansive medium through which disparate experiences can be connected and meaning
extrapolated from them. Sensory experience was translated into memory and metaphor through similar narrative processes which inscribed smells onto the scene and its spaces. At the same time, sensory content was seen to connect the materiality of the scene to the stories told about it.

Originally designed to impartially collect information about the scene, the group discussions enabled participants to collectively reorder subjective experience and render it into shared cultural memory that is nonetheless open to constant revision. The drag king scene’s potential for negotiated storytelling reiterates Barry Shank’s formulation of a scene as “an overproductive signifying community” (Shank 1994 cited in Straw 2004, 412). By referring to an “excess of information” within scenes, Straw identifies how scenes are not meaningful solely through the function that they are normally thought to serve. Rather, scenes are difficult to decipher because they are produced by local energies generated through diverse forms of participation, including retrospective narration. Similarly, Daniel Silver, Terry Nichols Clark and Clemente Jesus Navarro Yañez (2010, 2297; original emphasis) argue that the diversity internal to scenes suggests that they “should be conceived as places devoted to practices of meaning making through the pleasures of sociable consumption”. By attending to the interactional nature of narration within my group discussions, I have mapped the second-order emergence of shared meanings around the recollection of Sydney’s drag king scene.

The connection between social experience and social consciousness forms part of a wider process by which reflections about scene experiences are ordered into meaningful cultural narratives through the process of storytelling. As a small world, Sydney’s drag king scene draws upon a sense of social cohesion that only comes into being through the stories told
about it. Moreover, through such narrative activity participants come to inhabit the stories they tell. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that it is the power of stories, retrospectively told, that may be the threshold criteria for any social formation to be recognised as a scene.
The conclusions drawn from the previous chapter return me to my original impetus. In the introduction, I described my anxiety that Sydney’s once-vibrant drag king scene would all but disappear before I could adequately record it. This chapter’s epigraph underscores the routine nature of drag king events but also reveals the mixed expression of dispossession and nostalgia that accompanies acknowledgement of the scene’s temporal conditions. Throughout this project, I have focussed on what Kathleen Stewart (2007) calls “ordinary affects”, the everyday, even mundane, processes through which Sydney’s drag king scene is constituted as significant to its participants. I now move to consider how ordinary affects might simultaneously endure in cultural memory. In this chapter I conclude my thesis by connecting the collective aspect of scene stories to the imperative for memorialisation.

**Articulating Loss**

Immediately prior to the scheduled group discussions, the Sly Fox Hotel closed down for a fortnight for interior renovations. During that time, management replaced the old carpet, repainted the walls, installed new furniture, extended the stage area and improved the lighting and sound equipment. This unexpected renovation impacted on participants’ experience of the scene in two ways.
First, the renovations were experienced as a disruption to the material conditions of the venue. For example, Leonie provided an account of her first reaction when she and I walked into the venue after it reopened:

Because I’ve been going there for so many years, from the time when it was the dance floor in the front, and the dance floor in the back as it is now, to the time where they’ve just re-laid the carpets. I remember when I was with you, Kerryn, the first night we were walking in there and we were like, ‘What the hell has happened? This carpet is nice’.

We were walking around making spongy affects with our feet. But, when you first walk in you think, okay, this is the Sly Fox, it’s gonna be dirty, it’s gonna smell like stale alcohol, smell like lesbians.

Second, the renovations were simultaneously experienced as a disruption to the immaterial conditions of the venue. In many urban centres where fast-paced night-time economies are marked by the quick turnover of commercial infrastructure, renovations are used as a way to revitalise sites and reinvigorate patronage. This was undoubtedly the intention of the Sly Fox Hotel management who were responding to the venue’s declining popularity. However, the response of my research participants suggest that in the process of renovating, management intervened in their historical experience of the venue. This historical discontinuity is exemplified in Leonie’s comment to Katie:

I miss knowing that it’s the Sly Fox and it will be same every time you walk in, no matter who you see, no matter what shows are on. But, at the same time, they’ve gotten wall decals up, which is ‘If in doubt, dance!’ Dude, that’s not the Sly Fox. That’s not what I know as the Sly Fox.

On one hand, the material disruption offered participants the opportunity to reassert the historical significance of the venue by reiterating its connection to lesbian social life.
Leonie’s body language conveyed an immediate affective response to the change in material conditions: under the table, Leonie’s feet retraced her steps mimicking the tactile encounter with the carpet; her nose compressed as she relived the olfactory sensations; her gestures became expansive as she invoked the ‘lesbian smell’. By engaging in sensory rendition, Leonie’s performance served to reinstate the material conditions and moreover, invited others in the group discussion to participate in this affective experience of a past encounter. In Leonie’s enactment not only does the venue facilitate the maintenance of lesbian-centred relationships but it was understood to be literally permeated by the odours of those relationships; a smell we were all invited to jointly recall. The comment that the Sly Fox Hotel should “smell like lesbians” stands in for the long history of lesbian patronage of drag king events, and heightens the threat represented by the venue’s renovations.

On the other hand, in speaking of their alienation from the newly gentrified venue as a form of immaterial loss, my participants amplified their shared nostalgia for the scene. Any disruption to the continuity of smell along with any visible changes, such as placing wall decals within the venue, was interpreted as a challenge to the continuity of lesbian sociality. As presented in the previous chapter, sensory expression operated as a conduit into social recall because my research participants used smells to mediate between materiality and remembrance. Writing about the relation between memory and smell more generally, Drobnick (2002, 34) suggests that “the fragrant environment is often positioned as being in danger of being lost for ever”. Smells are foremost considered ephemeral. While smells hold the capacity to spark remembrance and function as a place holder to the past, part of their evocativeness is paradoxically connected to the threat that they will dissipate. Drobnick (2002, 34) goes on to argue that smell exists in a state of temporal and material flux:
The point is that the ephemerality of smellscapes demands an acknowledgement of their semiotic polyvalence – that because of their volatility, signification can never be objective, closed or definitive.

The polyvalence of smells stimulates the need to fix them in time and place, however impossible that task. At the same time, their ephemerality reinforces their affective resonance. Leonie’s contention that the Sly Fox Hotel has to “smell like lesbians” was an expression of a nostalgia that, as Drobnick (2002, 34) notes, “all too easily creeps in”, especially in the form of “tender yearning” for lost smellscapes. Nostalgia works to mythicise a moment in the past, which in this case saw the pre-renovated Sly Fox Hotel as representing the pinnacle of local lesbian sociality. Leonie’s sensory evocation of the scene was motivated by material changes to the venue but it also anticipated the scene’s dissolution, which lent it renewed affective intensity.

The renovations prompted my research participants to speculate on the ongoing viability of the scene, which might not have occurred if events retained a sense of permanency. For example, Cate, who had previously derided the “lip-syncing” and “karaoke in drag” characterisation of performances, surmised that the “daze” about the scene would “wear off due to the [weakening] quality” of performances. This would in turn correspond with a decline in the motivation to “just pop in and see them at the Sly Fox”. Holly likewise mused that drag king performances were not as attractive to a rising queer cultural membership because “there are so many people that have transitioned in our community now that drag is kind of almost defunct or inappropriate”. Gillianne suggested that the emergence of alternative events contributed to the scene’s decreasing popularity, describing the Sly Fox Hotel as “dead” because “there's just so much competition at the other end” of Newtown. For Gillianne, gentrification provided a potentially widening context for socialising that in turn
made drag king events defunct in their social role. While all three participants pointed to different reasons for the scene’s demise, their speculations uniformly attested to the precarity of the scene. These speculations should not be interpreted as disloyalty to the scene but rather are key to its ongoing memorialisation.

The temporal conditions that allowed participants to foresee the scene’s decline prompts renewed affiliation to it. In the process of reaffirming a scene felt as precarious, the performances take on almost mythical importance in the historicised function of the scene. As Eliza appealed to the rest of the group:

> You always want the performer to win. You always want the drag king to be, to be good. Yeah, you want them to be good, and so when the lip-syncing doesn’t work, or they forget their words, or there's not, the music's not right, or it's not loud enough so you're not believing that kind of…

Eliza trailed off at that moment, unable to offer anything more than a recalled feeling of empathy for a struggling drag king performer. Although most obvious in the wake of the renovations, mythologising prior experiences can already be observed in the general tendency to tell stories about the scene. The shared consciousness generated around scenes is always structured by past experience: that is, participants always look backwards from their present position. The retrospective structure of scene recognition necessarily generates the effect of historical recognition, which can include the drag king performances that ostensibly operated as its most visible function. In effect, these comments highlight how the scene is both affectively animated and historicised in relation to the moment of its contemporary passing.
Scene Memorialisation

The same expressions of nostalgia also work to solidify the Sly Fox Hotel as a site that anchors the social imaginary of the scene, even when it no longer hosts drag king performances. The epigraph is but one example of how previous experiences are always available for cultural reanimation. To go “back to her lesbian roots”, all Brooke needed to do was talk about revisiting the Sly Fox Hotel on a Wednesday night. The process of cultural memorialisation often works better in anecdote than in reality as seen in the example of a conversation I had in 2015 with a barista.

While I waited for my daily coffee at my favourite café, the barista and I would often chat about my research. Like many of the people I spoke to around that time, much of her earlier experience of Sydney’s lesbian social circuit revolved around drag king events, and she, too, keenly felt their absence. On one particular day, almost three years after the last drag king show at the Sly Fox Hotel, she told me that she had recently hosted friends visiting from the UK and she decided to give them a historical tour of the lesbian sites of Sydney. Entering the Hotel for the first time in years, she found a ‘burlesque trivia’ night in progress. Compared to a few years earlier, when a late evening arrival meant pushing into a venue filled to capacity, her recent Wednesday night visit revealed just five people inside. I recall her shaking her head as she told me that she couldn’t even finish her beer there. For her, trivia—its unpopularity confirmed by the sparseness of the crowd—didn’t accord with her memory of the once-thriving venue, and she preferred to leave her drink unfinished and her memory intact. This anecdotal exchange sedimented our collective memory of the Sly Fox Hotel as a drag king venue, working more strongly on both of us than simply a form of resistance to a disappointing material visit. Even now I picture the Sly Fox Hotel as the unkempt venue I
knew in its guise as the site of *Queer Central* for over a decade much more clearly that it’s present-day sleek fixtures and polished furnishings that exercise no affective call on me at all.

At the point where my research participants told stories about their past experiences at drag king events in Sydney, they were already engaged in a process of bringing this scene to life. The social role of storytelling is that it simultaneously captures the ephemerality of social moments and consolidates them into forms of collective recognition. Yet, the affective bonds generated through the retrospective evocation of the scene continue to bind people to the place and time of scenes long after their material passing. My research into Sydney’s drag king scene highlights the narrative mode through which a social moment starts to feel historical, where the elusiveness of a scene prompts the process of reanimation that guarantees its cultural significance. The emphasis Straw places on the instrumental role of investments for a scene’s emergence and vitality might also be carried over to assist understanding of the process of scene memorialisation that accompanies narrative reactivation.

Straw (1991, 373) identifies two countervailing pressures within scenes, “one towards the stabilization of local historical continuities, and another which works to disrupt such continuities, to cosmopolitanize and relativize them”. In making this observation, Straw emphasises the importance of the interaction between globalised transformative forces, such as gentrification, and the localised reordering of social structures in the face of precarity. The pull between the global and local produces a constantly shifting field against which scenes become metaphors for urban flux and excess. A scene’s temporal and spatial instability, Straw (2002, 254) points out, constitutes “a seductive sense of scenes as disruptive”. Experienced as ephemeral and effervescent, then, scenes operate outside the scope of any
formal cultural policy. Part of a scene’s instability is characterised by the way that it resists definition because it is moving in multiple directions. As Straw (2004, 412) later argues, a scene moves

  onwards, to later reiterations of itself; outwards, to more formal sorts of social or entrepreneurial activity; upwards, to the broader coalescing of cultural energies within which collective identities take shape.

In this sense, the multiple and highly specific conditions that ultimately contributed to Sydney drag king scene’s decline in popularity can be likened to the countervailing pressures and instability that characterise all urban scenes.

However, scenes also face backwards, anticipating their retrospective narration as socially intelligible moments. It is precisely by facing backwards that scenes produce the conditions of their own sedimentation. Consider Straw’s (1991, 379) own anecdote of his experience at a dance club, which I quote in full:

  Several years ago, at the end of a conference held at Carleton University, I went with a number of academic colleagues to Hull, Quebec to dance. We ended up at the most explicitly ‘underground’ of the many clubs along Hull’s main street (one whose recent history has been marred by door-admittance policies and changes in music style widely regarded as racist). As members of our group began to dance – with, in some cases, unexpected abandon – it was clear that the space of this club, like the act of dancing itself, evoked within many of them a sense of the eternal.

The sense of the eternal is produced by the way that scenes “create the grooves to which practices and affinities become fixed” (Straw 2002, 254). All it takes, Straw suggests (2002, 254), is a chance encounter for now marginal knowledges to be reinvigorated and peripheral social networks to be renewed, as in my conversation with the barista about the Sly Fox
Hotel. In this sense, “the city becomes a repository of memory” despite how much its urban architectures change (Straw 2002, 254).

While Straw’s expression of the “eternal” might seem at odds with my participants’ recognition of the Sydney drag king scene’s commercial precarity, immaterial investments continue to support forms of narration that bestow historical depth on past scenes and allow them to persist in personal and collective memory. The sense of the eternal—which is concomitant with moments of feeling historical—always accompanies the recognition of the moment of passing. Yet, as I argued in relation to Leonie’s expression of scene dispossession, this recognition also extends to the threatened loss of memory itself. This recognition prompts me to consider how the process of collective memorialisation can be interpreted as a form of archival work through which, to return to Raymond Williams’ formulation, social experience is consolidated into social consciousness.

Archival Tendencies

The archive looms large in our cultural imaginary. While a complex concept in theory and practice, the archive is a “useful focal point for bringing together issues of representation, interpretation and reason with questions of identity, evidence and authenticity” (Osborne 1999, 51). However, the utility of the archive is subtended by its relation to loss: the drive to collect the impressions of something no longer present also represents the past as something imperilled by the frailty of human memory. Before I apply the concept to Sydney’s drag king scene, it is useful to consider influential theoretical work around the archive, as it has attracted increasing interest outside the conventional domain of archivists and the librarians.
In her overview of the theory of the archive, Marlene Manoff (2004) provides examples of the ‘social archive’, the ‘raw archive’, the ‘imperial archive’, the ‘postcolonial archive’, the ‘popular archive’ and the ‘ethnographic archive’ as evidence of the different investments in the concept as formulated by different scholars. These converging interests are indicative of increasing recognition of the centrality of the concept to both academic enterprise and cultural work. Despite these different formulations, Harriet Bradley (1999, 108) argues that the archive’s enduring appeal persists in its attraction as edifice of the present designed to preserve the past for the future. Bradley (1999, 119) goes on to reflect that even in an age of postmodern scepticism, the archive continues to hold its alluring seductions and intoxications. There is a promise (or illusion?) that all time lost can become time regained. In the archive, there lingers an assurance of concreteness, objectivity, recovery and wholeness.

By revisiting the form and function of the archive, it is possible to, as Thomas Osborne (1999, 51) states, “oscillate between literalism and idealism”. In popular use, the archive is first of all conceptualised as a literal place—“initially a house, a domicile, an address” (Derrida 1996, 2)—that serves as a repository for documentary material. Indeed, Irving Velody (1998, 1, 2) traces the derivation of the term from its French, Latin and Greek origins to argue that “the word is defined, then, as a place in which public records are kept”. For Velody, any consideration of the archive must commence from a theory of its institutionalisation. Formerly connected to bureaucratic tasks of the identification and collection of material artefacts, the archive typically serves to accumulate information about people, places and practices (Featherstone 2006, 591). While archives typically operate as the repositories of cultural memory and the cultural imperative for archive use remains strong, the current ‘turn to the archive’ (Nesmith 2005) often unsettles its former
institutionalisation. More recently the literal form of the archive has been contested in the wake of its conceptual expansion. Now an archive’s function has been directed to ends that are indeterminate, revising its conceptual utility as one that functions as a “centre for interpretation” (Osbourne 1999, 52; original emphasis). Osborne (1999, 58) suggests that the epistemological basis of the archive is that which brings it into a relation of providence to produce a particular picture of things in a one-off singularity. And in each case, such a singularity is produced only through the labours of an aesthetic of perception; a fine, discriminating gaze that is able to isolate, on the basis of experience and example, items of significance out of a mass of detail.

Osborne thereby reveals the capacity of the archive to memorialise the everyday detail of the ordinary and the mundane, much like scenes. Terry Cook (2001) suggests that the radical paradigm shift offered by such interventions—from a juridical-administrative function of the state to socio-cultural functions grounded in democratic use; from the core task of preserving records to their interpretation—has resulted in a reconfiguration of the archive. Cook (2001, 24) now describes the archive as

Process rather than product, becoming rather than being, dynamic rather than static, context rather than text, reflecting time and place rather than universal absolutes.

Understood as an epistemological process rather than an ontological product, the expanded archive is no longer confined or restricted to rational limits. Carolyn Steedman (1998, 67) evocatively suggests that “the Archive is also a place of dreams”, a “boundless, limitless space” held within the “potential space” of memory and established by the cultural activity of the historian (Steedman 1998, 78). This radical reconfiguration of the archive’s potential has

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27 The ‘turn to the archive’ is attributed to renewed interest in Michel Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) in seeing the archive’s discursive function and Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* (1996) in rendering the archival impulse as metaphor. The radical paradigm shift in archive theory that these two works offer has been positioned as more general convergence around postmodernism.
led to a new perspective in seeing with the archive (Nesmith 1997, cited in Ketelaar 2001, 132). This perspective leads Eric Ketelaar (2001) to identify three stages in relation to the overall process, best conceived backwards. The third stage of “archiving” is traditionally recognised as the process of capturing or collecting documentation, a stage that is associated with the completed form of the archive. This stage is preceded by the second “creative” stage of “archivization” where archival form and function is formulated, or what could be understood as its institutionalisation. This stage is preceded by a first, more epistemologically oriented stage, which Ketelaar (2001, 133; original emphasis) terms “archivalization”, defined as the “conscious or unconscious choice (determined by social and cultural factors) to consider something worth archiving”. In ‘seeing with the archive’, archivists do not just maintain the integrity of archival material but enact the archive itself in the form of performative storytelling. In doing so, archivists contribute to the “drama of memory-making” (Cook and Schwartz 2002, 172), or the “tacit narratives” (Ketelaar 2001) that underlie any archive’s geneology. While originally intended as an interrogation of an archive’s form and function, this convergence of interest reveals that there is “growing self-consciousness about the fact that all scholarship is implicitly a negotiation with, and interpretation of, and a contribution to the archive” (Manoff 2004, 13). The movement between Ketelaar’s first stage of archivalization and second stage of archivization is suggestive of an opening up of the concept in ways that are potentially useful for capturing the material and immaterial dimensions of Sydney’s drag king scene at the moment of its demise.

*Living Archives*

Queer theory has contributed to an expansion of the archive not just in its form and function but also as a methodological approach. The utility of the notion of the queer archive lies in its
relation to the collection of ephemeral affects associated with queer cultures and sexual experience more generally. These associations are useful in considering how non-normative experiences can provide the basis of archival impulses predicated on collective practices that render them significant. As argued previously, intimate publics, such as those brought into being by participation in Sydney’s drag king scene, both reflect the desire for the social recognition of everyday lesbian life and actualise that process as a form of social consciousness.

Juana Maria Rodríguez’s work on butch/femme archives is useful in providing an archival methodology for registering sexual experience. Rodríguez (2007, 282) commences her analysis with the rhetorical question, “How do we construct an archive of desire?” While knowing that “sex and feelings articulations” exist, Rodríguez (2007, 283) suggests that the “challenge is not to explain or even record them, but to invoke the power of their presence”. She argues that there is a need to move away from the need to locate the textual trace of desire within archives and instead consider the performative aspect of an archive as a form of embodied interpretation. In terms that would resonate with my research participants, Rodríguez’s point is that the desire once evident in the ephemeral social encounter, which has “already passed”, is still available because “its impression lingers in the air and seeps into the skin” (Rodríguez 2007, 284).

Rodríguez’s evocation of an archive of desire finds more tangible form in the earlier work of Jose Esteban Muñoz in *Disidentifications* (1999) in which he considers the intersections of queer performances, cultural meaning and the everyday. To ‘disidentify’, in Muñoz’s account, is to read oneself and one’s experiences in a social moment that may not be culturally coded as such by a heteronormative culture. An expressions of non-normative lived
experience, queer performances do not have to meet the sexual expectations and fantasies of all those who watch them but merely provide a site for desire to be temporarily anchored and its impressions felt. Accordingly, queer events might be understood as vehicles that deliver people to “the utopian performative” or the sense of visceral, emotional, and social connection experienced by being together (Dolan 2001). In suggesting that “performance speaks to the reality of being queer at this particular moment” (Muñoz 1999, 1), Muñoz acknowledges how individuals negotiate ephemeral encounters, producing and preserving cultural knowledge in the form of what Rodríguez calls “lingering residues”. Queer performances, and by extension the embodiment of social and sexual experience that give such performances resonance, function in much the same way as Rodríguez’s archive of desire.

In his account of ephemera as evidence, Muñoz (1996, 10) draws on Williams’ formulation to argue that the “tropes of emotion and lived experience” are “indeed material without necessarily being ‘solid’”. As structures of feelings are concerned with emerging social experience, they always implicated in a “culture’s particularities” (Muñoz 1996, 10). This observation leads me back to the small world comprised around Sydney’s drag king scene and its mediation of what could be understood as archival effects. First, my participants drew on an already established and recognisable archive of the fleeting moments and experiences that rendered drag king events personally significant to them. Second, in that moment of social recall, drag king events simultaneously constituted new archival material that can be collectively drawn on in future moments. These archives of past and future experience draw their affective power from each other so that in coming together, both are reconfigured (Rodríguez 2007, 387). Moreover, as Ann Cvetkovich (2003, 47) suggests, desire materialises in a range of directions as an affective experience, preserving cultural knowledge
and generating new cultural practices. While the ephemeral, yet collective, experiences of desire keep minority cultures alive in a continuous process of regeneration, social consciousness is “produced and made pleasurable through acts and articulations” (Rodríguez 2007, 284). That is, social consciousness is a process of both invoking and embodying an archive of lived experience.

An archive that captures the connection between social experience and social consciousness presents methodological challenges. As pointed out in the introduction, the archival function identified by queer theorists must work with a looser set of evidentiary protocols that are associated with material gleaned from cultural practices. Following Muñoz’s interest in the intersections of affective experience and social formations, Cvetkovich (2002, 110) proposes a radically open archive in which lesbian feelings around intimacy, sexuality, love and activism are chronicled as a form of emotional memory: “those details of experience that are affective, sensory, often highly specific, and personal”. This produces an “unusual archive” where memories cohere around objects in unpredictable ways (Cvetkovich 2002, 110). Cvetkovich (2002, 112) insists on the importance of ephemeral materials and the affective relations they support, which are capable of binding individual feelings of nostalgia with collective investments in lesbian culture.

These lingering affective relations can be organised into what Cvetkovich (2002, 2003) refers to as an ‘archive of feelings’. As defined by Cvetkovich (2003, 244), an archive of feeling is both material and immaterial, at once incorporating objects that might not ordinarily be considered archival, and at the same time, resisting documentation because sex and feelings are too personal or ephemeral to leave records.
These feelings are encoded not in material objects or texts but in the practices that surround their production and reception. Such practices must therefore be captured via alternative methodologies of acquisition and access. In later work, Cvetkovich (2014) presents photography as a potential method for archiving the feelings that are attached to objects. Cvetkovich’s (2014, 274) argument is that the subjective, almost idiosyncratic, method of photographing objects of personal significance is capable of generating an archive of feelings “in the literal form of sensory experience”. Crucially for Cvetkovich, an archive of feelings blurs the distinction between the institutionalisation of archives and the personal collections of an individual. The obsessional impulse to collect and the sanctioned impulse to archive are the same, especially when both are prompted by “a desire to create the alternative histories and genealogies of queer lives” (Cvetkovich 2014, 275).

Prompted by Cvetkovich’s account, at this point I should confess that I have a collection of drag king memorabilia. This collection comprises a promotional tank top that was handed out to patrons of Queer Central, its front emblazoned with a peacock feathered-and-flowered drag king (who bears a remarkable resemblance to Sexy Galexy, founder of the event) and a much smaller emblem of the Sly Fox Hotel; an original edition of the University of Sydney’s student newspaper, Honi Soit, that featured a front page spread of local drag kings and an extensive article within on how the author encountered them; and a business card from drag king performer Randy Dicksin that displays a photograph of him lying against a leopard-print backdrop, a website address and the words ‘King for a Day: Drag King Competition’. Like the photographs Cvetkovich examines in her essay, these objects hold haptic significance for me. Touched objects transform personal experiences into the meaningful materiality that is key to “capturing the ephemeral through ephemera (Cvetkovich 2014, 280). My impulse to collect such ephemera is consistent with wanting “collective cultural practices that
acknowledge and showcase” lesbian sociality because such archival practices can offer, if nothing else, evidence that such cultures existed (Cvetkovich 2003, 161, 166).

Yet, collections of ephemera are not only mementos of past experience. Such collections might disrupt assumptions of the direct relation between the affective economy of objects and their relation to time and space. As Couze Venn (2006, 35) writes:

The collector thus amasses the past, her own and the community’s, gathering it for a rebirth to the present that at the same time renews a subjective link with the past and rescues, or wishes to rescue, a loss.

Via the impulse to collect, Cvetkovich’s radically open archive is capable of embodying the immateriality of otherwise lost social experience and, by extension, the loss posed by the precarity of memory itself. As Cvetkovich (2014, 291) argues, the archive is not just a site for preserving cultural knowledge around ephemera that act as repositories of feelings and emotions. It also operates as a site for new knowledges to find expression in their enactment. I would add that this process of archiving can be found in any medium of cultural expression, including those usually considered scholarly research. In her own example, Cvetkovich (2003, 82) reflects that writing about the experience of trauma within the development of butch/femme identities performs a particular archival function because “writing about these emotional and sexual intimacies becomes a way of forging a public sphere that can accommodate them”. Moreover, the experience of the archive is never outside of the lived experience of those who participate in it. Accordingly, my attempt to archive Sydney’s drag king scene should not been seen as an ‘extractive’ methodology in which exemplary materials can be taken away from social experience in order to materially reconstitute ‘the social’ within a separate research framework. Rather, my project reconceives social experience not as a “site of knowledge but of knowledge production” (Stoler 2002, 90).
Through embodied experience, my research participants “perform the critical work of making alternative histories” (Cvetkovich 2014, 291).

Cvetkovich’s scholarly intervention into the form and function of the archive provides the theoretical foundation upon which to reconsider the performative function of storytelling as a retrieval activity and memorialising practice. The sense of the eternal produced by the anecdotal interaction reignites the immaterial dimensions of the scene. In this sense, the anecdotes I have collected from others can be interpreted as an archival impulse that is indistinguishable from my collection of memorabilia. The ethnographic process of participating in stories works as an immaterial form of cultural exchange. A concept of the archive, repurposed by the ephemerality of social experience on one hand and the sustained affection relations that provide social consciousness on the other hand, manifests around the stories told about the scene. Through ‘seeing with the archive’, Sydney’s drag king scene endures in social consciousness through anecdotal exchange as a form of living archive.

Ethnographic Potential

In “Weak Theory in an Unfinished World”, Kathleen Stewart (2008, 71) remarks that ethnography is the “slow, but also sometimes sudden, accretion of modes of attunement and attachment”. In making this claim, Stewart brings into focus a particular method of attuning into the research environment. As Stewart (2008, 78) goes on to note:

Tracing the worlds that people make out of such contact zones requires supple attention and the capacity to imagine trajectories and follow tendencies into scenes of their excesses and end points.

In their introduction to the edited volume Deleuze and Research Methodologies, Rebecca Coleman and Jessica Ringrose (2013, 4) note that Stewart’s account of the productive
capacity of everyday affects should be applied in two ways. First, this requires attuning to the ways ordinary affects come together in moments of intensities and potentialities. This could be interpreted as the need for ethnographic attention. Second, capturing these affective movements requires “finding ways of writing and portraying the affective”. That is, the role of ethnographic description that follows from that original attention. In its retrospective consolidation into social consciousness, scene participation and ethnographic research only emerge through the process of their description.

The intertwined nature of scene participation and ethnographic methodology was made apparent to me one night when performers Randy Dicksin and Nikki Facchin (together as duo Campanosity) approached me and asked me to film their performance on their mobile phone.28 I read this request as indicating that they saw value in my presence as a researcher but also that, after many previous encounters where they seemed indifferent to my presence, they now accepted me in the inner circle of regular attendees. My engagement within the scene underwent a perceptible shift at that point, as evidenced by the changed focus in my fieldwork journal from notes on the performances and audience to documenting encounters and exchanges with participants. The same ordinary affects that attach themselves in the process of remaining open to emergent social feelings are similarly present in ethnographic research.

Proponents of ethnographic methodology have long recognised impacted relations between experience and representation (see Geertz 1973, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Denzin 1997). The lapse in time between the experience of an event and its recording highlights the

28 According to my field notes, this encounter took place at the regular Wednesday night at the Sly Fox in April 2012.
necessarily retrospective process of ethnographic research (see Agar 1996, 54). This is not only due to the practical matter that researchers cannot recall precisely what people said or did in the immediate ethnographic encounter, but this retrospection can also be considered in relation to Williams’ point about the fundamental difficulty of capturing structures of feeling that have not yet consolidated into a recognised social formation. Norman K. Denzin (1997) goes as far as to suggest that researchers do not directly capture lived experience but create it only in the social text subsequently written up. This renders ethnography a process by which “a theory of the social is also a theory of writing” (Denzin 1997, xii). James Clifford (1986, 2) describes how writing operates as a process of mediation where ethnographic texts are concerned with the “invention, not the representation, of culture”. Ethnography, then, is not separate from the means of communication in the use of metaphor, figuration and narrative - all these affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered (Clifford 1986, 4). As the process of ethnographic writing progresses through field notes, transcriptions, drafted interpretations, and – if all goes well – final published accounts, each operates as an archival practice of collecting and bringing to life again those past events in their final and completed presentation. To paraphrase Williams, this process renders emerging experience into ethnographic consciousness.

These observations lead to me to understand ethnography as a process that weaves across the construction and articulation of memory in both the creation of an historical situation and a moment of shared embodied experience in the present. As I have argued, social worlds take on more vividness when they are at the point of disappearance, which is why writing about them often takes on a sense of urgency. What links ethnographic writing more concretely to archival practices, however, is the idea that it is only at the point of departure from that moment that the social can be articulated. As Grossberg (2010, 322) states, paraphrasing
Foucault and his formulation of the power of discourse, “you only get to describe realities as they are disappearing, when they are dying”. Through ethnographic description, scenes emerge in writing in much the same way as they appear in the stories told by participants in the scene. As a collector of others’ stories, the researcher is not a neutral spectator but rather an active participant in the shaping of social experience. The process of bringing an archive into existence is triggered at the moment that attachment to a research object is imperilled. By looking at the conditions by which Ketelaar’s first stage of archivalization occurs highlights how “scholars (including archivists) are not, can never be, exterior to their objects” (Ketelaar 2001, 139). Ethnographic description, as Denzin (1997, xiii) describes it, must be considered dialogical because it operates as

the site at which the voices of the other, alongside the voices of the author, come alive and interact with one another. Thus the voices that are seen and heard (if only imaginatively) in the text are themselves textual, performative accomplishments.

These accomplishments have a prior life in the context of where they were produced. For Denzin (1997, 33), this process is a form of lived textuality, or the “embodied representations of experience”, that interprets ethnographic description as a performative archive.

My original interest in drag king culture is but one interaction that fuels this mobile scene. However, over the course of my ethnographic engagement, my attachment to drag king events has been superseded by an attunement to the scene. Crucially, these stories told about the scene would have occurred without my giving any ethnographic attention to them, and the scene would be kept alive for its participants in their telling. Ethnography mirrors, rather than mediates, this process. Group discussions designed to collect data on participants’ experiences of scene participation simultaneously offered me an opportunity to participate in
the process of bringing a scene to life. As such, anecdotes, and the ethnographic methodologies designed to capture them, reveal the simultaneous ephemerality of social moments and their retrospective consolidation into collective forms of recognition. As such, ethnographic practice is only one encounter that holds the ephemerality of past lesbian cultures in place through the same conditions that give firsthand social experience its affective conditions of participation. This is because, at its heart, ethnography is a way of being in a world that centres on relationality, much like participation in small worlds. The paradoxical registers of proximity and distance involved in ethnography mirrors the process of identification and disidentification that have long been recognised as at the heart of scenes’ lifecycles more generally.

Conclusion

Overall, I have argued for the specification of drag king culture as a scene rather than a performance genre or a politics of gender performativity. In its emphasis on both individualised experience and collective recognition, scene theory accommodates the ‘ordinary affects’ of participation and the emerging consciousness of its significance. Its theoretical openness has led me to explore the relationship of the individual to the collective, triangulate embodied intimacy to social, sexual and political configurations, and reveal the constitutive and representative dimensions of Sydney’s drag king scene.

In the introduction, I resisted using drag king performances as the defining phenomenon based on an “imagined” affiliation since this may not resonate with participants’ actual experience of it (see Ridge et. al. 1997 for a comparative argument in relation to gay male scenes). To do so may have inadvertently predetermined what forms of analysis are possible through the organising structure of the terms used to define it, compressing or obscuring
complex and varied practices by preconceiving and idealizing relations between people (Newton 2000b, Hird and Germon 1999, Kennedy and Davis 1994). This would have denied participants’ agency in determining the range of activities and the mode by which they see these as relating to their participation within the scene. At the same time, Straw (2002, 249) suggests that despite a decade of cultural studies analysis that has sought to refine the concept of scene, “its slipperiness remains”. This suggests to me that ‘scene’ is highly variable and called on to perform a variety of tasks without being limited by any of them. How my research participants characterised the scene within and against their own experiences of recounting it reconfirms the concept’s metonymical utility. I have used the concept of scene to accommodate how seemingly contradictory identities, practices and affiliations are upheld within the local and social proximity of small worlds.

Accordingly, I sought to capture some of the ephemeral experiences that are characteristic of my own increasingly immersive participation in the scene but also to trace how those experiences become intelligible through collective consciousness in the particular ethnographic encounter with my thirteen research participants. In my case study, Sydney’s drag king scene was revealed to be a small world that provided the site in which to anchor an expansive imaginary of lesbian social life. As much as the drag king performances gave events their raison d'être, the scene that supported them was instantiated through its participants’ investments in ‘being together’ in moments of intimate sociability. In turn, this process of instantiation simultaneously highlighted the precarity of social infrastructure, which accords with a longer legacy of lesbian commercial unsustainability in the area. Drag king spaces were generated through the modes by which lesbian women in Sydney have participated within these precarious spaces and made them meaningful alongside, or perhaps in spite of, the lack of commercial stability. Throughout this thesis, my contention has been
that it is as much the production as the consumption of sociality that allows for scenes to emerge. The scene’s affective sociality brings into being a small world that matters since it holds the ephemerality of desire, or social potential of being together, in place.

As revealed in this thesis, both the form and function of the scene are a product of ethnographic description. But more than simply offering what might seem to be an account of Sydney’s drag king scene at the height of its popularity, I also offered a perspective on its decline. In doing so, I contribute to wider conversations around the cultural work on the function of scenes, and social phenomenon more generally, by highlighting the temporalities inherent in the process through which social experiences are rendered collectively meaningful. First, my particular focus has brought together the theoretical tradition of scene studies with recent work on the affective potentialities of the everyday. Pairing these two theoretical approaches provided for analysis of how ‘being together’ engenders an affective relation through which scenes are rendered both productive and embodied. Second, in tracing affective investments in cultural memory as a scene fades from view, scene theory also contributes to the current preoccupations of queer theory in developing archives capable of capturing ephemeral experiences and their apparitional traces through retrospective social consciousness. Anecdotal narration facilitates and reflects the material and immaterial dimensions of scenes that comply with the precise historical juncture that enable them to emerge in the first place.

Accordingly, this thesis can be considered an exercise in “scene thinking” (Woo et. al. 2015). As Woo, Rennie and Poyntz (2016, 292) suggest of the resurgence in the concept, ‘scene thinking’ is an epistemological starting point for seeing any cultural phenomenon as “the setting for action”, rather than its ontological end point. Commencing analysis of Sydney’s
local drag king culture from the perspective of a scene is to be “sensitized to the on-going, relational constitution of culture” (Woo et. al. 2016, 292). In its emphasis on relationality throughout, my research also offers insight into the lifecycle of other scenes: their emergence, expansion or contraction and, inevitably, their fading.
Coda

“When I first went to Sly, I woke up thinking, ‘I actually don’t remember how I got here, but I got here’. So that’s a good thing!” (Cate).

There is something qualitatively different about Wednesday nights in Newtown compared to when I commenced my research project. Certainly women still congregate in the various leisure venues that may or may not strategically court their presence. But it seems to me that the night is less \textit{atmospheric} than the vibrancy of Dyke Nights in the past. Perhaps this says something about widespread changes to Sydney’s night-time economic arrangements. Perhaps it points to a temporary suspension of social activity for those who used to make the weekly trek to \textit{Queer Central}. Or perhaps it is simply indicative of my own lifestyle changes where going out to social events midweek has lost its appeal. It is not impossible that a resurgence of interest in drag king culture would reinstate events at their former sites, or that another ‘big thing’ on the event horizon will replace them in newly gentrified locations. No matter what the future holds, the decade-long phenomenon that saw drag king events as a popular pastime within Sydney’s lesbian social circuit is now over.

I have avoided speculating why precisely Sydney’s drag king scene fell from popularity. Established questions around the role of gentrification and the economic instability of gay and lesbian social ventures are immediately relevant to this cultural milieu that has seen a number of formerly iconic lesbian clubs and bars close worldwide. There is also a pressing need to consider the heightening, but ideally productive, tensions between historically entrenched gay and lesbian social spaces and an emerging trans and gender-diverse presence who may not share those same attachments. While I have used lesbian as a socio-cultural marker throughout this thesis, I have not fully resolved the complex relationship between
identity and practice, most obvious in the cultural differences between lesbian and queer terminology. These omissions are in part strategic, since to grapple with these questions would require a very different theoretical framing and methodological approach. Moreover, the thirteen individuals who consented to be part of this research reflect the specific interests and experiences of a loosely affiliated cultural group, which does not comprehensively represent the potential classed, ethnic, racial and differently abled diversity of those who may have come to the scene. Obviously, this thesis might tell a different story with a different set of research participants as, ultimately, it is their experiences of Sydney’s drag king scene from which I draw my conclusions. But sometimes these small worlds are very small indeed.

These omissions should not be seen to invalidate my findings nor should they suggest that the experiences of the scene I have recounted here are fragmentary. The contours of Sydney’s drag king scene is shaped by its capacity to support multiple modes of participation, not the valorisation of any single phenomenon. It is not that the scene produced and manipulated individual investments in sustaining a collective form, but that investments function affectively to make them meaningful to each and every individual. The Sydney drag king scene may no longer be found in the range of sites and practices that previously comprised it. However, the scene endures in its telling for those who participated in it because it matters to them. As Cate said in popular Australian vernacular, “So that’s a good thing”.

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