Performing organization: an adult education college as *drag king*

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Introduction

In recent years, not-for-profit (NFP) organizations have become embroiled in contestations over their purpose, operations and management. Most strongly such contestations are infused with the increasing managerialization of the sector. This is a process where NFPs are expected to manage themselves in a manner resembling commercial organizations. In a sense then, the identity of NFPs can be understood to exist within competing sets of differences that seek to define and fix the meaning of 'community organizations' and 'businesses'. Of course, no matter the confidence of their rhetorical usage, neither category is stable. It remains the case, however, that these categories are mobilized discursively as normative attempts to secure the meaning of NFP organizations. In this paper we focus on how they interact in practice and explore how this interaction fuels a form of agency tending towards ad-hoc transgression. To do so we draw some theoretical insight from queer theory. Indeed, if, as Sedgwick (1990) argues, 'virtually any aspect of modern Western culture, must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition', then such analysis is also relevant to organizations. From this perspective, we can consider an organization in that 'advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine' (Acker 1990:146).

This paper explores empirical material gathered in our research in a NFP organization—an adult community college. While agreeing in general that all organizations are integrally and invisibly cast in terms of gender (Hearn et al. 1989), we found in this site more specifically that a key distinction members used to discuss their understanding of the college was between it being either a community organization or a business organization—the former being characterized in relation to the feminine, the latter in relation to the masculine. We suggest that this organization is continually engaged in a 'drag' performance. For example, it performs 'business' when necessary and is able to 'lip synch' government agendas for the audience that desires them. Moreover, it is able to 'change its tune' and do a convincing 'community organization' as well. We do not mean to suggest that it is trying to trick or deceive, but like a 'good drag king', it has mastered these performances and this contributes to its success. This success is important in an environment when many small NFPs find it difficult to withstand the pressures of the contemporary economic and political environment (Staples 2006), but still desire to deal with them creatively, or even potentially transgressively. Such issues are especially salient in Adult and Community Education (ACE) organizations, given that they are in a climate where educational institutions are coerced into becoming players in educational markets (Marginson 1997).

Where some similar organizations struggle to remain viable, the organization we researched (although not entirely unscathed) remains a considerable player in the ACE sector. We suggest that much of this success might be attributed to its capacity to 'do drag'.

The research
The research project from which this paper's empirical materials are drawn is a three-year Australian Research Council project on everyday development practices that are integrated into the day-to-day work of organizations. The research approach taken was narrative inquiry, supplemented by a reduced form of ethnography.

In our efforts to explore organizational practices we have entered a first organization, a community college in metropolitan Sydney, and here notions of drag have triggered our imagination. Drag, understood in an everyday sense, is about a person of one biological sex performing the role of a gender other to that sex – hence 'the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed' (Butler 1999: 175). Stereotypically (although not necessarily) this means a male performer dressed in flamboyant feminine clothing. An important aspect of drag is the performer does not try to trick or deceive the audience of a particular gender identity. Instead, the performance of drag troubles simple male/female gender categories in 'an effort to negotiate cross-gendered identification' (Butler 1993:235). It is not that the he becomes a she, or vice versa, but rather that the categories between them are questioned. As Butler suggests:

> What is 'performed' in drag is, of course, *the sign* of gender, a sign that is not the same as the body that it figures, but cannot be read without it (1993:237 emphasis in original).

Hence, it is the *sign* of 'business', of 'NFP', and of 'community' organizations that we are interested in here, as they manifest in the actions of employees. We are interested in how these categories are 'performed' both *by* and *within* the organization. We are interested in analysis of drag kings to come from this work because they take us beyond the common distinctions used to understand work practices, and especially in a NFP organization—these are the gendered distinctions between business and community, between worker and manager, and (ultimately) between self and other. So while our research project is primarily concerned with organizational *practices*, we will suggest elsewhere that the very slipperyness of organization identity reported here impacts on organizational practices (Price et al. 2007).

Introducing the College
The college is one of around 60 similar organizations in NSW whose 'core business' is to 'offer quality, relevant, affordable and flexible adult learning opportunities that reflect the needs of the community'. There is also is an espoused investment in the importance of lifelong-learning and its contribution to 'the Government's social justice objectives' (BACE 1996:3).

Adult education, or what are locally called 'community colleges', and their predecessors have been part of NSW's education system since the early 1880s and have traditionally claimed provenance in discourses of social justice. In general they grew out of concern for providing 'second chance' education for adults. Literacy and adult basic education have been, and remain, central features in their work. In addition to this the colleges' activities have expanded to include providing non-accredited leisure learning courses on a 'user pays' basis. Over the last decade there has also been significant growth in the delivery of vocational education and training. All three types of delivery are included in the activities of colleges, with 'user pays' delivery of liberal arts courses being the most prevalent.

As an organization, the college is multiply positioned which present it with competing accountabilities. It is an Adult Community Education provider (ACE), a Not-For-Profit (NFP), a community organization and a Small to Medium Enterprise (SME)—it is also an employer. As an ACE provider it is embedded in a purchaser/provider relationship with the state. Despite significant decreases in public funding over the past decade, it remains accountable to the state. In its public face it espouses a position as a not-for-profit organization—existing *for* the community rather than existing because of profits *from* the community. Moreover, as an incorporated 'community organization' the college is accountable *to* the community. As a small to medium enterprise (SME), the organization is in the business of selling 'educational products' in educational markets. And finally, because the college employs a number of staff to carry out its various functions, it has the added accountability of an employer.

'First I was afraid—I was petrified'
Having introduced the college where our research took place, we now turn to the theoretical resources provided by 'queer theory'. In particular we are interested in how gendered identities overlap in the various discourses that generate meaning for this organization—we are concerned with how these discourses, when performed, undermine the purity of the assumed fixity of the gendered positions on which they rely. In taking up these concerns, following Parker (2002), we turn to queer theory in terms of how it manifests, '... a certain 'nervousness' about words, and about practices, and about the relationship between them' (2002:164)

A key concern in queer theory is the troubling dualistic thinking that has informed conventional understandings of gender and/or or homo/hetero-sexuality. Perhaps nowhere are these binaries more 'out' for inspection and confusion than in the performance of drag. 'Drag' is a useful concept for queer theorists because it helps trouble simple binary notions of gender, identity and sexuality. As Butler (1999) suggests '[*I*]*n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*' (p. 175, italics in original). In using drag as a metaphor for understanding the college we draw attention to its performances—a parody of gendered organizational discourse that can be seen to displace a sense of unity over

the meaning of the college. The college becomes as 'imitation without origin' (Butler 1999:175).

'And you see me—somebody new'
On the one hand there was an organization called 'the college' positioned discursively through its name as unified and self-contained—indeed, throughout organizational and public documents as well as in interview transcripts there was a version of the college as real, stable and tangible. On the other hand, however, people in the organization talked a more fluid understanding of what the college was. Despite a singular notion of the college, in our discussions with college workers it became apparent that there were tensions. As they described the organization they 'impersonated' naturalised organizational ideals. For example notions of 'community', and of 'business' and of 'not-for-profit' organization disrupted uncomplicated notions of 'the college'. These idealised notions relied on differentiation of alternate identities.

Our first impression *was* that there were two oppositional discourses and these were the 'business' and the 'community'. Moreover, this distinction echoed a cultural logic of gender. The community discourse was stereotypically feminine (and maternal) in that its concerns where with caring, nurturing, developing and 'looking after' the clients/students and with social connectedness. The business discourse was stereotypically masculine in that it was premised on competitiveness, achievement, entrepreneurship and control. Moreover, as gender identities, the feminine/community was also construed as secondary and lacking where the object of lack crossed issues of finances, structure, politics, and business skills.

The encroachment of business discourse in to the management of the college was intimated to us in various ways. As one of the managers commented:

> *… instead of hiring a contractor that is going to be bleeding money, if I can fix those things myself, I'm saving us a fair wack of cash because I know we need to look at very closely at ways to cut out expenditure*

Here we see a focus on autonomy and financial management as a form of what Sinclair (1998) identifies as entrepreneurial organizational masculinity. The increasing demands of such masculinist culture were also recognised. As an employee told us:

> *I decided that I wouldn't mind having a year off working in community and not pushing myself so much and I thought I might work at the college around the corner*

The contrast between the business and community discourse was evident—business was about being performance driven and competitive, while community was about being compassionate and encouraging. The inclusive and empathetic character of the community discourse was summed up another employee:

> *… the college is for all those people but its not only for those people its for me and its for all those people at head office and for all the tutors and its for the work-for-the-dole people and its for the immigrants that come here to learn English who want to join our community who come from another country—so it's a community thing—so that's a nice lovey-dovey-thing*

Here we see this 'lovey-dovey-thing' as almost a parody of femininity, but still recognition of it. In all, there was a romanticised and feminised notion of what it was to be a not-for-profit and/or community organization. This version of the college was performed not only by the workers' talk but also in that signs of 'community organization' were clearly evident in many of its public and internal documents. This served to give convincing performances of the college as a community organization.

Despite the obviousness and ubiquity of the business discourse in the college, it was not something that accepted without resistance. This was illustrated in our conversation with the college's principal. At the time we were discussing the use of performance appraisal processes in the college. These appraisals were something required to be performed as part of the college's drive towards improving managerial control through the creation of explicit and contract like performance agreements between the management and the staff. Nevertheless, the principal did not express a wholehearted adoption of this rhetoric:

> *In theory that's* [performance appraisals] *what I am supposed to do— probably the college council expect that that's what I do—and probably I would tell them that's what I do—but really the performance appraisal is an ongoing relationship I have with people*

The principal's comments illustrate that the newer business discourse, while present, was not adopted 'as is'. The resulting meaning of the organizations was thus something that was performed in relation to the discourse in which it was embedded, but at the same time this performativity was behoved to neither. In a sense it operated in the space in-between—illustrating Butler's point that:

> [p]erformativity describes this relation of being implicated in what one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure (Butler 1993:241).

Indeed it is in such impurity as located in the murky and contested intersection of business and community that its members performed 'the college'. Thus, despite the differentiation between the relatively pure rhetorical poles of 'business' and 'community', the discursive reality that was performed lacked the strict boundaries implied. In other words the heterosexual distinction

(business/masculine vs. community/feminine) was increasingly subject to subversion. We understand this as a type of organizational drag, one which:

> … serves a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure (Butler 1993:231).

More particularly we can understand it as a 'drag king' performance in that to survive in its current environment, the organization had to act like a business (masculine) while having emerged from the community (feminine). The result was a mixing of the two, as well as contestation over their dominance.

What became clearer however was that whichever 'identity' was evoked presupposed the possibility of a contradictory one—the two were collapsing into each other. Some workers, on recognising this, had their own strategies for balancing the tensions. As another employee said to us:

> *I'm not advocating deception but sometimes you have to—within the language—you have to sort of make your project be a good fit—you could say it's a skill—you make your project—you could says it's a skill or you could say its being forced to be slightly pragmatic*

Rather than think this as a mutually exclusive business/community dualism where one pole competes with its other, it is more helpful to understand these identities as mutually productive of one another. One college employee expressed this mutual productiveness as follows:

> *The only way you can really do it—is that you can say—without the business side of things there wouldn't be a community college—and all those equity programs would disappear.*

Following our metaphor, the drag king organization was an imitation and parody of masculinity. Nonetheless this imitation was performative, in that it also reconfigures the older notions of what it meant to be a community organization. This was a 'queering' of the organization in the sense that its identity in relation to the gendered discourses that informed it was 'un-fixed'.

'And I learned how to get along'
In general, the NSW ACE sector (including the college we investigated) has undergone significant changes as brought about by re-positioning of the broader changes to the public sector. As McIntyre suggests, ACE organizations have strategically shaped and re-shaped their activity in response to broader policy agendas (2001). Is it possible that their performance of drag has helped them do this?

What our brief and preliminary analysis has suggested is that the encroachment of managerial/business discourse on the college has not been characterised by a simple replacement of the one by the other. Instead, both business and community based discourse are complicated by the presences

of each other: a business not possible without community, community not possible without business, not-for-profit not possible without profit making. In other words, like the drag king performing 'male', all purist and dualistic versions of the college were other to that which was actually performed. They discursively espoused organization did not actually exist—rather, '...there is nothing behind the mask' (Parker 2002:151).

In the case of the college, what we observed was a masquerade of the masculine. It is important to note however (after Bataille in Pullen (2006)) that after repeated performances the mask begins to takes the shape of the face. Furthermore the mask does not just conceal the face but it has the potential to reveal. This bears direct relevance to the performance of the drag king—the masculine mask revealed, concealed and mutated the old community discourse. It rendered the college in a new form—but one that was emergent and becoming rather than prefigured by business and/or community—a process that is (and will do doubt continue to be) incomplete. The performance goes on.

'And I'll survive—I will survive'
By locating queer theory most generally in relation to 'non-dualistic thought and pedagogy' (Sedgwick 2003), we questioned the distinctions between community and business discourse that informs NFP practice. Moreover we could also relate this to gendered discourse in that the male (business) is understood as replacing and improving on the ever-lacking community (female). In questioning these dualisms and their hierarchy, we examined the contestation over the organization, as it can be understood as gendered**.** Moreover, we suggest that when seen as performance rather than discourse, gender distinctions begin to collapse in a form of 'drag' where the heterosexist purity that informs these central discursive categories is potentially subverted. We used the metaphor of 'drag kings' to understand the feminine organization which performs as male, and in so doing threatens to 'undo' its gender (cf. Butler 2004). So, while the college exemplifies the demands on people, regardless of sex, to 'manage like a man' (Wajcman 1998) we add that such forms of management might be a form of parody and potential subversiveness associated with drag performance.

As we have seen, the college operates in an environment where traces of 'business' and 'community' as well as 'not-for-profit' and 'education' discourses are ever-present and are in contestation. Indeed, it was this very contestation, and its resultant undecidability that provided the space for the college to perform who it was (becoming). This performance required knowing not only *when* but also *how* to perform a 'community', 'business', 'not-for-profit', 'profit making' and/or 'educational' organization. It also meant working in the space between these. The people we spoke to at the college decided *when* and *how* to perform particular versions of the organization. Through these performances—drag king performances—the college's masquerade refashioned it beyond the normative discourses within which it was located. It was this masquerade that was central to the meaning of the college … and to its ability to survive.

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3521 words