

Master's Thesis in Anthropology

MASK OF THE NIGHT:
An Anthropological Study of Itaewon Gay Hill and Drag

February 2024

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Abstract

Based on participant observation at Itaewon Gay Hill and interviews with gay men, drag performers, and transgender people who constitute the space, this study examines how their everyday lives unfold both within and beyond Gay Hill. Since the Korean War, Itaewon in Yongsan-gu has remained under the influence of the U.S. military and continues to bear the imprint of American culture. It has also become a gathering place for those who depart from the cultural order of heteronormativity. Men who live as heterosexuals in ordinary everyday life gather in Itaewon on nights before holidays and reveal parts of themselves that they have kept hidden. Gay Hill is a space that grants gay men membership; within its darkness, established gender roles are transformed and social norms are reorganized. Gay men form new relationships with others who share their sexuality, reveal selves they had previously believed must remain concealed, and undergo psychological transformations. Various forms of play help bring about these transformations, and the drag show is one such form.

Drag performers and gay men share particular cultural forms, and gay men therefore constitute the primary audience for drag shows. Women may also enter Gay Hill, but clubs and bars oriented toward gay men recognize gay men as their principal members. Kki, shared among them, is interpreted as a sign of difference while at the same time evoking an unfamiliar sensorium; audiences and performers who participate in the performance are transformed into beings different from the roles assigned to them within the existing social order.

To go onstage, a drag performer puts on a mask that completely alters their outward appearance. After donning a wig, heavy makeup, and heels, performers begin to enact another persona and enter Gay Hill as fictional figures of their own making. Drag brings pleasure to audiences onstage, yet even after performers step offstage they remain affected by the role of the drag mask, and the boundary between stage and everyday life gradually blurs or becomes inverted. The stage originally belongs to the domain of fantasy, but as more people in everyday life come to recognize the performer through the role of the mask, the figure of fantasy becomes the self of reality.

This is an ethnographic study of Gay Hill and drag. Participant observation was conducted in gay clubs featuring drag shows and in the streets of Gay Hill. Research participants included people whose everyday lives had been organized around work as drag performers or club operators, as well as people who had frequented Gay Hill for more than ten years. All had been visiting Itaewon for over a decade, and their engagement with the area extended beyond occasional visits: they had built parts of their everyday lives there. Through interaction within gay social worlds, they experienced or participated in everyday life as gay people, and some worked in or operated venues in Gay Hill.

Keywords: gay, drag, kki, liminality, performance, mask, role

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Translator's note.

Korean-language bibliographic titles have been rendered into English for readability while author names, publication years, journal information, and pagination follow the source bibliography. The main-text translation preserves the thesis's emic term *kki*, its distinction between transportation and transformation, and its use of mask, role, liminality, pollution, and abjection as analytic terms.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Section 1. Research Background and Research Questions

On nights before holidays, Itaewon does not begin to bustle until darkness has fully settled. As public transportation approaches the end of its operating hours, English, Korean, and other languages resound noisily through Itaewon Station. Emerging amid the crowd from Exit 3 and walking onward, one gradually notices fewer women on the street. Men dressed in tight shirts that accentuate their upper bodies and adorned with accessories pass by, leaving the deep scent of perfume in the air. Here, the approach of midnight means that the clubs are about to open. As the hour draws near, the orange taxis lining Itaewon-daero become entangled with the crowds, while people drinking at the mouths of alleys spill into the streets and begin fastening brightly colored paper wristbands around their wrists.

A long line forms at the entrance to one club as people gather to buy admission. Music erupts from basement spaces scattered throughout the area; men's chattering voices, cigarette smoke, and fluorescent light leaking from here and there diffuse across the street. At first glance, it resembles any other disorderly nightlife district, yet a closer look reveals something unfamiliar. As time passes, the clubs grow so crowded that there is scarcely room to stand. Around two in the morning, people who have been drinking elsewhere converge on the clubs, and the small interiors become so packed that bodily contact is unavoidable. At the most popular club, a space that seems scarcely larger than thirty pyeong receives more than five hundred visitors in a single day. Men knock bodies and glasses against one another, becoming thoroughly drunk, laughing and crying until dawn. Pierced by red and green lights, this darkness is Gay Hill, located in Itaewon, Yongsan-gu, Seoul.

Gay Hill has existed as a liberatory space not only for gay men but also for transgender people and other nonheterosexual people. Hatred toward nonheterosexual people excluded them from social standards of normality and classified them as peculiar people with 'perverse tastes.' They were treated as people who ought not to be visible.

The possibility that the fact of being different might transform every gaze directed at 'me' can become a profound fear in everyday life. Such fear casts the individual as a figure expected to correspond to a collective image and encourages them to live according to that standard. For this reason, many of those who come to Gay Hill to enjoy themselves on nights before holidays had already learned, even before recognizing themselves as gay, how to appear naturally heterosexual. Yet there are limits to a life organized around concealment. Living according to a social frame is

not necessarily difficult; enduring loneliness is. People therefore gather in their own ways and secure territories of their own.

Formed in the 1990s, Gay Hill has continued to contain numerous gay clubs and bars. It is also where drag culture first took root in South Korea and where many gay men, possessing a relatively exclusive form of membership, can still play without hiding that they are gay. In the past it was a secretive place accessible almost exclusively to gay men, but today women and people of other social types also visit to watch drag shows or spend time with gay men. On weekdays and during daylight hours, however, it is a sparsely populated residential neighborhood, a place that becomes visible only at particular times. Before sunset, or when the following day is a weekday, it is little different from any other dark and quiet alley in Seoul.

The emergence of drag culture in Gay Hill should be dated to around 1990.¹ Drag was once a relatively closed cultural form largely appropriated by LGBTQ people, but that closure has weakened and drag now attracts broader public interest. Drag performers work primarily in areas where gay men gather, including Itaewon and Jongno in Seoul, but they also perform in Busan, Gyeonggi Province, and elsewhere. The form of drag commonly represented in media is generally understood to have emerged in the twentieth century; by then, drag was already familiar among gay, lesbian, transgender, and artistic communities in Berlin, London, San Francisco, and New York, and it had developed as a performance culture in gay clubs and bars even before Prohibition was ratified in the United States in 1919 (see Frank DeCaro 2019).¹

A conventional drag performance involves a gay man dressing and making himself up as a woman and lip-syncing to the song of a female singer. One reason lies in the fact that, when gay culture first developed, one of the principal grounds on which homosexual men were despised within male social worlds was 'femininity.' Terms historically used to insult gay men, such as fag(g)ot and sissy, likewise carried feminizing connotations. Gay men thus embraced drag, which placed the femininity used as a basis for contempt conspicuously on display and transformed it into culture. Drag culture has continued to expand and now exerts considerable influence in media, fashion, and art.

The word drag was first recorded in the 1300s in the sense of pulling something beneath the sea with a hook or net. As a verb it referred to scraping the bottom of a river or lake with a line or hook in search of something. By the mid-nineteenth century it was also used as gay slang for 'women's clothing worn by a man,' a usage thought to derive from the way a long skirt worn by a man in theater or at a masquerade would drag along the floor. The word began to be used in the nineteenth century for an 'entertainer' who performs an exaggerated appearance different from their bodily sex (see the Oxford English Dictionary).

1. No official documentary source concerning this point could be found; this statement is based on a view shared by the drag performers whom the researcher met.

In this study, drag refers to people commonly called 'drag queens' or simply 'drag.' All of the drag performers who participated in this research create feminine appearances and might conventionally be called drag queens. Yet their appearances are not necessarily queen-like, and this study is less concerned with a gender schema divided into 'queens' and 'kings' than with the practice of creating an appearance and set of characteristics different from one's ordinary self. I therefore refer to all of them as drag. Focusing on drag shows performed in Gay Hill, this study examines drag performers' everyday lives and their lives onstage. It asks the following questions:

- 1) How did gay men come to gather in Gay Hill, and what kinds of psychological transformation do men undergo there?
- 2) What forms do drag shows in Gay Hill take, and what kinds of relationships are formed between drag performers and gay audiences?
- 3) What do the stage and the mask mean in the ways drag performers constitute their everyday lives?

Section 2. Theoretical Background and Review of Previous Research

1. Trends in Research on Sexual Minorities

The people observed in this study are members who have been active, or remain active, in Itaewon Gay Hill and who are commonly described as “sexual minorities.” They fall within categories such as gay and transgender. Research on people who cross binary sexual and gender norms generally mobilizes the expression “sexual minority.” This study, however, differs from such research. Studies of sexual minorities have tended to concentrate on discrimination, human rights as a response to discrimination, and arguments calling for social understanding. According to the analysis of Lee Hyunjin and Kim Myeongchan (2021), qualitative research on sexual minorities in South Korea first appeared in 2004. Among articles published in journals listed or considered for listing by the National Research Foundation of Korea, Baek Eunjeong’s 2004 study examined the stress and adaptation experienced by Christian gay men. No further qualitative research on sexual minorities appeared until 2010; in 2011, Yoon Seongok and Seong Seungyeon studied the gendered experiences of lesbians who were accepting of their sexual orientation. In this sense, qualitative research on sexual minorities effectively began to develop in the 2010s.

Among these studies, Cha Hyorok (2016) examines sexual minorities who experience conflict between religious belief and sexual identity, addressing such themes as “conflict arising

from difficulties in accepting and expressing sexual identity,” “conflict with family resulting from sexual identity,” and sexual minorities’ perceptions of Korean society’s attitudes toward them. As directions for expanding and deepening research on sexual minorities, Cha also calls for further work on cases in which parents experience shock, rejection, guilt, disappointment, or shame upon learning that their child is a sexual minority, as well as on the positions taken toward sexual minorities within Korean Buddhism (Cha 2016:343). Much research on sexual minorities similarly addresses the development and formation of sexual identity, counseling experiences, educational experiences, lived experience, and mental health, while the perceptions and experiences of nonssexual-minority people toward sexual minorities also constitute a major research topic.

The framework of the “sexual minority” was called forth as an ethical measure intended to protect people subjected to discrimination. As social perceptions of sexual minorities changed rapidly, awareness also spread that discriminatory ways of seeing them should be abandoned. Across different social fields, the question of “how to understand them” made the lived experiences of sexual minorities into research topics in their own right. Yet discourse on sexual-minority research simultaneously has a limitation: the sexual minority is reduced to an object of research and positioned as an object to be understood. As a research object, the sexual minority remains outside the domain of thought occupied by the plural subject expressed as “we.” They cannot enter the subject position of a nonheterosexual “we” or “I.” The sexual minority exists facelessly in the place of “you,” rather than “I,” unable to communicate to “me” any emotion, expression, or life narrative. Here, a “face” refers to the traces through which the distinctive impression, actual life, and vulnerability of an individual become perceptible. Remaining forever an Other, the sexual minority is fixed as an outside that “I” cannot incorporate and as one who appeals for “my” response (see Benson and O’Neill 2007).

“We” do not attempt to see the “face” of the sexual minority. This is not to deny that recognizing a difference between the sexuality regarded as ordinary in society and one’s own sensations may require a substantial process. What is problematic, however, is the assumption that this process must necessarily lead to alienation and fear, or must be so dramatic as to become a lifelong task. The fact that a sexual minority is different is, like the fact that everyone is different, an obvious and ultimately insignificant premise. When someone begins to use the name “gay” to explain themselves, what unfolds before them is in fact not a grand event capable of transforming an entire life, but a series of minor troubles.

The sexual minority as an Other who lives with an invisible face is always severed from what “I” desire or pursue, while experiences of life not grounded in the identity of sexual minority are disregarded. In addressing social situations in which discrimination, hatred, and violence against nonheterosexual people occur, this is akin to making victims voice their suffering and solicit pity rather than asking where responsibility lies in the principles that produce harm.

The symbol “sexual minority” exists on a plane separated from the actual everyday lives of nonheterosexual people and is not necessarily an expression they themselves use to explain who they are. Among the gay people who constituted the principal participants in this research and with whom participant observation was conducted, the term is not ordinarily used and often produces aversion. Nor is it common for them to become immersed in, or strongly resonate with, the confusion and discrimination foregrounded in much sexual-minority research. Just as heterosexual people may accept their sexual identity without particular reflection, anguish and suffering are not indispensable to the process of identifying as nonheterosexual. There is also a considerable gap between gay social groups that place importance on discrimination and equality and those that do not.

Identities that are neither heterosexual nor binary are often presented in terms of lack, and at their most extreme are pathologized or represented through histories of pathologized suffering. The identity projected by this image is partial because suffering becomes the narrative core through which the lives of those regarded as abnormal are described. Calling someone a minority while reproducing experiences of pity and alienation may be expected to produce solidarity, but it also has the effect of locating that person in the position of an excluded Other. Treating confusion as self-evident universalizes the idea that being different from others is unnatural, and difference is consequently fixed as otherness. The limitation of sexual-minority discourse is that it takes binary gender norms and heterocentrism as its basic premises and reduces sexual minorities to epistemological objects understood as those who depart from those premises. Their bright and healthy everyday lives do not become research topics, nor is there adequate discussion of how they live by negotiating with, responding to, and maneuvering within heterosexual norms.

In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas (1966) argues that every culture possesses its own classificatory system and principles. What becomes problematic within such systems is that which cannot be explained by the classificatory scheme; culture categorizes what it cannot explain as abnormality, exception, or deviance. Something viscous and sticky, for example, may be regarded as dirty because it violates the boundary between solid and liquid. The social ubiquity of stigmatizing images readily attached to nonheterosexual people - “uncleanness,” for instance - originates in the normativity of the heterosexual order. A normative system that recognizes as normal only gender roles imagined as female and male and sexuality constituted through the union of the two casts those outside it as transgressive. What fails to conform to the roles embedded in heterosexual norms consequently becomes “unclean.”

Recognizing this problem, Yoon Seongok and Seong Seungyeon (2011) departed from the tendency of studies of homosexual people to focus on negative emotional experiences and thoughts. Instead, they recruited as participants lesbian women who accepted their sexual identities and lived lives with high levels of satisfaction. According to the authors, participants felt intimidated by socioculturally embedded heterocentric thinking and experienced burdens and

loneliness arising from their recognition that their sexual identities differed from others. After forming social ties in which nonheterosexuality could be shared, however, they went through a process of accepting their sexual identities. Such acceptance brought experiences of self-efficacy, social support, and recognition, and participants came to seek the realization of their own value in more positive and developmental directions.

Cho Sumi (2019) likewise analyzes queer culture festivals as ritual spaces, examining how sexual minorities increase their sense of pride and become socially visible as nonheterosexual people. Her study describes not only how people called sexual minorities respond to discrimination and appropriate social hatred at queer culture festivals held annually in Seoul and other cities, but also cases of other people who support them, including parents of sexual-minority children. At the same time, Cho notes that even when discrimination and stigma can be avoided, it remains difficult to escape social isolation, anxiety about exposure, and the pain of self-denial produced by having to conceal part of one's identity (Cho 2019:260). She also examines how participants directly challenge expectations that they are "gloomy and immoral beings who ought to remain in the shadows" (Cho 2019:262).

Whereas Cho's study concerns sexual minorities broadly, including gay men, lesbians, and queer people, Nam Sujeong (2019) studies the collective leisure district formed by gay men in Ikseon-dong, Jongno-gu, Seoul as a "gay ghetto." She links the historical formation of the gay ghetto around Jongno 3-ga Station to Seoul's urban-development plans and strategies of spatial governance. She describes how gay men who conduct their everyday lives there actively create and appropriate a "space of difference" and examines how kki operates as a form of normativity. Nam nevertheless writes that, as a heterosexual woman and someone who was not "poor," she was "spat out" by the gay men of Jongno (Nam 2019:12). Because gay collectivities seek to maintain a degree of exclusivity in the territorial spaces they form, being recognized as a member is important if one is not to appear as a heterogeneous "outsider." They are reluctant to describe gay life in detail to those classified as outsiders because disclosing their everyday lives in full does not guarantee that those lives will be adequately understood.²

The researcher conducting the present study is himself a gay man who has frequented Itaewon for many years and shared everyday life as a member of the place; the analysis therefore maintains an internal perspective. Relationships with research participants and other members of Gay Hill had already been established before the formal research period, allowing the researcher to observe their changes over an extended period; the researcher himself also changed through the experiences he shared with them. A recurring binary in research on nonheterosexual people is to understand them either through a romantic narrative in which they resist discrimination with love

2. As of 2023, the principal areas in Seoul where gay men gather collectively can be divided into Itaewon, Jongno, and Sillim. Gay bars are concentrated in Jongno and Sillim, while Itaewon contains both bars and several clubs. Each area has its own characteristics.

or through a tragic narrative in which they suffer because they violate social norms (see Xavier Nunn 2023:192-193).

The symbol “sexual minority” is a symbol of an alternative form viewed from the position of what is called “normal”; it is also another name for the “abnormal.” As with the distinction of sexual minorities from heterosexual people, “differentiating symbols” identify or subsume symbols with what those symbols signify (Wagner 2016:introduction 17). In other words, although the symbol “sexual minority” and actual sexual-minority people are not the same, the diverse forms of life of particular individuals can enter that symbol only insofar as they correspond to “that which is not heterosexual or not grounded in binary gender.” The symbol therefore has the effect of invalidating “ordinary” lives lived by sexual minorities. It obscures the fact that nonheterosexual people actually live alongside heterosexual people within society by compromising with, negotiating with, and sometimes twisting heterocentrism. Recognizing this problem, the present study does not analyze events in Gay Hill from the position of normative normality. It analyzes them from the position of a gay person who belongs there, focusing on psychological changes among gay men, drag performance, and the unfolding of everyday life.

One ethnographic study of gay social worlds is Gilbert Herdt’s *Gay Culture in America* (1992), which analyzes “coming out” - the acceptance of one’s sexual identity and disclosure to others that one is gay - as a rite of passage. Herdt argues that becoming publicly gay or lesbian across social situations changes some of the deepest categories of the self, representations, and relationships (Herdt 1992:59). Before becoming publicly gay, a man enters a small group that shares homosexuality, confirms his sexuality there, and, after “graduating” from being homosexual, enters adulthood living as gay (Herdt 1992:61). This study also describes a process of psychological transformation that occurs through entry into Gay Hill. Yet the transformation described here does not consist, as in Herdt’s account, in publicly expressing one’s sexual orientation and proceeding to live openly as gay. Rather, it involves creating a separate domain of everyday life in which one can inhabit the role of being gay. The American gay population also has a context of identity politics surrounding the Stonewall uprising and AIDS, which distinguishes it from Korean society. The historical context of the United States therefore cannot simply be placed alongside the contemporary situation in Korea, particularly Seoul. Most gay men in Korea, even when they belong to gay social worlds, leave those spaces and live in other domains of everyday life while appearing heterosexual.

2. Research on Drag

Drag has often been explained as a form that crosses gender. It has been invoked as evidence for the argument that the sexed body is not essential but performative. A representative

formulation describes the drag queen as “a type of symbol that reveals gender as merely a social construction” (Greaf 2015:655). Drag queens with feminine appearances have been understood as expressing hyper-femininity, or defined as gay men who perform in women’s clothing even when they do not necessarily imitate women (Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro 2010:276). Kumbier (2003) and Egner and Maloney (2016) likewise describe drag queens and drag kings as figures who subvert or bend femininity and masculinity. Studies by Shapiro (2007), Surkan (2003), and Taylor and Rupp (2004) similarly mobilize drag in order to demonstrate that heterosexual gender norms are not an immutable natural order and to avoid essentialist understandings of gender.

Gender is a concept devised to classify people usefully. Etymologically, related terms such as genre, generic, and genus carry the sense of a “kind” or inclusive class. Gender emerged in the twentieth century as a dominant symbol distinguished from sex, and lives and people of diverse forms were reduced to the conceptual imaginary of gender (see the Oxford English Dictionary). Sex and gender came to be contrasted such that gender referred to socially constructed sex/gender, while sex designated the bodily sex formed at birth. Yet neither biological sex nor gender is in fact divided neatly into women and men.

For drag performers, gender is a tool that can be expressed and twisted, exaggerated and subverted. In a drag show, gender is understood as one among the roles tacitly agreed upon in the relationship between performer and audience, and there are multiple ways of expressing it. Most drag performers tuck the penis downward and secure it, then put on stockings. Padding the breasts or buttocks to represent a female body is optional. At times breast padding is replaced with balloons or bags of water used as prostheses. This is better understood not simply as the expression of femininity but as a parody of its materiality - in other words, as the use of gender as an element of play.

To explain drag exclusively through gender is to ask where drag lies on a bipolar spectrum between woman and man, thereby confining drag once again within binary gender. From the perspective of binary gender norms commonly shared in society, a performer with a male body may appear woman-like when displaying femininity onstage. To a gay audience, however, drag is a performer for whom the question of woman or man need not be settled: drag is simply drag. Put differently, explanations of drag through gender often presuppose not the perspective of an insider to LGBT culture but that of an outsider who takes heterosexual normativity as given; they therefore impose a context different from that of the culture in which drag actually operates. Gender appears differently according to situational context in every community and is related to sexuality, environment, and cultural context. Within the social worlds in which drag performers work, whether one is “a man or a woman” is not, in fact, the important question. A fixed mode of understanding drag through binary gender may locate it somewhere on a spectrum between female and male, but it cannot adequately discuss the environment and cultural background to which drag belongs, or the individual narratives and selves of drag performers. To understand drag, one must,

as the etymological imagination of “understand” suggests, stand alongside it, setting aside a linear standard of gender whose two extremes are man and woman.

From this perspective arises the need to enter gay culture and study it from within. Esther Newton’s ethnographic work (1972) offers one example. Conducted from an insider position within gay culture, Newton studied female impersonators performing in Chicago. At the time, homosexual people who had been rejected by their families left home or moved to other cities. Those without homes began living together and formed alternative families in these spaces, distributing roles among themselves around a “mother” figure; this was the camp. Those skilled at impersonating women became performers, appearing regularly or irregularly in gay clubs, heterosexual clubs, and tourist clubs, sometimes performing in teams and traveling to other cities. They fashioned “classy” appearances sharply opposed to the stigmatized images of abnormality and poverty attached to them, actively referencing cultural forms associated with the upper class. Strictly speaking, Newton’s female impersonators are a form of performer distinct from drag: whereas drag emphasizes exaggerated, loud, and spectacular appearances, female impersonation aims to reproduce the appearance of actual women as closely as possible. Yet a member of the camp might perform in drag and other shows, earn money, and feed the family in the role of mother. Female impersonation, drag queens, and roles within the camp were thus interconnected.

Section 3. Research Participants and Methods

1. Research Participants: Members of Itaewon Gay Hill

Research participants consisted of drag performers who primarily work in Itaewon, Yongsan-gu, Seoul; gay men who visit the area at least once a month; and people who had previously worked as drag performers in Itaewon or were employed in related businesses. All eight participants were people the researcher had known before beginning the formal research and were, or had been, members constituting Gay Hill.

Among the participants, Mini Han is a transgender woman who had experience performing drag before transitioning and who operated a gay club in Itaewon. There she directed the performances of people who took the stage and formed many friendships with gay patrons. The club she operated had a permanent stage, and drag performers regularly came to work and perform there. Many of those performers now appear frequently in magazines and other media. As a club operator, Mini Han not only directed drag performances but helped make them more polished by providing performers with costumes, wigs, and shoes.

More no longer performs in Itaewon, but previously worked as a drag performer in Itaewon Gay Hill for approximately twenty years. Trained in ballet, she gained recognition for an artistic style of costume and performance distinct from established drag forms. Both a drag performer and a dancer, she now performs in theaters, galleries, and other venues outside Itaewon. She too first began frequenting Itaewon as a gay person; she now lives as a transgender woman, is married to a man, and occupies the role of wife.

Kyam and Fiona currently perform drag shows in Itaewon, at a venue that is also among the oldest drag bars or gay bars in Gay Hill. There are only around twenty active drag performers in Itaewon at present. Although the number of drag performers included as formal research participants is therefore small, the four participants made it possible to understand drag culture across Gay Hill more broadly. The researcher's personal relationships with other drag performers and his experience working as a bartender in a club also aided observation not only of drag culture but of club culture.

All four gay research participants are friends of the researcher, and, with the exception of Jihoon, the researcher had known each for more than three years. They frequented Itaewon often enough that the researcher would encounter them there by chance even without arranging to meet. Addy, in particular, became friends with the researcher on his first visit to an Itaewon gay club, allowing the researcher to observe over roughly six years how his everyday life as a gay man expanded.

Name	Current occupation	Entry into Gay Hill	Notes
Mini Han	Businessperson, model	1990s	Fashion major; former drag performer
More	Writer, actor, drag performer	1990s	Dance major
Kyam	Dancer, drag performer	2000s	Acting major
Fiona	Illustrator, drag performer	2000s	Design major
Jihoon	Graduate student	2010s	Former drag performer; gay
Addy	Nurse	2010s	Drag-show audience; gay
Junseong	Office worker	2010s	Drag-show audience; gay
Jeonguk	Curator	2010s	Drag-show audience; gay

(Table 1. Research Participants)

2. Research Methods

Gay clubs and bars constituting Gay Hill began to appear in 1997 and have repeatedly disappeared and been replaced by new venues. As of December 2023, within roughly one kilometer of Itaewon Station there were five gay clubs and twenty-one gay bars. Gay clubs generally apply admission criteria that distinguish men from women, whereas gay bars often do not, making the category “gay bar” difficult to delimit precisely. If a gay bar is defined as a bar frequently visited by gay men in which gay patrons constitute more than half of the clientele, there are at least twenty-one such bars in Itaewon. Participant observation encompassed bars with large numbers of gay patrons as well as gay clubs and bars throughout Itaewon. Drag shows were observed primarily at gay bars in Gay Hill that hosted them; in gay clubs without drag shows, the researcher observed gay men’s patterns of behavior and other activities.

Participant observation and data collection in Itaewon were conducted from September 2022 through September 2023. During visits, the researcher took photographs and videos and kept fieldnotes in order to remember the field more vividly. The period of participant observation included both times when the researcher was employed as a bartender and times when he was not. When not working, he visited Gay Hill at least once a week and watched drag shows as an audience member. Performances outside Itaewon generally allowed photography and video recording as a matter of course, so prior consent was not always obtained for recording; consent was subsequently obtained from the person concerned whenever an image was to be included in the thesis.

Interviews were conducted during the same period, in the homes of participants or the researcher, in cafes, or at participants’ workplaces. With people with whom relationships had already been established, interviews proceeded much like ordinary conversations between friends or acquaintances, although permission was obtained before audio or video recording. Questions were prepared separately for each participant in advance, but interviews followed the flow of conversation. Transcripts were read repeatedly, and when additional topics emerged, follow-up questions were asked in subsequent interviews. During periods of employment, the researcher worked as a bartender every night before a holiday and met participants for interviews on weekdays. Participants were informed in advance that photographs and video could be collected as research materials at sites of participant observation. As on ordinary visits, performances at a particular Gay Hill venue featuring drag shows were recorded. When people who were not research participants appeared in the footage, those materials were neither disclosed nor shared with others and were not included in the thesis.

During participant observation in Itaewon Gay Hill, the researcher spoke with gay acquaintances and former coworkers or entered clubs and “played” together with other gay men. As he had done before acquiring the additional identity of researcher, he participated with them in

the forms of play taking place there. What changed during the formal research period was that he more actively approached drag performers and gay men in the field, asked questions, and initiated conversations. At clubs featuring drag shows, participants worked at the venue, and the fact that research was underway had already been shared with other drag performers who were not formal participants. This made it possible to discuss drag shows and gay culture with a wide range of people. Although they sometimes found the researcher's persistent questioning bothersome, they answered in detail. Informal conversations also occurred in the alleys of Gay Hill with people who were not research participants. These were neither recorded nor collected as research data but informed interpretations of situations occurring in Itaewon. All other analysis and interpretation of research materials were organized around the themes presented in the thesis, based on recorded and transcribed interviews. Several interviews were video-recorded with permission, and the footage was consulted in order to consider nonverbal expressions such as speakers' facial expressions and the atmosphere in which particular topics were discussed. The study received approval from the Seoul National University Institutional Review Board (IRB No. 2211/004-016).

3. Researcher Positionality

Since 2015, the researcher had visited Itaewon as often as once a week and as infrequently as once a month. Initially, like others, he went there for leisure. From November 2020 to July 2022, however, he worked as a bartender at a gay club in Itaewon. Because social-distancing policies were implemented irregularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were periods when he could not work; excluding those interruptions, he worked for approximately fifteen months. He had already begun working before the formal research and, in June 2021, while planning the study, disclosed his status as a researcher to the club's operators and continued working with their permission. The club was among the Itaewon venues with the most popular drag shows and among those most heavily frequented by gay men. Around August 2022, as the pandemic was drawing to a close, the venue changed its business format and now operates as a bar. While employed there, the researcher worked on weekend nights and nights before public holidays, sharing everyday life with others as a member of the venue.

After disclosing his researcher status, the identity of "employee" occupied an ambiguous position that was neither simply insider nor outsider, while enabling forms of interaction beyond those available to an ordinary audience member. Life in the space of participant observation involved participating in the rhythms and workings of the place while retaining an observational perspective as a researcher. His duties included mixing drinks for people dancing in the club and managing admission at the entrance, as well as maintaining the guest list and cleaning before and after opening. Because he worked in a club where drag performers were regularly present, he

became close with some of them and often visited their homes or met them separately to talk. Having frequented Itaewon for a long time and already knowing many people before beginning the research, together with working there for a substantial period for research purposes, helped when asking people to participate. One participant was one of the operators of the club where the researcher worked; most of the others were people he had come to know through the shared fact of being gay or through visits to various places in Itaewon. More was an exception: the researcher separately attended her performance, later contacted her, introduced himself as a researcher, and asked her to participate.

Because the principal purpose of formal participation was to hold private conversations through interviews, the number of participants was smaller than in many ethnographic studies. Yet the relationships and experiences the researcher had accumulated in Itaewon since 2015 formed an important background for interpreting and describing participants' experiences. He began spending time in Itaewon as a gay man in 2015. More than eight years had passed in which he formed various relationships with gay men there, shared narratives, and came to know numerous drag performers and gay men. In the spaces of participant observation, he was seen as "that guy we've known for years who went to graduate school" or "the guy who comes to Itaewon even more often now in the name of research." When he stood in an alley before entering a gay club and looked at other gay men, he appeared not as an observer but as "a gay guy looking for a handsome man." When he watched a drag show, he was seen as "the guy who wants to try drag." This experiential background widened the range of communication possible between observer and participants and deepened the questions at the center of the research.

Because the researcher's own subjectivity is reflected in this study, it could be criticized as excessively subjective. Objectivism, however, arrives at conclusions by treating structures or phenomena as realities already constituted outside the context of the group and thereby reifying a particular perspective. Participant observation for this study was instead conducted from the position of a co-subject participating in Gay Hill as one of its members. This positionality offers the advantage of understanding actors' everyday practices and worlds of meaning through an embodied practical sense inscribed in the body (see Bourdieu 1992). The identity of researcher as detached observer can easily lead one to force unfolding situations into arbitrary classificatory schemes. By contrast, the sensations the researcher experienced directly made it possible not to interpret the field solely through textual descriptions of gay culture and drag performance.

Among the people asked to become research participants after the researcher assumed that identity, some expressed resistance to having their "lives" made into research objects. Some responded negatively to explanations of drag or gay culture through discourses of gender or sexual minorities; others objected to the very fact of becoming a "research subject." The research created distance in some relationships and, conversely, greater closeness in others. Those who

regarded the opportunity to articulate their experiences and thoughts and tell them to another person positively agreed readily to participate.

Chapter 2. Research Site: A Hill That Shines at Night

Section 1. The Formation of Gay Hill

1. Before the 1990s: The U.S. Military and the Camptown

Yongsan's strategic importance as a military location from which central Seoul could be rapidly retaken in wartime is not unrelated to the present-day coexistence of diverse cultures in the district. Qing troops who entered Joseon to suppress the Imo Mutiny were stationed in Yongsan from 1882. When the peasant war broke out in March 1893, Japanese troops entered Korea under that pretext. Japan, already planning the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), stationed part of its forces near Hyochang-dong. Later, using the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) as a pretext, Japan relocated and reinforced its garrison around Yongsan and occupied the area until its defeat. After World War II, the U.S. 24th Division took over the former Japanese military base on September 24, 1945, and Yongsan began in earnest to become a deterritorialized space within the nation. With the establishment of the U.S. military base in Yongsan, a camptown formed in nearby Itaewon, and the U.S. military came to dominate Itaewon's commercial economy.³

After the Korean War, as U.S. forces stationed in Yongsan drove the local economy, camptowns developed around Itaewon and Samgakji. Itaewon in particular became a central district for prostitution and entertainment. An alley roughly ten meters from what is now called Gay Hill was known as Hooker Hill - literally, a hill of prostitutes - where women in the camptown performed sex work for U.S. servicemen. Those engaged in sex work there were not limited to people assigned female at birth. Men sometimes dressed as women and lived as yangsaeksi, while women dressing as men was also common.

Transgender people did not live only in Itaewon, but many gathered there. Records from the 1960s and 1970s indicate that substantial numbers of transgender people had lived in the Itaewon camptown since the 1960s. Records concerning transgender pimps and groups of sex workers also suggest that establishments specifically catering to transgender people may have existed from

3. One explanation holds that the name Itaewon came to be used for a place where people remained after the Imjin War, or where women who had been raped by Japanese soldiers during wartime gathered while pregnant with and raising children of another ethnic group; in this account, the name is associated with the characters I ('different') and I ('to be pregnant'). See the Encyclopedia of Korean Culture.

around this period (Ru-in 2012:259). In 1962, a former career soldier opened Seven Club, a bar for U.S. servicemen, where not only women but also men “entertained” male patrons. According to Moon Okjeong's autobiographical account as an intersex person, Itaewon was “a good place for despised and driven-out people to gather and live” (Moon 2005:155). The category yanggongju in Itaewon did not encompass only cisgender women; women who dressed as men, men who dressed as women, transgender people, and intersex people of diverse genders were incorporated beneath that sign.

It is impossible to determine precisely when gay men began gathering in the alleys where prostitution for U.S. servicemen flourished. Newspaper accounts suggest that people engaged in acts described through the discourse of “American culture” as “perverse” were gathering in Itaewon by the 1960s. “Perverse acts” at the time meant practices that violated “public morals and good customs” - that is, people who did not follow heterosexual or normative-family conventions - and would include those now described as gay or transgender. Gay men probably began gathering in Itaewon around the same time that male yanggongju appeared, shortly after the camptown took shape in the 1960s. Men were among those selling sex to U.S. servicemen, and because not all of them were transgender, men who desired men while living as men also likely began gathering in Itaewon during this period.



Figure 1. Back alley behind the Itaewon Fire Station in 1988 (Seoul History Archive)

The term “gay” used in 1970s Itaewon probably referred, in present-day terms, largely to transgender people (Ru-in 2012:261). Among yanggongju were people who dressed as women and had sex with men, and those engaged in prostitution were often collectively called “gay.” In other words, “gay” at the time likely referred to people who would now be described as

transgender or cross-dressers. The first gay bar established on Gay Hill was itself a drag bar. The boundary between Hooker Hill and Gay Hill was never organized according to biological sex, and even today entertainment venues employing transgender women and gay bars remain intermingled in the alley behind the Itaewon fire station. A bar featuring drag shows first opened on Gay Hill in 1997 and remains in operation. It did not initially stage regular drag shows. It began as a gay bar; employees started dressing as women for fun and lip-syncing on a small stage, and the favorable response to those performances led to a tradition that continues today.

Choi Jongil (2003:41) argues that the emergence of a gay community in Itaewon was possible because there was a connection between public perceptions of the Itaewon area and of gay culture. Ru-in (2012:252), however, cautions against explaining the gathering of homosexual people in Itaewon simply as an effect of American culture. Although Itaewon's proximity to a U.S. military base made it receptive to American culture and prevented it from being free of American influence, the McCarthyist climate in the United States around the 1950s complicates such an explanation. Until the late 1960s, U.S. servicemen could be arrested under sodomy laws for having sex with other men or merely visiting gay bars. Even outside their own country, U.S. soldiers therefore could not freely engage in homosexual practices in Itaewon.



Figure 2. Hooker Hill, July 2023

For postwar Korea, the United States was both a provider of fantasies promising escape from devastated reality and an object of desire to be emulated. At the same time, the Republic of Korea constituted through this relationship “offered” women as sacrifices for satisfying the desire of the Other. Women presented as sacrificial offerings had to be erased for the Republic of Korea to constitute itself as a subject. In this context, the formation of Gay Hill in Itaewon should be

understood not only through fantasies generated by American culture or white supremacy, but through the history in which Itaewon itself functioned as an abject sustaining the idea of Korea as a colonized subject. The abject is that which must be cast out for the subject to become a subject: neither subject nor object. "What becomes abject" is that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 1982:4). A subject imagining the desire of the Other must discard an indeterminate "something" - the abject - in order to make an "I." The abject is intimately close yet cannot be assimilated; it provokes desire but possesses value only as something opposed to the self (Kristeva 1982:2).

Camptown women became a foundation upon which the identity of an "advanced nation" could be sutured as "normal." Signified as heterogeneous beings through terms such as yanggongju, prostitute, comfort woman, yanggalbo, and whore, they were positioned as people who could not occupy the subject position of "I." Because yanggongju were imagined as polluting the myth of a "pure-blooded nation" reproduced through patrilineal descent, their existence became a national shame and a scar symbolizing damaged Korean masculinity. Korean men's condemnation of yanggongju, Kim Yeonsuk argues, expressed the self-contempt and humiliation of male subjects economically dependent upon them (2003:131); the actual consequences of that condemnation were borne by those who had been erased.

Korea's prostitution industry was enormous. Major newspapers reported estimates that in 1989 between 1.2 and 1.5 million people worked as prostitutes or in the entertainment industry, whose annual revenues exceeded four trillion won, more than five percent of GNP. Until the 1980s, Itaewon remained a center of this industry. From the beginning of the camptown, areas around the Yongsan base, including Itaewon, had been spatially organized to accommodate the sexual demands of U.S. servicemen. This was the background against which foreigner-only "UN clubs," Seven Club, Hooker Hill, and other whorehouses appeared in the alley behind the Itaewon fire station after the Korean War.

In Itaewon's foreigner clubs, people hailed as "women," whether biologically or culturally, commercialized entertainment that often included prostitution, and many died through violence and drugs. Yet because the flourishing private prostitution economy contributed to the national economy, the government tolerated or encouraged the commodification of women. In the 1960s, the Park Chung Hee regime displayed a double attitude: while formally defining prostitution as illegal, it managed camptown women in order to provide "comfortable sex exchanged for security" and praised them as "patriots" (Kang Junman 2012:102). Rather than seeking adequate social compensation for them, the regime took the lead in suppressing them (ibid.:109). Even while proclaiming the "eradication of prostitution" after the May 16 coup, the state designated special prostitution districts and cultivated the "kisaeng industry" when foreign currency could be earned. In pursuit of the title of an "economically advanced nation," the political order of the time did not hesitate to abandon the ideal of chastity.

As Itaewon's history demonstrates, the “woman” produced by masculinity represented through war was not limited to bodies assigned female. From the Korean perspective, men who formed sexual relationships with U.S. servicemen might have been seen as “homos,” yet people penetrated by servicemen - whether dating Americans or selling sex - were incorporated into the sign of yanggongju. Men who dressed as women and worked as yanggongju sometimes participated in self-governing guidance organizations for camptown women and served as officers under the designation “neuter.” At the time, the social signifier “man” was conditional upon possessing the economic power to support a woman. U.S. servicemen, backed by state-authorized “security” and exercising overwhelming economic power over Itaewon merchants, were therefore positioned as “men” and “patriarchs.” Like the wife in Yi Sang's *Wings*, the yanggongju sold her body to support Korean men; but the man was the one who was to fly away, while the woman was the one who had to disappear.

2. From the 1990s to the 2010s: A New Generation

After the 1990s, female sex workers gradually disappeared from Itaewon. One reason was the declining influence of the U.S. military over the entertainment district behind the Itaewon fire station. In 1964, when Korea's per-capita income was \$104, the purchasing power of a U.S. enlisted soldier earning \$120 a month was so great that his “absence” was difficult to imagine (Lee Nayoung 2007:32). After the 1990s, however, Koreans themselves acquired greater purchasing power and became increasingly influential in Itaewon's commercial economy. Reports of U.S. servicemen killing or assaulting Koreans, together with rising anti-American sentiment after the 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement and the June 1987 Democratic Uprising, diminished Itaewon's “Americanness.” Following the September 11 attacks in 2001, the U.S. military at times prohibited servicemen from entering the alleys behind the Itaewon fire station - Gay Hill and Hooker Hill - because of their proximity to an Islamic mosque. Hooker Hill and nearby clubs, once oriented toward sex work for U.S. servicemen, increasingly took Korean men as their principal customers, while the transgender club Yeoboyeobo became popular.

The reason transgender people and gay men gathered in spaces formerly occupied by cisgender women lies partly in the different ways Korean patriarchal norms hated yanggongju and transgender/gay people. Cisgender women were the principal population incorporated beneath the sign “whore”; transgender women and gay men were instead summoned through signs such as “pervert” and “person with abnormal sexual desire.” Both whore and pervert were objects of hatred. Yet by the 1990s, the latter could be incorporated into homosexual-rights activism on university campuses and civil organizations such as the Korean Homosexual Human Rights Association, thereby acquiring “diversity” as a new frame of existence. For Itaewon's commercial

district, which needed to retain the image of “advanced” American culture, “freedom” was also an indispensable banner, and that freedom encompassed diverse practices departing from traditional Korean sexual norms. Itaewon's designation as a Special Tourist Zone in 1997 further required the enjoyment and memory of U.S. military culture as a means of revitalizing the declining district; nowhere was that atmosphere more concentrated than in the alleys behind the fire station.

Song Doyoung (2007:99) describes Itaewon's transformation as a case in which, after a single foreign power once exercised absolute influence over a space, various other foreign populations gradually used the niches it had created to establish their own cultural territories. As U.S. forces declined, populations from Africa, Europe, Southeast Asia, the Anglophone world, the Middle East, and elsewhere began occupying distinct areas of Itaewon. Commercial districts formerly organized around the U.S. military cultivated images of Western sophistication or “hipness,” while multinational food cultures also entered the area. In Hannam-dong, affluent residential complexes began to be built on former foreigner housing sites, and cultural spaces such as cafes and galleries appeared in alleys along Itaewon-ro toward Hannam-dong. Itaewon's entertainment spaces generated new forms of music, dance, and performance, and many figures who would become famous in Korea's early popular-music industry worked in Itaewon during this period before entering the mainstream music scene.⁴

As Song suggests, Itaewon's multicultural territories formed by crossing rather than merging with one another. After U.S. military influence diminished, Itaewon developed villas, tailor shops, furniture stores, restaurant streets, and other zones, made possible by practical boundaries dividing distinct times and spaces. Entertainment businesses, in particular, generally operate late at night - clubs after about 11 p.m. - so even where geographical boundaries touch or streets are mixed, populations whose active hours do not overlap need not encounter one another. Gay Hill's clubs are busiest after midnight, especially between approximately 2 and 4 a.m.

By the 1990s, establishments called “gay bars” began appearing in Itaewon. Trance, which continues to operate around drag shows, opened on Gay Hill in 1997. Around the same period, new gay bars such as Garçon, Buzz, Platinum, Mardi Gras, La Noche, Spartacus, Splash, Autobahn, Out, Class, Aspirin, Orange, Zone Zipper, California, Key West, Chaplin, Hushigi, and Pashu appeared. Gay bars had existed in Itaewon before Trance, but Trance was the first on Gay Hill. Because rent there was cheap, other gay bars and clubs subsequently clustered around it. Before then, gay ghettos had formed mainly around Myeong-dong, Sindang, and Jongno. Their cultural territories differed from Gay Hill: in Sindang and Jongno, it was difficult to reveal oneself publicly as gay outside the bars themselves. Jongno in particular is in central Seoul, with large

4. The expression 'hip' began to circulate as a popular term in Korean society in the 2010s. It is commonly applied to people who produce cultural codes centered on subculture; a 'hipster' generally refers to someone who favors resistant, independent forms of taste.

numbers of people passing through, so even secluded alleys densely packed with gay bars were easily exposed to nongay people.⁵

Itaewon Gay Hill, by contrast, is literally a hill, with entertainment establishments extending to the top. Visiting a gay bar, gay club, or transgender bar is effectively the only reason to enter the alley. Most people there are therefore gay men; women or heterosexual men who do appear are likely to be familiar with gay culture. The enclosed topography created during the camptown period consequently offered gay men a relatively safe place. Jongno was dominated by seated bars organized around conversation, whereas Itaewon had several clubs. For those seeking club culture and the possibility of standing and dancing, Itaewon was at the time the only real choice.

Many of those attracted to club culture were resistant to hiding the fact that they were gay. As noted earlier, homosexual-rights activism emerged in Korea in the 1990s, and broadcaster Hong Seokcheon publicly came out in 2000, providing a new epistemological basis for understanding gay men. Those who began to understand themselves as “one among diverse human forms” sought pleasure among people with whom they could interact rather than remaining hidden in the closet or consumed by confusion. On Gay Hill they did not have to conceal themselves even in the alley outside bars and clubs. Self-expression and bodily play could therefore be freer there than elsewhere, and the district also drew people hungry for the relatively new culture of clubs. This marked both a generational break among gay men and the birth of a “cool” and “young” gay culture. Hooker Hill and Gay Hill have separate names, but their boundary has always remained blurred. From the 2000s, gay clubs and bars on Gay Hill expanded their territory. Many bars on Hooker Hill now remain primarily as transgender establishments, while only a few businesses oriented toward heterosexual patrons remain.

5. Clubs staging drag shows at the time were not confined to Gay Hill. Ollala and Japan, located on the Cheil Worldwide street roughly 300 meters from Gay Hill, also presented strip shows, drag shows, and other performances. These venues mainly performed for tour groups, and their operators recruited people in Itaewon known for displaying a great deal of kki. The drag performers included people trained in dance or choreography and people who had studied fashion overseas. Some performers active in those shows remain active in drag today.



Figure 3. Interior of a gay club: drag show

Section 2. Gay Hill and Liminality

1. Seclusion and the Itaewon Debut

This study interprets Gay Hill as a space of liminality. Liminality refers to a condition of standing between boundaries that divide physical and conceptual time-space. It exists as a passage from an unstable crisis or chaotic condition toward an ordered cosmos - from disorder to order - within which individuals exist as “betwixt and between.” Turner (1982) uses this phrase to explain the core of his theory of liminality. Drawing on Arnold van Gennep (1960), Turner uses liminality to describe both the place and the condition of transition within the multistage transformations accomplished through rites of passage.

Rites of passage accompany changes of “place, state, social position and age” (van Gennep 1960:161) and proceed through three stages: separation, transition, and reintegration. In tribal societies, for example, initiands in a liminal condition leave the established social system and exist as invisible persons. They temporarily become indeterminate beings: secular social relationships may be severed, previous rights and obligations suspended, and social order inverted. Individuals in liminality are separated from the social status they held in the secular state and become initiands, undergoing specific processes conducted by those who have already passed through the liminal stage. Liminal space is an intermediate place linking “what he is” to “what he may or will become.” Freed from fixed classifications, initiands experience an ambiguous

condition of being neither here nor there, “betwixt and between,” undergoing transformation as neither the person they once were nor yet the person they will become (Turner 1982:159).

As Turner writes, “the essence of liminality” lies in freely and playfully recombining factors into possible patterns (1982:159). Symbols found in rites of passage across the world seek to transform relations with society. Gay Hill can be understood as a liminal domain partly because darkness is one of its conditions, but more importantly because within its disorderly time-space, people different from those imagined as “normal” by heterocentric society become the protagonists.

Although Gay Hill consists primarily of clubs and bars, these venues are all oriented toward a specific population called “gay.” Gay men's motivation for going to Itaewon is therefore not reducible to pleasures such as dancing or drinking. Despite the many other places where one can drink and dance, gay men go to Gay Hill in order to meet other gay men in a place where people sharing gay sexuality gather with relative exclusivity. On weekend nights, men converge there in search of forms of play such as clubs and drag shows. Those who in everyday life conceal being gay and faithfully perform the meanings and rights of “adult men” reveal themselves in Itaewon as gay, concentrating on dancing with their bodies to popular music - especially songs by girl groups.

On Gay Hill, the body circulates as a symbol more explicitly than almost anywhere else, and language itself is transformed - for example, men address one another as *eonni* (“older sister”) or *oppa* (“older brother”). Most visitors are in their twenties and thirties. During the week they perform social roles through which they appear as adult men, including occupational roles; after midnight on the night before a weekend or holiday, they reveal themselves in Itaewon as gay. Most clubs open after 11 p.m. and are busiest around 2 a.m. At that hour, the shabby hills dense with residences are filled with liquor and loud music, and the disorder continues until dawn. Men temporarily forget the duties and morality of ordinary reality, meet other gay men while intoxicated, and fill the streets with profanity and playful insults. The voices are unmistakably male, yet their content and intonation are subtly twisted; feminizing slang between men circulates freely, alongside nasal tones and coquettish speech that would sound awkward elsewhere.⁶

Descending underground, one finds clubs illuminated in red where drag shows take place, while drag performers in heels frequently move through the surrounding streets. Some are already tall, and with heels stand a head above other men. Drunken men stagger through alleys thick with cigarette smoke; others sit in corners to talk after drinking. Everyone is with someone who

6. Among gay men, the terms *unni* ('older sister') and *oppa* ('older brother') shift in meaning according to context. *Unni* is generally used when there is no sexual tension between gay men. *Oppa* may be used toward a conventionally masculine-looking man when the speaker does not wish to present himself as masculine. Because *oppa* conventionally presupposes an opposite-sex relational frame, it is used comparatively rarely; *unni*, by contrast, is widely used among gay men described as *kkisuni*.

resembles them. Muscular or large-bodied men gather with similar men; younger and smaller men likewise cluster together. Groups form around similarities in physique, style of dress, and age.

Turner at times suggests that “entertainment” itself signifies a liminal phenomenon (1982:114). Like the etymological sense of being “held in between,” those who will return at sunrise to everyday life in the guise of heterosexual adult men become indeterminate beings on Gay Hill, appearing in forms not authorized by society. There is little reason to disclose one's age, name, workplace, or other social status, and one may know nothing about those gathered nearby. When nothing can be known about one another except the presumption of shared sexuality, the body becomes the principal criterion by which another person can be judged. In darkness, the male body is transformed into something to be won by another. Nonverbal symbols proliferate; gendered forms of address become playthings, dancing becomes flamboyant, and countless expressions such as subtle glances erupt.

People who do not belong to Gay Hill or other gay collectivities are called eundun, literally “secluded” or “in hiding.” In rites of passage in many tribal societies, novices who have not yet acquired the rights of adults are separated from women and children and secluded in isolated places where desires are restrained. The pre-debut condition of gay eundun resembles this insofar as sexuality or sexual orientation is not publicly expressed. Yet gay seclusion is distinguished not by whether sexual desire is satisfied - online spaces provide many ways to contact men and satisfy sexual desires without entering gay spaces - but by whether one possesses an offline space in which sexuality can be expressed.⁷

Today “gay” tends to be used as a generic label for all men who have erotic relations with men. Yet it is primarily a common noun used from the standpoint of outsiders to refer to men who take men as objects of desire. People called gay rarely use the noun “gay” as the sole first-person explanation of themselves. Men who become aware of erotic feelings toward men describe themselves in different ways according to their circumstances, using terms such as denial, MSM (men who have sex with men), eundun, iban, and ijok (“this side”). Each term refers to a different social position and is interpreted flexibly according to the group in which it is used.

7. 'Denial' refers to a person who senses sexual arousal or attachment toward men but denies that sensation. Reasons may include social discrimination and pervasive hatred. People who do not belong to a particular gay community may imagine gay people through homophobic stereotypes, so denial can also be a rejection of the imagined 'disgusting gay'; acknowledging erotic desire for men may also conflict with the self one had previously imagined. Such people generally do not identify themselves as gay. They may meet men online only for sex or consume gay pornography while avoiding knowing other gay men or forming particular relationships with them. Eundun ('seclusion') resembles denial in that a person does not meet other gay people, but differs because the person does not deny sexual attraction to men. It describes a condition in which one has not dated other gay men or had gay male friends and in which erotic relations with men do not occupy a large part of life. Even after beginning a romantic relationship, such a person may be unable to have the relationship recognized by others or tell others that he is seeing someone he loves; in everyday life he must lie about or conceal himself. Those who maintain eundun may fear that being known as gay will damage existing relationships or cause others' views of them to be distorted by prejudice and discriminatory conventions. MSM means all men who have sex with men, not only gay men; men who also have sex with women or people of other genders are included, as are men who have sex only with men. MSM describes that fact rather than a bounded social group. Iban and ijok are gay slang used to create distance from prejudices socially attached to the label 'gay.' Iban plays on ilban ('ordinary/general, conventionally heterosexual men) as 'class two,' meaning homosexual men; ijok ('this side') divides 'this side' from 'that side,' indicating that one occupies a different domain from heterosexual men. 'Debut' is likewise slang circulating within gay society.

In this study, “gay” refers to men who do not deny erotic desire toward men and who have experienced sexual and other forms of relationships primarily with other gay men. Coming out to family members, nongay friends, or acquaintances is not a condition of being gay. Although the idea that one must “come out” before being recognized as gay is widespread, becoming gay is in fact less a process of coming out than one of coming in - entering a place where other gay people are. This study calls men gay when they inhabit a culture composed of people with similar sexualities, such as Gay Hill, where others can see them as gay and they can also appear to themselves as gay.

Anyone can walk as far as the alleys of Gay Hill, but the spaces occupied for gay people always have gatekeepers. As van Gennep (1960:67) describes puberty rites, men in the ritual spaces of Gay Hill perform a gay personhood treated as if nonexistent in general society, enter a “world of sexuality,” and are granted the sex/sexual status of “gay.” Just as liminal spaces in many rites are safely separated from the outside, the time-space in which one moves from seclusion to debut is separated from general society.

The role of club guards as gatekeepers diminished somewhat after COVID-19, when distancing policies reduced and altered business hours, staffing contracted, and newly opened clubs and bars competed intensely for customers and became less inclined to divide outsiders from insiders. Nevertheless, guards at gay clubs continue to function as gatekeepers, and as the commercial district began recovering after COVID-19 and the Itaewon disaster, their role also began to return. Their task is to identify people who are not heterogeneous presences likely to disrupt the “atmosphere” of a place where gay men gather. As drag shows became widely known and media representations made gay culture more familiar, increasing numbers of cisgender women, heterosexual people, and other outside groups began entering Gay Hill. When women in particular become too numerous, the identity of the “gay club” is diluted. Filtering outsiders through a degree of exclusivity therefore reduces the risk that gay patrons' sexuality will be exposed and helps provide them with a sense of belonging.

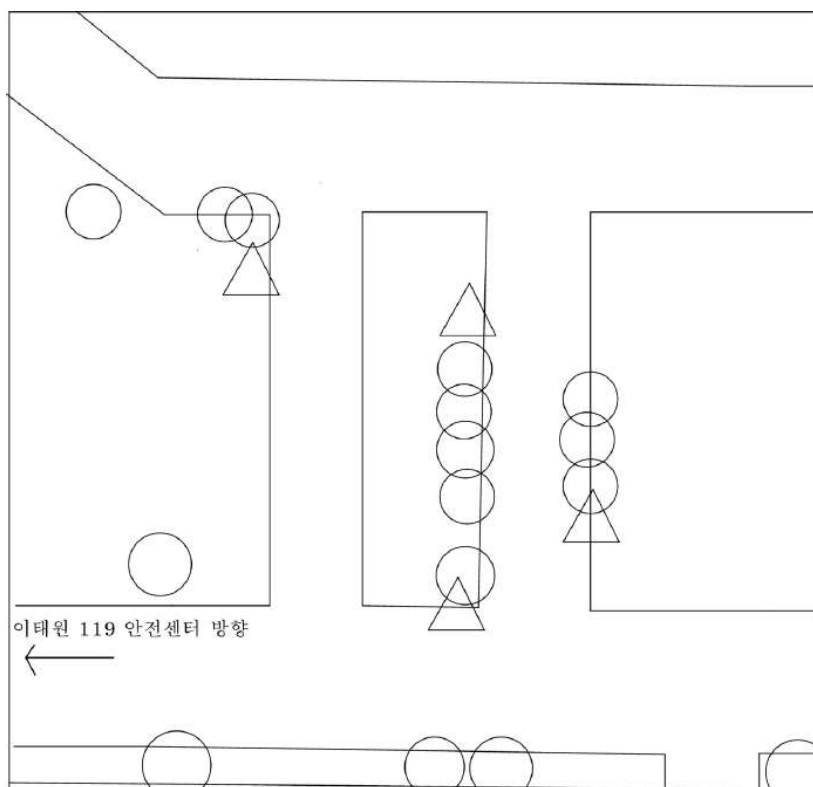


Figure 4. Clubs and bars in Gay Hill (triangles indicate gay clubs; circles indicate gay bars)

Addy: I went with a friend, and that friend was straight. We saw this huge line in front of the club. You could tell immediately it was a gay club. My friend thought it was fascinating, and seeing him react that way made me feel like I was supposed to find it fascinating too. But honestly, I wanted to go in. I think I was scared he might find out. At the time I was hiding my identity, and we went to the same school. I was a student then, so if he found out, I thought it might cause problems in my school life. (Interview, May 23, 2023)

The gatekeeper of a gay club cuts heterocentric social norms off from the club and maintains the sense of belonging available to gay patrons. Those judged to be outsiders include minors; groups in which women outnumber gay men; and heterosexual people. Minors can be screened simply through identification checks, but managing the proportion of women and identifying heterosexual patrons is less straightforward. Here “women” means cisgender women, excluding transgender women and drag performers. Even when a woman arrives with a man, the pair is classified as outsiders if the man is not gay. Heterosexual couples also visit because media channels and broader social discourse sometimes present Itaewon gay clubs as an “unusual date course,” but gay men do not wish to become spectacles for heterosexual observers. Highly

intoxicated people and those who appear entirely incompatible with Gay Hill - in other words, people who may be hostile to its members - are likewise stopped at the entrance.

Women generally must be accompanied by gay friends to enter a gay club. Standards shift according to the number of women already inside, but a common rule requires roughly two gay men for each woman. Women also pay substantially higher admission fees, often three or four times the price charged to men. The criteria are strict: even if a woman who has been refused entry asks an unfamiliar man on the street to pretend to be her friend and returns with him, she may still be refused if the gatekeeper judges that they are not actually friends.



Figure 5. People lining up before a gay club opens, August 4, 2023, 10:38 p.m.

There is no definitive practical criterion for identifying heterosexual men, but in the field the distinction is often made simply. Even when men arrive without women, heterosexual men are thought to look somewhat different from gay men; men who come to gay clubs are generally described as more “stylish.” If uncertainty remains - for example, when a man hesitates on the way into the entrance - the guard may ask, “Are you *ijjok*?” (“Are you on this side?”). As explained above, *ijjok* is gay slang. People who do not understand the expression are classified as outsiders. Younger visitors sometimes ask what it means; if the guard then asks directly, “Are you gay?”, heterosexual men generally leave because they have little reason to lie merely to enter a gay club. Only staff know the detailed criteria, but because everyone waits at the entrance to receive a wrist ticket from the gatekeeper, patrons can see and hear that particular admission standards are being applied.⁸

8. Saying that gay men are more 'stylish' than heterosexual men does not assert a literal or inherent difference. Rather, heterosexual men tend less often to make their physical appearance into an object of others' desire, whereas gay men—especially gay men in Itaewon—more strongly depend on presenting themselves through 53 their bodies in order to be recognized as desirable objects, and thus tend to become more skilled at styling themselves.

Most gay men in Korean society leave eundun by beginning to meet other gay men. They begin forming relationships and create narratives in which, among their many aspects, the self as a man who likes men can become the protagonist. Yet it remains uncommon to disclose sexual orientation to nongay people or family members. Discriminatory and prejudiced gazes are still frequently imposed upon gay people, and enduring such exhausting situations in everyday life is burdensome unless one places great value on complete self-disclosure. People also differ in how much they fear the changes that disclosing being gay could bring to their lives. The greater the fear, the more they tend to reduce the importance of gay sexual orientation within life; such fear arises partly from the belief that one must not negate the role of the “heterosexual man” through which one is seen in general society.

To “debut” means entering, from a state of seclusion, a place inhabited by others who share one's sexual orientation. It does not mean publicly expressing and receiving recognition for a stigmatizable sexual orientation. Debut is therefore different from becoming an “open gay” person who does not hide being gay from an unspecified public. The transition out of seclusion consists of recognizing one's sexual orientation, sharing it with others, and expanding relationships based on that sexuality.

Researcher: Don't you feel a distance? On Gay Hill you show your kki exactly as it is, but when you get back on the subway and go home you have to return again.

Addy: No. Rather than feeling distance, it's fun. It feels like I've done something deviant. I joke that we're going to Itaewon to “drain the kki out.” Like kki is something bad that has to be removed. (laughs) Like dialysis patients going in for dialysis. You go to Itaewon, drain out as much kki as you possibly can, and then you come back out and live everyday life again, just like an ordinary person. (Interview, May 22, 2023)

After debut, a gay man can express himself as gay in Gay Hill or in particular situations with other gay people, but this change does not lead to a condition in which a gay self can be displayed throughout everyday life. Debut separates gay sexual orientation from the world composed of family, friends, acquaintances, coworkers, and numerous other relationships and expands another world built upon that sexuality. The separated world remains a domain distinct from the reality in which one appears as a heterosexual man.

Recognition as a member of Gay Hill after debut may also take the form of being entered on a club operator's “guest” list, or, where no list exists, being personally known and contacted. This is recognition as a member of a particular club rather than a universal stage through which every debuted gay man passes. To become a guest generally means being sufficiently at home in

Itaewon to have formed a personal relationship with a club operator; economic means, sociability, and a capacity for self-expression are among its conditions. Guests may bypass entrance lines, enter even when accompanied only by women, and have admission fees waived. The status therefore carries symbolic meaning, though for most people membership consists more simply in interacting with other gay men in Itaewon and forming one's own community.⁹

The men granted the sexual/social status of “gay” in Itaewon leave seclusion. Because most male homosexual people in Korean society live while concealing sexual orientation, this becomes an important consideration in encounters between gay men. Someone wishing to remain secluded may risk having the sexuality they conceal exposed to an unspecified number of gay people if they meet someone who has debuted. They therefore tend to prefer other secluded men and avoid places where gay people gather. Conversely, debuted gay men are easily labeled *jongtaewon*¹⁰ - slang combining Jongno and Itaewon - by secluded men, who use expressions such as “No *jongtaewon*” online to signal caution toward socially connected gay men.¹¹ Seclusion itself, however, is interpreted in multiple ways. Limited relationships and the inability to have one's romantic relationship recognized by others may be understood as constraints, yet some gay men prefer relationships with secluded men because not meeting many other gay men is imagined to guarantee exclusivity and stability. Since even debuted gay men very rarely reveal being gay throughout general society, maintaining a closed sexual identity may sometimes be viewed positively in a romantic partner. Seclusion can therefore be an object of preference rather than avoidance.¹²

Researcher: You said that when we went near ○○ club before, you saw the line and were scared your friend beside you might find out. But you also said that feeling disappeared later. Was there some particular moment when it went away?

Addy: No, there wasn't. There wasn't any particular moment. Once you keep going, you start to know people there. You get acquaintances you met on that side. And if... how should I put it? It's like smoking. At first you cough and think, 'Why do people

9. According to participant Mini Han, the capacity for self-expression means being able, in spaces where gay men gather, to play exuberantly without being bound by one's appearance under ordinary social norms, and to express a 'natural stylishness' in which the fabricated appearance does not feel estranged from the self one understands oneself to be.

10. *Jongtaewon* is gay slang combining Jongno and Itaewon.

11. Two applications are especially widely used among Korean gay men. One allows users to mark *eundun* ('seclusion') as a descriptive hashtag (#); clicking the tag displays only users who have marked themselves that way. Another allows users to synchronize contacts in the application's settings, block selected people, and avoid exposing themselves to them from the outset. People who prefer *eundun* may write phrases such as 'no *kkisuni*, *Jongtaewon*, or feminine guys' on their profiles, indirectly indicating that they wish to avoid meeting men who have formed many relationships with other gay men.

12. Because of social discrimination, many gay communities are formed in online spaces that are not visible offline. Their principal function is often to mediate offline meetings, though they can also function entirely online. People in *eundun* in particular may selectively meet others online and later enter places where gay people gather, such as Itaewon or Jongno, through someone's introduction. The division between online and offline space gives each domain particular tendencies. Because online interaction does not require face-to-face contact or disclosure of one's social self, it may be used less as a community than as an outlet for sexual desire.

smoke this?' But later you start craving it and smoke. I think it was kind of like that. I've always had a lot of excitement in me and I like clubs, but when I go to a regular club, the people there aren't possible partners for me anyway.

Addy: But if I go to a gay club, I can enjoy the music and dance, and because there are possibilities among the people there, it isn't strange for me to flirt with someone or exchange contact information. Once there is that possibility that I could become something with these people, I think that was fun. Then one or two acquaintances start to appear... that was fun too. And as I got older, even if I got caught, I'd think, 'Ah, damn, there are so many other things in the world I have to worry about besides that,' and I stopped worrying so much. (laughs) Maybe I just got used to it by going there. Something like that. (Interview, July 24, 2023)

Men continually return to Gay Hill because its ritual character possesses the power to transform individual psychology. Being exposed to men who may take a sexual interest in oneself; openly displaying a sexual orientation concealed in general society; dancing to music and sharing pleasure with others who do the same; and participating in Gay Hill's diverse forms of play are sufficient to produce emotional movement. Experience among people who share a sexuality unauthorized by normative society contains the possibility of being transformed into narrative - here, narrative in the sense of a process through which the self is constituted.

Bruner (2003:63) describes self-making as a "narrative art" and argues that there is no "essential self" inside the person. Explaining oneself to someone resembles telling a story: self-making is narrative art, guided by the listener and by cultural forms of what one ought to be. The self is produced through narratives that individuals repeatedly create and recreate, not through some essence possessed within. In this sense, Gay Hill is a place in which men produce narratives constituting a gay self. There are others who see them as objects of desire - men desired by men - and within those relations they can be spoken of and seen as gay.

Within a cultural space organized around shared sexuality, men acquire the sign called "gay," express it through the body, and undergo a process of being recognized as members of a collectivity that shares it. A man who previously held erotic desire for men only internally thereby acquires means through which to express that disposition. Before debut, male desire could be concealed as sexuality alone; afterward, others who see the person through the role of "gay" become part of everyday life. Men consequently find cultural signs circulating in groups that share male desire - slang, modes of styling the body, and other forms - and use them to express themselves. Becoming gay thus means creating within everyday life a domain in which one can inhabit the role of gay rather than the role of heterosexual man. Entering Gay Hill is not merely entering a pleasure space and passively expecting enjoyment to be supplied; it is a process of

joining the disorder unfolding there, becoming recognized as a member, and filling one's surroundings with others with whom pleasure can be shared.

Becoming gay violates the general order of Korean society; within that order, the gay man is abnormal. The role of the normal adult man in Korean society presupposes heterosexuality: possessing a body that expresses masculinity and becoming a member of a male social world constituted in opposition to women. To be abnormal is to depart from a predictable order, and departure from order contains danger precisely because it cannot be predicted. In every encounter, the fact that people's roles are predictable to some degree indicates the existence of a shared culture, on the basis of which people can come to know one another. Without such expectations, individuals cannot predict what kind of person another is, how that person will act toward them, or what effects they may have; one's own identity and cultural role are therefore no longer guaranteed. Culture moves toward stability by preventing such danger (see Douglas 1966).

On Gay Hill, however, the “man who likes men” is not abnormal. It is a condition of belonging and, viewed from within, becomes a form of normality. Male homosexuality is the universal premise agreed upon by those present and the most basic premise constituting Gay Hill as a space. The standards of normality presupposed by general society are inverted: within this particular time-space, male homosexuality becomes normal and heterosexuality abnormal.

2. Gay Hill as a Space of Play



Figure 6. Interior of a gay club, May 27, 2023

Those seeking pleasure in Gay Hill as a liminal space mobilize diverse means. Spaces for music, dance, sociability, drinking, and other forms of play fill the hill. According to Huizinga, play arises in a space outside ordinary life; it is an independent and free activity that nevertheless

absorbs the player completely. It occurs within a delimited time and space according to fixed rules and particular forms, producing social groups that repeatedly mark their departure from the ordinary world through disguise and other means.

Roger Caillois makes Huizinga's discussion more specific by dividing play into agon (competition), alea (chance), mimicry (simulation), and ilinx (vertigo). Agon artificially creates equality of opportunity under ideal conditions in which competitors struggle and victory can be given a clear and indisputable value (Caillois 2001:14). Alea, like the dice game from which the term derives, is based on decisions independent of the player and beyond the player's influence; the winner is simply more favored by fortune than the loser (2001:17). Both establish artificial conditions of equality unavailable in reality, but agon relies upon the player's capacities, whereas alea replaces capacity with surrender to chance. Ilinx seeks temporarily to destroy stable perception and induce a kind of voluptuous panic in lucid consciousness, overwhelming the player through convulsion, seizure, shock, or other violent disruptions of reality (2001:23).

Mimicry is play in which participants become invented fictional figures and act in ways appropriate to those figures, producing a fictional, self-contained world of illusion. The player temporarily transforms the surrounding environment, believing themselves to be another being or making others believe in that being. Mimicry turns a person into a figure of fantasy rather than reality and makes them act as that figure; the environment producing the play determines the figure's actions. The figure appears not as a single stable form but in continuously changing forms. What remains consistent is that the player is treated not as themselves but as the figure others believe to exist within the game, while the person in disguise positions others within relations premised upon that belief. The essential aim of mimicry is not to deceive spectators completely. Participants know that it is temporary play rather than reality. The pleasure lies in being believed, within the game, to be another figure (Caillois 2001:19-20).



Figure 7. Gay Hill on the night before a holiday

In an orderly and stable world, agon and alea rise as the rules of social play and as dominant worldviews. Chance is controlled, rules strengthened, and a civilized society molded; metamorphosis is repeatedly exposed as crude imitation (Caillois 2001:130). An unstable balance between measurable competition and unpredictable fortune replaces mimicry and ilinx. Competition within established rules is treated as valuable, while unpredictable chance is eliminated in the name of “fairness.” In modern society, mimicry and ilinx survive in

hallucinatory and enchanting forms and occasionally reappear, but they are controlled so that they cannot conspire with one another. Mimicry is confined to settings strictly separated from everyday life, such as masks at a ballroom or carnival, or replaced by uniforms such as military dress; ilinx is standardized into theme parks that guarantee controlled pleasures such as the circus. The masked imitator becomes a spectacle, while the original represented by the mask loses its mystery and is reduced to an object of imitation. Mimicry and ilinx are thus separated and regulated, preserving stable perception in the service of real-world norms.

Researcher: Did you drink a lot at ○○○?

Addy: A lot of people come in after they've been drinking, and usually men buy drinks for me.

Researcher: What kind of men?

Addy: I just think I'm the kind of person who knows how to have fun on my own. Some people buy me drinks because they want to have fun with me, and sometimes I buy them drinks. I think that becomes kind of a medium. The drink itself. Like, between you and me, 'Cheers~.'

Researcher: What are you exchanging?

Addy: Rather than exchanging something, you're building a little more familiarity. It's not like there's anything special... maybe a chance to make a move on someone?¹³ If I like someone, I go over and buy him a drink. If someone thinks I'm okay, he buys me a drink. (laughs) Of course there can be something sexual in it, but there are also people who buy drinks simply because they're having such a good time. Like, 'This is so much fun. Let's go have even more fun together~.' That's the feeling. (Interview, July 31, 2022)

Most of the men in the bar are wearing short-sleeved T-shirts and jeans. There are some foreigners; a group of four or five seem to have come together. They appear to be playing with the people they came with, but they subtly glance at the men around them. The instant their eyes meet, they quickly turn their heads away. If their eyes meet again afterward, it signals interest; moving to another seat, turning one's back, or no longer looking signals a lack of interest. People who came together are mostly similar in style. Muscular men wear tight T-shirts or shirts, while smaller and shorter men generally wear loose clothing. The muscular men occupy the center of the venue... There is exactly one woman, and even she remains in a corner with little movement. She disappears after standing there for about five minutes... There is only one entrance

13. This is understood to mean seizing an opportunity to approach someone one finds attractive.

and exit, and because there are so many people that there is hardly room to step, bodily contact with others is unavoidable when entering or leaving. At such moments, some people grab the other person's hand or shoulder, or squeeze their buttocks... (Fieldnotes, May 21, 2023, 2:20 a.m., Itaewon gay club)

Gay Hill contains every form of play classified by Caillois: agon, alea, mimicry, and ilinx. Agon, or competition, appears chiefly in ways of displaying masculinity and becoming an object of others' attention: men compete through attractive appearance, handsomeness, masculinity, and dance. Some clubs and bars have stages open to anyone, where patrons perform the choreography of particular songs or expose their bodies to display masculinity. The more muscular the body, the more highly masculinity tends to be valued; some therefore remove their shirts inside clubs or on the street. Alea, or chance, includes encounters in which men who find one another attractive happen to meet and form a connection, or moments when a song whose choreography one happens to know comes on and one takes the stage. Becoming immersed in music and darkness while heavily intoxicated exemplifies ilinx; concealing one's role in ordinary society while exposing desire, or transforming one's appearance through drag and other forms, exemplifies mimicry.

For Caillois and Huizinga, play in a separated time-space creates within reality a temporary time-space devoted solely to play, which disappears when play ends. Children playing house in a living room, for example, may become mother and father within that game, but once it ends they return to the role of children within the household. The household is the order that frames their reality and determines their roles. Play occurring in a liminal space is different. Play on Gay Hill begins in a domain separated from social norms. It does not arise in a merely temporary enclave for play within "reality," but in a "separate reality." Gay Hill is separated from orders such as heterocentrism, yet it is a physical reality rather than a fantasy and has persisted for decades. Roles within its forms of play - gay, drag, and others - exist at a certain distance from roles in ordinary reality. "Everyday life as gay" and "everyday life as nongay" coexist in parallel within an individual's life.

Play on Gay Hill adopts an order formed apart from heterosexual norms, yet it remains capable of interpenetrating ordinary society. Caillois writes that when play ends "each recovers his former self" and that clear boundaries prevent alienation (2001:49). On Gay Hill, however, the role generated through play can remain after the play ends and thereby transform the preexisting self.

Addy: My everyday life doesn't exactly change. But there is an everyday life as gay. I do think I watch those people and learn from them: "Oh, you can live like this too." Some people live together, all of them open about being gay.

Seeing them live that way looks fun. I think it's impressive, enviable, cool. You learn: "There are lives like this. There are people like this." That has a big influence on my life. Not so much on the routines of everyday life - more on my mindset.

Researcher: What kind of mindset?

Addy: That being gay might not actually be such a big deal. Before, it felt like something I had to hide, something I absolutely couldn't get caught for. Now... it's kind of fun. Like playing Mafia. Like God, if there is a God, pointed at me and said, "You're gay. Don't get caught!" (laughs) ... I saw a documentary where someone said he was really glad to be gay. He said wherever he went in the world he could meet gay friends; wherever he went, there was family. With that one thing in common - being gay - you can become close very quickly. (Interview, May 22, 2023)

Those who experience a gay self in Itaewon gradually incorporate into ordinary life aspects of themselves they once believed had to remain hidden. Rather than simply enduring a life subordinated to discrimination or remaining within the sensation of being outside the norm, they undergo a transition in which they can invent a life as gay. Heterosexual norms proclaim prohibitions against homosexuality or an ideal of the "normal adult man." Those gathered in liminal space, however, expose previously concealed parts of the self and learn new ways of living. Norms divide those located within their boundaries from those outside them; people outside the norm are erased from social visibility like liminal initiands hidden in darkness. Yet their existence does not literally disappear. It vanishes only from the range that the norm is capable of illuminating.

Those denied the title "normal" recombine social factors playfully through nonverbal symbols and forms in the indeterminate time-space of liminality. Heterosexual roles are transformed into the sexual positions called "top" and "bottom"; masculinity is reinterpreted; gender is repeatedly dismantled and reconstructed through play. Countless relationships among people who share selves excluded to the underside of social structure expand the domain in which life as gay becomes possible. As that domain grows, so do the pleasures, frequency, and forms of play. Experience on Gay Hill thus offers men a sense of leaving the position of the "excluded minority," of being able to play with pleasure, and of standing together at a boundary. That sensation stimulates bodies and affects, propelling transformations into forms different from those that preceded them.

Jeonguk: In a gay club, when you start talking to somebody, there's a certain tension. Something could happen between you. That's why it's more exciting.

I don't go there with that as the goal - I'm satisfied even if I just dance - but there are these encounters while you're dancing. There's anticipation, tension. And dancing there makes me more conscious of how I look at that moment: "How do I look to other people right now?" If that's a shackle, it's a shackle, but in another sense it's fun. Interesting.

Researcher: Then what does being gay mean to you outside Itaewon?

Jeonguk: I don't consciously think about its role very much in everyday life. But if I think about it, some of the way I live was probably made there - the way I treat other people, communicate, listen to other people's stories...

Researcher: And inside Itaewon?

Jeonguk: Inside Itaewon it's almost like a license. (laughs) A right to occupy that space. Like a membership card attached to you when you and I communicate. (Interview, August 22, 2023)

As this interview suggests, awareness that one exists "as gay" presupposes the presence of others who see oneself as gay. A gay man is visually available to heterosexual and homosexual observers alike, but what is "seen" changes with the viewer's perspective. In a heterosexual club, where no one necessarily looks at him as gay, he has little need to recognize or express himself as gay. In a gay club, by contrast, he continuously senses how he appears under the particular gaze of others who see him as gay.

By forming relations with people who see him as gay, a man can begin to accept himself as gay in everyday life. Those who lived in seclusion acquire, through their Itaewon debut, people around them who see them in this way, and those relationships spread beyond the time-space of Itaewon's night. A friend met on Gay Hill can later be met for coffee in Sinsa-dong in broad daylight. Relations generated in Gay Hill's play are preserved in other realities.

Play on Gay Hill presupposes a time-space separated from ordinary reality, but this space repeatedly appears and disappears. Even when a person lives elsewhere as though nongay, the gay role remains behind the role being performed. Just as Gay Hill as liminality repeatedly appears and disappears in particular times and places, gay identity is a role that a man can put on and remove like a mask. Gay Hill and general society are not related as non-everyday to everyday or fantasy to reality. Both are reality and everyday life. Under the norms of general society, the gay self does not disappear; it is temporarily moved backstage to avoid the burden of exclusion. The gay self in the ordinary world is therefore concealed, not alienated, and remains part of reality.

Chapter 3. Gay, Drag, Performance

Section 1. Sexuality as Membership

The club is lit entirely in red. Laser lights sweep the room with the rhythm, but never brightly enough to reveal faces clearly; to see someone properly one has to wait until a beam passes across him. Some men have removed their shirts. Most are large and muscular and seem slightly set apart from those around them. One especially large man sometimes shoves others roughly aside when going to buy a drink or use the restroom. Before doing so, however, he looks at their faces; if someone seems closer to his type, he does not shove. Instead he places both hands on the man's shoulders and turns his body just enough to make room. Couples occasionally appear. Even while glancing at other men, they quickly turn their heads as a gesture of disinterest - yet they never stop scanning. (Fieldnotes, May 22, 2023, 2:20 a.m., Itaewon gay club)

“Gay” is a designation that encompasses sexuality, sexual orientation, sexual identity, bodily sex, and gender. Sexual orientation indicates toward whom a person's sexual desire is directed; sexual identity concerns how one identifies one's bodily sex; bodily sex is a medical classification made with reference to the body; gender is culturally constituted sex/gender. In the usage adopted here, gay refers to people born with bodies called male, who understand themselves as men, are culturally constituted as such, and take men as objects of erotic desire. The common denominator is “man.” Whereas masculinity in general society is constituted in opposition to “woman,” among the men of Gay Hill roles are differentiated within a social world composed only of men.¹⁴

The thesis uses “bodily sex” rather than treating “sex” as an uncomplicated synonym for biological sex. Biology understands the human body as material fact, but “biological sex” is not an intrinsic essence; its meaning depends upon context. In discussions of cancer, knowing sex may mean knowing whether a patient has a prostate or ovaries; in reproduction it may mean knowing whether a person produces sperm or possesses ova (Karkazis 2019). Here “bodily sex” therefore refers to classification based on the body when contrasted with culturally constituted gender.

14. Sex is often contrasted with gender as 'biological sex' versus culturally constituted gender. Biology, however, also encompasses behavior and environment, and 'biological sex' does not simply mean a sex grounded in the body in the way the term is commonly used. Biology treats the human body as material fact, while biological sex is neither essential nor intrinsic and can indicate only a particular meaning within the context in which it is used. In discussions of cancer, for example, knowing a patient's sex may mean knowing whether the person has a prostate or ovaries; in discussions of reproduction, it may mean knowing whether the person produces sperm or possesses ova (see Katrina Karkazis, 'The Misuses of Biological Sex,' 2019). Accordingly, when sex is used in this study in opposition to gender—that is, to indicate classification based on a person's body as distinct from culturally constituted gender—it is rendered as 'bodily sex.'

Gay men's expression of being male is less a masculinity grounded in the oppositional category "woman" than masculinity as a fabricated image. Masculinity does not simply reside in male bodies. It is socially and historically constituted, taking contextual form in cultural environments that demand it. As Beynon writes, "masculine" and "feminine" name culturally designated attributes that can be borne by both men and women (2001:7).

Gay men divide sexual roles chiefly into top and bottom according to whether one is the penetrating subject or the penetrated object. These positions - commonly called one's "preference" or "position" - are treated as important enough to shape relationships, including romantic ones. Although one body can physically occupy both positions and most gay men experience both across relationships over a lifetime, roles are often relatively fixed within a particular relationship.

Top and bottom also operate as visual classificatory images. A top, imagined as the active penetrating subject, may be expected to cultivate an appearance upon which a bottom can rely: taller or larger, short-haired, tanned, muscular, and conventionally "manly." The imagined bottom is positioned symbolically closer to "woman" in contrast, but this does not mean that bottoms become more desirable to tops the more perfectly they imitate femininity. Bottoms, too, are often regarded as more attractive when they display masculinity. Gay slang such as top-looking bottom points precisely to the attractiveness attributed to a "manly-looking bottom"; the reverse expression, a "bottom-looking top," is not ordinarily mobilized as a boast.

Because sexual position is not visibly marked, tops and bottoms alike mobilize masculinity to present their bodies as attractive. Men wishing to signify being tops tend to dramatize masculinity more strongly. Heterosexual men need not exaggerate masculinity to the same extent because women, differentiated by bodily sex, are continually present as an oppositional category. Gay men, by contrast, must distinguish their bodies from other men with the same bodily sex. Muscular bodies, short hair, and large physiques therefore frequently become intensified visual signs.

Attractive men are distinguished within gay social worlds, and attractiveness is often understood through "masculinity." The image of a manly exterior or an athletic, muscular body intensifies images of masculinity already circulating in general society. Yet what is valued is masculinity as a fabricated image. The attractive male is imagined as a visual figure; how that body was made and what its owner actually does with it are less important. A footballer's thick, solid thighs, for example, may be eroticized as masculine without any concern for whether the athlete defeated other men in competition or exercises dominance over women. What is desired is the "masculine body" that produces sexual tension, not the social history of wearing a heterosexual masculine mask.

Many gay men thus desire masculine bodies while feeling discomfort with a culture of masculinity premised upon domination of women. Heterosexual masculinity can signify social recognition of a man's capacity to dominate women, but gay men cannot easily identify with a

male social world organized around such domination. They may acquiesce in or tacitly accept that culture, but cannot participate in its defining sexual practice. A gay man may conceal his orientation and fabricate a heterosexual appearance when he believes participation in dominant masculinity is necessary for socioeconomic success, but it is difficult to fabricate the practice of taking women as sexual objects because sexual arousal itself cannot simply be manufactured.

Within gay society some men imitate the masculinity visible in general society by expressing ownership and dominance over other men. Those with economic resources may buy drinks for others or display intimacy with conventionally masculine men to mark themselves as members of that group. Yet economic display cannot by itself make a person an attractive erotic object, because it does not derive from the “body” through which attention is principally organized. A person may gain the right to join a conversation or group without becoming sexually desirable. In Gay Hill, where the body is a primary expressive medium, failure to become an erotic object can make one secondary. This is one reason young and conventionally handsome men are so visible there and why appearance-centered hierarchies are pervasive.

The male body on Gay Hill is therefore a means of gaining recognition from other men and of expressing oneself toward them. Men become acutely attentive to the bodies, voices, and minute movements of possible erotic partners - even whether a pinky finger extends or curls while someone drinks. On the street it is common to see men glance at one another by moving only their eyes, without turning their heads. At a bar, eyes follow the man ordering a drink beside them; when someone enters, a more handsome newcomer draws more gazes; people routinely discuss which club has the best “stock” of attractive men.

Gayness as sexuality takes many forms: struggles for recognition as an object of others' desire, self-expression, sexual relations, and other interpersonal relations. The aspect emphasized here is that gayness becomes a condition for receiving membership in a particular collectivity. The invention of a space in which one can belong “as gay” allows concealed parts of the self to appear outwardly, provides a sense of liberation, and repeatedly draws men back into that space.

Addy: At first, I think I became friends with people almost just by brushing shoulders. I met one friend on Gay Hill, then through him met another, then another hyung. I don't interact with all of them often, but when we happen to be at the same club we say hello and dance together. My ex also became connected through that network. It isn't that you meet one person in the club and instantly become close. There are so many overlapping people that you keep meeting, meeting, meeting, and eventually become close. At the club itself, you almost never become close; mostly you just exchange Instagram accounts. (Interview, May 22, 2023)

Addy's case shows how a self produced on Gay Hill is reflected into other domains of everyday life through relations with others. He had long known that gay clubs existed in Itaewon but avoided them until a few years earlier because of anxiety that others might discover he was gay. Now he visits Itaewon frequently with friends met there and participates with gay friends in cultural activities beyond Itaewon. His network began when he happened to discover that an existing friend was gay and visited Itaewon through that friend's introduction. Gradually the gay role occupied a larger portion of his everyday life; he experienced serious romantic relationships and began thinking about how to live a life as gay.

Most men initially visit Gay Hill with someone they already know and expand their relationships by meeting new people there. Through chains of overlapping acquaintances they enlarge a gay self. As the network grows, the range and depth of everyday life they share grows as well. Such relations enable forms of intimacy different from those available with heterosexual people. In Korea, where heterosexual norms centered on marriage often arrive with particular force around one's thirties, intimate relations capable of fully accepting forms of life outside those norms are especially likely to emerge among gay men.

One can see this overflow beyond Itaewon in the hours before dawn. Gay clubs usually close around 5:30 or 6 a.m., while gay bars may remain open longer if customers remain. Clubgoers then move to bars, go home, or gather in restaurants near the route to Itaewon Station to eat hangover soup. Around the time the first subway trains begin running, these restaurants are busiest. After hours of drinking, dancing, and play, men eat and talk together before returning to ordinary reality.

At a haejangguk restaurant near Itaewon Station, every table was full, so I waited briefly before entering. Among the customers, one group seemed to be split across several tables. A man seated in a corner was crying. Dabbing his eyes with tissue, he sobbed to the man beside him, saying, 'I've done everything I could to maintain these relationships, but my friends don't understand how I feel. I don't think I fit well with my friends.' The man comforting him said, 'Why would I not understand how you feel, hyung? I care about you as much as you care about me,' but his voice carried some irritation, as if he were tired. From his saying, 'We haven't seen each other in a while, let's not do this,' they did not seem to meet often. But the crying man's complaints did not stop. After comforting him for about ten minutes, the other man apparently decided that nothing was changing and moved to another table. Instead, three other friends came over and began comforting him again. The man repeated the same story to the other friends. While listening to his complaints, they also talked among themselves about other things. Some customers were grilling meat, and many were drinking soju. Everyone at the other tables was talking among themselves. When the server taking

orders asked me, 'Alcohol too?' it seemed that most people were ordering a drink with their hangover meal. Smoke from the meat being grilled drifted out the window. Outside, birdsong was now louder than the music. The sun had long since risen, and perhaps because it was summer, it was as bright as daytime. The customers in the restaurant were noisy, but perhaps because everyone was exhausted, their voices were not as loud as they had been in the bars. One customer looked as though he had just come from doing drag: he was wearing an ordinary black T-shirt, but his face still had heavy makeup on it. (Fieldnotes, August 5, 2023, 7:10 a.m.)

After playing fully as gay in Itaewon, people reaffirm that self one last time in the restaurant before returning. Over hangover soup and alcohol, they confirm the community to which they belong and the meaning they hold within it. To “become gay” is thus to enter a place such as Gay Hill where other gay people gather, to be surrounded by men who can see oneself as a sexual object, and - even when sexual desire is not directly involved - to participate in a shared environment composed of “men who take men as erotic objects.” Belonging to Itaewon's gay community through sexuality is not fundamentally an experience aimed at satisfying sexual desire. It is an experience of forming relationships.

Section 2. “Kki-ish” People



Figure 8. MC announcing the start of a drag show, May 21, 2023, 1:03 a.m.

Among the forms of play emerging on Gay Hill, the drag show is the most conspicuous. Clubs and bars across the hill host drag performers regularly or irregularly, and by 2023 drag performances also took place in other Itaewon venues beyond Gay Hill. One club at the entrance to Gay Hill has staged drag shows since the 1990s; today it runs roughly hour-long shows twice a

night, at about 1 a.m. and 3 a.m. As showtime approaches, patrons pour in and the area before the stage fills first.

Just before the show begins, people start crowding in, and the venue, roughly ten pyeong in size, fills until there is hardly room to stand. Before the show, the drag performer who has been performing there the longest explains the rules for watching. The lights that had illuminated the corners of the venue turn toward the stage, and everywhere except the stage becomes dark. The person giving the instructions changes from time to time, but it is usually the most senior drag performer. The rules are: do not push one another; tips start at 10,000 won, and 1,000- or 5,000-won bills are not accepted; put down your phones and watch with your own eyes; and respond enthusiastically. Jokes are mixed in along the way: 'The crowd isn't very good today,' or 'First time here? Ah, the ones we already had were better.' When the audience reacts, the performer fires back with playful profanity, and laughter and cheers burst out. The exact patter changes each time, but the overall pattern is similar. The drag performer giving the instructions slips behind the curtain. A little later, in the accent of a white man from an old American Western, a voice rings out: 'Good evening ladies and gentleman, Drag queens take your mark. The dance floor is now opened.' Driving drums sound, the track starts, and the drag show begins. The songs, in order, are: 1. 'Smooth Criminal' - Scott Bradlee's version (original by Michael Jackson); 2. 'Miari Pass' - Kim Yeon-ja; 3. 'I Wanna Be Where You Are' - Beyoncé; 4. 'Pink Lipstick' - Jang Hye-jin; 5. 'I Am What I Am' - Linda Eder; 6. 'La La La' - Shakira; 7. 'The Sparkling Diamond' from the musical *Moulin Rouge*; 8. 'Hey Goldmember' - Beyoncé. After the show, the drag performer who gave the opening instructions comes back out and calls the performers one by one to introduce them. At this point the drags are called 'showgirls.' One showgirl has a muscular body and is introduced as 'a woman who can lift 120 kilograms at the gym these days - more than most men.' A male audience member is also called up because, while everyone is greeting the crowd, one showgirl introduces him as 'today's boyfriend.' The drags are amused by how shy he looks despite his sturdy build, and one of them gives him military-style drill commands, switching in that moment to the voice of a middle-aged man: 'Attention! At ease!' Everyone laughs. When the man's friends shout, 'He did public service!' everyone laughs again. One showgirl takes the man into the dressing room. During the closing remarks, someone in the audience shouts, 'You're pretty!' Without even looking at the speaker's face, the drag performer replies in a comic nasal voice, 'I wish you are pretty too,' and the audience bursts into laughter. (Fieldnotes, May 22, 2023)



Figure 9. Drag performance: research participants Kyam (top) and Fiona (bottom)

Drag shows occur regularly and irregularly at multiple Gay Hill venues. Some places employ drag performers as staff who report for scheduled shifts; others book them for occasional performances. Most drag performers on Gay Hill are gay men, though some are transgender. This study focuses chiefly on drag shows as performances whose audience is gay. “Performance” here means staged enactment - a formally organized event such as a drag show - rather than Butler's concept of the performative.

Butler's performativity, drawing on Austin's performative utterance, concerns speech or acts that do not merely describe a reality but participate in bringing it into being. Her argument that

gender is performative further rejects the idea of an agent existing prior to the social force that produces the self and treats bodily sex distinctions as socially constituted. Whatever the validity or controversies surrounding those propositions, “performance” in the present discussion refers primarily to staged shows occurring on Gay Hill.¹⁵

Most drag performers working on Gay Hill first acquired kki in cultural territories where gay people gather - Itaewon, Jongno, and similar spaces - and then developed their particular talents into drag. There is no agreed-upon formal procedure for “debuting” as a drag performer. Yet performers commonly pass through a process of making their drag selves visible: posting photographs or videos in drag on social media, introducing themselves to others as drag, visiting spaces where other performers gather, and expanding their networks. They do not suddenly begin performing because of one decisive event. Before taking the stage, they undergo a preparatory period without yet having fully fixed the specific form called “drag,” gradually acquiring techniques needed to construct a drag-queen appearance: buying clothing considered outside male dress conventions, trying color cosmetics, and so forth.

To acquire kki is to move among the different “atmospheres” and cultures of Itaewon's gay spaces, select the group that feels closest to oneself, and embody its behavioral forms. Clubs and bars differ markedly. With the popularity of K-pop girl groups, many gay clubs came to play kki songs - girl-group songs with fixed choreography that patrons can reproduce. These venues tend to be aboveground, brightly lit, relatively public, and oriented toward an upbeat rather than closed or decadent atmosphere. Other clubs, often underground and darker, play house, disco, or techno associated with club subcultures. People newer to Itaewon or fond of K-pop choreography tend toward the brighter clubs; those who prefer house, techno, or DJ mixing tend toward darker ones.

Men sharing a sexuality oriented toward men divide into many groups not only by “atmosphere” but by their preference for drag shows, dancing, bars, age composition, or foreign clientele. What all these groups share in some fashion is kki. Rather than conforming to the standards of ordinary society, most strongly display a desire for self-expression. People whose modes of expression resemble one another - in gay slang, whose kki matches - gather and gradually refine those modes together. Before beginning drag, most gay men assimilate in this way to others in particular Itaewon spaces.

Addy: Thinking about it now, I like Trunk better than the other clubs that mainly play girl-group songs. K-pop has fixed choreography, right? The girl-group songs we know

15. Butler writes that gender is neither a noun nor a free-floating set of attributes; within inherited metaphysical discourse it proves to be performative, in the sense that it constitutes the identity it is purported to be, and is therefore always a doing, though not a doing by a subject presumed to preexist the deed (Butler 2008:131). Her account exposes bodily sex (sex), long treated as the ground of essential sexual difference, as itself constituted and thereby questions distinctions of identity founded on sexual difference. This argument has sometimes been read as reducing bodily sex to a physical fact without meaning, producing distortions and controversy; Butler's sex-gender distinction, however, is invoked in the critical context of compulsory heterosexuality's identification of women with their bodies.

- what we call kki songs - have choreography and particular dance movements that go with them. Trunk, on the other hand, doesn't really use those; it plays house music. That means everyone can dance in their own way. Because it isn't formalized, you can't tell whether someone is a good dancer or not. You can't tell whether they can do a particular choreography.

Researcher: But you're a good dancer.

Addy: But even there, you have point choreography. If you go to ○○, a gay club that mostly plays girl-group songs, it felt like you had to know the point choreography for the song before you could dance to it. But with the music at Trunk, there isn't even that concept of point choreography, and the DJ mixes the tracks. It all feels like one song, because several songs are blended together. It feels like one piece of music. The space - it becomes spatialization¹⁶. Like something is continuing? But at ○○, one song ends and then another whole song plays. Verse one and verse two finish completely, then it's the next song, then the next song. So I think ○○ is fun for people who like K-pop, people who like that sort of thing, people who like showing off kki. If I really wanted to dance, drink, and feel the atmosphere, I think I went to Trunk. (Interview, May 22, 2023)

In standard Korean, kki can colloquially mean a talent for entertainment or performance. On Gay Hill its meanings proliferate. Kkisuni, for example, is a slang term that feminizes people who wear makeup, dance well to girl-group songs, or have thin, high voices. Kki can also name an imperceptible energy latent in someone who does not yet recognize it. To say "you have kki" may mean "you seem like you could become someone special," describing a person with a desire to express themselves who has not yet found the form that expression should take. The term appears in numerous compounds and jokes. It is far more frequent on Gay Hill than in general society and circulates with highly variable meanings.

Researcher: Have you ever had something like this? Since you've seen so many people - whether it's a man preparing to transition or just a gay guy - do you ever look at someone and think, 'He definitely has kki. There's something there. He could become something'?

Mini Han: Oh, I feel it so strongly. Even when someone came to Trunk, I'd take one look and say, 'This one should become a drag queen. This one should become

16. Addy's use of 'spatialization' can be explained as follows. In venues that play kki songs, the shift from one song to another tends to produce an unavoidable sense of interruption no matter how skillfully the DJ mixes, because changes of key are pronounced and K-pop tracks use highly varied sounds. In venues centered on house music, by contrast, songs with similar BPM (beats per minute) and related sonic textures can be connected so that changes between tracks feel comparatively less discontinuous, producing the sensation of music flowing without interruption.

transgender.' Someone I said that to actually became transgender. If I said, 'You should become a drag queen,' they really became a drag queen. There were people I told, 'Wear clothes like this and this,' and when they actually dressed that way, they looked absolutely incredible.

Researcher: Who?

Mini Han: Several people. Some of the drag queens these days. I mean, that's a good thing. I can tell just by looking.

Researcher: How can you tell?

Mini Han: It's a feeling. A feeling only I know. I know as soon as I look. 'You should go with this kind of character.' (Interview, May 18, 2023)

Gay men gather with others sharing sexuality, divide roles among themselves, and name those roles. Top, bottom, drag, iltik, and many other words qualify men; kki is one of them. On Gay Hill, however, kki does not simply mean special talent. It can function as a sign for what appears heterogeneous to gay men themselves. Men who have spent ordinary life performing the role of “man” enter Gay Hill carrying classificatory criteria learned in general society. Acts that those criteria cannot easily distinguish - behaviors that do not follow ordinary male conventions - are perceived as kki-ish. Kki, then, is an abstract term mobilized to demarcate not only the feminine but the heterogeneous.

Among the people who constitute Itaewon, drag performers are the most kki-ish. Ordinary gay men may conceal being gay in general society, meet other gay people through temporary play on Gay Hill, and then return to other roles. Drag, by contrast, is treated as work and maintains a certain role while crossing the boundary between Gay Hill and ordinary society. From a gay male perspective, drag performers appear to have departed entirely from the social role “man.” Their bodily sex may be known as male, yet long wigs, elaborate makeup, and dresses make their appearance radically nonmasculine. Drag thus seems to move beyond kki as a quality used to describe feminine gay men and to turn kki itself into a persona. Making oneself visible and recognized to wider publics, including heterosexual audiences, can become a professional source of income; the performer's “work” consists in showing oneself through performances and media, including online platforms.

Gay Hill frequently transforms the “normal” sexual norms of ordinary society because those gathered there do not presuppose binary gender or heterocentrism. Yet departure from a norm still presupposes that norm. Heterogeneous forms outside the established order are named kki. Although everyone on Gay Hill departs from heterosexuality, people gather with others who share particular forms of heterogeneity and divide roles within those groups. Drag performers, whose bodily appearance itself is nonmasculine in a space of gay men, are accordingly classified as especially kki-ish.

Section 3. Staging Drag and Its Audience

Not every gay club or bar regularly stages drag shows or employs resident drag performers, but a high proportion of gay clubs have a small stage, often adjustable in size. The platform is usually only twenty to thirty centimeters high, one step above the floor, often beside the DJ booth. Venues with regular drag shows also have a backstage area directly beside or behind the stage, allowing performers to enter and leave through a curtain. Shows commonly begin around 1 or 3 a.m. The club music stops, the lights go out, and for several seconds the audience is deprived of ordinary sensory orientation. Then stage lights rise, the introduction to a song begins, performer and audience are positioned at a certain distance, and the performance starts.

Packed together closely enough to feel one another's breath, spectators watch the show under colored lights. Unlike many other performances, drag does not demand quiet, passive spectatorship. It explicitly asks the audience to cheer, respond, and "open their wallets." The greater the cheers, the more flamboyant the performer becomes; the more fully everyone in the room joins the performance, the more pleasurable the show.

Kyam: When I do a drag show, it changes depending on the audience's attitude.

Researcher: The audience's attitude?

Kyam: Yes.

Researcher: What kind of attitude is good?

Kyam: Some days it feels like I'm on K-Pop Star or something. Like actual judges have come and are watching me. When people watch us like that, the other girls feel the same way. 'What, did you come to judge us today?' But on days when there are lots of people genuinely enjoying the performance, I get excited too... [middle omitted]

Researcher: When you perform in front of an audience that feels like they're judging you, does the show not go well? Is it not fun?

Kyam: You mean the show doesn't go well? I'm someone who's good at shows. (laughs) It's just not fun for me. Then it's probably not fun for them either. If they've seen me when I'm doing well - when I'm genuinely having fun - they'll feel the difference. People at the venue see each other all the time, so they can tell: 'He doesn't want to do it today,' or 'He's genuinely excited today.' It doesn't mean I can't do the show because the audience is watching like that, but it's no fun. Anyway, if they came to see a show, they should have fun and go home. It's a shame.

Researcher: What does it mean to be good at a drag show? Is it being good at sync - matching the lyrics with your mouth at the exact right moment?

Kyam: That's basic. The most basic thing. It just has to be there by default. Always.

But honestly, I'm a bit of a show old-timer. Have you seen Drag Race¹⁷?

Researcher: Not much. I've seen a few episodes.

Kyam: I watched a few and stopped too. I don't like those Western drag shows. I can't relate to their shows.

Researcher: Is it like they don't pull you in?

Kyam: Right. Every song has a different mood, but they do these really excessive actions and overacting. Say it's a love song. A love song can be slow or fast, right? But they perform as if none of that matters, so I can't relate. When I see a show like that I cringe, like, 'Ugh! What do I do?' But a lot of people say, 'They're so good, so cool,' just because they do big, exaggerated actions... I think a good show is one you can relate to. (Interview, April 19, 2023)

The co-presence of gay and drag bodies in a small, dark space makes drag performance possible, requiring performers and spectators to gather at a particular time in Itaewon. Max Herrmann called performance “a play of all for all,” reconceptualizing actor and spectator as co-subjects. Performance is neither a subject-object relation in which the spectator merely observes the actor nor one in which an actor, treating themselves as subject and the audience as object, pours out meaning unilaterally (Fischer-Lichte 2017:63). Drag likewise treats gay spectators as participants whose perception and response help constitute the performance.

Researcher: When I worked at Trunk, when you came in early, you used to do that - watch the drags doing their shows and direct them, right? When you were doing that, what made a drag show good in your view?

Mini Han: Communication. Communication with the audience. There are people who can do only five movements even in a song where you're supposed to do ten, and people who can do all ten brilliantly. And there are people like me who can't really dance, but can overwhelm the stage with poses and facial expressions. There are those kinds of energies. That's what I look for.

Researcher: So you have to be able to take hold of the people there.

Mini Han: Right. Because that's how you make them watch the show. Before drag shows became popular on Gay Hill, gay guys would just be like, 'Oh, I guess there's a show,' and when the show started they'd say, 'They play old songs during shows...' and then leave and talk among themselves. Because they hadn't really had experience

17. RuPaul's Drag Race is an American television competition in which drag performers compete and a winner is selected each season. It follows multiple drag performers as they prepare for competitions and stage shows. It began airing in 2009 and, as of the thesis's writing, had continued through season 16.

watching that kind of drag show. There were a lot of those amazing showgirl unnies at ○○○, where drag shows had been around for a long time, but there were so many female customers there that gay guys stopped going. It's communication. Even if you don't know who someone is, you look at them and do the show. Then just because you looked at them, they say, 'She looked at me,' and they come back. Do you think you're only looking at that one person? You look around at everyone. That's what a show is. You have to look at the audience. But the kids don't look at the audience much. I know that if I just communicate, I can make them mine. That's how a show that would make 50,000 won can make another 50,000 in tips and become 100,000 won. It's good to make people want to give money. I really hate that kind of thing like, 'I did drag~ I'm just lip-syncing. This song doesn't even suit me, but I like it, so I'm going to lip-sync to it~.' (Interview, May 23, 2023)

Unlike theater or opera, where spectators are generally expected to remain quiet and refrain from inserting themselves into the event, drag-show spectators cheer and whistle when a song reaches a high note or emotional climax and give tips during the performance. A performer receiving a bill may hold the spectator's hand, make eye contact, or turn toward them while lip-syncing, drawing the tip-giver into the event.



Figure 10. A gay audience member entering the performance and passing a tip to the performer

The spectator must choose when to extend a bill: when the performer is facing them, close enough to take it, and not occupied by a movement or emotional gesture that makes receiving it difficult. To be acknowledged is not merely to become visible but to have one's presence in the space recognized. If the performer has no free hand, the spectator may tuck the bill into clothing

or place it directly in the performer's hand. Rather than passively waiting to be noticed, spectators wave bills, touch performers, and sometimes even rush the stage. Such an incursion is not necessarily treated as an “intrusion” that damages the show. A performer may embrace the spectator and dance with them, open the neckline for a bill to be inserted, or take money with the mouth. Audience words and gestures become part of the enactment.

Drag shows on Gay Hill are treated as play and take gay men as their primary audience. Drag performers directly demand response; spectators enjoy making their own presence felt. The more actively the audience participates, the more the pleasure of the performance multiplies, and drag performers actively mobilize cultural signs shared with gay spectators. Gay men do not simply gaze at drag as spectacle. They encounter performers who seek them out, expose their own selves in response, and coexist with drag as participants in the performance.

Section 4. Drag Shows and Performance

Drag performers and gay spectators most often share a sexual orientation toward men. Gay audiences can therefore readily understand many of the sexual elements and expressions mobilized in drag performance. Gay men also recognize that the heterosexual-male role through which ordinary life sees them does not fully fit, and they live at some distance from it. They can understand that the appearance fabricated by drag differs from the performer's ordinary reality without feeling compelled to judge whether that appearance is “true.” The shared condition of “liking men while not being women” allows drag and gay audiences to treat sexual elements in performance as devices for play.

Not belonging to the primary social category - heterosexual women - culturally positioned as erotic objects of men also enables performers and audiences to share affects expressed in songs: being unable to express love to the beloved or having to hide one's feelings. Drag shows frequently twist the gay desire “to be loved” even while expressing longing through songs and performance. This twisting is both a major element of drag and a conventional means of jolting spectators into another world.

Since pop culture became widely popular in the mid-twentieth century, gay cultures, particularly in the United States, have often favored female divas. When women sang of agentive love through outstanding performance or shared their own narratives, gay audiences could feel those narratives directly because they too loved men and imagined making themselves subjects from marginalized positions. Female divas in turn recognized gay publics and sometimes directly addressed LGBT communities. Drag performers recognized this interaction between gay collectivities and popular music and frequently built performances through the imitation and appropriation of female divas. Diva songs and well-known performances became a kind of

cultural literacy - common sense circulating in gay cultural spaces. Drag shows on Gay Hill therefore originate fundamentally in play within a society formed by gay people, a play in which performer and audience are both protagonists.

For a first-time spectator, the unfamiliar appearance of drag and the new experience produced by a drag show can be shocking. A tall man in heels may approach two meters in height and feel physically imposing. Heavy drag makeup, with extreme contrasts and colors and exceptionally long layered lashes, differs sharply from everyday cosmetics. Many drag venues are underground, dark, and red-lit - spaces that may appear decadent or ominous.

Researcher: What was it like seeing a drag show?

Addy: Honestly, I don't really remember the makeup and stuff... Rather than watching the stage and thinking, 'Wow, that's cool,' it was when I first saw drag with my own eyes - not even onstage - that I went, 'Wow, that's cool.' They had that languid drag-queen dance, you know? Swaying with the music. From far away, if you just see the silhouette in a kind of haze, it's incredibly, incredibly decadent. It feels... how should I put it? Like something is about to happen. That's the kind of movement it is...

Researcher: But you liked it?

Addy: Of course.

Researcher: Why?

Addy: Dangerous things are fun. It sparks your curiosity. At first it felt so unfamiliar, but later I realized I was copying that movement myself. That kind of kiki was unfamiliar at first - that swaying... how do I put it? I don't know how to describe it. Swaying, moving the chest like this, moving the hips... those performances felt really decadent. And the face is blank, too. You know? They stare off into the distance with that expression while doing it. I actually felt that was sexier than the show itself. More attractive somehow. (Interview, May 22, 2023)

Drag shows make unfamiliar perceptions and experiences possible for predominantly gay audiences. In one sense they offer both spectators and performers an imagined reality while plunging the audience into unpredictable disorder. To enter the place where drag appears, one descends a dark narrow passage like the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*, first passing a gatekeeper to demonstrate that one will not harm the space. After paying admission and receiving a paper wristband, one descends into increasingly damp air, pushes open a heavy door, and encounters loud music and red light.

Gay patrons may become members able to play with drag performers, but younger people or those unfamiliar with drag culture are often bewildered. Drag performers sometimes approach first, introduce themselves, and connect friends. Most gay men, however, do not easily approach

drag performers unless social networks overlap. Drag is unfamiliar and difficult. The order that says a man must not be feminine collapses in the presence of drag. For gay spectators, drag is perceived as a performer with another appearance; its figures and performances move spectators beyond the boundaries of everyday life. Within the club, drag is received as a de-sexualized being - neither man nor woman in the erotic classificatory sense. Drag has departed not only from the male appearance gay men generally desire but also from masculine modes of voice and movement. Knowing that the performer's bodily sex is male does not automatically make drag an erotic object. As Connell writes, choosing men as sexual objects means choosing not merely bodies with penises but embodied masculinity (2013:232).

Mini Han: Trunk was a space of freedom for gay people. As someone who made shows at Trunk for gay people, that's where I was. Imagine doing that in front of straight people - how unpleasant would that be? It's strange to think of doing the same thing in front of straight people. If that venue had been a straight club, that behavior would have become sexualized, right? But because it was a gay club, doing it onstage felt cool and sophisticated.

Researcher: Because gay people are people who like men, you mean they don't look at it sexually?

Mini Han: Yes. Just cool. It doesn't bother them.

Researcher: Does it feel that way from the side of the person showing it, too?

Mini Han: That's what a gay club is. Rather than doing it to show myself off, it was about giving people joy. That was the concept behind making a place like Trunk.

Other gay clubs don't have showgirls. (Interview, November 20, 2023)

Performance, Féral argues, lets spectators glimpse the inner, hidden, or inverted side of things, confront the limits of the subject, and become disoriented and demystified; it plays theatrically with the subject through symbolic structures and offers performer and spectator opportunities for transformation (1982:181). Drag creates and continually transforms a persona through an unfamiliar appearance and does not contain any single stable figure of the subject. Boundaries between woman and man are undone, but so too are boundaries of the subject within dance, song, and relations with gay men.

Within a space organized by gay sexuality, subjecthood ordinarily presupposes an active agent capable of becoming an attractive erotic object for others while satisfying one's own desire. Gay men can freely make erotic expressions in Gay Hill and other spaces. Drag cannot occupy that position in the same way, because gay men eroticize masculinity while drag is understood as having departed completely from it. The drag persona is treated as neither man nor woman but as performer and unfamiliar being. Some patrons initially feel fear or discomfort when drag

performers touch their bodies without hesitation, but by witnessing and experiencing the relations that emerge in the space they come to sense drag as de-sexualized - as not staking a claim through any particular sexuality.

Drag performers may stroke gay men's bodies and even grab buttocks, chests, or genitals. Within the thesis's ethnographic account, such actions are treated in the venue not as ordinary sexual incursions but as mischievous play. For performers, the audience member's embarrassment can become material for further teasing; for the spectator, norms that ordinarily protect bodily boundaries are suspended and the body becomes exposed to joking. The symbols enabling drag to become de-sexualized are precisely exaggerated feminine bodily signs opposed to the masculine body: red lipstick, high heels, dresses, and heavy makeup. These signal that a performer with a male body is no longer present in the role of "man" and emphasize departure from the masculinity eroticized by gay men. The drag persona and its tactile behavior repeatedly communicate a metacommunicative message: "I am touching you, but this does not mean I sexually desire you" (cf. Bateson 1955). Entertaining spectators through touch and sexual jokes is part of the performer's work, a role that produces and participates in liminality.

Féral (1982:171-176) identifies three characteristics of performance: manipulation of the body, manipulation of space, and the production of relations among artist, audience, artwork, and performer. Drag reorganizes the male body by dismantling its established signs and constructing another appearance. This includes adopting clothing coded as feminine; tucking the testicles and penis inward so that male genital contours do not show; removing body hair; layering heavy foundation and then reconstructing facial shading; gluing down and concealing the eyebrows before drawing new ones; wearing high heels; and putting on wigs. Voice and body size may still reveal bodily sex, but performers who do not speak or whose bodies are relatively slender may be perceived as more emphatically feminine than many cisgender women - not because they perfectly imitate ordinary women, but because drag intensifies the cultural signs of femininity.

Whether this new appearance is actually perceived as "woman" is not the crucial point. Drag is often classified as queen or king as though it consisted in imitating and exaggerating one of two genders, but in the drag show what matters is less the degree of resemblance to a gendered original than the audience's willingness to believe in the new figure fabricated within the performance space. If the transformation is conspicuously incomplete - for example, if a drag queen's bodily sex is made visually obtrusive in a way that breaks the fabricated figure - it can be experienced as a failure of metamorphosis that damages the performance's form. Separating the time-space of performance from ordinary reality requires the power to draw spectators into it, and this depends on acting technique.



Figure 11. Preparation for a drag show: research participant More

Acting technique means that a drag performer does not appear merely busy reproducing a song and choreography, but makes the drag figure feel like an actually existing persona - much as good acting makes an actor's role appear to be the actor themselves. Roger Baker distinguishes “real disguise” from “false disguise.” In real disguise, an actor playing a woman is accepted as a real woman within the drama or show by the other actors; this does not mean that audience or actors literally do not know the performer's sex. Rather, that knowledge is irrelevant to the essence and effect of the drama. False disguise occurs when there is no attempt to become anything beyond “a man pretending to be a woman” (Baker 1994:14-15).

Doing drag therefore means more than wearing heels, heavy makeup, and women's clothing. The fabricated figure must be believed as a character. A beard left visible beneath drag makeup or a conspicuously rough masculine voice issuing from a performer in heels and a dress can expose the ordinary persona beneath the mask. Such exposure may sometimes be used deliberately as a joke, but performers nevertheless share baseline conventions: Itaewon drag performers generally remove visible facial, underarm, and leg hair, for example, while not all construct breasts with prosthetics.

A drag persona cannot be absolutely anything. A thin, pale performer attempting to fabricate Aretha Franklin¹⁸, for example, may produce a comic gap between body and figure. Performers

18. Aretha Franklin was a Black American singer who began her career in the 1950s, was known as the 'Queen of Soul,' and had a large physique.

therefore construct drag personae in relation to existing bodily characteristics, including build and age. Older performers may fashion a dignified, formal “lady of the house” persona; younger performers may construct a more lively, energetic figure. Even when wigs and costumes change from show to show, performers maintain identities distinct from one another through consistent makeup styles, characteristic song choices, speech, dress, movement, and dancing.¹⁹

A song chosen as one performer's show song is generally not used by another performer, and this convention can extend across Itaewon rather than merely within one venue. Live recordings are often preferred to studio tracks. Because they contain audience cheers, singers' spoken remarks, and ad-libs, they require the drag performer to memorize and reproduce more material, but they also lend liveness to a lip-synced performance. Drag lip-syncing is itself more exaggerated than most lip-sync in popular music: lips and tongue move dramatically and emotion is amplified - a bright song may be performed with an enormous smile, while sad lyrics may be enacted almost as wailing. Ensemble songs from musicals are also used, with parts distributed among performers whose images can plausibly carry the song's narrative.

Drag shows generate unfamiliar sensations for gay audiences and break frames through which ordinary social order had defined them. This is possible because drag's appearance belongs to a category departing from masculinity and because gay spectators understand drag as a de-sexualized role, neither simply man nor woman, oriented toward making the audience have fun. To produce these moments, drag constructs a body departing from the male body and builds a stage through the formal genre of the drag show. The stage must be more than spectacular: it must be shareable with gay spectators and capable of producing pleasure together. In the space of the drag show, audience and performer interact, see one another from the other's position, and recognize one another's roles.

Chapter 4. Role-Play Across Boundaries

Section 1. The Mask That Invades Everyday Life

As dawn approaches and a man working in drag begins closing the venue, the vitality with which he had smiled and talked with customers disappears. Makeup removed, he returns to an ordinary “man.” He puts chairs on tables and clears glasses. The contrast is uncanny: moments

19. Drag performers may look similar at first glance, but after repeated viewing they differ enough for virtually anyone to recognize them. Differences include not only appearance but behavioral characteristics, speech, clothing style, and dancing ability, as well as the atmosphere of the songs commonly used in their drag shows. Some lip-sync upbeat songs while dancing spectacularly; others remain relatively still and concentrate on emotional expression and lip-sync. Still others create distinctive atmospheres with less conventionally popular, lyrically suggestive songs—for example, songs by Annie Lennox. Some drag shows use recordings containing a singer's narration, and some use music without lyrics.

earlier the drag performer wore a glittering dress and held a drink while talking with patrons; now, in ordinary clothes, he tidies the room. Customers who remain sense the changed atmosphere and begin to leave. No bright light necessarily snaps on at a fixed moment, and the music does not immediately stop, yet they know the performance is over. Once nearly everyone has left, the lights come up, cleaning is completed, and staff go home.

Some leave still wearing makeup, usually because they are going elsewhere to drink with friends. Others change clothes, remove most of the makeup, and walk down Gay Hill. In drag, strangers would recognize them and initiate conversation; out of drag, almost no one recognizes them. The sight of someone quickly descending the hill without greeting passersby and disappearing into the morning looks strikingly different - even a little lonely.

Because drag appears and disappears in a particular time-space, it can be interpreted as a mask. A persona is often imagined as a comprehensive and consistent set of characteristics belonging to one human being. A mask, by contrast, need not be understood as continuous with the wearer and need not presuppose an underlying essence. Honigmann (1977:268) describes the mask as functioning like a license: by covering one's face, it authorizes the wearer to behave as the figure represented by the mask. "Mask" can overlap semantically with persona, but here it refers both to a physical form and to the symbolic meanings carried by that form. Drag is, in this sense, a mask that can be put on and removed; the domain of everyday life lived without it remains partially separated from life as drag.

Researcher: What made you decide to be open about being gay?

Jihoon: If I know the relationship isn't going to fall apart, I don't really feel like hiding it. I haven't come out to my parents because I know very clearly that it would damage the relationship. My sisters brought it up first, so I told them.

Researcher: They asked you first, "Jihoon, are you gay?"

Jihoon: Yes. And with friends, if I tell them I'm gay at the beginning and they still approach me, then they're people who understand it anyway, so I don't hide it.

Researcher: But you're not open to everyone. In social life in Korea, there are still many homophobic people.

Jihoon: That's why I say I'm open only to friends. I draw a very clear line between colleagues and friends. Everyone in my lab is a colleague, because they can directly affect my future career. Outside that, friends - then I'm just open.

Researcher: Are you different when you're with colleagues and when you're with friends?

Jihoon: Yes. I build a very definite wall. People I don't want to show it to - I never show it. (Interview, July 28, 2023)

Jihoon is a gay man who previously performed in drag. Most gay men rarely encounter situations in ordinary life in which they are required to state their sexual orientation or identity. If sufficient distance is maintained, private matters can usually be deflected or concealed. Unless a man openly rejects the role of “heterosexual man” presupposed for him, others generally continue to assign that role. Managing impressions by revealing everyday life only partially - as Jihoon “builds a wall” - is therefore ordinary for many gay men. In this sense, the heterosexual-male role is itself a fabricated role and a mask. Just as a drag performer's everyday performance begins when the drag mask is put on, everyday life for gay men is also a stage on which particular roles are performed (cf. Goffman 1956).

On the stage of everyday life, one must act in ways appropriate to one's part. Gay and drag people are not unique in this regard. Everyone occupies multiple roles, and the time-spaces in which different roles are performed are separated to some degree. A woman who works as a lawyer may defend clients at work, care for two dogs at home, become a daughter when visiting her parents on the weekend, and become another woman's lover in a lesbian relationship. House, workplace, another person's home, public space, and the particular people present distribute different roles. Yet not every role receives social recognition, and occupying a role requires satisfying cultural conditions.

Individuals can imagine what they want to belong to, much as children dream about the occupations they hope to have. But realizing such a “dream” requires meeting qualifications and becoming a member of a particular group. Groups provide detailed frameworks for how those who belong should live in accordance with such desires. The argument continues from here into the thesis's analysis of how drag's mask and the roles attached to it move beyond the bounded stage and begin to reorganize everyday life.

To become a writer, one must write manuscripts, pass through a recognized course of education to some degree, and receive recognition from people in the field. Every cultural group sets conditions and gives a person some direction about “how one should live” in order to cultivate that person into a role designated by the culture. Not every dream, therefore, can be realized. Some can become socially recognized and admired painters, writers, artists, or actors. Yet a person born male may become a male ballet dancer but not a ballerina; a person who has not undergone an appropriate educational process or received recognition from an authoritative group cannot readily become a recognized writer, artist, or actor. Society and culture distinguish desires judged appropriate for realization from those judged inappropriate. Inappropriate desires are erased or pushed into darkness.

More, one of the research participants, began working in drag in Itaewon in 2000 and remained there for roughly twenty years before moving onto stages elsewhere. In his book *More, the Hairy Fish*, he writes: “Dad, I wanted to be a ballerina. Not a male ballet dancer. But I became neither” (Mo Jimin 2022:38). Although he majored in dance, on the day of freshman orientation a male senior slapped him and told him, “Get rid of that femininity.” In More’s account, general society does not tolerate femininity in men. Drag may wear a tutu onstage, but in ordinary society a male ballet dancer is expected to become a prince.

A mask makes the actor into a radically different being and allows intimate elements previously held inside to be brought forth. What changes through masking is not appearance alone. The appropriate acts and modes of expression prescribed by appearance change as well. Once masked as drag, a performer can express even what is regarded as “peculiar” through the drag figure. More was required by the gender order to erase his “femininity” because he had been born with a male body. By putting on the drag mask, however, that bodily condition could no longer restrict the expression of femininity.



Figure 12. Research participant More 1

For drag, the stage is not merely the small raised platform used during a drag show. It appears when a performer has constructed the outward form of drag, decided to perform the role, and entered a place containing others who call that self into being as drag. The drag role is therefore not enacted only during the formal show. The stage begins from the moment the performer enters a place where others address them as drag, and from the moment the performer recognizes that the mask has been put on.

Researcher: When you set a character or persona for drag, how long does that persona remain valid? Are you consciously thinking, “This is my character” only while performing, or does it remain after the show?

Fiona: When the character exists - while the relevant costume and wig and everything are set - I think I maintain the character. If I'm holding certain props, wearing that 1950s or 1960s housewife-type dress, a Marilyn Monroe-like curled wig, then as long as that image is being projected I think I maintain it. My energy is very different when I'm in drag and when I'm not. If I want to show a diva, then once I've put on that costume, that wig, and that mindset, I think of myself as a diva for as long as I'm wearing it and performing.

(Interview, April 20, 2023)

Mauss, in “A Category of the Human Mind: the Notion of Person; the Notion of Self,” traces the word person to the Latin *persona*, which came to carry the theatrical sense of *dramatis personae*. The idea of the person as an integrated, monadic individual is comparatively modern. Mauss describes a metamorphosis from role (*personnage*) to person (*personne*), and from there to an individual possessing metaphysical and moral value, even a sacred being.

Park likewise notes that the first meaning of *persona* is “mask” and insists that this is no accident. Everyone lives by carrying out roles. Acting here does not simply mean fabricating a part different from oneself; we know one another through roles. The mask is at once the role we want to become and a person, while roles become components of our “second nature” and personality. We enter the world as individuals, acquire characters, and thereby become persons (Park 1950:249-250, cited in Goffman 2016:33-34).

Roles require distinctions. Criteria such as sex/gender, age, and relationship are embedded in culture, and human beings enter worlds in which culture already exists. Among the most universal classificatory criteria is sex/gender. With limited exceptions, people are classified at birth on the basis of bodies, and before acquiring other socially differentiated roles, differentiation into women and men is pervasive.

More: The beauty I think about is something strange - bedsores, maggots, raw things, unfamiliar things. I think I see beauty there. I want to show images so unfamiliar that you can't see them in everyday life or on other stages. That's what I pursue. I think that's beautiful, that's my power, and that's More. ... In the book I called More a “sick fish,” but even that beautifies me too much. Ultimately, I'm a maggot. Not a maggot that lives but a maggot that hides; not a maggot that laughs but one that cries. Even the sick fish is beautified. I'm

just a maggot - the kind that comes from a bedsore, from something rotten. ...

But that maggot doesn't die or give up. It's a maggot dancing onstage.

Researcher: Do we have to call only fly larvae maggots? Aren't butterfly larvae also larvae?

More: I suppose so. And so onstage the maggot becomes a butterfly. Like in *The Silence of the Lambs* - isn't there something hidden in the throat? A chrysalis?

Researcher: A moth pupa.

More: Right. A moth pupa. Ultimately a maggot that becomes a beautiful butterfly onstage. So it is negation, but ultimately affirmation. There is affirmation within endless negation. (Interview, April 15, 2023)

Society presupposes an order for distinguishing roles and marks violations with signs of pollution in order to preserve that order. A man who behaves “unmanly,” for example, may be denounced with a homophobic slur that explicitly casts him as dirty. More's repeated formulation “I am a maggot” similarly marks the contempt he received for being a transgressive being - male, yet not masculine - under the norms of general society. A feminine man crosses the gender boundary and is therefore treated as both transgressive and polluted. As Douglas writes, the polluted person manifests a wrong condition, crosses a line that should not be crossed, and is “out of place” (1966:114). The feminine man is not intrinsically dirty; he becomes polluted because he violates an order in which women should be feminine and men masculine.

More, whose movements had been distinctive since childhood, began drag in Itaewon in 2000. In that “one-room underground world where no light entered,” he finally wore the heels, wig, and heavy makeup he had long desired (Mo Jimin 2022:23). His stage did not end in Itaewon. In 2010 he appeared in singer Lee Eun-mi's music video, making the unfamiliar existence of drag visible to a broader public. In 2020 he became the first drag performer to give an hour-long solo performance at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. In 2023, in the LG Arts Center dance-theater production *Romeo and Juliet* and *More*, he played Juliet - not a classical Juliet but one rewritten through More's own life history. Having once hidden in the night of Itaewon as something treated as strange and dirty, More acquired through drag a new symbol, “heterogeneity,” and took the stage through that role. An ordered reality had classified drag as violation and pushed it into darkness; in that darkness drag became a new symbol precisely by remaining faithful to its power to disturb order. This condenses More's phrase: “affirmation within negation.”

Researcher: Why have you stayed onstage for so long?

More: Because it's so beautiful. When I'm doing drag, I'm so brave. Even when I'm practically naked, there's not even a fraction of embarrassment. People always envy that: "How can you be so confident?" In reality I'm shy, but the moment I stand onstage I'm confident and nothing frightens me. The texture I tear out of that moment is so beautiful. It's one hundred percent my time - ten minutes if it's ten minutes, an hour if it's an hour. ... It's painful and difficult, but it's such a blessed profession. (Interview, April 15, 2023)

A mask separates an actor from an original role by changing outward appearance, but it also changes the gaze of others and thereby reorganizes the order surrounding the actor. The particular time-space in which not only the performer but the gaze and the distribution of roles are rearranged is classified as illusion. In its etymological sense, illusion means "to begin to play." Drag wears a mask under another order within a zone separated from ordinary reality and can there reveal expressions that could not be shown in ordinary life.

Beneath the mechanisms by which an order classifies expressions as violation or pollution lies abject desire. Kristeva's abject occupies the opposition between subject and object: it is what "I" expel in order to become a subject. To understand the self as distinct, something else must be cast out. What is expelled is represented as dirty and receives the metaphor of pollution. Filth, Kristeva writes, is not a quality in itself; it concerns boundaries and what is cast to the other side, the margin (1980:69). Abjection is produced not by the absence of cleanliness or health but by what disturbs identity, system, and order: what violates borders, positions, and rules, what is in-between, ambiguous, or composite (Kristeva 1982:4).



Figure 13. Research participant More 2

On Gay Hill, drag acquires a role not grounded in the heterocentric order of ordinary reality. Just as gay men construct a gay self and a world in which that role makes life newly legible, a domain of life is created in which drag can inhabit the role of the drag mask. The paradox of transformation is that something can appear as something else and, from a particular viewpoint, cease to be contradictory (Napier 1986:3). The apparently contradictory figure who is male yet also female ceases to be contradictory when Itaewon gay publics receive it through the mask called drag.

Fiona: Even before drag, since my early twenties I went everywhere and knew a lot of people. Everyone who knew me was really supportive when I started drag. Their reaction was basically, “It finally came!” (laughs) Like, “She’s doing what she was meant to do.” I’d built up this *kkisuni* image very steadily. Now my energy is very different in and out of drag, but the personality I have in drag was almost exactly my personality until my early thirties. After drag became my job, the two somehow separated. I didn’t deliberately separate them, but the tendencies I originally had went almost completely into drag, and now I’m calm when I’m not in drag.

Researcher: So the character created through drag took part of your everyday self away?

Fiona: It sounds strange for me to say it, but yes, that’s how I think about it. It sounds like an actor saying, “It was so hard to get out of the role.” (laughs)
(Interview, April 20, 2023)

Even if a mask can be put on and removed, and even if its wearer attempts to separate masked life from other everyday life, the mask invades the wearer’s everyday existence. As the masked role expands, the person increasingly acts according to it, and more people come to recognize the person through that role. For drag to produce greater income, performers must make themselves known to more people, appear before larger and more varied audiences, expose themselves more extensively through online channels, and expand beyond exclusively gay audiences.

As Fiona’s account shows, the drag mask remains connected to social identity and can change even the unmasked self. The longer masked life continues and the more experience accumulates, the blurrier the boundary between illusion and reality becomes. Our ability to recognize illusion depends upon the system through which we apprehend it (Napier 1986:3). Illusion begins as play at becoming another role; as others respond to that role, it becomes reinforced and self-evident. Ordinary worlds feel “real” because the roles that constitute them - names, affiliations, occupations, family and workplace - are taken as self-evident. Illusion

emerges through the boundaries that define reality; to leave the appearance and role previously understood as oneself is to enter illusion.

Researcher: Did you ever think about transition?

More: As the film shows, I gave that up.²⁰

Researcher: Gave it up?

More: I gave it up then, and I became a human being - a human not bound to any gender.

Researcher: Is that possible? Other people are always trying to classify you as woman or man.

More: I transcended that. I wear skirts on public transportation, take the village bus, wait outside in strange clothes. I found a kind of freedom. People always want to define you. Every time, I say: "I'm just a human. Don't ask for a title. I simply exist as a human - as myself, as kki."

Researcher: What is kki?

More: Kki is me. (laughs) It becomes money, blood, and flesh. Because I have kki, you came all this way to interview me. Though the interview itself doesn't pay. (laughs) (Interview, April 15, 2023)

More performs in drag but identifies in other areas of life as a transgender woman. In his autobiographical writing, he recalls being the only child with a male body among sisters and friends who treated him as a pretty younger sister; he remembers crying over the genitals between his legs while boys played ball, and writes that while practicing drag shows in Itaewon he did not need to doubt his existence. He later became a man's wife (Mo Jimin 2022:20-23). His mother likewise describes him without anxiety over whether he should be called a girl or boy. Outside the stage he can be a daughter or sister to family; onstage he becomes More, neither simply woman nor man; in ordinary public life he can be "a human in strange clothes." Desire once expelled as abject becomes, over time, a means of livelihood through drag.

Section 2. Rearranging Fantasy and Everyday Life

Researcher: What do you think drag is?

Mini Han: People with an extremely strong desire to express another self inside them want another character. When they become that person, it isn't the

20. Research participant More was also the protagonist of the 2022 documentary film *More*.

self they currently are. The original self that lived embarrassed and conscious of society disappears...

Researcher: Disappears?

Mini Han: Yes. I disappear. Say I'm Hwi Maeng right now, in this male appearance. The moment Hwi Maeng does drag, Hwi Maeng disappears and another persona comes out. You feel exhilaration, fun, fantasy in that.

Researcher: Fantasy?

Mini Han: Yes. There's fantasy. (Interview, May 3, 2023)

Not everyone who does drag can sustain masked everyday life alongside other everyday domains. Many begin because they are fascinated by using the stage to display boldly what they want to express, but soon find it difficult to coexist with the increasingly enlarged life of drag. Drag generally works at night, especially on nights before weekends and holidays. A person whose main occupation requires weekday daytime labor can therefore lose weekends. Alcohol is also central to the “good time” spent with gay men in entertainment venues, producing physical exhaustion. Cosmetics, shoes, elaborate costumes, wigs, and other objects that an ordinary man might never keep at home must remain continuously present. The longer one does drag, the more physical space these materials occupy. In visits to participants' homes, substantial areas - sometimes an entire room - were filled with costumes, wigs, and performance materials. Time must also be secured for choreography and lip-sync rehearsal.

Although drag is a removable mask, it is connected to the person. The paradox of the mask is that it is imaginary yet “makes believe” (Napier 1986:4). The mask fabricates a figure, shows that figure to others, and encourages them to accept the masked role without continually imagining the being beneath it. The drag role includes giving pleasure and performing, but these functions do not erase all the opportunity costs of drag. Its powerful attraction lies not only in songs and elaborate clothing but in the chance to experience another role. The mask releases a person from culturally ascribed roles and offers the fantasy of being transported into another role. Transportation temporarily performs another role and then returns to the prior form.

Over time, however, relationships in which one is known as drag increase, everyday time with those people increases, and more people know the performer primarily through the drag name. Even outside Itaewon and out of drag, others may call the performer by the drag name and address them as “unni” or “miss.” Transportation can then lead to transformation. Transformation does not presuppose a role to which one returns; it changes the self more fundamentally. A person who had fabricated a feminine role through drag may, for example, become a transgender woman through legal and social transition. Transportation can occur independently of the environment surrounding the individual, whereas transformation requires that the environment itself be rearranged.



Figure 14. Research participant Mini Han

Mini Han: When I did drag queen, I did a woman - and what came out wasn't brash at all, but a genuinely feminine woman. My body was huge, but that was my desire to become a woman, the heart of a woman, the heart of me at twenty. Drag lets you become someone else. It gave me the courage to pretend to be a woman in front of men, and confidence came out. As a man I had none. For even that one moment, dressed as a woman, I loved the fantasy - being inside that illusion. Makeup became addictive. Rather than my bare face, I liked talking with people in makeup, communicating with men in makeup, even flirting with ordinary men. None of that came out when I was bare-faced. (Interview, May 3, 2023)

Mini Han entered design school wanting to become a fashion designer of women's clothing and began drag while studying there. Yet drag was not identical to the “woman” she wanted to become. As discussed earlier, drag had to entertain an audience and play a brash role. Her inner desire, even while fabricating drag, was not to be “a gay man doing drag” but “a genuinely feminine woman.” The desire to become a woman did not suddenly arise when the drag mask was

put on. As a child she tried corsets without being told to do so. Watching disco girls in a nightclub she visited with her father, she wanted to become like them; backstage, those “disco-girl unnies” were not obscene figures but glamorous women she wanted to be.

The self represented in ordinary reality never perfectly exhausts the person. Human beings possess diverse impulses that change with mood and energy (Goffman 2016:77), and roles assigned at birth do not feel natural to everyone. Those who find that another role represents them more fully than an ascribed role can cross the boundary. Two decades ago, information about gay, transgender, and drag life was far less available in Korean media than it is now. Mini Han, who spent adolescence in the 1990s and 2000s, once heard that gay people gathered in Itaewon but walked for two hours without finding the place. She did not know whether she wanted to be a woman or loved men. She wanted to escape a reality in which she had to suppress herself, and began drag after a chance proposal from an acquaintance in Itaewon.

Mini Han: Drag was this: for a few hours, I could become another person and do what I wanted but couldn't do. My mind simply became that person. Even if my appearance wasn't exactly that person, I appeared like magic and enjoyed that moment. Those beautiful images were so pure and beautiful. That's how I fell into makeup. I didn't start makeup because I wanted to be a drag queen. There was a woman inside my mind, and drag queen was the route I used to approach her. If I had really been gay, I probably would have kept working there as a drag queen while doing my own work. But I wasn't. I was a woman. I wasn't gay. (Interview, May 3, 2023)



Figure 15. Gay club where drag shows were held: operator Mini Han and the drag performers who appeared there

If drag transports an individual into the role of a mask, gender transition transforms the person's gender role across domains of everyday life. A mask permits movement between fantasy and reality by being put on and removed; transformation does not. The drag role is attached to a particular staged time-space, whereas gender transition changes others' perceptions, legal status, and the person's social gender role itself. For transformation to be completed, the people, organizations, and orders surrounding the person must be realigned - as all the lights in a drag show turn their angles toward the stage when the music begins. The components of performance must be rearranged in order to make something different (cf. Schechner 1988).

Mini Han won Miss International Queen, the international transgender beauty pageant, in 2010. She later opened a gay club in Itaewon with two friends, became its owner, directed its

shows, and became the public face of Trunk. The woman she wanted to become had once remained a fantasy that could appear only through a mask. As the first Korean - and, at the time of the thesis, still the only Korean - winner of Miss International Queen, she became a woman confident both to herself and to others.

Mini Han: When I look at my life, I'm the protagonist of a film, my brain is the director, everyone sitting here is an extra, this minibar is my location, and everything seems to be following a script made from things I vaguely imagined as a child. It's fascinating. So I study: "What is the ending of this film, and with what attitude as an actor should I face it?" Whether the film becomes a hit depends on how I live - twenty years from now, five years, next month, even tomorrow. These days I think: "Right. I'm an actor. All of this is a show. If I'm a showgirl ready to do it well, I should try directing properly too." It's very fun. Every day. (Public lecture, Yeoksam-dong, Seoul, September 18, 2023)

Mini Han's transformation was enabled in part by the title "Miss International Queen" and the recognition it generated. For a performance process to cause transformation, the components of its context must be rearranged (Kapferer 1979:4). The gaze of others must cease to treat the person's womanhood as doubtful, and the role "woman" must be believed not as a manipulated mask but as the person themselves.

Cultural order repeatedly applies social standards to transgressive beings and attempts to determine the authenticity of roles that seem to cross boundaries. A boundary-crossing existence demonstrates that cultural order cannot encompass everyone; for those who have never recognized such a role as a social member, what cannot be imagined through existing order appears dangerous. Drag therefore exaggerates its appearance to make explicit that it occupies fantasy and performance. The play of non-heterosexual people in Gay Hill and Itaewon can be dismissed as deviance and made to fit prejudice. Mini Han's victory in the world's most authoritative transgender beauty pageant, however, provided grounds on which such prejudice could be denied. Collective recognition expanded the range within which her life could be imagined, marking it as not confined to the category of "abnormal."

Transformation requires not only that others believe the role of the mask but that the person beneath it can believe that role as well. In the performance of everyday life, a performer becomes immersed in the role and treats the impression being created as the sole reality (Goffman 2016:109). On another stage entered through the mask, drag can likewise, in Mini Han's words, "lose the original self" and become the mask itself. A self-created name may come to represent the person more closely than an involuntarily assigned role. There is no necessary reason to claim

that facts contradicting a fabricated appearance are more “real” than the appearance itself (Goffman 2016:89).

Section 3. The Drag Show as Masquerade

Within gay society, the role of drag encompasses entertainer, performing artist, and creator of unfamiliar moments through lip-sync, elaborate appearance, dance, and other devices. It also includes labor: staging shows professionally, raising the audience's excitement, and inducing spending. Drag performers work under individual names. For long-established performers, these names can remain in circulation for decades and become the names by which most people on Gay Hill know them. As ordinary names are believed to carry meanings within a life, drag names are deliberately made: they may verbalize a desired image, be bestowed by someone else, modify an existing name, or add syllables. The name condenses characteristics of the drag figure.

Even though the mask can be put on and removed, its role is not unrelated to the person. Honigmann's study of Krampus role-play in northern Austria found that children playing Krampus - a half-demon, half-goat figure - became more deeply immersed than those playing Saint Nicholas. On the eve of Saint Nicholas Day, Saint Nicholas visits neighborhood homes and fills children's shoes with gifts; behind him follows the black, hairy, horned Krampus. Officially the saint's servant, Krampus routinely “steals the show,” throwing mischievous children into a wooden basket and threatening rough punishment. Everyone recognizes that such mischief belongs to the Krampus role, and the strongest male, having won competition for the part, wears the horned mask.

Saint Nicholas reflects a socially mild role and wears relatively simple facial props. Krampus hides the ordinary appearance entirely behind a wooden mask and performs its opposite. The Krampus mask allows an individual to transcend banal everyday roles and customs and to fly from the obvious dimension of reality into imagination (Honigmann 1977:270). Contrary to the assumption that the masked role disappears when role-play ends, Honigmann argues that immersion allows feelings and attitudes to be taken over by the enacted character, affecting personal identity - the person's whole idea of who they are (1977:271).

Simply putting on a Krampus mask at home does not make someone Krampus. The figure appears when people gather on the appropriate night, everyone knows that the role-play is underway, and the time of fantasy has begun. Drag is similar. It does not appear merely because a body has taken on a certain form. Drag appears after the performer constructs the appearance, decides to perform the role, and enters a place containing others who call that self into being as drag. Whether makeup and costume are put on in Itaewon or before arriving is immaterial. The formal drag show is only one part of a broader performance that creates moments of entertainment

between drag and audience - a secondary stage entered after the mask is already on. Drag is not merely a performer but an actor fabricating a persona; the stage begins when that persona appears, within a staged time-space constituted by darkness, Itaewon's physical enclosure, and social conditions such as the presence of gay others.



Figure 16. Krampus (Klagenfurt, Austria, 2019)²¹

In society, people encounter one another while presupposing an order structured by culture and norms. The “I” visible to others is classified into a role, and interaction assumes shared frameworks of behavior. A mask permits departure from a previously recognized role, hiding the ordinary figure beneath it. Once masked, the actor must behave according to the mask's figure.

The referent used to construct the drag mask is not a single real human being. Itaewon contains many drag performers - roughly twenty or more in the period of fieldwork - with distinct appearances and shows. They share certain conventions that make them recognizable as drag, such as removing visible underarm or facial hair and wearing stockings and shoes, while preserving clearly differentiated makeup and styles. Drag is often imagined through the image of an American female pop diva, but Itaewon performers vary widely. Some use iconic mid- to late-twentieth-century American songs; others perform to delicate rather than upbeat tracks, such as Minnie Riperton's “Lovin' You”; still others use songs by Korean female singers popular from the 1970s through the 1990s, or remakes of older songs. One striking commonality is that performers do not use recordings sung by men as show songs. Even when the original song is by a man, the performance uses a version sung by a woman.

21. Image source: Austrian National Tourist Office, 'All About Krampus' (source URL as cited in the original thesis).

Within Gay Hill, drag's role is to bring pleasure to the audience. As described earlier, drag is de-sexualized for gay men: neither simply woman nor man. A performer may touch genitals, chest, or buttocks and make sexual jokes, yet such acts are not ordinarily interpreted as declarations of actual erotic intent within the performance frame. If drag pulls a man's hand onto a breast, what is touched may be a sponge-like prosthetic or merely a bra over a male chest. The material object matters less than the mischievous act of embarrassing the spectator. When the period of play ends, drag becomes another person and disappears. Even "Shall we go home together after this?" remains legible as a joke rather than a sincere proposition. The surface of sexual action and brazen language is used to disorient the audience.

Using a pop star's song and dancing to it likewise does not mean that drag is imitating that singer's personality. Songs, costumes, and wigs change from performance to performance. The persona that drag constructs is a composite processed from multiple figures. Even when "woman" is imitated, drag playfully recombines symbols and visual elements socially coded as feminine rather than attempting to look like a "real woman." The resulting appearance transforms feminine symbols and fills them with the actor's own desire and aspiration. A desire to be loved by men, or aspects of the self regarded as insufficiently masculine, may become visible through drag. In this sense gender and sexuality as modes of relation are not simply possessions; they can be modes of dispossession, ways of being for others or being made possible through others (Butler 2018:52).

Kyam: After work I watch YouTube. Or when the girls at our place rehearse shows with choreography, I sit in. I watch in the rehearsal room and say, "Why don't you try it like this?" When everyone's there, I go and do that. If we're planning a group show, I tell them what to prepare. Rehearsals are usually Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday.

Researcher: So you're kind of the teacher.

Kyam: Somehow that's what happened.

Researcher: Well, you're a dancer.²²

Kyam: Yes. I also taught a lot of transgender shows. I didn't perform them myself.

Researcher: What's a transgender show?

Kyam: Transgender women also do shows at their venues. If someone says, "I want to perform to this song," I go teach it and construct the performance. I've done that since I was young.

Researcher: Is that different from a drag show?

22. Research participant Kyam is also a professional dancer.

Kyam: In my head, a gender show is basically a “pretty-girl show.” Drag can express much more according to the song and the performer's character. In a gender show, even with the same performance, the person tries to look prettier.

It's a way of making an impression on customers: “There's a pretty girl like this here.” That's connected to their income too.

Researcher: A time to show your charms.

Kyam: Yes. Charm-display time. (Interview, April 19, 2023)

Gay Hill also hosts irregular shows other than drag, including shower shows and nude performances that display masculinity. What principally distinguishes drag is its construction of a persona and its active incorporation of spectators as co-subjects. Transgender women also perform, but the audiences for those performances are not primarily gay men. As discussed earlier, gay men take “men” as erotic objects, whereas spectators of transgender shows take transgender “women” as erotic objects; the spaces of performance are correspondingly separated.

People whose staged lives appear glamorous are often assumed to live glamorous lives everywhere. Yet the everyday spaces of drag performers and club operators in this research were often plain and quiet. Because they must prepare an interior self for outward display, they tend to remain still when alone. Much time is devoted to preparing drag; even their other occupations are often connected to it. Fiona is an illustrator who draws autobiographical comics, Kyam a choreographer, and More a dancer.

More: I'm very much an I - an introvert. But because of Instagram and my work I look like an E, an extrovert. I like being in nature. On days off I sit at temples, go to streams and listen to water, and try to be alone. I have to fill myself up. I have to release energy onstage, so I try not to spend it elsewhere. People misunderstand because of the life I have. It looks as though I meet huge numbers of people, but in fact I hardly meet anyone. The work simply makes things look glamorous. Seventy or eighty percent of me wants to hide. Inside that is perhaps twenty percent wriggling around wanting to be seen, and drag has to show that part enormously. Everyday life doesn't have to be shown. Drag has to be shown constantly, so it uses maybe a hundred times the energy. You know - the wig, the road, all of it.

Researcher: It's heavy, isn't it?

More: Heavy and painful. Every joint hurts, the earrings hurt, you're half-dead. If you ever wear that headpiece you'll understand - your head feels like it will split. Ordinary people can't even walk in those heels. (Interview, April 15, 2023)

Even if drag becomes integrated with the everyday self, doing a drag show requires technique more than “innate kki.” Many performers know how to make clothes, style wigs, and do all their own makeup. Purchased clothing must be altered to fit male bodies; props and garments unavailable in Korea may be made by hand or bought overseas. Drag must appear glamorous and refined while possessing the power to guide gay spectators into an imaginary world beyond ordinary social roles. Hair must look soft and full; earrings, dresses, necklaces, and other accessories must shine. The performer must also be able to approach men aggressively, act brazenly, and drink with spectacular excess. At the same time, because excessive touching or teasing can offend, the performer must read the person and calibrate the joke.

Masks differ by performer. One drag figure may be foolish and comic, another audacious; many are skilled at obscene jokes, profanity, and bawdy speech. Although the phrase “drag queen” is common, Itaewon drag performers may look queenly while behaving anything but refined. Over time, traits change through accumulated experience. Roles that make others laugh and receive strong responses are reinforced. Performers themselves distinguish between people who “do drag well” and those who do not. Criteria include precise lip-sync, makeup that survives sweat, well-maintained wig volume and texture, coherent combinations of costume, wig, and heels, emotional expression that fits the song, the ability to hold attention, complexity of acting, and the ability to command an audience. Such evaluation is carried out less by ordinary spectators than by other drag performers, especially veterans.

Fiona: Since it's kind of like stage makeup, whether someone studied it professionally or not, everyone has weak points. In my case, if I do my makeup too quickly, my skin gets very oily, so later some of it gets erased. And sometimes I do makeup that doesn't suit my face... Everyone has different facial lines and features, right? So the points you emphasize are different too. I think there's a process of learning those points. I think you level up when you come to understand what you're actually doing yourself.
(Interview, November 15, 2023)



Figure 17. Performance by research participant More (top: preparing for the performance; bottom: during the performance)

In one performance, More produced a markedly gentle impression in a bright venue. He combined a wool dress reminiscent of a jeogori with a massive face veil like a rolled bridal veil, harmonizing two objects that seemed unlikely to belong together.



Figure 18. Performance by research participant More 2

As the performance continued, he changed costumes, wigs, and props with the music. During Ravel's *Boléro*, he raised his heels to form a hoof-like shape and maintained a *bourrée* for roughly ten minutes.

Once the performance truly began, time seemed compressed. The melody was simple yet filled the small room more richly than almost any music. We had already been pulled somewhere. As the veil flowed across the stage after the performer, the audience too was drawn into another time-space. When a feast of sensations unavailable in everyday life scattered before our eyes, no spectator could try to predict the order the performer had imposed. We could only surrender ourselves and receive the emotions produced by the moving figure before us. The performer became sublime and took possession of the space; before we could locate ourselves, we were already part of it. We could do little but take the figure in through eyes and ears, as though unable to interrupt a shaman conducting a rite or the speech of one calling a god. The audience became a single mass, absorbed in receiving words, movements, and emotions. The performer was the one moving, yet I, a spectator, felt an inexplicable pain. Only hours earlier I had carried out the obligations of everyday life without much thought; here I could not tell what I should feel or what words could express it. "Beauty"? Even the word often used for a higher aesthetic response than "pretty" seemed inadequate. It was not the beauty of a

classical piano melody or a flower in full bloom. It was stickier, denser, stranger, extraordinary. (Fieldnotes, February 24, 2023)

Participants repeatedly emphasized drag technique. Becoming another role by putting on a drag mask might appear to require nothing more than cross-dressing and displaying confidence, or it might be imagined as a spontaneous release of something already inside a person who had always wanted to be a woman. Yet drag requires numerous objects and skills even to construct its appearance, and a good show requires practiced technique: trembling the lips to embody vibrations in the recorded voice; opening a heavily lipsticked mouth widely enough to make facial acting visible; learning appropriate hand movements and choreography. For drag to be received as performance rather than mere cross-dressing, technique must draw spectators out of reality and provide unfamiliar sensation.

Researcher: Don't you ever feel, when a show starts, as if your soul leaves the ordinary you for a while, does something, then comes back?

Kyam: Wouldn't I have to receive a spirit for that? (laughs)

Researcher: Like shamanic possession.

Kyam: Not at all. Maybe it's because I know the others too well. The three of us are similar - we're all introverts. We do it because it's fun and enjoyable. I don't think it's like going out of yourself and coming back in.

Researcher: Then in a way it's very technical.

Kyam: Right. (Interview, April 19, 2023)

Performing the drag role is therefore also the acquisition of bodily techniques. Culture establishes not only categories of sex/gender but modes of action appropriate to them: ways of walking, speaking, laughing, and other behavioral norms. Crossing a boundary does not simply mean throwing away and negating an ill-fitting role. It means making a body for a role that fits better; drag does this as well (cf. Mauss 1934). Spectacular appearance and dynamic movement can stimulate spectators, but stimulation alone is temporary. When a performer mobilizes precise and deliberate techniques in accordance with the drag figure, spectators can enter the performance and become separated from the norms of ordinary reality.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

At least once in childhood, almost everyone has transformed into something they wanted to be. Someone wraps a red cape around the shoulders and becomes Superman; someone puts on a store-bought dress and becomes a princess. On a jungle gym one becomes a gibbon; playing house, one becomes mother or father. Childhood play is the experience of becoming what one has not yet been and bringing imagined things into the world. A few people do not stop playing. Those who continually paint their own vision on canvas become painters; those who never stop writing their stories become writers; those who act as others become actors. Actor, painter, writer, and model are recognized occupations and objects of admiration. Yet not every childhood desire remains permissible in adulthood. A male actor cannot freely occupy every feminine role; a short person may be excluded from modeling; without appropriate education or recognition from a particular group one may not become a painter; without literary recognition or sales one may not be accepted as a writer. Society and culture classify desires according to whether they properly follow boundaries.

No one asks a recognized painter why they paint or treats the painting itself as contemptible. But what if the canvas were a face or body? If the person had passed through an appropriate process and been recognized as an “artist,” it might be interpreted as avant-garde art; otherwise the same act might be treated as perversion. When children become adults and enter society, they are no longer called simply by what they imagine themselves to be but by forms recognized and named by society. Childhood imagination is called a dream; adult desire is judged through conformity and violation.

Desire classified as violation must, for the sake of social order, be erased. Its bearers may not literally disappear, but they are classified as objects of avoidance and driven to places out of sight. Only after sunset do they gather there and enjoy a festival of their own. Yet the festival does not end. A festival of people who are not supposed to be proud calls them back again. Prohibition becomes a displaced site of desire and repeatedly draws people in. There they meet similar others, dance, become drunk, and show parts of themselves that ordinary society requires them to conceal. Surrounded by people who can laugh together simply because what each has hidden is similar, they gradually fill their worlds with people like themselves. And someone climbs onto a stage one step higher: for some, showing what was hidden is enough; others want to show more.

Gay Hill has been a place where heterogeneous people gathered to play for roughly thirty years since the 1990s. The names for them have changed. Today they may be called gay, transgender, or drag; today's transgender people were once categorized as gay, and today's gay people were once called homo. The thesis has asked what kind of place Gay Hill is, what experiences it offers those who constitute it, and how those experiences continue into their lives.

Chapter 2 interpreted Gay Hill as a space of liminality. Entering with social status temporarily erased and with body and sexuality as the basis of membership, men discover possibilities for explaining themselves differently. Gay Hill was not formed by gay people alone. Its emergence rests upon the historical rise and decline of the military camptown. A hill on which activities had to remain hidden became, over time, a place in which people could hide. There gay men could meet others like themselves. Parts of the self that had to be concealed appeared through forms of play, and the gathering of others called “gay” allowed a person to see their own form more clearly through others as mirrors.

Chapter 3 examined how male sexuality is recognized and shared within the heterogeneous background accumulated since Gay Hill's formation, and how drag shows approach gay audiences. Recognizing oneself as “gay” is not simply realizing that one feels erotic desire for men. It is entering a place where others gather who see one as gay and becoming a member among them. Watching a drag show, one does not remain merely a spectator but enters the performance. Gay men become objects of teasing; drag becomes de-sexualized; performer and audience form a relation requiring mutual recognition.

Chapter 4 explained drag through mask and role. The stage does not maintain a stable division between everyday life and fantasy. As the role of the drag mask is reinforced, the stage of drag spreads from fantasy into everyday life. The cases of Mini Han and More show that this can lead to transformation in which the role of the mask becomes the person. Rather than enduring a framework that does not fit in order to conform to an ascribed role, they acquire new roles and live differently.

Geertz writes that one important fact about human beings is that we begin with the innate capacity to live thousands of kinds of lives but end by living only one, and that humans urgently require symbolic sources of illumination through which they can discover their meaning in the world (1998:65). Human beings ultimately live one life, but not every process of life supplies meaning. A life becomes meaningful when one discovers one's own meaning, and such moments arise when the self seen by others and the self seen by oneself are not contradictory.

As the thesis has argued through transgressive desire, not everyone's dreams and desires are treated by others as conforming to order. Such people can quickly be cast as filthy or polluted. The metaphor of pollution implies that its object lies outside the control of a dominant class (Kim Hyun-kyung 2015:80); the order that produces pollution therefore testifies to the incompleteness of reality.

Gay Hill stands upon the history of the camptown formed after liberation and war. Women of the camptown were subsumed under the sign “prostitute” and erased under state violence. Yet some people occupying the social position “woman” in that setting did not have bodies classified as female. In the camptown order, “woman” could mean those positioned as objects of penetration by men; among them were people then called “woman-like men” or gay, some of whom would

now be understood as transgender, while men who penetrated or were penetrated by men were called homo, corresponding more closely to today's gay category. The gender order divided woman and man and treated eroticism between the two as the only form conforming to order. Those who violated it were cast out as abject and pushed off the illuminated stage of "normal" everyday life.

The places to which they were pushed included Itaewon's inexpensive hills. In small underground rooms filled with red light, gay men displayed kki without restraint. On weekend nights Itaewon always offered a hiding place. Able finally to breathe, they gathered and began to play. They put on makeup and dresses, climbed onto stages and became women for a while, walked in heels, and danced. "Men must be manly" fell from an uncrossable boundary into material for jokes. Binary sexual norms became tools for play, and other gay men gathered to join it.

They temporarily left social status behind and played through the very "unmanly" expressions for which they had been mocked. Names and occupations mattered little; being gay was enough to receive membership there. Existing as gay among other men through little more than the dim silhouettes of faces and bodies under dark club lighting produced psychological transition.

The gay part of the self concealed in ordinary reality is shared on Gay Hill through multiple forms of play. Some display masculinity through their bodies; others happen to meet someone they like and exchange drinks. Some depart entirely from a male appearance. Others, dizzy with alcohol, surrender their bodies to loud music among gay men. In ordinary play, the player returns to the original role when play ends. In liminal space, however, the role produced in play remains. Because Gay Hill exists as a domain separated from roles in ordinary reality, roles generated there persist on the hill even when a night's play ends. They continue calling other gay men back - people who cannot reveal being gay in ordinary reality, who feel isolated, and who seek a place where they can be recognized without hiding. As more people around them begin to call them gay, those who once concealed themselves gradually come to feel that gayness need not always be hidden. Interaction with other gay men changes everyday life.

Some play on Gay Hill is composed only of gay men; other play includes drag performers whose bodily appearance departs from the category "man." Drag goes onstage, forms a co-subject relation with spectators, and draws spectators into performance. Through unfamiliar appearance and the formal drag show, it plunges gay audiences into disorder. For gay men who take men as erotic objects, drag is received as de-sexualized - neither woman nor man. Drag's role is to entertain. By performing a fabricated character, the performer gradually acquires a comprehensive persona.

Drag can therefore be interpreted as a mask that can be put on and removed. Yet every mask carries a role, and actors inhabit masks with different intensities. The mask makes the person into

another being and removes outward appearance as an obstacle to expressing what had been intimate and hidden. The masked person must act according to the mask's figure, thereby entering illusion rather than ordinary reality. But the mask is not unrelated to its wearer. Connected to social identity, it can take part of that identity with it. The drag mask is a composite imagination made from multiple referents mixed with intimate desires. What emerges through the mask is both the actor's hidden desire and the kiki concealed by ordinary order.

The mask makes the actor believe its role. By performing a figure other than the previous self, the actor makes others believe in that role and, through the process, comes to believe the drag role as well. "Making believe" is, as Ryle puts it, of a higher order than belief in the sense of faith (Ryle 1963:250, cited in Napier 1986:23). Human beings may wait through faith for a redemptive moment that grants meaning; they may also distort projected reality in order to see another reality. Drag, once pushed out as a transgressive desire that should be erased, puts on a mask, makes others believe the role, and searches for its own meaning. The participants in this study - gay, transgender, and drag people - live with suffering imposed by the social classification "sexual minority." Yet they also possess a practical capacity to reflect the reality projected onto them and, in doing so, illuminate society more brightly.

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