

FIERCE BITCHES ON TRANNY LANE: GENDER, SEXUALITY, CULTURE, AND THE CLOSET IN THEME PARK PARADES

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ABSTRACT

This chapter draws on 17 months of ethnographic observations in the Parade department at an American theme park that I call Wonderland. The Parade department is a homonormative workplace, numerically and culturally dominated by gay men. I examine how this work culture challenges the dominance of heteronormative masculinity often embedded at work through an exploration of backstage interactions among performers. I also explore the gendered and racialized meanings of the camp aesthetic that performers embody. I argue that while Parade culture undermines workplace heteronormative masculinity, it also reproduces the epistemology of the closet through its reliance on the gay/straight binary.

I walk into Green-13, Wonderland's¹ Parade building, at 1:30 pm. Forty-five minutes from clock-in time, the hallways are already alive with the chatter and laughter of performers. I head to my locker, moving from one friend to the next. Even though most of us worked yesterday, we greet

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each other dramatically with hugs, kisses, and sometimes excited screams. I emerge from the clusters of people and into the rows of aqua green lockers. The noise behind me is broken by a well-known voice. “Wilson Tang!” Leif, a popular gay male performer, calls out as he wanders through the aisles of Parade lockers. “Where is that tranny?” he loudly asks no one in particular. I watch him glance down my aisle as I drop my bag at my locker.

“Hey Britney,” Stevyn, another gay performer, says as Leif passes. Leif breaks his stride to demurely cock his head to the left, chin tucked to his chest, and bat his eyes. “Hey gay girl,” he replies.

Leaving Leif to seek out his friend, I head to Parade Issue to check out my costume, a bright blue shirt with matching silver pants and jacket. As I enter I hear Ricky, a gay assistant manager, greet one of the straight women performers with a cheerful, “Hey betch!”

“Betch?” she says, a tone of confusion in her voice.

“That’s right. Betch,” he repeats with a large grin. “Not bitch. Betch.” With a bemused smile, she shakes her head and goes about getting her costume.

Back at my locker, I wait with Topher, one of my straight male friends, to clock-in. Friends stop by to say hi, giving us hugs or playfully grabbing my butt. Mike, a popular gay performer, walks by our aisle and does a double take when he sees us. Standing at the end of the aisle he starts to dance, eyes locked on Topher. His hips sway back and forth to a silent beat before he shakes his booty. Then he bends his knees slightly and, pivoting on his toes, swings his legs opens and shut – knees out to the sides, then knees together – as he sinks to the floor, a move that looks sexier than it sounds. While he drops, Mike bites his lip suggestively. “Is that an invitation?” Topher asks. He takes a couple steps toward Mike who immediately stands and looks flustered. “Uh-, n-, uh-. Oh. No!” Mike stammers with a tone of surprise. “Oh,” Topher says, shoulders slumping in mock disappointment. I shake my head. Only in Wonderland parades could a straight man (Topher) get shot down by the gay man (Mike) flirting with him.

Days like this were common in Parades.² The department had a high proportion of openly gay-identified men and a set of generally accepted rules for social interaction that were different than any job I had ever read about or held. Even more intriguing is the fact that Wonderland, like theme parks owned by the Walt Disney Company, Universal Studios, and Six Flag Theme Parks, is a purveyor of heteronormative narratives. Given the importance of heterosexuality to the onstage aesthetic, we might expect Wonderland Parades to reproduce a backstage culture that silences or tokenizes sexual minorities (Giuffre, Dellinger, & Williams, 2008; Hall, 1986, 1989; Ward & Winstanley, 2003, 2006; Williams, Giuffre, &

Dellinger, 2009; Woods & Lucas, 1993). Instead, the theme park's tales of heteronormative love and hegemonic masculinity are left in the hands of many men whose everyday backstage performances challenge these same stories.

This chapter draws on ethnographic observations and informal conversations with Wonderland Parade performers to explore issues of gender, sexuality, and race in a homonormative work culture. My description of Parade culture focuses on the hegemonic ways in which male performers "do gayness" (West & Zimmerman, 1987) through flamboyant gender performances that challenge heteronormative masculinity. I also investigate the ways in which this culture challenges and reinforces what Sedgwick (1990) refers to as "the epistemology of the closet," the subordination of homosexuality by heterosexuality that occurs in contemporary Western societies. I argue that Parade culture offers certain challenges to the closet while still reproducing elements of the gay/straight power dynamic.

BACKGROUND

Gender, sexuality, and race are all elements of the organizational structure of work, from the assumptions about ideal typical bureaucracy (Acker, 1990), to workforce composition (Kanter, 1977), and the segregation of occupations (Britton, 2000; Burrell & Hearn, 1989). They are also embedded in work culture. The interactions and norms that govern workplace relations privilege white, heterosexual men (Harvey Wingfield, 2009; Williams, 1992; Woods & Lucas, 1993). White heteronormative masculinity, then, both characterizes and structures advantages in most work organizations. The workplace is therefore a key site for the production of identity and the reproduction of inequality (Connell, 2010).

Workplaces are also the sites for challenges to hegemonic masculinity. Challenges to the prevailing racialized, gendered, and heterosexualized organization of work are enabled and constrained by three factors: numeric, organizational, and cultural dominance. Kanter's (1977) work on men and women in corporations shows that numbers matter. She argues that as numeric representation increases, work culture adjusts to include former tokens. Scott (2005) contends that numeric dominance is not enough. Her work on racial diversity in feminist organizations illustrates that minorities must also have increasing representation in organizational positions of power in order to achieve a more equitable work environment. Ward's (2008a, 2008b) work on racial diversity in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,

and Transgender (LGBT) organizations demonstrates that cultural norms and practices can naturalize, legitimate, and reproduce racism even when whites are in the minority.

Research on sexual minorities at work further evidences the importance of numeric, organizational, and cultural dominance in creating inclusive work environments. Heterosexist and “gay-friendly” workplaces often either valorize male, heteronormative sexuality and silence alternatives (Hall, 1986, 1989; Ward & Winstanley, 2003, 2006; Woods & Lucas, 1993), or tokenize sexual diversity at work (Giuffre et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2009). Sexual minorities experience greater sexual freedom of expressions in “gay” workplaces, where heterosexuals are absent or outnumbered (Lerum, 2004; Weston & Rofel, 1984).

Workplace heteronormativity is often sustained through culture. Woods and Lucas’s (1993) description of gay men’s experiences in professional and white-collar occupations demonstrates how heterosexual privilege is preserved in conversation and everyday objects visible at work such as family photos and wedding rings. In the UK Fire Service, humor and physical contact among male firefighters exclude gay men (Ward & Winstanley, 2006). In both cases, heteronormativity is reproduced through culture.

But work culture can also challenge heteronormative dominance. Coworkers’ inclusive language and vocal stands against homophobia can help sexual minority youth feel included at work (Willis, 2009). In gay-owned bars, clubs, and businesses, intimate same-gender contact (Westhaver, 2006), sexualized banter and interactions (Lerum, 2004), conversations about same-gender partners (Weston & Rofel, 1984), and gay-coded objects (Kotarba, Fackler, & Nowotny, 2009) can displace the centrality of heteronormative masculinity in social interaction. For example, members of Delta Lambda Phi, a national gay college fraternity, challenge heteronormative masculinity through campy, effeminate gender performances, drag, and reference to other men in the fraternity as “girlfriend” (Yeung, Stombler, & Wharton, 2006). The role of culture is evident, if implicit, in these studies.

In the Wonderland Parades department, gay men enjoy numeric, organizational, and cultural dominance. In this chapter, I focus on Parade work culture: the discourse, objects, practices, and sensibilities that guide social interactions among performers and naturalize a particular performance of gender and sexuality. I am interested in how the gay male domination of this department challenges the epistemology of the closet, a particular set of hegemonic power relationships embedded in social life.

The epistemology of the closet is a way of understanding the world as divided into binaries that mirror the straight/gay dichotomy: things are

known/unknown, included/excluded (Sedgwick, 1990). These binaries reflect and embed dominant ideas about sexuality in everyday social life. The logic of the straight/gay dichotomy places homosexuality in subordination to heterosexuality. In fact, heterosexuality's meaning and power depend on this subordination (Sedgwick, 1990). Sedgwick uses this framework to deconstruct literary texts, but it also applies to the social world. In the study of work, the epistemology of the closet anticipates that which is coded "gay" will be subordinated to that which is coded "straight," and that the validation of workplace heteronormativity depends on this marginalization. Research on the silencing (Hall, 1986, 1989; Ward & Winstanley, 2003, 2006) and tokenizing (Giuffre et al., 2008; Savin-Williams, 1993; Williams et al., 2009) of lesbians and gay men at work supports this expectation.

But does the existence and reproduction of a gay culture undermine or reify the logic of the gay/straight binary and dominance of heterosexuality embedded in most workplaces? Gay workplaces potentially challenge the epistemology of the closet by disrupting workplace heteronormativity. The culture that develops through interaction may provide sexual minorities with a space to engage in nontraditional, nonhegemonic performances of gender and sexuality, and contest the subordination of homosexuality to heterosexuality. Yet scholars have not explicitly considered what gay work cultures might look like or the extent to which they successfully challenge the logic of the closet. This chapter begins to address these questions through a case study of one homonormative workplace.

In the next section, I discuss my site and my position in the field. The rest of the chapter argues that the presence and enactment of a gay culture undermines the heteronormativity of work but reproduces the gay/straight binary that underpins the epistemology of the closet. I outline challenges to the closet, emphasizing the ways in which men and women reject heteronormative masculinity in backstage interaction. I also discuss the camp quality and racialization of Parade culture to explore the aesthetic quality of these challenges. I then turn a critical eye on this culture to explore how it reinforces the epistemology of the closet.

METHODS

My discussion of "gay" work culture comes from 17 months as a Parade performer at Wonderland, an American theme park. I draw on over 2,000 hours of on-the-job fieldwork and many informal conversations with

people in the department. All names in this chapter have been changed to pseudonyms. “Wonderland” is a Disney-like theme park. It boasts attractions for adults and children as well as an array of entertainment. Like Six Flags, Disney, and Universal Studios parks, Wonderland offers its guests the chance to meet characters, see staged shows, and watch traveling parades in the park. I performed in five such shows during my time in the field, working with and observing a couple of hundred performers.

My entrée into Parades was accidental, the result of a failed bid to work as a character in the park. In March 2008, I attended a Wonderland character audition, hoping to get an insider’s view on these performance jobs for a comparative project on actors. I was cut, but one of the casting directors offered me a role in a new medieval parade. Eager to get a foot in the door, I accepted. While I never succeeded in becoming a park character, I did become fascinated with the social world of Parades.

Parade performers engage in physically demanding, repetitious labor. In choreographed movement, performers traverse a set route through the park at a slow pace on or in procession with floats. Choreography is done to short, two- to three-minute songs blasted from speakers on floats and along the route. In a typical, forty-minute parade, performers repeat the same choreography dozens of times. Some roles are more difficult than others, and cast members possess a range of technical dance skills. There is also variation in what is worn, both within and between shows. Some performers are covered head to toe in a heavy costume to look like one of the park’s characters, while others wear more comfortable, lighter, form-fitting costumes that display their faces. Performers work in temperatures ranging from 40 to over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, depending on the time of year. Even in the coldest weather, performers come off the parade route drenched in sweat. Regardless of the weather and weight of the costume – which can exceed 30 pounds – workers must give physically and facially animated performances.

Parade life unfolds in two locations. There is the parade route, a commandeered section of paved walkway through the park that hosts a parade one or more times a day. Then there are the backstage areas performers use to prep and relax. It is in these backstage spaces that performers develop, maintain, and share the culture I describe. The most important of these spaces is Green-13, the Parade department building. Every workday begins and ends here, as does much of the prep work. Green-13 is home to performer time clocks, lockers, costumes, and changing areas. As the primary space for backstage work, Green-13 is an important site in which performers engage in Parade culture.

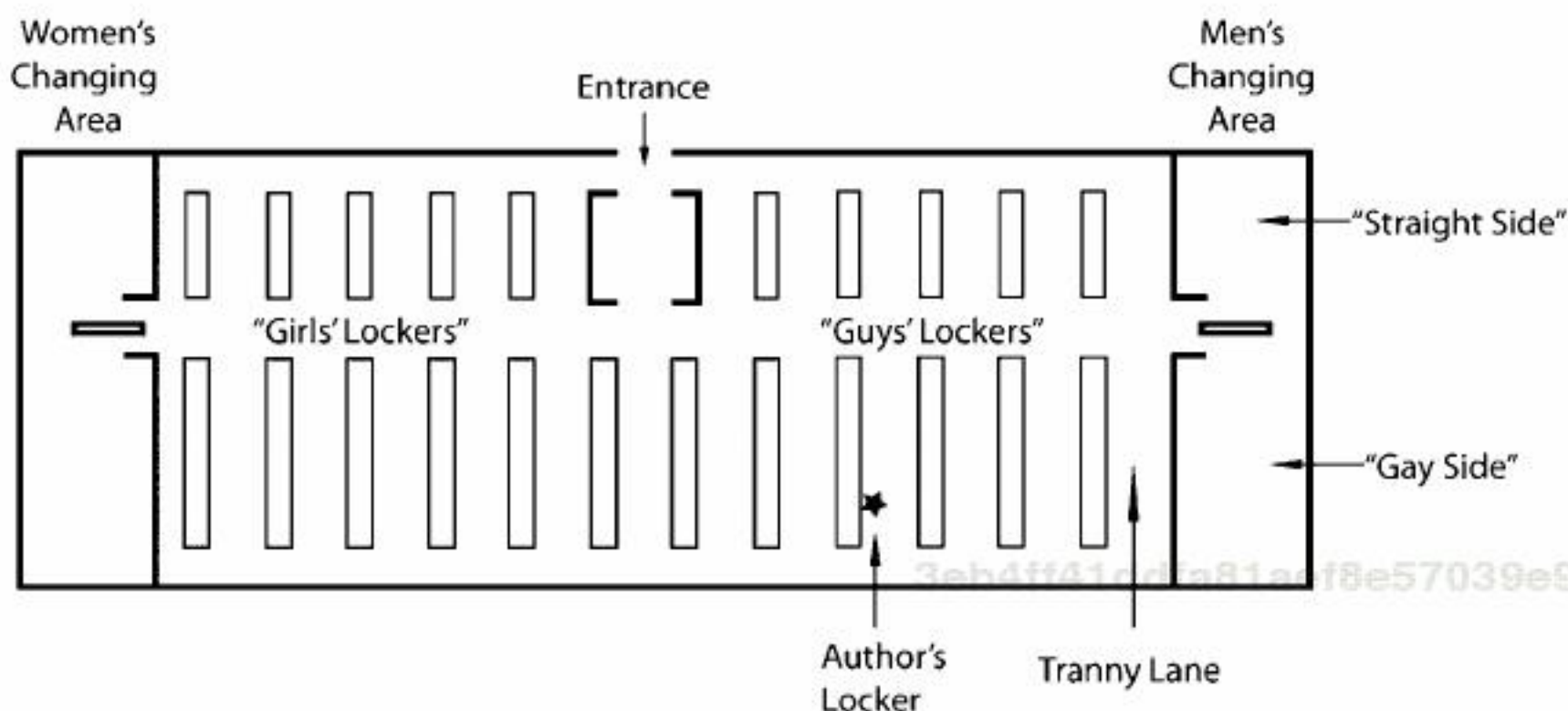


Fig. 1. Performer Locker and Changing Areas. Note: This is a floor plan for one section of Green-13, the building that housed the Parade department. Shown in the figure are the locker aisles and changing areas performers used daily; they were important social spaces and a primary site for the use and dissemination of Parades' homonormative culture. Major places of interest are identified, and discussed later in the chapter. While the figure is not to scale, differences in size are intentional. The "straight side" of the men's changing area, for example, was smaller than the "gay side."

Rows of aqua green lockers fill one large section of the building (see Fig. 1). The main entrance to Green-13 splits the aisles of lockers in half, with "girls' lockers" to the right and "guys' lockers"³ to the left. Bookending the locker aisles are the women's and men's changing areas. The last aisle before the men's changing area is called "Tranny Lane," a well-known location in Green-13 that I describe later in the chapter. The men's changing area is split by a plaster divider. During my fourth parade, the two sides were called the "gay" and "straight" changing areas, labels that reflect the dominant sexual identity of the performers that frequented each. Changing areas were home to much social activity in the half-hour before or after a parade.

There were roughly equal numbers of male and female Parade performers. This was largely structured into the parades themselves because all roles were gendered. Some were explicitly gendered. For example, partnered dancing always took place between a man and a woman. But sometimes the gendering of roles was less clear. While there were no gender-ambiguous characters, the gender of the performer in the costume did not always match the character. In general, however, there was equal gender representation. Racial and ethnic composition of casts was less stable.

Character look-alikes, like Universal Studios' Marilyn Monroe, Six Flags' Batman, and Disney's Cinderella, were the only explicitly racialized roles; otherwise it was easy to replace performers with someone of a different racial or ethnic background. My casts were roughly fifty percent white. Nonwhite performers were mostly Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander, with Black/African-American performers consistently the smallest racial/ethnic group in a cast.

About 80 percent of men in Parades openly identified as gay. This estimate comes from conversations I had with performers about the gay-to-straight male ratio. Some performers guessed a percentage. But on a few different occasions my coworkers and I counted the number of straight-identified men in the parade and compared that to the number of male spots. Men whose declared straight identity was suspect were counted as heterosexual, despite some performers' firm, contrary beliefs. There was also variation in the proportions between shows and within a show, as the cast of a parade was constantly changing.

While male homosexuality was openly performed and discussed, women's homosexuality or bisexuality was not. About five percent of female performers openly identified as lesbian or bisexual, or confided same-gender interests to me in private. It is possible that there were more women who did not identify as heterosexual, but such identities were the exception in Parades.

My reliance on data gathered from prolonged, highly participatory fieldwork provides certain strengths and limitations. Participant observation allows the researcher to see events unfold. I approach sexuality as a product of social interaction (Stein, 1989; Plummer, 1996). While most research on sexual minorities in organizations draws on interviews,⁴ I witnessed firsthand the intimate social interactions that occurred backstage as performers "did" gender and sexuality.

I was, however, constrained by physical space. I could not, for example, observe interactions in the women's changing area. The location of my locker – in the middle of the men's locker aisles – also put me in social contact with men more often than women before and after a parade. My limited access to women's spaces impacts my perception of Parade culture. I also lack systematic interviews, and am unable to make strong claims about how Parade workers interpret and understand the department's culture. I use informal conversations recorded in my notes to incorporate others' experiences in Parades. But in general I keep my discussion grounded in my direct observations of the enactment of gender and sexuality.

CHALLENGING THE CLOSET

Wonderland Parade culture presents an intriguing empirical case of “doing” gender and sexuality at work. It employs a large number of gay-identified men in what is otherwise a traditionally structured, large organization. This stands in stark contrast to the corporate work settings, dominated by heterosexual men, in existing research on sexuality in large organizations (Ward & Winstanley, 2003; Williams et al., 2009; Woods & Lucas, 1993). The department challenges heteronormative masculinity in a few important ways.

Performers share the belief that men are “gay until proven straight”; that is, all men are assumed to be gay. Three factors sustain this belief. First, gay men numerically dominate Parades, accounting for 80 percent of male performers. Second, gay men socially and organizationally dominate Parades. They are show directors, choreographers, managers, and assistant managers. The most popular men in Parades, the men who are well known if not also well liked, are gay. Laying claim to the space with loud, dramatic, and often humorous presence, these men exert considerable social influence at work.

Finally, the Parade department is characterized by a particular homonormativity – ideas and practices that make male gayness appear natural, normal, and right (Ward, 2008a, 2008b). The shared culture of Parades subverts heteronormative masculine dominance in meaningful ways. Wonderland workers recognize that the “gayness” of Parades goes beyond the high concentration of gay-identified men, though they never identify this extra quality as “culture.” The culture includes ironic use of gendered language, discussions of drag and same-gender interests, gay-coded language, stylish fashion, a shared taste in pop divas, and sensibilities of how male bodies should be seen and come into contact at work. These elements of Parade culture challenge a key premise of the epistemology of the closet. That which is “gay” is not marginalized or excluded from the workplace, but central and dominant. This particular homonormativity produces a sort of “gay face,” a collection of popular, digestible stereotypes that challenge hegemonic masculinity and conflate male effeminacy with gayness.

Parade performers often use language in a way that subverts and challenges commonly gendered meanings. Men often talk about one another as “girl” or “gurl,”⁵ reference themselves and others as “she” and “her,” and call close gay friends “sisters.” Nicknames appropriate gendered language. I worked with men known as Margo, J-Lo, and Britney.⁶ “Bitch”

is also frequently used in interaction with and talk about male and female performers, usually without the offensive meaning it carries outside Parades. Dylan talked about practicing for a new parade at home, saying, “You better believe a bitch moved all the couches in her living room to go over parading choreography.” Mike described an overnight rehearsal, saying, “Gurl last night at rehearsal I almost died! All that damn smoke and shit! A bitch can’t see!” The use of “bitch,” “her,” and “gurl” subvert the common gendered meaning these terms have as references to women and as insults to both women and men. In fact, backstage in Parades these gendered terms are rarely negative. That performers, particularly gay men, use gendered language to reference themselves and their friends – performers rarely call a man “gurl” unless there is familiarity – often make them terms of endearment.

Parade life sometimes revolves around discussions of drag. Explicit talk about drag fluctuates in the department, and is usually reserved for conversations about a man’s recent or upcoming drag show. But drag, and the conscious dramatization of gender performance it involves, is more consistently and casually present in the use of *tranny*. Performers conflate doing drag with being a tranny, using the terms interchangeably. Typically, “tranny” is used by men who perform in drag outside of work to reference themselves or other male drag performers.

“Tranny” is most often used to reference a particular place: “Tranny Lane,” the last row of lockers before the men’s changing area. The origin of Tranny Lane’s name is in its “inhabitants,” most of who do or have done drag. It is a well-known landmark in the Parade department, familiar to performers, choreographers, and management.

Performers casually talk about drag and “trannies” at work, and sometimes employ the discourse as a source of humor. One day after parades in the men’s changing area, a couple of men used “tranny” discourse to satirize “The Girls Next Door,” a television show about the Playboy Ranch.

Jack [a gay Tranny Lane resident]: “I want to open a Tranny Ranch.”

Dylan: “Can you call it the Tranch?”

Everyone erupts into loud laughter.

Jack: [with a large grin on his face] “Do I have to pay you royalties if I use it?”

Dylan: “No. Just put my face on the door.”

Jack: “OK.”

Someone cracks a joke about tarantulas being part of the décor, playing on the homophonic qualities of “tranch” and “tarantula.” Someone else sarcastically responds, “That’s real classy.”

Dylan: “You’re having sex with Trannies. How classy can it be?”

David: “They could be classy trannies ...”

Dylan: "Not if I'm the [hiring manager] ... [changing to a short, quick, commanding tone] 'Spread your legs. [short pause.] I'm sorry. Nothing fell out. We can't use you.'" [more laughter.]

The joke begins with a playful combination of the words Tranny and Ranch ("Tranch"). It peaks with Dylan's insistence that the "Tranch" cannot hire "classy" Trannies – that is, men who can carefully hide their sex while in drag. If a man's genitalia do not "fall out" when he spreads his legs, his drag performance is too convincing, too "classy," for Dylan's taste. The appreciation of unconvincing drag performance is part of the joke, the ironic approval of a failed effort.

The Tranch joke is possible because drag, referenced here with the term "tranny," is an important discursive reference in this culture. Humor is culturally constitutive. It requires shared knowledge about the reference so that play on and transgressions regarding the referent are commonly understood.

Despite Dylan's comment that sex with trannies is not "classy," the tone and atmosphere of the joke seemed playful and not intentionally hostile. Everyone in the changing area was friends with one or more of the male drag performers in Parades. Drag performance and "tranny" discourse are common and normalized in this space, so much so that the discussion of the Tranch was both humorous and mundane. The joke lived and died in the changing area. It was just another conversation about trannies and drag in Parades, noteworthy for my field notes but not to circulate around the department.

Parade culture also includes a set of gay-coded terms. New performers need to learn whether a parade is "sexual!" (a good thing) or "a hot mess" (a bad thing). You figure out what it means to "get it." It can be an affirmation; if you get an enviable parade role, someone might acknowledge the achievement saying, "Get it 5-day dancer!"⁷ It can also describe one's performance in a parade. To say "I was *gettin'* it on route today!" is to brag to your coworkers that your choreography was well executed, you felt high energy, and your performance was noteworthy.

The most common gay-coded term is "fierce," a substitute for "cool" or "amazing." Struck by your sense of fashion, a man might say, "Gurl! That shirt is *fierce*!" Brought into many American homes by Bravo's 2008 Project Runway winner Christian Siriano, whose own flamboyant presentation of self reinforced the gay code of this discourse, these terms were already used in certain gay subcultures. Fierce actually became popular in the 1980s' New York City ball scene (wordofthegay.wordpress.com). Its use in Parades exemplifies how performers at times draw on gay subcultures outside of

work to guide workplace interactions in ways that naturalize a homonormative masculinity.

Another element of this homonormative culture is the content of conversation. Gay men openly discuss male crushes and current or former boyfriends. The male body comes under the gaze of performers, and men frequently check out and compliment the bodies of male coworkers. Backstage this manifests as playful flirtation between men. All men are regularly objectified in this way, regardless of sexual identity.

Discussions of sexuality are also explicitly gay or about men. Rarely do straight-identified men boast about their sexual conquests of women. They lack the audience. Such stories would mark them as a “player” among the women in the department. It is far more common to hear gay-identified men talk about their sexual conquests or preferences. They bemoan how long it has been since they last had sex or openly discuss their preferred role (to give or receive) and position. I sat in on conversations about cockrings, oral sex, and the hypothetical or actual physical endowment of male performers. Even humor was highly sexualized in a homonormative way. During the winter holiday season, Domenic sang a modified Christmas song over lunch. Instead of “All I want for Christmas is you,” he crooned “All I want for Christmas is splooge”⁸ to startled snorts of laughter from the table. The joke is shockingly explicit and professes a nonheterosexual desire for another man’s semen. Part of the humor, in fact, is the juxtaposition of this desire with a job that entails promoting heteronormative narratives (especially during a holiday that commercializes heterosexual romantic love and family values).

Performers also talk about a particular type of music. Individual tastes among performers span a broad range of genres and artists. But at work, female pop stars are the most widely shared and discussed set of musicians. Divas like Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Janet Jackson, Britney Spears, and other female singers dominate the music selection for daily pre-parade warm-ups. While not the sole or even most common topic of conversation, these divas nevertheless constitute an important shared reference upon which social interaction and relationships are built. For example, one night before “A Winter Wonderland,” the holiday parade, I watched a young gay man in the costume of a female character do the entire choreography to Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies.” It was, to quote one of the other performers watching, “fierce,” and everyone nearby laughed and applauded.

The Parade department also gets coded as “gay” through male performers’ fashionable attire. As an aesthetic enterprise, fashion, both the type and style of clothing, is constructed as a feminine and gay industry

(Entwistle, 2004). The clothes worn to work, then, become important objects workers at Wonderland use to “do,” ascribe, and conflate gender and sexuality.

Sometimes gay men in Parades explicitly interpret fashion as a sign of sexual identity. One night, I listened to Domenic, who is biracial (Latino and African-American), and Jon, who is Asian American, discuss the sexuality of Will, a white coworker with whom we had been hanging out earlier in the evening.

“He’s definitely gay,” Domenic says.

“How do you know?” I ask.

Domenic tells me to look at how Will was dressed tonight. (Will had worn a designer button-down shirt, designer jeans, and cowboy boots.) I point out that Dawson, my straight, white roommate and our coworker, is a smart dresser. Domenic acknowledges this is true, but insists there is a difference in how Will and Dawson dress, one he believes reflects a difference in sexual identity. But when I press him to explain, he cannot articulate the difference. More importantly, his interpretation needs no justification in Parades. The department’s culture lends itself to and legitimates such readings as appropriate and “natural.”

A man’s interest in fashion, then, opens the doors to question his sexuality because it transgresses traditional masculinity. Fashion’s association with many of the openly gay-identified performers and more generally as a gay industry helps explain the impulse to read dress as a sign of sexual identity. A well-put-together outfit, fitted and made of designer pieces, becomes a material set of gay-coded symbols in much the same way that pictures of kids are read as symbols of heterosexuality (Woods & Lucas, 1993).

Beyond the general association of looking good with being gay, there are a few specific props men, usually gay men, frequently include in their outfit. Several men wear tight, brightly colored Capri pants to work. Oversized sunglasses are common, especially the day after a big party. Scarves, handbags, and clutches are also frequent accessories. Combined, these props are an arsenal of gay-coded objects that men often deploy in the performance of a particular homonormative masculinity, one that at times is diva-esque in its execution.

Performers also share a sensibility about how men’s bodies should be seen at work that departs from heteronormative masculinity. Catwalking, for example – dramatically stalking around as if one is on a fashion runway – was familiar backstage. Men might strike a dramatic pose in conversation, or covertly try on female wigs.⁹ Such performances contest traditional

notions of how the male body should move (with hips snapping left to right pausing only so the body can strike a pose) or look, and place men's bodies on direct display at work.

There are other, more subtle ways in which men "do" nonhegemonic masculinity. I was in the field a year before I even became aware of them, in part because I lacked a vocabulary to identify them. Jason, a gay Parade performer from Tranny Lane, brought them to my attention. During an audition, we watched two gay coworkers talk and flirt. Several people had already commented on how alike both young men were, though they had never met before today. Jason pointed out that they both "clutch the pearls" when they laugh, lightly placing one hand on their upper chest, palm open, where it is easy to imagine a pearl necklace might hang. He also noted how they "pop the hip," shifting their weight to one side so that their hips stuck out. After that audition, I noticed other men in the department engaging in similar performances.

The sensibility (conscious or not) regarding masculinity and male bodies is another way in which sexuality is inferred by coworkers. "Popping the hip" is particularly important in Parades. Hips are constructed as a feminized body part in American culture. Perhaps this relates to their association with child bearing, how the body moves while in heels, or the way in which they get sexualized such that hips in motion suggests a body out of control, the opposite of heteronormative masculinity that emphasizes control and restraint. Whatever the reason, there is a definite sense that hips play a role in the performance of male sexual identity.

This sensibility includes physical contact between men. During downtime before, between, and after parades gay men would sometimes rest on one another, heads on shoulders or in laps. Backstage, some men would hold each other's hands or stand embraced while they talked. For a few weeks, before our call time, one young gay performer would come find me seated on the floor chatting with some friends and curl up like a cat between my legs, one of my thighs acting as a pillow. The first time he did this, he caused a brief pause in our conversation. But then we shrugged as if to say, "OK. Only here." In general, performers recognized that "only in Wonderland Parades" would these things be so mundane. Sometimes interactions were more overtly sexual, like occasional groping. I was startled the first time someone grabbed my butt. By the time I left, I did not flinch. All men, regardless of sexual identity, occasionally received similar treatment and sometimes initiated it with another male coworker. In any other workplace the behavior might be inappropriate. But playful, sexualized contact was so common in Parades that it lost its taboo.

PASSING IN PARADES: STRAIGHT MEN IN A “GAY” WORK CULTURE

The dominance of a homonormative culture in Parades subordinates male heterosexuality to male homosexuality. Outside Parades, gay men face many situations where they must choose to “pass” as straight through careful performance and impression management or to endure social stigma. Straight-identified men encounter a similar experience when they come to work in Parades. Though few claim a counterfeit gay identity, straight men use the shared props, practices, and discourses available at work in ways that render their sexuality somewhat ambiguous.

Flirting is one important way straight men playfully challenge heteronormative masculinity through common workplace interactions. It might be a light, playful brush up a gay man’s neck, a locker room serenade, a sexual invitation that goes unfulfilled, or a joke that gets as far as a straight performer dropping to his knees in front of a gay coworker, mouth open. However far it goes, straight men find ways to engage in flirtatious play with gay men in the department, play that occasionally leads others to say, “Sometimes I wonder about (insert name) ...”

Straight men also employ discursive elements of Parade culture. After receiving some playful attitude from Petey (a gay man), Thomas (a straight man) loudly shot back with a smile, “Ever since she got [a new spot], she thinks she’s all that.” Another night, while hanging out with Domenic at his apartment, Timmy, his straight roommate and fellow Parade performer, got ready to turn in after a long day at his second job as a volunteer fire fighter. He bid us goodnight, adding, “She’s tired. She was swinging a pick for eight hours today,” in a feigned whine. We all paused before breaking up in laughter. This is a man whose deep, mellow voice and frequent use of “dude” would better fit a stereotypical southern California surfer. It is also not uncommon to hear straight men say “fierce” or “get it” backstage, often with a sense of irony that recognizes how these terms play with, and potentially challenge, traditional conceptions of heteronormative masculinity.

In order to really fit in, straight men must engage with this homonormative work culture. Although this requires them to perform a different – more “feminine” – version of masculinity than they might otherwise choose, they seemed comfortable enough doing it. A couple of straight men even admitted they enjoyed the attention – and I believe that others did, too, given the general willingness of Parade workers, gay and straight, to engage in the culture.

NOT “THE ONLY GIRL”: STRAIGHT WOMEN IN PARADES

The homonormative masculinity that characterized Parades also impacted the work lives of women. My limited access to women’s spaces in the department meant I was not consistently exposed to the same intimate social interactions among women, nor could I observe women engage with the homonormative culture of Parades in the same way I could observe men. Despite these limitations, I did capture – through observation and informal conversations – some important experiences women had in this “gay” department. Many women had one or more gay best friends, someone to cuddle, hold hands, and exchange kisses with backstage. They sometimes shared pet names, referring to each other as “husband” and “wife.” Occasionally two female friends would playfully fight over a gay coworker, each claiming him as her boyfriend.

I got the sense midway through my fieldwork that women felt physically comfortable and possibly “safe” in this work culture. Performers could (and sometimes had to) change out of their costume in an outdoor backstage area immediately after a parade. The changing space was enclosed by buildings on three sides and a series of head carts on the fourth.¹⁰ Several carts in a row block most views that non-Parade workers might have as they walked by. Performers could take a backstage shuttle to Green-13 to change, but most women undressed next to their male coworkers without hesitation.

The sexual identities of gay men also rendered their flirtations safe. Lacking “real” intention, gay men’s intimate contact was not received as sexual harassment from what I could tell. One afternoon, Abbey, a straight woman, and Ben, a gay man, got into a playful fight. What began as light slapping quickly dissolved into a wrestling match, both struggling and sometimes laughing as they groped each other’s chest, butt, and crotch. Though rare, I saw gay men grab women’s breasts backstage. Sometimes gay men were invited to cop a feel. For Sonia and PJ, it was a routine part of their friendship, a dynamic I expect made easier by the fact that coworkers often called PJ the “gayest” Parade performer.

When I asked women how they felt about these interactions, no one admitted to feeling sexually harassed. And there were no known instances of performers being fired for harassment during my time in the field. This does not mean that women enjoyed or were comfortable with the attention. It indicates that the behavior was normalized and constructed as acceptable, rather than inappropriate, in this space (Dellinger & Williams, 2002).

The homonormativity of Parades also allows straight-identified women to more openly express their sexuality. As I have already described, this culture objectifies the male body and normalizes sexual and romantic interests in men. Sharing similar, if not the same, sexual and romantic interests creates common ground for straight women and gay men. Many straight women bonded with gay male coworkers over lunch discussing who they think is attractive in the department. Some women admitted a need to “get laid” or “hook up.” On more than one occasion I heard a table of straight women join gay men in a discussion over who could “deep throat”¹¹ the most. In general, I observed that women in this workplace were not as open or explicit about their sexuality as gay men, but they seemed able and willing to express sexuality in Parades, perhaps more than they would in other workplaces.

Several straight women described the advantages of working in a homonormative department. In a group of gay men, some women do not feel like “the only girl.” Jade, a straight performer, admitted she loved working in Parades: she is a flirtatious person, she said, and her flirtations do not get “misinterpreted” by her gay male coworkers as they might by straight men. Sonia expressed similar feelings, noting that the absence of sexual interest on the part of gay men made work friendships easier. Abbey, the straight woman whose wrestling match with Ben became quite physical, felt that it was easier to talk about sex with her gay male coworkers. Versions of these ideas were expressed by other women in Parades, and support the idea that challenges to heteronormative masculinity impact both men and women at work.

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AESTHETIC CHALLENGES TO HETERONORMATIVE MASCULINITY

The challenges that Parade culture pose to workplace heteronormativity produce a particular aesthetic; a camping of gender and sexuality performances. Theatricality, style, and irony comingled with flamboyant gender performances in social interaction. This is not camp as an aesthetic of consumption, but camp as performed aesthetic, as an enacted sensibility (Dyer, 2002; Ross, [1988] 1993; Sontag, [1964] 1999).

Elements of Parade culture take on this camp aesthetic. Performers often used gendered language with a sense of irony. Referencing a man as “she” or “girl” intentionally mislabels that which is known (i.e., someone’s

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gender). This kind of inversion plays with the meaning of conventional gender categories (Johnsen, 2008). Performers also play with and invert the derogatory meanings of gendered terms. When a performer raves about a coworker saying, “I *love* that bitch,” or proclaims him- or herself as “such a bitch” with a smile and tone of pride, it is rarely mean spirited. In fact, being “bitchy” backstage in a job that demands a sweet, happy onstage disposition employs irony to challenge management’s demand for smiles on the parade route. It is a dramatic, theatrical way of highlighting one’s skill in performing happy and nice by suggesting that he or she is anything but these things.

The conflation of femininity and gayness in this particular homonormative culture seems to reify stereotypical femininity. But Parade culture does more than reproduce the feminine. It *camp*s the feminine. Performances of masculinity include *theatrical* femininity laced with irony, which is distinct from emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987). Drag, fashion, and female divas are all closely associated with forms of camping femininity in popular gay culture (Kates, 1997, 2001; Sontag, [1964] 1999). This flair for theatricality and irony position Parade culture in clear opposition to the heteronormative masculinity found in many workplaces.

Implicit in the gender performances of Parades are assumptions about both race and masculinity. The culture challenges white heteronormative masculinity through the appropriation of racialized forms of popular culture (Lopes, 2002; Watkins, 1994). The expressive, theatrical, stylish, and sometimes flamboyant aesthetic involved in camping gender performances appropriates elements of historically black popular culture (Gay, 1987; White & White, 1998; Yearwood, 1987). “Fierce” and drag have roots in the 1980s’ New York City Ball scene, dominated by men of color. Pop divas that dominate shared workplace music taste are women of color (e.g., Beyoncé and Janet Jackson), or white women (e.g. Britney Spears and Lady Gaga) whose work draw on historically black musical styles. Even the association of style with masculinity reflects a racialized challenge; contemporary popular culture often conflates the styles of people of color with what is *in*-style (Malone, 1996; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Willis, 1993).

The relationship between gender, sexuality, and race in Parades became apparent one afternoon before work. Topher, my straight black friend, and I were talking about Tee, a black assistant manager and performer in other Wonderland shows. Tee was popular – well known and well liked by many performers. He was facially and vocally expressive on and off the parade route, and used “fierce” with ease. A sharp dresser whose outfits were sometimes accessorized with a stylish scarf, Tee’s performance of

masculinity at work had many elements that would mark him as a gay man. During my conversation with Topher, I casually referenced Tee as one of the gay men in the department. “Tee’s not gay,” Topher interrupted to correct me. “He’s just black.”

Any white man giving the same performance of masculinity at work would struggle to convince his coworkers that he was straight. Fashionable scarves, in particular, undermine such a claim since they only served an aesthetic – as opposed to a functional – purpose. Recall how Will’s good taste in fashion conflicted with commonly held beliefs regarding the heteronormative masculinity of white men. But for Tee, fashion, facial and physical expressiveness offstage, and ease in using “fierce” were signs of his racial, and not sexual, identity: he’s not gay, he’s black.

Challenges to white heteronormativity are also evident in the social hierarchy of Parades. Men of color are overrepresented among “popular” performers relative to their numeric representation in the department. Though white men accounted for about 50 percent of male performers, the proportion of popular male performers that were white was significantly less. Men of color better exemplified the hegemonic performances of masculinity in the department. This gives further evidence of the racialization of Parade culture. Men of color were seen as having the “right” style and sensibility, which made their relatively high representation among popular performers “natural.”

REPRODUCING THE CLOSET

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The success of Parade culture in undermining the epistemology of the closet is tempered by the fact that the “gay until proven straight” rule and the factors that legitimate its dominance in Parades reinforce the basic binary opposition upon which the closet is built (Sedgwick, 1990). The gay/straight binary continues to be the basis for understanding social relations (Sedgwick, 1990). The process of coding something in Parades as “gay” draws on the epistemology of the closet. While the labeling process occurs through social interaction within the department’s social and physical boundaries, it is accomplished with repertoires people bring in from outside. So although certain dynamics of the closet change in this space, the basic principle – that people and things are gay *or* straight, known or unknown, spoken or silenced – is reproduced.

Reification of the closet through the “gay until proven straight” rule happens first on a discursive level: men are *gay* until proven *straight*.

These are the two primary means through which men's behavior are classified. During the run of one parade, there was a "gay side" and a "straight side" to the men's changing area. Compared to the rest of Wonderland, Parades was a "gay" department, implicitly labeling others as "straight." Even describing oneself as performing "with a gay smile," as Domenic did during our break one afternoon, serves to sort the social world into one of two categories, even when the object or act labeled is not about same- or cross-gender attraction.

The homo/hetero binary also occurs in the construction and ascription of men's sexual identity. There is little room for performers to claim a bisexual identity that others accept. Men are seen as either gay or straight. Rarely do performers directly disavow the possibility of male bisexuality. Instead, it is discredited through suggestion. I heard performers challenge a man's bisexual identity claims saying, "He *says* he's bi," in a tone that silently added a "but" disclaimer. In general, bisexuality seemed to be interpreted as confusion or a place of transition rather than a legitimate sexual identity.

Performers try to discern and sort the sexual identity of new men in Parades into the gay/straight binary. Gay men in particular are quick to conflate performances of gender and sexuality among male coworkers. Performance of nontraditional masculinities through engagement with gay-coded repertoires are read as signs of a gay identity, even though the rules of hegemonic masculinity in Parades legitimate campy male femininity as the "right" way to do masculinity. Every claim to a straight identity is questioned at some point. Challenges are rarely direct, even if many performers agree with Dominic that "if they say they're straight, then they're straight ... even if I know better." Instead, rumor and speculation circulate through the department as performers question male coworkers' claims to a heterosexual identity. Markers that would guarantee a straight identity in other workplaces, like a wife and children, could not stave off rumors that Abel was "in the closet." His flamboyant masculinity, locker on Tranny Lane, and handbag were all too powerfully coded as gay to allow him a questions-free straight identity.

The continued reference to gay sexuality in this workplace is a challenge to the epistemology of the closet, but it also reinforces the notion that homosexuality is male (Sedgwick, 1990). The Parade department is widely understood by performers to be a gay *male* space. Women's same-gender interests and desires are rendered invisible, as "gay" refers to male not female homosexuality. There were a few lesbian-identified women among performers; their limited presence was paired with a limited degree of openness. The homonormativity of the department, which valorizes the

“campy” feminine, provided cultural repertoires that reinforced the conflation of biological femaleness with heterosexuality.

This has two implications for the silencing of lesbianism. First, it means that the general rule for women is still “straight until proven gay.” Second, it increases pressure on women to silence their own nonheterosexual interests. A few women quietly confided crushes on other women to me, not wanting it to get around the department. Even “out” lesbians found it difficult to openly act on or discuss these same-gender attractions. “It’s hard being a lesbian here,” one white woman said with resignation, noting there were few who shared her interests. So while Wonderland Parade culture challenges the marginalization of male homosexuality, women continue to work within the traditional confines of the closet and the dominance of heterosexuality over homosexuality.

The homonormative masculinity that characterized Parades also marginalized other ways of performing “gayness.” Men in Parades draw on and subsequently reify popular associations between flamboyant effeminacy and “gayness.” This serves to exclude other ways of “doing gayness” – this is not a department of bears, faeries, or leather daddies (Hennen, 2008). These sexualities are subordinated as much as women’s same-sex interests.

The coding of Parades as a gay department by workers in and out of the department also obscures the importance of race. Doing gender and sexuality in Parades is about rejecting white heteronormative masculinity. However, the elements of popular culture important to performances of gender and sexuality in Parades appropriate black ideas, style, aesthetic, and practice. While sexual identity may enjoy greater visibility in Parades, the role of race is marginalized and forced into a different closet. If Sedgwick is correct in asserting that the world is divided along the gay/straight binary so that things are known/unknown, spoken/unspoken, race replaces sexuality as the unknown, unspoken factor in Parades.

Performers are aware of race more generally. They joke about race and racial stereotypes, typically referencing themselves or their friends. But the connections between race, gender, and sexuality are rarely made. The day that Topher corrects me – saying “Tee’s not gay. He’s just black.” – is a rare moment when the link is explicit. My mistake was viewing Tee’s performance of masculinity through a white, heteronormative aesthetic lens. Any straight-identified white man engaged in a similar performance of masculinity as Tee (think back to the story of Will, for example) would have his sexual identity called into question. Rarely did performers reflect on the racialization of masculinity in play. The importance of race to the

performance of gender and sexuality means that Parade culture challenges *white* heteronormative masculinity.

CONCLUSION

The culture of Wonderland Parades is an intriguing case of gender and sexuality at work. On the one hand, Parades' homonormativity challenges the subordination and exclusion of homosexuality in the workplace. The work culture upends the power dynamic of the gay/straight dichotomy, subordinating heteronormative masculinity in a social domain it typically claims. Many performers experience very real benefits from this power shift, including greater acceptance, visibility, and ease at work. These victories are tempered by the equally real fact that the culture continues to legitimate the gay/straight dichotomy, privilege *male* over *female* homosexuality, and exclude/silence other performances of gender and sexuality. Parade culture also renders race invisible despite its mediating role in the conflation of gender performance with sexual identity.

Challenges to heteronormative masculinity are spatially limited and bound to the park. Off Wonderland property, performers encounter a world that continues to privilege heteronormativity. In some ways this increases the value of Parades. An extraordinary workplace that values and legitimates certain manifestations of "gayness" as normative, its rarity makes it all the more precious for those who fit in.

More generally, however, this chapter demonstrates the degree to which a numerically dominant minority group can challenge traditional power dynamics at work through workplace culture. Workers can influence hegemonic rules of interaction and shape *how* work gets done. But the large presence of gay men does not guarantee equality. As we see in Wonderland Parades, swapping one culture for another can reproduce silence and exclusion. While the numeric dominance of a minority group has the potential to create workplace equality, in practice it may fall short.

This chapter raises some unanswered questions about homonormative work culture that deserve attention. I have described one cultural repertoire that marks a workplace as "gay." But there is more than one way to "do gayness" and challenge white heteronormativity (e.g., Hennen, 2008). Future research can explore the governing social dynamics of other homonormative work cultures, and where (geographically, occupationally, and socially) they occur. Research suggests, for example, that the performing arts allow and may even enable nonheteronormative performances of

gender and sexuality (Burt, 1995; Pascoe, 2007). We should also begin to examine social and historical forces that enable the development of heteronormative masculine work cultures and their alternatives. Such inquiry allows us to further unpack the structural basis of these cultures and the embeddedness of race, class, gender, and sexuality within those structures. Finally, we need to critically explore the ways in which work organizations capitalize on local, worker-produced cultures to garner worker consent, extract additional labor, or serve a specific group of consumers.

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NOTES

1. All names in this chapter have been changed.

2. Throughout the chapter, I refer to the Parade department as “Parades.” The capital “P” is intentional; it distinguishes the department from the activity, in the same way that we might differentiate between Marketing (the department) and marketing (the activity). When I discuss “parades,” I reference the shows themselves, not the department organized around the shows.

3. These were the labels used by performers and management to reference these areas. Despite the label, a few men and women were assigned lockers on the “wrong” (cross-gender) side. I believe the company’s goal was to separate men and women and reduce the risk of someone changing in or out of costume around a member of the opposite sex. However, if there were no lockers on the gender-appropriate aisles, newly hired performers were given lockers on the “other” side.

4. A few notable exceptions include Lerum, 2004; Ward, 2008a, 2008b; Yeung et al., 2006.

5. The “u” in “gurl” elongates the “er” sound of “girl.”

6. These nicknames reference famous female pop stars: Margaret Cho, Jennifer Lopez, and Britney Spears, respectively.

7. Parade performers regularly discuss their “spot,” which is a combination of their role(s) and their schedule in this/these role(s). A “5-day dancer,” for example, is someone scheduled in the role of dancer five days a week. Dance spots were often seen as the “best” spots, requiring greater technical dance skill.

8. Slang term for semen or male ejaculate.

9. Wonderland policy prohibits performers from wearing any costume or wig not assigned to them. Failure to adhere to this rule can result in a discipline up to termination of employment. However, performers sometimes ignored this rule and, despite the threat, no one I knew was fired.

10. Head carts are wheeled storage containers that look remarkably similar to the luggage carts towed between terminals and planes on airport runways. About 8 feet long, 6 feet wide, and 7 feet tall, they house costumes and character heads (hence the name).

11. The ability to fit the entire penis – tip to base – in one’s mouth while performing oral sex on a man.

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