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Going Back and Giving Back: The Ethics of Staying in the Field

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Abstract This article analyzes the benefits and ethical dilemmas of going back and continuing to write about the troupe of drag queens featured in our book, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*. The benefits include providing the drag queens the opportunity to revise and add to the stories we told about them and, through deepening friendships, changing the balance of power among us. Challenges include dealing with responses to the book, including those of family members, and conflicts over the royalties we shared with the troupe. Despite the pitfalls, going back contributes to public sociology by continuing conversations about research findings.

Keywords Fieldwork · Ethics · Ethnography

One day, out of the blue, seven years after the publication of our book, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Rupp and Taylor 2003), we received an email from a Key West resident we don't know: "Great book. I have what might appear to be a dumb question; do you have a favorite drag queen currently performing at the 801?" he asked. It was a question we could not have answered had we not remained "in the field" since we finished the project, and it reminded us how much staying involved with the drag queens we studied has shaped what we continue to write. Most of the time, the relationship between researchers and the researched ends when the project is finished—or, in the case of feminist research, participatory action research, or other methods sensitive to ethical responsibility to the researched—when the final product is shared with the subjects of the research. But sometimes the relationship continues, either

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because researchers were already participants, became participants, forged friendships, or simply could not tear themselves away. In the case of our relationship with the drag queens, the latter two reasons apply. We became friends and also keep on writing about them.

"Going back" is not necessarily the same as "going native" or becoming so engrossed in a community that one is in danger of losing all perspective as a researcher. Anthropological research usually requires staying in the field for a long time, which is why warnings about "going native" abound in anthropology. In contrast, the norm in sociological research is to leave when there is little else to learn, although if one lives in the field—as Bernadette Barton does for the research on her book, *Pray the Gay Away* (Barton 2011, forthcoming)—that is not possible. And leaving can create its own problems. Maxine Baca Zinn (2001) has written about the ethical dilemmas of "leaving the field" in her insider research on Chicano families, and Kimberly Huisman (2008) titles her article about feminist ethnography among Bosnian Muslim refugees in the United States "Does this mean you're not going to come visit me anymore?" When researchers have been involved in a community, it can be disappointing to the people they have worked with and studied when they leave to go on with their lives and future research projects. "Getting out" and leaving participants feeling positive about the research can be tricky (Smith 1997; Wolf 1991) and, sometimes, what Ellis (1995) calls "quagmires" appear when researchers return to the field. As Wendy Chapkis (2010) has said, there is a key difference between doing engaged research and being the researched: "Sometimes we can walk away" (p.494).

Staying in the field or going back as we have done falls somewhere in between living there and leaving, as is the case with other researchers who have written about revisiting and staying in touch (Gallmeier 1991), ending and resuming research (Kaplan 1991), leaving but remaining committed to the cause (Taylor 1991), or wondering if we ever really leave (Stebbins 1991). We have never entirely left the field, returning to Key West on a regular basis and continuing to write about the drag queens. In addition, we are also both insiders and outsiders: outsiders as women and non-drag queens, but also insiders in sharing a gay/lesbian identity and, through the course of the research, becoming friends and honorary members of the "801 family." As Nancy Naples (2004) has argued, "Insiderness and outsiderness are not fixed or static positions, rather, they are ever-shifting and permeable social locations that are differentially experienced and expressed" (p.373). We are sometimes members of the family, but, of course, we have yet to become drag queens.

We analyze here the benefits and ethical dilemmas of going back or staying in the field. First, continuing to write about the drag queens has meant that they have had the opportunity to revise the stories we told about their lives in the past. Not only have they had the chance to tell us things they wish had or had not been in the book, but, in addition, they avoid being frozen in time, since we are able to chart their changes as we continue to publish about them. Second, staying in touch and becoming friends has changed the balance of power among us from a contradictory mix of researchers/researched and fans/performers to a more equitable relationship. Bringing them to our university to perform on three different occasions has meant that they learned something about our lives, just as we had learned something about theirs. Going back has had a great many benefits, although the process is not without ethical challenges, including having to deal with responses to the book from both the drag queens and members of their families and managing a conflict over our agreement to share the royalties. In this article, we take on what Jodi O'Brien (2010) calls the "often overlooked challenges, concerns, unexpected insights, and ethical dilemmas that are a common but frequently unmarked aspect of the research process" (p.473).

We draw here on the original research for the book, undertaken between 1998 and 2001; our interactions with the drag queens since 2001; and, in particular, two tape-recorded group

interviews/conversations, one on July 4, 2004, published in *Sexualities*, and the other on July 14, 2010, in connection with this paper. The first of these conversations took place in the cabaret one afternoon. For the second, we invited Sushi, Kylie, and Gugi—the 801 girls to whom we are now closest—over to our house in Key West for cocktails and conversation.

Befriending the Drag Queens

We began our study of the drag queen troupe at the 801 Cabaret in Key West, Florida, in 1998. We did not set out to write about drag queens, but rather happened into a drag show and got hooked. What was occurring on stage was so different from the traditional female impersonation we had seen previously that we kept going back, taking along visitors, including many famous sociologists with whom we discussed the shows. The way that the drag queens played with gender and sexuality, calling attention to the fact that they were gay men and eliciting erotic responses outside audience members' sexual identities, intrigued us. That was how we came to write the book. Because they are public figures and proud of who they are and what they do, we did not have to disguise the location or their identities, so we did not confront the kind of dilemmas faced by Arlene Stein (2010) when her pseudonymous community was outed in the press. We should note that we follow the practice of the drag queens, who almost always use their drag names and female pronouns in everyday life but sometimes shift to male pronouns, a practice we at first found confusing but soon adopted.

But first, a bit about the cast of characters. Sushi, whose mother is Japanese and whose late father was an American GI, is the house queen. She is now in her forties, as are the other main characters here, and is the moving force behind the drag shows at the 801 Cabaret, the upstairs venue on the main street of Key West. Sushi and her then-boyfriend Greg drove to Key West from the West coast, and Sushi started work as a cleaner and then a bartender at the "boy bar" that is part of the same gay Bourbon Street complex. With a background in drag, she started to perform occasionally and then talked the owners into letting her manage a regular show at the 801. She hires and supervises the drag queens, makes almost all of the costumes, organizes the show, performs, and negotiates with the owners for their salaries. She is a celebrity in Key West and beyond, since for the last 14 years she has been featured on CNN on New Year's Eve, sitting in a giant red high-heeled shoe dangling above Duval Street that descends at the stroke of midnight to the crowds gathered below.

Several years after arriving in Key West, Sushi talked her best friend from high school, Kylie, into quitting her job at a grocery store in Los Angeles and coming to Key West to join the show. Kylie and Sushi began dressing up in Boy George-style flamboyant costumes in their hometown of Kaiser, Oregon, and eventually that morphed into drag. Kylie, unlike Sushi, never wanted to be a woman, although when Sushi began hooking in drag on the streets of Los Angeles, Kylie went along to protect her. That's how close they are. They live in the same house, along with Sushi's current partner, Jeff, Sushi's elderly mother, and several other drag queens. Kylie is more private and less flamboyant than Sushi and took a long time to trust us. When they come to perform in Santa Barbara, Kylie likes to stay in their motel room and watch television. Over the years, though, we have become close to Kylie in a different way. When Margo, the oldest of the drag queens, died of bladder cancer in her sixties, Kylie was devastated, and we spent a long brunch talking with her about her feelings. We had the same kinds of conversations when she lost her grandmother, to whom she was very close, and when a very good friend (and rare love interest) who worked as a bartender at the 801 died. Kylie has taken to calling us when we are in Key West and

having long heart-to-heart talks, with Verta in particular, because they went through family losses at about the same time.

Gugi joined the show later than the others in the original cast, replacing Inga, who moved down the street to another drag bar, where she still performs. Gugi is Puerto Rican, from Chicago, and we bonded right away because she loved our little dog, Emma. The first time we arranged for the girls to come to Santa Barbara, we invited Gugi because we knew she would be a big hit with the Latino students at our university. For a period after we finished the research, Gugi went to work at the same bar that hired Inga. She got a day job at a bank and did drag at night, but then she fell in love with Rob, who made her quit her jobs and move to Pennsylvania, where he began to abuse her. Gugi called the bar where she worked, but until someone there ran into Sushi on the street and told her that Gugi was in trouble, no one did anything to help her. Sushi sent her money for a plane ticket home, took her back at the show, and rented her a room in her house. That's the kind of family they are. Gugi has been slowly transforming her "Rob's Property" tattoos to claim her body and self back.

The other drag queen who came to Santa Barbara on their second and third trips is R.V., who grew up in rural Ohio and learned to do drag at Disney World in Orlando. The first time she came to Santa Barbara, she showed us a growth on her thigh that horrified us because it was so clearly skin cancer. She told us her father had died of melanoma, and we urged her to get to a doctor right away. Two years later she finally did something about it, but the cancer had spread. When we last called her, her phone message said she was on her "bucket tour." Her mother had driven her to Provincetown and Fire Island, where R.V. had often gone in the summer to perform. Sushi doubted that she would get back to Key West, but she did, painfully thin but still eager to perform. She even appeared in a local free paper, in drag and with a plunger over the large tumor on her head, very much in keeping with her performative sense of humor.

We had already lost Margo, Milla—who died at thirty-six from liver disease, no doubt a result of drinking, drugs, and black-market hormones—and Destiny, who came to the show just as we were finishing the book and who died of AIDS in her thirties. Scabby, a major player in the original troupe, also has AIDS and has been close to death several times. She recently moved to northern Florida, having lost her lover to AIDS as well. Whenever someone in the 801 family dies, we get a call from Sushi. We were dreading the call about R.V. as we first worked on this paper. And then it came, not a call, but a text message: "Might be rv's last night on this earth, say a prayer." Leila texted back: "We're praying to whom I don't know. Love to all of you." Back came: "Pray to margo n milla, that bitch in hell [Milla slept with Sushi's former boyfriend]. And just a little later, "Rv just died." The obituary made the front page of the local paper, announcing a "'Pot'luck Soiree" at the bar (in honor of R.V.'s fondness for marijuana) and a march to the ocean to scatter some of his ashes. The rest went into little ceramic pig salt shakers distributed to her friends—including one to us to scatter in Santa Barbara

We, the researchers, a lesbian couple for 33 years, are both professors at the University of California, Santa Barbara, having moved to Santa Barbara after 25 years at Ohio State University, where we began the drag queen research. We are both in our sixties. Verta is a sociologist, Leila, a historian by training, is now in the Department of Feminist Studies. We fell in love with Key West on our first visit 30 years ago and went back almost every year during our winter breaks. We finally bought a house there in 1996. While working on the book, we flew there every month for a week and spent long periods in the summer. At that time Margo, who wrote a column for the Key West gay newspaper, described us as coming and going more often than most people shower. Having moved to California, we go less

often, but still spend every break there. Our house is just around the corner from the pink drag queen house Sushi rents. So we stay in the field, but not full time.

Early on, Sushi seemed to trust us, urging us to "tell the truth" about them. Little did we know that people often try to get close to the drag queens by claiming they want to write a book about them. During our recent conversation, we asked Sushi again why she trusted us. "Because you were doing it. Because you came back," she replied. We also asked them whether they felt that we had done anything to exploit them. Sushi, in full drag queen mode, responded "Exploited us?! Yeah, definitely." Gugi started to laugh. Referring to their visits to perform at our university, he went on: "You exploited us at your fucking college, making us dance around for you." Everyone laughs. In a falsetto, imitating us, Sushi continues: "'Oh, you guys have to come, the young gay people want you.' Totally exploitation right there, for your guys' benefit." Gugi pipes up: "Not because we wanted to go shopping or nothing. Santa Barbara, who wants to go there?" Sushi gets serious: "I didn't feel exploited." Gugi: "We had a great time." Kylie adds, "I don't think anyone does, who's in that book." Sushi continues in her serious vein: "I've never felt exploited by you guys. You know. We joke around about it, but I don't really understand the concept of exploitation. We're smart people." Gugi chimes in: "I always thought it was like friends talking to friends."

Becoming friends with the people one studies is not unusual. Mitchell Duneier (1994, 2001) brought some of the street vendors he studied in New York to the University of California, Santa Barbara, to co-teach a seminar with him on "The Life of the Street and the Life of the Mind in Black America." Other researchers have gone beyond friendship with the people they studied, having sexual liaisons and writing about the consequences for their research (Bolton 1995; Goode 2002; Irwin 2006; Kulick 1995; Murray 1996; Newton 1996; Rubenstein 2004). It is worth noting that our differences—in gender, age, and class—and the lack of sexual attraction—not that we do not find their performances erotic—have probably made it easier to stay involved without getting entirely sucked into their world. When we asked them in the 2004 conversation if they thought our being lesbians had affected the study in any way, they responded, "You weren't bitchy queens." Nor are we, of course, the masculine men they tend to desire, which also facilitated our research. So our friendship is built around the study and the mutual respect that has developed over time.

Continuing the Story

We finished the research in 2001, and the book appeared in 2003. Since the book was published, we've written a series of articles drawing out different aspects of the book (Taylor and Rupp 2004, 2006): developing a theory of what makes certain forms of cultural expressions political, based on the drag shows (Taylor and Rupp 2003; Taylor et al. 2004); exploring the gender and sexual dynamics of the research from a methodological perspective (Rupp 2006; Taylor and Rupp 2005b, 2011); considering the research as participatory action research (Taylor and Rupp 2005a); comparing drag queens and drag kings (Rupp et al. 2010); and following up on the drag queens' reactions to the book (Rupp and Taylor 2005). This has allowed us to put in print the impact of the book on their lives and to document their changes.

It is clear that they are very proud of the book. When it first came out, they threw a book party for us at the bar, setting up a table on the stage for us to sign books. They came in various forms of drag and signed the book themselves, imprinting lipstick kisses along with their signatures, although Kylie once said, "I think it's weird that people want us to sign the

book." Kylie also found it odd that people tell her that they love the book, because she reads it as to some extent a tragedy: "There's just a lot of sad stories in there, I guess that's how life is, but it's just different when you're reading about it in print, and they're your friends, or even just reading about yourself, you forget, did I really feel that way?"

Yet they regularly call the book "our book." Sushi, one New Year's Eve, held up the book as she sat in the high heel for all of the CNN audience to see. Margo once told us, "I hold up the book [at the show] and I say, 'We did tell them everything!'" She found it surprising that "a small little drag club in the middle of nowhere is known worldwide," referring to people coming from all over the country and from Europe and saying, "'We've heard about you.'" Kylie was surprised by how much our students loved the book when the drag queens came to our campus to perform. We shared some papers that students had written about the book and the performance, and Kylie found them "eye-opening." In Key West, as Sushi noted, "People are amazed that, you know, that the drunken drag queens at the 801 actually have a book out," and Scabby added, "After they read it, I think they realize there was more to us than just being a bunch of drunks." Kylie reiterated this in our latest conversation, commenting that people in Key West were surprised that we chose the 801 Girls rather than some other drag queens. And when Kylie left a party we threw for Leila's sixtieth birthday, and we thanked her for coming, she said, "Thank you, you legitimated us."

But the publication of the book was not without its downsides for some of the girls. In the interview published in *Sexualities*, we asked how people in their lives had responded to the book (Rupp and Taylor 2005). "Oh, my mother screamed at me!" Scabby said, and Sushi added, "My mother, too." Scabby's mother did not know she was a drag queen until she found the book, which Scabby's brother, also a drag queen, had brought home. Sushi's mother asked to meet with us shortly after the book came out. She demanded to know why we had written a book that shamed her family. She was very angry, and at first we felt horrible, although we did wonder why she was not blaming Sushi for telling us the thing—that Sushi had sold sex in drag on the streets of Los Angeles—that so upset her. This went on for almost 2 hours, and after feeling guilty and sorry, we began to understand why Sushi has no shame. Her mother, who was born in Japan, maintains the kind of sense of honor and shame that is so important in Japanese culture. In response, presumably, Sushi is not ashamed of anything she has done. We later found out that, in fact, Sushi's mother had shamed her family by refusing to marry the man chosen for her and running away to marry an American soldier.

Seven years later, Sushi's mother still hates us. She refuses to speak to us and makes it very difficult for us when Sushi invites us over on holidays or when we see her in the cabaret for special events. It is some consolation that she hates almost everyone else, too—including, at least some of the time, Kylie and Sushi's partner Jeff. One thing Sushi found "poignant" was that her mother said, after reading the book, that she was really glad Sushi had Kylie back in the early L.A. days. "And that's the first time she's said that, you know, because I've known Kylie for 20 years, and out of the book, that came, our friendship came out so she finally realized that."

When we asked them in 2004 if there were things they did not like about the book, they named the cover (the photo of Sushi—she was supposed to get us a better picture but never did), some of their photos, and some of the references to illegal drugs. Kylie said "when you have a book like that, especially in a small town like this, where they're flaunting their drug use, it does attract the attention of the police." Sushi interrupted to say that the police knew, which Kylie acknowledged. How to talk about their drug use was a dilemma for us. When we first gave them the prospectus for the book at a weekly drag queen meeting, they objected to a line about them sipping cocktails and snorting coke in the dressing room

before the show. They knew that people in Key West are aware of their drug use, but they did not want us to describe any particular place or time they used drugs out of fear of being arrested. R.V. gave us the perfect line, so we wrote that they "sipped cocktails and powdered their noses" before the show. We tried to be careful throughout by avoiding statements about who did drugs when, but their use of drugs is important in understanding them. One night at the show when we were discussing with Kylie the book's disclosures about drug use, a tourist who overheard the conversation spoke up, reminding Kylie that the 801 Girls perform numbers about drug use in their show and that it is clearly no secret to anyone who has seen the show. R.V., for example, performed Mary Poppins' "A Spoonful of Sugar" with flour that she cut with a giant razor blade and snorted through a straw made out of PVC piping. Still, this was probably the way they made themselves most vulnerable, and we tried our best, in the tradition of ethical fieldwork practices, to tell an important part of the story without doing damage to their lives (Ellis 2007; Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Punch 1986; Barton 2011; Currier 2011; Einwohner 2011; González-López 2011).

There was also some tension about things they had said about each other, although the style of bitchiness endemic to drag queen culture made much of that more acceptable than it would be among other populations. We had to deal with Milla sleeping with Sushi's then-partner, Scabby being accused of stealing tips, and other conflicts among them. For example, in the middle of our latest conversation, Sushi announced, out of the blue, "Milla's dead, thank god. I knew there was a god." But since none of the betrayals or accusations was secret, we simply had to deal with them as sensitively as we could. In some ways, it was pretty amazing that we could describe acts of betrayal while still remaining on good terms with all of them. In fact, it was coming to understand how they could do such things to each other and remain close that helped us to understand what they call the "801 family" or the "drag mafia." In this regard, unlike other researchers, we were fortunate in studying people who had few secrets from each other and little shame (Ellis 2007).

In the *Sexualities* interview, Kylie told us she found it annoying that people "think that's us, and that was like six years ago….I wish you had an addendum to it. Because so much more has happened since then." R.V. added, typically tongue-in-cheek, "We've matured." That is why we published the interview and other pieces that touch on what has changed since the book came out. Margo talked about having come to a greater understanding of "the transgender thing, which I wasn't as astute about as I am now" as a result of a new troupe member who had breast implants and another who was saving for sex reassignment surgery. In the book, we told the story of David's (Margo) horror as a teenager growing up in New York when Christine Jorgensen's sex change hit the news, making him think that was what, as a gay man, he would have to do. Others had different responses to what we had reported in the book. Kylie commented, "I wish I'd told more, actually." Scabby changed her mind about being open about her HIV status. She had told us she was HIV-positive late in our research but asked us not to reveal this in the book. In the *Sexualities* interview, Scabby at first said that she was glad that we did not put her HIV status in the book, then reversed and said she was sorry she had made that decision, that everyone she cared about already knew and "it's not a big deal anymore." Margo responded, "See, that's how things change in five or six years."

So by staying in the field and continuing to write about different aspects of the drag queens, we have been able to allow them to reflect on the impact of the book on their lives and to present new facets of their experiences. The confrontation with Sushi's mother has been painful, causing Leila, the historian, to wish sometimes that she had stuck to writing about dead people. But by going back we think that we have been able to continue giving back to both the drag queens and the community of Key West. We have written elsewhere

about ongoing public conversations in Key West—sometimes quite contentious—responding to the book (Taylor and Rupp 2005b). An introductory sociology text includes our work as an example of public sociology because "it stimulates discussion about what it means to be a man or woman and what it means to be gay or straight in a number of different venues," citing responses from students in the UC Santa Barbara newspaper (Giddens et al. 2006, p. 399). As Wendy Chapkis (2010) has noted, "Even after publication, researchers do not really have the final word" (p.292). By staying in the field, we at least have been able to be part of those ongoing conversations and debates

Building Lasting Friendships

While we were doing the research, we not only interviewed the 801 girls, went to the shows, and watched them rehearse and get dressed, but we also invited them to our house and out for meals and attended their social events. Since finishing the research, we have continued to invite them over, take them out for meals, and tip them generously when we go to the shows. We have built lasting friendships, no less genuine because of the elements of power and exchange involved—as in all fieldwork—in the relationship (Rubenstein 2004; Stacey 1988).

Leila had a sixtieth birthday dinner for Verta at our favorite restaurant, Antonia's, and, of course, we invited the girls. Sushi came with Jeff, Scabby with her lover Ricky, and Gugi and R.V. came too. Kylie backed out at the last moment because the friend whose later death hit her so hard was depressed that night, and she wanted to be with him. Pretty much by accident, Sushi turned out to be a sort of master of ceremonies that night. The joke of the evening started when Verta introduced Sushi to her first lover, Betty Jo, who had come from out of town with her partner Babs especially for the occasion. Sushi latched onto the fact that Betty Jo was, in Sushi's terms, like a "drag mother," the one who introduces you to drag, and so Sushi began calling her "muff daddy." The party had a special feel because it brought together the drag queens with our neighbors and friends, gay and straight. As our lawyer commented, it was an amazing mix of people, and we see it as another example of the ways that what we called the "politics of vulgarity" in the book works to lessen the distance between the drag queens and "respectable" audience members (Rupp and Taylor 2003, p. 140). None of this would have happened without the friendship we had built with the drag queens.

In the 2004 interview, when we asked the girls whether our being lesbians had any impact on the study, most of their answers focused on how they felt about us (Rupp and Taylor 2005). "We gave you the interviews, which I think proves how we feel about you," said Margo. "We love you girls," added Scabby. Kylie said, "You guys were interesting to talk to. And it was obvious that you liked us, but I didn't know, really, what to think of you, it took a while." Sushi once told us we were the only women she loved besides her mother and that when we get old, she will "wipe our pussies." Recently she asked if, when her mother dies, she can come stay at our house in Santa Barbara for a week.

In an article we published in a special issue of *Signs* on "New Feminist Approaches to Social Science Methodologies", we analyzed the complicated power dynamics at play in the research (Taylor and Rupp 2005b). Recognizing the many kinds of power at work in research interactions, we were attentive to our different structural positions, identities, and standpoints. We were economically and educationally advantaged and were the ones writing the book, but they were men—despite the clothing, wigs, and makeup—as well as local celebrities. In public, they called us "the lesbians," "lesbo one" and "lesbo two," "the pussy lickers," or, our favorite, "the professors of lesbian love." Sushi still calls us "the lesbians"

or "lesbos," but it is no longer just a way to remind us that, despite the class and educational and other differences between us, we are all in some ways still in the same boat. A few months before our last interview with them, we had a cocktail party in Key West and invited Sushi, Kylie, Gugi, and R.V., and asked Sushi to include any of the other girls who were in the book. Instead she brought everyone performing in the show at that time, as well as the director of a documentary about the show and a famous Canadian lesbian novelist who was writing a book she dedicated to Sushi. At one point Sushi turned to one of the drag queens we had seen only on stage and said, "See, I told you the lesbians were cool." We realized that inviting everyone to the party was a way of validating us for the new performers and ensuring that we would retain our commitment to the show even with its new cast.

Remaining friends also had a downside, which emerged around the issue of royalties. From the beginning, we had promised Sushi we would give half of the royalties to Sushi's company, "Gook Productions" (the name a reflection of her reclaiming of such racially charged terms). Sushi's dream was to save to buy a drag queen house where they all could live. They did not all share that goal, so from the beginning some wanted to divide up whatever money came their way. Sushi insisted that we talk only to her about the money, since they would just squander it. One of the drag queens we interviewed late in the project demanded a separate cut and, when we refused, withdrew permission for us to use his interview, causing us to have to make revisions in the page proof stage.

Of course we tried to warn them that academic books, even accessibly written academic books, do not make a lot of money. We have still not earned beyond our 7,500 dollar advance, which we spent on the project. But after the book appeared, we transferred stock worth four thousand dollars to Sushi, hoping that the amount would increase over time. We are not sure exactly how this happened, but a rumor spread quickly through the drag queen community that we had given Sushi a very large sum. One day we came home to find a series of phone messages from Milla, starting with "Hi, how are you guys doing?" and ending with "Call me before I talk to a lawyer." When Leila called back, she was able to smooth things over by reiterating that the original deal was to give the money to Sushi, but Sushi did end up giving Milla some money as her share. She did the same thing for Scabby, who also called us about what had by that time in the rumor mill become something like 25,000 dollars we had supposedly given to Sushi.

Despite the fact that things such as this would never have happened if we had just moved on, the rewards of our friendships far outweigh the negatives. Having seen the changing dynamics of the shows, the ebbs and flows of relationships, experienced illnesses and deaths, we have come to understand even more deeply what it means when they talk about their drag family and how committed they are to the political work of drag. We have moved beyond being researchers and the researched or fans and performers, and our friendship has equalized the complex power dynamics between us and them.

Probably nothing facilitated that shift more than bringing them to Santa Barbara in 2004, where they could see us in our world as we had so often seen them in theirs. The first time they came, they performed in Verta's introductory sociology class to a crowd of around a thousand students. The class was at noon, an hour at which the drag queens are not always up. We had no idea what to expect. Would the students sit quietly as if in a regular class session? Would they be shocked? From the moment the girls came on stage, the students went wild. It was a fabulous show. We had asked Kylie not to strip, as she usually does at the end of her show, leaving on her wig and makeup to contrast with her well-hung male body as she performs to "Queen of the Night." But of course she did.

That night there was a panel discussion with two drag kings, billed as "Absolutely Fabulous: Race, Gender, Class and Drag King and Queen Culture," at the Multicultural Center. It had been a long day, and this was a very foreign setting for them—it was the first time any of them had been on a college campus. The drag queens knew nothing about drag kings and, when they realized that they were female-bodied, began using female pronouns to address them. Even now, Sushi remembers the tension, describing it as "scary." She sat behind a table on stage with an unlit cigarette in her mouth, which irritated one of the drag kings. "I just wanted to have a cigarette, and she was militant, honey," Sushi said in our latest conversation. Then Sushi said she thought issues of gender, sexuality and terminology should not be taken so seriously. As the story in the student newspaper quoted her, "You suck cocks or you lick pussy. Who cares? We're all the same" (Gonzalez 2004, p. 5). She went on to say that in her small town high school, she used to cry when she was called a "jap" or "faggot," but explained that now she and the other drag queens use words such as "spic" and what she called "the n word" as a way of strengthening themselves and deflecting hatred with humor and light-heartedness. Addressing a Black staff member, she asked, "Do you use the n word?" to which the woman responded, tersely, "I choose not to." To top it all off, a graduate student asked a question, prefacing it with "I know you don't think of yourselves as intellectuals," which they read as meaning, "I know you're not smart." If we needed reminding, it was clear that they could be as out of place in our world as we would have been if Sushi had succeeded in talking us into performing the lesbian duet from *Rent* when she put us in drag one night at the end of the research phase.

But despite the tensions of that evening, their visits to Santa Barbara were a great success. We brought them back twice more, the last time at the instigation of the Queer Student Union, who reserved the largest venue on campus and filled it for an evening performance. On a more personal level, their coming into our world further cemented our friendship. Sushi remembers our bringing them food from Taco Bell in the middle of the night when they were hungry after their performance, singing "Moon River" at our house, and hanging out in our yard. Sushi and Kylie then fell into one of the squabbles where we say they act just like an old married couple:

> **Kylie**: You think singing "Moon River" around a piano bonds you? It takes time to bond to people.
> **Sushi**: That bonded me, honey.
> **Gugi**: Oh, yeah.
> **Kylie** [*to Sushi*]: I hate the way you think. I don't even think you think sometimes.
> **Sushi**: I don't, totally, I'm just right in the moment, Kylie. I just, when you say it takes a lot of time, I mean, how many times have you been over here? How many times have you been to lunch with us? It took you this long because you, you always say, "Well, I don't want to go, or I can't, I'm sick, or I'm not doing this, or whatever." It's like you act like, these girls have been trying to get to know you for the last ten years.
> **Kylie**: They do know me.
> **Sushi**: Yeah, they do know you, but
> **Kylie**: I don't need your help, I feel better when I call them and talk to them privately than with you around, to be quite honest.
> **Sushi**: Well, there you go.
> **Kylie** [*to us*]: I do, I can talk to you guys, like I heard that you hurt yourself [to Verta] and called to see what's going on, the old lady fell down the stairs. [We laugh.]

But they agree that the visit to Santa Barbara was important. Sushi says, "Yeah, we went there. Saw your house—couldn't stay there." Everyone laughs, because Sushi has always

wanted to camp out in our house rather than stay in a motel. Then she moves out of drag queen mode again: "That was really nice. I think that's how our relationship started growing. From that first experience going there with you guys." Gugi adds, "I think for me, we bonded more, we've become more like a family than anything else." Kylie adds, "You guys could have just written the book and then gone, it's the fact that you stuck around and, you know, took the time to do that." Sushi and Gugi brought up the post-it love notes they stuck all over our house, so that every time we open a closet or drawer or medicine cabinet, we find another one. "Did you find all the notes?" Sushi asks. "No, they haven't," says Gugi, convinced there are still some hiding in an obscure place.

Staying in the field, and even more important, bringing them into our lives in Santa Barbara, has not only strengthened our friendship but also minimized any feeling of exploiting or disappointing them. Of course, the differences between us remain. We continue the kind of exchange typical of fieldwork, an exchange of money and resources for access to the lives of others. But it is no longer solely about that. Rather, we are older friends who have more privilege and more money and can afford to treat and tip them for the pleasure of their company and their performances. The fact, as Kylie put it, that we "stuck around" equalized the power imbalances inherent in the research process and rewards us with satisfying friendships.

Going Back and Giving Back

Staying in contact with the drag queens over the last 12 years and continuing to write about them has convinced us of the benefits of this kind of approach, realizing of course that it is only possible if there is an affinity between researcher and the researched. Kathleen Blee (1998, 2003), for example, who studied organized racist movements in the United States, had no reason at all to stay in the field. That our queer identities serve as the basis of a bond that helps to transcend our gender, age, and class differences reinforces the argument we make in the book about the collective identity forged in the shows, in part through the politics of vulgarity that blur the lines between respectable audience members and the marginal drag queens (Rupp and Taylor 2003). To quote Sushi again, "You suck cock or you lick pussy. Who cares? We're all the same." Our bonding over queerness and our appreciation for their politics of vulgarity have freed us in certain ways to be more "in your face" about gender and sexuality, both in our research and in our daily interactions. At the same time, we are not in their lives on an everyday basis, so our kind of going back means that we have also been able to move on to other projects. And our differences mean that they do not expect us to immerse ourselves entirely in their worlds. We visit, both literally and figuratively, but we do not live there.

As we have argued, going back has allowed the drag queens to revise and add to their stories as we continue to write about them, and solidifying our friendships and bringing them into our world has equalized the power dynamics inherent between the researched and the researchers. At the same time, we have had to deal with some of the negative responses to the book, most notably from Sushi's mother, and with the struggle over the shared royalties. All of this has been easier because of the nature of drag queen culture—the expected bitchiness, the openness about ways they have cheated or betrayed each other, the lack of secrets, and the campiness

Despite the particularities of our study, we think some of the advantages of going back would apply to other studies where there is affinity with the subjects of study. The longer one stays in touch, the more trust develops about sensitive matters and the more awareness

comes about the vulnerabilities and tensions in the community. We worked through the issues about drug use in a way that would not have been possible had we simply left when the book was finished. And instead of a lawsuit about the royalties, we were able to smooth things out because they called us as friends. Even the drag queen who rescinded permission to use her interview is now friendly and appreciative.

Perhaps most important, going back and continuing to write about the drag queens has fulfilled the goals of public sociology, both through the conversations about drag that took place in Key West and Santa Barbara and in the complex interaction between our articulation of the political consequences of drag and their convictions about what they do. That is, we came to see their intention to do what Sushi early on called "political work," then developed an argument about the politics of drag, and in so doing reinforced that aspect of their performances. In our recent conversation, when we began talking about the book, Kylie chimed in, "We're not just performing to people, it's not just entertaining" and Gugi agreed: "We're changing people's minds. To change society." Kylie responded, "I think we change people's opinions about gay people and drag queens by being their friend and having them know you one on one." Later Kylie added, "So I guess we're really famous in academia." Everyone laughed. "They're taking it seriously." Sushi picked up the theme: "Like in Australia, like in a college classroom, they're going to say, 'Well, Kylie Jean says…'" In a phone conversation with Verta about her work on social movements, just before that evening, Kylie had commented, "As far as social movements and social change goes, I've come to believe it's the everyday little things that matter."

It is clear that the drag queens are serious about the politics they perform and value the platform they have as celebrities, in Key West and beyond, to articulate their point of view. Perhaps nothing illustrates that so much as Sushi's annual New Year's Eve stint on CNN. People all over the world watch a gay celebration with Sushi as the star. In our last conversation, Sushi told us that she now has to sign a contract with CNN agreeing, as she put it, that "I would not say that Anderson Cooper is a faggot." This happened because one year she told him, on the air, that he was the sexiest man on television, and last year she said, "It's nice to see you out and about." She is annoyed both by this—"I'm thinking of writing to Anderson Cooper and saying, 'Hey, faggot, listen to me, I know you're a cocksucker just like me'"—as well as the fact that the Tourist Development Council in Key West is taking control of the event, eliminating Kylie as co-host and doing other things that seem like a "de-queering" of the evening. To top it off, Sushi was not getting paid and was spending a lot of her own money on the fabulous dresses she makes for the night. Kylie calls her "an actress," shouting, "They're shooting a commercial [for the bar]," and then adding, "I don't know an actress that does commercials for free." For all of these reasons, Sushi announced on the air last year that it was her last in the shoe. We had a long conversation at the end of the evening during our last interview, talking to Sushi about how important the event is in making queer culture visible to millions of television viewers. In the end, Sushi went back in the shoe, was reimbursed for her dress, and got paid. This was an example of the commitment of the girls to keeping gay politics front and center in Key West and the way that our staying in a relationship with them plays a role in that process.

That story is also a reminder to us of how much we have learned by going back. Our experiences with the 801 Girls confirm our commitment to engaging in ethical field research that can help to bring about social change. Not everyone can go back, but we are glad that we have.

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