

“Academic Drag” and the Performance of the Critical Personae: an Exchange on Sexuality,  
Politics, and Identity in the Academy (Samek & Donofrio, 2013)

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Seminar in Critical Theory

Fall 2019

Public Scholarship Final Draft

## **Introduction**

Throughout history, the education system and the classroom itself have both been revered as a tool and location for socialization – both physically and intellectually. This socialization grows and changes, much like the students within the classroom. Children learn how to socially behave and interact with others in terms of sharing and politeness from the moment they begin elementary school, followed by the spark of ideas and knowledge that follow them through high school. Students gain a more focused perspective coming together in undergraduate classrooms, in which they begin to learn to maneuver not only their intellect, but their physical bodies in professional, academic settings and interactions. Finally, a refined, deeper understanding is established in graduate school, in which the concept of professionalism is ingrained into the inner workings of the graduate classroom.

Samek and Donofrio (2013) point out the ways in which the professional socialization that manifests within graduate classrooms is overall problematic, as the professionalism is centered around heteronormativity with a design that further separates the divide between the personal and private. When referring to heteronormativity, Samek and Donofrio (2013) are using the term as a label for the numerous ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life, overall creating an insidious order over everyday existence. Heteronormativity upholds rigid conceptualizations of gender and sexuality, ultimately influencing conceptualizations of ourselves and others, as well as how we dress, behave, and interact in the world around us. Taking note of the limiting regulations of the graduate classroom, scholarship, and the academy is not to discredit higher education, but to point out these discrepancies to create change in the future.

## The “Academic Stage”

In order to take a closer look at the ways in which Samek and Donofrio (2013) critique the academy, understanding their conceptualization of the ‘academic stage’ is essential. Using the phrase ‘academic stage’ encompasses two concepts: the performance and the script. These concepts do not entail performances and scripts in the literal sense, but more so as metaphor to depict, represent, and explain *how* the academy rigidly regulates scholars and graduate students.

In this context, an individual’s ‘performance’ is the ways in which they present themselves, such as how they dress, how they take up space in a classroom as a student or in front of the class as an instructor, etc. Though the way we dress may seem like a choice made by their own volition, however, these choices are governed by scripts established through social norms that have been perpetuated in our society. Scripts are rules that are more implicit than explicit and learned through socialization throughout our lives. Bringing these two concepts together, the performance and the script create the ‘academic stage’ – the ways in which individuals within the academy act and present themselves in an academic context, such as in the classroom.

Scholars on the academic stage must follow the script of ‘professionalism,’ which, as Samek and Donofrio (2013) note, historically upholds highly gendered frameworks as a means to understand our social world. By this notion, the researchers are expanding on their conceptualizations of the academy, or higher education, as an area that perpetuate these problematic frameworks that ultimately influence the ways in which graduate students and scholars speak, act, dress, interact with others, etc. In the graduate classroom, we learn to adhere to these perpetuated frameworks, even if they are sexist, racism, homophobic, classist, and ableist beliefs, as following them is a means through which we can move up the academic ladder, we can get the lead role on the academic stage. We don our ‘academic drag,’ follow the script and conform

to all of this in the name of our own professional development. Academic drag is the term that the researchers attribute to the performances and scripts individuals follow to conform and succeed in the academy. Ultimately, this type of academic socialization continues to perpetuate the exclusion of queer identities and queerness, and the evasion of scholarship that queers the communication discipline.

### **Queerness in the Classroom**

Building upon the concept of the ‘academic stage,’ Samek and Donofrio (2013) bring queer theory and queer politics into the conversation. In this piece, the researchers utilize the word “queer” in numerous ways: the queer identity and the queer project. Understanding the researchers’ perspective of queer identities in the graduate classroom and the academic is pertinent to their conceptualization of the ‘queer project.’

One of the researchers details in her narratives her experiences as a queer instructor, using “queer” as an umbrella term for the LGBTQIA+ community. Samek and Donofrio (2013) include this narrative in their piece as it reveals the ways in which the toxic frameworks of the ‘academic stage’ manifest in real life and have real life consequences for those involved. In terms of these identities existing within the graduate classroom, Samek and Donofrio (2013) argue that sexuality is typically placed on the backburner, ignored due to the focus on other social locations (gender, race, socioeconomic status, religion, etc.) in graduate classroom conversations.

Both Samek and Donofrio (2013) detail the ways in which queer identities are avoided in the classroom. For example, Samek writes that she almost always moderated or changed her performances to conform to gender norms and heteronormative guidelines for crafting a ‘professional’ identity – disguising her own identity as a queer woman. Donofrio also expresses

the fact that she doesn't think that her private life is necessary to discuss in the classroom, even though she is straight. Both of these – Samek's change in her behavior and presentation and Donofrio's avoidance of her own heterosexual relationship – are results of heteronormative conceptualizations of professionalism and what is deemed 'acceptable' in the classroom.

Excluding queer voices, identities, and experiences from the conversation further perpetuates the professional socialization that currently exists within academia, reifying the assumption of default heterosexuality. Queer folks rarely come out once, as in most cases coming out is a continual process that may play out differently depending on the context of the situation. The dichotomy of outing oneself versus staying silent on the matter creates what Samek and Donofrio (2013) refer to as the dual oppression/safety of the closet. The oppression/safety duality is the first of many binaries or dichotomies addressed in this piece, many of which fall into the toxicity of the academic stage.

In the graduate classroom and in the academy, queer folks are left to battle the binaries of keeping separate the personal and the academic, the public and the private. The public, in this sense, what they share in a classroom or academic setting, and the private, the details of their lives that others might not know about unless they disclose this information. This once again falls under the notion of heteronormative conceptualizations of the overlap of public and private life – Samek and Donofrio (2013) explain that heterosexual culture, which is essentially what is mainstream or the social norm, maintains dominance over socialization by deeming 'personal life' distinct and separate from work, politics, and the public. The queer identity, then, when left on the backburner, is left there to simmer, ignoring the potential political implications of "the personal is political" self-disclosure.

The researchers question the limits of this divide between personal life and academics. At what point can we not control what in our personal lives is kept private? Why should we exclude our own personal experiences from our scholarship? Where do we draw the line?

### **Ending Avoidance**

Samek and Donofrio (2013) support the importance of what they refer to as the ‘queer project.’ In this case, ‘queer’ isn’t necessarily referring to queer identities but more so the verb or action of *queering* something. Queer projects (research) are ones that actively fight against binaries and dualities, especially within the classroom and in academics. Arguably, this piece by Samek and Donofrio (2013) is a queer project as it critically analyzes and calls out the toxicity of professional socialization and the binary divide of the personal and public in academics. The researchers stepped out of their ‘academic drag’ to go against the normalized demands of professionalism to illuminate the troubling implications of professional socialization and the exclusion of queer voices in academics.

The perpetuation of the public/private divide continues to inhibit the potential for graduate classrooms to be spaces in which we critique as opposed to conserve ideologies. Breaking through this divide means that we need to stress the importance of having difficult conversations about the current state of academics and the lived realities of those excluded from these narratives, much like the researchers did in this piece. Ultimately, Samek and Donofrio (2013) call for an end to the avoidance. The researchers emphasize that graduate programs should not only teach professionalism but provide a platform for graduate students (and faculty) to hold professionalism itself as an object to critique. Doing so would allow for students and instructors to unpack the deeply imbedded professional ideal of academic folks. Critiquing professionalism and the stage

on which it performs illuminates implicit expectations of a professor's race, class, gender, sexuality, ability level, etc. that we currently uphold and perpetuate.

### **References**

Samek, A. A. & Donofrio, T. A. (2013). "Academic drag" and the performance of the critical personae: An exchange on sexuality, politics, and identity in the academy, *Women's Studies in Communication*, 36(1), 28-55. DOI: 10.1080/07491409.2012.754388