“Who’s here for local drag?”: Community, Identity, and Remix in Seattle’s Drag Scene

John M. Kohfeld

A dissertation
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington
2021

Reading Committee:
Christina Sunardi, Chair
Patricia Shehan Campbell
Shannon Dudley
John Vallier

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:
School of Music

© Copyright 2021

John M. Kohfeld

University of Washington

Abstract

"Who's here for local drag?": Community, Identity, and Remix in Seattle's Drag Scene

John M. Kohfeld

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Christina Sunardi

School of Music

In this dissertation, I examine the way Seattle drag artists embody the practice of remix through live and digital performance, weaving together sound, visual references, history, politics, gender, body, and affect in creative ways that both entertain audiences and make critical space for marginalized queer identities within the broader performance scene of Seattle. Besides applying remix theory (Navas 2012) in a novel way to the ephemera of live performance, I also use José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification (1999) to understand how drag artists work "within-and-against" the dominant ideologies that marginalize them. This dissertation adds a critical perspective to drag studies in the way it blends critical media studies and queer theory with self-reflexive ethnographic work. My work is based on over a decade of involvement in drag cultures around the United States, but is focused on two years of fieldwork conducted

between 2019-2020 in Seattle, where I participated in the local drag scene both as an audience member and as a drag artist.

The international popularity of the televised drag reality competition, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present), has resulted in a massive influx of public interest, capital, and tourism in the queer public spaces. In chapter 1, I discuss how Seattle drag artists negotiate the hegemony of mainstream drag culture, using alternative drag as a method to queer normative ideas of gender, body, and vocality to make critical space for their communities. In chapter 2, I continue this discussion in the context of queer public space in Seattle, looking to how drag artists navigate the politics of space and identity within performance venues. Drawing from Annemarie Bean's notion of performative containment (2001), I use chapter 3 to trace the history of cross-gender performance from minstrelsy and vaudeville to drag to discuss how Seattle artists approach the troubled legacy of spectacularized performances of race and gender.

In chapter 4, I offer a model of how remix theory can be applied beyond the examination of sonic artifacts to the ephemera of live performance, attending to the ways drag artists physically embody the practice of remix. The timing of my research encompassed several tumultuous events that profoundly impacted the communities that comprise Seattle's drag scene. In chapter 5, I look to the ways Seattle drag artists channeled the spirit of resistance from their queer forebears, deploying remix to critique the Trump administration, respond to threats from local far-right political groups, and participate in the Black Lives Matter uprising of 2020. Finally, I use chapter 6 to show how drag artists utilized digital performance during the ongoing lockdown enacted to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus, creating imaginative visions of queer futurity (Muñoz 2009) to inspire hope and uplift their communities.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements………………………………………………………………………… ii

List of Figures……………………………………………………………………………… vi

Inscription………………………………………………………………………………. vii

Introduction………………………………………………………………………………… 1

PART I: Drag and Identity Politics

Chapter 1. "I'm causing such a racket": The Sonic Queerness of Alternative Drag…………… 22

Chapter 2. "Where's the space for that?": Drag Performance, Identity, and Queer Public Space in Seattle……………………………………………………………………………………… 58

Chapter 3. "We're still here, keeping this story alive": Navigating Performative Containment in Cross-Gender Performance…………………………………………………………………… 109

PART II: Drag Performance and Remix

Chapter 4. "It's like live performance collage": Remix Praxis as Drag Practice………………145

Chapter 5. "QUEERS BASH BACK!": Seattle Drag and Political Performance in the Trump Era……………………………………………………………………………………………198

Chapter 6. "We do what we can with what we have": Digital Drag During the COVID-19 Pandemic…………………………………………………………………………………… 238

Epilogue……………………………………………………………………………………… 272

Appendix 1. List of Performers……………………..……………………………………… 304

Appendix 2. Dissertation Discography…………………………………………………………309

Bibliography……………………………………………………………………………………311

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is the product of numerous conversations, feedback from advisors and confidants, and support from family, friends, and community. As an ethnographic project, this work would not be possible without the artists and friends whose thoughts, reflections, and performances profoundly shaped my growth as a scholar and as a person. My deepest gratitude goes to the drag artists and queer community members who generously offered their time and expertise through interviews, conversations, and media permissions for this project: Miss Texas 1988, Samuel L. JackYouSon, Londyn Bradshaw, Mercury Divine, Dee Osiecki, Silver Ly, Uh Oh, Keith Johnson, Arrhythmio, Cookie Couture, and Kitty Glitter. My thanks to the hundreds of queer performers who shared their art and experiences over the last two years as well as to the Seattle venues that made space for our community. Not being able to visit the Kremwerk Complex, R Place, the Rendezvous, queer/bar, WILDROSE, and the other Seattle venues at which queer folks congregate over the last 12 months of the COVID-19 pandemic has left a profound void in my life, and my heart reaches towards a future where we can all gather together again in the spirit of queer joy and camaraderie. I would also like to acknowledge the First People of Seattle, the Duwamish Tribe, as well as the numerous Coast Salish peoples on whose land I lived, worked, and studied over the course of my graduate school career.

I want to thank my committee, whose guidance helped shape my thinking and writing during my time at the University of Washington: Patricia Shehan Campbell, John Vallier, Shannon Dudley, and Danny Hoffman. Without you, I would not be the scholar I am today. Most of all, thank you to my committee chair, mentor, and friend Christina Sunardi. This dissertation would never have come to be without your thoughtful comments, encouragement, and advocacy on my behalf. I would also like to express my gratitude to Deborah Wong, Laurel Sercombe, Marisol Berríos-Miranda, Michelle Habell-Pallán, Katheryne Mitchell, and Jessica Johnson for your support and mentorship during my coursework and dissertation research. My thanks to the University of Washington School of Music, Department of Admissions, and Office of the Provost for providing scholarships and graduate assistantships over the course of my coursework and research; thank you also to the sponsors of the Eleanor Wilson Fellowship, the Boeing Fellowship, and the Jane and David Davis Fellowship, whose generosity allowed me the financial support to complete my dissertation. I would also like to thank the crew at Swanson's Nursery, especially Leslie Bruckner, Erich Nordstrom, Liane Smith, and Kate Schnaidt, for the opportunity to work and grow at the garden center while I was doing my research and writing.

Much of what I have learned as a graduate student came from the countless conversations with my friends and colleagues at the University of Washington. My thanks to Solmaz Shakerifard, Juliana Cantarelli Vita, David Aarons, Joseph Kinzer, Will Coppola, Giuliana Conti, Ethan Nowack, Graham Peterson, Skúli Gestsson, Katia Chaterji, Claire Anderson, Jim Morford, Chris Mena, Matt Sablan, Meg Stohlmann, Anita Kumar, Bethany Grant, Taina Lorenz, and Kait LaPorte. Thank you also to João Vita, Nicole Sonbert, Wil Guerrero, Bri Wilson, Colin Wichman, and Adrienne Alton-Gust. As I cross the threshold of being conferred a Ph.D. in music, I want to thank the music educators that have shaped me into the person I am today. Keith Mitchell, Eve Harwood, Lucinda Lawrence, Roger Kelley, and Karin Hendricks, the love, sincerity, and progressive spirit you bring to your teaching will forever be a part of me. Special thanks to Jocelyn Mory, Jack Flesher, and Megan Francisco, who have been my anchors during this difficult process. Jo, I could not have completed this dissertation without our weekly walks, writing benchmarks, and frank conversations; Jack, your companionship through my fieldwork and beyond has been vital to my growth as a scholar and person; Megan, you have been a grounding presence in my life, whether it was through *Survivor* marathons or practical advice on getting through the dissertation phase with my mental health intact.

Thank you to the friends who have supported me mentally and emotionally throughout my life, but who have offered special love, patience, and encouragement while I crafted my dissertation—I could not have done this without you. Ginger Chase, my drag sister, our early experimentation with drag together helped me find the path that led me to this work, and for that I am forever grateful. Amanda Albert, you lightened the dissertation dread by sending that helpful post about how it can be written in a month; Carrie Emge, you were my biggest cheerleader through this process. Lauren Bagsby, I would not be in this world without you. The experiences we share, the journeys we have taken together—we are two halves of a whole and part of my heart will always be with you. Thank you to my cat, Eleanor, whose strict observation of dinnertime helped remind me to take breaks from writing. I would also like to thank the folks at Ridgecrest Public House in Shoreline, where I wrote over half my dissertation—for me, there was nothing better than a friendly pub atmosphere and pint or two of beer to help facilitate the flow of ideas. Cheers!

Finally, my deep gratitude to my family for encouragement throughout my life. To my godparents Pat and Greg Kohlberg and cousin Kelly for your unconditional love—I am so thankful that we have remained in touch despite our distance. To my mother, Mary Kay—you brought me into this world, introduced me to music and creative design, and have encouraged my passion for the arts without hesitation even when I was not entirely sure of who I was or what direction I was going. To my stepfather, Dan, and grandma Mary Lou—you have both been grounded and encouraging presences since entering my life, and I am so glad our paths have crossed. To my sister, Karen—I could not have done this without your support and advice navigating the maze of academia; to my brother-in-law Klaus, thank you for offering perspective in a world that is wider than academia; finally, to my niece Katie, thank you for your thoughtfulness, curiosity, and kindness. You rock, kiddo!

List of Figures

Chapter 1

Figure 1 Drag queen makeup example………………………………………………. 27
Figure 2 Drag king makeup example………………………………………………… 28
Figure 3 Alternative drag makeup example…………………………………………… 30

Chapter 2

Figure 4 Locations of Pioneer Square, Capitol Hill, and the Central District in Seattle 61
Figure 5 Locations of Broadway and the Pike/Pine Corridor in Capitol Hill……….. 64
Figure 6 Locations of R Place, the Rendezvous, and the Kremwerk Complex……… 67
Figure 7 Promotional poster for *So You Think You Can Drag* season 2…………….. 74
Figure 8 Mercury Divine's "godmod grotesque burlesque drag"…………………… 85
Figure 9 Monthly show themes for *Kings* and *WEIRD* in 2019…………………… 89
Figure 10 Pony's front door sign discouraging cisheterosexual tourists from entering 101

Chapter 4

Figure 11 Dion Dior Black performing her "Crazy" megamix……………………….. 150
Figure 12 Gaysha Starr performing "I'm Your Baby Tonight" dressed as Whitney Houston…………………………………………………………………….. 159
Figure 13 Screenshots from the "Telephone" music video featuring Lady Gaga and Beyoncé…………………………………………………………………….. 165
Figure 14 Londyn Bradshaw and Miss Texas 1988 performing their "Telephone" mix 166
Figure 15 Lazarus Rise and Mercury Divine performing their "Be Mean" mix……… 185

Chapter 5

Figure 16 Freeza D'Lust performing her "Go the Distance/Stronger" mix…………… 212
Figure 17 Samuel L. JackYouSon and Greyson Darius Bolt onstage during *Kings*… 216
Figure 18 A Black Lives Matter protestor dressed as "Mayor Karen Teargas"……… 220
Figure 19 Mercury Divine dressed as Donald Trump………………………………… 224
Figure 20 Miss Texas 1988 dressed as Nancy Pelosi………………………………… 226
Figure 21 Alessandra Hunt performing her "It's Not Right" mix……………………… 232

Chapter 6

Figure 22 Uh Oh performing during the digital drag show, *Cry Baby*………………… 244
Figure 23 Screenshot of Londyn Bradshaw and John Queere in Londyn's "Moral of the Story" digital drag video………………………………………………… 254
Figure 24 Screenshots of John Queere performing "Levitating"……………………… 258
Figure 25 Screenshot of King County Public Health promoting the use of glory holes as a safe sex alternative during the COVID-19 pandemic………………… 262
Figure 26 Photographs from the experimental show, *Glory Hole: Drag*……………… 264

Epilogue

Figure 27 Drag sisters Priscilla and Jinger Fahrenheit after a show at Attitudes Nightclub in St. Louis……………………………………………………… 273

Figure 28 The author and a friend with drag queen Kristi Champagne after a show in Seattle……………………………………………………………… 274
Figure 29 Makeup detail for John Queere……………………………………………… 295
Figure 30 John Queere in full cowboy attire…………………………………………… 296
Figure 31 John Queere singing “Dead of Night” at Kremwerk………………………… 300

If you can name every single Drag Race *queen but can’t name ten local queens in your hometown, you’re a* Drag Race *fan, not a drag fan.*

Kim Chi

Introduction

On a cold, damp evening in February 2019, my friends Jack, Solmaz, Graham, and I watch the televised finale of *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* season 4. We are crammed together at a *Drag Race* watch party in the Velvet Lounge of the Rendezvous, a bar and performance venue in Belltown, Seattle. Projected on a large portable screen, the episode of *Drag Race* ends as Mercury Divine, the drag king co-host of the watch party, announces, "now it's time to show you drag you'd never see on *Drag Race!"* Mercury then launches into a lip-sync of "Satisfied" by actress Renée Elise Goldberry from Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*, dressed as the Ice King from Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time.* Mercury deftly navigates the intricate rapped lyrics of "Satisfied" as they juxtapose feminine and masculine gestures in their performance, creating something compelling, emotive, and queerly unique. Their blend of gender performance, glittery DIY king look, and virtuosic lip-sync skill create critical space for the art of drag kinging alongside a television show that has yet to feature a drag king.

Three months later, on a warm spring evening in early May, I am at the queer-owned pizza shop Little Maria's in the Denny Triangle with my friends Jack, Jocelyn, Skúli, and Juliana. We take seats together at a booth after ordering drinks, ready for yet another *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 11 watch party. Drag queen hostess Londyn Bradshaw welcomes the crowd on the microphone with one of her usual greetings: "Who's here for *RuPaul's Drag Race?"* A few people clap—they have likely never been to one of Londyn's *Drag Race* watch parties. They stop clapping abruptly as an awkward silence descends. Londyn breaks the tension with a follow-up question: "Who's here for local drag?" The audience erupts with cheers, and Londyn and her co-hosts start the show. After the *Drag Race* episode, Londyn performs "Tempo" by pop singer Lizzo featuring rapper Missy Elliott, to our excitement—Jack had requested Londyn to do a Lizzo number last week! We applaud and pass her cash tips as Londyn performs a high-energy lip-sync, using every inch of the space to ensure all her guests are getting an excellent show. Another episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* plays on mute in the background of the bar, largely forgotten in light of the dynamic atmosphere of the local drag scene.

A year later, it is the first full day of spring 2020 and Seattle is in a complete lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19. All live drag shows are indefinitely suspended; Seattle drag artists have migrated to online spaces to continue performing. I am on a Zoom call with my friend Silver, whom I had met the previous year through attending live drag shows in Seattle. We have not seen each other in over a month, so in between catching-up and checking in with one another, we chat about drag performance. When I ask them about their feelings regarding *RuPaul's Drag Race,* the conversation shifts to a discussion of the show's pros and cons. Silver expresses exasperation with *Drag Race* watchers—often cisheterosexual fans—who claim to know all about drag culture despite never attending local shows or supporting local queer artists and queer-owned venues. With a sigh, Silver points out, "It's like what we say: you're not a fan of drag, you're a fan of *RuPaul's Drag Race"* (interview, 03/20/2020). This statement, as well as the vignettes that precede it, reveal a marked rift between a mainstream popular culture phenomenon and one of the subcultural performance scenes on which it is based.

While I have been captivated by the art of drag for over a decade, my involvement with drag culture has largely been mediated through *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present), a televised reality competition hosted by drag queen superstar RuPaul, who seeks to find "America's Next Drag Superstar" once a year among a cast of around a dozen drag queens. My dissertation fieldwork on Seattle's drag scene thus began with *RuPaul's Drag Race*—I first entered the scene by attending *Drag Race* watch parties, in which local drag artists offer episode commentary and performances in bars and clubs to viewers. After a few months of networking, I gradually uncovered a vast, diverse queer performance scene consisting of hundreds of LGBTQ+[1] artists at dozens of venues scattered throughout Seattle. I realized that *Drag Race* was less a reflection of local drag scenes and more of a small window through which brief glimpses of queer performance could be seen. This dissertation reflects my two-year journey through Seattle's drag scene, starting with regular attendance at *Drag Race* watch parties. With Jack and other friends at my side, I stumbled upon dozens of queer performance shows unique to Seattle, featuring drag queens, drag kings, and drag things; burlesquers, cosplayers, and queer puppeteers; family-friendly Drag Queen Story Hours and gritty, underground punk drag spectacles; QTPOC[2]-centered variety shows and fundraisers for local LGBTQ+ causes; Pride showcases and Halloween parties; and much more. Over the course of navigating through Seattle's queer performance scene—of which I only scratched the surface—I developed and launched my own drag king character, John Queere, who opened doors into understanding the art of drag more intimately and allowed me to express my own sensibilities as a queer performer in Seattle's drag scene.

In this dissertation, I argue that drag artists embody the practice of remix through live and digital performance, weaving together sound, visual references, history, politics, gender, body, and affect in creative ways that both entertain audiences and make critical space for marginalized queer identities within the broader performance scene of Seattle. Drag performance in Seattle is a powerful expression of queer identity, typically held in queer public spaces such as bars and clubs where LGBTQ+ people gather to form community bonds. Within drag cultures, the process of remix reflects not only an audio/visual production technique but also an aesthetic of performance: drag artists remix gender, body, sexuality, and other major markers of identity in ways that push audiences to re-think hegemonic social norms that keep queer people—especially transgender people of color—at the margins of society. In the context of my fieldwork, conducted between January 2019 and December 2020, these performance strategies served as powerful rebuttals to the resurgence of far-right political ideologies of the Trump era as well as coping tactics for the grim reality of a global pandemic. Drag artists in Seattle demonstrate their tenacity, creativity, and commitment to the queer community through performance.

---

[1] LGBTQ+ is an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning. The plus sign indicates that there are many other identities folded into this diverse community, including asexual, pansexual, non-binary, intersex, two-spirit, agender, and other non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities.

[2] QTPOC is an acronym that stands for queer and trans people of color.

Out in the Scene: Positionality

My first experiences with drag coincided with my first experiences with queer culture, as the two were one and the same for me as a closeted queer teen from rural southern Illinois. I had a small, close-knit group of queer friends including my lifelong best friend, Lauren. On weekends, we would dress up and drive across the river to St. Louis, heading for the gay bars and clubs located along Manchester Ave and Choteau Ave, southeast of Forest Park. Our favorite club was The Complex (now permanently closed). Home to drag troupe GlitterBomb Productions, The Complex hosted fabulous drag shows and dancing on weekend nights. This space will forever remain close to my heart: it was the first place where I felt free to dress the way I wanted without fear of violence and judgement. The shows were my first experiences with live drag. The dancefloor was where I first shared a kiss with a man. On a particularly memorable January evening in 2008 or 2009, I recall splitting a cigarette with Lauren out on the chilly patio, where we discovered another group of people from our high school. We spent the night chatting about our closeted high school lives with them—virtually no one had been out at our high school in the early 2000s, it was too risky—and marveling at how many queer kids made it out of that town. Over a decade later, it is hard for me to express how validating it was to know that I was not the only one who felt hopelessly isolated growing up, wondering if I had the strength to endure the long, lonely road that appeared to stretch ahead to infinity. The warm, smoky embrace of The Complex did wonders for helping me to begin a path of self-acceptance and self-love, and its resident drag artists were the embodiment of queer freedom to me.

The launch of season 1 of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in 2009 was my introduction to the idea of a broader queer culture, shared by LGBTQ+ people around the United States and beyond. Not yet out to my family, or to all of my friends—and fearful of persecution and rejection at a time in which the trend of public cisheterosexual acceptance of LGBTQ+ issues was just beginning in my small corner the Midwest—I watched every episode of *Drag Race* with a blend of studied fascination and total awe. The show was my window to queer culture and queer role models. Aired on the LGBTQ+ cable television network LogoTV, *RuPaul's Drag Race* remixed elements of popular fashion-oriented reality competitions of the decade, such as *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*, into a campy mashup of drag and reality television. I was hooked from the start—I spent the first season surreptitiously watching these magnificent queens complete challenges and runway looks on their quest to become "America's Next Drag Superstar." The show inspired me to pluck up the courage to buy a five-dollar eye palette from a Walgreens in Champaign, IL and smear glittery shadow across my eyelids for the first time.

By 2012, I was working as a high school band director in Kansas City, MO. *RuPaul's Drag Race* was wrapping up its fourth season and beginning to attract mainstream attention. I was no stranger to the gay bars and clubs of Kansas City, and had since come out to most of my friends and some of my family. With less inhibitions, more independence, and support from friends, I began experimenting with drag, inspired by the gritty alternative look of *Drag Race* season 4 contestant Sharon Needles. Over time, I taught myself the basics of drag queen makeup, learning to block my brows, contour my face, and apply eye makeup. In 2015, I left my teaching position in Kansas City and moved back to the St. Louis area, working full-time retail and teaching music privately while I crafted graduate school applications. I reconnected with another high school friend, Ginger, and we began doing drag at the same time, becoming drag sisters Jinger and Priscilla Fahrenheit. Jinger Fahrenheit went on to become an established queen in the St. Louis drag scene, winning Ms. Pride St. Louis in 2017. Priscilla, encouraged by her drag sister despite being in the midst of preparing for a cross-country move to Seattle, performed once at Attitudes Nightclub in June 2015. I wore an ill-fitting, off-the-rack red dress from Torrid, but my makeup and hair (including glitter-gold beard) were fabulous. My lip sync to ABBA's "Money Money Money" drew polite applause, and I made a modest three dollars in tips.

After moving to Seattle in 2015, my drag materials were packed away. I knew Seattle had a substantive queer community and vibrant drag scene, but I made little effort to connect with either. I continued to watch *RuPaul's Drag Race* with growing disinterest, noting its decline in production originality and its increasingly mainstream messaging. Balancing coursework, graduate student assistantships, and my involvement with Seattle's Garifuna community left me with virtually no free time. After three years of this track, I realized I had created an unsustainable trajectory for myself, complicated by my disillusionment with ethnographic methodology. The realization that I was uncritically replicating colonialist models of scholarship coupled with the growing feeling that I could not be myself in "the field" led me to a turning point: I had essentially re-closeted myself over the course of my graduate career at the expense of my own well-being. These feelings highlight the disconnect experienced by queer students and researchers engaged with ethnomusicological fieldwork methods and pedagogies that assume universal cisheterosexuality (Barz & Cheng 2019).

As I prepared for my doctoral qualifying exams, I looked to topics closer to my own subjectivity that felt more ethical to pursue. Drawing on my own participation within the circulation of memes, viral videos, and discourse around popular music on social media sites such as Twitter, I researched the confluence of sound, technology, and the performance of identity within U.S. popular culture, which culminated in two of my qualifying exam papers on cross-gender performance in minstrelsy and the growing field of remix studies (Kohfeld 2018a; 2018b). I realized that I had unwittingly circled back to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, itself a rich site to pursue the issues I explored in my exam papers: how do drag artists negotiate a troubled history of racialized performance on popular stages of the United States? (see chapter 3).

With two new seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race* scheduled for 2019 (season 11 and *All-Stars* season 4), I decided to pursue ethnographic fieldwork on Seattle's drag scene, focusing first on *RuPaul's Drag Race* watch parties. My personal and academic interest in drag led me further into the scene, and fieldwork rapidly gave way to a regular social life as part of Seattle's queer community. The research process helped me to find my own voice in relation to my material, even becoming therapeutic at times as I explored my own relationship with queerness and the queer communities in which I have resided. For the first time in many years, I felt comfortable enough to experiment with gender through the art of drag. Most importantly, I was finally part of a community in which queerness was celebrated.

“Wait, is this for fieldwork?”: Methodology

My methodology began largely as that of a participant-observer, hanging out near the back of crowds at *Drag Race* watch parties in Seattle bars or clubs like most newcomers would. My friend Jack, also an ethnomusicology graduate student at the University of Washington, accompanied me out on almost every fieldwork excursion during 2019; his thoughts and observations as a queer person and scholar were vital to my own understanding of what was going on around us. Fellow students in the Ethnomusicology Program, my friends Jocelyn Mory, Graham Peterson, and Ethan Nowack all accompanied me on fieldwork excursions semi-regularly, interested in Seattle’s drag scene and my evolving research project. As a researcher, I found that having a group of people who were both friends and colleagues made fieldwork immensely easier, especially during the early stages as I had people to rely on when venturing through unfamiliar social spaces.

Once I became accustomed to certain venues, attending shows week-by-week, I developed friendships with people in the queer community who were also supporters of local drag, including Silver (mentioned above). I also began introducing myself to my favorite drag artists, balancing new friendships with professional interest in their art. At the height of my fieldwork in spring 2019, I was attending three to four shows a week in Seattle’s Belltown, downtown, and Capitol Hill neighborhoods; later that year, I adopted a more selective approach, focusing more on specific artists and shows rather than attempting to attend as many events as possible. My fieldwork abruptly shifted to an all-digital format in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic forced all bars and clubs to close, and drag performance shifted to streaming sites such as Instagram Live, Twitch, and Vimeo. By the end of my fieldwork in December 2020, I had conducted around a dozen informal interviews—in-person pre-pandemic, via Zoom or Skype during the lockdown—along with countless informal conversations at events or social gatherings. I transcribed a few interviews word-for-word before gradually adopting a faster method of simply annotating the recordings for ease of access later.

Social media was a cornerstone to my methodology. I used Instagram to follow drag artists in Seattle, keep track of upcoming performances, and message individuals. The app was useful later during my writing stage as I could retroactively access photos and short videos in my analysis of the visual, sonic, and performative dimensions of drag numbers that became central to my chapter arguments. Instagram also became integral in the early stages of the pandemic when drag first went digital (see chapter 6). Shazam, a song identification app, was also immensely useful to me while attending drag shows—if I was unfamiliar with a track to which a drag artist was performing, I could find out what it was and who produced it with a simple tap. I also used Twitter and Facebook to a lesser degree, following artists on these platforms to keep myself updated on shows and community events.

Participant-observation gave way to fuller participation in December 2019 when I began performing in Seattle as my drag king alter-ego, John Queere. I immediately noticed a change in my social interactions with drag artists—I was now part of the scene as a performer, not just an outsider looking in. Based on my observations pre- and post-debut, as well as my own experiences as a drag performer, I maintain that many drag artists keep a certain level of professional distance from even the most enthusiastic newcomers to their scenes. Drag performance is often intimate and contains sexual themes; queer people—especially femme-presenting individuals—are frequently fetishized and sexualized within mainstream culture and therefore face higher risks of homophobic, transphobic, and/or sexual violence. Drag performers thus carefully negotiate a balance between their performance personae and their offstage lives.

Not all fans come with good intentions, and queer artists have to be careful. They look out for one another within their own community networks, working together to neutralize threats to the community or individuals within the community. I saw this play out over the course of 2019 in which a particular regular audience member developed a predatory pattern of behavior, luring artists in with lavish tips to create exploitative relationships over a period of subsequent months. After communicating their shared experiences about this person, drag artists worked together and ceased to accept tips and attention from them, who eventually stopped frequenting shows. When I began performing as a drag artist, these unspoken social norms between queer performers became much more apparent.

I also had to be careful myself. At one point during my fieldwork, an individual in the scene groped me several times at a bar event without my consent, to the point where I had to leave the event. We had only met the prior month and I felt very uncomfortable with this person's aggressive physical advances. After processing the experience, I made the decision to terminate my relationship with the person and avoided all social interactions with them at subsequent events where we both appeared, which proved to be quite easy. Given that gay bars are considered places for free sexual interaction, this person's intent may not have been predatory despite its impact having certainly been so for me. I made the choice not to identify the person in this writing without having spoken with them about the incident since.

My identity as a researcher proved to be both a challenge and an opening for interaction in the scene. Some artists, who were gregarious and free with information in casual conversation, appeared to be intimidated by the informal interview and even yielded conflicting information with what I believed to be true from earlier interactions. The presence of a question outline, consent paperwork, and voice recording created a marked boundary in these instances—in one case, an artist apologized when the recorded interview ended, feeling as though they had "failed." We both reverted to a much more relaxed state once the recording ended, revealing the social performativity of interviewing/being interviewed. In another instance, drag queen Londyn Bradshaw poked fun at the odd dynamic—when I went to take a selfie with them after a performance, they quipped, "wait, is this for fieldwork?"—unsure if they were dealing with Mike the researcher or Mike the friend. The self-awareness of my multiple identities—impossible for even me to disentangle—haunted me throughout my fieldwork and followed me through queer spaces far from Seattle while I was away on breaks or attending conferences.

While my status as a Ph.D. student was intimidating to some, other artists were very interested in my research, contacting me in the interest of becoming interviewees to share their thoughts and experiences with drag. Some artists were researchers themselves. During my interview with Miss Texas 1988, they recommended several books, ranging from queer theory to queer historical accounts; I reciprocated by recommending and lending texts to them. This interaction reveals how academic knowledge is not the sole province of the researcher, as those "being researched" can be just as well-versed in theory, if not more so. For me, this also highlighted the privilege of my student access to the vast holdings of the University of Washington Libraries. While Miss Texas could recommend a list of books to me that I could order and have within days, the same is not necessarily true for them, given the potential difficulties of accessing information when one lacks institutional affiliation. While there are ways around this, the complex web of copyright law and the elitist gatekeeping of academia complicate drag artists' ability to engage with materials written about them or their culture, just as it does with other communities and cultures about whom we write.

Approaching Drag Performance: Key Theoretical Frameworks

I approached my fieldwork with several theoretical frameworks that informed the way I participated within the scene and formulated my ideas on the broader processes at play. While these are expanded upon in later chapters, I wish to outline them here, as they shaped my writing throughout this dissertation. The theoretical framework that impacted my thinking most profoundly was remix theory, as I found its approach to practices of cultural production both fascinating and highly useful to the fields of musicology, ethnomusicology, and sound studies as well as my own study of drag performance. As research becomes increasingly interdisciplinary, and more attention is given to how digital technologies are used for the production, dissemination, transmission, and consumption of music, remix theory offers a powerful lens for approaching the complex, rhizomatic relationships between sound, image, affect, history, and culture.

With roots in 1970s Jamaican music production practice, remix—or the blending of multiple sonic tracks to create new mashup pieces—has become ubiquitous in cultural production over the last half-century (Navas 2012). Remix studies scholar Eduardo Navas published his book *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* in 2012, asserting that remix practice serves as a form of discourse within new media of the 21st century. Defining discourse as "a set of ideas up for debate in written and oral form" (2012: 3), Navas identifies components of remix at play—such as recursion, sampling, and value-add—in music, visual art, software development, and marketing. This reveals how the manipulation of image and sound has become the dominant form of discourse in much of the cultural production of the digital age, which he refers to as "Remix" with a capital "R." As discourse, Remix "informs the development of material reality dependent on the constant recyclability of material with the implementation of mechanical reproduction" (2012: 3) and is an invaluable tool to help understand culture as it is increasingly defined by the processes of recyclability and appropriation (2012: 7).

While groundbreaking in addressing the degree in which remix aesthetics are interwoven through cultural production of the late 20th century and early 21st century, Navas's assertions regarding Remix echo Fredric Jameson's landmark discussion of postmodernism (1991). The "weakening of historicity" as samples take on new meanings in new contexts (1991: 6); the decentering of the author in favor of more diffuse interpretations of subjectivity (ibid.: 14-15); and the use of commodity products in artistic production and vice versa (ibid.: 4) all have considerable overlap with remix aesthetics. However, echoing Angela McRobbie's feminist critique of postmodernism (1994), I disagree with Jameson's lament regarding the lack of depth and affect in cultural production in the postmodern era. Responding to Jameson, McRobbie points out that his negative valuations regarding the superficiality, cultural recyclability, and diffusive subjectivity in postmodern cultural production are not indicative of cultural decline—rather, they serve as political strategies in the artistic and cultural production of marginalized individuals (McRobbie 1994: 4). This dissertation will extend this critique in the context of Seattle's drag artists, whose postmodern approach to cultural production deeply engage with the affective and political dimensions of queer identity and sociality.

The terms "sampling" and "remix" are often erroneously used interchangeably, though remix studies scholar Owen Gallagher notes that sampling is actually the first stage of remix, in which elements are compiled to later be remixed together into something new (2018: 261). When used in terms of sound production, sampling is "the process of taking already existent musical ingredients and recombining them in an original mix" (Gallagher 2018, citing Westrup and Laderman 2014). By reading Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss's interpretation of the term in his book

Mashup Cultures (2010), Gallagher expanded its definition to include artistic production practices outside of music, including visual art, film, video, and literature (2018: 260).

In its original context of 1970s Jamaican music production practice, “a music mashup is the vocal track of one song overlaid on the instrumental track of another song, with the contrast between the two revealed as the artistic intent” (Navas 2018: 191). In the 21st century, music mashups are so prevalent that they are considered a musical genre; with the development and proliferation of digital audio technologies, they have become exceedingly complex and sophisticated, sometimes incorporating elements of dozens of songs into a single track (ibid.: 193). In terms of remix practice, a mashup is the product of samples remixed together. Samples carry semantic relevance from their original context; the juxtaposition of samples into a mashup produces novel meanings during the remix process.

Virtually all the performances I attended in the Seattle drag scene incorporated remix. Following Navas, I address their use of remix not just as a musical production technique, but also as a discursive strategy employed by performers to create meaningful experiences for themselves and their audiences. Sampling from music, sound, fashion, film, and television, drag artists weave these disparate elements together onto their own bodies to create living mashups. New meanings are generated through the realization of these mashups through not only the drag artist’s performance in real time, but also the audience’s interpretation(s) of the remixed work. Drag artists go beyond the use of visual and sonic references in the remix process, rendering gender, body, affect, politics, historical references, and queer cultural aesthetics into samples that imbue their mashup performances with potent constellations of meaning.

Another important theoretical framework that guided my thinking during my fieldwork was queer studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentification, which he describes as “the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (1999: 4). Muñoz first approaches the term “disidentification” by identifying three processes of (per)forming the self in terms of what he names “the Pêcheux paradigm” (1999: 11). French linguist Michel Pêcheux developed a theory of *disidentification* (1982) in response to Marxian theorist Louis Althusser’s theory of subject formation and interpellation, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1971). In Muñoz’s words, Althusser’s definition of ideology is “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. The location of ideology is always with an *apparatus* and its practice or practices, such as the state apparatus” (1999: 11). In other words, people form social identities in response to the societal structures that dominate their environment.

Pêcheux expanded upon Althusser’s theory by describing three modes in which subjects construct themselves in response to the dominant ideology within the state apparatus: identification, counter-identification, and disidentification. In the first mode (“identification”), subjects identify *with* the dominant ideology, constructing and performing their identity in ways that conform to the normative standards within the state apparatus. In the second mode (“counter-identification”), subjects identify *against* the dominant ideology, using its standards as a measure with which to rebel against normative standards. As Muñoz elaborates, Pêcheux points out how counter-identification serves to reinforce the dominant ideology because of its inherent dependence on normative standards to function. Thus, *disidentification* is offered as the third mode of subject formation:

> “disidentification works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this ‘working on and against’ is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring

> to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance" (Muñoz 1999: 11-12).

Muñoz takes disidentification several steps further than Pêcheux: the chapters that follow in his text *Disidentifications* describe ways in which disidentification is used as "a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance" (1999: 25) that serve as survival strategies for minoritized subjects.

Queer artists in the Seattle drag scene employ disidentificatory strategies as they craft soundscapes, material artifacts, experiences, and spaces that "work on and against" the norms of the dominant culture, or a capitalist state apparatus imbued with hegemonic white heteropatriarchy. However, drag artists also strategically disidentify with mainstream drag culture, or the norms developed and enforced by the cultural supremacy of *RuPaul's Drag Race* within drag scenes. Referred to by Muñoz as "commercial drag," or "a sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption" (1999: 99), mainstream drag culture has brought greater visibility to LGBTQ+ identities and increased attendance at live drag shows in the United States and elsewhere. However, the so-called progressive identity politics championed by the producers of *RuPaul's Drag Race* cast an insidious shadow. Through *Drag Race,* mainstream drag culture is linked to projects of consumerism, queer respectability, and the construction of a compliant, homonormative subject ensnared within the rainbow grip of U.S. multiculturalism. Queer bodies are ascribed commercial value according to oppressive hierarchies of color, class, ability, size, and assigned sex at birth. Queer spaces are inundated by drag tourists, seeking to experience "authentic" drag without regard for the queer social norms of these spaces. Drag artists must thus navigate multiple layers of cultural hegemony, working within-and-against both mainstream drag culture and popular culture more broadly to carve out space for themselves and their communities.

As I read Muñoz, I began thinking of the overlap between disidentification and Remix; in particular, the ways both theories—derived from postmodernist thinking—are used as discursive strategies that call critical attention to the samples that make up the subject/mashup. A particular quote by Muñoz, laden with technological metaphors and imagery, helped me to form a bridge between his ideas and Navas's application of Remix (2012):

> "Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that had been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" (1999: 31).

In a sense, disidentification is, therefore, a *remix* of dominant ideology. Minoritized subjects strategically sample elements—"raw material"—of dominant culture, *remixing* them into mashups, identities, or performances that question the "encoded meanings" embedded within the source material. This process reveals the "universalizing and exclusionary machinations" of hegemony, opening up space for the minoritized subject. For drag artists in Seattle, remix thus becomes more than just a process of cultural production—it becomes a survival strategy.

Alongside the above theoretical frameworks, I acknowledge the work of Rachel Devitt, as my own ethnographic research parallels her own. A graduate of the University of Washington Ethnomusicology Program (then Division), Devitt conducted an ethnographic study among drag artists and gender performers in Seattle, the Bay Area, and Chicago between 2005-2009, culminating in her dissertation and a subsequent publication (Devitt 2009; 2013). In part, her work examines the ways femme gender performers[3] "critically stage their own consumption of the popular music they enjoy, interrupting its narratives and rhythms with their choreography and reterritorializing it with their dancing bodies" (2013: 427). Her analysis of the performative relationship between popular music and gender performance, as well as her application of Muñoz's theory of disidentification, provided me with an invaluable precedent for my own work analyzing the soundscapes of Seattle's queer performance scene, the relationship between mainstream drag culture and local drag artists, and the use of remix as a form of cultural production.

Chapter Overview

As master remixers, Seattle drag artists utilize performance as a strategy to address issues of space and identity, detailed in the first section of this dissertation (chapters 1-3). The second section (chapters 4-6) begins with an in-depth discussion of remix theory in the context of drag performance and then provides detail on how Seattle drag artists used remix in ways that highlight queer aesthetics and sociality, political commentary during the turbulence of the Trump era, and digital drag shows during the lockdown of 2020-2021.

As a performance strategy, remix relies not only on the use of audio samples, but visual elements that index major markers of identity such as gender, orientation, race, and class. Chapter 1 begins with a brief overview of the six major modes of queer performance I encountered in Seattle during my fieldwork, including performance art, burlesque, cosplay, drag queening, drag kinging, and alternative drag. I then introduce *RuPaul's Drag Race* as the global arbiter of mainstream drag culture, moving into a discussion of the ways alternative drag artists in Seattle deploy sonic queerness in performance to contest the sonic cisnormativity of mainstream drag culture to make room for queer subjectivities. Chapter 2 picks up from there, where I explore the relationship between drag performance and queer public space in Seattle from the early 20th century through the late 2010s. Seattle drag artists negotiate the popularity of mainstream drag culture and cisheterosexual tourism in queer public spaces through a variety of political and performative strategies, most notably in the creation of spaces that valorize identities that are marginalized both by mainstream culture and within the LGBTQ+ community. Beginning with a brief history of cross-gender performance in U.S. American popular culture, chapter 3 is a discussion of how drag artists today negotiate the troubling legacy of the minstrel show, which relied upon spectacularized performances of race, gender, and class to entertain the masses. Here, I use theater studies scholar Annemarie Bean's notion of performative containment (2001) as a lens to understand how drag artists grapple with stereotypes codified through cross-gender performance.

---

[3] Gender performance refers to a broad range of performance styles that rely on spectacular performances of gender, including drag and burlesque. In chapter 1, I discuss six broad queer performance styles that incorporate gender performance.

In the second section, I dive more deeply into the mechanics of remix in relation to drag culture in Seattle, starting in chapter 4 where I analyze drag performance as fundamentally imbued with the process of remix. Through a deep analysis of two mashup performances, I trace the ways drag artists' usage of sonic, visual, and affective samples, remixed into entertaining mashups, form a framework of cultural production defined by the recyclability of cultural artifacts and referents. Drag-as-remix also utilizes gender, desire, and the body as samples, reconfiguring these elements within mashups in ways that create space for queer people within popular culture. Chapter 5 contextualizes the discussion of drag as remix alongside the political turbulence of 2019 and 2020 in the United States. Here, I look to the ways Seattle drag artists deploy powerful performative responses to local right-wing extremist groups, the antics of the Trump administration, and Seattle politics in the context of the Black Lives Matter uprising of 2020. By embracing queer history at the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, Seattle drag artists situate themselves both as community leaders and culture-bearers, using their art to protest injustice, resist oppression, and uplift the marginalized. In chapter 6, I use José Esteban Muñoz's theory of queer utopianism as a lens to understand how Seattle drag artists used digital drag performance in 2020 to create utopic visions of a queer future during a global pandemic and indefinite lockdown.

My experiences as a queer person and drag artist come to the fore in the epilogue, where I offer a reflection of my first live performance in the Seattle drag scene as my drag king alter-ego, John Queere, as a way to summarize how the major themes of this dissertation play out in my own life and art. Finally, I include two appendices; appendix 1 is a list of over one hundred performers I encountered in the Seattle scene over the course of my fieldwork while appendix 2 is a collation of the music I analyze throughout this dissertation to give the reader a soundscape of Seattle drag between 2019-2020. Drag scenes grow and change like any other performance community, and this dissertation captures the spirit of a unique moment in Seattle history defined by political upheaval, rapid change, a devastating pandemic, and hope for a better future.

PART I: Drag and Identity Politics

Chapter 1

"I'm causing such a racket": The Sonic Queerness of Alternative Drag

My first challenge in this dissertation was to narrow down the forms of drag I saw in Seattle in a way that can be easily articulated, yet does not invalidate the massive diversity of an art form that has appeared in cultures worldwide in various forms for centuries. My orientation as an ethnomusicologist focused on U.S. popular culture is complemented by personal experiences as a queer person and drag artist in scenes throughout cities in the United States. With this context, I approach drag as part of six major forms of queer performance—performance art, burlesque, cosplay, drag queening, drag kinging, and alternative drag—that I saw enacted in Seattle during my two years of fieldwork in the city. Over the course of 2019-2020, I interacted with, heard about, or saw live performances by over one hundred performers from Seattle.[4] Alternative drag quickly captivated my interest and became the focus of my research.

In this chapter, I propose the concept of sonic queerness as an aural strategy used by alternative drag artists in Seattle in their performance of remixed mashups that explicitly make space for queer identities that are otherwise marginalized in cisheterosexual society. Eschewing sonic cisnormativity—i.e., resisting cisheterosexual ideals of what femininity and masculinity should sound like during drag performance—gives queer artists greater depth in exploring issues that impact them. I contextualize sonic cisnormativity in mainstream drag culture of the 2010s, which has largely been defined by legendary drag queen RuPaul Charles and his hit reality television show, *RuPaul's Drag Race.* Both *Drag Race* and local artists use sonic cisnormativity to make drag performance legible and palatable to cisheterosexual consumers. The way alternative drag artists mash-up normative gender and sonic markers with queer aesthetics thus refocuses drag artistry as a form of performance art by queer people and for queer people in local scenes like Seattle.

---

[4] In Appendix 1, I list these performers along with their performance styles, Instagram handles, and shows/titles with which they are associated.

Styles of Queer Performance in Seattle, 2019-2020

The art of drag in the United States is incredibly varied, befitting its status as a malleable performance style that samples from popular stage genres, visual culture, the fashion and beauty industry, and queer cultural aesthetics. From the polished pageant queens of the Bible Belt to the punk kings of the Rust Belt, from the fashion-forward divas of New York City to the gritty alternative drag artists of the Pacific Northwest, from the dancing showgirls of Las Vegas to the radical activessles of Chicago—drag varies immensely between regions and cities within the United States. While specific localities have reputations for certain drag styles, individual scenes are incredibly diverse within themselves, encompassing dozens or even hundreds of performers each with a unique take on the art of drag. The fluid boundaries between regions and substyles have become more permeable in the 2010s as drag culture has become more visible and more popular than ever.

Befitting a large U.S. city with a sizeable queer population, Seattle's drag scene boasts a myriad of different drag styles within its broader queer performance scene. Queer performance consists of six major categories: performance art, burlesque, cosplay, drag queening, drag kinging, and alternative drag. These categories are not fixed, and there is considerable overlap between them. However, understanding the core elements of each of these queer performance styles helps to emplace them within scenes, as each of these categories are associated with different identities, venues, and stylistic norms. Dividing them this way also strategically reveals which elements of queer performance are most valorized on the popular stages of mainstream drag culture.

The most difficult category to define is performance art, as the term can easily be used to describe any of the other styles of queer performance. However, my understanding of the term in the context of the Seattle queer performance scene is a way to describe works that are meticulously thought-out, abstract or intellectual in nature, less focused on entertainment value and more on artistic expression, and/or longer in form than the average drag or burlesque number. Seattle drag artist Miss Texas 1988 was often labeled a performance artist by other drag artists in the scene due to the way their work challenged the conventions of drag performance in terms of form, content, and execution. Works by the experimental drag collective *Glory Hole* (see chapter 6) are also widely regarded as performance art within the scene.

While my experiences with burlesque during my fieldwork were more limited, I attended or participated in dozens of shows featuring burlesque performers in Seattle. Today, burlesque is regarded as a performance style that is structured around the sensuous display of the body, involving techniques such as striptease, eroticized gesture, and the art of the reveal. However, the earliest usages of the term referred to an English theatrical and literary device centered around the parody of serious matters in a mocking, amusing manner; the term came to represent a sexualized stage performance on U.S. American variety stages in the late 19th century (Jump 1972). Modern audiences and performers of burlesque are not always queer, though I noticed a significant presence of queer performers within the burlesque scene of Seattle—in fact, many burlesque artists double as drag artists (and vice versa). As I saw it, the majority of burlesque artists in Seattle present as women and/or femmes; burlesque shows also tended to come with more expensive ticket prices in Seattle when compared to drag shows.[5]

Cosplay, a portmanteau of "costume play," is not a uniquely queer style of performance, but significant numbers of queer people engage in cosplay and the aesthetic has greatly influenced other styles of queer performance. In short, cosplay is defined as embodying the look and mannerisms of specific characters from popular culture (Disney princesses, *Star Wars* characters, superheroes, *Pokémon,* etc.) or, to a lesser degree, mass culture (politicians, celebrities, and other public figures). Beyond crafting and posting looks on social media, cosplayers often congregate at popular culture conventions, such as Seattle's own *Emerald City Comic Con* held annually in March. Silver, a friend I made through attending shows regularly in the Seattle scene, has experience as a cosplayer and noted the art form differed from drag in several key ways. Cosplayers typically do not lip-sync, and the overall energy of cosplay is significantly more "relaxed," as it is less about impersonation or creating a character and more about the joy and creativity accessed by dressing up as one's favorite characters from television, anime, or manga (Silver, interview, 03/20/2020).

Drag queening and drag kinging are twin styles of queer performance that seek to convey exaggerated performances of femininity and masculinity, respectively. They are historically tied to stage performance, incorporating live singing, lip-syncing, and/or dance and gesture in entertaining representations (or parodies) of binary gender. In interviews, Seattle drag artists and audience members alike identified drag as a queer art form, though the nuance within their responses were noteworthy. Alternative drag artist Miss Texas 1988 does not consider all forms of drag as inherently queer art forms, using Shakespearean theater and *Saturday Night Live* as examples of "straight lineages" of drag (interview, 01/10/2020). However, Texas conceded that drag has become more of a queer and trans art form in recent decades, used to push against the rigid gender expectations that have crystallized over the last century in the United States (ibid.). While he regards drag as a queer art form, drag king/drag thing Arrhythmio noted that straight people indeed do drag, likening their adoption of drag without acknowledging its queer history to the urban process of gentrification. Arrhythmio refuses to gatekeep the art form (i.e., drag is for queers only), though he has "less interest in what a cishet person has to say" through their use of drag as artistic expression (interview, 04/03/2020). On the other hand, Silver, a fan of Seattle drag, stated that drag helps both LGBTQ+ people and cisheterosexual people express themselves, citing Seattle drag queen Skarlet Dior Black as a prominent example of the latter. While they think of drag as a queer art form, Silver asserted drag loses its queerness when it is used to make fun of queer people or certain gender expressions; at that point, they likened it to blackface minstrelsy in the sense that it simply promulgates harmful stereotypes about a minoritized group (interview, 03/20/2020). Silver's point connects to Judith Butler's discussion of drag as a "subversive bodily act," in which Butler avows that not all forms of drag performance are subversive—some can be used to reinforce hegemonic cultural norms (1990: 189).

---

[5] For more information on burlesque in Seattle between 2000-2010, look to Rachel Devitt's work (2009; 2013).

The drag queen—commonly assumed to be a cis gay man cross-dressed in flamboyant women's clothing—is a conspicuously visible representation of queer performance culture both within the LGBTQ+ community and mainstream popular culture. In U.S. American culture, drag queens are part of a long history of performances of spectacularized femininity stretching back to the 19th century, including the wench character of blackface minstrelsy and the glamourous female impersonators of the vaudeville stage (see chapter 3). While there is also a long history of male impersonators in British and U.S. American theater and vaudeville, the performance styles of modern drag kings is patterned more after drag queens of the latter half of the 20th century than their 19th-century forebears (Halberstam 1998; Rodger 2018). Often queer women dressed up in men's clothing, drag kings enact portrayals of masculinity in performance (Halberstam 1998). Drag queening and drag kinging have distinctive makeup styles that are inverse to one another: while conventional queen makeup seeks to soften hard edges and create shapely curves in the face, conventional king makeup forms harder angles and broader features (see Figures 1-2). In the Seattle scene and elsewhere, drag kinging is not the sole province of queer women and drag queening is not only enacted by queer men. People of all genders and sexualities take to stages as drag queens and drag kings, creating fantastic performances of exaggerated femininity and masculinity to both express themselves and entertain their audiences.

Figure 1: The author models classic drag queen makeup, which is about creating softness, rounder shapes, and emphasizing the eyes. Makeup and photographs by the author, 2013.

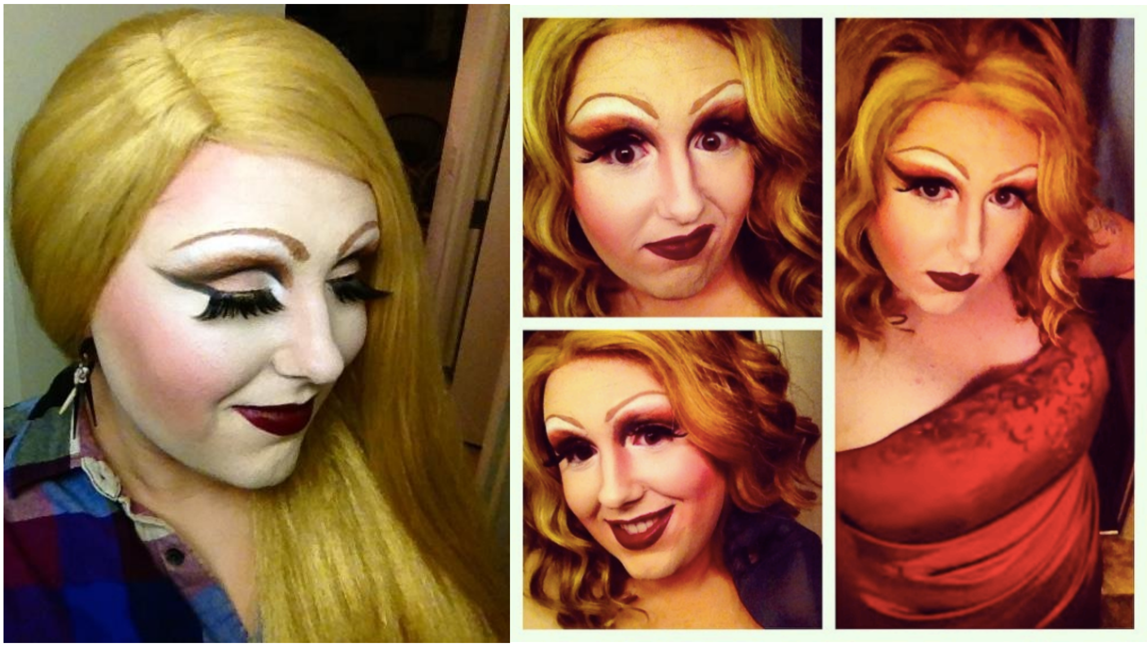
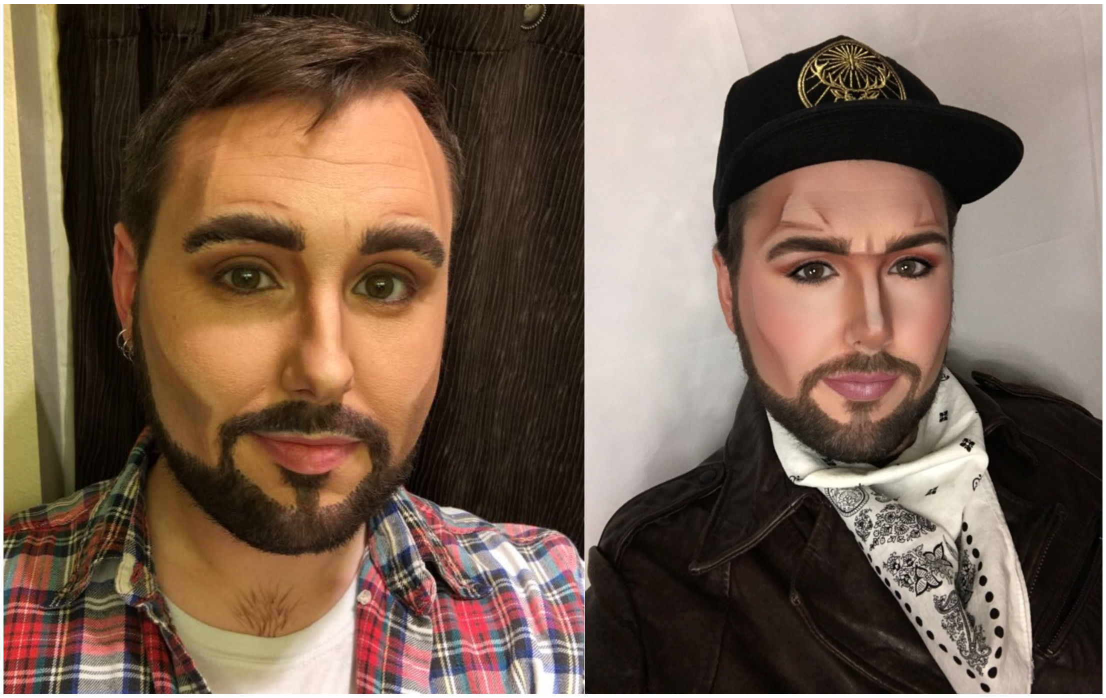


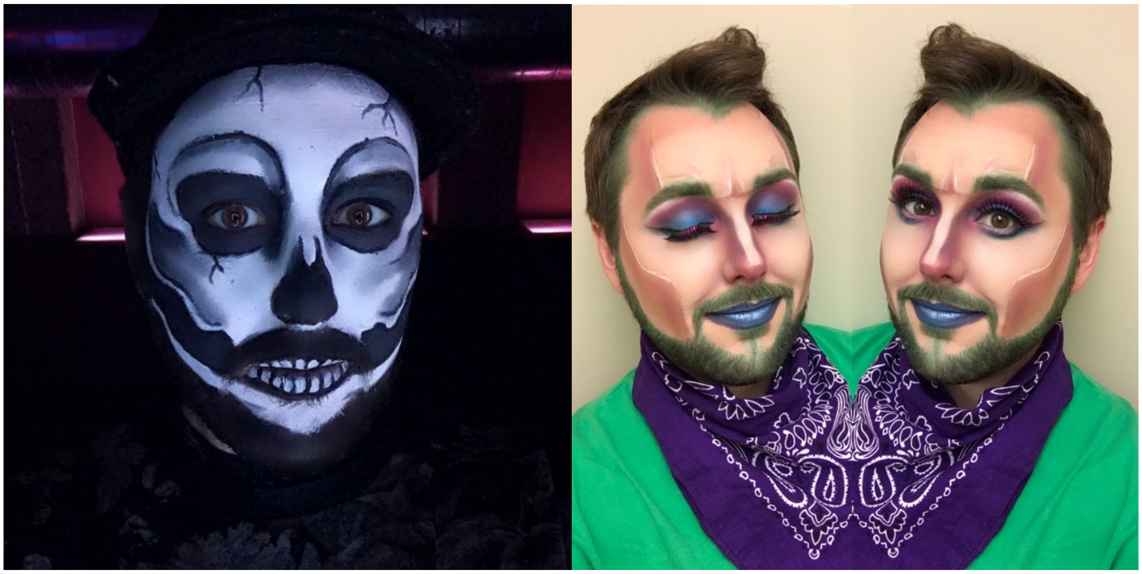
Figure 2: The author models classic drag king makeup by creating more angular features, including a squarer nose, heavier brows, and stylized facial hair. Makeup and photographs by the author, 2019.



Alternative drag tends to sample from the visual, sonic, and affective elements of multiple genders simultaneously, or rejects the performance of gender entirely (see Figure 3). I use the term here as a catch-all for drag looks and performances that either de-prioritize or purposefully distort normative gender; common substyles include horror, monster, genderfuck, activessle, tranimal, club kid, fetish wear, and trash, to name only a few. Horror drag and monster drag typically seek to portray frightening, monstrous, and alien characters. Similarly, tranimal drag pushes the conventions of gender and humanity to extreme limits. Genderfuck is a term denoting a look or performance style that blends obvious gender markers in incongruent ways, such as bearded drag queens. Activessle drag is tied to political activism and typically describes the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a queer order of dragged-out nuns formed in San Francisco in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s that use their artistry to raise money for LGBTQ+ community issues (Senelick 2000: 466). Club kids, associated with queer nightlife in New Romantics-era London and New York in the late 1980s and early 1990s, create extravagant, avant-garde looks that remix mainstream fashion with queer aesthetics (Davenport 2017: 74-133). Trash drag utilizes unconventional or undesirable materials in the creation of fabulous costumes, challenging normative ideals that conflate wealth with glamour and beauty. Each of these alternative drag substyles have unique, intersecting histories; drag artists of all types often sample from elements of these substyles over the course of their careers to pay homage to legendary artists of the past or to remix their own looks and personae in the creation of new and interesting looks.

Alternative drag is rooted in underground queer art scenes throughout the United States. The anarchic drag style of the queer hippie theater group the Cockettes, founded in 1969 in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco, was a major precedent for contemporary alternative drag, as was the experimental work of New York City-based queer playwright and performer Charles Ludlam (Senelick 2000: 413). The shockingly queer underground films of John Waters of the 1970s and 1980s, featuring the legendary drag queen Divine, have also profoundly shaped alternative drag. Together, these artists (and many more) eschewed mainstream cisheterosexual appeal in favor of pushing the boundaries of art, gender, sexuality, body, and narrative.

Figure 3: The author models alternative drag looks, which tend to place less emphasis on constructing normative gender, such as this detailed horror skull makeup (left) and a digitally-altered genderfuck look that blends aspects of queen makeup and king makeup into the same face (right). Makeup and photographs by the author, 2019 (left) and 2020 (right).



In general, my fieldwork focused on alternative drag in Seattle. In this context, a related term to alternative drag is "punk drag," as it is a style that consciously rejects the cisheteronormative standards of "classic" kinging and queening in favor of unpolished, DIY queer expression. Most alternative drag performers in Seattle strategically blend queening and/or kinging along with their natural body features to queer the ideas of normative gender, including the display of body hair (including facial hair) on femme looks; avoiding constructing conventional gendered physiques with pads, tape, tucking, or packers;[6] foregoing wigs; or purposely painting and dressing themselves in ways that are animalistic, avant-garde, or "ugly." Alternative drag performers also push the limits of humanity, using costuming, painting, or prosthetics to transform themselves into monsters, aliens, demons, animals, cyborgs, mythical beings, or hybrid creatures.

---

[6] Drag artists use pads and tape to create the illusion of hips and buttocks, a flatter chest, or a larger chest; to "tuck" is to tape external genitalia back to create the illusion of a flat crotch while packers are used to create the illusion of external genitalia. "Classic" drag artists use a variety of these techniques to make their bodies appear more masculine or feminine, conforming to conventional cisnormative standards of sex in the construction of their drag personae.

Alternative drag moreover challenges the conventions of classic drag performance in the creation of pieces that go beyond lip-syncing a three-minute popular song. On a sunny Friday afternoon in April 2020, I spoke to Arrhythmio via Skype about the development of his drag over the prior year. No longer interested in portraying masculinity with his drag, Arrhythmio had shifted from performing as a drag king to a "drag thing," employing a monster/creature angle to his look and performances. Equally a director, a musician, and a performance artist, Arrhythmio identified himself as an alternative drag artist when I asked how he related to the term. Contrary to classic drag kinging or queening, which is "pretty much a lip sync to a song," Arrhythmio noted that alternative drag artists employ a "multi-platform lens," sampling from theater, live music, cabaret, and other art forms to create longer-durational pieces, with the optimum length ranging between 10-15 minutes (interview, 04/03/2020). These longer-durational pieces, which I have seen utilized by other alternative drag artists in Seattle (such as the cast of the experimental drag collective *Glory Hole*) allow artists to convey more intricate narratives and greater depths of emotional intensity (ibid.). Naturally, this style of performance requires alternative drag artists to be savvy content creators. A few write their own material or improvise freely, although the majority employ remix strategies to carefully craft performance narratives through mashing-up a collage of sonic, visual, and affective samples (see chapter 4).

An alternative drag artist from Seattle, Miss Texas 1988 uses queer theory as a fundamental building block in the construction of their drag persona, demonstrating how some alternative drag artists use abstract concepts to realize concrete characters that mash-up academic theory with popular performance. Inspired by J. Halberstam's *The Art of Queer Failure* (2011), Nico created Miss Texas 1988 as a failed Miss America contestant stumbling her way through a women's beauty contest built around the male gaze in a way that both entertains the audience but also subverts normative constructions of sex, gender, class, and beauty (interview, 01/10/20). Noting that "failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well," Halberstam upholds queer failure as a performative alternative to conventional models of success in a heteronormative capitalist society, such as reproductive maturity and the accumulation of wealth (2011: 3). In terms of embodying a failed pageant queen, Miss Texas 1988's early signature look included tangled hair, smeared makeup, garish clothing, and a pasted-on, slightly panicked smile.[7] Their profoundly queer approach to drag performance goes beyond critiquing cisheterosexual gender and beauty ideals in mainstream culture: they also fundamentally challenge the art of drag queening itself in the sense that many "classic" drag queens—and "classic" drag kings, as well—continue to uphold cisheteronormative ideals of body and identity in order to appear palatable wider audiences.

Queer performance art, burlesque, cosplay, drag kinging, drag queening, and alternative drag are synergistic performance modes; that is, they rarely exist in "pure" form as artists frequently remix aesthetics and techniques from multiple modes simultaneously in performance. For instance, at *WEIRD,* a pop culture drag show at the queer club Kremwerk in June 2019, alternative drag king Mercury Divine dressed as Bob Belcher from the hit animated television show *Bob's Burgers*. Lip-syncing to a mashup of audio from a *Bob's Burgers* Thanksgiving episode and the dance-pop song "Irresistible" by *Drag Race* alumna Blair St. Clair, they performed a sensual striptease that climaxed with Mercury artfully fucking an inflatable

---

[7] Like most drag artists, Miss Texas 1988's look and style are an ongoing work in progress. To see their current style and performances, visit @misstexas1988 on Instagram.

Thanksgiving turkey onstage, thus remixing elements of kinging, cosplay, burlesque, and alternative drag within a single performance. Indeed, many of the most memorable and best-received drag performances are those that utilize multiple modes of queer performance within a single act, as they showcase the range and creativity of queer artists.

The focus of this dissertation is on alternative drag culture in Seattle; as such, a discussion of mainstream drag culture as its foil is essential. Among the diversity of queer performance styles, the classic drag queen conveying an exaggerated performance of femininity that stays largely within the bounds of cisnormative gender conventions reigns supreme as the symbol for queer performance among LGBTQ+ people and cisheterosexual audiences alike. Drag queens—and their late 19th-century/early 20th-century counterpart, the female impersonator—are the cornerstone of mainstream drag culture, which is dominated and largely defined today by drag queen superstar RuPaul Charles and his hit television reality competition franchise, *RuPaul's Drag Race.*

RuPaul's Drag Empire: The (Re)Emergence of Mainstream Drag Culture in the 2010s

The classic, gender-normative approach to cross-gender performance has captivated mainstream interest multiple times over the last two centuries in the United States, beginning with the female and male impersonators of 19th-century minstrelsy and vaudeville that captivated the popular imagination with the art of gender illusion (Toll 1976; Bean 2001; Casey 2015; Rodger 2018; chapter 3 of this dissertation). Drag, as cross-gender performance came to be known in the latter half of the 20th century, again captivated a mass cisheterosexual audience through the emergence of drag queen RuPaul Charles into the mainstream in 1990. A Black cis gay man from Atlanta who came to prominence in the queer club scene of New York City in the

1980s, RuPaul shifted away from his avant-garde genderfuck roots to embody his signature blonde, statuesque, and gender-normative version of drag femininity. With this new look—developed in collaboration with queer stylists Mathu Anderson and Zaldy—RuPaul secured crossover success as a MAC makeup spokesmodel, a popular music artist with his international dance hit “Supermodel” (1992), and as a host and entertainer with his sharp wit and business acumen (Davenport 2017). RuPaul’s mainstream success—as well as the mainstream visibility of New York City’s queer Black and Latinx ballroom scene with the releases of Jennie Livingston’s documentary *Paris is Burning* and pop singer Madonna’s “Vogue” both in 1990—resulted in a flurry of drag content in popular culture of the 1990s, notably through film (ibid.). The international success of Australia’s *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) precipitated a Hollywood spin-off the following year, *To Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995); Hollywood also released the drag-centered films *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) and *The Birdcage* (1996).

This renewed mainstream interest in progressive, compassionate portrayals of drag performance and LGBT lifestyles failed to center queer performers, with nearly all the leading roles held by cisheterosexual men (Davenport 2017). In his seminal work, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz named this incarnation of cross-gender performance “commercial drag,” speaking to its close ties to consumer culture and cisheterosexual norms; his counterpart to commercial drag was “terrorist drag,” which is a performance style that highlights queerness while rejecting assimilationist ideas of body, beauty, identity, behavior, and consumer culture (ibid.). The latter obviously has strong ties to the tradition of alternative drag artistry.

The post-9/11 Bush-era conservatism of the early 2000s—during which I came of age as an anxious, isolated, closeted queer in the rural Midwest—saw a backslide in mainstream interest in LGBTQ+ identities and culture in the United States, including drag performance. In this uncertain climate, the inaugural season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* was launched in 2009 on the LGBTQ+ cable television network, LogoTV. For many queer people—including me and countless other queer millennials—*RuPaul's Drag Race* was massively transformative. It was the first time I saw real queer people, living out queer lives with full agency and practicing what (to me) was the queerest art form of all: drag queening. I treasured every episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race,* watching in secret during its first three seasons because I was not fully out to my friends and family. *RuPaul's Drag Race* inspired me to try the art of drag, which I enjoy to this day both as a personal artistic pursuit and as an academic topic.

By the fourth season of *RuPaul's Drag Race,* released in 2013, the television show had amassed a significant cisheterosexual following. The show's crossover success was in part due to its successful navigation of a dense media environment, capitalizing on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube in the creation of a multi-platform empire (Gudelunas 2017). Fans could interact with the show's contestants and producers on social media, communicating directly with the queens and weighing in on the choices for casting and selection of in-show titles such as the fan-favorite "Miss Congeniality" and the coveted "America's Next Drag Superstar." The season finale for season 4 of *RuPaul's Drag Race* was the first time I attended a *RuPaul's Drag Race* watch party. Velicia (my friend and coworker at Kansas City Public Schools) and I watched Sharon Needles crowned "America's Next Drag Superstar" at Missie B's, a popular gay club in the Westport neighborhood of Kansas City, Missouri. *RuPaul's Drag Race* watch parties have since become a liminal space at queer venues where drag artists, regular queer patrons, and cisheterosexual tourists come into routine contact (see chapter 2). A year after my first watch party, I attended a *Drag Race* live tour, *Battle of the Seasons,* at the Uptown Theater in KCMO with Velicia and her wife. *Battle of the Seasons* kicked off a flood of live tours featuring *Drag Race* alumni, including the massive, annual international *Werq the World* tour and the acclaimed *RuPaul's Drag Race LIVE! Las Vegas.* The *Drag Race* franchise has expanded with a flurry of spin-off shows, including *RuPaul's Drag Race Untucked* (2010-present), which is a drama-filled backstage look at each successive season of *Drag Race; RuPaul's Drag U* (2010-2012), which featured *Drag Race* queens giving makeovers to everyday women; *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* (2012-present)*,* in which fan favorite queens return to capture the crown; *RuPaul's Secret Celebrity Drag Race* (2020), which featured *Drag Race* queens transforming celebrities into drag superstars; and *RuPaul's Drag Race Holi-slay Spectacular* (2018), a Christmas special.

During the release of its fourth, fifth, and sixth regular seasons, between 2013-2015—which I personally refer to as the "golden age" of *Drag Race* for these seasons' superb narrative construction, memorable contestants, and boom in popularity—*RuPaul's Drag Race* rapidly amassed a mainstream following beyond the modest queer-majority audience of its first few seasons. In 2015, the seventh season of *Drag Race* was nominated for its first Emmy Award; its eighth season snatched the show's first Emmy win in 2016. As of January 2021, the first twelve seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race* have earned a staggering 39 nominations and 19 wins (ATAS 2021), cementing its status as the benchmark for mainstream drag culture of the 2010s. Later seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race* have been more accessible to wider audiences, as well. In 2017, the ninth season of *Drag Race* debuted on the mainstream network VH1, a marked move from the relative obscurity of the LGBTQ-focused LogoTV network. Since its mainstream popularity, cultural critics and scholars have noted the show's unabashed embrace of normative conventions that run counter to many of the lived experiences and beliefs of queer individuals in subcultural drag scenes, including fusing drag performance with U.S. nationalism and imperialism (Ferrante 2017), the re-valorization of the nuclear family over queer family networks (O'Halloran 2017), and the neoliberal co-optation of self-love discourse, camp aesthetics,[8] and personal "branding" that collectively conform to consumerist ideals (Yudelman 2017; Daggett 2017; Schottmiller 2017; Chetwynd 2020).

RuPaul's Drag Race has also expanded beyond the United States to form a massive international media empire. Loosely affiliated with RuPaul and his team of producers, *The Switch Drag Race* (2015-2018?)[9] and *Drag Race Thailand* (2018-2019?)[10] were the first international franchises of the show. The first English-language international incarnation of *Drag Race,* the first season of *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* launched on BBC Three in 2019; *Drag Race UK* is currently airing its second season as of January 2021. In 2020, *Drag Race Holland* and *Canada's Drag Race* premiered, with the latter assured a second season (Street 2021). In January 2021, World of Wonder (the production company behind *RuPaul's Drag Race*) announced the cast of *RuPaul's Drag Race Down Under,* featuring drag artists from Australia and New Zealand. Additionally, Brazilian and continental Spanish versions of *Drag Race* have been rumored for several years, though official announcements have yet to be made regarding casting, filming, or release as of January 2021.

---

[8] See chapter 4 for a brief discussion of camp; Carl Schottmiller's 2017 dissertation also includes an excellent and detailed discussion of camp aesthetics in the context of *RuPaul's Drag Race.*

[9] The first season of *The Switch Drag Race* (2015-2016) featured a cast of Chilean drag artists; the second season (2018) featured drag artists from Hispanophone Latin America. A third season has yet to be announced.

[10] Both seasons of *Drag Race Thailand,* featuring contestants from Thailand and around Southeast Asia, were well-received in terms of viewership; a third season of the show was rumored but has yet to be announced.

Because of the language difference, the Thai, Latin American, and Dutch versions of *Drag Race* are the most independent from RuPaul; the UK and Australia/New Zealand versions of *Drag Race* are still hosted by RuPaul and *Canada's Drag Race* is hosted by *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 11 alumna Brooke Lynn Hytes. I have noticed that the non-U.S. English-language versions of *Drag Race* tend to over-emphasize cultural differences, highlighting cultural and linguistic conventions that are relatively unremarkable to locals but exotic to U.S. Americans. For example, when RuPaul enters the workroom to announce the weekly challenges, he greets the season 2 cast of UK queens with an "'ello, guv'na!" in a cheesy imitation of a Cockney accent. Though it has yet to air as of this writing, the title of *RuPaul's Drag Race Down Under* indicates the AU/NZ version of the show will be no different by positioning the show in literal geographical relation to the United States.

Furthermore, conventions of drag performance in the United States are foisted upon contestants from places with different approaches to drag: British-American drag artist Charlie Hides, who is infamous for refusing to a lip-sync on an episode of season 9 of the U.S. version of *Drag Race,* later said in an interview that "99% percent of [drag queens] in the UK do sing live" (Moylan 2017). However, the contestants of *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* are still expected to lip-sync for their lives—not sing—as the cornerstone performance challenge that concludes every episode. As such, mainstream drag culture positions the United States as the queer geographical center of global drag culture despite the rich independent histories of drag and cross-gender performance outside of the dominant settler culture of the continental United States.

As RuPaul's drag empire expands across the world, queer artists view the explosion of mainstream drag culture as both a golden opportunity for drag culture but also as a challenge to the diversity and history of local queer scenes. This raises the issue of visibility politics within mainstream culture as certain drag artists and styles are valorized over others.

Mainstream Drag Culture, Assigned Gender at Birth, and the Politics of Visibility

RuPaul's Drag Race collapses queer performance into a relatively narrow range of drag artistry centered around queening, which affords drag queens the lion's share of opportunity, visibility, and mobility within mainstream drag culture. The basic show format of *Drag Race* features weekly challenges related to the art of drag queening: lip-syncing, singing, dancing, hosting, costume construction, comedy, acting, self-branding, and teamwork. After each challenge, the contestants appear before the judges for a fashion-focused runway challenge to receive critiques for their performances during the episode. The two contestants that receive the lowest scores of the week must then "lip-sync for their lives" in front of RuPaul, simultaneously performing the same song onstage in a battle for RuPaul's favor. The winner of the lip-sync is offered a "shantay, you stay" from RuPaul while the loser is asked to "sashay away" and is eliminated from the competition. The popularity of *Drag Race* has resulted in an explosion of mainstream interest in drag queens. While drag kings, alternative drag artists, and other queer performers have also benefitted from the broad public interest in drag culture during the 2010s, these artists have yet to achieve equivalent popularity and visibility to drag queens in queer performance scenes despite their long history of contributions to queer culture.

The issue of (in)visibility in drag culture is most often discussed by fans and critics of the show in terms of the linked categories of gender identity and assigned gender at birth. Gender identity describes the way a person self-identifies their gender, whether it is congruent to the gender they were assigned at birth or something different. The term "assigned gender at birth" describes the system of gender classification that was normalized under the U.S. medical establishment, in which newborns possessing a penis are assigned male at birth, or AMAB; newborns lacking a penis are assigned female at birth, or AFAB. The phallocentrism of this system shifted during the latter half of the 20th century as medical professionals took hormones and chromosomes into account during sex assignment, rather than relying solely on external genitalia (Kessler & McKenna 1978). Intersex infants—that is, newborns possessing combinations of hormones, chromosomes, and/or genitalia that defy the medically-constructed sex binary—are "treated" through hormone therapy or surgery to ensure their genitals conform to male-female standards (Kessler 1990).

Queer people today increasingly use the terms AFAB and AMAB in place of terms and phrases like "born male," "biologically female," or "trapped in the wrong body" to draw attention to the violence of gender assignment at birth by the medical industrial complex, rather than assuming responsibility for their failure to conform to rigid, socially-constructed sex and gender norms. At the same time, the terms AFAB and AMAB are useful in highlighting the diverse gender expressions and experiences of people without universalizing cis experience and erasing trans identities. For example, naming reproductive justice as an AFAB issue strategically acknowledges the shared experiences of cis women, trans men, and certain intersex and non-binary people who possess a uterus, whereas referring to it merely as a "women's issue" is inaccurate since reproductive justice in practice affects trans and cis women differently; referring to it as a "women's issue" also completely erases non-cis AFAB individuals like trans men, intersex people, and non-binary individuals. While this change in terminology may seem purely semantic to some, it is a critical shift for intersex and transgender people (including non-binary individuals) who have long suffered from lack of equal access to healthcare and abuse at the hands of the medical industrial complex.

AMAB and AFAB queer people alike have long been integral parts of queer performance cultures, including drag. As I witnessed as a young queer person participating in drag scenes across the United States from 2008 to the present, AMAB individuals—including cis queer men, transgender women, some intersex people, and some non-binary people—tend to dominate the art of drag queening, though there are many AFAB drag queens, as well. Conversely, AFAB individuals—comprised of cis queer women, transgender men, some intersex people, and some non-binary people—tend to dominate the art of drag kinging. (AMAB drag kings are less common than AFAB drag queens, though they do exist—I am one!) In Seattle's queer performance scene of 2019-2020, I noticed that AMAB entertainers tended to dominate within the lineups of drag shows around the city, though both AMAB and AFAB artists alike performed as drag queens, drag kings, burlesquers, or alternative drag artists. Additionally, transgender individuals—encompassing trans men, trans women, and non-binary folks—actually make up a sizable majority within Seattle's drag scene, and local drag scenes in the United States more broadly.

These statistics stand in stark contrast to mainstream drag culture. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is celebrated as a landmark television show for sexual, gender, and ethnic diversity, given that nearly all the contestants and regular judges are LGBTQ+ and people of color are prominently featured as judges and contestants. However, some queer viewers of the show—including myself—are critical of the almost complete lack of representation of AFAB and/or trans identities who have long been integral to drag subcultures. According to the official *RuPaul's Drag Race* Wiki page, which compiles basic data from all episodes, bonus materials, and contestants' social media accounts, the actual gender diversity of the show is remarkable in its overwhelming composition of cisgender men, who make up 81% of the contestants cast in seasons 1-12. A mere 6% of contestants are trans women, with the remaining 15% are comprised of non-binary or gender-fluid contestants (*RuPaul's Drag Race* Wiki, 2021). In *RuPaul's Drag Race* seasons 1-12, zero contestants are cis women, trans men, or AFAB non-binary people; fans of *Drag Race* have been increasingly vocal over this erasure of a huge subset of drag entertainers based solely on assigned gender at birth. Season 13 of *RuPaul's Drag Race,* released in January 2021, finally broke the trend with the casting of its first-ever AFAB contestant, Gottmik, a transgender man who performs as a drag queen. Season 13 is currently airing as of this writing, but has already begun addressing Gottmik's "gender journey," unique given the show's overwhelming representation of cis queer men. As a result of the skewed composition of *Drag Race,* virtually all mainstream drag artists are AMAB, with several notable exceptions—such as *Dragula* season 3 winner and drag king Landon Cider, and *Drag Race* season 13 drag queen Gottmik—which is largely because of RuPaul's longtime refusal to allow AFAB entertainers on *Drag Race.*

Despite being credited within queer vernacular culture as having literally invented many modern conventions of drag artistry, transgender women and non-binary performers are also grossly underrepresented within mainstream drag culture due in large part to their lack of representation on *Drag Race.* The major contributing factor to this phenomenon is RuPaul's history of transphobic remarks and his convoluted, insensitive approach to allowing transgender women to compete on the show—they can only compete if they are pre-transition, or up to a certain point in their transition before it grants them an "unfair advantage" over their competitors (Aitkenhead 2018). This transphobic rhetoric polices and politicizes the bodies of trans women, a demographic that already faces high rates of violence, harassment, and discrimination in society centered on their bodies, presentation, and ability to pass as cis women. The belief that medical transition grants an advantage to trans women on *RuPaul's Drag Race* is further complicated by the unrestricted admission of cis men or AMAB non-binary contestants who have had extensive cosmetic surgery to facilitate more dramatic drag transformations, such as facial reshaping or implants in the buttocks, hips, or chest. It would appear that RuPaul has no qualms about altered bodies on his show, so long as the body was assigned male at birth, still possesses a penis, and is altered only for performance rather than as an expression of a performer's out-of-drag identity.

Even among its large pool of AMAB contestants, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is further limited in the way it represents a narrow idea of queer performance, centered around the successful execution of female impersonation. A classic RuPaul catchphrase, uttered by the host every episode before the contestants jockey to impress the judges' panel with their weekly runway look, reveals the ultimate criterion for mainstream drag culture: "Gentlemen, start your engines. And may the best *woman*, win!"[11] Female impersonation is thus the ultimate goal for a drag queen, as that is her only ticket to mainstream success—which parallels RuPaul's shift from queer alternative drag artist of the 1980s to modelesque "glamazon" in the 1990s. The major substyles of drag codified by *RuPaul's Drag Race* are limited to comedy queen, glamour queen, pageant queen, dancing queen, and alternative queen. While the inclusion of the latter reveals a steadily growing presence of AMAB drag queens whose drag falls further into the alternative drag category—goth looks, horror looks, club kid looks, androgynous looks—these contestants ultimately must conform to normative feminine gender ideals or be harangued by the judges and eventually eliminated.[12] Other queer performance styles make brief appearances on the main stage of *RuPaul's Drag Race.* A handful of *Drag Race* queens have used burlesque during their runway presentations or performances; additionally, cosplay is also hinted at, with the occasional *Drag Race* contestant utilizing a look or performance that evokes characters from science fiction, fantasy, or video gaming.

---

[11] This catchphrase was conspicuously changed in season 13, aired beginning in January 2021, to "Racers, start your engines. And may the best *drag queen*, win!" Alongside the casting of a trans man contestant, I interpret this recent move as RuPaul's acknowledgement that not all drag queens are "gentlemen" and that female impersonation—"the best woman"—is no longer the ultimate goal of drag artistry on *Drag Race.*

Drag kinging is lost completely within *Drag Race*. Given that AFAB performers across the board are excluded (until Gottmik's admission to season 13), and kinging is generally associated with AFAB queer performance, this comes as no surprise. Over the last decade, there have been at least two instances where the all-queen cast is asked to execute "boy drag" in a challenge (season 2 of *Drag Race* and season 2 of *RuPaul's Drag Race All-Stars)*, but practiced masculine gender performance and the art of kinging are largely ignored in these instances. This issue came to the fore during season 11 of *RuPaul's Drag Race,* when guest judge Miley Cyrus appeared as a "drag king" cameraman to prank the contestants. As part of my fieldwork, I attended *Drag Race* watch parties at bars throughout Seattle. At the watch party for this episode, drag king host Mercury Divine paused the episode to critique Miley's look as sloppy, inaccurate, and fitting for RuPaul's dismissive attitude towards drag kings. Mercury pointed out that the *Drag Race* producers could have easily hired an actual drag king from Los Angeles to do Miley's drag look, such as legendary drag king Landon Cider; instead, Miley was styled in loose black clothing with a black cap; her breasts were still obvious; her makeup was femme with a lazy goatee that Mercury said "look[ed] like ginger pubes glued to her face" (02/28/2019).

---

[12] This typically plays out as the judges demanding to see more "range" (read: normative looks with broader appeal) from alternative artists. Normative drag queens on the show can get away with wearing virtually the same wig and same look in different colors week after week and not receive the same critique—Bianca Del Rio often jokes she managed to win season 6 of *Drag Race* despite wearing the same dress on the runway every single week.

Landon Cider, referenced twice already, is the only drag king that has broken into mainstream drag culture, though he has only a fraction of the visibility and following of his *Drag Race* queen counterparts. In 2016, Landon Cider (who also goes by Kristine Bellaluna) wrote an article in the mainstream LGBTQ+ publication *The Advocate,* responding to an interview RuPaul gave to the site the previous week. When asked about the exclusion of drag kings and AFAB drag queens, RuPaul claimed that the "irony of drag," or its subversion of patriarchy, is lost when "women" do drag, either as kings or as queens. Landon took issue with this, pointing out that drag kings and AFAB queens subvert patriarchal gender norms just as much as AMAB drag queens, if not more so (Cider 2016). Careful not to alienate himself from RuPaul and the legion of *Drag Race* fans, Cider's overall argument is supportive of *Drag Race,* though he called for RuPaul to accept kings in the competition:

> "Although the king community has had a recent burst of growth over the last decade, we're still leaps and bounds behind the visibility that drag queens enjoy with *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Logo's reality competition, which is the world's most prominent stage for drag performers. You haven't seen drag kings on *Drag Race*, but trust me, we exist. And it's past time we get the opportunity to lip-synch for our lives alongside our equally talented sisters" (Cider 2016).

While RuPaul has shown no signs of accepting kings on his show, Landon Cider finally accessed mainstream drag culture after winning season 3 of *Dragula* in October 2019. *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* set itself up as the alternative drag counterpart to *RuPaul's Drag Race* in 2016 with its first season, aired on YouTube through the *Hey Qween!* channel. The show is hosted by The Boulet Brothers, a Los Angeles-based drag duo specializing in glamourous goth-horror drag looks and elaborate themed parties in LA's nightlife scene. Featuring an all-LA cast of AMAB drag queens, the casting and format of *Dragula* was initially similar to *RuPaul's Drag*

Race, though its three pillars of “horror, glamour, and filth” encapsulate the grittier, counter-culture aesthetic of alternative drag when compared to the prioritization of convincing female impersonation in *Drag Race.* Rather than “America’s Next Drag Superstar,” *Dragula* seeks “America’s Next Drag Supermonster.”

Dragula gained a steady queer following through its first two seasons (2016-2017) through its refreshing depiction of non-normative drag. This coincided with a time that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* became increasingly formulaic and critiqued by queer fans for its lack of artistic diversity (i.e., Landon Cider’s *Advocate* piece). In 2019, *Dragula* was picked up by the Amazon Prime streaming service for its third season, and has recently moved to the equally-mainstream Netflix streaming service. While *Dragula* has been critiqued by drag artists for perpetuating objective standards for drag performance (rather than respecting individuals’ artistic approaches) and not adequately paying its contestants (anonymous interview, 2020), it continues to showcase queer identities never before seen on *Drag Race*, including two AFAB drag artists in its third season: Hollow Eve, a self-described post-gender drag socialist from the Bay Area, and Landon Cider, the famed Los Angeles-based drag king. The representation of AFAB artists was revolutionary, sparking important conversations about the exclusionary politics of mainstream drag culture and introducing AFAB drag artists to broader audiences for the first time. Landon’s ultimate win in season 3 of *Dragula* proved that drag kings—and AFAB artists more broadly—could indeed reign just as fiercely as queens.

While Seattle drag king Mercury Divine has been very vocal of his criticism of RuPaul’s transphobia, dismissal of drag kings, and exclusion of AFAB performers, drag kings in Seattle by and large approach the issue with considerable nuance. Even Mercury has asserted that drag kings would not work well as contestants on *Drag Race* because the fundamental structure of many of the challenges would simply not translate well to drag kinging. Drag king/drag thing Arrhythmio was initially hypercritical of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and RuPaul as well, though his views shifted over the course of 2019—while still deeply problematic in its treatment of trans identity and omission of AFAB drag artists, *Drag Race* brought more visibility to the scene, putting queer people and drag artistry in living rooms around the world (interview, 04/03/2020). He also acknowledged that the show is fun to watch and an excellent way to discover new drag artists as successive seasons are released (ibid.), with which I heartily agree despite my own critiques of *Drag Race*.

In contrast, the venerable Seattle MC and drag king Samuel L. JackYouSon, the primary host of Seattle's long-running all-drag king *Kings* show at Kremwerk, had nothing but positive things to say about RuPaul during our interview (09/15/2020). He expressed feeling a sense of disappointment that so many queer people "hate on" RuPaul. Shelli—the woman behind Samuel—came of age in Los Angeles during the 1970s and 1980s, during RuPaul's rise to mainstream fame. In her words:

> "Ru did change the game. What it meant to me as a 15, 16 year old Black kid who was a street dancer, but the club scene is going, and then you have motherfuckers like RuPaul show up like 'whatever girl, I'm about to make it work, you betta work.' It was—just so much growth happened… [RuPaul] suffered the slings and arrows all along the way. Motherfuckers were trying to shut down RuPaul all along the way, at every point. But RuPaul still managed to change the world" (interview, 09/15/2020).

Returning to present-day RuPaul's impact on local drag scenes during the *Drag Race* era, Shelli/Samuel also pointed out how the Seattle drag scene was featured in seasons 5, 6, and 8 of *RuPaul's Drag Race* with the casting of Seattle queens Jinkx Monsoon, BenDeLaCreme, Magnolia Crawford, and Robbie Turner. As a result of these artists' presence on *Drag Race*—especially Jinkx Monsoon's win in season 5—there was an explosion of opportunities for drag artists in the city, including drag kings: "Queens, kings, bios[13]—everybody was making money!" (ibid.). When I pressed about the exclusion of AFAB performers in *Drag Race,* and by extension, within mainstream drag culture, Samuel chuckled and replied, "the wave is still coming in. If I get splashed by the wave while I'm riding in, it doesn't change the fact that I'm still riding the wave onto the beach! I just want to see people keep the wave going" (ibid.).

Mainstream drag culture neither benefits all queer artists equally, nor does it highlight the diversity of queer performance styles such as burlesque, drag kinging, and alternative drag. The longstanding ban on AFAB drag performers in televised mainstream drag culture has taken ten years to be overcome with the landmark casting of performers like drag king Landon Cider on *Dragula* season 3 and drag queen Gottmik on *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 13. As a result, AMAB drag queens—the overwhelming majority of them cis queer men—have disproportionate control over representations of queerness and drag performance in mainstream drag culture. AFAB drag artists in local scenes like Seattle have long been critical of the exclusion of AFAB drag artists and drag kings on the main stage of *Drag Race,* though they acknowledge RuPaul's tremendous power as a drag icon who managed to sell the queer art of drag to mainstream audiences around the world.

The Voice of Drag: Alternative Drag's Embrace of Sonic Queerness

Voice is a major marker of identity. The work of musicologist Nina Eidsheim focuses on the way voice is racialized in music performance: her interrogation of the construction of "sonic blackness" in different U.S. American music traditions reveals that the racialization of voice is not inherent to the speaker/vocalist but instead a product of the listener's perception, drawing on contextual aural factors such as accent, timbre, dialect, and genre (Eidsheim 2012; 2018). The term vocalic body describes the listener's psychic personification of a disembodied voice (Connor 2000). Connor writes, "[v]oices are produced by bodies: but they can also themselves produce bodies" (ibid.: 35).

---

[13] The term "bios" here is short for "bio queen" and "bio king," which are old-school terms for women/AFAB drag queens and men/AMAB drag kings, respectively. The terms have since fallen out of favor for many queer artists because of their reification of "biological" gender.

Given that a body's gender assignment at birth is no guarantee of heterosexuality or cisgender identity, listeners typically rely on sonic factors such as pitch, range, timbre, and cadence to make an assumption about a speaker's or singer's gender (or sexuality). Indeed, a major component of transitioning for some transgender individuals is altering the voice, which allows them to sonically pass in cisgender society. For AFAB individuals such as trans men, the use of testosterone lengthens the vocal chords, producing a deeper vocalic body that indexes cis masculinity; conversely, AMAB individuals such as trans women commonly undergo voice training to adopt a pitch, timbre, and cadence that indexes cis femininity. In queer performance, including drag, visual information is arguably the strongest indicator of gender for audience members: a drag queen merely has to step onstage with high heels, a dress, glamourous makeup, jewelry, and extravagant hair to cue femininity without uttering a word. However, the aural components of queer performance play a strong role in either confirming or complicating audience members' perception of the gender (and by extension, sexuality) of the performing body.

Virtually all types of queer performance incorporate music or sound, blending live sound with pre-recorded sound during the performance. Live aural elements include singing, banter, comedy, instrumental performance, audience interaction, and ambient noise; pre-recorded sound typically consists of popular songs, spoken word, samples from television or film, and/or sound effects. Popular music is arguably the most iconic soundtrack to drag performance. The most common types of popular music used within drag and burlesque performances I attended in Seattle include Top 40 hits, dance music, hip hop, pop rock, and alternative pop—a term I use to describe music that shares major characteristics with Top 40 pop hits, but has not reached mainstream charts. However, drag artists in Seattle have collectively proven to be extremely eclectic in their musical tastes, sampling from country, swing, disco, folk, electronic, Latinx, show tunes, and classical music in the creation of their performance mashups for shows. Some also opt to perform their own original music, though this is rare; singing or performing on an instrument live is also uncommon.

Given that voice is a strong marker of gender, drag queens and kings seeking to convey normative gender will typically alter their voices to create congruence between the way they look and the way they sound, combining the visual illusion with an aural illusion to preserve cisgender standards of gender performance. I liken this phenomenon to theater studies scholar Jocelyn Buckner's concept of "aural drag," which she uses as a framework to understand how the African American Hyers Sisters of the late 19th century used pitch, dialect, and cadence in their vocal performance to defy audience expectations of how Black women should sound onstage (2012). Drawing from their Western classical training, Anna Madah and Emma Louise Hyers skillfully executed vocal duets with complimentary male and female vocal parts: "while Anna Madah possessed a soaring soprano voice, Emma Louise boasted a deep and rich contralto that extended far into the bass line. They capitalized on this range by performing female and male roles in duets […] In doing so, the siblings enacted what I call 'aural drag,' an audible, gendered 'passing' as a mature man and woman, in the ears of their audiences" (2012: 311).

Queer performers commonly utilize aural drag to maintain congruence with their visual impersonation of normative genders. For live speech and singing, this entails modulating pitch, changing the cadence of speech, using slang, or deploying an accent or dialect to index cisness. When drag queens and kings lip-sync, this is reflected in their music choices: if a drag king's goal is to impersonate a man through drag in the cisnormative sense, his selection of a track will feature a male vocalist. This way, when he lip-syncs for his audience while dressed as a man, his vocalic body will confirm the illusion of cis-maleness for his audience. In the case of tracks where a vocalist of a gender *not* being portrayed appears, drag artists will "sit out" that section so as not to ruin the illusion of normative gender. For example, if a drag queen is seeking to emulate conventional femininity by lip-syncing "Crazy in Love" (2003), a popular Beyoncé song that also features rapper Jay-Z, she will only lip-sync Beyoncé's part and leave the Jay-Z lyrics disembodied—or even better, a guest drag king will spontaneously join her onstage to lip-sync Jay-Z's verse.

I name the maintenance of cisnormative standards in the aural dimension of classic drag performance as *sonic cisnormativity.* This practice is almost ubiquitous in mainstream drag culture. In challenges and "lip-sync-for-your-life" performances, drag queens on the stage of *RuPaul's Drag Race* are *always* given lip-syncs to tracks featuring female vocals in order to maintain congruence between the aural dimension of the performance and their feminine visual presentation. Sonic cisnormativity also manifests in queens' speaking or singing voices while in drag: typically, drag queens will adopt a vocalic body that indexes femininity while in drag in order to complete the illusion of cis femaleness. On *Drag Race,* queens who refuse to alter their voices while in drag are often pointedly told they should do so by fellow contestants or judges, indicating the hegemonic status of sonic cisnormativity in mainstream drag culture—although this has become less of an issue in later seasons of *Drag Race,* coinciding with the acceptance of more alternative queens as contestants. An important exception to maintaining a “female” vocalic body is a common drag queen trope in which an AMAB drag queen will suddenly drop their voice into a deeper, more masculine register while singing or speaking for comic effect. However, I maintain that this exception proves the rule: audience members are already aware that they are witnessing cross-gender performance, so the temporary break in the aural illusion is the playful wink and nudge between performer and audience that acknowledges that the sonic and visual markers of gender are performative rather than a rejection of sonic cisnormativity. Further, a sudden, strategic change in pitch or timbre for comedic effect does not negate the other contextual elements, including cadence, pronunciation, and dialect, to fully break from sonic cisnormativity.

Beyond staged performances, queer people are accustomed to strategic performances of cisnormativity—including in the sonic sense—to cope with and survive in a cisheterosupremacist society. For example, my personal way of speaking—pitch, cadence, use of slang, etc.—is drastically different when I am at a queer bar in Seattle versus a bar in my small rural hometown of Smithton, Illinois, in which visible queerness is a potential liability given the town’s Midwestern cultural conservatism. My ability to code-switch between social contexts is so fluid and unconscious that I do not even consider one mode of performance as more authentic than another—it is simply how I have learned to operate in the world as a queer person. Queerness is thus not entirely intrinsically part of myself; rather, queerness also describes a performative mode that I adopt in specific settings to make myself legible to other queer people or identify queerness in others. This process is called *queer listening* by performance studies scholar and artist Yves Bonenfant:

> "Queer is a doing, not a being. Even if the source of some versions of queerness lies in the existential ground of selfhood, and is thus rooted in biological imperatives, it is through doing queer and being identified and marked as queer that the queer become queer to themselves and to the world. Hence the consequence of the naming of queer, separating queer into 'other.' *Queer listening listens out for, reaches toward, the disoriented or differently oriented other"* (2014: 78, emphasis mine).

I do not wish to position certain types of drag performance as more or less queer than others. My intent here is to instead point out the differences between drag performance that embraces cisnormativity—thus increasing its legibility for cisheterosexual audiences and potential for mainstream success—and drag performance that invites queer listening to "reach toward the differently oriented other." This echoes Butler's assertion that drag performance can be used to reinforce hegemonic gender norms, or subvert them (1990).

Alternative drag artists in Seattle reject sonic cisnormativity primarily because their art is meant for other queer people. When performing they do not change their voices to fulfill a sonic expectation of normative gender, and they lip-sync to whatever song is appropriate for their performance regardless of whether or not the vocalic body of the singer appears congruent with the gender(s) they are presenting onstage—if they are presenting gender at all. In some cases, they will even embody multiple voices and/or genders in performance. Going back to the hypothetical drag performance to "Crazy in Love," a savvy alternative drag performer will embody Beyoncé one way and then shift their characterization to evoke Jay-Z in a contrasting way all during the same performance. Pushing beyond centering the obvious gender differences of Beyoncé and Jay-Z in performance—something that seasoned audiences of drag have seen *ad nauseum*—opens up vast possibilities in creating something new and unique. Alternative drag artists thus remix normative gender with queer subjectivities in the visual, performative, and sonic realms. The aural rejection of sonic cisnormativity by alternative drag artists is *sonic queerness*, accessed and made legible through the practice of queer listening.

Alternative drag artists in Seattle routinely deployed sonic queerness in performance during 2019 and 2020. From March 2020 through the end of my fieldwork, drag performance in Seattle had moved almost exclusively to digital spaces in light of state lockdowns implemented to curb the spread of COVID-19 (see chapter 6). As part of Seattle's alternative drag scene, Michete followed suit, utilizing social media to disseminate her work. While she had previously performed as a drag queen in the Seattle scene at alternative drag shows, Michete identifies more as a queer popular musician, having released three mixtapes since 2015 (Schafer 2018). On October 27, 2020, she released her electro-rap song and music video "Back of the Truck" via YouTube and streaming platforms Spotify and Apple music. In the music video, co-produced by Michete and Stephen Anunsen, Michete first appears in a dark alleyway, wearing a black leather jacket, black thong, black boots, sunglasses, neon-green nails, a long blonde wig, and her signature blue lipstick. She then dances while lip-syncing to her own vocals, accompanied by flashing green and purple lights and interspersed with shots of her nearly naked without the leather jacket or lounging in the back of a pickup truck. The song's lyrics are a prime example of sonic queerness, as Michete strategically juxtaposes cisheterosexual social norms with her own queer subjectivity:

[intro]
Acting like a slut, looking like a bitch
Acting like a slut while I'm looking like a bitch (x14)

[verse]
Acting like a slut, looking like a bitch
I am not like other girls, I have a dick
Titties out, leather jacket, I'm causing such a racket
Walk like a bitch but I talk like a faggot
I don't give a fuck if I'm lady-like
You should know that Mimi's gonna get it any way she likes
Bet you wanna see what's up, bet you wanna stay the night
Bet you wanna beat it up, bet you wanna lay the pipe

[outro]
Back of the truck, I look like something that you wanna fuck
I look like something that you wanna fuck
I look like something that you wanna fuck, yeah (x8)

Michete's identity as a trans woman does not stop her from rejecting sonic cisnormativity. Her declarations of "*I don't give a fuck if I'm ladylike*" and *"I am not like other girls, I have a dick"* become profound statements of resistance to cisheterosexual expectations of womanhood. Furthermore, she makes no apparent effort to modify the pitch or timbre of her voice to conform to any expectation of sonic cisnormativity; rather, she insists, "*I talk like a faggot."* Perhaps most radical of all is her assurance that despite her obvious transness, as well as her aberrant behavior—"*acting like a slut, looking like a bitch"*—she is still sexually desirable to others—"*Bet you wanna lay the pipe / I look like something that you wanna fuck"*—and able to exercise agency in meeting her own desires—"*you should know that Mimi's gonna get it any way she likes."* Like many other queer people, trans women face a double-standard under cisheterosupremacy: they are routinely erased, suppressed, harassed, denied access to essential services, mocked, assaulted, or murdered whether they conform to cis feminine standards or fail to meet them. Michete rejects this trap of cisnormativity, choosing instead to celebrate her transness, her queerness, and her sexual desire through alternative drag performance.

Entranced by Michete's boldness as well as the sheer queer punk brilliance of "Back of the Truck," I (and many others) streamed the song incessantly following its release, leading to it rapidly becoming Michete's top-streamed song on Spotify as well as earning attention from legendary *Drag Race* queens Alaska 5000 and Willam Belli[14] on their popular podcast, *Race*

---

[14] A trash queen, Alaska 5000 is a celebrated example of alternative drag artistry within the *Drag Race* fandom. Willam is a queer punk icon since her disqualification from season 4 of *RuPaul's Drag Race*—her rumored refusal to conform to RuPaul's rules on the show inspired many queer rebel spirits.

Chaser (2021). Its explosion of popularity among queer listeners beyond Seattle's alternative drag scene reveal the importance place that sonic queerness occupies among queer artists and their audiences.

The rejection of sonic normativity has a tangible political purpose in sustaining queer community networks and valorizing queer identities. Using performance to acknowledge that some women have dicks, some men have vaginas, bodies have hair, and vocalic bodies do not conform to the physical bodies they emanate from in the cisnormative sense become radical declarations of queer selfhood. Through the process of remix, alternative drag performers actively create space for the trans, non-binary, and otherwise queer bodies that are violently persecuted and routinely marginalized in society. As many alternative drag artists are themselves transgender and/or non-binary, these creative choices are also profound forms of self-expression that invite the audience to reconsider their own ideas of gender and body. The liberatory politics of sonic queerness go even further, embracing any person punished for their inability to meet the impossible standards of fixed, binary gender. Alternative drag asserts that queerness is valid and that the visibly queer body in performance deserves just as much space, attention, and love as cisheterosexual performing bodies.

Conclusion

Among the six major queer performance styles I witnessed in Seattle between 2019-2020, alternative drag captured my interest the most deeply. Beyond resonating with my own identity as a queer person, I appreciated the way alternative drag artists simultaneously embrace and reject the limited purview of queer performance defined by *RuPaul's Drag Race.* While drag artists and queer performers in general have benefited from the mainstream popularity of drag in the 2010s, the narrow range of drag styles used and near-invisibility of AFAB performers on the stages of mainstream drag culture have resulted in uneven opportunities for queer performers in Seattle.

Alternative drag in Seattle challenges the sonic cisnormativity of mainstream drag culture set by the popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Sonic queerness is generated through a critical remix of visual presentation, spoken or sung parts, and song choices for lip-synced tracks that tactically reject cisheterosexual standards of sound, body, and behavior. Drag artists' deployment of sonic queerness functions as resistance to cisheteronormativity, making critical space for queer and trans bodies that are marginalized in society. The rise of mainstream drag culture in the 2010s has resulted in mass cisheterosexual patronage of queer spaces, which has proven a blessing and a curse for local drag artists and queer patrons of bars and clubs. In the next chapter, I will explore the way Seattle's queer public spaces—that is, bars, clubs, and other venues for queer performance—inform the politics of identity as drag artists labor to create space for themselves and their communities.

Chapter 2

“Where’s the space for that?”: Drag Performance, Identity, and Queer Public Space in Seattle

Drag performance is central to the maintenance of queer public space in Seattle. Colloquially known as “gay bars,” these spaces also include clubs, restaurants, and arts venues concentrated in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, but scattered liberally though other areas of the city as of the late 2010s. Beginning with underground clubs in the early 20th century, queer spaces became increasingly mainstream in the latter half of the 20th century as the Capitol Hill neighborhood became the center of queer public culture in the city. In the 2010s, the increase in visibility and public acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities, compounded by the popularity of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, has led to a renaissance of local drag culture, with hundreds of active drag artists, dozens of recurring drag shows, and several queer-owned venues sprinkled throughout Seattle. However, the popularity of mainstream drag culture has led to uneven opportunities among queer performers in the city, with certain drag styles and performers valorized over others. In this chapter, I demonstrate how identity politics—sexuality, assigned gender at birth, gender presentation, performance style, age, race/ethnicity, and class—shape queer public spaces where drag performance takes place. Drag artists in Seattle negotiate these identity politics with a variety of performative and political strategies, including remixing dominant ideologies with queer sociosexual aesthetics and creating spaces that specifically serve marginalized identities within the queer community.

I begin this chapter with a brief history of queer public space in Seattle, focusing on how cross-gender performance has always played a key role in the maintenance of these spaces. I then move into a description of the three venues I frequented between 2019-2020, looking to the ways drag artists navigate the inter- and intra-community identity politics in queer public spaces.

While the increase in cisheterosexual participation in local drag scenes has been a boon to queer artists and queer-owned venues, it has profoundly reshaped the character of many venues in Seattle. Tensions between drag artists with differing venue affiliations, identity formations, and relative proximity to mainstream drag culture also play out in queer public spaces. However, drag artists respond to these pressures by asserting agency in a variety of ways. They deploy disidentificatory practices (Muñoz 1999) and critically stage their own consumption (Devitt 2009) to both participate within mainstream drag culture while simultaneously critiquing it through the creation and performance of remixed mashups. Other(ed) artists use intersectional approaches to queer politics (Cohen 1997; 2019), creating spaces that purposefully serve members of the queer community affected by multiple layers of oppression and sustaining a queer sociosexual economy (Hankins 2015) that transforms the practice of tipping into a nod towards the radical redistribution of wealth.

It is critical to mention that queer public space in Seattle is not limited to bars, clubs, and performance venues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, drag performance moved online, extending queer public space into a virtual realm (see chapter 6); around the same time, drag artists took to the streets with other activists during the ongoing demonstrations against state-sanctioned violence against Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) sparked by the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 (see chapter 5). This chapter focuses on queer public space as it existed within the bars, clubs, and performance venues I visited during 2019-2020, prior to the COVID-19 lockdown enacted in Washington state in early March 2020.

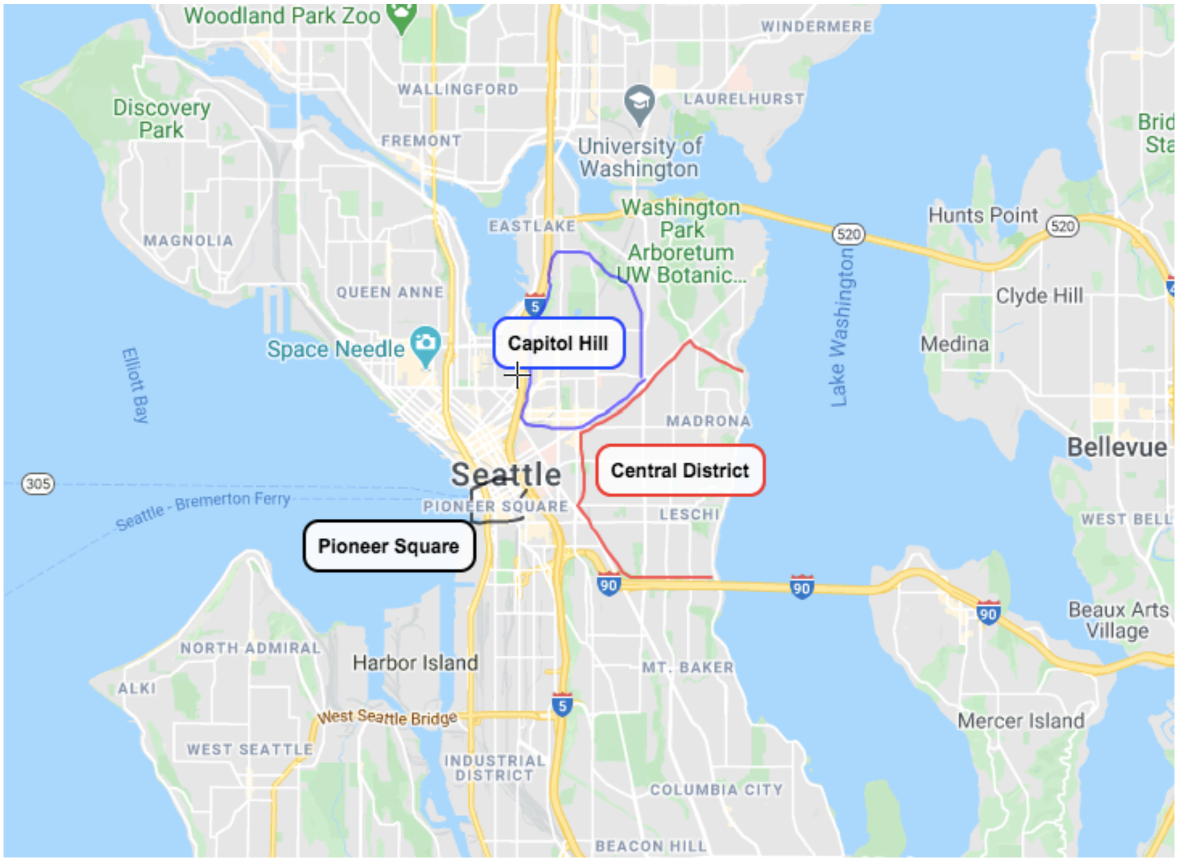
A Brief History of Public Queer Space in Seattle

In terms of public space, Seattle's gay and lesbian community[15] had its beginnings in the Pioneer Square neighborhood just south of downtown (see Figure 4). Cultural landscape specialist and Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board member Rich Freitas traced Pioneer Square's queer history from the end of Prohibition in 1933—when public records for bars and taverns became available—to 1974, when many members of the LGBTQ+ community began relocating to Capitol Hill as Pioneer Square deteriorated (2017). Pioneer Square's status as Seattle's gay mecca took form as a network of bars, pool halls, clubs, bathhouses, and restaurants that were either owned by gay people or served as safe spaces for them to congregate in an otherwise homophobic public sphere (Freitas 2017). As a critical location for the U.S. military during the second World War, Seattle was also a popular spot for (closeted) gay and lesbian military personnel, who frequented the Pioneer Square area (Paulson 1996; Hill 2003; Bronski 2011). A well-established payoff system to local police sustained Pioneer Square's gay social spaces during the mid-20th century, despite state and federal laws criminalizing same-sex activity and crossdressing (Hill 2003); however, police brutality was still an ever-present threat to gender and sexual minorities in Seattle, especially for queer people of color, cross-dressers, and/or other gender nonconforming folks (Paulson 1996).

---

[15] I purposefully use the term "gay and lesbian community" here not because bisexuals, transgender people, and other sexual and gender minorities were absent at the time, but because more-inclusive terms like "LGBTQ+ community" or "queer community" are anachronistic descriptors.

Figure 4: Locations of Pioneer Square, Capitol Hill, and the Central District. Map created by author using scribblemaps.com, October 28, 2020.



Seattle's center of drag culture in the mid-20th century was the Garden of Allah Cabaret, which operated in the basement of the Arlington Hotel in Pioneer Square between 1946-1956 (Paulson 1996). The center of Seattle's gay and lesbian community during the decade of its operation, the Garden primarily featured female impersonation, though male impersonation was also included (ibid.). In his book, Paulson offers a rich account of queer performance in Seattle at the Garden, highlighting legendary artists such as Jackie Starr and the performers in the traveling Jewel Box Revue. However, the Garden of Allah was more than just a drag club—it served as one of Seattle's first public gathering spaces for sexual and gender minorities, providing a setting for pre-Stonewall gay rights organizing to later coalesce into the post-Stonewall[16] social and political movements that catapulted LGBTQ+ rights into mainstream discourse in Seattle (ibid.). Another important gay/queer institution in Pioneer Square was the Double Header, located at the intersection of 2nd Avenue and Washington Street. Opened in 1934, the Double Header was the oldest continuously operating gay bar in the United States by the turn of the century (Hill 2003). With its closure in December 2015, the last pre-Stonewall queer space in Pioneer Square was lost, making the cause for preservation of the neighborhood's rich LGBTQ+ history all the more urgent (Freitas 2017).

Identity played a central role in the gay and lesbian activism of the 1970s in Seattle, as activists sought to find commonality with their cisheterosexual neighbors while emulating the political and economic strategies of other identity-based movements of the era. In 1969, the Dorian Counseling Service for Homosexuals[17], commonly known as the "Dorian House," was opened by a group of gay community leaders called the Dorian Society in Capitol Hill (Atkins 2011). As the first Seattle public gay institution that was not a bar or bathhouse, the choice of location was a significant mark of the gay and lesbian community's shift away from the bars of Pioneer Square to the more affluent and residential Capitol Hill. The Dorian Society hosted drag balls in its fundraising and outreach events, bringing the art form out from the underground bars and clubs and into the more reputable arena of community politics (ibid.), which underlines the importance of drag for LGBTQ+ community organizing. However, respectability politics still were at play, as concerned voices in the gay and lesbian community spoke out against cross-gender performance as endangering the expansion of LGBTQ+ rights. In 1978, during a political struggle between the queer community and Seattle police officers Dennis Falk and David Estes over their Initiative 13—which, if it had been passed, would have overturned city ordinances protecting gays and lesbians from job and housing discrimination—some gay and lesbian activists suggested cancelling Seattle's fourth annual Pride altogether over fears that drag queens parading through the streets would be too provocative for cisheterosexual Seattle voters (Atkins 2011). Despite the uncertainty, Seattle Pride 1978 was louder, gayer, and more political than ever, and Initiative 13 was opposed by a landslide by Seattle voters the following November (ibid.; Crowley 1990). This was not the end of the battle, however—LGBTQ+ activists fought and overturned a King County ordinance allowing job and housing discrimination in 1980, and defeated a statewide initiative to overturn city-level protections in 1990. On the federal level, the Supreme Court guaranteed protection of LGBTQ+ individuals from job discrimination in 2020 as part of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; laws prohibiting housing discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals are still set by municipalities, counties, and/or states as of January 2021.

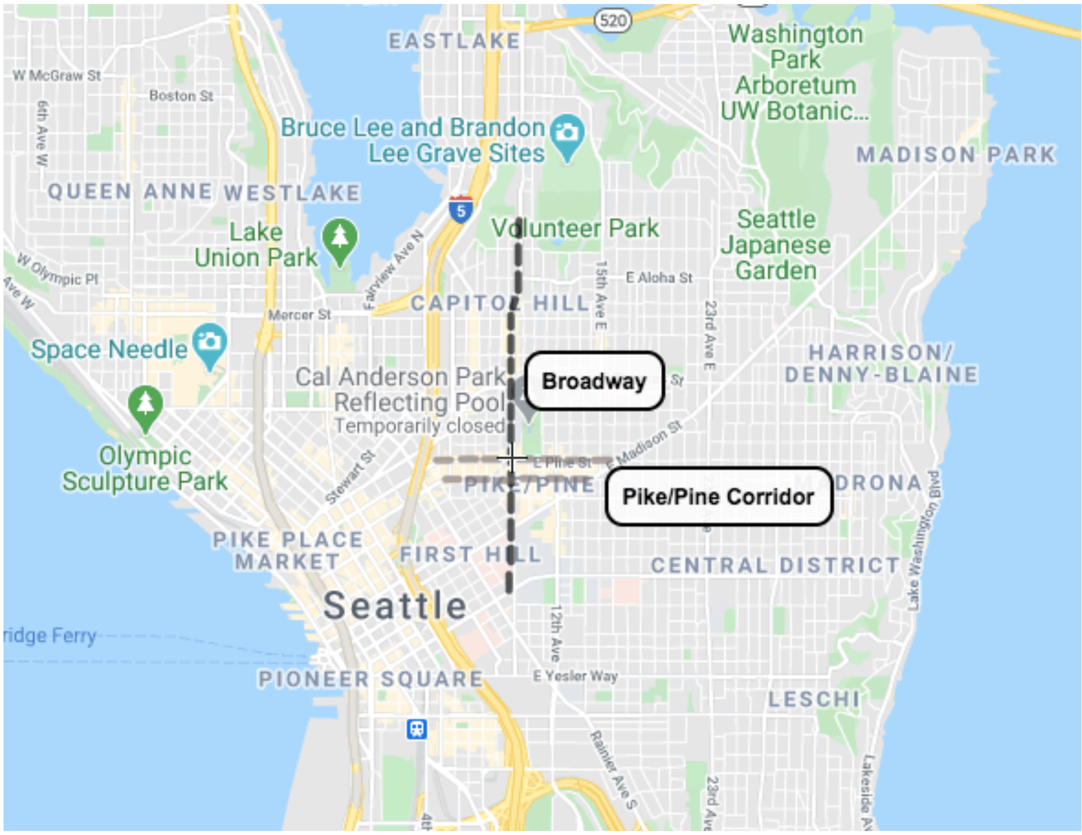
---

[16] The Stonewall riots occurred between June 28 and July 3, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village in Manhattan, New York City. Characterized as the beginning of the "gay liberation movement," or struggle for LGBTQ+ rights, the Stonewall riots were led by cross-gender performers and trans people of color to protest police raids of gay bars and ongoing police brutality directed against gender and sexual minorities. Pride celebrations are traditionally held at the end of June in the United States to commemorate the Stonewall riots; drag artists are considered an integral part of Pride because of their association with organized resistance against police brutality.

[17] The name was subsequently changed to "Seattle Counseling Service for Sexual Minorities" to be more inclusive (Atkins 2011).

As gay and lesbian-owned businesses concentrated in the area during the 1970s, the Broadway corridor of Capitol Hill between Pike and Pine Street, just northwest of the Central District, became a hub for Seattle's LGBTQ+ community (Atkins 2011; see Figure 5). Gay and lesbian community leaders sought to mimic the economic enclaves created by other minoritized groups during the ethnic identity movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and LGBTQ+ individuals were encouraged to adopt “more reputable” businesses (e.g., those unrelated to alcohol consumption, queer performance, and/or sex work) while activists implored the community to “buy gay” to build a relatively independent “homosexual economy” (ibid.). While cross-gender performance was seen as too radical by many assimilationists, drag artists were still an important part of the growing LGBTQ+ community. In 1971, the Queen City Business Guild (composed primarily of gay and lesbian bar and bathhouse owners) helped establish the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Olympic and Rainier Empire (ibid.; Imperial Court of Seattle 2020), composed of prominent drag artists and other queer community leaders that host events for queer community empowerment and charity causes (interview with Londyn Bradshaw, 01/07/2020).

Figure 5: A closer look at Capitol Hill, with Broadway defined by the vertical dashed line and the Pike/Pine Corridor defined with the parallel dashed lines. The intersection of Broadway and the Pike/Pine corridor was (and remains) the epicenter of queer public space in Capitol Hill. Map created by author using scribblemaps.com, November 11, 2020.


Broadway
Pike/Pine Corridor
EASTLAKE
Washington Park Arboretum UW Botanic...
MADISON PARK
Bruce Lee and Brandon Lee Grave Sites
QUEEN ANNE
WESTLAKE
Lake Union Park
Volunteer Park
Seattle Japanese Garden
CAPITOL HILL
Space Needle
Cal Anderson Park Reflecting Pool Temporarily closed
HARRISON/ DENNY-BLAINE
Olympic Sculpture Park
PIKE/PINE
PIKE PLACE MARKET
FIRST HILL
CENTRAL DISTRICT
Seattle
PIONEER SQUARE
LESCHI

Not all members of the LGBTQ+ community supported the transformation of Capitol Hill's Broadway corridor, pointing out that poorer members of the community would be displaced by upper- and middle-class gentrifiers in the neighborhood; similarly, some cisheterosexual homeowners in the neighborhood resisted the changes (Atkins 2011). However, more bars, bistros, and boutiques oriented towards the gay community opened along the Pike/Pine corridor into the 1980s. Seattle's Gay Pride March was officially relocated from downtown to Broadway in 1982, and gradually became a regular route stretching from the Central District up to Volunteer Park (Atkins 2011). While drag performance had generally fallen out of favor in the assimilation-minded gay and lesbian community in the 1970s, it returned to Capitol Hill in force in the late 1980s and early 1990s during the AIDS crisis, largely through the work of legendary Seattle drag queen and Imperial Court Empress Crystal Lane (aka Kris Kristofferson), who performed nightly in drag to raise money for HIV/AIDS charities before succumbing to the disease in 1994 (ibid.).

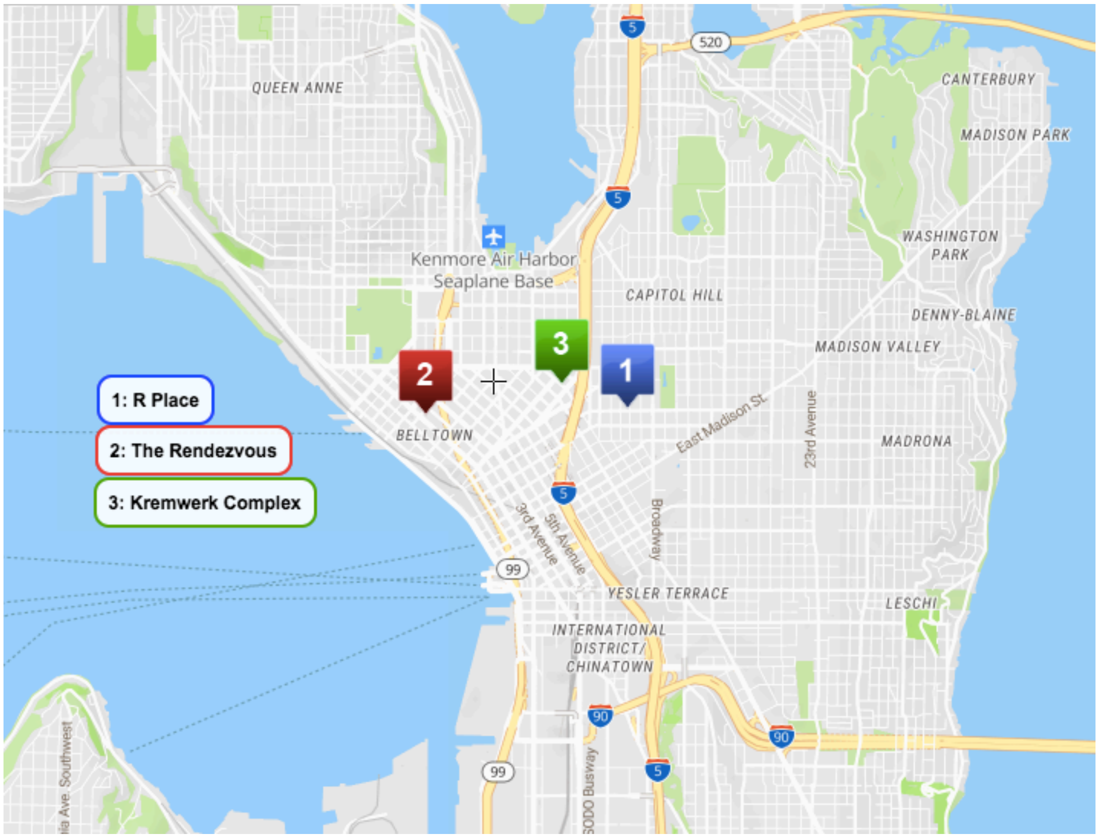
The Central District and Capitol Hill became prime sites for gentrification in the 1990s and 2000s as Seattle's booming tech economy drew high-paid professionals to the city. First described in the 1920s as the locus for Seattle's Black community, the Central District (or CD) saw its Black population in 1970 at 48% diminish to just 20% by 2010 (Morill 2013). Because of their proximity to the downtown core and Amazon campus to the west and the University of Washington to the north, the CD and Capitol Hill were considered ideal residential areas by wealthy newcomers drawn to Seattle's financial, tech, and education industries. Property prices skyrocketed, resulting in the displacement of lower-income Black residents from the area, including members of the Black queer community, powering the decline in the CD's Black population (Morill 2013).

The popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and mainstream embrace of LGBTQ+ culture in the 2010s also drew cisheterosexuals to the Capitol Hill and CD residential areas because of their proximity to the exciting queer nightlife along the Pike/Pine corridor. As queer performance waxed in popularity through the 2010s, LGBTQ+ bars and clubs saw a massive increase in cisheterosexual patronage. My interviews with Seattle drag artists, as well as my own experiences in the scene, reveal how this trend became a blessing and a curse for the drag community. On the one hand, cisheterosexual visitors bring money and recognition to drag artists and queer businesses; however, their presence in large numbers has a drastic impact on the character of these spaces and results in the displacement of the most vulnerable members of the LGBTQ+ community, who often rely upon queer public spaces the most for safety, sociality, and/or economic opportunity (be it employment, performance work, meeting potential friends and partners, or sex work). Many venues featuring queer performance attract large numbers of cisheterosexual patrons, whom I refer to as "tourists," following Esther Newton's description of drag venues in Midwestern cities (1972). A tourist club (or bar) is a space that caters to cisheterosexual audiences interested in consuming the erotic and exotic pleasures of queer performance (ibid.: 7). As queer performance is professionalized and its host spaces are "legitimized" for tourists, marginal identities and/or lifestyles under the LGBTQ+ umbrella are sometimes pushed out. The atmospheres of different venues profoundly shaped both my experiences, and the experiences of my informants, over the course of 2019-2020.

Queer Public Space in late-2010s Seattle: (Some) Venues for Drag Performance

Between January 2019 and March 2020, my fieldwork was conducted primarily at three venues in Seattle: R Place, The Rendezvous, and the Kremwerk Complex (see Figure 6). I want to make it clear that there are many other venues for drag performance in Seattle beyond these; in the two years I spent taking notes and interviewing members of the Seattle drag scene, I chose to focus on a smaller number of venues to get a better sense of the styles of drag performance present, the general character of the patrons/audiences, and to follow the careers of specific artists more closely.

Figure 6: Locations of my three primary field sites in Seattle in 2019. Map created by author using scribblemaps.com, November 17, 2020.


1: R Place
2: The Rendezvous
3: Kremwerk Complex
1
2
3
QUEEN ANNE
CANTERBURY
MADISON PARK
Kenmore Air Harbor Seaplane Base
CAPITOL HILL
WASHINGTON PARK
DENNY-BLAINE
MADISON VALLEY
BELLTOWN
East Madison St
23rd Avenue
MADRONA
3rd Avenue
5th Avenue
Broadway
YESLER TERRACE
LESCHI
INTERNATIONAL DISTRICT/ CHINATOWN
SODO Busway
520
5
90
99

Venues are an important identity marker for drag artists. As they secure regular bookings or coveted cast spots at a given venue, that space becomes an artist's "home bar," often articulated through casual remarks like "she's an R Place girl" or "they're one of the Kremwerk queens." I noticed casual rivalries between performers associated with different venues, though these tended to be affable in character in most cases. Further, the reputation of venues among the drag community of Seattle directly correlated with how venues allegedly treat their artists.[18] To my knowledge, an artist's "home bar" does not prevent them from securing bookings or cast spots at other venues. Conversely, many artists operate without any specific venue affiliation, performing at different bars, clubs, or events around the city. Because queening is valorized as a form of mainstream drag culture, drag queens tend to have greater mobility within the scene and thus tend to occupy cast spots and have a greater tendency for venue affiliation. With more limited opportunities for kinging in the scene, drag kings are more itinerant, taking gigs at different venues throughout the city to sustain their careers.

As my initial research questions revolved around the relationship between *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the Seattle drag scene, I chose the Rendezvous, R Place, and the Kremwerk Complex because these three venues hosted regular watch parties for *RuPaul's Drag Race All-Stars* season 4 and *Drag Race* season 11, both of which aired in 2019. As I became more in-tune with local drag shows and performers, I began attending shows in other spaces (both for research and for fun), which will be discussed later in this chapter in relation to their status as queer public spaces and the associated issues of identity and accommodation.

Struggles over Space at R Place: "Straight Infiltrators" and Intra-Community Tensions

Located along the Pike/Pine corridor at the intersection of East Pine Street and Boylston Avenue, R Place is situated at the epicenter of the historic Capitol Hill "gayborhood." With three levels that each include its own bar, R Place boasts dancing, drag shows, and television watch parties. My first official fieldwork excursion was a *RuPaul's Drag Race All-Stars* season 4 watch party at R Place in January 2019; there, I noted the large number of cisheterosexual-appearing viewers in the space. As a queer person who has taken part in queer public spaces throughout the United States since 2010, I am no stranger to cisheterosexual tourists. Many are lovely, but there are certain patterns of aggravating behavior that I have come to recognize.

---

[18] For example, a venue (which I will not name here) that allegedly did not pay a performer a promised reward for a competition in 2018 was routinely criticized by other performers at other venues during the following years. News travels quickly among drag artists, especially pertaining to predatory practices regarding their safety, accommodations, and fair compensation.

In fact, the two women who sat next to my friend Jack and I on that night in January 2019 proved to be quite toxic examples of this crowd, committing several of the "cardinal sins" of straight tourists in queer spaces. First complimenting me on my painted nails and light makeup, the woman immediately next to me—a complete stranger—used her phone to take a selfie with me without my consent, relegating my role to that of a queer prop for documentation of her excursion to gay space. Even today, it is critical to respect the privacy of patrons of queer public spaces; being present in a gay bar is not a public declaration of belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. Besides being rude, taking unsolicited photos of people in gay bars can result in social ostracization or even violence against queer people if photos are circulated widely. Taken aback by her impudence, I sat mutely as she bragged about her engagement, introducing me to her maid of honor while showing off her opulent ring. Prior to the federal passage of same-sex marriage in 2015, showing off engagement rings in queer public spaces was a flagrant display of cisheterosexual privilege—although bachelorette parties are typically welcome in gay bars since they bring in a lot of money and energy. However, I still find it gauche when coming from a stranger in a gay bar, as if her status of bride-to-be entitles her to special attention from queer people.

Most puzzling, however, was her lecture on appropriate behavior for drag queens with the opening salvo, “you know who I don’t like in your culture?” She launched into an account of how “bitchy” a Seattle queen[19] was to her, comparing that experience to meeting Raja and Manila Luzon, her favorite *Drag Race* queens, whom she had met at a meet-and-greet in Los Angeles. This reveals how an experience in which a television celebrity is paid to engage with fans in a controlled environment becomes a *Drag Race* viewer’s baseline for how drag culture operates. Given how callously she treated me, I can only imagine how she approached the Seattle queen she claimed had been rude to her. When drag artists become commoditized in mainstream drag culture through televised appearances, major tours, and meet-and-greet experiences, fans often fail to recognize the social dynamics of local drag scenes, treating queer performers as their pets and queer public spaces as their playgrounds. Needless to say, this one watch party experience—while rich in terms of shedding light on my question about the impact of *Drag Race* on queer public spaces—proved to be too much for me. I had a minor breakdown after returning home that evening, overwhelmed by feelings of anger and frustration at being objectified and marginalized during my first fieldwork outing at a gay bar. Unable to separate my role of ethnographer with my identity of being a queer person desiring of a safe and comfortable queer public space to be myself, I opted to attend a more queer-centric watch party: *ReBel’s Drag Race* at the Rendezvous, which I discuss later in this chapter.

The presence of cisheterosexual patrons was still remarkable during *So You Think You Can Drag,* a local drag competition held at R Place a few months after my initial unsavory experience at the bar. On May 9, 2019, I arrived at R Place early and stood in line for the show before the doors opened. As the competition was held on the third floor of the bar, the line stretched from the base of the third-floor staircase[20] along a balcony on the second floor which opened to the main bar on the first floor. A raucous group of what appeared to be cisheterosexual women were making a scene below, already obnoxiously drunk at 6:30PM on a Wednesday. Two queer-appearing people near me in line stared down at the group with clear distaste. The first remarked, "it's some messy bitches in here already," to which the second replied, "the straights have infiltrated again." While I missed the opportunity to speak directly to the pair, their exchange stuck with me, as I understood the sentiment especially after my own prior experience at R Place. Unaware that gay bars are a place of refuge, relaxation, and home to many queers, disruptive cisheterosexual-appearing people who treat gay bars as places to get excessively drunk—or "messy"—are singled out as "straight infiltrators" by queer patrons. It is important to recognize that many cisheterosexual women consider gay bars as refuges, too—places to gather, relax, and have fun away from the pressures (and sometimes danger) of cisheterosexual men in mainstream bars and clubs. Further, gender and sexuality are fluid constructs that can change throughout a person's life; visiting queer public space can be a major step for a person who identifies as cisheterosexual but is also questioning their identity. Finally, the nuances of social power and privilege layered within such exchanges are complex, as gay men (and other queer people) regularly perpetuate misogynistic rhetoric and behaviors targeting women, including cisheterosexual women. In any case, issues surrounding the tensions between cisheterosexual tourists and visibly queer patrons (including myself) permeated my project.

---

[19] I met this queen several months later and found her to be quite friendly and professional, both during a show at R Place and while chatting with her in a group at a different bar after the show.

---

[20] The multiple levels in R Place also points to issues of accessibility in the space; while the bar does have an elevator that serves all three floors, it is unreliable. During a particularly infamous evening at *So You Think You Can Drag,* two drag artists in the competition got stuck in the elevator for nearly an hour.

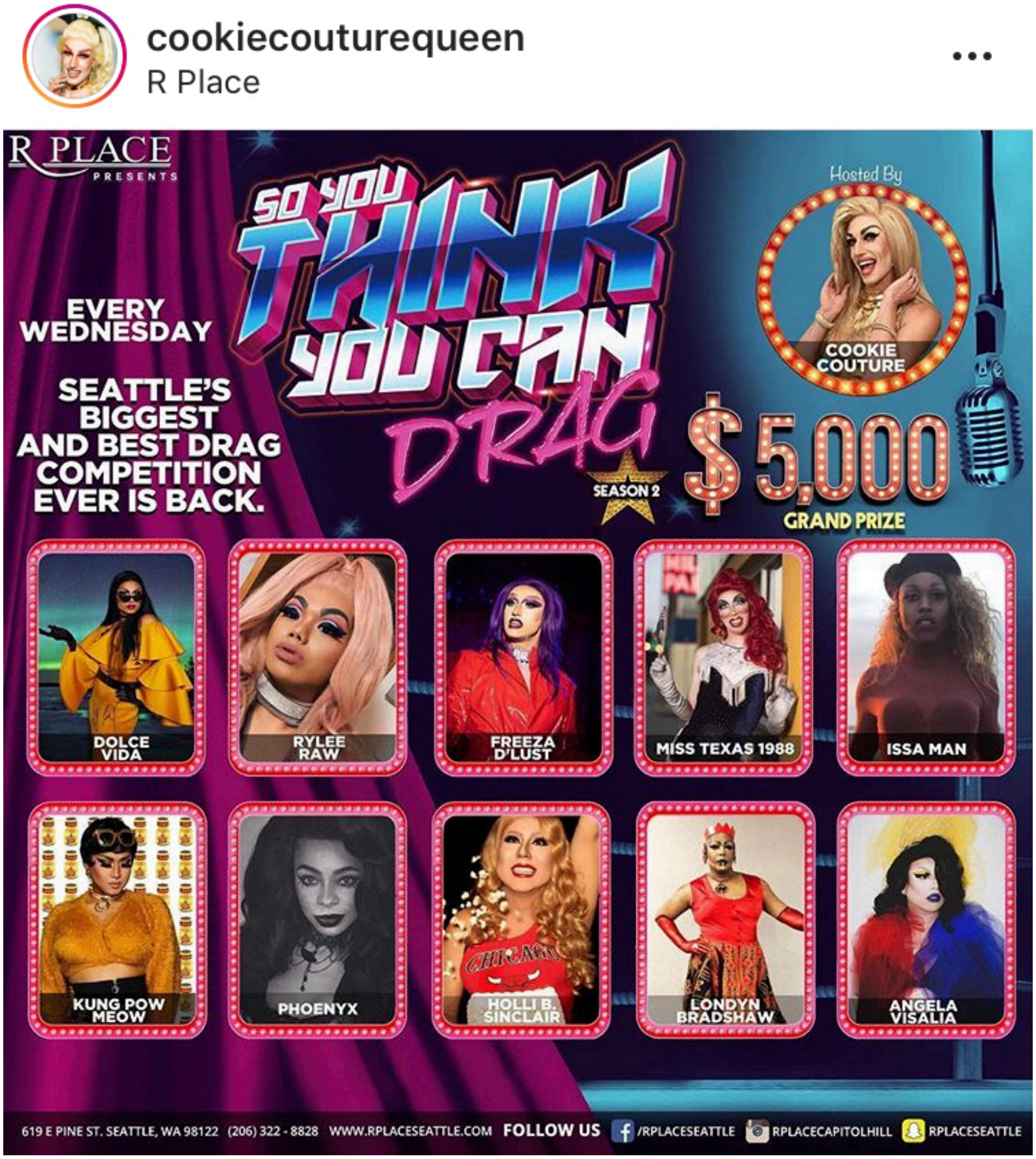
However, those who come into the space with respect or at the invitation of queer friends go unremarked, and I noted many positive interactions with cisheterosexual visitors at R Place (and other venues in Seattle). When I asked Londyn Bradshaw about the impact of cisheterosexuals at drag shows, their reply was quite diplomatic (befitting their skill as a host), and also spoke to the economic importance of cisheterosexual patronage:

> "I think people assume that [when] heterosexual people go to shows, they're gonna get drunk and crazy, but in reality you have to respect them as well, because they pay as much money and drink as much as the queers do. So if they're having a good time by shouting and wooing and stuff like that, then that means they'll come back and we'll keep having a successful show and making money (interview, 01/07/2020).

Later in the same interview, Londyn challenged my own bias about cisheterosexual tourists when I pressed the issue, pointing out to me that it is not fair to lump them all under the "same umbrella" because of the outrageous behavior of a few, despite Londyn also having had uncomfortable interactions with rowdy cisheterosexual audience members while hosting shows (ibid.). Londyn's nuanced response balances the integral role of cisheterosexual tourists in maintaining queer performance scenes while also acknowledging that issues do arise when cisheterosexual visitors fail to respect the social norms of queer public spaces.

Besides showcasing a diverse audience in terms of queer/cisheterosexual representation, *So You Think You Can Drag* was also a study in how subsets of the Seattle drag community negotiated differing approaches to terminology, community values, and drag artistry. A weekly local drag competition, *So You Think You Can Drag* held its second "season" between April and June 2019 (see Figure 7). I found out about *So You Think You Can Drag* through Londyn Bradshaw, the host of the *Drag Race* watch party at the pizzeria Little Maria's, who invited my friends and I to attend *So You Think You Can Drag* to watch her compete (and help her secure the weekly audience vote to continue in the competition). The benefits of competing in the competition were increased visibility within the Seattle drag scene as well as a cash prize of $5000 for the winner. Besides Cookie Couture, the well-known Seattle drag queen who hosted the show, *So You Think You Can Drag* featured two celebrated queens from R Place as regular judges for the competition: Mila Skyy and Amora Dior Black. Mila and Amora had greater weight in voting decisions (each audience member could cast two votes per night; Mila and Amora each had fifteen votes) and provided live critiques of each performer's runway halfway through the show. Each week also featured one or two guest judges, typically related in some way to the weekly themes, which included live singing, drag kinging, red carpet looks, Pride, and other topics and performance styles broadly related to drag culture. Guest judges did not have extra weight in voting decisions, but participated in the live critiques.

Figure 7: The promo poster for season 2 of *So You Think You Can Drag*, including the full cast, details, and contact information for the hosting venue, R Place. Screenshot taken by author from Cookie Couture's Instagram account, used with permission.


cookiecouturequeen
R Place
R PLACE
PRESENTS
SO YOU THINK YOU CAN DRAG
SEASON 2
Hosted By
COOKIE COUTURE
EVERY WEDNESDAY
SEATTLE'S BIGGEST AND BEST DRAG COMPETITION EVER IS BACK.
$ 5,000
GRAND PRIZE
DOLCE VIDA
RYLEE RAW
FREEZA D'LUST
MISS TEXAS 1988
ISSA MAN
KUNG POW MEOW
PHOENYX
HOLLI B. SINCLAIR
LONDYN BRADSHAW
ANGELA VISALIA
619 E PINE ST. SEATTLE, WA 98122 (206) 322 - 8828 WWW.RPLACESEATTLE.COM FOLLOW US /RPLACESEATTLE RPLACECAPITOLHILL RPLACESEATTLE

Each show was divided into two parts: first, a runway, in which each contestant takes a turn modeling a look based upon their interpretation of the weekly theme, evoking the tradition of "walking a category" in ballroom culture (Livingston 1990; Bailey 2013); second, a five- to eight-minute performance fitting the parameters of the talent theme, which echoes the performance format commonly seen at drag shows today. Guest judges often performed between the runway and talent portions while the contestants changed out of their runway looks in preparation for their talent performances. The latter typically featured "standard" lip-sync performances, but often to creatively remixed tracks that incorporated music, sound effects, and spoken word.[21] Props, dancing, reveals, and robust narrative elements tended to define the strongest talent performances. After the talent performances, audience members were asked to cast their votes. During the first month of the competition, the audience voted with tickets placed into ballot boxes for each contestant; in the final weeks, each audience member submitted a ballot in which each contestant could be scored separately on their runway and their talent on a 1-5 or 1-10 scale. Because of this system, audience participation was crucial, and the space on any given week was packed as the contestants recruited as many of their friends, family, and fans to attend to help them advance to the next week. The resulting audience was a diverse mix of other drag performers, queer community members, and cisheterosexual friends and family members to the contestants.

As the cast of *So You Think You Can Drag* season 2 consisted entirely of drag queens—all AMAB[22] except one—it was not a remarkably diverse grouping in terms of gender presentation and drag styles. However, during the fifth week of the competition*,* the cast was asked to create a drag king character for both the runway and talent portions of the show, and two drag kings (Sam I'Am and Mercury Divine) were brought in as guest judges. Overall, the night did not go well. According to the guest kings, and echoed by many audience members including myself, only two or three of the cast members effectively executed drag king characters, simultaneously revealing how different the art of kinging is from the art of queening as well as how little some drag queen performers think of the effort that goes into creating a compelling drag king character. Further, tensions between the drag queen judges and drag king guest judges came to a head when the lone AFAB cast member was mistakenly misgendered[23] and referred to as a "bio queen"[24] by the drag queen judges during the runway critiques. The term "sis," short for "sister," became the most contentious point. Used as a term of endearment between drag queens—particularly Black queens—the gendered component of the term (and similarity to the term "cis," short for "cisgender") was not well-received when leveled against the white, non-binary and agender drag king guest judges during the very public disagreement over terminology. As tensions reached a breaking point, the bar owner took to the stage to shut down the argument. Based on my own observations and casual follow-up conversations with other people present, my understanding is that the R Place queens felt disrespected by being publicly called out by their drag king guests, who, in turn, felt marginalized and dismissed in a space dominated by AMAB drag queens and their supporters during an event meant to celebrate the art of kinging.

---

[21] For an in-depth discussion of remix and drag performance, see chapter 4.

[22] AMAB is an acronym meaning "assigned male at birth," encompassing cisgender men, trans women, some intersex people, and some non-binary people; its counterpart is AFAB, or "assigned female at birth" which describes cisgender women, trans men, some intersex people, and some non-binary people. This terminology avoids socially constructed, sex and gender essentialist terms like "biological woman" or "born male" while also explicitly addressing the violence of gender assignment by cisheterosupremacist medical institutions. See chapter 1.

---

[23] To misgender someone is to use the incorrect pronoun, name, or gendered label. As I understand it based on conversations with others present at the show, this contestant had not yet come out to the R Place queens as non-binary, which is why the queens misgendered the contestant onstage.

[24] The term "bio queen" is a controversial term for a woman (or AFAB person) who performs as a drag queen. Besides ascribing biological essentialism to the performance of gender, it also is an Othering term in that it implicitly constructs AMAB drag queens as unmarked or "normal." Simply referring to any person who does drag queening as a drag queen is preferred, regardless of their gender identity or gender assignment at birth. The drag king equivalent is "bio king"—less common, but similarly problematized in favor of simply using the term "drag king" to describe any performer using a kinging style. With that said, there are some drag artists who still prefer to refer to themselves as "bio queens" or "bio kings." A related pair of terms are "hyper queen" and "hyper king."

The interaction soured the relationships between the R Place queens and the guest kings, and revealed the existence of tension between artists of different styles, complicated by the intersecting layers of gender, race, and performance identities with venue affiliations. For many audience members, the argument served as a learning moment regarding appropriate terminology around both gender and gendered performance. However, it was an uncomfortable moment, and quite triggering for some—one person at my table left the bar in disgust after the altercation, citing their anger and exhaustion at the routine marginalization of drag kings and AFAB performers in AMAB-majority gay bars. This moment also exposed the fact that conflicts in public queer space are not just felt between local queers and cisheterosexual tourists. Differing value systems around gender presentation, social norms, and terminology create intra-community rifts between subsets of the Seattle drag community, exacerbated by the dominance of AMAB drag queens in public queer spaces thanks to the hegemony of mainstream queer culture.

My experiences at R Place revealed definite tensions that have arisen around the competition for space, safety, and visibility between different identity groups. Immediately apparent to me was the friction between local queers and cisheterosexual tourists as the latter visit queer public spaces in greater numbers, thanks to the popularity of mainstream drag culture and the allure of queer performance. However, intra-community conflicts arise among queer patrons as well, as LGBTQ+ audience members and drag performers of differing race, age, gender presentation, assigned gender at birth, and performance style disagree (sometimes heatedly) over their values and beliefs. The next section explores how drag artists strategically use performance to valorize marginalized identities in queer public spaces.

Rebels at The Rendezvous: Disidentification with Mainstream Drag Culture

Drag artists in Seattle use space in creative ways to make room for marginalized members of the queer community, even within venues that are not widely considered as queer public space. One such tactic is the use of the *RuPaul's Drag Race* watch party, a cornerstone of contemporary mainstream drag culture, to spark dialogue about the show producers' embrace of consumerism, misogyny, and normative notions of body, beauty, and gender—a process that queer studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz calls disidentification. Described as a third mode of identity formation utilized by queers of color as a survival strategy, disidentification sits between *identification,* or assimilation, and *counter-identification*, or separatism (Muñoz 1999). Subjects that use disidentification work within and against the dominant frameworks that oppress them, embracing mainstream referents while simultaneously critiquing them. In the context of Seattle's drag scene, this process is enacted through the creative use of remix, discussed in further detail in chapter 4.

The second venue I frequented was The Rendezvous (see Figure 6 above), a bar and theater in Belltown. While this part of Seattle is not directly associated with queer nightlife—and I would not characterize the Rendezvous as a "gay bar" per se—this venue regularly hosted events related to queer performance culture, most commonly burlesque. The main bar and kitchen of the Rendezvous serves three performance spaces: the Jewelbox Lounge on the main floor, the Grotto on the lower level, and the upstairs Velvet Lounge. I attended a few events in the Jewelbox Lounge, which were usually polished variety shows featuring drag and burlesque performers. This space featured a stage complete with curtains and a seating area of modest size. Audiences in the Jewelbox Lounge were mixed-orientation, but leaning more towards greater cisheterosexual representation. This was epitomized by a visit to a burlesque show in the

Jewelbox Lounge in October 2019: while most (if not all) the performers onstage were queer, it felt as though my friend Jack and I were the only queer people in the audience based on a preponderance of opposite-sex couples, subtle ways the audience reacted to the performance, and overheard snatches of conversation. While audiences of burlesque tend to be markedly different from those of drag, there is considerable overlap between burlesque and drag in the Seattle queer performance scene; artists of either type commonly draw on performance conventions from the other, and the term "draglesque" is used to describe performers who bridge the gap between the two styles.

Beyond the experience of being part of the audience, the astronomical ticket price of the show—ranging between $25-$45—was also a mark against it as being queerly oriented. While the word "queer" means different things to different people—with multiple valid interpretations—I have noticed that in the literature on queer theory, in my fieldwork, and in my own experience that the term is deployed with an intersectional approach, denoting a radical, inclusive, progressive, anti-racist, and/or anti-capitalist orientation alongside the signification of gender and sexual difference vis-a-vis cisheterosexuality. My first encounter with queer theory was in an undergraduate seminar with C.L. Cole at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2011, where we read a critical piece by Black feminist scholar Cathy J. Cohen (1997; 2019). Building upon the ideas of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), Cohen problematizes the queer/non-queer binary constructed by white queer theorists of the 1990s. Treating queerness as a monolithic identity limits the radical potential of queer theory to account for the lived experiences of people struggling against cisnormativity and/or heteronormativity; an intersectional approach to queerness engenders the potential to dismantle multiple layers of oppression of which cisheterosupremacy is but one component. In Seattle, queer show producers often utilize “pay-what-you-can” systems. A disidentificatory practice in itself, the use of this economic model promotes inclusion, increases attendance, boosts the sum of direct tips to queer performers, and challenges the capitalist notion that fixed monetary value can be assigned to the ephemera of performance.

While I never attended a show in the Rendezvous’ lower level, I spent many evenings in the upstairs Velvet Lounge, or as drag artist Arrhythmio called it, “our weird little velvet attic” (02/28/2020). A cozy space, the Velvet Lounge features a row of built-in red velvet couches along one wall, with tables and chairs arranged opposite them. At the head of the room, there is a balcony overlooking the lower level of the bar, which was usually obscured by a black curtain. A projector screen was often set up in front of this curtain, useful for *ReBel’s Drag Race,* a free *RuPaul’s Drag Race* watch party hosted by drag king/drag thing[25] Arrythmio and drag king/“draglesquer” Mercury Divine. Also present was Dee, who regularly works the tech side of Mercury’s shows and performances. The Velvet Lounge was quite different from the rest of the Rendezvous in terms of whom it served. Nearly all patrons of *ReBel’s Drag Race* in the Velvet Lounge were queer and/or AFAB, which fits the hosts’ intention to create a watch party that centered queer and AFAB viewers (and was a major part of my decision to regularly attend *ReBel’s Drag Race*). On occasion, cisheterosexual-appearing people would wander up to see what was going on upstairs, but would not linger long (to our amusement), prompting jokes about how “the straights wanted to check on the queer zoo upstairs, but things were scary and weird so they left” (05/09/2019).

---

[25] While Arrhythmio had previously identified as a drag king, they shifted their identification to that of “drag thing” in 2020 as their artistic focus shifted from portraying masculinity to a “creature/monster/alien angle” (04/03/2020). The term is used by other drag artists that have shifted away from the gendered lenses of kinging and queening; a similar term I have encountered in the scene is “post-drag.”

I began regularly attending *ReBel's Drag Race* in January 2019, through the second half of *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* season 4 and the full run of *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 11 through May 2019. After providing commentary during the episode, Mercury and Arrhythmio performed for the watch party attendees, often with a teasing "now it's time to show you drag that RuPaul doesn't want you to see!" (02/15/2019), which is a direct reference to RuPaul's refusal to allow AFAB performers to compete on *Drag Race* (Aitkenhead 2018).[26] As an AFAB drag artist with a complicated love/hate relationship with *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Mercury Divine created *ReBel's Drag Race* as a space designed specifically for queer identities excluded from *Drag Race*. This deliberate centering of queer audiences also actively resists the "cisheterosexual colonization" of *Drag Race* watch parties, which I observed more broadly throughout Seattle watch party culture. Like many other local watch parties, the drag king hosts of *ReBel's Drag Race* actively invited audience participation, asking attendees for thoughts, opinions, and critiques about the show. By playing a torrented file of *Drag Race*, the hosts also had more control over the pace of the watch party: we were not beholden to the schedule of the television network. Mercury was free to start and stop the show as they pleased. Both co-hosts also used their bodies to physically block RuPaul's image on the projector screen during the *RuPaul's Drag Race* title sequence, playfully shielding their audience from RuPaul. These actions are what ethnomusicologist Rachel Devitt would call the *critical staging of consumption* (2009). Drawing also from Muñoz (1999), Devitt used this specific formation of disidentification in her dissertation to describe the ways Seattle drag and burlesque femme artists used popular music and culture referents to celebrate the popular culture they love while simultaneously "wield[ing] performative control" over it (2009).

---

[26] This was notably changed in season 13 of *RuPaul's Drag Race,* which began airing in January 2021, when drag queen contestant Gottmik became the first trans man and AFAB person to compete on the show.

Unlike other watch parties, Mercury opted to pirate *RuPaul's Drag Race* for *ReBel's*, asserting, "that transphobe [RuPaul] will get none of my money" (05/30/2019). Throughout the episode of *Drag Race*, Mercury interjected commentary, sometimes about the looks and performances of the contestants, but most often in ways that called attention to the show's blatant embrace of normative beauty standards, misogyny, ableism, and consumerism. While product placement has always been a part of *Drag Race,* recent seasons (seasons 7-12) have become particularly saturated with RuPaul's own brand or the products of corporate stakeholders interested in reaching the ever-growing audiences of *Drag Race*. Mercury lampooned this development by turning it into a drinking game for their attendees: "drink every time RuPaul tries to sell you shit" (02/15/2019). Ironically, this strategy critiques consumerism through consumption, as it in effect promotes drink sales at the Rendezvous during *ReBel's Drag Race*, which comes as no surprise. As MCs and entertainers, drag artists have long been used to facilitate alcohol sales at bars and venues.

If RuPaul and *Drag Race* are so problematic, I often wondered why drag artists bother watching the show at all. I posed this question to Mercury during *ReBel's*: despite RuPaul's relentless self-promotion and problematic behavior, Mercury chooses to watch the show and participate in mainstream drag culture to support the contestants on the show and to keep up with trends in drag culture (03/11/2019). Indeed, I have yet to meet an artist in the Seattle drag scene who is unfamiliar with *Drag Race*. The show's immense influence on the art of drag makes it impossible to ignore, even for performers who actively dislike it—which is why so many drag artists assume disidentificatory relationships with *Drag Race.* Additionally, drag performance often relies on the clever remix of popular culture references, so *Drag Race* literacy is an assured way to connect with audiences at drag shows. Finally, the performances that follow the watch party at *ReBel's Drag Race* serve an important purpose. On one level, they are entertaining and reassert the living tradition of drag performance that exists alongside televised mainstream drag culture. On another level, they serve to re-center AFAB drag artists beside the television show that has systematically erased them.

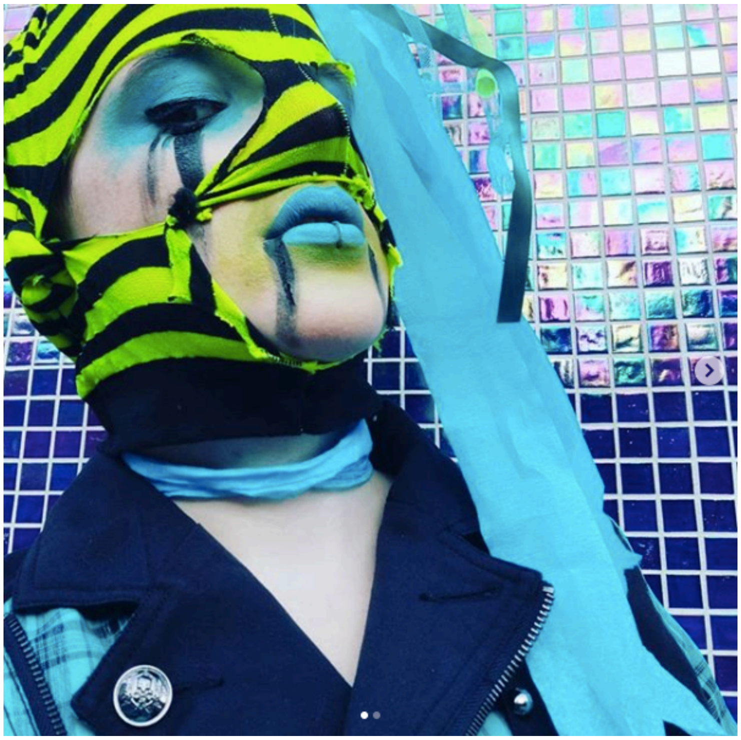
A notable post-show performance at *ReBel's Drag Race* came at the conclusion of *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 11, after the final lip-sync performance between contestants Brooke Lynn Hytes and Yvie Oddly, aired on VH1 on May 30, 2019. Brooke Lynn Hytes, originally from Toronto, ON, represented the glamorous, polished drag queen style that is highly prized on *Drag Race*. In contrast, the gritty, DIY (do-it-yourself), and experimental looks of Yvie Oddly from Denver, CO represented alternative drag. The song chosen for the final "lip-sync for the crown" competition was Lady Gaga's "The Edge of Glory" (2011). As an widely-known "gay icon" (and a past guest judge on *Drag Race*), the use of a Gaga track is unsurprising within a show celebrating mainstream drag culture. While Brooke Lynn physically looked more like Gaga—particularly with her blonde wig—Yvie better captured the "mother monster" persona that Gaga cultivated when "The Edge of Glory" was released. During the lip-sync, Brooke Lynn centered her performance around a reveal. In *Drag Race*, reveals (on-stage wig and/or costume changes mid-number) are such an overdone trope that Brooke Lynn camped it up[27] to the extreme. Wearing a black cloak with the word "REVEAL" all over it, and "HERE COMES THE REVEAL" on the back, she pulled the cloak off at a climactic moment in the song to reveal an opulent, sparkling bodysuit underneath. Yvie Oddly, wearing a relatively simple brown bejeweled gown, used a reveal in her performance, too. The main feature of her look was an elaborate mirrored headpiece that gave her the appearance of having three faces; she then turned around to reveal a painted mask on the back of her head.

---

[27] To "camp it up" in this case means to do something in an overly exaggerated fashion. I define camp in more detail in chapter 4.

Yvie Oddly was crowned the winner of season 11, to the delight of the *ReBel's Drag Race* group; Mercury then did a performance in response to the episode. Their look and costume (see Figure 8) fit the alternative drag aesthetic, in a substyle known as club kid characterized by artistic, avant-garde looks. They lip-synced to Marilyn Manson's "Doll-Dagga Buzz-Buzz Ziggety-Zag" (released 2003), a song that falls far outside the purview of mainstream drag culture. The use of a metal song with a male vocalist stands in stark contrast with the typical pop songs with female vocalists seen consistently on *Drag Race*, such as Lady Gaga. With distorted guitars and growled vocals that remain in a narrow melodic range, Manson's performance is harsh and jarring after the buoyant synths and soaring melodies of Lady Gaga.

Figure 8: A photograph of Mercury Divine's "godmod grotesque burlesque drag" from their performance at the final *ReBel's Drag Race* watch party for season 11 of *Drag Race*. Photograph from Mercury Divine's Instagram, used with permission.



"Doll-Dagga Buzz-Buzz Ziggety-Zag"

[verse 1]
All the goose-step girlies with their cursive faces
We know it's all Braille beneath the skirt
I'm bulletproof bizzop and swing heil
And I don't really care what gentlemen prefer.

Say, all you pin-down girls and bonafide ballers,
So manically depressed and manically dressed
We got our "Venus Not In Furs," but "In Uniforms."
If you're not dancing, then you're dead.

[chorus]
Doll-dagga buzz-buzz ziggety-zag
Godmod grotesque burlesque drag (x2)

In the context of Mercury's performance, the lyrics of "Doll-Dagga" become a biting critique of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, its host RuPaul, and its contestants. The song choice also celebrated Yvie's weird, alternative drag aesthetic when compared to the more normative queens that comprised the rest of the season 11 cast. A trained and experienced burlesquer, Mercury utilized striptease during the performance, using the art of the reveal to complement their overall performance narrative. Their use of this performance technique highlighted the stagnancy of the reveal trope on *Drag Race*, in which queens center entire performances around mediocre, poorly-executed reveals. Through their lip sync performance, Mercury rejected the "goose step girlies" "in uniforms" of *Drag Race* in favor of their own "godmod grotesque burlesque drag"—drag that is not limited by normative drag standards set forth by RuPaul and his production team.

ReBel's Drag Race is a prime example of how drag artists imaginatively use mainstream venues to create queer public space, as well as a concrete application of José Esteban Muñoz's notion of disidentification. While not a person of color, Mercury Divine is a queer person who is marginalized within mainstream drag culture in part because of their positionality as an AFAB drag king. By creating a space to critically stage the consumption of *RuPaul's Drag Race* that centers trans and AFAB viewers, tactically refusing to pay for streaming rights to the show, and using their own performing body to contest the erasure of AFAB drag kings, *ReBel's Drag Race* serves as a powerful act of disidentification, centering identities that are otherwise left behind by *RuPaul's Drag Race.* While *ReBel's* is unique in its trans- and AFAB-centered approach to the television watch party, the Kremwerk Complex is notable for offering a variety of recurring shows that celebrate marginalized identities within drag culture.

The Kremwerk Complex: Making Space for Marginalized Artists

The third and final space in which I regularly spent time during fieldwork was the Kremwerk Complex, located on Minor Avenue between Stewart and Howell in the Denny Triangle (see Figure 6 above). An odd part of town, the Denny Triangle is bordered by the Amazon campus of South Lake Union to the north, the Seattle downtown retail core to the southwest, and Interstate 5 to the east. Despite its central location in the city, this area is relatively far from the Seattle light rail, express bus service, and affordable parking, making navigation to Kremwerk tricky for potential patrons. The Kremwerk Complex consists of three spaces: Little Maria's Pizza, the Timbre Room, and Kremwerk itself. A queer-owned and operated pizza restaurant and bar,[28] Little Maria's is a gathering place for members of the drag community, particularly those associated with Kremwerk. Many of the staff at Little Maria's were drag performers, and the work as staff members provided them with the steady employment and income that drag performance does not offer the vast majority of drag artists.[29] Little Maria's also was the setting for a regular *Drag Race* watch party hosted by drag queen Londyn Bradshaw and a queer karaoke night called *Beat* hosted by drag queen Noona. While patrons of the space are predominantly queer due to the regularity of drag-related programming, Little Maria's also hosts non-queer events (such as a *Geeks Who Drink* trivia night) that draws cisheterosexual regulars. Drag shows at Little Maria's are particularly notable in that they are among the few all-ages spaces in the broader constellation of shows in Seattle; they thus tend to draw both younger patrons and younger drag artists.

---

[28] As a restaurant, Little Maria's was able to remain open during the pandemic, and I attended a few socially-distanced drag shows and watch parties there during May and June 2020. However, due to an increase in COVID-19 cases in King County, the staff discontinued these offerings in July. Despite offering take-out and limited seating, Little Maria's temporarily closed in September 2020.

[29] During my two years of fieldwork, I encountered around one hundred drag artists in Seattle (either through attendance at live shows or social media). Among them, only two made a living performing in drag full-time before the pandemic (interview with Miss Texas 1988, 01/10/2020), demonstrating the importance of "day jobs" that allow queer people the financial and temporal flexibility to sustain careers as drag artists.

There are two event spaces in Kremwerk, with the primary site for drag shows, DJ sets, and parties located on the lower level (called Kremwerk). A dark, industrial space with infinity mirrors, a full bar, low ceilings, and an odd corner-shaped stage, Kremwerk features EDM dance parties that draw different audiences from its queer programming, though from what I've seen on nights when EDM events run concurrent with drag shows, there is noticeable overlap between the two scenes in terms of queer patronage. More importantly, Kremwerk was the setting for many recurring drag shows, including *Kings, WEIRD, WERKshop*, *Cucci's Critter Barn,* and *Arthaus.* The space is also used for special drag showcases such as the Rocky Horror Shadowcast offered Halloween 2019, in which a group of drag performers acted out musical scenes as the movie was projected onto a screen behind them.

As of November 2020, *Kings* is a five-year-old drag king showcase occurring every last Saturday of the month, hosted primarily by Samuel L. JackYouSon, with Mercury Divine or Salvador Saber occasionally co-hosting. *Kings* usually lasts for two hours with an intermission in the middle, featuring a half dozen performers specializing in kinging, live singing, or burlesque. Each *Kings* show had a loose theme that fit the season in which it was held (see Figure 9). Of all the drag shows I attended in 2019, *Kings* consistently had the highest proportion of AFAB performers and AFAB audiences, reflecting the high number of AFAB queer artists who perform in the king style of drag. *Kings* is thus a critical performance space for a sizable portion of the queer community that is relatively underserved by other queer public spaces.

Figure 9: Monthly themes for *Kings* and *WEIRD* during 2019.

MONTH	***Kings***	***WEIRD***
April 2019	*Kings: Goth Kings*	*Game of Thrones: The Drag Show*
May 2019	*Kings: 3rd Annual Prom*	*Street Fighter vs. Mortal Kombat: The Drag Show*
June 2019	*Kings: Pride 2019*	*Adult Swim [the drag show]*
July 2019	*Kings: Pop Culture Kings*	*Netflix & Drag*
August 2019	*Kings: Club Kids*	*Final Fantasy vs. Kingdom Hearts*
September 2019	*Kings: Back to Basics*	*Sailor Moon vs. Dragon Ball Z*
Early October 2019		*Buffy the Vampire Slayer: A Drag Tribute*
Later October 2019	*Kings: Halloween Edition*	*Tragic Kingdom: A Drag Tribute to No Doubt and Gwen Stefani*
November 2019	*Kings: 4th Anniversary Show*	*Star Wars vs. Star Trek*
December 2019	*Kings: Dreams & Fantasies*	*Country Christmas*

WEIRD was another monthly show held in the primary Kremwerk space. Hosted by Londyn Bradshaw, Cookie Couture, or Old Witch, *WEIRD* was a variety show that featured a series of drag acts arranged around a predetermined popular culture theme (see Figure 9 above) and often drew cisheterosexual tourists because of its embrace of mainstream pop culture (interview with Londyn Bradshaw, 01/07/2020). *WEIRD* was held twice during October 2019 because Halloween season is lucrative for drag artists, as both queer and mainstream audiences seek out drag shows to celebrate the holiday. While *WEIRD* is indefinitely on pause during the pandemic, *Kings* moved to a digital format during 2020, though it was not offered in monthly installments.

Another notable show I attended in the lower level of Kremwerk was *WERKshop Wednesdays*. Held regularly on the second Wednesday of each month, *WERKshop* is a structured open-stage night hosted by Mercury Divine. While *WERKshop* is also restricted to 21+, the cover charge is only $3, which helps to draw patrons to an amateur drag show on a weeknight. Mercury values creating space for new performers, which they reiterate at the beginning of every *WERKshop,* though seasoned performers are also welcome to sign up—particularly if they want to try something new in a low-stakes environment. Because audience expectations of drag performance are increasingly higher with the saturation of drag-related content in popular culture, it is difficult for new performers to break out into the scene or for established performers to try new ideas in regular shows because of inflated expectations. *WERKshop* has this become a safe space for amateur performers in the Seattle scene, including myself. While I have previously performed onstage as a drag queen in St. Louis, *WERKshop* was my first Seattle performance and the first appearance of my drag king character, John Queere (see the epilogue of this dissertation).

Unlike the pay-what-you-can models used for other recurring shows, *WEIRD* and *Kings* cost between $10-$15; these shows (as well as *WERKshop*) are also age-restricted to 21+ because of alcohol sales at the downstairs bar. Furthermore, the downstairs venue is only reachable via stairs, making navigation to the space exceedingly difficult for patrons needing mobility aids (interview with Silver, 03/20/2020). While Kremwerk's diversity of show content have made it central within alternative drag culture in Seattle, the barriers around financial cost, age restrictions, and the physical layout of the space raise significant issues of accessibility among the queer community. I learned through casual conversations with drag performers in early 2020 that Kremwerk management had planned to expand the venue to include a street-level performance space that would considerably improve accessibility, though the status of this project is on indefinite hiatus given the club's shutdown during the 2020 pandemic.

As the second main performance space at Kremwerk, the Timbre Room is a ground-level stage and bar that hosts drag shows, live music, and DJ sets. There are two recurring drag shows at Timbre Room that center POC[30] performers. The first, called *Bang the Gong,* features queer performers of Asian descent, hosted by drag queens Whispurr Water-Shadow and Riley Raww. The title of the show indicates the reclamation of a pernicious Asian stereotype, as the gong serves as a potent visual and sonic marker of exoticism and difference in representations of Asians within North American popular culture. While I never attended *Bang the Gong*, promotional posters for the show reveal how the organizers place particular importance on cultural heritage, with promos asserting "performers are encouraged to perform songs from their Asian backgrounds" as well as the inclusion of a "cultural appreciation spot" from a guest drag performer of any background (Kremwerk 2020). As an all-Asian show, *Bang the Gong* is an important space for a relatively underserved part of the Seattle queer community.

The second all-POC show in the Timbre Room was *NOIR*, a variety show hosted by drag queens Londyn Bradshaw and Skarlet Dior Black, which I attended regularly in 2019 and 2020. *NOIR* was first established largely through the labor of Londyn Bradshaw, who described the show as "a POC-oriented show with only people of color performing, and people of color in the DJ booth, and people of color at the bar, and people of color kittening.[31] So we try to have a whole POC venue" (interview, 01/07/2020). *NOIR* typically lasted about two hours, with an intermission in the middle of a dozen solo or duet acts by five or six different performers. It began in February 2019 as a *Black Panther*-themed drag show called *Queens of Wakanda* featuring an all-Black cast; the popularity of the show led to bimonthly and then monthly *NOIR* showcases as well as the addition of non-Black POC cast members (ibid.). By February 2020, *NOIR* had grown significantly, and the show was held four times for Black History Month 2020 with a different theme each week: a Whitney Houston tribute show, a celebration of female rappers, a one-year-anniversary show featuring special guest Kornbread Jeté from Los Angeles, and a show themed for classic Black American sitcoms.

---

[30] In the United States, POC is a commonly used abbreviation for "people of color," typically encompassing Black, Latinx, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Native American identities—though self-identification norms and identity politics do not ensure the universality of the term "people of color" among individuals from these groups.

[31] "Kittening" is a term derived from burlesque, describing the act of clearing the stage between performances; a kitten's job at a drag show is to gather up any props or discarded clothing as well as to collect dropped or thrown tips. As performers in their own right, kittens often dress to

Though *NOIR* exclusively featured Black and POC artists, its audience was primarily white, which was often noted by the hosts—especially Skarlet. A Black woman and drag queen who identifies as heterosexual,[32] Skarlet Dior Black is part of the House of Black, headed by mother Amora Dior Black (of R Place) which includes several other prominent performers in the Seattle scene, including Dion Dior Black. Skarlet offered intrepid political commentary on the microphone during *NOIR*, calling out white supremacy, addressing anti-Blackness in both mainstream culture and queer culture, celebrating Black culture and performers, and instructing her majority-white audience in better models of allyship. She refused to ever allow a white person to take up sonic or physical space at *NOIR* by ensuring only people of color were allowed

---

the theme of the show or in a sexually provocative way, serving as visual entertainment for the audience between numbers. If the show host needs to stall for any reason, the kitten also serves as a foil for the host to keep the energy up in the space.

[32] Skarlet is the only drag artist in the Seattle scene whom I know of that identifies as heterosexual; nonetheless, I consider Skarlet as a part of the queer community because of her drag artistry, understanding of queer culture, and commitment to intersectional activism that includes queer issues.

access to the stage and microphone, and deftly confronted any white audience member bold enough to heckle her.

Skarlet's fusion of political awareness and critique with drag performance was not limited to her hosting, as many of her numbers at *NOIR* incorporated these themes. On June 27th, 2020, *NOIR* held a socially-distanced Pride show after King County moved into "Phase 1.5" of its reopening plan following a COVID-19 lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19, allowing for limited indoor seating at restaurants in Seattle; since the restaurant Little Maria's Pizza is directly connected to the Timbre Room, the venue was allowed to open. Seats were arranged in groups of two six feet apart from one another, masks were mandated for everyone in the space except for the performers, and many individuals wore disposable gloves. The show was also livestreamed for guests who were either unable to get tickets for the limited in-person seating or who opted to attend remotely in light of the pandemic.

Tipping is an important part of drag performance; audience members are encouraged to tip often not only to financially support the performers, but also to create and sustain a sense of community built around queer performance and queer desire. Tips are usually offered in the form of cash, with $1 being the standard, though larger bills of $5, $10, $20, and even $100 are not uncommon. Sometimes, audience members tip drag artists with small gifts such as drinks from the bar, cannabis, or beauty products—though these are typically only offered between friends or if a drag artist specifically requests them. Ethnomusicologist Sarah Hankins asserts that tipping practice at drag shows serves as a "queer sociosexual economy" in which audience members pay drag artists directly for personal attention, ranging from fleeting caresses and playful winks to the more erotic realm of lap dances or even simulated sexual acts[33] (Hankins 2015). Tipping is also a way to simply show direct appreciation for an artist—while I tended to tip every drag performer in any given show to show support for the entire cast, I most often tipped performers I knew personally, performers with particular skill in the arts of drag performance, or performers who utilized references that I recognized in their mashups. At *NOIR,* the show hosts encouraged us to tip the performers using apps and services like Venmo, Paypal, and Cashapp to reduce the amount of paper bills circulating between audience members and the cast, but cash tips were still accepted. The sense of intimacy generated by tipping an artist directly in some ways seems lost when done through apps, though it is somewhat more personal in that audience members can include a message with their tip and performers can "like" or respond to digital tips from audience members.

At the time of this Pride show, Seattle was also in the midst of sustained mass protest and political unrest as local activists and community members demonstrated in favor of defunding the Seattle Police Department for ongoing abuse of members of Black and POC communities, sparked by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020. Indeed, many members of Seattle's queer community—drag artists prominent among them—called for Pride 2020 to focus on the amplification of Black voices and empowerment of QTPOC individuals, recognizing the roots of the U.S. queer rights movement within the activism of trans women of color, including Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera during the 1960s and beyond. This call also echoes the work by Black feminist scholars such as

---

[33] Hankins links tipping practice in gender performance to sex work, a similar underground economy, noting among her interlocutors that tipping during a drag show occasionally preceded the solicitation of sex work after the show (2015). Overlap between drag artists and sex workers is not uncommon; I know of several artists in the Seattle scene who also engage in sex work.

Crenshaw and Cohen, pushing for an intersectional orientation in queer community politics that centers direct action against anti-Blackness in the criminal justice system. Beyond attending marches and protests in the city, which I discuss in chapter 5, I viewed attending *NOIR* in support of POC drag artists as an ideal way of celebrating Pride during a turbulent yet transformative year.

At *NOIR,* Skarlet performed “10%” by KAYTRANADA, the lead single of KAYTRANADA’s second album *Bubba* (2019). KAYTRANADA is the DJ name of Haitian-Canadian artist Louis Kevin Celestrin, based in Montreal, Québec; his blend of electronica and hip hop beats has become quite popular in the latter half of the 2010s. Kali Uchis, the featured singer in “10%,” is an openly queer Colombian American singer from Virginia who has gained mainstream attention since 2018 for both her own original music as well as her collaborations with high-profile popular musicians from the US, Canada, and the UK. The lyrics of the song feature the singer imploring another person (perhaps a lover?) for a more equitable relationship; the singer is also secure in her own identity while her “other” is constructed as a pretender:

[pre-chorus]
You keep on takin' from me, but where's my ten percent?
You keep on takin' from me, I wonder where you went?
You keep on takin' from me, but where's my ten percent?
You keep on takin' from me

[chorus]
Why you tryna lie for them?
Pretending who you are
But baby why even pretend?
You're trying way too hard
Ego is not your friend
I only speak the truth
No, I'm not trying to offend
Why you tryna lie for them?

[verse]
I wake up, it's so good to be me

In the mirror, it's good to see me
I don't check for these other bitches
You can ask God, 'cause that's my witness
You just don't have a clue who to be
Look in your eyes, I see the envy
I don't check for these other bitches
You can ask God, 'cause that's my witness

The lyrics took on new meanings in the context of Skarlet's performance. The theme of self-love in the verse is an empowering message during a Pride show, and especially so for a Black woman in the context of a BLM uprising. There is also potency in Skarlet lip-syncing the lines, "*you keep on takin' from me"* to a room filled with white people. The "taking" can refer to the legacy of enslavement, in which Black women's bodies were subject to routine physical, sexual, and psychological abuse both during and after chattel slavery; it can also refer to the ongoing exploitation of Black women's cultural production as social currency in both popular culture and queer culture. The chorus—*"why you tryna lie for them? / Pretending who you are"*— transforms into a potential interrogation of the audience's investment in white supremacy and its reliance on racist policing. Most striking is the song's central question, "*but where's my ten percent?"* The phrase becomes a performative demand for reparations for Black people in the United States as compensation for both their ancestors' enslavement as well as their ongoing oppression at the hands of an anti-Black criminal justice system. Skarlet's frequent on-mic demands for her "forty acres and a mule"[34] (typically once while hosting per *NOIR* show) transforms the act of tipping into a radical act of wealth redistribution—a fitting addition to the existing queer sociosexual economy of the drag show. Deeply moved by her power and creativity through her performance of "10%," I offered Skarlet a $10 bill as she lip-synced the pre-chorus a second time, which she accepted along with several other cash tips from the audience. She concluded her performance of the song by seating herself on the edge of the stage, counting the reparations obtained from her audience. While still in-character for the song, Skarlet's performance persona elided into her offstage identity as a Black activist. This performance also demonstrates how *NOIR* creates space that reimagines "hegemonic mappings of gender, sex, and social power" (Hankins 2015) through the clever mix of political and popular culture referents.

---

[34] Forty acres and a mule refers to the redistribution of land and wealth to newly-freed Black Americans in the southern United States at the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865 (Darity & Mullen 2020). The promise was not kept by the federal government (ibid.), and the term "forty acres and a mule" today symbolizes the demand for reparations for Black Americans by the federal government in recompense for their historical and ongoing economic oppression.

As a center for alternative drag culture in Seattle, shows and artists at the Kremwerk Complex make space for marginalized identities within drag culture. While physical, economic, and age accessibility is an issue for parts of the venue, the all-ages designation of Little Maria's pizzeria draws under-21 patrons and artists; the long-running *Kings* is one of only two recurring drag king revues in the city; *WERKshop* creates space for amateur performers and untested acts; and *Bang the Gong* and *NOIR* specifically celebrate POC performers. These shows reveal the importance of identity affiliation within the drag community, as the show hosts use identity markers as the central organizing feature for their productions. As I visited more venues throughout Seattle and conducted interviews with artists and friends in the scene, I realized identity markers are important features for venues by-and-large, either by practice or by reputation.

Honorable Mentions: Other Notable Seattle Venues

There were many other queer public spaces in Seattle that warrant attention for the numerous ways they helped me understand the relationship between identity and venues for drag performance. As with my three primary fieldwork sites, gender, sexuality, class, race, and ethnicity were marked issues in the construction of these spaces and the composition of their patrons—particularly within venues that are dedicated to maintaining their status as queer public space. While I did not visit these spaces as often, my own experiences coupled with discourse among drag artists and queer community members were central to my understanding of how these spaces are conceived of within the Seattle queer community

The first "gay bar" in Seattle I ever attended, the Unicorn, is a carnival-themed bar in Capitol Hill, also in the Pike/Pine corridor at the corner of Pike Street and 12th Avenue. Humorously characterized as "a gay bar for straight people" in the context of queer venues like R Place and Kremwerk (seattledragmemes 2019), the Unicorn is not considered a prime space for queers by members of the drag community because of its thorough "colonization" by cisheterosexual patrons, despite its occasional drag show and whimsical ambiance. Before my fieldwork, I had visited the Unicorn with straight friends a few times, including out-of-town visitors like my mother: as a gay bar oriented towards cisheterosexuals, it was a safe bet to get a "gay bar experience" for folks less acquainted with the radical gender and sexual politics that demarcate other queer public spaces.

Queer/bar is one of Seattle's most trendy and popular gay bars. Located in the Pike/Pine corridor on 11th Ave in Capitol Hill, the posh space features a full bar and kitchen, a performance stage, queer artwork on the walls, and regular queer events such as drag brunch, drag shows, and watch parties. Among the many drag venues in Seattle, queer/bar is a center of mainstream drag culture. When *Drag Race* queens visit Seattle, they often perform at queer/bar—in fact, a *Drag Race* watch party I attended in January 2019 at queer/bar featured Monét X Change, the winner of *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* season 4. The elevated profile of this visiting performer was reflected in the high ticket price. Even without celebrity guests, queer/bar tends to be more expensive that the other spaces described above, succinctly expressed by a friend I met through the Seattle drag scene during an interview: "if you're at queer/bar, you just got your paycheck" (interview with Silver, 03/20/2020). When I attended the *Drag Race* watch party, I was barely able to see Monét's performance because the layout of the space made it difficult to see the stage; furthermore, one of my friends attending with me got groped in the packed space, which left a bad impression among our group and led me to discard it as a regular fieldwork space despite its weekly *Drag Race* watch party and excellent cast of drag performers. As I experienced, and reinforced by Silver, the audience at queer/bar tends to be more white, affluent, male, and normative (interview, 03/20/2020).

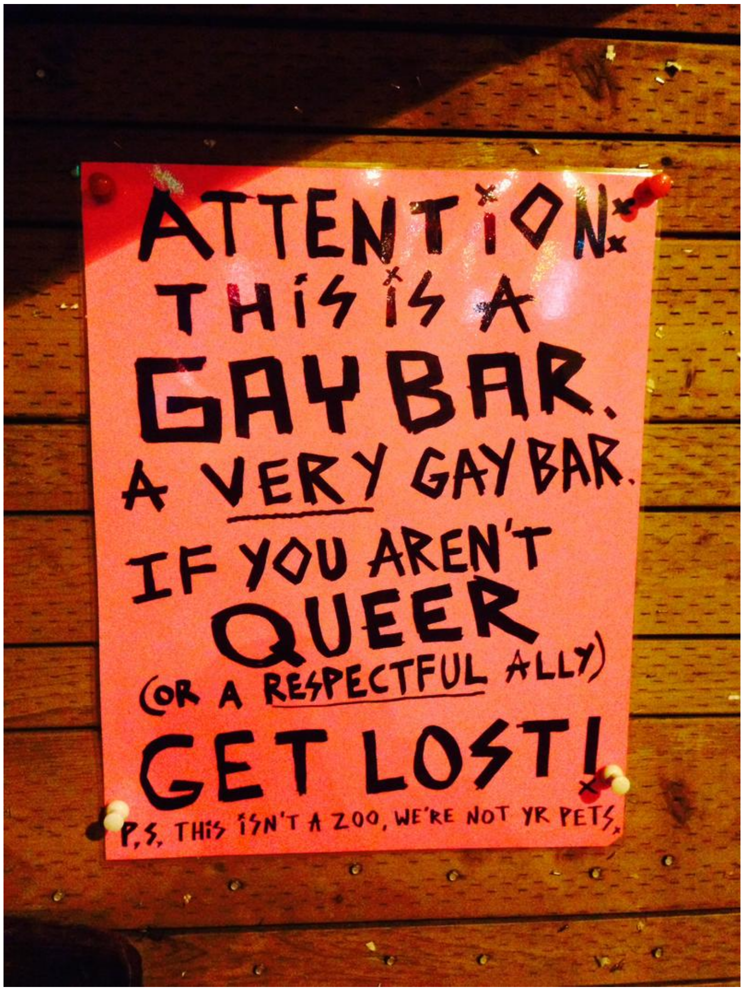
Julia's on Broadway is another epicenter of mainstream drag culture, best known in Seattle for its recurring show, *Le Faux*. A polished production of expert celebrity impersonators, Julia's is a tourist magnet in the heart of Capitol Hill on the corner of Broadway and Thomas Street. *Le Faux* is perfect for audiences whose idea of drag revolves around classic old-school queening, such as the style prized by *RuPaul's Drag Race* or other mainstream drag culture standards, such as the Hollywood films *To Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1993) and *The Birdcage* (1996). I attended two shows at *Le Faux* with friends in 2016 and 2017 prior to my fieldwork. While the performative illusions of Taylor Swift, Adele, Beyoncé, and Katy Perry were spectacular, the astronomical ticket price and predictable performance formula bar many queers from regular attendance.

Contrasting the classy ambiance of Julia's, Pony is a gritty gay dive bar located in Capitol Hill at the triangular-shaped confluence of Madison Street and Union Street. While I have never attended a drag show at Pony,[35] I have gone there to dance and hang out with friends many times. Pony evokes the old-school gay bar aesthetic: gay pornography and queer artwork papers the walls, drinks are cheap and strong, and there are many opportunities to cruise for sex or intimacy among the queer men and other AMAB patrons who dominate the space. My favorite feature of Pony is its unabashed rejection of cisheterosexual tourists, evidenced by a sign that graces its front door (see Figure 10). For many queers in Seattle, Pony is an escape from the crushing pressure of heterosupremacy. Such liberatory spaces are critical for queer communities, especially during a time when queer spaces are under constant incursions by cisheterosexuals looking for an "exotic" night out.

---

[35] One regular drag show held at Pony before the COVID-19 lockdown was *Queen4Queen,* hosted by Cookie Couture and Rowan Ruthless every third Thursday of the month.

Figure 10: The sign outside of the front door at Pony, discouraging non-queer tourists from entering. Photograph by author, March 2019.


ATTENTION:
THIS IS A
GAY BAR.
A VERY GAY BAR.
IF YOU AREN'T
QUEER
(OR A RESPECTFUL ALLY)
GET LOST!
P.S. THIS ISN'T A ZOO, WE'RE NOT YR PETS.

The Swallow Bar in White Center is similar to Pony in that it boasts a classic male gay bar vibe, but with a nautical twist featuring sailor imagery and erotica throughout the space. A monthly show called *Rat City Cruise* calls Swallow Bar home, hosted by alternative drag queens Old Witch and Miss Texas 1988. I attended one *Rat City Cruise* in early 2020 and enjoyed the show, but White Center's location on the far south side of Seattle prevented me from regularly attending. One remarkable factor about The Swallow Bar is the apparent disconnect between the space in the bar and its surrounding community. Silver shared their experience attending Swallow Bar:

> “When I was at the Swallow for *Rat City Cruise*, I was the only person of color in that entire bar that night… since I’ve lived in Seattle my whole life, ‘White Center’, ironic for the name, has been a historically POC neighborhood for low-income and predominantly Black and southeast Asian community members. However, I don’t see that represented in the bars or around that area, especially in the nightlife. Is it because there hasn’t been a space for it? Or has the space that’s been created for it been tokenizing? I haven’t been able to analyze that. Where are the queer POC going? Where’s the space for that?” (interview, 03/20/2020).

While queer public spaces create important havens for LGBTQ+ people, this does not guarantee their inclusivity. Race, ethnicity, and class play significant roles in dividing the queer community; while spaces like Pony and the Swallow are designed to cater to white cis gay men, they are not necessarily guaranteed to low-income queers, queer women, trans people, and/or queer people of color, even when these queer public spaces are located in neighborhoods populated primarily by members of these communities. Silver’s question of “where’s the space for that?” echoed in my mind after our conversation, and helped to frame my thinking about space more broadly as I developed my ideas.

The WILDROSE is a lesbian bar in Capitol Hill, located in the Pike/Pine corridor at the corner of Pike Street and 11th Avenue. According to drag king Vincent Milay, who co-hosted a pre-pandemic drag king show called *Wild Thorns* every first Wednesday at the bar, WILDROSE is the last remaining lesbian bar on the West Coast, and likely one of fewer than a dozen remaining lesbian bars throughout the entire United States.[36] The decline of lesbian bars in the last two decades is attributed variously to gentrification, straight colonization of queer public spaces, and integration of LGBTQ+ identities into mainstream public spaces. I had always been cautious about going to WILDROSE, as I am sensitive to occupying space in a bar that is not for me (as someone who is neither a woman nor a lesbian). However, after attending the first *Wild Thorns* show in December 2019, I resolved to bring my business to this resolutely queer, women-led space whenever I am in the area. The monthly *Wild Thorns* show features a cast comprised entirely of trans and non-binary performers, including four drag kings (Vincent Milay, John Jacob JingleHeimer Shit,[37] Cesare the Drag Prince, and a rotating guest king) and one "token queen," Siren St. James. The "token queen" moniker is a jab at the dominance of drag queens in drag scenes, in which drag queen show hosts routinely hire one drag king to round out their all-queen cast in order to boast of their show's "diversity." Like tokenization in other contexts, this pattern of behavior provides minimal opportunities for drag kings and pushes the art of kinging to the margins of queer performance. *Wild Thorns* inverts this convention while also providing greater opportunity for drag kings.

---

[36] Having grown up in the St. Louis area, I was aware of St. Louis’s lesbian bar, Novak’s, though I never visited it. Located on Manchester Avenue in the Grove—a stretch of queer clubs and bars—Novak’s sadly closed in the early 2010s and was replaced by a straight-owned club that was essentially a gay club for cisheterosexuals.

I spoke in more depth about space and the WILDROSE with Miss Texas 1988. When I shared with them my initial reluctance to take up space in a lesbian bar, they alluded to sexism at play within the LGBTQ+ community:

> "I think there are some historical cultural divides between like, the hard gay community and the hard lesbian community. […] Bars were not even, like back in the 40s and 50s, as much of a thing for like, lesbians… it's not that gay men aren't welcome in [WILDROSE]. It's that gay men are actually intimidated by the power structure. And so they just say that they aren't welcome there. But they make the excuse that they don't feel welcome" (interview with Miss Texas 1988, 01/10/2020).

Here, Texas suggests that lesbian bars are not "dying out" solely because of cisheterosexual colonization or gentrification, but also due to power dynamics within the queer community—notably, men's discomfort with patronizing women-owned establishments that are not built to cater to the gay male gaze. In any case, this conversation challenged me to re-think my previous reasoning for avoiding the WILDROSE and to commit my support for an establishment by and for queer women in Seattle.

---

[37] John Jacob JingleHeimer Shit is the drag king alter-ego of Miss Texas 1988.

Located less than a block from the WILDROSE, the Cha Cha Lounge is not a gay bar per se, but its character shifted in a very queer direction after 10PM on the first and third Wednesday nights each month (pre-pandemic). The Cha Cha Lounge features "Mexican-themed" knick-knacks affixed to the walls and ceiling (Cha Cha Lounge 2020). A free drag show called *Heels*, hosted by queens Betty Wetter and Butylene O'Kipple, was held in this basement space in the Pike/Pine corridor between 10th and 11th Avenue. The name "*Heels* at the Cha Cha Lounge" is a reference to underground queer filmmaker John Waters' iconic 1974 film *Female Trouble* starring legendary drag queen Divine. Reachable only via a steep set of stairs, the Cha Cha Lounge is not the most physically accessible venue, but is quite popular among the Seattle drag community. During my first visit to *Heels* in December 2019, I amusedly watched perplexed cisheterosexuals slowly trickle out as they found themselves suddenly surrounded by alternative drag artists and their attendant queer audience. As I made *Heels* a regular part of my drag show rotation, I noticed that large numbers of local drag artists attended the show, which is unusual. Betty and Butylene occasionally commented on this, thanking the queer performers in the audience for attending what they described as their "humble" show. That *Heels* is on a Wednesday night and is free are factors for drawing a larger queer audience, but the fact that other drag artists made a point to regularly patronize *Heels* speaks to its importance within the larger drag community as well as the paucity of other engagements at 10PM on Wednesday nights.

In addition to being one of the most queer shows in terms of content, audience, and aesthetic, *Heels* at the Cha Cha Lounge was also the only show I attended between 2019-2020 that recognized Seattle's First People, the Duwamish Tribe. Co-host Butylene O'Kipple, herself of Indigenous heritage (Cookie Couture & Butylene O'Kipple 2020), opened each show with a land acknowledgement. Butylene and her fellow co-host Betty Wetter would then begin the show by performing to a track created by the duo, lip-syncing to their own recorded vocals in a silly, lighthearted song that set the mood for the guest performances that followed. Besides serving as an introduction, the opening number gave the audience a chance to "practice" tipping, thus allowing the hosts to ensure that their audience is warmed up and ready to tip the rest of the cast. However, my biggest incentive to tip during the opening number was always in response to Butylene's announcement that all tips gathered during that performance would be donated to RealRent Duwamish.

The Duwamish Tribe have lived in and around the land that is now called Seattle for thousands of years, or "time immemorial" (RealRentDuwamish 2020). Unlike many other Tribes across the United States and Canada, the Duwamish are not federally recognized, and thus are grossly underrepresented, underfunded, and unacknowledged despite the immense concentration of wealth controlled by settlers within their tribal lands (ibid.). RealRent Duwamish is a grassroots organization that collects rent from Seattleites to compensate the mass theft of their land by the U.S. government since the first Anglo settlers arrived in the area. All money donated to RealRent Duwamish goes to Duwamish Tribal Services, which provides social, educational, health, and economic services to Duwamish people in the region. Part of this also funds the Duwamish Longhouse and Cultural Center, located in the Delridge neighborhood of West Seattle. After attending several shows at *Heels*, I decided to become a Real Renter, pledging a recurring donation to RealRent Duwamish. As suggested on their website, I now donate $18.55 a month to commemorate the year of the now-broken Point Elliott Treaty, in which the Duwamish tribe were coerced into ceding 54,000 acres of their land (RealRentDuwamish 2020). Like with *NOIR* at Kremwerk, *Heels* at the Cha Cha Lounge sets up a space in which a queer economy takes a decidedly anti-colonial approach in honoring the local Indigenous people with concrete financial compensation for the theft of their ancestral lands. This show also takes the identity politics that play out in venues throughout the city and adds a decolonial lens—while artists and audiences are brought together or divided by gender, sexuality, race, class, age, and other factors, the hosts of *Heels* remind us all that the Duwamish people lived here first.

Conclusion

Drag performance has long shaped the character of queer public spaces in Seattle, marked by shifting negotiations of identity. During the 20th century, queer public space in Seattle was defined by marginality, existing underground (literally, in the case of the Garden of Allah) and reliant on fragile alliances within a brutal cisheterosupremacist state. Cross-gender performers often had the most to lose during an era when their art form was criminalized, but nonetheless served as central figures in the community's battle for mainstream acceptance in the post-Stonewall era. Drag performance was again a contentious issue as elements of the gay and lesbian community distanced themselves from a practice that was seen as fundamentally incompatible with the project of assimilation, though drag artists endured as pillars of the queer community during the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. Radical shifts in the demographics in the city in more recent decades have highlighted issues of access and affordability for both living space and queer public spaces.

However, the emergence of mainstream drag culture in the 2010s, coupled with an increase in public acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities, was a boon for drag performers and queer-owned venues. Cisheterosexual attendance at drag shows and queer bars, due in large part to the massive popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its associated culture of live watch parties, brought unprecedented amounts of capital into queer public spaces. The mainstream embrace of drag culture proved to have a more insidious impact, as local queer patrons and cisheterosexual tourists clashed in queer public spaces and drag performance became increasingly hierarchal, with certain performers, identities, and styles valorized over others. The sheer number of bars and clubs in Seattle's drag scene engendered a complex web of sub-scenes, marked by layers of venue affiliation and divergent systems of value regarding drag performance and identity terminology. With physical, cultural, or economic barriers to access, many queer public spaces fail to be accessible to members of the community in which they are located.

Drag artists and venues negotiate these challenges in a variety of creative ways, primarily through centering and celebrating marginalized identities within the queer community. While most queer-owned venues welcome diverse audiences in the spirit of inclusion and profit, others remain explicitly queer in their orientation, going as far as to discourage cisheterosexual patrons from attendance to preserve the countercultural vibe that defined underground queer public spaces for over a century. Some artists choose to participate in mainstream drag culture with a critical perspective, using disidentificatory practices and remix strategies to keep up with the scene while also providing space to address the shortcomings of mainstream drag culture. Others use space to design enclaves for marginalized artists and audience members, drawing upon intersectional approaches to queer community politics to subvert problematic power dynamics within the queer community and develop queer sociosexual economies that uplift those positioned at the crosshairs of cisheterosupremacy and racial capitalism. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic brought all of these live spaces to a grinding halt in 2020, and it remains to be seen how venues will be shaped after local restrictions are eased post-pandemic. Regardless, I have confidence that queer public space will endure in Seattle, just as it has for over a century.

The focus of the next chapter is again on issues of identity in drag performance, with particular attention to the ways cross-gender performance enables spectacularized performances of race, class, and gender. Looking to the history of popular cross-gender performance in the United States—from the minstrel stage of the 19th century to the main stage of *RuPaul's Drag Race* of the early 21st century—reveals an unsettling history of stereotyping and the performative containment of minoritized communities. However, drag artists in Seattle negotiate the insidious legacy of performative containment in novel and entertaining ways.

Chapter 3

“We’re still here, keeping this story alive”: Navigating Performative Containment in Cross-Gender Performance

The creation and performance of drag personae involves drawing extensively upon visual, aural, and performative tropes drawn from culturally-constructed notions of social identity. This convention positions drag culture within a long history of spectacularized performances of race, class, and gender on popular stages in the United States, stretching back to the minstrel show of the 19th century. In acknowledgement of this difficult lineage, drag performance is closely monitored by audiences and artists, particularly when drag performers sample from cultural and/or identity groups with which they do not apparently belong. While the issue of “cultural ownership” is itself a nuanced and ever-shifting conversation, it is generally agreed upon within both mainstream drag culture and local drag scenes that artists must be sensitive to the power differentials that exist between groups with privilege and those without in an effort to avoid the perpetuation of pernicious stereotypes.

Though controversy over cultural appropriation still arises within drag scenes, I believe queer artists in Seattle and their audiences are particularly sensitive to these dynamics and proactively work to avoid offensive behavior, as most queer artists exist at the intersection of multiple vectors of oppression and thus have (at least) a rudimentary understanding of the damaging effects of cultural theft. For example, nearly all of the drag artists in Seattle that I interviewed during my fieldwork demonstrated awareness of the parallels between 19th-century minstrelsy and 21st-century drag performance during our conversations, which often manifested as sensitivity to the contemporary issue of cultural appropriation. Black, Latinx, Asian, queer, trans, and/or female positionalities are routinely caricatured through derogatory stereotypes in U.S. American popular media; people racialized and/or gendered into these categories are subsequently contained to roles codified by the status quo in the entertainment industry—or excluded from the industry entirely. However, minoritized cross-gender performers have long contested their containment and erasure, resisting these phenomena by strategically embracing or rejecting stereotypes that are perpetuated by the mainstream entertainment industry.

In this chapter, I draw from the work of performance studies scholar Annemarie Bean to trace the phenomenon of performative containment of minoritized identities within cross-gender performance in U.S. popular culture. From the male impersonators of the 19th-century vaudeville stage to the kings and queens on Seattle stages in the late 2010s, cross-gender performers assert agency, balancing entertainment value with their tactical challenges of performative containment. After attending to female impersonation in the minstrel show of the 19th century, I will turn to cross-gender performance in 20th century vaudeville and finally to drag performance in the late 20th and early 21st century. Discussions of performative containment in minstrelsy and vaudeville will center on the spectacularization of gendered formations of Blackness, whiteness, and Asianness. While much work has been done concerning the intersections of race and class in minstrelsy (Toll 1976; Lott 1993), I focus on the ways racialized performance is also ineludibly gendered to better understand the relationship between minstrelsy, vaudeville, and contemporary drag performance. In terms of the latter, I look to representations of racialized femininities in the televised reality competition *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present). As part of mainstream drag culture, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a major arbiter of cross-gender performance conventions in contemporary drag culture. The show simultaneously continues the project of performative containment while also allowing minoritized drag artists greater agency in self-representation and access to opportunities in the entertainment industry. Similarly, drag artists in the Seattle scene negotiate the insidious legacy of performative containment by creating empowering representations of minoritized identities that strategically sample from problematic elements in popular culture, remixing them in ways that challenge damaging stereotypes. The final section of this chapter draws from my ethnographic fieldwork in the Seattle drag scene between 2019-2020, looking to the performances of four mashups by different Seattle drag artists to illustrate this point.

Containing the "potentially unruly gender": the 19th-century minstrel show

Acknowledging the history of popular cross-gender performance in the United States is critical in understanding how drag artists, audiences, and show producers sustain, ignore, or challenge the legacy of performative containment. Coinciding with the birth of minstrelsy, the art of female impersonation in the U.S. coalesced in the 1840s in British stage plays performed in American college settings (Bean 2001). The theater stage, as well as the U.S. American university, were all-male spaces in the early 19th century; as such, men (or boys) cross-dressed in order to portray female characters. It is no surprise, then, that blackface minstrelsy utilized female impersonation; the first record of a blackface minstrel cross-gender performance was in 1840 (Bean 2001: 1). In the 1840s, female impersonation in minstrelsy was limited to a genre called *wench songs* (Senelick 2000; Bean 2001)—with one of the most popular of these first-generation minstrel songs being "Miss Lucy Long" (Riis 2014). In early wench songs, a white man in blackface would sing to a passive female character onstage, usually another white man in blackface playing a mixed-race "mulatta" woman, or wench. The early wench performer did not speak or sing, and only sometimes danced; the character was simply "an object to behold" (Bean 2001: 54-55). Hence, Bean calls female impersonation in minstrelsy *performative containment*. Patterned on the literal containment of enslaved African American women, female impersonators embodied this reality in their staged characterizations (2001: 6). Bean, applying Judith Butler's point that drag can be utilized for subversive *or* hegemonic purposes (1990), goes further, pointing out that the female impersonator "neatly contains the potentially unruly gender in performance," defining the position of women—especially Black women—as that of containment (2001: 80-81). Thus, the queer possibilities of these gender and racial crossings were complicated by its usage to enforce rigid, hierarchal class, gender, and racial norms.

Racialized performance in minstrelsy was inseparable from gendered performance. During the 19th century, male minstrel stock characters such as Zip Coon and Sambo became synonymous with Black men in the U.S. American popular consciousness—particularly among rural whites whose only experience with "African American culture" was transmitted through the distorting lens of the minstrel show (Lott 1993). Beyond ascribing exaggerated racial characteristics to Black men, white minstrels gendered and sexualized Black male bodies in disturbing and oft-contradictory ways through these stock characters (Riggs 1987; Lott 1993; White 2011). Likewise, female impersonation through wench songs projected a multitude of gendered and sexual stereotypes onto the bodies of Black women. White male minstrels constructed African American femininity as grotesque and overly dependent on food and sex; they also reinforced the attractiveness of light-skinned women over dark-skinned women, valorizing colorist ideologies that determine human worth by one's relative proximity to whiteness (Bean 2001: 130). When Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suffused U.S. American popular consciousness in the 1850s, minstrels were quick to remix the work for the stage—although their adaptations rarely mirrored Stowe's attempt at sympathetic portrayals of Black subjects. Female characters in stage adaptations of Stowe's novel were almost always played by white men in blackface drag; complex women in the novel meant to sway white audiences to oppose the institution of slavery were objectified and reduced to simple character tropes, such as the wench (Lott 1993: 217).

Producing whiteness through the cross-dressed, cross-raced body

Representations of race in popular performance are not limited to Blackness or racial Others—they have long involved the production and maintenance of white identities as well. Female impersonators on the minstrel stages of the 19th century instructed audiences on proper white, heterosexual masculinity through song, dance, and comedic sketches. This "secured masculine identity" needed a passive female character to serve as its opposite, even before women were accepted onstage (Bean 2001: 246). In the middle period of minstrelsy (1851-1865), wench characters took on much more active roles within the minstrel show, including sketches, stump speeches, and opera burlesques (ibid.: 6). By then, the wench character had become inappropriate for the project of white male identity construction for audiences—Bean suggests the character was too "active" and "passionate" at that point to successfully facilitate "the formation of a successful masculine identity" (ibid.: 248). Thus, a new character type was developed during the 1880s: a well-dressed, passive, elegant, and delicate ingénue called the *prima donna* (Toll 1974: 140).

The prima donna opened the door for representations of white femininity on the minstrel stage, which coincided with the increase of white women in attendance at minstrel shows after the U.S. civil war (Lott 1993: 187). A Victorian ideal of hyper-femininity, the light-skinned, white, or hyperwhite prima donna "presented women with the male ideal of African American and white femininity on (and off) the stage" (Bean 2001: 56). Hyperwhiteness was achieved through the use of whiteface makeup or skin lightening products (Casey 2015). With this practice, minstrel performers could don and doff an exaggerated version of whiteness just as they had been doing with blackness, though hyperwhiteness was associated with femininity and was typically used only by female impersonators (ibid.). The prima donna was one of the most important characters during the late period of minstrelsy (1865-1890); indeed, the highest-paid minstrel performer in 1882 was "The Only Leon" (Toll 1974: 142; Bean 2001: 97). Leon performed as a prima donna: feminine, distinguished, sometimes white (or hyperwhite) and sometimes in blackface as a light-skinned African American woman. Leon's "burlesque operas" were exceedingly popular among audiences (Bean 2001), and he was noted for his "devotion to the real, the genuine article" (ibid.: 96): essentially, his performances sought to convey feminine authenticity rather than the comedic performances of previous minstrel wench characters. This emergent dichotomy of a "glamour queen" as opposed to a "comedy queen" remains embedded in femme drag performance in the 20th century (Newton 1972) and beyond. Like the prima donna, the ideal glamour queen conveys realness; successful comedy queens rely instead on quick wit and physical humor.

Leon's performances of white femininity as the prima donna imposed the project of performative containment onto the bodies of white women in the mid- and late periods of minstrelsy. Coinciding with the first wave of feminism (1860-1900), other female impersonators continued this project on the political front, countering suffragettes and women abolitionists with mocking songs and stump speeches (Bean, Hatch, and Brooks 1996: 135-137). Minstrels already had a reputation for recognizing and parodying major political developments of the time period, such as chattel slavery, secessionism, temperance, and abolitionism (Toll 1974; Lott 1993), and women's rights was no exception. Cross-dressed white male minstrels—sometimes in blackface, sometimes not—sampled from notable speeches and writings of feminist activists, simultaneously mocking these women while also recognizing their influence (Bean 2001: 61-62). However, even when performing without blackface, these white male minstrels' use of an exaggerated, constructed "African American" dialect and performative conventions derived from blackface minstrelsy coded these counter-feminist performances as racialized (ibid.: 67-68).

At the same time, postbellum minstrelsy saw the addition of female performers, who combined elements drawn from minstrelsy, vaudeville, and burlesque in their performances, though their role on the minstrel stage was limited to sex appeal (Toll 1974). The phenomenon of performative containment impacted women's entry into minstrelsy: when women appeared on the popular stage in the 1870s, they had to assume roles codified by female impersonators, such as the prima donna (Bean 2001: 88). Images allowed to Black women onstage were limited to plantation mammies or mixed-race women ("mulattas") who were either hypersexualized wenches or tragic characters doomed to die in light of their inability to assimilate into white or Black society (ibid.: 89). Black men—while active onstage in large numbers beginning in the 1850s—entered minstrelsy in even greater numbers after the Civil War (Riis 2014: 297). Black male minstrel cross-dressers based their performances on comedic parody, not on "realness" (Bean 2001: 163). This is likely because audiences of the time period could only accept the enactment of Victorian femininity performed by light-skinned bodies; the prima donna role was thus perceived as more suitable for white (or light-skinned) men working as female impersonators.

Minstrelsy gave way to vaudeville in 1890 (Bean 2001: 84), which became the dominant form of American popular entertainment until 1920 (Casey 2015). Vaudeville of the 1910s and 1920s represented the apex of cross-gender performance in U.S. American culture—in fact, once driven underground by the increased enforcement of "morality laws" prohibiting cross-dressing during the 1940s and 1950s (ibid.), cross-gender performance did not take center stage in U.S. American popular culture until the rise of RuPaul during his "Supermodel" era beginning in 1992. Kathleen Casey writes, "[p]opular in the nineteenth century on the male-dominated minstrel stage, theatrical cross-dressing developed new meaning in vaudeville when men began to perform as women alongside women. This effectively nullified old rationales for gender impersonation, *making it clear that audiences were interested in cross-dressers for the sake of cross-dressing itself*" (Casey 2015: xvii, emphasis mine). Given that most vaudeville performers began their careers in minstrel shows (Casey 2015), racialized performances were familiar to them, especially female impersonators.

Julian Eltinge was a popular female impersonator on the vaudeville stage who is remembered today among the queer community as one of the first popular drag performers, as referenced by drag king Samuel L. JackYouSon during our interview while we were talking about drag and vaudeville of the 1910s (interview, 09/15/2020). Eltinge utilized both blackface and whiteface to portray ultra-feminine prima donna characters. His performances were thoroughly in-line with hegemonic norms of race, gender, and consumerism: they encoded heterosexual desire among men, taught racialized feminine ideals to women, and were also used to sell makeup and skin whitening products to women (Casey 2015). Interestingly, Eltinge was reluctant to embrace his on-stage, hyper-feminine persona, emphasizing his professionalism (a masculine trait) and the hours of daily practice it took to become feminine: "by suggesting he cross-dressed only unwillingly or as a means to achieve upward mobility, rather than for pleasure, Eltinge's narrative essentially upheld existing male female norms" (Casey 2015: 45). Eltinge's performances also reveal the ways in which whiteness was feminized, or femininity was whitened: Casey notes the "concrete racial difference between women and men" regarding skin color in the early 20th century: the ideal white man was tanned from a Rooseveltian "strenuous life" while the ideal white woman was pale, or hyperwhite, from a domestic indoor lifestyle (2015: 66).

Women defy containment: Male impersonators take to the popular stage

Vaudeville of the early 20th century also featured male impersonation, though women had been cross-dressing as men as part of popular U.S. American entertainment since the 1860s (Rodger 2018) and for economic opportunity in industries associated with the colonial project of western expansion even before that (Senelick 2000). The first male impersonators to appear on U.S. variety stages were English actress Annie Hindle and American vaudevillian Ella Wesner; these women typically performed either as working-class male characters or as foppish, effeminate high-society elites (ibid.). Women performing onstage as men to male audiences served as a sharp rebuttal to the performative containment of women by demonstrating that women's bodies could channel convincing representations of both femininity *and* masculinity. Furthermore, male impersonators such as Hindle and Wesner weren't merely entertainment—they simultaneously instructed their male audiences on proper white working-class masculinity, lampooned the ruling white male elite, and provided instructions on upward class mobility (Rodger 2018). With the massive successes of Hindle and Wesner, women appeared on vaudeville stages as male impersonators in much greater numbers over the next five decades (ibid.), remixing contemporary ideals of femininity, masculinity, sexuality, class, and race.

Lillyn Brown, a multiethnic (African American, Native American, and French Canadian) woman, was known for her skillful performances of distinguished, cosmopolitan, and elegant Black masculinity that served to counter pervasive stereotypes of Black men within 20th century

American popular culture: “at a time when African Americans were fighting derogatory stereotypes of the primitive black savage, *black male impersonators* [including Brown] *seized an opportunity to perform new visions of modern black manhood”* (Casey 2015: 80, emphasis mine). Besides offering reparative portrayals of Black masculinity, Lillyn Brown’s cross-gender performances demonstrated that Black women’s bodies were suitable for playing multiple genders, “subverting the dominance of minstrelsy’s containment of the African American female body as fixed, unmoving, and confined to the two categories of mulatta or mama” (Bean 2001: 179). The spell of performative containment relegating both white and Black women to the role of passive objects was thus already contested by male impersonators in the late 19th century and early 20th century. This set the stage for later performers to continue this narrative of resistance, such as those I observed in the Seattle drag scene between 2019-2020.

Sexual deviance and state violence: cross-gender performance loses its mainstream appeal

During the waning days of vaudeville in the late 1930s, after the onset of the Great Depression, public interest in cross-gender performance began to decline and performers were forced to adapt to new laws prohibiting gender and sexual deviance, most of which came into full effect in the post-WWII era when conservative approaches to gender and family became the model for citizenship across the United States (Bronski 2011). Some performers emphasized their professionalism, emphasizing performance skills other than cross-dressing and gender performance to avoid censure and scandal (Senelick 2000). Others chose to literally “straighten” their acts: Lillyn Brown distanced herself from her cross-gender performances later in her career, insisting upon her own innate femininity and heterosexuality in her performances (Casey 2015: 82). Most quit the business, or moved their activities underground. Psychologists of the time period warned against cross-dressing as a gateway to gender inversion, and, by extension, "race suicide"—if white men were allowed to cross-dress, they would become homosexual and consequently unable to lead families and sustain the white race (Casey 2015: 89). Female impersonation was particularly linked to sexual deviancy (Casey 2015: 75) and most performers were driven out of business. Even Julian Eltinge, who was seen as a charming exception—likely because his performances had long preserved the oppressive status quo of race and gender—was reduced to appearing onstage in male attire standing forlornly next to his fabulous gowns and costumes, unable to don them because of strict enforcement of laws prohibiting cross-dressing (ibid.).

By the end of the 1940s, cross-gender performance had been driven fully underground, with few exceptions. In Seattle, female and male impersonators in the 1940s and 1950s could be found literally underground at the Garden of Allah Cabaret located underneath the Arlington Hotel in Pioneer Square (Paulson 1996). No longer acceptable to mainstream audiences, cross-gender performance in Seattle was firmly associated with queer subculture, though heterosexual-identified "tourists" still patronized the Garden of Allah during its peak around 1950 to watch shows or to discreetly cruise for sex (ibid.). While the city tolerated the Garden of Allah, queer performers were often targets of brutal police violence (ibid.). Likewise, in other U.S. cities during the 1960s, female impersonation was considered an urban, deviant, "homosexual" pursuit (Newton 1972) and was thus practiced with considerable discretion to avoid state-sanctioned homo- and transphobic violence. This era saw a shift in terminology as well—the term *female impersonation* was associated with an older generation of performers, connoting a higher degree of talent and professionalism; conversely, younger performers were said to be "doing drag" (ibid.). Female impersonators and drag queens could be found performing either in underground gay clubs, or “tourist” clubs where heterosexual patrons could come to see female impersonators (ibid.).

Drag subcultures in the 1960s were centered in New York City, Chicago, New Orleans, Kansas City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles (ibid.). The practice of cross-dressing was risky, as male club-goers had to wear a minimum of five articles of male attire or risk arrest during police raids (Senelick 2000). Newton mentions The Jewel Box Lounge, a popular “tourist” club in 1960s Kansas City, Missouri (1972: 117), of which I had previously learned from conversations with drag artists in Kansas City while I participated within drag and club culture in that city between 2011-2014. The Jewel Box Lounge was situated on Troost Avenue, the historic (and current) racial and socioeconomic dividing line between majority-white and majority-Black neighborhoods of Kansas City; I find it interesting that the club, a liminal place for queer-heterosexual interaction, was also situated along a prominent racial border within the segregationist racial logic of the city. The Kansas City drag queens I met in the early 2010s regarded The Jewel Box Lounge as a legendary part of local queer history, and lamented its relative obscurity within broader Kansas City history.

In her discussion of the queens whom she interviewed and observed, Newton distinguished between “stage” and “street” impersonators. The older generation of performers, or “stage impersonators” (1972: 7), typically performed “live” acts in which they would sing with an accompanying band. These queens hearkened back to the female impersonators of vaudeville through their performance style, their strictly masculine off-stage personae, and their insistence on talent and professionalism (Newton 1972). The younger generation of queens, called “street impersonators” (ibid.: 7), typically performed “record acts” (lip-syncing) while dancing along to pre-recorded music. Unlike the older generation, there was considerably less distinction between on-stage and off-stage personae of street impersonators, who were usually androgynous in their everyday appearance. Because of their performance style and queer gender presentations, street impersonators were paid less than stage impersonators by bar managers, regarded as less talented by audiences, utilized sex work to supplement their performance income, and were criticized as "too nelly" by conservative-minded older performers (Newton 1972). This dichotomy was not strict, however—theater studies scholar Laurence Senelick later pointed out that in these same scenes, plenty of "stage" impersonators engaged in sex work, appeared in drag in public, and performed record acts (2000).

Drag acts in 1960s nightclubs were broadly divided into glamour, comedy, dancing, and singing (Newton 1972: 43). The glamour drag act was remarkably similar to the prima donna performance in minstrelsy: a convincing performance of idealized femininity was prized (ibid.: 57). Many performers who sought to convey realness utilized hormones and surgery to enhance their onstage drag personae and/or to realize themselves as transgender women in their everyday lives (Senelick 2000). Comedic drag, on the other hand, shares characteristics with the wench character of minstrelsy: exaggerated physical features and "ugliness" were deployed as aesthetic strategies for drawing laughs from the audiences. Newton mentions the use of wild, frizzy "fright wigs" in the routines of comedy queens (1972: 52), indicating that a racialized femininity—likely a referent to the unkempt wigs of wench characters in minstrelsy—was a common tactic to elicit laughs. Performative containment thus remained pervasive in cross-gender performance as a new generation of artists entered the stage, with representations of white femininity largely concerned with "realness" and glamour while Black femininity was associated with parody and comedic excess.

Newton's study of female impersonators—the first ethnographer to apply the term "community" to a subset of "homosexual culture"—was inspired by Charles Keil's *Urban Blues* (1966). Newton remarked on the similarities between drag as a "cultural production" within the homosexual community and how Keil applied the term to the African American community in Chicago. In her dissertation, Annemarie Bean points out this connection, noting that Newton's inspiration for the study of female impersonation demonstrates the connectedness between racialized and gendered performativity within the minds of ethnographic researchers:

> "Newton found her connection between the drag and gospel shows mysterious and spontaneous; however, I would argue that her marking of the drag show in terms of the gospel show is not arbitrary. Once again, African American bodies appear tied to a performance of gender, by the 'spontaneous' analogy of the ethnographer. It voices once again the imprecation of the performance of blackness as always evoking gender in American culture" (2001: 23).

With this astute observation, Bean notes that the phenomenon of performative containment exists not only on the staged spectacle of cross-gender and cross-racial performances, but also within the minds of audiences and researchers. The trajectory of my own dissertation project reflects this: I began with an interest in how digital media perpetuates stereotypes of Blackness, and pivoted to the study of drag after noting how certain constructions of Blackness are used in the creation of spectacularized performances of femininity in the 21st century.

The curious case of Shirley Q. Liquor: Racial ventriloquism and blackface drag

As I researched the relationship between minstrelsy and contemporary drag performance, I soon encountered Shirley Q. Liquor, an infamous modern blackface drag artist. In 1990, F. Charles "Chuck" Knipp, a white gay man from southeastern Texas, began performing a caricature of a southern Black woman on radio shows around the Gulf South. The character began as voice act, patterned after "beloved" Black women from Knipp's childhood, including his nanny and fifth grade teacher (Schlueter 2013). The perception of Knipp's "authentic" containment of Black women's vocality by his family and community, combined with his claims that his performances celebrated the women he mimicked, served as justification for Knipp's further development of the character (ibid.). This reasoning echoes the defenses mounted for the "love and theft" pattern of blackface minstrel performance in the 19th century (Lott 1993). Performance studies scholar Jennifer Schlueter closely analyzed Knipp's work, noting that his use of malapropisms, spoonerisms, hypercorrections, and dialect are largely accurate to speech patterns of the rural Gulf South, supporting Knipp's argument regarding the "authenticity" of his work. Schlueter adds, "because Knipp is working across racial lines, as listeners, we are on anxious alert for transgression, and so sometimes we hear it when it is not there" (2013: 171). Knipp's use of "blackvoice" was indeed so "accurate," that many listeners did not realize they were actually hearing a white man (Schlueter 2013). As argued by musicologist Nina Eidsheim, the perception of race within the human voice is not due to biological racial differences, but rather informed by non-sonic factors, including both preconceived notions about race, dialect, and timbre, as well as visual markers taken in real-time (2012). When performing on radio, Knipp's deployment of gendered blackvoice is divorced from visual markers, so when "the informational composite that comprises 'voice as heard' seems to point toward what a listener understands as 'difference,' what she hears is precisely that: difference—including racial otherness" (Eidsheim 2012: 10). In other words, Knipp's vocalic body—divorced from his physical whiteness—evoked a specific configuration of Southern Black femininity among listeners.

After twelve years of radio performances of "Shirley Q. Liquor," as the character came to be called, Knipp took a step further to physically embody her as a drag queen in 2002.

Embracing the comedy queen aesthetic, Knipp assembled Shirley Q. Liquor through a gauche remix of visual markers rooted in stereotypes of poor Black women. With “the cheapest black lady wig I could find [at] the Vietnamese wig store” (Schlueter 2013: 173, quoting Knipp), a “hideous, big-ass mammy outfit” (ibid.) consisting of a long muumuu, and brown face paint complete with a bright red clown lip, Knipp’s embodiment of Shirley Q. Liquor completed the disturbing parallels to blackface minstrelsy of the late 19th century and early 20th century. His deliberate deployment of cheap, “hideous” garments to evoke a mammy character ran counter to his assertion that he was portraying an “authentic” character with love; as Schlueter notes, “there is something deeply self-loathing about Knipp’s work” (2013: 175). The turning point for Knipp’s career came as a result of this grotesque physical embodiment: while audiences were ambivalent to—or ignorant of—Knipp’s “racial ventriloquism,” the “visual cue of the blackface mask” caused widespread backlash and boycotts that resulted in Knipp moving Shirley Q. Liquor off live stages and back to radio and social media in 2011 (Schlueter 2013). Interestingly, one of Knipp’s earliest defenders was none other than Black drag queen superstar RuPaul Charles. RuPaul’s assertion that Knipp’s “comedy routine” was full of Knipp’s “love and respect” for Black culture (Schlueter 2013, citing RuPaul 2002) complicated the discourse about the acceptability of Knipp’s blackface character, given RuPaul’s apparent authority granted by his status as a Black drag queen.

In any case, the story of Shirley Q. Liquor reveals that the practice of performative containment has distinct vocalic and embodied dimensions. While “racial ventriloquism” may merely inspire discomfort or raise eyebrows, Knipp’s character demonstrates that the physical embodiment of Blackness by white cross-gender performers is a much clearer transgression of social norms in the 21st century. Another gray area concerning the promulgation of spectacularized racial performances are those enacted by minoritized drag performers, as seen on the stage or *RuPaul's Drag Race.*

Drag takes center stage, again: *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the specter of performative containment

The performative containment of minoritized identities through cross-gender performance has continued within the popular televised reality competition *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which features drag artists who rely upon spectacularized representations of racial identities for artistic and entertainment value. However, *Drag Race* has also given minoritized drag performers unprecedented levels of agency in self-representation within the entertainment industry. *Drag Race* is also notorious for disallowing women or AFAB (assigned female at birth) people to compete on the show for its first twelve years. Despite roots in the radical queer performance scenes of Atlanta and New York, which included prominent queer women, trans people, and gender non-conforming people in their constellation of performers, promoters, muses, and artists (Davenport 2017), drag queen RuPaul—a Black cis gay man—positions drag performance squarely in the hands of other cis male performers (Brennan & Gudelunas 2017), though there is a small but increasing presence of trans women and non-binary people among the show's contestants, as well as a trans man cast in season 13. With casts repeatedly made up of solid cis male majorities, *Drag Race* thus normalizes the performative containment of women and/or femininity by cis men in the lucrative engine room of mainstream drag culture, despite local drag scenes' frequent disavowal of this phenomenon.

In 2009, the first season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* aired on LogoTV, a cable network dedicated to LGBTQ+ programming. Host RuPaul, famed "Supermodel of the World" and arguably the most famous female impersonator in the Unites States since The Only Leon, brought nine drag queens together to compete for the title of "America's Next Drag Superstar." *Drag Race* combines drag culture as appropriated from the ballroom drag subculture (popularized through Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* in 1990) and a remix of aesthetics from other reality hits of the 2000s, *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*. As of this writing in January 2021, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has moved from LogoTV to the mainstream VH1 cable television network, earned nineteen Primetime Emmy Awards, inspired at least a dozen spin-offs[38], and is airing its thirteenth season in 2021.

Conventions of feminine beauty in contemporary drag practice as seen in *Drag Race* echo the Victorian ideals of white womanhood codified by the prima donna role of minstrelsy. Regarding makeup, the nose is slimmed, the jaw is narrowed, and the brow reduced; the face is also lightened with highlighter at strategic points to emphasize eyes, cheekbones, and lips. For the body, the waist is cinched inwards to accentuate the curve of hips and bust, and all body hair is covered or removed. While some popular drag queens today exaggerate these "classic" features to the point of parody (notable examples from *Drag Race* include drag superstars Bianca Del Rio, Trixie Mattel, and Kim Chi), and alternative drag artists deliberately eschew these standards by painting, padding, and performing in ways that queer normative gender, race, and body ideals entirely (see chapter 1), the prima donna look is ubiquitous among "glamour queens" on the *Drag Race* stage.

---

[38] This includes six international *Drag Race* franchises: *The Switch Drag Race* (2015-) based in Chile, *Drag Race Thailand* (2018-2019), *Drag Race UK* (2019-), *Canada's Drag Race* (2020-), *Drag Race Holland* (2020-), and *Drag Race Australia* (2021). Other official *Drag Race* spinoffs include *Untucked* (2010-), *RuPaul's Drag U* (2010-2012), *All-Stars* (2012-), *Secret Celebrity Drag Race* (2020-), *Vegas Revue* (2020-), and several holiday specials. The *Drag Race* franchise has become a global phenomenon, securing RuPaul's interpretation of drag performance as a quintessential part of 21st-century mainstream popular culture.

Contemporary arguments against drag include charges against it as a form of modern-day minstrelsy that is performed at the expense of women. In June 2019, far-right conservative activist Amber Krabach of King County, Washington campaigned on Facebook against a Drag Queen Story Hour[39] in Renton in a vain effort to drum up support for her upcoming state legislature bid (see chapter 5). When alerted to what was essentially an anti-queer hate campaign directed against Seattle drag artists, I found that the majority of arguments against Drag Queen Story Hour were vitriolic homophobic and transphobic fearmongering about "sexual perverts" influencing children with their "deviant lifestyles," with some going as far as to advocate waiting outside of Seattle gay bars to beat drag artists or suggest putting queer people to death. Wading steadfastly through a deluge of hate speech, I came across one Facebook commenter who likened drag queens to blackface minstrels, or men who dress up mockingly as women. While it was easy for me to dismiss the perspective of a stranger who clearly had very little experience with queer culture, the idea of drag-as-minstrelsy came up again during a casual conversation with my sister Karen later that year. She mentioned a neighbor, Jane,[40] who disapproved of drag as a misogynistic practice. Feeling protective of the art form, my immediate response was, "well, sounds like Jane hasn't seen any good drag, then," but it was far harder to dismiss Jane's viewpoint as someone I know and respect like I would a stranger on the Internet. After some reflection, I realized how easy it is for women like Jane—who do not regularly attend drag shows but have some exposure to mainstream drag culture—to come to that conclusion. When mainstream drag culture is dominated by cis gay men delineating the parameters of femininity and womanhood—and women themselves are expressly forbidden from competing on the largest drag stages in the world—the charge of contemporary drag as "female minstrelsy" becomes considerably more complicated. Mainstream drag culture fails to acknowledge the way local drag artists push against the performative containment of women, as female drag artists have considerable agency over representations of femininity in drag performance.

---

[39] Drag Queen Story Hour is a regular event in which drag artists read children's books and/or give performances oriented towards children and young adults at public libraries around the country. Themes consist of age-appropriate discussions around gender and sexual diversity, self-acceptance, and an appreciation for others. See chapter 5.

[40] A pseudonym.

Scholars examining *Drag Race* scrutinize how contestants utilize spectacularized racialized performances for dramatic or comedic effect—often after being encouraged to do so by the judges and producers. Sociologist Sabrina Strings and global studies scholar Long T. Bui used the third season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2011) to interrogate how the show productively challenges the construction of binary gender while simultaneously reifying the "realness" or naturalness of race (Strings & Bui 2014). By examining the way contestants perform and are critiqued by the judges, Strings and Bui noted how Black and Latinx queens in the early seasons of *Drag Race* are regarded as channeling their "personality" when enacting overtly racialized performances—including performances rooted in minstrel stereotypes—whereas white-appearing and Asian contestants had more freedom in their expressions of racialized femininity (ibid.). If a Black or Latinx queen fails to stand out in performance, she is thus encouraged to express more "personality," which is code for racialized stereotypes (ibid.). This is akin to the process of performative containment in minstrelsy and vaudeville in that it treats stereotypical representations of Black femininity and Latinadad as innate to the bodies that "naturally" produce them; however, it differs significantly from white minstrels in blackface drag in that Black and Latinx queens still have agency in *choosing* to embrace stereotypes for the cameras of *Drag Race,* the degree to which they perform them, and the subtle ways they subvert them.

Another common critique of *RuPaul's Drag Race* is the treatment of Puerto Rican identity on the show. Puerto Rico is rich in drag culture, and nearly every season of *Drag Race* has at least one Puerto Rican queen represented. Using the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Sarah Ahmed, J. McIntyre and D. W. Riggs point out how the show's portrayal of Puerto Rican queens is informed by the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the mainland United States (2017: 62), most notably through the privileging of the English language and through the perpetuation of racialized stereotypes of Latina identities (ibid.: 63). When show producers limit queens' narrative arcs to their Puerto Rican identity, they become "too regional" to be serious contenders to the title of "America's Next Drag Superstar," and are subsequently eliminated (season 2's Jessica Wild, season 3's Yara Sofia, season 5's Lineysha Sparx). Sarah Jenkins, in another essay in the same collection, notes how Puerto Rican queens' bilingual abilities in the show are framed through the production process as a liability rather than as a strength (2017: 83), which often manifests in these queens receiving edits that show them struggling with the English language while their Anglo counterparts pull ahead in the race for the crown. For example, Puerto Rican queen Kenya Michaels was routinely critiqued by the judges and teased by her competitors for her English language skills to the point where she had a breakdown on camera (*RuPaul's Drag Race Untucked,* season 4, episode 5), after which she was eliminated for "misunderstanding" the weekly challenge. It becomes painfully obvious how *RuPaul's Drag Race* upholds the supremacy of the Anglo-North American subject at the expense of drag artists deemed "too Puerto Rican" or not fluent enough in the English language to be crowned "America's Next Drag Superstar."

Jenkins extends her critique to other racialized subjects within the show, noting how season 1 queen BeBe Zahara Benet, originally from Cameroon, was consistently framed (by herself and by others) in terms of a monolithic, essentialized “Africa” (ibid.: 79)—judges would literally shout “CAMEROON!” or “AFRICA!” when Bebe entered the stage, which subsequently stuck to Bebe as one of her “catchphrases.” Manila Luzon, from season 3, and Jiggly Caliente, from season 4, strategically deployed Asian stereotypes to their advantage in the show; Jenkins considers these racialized performances “more dangerous” because they are seen as more acceptable by the judges (and viewers) given both queens’ Filipina heritage (2017: 85-86). In a parallel to the 19th-century minstrel stage, the use of “stock characters” in reality television becomes “a form of shorthand communication with a broad audience base” (McIntyre & Riggs 2017: 64, citing Wang 2010). *Drag Race* producers succinctly convey around a dozen contestants’ drag personae within the limited time frame of around nine hours of aired footage per season by depending on the signifying power of stock characters, despite the problematic reliance on racist tropes that perpetuate the performative containment of racialized femininities.

With that said, these queens’ agency in performatively remixing ethnic tropes derived from their personal backgrounds to advance their careers in an industry that has always been unwelcoming or outright hostile to QPOC (queer people of color) is significant. I would venture to say that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has in fact launched more careers for QPOC than any other U.S. American television franchise to date. Black, Puerto Rican, Latinx, and Asian queens using stereotypes for their own artistic and financial gain fundamentally weakens the grip of performative containment, a process queer scholar José Muñoz would call *disidentification* (1999; see the introduction of this dissertation). Like the minstrels and vaudevillians from minoritized groups in the 19th and 20th centuries, these queens strategically erode the oppressive structures that define their identities while simultaneously embracing them.

Seattle drag artists negotiate the legacy of performative containment

In the late 2010s and 2020, drag artists in Seattle still grapple with the long shadow of performative containment, first established on the minstrel stage and sustained through vaudeville and drag performance of the 20th century. Seattle drag king Samuel L. JackYouSon, the drag persona of Shelli Kountz, is a skilled and entertaining MC that I first met in 2019 while attending *Kings* at Kremwerk. A live singer, comic, community activist, and host, Samuel L. JackYouSon is also a heartfelt tribute to the men in Shelli's community that kept watch over women out in public while Shelli was growing up in Los Angeles:

> "Samuel started in vague drag, going for *cholo* Blackness in LA, a Black/Mexican/Native mix… This is a Black man on the streets, who isn't ON the streets, but you know he loves the streets. He's always like an honorary mayor for any schtick going down. And sometimes that has to do with *[here, Shelli drops the pitch of her voice into Samuel's drawl]* women getting taken advantage of—even though he wouldn't mind a date, you know. Or it has to do with some real shit going down, doing some key players on the gangsterdom, and Samuel is there like 'hey! You know what, everyone wants to go home tonight, let's just cut this shit short'… he's kind of this magic agent of change and power and everybody getting along" (interview, 09/15/20).

Despite Samuel's position as a protector and community leader, Shelli found that they had to labor at managing audience perceptions of his persona, preferring MC gigs which enabled Samuel to clearly communicate his messages of love, acceptance, and communitas with the audience. Shelli elaborated:

> "When I first started him, all the white people—and I only say it that way because that's the best way to say it—all the white people thought that Samuel was immediately a pimp. Immediately he had something to do, especially, with making sure that women's bodies were available and on sale. It took me a couple years to make it very clear that Samuel wasn't doing that. So much so, that I didn't do any performances other than Samuel as an MC. People invited me to do numbers all the time, I rejected every single opportunity save a few… Every other gig, I fucking turned my nose up at. I really did. I was like nope, I'm sorry, I can't do that. Because I knew that it was about this characterization of Black maleness that you—these potential bookers—you are gonna try to use this to justify wherever the fuck you see yourself in the equation" (ibid.).

Shelli's refusal to take gigs that set up Samuel L. JackYouSon as a "bad Black man"—a neo-minstrel stock character codified within U.S. popular culture through the latter half of the 20th century, particularly through the gangsta rap subgenre of hip hop (White 2011)—is an intentional act of resistance to the phenomenon of performative containment that haunts Black performers to this day. Like Lillyn Brown, Shelli maintains careful control over Samuel's appearance and reception in ways that allow her to contest the use of spectacularized, exaggerated Blackness as social capital within white-dominated Seattle nightclubs.

During the peak of vaudeville in the 1910s, male impersonation was lucrative—it paid better to perform as a man than it did to appear onstage as a woman (Casey 2015: 82). This remains true today, particularly in Shelli's case. In an interview with Cassandra Croft that appeared in issue 2 of *The Buzz*—a zine produced by Rudy's Barbershop in Seattle—Shelli reports: "it's been so much easier for me to get bookings and perform as this [male] characterization of Black than to actually be a Black woman and get those same bookings. It's not necessarily a negative thing, but it has kind of underscored how invisible certain voices are. Samuel has given me the chance to have a stronger voice than I think I would have had without this character" (*The Buzz* 2020). During our interview, Shelli also pointed out that her adoption of a Black drag king character afforded her much more social capital and mobility within the queer scene of Seattle in 2013 when Samuel made his stage debut, which in turn allowed her access to the larger discourse regarding the Seattle community:

> "Samuel gave me the leverage that I didn't just have myself. …I became a community leader. I knew everybody in town, I knew politicians, all the local services departments, people at the local hospital… Samuel became this real repository for me to have these authentic conversations. I want people to feel better when it's all said and done, but I want to still say it. Because I'm seeing the struggles. I'm gonna try to keep it funny, but we're still gonna talk about it" (interview, 09/15/20).

This quote illustrates how Shelli utilizes her drag king persona to leverage her influence within the community. Beyond sustaining a progressive representation of Black masculinity and resisting the performative containment of Black women set down by minstrelsy, Samuel L. JackYouSon masterfully blends entertainment with social activism and community building.

While the white supremacist legacy of the 19th-century prima donna persists through cultural norms and beauty standards within the Seattle drag scene, drag artists typically utilized performances of whiteness to comedic effect during shows I attended. As the privileged identity within the U.S. American system of racial categorization, whiteness is considered fair game for critique within drag performance by both white and non-white artists. Besides white artists and MCs making casually disparaging or self-aware remarks about their own white privilege, other artists created entire numbers that parodied whiteness. During the second season of *So You Think You Can Drag* at R Place in spring 2019, the second runway competition for the contestants featured a hometown runway. Angela Visalia, a Seattle drag queen of Argentinian descent with a pop-punk performance persona, chose to represent her hometown of Bellevue as a parody of the typical Eastside[41] affluent white liberal woman. Visalia cruised onto the stage with a Prius steering wheel in one hand and a Starbucks coffee cup in the other, dressed fashionably with a blonde wig and sunglasses. When she turned around onstage, she revealed an "I'm With Her" bumper sticker from Hillary Clinton's 2016 Presidential campaign affixed to her padded rear. A visual remix of the gendered and racialized aspects associated with Eastside snobbery, affluence, and political liberalism, Angela's look and performance were well-received by the judges and audience. With the steering wheel and bumper sticker, Visalia also referenced the mobility of suburban whiteness, a privilege afforded to affluent white Americans living in proximity to urban centers where BIPOC (Black and Indigenous people of color) are historically and presently confined to ethnic ghettoes, reservations, or redlined neighborhoods through the segregationist logic of U.S. American urban planning.

---

[41] In the context of Seattle, this term describes the suburban cities of Bellevue, Kirkland, Redmond, Issaquah, and other localities east of Lake Washington, which separates the Eastside from the city of Seattle to the west.

A few weeks after Angela Visalia's Bellevue hometown look, the contestants of *So You Think You Can Drag* completed a live singing challenge (Angela had unfortunately been eliminated at this point and was no longer in the competition). Competition frontrunner Kung Pow Meow, an Asian American queen from the Seattle scene, sang a campy[42] rendition of Vanessa Carlton's "A Thousand Miles" (2001) for her main number of the night. The opening piano hook to the song immediately indexed a specific formation of gendered whiteness to the audience, thanks to its use in the 2004 film *White Chicks* directed by Keenan Wayans and starring his brothers, Shawn and Marlon Wayans. In the film, Shawn and Marlon play FBI agents who go undercover in whiteface drag to solve a crime. The film thus explores the construction of white U.S. American femininity using a form of "reverse minstrelsy" that reaps the comedic value of "the black-body-in-white" in which the conventions of blackface minstrelsy are inverted (Yancy and Ryser 2008). The prominence of piano and orchestral strings, mellow bass and percussion, and vulnerable, introspective vocal style lead to "A Thousand Miles" becoming a "jam" associated with young white women both within the filmic universe of *White Chicks* and in mass culture writ large (Smith-Shomade 2008). Kung Pow deftly deployed the queer art of failure in her performance (Halberstam 2011; see the introduction of this dissertation), mumbling her way through the lyrics in a glib rendition of ditzy white mediocrity. When show host Cookie Couture inquired whether or not Kung Pow rehearsed for her performance, she retorted, "Yes, I watched *White Chicks,*" eliciting laughter and applause from the audience, while also revealing her artistic intent of lampooning whiteness.

---

[42] See chapter 4 for a discussion of camp, as well as citations for literature on the topic.

It is important to note that these drag artists are sampling from a specific form of whiteness associated with upper- to middle-class cisheterosexual suburban women in both of these examples. As with Blackness, whiteness is impossible to render in performance without markers of gender, class, and sexuality. In their critique of *White Chicks,* film studies scholars George Yancy and Tracey Ann Ryser write:

> "While within the context of the film, the Wayanses, disguised as white women, acquire a power position in their 'reverse minstrel show' performances, what remains obvious is that white women, not white men, are the object of ridicule and critique. However, white men continue to possess the majority of political and economic power in America. Hence, it might be argued that while wealthy white women are the main characters through which whiteness gets critiqued, white men slip through the filmic counter-gaze of the Wayans brothers and that this slippage serves to reassert white male domination" (2008).

Thus, the whiteness performed by Angela Visalia and Kung Pow Meow both allows queer POC to render whiteness as tangible and absurd—thus robbing it of some of its power—while also echoing the project of performative containment seen within 19th-century minstrelsy. White femininity/womanhood becomes the contained positionality while cisheterosexual white masculinity/manhood remains unmarked and intact.

Resisting the performative containment of Asian/Asian American identities through drag performance

Black Americans are not the only minoritized group in the United States that are haunted to this day by the specter of minstrelsy. As discussed by history and American studies scholar Krystyn Moon, the practice of yellowface describes a performance style pioneered in California in the 1850s, reaching national audiences by the 1870s (Moon 2005). Yellowface minstrelsy featured white stage performers portraying East Asians—most commonly Chinese and Chinese Americans—in a degrading, exaggerated fashion, using a combination of dialect, posture, costuming, makeup, and music (ibid.). Yellowface was also reflected in cartoons and advertisements, fixing grotesque and mocking ideas of Asianness within the racial imaginations of Americans throughout the country. The advent of yellowface minstrelsy, as well as its rise to national popularity, coincided with a large influx of Chinese migrants to the western United States during the mid-19th century. The subsequent growth of Asian communities on the west coast soon stoked white fears of a Chinese takeover, leading to widespread anti-Asian sentiment and violence that culminated in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which legally marked Chinese and other Asian bodies as irredeemably foreign and fundamentally un-American (Moon 2005). Like with blackface minstrelsy (Lott 1993), public interest in yellowface performance reflected a complicated blend of fascination with alluring Orientalist fantasies alongside racialized hatred and fear of Chinese and other Asian immigrants to the United States. While the arrival of Chinese and Chinese Americans in vaudeville helped to combat many of the stereotypes codified by yellowface minstrelsy (Moon 2005), the insidious legacy of performative containment of the Chinese/Asian body set down by yellowface still echoes in U.S. American popular culture to this day.

Just as blackface minstrelsy continued through vaudeville, early film, and into the Golden Age of Hollywood (Rogin 1996), yellowface minstrelsy found a home in new formations of U.S. American popular media in the 20th century. Representations of Asian characters in Hollywood film were typically relegated to white actors wearing yellowface makeup and facial prosthetics to make their features appear more "Oriental"—a purposeful term here that emphasizes the perceived physicality and geography of racial difference while also "remind[ing] us of the fictional origins and status of Hollywood's Asian characterizations" (Fuller 2010). Cinema studies scholar Karla Fuller, quoting Edward Said, asserts that "the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks…includ[ing] Hollywood" (ibid.). While Fuller's focus is on examining the phenomenon of racial difference as performance in mainstream media, her case studies of films between 1930-1960 reveals the deep entrenchment of Orientalist portrayals of Asian characters by white actors in yellowface.

Contemporary discourse within film studies and Asian American studies concerning representations of Asianness in U.S. American cinema have shifted focus from the issue of yellowface to the phenomenon of whitewashing. Broadly defined as the casting of white actors in Asian roles, whitewashing differs from yellowface in that the racial masquerade of the latter is abandoned to avoid racist stereotyping, which is no longer acceptable to mainstream audiences (Nishime 2017). One such example is the casting of white British actress Tilda Swinton in place of the Ancient One (originally a Tibetan man) in the Marvel Comics film adaptation for *Doctor Strange* (2016). Communications scholar LeiLani Nishime analyzes this move:

> "The studio's public statements frame whitewashing as a corrective to the historical injuries of stereotyping and as a response to the growing influence of Asian markets. Within that frame, the studio can promote itself as an agent for social change by transforming an Asian stereotype into an empowered white woman to move the audience past racist representations and by acknowledging the power of Asian audiences… more disturbing still is the persistent and pernicious linking of whitewashing to stories of racial progress so that imagining a nonracist future means imagining a white future" (2017).

Whitewashing continues the legacy of performative containment codified by yellowface minstrelsy by swallowing up Asian identities—in the name of gendered "progress"—as U.S.-based film studios remix comics, anime, and other Asian/Asian American literature into new formations of popular mass media. I continue to use the term *performative containment* here because the Asian body does not disappear entirely into the white actress—it remains in the minds of audiences familiar with the sampled source material. The missing Asian body haunts its whitewashed vessel, contained within it despite its apparent absence.

On June 15, 2019, I attended a show at Kremwerk with friends, where I witnessed a Seattle drag artist enact a performance that turned the performative containment of Asians/Asian Americans in popular media on its head. As part of the *WEIRD* series, *Adult Swim: The Drag Show* was hosted by Seattle queens, Londyn Bradshaw and Old Witch. *Adult Swim* was an after-hours programming block on Cartoon Network that featured animated television shows aimed at young adults. It included several anime titles (which popularized the Japanese art form among younger U.S. viewers in the 2000s), including *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex,* based on the cyberpunk-themed Japanese media franchise *The Ghost in the Shell*.

During her second number that evening, drag queen Rowan Ruthless performed Yoko Kanno's "Inner Universe", the theme song to the first season of *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex.* Released in 2003, the song's lyrics are a blend of Russian, English, and Latin with vocals by Russian singer Origa, known for her collaborations with Japanese composers including Kanno, and by Ben Del Maestro, a boy soprano. I remember being impressed by Rowan's adeptness in lip-syncing a song in three languages (!), but the poignant theme of her number stood out to me even more. Rowan, herself of Chinese American descent (Cookie Couture & Rowan Ruthless 2020) satirized the phenomenon of whitewashing in U.S. American popular visual media. Rowan's use of the *Ghost in the Shell* title theme specifically indexed the controversial casting of white U.S. American actress Scarlett Johansson in the lead role of the 2017 U.S. film adaptation, Major Mira Killian/Moto Kusanagi.

As noted by cinema studies scholar Janice Loreck, the backlash to Johansson's casting was immediate, with critics accusing DreamWorks of whitewashing the source material and contributing to the persistent structural racism in the U.S. film industry which has resulted in the significant underrepresentation of Asians and Asian Americans in Hollywood cinema (2018). However, the character's complicated racial history within the mythos of the series adds a significant layer to the issue of racial identity in film: set in 21st century Japan, the Major (Johansson) is a cyborg with a Caucasian artificial body (shell) inhabited by the mind (ghost) of a young Japanese woman—hence the series title *Ghost in the Shell* (Loreck 2018). Like many other key works in the science fiction genre, this theme represents an exploration of the mind/body split and nature of humanity; indeed, defenders of Johansson's casting argued that this "transracial" character serves to embody this theme in a particularly visceral way (ibid.).

However, Loreck argues that Johansson's persistent and recognizable whiteness outside of the film, amplified by her blonde hair (though covered with a black wig in *Ghost in the Shell*), plus her distinctive husky vocal timbre, trouble the narrative of transraciality. In other words, her celebrity status and her signature vocality "penetrat[e] into the fictional world of the text" (2018: 40), thus rendering the character's original Japanese identity illegible. Loreck's focus on vocal timbre as a sonic marker of Johansson's whiteness is reinforced with a look to the work of musicologist Nina Eidsheim. While her initial approach concerned sonic Blackness, Eidsheim argues that the way voices are perceived as racialized is not based purely on sound but also on non-sonic contextual factors, including preconceptions about race within the minds of the listener (2012). Listening is not a neutral activity; thus, Johansson's vocalic body plays a critical role in how her purportedly transracial character (mis)reads to audiences familiar with her as a blonde white celebrity. LeiLani Nishime, writing about similar instances of whitewashing/transraciality in 2012's *Cloud Atlas* and 2014's *Ex Machina,* succinctly summarizes: "through the technologically enabled magic of racial transformation— specifically

Asian women becoming white women—we learn which bodies attain subjecthood and which are destined to be used and discarded. The racial flexibility promised by a disembodied cybernetic future works to empower the films' white stars, but delivers a distinctively different message for its secondary Asian female characters" (2017). In other words, white subjecthood is free to transcend racial, gendered, and technological barriers in science fiction while Asian subjects are relegated to erasure and containment.

During her performance at *WEIRD,* Rowan Ruthless embodied the problematic narrative of transraciality of the *Ghost in the Shell* film adaptation by performing an elaborate dance of identity: an Asian American drag queen dressed as a blonde white actress performing as a Caucasian cyborg with a Japanese ghost. Remarkably, the sonic aspect of the performance mirrors this play of identity. Through her lip-sync, Rowan embodied the vocals of Russian singer Origa, though the song was composed by Japanese composer Yoko Kanno: as such, we again see the pattern of an Asian American drag queen adopting the voice of a white singer who is in turn performing a song written by a Japanese woman. While the power dynamics differ between Origa and Kanno's collaboration versus the whitewashed casting of Johansson as the Major, the parallel of transracial performance between the visual and sonic realms is striking.

However, the subtlety of this parallel was unnoticeable compared to Rowan's next move in her performance. First appearing onstage in a straight black bob, Rowan pulled the wig off at a strategic moment in the song, revealing a blonde bob underneath. I remember the audience erupting with laughter—we immediately recognized the reference to Scarlett Johansson, and Rowan proceeded to camp up the performance even more by doing awkward, clumsy martial arts moves onstage. With that, Rowan's performance became a caricature of whiteness; like Kung Pow Meow's sung rendition of "A Thousand Miles" at *So You Think You Can Drag*, whiteness became marked onstage by a tactical failure to perform well. In Rowan's performance, whiteness is also articulated as a performance of cultural appropriation, a conscious act of adopting some aspect of Otherness for social and financial gain. This element is what made Rowan's performance so memorable to me, and demonstrates how Asian American drag artists resist the legacy that performative containment set down by a long history of yellowface minstrelsy and whitewashing in U.S. popular media, peeling back the seemingly inert façade of whiteness to reveal its constructedness.

Conclusion

By tracing cross-gender performance in U.S. American popular culture from minstrelsy through vaudeville to current drag practice, this chapter provides critical historical context in understanding the racialized dimensions of contemporary drag performance. By sampling from historical stereotypes of Blackness, whiteness, Asianness, and Latinadad, performers (and show producers) are assured that spectacularized performances of gender on the popular stage will be embraced by mass audiences. This tried-and-true system has fed on itself over the last two centuries, re-enforcing stereotypes about minoritized identities in the minds of performers and audiences while also continuously reinscribing them.

Established on the popular stages of the minstrel show in the mid-19th century, the phenomenon of performative containment has haunted cross-gender performance to the present day. Conceived of as a way to understand how Black femininity was narrowly delineated by white male minstrels in the 19th century, I have expanded Bean's framework to show how cross-gender entertainers construct and perform a variety of racialized and gendered identities, including within present-day mainstream drag culture (*RuPaul's Drag Race*) and among the artists of Seattle's drag scene. However, I have also demonstrated in this chapter that minoritized cross-gender performers have resisted the legacy of performative containment by creatively negotiating the expectations set down by white men in cross-race and/or cross-gender stage roles. By embracing aspects of these tropes, minoritized cross-gender performers are able to undermine from within, creating empowering representations of their own identities. From the male impersonators of the 19th-century vaudeville stage to the kings and queens on Seattle stages in the late 2010s, cross-gender performers assert agency, pushing against performative containment in novel and entertaining ways.

The historical overview in this chapter also reveals the ebb-and-flow in popularity of cross-gender performance in U.S. American culture. I began my dissertation project with an examination of blackface minstrelsy with the intent to compare it to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, completely unaware that cross-gender performers like Julian Eltinge, Ella Wesner, The Only Leon, and Lillyn Brown had represented the pinnacle of U.S. American popular entertainment in the late 19th- and early 20th centuries. I had mistakenly believed that RuPaul was the beginning of mainstream U.S. audiences' fascination with drag, as did some of the Seattle drag artists with whom I collaborated for this project. A notable exception to this was Shelli, who was well-aware of our nation's history of cross-gender popular performance. While discussing this parallel towards the end of our interview, Shelli left me with an astute quote befitting her auspicious role as a storyteller: "In any given lifetime, you're only gonna be here and witness only so much of things. When you're reaching back to the characters you're reaching to, they are still alive all along the way, ever since they first happened. We're still here, keeping this story alive—you never know who it's gonna affect …for me, the question is, how do you keep it happening while you're still here?" (interview, 09/15/20). Shelli's moving remark speaks to the critical importance of queer culture-bearers in maintaining these stories: as queer people, we can never take for granted our safety and security in a violently cisheterosupremacist society, particularly for queer folks who occupy positions at multiple intersecting oppressions. The speed at which 20th-century cross-gender performers went from international superstars to maligned “sexual deviants” when U.S. political culture took a sharp conservative turn during the 1940s is disturbing. With cross-gender performance again reaching an apex of popularity in the United States, this unsettling historical precedent brings greater urgency in my project of re-examining histories of U.S. popular culture that exclude gender and sexual diversity, and—more importantly—sharing the stories and artistry of queer performers today.

The next section of this dissertation, chapters 4-6, will focus on the use of remix in drag performance as a both an audio production technique and as an aesthetic of cultural production. As community leaders and culture-bearers, drag artists sample from a broad range of visual, sonic, and affective sources to create mashups that both entertain and do important political work. The production of virtual drag numbers during the pandemic allowed drag artists to continue making performance art when queer public spaces were closed due to lockdowns, and drag artists also used mashup performances to craft potent political statements in an era of political unrest and right-wing extremism. However, a discussion of remix theory as it applies to drag performance in Seattle is first needed to understand these phenomena.

PART II: Drag Performance and Remix

Chapter 4
"It's like live performance collage": Remix Praxis as Drag Practice

Drag performance is fundamentally imbued with the process of remix. As I regularly encountered in Seattle's drag scene, artists routinely remix body, gender, sound, and sexuality along with popular culture references and queer aesthetics to create entertaining mashups that do important political and community work. The chapter title is drawn from a quote by Seattle drag artist Miss Texas 1988, who regularly pushed my thinking about drag through their performances as well as our conversations about queer theory and drag history. The way they described their creative process speaks directly to remix practice, as the terminology they use mirrors that within other art forms that utilize remix. Here, I speak of remix not just as a musical production technique, but also as a discursive strategy employed by performers to create meaningful experiences for themselves, their audiences, and the queer community more broadly. Sampling from music, sound, fashion, film, television, and politics, drag artists weave these disparate elements together onto their own bodies to create living mashups. Layers of meaning are generated through their realization not only by the drag artist's performance in real time, but also the audience's interpretation(s) of the remixed work.

While many different artists and performances are referenced throughout this chapter, I will examine two duet performances by alternative drag[43] artists in Seattle in-depth to explore this process. My analyses will push beyond the more obvious usage of sonic and visual referents as samples to reveal how artists use more abstract elements in sample-based creative production. "Telephone" by Miss Texas 1988 and Londyn Bradshaw is a demonstration of how a larger narrative takes precedence in shaping the arrangement and performance of interrelated samples, but also an example of how queer artists performatively render the affective elements of queer sociality that stick to certain samples, which in turn provoke powerful affective responses from audience members. “Be Mean” by Lazarus Rise and Mercury Divine accomplishes something similar: this performance shows how drag artists use gender, body, and desire as samples alongside sonic elements in the formation of mashups that radically reconfigure mainstream popular culture to make room for queer people. The final section of this chapter will grapple with issues of authorship and the appropriation of copyrighted materials as drag artists navigate the complex (and vague) legal frameworks that haunt the self-regulatory systems of ethics that define remix cultures. However, a discussion of remix theory and key definitions of terms like “remix,” “sample,” and “mashup” must first be addressed.

---

[43] For a description of "alternative drag," see chapter 1.

Remix Theory

While Eduardo Navas was not the first scholar to write about remix, his work undoubtedly formed the foundation of the field of remix studies. In *Remix Theory,* he set out to assess how Remix permeates art, music, media, and culture (2012). Here, “Remix” with a capital “R” refers to Remix as discourse, though Navas helpfully expands the definition of *discourse* as “a set of ideas up for debate in written and oral form[s]” to include all forms of media in the 21st century, including digital media objects (2012: 3-4). Navas’s use of Remix also contrasts with *remix culture,* which he defines as a “movement…preoccupied with the free exchange of ideas and their manifestation as specific products” (2012: 3). Remix as discourse “informs the development of material reality dependent on the constant recyclability of material with the implementation of mechanical reproduction” (ibid.) and is an invaluable tool to help understand culture as it is increasingly defined by the processes of recyclability and appropriation (2012: 7).

These processes are linked to the original context of remix practice, rooted in DJ culture of African American and Caribbean music production the 1970s; over time, sampling practice made its way into culture at large, which Navas calls “a tradition of appropriation” (2012: 4). This chapter will grapple with the legal and ethical dimensions concerning drag artists’ appropriation of copyrighted work in the process of remix; the politics of identity related to drag performance are primarily discussed in chapters 1-3.

Remix theory can be categorized as a form of postmodern cultural production as outlined by Fredric Jameson (1991) due to its diffusion of the notion of authorship, the way remix practice weakens the historicity of samples when they are emplaced in new contexts, and the embrace of commodity culture as a source for artistic production. Feminist studies scholar Angela McRobbie disputes Jameson’s lament of the superficiality of postmodernism, pointing out how the cultural production of marginalized individuals in the postmodern era represent creative engagement with a variety of sources that actually serve as critical survival strategies for oppressed communities (McRobbie 1994: 4), which encompasses how remix is used by many communities, including its original context of Caribbean-American music practice and within drag cultures as described in this dissertation. The way marginalized artists remix aural, visual, and affective samples—including from commodity culture—is neither random nor a tacit embrace of consumerism; rather, it represents a deftness in navigating dense media environments in ways that challenge the long legacy of white heterosupremacist logic in cultural production.

Sampling is a critical part of remix/Remix; indeed, one must understand sampling to understand remix. In his essay on sampling in *Keywords in Remix Studies,* Owen Gallagher traced the trajectory of the term, looking to its historical context, its relationship with recording technology, and its various applications across different forms of media (2018). Beginning with a definition from the Oxford English Dictionary: “a representative part or single item from a larger whole or group” (2018: 260), Gallagher followed with definitions of sampling linked to sound: “the process of taking already existent musical ingredients and recombining them in an original mix” (ibid., citing Westrup and Laderman 2014) and “a form of the fine arts practice of collage, but one that is done with audio tools rather than scissors and glue” (2018: 260; citing McLeod and DiCola 2011). By reading Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss’s interpretation of the term in his book *Mashup Cultures* (2010), Gallagher expanded its definition to include artistic production practices outside of music, including visual art, film, video, and literature (2018: 260). Gallagher also helpfully distinguishes between *sampling* and *remix,* as the two terms are often (erroneously) used interchangeably. Sampling is the process that occurs *prior* to remix:

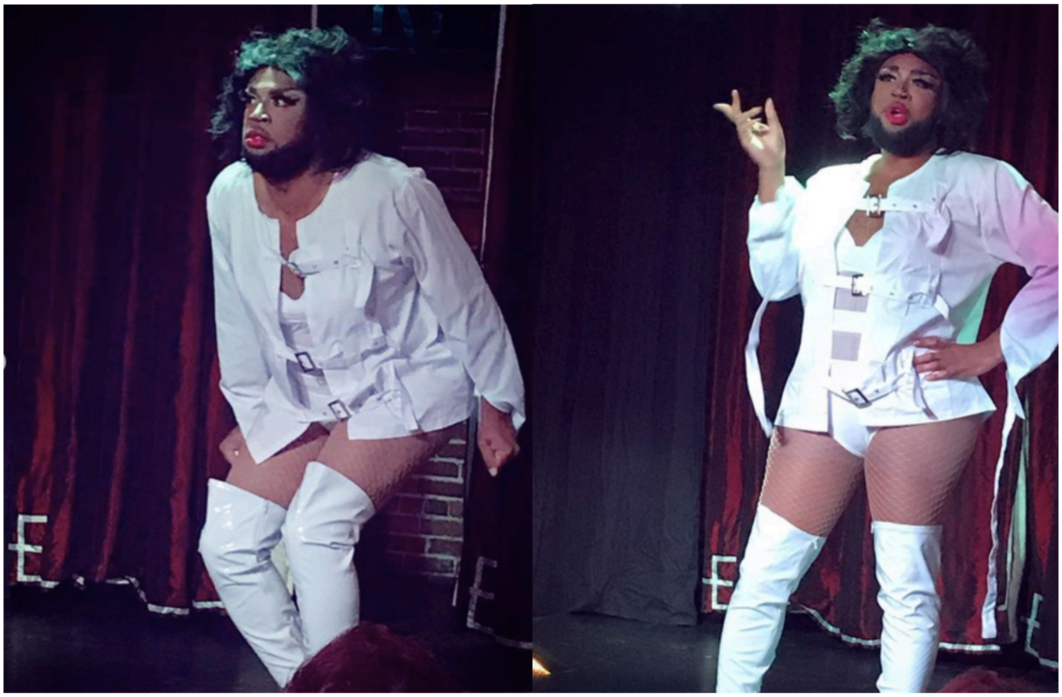
> “The sampling stage is merely the compiling of an archive of elements that will subsequently be used to create something new…When any sample is inserted or pasted into a new composition, the process of creating a remix has begun…Remixing is post-production—deciding which samples to use, where to place them in the composition, creating juxtapositions of meaning by placing two different samples in temporal or spatial proximity, or recombining them in some way to produce something novel” (2018: 261).

Viewing sampling as a broader practice beyond music reveals its ubiquitous presence within the creative production of remixes in diverse contexts. For drag performance, the “archive of elements” (borrowing Gallagher’s terminology) consists primarily of sonic, visual, and performative samples (music, sound, makeup, costuming, gesture, dance), remixed together into a mashup.

Mashup is another important term concerning the practice of remix. Nate Harrison and Eduardo Navas, co-writing a chapter, “Mashup,” in *Keywords in Remix Studies,* traced the origin of the term within music production to its original context of 1970s Jamaican music production practice: “a music mashup is the vocal track of one song overlaid on the instrumental track of another song, with the contrast between the two revealed as the artistic intent” (2018: 191), or, in the most simplistic terms, "the extraction of information from two or more sources" (ibid.: 196). In the 21st century, music mashups are so common that they are regarded as an independent music genre; with the development and proliferation of digital audio technologies, they have become exceedingly complex and sophisticated, sometimes incorporating elements of dozens of songs into a single track (ibid.: 193). Another term used to describe complex mashups that incorporate a multitude of sonic samples is *megamix* (Navas 2012: 95).

The majority of performances I attended in the Seattle drag scene employed music mashups of this sort—well before a performance, the drag artist would sample from a variety of songs to create a remixed track to which they would perform onstage. These mashups regularly used sounds beyond music; drag artists often sampled clips from television or film, spoken word (by themselves or by others), or other sounds (barking dogs, screams, gunshots) that, when remixed together, create a meaningful performance narrative. One such example is a performance by Seattle drag artist Dion Dior Black, performing as a guest judge at the second season of a local competition *So You Think You Can Drag* in June 2019. Appearing onstage in a straitjacket, Dion lip-synced along to a complex megamix consisting of audio samples from Gnarls Barkley's "Crazy" (2006), Patsy Cline's "Crazy" (1961), the character Gretchen Wieners' iconic English class rant from the cult classic film *Mean Girls* (2004), clips of *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 11 winner Yvie Oddly's distinctive laugh (2019), and a spoken word excerpt from a Tiffany Haddish stand-up comedy special. Dion's sonic samples, outfit, and gestures all evoked the narrative she was crafting onstage for us: a bearded queen escapes her captivity in an asylum, wriggling her way out of a white straitjacket while lip syncing to memorable songs and clips relating to craziness (see Figure 11). While the overall effect was hilarious, I also read Dion's mashup and performance as a critique of the stigmatization attached to Black, femme, queer bodies, culminating in her transcendence from containment. As I found during the course of my fieldwork, the most original, successful, and engaging performances were those that involved creative mashups that remixed not only music tracks, but sound from a variety of sources.

Figure 11: Two mid-performance photos of Dion Dior Black at R Place, a bearded drag queen wearing white thigh-high boots, a white corset, and an open white straitjacket. Photographs by author, June 2019.



While Navas, Gallagher, and Harrison have done much to shape remix/Remix into a unified field of study and provide key definitions for its components, approaches taken by other scholars have expanded remix theory into useful analytic frameworks, including highlighting the usefulness of Remix as a discursive strategy. From the perspective of socio-cognitive linguistics, Martin Irvine drew upon Peircean semiotics, Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, and generative-combinatorial-recursive models of language to posit that the practice of remix utilizes the same normative processes that enable combinatoriality of language and thought (2015). With regard to semiotics, he asserted that the process of meaning-making is always remix: "meaning emerges through a ‘Remix’ of symbolically structured ‘inputs’ restructured into further ‘outputs’ with a ‘value-add’, a development of additional conceptual relations and contexts for other routes in a meaning network” (2015: 21). In other words, the interpretant is a remix of signs generated through the reading of referents, including a “value-add” developed through one’s relationship to other referents. Irvine also applied Bakhtin’s concept of the “dialogized utterance,” which I understand to mean that any given expression is always in response to, *and* in anticipation of, another expression: “an individual person’s meaning, cognition, and expression require and presuppose a community of *others*” (2015: 22). The final notion, regarding generative-combinatorial-recursive models of language, is based on the principle of “discrete infinity” (ibid.: 23), or the capacity for infinite, unlimited, open-ended expression from finite means (individual units of meaning). The boundless possibility of expression is accomplished through *recursion*, or looping, open-ended structures of expression (ibid.). Thus, the practice of remix involves adding units of meaning to existing ideas; always in response to or in anticipation of something, somewhere within collective remix culture; and fundamentally based on recursive processes (loops) in order to maintain a chain of open-endedness (ibid.: 33). Irvine’s socio-linguistic interpretation of remix supports Navas’s assertion that Remix is indeed a form a discourse. It is productive here to reflect upon Walter Benjamin’s classic essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in which he expressed his concerns over the loss of the “auras” of original artworks, severed from their sources and dispersed into infinity through the process of mechanical reproduction (1936). The idea of remix as discourse as promoted by scholars such as Irvine and Navas demonstrate how a work of art’s aura is not lost through sampling and remix; rather, the sample’s aura becomes an important component of how the sample ultimately communicates meaning within new configurations and contexts.

Remix as a discursive strategy is a useful framework for analyzing drag practice like Dion Dior Black's "Crazy" megamix and performance. On one level, Dion's performance can be analyzed purely in terms of the remixed artifact (the digital mashup to which she performed), drawing an understanding of her overall performance solely through its sourced samples, or "units of meaning"; the next step is looking to the way Dion uses her costumed and made-up body onstage to visually and performatively tie together the various "crazy" references present in the mashup—additional "units of meaning" that are added in real-time to the performance of the mashup. However, the effectiveness of the performance is ultimately determined through a dialogue with a "community of others": the *audience* is actively engaged in the real-time remix process through their understanding, misunderstanding, or ignorance of Dion's references. It is on this level that deeper commentary regarding the racialized and gendered components of mental illness, evoked by Dion's samples and performance, emerge. None of the sounded samples comment explicitly on this: it is through the process of their remix, presentation, and interpretation that these meanings materialize.

It is important to consider intent versus impact in performance. Having not spoken to Dion Dior Black about her performance that evening, I cannot assume my interpretation of her overall narrative was her intent; neither can I assume that any other audience member present walked away from that performance with the same interpretation. The production of meaning—or Remix—occurs as a dialogue between performer and individual members of the audience. In terms of Irvine's application of semiotics, the performance "inputs" consist not only of Dion's sampled materials, but also audience members' preconceived notions *about* those samples (i.e., their ideological baggage); thus, the "outputs" include the value-add of how the performance shapes audience members' understanding of the sampled materials. This is how Remix functions as a discursive strategy: meaning is ultimately generated in a third space located *between* the performer and their audience, which evokes performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson's notion of "dialogic performance" (2003). While my approach to this concept with Remix is novel, gender studies scholar Marlon Bailey has previously written of the production of gender in ballroom culture (a scene similar to drag performance in that it involves queer people engaged in performances of race, class, and gender that are often spectacularized) as that of "communal performance labor" (Bailey 2013: 45; Khubchandani 2020), or a process of semiotic production that occurs between participants within a scene, be they in a presentational mode or taking on the role of an active observer. The affective dimension of communal performance labor is vital for the survival of many queer people, as this process forms and maintains safe spaces where identity experimentation, community validation, and the generation of self-worth all intersect.

Remix Theory as a Framework for Culture

An important contribution to remix studies—and influential to my own thinking about remix—is Tashima Thomas's application of Remix as a *cultural framework*, which she uses to interrogate the aesthetic of race in artistic production in Latin American and Caribbean visual cultures (2015). The sampling and reassembling of racialized bodies in the creation of "visual soundtracks" illustrates the "nuances and complexities of how race, and particularly blackness, is constructed and remixed in the cultural imaginary" (ibid.: 179). Drawing from Navas (2012), she identifies four types of remix at play in her analysis: (1) extended remix, which is defined as a longer version of an original song; (2) selective remix, which adds or subtracts elements from the original while depending on recognition of the original to maintain semantic relevance; (3) reflexive remix, which "allegorizes and extends the aesthetic of sampling, claims autonomy when carrying the name of the original, and leaves the original tracks largely intact and recognizable" (2015: 185, citing Navas 2012); and (4) regenerative remix, which is the application of remix strategies to works outside of music.

Thomas first looks to *casta* paintings from colonial Mexico, naming four important examples as *extended remixes*, or expanded versions, of the original *casta* composition *Rendition of a Mulatto* by Manuel Arellano (1711). Miguel Cabrera's *From Spaniard and Mulata, Morisca* (1763) is a *selective remix*, because it includes the figure of the subject of Arellano's original *casta* painting with the addition of her partner and their children (Thomas 2015). Thomas then turns to the figure of Carmen Miranda in 20th century Brazilian visual culture, naming her "cultural appropriation of blackness through the modeling of her persona after black *Bahianas* [as] an active case of remix and sampling" (2015: 185). This cultural aestheticization of race is a performative, *reflexive remix*, drawn from samples of Brazilian Blackness, claiming autonomy from the "originals" (Bahianas) while leaving them "intact and recognizable" (ibid.).

In her final example, Thomas analyzes the character of Tia Dalma/Calypso from Walt Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, naming the character as regenerative remix, or as "a performative embodiment of remix as an extra-species mashup of mulatta/monster identities" (2015: 187). Through analysis of dialogue and exposition in the film, Thomas interprets the character as an object of white male desire for the mulatta/Afro-Caribbean body: she fulfills the tragic mulatta stereotype by transforming into a monster and returning to the sea after failing to perform humanity (ibid.: 189). The term *regenerative remix* fits this case in the sense that the character functions as a representation of remix. I also wish to point out that all of Thomas's other examples—*casta* paintings and the character of Carmen Miranda—can be termed *regenerative remixes* in the spirit of Navas's original definition of the term as the application of remix strategies outside of music.

Thomas's application of remix as performative embodiment are invaluable to my own approach to drag as remix—indeed, both Tia Dalma/Calypso and Carmen Miranda can be loosely interpreted as drag characters in and of themselves, since they rely upon spectacularized performances of race and gender to function. Additionally, her application of Navas's four types of remix (2012) transfers neatly to drag practice. Drag mashups generally fall under the categories of selective or reflexive remixes (with all of them having the quality of being regenerative remixes, given that they all sample from the visual, performative, and affective realms in addition to sonic/musical elements). Drag mashups that take popular songs and add visual and performative elements are selective remixes—to name a common example, a mashup that uses substantial parts of two or three popular songs by the same pop artist, with the drag performer working to embody that artist as they perform the mashup. In this case, the semantic relevance of the mashup is wholly dependent on the original song(s) to function, though new elements are added or subtracted as the drag artist channels performative and affective qualities such as realness,[44] exaggeration, or parody of the original materials.

On the other hand, drag mashups that aestheticize the practice of sampling while relying less upon the original materials for semantic relevance—though still leaving them intact and recognizable during the performance of the mashup—are reflexive remixes. An excellent example of this type of mashup is Dion Dior Black's "Crazy" megamix. No single sonic sample dominates within the mix, though they are all still individually recognizable in performance; instead, the multitude of samples (alongside Dion's performance, of course) work together to communicate the overall narrative and theme of stigmatization of mental illness.

---

[44] In the context of queer performance, "realness" refers to perfect gender illusion (e.g., a drag artist who portrays a cis gender well enough that they could pass as cisheterosexual in mainstream society) or near-perfect evocation of celebrity or character through look, gesture, and/or sonic likeness (the latter is usually attained through lip-syncing). See chapter 1.

While my work centers on queer people using remix, others have already laid the groundwork on remix as an inherently queer creative process. Educator and video artist Elisa Kreisinger subverts popular television series by creatively remixing the heteronormative source material into shows about queer people, with her works *QueerCarrie* (2009-2010, based on *Sex and the City*) and *QueerMen* (2013, based on *Mad Men*). She writes: "the remix process itself can be considered a queer act. If queer is defined as any act that challenges, questions, or provokes the normal, the acceptable, and the dominant, then remix's required rejection of the dominant and acceptable notions of copyright challenges the author/reader and owner/user binaries on which it is based" (2015: 481). Here, she defines the practice of remix as "queer" not just in the way she applies it to create queer-affirming remix videos, but as a process that fundamentally unsettles binaries of author/reader, producer/consumer, and original/copy. In this sense, drag performance that utilizes remix similarly becomes queer on multiple levels: the samples, process, product, and performance all index queerness in interlocking ways.

As a queer subcultural practice that frequently manifests within drag performance, the concept of camp is also fundamentally imbued with remix aesthetics. While there is a great deal of discourse about the origins of camp, what elements define it, and whether or not camp is inherently queer, it can be broadly characterized as a mode of performance that is imbued with irony, exaggeration, and/or parody, typically developed by individuals in response to systemic oppression (Schottmiller 2017; Newton 1972). In terms of the production of content, camp provides queer people (including drag artists) with a method to strategically sample elements from cisheteronormative popular culture that excludes them; doing so enables them to embed queer codes and references within the remixed results in ways that are comprehensible to other queer people, but not necessarily legible to cisheterosexual cultural outsiders (Schottmiller 2017, citing Chauncey 1994). The ability to discern camp aesthetics in queer performance requires a special attunement to queer ways of perceiving the world, or what Yves Bonenfant calls "queer listening":

> "Queer is a doing, not a being. Even if the source of some versions of queerness lies in the existential ground of selfhood, and is thus rooted in biological imperatives, it is through doing queer and being identified and marked as queer that the queer become queer to themselves and to the world. Hence the consequence of the naming of queer, separating queer into 'other.' *Queer listening listens out for, reaches toward, the disoriented or differently oriented other"* (Bonenfant 2014: 78, emphasis mine).

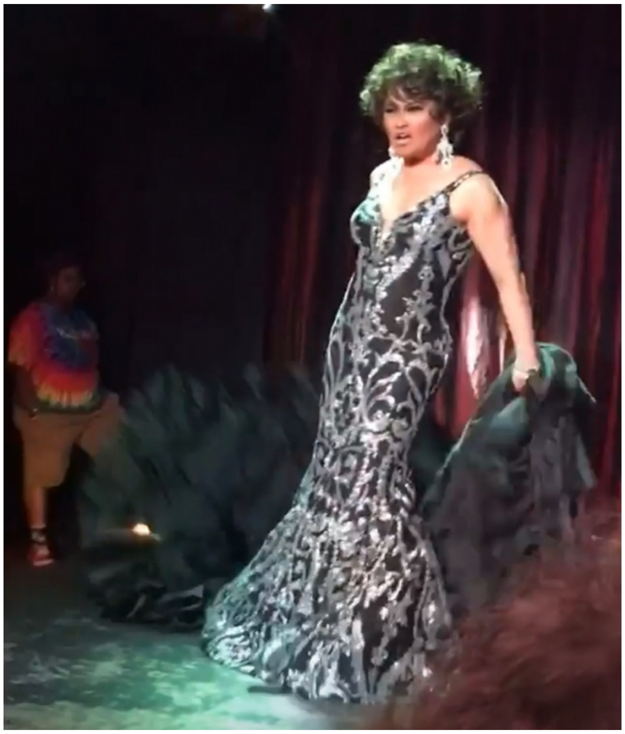
While there is no universal queer experience—that line of thinking often privileges white, middle-class, Anglo-American cis gay identity as the norm—it is still useful to consider how queer people relate to one another based on shared experiences of systemic oppression. Camp is one such performative mode shared broadly among LGBTQ+ people, though camp sensibilities and the identification of specific references will obviously vary across different social, cultural, and generational groups within the LGBTQ+ community. In any case, drag performance is fundamentally imbued with camp aesthetics, seen through the ubiquitous use of coded language, double-entendres, exaggerated performances of identity, and the intricate layering of parody and irony. When samples from popular culture are "mined" for these "queer potentials" (Khubchandani 2020), camp emerges as a mashup between dominant culture referents and queer aesthetics.

“You’re not gonna reach my telephone”: Miss Texas 1988 and Londyn Bradshaw

Miss Texas 1988 perches comfortably on a couch in their shared home in Capitol Hill. It’s a chilly day in January 2020; the slate-gray clouds threaten rain as Texas and I sip hot tea and talk about drag. After sharing some of my nascent ideas about drag as a form of remix, I ask them about their creative process. Texas first speaks to the literal process of remix that takes place in the creation of tracks for staged performances at clubs and bars, mentioning GarageBand as one of the programs used to blend different songs or sounds into a mashup. (Another program I have heard artists mention is Audacity—both of these are relatively cheap and easy to use.) Most drag artists start with a song and build a performance from there, creating a look or character that fits the song, and then utilizing gestures (be it dance, or facial expressions, or audience interaction) in real-time while performing to the unedited track at a show. Unless the artist decides to add other sounds or songs to create a mashup, this strategy involves very little remix in terms of audio production. I use this method when performing my own drag character, John Queere. For my performances, I simply choose songs that I know well and build a performance from there. Other factors in my own song choice include songs with themes that relate to my character and songs that I can sing live without having to modulate the track. I have yet to edit or remix a track myself for performance.

For perspective, “classic” forms of drag performance do not typically use mashups. However, a notable exception are parody songs, in which the performer performs a karaoke version of a popular song, substituting lewd lyrics in place of the original ones. This campy mashup technique is a guaranteed crowd-pleaser, even if the performer isn’t a polished singer—often, that “camps it up” even more, adding to the overall comedic effect. In contrast, a “classic” drag performer typically chooses a single track and coordinates their look and gesture to match the song. The best performances of this type convey "realness" through gender illusion, evocation of the original singer, and emotional sincerity. Legendary Seattle queens like Gaysha Starr and Kahlua Ice exemplify this technique (see Figure 12). In February 2020, the show series *NOIR* at Kremwerk did a weekly showcase of Black/POC drag artists in celebration of Black History Month; the February 6th show was a dedication to Whitney Houston. Both Gaysha and Kahlua performed their Whitney songs in Whitney drag, evoking the diva not just with their song choice but also through wig, wardrobe, gesture, and expressivity. The combination of song and visual signs brought Whitney Houston back to life that night.

Figure 12: Legendary Seattle queen Gaysha Starr exemplifies the "classic" drag style with this look during her performance as a guest judge at the "Night of a Thousand Whitneys" during the *So You Think You Can Drag* competition in June 2019. Here, Gaysha wears an extravagant black and silver gown, which she has just revealed after artfully pulling off a puffy silken overcoat. Lip-syncing to a club mix of Whitney Houston's "I'm Your Baby Tonight," Starr's dress, wig, jewelry, and gestures are all meant to evoke "realness," i.e., to performatively channel Whitney Houston as closely as possible, which she accomplishes to great effect. Photograph by author.



In her monograph on female impersonation in the United States, Esther Newton identifies this style of drag as a "record act," utilized by "street impersonators" in urban drag scenes of the 1960s (1972: 7). The latter term refers to younger performers at the time who made significantly less effort to blend into the cisheterosexual mainstream than their more cautious elders,[45] and performed by lip-syncing to prerecorded music. The older generation of performers at the time—identified as "stage impersonators" by Newton—utilized a performance style akin to the famed female impersonators of vaudeville and minstrelsy, singing live with a backup ensemble (Newton 1972; Bean 2001; Casey 2015). Stage impersonators also kept stricter separation between their onstage personae and their offstage gender presentations, which allowed them to pass in mainstream society and afforded them significantly more status than their younger (queerer) kin (Newton 1972: 15). Through the latter half of the 20th century, "street impersonators" came to be known as drag queens (or kings, as male impersonation reemerged in queer performance scenes in the 1990s) and "record acts" became synonymous with drag performance writ large, since a single DJ playing records was far cheaper and space-efficient than using live musicians (Newton 1972: 44). Though the music technologies used have changed considerably since the 1960s, the use of a DJ and prerecorded music is ubiquitous in drag performance today. Mp3 files and USB drives have replaced vinyl records as the dominant media used in drag performance—these formats can be digitally altered and shared with greater ease than older technologies like cassettes and compact discs. They are also favored over streaming media, since reliable internet connectivity is not guaranteed at all performance venues.

---

[45] In conjunction with a rise in social conservatism in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s, homosexuality and cross-gender behavior were broadly criminalized under so-called "sodomy laws" as "crimes against nature" (Bronski 2011). In the 1950s, virtually all states had sodomy laws in effect, with repeals occurring on a state-by-state basis between 1970-2000 until the U.S. Supreme Court ruled sodomy laws as unconstitutional in *Lawrence v. Texas* in 2003. See chapter 3 for more information on the history of cross-gender performance in the United States.

In the 2010s, drag performance has again undergone a transformation. The standard, single-song "record acts" that dominated drag since the 1970s and 1980s have gradually been supplanted by more elaborate sound mashups as drag artists seek new and interesting ways to craft performance narratives, production technologies become more easily accessible, and mass dissemination technologies bring vast archives of sonic samples to drag artists' painted fingertips. Back in our interview, Miss Texas 1988 explains their own process of creating performance tracks. With a background in theater, Texas treats their performance as a script: they begin with a concept and then sample from sound and image to craft their performance narrative. The music does not inform the rest of the performance; rather, it is the *script* that is the overarching organizational principle for their work. From there, Texas remixes their samples into the final product, embodying the mashup onstage along with the final in-the-moment performative touches that bring it to life, a process they described to me as "live performance collage." Texas calls their process "backwards" compared to other drag artists, in that most performers allow their song choices to direct their performance narratives. However, for me, Texas's process of prioritizing narrative flow is a major part of what makes their performances so compelling, as it enables them to assemble a larger diversity of sonic, visual, and affective samples during the remix process and makes for excellent storytelling.

The art of sampling is not limited to the selection of sources: the way they are combined, as well as the performance of the mashup, are also key factors in its import. Referring to sampling practice in hip-hop, Vanessa Chang writes, "for hip-hop producers – who *are* highly attuned to the origins of particular samples – the significance tends to lie more in the ingenuity of the way the elements are fused together than in calling attention to the diversity of their origins" (Chang 2009: 146; citing Joseph Schloss 2004: 66). Like within hip hop, as Chang and Schloss point out, the transformative potential of remix practice is revealed through mashups that fuse together samples in creative ways that entertain and/or do political work. In the case of Seattle's alternative drag scene, this includes injecting camp aesthetics, making space for queer genders and sexual identities in popular culture, critiquing racialized capitalism, or rejecting homonormativity within lesbian and gay-dominated social spaces. The above quote also acknowledges the importance of history in sampling practice: artists need to have an intimate understanding of their source material. Still writing with hip hop in mind, Vanessa Chang identifies the successful sample artist as an expert listener, not just in the sense of knowing their archive, but also through their ability to "[conceive] of sound as plastic material, and not as a finished product" (2009: 147). This modality is intrinsic to drag performance, for even the most basic sonic mashup still requires the artist to remix visual elements, gender, gesture, and affect into the final product. More sophisticated mashups, on the other hand, call for artists to think purposefully about which samples to use, how to modify and arrange them within the overall mix, and finally how to embody them for the audience. In the process of sampling, drag artists are experts at queer listening (Bonenfant 2014), deftly using their senses—honed through experiencing the world as queer people—to select, modify, and perform collections of samples that will convey an assortment of emotions, sensibilities, and temporal references to their fellow queers during the embodiment of their mashup.

A prime example of this remix process is the "Telephone" megamix, created and performed in collaboration between Miss Texas and Londyn Bradshaw. In the spring of 2019, both queens competed in *So You Think You Can Drag* season 2 at R Place in Capitol Hill; one of their weekly challenges was to perform a duet with one of their competitors. When Londyn and Texas were paired up, I knew they would create something extremely entertaining. June 19, the night of the show, I was not disappointed, as my field notes show:

> **MTX and LB: FANTASTIC. Amazing looks, transitions, and choreography. Began with each doing a snippet of separate phone-related songs: Miss Texas doing Robyn's "Call Your Girlfriend" and Londyn doing Cazwell's "I Blocked Your Number." Then, into the main duet: Lady Gaga and Beyoncé's "Telephone"; finally, a bonus song at the end: Lizzo's "Phone." During "Telephone," Londyn lost her wig (typical) so Miss Texas snatches her own off to match! Cute! BUT THEN it's part of the number! They're each wearing do-rags with telephone cords attached and swing them around like helicopters. OMG so good! Playing with audience expectations in a masterful way.**

The central organizing principle of the performance—the script—began with Miss Texas and Londyn taking on the physical and stylistic roles of Lady Gaga and Beyoncé. This connection goes beyond the obvious color similarities (Gaga and Texas are white, Beyoncé and Londyn are Black):[46] both pop divas are well-known for their skillful execution of a concept through music and performance; for example, Beyoncé's groundbreaking visual album *Lemonade* (2016) recounts her emotional journey after her husband's infidelity, and Gaga's brilliant debut duology *The Fame* (2008) and *The Fame Monster* (2009) explores the then-nouveau pop star's conflict with the double-edged sword of fame. Miss Texas and Londyn have both established similar reputations as conceptual artists in the Seattle drag scene through their clever approaches to performance in shows like *WEIRD*, *Arthaus*, and *So You Think You Can*

---

[46] Another duo in the competition, also a white queen and Black queen, had planned to do "Telephone" as well and were upset when Texas and Londyn called it first in the competition group chat, where performers kept in communication to ensure songs would not be repeated during a single show. Evidently, a white/Black queen duo immediately conjured the powerful pairing of Lady Gaga and Beyoncé in "Telephone"—it was the first song that came to my mind for this pairing, too, after Londyn shared with me that she was doing a duet with Texas the week before the performance.

Drag, where participants are consistently challenged to creatively interpret a theme. Furthermore, Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, like many female pop superstars, are also well-known for their dancing skill (Beyoncé perhaps more so); as a trained dancer, Londyn Bradshaw also brought her experience in creating and executing choreography to the duet. In short, I could not think of a better duo in the Seattle scene to realize a Gaga/Beyoncé collaboration.

Gaga and Beyoncé have the added cultural currency of "goddess" status among queers, and their music is particularly well-known among LGBTQ+ millennials. In 2010, the two superstars collaborated on the hit song/music video "Telephone," released on Lady Gaga's second album *The Fame Monster* the previous year. The song and music video became the conceptual basis for Londyn and Texas's duet performance. Texas and Londyn relied on Lady Gaga's wholly original looks from the music video to construct their outfits. A leading fashion icon in popular culture during the early 2010s, Gaga's Diet Coke-can hair curlers and caution tape dress (see Figures 13-14) raised many eyebrows when "Telephone" was released; by identifying these visual samples in Texas's and Londyn's costuming, audience members in-the-know could immediately reference the "Telephone" music video at a glance.

Figure 13: Stills from the music video for “Telephone” by Lady Gaga ft. Beyoncé (2010). The top image is of Lady Gaga (left) and Beyoncé (right, as Honey B) seated in The Pussy Wagon from Quentin Tarantino’s film *Kill Bill*; Honey B is looking at Gaga while eating a Little Debbie Honey Bun. In the left bottom image, Lady Gaga sings the first verse of “Telephone” into a prison phone, wearing a studded black jacket and blonde wig with soda-can curlers. In the center bottom image, Beyoncé walks through a diner wearing a form-fitting yellow dress, black sunglasses, and yellow fedora. In the right bottom image, Gaga stands in a prison cell wearing a revealing garment made from yellow caution tape. Images from Vevo.

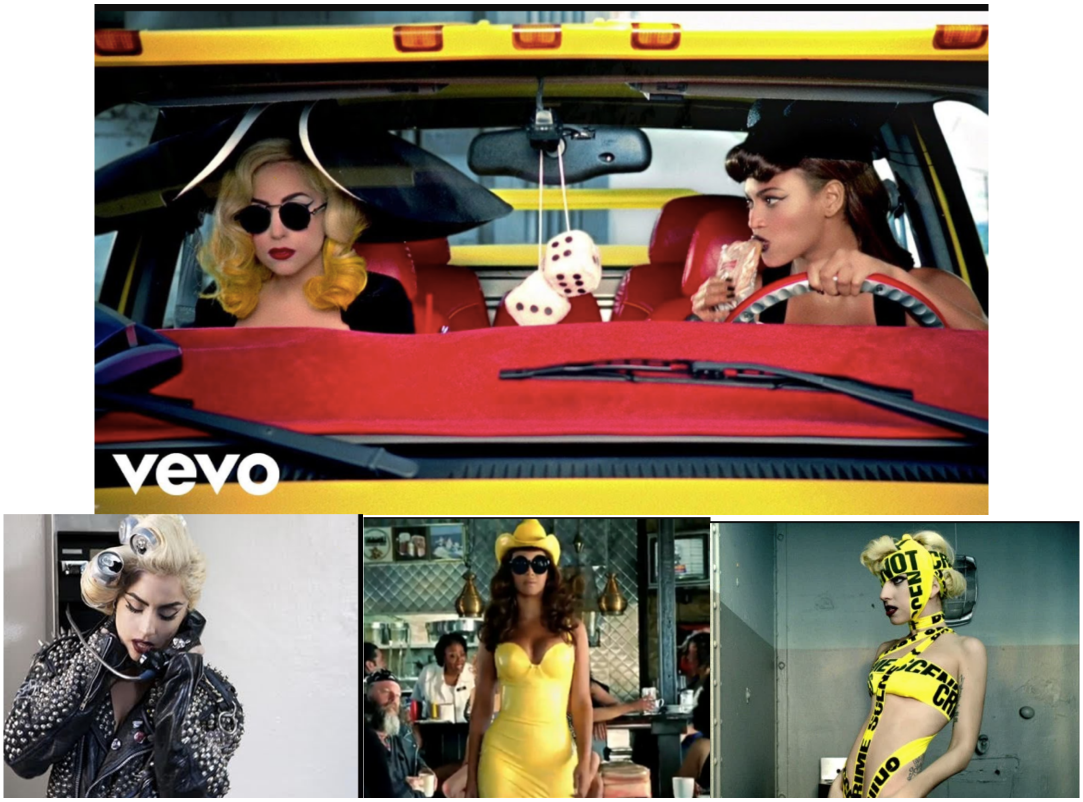
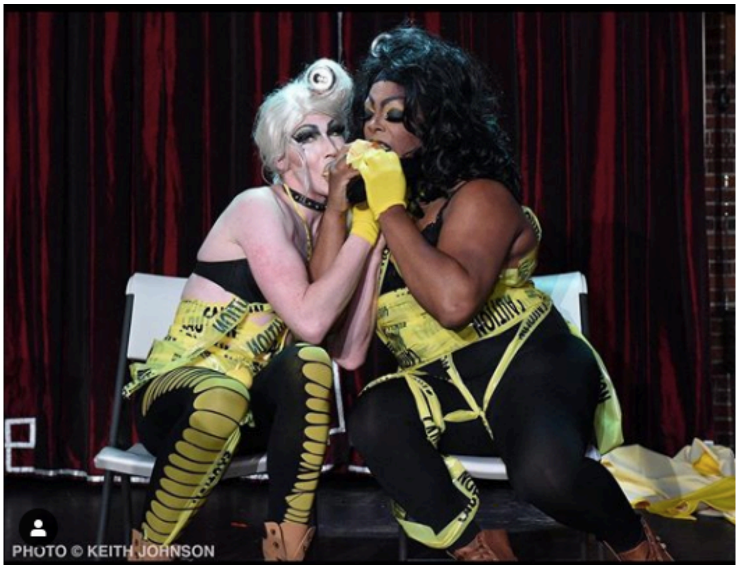


Figure 14: Miss Texas 1988 (left) and Londyn Bradshaw (right) share a Honey Bun while seated onstage during their "Telephone" mashup performance at R Place, June 19, 2019. Both artists are wearing black undergarments with yellow caution tape wrapped around their bodies; Miss Texas has a soda can curled into her wig. Photograph by Keith Johnson, used with permission.



Their competition performance was a smashing success for both Londyn and Texas, ultimately leading to Miss Texas winning the challenge for the week. I was lucky to see the performance again on January 11, 2020 at *Cucci's Critter Barn*, a monthly alternative drag show at Kremwerk hosted by Cucci Binaca. Londyn and Texas were guest performers that evening, and I managed to record the performance on my phone, which enabled me to do a closer analysis of the mashup.

In the video from *Critter Barn*, Miss Texas enters the Kremwerk stage in a black and yellow blouse/skirt combo, performing a brief lip-sync to Robyn's dance pop hit "Call Your Girlfriend." Another queer icon, Swedish pop artist Robyn released "Call Your Girlfriend" in 2010 as part of her hit album *Body Talk,* and the song has since become a queer anthem. Sung from a point in time where one relationship blends into another, "Call Your Girlfriend" pushes the listener to radically reimagine how we disentangle ourselves from one another in a more compassionate way, but also to reflect on the inevitability of our own eventual replacement: by the end of the song, after the singer implores her lover to break it off with their girlfriend, a savvy listener is left wondering when the singer will receive *her* call, in turn (Kennedy-Lopez 2020). In the number, Texas lip-syncs a chorus and two verses of the song into a bright yellow telephone:

[chorus]
Call your girlfriend
It's time you had the talk
Give your reasons
Say it's not her fault
But you just met somebody new

[verses]
Tell her not to get upset
Second-guessing everything you said and done
And then when she gets upset
Tell her how you never meant to hurt no one

And you tell her that the only way her heart can mend
Is when she learns to love again
And it won't make sense right now but you're still her friend
And then you let her down easy—

As the track swells with sweeping synths, Texas gestures to the audience to belt out another chorus of "Call Your Girlfriend" along with her. However, the music stops suddenly and the sound of a phone rings through the club. Prompting the audience to begin singing along at the chorus and then abruptly cutting the sample short was a subtle and masterful move on the part of the performer—the catharsis of singing the most familiar part of a beloved queer anthem together became a tease that directed our attention into the next part of the mix.

Looking just as confused as the audience by the interruption, Miss Texas glances down at the phone in her hand, and then playfully tugs on the cord as the percussive opening hook to "I Blocked Your Number" begins. Texas continues to pull on the ridiculously long phone cord, dragging Londyn onstage, who is holding a second phone attached to the other end. Wearing a bright yellow dress, Londyn then lip-syncs the spoken introduction to "I Blocked Your Number" to a dumbstruck Texas, who exits as Londyn takes center stage. Written and performed by queer rapper Cazwell, "I Blocked Your Number" was released as part of his 2014 album, *Hard 2 B Fresh.* Unlike Robyn, Lady Gaga, and Beyoncé, openly gay rapper Cazwell is not well-known among mainstream audiences; much of his work is explicitly queer-themed in its content and is subsequently better-known among LGBTQ+ listeners. Here, the use of Robyn's "Call Your Girlfriend" as a sample helps to solidify its significance as a queer anthem when put directly into conversation with the work of an overtly queer artist. In the performance, Londyn's demeanor and the hip hop song style provide contrast to Texas's introduction:

[spoken introduction]
I'm sorry, the person you are trying to reach
Has taken it upon themselves to block your number
Because you…are an asshole (Londyn yanks the cord out from her receiver; the word 'asshole' echoes rhythmically as the beat intensifies)
I'm sorry

[rapped verses]
Ooh, you tryna get back in
You can kiss my ass again
Move, got that U-Haul out back
Packed up your shit, ho
Yeah that's my soundtrack
(thrown tips fly through the air as Londyn collects more by hand from the audience members in the front)

I am fly like a motherfucker
You are sorry as a motherfucker
We got no need for the talking
Keys in my hand proceed with the walkin'

Let's take a look at who's still standing
Let's take a look at who's in demand and
Shit got shook, your head in the sand
And you get the hook all part of your plan man
What you thought come late to the after party

What you caught, commit to your after party
That sad tacky ass ho done it, ya hit it
Now take your ass down to the clinic, bitch

Blocked (repeats; Londyn points dramatically at different audience members for each "blocked")
I blocked your number
I blocked your call
I blocked your number—

The music stops again to the phone ringing. By this point, the audience is clued into the formula: in this mashup, the ringing phone sample functions as a transition. Besides operating as a sonic segue into the next sample, it also works to bring the audience's attention back to the narrative, as we are conditioned to practice alertness at the sound of a ringing phone in our everyday lives. Londyn stops dancing and brings the receiver up to her ear, and the opening hook to Lady Gaga and Beyoncé's "Telephone" begins. Played on a synth harp, the hook—unmistakable to the queers in the room, indicating its potency as a sonic sample—brings cheers from the audience. Miss Texas reenters the stage in a black bra, panty, and tights with yellow caution tape wrapped around her body, evoking one of Gaga's classic looks from the "Telephone" music video (see Figure 14 above). The audience roars their approval at the congruence between Texas's look and the sound of "Telephone": besides the satisfaction of recognizing the sample, it also activated a potent nostalgia for the original video and performance of "Telephone." For me, this triggered a powerful affective sense of queer intimacy and belonging, rooted in my own memories of the song.

A decade prior to the "Telephone" mashup performance at Kremwerk, I attended Lady Gaga's *Monster Ball* tour at the Fox Theater in St. Louis with two of my closest friends. All three of us were "baby queers," in varying stages of coming out to other friends, family, and ourselves; we were wholly reliant on one another for mental and emotional support through that difficult and terrifying process. I have vivid memories of us crammed together into a small bathroom, doing our makeup and hair in preparation for the concert. It was one of the first times I went out in makeup—I drew a crude black lightning bolt across my face in reference to Lady Gaga's 2008 "Poker Face" music video (which is itself a reference to David Bowie's iconic lightning bolt makeup look on the cover to his 1973 *Aladdin Sane* album). A Lady Gaga concert provided me with the cover I needed to experiment with my gender presentation. For all three of us, Lady Gaga's *Monster Ball* of 2010—which featured a live, dynamic performance of "Telephone"—represented an exceedingly rare opportunity to be queer in the world, relatively free of fear and the constant pressure of cisheterosupremacy. The Fox Theater was packed that night, and I remember seeing dozens (hundreds?) of other queer people just like us—nervous to be *out*, but celebrating it all the same. This is the powerful affective quality of samples like "Telephone"—for queer listeners of a certain place and age, it has the potential to index a sense of freedom, of belonging, of being unabashedly oneself.

The practice of sampling is therefore a social act, utilizing the past to generate a sense of community through both the historical context of samples and the affective dimensions that accompany them. As Vanessa Chang asserts, samples are more akin to memory rather than history: they are not beholden to their point of origin, since they are fundamentally transformed by their new context. She writes, "[the] somewhat anachronistic temporal position [of the sample] can be described in terms of the opposition between memory and history… the antagonism between history and memory here marks history as an ossifying process, a failed iteration and reiteration of the past. *Sampling may well serve as a live act of memory*, a means of cultural participation in an increasingly stratified and technocratic world" (Chang 2009: 156, emphasis mine). As seen in "Telephone," the practice of sampling by drag artists serves as social memory for queer people, and the performance of mashups as "live acts of memory" reiterates the sonic, visual, and affective components of queer social identity that are, in turn, identified through dialogic performance (Johnson 2003) with members of the audience who are practiced in queer listening. As such, drag artists are not only authors or archivists, but also culture-bearers: they *embody* queer culture through dialogic performance.

Back in the performance in Seattle, Londyn looks on while Texas lip-syncs Gaga's opening verse to "Telephone" into the yellow receiver:

Hello, hello baby
You called, I can't hear a thing
I have got no service in the club
You see, see
Wha-wha-what did you say? (Texas snatches the other receiver from Londyn and holds both up to her ears)
Oh, you're breaking up on me (Londyn walks offstage)
Sorry, I cannot hear you
I'm kinda busy

K-kinda busy (At the back of her stage, Londyn pulls off her yellow dress to reveal a black bathing suit covered in yellow caution tape, matching Texas. The pair march together in step to the front of the stage to cheers. An audience member excitedly yells out "CHOREO!", anticipating the upcoming dance sequence)
K-kinda busy
Sorry, I cannot hear you
I'm kinda busy

(Texas and Londyn take turns lip-syncing Gaga's lines to the second verse into their phone receivers while gesturing together in rhythm)
Londyn: *Just a second, it's my favorite song they're gonna play*
Texas: *And I cannot text you with a drink in my hand, eh*
Londyn: *You should have made some plans with me, you knew that I was free*
Texas: *And now you won't stop calling me, I'm kinda busy*

(the chorus begins and both queens begin a choreographed dance sequence based on moves from the "Telephone" music video while lip-syncing in unison; the audience roars with approval at the congruence between song and dance)
Stop calling, stop calling
I don't wanna think any more
I left my head and my heart on the dance floor
Stop calling, stop calling,
I don't wanna talk anymore
I got my head and my heart on the dance floor

(the queens turn to each other and trade mock blows)
Eh, eh, eh, eh…
Stop telephoning me
Eh, eh, eh, eh…
I'm busy, eh, eh, eh, eh…
Stop telephoning me
Eh, eh, eh, eh…
(the queens turn around and walk to the back of the stage, where they each pick up a folding chair. As the bridge begins, they turn to the front of the stage and walk back out. On the word "out"—a downbeat—both queens CLACK their chairs down onto the stage.)
Call all you want, but there's no one home
And you're not gonna reach my telephone
Out in the club, and I'm sipping that bub
And you're not gonna reach my telephone
[repeats]

Before the bridge can continue, the music stops and Londyn and Texas abruptly drop down into the chairs. They mime bouncing up and down, as if they are riding in a car on a bumpy road. This performative sample is taken from the music video to "Telephone," in which Beyoncé (playing Honey B—itself a reference to the character Honey Bunny from Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction* but also a clever allusion to her real-life designation as Queen B and a product placement for Little Debbie's Honey Buns) bails Lady Gaga out of jail and drives off with her in a yellow pickup truck. During the performance, Londyn turns to Texas and lip-syncs to Honey B's spoken lines: *You've been a very bad girl. A very, very, bad, bad girl, Gaga.* Londyn cuffs Texas's ear and Texas recoils dramatically. Crinkling noises are heard on the track—in the music video, Beyoncé/Honey B pulls out a Honey Bun, takes a bite, and then offers the rest of it to Gaga. In the performance, both Texas and Londyn pull Honey Buns out of their bras, cross arms, and take huge bites as the audience laughs at the campy gag. The song resumes with Beyoncé/Honey B's sung verse, with Londyn lip-syncing along while miming driving the car:

Boy, the way you blowing up my phone, won't make me leave no faster

Put my coat on faster, leave my girls no faster
I shoulda left my phone at home, 'cause this is a disaster (Londyn gestures to Texas while lip-syncing this line, a playful bit of shade, or teasing)
Calling like a collector, sorry I cannot answer

(As Texas lip-syncs Gaga's subsequent verse, Texas—realizing that Londyn has taken her hands off the steering wheel—looks alarmed and reaches over to mime taking the wheel of the car as Londyn begins to mime texting on a cell phone)
Not that I don't like you, I'm just at a party
And I am sick and tired of my phone ringing, eh
(Beyoncé returns; Londyn finishes "texting" and takes back both the wheel and the lip-sync)
Sometimes I feel like I live in Grand Central Station
Tonight I'm not taking no calls, 'cause I'll be dancing

(Both queens lip sync together and begin choreographed movements)
'Cause I'll be dancing, 'cause I'll be dancing
Tonight I'm not taking no calls, 'cause I'll be dancing

(The chorus returns, and the queens continue to lip-sync and move together)
Stop calling, stop calling
I don't wanna think any more
I left my head and my heart on the dance floor
Stop calling, stop calling,
I don't wanna talk anymore
I got my head and my heart on the dance floor

(The queens turn to each other and trade mock blows)
Stop calling, stop calling
I don't wanna think any more
I left my head and my heart on the dance floor
(The queens help each other rise from the chairs)
Stop calling, stop calling,
I don't wanna talk anymore
I got my head and my heart on the dance floor

(Here, they both do synchronized dance moves taken not just from "Telephone" but also "Bad Romance," another mega-popular Lady Gaga hit from the same time period)
Eh, eh, eh, eh…
Stop telephoning me
Eh, eh, eh, eh…
I'm busy, eh, eh, eh, eh…

Before the chorus can end, the track stops yet again to the shrill sound of a phone ringing.

Both queens stop dead in their tracks and look around, confused. Breaking character, Londyn turns to Texas and says aloud, exasperatedly, “Seriously, Texas?!” Texas looks sheepish and turns to members of the audience in the front row, trying to locate the ringing phone as people chuckle at the farce. The phone stops ringing as a new track begins—an EDM remix of Lizzo’s “Phone” from 2016. A relative newcomer to pop superstardom, Minneapolis-based Lizzo captured mainstream popularity in the late 2010s with her skills as a rapper, singer, songwriter, and classically-trained flautist. Her messages of self-love, fat acceptance, and general body positivity have led queer audiences in particular to embrace her music. “Phone” is a lighthearted piece—after a long night out of clubbing, the (presumably drunk) singer cannot locate her phone, and repeatedly asks around for her device so she can get home.

(hook)
Uh, where the hell my phone? Where the hell my phone?
Where the hell my, where the hell my phone, huh?
How I’m ‘posed to get home?
(repeats)

In performance, Texas and Londyn remove their wigs after one verse, revealing black do-rags with black phone cords extending from the tops of their heads. As the EDM mix dance break begins, the queens swing the cords around—Londyn’s wig is still attached to the end of her cord, and goes soaring through the air—and the audience goes wild. The stage is showered with thrown tips. The hook repeats—“where the hell my phone?”—and the music ends abruptly with Siri (the virtual assistant built into iPhones) responding, “but, you’re holding it,” to which Londyn (still lip-syncing as Lizzo) responds with a final “oh.” The audience cheers Londyn and Texas off the stage.

The effectiveness of the “Telephone” mix lies in its cohesive narrative, campy performance by the queens, and masterful use of queer and/or popular culture referents. The songs themselves create a coherent storyline: in Robyn’s “Call Your Girlfriend,” one relationship is kindled while another dissolves; then, in Cazwell's "I Blocked Your Number," the jilted member of the love triangle takes their revenge by cutting off communication. In an era where our dependence on smart devices is ever-increasing, the release of ignoring a ringing phone in favor of losing oneself in the club in Lady Gaga and Beyoncé's "Telephone" is contrasted by the panicked, closing-time confusion of a lost device in Lizzo's "Phone." These phone-themed vignettes are relatable to audience members, given that socialization and communication is increasingly mediated through technology (or nearly completely so, as during the COVID-19 pandemic).

Gender studies scholar Jack Halberstam has discussed how Lady Gaga and Beyoncé's "Telephone" connects to deeper concepts about navigating gender, communication, and desire in a digital world. He points out how telephones have been gendered through popular media: the woman is always the passive receiver, patiently waiting (often in vain) for the active gentleman caller to make his move (2012: 108). Now that the telephone has been modified to the point where it can be taken anywhere, women are therefore always accessible—which has led to new gendered formations of the same old formula of women-as-passive receivers: the booty call, leaving her "on read," "sliding into her DMs."[47] However, in "Telephone," Gaga and Beyoncé go beyond flipping the script: they simply refuse to pick up the call because they are too busy dancing with their girls and enjoying their night out, freeing themselves from the "tyranny of the phone" in favor of their own sisterhood (Halberstam 2012: 110). Texas's and Londyn's script is imbued with this reading of “Telephone,” and is manifested through their performance—indeed, it was Miss Texas who recommended I read Halberstam’s interpretation of the song in *Gaga Feminism* (2012) when I asked Texas about their process in creating the mix.

---

[47] A booty call is a late-night request for sex or intimacy. Leaving someone "on read" means to send a read receipt in a text thread without responding to the text, so the other party knows you have deliberately chosen *not* to respond to them—a subtle but potentially devastating move to a partner or a romantic/sexual interest. "Sliding into someone's DMs" means to utilize the direct messaging feature of apps like Twitter and Instagram to smoothly initiate conversation with someone for sexual or romantic purposes.

Halberstam also uses the “Telephone” music video as a framework with which to articulate the politics of “Gaga feminism” in his book of the same name, which he describes as “a form of political expression that masquerades as naïve nonsense but that actually participates in big and meaningful forms of critique” (2012: 22). Named for Lady Gaga, of course, this formation of feminism is exemplified by the pop star’s campy style and skillful manipulation of mass media that manages to say everything and nothing at once during an age when we are all inundated by the compounding failure of neoliberal capitalism in the United States (the erosion of public institutions, the social safety net, and trust in representational government; the politics of spectacle; the exponential growth of racial and economic inequality; the sluggish governmental responses to health, environmental, and economic crises; etc.). Regarding Gaga feminism, Halberstam elaborates, “it is a scavenger feminism that borrows promiscuously, steals from everywhere, and inhabits the ground of stereotype and cliché all at the same time” (2012: 30). This description immediately brought to mind drag performance—as “gaga feminists,” drag artists do all of these things in meaningful ways to communicate their political beliefs, showcase their skills, pay their bills, and otherwise reimagine a world in which low-income queers of color are valued as human beings rather than as tokenized entertainment. The language of borrowing, theft, and cliché also speaks directly to remix, positioning gaga feminism as another facet of remix culture (Navas 2012), defined by a never-ending cycle of appropriation and transformation. The storyline in the “Telephone” video—emulated by Texas and Londyn during their drag remix—samples broadly from popular culture, consumer products, gender, and sexuality to create a gaga feminist mashup that positions women (and queers) as uncontrollable, desirable yet dangerous, and expert navigators of dense media environments.

On the first night when Miss Texas 1988 and Londyn Bradshaw performed their "Telephone" mix—during the *So You Think You Can Drag* competition—Texas delivered another incredible mashup performance. After an audience vote, Texas secured a spot in the top two of the week spot alongside Kung Pow Meow. To determine the winner of the night, the top two queens went head-to-head in a lip-sync battle, similar to *RuPaul's Drag Race.* The song pre-chosen for the final was Rihanna's "Only Girl (In the World)" from her 2010 album *Loud.* An electropop hit, the song features Rihanna demanding her lover's attention: *want you to make me feel like I'm the only girl in the world / like I'm the only one that you'll ever love / like I'm the only one who knows your heart / only girl in the world.*

In the lip-sync battle, Kung Pow Meow delivered a solid performance, using typical gestures and lip-syncing the lyrics fairly well. However, her performance was overshadowed by Miss Texas. Wearing a nude body stocking with artificial flowers strategically arranged over her chest and groin, Texas realized "Only Girl (In the World)" as the biblical Eve, using a prop snake and apples to represent a battle with temptation, ultimately succumbing to her desires. Near the end of the song, Texas produced a handwritten sign reading "ADAM AND EVE, NOT ADAM AND STEVE." An infamous rallying cry among those who opposed same-sex marriage on the basis of a Christian theological worldview—particularly in the so-called "Culture Wars" of U.S. politics during the 1990s-2000s—this hateful message is well-known in a club full of queer people and their allies, provoking a powerful collective affective response to that point in time. At the conclusion of the lip-sync, Miss Texas shredded the sign to thunderous applause, and easily snatched the win for the night.

Texas's performance of "Only Girl (In the World)" takes on its full significance when placed into context with the visual and performative samples they introduced into the mix. By itself, the song "Only Girl" does not communicate Biblical references (besides the literal interpretation of the song title), let alone a critique of homophobic, paleoconservative Christian values; rather, audiences are more likely to conjure images of Rihanna, the colorful "Only Girl" music video from 2010, or (more generically) dance/pop culture from when the song was topping the charts. Referencing Thomas Turino's outline of a Peircean semiotics of music (1999), Vanessa Chang writes: "[t]he musical sign is a cipher, its aura generated through the intersection of historical, musical and generic elements. However, these meanings are not intrinsic to a sign or sample, which can be manipulated to produce a multiplicity of meanings, even contradictory ones" (Chang 2009: 148). As such, the various sonic and visual samples used in Texas's "Only Girl" mashup retain the auras of their original contexts but are transformed through the remix process, taking on new meanings when put into conversation with other samples and subsequently performed live by the artist. While not a sonic sample, the "ADAM AND EVE, NOT ADAM AND STEVE" sign is a prime example of how contradictory meanings can be generated through the manipulation of samples within a mashup. The "ADAM AND EVE…" sign indexes a specific moment in anti-same sex marriage activism on the basis of a formation of conservative Christianity. However, that sign's aura is strategically turned against itself, or queered, when placed in the context of the mashup, and it takes on an oppositional political significance when compared to its origin. The sonic and performative elements—"Only Girl" and Texas's embodiment of the mashup—facilitate this transformation.

“Be mean to me”: Lazarus Rise and Mercury Divine

Besides utilizing sonic artifacts, alternative drag artists often sample from visual media and the affective realm, as seen in the “Telephone” mashup. However, artists also creatively exploit gender, body, desire, and even humanity in the process of remix, rendering these seemingly fixed categories into mutable samples in the formation of fantastic mashups. While all drag artists remix gender to some degree—gender play is arguably fundamental for drag practice—the creative deployment of gender, body, and humanity alongside sonic, visual, and affective references is particularly spectacular in alternative drag performance.

On the night of Saturday, March 7, 2020, my friend Jack and I attended the *Arthaus* semi-finals at Kremwerk. We had no idea this would be one of our last live drag events for a while: the first media rumblings of community transmission of COVID-19 in were beginning in the United States, with concerns about a potential lockdown circulating in the Seattle queer community after a tragic COVID-19 outbreak at an elder care facility in nearby Kirkland. However, the encroaching pandemic was far from our minds, eclipsed by the promise of a thrilling drag show. The basement venue of Kremwerk was packed. Keen to support the kings featured in the show, I sported my best king makeup along with a camo shirt and Jägermeister ballcap that fit the aesthetic of my drag character, John Queere. Jack and I chose seats in the second row back from the stage and chatted for a bit with an extraordinarily intoxicated woman from Vilnius, Lithuania (who, after spilling a drink on the stage, left the show early—to everyone else’s relief. I do not know if she was heterosexual, but she certainly fit the stereotype of the “messy straight” at the drag show—see chapter 2).

Now in its sixth season, *Arthaus* is a staged drag competition that features drag organizations called “hauses” (*häuser*?) from the Seattle area who compete in a series of group performances over the course of a year. Held every two to three months, each individual show features two "hauses" that perform two numbers for the audience. The winners of the previous season of *Arthaus* host the current season and perform during each show. Audience members vote on which haus will advance to the next round while the other haus is eliminated from the competition, although they can potentially re-enter the competition through a later Redemption round.

The term "haus" alludes to the house system of ballroom culture, in which communities of predominantly Black and Latinx queer/trans people gather under a seasoned drag mother (or father, or parent) who operates as the matriarch and/or provider for the house. This system exists in QTPOC[48] communities throughout the United States, with established scenes in New York City, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Newark, Atlanta, and Detroit (Livingston 1990; Bailey 2013). Referred to as the Kiki Ballroom Scene, the Seattle-Tacoma area has several active ballroom houses including the House of Monét, the Royal House of Noir, and the House of Princeton. In mainstream popular culture, ballroom culture tends to be associated with the scene in Harlem in the 1980s and 1990s, due largely to the release of Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning* and Madonna's hit single "Vogue" both in 1990. The *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise has also extensively appropriated language and customs from the NYC ballroom scene, owing to RuPaul's own proximity to that scene during his time working as a drag artist and go-go dancer in New York during the 1980s (Davenport 2017).

In 2018, the television show *Pose* began airing on the cable television station FX, telling fictionalized stories of Black and Latinx queer and trans participants in the Harlem ballroom scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s, highlighting the house system and performance style that functioned as a critical survival strategy for a community devastated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, racism, poverty, and anti-queer/anti-trans violence. *Pose* is celebrated for featuring writers and a cast made up almost entirely of Black trans women and queer people, many of whom have direct connections to the contemporary NYC scene. In 2020, the reality TV series and ballroom competition *Legendary* began airing on HBO Max. Unlike *RuPaul's Drag Race, Pose, Paris Is Burning,* and "Vogue," *Legendary* presents ballroom culture as a living QTPOC tradition rather than exhibiting it as a static 1980s-90s subculture.

---

[48] Queer and trans people of color.

Besides introducing Black and Latinx queer music, fashion, dance, lexicon, and aesthetics into mainstream popular culture, these media have also profoundly shaped broader queer culture over the last thirty years. Non-Black/non-Latinx queer people often uncritically (or unknowingly) adopt Black and Latinx queer cultural aesthetics drawn from ballroom culture, funneled through *RuPaul's Drag Race* and mutated into what Jose Muñoz calls "commercial drag" (1999) or what I refer to as mainstream drag culture throughout this dissertation. Ironically, these same queer people often bemoan cultural appropriation when cisheterosexual people use these cultural aesthetics in turn. Here, I speak from experience: during my late teens and early twenties, *RuPaul's Drag Race* was my only window into queer life, and I zealously played gatekeeper to what I identified as *my* culture—ignorant of the complex, rhizomatic layers of queer culture that extended far beyond *RuPaul's Drag Race*. While a discussion of issues surrounding cultural performance in drag is discussed in chapter 3, my point here is to highlight how ballroom concepts such as "house/haus" have become widely adopted within Seattle's drag scene in the 2010s.

Last year's *Arthaus* winners, Horse Club NW, consists of Beau Degas (pronounced like *bodega*) and Bitch Hazel. Beau Degas is a younger performer in the scene but already well-known, especially for their incredible make-up artistry; Bitch Hazel is respected for their highly conceptual style of performance. Together, as Horse Club NW, the two create campy mixes that play on the "horse girl" archetype, i.e. adolescent girls who are passionate about horses. The theme of the night was "One-Trick Pony," which plays on the hosts' haus name and also sets the stage for magic-themed performances.

The first haus competing for the evening consisted of Cosmic Haus, made up of Vel Veeta and Arrietty. Vel Veeta moved from Reno, Nevada to Seattle in 2019. Already a skilled and experienced queen with a classic "old-school" drag look, Vel Veeta quickly established herself in Seattle through networking and demonstrating her ability to move outside of the classic drag look, experimenting with makeup, costumes, and concepts in ways that made her right at home in Seattle's alternative drag scene. I know less about Arrietty, but have been consistently impressed with their performance style, makeup prowess, and skillful use of unconventional materials in constructing their looks.

Challenging Cosmic Haus was 7 Alchemy Lane. A drag king haus, the official membership consists of Cesare the Drag Prince, Sid Seedy, Lazarus Rise, and Mercury Divine, although the latter two kings were the only two competing during this round. Lazarus describes themselves on their Instagram account as a "punk faerie princex, musician/singer, drag/burlesque monster." Prior to their *Arthaus* performance, I had seen Lazarus perform king and burlesque numbers at *Heels* and *Wild Thorns*—their compelling visual storytelling through gesture, costume, and performance left a lasting impression. I was much more familiar with Mercury Divine, having closely followed their drag and burlesque work throughout 2019 at a variety of venues. It is notable that both these performers mash up drag and burlesque, sampling from each performance style to create "draglesque" numbers.

Both hauses had fantastic performances that brought together samples drawn from popular culture and the occult, fitting the show's magic theme. However, 7 Alchemy Lane won the evening after an audience vote, ensuring they would move on to the *Arthaus* finals (which were ultimately postponed indefinitely due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Their first performance of the evening was a spectacular mashup of popular culture and queer sociosexual aesthetics that served to radically reimagine the politics of gender, humanity, and desire. I do not possess a full recording of the performance, so I am writing here from memory.

Lazarus first entered the stage dressed as Harry Potter, complete with short black wig, round wire-framed glasses, a lightning scar, Quidditch robes in red Gryffindor colors, and a broomstick. They zoomed around the stage to "Hedwig's Theme" from John Williams's score to the *Harry Potter* film series, which were released from 2001 to 2011, playfully pursuing Mercury Divine dressed as the Golden Snitch. In the *Harry Potter* franchise, Quidditch is a soccer-like sport played on broomsticks, often by the young witches and wizards of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. As a student at Hogwarts, Harry Potter plays the position of Seeker on the Gryffindor House team. The Seeker's sole job during a Quidditch match is to capture the Golden Snitch: a small, enchanted golden ball with feathery wings that zooms nimbly around the Quidditch pitch. Many members of the audience were folks in their 20s and 30s and were thus members of a generation that had grown up with the *Harry Potter* series as children. As Lazarus and Mercury reenacted Harry's pursuit of the Snitch, we laughed delightedly at this whimsical childhood reference.

The performance shifted into a new direction as the music changed to "Be Mean" by DNCE, a dance-rock band fronted by U.S. American pop star Joe Jonas in the mid-2010s. Still in character as Harry Potter, Lazarus took on the role of a sub (the submissive role in a sub-dom relationship) while lip-syncing the song:

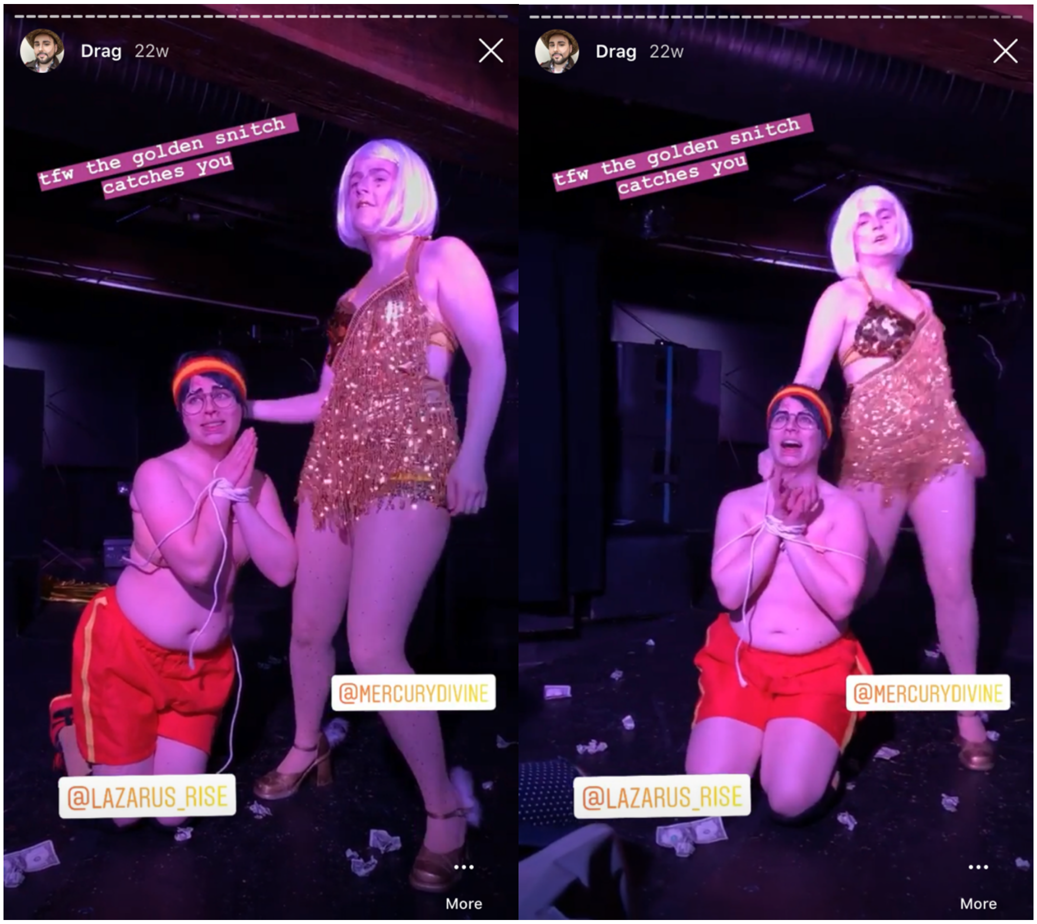
[verse 1]
Say you like the torture honey
Don't forget the whip
My left hand's getting loose
Don't let me slip
Said you got some handcuffs
Throw out the key
I don't need a safe word
No you don't gotta save me

[pre-chorus]
If pain's what you like
Torture me all night

[chorus]
Make love burnin'
Love how you keep me hurting
So ooh-ooh be mean, be mean to me
Be mean to me
With that body, you got the right to get naughty
So ooh-ooh be mean, be mean to me
Be mean to me

As Lazarus delivered the lyrics to the song, Mercury Divine took on the role of a dom (dominant), teasing and torturing Lazarus by tying them up, whipping them, and ultimately rubbing gold body paint all over their body. Both artists used their skills as burlesquers to heighten the sensuality of the performance, stripping artfully down to sexy outfits that fit their new sub/dom relationship (see Figure 15). This narrative turn in the performance queerly flips the original dynamic on its head: Harry Potter is captured by the object of his desire, becoming its property after being painted gold himself. As revealed through the song choice and performance gestures, Harry Potter takes perverse delight in being tortured and painted by the Snitch. Given that the relationship is between an adolescent wizard and an enchanted ball, this takes the sub/dom relationship into an even queerer direction. Further, the cultural significance of *Harry Potter* as an instantly-recognizable childhood classic stands in sharp contrast to the "adult content" of Lazarus and Mercury's fetish-play remix.

Figure 15: Screenshots from my Instagram "Drag" Highlight (where I collate clips of Seattle drag performances): two stills from a short video of Lazarus Rise and Mercury Divine dressed as Harry Potter and the Golden Snitch, respectively, at the *Arthaus* semi-finals in January 2020. Lazarus (as Harry) has been stripped down to his Gryffindor-colored Quidditch shorts and bound at the wrists with white rope as he lip-syncs "Be Mean" while Mercury (dressed as a sensual, femme Golden Snitch) circles him seductively. The performers' Instagram accounts are tagged in the screenshots (this enables the performers to view and share my post in their own Instagram stories, which they often do) along with my text comment, inspired by my in-the-moment response to the performance: "tfw [that feeling when] the golden snitch catches you."


Drag 22w
tfw the golden snitch catches you
@MERCURYDIVINE
@LAZARUS_RISE
More
Drag 22w
tfw the golden snitch catches you
@MERCURYDIVINE
@LAZARUS_RISE
More

Like other alternative drag performances, the *Harry Potter*/"Be Mean" mashup goes far beyond the performance of gender. Yet, gender play is certainly present within the mashup. In her article on the role of popular music in drag and burlesque performance in Seattle, Rachel

Devitt argues that "[g]ender performance is, by definition, based on the notion of gender *as* repertoire, as an incessant series of performances that are learned and produced both onstage and off' (2013: 435, original emphasis). Gender is simply one tool in performers' toolbox, learned and practiced through repetition in not just performance, but everyday life, as Devitt's quote points out—which warrants a nod to Judith Butler's oft-cited notion of gender performativity (Butler 1990). Thinking in terms of remix practice, I suggest that gender is but a sample, brought into play by Lazarus and Mercury alongside sound, gesture, and popular culture referents in the creation of the overall mashup. Gender is not only legible through visual elements, however—in Lazarus's performance, the use of Joe Jonas's vocals in "Be Mean" alongside the likeness of Harry Potter reinforces a gender associated with young, white, cis maleness. The combination of samples within the mashup helps to facilitate audience reception of the character during the performance of the remix.

While gender was a component of the mashup, neither performer sought to channel gender "realness" as one would see conveyed in a more classic style of drag performance. Rather, the focus of the performance was on developing the narrative relationship between the characters, as well as making the *Harry Potter* references legible for the audience. Lazarus assumed a realistic boy gender for their Harry Potter character, but did not prioritize normative gender realness throughout the performance: their taped chest was clearly visible during their strip during the fetish play component of the performance, even as they embodied the vocal stylings of Joe Jonas. Mercury Divine presented an imposing queer femme gender after their switch from Snitch to dom, but ultimately they were campily playing an enchanted object rather than a clearly gendered character. The relationship between characters further deprivileges gender as a lens with which to interpret the performance. Normative gender relies on clear sexual markers to function, albeit often in ways that privilege cis genders, heterosexuality, and homosexuality (man + man = homosexual; woman + woman = homosexual; woman + man = heterosexual). However, the gender and sexual play in the “Be Mean” mashup shatters these assumptions. The sub/dom relationship between boy and Snitch obscures normative referents for both gender and sexuality, as there are no clear referents that fit such a queer pairing.

Lazarus Rise’s and Mercury Divine’s queer use of *Harry Potter* as a sample in their performance is particularly notable in light of the transphobia of the author of the *Harry Potter* series, J.K. Rowling. In a series of tweets posted to her account between 2019 and 2020, Rowling asserted the biological certitude of sex, adopting a toxic rhetoric that has long been used by TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) to undermine the experiences of trans and non-binary people within feminist political movements and women’s spaces. In summary, Rowling repeatedly reinforced the idea that transgender women are biological men and thus essentially separate from cisgender women, ignoring years of trans activism that has sought to dismantle the tyranny of sex and gender essentialism in mainstream discourse. By asserting that trans women are not real women (invalidating the experiences of trans men and non-binary people by extension), Rowling plays into myths about trans people’s “inauthenticity,” which serves as justification for widespread discrimination, harassment, violence, and murder perpetuated against trans people (National Center for Transgender Equality 2020).

In remixing Rowling’s beloved characters alongside queer aesthetics and themes, Lazarus and Mercury reterritorialize this particular bit of popular culture for themselves and their fellow queers, and thereby on some level confront and challenge Rowling’s repeated transphobic statements.[49] Rachel Devitt writes, “drag and gender performance provide LGBT music fans with a rich repertoire of subversive strategies for queering popular music, of clearing space for themselves within an often adamantly heterosexist musical history by critiquing the normative conventions of popular culture and laying claim to the music they love” (2013: 430). In the case of the “Be Mean” mashup, Lazarus and Mercury do the very same thing, subverting Rowling’s most popular character in ways that entertain and affirm queer ways-of-being. Yet, as a reflexive remix, the components of the “Be Mean” mashup remain relatively intact and recognizable, as drag artists do not claim ownership over the sampled components with which they assemble their mashups. Devitt continues, “Rather than insisting on complete control over the songs to which they perform, they are demanding a role in the ‘semiotic productivity’ of popular cultures that is meaningful to them. In a sense, they are attempting to highlight and even celebrate, but also to performatively create, what Charles Keil calls ‘participatory discrepancies’ of music, the slight ‘out of syncness’ that ‘creates groove and invites us to participate’” (2013: 443-444, citing Keil 2005: 98). By performatively enacting participatory discrepancies in mashing-up *Harry Potter* with queer sociosexual aesthetics, Lazarus and Mercury playfully invite the members of their audience into a campy, utopic world where queer desire is celebrated within the popular media we love—not as authors of the experience, but as fellow participants.

---

[49] After J.K Rowling shared links to TERF merchandise promoting transphobic rhetoric through her Twitter account in September 2020, Mercury Divine posted an announcement to their Facebook account, officially retiring their Harry Potter act, stating, “…this has gone beyond ignorance to outright malice at this point and I just can’t, even passively, be a participant in that,” demonstrating that queer artists have limits in terms of utilizing problematic source materials (Mercury Divine, public Facebook post, 09/23/2020).

The Ethics of Sampling and Appropriation in Drag Performance

> "The point about pop culture is that so much of it is borrowed. There's very little that's brand new. Instead, creativity today is a kind of shopping process—picking up on and sampling things from the world around you, things you grew up with. That's very much my modus operandi. If you knew all the references, you could deconstruct one of my performances and place every look, every word, and every move" (Schottmiller 2017, citing RuPaul 1995).

The above quote by RuPaul, arguably the most famous and recognizable drag artist in the world, reveals the depth of integration between popular culture and remix aesthetics. It also highlights the interconnectivity of popular culture and drag performance, as do the mashups by Seattle drag artists discussed in this chapter. If drag performance is defined by sampling and remix, is any of it original? What are the ethical implications for using and transforming others' work, especially when artists often use significant portions of prerecorded songs in crafting performance tracks? The notion of originality and authorship, which are tied to legal frameworks of copyright, is a core tension within all artistic practices defined by remix.

Legal scholar Lawrence Lessig, founder of Creative Commons in 2001 and advocate of "free culture" (2004), is one among many prominent voices that have critiqued the inefficacy of copyright law in the digital era, given that sampling and remix have become ubiquitous as modes of production in music, performance, writing, visual art, architecture, social media, and consumer culture. Eduardo Navas notes that remix is a useful way to theorize about a culture defined by recyclability and appropriation (2012: 7), using a two-step process that he calls "the framework of culture": first, an element is introduced into culture; second, once that element attains cultural value it is re-evaluated through appropriation, social commentary, or sampling (ibid.: 15). So long as an element retains its cultural value, this process is cyclical as elements are repeatedly sampled and re-sampled; the movement between levels is the act of remix. Like other cultural producers, drag artists take a direct part in the framework of culture. However, when cultural production becomes a closed loop defined by an endless cycle of remix, the questions of originality and authorship remain.

In his “The Death of the Author” (1967; English trans. 1977), Roland Barthes argues that the authority of the author is replaced by that of the *interpretation* of the work by an anonymous reader; in his 1969 essay “What is an Author?”, Michel Foucault takes this concept a step further, interrogating the “author-function”—traced through legal and disciplinary systems—as one meant to control and shape discourse (Vallier 2018: 36-37), which is a Eurocentric and patriarchal epistemology of cultural production. Interestingly, Barthes and Foucault’s deconstruction of the author corresponded with a sharp rise of sampling in artistic and cultural production among minoritized communities in the Americas and Europe (ibid.: 39, citing Navas 2012), including within drag scenes of the United States as “record acts” became the norm for performance (Newton 1972). In a chapter titled “Appropriation”, authored in collaboration between the 20+ contributors to *Keywords in Remix Studies*—a collective work that itself challenges the notion of “authorship”—the writers address a paradox in the notion of appropriation and authorship. They write, “ironically, it’s appropriation art [such as remix] that implicitly or explicitly credits the work of others in its creation, while it is the supposedly authentic that erases its collaborators and its history” (2018: 18). In the case of popular music, the current system of copyright collapses these histories to favor big-name superstar performers and producers; however, it has always been difficult to name a single author in popular music, as songs are typically the result of collaboration between a multitude of creators and/or themselves products of sampling and appropriation from earlier material. While its collage of visual and sonic samples are not explicitly cited, drag is rarely opaque in its sampling process: artists often rely on audience members to recognize the individual parts of the mashup to maximize the performance's impact, as seen in both the "Telephone" and *Harry Potter*/"Be Mean" mashups. As such, drag blurs the notion of authorship. The drag artist is certainly a major force in "shaping the discourse" of a given mashup performance. However, the audience (taking the place of Barthes's reader) is critical in the interpretation of the work—doing Bailey's "communal performance labor" (2013) through the practice of dialogic performance (Johnson 2003)—which entails recognizing (or misrecognizing) the constellation of sonic, visual, and affective samples pulled together in the creation of the mashup.

In the absence of legal frameworks that appropriately accommodate the complicated systems of appropriation and networks of collaborative authorship within remix culture, codes of self-regulatory ethics have emerged. The uncertainty surrounding copyright and fair use[50] has led some scholars and practitioners to investigate the ethical dimensions of sampling, appropriation, and creativity within remix culture. Through interpretation of survey data sent to "participants in remix cultures," Aram Sinnreich (2015) identifies eleven criteria (commercial, legal, authenticity, innovation, labor, moral, continuity, use value, aesthetic, power relations, and self-expression) that emerge from fixed- and open-ended responses regarding ethics in networked culture. He concludes that communities and individuals tend to develop their own ethical frameworks through practice (ibid.). Mette Birk follows Sinnreich's work, creatively sampling from the concept of disciplinary panopticism from Foucault (1975) and journalist Quinn Norton's "do-ocratic" framework, which Norton used to describe the modus operandi of hacktivist collective Anonymous: "[to] rule by sheer doing: individuals propose actions, others join in (or not)… There's no one to grant permission, no promise of praise or credit, so every action must be its own reward" (2012). Birk mashes-up these ideas to propose "do-ocratic panopticism" (2015: 246). In this model, the "do-ocracy" is managed through the self-regulatory behavior of panopticism, as remixers know their posted works are visible within online networks (ibid.: 253). Through these structures, a code of networked ethics emerges: individuals are mindful of copyright law, but not constrained by it.

---

[50] "Fair use," as defined in Section 107 of the U.S. Copyright Act, asserts the right of creators to utilize copyrighted materials so long as the benefit to society is greater than the private loss. The four factors used to determine fair use of copyrighted work are (1) the purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of a commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes; (2) the nature of the copyrighted work; (3) the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole; and (4) the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work. A vague statement, fair use is determined on a case-by-case basis; recent case law rulings tend to involve two questions regarding fair use: "(1) is the use transformative, or different from the original material? and (2) was the appropriate amount taken to match the new use—not too much or too little?" (Aufderheide 2015).

These same systems—self-regulatory ethics and "do-ocratic panopticism"—operate within drag performance. When I asked Miss Texas 1988 about drag-as-remix, they first acknowledged the gray area of sampling from preexisting material: "in some sense, we're stealing, because you're literally taking someone else's art and you're—kind of collaging? It's like live performance collage. But I do think reification is the central tenet of what drag does with that music. Whether you are trying to really replicate it, there's still something challenging about the fact that you are replicating something that you're told you're not, or heightening [the original meaning]. Or, you are taking the song and you are subverting it and doing something completely different than what the song is actually, originally doing. So I do think it actually is the work of reification, of changing it by context" (interview, 01/10/2020). Texas's comment speaks to the ethics of appropriation in sampling practice; or, in other words, how some drag artists are exceedingly self-aware of their own culture of sampling and appropriation. Texas's attention to reification is the key: transformation, or "changing it by context," is a critical rationalization for appropriation art. This aligns with Sinnreich's dimensions of innovation, labor, aesthetic, and self-expression: so long as drag artists do the work to transform their samples into something distinctive in an innovative way, the mashup will be accepted by audiences and by fellow artists, regardless of whether or not it is technically defined as fair use under U.S. copyright law. Comments such as “they performed well, but I’ve seen it [a key element of the mashup] before” are commonly leveled at artists who repeat ideas by their peers. Further, Birke’s “do-ocratic panopticism” prevents artists from stealing performance narratives, themes, and mashups from each other: word travels fast in the Seattle drag community—by word-of-mouth or through social media—and if it comes to light that an artist is plagiarizing from other artists, show hosts are less likely to book them.

Additionally, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (and to a lesser extent, other popular representations of drag, including international *Drag Race* franchises and the alternative drag reality television competition *Dragula*) operates as the baseline for general innovation within drag. The creative choices by the queens on *Drag Race* are rarely novel—especially to other seasoned drag artists—but once a look, gimmick, or catchphrase has graced the main stage of *RuPaul’s Drag Race,* its only cultural currency at that point is as an outright *Drag Race* reference. As such, drag artists who uncritically replicate these elements risk reproach by audiences—which is unfortunate, given that *Drag Race* artists typically have significant amounts of wealth and experience on their side, unlike the vast majority of local artists. The real issue is not local artists’ creative capabilities—I have seen Seattle artists do things that *Drag Race* could never even dream of—but rather mainstream audiences’ demands for ever-increasing levels of spectacle that are narrowly defined by *Drag Race*-styles of drag performance.

However, samples are still fair game to use even when used frequently, so long as they are transformed in new and interesting ways. For instance, over the course of a year, I saw the song “Part of Your World” from Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* (1989) presented three times by different Seattle alternative drag artists; however, all three numbers were distinct from one another despite using the same musical sample. I first saw a karaoke version of the song (with vocals removed) performed by Dolce Vida at *So You Think You Can Drag* during a live-singing challenge. Dolce chose not to showcase singing skill, so she camped up the performance to compensate, mumbling her way through the lyrics into a microphone to great comic effect. As Disney’s mermaid Ariel sings to the viewer about her collection of human-made treasures in *The Little Mermaid* while longing to join the human world, Dolce rummaged through a QFC shopping bag full of dildos, leather restraints, and anal beads as she expressed her longing to join the fetish community:

(verse 2)
I've got gadgets and gizmos a-plenty
I've got whozits and whatzits galore
You want thingamabobs? I’ve got twenty!
But who cares?
No big deal
I want more…

In the middle of the performance, an audience member playfully heckled Dolce; without missing a beat, Dolce leaned into the microphone and snapped, “This is MY story!” The queer brilliance of combining a chaste Disney princess with queer sexual freedom, a tongue-in-cheek failure to sing “well,” quick wit, and the overall physical comedy of the performance left the audience in stitches, and remains one of the most memorable numbers from *So You Think You Can Drag.*

The second performance using “Part of Your World” was about a month later, by Vel Veeta at *Adult Swim: The Drag Show*. The show theme was inspired by Cartoon Network’s *Adult Swim* programming block, which aired original animated television shows targeted towards young adults that aired after-hours in the 2000s, including *Aqua Teen Hunger Force, Robot*

Chicken, The Boondocks, and *Rick and Morty* (to name a few); the block also featured reruns of popular animated shows such as *Family Guy, Bob's Burgers,* and *Futurama*. Impeccably dressed as Leela from *Futurama,* Vel created a music mashup between Disney's "Part of Your World" and the electropop hit "Freakshow" by Britney Spears (2007) to tell Leela's origin story: a beautiful, cycloptic human mutant from the urban sewers yearns to join the surface world. During "Part of Your World," Vel lip-synced to the Disneyesque soprano vocals by Jodi Marie Benson; however, whenever the word "sea" or "water" would come up, Vel would bellow "SEWER" in an exaggerated basso voice over the track (to emphasize Leela's perspective as a sewer-dwelling mutant). Vel's unique and original take on "Part of Your World" rendered it distinct from Dolce's performance the previous month, and also stood out with a performance style that blended lip-syncing with live vocals, as well as the use of an additional song in the overall mashup to better convey her character's narrative.

The final performance I witnessed of "Part of Your World" came in January 2020, this time by Bosco at *Soft Shock* at Kremwerk. Fitting the horror theme of the show, Bosco's twist on the Disney classic explored a new take on the mermaid: what if Ariel was not beautiful—what if she was a terrifying mashup of human and deep-sea anglerfish? Bosco lip-synced the song in a rather conservative blouse and skirt, but with unsettling white contacts, massive fangs protruding upwards from her chin, and a finned headpiece featuring a flexible reading light to complete the fearful anglerfish visage. The very end of "Part of Your World" included a loud scream mixed over the song, at which point Bosco lunged at the front row—a soft shock, indeed. These three performances of "Part of Your World" are distinguishable through contrasting narratives, themes, and performance styles, despite relying on the same musical sample as a foundation for the mashup. With a self-regulating system of community ethics in place, Disney copyright is less of a concern. Queer performers would not bat a glittery eyelid over "stealing" a song owned a corporation worth over $100 billion—rather, the real ethical issue at play is respecting the artistic production of one's peers.

The meanings of samples change profoundly in their new context, further eroding the semantic purity of the source material and thus chipping away even further at its fixity as "original." Vanessa Chang, reading Deleuze and Guattari (1987), speaks to the rhizomatic nature of relationship between samples and their origins, resisting the impulse to define a sample as moving in a linear fashion from source to facsimile: "The paradigm of the tree is a stratified semantic map that takes root at the origin, the beginning point from which all meanings spring. The rhizome does away with the very notion of origin… Like the rhizome, the sample resists arborification, a multiplicity of meanings always available to the elastic musical sign" (Chang 2009: 156). This logic challenges the tyranny of the "original"—or the "root" in this particular metaphor—as the ultimate source of semantic meaning for subsequent incarnations. The notion of the rhizome, on the other hand, allows for multiple interpretations of a sign from a variety of directions. When a drag artist performs a mashup composed of samples drawn from popular culture, audience members interpret and react to the artists' choices in varying ways based upon their own experiences and affective responses to the material; further, the drag artist's performance of the materials also imbues the so-called *originals* with new meanings. Now firmly embedded within a rhizomatic maze of meanings because of its elasticity as a musical sample, I will never think of Disney's "Part of Your World" without conjuring memories of Dolce Vida's sex toy mumble-rap, Vel Veeta's *Futurama* mashup, or Bosco's deep-sea anglerfish. True to a rhizomatic relationship, these mashups are informed by the context of the original Disney song—

but for drag artists and audience members in Seattle, the original is now forever haunted by queer camp aesthetics accrued during its multiple performances.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the interrelatedness of drag performance and remix culture using performances in Seattle's alternative drag scene between 2019-2020 to show how drag artists utilize sonic, visual, performative, and affective samples in the creation of spectacular mashups. In the process, drag artists performatively embody the aesthetic of remix to communicate queer community values and politics and "camp up" popular culture referents to make room for queer bodies and desires within the media in which we collectively participate. As a discursive process, remix in drag performance requires an audience to make full sense (or not) of the constellation of samples drawn into the mashup; both the sampling process and realization of drag mashups rely upon communal performance labor and queer listening to sustain a sense of queer social memory. As a tradition of appropriation—like other remix cultures—drag also fundamentally challenges the notion of authorship as samples take on increasingly complex semantic relationships when used in different ways across performances. In the next chapter, I will turn to examine the way Seattle drag artists used the remix process to create mashups that served express political purposes. Emboldened by the toxic rhetoric of Donald Trump, local right-wing extremists targeted several prominent drag artists in the Seattle scene during the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots. Drag artists responded by embodying the spirits of resistance from their queer forebears, drawing samples from history, popular culture, and queer cultural aesthetics that both served to entertain and offer resistance to threats to themselves and their community.

Chapter 5

“QUEERS BASH BACK!”: Seattle Drag and Political Performance in the Trump Era

Drag is inseparable from politics for many queer artists due to its history as a form of performative resistance and its enduring association with LGBTQ+ activism. The legacies of U.S. American drag artist-activists such as Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and Stormé DeLarverie are imbued with radical potency, given these queer icons’ lasting impact on LGBTQ+ political movements in the United States over the last half century. With a resurgence of right-wing political extremism across the country after Donald Trump’s rise to the office of President of the United States in 2017, the importance of political awareness among the Seattle queer community became even more urgent. Despite Seattle’s reputation for political progressivism, local right-wing political groups targeted drag artists and queer individuals in 2019 in an effort to terrorize the LGBTQ+ community, prompting drag artists to craft political performances in response. In the context of the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprising, Seattle drag artists again used performance as a political tool to rally against neoliberal city policies and systemic state violence against minoritized groups.

Using remix strategies, drag artists in Seattle also directly critiqued Donald Trump, developing and performing mashups that blended political issues with popular music. It is important to note that political critique of Trump was not unique to the Seattle drag scene—quite the contrary. A cornerstone of mainstream drag culture, the televised drag competition *RuPaul’s Drag Race* incorporated critiques of the Trump administration in the eleventh season of the show aired in 2019, though its efficacy was questioned by drag artists and audiences in Seattle. The use of anti-Trump rhetoric in performance revealed the significance of balancing political critique with entertainment value in the remix process, as failing to find the right equilibrium can result in mixed messaging or poor reception among audiences.

In this chapter, I show how Seattle drag artists responded to the political turbulence of 2019 and 2020 through the deployment of powerful performative responses, affirming their right to exist as well as situating themselves as community leaders and culture-bearers for queer communities. Ever resourceful, they pulled from popular music, U.S. political history, queer history, and their own lived experiences, weaving these disparate elements together to create performance mashups that were both entertaining and impactful for LGBTQ+ people and their allies. As culture-bearers for the queer community, drag artists channel the spirit of resistance of their queer forebears, embodying queer history through performance to uplift themselves and their communities.

Navigating the 50th Anniversary of Pride in the Age of Trump

> "The Stonewall Riots are still happening—serving as a flash point not just for queer rights but also for queer culture, changing irrevocably how LGBTQ people see themselves and their place in society, which naturally affects how they express themselves both personally and artistically" (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2018: 21).

My fieldwork coincided with a momentous year for queer communities in the United States. Pride 2019 marked the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, in which drag artists and patrons of the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York City, mounted coordinated resistance against police between June 28 and July 3, 1969 to counter systemic state brutality against queer people. The continuing criminalization of cross-dressing and homosexuality in the 1960s had allowed police to openly abuse lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, and raids on gay bars like the Stonewall Inn were the norm.[51] Led by Black drag artists—including trans woman/drag queen Marsha P. Johnson and butch lesbian/drag king Stormé DeLarverie—the Stonewall riots are widely cited within queer vernacular culture as the beginning of an organized LGBTQ+ rights movement in the United States. Now a mainstream celebration, complete with corporate sponsorship, state support, and mass cisheterosexual attendance, Pride month is celebrated annually in June to commemorate the Stonewall riots.[52] Drag artists are foregrounded at Pride to celebrate their legacy of political activism on behalf of the queer community—for several years, even *RuPaul's Drag Race* was aired in such a way that the finale for each season corresponded with the final weekend of Pride month.

---

[51] While venues like the Stonewall Inn were technically illegal, they survived through payoff systems to local authorities and/or protection from organized crime syndicates (Paulson 1996; Fitzgerald & Marquez 2018).

Despite a growth in mainstream support and nearly fifty years of significant legislative victories for LGBTQ+ people in the United States, Pride has not yet become a utopic vision of social progress. My experiences within the Seattle drag scene revealed how queer people—even in so-called progressive bubbles like western Washington—are still subjected to homophobic and transphobic harassment and violence during Pride month. Since the 2016 election, there has been a marked rise in visible activity among violent alt-right groups, emboldened by Trump's embrace of "omnipotent white masculinity" in his political performance style (Kusz 2018) and his conflicting messaging regarding the activity of neo-Nazi and white supremacist organizations within his political base (Rascoe 2018; Hesson & Cooke 2020). The term "alt-right," short for "alternative right," is a neologism denoting a network of loosely affiliated political groups espousing right-wing extremism in the early 21st century. In the United States, the alt-right rose to national prominence when Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump appointed Steve Bannon as his campaign CEO in 2016 and later as Senior Counselor to the President, with Bannon himself describing his web outlet *Breitbart News* as "the platform of the Alt-Right" (Main 2018). Specific belief systems among alt-right groups vary, thought they are typically united in their rejection of liberal democracy, deployment of vitriolic rhetoric meant to erode ethical standards for communication, and espousal of white nationalist ideals (ibid.), with the latter including masculinist ideas of gender that are distinctly anti-feminist and anti-queer. In line with its embrace of alt-right white supremacist ideals, Trump's campaign rhetoric and administration ruthlessly and repeatedly demonized Black, Latinx, Asian, and/or Muslim U.S. Americans—as well as migrants and refugees from Black/African, Latinx, Asian, and/or Muslim-majority countries. At the same time, the Trump administration executed a "rollback" of Obama-era assimilationist policies (Moreau 2018),[53] and anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-feminist sentiments permeate the ideologies of many pro-Trump alt-right organizations such as the Proud Boys (SPLC 2020).

---

[52] State support at Pride often includes local police departments not just as "security," but as part of Pride parades, which is perennially criticized by queer activists given that police brutality is an ongoing issue affecting the queer community—particularly Black, Latinx, and/or Indigenous queer people. "NO COPS AT PRIDE" is a common slogan used to raise awareness and rally resistance against the presence of police at public Pride celebrations in cities throughout the United States—I have personally seen the use of this slogan in Seattle; St. Louis; Chicago; Champaign-Urbana, Illinois; and Kansas City, Missouri between 2009-2019.

---

[53] Proposed by queer theorist Jasbir Puar, the term *homonationalism* denotes a phenomenon in which certain queer subjects become assimilated into the U.S. nation-state through liberal domestic policy in the post-9/11 era (e.g., overturning federal sodomy laws, state recognition of same-sex marriage, and expansion of anti-discrimination legislation). Homonationalism relies on the strategic positioning of certain non-Western societies as "backwards" with regards to sexual and gender diversity, which justifies ongoing U.S. imperialist endeavors in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of liberal progress (Puar 2007). Homonationalist policy was furthered by the Obama administration's deployment of liberal stances to fold certain parts of the LGBTQ+ community into the Democratic Party base, which perpetuated the myth of U.S. exceptionalism and progressivism on the international stage despite ongoing military campaigns abroad and domestic human rights abuses. Notable examples of the Trump administration's post-2016 "rollback" include its removal of all references to LGBTQ+ issues on official White House media, tactically ignoring Pride month, banning transgender individuals from serving in the U.S. military, and appointing individuals with anti-LGBTQ+ positions to federal judicial positions (Moreau 2018).

Throughout U.S. American history, drag artists often bear the brunt of persecution by anti-LGBTQ+ forces given their high visibility within queer scenes; those who have the added status as community leaders, activists, and trailblazers are even more likely to be targeted, as are people of color and/or trans drag artists. The fact that police in 1969 initially targeted a cross-dressed Black butch lesbian at the Stonewall Inn is no coincidence, and this pattern continues today. During Pride month 2019 in Seattle, hate campaigns came from conservative political activists and right-wing terrorist organizations, who targeted several drag artists for their participation in Drag Queen Story Hour events at local libraries.

Manufacturing Controversy at Drag Queen Story Hour

In spring of 2019, leading up to the 50th anniversary Pride month, right-wing activists in Washington state used social media to whip up a moral panic around queer artists "corrupting" children at public library events. Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) was conceived by lesbian author and social organizer Michelle Tea in San Francisco, CA in 2016 (Condren 2019). With a stated goal of providing children with "glamorous, positive, and unabashedly queer role models," the program has since been adopted in 45 different cities spanning across North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia, including Tacoma, WA (DQSH 2020). The premise is fairly straightforward: bookstores, schools, or libraries partner with DQSH, which facilitates the hiring and training of local drag artists for the program. Drag artists then host readings or performances for children, youth, and families, typically featuring children's literature that highlights "rainbow families," i.e., families with LGBTQ+ caregivers or LGBTQ+ children (Naidoo 2019). DQSH also offers resources for LGBTQ+ organizations and libraries to conduct similar programs in places without an official DQSH team (Condren 2019).

I first became aware of Drag Queen Story Hour through the work of drag queen Cookie Couture. A fixture in the Seattle drag performance scene, Cookie hosts several shows at queer venues throughout the city, including the popular *So You Think You Can Drag* competition at R Place in the Capitol Hill neighborhood. Cookie participated in Drag Queen Story Hour in 2019, reading aloud to dozens of children and youth at recurring events at the public library in Des Moines, WA and the Sky View Observatory at Columbia Center in downtown Seattle. As the parent of four children, Cookie Couture is the perfect queen for such events. Four other Seattle queens—Londyn Bradshaw, Kylie Mooncakes, Freeza D'Lust, and Baby—participated in a teen Pride event at the Renton Public Library in June 2019, doing age-appropriate performances for attendees that centered themes of self-love and the acceptance of gender and sexual diversity, such as Baby lip-syncing to popular hip hop artist Lizzo's trans-inclusive feminist anthem "Like a Girl" (released in April 2019).

Despite broad community support at these events, these artists became lightning rods for controversy. Conservative organizations, including the Spokane-based anti-drag group 500 Mom Strong, Seattle-based alt-right media collective Operation Cold Front, and the (failed) campaign for alt-right candidate for Washington's 45th legislative district Amber Krabach, spread misleading information on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. A member of 500 Mom Strong deliberately conflated the queens' performances at the teen Pride event at the Renton Library with a safe sex workshop that occurred earlier that day, falsely claiming online that the drag queens were handing out lube, condoms, and genital-shaped bookmarks to underage children while performing; this woman also took a video of Baby performing "Like a Girl" without permission, which ended up as part of a grossly sensationalized national story on *The*

Story With Martha MacCallum on FoxNews (B. January 2019).[54] On the show, discussion between MacCallum and 500 Mom Strong representatives focused on stereotypes about queer people "grooming youth for sexually deviant lifestyles," which was used as a broad condemnation of Drag Queen Story Hour events across the country.

As social media posts from my friends in the community alerted me to the growing controversy, I spent a day combing through Facebook for more information, where I discovered a number of disturbing posts touting homophobic and transphobic rhetoric—though there was also a roughly equal number of accounts posting in support of the drag artists and queer community. The repeated, deliberate misgendering of the four drag artists who performed at the Renton Library—two of whom are trans women, the other two are non-binary—as "men in dresses" (paraphrasing multiple commenters) became a particular nuisance to the artists and their allies, as this particular transphobic tactic is often used to ignore the voices of trans people, justify violence against them, and perpetuate their stigmatization as "mentally ill."[55] Some of the worst posts—such as those distributed by the Krabach campaign and Operation Cold Front via Facebook—culled Instagram photos of Cookie Couture and Baby performing at 21+ nightclub events, juxtaposing their drag looks that involved gore, sexual imagery, and other mature themes within the conversation around drag artists children's events to maximize shock value.

---

[54] The woman, along with another member of 500 Mom Strong, was escorted out of the library by police for being present at a teen event without children and for videoing the event without permission (Keimig 2019).

[55] Transgender identities—encompassing trans men, trans women, and non-binary people—were categorized as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Organization ("gender identity disorder") up until 2013 with the publication of the DSM-5. In the DSM-5, "gender identity disorder" was replaced with "gender dysphoria." This addressed the source of gender-identity related distress experienced by many transgender people as a failure of the social system of sex assignment at birth, rather than placing the onus of mental illness on transgender people themselves (APO 2020). Naturally, this recent shift in theorization of transgender identities by the APO does not reflect how we are treated by the general public.

By politicizing queer identity and linking drag artistry to sexual deviance and pedophilia, these agents whipped up a moral panic on social media that spawned real threats of violence against the queer community. While drag artists like Baby shrugged off the ignorant comments of bigots and political commentators in light of overwhelming support from friends and community members (Keimig 2019), the connections between local conservative media organizations and more sinister alt-right groups generated a crisis. Drag Queen Story Hour events continued through the month of June in celebration of Pride month, drawing members of the right-wing paramilitary group Washington State Three Percenters and the neo-fascist Proud Boys organization at protests outside of public libraries (ibid.), and direct threats were made against drag artists online. Several days after the teen Pride event at the Renton Library, one of the queens involved shared a post on their Facebook alerting the community that a friend had been jumped by five Proud Boys at the corner of Pine and Belmont at dusk. One of the assailants was reported to have a knife, though the victim managed to escape before being seriously wounded. The alleged attack was unsubstantiated by formal news reports, which is not unusual, since queer people—especially queer people of color and/or transgender people—are significantly less likely to report violence to police, given that police cannot be trusted to protect the interests and welfare of queer and trans people of color and are themselves the perpetrators of anti-queer violence. In any case, this report was deeply disturbing to the queer community, given that the alleged attack occurred in the geographical center of Seattle's queer community just before Pride weekend.

As the most prominent face of Drag Queen Story Hour in the Seattle area, Cookie Couture and her partner were doxxed by members of Operation Cold Front and/or the Proud Boys (Operation Cold Front denied the allegations against them on Facebook when confronted by commenters). “Doxxing” refers to one’s personal information being leaked online for malicious purposes. Cookie’s name, partner’s name, children’s names, home address, and day job address all began circulating online among alt-right Seattle groups, prompting Cookie and her partner to lock down their social media accounts. Word of Cookie’s family’s doxxing spread through the community like wildfire, and we feared for their safety. On June 19, 2019, I attended the weekly *So You Think You Can Drag* event at R Place, where Cookie continued her hosting duty for the show despite the recent threat against her. Just before the show began, Floyd, the owner of R Place, appeared onstage and gave a brief speech to the audience, acknowledging Cookie’s situation. Imploring the audience to look out for one another, Floyd recalled the story of Matthew Shepard, a young gay man who was kidnapped, tortured, and left to die by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson near Laramie, WY in 1998. Shepard’s horrific murder sparked a national conversation about lethal homophobic violence and renewed efforts by LGBTQ+ activists to pursue more comprehensive hate crime legislation across the country. Floyd’s call for community care was followed by the presentation of a gift to Cookie: a beautiful framed print of a photo of Cookie reading to children at the Des Moines Public Library. This emotional presentation was followed by a Pride-themed runway by the contestants, and I remember being tremendously moved by the feelings of solidarity among the audience and performers that night.

A few days later, the Proud Boys announced their intent to disrupt Seattle’s Trans Pride March on June 28, 2019 (TransPrideSeattle 2019). Besides the alleged Proud Boys attack and Cookie’s family’s doxxing, there was also a documented rise in anti-queer vandalism in the Capitol Hill neighborhood that month—trans pride flags and rainbow pride flags were ripped down from businesses, and artwork for the AIDS Memorial Project in Capitol Hill was defaced or stolen (Strangeways 2019). The threat by the Proud Boys put Trans Pride organizers on high alert for violence. The community pulled together, with posts online calling for allies to serve as protective escorts and rides for vulnerable members of the community, including POC, women, and trans people. The threat appeared to be an empty one, however, as the Trans Pride March drew record numbers, and no notable disruptions were recorded among media outlets covering the event. Queer activists and artists revealed their tenacity and reliance on community organization to counter the numerous threats made against them in 2019, though many of the more memorable moments came from artists' staged performances that addressed the right-wing hate campaigns.

"Stronger": Staging Performative Resistance to Alt-Right Terror

Beyond participating in community watch initiatives, drag artists also employed performative strategies in their staged numbers to counter the spike in anti-queer rhetoric during Pride 2019. By using their art to counter acts of violence against themselves and their community, drag performers remixed popular songs alongside political statements and their own personal experiences to create entertaining mashups that indexed queer histories of political resistance. Their performances demonstrated the tenacity of the queer community and drag artists' continued role as leaders in the active resistance against homophobic, transphobic, and racist threats.

Wednesday, June 26, 2019 was the finale of the *So You Think You Can Drag* competition at R Place. Cookie's family's doxxing had occurred ten days before, the alleged attack on a queer person by Proud Boys six days before, and online threats of violence against the upcoming Pride festivities were on everyone's minds. Baby, Kylie Mooncakes, Londyn Bradshaw, and Freeza D'Lust had just performed at the teen Pride event at the Renton Public Library a few days before, and discourse on social media still reflected the controversy about Drag Queen Story Hour and related events. My friends and I were determined to attend the finale of *So You Think You Can Drag,* but were alert to potential threats when walking through Capitol Hill to the venue.

As one of the finalists for *So You Think You Can Drag*, Freeza D'Lust chose to frame her final number for the competition as a victim-to-survivor narrative in response to the hate mail she had been receiving in light of her participation at the Renton Public Library event. Appearing onstage solo in a blue and white bodysuit, she began her performance by singing "Go the Distance" live, remixed with audio of her reading hateful comments from strangers about herself from social media concerning her performance at the Renton Library. Originally sung by the title character (voiced by Roger Bart) of Disney's animated film *Hercules* (1997), "Go the Distance" is an inspirational anthem, used to express the godling Hercules's feelings of ostracization and isolation after being teased and tormented by his mortal peers.[56] The use of hate mail as a sonic sample, read by Freeza herself, immediately indexed the Drag Queen Story Hour controversy and effectively communicated Freeza's emotional struggle with the abuse she faced as a result. By choosing to sing "Go the Distance" live, rather than lip-syncing, Freeza personalized her message of victimization and resilience in the face of cruelty even further, suggesting that the pushback against her drag persona at the Renton Library Pride event was an extension of the discrimination she faces as a queer, non-binary person out of drag. This narrative was all too familiar for many members of the audience.

---

[56] In the Disney film—which was a controversial retelling (remix) of Greek mythology—Hercules is born to the god Zeus and goddess Hera. As a baby, Hercules is rendered mortal by his jealous uncle, the god Hades, and Hercules is thus banished from the home of the gods to live with a loving, mortal foster family down on earth. However, Hades' plan does not remove Hercules of his godlike strength. Unaware of his godly heritage, teenage Hercules becomes an outcast among his mortal peers because of his inexplicable strength and lack of coordination. After a hard day, Hercules sings "Go the Distance" as an expression of his resilience as he searches for where he truly belongs (*Hercules* 1997). A pop version was recorded by Michael Bolton; a Spanish-language pop version was recorded by Ricky Martin. "Go the Distance" is arguably the most popular and well-remembered song from the film.

After concluding "Go the Distance," the audio to "Stronger (What Doesn't Kill You)" by Kelly Clarkson began as Freeza's narrative shifted from the positionality of "victim" to that of "survivor." A dance-pop hit released as part of Clarkson's fifth studio album *Stronger* in 2011, "Stronger" was re-released as a single in 2012, gaining three Grammy nominations that year. The song's message of empowerment in the face of continued adversity resonated with the queer community—especially queer millennials like Freeza, myself, and many others in attendance at *So You Think You Can Drag*—and the song has been a well-known anthem for LGBTQ+ Pride since its release:

[verse 1]
You think you got the best of me
Think you had the last laugh
Bet you think that everything good is gone
Think you left me broken down
Think that I'd come running back
Baby you don't know me, 'cause you're dead wrong

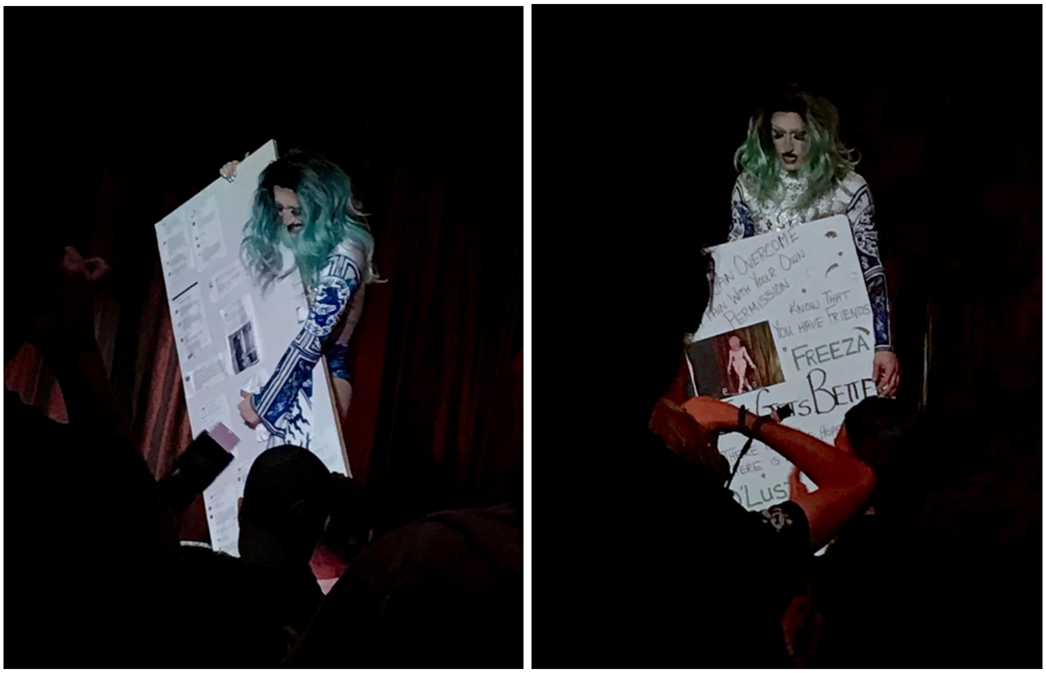
[chorus]
What doesn't kill you makes you stronger
Stand a little taller
Doesn't mean I'm lonely when I'm alone
What doesn't kill you makes a fighter
Footsteps even lighter
Doesn't mean I'm over 'cause you're gone
What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, stronger
Just me, myself and I
What doesn't kill you makes you stronger
Stand a little taller
Doesn't mean I'm lonely when I'm alone

Like with "Go the Distance," Freeza deployed remix techniques in her performance of "Stronger," inserting audio samples of "it gets better" voiceovers from the Trevor Project and "It Gets Better" campaign, drawing from a history of queer-positive mental health resources. In

1994, writer James Lecesne and producers Peggy Rajski and Randy Stone collaborated on the release of the short film *Trevor,* in which the title character—a gay 13-year-old Diana Ross fan—attempts suicide in 1981 after ostracization from his parents and bullying from his peers for his homosexuality. Four years after the film's release, Lecesne, Rajski, and Stone—realizing that actual children like the character Trevor had little to no access to queer-friendly mental health services—founded a U.S.-based nonprofit organization called the Trevor Project to address the ongoing epidemic of suicide among lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and questioning youth and young adults (The Trevor Project 2020). The Trevor Project features advocacy campaigns on behalf of LGBTQ+ youth, hosts workshops for schools and youth organizations, and 24/7 suicide prevention and counseling services for youth in crisis (ibid.). A closely affiliated movement is the "It Gets Better" Project, founded by Seattle-based columnist Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller in 2010. The "It Gets Better Project" is most notable as a social media campaign, in which LGBTQ+ celebrities and icons employ victim-to-survivor narratives in the form of short personal stories of how their lives improved after difficult experiences with discrimination, exclusion, abandonment, self-harm, and/or violence as youth. Freeza's use of audio clips drawn from the Trevor Project and "It Gets Better" campaign reinforce her use of Kelly Clarkson's "Stronger" as an anthem for resilience and self-empowerment for queer people. No longer singing live, Freeza's performance took on a more physically active dimension as she used her considerable gymnastic skills while lip-syncing "Stronger" to contrast her relatively demure presentation of "Go the Distance." This shift in energy reflects Freeza's use of the victim-to-survivor narrative in that her physical and aural portrayal of victimization is softer, more intimate, and less athletic than her portrayal of survivor subjecthood.

During the transition between the “Go the Distance”/victim and “Stronger”/survivor segments of her performance, Freeza revealed a poster board collaged with samples of the hate mail sent to her over the last few days, dramatically tearing them off one-by-one while performing to “Stronger” as a symbolic gesture of overcoming the hate directed towards her. Towards the climax of her “Stronger” lip-sync, she turned the poster board around to reveal a self-empowerment poster with messages like “you can overcome any pain with your own permission” and “know that you have friends” and “it gets better,” completing her narrative arc from victim to survivor (see Figure 16). The performance was incredibly moving, its affective dimension encompassing not just Freeza’s emotional journey through the alt-right hate campaign presently directed at her, but the fear and uncertainty that the rest of us in the audience felt during the turbulent political atmosphere of Pride 2019 in Seattle. While Freeza did not win the *So You Think You Can Drag* competition that night, her performance was a standout in the way it blurred the lines between Freeza’s drag persona and her offstage experiences, personalizing her performance and inspiring both pride and sympathy for her journey. Her use of “It Gets Better” materials also recalled a point in history where a marked shift for mainstream queer acceptance occurred as celebrities came out in support of the LGBTQ+ community in large numbers, dramatically reshaping public opinion about LGBTQ+ people and reminding us all of the halting progress made over the last half-century since Stonewall. The vitriol directed at the queer community by alt-right groups today felt less like a frightening cultural shift and more like the fading vestige of a more difficult past.

Figure 16: Two mid-performance photos of Freeza D'Lust at the finale of *So You Think You Can Drag* at R Place, in which she presents a poster board collaged with digital hate mail. After emphatically tearing off the hateful comments (left), Freeza turned around the poster board to reveal a collage of "It Gets Better" themed materials (right), completing her performative transformation from victim to survivor. Photographs by author, June 26, 2019.



While powerful in its affective potential, the use of the victim-to-survivor trope perpetuates a problematic, formulaic response to processing trauma. The overwhelming use of "it gets better" as a method for responding to trauma is not universally effective, as many people experience and process trauma in non-linear ways (Flesher 2018). The hegemony of victim-to-survivor narratives in mental health resources for queer youth, such as the Trevor Project and "It Gets Better," can actually serve to alienate young LGBTQ+ people even further, as these campaigns create unhealthy pressure to conform to a standard of trauma response that fits the neoliberal norms of self-betterment, i.e., "only you can overcome your own victimization." Many queer youth do not have the power to take this sort of control over their own lives; as such, victim-to-survivor narratives are not the sole answer as a political and affective response to community trauma. However, the way Freeza incorporated her personal experiences within her narrative lent her performance a considerable amount of genuineness and vulnerability, contributing to its effectiveness as a political statement that resonated with many people in her audience. Freeza's success at weaving together drag artistry with political activism and queer history was mirrored by other drag artists in Seattle, though the latter employed different strategies to achieve their goals.

"We'll fight 'til it's over": The Embodiment of Queer History as a Political Strategy

Choosing to address the sense of uncertainty surrounding Seattle Pride 2019, other drag artists harnessed the power of a collective sense of history in more overt ways, as I witnessed at a drag show the following weekend. As living symbols for the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights, drag artists in Seattle embody queer history as a political strategy, particularly during Pride celebrations. On Saturday, June 29—the height of Pride weekend 2019—I attended the *Kings* Pride show at Kremwerk with friends. It was a beautiful June evening with ample sunshine, courtesy of Seattle's long summer days; my friend Jack and I walked down to the Denny Triangle from the Capitol Hill Pridefest to get pre-show pizza at Little Maria's, the pizza shop above the Kremwerk drag venue. After meeting up with our friend Jocelyn, we headed down to Kremwerk to see the all-drag king *Kings* show, where we were first inspected for concealed weapons by a bouncer.[57] Like with other drag shows during June 2019, *Kings* was affected by the political unrest of the ongoing alt-right hate campaigns in notable ways. One of the two regular hosts—Salvador Saber, a drag king from Tacoma[58]—cancelled his appearance that evening; from what I heard from another drag king in the cast just before the show, Salvador had been concerned about the recent threats made by the Proud Boys. While my friends and I missed seeing Salvador—his dance and lip-sync skill to lite metal and pop rock numbers of the 1980s and 1990s were consistently among our favorite performances at *Kings*—we understood his caution in light of the situation. Mercury Divine, a cast regular at *Kings* (and no stranger to hosting) took Salvador's place as co-host for the evening.

---

[57] This bouncer ironically failed to find a small pocketknife belonging to my friend Jack—carried by him primarily for utility—which led us to speculate about the performance of security at queer venues in the post-Pulse massacre world. The Pulse massacre refers to a mass shooting at a gay nightclub in June 2016 in Orlando, Florida, in which gunman Omar Mateen left 49 people dead (including himself) and over 50 people wounded, the vast majority of victims being Latinx LGBTQ+ young adults.

The main host and MC of *Kings,* Samuel L. "Stonewall" JackYouSon (see Figure 17), used the *Kings* show as a platform to talk about "the reason for the season," educating the crowd on the history of Pride on its 50th anniversary—most notably, the central presence of a drag king named Stormé DeLarverie at the Stonewall riots in 1969.[59] The significance of explicitly naming Stormé DeLarverie lies in the shifting, conflicting histories of the Stonewall Riots. Early accounts tended to leave out the names of the trans drag artists involved because the assimilationist Gay Liberation Front of the 1970s focused on the interest of relatively-normative cis white gays and lesbians; eventually, the Black trans drag queen Marsha P. Johnson was named as the "mother of Pride" in queer oral histories for her involvement.[60] According to queer oral histories in the latter half of the 2010s, which I heard primarily through drag kings in the

---

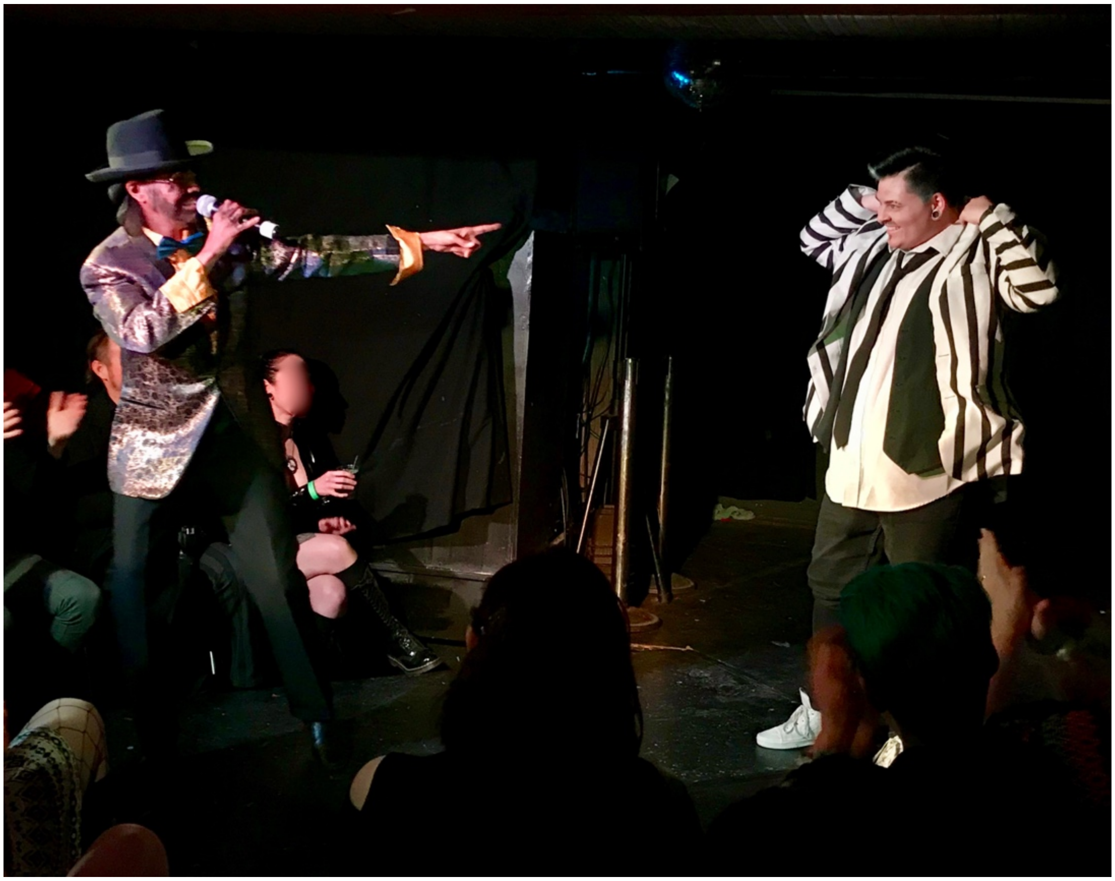
[58] Salvador Saber is perhaps better-known in the drag community of the Seattle-Tacoma area by his drag queen persona, Cannoli.

[59] Samuel L. JackYouSon added the "Stonewall" moniker for the night in honor of Pride and also to call attention to his recent 50th birthday—Shelli, the person behind Samuel, was auspiciously born the same year as the Stonewall riots.

[60] Here, I am relying on my own knowledge of the Stonewall riots, pieced together bit-by-bit over many years from casual conversations and experiences drawn from coming-of-age in queer spaces around the United States.

Seattle scene during my fieldwork, Stormé DeLarverie was a biracial Black/white butch lesbian and drag king from New Orleans, LA. Her assault and arrest at the Stonewall Inn sparked the 1969 riots: as she was clubbed in the face and hauled away by four undercover police officers for violating cross-dressing ordinances, she yelled to the crowd, "*why don't you guys do something?,"* which provided the crucial spark for organized resistance. Print sources have since begun to acknowledge DeLarverie's integral role in the Stonewall riots, including journalistic historical resources (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2018) and academic investigations into queer performance historiography (Schares 2020), showing how long it can take for a pivotal queer activist to actually come to be recognized within her own community. As persons marginalized around race, class, gender, sexuality, and body, drag artists become living archives out of necessity, serving as culture bearers for not only drag performance styles but lived queer histories.

Figure 17: Drag king and *Kings* MC Samuel L. JackYouSon (left) interacts with drag king Greyson Darius Bolt (right) on the basement stage of Kremwerk. Photograph by author, May 25, 2019.



On the 50th anniversary of DeLarverie's monumental act of resistance to state violence, Samuel L. "Stonewall" JackYouSon reiterated her importance to the *Kings* crowd at Kremwerk, following in the tradition of serving as a keeper of queer history. In a later interview, Samuel shared with me the importance of being a storyteller in addition to an entertainer, which reflects the time and care he puts into adopting the role of educator and culture-bearer at drag shows (interview, 09/15/2020). Many young LGBTQ+ people and cisheterosexual allies are unaware of Pride's significance as an ongoing battle for cultural continuity, thinking of Pride as an excuse to drink, dance, party, hook up, and uncritically embrace rainbow capitalism.[61] Samuel masterfully used the story of the Stonewall riots and its Black instigators to not only reassure us of our strength as a community in the face of pressure from alt-right terror, but also to point out the inseparability between Black liberation and queer liberation. Samuel's intersectional approach to Pride acknowledges the disproportionate oppression faced by Black queer and trans people in the United States at the hands of police, the justice system, and modern white supremacist movements like the Proud Boys and other alt-right groups.

Samuel's blending of political commentary and entertainment while hosting was echoed by many of the performers. The *Kings* Pride 2019 show was one of the most memorable shows I attended during fieldwork, with several artists doing political Pride-themed numbers. However, one standout was drag king Mercury Divine's first performance of the evening. Appearing onstage in all black with extensive rainbow chiffon accents, Mercury lip-synced to "Can't Hold Us" by the Seattle-based duo consisting of rapper Macklemore and producer Ryan Lewis. The chorus of the song features vocals by Seattle-based singer-songwriter Ray Dalton. Released on Macklemore and Lewis's debut album *The Heist* in 2011, "Can't Hold Us" became a sleeper hit, receiving a Grammy nomination for Best Music Video in 2014. The song foregrounds a gospel-inflected piano hook reinforced by Dalton's vocal styling, with rapped verses by Macklemore presenting a narrative of persistence in the face of adversity:

[verse 2 excerpt, Macklemore]
Nah I never ever did it for a throne
That validation comes from giving it back to the people

---

[61] The term "rainbow capitalism" refers to the phenomenon of large corporate entities using Pride as a marketing campaign during the month of June. While Pride-themed merchandise and advertisements communicate important messages of acceptance, diversity, and hope, a more holistic view takes into account the ways companies like Target, Starbucks, and Amazon make massive profits from their one month of performative allyship without offering proportional contributions to the LGBTQ+ community or acknowledgment of the complex history of Pride.

Nah sing a song and it goes like
Raise those hands, this is our party
We came here to live life like nobody was watching
I got my city right behind me, if I fall, they got me
Learn from that failure, gain humility, and then we keep marching I said:

[chorus, Ray Dalton]
Can we go back, this is the moment
Tonight is the night, we'll fight 'til it's over
So we put our hands up like the ceiling can't hold us
Like the ceiling can't hold us [x2]

In Mercury's performance, with the context of political turmoil affecting Seattle's queer community, the song became a Pride anthem of resistance that effectively captured the present moment while simultaneously hearkening back to the Stonewall riots, best encapsulated by the lyrics of Dalton's sung chorus: *can we go back, this is the moment/ tonight is the night, we'll fight 'til it's over*. Eschewing a victim-to-survivor narrative in favor of a more aggressive stance that answers Stormé DeLarverie's legendary call of "*why don't you guys do something?*", Mercury produced a hand-written sign reading "QUEERS BASH BACK" towards the end of the second rapped verse, eliciting cheers from the crowd. Mercury's blend of visual and sonic samples, amplified by the copresence of our queer ancestors, made me feel invulnerable and protective of the queer collective, undeterred by the cowardly threats issued by the Proud Boys.

"Let's Get In Formation": Queer History, Drag Performance, and Black Lives Matter

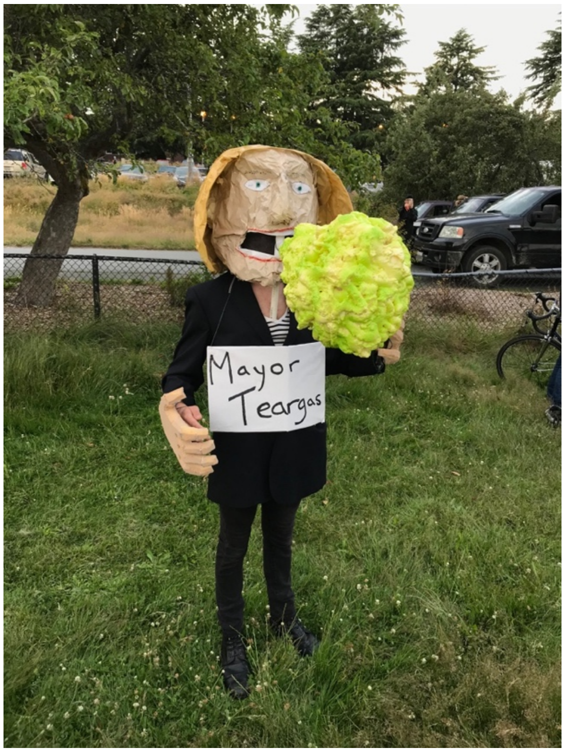
One year later, Pride looked markedly different, though drag performance again manifested as a blend of entertainment and an ethos of collective resistance. June 2020 was marked by a semi-total lockdown, with all bars, clubs, and other performance venues in Seattle shut down in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (with a few exceptions—see chapter 2). In light of the wave of Black Lives Matter demonstrations that erupted across the United States in the wake of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers on May 25, 2020, both local and national queer public figures (including many prominent Seattle drag artists) declared Pride 2020 as a dedication to Black Lives Matter, with particular emphasis on the ongoing epidemic of violence against Black trans women. In Seattle, most non-Black drag artists conducting regular virtual performances (see chapter 6) shifted their platforms to amplify the voices of Black, queer, and/or trans artists. The few instances of live drag performance in summer 2020 were in association with Black Lives Matter demonstrations.

On July 3, 2020—51 years to the day after the final evening of the Stonewall riots—I attended the "Rally for Black Lives: Fuck the Fourth" with friends. The event was sponsored by The Engage Team, a Seattle-based collective of community activists formed in June 2020 that organizes marches and events in the Seattle area. Many of the leadership and volunteers of The Engage Team are queer artists, and events such as the Rally for Black Lives featured live drag performances. While the event was scheduled for July 3 in part to disrupt the status quo of the nationalist Independence Day holiday, its primary purpose was to call attention to Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan's continued support of the Seattle Police Department despite their repeated use of extreme force against protestors in CHAZ/CHOP.[62] The "Fuck the Fourth" event was described online as "a peaceful rally meant to challenge the privileged residents of North Seattle and to hold their precinct and representatives accountable, featuring live performances and educational speeches” (The Engage Team 2020). Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan, or “Mayor Karen Teargas” (see Figure 18), became a target for criticism due to her callous indifference for the plight of protestors and activists injured and/or jailed by the Seattle Police Department’s egregious use of force and military-grade crowd-dispersal agents, such as rubber bullets and tear gas during 2020, as well as her tacit opposition to community demands to defund SPD and reinvest in minoritized communities in Seattle. Several high-profile organizations called for her resignation over her handling of the protests, including the Seattle Human Rights Commission and the Seattle LGBTQ Commission (Beekman 2020).

---

[62] CHAZ (Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone) and CHOP (Capitol Hill Occupied Protest) describe a handful of city blocks around the Pike/Pine corridor in Capitol Hill, centered around Cal Anderson Park. The so-called free zone was established on June 8, 2020 after police evacuated their East Precinct building after nearly two weeks of sustained protest, but was recaptured by police by July 1, 2020. The CHAZ/CHOP had no formal leadership, but operated around three central demands: the defunding of the Seattle Police Department; reinvestment into Seattle's Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities; and the promise that all captured protestors would be released without formal charges. It began as a peaceful artist-activist collective, but the gradual loss of focus on its original purpose led to its decline and ultimate dissolution.

Figure 18: A protestor dressed as “Mayor Karen Teargas” at the July 3 rally in Magnuson Park, Seattle, a critique of Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan. On June 8, 2020—three days after Durkan and Seattle police chief Carmen Best announced a ban on the use of chemical agents by police in Seattle—the Seattle Police Department deployed pepper spray and tear gas against peaceful protesters near the East Precinct in Capitol Hill. The density of residential apartments along the block resulted in some Seattleites getting teargassed in their own apartments (Graham 2020). Durkan’s betrayal earned her the pejorative “Karen” moniker, a popular 2020 slang term denoting an entitled white woman who wields her privilege at the expense of others. Photograph by author; subject deliberately left anonymous.



Observing social distancing and masking mandates, we first gathered at Magnuson Park in Northeast Seattle, where organizers distributed food and print resources about racial and economic justice to a crowd numbering around 500 people. Before we marched through the affluent Windermere neighborhood for a rally and teach-in on the street outside of Mayor Durkan's mansion,[63] three drag artists performed at Magnuson Park to energize the crowd and focus our collective energy on the task at hand. Like their queer forebears Marsha P. Johnson, Stormé DeLarverie, and Sylvia Rivera,[64] the Black femme and trans Seattle drag artists at Magnuson used their considerable skill as performers to demand change for marginalized people within their community. Dancing in grassy fields or on makeshift stages to the booming accompaniment of a DIY mobile sound system, Tinashea Monét, Kennedy Kardashian Monét, and D'Monica Leone performed before and after the march for the crowd. Broadcasting the urgency of direct financial support for Black queer and trans artists during a political uprising and global pandemic, organizers shouted the performers' CashApp and Venmo handles over a megaphone so we could tip them digitally. For their performances, the queens used popular songs with broad appeal and political overtones to complement the cause.

---

[63] The rally and teach-in lasted approximately an hour, featuring speakers among The Engage Team who educated the crowd on the relationship between police reform/abolition, the prison industrial complex, and the systemic subjugation of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people in the United States.

[64] Sylvia Rivera was a Latina trans woman, drag queen, and activist from New York City. While not present at the initial Stonewall riot alongside Stormé DeLarverie and Marsha P. Johnson, Rivera became a public face of the queer civil rights movement. She co-founded STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) with Johnson in 1970, which provided critical support to homeless trans youth, queer people of color, and sex workers in New York City marginalized both within mainstream society and the gay and lesbian community. Considered too radical by the assimilationist Gay Liberation Front in the 1970s, Rivera has inspired subsequent generations of radical queer and trans activists looking to push against the white, homonormative, and/or neoliberal orientations of modern LGBTQ+ social justice initiatives (Lewis 2017).

One such song used at the July 3 rally was "Formation" by Beyoncé, released in early 2016 as the lead single to her hit visual album *Lemonade.* The song's unapologetic embrace and celebration of southern Blackness and Black femme identity contributed to its adoption as an anthem of empowerment by Black, feminist, and queer positionalities, including the Black Lives Matter movement. Released in spring 2016, the music video for "Formation" reinforced the political messaging in the lyrics, utilizing imagery that commented upon police brutality against Black individuals, yet in a way that is positive and uplifting; Beyoncé also foregrounded the voices of Black queer bounce artists[65] in the music video, with spoken word provided by Big Freedia and Messy Mya.[66] Furthermore, Beyoncé's live performance of "Formation" at the Super Bowl 50 Halftime Show in February 2016 cemented its mainstream appeal and its association with Black Pride. Beyoncé and her performance team blended 1970s Black Panther iconography with feminist symbology on one of the largest popular stages in history, with the Super Bowl 50 Halftime Show boasting 115.5 million viewers (Pallotta and Stelter 2016).

Though pro-capitalist "Formation" lyrics such as "*you just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making"* and *"always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper* [money]" are incongruent with the more radical, anti-neoliberal elements of Black Lives Matter and queer organizations, the iconic song became a perfect rallying cry for Seattle drag artists at the "Fuck the Fourth" march on July 3:

---

[65] "Bounce," or "sissy bounce," is a style of hip hop music and dance originating within the Black queer community of New Orleans in the late 1980s. Bounce attained some mainstream appeal in the 1990s with breakthroughs by artists such as Big Freedia; it was appropriated more widely in the 2010s with the popularity of dance moves like twerking and adoption of the music style by megastars such as Beyoncé.

[66] Beyoncé's use of Messy Mya's voice posthumously was regarded as controversial, given that the New Orleans-based rapper was murdered six years prior to the release of "Formation." However, Messy Mya's aural resurrection on "Formation" through sample-based music production—"*bitch, I'm back by popular demand!"*—sparked newfound interest in his career and created conversation about violence perpetuated against poor Black queer individuals in New Orleans and elsewhere.

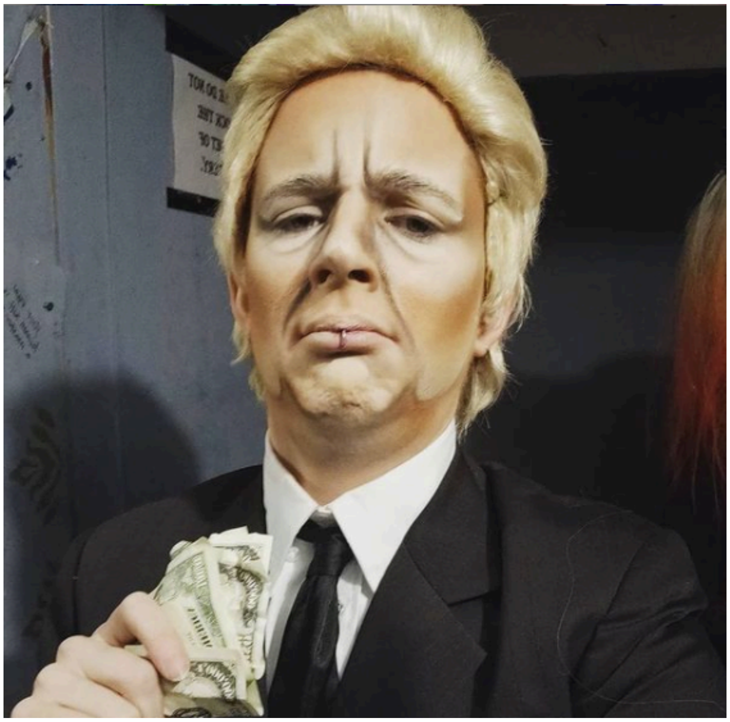
[chorus]
Okay, okay ladies, now let's get in formation ('cause I slay)
Okay ladies, now let's get in formation ('cause I slay)
Prove to me you got some coordination ('cause I slay)
Slay trick, or you get eliminated

To "slay" in this context is to do something with great skill, as the featured drag artists demonstrated with their energetic performances (it is not easy to dance in heels in grass!). The lyrics "*now let's get in formation*" reinforced the organizers' call for non-Black allies at the march to use their bodies as a protective barrier for the more vulnerable Black, femme, trans, poor, and Indigenous people for whom this rally was dedicated: using one's whiteness, maleness, cisness, age, family status, and perceived affluence to shield those whose bodies are routinely subjected to police abuse was a common strategy used at protests and marches throughout Seattle and elsewhere during the 2020 uprisings. The phrase "*let's get in formation*" also doubles aurally as *"let's get information,"* which was a critical part of The Engage Team's mission to educate participants on the intersections between state violence, neoliberal capitalism, homophobia, transphobia, and racism through their distribution of social justice literature and their teach-in at Durkan's mansion. D'Monica Leone shared her feelings of pride and self-empowerment in a later public Instagram post after having "danced with her ancestors" at Magnuson Park, evoking the drag artists at Stonewall who laid the groundwork for queer activism, carving out space for Black queer and trans people at great personal cost. D'Monica and the other artists and organizers carried the legacy of the Stonewall riots into 2020. Drag artists' performing bodies transcend space and time in these moments, when the queer community rallies to face its adversaries and protect its most vulnerable members.

“Impeach the President”: Balancing Entertainment with Political Critique in Drag Performance

During my fieldwork, politicized drag performance in Seattle was not limited to responding to local alt-right groups and furthering social justice initiatives. As the embodiment of the United States’ backwards tilt towards political conservativism, xenophobia, and white supremacist ideology, Donald Trump was a common target for parody, critique, and even impersonation (see Figure 19), with dozens of drag artists in Seattle incorporating Trump themes in their performances between 2019-2020. The highly publicized impeachment proceedings against Trump in autumn 2019 became the subject of elaborate, entertaining remixes by Seattle drag artists, who blended popular music with political referents to maximize crossover appeal while simultaneously providing focused political critiques.

Figure 19: Seattle drag king Mercury Divine dons a Trump visage before a greed-themed drag/burlesque performance at a *Seven Deadly Sins* show at The Rendezvous in October 2019. Photo from Mercury’s Instagram @mercurydivine, used with permission.



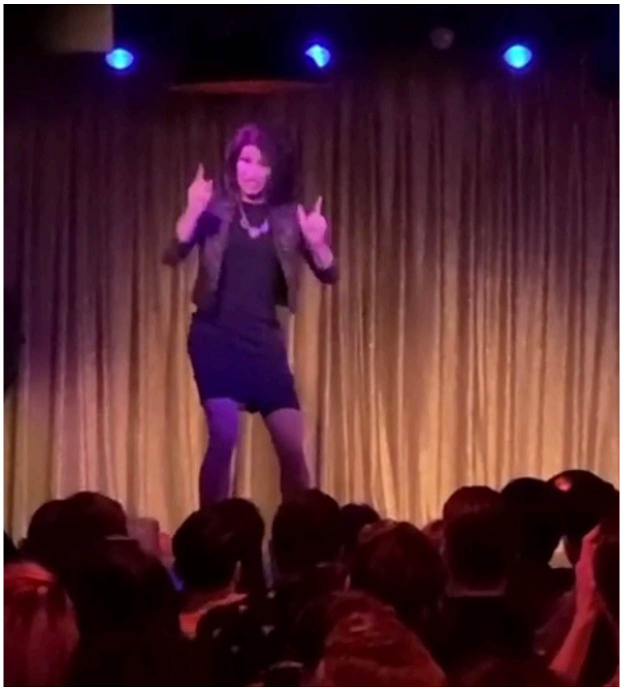
On September 26, 2019, alternative drag artist Miss Texas 1988 performed at *TUSH,* a pre-lockdown drag show recurring every last Thursday of the month at the Clock-Out Lounge in Beacon Hill, Seattle. Audiences at pre-lockdown *TUSH* tend to be more cisheterosexual in terms of gender/orientation, as the Beacon Hill neighborhood does not have a reputation for queer nightlife. Indeed, the Clock-Out Lounge is characterized as a live music venue rather than as a club, so *TUSH* is billed as a "Beacon Hill drag takeover." Consequently, drag artists tend to utilize more mainstream political and popular culture references to appeal to this audience.

As I witnessed in an Instagram video of the event,[67] Miss Texas 1988 appeared onstage dressed as U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (see Figure 20) and further evoked her likeness by adopting performative gestures associated with the Speaker such as the sideways "Pelosi clap." The Pelosi clap became a meme after Pelosi's apparent condescending gesture towards Donald Trump at the conclusion of his State of the Union address in January 2019. Other performative gestures adopted by Texas were less "Pelosi-like," but contributed to the overall entertainment value of the piece—such as miming playing the drums and gesticulating expressively while lip-syncing. In this sense, Miss Texas's performing body became an integral part of the mashup, and helped to sync-up Pelosi's likeness in the context of a drag show.

---

[67] While I was not present, I watched the video of Miss Texas's performance several times, posted publicly by @jetsetterkc on their Instagram account.

Figure 20: Miss Texas 1988 dressed as U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi at *TUSH* on September 26, 2019. Screenshot taken from @jetsetterkc's public Instagram video of the performance.



The sonic samples began with Nancy Pelosi's speech to the U.S. House of Representatives from September 24, 2019. After a whistleblower in the intelligence community alleged Trump threatened to withhold aid to Ukraine unless Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky agreed to open an investigation that would effectively weaken Trump's primary political rival, former Vice President Joe Biden, Pelosi announced an impeachment inquiry. In Pelosi's words: *"The actions of the Trump presidency have revealed the dishonorable fact of the President's betrayal of his oath of office, betrayal of our national security, and betrayal of the integrity of our elections. Therefore, today, I am announcing the House of Representatives is moving forward with an official impeachment inquiry"* (speaker.gov 2019). Immediately after Texas finished lip-syncing this clip, the beat to "Impeach the President" began to play. Originally by U.S. funk band the Honey Drippers, the oft-sampled "Impeach the President" was released in

1973 as a protest song against then-President Richard Nixon. In this way, Texas capitalized on the historical significance of the Honey Drippers to elevate their performance. Given the resignation of Nixon after the House Judiciary committee approved three articles of impeachment against him in 1974, the sample energized the crowd when positioned in a mashup critiquing Donald Trump:

[verse 1]
Some people say that he's guilty (that he's guilty)
Some people say, I don't know (I don't know)
Some people say, give him a chance (give him a chance)
Some people say, wait 'til he's convicted ('til he's convicted)

[chorus]
Impeach the President (x4)

While lip-syncing "Impeach the President," Miss Texas moved down from the stage to accept cash tips by audience members, still in character as Nancy Pelosi. As a saxophone sped through a riff at the conclusion of the first chorus, Texas returned to the stage and adopted a stern countenance as Donald Trump's infamous rebuttal played, defending his phone call to Zelensky: *"the call was perfect, it couldn't have been nicer, and even the Ukrainian President put out a statement that that was a perfect call, that there was no pressure…"* (whitehouse.gov 2019). After dramatically dismissing Trump's statement through gesture, Texas began lip-syncing the final sample of the megamix, "Bye Bye Bye" by N*SYNC (2000):

[pre-chorus]
I know that I can't take no more
It ain't no lie
I wanna see you out that door
Baby, bye bye bye
Bye bye

[chorus]
Don't wanna be a fool for you
Just another player in your game for two
You may hate me but it ain't no lie

Baby, bye bye bye
Bye bye
Don't really wanna make it tough
I just wanna tell you that I've had enough
It might sound crazy but it ain't no lie
Baby, bye bye bye

While the lyrics of "Bye Bye Bye" refer to the singer ending a relationship with a lover, Texas's use of the song as Pelosi's rebuttal to Trump transforms the meaning into a performative demand for his removal from office.

With Trump and Pelosi's sonic samples drawn from interviews released on Tuesday, September 24, Miss Texas had less than 48 hours to put the mashup and performance together. The modern political samples were fresh in everyone's minds, despite the blistering pace of the news cycle, with an average of at least one political scandal or crisis per week related to Donald Trump and his administration. Texas reported it was a "race against time" to craft the mix and memorize the lip-sync before the Thursday show (interview, 01/10/2020). Waiting any later to perform this particular mix ran the risk of its political timeliness losing effectiveness as the news cycle—and thus audiences' attention—moved on to the next issue.

A few months after this show, Miss Texas and I chatted about the political efficacy of drag performance, and Texas pointed out the importance of striking a balance between entertainment value and political critique—it was, in fact, advice they got from other performers when crafting performance narratives (interview, 01/10/2020). However, Texas views their drag as fundamentally political, regardless of whether or not national politics are sampled in performances. To paraphrase them, drag takes on identities that we are told we either should or shouldn't be, and claiming ownership over that performance transforms drag into a political act (ibid.). However, it is equally important to give audiences a "show," which Texas achieves by being timely with their critique and mixing in popular songs that simultaneously support the narrative of impeachment as well as invoke pleasure and nostalgia associated with the Honey Drippers and N*SYNC.

Two months after Miss Texas's performance at *TUSH*, drag queen Alessandra Hunt performed another political number on November 29, 2019—Black Friday in the United States. Held on the last Friday of the month at Kremwerk (pre-pandemic), the all-POC show *NOIR* celebrates and centers QTPOC (queer/trans people of color), one of only three recurring drag shows in Seattle to do so. *NOIR's* audience, like many drag shows at Kremwerk, tend to be much queerer than audiences at *TUSH,* given that Kremwerk is more explicitly defined as a venue for drag performance and also has a reputation for hosting alternative and experimental drag styles. Indeed, the show was promoted in the queer community as an alternative to the hyper-consumerism of Black Friday—and was also a birthday celebration for show co-host Londyn Bradshaw.

Dressed in a simple black shift dress and black boots—a relatively understated look for a queen otherwise known for fabulous, opulent looks—Alessandra Hunt began her second performance of the evening lip-syncing to Whitney Houston's recording of "The Star Spangled Banner." In January 1991, Houston performed the U.S. national anthem live in Tampa Bay, Florida at the 35th Super Bowl. Released the following month as a charity single by Houston in response to the war in the Persian Gulf, the recording was re-released by Arista Records in 2001 following the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York. Houston's performance and commercial releases are among the most popular recordings of the U.S. national anthem: her version was the first to reach the Top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100 charts and the first to be certified platinum in 2001 after its re-release (*Billboard* 2020). This sample thus invokes complex blend of historical indices for U.S. imperialism, nationalism, and patriotism in addition to Houston's legendary vocal prowess.

I was first guarded in my response to Alessandra's performance. I wondered why she chose to perform the national anthem at a QTPOC drag show, given the tension between communities of color and a militarized, white supremacist police state. My questions were answered as Alessandra reached the climax of the song: she slipped a black glove on her right hand and took a knee, and the audience cheered the powerful symbolism of the move. The glove, of course, evoked the renowned salute by U.S. Olympic athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, Mexico (Peterson 2009). Protesting the abuse of African American human rights in the United States, Smith and Carlos used the U.S. national anthem as the soundscape for their protest, weaving national identity, patriotism, Black Power, and activism together into a potent political statement. By taking a knee in her performance at Kremwerk, Alessandra blended this historic moment for Black Pride with a more recent demonstration, referencing Colin Kaepernick's protest of police brutality and solidarity with the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. Playing for the San Francisco 49ers during the 2016 preseason, Kaepernick chose to sit during the performance of the U.S. national anthem in protest. At subsequent games, Kaepernick took a knee during the anthem, prompting a renewal of polarized conversations about respectability, patriotism, and political activism.

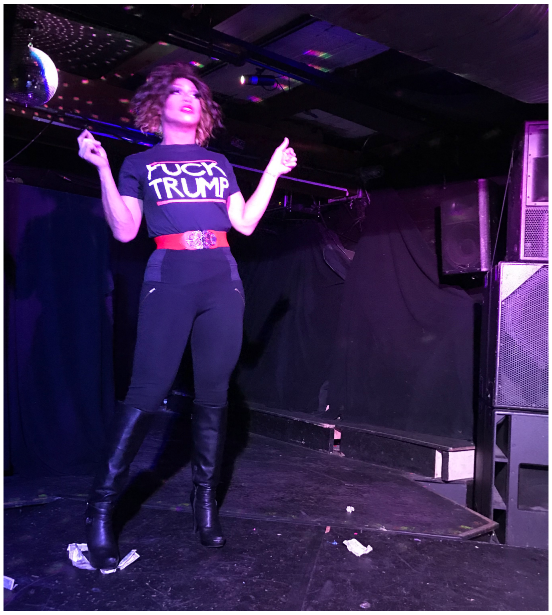
Referencing several historic moments simultaneously, Alessandra Hunt cleverly blended samples from the Black Power movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and one of the most iconic Black popular musicians of the last half-century to comment upon the U.S. national anthem at a QTPOC drag show. Her performance was not complete, however. After she lip-synced the final phrase of Houston's rendition of the anthem, she sprang back up as her music mashup shifted to the Thunderpuss dance mix of Whitney Houston's "It's Not Right but It's Okay." Released originally in 1998 as the lead single from Houston's fourth studio album, the song is told from the point of view of a scorned woman admonishing her unfaithful lover. Its empowering story of resistance, resilience, and overcoming mistreatment led to its adoption as a gay anthem among the LGBTQ+ community:

[chorus]
It's not right, but it's okay
I'm gonna make it anyway
Pack your bag up and leave
And don't you dare come running back to me

It's not right, but it's okay
I'm gonna make it anyway
Close the door behind you, leave your key
I'd rather be alone then unhappy

As Alessandra lip-synced to "It's Not Right but It's Okay," she removed her black shift to reveal a black T-shirt with "FUCK TRUMP" displayed prominently across the chest, adding yet another layer of political critique to her performance (see Figure 21). This show was just after the highly publicized House of Representatives Intelligence Committee hearings between November 13-21, 2019, in which a series of witnesses were questioned by members of Congress related to Donald Trump's alleged abuse of power, quid pro quo, bribery, and obstruction of justice. As such, Alessandra's use of "It's Not Right but It's Okay" took on new meanings in the mashup: rather than a woman telling her partner to "pack your bags and leave…close the door behind you, leave your key", the song became an American telling Trump to vacate his office as evidence of his criminal misconduct mounted.

Figure 21: Alessandra Hunt wearing a black outfit featuring a "FUCK TRUMP" T-shirt during her performance of "It's Not Right, But It's Okay" at *NOIR* on November 29, 2019. Photograph by author.



There is additional significance with the context of the Black Power and Black Lives Matter references and imagery, given Donald Trump's history of incendiary commentary on the topic. Never one to shy away from controversy, Trump made multiple statements about the NFL protests to rile up his base during his campaign for and tenure as President. In August 2016, Trump suggested Colin Kaepernick leave the United States after Kaepernick began sitting out during the national anthem (Bixby 2016); at another rally the following year, Trump stated that NFL owners should "get that son of a bitch off the field" after San Francisco 49ers player Eric Reid's protest in solidarity with Kaepernick (NBC Sports 2017). By embodying a powerful history of Black resistance to white supremacy and then immediately following into a sonic and visual critique of Trump and a performative demand for his removal, Alessandra Hunt offered a formidable rebuttal to Trump's targeted harassment of Kaepernick and other Black Lives Matter activists.

Both these examples show the powerful impact of remix in creating performances that are entertaining, moving, and critical of current political discourse. Drag artists deftly use their own bodies to incorporate visual and performative samples into their mashups, embodying the process of remix. Popular songs by N*SYNC and Whitney Houston take on potent new meanings when mashed-up alongside visual and sonic likenesses of contemporary political figures. These mashups speak to their adaptability during a time period in which local drag in Seattle is increasingly patronized by cisheterosexual audiences. Alternative drag artists like Miss Texas and Alessandra masterfully balance entertainment value with political critique, revealing the versatility of the art form. They also demonstrate their adeptness at addressing current events while acknowledging significant historical precedents to their critiques. While I found these performances to be the most impactful and entertaining critiques of the Trump administration during 2019, mainstream drag culture also reflected this phenomenon, though its efficacy was disputed by local drag artists.

Reactions to the Portrayal of Trump in *RuPaul's Drag Race*

In a discussion of critiques of Donald Trump on stages throughout Seattle, it is important to mention the critiques of Trump on the largest drag stage of all—the televised reality competition *RuPaul's Drag Race.* Celebrity drag queen RuPaul is no stranger to political commentary, and the content of *RuPaul's Drag Race* reflected a measured flow of performative disdain for Trump since 2017. As part of my fieldwork, I regularly attended *RuPaul's Drag Race* watch parties in the Seattle. Watch parties, held in bars and clubs, are hosted by local drag artists who provide live commentary about the episode to participants, transforming the consumption of a television show into a participatory community event. My preferred watch party in 2019 was *ReBel's Drag Race,* hosted by drag king Mercury Divine.

Aired on March 21, 2019, the fourth episode of the eleventh season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* featured a performance by the cast in *Trump: The Rusical.* The term "rusical," a portmanteau of "RuPaul" and "musical,"[68] describes a musical challenge that has recurred in every season of *Drag Race* and *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* since *Shade: The Rusical* debuted on *Drag Race* season 6 in 2015. A 10-minute parody of *Grease* (1971), *Trump: The Rusical* centered on high-profile women in the Trump administration, including Senior Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway, White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, First Lady Melania Trump, daughter and advisor Ivanka Trump, and former political aide Omarosa Manigault Newman. Also featured were detractors of Trump, including former Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, adult film actress Stormy Daniels, and media mogul Oprah Winfrey. The women were all played by contestants, while Trump himself was portrayed by former *Drag Race* and *All Stars* contestant Ginger Minj.

The rusical offered little in terms of concrete political critique, relying instead on physical parody, slapstick comedy, and lewd jokes about Trump's history of alleged sexual misconduct. The plot traces the development of Trump's allies into his opponents, who unite with Clinton, Winfrey, and Daniels after ditching Trump for his misogynistic behavior. Acknowledging the importance of recent history of resistance to Trump, the second "act" referenced the Women's March, first held in 2017 in protest of Trump's inauguration; the #MeToo movement, amplified in 2017 by actress Alyssa Milano in response to film executive Harvey Weinstein's serial abuse of women; and political calls for more women to run for office in the United States in the 2018 and 2020 elections. Given the show's refusal to allow AFAB[69] contestants and "post-transition" trans women to compete on the show,[70] this pro-women message rang hollow at the watch party. Regarding the placement of a Trump parody alongside feminist messaging, drag king host Mercury Divine commented after the rusical, "when you do a parody musical, this reads as parody too," pointing out how the message gets lost or can easily be misconstrued, especially alongside the show's problematic casting rules (03/21/2019). In this sense, the remix process behind *Trump: The Rusical* failed to clearly express its feminist message because the significance of one sample inflects the interpretation of the overall mashup.

---

[68] RuPaul's love of puns, as well as his relentless self-branding, are reflected in the hyper-saturation of words and phrases like "rusical," "rupocalypse," "no rupologies," "rudemption," and others throughout the show and its related media.

Considering the construction of the whole episode further supports this argument. As the first openly Muslim contestant to compete on *RuPaul's Drag Race,* Mercedes Iman Diamond from Minneapolis, MN opened up to the other contestants about the difficulties she faces as a Muslim in the United States while the queens were being filmed preparing for the rusical. Unbeknownst to her, she was placed on the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation "No Fly List" on the sole basis for her Muslim-sounding legal name, Ali Mohammed. After she suffered a stroke brought on by the physical demands of driving extreme distances for performance gigs, Mercedes later changed her name to Curran in an effort to lessen the Islamophobia directed against her (*Drag Race* season 11, episode 4). Mercedes was sent home at the end of the episode after failing to impress the judges with her portrayal of Ivanka Trump in *Trump: The Rusical.* After Mercedes's elimination, Mercury quipped, "how fucked up is it that the Muslim girl goes home on the Trump episode?" (03/21/2019), revealing how the overall watch experience of the episode inflects the reception of a Trump-themed rusical. The show's own historic milestone of admitting an openly Muslim queen was thus turned against itself. The consensus among the *ReBel's Drag Race* attendees that evening was that this episode as one of the worst of a particularly weak season.

---

[69] AFAB stands for "assigned female at birth," a way to acknowledge certain shared experiences to people assigned as female by medical professionals, including cis women, trans men, some intersex people, and some non-binary people. The term avoids essentialist terms like "biological female" and calls attention to the social construction of sex/gender assignment.

[70] Despite being lauded for its progressive approach to queer representation, the exclusionary casting practices of *RuPaul's Drag Race* erase not only drag kings, but a long history of cis women, trans women, trans men, intersex people, and AFAB non-binary drag queens within drag culture. However, in December 2020, the cast announcement for *Drag Race* season 13 revealed the inclusion of a trans man contestant, Gottmik, the first AFAB contestant ever cast on the show.

With that said, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has made multiple, highly visible political statements over the last four years. Appearances by high-profile Democrats such as then-House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (*RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars 3* episode 7, 2017) and Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (*Drag Race* season 12 episode 7, 2020) bring the massive audiences of *Drag Race* more familiarity with these prominent women. Recent seasons of the show stress the importance of voting, which reinforces its intent to make concrete political change through encouraging participation in the electoral system—a strategy that may or may not have had an impact in Donald Trump's monumental loss to President Joe Biden in November 2020. A global phenomenon of mainstream drag culture, the substantive reach of *RuPaul's Drag Race* somewhat counterbalances the clumsy performativity of its politics—though my experiences in the Seattle scene indicate that local drag artists can be counted on for more direct, personal, creative, and radical approaches to political performance.

Conclusion

With the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, the year 2019 was a milestone for LGBTQ+ rights; the year 2020 was a milestone for racial justice initiatives after the massive Black Lives Matter demonstrations that summer. As community leaders and queer culture-bearers, drag artists in Seattle were at the forefront of celebrations and protests alike. By blending history, popular music, and contemporary political references in the creation of mashups that balanced entertainment value with political critique, drag artists utilized performance to resist terror campaigns by alt-right extremists in the Seattle area, call out racist neoliberal policy in the city of Seattle, and critique Donald Trump. These practices show how drag artists deftly navigate ever-shifting political landscapes, reflecting their adaptability as content creators. The next chapter will show how Seattle drag artists put these skills to the test during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 in light of the mass closure of queer public spaces featuring live drag performance to curb the spread of COVID-19. By modifying their performance styles, Seattle drag artists embraced a new era of virtual drag performance.

Chapter 6

"We do what we can with what we have": Digital Drag During the COVID-19 Pandemic

With the abrupt enactment of lockdowns throughout the United States in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtually all live public events were cancelled to curb the spread of the virus beginning in spring 2020. In Seattle's queer community, drag performance was suspended indefinitely beginning March 15, 2020 after Washington state Governor Jay Inslee signed an emergency declaration closing all bars and restaurants and banning gatherings of 50 or more in an effort to reduce transmission rates of the virus (Gilbert, Vinh, & Paul 2020). On March 23, Governor Inslee issued a two-week stay-at-home order, banning all public and private social, spiritual, and recreational gatherings and urging residents to stay home unless engaging in activities deemed essential (La Corte 2020). Given that most drag performance occurs at venues classified as bars or restaurants, and are not deemed "essential" activities in the eyes of the state, live public drag performance was effectively shut down. While these initial lockdowns were deemed temporary—and restrictions ebbed and flowed with the rates of COVID-19 cases in Washington state—they remained largely in effect through the rest of 2020 (and are still in place as of this writing).

After the initial sense of shock and devastation at this abrupt loss of their gigs—expressed through social media accounts like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—drag artists in localities with strict lockdowns, including Seattle, responded by shifting most of their activities online.[71] Initially, the format of performances remained similar to in-person drag shows, with a host using a social media account to feature a series of drag artists performing live to single tracks or remixed mashups in their homes. However, as the lockdown wore on, drag artists became increasingly creative, pushing digital drag to new heights of sophistication. Most began producing short music videos, prerecording three- to five-minute performance videos that they then would submit to a show host or venue. The host or venue would then stream the series of videos at the performance time using Zoom or Twitch.

---

[71] There were a few instances of live drag performance during the lockdown in Seattle, such as at Black Lives Matter protests and demonstrations in the city and at venues with extremely limited capacity to meet state social distancing mandates (see chapter 5). However, the lack of a federal lockdown mandate in the United States allowed some drag scenes to continue live shows with varying degrees of precautionary modifications in other parts of the country—my friends Lauren and Ricky were able to attend a live show indoors in Knoxville, Tennessee in November 2020

With this new format came a wealth of possibilities. Investing in green screens, props, and video editing software, some drag artists began producing incredibly complex and artistic works, blending drag with graphic design and digital video production to create virtual performance art. The online performance format began to break down the locality of drag scenes, as artists from anywhere in the world could be featured in a given show and audiences could now easily gain access to local drag scenes in faraway places. Drag artists also began collaborating on longer-form works, turning what would have been hour-long shows pre-lockdown into feature film-length works. Some show producers used platforms like Vimeo and Zoom to create paywalls to access their content while others continued using platforms like Instagram and Twitch to distribute their work for free. In most cases, artists and show producers included performers' Cashapp, Venmo, and/or PayPal handles to enable viewers to send virtual tips to performers.

The new landscape for drag brought many opportunities, but with them came challenges. Without technological skill, long-time live performers floundered to keep up with the abrupt shift

---

because of the state's relatively lax approach to COVID-19-related restrictions. Lauren sent me Snapchat videos of the show, and I noticed the performers maintained six feet of distance from audience members, who were separated from the stage by velvet ropes. Audience members also appeared to be masked unless actively sipping a drink.

to digital content production. Complications around using and remixing copyrighted audio materials from popular music and other sonic sources became much more pronounced as ephemeral live performance gave way to the production and dissemination of more permanent digital content. Recurring shows in Seattle like *Kings*, *NOIR, Lashes, Heels,* and more were disrupted, with some of them offering shows more sporadically and others going on an indefinite hiatus. Venues suffered economically from the lack of patronage, even when hosting for-pay digital shows through their social media accounts. Most notably, the loss of a sense of community brought on through regular visits to queer public spaces weighed heavily on many members of the queer community, including myself. While I patronized digital shows sporadically through 2020, I gradually drifted away from keeping up with the scene to focus on the isolating task of writing this dissertation.

Despite the challenges brought to the Seattle drag scene by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent ongoing lockdown, drag artists demonstrated their flexibility and ingenuity in producing and distributing their work to broader audiences in digital forms. In this chapter, I will show how Seattle drag artists offset the loss of queer public space and sustained their communities by using social media platforms, video recording and editing software, and their own boundless creativity to create digital content for audiences during the 2020 lockdowns. I read this process of cultural production as an incarnation of José Esteban Muñoz's concept of queer utopianism (2009).

In language that sounds quite prescient during an era of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, Muñoz writes:

> "Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there.* Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must

> never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" (Muñoz 2009: 1).

Drawing on hope as a methodology, Muñoz analyzes queer artistic production in the United States in the latter half of the 20th century as "the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (ibid.). At a time in which queer theory was mired in nihilism and mainstream LGBTQ+ politics were consumed by a pragmatic assimilationist agenda (Muñoz 2009), Muñoz's imaginative move to radically re-embrace the concept of utopia through analysis of queer artistic production profoundly reshaped the field of queer studies. This chapter is meant to capture the spirit of a unique, ongoing moment in history in which drag artists in Seattle deploy intangible concepts like hope, nostalgia, and longing as samples in their remixed mashups to create Muñozian visions of a queer future. These works of art helped both the artists and their audiences combat a growing sense of hopelessness in the face of extreme political polarization and the crushing despair of a global pandemic. While I hope these observations will eventually prove foundational to understanding the way performance communities responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, they also highlight the beauty, adaptability, and tenacity of the queer imagination in the face of adversity.

The Lockdown Begins: Drag Shows via Instagram Live

In the earliest stages of the Washington state lockdown in March and April 2020, Seattle drag shows first moved to Instagram Live. Most performers and audience members in the Seattle drag community were already active on Instagram, using the social media site to post photos, short videos, promotional materials for live shows, and network with one another. Instagram served as a temporary hub for digital drag performance until the app's shortcomings led drag artists and their audiences to seek more reliable and flexible platforms.

Instagram first launched in 2010 as a simple photo-sharing app for iPhone, allowing its users to apply filters to their photos, follow other accounts, and interact with other users' photos through "likes" and comments. The app proved both popular and lucrative, quickly expanding to operating systems beyond iPhone and amassing 1 million users by the end of its second month of activity (Desreumeaux 2014); in 2012, Instagram was purchased by rival social media platform Facebook for $1 billion (Facebook 2012). In November 2016, in response to the popularity of competing smartphone-based apps like SnapChat and Periscope, Instagram launched its Instagram Live feature, allowing users to broadcast video directly to their followers in real-time—though Live videos are not permanent, i.e., they are only accessible while the user is streaming as with a live event (Constine 2016). Prospective viewers can access a Live video by tapping the account icon belonging to the user streaming live; once there, viewers can see through the user's phone camera, hear audio in real-time, and comment or react by utilizing a rolling thread along with other viewers. With its direct and near-instantaneous sharing capability, Instagram Live—along with similar streaming technology on other social media apps—revolutionized communications for celebrities, artists, politicians, journalists, and activists.

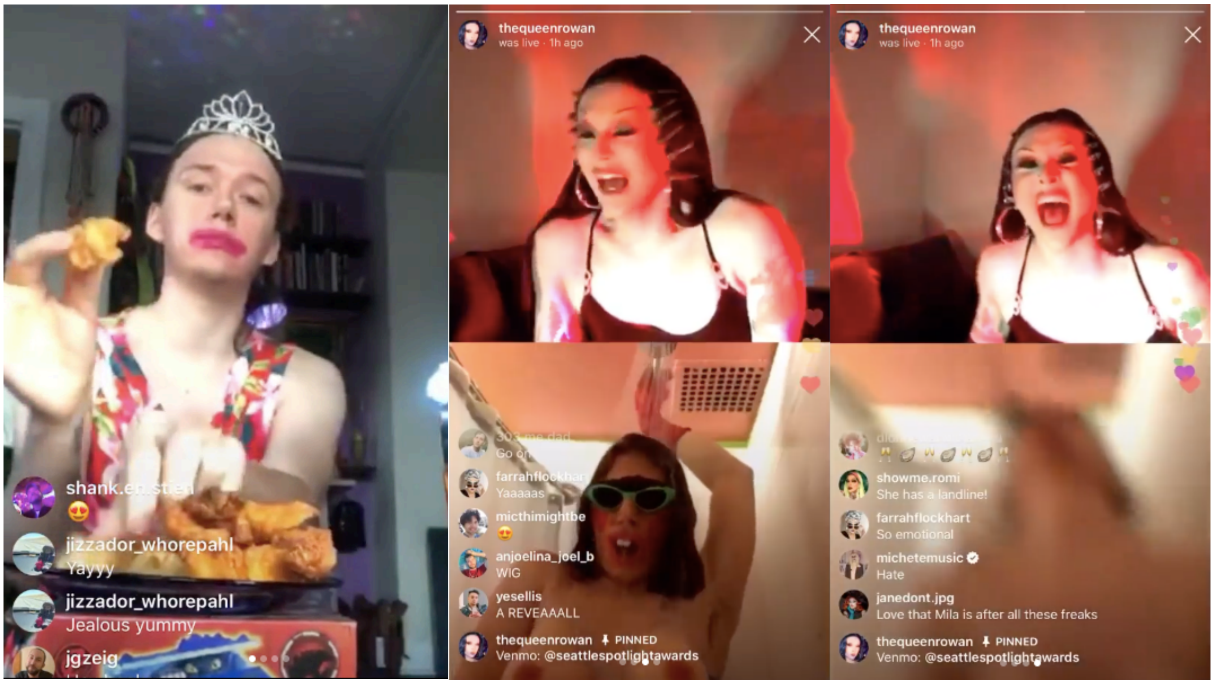
While I rarely utilized the Instagram Live feature prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the app itself proved immensely useful for my fieldwork. Besides sharing photos and short videos with friends and artists in the Seattle drag community, I used Instagram frequently to network with drag artists, find shows around the city to attend (both live and digital), and help me to recall dates, locations, and other data about drag events much later when making sense of my field notes. Drag artists occasionally used the Live feature to communicate directly with their followers, typically hosting Q&A sessions while doing their makeup before a show or directly after a show. Their familiarity with Instagram coupled with their existing connections with friends and fans undoubtedly led Seattle drag artists to pivot to Live after live shows were effectively banned by the state.

In mid-April 2020, Seattle drag queen Rowan Ruthless hosted her monthly drag show *Cry Baby*,[72] billed as "a show for emotional queens," typically held live at the queer club Kremwerk near Seattle's downtown business district. With Kremwerk's temporary closure, Rowan streamed the show via Instagram Live. *Cry Baby* cast member and alternative drag artist Uh Oh, the alter-ego of Seattle Stranger editor/correspondent Chase Burns, made her appearance at the show and later posted video clips to her main page (see Figure 22). Uh Oh's brand of drag is thoroughly experimental—she utilizes nontraditional makeup and body construction techniques, with her signature look featuring over-drawn pink lips, cartoonish red cheeks, buck teeth, and a heavy black unibrow artfully smeared across her face. Sometimes, she dons painted masks instead of makeup, and her outfits are a bizarre patchwork of brightly-colored garments, cheap accessories, flimsy plastic breasts, and tangled wigs. As an alternative drag artist, Uh Oh's look and performance queers normative conventions of drag artistry codified by mainstream drag culture. Her brazen embrace of chaos offers an imaginative model of drag performance that is unconstrained by cisheteronormative ideals of beauty, body, gender, and behavior, moving the art of drag closer to a queer utopian vision of free expression.

---

[72] Like the Seattle drag show *Heels* at the Cha Cha Lounge, the show title of *Cry Baby* is derived from one of queer filmmaker John Waters' cult classic films, *Cry-Baby* (1990).

Figure 22: Three screenshots of Uh Oh, posted on @chaseburnsy's Instagram page April 15, 2020. The leftmost screenshot features Uh Oh before the show, applying her signature makeup while listening to music, eating fried chicken, and speaking to her viewers, whose text comments roll upwards in a steady stream. The middle and rightmost screenshot are from later that evening during Uh Oh's Live performance of "Better Off Alone." *Cry Baby* show host Rowan Ruthless appears at the top of the screen, laughing at Uh Oh's antics. Photographs used with permission.



shank.en.stien
😍
jizzador_whorepahl
Yayyy
jizzador_whorepahl
Jealous yummy
jgzeig

thequeenrowan
was live · 1h ago
Go on
farrahflockhart
Yaaaaas
micthimightbe
😍
anjoelina_joel_b
WIG
yesellis
A REVEAAALL
thequeenrowan PINNED
Venmo: @seattlespotlightawards

thequeenrowan
was live · 1h ago
showme.romi
She has a landline!
farrahflockhart
So emotional
michetemusic
Hate
janedont.jpg
Love that Mila is after all these freaks
thequeenrowan PINNED
Venmo: @seattlespotlightawards

Given that Instagram Live videos were not automatically archived by the site in April 2020, I would have missed this performance entirely if Uh Oh had not uploaded the videos to her main Instagram feed. I watched these clips numerous times for their queer brilliance and hilarity. Uh Oh began her day by applying her signature makeup via Live through her own Instagram account, listening to an eclectic music playlist while interacting with viewers, whose comments rolled upwards in a steady stream on the Live video. The digital edition of *Cry Baby* began later that evening at 8:00PM. Show host Rowan Ruthless began streaming a Live video from her Instagram account, inviting each successive performer as a co-host for the Live video, which enabled the performers to share the screen during their number—it would then appear as a split screen, with Rowan at the top and the current performer on the bottom (see Figure 22 above).

Viewers tuned in through Rowan's Instagram account and could interact with Rowan, the performers, and each other by posting text or reactions into a rolling comment thread. Rowan also pinned a comment at the base of the comment thread—to pin a comment means it will not roll upwards and disappear with the flow of commentary from viewers—which kept each performer's Cashapp or Venmo information on the main screen to enable viewers to tip the performers digitally.

Uh Oh performed to the 1999 Eurodance hit "Better Off Alone," produced by the Netherlands-based trance music project Alice Deejay, which became a blueprint for the sound and texture of commercial electronic dance music of the 2000s (*VIBE* 2013). With a driving dance beat, infectious melodic hook, and repetitive, minimal lyrics—*"do you think you're better off alone? / ooh, talk to me"*—the song became a dance club staple in the following decade; its hook also was widely sampled by other popular music artists. Appearing nude from the torso up in her bathroom shower, Uh Oh stood in front of the camera wearing her signature graphic makeup, buck teeth, green cat-eye sunglasses, and plastic breasts. Swaying to the music, Uh Oh turned on the water and used a hand-held wand to shower herself, sensuously parting her over-drawn lips to reveal her buck teeth in apparent ecstasy. Black paint from her unibrow began melting down her face and neck, and the hook to "Better Off Alone" looped as Uh Oh lip-synced seductively: "*do you think you're better off alone?*" Comments and reactions from viewers cascaded up the screen as Rowan began to break up laughing at the scene. The music built up to yet another throbbing chorus, to which Uh Oh delivered the final blow to Rowan's composure. Now with sopping hair from using the shower wand, Uh Oh rhythmically flipped her long hair around, spraying water everywhere and spattering the camera lens. The steady groove of "Better Off Alone" was now accentuated with a wet *thwock thwock thwock* of Uh Oh's hair slapping against the walls of the shower. Both Rowan and the viewers in the comments dissolved into laughter.

While profoundly silly, this brilliant performance managed to queerly reflect both the absurdity and necessity of the lockdown. The song title and lyrics to “Better Off Alone” communicate the importance of social distancing and staying home to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus, while the dance beat and queer antics of Uh Oh simultaneously index past, present, and future. Viewers—including myself—could easily recall better times together on dance floors of the past thanks to the ubiquity of “Better Off Alone” in queer club soundscapes of the 2000s and 2010s. This activation of nostalgia was paralleled by a nod to the isolation of the present. Singing, lip-syncing, and dancing in a shower is strongly relatable, and Uh Oh’s performance served as a reminder of the potential for queer joy and freedom even in the most mundane setting. By mid-April, most of us were feeling the heavy weight of social isolation, cut off from the release of queer public spaces and live drag performance. Uh Oh’s performance—and other digital drag performances—thus promise glimpses of a Muñozian utopic queer future post-lockdown when drag artists and their audiences can again gather together in real-time.

While Instagram Live served as a hub for Seattle drag performance for at least a month, its limitations eventually led to its abandonment in favor of other platforms. The drawbacks of Instagram Live include the inability to insert prerecorded performance videos on the stream, the awkward condensed layout that superimposes viewer comments over the video, the two-account limit for host sharing, relatively poor video and audio quality, an hour-long limit on Live streams,[73] and Instagram’s own restrictions against copyrighted audio materials. I encountered the latter issue directly on April 3, 2020 while watching an Instagram Live stream by a Seattle-based drag artist who hosted a recurring show on Fridays in April. The artist[74] lip-synced, sang, and danced for viewers from their room to a range of pop-punk, metal, and musical theater songs in a free-form performance. The Live stream on April 3 was interrupted by Instagram, which temporarily shut down the artist's ability to use Live because they were streaming copyrighted music: in this case, it was a track from Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* that raised the flag. Instagram uses automated software that detects copyrighted works to uphold agreements with rights holders, limiting viewership of posts and cutting short Live streams that include significant portions of copyrighted music (Instagram 2020).

---

[73] In October 2020, Instagram increased the time limit for Live videos from 60 minutes to four hours (Perez 2020).

After their Live stream was cut short, the drag artist simply switched to their non-drag Instagram account and continued the show, though they lost some viewers and momentum because of the interruption. Besides switching accounts to avoid censorship, other drag artists circumvented copyright identification software on Instagram through digital alteration, including pitch-shifting, speeding up or slowing down the tempo, or remixing tracks in such a way that music excerpts are not long enough to be flagged. In this sense, remix strategies became emblematic of resistance to tech companies' use of automated software to quash artists' fair use of copyrighted audio sources,[75] allowing drag artists to keep the party going despite the pandemic and its associated lockdowns. However, the effort it took to circumvent the drawbacks of Instagram Live led Seattle drag artists—and drag artists from around the world—to other platforms by the end of spring.

---

[74] I am choosing not to identify this person to protect their identity since their performance involved potential copyright infringement.

[75] See chapter 4 for a discussion of copyright and fair use in the context of drag performance.

From Live Streams to Digital Content Production: Drag Artistry on Twitch and Plexstorm

In 2020, drag artists were quick to take advantage of the possibilities of virtual performance, shifting the art of drag from a stage format to digital content production. Live streams of performers doing single-take video shots in their homes—often with tinny audio, glitchy visuals, and awkward angles—could not compete with the polished, edited short-form videos of pioneering drag artists, and eventually formats like Instagram Live were abandoned. Drag artists turned to live streaming platforms such as Twitch and Plexstorm, producing imaginative short-form videos optimized for digital streaming. As a result, Seattle drag artists shifted from stage performers to content creators, and audiences for drag expanded as digital show format broke down the geographical barriers of local scenes. Drag artists' ability to quickly adapt to new technologies in the realization of imaginative new modes of queer performance positioned them at the forefront of queer futurity, empowering themselves and their communities as resilient in the face of extreme adversity.

Drag culture had been part of film history well before the COVID-19 pandemic. The radically queer and unapologetically trashy low-budget films of queer director John Waters of the 1970s and 1980s, starring legendary drag queen Divine, included the cult classics *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974), and *Hairspray* (1988). With all considered part of queer filmic canon, the latter film attained mainstream recognition.[76] Furthermore, drag on film saturated mainstream culture in the 1990s after RuPaul's crossover success in 1992 prompted the film industry to release a slew of drag-related feature films, including Australia's *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) and the United States' *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *To Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995), and *The Birdcage* (1996). While progressive in some ways given the compassionate portrayal of drag artists and LGBT lifestyles, these mainstream films failed to center queer performers, with nearly all the leading roles held by cisheterosexual men (Davenport 2017). The popularity of the television reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present) cemented drag's association with video by the 2010s. Furthermore, some pre-lockdown drag artists—including Seattle's Londyn Bradshaw—had extensive followings on short-form video apps like TikTok, creating and distributing viral videos to queer and mainstream audiences alike. The movement from stage performance to digital videos by drag artists during the COVID-19 pandemic thus had over a half-century of precedent in film, television, and social media. Drag artists and their audiences enthusiastically took to the new medium.

---

[76] Divine's portrayal of Edna Turnblad in John Waters' *Hairspray* established the precedent of the role forever being played by a person in matronly drag in subsequent stage and film productions. Furthermore, even Disney was enchanted by Divine's fabulous, larger-than-life presence, patterning the villainous sea witch Ursula in the animated film *The Little Mermaid* (1989) after her, unwittingly introducing generations of children—including myself—to a radically subversive queer icon.

My first foray into digital drag beyond Instagram Live was Twitch. Launched by live stream platform Justin.tv in 2011, Twitch began as an e-sports venture, featuring live streams of both professional and amateur video gaming conventions, tournaments, and matches (Wilhelm 2011). Users can also stream themselves playing video games or tune into other users' streams. With over 55 million users by August 2014, the popularity of Twitch led to its acquisition by tech giant Amazon that year for $970 million in a bid to compete with the ubiquity of streaming services like Netflix and Google-owned YouTube (MacMillan & Bensinger 2014). Indeed, Google sought to counter Amazon's dominance of the e-sports market via Twitch by adding gaming live streaming to YouTube in 2015, which prompted Twitch to partner with multimedia software giant Adobe and introduce art-related live streams with its "Creative" category later that year (Machkovech 2015). While similar to Instagram Live in its commitment to honor agreements with copyright holders of audio content, Twitch differs from Instagram in its featured service called Soundtrack, which is a curated library of fully-licensed music for free use in live streams on the site; its Music Guidelines expressly forbid streaming copyrighted material but the webpage also acknowledges the potential for fair use applications (Twitch n.d.). The digital stage was thus set for drag artists' adoption of Twitch's streaming services when lockdowns prohibited stage performance and Instagram Live stifled performance livestreams.

By 2020, drag had been industrialized vis-a-vis mainstream drag culture long enough for a pronounced separation among drag artists, with high-profile, well-paid *RuPaul's Drag Race* alumni at one extreme and struggling local artists—for whom drag is not a full-time job, or even profitable—at the other. While this "local drag artist/*Drag Race* queen" binary is certainly not absolute, several drag artists in the Seattle community referenced it between 2019-2020 in casual conversations and interviews, indicating the unevenness of opportunity for drag artists despite a growing demand for the art form by mainstream audiences. However, the lockdowns of late winter 2020 acted as a leveling force, resulting in local artists and *Drag Race* icons alike losing virtually all of their gig-based income. As the winner of the second season of the televised alternative drag competition *Dragula: The Search for the World's Next Drag Supermonster,* Atlanta-based drag queen Biqtch Puddin' (first name pronounced like "bitch") used her Twitch platform to bring much-needed gigs back to drag artists in crisis. Speaking to the loss of financial opportunities to *Vice* columnist Gina Tonic in April, Biqtch shared, "it wasn't just the local CVQ [queen] hosting the trivia night down the street either. It was also *Dragula* contestants, it was *RuPaul* contestants, it was everybody" (Tonic 2020). On April 3, 2020, Biqtch Puddin's *Digital Drag Show* became the first regular live stream virtual drag show through Twitch, featuring diverse drag artists with varying levels of mainstream exposure from around the world. As a reasonably well-known drag artist (within drag scenes, at least) with knowledge and experience of Twitch's platform thanks to her e-gaming experience, Biqtch was uniquely positioned to bring together alternative drag artists, drag kings, drag queens, *Drag Race* and *Dragula* stars, and other queer performance artists together in one weekly show. After its initial success in early April 2020, *Digital Drag* continues to air at 10PM EST every Friday, with a $10 suggested donation via Venmo or Cashapp to support the artists. Biqtch and her co-producers also included the Venmo and/or Cashapp handles for individual performers during the show, enabling viewers to pay the artists directly.

I attended Biqtch's second *Digital Drag Show* on April 10, 2020, after Seattle drag king Mercury Divine shared a promotional poster for the show on their Instagram account after securing a cast spot. Watching the show on my laptop alone in my room, I was thoroughly impressed with the diversity of artists and the sophistication of their offerings. Some artists chose to do live performances, but most opted to send in pre-recorded videos to Biqtch and her production team, who then aired them on the live stream. Compared to the grainy single-takes of Instagram live, the pre-recorded videos in *Digital Drag* were revolutionary: drag artists could now add special effects, green-screen backdrops, video and audio manipulation, "instant" costume and makeup changes, and even location switches (with appropriate distancing). In accordance with COVID-19 restrictions—which can vary broadly in a drag show incorporating submissions from drag artists from all over the world—most digital drag shows included "ground rules" for prerecorded and live submissions, prohibiting content that featured gatherings of five or more, lack of social distancing, and use of public spaces.

The loss of live public space was thus offset by queer artists' imaginative embrace of the boundless potential of digital performance. The future of drag became a virtual network of diverse artists spanning the globe. In Seattle, drag artists and queer venues took to Twitch with a variety of performance strategies. With the continuation of COVID-19-related lockdowns into Pride month 2020, Seattle venues like R Place and Kremwerk created Twitch accounts to begin streaming virtual drag shows, hosting digital editions of popular local shows like *TUSH, Lashes, Kings,* and *NOIR,* providing performance opportunities to both Seattle drag artists and "guest spots" for out-of-town drag artists from around the world. Individual drag artists also continued to use Twitch to stream content. Seattle drag king Mercury Divine used their Twitch to stream makeup tutorials in addition to creating and submitting a storm of content to digital drag shows. A gamer and drag queen, Londyn Bradshaw embraced Twitch wholeheartedly, streaming themselves applying makeup, playing video games in drag, and collaborating with other drag artists for performance projects. Over the course of the spring and summer, Londyn developed a series of drag videos, collating them into a digital "one-human show" called *The Levels of Londyn,* which they aired via their Twitch account on August 6, 2020. Londyn worked to uplift their fellow artists by including guest appearances by other Seattle drag artists and queer community members; they also helped performers with less technological know-how with shooting, editing, and submitting digital drag videos.

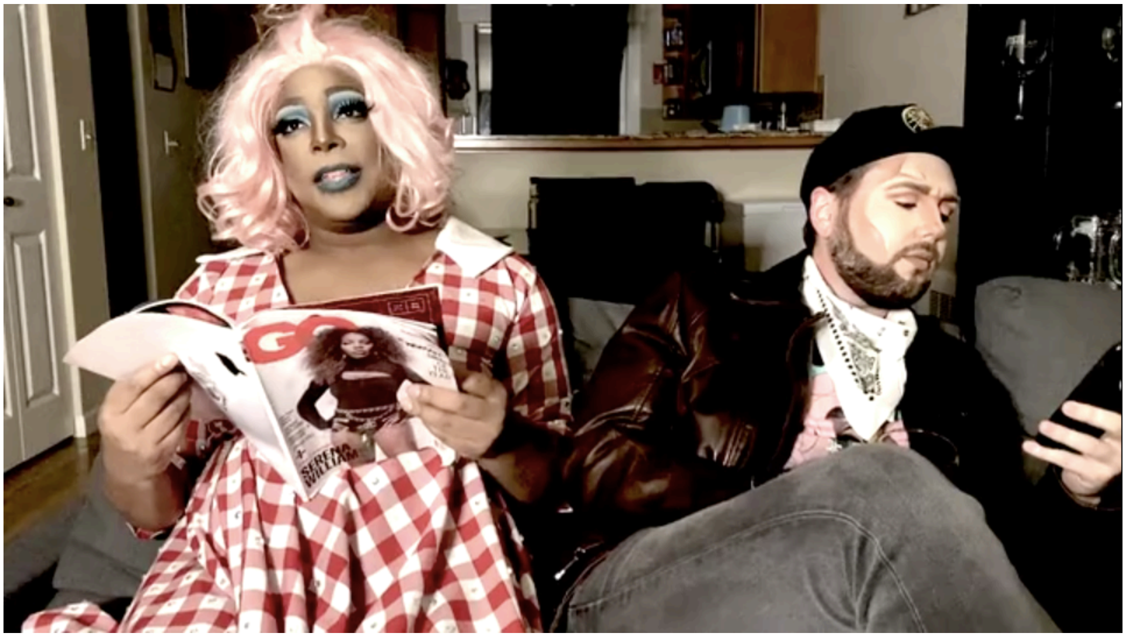
One video included in *The Levels of Londyn* featured my drag king alter-ego, John Queere. Set to U.S. American indie pop artist Ashe's "Moral of the Story" (released 2019) the video stars Londyn as a woman in lockdown, seeking to connect with an emotionally distant lover (played by me in drag, see Figure 23). The overall format of the piece is essentially akin to a music video, with an edited series of short scenes interspersed with shots of Londyn lip-syncing directly to the camera. The lyrics of the song reflect Londyn's narrative of domestic abuse:

[chorus]
Some mistakes get made
That's alright, that's okay
You can think that you're in love
When you're really just in pain
Some mistakes get made
That's alright, that's okay
In the end it's better for me
That's the moral of the story babe

After a shot of Londyn removing a pair sunglasses to reveal a black eye towards the end of the video, she packs a bag and leaves her abuser despite the ongoing pandemic. Londyn's vision for the piece was to highlight the issue of domestic violence during lockdown, drawing attention to the plight of individuals trapped at home with abusers. Because of the sensitive subject matter, the video begins with a content warning for domestic violence, and the end title for the video includes a phone number for the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

Following Washington state's restriction of social gatherings to five or fewer people as of May 2020, we prepared and shot the "Moral of the Story" video with a skeleton crew: Londyn directed and starred, I served in the supporting role, Londyn's roommate Duchess Drew Nightshade (also a Seattle drag artist) filmed on their phone, and our friend Bri assisted with setup, lighting, and direction. The shots with Londyn and me were done in their common area; Londyn then filmed a series of confessional-style shots of themselves lip-syncing to create contrast with the visual narrative and maintain focus on the main character. Like other drag artists, Londyn used the video multiple times over the course of the summer and autumn, submitting to different digital drag shows along with her other content. Reactions to the video were solemn but generally positive, with some viewers thanking Londyn for highlighting a pressing current social issue with her art.

Figure 23: In a screenshot from a digital drag video from May 2020, Londyn Bradshaw lip-syncs “Moral of the Story” as a lockdown-era woman trapped in a relationship with an abusive partner, played by me as my drag king alter-ego, John Queere.



Like Twitch, the streaming platform Plexstorm is focused on gaming, though it notably serves a more niche market. Categorizing itself as an “adult gaming site,” Switzerland-based Plexstorm allows nudity, pornography, and video games with explicit content (though this is not required), with operations since at least January 2018 (AVN Staff 2018). Many of its primary streamers are online sex workers colloquially known as “cam girls.” Short for “camera girls”—and joined by “cam boys” as well as the gender-inclusive “cam models”—these sex workers operate exclusively online, appearing nude or engaging in solo erotic acts for paying viewers, typically in the context of gaming when appearing on sites like Plexstorm. Plexstorm’s openness to adult content includes a stringent list of community guidelines, including bans on extreme violence, hate speech, gore, necrophilia, bestiality, sexual content involving minors, nonconsensual sex acts, and the appearance of lethal weapons (Plexstorm 2021).

Some drag artists turned to Plexstorm because of its open approach to nudity and sexual content, organizing digital drag shows similar to those on Twitch but allowing participants greater freedom in their artistic expression—particularly around the uneven regulation of nude bodies. Citing the Washington State Liquor and Cannabis Control Board, Seattle drag and burlesque artists regularly question why "male" chests are allowed for full display in performance venues serving alcohol while "female" chests cannot display the areola or nipple in the same context. Given that the majority of Seattle drag artists are transgender (including non-binary identities), and are otherwise critical of the misogynistic regulation of bodies assigned female at birth (AFAB), the state's use of biological essentialism with regards to the regulation of nudity is a sore point—especially for individuals whose chests are deemed "female" by the state despite them not identifying as such. As I frequently encountered during live drag and burlesque shows in the city, performers of all genders tended to cover their nipples when performing bare-chested even when not required by the state in solidarity with AFAB performers who were legally barred from fully displaying their nude torsos. Sites like Twitch tend to follow state nudity laws, prohibiting "those who present as women" from exposing their nipples while streaming on the site (Twitch 2020). While less biologically essentialist in the sense that Twitch respects users' self-identification, this policy contributes to queer performance artists' choice to pivot to sites without misogynistic nudity laws, such as Plexstorm.

WERKshop Wednesdays, an amateur drag and burlesque show held monthly at Kremwerk,[77] was moved to Plexstorm by drag king host Mercury Divine in the summer of 2020.

---

[77] See chapter 2 for more information on the live incarnation of *WERKshop Wednesdays.*

The format of *WERKshop* is fairly simple: any person with an act can sign up for one of ten cast spots for a given show; new performers are encouraged to participate. While Mercury opens the stage to any type of performer or performance style—when pitching the show, they often joke, "you can just get up here and eat a burrito, I don't care"—the *WERKshop* cast tends to consistently feature a balance of drag artists and burlesque artists. There is a considerable amount of overlap between those categories: for instance, Mercury is often identified as a "draglesquer," or a queer performance artist that fuses drag and burlesque in their work. The digital version of *WERKshop* reflected the live version of the show, accruing roughly equal parts drag artists and burlesque artists. Around a month before the September 2020 digital version of the show, I emailed Mercury to express my interest in participating, and they sent back my instructions for submitting a video for the show.[78]

My preparation for the show began with a song, "Levitating" by Dua Lipa, released in spring of 2020. The fast-paced, upbeat lyrics and catchy dance pop beat resonated with me—I had been singing the song all summer long, so it made sense to turn it into a digital drag number. In "Levitating," the singer expresses their elation about the prospect of a new relationship using language and phrases that reference space and astrology. Between balancing online teaching, writing, and retail work, and otherwise stuck at home for the lockdown without access to the release of queer public spaces, the escapist nature of the song appealed to me greatly in the context of a difficult year. In Muñozian terms, I adopted a utopic performative mode that queerly transcended the prison of the present with a fleeting, playful embrace of a whimsical future that I would then share with my friends and show audiences:

---

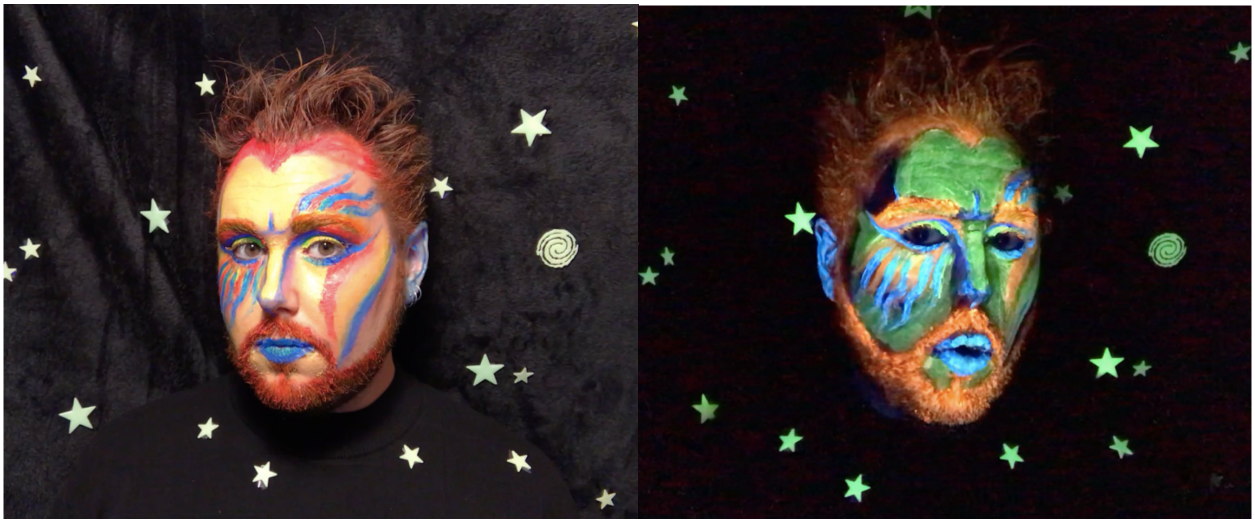
[78] This was my second time participating in *WERKshop*—I had performed there live for the first time as John Queere in December 2019. I had also signed up for the March 2020 live edition of *WERKshop,* but was unable to perform because I was sick with what turned out to be a mild case of COVID-19. The March show was the last live *WERKshop* held before Kremwerk closed for the lockdown.

[verse 2]
I believe that you're for me, I feel it in our energy
I see us written in the stars
We can go wherever so let's do it now or never
Baby, nothing's ever ever too far
Glitter in the skies, glitter in our eyes, shining just the way we are
I feel like we're forever every time we get together
But whatever, let's get lost on Mars.

Inspired by the experimental approaches to performance I had seen in digital drag shows throughout the summer, I decided to lip-sync the song as a glittering disembodied head floating in space. Taking advantage of grand opening sales at seasonal Halloween stores in Seattle, I purchased glow-in-the-dark stars, ultraviolet face paint, and a blacklight.

Set-up and filming the video took about ten hours: I first applied my usual drag king makeup and then drew patterns over it with the UV face paint, using a UV-reactive orange hair gel to spike up my hair and add color to my beard, mustache, and eyebrows. As I played with the UV face paint, I was spontaneously inspired by UK-based drag king Oliver Assets (Instagram: @oliverassets), known for his incredibly detailed and emotive painting style that resembles Impressionist paintings. In the spirit of Oliver Assets, I adjusted my look to embody a psychedelic Van Gogh. Since my head was the only part of me meant to register in the video, I wore a black sweatshirt with glow-in-the-dark stars taped on it to blend into the set. I then arranged my set, using a black micro-plush blanket with glow-in-the-dark stars as my backdrop a la Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* (1889). The DIY lighting setup was two-fold: a three-way bulb on its brightest setting pointed directly at me, with a blacklight directly underneath to pick up the UV paint. I recorded the video four times in a single take using my iPhone 7, lip-syncing the music while moving my head and using my face to express the song. At a strategic point during the music, I unplugged the three-way bulb, leaving only the blacklight to pick up my UV paint and the stars in the backdrop (see Figure 24).

Figure 24: Two mid-performance photos of John Queere (the author's drag king alter-ego) performing Dua Lipa's "Levitating" at the *WERKshop Wednesday* digital drag show on September 16, 2020. The first shot is with regular lighting; the second shot is with blacklight only, revealing UV paint. The digital format of drag during lockdown enabled me to realize this fantastical piece, which would have been significantly more difficult to pull off in a club setting.



After getting a take that I liked, I cleaned up my mess and uploaded the video to my laptop. At this point in the production process, most drag artists edit their footage with programs like iMovie or Adobe Premiere, stitching multiple shots together into a coherent video as well as adding filters, text, and effects. Some artists incorporate multiple looks into a single video—one drag artist at a digital edition of *Kings* aired during summer 2020 embodied both a drag queen and a drag king version of themselves in a single video, lip-syncing different parts of their chosen song as completely different personae. My MacBook Air is fairly simple, however, which is why I chose to do a single take for my video. However, I wish to emphasize the time, skill, and work it takes to produce a single drag video: even the simplest performance video can take several days to put together.[79] Upon reflection, I relished the control I had over producing a digital drag video as opposed to a live performance—if I messed up my words or simply didn't like a take of my number, I could simply do another. Digital drag is thus an excellent option for artists who struggle with performance anxiety, have difficulty accessing venue spaces, or wish to use digital production in the realization of their artistic vision.

I sent my video to Mercury the weekend before the show and promoted my appearance on social media to friends around the country. On September 16, 2020, *WERKshop Wednesday* streamed on Plexstorm, hosted by Mercury Divine in real time, who acted as a curator, MC, and DJ for the series of digital drag videos to follow. Friends of mine from Seattle, Los Angeles, southern Illinois, Chicago, and Knoxville tuned into the show, texting me as I watched the show along with them. My work was applauded by Mercury and other viewers (via Plexstorm's chat feature), and I received around $30 in tips via my Venmo account included with my performance. It was surreal to see my video within a line-up of other talented artists, and even more special that friends from far away were able to watch my show simultaneously. This reveals one of the best aspects of digital drag—with an online format, anyone with a reliable Internet connection and the ability to access sites like Twitch and Plexstorm are able to watch drag shows from anywhere in the world. Borrowing again from Muñoz, the reach of digital drag thus fuses the humdrum "here and now" with the interminable "then and there" (Muñoz 2009). With this vast new potentiality, drag artists are no longer tied to specific venues in dense metropolitan areas, which empowers queer artists from isolated areas or those from places in which public drag performance is prohibited or stigmatized.

---

[79] For my dissertation defense in March 2021, I developed a digital drag video of John Queere performing "Replay" by Lady Gaga for my committee, which was significantly more sophisticated than my "Levitating" video. Between preparing the song, shooting around a dozen scenes outdoors with friends, and editing the raw footage with iMovie, the production took nearly a week.

It is undeniable that our digital way of life during lockdown will persist long after state social distancing mandates are lifted as a COVID-19 vaccine becomes widely available, and drag performance is no different. Although the community ethos and physical intimacy of queer public spaces cannot be reproduced on sites like Twitch and Plexstorm, the artistic possibilities and online connections forged by digital drag performance will undeniably reshape drag as an art form long after the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, shaping an enduring virtual utopia defined by the imaginative potential of queer artists.

Glory Hole: Avant-Garde Drag in the Lockdown Era

In 2019, Seattle drag artists One, Bitch Hazel, Stasia Coup, Miss Texas 1988, and Angel Baby Kill Kill Kill formed a queer artist's collective focused on avant-garde drag performance. Choosing to push the art of drag beyond what is seen in a typical drag show, these alternative drag artists conceived of a monthly queer performance art installation with rotating venues that they called *Glory Hole*. In their one-year anniversary zine, titled "Anniversorry," the *Glory Hole* artists reflected on the genesis of the collective in a short essay called "An Oral History of the Hole." Heading to the gym together one day, One and Miss Texas 1988 conceived of the title *Glory Hole* for their experimental drag collective as something "simple and a little lascivious but not too lascivious… we almost called it 'High Faggotry.' And then we landed at *Glory Hole.* I think it was a joke at first" (*Glory Hole* cast 2020b). After bringing the full cast on board, the collective launched their first *Glory Hole* show in August 2019. Each subsequent incarnation of *Glory Hole* was based around a theme and featured one guest artist.

The glory hole has been emblematic to anonymous sexual contact among queer men living in persecuting societies for centuries. A glory hole is a hole in a partition—a wall, a bathroom stall—through which two or more people can engage in oral, anal, or digital sexual contact without revealing their identity, potentially exposing themselves to shame, violence, or ostracization. Glory holes have a long association with male-male sexual activity in societies with legacies of anti-queer persecution, including the United States. They can be found virtually anywhere by those who know what to look for, befitting their widespread usage by an oppressed sexual minority. Part of the cruising spaces[80] that comprise what Muñoz calls a "queer sex utopia" because of their outright rejection of cisheteronormative sexual mores, glory holes—and cruising culture in general—have been stigmatized even within the LGBTQ+ rights movement in recent decades as antithetical to the assimilationist mainstream gay rights agenda (2009). Ironically, glory holes were promoted by some state health departments as a safe sex method during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

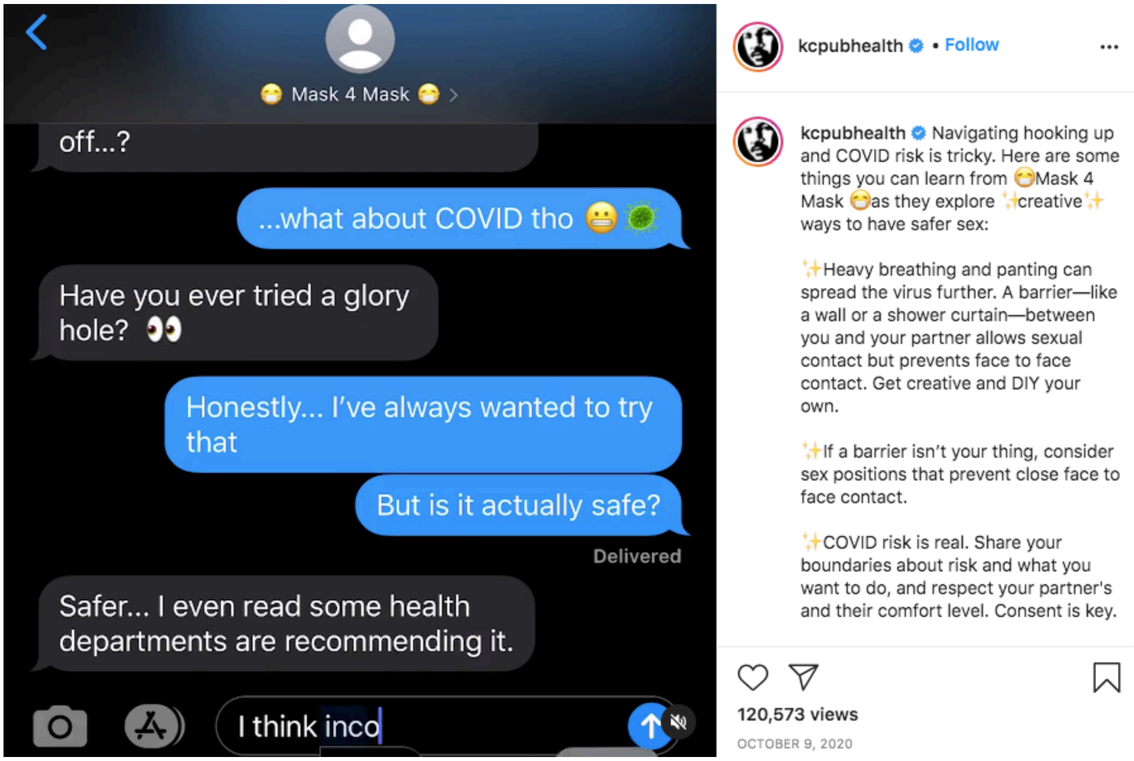
On October 9, 2020, the Seattle & King County Public Health Department posted a video to their Instagram account promoting the use of glory holes for sex during the pandemic (see Figure 25). Because glory holes rarely involve face-to-face contact, their usage for sexual activity significantly reduces the likelihood of transmission of COVID-19 during sex. Among Seattle's queer community, this announcement was met with equal parts glee and bemusement. Did a family member write this?[81] Or, perhaps the cisheterosexuals have finally recognized the queer brilliance in the art of discreet public sex, especially given that queers have navigated the ongoing HIV/AIDS pandemic in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic of the present day. In any case, the glory hole has a profound and endearing association with the queer community and subcultural sexual activity.

---

[80] In the context of queer culture, cruising spaces denote public or semi-public places in when people (usually men) can engage in anonymous sexual activity, such as parks, bathhouses, adult theaters, public bathrooms, and other places with a reasonable balance of privacy and ease-of-access.

[81] Here, the term "family member" is queer slang, denoting a fellow queer person.

Figure 25: A public post from the Seattle & King County Public Health Department Instagram page from October 9, 2020. In a short video simulating a text conversation between two sexual partners, one suggests the use of a glory hole to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission during sex. Screenshot by author, January 13, 2021.



😷 Mask 4 Mask 😷

off...?

...what about COVID tho 😬🦠

Have you ever tried a glory hole? 👀

Honestly... I've always wanted to try that

But is it actually safe?

Delivered

Safer... I even read some health departments are recommending it.

I think inco

kcpubhealth • Follow

kcpubhealth Navigating hooking up and COVID risk is tricky. Here are some things you can learn from 😷Mask 4 Mask 😷as they explore ✨creative✨ ways to have safer sex:

✨Heavy breathing and panting can spread the virus further. A barrier—like a wall or a shower curtain—between you and your partner allows sexual contact but prevents face to face contact. Get creative and DIY your own.

✨If a barrier isn't your thing, consider sex positions that prevent close face to face contact.

✨COVID risk is real. Share your boundaries about risk and what you want to do, and respect your partner's and their comfort level. Consent is key.

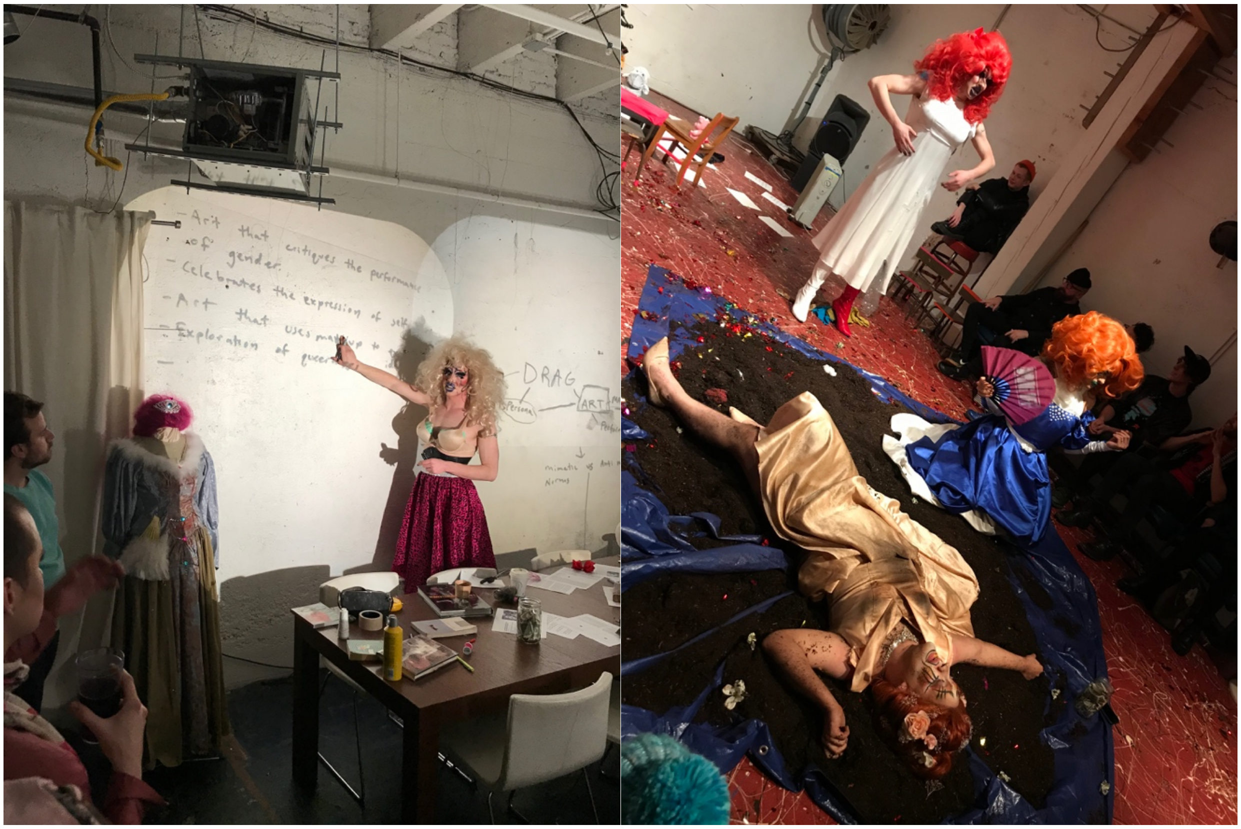
120,573 views

OCTOBER 9, 2020

My first attendance of *Glory Hole* was pre-pandemic, on January 17, 2020 at Studio Current in Capitol Hill, Seattle. I first became aware of the show after my interview with Miss Texas 1988 the week before. During our conversation about queer theory and experimental drag, Texas suggested I check out *Glory Hole* the following week. Given that the show theme was "Drag," I donned my John Queere drag king look with a collage of camo-printed clothing, excited at the prospect of seeing a fresh take on the drag show format. My friend Jack and I arrived in Capitol Hill early, where we had a drink at the nearby lesbian bar WILDROSE. At

8:00PM, we walked across the street to Studio Current to attend *Glory Hole: DRAG*, with performances by One, Bitch Hazel, Miss Texas 1988, Uh Oh, and guest Irene DuBois. Rather than featuring drag as a series of staged performances, the format of *Glory Hole* involves each artist developing a free-form presentational or interactive piece fitting the theme of "drag." Guests roamed the space freely, interacting with the artists (or not) as each artist realized their performance art piece during the course of the show. For instance, for *Glory Hole: DRAG,* Miss Texas 1988 utilized queer theory to give an interactive lecture on the art of drag, drawing from queer scholars José Muñoz and J. Halberstam while using an old-fashioned transparency projector to query audience members on the elusive definition of drag (see Figure 26). Irene DuBois sat in a corner of the space, interpreting the theme of "drag" quite literally by taking the hour to apply her signature makeup before walking several blocks away to perform in her regular cast spot for *Lashes* at R Place after *Glory Hole's* conclusion. Bitch Hazel rolled around in a massive pile of mulch for 45 minutes before arising to lip-sync Judy Garland's "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" in her interpretation of the theme (see Figure 26). Needless to say, the intellectual, diverse, and profoundly queer approaches to drag performance at *Glory Hole* had Jack and I transfixed, and we enthusiastically attended the subsequent month's edition (*Glory Hole: 2D*) before the show was put on indefinite hiatus in light of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Figure 26: Two pre-pandemic photos of the January 2020 incarnation of the experimental drag showcase, *Glory Hole: DRAG* at Studio Current in Capitol Hill, Seattle. On the left, Miss Texas 1988 uses a transparency projector and queer theory to deliver an interactive lecture on the nature of drag to attendees; on the right, Miss Texas 1988 and One pose behind Bitch Hazel, who is wallowing in a large pile of mulch. I still remember the rich, earthy smell of the mulch. Photographs by author.


-Art that critiques the performance of gender.
-Celebrates the expression of self
-Art that uses makeup to
-Exploration of queer
DRAG
Persona
ART
mimetic vs Anti
Norms

During the pandemic, the *Glory Hole* collective utilized digital drag performance to great effect. Their performance for July 2020 was titled *Climax,* and each artist created a piece that reflected the theme, using the streaming video site Vimeo as their medium. Launched in 2004 as an ad-free video-hosting and sharing platform, Vimeo was purchased by the U.S. American holding company InterActiveCorp (IAC) in 2006 as competition to the Google-owned video sharing site YouTube (Pullen 2011). The benefits of using Vimeo are manifold: as a video streaming service, artists are able to upload edited videos of considerable length and enact a paywall to restrict free access to their content. With this level of control of viewership, artists are also able to include explicit content if they wish. Using their Instagram and Facebook pages, the artists of the *Glory Hole* collective began teasing their new video project in the early weeks of the lockdown, finally releasing *Glory Hole: Climax* on Vimeo on April 5, 2020 with an $8.88 paywall.

Befitting their status as an experimental queer art collective, the cast of *Glory Hole: Climax* pushed the art of digital drag to new heights of creativity, using a Muñozian approach to creative and sexual freedom in the realization of their art. Rather than structuring the piece as a series of successive performances, the artists wove their individual pieces through each other in a 27-minute piece. This non-linear structure reflects the experience of walking through a live *Glory Hole* performance, with different artists' performances coming in and out of focus as one moves through the space. Each artist approached the theme of climax differently. In three separate segments, Miss Texas 1988 deployed extreme close-ups of her lighting a candle, applying makeup, painting her nails, and putting on her outfit. The shots lingered on lips, fingertips, stitches, zippers, and fasteners, highlighting the erotic nature of these places where touching and joining occur. Texas did not lip-sync in their segments; rather, Hollywood actress Sophia Loren's English-language version of "Zou Bisou Bisou" simply served as a soundtrack. In Texas's first sequence, the song was slowed down; in the second sequence, it was at regular speed; in the final sequence, it was sped up. The speed of the music—languid, then more regular, then rushed—corresponded with the pace of the visual elements, creating a mounting sense of urgency towards the heated climax of Texas's contribution to the overall piece.

In contrast, Angel Baby Kill Kill Kill, Bitch Hazel, and Femme Daddy produced more-or-less complete segments, though shots from their pieces were interspersed throughout the larger work as part of transitions. Angel Baby Kill Kill Kill took the sexuality aspect of climax in a literal sense, performing a lip-sync of queer English pop icon George Michael's "Faith" (1987) in a bed dressed in nothing but their underwear. Over the course of the piece, the lip-sync was gradually taken over by tender shots of them having sex with a partner dressed in their usual drag look, giving the impression of a masturbatory sexual encounter with one's own drag alter-ego:

[verse 1]
Well, I guess it would be nice if I could touch your body
I know not everybody has got a body like you
But I gotta think twice before I give my heart away
And I know all the games you play because I played them, too

The sound of the segment paralleled the storyline, with the song gradually giving way to the sounds of moaning and heavy breathing.

Bitch Hazel also played with the idea of multiple selves. Shot in their bathroom, the segment began *sans* music with Bitch Hazel out-of-drag washing their hands in the sink. As they gazed at themselves alone in the mirror, the 2010 electropop hit "Dancing On My Own" by Swedish pop icon Robyn began to play. Lip-syncing along half-heartedly, Bitch Hazel steps into the shower, pulls the curtain closed, and then sweeps it open with newfound vigor to reveal themselves in fabulous drag. The lighting abruptly changes to a nightclub ambiance, and Bitch Hazel appears in five different drag looks as they energetically danced and lip-sync through the chorus, second verse, and second chorus of the song. In the last chorus after the bridge, the entire cast of *Glory Hole* suddenly appears in the bathroom together near the climax of the song, all dressed in Bitch Hazel's various looks from earlier throughout the segment to give the impression of five Bitch Hazels.[82] The herd of Hazels dance and sing together during the final chorus:

I'm in the corner, watching you kiss her, oh

---

[82] In the end credits, the group is credited as Ditch, Glitch, Kitsch, and Stitch Hazel (Glory Hole 2020a).

I'm right over here, why can't you see me? Oh
I'm giving it my all, but I'm not the girl you're taking home, ooh
I'll keep dancing on my own

Just as with Robyn's version of the song, Bitch Hazel's adaptation of "Dancing On My Own" communicates a sense of loneliness yet also a commitment to continue dancing with oneself during the isolation of the lockdown, spontaneously creating a queer utopia even in the most dismal and lonely of settings. As the song ends, the Hazel quintet vanishes and the lighting returns to normal. Bitch Hazel, back in their everyday look and with their hands gripping the sides of the sink, looks winded as they stare into the mirror at their reflection.

Femme Daddy, the guest artist at this incarnation of *Glory Hole,* interpreted the theme of climax as supreme overstimulation. Appearing with a clean face in front of a neutral backdrop, they speak directly to the camera to introduce their piece: "I decided to take a bunch of acid and eat a ton of edibles and I'm gonna try to do makeup with a Hitachi magic wand strapped to my pussy for two hours, so, say goodbye to my clit!" (*Glory Hole* 2020a). After taking the acid, eating a large Rice Krispie treat edible, and positioning their Hitachi, the music to "Supernature (Instrumental Climax Edit)" by legendary disco producer Cerrone began to play as the visuals shift to sped-up footage of Femme Daddy transforming into a clownish apparition in psychedelic pink and purple. Once finished—and clearly high out of their mind—Femme Daddy lip-syncs "Walkin' After Midnight" by classic U.S. American country artist Patsy Cline:

I stop to see a weepin' willow
Cryin' on his pillow
Maybe he's cryin' for me
And as the skies turn gloomy
Night winds whisper to me
I'm lonesome as I can be.

In Femme Daddy's interpretation, Cline's solitary nighttime walk becomes a vibrant, blissful acid trip towards a climax in Muñoz's queer utopia. Like Bitch Hazel, Femme Daddy used an

iconic popular song indexing loneliness to build a creative solo piece that positions isolation as a state of mind that can be overcome through a queer mix of autoerotic stimulation, imagination, and mind-altering drugs.

Similar to Miss Texas 1988's three-part sequence, One's contribution to *Glory Hole: Climax* was broken up into segments that were interspersed throughout the larger work. Appearing in full drag, One seats themselves on a blanket in front of a low covered table in a grassy backyard. They unwrap a cucumber from plastic and sensuously sanitize it with a disinfectant wipe. Poised with a raised knife, the sequence ends just before One slices into the cucumber. Later, in the second sequence, One sanitizes a toy drum and drumsticks, though the sequence again ends just before they strike the drum. In the third sequence, One combines gin, lemon, grenadine, and ice in a cocktail shaker (after sanitizing that, as well), but just before they begin to shake it, the sequence ends. In their last sequence, One opens a carton of vanilla ice cream and scoops it into a bowl. After they suggestively shake a can of whipped cream, the sequence cuts off just before it spurts—and then, suddenly, climax is reached. Floodgates open, the viewer is overloaded with a quick succession of climactic clips from all the artists—Angel Baby Kill Kill Kill writhing in sexual ecstasy, Bitch Hazel spinning alone in their bathroom, Femme Daddy dropping acid, a sumptuous close-up of Miss Texas's painted lips—and finally the climax shots from all of One's previous sequences: rapturously chopping up the cucumber, hitting the drum with vigor, shaking and pouring the Pink Lady cocktail, and squirting the entire can of whipped cream on the ice cream with a facial expression akin to sexual pleasure. This sequence is set to the song "Imposible" by Mexican singer-songwriter Natalia Lafourcade featuring León Larregui, in which a lonely woman expresses her love to an unfaithful partner who does not love her back, but chooses to leave their eventual punishment to God rather than hating them eternally:

[verso 3]
No creas que tus infamias me perjuran
Incitan mi valor, para olvidarte
Te quiero mucho más que en vez de odiarte
Que tú castigo, que tú castigo, que tú castigo
Ah…
Que tú castigo, se lo dejo a Dios

Using the instrumental coda to the song as a dreamy dénouement, One brilliantly remixes an array of mundane activities into their series of climaxes and concludes *Glory Hole: Climax* by washing their hands in a large, ornate bowl: a routine activity with supreme importance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taken together, *Glory Hole: Climax* captures the sense of loneliness and isolation of the lockdown through its musical samples and visual sequences. However, the artists use their own queer ways-of-being and limitless creativity to break through the grim monotony of pandemic life to access a sense of queer utopia. At a time when many members of Seattle's queer community struggled with the loss of queer public spaces, the *Glory Hole* collective offered a model of queer perseverance:

this show is put together by a group of seattle performers.
we do what we can with what we have
which is not a lot but it is something
and that is what matters (*Glory Hole* cast 2020a).

Glory Hole: Climax is also groundbreaking as a piece of drag culture. The *Glory Hole* collective had long challenged the conventions of drag performance, and their digital drag production in April 2020 pushed the bar of digital drag performance even further with its creative use of music, sound, image, and gesture; its collective approach to drag performance; and its clever remixing of individual works into a coherent, artistic whole. As a digital work, the piece has arguably a far greater reach than live versions of *Glory Hole*, and I have no doubt that digital drag will continue to grow and develop long after the conclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

José Muñoz's notion of the queer utopia, envisioned and accessed through queer artistic production, could not have been a better prediction of the state of drag performance in Seattle during the lockdowns of 2020. This chapter explored the trajectory of digital drag produced in Seattle during the lockdown in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing the ways Seattle drag artists use their creativity, flexibility, and adaptability to transform a live performance style into digital content creation that generate nostalgia for better days past, imaginative reinterpretations of a gloomy present, and hopeful glimpses into a queer future. Beginning with live stream performances on Instagram Live, drag artists gradually shifted their roles to that of content creators, using sites like Vimeo, Twitch, and Plexstorm and video editing software to produce digital drag videos. With near-limitless possibilities of digital production, innovative ways to craft storylines and interpret music reshaped the face of drag as artists combatted feelings of loneliness and isolation with their art. Digital drag blurs the boundaries between local scenes, given that drag artists from anywhere in the world can now appear together within the same show; it also fundamentally challenges the standardized format of live drag as a sequence of more-or-less unrelated acts with the introduction of sophisticated, longer-form collaborative works. My own approach to drag performance was transformed by digital drag during the pandemic as I realized I enjoyed the greater control I had over the production of imaginative videos, despite the loss of the exciting, ephemeral nature of live performance. While digital drag remains the norm as of this writing in January 2021—given the continuation of state-mandated lockdowns in the United States as the COVID-19 vaccine is slowly administered—I am certain that drag performance in Seattle and beyond will forever be revolutionized by drag artists' utopic visions of a digital queer future.

Epilogue

Like many other ethnomusicologists, I gradually became more involved in my host scene over the course of my fieldwork, transitioning from observer to full participant. The process of writing this dissertation reflected this as well—my initial chapter drafts were written more impassively, but as the material became more personal, I found a stronger voice in situating myself as an integral part of the events unfolding around me. The most significant shift for me was embracing what I had been learning in Seattle's drag scene in order to dive in as a drag artist myself. While I had nearly a decade of experience in drag scenes, and had dabbled in drag queening as well, it was the transformative performances of Seattle's drag kings, drag queens, and alternative drag artists that led me on a path of self-discovery and healing. Inspired by the growing momentum of performative ethnography, which I encountered in the writing of E. Patrick Johnson (2003) and explored further in conversations with Deborah Wong, my advisor Christina Sunardi, and my friends and colleagues in the University of Washington Ethnomusicology Program, I chose to structure this epilogue as a self-reflexive piece to share how this research project changed me.

My new drag character, John Queere, emerged from three intersecting phenomena: the art of performing queer masculinity, queer country music, and reconnecting with my rural Midwestern regional identity. The process of developing and embodying John Queere also reflected the main themes of this dissertation. Like other drag artists in Seattle, I negotiated performances of gender, regional identity, and affinity with music genres with a disidentificatory lens, strategically sampling certain elements of dominant culture but remixing them in a way that created new, queer meanings for myself and my audiences. In this way, I paralleled the cultural work done by the Seattle drag artists detailed in this dissertation by using performance to create critical space for queer identities and challenging cisnormative ideals about gender, body, and sexuality.

Queens to Kings: Uncovering Queer Masculinity

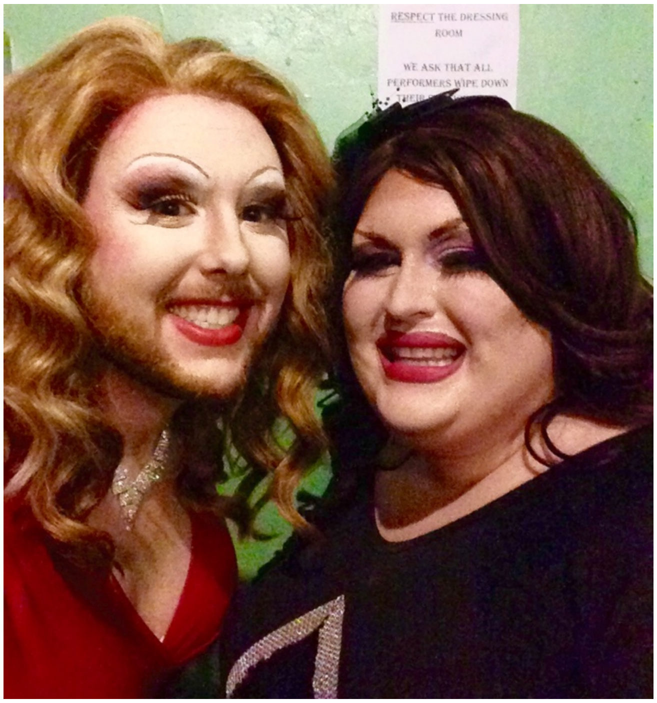
My engagement with drag kings and the art of kinging through my fieldwork drastically changed my perspective of drag performance and queer masculinity. The work of Mercury Divine, Lazarus Rise, Arrhythmio, Samuel L. JackYouSon, Salvador Saber, Cesare the Drag Prince, Thadayus, Vincent Milay, and many others in the Seattle scene opened my eyes to the diversity of drag kings and the power, grace, humor, and brilliance of their performances. Before my fieldwork began in 2019, I admittedly gave drag kings very little thought. To me, drag was about queening because of my engagement with mainstream drag culture, in which drag kings are virtually nonexistent.

I never thought of myself as being able to be a drag king, because my understanding of drag was limited by binary logic: kinging was something that queer women did, while queening was something that queer men did, with few exceptions. Beyond this, performing masculinity felt wrong for me, and I had no interest in doing so. All of my early experiences with gender exploration and drag involved seeking out femininity. As a non-binary person assigned male at birth (AMAB) who experienced strong feelings of rejection towards male gender roles throughout my life, I believed that expressing queerness meant distancing myself from masculinity and maleness. In other words, my outward male presentation led me to constantly pressure myself to balance out these characteristics with femininity to read as queer. Gatekeeping is prevalent in the queer community, like within many marginalized communities. In my experience, it is very common to feel—or be made to feel—either too queer or not queer enough in any given space. I often felt I had to prove my queerness to be able to access and use that label. Further, I labored under the delusion that femaleness and femininity exist opposite maleness and masculinity. In short, I felt I could not be truly queer if I did not reject masculinity, so I worked to balance my gender presentation to better reflect my genderqueer self.

Makeup began as a hobby, but I needed help to get further into drag queening. With the application of contouring and highlights, I learned to reshape my face from masculine to feminine, learning the basics of drag queen makeup through YouTube videos and *Drag Race*. I also enjoyed blending gender in ways that reflected my genderqueer/non-binary identity and began wearing more subtle makeup looks in my everyday life. I gradually added wigs and accessories, but kept most of my drag experimentation confined to my small Midtown apartment in Kansas City, only sharing photos with friends. On occasion, when it felt safe enough to do so, I went out in makeup—typically for Halloween and Pride. However, the jump to full cross-dressing, including clothing, shoes, and padding, was incredibly intimidating. With substantial encouragement and help from my drag sister Jinger Fahrenheit and Jinger's drag mother Mona Chase, I finally created a full drag character and performed onstage. Jinger is a friend of mine from high school; as "drag sisters," we started dabbling in drag at about the same time and encouraged one another in our early exploration of drag makeup, wigs, and body shape construction. Mona Chase is an established queen in the St. Louis scene that began coaching Jinger in the art of drag queening—Mona styled my wig for my first performance.

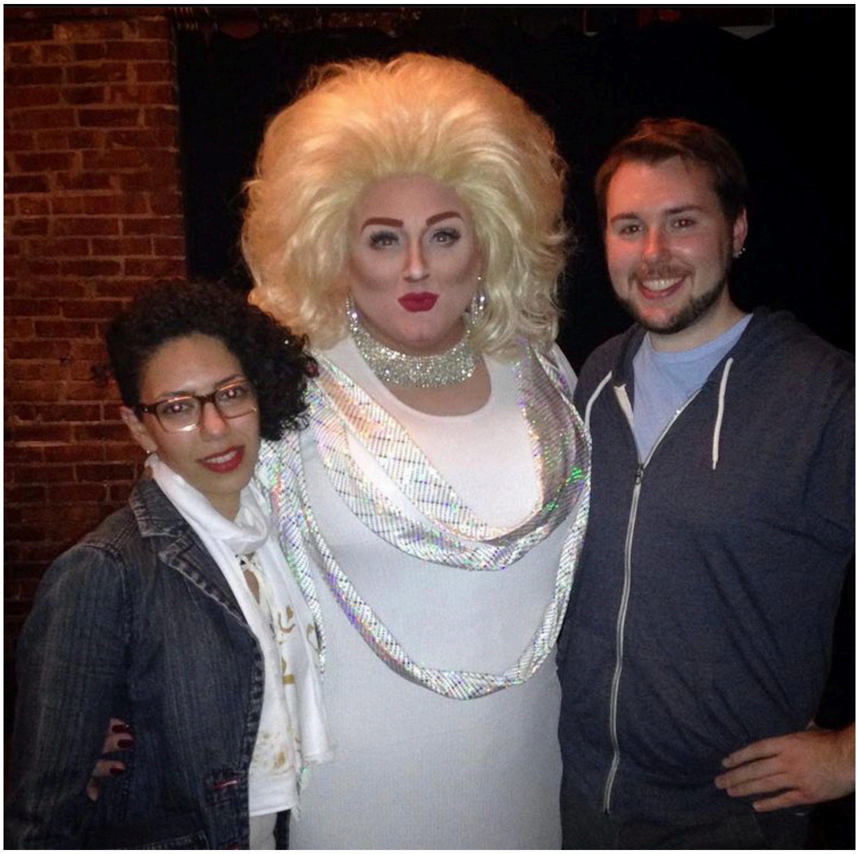
I will never forget the balmy spring afternoon I spent with Jinger putting my first full drag look together. She took me to Torrid at the mall in Fairview Heights, IL where I bought a simple red dress; we then went to the nearby Wal-Mart to buy several cheap pairs of tights, a bra, and ingredients for fake breasts: balloons filled with dry rice. Priscilla Fahrenheit, as I called my new drag persona, was first embodied at Attitudes Nightclub in St. Louis, Missouri on May 15, 2015. The name "Priscilla" came from my favorite movie—*The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*—and my surname came from Jinger to denote our queer familial bond. After finishing one of my grueling shifts as a bakery clerk at a local grocery store, I sped over to St. Louis and hurriedly did my face in a friend's bathroom while she watched with fascination. I loathed the idea of shaving my face for one drag number, so I powdered my facial hair with a gold glitter to drag it up. Once I got to the club, I dressed and put on the finishing touches with Jinger's help (see Figure 27). I was so nervous stepping onstage as ABBA's "Money Money Money" began to play, but I had two friends in the audience—Nzingha and David—whose presence brought me strength. Performing as a drag queen was very liberating. Drag queening gave me free license to express femininity in front of a large crowd of strangers who were there in support, willing the bearded baby queen in the ill-fitting Torrid dress to succeed during her first drag number. Being celebrated for my queer gender expression was a new feeling, and Attitudes Nightclub (now permanently closed) will forever remain in my heard as a place of queer joy and radical self-expression.

Figure 27: Drag sisters Priscilla Fahrenheit (left, the author) and Jinger Fahrenheit (right) after their performances at Attitudes Nightclub in St. Louis, MO, May 15, 2015. Photograph taken by the author.



Between work and preparing for a cross-country move to Seattle, I did not perform again as Priscilla Fahrenheit, and my drag things were packed away. Once in Seattle and surrounded by unfamiliar faces, I retreated back within myself to a certain degree, not fully comfortable with expressing *too much* queerness as I got my bearings in a new graduate program. While I still enjoyed the art of queening by keeping up with *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I only attended one show in Seattle with my new friend and colleague, Solmaz—we saw a production of *Le Faux* at Julia's on Broadway in April 2016 (see Figure 28). I made little effort to make connections in Seattle's queer community until I began my fieldwork three years later.

Figure 28: My friend and colleague Solmaz ShakeriFard (left) and I (right) pose with drag queen and host Kristi Champagne (center) after a show at Julia's on Broadway in Seattle in 2016. Photograph taken for us by another audience member.



Drag queening thus eclipsed all other forms of queer performance in my mind during my early explorations of drag. With the growing popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race,* drag queening was virtually everywhere, and I was entranced by it as a potent expression of queer femininity. For so long, I overlooked the art of kinging, even after seeing extraordinary drag kings in St. Louis such as Rydyr, who was the first drag king I ever saw perform at The Complex nightclub in 2009. Because of my own rejection of masculinity, I did not fully appreciate or value queer masculinity in performance until I reached a point in my life where I could separate masculinity from maleness. The combination of reading parts of Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) in an ethnomusicology seminar and seeing Seattle drag kings don and doff a rainbow of masculinities in performance were an awakening for me. For the first time, I recognized that masculinity could be just as mutable and performative as femininity, and I experienced a sense of self-reconciliation regarding my understanding of gender expression in relation to non-binary identity with this realization. Around the same time, I began to break down a musical bias that I had held uncritically for most of my life.

Outlaw Sounds: Embracing Queer Country Music

Growing up, I disliked country music, despite being surrounded by it in rural southern Illinois. Raised in the St. Louis metro-east cities of East St. Louis and Belleville, my mother grew up listening to album-oriented rock and singer-songwriter music of the 1970s. I remember laughing at her joking dismissal of country music as "bitchin' and moanin'," with which I agreed for most of my life. Largely due to the class- and race-based categorization of popular music by the U.S. music industry, country music represented the white rural working class—farmers and laborers—a group to which we did not belong, but one that was always in close proximity. Distancing ourselves from country music was a manifestation of our family's identification with middle-class ideals. For me, country music also represented political conservatism and traditional gender roles. I never thought the genre could house and nurture queerness, so I paid it little attention until I was well into my twenties.

My exploration of country music began with Kacey Musgraves, a contemporary popular country singer/songwriter based in Nashville, Tennessee. Musgraves's style echoes the countrypolitan sound of Patsy Cline and the progressive character of "outlaws" like Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. Her third single, "Follow Your Arrow," released in 2013 as part of her debut album *Same Trailer Different Park*, came to me through a mix CD from my friend

Carrie. Cheery and upbeat in character, the song nonetheless critiques the misogynistic double-standards around sex and religion, adopts a pro-cannabis stance, and acknowledges same-sex identity. Musgraves opened my mind to progressive country music and I became an instant fan, listening to her album *Golden Hour* on repeat when it was released in 2018. I was not alone in my enjoyment of the album—it won "Best Country Album" and "Album of the Year" at the 61st Grammy Awards. For my 30th birthday, Carrie visited Seattle and we saw Musgraves live at the Paramount downtown. Musgraves also prompted me to listen to the music of her feminist/progressive forebears of the 1960s and 1970s like Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn.

My casual fling with country music became more focused when I encountered the work of musicologist Nadine Hubbs. Her book *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (2014) spoke directly to my long struggle with reconciling my queerness with the country music soundscape of my hometown. Hubbs argues that country music has become emblematic of an artificial divide created between urban queer folks and the white rural working class, which nullifies potential alliances between these groups that could challenge the cisheteronormative middle-class values that keep both "rednecks" and "queers" subjugated (2014). With rich textual and musical analysis, Hubbs traces the overlap between queerness and working-class subjectivity through country music, tracing the way the white working class was gradually reframed as the scapegoat for social and political ills of the United States (ibid.). This argument opened my mind to the queer possibilities of genres of music that I had long dismissed, clouded by my middle-class bias towards working-class subjectivities and the musics associated with them.

I began exploring American folk music with purpose, encountering a number of queer folk artists. Some were already familiar, such as the Indigo Girls and Tracy Chapman, who each had several hits in the 1990s that I recall hearing on the radio while young. The folk-rock duo

Indigo Girls, consisting of Amy Ray and Emily Saliers, were openly lesbian from the beginning of their careers in the late 1980s; singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman has never publicly disclosed her sexual orientation but has had relationships with women (most notably with writer Alice Walker in the mid-1990s) and participates in social activism that benefits LGBTQ+ communities. The work of iconic roots music musician Rhiannon Giddens introduced me to Amythyst Kiah, a queer multi-instrumentalist and singer from Tennessee who records and performs old-time music, folk ballads, and her own original music. A former contestant of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Trixie Mattel (name Brian Firkus out of drag) released a folk album in 2018 called *Two Birds,* followed by a sister album in 2019 called *One Stone.* Firkus's musical style, as well as the look of his drag queen alter-ego, were heavily influenced by Dolly Parton. While only modestly successful, Mattel's music career deepened my awareness of country and folk music produced by queer people. Through reading the work of musicologist Shana Goldin-Perschbacher, I discovered the Transamericana microgenre, consisting of trans and non-binary folk musicians including Canadian folk artist Rae Spoon (2015). When I taught an undergraduate folk music class at the University of Washington in summer 2019, I developed a lecture on queer folk musicians, drawing from my exploration of the above artists and the work of Goldin-Perschbacher and Nadine Hubbs.

In late summer of 2019, my friend Jack sent me a text recommending queer country artist Orville Peck just before I embarked on a two-hour flight between Hobart and Sydney while on a trip to Australia. I listened to his album *Pony* twice in a row, and many more times in the following months. Orville Peck is likely the alias of Daniel Pitout, the drummer of a queercore punk band Nü Sensae from Vancouver, BC. Orville Peck self-produced his album *Pony,* releasing it in collaboration with the Seattle-based Sub Pop label in early 2019. The sound of

Pony blends aesthetics from post-punk, indie folk, and shoegaze with country music. The themes of the album—sex, death, loss, and isolation—are not unusual for country music, but told through a distinctly queer point of view.

Kacey Musgraves's "Follow Your Arrow" started me on an exciting journey through Americana music, ranging from the country icons of the 1970s to queer folk and country musicians of the present day. After Orville Peck's debut, I dug deeper into queer country music to find a thriving sub-scene with rich history including Paisley Fields, Karen and the Sorrows, and the iconic Lavender Country. Originally from a farming community in rural Washington state (sources disagree on his exact hometown), singer-songwriter Patrick Haggerty became a gay activist while attending graduate school at the University of Washington in the 1970s, forming the gay country group Lavender Country in Seattle in 1972 (Dickinson 2000). The group released an eponymous album in 1973 and famously refused to "straighten" their act to appeal to mainstream fans, instead performing at Seattle's first Pride celebration in 1974 (ibid.), a profoundly queer public statement during the time period. Lavender Country is relatively unknown within mainstream culture, but they established a strong precedent for queer country music. After the publication of Chris Dickinson's article on Lavender Country in 2000 and Haggerty's song "Crying These Cocksucking Tears" was posted on YouTube later that decade, the band experienced a revival, inspiring a new generation of queer country musicians (Baume 2016). Haggerty was featured on an alternate version of Trixie Mattel's song "Stranger" in 2020 as a tribute to his iconic status as an artist and activist.

Between Patrick Haggerty and Orville Peck, the Pacific Northwest is somewhat of a center for queer country music. It is no coincidence that I became entranced by country music while living here. As much as I disliked mainstream country music and what I believed it stood for growing up in the Midwest, moving away from home gave me a renewed perspective on both country music and my home region.

From Heartland to Coast: Queerness and Regional Identity

At 24 years old, I was between my second and third years of teaching middle- and high-school band in Kansas City, Missouri. I had myself convinced that I loved my job and could do it for the rest of my life. That summer was difficult—I contracted mononucleosis which left me ill for several months, lost my beloved grandmother, and allowed a promising relationship to dissolve. I also felt trapped. I had lived only in Illinois and Missouri, and I wanted more. I remember spending weekends idly looking up *au pair* positions in Spain and Germany, interested in visiting Europe to work on developing proficiency in a language other than English. Halfway through my third year of teaching, I realized I had to make a change, and resolved to spend the next year researching graduate schools. While personal and professional development were my priorities, a not-insignificant reason for leaving teaching was to give myself an opportunity to get the hell out of the Midwest.

My early life was spent in unincorporated Madison County, Illinois. The house my father owned was situated on thirteen acres of land between the hamlets of Alhambra and Hamel in southern Illinois. When I was eight years old, I moved with my mother to the exurban town of Freeburg, IL, and later Smithton, IL, which I call my hometown. While soybeans form the backbone of the regional economy, the strip-mining of coal has played a substantial economic role over the last century. The outsourcing of soy production and the phasing out of coal led to the widespread collapse of the southern Illinois economy starting in the late 1980s, from which it has yet to recover. Working in academia and banking, respectively, my father and mother were left relatively untouched by the collapse of these economies. However, my father died in 1998, losing the battle to opioid addiction that he had struggled with for much of his life. After our move, my mother was profoundly affected by the outsourcing of financial management services and the subprime mortgage crisis of the 2000s, losing two careers during that decade.

My childhood was spent climbing fruit trees, collecting acorns and hickory nuts, fishing for bluegill in the nearby lake, and catching frogs in the spillway. I developed a love for animals, plants, and the outdoors that I retain today, and learned to keep myself entertained despite being quite lonely. In Freeburg and Smithton, friendships came and went, but music became my lifeline in high school after I joined the band. I slowly realized I was not straight when I found myself attracted to other boys. With no queer role models, or even an understanding that being queer was okay, I fell into a dark place. I struggled with suicidal thoughts and self-loathing through my teen years, telling no one for fear of rejection or violence.

I came out to my friend Lauren as gay when I was 19; she was also exploring her sexuality at the time. Besides having something else in common with my best friend, it was a relief to finally tell someone. I told more friends after spending two years in the refreshingly progressive atmosphere at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. I finally told my mom when I was 20. She was not hostile about it, but did not fully understand; it was over a year before we talked about it again. It took us the better part of a decade to process it together. Despite the relief of coming out to most of my friends and immediate family, the damage was done. As a queer person, I had firmly attached feelings of fear, self-loathing, and loneliness to the geography of my upbringing. These negative associations were compounded by the growing sense of desperation in my home region. During the 2010s, the hard times in southern Illinois deepened after the 2008 housing market collapse, increasing deindustrialization of local urban centers, and the ever-rising death toll of the opioid crisis.

After finishing my undergraduate degree in music education and three years of teaching in Kansas City, MO, I chose to leave secondary school teaching because I felt stuck. Interested in U.S. American music and (somewhat secretly) queer studies, I applied to three graduate programs in ethnomusicology in Indiana, St. Louis, and Seattle. Beyond the appeal of University of Washington's Ethnomusicology program, I jumped at the chance to move to Seattle, and loved the change once I moved. And what a change: the tallest trees I had ever seen, mild climate, salt water, and mountains on all sides; the liberal politics, progressive activism, and tolerance of difference. The distance from my hometown and teaching profession were freeing as well. No longer a public school teacher, I did not have to worry about whether or not my queer identity would be "too much" and result in ostracization or losing my job. However, I did little to engage with the local queer community in Seattle for over four years, and I initially chose to pursue research that made it again difficult to be out as a queer person. I learned that moving to a city with a progressive reputation was not a guarantee of feeling a sense of queer freedom—it was going to take self-work to find a healthy balance.

After a few years in Seattle, I began to experience a sense of nostalgia and wistfulness for the Midwest. In some ways, it was quite concrete—I was paying twice as much for half the space in Seattle versus Kansas City, I couldn't easily visit my family, and I was far from most of my lifelong friends. In other ways, it was more intangible. I did not feel a sense of instant intimacy and warm camaraderie with people that I felt as a Midwesterner in the Midwest; the hard work ethic and down-to-earth community ethos I knew from home were replaced by what I perceived as chilly politeness, virtue-signaling, and west coast individualism.

In early 2019, I read a book that profoundly changed my thinking about queerness and geography in the United States—*Real Queer America: LGBT Stories from Red States* by Samantha Allen (2018), a journalist who grew up and lived in many different conservative states in the Mountain West, Midwest, and South. After being raised male and Mormon in Utah, Allen came out as a transgender woman, transitioned, and met and married her female partner in Indiana, settling later in northern Florida. In *Real Queer America*, Allen retraced her geographic life journey, adding stops in conservative strongholds of the United States: Utah, Texas, Arkansas, Indiana, Tennessee, and Georgia. She argues that while queerness and queer communities are associated with coastal liberal centers—the destinations of "queer flight" for queers with the privilege of mobility—the majority of U.S. queers live in rural parts of the more conservative parts of the country, and deploy powerful community-organizing techniques to not only survive but thrive where they are rooted (ibid.). A complement to this argument is that the coastal liberal centers are not guaranteed safety zones for LGBTQ+ people, which Allen supports by citing the rising rates of anti-queer violence during the 2010s in places such as Seattle's iconic queer neighborhood, Capitol Hill (ibid.), which later became very real to me as I embarked upon immersive fieldwork in Seattle's queer community. Alongside these grim statistics is Allen's assertion that queers in "battle states" (e.g., conservative states in the Mountain West, Plains, Midwest, and South that do not have statewide protections for queer and trans people in terms of housing, employment, and anti-discrimination) have more active, more intimate, and more diverse queer social networks when compared to progressive states (ibid.). In urban centers on the coasts, queer people with significant privilege around race, class, gender presentation, and ability need not rely on queer social networks to survive and thrive, which results in more diffuse and unfocused communities in which identity divisions are greatly pronounced, and more vulnerable members of the queer community are disproportionately affected by anti-queer discrimination and violence.

Allen's work spoke deeply to me. As a queer with the privilege to move from the rural Midwest to the "greener pastures" of western Washington, I felt conflicted—guilty, even, for having left a queer community devastated by a drug crisis, deepening economic recession, and a suffocating wave of right-wing populism. I also felt a sense of pride in myself for having survived such difficult circumstances and for the queer people back home who managed to thrive, organize, and create art in difficult circumstances. Allen's book brought me newfound understanding of my regional culture that was reflected in the way I expressed my queer identity in Seattle, and contributed to the construction of my drag character.

Merging Music with a Queer Midwestern Masculinity: Conceiving a Drag King

My newfound respect for performances of queer masculinity, embrace of queer country music, and acknowledgement of my complex relationship to the Midwest intersected in September of 2019. With several months of fieldwork in Seattle's drag scene under my belt, I was ready to try my hand at the art of drag once again. However, I had a new character in mind—a sad, gay cowboy patterned after Orville Peck. This character became the product of my disidentificatory relationship with mainstream drag culture, country music, and my southern Illinois home. By remixing elements of regional identity, queer aesthetics, and popular culture, I found a way to express myself while also challenging the conception of what coastal LGBTQ+ culture and rural Midwestern culture look like, blending them together into a queer mashup of my own experiences.

My new drag character was meant to defy audience expectations. Creating a drag king character rather than reviving a queen persona was a conscious choice made as a rejection of the norms of mainstream drag culture, which valorizes drag queening but erases drag kings. I also made the decision to sing live, which complicates the idea that drag performance is centered around lip-syncing and allowed me an alternative mode of artistic expression. Most importantly, I wanted to create a rural character that was both dignified, yet non-traditional. There are virtually no positive representations of rural identity within mainstream drag culture. Narratives of drag queens from rural places on *Drag Race* tend to create distance between themselves from their country roots, furthering the idea that queer people can only find freedom of expression by rejecting rurality in favor of the cosmopolitan character of urban spaces. Occasionally, queens on *Drag Race* with rural backgrounds would make use of "hillbilly" stereotypes for comedic effect, such as the performances of Alabama native Trinity the Tuck on season 10 of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. In this context, rural identities are positioned as backwards, ignorant, and hopelessly anti-queer, Othered in comparison to the cosmopolitan, progressive, educated urban queer. While it is important to acknowledge that homophobia and transphobia are serious issues affecting rural queers—especially in states without LGBTQ+ protections or with anti-LGBTQ+ policies—it is just as harmful to position rural identity and queer identity as the antithesis of the other. The conditions that make life difficult for queer people in rural areas are part of larger systems of economic, social, and cultural marginalization at play—not simply because all rural people are bigots.

While mainstream country music tends to embrace conservatism and cisheteronormativity, queer country music expresses pride for rural lifestyles while making room for queer identities. I have noticed disconnects between country music and drag culture. While mainstream drag culture has embraced country music and aesthetics—Reba McEntire, Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, and Shania Twain are all gay icons and often impersonated by drag queens—there seems to be a lack of acknowledgement of queer country music, including legends like Lavender Country. The drag queen Trixie Mattel became the first queer country music icon for many fans of *Drag Race,* including myself, although her career is patterned largely after mainstream country icon Dolly Parton. As I discovered in my fieldwork, alternative drag artists in Seattle tended to avoid all country music, queer or mainstream. I would venture to assert that urban queer communities veer away from wholeheartedly embracing anything associated with rural culture and traditional values—including country music—because of their seeming incompatibility. I spent over a decade convincing myself that I would never like country music because I felt it was contrary to my queerness. As such, I wanted my drag character to embrace queer country music in a way that reveals that queerness can thrive in non-parodic representations of rural identity.

LGBTQ+ people in rural places work to create representations of queerness that reflect their regional identities. Many shoulder the burden of combatting homophobia and transphobia alongside oppressions rooted in economic marginality, regional stereotypes, white supremacy, and settler colonialism. Broadly blaming the Midwest and South for Donald Trump's rise to power while ignoring the complacency of coastal liberals undermines the remarkable organizing efforts made by grassroots activists in these regions, many of whom are rural and queer. With this in mind, I wanted to render rural queer identity visible within drag culture to help dismantle the idea that queer political activism can only be urban and cosmopolitan.

Having been raised male in southern Illinois, I have an intimate knowledge of how rural Midwest masculinity is constructed and performed. My goal was to create a version of rural

Midwest masculinity that poked fun at the idea of innate or natural gender without creating yet another redneck caricature. I also wanted to render queer Midwestern masculinities as visible and valid both as a method of self-exploration and expression, and as a tribute to the many incredible Midwestern queer people I encountered during my early adulthood.

Embodying John Queere: Serving Face, Voice, and Cowboy Boots

My drag king character was conceived as I explored the above issues, but was not embodied until December 2019. I first began experimenting with drag king makeup in September 2019, after several months of seeing drag kings performing live. The difference between king makeup and queen makeup may not be obvious to casual audiences, but the two styles are profoundly dissimilar—in fact, almost inverse of one another (see chapter 1). With experience in applying queen makeup, I thought creating a drag king look would be easy, but it took me several tries over a period of months to even grasp the basics.

In general, queen makeup serves to feminize the face. This complex transformation involves rounding out the cheeks, forehead, and jawline with contouring; using warmer foundation tones to negate the blueish shadows of stubble, brows, and sideburns; narrowing the nose; and creating fuller eyes and lips. Full body transformations typically involve augmenting the hips and breasts with pads, prosthetics, cosmetics, or surgery; removing or covering body hair; tucking back external genitalia to create a flatter crotch; utilizing feminine clothing, shoes, and jewelry; and feminizing performance with voice and gesture. My attraction to queerness as a person assigned male at birth (AMAB) involved learning how to strategically feminize my face, body, and performance both in drag and in my everyday life. Drag queens who were assigned female at birth (AFAB) still must utilize these techniques to create exaggerated representations of femininity in the construction of their queen personae. As I have learned from AFAB queens (like my drag sister Jinger), these performers do not automatically have an advantage at queening simply because they are AFAB. Very few bodies, regardless of their assigned sex at birth, meet the baseline of the larger-than-life drag femininity without augmentation.

King makeup serves to masculinize a face. Contouring creates a squarer jaw, forehead, and cheekbones; the brow becomes heavier and the larynx more pronounced. The nose is widened to appear larger and eyebrows are augmented to appear bushier. Warm colors are used to create a flush around the nose and cheeks, which makes the lower face and jaw appear cooler by contrast, creating the illusion of stubble. Facial hair is added with makeup or prosthetics. Full body transformations include taping back breasts; wearing larger, squarer clothing to conceal body curves; utilizing phallic packers or other objects to augment the appearance of external genitalia; painting on chest and abdominal muscles; and deepening the voice and utilizing sharper, shorter gestures to evoke masculinity. AMAB kings utilize many of these same techniques to construct their masculine drag personae, augmenting their features to create more convincing appearances of drag masculinity.

I chose the name "John Queere" for my character. The name is a play on "John Deere," a household name in rural places, especially the Midwest and South: John Deere is a prominent farm supply company that designs tractors, farm equipment, and apparel. When I was growing up, my father owned a John Deere tractor and riding mower that he used to maintain our land. He also had a John Deere baseball cap. Our family albums include photos of me as a toddler, perched on our tractor with my father, wearing his John Deere cap. These deep-seated memories combined with my desire to create a drag persona borne out of my rural Midwest identity gave birth to John Queere.

In November 2019, while I was beginning to write my dissertation, I connected with Adrienne Alton-Gust, another scholar working on a dissertation about drag performance in the United States. As part of her fieldwork, Adrienne created a drag king character, Yung King Cole. Adrienne's description of her drag alter-ego re-sparked my interest to perform live in drag, as I had only participated in the Seattle drag scene as an audience member. During my fieldwork, I worked regularly with Mercury Divine, a drag king in the Seattle community; their performances were among the first that taught me to recognize and value queer masculinity in drag performance. On the second Wednesday of each month, Mercury hosted an open stage night called *WERKshop Wednesdays* for amateur performers at Kremwerk, a popular queer nightclub in downtown Seattle. I had attended a few *WERKshops* as an audience member but never took the initiative to sign up. With encouragement from Adrienne and Mercury, I resolved to do drag before the end of the year, and finally signed up to perform at the final *WERKshop* of the year on December 11, 2019.

After committing to the show, John Queere's debut was assured—but how to embody him? I chose to sing live, which is not conventional among drag performers in the United States. Most drag artists lip-sync, selling their performances with dance, gesture, humorous interpretations of the music, and their interactions with the audiences. Feeling overwhelmed with my inexperience with stage performance and movement, I thought that singing live would both highlight a skill and cover for my relative inexperience in dance, lip-sync, and audience interaction. As Orville Peck remained my musical obsession, I chose "Dead of Night" as the song for John Queere's first performance. I was able to find a YouTube video of a karaoke version (i.e., the song with the vocals removed) of "Dead of Night," making my job at creating an mp3 track for the show much easier.

The sun goes down, another dreamless night
You're right by my side
You wake me up, you say it's time to ride
In the dead of night
Dead of night
Strange canyon roads, strange look in your eyes
You shut them as we fly, as we fly

Stark hollow town, Carson City lights
Baby let's get high
Spend a Johnny's cash, hitch another ride
We laugh until we cry
You say go fast, I say hold on tight
In the dead of night
Dead of night

See—see the boys as they walk on by,
See—see the boys as they walk on by.
As they walk on by (by)
As they walk on by (by)
As they walk on— (by)
It's enough to make a young man—

Six summers now, another dreamless night
You're not by my side
Scratch on the moon, like a familiar smile
Stained on my mind
Some other town, someone else's life
Dead in the night
In the night

See—see the boys as they walk on by
See—see the boys as they walk on by
See—see the boys as they walk on by
As they walk on by (by)
As they walk on by (by)
As they walk on— (by)
It's enough to make a young man—

By using Orville Peck's "Dead of Night," John Queere's characterization began to develop. With poetic, indirect language, the lyrics tell the story of an intimate relationship between two men in the rural Mountain West, culminating in the narrator's expression of loss and loneliness at the death of his partner. This narrative, and its carefully coded presentation, resonated with my personal experience as a queer from the Midwest. I felt I could easily tap into the emotional core of the song, particularly in the third verse where Peck's voice cracks with grief. As I practiced the song, I became more invested in the material. At one point, singing the third verse made me emotional to the point of being unable to perform as I grappled with the reality of queer oppression that has long haunted my life, the lives of my queer friends, and queer communities more broadly: the shadow of the HIV pandemic, losing loved ones to suicide, experiencing homophobic violence, the 2016 massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, and the ongoing epidemic violence against trans women of color. Music allowed me to tap into a vast well of emotion of which I was not even fully aware: queer pain, rage, sorrow, loss.

Beyond singing, embodying John Queere required a look. After signing up for *WERKshop Wednesday*, I needed to find a costume that appropriately reflected my character and the song I had chosen. Since men's clothing is plentiful in my wardrobe, many parts of my costume were already in my closet: cotton undershirts, flannel tops, men's jeans. However, if I really wanted to sell a rural cowboy character, I would need to acquire some new clothing. I spent a Saturday in early December combing Goodwill stores in Seattle. Thrift stores are very common destinations for drag artists and other queer performers, as the relatively low cost for clothing used for performance works for the relatively low budgets of drag artists. Drag is an expensive endeavor: very few make a full-time living from drag, and among those who can, many are *RuPaul's Drag Race* alumni who have international fanbases. The rest work full time jobs in addition to performing one to four nights a week. After four Goodwill stores (Ballard, Dearborn, Capitol Hill, and Shoreline) and one costume shop (Display & Costume in Northgate), I had a leather coat, cowboy hat, leather cowboy boots, leather belt, and a bolt of red sequins, all for under $100. I also bought a rust-orange handkerchief online and dug out a black Jägermeister ballcap I had won at a drag bingo in St. Louis the previous month. I spent a rainy December evening adding sequins to my hat, boots, and coat to create a more glitzy look for my stage performance: I did not want to be just a cowboy, I wanted to be a *draggy* cowboy.

In the meantime, I was practicing my song, committing the words and melody to memory. While Peck's vocals matched with my own natural vocal range, "Dead of Night" is not an easy song. The verses are in a low bass/baritone range, with the lowest notes being right at the bottom of my singing range. The chorus, however, jumps up two octaves into the head register, beginning with an octave grace-note flipping from chest register to head register—akin to the plaintive yodel common in country music. From the head register, the vocal melody of the chorus descends smoothly back into the chest voice before finally dropping two octaves back into the low register. This melody proved to be a challenge, but I managed it; I was lucky that my break between head voice and chest voice matched Peck's.

The day of the performance arrived. After work, I went home to change and do my makeup, which took about two hours. I contoured my forehead and cheeks to make my face more angular and augmented my existing facial hair to make it look more sculpted, which I achieved by hardening the lines of my beard and mustache with an eyebrow pencil and brown powder. I thickened my brows and used a palette of neutral colors to emphasize my eyes. With the addition of my costume, I morphed into John Queere (see Figures 29-30). The change was profound, and I felt funny: a mix of pride and joy at my transformation; but also more complex feelings of nostalgia, history, and homesickness at embodying a masculinity that I had worked so hard and for so long to reject. The overall effect was intoxicating, and I braved the dense evening traffic to Kremwerk.

Figure 29: Makeup detail for John Queere, including contoured cheeks, forehead, brow, and nose; thickened eyebrows and facial hair; and neutral colors around the eyes to add depth and dimension. Also of note: plaid shirt, burnt orange handkerchief (cowboy in the hanky code), and a Jägermeister ballcap. Photograph taken by the author, December 11, 2019.

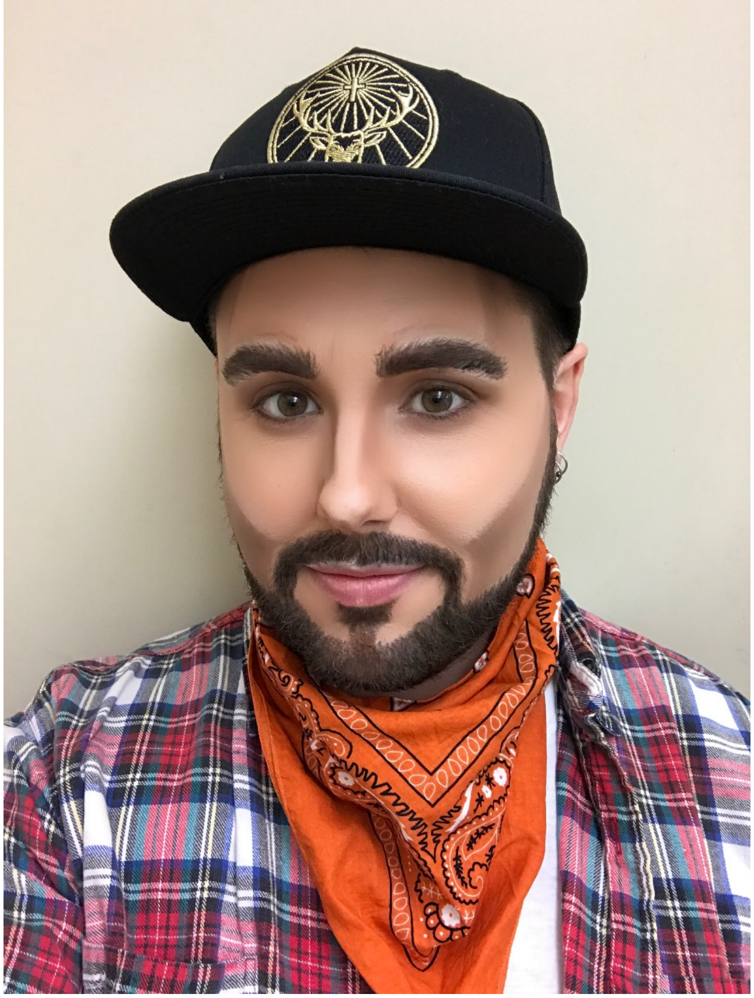
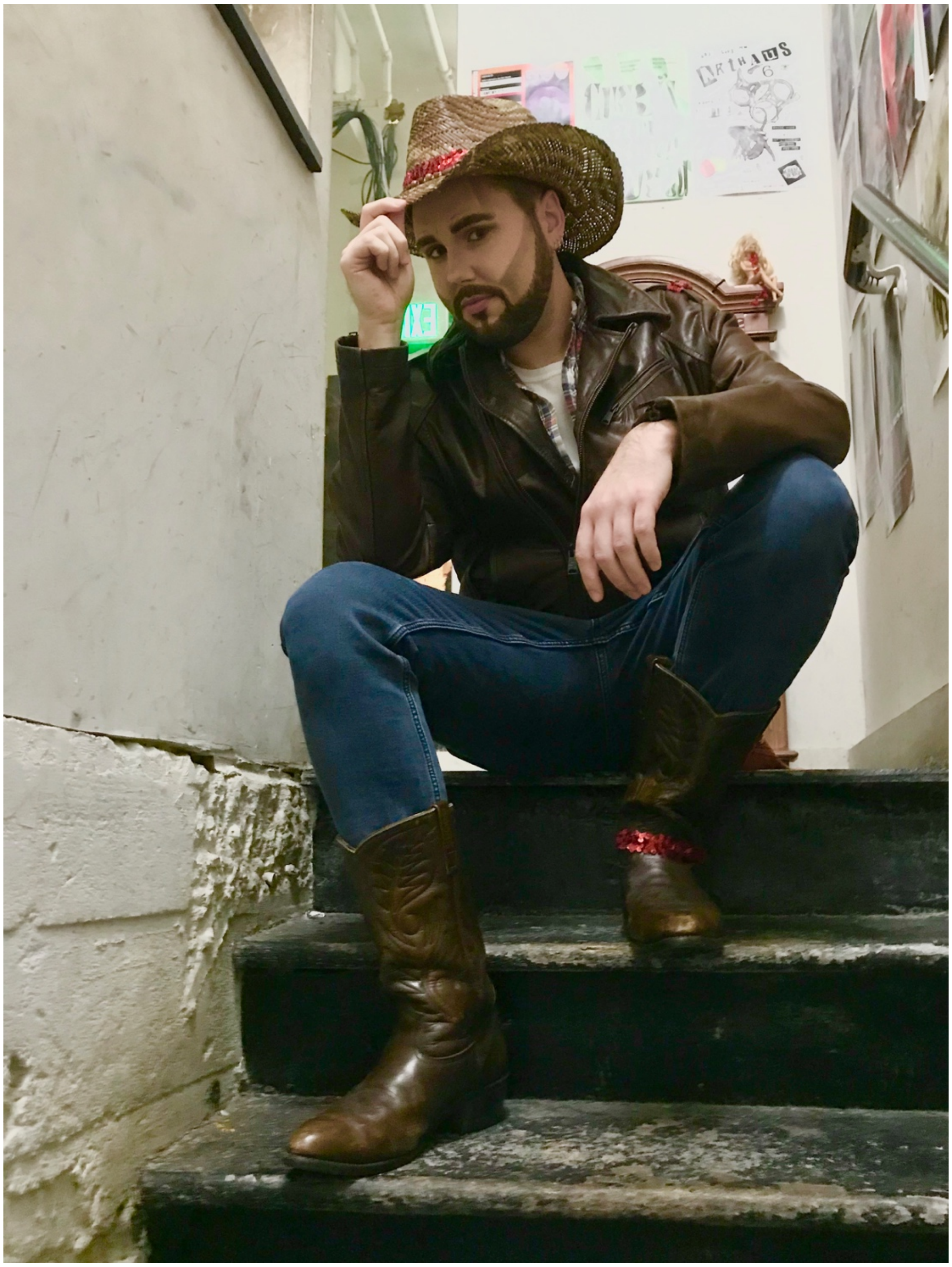


Figure 30: John Queere in full attire at Kremwerk, wearing a cowboy hat and boots, brown leather jacket, and blue jeans. I used red sequin accents on the hat, jacket, and left boot (originally, there were sequins on the right boot, but they fell off). Photograph taken by fellow cast member Alix Hard.



Despite traffic delays, I arrived very early and watched the venue staff set up the space for the performance. Mercury greeted me, and introduced me to the DJ who would be handling sound for the night. I did a sound check and was immediately nervous: my anxiety at live performance resulted in vocal tension, which made the complex transitions between chest and head voices exceedingly difficult. After the sound check, I headed upstairs to Little Maria's Pizza to meet my friend Jack for a slice of pizza before the show. As a trained vocalist, Jack gave me some useful tips to help relax my vocal cords before the show. I felt more confident in my ability to tackle the song.

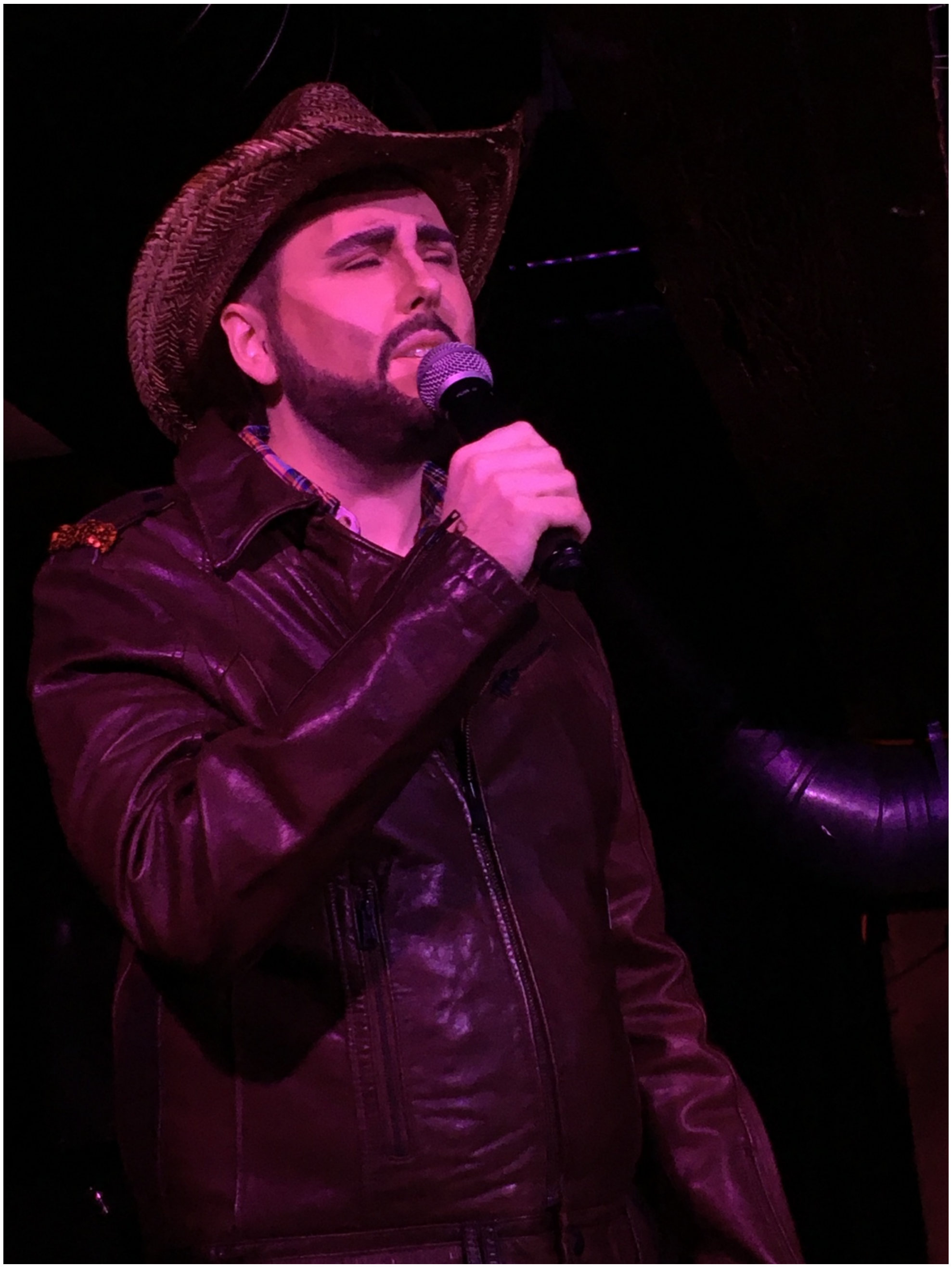
The show started at 8:30; I was scheduled to perform at 10:30. I watched the first half of the show from the audience with Jack and my friend Juliana, entertained by the other performers but also nervous as all hell for my upcoming number. At intermission, I went outside to do a few stress-relieving vocal warmups, chatting with Bruno Baewatch, another performer. He was very supportive and encouraging, which helped me relax before my number. This was a new experience for me: despite having been researching the drag scene in Seattle for the last month, I had never chatted with a drag performer *as a fellow performer.* Over the night, I noticed this shift: a sense of camaraderie, a more "in" feel; even though before I was a fellow queer coming to see queers do art, being part of the show represented a new level of intimacy with drag culture. This was particularly pronounced with Mercury Divine, the host. I had been attending Mercury's shows regularly over the last year, but this was the warmest they had ever been with me. I imagine that my commitment to performing alongside them in one of their shows had broken down some of the wall between researcher/subject, interviewer/interviewee, audience/performer, and insider/outsider.

10:30 arrived: Mercury introduced me, talking up my "real" talent and "real" skill as a musician. I found this interesting, and not unique to this moment. Singing live, and being a graduate student in a music program, had long made me exceptional to drag artists in Seattle. I believe this reflects the relative professionalization of music, an art form perceived as restricted to those with training and talent, situated “above” the arts of lip-syncing, gender performance, and keeping an audience entertained. This recurring attitude perplexed me: yes, I was a trained musician (in woodwinds, nonetheless, which actually led to some insecurity around singing in public given that I was not a trained singer). However, I did not see myself as inherently more talented than the other performers—quite the opposite! The way the other performers moved their bodies, lip-synced, occupied the stage, gestured, interacted with the audience—these skills seemed above and beyond to me.

During my introduction, Mercury also noted the resurgence of country music—particularly queer country music (there was a previous duet in the show, drag queen Jolene Granby and her performance partner David, who did a country number). As a person raised in rural Georgia, Mercury related to the audience a similar story as my own, involving actively counter-identifying with country music because of its association with rural conservativism and anti-queerness. They also relayed my invocation of queer history that I wove into my costume with the burnt orange handkerchief. I referenced the “hanky code” used primarily in the 1970s, in which gay and queer men in the United States would wear color-coded handkerchiefs in their back pockets to cruise for sex and intimacy. Left/right position indicated active/passive positioning while the color indicated the sex or intimate act. For instance, a light blue handkerchief in the right back pocket signaled one’s willingness to perform oral sex, while a light blue handkerchief on the left back pocket signaled one’s willingness to receive oral sex. Known only to other queer people at the time, the hanky code was a way to publicly express queer desire without threat of violence or exposure. I sought to invoke this bit of classic queer history by wearing a rust-orange handkerchief in my left back pocket, signaling I was a cowboy (fitting my character; if I had worn it in my right back pocket, I would have been signaling my willingness to be a cowboy's "horse").

As Mercury announced my name and the audience applauded, I walked onstage and stood in front of the microphone. I closed my eyes as the opening bars of "Dead of Night" began. The lights were bright, even through my eyelids, and I leaned into the microphone to softly croon the first verse, which came to me effortlessly (see Figure 31). As the second verse began, I pulled the mic from the stand, and disaster struck—the microphone began to malfunction! Without missing a word or a beat—my relentless practice had paid off—I fiddled with the microphone as it died of a low battery. As I did so, I noticed someone in the first row holding out a dollar bill—a tip for my performance! Dazed, I leaned forward to accept the tip, and Mercury suddenly appeared from backstage to give me their microphone in place of my malfunctioning one. Whew! Problem solved! Excellent hosting by Mercury Divine. I took the tip from the audience member and noticed many more crumpled bills on the stage—wow! People were tipping my performance! All the while, I had been singing the second verse. Looking back, I am so relieved I had practiced the song to the point of knowing the words so intimately to not have dropped a single word. For artists who lip-sync, losing track of one's words can be easily masked with a number of tricks, such as physically turning around, faking lyrics, or using gesture to divert the audience. The song plays on with the words still intact, so aural cues of a lip-sync mistake are nonexistent. However, if you stop singing mid-performance, the mistake is more obvious to your audience.

Figure 31: John Queere singing "Dead of Night" on the stage of *WERKshop Wednesday* in December 2019. Photograph by Jack Flesher.



Feeling emboldened by surviving the microphone mishap, I moved into the chorus, adequately executing the tricky vocal break. I could see people throwing tips, and I felt stronger and more confident. I moved into the third verse—the verse expressing longing and loss—

pushing emotion into my voice. I had hoped to move myself to tears as I had done a few times during practice, but I think that I was too elated and hyped on adrenaline to access that emotion and had to fake it instead. As I finished the second and final chorus, I used the orange handkerchief in my back pocket to dab at my eyes as if I were crying, dropping it during the outro as I moved offstage. Success—I was done!

Backstage, the stage kitten—a person who collects thrown tips and anything dropped/taken off by the performer during the number—returned my handkerchief and handed me a wad of money. I had made over twenty dollars in tips (ten of it being in Canadian dollars, from Jack). I was elated. People had enjoyed my performance enough to tip me! Later, I received congratulations from other cast members and from Mercury. The feeling was wonderful: I was a part of drag culture, not just an observer of it.

The Future of John Queere

I signed up to perform as John Queere at *WERKshop Wednesday* again, three months later in March 2020; however, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted my plans and I have yet to perform live a second time. In September 2020, inspired by the renaissance of digital drag that allowed queer artists to continue practicing their art in the era of lockdowns, I developed a digital drag number as John Queere. However, my character concept for my second performance was markedly different from my first, as I simply had difficulty connecting rural queer masculinity to my song choice and performance style (see chapter 6). With that said, I have new ideas for John Queere that I look forward to exploring further after the completion of this dissertation.

I spent a great deal of my life distancing myself from masculinity, country music, and my rural Midwestern roots. However, over the course of my research, queer performance helped me to reconnect with parts of myself that I had rejected. Besides contesting the supremacy of queening in mainstream drag culture, drag artists in the Seattle scene helped me realize that I could claim aspects of masculinity without losing my femininity, queerly blending the two into new and exciting forms of self-expression. This phenomenon is what drew me to alternative drag, as this form of drag often remixes gender and identity in ways that question the fixity of masculinity on male-appearing bodies and femininity on female-appearing bodies (whether in or out of drag). Alternative drag artists' use of sonic queerness in performance brought me a sense of pride in being myself. Upon reflection, I realized I had been pressuring myself to conform to external standards of queerness—urban, cosmopolitan, effeminate—rather than just existing as a queer person. Similarly, queer country music allowed me to connect with a genre of music that I never felt comfortable embracing, as artists like Lavender Country and Orville Peck challenged my bias about rurality and queerness. An appreciation for queer masculinity and queer country music allowed me to reconnect with my home region. With a new understanding of my own biases, I felt a renewed link to my rural Midwestern roots. John Queere became an embodiment of my process as well as a therapeutic outlet for the emotions dredged up by critical self-reflection.

The process of developing John Queere mirrored the way I made sense of my research materials when crafting this dissertation. Seattle drag artists perform a complex dance of identity, using queer public spaces to create art that makes room for queer bodies within both popular culture and mainstream drag culture. By remixing referents from popular music, politics, history, gender, and queer culture, alternative drag functions as a disidentificatory mode of performance that rejects cisnormative conventions and provides a model for queer futurity. Unlike mainstream drag culture, which is defined by restrictive ideas on what drag is and who can practice it, alternative drag welcomes perspectives that are less visible within the LGBTQ+ community. In Seattle, it is a community where I have the space to explore my relationship to queerness, gender, and rurality through drag performance, and I am grateful for the circumstances that led me to this place of self-reflection and healing.

Appendix 1: List of Performers

This list reflects performers I saw live, heard about within the community, or were otherwise active queer performance artists in the Seattle scene in 2019. The three rightmost columns (regular venues, titles known, and hosted shows during 2019) are likely incomplete, given the overwhelming number of performers, venues, and shows in the scene. Some artists ceased performing during 2020 in light of the pandemic; others were not performing even in 2019 but were still well-known enough to be mentioned at shows or in conversation.

Performer name	***Instagram @***	***Style(s) observed***	***Regular venue(s)***	***Titles known***	***Hosted shows during 2019***
Adé A Cônnére	adeahmir	Queen	Re-Bar		
Al Lykya	mr.al.lykya	Burlesque	queer/bar		
Aleksa Manila	aleksamanila	Queen		Many	
Alessandra Hunt	earvinryann	Queen	Kremwerk, R Place		
Americano	farm_wreck_barbie	Queen, alt-drag	Kremwerk		
Amora Dior Black	amoradiorblack	Queen	R Place	Washington Entertainer of the Year, 2017	Lashes @ R Place
Andrew Scott	queenandrew_	Queen, impersonation	Julia's		
Angel Baby Kill Kill Kill	angelbabykillkillkill	Alt-drag	Kremwerk		
Angela Visalia	angelavisalia	Queen	R Place		
Annabell De-Vil (Alix Hard)	jordonmeinke	King, queen, alt-drag	Kremwerk		
Arrhythmio	arrhythmiuhhh	King, alt-drag, performance art	Kremwerk, Copious		
Arrietty	arrietty.1	Queen, king, alt-drag	Kremwerk, others		
Arson Nicki	arsonnicki	Alt-drag, DJ	Kremwerk		Rapture @ Kremwerk
Baby Witch	imthebabywitch	Queen, alt-drag	Kremwerk		Baby's Play Pen @ Kremwerk
Beau Degas	beau_degas	Queen, alt-drag	Kremwerk		Arthaus @ Kremwerk
BenDeLaCreme	bendelacreme	Queen, burlesque, actor	Varies	Contestant, s6 of RPDR and s4 of RPDR All-Stars	Many
Betty Wetter	betty.wetter	Queen, alt-drag	queer/bar, Cha Cha Lounge, others		Heels @ the Cha Cha Lounge; others
Bitch Hazel	margaret.at.the.office	ALt-drag	Kremwerk, Studio Current		Arthaus @ Kremwerk
Bosco	thisisbosco	Alt-drag	queer/bar, Neighbors		
Briq House	ms.briqhouse	Burlesque	queer/bar		
Bruno Baewatch	bruno.baewatch	Burlesque	Kremwerk		
Butylene O'Kipple	butyleneokipple	Queen, alt-drag	Cha Cha Lounge		Heels @ the Cha Cha Lounge
Cannoli (Salvador Saber)	livecannoli	Queen, king, impersonation	Kremwerk, others		Kings @ Kremwerk
Carmen Dioxide	carmen_dioxide_queen	Queen, alt-drag			

Ceasar Hart	ceasarhart	King	Kremwerk		
Cesare the Drag Prince	cesare_drag_prince	King, alt-drag	Kremwerk		
Chaos X Machina	chaosxmachina	Burlesque	Kremwerk, others		
Cookie Couture	cookiecouturequeen	Queen, alt-drag	Kremwerk, R Place, others		So You Think You Can Drag @ R Place; WEIRD @ Kremwerk; Drag Queen Story Time @ King County Public Libraries; West End Girls @ Skylark
Cranberry	sheiscranberry	Queen	Skylark		
Cucci Binaca	cuccibinaca	Alt-drag	Kremwerk		Cucci's Critter Barn @ Kremwerk
Daddy Issues	daddyissuesdrag	Alt-drag	Kremwerk, queer/bar	Mx. Gay Washington	
Dean the Vampire King	dean.the.vampire.king	King, alt-drag	Kremwerk	Mr. Gay Seattle	
Deeva Deveraux-St. Laurent		Queen		Olympia 48 Empress	
Dina Martina	dinamartina	Alt-drag	Re-bar, others		The Dina Martina Christmas Show
Dion Dior Black	diondiorblack	Bearded queen	R Place	National Bearded Queen 2019	
D'Monica Leone	dmonica_leone	Queen, burlesque			
Dolce Vida	dolcedelavida	Queen	R Place		
DonnaTella Howe	donnatellahowe	Queen	Kremwerk	Olympia 45, Miss Gay Seattle 48, Imperial Princess 37 of Seattle	
Doreen DeLuscious (Rick Sinner)	dorinedeluscious	Burlesque, king	Kremwerk		
Drew Paradisco	drewparadisco	Queen	Various	Olympia 47, Miss Gay Seattle 51, Miss Gay Washington 16-17	
Duchess Drew Nightshade	theduchessdrew	Queen	Kremwerk, others	Miss Gay Seattle 54	
Emory Stone D	emory_stone.d	Alt-drag, burlesque	Kremwerk		
Eucalypstick	eucalypstick	Queen			
Faggedy Randy	faggedyrandy	Burlesque	queer/bar, others		
Femme Daddy	jesthedeluxe	Queen			
Fraya Love	fraya_love	Queen, alt-drag			
Freeza D’lust	freeza_dlust	Queen	R Place, Kremwerk		
Gaysha Starr	gaysha.starr	Queen			
Glambrosia Salad	sashabailey	Queen, alt-drag	Kremwerk		
Holli B. Sinclair	hollibsinclair	Queen	R Place		
Hot Pink Shade	hotpinkshade	Queen	Kremwerk		
Irene DuBois	queenirenedubois	Queen, alt-drag	Kremwerk, R Place, queer/bar, Julia's	Winner, s1 of SYTYCD	
Isaac Scott	isaacscottqueen	Queen, impersonation	Julia's		

Isabella Extynn	isabellaextynn	Queen	R Place		
Isis	chi.sherman	Queen	Kremwerk		
Issa Man	issamanofficial	Queen, alt-drag	R Place, Kremwerk, others		
Jackie Hell	jackiehell	Queen, alt-drag			
James Majesty	jamesmajesty	Queen, alt-drag	Does not live in Seattle	Finalist, s2 of Dragula	
Jane Don't	janedont.jpg	Bearded queen			
Jaxen Brown	jaxenbrown	Queen, impersonation	Julia's		
Jelli Monster	jelli.monster	Alt-drag	Kremwerk		
Jessica Paradisco St Laurent	the_jessicaparadisco	Queen	Kremwerk, others	Imperial Princess 42 of Seattle	
Jesus La Pinga	jesuslapinga	Burlesque	Kremwerk, others		
Jinkx Monsoon	thejinkx	Queen, musician, actor	Varies	Winner, s5 of RPDR	
John Queere	jmk_29	King	Kremwerk		
Jolene Granby	jolenegranby	Queen	Kremwerk		
Julien Hellfire	julien.hellfire.burlesque	Burlesque	Kremwerk		
Kahlua Ice	pgerardblakes	Queen	Kremwerk	Miss Gay Seattle 28, Miss Gay Washington	
Kaleena Markos	kaleenamarkos	Queen, impersonation	queer/bar, Julia's		
Karmen Korbel	karmenkorbel	Queen	queer/bar		
Kenzie Kardashian	j_kardashian206	Queen			
Kida Rarity	kida.rarity	Queen	R Place		
Killer Bunny	sir_killer_bunny	Queen, king	Kremwerk		
Kitty Glitter	kittyglitterqueen	Bearded queen	queer/bar		
Klaudya Markos	latinbarbie.klaudya	Queen, impersonation	Julia's		
Kristie Champagne	kristiechampagne	Queen, impersonation	Julia's, queer/bar		
Kung Pow Meow	kungpowmeow	Queen	R Place, queer/bar	Runner-up, s2 of SYTYCD	
Kylie Mooncakes	xmooncakes	Queen	Kremwerk, others		Bang the Gong @ Kremwerk
La Saveona Hunt	lasaveonahunt	Queen	queer/bar		Various shows at queer/bar
Ladie Chablis	ladiechablis	Queen	R Place	Olympia 49	Lashes @ R Place
Lazarus Rise	lazarus_rise	King, alt-drag, burlesque	Cha Cha Lounge, Kremwerk, others		
Leilani Glamazon	leilaniglamazonofficial	Queen	Kremwerk		
Londyn Bradshaw	londy.bradshaw	Queen, alt-drag	Kremwerk, others	Miss Gay Seattle 53, Imperial Princess 43	WEIRD @ Kremwerk; NOIR @ Kremwerk; watch party @ Little Maria's
LüChi (drag duo act of Ümlaut and Isis)	lifewithluchi	Queens	Kremwerk		
Mad Madyx	madmadyxx	King, alt-drag	Kremwerk		
Magnolia Crawford	magnoliacrawford	Queen	Quit drag after RPDR	Contestant, s6 of RPDR	
Mama Tits	themamatits	Queen, musician, actor	Travels extensively		Seattle Pride

Manica	hello_manica	Queen, musician	Kremwerk		
Melody Lush	theonlymelodylush	Queen	Kremwerk, Julia's		
Mercury Divine	mercurydivine	King, alt-drag, cosplay, burlesque	Kremwerk, Rendezvous, others		Werkshop Wednesdays @ Kremwerk; Kings @ Kremwerk; ReBel's Drag Race @ The Rendezvous
Michete	michetemusic	Queen, musician	Kremwerk		
Mila Skyy	missmilaskyy	Queen	R Place		Lashes @ R Place
Miss Texas 1988 (John Jacob Jingleheimer Shit)	misstexas1988	Queen, alt-drag, king, performance art	R Place, Wildrose, Kremwerk, others	Winner, s2 of SYTYCD	Wild Thorns @ The Wildrose; Rat City Cruise @ Swallow Bar
Monikkie Shame	monikkieshame	Alt-drag		Contestant, s2 of Dragula	
Noah Spades	noahspades	King	Kremwerk		
Noona	noonaqween_	Queen	Kremwerk		Beat @ Little Maria's
Nyx Moons	nyx.moons	Alt-drag	Cha Cha Lounge		
Old Witch	old_witch_queen	Queen, alt-drag	Kremwerk, Cha Cha Lounge, others		WEIRD @ Kremwerk; Rat City Cruise @ Swallow Bar; Soft Shock @ Kremwerk
Oliver Heart	mxoliverheart	King	Kremwerk		
One	onelikethenumbertwo	Alt-drag	Studio Current		
Parker Perry	lilahadway	King	Kremwerk		
PhoeNyx	phoenyx_official	Queen	R Place		
Robbie Turner	therobbieturner	Queen	Quit drag in 2018	Contestant, s8 of RPDR	
Romi	showme.romi	Queen	Cha Cha Lounge, others		
Rowan Ruthless	thequeenrowan	Queen	Kremwerk, others		Cry Baby @ Kremwerk
Ruby Mimosa	rubymimosa	Burlesque	queer/bar, others	Member of The Atomic Bombshells troupe	Burlesque Karaoke @ queer/bar
Rylee Raw	ryleeraww	Queen	R Place, queer/bar, Little Maria's		Beat @ Little Maria's
Sam I'Am	mxsamiam / wigsbysam	King	Kremwerk		
Samuel L. JackYouSon	diva_down	King	Kremwerk		Kings @ Kremwerk
Sativa	sativathequeen	Queen			
SHE	whothefuckisshetho	Bearded queen	Kremwerk, others		
Sigh Wren	sigh_wren	Queen	Kremwerk		
Siren Hung St. James	sirenthebarbie	Queen	queer/bar, Kremwerk	Ms. Gay Seattle 14, WA Entertainer of the Year 2018-19	
Skarlet Dior Black	skarletdiorblack	Queen	Kremwerk		NOIR @ Kremwerk
Solana Solstice	solanasolstice	Queen, burlesque	Cha Cha Lounge		
Stacey Starstruck	stacey.starstruck	Queen	queer/bar, Kremwerk		
Star Swagg	starswagg2020	King, hip hop artist	Kremwerk		
Stasia Coup	stasia_coup	Queen			

Strawberry Shartcake	strawberryshartcakeofficial	Alt-drag	queer/bar, R Place		
Sugar Darling	sugar.teeth	Alt-drag	Kremwerk		
Sylvia O'Stayformore	sylviaostay	Queen	Palace Theater		Bacon Strip @ Palace Theater & Art Bar
Thadayus	thadayusking	King	Kremwerk		
Thistle Thornbox	thistle_bitch_	Queen, alt-drag	Copious, Kremwerk		
Tinashea Monét	tinasheamonet	Queen			
Troia Prince	troiaprince	Queen	Little Maria's		
Uh Oh	chaseburnsy	Alt-drag	Kremwerk		
Ümlaut	luklupe	Queen	Kremwerk		
Vel Veeta	vel_veeta	Queen	Kremwerk		
Victor Parallax	vparallax	Burlesque	Rendezvous		
Vincent Milay	vincent_milay	King	Kremwerk, Wildrose		Wild Thorns
Violetta Sparxx (Kennedy Kardashian Monét)	misskennedyk	Queen	R Place	Washington Entertainer of the Year, 2020	
Visage "Legs" LaRue	visagelarue	Queen	Kremwerk, R Place		
Vivienne Duchanne	ms_duchanne	Queen	R Place	Queen of Hearts Seattle 2018-19	
Voodoo Nightshade	voodoonightshade	Queen, alt-drag	Kremwerk		
Waxie Moon	waxiemoon	Queen, burlesque	queer/bar		
Willy Nilly	thewillynilly	Burlesque	queer/bar, others		
Whispurr Water-Shadow	whispurrwatershadow	Queen	Kremwerk, Neighbors		

Appendix 2: Dissertation Discography

Introduction
“Satisfied” Renée Elise Goldsberry and Lin-Manuel Miranda (2015)
“Tempo” Lizzo ft. Missy Elliott (2019)

Chapter 1
“Irresistible” Blair St. Clair (2018)
“Supermodel (You Better Work)” RuPaul Charles (1992)
“Vogue” Madonna (1990)
“Crazy in Love” Beyoncé ft. Jay-Z (2003)
“Back of the Truck” Michete (2020)

Chapter 2
“The Edge of Glory” Lady Gaga (2011)
“Doll-Dagga Buzz-Buzz Ziggety-Zag” Marilyn Manson (2003)
“10%” KAYTRANADA ft. Kali Uchis (2019)

Chapter 3
“A Thousand Miles” Vanessa Carlton (2001)
“Inner Universe” Yoko Kanno and Origa (2003)

Chapter 4
“Crazy” Gnarls Barkley (2006)
“Crazy” Patsy Cline (1961)
“I’m Your Baby Tonight” Whitney Houston (1990)
“Call Your Girlfriend” Robyn (2010)
“I Blocked Your Number” Cazwell (2014)
“Telephone” Lady Gaga ft. Beyoncé (2010)
“Phone” Lizzo (2016)
“Only Girl (In the World)” Rihanna (2010)
“Be Mean” DNCE (2016)
“Part of Your World” Disney/Jodi Benson (1989)
“Freakshow” Britney Spears (2007)

Chapter 5
“Like a Girl” Lizzo (2019)
“Go the Distance” Disney (1997)
“Stronger” Kelly Clarkson (2012)
“Can’t Hold Us” Macklemore & Ryan Lewis ft. Ray Dalton (2011)
“Formation” Beyoncé (2016)
“Impeach the President” The Honey Drippers (1973)
“Bye Bye Bye” N*SYNC (2000)
“The Star Spangled Banner” Whitney Houston (1991)
“It’s Not Right, But It’s Okay (Thunderpuss Dance Mix)” Whitney Houston (1999)

Chapter 6

“Better Off Alone” Alice Deejay (1999)
“Moral of the Story” Ashe (2019)
“Levitating” Dua Lipa (2020)
“Over the Rainbow” Judy Garland (1939)
“Zoo Be Zoo Be Zoo” Sophia Loren (1960)
“Faith” George Michael (1987)
“Dancing On My Own” Robyn (2010)
“Supernature (Instrumental Climax Edit)” Cerrone (2018)
“Walkin’ After Midnight” Patsy Cline (1957)
“Imposible” Natalia Lafourcade ft. Leon Larregui (2012)

Epilogue

“Money Money Money” ABBA (1976)
“Follow Your Arrow” Kacey Musgraves (2013)
“Cryin’ Those Cocksucking Tears” Lavender Country (1973)
“Stranger” Trixie Mattel ft. Lavender Country (2020)
“Dead of Night” Orville Peck (2019)

Bibliography

Academy of Television Arts & Sciences. 2021. "*RuPaul's Drag Race:* Awards and Nominations," https://www.emmys.com/shows/rupauls-drag-race. Accessed 01/18/2021.

Aitkenhead, Decca. 2018. "RuPaul: 'Drag is a big f-you to make-dominated culture'" in *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/mar/03/rupaul-drag-race-big-f-you-to-male-dominated-culture. Accessed 10/30/2020.

Alaska 5000 and Willam Belli. 2021. "HOT GOSS #81: 'Ring in the Ru-Year, PV Divas and Kevin McHale!" *Race Chaser with Alaska & Willam.* January 8. https://open.spotify.com/episode/3AbMzw5CDiwp8qjJQI1BeL?si=d738SPofQ9yZagewZLInzw. Accessed 01/21/2021.

Allen, Samantha. 2018. *Real Queer America: LGBT Stories from Red States.* New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Althusser, Louis. 1971. *Lenin and Marxism and Other Essays,* trans. Ben Brewster, 127-87. New York: Monthly Review Press.

American Psychiatric Association. 2020. "Gender Dysphoria Diagnosis," https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/education/transgender-and-gender-nonconforming-patients/gender-dysphoria-diagnosis. Accessed 12/03/2020.

Atkins, Gary. 2011. *Gay Seattle: Stories of Exile and Belonging.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Aufderheide, Patricia. 2015. "Copyright and Fair Use in Remix: From Alarmism to Action." In *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies,* ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough, 270-82. New York: Routledge.

AVN Staff. 2018. "Plexstorm's Streaming Site Connects Porn Gamer Girls with Fans." *AVN Media Network* https://avn.com/business/articles/technology/plexstorm-to-launch-worlds-first-adult-game-streaming-platform-755942.html. Accessed 01/10/2021.

Bailey, Marlon. 2013. *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Barthes, Roland. 1977. "The Death of the Author." In *Image, Music, Text,* trans. S. Heath, 142-48. New York: Hill and Wang.

Barz, Gregory and Willian Cheng (ed.). 2019. *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Baume, Matt. 2016. "Gay Country Superstar Patrick Haggerty Is Still 'Cryin' Those Cocksucking Tears.'" *VICE* https://www.vice.com/en/article/4w5vm9/cryin-those-cocksucking-tears-the-legacy-of-lavender-country-patrick-haggerty-gay-country-superstar. Accessed 01/28/2021.

Bean, Annemarie; Hatch, James V.; and Brooks McNamara (ed.). 1996. *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Bean, Annemarie. 2001. *Female Impersonators in Blackface Minstrelsy.* Dissertation: New York University.

Beekman, Daniel. 2020. "Seattle LGBTQ Commission, in close vote, calls on Mayor Jenny Durkan to resign." *The Seattle Times* https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/seattle-lgbtq-commission-in-close-vote-calls-on-mayor-jenny-durkan-to-resign/.
Accessed 12/07/2020.

Benjamin, Walter. 1936. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Essay.

Billboard. 2020. "Whitney Houston Chart History." https://www.billboard.com/music/whitney-houston/chart-history/HSI. Accessed 10/06/2020.

Birk, Mette. 2015. "The Panopticon of Ethical Video Remix Practice." In *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies,* ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough, 246-57. New York: Routledge.

Bixby, Scott. 2016. "Trump on Colin Kaepernick: 'He should find a country that works better for him.'" *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/aug/29/donald-trump-colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest. Accessed 10/06/2020.

Bonenfant, Yves. 2014. "Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres." *Performance Research* 15(3): 74-80.

Brennan, Niall and David Gudelunas (ed.). 2017. *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture: The Boundaries of Reality TV.* Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bronski, Michael. 2011. *A Queer History of the United States.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Buckner, Jocelyn. 2012. "'Spectacular Opacities': The Hyers Sisters' Performances of Respectability and Resistance." *African American Review* 45(3): 309-23.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge.

Casey, Kathleen B. 2015. *The Prettiest Girl on Stage Is a Man: Race and Gender Benders in American Vaudeville.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Cha Cha Lounge Seattle. 2020. "About." https://chachalounge.com/seattle/about.php. Accessed 11/13/2020.

Chang, Vanessa. 2009. "Records That Play: The Present Past in Sampling Practice." *Popular Music* 28(2): 143-59.

Charles, RuPaul. 1995. *Lettin' It All Hang Out: An Autobiography.* New York: Hyperion Books.

Chauncey, George. 1994. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940.* New York: Basic Books.

Chetwynd, Phoebe. 2020. "Postfeminist Hegemony in a Precarious World: Lessons in Neoliberal Survival from RuPaul's Drag Race." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 21(3): 22-35.

Cider, Landon. 2016. "Dear *Drag Race*: It's Time to Let Kings Compete." *The Advocate* https://www.advocate.com/television/2016/9/01/dear-drag-race-its-time-let-kings-compete

Cohen, Cathy. 1997. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 3(4): 437-65.

Cohen, Cathy. 2019. "The Radical Potential of Queer?: Twenty Years Later." *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 25(1): 140-44.

Condren, Chelsea. 2018. "Far from a Drag: How One Library Embraced Drag Queen Story Hour." *Children & Libraries* 16(1): 21-22.

Connor, Steven. 2000. *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Constine, Josh. 2016. "Instagram launches disappearing Live video and messages." *TechCrunch* https://techcrunch.com/2016/11/21/instagram-live/. Accessed 01/06/2021.

Couture, Cookie. 2020. "Butylene O'Kipple." *Queen4Queen: The Podcast* featuring Butylene O'Kipple. January 30.
https://open.spotify.com/episode/25xDNtP6FGMm24H1DLz1pg?si=044LN55lSNCC1_BuLv7pMg
Accessed 08/01/2020.

Couture, Cookie. 2020. "Rowan Ruthless." *Queen4Queen: The Podcast* featuring Rowan Ruthless. February 14. https://open.spotify.com/episode/0WjoGogrYjWJD0zPeG5tPv?si=B-XUwZsnTjW134H9d2zE6g. Accessed 08/01/2020.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 4(1): 139-68.

Croft, Cassandra. 2020. “Drag Kings: An Interview with Samuel L. Jack You Son.” *The Buzz.* https://rudysbarbershop.com/blogs/buzz/drag-kings-an-interview-with-samuel-l-jack-you-son.

Crowley, Walt. 1999. “Seattle voters reject Initiative 13 and uphold gay and lesbian rights on November 7, 1978.” *HistoryLink.org.* https://www.historylink.org/File/1403. Accessed 10/24/2020.

Daggett, Chelsea. 2017. “‘If You Can’t Love Yourself, How in the Hell You Gonna Love Somebody Else?’: Drag TV and Self-Love Discourse.” In *RuPaul’s Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture,* ed. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, 271-85. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Darity, William and Kirsten Mullen. 2020. *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Davenport, Jeremiah. 2017. *From The Love Ball to RuPaul: The Mainstreaming of Drag in the 1990s.* Dissertation: Case Western Reserve University.

Deleuze, G., and F. Guattari. 1987. “Introduction: Rhizome.” In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. B. Massumi, 3-25. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Desreumeaux, Geoff. 2014. “The Complete History of Instagram.” *WERSM* https://wersm.com/the-complete-history-of-instagram/. Accessed 01/06/2021.

Devitt, Rachel. 2009. *Girl on Girl: Passing, Ambivalence, and Queer Musical Time in Gender Performative Negotiations of Popular Music.* Dissertation: University of Washington Seattle.

Devitt, Rachel. 2013. “ ‘Keep the best of you, “do” the rest of you’: passing, ambivalence and keeping queer time in gender performative negotiations of popular music.” *Popular Music* 32(3): 427-49.

Dickinson, Chris. 2000. “Country Undetectable: Gay Artists in Country Music.” *Journal of Country Music* 21(1): 28-39.

DiCola, Peter and Kembrew McLeod. 2011. *Creative License: The Law and Culture of Digital Sampling.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Drag Queen Story Hour. 2020. “What Is Drag Queen Story Hour?” https://www.dragqueenstoryhour.org/. Accessed 11/23/2020.

Duwamish Tribe. 2020. Real Rent Duwamish. https://www.realrentduwamish.org/

Eidsheim, Nina. 2012. “Voice as Action: Toward a Model for Analyzing the Dynamic Construction of Racialized Voice.” *Current Musicology* (93): 9-33.

Eidsheim, Nina. 2018. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

The Engage Team. 2020. Instagram account. https://www.instagram.com/theengageteam. Accessed 12/06/2020.

Facebook. 2012. "Facebook to Acquire Instagram." *Facebook Newsroom* https://about.fb.com/news/2012/04/facebook-to-acquire-instagram/. Accessed 01/06/2021.

Ferrante, Anna Antonia. 2017. "Super Troopers: The Homonormative Regime of Visibility in *RuPaul's Drag Race."* In *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture,* ed. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, 153-65. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Fitzgerald, Tom and Lorenzo Marquez. 2018. *Legendary Children: The First Decade of RuPaul's Drag Race and the Last Century of Queer Life.* New York: Penguin Books.

Flesher, Jackson. 2018. "Joking About the Darkness: Affect, Queerness, and Politics in the Work of Amanda Palmer." Thesis: McGill University.

Foucault, Michel. 1969. "What is an Author?" February 22. Collège de France.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* New York: Random House.

Freitas, Rich. 2017. "'The Land at Our Feet:' Preserving Pioneer Square's Queer Landscape." Thesis: University of Washington.

Fuller, Karla Rae. 2010. *Hollywood Goes Oriental: CaucAsian Performance in American Film.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Gallagher, Owen. 2018. "Sampling." In *Keywords in Remix Studies,* ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough, 259-72. New York: Routledge.

Gilbert, Daniel, Tan Vinh, and Crystal Paul. 2020. "Washington state to shut down restaurants, bars, and cap gatherings at 50 to stop spread of coronavirus." *The Seattle Times* https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/king-county-and-washington-state-to-act-on-bars-restaurants-and-gatherings/. Accessed 01/06/2021.

Glory Hole cast. 2020a. *Glory Hole: Climax.* Fukd Up Variety Show on Vimeo, https://vimeo.com/ondemand/gloryholeclimax. Accessed 01/13/2021.

Glory Hole cast. 2020b. *Glory Hole: Anniversorry.* Self-published zine.

Goldin-Perschbacher, Shana. 2015. "TransAmericana: Gender, Genre, Journey." *New Literary History* 46(4): 775-803.

Graham, Nathalie. 2020. "Seattle Says Only SWAT Can Use Tear Gas For 30 Days." *The Stranger* https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2020/06/05/43849665/seattle-says-only-swat-can-use-tear-gas-for-30-days. Accessed 12/07/2020.

Gudelunas, David. 2017. "Digital Extensions, Experiential Extensions, and Hair Extensions: *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the New Media Environment." In *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture,* ed. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, 231-43. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Halberstam, J. 1998. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Halberstam, Jack. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Halberstam, Jack. 2012. *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Hankins, Sarah. 2015. "'I'm a Cross between a Clown, a Stripper, and a Streetwalker': Drag Tipping, Sex Work, and a Queer Sociosexual Economy." *Signs* 40(2): 441-66.

Harrison, Nate and Eduardo Navas. 2018. "Mashup." In *Keywords in Remix Studies,* ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough, 188-201. New York: Routledge.

Hesson, Ted and Christina Cooke. 2020. "Explainer: President Trump asked the Proud Boys to 'stand by.' Who are they?" ed. Jonathan Oatis, *Reuters.* https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-extremists-explainer/explainer-president-trump-asked-the-proud-boys-to-stand-by-who-are-they-idUSKBN26L3Q1. Accessed 12/05/2020.

Hubbs, Nadine. 2014. *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music.* Oakland: University of California Press.

The Imperial Sovereign Court of Seattle. 2020. Website. http://www.imperialcourtofseattle.org/ Accessed 11/13/2020.

Instagram. 2020. "Updates and Guidelines for Including Music in Video." *Instagram Tips and Tricks Blog* https://about.instagram.com/blog/tips-and-tricks/updates-and-guidelines-for-including-music-in-video/. Accessed 01/07/2021.

Irvine, Martin. 2015. "Remix and the Dialogic Engine of Culture: A Model for Generative Combinatoriality." In *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies,* ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough, 15-42. New York: Routledge.

Jameson, Fredric. 1991. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Durham: Duke University Press.

January, Brianna. 2019. "Fox guest says that drag queens and LGBTQ people are grooming youth 'into their unhealthy lifestyle' that includes 'HIV and AIDS.'" *Media Matters* https://www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/fox-guest-says-drag-queens-and-lgbtq-people-are-grooming-youth-their-unhealthy-lifestyle. Accessed 11/23/2020.

Jenkins, Sarah Tucker. 2017. "Spicy. Exotic. Creature. Representations of Racial and Ethnic Minorities on *RuPaul's Drag Race.*" In *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture,* ed. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, 77-90. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Johnson, E. Patrick. 2003. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Jump, John D. 1972. *Burlesque.* London: Methuen.

Keil, Charles. 1966. *Urban Blues.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Keil, Charles. 1987. "Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music." *Cultural Anthropology* 2(3): 275-83.

Keil, Charles. 1995. "Participatory Discrepancies: A Progress Report." *Ethnomusicology* 39(1): 1-19.

Keimig, Jasmyne. 2019. "Seattle Drag Queens Perform Despite Protests and Doxxing." *The Stranger* https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2019/06/28/40613958/seattle-drag-queens-perform-despite-protests-and-doxxing-im-not-going-anywhere. Accessed 11/23/2020.

Kennedy-Lopez, Z. 2020. "The Utopian, Queer Promise of Robyn's 'Call Your Girlfriend.'" *Autostraddle* https://www.autostraddle.com/the-utopian-queer-promise-of-robyns-call-your-girlfriend/. Accessed 08/10/2020.

Kessler, Suzanne. 1978. *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach.* New York: Wiley.

Kessler, Suzanne. 1990. "The Medical Construction of Gender: Case Management of Intersexed Infants," *Signs* 16(1): 3-26.

Khubchandani, Kareem. 2020. *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Kohfeld, J. M. 2018a. "From Minstrelsy to *Drag Race:* Gender Performance in U.S. American Popular Culture." Unpublished paper: University of Washington Seattle.

Kohfeld, J. M. 2018b. "Themes in Remix Studies." Unpublished paper: University of Washington Seattle.

Kreisinger, Elisa. 2015. "Remixing the Remix." In *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies,* ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough, 480-86. New York: Routledge.

Kremwerk. 2020. *Bang the Gong* poster. http://www.kremwerk.com/upcoming/2020/1/18/bang-the-gong

Kusz, Kyle W. 2017. "'Winning bigly': Sporting Fantasies of White Male Omnipotence in the Rise of Trump and Alt Right White Supremacy." *Journal of Hate Studies* 14(1): 113+.

La Corte, Rachel. 2020. "Washington governor issues two-week stay-at-home order." *AP News* https://apnews.com/article/5abcb144b6d0f106436e67c7930a5243. Accessed 01/06/2021.

Lessig, Lawrence. 2004. *Free Culture.* Self-published.

Lewis, Abram J. 2017. "Trans History in a Moment of Danger: Organizing Within and Beyond 'Visibility' in the 1970s." In *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility,* ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Livingston, Jennie. 1990. *Paris is Burning.* New York: Off White Productions.

Lott, Eric. 2013. *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy & the American Working Class.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Loreck, Janice. 2018. "Race and Stardom in Ghost in the Shell" *Science Fiction Film and Television* 11(1): 37-44.

Machkovech, Sam. 2015. "Twitch launches 'Creative' category, eight-day Bob Ross *Painting* marathon." *Ars Technica* https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2015/10/twitch-launches-creative-category-eight-day-bob-ross-painting-marathon/. Accessed 01/10/2021.

MacMillan, Douglas and Greg Bensinger. 2014. "Amazon to Buy Video Site Twitch for $970 Million." *The Wall Street Journal* https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-to-buy-video-site-twitch-for-more-than-1-billion-1408988885?tesla=y&mg=reno64-wsj. Accessed 01/10/2021.

Main, Thomas J. 2018. *The Rise of the Alt-Right.* Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

McIntyre, J. and D. W. Riggs. 2017. "North American Universalism in *RuPaul's Drag Race:* Stereotypes, Linguicism, and the Construction of 'Puerto Rican Queens.'" In *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture,* ed. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, 61-75. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan.

McRobbie, Angela. 1994. *Postmodernism and Popular Culture.* Abingdon, UK: Taylor & Francis Group.

Moon, Krystyn. 2004. *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s.* Piscataway: Rutgers University Press.

Moreau, Julie. 2018. "Trump in Transnational Perspective: Insights from Global LGBT Politics." *Politics & Gender* 14(4): 619-48.

Morill, Richard. 2013. “The Seattle Central District (CD) Over Eighty Years.” *The Geographical Review* 103(3): 315-35.

Moylan, Brian. 2017. “Charlie Hides Didn’t Lip Sync for His Life on ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race.’” *VICE* https://www.vice.com/en/article/z4dxk8/charlie-hides-didnt-lip-sync-for-his-life-on-rupauls-drag-race. Accessed 01/27/2021.

Muñoz, José Estaban. 1999. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Muñoz, Jose Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* New York: NYU Press.

N.A. 2021. “RuPaul’s Drag Race Wiki.” https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/wiki/RuPaul%27s_Drag_Race_Wiki. Accessed 01/20/2021.

Naidoo, Jamie Campbell. 2019. “A Rainbow of Creativity: Exploring Drag Queen Storytimes and Gender Creative Programming in Public Libraries.” *Children & Libraries* 16(4): 12-22.

National Center for Transgender Equality. 2020. “Issues: Anti-Violence.” https://transequality.org/issues/anti-violence

Navas, Eduardo. 2012. *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling.* New York: Springer.

Navas, E., O. Gallagher, and x. burrough (ed.). 2015. *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies.* New York: Routledge.

Navas, Eduardo, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough. 2018. *Keywords in Remix Studies.* New York: Routledge.

Navas, Eduardo et. al. 2018. “Appropriation.” In *Keywords in Remix Studies,* ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough, 14-22. New York: Routledge.

NBC Sports. 2017. “Trump Anthem Protestors.” *NBC Sports* https://www.nbcsports.com/bayarea/49ers/trump-anthem-protesters-get-son-b-field. Accessed 10/06/2020.

Newton, Esther. 1972. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Nishime, LeiLani. 2017. “Whitewashing Yellow Futures in Ex Machina, Cloud Atlas, and Advantageous: Gender, Labor, and Technology in Sci-fi Film.” *Journal of Asian American Studies,* 20(1): 29-49.

Norton, Quinn. 2012. "How Anonymous Picks Targets, Launches Attacks, and Takes Powerful Organizations Down." *WIRED.*

O'Halloran, Kate. 2017. "*RuPaul's Drag Race* and the Reconceptualisation of Queer Communities and Publics." In *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture,* ed. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, 213-28. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Pallotta, Frank and Brian Stelter. 2016. "Super Bowl 50 Audience Is the Third Largest in History." *CNN Business* https://money.cnn.com/2016/02/08/media/super-bowl-50-ratings/index.html. Accessed 12/07/2020.

Paulson, Don. 1996. *An Evening at the Garden of Allah: A Gay Cabaret in Seattle.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Pêcheux, Michel. 1982. *Language, Semantics, and Ideology*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Perez, Sarah. 2020. "Instagram extends time limits on live streams to 4 hours, will soon support archiving." *TechCrunch* https://techcrunch.com/2020/10/27/instagram-extends-time-limits-on-live-streams-to-4-hours-will-soon-support-archiving/. Accessed 01/07/2021.

Peterson, Jason. 2009. "A 'Race' for Equality: Print Media Coverage of the 1968 Olympic Protest by Tommie Smith and John Carlos." *American Journalism* 26(2): 99-121.

Plexstorm. 2021. "Community Rules." https://www.plexstorm.com/content/community-rules. Accessed 01/10/2021.

Puar, Jasbir. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Pullen, John Patrick. 2011. "How Vimeo became hipster YouTube." *Fortune* https://fortune.com/2011/02/23/how-vimeo-became-hipster-youtube/. Accessed 01/12/2021.

Rascoe, Ayesha. 2018. "A Year After Charlottesville, Not Much Has Changed For Trump." *National Public Radio* https://www.npr.org/2018/08/11/637665414/a-year-after-charlottesville-not-much-has-changed-for-trump. Accessed 12/05/2020.

Riggs, Marlon. 1987. *Ethnic Notions.* San Francisco: California Newsreel.

Riis, Thomas. 2014. "Musical Theater." In *African American Music: An Introduction* (2nd edition), ed. Mellonee Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby. New York: Routledge.

Rodger, Gillian M. 2018. *Just One of the Boys: Female-to-Male Cross Dressing on the American Variety Stage.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Rogin, Michael. 1996. *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Schafer, Joseph. 2018. "Michete Makes Mouthy Underground Hits That Shouldn't Be So Much Fun." *The Stranger* https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2018/06/22/27981177/michete-makes-mouthy-pop-hiphop-that-shouldnt-be-so-much-fun. Accessed 01/21/2021.

Schares, Evan Mitchell. 2020. "Witnessing the Archive: Stormé DeLarverie and Queer Performance Historicity." *Text & Performance Quarterly* 40(3): 250-67.

Schloss, Joseph. 2004. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop.* Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Schlueter, Jennifer. 2013. "'How you durrin?' Chuck Knipp, Shirley Q. Liquor, and Contemporary Blackface." *TDR: The Drama Review* 57(2): 163-81.

Schottmiller, Carl. 2017. *Reading RuPaul's Drag Race: Queer Memory, Camp Capitalism, and RuPaul's Drag Empire.* Dissertation: University of California Los Angeles.

Senelick, Laurence. 2000. *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre.* New York: Routledge.

Sinnreich, Aram. 2015. "The Emerging Ethics of Networked Culture." In *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies,* ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough, 227-45. New York: Routledge.

Smith-Shomade, Beretta E. 2008. "Surviving *In Living Color* with Some *White Chicks:* Whiteness in the Wayans' (Black) Minds." In *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi, 344-59. New York: Routledge.

Sonvilla-Weiss, Stefan (ed.). 2010. *Mashup Cultures.* New York: Springer.

Southern Poverty Law Center. 2020. "Extremist Group Info: Proud Boys." https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys. Accessed 12/05/2020.

Speaker.gov. 2019. "Pelosi Remarks Announcing Impeachment Inquiry." Press release. https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/92419-0. Accessed 10/06/2020.

Strangeways, Michael. 2019. "Vandalism and Fascist Groups Loom Over Seattle Pride Month Festivities." *Seattle Gay Scene* http://seattlegayscene.com/2019/06/vandalism-and-fascist-groups-loom-over-seattle-pride-month-festivities/. Accessed 11/23/2020.

Street, Mikelle. 2021. "Canada's Drag Race Just Confirmed It's Returning in 2021." *OUT.com* https://www.out.com/television/2021/1/07/canadas-drag-race-season-2-confirmed-2021. Accessed 01/18/2021.

Strings, Sabrina, and Long T. Bui. 2014. "'She is not acting, she is': The Conflict Between Gender and Racial Realness on *RuPaul's Drag Race*." *Feminist Media Studies* 14(5): 822-36.

Thomas, Tashima. 2015. "Race and Remix: The Aesthetics of Race in the Visual and Performing Arts." In *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies,* ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough, 179-91. New York: Routledge.

Toll, Robert. 1974. *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Tonic, Gina. 2020. "The Atlanta queen taking your local drag scene to the Internet." *i-D Vice* https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/pkenag/biqtch-puddin-the-digital-drag-show-coronavirus. Accessed 01/10/2021.

TransPrideSeattle. 2019. "GJL Statement About Right Wing Protestors at Trans Pride." https://www.transprideseattle.org/gjl_statement_about_right_wing_protesters_at_trans_pride. Accessed 12/01/2020.

The Trevor Project. 2020. "About." https://www.thetrevorproject.org/about/. Accessed 12/01/2020.

Turino, Thomas. 1999. "Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircean Semiotic Theory for Music." *Ethnomusicology* 43(2): 221-55.

Twitch. n.d. "Music Guidelines." Legal and Community Guidelines https://www.twitch.tv/p/legal/community-guidelines/music/. Accessed 01/10/2021.

Vallier, John. 2018. "Authorship." In *Keywords in Remix Studies,* ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough, 33-42. New York: Routledge.

VIBE. 2013. "Before EDM: 30 Dance Tracks From the 90s That Changed the Game." *VIBE* *https://www.vibe.com/photos/edm-30-dance-tracks-90s-changed-game/alice-deejay*. Accessed 01/14/2021.

Wang, Grace. 2010. "A Shot at Half-Exposure: Asian Americans in Reality TV Shows." *Television and New Media* 11(5): 404-27.

Westrup, Laurel and David Laderman. 2014. *Sampling Media.* New York: Oxford University Press.

White, Miles. 2011. *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance on Masculinity.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Whitehouse.gov. 2019. "Remarks by President Trump Upon Arriving at the U.N. General Assembly." Press release. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-upon-arriving-u-n-general-assembly-new-york-ny/. Accessed 10/06/2020.

Wilhelm, Alex. 2011. "TwitchTV: Justin.tv's killer new esports project." *The Next Web* https://thenextweb.com/media/2011/06/06/twitchtv-justin-tvs-killer-new-esports-project/. Accessed 01/10/2021.

Yancy, George and Tracey Ann Ryser. 2008. "Whiting Up and Blacking Out: White Privilege, Race, and 'White Chicks.'" *African American Review* 42(3-4): 731-46.

Yudelman, Julia. 2017. "The RuPaulitics of Subjectification in *RuPaul's Drag Race.*" In *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture,* ed. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, 15-28. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan.