***From Drag Queens to Leathermen: Language, Gender, and
Gay Male Subcultures***

Rusty Barrett (2017)

New York: Oxford University Press, 268 pp.

Reviewed by Maureen Kosse

In addition to its contribution to the study of gender, sexuality and language, *From Drag Queens to Leathermen* is also a piece of queer history. Importantly, Rusty Barrett challenges dominant monolithic images of 'gay men' through examining the discourses of various gay male subcultures. While gender and sexuality are often treated as separate phenomena in the social sciences, Barrett's book compellingly demonstrates that gender and sexuality fundamentally co-construct one another; in turn, the author shows how each subculture inflects their performances of gender and sexuality along the lines of race, class and other relevant subject positions. Each chapter serves as a case study for a gay male subculture: drag queens, radical faeries, bears, circuit boys, barebackers and leathermen. Barrett is careful to point out that, as subcultures within a subculture, these 'sub-subcultures' often position themselves against both heteronormativity and hegemonic understandings of gay male culture.

In the first chapter, Barrett establishes the theoretical background to the book. He uses the concept of indexical disjuncture to illustrate the range of seemingly disparate signs – linguistic and nonlinguistic – used by each subculture to perform subcultural identity. Indexical disjuncture refers to 'an indexical interpretation in which a sign (or set of signs) indexes an

Affiliation

Maureen Kosse
she/her/hers
Department of Linguistics, University of Colorado Boulder, USA
email: mary.kosse@colorado.edu

interactional component that is not normatively associated with the context involved' (17). Indexical disjuncture relies on the simultaneous use of marked indexical forms that are not conventionally brought together; for example, middle-class bears may juxtapose masculine working-class linguistic features with stereotypically feminine practices like knitting or hosting potluck dinners (Chapter 4). Barrett makes no claim to universality in his analysis, instead arguing that indexical disjuncture has the potential to resist dominant norms in one sphere while reinforcing domination in another.

In subsequent chapters Barrett analyses a gay male subculture's predominant ideologies and practices, with special attention paid to points of indexical disjuncture. Chapter 2 expands on Barrett's previous research on drag performance (cf. Barrett 1999); more specifically, African American drag queens are found adopting stereotypically white feminine forms in their feminine performance (per Lakoff 1975), but then selectively break into masculine speech styles to highlight the gender ambiguity of drag. Chapter 3 considers radical faerie ritual music, a subculture defined by spirituality and explicit rejection of heteronormativity, colonialism and Christian norms. In this queer neopagan practice, radical faerie spiritual appropriation follows from faerie-specific ideologies of language and gender rather than the 'cafeteria' approach associated with many New Age religions. Chapter 4 looks at the working-class language of bear culture, a community centred around larger and hairier men. While critics of bear culture argue that bears use working-class signs to reproduce conventional heterosexual masculinities, bear culture draws heavily from feminine indexical forms and second wave feminist perspectives on gender resistance. Chapter 5 covers language ideologies on the circuit party scene, where circuit boys, whose practices largely centre around hypermasculinity, use camp forms of language to distinguish themselves from heterosexual men. Chapter 6 looks at barebackers, an identity category based around unprotected sexual intercourse and opposition to moralistic 'protected sex' discourses of HIV prevention. The sexual scripts in barebacker pornography and sexblogs reveal a practice that is at once highly transgressive yet highly normative in its ideology of informed consent. Chapter 7 examines the political speeches of leathermen at the International Mister Leather contest. Leatherman identity involves the construction of a social persona, the 'sexual outlaw', yet also indexes traits associated with discipline, regimented behaviour and patriotism. Speakers link seemingly opposed citizenship discourses with discourses of alternative sexual practices to ultimately reject the pressure to hide or assimilate to dominant sexual norms.

The strengths of this book are manifold. Throughout the text, Barrett illustrates the complex semiotic webs from which each subculture constructs its identity, taking care to point out the history and ideological structure of these communities. Barrett carefully attends to time and place throughout his analysis, as well as the many ambiguities that arise from sub-subcultural group identity. Chapter 6 'Viral Loads' is particularly strong in this regard. Barebacking, or when gay men engage in unprotected anal sex, remains relatively taboo (in part due to public misunderstanding of HIV/AIDS). In this chapter, Barrett analyses stance markers and sexual scripts both on barebacker blogs and in barebacker pornography. In contrast to pathologising representations of barebackers as irrational, unstable and suicidal, self-identified barebackers carefully consider and consent to potential risks. 'Viral Loads' stands out for Barrett's empathetic, informative approach to a highly stigmatised sexual identity.

Of the analytical concepts in this book, indexical disjuncture is one of the most interesting and productive. As outlined in this book, each subculture forges identity through the combination of seemingly disparate signs: Blackness and whiteness, patriotism and anti-normativity, masculinities and femininities. But to whom does this disjuncture belong? To which listening subject (Inoue 2003) are these disjunctures subversive? The underlying presupposition of disjuncture speaks to the categorical nature of language and thought, influenced by the communities of practice of which we are part. A naïve audience may perceive a disjuncture when watching a bear knit a scarf, but to the bear this may feel like a perfectly natural practice, aligned to the ideological webs undergirding bear practices and gender ideologies. How might this analysis change if, instead of disjuncture, we thought of these moments as a form of synthesis? For instance, by the standards of mainstream US sexual culture, the risks barebackers take are unconscionable. However, barebackers authorise themselves as legitimate sexual actors by denying 'protected sex' discourses in favour of informed consent' and sharing sexual fantasies that naturalise the desire to exchange sperm. To them, there may be no disjuncture at all.

The analysis provided in this book gives crucial perspective to underrepresented and misunderstood gay male subcultures. Barrett's deep engagement with diverse linguistic data sources and methods, enhanced by his sharp ethnographic insight, encourages the reader to think far beyond mainstream images of 'gay culture'. For this reason, *From Drag Queens to Leathermen* is a rich contribution to the literature on language, gender and sexuality.

References

- Barrett, Rusty (1999) Indexing polyphonous identity in the speech of African American drag queens. In Mary Bucholtz, A. C. Liang and Lauren Sutton (eds) *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse* 313–331. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Inoue, Miyako (2003) The listening subject of Japanese modernity and his auditory double: citing, sighting, and siting the modern Japanese woman. *Cultural Anthropology* 18(2): 156–193. <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2003.18.2.156>
- Lakoff, Robin (1975) *Language and Woman's Place*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.