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BOOK REVIEW

Ethno-Archiving: Documenting a Scene at the Moment of its Demise

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Intimate Investments in Drag King Cultures, Kerryn Drysdale.

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Drag shows have played a key role in the development of Sydney's commercial lesbian and gay subculture throughout the last century. Since at least the early 1970s, this scene has been mixed, providing a performance context for both drag queens and drag kings. Traditionally, the eastern suburbs of Sydney were the heart of the lesbian and gay 'camp' scene and popular venues, such as the Park Inn Hotel or 'Kandy's' at Centennial Park and Chez Ivy in Bondi, regularly hosted drag shows. Much of this history has been captured in Pride History Group's *Out and About: Sydney's Lesbian Social Scene 1960s-1980s* (Sydney, 2009). Laurie van Camp, who performed as a drag king on this scene, recalls that 'Mostly in the early days you'd just get up on the stage every now and again and mime and dance to the music' but as the scene developed, performers began to gather a following and sing in their own voice. Popular music included Cher's 'Bang Bang!' and songs by Bobby Darren and Tammy Wynette. As a Country and Western singer, Laurie wore 'all that clobber, you know, like the lariats and the cowboy boots and stuff like that' (25). Another 'quite butch' performer, Yogi Bear, was well-known for drag shows at the Grand Hotel near Central Station in the late 1970s and used to sing Elvis and Cliff Richard songs in a 'sequined or shimmery kind of vest' (26). These drag king shows

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providing a focal point for lesbian socialising in this period and enabled the development of a collective identity and culture beyond the space of performance.

Kerryn Drysdale's *Intimate Investments in Drag King Cultures* picks up this story several decades later, exploring the drag king culture that emerged in Sydney between 1999 and 2012. In particular, the book focuses on the event *Kingki Kingdom* (later renamed *Queer Central*), which was hosted by The Sly Fox Hotel in the inner west suburb of Newtown on Wednesday nights. In the decades since the 1970s, the focus of Sydney's lesbian community and nightlife had shifted towards the inner west but, despite its reputation as a suburb with a high concentration of lesbian residents, Newtown did not at this time have any exclusively lesbian venues. Instead some venues catered to a lesbian clientele through designated 'dyke nights' on certain nights of the week, a practice which fostered a sense of a closely-knit local community, confounding outsiders such as this reviewer who, newly arrived in Sydney from Manchester in the UK, was unable to make sense of the fluid scene. Given this unique local context, Drysdale's study of drag king events can therefore be read as a study of a local lesbian social scene that does not claim the occupancy rights of gay businesses nor the territorial model of urban space they theoretically support.

Much of the literature on the drag king scene to date, including Judith (Jack) Halberstam and Del LaGrace Volcano's *The Drag King Book* (Serpent's Tail, 1999), has, perhaps unsurprisingly, focused on the stage, paying homage to the creativity and diversity of performances of female masculinity. While Kerryn Drysdale's *Intimate Investments in Drag King Cultures* is also a deeply invested – indeed, loving – tribute to the drag king scene, its major contribution is to turn the lens around, shifting the focus from the stage to the audience in order to explore the role of the drag king scene in fostering this unique lesbian subculture.

In keeping with a broader tradition of writing about the drag king scene, Drysdale's study was inspired by her personal participation in Sydney's drag king culture and utilises immersive research methods. However, the book also draws heavily on a series of focus group interviews conducted with thirteen other participants in the scene, many of whom were part of existing friendship networks. These interviews provide fascinating insights into the ways in which the culture engaged the emotions, desires, senses and sexual identities of individual audience members. Other figures on the scene, from the bouncers who policed the boundaries of this world to the 'pool table dykes' who dominated the area furthest from the stage and appraised new arrivals, remain shadowy. At times I found myself wondering how their voices might have differed from the 'white, educated and middle-class' (18) focus group participants potentially adding further layers of complexity to our understanding of the socially striated scene.

The first part of the book explores the development of Sydney's drag king culture in the 1990s and early 2000s as a scene. Drysdale traces its historical emergence and the specific local conditions which defined lesbian social life in Sydney in this period. She also points to the legacy of spatial contingency in Sydney's lesbian scene and the anxieties about economic sustainability as factors which imbued the drag king scene with a sense of precarity. Mindful of these local conditions, Drysdale provides both a finely-drawn study of a culturally and geographically specific scene and challenges assumptions about the potential universality of drag king culture. The characteristics and social functions of Sydney's drag king scene, Drysdale suggests, were uniquely defined by the set of historical, cultural and economic factors that have shaped lesbian socialising in the city more broadly.

The second part of the book is an immersive account of a social world that involves not just staged events but the networks and activities that coalesce around participation in the

drag king scene. Focusing on the audience, rather than the drag king performances, allows Drysdale to question the centrality of literal performance. Rather than being the *raison d'être* of the scene, Drysdale suggests that the performances provide a temporal and physical space for audience members to socialise within largely pre-existing networks. Drag king events gave shape and routine to audience members' social practices and, in doing so, cemented an intimate connection between participants. Drawing on recent scholarship on the affective possibilities of routine social practices, Drysdale demonstrates the ways in which desire, physical contact and the transmission of feeling both amongst audience members and between performers and the audience help to create a sense of 'intimate attunement' (92). This 'social imaginary' (91) is fostered by a shared sense of belonging based on insider knowledge of the scene, regular attendance and the performance of certain identities through dress. At the same, this imaginary is reinforced by policing its borders against symbolic 'outsiders,' such as straight men, so that the semblance of territorial control is asserted over space however temporarily.

The most compelling aspect of the book is its depiction of Sydney's drag king scene at the moment of its decline. The sense of the precarity that runs throughout will be recognised by anyone familiar with the history of Sydney's lesbian bar and commercial scene, which has throughout its existence been characterised by short-lived events, shifting venues and the perceived need to assert itself over the competing and stronger demands of the straight and gay male night-time economy. As a historian, I would have been interested to read more on the specific material conditions of this particular scene's demise, but Drysdale instead focuses on the continued cultural significance of the scene in the shared narratives and social imaginaries of its participants, which is fascinating in its own right. While instability and ephemerality have long been recognised as characteristics of all scenes in subcultural studies, Drysdale pushes the boundaries of scene thinking by prompting us to reflect on the 'backward-facing capacity' of scenes that retain the potential for 'cultural reanimation' (161-2). Even after the moment of their dissolution, such scenes remain important mechanism for the social cohesion of lesbian subcultures.

Reflecting on the methodological approach employed in researching *Intimate Investments in Drag King Culture*, Kerryn Drysdale raises some interesting questions about the nature of the archive. She notes that prohibitions on photography, and the ephemeral and precarious nature of the scene more broadly, has meant that few material traces of the scene's existence remain in traditional archives, an experience typical of many LGBTQ subcultures and lives. Drawing on the work of José Esteban Muñoz, Juana María Rodríguez, Ann Cvetkovich and others on the queer archive, Drysdale argues for the potential of ethnographic research techniques as a form of archiving that enables the relational recreation of shared social affects and the scenes that produced them. As an active participant in the creation of these narratives, the researcher shares with the focus group in the archival process of bringing such scenes to life. In *Intimate Investments in Drag King Cultures*, Kerryn Drysdale reanimates a unique and vibrant lesbian social scene after its demise and reflects on the role of participants and scholars that ongoing affective process.