

Abstract

Doing drag can constitute an important way to grapple with intersecting issues of embodied power and normativity, as it primes the performer to subvert (or, in fact, reproduce) various gendered, racial, classed, and sexual norms that play out on the body. This study explored whether white, Afrikaans-speaking drag performers took up this opportunity to use their drag artistry to think critically about questions of their own identities, their sense of belonging, and how they made sense of their imagined drag communities in the post-apartheid South African context. Drawing on qualitative data from five in-depth, semi-structured interviews with white Afrikaans-speaking individuals who perform as drag artists, this research used critical discourse and thematic analysis to unpack how participants made sense of their identities and experiences as drag performers. The analysis demonstrated that participants identified with various normative understandings of drag culture that manifest symbolically and materially in complex ways. These played out through discourses where participants actively opted out of using drag to critically engage their white, Afrikaans and queer positionalities. This, in turn, had implications for questions of their imagined (non)belonging within the local drag community itself, with centres and margins being constructed along axes of gender and race in ways that continued to privilege a white cisgender masculine ideal and reified the haunting histories of white supremacy and cissexism in South Africa. Moreover, it was found that representations of drag from the global north were firmly cementing themselves in the post-apartheid South African space and subsequently contributed to participants' self-integration within a homogenising 'global' drag culture. As a result, their dominant sense-making around drag was increasingly depoliticised and entangled with neoliberal values that took on a lens of drag as a commodity for mainstream consumption, thus further closing down opportunities for participants to critically interrogate issues of power, oppression, and subversion through drag. The study offered reflections for the ways in which drag culture and divisions in the South African drag community were being made sense of through the perspectives of white Afrikaans-speaking drag artists and concluded with ideas of what this might mean for the future of drag in South Africa.