

Pink Wigs, Bearded Nuns and Budding Anthropologists:
Issues of Transformation and Self-making in and around
Edinburgh Drag Culture

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FIG 1: Fig. 1 The Rabbit Hole stage.
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“It’s an expensive, time consuming, frustrating process. And I [made my drag daughter¹ meditate on] ‘Why have you decided that spending three or four hours changing your gender to please a group of people who are drunk, why do you feel that that’s a good idea’. Because on a piece of paper that’s a shit idea. That’s a fucking stupid idea.”

We are sitting in a crowded café with Tiger, a Drag Queen and former Napier student we met during our fieldwork at the Drag show “The Rabbit Hole”, which takes place in CC Blooms every Tuesday. He has just put into very blunt words one of the main questions we have encountered during our research. As with many other anthropological questions, there is no single and clear-cut answer, but a wider array of possible interpretations.

The following article is a collection of ethnographic vignettes, which give the reader an intimate insight into this “unfamiliar” part of Edinburgh’s social milieu. Each of them is designed to evoke and explore some of the different forms of transformation taking place, which do not only involve the Drag performers, but also the people around them – including us.

First we will focus on Alice Rabbit – the host and founder of the Rabbit Hole – and the interplay between physical and psychological change that she undergoes when doing Drag. Second we will show you Sister Ann Tici-Pation’s “manifestation” – one of Tiger’s alter egos, who is a member of the Order of Perpetual Indulgence, an organisation which provides support to LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) people and promotes universal joy and the eradication of shame. Finally, we will reflect on the changes in ourselves as both individuals and budding anthropologists that these encounters have brought about.

Alice Rabbit’s New Beginning

“Follow me down the rabbit hole...” As soon as Natalia Kills’ song ends, Alice Rabbit steps onto the stage and shouts: “Welcome to the Rabbit Hoooooole!”. The myriad of pink sequins on her dress glitter as the spotlights hit them. She flicks her bubble-gum pink long hair backwards as the audience blows up in cheering and shouting. There is no time to waste at the Rabbit Hole, so the show begins: Alice is the first one to perform in one of her usual sketches, lip-synching to an audio clip of “hysterical laughter”. Afterwards, she introduces the other Drag Queens who will perform that night. Every performance is different, and during the time we have been conducting our fieldwork we have never seen the same one twice, except for Alice’s trademark opening and closing sketches.

Alice introduces each of them with enthusiasm, loudly shouting “NEXT!” and whenever the audience does not respond with enough energy she does not hesitate to reproach them with an “Excuse me?! I’ve said NEXT!”. People tend to respond actively to these forms of interaction, but sometimes they simply return the prolonged eye contact with a shy smile: staring at a Drag Queen during her performance is hypnotising and intimidating at the same time.

Today is the last Tuesday of January, and as every last week of the month, the show has a specific

1. When someone wants to start doing drag, they are usually mentored by a more experienced Drag Queen who provides support. They call each other ‘daughter’ and ‘mother’ respectively.

theme: this time it is “New Hole, New Me”. We enjoy the first few performances – consisting of the usual mix of lip-synching and dancing, but it is only during Alice’s second performance that the meaning of the theme becomes clear. The melancholic song “Cut the World” by Antony and the Johnsons starts playing, and the atmosphere suddenly changes: Lawrence Chaney, one of Alice’s Drag daughters, carries a chair to the centre of the stage, and all the other Drag Queens come close. Alice appears, wearing only her tights and a long wide white cape, on which insults like *Bitch. Fat. Ugly* are written in black marker. As the song plays, no one speaks a word. We have no idea what to expect: it feels very different from Alice’s usual performances, more serious and personal. She takes off her pink wig with a solemn movement as she takes a seat and the other Drag Queens gather around her. Lawrence stands behind her, holding an electric razor – and begins shaving her hair off. Meanwhile, Alice is making sweeping movements with her arms, following the music. This results in the shave being uneven: tufts of hair remain scattered on her head, which could be funny, if it was not for the intense atmosphere. As it goes on, no one in the audience makes a sound, until the song ends and Alice stands up, bows, and smiles. Then suddenly the spell is broken: the audience blows up in clapping and shouting, as Alice gets off the stage trying to hide her naked sides. The tension has been palpable during the entire performance, and it is a sort of relief to be able to laugh and cheer again. We do not know exactly how to feel about that performance, but we have a chance to ask her about it during an interview a couple of weeks later:

Interviewer: “When you shaved off your hair, what made you want to do it? Was that planned ahead?”

Alice: “It was planned ahead, I got a bit tired of this like new-year-new-me fucking cliché [...]. When I got my show, I was getting a lot of success, but I was also being very bad to friends, ‘cause I’m lost in my work load, and I don’t know when to stop being a bit of a bitch to get something done. And then I realised I’m a human, they’re human. So in a sense I think I did wrong to people who are very important to me. I watched the Game of Thrones (she giggles) and I saw this character, called Cersei, she got her hair all cut off ‘cause she had sinned. It’s like a re-birth, a cleansing, and when it’s done you can go on and start afresh. So basically when I did ‘Cut the World’, this song by Antony and the Johnsons, this is about new beginnings. So for me that was my way of separating my “cuntiness” that I did last year and moving on to something like a fresh start. But it was like a mock of it, but also internal.”

Alice’s transformation is meaningful both for her and the people around her. Through changing her physical appearance in front of us and her friends, she expresses her internal resolution to change her attitude. It is a public statement of both her freedom to take back control over her life and of her commitment to become a better person.

Sister Ann Manifests

We are sitting in Tiger’s living room, with the Baileys we brought and the lattes Tiger just made for the three of us while telling us about the background of the Order of Perpetual Indulgence. The walls seem to bear down on us, loaded with any sorts of things piled up one onto the other: here a piano, there a tower of old paperbacks, magazines, and colourful wigs that sit like lazy cats on the pieces of furniture barely visible under the heaps of random stuff. Tiger is stirring his latte filled up with tons of sugar, his make-up bags all around him:

“Do you want me to talk you through it?”

“Yes sure.”

“Okay, so I’ll explain to you what I’m doing and what the Order is about as we go on”.

He puts on some perfume, and a playlist titled ‘Manifesting’, which consists of songs that put him in the right headspace. It is a mix of tunes from Tiger’s childhood, and movie soundtracks – especially Star Wars, of which we guess Tiger is a big fan, considering the big Chewbacca ring on one of his fingers. There is also some pop music, like Katy Perry, alongside Maya Angelou reciting her poem “Still I rise” (1978):

[...]



FIG 2: Alice getting her head shaved.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise. [...]

Right now he is still Tiger. Sister Ann will gradually manifest herself through Tiger's body as the make-up and elements of the habit are layered on.

"You'll see the change, at some point. The voice will change too as Ann shows through. She's all the best parts of Tiger. She's all about positive thoughts", Tiger says.

First, he puts on a headband to keep his hair back. As he applies the white facepaint with his fingers, he tells us that the white canvas is the starting point of any art performance: it allows you to become who you want to be that night. What he does here, he says, is not drag per-se, but rather *gender-fuckery*, which is designed to challenge people's perceptions of what gender is and how it should be presented. The colourful make-up and habits that 'Black Veils' – full members of the Order – wear are also designed to draw people's attention and spread the word about the support that they offer. Simultaneously, the painted face represents the 'eternal fool' and serves as a kind of mask. The clownish make-up helps Ann in her job: "People will disclose more to you if you're a character and not a person. They will feel free to confess you their problems". It seems perfectly reasonable to us – we, too, would tell the story of our lives to a nun. The fact that she is 6.2 feet tall and has a ginger beard is secondary.

Every time Sister Ann manifests, her make-up is going to turn out different. Nonetheless, as Tiger explains to us, there are some fixed elements which characterise each Sister, and her status within the order. For example, Sister Ann's distinctive detail is two lines – one straight and the other curved – painted below each eye, representing the Egyptian Wadjet's eye (see Horus' eye). The painted lips on the other hand mean she can speak for the Order, that she can represent it officially, and only black veil nuns are entitled to do so.

While he applies more colour to his eyes – bronze, gold, bright blue – Tiger tells us more about Sister Ann, especially how helpful she was while he was writing his dissertation. Being her made it possible to compartmentalise the stress and anxiety he went through during that time. Halfway through the process of putting on make-up, Tiger stretches and inhales deeply, and Sister Ann joins us. The transformation is not abrupt, but nonetheless noticeable. The change is just relatively physical. We can mostly perceive it in the gestures, the posture, the eyes, which become sweeter. 'Manifesting' really is a very appropriate term for what we witness here. Sister Ann continues the conversation, and tells us more about Tiger's drag-persona Philippa Snatch. She does not openly criticise her, but we still get the strong impression that she doesn't fully approve of her 'sibling'. As Sister Ann puts it, she would never talk badly about Philippa, but the same cannot be said about Philippa in relation to her.

Tonight, Sister Ann is not wearing her "traditional" (= full religious habit), but still puts on her veil, her scapular – which is covered in pins from all the events she has attended – her whistle and her vial of Holy Glitter. As she explains, when the other Sisters decide that novices are ready to fully join the Order, they receive their own vial, which contains some glitter mixed with a small quantity of the ashes of deceased members directly from San Francisco, where the Order was founded in 1979. What is more Catholic than that? Definitely not the fact that members of the Order are not supposed to wear underwear when manifesting.

When Sister Ann is ready, she grabs her basket full of condoms, lube sachets, and latex gloves. The free distribution of these items is part of the Order's promotion of safe sex. After completing her outfit with the fake fur she had been sitting on, we head out to pick up Brother Bimbo del Doppio Senso on our way to the monthly "Nuncheon", where organisational matters of the Order will be discussed. During our walk through the Broughton area, we can observe the reactions of passers-by to Sister Ann's eye-catching appearance. The contrast between the 6.2 feet tall bearded and colourful nun and the posh buildings around her is striking.

People definitely take notice; men tend to look away whereas women are more likely to stare. Nonetheless, Sister Ann's reaction is admirable: she gracefully smiles back at people and wishes them a good eve-

ning. As she tells us, because of her size and fighting abilities she is not afraid of walking alone, even though the Order members are not supposed to do so as they might be attacked. Even in a relatively quiet city like Edinburgh, homophobia can sadly still be an issue.

Manifesting Sister Ann is a way for Tiger to bring out all his positive feelings and attitude. On the one hand, he is able to detach himself temporarily from his preoccupations. On the other, this makes it possible for Sister Ann to provide support to others. In this sense, Tiger's transformation is not just about self-expression, but it also possesses practical and altruistic purposes.



FIG 3: The transformation from Tiger to Sister Ann

Hannah's Royal Night Out

There are clothes strewn over my bed and sofa, all from the men's section of one store or another. It is surprising to see how many things I already own that aren't officially designed for my gender. My friend has brought along her own share of clothes, as well as an improvised binder made from the elastic part of form-shaping underwear. Tonight, we will try out being drag kings.

We have both been curious for a while, dressing up in our own rooms and hiding long hair under beanies, but this semester's fieldwork has opened up a new door to actually explore this more, and tonight we will step through it. We have decided to go to a drag show dressed in drag; not to perform (at least not yet), but as audience members.

The clothes and the binding are only one part of it (though the binding is the one I will be most conscious of throughout the night – breasts are not meant to be that squashed). What we spend the most time on is the make-up. We follow drag king make-up tutorials from the internet while applying highlights and contouring, and it is impressive how much my face changes through the simple addition of some shadows in the right places. When I look in the mirror, I feel simultaneously more and less like myself.

With gelled-back hair and a bottle of wine, we head out. It's already dark, so I don't feel particularly visible, but people still look at us. I can't tell what they think, whether it is positive or negative, but I find that I don't care. We just continue talking, and laughing, and I feel free and powerful and like a king.

At the venue, we still stand out slightly, but we are definitely not the most eye-catching people there.



FIG 4: 'Oh my god I look like my brother'

The drag queens' make-up and outfits are striking – a pink wig here, an elaborate Mad Hatter outfit there. The show takes my mind mostly off of my appearance, but during the breaks in-between performances I regularly go to the bathroom to adjust the binder. This is definitely the most troublesome part, but I find I don't resent it as much as I could. It's like a constant reminder that I am a different version of myself tonight.

During one of the breaks, my friend and I dance on the small dancefloor. We try – half consciously, half not – to move in a less 'feminine' manner, which changes the way we dance (less hips, wider stance) but not how much we enjoy it. At one point, two girls join us in a loose circle, and we all dance together. Suddenly, I feel uncomfortable in my skin. The character I am presenting right now – confident, cocky, *masculine* – clashes with who I feel I am. It doesn't last long, luckily; as soon as the girls leave I feel the pressure lifting. Curiously, my attraction to certain people apparently plays out differently in drag, dependent on what social role I am fulfilling. I don't ponder these things for long though; Alice Rabbit walks by, sees me, and lifts me clean off the ground in a big hug. All feels right again.

The rest of the night passes fast; the performances are amazing, the people are nice, and we dance until the venue closes. It is interesting how I can feel both like myself and like someone else at the same time. Through changing my appearance, I am able to freely express parts of myself that aren't usually in the foreground. At the same time, I am not fully removed from the character I'm presenting; unlike with theatre, the transformation is only from one version of myself into another. Excluding the moment where that second version clashed with the former, it was a great experience. I'd definitely like to do it again at some point, but for now I mainly want to get out of my binder.

Gaia's Drag Therapy

It is late afternoon, and John is sitting on the couch in my kitchen: next to him a huge make-up bag filled up with any sorts of powder, brushes, and palettes. He starts putting on a thick layer of pale foundation on the highest points of his face: cheekbones, bridge of the nose, forehead, followed by a darker shade in the hollows of the cheeks and jawline. "I know it looks weird – he says looking at me – but it will all come together when



FIG 5: Alice's transformation and the Budding Anthropologists

it's done". Forty minutes, a pair of false lashes and a black dress later, John is not there anymore. Alice comes out of my room after positioning her foam padding in the right places, and asks me if they look even on both her hips. I am astonished: if I did not know it, I would never say that those hips are not real. She is not wearing her wig yet, but a simple black turban: she is gorgeous. We call a cab and head together to the Rabbit Hole, just in time to meet the other performers of tonight.

It is almost the end of the show, which means it is time for the much feared "Audience Victimisation". Alice is going to pick four members of the audience to dance on stage "as badly as possible". The audience is going to "boo" at the worst dancer, who will then be crowned as the winner. The price is usually nothing, but a moment of questionable glory. I am sitting in the second row, hidden by a taller guy in front of me, which makes me feel relatively safe. I am wrong. Alice walks straight toward me, she offers me her hand and whispers in the microphone: "Come on, sweetie, you owe me this". It seems legit after she came to my flat this afternoon and allowed us to interview her. So when it is my turn, I step onto the stage like a convict on the gallows. Afterwards I will tell myself that it was not exclusively an embarrassing experience: it helped me see the show from the performers' perspective, how it feels to be at the centre of everyone's attention. It is actually empowering. The "Macarena" starts playing, and I do not remember what I have done. Some of my friends later tell me it was entertaining. I choose to believe so. I do not remember how to dance the Macarena, so Alice comes up beside me below the stage and starts showing me the moves. How lovely of her. "Unfortunately", I do not win, but Alice and I definitely become closer: "I hope you did not mind I picked you. I mean you did well! And it was fun wasn't it?" she tells me after the show as we sit next to each other with a couple of drinks in front of us.

Besides the questionable contribution that my "performance" gave to our studies, it makes me reflect on a wider lesson that Drag culture and Alice taught me during my first fieldwork project. I did not undergo any form of physical transformation; it did not make me want to wear more make-up nor different clothes. Nonetheless, I realised that a transformation did occur. This fieldwork experience helped me question myself and my own understanding of femininity, while giving me a feeling of what it is actually like to be an

anthropologist – and from what I got, it also means putting yourself on the line.

Alice helped me feel more confident about my own femininity – regardless of whether I am expressing it. Seeing her pulling off all sorts of clothes, even not having what most people would define as the “ideal body type”, made me think “Why can’t I do it too? Why should I be ashamed of mine?”. Both Alice and Tiger as Sister Ann made me feel more positive about myself despite my flaws, encouraging me not to care about other people’s judgement and not to force myself into restrictive categories when it comes to defining my gender, my sexuality, my identity.

Conclusion

“Drag is a way of communicating parts of a person that aren’t normally shown, that society doesn’t appreciate. Drag is a place, is a safe space for the art kids, the kids who want to cover themselves in paint, who want to have a paint enema. You know, these crazy, fauvist, crazy wonder children. It’s a way of getting the things that are inside of our heads, that keep us awake, out, in front of other people’s eyes. That’s what Drag is for me.”

Going back to the question asked at the beginning of this article, here is Tiger’s answer. This is not a universal answer – if such a thing even exists – but that does not make it any less true. The transformation process that Drag performers undergo affects not only them, but also the people around them. With LGBT+ issues gaining more and more visibility, and after the recent horrific shooting in the Orlando gay nightclub Pulse, we believe it is very important to give voice to members of the queer community like Tiger and Alice. The encounters we made during this fieldwork experience deeply influenced us, in ways we had not predicted. They helped us to grow both as individuals and as budding anthropologists, and hopefully, these vignettes have given you a taste of this extraordinary and unfamiliar side of Edinburgh we had the fortune to experience.

References

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Alice Rabbit, all the performers of the Rabbit Hole, and Tiger, for their willingness to help us with our project and to answer our questions, but mostly for their wonderful show and for introducing us to the fabulous world of Drag. Also, we would like to thank Koreen for her enthusiastic support.