

HOLLISTER, KELTON. M.A. *If Gender Isn't Binary, Neither is Drag: An Analysis of Drag, Progressiveness, and Activism.* (2022)
Directed by Dr. Danielle Bouchard. 118 pp.

This thesis seeks to analyze and challenge how drag, and those who perform it, are generally conceived of in much of the scholarship, as well as argue for a more nuanced view of drag that challenges binaries of gender, morality, and potential for social change. Rather than solely a leisure activity taken part in by cisgender gay men's and lesbians dressing as the "opposite" gender, I argue that drag is present in many forms throughout U.S. culture, is frequently used for activist ends, and that the prevailing view of performer identities and presentation is reductive and erases large swaths of the population who perform or engage with drag. Furthermore, I question trends in the scholarship that seek to frame drag as always either subversive or regressive, asserting instead that doing so furthers a non-intersectional, single-axis model of oppression and elides the ways in which all gendered embodiment, in or out of drag, is as imbricated in reproducing harmful gender norms as drag genders can be. In addition, I argue that the insights of drag scholarship can be of relevance to scholars in a variety of fields, challenging the pigeonholing of the study of drag into LGBTQ Studies alone. Ultimately, I will further a reformulation of how drag, and the study of drag, are positioned within academia and argue for a more nuanced, holistic understanding.

IF GENDER ISN'T BINARY, NEITHER IS DRAG: AN ANALYSIS OF DRAG,
PROGRESSIVENESS, AND ACTIVISM

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to

the Faculty of The Graduate School at

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Greensboro

2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to all of the people who have made this project possible. My parents, Bob Hollister, Nancy Lamson, and Alice Lamson; my spouse, Kevin Dorman, and my friends, too many to name, have all provided vital mental and emotional care. My committee, Dr. Sarah Cervenak, Dr. Daniel Coleman, and Dr. Gwen Hunnicutt have all provided invaluable input and support, and I would especially like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Danielle Bouchard, for a level of care, insightful feedback, and intellectual rigor and generosity with which none of this would have been possible.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION: WHAT DRAG IS AND WHAT DRAG DOES

Memory

Brooklyn, 2012

It's the night of the show, and I'm sprinting across Brooklyn in half drag and no coat to get my friend away from some cops. By the time I convince them I'll "take care of her" (she doesn't need anyone to take care of her), we've missed our train, and the next one doesn't come for another seventeen minutes. We're definitely going to be late, and it would take twenty minutes to get to my dorm and back, much less finish putting on drag. We sit in the subway, her fuming and me freezing. Eventually the train arrives, and we do the subway calculus to figure out the least-stained seats closest to the doors.

Three stops later, we climb the stairs and head toward the cafe, only making two wrong turns. We get cussed out by a guy who's figured out the show has a cash-only door fee and tipping system when we don't have any spare money for him, and push our way through the doors and into the crowd – this show would definitely not be fire-marshal-approved. All the stools and chairs are either occupied or stacked against the wall to make a stage space, so we jostle our way to the front and pop a squat on the floor, ignoring a few dirty looks. The cafe is tiny, walls papered with framed zine covers, horror B-movie posters, and fliers for other local events. Most of the attendants have PBRs or Yuenglings in hand, chatting and flirting animatedly (we're too young to drink legally and too nervous to press our luck with the bartender, even though it seems like they have not carded a single person all night). Even though we were running late, the show is running later, so we haven't missed anything yet.

Eventually the emcee, a short white queer with an alternative-lifestyle haircut and a suit jacket with sneakers, comes out holding a crackly microphone and announces, "All right,

everybody, they've almost finished taping their boobs and genitals down, so the show is starting in about five minutes." The audience whoops and cheers, with one person shouting "ABOUT DAMN TIME!" from the back. About twelve minutes later, the show actually begins. The emcee starts by telling us that the door fees from tonight's show are going to one of the performers's top surgery fund, and holds up a huge tip jar made out of a gallon-size water bottle, making sure we know that tips put in the jar go to the fund and tips handed directly to the performers are going to the performers themselves. "Jar for donation, hand for appreciation," they make us repeat back to them before ceremoniously pulling a crumpled bill out of their suit jacket and dropping it into the jar, handing the jar to someone in the front row who puts their own donation in before dutifully passing it along; the jar makes the rounds continually throughout the night and is almost full by the time the show ends. "And now, give it up for our first performers!" We all cheer as the house lights go down and the "spotlight" (really a Pixar-style standing lamp with a high-watt bulb) lights up the wall.

The first performers are an established white middle-aged local favorite drag queen and an up-and-coming white king who's probably only a few years older than me. They're dressed as a 1950s housewife and her salaryman husband, and the wife tries to kiss the husband when he comes home from work, but he pushes by and sits down on the "couch" (read: rusty folding chair), pulling out a newspaper and ignoring his wife while she vamps around the stage, doing more and more ridiculous gendered tasks to get his attention. She vacuums over his shoes while striking pin-up poses, brings him a meal on a TV tray and tries to lean on his shoulder to watch TV, and eventually pulls off an impressively-fast offstage quick-change and comes out in a negligee and feather boa. He ignores her the whole time until she wraps the boa around his neck, and suddenly he sits up straight, stroking the boa and pulling it away from her to wrap around his

shoulders, striding around the stage, hips swishing. His wife clearly gets an idea; she takes off his tie and wraps it around her own neck, steals his fedora for herself, and pulls off her negligee (winking saucily at the whooping and hollering audience as she does), pulling it over his head. Suddenly he's paying attention to his wife! By the end of the song, they've traded clothes, and the routine ends with the newly-gender-nonconforming '50s couple kissing sweetly. The crowd goes wild, and both the king and queen have a solid number of bills stuffed into their various items of clothing.

After this, there are about six other performances: white kings doing frankly interchangeable greaser lip synch performances, a Latinx drag queen perfectly emulating Selena singing *Como la Flor*, a black king so new to the art form that his routine consists almost exclusively of body rolls, and another performance by the queen from the first act. The show ends with two kings, one of whom is the beneficiary of the fundraiser, playing Edward and Jacob from *Twilight*, with one of their friends portraying Bella. Edward and Jacob fight over her for most of the song, much to her delight, until they get into a physical fight whose pushing and shoving quickly changes to a passionate makeout session as Bella storms off the stage.

Afterward, the emcee comes back to the stage and rustles the almost-full jar, saying "We still have to count it fully, but looking at what we've got so far, we're most of the way to our fundraising goal!" Just offstage, the king who it's going toward is sniffing, overcome and excited. The audience has been very good about following the "tip in the hand/tip in the jar" rule, but I notice both of the drag queens quietly placing their personal tips in the jar to fill it up once the jar is taken offstage. I have a lump in my throat; I can't imagine having this level of support for my transition, either financial or social.

Afterwards, my friend and I forgo the post-show dance party to head out; she's got to get all the way back to uptown Manhattan. I give the few dollars I have left over from tips and donations to the guy who cussed us out earlier and we make our way to the subway, cold but happy. "You know, even with the shit with the cops, this was a fun night," says my friend.

"Yeah," I agree, "It was."

Theory

This experience is one of the formative moments in why I became interested in studying drag. Hosted by Brooklyn drag collective Switch 'N Play, it was the second drag show that I had attended in person, although I had watched countless YouTube videos of drag performances throughout the years prior. However, it was the first one with an explicitly activist bent that I had attended, and I quickly came to learn that in fact, many drag shows are specifically activist in nature, whether that activism takes the form of fundraising, community-building, or raising awareness for causes important to the performers. Furthermore, many drag performers identify drag as closely related, if not always directly tied, to activism. As such, I set out to study the scholarly literature on drag's possibilities for activism.

When I began my research, however, I found many scholars were far more interested in debating whether drag itself is either inherently progressive or regressive, what Kayte Stokoe (2019) has termed the subversive/reactive dichotomy. I quickly grew frustrated, as in my opinion, both conceptions serve primarily to flatten what drag is and does and erase a large proportion of drag performers. The reactive/regressive view often misgenders or fails to recognize the existence of trans drag performers, forecloses any possibility that drag could potentially do activist work, and tends to focus on a single-axis framework of oppression that posits that sexism is *the* primary oppression rather than one of many deeply impactful, co-

imbricated isms, thereby overlooking the ways in which, for example, a white woman can have privilege over a Black man. The subversive view, however, is similarly problematic. Stokoe makes the point that “As drag performance is dependent on context, performer intent, performance content, and audience response, this positioning can lead to false generalizations or to a separation into ‘good’, ‘subversive’ drag and ‘bad’, ‘reactionary’ drag. Further, while *certain performances encourage their audiences to rethink their ideas about gender, oppressions, and norms*, performances cannot act directly on structural norms” (5, emphasis in original). I would also add that there tends to be a binary in the scholarship based on the gender being performed and assumptions about the “authenticity” of the choice to do drag, such as Katie Horowitz’s assertion that:

Drag queens can circulate within the mainstream of American culture because (a) femininity is always already [perceived to be] frivolous, inconsequential, ergo no cause for concern; and (b) the emotional remove on which camp is predicated insistently calls attention to the artificiality—the performedness—of their performances. Kings, however, have not and likely never will enjoy the same kind of widespread attention and acceptance, and this is not just because masculinity is a priori a more serious business in our culture than femininity, but because the rhetorical practice of earnestness (i.e., emotional authenticity) undermines their performances’ status as theater. Earnestness by definition is genuine, literal, real, and the possibility that this earnestness may itself be an illusion may well be lost on those observers not primed to read king performances against the grain. To wit, the perceived realness of kinging, born of its refusal of queening’s aesthetic excess and reinforced by performers’ seemingly unaffected gestures and overall

bodily comportment, is threatening enough to the sanctity of masculinity to undermine its status as entertainment. (79 - 80)

While Horowitz does draw attention to the fact that the kings' earnestness may be part of the act, the overall assumption that queening is inherently or always less authentic than kinging reinforces discourses about queening that postulate that a) all drag queens are cis men, and b) male femininity is always an appropriation rather than a genuinely felt and lived identity. This pattern, while usually not intentionally anti-trans, still bears striking resemblance to trans-exclusionary feminists' transmisogynistic assertions about trans women, and also serves as an example of how drag kings are frequently positioned as automatically more subversive than drag queens, which overlooks subversive drag queen performances and problematic drag king performances. In addition, the association of camp with drag queens in opposition to earnestness in drag kings feels off to me, as I have seen many performances of drag masculinity that I would categorize as quite campy, such as in the Dorian Electra video for "Man to Man," which I will discuss in more depth in my "Drag Masculinities" chapter.

At this point it may be useful for me to define what I mean by "drag," particularly as I wish to challenge many of the common assumptions about what drag is. A common understanding of drag positions it as an act of cross-dressing in which someone assumes the appearance of a person whose gender is supposedly in direct opposition to their "real" gender, and distinct from transgenderism and cross-dressing for sexual gratification. I, as will be shown, do not agree with this definition. Instead, I suggest drag is the embodiment of a gendered performance that tends to be over the top and focused on gender roles. This new formulation recognizes trans performers who perform drag as the gender with which they identify and includes cis people who perform as the gender with which they identify without referring to them with such problematic terms as

“faux queen” and “bio queen.” Under this formulation, drag is also not just an act deliberately performed by a person consciously dressing as a particular gender: drag can also be less consciously performed by someone embodying the gender they identify with to an extreme, such as Reese Witherspoon in *Legally Blonde* or Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator*. That said, I am focusing here on *intentional* drag; however, a more capacious understanding of drag in general is nevertheless useful as a framework with which to more deeply engage with drag as a process of gender formation and is certainly worthy of further study and analysis in the future. My broader definition of drag also allows for a better understanding of the drag performed by those whose drag changes gender or cannot easily be confined to either kinging or queening. For example, the drag performer Dahli formerly solely performed femininity as a drag queen, but over the years, they have switched to performing drag that refers to a variety of genders and now frequently perform what I would describe as drag masculinity; a view of drag as always being in opposition to sex and gender would both fail to account for both the variety of drag genders they now embody as well as their non-binary identity and the fact that they perform drag masculinity as a person assigned male at birth. Through this example we can see both the shortcomings of the more standard definition of drag as well as the ways in which my reformulation better accounts for nuances of both gender identity and gendered expression in drag.

Due to the trends identified above in both popular understandings and the scholarship, I have decided to focus in particular on challenging the subversive/regressive dichotomy as well as assumptions about performer identity based on the gender(s) they perform in their drag. I will contend that performance of drag genders cannot be neatly categorized as *either* entirely progressive *or* entirely problematic, as within a toxic and binary gender schema, no gender - in drag or not - can be completely unproblematic. In addition, the expectation that drag performers

put forth a performance of gender that explicitly challenges gender hegemony at all times puts the onus on drag performers to “solve” gender rather than recognizing that everyone is always imbricated in the process of reinforcing gender norms. Due to the association of drag with LGBTQ subcultures and the act of gender transgression, these expectations also imply that those viewed as outside of heterosexuality and cisgenderism have a higher responsibility to either uphold or reject gender norms than straight and cisgender people. As such, an expectation that drag be either completely subversive or regressive not only constrains drag performers’ creative possibilities, it is also tied to cissexism and heterosexism.

I will begin to challenge this dichotomy, as well as other problematic patterns in the scholarship on drag, in the next chapter, “The State of the Field, or: Who Runs the Runway?” Some of these other problems include the essentialization of performer identity, assumptions of inherent difference and antagonism between kings and queens, the unquestioned association of drag with gayness and attendant lack of interrogation of what are viewed as demographic realities, and the methodological practices that contribute to these problems. To do so, I will analyze and unpack the work of Stokoe, Horowitz, Janice Raymond, and Daniel Harris; I will also utilize the work of Hil Malatino and Jules Gill-Peterson to point to trans studies scholars’ work about archives as a way to resist an uncritical acceptance of assertions about performers’ identities and demographics. Finally, I will suggest other ways forward, such as ethnography that focuses on researching *with* rather than *about* drag performers (thus avoiding the risk of misreading and misattribution when it comes to performers’ actual identities and politics), more research on drag audiences as well as performers, and conscious attention to researcher positionality, particularly identity vectors such as race and class.

In the next chapter, “Drag Masculinities: Problems and Possibilities,” I will examine four performances by two artists who I read as embodying drag masculinity in their work, the drag king Landon Cider and the genderqueer musician Dorian Electra, in order to further question the subversive/regressive dichotomy in particular. While the subversive/regressive dichotomy applies to drag femininities as well, I have chosen to focus on drag masculinity for several reasons. Firstly, the reproduction of toxic masculinity within drag kinging has been of great contention in the scholarship, with scholars such as Sheila Jeffreys (2003) arguing that it contributes to patriarchy and violence against women (and also leads to transmasculine identity, which she also disapproves of), whereas scholars such as Jae Basiliere - whose work will be a primary resource in this chapter - argue that drag kinging enacts a specifically feminist masculinity, even when the king in question performs hegemonic masculinity as part of their act (1998). I believe that both perspectives get the issue wrong (particularly Jeffreys’), in that drag kinging can both challenge and glamorize problems of masculinity.

For example, one of the Landon Cider looks I will be analyzing deliberately embodies stereotypes around Mexican masculinity (he plays a vampire mariachi), which could be read as reinforcing them, but in fact uses these aesthetics to both celebrate Mexican identity and challenge anti-Mexican sentiment both within the Trump movement and certain branches of white feminism. Dorian Electra’s music video for “Guyliner” portrays a masculinity that embraces makeup use and sensitivity yet also objectifies women and, even in its supposed gender subversion, still reinforces implied inherent differences between men and women. Similarly, their music video and lyrics for “Man to Man” appropriates and reformulates male-conflict-associated language into an assertion that the truly manly way to handle conflicts is through peaceful communication rather than physical violence, yet in so doing still aligns

femininity with deceptiveness and passive-aggression. I also chose to analyze Landon Cider's werewolf leather daddy look in this chapter in order to challenge the assumption in the literature that kinging and queening emerge from inherently separated gay and lesbian spaces, as his savvy deployment of aesthetics and actions associated with gay male sexual subcultures shows that he has intimate knowledge of a queer subculture not typically aligned with lesbianism. In addition, the audience and host reactions to this look counter the assumption that gay and lesbian sexual identity is essentially static, as many of the observers who do not identify as being attracted to women expressed a strong attraction to Cider in the performance with full knowledge of his out-of-drag cis lesbian identity and body.

The next chapter will focus on drag and activism in order to argue that while not all drag is activist in nature, many drag performers and troupes actively engage with activism in their work and, in many cases, view it as integrally intertwined with their drag. For example, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (the first group I will be analyzing) require that all members take part in community service, which the organization as a whole and many individual members describe as a "calling," and have strict rules about the drag aesthetics presented by members based on their level of membership, which is always predicated upon a certain amount of community service. As such, their drag and their activism are so knotted together as to be impossible to untie, showing that feminist critiques that define drag queening as always antifeminist ignore the ways in which queening can be intrinsically focused on fighting for causes many would define as feminist, such as defending youth and caring for those in hospice. Similarly, the drag troupe the Armorettes specifically focus on fighting HIV/AIDS in the South, donating all of their tips to organizations that combat the spread of the syndrome. One of their members also asserted that drag queens are always the first people turned to when it's time to

raise funds, showing that queening has a known legacy in activist and charitable work (Bennett and West, 2009). Thus, even though certain acts and aesthetics the Armorettes employ (which Bennett and West term “tactical repertoires”) can be read as transmisogynistic and so transgressive as to be offensive, their work still promotes the progressive and feminist cause of helping those minoritized people most impacted by HIV and AIDS.

I will also analyze a performance put on by drag queen Serena.³⁰³ at KQTxPROJECT’s 2020 Chuseok celebration, which, unlike the Armorettes’ work, was focused less on fundraising than on building community. Specifically, Serena’s performance at the event served to unite Koreans across the diaspora and provide community and cultural knowledge to those who, due to colonialism and racism’s impact on the Korean diaspora, had lost access to cultural and historical knowledge they wished to get back in touch with. In addition, KQTxPROJECT, in creating the event, specifically recruited Black performers in order to resist anti-Blackness in Asian and Asian American communities, and hosting the event online – which was in large part due to necessity during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic – allowed those in the diaspora to gain access to the event regardless of physical location or financial need. As such, the Chuseok show evidences how drag can do activist work unrelated to fundraising and rather, focused on community- and coalition-building as well as the sharing of knowledge lost due to the effects of the diasporic experience. Another performer I will analyze here, Vander von Odd, similarly uses their drag for activist ends unrelated to fundraising, using their visceral and emotive style of drag to challenge audiences to recognize the violences of internalized oppression and literally speak for those who cannot. Finally, I will discuss the digital drag shows put on by drag queen Biqtch Puddin as a way to support drag artists who lost their source of income due to lockdowns and other pandemic restrictions. They also used a distinctly egalitarian funding process, splitting

donations equally among all performers, which helps “even the playing field” so that new performers, drag kings, and drag performers of color will be paid the same as drag performers who, due to their race, style of drag, and fame, typically make much more in tips than those performers with less cultural capital. Putting all of these groups’ and performers’ actions in conversation with one another shows that, while not all drag is explicitly activist or political in nature, activist work is far more integral to drag than is frequently understood, and an analysis of drag that focuses solely on whether the performers’ representation is problematic or not misses out on other progressive and feminist work done by drag artists.

In the Conclusion, I will tie these analyses together to show that ultimately, drag is far more nuanced, and does far more both individually and structurally, than much of the scholarship evinces. While, of course, a graduate thesis is unlikely to receive wide circulation, this work remains vitally important to not just the field of drag scholarship but general scholarship as a whole. For example, forms of the subversive/regressive dichotomy arise in various forms in fields that are not necessarily related to drag, such as history and literary criticism, and defining and suggesting how to address the concept will be applicable for any scholar working with a topic impacted by overly-binaristic arguments. In addition, the burgeoning field of masculinity studies could certainly use more scholarship around forms of drag masculinity, as it provides insight into how masculinity is conceived of and employed by those who may not identify as men. For these reasons and more, this work will not just serve to deepen analysis and scholarship within drag studies; it will also provide ways forward for scholarship in a variety of fields impacted by issues similar to those I will be analyzing. It will also show a greater respect to the complexities of performers’ identities and experiences and encourage scholars to change the ways they might define drag in order to better represent their interlocutors. I also believe that my

contention that trans studies provides vital modes of analysis is not limited to the study of drag, as more frequently integrating the work trans studies scholars are doing would benefit a variety of topics and fields of study. For example, trans studies scholars' insistence on delinking and denaturalizing categories of sex and gender would be productive for quantitative researchers in a variety of fields to take up, as many studies only provide a single sex or gender category with two to sometimes three options, thus rendering assertions about gender or sex suspect as the data cannot accurately speak to the experiences of many trans and/or intersex participants. In addition, taking the experiences and scholarship of trans pedagogues seriously should be of vital importance for educators and educational scholars, considering both the increasing prevalence of trans and non-binary identity amongst students and the recent surge in legislation attempting to disenfranchise trans youth in school settings and restrict the ability of instructors to speak to trans experiences in the classroom. Those working and studying within medical fields should also ideally spend time reading trans studies scholarship, which can help impress upon them the history of medical violence against trans and intersex patients and allow them to provide better care to clients of a variety of sexes and genders. As such, many of those working in fields outside of trans studies can strengthen both their own scholarship and their treatment of interlocutors, students, and patients.

In the end, the act of studying drag ultimately can and should impact fields and topics which do not typically focus on drag. Since this is the case, this also means that those of us who do produce scholarship on drag have a responsibility to put out the most nuanced, accurate work we can, in order to both respect our interlocutors and provide outside researchers with the most useful scholarship possible. While drag as entertainment and a source of fun and pleasure is important in and of itself, recognizing the deeper work it does, particularly its activist work, is

also vital in terms of respecting and analyzing the craft. I hope that this work will contribute to that aim and encourage other scholars to do the same. After all, if drag has influenced my life and thinking so deeply, it certainly will do the same for others - scholars, audience members, and drag performers alike. It is my hope that this work will add depth and nuance to the field, as well as encourage others to recognize that drag is complicated, powerful, and important, both as an art form and as an area of study.

CHAPTER II: THE STATE OF THE FIELD, OR: WHO RUNS THE RUNWAY?

Scholarship on drag is diverse and takes many forms, from cultural critique to statistical review to ethnographic work. Arguably the best-known and most foundational research is Rupp and Taylor's 2003 *Girls of the 801 Cabaret*, an extensive study of the drag queens at one of the most well-known and longest-running drag bars in the United States; however, the research did not start in 2003, with Esther Newton's 1972 *Mother Camp* being perhaps the first long-term ethnographic study of drag queens. Scholarship focusing on drag kings is relatively new, with the first full book specifically examining drag kings, Halberstam and Volcano's *The Drag King Book*, published in 1999. That said, the study of drag kings is currently flourishing. Unfortunately, I have yet to find research on non-binary drag, although non-binary *performers* are increasingly represented in the research. Regardless, the study of drag is older and more complex than many would assume. But is it complex enough?

I would argue that, no, it is not. As mentioned, there is a dearth of research regarding non-binary drag, despite non-binary drag becoming more and more visible in popular culture. When I refer to non-binary drag, I mean drag that both deliberately portrays a persona who cannot be easily slotted into "male" or "female" aesthetics, as well as the increasing practice of performers alternating between various gendered embodiments in different performances. In addition, I have identified several other key issues with the body of literature: expectations that drag be *either* subversive or regressive, essentialism of performer identity, assumptions of antagonism between queens and kings, a hierarchical focus on sexism as a primary form of oppression within the community, the conflation of drag with gayness, research methods that focus on speaking *about* rather than *with* drag performers, and an uncritical acceptance of what appear to be demographic realities. These key issues are all undergirded by a binaristic streak,

not just in terms of the gender binary but also in terms of politics and implied morality, where certain identity groups are viewed as homogenous and moral failings – or benefits – on the part of a handful of the overall population are extrapolated to make statements about not just the entirety of the group itself but also the type of drag being performed as a whole. As such, one often encounters scholarship that claims that, for example, drag queening is inherently sexist due to reports made by drag kings about their interactions. This generalization emerges from several more specific assumptions: 1) drag queens are always cisgender men and drag kings are always cisgender women, 2) any conflict between these two groups is always about sexism, and 3) we can assume that one group’s assertions about another can be taken as true without hearing the other side of the story. When taken together, they reveal that much of the scholarship on drag is rife with misgendering, one-sidedness, conflationary moralism, and a non-intersectional analysis of gender dynamics.

With these issues at the fore, we must be careful to unpack many of the assumptions and statements made in scholarship focusing on drag (which is, of course, also a good practice regarding all forms of scholarship). We should also think through other ways forward for ongoing scholarship about drag that could help researchers avoid these pitfalls. For example, I identify more direct research with rather than about drag populations to be a potential productive option; participatory research would be an especially fruitful way to go about this. While scholars many scholars endeavor to engage in participatory research, I feel that they often miss a step I find vital: showing the participants the results of the research *before* publication. I also believe that a move away from always associating drag with both gayness and alterity can both help challenge the issues of essentialism and broaden the understanding of underrepresented performers and types of drag, such as cis straight drag queens and “alternative” drag that is less

interested in reproducing cisgender beauty than it is in challenging it. I also suggest that drag researchers - myself included - must do a better job of fully outlining their positionality so as not to elide power differences outside of sex and gender. Doing so will both make the body of literature deeper and more diverse and allow for arguments that move us away from drag study being pigeonholed into LGBTQ studies when, in reality, drag and research around drag are as relevant to straight cisgender people as LGBTQ people. In addition, it will help to challenge some of the prevailing ideas about sexuality, gender, and gendered presentation that are reproduced within this scholarship. Finally, I suggest a more deliberate turn towards trans studies as an avenue for understanding non-binary drag and historical uses of the term “drag queen” for people we would currently identify as trans women. For example, I argue that viewing the archive with a critical eye in order to challenge dominant narratives by examining who is missing is a vital contribution from trans studies, which I will discuss in more depth below. All of these moves could help diversify and grow the field beyond its current status.

Boxes and Binaries

One aspect of the body of literature on drag that may at first seem paradoxical is that the stances put forth are often rigid and binaristic; many scholars are taking a practice that is inherently boundary-confusing and producing analyses that simplify the practice into an “either/or” that fits neatly into a scholarly “box.” Scholarship on drag overwhelmingly tends to fall into what Stokoe (2019) refers to as “the subversive/reactionary dichotomy” – the assumption that drag either subverts or upholds norms” (54). For example, Rupp and Taylor (2003) contend that drag is a “strategic collective action” that challenges conventional understandings of gender and sexuality (212-213), while Raymond’s 1994 introduction to the

reprint of her 1979 *The Transsexual Empire* argues that drag is inherently misogynistic.¹ These two diametrically opposed stances – that drag *either* challenges *or* reinforces harmful gender norms – result in a body of scholarship that frequently lacks nuance, with a few notable exceptions. It is also undergirded by a gender essentialism that emerges from scholarship such as Raymond’s and ties forms of drag to (implicitly gendered and sexed) queer populations. Similarly, drag scholarship often lacks complexity in its portrayal of the identities of performers (which will be covered in more depth below), an essentialism that calls into question the veracity of findings based in assumptions that, for example, all drag queens are cisgender gay men.

Another binary produced and reinforced by scholars is a tendency to pit queens and kings against each other and assert that there is a constant, fundamental difference between the two. For example, Katie Horowitz devotes separate chapters of *Drag, Interperformance, and the Trouble with Queerness* to kings and queens, arguing in essence that kinging is subversive, whereas queening is regressive, stating that “unlike kinging, which renders patriarchy irrelevant to the embodiment of masculinity, queening renders irrelevant masculinity itself. And masculinity is not alone in its exile from drag queen shows ... drag queens highlight the markedness of femininity by banishing to the margins race, class, and sexuality—the intersections where, not incidentally, king performance thrives” (48). Although she does note that there are other forms of queening that are explicitly political or subversive, and that she is speaking specifically about the forms of drag she observed in her fieldwork, she still goes on to say that the claim encompasses the majority of queening. In addition, the assertion that drag kings do not banish race, class, and sexuality in their drag is certainly an overgeneralization, and a potentially dangerous one at that. For instance, in Shapiro’s *The Impact of Race on Gender*

¹ It should be noted that, in keeping with Raymond’s fixation on transfemininity, her assessment revolves solely around queening and omits drag kings within her analysis.

Transformation in a Drag Troupe, Shapiro revisits their earlier argument (from *Drag Kinging and the Transformation of Gender Identities*, 2007) that drag kinging leads to performers realizing that they are trans and points out that in fact, that analysis was not cognizant of the differential experiences of drag kings based on race, as the studied kings who were people of color expressed that racial dynamics within the Disposable Boy Toys troupe left them relatively unable to express or perform masculinities that spoke to their experiences and backgrounds. Furthermore, the intended antiracism of the mostly-white troupe combined with the prevalence and popularity of their group numbers meant kings of color could not express forms of masculinity that spoke to them as people of color (for example, the troupe agreed that white kings performing hip hop was problematic, so any opportunities for the Black kings in the troupe to perform a hip hop-related form of masculinity were foreclosed in the group performances and relegated to the solo performances, which were less popular and earned fewer tips.) Shapiro states “If drag in DBT was a place to practice masculinities and femininities one might inhabit, and this practice was critical for fostering individual identity shifts, the lack of performances of non-White gender effectively blocked this mechanism for members of colour ... While the group felt welcoming to most White members, for some people of colour in DBT the constant debate about race and simultaneous lack of opportunities to perform non-White genders made DBT a racist and unsafe space for self-exploration” (163-164). (And anecdotally, I can certainly say that I have witnessed undeniably racist drag king performances.)

Another way in which this tendency to position kings and queens as fundamentally different from and potentially antagonistic toward each other shows up in the scholarship is in the frequency with which scholars compare the two without actually putting drag performers in conversation with one another. For example, Rupp et al. compare and contrast the queens at the

801 Cabaret in Key West with the Disposable Boy Toys drag king troupe, which was based out of Santa Barbara, California. As such, the data on each group comes from completely different parts of the country that have vastly contrasting cultures and politics. In addition, these locational differences mean the kings and queens were not actually put in conversation with one another, meaning the comparisons being drawn emerge from a standpoint that reinforces problems with researcher/participant power relations. For instance, the decontextualization of these discrete experiences speaks to ongoing issues in research settings wherein researchers exert power as “experts” to remove participant agency by picking and choosing the data and participants that are most useful for the argument at hand and not returning the data to the participants prior to publication.

While ethnographic research has shown that woman-identified drag kings (and women out of drag) often face misogyny at the hands of cisgender gay drag queens (Rupp and Taylor, 2003; Berbarly and Johnson, 2009), little scholarly attention has been paid to instances of supportive relationships between kings and queens, despite its abundance in “non-scholarly” personal testimonies.² This emphasis on difference and conflict over similarity and solidarity often has the tendency to essentialize king and queen identities in ways that reinforce cissexist assumptions about performer identity, even by those who otherwise present a more nuanced view of performer identities. Furthermore, they may also (usually unconsciously) evince a retrograde and non-intersectional feminist stance that positions sexism as the oppression that supercedes all else; for example, an assessment that focuses solely on drag queens enacting misogyny on drag kings ignores that in the case of a transmasculine king and a transfeminine queen, the queen cannot actually behave misogynistically toward the king (and conversely, he can enact misogyny

² One notable exception is Barnett and Johnson’s *We Are All Royalty: Narrative Comparison of a Drag Queen and King* (2013), wherein a king and queen are interviewed together.

toward her). As misogyny is a form of oppression that targets women specifically, a man cannot be subject to it. This is of course not to say that men can never experience discrimination based on their gender, such as in the case of trans and/or racialized men, but it does mean that a woman cannot exert misogyny upon them. Furthermore, the social implications of saying a trans woman can be misogynistic toward men are troubling; while it is true that women can treat one another poorly due to internalized patriarchal norms, the ascription of misogyny to trans women has often been rhetorically deployed by scholars such as Raymond (discussed in more detail below) to misgender trans women and portray them as a threat to cis women. The focus on gendered relations within drag communities also leaves other forms of oppression largely unexamined in favor of an analysis that implicitly positions queens and kings as cisgender men and women, respectively, and sidesteps issues of racism and other oppressions by foregrounding the experience of sexism as always the primary cause of divisions between kings and queens. As such, even scholars who otherwise argue that scholarship on drag essentializes participant gender identities may contribute to that very same essentialization.

Drag scholarship also creates and reinforces binaries through an exclusive focus on kings and queens. While scholars are beginning to recognize that performers themselves may be non-binary, there is a dramatic dearth of scholarship on performers whose drag personae may be non-binary or who perform a variety of drag genders. (There is also very little to be found in the archive regarding cis drag artists whose drag personae correspond with their gender identities, and coverage in the popular media often refers to them with cissexist language such as “bio femme” or “faux queen.”) While these types of performers and performances may be in the minority in comparison to other forms of drag, their exclusion in terms of the scholarship is still significant in that it allows for arguments about drag as a whole that are only concerned with a

particular section of the population. This also replicates the essentialist linkage of gender and biology through language such as that which contrasts sex and gender in ways that differentiate types of queening based on the assigned sex of the queen in question. In addition, calling a cisgender drag queen a “bio queen” reproduces the cissexist and intersex-exclusionary practice of using “biology” as code for assigned sex (or assumed genital configuration) and reifying the concept of “biological sex” as stable, unchanging, and readily visible to outsiders, while also rhetorically removing trans and intersex people from the category of the human by equating them with “non-biological” entities.

But how to challenge these binaries without erasing the fact that they do emerge from demographic realities, or at least what seem to be demographic realities? To begin to answer this question, I first turn to the ongoing discussion in contemporary trans studies about questions of the archive, especially the medical archive. This discussion is useful for answering this question in that it helps to explicate how the most minoritized research subjects, or those whose experiences do not support the researcher’s agenda or foregone conclusion, are left out of the record, thereby making the archive unreliable and exclusionary. Considering the exclusion of non-binary drag personae in scholarship that makes binary regressive/subversive arguments, trans studies work on sexualized, gendered, and raced archival exclusions directly helps us see the agendas inherent in these absences.

In “Gone, Missing: Queering and Racializing Absence in Trans and Intersex Archives,” Hil Malatino explicates how “Racialized, classed, and queer absences are central to understanding how access to technologies of transition have become intensively compromised for poor folks, trans folks of color, and gender-nonconforming, nonheterosexual folks while they have, simultaneously, been coercively imposed on intersex folks in the interest of normalizing

our divergent forms of sexed embodiment” (158). According to Malatino, these absences are significant in that in many cases, what has been recorded about intersex and trans bodies and lives selectively displays the most normative narratives, which Malatino terms transnormativity. Importantly, Malatino acknowledges that many of these narratives are in essence coerced: it has only been fairly recently that access to transition technologies for trans people have been delinked from a requirement that trans patients express having “always known” their gender, meaning that non-transnormative accounts are absent from the archives due to the pressure to officially produce a particular narrative in order to access the medical care they need (162-163). This also leads to an absence of narratives about intersex people who do not want medical interventions or who are traumatized by interactions with medical professionals. In addition, medical professionals often misread patient affect: in one of the case studies covered, an intersex man’s anger at being coerced into sexual reassignment was misinterpreted by the doctor as anger about a “wrongly assigned” gender.

Jules Gill-Peterson also concerns herself with absence in trans and intersex archives, pointing out that not only did intersex medical intervention shape the emergence of trans sex reassignment medicine, these forms of medical technology ended up primarily used by, and associated with, whiteness due to both the wariness of Black people to engage with the medical establishment and the racist economic oppression that put these interventions outside of the realm of possibility for many Black people, but also due to medical racism that defined the Black body as less plastic than white bodies, making doctors believe that their bodies were insufficiently flexible for sex reassignment techniques to be applicable (610-611). Furthermore, legal apparatuses used to keep medical records confidential make it difficult for scholars to divulge or express important information about patients that might diverge from the publicly-

published articles about them, once again foreclosing many opportunities to see trans and intersex people whose narratives do not conform to transnormativity. What both of these scholars reveal about supposed demographic realities regarding minoritized populations – particularly those whose gender and/or sex do not conform to normative expectations of permanent binarism, such as drag performers – is that demographic data is always partial, racialized, and classed, and especially erases the voices and presence of gender-nonconforming people who do not fit into notions of transnormativity. As such, the number of non-binary and otherwise gender-nonconforming drag performers is almost certainly vastly underrepresented in the existing scholarship on drag. Later in the chapter I will address the importance of including non-binary drag in scholarship going forward, but for now, suffice it to say that this is not an issue of a dearth of non-binary drag performers, it is an issue of a dearth of research that includes them.

I believe another method for addressing these supposed demographic realities is unpacking the details of the contexts from which these data and assumptions arise. For example, one reason for the assumption that all/most drag queens are cisgender gay men can be traced to the historic systematic exclusion of trans women from some of the most well-known drag institutions: *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the U.S. pageant system.³ The Miss Gay America pageant system states in the rules section of their webpage that “Contestants must be male, at least twenty-one (21) years old and can not have or be on any type hormone. Absolutely no breast implants, cosmetic or body enhancing implants below the neck or silicone (or any other similar type product-chemical) injections, excluding the face, will be allowed before or during the contestant's reign.” Due to these rules that regulate the identities and level of hormonal or surgical intervention allowed within these competitions, many transfeminine drag queens

³ *RPDR* has in recent years (begrudgingly) begun to allow trans women and has renamed content based in transmisogynistic slurs.

stay(ed) closeted, or put off or hid evidence of transition-related healthcare interventions either until after winning the publicly-visible trophy they were competing for or after they officially retire from the circuit. This exclusion in part explains the assumption that drag queening is exclusively practiced by gay men, especially when one keeps in mind cultural tendencies to align femininity with gayness when performed by someone read as male or assigned male at birth. This conflation of perceived masculine femininity with gayness also serves to erase straight male drag queens.

Older scholarship on drag frequently relies on notions of gender that target transfeminine people specifically as deceptive, mentally ill, fetishistic, and potentially dangerous to others. Certain branches of gay and lesbian theorizing on trans identity and embodiment, as well as scholarship in other fields, especially psychology and sexology, is frequently marked by an inability to settle on whether trans people are ultimately “deceptive” about our identities or too “in-your-face” about them. It is of course important to recognize that these beliefs, while characteristic of a certain branch of gay and lesbian theorizing, did not originate this transphobia. Rather, it already existed in larger cultural and institutional narratives, which these scholars have reformulated and amplified, using the language of academia to legitimize and spread these narratives in ways that align them with rationality, knowledge, and education-based legitimacy. These beliefs have been rhetorically utilized to equate transness, particularly transfemininity, with violence against cis women and children.

This rhetoric of threat is arguably most expounded-upon in the work of Janice Raymond, who trivializes sexual violence by asserting that the mere presence of trans women in lesbian spaces is tantamount to rape. Raymond also takes the rape argument so far as to have partnered with conservative lawmakers to craft legislation designed to deny government-assisted

healthcare to trans people (Williams). While Raymond is versed enough with academic feminist writing to present work that, at first blush, seems to have a coherent argument, unpacking her work reveals the inconsistencies in her thinking. Primarily, she cannot seem to decide how she feels about femininity: on the one hand, she argues that femininity belongs solely to cis women, making trans femininities an offensive patriarchal appropriation; on the other, she views femininity as inherently oppressive to cis women, arguing in her attempt to rebut arguments that it is hypocritical to condemn transfeminine people for wearing dresses and not cis women for wearing pants that “[p]ants are practical in all types of weather and don’t make women physically vulnerable or encourage sexual harassment” (xxviii). One might think that if she views femininity as harmful and is devoted to the cause of furthering trans women’s suffering, she would applaud the oppression of trans women due to their femininity, but this is not the case.

Raymond’s work is also subject to the concerns many in trans studies have brought up regarding problems of the archive: Who is included? Why are certain people excluded? And how can we take the archive’s representations of minoritized people as “gospel” when the issues of who is archived and why are directly related to the oppression they face? In “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” Sandy Stone notes that a major issue regarding the archive is that medical researchers did not consider autobiographical accounts to be reliable, and these accounts were often “invisible” in library systems (5). In addition, Stone points out that those autobiographical accounts that do exist were often mitigated by the narratives expected of early transsexuals, that is, a sudden and unambiguous shift from “purely” male to “purely” female that erases accounts of gender ambiguity and creates a strong binary between the two as a method of legitimating the subject’s womanhood. This also has the effect of gendering the subject as male

prior to medical transition and as female afterwards, a sensationalism that works well for the popular press but, Stone argues, has influenced transmisogynistic feminist theory (227).

These narratives have also influenced medical history. As in the case of Malatino's arguments, Stone points out that many trans people have had to reproduce narratives of what Malatino terms transnormativity in order to access medical care; according to Stone, this was due to doctors only wanting to perform surgery on trans women who would be less likely to "fail" at the forms of femininity the doctors associated with womanhood, meaning trans women learned to reproduce the "symptoms" that were outlined in the medical text of the time (227-228). This homogenizing of traits required to transition, Stone argues, is in many ways at the root of Raymond's screed, as it in essence gives permission for others to make totalizing statements about all trans people. As such, the archive which Raymond draws from, implicitly and explicitly, is flawed and partial at its core, weakening her work academically.

This anti-trans sentiment within gay theorizing is not isolated to certain branches of lesbian theory; although Raymond's work is the most notorious for transmisogyny, the assertion that trans people are inauthentic and morally objectionable has also been evident within theorizing by and about gay men. For example, Daniel Harris' *The aesthetic of drag* argues that

Suffused with self-deprecating irony, drag is a farcical prank, a laughable hoax for Halloween, while transvestitism is the ultimate swindle, the calculated imposture of an accomplished illusionist who undertakes a desperately earnest act of sexual self-effacement. The stylistic ideal of the transvestite, who attempts to blend seamlessly into the general public, is the understated look of the cautious centrist who prefers unobtrusive clothing that is tastefully subdued and unassertive and

therefore unlikely to draw attention to the inevitable imperfections of his disguise, his suspiciously masculine jaw, husky voice, and square shoulders. (62)

Harris goes on to say that, in comparison to drag queens, transfeminine people “flee” from their gender (he also accuses them of fearing disclosure but does not concern himself with *why* a trans woman might have something to fear if revealed to be trans) and contradicts his own argument about what he views as drag’s deliberate gender transgression by digressing for a paragraph about how the erosion of rigid gender norms in fashion is supposedly eliminating the conditions that make drag possible. (While it is not particularly shocking that a gay theorist in 1995 would disapprove of trans women, it is eyebrow-raising that he would imply that cis women wearing pants are to blame for changes in drag.) Harris similarly contradicts himself later in the article by admiringly quoting a (noticeably not mentioned by name) founder of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries – apparently, transvestites are acceptable so long as they remain nameless and are identified primarily as drag queens. Interestingly, in his defense of drag, Harris also reaffirms some of the very critiques of drag brought forth by feminist theorists, mentioning that drag queens’ aesthetic descends from “actresses and singers who starred in minstrel shows and vaudeville, the two major varieties of mass entertainment in which female impersonation flourished” (63) without acknowledging that there could be anything racist about an aesthetic influenced by minstrel shows.

When read in concert, Harris’ and Raymond’s work makes clear that some theorists have historically theorized transfemininity as oppositional to gay and lesbian identity and politics, be these politics radical or conservative. Of course, this is not true for all gay and lesbian theorizing of the time period, but it cannot be denied that Raymond’s theorizing has become equated with lesbian theory writ large of the time period, and still reverberates within transmisogynist

“feminist” movements today. But what of more modern gay and lesbian theorists? While outright transmisogyny is mostly out of fashion in current feminist writing, some of the characteristic features of the transphobia espoused by authors like Raymond and Harris reoccur in modern scholarship in more subtle (and, most likely, unintentional the majority of the time) ways. This means that even scholarship that is not openly transphobic can still harm and misrepresent trans people when speaking about drag. I contend that these misrepresentations may actually provide avenues for solidarity between transfeminine drag performers and those whose identities fall outside of the categories of cisgender gayness (such as cis women, trans performers, and straight male drag queens), all of whom are rhetorically utilized and subsequently sidelined by scholars who view drag as “queer” (a.k.a., cis gay and lesbian) above all else.

The literature is rife with the implication that drag is a “gay thing,” be it in articles arguing that drag kinging is about celebrating lesbian subcultures or studies that define drag queens as gay men who dress as women but do not identify as such (Rupp and Taylor, 2003; Harris, 1995). Of course, this is not always the case; there is a small but burgeoning group of scholarship focusing specifically on trans drag performers (Shapiro), but I have not yet found scholarly study of straight drag performers (outside of analyses of problematic film portrayals by cis actors). However, I have hope that this could change soon, as the most recent season of *RPDR* features its first straight cisgender queen. The show’s popularity both culturally and in the scholarship may mean that this small act of representation is recognized as worthy of study. Nevertheless, it is especially frustrating that oftentimes those scholars most invested in portraying drag as subversive end up portraying drag as the semi-exclusive domain of those members of the queer community with access to the most racial, gendered, and financial capital. This ignores the ways in which what is categorized as “subversive” is often premised on access

to privilege and resources. In particular, the ability to consciously craft a performance recognized by feminist authors as subversive is often tied to an educational background in feminist and/or queer theory that those who are poor or otherwise unable to attend college (as most k-12 settings do not provide courses on feminist theory). As such, the expectation that drag be explicitly political and anti-hegemonic at all times arguably actually reinforces classist and ableist hegemony. It also assumes that there is one specific type of masculinity or femininity that is legible to all, which fails to recognize how a version of gender that seems regressive to white college-educated U.S.-based scholars may actually subvert gender norms within cultures outside of the researcher's purview. In addition, considering the importance of lived experience to feminist theory, it is highly probable that performers may know more about feminist-theory-as-practice through their drag than outside scholars could ever know.

This also leads to pigeonholing of the study of drag. Outside of LGBTQ studies, drag must frequently be defended as worthy of study at all. While it is of course always useful for scholars to justify the "why" of their research, the pointedness of the question outside of lgbtq studies – as well as the assumption of relevance within LGBTQ studies – warrants consideration. I suspect these attitudes are rooted in the aforementioned assumption that drag is a "gay thing." The unspoken assumption is that because drag is a "gay thing" that is not omnipresent in all gay spaces, and gay populations and spaces are relatively small already, drag does not have relevance or meaning to the majority of people. As a result, LGBTQ studies scholars are not expected to defend the choice to study drag; it is assumed to be intrinsically queer or worthy of critique as not being the "right" *kind* of queer. Outside of LGBTQ studies, the assumption of queerness and demand for intensive justification serves, I contend, as evidence of the larger assumption that

academia is sexually and gender agnostic or, even more worrisome, specifically heterosexual and cisgender.

As such, we must be cautious not to give drag research a pass to not have to convincingly justify its worthiness within lgbtq studies, as doing so leads to a lack of intellectual rigor and the erasure of drag performed by straight populations. We should also push back against overly skeptical demands for justification within other fields in order to resist assumptions that queerness is not inherent to all fields or that queer topics are inherently less rigorous or less worthy of study. Relatedly, in order to demonstrate rigor both within LGBTQ studies and other fields, researchers should work to deliberately recruit from diverse and minoritized populations who work in a variety of drag settings and genres. A study that solely or primarily interviews white cisgender gay men who compete in the pageant circuit (where passing as a cisgender woman who conforms to cultural beauty standards is the overarching expectation) is arguably more likely to generalize drag as reifying gender norms, whereas a study of only trans of color alternative drag queens will likely conclude the opposite, and neither example's results can be extrapolated to cover drag as a whole due to the exclusion of kings and non-binary royalty. Of course, one may not have the access, resources, or research scope to be entirely comprehensive; in that case researchers should follow what Stokoe terms a "particularizing approach" (67), wherein researchers are careful to contextualize their findings and resist universalizing them.

It seems to me that scholarly division about drag's subversive or regressive status is partially associated with whether this scholarship focuses on drag kings or drag queens. Those studying kings tend to argue in favor of the subversive reading such as in Jae Basiliere's argument that drag kings enact feminist masculinity even when performing hegemonic

masculinity (981), while those studying queens tend to fall into the “regressive” camp, such as in Rupp and Taylor’s “When the Girls are Men.” Of course, this is a vast oversimplification, and many scholars present more nuanced or conditional approaches. Perhaps, then, it would be more accurate to say that this division is not solely based on a king/queen binary but rather also the type of drag being performed. For instance, drag queens who work the pageant scene or present normatively feminine drag are generally placed in the “regressive” category, as most critiques of drag as misogynistic and appropriative only focus on queens who are categorized as “female impersonators” (Shacht, 2002), whereas alternative drag queens, when acknowledged, are more likely to be viewed as subversive. For example, Lindval states about the alternative queens on *The Boulet Brothers’ Dragula* that:

There is no better way to describe these queens than as ghouls: they embody that which is not dead or alive, real or imaginary, male or female, animal or human ... [the episode extermination challenge involving the consumption of brains] reads not only as a reminder of the brain-eating ghoul created and reproduced in visual culture; when performed by queer bodies that opt for abjection as a means to reclaim the monster, the gesture seems like a veiled way to eat and digest a structure of thought that has for so long maligned the monster as the incarnation of all things different. These drag queen zombies acknowledge the potential for the monster to challenge boundaries and categories ... and reclaim its capability to produce meaning for itself instead of reflecting meanings cast upon it. (25)

While I agree with the argument that these queens are typically more politically radical and subversive than most pageant queens, we must be careful not to valorize them as being less problematic overall. Many of the queens who have taken part in *Dragula* have been accused of

racial abuse, misogyny, gaslighting and abusing others, transmedicalism (a view espoused by certain trans people that argues that trans people who do not wish to transition via hormones and/or surgery are insufficiently trans, a stance that is notably anti-non-binary, even if not directly stated as such), and sexual violence, and so we also need to recognize that alternative queens can be monstrous in more ways than one.

Conversely, drag kings who perform a legibly non-feminine masculinity are more likely to be viewed as subversive in their embodied critique of normative masculinity, whereas feminine drag kings are frequently viewed as regressive in their assumed desire to remind audiences that they are appropriately feminine offstage. Surkan (2002) succinctly sums this up in his discussion of perceptions of drag kings in relation to their off stage butch/femme presentation: “The bias toward privileging masculine kings situates them not only as more authentic but also as more transgressive” (171). This is especially notable in Volcano and Halberstam’s work on drag kings, wherein they argue that drag kings who strip, perform a feminine masculinity, and/or bring awareness to the constructedness of their masculine presentation are seeking primarily to remind the audience of their “ultimate” womanhood, stating that butch drag kings’ performances come from a place of “authentic” masculinity and that “the ‘femme’ drag king and the ‘androgynous’ drag king assumes her masculinity as an act ... s/he leaves her masculinity behind when she takes off the fake hair and the boxers and the chest binding” (36). This analysis leaves out transmasculine drag kings who identify with or perform a femme presentation and unconsciously leans into a transnormative narrative of who deserves to “authentically” identify as a certain type of trans person.

It is significant that much of the scholarship focuses on supposed “authenticity,” contradicting the often-stated recognition that (at least in many eyes) drag is a deliberately

constructed performance that diverges from the performer's "inherent" self or presentation. I find it interesting, in addition, that many scholars who use the language of authenticity when speaking about drag do not engage with Black drag and ballroom conceptions of "realness;" rather than engaging with what Bailey in *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* describes as ballroom performers' and their communities' utilization of realness as a potential mode of disidentification, they are referring to a whitewashed notion of authenticity that comes primarily from analyzing performances from an outside perspective rather than speaking with performers. A preoccupation with authenticity in drag writ large that does not also recognize and grapple with the role of realness in non-white drag fails to do more than reaffirm the *perceived* alterity of drag, particularly drag that does not fall into standard white forms. Bailey argues that in the ballroom scene, "realness" serves two functions:

First, it is a guide that members use to construct, rehearse, and hone their performances and the presentations of their bodies to compete, be judged, and snatch trophies at balls for enacting the most "real" gender performance for a given realness category. Second, realness is based on the individual and communal recognition of ... the way in which members enact their realness performances to create the illusion of gender and sexual normativity and to blend into the larger heteronormative society to avoid homophobic discrimination, exclusion, violence, and death. (55 - 56)

This means that, rather than realness being necessarily related to some kind of interior "authentic" identification as the role being performed, it is rather about being able to pass within a racist and homophobic society and is therefore a kind of disidentification that seeks not to uncritically reproduce the forms of gender and sexuality that lead to

discrimination but to strategically reappropriate them for both survivability and pleasure within Black LGBTQ communities. That said, Bailey does acknowledge that realness also has its limits in that it tends to align gendered realness with passing as cisgender and straight, thus often reinscribing cissexism and heterosexism (68). Even so, Bailey's lexicon of ballroom genders (36 – 45) shows that, even though often potentially rooted in cissexist ideologies of gender, ballroom provides avenues for a wider variety of gendered identities and presentations than available in the external gender system. Nevertheless, despite its problems, realness still functions to allow Black LGBTQ people to use markers of gendered and sexual normativity to move safely through a racist and homo/transphobic world - and, in the case of ballroom competitions, have fun and potentially make a little money doing so. This understanding of realness is productive for analyses of drag in that it divorces an attempt to pass from an "authentic" inner identity, which allows for a reading of drag that neither excoriates drag performers for supposedly uncritically reproducing problems of gender nor divides drag performers based on whether their drag is perceived as arriving from an "authentic" personal identity. It also helpfully positions passing as gender-normative as an act of fugitivity through reclamation and disidentification rather than a deliberate engagement with alterity as a political statement.

Disidentification, as coined and defined by Muñoz, "is a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology ... [disidentification] resists the binary of identification and counteridentification" (97). Contrary to counteridentification, which Muñoz identifies as recreating the discourse it purports to

challenge, disidentification appropriates and twists elements of the dominant culture being critiqued while rejecting that which cannot be rehabilitated. Snorton demonstrates how enslaved people used “cross-gender” disguise – gender fungibility – as a tactical performance during the supposed transitional period between legalized chattel slavery and “emancipation.” gender transgression as fugitivity. As such, Snorton and Bailey’s works identify gender malleability and flexibility as key to Black (queer) survival from the mid-1800s through the late 2010s, which serves to problematize perceptions of attempts to “pass” as automatic reifications of white gender norms rather than tactics of survival within racist cisheterosexist society. When Snorton and Muñoz’s concepts of disidentification and fugitivity are put in conversation, we can see how drag genders and performances can be vital avenues of not just enjoyment but also survivability for minoritarian subjects.

That said, while alterity certainly has an undeniable role in the societal positioning of drag, particularly as practiced within racially minoritized groups, the focus on alterity or minoritarian identity does not reflect the reality of drag’s omnipresence in U.S. American pop culture and society. The premiere of the most recent season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* netted 1.3 million viewers (not accounting for later streamings) (Petski), which may not be much compared to other reality show premieres, but the Nielsen numbers don’t account for later streamings and the cultural phenomenon of Monday night watch parties at gay bars (Gudelunas), where dozens of people may be watching one television, thus making the viewership actually much higher than what initial ratings imply. In addition, when I mention researching drag, almost everyone I speak to immediately lists off their favorite or least favorite performers, episodes, or movies. Drag queens read storybooks to children in public libraries every weekend and drag brunches are

extremely popular with the bachelorette party crowd; drag is everywhere in the U.S. While it is still associated with a minoritized group and performers rarely make a living off of their drag entirely, a representation of drag as always marked by alterity seems misguided when the fact of the matter is that some of the most well-known drag performers are wealthy white cis men, and drag itself is visibly evident, and frequently enjoyed, throughout a variety of societal sectors.

Sashays and Ways Forward

As such, while alterity is a useful lens in that it acknowledges that drag is associated with queer subcultures, it does not fully speak to the ways in which drag is becoming increasingly well-known, if not mainstream, and is no longer solely performed late at night in gay bars. A more accurate lens may lie in viewing drag as *associated* with alterity rather than purely *subject* to alterity. This reframing could help scholars and drag performers themselves more readily recognize the diversity of drag and its changing visibility nationally and internationally and help combat the essentialism I have outlined above. Another important way to shift the narrative would be to pay more attention to social sciences research that speaks *with* rather than *for* drag performers and more directly reproduces their voices and statements. For example, as mentioned above, Barnett and Johnson's *We are All Royalty*, which provides direct transcription of the interviews performed, challenges the assertions of fundamental antagonism between kings and queens by showing a dialogue with both a drag king and a drag queen that frequently agree with each other about drag's activist potential and the importance of queer spaces for drag performance. And Berbery and Johnson's *En/Activist Drag: Kings Reflect on Queerness, Queens and Questionable Masculinities* uses poetic transcription to capture the tone, pauses, and verbiage of their interviewees, which allows for a better understanding of them as people rather than abstract study subjects. Hearing directly from the performers themselves, rather than relying

on the interpretations of researchers alone, gives a clearer understanding of what is important to performers, how they conceptualize their art and their identities, and the actual content of what they're saying.

Further research on both non-binary drag and drag as performed by cisgender and heterosexual people would also be a productive avenue for change within the field. I think that this could address two seemingly divergent issues at once: recognizing the breadth of non-binary gender expressions and drag's possibilities as a whole, and also the ways in which the topics that drag addresses are assumed to be confined primarily to LGBTQ people. Non-binary drag importantly challenges the gender essentialism undergirding the project of the subversive/regressive paradigm as well as the argument that drag is inherently problematic in its supposed focus on reproducing cissexist beauty standards. In terms of the connection to the issue of drag being defined as an "LGBTQ thing," non-binary drag challenges notions of drag as something that always involves gender "crossing," and opens up opportunities for cisgender and heterosexual people to witness drag that corresponds with the performer's gender identity and/or sex, and therefore to begin to think about how their own gendered embodiment can be a form of drag. While, of course, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* is foundational in terms of the assertion that all gender is in essence a form of drag, the majority of non-academics, particularly those not versed in theories of gender and queerness, will most likely be unfamiliar with the idea (they may be more familiar with RuPaul's similar assertion that "We're born naked, the rest is drag.") As such, we cannot solely rely on Butler's theorizing to reach vast public audiences, and so witnessing non-binary forms of drag may be the most readily-available example for popular audiences. This means that non-binary drag, as well as drag performed by cisgender and heterosexual people (such as *Dragula*'s Disasterina and *RPDR*'s Maddy Morphosis), are

possibly the best ways to expose non-LGBTQ audiences to the idea that gender itself is a form of drag, and one that they can and should incorporate into their own self-conception.

In addition, a move away from Butlerian theorizing and towards more contemporary trans studies approaches to gender may be useful in that much of Butler's work is not taken up or deployed by scholars in ways that are sensitive to, and accurately represent, people's lived experience of gender. For example, a professor uncritically teaching the idea that all gender is drag can unfortunately lead to students not taking trans people's genders seriously; after all, if all gender is drag, which means gender isn't "real," why does it matter that I be careful not to misgender someone? Instead, a turn to trans studies' attention to what gender is, how it is formulated, and how it manifests may be more productive in studying drag. In particular, trans studies' interrogation of the concept of sex as "real" and "biological" would be productive, in that it delinks the assumptions that to perform a certain gender through drag necessarily indicates a sexed body that is in opposition to that gender. Trans studies' insistence on recognizing both the interiority and the materiality of sexed and gendered experience would also counter assumptions that drag is always "surface-level" and not, for many, a deeply-felt experience of gendered embodiment. Finally, a turn towards trans studies would necessitate more of a recognition of the experiences of trans drag performers, which would reduce misgendering, increase the accuracy of conclusions drawn regarding gender and drag, make it more likely for trans drag performers to be interlocutors in research, and ultimately deepen the research and analysis conducted.

The next issue I would like to cover in more depth is that of the subversive/regressive paradigm and how to challenge it. I believe that researchers of drag must spend more time unpacking, and relaying, their positionality when it comes to the topic. It has not escaped my

notice that many of the researchers who argue that drag kinging is more subversive than queening identify themselves as queer women, yet rarely does this admission go beyond the point of mere acknowledgement rather than an in-depth reflection on how this could color their viewpoint. For example, Allison (1994) has pointed to how, in her experience, lesbian communities have frequently prioritized sexism and homophobia over other forms of oppression such as class and race and therefore failed to fully examine their own positionality outside of the axes of gender and sexuality. It can be easy for a scholar immersed in certain branches of queer communities to have more access to drag kings who may be more likely to express grievances with queens based on gender relations than analyze their own potential culpability in terms of other forms of oppression. For example, in the research, white kings, or kings whose race is not specified – which usually indicates that both they and the researcher[s] are white – tend to identify patriarchal relationships between sexes as a primary issue within drag, whereas Shapiro’s work indicates that kings of color identify racism as a primary issue regarding their own participation within drag. Shapiro states that the genders imagined within the Disposable Boy Toys

were raced White and this racialised imagining—a product of White privilege—was unintentional but very real in its consequences. Nate Prince, for example, felt that the manner in which he was supposed to do gender according to the group did not reflect his own Asian Pacific Islander-inflected gender norms ... The outcome of these racialised imaginings of masculinities and femininities was that the group did not offer members of colour new ways to imagine racialised genders with which they could identify. This made DBT a very different kind of exploratory

space for members of colour, which inhibited the imaginative possibility
mechanism for personal identity change. (162)

As such, if researchers do not keep these issues in mind or revisit their earlier work in the ways Shapiro did here, the researcher in question is not only coming into their work with their own pre-existing conceptions, but they are also more likely to be able to conduct research with and have access to populations who share, and therefore, reinforce those conceptions. In addition, there exists the ongoing issue of researcher whiteness going unmarked, wherein the researcher identifies their own gender and sexuality, but not race, but mentions the racial makeup of their research subjects, such as in Taylor and Rupp's "When the Girls are Men: Negotiating Gender and Sexual Differences in a Study of Drag Queens," where the researchers' race was invisibilised and not recognized as a possible power dynamic the researchers may have had over certain participants. It is also notable that outside of the queens of color, the queens' race is not always specified in their descriptions; another example of whiteness going unmarked. While this piece does an excellent job of investigating how sexualized and gendered power differences impacted their research, the notation and lack of notation of specific people's races, including the researchers', leaves open the question of whether or not race was actively considered. This evidences that in some cases, researchers not only view their own race as inconsequential, thereby not recognizing the role their race plays in participant-researcher power dynamics, but also indicates that they prioritize gender and sexual difference as more salient than other identity markers. This ultimately means that researchers of drag must more fully reckon with, and explicate, their own positionality when it comes to their research - in all situations, regardless of gender or sexuality.

Another important avenue for scholarship could be more research with and about drag consumers and audiences. While much of the important ethnographic work, such as Taylor and Rupp's *The Girls of the 801 Cabaret*, interviews audiences as well as drag performers, there is far less research being conducted that specifically focuses on drag audiences' perceptions; however, a notable example is Schacht's "Beyond the Boundaries of the Classroom: Teaching About Gender and Sexuality at a Drag Show," wherein he speaks about his pedagogical and ethnographic practice of bringing students to drag shows (although it should be noted that in other works, he has traded in transmisogyny similar to Harris' assertions about trans people and gender regressiveness). While studying performer intent is vital in terms of understanding their motivations and practices, also investigating audience reactions could add holistic depth to the field: what are the similarities and disparities between the artist's intended performance and the audience's perceptions of that performance? How do audience expectations and understandings of drag shape both the overall drag scene and the performers' practices? Answering these questions could be key to understanding nuances in performer identity and intention and the efficacy of their drag, particularly in the case of drag performers who view their work as activist.

Finally, I would suggest that drag scholars increase their literacy with, and inclusion of, trans studies in their analyses. While many scholars are increasingly recognizing trans identities and using genderqueer as a frame for understanding drag (Berbary and Johnson), more inclusion of trans studies theories across the field would add to the scholarship. As I have shown, trans studies' concern with the erasures and elisions within archives are productive for analyzing why certain forms of drag are overlooked within the canon. Other useful theories might include trans pedagogies and trans historicity regarding the cultural-linguistic changes behind the separation of "drag queen" and "transvestite" from "transgender" identities over time. For example, trans

pedagogies that focus on tactics for delinking pronouns from assumed genders in classroom spaces (as in Finn Enke’s “Stick Figures and Little Bits: Toward a Non-binary Pedagogy”) could be a productive avenue for the project of studying non-binary drag, as well as fighting assumptions about performers’ gender identities. And studying the linguistic changes mentioned above could provide vital insight into race, sexuality, and drag, considering that it could be argued that the move toward “transgender” and away from “drag queen” is a legitimizing tactic for white neoliberal trans subjects to distance themselves from the historical examples of street-based sex workers of color who lived in ways we would now describe as trans but who, at the time at least, identified themselves as drag queens.

Conclusion

While I have no wish to paint the field of drag research as an entirely problematic one, as I have shown, the current state of the field leaves much to be desired in a variety of ways. Luckily, many of these issues have begun to be addressed and reduced, but there is still much room to grow. While there has been a clear generational shift in the scholarship from the 1970s and 90s to the more in depth work contemporary scholars such as Stokoe and Horowitz – and now, myself – we still have much to improve upon. From researching with rather than about drag performers to more deeply engaging with trans studies, I have attempted to provide suggestions for further development and diversification of the field. While I outlined several particular steps, they are united by themes of anti-binarism, increased nuance, and performer agency. These main themes, if focused upon, can greatly grow the field both in terms of the fields of scholarship that most commonly engage with drag research, such as LGBTQ studies and ethnography, as well as encouraging other fields to more meaningfully engage with drag and take it more seriously as a

topic of study. As such, it is my hope that the field will continue to grow in terms of nuance, care, and interdisciplinarity.

CHAPTER III: DRAG MASCULINITIES: PROBLEMS AND POTENTIALS

Several questions tend to arise in scholarly discussion of drag kinging. Does a performance of masculinity that is explicitly about playing a character who is sexist, gender stereotypical, and/or politically incorrect serve to reproduce those problems or to subversively parody them? Does onstage sexism overshadow offstage feminism? What role does personal identity play when judging onstage performance? There have been a variety of responses to these questions. On the one hand, scholars like Sheila Jeffreys automatically align drag kinging with an offstage butch identity that she correlates with a drive to claim male privilege at the expense of other lesbians: “Some of the lesbians who had demonstrated their commitment to achieving male power and privilege by assuming a ‘butch’ identity, by packing and holding ‘drag king’ contests to see who could move most convincingly like a man, and particularly a gay man, moved towards the mutilating surgery and hormone consumption which promised ‘realness’ in their quest” (1) – a frankly insulting misappropriation of the term “realness” and its implications within queer communities of color. On the other hand, scholars such as Basiliere push back against such assertions, stating that “drag kings perform gender in ways that can work to undermine the sanctity of masculine dominance ... When drag kings perform masculinity with bodies that are explicitly marked as not hegemonically masculine, they are not celebrating the norms of masculine dominance. Rather, I contend, they are intervening in our cultural celebration of masculinity by reimagining masculine standards as explicitly queer” (998 - 999). These arguments both relate to and differ from analyses of drag femininities. Whereas critics of drag femininities charge them with reproducing racist and sexist beauty norms and stereotypes (hooks, 1991) or misogynistically appropriating femininity to reinforce gender roles (Raymond, 1994; Schacht, 2002), critics of drag masculinities tend to position them as reinforcing violent

heteropatriarchy at the expense of women and reproducing or enacting the physical abuse of cis women (Jeffreys and Gottschalk, 2014). In other words, the idea is generally that drag femininities trivialize womanhood and enact symbolic violence against women through the performers' supposedly inherent masculinity, whereas drag masculinities reject a supposedly inherent womanhood and enact or contribute to physical violence against women.

Clearly, there is a broad spectrum of opinions about the morality of drag kinging. I cannot say I fall in the middle of these opinions – I would like to get as far away from the first reading as possible while maintaining nuance – but I certainly would not say it is always or necessarily one or the other in terms of subversiveness or regressiveness. Parody still reproduces the problem being parodied, but this does not mean that parody does not also do important critical work. In addition, the assumption that onstage performances of masculinity definitively map onto offstage politics is challenged by the actions of drag kings themselves. For example, the drag king Wang Newton is known for performances that explicitly push the boundaries of political correctness through a lothario-esque persona, yet their offstage engagement with drag is explicitly anti-oppressive, as they co-produced an online series showcasing Asian drag artists in order to counter their exclusion within drag spaces and partnered with the LGBTQ+-elder focused nonprofit SAGE to foster support systems for elders facing isolation during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Clearly, the subversive/regressive dichotomy cannot be easily defined when a holistic view of those performing drag masculinities' onstage and offstage politics is brought into the conversation.

One reason why I wish to investigate the topic of drag masculinities is to further delve into, and challenge, the subversive/regressive dichotomy. While this moral binarism regarding hegemonic gender norms is not isolated to drag masculinities – scholars such as hooks and

Schacht have argued that drag queens are generally inherently regressive and/or patriarchal – I am interested in focusing on drag masculinities in this inquiry for several reasons, which relate to several deeply co-imbricated points. Firstly, the canon of research on drag kinging has historically been more nuanced than scholarship on queening in terms of the identities of performers, which reduces the issues of essentialization that frequently crop up in critiques of drag queens that assume queens either are cis men or always hold male privilege, thereby misgendering many performers and relegating criticism to reductive accusations of misogyny that fail to take other factors into account. Secondly, there is much to unpack in terms of scholars’ representations of drag kinging and masculinities that needs to be addressed, such as the tendency to affirm drag kinging as inherently subversive in that it is typically performed by people viewed as having less social and financial capital than drag queens. In addition, perceptions of drag kinging are often tied into the idea that masculinity is inherently more oppressive and problematic than femininity, an assumption that ignores the ways in which femininity functions in patriarchy, and positions women as always victimized and oppressed rather than potentially culpable in violence and problematic patriarchal behavior themselves. This feeds into perceptions of drag kinging as more subversive than drag queening, as the assumption is that a drag king is assigned female at birth (AFAB) and has experience with sexist oppression and therefore is more enlightened about gender than a drag queen, who is generally assumed to be male assigned at birth (AMAB); this is problematic not just in that it misgenders many drag performers but also in that it assumes a single-axis model of oppression that positions women as victims and men as violators. The single-axis model is especially dangerous when combined with transmisogyny, as it has historically been deployed in order to paint trans women and transfeminine people who want access to gendered spaces as appropriative at best and

violent at worst. Finally, many drag kings do state a specific activist and feminist underpinning for their work, and I find this productive in terms of teasing out the tensions between stated intent, interpretation, and aesthetics. As mentioned, these topics are deeply interrelated, which will be investigated further below.

To conduct this analysis, I will begin with close reads of performances by two performers that I view as portraying or referring to cultural understandings of masculinity. In order to be clear, I feel I should define what I mean when I refer to drag masculinities in this chapter before introducing our cast. Rather than referring to drag kinging specifically, I am referring to drag performed by a variety of bodies and identities that specifically plays with tropes of masculinity, rather than an identification of their personae with manhood per se. By tropes of masculinity, I mean traits and behaviors that are generally societally associated with masculinity or manhood (often incorrectly), such as particular forms of body language, clothing choices, and physical traits such as facial hair, flat-chestedness, and body and facial hair. This is of course not to say that these tropes actually correlate to masculine identity; it would be disingenuous to my history and self, and those of many others, to say that these traits actually make someone masculine or a man. However, drag as a whole plays with gendered stereotypes, and so analyzing drag along gender lines always involves a recognition of overall societal assumptions surrounding gender, whether or not they are true.

The performers I will be analyzing are the drag king Landon Cider, winner of Season 3 of *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula*, and the hyperpop musician Dorian Electra. Landon Cider portrays a more straightforward form of drag masculinity, simply in that he⁴ specifically

⁴ In this chapter, I will be referring to Landon Cider as “he,” in accordance with his character’s gender; the performer identifies as a cisgender lesbian outside of drag, but in drag Landon Cider always uses he/him pronouns. In addition, this will also make the writing clearer and more consistent. I will refer to Dorian Electra with “they,” because even though their performances typically specifically parody masculinity, some of their drag involves

identifies his character as both a man and a drag king. That said, he still employs aesthetics more commonly associated with queening (such as rhinestones, corsetry, and elaborate makeup), which he has stated is because in competing with drag queens and femme-leaning genderfuck drag performers on his season of *Dragula*, he felt that he had to engage in more “glamorous” aesthetics typically associated with queens in order to be noticed alongside them. Dorian Electra, rather than performing as one character with a variety of looks, almost always performs different forms of masculinity with every music video or album – although still with a level of flashy aesthetics frequently associated with femininity and makeup straight out of the trendiest of social media accounts (I say almost always because they have released a few videos in female drag, but the vast majority of their work involves portrayals of and engagement with masculinity specifically).

I selected these performers in large part because their more flamboyant aesthetic challenges the dominant narrative of drag kings as normatively butch, therefore complicating the common arguments about drag kinging reproducing hegemonic masculinity. That said, they all still critique hegemonic masculinity: one of Landon Cider’s looks for the season finale specifically portrays the kind of straight man who objectifies women while neglecting his own grooming and comportment and Dorian Electra’s songs all address different variations of problematic and toxic masculinity. The interplay between aesthetic razzle-dazzle and the violences of problematic masculinity both of these performers embody in their performances, I contend, serve to problematize the assumption that masculine drag is either subversive or regressive rather than, like all gendered embodiment, both at once.

parodying and embodying normative femininity and they are adamant about their genderqueer identity in general. When referring to a specific masculine character I will use “he” but for the most part will refer to Electra with they/them pronouns.

The question of whether a performance is regressive/reactive or subversive upholds normative ideas of what kinds of gendered embodiment is moral or correct as well as the assumption that members of a minoritized or minority group will necessarily be less problematic along all axes of identity, and if they are not, they are even more insufficiently progressive than members of majoritarian groups who share similar problematic views and behaviors. This connects back to the regressive/subversive pattern identified above, wherein drag kinging is inscribed as either entirely feminist or entirely problematic. I also contend that the glamorous presentation embodied by my selected performers matched with the intention of criticizing violent masculinity complicates the reactionary/subversive dichotomy in that a critique of masculinity in concert with an embodiment that functions to glamorize masculinity (at least aesthetically if not politically) cannot necessarily be simplified into an understanding of their performances as *either* critiquing *or* upholding hegemonic masculinity, as it portrays masculinity as both harmful and aesthetically pleasing.

The issue of aesthetics is important here, as drag as a medium inherently engages with aesthetics, and I would argue that this engagement is deeply related to the analyses of drag as reinforcing hegemonic gender. For example, hooks' critique of the drag queens in *Paris is Burning* is tied to the visual emulation of white beauty standards, and Harris' convoluted arguments about drag aesthetics are strikingly tied to his anxieties regarding traditionally gendered styles of dress. Similarly, Lindvall's analysis of the horror-themed drag showcased in *Dragula* celebrates the ways in which the queens on the show embrace visual monstrosity in ways that counter hegemonic beauty standards (26). This then brings up another issue, one which I cannot fully delve into here but would encourage further research into, namely the privileging of the visual in analyses of drag. It cannot be denied that drag is a primarily visual medium, so it

makes sense for analyses – including my own – to focus on the visual aesthetics, particularly when analyzing televised portrayals such as the ones I engage with. That said, those visual elements are physically embodied by the performers, and the impacts on their bodies are important to acknowledge. For instance, in order to present a form of femininity arguably aligned with cissexist, sizeist, racist, and transmisogynist beauty norms, many drag queens must engage with highly uncomfortable physical processes, such as corseting, tucking, and surgical bodily modification. As such, an argument that they reproduce the types of beauty norms that result in the physical harm of non-drag feminine bodies overlooks the fact that they, too, are subject to physical torment in the name of said beauty norms – the main unspoken assumption being that they *choose* to do so in ways women out of drag do not have the option to. This has not been fleshed out as extensively within studies of drag kings, but I would contend that the physical harm and pain many, but not all, drag kings go through, supposedly in the name of gendered normativity (such as chest binding and the discomfort of fake facial hair), also brings into question whether the supposed cultural harm of drag-reinforced gender norms upon people who don't consciously do drag supersedes the physical harm drag performers put themselves through in order to perform these norms.

In addition, there are other ways drag impacts embodiment not fully recognized when visual aesthetics are analyzed without connecting them to other somatic experiences. For instance, in *Dragula*, the lowest-performing contestants for each episode must undergo an elimination challenge that is specifically designed to be physically and psychologically painful, discomfiting, or otherwise abject; notable examples include being buried alive, standing in bare feet for extended periods in ice baths, undergoing body piercing with large-gauged needles, and ingesting uncooked organ meat, pureed raw fish, or live spiders. These elimination challenges (as

well as the final “filth” prompts) invoke bodily experiences related to abjection not just in the contestants forced to undergo them but also the audience and the professionals tasked with recording them. The final filth look and performance by Season 2’s winner, Bitqh Puddin, was lauded by the hosts specifically because it caused multiple production team workers to run out of the room to vomit, and I, even sitting on my couch months later, felt sick to my stomach watching her eat a wad of wet hair pulled out of a mop bucket. While the majority of drag arguably does not engage with abjection in such a visceral way, it is nevertheless an argument for a more holistic analysis of drag as a fully somatic rather than solely visual experience. And of course, it is always helpful to challenge ourselves to actively include the experiences of blind people when analyzing mediums primarily associated with visuality.

That said, due to the constraints of the pandemic, I am primarily focused here on visual analyses, as up until recently I did not feel safe to attend what few in-person drag shows that I could have theoretically attended. (That said, another significant feature of drag during the pandemic, which I will work through in more depth in my “Drag and Activism” chapter, has to do with how the pandemic actually enabled wider audiences to virtually attend drag shows, which, due to the physical locations in which these shows have traditionally been held, have typically been inaccessible to underage people, sober people, and those outside of “gay-friendly” urban centers.) I also, when attempting to recruit drag performers for a smaller-scale ethnographic project during the pandemic, encountered financial barriers and was unable to fall back on typical pre-pandemic recruitment tactics for drag performers, namely flyering and being in physical attendance at live shows.

In light of these constraints, I will analyze several looks or performances by each performer selected in order to better understand these tensions. First, I will delve into two looks

Landon Cider showcased on his season of *Dragula*: a werewolf leather daddy look and an anti-Trump mariachi look. The first look contradicts frequent scholarly assertions of drag kinging and drag queening originating in subcultures that do not intersect by embodying aesthetics and behaviors that A) are associated with nuances of gay male subcultures, and B) simultaneously arise from the leather scene, which is often a site of inter-gender commiseration based on shared queerness rather than necessarily subdivided into gender-segregated sects. This first look also challenges the idea that sexual identities are completely static, even amongst monosexuals, which is indicated in the audience's attraction to him. The second look is a useful insight into how drag performers use their drag for activist work, and the complexities of intent, aesthetics, and interpretation, as well as the problems associated with limiting feminism's scope solely to male-female power dynamics. It also, I contend, implicitly problematizes white feminist perceptions of Latinx masculinity as inherently anti-femme and homophobic moreso than other racial and ethnic groups' manifestations of masculinity.

Next, I will analyze the aesthetics of Dorian Electra's music videos for the songs "Guyliner" and "Man to Man" from their 2019 album *Flamboyant*. I selected "Guyliner" for its direct relationship to the interplay between glamor and problematic masculinity that I wish to investigate; in it, Dorian takes on the character of an emo "softboy," who portrays sensitivity and wears makeup in ways that at first seem to be a proto-feminist subversion of gender norms, but which the character actually uses as a strategy to attract women, who he implicitly objectifies and infantilizes by referring to them as "chicks." (In addition, the language of "guyliner" problematically separates the genders by renaming a product associated with women in order to assert masculinity rather than accept male femininity.) At the same time, the character asserts that wearing eyeliner "feels so right" and that "this is the real me, baby, it's no disguise,"

complicating the assumption that just because part of the reasoning for the character wearing makeup is sexist, that no part of the choice can be deeply felt or unrelated to sexism.

In “Man to Man,” Dorian plays a character who both embraces and rejects violent masculinity. Wearing outfits emulating ‘80s street fighters, knights, and boxers, Electra sings to a friend and/or lover who is clearly talking trash behind their back and entreats him to face them “man to man” and fight them. The lyrics and aesthetics obviously invoke conceptions of masculinity as tied to violent conflict in these ways, but other lyrics and actions in the video also undercut this by asking the subject “Are you man enough to soften up?”, stating that he needs to lay his weapons down, and ending the video with the two opponents kissing rather than fighting. As such, Electra both ties masculinity to violence and also insists that there is the possibility of a peaceful, communicative masculinity.

Ultimately, by putting these performers and performances in conversation, I hope to argue for a view of drag masculinities as neither entirely subversive nor entirely problematic but rather a complicated mixture of both that cannot be definitively separated and challenge assumptions about drag performers’ (and their audience members’) identities. Through both close reading of individual performances and analyzing some of the scholarly literature on drag, I will draw connections between specific portrayals of masculinity in drag and larger cultural and scholarly patterns to both challenge and deepen the existing literature.

Landon Cider

For the “Halloween Haunts” episode in Season 3 of *Dragula*, the remaining four performers were tasked with creating a look based on classic Halloween costumes, such as Frankenstein and the Grim Reaper. Landon Cider chose to base his on werewolves, and won by a country mile, in large part due to his embrace of gay male fetish subcultures, specifically leather

and pup play. He emerged from backstage wearing a pup mask, leather jacket, black pants which were soon revealed to be tearaway, a leather biker's cap adorned with piercings and phases of the moon imagery, and a black pumpkin-shaped candy basket with a full moon and crow on the front. (The contestants were also tasked with incorporating a pumpkin prop into their look.) He removed the mask and jacket to reveal fangs, a salt-and-pepper beard, and a muscled torso (painted onto a bodysuit) covered in body hair and a leather chest harness with werewolf fangs in the middle. For the rest of the performance, he vamped and strutted around the stage, once more evoking gay male sexual subcultures by miming doing poppers. In *Dragula*, all the contestants' performances are edited together with music over them, so it is unclear what in particular he is dancing to. However, after this point, the contestants did a rare (for *Dragula*) lip synch battle to the song "Dread" by the band Ritual Aesthetic in which he prowled around the stage, snarling and miming clawing the air. This performance was so popular with the judges and the show's audience that it became his primary number for the *Dragula* post-season US tour, which leaned into the gay sex subculture references even more by incorporating dancers wearing only underwear, chains or leather harnesses around their chests, and pup play masks, finishing the performance by miming doing poppers with the dancers and simulating an orgy.

This performance is significant for my analysis for a number of reasons. Firstly, it complicates understandings of drag as confined to either lesbian or gay male spaces and subcultures. For example, Horowitz (2019) studies drag performances at a venue in Cleveland that technically contains two venues: Bounce, a dance club frequented by gay men and the site of drag queen shows, and Urban Station, a dive bar primarily patronized by queer women and the site of drag king shows (5). While it is true that these spaces are in many ways gender-segregated, both in terms of patrons and the types of drag being performed in each space, I

would (tentatively) posit that spaces such as these might allow for more fluid social interactions between both patrons and drag performers of a variety of genders and sexualities than one researcher may witness. I say this not to discredit Horowitz's excellent ethnographic work or overall arguments about differences between gay male and lesbian subcultures and spaces, but rather to point out that there could be productive slippage within spaces that cater to both subcultures in the same physical location, particularly in the instance of trans people who may not feel fully accepted in either gender-designated space. While this is mere conjecture on my part, and may well be completely incorrect in the case of the specific space(s) Horowitz studied, I consider it highly likely that there could be more cross-identity solidarity in these spaces than may meet the eye and that drag queens' and drag kings' acts may influence one another in significant but underrecognized ways. In addition, Basiliere's research indicated wider crossover between gendered drag cultures than previously assumed, namely in that a mister (a gay man who performs over-the-top masculinity within the pageant queen scene) was in attendance at a drag king show and asked a king if he could borrow his choreography (1997). This provides evidence that drag cultures may not be as gender-divided than many assume.

Although I do not know Landon Cider's background within various queer subcultures, this performance evinces more than a passing understanding of gay male ones. Landon Cider has identified as a lesbian in interviews, and while not all lesbians identify as women, he has never, to my knowledge, identified himself as anything other than a cis woman out of drag. When this performance is read in concert with his out-of-drag identity, it challenges ideas of kinging and queening as always emerging from, and therefore not fully cognizant of, completely separate gay and lesbian subcultures. It would be one thing to include references to leather culture in general, but to specifically reference poppers indicates a knowledge of gay male sexual subcultures that

undercuts the idea that lesbian and gay drag and club scenes are so separate as to give rise to forms of drag that do not intersect. (While poppers usage is certainly not isolated to gay men, it is primarily associated with gay male sexual subcultures.) That said, I must make the important caveat that drag king performances often invoke or portray male-male relationships and sexuality, so this is certainly not the first iteration of drag kinging to engage with gay masculinity, but out of all the performances I have seen, it engages with the granular specificities of gay sexual subcultures in the most depth. It is especially notable in that the live performances specifically use AMAB dancers out of drag; most of the drag king performances I have seen that invoke gay male sexuality or relationships involve multiple AFAB drag kings, thereby perhaps unintentionally reaffirming certain audience members' assumptions of drag kings as "ultimately" having a lesbian identity.

This performance, then, necessarily challenges analyses of drag kinging that draw a hard line between gay and lesbian subcultures and spaces. It also, when audience reactions are included, challenges the idea that sexual identity categories are always static, impermeable, and cissexist. Multiple judges and contestants who present themselves as solely attracted to men expressed a strong attraction to Cider in this performance, while conscious of and acknowledging his offstage identity and embodiment as a cis woman lesbian. This shows that many people are fully capable of embracing an attraction to a gender expression regardless of, and in fact with full knowledge of, its supposed distance from the bodies assumed to correspond with that expression and identity. In this way, Cider's performance demonstrates that the identity categories often associated with drag show attendance are in fact far more flexible than many scholars assume.

Ultimately, Cider's savvy deployment of gendered tropes and trappings associated with gay masculinity indicates that both drag performers' and their audiences' genders and sexualities

overlap in far more complex ways than is frequently assumed. Rather than being a straightforward case of drag kinging always emerging from, referring to, and consumed within lesbian cultures and spaces, Cider's "insider knowledge" of gay male subcultures shows that a strict separation between lesbian and gay male spaces and cultures may not necessarily be the case when it comes to the inspiration behind and performance of drag. In addition, the audience's attraction to him also undermines notions of sexual identity as static, even in the case of monosexuals.

The next Landon Cider performance I wish to study is his mariachi look from the second episode of *Dragula* season 3. For the episode, the contestants were tasked with creating a "vampire burlesque" look and routine involving a strip tease and the incorporation of a fan provided by one of the show's corporate sponsors that the performers were to decorate or modify themselves. Landon Cider decided to take his look in a decidedly political direction, stating that, as a Mexican American, he wanted to challenge Trumpist policies regarding Mexican immigrants. In his runway performance, he strutted across the stage in a full charro-influenced mariachi costume, complete with a perfectly tailored white and gold jacket, matching white and gold pants, gold silk vest, and a wide-brimmed white and gold sombrero. He also wore a long fake mustache and a wig with a widow's peak as a visual reference to Dracula; other references to the vampire theme were evident in his billowing red silk ascot, yellow eye contacts, and red silk gloves with red rhinestones on the fingertips. Before using the fan prop, he also displayed another important prop: a black glass bottle with a label that said "F*CK YOUR WALL" over a brick background.

Landon Cider pushed the bottle slowly toward the front of the stage, both so that the judges could clearly read it and so the camera would get a good shot. After showing the bottle,

he took a big swig from it, afterward wiping some fake blood from his lips and down his chin in a slow, sensual motion, revealing the vampire fangs he was wearing. This served as an important reclamation and satirization of common white American filmic representations of Mexican and Latinx men as both alcoholic and focused more on the self than on larger political goals. Next, he pulled out and snapped open his large black fan, which he had decorated with a gold glitter bugle, and mimed blowing it. This was another reference to Mexican culture, not just mariachi music but also invoking the visual echo of El Deguello, one of the Mexican military bugle calls associated with the Battle of the Alamo and the most recognizable bugle call to non-Mexican audiences. After doing so, he flapped the fan vigorously for a few moments before switching to the strip portion of the burlesque act.

Slowly striding across the stage, he slowly untied and pulled off his large red ascot, revealing a latex necklace beneath designed to look like blood dripping from a slashed throat. Next he turned his back partially to the audience and slowly removed the jacket and vest, unveiling a rhinestone-and leather chest harness (with the rhinestone section clearly imitative of an inverted cross) and rhinestone pasties over where the nipples on his bodysuit would be. In one swift motion, he tugged off his pants, revealing they were cleverly-masked tearaway pants the whole time. Underneath, he wore black briefs with rhinestones on the bulge, a gold belt, and black garters, also with inverted cross imagery. Reaching into his briefs, he pulled out what I first assumed was a packer, revealing it to actually be a partially foil-wrapped burrito, which he took a defiant bite out of – another reference to Mexican pride and culture and, like the mariachi costume itself, a reclamation of stereotypes about Mexicans. In addition, aggressively eating the burrito-as-phallus undermines and satirizes cissexism and equations of Mexican machismo with phallocentrism. I also read it as countering white equations of Mexican foods with specific

physical genitalia, which also challenges Halberstam's assertion that femme (or femme-adjacent) drag kinging involving stripping seeks to reaffirm the performer's ultimate femininity. If that were the goal, the overall racist cissexist cultural narrative would likely result in the food item in question being a taco rather than a burrito; as such, the choice of burrito both invokes and challenges racism as well as the assumption that a femme drag king's strip routine seeks to ultimately reaffirm the performer as AFAB. As the final step in the routine, Cider removed the sombrero before upending the "F*CK YOUR WALL" bottle over his head, drenching himself in fake blood and ending the routine with the bottle upraised and a bold stare at the judges. This move, while obviously being in large part related to the requirements of the challenge regarding vampirism, can also be read as an indictment of U.S. violent consumption (vampirism) of Mexican culture and economic well-being as well as an insistence that the blood of Mexicans suffering at the border is on U.S. hands.

This routine is noticeable in that it engages with racialized masculine stereotypes, but rather than being a straightforward critique of masculinity, it instead weaponizes these stereotypes in order to make a point about dominant narratives of race and culture rather than sexist oppression. This complicates and challenges scholarly assumptions about whether or not drag masculinity is feminist, depending on the scholar's opinion about what does and does not constitute feminism. In a definition of feminism that is focused primarily on sexism, this performance would likely not be called feminist, in that it neither focuses on uplifting women or on critiquing masculinity itself. In a more intersectional feminist view that understands patriarchy as more than hierarchical relations between genders but rather interlocking systems of oppression, this performance can be called feminist, in that it challenges racism and imperialism. I (perhaps obviously) fall into the second camp, for several reasons. First and foremost is the fact

that one form of oppression cannot meaningfully be addressed if others are not; as black feminist and standpoint theorists have shown, multiple axes of identity intersect to doubly harm those who are, for example, black women. Secondly, as a trans man, I find that feminism that focuses solely on non-intersectional male-female power relations generally has no place for me.

In addition, although he does not specifically reference white feminism here, Cider implicitly critiques white feminist understandings of Latinx cultures as inherently more patriarchal than white ones. While it is important to recognize the role of machismo in the oppression of women in Latin America and Latinx immigrant communities as well as the cultural and national distinctions in the oppression of feminine people and women, the concept has been rhetorically utilized by non-Latinx feminists in order to position Latinx men, and gender relations within Latinx communities, as especially patriarchal; as such, what was initially intended as a culturally-sensitive response to sexism by and within Latinx feminism has been co-opted by white feminists as an indictment of Latinx men as supposedly more prone to sexism and patriarchal violence than men of other racial and ethnic groups. Cider's embodiment of stereotypes about Mexican men, when placed within the context of a burlesque routine, therefore challenges white feminist assertions about machismo, particularly if we recognize that assertions about a group's morality always implicitly position the morally "deficient" as unattractive, especially where moralism and racism converge. Cider's insistence not just that the racism and American imperialism inherent to Trumpism is bad, but also that the embodiment of stereotypical Mexican men can be attractive (outside the context of racial fetishism), positions this performance as not just feminist but also critical of certain branches of feminism.

This performance also critically challenges white feminist conceptions of Mexican men in the ultimate "reveal" at the end of the strip portion of the pasties, garters, and body harness.

Most conceptions of machismo portray it as inherently anti-woman and homophobic, and Cider's portrayal of a primarily outwardly normatively-masculine Mexican man prior to the striptease and subsequent revealing of sartorial trappings more aligned with femininity and gay masculinity directly challenges the assumption that a surface-level appearance of Latinx masculinity means the person in question automatically has a normatively masculine, anti-feminine, and homophobic interior experience. In addition, the inverted cross symbolism challenges the perception that Latinx gender relations are inherently reliant upon and uncritically beholden to Catholicism. As a result, his performance here indicts not just the racist and anti-Latinx sentiments on the right, but also these same sentiments that emerge on the left when it comes to beliefs and discourses around Latinx men. Cider reveals that in terms of both conservative and liberal (mis)understandings of Mexican masculinity, there is far more than meets the eye.

As such, in this instance, Cider's drag evades simple categorizations of drag masculinity as always either upholding or subverting problematic masculinity. One could certainly, if engaging on a surface level, argue that this performance is not feminist, in that not only does it "fail" to critique gender relations or sexism, it also can be read as reinforcing harmful and reductive stereotypes surrounding Latinx people, such as alcohol (ab)use, mariachi aesthetics, and the equation of specific Mexican foods with physical genitalia. However, a deeper engagement with the performance reveals that he is arguably utilizing these stereotypes as a form of disidentification and a tactic to confront and undermine audience racism. Cider here shows us that drag masculinity can engage with and invoke problematic tropes of masculinity in a way that neither reaffirms nor explicitly rejects masculinity, and that implicitly questions whether a still-stereotypical performance of masculinity is automatically hegemonic when analyses of race, ethnicity, and "hidden" gender-nonconformity are brought into the conversation. In addition,

accusations that *all* drag kinging that references or engages with sexism reinforces hegemonic masculinity fails to recognize that for drag performers of color, their portrayal of masculinity can never be completely hegemonic, as gender hegemony (in the U.S.-based context I am studying) is always tied to white supremacy; a drag performer of color playing a sexist character certainly can be read as reinforcing patriarchy in many ways, but due to racialization, the character can never be completely hegemonic. This is certainly true in the case of Landon Cider's portrayal here, because in the context of U.S. racism, a Latinx man will still have less access to male privilege than a white man. As such, arguments about hegemonic masculinity in drag must be careful not to whitewash drag as a whole or engage with the single-axis model of patriarchal oppression.

Dorian Electra

The first Dorian Electra video I will analyze is "Guyliner," in which they take on the role of an emo boy in order to both challenge gender norms around makeup usage, and in some ways, reinforce them as well. The video starts with a strobe and epilepsy warning in green and white text on a black screen. As the chirpy, high-tempo song begins, the shot switches to a poster in which Electra fronts an emo band alongside a bassist, a guitarist, and a drummer. All four of them are dressed in black, white, and lime green, and their outfits incorporate trappings from punk, emo, and goth aesthetics, such as corsets, fishnet tights, spiky necklaces, and black patent-leather platform boots. Electra stands with one hip cocked, holding a microphone in their right hand with the pinky raised. Their hair is lime green with black raccoon stripes (matching the lime-green-and-black oversized tie they wear beneath their ruffled collar), cut very short on one side and long on the other, with the long bangs covering half of their face in classic emo fashion. They have over-the-top, almost spidery eyeliner on, and the bottom half of their body is covered

by the word “Guyliner” in Gothic font. The poster is visually framed by lime-green leopard print fabric on one side, a black sequined curtain on the other, plain green fabric on the top, and smaller pictures of the band on the bottom; there are also three long taper candles in the shot, which are a recurring visual motif in Electra’s videos from this time period.

The camera then quickly cuts between shots of other photos of Electra and the band hung up around the room, setting the character up as vain and image-focused. We then see their alarm clock going off - it’s 12:00PM and they’re only now waking up. They sit up in bed, smudged eyeshadow around their eyes and wearing black silk pajamas; they also wear their signature drawn-on pencil mustache. Next to them on the bed is a body pillow with an image of a scantily-clad woman, a visual reminder that just because the character wears makeup and calls herself sensitive, that does not mean they do not traffic in the objectification of women. The camera zooms out to show the rest of the room, walls cluttered with curtains, photos, Guyliner merch, and at least one plastic skeleton. They rifle through and try on several articles of clothing, pausing to take a pouty-faced selfie before sitting down in front of a vanity mirror, singing “Look in the mirror, I’m feeling fine/ It’s crystal clear that it’s time to line my eyes.” They do so with Guyliner-branded eyeliner (previously available to purchase from Electra’s online store), which comes in an inkpot with a quill-shaped applicator.

The camera returns to the poster from the beginning of the video; now the Electra in the poster is singing, although the other band members remain still. They assert to the listener that “I’m a guy/ Don’t be surprised/ If I take my time/ To glamorize/ No reason why/ That I can’t try/ To line my eyes/ It feels so right.” The camera undercuts this potentially-feminist message by zooming back in on the body pillow as a reminder of the character’s underlying misogyny. Next we see the whole band in motion, headbanging and thrashing the drums as Electra sings the

chorus, saying “Yeah, you know I’m wearing guyliner/ And everybody’s staring/ This is the real me, baby, this ain’t no disguise,” which serves to position them as a victim of societal femmephobia and also challenge the way society aligns makeup use with artifice and inauthenticity – an argument which I will take up more below.

While the lyric about being “the real me” communicates to the audience that the character does genuinely enjoy wearing makeup as an expression of identity, the next lyrics contradict this message, as a now football-uniform-clad Electra licks a green-and-black football in a locker room over lyrics that assert that “Chicks dig it when they see me cry,” implying that a major reason for the wearing of guyliner is to attract women by visually communicating sensitivity through tear-streaked makeup. Next we see Electra in a steampunk-inspired outfit, using old-fashioned distilling equipment to create their guyliner. As they repeat the chorus, the camera cuts back and forth between shots of the distillery, Electra back in the football uniform, and Electra wearing a curled wig, black top with Elizabethan ruff and sleeves, and black and green fake nails while posing with Guyliner while light flashes, indicating a photo shoot.

The next scene shows a city being destroyed by huge goth boots; when zoomed out we see Electra in full goth regalia, stomping through a miniature city a la Godzilla, and singing “Everybody coming at me, they want to attack me/ They wanna wipe me clean/ They can make me cry, but they can’t make me bleed” and referring to themselves as “masc for mascara” - a reference to the usually-femmephobic identity within gay male communities known as “masc for masc.” This adds an interesting dimension to the character, as they are only shown as being attracted to women throughout the rest of the video; it is unclear to me whether this was a rhetorical move designed to queer the character or if Electra simply wanted to use queer wordplay. The lyric immediately following this also refers to society having a “feeling of terror”

when seeing him cry, showing some of the complexities of power when it comes to being viewed as an effeminate man: it at once makes one vulnerable to violence, while also giving one a feeling of power over others' emotions. We see them pluck the moon from the sky and smash it against their head (breaking objects with their head is another recurring motif in their music videos) during these lyrics before continuing to stomp through the miniature city.

After this point, we see them on a black and green motorcycle, holding up a trophy and surrounded by cheering fans, almost all of whom are wearing dramatic eyeliner themselves. I read this scene, in conjunction with the football imagery, as a way to visually align the character with traditional masculinity and competition and remind the viewer that despite wearing makeup, the character is still invested in, and fantasizes about participating in, hegemonic masculinity. Finally, the video cuts back and forth between shots of the various outfits worn throughout the video and ends with an extended, silent shot of Electra once again alone in their bedroom next to the body pillow, dramatically contrasting with the crowded motorcycle championship scene in a manner that implies that the character is ultimately lonely, unable to genuinely connect with women, and that most of the scenes in the video may have been just fantasies in the end.

As well as having a strikingly consistent visual language, the music video adds dimension to the song itself through its visual representation of the character in question and the ways in which it explicitly positions him as objectifying women. While the lyrics about "chicks" clearly invoke sexist language around women, the shots of the body pillow reinforce the overall sexism of the character even more, as does the motorcycle championship scene. The championship scene in particular is notable in that it is the only time we see people visibly read as men (other than the character) in the music video. To me, this shows that the character's main relationship to others is as a power fantasy, considering that no football players were present in any of the

football scenes: to succeed at football, you have to be part of a team, and the character clearly wants to be the center of attention. Even when he is in group scenes with the otherwise all-female band, the character views himself as the only, and therefore exceptional man (and one who is the center of attention as the frontman). In this way, he is positioned as having access to women due to his supposed – and ultimately revealed as false through his own actions and language – shared traits of sensitivity and wearing makeup or through dominance via sports, not through any genuine interactions with people on an equal level.

This also connects to more misogyny tucked into the lyrics surrounding “chicks digg[ing] it when they see [him] cry,” as they implicitly buy into cultural constructs of womanhood as emotional and vulnerable and masculinity as stoic and protective. In addition, the use of “guyliner” instead of “eyeliner” reinforces the idea that makeup is inherently feminine and, in order to engage with objects and practices associated with femininity while retaining masculine identity, these objects and practices must be renamed. This makes the visual connections in the video to mid-’00s emo culture especially clever, as the aesthetic trends evoked arose at the same time as not just “guyliner” but similar masculinized portmanteaus such as “murse” (man-purse) and “manny” (male nanny), which can be seen as a reaction to the rise of so-called metrosexuals and the aforementioned emos. Given these stereotypical portrayals of gender and the critique of the character in the video’s execution, it would be easy to present this as an example of drag masculinity as, in this case, either inherently problematic in its invocation of gender hegemony or inherently progressive in its critique of problematic masculinity. However, the fact that it could be read either way actually strengthens the argument that drag masculinity is neither always one or the other; if both are possibilities, the performance is doing both at once. In addition, I read the lyrics surrounding wearing makeup being “the real me,” wearing eyeliner

feeling “so right,” and society’s terror at seeing the character cry as actually serving to reinforce a (complicatedly) feminist reading of the song.

The lyric about wearing makeup being “the real me, baby/ This ain’t no disguise,” as mentioned previously, challenges societal associations of cosmetic use with deception and shallowness. Rhetoric surrounding makeup use often circles around a cultural tendency Horowitz and others have identified as equating femininity with artifice and masculinity with authenticity. For instance, in her discussion of gendered gestures, Horowitz mentions that in Western culture, masculinity is defined by its presence and femininity by masculinity’s absence and points out that “[q]ueens’ gestures and comportment are highly stylized and deliberately choreographed, whereas kings’ performance *appears* to be more improvised, reflecting the parallel assumptions that femininity is put on while masculinity emanates unaffectedly from within” (66, emphasis in original.) In essence, the belief is that femininity is affected and surface-level, whereas masculinity arises “naturally” and is therefore more “real,” which we see on both a cultural level and in the scholarship around drag, such as Halberstam’s assertion in *The Drag King Book* that femme drag kings are in essence playing with and then discarding masculinity in contrast with butch drag kings’ masculinity, which supposedly arises “authentically” from within (36). Electra’s lyrics here complicate these assumptions by positioning makeup usage (as culturally aligned with femininity) as part of an authentic self – and a specifically masculine one at that. As such, even with gender-normative language and a clear critique of masculinity throughout, Electra challenges the assumption that masculinity and femininity do not overlap and that makeup cannot be an integral aspect of the self rather than a disguise of the self.

The second video I wish to analyze is “Man to Man,” which is another track off of 2019’s *Flamboyant*. The video starts off with shots of silhouetted figures – many of whom are wearing

what appear to be outfits influenced by gay fetish subcultures of the '70s and '80s – behind a chain-link fence striking poses associated with vogue alongside finger snaps as red and blue lights alternate in time with the snapping, a clear visual reference to the presence of the police. After we see the title “Man to Man” superimposed over a dark background including buildings and a bonfire, it’s revealed that the colors are also associated with Electra’s aesthetic for this portion of the video, as they’re sitting backwards on a chair wearing blue hair, red eyeshadow, and a red leather jacket with dramatic padded shoulders, as well as a white tank top, a chain necklace, and pink lip gloss - and, of course, the penciled-on moustache. As the dancers continue to move in time in the background, Electra angrily addresses the camera, singing “You know I ain’t straight/ But I’mma say it straight to you/ I look you in the face/ Every time I talk to you/ I wanna be clear and not convolute/ I say what I mean/ And I expect the same from you.”

Upon finishing that verse, they stand up and throw the chair to the side. Four dancers snap to a v-formation behind them, all wearing '80s leather gear such as oversized jackets, black chaps over red pants, and biker caps. The five of them start to move forward through a hallway outlined by chain-linked fences and neon lines on the floor, juking as if ready to punch as Electra, singing the bridge, asks if the subject wants to “play rough in the parking lot” and accusing them of falsely acting tough and saying “We can take it outside, scuff it in the streetlights/I just really wanna fight with you.” The camera cuts to a larger scene, also surrounded by chain-link fences, where Electra and the dancers execute dramatic blocky choreography as several men look on, some of whom are pumping iron and most of whom are wearing leather chest harnesses and penciled-on mustaches. The camera cuts to several close ups of these men – one in particular, an exceptionally attractive guy with sharp cheekbones and a voluminous high and tight hairstyle – as Electra sings the chorus: “Man to man, hand to hand/

One on one, friend to friend/ Are you man enough to soften up? Are you tough enough to open up?/ Man to man/ You gotta let me in.”

Next the camera zooms out on an armor-clad Electra, who tells the subject they have to be the bigger man, put their weapons down, and put their fists away as the camera reveals the same dancers arranged on either side of them behind a long table set with silverware, vases of fake flowers, and electric taper candles, with the posing clearly imitating DaVinci’s *The Last Supper*. As they transition back into the bridge, we see Electra and several men in a dark room full of boxing dummies, which Dorian pushes (notably, *not* punches) out of their way as they stride through the room wearing a black corset over red boxing gear, including groin cover and gloves. For the chorus, the camera cuts back and forth between the boxing scene and shots of Electra and the dancers doing blocky choreography with swords back in the Last Supper room, with, as always, a shot of something being smashed against Electra’s head (in this instance, a vase filled with water and single silver rose.) Finally, we see Electra glare at the attractive man from earlier – clearly their opponent – before transitioning into the next scene.

In this scene, Electra sits in the corner of a boxing ring illuminated by the ropes, which are blue, white, and red neon. Electra is sweat-soaked and wearing a blue robe and shorts with white leather wrestling boots, and the camera cuts to the other corner to show the opponent wearing similar garb but in red, inserting an orange mouth guard. Both of them have bruises on their faces and the camera alternates between slow zoom ins on each of them as Electra tells their opponent to not beat around the bush, talk behind their back, and act cowardly, before Electra stands slowly, inserting a blue mouth guard and removing the robe to reveal a bare chest with bandaids with nipples drawn onto them over their physical nipples. The opponents draw closer to each other as Electra tells the subject to “Just take my hand, we can settle this man to man.” But

rather than punching each other, the two instead kiss, blood smearing their split lips – which, to my mind, then begs the question of what it is that led them to switch from rounds of fighting to kissing. They then turn to (presumably) the crowd, each raising a gloved hand in the classic victor’s pose as the song crescendos. For the remainder of the video, the bridge and chorus repeat as the camera cuts back and forth between Electra dancing in the boxing ring, choreography from the beginning and Last Supper scenes, and other images of Electra in various costumes associated with (masculine) violence, such as a Roman soldier, a fencer, and a toreador, before ending with a shot from behind of Dorian and their opponent-turned-lover in the ring with fists upraised as the crowd cheers and doves (an obvious reference to peace) fly in. In addition, in the interceding shots, Electra repeatedly poses with a rose, and the weights one of the background characters was lifting are revealed to be roses as well, realigning masculine violence and physicality with symbols of love. This connects to Basiliere’s assertion that in some cases, drag kings that engage with hegemonic masculinity “are feminist in their willingness to stare at a predatory or violent masculinity and reimagine it within a feminist context” (995).

This song and music video are notable for their representation, critique, and ultimate rejection of the associations between masculinity and violent conflict. The phrase “let’s settle this man to man” has, for many of us, been an invitation to a physical brawl at most and a screaming match laced with homo-, femme-, and transphobic slurs at least. Electra clearly invokes this in the music video through the repeated imagery of ‘80s street brawls, knights in armor, and boxers, yet notably never engages in actual fighting throughout. As mentioned, in the boxing training scene, they only push aside the boxing dummies, even as backup performers punch their own dummies, and despite the bruises and split lips that indicate that Electra and their opponent-turned-lover had previously been physically fighting, that conflict only ever

occurs offscreen, with the only action we see Electra take in the ring being one associated with romance or sex rather than straightforward violence. Similarly, in the Last Supper sword fighting scenes, we see the dancers crossing blades, but Electra never engages with the others violently outside of the shot of one of them smashing the vase against their head - even in that one act of physical violence Electra is party to, they are not the aggressor and do not respond with violence. As such, even though the language of the lyrics invokes violence and the aesthetic choices throughout are all associated with violence as well, Electra never actually partakes in actual physical violence throughout the entire video, undercutting any potential assertions that they are embodying or glorifying masculine violence through their drag in this particular instance.

In addition, the repeated visual invocations of roses and, towards the end of the video, doves, contrast the images of masculine violence with symbols associated with love and peace. The lyrics also function to contrast masculine-violence-as-contrast-resolution with other forms of conflict resolution, such as in the entreaties to “take my hand” and “put your fists away.” In particular, the repeated “Are you man enough to soften up?/ Are you tough enough to open up?” appropriates and queers language that typically associates manhood with stoicism and problem-solving through physical strength in order to assert that in order to be a “real man,” one should be able to address conflicts through sharing and discussing emotional issues rather than resorting to physical violence. As such, the song and video realign masculinity with cooperation, peace, and productive conversation rather than disagreement and violence even while employing violent imagery. In addition, the opening line referring to queer sexuality and the use of camp aesthetics (such as the obviously-drawn-on mustaches, clearly fake flowers and candles, and flamboyant costuming) serve to effectively queer and subvert the aspects of the song and video that engage with hegemonic masculinity. This coheres with Basiliere’s contention that many drag kings

employ camp to “[walk] the line between performing a recognizable masculinity and performing a gendered expression that is actively designed to challenge gendered ideologies” (997).

Nevertheless, the representation of masculine violence when read in concert with Electra’s glamorous makeup and the normative attractiveness of the opponent character still function to align masculine violence with aesthetic beauty in ways that are not completely subverted by the overall message unless a very close reading is conducted, and close readings such as these are not typically undertaken by the average media consumer. As such, there is undeniable potential for many watchers to come away from the video with the view that this sort of violence is both attractive and aligned with masculinity – or at least that that is Electra’s perspective. Due to this, I do not believe that the video can necessarily be entirely read as a complete rejection of violent masculinity, although it is certainly not an endorsement of such either.

In addition, the lyrics telling the opponent/friend/lover not to talk behind their back, launch a sneak attack, or “act cowardly” in combination with an exhortation to be a man prompt further consideration in terms of the gender progressivism of the song. Considering that “conflict-avoidant” (which I would argue could be read as “conflict-reductive” instead) strategies such as “gossiping” or passive-aggression are typically associated with women and girls, a correlation between manliness/masculinity and the rejection of these tactics potentially furthers the problem of defining masculinity as a disavowal of femininity and once again depicting femininity as fundamentally tied to deception, inauthenticity, and passivity. Furthermore, the association of these tactics with dishonesty elides the fact that for many women and femmes, passive-aggression as a way to avoid outright conflict is necessary for survival in a context in which they may not have the social or financial capital to address abuse and violence without

further violence, abuse, or criminalization. The lyrics also ultimately connect manliness with “bravery” and confrontation, and while Dorian is advocating for a more peaceful form of confrontation, this reformulation still does not completely divorce manhood from concepts such as valor and conflict. For these reasons, even as the lyrics function to redefine masculinity as something sensitive, peaceful, and emotionally open, they still traffic in language that describes manliness as being in opposition to femininity, which becomes associated with tactics of escape and conflict avoidance.

Ultimately, this video once again functions to both critique and glamorize traits of hegemonic masculinity. On the one hand, the reformulation of “true” manhood as peaceful and communicative rather than violent and stoic, as well as the explicit queerness, certainly subverts expectations of masculinity and serves to, as Basiliere argues, “interven[e] in our cultural celebration of masculinity by reimagining masculine standards as explicitly queer” (999) and interject a queer sensibility into manhood. On the other, the lyrics also reinforce rather than completely reformulate gendered standards and stereotypes regarding masculinity and femininity. In addition, as is the case with most of Electra’s videos from this time period (including “Guyliner”), Electra’s skillful use of makeup can be read as functioning to literally glamorize masculinity, including the aspects they are critiquing or parodying. This complexity, I contend, serves to support my overall argument that drag masculinity cannot be necessarily defined as either progressive or subversive. Electra’s performances both parody and critique hegemonic masculinity and arguably reproduce its problems at the same time. It is also worth noting that in a context in which gender norms of all kinds are arguably always violent in some way and also virtually inescapable for all of us, it would be difficult to find any expression of masculinity (or femininity, for that matter) that is completely unproblematic. That said, putting

the onus of reproducing or defying gender norms on drag artists specifically allows critics to leave the problematic genders and gender expressions of people who are not drag performers unexamined. As such, even though it is critical to examine the harms reproduced within drag, researchers must be careful to question whether they would so avidly apply these same critiques to those outside of drag.

Conclusion

As I have shown, a straightforward reading of drag masculinities as either progressive or regressive misses the mark and does not account for the complexities of gender and gender relations in both drag and the world outside of drag. Furthermore, feminist critiques of drag kinging as always problematic not only generally, as Basiliere says, “miss the broader social context from which they emerge” (998), they also implicitly center white forms of gender and fail to recognize that drag performers of color can never fully reproduce gender hegemony in the U.S. context. These critiques often rely on a non-intersectional view of patriarchy that positions male-female relations as the “ultimate” form of oppression, which ignores other forms of oppression and is frequently utilized by trans-exclusionary feminists to misgender trans women and blame them for reproducing gender norms and violence. This perspective also, when applied to drag, puts the onus for reproducing gender hegemony and harm on drag performers in ways rarely applied to other kinds of performance and identity.

On the flip side, assertions that drag masculinities are always feminist or progressive downplays the ways certain drag performers do *not* reproduce harmful forms of masculinity as a conscious critique of these harms, and overlooks how, for example, a white drag performer who views themselves as an anti-racist feminist can still exclude and minoritize performers of color, such as in Shapiro’s analysis of gender relations within the Disposable Boy Toys troupe. These

arguments also tend to frame drag masculinity as always performed by AFAB people in ways which not only erase AMAB performers who perform masculinity but also imply that progressive critiques of masculinity within drag arises from having faced a particular form of sexism, thereby reinforcing cissexist arguments that portray AFAB people as always victimized by patriarchy in ways that make their critiques more “authentic” and progressive than those brought by AMAB performers.

Given these issues, drag masculinity cannot and should not be understood as purely progressive or regressive when it comes to performing gender. As I have shown in my examples above, performers who perform drag masculinity often both challenge or reformulate *and* reproduce problems associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as racial and sexual stereotypes, the objectification of women, and masculine violence. A nuanced and careful reading of performances of masculine drag reveals that, just like with non-drag gender, any gender expression has the potential to be anti-oppressive but cannot help but be invested and imbricated in the very issues being parodied or critiqued. As such, an expectation that drag masculinity be completely critical of or reinforcing of hegemonic masculinity is always destined for disappointment. Instead, scholars should approach drag masculinity with an understanding that there is ultimately very little that any of us, drag performer or not, can do to ever be completely anti-oppressive in their expression of gender, but that the potential still remains for drag masculinity, flawed as it may often be, to challenge and reformulate problems of hegemonic masculinity.

CHAPTER IV: FUNDS, AWARENESS, COMMUNITY: DRAG AND ACTIVISM

Seeing a drag show become a place of intercommunity support was a formative moment for me. I came to realize that many people's conception of drag is as a spectacle solely for the entertainment of others and often accompanied by backstage drama, elitism, and sexism. This is of course not entirely untrue – almost every episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* revels in egotistic drama and problematic portrayals of race and gender that go mostly unaddressed – but in my experience, it is also not representative of what drag truly is and does. Almost every drag show I have been to has had a charity or mutual aid component, the goal of raising awareness for various causes and organizations. Analyses of drag, however, have frequently been preoccupied with whether or not drag is activist at all, which of course tends to be frequently tied into questions of whether or not drag is intrinsically progressive or regressive. To my eye, this requires further unpacking, in large part because in my experience, it is rare for any other overarching genre of live performance to be automatically expected to be activist and progressive at its core. Why is drag *expected* to be politically and morally progressive, and especially criticized if it fails to be, in comparison to, say, improv theater or stand-up comedy? And why are performers who generally cannot make a living on drag alone expected to always inject progressive politics into their performances, especially considering that many (but certainly not all) drag audience members come to drag shows looking for light-hearted escape rather than political activism?

It is also significant to note that this expectation of activism, and the attendant fixation on whether specific iterations of drag are progressive or subversive, functions to elide the forms of activism happening within drag outside of the representation of gender. Whether or not a performer's drag represents an unproblematic form of gender, their drag may still work towards

activist ends. For example, one of the drag troupes I analyze in this chapter, the Armorettes, arguably portray a form of camp drag that at its core is transmisogynist in its association of non-passing femininity on the part of AMAB people with absurdity and humor, but they deploy this problematic form of drag as a way to draw in audiences, who then support the charitable causes the Armorettes work for (the Armorettes donate 100% of their proceeds to fighting HIV/AIDS in the U.S. South). As such, an analysis of their drag that focuses solely on whether or not they are presenting a feminist or unproblematic form of femininity effaces the ways in which their drag does important work for social change and the survivability of minoritized populations and, paradoxically, devalues and disallows the important work their drag does outside.

My suspicion is that this is due in part to the disconnect between the assumed identities of performers and audiences (drag as always by and for queer people), and the realities of who consumes and, ultimately, funds drag. In terms of non-celebrity drag, while nightlife contexts tend to draw primarily queer audiences, the lucrative phenomenon of drag brunches is often populated by supposedly straighter audiences, such as bachelorette parties and out-of-towners visiting a “gay capital” for the first time. Many such audience members are frequently looking for spectacular, “lighter” performances rather than explicitly political ones. For instance, a contact of mine who works as a popular queen in Denver has stated that her drag activism is focused on elevating trans drag performers by putting the money she makes in the brunch scene towards hosting a trans-only weekly show, because in her view visibility in queer political scenes does less to materially benefit minoritized drag performers than getting them slots in the less-political, more demographically straight brunch scene (Angela Barbara, personal communication, August 11, 2019). That said, many independent drag artists *do* craft explicitly political work, but when it comes to being able to support themselves via drag, this work

generally does little to financially benefit them. However, in terms of celebrity drag – by which I mean drag for and benefiting/emerging from *RPDR*, *Dragula*, and the more well-known segments of the pageant scene – performers have more financial leeway to craft explicitly political performances, as the financial incentive is more focused on judges’ opinions rather than audience tips. On the other hand, outside of *Dragula*, most celebrity drag is intended to be light entertainment that does not significantly challenge or discomfit audiences, so there is often a disconnect between the potential to craft political work and the likelihood of doing so in terms of competitions, but celebrity drag performers may raise awareness or money for causes in non-competition settings.

This topic relates back to my curiosity as to why drag genders are held to higher standards than non-drag genders in terms of morality and relation to feminism, which I find to be relatively under-researched. Stokoe does importantly argue that hooks’ analysis of the morality of the trans women in *Paris is Burning*, while vital in terms of how it challenges the perceived internalized racism and reification of whiteness several of the participants partake in, is problematic in that “the womanhood of trans women is not conditional on having progressive views” (58). Furthermore, Stokoe points out that

It is unrealistic to expect that the art and lives of drag performers and/or of trans people constantly challenge oppressive ideas and systems. To do so is to hold them to a higher standard than gender conventional, cisgender artists, actors, and musicians, as well as to ignore the impact of the material conditions of their lives. Moreover, when (certain) critics insist that drag must be subversive or transgressive, they not only position their own view of subversion as a yardstick but also use any perceived lack of subversion as evidence that a given

performance must be flawed or even reactionary. While some performances do contain elements of oppressive discourses or belief systems, the characterization of drag as wholly subversive or wholly reactionary fails to acknowledge the diversity of global drag. (17 - 18)

Unfortunately, outside of this insightful breakdown, there is very little other research on the topic of drag genders being held to higher standards than non-drag genders. In addition, in what little research there is on the topic, analysis is typically focused on drag performers' personae's problematic nature (or lack thereof), with little critical attention given to how non-drag genders are equally imbricated in upholding or challenging gender norms. We can see this playing out in at least two ways: first, a critique of drag for reinforcing gender hegemony falls flat when those who perpetuate that same gender hegemony out of drag are not also critiqued, and second, if drag performers receive adulation, praise, and tips for performances that supposedly enact gender hegemony, failing to recognize how and why audiences might gain pleasure from these performances is a huge oversight and does not contend with the role of capitalism, and audience responsibility, within monetized gendered performances.

For example, in Rupp and Taylor's *When the Girls are Men: Negotiating Gender and Sexual Dynamics in a Study of Drag Queens*, they rightfully note the personal violation they felt when the queens they studied would bring them onstage, grope them, and out them as lesbians using vulgar language as part of their acts (2123). However, this behavior is solely attributed to male dominance and a desire to mitigate Rupp and Taylor's privilege as researchers, which does not fully delve into how this behavior (unacceptable as it might be) could be something audiences may have expected and taken pleasure in, thereby making these actions not necessarily solely attributable to sexism and researcher-subject power relations alone but rather a tactic to

please the crowd that provides income for the queens in question. Not only does this leave the financial necessity of inappropriate behavior unexamined, it also puts sole responsibility on the queens rather than recognizing that the audiences who support this behavior are also culpable in enabling it due to their pleasure at seeing this transgression – or rather, violation – enacted onstage. And in her chapter on queening, Horowitz asserts that drag queens seek to emulate wealth and fame in such a way as to ignore class or imply it does not impact them and “effac[e] other categories of difference like race and sexuality” (51) in contrast to kings, who Horowitz views as embracing working-class experiences. This, again, does not fully reckon with the fact that these queens’ performances do not necessarily solely arise from a personal glamorization of wealth and fame rather than a response to audience desires for such, or that in supposed embrace of working-class culture and aesthetics, drag kings may potentially lean into and glamorize classist and racist stereotypes regarding working-class masculinity. In addition, considering that many drag queens cannot make a living off of their drag yet are expected to perform “high-class” feminine aesthetics, which takes financial investment, even queens who seem to unquestioningly glorify wealth and fame may in fact be living in poverty themselves.

Performer pleasure is also an underrecognized factor, and that underrecognition is tied into cissexism and heterosexism. For example, we have seen a (beneficial) surge in recent years in younger feminists reclaiming trappings of femininity as something that brings them joy, pleasure, and empowerment as women. Why is embracing aesthetics that, according to some, reinforce hegemonic femininity increasingly acceptable for women outside of drag, but still problematic when embodied by drag queens? (It is also notable that trans women are similarly frequently critiqued for supposedly upholding harmful gender norms regarding femininity in ways cis women are not.) It seems likely to me that the expectation that drag genders be

exemplary in terms of gender politics and representation is intimately tied into the heterosexist and cissexist assumptions that anyone who falls outside of mainstream gender norms must automatically interrogate and defy these norms in order to access the benefits of acceptance and gendered and sexual privilege in ways cis and straight people are infrequently asked to perform in order to avoid invalidation on sexual and gender grounds. This is then, also, tied into the assumption that drag is always performed by queer people who have an investment in progressive politics rather than people of a variety of sexual and gender identities and political beliefs. (If that assumption were true, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Kinky Boots*, and *Dear Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* would never have been made.)

Regardless of performer identity, performer pleasure must be recognized. While one of the more obvious examples is that of gender euphoria or affirmation of one's gender (particularly when the number of trans drag performers who cite drag as their impetus for exploring and realizing their gender identity is accounted for), there are other forms of pleasurable experience as well. Perhaps someone just likes the way a dress feels on their legs, enjoys the process of putting on makeup, or finds validation from enthusiastic crowd reactions. In these instances, the act of performing drag is not automatically tied to identity or politics but rather fun and enjoyment. Expecting activities someone does for fun to be automatically politically conscious at all times runs the risk of eliminating that person's experience of fun entirely and devaluing the ways in which finding enjoyment in the context of increasing climate and economic precarity, global conflict, and rising extremism is both an act of survival and importantly political.

This also applies to the audiences who go to drag shows. Although some of us *do* explicitly seek out political and alternative drag, many patrons do not; they simply want to be entertained on their day or night off, and they also deserve to enjoy the forms of drag that appeal

to them without expecting a political stance or investment. If we take seriously the contention that fun and pleasure are necessary for survival and that surviving – and thriving – is political, we can begin to have an expanded understanding of drag and activism. In this instance, we can see how the mere act of making possible an entertaining escape from the everyday for people who may be facing marginalization, struggle, or suffering outside of the drag venue, drag performance can serve a vital political function even without an overt political stance or conscious intention.

And of course, there are many overtly political drag performers and groups, and these political activist acts can take a variety of forms, from fundraising to raising awareness for causes to physically and emotionally protecting others from harassment (and of course, these types of activism are not mutually exclusive). To delve further into these acts of explicit, deliberate forms of drag-as-activism, I will briefly analyze some of the activist work done by The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, The Armorettes, contributors to the KQTxPROJECT, and the *Dragula* winners Vander von Odd and Biqtch Puddin. Each of these groups or performers collects money for charity, raises awareness for issues important to them, and/or fosters community for the minoritized. I have selected them to showcase the specific acts of explicit charity many people look for as “proof” of activist action within drag in contrast to the fun-as-activism performances mentioned above, which is unfortunately often dismissed as not “true” activism or overlooked in feminist critiques that focus on representations of hegemonic gender rather than the material and ideological work drag often does in the name of causes many feminists would support.

I also wish to make an important caveat before I begin, namely that even with my argument for fun-as-activism, I wish to recognize that drag *itself* does not necessarily constitute

activism. As Horowitz points out in response to Rupp and Taylor's (2003) argument that drag is "a form of strategic, collective action that is part of the larger repertoire of contention of the larger gay and lesbian movement" (212), "drag should not be regarded as *necessarily* constituting strategic action in and of itself. Drag performances which take place within the context of LGBTQIA+ cultures are not necessarily inherently political due to their context" (71, emphasis in original). Instead, Horowitz believes contextual analysis is important before making such assertions. While I do still believe that pleasure for pleasure's sake can be political in and of itself, that does not mean that the performers in question are *intending* for their performances to be read as political or activist. As such, I want to focus particularly on those who do make some type of activist or political claim in their drag, as this will help better elucidate what deliberate tactics are employed and how they relate to the drag being performed.

Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

Formed as a not-for-profit in 1979 with the mission "to promulgate universal joy and expiate stigmatic guilt," the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence take camp aesthetics to the extreme with their nun habits, gaudy jewelry, and clownlike makeup. They also take gleeful sacrilege to the extreme, earning them both praise and excoriation. Interestingly, however, while their outfits, structure, and names all arguably parody the tropes of the Roman Catholic church – which they do critique for its queerphobic, sexist, and anti-contraception policies, among others (Wilcox, 173) – they also assert that they *are* nuns and refer to membership as a serious, life-long calling. In many ways, their activities and vows do correlate with traditional Catholic nuns', although explicitly *not* celibacy. Primarily, the main correlation is in their devotion to community service. They note on their recruitment page that while they are frequently associated with fundraising,

[T]hat is not our mission and our work spans a lot of other areas. In addition to fundraising, the work of a Sister also includes ministry, education and entertainment. We organize, plan and throw events, some of which are very large and complex. The Sisters regularly visit local hospices, bringing joy to the people there. We also have some very intense one-on-one sessions with the people we meet while out. Ours is a “ministry of presence.” (thesisters.org, “Become a Nun”)

Clearly, the Sisters⁵ do not take the spiritual aspect of their work lightly, despite what their irreverence and transgressiveness may otherwise imply. Wilcox argues the Sisters enact a mode of disidentification she has termed “serious parody,” which is “a form of cultural protest in which a disempowered group parodies an oppressive cultural institution while simultaneously claiming for itself what it believes to be an equally good or superior enactment of one or more culturally respected aspects of that same institution” (70). This identificatory serious parody is what allows the Sisters to caustically parody the rites and roles of the Catholic church while still claiming an identity as a nun (while, of course, many religions outside of Catholicism have nuns, the Sisters explicitly refer to, engage with, and parody Catholicism.) As well as the adjacency to the vows of nuns, the path to becoming a Sister consists of multiple steps that take around a year to complete and mirror many requirements of applicants to be nuns, such as strict codes of dress around which types of habits an applicant can and cannot wear at each step. In addition, prospective Sisters are required to spend at least 14 hours studying the Order’s history and requirements in the Archives over the course of their initiation and must attend and work at dozens of events (including finally organizing one of their own). Clearly, like the extensive rites

⁵ Although their ranks have expanded to include members whose personal identities and drag personae range across the gender spectrum, the organization as a whole is still referred to as “the Sisters,” and, according to Wilcox, even those with male personae refer to themselves as nuns rather than priests, altar boys, etc. (70)

and requirements involved in becoming a Catholic nun, spending significant time learning and participating in community service is a prerequisite for full membership as well as a test of endurance and commitment.

What is especially interesting is that, while much of their activism focuses on material change, such as fundraising and (recently) distributing free COVID test kits, even more of it has to do with the social and ideological realm. There are the aforementioned hospice visits, as well as one-on-one ministry and protests, including recent protests against North Carolina's Lt. Governor, and awareness campaigns for other drag activism groups. They also nonviolently use their physical presence to protect others, namely using their attention-grabbing and sacreligious appearance to distract protestors at Pride events from harassing queer and trans youth. They blend several forms of drag activism, covering fundraising, awareness campaigns, community-building, and interpersonal counseling.

As such, they are an example of how drag *can* be definitively tied to activism. For the Sisters, their drag cannot and should not exist without activism, and their activism cannot exist without drag; their drag and activism are inextricably intertwined and unable to be separated from one another. Similarly, their religious aesthetics and their drag cannot be detached, as members and prospective members of all but the first level of initiation are required to wear their habits (and signature "whiteface" makeup, as they call it) to all public events. This simultaneous embodiment and subversion of expectations of the Catholic church within their drag activism serves not just as a shocking transgression of what is supposed to be acceptable for nuns, but also as an insistence that their commitment to activism and social change is integral to their drag by tying together drag aesthetics and nun sartorial requirements as a way to visually signal their commitment to community service in much the same way nuns do. This also, I would contend,

functions as a rebuttal to femmephobic ideologies that position trappings of femininity such as makeup and jewelry as frivolous, shallow, and self-absorbed. In these ways, the Sisters' practices counter any arguments that drag is likewise surface-level and unserious, even if the aesthetic of their drag is anything but unserious. The Sisters are proof that drag, while not always activist, frequently is, and that this activism can be not just a by-product of or complement to drag but actually deeply and intrinsically tied to the practice of drag itself.

The Armorettes

Like the Sisters, the drag queen troupe known as the Armorettes are known for their campy aesthetics, bawdiness, and commitment to activism as a part of their drag (also like the Sisters, they formed in 1979). Unlike the Sisters, however, they focus on one particular activist cause: HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment in the South more generally and Atlanta specifically. They also focus primarily on fundraising; although they do remind audience members to practice safe sex, their main goal is financial, and they estimate that in that time they have raised over 2.3 million dollars for the cause, and say they will not stop until a cure is found. The six original members, after seeing friends and lovers dying of AIDS, changed from general drag performance to focus on their new goal, donating every tip to “combat the encroaching epidemic and the stigmatizing rhetoric that accompanied it” (West and Bennett, 301). That said, although this goal is arguably activist in nature, not all members of the Armorettes categorize themselves as activists; nevertheless, the work they do is deliberately tied to charity and social and material change, making their drag and the way they deploy it activist, regardless of individual comfort with the term.

The Armorettes deploy camp aesthetics and filthy, provocative humor to achieve their goals, using them as tactical repertoires, which West and Bennett define as “the intentional

reworking of signs and symbols, including bodies, to publicly address and thus to constitute a collective identity to motivate them to action” (305). These tactical repertoires include representations of bodily fluids and waste and a deliberate choice not to perform drag intended to allow the queens to “pass,” which grab audience attention in ways that bring notoriety to the troupe, which they then use to raise money for the cause. This lewd and relatively uncommon form of drag can be useful for their fundraising efforts in that it provokes curiosity to witness from those who may not otherwise attend drag shows or shows that they know have an explicitly activist or charitable goal. This irreverence and desire to shock does not mean that the Armorettes are not shrewd with their activism, however: West and Bennett point out that the Armorettes stipulate that the HIV/AIDS organizations they contract with must put 100% of proceeds to services and programming rather than employee salaries or administrative fees (306). Of course, their outrageousness and political incorrectness has the risk to backfire, but they view it as a way to grab audience attention which then translates into more tips and more engagement with their arguments in favor of safe sex. In addition, their embrace of abjection while focusing on HIV/AIDS’ impact on the queer community rhetorically reclaims the accusations of disgustingness and immorality historically tied to the overall culture’s reaction to HIV/AIDS as something that primarily (in the U.S., at least) impacted LGBTQ people at the epidemic’s peak.

Like the Sisters, members of the Armorettes also explicitly connect drag and activism. One of the members, Wild Cherry Sucret, is quoted in Jeffrey and Bennett as saying “I think drag queens are always the first group that people go to when they need fundraising. People want to malign drag queens, but when it comes down to it, they are the first to step up to the plate when there is a need” (309 - 310). Rather than portraying fundraising as something secondary to drag queen performance, Sucret identifies it as a long-term, primary facet. This is also repeated

anecdotally with a former drag queen I once interviewed⁶ stating that every drag queen she had known or worked with performed “more charity shows than I can count, certainly more than the paid shows.”

Finally, it is important to recognize that while the Armorettes are primarily focused on fundraising within their activism, this does not mean their performances do not do other, less tangible forms of activist work. Primarily, this takes the form of education and community-building. For example, they typically turn their birthday parties into fundraising events where they tell personal stories about those they’ve lost to AIDS and their resultant commitment to fundraising with the Armorettes; as well as raising money at these events, they also report that these confessional stories, ones which have less place in their raunchy and uproarious group shows, prompt community members to share stories of their own and forge relationships with others with similar experiences. In these ways, their activism should not be viewed as limited to fundraising alone, as they actively allow for LGBTQ folks impacted by HIV/AIDS to form communities that both recognize tragedy and loss but undercut the suffering with humor and lightheartedness in ways less common in settings such as support groups. They also share information about safe sex and push back against what they have identified as a sort of flippantness around the syndrome on the part of younger people, who often view the advent of PrEP as proof that the syndrome is no longer relevant to their concerns or those of other LGBTQ people. This means that, while their work is fundraising-based on the surface, it also functions to build community and enhance community safety and awareness, showing that even drag focused on the charity side of activism in fact does other important work for social change.

⁶ I wish to note that this interlocutor gave permission for me to include this snippet, but did not wish to be fully quoted or identified, in terms of name/pseudonym, physical location, or temporality of interview.

The KQTxPROJECT

The KQTxPROJECT is (or was, they have been relatively inactive since 2020 and it is unclear whether or not they are still working, on hold due to the pandemic, or defunct) an organization that bills itself as “a filmmaking and community organizing grassroots group” that seeks “to build a transnational LGBTQ* Korean diasporic community and advance the acceptance, equality, and liberation of all Queer and Trans people of Korean descent.” For this portion of my analysis, I will be focusing on their October 2020 “MIDNIGHT COMMUNION: A Virtual Chuseok Celebration.” This event took the form of an Instagram live event wherein a variety of QTBIPOC performers – some doing drag, many not – were invited to showcase multimedia performances “that reflect their relationship to their ancestors; to abundance; and to their visions for QTBIPOC liberation.” The other stated goals of the event were to foster community within diasporic groups and share cultural practices lost or sublimated due to dispersal, colonialism, and religious imperialism. While Chuseok is a Korean holiday, the organizers, wishing to recognize and counter anti-Latinx bias and particularly, anti-Blackness within Asian and Asian diasporic communities in the wake of the George Floyd protests, opened up applications to any QTBIPOC performers who wished to contribute, and the result was a diverse and powerful show with contributions from people around the country and the world. In addition, the host and one of the event’s organizers made the point that they had heard that Chuseok had queer roots but the history of colonization and erasure made that information inaccessible to them, indicating the loss and mourning involved in the erasure of indigenous queerness through colonialism but also opening up the possibility of a “re-queering” of Chuseok through the contributions of modern-day queers.

The event was meant to be by and for BIPOC and diasporic people, but my spouse and I (who are both white) were lucky enough to receive personal invitations from one of the performers, and other white folks were allowed to join if they promised to donate to the performers, which we also did. As mentioned, not all of the performers were drag artists, but several were, and I think the event as a whole testifies to drag and activism. Unlike the Armorettes, and, to a lesser degree, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, this event did not have a specific fundraising component, although we were encouraged to Venmo tips to the performers as an act of solidarity with creative artists of color struggling to support themselves after most live shows were shut down. This was a topic one of the drag performers, Seoul-based queen Serena.303, engaged with in her performance. Stating that she wanted to perform a tribute to the vibrant queer nightlife community in Seoul, she ran around various parts of Seoul, ranging from industrial rooftops to lush city parks, in a variety of mod-inspired outfits while lip synching to Patti Kim's 1963 tribute to the city, alternately translated as "Pledge of Love," "Love of Seoul," and "Maternal Feelings of Seoul." As the last scene, Serena lipsynched to the lyrics on a red-curtained nightclub stage, eschewing the Western-style mod outfits for a red and pink hanbok.

In this brief performance, Serena.303 in conjunction with the organizers did important drag activism in ways that do not focus on fundraising or other more material goals. Rather, this performance importantly served as a bridge between a queer Korean and queer and trans diasporic Koreans. Throughout the night, performers, hosts, and attendees frequently referred to a feeling of loss due to diasporic conditions, particularly in terms of loss of cultural traditions, languages, and contact with those from their homelands, particularly in the cases of transracial adoptees and second-generation immigrants whose families converted to Christianity. In performing in a U.S.-based event and showcasing the architecture and natural beauty of Seoul

while lip synching to a song in Korean, Serena provided diasporic LGBTQ+ peers a chance to connect with a queer person from their homeland (she was also very active in the chat while the performance was being broadcast), witness the beauty she finds in Seoul, and hear a song about Korean pride that is extremely hard to locate in the U.S. In addition, in tying her performance to queer life in Seoul while lip synching to a song about Korean pride that emerged during a period of nationalism-related political and military upheaval in postcolonial Korea, she symbolically interjected queerness into a moment in South Korean national history associated with conservatism. This, combined with wearing the hanbok in the nightclub scene at the end and the general dedication to queer life in Seoul, implicitly countered racist and colonialist narratives that equate Korea and other non-Western states, especially those with ties to national militarism, as always inherently anti-queer. When this is read in concert with the act of reaching out to queer diasporic Koreans through her participation, we can clearly read this performance as having strong activist underpinnings in terms of both countering racist narratives about Korea's supposed homophobia and reaching out to diasporic Koreans to both provide education about Korea's past and present and assert that as queer and trans people, they do have a place in Korea.

This performance, alongside the organizers' dedication to supporting and forging diasporic communities, uplifting creators of color in the height of the economic crush of the pandemic, combating cultural loss and erasure, and coalition-building as a way to combat anti-Blackness and other forms of racial bias within Asian and Asian American communities, are evidence of clear activist aims that had little to do with fundraising or financial gain, outside of encouraging attendees to tip the performers. Instead, MOONLIGHT COMMUNION showed that drag, and spaces that facilitate drag, can take part in ideological and social activism centered around community-building, fighting racist and colonialist stereotypes and narratives, and

reconnecting people to lost and erased backgrounds. It also enabled an expansion of access to drag for those who have been, for a variety of reasons, unable to attend drag shows in person. In addition, in specifying that white folks should only attend if personally invited and/or willing to donate tips to the performers, the organizers explicitly set out to make a space by and for people of color to celebrate their heritages and grapple with histories of colonialism and racist erasure without having to worry excessively about white feelings or reactions, and to hold white people accountable for the historic and ongoing practice of appropriating and accessing people of color's artistic labor without repercussion. For these reasons, this event, and Serena's performance at it, showcase that drag need not be focused on raising money in order to be powerfully activist.

Vander von Odd and Biqtch Puddin

As has surely become apparent over the course of this thesis, I find *The Boulet Brother's Dragula* to be an exciting and important factor in what is going on in drag today, and that is not limited to what goes on in front of the show's cameras. Many of the performers have gone on to do important work, both deliberately activist and in terms of the ongoing evolution of drag in the public eye, and it cannot be denied that those who won their respective season have the most opportunities to do so. Two of the winners I will be focusing on here (another is focused upon in my Drag Masculinities chapter) are Vander von Odd, the winner of Season 1, and Biqtch Puddin, the underdog winner of Season 2. von Odd, who has a background in filmmaking and editing, has since gone on to become a producer for *Dragula*, and Puddin has become a popular Twitch streamer over the course of the pandemic. Like Serena.303 and the KQTxPROJECT organizers, their activist efforts are less focused on fundraising (particularly in the case of von Odd) and more on community-building and raising awareness for issues they find important.

von Odd's work has almost always had a powerfully ideological slant. For instance, when asked to make a fashion-themed look for their season of *Dragula*, they startled audiences by vomiting on the runway in order to make a point about eating disorders within the industry, and one of their famous performances involves lip synching to Radiohead's "Creep" while stripping off their dress and wig to reveal a body covered in painted-on self-injury scars, some of which spell out "love me" and "fuck me" after an opening film montage that features the words "creep," "weirdo," and "faggot" in classic carnival freak-show font. As can be gleaned from these anecdotes, their work often focuses deeply on not just interpersonal violence but the ways these violences become internalized and self-inflicted as a result. Another of their well-known performances, and the one which I will focus on here, focuses not on what is said to queer people but what queer people leave unsaid.

This iteration of the performance occurred in 2018 at one of the drag queen Sasha Velour's famous drag events, *Nightgowns*. Bright red spotlights came on as Vander glided onstage in a long blond wig, red dress, and crown made of dark mirror shards, face pointed down. (As the recently-crowned World's Drag Supermonster, they wore iterations of this crown at most of their shows for several months.) The audience already started yelling "Yaaas!" and "Now that's how you do it!" as Vander turned their back to the audience before the music even began. The lights went down and a huge screen rolled from the ceiling, projecting a close up video of Vander, wigless and contoured in dark red, scarlet glittery eyebrows protruding from their face. Black latex gloves contrasted with Vander's pale skin and red makeup as they slowly began to sew their lips shut, camera lingering on the needle popping through their lips in order to show that this wasn't stage trickery, it's *real*. Most of the audience was whooping and hollering in approval, although a few audience members could understandably be heard expressing disgust

or discomfort. As the Vander onscreen finished stitching their mouth closed, the Vander onstage stretched their arms out to the side as if readying to conduct an orchestra, revealing long, sharp finger extensions. The Vander onscreen held up a finger to their stitched-up lips and the horror-movie audio of tight strings and atonal voices crescendoed right before the screen went black.

A moment later, the screen faded back up to a washed-out shot of the yellow brick road surrounded by poppies, ash falling from the sky, and the remastered version of Somewhere Over the Rainbow began to play as Vander turned to the audience and stepped downstage, revealing red painted-on scars criss-crossing their chest beneath a red Elizabethan ruff, bandages covering their now presumably stitched closed mouth. As Judy Garland began to sing, Vander clasped their hands to their mouth as if just now realizing they could not sing (or lip synch) along. They spread their arms wide as the phrase SPEAK FOR THOSE WHO CANNOT appeared on the screen. The lyrics to the song began to fade onto the screen and Vander started to conduct the audience in singing the words they could not, mixing some graceful vamping into the conducting. At first, not everyone seemed comfortable singing, but as the song progressed, more and more of the audience joined in, not perfectly matching Garland's tempo changes but clearly familiar enough with the song to follow along.

Just before the final "bluebirds" refrain, Vander slowly pulled the bandages off their mouth, showing that their red-smudged lips were no longer stitched shut. They stepped downstage and lip synched along with the last few lines, mouth wide, facial expression and body language communicating both reclamation and anger as they beseeched the audience "If happy little bluebirds fly/ Beyond the rainbow,/ Why, oh, why/ Can't I?" As the song ended, they raised their arms again, this time not to conduct but rather as if to say "this kingdom is mine" as the

colors returned to the screen, yellow brick road and poppies no longer washed out, the Emerald City rising on the horizon.

This performance is a clear example of von Odd's unique mixture of stomach-churning bodily trauma and social messaging literally stitched together, and is evidence of how drag activism takes nonmaterial ideological forms as well. Considering their newfound fame and the huge audience at the event, von Odd was clearly paid well enough to not have to perform for tips, and I have found no reports of financial donations to causes on their part. Rather, they use their platform to make political messages that challenge the audience to fight oppression and support the minoritized socially rather than financially. Like the "Creep" performance, this one uses representations of self-mutilation not to portray those who self-injure as frightening or freakish, but rather as victims of larger societal forces that they internalize and enact upon themselves, which is vitally important in a context in which self-injury is frequently portrayed as an individual failing to properly handle a non-contextualized mental illness rather than a method of coping with oppression or trauma-induced mental anguish. As such, rather than glorifying or fetishizing the aesthetic of self-injury, von Odd's evocations of self-injury, particularly in the context of queer youth either being silenced or victims of bullying, visually connect outside oppression to internalized oppression in ways the audience cannot overlook or ignore.

Further, the exhortation to the audience to speak for those who cannot requires the audience to become active agents of social change in ways one-time financial donations do not. While, of course, many will not necessarily follow the charge once they've left the performance venue, the connection of the charge to speak to others to an embodied, affective experience of symbolically doing so may encourage attendees to "flash back" to the experience the next time they witness someone using oppressive language or enacting violence, and be spurred on to

intervene. In this way, even though the results of the activism here are not material financially, they still can result in other forms of material as well as ideological change. As well as this form of ideological change, von Odd also views education about queer and drag history as a vital form of activism, stating that having a queer person roll their eyes at someone for not recognizing a name deters people from wanting to know about queer history “and so I make a conscious effort to make people feel excited about historic queer figures and events” (Megarry), specifically Sylvia Rivera, Barquette, and Fakir Mustafar. For von Odd, activism is tied to education and connection to lost and sublimated queer ancestry in similar ways to the excavation of lost (queer) cultural ancestry important to the participants and organizers of KQTxPROJECT’s Chuseok celebration. von Odd’s performance here, and overall emphasis on education and social change through artistry, show that drag can be activist in ways unrelated to fundraising.

Biqtch Puddin, in contrast to von Odd, has not frequently engaged with bodily abjection outside of the requirements of their season on *Dragula*. Rather than using the aesthetics of their drag to make activist points to the outside world, they view their drag aesthetic as a way of reclaiming their body and queerness for themselves in the face of the rampant homophobia they faced as a child, emulating busty ‘80s “video game vixens” as a way to feel powerful and “badass” (Dupere). But while they do not deploy their aesthetic for deliberately activist aims in the ways that other *Dragula* winners I have analyzed do, they have used their shared fame and platform to foster community, help financially support struggling and minoritized drag artists, and expand access to drag in important ways during the pandemic.

After the first wave of pandemic lockdowns, Puddin observed that many of the drag artists they knew and followed online were struggling to make ends meet now that live performance, their primary way of making money, was impossible. Puddin, who already had a

fairly well-established presence on Twitch thanks to their practice of livestreaming themselves playing video games in full drag, decided to use the platform to organize weekly digital drag shows in order to help the drag community financially support themselves during the pandemic, and rather than cash tips for the individual performers, they had a suggested Venmo, CashApp, or PayPal donation of \$10 for each show, which would be split evenly amongst the performers (Tonic). This was already a strikingly collectivist approach to supporting drag performers, who often work for tips that tend to be unevenly distributed.

This egalitarian approach to tipping and payment is especially impactful considering the diversity, and relative fame or lack thereof, of the performers in question. Rather than prioritizing already-famous performers (although they certainly did participate, including von Odd and Landon Cider), Puddin held open casting calls, and made sure to include multiple drag kings and non-binary drag artists, who are often sidelined or excluded in the queen-heavy bar and club scenes. In addition, the casting calls were open to those who wanted to take part but were not performers, such as those who could run tech support or queer business owners who wanted to advertise on the show, all of whom were also compensated through the egalitarian tipping scheme (Tonic).

Puddin's organizational efforts regarding digital drag also do important work, which the Chuseok celebration also conducted, in terms of making drag more accessible to a wider audience. While the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot, in any sense, be categorized as a "good thing" overall, I would argue that its impact on drag has made the benefits of drag more widely accessible than previously possible, particularly considering that drag performances have typically, on a broad scale, been held at bars and clubs. Of course, gay bars and clubs have historically served as spaces of refuge for LGBTQ populations unable to safely be themselves in

majority-straight spaces, the general restriction of drag to these spaces also has the effect of limiting access for those who are underage, live outside of urban centers that play host to gay bars, and/or must avoid bar and club scenes in order to support their sobriety. The fact that drag has had to shift online in the face of lockdowns and restrictions has enabled more people to access the pleasures and potentials of drag, particularly closeted youth who are able to avoid detection and predation by turning on safe search mode before tuning in; my hope is that, even as drag is more able to shift back to in-person now that, in many places, restrictions are being lifted (for better or for worse), digital drag shows will continue to be put on so that those limited by age, location, and/or sobriety can more safely and comfortably attend drag shows. Puddin also specifically emphasizes that the suggested donation amount is not mandatory, stating “If you don’t have any coin right now but you want to support a show, watch! Watch drag ... Share the link, tag your friends, share and support. That’s what you can do. Don’t be intimidated if you can’t give anything” (qtd. in Tonic). This shows that, while still insisting that the payment be equally split and that everyone involved in the production be part of the LGBTQ community, Puddin views access to the artistry and community of drag as equally vital to the work their online drag shows do as the financial impacts.

Conclusion

While I agree with Horowitz that drag is not necessarily always activist, these examples demonstrate the potential of activist drag and the variety of ways it is implemented by different drag performers and organizations. This includes charity and fundraising, community-building, raising awareness for various causes, and expanding access to drag. Some artists, such as the Armorettes and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, use absurdity and transgression of social norms to raise both money and awareness, and in a similar vein, alternative drag performers such

as Vander von Odd deploy abjection to spur audiences into action. Others, such as the KQTxPROJECT and Biqtch Puddin, focus on building supportive community for minoritized groups through event organization while also encouraging financial support of the various performers involved in those events. The performers taking part in these events often do activist work of their own within their performances, such as in the case of Serena.³⁰³ reaching out to and sharing cultural history with diasporic audiences and implicitly challenging colonialist and racist stereotypes. This type of work falls under the form of drag activism Rupp and Taylor identify as “deconstructing and destabilizing historically negative and stigmatized identities and constructing and expressing new and more positively valued ones.” (219)

Furthermore, certain groups and performers identify activism as an intrinsic part of drag; the Sisters’ drag is deeply intertwined with their mandates for activism to such a degree that their drag cannot exist without activism and vice versa, and members of the Armorettes assert that the history of drag queening is so intimately connected to charity work that drag queens are often the first ones reached out to when causes need to raise funds. For these performers, drag is both historically and presently tied to activism in such a way as to make it impossible to assert that drag is always frivolous, light entertainment rather than a practice with a long history of deliberate activist underpinnings. This is represented not just in the longevity of their organizations’ existences but also in the practices of contemporary drag performers not associated with formal charitable organizations, such as von Odd and Biqtch Puddin. These examples also rebut assertions from certain feminist scholars that drag is always harmful and oppressive, as even the Armorettes’ often-problematic performances ultimately fulfill the feminist goal of supporting and uplifting minoritized individuals and communities. I have also argued that even drag without a deliberate activist goal can serve political ends by fostering joy

and pleasure for both performers and audiences, which is a matter of survival as well as enjoyment. Ultimately, I hope to have shown that drag, while not always explicitly activist, has worked for justice, health, survivability, and community preservation throughout history and must therefore be recognized for its political underpinnings.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION: DRAGGING THE PIECES INTO PLACE

Memory

Denver, 2019

It's 11AM on a Saturday and even though the time difference between North Carolina and Colorado means my circadian rhythm thinks it's 9AM, my body actually has no idea what time it should feel like; our flight didn't get into Denver until 3AM, I ate a hamburger and fries for breakfast, and everyone is doing jello shots. My new buddy, the drag king Jerrod, tells me I should have one too, but I demur, explaining that I already spent all my cash on tipping the performers. He waves a hand in dismissal. "Listen, I tell her you're my friend and she'll just give you one,"⁷ he says, waving over the drag queen in a white dress and shoes and a sky-high blonde wig who's currently winding her way through the crowded restaurant with a tray laden with little plastic cups filled with a colorful mix of jello and vodka. She shoots him a look that clearly says she'll get to us in time, once all the bachelorettes and tipsy grandmas have been served and she's made as many tips from them as she can. While we wait, Jerrod orders a Michelada and asks how long I'm in town for.

"Just until Thursday morning," I respond. "Not much time to do anything."

"Nonsense!" He replies. "There's like six shows going on by Wednesday." He begins to list them out: tomorrow morning there's a drag king brunch at this same restaurant and another drag king show that evening that Jerrod is performing in before going to his other job as a house DJ, on Monday a nearby club is hosting a show featuring alternative queens ("Those girls are

⁷ Please note that all dialogue here is taken from diary notes I made that evening after the fact rather than formal interviews with precise transcription. As such, the statements of all interlocutors in this section should be viewed as semi-accurate non-fiction rather than a formal interview. This is why I also refer to them with pseudonyms, both in terms of legal names and drag names. In addition, I use the pronouns associated with their drag personae whether in or out of drag at the time, and any referral to their out-of-drag gender identities is based on verbiage they used at the time and should not be assumed to be necessarily representative of their identities in 2022.

crazy,” says Jerrod), and on Tuesday there is a queen night at a gay sports bar and a trans-performers-only show at the same club that hosts the alternative queens night. I ask if he’s also performing at the brunch show tomorrow. “Nah,” he says. “They’re all white. It’s not like they won’t let me perform with them if I want, the kings are nice, but the brunch crowd doesn’t know what to do with Black drag kings. I’m not gonna get all up in makeup and glue on sideburns just to make like seven bucks for a full set. Not even worth the gas it takes to get here.”

By this point the drag queen, Angela, has made her way over to us. I don’t understand how she’s managed to perform two numbers and then walk all around the restaurant in the seven inch stilettos she’s wearing. “Goddamn, I’m sweating my tits off and these assholes are barely tipping,” she complains breathlessly.

“That’s how you know most of them are straight first-timers,” says Jerrod. “They never realize you’re supposed to tip.” Angela rolls her eyes in agreement and lays the tray down on the bar. “Gimme a purple one and give my friend Kelton here an orange one.”

“You think just because you know me you get free shots?”

“Ok, I’ll pay for mine, but Kelton traveled all the way from North Carolina just for us and his flight didn’t land until 3, he deserves a shot.”

“Oh no, it’s okay, I don’t even really want...” I begin, but Angela has already neatly plopped the little plastic cup down in front of me. She grabs another one for herself and raises it in a toast.

“To out-of-towners who actually tip,” she says, winking at me, and she and Jerrod down their shots. I don’t necessarily want one but I’d feel rude turning it down, so I follow suit.

“Atta boy!” crows Jerrod, clapping me on the shoulder. The sound system crackles on and a song I recognize as an old standard starts to play. A drag queen in a black bra, black

elbow-length gloves, green pencil skirt, flesh-toned bodysuit, and red kitten heels minces her way onto the stage. Jerrod tsks in disapproval. “How are you gonna be wearing a flesh-toned bodysuit with a black corset underneath? Tacky.” Sure enough, now that he’s pointed it out, I can see black shapewear underneath the bodysuit.

Angela nods, lips pursed. “She’s a sweetheart but such a mess. God love her.” I spend the rest of the set trying to look attentive as Angela and Jerrod systematically break down everything else they think is wrong with Camilla’s outfit and performance: the shoes are scuffed, her lip synching is off, and she’s cinched her skirt with a visible safety pin rather than having altered it by sewing. “Well, we can’t all be as good with a sewing machine as me,” Angela says proudly, smoothing her dress. “I haven’t bought a single garment for my drag in three years.” I ask her how long she’s been doing drag and try to hide my surprise when the 24-year-old queen tells me she’s been doing it for six years.

“She also runs this damn scene,” Jerrod says proudly. It turns out Angela coordinates and runs three recurring shows, including the one by and for trans people Jerrod mentioned earlier.

“Yeah, I have a rich family who set me up nice, so I try and do some good with it by using that money to support baby kings and queens, getting them gigs and stuff,” she explains. “Most of the clubs only wanna book well-known queens, so I make sure newbies can get gigs at the shows I host. I’m really proud of the all-trans show, I’m not trans but I have friends who are and they have trouble booking gigs even if they’re fucking fantastic so I use the money I make at drag brunch to rent out the club on Tuesdays for T4T. That way I can force these straight folks to support trans folks in drag whether they want to or not. Oh, shit, I’m up next! Nice meeting you!” Angela hops out of her seat and somehow sprints to the stage as the other queen finishes her number.

Jerrod and I keep chatting as the show goes on, him telling me about the best kings and queens around and how to find all the gender neutral bathrooms at drag venues. After the show, Angela and the queen from before, who I find out goes by Camilla, join us at the bar. Jerrod immediately informs Camilla that her black shapewear under the flesh-toned bodysuit is shameful. “I know, I know. But you try finding perfect shapewear that fits a big girl like me!”

“You know I love you,” he says, “You just gotta step up your game. Be a little professional.” For the next hour or so, the four of us chat about the best techniques for contouring, gluing on fake facial hair, and sewing dresses that, in Angela’s words, “make a skinny bitch look like she has some hips.”

They also proudly tell me about a local summer camp they’ve volunteered for called “Dragutante” that partners youth aged six to sixteen who are interested in doing drag with established drag artists to serve as mentors and prepare them to perform in a show at the end of the week. Angela mentions her last mentee was an eight-year-old cis girl who wanted to become a drag queen, and comments that there’s no reason a cis girl shouldn’t be able to be a drag queen. “I hate when people say cis women drag queens are cheating or whatever,” Angela says, waving her hands for emphasis and nearly taking out the eye of a passing server with her 3-inch press-on nails. “Drag isn’t even always about trying to pass or anything like that. Like what woman do you see walking around looking like me all the time? Women – trans, cis, whatever – being drag queens isn’t cheating. We should want more people to do drag anyways!” We all cheers to that, Angela and Camilla with jello shots, Jerrod with his Michelada, and me with a boring old Coke.

Eventually, we all peel off to go our separate ways – Camilla and Angela to get out of drag, Jerrod to see a woman he insists is not his girlfriend (to which Angela raises a skeptical eyebrow), and me to find a queer bookstore Jerrod recommended –but not before taking selfies

together and exchanging info. Jerrod insists I reach out to him the next time I'm in Denver so we can go to more drag shows together. Unfortunately, the pandemic has made a trip back that way impossible for the last few years, but I'm going back to Denver in November and I look forward to seeing Jerrod and Angela again, and witness more of Denver's vibrant drag scene, once I'm finally back in the city.

Theory

This anecdote, I feel, helps to sum up and show examples of many of the arguments I have made throughout the course of this thesis. The all-trans show Angela runs, as well as her mentee being a cis girl drag queen, shows that assumptions that drag is always performed by cis gays and lesbians "cross-dressing" do not speak to the actual realities of who exactly performs drag. Jerrod's friendship with many of the drag queens, and intimate knowledge of exactly what kind and color of shapewear a drag queen is expected to wear, challenges assertions that drag kings and queens rarely cross paths and that their drag techniques and practices are completely separate from one another. In addition, Jerrod and Angela's comments about the demographics of the drag brunch scene counter the idea that drag is always inherently tied to alterity and queer spaces. This anecdote also evidences the forms of activist work drag can do, such as Angela's using the money she earns to uplift minoritized trans drag performers and the volunteer work involved in mentoring for Dragutante. Finally, it also shows the importance of drag in building community, not just in the organizational work Angela does but also in the fact that Jerrod saw me sitting alone, struck up a conversation, and introduced me to others in the drag community; I had not expected that going to a drag show on my lonesome in a new city would result in new friends and connections.

In particular, the conversation around trans and cis drag performers connects to the critiques I forwarded in my State of the Field chapter. As I have shown, patterns in the scholarship – even in scholarship that otherwise recognizes that not all drag performers are cis – still tend to equate queening with AMAB embodiment and masculine identity and kinging with AFAB embodiment and female identity. I have argued that this is, in fact, an oversimplification that fails to grapple with the true reality of who does what type of drag and why. Similarly, drag is almost invariably connected to LGBTQ, and specifically cis gay, identities and communities within both the scholarship and the popular understanding, which erases the experiences of cis and straight drag performers and the history of popular media casting cis and straight performers in drag roles, such as in *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything? Julie Newmar*. I view much of this acceptance of supposed demographic realities regarding drag as questionable considering the fact that the most minoritized populations are historically excluded from the archive, due to both erasure on the part of researchers with a particular agenda and the choice of minoritized subjects to avoid research contexts in which they have been exploited and misrepresented, and I have pointed to the archival work of trans studies scholars such as Malatino and Gill-Peterson as a way to address these assumptions and exclusions.

This gender and sexual binarism also surfaces in the subversive/reactive or regressive dichotomy, which seeks to define drag as *either* feminist/progressive *or* always-oppressive and regressive. I have contended, in both the State of the Field and especially the Drag Masculinities chapters, that this view is reductive and not representative. Furthermore, this tendency in the scholarship puts an excessive burden upon drag performers and genders to “solve” problems of gender and portray a perfectly unproblematic rendition of gender, which allows the ways in which non-drag genders uphold and reproduce problems of gender to go unnoticed, and posits

the existence of universally hegemonic/antihegemonic genders that fail to recognize the ways in which gender hegemony is structured by not just male-female relations but also by white supremacy and colonialism. This is in part, I have argued, due to researchers failing to examine and incorporate their own positionality and investment in a single-axis model of oppression that posits male-female sexist oppression as *the* primary oppression and therefore failing to recognize how the racial, classed, and educational backgrounds of researchers impact their findings.

As I have shown in the Drag Masculinities chapter, these same tensions apply to drag masculinities specifically, although the accusations of hegemony and problematic representation differ slightly. Specifically, whereas drag femininities are critiqued primarily for reproducing sexist gender and beauty norms (which are then, in the case of scholars such as Raymond, theoretically yoked to physical violence against women), drag masculinities are critiqued for supposedly glorifying hegemonic masculinity, particularly its relationship to physical and sexual violence. Scholars such as Basiliere challenge the assumption that drag kings' portrayal of toxic masculinities necessarily uncritically reinforce these traits rather than satirizing and critiquing them. However, as I have endeavored to show, this analysis does not fully represent the reality of the ways in which these portrayals of masculinity can both challenge *and* glamorize or reinforce these problems. A more nuanced close read of individual performances of drag masculinity, such as the ones I performed regarding the work of Landon Cider and Dorian Electra, can better elucidate these tensions and challenge the assumption that a representation is necessarily either an embrace or rejection of particular problems of gender.

While my experience in Denver is not typically the norm when attending a drag show – I have been to other shows where I have not been so readily included – it speaks to what drag can do. And of course, it does not particularly support any of my arguments about drag masculinity,

as although Jerrod is a drag king, he was not there in drag and it was an entirely-queen show. Nevertheless, elements of it can still be relevant to the overall argument that drag is not either regressive or progressive but rather a mix of both. For example, Jerrod and Angela’s evaluation of Camilla’s drag was not just unkind but also based on relatively cissexist and sizeist definitions of what “successful” drag queening should look like, and throughout our conversation, Angela and Camilla frequently threw around gendered and sexualized terms that are arguably not reclaimable by cis men. In addition, in her role as hostess, Angela engaged in behavior common at drag queen shows that I find problematic, namely making audience members come onstage (sometimes even physically pulling them onto the stage) to take part in informal competitions that are uncomfortable and often designed to be somewhat humiliating for participants. These expectations also sometimes involve actions that I believe should require a (non-public) conversation about consent beforehand, such as partially undressing, simulating sex with strangers, and rapidly ingesting alcohol. While none of the audience members refused to participate, many seemed visibly uncomfortable, and the public nature of the event and implication that it was “all part of the fun” implicitly make it difficult for someone to refuse to participate without being viewed as being a “downer.” In particular, the challenges requiring participants to drink alcohol and the offstage normalization of drinking hard liquor in the morning – even in a brunch setting, where morning cocktails such as Bloody Marys and mimosas are common, taking multiple vodka shots is out of the norm – cohere with Rupp and Taylor’s statement that drag queen lifestyles tend to involve drug use and heavy drinking (2121).⁸

⁸ While I do not want to contribute to narratives that define drug and alcohol use as immoral or do not recognize substance abuse as an illness – and one often related to experiences of oppression – rather than a personal failing, and also find it important to recognize that historically, gay bars have frequently been the only relatively safe space in which LGBTQ could gather, I also wish to recognize that the normalization of heavy alcohol consumption leads to negative health outcomes, and, frequently, the social isolation of LGBTQ people who choose or need to be sober.

As such, if we take these problems and limitations in concert with the aspects of community-building and charitable work Angela endeavors for, we can see how limiting discourse around drag to the supposed progressivism or lack thereof as evidenced in their onstage performances sidelines the important activist work drag performers often utilize their drag in favor of. Like the Armorettes, Angela's onstage performance can reinforce, or at least fail to question, problematic norms and behaviors, but is used as a tactical repertoire to effect social change "offstage." And like the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, she intertwines her drag with a desire to enact social change, and like Bitch Puddin, she uses her cultural and financial capital as a well-known drag queen to uplift minoritized drag performers who do not have the same access to the drag venues that are most lucrative or publicly visible. In this way, Angela shows that drag can be both regressive and subversive at the same time and that a definition of her drag as either one or the other fails to capture the complexities of drag.

In addition, I have shown that drag that does not involve putting finances towards specific causes can still do activist work. For example, the KQTxPROJECT Chuseok event focused on supporting diasporic queers and excavating – and queering – lost cultural knowledge while also challenging anti-Blackness within other communities of color by elevating and building coalitions with Black artists. And the specific drag queen whose performance from the Chuseok show I analyzed furthered and deepened these aims by connecting with Korean diasporic LGBTQ people and providing them with insight into the Korean language, music, and culture she values, while also combating narratives of Korea as anti-queer. I have also argued that Vander von Odd engages in ideological activist work by crafting performances that engage with abjection and violence to encourage support of minoritized populations and visually tie external and internal oppressions together.

I hope to have shown that drag, and the identities of those who perform it, is more complex than is frequently assumed and worthy of deeper consideration, not just within drag studies but within a variety of fields. An effort to delve into the complexities of any artform or subject rather than accept commonly-held assumptions about the field can benefit any scholar, as can a deliberate effort to challenge binarism in all its forms. In addition, arguing that an outward projection of identity and politics (or an outsider's perception of such) necessarily relates to the overall work being done beneath the surface forecloses an understanding of drag in particular as doing activist work outside of representation of gender roles, an understanding of which can also be applied to multiple fields of study. And the arguments of scholars of drag will ultimately be deepened and better-supported when acknowledgment and recognition of performers' identities and political efforts are better integrated into our work. In the end, we will all benefit from resisting binarism, adding complexity to our arguments, studying with rather than about interlocutors, and resisting the temptation to flatten our analyses of the work particular subjects do based on whether or not a single facet of their presentation could be viewed as problematic or not, and I hope that this work will contribute to those aims.

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