

**PRETTY IN PINK:
AN INNER SURRENDERING TO A CAST OF FIVE**

A contextual essay to accompany the performance

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To everyone who perseveres in spite of agony.

To everyone who yearns for connection.

To life and mystery.

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Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Dedication Page.....	3
Acknowledgments.....	5
Table Of Contents.....	7
Purpose and Objectives.....	9
Context and Conceptual Framework.....	13
Life Myth.....	13
Field Theory and Roles.....	16
Mainstream and Margin.....	19
Inner Work.....	22
Levels Of Experience.....	24

Performance and Performativity: Drag and Shamans—Concepts Of Identity and Gender As Performance.....	27
Developing The Performance.....	35
Flirts and Edgework.....	36
Aurora Borealis—An Example.....	39
Contributions and Limitations Of My Project.....	41
References.....	45

Purpose and Objectives

This is a love story.

A love story about loving another man, about loving the world, and being loved in return. About loving myself. At least, this is the part of the mystery I have gleaned so far.

I hear Nat King Cole singing,¹ “The greatest thing you’ll ever learn is to love and be loved back in return.”²

I start this contextual essay here, because what I’ve just written reflects the deepest intention of my project, of the performance, and this essay that accompanies it: to love myself unabashedly—and fully.

¹ Ahbez, E. (1947). Nature boy [Recorded by Nat King Cole]. On *The greatest of Nat King Cole* [record]. Los Angeles, CA: Capitol Records (1948).

² I have italicized certain sections of the essay to indicate more feeling and poetic responses than the general, more linear form of the rest of the essay. The weaving of both communication styles reflects my own inner diversity.

For me, self-love has been an ongoing mythic task and a challenge that has, at times, felt impossible to achieve. It is a process, a discipline—a spiritual warriorship— social action, a feeling skill, , a way of being, acting, and relating to my own wholeness, to the wholeness of others and, finally, also a way of relating to the world and the challenges it holds.

In order to integrate and deepen my learning and in order to also make a contribution to Process Work, I decided to create a work of performance art about my relationship to self-love. The performance draws on my experience of gender and sexuality, love and desire, margin and mainstream, inside and out. It is based on my waking and dream life, my yearnings and fears, and on my experiences of heartbreak and resilience.

The performance will take place in a public venue in Portland, Oregon, in October of 2011. The performance will be recorded. A DVD and this contextual essay and will be available at the PWI library. I seek to reach men who like to dress up and perform. I want to create a reflection of these experiences and make them more visible and more known; and I also seek to reach process workers and other helping professionals, who are interested in cultural competency and diversity; individuals who have experienced or are interested in exploring marginalization and, finally, artists.

I chose the medium of performance for two reasons: performance is a central element of my earliest childhood memory; and it allows me to venture beyond pathology, inasmuch as it is a container that can simultaneously hold many different dimensions and levels of reality and human experience as well as being a doorway out of isolation

into the public sphere of life.

The Process Work³ concept of life myth represents the cornerstone of the conceptual framework that holds this project together. In addition, the framework draws on other relevant concepts and theories in Process Work, queer theory, drag performance, and shamanism, all of which contain, inform, and guide my creative process. These will be discussed in more detail in the Conceptual Framework section. But I'll briefly explain what I mean by life myth here.

The concept of life myth is the idea that individuals have a basic direction or pattern in life, that there exists a basic blueprint behind life's meandering paths, which first shows itself in early childhood memories or dreams. These memories or dreams contain crucial information about and foreshadow one's life direction and, as a consequence, they are experiences where numinous material can reveal itself.⁴ My intention with this project is to explore and deepen my understanding of my life myth in order to live it more fully and to bring it into the world through the medium of performance art as a form of social action and commentary.

³ According to Diamond & Jones (2004), Process Work is described as "an ever evolving" awareness modality with applications to psychotherapy, conflict resolution, spirituality, diversity and leadership training. The Process Work approach was developed by Arnold Mindell and his colleagues and started with the observation that body experiences are mirrored in dreams. Based on this observation, Mindell proposed the existence of a "Dreambody," which he describes as a dreamlike, unifying field that gives expression to body symptoms and dreams alike. This approach combines Jung's teleological meaning with the Taoist reverence for what's happening and with the quantum physics' concept of fields of energy patterning behavior of matter in the worldview that there is a key to our wholeness in the disturbing experience that is happening.

⁴ Diamond, J. & Jones, L. S. (2004). *A path made by walking: Process Work in practice*. Portland, OR: Lao Tse Press.

While my performance comes out of very personal experiences, I see it also as a kind of mythmaking—as the making of a new myth that reflects on and puts center stage the typically marginalized experiences of all men. It is in this sense that my performance becomes a sociopolitical commentary on the effects of homophobia, heterosexism, and gender and gendered roles of men.

The performance and this contextual essay are a culmination of a number of years of rigorous academic study and the personal development that have resulted from studying and practicing Process Work, a multicultural, multileveled awareness practice, with its core values of love of diversity, reverence for the unknown, and its rigorous theoretical framework. Process Work has given me the worldview and the tools with which I approach this project.

I will now briefly discuss the work done by Process Work students and practitioners to indicate how these have informed this project and the conceptual framework that guides and contains my creative process. I will discuss some of the key Process Work concepts that are particularly relevant to this project, such as life myth, inner work, worldwork, and deep democracy, as well as some basic ideas from Queer Theory, Drag Performance, and Shamanism that shaped the approach to my performance. Finally, I will discuss my approach to developing the performance and explain how this project contributes to and challenges my ability to love myself, how it inspired my personal growth and learning, and the contribution this project might make to the theory and practice of Process Work.

Context and Conceptual Framework

My performance is one of a growing number of creative projects by Process Work students and practitioners who have utilized Process Work ideas, tools, and techniques to explore and support their creative processes. I have been influenced and inspired by these projects and draw on them as practical guides and as sources of support for my own creative process.

For example, Rhea Shapiro and Dawn Menken have each created performances based on autobiographical material (*Rattle!* and *Mama Speak*). Their performances valorize the use of personal and marginalized experiences as a legitimate and important source of material for creating performance art. This aspect of their work forms the conceptual and experiential basis for my own explorations inasmuch as their work provides a

model for believing in and valuing of my own experiences as an immigrant Armenian Georgian-gay-feeling-creative man in the face of outer and inner norms that see these experiences as unwanted and at times even as pathological.

Life Myth

The Process Work concept of life myth provides the basic framework for understanding my personal experiences. An individual's life myth can be seen a holographic pattern, insofar as the part (the childhood dream) contains information about the whole (the lifelong issues and challenges). The life myth acts like a subtle directional force, much like the moon's gravitational pull acts on the ocean. Carl Jung originally used this term to describe the basic patterning underlying the life-long development of individuals. He found that childhood dreams often stayed in his clients' memories into adulthood and that they contained an archetypal, mythic pattern for their lives. In the context of Process Work, Arnold Mindell⁵ extended Jung's ideas about life myth and childhood dreams by proposing that patterning for a person's life can also be seen in recurrent and long-term processes, such as chronic symptoms, illness, addictions, and relationship patterns. Mindell suggested that a life myth represents a form of psychological inheritance that includes tendencies related to parents, ancestors, cultural context, and historical background. According to Mindell, "the first dreams we remember are significant in a process-oriented sense because 'first' means to us 'most ancient,' most

⁵ According to Diamond & Jones (2004), the development of Process Work "is best understood as Arnold Mindell's lifelong quest to piece together the mysteries of human consciousness, physics, and psychology" (p. 2).

prominently significant in describing our longest and most typical patterns.”⁶ He asserts that it’s nature’s gift to us, and that we spend our lifetime living and working with these mythic elements / energies, and that our mastery of moving fluidly between them is our gift back to nature.⁷

My own life myth has to do with performing myself publicly and with the freedom to love the experience of all parts of myself and I utilize the medium of performance to create a space to explore my life myth in order to bring out and share my innermost experience and feelings. I use performance to follow Mindell’s challenge to integrate my life myth, to live it fully, and begin the process of self-discovery here by examining and discussing the memories in which my life myth initially appears.

The curtains draping the doorway, floor to ceiling, the doorway between the bedroom and the living room—a passage between two worlds. I wear the dress, sleek, and slightly above the knee. Polyester. I feel comfortable in it, love it, although I have a sense that this is somehow taboo. Me wearing it. “It was a girl’s nightgown,” says my mother “and you just loved wearing it.”

I put it on and I feel at home. Bedtime. The curtains part and I make an entrance. The world changes. I am no longer me. I am otherworldly, singing, dancing, with freedom and in ecstasy.

I am wearing, lipstick, eyeliner, high heels, and a dress. I am someone I have seen on

⁶ Strachlan, A. J. (1992). *The dreaming body: A case study of the relationship between chronic body symptoms and childhood dreams according to Process-oriented psychology*. Doctoral dissertation, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA.

⁷ Personal notes from Arnold Mindell’s “Facilitation Seminar” in Yachats, OR, January 2004.

TV, singing a song about a million red roses. Dancing a million red roses. Someone else. Not me. Singing and dancing. The center of attention.

I am aware I am in front of people, every now and again, zooming in and out of, ecstatic freedom, the audience. Mom, grandma, family and friends, Irina, the neighbor girl friend, sometimes dad. I become more and more aware of an audience as time goes on: reactions, smiles, frowns, surprise, my grandma's worries and warnings, in her caring of me, against the grave consequences of being like such-and-such dancer. I feel shamed by her fear and worry, her hushed tone, but also ecstasy.

These earliest childhood memories contain all the essential aspects and conflicting directions of my life path, the recurring themes that I revisit again and again: openness and creativity; surrendering to the unknown inside of myself; performance and showing myself; the audience, with appreciation and awe as well as harsh and critical voices; the stage; the curtains; the director, the censor and the critic; and the margins and norms of a larger culture.

Field Theory and Roles

Process Work theory suggests that personal experiences are never only personal.⁸ It assumes that all experience is shared and that what appears to be personal and separate is in effect also an expression of a larger collective experience. Process work conceptualizes this collective experience as a field in the processes of discovering its

⁸ Personal notes from "Worldwork Global Conflict Resolution Seminar" in Washington D.C., 1999.

diversity. This field is populated with diverse experiences or “roles.” Instead of merely conflicting, consciously occupying and enacting these diverse roles allows the roles to interact and enables the awareness process to unfold.

One of the roles that may emerge in the processing of a social issue, like heterosexism and homophobia, is the role of the social activist. It is a role I strongly identify with in terms of the politics of gay lesbian bisexual transgendered queer issues. While this role is created by the marginalization in the field, it is also a necessary voice. The social activist fights for the oppressed, for the ideals of justice and equality, and champions the underdog. The social activist identifies the oppressor as an enemy and fights. As a social activist I am one-sided, insisting on my point of view.

In contrast to social activism, the elder is another role that sometimes emerges in a field. The elder identifies with many roles or parts and fluidly moves between the position of the margin, the norm, and the social activist, holding the whole scene together. The elder is all parts and is beyond the polarities that characterize consensus reality or dreamland. The elder operates at the essence⁹ level where there is no separation. The role of the elder is crucial in reaching momentary resolution and awareness.

My performance seeks to process the issues of heterosexism and homophobia and

⁹ Process work posits the essence level as the deepest, non-dualistic level of reality that deals with dreamlike tendencies, sentiently felt to move us. See www.aamindell.net/blog/what for more information on the essence level of reality.

explores the roles of social activist and elder in my reflections on my lived experience of gender, sexuality and love, mainstream and margin, inside and out. As a result, I channel and work with many world ghosts, or unrepresented roles that are felt or experienced, by the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Queer community: the ghost of heterosexism, homophobia, racism, sexism, and gender oppression. In performing, I make visible the often invisible and silent suffering and create a new inner and outer pattern for relationship. In this sense, my personal suffering is shown to also be collective suffering as much as my bliss is also everyone's. In valuing my own humanity, I also value everyone's humanity.

The performance is also a way for me to believe in my creativity and as such it is not only a medium but also a claiming of a forbidden inner experience. I defy something outside and inside myself that pathologizes, criminalizes, and shames me. I refuse to stay invisible and silent and fixed in just this one identity. In this, I am taking the role of the social activist. As I do this, I learn about my internalized oppression and how I, in turn, oppress the mainstream, inside and out, in an attempt to break free from marginality. I explore the mainstream's structure and form and their particular qualities. I become the mainstream and, in doing so, start to develop and occupy the role of the elder.

In this sense, I see my performance (as well as the earlier performances of other process workers) as political acts and as worldwork—Process Work's way of working with

diversity and challenging social and world issues. Central to worldwork is the idea of Deep Democracy,¹⁰ a metaskill¹¹ and a core value of Process Work that holds all viewpoints and voices, including all parts and states of consciousness as necessary. Deep Democracy values and supports the relationships between different viewpoints or positions as well as different states of awareness.

Deep Democracy provides a model for valuing the totality of my humanity and my experiences, my inner and outer diversity, simultaneously valuing me, the oppressed, and the not me, the marginalizer and, finally, the relationship between the two.

Mainstream and Margin

One of the basic premises of Process Work theory is the concept of primary and secondary process separated by an edge. The primary process refers to those experiences which are closer to one's identity and more known; the secondary process to those experiences that are further from one's identity and lesser known or not known at all. It is possible to think of one's primary identity as one's mainstream identity that marginalizes the lesser known or less wanted aspects of the self. Joe Goodbread speaks to the notion of mainstream and marginality, framing it poignantly: "The margins are terrifying because they are unknown. The known world, no matter how repugnant, is at

¹⁰ Mindell, Arnold. (2000). *The leader as a martial artist: An introduction to deep democracy techniques and strategies for resolving conflict and creating community*. Portland, OR: Lao Tse Press.

¹¹ According to Amy Mindell (2003), metaskills are the feeling attitudes that inform our practice of the skills of Process Work. They reflect our underlying beliefs about life, nature, and human development and bring rich liveliness and power to our work.

least reliable.”¹² For example a man usually identifies as masculine and identifies less as feminine, and those two categories are clearly delineated. Here the edge is a barrier or limit between the known and unknown gender identity.

An edge is often felt as discomfort, nervousness, or excitement because it is an encounter with something new or unfamiliar. Process work theory understands long-term edges or life edges as opportunities for engaging with the central material and, perhaps, for learning the central lessons of a person’s life. In other words, as Julie Diamond and Caroline Spark Jones conceptualize it, they are opportunities for discovering one’s path of heart or a “path made by walking while we venture further on our life journey.”¹³ When I apply this schema to myself, my primary identity is that of a loving gentle sensitive gay man. The experience of an outspoken, creative, direct person who is vocal about his feelings and needs is beyond my known identity. My primary identity is based on a belief that I must not disturb the status quo in order to stay alive, succeed and be loved, that what I do is what is valuable about me and not who I am. My nature and my humanity is not enough: it needs justification to be and to be loved. In working on the performance, I am challenged to identify with the more secondary aspects of my identity. Some of the characters I develop are raw, direct, and unabashed; others are deeply feeling and subtle. Even though my primary identity does not experience it this way, all these parts are equally a part of nature.

The schema of primary and secondary processes separated by edges can be applied to

¹² Goodbread, J. (2009). *Living on the edge: The mythical, spiritual, and philosophical roots of social marginality* (p. 7-8). New York, New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc

¹³ Diamond, J. & Jones, L. S. (2004). *A path made by walking: Process Work in practice* (p. 20). Portland, OR: Lao Tse Press.

an entire culture as well as the individual. In his book on the mythical, spiritual, and philosophical roots of social marginality, *Living On The Edge*, Joe Goodbread writes: “Margins are co-created by all of us. The implicit norms that define who we are as a society and as human beings also define what is marginal. By consenting to these norms, if only through our silence, we re-create and strengthen them. It is, in normal times, a quiet process, yet without our ongoing consent, both society and its margins would vanish into thin air.”¹⁴

Two examples of performances created by process workers that put typically marginalized or pathologized experiences center stage are the graduating projects created by Carol Zahner and Annie Blair. Carol Zahner’s performance piece is based on her experience of her first sexual memory and in “Dancing Through The Field Of Binging and Starving” Annie Blair addressed her experience of “little eating dreaming” or anorexia and bulimia. Instead of marginalizing their experiences, both risked bringing intimate and often isolating and pathologized experiences into the open, utilizing themselves and the stage as a central space for creating a sense of community, sharing, and transformation. Their performances inspired my own. Growing up in Georgia, as a man, I was not to feel, be creative, sensual, or love other men. Paradoxically, my inner mainstream also pathologizes a more direct, raw, and self-focused way of being as an unacceptable reaction to a rigidly and culturally defined male gender role. In my performance, I attempt to explore both my inner and outer mainstreams, to develop fluidity and a sense of freedom and play with identity as

¹⁴ Goodbread, J. (2009). *Living on the edge: The mythical, spiritual, and philosophical roots of social marginality* (p. 7-8). New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

moment-to-moment process.

I also build on the Process Work applications of acting and performance as they are outlined in Arlene Audergon's article, *Process Acting*¹⁵, and Lisa Blair's dissertation, *All Of The Apple Is Me*¹⁶. Arlene Audergon develops a framework for working with acting and actors, which she calls Process Acting. She explains that in preparing to play certain characters, actors come up against belief systems that limit their access to the full range of the character's being. They encounter an edge—the limit of their known world of experience. Arlene Audergon suggests that processing the internal conflicts they experience in relation to dramatic character enables actors to embody more diverse parts and that this can also lead to personal and artistic growth. I followed her approach in working on my own biographical material and edges in developing the characters for the performance. Using this technique allowed me to become someone else—someone not me—and to explore, experience, and develop different dream-based characters and, in so doing, identify with unknown parts of myself. I used an approach outlined by Lisa Blair in her graduating project *All Of The Apple Is Me* that uses inner work to develop dramatic characters.

Inner Work

The performance is an opportunity to explore and develop relationships among the

¹⁵ Audergon, A. (1994-1995, Winter). Process acting. *Journal of Process Oriented Psychology: Art and Creativity* 6(2), 63-71.

¹⁶ Blair, L. (2009). *All of the apple is me: Process Work and acting an exploration and practical guide*. Unpublished thesis, Process Work Institute, Portland, OR.

different aspects of my inner and outer reality, using an experiential technique that Process Work calls innerwork—a way to consciously explore diverse aspects of one’s self and identify with their essential energies and whatever roles might emerge from them. The concept of deep democracy applies here as well: inside our selves, all parts, states, voices and the relationships between them are valuable and needed for wholeness. Self-love results from a deeply democratic attitude that embraces internal diversity by appreciating each role. In my own life experience and with respect to my own life myth, the following roles and experiences appear: the artist, the social activist, the dude, the elder, the gay man, the Georgian Armenian immigrant, the killer as well as heartbreak, resilience, love, marginalization, and sensuality. I experience conflicts, the polarities between these: the social activist feels betrayed by the elder; the gay man and the Georgian Armenian don’t have much of a relationship; the dude doesn’t understand the heartbreak nor the sensuality of the artist; my everyday self finds it difficult to identify with and allowing many of these experiences. I am shy to discover myself in and flow with these new ways. To see myself as process, as being in process.

However, when I allow these different parts to have a voice and interact, I experience a sense of freedom and feel more whole. I unfold each of the roles, become each of the characters, and then, from the position of the elder, I try to facilitate a dialogue between them. I realize that all the parts of my early childhood memory are me as well: the curtains, the costume, the audience, the performer, the critic, the censor, the performance of it all.

I become visible to myself in my fascination with costume and clothing. I use clothes as a dream door—as a way into *dreaming while awake*—to my inner diverse experience. I dream myself into being, performing my inner world to an audience in full color, texture, pattern, fabric, and drag. I orchestrate the whole performance, directing individual elements and characters.

I realize: I am neither only a victim nor a perpetrator. I transcend this polarity as the characters and the relationships between them unfold and am able to reflect on and contain the whole scene, to develop a sense of detachment and compassion as I witness this unfolding drama.

I realize: I choose performance as a way of exploring and using my life myth rather than being propelled by it unconsciously.

Performance is a way for me to encompass all of the directions suggested by my life myth: the performer, costume, the curtain as a space between myself and the audience, the director, the censor and, finally, also the stage as the deepest intention holding all of these energies and relationships.

I can almost not do it.

To unfold, explore, become, experience the different parts of my life myth and to

develop the characters that make up the cast of my performance, I used inner work as the basic tool for developing the character in my performance. In this I was partially guided by Lisa Blair's application of Process Work techniques to acting and performance. Using technical concepts in Process Work, she defines the relationship between edges, channels, and levels in terms of acting techniques, suggesting that actors experience the limits of their known identity (or edge) within a certain perceptual modality (or channel). The techniques used for working at a specific edge will be located in one of the three levels of reality: the consensus reality level, dreamland, or sentient level.

Levels Of Experience

Consensus reality experiences refer to what we perceive as factual and objective. It is also the world of cultural norms with which everyone (more or less) agrees. At this level of perception, men and women have socially and culturally assigned roles. In dreamland and at a symbolic level, roles are more fluid however. Process work and role theory suggest that individuals are bigger than the roles they are identified with, and that roles are always bigger and more enduring than the persons who temporarily occupy them. Essence level or process mind experiences refer to experiences of oneness (a lack of polarities) and pure potential. This is the level of arising. To illustrate how I worked with these different levels to develop my performance and how costume might work on these levels, I will talk about one of the characters, Pink.

Most of the time, people dress unconsciously. But their dreams can be seen in what they wear. Costume becomes a dream door to the mystery and the unknown. Marion Woodman, a Jungian analyst, writes about clothes: “Clothes in fairy tales, like clothes in dreams and life, create an image. They cover and reveal our naked truth. . . . Color, cut, texture, period are all significant. They may create a persona we assume to impress the world: they may be authentic expressions of who we are.”¹⁷

In consensus reality Pink is a pale pink men’s shirt. The shape and presentation of it is something we can all agree on. In dreamland, this same piece of clothing can be a part of me, dreaming itself as a pink chiffon creature on a swing, singing lullabies. It is my fuchsia hair and a glittering hot pink sequined mini skirt. At this level of experience I connect and become aware of how I experience myself internally. At the deepest, essence level, before words, before images, before roles, the pink chiffon experience becomes the subtlest awareness, a little flirt of a burst of pink color, the seed from which everything else arises.

Essence of chiffon: delicate, vulnerable, barely there. Letting song come out, effortless being, surrendering, willow, wind, tree, rippled water.

Lisa Blair suggests that Process Work awareness training is in fact a form of rigorous acting training that facilitates the discovery of the diversity of human experience and enables individuals to identify and explore their personal edges and different channels of expression.¹⁸ Developing the performance thus meant looking at and exploring my

¹⁷ Woodman, M. (1992). *Leaving my father’s house: A journey to conscious femininity* (p. 23). Boulder, CO: Shambala Publications.

¹⁸ A channel is the way in which a signal is represented. Signals may appear in a number of different

experiences at all three levels. It involved studying the history of gay lesbian bisexual trans queer (GLBTQ) civil rights movement to prepare for one of my characters at the consensus reality level; exploring characters or roles by inhabiting through the symbolic meaning of costume as well as the subjective experiences of movement and sound in dreamland; and finally, at the essence level, working with subtle energies (using what Process work calls “flirts”) of a color or the almost imperceptible beginnings of a movement and finding analogues for this experience in nature.

Performance and Performativity:

Drag and Shamans—Concepts Of Identity and Gender As Performance

Arlene Audergon sees performance and process work as similar because “of the numinous atmosphere they create by bringing awareness and expression to our dream life, mythic background, and personal stories.”¹⁹ The parallel world of art creates a Deep Democracy of appreciating each figure as divine and as “a welcome guide from beyond.”²⁰ Beyond right and wrong, with its own unique set of identifiers, grounded in

channels. Each channel represents a different way of perceiving. Process Work theory posits two kinds of channels, basic or composite, and based on the proximity to awareness occupied or unoccupied.

¹⁹ Audergon, A. (1994-1995, Winter). Process acting (p. 64). *Journal of Process Oriented Psychology: Art and Creativity* 6(2).

²⁰ Rumi (1997). Guesthouse [poem] (p. 77). *Illuminated Rumi*. (C. Barks, Trans.) New York, NY: Broadway Books.

creativity, performance de-pathologizes human experience. It does so by inviting the viewer and the artist to explore typically less used modalities of expression such as movement and proprioception and to explore other worlds of character's experience by way of edgework as well as providing a way out of individual isolation into the world. I not only work on my own material psychologically, but also theatrically: I play it, I become it, I experience it. My inner audience is now the world and I am a part of it.

Performance and theatre have historically been a medium to say the unspeakable, and to comment on the mainstream. I am utilizing the stage as a way to deliberately and publicly embrace and transform the shamed and marginalized parts (my own and my culture's), and to transform my inner points of reference, my inner margin and mainstream.

My performance finds itself at the intersection of performance art (specifically drag performance), worldwork, and shamanism, and I will now explain the concepts from each of these practices that have informed my creative process and how my work aligns with them.

Drag performance and shamanism share a marginal relationship with the mainstream and include transgression as a practice. In the long history of art, drama and performance have often been a means to express unpopular opinions, to comment on conventional life, the current political regime, or laugh at human foibles. Drag queens, like jesters, have historically occupied a number of roles: social commentator, entertainer, artist, and political activist. In her movie, "Queens of Heart: Community

Therapists In Drag,”²¹ Jan Haaken sees drag queens as community therapists in their modeling of culturally taboo behavior, who, in so doing, give audience members a chance to momentarily experience their own wholeness. Haaken focuses her psychological analysis on the culture at large, portraying drag performers as keen observers of human behaviour who, using performance, provide the mainstream culture with a reflection of itself, as well as model new and unknown ways of being, by impersonating the other gender.

It is beyond the scope and focus of this essay to give the reader an understanding of the ancient and vast field of shamanism, but I do briefly outline the concept of shapeshifting, which informs my approach to performance. Not unlike actors and drag performers (and artists in general), shamans have also always journeyed between worlds, worlds that have become inaccessible to the ordinary person living in everyday reality, to enter the unknown and have brought back healing and transformative messages.

One of the skills that makes this possible for shamans is shapeshifting, or the ability to change the shape of a specific energy field, be this a physical object or something that is intangible. Shamans achieve this by dropping personal history and, with it, their attachment to a specific identity. Fluidity of identity or non-attachment to a fixed or single identity is the essence of shamanism and results from the shaman’s view of the world as the ground for hunting personal power and a perception of difficulties as

²¹ Haaken, J. (2006). *Queens of heart: Community therapists in drag* [Film]. United States: Kwamba Productions.

opportunities for personal growth.²² Shamans develop their second attention, a steady focus on irrational events, as a way to awaken to the totality of their being. Don Juan, a shaman from the Yaqui tradition, introduced by Carlos Castaneda to North American readers in the 1970s shapeshifts fluidly and shocks Castaneda by personifying a businessman at a bank, wearing a three-piece suit, appearing in a way that is inconceivable and unexpected to his student.²³

I choose the shaman's path when I choose to reflect on my experiences of gender and sexual orientation, margin and mainstream, love and desire, inasmuch as I focus in an area that has been a source of suffering and public humiliation—for me and many others like me. I use my struggles and suffering as a space from which to create performance art. In doing so, I am using a key principles shared by shamanism and Process Work, approaching disturbances as sources for creativity and transformation. I gain personal power in a resulting sense of detachment from my suffering and in my refusal to feel victimized. I shapeshift into the different roles in the field (into the audience, the mainstream, the marginalized, for example) becoming more fluid and less attached to my everyday self and identity. I am modeling a new way of being for myself and the community, bringing back a message of freedom and fluidity.

Shapeshifting is also a central element of drag performance. It is something I have done intuitively all my life, using costume to translating feelings, transform atmospheres and subtle flirts into colors, textures, and form. I ask myself this question: Who is dressing

²² Mindell, Arnold. (1996). *The shaman's body: A new shamanism for transforming health, relationships, and the community* (p. 10). San Francisco, CA Harper Collins.

²³ Castaneda, C. (1974). *Tales of power*. New York, NY: Washington Square Press.

me? Who is choosing this hat, that color, this texture? The choice can be more or less unconscious, can lead to more or less known or familiar experiences, and the question opens a door to a different way of being in the world. Who or what directs me to perform myself in these ways.

Costume and clothing are ways of experiencing myself outside of space and time.

Marion Woodman's explanation of the role of clothing resonates with my own sense:

“In the mystery religions, initiates changed their clothes at each step of the initiation.

The inner transformation was symbolized in particular clothing, each garment being identified with an inner archetype. When the ceremony was complete, the clothes were taken off. The person was no longer identified with the god [the clothes represented].”

24

Each character of my performance has a costume and, once the costume is put on or taken off, the transformation is complete. Much like performance, costume is a way of embodying a character—color, cut, texture, period are all significant—an momentarily authentic expression of who am. I use clothing as costume to express and make concrete different worlds that give rise to the different characters my self-performance.

Clothes are not only a way to express myself or to perform. They are also a way of getting in touch with an inner experience. They have the power to transport and transgress the internalized mainstream and its norms and provide access to an experience over the edge. In the book, *Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*,

²⁴ Woodman, M. (1992). *Leaving my father's house: A journey to conscious femininity* (p. 23). Boulder, CO: Shambala Publications.

Larry Mitchell claims, "a man can learn more by wearing a dress for a day, than wearing a suit for a lifetime."²⁵

My performance of a diverse self is also informed by queer theory, specifically by the concepts of social construction and performativity. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss queer theory in detail, but I will outline the two key ideas that inform my project, namely the idea that gender is socially constructed and that gender is performative. Postmodern queer theorists insist on the fluid, performative nature of gender, and disagree with an essentialist approach to gender that understands women and men as fundamentally and inherently different. Postmodernists claim that gender is a product of time, space, historical context, and economy—a social construction. Judith Butler,²⁶ who developed the notion of performativity, a key idea in queer theory, argues that *gender* is a set of cultural meanings that are placed (or imposed) on one's physical body. Butler calls this "placement" [or gendering] a *performance* to emphasize that we ourselves are the actors.

As actors in the theatre, we are directed to express and perform ourselves through our bodies following a pre-existing script. Although we must accept responsibility for having reproduced certain performances of gender, we must also understand that we were in a sense *obligated* to follow the script.

Unlike Judith Butler's initial valorization of drag (understood as a recognized public

²⁵ Mitchell, L. (1977). *Faggots and their friends between revolutions* (p. 19). New York, NY: Calamus Press.

²⁶ Butler, J. (1988, December). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4).

performance of gender which exposes the constructs of gender to those who witness it), the above statement and my personal experience suggests that cross-dressing creates cultural change not only from without, but from within. It is the man who is wearing the dress who learns as well as those who look at him.

I am transformed not only in my outer presentation but my inner experience of myself changes as well. When I wear a hot pink sequin tube top as a skirt, I experience myself in a new way: as sensual, desirable and vulnerable; or when I dress up in sweatpants and a baseball cap: I feel comfortable and at ease in the world. I am also deliberately using my clothing to comment on gender roles and sexual orientation; and I explore being an essentialist when I perform a culturally scripted male role. What I'm doing is a political and creative act. It is scripted in my life myth. The challenge is to believe in my own experience against and in the face of great opposition, and having the fluidity to love and experience the totality of my nature.

My project explores the concept gender as a performance. I perform cultural scripts that are meant to inform me as to how to be a man. I perform cultural meanings imposed on women. I illustrate the constructed nature of gender by writing. Constructing my own gender script, going back and forth between reproductions of culturally defined gender norms. I see this as inner as well as and outer social action, as a commentary on the social norms and gender roles that seeks to make explicit the suffering and the heartbreak that results from a hetero-normative consensus reality system that does not make room for dreaming and essence level experiences.

I become a stage for my own process and, in this sense, my performance is representation of my life myth. The performance asks the question: who performs who? Who is the audience? And who is directing? What is the story, the whole story, and what is the message in the performance?

My project, this essay and the performance, are an innerwork, a relationship work, and worldwork. It challenges me to inner and outer deep democracy, not only to social action: it demands that I enact and use my inner mainstream as well as the marginality of myself in the world and to perform them both.

Developing The Performance

My performance is a one-man show, with a set of 5 characters. They started out as a nighttime dream image, a flickers of a color, textures, or shapes that caught my attention and that I unfolded, amplified, moved, and expanded into characters. Some

came to me from deep within, others appeared in the form of a flirt from the outside world. They all asked to be brought into the world and shared.

The performance is a way of reflecting on and developing a sense of detachment from my personal history. It makes my history real and helps me develop detachment.

Because of my history of trauma around creativity, performing is a way of believing in my perceptions, creativity, and experience. This fulfills the task outlined in my life myth: fluidity with my experience of identity.

I used innerwork as the main tool in the creation of my performance. I applied the schema of known and unknown parts of myself, separated by an edge, a boundary between my usual identity and the role of the performer as well as the process of developing the performance and the characters.

Here is the general structure of this process, as applied by Arlene Audergon and Lisa Blair: performers use their awareness to notice a signal in one of the channels or pick up flirts, using the process work methods of unfolding, amplification, edgework, working with different levels, and metaskills to develop more of a relationship with this new aspect of their identity.

I used this approach, working on my own doing innerwork, working with Dawn Menken, my therapist, and working with Rhea Shapiro, my performance director.

Flirts and Edgework

The idea of the performance first crossed my mind when I discovered an image of

myself on the cover of *Just Out*, a local gay paper. The photograph was taken at the Pride March. There I was: hot pink fishnets, glitter, and sequins, holding Keith Haring's painting of creatures dancing, hearts in hand.

Who is this man?

At the time, I had not yet remembered my childhood experiences of dressing up, but I remember the feeling of the rightness of this image, somehow, and imagined a path unfolding: of me performing me, me performing the world, to the audience of the world and of myself. I did not know what was ahead. I still don't.

Process Work helps me understand this as a flirt in the world channel: I saw a reflection of parts of me that I was not identified with. I saw a public, political, unabashed, creative man. This man was no longer a victim. He—*I*—was empowered.

In working on myself, I discovered a part that wanted to create a performance. I immediately also discovered other inner parts who vocalized their opinions as to why this would never work. I was at an edge. I had come up against the belief system of my known identity.

I can almost not do it.

Almost not show my suffering and feel the agony of being who I am in the world that does not want me like that. Hide what is unnamable, unspeakable.

I was at my personal and cultural edge of being a different kind of man and speaking publicly about this experience.

To stay alive and make something of myself.

In this belief system, performance in particular, and creativity in general, did not belong within the rigorous academic psychological training program I was enrolled in.

According to this belief system, personal psychology was not a legitimate subject of performance art. Neither did I have the necessary experience or tools to create anything of value.

Who do you think you are?

Nothing.

I identified and agreed with all of these viewpoints. This belief system was there from the beginning and perseverated every step of the way. My therapist modeled valuing my creativity, seeing it as precious and important and, perhaps most helpfully, as belonging not to me but to nature.

I needed to develop this attitude or metaskill,²⁷ this *feeling* attitude if I was to create a performance. I had to pick up the power of my inner audience and perceive myself in a new way, in order to support and applaud my creativity. At the same time, I had to listen to the critics' suggestions to give my project a more rigorous academic underpinning and learn to value it as an invitation to discover a deeper intention behind my performance, as a way of exploring the deepest aspects of my characters and their messages to the world.

²⁷ Mindell, Amy. (2003). *Metaskills: The spiritual art of therapy*. Portland, Oregon: Lao Tse Press.

I become aware of the critic and fight with the shame. I persevere. I become the audience that criticizes and looks at myself. I see a feeling sensitive gay man. The fear dissipates.

I can go on.

As I continue working, I develop a meta-position, a perspective of the whole scene, compassion toward myself and my experiences. For what I've been through, explicating my innermost feelings. This experience of compassion transforms my inner norms and margins.

Creating this performance represents a life edge for me. Beyond this, I do not know myself.

Who am I beyond the territory of my marginality?

I am reclaiming creativity and play and unabashed self-love. Putting it center stage.

Aurora Borealis—An Example

The theory and technique of Process Work, in many ways, parallel and overlap with a theatrical performance vocabulary of gesture, sound, movement, language, costume and relationship to space and time, which are traditionally used to flesh out character. An example of a Process Work technique is unfolding. I use “unfolding” in the development of the character of Aurora Borealis, who first appeared years ago in a nighttime dream in which I am performing an unrehearsed movement piece. As I spontaneously move, the lights of the aurora borealis seem to be connected to the movement itself.

This character appeared again more recently, in an innerwork meditation exercise. Her unabashed beauty, perceived as movement and color, again, spontaneously shone out.

I began developing the elements of spontaneity, unabashed shining, and beauty—characteristics that are all beyond my normal, everyday sense of self. (Process Work would call these secondary aspects of my experience). I used amplification methods to develop this character: moving like Aurora Borealis, thinking and speaking like her and imagining others who unabashedly shine. I also recognized my own moments of unabashed beauty (like the one captured on the cover of *Just Out*, in my hot pink mini skirt).

At a deeper level, I worked with a sentient essence of noticing the impulse of unabashed beauty in myself—before it even showed itself to become a figure: a slow

and subtle movement, delicate, weightless, effortless. There is no self-consciousness or

concern with a critical voice. It is an experience of simply, delicately

BEING.

Contributions and Limitations Of My Project

The portrayal of my life myth as a marginalized individual contributes to the larger social field, and more specifically to the growing body of research and application of Process Work in creativity, worldwork, and marginalization.

I make a theoretical contribution by beginning to outline how a framework might be developed that combines elements of Process Work, Queer Theory, and Shamanism.

My project (this essay and the performance) is both personal and impersonal: it includes innerwork, relationship work, and worldwork. This is both its limitation and its strength. It is a way of loving myself and the world. It is a challenge to myself to develop my inner and outer deep democracy and to model–perform this–in the world.

I would like to end this essay with a poem that offers you a glimpse into my creative nature—a glimpse that I hope will become an exciting and fulfilling reality for me.

*Opening the chiffon heart softness of my vulnerability
Today I would like to wear my heart. Not just on my sleeve*

I want to wear it as a dress.

*Imagine pink chiffon, cherry blossom pink chiffon, creatures
from a dream, delicate, all seven of them, singing
and on a swing, hanging off a willow by the river.*

*Let us out, let us sing
they plead*

*They sing something high pitched, like
Gorecki's symphony #3, pure and almost
like a Gregorian chant, the symmetry
has something majestic in it.*

*Black lace of my desire, in a bordello
or on a delicate glove trimmed
with chocolate mink fur.*

*I must not forget the allure and illusiveness, yes
the slit just above the right knee, no
a little higher, where you
could almost see the orange jockstrap beneath the
Oscar de la Renta ruffles, two tone, pink and poppy red.*

*My hair is pulled back
no, to the side and there is a flower
in it. The passion of tango,
Almodovar, bullfighting, suddenly everything
speeds up, and I can feel the raw immediacy.*

*Kaftan sleeves puff out,
but the dress is held by two straps, elastic and firm,
remind me to bounce off fear*

*Also a starched Elizabethan collar
standing regal,
unbending will and power of a woman monarch.*

*And, did you see
the exhibit last fall at the international fashion photography exhibit in NYC.
And the indigenous Peruvian women wearing fancy gowns with blood and guts draped
carefully to trim the dress?*

*The shock
of suddenly realizing the humanity and
the suffering, the blood and guts
are my glory too, dear friend*

*The last part of the dress is a heart
a beating heart*

*If you saw this heart, walking down the street,
one morning, fragile, raw, and bleeding*

*Would you let it bleed to death? Would you address it politely?
Or call the ambulance and clean up squad perhaps?
Would you capture it and charge admission?*

*Perhaps you might permit your heart to join it?
Maybe together they would skip a beat, having finally found each other.*

*What shoes will I wear? Something practical? Wrestling shoes.
I need to be able to wrestle
with you, my ally, my brother, my killer,
(Did you recognize Leonard Cohen?)*

Struggle with me. Feel my pain. Hear my suffering.

*Yes wrestling shoes
accents of snakeskin and gold lamé and aqua*

*Wait, aqua makes me flow
I need a firm ground, maybe
earthy brown?*

*Holding it
the majesty, the grind, the agony*

The beauty of it all.

Ta ta ta ta ta tat a tat at. Love is a bird and you can't catch it

LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE

I wear what I am today

The intricate layers.

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