

RUSTY BARRETT

FROM DRAG QUEENS TO LEATHERMEN

LANGUAGE, GENDER, AND GAY MALE SUBCULTURES



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From Drag Queens to Leathermen

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From Drag Queens to Leathermen: Language, Gender, and Gay Male

Subcultures

Rusty Barrett

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LANGUAGE, GENDER, AND GAY MALE
SUBCULTURES

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For Albert Zapata

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SERIES FOREWORD

Oxford's series Studies in Language, Gender, and Sexuality provides a broad-based interdisciplinary forum for the best new scholarship on language, gender, and sexuality. The mandate of the series is to encourage innovative work in the field, a goal that may be achieved through the revisitation of familiar topics from fresh vantage points, through the introduction of new avenues of research, or through new theoretical or methodological frameworks. The series is interdisciplinary in its scope: volumes may be authored by scholars in such disciplines as anthropology, communication, education, feminist and gender studies, linguistics, literary studies, psychology, queer studies, race and ethnic studies, and sociology, and other fields.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

The study of gender is necessarily also the study of sexuality. Yet for many years the intimate connection between gender and sexuality, which was evident at least as subtext in a wealth of studies conducted within language and gender studies, remained largely unacknowledged and unexplored. With the advent of feminist poststructuralism, the profound influence of Judith Butler's work reverberated throughout the social sciences and humanities, yet beyond a relatively small group of scholars—Rusty Barrett key among them—gender and sexuality have often continued to be investigated separately.

In *From Drag Queens to Leathermen: Language, Gender, and Gay Male Subcultures*, Rusty Barrett convincingly demonstrates not simply the analytic benefit but the theoretical necessity of approaching gender and sexuality as deeply interlinked phenomena. Barrett's work represents a critical shift in the field by placing gender and sexuality on equal footing. In examining precisely how gay men within different subcultures simultaneously participate in semiotic systems of gender and of sexuality—and, just as important, in systems of race, class, and other sociopolitical structures—he shows the impossibility of bracketing any part of social identity to focus exclusively on sexuality or gender.

The resulting book is an astonishingly rich and nuanced examination of the complex relationship among language, gender, and sexuality that underlies the many different ways of being gay in the United States. Barrett's extraordinarily broad and deep investigation, the culmination of nearly two decades of fieldwork and scholarly research, makes an essential contribution to both linguistic and nonlinguistic studies of sexuality by calling attention to the diversity of gay men's ideologies and practices as well as the crucial role of language in indexing specific subcultural identities. Challenging conventional accounts that too often treat "gay identity" as unproblematically monolithic, Barrett reveals how cultural signs of masculinity and, at times, femininity are enlisted to semiotically produce a wide range of gay male subjectivities. In so doing, he clearly and compellingly lays out the theoretical and political implications of this enlarged understanding of gay identities as plural rather than singular. Throughout the volume, Barrett shows how the wide variety of subcultures that he discusses—drag queens, radical faeries, bears, circuit boys, barebackers, and leathermen—are sometimes in alignment and sometimes in opposition in their understandings of what it means to be a gay man.

First and foremost, *From Drag Queens to Leathermen* is a deeply insightful and finely observed ethnography of gay male subcultures that have been variously sensationalized, vilified, misunderstood, misrepresented, dismissed, and ignored by heteronormative society. But it is also a major theoretical statement by a leading scholar of language, gender, and sexuality. Barrett's brilliant reworking of Butler's concept of performativity and the linguistic concept of indexicality helps move the field in exciting and productive new directions by providing a sophisticated theoretical understanding of the semiotics of language, embodiment, and materiality in constituting social selves and others.

As those readers familiar with his work already know, Barrett is not only a formidable scholar but also a skilled storyteller, and the story he tells about language, gender, and sexuality in the following pages is engrossing, often startling, and always illuminating. In crafting his argument, he seamlessly blends queer theory and linguistics, ethnography and semiotic analysis, the embodied reality of sexuality and the theoretical and political projects for which it has been pressed into service. A timely and necessary contribution to the study of language, gender, and sexuality, *From Drag Queens to Leathermen* is both a remarkable scholarly achievement and a generous and deeply human account of the diversity and complexity of gay men's social and sexual lives.

Mary Bucholtz
Series Editor

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This book would not have been possible without support from numerous individuals and institutions. Preliminary research for this book was supported by a Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Humanities and Humanistic Social Sciences in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Chicago. Additional support came from the College of Arts and Sciences and the English Department at the University of Kentucky.

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TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

.	End of intonation unit, falling intonation
?	End of intonation unit, rising intonation
H	Rising intonation
H*	High-pitch accent
L*	Low-pitch accent
<[]>	Phonetic transcription
(.)	Pause of 0.5 seconds or less
(n.n)	Measured pause greater than 0.5 seconds
<>	Obscured speech or speech removed for reasons of anonymity
()	gestures or other extralinguistic information

From Drag Queens to Leathermen

Introduction

Although it was once common to refer to *gay subculture* in the singular, the assumption of a single, uniform, gay subculture is now rare in academic writing.¹ Indeed, as early as 1979, Laud Humphreys, known for his groundbreaking sociological studies of male homosexual behavior, argued against using the term subculture to refer to gay male communities. His reasoning included issues with the then-current theoretical working definition and connotations of subculture, which was used primarily in studies of “violent offenders, delinquent gangs, and other criminal or ‘deviant’ groups” (Humphreys 1979: 139). He also felt that the term gay subculture failed to account for the existence of a variety of distinct subcultures within the gay community:

[T]here are a number of well-defined subcultures operating *within* the gay world: a diverse array that includes lesbian feminists, gay academics, suburban couples, street hustlers, drag queens and gay bikers. (1979: 140; original emphasis)

Humphreys proposed the term *satellite culture* (which he borrowed from T. S. Eliot 1949) to refer to an intermediary type of culture that is distinct from hegemonic dominant culture but also contains its own subcultures. However, gay subcultures may also have their own sub-subcultures. Drag queen subculture, for example, includes a number of distinct (sub-)subcultures, such as *glam queens* (who project a sophisticated, upper-class image), *trash queens* or *clown queens* (who perform comic routines and dress in outrageous, exaggerated costumes), and *street queens* (who work primarily in prostitution and dress accordingly).

Categories of social identity are hierarchical (see Abrams 1999; Tajfel 1981); for example, gay men are a subcategory of men, drag queens are a

subcategory of gay men, glam queens are a subcategory of drag queens, and so on. The focus of *From Drag Queens to Leathermen* is on groups that can be seen as subcategories of gay men. Of course, there are also subcategories of gay men that arise through the intersection of sexual identity and other social groups unrelated to sexual orientation (such as Asian American gay men, gay male professional athletes, or gay male Catholics). The subcultures in this book, however, do not involve such intersections; in the discussion that follows, subcultural identity entails identification as a gay man. Thus the notion of a “straight circuit boy,” for example, is an oxymoron as being a circuit boy entails being gay.

The contemporary study of subcultures emerges from work in urban ethnography and the study of “social deviance” conducted by social scientists at the University of Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s. Although this research considered a variety of forms of “deviance,” especially criminality, the Chicago school also produced a number of important detailed ethnographic studies of sexual subcultures (see Rubin 2002). In the 1970s, the Birmingham school of subcultural studies emerged, focusing less on deviance and more on the relationships between social class and adolescence. The Birmingham school challenged the emphasis on morality and deviance in the work of the Chicago school and focused on the ways in which subcultures may serve as a form of youth resistance, particularly among boys (see Gelder 2007; Halberstam 2005). The Birmingham school emphasized the political implications of style (see Hebdige 1979), a theme that is also important in this book. However, the emphasis on youth in research on subcultures limits the applicability of theories of subculture for adult gay men, whose experience with dominant culture is quite different from that of heterosexual adolescents. In fact, Jack Halberstam (2005) sees the study of queer subcultures as a way of challenging dominant understandings of youth and adolescence. Because lesbians and gay men may participate in subcultures well into adulthood, Halberstam argues against a view in which “youth cultures” represent a stage or phase in the process of reaching adulthood.

In addition to being subsets of larger dominant communities, subcultures are generally seen as being in opposition to hegemonic culture. Subcultures are thus associated with counterpublic discourses (see Warner 2002) that interact with dominant public discourses. The oppositional relationship between counterpublics and publics is not static, however, and the relationships between subcultures and dominant cultures are regularly contested and altered. The subcultures examined in this book are positioned not only in opposition to dominant heteronormative culture, but also in opposition to dominant understandings of gay male culture. They can therefore be seen as “counter-counterpublics” that challenge the normative ideologies that dominate gay male counterpublics. A subculture like bears (discussed in Chapter 4), for example, challenges heteronormative assumptions of class and

gender while also challenging gay male norms concerning physical attractiveness and sexual desirability. Similarly, barebackers (discussed in Chapter 6) challenge gay male ideologies of sexual responsibility as well as heteronormative ideologies about morality and sexual behavior. Thus, in addition to being subgroups within an imagined gay community, the subcultures considered in the following chapters are socially positioned in opposition to both heteronormative culture and hegemonic forms of gay male culture. At the same time, these subcultures may also reproduce some aspects of larger ideological systems. Moreover, as I argue throughout this book, gay male subcultures are crucially constituted through language.

From Drag Queens to Leathermen focuses on six specific gay male subcultures: drag queens, radical faeries, bears, circuit boys, barebackers, and leathermen. Drag queen subculture, the focus of Chapter 2, involves non-normative gender presentation, including cross-dressing and the adoption of a feminine style and demeanor. Although drag queens may public present themselves as “women,” they typically identify as gay men, although the boundaries between these categories are not always clear-cut (see Valentine 2007). Chapter 3 considers the radical faeries, a subculture grounded in Neopagan and New Age religious movements. Radical faerie identity involves, in part, language that positions faeries in opposition to Christianity. Like many New Age movements, radical faeries appropriate widely from other cultures and religious traditions. Radical faerie identity emerges from the network of relationships among various forms of appropriation. In particular, the appropriation of Native American understandings of gender serve to position radical faeries as being outside of hegemonic gay male culture, which they feel encourages gay men to imitate forms of heterosexual masculinity. Bear subculture, examined in Chapter 4, is founded on a gay male identity that celebrates being heavyset and hairy and is thus in opposition to the ideals of the body in gay male culture. Chapter 5 examines language ideology among circuit boys, a subculture revolving around gay dance parties similar to raves. Chapter 6 examines barebackers, a more recently established subculture built around a refusal to use condoms during anal intercourse; in this way, barebacker identity challenges hegemonic ideologies in the area of public health. Leatherman subculture (discussed in Chapter 7) is built on alternative sexual practices, including clothing fetishes, sadomasochism, and bondage–domination. These subcultures by no means represent the full spectrum of various gay male subcultures, but have been chosen so as to provide a representative set of case studies to examine the ways in which language serves to variously support and challenge dominant understandings of gender and gay male identity.²

The focus of this work is primarily on manifestations of gay male subcultures in North American contexts, although all of the subcultures I analyze are international to some extent. Moreover, with the exception of drag queens,

the subcultures examined here are generally dominated by white, middle-class gay men. Although Chapter 2 focuses on African American drag queens, the case studies in other chapters focus primarily on white gay men. However, race and ethnicity are also important in understanding normative identity within white-dominated subcultures, where the social construction of whiteness may unintentionally restrict participation from gay men of color (see Bérubé 2001). The appropriation of white, Southern working-class symbols among bears, for example, may make bear subculture seem less inviting to many gay men who are not themselves white. Finally, the subcultures discussed in the following chapters are for the most part gender exclusive, so that participation by women is rare or entirely absent. For drag queens, bears, and barebackers, subcultural identity entails male gender identity. Women are not consciously excluded from participation in circuit parties but circuit subculture is so dominated by gay male masculinity that few women participate. Leather subculture is certainly not exclusively male: Lesbians, bisexual, and heterosexual women are involved in leather culture. However, the discussion of leatherman subculture presented in Chapter 7 focuses on the International Mr. Leather contest, a context in which women's participation is quite rare. As with issues of race and ethnicity, however, gender plays a central role in gay male subcultures, even in exclusively male social contexts.

This chapter outlines the theoretical background that serves as a basis for the case studies that follow. After outlining the approach to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) taken in much of sociocultural linguistics, the chapter introduces the concepts of *performativity* and *indexicality*, which are basic to the analyses that follow, and discusses their implications for understanding gender ideology, social normativity, the social construction of community and ideologies concerning language use. I then discuss my research methods and my own position as a gay male researcher. Finally, the chapter provides an overview of the subcultures under examination and outlines the remainder of the volume.

Language and Gender in Gay Male Communities

Early studies of gay male and lesbian language emphasized “secret” language or argot and tended to focus on the existence of slang terms within gay and lesbian communities (for reviews, see Barrett 2006; Jacobs 1996; Kulick 2000; Livia and Hall 1997; Queen 2007). Such studies examined what M. A. K. Halliday called *anti-languages*, or “special forms of language generated by some kind of anti-society” (Halliday 1976: 570). He notes that anti-languages are learned only through resocialization into such “anti-societies”:

An anti-language, however, is nobody's “mother tongue”; it exists solely in the context of *resocialization*, and the reality it creates is inherently an

alternate reality, one that is constructed precisely in order to function in alternation. It is the language of an anti-society. (1976: 575)

The potential for language to create an alternative understanding of reality is important for understanding LGBT forms of language. However, the concept of an anti-society fails to capture the complexity of the relationship between LGBT counterpublics and dominant forms of heteronormativity. Anti-languages allow for “secret” communication regarding subcultural social practices associated with nonnormative forms of behavior, most often criminal behavior. However, forms of secrecy serve multiple social functions (see Debenport 2009) that extend well beyond the clandestine activities of anti-societies. After the gay rights movement emerged following the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969, approaches to LGBT language began to shift. Although the argot model of gay and lesbian language continued into the 1980s (e.g., Hayes 1981; Painter 1981), most studies in the post-Stonewall era tend to focus on other social functions of LGBT forms of language, such as the social construction of community and the expression of sexual identity or sexual desires.

The structure of gay male language in English-speaking contexts varies widely. Polari, a British variety that has largely fallen out of use (Baker 2002, 2004), differs enough from other varieties of English that it is sometimes considered a separate language (e.g., Grimes et al. 1996). The grammar of Polari is primarily English, but Polari differs from other varieties of English in the syntax of negative constructions (Baker 2002). Its vocabulary is drawn from a number of sources, including *Lingua Franca* (spoken by merchant marines), Romani, and Cockney rhyming slang. The lexicon of Polari extends beyond subcultural domains to include substitutions for everyday vocabulary like “to see” [*varda*], “to wash” [*dhobie*], or “bad” [*cod*]. Compared with the differences between Polari and standard British English, the differences between standard varieties of American English and gay male slang in the United States seem almost negligible. Somewhere between Polari and U.S. slang is Gayle, a variety of gay male English in spoken in South Africa with syntax that does not differ from that of standard English but with a larger range of lexical substitution than that found in the United States. The vocabulary of Gayle includes a number of items from Polari, borrowings from various South African languages other than English, and substitutions involving female proper names, such as *Dora* to mean “drink” (Cage 2003).

Although these three gay male English languages vary widely in their degree of difference from other English varieties, there is no correlation between linguistic divergence and the social pressure for secrecy. In other words, there is no reason to assume that the distinctiveness of Polari implies any major difference in the degree of homophobia in British culture compared with that of the United States or South Africa. Similarly, the decline of Polari in the post-Stonewall era should not be seen as resulting from a reduction in the need for maintaining

secrecy. Paul Baker (2002) provides a number of factors involved in the decline of Polari, ranging from media overexposure to political backlash against expressions of gay male effeminacy, so that the decline of Polari is not a direct result of a decline in the need for secrecy during the post-Stonewall era.

Another commonly raised issue in studies of language and sexuality has been the question of “authenticity.” Debates over whether there is a distinctive “authentic” form of gay male language have surfaced repeatedly in research on gay male language (e.g., Darsey 1981; Hayes 1981; Kulick 2000; Leap 1996; Stanley 1970). Gay male and lesbian language use largely involves the appropriation of language associated with other groups, and the way in which appropriated forms are combined can enlighten local LGBT ideologies of gender and sexuality. Thus, rather than assume that “authenticity” is an inherent or essential cultural trait, the approach I take in this book assumes that authenticity is regularly contested, through what Bucholtz and Hall (2004, 2005) call *denaturalization*. That is, authenticity does not exist independently from the discourse that validates or questions the (presumably essentialized) relationship between cultural expression and social identity.

Since the mid-1990s research on gay male language use has shifted away from questions of secrecy or authenticity. The field of queer linguistics (Barrett 1997, 2001; Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 2005; Hall 2003; Livia 2001; Livia and Hall 1997; Queen 2001) draws on feminist theory, queer theory, and sociolinguistic theory to examine the ways in which language is used to both reinforce hegemonic heteronormativity and to negotiate nonnormative sexualities. As Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2004) argue, this approach allows for a unified examination of interactions among sexual ideologies, linguistic practices, and sexual identities.

Forms of Discourse

The argot model reinforces stereotypes about the “secret” pre-Stonewall homosexual culture, such as the idea that there was virtually no public discourse involving homosexuality in that era. The stereotype of an earlier “closeted” culture has played an important role in gay political movements in which being “public” about one’s sexual identity is seen as central to achieving social acceptance for homosexuality. Perhaps because of its political utility, this stereotype is often reinforced in academic writing about homosexuality. For example, in her groundbreaking analysis of the role of the closet in twentieth-century culture, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argued that the idea of the closet was founded in post-Stonewall politics:

Yet even the phrase “the closet” as a publicly intelligible signifier for gay-related epistemological issues is made available, obviously, only by the

difference made by the post-Stonewall gay politics oriented around coming *out* of the closet. (1990: 14; original emphasis)

In fact, however, the term *coming out* existed long before Stonewall (Legman lists it in his 1941 glossary, for example), and there were certainly highly public discussions of homosexuality in the media before Stonewall (see Bronski 2003; Chauncey 1994; Loughery 1998). Thus, despite broad social prohibitions on homosexuality, discussions about and among men and women who identified as homosexuals were common. Because of such differences between dominant ideologies and individual behaviors, it is important to distinguish the language of everyday interactions from the language associated with broader social ideologies.

Sociocultural linguists generally distinguish between *discourse*, referring to linguistic structure within texts or interactions between individuals, and *societal discourse*, meaning broad expressions of hegemonic ideologies that dominate public life or discourse in the sense of Michel Foucault 1990 [1976], 1994 [1970]). Because personal interactions occur within contexts that are influenced by societal discourse, the forms of language used in interactions regularly involve associations with ideologies that circulate through society as individuals use language to position themselves with respect to tropes (or recurrent rhetorical figures) from societal discourse. A trope such as “gay men are naturally effeminate” allows an individual either to reference forms of femininity to convey gay identity or to avoid the use of markers of femininity in order to challenge the prevailing stereotype (see Goffman 1963). In both cases, however, societal discourse offers a set of citations or cultural references that inform individual expressions of identity. Because of the close connection between (interactional) discourse and societal discourse, research in sociocultural linguistics (including the research presented in this book) often attempts to examine the ways in which individuals use language to construct themselves as social actors within a given cultural context. As the forms of language that may convey specific types of individual identity emerge in culturally specific contexts, ethnographic knowledge, or an insider understanding of the local culture gained through fieldwork, is a prerequisite for attempting to understand the relationship between the language use and social meaning. Examining the ways in which individuals assert identities through language sheds light both on questions of how cultural tropes influence the social construction of identity and on the ways in which language is used to convey social meaning.

Although it is generally recognized that expressions of identity are neither static nor monolithic, there is a tendency to segregate research on individual patterns of behavior (or studies at the “micro” level) from studies of broad issues related to societal discourse (or “macro” level studies). Work in sociocultural linguistics attempts to bridge this gap by relating interactional