

# **Non-Binary Drag: A Trans\* Musicology of Sensation and Interperformativity**

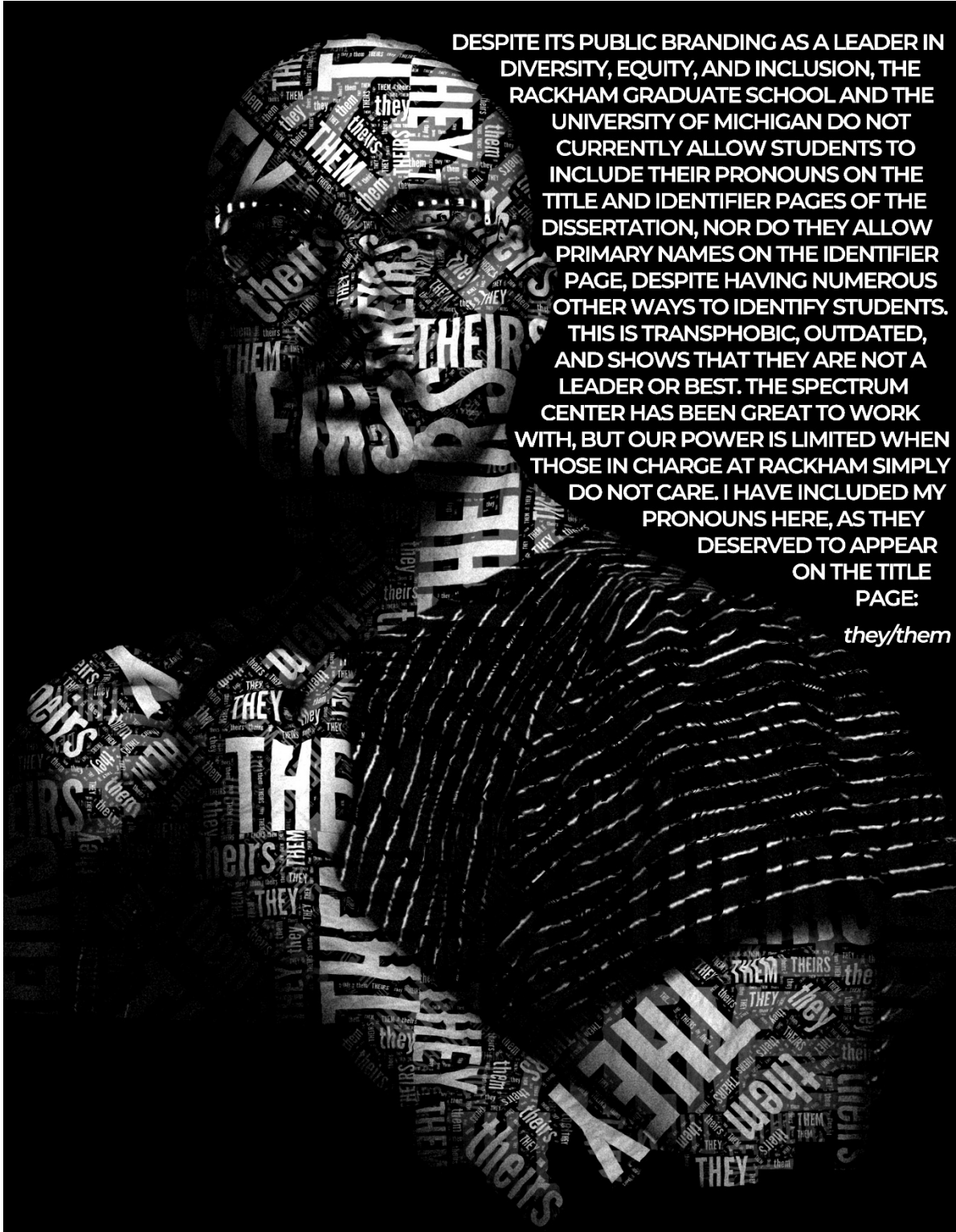
by

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*they/them*

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my *Twitch* community. You've been with me since before I even started the Ph.D. and you've gotten me through every step of the way.

## Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the encouragement and support from a myriad of people. I would like to first thank my advisor, Christi-Anne Castro, for all the guidance and patience over the past near-decade. Years ago, she said that she would remember me as the student that always made things harder on themselves—I hope that I’ve since made a more lasting impression! What I will remember is Christi-Anne’s kindness and forthright demeanor that constantly saved me from getting stuck in my own head, as well as her selfless guidance that always pushed me to go a step further. Similarly, Dean Hubbs has always kept me focused on the bigger picture as a researcher and writer. Inderjit Kaur has always reminded me to approach topics from a wide array of perspectives. Finally, Scott Larson’s discerning eye and artful command of trans\* history has been vital.

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Finally, I must express thanks that is not mine to give. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Zionist project has worked tirelessly to colonize Palestine and eradicate the Palestinian people. Prior to emergent heart surgery and the COVID-19 pandemic, I was embroiled in the necessary work surrounding queer Palestinian artistry and expression. It was a time colored by exceptional precarity, made even more difficult by not being able to enter the West Bank or Gaza due to

politics. I made every effort to continue that work but had to adjust due to forces beyond my control. Since October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, I have been shunned by most of the Israeli performers that I had come to know. My thanks go out to the few that remain ardent supporters of Palestine and continue to challenge the Occupation. For their safety, I do not mention names, but you know who you are. من النهر إلى البحر.

The story this document tells is a shared one and I am exceptionally fortunate to have been able to contribute my pen to tell a mere ounce of it.

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## Abstract

In the world of drag performance, the influence of *RuPaul's Drag Race* cannot be overstated. Yet, while garnering increased public acclaim for drag, the show has narrowed the public's perception of the art form, steering it towards a homogenous aesthetic primarily embodied by cisgender gay men. Such impact risks overshadowing the vibrant diversity inherent in drag artistry; particularly, the contributions of trans\* and non-binary performers. My dissertation seeks to re-frame our understanding of drag by foregrounding trans\* and non-binary artists who, by their very existence, defy the binary concepts of gender that have traditionally constituted and constrained the profession. My research showcases how non-binary royalty employ sound not just as means of entertainment, but also as a powerful tool to question and redefine gender performance. Using the concept of gender euphoria as a guiding principle, I delve into the transformative experiences of these performers and their audiences, exploring how they use music to participate in self-regulation, self-actualization, and queer worldmaking.

This project presents seven years of multi-sited fieldwork where I engaged with drag communities as a scholar, performer, and photographer across the midwestern United States and the live-streaming platform *Twitch*. Through a realm of sound and silence, I investigate in-person drag shows, archives, and digital performances by joining theories of affect, intersubjectivity, queer time, and interperformativity, wherein I situate drag as a multisensorial performance imbued with queer histories and aesthetics. I scrutinize the affective resonance of “loudness” in live performances to consider how non-binary performers consciously manipulate volume to

craft their gender identities. I also venture into the realm of visual archives to suggest ways to interpret the hidden sounds of gender euphoria from historical photographs. In addressing the burgeoning world of digital drag through a metaphor of the mirror, I analyze how non-binary performers adapt and innovate drag's musical elements within virtual spaces. Each of these case studies is an exploration of how we may use Katie Horowitz's (2020) concept of interperformativity to tear down the barriers between performance and performativity and between identity and performance. In doing so, I claim that trans\* and non-binary drag shows us that we cannot separate off-stage and on-stage selves.

Accompanying my written work is my digital drag short film *Living Loud*, which showcases the journey of a gender non-conforming individual. This film, along with my ethnographic analysis, illustrates that gender euphoria interperformatively materializes through sound's somatic and aesthetic dimensions. In centering gender euphoria and trans\* performers, I use the three metaphors of loudness, silence, and the mirror to propose a non-binary paradigm through which to suggest a new approach to musicological and gender analysis.

## Chapter 1 Setting the Stage

### Background

I first encountered drag as an adult in 2014. My homophobic father had died a couple years prior and I was in the late stages of leaving the evangelical cult I had grown up in. When I came out to myself and to a few close friends as gay during my undergrad, I found it exceptionally difficult to reconcile my new identity with a life-long amount of moral guilt and shame. Not knowing what to do, I sought advice from my friend Charissa, a lesbian who was a non-traditional student that had high school-aged kids of her own. I told her that I didn't know what being gay looked like. What did healthy gay love look like? I grew up thinking gay and debauchery went hand-in-hand and that being a gay man (long before realizing I was non-binary) meant I needed to be flamboyant and sex-driven. I was still at the stage of queer becoming where my internalized homophobia outweighed everything else. As a kind and simple gesture, Charissa gave me her *Netflix* password. At risk of being cliché, it changed everything. I was finally able to expose myself to queer media, albeit certainly limited. One of the shows I found was *RuPaul's Drag Race*. For the first time, I saw gay men on the screen who did not seem to have an issue with balancing various sides of themselves: feminine, masculine, creative, expressive—while only being celebrated for everything. I fell in love with the costumes, the glamor, the creativity, but above all, the expressivity each embodied. I listened to the queens' stories and saw their lives materialize through drag. These men were more than entertainers; they were living examples of resilience and authenticity. Through their campy performances and behind-the-scenes

conversations, they confronted and celebrated their pasts, insecurities, strengths, and dreams. From tales of coming out, battling discrimination, or finding empowerment through their drag persona, every anecdote broke down my preconceived notions of what it meant to be gay. Could I also learn to tell my story?

Over the past several years, the U.S.-based drag empire *RuPaul's Drag Race*, has eclipsed and transformed drag across the world. Above all, the show has led to increased public support and normalization for drag, which has also sparked the careers of countless new performers. Many, like myself, first encountered drag through the popular reality television competition series. Often, however, these new drag audiences never come to engage with “on-the-ground” drag happening in their own local nightclubs and bars. Participating in nightlife is certainly not necessary to appreciate drag from afar, but only consuming drag through *RuPaul*<sup>1</sup> shapes one's understanding of the genre and the queer community surrounding it. For all the good the show has accomplished, it has also become hegemonic and perpetuated harm in the community. From the “villain edit” where producers tend to frame queens of color through racist stereotypes, to RuPaul, himself, infamously being vocal about not wanting women or transgender people on his show, *Drag Race* has touted a skewed view of how drag can uplift the community. Furthermore, although there have recently been (openly) trans performers on the show, its contestants remain predominantly cisgender gay men with humorous aesthetic styles. Despite my earlier love, I no longer resonate with the show. I do not see myself, as a non-binary person, reflected on the screen. Likewise, as a performer, I cannot imagine having costumes that

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<sup>1</sup> As a shorthand, many people refer to the entire *RuPaul's Drag Race* empire as simply “RuPaul.” It would be incorrect to say “televised drag” since much of the fandom engages with *RuPaul* through *YouTube*, blogs, conventions, merchandise, etc. For clarity, I italicize the name when referring to the empire, but leave it when referring to RuPaul Charles, the person. At times, I use *Drag Race* to refer specifically to the show.

were not thrifted or cheaply made, or a performance space with perfect, studio-quality lighting and audio. I tend to enjoy performing campy humor and a femme aesthetic, which is certainly not unlike *Drag Race*, but I have lost gigs when stepping outside this mold. *RuPaul* shatters anti-gay barriers while avoiding truly queering spaces by producing “safe” content centering cisgender gay men whose identities have already been largely normalized in society.

This study re-centers the drag frame specifically on trans\* and non-binary artists. Non-binary performers bring another dimension to the drag community. With an identity that inherently refuses to fit within the dichotomy of male or female, their drag often blurs and bends gender lines. Their art can challenge the audience’s perceptions of gender norms through costuming, makeup, and sound that expresses the fluidity of their gender experiences. One of the first non-binary drag artists that I saw was Courtney Act from Season 6 of *Drag Race* (although they came out after their *Drag Race* season). Unlike most drag performers of today, Act is a professional singer and both lip syncs and performs their own music. My journey as a drag artist and scholar has been inspired by Act, whose performances often exaggerate the flexibility of gender. For example, I regularly use their music video “To Russia with Love” (2014) when teaching introductory classes about queerness and the voice. Act’s “middling” range lends itself to an inability to distinguish man or woman. Although non-binary people do not necessarily aim for androgyny, Act’s work is a beautiful example of how non-binary art can bring nuance to the conversation of gender.

Trans\* and non-binary people participate in drag in as many ways as there are drag styles. My dissertation focuses more on styles of drag found in local bars since it is often there that these raw and personal expressions of gender and identity thrive. As the predominant arena for drag, the culture in these venues can be more inclusive and reflective of the diverse gender

experiences than highly produced television. Away from the cameras, the performances are not just about competition and public entertainment, but about storytelling, political statements, and finding oneself. These spaces provide community and solidarity where monarchs and the audience alike can share a moment of collective embrace of difference and defiance.

A drag monarch is a person of any off-stage gender who performs drag of any on-stage gender. Drag is a multi-faceted performance art grounded in LGBTQIA+<sup>2</sup> communities and is often portrayed through an exaggerated interpretation of cultural gender codes, such as masculinity and femininity. In my dissertation, I regularly use the terms “monarch” and “royalty,” as well as the more general “artist” and “performer” to refer to those that practice drag. This is a conscious effort to use gender neutral language when referring to non-binary people or to performance situations where the gendered terms drag “queen” or “king” are less relevant.

Throughout the history of drag, various styles have emerged with unique and overlapping characteristics. According to fellow ethnomusicologist and drag researcher Adrienne Alton-Gust (she/her), who performs as Young King Cole (he/they), “drag is art, theater, a production, musical interpretation, and more.”<sup>3</sup> As Alton-Gust suggests, drag is a multifaceted art form with an array of styles reflecting the broad spectrum of gender expression and creativity. It can range from high glamor and meticulously crafted elegance to exaggerated, comedic performance. Some artists might delve into the avant-garde, pushing boundaries with abstract or conceptual

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<sup>2</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans\*, Queer, Intersex, Agender/Asexual, etc. At times, I use the expanded form with “2S” to refer to Two-Spirit, and other times, I shorten the acronym to better match those relevant to the situation. I prefer the general use of the longer LGBTQIA2S+ since it considers sexuality (based on gendered attraction) - LGB, gender - T, queerness (broadly defined) - Q, sex - I, propensity for sexuality or gender - A, and race - 2S.

<sup>3</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

looks, while others might draw inspiration from pop culture and embody specific characters or icons with precision. Others make bold statements on society and some overtly play with the subversion of gender norms. What binds these and countless other diverse styles together is the underlying essence of drag as a performance art that challenges, entertains, and celebrates the fluid nature of identity.

One prominent style of drag is Pageant Drag that epitomizes glamor, elegance, and the meticulous embodiment of traditional female beauty standards. Pageant competitors are judged on criteria such as evening gown presentation, talent, personal interview, and swimsuit. Much like its mainstream beauty counterparts, pageant drag emphasizes polish and poise, with participants spending years refining their craft to attain titles like Miss Gay America or Miss Continental, which are highly revered within the drag community (Davis 2016).

Contrasting the lipstick and polish of pageant drag is the fierce and politically-charged Ballroom scene, rooted in Black and Latine<sup>4</sup> LGBTQ+ communities. Ballroom culture consists of houses—alternative families led by a “mother” or “father”—that compete in balls, events where individuals “walk” and are judged for their dance skills, appearance, and ability to convincingly embody various gender expressions and social archetypes. Each category in a ball, such as “Realness” or “Vogueing,” challenges contestants to surpass the expectations of a specific theme or identity. Ballroom has its own vernacular, aesthetic standards, and codes of conduct that contribute to a pivotal language of resistance and community (Bailey 2013).

Another emergent trend within the art of drag is the phenomenon referred to colloquially as “faggotry,” though it is important to note that this epithet can be contentious and derogatory if

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<sup>4</sup> I use “Latine” rather than “Latinx” to denote a gender neutral/comprehensive Latin population, as the ‘e’ suffix originates in Spanish whereas the ‘x’ originates in English.



not used as a term reclaimed by those within the queer community. The practice broadly refers to drag performances that are aimed at or have become popular with heterosexual audiences, often occurring in mainstream settings like brunches at restaurants or bars, as well as certain musical restaurants where drag performers entertain guests. “Drag Brunches” have soared in popularity and often feature drag queens performing lip syncs, dance numbers, and interacting comedically with the audience while diners enjoy their meals. These events are typically characterized by a lighthearted and accessible atmosphere, aiming to entertain and engage people who may not be as deeply immersed in the traditional drag or LGBT+ cultures. The performances can be campy, extravagant, and fun, showcasing the diversity and palatability of drag artistry that appeals to a broad audience demographic. This type of drag can be a double-edged sword; on one side, it encapsulates a sense of inclusivity, providing a platform for performers to reach wider audiences and for those audiences to partake in the vibrant world of drag culture. On the other, it can also raise concerns among some within the queer community about drag culture being commodified or diluted when co-opted by mainstream venues for entertainment purposes, potentially shying away from drag’s more subversive and political roots (Montondo 2022).

Even within the bar culture that I tend to focus on, there are a variety of drag styles and aesthetics. For example, there is Camp Drag which leverages humor, satire, and exaggerated caricatures of femininity. It often involves elaborate and outlandish costumes, oversized wigs, and theatrical makeup. Camp drag performers might lean into societal critiques or skewer pop culture, emphasizing the performative aspect of gender through parody. This style can be seen in everything from the offbeat performances of local drag bars and cabarets to the inclusion of camp-inspired looks on mainstream shows like *Drag Race*.

In contrast to the campy style, Genderfuck Drag challenges and deconstructs binary notions of gender through a purposeful mix of traditionally masculine and feminine signifiers. RuPaul, himself, became famous in the 1990s for genderfuckery. Performers might sport beards with full makeup or juxtapose a glamorous gown with a conspicuous bulge. This style often serves as a political statement, queering gender norms and troubling society's expectations, and leaving audiences to question the very concept of gender itself. Androgynous Drag, while similar to genderfuck, often plays with a more seamless blending of gender markers, creating an aesthetic that does not necessarily seek to critique gender norms but to exist within a fluid space between them. Performers might focus on a more neutral or ambiguous presentation, pulling equally from masculine and feminine traits.

Professor Nadine Hubbs, a scholar of gender and sexuality, has described drag as being constituted by binary gender.<sup>5</sup> I agree, as even for genderfuck and androgynous styles, the artform of drag came to exist, in part, as a response to the limitations of the binary and its supposed gender roles and expectations. By transforming or “reversing” one’s gender, drag is a way to challenge pre-conceived notions of what it means to be a particular gender.<sup>6</sup> While the idea of “transforming” has been more highly regarded as a practice in drag queening than in kinging (Horowitz 2020; Halberstam 1998), the allure of transformation has likewise helped constitute theoretical configurations of [binary] gender. The apparent shock of a drag queen’s “reveal,” where she confesses her gender “secret,” sheds light on the frailty of gender as an essentialized binary formulation (Hubbs, email message; See also: Newton 1972; Butler 1990; Garber 1991). “The value in the performance, for these audiences and the ‘impersonators’

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<sup>5</sup> Nadine Hubbs, conversation with the author, 3 June 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Nadine Hubbs, email message to author, 5 June 2024.

Newton spoke and hung out with, was premised on its skilled, successful, stylish *reversal* of binary gender” (Hubbs, email message, emphasis in original). I build from Hubbs’s phrasing and argue that drag and binary gender are dually constitutive, for drag has become constrained by these same binary conditions. Without pre-existing expectations of [binary] gender, drag stands to lose a major part of its subversive quality. Therefore, the very presence of non-binary drag marks a radical shift in drag history and aesthetics, albeit in a way that I argue remains subversive. A non-binary paradigm encourages us to reflect on the intersection where performance meets identity, as well as the ways in which gender and drag can be reconstituted without the strictures of the binary. Non-binary drag not only subverts gender roles and expectations, but the [binary] category of gender itself. By combining musicological analysis with Katie Horowitz’s (2020) concept of *interperformativity* (see Chapter 2) to analyze sound at this juncture where non-binary identity and performance meet, we are afforded a profound insight into the affective, metaphorical, and practical applications of music in drag.

Each style of drag embodies its own unique narrative, cultural backdrop, and set of performance rituals, yet they all share a common thread: providing space for expression beyond societal constraints and celebrating the multiplicity of gender as a site of creative potential. This notion is vividly echoed in the experiences of my interlocutors, such as Portia Lynn and Rothii, for whom drag serves as a profound medium of self-expression and connection. According to drag queen Portia Lynn (she/her), “drag is a way to express myself free of societal expectations. I aim to make people laugh mostly. Above all else, it is a way to connect with other queer people and celebrate things that our community cherishes.” For Rothii (she/they) “drag is a way for me to let my artistry out as well as letting myself be free in how I present. It allows me to in a way take off a mask and let myself just be in the moment.” Their personal accounts reaffirm that,

regardless of the form it takes, drag is a dynamic route for performers to strip away societal expectations and unveil more authentic versions of themselves. Whether pageantry or parody, protest or blend, drag in all its glorious forms articulates a message of freedom and the transformative power of performance.

In contrast with the most popular contemporary practices of drag, histories of drag often begin with its appearance in the theater and on the vaudeville stage (Baker 1994; Garber 1991; Senelick 2000). These narratives typically center the drag queen over kings and others. As I discuss below, the theater tradition has been documented more than other historical traditions like drag balls and nightclubs, especially when concerning European drag practices (see also: Chapter 2).<sup>7</sup> This narrative contributes to a false sense of historical trajectory that suggests drag was birthed in the theater, when in fact, it was only one lineage. In my dissertation, I focus on drag monarchs based in nightclubs and bars, as it is the most popular style today.

Although the following case studies engage with different types of drag media across multiple timeframes, I have limited my research to drag that shares a few common elements; namely, lip synching and queer audiences. In Chapter 3, I discuss a number of southeast Michigan drag artists that work in local nightclubs and bars. They typically lip sync a popular song and dance (to varying degrees). While spoken word can occur in their musical mixes, it is typically someone else's voice on a recording and not their own. This is similar to the earlier "record acts" that Esther Newton described in her groundbreaking 1972 drag ethnography, *Mother Camp*. Not only does lip synching allow a monarch to sonically embody another's words (often a famous female diva), but it allows a performer to do physical routines that would be

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<sup>7</sup> There is a Eurocentric art focus that does not tend to distinguish between U.S. and European (largely British) drag histories.

difficult to accomplish if they were to sing live (Langley 2006). In Chapter 4, I push the boundaries of performance to discuss the musical elements of drag that are seemingly lost when we only have silent photographs to remember the past. By focusing on a performer famous for her ability to lip sync, as well as accurately mimic the voices of infamous divas, I make a case for how we may interpret the silence we are presented with, today. In Chapter 5, I detail a new style of drag performance known as drag streaming. It is a stylistic successor to the nightclub/bar style but is newly transformed through the use of digital media. These artists regularly perform non-musical drag, but lip sync at special moments in a way that reflects and expands the traditional style.

As should be clear, there is no sole definition of drag, and it is left up to the performers, themselves, to decide what it means to them. In response to an online survey I conducted, CYREEL (any pronouns) said that “drag is an art form that fights against the construct of gender and the way it is used to oppress those who don’t conform or don’t live within the binary of gender,”<sup>8</sup> whereas Force Majeure (they/them) described it as “the exploration and exploitation of gender norms and customs, a satirical mirror and a powerful expression of queer art.”<sup>9</sup> For ReecizPieciz (it/its), “drag is me pushing aside my feelings of trying to “pass” or trying to fit an idea of what I am. It’s an invitation to share in the love and joy I have for my soul and body,”<sup>10</sup> and for Sir Guy (any pronouns):

Drag is an art form- specifically to me- an art form of transformation. To be someone you’re not usually and still identify with them in a way- if that makes sense? For

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<sup>8</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

<sup>9</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

<sup>10</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

example, I \*am\* Sir Guy but not all the time. I like when I'm him but I also like having him as a separate identity than that of my day to day identity.<sup>11</sup>

Fearless Amaretto (they/them) beautifully stated that:

Drag is the amplification of my inner self. From the looks to the energy, drag is a way to release the reins and truly let all of you free. The songs are always chosen because I connect with them in some way, and through the performance I share a part of myself to friends and strangers alike and they applaud and pay you for your contribution. It touches people, and helps them grasp the bits of themselves that they see in your art.<sup>12</sup>

My dissertation is, in small part, a response to the RuPaulification of drag whereby the legible styles and aesthetics of drag have become compressed and exclusionary. In many ways, the bigger problem that has arisen is one of binary thinking. Not only are non-binary people, by definition, removed from such a traditional configuration of drag, but those that do fall within the categories of male and female are further restricted in their potential for expression if said practice does not align with the normative binary model. This means that many trans\* people are likewise precluded from the discussion, but as Schuller explains:

Life does not follow the course of binaries, even binaries that trace 'interactions' between  $x$  and  $y$ —as theorists, we need to grapple with encounters, dynamics, materializations, and assemblages that never presume  $x$  can be constituted outside of  $y$ . (Schuller 2023:143)

But what does it mean to be non-binary? The history of non-binary as a gender category is complex and nuanced, spanning across numerous cultures and historical periods. The actual term “non-binary” is a relatively new addition to the English language and refers to gender identities

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<sup>11</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

<sup>12</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

that do not fit exclusively within the traditional dichotomy of male and female. However, the concept of more than two genders is not new and has been recognized in various societies long before the term was popularized, like the *sekhet* (sh̄t) of ancient Egypt (Pires 2024), the *bissu* of Indonesia (Andaya 2018), and the *māhū* of Kanaka Maoli (Hawaiian) and Maohi (Tahitian) cultures (Matzner 2001). Unlike binary gender configurations, none of these “non-binary” identities are tied to one’s genitalia. Beyond these, there are countless other examples of third-gender identities like the *muxe* of the Zapotec cultures of Oaxaca (AMAB<sup>13</sup> and feminine) (Mendoza-Álvarez and Espino-Armendáriz 2018), the *hijra* of South Asia (AMAB eunuchs and feminine) (Roy 2016), the *mukhannathun* of pre- and early Islamic society (AMAB and feminine) (Ludovic-Mohamed 2019), the *fa’afafine* and *fa’afatama* of Samoa (AMAB and AFAB<sup>14</sup> respectively) (Besnier and Alexeyeff 2014), and the variety of Native American identities that fall under the indigenous Two-Spirit umbrella (Smithers 2022).

The 20th century saw a rise of psychological and sociological studies into gender and sexual identities in Western culture. Pioneering sexologists like Magnus Hirschfeld began challenging the binary conception of gender and introduced the idea that sexuality, and in turn gender, exists within a wide spectrum. Following Hirschfeld, the concept of trans\* individuals began to gain recognition in the medical and psychological communities, though non-binary identities remained largely unrecognized. During the latter part of the century, the feminist and gay liberation movements prompted greater exploration of gender roles and sexuality. These movements laid the groundwork for a broader understanding of gender, apart from the strictly medicalized views of the time.

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<sup>13</sup> Assigned male at birth

<sup>14</sup> Assigned female at birth

The term “non-binary” began to gain traction in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as activists and gender theorists sought language that could capture the experience of individuals who did not identify strictly as men or women. “Non-binary” became a part of the expanding lexicon surrounding gender identity, which includes terms such as “genderqueer,” “agender,” “bigender,” and “genderfluid,” among others. The increasing visibility of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, coupled with the rise of the internet as a tool for community formation and discourse, has allowed for greater awareness and discussion of non-binary identities (Berberick 2021; Young 2020). Online platforms have created spaces for non-binary people, or “enbies,”<sup>15</sup> to share their experiences, connect with others, and organize for greater recognition and rights. Since the 2010s, non-binary identities have become more visible within mainstream culture. Celebrities and public figures have begun to identify openly as enby, bringing further awareness to the term. Legal recognition of non-binary genders has started to become a reality in some places, with options for “X” or equivalent non-binary gender markers on identification documents emerging in countries like Australia, New Zealand, and Bangladesh.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “Enby” is the phonetic version of the “NB” abbreviation for non-binary. While the NB form is used frequently, I avoid it here since it has, unfortunately, come to also mean “non-Black” in some circles.

<sup>16</sup> Legal recognition of non-binary gender is recognized in the following countries as of 4 May 2024. This does not mean that every state or district within these countries recognize them, but that their national passports have the option: Bangladesh (2013), India (2014), Nepal (2013), Pakistan (2023), Denmark (2014), Iceland (2019), Malta (2017), Netherlands (2018), Canada (2019), Mexico (2023), United States (2022), Australia (2011), New Zealand (2012), Argentina (2021), Chile (2022), Colombia (2022), Antarctica. Non-binary gender recognition is available for intersex individuals in Austria (2018), Germany (2018), Kenya (2022), and Brazil (2021). “Legal recognition of non-binary gender,” *Equaldex*. <https://www.equaldex.com/issue/non-binary-gender-recognition>.



The rise of academic work related to gender studies has also contributed to the recognition and understanding of non-binary identities. Scholars like Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam have challenged traditional notions of gender and have used queer theory to help frame the discourse around non-conforming identities. Butler's work on the non-essence of gender as constructed by sociality has been especially helpful for considering genders beyond the binary (see Chapter 2). Research on non-binary populations has also found footing within the fields of psychology and healthcare, with particular attention towards the limits of present research methods when interlocutors identify beyond binary parameters (Beischel et al. 2021). Vincent (2020), for example, has outlined the implications for what Foucault called the "medical gaze" whereby a doctor, with the support of their institution, has the power to decide if a gender non-conforming person "deserves" or conversely "requires" medical intervention. Richards et al. (2016) has considered ways that mental health professionals may better treat non-binary and genderqueer people. This is especially important since non-binary young people are at increased risk of abuse than their cisgender counterparts (Chew et al. 2020). Additionally, Schudson and Morgenroth (2022) have discussed how many binary-identified people hold prejudices against enbies due to deeply rooted gender/sex essentialist beliefs. As Monro (2019) has pointed out, nevertheless, scholarly literature has not kept up with the rapidly expanding societal presence and recognition of non-binary identities. Hardy and Monypenny (2019) have made a case for queering music therapy in order to reach transgender and non-binary youth, and Sharp and Shannon (2020) discussed how social media sites like *Tumblr* serve as an affective, communicative, and creative place where identity can be explored. Although it is steadily gaining momentum, very little attention has been given to non-binary creativity and artistry.

Within drag scholarship, even less has been published about non-binary people. For example, Mendoza (2020) discussed how non-binary monarch Hollow Eve challenges heteronormative spaces. Hollister (2022) argued against the dominant subversive/regressive narrative of drag, offering examples of how artists like Landon Cider, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and Biqtch Puddin work to combat limited beliefs about drag's activist potential. Rogers (2018) conducted in-depth survey research with trans\* and non-binary drag kings in the Southeastern United States and found that drag has been a unique resource for gender affirmation and exploration in communities where non-conforming identities are not feasible. Rogers's study is unique in that it is the first to attempt to survey a wide range of performers rather than focusing primarily on celebrity artists. That said, it should be noted that most of the current published work on non-binary drag, like Mendoza and Hollister's, comes in the form of M.A. theses.

Trans\* drag has received more attention, most notably by La Fountain-Stokes's (2021) exploration of Puerto Rican drag and *transloca* performance, Santana's (2022) work on the Cuban *transformista* and sexual subjectivity, and Davenport's (2017) analysis of 1990s drag culture in New York City. Elsewhere, Davenport (2023) and Cochrane (2020) have written about how drag helped them come to terms with their identities as trans women. In *Decolonize Drag* (2023), Kareem Khubchandani and his drag alter ego, LaWhore Vagistan, expertly read drag as a way to challenge existing binaries and expectations of not only gender, but drag itself. In some ways, my argument for turning our attention to drag performers that do not fit into the tidy categories of male-to-female drag (or vice versa) parallels Khubchandani's work where he suggests that we "decenter gender as the sole rubric of evaluating the practice—this requires understanding that gender is simultaneously constituted by race, religion, class, ability, and

more” (26). While Khubchandani’s book discusses the limits in configuring drag through gender alone and how the figure of the “palatable” drag performer has often become a proxy for colonial politics, I focus on the point at which music engages with on-stage and off-stage selves to craft personal and community narratives.

Prior to the widespread use of “trans,” a few scholars dove into the topic of drag and cross-dressing. Marjorie Garber’s *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* is a foundational text in the field of drag studies that examines the phenomenon of cross-dressing and its impact on the culture at large. Published in 1991, Garber’s work combines theoretical analysis with a wide array of historical and contemporary examples from literature, theater, film, and the daily performance of gender. Garber’s main thesis posits that cross-dressing is a third category that disrupts the binary understanding of gender. Crossing and blurring gender lines in dress becomes a metaphor for the indeterminate in society and culture, signifying a “category crisis” that challenges existing frameworks and reveals the unstable nature of what is often considered foundational and fixed—gender identity. Garber argues that cross-dressing has the potential to trouble and question the clear-cut distinctions between genders and to expose the performative nature of gender itself. *Vested Interests* underscores drag’s power to critique and destabilize normative gender presentations, but Garber’s focus on cross-dressing is as a cultural phenomenon and symbolic rather than on the lived experiences of gender non-conforming individuals.

Both Garber and Butler are interested in how the performance of gender can reveal it to be an unstable and constructed set of behaviors, rather than a natural or inherent quality. Butler’s theory of performativity suggests that gender identities are constituted through repeated acts and gestures; they are performative rather than expressive of a pre-existing reality. Garber likewise

hints at this performative aspect of cross-dressing in the way it unsettles the audience's expectations and reveals the constructedness of gender. However, while Garber emphasizes the symbolic and representational significance of cross-dressing, Butler is more focused on the discursive production of gender and the material effects of its performance. In essence, while Garber's work illuminates cultural implications surrounding cross-dressing, Butler's theoretical framework provides the conceptual tools to understand the power dynamics and social consequences of such performances of gender. Together, their works invite a more nuanced consideration of drag as a fulcrum for challenging, reiterating, and reimagining gender norms and the societal structures built upon them.

In contrast to Garber, Laurence Senelick (2000) attempts to offer a comprehensive historical account of gender impersonation in theatrical practices. Senelick traces the representation and signification of drag across cultures and historical periods. His work captures the shifting nature of gender as performance and the role of the theatre as a space for the articulation of gendered identities. Senelick's book is grounded in exhaustive research, bringing to light the historical lineage of cross-dressing and drag, from the Greek and Roman stages to contemporary performance art. He provides detailed accounts of how different cultures have embraced, regulated, or forbidden gender impersonation in theater. The material covers a broad geographic range and discusses a diversity of forms, from kabuki theater in Japan to Shakespearean plays where males historically performed female roles, all the way to the modern drag scene. While the breadth of Senelick's work is impressive and takes the artform of drag in multiple contexts seriously, he lacks an analysis informed by the off-stage, lived experiences of gender non-conforming people. In his view, drag is always a "symbol-making art" and therefore,

“to claim that stage transvestism is the symbol of symbols somehow abates the alchemy achieved by the theatrical performance of gender” (Senelick 2000:7).

In some ways, my dissertation joins the conversation where Garber and Senelick seem to fall short. Garber’s book theorizes a wide array of Western cross-dressing practices but fails to analyze the potential of drag as an art form and transness as an identity. Conversely, Senelick removes the person from the art. I posit that the musical performances of non-binary drag artists can exceed Butlerian notions of performativity and gender, while remaining firmly rooted in a lineage of queerness going back to the earliest days of the United States. To create a critical understanding of the present, I examine the origins of drag performance through trans\* non-binary formation of identity. Prior to the 21st century, drag and trans\* in the U.S. were often gradients of the same non-normative gender category. My dissertation draws upon the history of transvestism and cross-dressing but keeps drag at the forefront of my theory and analysis. By showing how they are simultaneously intertwined and distinct, I am able to analyze the limits and possibilities of each. This is especially important to my methodology, for there is a long history of unethical research practices regarding trans\* people (Blair 2016). Due to the rising anti-trans legislation and harsh political climate for trans\* people in the United States, we work in a precarious time. Trans\* visibility has never been more important, yet may be likewise perilous to trans\* communities if they are outed. By researching trans\* and non-binary drag performers, I work with people that are *already* choosing to be in the spotlight.

Like drag, there is no singular definition of non-binary or trans\*. Non-binary trans\* activist, artist, and theorist, Kate Bornstein (1994) has pointed out that many trans\* people (as well as drag queens) operate within a precarious binary rife with in-/out-group politics. These

sub-communities dictate who would or would not be considered legitimate, which tends to ostracize those who do not seem to fit neatly. Bornstein identifies a cycle wherein:

Post-operative transsexuals...look down on: Pre-operative transsexuals...who in turn look down on: Transgenders...who can't abide: She-Males...who snub the: Drag Queens...who laugh about the: Out Transvestites...who pity the: Closet cases...who mock the post-op transsexuals (Bornstein 1994:67–68).

According to Bornstein, we are meant to be outsiders, outlaws in nebulous formation near a gendered system that most definitely exists. They argue that no one fits cleanly within the binary, as there is no comprehensive definition of male or female, and so to exist beyond it is a recognition of reality. For enbies, attempts to engage with gender expectations and narratives are frequently cause for self-exclusion. Non-binary, as a term, stems from transgender vis-à-vis a post-structuralist queer theory.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, its roots are only obliquely related to the material body insofar as it has crossed paths with those with trans(sexual) identities.

Throughout my dissertation, I use a variety of terms to mean trans, usually with an accompanying asterisk. The use of an asterisk has sparked significant debate within the transgender community. The asterisk was initially introduced with the intention of creating a more inclusive term. However, it has since become a point of contention, with arguments both for and against its usage. The intention behind adding an asterisk to “trans” was to broaden the scope of the term (Tompkins 2014). The expanded “trans\*” was meant to include not only transgender individuals but also those with transsexual, transvestite, non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, bigender, and other non-cisgender identities. The asterisk functions

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<sup>17</sup> Eris Young, *They/them/their: a guide to nonbinary and genderqueer identities*, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 2020), 63.

similarly to its usage in search terms, where it is used as a wildcard to include a variety of endings following the root word. Ironically, a Boolean search with trans\* would only result in entries that contain the prefix “trans,” and not the additional terms like non-binary or genderqueer. By using “trans\*,” some activists and community members hoped to foster a sense of unity among all identities under the transgender umbrella. The idea was to underscore the common experiences and challenges faced by those who do not identify with their gender assigned at birth, regardless of the specifics of their gender identity or expression.

However, critics argue that the term “transgender” (from its early 1990s conception) already serves as an inclusive term that covers a wide range of gender identities and expressions (Tompkins 2014). They contend that adding the asterisk is redundant and suggests that non-binary and other gender-nonconforming individuals are not inherently a part of the trans community, needing a separate marker for inclusion. Some community members have observed that the addition of the asterisk can lead to confusion, especially for those who are not well-versed in the nuances of gender identity terms. This confusion can lead to the misuse of the term or the mischaracterization of the community it is intended to represent.

While “trans\*” has been used with the intention of being more inclusive, the conversation around its efficacy and value continues. Some continue to use the term, while others have reverted to using “trans” without the asterisk, respecting the inclusivity inherent in the latter. The evolution of language in the transgender community reflects a larger process of identity formation, self-determination, and the complexity of representing diverse experiences under a unified framework. As such, debates about terminology are ongoing and indicative of the vibrant and evolving nature of LGBTQIA2S+ discourse.

Ultimately, the choice to use “trans,” “trans\*,” or any other variation of language is deeply personal and often influenced by individual and community preferences. The most important underlying principle remains respect for each individual’s self-identification and the acknowledgment of the diversity that exists within the transgender community. In my dissertation, I rely on the asterisk form to refer to the multitude of trans- identities that were running in parallel through the 20th century; namely, transvestite, transsexual, and transgender. I try to clarify when another meaning should be inferred. When I use “trans” without the asterisk, I am referring to the present-day popular meaning of transgender.

I follow Vincent (2020) in using non-binary as a category under the broader trans\* umbrella to emphasize a departure from the gender someone was assigned at birth, as well as general disregard for the confines of male and female. It is impossible to account for each subjective experience, and non-binaryness is, indeed, antithetical to being a monolith. While I occasionally use the phrases “assigned female (or male) at birth,” abbreviated as AFAB or AMAB, as a way to note the trans\*, or non-cisgender, aspect of someone’s experience as described by many (certainly not all) non-binary individuals, I pointedly do not conflate intersex with being trans\* or non-binary on purely medical terms, as it erases political specificity (Vincent 2020:11). However, I do consider the trans\* descriptor helpful when one’s non-conforming gender presentation or felt sense of gender is tied to being intersex. I have occasionally come across intersex individuals that cheekily state that as non-binary intersex people they are, essentially, cisgender. Enke (2012) has also offered a feminist critique of the stability and usefulness of “cisgender” as an opposing category to trans, claiming that its usage only reifies trans’s otherness. I disagree. I view cis- alongside trans- as adjectival descriptors that help explain one’s relationship to their gender, not as evidence of an essence of man or woman.



Some non-binary people do not label themselves as trans\*, but I have found that it is often a result of “not feeling trans enough.” Typically, this is a transmedicalist approach that delimits transgender as material (Vincent 2020; Rajunov and Duane 2019). Bodily dysphoria is “required” for these cases in order to sufficiently “prove” that someone is trans. Although some non-binary people do not “pass” since they are not transitioning medically in a binary legible way, some also mistakenly pass for the same reason. Vincent remarked in their study that the standard of validity often rested with oneself, as participants did not view others as less legitimate if they were not physically transitioning (Vincent 2020:73).

Adhering to a non-binary paradigm within trans\* studies is not without its own methodological concerns. There is disagreement within trans\* circles about whether binary trans\* people exist (i.e. a trans man or trans woman that are not genderfluid). Nicolazzo and Jourian (2019) warned in a public opinion piece that maintaining a dichotomy between non-binary- and binary-trans experiences plays into cisnormative narratives of trans people rather than allowing for trans\* complexity. They argued that such a dichotomy is harmful and maintains problematic “cislation,” wherein trans\* people offer a reductive portrayal of their experiences to appease cisgender (lack of) understanding. They suggested that this “cislation” leads to a wider problem where, as Prosser described, there exists a stereotype of the transsexual subject “trapped in—and trying to escape—the wrong (sexed) body” (Prosser 1998:67).

I agree with Nicolazzo and Jourian that reducing trans\* experiences for the sake of cis legibility is harmful for all involved. As the authors explain, many people wrongly assert that a “binary” trans\* person is somehow in the wrong, and their trans\* experiences are flattened when forced into a cis binary standard. This can turn into a dangerous us-versus-them when we could, instead, recognize a multitude of experiences where people live despite the gender binary rather

than being bound by it. However, I tend to work in favor of distinguishing between binary and non-binary trans\* people, at least on the surface, in order to better speak about the experiences of my interlocutors. In my research, I have found many trans\* people who originally identified within the binary and some (not all) who have since begun to claim an enby identifier. Similarly, there are many, myself included, who began using gender non-conforming labels like enby before adding trans\* into the mix. I originally refused to call myself transgender, and only non-binary. I felt that I had not lived an “appropriately” trans\* life in society where trans\* people are believed to *have* to go through particular struggles. I believed my experience invalidated my claim to trans\*. Although as a scholar I understood that non-binary was a form of trans\*, i.e., not cis, I still thought I was not trans *enough* because I was not transitioning medically. This transmedicalist fallacy is rampant within the trans\* community (Rajunov and Duane 2019). Beyond medical transition, some enbies reject the trans\* modifier for other personal reasons. Anecdotally, I have also known people who employ non-binary as a way to bolster their sense of moral self at the expense of trans\* people more broadly—a direct parallel of Nicolazzo and Jourian’s problem; however, they appear to be a minority within the trans\* community. The foundation of my methodology rests with language used by the communities with whom I engage.

Discussed further in Chapter 2, my dissertation employs Katie Horowitz’s (2020) theory of interperformativity as a way to conceptualize the relationship between a performer’s on- and off-stage selves. Interperformance, according to Horowitz, is the “notion that relations give rise to identity” (11). For drag, it is the idea that one’s off-stage life is not forgotten when they are on stage and must, therefore, be taken into consideration. The opposite is also true, and many performers come to find themselves impacted by the artform. The relationship between these

personas is crucial for understanding the meaning made through performance. Similarly, interperformativity encourages us to think about drag in relation to one's community and social life since it is the audience that interprets performative meaning based on their ideas of who is performing on stage. For example, knowing that someone is non-binary allows for a different interpretation of femininity than someone the audience knows to be a cisgender man or woman. Likewise, artists tend to create performances with their audience's identities in mind. Interperformativity invites us to consider subjectivity from a multitude of directions.

According to Karen Barad (2003), relations are the "smallest material units—relational 'atoms'" and agency is expressed in terms of intra-actions within those phenomena rather than interactions between things or actions of one thing upon another (Horowitz 2020:10). This means that the most important part of gender is the journey of its formation and not the destination or result. It is the substance, not the code. Sometimes, people embody illegible forms of masculinity or femininity which demarcate the spaces through which they can successfully travel in places dominated by particular forms of binary gender. Horowitz found that those who did not ascribe to an established, hegemonic rendering of gender often had no place in queening because of the expectations therein. Instead, they were able to participate alongside kings just as Halberstam (1998) noted. Halberstam would argue that by and large, a non-cis male drag performer would bring an air of diachronicity to the stage, as we are often engaging internally with the on-stage performer's off-stage reality and the disconnect therein. According to Jarman (2018), this is one way gender theorists have established the function of camp as it pertains to non-cisgender male drag performers. Since camp has traditionally been tied to a cis gay male sensibility, women and gender non-conforming performers must rely on alternative forms of camp for they have yet to

form a culture-wide sensibility of what it means to be a non-cis male queer and all the necessary references, humor, and standards that can be manipulated and “disconnected” as camp.

But what about for non-binary people? I think both tradition and its expansion happen. In my own performance practice, I tend to play up traditionally femme aspects, but at other times, I challenge it by having body hair. The plurality of femininity lends itself to intelligibility for a broader audience. It does not take away my non-binary identity but circumscribes its legibility in society. I would argue that a non-binary paradigm is unintelligible to most while they remain stuck in binary thinking. But if we reconsider the relations, the intra-actions, the *interperformative* nature of drag, then we can come to understand that a non-binary paradigm is simply a new set of relations. It is a pluralistic relationality predicated on self-actualization and community rather than oppression or individualism.

Horowitz is the first to consider drag explicitly in terms of relationality but is by no means the first to consider the world beyond performance as a set of relations. I discuss relationality more in Chapter 4, but it has already been examined in terms of race, subjectivity, and ignorance. Hoagland (2007), for example, has pointed out that colonizers, in this case the Spanish, “did not pre-exist as colonizers. They became colonizers by interacting, by engaging the Mexica (Aztecs) in the praxis of colonization as they developed tools and policies in administering Spanish rule in reaction and response to resistances and tools developed by the Mexica” (Hoagland 2007:97). She stated that, similarly, the concern over gay marriage is not about gay people, but about straight people’s relationality between men and women (98). Even my own dysphoria raged during the stay-at-home era of the COVID-19 pandemic for I could not dress up in a femme way in the presence of others. *If no one else is around to hear it, does gender expression make a sound?* Relationality is also present as a core feature of indigenous

studies. Cree scholar Shawn Wilson wrote that “I’m not just in these relationships, but rather that I am these relationships...my understanding of knowledge itself, is relational. Relationships are reality, and reality is relationships” (Wilson 2013:313). “Relationality is kinship. A relational approach does not attempt to segment and classify the world but create stronger relationality (or ceremony) between entities” (Tynan 2021:606). Likewise, “stories and storytelling are widely acknowledged as culturally nuanced ways of knowing, produced within networks of relational meaning-making” (Hunt 2014:27). My dissertation does not directly deal with relationality ala Nancy’s (2000) singularity or Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) “flesh,” nor do I talk about relationality in terms of the ethnographer’s relationship with the research subjects per se, although much could be said about that (Frosh and Sheldon 2019). I am somewhat in line with Stephen A. Mitchell’s analysis of Loewald’s relational framework whereby relationality is built upon a psychoanalytic theory of intersubjectivity and intentionality. In Loewald’s fourth mode, for example, “the persons, both oneself and others, have become more complex agents, with self-reflective intentionality (thinking about and trying to do things) and dependency (upon other agents for completion)” (Mitchell 2000:64). In this way, I also favor using “intersubjectivity” over “intercorporeality.” Although I root my analysis in phenomenological experiences, the actors at play in the formation and negotiation of identity in the following case studies are not always human. An argument may be made that the ability to hear one’s subjectivity or intentionality through a loudspeaker, photograph, or video recording results from an interplay of bodies. I prefer intersubjectivity since I see it both incorporating aspects of intercorporeality and emphasizing the subjective role of personal knowledge and identification, which is the core of my theory.

When viewed through a standard academic or social binarism, drag is a practice of contradictions. Of resistance. Refusal. It is, undoubtedly, all of those things; yet, from a non-binary perspective, we know that such a position is untenable, for the incongruence between off-stage and on-stage selves is rarely clear-cut. We are not, therefore, as gender non-conforming people who have adopted a 21st-century academic language of identification, typically allowed into a conversation, much less a formal theorization, of a genre created by us, for us. My goal is not to reject current histories of drag or discount any drag communities' interpretations or motivations for the art. Present-day academic and popular knowledge of drag based on the gender binary and resistance narratives is incomplete, not incorrect. Similarly, I am not interested in doing away with other modes of drag analysis entirely in favor of sound. What I am presenting is a way of including more people in future discourse, as we all continue to work to understand drag, music, and queer experiences.

## **Methodology**

My dissertation combines multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork and archival study on trans\* non-binary drag performers from across the midwestern U.S. and the live-streaming platform *Twitch*. It is the result of over seven years engaging with these communities as a scholar, performer, and photographer. Gender euphoria serves as my conceptual framework to examine how non-binary drag artists come to understand and reinvent their gender through music. Gender euphoria is a broad concept, but generally “refers to positive emotions resulting from affirmation of one’s gender identity or expression and can include a wide variety of emotions and experiences (Jacobsen and Devor 2022:12). It is typically understood as a counterpart to gender *dysphoria*, or the “discomfort a trans person feels due to the mismatch

between the gender they were assigned at birth, and which people expect them to express, and the gender they identify with” (Young 2020:16). However, recent research by Jacobsen and Devor (2022), Ashley et al. (2019), and Beischel et al. (2021) has shown that they are not opposites and one is not necessary for the other (see Chapter 2). Working within a realm of sound and silence, I investigate in-person drag shows, archives, and digital performances by joining theories of affect, intersubjectivity, queer time, and interperformativity, wherein I situate drag as a multisensorial performance imbued with queer histories and aesthetics. I argue that euphoria is an element of gender expression that becomes material through the somatic and aesthetic nature of sound, and guides us toward potential new analytical frameworks for drag. In centering gender euphoria and trans\* performers, I use the three metaphors of loudness, silence, and the mirror to propose a non-binary paradigm through which to suggest a new approach to musicological and gender analysis.

However, there is a downside to centering euphoria. As Malatino has expressed at length:

When it comes to actually ameliorating the structural conditions that produce trans precarity and exacerbate transphobia, transmisogyny, and transmisogynoir, it doesn't matter all that much how great I—a white, educationally and economically privileged trans masc—feel about how often I am correctly gendered, about the gender-affirming outfits I put on, about looking in the mirror and not recoiling or dealing with a bout of dysphoric anxiety...it doesn't actually offer a model of or prod to coalition...Euphoria is an outside way of describing the pleasure of recognition and affirmation, which sits right alongside all sorts of negativity, rather than supplants it; the use of *euphoria* in such instances is thus unfaithful to the actual meaning of the word, which is bliss and the concomitant absolute (though temporary) obliteration of all bad feelings (Malatino 2022:195–196).

To an extent, I agree. At the danger of being reductive, it does not, in fact, matter *to anyone else* how often I am correctly gendered. The problem with this understanding, and ironically appears to be Malatino's point, is that euphoria does not come from others. You cannot give me euphoria, but perhaps I, due to whatever circumstances, feel it when you respond positively to my transness, intentionally or not. Conversely, my dissertation argues that within a non-binary worldview, euphoria comes from within *despite* how the world responds to us. It is an instance of *self-acceptance* and *self-actualization* that can contribute to collective queer worldmaking. It takes into account the many negative feelings that accompany transness in a White-cis-hetero-patriarchal world, but it recognizes that we are not in control of others' responses. It is not a lackadaisical longing for utopia, or an excuse to disavow the many harms trans people face and even enact on the community (ala settler colonialism via exoticization and indigenous-inspired, "New Age" forms of self-care). It is important to note that the form of euphoria that Malatino describes is somewhat in line with how euphoria has been referred to, historically, in the zines and newsletters like the *TV-TS Tapestry* (see Chapters 2 and 4), but does not represent the totality of the non-binary framework that I describe.

Throughout my dissertation, I rely on interview material, survey responses, (auto)biographies of trans\* and non-binary people and drag performers, digital recordings and livestreams, the U-M Special Collections Labadie Collection, the Queer Music Heritage online archive, the Digital Transgender Archive, and notes from live performances. Much of my data from 2020 comes from digital versions of normally in-person situations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Southeast Michigan is an important location for my project. As an area home to one of the largest public universities in the U.S. (Ann Arbor), there is a constant rotation of performers, as many are students. The university presence causes a transient diversity of



audience members and performers. Therefore, not only is there ethnographic opportunity to work with a wide variety of drag artists from all over the country, but many are also scholars actively coming to terms with their identities through performance.

My dissertation falls largely under the umbrella of insider participant observation whereby I am researching my own communities. Prior to 2020, and the limitations brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, I had merely conducted research in Michigan and on *Twitch* as fieldwork in preparation for long-term projects with queer communities in Palestine. Once my topic was refocused on the field at home, I quickly became aware of the delicate balancing act between insider researcher and subject (Hill Collins 1986; Weiss 1994). Insiders' pre-existing relationships and personal involvement in their communities can introduce a bias that may inadvertently color the interpretation of data. Further, the deep personal connections and shared experiences might threaten the objectivity needed to analyze behaviors and cultural practices without one's own beliefs and feelings influencing the outcomes. Moreover, such closeness can lead to over-familiarity, where a researcher risks taking for granted certain dynamics or subtleties that a more detached observer might note as significant. Haniff warns that "an insider may be of more detriment than an outsider and a native more foreign than a foreigner" (Haniff 1985:112). Yet, as Labaree explains, locating insiderness and outsidership on a continuum is "inadequate in explaining the location of hidden ethical and methodological dilemmas of 'going observationalist'" (Labaree 2002:117), for someone's degree of insiderness can change over time. It may be better understood as "a continual process of introspective inquiry that researchers can use to monitor their access to the community" (117).

While my dissertation focuses on the intersectionality between the trans\* non-binary identities and drag performance represented in my communities, it admittedly does not majorly

center theories regarding other broad concepts like race or class (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of how race and White Supremacy helped shape modern gender categories, and Chapter 4 for a discussion of Whiteness, trans\* identity, and indigeneity). However, in planning my analyses, examples, and research outreach, I aimed to engage with as many distinct voices as possible, with special care taken to include the work and opinions of Black performers. My access to artists, nevertheless, was limited to those in the performance scenes in southeast Michigan and on *Twitch*, which are predominantly White. Many drag producers in the Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti area, in particular, have exhibited a reticence for booking Black performers; however, the situation has improved slightly in the last few years as multiple performers began dropping out of all-White shows and calling out the shows' producers on social media. Additionally, some of the performers that I worked with no longer perform drag; I still included their words as they reveal important aspects of their community and culture. Further, as I discuss in Chapter 5, *Twitch* is often not a safe place for non-White performers, and some Latine artists, for example, have had their lives put in danger for appearing on stream in drag. In my digital drag research, I was also limited to materials available after the initial live streams. *Twitch* mutes the recording of a stream if copyrighted music is detected. This means that most digital drag numbers are lost unless the performers manually upload their videos elsewhere, like *YouTube* or Google Drive.

Another pitfall of insider research is the potential to influence the environment being studied. As participants are aware of the researcher's dual role, their behavior may change, either consciously or unconsciously, in response to the researcher's presence and thus skew the authenticity of observed interactions. Managing confidentiality and ethical concerns also becomes more complex, as insider researchers have to navigate the delicate balance between their loyalty and responsibilities to the community and the demands of rigorous academic

research. Throughout the dissertation process, I have necessarily developed a peculiar hesitancy through which I choose when to reveal personal details and conversations. This practice has been developed in conjunction with the performers whose voices line these pages. Immersing oneself in the field can also resurface past traumas or create new emotional challenges, especially when studying communities that one has a personal stake in. This emotional labor may impact the researcher's wellbeing and potentially affect their ability to remain engaged with the research over extended periods. Over the years, I have had to be especially careful to detach myself at times in order to not break professional ties or friendships. Being an insider means walking a tightrope between the personal and the professional, a balancing act that requires constant reflection and adjustment to maintain the integrity of the research process.

While writing from an insider perspective is precarious, it is also the path most prepared to garner change (Gardner et al. 2017:106). Following Wikilund's analysis of the colloquialized "me-search," "we can start by asking who we are and what is important to us" (Wikilund 2016:244). The core focus of the following chapters comes from the question: if drag performance is understood as an exaggerated performance of gender, what exactly are non-binary people exaggerating? In what type of world does our drag fit? While I personally benefit from this research as a trans\* non-binary drag artist, the question of what non-binaryness means for drag permeates throughout the community. There is a shared frustration that non-binary performers work through in order to find their way.

Beyond survey data, my study evaluates drag performers' creative practices using a variety of ethnographic methods. First, I observed rehearsals and performances. When possible, I made audio and video recordings as well as photos at each stage of the performance process to aid my own observations and recollection. This is crucial in recognizing how musical

performances develop and change over time as recurring drag shows are keen to not repeat materials. This has also helped me to form a picture of the various social and intellectual discourses that surround and interact with queer life and its multiple expressions.

Second, I employed participant-observation as a drag artist with Heads Over Heels (Michigan) and various digital opportunities through a network of drag streamers on *Twitch*. I made note of how artists plan and prepare shows and marketing videos, and craft dynamic drag personas through fashion, acting, and musical choices. This allowed me to access the creative process, administrative decisions, and daily workings of the performers in and out of drag.

I complemented these experiences with the standard ethnomusicological practices of informal conversations and interviews with drag performers and audience members. In semi-structured, scheduled interviews with drag artists, I analyzed their motivations and performance philosophies. Why are specific portrayals of gender and sexuality an important mode of expression? How do they maneuver the contemporary musical landscape that often incorporates social media and marketing for success? Finally, in speaking with audiences through unstructured interviews at the performance venue, I aimed to better understand queer music reception and consumption. What are the social, musical, and ideological impulses that draw audiences to drag shows and particular musical spaces such as queer-themed nightclubs and bars? Utilizing unstructured and semi-structured interviews allows for collecting highly subjective data.

A major aspect of my evaluative process was the feedback interview where I played back recordings of rehearsals and productions for the performers to comment on and critique their work. Not only did I gain insight into the creative intentions from the artists themselves, but I was able to compare their self-evaluations over time. I also held a variant of the outside feedback

interview with audience members when possible. It is integral to compare my interpretations and reactions of a performance as a trained ethnomusicologist with both local consumers and producers of queer music. What is the relationship between audience and presenter and how are shows and performances shaped as a result? My choices for audience interviewees came from those noticed to regularly attend, as well as others chosen at random.

An essential part of my fieldwork has been working as a photographer, as it was not only my way into the field, but continues to influence my performance style since I am always thinking about how my drag will be perceived. It was only months after networking with local drag artists that I began performing, myself. Interacting with performers through photography reveals practices and motivations that may not be apparent from the perspective of the average audience member or ethnomusicologist. After *Holy Bones* (2021) and *Teaseagogo* (2021), two drag and burlesque shows in Michigan, performers reposted my photos with captions highlighting the euphoria and queer joy felt in seeing their internal experiences reflected back at them. Fieldwork that offers an immediate product back to the performer allows us to better understand the subjective experience of becoming a queer object. I have found that photographing drag, and even gender non-conforming burlesque performances, can be a useful method for documenting queer affect. While musical sound is often the inspiration for the body, the body is the locus for euphoria, and to capture it visually means that we are afforded unique insight into its affective processes. Not only were the performers recognizing present and remembered euphoria, we, photographer and subject, shared a momentary understanding of what that euphoria meant. My dissertation, in part, examines this affective relationship between photographer-ethnographer, performer, and viewer where we are bound together by emotions

(Ahmed 2004; Evans 2013) that manifest across spacetime as a photograph (Abel 2013; Sedgwick 1999).

Finally, I balance ethnographic and reflexive writing throughout my chapters. As a participant-observer and fellow trans\* non-binary drag performer, I have personal investment in not only the communities with whom I engage, but in the political and intellectual work enacted through a Ph.D. dissertation. I acknowledge the responsibility not only to be vulnerable, but to be diligent in my portrayal and analysis as an observer. This respect is further reflected in my decision to focus on drag performers rather than trans\* people more broadly. While I would argue that euphoria is transmitted similarly across the lines of subjectivity and identity for many enbies, drag performers embrace the spotlight. We have chosen to be iconic and reveal aspects of non-binary life that otherwise should not necessarily be publicized and certainly not fetishized.

To complement the formal dissertation, I produced a digital drag short film titled *Living Loud* (see Chapter 6). *Living Loud* is a direct response to the rising trend of anti-trans legislation in the United States. I made it in effort to promote one way that public scholarship in ethnomusicology may combine with performance. Drawing from theories discussed in Chapter 3, I play on the metaphor of a queer person living “loudly” in a society that demands their silence. The film was also an opportunity to elevate my own drag artistry beyond my traditional campy aesthetic in favor of a more serious, political tone. It was an exercise in balance; one that only continues.

My chapters are organized according to their relationship with the nightclub/bar style of drag rather than chronologically. My goal with this structure is to avoid a false narrative of progress or development. Placing each case study horizontally from one another is but one method I hope to offer to those struggling with researching historical drag. It is a genre that has

been vastly under-documented, but through euphoria we can, perhaps, find a way forward by evaluating our positions as present-day researchers.

I also aim to model the use of pronouns in research. When writing elsewhere about non-binary drag, I received feedback that using “binary” pronouns like “she/her” was confusing when speaking about non-binary people. On the contrary, there is no set way to be non-binary! It is up to an individual to decide what pronouns they wish to use; often, they differ when in or out of drag. When I introduce a new performer, I include their pronouns as they wish them to be known. I hope this begins a trend in all scholarship, regardless of the subject.

The post-colonic title of my dissertation *A Trans\* Musicology of Sensation and Interperformativity* is a response to Dana Baitz’s (2018) call for a trans\* method in musicology. Baitz points out that constructivist and poststructuralist queer methodologies are unable to account for lived trans\* experiences, but “through trans\* musicology, we begin to reinstate a personal narrative (and the conditions producing it) as a source of knowledge” (377). The goal is to “situate meaning at the intersection of material and ephemeral fields of significance” (377). In this way, my dissertation shows how, through drag, the material body comes into communication with communities and oneself. I see the following chapters as methodological offerings that may be built upon by others to draw us one step closer to understanding trans\* and non-binary experiences and drag as a musical artform.

## **Chapter Descriptions**

In Chapter 2, “Moving through Time: Gender Euphoria and Trans\* Drag,” I survey the history of drag in the United States, putting special emphasis on conceptions of “queer time” and gender euphoria. I consider the multivarious nature of drag and its relationship to transness as a

way to establish a methodology of telling trans stories. Through Ruti (2017), I build from Edelman and Muñoz's debate on the nature of queer futures (rather than queer pasts) in order to offer a phenomenological portrayal of gender euphoria that crosses time and medium. In particular, I enter the conversation by engaging with prominent academic and public theories that have circulated about the potential and limits of *transgender* and *transsexuality* as identity models (Keegan 2020). Following Keegan, I claim that a trans\* subject neither fits neatly within a Butlerian queer theory based on normative power, nor in a "body narrative" that centers the materiality of the body (Prosser 1998). While I tend to lean more on evaluating subjectivity to interpret drag as an intertextual performance, the identity work that body narratives divulge is critical for understanding how enbies can perform beyond binary drag limits. In doing so, I follow Lynda Johnston's (2019) example and keep identity and subjectivity in tension with one another as related, yet separate categories in order to show how their mutual construction can inform people's lived experiences (which includes performing in drag). To reconcile this paradox that exists between scholarship and lived experience, I employ Horowitz's (2020) conceptualization of "interperformativity." What results is a theorization of trans\* and non-binary subjectivities not bound by linear time.

In Chapter 3, "Living Life, Living Loud: Affective Transmission of Trans\* Euphoria," I examine the affective potential of loudness in the performances of trans non-binary drag performers in the Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti, MI area. Drawing on ethnographic research, I trace gender euphoria and loudness as aesthetic and somatic values (Vannini and Waskul 2006). In doing so, I discuss how non-binary performers and their audiences use loudness to negotiate musical and cultural meaning, and how drag operates as a technology of the self. Through interperformativity, I argue that euphoria functions as a cultural gender marker in non-binary



drag performance, and can heighten the intersubjective connection between artist and listener. As a scholar, I am admittedly to some degree, at the mercy of over-attending to the cumulative effects of multiple theoretical assemblages colliding and transforming. Kathleen Stewart (2017) warns us that the world as seen by scholars presupposes affect's presence in it, which chiefly serves to legitimize their own studies. In other words, noticing and emphasizing affect makes us more aware, yet, possibly to our own detriment, as it may weaken affect's power. My emphasis on affect is based on how performers have described their experiences in drag. Throughout my time in Michigan, I have worked with many drag monarchs formally and informally. As friends, we discuss our ideas for numbers: "What about this song? How do you think the audience would react to this? Should I add another clip?" As a researcher in the throes of "me-search," I am constantly holding back my eagerness to talk about theory when a friend introduces an idea that makes me shout inside...and occasionally outside, "That's going in the dissertation!" By using Bird's (2020) haptic aurality as a guiding affective theory, I write about the construction of intersubjectivity in drag from both the performers' and audience's perspectives. Being personally asked to perform euphoria (see Chapter 5), to bring it into being, led me to understand that I was in fact attempting to transmit an aspect of my felt identity out of drag across subjective boundaries in drag. This interperformative realization opened up a new conceptual framework through which I could delve into questions of musical embodiment and the performance of queer intersubjectivities. In Chapter 3, I argue that euphoria can manifest as both an intra- and inter-personal gendered affect in non-binary musical performances. The embodied and communal nature of music renders it an ideal medium to analyze the affective paths between self and performance, and the resulting multi-layered intersubjectivity.

Chapter 4, “Photographic Silence and Listening for Euphoria,” is an exploration of how we may begin to listen to drag from the past. Drag has only recently gained notoriety in academic circles as a subject worth preserving, and much of its sonic history has been lost or was never recorded. In this chapter, I analyze a collection of historical and present-day photographs to discuss how the sounds of gender euphoria may be interpreted in the “silent” archive. I build from Tina Campt’s (2017) work *Listening to Images* where she examines photographs of Black subjects that have traditionally gone unnoticed (passport photos, mugshots, and ethnographic photos of rural African women). Although her use of sonic metaphors was misappropriated, Campt’s theory of attuning one’s senses to a politics of refusal and futurity is important for understanding non-binary drag through images. The exploration of silence—an ostensibly simple concept that reveals its complexity under scrutiny—resonates at the heart of this chapter. Building upon the paradoxical notion presented by philosopher Roy Sorenson (2009) that silence, an purported non-entity, can indeed be apprehended through the act of hearing, Chapter 4 ventures further into an auditory realm where silence becomes a canvas for contemplation and the experience of “hearing” euphoria. The central premise is that a successful perception of silence is not the failure to hear, but rather an auditory recognition of absence. I then open a dialogue on the Husserlian-esque concept of archival tertiary protention, the anticipation of future experiences grounded in our interaction with the past as captured by archives and their contents. Drawing from methodologies across the humanities and neurosciences, the chapter proposes a synesthetic journey into the auditory dimensions of silence, euphoria, and the archive through visual cues. By breaking down photographs of both a drag performer and a crossdresser, I make an interperformative claim that we can build on-stage and off-stage context from limited data.

In Chapter 5, “Re/Mediating the Trans Mirror: Gender Euphoria and Digital Drag’s Musical Potential,” I turn to drag that is performed online. It is a story of mirrors and reflections. I examine the work of three drag performers on the live-streaming platform *Twitch*, and how their approach to drag and euphoria is colored by their experiences as streamers. For the first time in the contemporary history of drag, we are seeing a musical genre divorce from its intrinsic musicality, and performers are coming to the stage with new motivations and practices. In this case study, I engage with the longstanding film practice known as the “transgender mirror.” By reframing artists’ broadcasting software as a digital mirror to evaluate the formation and portrayal of euphoria, I show how digital drag artistry is a process of self-regulation. In doing so, I also suggest that a non-binary viewpoint may reveal a deeper understanding of how music functions in drag. Interperformativity is a useful framework for analyzing non-binary digital drag. It is both performance and ritual; it reflects and informs our lives. Digital drag gives us the opportunity to see ourselves, edit, negotiate, and self-regulate during performances. While it is possible in in-person drag, we can more readily see the interaction between our lives as ritual and performance when in the digital realm. In a nightclub, for instance, we can notice how someone momentarily inhabits a new persona or aesthetic, but as the barriers between hobbyist and professional performance dwindle through live streaming, we see the relationship more tightly. Music’s role, therefore, is altered and is no longer a tool that should be necessarily interpreted as a way to transmit or convey meaning. Since the use of music in digital drag is intentional instead of expected, we cannot consider the mediation of in-person drag to digital spaces as a 1:1 translation: its very presence is meaningful. By examining how performers use music online, we can see that digital drag is not only a reflection of in-person shows, but it also expands upon the medium itself.

There are also limiting factors of drag in digital form. As evidenced by the worldwide empire of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the breadth of dissemination can yield a “violent care” (Van Dooren 2019). For all the good that results from its wild success, that same success shadows and silences other local forms of art (Allahyari 2022:198). Yet, there is also potential in these new bounds. In the conscious creation of digital drag, meaning work that artistically shapes and engages with the medium rather than merely capturing an offline performance, it becomes a way to reconfigure the future while reimagining the past. I borrow this idea of reimagining through a new medium from Allahyari’s explanation of her 3D printed renderings of previously forgotten female jinns from Persian history (205). She showed that new technology like a 3D printer can be used to “not just reproduce and replicate, but rather offer a point of departure from masculinist approaches to novel technologies” (Sharma and Singh 2022:15). While offline drag is not necessarily a masculinist approach, its modern roots lie in the performance traditions founded in male spaces (see Chapter 2). By removing drag from its historically male arena, digital drag offers new paths forward.

In the 6th and final chapter, I offer a brief discussion of the changes I have seen since I started writing this dissertation and suggest some paths for moving forward. As part of my efforts to model a novel approach to musicology, I present a musical example that I analyze using the methods outlined in the earlier chapters; namely, through the metaphors of loudness, silence, and the mirror. Finally, Chapter 6 presents an analysis of a short drag film that I made while dissertating.

## Chapter 2 Moving Through Time: Gender Euphoria and Trans\* Drag

### Introduction

“Unlike a possibility, a thing that simply might happen, a potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent<sup>18</sup>, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense”

(Muñoz 2019:9).

*When I first put on drag, I was afraid. Like many others, I chose Halloween as my debut since there was relative safety in the expectation for dressing up. But this wasn't the first time I had tried drag. I had already spent hours at neighborhood drug stores, sneakily finding the right shade of cheap foundation and lipstick. The pictures of those early looks will never see the light of day. At the time, I barely knew what non-binary even meant. I knew some friends that were non-binary, but struggled to wrap my head around how you could be a gender without any identifiable elements. But after doing drag for a few months, I started to understand the frailty of the thing we call gender. Sure, the bravery of putting on makeup might have “proven” my comfort with my own masculinity, or maybe it did something else entirely. I began to get over my fear of being perceived and started to feel the joy that came from exploring.*

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<sup>18</sup> Muñoz's use of “eminent” stands out here, as opposed to “imminent.” I read it as a typographical error since his discussion of potentiality is anticipatory in nature rather than as something that notably emerges.

“Queer time” is a theoretical concept that has emerged from queer theory and is often used to describe the ways in which queer individuals experience and conceptualize time differently from heteronormative timelines. This theoretical approach emphasizes a temporal framework that is largely oriented towards the past, engaging in a form of timekeeping that heavily involves the remembrance, reinterpretation, and reinvigoration of historical experiences. The idea is largely attributed to the work of scholars like Halberstam, who argues that the traditional milestones of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death do not necessarily structure the lives of queer individuals in the same way that they do for heterosexual people. Instead, queer temporalities might involve alternative ways of organizing life events, priorities, and relationships, often as a result of marginalization and a need to find or create a sense of community and belonging outside of mainstream society’s expectations. The phrase comes from a 1915 poem by Robert Graves titled “It’s a Queer Time.” Although Graves was openly bisexual and polyamorous, his use of “queer” does not explicitly reference the LGBTQIA2S+ community. Nevertheless, the poem’s themes of lives disrupted and living in moments that defy traditional chronologies have since resonated profoundly with today’s use of queerness.

Queer time’s focus on the past is evident in how it values the personal and collective histories of queer individuals and communities. This involves a critical reflection on the legacies of marginalization, resilience, and activism that have defined broadly queer experiences. By re-examining past struggles and achievements, queer time acknowledges that these events and narratives are not merely a prelude to the present but are in active, ongoing conversation with it. They inform the ways in which queer individuals and communities navigate their current realities and construct their senses of self. With its retrospective focus, queer time thus serves as a compelling analytical tool, as it enables an interplay between past and present that underlines

the significance of historical understanding. Following a discussion of queer time, I show how interperformativity (introduced in Chapter 1) encourages us to consider drag performance through the lens of both on- and off-stage personas. As a theoretical framework that merges identity and performance, interperformativity blends nicely with queer time in drag analysis since both take into consideration one's personal and communal pasts in order to better make sense of the present. While it does account for future possibilities, queer time primarily foregrounds how the past continuously informs and intersects with the lives of queer individuals, ensuring that histories of resistance and existence remain integral to the collective queer consciousness. In this chapter, I argue that considering queer time through euphoria allows us to prioritize the future.

In this way, I view queer time as a concept through which we may develop what José Esteban Muñoz (2019), after Bloch, called a “concrete utopia.” In counterpoint to the lofty, unattainable notions of abstract utopianism, a concrete form of utopia is grounded in the real and now while simultaneously nurturing visions of the future. Through this framework, bringing up past events to illuminate the present becomes not only an archival practice but a critical method for envisioning a future where queer existence is not only possible, but flourishing.

Muñoz's concrete utopia encourages us to look at the past with a sense of hope and a belief in the potential for change and growth. By recalling the adversities and the resilience of those who came before, we recognize that the present situation is another point in the narrative that can be positively affected by learning from earlier struggles and triumphs. This remembrance serves as a foundation for the communities to draw strength from and as a map that guides the way towards the future. By actively engaging with the past, queer communities are encouraged to imagine a better world and take concrete actions to push toward it. At the same

time, Muñoz's concept reminds us that this envisioning of the future must be grounded in the concrete realities of the present moment. It suggests that while we can and should dream of a utopian future, our actions and plans must address the tangible needs and conditions of our communities today. By linking past events with contemporary issues, we gain a clearer understanding of the structural inequalities and challenges that persist. And with this understanding, we can better shape the interventions needed to create a future where the freedom and well-being of the queer individuals are recognized and ensured.

My goal in presenting drag case studies across different time periods and locations is not to write a formal history or through-narrative of "progress," but to point out the usefulness in identifying the stakes of queerness and temporality over time. Considering queer time through euphoria, as this chapter proposes, can expand the utility of Muñoz's concrete utopias. It means not just learning from past events but also rejoicing in the pleasures, achievements, and victories that have been part of queer histories. This approach prioritizes the affective, the joyous, and the celebratory dimensions of queer life, advancing a radically inclusive vision for the future. Experienced in the present, this euphoric outlook reinforces the notion that queer lives are lives full of potential, deserving of happiness and full participation in the world's unfolding future.

In the context of queer studies, the notion of the "future" is deeply entwined with an expansive and critical understanding of what possibilities lie ahead, particularly for those whose lives deviate from heteronormative timelines and expectations. It is not about time, per se, but potential. The future, from a queer time perspective, is not a predetermined sequence of events leading to heteronormative outcomes like marriage and biological reproduction but is an opportunity to participate in self-actualization and queer worldmaking. Moreover, queer time fosters a sense of intergenerational connection and acknowledges how past queer experiences



and struggles shape the present and the yet-to-come, emphasizing the role of collective memory and shared aspirations in crafting the futures of queer communities. This perspective on time encourages innovative approaches to social and political change that are not confined by a conventional march toward a preconceived future. Instead, the futures envisaged in queer studies are often radical, imaginative, and serve as an act of defiance against systems that threaten queer existences. It celebrates survival and endurance as testament to a future for queer people that persists and evolves beyond oppression. It privileges the potentialities and newfound cultural significance crafted by queer individuals and their diverse experiences.

There has long been a debate in queer studies on the precise nature and possibilities of the future. On one side is the anti-relational school of thought that emphasizes the self and its ability to reject the world as a way to live an ethical life. On the other, are the proponents for relationality whereby a subject's relationship to others takes center stage in the politics of queer theory. The core of the debate centers around the notion of reproductive futurity and how the child figures into normativity and queerness. The debate can be distilled in a few different ways, but tends to point back to Edelman's (2004) controversial Lacanian reading of subjective negativity where the most radical thing a queer person can do is to reject society. After all, why would someone who has been repeatedly oppressed and denied a full life ever want to participate in the very normative institutions that have rejected them?

Lacanian negativity refers to the idea of a fundamental lack or void at the heart of human development and experience. It is the persistent feeling that something is missing inside us, which we cannot quite identify or fill. Lacan believed that this feeling of incompleteness drives all human behavior and desire, as we constantly strive for something to make us feel whole or complete. The queer, revolutionary future, for the anti-relational, psychoanalytic Edelman, is an

opportunity to withhold oneself. By pursuing the social death drive, the gay man capitalizes on his queerness—and its supposed innate negativity—in a counter-hegemonic act. Freud’s notion of the death drive is his way of explaining a strange drive within humans that seems to go against the instinct for survival and pleasure (life instincts). The death drive pushes us toward self-destructive actions, repetition of painful or traumatic experiences, and ultimately, death. It is like there is a part of us that is not just seeking happiness but is also drawn to end tension and return to a state of calm, even if it means self-destruction. In essence, both Lacan and Freud’s theories try to explain some of the more mysterious and darker aspects of human behavior, beyond just pleasure-seeking and the need to survive, by pointing out that there is a deep sense of absence in us that we are trying to cope with in various ways. Edelman’s contribution builds from Lacan and Freud to articulate a queer position that rejects the imperative to serve the future. By drawing from Lacanian negativity, Edelman suggests that queerness becomes a space or identity that does not adhere to the symbolically ordained roles that are demanded by the social structure (in this case, the structure that idealizes reproduction and futurism). He further argues that queerness, by not conforming to reproductive futurism, embodies a kind of Lacanian Real—a state outside the symbolic order that does not comply with its mandates. By refusing the call to participate in futurity, Edelman’s figure of the queer embraces the death drive as a form of political refusal, rejecting the demand to sacrifice the present for the sake of the future. Such a radical expression thereby constitutes the ideal queer: one who has no future, for the future is merely a normative fantasy. To reject the normative, which is the ostensible goal of queerness, means to reject the idea of the future, to say “no.”

In the opposing school, there is Muñoz (2019) who challenges Edelman’s theory for its own normative faults; namely, that Edelman’s queer is a normative, cisgender, White, gay man.

Muñoz wants to “glimpse another time and place: a ‘not-yet’ where queer youths of color actually get to grow up” (96). The future has never been available to all children and, therefore, the stakes and implications for rejecting it are not equivocal. Both Edelman and Muñoz agree that the current world is not enough, but whereas Edelman calls for rejecting the future as a point of ethical opting out, Muñoz reminds us that only those with a secure future have the privilege to consciously abstain from it.

Following Ruti (2017), I propose a path to the future that combines aspects from each school. In *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory’s Defiant Subjects*, Ruti explores the dynamics of contemporary queer theory by examining the tension between capitalizing on the future’s transformative potential and its repudiation. She recognizes that while Edelman’s notion of refusing the future, as symbolized by his rejection of “the Child” as the emblem of heteronormative investment, offers a defiant and powerful critique of political and social norms, it also risks embracing a kind of nihilism that may limit the avenues for positive queer engagement and change. Conversely, Muñoz’s insistence on the hope of a concrete utopia speaks to the human need for potentiality and the pursuit of a better world, yet it can be critiqued for potentially glossing over the immediate and oppressive realities faced by queer individuals. She works to create a dialogue between these stances, suggesting that it is possible to cultivate a form of queer theory that incorporates both the radical critique of the present and the imaginative reach for a utopian future. She argues that the act of “opting out” does not necessarily mean a retreat from politics or a withdrawal into individualized forms of being but can be an ethically grounded choice that recognizes the complexity of negotiating one’s position within a society that often resists and marginalizes queer ways of life. Ruti calls for a reevaluation of what it means to engage with queer theory and politics and urges a move beyond binary choices. She

invites readers to recognize the power inherent in choosing to opt out from normative demands and to see this as a conscious, ethical stance that can contribute to a more inclusive, hopeful, and critical engagement with the world. Ruti's work is an invitation to understand opting out as a form of queer ethical practice that navigates the intricacies of desire, the weight of societal expectations, and the shimmer of futurity.

Ruti's use of Lacanian theory, particularly the concept of Lacanian negativity, underpins much of her philosophical groundwork. She grapples with the way his concept of lack influences subjectivity, identity, and desire within queer theory. For Lacan, the sense of lack is what propels desire, and it is through desire that individuals pursue what they believe will make them complete, although such completion is ultimately impossible. Ruti employs this notion to redefine queer resistance. Instead of viewing the lack, or the experience of not fully fitting into heteronormative constructs, as solely negative or as a deficit, Ruti suggests that this void can be a source of creative and transformative energy. In other words, rather than simply being a lacuna, the Lacanian lack becomes a space for potential, providing a bedrock for the formulation of identity and for establishing a stance that is defiantly at odds with societal expectations. Through this lens of Lacanian negativity, Ruti reinterprets the idea of "opting out" as not merely a negation of societal norms but as an ethically significant act of self-assertion and individuation. It is the lack that instigates a process of becoming, a formation of a self that does not derive its value from compliance with a given social order but from the intrinsically creative and dynamic process of contending with one's own desires and the restrictions imposed by society.

In my efforts to work within a non-binary research paradigm, I offer gender euphoria as a promise of a queer future from the present. Gender euphoria, with its emphasis on the joy and satisfaction that come from expressions of identity that align with one's inner sense of self, offers

a potentially transformative lens through which to view the debates on queer futures and identity within queer theory. It centers positive experiences and affirmations of gender, providing a counterpoint to narratives that have traditionally focused on dysphoria, marginalization, and oppression. This shift does not negate the realities of struggle but rather complements them by offering a fuller spectrum of queer and trans\* experiences and processes of self-actualization and worldmaking. In this chapter, I discuss euphoria as it relates to the recent history of drag performance and trans\* people, and suggest ways that it can help us consider a relational future that is not devoid of counter-hegemonic desire and does not negate autonomy. Rather than focus on the negative space described through Ruti's reading of Lacanian theory, I focus my discussion on a vein directed more towards the concerns of autonomy and essentialism.

To understand queer futures, we must first pay attention to how queer pasts are conceived. It is crucial to understand that the historical narrative of drag is anything but straight; rather, it is a labyrinth of experiences entwined with trans\* expression. By tracing these patterns throughout this chapter, I aim to craft a methodological approach for recounting the stories of trans\* people. In particular, I draw from Keegan's (2020) critique of trans\* conceptualizations via Butler and Prosser. This analytical dispute rests on a practical binary between academic and public discourse that concerns the limits and potential of defining *transgender* and *transsexuality* as identity constructs. There is a common discrepancy between scholarship and the tangible realities of trans\* lives. Intellectual models, whether Butlerian paradigms anchored to normative power or Prosser's "body narrative" deeply concerned with corporeality, seem insufficient when faced with the complex subjectivity of trans\* individuals. As a core theoretical framing for my dissertation, I use Horowitz's drag-based notion of "interperformativity," to offer a flexible framework for envisioning trans\* and non-binary identities, free from the constraints of linear

temporality. Such relationality is a way to move beyond binaristic thinking and once again places euphoria as a cross-temporal element of trans expression and futurity. In drag performance, artists explore the creativity and elasticity of gender, often highlighting its constructed nature while also celebrating the genuine identities and experiences of those performing. Drag, as an art form and cultural practice, embodies the performative and transformative potential that lies at the heart of both gender expression and queer futurity. It provides a space where the rigid expectations of normative gender presentations and queer time can be contested, reimaged, and played with.

The notion of queer temporality began to carry more specific associations and relevance with historical LGBTQIA2S+ experiences over the course of the 20th century, especially during the mid-century McCarthyist lavender scare. Institutions, particularly government and legal entities, played a significant role in shaping the experiences of queer individuals during this period. They fostered environments that contributed to what could now be conceptualized as queer time by enforcing strict moral codes and punishing those who deviated from them (Johnson 2004). The prevailing mid-century institutional culture—which surveilled, disciplined, and often ostracized queer people—directly impacted their lives and the ways they conceived of their futures and legacies. The lavender scare, as part of this institutional pressure, systematically marginalized queer individuals, creating an alternate social timeline that was often defined by concealment, resistance, and community building, due to the threat of exposure and the high cost of openly living a queer life. Stigma and discrimination caused many to live clandestinely, shaping their life choices and relationships in ways that diverged significantly from societal expectations.

As the term “queer” itself was reclaimed by LGBTQIA2S+ activists and scholars in the latter part of the 20th century, so too did the discussion of time become reframed in a more positive and empowering light. In academia, queer time has taken on a nuanced and critical meaning whereby we may use it to analyze the disruption of heteronormative timelines as a potential site of resistance and liberation. As it became a more popularized concept through scholarly work and increased visibility of the queer community, queer time expanded beyond academic circles and started to influence various cultural and social aspects. It now serves as a framework through which to understand the innovative, frequently subversive ways in which queer individuals and communities create and inhabit their own distinct temporalities, often in response to and as a critique of the dominant timing and pacing of life events that are predicated on heteronormative assumptions. As more inclusive discourses emerge, the understanding of queer time continues to evolve, highlighting new possibilities for human experiences and cultural identities beyond conventional temporal frameworks.

If we are to understand how euphoria may take us into the future, we must consider how it fits within queer temporality. The alternate social timeline typically rests on a past long lost, or what Svetlana Boym (2007) would call a form of nostalgia. According to Boym, not all nostalgias are equal in type or function, and her work is concerned with delineating between two types of nostalgia, the restorative and reflective. The restorative imagines a collective home lost; rituals and images crafted in sake of preservation and optimism for an eventual return to specific “glory days,” or to the motherland for those in diaspora. Contrastingly, reflective nostalgia emphasizes the experience of longing. It is an individual plight centering on memory, but never presupposes a return. In some cases, these memories never actually happened, but were of a paradise imagined in order to shadow traumatic experiences. For queer studies, reflective

nostalgia is generally the type invoked as it instantly and quite usefully evokes narratives of oppression regarding queer bodies in heteronormative spaces. Through a lens of resistance or dysphoria, queerness demands longing for utopia, but is not necessarily hopeful that one will ever be reached. However, a queer reading through reflective nostalgia remains quite limited. While queer is often understood as non-heteronormative and ultimately oppressed within a hetero-normative society, oppression is not an intrinsic factor of queerness, but merely a frequent product of queer-normative relationships that accompany queer experiences in many places, today.

Jodie Taylor (2010) has discussed how music and queer nightclubs offer an opportunity for participants to momentarily transcend conventional social demands and hallmarks of queer temporal experiences like the feelings associated with aging despite not having the chance to “live.” Although she did not reference nostalgia specifically, her work shows that queerness should not be misconstrued as only relying on the utopias rooted in the past. What is unique about her analysis is that she does not consider such a temporality as related to sexual losses, and therefore sidesteps the Muñoz and Edelman debate of reproductive futurity in favor of an approach that lends autonomy to the queer individual. Instead, she aligns more closely with Freccero’s queer time, or “that which ‘think[s] “queer” as a critique of (temporal) normativity tout court rather than sexual normativity specifically” (Taylor 2010:904). In applying euphoria, I aim to refigure queer-normative renderings of time away from notions of loss and towards feelings of hope.

Finally, to explore identity means to acknowledge its dependence on both time and space. There is no singular, unbroken lineage to be traced when it comes to the art of drag; rather, we are met with a rich medley of cultural and artistic expressions that reflect the nuanced



performances of gender across the ages. In this chapter, I deliberately conflate the recent history of drag in the United States with trans\* history in order to set the stage, because it allows me to analyze the limits and possibilities of each. Throughout the 20th century, the term “drag” often fell under the “trans” umbrella and so to understand them we must consider their long-standing relationship. Yet, while indeed closely linked, this combination also reveals clear distinctions. In studying trans\* and non-binary drag artists in particular, we encounter the inherent challenge of retroactively applying contemporary labels to historical personas. Beemyn (2014) articulates this dilemma, pointing toward the balancing act of interpreting and honoring identities across time. In this chapter, I seek not only to outline a history of gender non-conformity but also to critique the frameworks that have often restricted the understanding of trans\* narratives.

### **Categories, Limits, Race, and Binaries**

The notion of gender non-conformity first became a legal issue for colonial America in 1629 when a court in Virginia ruled that Thomas/Thomasine Hall must wear men’s breeches alongside a woman’s cap and apron in order to publicly announce that they were bigendered, or intersex, as we would call it today. This decision challenged the rigidity of the sex-based gender binary that early settlers brought from Europe, while concomitantly reinforcing it socially. While Hall was allowed to publicly exist outside the European gender binary, they were mandated to wear their identity on both their proverbial and actual sleeves. Over time, this legal practice was codified further in much more confining ways. In the landscape of American history, the rise of strict categories of gender and sexuality must be understood within the context of race and colonization, a nexus where the control of bodies and identities meets the discipline of social order and power. Both Clare Sears’s *Arresting Dress* and C. Riley Snorton’s *Black on Both Sides*

offer critical insights into how these categories were delimited and enforced, providing a nuanced understanding of the racial history of trans identity and the legal regulation of gender non-conformity. They present histories of gender diversity and highlight how these expressions conflict with Euro-American societal norms that are deeply entrenched in racism and colonization. This conflict is especially important for the crossdressing lineage of drag since it combines off- and on-stage expressions, and understanding it requires delving deeper into how gender and sexuality were not only culturally chartered but also legally delimited within the burgeoning cities of America.

In *Arresting Dress*, Sears chronicles the 1863 ordinance passed in San Francisco, which criminalized appearing in public in “a dress not belonging to his or her sex” (6). Prior to this order, 19<sup>th</sup> century San Francisco saw a broad “loosening” of the Euro-American gender strictures based on anatomy (28–29) that Hall was subjected to earlier. Both men and women were allowed to experiment publicly with dress, labor, and sociality. However, this freedom remained bound by colonial experiences of the United States and Spain (29). Pointedly, Indigenous and Mexican women were not seen as women, as they were not considered of “value” to the European colonizers as such; therefore, in conjunction with the mass influx of men during the Gold Rush, San Francisco took on a peculiar homosocial character built upon upholding Whiteness (28). San Francisco’s crossdressing law was not an isolated phenomenon; it was a symptomatic response to the broader cultural anxieties of the time. This law was not merely about maintaining social decorum but was deeply enmeshed with concerns about maintaining a racial and sexual order that privileged White normative sexuality. By policing clothing, a highly visible and interpretable signifier of gender, authorities sought to maintain clear distinctions between men and women that were believed to be natural and pivotal to social

stability. The second half of the 19th century saw the collision of manifest destiny, the residues of the Mexican-American War, and a surge of immigration due to the Gold Rush. Amidst this upheaval, the crossdressing law can be read as an attempt to create a legible population for ease of governance.

In unpacking why crossdressing became a target of legal concern, Sears's analysis underscores the role of racism. She states that the Chinese community, in particular, faced significant discrimination, and Chinese men were often depicted in popular culture as effeminate and wearing robes, which could resemble dresses. This racism contributed to the stigmatization of crossdressing and made it a subject of scorn and legal penalty. By regulating dress, the law not only encoded gender norms but also racial hierarchies, seeking to preserve the dominance of the White, Euro-American, gender binary. Legal discourses around crossdressing also had powerful effects on the construction of sexuality. Gender non-conformity was conflated with deviant sexuality, and Sears argues that these legal categorizations played a pivotal role in the emergence of homosexual identities—as individuals who transgressed gendered norms became labeled according to their perceived sexual behaviors. The legal system, therefore, did not just regulate gender; it actively participated in the creation and policing of sexual identities. The act of a person donning the clothing of the “opposite” sex was seen as subverting the traditional [White] gender roles and, by extension, the expected heteronormative relations. Crossdressing muddied the waters of the gender binary and further brought into question the legitimacy of heteronormative structures which authorities were attempting to solidify as the pillars of the new social order. In this way, the law functioned as a tool for colonization. The Indigenous populations and the Mexican residents, with their own intricate understandings of gender and sexuality, were subsequently cast as “backward” and othered in the emergence of a new

American identity tightly bound to strict gender norms according to European standards. Thus, legal prohibitions of crossdressing can be seen as part of the broader colonial project, which imposed particular social mores onto diverse populations under the guise of progress and civility.

Colonization efforts were likewise connected with the establishment of visible, legible social categories for a rapidly growing population. The consequence of this inscription of normativity was that crossdressing laws became arenas for the negotiation of power. Notably, the enforcement of these laws was often selective, targeting those marginalized by their ethnicity, socio-economic status, or non-conformity to gender stereotypes, thereby illuminating the myriad ways that power, privilege, and marginalization were reproduced. The emergence of legal strictures against crossdressing in the 19th and 20th centuries also had unique implications for Black populations. For Black men and women, crossdressing often carried an additional threat not just of arrest but of lynching, violence, or other extra-legal punishment. This stark reality is tied to the fact that Black bodies were already seen as aberrant, and any further deviation from societal norms, such as transgressing gendered dress codes, could result in dire consequences. We may, therefore, conceive of these laws as a disciplinary response to the mutability of gender and race exemplified by how enslaved Black people occasionally used crossdressing as a way to more safely “pass” and transition out of captivity.

In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, C. Riley Snorton (2017) presents a case for understanding crossdressing through the concept of fungibility, or interchangeability. He integrates it with the idea of fugitivity and the transitive nature of transness to create a nuanced framework for understanding the interplay between race, gender, and the fluidity of identity. Fungibility, in the context of Blackness and transness, connects back to the commodification of Black bodies under chattel slavery, where individuals were seen not as

humans but as interchangeable and exploitable labor. Following this, fugitivity emerges as a mode of resistance to the condition of being owned: it is the act of escaping, of asserting agency in the face of fungibility.

Snorton builds upon the notion of “fungible fugitivity” to describe how Black individuals navigated a world that continuously tried to fix and commodify their identities. There is an inherent tension in the existence of Black bodies where the historical perception of Blackness as fungible clashes with the pursuit of self-determination, a hallmark of the trans experience I describe. In many ways, through “trans-ing”<sup>19</sup> one’s identity, Black people could embody the fugitive by challenging and evading the categories imposed upon them, whether those categories pertain to race or gender. Highlighting the transitive aspect of transness, Snorton emphasizes the possibility of change, of being in a state of flux or transition that is neither necessarily linear nor tied to a specific end point. He positions trans identities as inherently resistive, as they move across and potentially disrupt rigid binaries. This transitivity becomes a form of fugitivity in itself—a refusal to be held within the static and alienating categories produced by a racialized and gendered society.

For Black trans individuals, this transitivity of identity and experience is emblematic of the resistance to the imposed conditions of fungibility. By asserting their gender identity, they challenge both the historical condition of being seen as property and the cultural narratives that continue to frame Blackness as something that can be owned, defined by others, and lack agency. Instead, these individuals assert a personal narrative that is fluid, self-determined, and in

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<sup>19</sup> “Trans-ing” is my own verbiage to describe the agential angle of Snorton’s multifaceted approach to trans which does not refer to a gender or sexual category inasmuch as it describes an ongoing process of mutability.

opposition to the [Euro-American] societal expectations that seek to pin down and commodify their existence.

We may extend his analysis of fungibility of crossdressing and Blackness to the way race operates within the broader politics of crossdressing and gender performance. Blackness, when viewed through the lens of fungibility, becomes a backdrop upon which various identities can be projected, erased, or manipulated. In terms of performance art, this is particularly apparent when considering the history of blackface minstrelsy, where White performers would paint their faces black and dress in caricatured versions of Black people's attire. Here, Blackness is used as a costume, an interchangeable guise that can be misappropriated and removed at the whim of the wearer, much like clothing in the act of crossdressing.

Sears also explains that crossdressing, as a form of vaudeville entertainment, was beloved by many despite its illegality off the stage. Rather than repeating this paradox, Sears claims that “by emphasizing gender normativity and sexual propriety and through a strict stage/street divide, vaudeville impersonations reinscribed the gender boundaries that the law policed” (101).<sup>20</sup> We know that this stage/street divide continued until at least the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century where Newton (1972) found similar aesthetics and values. This is in direct contrast to the off-stage/on-stage identity-meets-performance angle that I propose in this dissertation. Instead, today's intellectual model appears to be a closer successor to the dime museums and freak-shows that Sears describes where “entertainment centered on performances of bodily difference and paid particularly close attention to bodies that challenged gender, racial, and national boundaries or that ostensibly revealed the somatic penalties of immorality through spectacles of disease or

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<sup>20</sup> For more on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century male impersonator tradition in variety shows, see Gillian M. Rodger, *Just One of the Boys: Female-to-Male Cross-Dressing on the American Variety Stage*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 2018.

deformity” (102–103). Home to the now stereotypical “bearded lady” and anatomical “freaks,” freak-shows were a middle space that allowed gender diverse people to legally exist (however offensively) without fitting fully into the dominant binary narratives of the vaudevillian stage. It was an often underground world where gender non-conforming people could find financial success. While today’s drag shows are a world apart from vaudeville and freak-shows, there are veritable echoes in how the increasingly conservative state figures “problem bodies” into (or out of) society.

*Arresting Dress* highlights the complexity of 19th-century San Francisco’s social landscape, revealing how gender and sexual categories were not innate or pre-existing but rather constructed and solidified through legal, racial, and colonial machinations. Sears’s lens allows us to see the intersectionality of oppression and the strategic use of law to shape societal boundaries; not just judging individuals’ expressions but molding the broader societal understanding of what was deemed acceptable gender and sexual conduct. Similarly, Snorton’s analysis calls for a recognition of the deeply entwined history of race and gender, while highlighting the continuous movement against the forces that seek to restrict and define Black trans identities. From the moment of European contact with the Americas, colonizers sought to categorize and order the world as they saw it, which included rigid, binary understandings of gender despite its pervasive mutability in non-White community praxis. These gender systems often included more fluid conceptions that did not align with European binary views, and were systematically disregarded and repressed in the service of chattel slavery and colonial conquest and control.

The biased lineage continued throughout the 20th century in anthropology, as scholars adopted earlier language. For example, when describing a Native American person with a penis

who had sex with other people with penises and/or performed “feminine” duties, they were labeled as “homosexuals,” “hermaphrodites,” or “berdaches.”<sup>21</sup> As Snorton discusses, within the United States, the legacy of transatlantic slavery further complicated the construction of gender and sexuality. Enslaved Black people were stripped of autonomy over their bodies and identities, facing extreme forms of dehumanization. Their gender and sexual identities were manipulated and policed under the interests of the slave economy. During the antebellum and postbellum eras, the bodies of Black men and women were often depicted as simultaneously hypersexualized and gender non-conforming in the public imagination. This was an attempt to justify their treatment as property and lesser beings. Furthermore, Blackness functioned within eugenic and medical discourse as a kind of primitive foil for the development of modern sexological and medical classifications of bodies, behavior, and identity. However, medical professionals eventually began differentiating between same-sex relationships and gender differences.

In 1910, Magnus Hirschfeld coined the term “transvestite” to describe people who experienced a “feeling of peace, security and exaltation, happiness and well-being...when in the clothing of the other sex” (Hirschfeld, cited in Beemyn 2014:505). Reminiscent of today’s conceptualization of gender euphoria, Hirschfeld’s “transvestite” and broader research revolutionized our understanding of gender and sexuality at the time. Beemyn notes that Hirschfeld’s study is unique, as he did not pathologize transvestism or assume a relationship between it and [homo]sexuality. However, Hirschfeld also did not differentiate between those that enjoyed crossdressing but lived life as their assigned birth gender and those that lived cross-dressed lives.

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<sup>21</sup> A pejorative French term stolen from the Arabic “bardage” (بِرْدَج): a young, enslaved male used for sexual purposes. Since the 1990s, “two-spirit” has replaced berdache.



Throughout the 20th century, queer terminology was flexible. In many cases, the now outdated terms like “transvestite,” “cross-dresser,” and sometimes “female impersonator,” referred to the same phenomenon as “drag” and “trans\*” (Beemyn 2014; Stryker 2008; Ackroyd 1979). In other instances, the “queen” and the “female impersonator” were noted as related yet distinct (Newton [1972] 1979; Baker et al 1994; Halberstam 1998). Such conflation persists in many circles today, albeit typically as transphobic slang used in the spirit of homophobia (Beemyn 2014; Newton 1979). Given the historical complexities and fluidity of terminology and understandings, in this dissertation, I have chosen to emphasize trans\* and non-binary drag performers. Although they share much of their histories, by highlighting this intersection, I take a firm stance that they are, indeed, distinct phenomena. By doing so, I am able to show how gendered identity and subjectivity can relate to queer musical performances.

For drag as a performance, “female impersonation realistically began when clothing started to take on gendered meanings in cultures as a form of cross-dressing behavior” (Schacht and Underwood 2004:4). What we consider drag, today, is really the culmination of a wide span of on- and off-stage performance trajectories. From the Elizabethan-era theater, to daily crossdressing, drag has come to be a catch-all term for many non-normative gender performances. We know that the “gay bar” style of drag may be traced to the 18th-century London Molly Houses (Baker 1994), as well as to early social gatherings hosted by previously enslaved Black “drag queens” like William Dorsey Swann (Joseph 2020). Even with the case of Swann, whom we know used the title of drag queen, scarcity of archival records leaves us with more questions than answers regarding historical paths, trends, and trajectories. Due to the criminalization of much of LGBTQIA2S+ life and culture, many queer people and their families

ordered their records (personal letters, journals, and diaries) to be burned. “If there was no proof, there was no crime” (Olsen 2023:xv).

As I discussed previously, gender impersonation was already a popular form of theater from around the mid-19th century until social responses to industrialization and suffrage shifted and new classes were formed (Goodman 2023:19). By at least the late 19th century, crossdressers had begun hosting “drags” in New York, but the audience demographics had already begun to narrow from the earlier vaudeville and stage traditions. By the 1930s, “drag balls” had spread across the U.S. with many obtaining legal permits so that attendees would not be violating local crossdressing ordinances (Beemyn 2014:504).

In the 1960s, Esther Newton conducted the first ethnographic project on drag. Her work set the foundation for academic drag research and inspired many, like Judith Butler, who went on to theorize gender through a drag lens. Her book remains one of the most comprehensive records of 1960s urban drag in the United States. In *Mother Camp*, Newton discussed two main types of drag: street impersonators (record acts) and stage impersonators (live acts).<sup>22</sup> The street style combined lip-synched performances with the “street fairy” life. Street fairies did not change their gender nonconforming fashion or flamboyant personalities when in public and did not necessarily perform on-stage. Typically, street impersonators were at one time street fairies (Newton 1979:10).<sup>23</sup> The stage style yielded female impersonators, the most respected of all drag performers. These queens were staunch gender conformists when out of drag but presented

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<sup>22</sup> A record act is lip-synched and a live act is sung live. For consistency, I use the term “drag” in the way we would today with regard to a drag queen/king/performer/etc. For Newton, the female impersonator would be today’s drag queen, while a queen would have been an effeminate gay man.

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, there doesn’t appear to be a record of someone who is both a street fairy and street impersonator.

glamorous (or comedic) theatrical representations of femininity when on the stage. The female impersonators interviewed by Newton sought normative legitimization by aiming to star in film or television either in drag or male clothes, while street fairies often wanted to star as a female impersonator. Many female impersonators distanced themselves from and even hated the street fairies who wore their effeminacy on their sleeve like a neon sign. Even worse, in their opinion, was the “hormone queen” who used hormones or plastic inserts to reshape their bodies, since they were, in effect, “placing themselves out of the homosexual subculture, since, by definition, a homosexual man wants to sleep with other *men* (i.e., no gay man would want to sleep with these ‘hormone queens’)” (102). Although many stage impersonators sharply criticized the street queens that used hormones, neither the category of street queen, nor the street fairy, were necessarily transsexual in nature, since they were specifically describing those understood to be cisgender gay men (although they would likely be considered trans under today’s broad umbrella model). Transsexual and transgender people were entirely separate from the performance scenes that Newton surveyed. Further, Newton reported that both street and female impersonators openly distanced themselves from the “transy” (once again, not to be confused with the non-drag-performing transsexual), a deviant gay man that cross-dressed only for sexual pleasure. This bled into performance styles as well.

Transy drag is wrong because it violates the glamour standard, which is synonymous with professionalism, that is, the right context and motivation for impersonation (performance, making legitimate money) as opposed to the wrong context and motivation (private life, private compulsion to *be* rather than to *imitate* a woman). In addition, transy drag violates the implicit aesthetic in the glamour standard, for transy drag makes one look like an ordinary woman, and ordinary women are not beautiful (51, emphasis in original).

While gender was often a part of Newton's discussion in terms of the more or less effeminate homosexual man, she did not separate gender and sexuality categorically. Rather, masculine and feminine performances were gradients of homosexuality unless medical intervention was present. Drag was, therefore, a way to theorize about homosexuality, not gender directly. Newton claimed that even if a person never attended a drag show, the figure of the drag queen would remain legible in society as a symbol of homosexuality. "The status of female impersonator has two fundamental and inseparable parts, show business and homosexuality," for "the peculiar skills involved in being a female impersonator were learned in the gay world, not in show business" (31). The result was that drag as a social performance could reveal the powerlessness experienced by the gay [male] community (xvi). Indeed, the most common denominator in scholarship around 20th-century drag is that it was a homosexual performance (Newton 1979; Ackroyd 1979; Shacht and Underwood 2004; Schewe 2009; Berrick 2008).

In seeming parallel, there is the drag king. Traditionally considered cisgender women-as-men or trans\* men-as-men, drag kings receive far less attention and access to performance spaces as do queens. The most common statement made by audience members and drag fans when I have asked about kings is along the lines of "Why would I want to see a drag king? They're boring!" Although I disagree with the sentiment, many of my respondents declare their preferred drag aesthetic is rooted in strikingly glamorous [read: high femme], decidedly theatrical, binary (male-to-female) transformation. In her ethnography, Newton mentions women that are male impersonators, called drag butches, but does not go into detail. Halberstam also discusses the historical drag butch, but their closer investigation led to a more complex definition that blurs the lines between drag and trans: "a masculine woman who wears male attire as part of her quotidian gender expression" (Halberstam 1998:232).

Drysdale has shown that drag king scholarship typically falls into one of two analytic divisions, “either a performative practice of gendered or sexual identity” (Baker and Kelly 2016; See: Shapiro 2007; Rupp et al. 2010; Halberstam 1997) or as a “destabilising political strategy derived from queer cultural membership” (Drysdale 2019: 27; See: Baker and Kelly 2016; Halberstam 1998, 2005; Troka et al. 2002). To better understand drag and the notion of being non-binary, I first borrow a point of contention within the former.

One of Halberstam’s (1998) core realizations about drag kings is that their “maleness”<sup>24</sup> is undercut by the very nature of performing masculinity (Halberstam 1998; Berrick 2008). Stormé DeLarverie, a Black butch male impersonator who began working in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, claimed that the male impersonator “‘has to take things off,’ while the female impersonator has to add things” (Halberstam 1997:115). This is to say that maleness is regarded as the norm while femaleness is a form of excess and theatrics. Newton similarly found this to be true for queening, although she generalized it for all drag.

In fact *the* distinguishing characteristic of drag, as opposed to heterosexual transvestism, is its group character; *all* drag, whether formal, informal, or professional, has a theatrical structure and style. There is no drag without an actor and his audience, and there is no drag without drama (or theatricality) (Newton 1979:37, emphasis in original).

Halberstam nevertheless critiques Newton, as well as Butler (1990), for classifying drag kinging as a lesbian analog to gay male queening. First, drag has not been a critical part of lesbian bar culture, like queening has for gay male spaces. Second, Halberstam argues that maleness is not

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<sup>24</sup> I employ the terms “maleness” and “femaleness” in contrast to “masculinity” and “femininity” to avoid confusion between *being/becoming* a man or woman and forms of masculinity and femininity that are not intrinsically male or female, respectively. Methodologically, it is important to recognize, yet also work beyond, the gender binary.

performative, and therefore kinging cannot be the ontological counterpart to queening. “Whereas the drag queen expands and becomes flamboyant, the drag king constrains and becomes quietly macho.” For Halberstam, this distinction lies, in part, through the limits of masculine camp and gay sensibility (Halberstam 1997, 1998; Berrick 2008; Drysdale 2019; Horowitz 2020).

Horowitz goes further and challenges the very foundation that perpetuates a relationship between lesbian and gay cultures. Calling it a “political marriage of convenience,” she suggests that to assume their connection is “to obscure the complex and transformative ways in which practitioners of each idiom perform gender.” In her fieldwork on Cleveland drag kings and queens, Horowitz found that drag was the medium through which performers explored their queerness rather than a result of their queerness (Horowitz 2020: 10; Shapiro 2007; Rogers 2018; Devitt 2013). This is precisely what I have found in my fieldwork, as well as my own journey as an enby drag performer. While I may have been more open to publicly consuming drag due to comfort with my queerness, performing drag also pushed me to explore and better understand my gender. It is a confluence of performance and performativity. According to GG Bussy (she/they), drag is “the elevation of gender performance into a creative art, it allows me to play with my self-expression in a way I can’t in ‘professional’ environments while being surrounded by peers who support and appreciate my experimentation.”<sup>25</sup>

Horowitz’s resulting theory, called “interperformance,” is a “paradigm based on an ontology of bodily intra-action” that “accounts for both the theoretical fluidity and the apparent fixity of individual identity.” Interperformativity is a concept used to understand the relationship between an individual’s performance of identity in different contexts such as the distinction between on-stage personas and off-stage selves. Horowitz posits that identity arises from the

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<sup>25</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

complex web of relationships that individuals navigate rather than being a static trait or inherent quality. This perspective suggests that identity is a continually evolving process influenced by the dynamic interplay of different performative acts. Intra-actions, a term developed by Karen Barad (2003), refers to the fundamental notion that relations themselves constitute the primary elements of reality. This view departs from traditional ideas of separate entities interacting with each other, emphasizing instead that phenomena emerge through intra-actions within the relational field. Agency, then, is not an attribute of individual entities but is produced and distributed within the network of intra-actions. Such an understanding is especially relevant in discussions of gender, where the focus is placed on the processes through which gender identities are formed. It asserts the journey of gender becoming over any fixed categorization or endpoint. These concepts shed light on how individuals navigate and perform gender, particularly when conventional expressions of masculinity or femininity do not fit established norms. Horowitz observes that individuals who do not conform to dominant gender expectations may find themselves excluded from certain performative spaces. Instead, as Halberstam notes, such individuals might carve out a space where they align or “participate alongside” other performances, like those of “kings,” which provides room for more diverse expressions of gender identity. These theoretical frameworks highlight the fluid, relational, and journey-centric nature of identity, and underline the ongoing process of becoming and belonging that defies fixed boundaries or definitions. I will return to it later, but Horowitz claims that there is no longer a usefulness to separating performance and performativity; rather, the importance lies in the interactions between relational phenomena.

The presence of non-binary drag artists raises questions all around, for there are no analogous cultural codes that equate to being non-binary, either through gender or sexuality. The

drag queen expands, the king constrains, but what does the non-binary monarch do with gender? If they are participating in a performative practice of gendered identity, then what does it mean to be performatively beyond the binary, for which we have no clear reference? On the stage, they may certainly appropriate normative gender expressions that fit neatly within the binary drag paradigm, but becoming all the more common, one may find a non-binary performer who capitalizes on ambiguity or even one who throws everything away for sake of performing as non-human (e.g. as an alien, monster, or even a [previously] inanimate object like a sofa chair).<sup>26</sup> As Moonshianne Fantasy (they/ze/he) described to me, “Drag is art. It’s gender expression and gender disruption. You don’t have to personify in gender for drag. You can be a monster or an alien. Drag is drag.”<sup>27</sup> What aspects of gender, then, is a non-binary drag artist performing when intentionally doing so in a non-binary way, whatever that means (rather than simply being read as a binary queen or king)? As I stated in Chapter 1, I believe that euphoria is one of potentially limitless markers of non-binary subjectivity that a drag artist may tap into. Throughout this chapter, and the rest of my dissertation, I hope to show that euphoria can be both a performative practice of gendered identity and a destabilizing political strategy.

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<sup>26</sup> Gender-fluid drag artist and *Drag Race* season 9 winner, Sasha Velour has famously opened shows to Jennifer Lopez’s “Waiting for Tonight” dressed as a giant blue chair, whose gag reference becomes clear when the track shifts to Kylie Minogue’s “In My Arms.” There is also a long history of “gender fuckery” and “tranimal” drag that is not directly tied to non-binary people, but to destroying the concept of gender altogether. See also: Sarah Hankins, “I’m a Cross between a Clown, a Stripper, and a Streetwalker’: Drag Tipping, Sex Work, and a Queer Sociosexual Economy,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, no. 2 (2015) and Kareem Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*. (New York: OR Books), 2023.

<sup>27</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.



## **Trans Paradox and Interperformativity**

The 20th century saw drag and transness develop as people drew new paths of gender and sexuality. They created various categories for themselves and others, culminating in fluid terminology and philosophical stances. Beyond drag, interperformativity is a welcome reminder to evaluate what we consider trans\* as an ongoing set of “intra-actions” informed by personal experiences and communal exchange. Similar to drag, there is also disparity between terminology in trans\* studies more broadly. Keegan (2020) has shown that disciplinary limits in professional institutions tend to relegate the categories under the trans\* umbrella to conflicting epistemologies. Trans\* within women’s studies and queer studies contexts, for instance, is often incongruous. For women’s and feminist studies, gender is predominantly based on subordination. To maintain legitimization against the patriarchy, gender must be a stable, self-reflexive category (Keegan 2020:388; Brown 2005; Rubin [1975], [1984] 2012; Halley 2006; McClary 1990). When trans\* people are introduced into the mix, they are consigned to the same theory of oppression: in order to be suppressed “like women,” they must fit, however roughly, within feminist critiques of the binary patriarchy. However, trans\* (and many formations of queer more broadly) cannot be conceptualized this way, as it depends on fairly rigid gender and gender-based sexuality categories that cleanly suppress one another. Trans\* says “but gender is not real like that.” If trans\* were allowed to be trans- and mobile, and not a “queer” stand-in for “woman-like,” then the binary power (and essentialist framing) bolstering traditional women’s studies could falter.

For queer studies, on the other hand, gender connotes a system of [sexual] power relations between opposing binary categories, heterosexuality and homosexuality (Keegan 2020: 390; Taylor 2012). Gender is, therefore, a schema innately tied to heteronormativity (Keegan

2020; Stryker 2004; Love 2014; Rodger 2004; Hawkins 2019). According to Prosser (1998), this system of power comes, in part, from queer theory's appropriation of trans\*: "With the focus on the gender-ambivalent subject, transition has become the lever for the queer movement to loosen the fixity of gender identities enough to enable affiliation and identification between gay men and lesbians" (5). The gender-ambivalent subject that Prosser is referring to is the one that Butler first held up as a way to undermine or "trouble" the habituation of heterosexuality and the resulting binary. The transgender subject also served as a foil to Butler's later positioning of the transsexual subject as a way to delineate the limits of said trouble. While both queer and trans studies have similar roots in poststructuralist thought, queer studies has had less investment in embodiment and materiality (Love 2014; Prosser 1998). Through a "body narrative" like Prosser describes, trans\* studies once again disagrees and asserts that gender is "real like this."

It is easy to disregard a body narrative as striving for essentialism, and social constructionism is typically framed as its logical opposite, but sometimes people necessarily endorse these frameworks simultaneously to understand the social world (Schudson and Gelman 2022). The distinction between what is real or unreal, or even between what is feminist or queer, goes back to the debate surrounding a subject's autonomy for queer futures. Muñoz and Edelman present us with distinct visions of queerness and its temporal dimensions, with Muñoz advocating for a queer futurity informed by the echoes of the past and the transformative potential of the present, while Edelman takes an anti-relational stance, suggesting an ethical disengagement from a heteronormatively defined future. Juxtaposing this with the debate between Butler and Prosser, where Butler's notion of performativity challenges stable notions of gender identity and Prosser seeks to emphasize the material reality of transgender bodies and experiences, I see a parallel tension. Butler's work can be interpreted as posing a challenge to

normative and linear understandings of gender, similar to Muñoz's challenge to linear temporal narratives. Both scholars prioritize the emancipatory possibilities latent within present performances of identity, linking them to future potentials. Conversely, Prosser, like Edelman, emphasizes the concrete materiality of the body and lived experience. They share a skepticism of how abstract theoretical constructs might obscure the realities faced by transgender individuals.

Horowitz's interperformativity offers a unique way to explore drag and can function as a conceptual bridge within this discourse. Not only can drag serve as a resource for queer exploration via the relative safety of the stage (Rogers 2018; Baker and Kelly 2016), it can be a powerful political tool (Rupp and Taylor 2015; Rupp et al. 2010; Schewe 2009; Shapiro 2007; Kaminski 2003), and reify local community queerness (MacIntyre 2017, 2018; Drysdale 2019, Rogers 2018). Interperformativity recognizes the interconnected, co-creative nature of identity, where the performance of selves is never solitary but always in relation to others, reminiscent of Muñoz's insistence on the collective dimensions of queerness. Here, relationality returns to the forefront, compatible with the view that gender identity is developed, affirmed, and understood through interactions with others, while also recognizing individual agency.

Horowitz's concept builds upon and extends Butler's idea of performativity, which suggests that gender is not an innate quality but rather is constructed through repeated social performances. Where Butler's work focuses on how individuals perform gender within a social context, Horowitz offers interperformativity to emphasize the interconnected and interactional nature of these performances. Butler's initial theory placed significant emphasis on the performer but was less explicit about the role of spectators and the wider community. Horowitz looks more closely at this interaction, insisting that those who witness and react to performances of identity are also participants in the construction of that identity. This adds a layer to our understanding of

performativity, bringing it out of the individualistic sphere and into a more relational one. Interperformativity aims to capture the dynamic ways in which identities are constituted through relationships with others and through communal contexts. The production of identity is never a solitary act. Horowitz's framework addresses the nature of identity formation, particularly the dichotomy between viewing identity as an individual, autonomous act versus seeing it as inextricably linked to a broader social fabric. Interperformativity offers a rich analytical method for examining the complexities of identity politics. It allows for a nuanced understanding of how gender and sexuality are experienced and expressed in communal settings, such as in drag performances, LGBTQIA2S+ activism, or online communities where multiple actors and actions are constantly influencing each other. Her approach is particularly useful for understanding phenomena like drag culture, where the interaction between performers and audiences is crucial to the experience.

For gender, as Horowitz says, a buzz cut, as an intra-action, "might give meaning to the concept 'masculinity' or even 'female masculinity' for any given observer" (11). But it does not say anything about the essence of said masculinity. The "amalgam of relations" that signify masc or femme simply tend to occur more or less frequently and contribute to the identification of man or woman, respectively. "It is the relative consistency of these relations over time that gives weight to gender" (11). This is in direct, yet subtle, contrast to Butler's performativity. It is not the repetition of acts that are performative, but the repetition of their relationships, their intra-activity. Meanings are not essential since the world is so varied. But within certain contexts, the meaning changes and gives form to something perceived as essential from within that situation. Horowitz suggests that "within the framework of interperformance, there is no longer cause to debate whether a cisgender femme is a more authentic woman than a cisgender butch, a

transgender woman, a bedroom cross-dresser, or a professional drag queen because the meaning of *woman* is coextensive with each new intra-action” (11). She goes on to say, however, that this does not negate the importance of historical categories like woman, or its relative potential and abuse. Instead, interperformativity challenges the idea that we must employ representational methods for analysis and offers a relational one. “Both performance and performativity are radically dependent on the prior existence of a material body in order to produce meaning,” regardless of where that intra-actional production occurs (12). Horowitz claims that “drag shows us *there is no difference between performance and performativity*, that the rhetorical distinction between the two has exhausted its utility” (12, emphasis in original). “Studies predicated on this framework view performance as a (mere) metaphor for real-life phenomena, rather than as a real-life phenomenon in its own right” (38). This is also how people can come to know themselves through drag, rather than drag invoking some change or believing that we do drag because we are queer. It is anti-essentialist, while recognizing that people have given meaning to many things over time that appear essentialist.

One of the key debates that interperformativity satisfies is the ongoing discussion around agency and autonomy in identity performance. Are individuals solely responsible for crafting their identities, or are these identities co-created through a network of relationships and societal influences? Interperformativity suggests that agency is not only a personal attribute but also something that is negotiated between individuals. It supports the view that subjectivity and agency are collaborative and emergent properties of social life, rather than simply outcomes of individual will or intention. For Butler, relationality is a way to say that the subject lacks autonomy. They argue against the classical notion of a pre-social individual who possesses a

stable and coherent identity from birth. Although Butler resists the idea of a durable identity that fits easily within established social structures, its dependence on power limits overall autonomy.

As part of their theory of performativity, Butler's relationality is multi-dimensional—it encompasses the discursive, the social, the material, and the ethical to show how subjects are shaped and constituted through a complex web of interactions and power relations. It hinges upon the relationship between the subject and the norms that govern social existence. The Butlerian subject lacks autonomy for they are always already bound by the discursive field of power that precedes and shapes them. “The moment we relinquish the distinction between desires generated by the performance principle (the service of goods) and desires generated by the loss of the Thing, we surrender the capacity to imagine agency, which is exactly the weakness of Butler's paradigm” (Ruti 2017:86). Crucially, interperformativity allows us to move beyond the weakness that Ruti identified and expands Butler's work with a focus on the present rather than some lost idyllic past of nostalgia, all too characteristic of normative queerness. It recognizes that identities are not only performed by individuals, but also formed through ongoing interactions. Her theory adds an immediacy and interactivity to Butler's claims by highlighting how individuals are intertwined in the performative creation of each other's identities. Although there are many potential avenues for exploring the intra-actions between drag and gender, and I discuss some non-human, archival interactions in Chapter 4, I want to focus here on euphoria as it crosses the lines of essentialist and constructivist notions of gender.

## Gender Euphoria

Goosebumps. Like you're finally who you always were supposed to be. Like the spirit you and the physical you finally met on one accord. It definitely happened both in and out of drag for me. Simple things like getting your contour and blush just right, or the guy down the street calling you 'miss.' It comes in varying intensities. (Fearless Amaretto)<sup>28</sup>

It's the feeling of being seen as someone who is existing outside of the typical gender binary, which happens in and out of drag. (GG Bussy)<sup>29</sup>

For me it's like when you open a new book and smell the pages. When someone uses my pronouns or accepts that I'm nonbinary without fail it feels like the first sunlight of dawn. I feel it both in and out of drag. (Moonshianne Fantasy)<sup>30</sup>

As the above quotes describe, gender euphoria, that profound sense of well-being or satisfaction that accompanies the alignment of one's gender identity and expression, provides a promising path forward. This concept allows for an appreciation of the joy and fulfillment that can come from living authentically, regardless of whether that aligns with normative expectations. Through it, we are able to craft a vision of a queer future that embraces both the celebratory performances of identity in the present and the potential for future transformations. By integrating these various threads—Butler's and Prosser's dialogues on the nature of identity, Muñoz's envisioning of a utopic queer futurity, Edelman's rejection of reproductive futurity, and Horowitz's concept of interperformativity—into the fabric of queer futures and euphoria, we can

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<sup>28</sup> "Drag Performance Practice." *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

<sup>29</sup> "Drag Performance Practice." *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

<sup>30</sup> "Drag Performance Practice." *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

articulate an inclusive vision. Such a future would not only validate the complex experiences of queer, trans\*, and non-binary individuals but also emphasize the importance of relational networks, historical awareness, and the collective pursuit of a world where the potential for joy and affirmation is recognized as a vital part of the struggle for liberation. In this framework, the past and present serve as fertile ground for nurturing a future that values multiple forms of existence, interconnectivity, and the intrinsic worth found within each act of self-realization. For drag, euphoria heightens the potential for affective meaning, and importantly, through interperformativity, we know that such meaning is realized by bodies connecting over time.

Gender euphoria seems, at first, like the ontological opposite to gender dysphoria; however, the reality is more nuanced. Gender dysphoria involves a sense of distress or discomfort that a person may experience when their gender identity does not align with the gender they were assigned at birth, which, as Laura Kate Dale points out in her edited volume, often serves as a powerful motivator for individuals to contemplate and initiate changes to align their external presentation with their internal sense of self. She outlines the difference by describing dysphoria as a catalyst: “It’s quite often what kicks a person from spending years thinking, *It sure would be nice to be a different gender from the one I was assigned at birth*, into actually deciding to make a change in who they want to live as...it lights a fire under many and underscores the aspects of themselves they’re unhappy living with” (Dale 2021:1-2, emphasis in original). Conversely, gender euphoria refers to the profound sense of joy and satisfaction individuals may feel when they are able to express their gender identity in a manner that resonates with them. While gender euphoria may be achieved in the process of combatting dysphoria, it is not its direct antithesis because the absence of dysphoria does not automatically result in euphoria, or vice versa. A person might experience intense dysphoria, but find moments



of joy in certain aspects of their gender. Furthermore, an individual's relationship with their gender is complex and can change over time. Some people may feel dysphoria strongly at one point in their lives but less so at another, or they may never feel it strongly at all, yet still identify as transgender. Similarly, a person might occasionally experience gender euphoria without it being a consistent or defining part of their experience. Recognizing this complexity allows for a more inclusive and accurate understanding of the varied ways in which people encounter and navigate their gender identities beyond a simple dichotomy of negative versus positive feelings.

What is crucial to understand is that one need not experience the discomfort of gender dysphoria to validate their transgender identity; experiencing gender euphoria is a wholly legitimate and independent reason for exploring and embracing a gender expression that diverges from the one assigned at birth. This concept reinforces the idea that suffering is not a requisite for authenticity in one's gender journey. It parallels my earlier assertion that oppression is not necessary to validate one's queerness. If one were to experiment with gender and find joy in a new presentation other than the one assigned at birth, that is all the more reason for them to pursue it. As drag artist and non-binary trans\* woman Chelora (she/they) described:

Euphoria for me feels like freedom. It feels like unbridled joy, even from the simplest of things. It's like solving a riddle you've been questioning, pondering, avoiding, and sometimes neglecting, for years, and it's coming more and more together.<sup>31</sup>

Although euphoria is liberating, dysphoria's medicalized roots reinforce its pathological connotation, today. Dysphoria was popularized by U.S. psychiatrist Norman Fisk in the 1970s as a way to describe the distress someone experiences over their gender. Until recently, it served as

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<sup>31</sup> "Drag Performance Practice." *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

a core diagnostic criterion for a wide variety of psychopathological disorders for both the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems and the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*. Although the ICD-11 (2018) removed gender identity disorders, the *DSM-5* (2013) maintains gender dysphoria as an official diagnosis. In the last two decades, there has been a rise in clinical research to better understand the limitations of current diagnostic methods, and many have turned to qualitative research to learn from trans\* people directly (Pulice-Farrow et al. 2019; Galupo and Pulice-Farrow 2020). Conversely, researchers like Will Beischel (who coincidentally began their drag career as Ariana Grindr in Ann Arbor, MI), have worked to flip the script and establish a basis for research into gender euphoria. In their article, co-written with Stéphanie E. M. Gauvin & Sari M. van Anders (2022), they found that trans\* and non-binary community members (N=47) described euphoria and its relationship to dysphoria in at least one of five thematic categories: (1) gender euphoria describes a joyful feeling of rightness in one's gender/sex, (2) gender euphoric experiences can be external, internal, and/or social, (3) "gender euphoria" originated in and circulates in online and in-person gender/sex minority communities, (4) dysphoria describes a negative feeling of conflict between gender/sexed aspects of one's self, and (5) the relationship between euphoria and dysphoria is complex. This study was an attempt to build a shared understanding of what euphoria means for people and it has become a fundamental text for those investigating the phenomenon.

Their findings reflect my own research with trans\* and non-binary communities. Most striking, however, is point number three. In both Beischel et al. and my own work, many discuss how social media platforms like *YouTube*, *Tumblr*, and *Reddit* are where they first learned of the term (see also: Chapter 5). Consequently, they often believe that it originated in online spaces

like *Tumblr*, where many trans people built communities around exploring their identities and transitions (Haimson et al. 2021). But gender euphoria is not new. Although Hirschfeld had discussed the broad joy that transvestites felt, the earliest use of “euphoria” that I have found comes from a chapter written by Daphne Morrissey and published in *Turnabout: A Magazine of Transvestism* vol. 1, no. 2 from October 1963. “Grow Old Along with Me...” tells the story of an AMAB protagonist who stumbles into crossdressing after experiencing joy when performing as Gittel Mosca in the play *Two for the Seesaw*. Bolstered by a budding romance between their friend Gloria and their cross-dressed persona, Gittel, the hero, ends up facing gender confusion as the “emotions of two people inside me were colliding. I was proud, pleased, and a little conceited in the role I was playing; at the same time, my masculine being was stirred by this new, warm, and gentle Gloria I was just beginning to know” (Morrissey 1963:39). After a night socializing with Gloria and exploring their own developing emotions (including a kiss), “Git,” who later takes the name “Daphne,” found themselves filled with euphoria “induced by that evening [and] would sustain me” until the next time they could be together (41). Morrissey’s story shows that the concept of euphoria has long been an important aspect of being trans\*. Her protagonist was allowed to not experience dysphoria, but rather found themselves as trans by chasing the positive feelings that came with crossdressing.

The first formal definition appeared a decade later and was written by Ariadne “Ari” Kane (she/he pronouns), a bi-gender, bisexual, crossdresser who has worked as an activist, educator, and co-founder of the Fantasia Fair, an annual conference held in Provincetown, MA for crossdressers and trans\* people. The first “FanFair,” held in 1975 was a groundbreaking event since it brought together crossdressers from all over the country and involved the entire

city.<sup>32</sup> In 1976, Kane organized The Provincetown Symposium as part of that year's Fantasia Fair. The event transcript was published in the hope that it would "give the reader new insight and understanding about a misunderstood set of behaviors" (Kane 1976:n.p.). In her talk, Kane provided an impressive and condensed survey of non-conforming genders and crossdressing throughout history, spanning from Hellenistic Greek *hetaerae* to the court of Louis XIV, and to the "berdache" of the American southwest. She also set out to clarify terms he felt society misunderstood. After "gender *role*," Kane spent considerable time explaining "gender euphoria," as it "describes a person who feels content expressing a dual gender role. Most transgenderists<sup>33</sup> fall into this category" (Kane 1976:6). To offer the clearest picture of how gender complexity was conceived at the time, I quote Kane at length:

One way to look at it is to picture a tree. The seed is the human being, and the roots are the crossdressing behavior, which usually develops at a very early age. As the stem grows, it reaches a junction. I'll call this first junction the TV junction point, because it marks the stage where the person has gone from wearing maybe one or two items of feminine clothing to a complete crossdressed state. At this first junction, the individual usually has a pretty clear gender identity and role. His interest in the art and practice of crossdressing has nothing to do with questioning his gender identity or role.

Then as we go up the tree, we come to the junction marking the transgenderist. This is an individual whose crossdressing includes the expression of what we might call "feminine"

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<sup>32</sup> Laura Granger and Joan Hoff, "A Brief History of Trans Community of New England," *TCNE*. 2004, <https://tcne.org/a-brief-history-of-trans-community-of-new-england/>.

<sup>33</sup> "Transgenderist" was the term for any *transgender* person. It was often abbreviated as "TG" alongside "TV" (transvestite) and "TS" (transsexual).

feelings. For example, a man who feels that it is “unmanly” to cry can do so without guilt or embarrassment as his “femme” self. Here are the beginnings of developing gender dysphoria or gender euphoria. If gender dysphoria develops, the person may move toward the next junction point, which is the transsexual.

At this point the person seeks chemical and probably surgical means of developing a body that conforms to his preferred gender. Once this surgery is completed the person no longer considers himself or herself a “transsexual,” but has become the desired sex--man or woman.

The number of people who move from crossdressing activity to having sex reassignment surgery is very small. Most people reach some junction and stay there; some also lose interest in it entirely. In any case, the crossdressing behavior is only a small part of the total person (Kane 1976:6).

Kane’s tree of trans\* experience is important, not only for showing a glimpse of trans\* conceptualizations of the past, but that it does not rely on dysphoria as the impetus to travel along its various trans\* branches—dysphoria was only reserved for medical intervention, and even then could result in a sort of “post-trans” life. Instead, the individual listens to their body and how it responds to experiences. They listen for joy, of things feeling right. They listen for what trans non-binary drag artist Force Majeure describes as “a warm light coming from my center, an alignment where things click into place and it feels normal and good.”<sup>34</sup> In an online

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<sup>34</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

survey of drag performers that I conducted (N=19), all 16 non-binary participants reported experiencing gender euphoria, whereas the 3 cisgender performers did not.<sup>35</sup>

The historical context for drag connecting with transness through euphoria may arrive in any manner of ways including lyrics, aesthetic practices, cultural iconography, or community networks. Each represents a choice, however conscious, for how to enact the present. While there is no set way to perform drag—no genre limitations or even aesthetic guidelines—a through-line has existed as gender play. Its continuity allows for improvisation and creativity lush with an embodied history. For the non-binary performer, euphoria can serve as said playful element. It is both a productive space and aesthetic place, what Lila Gray might call a “sensitive node” around and through which history can be told and lived non-chronologically (2013:71). It is simultaneously a way to look upon the past, as well as a site to historicize the present. The conception of time as non-linear echoes the approach taken by Deleuze and Guattari and their use of the rhizome as a metaphor:

The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five, etc....It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows...When a multiplicity of this kind changes dimension, it necessarily changes in nature as well, undergoes a metamorphosis (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:21).

It is this metamorphosis that interests me in regard to euphoria. At the outset, I resonate with the idea of a lack of hierarchy, a horizontal movement benefitting from an archaeological, relational

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<sup>35</sup> 6 of the 16 non-binary participants do not consider themselves trans\*. “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

exploration rather than an anti-social genealogical one. However, a rhizome's strength can also be a weakness. Indeed, societal and perhaps musical power rarely functions top-down; nevertheless, in horizontal formations, people are not often aware that such power is present until after it has come and gone. For scholars of affect, this sideways plane is a fruitful, and maybe even conveniently placed area for invisible, unnoticeable catalysis. But in recognizing change we are found noticing what came before. In this way, perhaps we could use Carol Muller's (2011) concept of the echo to help conceptualize how a horizontal framework functions over time. An echo accounts for changes across spacetime, morphed by the gravitational pull of objects, people, and ideals, and likewise accepts that its beginning does not constitute origin. Like an echo, queer time is not linear (Halberstam 2005). This is not to say rhizomatic analysis would be unproductive when it comes to drag, quite the opposite, but the echo is a reminder that there can indeed be both hierarchies and sideways movement. Through rhizomatic orientation, Gill argues, "senses of individual selfhood merge with identification with one's lineage and construct a collective selfhood" (2017:127). In the same way, I suggest that euphoria can merge trajectories, form subjectivity, and realize culture.

Euphoria also contributes to personal self-understanding. In her discussion of happiness, Ahmed (2010) found that joy can be both intentional (directed toward an object) and affective (in contact with an object). What I find most fascinating about Ahmed's idea is that she does not treat affect as something with a beginning and an end, or an impulse and reaction (i.e., a process). Instead, it is *part* of a then-present state of being, or what she calls an "orientation" that defines a subject's surroundings. Going a step further, Ahmed argues that a person may arrive at their surroundings because of their orientations, and as such, the objects found there are already imbued with evaluated feelings like happiness or pain. For Tomie Hahn (2007), it is not the

orientation, but the *disorientation* that transmits meaning. Extraordinary encounters disorient and remain extraordinary until they are internalized into the ordinary. Over time, the “strangeness” that dis-oriens one’s identity is revealed as their very self. Drag is, after all, a playground for on- and off-stage gender, and the orientation that performers must find themselves (and consequently lead their audiences to) is in an unrelentingly disorienting queerness. In this way, euphoria may index prior dysphoria; however, as a disorientation, it simultaneously interfaces with the body in a new way. I offer euphoria in partial response to Schuller’s call for “more ways of living in bodies together, of conceptualizations of the self that recognize it to be a complex of affects, desires, orientations, and precipitations of experience ultimately coterminous with other bodies and wider ecologies” (Schuller 2023:155). It is representative of autonomy, self-actualization, power, and relationality. Euphoria is not only a dialectical, cross-temporal model of queer experience in a binary world, but a cosmology of joy in self-concept.

### **Non-Binary Potential**

A critical question that remains: can someone who is not non-binary perform non-binary drag? From an identity perspective, no, no more than a non-binary person can perform binary drag. While I do not subscribe to an essentialist view of identity, when people perform with identity categories in mind, interperformativity tells us that we must take it into consideration. Identity and performance often become entangled, and the argument hinges on lived experience. While performance art, by nature, plays with the boundaries of identity and expression, non-binary drag is more than an aesthetic; it is an articulation of an identity that exists outside the binary gender norms. In this respect, non-binary drag performed by individuals who do not share this identity risks misinterpretation or appropriation.



However, my dissertation does not stop at the limits of performative expression. It reaches for a broader understanding through a non-binary lens. It posits that anyone, irrespective of their identity, can engage in performance that embodies a non-binary worldview, particularly when approached from a subjective perspective. According to Sedgwick, “queer” refers to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality, aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick 1993:8; emphasis in original). In a similar way, I understand non-binaryness as potential. This is not a matter of appropriation, but rather a testament to the inherent possibility of a non-binary paradigm mediated through performance. This perspective is the essence of a “Trans\* Musicology” as presented in my dissertation title, which does not restrict study to trans\* individuals exclusively but opens the door for more inclusive inquiry into the capacity of trans\* and non-binary to produce meaning.

“Euphoria” offers a glimpse of the potential for a world in which the concepts of gender and performance are liberated from binary constraints, providing material for examining diverse subjectivities. It is within the dissonant space of the “not-yet-realized” that we confront the complex interplay between present realities and future possibilities. Our future must be grounded. We also must be cautious not to conflate the intrapersonal experience of non-binary individuals with the broader paradigm shift toward inclusive futures. Instead, by critically analyzing non-binary drag, we can cultivate a nuanced appreciation that respects individual identities while simultaneously expanding our collective consciousness toward embracing an inclusive spectrum of gender expressions and identities, which is the foundation for meaningful, enduring transformation.

In conceiving of euphoria as a path to the future, I believe that we would benefit from combining aspects from each school of thought. Through Muñoz, I view gender euphoria as a potentiality. It is a way to live the future now. It is always looking forward by living the present as if it is already the future's necessary past, while never being fully reachable in either the future or the present. It is a "nonbeing that is eminent" (Muñoz 2019:9). For scholars of the social, relational tradition, like Muñoz, euphoria is perhaps most clearly understood as a representative facet of utopia—the not-yet glimpse of the future where queerness is always headed, yet can never reach. From Muñoz's relational perspective, gender euphoria could be considered a significant affective experience that underscores and energizes the move toward a more inclusive and queer-affirming future. Muñoz sees queerness as an ideal, an aspirational blueprint for world-making that goes beyond the here and now. Gender euphoria can be seen as an emotive force that propels individuals and communities toward the creation of spaces and narratives that validate the fluidity and diversity of gender experiences. Within this framework, gender euphoria is a tool for crafting affirmative visions of identity that challenge the status quo and imagine new possibilities for being. It is an affective state that bridges past, present, and future, acknowledging historical struggles for gender liberation while also sidestepping and moving beyond them. It is a form of queerness that anchors itself in a future potential even as it is experienced in the present and carries the lessons of the past.

However, those following Edelman's claim that queer futures are necessarily tied to rebellion and the death drive (or somewhere in the middle like Halberstam's queer failure), would likely disregard the notion that euphoria serves a critical role for non-binary genders. From an anti-relational perspective, euphoria could be considered a form of affect that is still entangled with normative structures to the extent that it centers on a sense of alignment or

coherence. Therefore, it could perpetuate the same forms of exclusion and normalization that reproductive futurism does. Gender euphoria, in celebrating a concordance between one's gender identity and expression, could be seen as seeking a form of validation or intelligibility that is in tension with Edelman's valorization of queerness as a position that challenges and rejects normative conceptions of social value and order. Like Žižek's "no!" an anti-relational stance for euphoria may position it as the Lacanian destructive act whereby the subject steps away from the symbolic order of the Other and dives into the jouissance of the real (Ruti 2017:19). By tapping into the realm of euphoria, one may lose social viability, but in doing so, honor their inner desire.

Alternatively, even from an anti-relational perspective, it is possible that gender euphoria could be reclaimed as a disruptive force. If gender euphoria arises from moments or practices that destabilize traditional gender categories and roles, such as through non-binary identifications or expressions, it could be understood as a form of resistance that aligns with Edelman's notion of queerness as inherently oppositional. In this way, gender euphoria could be conceptualized not as affirmative of a better future, but as a kind of pleasure in the negation of normative identity categories, and therefore as a practice of anti-futurity.

Euphoria is also similar to Berlant's "cruel optimism" whereby we suppress feelings of neglect in the hope that we can live a life that has been so far denied. Berlant's affective concept is an attempt to mediate between the relational and anti-relational schools of thought and to pave a way for us to consider the practical implications of desire in a capitalist society. Although their theory is aligned more with structuralism, Berlant's cruel optimism shows us that the queer subject can choose when to enact social negativity for their own benefit. In essence, one may maintain their autonomy while living in a power-ridden world. Similarly, in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed discusses how a queer approach to marriage and the future may

be multifaceted. On one hand, the desire to have access to the institution may be a sensible response to the years of abuse and rejection by a normative world. On the other, being willing to be the “right kind of queer” only reaffirms one’s Otherness against the normality of the cisheteropatriarchy. “Opting out—the ability to defeat cruel optimism, as it were—presupposes the capacity to resist what Ahmed calls the dominant ‘happiness scripts’ of our society, such as the marriage script” (Ruti 2017:18). My rendering of euphoria, nevertheless, works differently than Ahmed’s happiness script or Berlant’s cruel optimism because it is not trying to be accepted by the world at all, but to make a new present entirely. It allows us to bypass Foucauldian power dynamics and maintain autonomy, while simultaneously not succumbing to a Freudian death drive. Although a non-binary paradigm based on euphoria intersects with arguments for relationality and anti-relationality, it forever runs somewhat oblivious to the debates between rights-based and revolutionary approaches to gender and institutions (Ruti 2017:15). In the following chapters, I discuss how euphoria works as a “future that will have had to happen.” I hope to show that it is an affective middle ground precisely because it creates an altogether new ground.

## Chapter 3 Living Life, Living Loud: Affective Transmission of Trans\* Euphoria

### Introduction

*I'm trans. It's hard to convey what exactly that means. What that...this feels like. For most of my day, I feel an awkward pain, as if my body is withholding some inner truth from me. I carry a reticent fear when walking down the street in "gender-bent" clothes, when seeing friends openly support the wizarding intellectual property of an infamous transphobe, when deciding which bathroom to enter, when scoping out the exits in a nightclub, or even when picking up tea at a local shop in preparation of writing this chapter, nail extensions and beard on simultaneous display as I sign the receipt. That eclipsed area, the place from where my nausea wells up, pinging red alerts every time I remember that I'm trans. That I'm teaching about drag at a state university. Where I try to safeguard my students by curtailing myself, my materials, and my online presence in an effort to prevent conservative hate raids or worse. It's a wrenching feeling that shapes my day-to-day life. My body reminds me of the hate in the world as it interfaces between the destructive force of fascist demagogues and my own self-concept. But I can also feel liberated by my transness. There is a notable feeling of lightness, of pleasure, of adrenaline that pools in my gut. There are moments, however fleeting, where my joy yields confidence and peace. I feel safe. I feel uninhibited. I'm not too loud or quiet, nor plain like a luke-warm conversation. I don't feel like I am me, I feel me. It's euphoric.*

In this chapter, I seek out the body as a middle ground. I am interested in how lived experience shapes feelings at the point where outside meets inside. In many ways, what I describe is a felt sense of intersubjectivity. Pre-linguistically, our bodies can respond to external narratives in parallel or contrast with our internal worldviews (Walser 1991). These feelings can erupt as bouts of joy or anxiety in response to stimuli out in the world. We know that such emotions and feelings are constructed socially and are the product of our interrelationship with bodies and things over time. Drag performance is but one avenue where individuals and communities may come together to dance, flirt, protest, resist, and thrive with less fear of discrimination or violence. From the dance floor to the recorded track, the entire nightclub or drag show space is transformed into a place that emphasizes simultaneous interaction among many individuals (Garcia-Mispireta 2023, 2011; M. Butler 2006; Lawrence 2011; Brewster and Broughton 2014).

Nightclubs and bars have long been a space for queer communities to thrive. Drag performance as we understand it today in the context of a bar or nightclub finds some of its early roots in the Molly Houses of 18th-century London. These establishments were combination taverns, coffee houses, and private rooms where gay men would meet, socialize, and often engage in sexual encounters. The term “Molly” was a contemporary slang word for a homosexual man, and the “Molly Houses” became their havens. At Molly Houses, men would frequently take on female personas, perform in dresses and wigs, and hold mock weddings and birth ceremonies. In this context, drag was a form of entertainment for the patrons, but it also allowed these men to play with gender norms in a society where strict roles were imposed on people according to their sex at birth. It was not only a form of escapism but also a way to build a sense of community and identity. Since these activities were illegal and punishable by death,

Molly Houses were often the target of police raids. One of the most famous cases was that of Mother Clap's Molly House, which was raided in 1726 leading to the arrest and execution of several men. The owner, Margaret Clap, was also arrested and convicted for "keeping a disorderly house" for sodomites (Cassidy 2007:99). Rictor Norton (1992) argued that these spaces birthed the notion of a singular "gay" subculture. Although attempting to pinpoint the birthplace of gay subjectivity is almost always misguided, it is significant that a shared "nightlife" venue served as a community space for gay men who regularly participated in crossdressing for entertainment purposes. Molly Houses were important precursors to the modern idea of nightclubs as spaces where individuals could explore their identities away from the oppressive gaze of mainstream society.

Moving into the 19th and early 20th centuries, elements of drag could be seen in vaudeville and burlesque shows. These theatrical productions, often comedic in nature, featured both men and women cross-dressing as part of their acts. Male performers like Julian Eltinge achieved significant mainstream success, though such performances were seen as an act, separate from the performer's offstage identity. Regardless, these theatrical traditions provided a platform for gender-bending performances and further established drag as a form of entertainment in the nightlife scene.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was a vital period in the history of drag. It was during this time that the precursor to today's ballroom practice began to flourish, with LGBTQ+ African Americans and Latines leading the way. Balls were events where participants would "walk" and compete in various categories, often involving drag. Although Ballroom culture still exists today, and many drag performers cross in and out of the community and genre, they are

distinct practices with their own trajectories. That said, today's drag is indebted to ballroom through its (mis)appropriation of cultural language, familial structure, and media popularity.

What we think about as nightclub/bar drag today began manifesting itself around the middle of the 20th century in urban centers. Since then, nightclubs have remained a haven for queer people precisely because they offer a retreat from the heteronormative world. In these spaces, individuals can express themselves freely, find community, and explore aspects of their identity that may not be safe in other contexts. Bars and clubs have long provided enclosed, controlled environments where privacy was respected. For example, during times of legal persecution, bartenders might have used coded language or signals to warn patrons of police presence (Chauncey 1994). They have also been sites for community building for they afford queer individuals the opportunity to meet others with shared experiences and identities. In these spaces, patrons can engage with a community that offers support, understanding, and a sense of belonging in a world that, especially in the past, offered little acceptance. Bars and nightclubs allow for the exploration of identity in a supportive environment. Within their walls, individuals can experiment with gender presentation and sexuality through clothing, makeup, and behavior without the fear of reprisal that would be far likelier in other societal settings. Queer clubs and drag stages, in particular, have provided outlets for highly creative and subversive forms of expression. Bars and clubs have not only served as sanctuaries but also as important centers for activism and political mobilization. Historically, they have hosted meetings for activist groups, served as rallying points for protests, and functioned as informal headquarters during important community crises like the AIDS epidemic. On a more personal level, clubs and bars offer a space where societal pressures and expectations can be temporarily relieved. Here, LGBTQIA2S+ individuals can engage in relationships, behaviors, and conversations that may not be possible in



their day-to-day lives. The atmosphere of understanding and liberation that characterizes many queer nightlife venues is a powerful draw for those seeking to escape oppressive societal norms.

In highlighting the body within communal drag spaces like bars and nightclubs, however, I occasionally play with the notion of subjectivity as personal and somehow divorced from others. For countless trans and non-binary people, the continued onslaught of public anti-trans rhetoric and action heightens a feeling of dysphoric pain and isolation from the world. Some put up mental buffers to keep themselves physically and emotionally safe by distancing themselves and seeking independence from wider communities, but drag tears down these walls. Where we as trans people, and perhaps especially as enbies, come to hide and withhold from the world—and oftentimes ourselves—as an act of protection, drag performance leans into the natural imbalances of intersubjectivity and agency. It is never an equal give and take in a world that tries to limit you. Consequently, drag critiques the asymmetry of power, and in turn, serves as an outlet for its reclamation. Through interperformativity, we can see that hidden area of ourselves, so well-guarded, is suffused with meaning. The secrets we hold are an important part of our subjectivity, and one that we might refuse to share with the world because we *know* we can *feel* the world limiting us any time we allow our inner selves to push outward. Drag performance disquiets such dysphoria and limitation, revealing what is buried, and declaring it proudly.

In this chapter, I approach these powerfully intersubjective moments from two directions to show the potential ways that performers can utilize established listening practices in order to tailor their performances to evoke specific experiences. First, rather than purely focusing on the pain and dysphoria that trans people overcome, I argue that trans drag performers may feel a sense of gender euphoria when they allow their sense of self to shine over societal expectations and hate. Tracing euphoria as a feeling allows for an analysis of the body as a physical index of

gender (but certainly not as a prescriptive declaration of it). Second, I look at how audience listening practices engage with and may be engaged *by* the performer's body. As Horowitz (2020) shows us, meaning comes from the relationship between individuals. Drag audiences can approach and perhaps even internalize the feelings of gender euphoria presented by the performer. By positioning the body as a flexible interface, rather than a rigid barrier between the audience and monarch, I open a discussion on the nature of drag and how sound can have an affective role in the (inter-)subjective enactment of gender, and how such practice draws a performer into a world of discovery and self-concept. In this way, sound becomes the medium through which I trace affect as a mode of intersubjectivity, and whereby gender is the dialogic message (McLuhan 1965).

## **Euphoria and Affect**

Gender euphoria crosses the lines of essentialist and constructivist notions of gender (see Chapter 2). It is a phenomenon largely understood as a “a distinct enjoyment or satisfaction caused by the correspondence between the person's gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other than the one assigned at birth” (Ashley and Ells 2018:2; Beischel et al. 2021; Austin et al. 2022; Dale 2021). In a drag performance, royalty can choose to wield euphoria, affectively, for themselves, as well as part of their outward message. It transits over and through the body by means of an enigmatic series of nodes whereby emotions may roam and spark feelings. I conceive of affect, in this sense, as a functional mode of nodal paths whose highway-like system serves not only as a tool of self-regulation, but a route for interpersonal connection where meaning can be produced.

My use of affect is somewhat in line with what Navaro would claim exists along the “patriliny” of the affective turn based on Western anti-Enlightenment philosophies following Spinoza, Deleuze, and Guattari (Navaro 2017; Anderson and Harrison 2016; Connolly 2011; Massumi 2002; Thrift 2010). Further, DeNora and others have already conceived of affect as a tool of self-regulation and adopted a somewhat general use that “comprises anything from music preference, mood, and emotion to aesthetic and even spiritual experiences” (Juslin and Sloboda, 2010:9; DeNora 2000; Navaro 2017; Grossberg 2010). While all these could be applied to drag performances, I am most interested in the forms of self-regulation that denote how sound affects the performer-audience inter-experiences of gender euphoria.

Definitions and descriptions of affect are so variable that Ana Hofman has asked whether it has “become a conceptual outlet for any kind of ‘sensorial, emotional, visceral’ approach to music that merely reopens/re-actualises old-fashioned binaries between mind and body, cognitive and somatic” (Hofman 2015:36). Although I do not intend to encapsulate an entire constellation of abstraction, I also endeavor to avoid reifying Cartesian thought. It is easy to use theory to distinguish between the mind and body, but such methods are impractical for explaining how people interpret feelings (and emotions) pre-cognitively, as a result of engaging with society. Similarly, Richard Shusterman (2000) has called for incorporating the body “as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning” through his idea of somaesthetics (Shusterman 2000:219). I favor mechanisms that allow for agency in telling one’s own story, but may, perhaps, also tell more complete stories often left unexplained or overlooked when bodily experience is rendered as text.

Admittedly, one could assert that the distinction I approach between mind and body, or even identity and subjectivity, opens discussion into affect and its relationship to bodily matter.

Both Clough (2003) and Massumi (2002) have sought to reveal the physical and “missing” (i.e. autonomous) aspects of affect which result in a theory based on an interpretation of the body as open-ended, in contrast to a closely defined body-as-organism. For example, Clough (2003) describes the body as a cumulation of its organic material alongside the potentiality of the perceptual body whereby power may be enacted. She proposes a biopolitical framework of a “turbulent, complex, far-from-equilibrium open system” that encompasses the body as information and data circumscribed by institutional control (2003:363). Building from French theorists like Foucault and Deleuze, Clough’s structure enmeshes the body with its affective environs as they are simultaneously modulated toward normalization in society. Although her work discusses the broader biopolitical implications for “opening” the body to its affective milieu and power within the nation-state, capitalism, and civil institutions, her rendering is useful here as we consider the complex, affective interweaving of bodies in a drag space where notions of “normal” are simultaneously on display and ignored.

My theory of the body as a “flexible interface” seems to align. Where we differ, however, is in how Clough describes a sense of dismay toward a scholarly overreliance on emotion and affect, a subjective dialectic that remains tied to structuralism through “a return to the subject as the subject of emotion” (2010:207). Where Clough dismisses subjectivity in favor of scrutinizing the broad material forces that compose the political, “biomediated body,” I agree, instead, with Vannini and Waskul’s practical observation that “grounding esthetic meaning into the sensual body is not a way of embracing subjectivism. Meaning does not reside in isolated bodies but instead in the connection between living organisms and the iconic trace” (Vannini and Waskul 2006:15–16). While we should recognize meaning as cultural and intersubjective, we must also take note that meaning is felt in a body often perceived as private and isolated, or “safeguarded”

from the world. The multi-directional nature of gender euphoria proves useful as it allows us to recognize the body as indeed open-ended, that is, engaging with an array of normalizing powers, but more importantly, as a site for the non-hierarchical, “multivalent and complex ways that feelings and emotions are produced and generate knowledge” (Gill 2017:17). An application of affect theory for trans drag analysis can, therefore, reveal “the epistemological gap between how bodies feel and how subjects make sense of how they feel” (White 2017:177).

My fieldwork among drag royalty has consistently shown that any theory attending to the strictures of cultural performativity and the deliberateness of performance necessitates viewing them together. We do not have the privilege of accessing gender uncritically as drag performers or trans people, although trans drag performers likely have had more practice wading through uncertain waters. The drag monarch must “put on” a performance whereby gender has already been quantified for the stage.<sup>36</sup> To some extent, by definition, a trans person has similarly engaged with cultural aspects of gender in order to recognize their transness. Many of the drag monarchs I have interviewed who came out as trans after they began performing have pointed to a sort of trans “reckoning” where off-stage and on-stage forms of gender expression have collided. As they deconstructed the categories of gender as part of their trans becoming, their reframing bled over into their drag, smudging the lines encircling identity and expression.

CYREEL (any pronouns) describes this experience as:

I feel like I am tuning with a higher version of myself. Art is my spiritual practice. To me there is nothing more powerful than creating something from nothing, and that’s what I do every time I do drag.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Chapter 2 for a brief discussion about “putting on” gender as a queen or king

<sup>37</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

The affective work enacted by trans drag highlights the ever-present dialogue always already established by gender performativity upon which euphoria and music interact.

Through sound, drag has the potential to incite feelings such as gender euphoria that can be “privatized” or shared between performer and audience. I argue that euphoria is a felt perception that can accompany and color sound waves as they travel through us. Therefore, to claim that sound has an ability to incite euphoric meaning through the body affectively is to also claim that knowledge of euphoria is both aesthetic and somatic. The body informs perception just as perception shapes the body. Gender euphoria may be understood, then, not only as a cultural subject of a purely aesthetic sense, but as a somatic way of knowing that engages with, yet affectively transcends language in musical performance. Although gender euphoria has not yet been implemented, the refashioning of intersubjectivity as a somatic and aesthetic connection is not new.

Vannini and Waskul claim that the felt act of perceiving beauty is an integral part of how our lives are shaped, yet somatics are often left out of sociological discussions of aesthetics (2006:5). In a cunning thought exercise, they established a world where instead of illustrating “music as life,” the common metaphor was flipped to portray “life as music.” Their work showed that it is impossible to capture the aesthetic qualities of music in language, but only in the relationship between “somatic experience, rhythm, harmony, melody, tone color, and form” (8). Musically, when enby monarchs reference their euphoria in a drag number, they tend to do so with the intent for the audience to “get it.” Although not necessarily pedagogical, they aim to teach the crowd: 1) to meet them halfway, 2) to see them, and 3) to find their own joy. They are working off the assumed tastes of the crowd and (sub)consciously internalized, *self*-centered understanding of the music. They translate the queerness they found in the original sound(s)

alongside their own artistry and perception of how the audience will receive the number. We know that queerness can be communicated and readily analyzed through lyrical content, fashion, gesture, and setting, all of which can be colored further by personal and collective experiences. But in discerning euphoria as only one aspect of queerness, I hope to show that there is analytical potential that goes beyond our standard modes of analysis, albeit each is equally important. I argue that in framing euphoria as an aesthetic, we may also come to recognize its interplay with, and as, somatic. Therefore, as drag artists aim to coax their audiences to meet them halfway, to see them, and to find their own joy, it is as much a felt process as it is conceptual and emotional. Building on Vannini and Waskul's musical-aesthetic value list, I use "loudness" to trace this web. While the profound, internal experience of euphoria often happens in moments of stillness and quiet (see Chapter 4), its intensity escapes the body musically by resonating in ways that are similarly intense. In music, the first thing we think of in terms of "loud" is, of course, dynamics, and rightly so. But what if we were to take Vannini and Waskul's lead and reconsider life as music? Life as loud? As a metaphor, what can loud denote?

The following case study of euphoria and affect is presented in two parts in order to convey a multitude of ways that performers and audience members may construct gender euphoria through drag performance. In the first half, I explore the idea of loudness as it pertains to a performer's felt sense of identity and becoming. In the second, I shift focus and discuss how audiences engage with loudness to constitute meaning. Inspired by Vannini and Waskul, this chapter employs loudness in drag performances as a way to trace the perception and creation of gender euphoria, following their statement that "meaning resides in the embodied poietic and aesthetic action directed toward music" (16).

## Performer Perspective

In his article “Haptic Aurality: On Touching the Voice in Drag Lip-Sync Performance,” Jacob Bird (2020) described the experience of being at a drag show as dependent upon the volume in the club. One of his interlocutors detailed the importance of an all-encompassing sound. Without the loud volume, audiences are more likely to struggle with suspending disbelief in order to momentarily see and hear the recorded voice as coming from the drag performer’s throat. When seeing in-person, local drag, as opposed to highly produced television like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* or *Dragula*, one will often come across a bar or other small venue where the sound system is lacking. Oftentimes in these cases, what the audience hears instead is the performers’ breath and movement of their clothes and shoes over the lyrics. The fidelity of quieter drag may distract a listener expecting television-level audio production clarity. Even for audiences accustomed to the soundscape of in-person drag, hearing too many non-musical sounds may break the immersion. In Classical musical settings, audiences often perceive increasing loudness as a sign of tension (Eitan 2013). On the drag stage, however, where the separation of audience and performer is more fluid, loudness becomes a tool for highlighting subjectivity. If the sound system is too quiet, audiences can more easily hear the “real life” person dressed in drag. Conversely, if they can successfully “hide” in the loud sound of the recorded track, then audiences are better primed to hear the story of their performance.

In his article on loudness and affect, Heller describes loudness as existing “as a continuum bounded on either side by silence and pain” (Heller 2015:42). This perceptual scale references the psychophysical chart of phons (unit of perceived loudness), first popularized by George William Clarkson Kaye in 1937. This scale is commonly found in today’s physics and acoustic textbooks, and the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)



publishes their own version for public awareness. Rather than using standard decibels, the loudness scale uses phons, or A-weighted decibels (dBA), to attempt to establish a shared perceptual range by equating perceived loudness to familiar situations. For example, zero is near the threshold for hearing at 1000 Hz, while 40 dBA sounds like a soft whisper from 5 feet away. In Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti nightclubs and bars, I regularly recorded sound levels between 80–115 dBA, or according to OSHA’s scale, from a freight train 100 feet away to a nightclub with music.<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that although the sound levels are frequently lower than the 110 dBA floor for a nightclub according to OSHA, the perceived loudness also depends on the size of the space. Local bars are much smaller than a nightclub. For example, at Keystone Bar and Arcade in Ypsilanti, MI, I typically registered between 80–95 dBA. During drag shows, audiences line the makeshift “stage” by standing around a tape outline placed on the concrete floor near the front of the venue (see Figure 3.1). Prior to the tape outline, the stage would change shape throughout the show, with the secondary “room” with the couches becoming entirely closed off. The outline helped force audiences to widen the performance space beyond a tight oval and encourage drag artists to be more dynamic in how they moved among the audience. Most of the local spaces have tiny stages so many artists develop styles that are similarly restrained. Even post-outline, some monarchs never travel around the central brick wall, staying well within the loudest area of the bar. To help combat quietness, the venue’s speakers are positioned mostly around the main oval so that the sound envelops the stage. Once you go beyond the tape outline, the volume diminishes, although the reverberation of the low ceiling and concrete floor ensure

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<sup>38</sup> I used the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health’s (NIOSH) Sound Level Meter App on my phone to measure the dBA. I discovered this application after I had completed most of my dissertation fieldwork, so future empirical analysis is necessary to expand on these findings.

that it always has a nightclub feel. Even from the host's perspective, slightly behind the primary speakers, it is possible to hear some of what goes on "backstage" in the employee area where performers may wait prior to their number.

As a metaphor, loud usually comes to mean forefronted. In my own performances, I have noticed that without a powerful sound system, sometimes I can be more focused on trying to hide loud breathing more than acting out a lip sync to its fullest. Loud becomes an abrasive guiding line that shapes my anxiety in a performance. I am hyper aware of my body in a space. It screams. Loud is my breath. Loud is my heart. Louder are my quads while dancing in heels. Even louder is my apprehension. Will the performance be entertaining? Can the crowd hear my unease or lack of confidence by merely looking into my eyes...the only part of my face I can't hide behind makeup? For myself and many others, trans\* and cisgender monarchs alike, loud can be an excruciating metaphor of being seen in a way we do not want to happen. But in a practical sense, loudness also covers our actual voices and allows us to be freer in performance. Many artists admit to lightly vocalizing or even full singing beneath a recording. Physically singing along helps with timing visually, as well as makes it easier to personally get into the lyrics more as an actor. But, this is not possible in a quieter setting.

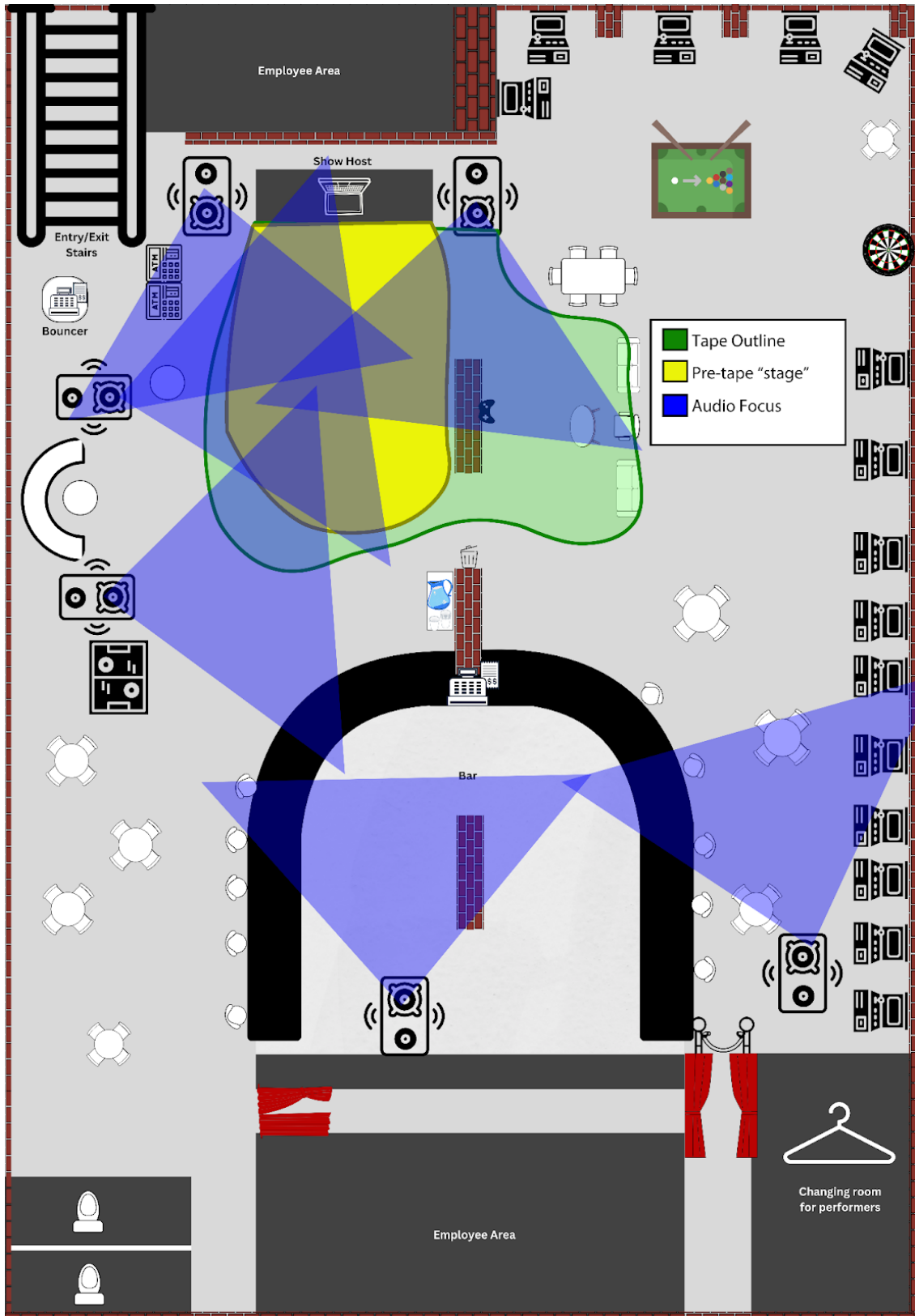


Figure 3.1 Keystone Bar & Arcade Stage Area

Welch and Fremaux (2017) have shown that nightclub crowds also tend to meaningfully gravitate towards the loud sounds found in a club. The researchers discovered that the reason behind clubgoers' enjoyment fell into at least one of four categories: arousal/excitement, facilitation of socialization, masking of both external sound and unwanted thoughts, and an emphasis and enhancement of personal identity." During field work, I began further noticing a trend in queer nightclubs wherein non-queer attendees were apt to hover near the edges of the dance floor. I initially presumed they congregated there to be slightly separated from the more flamboyant queer-performing dancers in the middle of the crowd, thereby, asserting their difference and possible difficulty identifying fully with the predominantly queer clubgoers. I eventually realized, however, that often the sound itself is also different in these areas of nightclubs. Although commensurably loud, the music on the outskirts tends to be thinner than other parts of the dance floor due to the placement of the sub-woofer speakers. It is notable that, on one hand, the treble frequencies have nearly identical dynamic levels which makes the difference between areas less noticeable. On the other, the significantly decreased bass pressure lends itself primarily to hearing the music through the ears instead of being felt throughout the entire body.

To some extent, a drag number could entail any of these forms of loudness. Drag King Johnny Rocket (he/him) described this experience to me, saying that the louder the sound (short of inducing pain), the more he is able to maintain his excitement and high energy that he was already hoping to convey to the audience. It helps him to stay in character and enjoy performing in-the-moment while also avoiding the potential awkwardness and boredom that "quiet" signifies. Similar to Johnny's case, my other interviews with performers have shown that, during a number, they are concerned primarily with avoiding the quiet rather than chasing the loud. For

if the music is the loudest thing in the room, no one can hear how loud *you* are—your crafted story, rather than your “off-stage self in mere costume” should shine.

For a trans\* person, being the loudest one in daily life is usually not the safest. Regardless of one’s personal journey or desire for gender-affirming healthcare (including both physical and mental healthcare), transphobia remains a highly visible, yet often disguised, danger lying in wait. In the first 19 days of 2023, there had already been 162 anti-trans bills submitted by various state legislatures across the U.S. These bills not only cause child abuse, but most are aimed at imprisoning trans\* adults and those that help trans\* people, across the board. Trans\* people are always aware of how loud they are, but what is most beautiful is that they know how loud they can be, if only given the chance. While many trans\* people typically avoid being “loud,” drag offers them a chance to flip the script and thrive in the expressive wall of sound. A crucial point here is that non-binary royalty are not merely rejecting quiet dysphoria in place of loudness as many performers appear to do, for such a perspective is bound in a binary, dysphoric worldview. Instead, the loudness of euphoria appears *despite* dysphoria. It is not a response birthed as a narrative of resistance, but a proclamation of self-actualization. While the loudness, itself, remains a practical, physical phenomenon, the accompanying euphoria is an active decision materialized through loudness. A non-binary worldview allows us to see that dysphoria and euphoria are not opposites, but cousins in their musical portrayal as quiet and loud.

I turn to Zooney Gaychanel (she/her), a drag queen and trans woman whose use of drag as a communicative tool reveals some of the affective potential of drag performance. On September 5th, 2021, Zooney hosted a drag show as part of the annual University of Michigan Pride Outside event to welcome new and returning LGBTQ+ students. As this is one of the largest audiences for a drag show in Ann Arbor, due to the sheer amount of outdoor space on intramural athletic

fields, Zooney and other performers took extra care to present numbers that would resonate with the students. 2021 was a special year. Not only was it the first time since 2019 that the event happened (due to the COVID-19 pandemic), but Zooney had come to know herself as non-binary and she used the show to announce it to the world. To do so, Zooney prepared a lip sync to Jessie J's pop song "Masterpiece" (2014). The song tells a story of someone who confidently steps out on their own where they "go with the punches, and take the hits," because "those who mind don't matter, those who matter don't mind." As a masterpiece in progress, they know they are someone who is "perfectly incomplete," but have decided to live more truthfully in the world. Visually, Zooney conveys the narrative by "painting" a canvas that is ultimately revealed as the non-binary flag (from top to bottom: horizontal yellow, white, purple, and black stripes). The painting is flipped around at the key change (c minor to Eb Major) and climax of the song.

"Masterpiece" by Jessie J (2014)

So much pressure, why so loud?	I like the view from the top
If you don't like my sound, you can turn it	You talk that
down	Blah blah that la la, that rah rah sh
I gotta roll	And I'm so done, I'm so over it
And I walk it alone	Sometimes I mess up, I eff up, I hit and miss
Uphill battle, I look good when	But I'm okay, I'm cool with it
I climb	I still fall on my face sometimes
I'm ferocious precocious	and I
I get braggadocios, I'm not	Can't color inside the lines 'cause
gonna stop	I'm perfectly incomplete

I'm still working on my masterpiece and I  
I wanna hang with the greatest gotta  
Way to go, but it's worth the wait, no  
You haven't seen the best of me  
I'm still working on my masterpiece and I  
Those who mind, don't matter  
Those who matter, don't mind  
If you don't catch what I'm throwing then I  
    leave you behind  
Don't need a flash  
And I am leaving like that  
They talk that  
Blah blah that la la, that rah rah sh  
Go with the punches, and take the hits  
Sometimes I mess up, I eff up, I swing and  
    miss  
But it's okay, I'm cool with this  
I still fall on my face sometimes  
    and I  
Can't color inside the lines 'cause  
I'm perfectly incomplete  
I'm still working on my masterpiece and I  
I wanna hang with the greatest gotta

Way to go, but it's worth the wait, no  
You haven't seen the best of me  
I'm still working on my masterpiece and I  
I still fall on my face sometimes  
    and I  
Can't color inside the lines 'cause  
I'm perfectly incomplete  
I'm still working on my masterpiece  
Masterpiece, masterpiece  
I still fall on my face sometimes  
    and I  
    [simultaneous "yeah"  
    vocalizations] (painting  
    flipped)  
Can't color inside the lines 'cause  
I'm perfectly incomplete  
I'm still working on my masterpiece and I  
I wanna hang with the greatest gotta  
Way to go, but it's worth the wait, no  
You haven't seen the best of me  
I'm still working on my masterpiece and I  
    [standing ovation]  
Still workin' on my masterpiece

Jessie J's pop rock single is an uplifting song of self empowerment, performed with piano, strings, and synths. Set predominantly in c minor, the song is driven forward by pulsing eighth notes on the first and third beats of each measure. The pulse becomes disrupted during each chorus when the accompaniment turns into sustained whole and half notes. This interruption allows the melody to take on a syncopated nature, emphasizing that she "can't color inside the lines, 'cause I'm perfectly incomplete." Leading to the key change, the song builds with a rising figure and Ab6–Abmaj7–Absus2 progression before landing on Eb Major. After the key change, Jessie J begins vocalizing and harmonizing alongside herself. It is in these dual vocalic moments that the crowd responded to Zooley the most. Not only does the added voice contribute to the overall excitement of the song, it is a common pop music feature that allows drag performers to become even more expressive. At the finale of the song, while the regular lyrics are still going, Zooley lip syncs an emphatic "I'm still working on, I'm still working on, I'm still working on my masterpiece." This is one of the few drag performances I have ever witnessed that received a standing ovation (or overwhelming cheering, which is the equivalent in a nightclub where there are no seats). Guided by gender euphoria, Zooley fully embraced the lyrics as a reflection of her own trans\* story, and the audience responded in kind, screaming and shouting affirmations to Zooley.

In most of Zooley's drag numbers, she incorporates both pop music as well as humorous spoken word from social media platforms such as *TikTok* and *Instagram*, or skits from comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live* or *MadTV*. Since at least the early 1990s and Lypsinka's infamous "Telephone" performance, drag royalty have made narrative mixes by combining



songs and/or spoken word.<sup>39</sup> Like Zooey, many drag artists tend to lean toward upbeat music that makes them want to move or dance. Fearless Amaretto (they/them) describes their music choices as dependent upon how it makes them feel:

The music has to move me. I listen to music all day every day, but I always know when “that song” comes on. It’s like I hear it and I see the performance in my head. Like I’ve already done it before.<sup>40</sup>

Johnny Rocket elaborated that:

There’s several factors that go into my music selection. I generally love to perform high-energy pop, rock, and indie songs. I go for songs that make me want to dance! It also helps if the song has some sort of build or crescendo. I like to incorporate a reveal or dramatic moment at this pivotal moment in the song.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, Force Majeure (they/them) looks to “what inspires movement in my body.” Epithet (she/her), who is not local to Michigan, but responded to one of my online surveys, said:

Either I get a stupid idea for a mix and find songs that fit what I want to do, or I hear a song and can feel the music in my body and know I can channel whatever emotion that song makes me feel.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Lypsinka was by no means the first to make a drag mix, others like the Fono Fools duo had been making their own cassette tape mixes since at least the late 1960s, but Lypsinka was one of the first to popularize the acrobatic nature of rapidly changing clips during a lip synch. More archival work must be done to find the earliest lip synchers.

<sup>40</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

<sup>41</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

<sup>42</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

Mochi (he/they/xe), a newer drag performer to the southeast Michigan scene also seeks out music that makes them feel something: “When I’m listening to music in the car, I like to imagine myself dancing to the songs.”<sup>43</sup>

Some performers simply put songs together either in clips or in full, while many include additional sound effects or spoken word, usually using a free editing software like Audacity. While it happens, it is less common that an experienced artist performs one song, start-to-finish, without any other audio clips mixed in. Whereas monarchs usually start with a song that makes them feel something, personally, they soon flip their attention to the audience and ask how they can best portray their feelings for the crowd. Much like a DJ, monarchs must have an ear for the overall performance to effectively transition between each disjointed part. During her preparation for Pride Outside, Zooey expressed concern to me over only lip-synching one un-edited song rather than a full mix. Ultimately, she decided that her message would be better received if the emotional flow was not broken by intermingling camp and humor. This was a major departure from her usual process. We have had many discussions over the years about the level of detail and control that making a mix affords. Although respectfully unspoken by performers, I have interpreted conversations with many monarchs as hinting at esteem held for someone who makes a mix instead of “just pressing play on Spotify.” Zooey tends to spend a few weeks to months compiling and editing clips to perform, but her desire to more accurately reflect her inner self and journey as non-binary was the catalyst for changing her creative process. In an interview, she stated that she recognized that the euphoria of her aligned gender identity and expression could not be conveyed through her usual performance practice, but required engaging deliberately across off-stage and on-stage presentations. I interpreted, and have since confirmed, Zooey’s

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<sup>43</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

claims were not truly about the audience, for it is impossible to fully predict how someone else will react. Instead, she, herself, felt a disruption of the emotional rhythm of the song, since it was a topic held so near. It was an opportunity for her *life as loud* to be fully embraced, but on her own terms. So rather than the result of potentially stunted audience empathy, changing the creative method signaled her own realization that the injection of humor for the sake of audience entertainment was counter to the feelings of self and euphoria that she expected. There was a felt solemnity hidden within the booming speakers. In order to impart a core aspect of her being, rather than that of a character, Zooney had to live it. To feel it. To shout it. It was a way for the audience to hear her. Not her words. Her. Zooney.

Zooney was able to live life as loud. Not only through the booming sound system, but in identifying and mobilizing her transness on such a public scale. She tapped into a powerful affect that interfaced with her embodied sense of gender euphoria and a pre-existing community understanding of how a cis-heteronormative world affects us all. By examining her performance through a dynamic lens of transness and euphoria, we gain an understanding of drag as a point of queer musical inter-action with a cisgender, heterosexual world.

When preparing another reflective number, Zooney reached out to me once again to express a similar fear that making one of her characteristic mixes of music and comedic sound clips could negatively disrupt the message she wanted to convey. Her goal was to perform a number for a Valentine's Day-themed, "Heartbreakers Ball" where she could flip the script and emphasize community love, solidarity, and hope rather than fleeting relationships and hardships. She chose to perform "When We Were Young" by Adele. The song was released in 2015 as part of Adele's album, *25*. Notably, the entire album is a well-known homage to Adele's own life

experiences at the time. It was in direct contrast to her earlier work, *21*, that was characterized by heartbreak. In *25*, Adele became reflective and nostalgic:

It was based on us being older, and being at a party at this house, and seeing everyone that you've ever fallen out with, everyone that you've ever loved, everyone that you've never loved, and stuff like that, where you can't find the time to be in each other [sic] lives....And you're all thrown together at this party when you're like 50, and it doesn't matter and you have so much fun and you feel like you're 15 again. So that's the kind of vibe of it really.<sup>44</sup>

Zooey's presentation drew the audience in and included them figuratively and literally. She worked to prepare a giant collage of photos of herself with her friends to display on the stage. Before the show, she planned to take a number of instant polaroid images to tack onto the collage. She utilized the intimate setting of the small Keystone Bar and Arcade to help evoke the emotional weight of the lyrics while reframing them as community love:

“When We Were Young” by Adele (2015)

Everybody loves the things you do	You're like a dream come true
From the way you talk	But if by chance you're here alone
To the way you move	Can I have a moment?
Everybody here is watching you	Before I go?
'Cause you feel like home	'Cause I've been by myself all night long

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<sup>44</sup> Daniel Kreps, “Adele Talks ‘When We Were Young,’ Jeff Buckley Influence in New Interview,” *Rolling Stone*, 17 Nov 2015. Accessed 25 Jan 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/adele-talks-when-we-were-young-jeff-buckley-influence-in-new-interview-71273/>.

Hoping you're someone I used to know  
You look like a movie  
You sound like a song  
My God this reminds me, of when we were  
    young  
Let me photograph you in this light  
In case it is the last time  
That we might be exactly like we were  
Before we realized  
We were scared of getting old  
It made us restless  
It was just like a movie  
It was just like a song  
I was so scared to face my fears  
Nobody told me that you'd be here  
And I'd swear you moved overseas  
That's what you said, when you left me  
You still look like a movie  
You still sound like a song  
My God, this reminds me, of when we were  
    young  
Let me photograph you in this light  
In case it is the last time

That we might be exactly like we were  
Before we realized  
We were sad of getting old  
It made us restless  
It was just like a movie  
It was just like a song  
When we were young  
(When we were young)  
When we were young  
(When we were young)  
It's hard to win me back  
Everything just takes me back  
To when you were there  
To when you were there  
And a part of me keeps holding on  
Just in case it hasn't gone  
I guess I still care  
Do you still care?  
It was just like a movie  
It was just like a song  
My God, this reminds me  
Of when we were young  
When we were young

(When we were young)	We were sad of getting old
When we were young	It made us restless
(When we were young)	Oh I'm so mad I'm getting old
Let me photograph you in this light	It makes me reckless
In case it is the last time	It was just like a movie
That we might be exactly like we were	It was just like a song
Before we realized	When we were young

While lip synching Adele's nostalgic words, Zoey aimed to take instant-photos of the audience in order to be able to give them a material iconic representation of that moment to keep. Unfortunately, her camera malfunctioned as the number began, but she still took digital photos with a borrowed phone so that she could, at the very least, share them on social media and tag those present. She actively centered the simultaneous trauma and euphoric potential in the queer community as Adele switched from chest voice to a mix on "Let me photograph you in this light in case it is the last time." The lyrics refer to the sadness that can accompany getting older, but double as a reference to the pain of queer time lost, and a queer future found (see Chapter 2). Zoey's unconventional use of a polaroid camera during a drag number was intended to collapse the boundaries between performer and audience, saturating the space in emotional feeling and creative expression.

Unlike the Pride Outside event which had a general audience of undergraduate students, audiences at a place like Keystone are more typically queer. While there are undoubtedly plenty of allies that attend these shows, it is always glaringly obvious when an "unsuspecting" cis het

group arrives, only to be greeted by drag performers mid-performance. Due to the entryway's location at the bottom of a staircase near the front of the performance space, it is clear when potential patrons turn around and leave, and even clearer when their scowls and disgust are on display.

Like in "Masterpiece," Zoey saw herself in the emotional content of "When We Were Young." However, this time the relation was even more tangible through the inclusion of the photos and emphasis on relating to her community. As a close friend, I know that the months leading up to this performance were riddled with hardship, frustration, and loss. Zoey had begun to seek out new ways to re-establish a sense of queer community in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti. Although the situation remains precarious in 2023, some venues have finally begun to allow drag and other LGBT-focused events to occur.<sup>45</sup>

Leading up to the intimate performance, her social media transformed into messages of gratitude, of love, of hope, and support for her friends and drag colleagues. "When We Were Young" was that emotion realized. Zoey put on her drag to spotlight the safety and love that accompanies community. Despite the intimate moment that appears relatively quiet and reverent in contrast to Pride Outside, the performance remained loud in content.

Even beyond specifically reflective numbers like "Masterpiece" or "When We Were Young," drag (both preparation and performance) is often a medium through which monarchs explore their queerness and gender identities (Horowitz 2019: 10; Shapiro 2007; Rogers 2018; Devitt 2013). Doing drag pushed me to scrutinize and better understand my gender as I sought to

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<sup>45</sup> Most bars re-opened in 2021, but refused to allow drag back. Many cited that they were looking for something less "niche" that would appeal to non-LGBT audiences as well. In 2020, Ann Arbor also saw one of its longtime queer venues, Aut Bar, close due to financial concerns and the pandemic.

quantify it in my own performances. Zooney not only used drag to present her identity to her audiences, but was able to develop confidence in appearing a certain way, visually. Like Zooney, Portia Lynn (she/her) describes how her off-stage self is affected by her drag persona:

I feel gender euphoria when I get out of drag. It is because of drag that I am more comfortable with the skin I am in. It also has allowed me to be more feminine out of drag without the negative thoughts that used to come along with “feminine” actions or clothing choices.<sup>46</sup>

Others like ReecizPieciz (it/its) see drag as a way to heighten its relationship with itself:

My connection and euphoria with my gender is very fluid so it’s hard to describe but what I think describes it best is knowing that my body and clothing is conveying the inward love and intricacy of my personality I feel. Drag often heightens my euphoria, allowing me to feel euphoric in ways I normally don’t.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, Johnny Rocket noted that he was pleasantly surprised when he put on his drag and it brought about gender euphoria. In a 2022 interview, he told me that his drag king persona is inspired by traditional markers of masculinity and the aesthetics he sees performed by other kings. His eyes lit up when expressing his excitement in the act of “putting on” drag because he knows it will be euphoric once his chest is bound, and his beard and brows drawn:<sup>48</sup>

When I feel gender euphoria, it feels like pure joy. I can’t stop smiling! It makes me feel confident, hot, and wholly myself. When I feel gender euphoria, my body feels exactly like it’s supposed to -- perfect, despite and because of all its imperfections.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

<sup>47</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

<sup>48</sup> Since that initial interview, Johnny has undergone top surgery to better express his trans-masc enby self.

<sup>49</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.



This joy also resounds loudly in his performances that are characteristically up-beat, exciting, and energetic. That said, he was careful to note that, while appearing similar, “Johnny,” the character, remains separate from everyday life. There is a boldness and crassness that “Johnny” embodies for sake of entertainment, that out-of-drag Johnny does not fully aspire to as a transmasculine person. Nonetheless, drag has been important for Johnny’s gender becoming. As part of a first date, he attended a Christmas-themed charity show hosted by ZooeY Gaychanel at Ann Arbor’s Club Above in 2019. It was his first time seeing drag, and he said that when the opening performer came out, something clicked inside. “Oh shit, maybe I’m not a woman!”<sup>50</sup> This show marked the beginning of his journey exploring gender in drag on-stage, as well as consciously becoming transmasculine off-stage.

Drag is everything to me! Attending my first drag show first inspired me to think critically about my own gender. The community I found in drag gave me the knowledge and support I needed to realize my trans identity and come out publicly. Now, every time I’m in drag, it’s a celebration of my gender journey (Johnny Rocket).<sup>51</sup>

Johnny’s story differs from ZooeY’s here. She has intentionally used drag as a safe way to experiment with off-stage gender before inhabiting it day-to-day, whereas Johnny saw the two mostly go together. As her gender identity has developed, ZooeY’s drag has also shifted to always be a step “beyond” everyday ZooeY.

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<sup>50</sup> Johnny Rocket, interview with author, 21 Jul 2022. This interview represented a circle of sorts. This was the first time we realized that the show Johnny attended was also my drag performance debut—although my performance wasn’t notable and I cannot claim to have influenced him. The main performer he remembered was Elle XL (known at the time as “Amanduh”), who came out as non-binary soon after that show.

<sup>51</sup> Johnny Rocket, interview with author, 21 Jul 2022.

The subtle differences in how Zooney and Johnny approach their drag in relation to their everyday lives point to the heart of my proposition that gender euphoria can be felt affectively through drag. It is self-regulatory as well as an opportunity to evaluate and interact in a space, loudness constantly in motion. Gender euphoria joins off-stage and on-stage life, allowing the monarch to choose when and how to inhabit their fullest, loudest selves as purposefully felt, embodied exchanges.

### **Audience Perspective**

After bolstering the very practical necessity of helping a drag artist really “get into it” via the hapticality of loud sounds, Bird suggests on a theoretical level that as the wave of sound permeates one’s body, music’s materiality helps to “suture the break between drag queen and loudspeaker” (Bird 2020:45). There is a suspension of disbelief where the vocalic body aligns with the observed one. This applies both to the audience member being entertained by this larger-than-life character as well as the performer themselves, as I described above. The practical nature of drag performance, therefore, yields a re-embodiment of sorts wherein performer and audience member are intertwined by the same aural catalyst across a shared narrative.

Khubchandani describes this general exchange:

By facing her, tipping her, whistling for her, we come into relation with her, become gendered subjects of her address, ritualized witnesses of her song and dance, fellow travelers through time, space, and feeling. For those of us who traffic in her aesthetics, she affirms our right to be there, to reinvent gender, to exaggerate dance, to commit fully to the emotions and breaths of a song. We continue to cruise while she performs, but her splits and lip-quivers fight for our attention, ask us to praise and honor her

transfemininity in spaces where naturalized masculinities—jocks, bros, and bears—carry so much cultural capital (Khubchandani 2020:18).

In terms of gender euphoria, this narrative is both aesthetic and somatic. The sound of drag yields intersubjective meaning. This sonic impetus not only “sutures the break between drag queen and loudspeaker,” but intimates the perceptual distance between performer and audience. To borrow a term from film studies, an audience encompassed by sound is more likely to accept the “audio-visual contract” whereby they can believe the sound and visuals are coming from the world within the screen (stage). As I noted above, to hear a performer’s breath and clothing smashes the illusion.

In a small nightclub or bar, the mere likelihood of quiet can be agonizing. Although unintentional, the Pride Outside event organizers helped to counteract this by choosing an outdoor venue. Not only does it make room for a crowd of hundreds, but artists are also afforded the simultaneous protection of being physically distant, while their prepared sonic space is quite immersive and near. In my own numbers at this show, I found that I could comfortably “hide” in the sound for quite some way into the crowd before feeling the urge to return to front and center, as I began to externally notice my own mouthed sounds escaping. These are the unintentional, yet near unavoidable quiet grunts and breathy words that emerge when mouthing a lip sync. That said, for an outdoor show like Pride Outside, there is an additional pitfall where the lip sync may be out-of-sync and therefore less effective once the delayed sound hits the furthest reaches of the audience. When the sound is delayed, disbelief is reintroduced, and the audio-visual contract is broken. This metaphoric suturing is enacted by the physical nature of sound waves and our pre-existing expectations of its alignment with the visuals. I apply Bird’s notion of haptic aurality, then, as a corporeal link between feeling and sound. Between performance and knowing.

Between life and loud. Therefore, I amplify his idea to represent this tangible series of affective nodes through which sound and meaning traverse through and around the body.

Loud is always charged with meaning. From a guardian raising their voice to admonish a child, to a friendly neighbor shouting “good morning,” to a stranger on the street yelling to warn of oncoming traffic. We internalize and respond to these loud moments. Beyond the voice, we are likewise attuned to the loudness of a train whistle, a car horn, the booming bass of a party, or the plethora of things that go bump in the night. Loud draws attention. It incites connection. It does not merely pass on meaning. Loud, itself, *is* meaning. But it is perhaps only through the network opened by haptic aurality that such aesthetic knowledge can be observed.

Following Bird, my adaptation of hapticality is drawn from the work of Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of the haptic or smooth vs. the optic or striated, as well as Laura Marks’s expansion of their idea towards a “haptic visuality” in film. Deleuze and Guattari discussed the idea of the smooth vs. the striated in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). While the smooth consists of the formlessness like the open sea, the striated denotes paths and structure. It is the same sea, but one experience is journey-based, affected by the wind and waves in the moment, while the other is destination-based, supported by navigational concepts such as latitude and longitude. The smooth, haptic journey is internalized, whereas the destination, the striated subject, remains external.

Marks (2000) elaborated upon Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding in order to apply it to film analysis. She argued that as a mode of hapticality, visuality functions similar to the sense of touch. Therein, the act of watching a film could spark physical feelings and memories from all the senses. Her phenomenological approach suggested that film could be a tool to pass on cultural memory and experiences. In practice, haptic visuality is formed through intimate

closeups. When you see goosebumps on another's skin, you can almost feel them empathetically. It fires the mirror neurons. When a camera captures said goosebumps, it is usually done with an extreme close-up and shallow depth of field. The lens's short depth renders the background out-of-focus. In the haptic sense, it mimics a place where we go behind the eyes, even before becoming aware that we are entering the mind's eye. The area of being where "flow" manifests, possibly even up until the point of dissociation or obsession.

As Bird shows us, hapticality is not limited to the eyes, for the body comes to know meaning through all its senses. We can notice hapticality, then, in that feeling of intimacy. I mean intimate as in relating to oneself via absorbing an external experience regardless of the sense. You take in what you encounter, but the "shallow depth of field" tricks your mind into thinking things are indeed as close as they appear. They are internalized as your own. The intimate reception is beautifully profound. It applies to both performer and audience, individually and collectively. These innate complexities of depth and understanding reaffirm my refusal to separate subjectivity and intersubjectivity when analyzing the intentionally intersubjective art of drag. Heller (2015) theorized a similar phenomenon called "listener collapse" where:

loud sound dissolves the ability to distinguish between interior and exterior worlds, especially in regard to sound and self. Sound does not only touch, it saturates and fills mental and physical consciousness, eliminating the possibility of detached listening (45). Following Gracyk's (1996) discussion of immersion within loud rock music and Nancy's (2007) inside/outside, listener collapse could also describe the intersubjective moment "behind the eyes." It is a way to conceive of sound's haptic potential for bridging between the external world and internal experience (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of alternate forms of hapticality as it relates to the endosonus, exosonus, and their temporal experience through the primal imprint).

In music, dynamics are one of the only ways we can determine depth; that is, distance from the listener to the perceived source. Of course, in focusing on a nightclub or theater setting that houses most drag, I am forgoing echoes, the doppler effect, or pitch alterations from physically being far away. I am also positing a contractual limitation on distance between audience and performer, as in the case of *Pride Outside* where the visuals and sounds may not always seem to align temporally. To be even more precise, I suggest that loudness during a drag performance allows for an intimacy that links the audience to the performer. The hapticality of sound primes the audience for participating in the construction of meaning. It allows them to momentarily suspend disbelief and experience empathy.

When the lyrics become aurally forefronted over the rustling of costumes and a performer's breath, it allows all present to tap into the meaning behind the words. In Zooey Gaychanel's case, anyone can empathize cognitively with the idea of a transphobic society forcing a trans person to struggle or belabor their "perfect incomplete[ness]." From the opening moments of Zooey's reflective "Masterpiece," she quickly framed the narrative towards the effect that society has on personal expression. Although the audience was not yet aware of the specific trans undertones in her words, the sentiment was easily relatable under the umbrella of an LGBTQ+ event. The setting alone encouraged the audience to meet her halfway:

So much pressure, why so loud?

If you don't like my sound, you can turn it down

I gotta roll

And I walk alone

....

Through the metaphors of (societal) pressure and loudness, Zooey presented an ongoing struggle where her failures were constantly shouting at the vanguard of people's minds. She visibly stumbled, fell, and could not "color inside the lines," reminding us that her voice is not given the agency it deserves as she simply wants to show us her true self and potential. What we see in Zooey's performance is a familiar narrative of trans life. Many of us are treated as if on display, constantly reminded by others of our transness, our Otherness in a cisgender, heterosexual world. Society cannot always pinpoint where or how we are different, but their usual response is to stifle any outward expression that does not fit in the lines. While many cisgender people relegate transness to some stable, finite category where one is transgender and that is the end of it, many trans people consider transness as a journey and not a destination. It is this journey, this unfolding of experience that I am inspired by, for I believe it can help us reframe our perspectives. Through the act of lip syncing, Zooey evokes personal experience and aesthetics. She applies her understanding of audience listening practices [read: expectations] to make meaning through music and somatic experience. In effect, Zooey taps into the potential of haptic aurality (and possibly visuality) so audiences can internalize her narrative through mind and body.

This is similar to Julian Henriques's account of sonic dominance in reggae where a powerful sound system yields almost total attention (Henriques 2003:452). He found that, "In the reggae sound system session the aural is both a medium for oral or musical codes of communication, as well as a material thing in and of itself" (460). We can intellectually relate to Zooey as she finds agency and perhaps even joy in sharing her experiences with a whole audience of people. But in addition to distracting away from the disconnect between the recorded track and drag performer, the nature of being awash in a wall of sound can also distract attendees

from recognizing themselves as mere observers. It is “sound as both content and form, acoustic energy and sign wave information, both substance and code, particle and pattern,” somatic and aesthetic (460). At times, listeners can become fully engrossed, and in subconscious solidarity with the narrative. Their perspectives can shift between personal and interpersonal ways of thinking.

Haptic aurality tells us that when the sonic depth of field is narrow, it draws us in as listeners to “believe” a lip sync. This belief is a form of self-identification or relationship due to the closeness of the sound; perhaps allowing a “my vocal cords make sound, so should yours” suspension of disbelief. The loud wall of sound is where we journey through and experience the feeling of sound waves with a rawness of meaning, a hapticality that informs our body with aesthetic knowledge about external forces that we may then instinctively relate to.

This is not to say that hapticality is not conscious or even universal. It is merely seen and experienced in a more deeply personal space than Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of the striated or Clough’s biomediated body. It is internal rather than external. It is haptic rather than tactile. It is a sort of proprioception and orientation rather than engagement or purposeful interaction. Hapticality is the meaning-full product of a medium such as sound that is simultaneously not touchable, yet wholly physical. In Zooey’s case, the loud suturing helps us become re-oriented, in mind and body, toward her narrative of struggle from living every day in a transphobic world, rather than when her transness is compulsorily accentuated by society.

Through her manipulation of established listening practices, combined with an audience initially unaware of her transness, Zooey tapped into forms of empathy that opened the door for crowd interpretation. Not only did it prime them to recognize the limitations of a (cis-)heteropatriarchal world, but she invited them to internalize her joy. As she felt euphoria in



resisting and perhaps even overcoming the world's restrictive clamor, Zooney imparted the aesthetic of euphoria through sound as motion. It helped enact a form of embodiment and intentionality where we became attuned not only to the ongoing process of becoming while trans in everyday life, but to the euphoria achievable through self-actualization.

Thus far, I have focused on the somatic reception of loud in order to recast how we conceive of the intersubjectivity between drag performer and audience. The sonic dominance, to once again borrow Henriques's term, "generates a very special type of environment and experience – a place between places and a time out of time," (Henriques 2003:469) as audience members and performers alike begin to, "have a relationship not with the sound as something separate from them, but in the sound as something which is a part of them" (464). While the euphoria in Zooney Gaychanel's performance orients audience members haptically, it is through the audience's own perception and cognitively empathetic response to that euphoria that Zooney can build meaning. Sometimes, this response becomes physical. In the context of Keystone, for example, there are areas where "non-participants" can go that are quieter. These areas are typically far beyond the tape outline and it is much easier to have a conversation, albeit with raised voices, in these sections (see Figure 3.2). It is also common for a "semi-participative" group to occupy the table directly adjacent to the main speakers. This long high-top table is the closest sitting area to the pool table and dartboard, two of the most popular games for groups to play at Keystone. It is somewhat removed from the show since the tape outline does not reach it fully and often serves as a boundary, protective or welcoming. Sometimes groups sit on the far end and do not engage with the drag show, and at other times, sit closer to the stage. There is an unspoken practice that those standing around the tape outline gauge the situation and either close off the stage or open it to those sitting at the table depending on their demeanor.

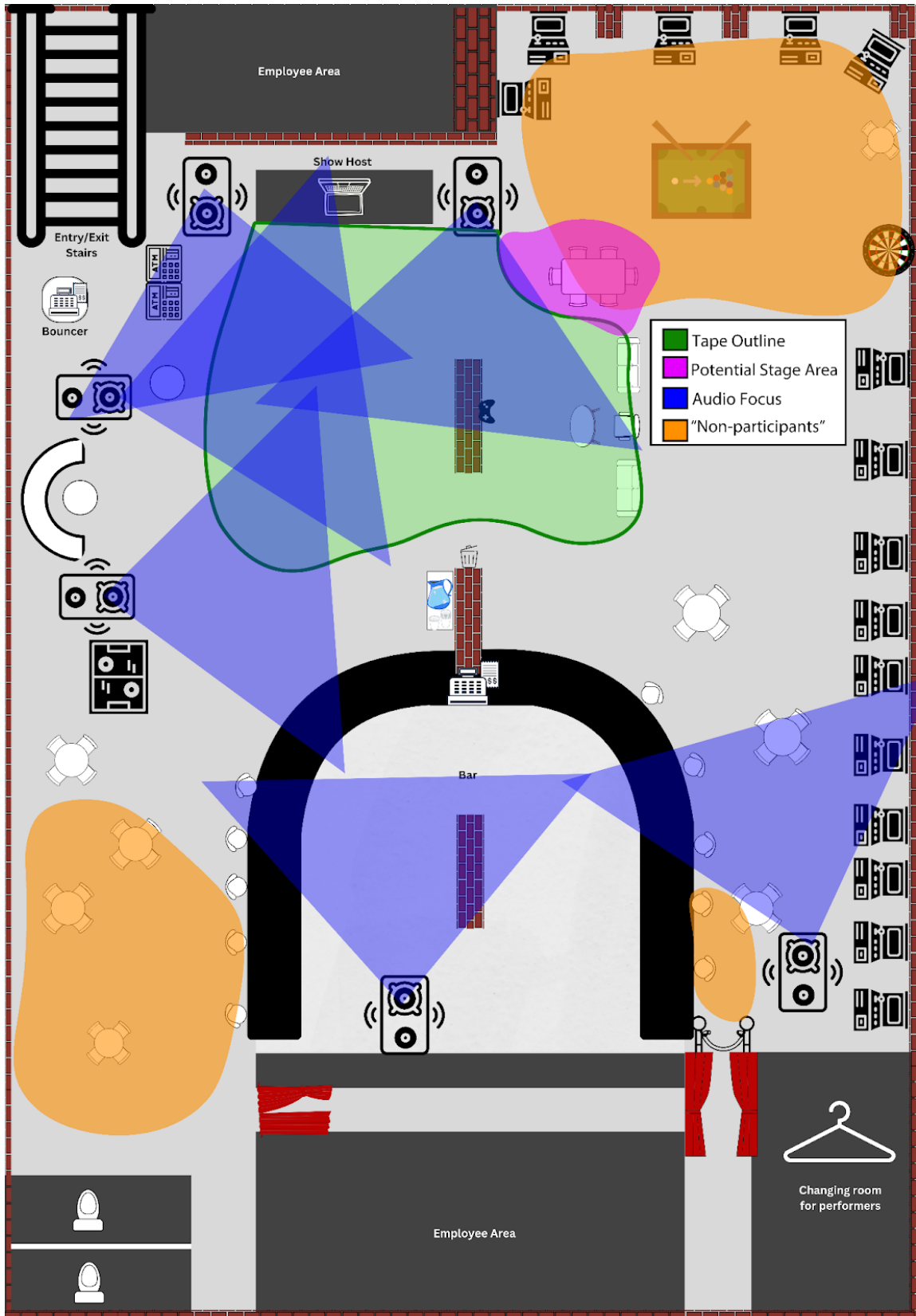


Figure 3.2 Keystone Bar & Arcade with Non-Participant Areas

It is also a common problem at Keystone that non-queer “outsiders” will arrive and attempt to cross the “stage” mid-performance. It became custom for a few regulars to stand and “guard” the stage, preventing people from walking across to the bar or dartboard until after the number finished. Unfortunately, protecting the performers often yields profanity and threats of violence spewed toward the community member that stepped in to stop them. As far as I am aware, harsh words and profane gestures have been the extent of it. These moments are not ones of policing, rather, are examples of “communal performance labor” (Bailey 2013) whereby participants practice drag alongside the performer by helping to regulate the space accordingly. Following Khubchandani, by protecting the drag performer we also come into relation with them. We affirm their aesthetics and we affirm one another’s right to be there.

But there is a key part of drag that allows us to take these theories even further. In his book *The Anatomy of Loneliness* (2021), Chikako Ozawa-de Silva notes that, “If subjectivity is typically understood as the cognitive and affective states of individuals, then empathy can be understood as the capacity to understand and resonate with those states in another” (37). Drag is not simply an art produced from the stage (or loudspeaker), but one that is continuously informed affectively by audience feedback, where loudness is a key indicator. While all subjectivity is intersubjectivity, drag is unique because the genre demands that it performs this loud interrelationship between drag monarch and audience member. Just as we become re-oriented toward the performer, they also become oriented toward the audience.

Through his work on queer dancefloor intimacies, Luis Manuel Garcia (2011) has shown that people are not empty vessels that succumb to an impersonal affect, but simultaneously invest in their own personal affective experiences while being open to an environment filled with affect from others. Further, people are known to be affected by those more closely related to them

rather than larger narratives (Mazzarella 2017). Drag performers are not immune to this; in fact, they rely on it. They work to present an account that people can relate to because they, too, can identify with it. When the audience screams, cheers, and laughs along with a drag artist, they are performing their own cognizance for the genre and situation. Their response of *loud* is to return a mediated version of the performer's own loudness as dispensed from the stage. This can be hindered and the performance deemed less successful due to poor audio and quietness, or rather a lack of loudness. If the sound production is underwhelming leading the audience to not "believe" the number, they are less likely to participate in the same way, resulting in an even quieter, awkward situation now filled with the breath and shuffles of the crowd and not just the monarch. That said, from my time at shows, I have seen how experienced members of the audience are quite often aware of this and will try to cheer even louder to keep everything going and less awkward for everyone. After all, as Welch and Fremaux pointed out, clubgoers rely on loudness to mask undesirable sounds and unwanted thoughts (2017). Their sensate escapism begs for the (new) meaning offered to them by the performer.

Denise Gill wrote that, "Transmission emerges as the site where past practices are rendered hopeful iterations of the future" (Gill 2017:99). I would argue that an instance of hapticality is such a site in that the subconscious expansiveness of interrelating parts is informed by prior interactions. What I have attempted to show in this chapter, is that these sites are necessarily somatic as much as they are emotional or cultural. The drag monarch and audience member both come to a show where the nature of drag demands they meet one another in a shared realm supported by sound system, artistry, and community knowledge. Trans\* performers like Zooley Gaychanel and Johnny Rocket use music to self-regulate their loudness in a transphobic world. Zooley's story, in particular, has shown us that there is performative meaning

in the act of seeking joy and euphoria through drag. From the stage, she gazes upon the audience as they, in turn, can escape into her very same gaze. Living *life as loud* narrows the gap between them. This metaphor of loudness in drag performance is perhaps what Ozawa-de Silva would call a form of second-person subjectivity. That which is perceived becomes dually personal as those involved are in constant communication throughout the lip sync. The second-person nature of a drag number begs all participants to affectively empathize with the object having the experience, while they were already intimately tied intersubjectively due to the same rules of drag performance. But we must remember that such affective empathy is equally somatic as it is intellectual. Affective empathy, according to Ozawa-de Silva, is either, “adopting the posture or matching the neural responses of an observed other,” or “coming to feel as another person feels” on a level more intense than intellectually sympathizing. (Ozawa-de Silva 2021:38). By tracing the aesthetic perception and creation of gender euphoria through my metaphor of “loud,” we are able to easily see the body as an interface between recorded track, performer, and audience. As Vannini and Waskul said, “meaning as music, therefore, becomes a sensorial phenomenon through which the textures of physical experience are refracted onto the textures of sound, through both the poietic and esthetic processes” (Vannini and Waskul 2006:15). I posit that loud is not merely an affective catalyst in the formation of meaning, and reframe their quote suggesting that loud “*is* the resonance of individuals acting in concert with one another” (16).

If we are able to recast our perception of the world of drag through a trans\* voice and lens, we open the door toward the radical potential of euphoria to usurp hate and guide us in self-actualization. Understanding transness as orienting ourselves in the world in a non-regulated, smooth way, opens the door for conceiving of new queer knowledge of experience. I end with

words from the start of this chapter, as the process of becoming is always a part of our beginning:

*There are moments, however fleeting, where my joy yields confidence and peace. I feel safe. I feel uninhibited. I'm not too loud or quiet, nor plain like a luke-warm conversation. I don't feel like I am me, I feel me. It's euphoric.*

## Chapter 4 Photographic Silence and Listening for Euphoria

### Introduction

We hear silence, which is the absence of sounds. Silence cannot be seen, tasted, smelled, or felt. Only heard. Hearing silence is successful perception of an absence of sound. It is not a failure to hear sound. A deaf man cannot hear silence.

(Sorenson 2009:126).

*I found myself editing a set of photos earlier this evening. It was another day of revisiting my personal archive to try to catch up on the embarrassing backlog of unedited event shots. At some point my lo-fi playlist on Spotify accidentally paused, but I didn't notice, and it didn't matter because I was making all the effort to relive the show from months prior. It wasn't all that fresh in my memory, but when I saw the costumes and grandeur on stage, I instantly began to recall the sounds of the night—the cheering, the laughter, the booming bass, the hours of hearing my friends' drag mixes on repeat in the dressing room and in the car on the way to the show. But here I was, sitting in a weighty silence that momentarily separated me from the outside world. One that only I could hear.*

In his opening argument on the perception and introspection of absences, philosopher Roy Sorenson complicates long-standing theorizations of sound whereby silence has been framed as a mere absence of sound rather than its own discrete event. Although there are seeming contradictions in his work, his contribution offers an understanding of the role that the ear plays in hearing absences in addition to the formal input of sound waves. But what about the sounds we hear without our ears ever becoming engaged? What about imagined sounds? Stepping into the silent world of historical photographs, this chapter weaves a narrative around the notion of unseen sounds and veiled euphoria harbored within the images of trans and non-binary performers. It is a journey that begins with a question: “Can we hear any aspects of euphoria in a silent music-related photograph?” In an attempt to answer this, I turn to the cues that images offer us, the pauses they command, and the stories they whisper through their silence. I consider new ideas about silence and the archive alongside the concepts of triple intentionality, hapticality, relationality, and euphoria in order to open the door to fresh possibilities. I seek out the potential for photographs to transcend their ostensibly inherent quietness, thereby prompting a richer, more visceral response that might allow us to “hear” the joy of the subjects that we study. If interperformativity asks us to take into consideration one’s off-stage life, what does this mean when dealing with the limits of an archive? This chapter is not only about the challenge of identifying euphoria in silence, but also how multisensory approaches to historical artifacts can transform our understanding of the archive and, by extension, the history of drag performance.

I am not alone in asking what can be achieved by listening to images. In her chapter in *Archival Silences*, Buenrostro (2021) discussed the importance that listening to silences through photographs is for creating a democratic archive. She claimed that archivists can use their



authority to help mediate and uncover silences. Buenrostro's work followed Lito Ocampo, who was arrested in 1974 when he was 20 years old in the Province of Pangasinan in the Philippines. To help center and drive conversations with Ocampo and others during ethnographic interviews, Buenrostro used photographs that had been secretly taken by Ocampo during his imprisonment. Her research showed that:

Photographs operate not only as evidence, but also as sites of memory or *lieux de mémoire*...as people interact with photographs, life stories are evoked and generated so that the 'repressed or suppressed memories' not be completely forgotten or undermined by 'master memories' or dominant narratives (Buenrostro 2021:125).

Another interviewee, for example, began describing parts of daily life as a prisoner that he was reminded of when he saw a portrait of himself sitting on a bed. Photographs were the affective tool that helped Buenrostro's interlocutors grasp onto memories and give voice to aspects of their experiences that have long been silenced and forgotten.

Others like Shankar (2019), Fairey (2018), and Prins (2010) have turned their ears to a practice known as participatory photography in order to better understand the anthropological value of listening to one's ethnographic participants rather than simply hearing them. Following Feld and Basso (1996), Shankar claims that "when we see an image, we also hear: we get a sense of place and make assumptions about who people are" (Shankar 2019:232). Similarly, Back (2004) and Edwards (2008) have used photography as a way to metaphorically listen to those who are normally overlooked by society.

Recent work in neuroscience further suggests that imagined sounds may have a direct connection to the visual process. With regard to internal experiences, cross-sensory research is certainly not new. It would be, after all, the reflective site for all sensory experiences. For

visuals, sounds, and haptics, this is especially true, as there has been extensive research and philosophical pondering on phenomena like synesthesia. Understood as a crossing of the senses, synesthesia has been traditionally believed to be a rare occurrence, but some scholars such as Ginsberg (1923) claim that everyone has some form of synesthesia, with 15% of the population simply experiencing more vivid manifestations of such crossings (Johnson, Allison, and Baron-Cohen 2013:14). Part of the discrepancy between estimations is that there is no universally recognized diagnostic criteria, or strict definition of what constitutes synesthesia. In Western culture, for example, we often use metaphors based in 16th-century synaesthetic, alchemical thought to describe the weather or one's feelings (e.g. warm, heavy, dark). While cross-sensorial, this is quite distinct from seeing colors (externally projected or internally associated) when hearing music.

Similarly, there has recently been increased interest in the mechanisms underlying the “tingling” feelings that accompany auditory- or visually-induced ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response). Many ASMR-responders report feeling tingling sensations that start at their scalp when they experience certain stimuli like whispering, tapping, moving lights, and even personal attention. Poerio, Ueda, and Kondo (2022) found that there is a significant, positive correlation between those that report experiencing ASMR and those that have common types of synesthesia. While they note that more research is needed to determine their differences, their co-occurrence suggests a relationship that could reveal a deeper understanding of what synesthesia is (or is not). Both research into ASMR and synesthesia proper continuously hint that the cross-sensory mechanisms at play may be present in everyone, not just diagnosed synaesthetes.

In their work on hearing motion synesthesia, Fassnidge and Freeman (2018) explored exactly that. They found that visual input can sometimes invoke an auditory sensation in the

endosonus known as vEAR, or “visually-evoked auditory response.” Building from studies on synesthesia and high-level cognitive imagery, the authors explain that vEAR may be much more common in the general public than traditional forms of synesthesia, like the association of music with colors. They presented research participants with a variety of silent videos with varying degrees of visual motion, flashes, and other patterns and asked them to rate the level of imagined sounds each provoked.

One popular example of vEAR that the authors use to explain the phenomenon is a GIF showing two transmission towers swinging their power lines like a jump rope with a third tower jumping. As it lands, the canvas shakes, as if the ground trembled. Many report hearing a proto-synaesthetic “thud” that can be described as an experience that is “weirder than the normal experience of hearing. It’s somewhere at the hazy intersection between a real sensation and imagination” (Resnick 2018). The growing popularity of Reddit forums like the /r/noisygifs, with 304k members where people upload GIFs that they can supposedly hear, and others such as this is important when considering that there was a positive correlation between respondents who were familiar with vEAR and reported sonic activity when viewing the images. In their initial large-scale study, the authors attempted to determine if vEAR was the result of true synesthesia or a form of associative auditory imagery. While there is evidence supporting either process, in an earlier study, Fassnidge, Marcotti, and Freeman (2017) found strong indication that low-level visualization may stimulate auditory processing without the need to access higher-level associations. When playing quiet, external audio at the same time as a visual input, many respondents noted that they could no longer hear the sound waves due to the forceful sounds in their mind.

In addition to /r/noisygifs, one may frequently come across social media posts or pop culture articles along the lines of “I can hear this image.” These tend to be screencaps or memes from iconic moments in a particular fandom. For drag, there are countless images showing a *Drag Race* queen’s exaggerated facial expression. Although different than the automatic synaesthetic response to a visual or auditory stimulus, the ability to be momentarily transported back to an iconic moment and hear a quip in the imagined voice of said queen, reflects the potential wide-spread nature of cross-sensory experiences in media.

If we are in some way familiar with a situation, then perhaps the sounds we hear upon looking at a photograph are a form of vEAR. It may take varying levels of awareness to hear more or less distinct material, but imagined sound can be activated at each stage. In the /r/rupaulsdragrace Reddit forum, user u/American\_Life posted an image of Eureka O’Hara with the title “I can hear this picture. What other pictures can you guys hear?”<sup>52</sup> Many responded with quotes or links to other pictures with titles like “Latrice laughing” or “HIEEEEE,” clearly referencing other iconic memories from the show. One user, u/EricHD97, made the comment “Not sure if it counts but I can always hear the deafening silence when I see a picture of Laganja’s standup routine.” Although it is a bit tongue-in-cheek, their comment suggests that silence may also have a place in vEAR, especially in the case of contextual screencaps.<sup>53</sup>

vEAR is simply another way to show that we can hear visuals in our minds. What seems silent can resound with context (screencaps) or even other biological factors (bouncing GIFs)

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<sup>52</sup> u/American\_Life. “R/Rupaulsdragrace - I Can Hear This Picture. What Other Pictures Can You Guys Hear?” *Reddit*. 2018. Accessed 26 March 2024.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/rupaulsdragrace/comments/90z1qv/i\\_can\\_hear\\_this\\_picture\\_what\\_othe\\_r\\_pictures\\_can/](https://www.reddit.com/r/rupaulsdragrace/comments/90z1qv/i_can_hear_this_picture_what_othe_r_pictures_can/).

<sup>53</sup> Silence in looping GIFs also occurs, but seems to be more akin to the musical contrast between sound and silent absence.

that affect more than just synaesthetes. It is important to note that while I can hear many GIFs upon first sight, if I am not familiar with a particular *Drag Race* argument or other iconic moment, I am unable to hear the image at all. That said, the rising prevalence of “can you hear this image” posts have formed a genre where one can at least expect that others may be able to hear it.

To understand more of the potential and limits of silence, I return to Sorenson’s work. He positions the ear as the sole organ for sensing sound, claiming that the rest of the body can merely detect sound. As a philosopher, his approach is, understandably, a phenomenological one that treats silence as an event rather than material—silence is certainly different from a decontextualized stasis of nothing. Like a shadow shaping the edges of light, absence requires perspective. To this end, we know the answer to the age-old question: if a *tree falls in a forest*, the answer is ‘no,’ it does not make a sound unless it can be perceived by a listener with the capacity to interpret sounds, but so too could the listener hear silence if the tree were to not fall. While Sorenson’s scholarship brings the body into philosophical discussions that have often precluded it, his approach still maneuvers through a limited scope of sensory involvement with sound and makes certain assumptions about silence that are misguided.

While I agree that silence as an event requires perceptual delineation, to say that “a deaf man cannot hear silence” is an ableist misunderstanding. Not only do most forms of deafness not equate to anacusis, or total hearing loss, but such a claim negates the undeniable fact that we also “hear” through our entire bodies, not the ear alone. In the previous chapter, I discussed how we can hear euphoria through the haptic “touch” of sound’s loud physical nature in a nightclub, and anyone that has stood near a subwoofer or marching band knows that we do, indeed, *feel* sound throughout our bodies. Sorenson would say that this is a difference between detection and

sensing. For example, we may *detect* electricity from a battery by touching it with our tongue, but an animal like the electric eel has special organs for *sensing* electric activity. In the same way, according to Sorenson, only our ears can sense sound (127–128). But in practical terms, what does it mean to detect rather than sense sound? For example, try listening to a sound source and turn your head left to right slowly. Notice how the sound feels different when it hits your ear in different ways. Don't try to *listen* to what the content of the sound is, but feel, *hear*, how the sound waves hit your ear differently. With practice, one can become more aware of the pulsating air hitting their ears from certain directions.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps this is a form of detecting sound through our skin organ and how it affects the sound waves prior to vibrating the mechanisms of the inner ear, but, as Pauline Oliveros has shown us through Deep Listening, hearing (physical) is not the same as listening (reflective), and neither of which are limited to the ear alone.

As Jennifer Judkins (2011) discussed, the concept of “silence” tends to appear when in apposition with music. Musicians shape the musical experience by framing lush or boisterous sounds with quiet and stillness. Although the noise of shuffling and rustling remains, the musical moment is encased in perceptual silence. Judkins delineates between two forms of musical silence: measured and unmeasured. From internal “breath marks” in a musical line, to improvised grand pauses and caesuras, both measured and unmeasured silences are defined by their temporal relationship to the musical *sound*. Anthropologist William O. Beeman (2005) drew from Shannon and Weaver's (1949) Gestalt psychology concepts of figure and ground and high- and low-information content to describe these musical breaks. A silent pause between

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<sup>54</sup> While it goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, it would be interesting to examine if there is a correlation between source direction and interpretation of its content. Anecdotally, I have found it to be true. Although I am exploring the role of listening in this chapter, if we instead focus on hearing, what can we learn about our relationship with the world?

movements, for example, is “the steady state ‘ground’ against which music becomes a ‘figure’” (25). Conversely, a fermata becomes high information content as a figure in contrast to the ongoing musical ground. Like Sorenson points out, musical silence tends to be framed simply as a case of absences. Sound and “silence” are often opposite pairings for dramatic effect. Silence can also point to our surroundings at a specific time. When recording audio, it is important to record a few seconds of “silent” room sound that may be used between clips since the ambient noise changes with each setting. Although subtle, a “more absent absence” disrupts the flow usually gone unnoticed by the listener. Musical silence may also reveal the unspoken. Like Messiaen’s silence-sound paradox in his *Vingt regards sur l’enfant Jesu* or Mompou’s *Música callada*, composers have often used the weighty void of silence to exemplify spiritual reverence and contemplation (Losseff 2007:4–5).

In sound studies, silence is often brought into discussion around “noise,” partially because we know true silence cannot exist so what we define as silence is, in fact, quite noisy. As Cage masterfully reminded us in *4’33”*, sound is constant in society; even in the extreme of an anechoic chamber, you would begin to hear your own bodily systems. Yet, we do hear “silence” as a perceptual phenomenon when we begin to *listen* for meaning in the quiet. Sorenson seems to contradict himself by saying that reflection is not needed for silence to exist and sometimes we are only aware of it after it is gone, but I would argue that such awareness is undeniably a form of reflection (Sorenson 2009:127). To convey this idea, he offers the example of a dog whistle. If you did not notice the puff of air, the high frequency would go entirely unnoticed. Silence. But as he states earlier in the chapter, hearing silence is not the same as not hearing.

Sorenson also makes note of the Cage and anechoic chamber examples, but dismisses them as an unreasonable privileging of high standards. He likens silence to how a knife, while freshly cleaned from a dishwasher, remains unsuitable for surgery. Yet, if we are to hold silence as a phenomenological event, dependent upon an observer's interpretation, I argue that we cannot preclude an exhaustive range for the sake of semantics. We can hold that silence is objectively unachievable, while making room for perceived silence from the listener. After all, sound, and silence, are dependent upon the presence of one that can interpret them. The sound waves produced by a dog whistle are only "silent" for humans, not for dogs. Like the tree in the forest, humans are not the only beings for whom sound exists.

Where I believe that Sorenson falls short is that his definition of silence remains dependent upon external factors. He is most concerned with forms of silence found in our world through the absence of sound waves, but imagined sound is no less real. In this chapter, I aim to expand the conversation around silence by approaching it from a temporal and multisensory angle that takes advantage of sounds heard only in the mind. Assuming that we *can* hear euphoria through a silent photograph, I ask *how*. Like in the case of vEAR, I argue that it is possible to also sense some forms of sound through sight. To do so, I turn to Daughtry's (2022) expansion of Grimshaw and Garner's notion of the sonic aggregate and Husserl's triple intentionality of the living present. While Daughtry was concerned with exploring the role of memory with earworms and imagined music, his theorization of where and when sound occurs in the mind is useful for guiding us in interpreting the multivalent nature of silence in the moment.

Grimshaw and Garner's (2015) sonic aggregate is a phenomenological model for delineating the experience of sound. It is comprised of the exosonus (external sound waves) and



the endosonus (internal sound reflection or imagination). Their model shows that the conditions for sound to be “sound,” are defined by:

exosonus + endosonus = “sonic aggregate” = “sound”

sonic aggregate - exosonus = “sound”

sonic aggregate - endosonus < “sound” (Daughtry 2022:142)

In other words, without the internal interpretation and/or formulation of sound, external waves lack sonic meaning; they are lesser than sound-as-meaning. Similar to Sorenson’s claim, we may flip the sonic aggregate model to render silence as a discrete event, for even if we take away the exosonus, we may still have a meaningful sonic episode. A waveless sonic aggregate remains a legitimate form of sound although it is limited to the mind. As Daughtry explains, we can apply Grimshaw and Garner’s model to understand everyday sonic experiences. For example, this is the basis for repetitive “earworms” that occur distinct from external audio. While they may be triggered by peripheral stimuli, their presence is wholly internal.

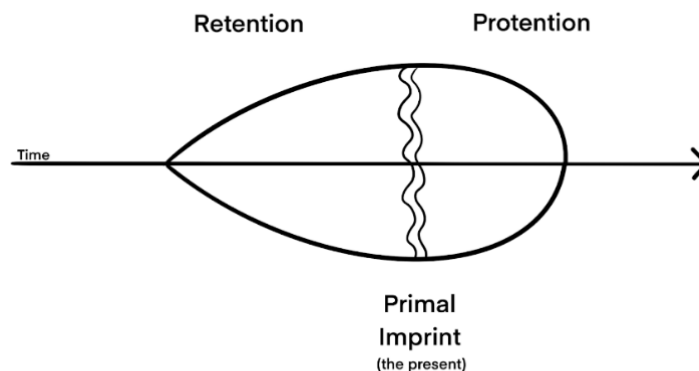


Figure 4.1 Husserl’s triple intentionality<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Adapted from Daughtry (2022:146)

Another key facet of Daughtry's conceptualization of imagined music is memory. After all, earworms tend to be snippets of songs or jingles we are familiar with. His discussion of memory draws from Husserl's notion of triple intentionality, or retention, primal imprint (or impression), and protention. The comet-shaped past-present-future structure (Figure 4.1) is a way to identify when sound enters the experience of the endosonus, whereby familiar sounds have a more elongated structure and unfamiliar ones are much more abrupt in their potential for recall and anticipation. The elongated present is shaped by predictability. For example, unpredictable music will have a much shorter protentive future, while predictable music would have a longer, flatter shape for both retention and protention.

The traditional forms of retention and protention are entwined across two levels, with the past always informing the future. Although each refers to the past or future, respectively, they are simply ways that we make sense of our position in time, as we can only perceive things from the present. Primary retention is the immediate trailing of consciousness. Take, for example, the melody to Cher's "Believe" (1998). For us to recognize a melody, we must remember the previous notes. When her voice lands on "life," the lyrics "Do" "you" "believe" "in" are still fresh in our minds, and their context gives melodic meaning to the full line. Similarly, primary protention is the basic, immediate anticipation of the future. By the time we hear "life," one can already anticipate "after love" to come immediately after. It is gravitational. Moving to the second level, secondary retention manifests itself as a reflective recollection of an experience. The way we can remember the melody to "Believe" or any other song, is a form of secondary retention. In contrast to its primary counterpart, it is a form of long-term memory. In turn, secondary protention is the conscious, reflective anticipation that incorporates past experiences

and knowledge. As a form of secondary protention, traditional Western harmony, for example, invokes certain melodic expectations based on our familiarity with the system. Further, if I were in the middle of listening to a less familiar Cher song, I could make certain assumptions on the melodic content based on hearing countless others.

Other philosophers have extended these to a third level that emphasizes the externalization of consciousness. Bernard Stiegler (2010) claims that we also have forms of memory that exist outside of the body as expressions of tertiary retention. The earth, itself, remembers carts that have passed through its landscape. The ruts in the ground serve as a temporal link to the wheels that have gone back and forth. Additionally, Yuk Hui (2019) has made a case for tertiary protention. In his work, he has outlined ways that predictive algorithms are monuments to the past. The anticipatory nature of a predictive algorithm depends on someone from the now-present and the then-past to make assumptions about what the future should look like. The coding involved in such algorithms creates systems that further construct futures based on their developers' present biases.

In the following case study, I make use of these augmented forms as they relate to gender and euphoria, respectively. Like the lower levels, tertiary retention is tied to the future and vice versa. The ruts in the ground are a memory of the past that help shape future travel along a path. Similarly, binary gender is a form of tertiary retention whereby the performative grooves instill a trajectory set by tradition. Tertiary protention is likewise tied to the past. The protentive externalization of consciousness is rooted in both memory and its affordances. In Hui's example of technological consciousness, a predictive algorithm is based on past decisions. Such systems are made by those with a vision of a particular future who attempt to manifest it in the long term. As I hope to show, euphoria is a form of tertiary protention that enables a future based on past

and present iterations of gender. Like a predictive algorithm, the future that euphoria manifests depends on how we enact it in the present.

Daughtry's theorization emphasizes the slippery characteristics of triple intentionality. The past-present-future structure is rarely so linear. Since imagined sound does not rely on the exosonus as a catalyst, there is a recursive variability to retention, impression, and protention. For example, when one experiences an earworm, they are not likely to be hearing the entirety of a song, and it may be in the wrong key or at an incorrect tempo. Nevertheless, as Daughtry explained, if asked about his experience, he might simply say something like "I have Adele's 'Rolling the in the Deep' stuck in my head" (Daughtry 2022:149). By combining the sonic aggregate with triple intentionality, Daughtry shows us that there is even flexibility in defining sonic moments, silent or otherwise, as discrete events.

### **Silence in the Archive**

To move forward, I turn to the archive, which, as Hui explained, functions "as tertiary retention, [and] conditions the selection of protentions, which is, properly speaking, the fabric of experience." (Hui 2019:140). One of the difficulties in researching drag's musical history is the lack of material archival objects. For social, political, and logistical reasons, most of our non-theatre history has been lost to time. However, one of our greatest resources comes in the form of photographs. These images span the full range from portraits to candid to performance photos, typically interspersed throughout newspaper ads, reviews, the occasional interview transcript, or housed in a short zine or periodical like *Female Mimics*. After oral histories passed down from those that survived the AIDS crisis, photographs are our primary link to drag's positive bar and nightclub past (as opposed to police and medical pathology records). At the tertiary level of

consciousness, an archive serves as an external monument to history whereby we may shape our collective future by our rendering of the past. Without record of the musical sounds, I propose that there are certain assumptions imposed by the presence of visual-dominant archives on the history of a musical genre.

During my research, I found JD Doyle's Queer Music Heritage (QMH)<sup>56</sup> and the Digital Transgender Archive (DTA)<sup>57</sup> especially helpful for their wide breadth of materials. In contrast to location-based archives, these digital collections serve as central repositories linking to myriad physical and virtual collections. Their scholarly strength is in their dedication to a widespread thematic compilation rather than sparse documents found among other materials in geographically distant locations. Both help solve the problem of trans and drag history impossibly dispersed throughout the world, but they remain focused on visual materials. For example, when searching for sound recordings on DTA, only 22 entries showed, as opposed to its collection of thousands of photographs. In contrast, QMH is tailored specifically to queer music. It is one of the most comprehensive archives available for queer music history, and many of DTA's own entries are simply links to QMH. QMH was started as an online companion to Doyle's radio show by the same name, which ran from 2000–2015, whose goal according to the website's introduction was "to preserve and share the music of our culture." It is important to note that a key difference between these archives is that DTA is configured primarily as an interface between the researcher and a wide array of archives across the world, while QMH hosts

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<sup>56</sup> J.D. Doyle. *Queer Music Heritage -- Gay Radio, Lesbian Radio, Transgender Radio*. Accessed March 26, 2024. <https://www.queermusicheritage.com/>.

<sup>57</sup> *Digital Transgender Archive*. Accessed March 26, 2024. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/>.

its own collection.<sup>58</sup> Most relevant to my work is the Drag & Female Impersonation section, which Doyle's website says has been a major draw for people. It is, indeed, the largest collection of drag history available on the internet, and quite possibly anywhere.

The section is divided into two halves: the Drag Artist Discography that only features artists with recorded works, and the Female Impersonation Galleries that contain pages on notorious artists that do *not* have known recorded works. Since music is a central focus for this archive, it is logical to distinguish between these for research purposes, but it is revealing that the structure places discographical performance higher than, or at least distinct from, other forms of this musical genre (including lip synchs). This is all the more pertinent when realizing that even the discography is often "silent," with only a photo of an album cover available, rather than an audio recording. When we examine a photograph, we may anticipate learning about the past. We can expect certain narratives, identities, or social environments as captured by the camera. But these interpretations are culturally bound by historical discourse and may contain biases based on contemporary notions. This also goes for the photo's context within an archive. To return to the language of consciousness and experience, the metaphysics of QMH are the assumptions surrounding the photos; in this case, the discographical section heavily influences our interpretation of the photograph. It *feels* more musical than the silent female impersonator collection. Even the title "artist" is removed. By no means do I think that Doyle intended to impose a record act/lip sync hierarchy, but its framing does reflect the wider cultural rhetoric of pre-1980s, hierarchical drag that Newton ([1972] 1979, see Chapter 2) describes (which Doyle's website notes that he is most interested in).

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<sup>58</sup> It is unclear if J.D. Doyle owns the rights to all of the materials available on his site, or if he even has the originals, with many said to have been found on sites like eBay. An educational fair use disclaimer appears at the bottom of the home page.

In order to better understand the implication of QMH's archival structure, we must further analyze the nature of its metaphysics: what brings it into being? How does it relate to the researcher? While QMH as a fan repository does not publish what metadata is contained in its photos, other traditional research-oriented archives like DTA list various keywords and topics associated with an image. In QMH, it is often hard to find materials since the structure was originally built around Doyle's radio show, and not for traditional academic research that benefits from cross-referencing. Pages are typically sorted by performers' names and contain all the information about said performer in the single entry. In many ways, this is much queerer and more genre-breaking than the DTA while simultaneously being more limited due to one man's presentation-based organizational structure. It also somewhat reflects the relational nature of drag insofar as it tries to paint a picture of an artist as a whole, rather than brief excerpts of their life appearing on multiple drag and non-drag stages. As discussed in previous chapters, the form of relationality that I am employing is called "interperformativity," which is "the notion that relations give rise to identity" (Horowitz 2020:11). Horowitz's theory challenges the longstanding Butlerian discussion of performance versus performativity and claims that the differences between them have run their course in scholarship. She posits that we should, instead, take note of the relationships and "intra-actions" between people in order to understand the cumulative circumstances that form gender. In Husserlian terms, Horowitz makes a case for analyzing the relationships between retention and protention that have accumulated to a tertiary level. In this light, we must similarly inspect the relationships between archives and people in order to ascertain how they influence one another over time. If we are to explore interperformativity as a way to frame analysis of a photographic-majority archive, what may we gain in our discussion of music?

As an embodied form of musical culture, “an archival record can store only the shadow of a song or dance” (Harris, Barwick, and Troy 2022:1). In their introduction to the edited volume *Music, Dance and the Archive*, Barwick and Troy describe their process of bringing an old song back to life. Although it would have originally been sung, the only material that remained was a piano transcription discovered in an archive. After some experimentation with tessitura and what felt “natural” for their voices, the editors eventually shared the song with their community. It was only after fully embodying this history through a performative context that it could be perceived in its relational form. The multi-sensory embodiment connected them to their own embodied, indigenous language and oral history practices. If I were to recreate the looks of those royalty found in the archive, I would undoubtedly find myself feeling a new side to drag history. If my own makeup technique were to interact with historical styles, I would gain a deeper perspective of what it meant to perform drag in the past, but I would still miss out on its aural qualities.

To take gender euphoria as an example, it can only exist in an image if the individuals, the audience, come to understand it in a given moment. This is not to say that the subjects in the photo did or did not experience a form of euphoria, regardless of its emotional manifestation, but it is impossible to know what they felt in the moment without their own admission. What is more important to note is that the recognition of euphoria *after the fact* is essential to its transmission by photograph. But simply observing the visual traces of euphoria in an image does not necessarily convey its historical sonic footprint. How, then, may we come to know the musical aspects of euphoria through a silent photograph? We must first ask what is it that we seek from a photo? Is it evidence of joy? Or even bittersweet sadness? A certain pose or particular framing? Affectively, it is the product of our own quest for euphoria within a sea of cultural and material



interactions. I argue that the answer lies in the contextual relationship of the photographic subject, their history, and our willingness to explore research through multiple senses. Like Barwick and Troy's example, meaning can be found when embodying art in non-traditional ways. What and who came before and after the photo? And in terms of music, what sounds encompassed the moment? What are the tertiary sonic elements that comprise our understanding of the event captured? What does listening to a photograph do for us?

An interperformative archive like QMH or DTA is, by definition, a relational one. Relationality has already been explored extensively in indigenous studies to discuss the ways in which we may conceive of such archives.

An archive in my line of work is just as likely to be in a wardrobe, cupboard or meetinghouse; Indigenous texts might be carved, oral, written, sung, woven, danced and so on. Archives are places where things, people and ideas come together. (Te Punga Somerville 2017:121).

In her chapter on indigenous research methods, Alice Te Punga Somerville investigated archives as not merely the "text" itself, but in the embodied knowledge when said text is *performed*. Her method assumes "Indigenous presence and proximity rather than focusing on distance and loss" (Te Punga Somerville 2017:121). She draws from Epeli Hau'ofa's (1994) idea that the Pacific is not the European-imagined "islands in a far-flung sea," but a connected, Indigenous-imagined "sea of islands" in Oceania, whereby people are incredibly mobile (Te Punga Somerville 2017:123). For Te Punga Somerville, if we conceive of archives as a "sea of islands" rather than isolated and scattered pockets of history, we can sooner come to recognize how archives are not merely traces of the past, but opportunities to engage across spacetime with those that came before and those that will one day come. We are all connected in the "unfolding perceptual *now*

that is nestled between” retention and protention (Daughtry 2022:145). What would it mean, then, to reconceptualize a drag archive to focus on presence, proximity, and euphoria, rather than physical or temporal distance, or in the case of police and pathology records, dysphoria and loss? For drag, what does it mean to come together as things, people, and ideas? Following Te Punga Somerville, we may also agree with Achille Mbembe who claimed that archival materials are “removed from time and from life” and “have no meaning outside the subjective experience of those individuals who, at a given moment, come to use them” (Mbembe 2002:22–23). While we are all connected, meaning forms at the interstices of interaction. To explore musical euphoria through a photographic juncture, our investigation benefits from embodied, multi-sensory research.

For historical analysis of marginalized and oppressed groups, multisensorial archival work is especially important, for the present is home to the scars of the past. While the trauma of dysphoria and societal hate does not necessarily metabolize in the queer body over generations like Resmaa Menakem (2017) has described in her theory of intergenerational memories and racism, we inherit the knowledge and our bodies newly undergo the abrasive pangs time and time again. Like many other groups, each queer generation must come to face a world that constricts and molds experience, affecting how we form and approach the archive. To circumvent these limits is not a mere act of resistance, but a promise to one’s future self that our present efforts can shape what is to come. Simas, for example, has described that the movements of indigenous ritual, ceremony, dance, and childhood play have informed their archival body.

This archive or codex lives in relationality to the natural world and holds the power to decolonise, to heal bodies of land and water, while also possessing the ability to shift and change the contemporary spaces that we currently occupy....As my bones were shaped

by gestures, my senses became developed to receive and perceive information in culturally specific ways (Simas 2022:81–82).

The abrasions felt by queer people are part of the tertiary elements of retention in a cis-heteropatriarchal society. It is not always apparent where their origins lie, but their presence fundamentally shapes the future within our dominant binary paradigm. I am especially drawn to Horowitz's interperformative framework as a way to challenge such institutional rituals. She considers how myriad competing factors often render similar results and are, therefore, more important than seeking out some original material. For example, she points to feminist scientist Karen Barad's discussion of light. Physicists are not in true agreement about the nature of light. On one hand, it appears like particles known as photons, but when disrupted by a particular medium, like water, it can look like a wave. "Particle" and "wave" do not refer to the "inherent characteristics of an object [light] that precedes its intra-action" (Horowitz 2020:10); instead, they denote that object's relationship(s) to other things. This is important because when we see the result of an action, we cannot always tell what caused it. After all, damage on a wall could be from a pressure washer or a gun and it can be almost impossible to know (10).

Horowitz claims that this is similar to how performance and performativity function. Since there is no true "root" that we can identify genealogically, it is counterproductive to attempt to determine what set of quotidian rituals manifest as performative or mere performance. What is more important than finding the "cause" is to question the very relationships upon which gender subsists. While I am interested in what we can observe about gender in a photograph, I am not truly inquiring about intersubjectivity from the photographic subject, rather, our imagination of what their image contains, both visual and sonic. Although our perception is dependent upon our own experiences, we are, nevertheless, in conversation with others during

this process. Following Simas and Horowitz, I do not believe we can fully analyze the relational nature of a drag archive while abandoning entire contextual webs of culture and experience.

But all of this comes with a warning. While indigenous scholarship is immensely insightful through its significant dedication to recognizing such cultural relationships, I am reminded that the reason that many non-indigenous forms of scholarship do not emphasize these exchanges is because awareness of their presence has been silenced by systems built on and by Whiteness. This does not mean that, as a White settler, I should reappropriate indigenous methods for my own gain, but instead need to recognize the interrelationship of society and power that has birthed what I think of as culture and the trans/drag archive. For example, Jespersen has described the ways in which White trans people employ “passing” as an avenue to “‘pass’ into the dominant U.S. body politic, not just by gender, but by investment in the nation” (Jespersen 2022:32). Drawing from Puar’s homonationalism and Morgensen’s *settler* homonationalism, Jespersen claims that many White trans people contribute to the erasure and exploitation of Indigenous histories in their efforts to “normalize” trans identity. In fact, many often co-opt indigenous knowledge to validate White trans identity, but do so while not recognizing their role(s) in such histories (36). As a form of settler *transnationalism*, the pursuit of transnormativity occludes the biopolitics of a colonial past and present.

Similarly, Malatino (2022) and Awkward-Rich (2022) have challenged the insistence on trans joy that many (especially White) trans people use in order to distance themselves from those deemed “sick” or “aberrant.” They claim that this insistence is an attempt to avoid the dangers of pathologization, but only does so by way of leaving behind that some trans people are, in fact, sick and/or disabled, or do not conform to White normative standards of gender. What they truly warn us about is that appropriating the language and experience of joy for the

sake of “normalcy,” rather than self-actualization or worldmaking, harms the community. As discussed in Chapter 1, Malatino pointedly rejects the premise of gender euphoria, claiming that focusing on joy inhibits the reality of the present. Euphoria, as my dissertation has set out to show, is an opportunity to reject the limiting demands of a (im)perfect trans subject. Similar (but not opposite) to dysphoria, euphoria is a perceptual mode that gives meaning and energy to particular actions. The dreaming that it ushers in is a way to shape the future from the present. I argue that we must look for these dreams in the externalization of memory, in the archive. We must listen to the euphoric archival photograph anew. In order to experience archival protention, we must open ourselves to that which will have had to happen. By understanding the relational metaphysics about the role and nature of the archive, we can better understand the complex relationship between documentation, memory, and silence. As a form of archival tertiary protention, my configuration of euphoria more readily emphasizes what Tina Campt would call a quotidian refusal of being rejected.

### **Listening to Images**

In her 2017 monograph, Tina Campt proposed a methodology for exploring Black refusal and futurity by listening to images. Her work surveyed a range of genres of forgotten photographs—those all but deemed by society as too uninteresting for recognition like passport images, convict photos, and ethnographic portraits of rural African women. Her analysis was directed toward what circumstances sparked the photo, not only the genre, but what happened before and after the shutter was engaged. In each case she found evidence of a seemingly pervasive, underlying force of refusal. She noted that the ethnographic portraits, in particular, revealed a refusal to be forced into an unnaturally still pose, an uncomfortable stasis that only

served the photographer rather than told the women's stories. Campt claims that we can feel this unease, this refusal, by listening to the quiet frequencies in an image. By listening for that which is unspoken, we can better understand the stasis captured by these particular portraits. Similar to Sontag (1977), she points out that we are susceptible to the narratives of photographic subjectivity that underpin our society. What we see, or hear, or rather, what we do not see or hear in a photograph depends on our ability to relate to those we perceive as Othered. Campt's formulation is built on three processes: hapticality, stasis, and refusal.

Despite her occasional misuse of musical terminology, Campt's work fits neatly into the model of silence put forth by Sorenson. She emphasizes that the silence accompanying these disregarded photographs is a pointed circumstance dependent upon a hearer's willingness to listen to their stories. For Campt, listening to a silent photograph depends on interfacing with a form of hapticality. Her version draws from Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's expedition through the undercommons, that "ungovernable realm of social life, the place where we—colonized, queer, otherwise marginal—make meaning with each other" (Ngin 2020), where hapticality is:

the touch of the undercommons, the interiority of sentiment, the feel that what is to come is here. Hapticality, the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you, this feel of the shipped is not regulated, at least not successfully, by a state, a religion, a people, an empire, a piece of land, a totem (Moten and Harney 2013:38).

Similar to Bird and Marks's sensory expansion of hapticality (Chapter 3), Moten and Harney's model is a form of 2nd-person subjectivity that is also somatic:

Our collective attempts to theorize the haptic as a visceral register of experience and vital zone of experimentation, direct us to somatic forms of knowledge attuned not only to contemporary bodies and spaces, but also to the worlds and imaginations that have both conditioned and surpassed the body in and of performance (Bradley 2014:129–130).

This variant of somatic takes on a non-traditional, almost paradoxical definition. While it relates to the Cartesian body, considering the endosonus and its effects on the rest of the body as part of the soma (rather than a truly distinct duality) opens the door for innovative analysis of embodied culture. The key factor, nevertheless, is not that sound is being used metaphorically, but that, through sonic metaphors, we can better understand the temporality, cohesiveness, and communality present in the photographs. Through *Campt*, this hapticality differs from my rendering in the previous chapter. Here, it marks the affective, metaphorical threshold between exosonus and endosonus, as a multi-level form of triple intentionality. Hapticality is the apparatus by which our consciousnesses engage with one another and the environment. It allows us to identify the silence and find meaning in the absence it denotes.

Although there are no external sound waves present, *Campt* describes the “low frequencies” of refusal and futurity as:

a quiet hum of reverb and vibrato. Not always perceptible to the human ear, we feel it more in the throat...To listen to them is to be attuned to their unsayable truths, to perceive their quiet frequencies of possibility—the possibility to inhabit a future as unbounded black subject (*Campt* 2017:45).

*Campt*'s configuration of hapticality skips over the material reality of sound and leaves it purely as an embodied metaphor. In Chapter 3, I did something similar in terms of introducing a metaphor, but rooted it in the physical nature of sound as a conscious phenomenon. While I was

suggesting that performers and audiences could recognize and participate in the discursive nature of loudness and euphoria, Campt calls us to consider ourselves as only the audience—far removed from the moment captured. In her rendering, we not only listen back in time, but we listen to the present. An important adjustment to Campt’s theory is to reconfigure what quiet means. She relates inaudibility to quietness, but low frequencies can scream. They can damage or destroy when heard by the rest of the body instead of the ears, and for this reason are all too frequently used in governmental weaponry (Volcler 2013; Cusick 2016; Goodman 2010). The quietness, or even outright silence, exists, rather, when we are not listening with our full bodies or recognizing the way that forces interact with us. The quietude that Campt describes is not due to subtlety of movement (as opposed to loud vibrations of air or another medium), but our lack of attention. Her insightful use of quiet as opposed to silence, allows us to place these vibrations firmly in the endosonus. When dealing with the visual transmission of sonic euphoria, what happens when it does not scream, but seeps and prods along in the quiet of performance? Following Campt, I am listening for what Georges Perec has called the “‘infraordinary’— everyday practices we don’t always notice and whose seeming insignificance requires excessive attention” (Campt 2017:8).

In contrast to her quiet, “low frequencies,” Campt also establishes a model for silence that she calls stasis. Like in the example of the ethnographic portraits, the stasis, the silence, shines a light on what is not being said. Indeed, the quiet that Campt is inspired by is an exosonus form of stasis whereby sound waves and their vibratory media present little-to-no movement. As with any photograph, the moment is arrested from time, detached from its temporal reality and always already primed for future audiences as an object of the past. But it goes further. The haptic junction reveals that the instance of silence is not necessarily a byproduct of absences. Like Barad’s discourse on light and Horowitz’s analysis of performance



and performativity, stasis does not say much about what caused it for it “is neither an absence nor a cessation of motion; it is a continual balancing of multiple forces in equilibrium” (Campt 2017:9–10). Stasis and its silent companion ask us to inspect materials based on their apparent effect. As Horowitz has shown us, we know that we cannot always find the cause of such effects, but the investigative process helps us recognize other factors in constant circulation that influence us. By traveling through the physical memory of an ostensible cart’s tracks in the grass, we have the opportunity to realize how such a determined path dictates present and future movement through the area.

Searching for euphoria in QMH’s photographs is important because it highlights the ways that queer people have both refused assimilation and sought to normalize queer culture over time, and how our memory of it shapes our future. In Campt’s analysis of homogenized passport photography, she noted that the subjects enacted a distinct refusal to be forced into an Othered position. They had made their way to a new land, and by choosing a degree of assimilation, their refusal to be Othered marked an unwillingness to be relegated, or minimized, or “sent back.” In Campt’s words, the audible frequency of the Dyche passport photos is “the quotidian practice of refusal” (Campt 2017:32). This comes from Moten and Harney’s “the refusal to be refused” and Butler and Athanasiou’s “refusal to stay in one’s proper place.” The act of staying in place, of refusing to be ousted, especially in diaspora, is the core of her theory. It is enmeshed with a sense of futurity because staying in place is the thing that “will have had to happen” for a loving, secure future. Without recognizing how the future that is tertiary protention functions alongside the present impression and past retention, the future is bound to tradition. In terms of gender, euphoria is not a search for utopia, but a recognition of the present, and an agential mark for one’s future. It is living the future now as a point of self-actualization rather than a false sense of

utopia or privilege. Therefore, I claim that a performance of euphoria is an acknowledgement that things are not ideal in the moment, but for the future to manifest itself, we must refuse to be refused. We must refuse the limitations society puts on us, while also not limiting ourselves in a similarly antagonistic way.

In 2013, Linda Simpson released a short book titled *Pages* which features photographs of her friend Page from 1991 until she passed in 2001. Page was a “pre-op”<sup>59</sup> and an occasional drag performer. At the time, the boundary between trans\* people and drag artists was not so clear-cut, with many fluidly existing between the two. In her book, Simpson mentions that the first time she cast Page in a drag show, she performed as an alien. Peering back from the 2020s, I instantly relate Page’s story to what a non-binary person may do today. It is common for non-binary drag artists to perform as aliens or other non-human creatures to avoid performing as traditional, binary drag queens or kings, but as drag *things*. When looking through the chronological set of photos, I see a journey of a trans person who moved through androgyny to a femme presentation. It is undoubtedly relatable for many trans people, today. I see someone whose smile seems to become more pronounced over time, their joy surfacing as they continue to discover themselves and refuse society’s limitations. But I also hear a friendship that ebbed and flowed throughout the years. I hear the sounds of clubs, of backstage, the murmur and pounding bass that undoubtedly pervaded hallways and entryways. I hear the “infraordinary” sounds of NYC traffic, emergency vehicles, and shouting outside the apartment where Page sits. I hear the loudness of living as oneself in public. I hear the quiet knowing of a smirk or fatigued smile. I hear the subtle awkwardness of posing before the characteristic pop of a film camera’s flash. I

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<sup>59</sup> In the early 1990s, a “pre-op” was a person, typically AMAB, that we would consider transgender today and who had not yet had bottom surgery.

hear an unspoken-ness; an unspoken-ness suffused with emotions, some that I cannot yet identify. As I sit flipping through the photo book, I hear the silence of my situation, listening for a life now surviving only in the memories of her friends and those willing to listen. I never met Page so cannot hear her voice, but I can hear the haptic infraordinary of what I understand of her situation through my own trans experience twenty years and 600 miles away. Like Camp suggested, I listen to the present via the past. The archive is not the collection of silent photos, but the sounds of the memories of the lives they represent, heard by the viewer-listener. Meaning is found is listening to the infraordinary.

When listening to a photographic archive like QMH from a couple decades into the twenty-first century, I am astounded by the number of professional portraits. A portrait, today, signifies wealth and success. Certainly, many of QMH's extant portraits are of infamous queer people such as Coccinelle, Christine Jorgensen, and others, but the style of photography is significant. Much more than the anti-assimilation drive of today, drag performers of the past often strived to break into the world of cis-het art to find legitimacy (Newton [1972] 1979). As Jespersen noted, transnormativity has long been a part of non-indigenous trans cultural desire, and the same is true for drag. Many used drag queendom to fund their professional creative careers as cisgender men, or to further fit in as women. As such, the degree in which a drag performer was deemed successful largely depended on their legibility in wider cis-het culture. In *Female Mimics*, a periodical that began in 1963 featuring "The World's FOREMOST FEMALE IMPERSONATORS," we see page after page of moviestar-esque portraits that feature performers at all stages of their drag process, with special attention paid to the transformation of getting into drag. Accompanied by a set of ever-increasing boudoir-style photos, *Female Mimics* introduces Kim August with the following text:

FEMALE MIMICS salutes one of America's foremost impersonators – the dazzling, the incredible Kim August. When in costume, Kim's remarkably mobile features have been likened to such entirely different personages as Peggy Lee, Jayne Mansfield, Susan Heyward, and Lena Horne. Currently, Kim is star of the spectacular revue at New York's 82 Club. He makes full use of the club's wardrobe, lighting, and stage facilities to add to the authenticity of his acts. Pictured here in his swank East Side penthouse, Kim demonstrates the technique he uses to transform himself from a virile man to the unbelievably realistic likenesses of some of the world's most beautiful women.<sup>60</sup>

Like Kim, most of the photos throughout the *Female Mimics* series, as well as QMH and DTA more broadly, picture the performers in varying stages of undress, all through staged portraiture. If there were any doubt prior to seeing them, the stylistic choice screams success and professionalism—these are not your run-of-the-mill performers, but the “best of the best.” What is unspoken is the wider cultural desire to be successful in the cis-het artworld, in places like Hollywood. Unless we are listening for it, the juxtaposition between portrait-like performance photos from New York's “82 Club” and a promotional photo of Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis from *Some Like It Hot* (1959), silences just how distant these two cultures were. It is only in listening for the relationship between what came before and after these photos that we can hear their radical reality. When we see Kitt Russell, who produced, staged, and directed the Club 82 Revue (*Female Mimics* 1963:42–46) appearing on stage in a setting reminiscent of a Golden-Age Hollywood musical, we only hear the meaning of that moment's drag when we listen for what happens when the lights are turned off. We hear the danger of traveling through town as a queer

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<sup>60</sup> Selbee Associates, Inc.. “Female Mimics Premiere Issue.” Periodical. 1963. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/7w62f8323>.

person. We hear the harassment in the street and on nighttime family television. We hear the true distance between a drag queen and Hollywood diva. It is not, in fact, the same music being performed, for it is only through a relational framework that the musical moment may be heard and understood. A theory of relationality concerning a drag archive evokes a long history of refusal and oppression, and indeed also the transnormative pursuits of those hoping to pass as male or female whether on- or off-stage. As we will see in the following case study, it is only by listening to the various relationships between elements that we can uncover an understanding of the moment.

In 1978, Merissa Sherrill Lynn (1942–2017) began publishing the *TV-TS Tapestry* newsletter as part of the Tiffany Club, a support group for greater Boston area crossdressers and their families. The newsletter provided an opportunity for social organizing and served as a resource for many in between formal meetings. Over the years, its pages held affirming poetry, pontifications, advertisements for trans healthcare providers, and photos of some of its authors, like Lynn. A form of the Tiffany Club still exists today as the Trans Club of New England, but no longer publishes a public newsletter (although there is a mailing list for members who pay one-time dues).

The *TV-TS Tapestry* was introduced at a time where newsletters were common and a frequent resource for trans\* and queer people across the United States. In fact, it shares community roots with the Provincetown Symposium that I referenced in Chapter 2 where I mentioned that Ari Kane was the first person to publish a definition of gender euphoria.<sup>61</sup> Kane

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<sup>61</sup> Lynn published her own definition of Gender Euphoria through *Transgender Tapestry* issue 51 (1988) as part of a list of “Definitions of Terms Commonly Used in the Transvestite-Transsexual Community.” She states that “Gender dysphoria/euphoria - Unhappy/happy with one’s socially

was a part of a social support group for crossdressers called the Cherrystone Club, which Lynn joined in 1975. In 1978, there was a major schism that resulted in the Cherrystone Club's dissolution into two separate entities: the Kay Mayflower Society made by those that primarily wanted a social club, and the Tiffany Club, composed of members, led by Lynn, that sought support for the community. The Tiffany Club began publishing the *TV-TS Tapestry* at the club's inception, but went through various iterations over the years. In 1981, the Tapestry newsletter morphed into a full magazine, leaving behind its cheaply-made xerographic print for a glossy finish. The magazine began including interviews and articles by medical professionals as well as event and personal listings from across the country. In 1987, the Tiffany Club was dissolved to make way for Lynn's new organization, the International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE), which also took over the responsibility of publishing the quarterly magazine. Later that year, the Tiffany Club of New England (TCNE) was formed to help keep local focus alongside the IFGE's global eye (TCNE 2004). The TCNE is the only remaining iteration today, albeit they changed their name to the Trans Club of New England in 2018.

The following two photos of Merissa Sherrill Lynn appeared in *TV-TS Tapestry*, volumes #13 (July 1979) and #16 (October 1979) as part of the Forum. The Forum was the final section of the newsletter and was always accompanied by the following description:

The Forum is for exploring what we think, what we feel, what we say and do, for exploring our difficulties, our guilts and fears, and how we can overcome them. The Forum is not for fiction or fantasy or technical articles. Rather, it is for talk, for thought, for understanding ourselves and one another, and for sharing ourselves with others.

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and culturally assigned gender role," which is a slight change from Kane's dual-gender configuration from a decade prior.

Both of these Forum entries contain snippets from a longer epic poem by Lynn about her philosophy of life. These portions are directly related to her understanding of crossdressing and identity (Lynn [July] 1979:4). In order to listen to Lynn’s portraits, it is important to recognize their dual purpose as proudly showing a crossdresser thriving in life and for exemplifying the poetry. Unlike drag photos of the time, Lynn appears stoic, yet content. In each, she looks toward the camera, yet does not seem to “perform” for it. Both photos are low-quality xerography and accompany monotype text, reflecting the “amateur,” “everyday” person rather than a superstar celebrity vying for public acclaim. To my knowledge, Lynn’s full poem was never published in full, but I reproduce the pieces here to help show her thoughtful attention to reflecting its words, visually.



Figure 4.2 Photo of Merissa Sherrill Lynn, published in July 1979

The first excerpt is titled “A Tree,” which according to Lynn “is a statement of my masculinity, my femininity, of me as a total human being” (Lynn [July] 1979:4).

I see myself in many things,	As a whole the maple tree
Have since just a child.	Is a harmonious work of art,
Try to picture if you will	But to understand the tree, and me,
A maple in the wild.	You must understand its parts.
A tree that’s tall and handsome,	The roots and trunk are strong,
Standing proud against the wind,	Gray and gnarled and rough.
With the sun and sky reflecting	These solid parts are stable,
Off the leaves and through the limbs.	They’re durable and they’re tough.
In my own perception	They stave off nature’s folly,
I can see and feel that tree,	And keep the tree alive.
Then take that simple maple,	Because of their stability
And give it human qualities,	The maple will survive.
Then define and redefine	The roots and trunk are masculine,
What I see and feel.	Reflect a manly pride.
Upon these fine embroiderments	But if these parts were left alone
I’ve transcended what is real.	The tree would quickly die.
From the energy of my mind	The tree is more than roots ‘n trunk,
I’ve taken this humble tree,	It is also leaves and limbs.
Created a grand reflection	Each part serves its purpose,
Of nature and of me.	As does the sap within.



That living fluid flows  
From earth to extremities,  
And like the parts just mentioned  
Gives survival to the tree.  
Though this fluid has no gender,  
No personality,  
It is the living link between  
The trunk and limbs and leaves.  
The limbs are long and graceful,  
Swaying musically in the wind.  
Like the arms of a ballerina  
They are poetic when they bend.  
They protect the birds and squirrels  
Like a grand maternal dame  
So nature's gentler creatures  
May in her loving arms remain.  
Limbs are flowing and they're lovely,  
Have personality,  
Give grace and give beauty,  
And feminine dignity.  
Leaves also serve their purpose,  
They're the first to touch the sun.  
They are delicate and they're moody,

They're flighty and full of fun.  
They're the tree's cloak and plumage,  
The tree's ornaments,  
Splendid decorations,  
The tree's embroidery.  
The leaves are very special,  
The tree's frivolity,  
A subtle demonstration of  
Nature's feminine vanity.  
The tree is not a he or she,  
The tree is just a tree,  
But in that single living tree  
Are many personalities.  
There's the patriarch, the mother,  
The poet and the child.  
There's the flighty little lady,  
The savage, and the mild.  
Each quality is what it is,  
Neither bad nor good.  
Each one's a reflection of  
It's character and moods.  
There is rugged independent pride,  
Love and poetry,

Defiance and submission,

And wild frivolity.

There's dependance and there's sadness,

Happiness and there's fears.

There's beauty and there's ugliness,

Humility and there's tears.

It's both plain and handsome,

so many qualities,

Yet its [sic] only just a single tree

With universal harmony.

It's alone yet it's intimate,

Touched by sun and earth,

Apart yet in unity with

God the universe.

The language of a tree harkens back to Kane's conceptualization of trans experience (Chapter 2) whereby people travel along a tree's roots and branches by following their feelings of euphoria. The tree as a metaphor serves as a haptic gateway for trans affirmation. This language was common in Boston-area trans\* circles of the time, and the TCNE website states that the frequent "mixed metaphor of acorns and maple trees was our way of saying that all of us were born as acorns, but didn't grow to be oaks." Lynn is wearing a dress with branches and vines sprouting from the base and working upward and outward. She also sits on a chair upholstered with leaf-like patterned fabric. She, herself, appears as a branch of the tree. Although we cannot hear her voice, Lynn's words resound through her stoicism as if music, for

The tree is more than roots 'n trunk,

It is also leaves and limbs.

Each part serves its purpose,

As does the sap within.

That living fluid flows

From earth to extremities,

And like the parts just mentioned  
Gives survival to the tree.  
Though this fluid has no gender,  
No personality,  
It is the living link between  
The trunk and limbs and leaves.  
The limbs are long and graceful,  
Swaying musically in the wind.

Lynn's silence, her contentment, is part of her song of living as someone with both masculine and feminine aspects. Unlike the photos that Campt analyzed, Lynn is not holding back in effort to remain still for the photographer, rather, her stasis is based on the very notion that she is not going anywhere. She is firmly and confidently rooted where she is at and will move gracefully as she continues to look inward for those parts of her that "gives survival to the tree"—those trans experiences that give her hope and the drive to keep going despite the world. It is her euphoria, not her dysphoria represented by the tree.

Only a couple months later, Lynn published another section of her poem, this time titled "A Better Way to Be."



Figure 4.3 Photo of Merissa Sherrill Lynn, published in October 1979

I'm a prisoner of terms

That I do not understand,

Of words that have no meaning,

Of thoughts that do not end.

I'm a thinking sensing person

With feelings deep inside.

These are overwhelming feelings

That I do not wish to hide.

People say that God says

These feelings I have are wrong.

They are feelings for a woman and

In a man do not belong.

But everyone has these feelings

Whether you're a woman or a man,

And to say a man should not feel,

I can not comprehend.

If they're just felt by women

Than a woman I prefer to be,

But what it means to be a woman

Is a mystery to me.

Man can impregnate,

Women can give birth.

That to me seems natural

To populate the earth.

But then men and women  
    Must act in certain ways,  
Be different in what they feel and do,  
    Different in what they say.  
Play different roles in life,  
    And wear different clothes,  
Play different childhood games.  
    And have different goals.  
To be a woman or a man  
    Is supposedly sealed by fate.  
What has all this got to do  
    With the ability to propagate? [sic]  
Female and male is sex,  
    A matter of biology.  
But masculine and feminine  
    Is a way to feel and be.  
If feminine is woman.  
    And masculine is man.  
Then I'd rather be a woman  
    If I possibly can.

When I see a woman I feel inside  
    A need to copy her.  
She looks and walks in certain ways,  
    In ways that I prefer.  
When I hear her talk to me  
    It's a musical talk  
When I see her walk by me  
    It's a poetic walk.  
When she floats into a room  
    In a flowing gown  
She's a queen, she's a goddess,  
    My living soul is bound.  
I want to worship her and take her  
    Deep inside my soul,  
To love her, to be her,  
    To make my spirit whole.  
To be a woman is an art.  
    It's spiritual poetry,  
And to be a woman is  
    A better way to be.

Like the first portrait, Lynn once again appears stoic, this time with a slight nod towards the camera. She is wearing a long white gown and has a flower in her hair. Although the gown functions as somewhat of a blank canvas, hiding any bodily shapes, it takes on a clearly gendered angle when accompanied by the words “When she floats into a room/ In a flowing gown/ She’s a queen, she’s a goddess/ My living soul is bound.” The stark black and white contrast in this photo is all the more pronounced by the bare wall and what appears to be a dark carpeted floor. The camera’s flash emphasizes the robe, highlighting it over Lynn’s own under-exposed skin to the point she is almost unrecognizable. Here, the gown is the poetic figure talking musically, while Lynn is pushed into the background. She becomes silenced by (or rather momentarily takes backstage to) the very external thing that represents her gender, those roles that she chooses to adopt, to put on, for sake of being treated “like a woman.” Once again, her silence is a choice. The stillness she performs for the camera works to allow society’s gender-role “prison” to be scrutinized. As we struggle to see who is actually in the photo, we feel what I believe Lynn wanted us to feel: that we must, indeed, work to come to know the person underneath the gender, to learn to recognize them for who they are.

We may interpret Lynn’s photos in their relational context as supportive images sent out to the crossdressing community. From an archival, Husserlian perspective, the portraits are temporal spaces rife with possibilities. Not only do they serve as the memory of her experiences of the moment, but they show a potential personal anticipation of self-expression and the impact it may have on her audience. The images help us “remember” then-recent events that led up to taking the photos—perhaps reflecting on inner dialogues, societal interactions, or the overall journey that influenced her poetry and her choice to share her photos in such a public forum. Their inclusion in *TV-TS Tapestry* also helped pave the way for the future. When listening to the

photos, I hear the confident song of a trans\* person that lived a future that was not fully accessible to them at the time. But I also become aware of the distant memories and experiences that shaped Lynn's life over the years, including the historical context of the trans community's struggles and achievements. Her images serve as a frozen moment in time that encapsulates these layers of temporality, while also connecting to a larger history and anticipated future.

In order to show the cultural reality that Merissa Sherrill Lynn's stoic, poetic portraits of a person living a daily trans\* life, I offer the following contemporary photo set in clear contrast. This 2-page *Female Mimics* (1966) spread features Kim August (1935–1994), who starred in the magazine's 1963 premiere copy referenced above. Kim was originally from Flint, MI, and was a part of the drag scenes in San Francisco and New York. These images are part of the volume's final section labeled "Who Has It? The Guys From The U.S.A. or Europe?" which features Holli White, Coccinelle, Kim August, Bambi, and Hans Crystal (51–65). Reflecting the fluctuating terminology over the years, *Female Mimics* went through various stages throughout its span from 1963–1979, where it featured photos and profiles of drag performers and trans\* celebrities. Nevertheless, its creators recognized at least some degree of distinction between on- and off-stage gender presentation. For example, Coccinelle's entry in "Who Has It?" contains the description "The world's most famous she-male, Coccinelle, was granted legal status as a woman in France in 1961! However she qualifies as an all-time great mimic..." (55). Coccinelle was the stage name for Jacqueline Charlotte Dufresnoy (1931–2006), a renowned singer and trans woman that became infamous for having been one of the first Europeans to undergo gender confirmation surgery in 1958. Her inclusion in *Female Mimics* and the magazine's subsequent use of "he" pronouns to refer to her only show the stubborn, yet flexible language common at the time.



Figure 4.4 Kim August photo set in *Female Mimics*, 1966, pgs. 58–59

What is glaringly apparent in this photo set is that the fourth image on the far right was taken at a different time than the first three. Although I do not know the photographer or the original circumstances around the photos, the first three are part of a much larger set that appeared as part of August's feature in the premiere of *Female Mimics*. The last photo stands out for a few reasons. First, the blonde wig is in a different style, the background is indoors rather than what could be (mis)perceived as a porch or balcony,<sup>62</sup> and August's skin is on display via a lack of thick black pantyhose. The following page contains the same photos save one.

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<sup>62</sup> The photos were originally in color and were clearly shot indoors, but when made black and white, the setting became more ambiguous due to the railing and plants. The original photos were also not cropped so tightly, making the interior even clearer.





Figure 4.5 Kim August photo set 2 in *Female Mimics*, 1966, pg. 60

The immediate question: why replace the top left image with the fourth one on the prior page? The fourth photo comes from another photoshoot, potentially by the same photographer as the first. While the first three show Kim with a traditional “come hither” gaze, the fourth one amps up the sexual material. Her only clothes are a pair of pumps, thin stockings, and a black leather jacket (where her gloved hands are already pulling at the belt). She bares her neck to reveal a more submissive, feminine side in contrast to the downward, dominant gaze and raised shoulders of the first three. The curtains are closed and privatizing whatever scandalous events are about to occur. The fourth photo is sex. In actuality, the fourth photo is not Kim August at all, but Terry Noel, a female impersonator who had sexual reassignment surgery in 1965 and quit

the business altogether in 1967.<sup>63</sup> Her portrait comes from another set published in the third volume of *Female Mimics* in 1963, although this particular image did not appear in the original magazine feature.

The incorporation of Terry's photo may have been a simple mistake, but we should consider how such a mistake could pass the editorial process and the implications for having done so. Although Kim and Terry favor one another in these photos, and many may not have recognized that they are different people through these images alone, their contrasting style should give pause; especially, when the "correct" photo appears on the flip side of the page and time was taken to crop each image down to fit neatly in the 2-page spread. I believe that the fourth photo's inclusion was because of Kim's proximity to the others who have "it," where "it" could be understood as celebrity spark and "womanly" aura. For example, on the previous page, Coccinelle appears in multiple boudoir-style photos, in one of which she reveals her nude breast. Although fierce, Kim's other photos do not read as sex in the same feminine way. The transformative possibility of female impersonation is at its peak, at least in the drag or "mimic" sense, when feminine glamor becomes indistinguishable from woman. But not just any woman, one that is larger than life—a celebrity. By bolstering Kim's photoshoot with Terry's sensuous shot, the spread more readily reflects the air of sexy "womanhood" that *Female Mimics* is featuring.

Such a moviestar-esque portrait series is not truly silent at all. When listening with celebrity intention, we can imagine hearing multiple things. First, perhaps the "woman" in the photo is speaking seductively, and maybe we hear the paparazzi right outside the curtained

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<sup>63</sup> Terry Noel interview with J.D. Doyle, n.d. <https://www.queermusicheritage.com/fem-terrynoel.html>.

window. In this moment, “Kim” has become *the* female star. She has “it.” These sounds are all the more supported by the description accompanying the set:

Another American entry in who has the most ‘IT’ is Kim August! Kim’s remarkable mobile features have been compared to such glamour gals as Mansfield, Susan Hayward, Lena Horne!

Kim is a familiar star at New York’s famous 82 Club—he has also appeared around the world, claiming acclaim wherever he goes! Kim can re-create exact voices and gestures of famous singers and actresses. Seeing him on stage one would never suspect he’s not the real thing! (*Female Mimics* 1966:58–59)

The sound of drag that we hear through the photo is sex. We already know that many female impersonators’ ultimate goal at the time was to find stardom in the cishet entertainment world. Part of the mystery and appeal of a drag queen was in her ability to transform into being sexy “as a woman.” It was not that drag was innately sexual, but that women, in the eyes of cishet men, were sexualized. Therefore, to morph into a woman, meant that sometimes the drag mimic must likewise become the epitome of sex. “Kim” has put on her blonde Jayne Mansfield wig, seduced us with a convincingly real voice, and invited us to her place for time with a real woman, just like Coccinelle.

Kim’s photos in *Female Mimics* reflect a somewhat different aspect of retention and protention than Lynn’s. The provocative and performative nature of the photos might be more closely aligned with the secondary level. This photo set emphasizes the anticipatory allure of glamor and stardom for both the subject and their audience, and it only gains context when building from the recent past of her performances. Working within a cultural milieu bustling

with the energy of gender performance and queer visibility, she developed celebrity status as a female impersonator. The accidental addition of Terry's photo connects the spread to a more distant legacy of entertainment, gender performance, and the complexities surrounding public and private identities in a society that often misunderstands or overlooks the depth of trans experiences. So while Kim's presence might inspire others in the trans and drag communities, this particular framing reinforces existing public perceptions of gender roles.

By showing photos of both a female impersonator and a daily crossdresser, I hope to have shown how central the idea of being "real" is, while simultaneously recognizing how different real can be. Merissa Sherrill Lynn offers us a personal insight into the nuanced and complex layers of identity, where gender expression is an artful blend of intimacies, dualities, and relationships. Across the pages of *TV-TS Tapestry*, Lynn imparts a living testimony to the intricate, oftentimes muted, symphony of trans experiences. In contrast to the striking representations that cater to glamor and spectacle in the series like *Female Mimics*, Lynn invites us to a quiet and contemplative examination of the trans self. Lynn's photos provide an invaluable lens through which we can discern the transformative nature of crossdressing—far beyond simple mimicry or entertainment. Her poetics and visage work as a meditation on existence and identity, serving as a beacon of authenticity for many trans\* individuals tirelessly navigating between societal expectations and personal truths.

Kim August's photos, on the other hand, dance with an entirely different cadence. They are not quiet reflections, but rather loud proclamations of an achieved, albeit different, sense of authenticity, a constructed and celebrated femininity that is meant to dazzle, seduce, and entertain. The significance of her photos lies not only in their aesthetic appeal but also in their cultural weight, as they capture the liberation and defiance of gender norms of the time. They

carry the beat of visibility in an era where queer representation was far from mainstream. Moreover, the allure and deliberate staging of Kim's imagery communicate a powerful statement about gender roles as they relate to desire and sexuality. She presents an embodiment of femininity that plays directly into, and simultaneously subverts, the male gaze. In doing so, Kim's photos act as a mirror reflecting the often unspoken societal expectation that womanhood and sexual objectification are intertwined, challenging the audience to reassess their understanding of what constitutes "realness" in gender presentation.

Where *Female Mimics* may capture the essence of celebratory visibility and aspirational stardom within the public's eye, Lynn's humble "self-portraits" anchor us in the profound individuality and introspective journey each trans\* person undertakes. The photos underscore the dialogic interplay between outward performance and inward affirmation, and the relentless pursuit of self-realization amid a world of contrasting stages. It is through the silent song of images like Merissa Sherrill Lynn's and the dazzling displays of performers-in-motion like Kim August that we can begin to grasp the full orchestration of voices within the trans\* and gender non-conforming communities of the time.

I opened the "Silence in the Archive" section with the following quote. "As tertiary retention, [an archive] conditions the selection of protentions, which is, properly speaking, the fabric of experience" (Hui 2019:140). Hui's words reaffirm that tertiary retention influences the cumulation of protentions—that is, the way external systems store and interpret our past experiences conditions what we come to expect in the future. This learned anticipation informs the "fabric" of our experience because our knowledge is not merely individual and immediate, but also communal and extended over time, mediated by these external factors. When we proffer silent, photographic-majority archives, memories, we instill a future based on silence. Engaging

with an archive might involve a multi-sensory interaction where, for instance, looking at photographs could evoke auditory memories or sensation. The sound heard could be influenced by one's protentional expectations based on their own past experiences, or by those who formed the archive, stored as tertiary retentions. Understanding that people may hear "silence" or feel the presence of sounds in an ostensibly soundless archive can impact how we approach archival research and curation. We must consider how the multi-sensory experience of memory and archival materials influence the layered interpretation and the emotional engagement of the audience.

### **A Photographer-Researcher Perspective**

"An archive is not just a relic from the past or some accumulation of outdated material: rather, it opens a path to the past in a way that anticipates a future" (Hui 2019:131). There is forced directedness for an imposed future in archives with algorithms or other structures to guide our paths of understanding. They leave little room for creativity or alternative possibilities. In this chapter, I have attempted to show that the multi-sensorial opportunity in archival research should encourage us to revisit the default processes and "archaic" interpretations of data. In other words, we should approach photos in a new way, not merely as visual images of a past often forgotten. In doing so, we open the potential for a future that allows for multiple interpretations and trajectories, not just those that are seemingly established by current archival understandings. In this final section, I describe some of the ways in which I engage with silence and the tertiary protention of an archive, as a professional drag photographer.

In traditional ethnomusicology, it is common practice for a researcher to enter into the field by merit of performance in their target music culture. One may begin to study with a local

master performer and/or simply gain access to performers by way of being musician colleagues in an ensemble. In each of my field sites, I similarly participated in the music culture through performing, but co-creation in drag works differently. In U.S.-based drag, people tend to perform solo, and therefore, communal creativity manifests itself more through performer-audience interaction. It can be difficult and costly to get started, especially if you are beginning with a smaller network. As such, photography, rather than drag performance, was my entry into the field. Although not an instrument in the conventional sense, my camera was a tool that enabled me to perform my understanding of queerness in a creative way. It helped me engage others through community, co-creation, and individual style similar to what I could have done had I joined a music ensemble, and perhaps even more so through the potential for materially giving back to the community. But this was not always the case. I initially, probably like many researchers, took my camera with me to a nightclub under the guise of fieldwork, when, in reality, it was so I could hide behind it. By placing myself at arms length from my “subjects,” who would one day become my friends, I did not have to engage like an insider—which I not only had little control over, but with which, to this day, I still struggle. I have never been a big fan of nightclubs and still tend to only enjoy myself if there is a drag event happening. Although the difference is not so severe today, I still slide somewhat into my researcher side when I am behind my camera. Although I ultimately positioned my own community as a field site rather than a preparatory scene, photography was how I made and continue to make many of my initial connections, personal and professional.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was researching drag, queerness, and Arab identities within Palestine-Israel. I had begun “practicing” fieldwork in Michigan as a way to prepare for months abroad. However, I shifted my focus once the borders closed and I was able to invest more time in the Michigan scene.

Whereas Campft focused on the mundanity of the “forgotten,” drag photography offers a perspective from the other side of the refusal-futurity coin. Drag performers love the limelight, and much of our success depends on documenting our work on social media. As mentioned in Chapter One, I have chosen to write about gender nonconformity under the auspices of drag, as drag royalty have already chosen to work in the public eye and there are ethical concerns of spotlighting marginalized people. Trans people, as well as other marginalized groups, are often positioned in a way that highlights their Otherness in a cisgender, heterosexual world. Sometimes, and as the recent documentary *Framing Agnes* (2022) creatively portrayed, trans people just want to be left alone. Beyond the delicate politics of “passing” under the radar of potentially abusive people, we simply want to *be left alone* for sake of our queerness. It is this backdrop that interplays with the common desire I mentioned earlier of professionalism and cultural legibility when performing.

When I take a drag photograph, I am consciously aware of the moment. As someone that specializes in performance photography, I employ my knowledge of drag to plan out shots that convey a sense of professionalism; typically, of money and class since it is the definition of success for many. I patiently wait for certain poses that will resound well in the current drag culture as portraits. Such portraiture is my way of acknowledging the drag artist’s queer refusal of being rejected or forgotten; it is a way to support their proclamation of euphoric belonging as negotiated in the contextual moment. To capture the following image, the performer and I locked eyes when she was across the stage. She slowly made her way over and turned and posed directly for my camera. I was off to the side a bit in preparation for an image, rather than center-stage, so it was especially clear that she was posing for me. During the number, I decided that a backlit



portrait better conveyed her aesthetic as a world-renowned queen. I had planned the framing and she moved to me for the shot.



Figure 4.6 Photo of Violet Chachki at Cross, Tel Aviv, Israel (January 2020)

While Violet all but demands this degree of class as part of her well-known aesthetic made famous by her *Drag Race* success, I try to mimic the feel when taking photos of local royalty, too: they deserve to feel expensive, to feel successful. Even when taking a candid photo, I attempt to maintain the portrait style. This way, performers can use the images for advertisements, as well as enjoy them as part of their own collection. The following candid of Nika Fierce (they/them) was taken at *Holy Bones*, a local arts and vendor show in Ypsilanti, MI. Prior to the drag portion of the event, I walked around taking candid photos of the performers, both to

prepare my camera settings for the upcoming performance and to take candid “portraits” for use in later advertisements.



Figure 4.7 Photo of Nika Fierce at Holy Bones, Ypsilanti, MI (October 2021)

I would not say that either of these images necessarily produce gender euphoria; they are simply “good” photos. They are both snapshots ripped out of time, yet resound in their moments. In each, the performer dominates the frame and does not seem to relate to anything else, directly. In Violet’s case, I know that she turned and posed, and continued to do so throughout her show. If viewed alongside the other images that I took, it becomes fairly clear when she is posing for a camera. In her case, both performer and photographer were aligned and consciously chose to portray a certain image (albeit we had no way to know what one another had in mind). In Nika’s candid, we can hear the unknowing joy of living without posing, without being center-stage.

Although they knew I was present, they were not aware I was distantly snapping a photo at this moment, so we hear the joy of being in public in an openly queer, non-binary way. They simply exist. As a photographer-ethnographer, it was my duty to capture both of these instances in the best way possible to reflect the moment, and both were influenced by my interpretation of their success.

Dottie Monroe (they/them) is a non-binary burlesque and drag performer in Michigan. When I sent out a call for photographs that made people feel gender euphoria, they sent me these. The first photo shows them prior to a performance, still wheeling in their wardrobe. Dottie expressed to me in an *Instagram* message that their euphoria comes from seeing themselves with masc and femme energies juxtaposed and the confidence they felt as a result. The euphoria was not necessarily present at the time the photo was taken, but resounds when viewing/listening to the image. Dottie sees their smile and it actuates a present one. It is a smile that knows that happiness is not always guaranteed because it hears societal judgment for such masc-femme juxtaposition. In some ways, it is bittersweet. Hearing the photo means hearing the memory of the once- (and possibly still-) present life. Even more poignant is the selfie from around 2010. “It was my married Christian mom phase... a combination of dysphoria and bittersweet.”<sup>65</sup> Dottie told me that the selfie used to bring them incredible dysphoria, but now marks how far they have come in life. Today, there is a stirring euphoria present in the negativity of the past.

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<sup>65</sup> Dottie Monroe, *Instagram* direct message with author, 11 Jan 2024.



Figure 4.8 Photo of Dottie Monroe at Teaseagogo East Lansing, MI (2022)<sup>66</sup>



Figure 4.9 Photo of Dottie Monroe (from around 2010)

When it comes to euphoria, I have seen a marked difference in what makes a photo successful in a performer's eyes. The photos I showed above were technically good photos. The

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<sup>66</sup> Photo by Kendall Lartigue

framing benefitted the scene, the camera settings were balanced for good lighting, etc. In the following image of Johnny Rocket, I see multiple *technical* issues.



Figure 4.10 Photo of Johnny Rocket, at Holy Bones, Ypsilanti, MI (October 2021)

There is nothing particularly special about this photo in terms of framing or action. He is seen wearing a tanktop, standing relatively still, and the shadows are a bit too deep. It does not shout about any particular happening or aesthetic. I sent it, mostly expecting that Johnny would crop it to potentially use for a future flyer where words and graphics would largely cover him—I tend to offer a number of less-than-perfect photos alongside meticulously edited portraits for

performers' own gratification. After the performance, however, Johnny posted this image alongside others from the day to his *Instagram* with the caption "I can't quite express the euphoria I felt at seeing myself in drag in these photos - especially the first one." (Rocket 2021). When I asked him about why this image, in particular, he said that he saw his inner self reflected out in the open. It was like he was not hiding, but living as this euphoric, masculine being despite the world. The photo vibrated with his recognition of a situation whereby he refused being rejected by an imperfect society. Johnny Rocket knew that he was not exactly the person in the photo and that his reality would not let him embody it fully, but he found gender euphoria through an awareness that the then-present Johnny in the photo was living a future that will have had to happen for his now-present self to also obtain it. It is not false innocence, but a radical choice.

There are also some photos that performers do not want to see. For example, trans woman and drag performer Zooley Gaychanel expressed that old photos of her in drag with a beard, while provocative at the time, are dysphoric today since she has come to understand her gender differently. She actively curates her public archive in a way that silences the traumatic and dysphoric. Her social persona is necessarily crafted as a euphoric one based on her current understanding of gender success in society. In this instance, I agree with Malatino (2022) in that it is crucial to sit with bad feelings in order to reach liberation, as oppressive structures bury those feelings. The Whiteness performed online through euphoric aspirations becomes entrenched in trans life as demarcated by social media geographies.

Johnny's confession reveals what is lost, or even forgotten, in the usual pile of discarded portraits. Following consistent feedback from the community, I have since made it a habit to include photos with minor "mistakes" or "deficiencies," as most of the time, a non-photographer

is simply happy to have their photo taken. This practice has set me apart from other local photographers that only submit a handful of curated images. However, I must also be careful to negotiate what euphoria and dysphoria mean for a performer. While Malatino's critique challenges a reliance on seeking euphoria as central to one's identity and expression, its existence denotes a specific flavor of euphoria and reveals a performer's subjectivity. The community has taught me, therefore, that we can hear these intimate moments in the quietness of performance, in the quiet subtleties of a "silent" photograph.

It is significant that Johnny posted the photos with this caption on social media, which is arguably the most extensive archive of the present and recent past that has all but become material through its pervasiveness in our lives. In terms of geography, social media melts distance and somewhat homogenizes experience and reception. This is most apparent in today's drag when comparing the lack of distinctiveness between styles. Popular media like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *The Boulet Brothers': Dragula*, alongside social media, have drastically standardized individual drag creativity while likewise drawing in larger audiences with greater potential for creativity. I do not mean to critique the role of social media or its value as an archive, rather, it is important to remember the practical relationship between the archive and culture. Almost weekly, I see posts by performers that are discouraged by what they see on social media. When seeing others' portraits, they can become frustrated since they are not having the same apparent success. The reverse is also true. When performers have quality photos of themselves, they are shared everywhere, and tend to be accompanied by an "open for bookings" statement. This is part of why I developed the photography style that I did: everyone deserves to be uplifted by drag. As Horowitz mentioned, "if identity is the product of relations...LBQ (or any other) identity would shift from place to place, because to shift places is to shift the entire set

of relations that encompasses one's body" (Horowitz 2020:99). If we shift the formation of identity to the place of social media, we also shift its set of relations and their immediate impact on the archive and its protentional self. While Te Punga Somerville has shown us that we should approach archives as innately connected, social media readily necessitates that people's archives are always already in constant conversation with one another.

Although I began in the Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti area as a hobbyist photographer, it quickly developed into professional work, and I even made somewhat of a name for myself across Michigan as a low-light drag and burlesque photographer. I have a rule that I do not use flash when taking photos, as it is distracting to the performers, and have had to implement a unique set of skills and specialized equipment to capture these queer moments; after all, a camera can only reimagine what it sees. From framing to color grading, from noise to shadow, I always have the final edit in mind before activating the shutter. From interpreting the subject in their setting (Violet and Nika), or hearing music re-sound when listening for context (New York's 82 Club), to how photos can affect subjects over time (Dottie and Johnny), when I engage with photographs as a researcher or photographer, I am always listening for their stories. All of my photos work as the "becoming" of an archive. By imagining how they will be experienced later, I have been led to take them in a way where their sounds can be heard for decades. I am creating "a tactile universe because the document can be touched, a visual universe because it can be seen, a cognitive universe because it can be read and decoded" (Mbembe 2002:20), a sonic universe because it can be heard, and a euphoric universe because it performs the future that will have had to happen.

I set out in this chapter to tell a particular story, a tale of methodology. I can only know so much about what happened in the past through an archive. I cannot tell what someone is



feeling through a photograph, but I can see how they were captured and potentially weigh that against an idea of refusal and self-actualization. There is also the danger of assuming someone's felt gender across history. While I am working mostly with present-day performers that are also trans and non-binary, the relative newness of the term means that I cannot accurately apply the category to someone else from the past, for "the archive is porous to societal processes and discourses" (Hamilton, Harris, and Reid 2002:7). "Archives are often both documents of exclusion and monuments to particular configurations of power" (9). If we turn to the depths of an archive, particularly with an eye and ear toward photographs, we encounter silence—not just in the absence of sound, but in the gaps and spaces left by untold stories, marginalized voices, and the inherent limitations of what visual records can convey about the inner lives of their subjects. By tracing euphoria through archival images, stepping cautiously around the peril of anachronism, we can hear the sounds of self and culture. These sounds are not external but metaphorically and internally resonant. The archival images speak to us, not in decibels, but in the deeply human quest for joy, acceptance, and recognition that threads through the personal and communal narratives they embody. If we are to consider new conceptions of silence and the archive with notions of triple intentionality, relationality, and imagined sound in mind, perhaps we may come to understand that archival materials like photographs can evoke complex, multi-sensory responses that further affect how we interact with and interpret said archives. This disrupts the idea of a musical archive's silence being a mere lack of auditory stimulus, and offers a canvas for a rich, experiential engagement that could alter both our present knowledge and future interpretations of drag.

## Chapter 5 Re/Mediating the Trans Mirror: Gender Euphoria and Digital Drag's Musical Potential

### Introduction

*Today, I'm wearing a dress. It's a simple one. Black fabric with white polka dots stretched over my body. My upper arms feel the chill in the air, but I sit writing with a knowing warmth. Last night I planned this dress. It was my solution to hours of doom scrolling social media. I heard the news that yet another trans\* girl had been murdered. I also thought of my students—this week is about trans\* representation in film. And I feel guilty. Guilty for passing apathetically. I've sought safety for so long that my daily stealth has become a part of my performative rituals, my gender steadily reinscribed by dysphoria. But today I am home. I am at my computer where a video game has been open to its home screen for the last hour. I sit and think about this moment. My camera is on, but until I press "start streaming," no one knows. Neither does anyone mistake my dress or makeup for drag. Only I am aware of my comfort in seeking euphoria. It's a quiet journey that is alone, yet loud in my refusal.*

The start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 led many industries, including drag, to relocate to online spaces. Not only were digital shows a great opportunity to maintain creative expression, they were the only source of income for some during the brief stay-at-home orders. Like the U.S. government's response to the pandemic, the transition was mostly temporary. As of this writing, the majority of drag is no longer online. However, a large community does

remain on live-streaming platforms like *Twitch*, albeit with far less novelty and a different type of prestige than that of offline drag. Although its roots are in transposing in-person drag to online spaces, the digital drag that predominates today, most strikingly, is not grounded in lip synching or musical performance; rather, it is a visual form centered around live streaming content such as video games. In this world, drag shows and lip synching are revered as special moments outside everyday digital drag artistry. They complement the genre rather than define it. In this chapter, I examine this restructured relationship between drag and sound, and argue that digital drag shows are opportunities for drag royalty to flex their creativity through amateur video production while representing a new perspective of what drag can be.

In Chapter Three, I put forth a metaphor of *life as loud* as a way to show how gender euphoria sails between drag performers, audience members, and the recorded track. It is both a convenient metaphor to intellectualize a sense of self-actualized euphoria, but also exists as a very real, physical phenomenon. In a typical drag venue like a nightclub, euphoria demands loudness, as the definition of the situation means that clubgoers are predisposed to finding pleasure in loud sounds.<sup>67</sup> But drag is not only relegated to loud nightclubs, bars, and other musical venues, and loud is, of course, not the only way to produce gender euphoria or a “second-person” subjectivity, as previously described.

In this chapter, I turn my gaze to the changes that come with performing drag online rather than in-person. I ask what it means to re/mediate a genre predicated by sound into a digital world that prioritizes visuals, whereby music is typically left as an afterthought. In this system of drag, lip synching only takes center stage through special events that supplement regular

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<sup>67</sup> David Welch and Guy Fremaux, “Why Do People Like Loud Sound? A Qualitative Study,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 14, no. 8 (2017).

practice. Since musical performance has long been the primary method for expressing subjectivity in drag, what happens when it becomes ancillary? What concerns me are the ways in which we tell stories through drag, and how despite appearing familiar, these narratives can resound in contrast when mediated from the physical to the virtual stage. Therefore, in noticing the restructuring of music and drag in this digital system, so too must I call into question the creative process and reception of said music.

Whereas Chapter Three emphasized the demand for loudness during in-person drag shows, there is no such expectation in the digital realm; in fact, it is often quite the opposite when considering thin walls and common courtesy in home environments. This also applies to headphone users that are arguably not as inclined to listen to speech as loudly as they would some genres of music. Since digital drag shows, like in-person ones, have hosts that talk between numbers, it is less likely that someone would maintain a high volume on their headphones throughout for the sake of enjoying the loud music. Further, headphones and typical computer speakers do not envelop the listener with sound that reverberates throughout their body like in a nightclub. And, of course, in most instances of digital drag, there is no lip synching at all. Therefore, we must adapt our approaches to both intersubjective drag analysis and ethnomusicological inquiry. As the listening practice changes from stage to computer screen, so do the elements of creation and transmission. I argue that euphoria remains musically, but its constitution subsumes the characteristics of the digital setting and medium.

Throughout my dissertation, I have attempted to paint fragments of a variety of aural perspectives of drag. By analyzing sonic instances of drag across boundaries of both time and media (nightclubs, photographs, and now, the internet), I offer one way to navigate a largely visual genre whose complex history has been deeply obscured by political conservatism,

transphobia, and in-group, queer counterculturalism. This chapter tells the story from the perspective of the listener-performer who uses technology to engage their off-stage life in their art as a practice of interperformativity.

Advocating for a non-binary paradigm is not an attempt to analyze the semiotics of seeing or hearing in order to write a history of the senses in Western culture. Nevertheless, I am inspired by those like Classen (2006) and Sterne (2003) who have begun writing such histories. In *The Audible Past*, Sterne described that the ways in which people discuss the senses have changed since the mid-18th century. His goal was to challenge the popular assumption that technology like the phonograph, telephone, or radio led to cultural shifts whereby hearing gained newfound importance in society. He offered, instead, a survey of pre-existing “cultural worlds” through which such innovations were birthed. Similarly, I submit that a non-binary perspective reveals a world of interpretation whereby we may revisit elements of gender performance and musical intersubjectivity. Whereas Sterne was attentive to the changing ideologies of sound, I am concerned with aspects of music whose importance remains undercut by the visual.

In this chapter, I am proposing two things. First, the re/mediation of drag in the digital space necessitates alternative forms of analysis that do not assume in-person drag as the foundation or goal. I use a forward slash rather than a hyphen to suggest that the mediation of digital drag is not only a re-mediated form of in-person drag, but perhaps more interestingly, something original in its own right that we come to know through a discussion of second-person subjectivity and sound. Second, we must apply a non-binary paradigm to see such originality and expansiveness in the construction of gender within a digital space that is always already transgressive and immersive. This affords us the opportunity to perceive the world in an entirely different manner. In doing so, I also aim to avoid the common pitfalls where research is accused

of trying to exist in a vacuum or utopia, or is so fixated on one mode of experience so as to encapsulate our impression of the world through a single lens.<sup>68</sup> Further, in establishing this sound world, I continue my earlier discussion about resistance narratives and drag analysis.

Throughout the 20th century, the U.S. went through multiple waves of political conservatism whereby film and video have been at the constant forefront of the media battle of representation and expression. Between the ultra-conservative Hays Code and McCarthy's Lavender Scare (Johnson 2004), both media and physical spaces have been regulated in ways that prevent drag performers and trans\* people from flourishing. As new technologies like television, and ultimately the internet, developed, such restrictions become harder to enforce. Digital drag is an excellent avenue for such a case study since the re/mediated sound is necessarily disembodied by technology, and the digital space allows performers to experiment with artistic expressions they are not safe to do in-person.

I approach these ideas from a couple of directions. Following an overview of digital drag's background and limitations, I discuss how the nature of non-musical live streaming affects the goals of digital drag, then, by zeroing in on the long-standing film practice known as the "transgender mirror," I complicate how we interpret filmed gender performance. The transgender mirror is an enduring narrative film device that ostensibly shows the audience a trans person's inner dysphoria by locking them in time and place. It is usually an uncanny reflection that supposedly represents a split between one's felt truth and their external presentation. By reframing the transgender mirror through digital drag, I show how a non-binary perspective may

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<sup>68</sup> See: Charles Fourier's (1851) discussion of the single-minded "monogyne" in Constance Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender, and the Aesthetic Imagination*, (Taylor & Francis, 2006), 142-143.

shift the meaning of drag performance. Each of these reveal patterns that convey an underlying grasp of drag that, in turn, reflect a broader understanding of musical intersubjectivity.

In addition to employing my euphoric lens and centering non-binary drag performers that have created musical narratives directly referencing their gender, I now also prioritize examples from drag royalty who began their creative practice as a streamer before doing drag, although the concepts can be transferred to a variety of situations. This distinction is important because a non-binary paradigm goes beyond drag itself, and therefore we must recognize that the aural nature of drag likewise contains multitudes. This chapter is a story of mirrors and reflections—one through which I hope we can begin to reimagine the potential in broader gendered and musical analyses.

### **What is Digital Drag?**

Digital drag occurs in three primary ways. In the earliest days of the pandemic, many monarchs looked to refashion online spaces for drag through live-streaming their lip syncs. Hosted on social media sites like *Twitch*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *YouTube*, a digital drag show is essentially a pre-recorded or live-streamed version of an in-person show. There is still a host that fills the time between performances with banter and announcements, and there are often show themes that the numbers must follow. Some drag royalty have even been able to record their lip syncs from an empty bar in an attempt to mimic the in-person feel. The vast majority, however, resort to lip-synching to a webcam or phone from home. This style of performance is typically a “point-and-shoot” way of lip-synching in front of a blank or uninteresting wall. Even when pre-recorded, the point-and-shoot style often aims to portray “true” drag. It is an attempt to have a 1:1 translation or mediation from in-person to digital. Nevertheless, as time has gone on, audiences have dwindled. From many that I have spoken to, performers and audiences alike,

point-and-shoot lip-synching feels hollow. Some performers also look down on those that only perform online, suggesting that their drag isn't "real." The harsh criticism usually comes from offline performers that never adapted to digital drag "filmmaking" techniques other than the point-and-shoot style. It is, after all, difficult to relate to the performers since the emphasis on a lip-synching head often leaves the rest of the body out of the frame. As a persistently floating head or torso that does not engage with the background, the voice and vocalic body cannot align.<sup>69</sup> There is rarely that suspension of disbelief so characteristic of successful drag lip-synching, where one momentarily forgets the person in front of them is not actually singing.

Over time, many artists began to produce highly edited performances, either through their own technological merit or by hiring a professional editor. The fall of 2020 saw the rise in popularity of in-home green screen magic. For the first time, drag monarchs could lip sync in any number of locations or settings, all from their bedroom. This meant that someone filming solo could now have backup dancers, or multiple simultaneous costumes, or even simply take the time to refilm any mistakes or cover elements that could detract from the performance. Although the earlier point-and-shoot style remains, it has been largely replaced, as of this writing, with the edited style, or a mix of the two.

The third type is what is colloquially known as the "drag streamer." Although it is different for everyone, the typical drag streamer is one that appears in drag clothing and makeup yet produces content similar to a non-drag streamer, that is, video games, costume-making, etc. My practice as a drag streamer has been to live stream the entire process of getting into drag. I chat with my community as I try new makeup styles and techniques, and sometimes follow

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<sup>69</sup> See: Freya Jarman, "Watch My Lips," *Music and Camp*, eds. Christopher Moore and Philip Purvis, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 95-117.



viewer suggestions for a particular look that day. As Thomas (2020) described in his analysis of live-streamed music performance, this type of streaming is an example of a burgeoning genre he calls “process as performance,” or the documentation of the creative process as the content itself. Afterwards, I tend to play video games while remaining in drag. Some monarchs arrive to stream with makeup and wardrobe completed already. Many also participate in digital drag shows where they present pre-recorded (point-and-shoot or edited) numbers, but it is not a prerequisite. Instead, these shows exist as special events where streamers and their communities can come together and watch the show on the host’s channel. They tend to be announced a few weeks in advance, and streamer-performers often build up hype around the upcoming show during their regular streams.

My chapter focuses on styles of drag found on the live-streaming platform, *Twitch*, but it is by no means the only venue for digital drag or representative of all types of digital drag. There are countless examples of musical and non-musical drag that appear on sites like *YouTube*. One of the most famous recent examples is Trixie Mattel and Katya Zamolodchikova’s comedy web series *UNHhhh* (2016–Present) where they gab over a loose topic in front of a green screen. The show’s novel editing style has served as inspiration for a wide variety of videos, queer and non-queer alike. Since 2005, Fausto Fernós and Marc Felion have worked on their daily LGBT podcast, *Feast of Fun* (previously *Feast of Fools*), which eventually branched off into their *YouTube* web series, *Cooking with Drag Queens*, where the hosts would learn a dish while interviewing a guest artist. Digital drag has also occurred as a hybrid element of performance art. For example, Sasha Velour helped popularize the use of a projector during a lip synch number through her drag revue, *NightGowns* (2015–Present). Prior to its dissolution, the TV network Quibi produced one season of *NightGowns* which followed Velour and her team in making the

revue its own stage act. The show won the 2021 RealScreen Award for “Digital Content, Short Form Content, Non-Fiction.”<sup>70</sup> In terms of digital drag lip synching, there is also a long history of drag music video production going back at least to c.1982 with RuPaul’s performance of Dionne Warwick’s “Heartbreaker” for *The American Music Show* (1981–2005), a campy variety show produced by Dick Richards (1946–2018) which regular featured underground drag performances, skits, and documentary footage of queer icons like RuPaul, Lady Bunny, Jayne County, Lahoma van Zandt, Larry Tee, and The Fabulous Pop Tarts (Randy Barbato and Fenton Bailey).<sup>71</sup> By zeroing in on *Twitch* drag, I aim to show just one of many potential avenues for digital drag performance in order to encourage a broader discussion of alternative forms of drag and their musicological implications.

In particular, I am focusing on drag streamers on *Twitch*, as it has been the most popular of all the online spaces for all three primary types of digital drag, as there were already queer communities accustomed to live-streamed content.<sup>72</sup> Discoverability on *Twitch* is also relatively more likely than on other platforms due to these pre-existing communities and a searchable tagging system. There are limits to the potential for discovery, but *Twitch*’s mechanic remains the most promising for now. In fact, drag streamers were especially vocal about convincing

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<sup>70</sup> “2021 Winners & Nominees,” *Realscreen Awards* ★ 2021 Winners & Nominees ★, <https://awards.realscreen.com/Winners/Winner/2021>. Accessed 4 Apr. 2024.

<sup>71</sup> Without Richards, we would not have much of the live video recordings of drag in Atlanta or NYC from the late 1970s–1990s. After Nelson Sullivan’s death in 1989, Richards drove from Atlanta to NYC and saved his video archive, too. These recordings span a wide array of materials, from interviews, behind-the-scenes discussions, music videos, comedy skits, to early “vlog-style” day-in-the-life of the videographers and their friends. Sullivan’s archive is now hosted at New York University and via *YouTube* @5ninthavenueproject and Richards’s archive is available at Emory University and portions via *YouTube* @Misterrichardson.

<sup>72</sup> The “drag streamer” is not dissimilar to pre-recorded talkshow and gossip review forms of drag hosts found on *YouTube* like Trixie Mattel and Katya Zamolodchikova’s comedy series *Unhhhh*, produced by *World of Wonder*. I limit my discussion here to “live” drag as the closest analog to in-person drag.

*Twitch* administration to include searchable community tags like “Trans,” “Black,” and “Disabled” in 2021.<sup>73</sup> As of 2023, the tagging system is no longer pre-defined; rather, streamers can customize their own set of tags.

*Twitch* has also become a thriving musical space for other genres like hip-hop and EDM. Like drag, the greatest influx of music streams occurred during the beginning of the pandemic as people were looking to online content for social solidarity (Vandenberg 2020). Gamble and Ng (2022) have noted that a streamer’s ability to run their own entertainment event on *Twitch* has helped musicians to develop skills not only for in-person production work, but find a path for liberation and an expression of self. The music community-building aspect of *Twitch* resembles, but can go beyond, in-person forms of community management. Likewise, from an audience standpoint, *Twitch* allows a sense of “ownership” over supporting a streamer and their art, most apparent in the practice of moderating. A streamer can choose community members that want to volunteer their time and support by helping moderate the stream. With active mods in the chat, a streamer can more easily focus on their own content creation, rather than looking out for trolls. In larger streams, especially musical ones, mods are crucial to the ongoing success and flow of the channel.

Drag streaming is by far the most popular style of digital drag for a few reasons. First, it is relatively easy to begin. Due to the popularity of live streaming, there were, even prior to 2020, already thousands of instructional videos on *YouTube* educating people on how to get started streaming or enhance one’s technical prowess. A drag artist can quickly set up to go live.

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<sup>73</sup> Molly Sprayregen, “Twitch Adds Transgender Tag After Years of Protests from Trans Community,” *them*, 28 May 2021. Accessed 29 Sept 2023, <https://www.them.us/story/twitch-adds-transgender-tag-after-years-of-protests-from-trans-community>.

Although they require similar technology (computer, camera, lighting), producing a stream is much simpler than recording and editing a digital number, point-and-shoot style notwithstanding.

Additionally, anyone can do drag at any time, online, since there are no producers or casting directors. This leads to more variety in styles and presentations. During their pageant, GaebPride said that part of their love for *Twitch* drag is the inclusivity. They are a non-binary, bearded queen, and have not been able to meet similar artists in person. Online, one can use their own channel to explore makeup, design, performance, art, gaming, etc. without fear of being fired from a club. I, myself, have been denied in-person gigs for having “non-feminine” body hair when performing femme-coded drag as an AMAB person.

Second, streaming already had a culture for making profit. When the pandemic began, many drag artists were able to supplement their lost income by seeking tips through digital performances. This was especially easy on *Twitch* due to its built-in donation system (Partin 2020). On *Twitch*, communities can donate to a streamer via a monthly subscription in exchange for emotes (personalized emojis for use in chat messages), cheers (messages that include “bits” where 1 bit = 1¢), donating directly through a linked service like PayPal or a streamer-specific platform like Stream Elements or Stream Labs, or through a variety of countless other monetizable actions that a streamer incorporates through *Twitch*’s third-party extension feature. During digital drag shows, it is common to have a lower thirds name card that has the performer’s CashApp or Venmo username so that audiences may tip them directly, and any donations made to the host’s channel are typically divided evenly among the performers.

The third reason for drag streaming’s popularity is that the platform also laid the path for newcomers, who, as of this writing, make up the majority of the remaining digital drag performer-streamers. Many of the drag artists on *Twitch* had never done drag before starting

digitally. Digital drag was also the first encounter for tons of viewers, especially teenagers that could not yet enter most nightclubs, and adults who simply had never seen it before. In the early days of the pandemic, as so many were stuck at home and able to spend more time online, there were countless drag fans that flocked to streams to come “face-to-face” with the spectacle. I do not know a single drag performer on *Twitch* that has not received innumerable questions and requests for advice about makeup, wardrobe, and performance.

Typically, *Twitch* streamers play video games, make arts and crafts, chat with their communities, or participate in table-top role playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*. Adding drag into the mix was a novel idea. In terms of branding one’s content, drag quickly became a popular outlet for queer creators to find their niche. Some sought out the novelty of drag as a costume, others found use in exploring more facets of their gender, and some were drawn to the artistic freedom that digital drag allows. Crucially, most of these alternative avenues to “perform” drag, are non-musical entirely. CharaCouture, “the drawsplay queen of Twitch,” is a genderfluid fashion illustrator who melds their drag with graphic design. She draws fantastical costumes and settings before editing her face into the scene. Some, like Virgos Horror, Gothess Jasmine, and Alien King Luc spend stream time crafting costumes and props for their drag. Virgo has, in turn, occasionally used the masks he’s made to host live-streamed movie nights and watch parties in drag. Others like OMG\_Juni incorporate drag as cosplay. Queen PiB hosts retro gaming sessions with shock-jock style commentary, and some like Granny play games while never acknowledging their drag—remaining in-character on all forms of social media. For the first time in the modern history of drag, we are seeing the genre divorce from its musicality. While people like Granny or PiB do use affected voices and sound effects as part of their characters, the fundamental nature of digital drag does not demand any sort of musical performance. We are not

attending their “show” expecting them to sing or lip sync. This means that when musical instances such as lip-synching happen, they are all the more intentional for the drag streamer. What I am claiming is that due to their experience as a streamer first, *drag* streamers approach drag in a highly analytical, reflective way that influences their overall style and practice.

During the “Stream Supreme Drag Pageant” hosted by the *Gayming Magazine* channel in February 2023, GaebPride announced with excitement that their first in-person performance was coming soon. Prior to this, Gaeb had primarily gotten into drag and played video games, all without a specifically musical framework. Non-musical instances of drag are not new, but the arena of digital drag is marked by such openness and accessibility. It is common to find in-person drag bingo, trivia night, or story hour at a local library, but these can also happen online. While lip synching or live singing may occur in this type of in-person event, the events themselves (bingo, trivia, story hour, etc.) are considered secondary to a drag performer’s career. It is the reverse on *Twitch*.

Finally, I believe that drag streaming has exceeded other forms of digital drag due to its ability to parallel the community building found through in-person drag, and even expand its potential for accessibility and safety. Creators like Tempvia Moonlight and Virgos Horror found *Twitch* to be a safer alternative to in-person shows during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing danger for minoritized people in the U.S. There are fewer direct limitations, online, based on physical accessibility than those that may happen in a nightclub. One also avoids risk of Covid or other infection from the safety of their home computer setup. Further, no one has to know where you live when online, and a monarch does not have to navigate unsafe transportation to and from a venue. Whereas drag queen story hour at a local

library is at high risk of violence and harm in the U.S., you can have story hours online with relative safety.

While all forms of digital drag offer a degree of anonymity and social distancing, drag streaming is unique in that it allows for communities to form around these desires. On one hand, even though a performer may participate in multiple digital drag shows, their sparseness hinders the development of long-term relationships. This is different from in-person drag where a community can still build around weekly or monthly drag shows since all involved are able to connect with one another before, during, and after the event. Drag streaming, on the other hand, allows for similar “off-stage” exchanges to occur by proximity, albeit limited to online geography. Although most *Twitch* streamers do not stream as their full-time job, their streaming hobby tends to occur more frequently than formal digital shows. It is impractical to host three plus shows a week, but someone may feasibly stream individual content whenever they have time. Likewise, audiences, or “viewers,” are encouraged to engage with one another and the streamer through chat messages and other types of involvement dreamed up by the streamer. Many form friendships that are continued in other online places like community Discords, social media, and multiplayer games. Intentionally creating spaces like these is crucial to re-mediating the genre online so as to not lose drag’s core propensity for community support and growth.

The mother of *Twitch* drag, Deere, has sought to do precisely that. She combines her life-long interest in video games with her love of drag to establish a safe place for queer people in gaming spaces online. Her innovative work on *Twitch* began in 2016, and today, she remains one of the most successful drag artists on the platform. Digital drag on *Twitch* would not have been

as viable without Deere's business acumen and ingenuity.<sup>74</sup> Making it her full-time career, Deere has worked to challenge long-standing issues in the online gaming community that has been predominantly cis het White men whose content relies on trash talk, bullying, and sometimes outright abuse.<sup>75</sup> Her goals are based in the belief that:

...through streaming, we in the industry are making drag culture accessible. I think I have helped to be an example that one does not have to be at the club or on TV to do drag, and a fan does not need to go to only watch TV or visit a drag bar to experience drag. There's unlimited ways to be a part of the culture and enjoy it.<sup>76</sup>

Similarly, in an interview with *i-D*, fellow *Twitch* Partner and drag creator Elix said:

Now that I've started doing drag, I feel so damn blessed and it's given me so much confidence I can't even tell you...My main message of my stream is that I want to

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<sup>74</sup> As of February 15th, 2023, Deere had 60.7 thousand followers. She made history in early 2019 as the first drag streamer to make partner on *Twitch*. To become a partner, one must go through a rigorous application process that only unlocks once certain metrics have been met. Partners have perks like higher payouts and more customization, as well as a verified checkmark next to their names when they chat in other streams. As of February 13th, 2023, only 3% of all active *Twitch* streamers were partners (source: "Twitch Affiliate and Partner Stats Ratio Charts," *Twitchstats*, Accessed February 13, 2023. <https://twitchstats.net/affiliate-and-partner-ratio>).

<sup>75</sup> Ed Nightingale, "Meet the drag troupe changing the face of online gaming," *i-D*, 23 Aug 2019. Accessed 15 Feb 2023. <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/xwexg7/meet-the-drag-troupe-changing-the-face-of-online-gaming>. *Twitch* has also had a history of not moderating its advertisers. In 2019, there was even pornography shown during a stream's ads. See: Emma Kent, "It's been a terrible week for Twitch," *EuroGamer*, 12 Aug 2019. Accessed 15 Feb 2023.

<https://www.eurogamer.net/its-been-a-terrible-week-for-twitch>. In another instance, *Twitch* had to sue to identify users that had uploaded parts of a video taken of the Christchurch mosque shootings from March of 2019. See: Joseph Cox, "Twitch Sues to Identify Users Who Uploaded Christchurch Video and Porn to Its Platform," *Vice*, 17 Jun 2019. Accessed 15 Feb 2023. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/43j5en/twitch-sues-to-identify-users-uploaded-christchurch-porn-game-of-thrones>.

<sup>76</sup> Christian Allaire, "Meet Four Drag Queens Redefining What a Gamer Looks Like," *Vogue*, 30 Nov 2021. Accessed 15 Feb 2023. <https://www.vogue.com/article/drag-queen-gamers-taking-over-twitch>.



influence people to build their confidence. I want to influence people to love themselves, because I started really late.<sup>77</sup>

Due to my own experience as a streamer long before I included my drag online, I noticed a considerable uptick in community engagement and numbers during drag streams. I have also been able to make lasting connections and friendships, and have had the opportunity to learn from countless creatives and community members, all because of *Twitch*.

While there were drag artists who streamed on *Twitch* prior to the pandemic, 2020 saw an exponential growth of drag communities, with many forming collectives called “stream teams.” The purpose of a *Twitch* team is to identify other streamers who share a collective interest, goal, or characteristic. Many stream teams have a lengthy application process to make sure all members are working with the same message and values in mind (for Stream Queens Code of Conduct, see Appendix A).

During a livestream, viewers can see which team the streamer is a part of and are able to click the hyperlinked team name to see other members of said team. A streamer can be part of multiple teams, but only one may be automatically hyperlinked (the others can be manually hyperlinked in the channel’s “about” section). While not every streamer participates in the same way, it is typically expected for members to “raid” a fellow teammate once their stream is complete. A *Twitch* raid is when a streamer ends their livestream and takes their viewers to someone else’s page to continue the fun. *Twitch* has an automated function where the streamer can type in the target channel name and the system will automatically pull over their entire

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<sup>77</sup> Ed Nightingale, “Meet the drag troupe changing the face of online gaming,” *i-D*, 23 Aug 2019. Accessed 15 Feb 2023. <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/xwexg7/meet-the-drag-troupe-changing-the-face-of-online-gaming>. At the time of the interview, Elix’s drag name was “Elixa.”

viewership to the target stream. Once the initial streamer is offline, going to their channel would show that they are “hosting” the target stream, and a viewer sees a link that will take them to the hosted channel. It is a way for one streamer to “pass on the love” and support another, typically a friend or someone with a smaller viewership. Prior to October 3rd, 2022, streamers could also officially “host” a stream, which functions much like a raid, but the community is not brought over all at once, and it typically happens when the streamer is offline. The streamer could set up a list of channels that would be auto-hosted when offline. In this way, a stream team helps to build community by encouraging raids to fellow team members. It is also a great way to find other like-minded content creators when looking to collaborate or watch someone new (some teams are quite large and not everyone knows one another). The mutual growth helps combat the competitive nature of “winning” viewers’ attention (Gamble and Ng 2022). Without stream teams centralizing queer networks and communities, I do not believe that drag would have become so successful and respected on *Twitch*. That said, anecdotally speaking, from 2023 on, the drag community has been more separated and less active as a unified *community*. I believe this is largely due to *Twitch* no longer being a necessity for people who would rather have drag in person and many of those who were drawn to *Twitch* in 2020 and found quick success, have since left the platform as numbers dwindled.

For drag, Team Stream Queens is the most prominent one on the platform. Founded by Deere in 2019, it is an all-drag troupe that seeks “to unify the Drag queens, kings, characters, & creatures of Twitch in one place!”<sup>78</sup> While less active as a whole due to many drag monarchs returning to in-person stages, the Stream Queens had 116 semi-active members as of November

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<sup>78</sup> “Team Stream Queens,” *Twitch*, Accessed 1 Oct 2023.  
<https://www.twitch.tv/team/streamqueens>.

19th, 2023. The Stream Queens have been exceptionally successful for networking, especially in 2020. As artists went online, so did many of their audiences. *Twitch* drag artistry as a whole saw an influx of viewers, many of whom were also new to *Twitch*. Many of my own community members reported that I was one of the first streams they saw after joining the platform, despite choosing to not pursue joining the Stream Queens team. In addition to my proximity to many Stream Queens as a friend and colleague, some viewers found me through raids, others through searching “drag” or “makeup” (which I always included in my stream titles), and some through *Twitch*’s own “recommended channels” algorithm.

What sets the Stream Queens apart from other teams is that they also host periodic conventions and themed events. The largest of these is their annual Stream Queens Con. It is a multi-day online event that lasts from around 11am to 10pm each day. Much like at offline conventions, the Stream Queens host a variety of panels featuring speakers from the team, as well as other streamers and guests. In the third Stream Queens Con held December 1–4, 2022, there were panels like “EXP Queens: The JRPG Panel,” “Kings of the Internet,” “Black Excellence,” “Transgender Panel,” “Creators with Disabilities,” “Contemporary Issues in Fashion & Drag,” and so on.

The schedule is also printed on t-shirts for Stream Queens members to purchase and help advertise offline. The style is intended to reflect concert merchandise, and the proceeds typically go to an AIDS fund or similar charity organization since the conference tends to align with World AIDS Day (December 1st). The panels are typically organized around a central theme of identity or interest. At the end of the four-day event, there was a digital drag show followed by stream queen Arson Nicki’s DJ set. The online success has also bled over into in-person drag

shows at various “TwitchCon” events around the world.

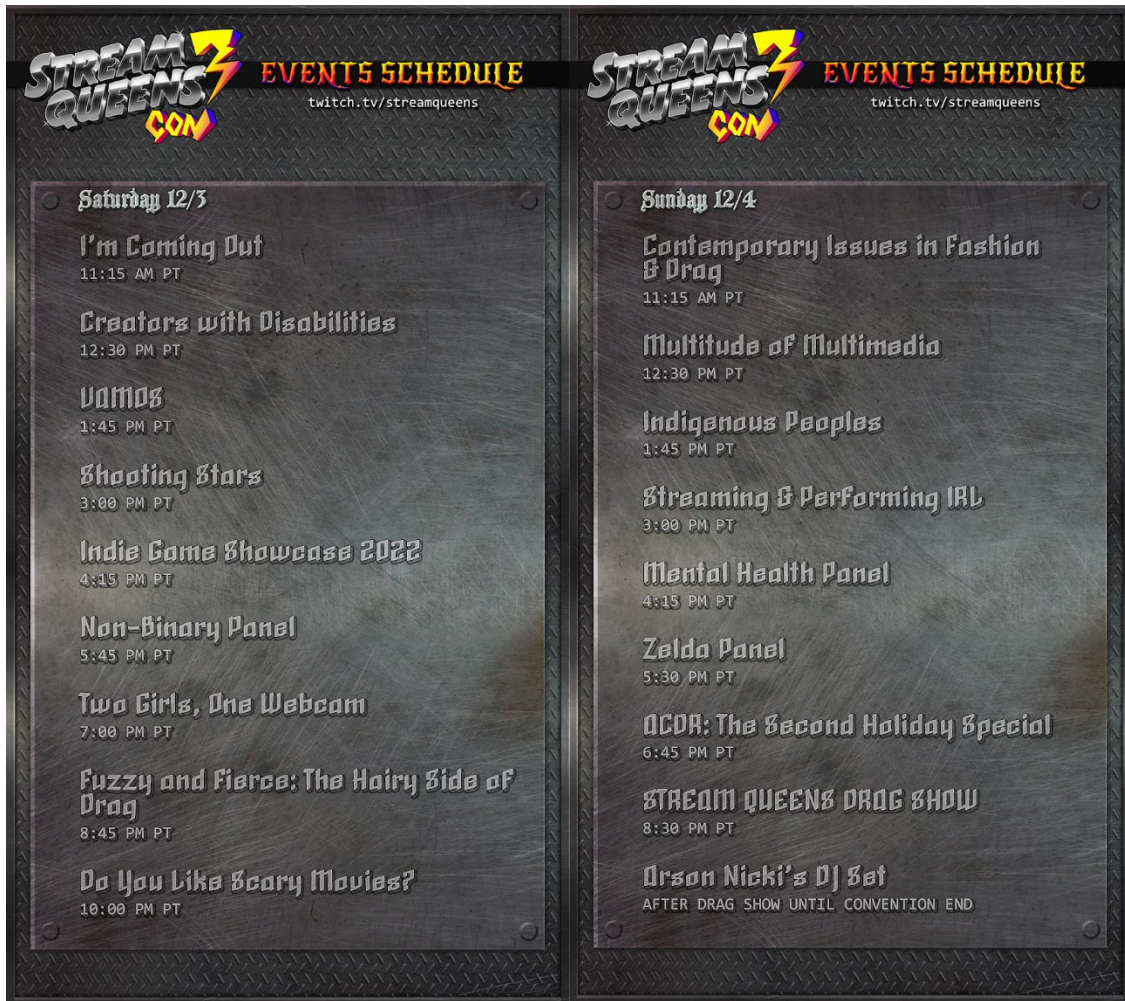


Figure 5.1 Stream Queens Con 3 Schedule, Days Three and Four

## Challenges to Digital Drag

Yet, online drag is not without its issues. All the monarchs that I have spoken to have expressed how frustrating digital drag can be. For many of them, technology is a difficult hurdle and quite often not worth the effort or expense, despite the plethora of tutorials. Although streaming equipment is becoming cheaper, the startup costs of an adequate computer, camera,

microphone, lighting, and robust internet connection can be tremendous. This is especially true considering donations are few and far between, even when digital audience sizes were at their peak in early summer of 2020. Some drag artists that entered the digital realm to make money were frustrated with the amount of work and luck it took to be successful online. Generally speaking, those that prioritized building long-term connections as streamers have been far better off. Once the initial novelty of drag faded, and arguably once in-person audiences were no longer working from home, tips became few and far between. At an in-person show in Michigan in 2023, for example, it is typical to be paid \$20-\$30 per number, or up to \$75 per show. Additionally, audiences arrive prepared to tip monarchs with cash throughout the event. Online, most shows do not pay participants (as there is no entry cover or bar), and the rare pool of tips is spread among everyone. For example, in 2021, I spent a few weeks filming and editing a six-minute number (including: five looks, green screening, seven filming setups, and Adobe After Effects special effects) for a show of eleven cast members that had over a hundred concurrent viewers, and none of the performers received a dime. It is an unfortunate norm for digital drag. My research has been mostly limited to drag streamers based in the United States, but a broader economic study that compares in-person and digital payment for performers that live in places where tipping is not customary would be insightful.

Furthermore, Elix and others have been violently targeted for being openly queer online. Beyond the steady wave of trolls and typical bullying from “anonymous” comments in chat, many have been victims of doxxing, hate raids, and swatting. Swatting is a criminal process whereby harassers make false reports to emergency services. Following a cyberattack where her IP address was shared the day before, on November 9th, 2021, Elix’s personal information was spammed in her chat, “doxxing” her location. A few minutes later, she was swatted. Police were

outside her home with a megaphone shouting her legal name and to come outside. She was told that there were reports that she had gruesomely murdered her brother, hiding his body in the basement, and planned to commit suicide. Elix was “lucky” that she was only handcuffed—in a country ravaged by police violence, especially toward first-generation Latine immigrants like Elix, swatting is often fatal.<sup>79</sup> Police told her that they were suspicious because they knew that her Las Vegas home was unlikely to even have a basement. Additionally, law enforcement reported that they found files from years prior where Elix’s workplace had received multiple bomb threats after a cyberstalking campaign launched against her by a YouTuber.<sup>80</sup> Elix was the sixth member of Team Stream Queens to be swatted in a two-month period. Whether in-person or digital, any time a queer person occupies a space, it is an act of resistance.

In the last few years, political groups and fundamentalist organizations have escalated attacks on LGBTQIA2S+ people and queer spaces in the United States. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) reported that lawmakers introduced nearly 500 anti-LGBTQ bills into state legislatures from January-October 2023.<sup>81</sup> The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) also reported more than 160 “protests and significant threats” against drag events in 2022, including armed protests, a widespread power outage, and a deadly

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<sup>79</sup> Kalhan Rosenblatt, “Family of Wichita man killed by police in swatting incident seeking \$25 million from city,” *NBC News*, 11 Nov 2019. Accessed 15 Feb 2023. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/family-wichita-man-killed-police-swatting-incident-seeking-25-million-n1079836>.

<sup>80</sup> Morgan Keith, “A drag queen Twitch streamer who was targeted in a recent uptick in swatting says the livestreaming service needs to protect users' privacy,” *Yahoo*, 27 Nov 2021. Accessed 15 Feb 2023. <https://www.yahoo.com/video/drag-queen-twitch-streamer-targeted-054222191.html>.

<sup>81</sup> The ACLU reports 496 bills so far for the 2023 legislative session. “Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures,” *ACLU*. Accessed on 1 October 2023. <https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights>.

nightclub shooting.<sup>82</sup> These actions are an attempt to not only ban drag, but eliminate queer people altogether.

What we have seen in American politics buttressed by evangelicalism, is that drag remains a stand-in for trans\* identity. Conservative lawmakers tend to write ambiguously to apply selective, yet wide-spread criminalization of all things queer through the steady onslaught against trans\* people. For example, on February 9th, 2023, the Tennessee Senate passed a drag ban that could also be used to indict trans\* people. Tennessee Senate Bill 3 (cross-filed with TN House Bill 9) criminalizes “male or female impersonators who provide entertainment that appeals to a prurient interest, or similar entertainers, regardless of whether or not performed for consideration” on public property or anywhere that a minor could witness them.<sup>83</sup> With frightening similarity to the deadly McCarthyism of a half-century prior, this is only one example of hundreds where Republican lawmakers use vague language to enable the public to interpret “prurience” at-will. This leads to no legal protection or recourse on behalf of trans\* people or drag performers who are not performing sexually explicit content, but are accused of doing so by anyone on the street. Fortunately, some states are proposing their own safe-haven bills to protect current residents and future trans\* refugees from throughout the country.<sup>84</sup> We still do not know the effects these laws will have on online social media spaces not bound by state lines, although the immediate future seems grim, as language addressing cross-state,

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<sup>82</sup> GLAAD, “UPDATED Report: Drag Events Faced More than 160 Protests and Significant Threats Since Early 2022,” *GLAAD.org*, 25 April 2023. Accessed 1 Oct 2023. <https://glaad.org/anti-drag-report/>.

<sup>83</sup> Would amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Section 7-51-1407.

<sup>84</sup> Arit John, “What makes for a transgender safe haven? California, other blue states are figuring it out,” *Los Angeles Times*, 11 Aug 2023. Accessed 1 Oct 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2023-08-11/transgender-safe-haven-shield-laws-refuge-states>.

gender-affirming telehealthcare is becoming more frequent in these anti-trans/drag bills.

Although most of the anti-drag bills that have passed in legislation have been struck down by the courts, countless healthcare restrictions remain. The transphobic, anti-LGBT sentiment remains a core backing track to digital drag performers, trans and cisgender alike. The censorship and active harm coming from legislators and newly emboldened conservatives that feel justified in their hate should remind us that the world of digital drag is simultaneously different and entwined with “off-line” politics.

For many trans\* people and drag streamers, including myself, online harassment is seemingly inevitable. Likewise, we have seen the effects of recent political actions reflected in the streaming space. While I have been fortunate to not have been doxxed or swatted, I have been the target of many hate raids that have spread to other social media platforms, with some that have lasted months. It is common to receive death threats with explicit detail and attempts to have my accounts hacked.

The harassment that I experience, notwithstanding, remains far less than that received by trans women; especially, trans women of color. For example, there are many Black streamers, even cisgender ones who, in order to help protect themselves, do not use a webcam, and others that only appear in drag during a digital drag show in order to lessen the ongoing antagonism. It is imperative to remember, nevertheless, that online platforms provide much more positivity and potential in general, although systems must be put in place to allow all its users to have these opportunities. Many drag and non-drag streamers even participated in the #ADayOffTwitch



boycott on September 1, 2021 in protest of *Twitch*'s lack of action to protect streamers from hate raids and other harassment.<sup>85</sup> Online safety and moderation is a never-ending project.

In addition to favoring non-musical instances of drag as the standard, the intersubjective potential for digital drag is, likewise, necessarily transformed. As mentioned above, the primary difference between an in-person and digital show is that, ironically, the live-streamed version is pre-recorded. This introduces a major problem. Audiences are unable to respond online like those found in person. Although their words can be relayed through chat, they arrive too late since they are watching a pre-recorded number. Therefore, performers are not able to consider live audience feedback in order to reshape their performances like they would in person, as discussed in Chapter Three. Instead, performers turn to technology to serve as their mirror which aids in the creation of a new world for their art and community.

### **Sounding the World of Digital Drag**

To frame the sound world of digital drag through the idea of a mirror, I draw upon a long history of sound studies. I am attempting to outline a non-binary paradigm for sound and gender research. In considering the mediation of drag, I am curious how, as Ihde put it, “the same technology in another cultural context becomes quite a ‘different’ technology” (Ihde 1990:144). What I characterize as a “new” digital worldview is the result of research utilizing an interperformative framework of relations (Horowitz 2020). Drag performance is, by no means, representative of an entire cosmology. It is not realistic to imagine drag as central to one’s

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<sup>85</sup> Ana Diaz, “What is ‘A Day Off Twitch,’” *Polygon* 1 Sept 2021. <https://www.polygon.com/22652063/a-day-off-twitch-streaming-platform-hate-raids-boycott>. Accessed 1 Oct 2023.

interpretation of the world, but we may, instead, come to view the world of drag as interpreted through non-binary and digital lenses. Inspired by Feld's discussion of embodied locality in Papua New Guinea, I do seek to link *Twitch* as a digital "place to cosmology through sound" (Feld 2012:126). He noticed that the Kaluli (Bosavi) people lived in a world composed of "relational ontologies and their acoustemologies, their acoustic ways of knowing, tracking orientations to the world through sound" (Feld 2012:126). Similarly, the intersubjectivity of drag relies on relational ontologies of sound and subjectivity that could be understood as a broader acoustemology of the "world of drag." In addition to a non-binary perspective, I position the digital-first nature of digital drag as fundamental to one's understanding and interpretation of the drag system as a whole. By working from this viewpoint, I insinuate that for non-streamers and non-*Twitch* regulars, i.e. outsiders, digital drag ruptures the traditional sonic world of drag. Much of the foundation of ethnomusicological work, and certainly that of acoustemology, has been a discursive practice, revealing ways that "outsiders" make sense of "insiders'" musicality. Attempts to outline these bridges have yielded a great deal of understanding of how people engage with sound and music, as well as how others can come to learn and appreciate the same. Be that as it may, an emphasis on insider-outsider relationships ignores the reality of 21st-century communities whose culture and practices overlap. The shifting aurality of digital drag, therefore, necessitates that we reconsider its relational ontologies.

Researchers like Droumeva and Andrisani (2011) have already attempted to consolidate a variety of perspectives from across the fields of digital humanities, cultural studies, and sensory ethnography to understand how aurality can become re-mediated. Their research explored the nature of mobile technology on immersive listening. Following the work of scholars like Schafer (1977), McLuhan (1964), Nancy (2007), Ihde (1976), and Ong (1982), they found that

embodiment must necessarily be conceptualized as “a dynamic co-construction of *both* phenomenal corporeality and a cultural, communicative context” (Droumeva and Andrisani 2011:5). While I agree that any articulation of the nature of embodiment is necessarily dependent upon an exploration of the corporeal, the “body” in digital drag is not so obvious. The immersive quality of in-person drag is, at the very least, obscured if not fully absent in the digital field due to a lack of an unambiguous body. Therefore, I submit an alternative to the formal body based on a pre-existing theorization of subjectivity in drag performance: the mirror. This substitute allows us to locate the self amidst an ongoing re/mediation since drag monarchs are already somewhat attuned to this intersubjectivity. And, as Droumeva and Andrisani noted, “the propensity for the individual to engage the sonic environment hinges upon one’s own history with sound, and the manner that the aural modality has been cultivated according to the context in which the subject is situated” (3).

The godmother of drag research, Esther Newton ([1972] 1979), has long used the mirror as a metaphor when describing the necessity of performer-audience interaction. The drag queen must see herself “reflected back approvingly” by the audience for her performance to be successful. As I showed in Chapter Three, there must be apparent evidence of a shared narrative happening. For example, in the U.S. one must remember to leave room in the performance to interact with the crowd; otherwise, they will miss out on tips.<sup>86</sup> It is a common mistake that even more experienced performers sometimes make, and it can be awkward if you find yourself having to improvise for a lack of a plan and your routine gets interrupted. Both performers and

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<sup>86</sup> In some areas without low-denomination paper money (or extensive tipping culture), like Palestine-Israel, where I conducted fieldwork prior to the pandemic, performers do not receive tips. Instead, they are paid a higher amount for the whole show depending on the sales that night. It is also more common to have ensemble performances which helps fill the time when there are no lyrics to lip-synch.

audiences expect this exchange. Similarly, we know that performers in numerous musical contexts rely on audiences for support. Rahaim (2012), for example, has written about a similar feedback loop in the context of Hindustani music whereby both audiences and musicians perform a variety of vocal and bodily gestures to support one another. In Chapter Three, I also outlined ways that performers and attendees at an in-person drag show communicate intersubjectively through sound. In digital drag, however, this practice is quite different.

Combined with the inability to witness and engage with audience reactions as they would in a club, digital drag monarchs cannot see, or hear, themselves “reflected back approvingly.” Their art was already produced by the time anyone sees it. But this does not mean that the mirror is absent, rather, it has been re/mediated. To move forward, we must shift our perspectives to the only audience member in the room at the time of creation: the performers themselves who edit and re-edit.

The following case study is divided into three parts, each presenting a different type of reflection. The first part considers a streamer’s recording and broadcasting software as a technological mirror that helps the performer self-regulate and self-actualize. Through this mirror, I argue that the performers see themselves as moldable objects, ready to be shaped (by themselves) for a potential public. The second part continues the mirror metaphor to show how some digital drag artists actively engage with broad narratives of gender dysphoria and euphoria. I bring the recorded number into conversation with film theory to show how non-binary monarchs can intentionally usurp narratives of dysphoria. Finally, I offer an example of a cisgender performer whose work expands the artificial boundaries I have placed by spotlighting non-binary performers throughout my dissertation. By examining two of his digital numbers, I show how a non-binary paradigm is not limited to non-binary subjects.

While the majority of *Twitch* drag royalty did not seek out digital drag as a means of escaping political or social antagonism, we can see the effects of such hostility by tracing how gender euphoria maneuvers in this digital realm. At face-value, resistance and self-actualization, or even dysphoria and euphoria, are two sides of the same coin. But I disagree. They are not mere parallel approaches. Both have aspects of one another, but remain entirely separate in meaning. The reflections that follow ask us to root ourselves in a sound world that listens back into a domain of dysphoria and binaries, while never being bound by it.

## **Music as a Mirror**

### **Broadcasting Software as a Mirror**

In the spring of 2021, I was invited to perform in a live-streamed digital drag show on *Twitch*. It was a gender euphoria-themed show with an all trans, nonbinary, and genderqueer cast. It was the first time I had been asked to perform *as* a non-binary person, as well as in a way that explicitly conveyed gender euphoria. The show allowed me not only to interrogate my own gender, but also see how other enbies envisioned theirs. I felt its theme of gender euphoria demanded me to somehow reconcile my traditionally crafted, femme drag queen persona with my out-of-costume enby gender identity. It forced me to quell my preoccupation with my inability to intellectually define, capture, and convey non-binary-ness and gender euphoria in a drag video.

When thinking of drag, one imagines a larger-than-life performance of gender where, typically, feminine equals queen and masculine equals king. It is a parody of gender expectations within a binary (Schachter and Underwood 2004). But how could I, as a non-binary person whose gender is not pronounced by specific cultural markers, perform drag in a non-binary way?



Figure 5.2 GENDER EUPHORIA show flyer

Could I expand the conventions of traditional drag while still portraying gendered codes? Beyond femininity and masculinity, what could I exaggerate in a staged performance of seemingly nondescript gender? Up until this show, I had considered euphoria mostly as an individualized experience, not as a conversation I had with others from the stage, as was the case in Chapter Three. What resulted was a highly edited narrative where I conveyed a process of becoming, as my out-of-drag self was drawn into a fantastical green-screened world of euphoria and personal expression.

In my digital “music video” performance, “Sanctuary,” I told a story of gender becoming. I knew that I could not have audience involvement like I typically did in a club, so I relied heavily on narrative. I divided the number into three main acts, with visuals changing alongside each audio segment. The first two parts present questions about identity, and the final (and much longer) section acts out the whole process of questioning and finding “sanctuary” in oneself. My goal was to convey my own uncertainties while also encouraging both myself and the audience.

The first question, *what do I see*, invites the viewer into a moment of vulnerability. Reminiscent of a small lounge, I reclined in a sparkling gown and black mesh fascinator while lip-synching Meryl Streeps’s opening words in *Death Becomes Her*.

What do I see?

That’s the question I’m most afraid of.

One that asks me what

I’m really made of.

What do I see, much

more than a reflection.

a romance with sheer perfection.

The second question breaks the fourth wall even further and addresses the audience directly.

*Why are you blaming yourself for not fitting into a standard that doesn't fit you?*

Elle Deran, *Instagram Reel*

People!

Sorry, I'm yelling.

Why are you blaming yourself for not fitting into a standard that doesn't fit you?

Why are you blaming yourself and not the standard?

If it doesn't fit you, then it's not for you.

So be you.

God, just be you.

We have so many expectations, we have to fit into all—

We have these ideas that there's a right way to do this.

There's a right way to live. There's a right way to be:

Look, act, speak, everything.

But there literally is no right way.

The right way is your way.

So like—

We need to slow down, slow down our thoughts and lower our expectations of ourselves

So we can listen to that voice that says “that feels right, that feels wrong”

And then you'll be yourself and we deserve you.

So get on it.



Okay? I love you.

As is typical in my drag, this question came in the form of audio from an *Instagram* reel. Elle Deran is a non-binary trans\* woman whose social media became well-known in enby circles over the last few years. In order to break the fourth wall, I lip-synched her words out of drag. I wore a loose blouse with small shoulder pads, non-drag makeup, and earrings. In other words, how I saw myself, at the time, euphorically appearing off-stage.<sup>87</sup>

As I discussed previously, in-person reflective numbers like Zoöey Gaychanel's "Masterpiece" (Chapter 3) require a drag monarch to take special care to evaluate internally how to most clearly relay their story externally, as an embodied experience.<sup>88</sup> In digital drag, the artist must similarly dig into their creativity, but they are afforded an entirely different set of tools through the power of multi-layered editing and recording. When creating "Sanctuary," I quickly discovered how contrary in-person and digital performance styles could be. What may appear as disjointed in-person does not necessarily disrupt the narrative flow of a video, and indeed, can bolster it. Merely changing the green-screened background and costuming supported the somewhat drastic shifts between my three "acts." It would be impossible to have multiple drag and non-drag looks within an in-person performance.

Chelora Flora (she/they) is another drag streamer who feels that there is a distinct difference from her digital art to what is possible in-person. She is a trans non-binary woman

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<sup>87</sup> Digital drag helped me achieve a look not possible in-person, as the camera also does not show below my upper torso. I could not actually fit into the blouse anymore so only the top few buttons were used. This came at a time in the pandemic where I still had not been in contact with people outside of my home and I found euphoria in being able to have a reason to dress up and feel good about myself.

<sup>88</sup> Although not unheard of, in the U.S., it is less common to have other actors join a performance as additional characters wherein the monarch can convey a multifaceted narrative. This also looks over hybrid in-person and digital numbers commonly found in settings like Sasha Velour's *Nightgowns* where a projector is used as an overlay.

who has been streaming and organizing around drag since long before the pandemic began, and has been instrumental in coordinating with the Stream Queens. She appears on stream both in- and out-of-drag, but also crafts a wide array of digital drag numbers. Her performance repertoire ranges from non-lyrical, art film-esque movie soundtracks to parodies of video game characters like Waluigi from the *Mario* franchise. Like many full-time streamers, Chelora spends much of her day reviewing her content and critiquing herself through photo and video editing. But this practice is not limited to offline branding review. She uses the same skills and motivations whether editing a clip from a previous stream or a digital drag number.

For context, when a streamer goes live, they use a program such as Open Broadcasting Software (OBS). Within the application, they can choose how to customize various scenes or scenarios visually and aurally, they can read chat, see notifications, and have their current computer stats available. They also have a live-view of their stream output. Many, including myself, have gotten into drag using this live view as an actual mirror, but better. By moving my camera, I can have mirror angles not possible with a regular one. I have full control. As streamers, the OBS “dashboard” is especially important to shaping one’s desired persona and brand. One wrong setting and your entire stream could be blank visually, have no audio, or you could be revealing too much private information through your camera, microphone, or shared computer screen. While OBS is primarily for live-streaming, some artists use it to record their digital numbers, although post-production editing is relegated to other programs.

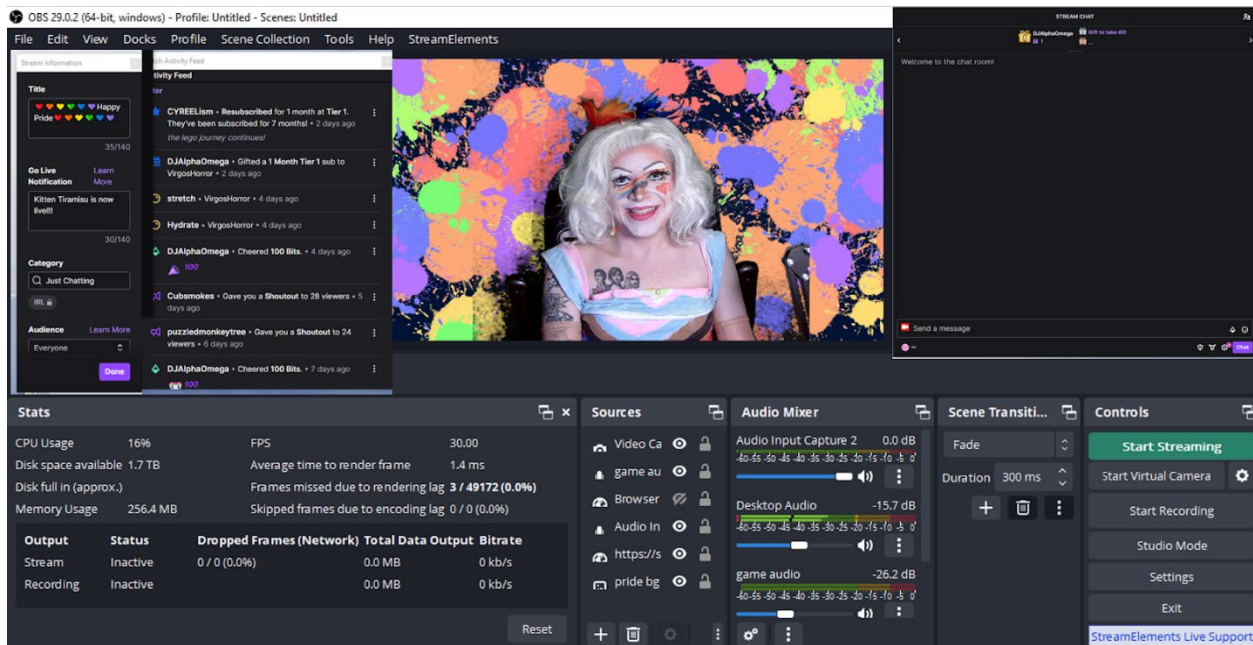


Figure 5.3 Image of Kitten Tiramisu’s OBS layout.<sup>89</sup>

Chelora’s drag is constantly evolving through this self-directed marketing presence grounded in live-streamed content creation. She told me that she is far more comfortable performing drag digitally than in-person, in part due to their ability to control everything: from hiding any flaws to maintaining safety as a trans person.<sup>90</sup> Her process of editing has become a form of self-regulation and exploration. Their streaming and recording software functions as a mirror through which she crafts an expression, albeit one entangled in the anxiety of both on- and off-stage lived experiences.

In 2020 she released a video set to the song “Lights Go Out” from a futuristic anime set on Mars called *Carole & Tuesday*. She describes the number as her attempt to show the duality of self. At the time, they only identified as non-binary rather than a trans woman, and felt waves

<sup>89</sup> Typically, her stream chat, activity feed, and stream information panels are grouped together on a different section of her monitor from the rest of OBS, but both are visible. I combined them here to save space.

<sup>90</sup> Chelora Flora, interview with the author, 4 Jun 2023.

of confusion on how to express the clash between masculinity and femininity imposed by society. Similar to my own “Sanctuary,” Chelora relied on overt narrative to portray this unease. She divided the screen in vertical halves with two characters lip-synching simultaneously. Importantly, Chelora’s femme side is relegated to an industrial, indoor setting, while her masc side is always outdoors. In an interview, she told me that beyond her then-understanding of gender as something that is either/or (which she disagrees with today), “Lights Go Out” reflects how they had to live their daily life: femme presenting at home, but safely presenting as more masculine in public.

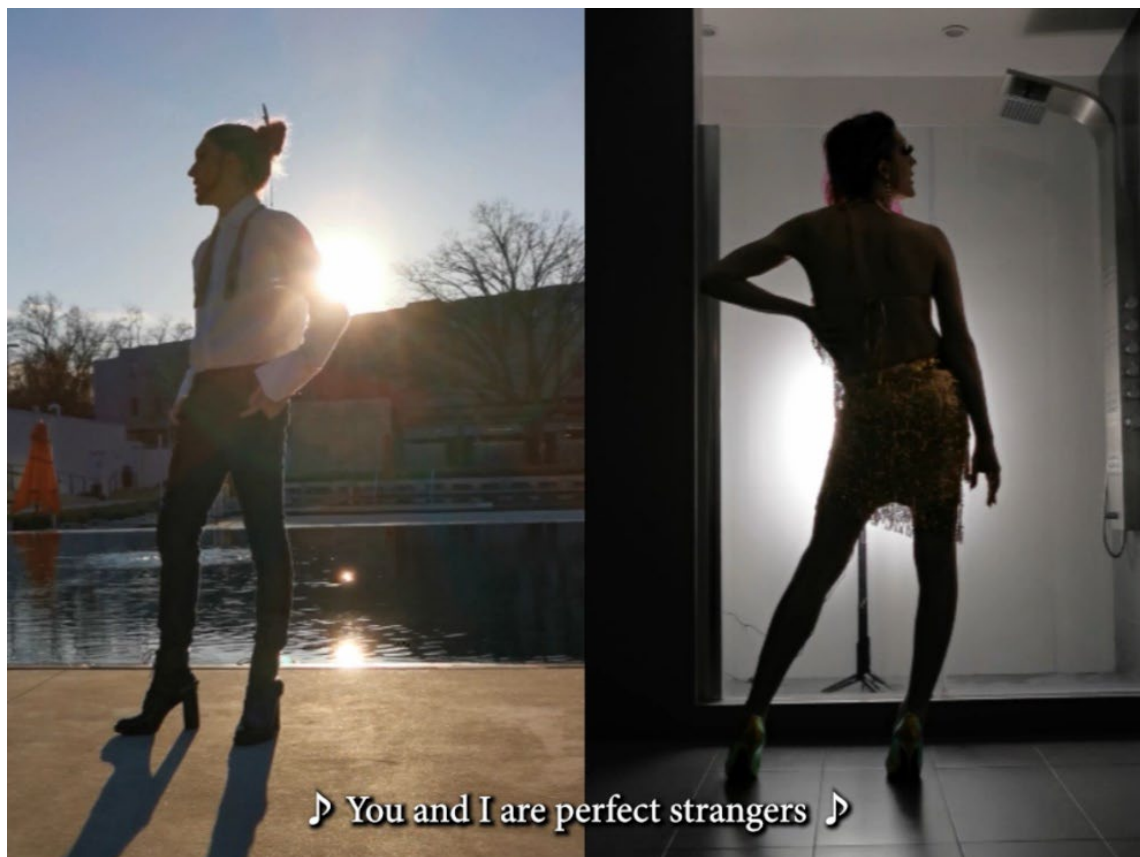


Figure 5.4 Screen capture from “Lights Go Out” video

In the anime, “Lights Go Out” was written by the pompous character DJ Ertegun after he went bankrupt once his AI manager stole his money. It was his attempt to return to what made

him love music in the first place, prior to becoming famous through the use of AI music production tools. It was also the first time he had a human, rather than an AI persona, sing one of his songs. Despite not using AI, the EDM song still features heavily processed, robotic vocals.

“Lights Go Out” from *Carole and Tuesday* (2019)

You and I are perfect strangers	When the lights go out, out
We never wanna be alone	When the lights go out
Looking up into the stars	Out (Out)
We see them in the same light	(When the lights go out)
You and I are perfect strangers	Oh-oh-oh-oh (Out)
We never wanna be alone	Yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah
Looking up into the stars	(When the lights go out)
We see them in the same light	Yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah
I know somewhere we can go	(When the lights go out, when the lights go
Somewhere we can lose control	out)
We can find a miracle	Yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah
When the lights go out	(When the lights go out, when the lights go
When the lights go out	out)
When the lights go out	

Following the lyrics, each of Chelora’s gendered sides “were perfect strangers” who dissolved into one another when “the lights go out” for only there could they “lose control” and

“find a miracle” of being all of herself. The lyrics and split visuals offer a critique of the common media trope whereby a trans person who was a man *instantly* became a woman. This does not acknowledge all the years where transition and adjustment actually take place. Instead, it suggests that being trans is simply a choice that one may decide to act on one afternoon. At first glance, Chelora’s portrayal may be misread since she seemed to effortlessly transition between masculinity and femininity. However, the hidden space where “the lights go out” melds these aspects competing in a dysphoric life and recognizes the beauty in displaying all of them at once. Her use of duality reflects her either/or perspective, but when viewed through a non-binary lens, is depicted in a way that alludes to the nuance of her journey. Furthermore, Chelora’s creative rendering of herself continues to shape and be shaped by their self-evaluative experience as a streamer.

Later in the recording, there is a point where the two personas stop lip-synching together. While the masc side continues, the femme Chelora’s camera turns to slow motion and eventually goes dark. I asked about this moment during an interview and she shared that the disappearance was, at the time, a logistical choice. She was not happy with the footage obtained and had to make do. She said that looking back, however, it was her unease with appearing femme in public that made the footage unusable; her off-stage anxiety reflected too much on camera. So, like in everyday life, the externalized masc side was the safest option. As Chelora’s number shows, streaming software like OBS allows drag performers to engage their off-stage and on-stage selves throughout their creative editing process. As a streamer first, Chelora’s practice forefronts her technology as a self-regulating tool. Their desire remains to reveal her inner self to their audience, but she only does so by reflecting first.

## The Euphoric Transgender Mirror

Prosser (1998) and Halberstam (2005) have noted that transgender representation in film is usually conveyed through the dysphoric transgender mirror trope. Directors tend to compose these moments as an “impossible shot” where we seemingly look at the reflection from the subject’s perspective, yet do not see the camera. They stare at the mirror and something is horribly off. A somewhat recent example of this can be found in the controversial movie *The Danish Girl*, where cisgender actor Eddie Redmayne, plays Lili Elbe, a Danish trans woman that underwent gender-affirming surgery in the early 1930s. At one point, Redmayne runs to a private full-length mirror, where they strip off their male clothing and slowly contort their body to emphasize feminine curves and smoothness. We also see Redmayne tuck his penis through his legs as a sort of shock point to remind the audience that he is playing a *dysphoric* trans woman.

Despite the trope’s overuse within the media, the same mirror can serve as a useful way to think about identity. In *Second Skins*, Prosser argued that the narrative telling of transsexual identity is, in fact, a re-telling of a re-telling. He described the process for “official” transition where:

in order to be diagnosed as transsexual, s/he must recount a transsexual autobiography. The story of a strong, early, and persistent transgendered identification is required by the clinical authorities, the psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychotherapists who traditionally function as the gatekeepers to the means of transsexual “conversion” (Prosser 1998:101).

He goes on to say that the autobiographies that we read by trans people are these autobiographical stories the “second time around.” The transsexual must rewrite their history for the clinician who may then help them continue to “rewrite” their future. Similarly, he argued that

one's own social narrative is a manner of re-telling for it is "the story the transsexual must weave around the body in order that this body may be 'read'" (101). This is not completely dissimilar to how a streamer weaves their own narrative through OBS.

Prosser's theories may be criticized, today, for their emphasis on the *transsexual* rather than the *transgender* body (see Chapter Two). By focusing on transsexuality, his ideas are seemingly founded in transmedicalization, that is, to be trans one must necessarily desire some sort of physical medical intervention such as gender-affirming surgery. From the transmedical perspective, dysphoria is paramount to legitimize one's trans identity, and said dysphoria comes from not having a body that aligns with one's felt experience of gender. In this framework, the "realignment" demands a binary crossing from male to female or vice versa.

Transmedicalism is a major barrier that often prevents access to resources, supports the denigration of "non-passing" trans\* people, and excludes non-binary people almost entirely if they are not willing to submit to the arbitrary binary scale. Even in 2023, the University of Michigan's Academic Human Resources office requires that trans\* graduate student employees pursuing some types of healthcare undergo extensive evaluation by clinicians in order for insurance to cover treatment. Gender dysphoria remains a necessary diagnosis for most gender affirming care. Cisgender patients requesting identical healthcare are received with no restrictions based on their gender identity. This is in direct contrast to current standards of medicine put forth by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH). At the University of Michigan, the standard for all graduate student insurance coverage is set by negotiations between Academic Human Resources and the Graduate Employees' Organization #3550. Bargaining in 2023 was especially difficult, resulting in a 5-month graduate student employee strike. While the Queer and Trans Caucus was successful in gaining some forward



momentum for healthcare, most of its bargaining points were dismissed by the general membership in order to sign the university's "last, best, and final offer" in August. For nearly a year at the bargaining table, university administration's lead negotiator, Katie DeLong, repeatedly stated that the University of Michigan was not interested in updating to the current standards of healthcare since they were not legally required to. From Chapter One, we know that dysphoria is not an essential trait for being trans\*, albeit many trans\* people come to recognize their trans\* identity because of it. It would be easy to dismiss Prosser's ideas for sake of ostensibly outdated terminology, but rather than fully eschewing his theoretical framing, what would it mean if we flipped this story? What happens if we look for euphoria in the telltale mirror?

In 2021, drag streamers Derryk and HeyyBeetch hosted a series of digital shows that highlighted a variety of drag royalty, with a special emphasis on femme and trans\* people. During their show called "A Night of Feminine Musical Power," Derryk (they/ze/he), who is non-binary and also performs under the name Moonshianne Fantasy, performed to Cher's emotional power ballad "You Haven't Seen the Last of Me."

The number opens with a bearded Derryk dressed in femme clothing and makeup listening to two voicemails. Both callers reject and harshly insult them, emphasizing that there is something off with Derryk, and it is ruining both their on-stage and off-stage chances for love or success. As the song begins, the image shifts to a dream-like, black-and-white view. We see them sit at their streaming desk where they reapply makeup and lip-synch both to the camera and to a physical mirror. The inclusion of the mirror is in an attempt at an impossible shot, where their inner dysphoria is arrested out of time and ushered center-stage during the chorus. At the second verse, the setting shifts once again, and Derryk appears on a beach. The image continues

in black-and-white, but the camera orientation opens up from portrait to landscape. As the beach scene remains in black-and-white, it is feasible to construe this section as coming from a place of interiority. The wide angle of the landscape orientation overlooking the sea reinforces the idea of an infinite inner world. Strengthened by a “dysphoric” mirror, the scene reads as a point of resistance, of rebellion, against an oppressive society that will not allow Derryk to exist as they are. But when re-interpreted as a tool of euphoria, the mirror reveals an inner reflection that does not act in struggle, but in self-actualization. The boundless space Derryk finds themselves in serves as a -cosm for communicating their existence. They confidently stand their ground and shout out over the sea “This is far from over, *I* am far from over/ You haven’t seen the last of me.” It is not until the final lines “Oh, no, you haven’t seen the last of me/ You haven’t seen the last of me,” that we once again see Derryk at their desk and mirror. Although it is the end, it is the first time we see them taking their makeup off.

“You Haven’t Seen the Last of Me” by Cher (2010)

Feeling broken	And I’ve been pushed way past the point of
Barely holding on	breaking
But there’s just something so strong	But I can take it
Somewhere inside me	I’ll be back
And I am down but I’ll get up again	Back on my feet
Don’t count me out just yet	This is far from over
I’ve been brought down to my knees	You haven’t seen the last of me
	You haven’t seen the last of me
	They can say that

I won't stay around  
But I'm gonna stand my ground  
You're not gonna stop me  
You don't know me  
You don't know who I am  
Don't count me out so fast  
  
I've been brought down to my knees  
And I've been pushed way past the point of  
    breaking  
But I can take it  
I'll be back  
Back on my feet  
This is far from over  
You haven't seen the last of me  
  
There will be no fade out  
This is not the end  
I'm down now  
But I'll be standing tall again  
Times are hard but  
I was built tough

I'm gonna show you all what I'm made of  
I've been brought down to my knees  
And I've been pushed way past the point of  
    breaking  
But I can take it  
I'll be back  
Back on my feet  
This is far from over  
I am far from over  
You haven't seen the last of me  
  
No no  
I'm not going nowhere  
I'm staying right here  
Oh no  
You won't see me begging  
I'm not taking my bow  
Can't stop me  
It's not the end  
You haven't seen the last of me  
Oh no  
You haven't seen the last of me

In an affirming direction, media theorist J.B. Cole also challenges the rigidity of a dysphoric mirror:

For trans people, the mirror can reveal illuminating realizations of self-recognition as the body image is reshaped across and after transition, and therefore, traumatic dissociation from the reflected image is an experience that can further transition over time as the reflection changes (Cole, 2022:246).

Unlike the dysphoric trans mirror scene in a film, drag allows for such an in-the-moment reading of one's narrative. It is not simply a static re-telling. The nature of drag performance allows for an open expectation of narrative. Drag all but demands a suspension of diachronicity while not being totally synchronic either. Even for performers that you see frequently, you are never sure what sort of character will be on stage. There is an understanding that there will be some type of broadly queer sensibility over time, but especially in the case of a trans\* non-binary performer, not necessarily one that requires a clearly defined history and recognition of one's off-stage life. In a sort of anecdotal paradox, I am saying that once we know someone is non-binary, whose gender, by definition cannot be narrowly defined, we are less likely to have stringent expectations for their personas on stage. This allows them to more readily portray their chosen narrative(s).

Derryk's short mirror scene reflects a euphoria in the ability not only to exist, but to thrive. The emotional weight of Cher's voice singing the lyrics, "Feeling broken/barely holding on/but there's just something so strong/somewhere inside me," takes on new meaning when viewed through a euphoric mirror. I had the opportunity to present my analysis to Derryk.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Derryk, discussion with the author, June 2023.

Although they did not have all the formal language to express their technique in detail, they were ecstatic that I heard the difference in their mirror scene. By staging a faux-dysphoric, impossible shot, Derryk invited us to witness the euphoria of being themselves. “I’ll be back/back on my feet/this is far from over/you haven’t seen the last of me.”



Figure 5.5 Screen Capture from “You Haven’t Seen the Last of Me” video

Derryk and I also recognized a correlation between their number and my own “Sanctuary.” They had the opportunity to see my performance as they were the host who invited me to participate in the gender euphoria show. Similar to their vast sea, my video contained a boundless fantasy world where the “euphoric” character lip-synched to my out-of-drag self.

Visually, I positioned this character as existing separate from the “real” world, divided by a mirror. I chose the song “Sanctuary” by Hikaru Utada for its relevance as part of a video game soundtrack and for its musical cleverness. Throughout the song, there are lines that are digitally reversed. I took advantage of the backward audio to paint a mirror in sight and sound.

[chorus]

In you and I, there’s a new land

Angels in flight (wɒŋk uɔɪ nɑːt nɔɪtʃeɪfə ɛrɒm diːn I)

*[I need more affection than you know]*

My Sanctuary, my Sanctuary, ah

Where fears and lies melt away

Music will tie (wɒŋk uɔɪ nɑːt nɔɪtʃeɪfə ɛrɒm diːn I)

*[I need more affection than you know]*

What’s left of me, what's left of me now

[bridge]

My heart’s a battleground

(snɔɪtɔːm ɛɪt diːn I)

*[I need true emotions]*

(wɒŋk uɔɪ nɑːt nɔɪtʃeɪfə ɛrɒm diːn I)

*[I need more affection than you know]*

(snɔɪtɔːm ɛɪt diːn I)

*[I need true emotions]*

As the song goes on, my out-of-drag self begins to “hear” the euphoric character’s voice. They were always watching and singing out from beyond the mirror. Eventually, in my own attempt at a “dysphoric” impossible shot, I flip the image as if to step through the mirror into the euphoric world. The world that could be my own. A world where I am not held back by false emotions, or a lack of true affection for who I am or am not. Where “My fears, my lies/Melt away.”

If we recognize euphoria as a form of ever-changing knowledge, then perhaps we can follow Cole’s suggestion and conceive of a digital trans mirror image as one of support, of positive expression, similar to the one Newton described as essential to drag performance. This euphoric knowledge is the subjectivity birthed by trans experience and mediated through a practice of self-evaluation and digital video performance. Productions like Derryk’s, or even my own, show us that once we can recognize the mirror, its reflections reveal new worlds altogether.

### **The Non-Binary Paradigm at Work**

The first two parts of this case study presented off-stage, quotidian euphoria through the digital trans mirror. Chelora’s number highlighted one of the ways that live streaming influences a creator’s motivation and artistic practice. Derryk’s example illustrated how monarchs can use the digital space to tap into long-standing conversations about gender performance. Both instances are lessons in the necessity of an interperformative framework to analyze drag: we cannot forget one’s off-stage life. Further, they begin to intimate the advantage of a non-binary frame of reference. In this final part, I examine a cisgender performer whose drag expands those earlier points.

It is common to come across performances by cisgender monarchs that refer to their gender at the expense of trans\* people. Both in-person and digital numbers of this sort present

the performers as firmly within the binary, as they belittle others via misogynistic or transphobic jokes, e.g. the “man in a dress” stereotype. Following Halberstam’s discussion of drag queens vs. kings (Chapter 2), such humor effectively casts their drag as a character that they are putting on. This character is kept at arm’s-length from their off-stage self. Virgos Horror (he/him) challenges this trend.

His streamer-first artistry reifies the process of finding himself as both subject and object, rather than by Othering through denigration or dissociation. He tells his story by having already been his own autobiographical “clinician.” Like Chelora and Derryk, Virgo’s drag is both influenced by and informs his day-to-day life. The same could, indeed, be said about many digital drag performer-streamers. Chelora and Derryk’s enby identities were the topic of their performances, and analyzing them through a non-binary lens, called to question how we interpret their approaches to gender. In addition to the digital-first system, we saw that both performances could be defined by dysphoria or euphoria, respectively. However, unlike them, Virgo is a cisgender man. Yet, by applying a non-binary paradigm to his work, we see how, like Chelora and Derryk, Virgo’s digital rendering of drag augments traditional in-person modes of drag intersubjectivity. A non-binary, euphoric framework is not limited to non-binary people, rather, it challenges deeply held understandings of what it means to perform gender and drag through music.

As part of his birthday celebration stream in 2022, Virgo revealed his drag persona, Nicki Whorror (he/she/they). Although Virgo is a cisgender gay man, he describes Nicki as a genderless shapeshifter whose form changes depending on the story being told.<sup>92</sup> Nicki appeared in two pre-recorded numbers, bookending the stream as part of one extensive performance.

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<sup>92</sup> Virgos Horror, interview with author, 18 Sep 2023.



According to Virgo, the solo and community video games played in between the digital numbers were just as important to his story as the lip-synching. Both performances featured music by the American rock band In This Moment.<sup>93</sup>

The stream began with “God is She.” It is a story of how Virgo met Nicki, and in doing so, became more of himself. The video opens with text accompanied by silence.

Once Upon a Time....

A young Virgo went to sleep

Praying to show him the way

To change his sin

Now I lay me down to sleep

For the dreams you see

Are the answers you seek

[spoken by an out-of-drag Virgo:]

What’s going on?

Where am I?

Young Virgo was stuck in this nightmare

Haunted by all his negative thoughts

Till he saw....

Her

In the number we see two main characters: Negativity and Nicki. Negativity appears as a hooded figure wearing a plain white mask and gloves. They are blindfolded and have paint dripped

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<sup>93</sup> Fans also describe In This Moment as alternative metal, gothic metal, metalcore, and hard rock

across their cheeks like bleeding tears. They are always silent, slinking along. Taunting. During a feedback interview with Virgo, I learned that Negativity’s design was intended to not stand out. He originally created them as a “minion” that serves the “Supreme.” The Supreme was an elaborate mask design he made in 2020 for art school that represented him releasing all the bad things from that year. Although Negativity remains silent, their words are loud. They claim that “you’re not good enough,” “Black men don’t wear dresses,” “your drag won’t be taken seriously.” Nicki arrives to challenge Virgo’s horrors. In obvious contrast, the lip-synching Nicki Whorror is dressed as a seductive devil wearing a long black dress reminiscent of Vampira or Morticia Addams. Her skin is painted red. She has shapeshifted into the antithesis of Negativity. Throughout the song, Nicki’s devilish transformation also reflects Virgo’s upbringing in the South. She’s the epitome of unholy, all the things Virgo was taught to fear.

Surprisingly, I learned that Virgo, who has built his brand around horror and all things scary, grew up terrified of Halloween. Nicki represents his coming-to-terms with the things that frighten him. In finding his own voice and recognizing the importance of living as himself, Virgo’s drag has become an extension of his daily experiences. Nicki “vocally” reenacts this unfolding on the chorus.

“God Is She” by In This Moment (2020)

I am the God and the Devil around you  
I am the Heaven and the Hell you crave  
I am the queens and the kings that you bow  
to

I am the name written on your grave  
I am the sun that you bask in and feed on  
I am the moon that you howl to

I am the daydream, bring you faith and  
conviction  
I am the nightmare you've been crawling  
through  
So watch as I set fire to everything  
Watch as I burn down everything, anything  
Watch as I destroy you  
Watch as she turns into God  
Watch as she, watch as she turns into me  
I am the righteousness, the church and the  
holy  
I am the voodoo doll you want to believe  
I am the angles that hold and surround you  
I am the demon you're afraid to meet  
I am the temple that will bless and feed you  
I am the religion keeping you in chains  
I am the cure you pray will find you  
I am the disease running through your veins  
So watch as I set fire to everything

Watch as I burn down everything, anything  
Watch as I destroy you  
Watch as she turns into God  
Watch as she, watch as she turns into me  
God is She  
God is She, She is God  
God is She, She is God  
God is She, She is God  
God is She, She is God  
Watch as I set fire to everything  
And watch as I burn down everything,  
anything  
Watch as I set fire to everything  
Watch as I burn down everything, anything  
Watch as I destroy you  
Watch as she turns into God  
Watch as she, watch as she turns into me  
God is She, She is God  
God is She, She is God  
God is She

The ending number, “Born in Flames,” only showed Nicki. Having defeated Negativity, her job was now to speak directly to Virgo and bring him into his own domain.

“Born in Flames” by In This Moment (2020)

I can feel that you’re hurting

I feel it in your eyes

A familiar sting I always recognize

You don’t speak of it, but I can hear what

you say

I’ll watch as you burn and come back to life

again

And don’t you know

That we are Gods

And holy blood

Runs through our veins

And don’t you know

That you’re a king

Raised by queens

Born in flames, born in flames

I can see that you’re changing, something’s

taking hold

I watch you hunt as your demons starting to

take control

You know you are me, and I know I am you

And I promised you someday our pain

would pull us through

Don’t you know

That we are Gods

Holy blood

Runs through our veins

Now you know

That you’re a king

Raised by queens

Born in flames

Born in flames

Don't you know	Raised by queens
That we are Gods	Born in flames
Holy blood	Born in flames
Runs through our veins	Born in flames
Don't you know	Don't you know
That you're a king	Born in flames

Like “God is She,” “Born in Flames” is a hybrid point-and-shoot and edited number. Since they were his first time working with video, Virgo was limited in his editing ability. Nevertheless, he successfully conveyed the panegyric nature of Nicki’s words, as the green-screened background features flames and bright orange, red, and yellow lights outflowing from behind Nicki towards the audience. She uses her power, for *God is She*, to impart potential and ability. The chorus was an especially impactful moment. The image of Nicki we see is one that has makeup smeared and beginning to come off. Virgo was unsure of his capacity to convincingly make any jump cuts midway through the lip sync, but he kept breaking down in tears. Nicki’s portrayal reflects the physical significance of the words:

And don't you know  
 That we are Gods  
 And holy blood  
 Runs through our veins  
 And don't you know

That you're a king

Raised by queens

Born in flames, born in flames



Figure 5.6 Screen Capture from “Born in Flames” video

Stepping into his own, Virgo also nods toward the drag performers and friends that helped inspire him along the way. Anyone can experience dysphoria or euphoria in being themselves. While Chelora and Derryk’s digital numbers centered their non-binary identities, Virgo’s denotes a more general form of self-actualization that is likewise interwoven with his

gender. Through a dysphoric lens, Nicki's lip-synching is a form of queer resistance. However, if we change the reflection, we come to understand the positioning of her voice. She is not responding to an awful world, she is speaking to a young boy who cannot yet imagine a euphoric one. Hers. And soon to be, his. This is incredibly similar to the characters I included in my own "Sanctuary" example above, where the fully realized personas taught me from a limitless world beyond the mirror. Virgo told me that he did not have a public audience in mind when creating this. He was his target audience. Although he played community games in between the numbers, Virgo described the entire stream like it was a diary entry. His performance ended with text appearing once more.

And that ends our tale

Of how Virgo met Nicki

And how he gained his self confidence

An intimate reflection, like Virgo's, Nicki's story is ongoing.

Since the early-to-mid-20th century, lip-synching has been a central feature of drag performance. Its removal in digital spaces like *Twitch* predicated a shift in the sonic worldmaking of drag. My goal has been to paint a web of seemingly disparate parts of recent amateur musical video performance to show how we can understand re/mediated genres. If we are to consider the drag filming process, as well as the recording and broadcasting software used, as forms of mirrors, we must acknowledge that they are collaborative ones rather than images of judgment like those found in film tropes. Drag royalty may produce, edit, and evaluate their expressions both in-the-moment and over time. The mirror captures and conveys. It is a patient medium of

self-regulation and actualization. Both on-stage and off-stage life meld through the mirror, creating meaningful stories that transform as much as they reveal.

Like Narcissus captured by the sight of his reflection, the transsexual in autobiography neither fully merges with nor moves away from the image of the changed self. The act of self-reflection both begins the metamorphosis and prevents the total mergence of past into present self that would mean the disappearance of this remarkable narrative (Prosser 1998:131).

The reflection we see in digital drag is indeed just as personal, but its potential echoes our ability to self-actualize rather than succumb to a societally-induced dysphoria. For the streaming community, editing technology becomes second nature by mere repetition. I have shown that it is a similar case for drag streamers that film a digital number. While aspects of editing are perhaps new, the practice of recording is the same. Further, the performing drag streamer knows that their number will be shown at a later time. Their engagement with the audience is, therefore, often based on more complex narratives akin to an art film or music video rather than providing room for tip-making and audience involvement. We know that “one cannot be queer alone” (Getsy 2017:255), and performer-streamers must therefore embody both audience and creator positionalities. By reframing and re/mediating these creative endeavors through the digital film mirror, I have argued that live-streaming and amateur drag film production are unique processes of self-regulation that allow the creator special access to audience perspective, as they themselves are a part of it. Its mirror is not one of contempt or capriciousness. It does not denigrate or spite. Rather, it is a tool for actualizing what an artist wants to see. The mirror and performer work together from a dual frame of reference, thereby shaping collective experience and understanding of what it means to be trans and perform drag.



## Chapter 6 Revisiting Queer Futures

*March 16th, 2023. I'm performing tonight—it's been a while. Heck, it's been over a year since I last performed at Pride Outside, but tonight I'm doing 4 numbers and judging a competition. I've been so excited about prepping my numbers that I forgot that I was supposed to also decide on a new drag name until today. My old name just doesn't fit me anymore. My style has developed, my aesthetic changed. My drag has taken on a much more personal flavor than the "trashy couture" I started with. I think I've decided on "Lady Grey." It's been 2 months since I came out with my new name publicly: Julian Grey. Maybe hearing it in more contexts than Grey's Anatomy will help me get used to it. Tonight, I am a storyteller. Tonight, I perform confidence (even my undergrads are coming to see me). Tonight, I shout a message that we're not going anywhere. Tonight, I remind people to find joy in themselves. Tonight, I present absurdity and humor, reverence, and a political warning. Tonight, I introduce Lady Grey.*

### **Modeling Analysis**

In each of the preceding case studies, I presented a novel analytical framework. From the metaphors of loudness, silence, and the mirror, I have attempted to show how we can not only derive methods from our subject matter, but that we may use them in a variety of situations. In this chapter, I offer one final example of how we may combine these elements in a way that sparks new observations without disregarding other traditional musicological methods. Although the approaches in my earlier chapters were used specifically across different time periods and

media, by employing them all on one piece, I show one way to implement them in broader contexts. The goal of a new paradigm is not to establish a particular aesthetic, in this case a non-binary one, but to seek out potential. I chose “Not Human” by Swedish artist ionnalee, the creator of the audiovisual project iamamiwhoami. The song has been performed widely by drag artist Vander Von Odd (she/her), who has even performed her lip synch on stage with ionnalee. I chose the song, in part, because it is representative of Von Odd’s innovative repertoire and offers a clear example of combining digital technology with live drag performance. Von Odd is also one of the first genderqueer artists who appeared on the televised competition series *The Boulet Brothers’: Dragula*, which works in monstrous counterpoint to the polish of *Drag Race*. The show’s three tenets that contestants are rated on are horror, filth, and glamor.

“Not Human” tells a story of distortion and ambiguity. The lyrics describe the subject coming across a familiar face who has since changed into someone (or *something*) mystical and unexpected with a sexy allure enshrouded by primal danger. A tension arises from a constant push and pull of tonality, leaving the listener in a state of ambiguity. Throughout the song, the melody circles firmly around a b minor triad with occasional visits to VII and v. However, the bass line tells a different story, one that drags the listener to e minor. “Not Human” begins with a 4-bar bass introduction that is repeated for most of the song. Our ears are primed for e minor with a simple i-V-i progression that falls stepwise  $\hat{3}$  to  $\hat{1}$  at the repeat. When the treble motif enters on the third iteration of the bass (Figure 6.1), however, the familiarity of e becomes stretched, as we are drawn into the world of b minor. Our protentional (see Chapter 4), anticipated journey is subverted. Rather than interpret the b minor melody as a dominant tonality

provoking apprehension in e minor, the song’s frequent use of C# and lack of C<sup>♮</sup> urges us to reconsider b minor’s role as an ambiguous foil to e minor.



Figure 6.1 Treble Entrance in “Not Human” by ionnalee (2017)

Ambiguity is a striking element in pop music where simple bass lines and harmonies typically repeat under a melody cycling through riffs. In musical elements such as tonality, we may read ambiguity through queerness, depending on other factors; in this example, through its relationship to drag. In the case of “Not Human,” the limits brought about by simplicity are a fertile ground for creativity that extends beyond a discussion of gender or sexual difference. In assuming a pre-existing queer subjectivity based on the drag setting, what can ambiguity, as an analytic (Gavin 2018), tell us about said queerness? Rather, to apply my own formulation, when bound by repetition such as the b minor bass line, what is not being said? What remains unspoken? Silent?

Like the star-crossed love of the bass and melody, the lyrics introduce us to two characters. The main subject sings about the mysterious figure whose “hungry eyes glow with fire.” At face-value, we can assume that the main character is a tree that is being burned down by someone that visited them often, but not before they took a bite of the tree’s fruit. Dazzled by a non-normative, cross-species love, the tree ignores the smoke signals “spelling out your name,” only to become further lost in orgasmic release on the loud climax of the chorus “oh, you make

my waters flow/ now look how tall I grow/ i'm not human." Although the lyrics could be interpreted directly as a tree, the proto-anthropomorphizing perspective casts further doubt on the exact nature of the subject or its object.<sup>94</sup> As our expectations become subverted sonically and textually, our ability to dream a future becomes all the more important. In this way, we can consider the "tree's" disregard for its own demise not as a Freudian death drive (Chapter 2), but as an active move toward self-actualization. It dreams of a future, for "the winds are shifting, are you in....are you ready to begin?"

"Not Human" by ionnalee (2017)

Verse 1:

i saw you there at night

i'm not human

your shape appeared in the distance

oh, with you it's magical

your face distorted in the light

the urge is animal

and out of breath, i closely listened

i'm not human

your hungry eyes glow with fire

and light up my humid hollow

Verse 2:

just like me, the treacherous kind

i felt you take a bite

your calming voice silently whispered

Pre-Chorus:

how do you see your life in time?

the warning's spelling out your name

and is it worth all of these blisters?

the winds are shifting, are you in?

these broken limbs are worn and tired

but our words are not yet written

Chorus:

our ember still burning inside

oh, you make my waters flow

now look how tall i grow

Pre-Chorus:

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<sup>94</sup> ionnalee's music video for "Not Human," presents a similarly ambiguous narrative of a Nordic cult and sensuality. iamamiwhoami, "ionnalee; NOT HUMAN," YouTube video, 6:06, 7 Jun 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Xdov\\_B-cQg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Xdov_B-cQg).

the warning's spelling out your name  
are you ready to begin?

morning will put out this flame  
the winds are shifting, are you in

Although Vander Von Odd does not appear to make a distinction between the two characters during the second verse, ionnalee does musically. The subject's positioning is typically supported by an upward leap of a fifth in both the verses and pre-chorus (Figure 6.2). In the latter half of the second verse, however, the dual perspective is confirmed when we hear the melody flip the figure to a lamenting, descending fourth on "these broken limbs are worn and tired" (Figure 6.3). One instance of the falling figure appears in the first verse, but when its parallel occurs in the second, we hear ionnalee's vocal timbre shift to a light and breathy tone that sounds as if it is at the cusp of her head voice. As the tree metaphorically looks/listens "upward" to its companion's voice, the second persona falls down in sadness to meet it halfway. Their object of desire continues to mirror the tree as a point of second-person subjectivity (Chapters 3 and 5), as their voice falls back to the earth, for "our words are not yet written/ our ember still burning inside." The two find a shared, complex subjectivity characterized by an unknown future as the tension between e minor and b minor becomes further solidified. The melody cannot shake landing on E, to the point that the harmony on the final note sounds both a D and an E. Unrelentingly, ionnalee slides between the two pitches on her last syllable. Despite the E appearing in the melody for what we can expect to be a second inversion tonic seventh chord (from the perspective of the bass), the B in the bass forces us to hear its own E tonic in the melody as a tension-filled, suspended fourth.

First Verse

I saw you there at night your shape appeared in the distance

5 your face dis-tor-ted in the light and out of breath I clo-sely lis-tened

9 your hun-gry eyes glow with fire and light up my hu-mid hol-low

13 just like me the trea-cher-ous side

Figure 6.2 First Verse, “Not Human” by ionnalee (2017)

### Second Verse

I felt you take a bite your cal-ming voice si-lent-ly whis-pered

5  
how do you see your life in time and is it worth all of these blis-ters

9  
these bro-ken limbs are worn and tir - ed but our words are not yet wri-tten

13  
our em-ber still bur - ning in - side

Figure 6.3 Second Verse, “Not Human” by ionnalee (2017)

In Von Odd's performance(s), she uses a phone attached to her wrist that plays a pre-made video. The screen cycles between various sets of humanoid (vampire, alien, etc.) eyes and lip-synching mouths and she places the phone in front of her face to emphasize important lyrics like "I'm not human!" Von Odd capitalizes on the e minor – b minor struggle and shifts between eyes and mouth, heightening our own visual tension between voice and vocalic body. Although the phone serves as a drag gimmick for lip synching, it is significant that Von Odd uses it to replace her eyes more often than her lips. The first time it occurs is on the pre-chorus where the phone lip synchs "the warning's spelling out your name." But as the winds begin shifting, her wrist moves upwards, and her re/mediated eyes gaze outward and ask with supernatural flair, "are you in?" While her voice cannot be silenced, Von Odd's gaze is drawn into worlds anew. She is always looking to the future. Will we join her? At the same time, the bass all but falls away to emphasize looking upward. The rhythmic drive is replaced with a subtle half-note pulse of E-E-A-A-F#-F#-A-A before returning to the driving, e minor bass pattern in the chorus. The pre-chorus, as is common in pop music, is also the quietest part of the song due to its thinner texture and rhythmic simplicity. During the *Night Gowns*<sup>95</sup> performance where the performers do not leave the stage to interact with the audience, the lighting designer dramatized this stark absence of material by turning out the lights so that only Von Odd's phone could be seen. In other recordings available on *YouTube*, Von Odd uses this time to collect tips from the audience. Although I cannot confirm without experiencing the performance in person, the high-pitched synths that pull the listener away from the rootedness of the bass to hear the smoke signals in the

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<sup>95</sup> Drag Coven, "Nightgowns (9/10/17) – Vander Von Odd (Not Human), YouTube video, 5:19, 18 Sep 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0waA6wwpgto>.



sky seem to have helped cover up some of the in-room speech, as if it were white noise. In-person analysis is needed to understand the role of and types of loudness present in the room.

By mirroring her perspective through such re/mediation (Chapter 5), the phone troubles our understanding of what exactly is not human. Is it the song's subject? Its object of desire? Vander Von Odd, herself? Or does it, perhaps, have something to do with us as the audience, for we are the ones peering out into an unknown world? It is *our* expectations that are being subverted as we are faced with an extra/non-human lip synch. While Von Odd does not give us a clear answer, and it would be antithetical to the nature of the performance to do so, meditating on the "not human" takes on new meaning when we interperformatively consider Von Odd's off-stage identity. We can read her genderqueer trans femme identity through a historical lens of non-human thingness. As I discussed at various points throughout my dissertation, trans\* and non-binary history has had long ties to the idea of performing beyond the "human" binary. Many drag performers refuse to be called drag queens or kings, but prefer the moniker of drag "things." Others are drawn to the vocabulary and aesthetics of the monster or an alien. Still others refuse all of these and form their own language that reaffirms their humanity, as I have done by using the neutral form of "monarch" and "royalty." Vander Von Odd falls into the more monstrous camp, supported by her success with *The Boulet Brothers': Dragula*. It is in this realm that her not humanness finds meaning for herself as a human. According to a biographical snippet on social media, she finds herself "empowered by anti-heroes, villains, witches and monsters, she is most inspired by the dichotomy in these; good and evil, logic and superstition, masculine and feminine."<sup>96</sup> It is precisely the complex blend of subjectivities that Von Odd thrives in. In her

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<sup>96</sup> Vander Von Odd, "About," *YouTube*, Accessed 12 June 2024.  
<https://www.youtube.com/@vandervonodd822>.

performance, we see this come to fruition on the final iteration of “I’m not human” where she uses the phone in front of her eyes instead of her mouth. The “not human” is a gaze. A perspective. A paradigm through which we can learn to not only see her but hear her voice through the music and performance. The silence screams at us to look in the mirror and listen.

### **Anti-Trans Legislation**

In listening to the wider context of this trans femme’s performance, we must consider the growing backlash to such euphoric release. Since writing briefly about the rising anti-trans legislation in the United States in Chapter 3, the political situation has only worsened for trans\* people. As of May 8th, 2024, 550 anti-trans bills have been introduced in both state and federal legislatures. Luckily 193 have failed, but 27 have passed so far. The recent influx of anti-trans legislation has been outrageous to say the least.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Bills Introduced</b>	<b>Bills Passed</b>	<b>Comments</b>
2021	143	18	
2022	174	26	
2023	600	87	
2024	550	27	Across 42 states and federally, as of May 8th, 2024.

Figure 6.4 Anti-Trans Legislation Numbers<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Data sourced from the Trans Legislation Tracker <https://translegislation.com/>. Erin Reed also maintains Anti-Trans Legislative Risk Assessment Maps on her website: <https://www.erininthemorning.com/p/anti-trans-legislative-risk-assessment-43a>.

Even where little to no such legislation passes, the constant media barrage of political tirades affects trans\* people everywhere. Drag has been the legislative focus for many conservative politicians who claim the artform is inherently sexual and deviant. Rothii described the situation from a non-binary performer's perspective:

The most pressing thing is how and I say this loosely, the media and political parties are putting out the statement that drag is by nature sexual. Drag is not men/women/non-binary dressing to do things that the media is saying we are doing. Drag is an art form, drag is a story, drag is a person letting people see their vision or even a piece of them. Drag does not equal predator. That needs to be driven into so many people as this doesn't just affect drag artists. This affects everyone. From someone who may be fem dressing in masc attire, all the way down to just someone having features that are more opposite of them when in reality, this could be someone cisgender, trans or non-binary. This is all pressing because it doesn't just affect the lgbtqia+ community, as it does heavily, but it impacts everyone.<sup>98</sup>

This intensifying climate of anti-trans sentiment and legislative attacks on the drag community underscores the importance and urgency of continuing academic research in this field. As Rothii's testimony poignantly highlights the misconceptions and vilification of drag that trans\* and non-binary individuals face, it becomes clear that scholarly work must not only keep pace with social discourse but also seek to inform and counteract the damaging narratives taking hold in the media and politics. Fortunately, there seems to be a growing body of work dedicated to understanding the intricacies of drag and the experiences of non-binary individuals. Despite the

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<sup>98</sup> "Drag Performance Practice." *Qualtrics*. Apr. 2024.

challenges they face in the broader social and political arenas, the persistent flow of expansive and inclusive literature on these topics stands as a beacon of resilience.

### **Exciting New Research**

As with any dissertating Ph.D. candidate, I have regularly returned to search terms that I had previously. It has been an inspiring journey to see new work being produced about drag. Out of 256 bibliography sources, nearly one half (114) were published since I began this process. Of these, many are specifically about non-binary life and drag performance; unfortunately, still not considered together. There are also promising books on the horizon—most notably, Channing Gerard Joseph’s upcoming (TBD) volume on William Dorsey Swann, a formerly enslaved, gender non-conforming individual that was the first person to call themselves a “drag queen” (Joseph 2023). Additionally, there are new trade books available to the general public, such as Craig Seligman’s 2023 book, *Who Does That Bitch Think She Is?: Doris Fish and the Rise of Drag*, and Sasha Velour’s *The Big Reveal: An Illustrated Manifesto of Drag* (2023). There are now even children’s books about drag, like *The Hips on the Drag Queen Go Swish, Swish, Swish* (2020) by Lil Miss Hot Mess and illustrated by Olga de Dios Ruiz, and *The Drag-Queen Knight* (2023) by Nolash Lesly Leon. These new materials stand in stark contrast to the surge in book bans and formal challenges to LGBTQ-themed books in libraries and classrooms. Most of these challenges come from conservative anti-LGBT+ book lists shared around social media that target books written by or about LGBTQ+ people.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Samantha Laine Perfas, “Who’s getting hurt most by soaring LGBTQ book bans? Librarians say kids,” *The Harvard Gazette*. 28 Jun 2023. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2023/06/lgbtq-book-challenges-are-on-the-rise-heres-why/>

Drag has also taken an exciting turn in public scholarship from the University of Michigan. As part of U-M's Arts Initiative, American Culture Professor Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes held two events during the 2023–2024 academic year. In October of 2023, his drag persona, Lola von Miramar, hosted a discussion panel at Necto, a nightclub in downtown Ann Arbor that is popular with undergraduate students for its Friday Pride nights. The panel featured *Drag Race* star Monet X Change and they discussed drag as resistance. The following April, Lola performed alongside LaWhore Vagistan (Kareem Khubchandani) at the U-M Hatcher Graduate Library to talk about their books, politics, and some of the artistic elements of drag not seen on *Drag Race*.

I have also had the opportunity to dive further into public scholarship with drag. In October of 2023 I worked with three other drag performers and ethnomusicologists to present a 90-minute performative session at the Society for Ethnomusicology annual meeting in Ottawa, Canada. Our drag “conversation-recital” was called “LGBTQ+ Censorship and Public Spaces” and displayed a wide array of styles and community perspectives. Tifa Wine (Ryan Persadie) explored notions of selective forgetting and diasporic amnesias of climate justice and struggle within Indo-Caribbean communities through a filmed digital drag number named “Forgotten.” Tony Flags and Feathers (Carlo Aguilar González) performed an in-person lip sync that confronted othering and silencing practices in listening to ethnic and linguistic differences in higher education spaces, all from the critical point raised by Hispanic/Latine queer and non-binary diaspora in the United States. Young King Cole (Adrienne C. Alton-Gust) lip synched

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NYPL Staff, “LGBTQ+ Titles Target for Censorship: Stand Against Book Banning,” *New York Public Library*. 23 Jun 2023. <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2023/06/23/lgbtq-titles-targeted-censorship-stand-against-book-banning>.

“For What It’s Worth,” a 2020 cover by Billy Porter that paid homage to a 1960s protest song written by Stephen Stills, reinterpreted as a Black Lives Matter message. As Lady Grey, I combined digital and in-person performance for a hybrid multimedia piece built around audience engagement and campy unease that defied anti-queer evangelical Christian religious practice and politics. My performance concluded with an audience sing-along of the hymn tune “Nettleton” (familiar to many as “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”) with new ex-evangelical, queer-affirming lyrics written by Alanah Sabatini. Each of these stories addressed the dangers present in living and working as multiply-marginalized people.

Following our performance, we had a heartfelt discussion where audience members shared their own stories of learning to support their trans\* and non-binary children, of navigating deadly political waters internationally, and of the difficulty in seeking a safe place within the academy and professional organizations. Many sought advice on how to maneuver precarity both within and outside queer communities, while others reported a sense of aspiration and newfound intention upon hearing us describe our and our communities’ artistic and scholarly practices in response to the waxing anti-trans and anti-drag movement.

Adrienne and I had organized “LGBTQ+ Censorship and Public Spaces” to help remind us all that music, scholarship, and action must not remain separate. We called our session a “conversation-recital,” but in actuality, it was a session that broke out beyond the traditional structure of a conference presentation about sound and community. It sparked an entire weekend of tears, of uplifting promise, and of statements like “this is the first time I have been able to feel wholly queer/like myself/confident/hopeful/welcomed/euphoric at a conference.”

We concluded our performance-discussion by attending the SEM welcome reception in full drag, a move that placed all of our professional careers at risk within higher education

respectability politics. However, countless attendees came up to us and celebrated our presence and courage, expressing their gratitude for making a loving and affirming space for scholars (especially young, trans\* and non-White ones) and all those rejected and excluded by the traditional strictures imposed in a “professionalism” entrenched in White Supremacy and queerphobia.

The overwhelming success of our SEM session led me to continue my work with a hybrid film format, and I spent the next few months producing a much larger project called *Living Loud* which is a 20-minute digital drag short film and discussion guide meant to accompany this dissertation. The whole project is a direct response to the anti-trans political movement. Unlike conventional musicology, which centers the written word, *Living Loud* is an educational short film that features popular music, queer poetry, and ethnomusicology, all through the lens of drag performance. I also went beyond the typical drag practice found at a nightclub, and drew from my experience in the digital realm to interweave layers of sound and visuals akin to an art film whereby social commentary manifests through complex narratives not possible in traditional drag. I recently released it on *YouTube* and my personal website (<https://juliangrey.site>) with an accompanying discussion guide for public use. I am still in the process of creating an advanced classroom discussion companion that engages directly with queer and performance theories. Like this dissertation, *Living Loud* was designed to educate and uplift, and focuses on gender euphoria rather than dysphoria. As a form of public scholarship, the goal was to break away from formats like a conference talk or research paper in favor of embracing accessibility. Everyone deserves access to knowledge and art. In order to help model its feasibility for other scholars and artists, I produced the entire project entirely by myself. There is also a limit to the reach that a digital drag film can have. Like an in-person or *Twitch* drag

show, I lip-synched to copyrighted popular music; however, unlike drag in most established nightclubs, I do not have a blanket license that covers it.<sup>100</sup> While the free “borrowing” in *Living Loud* falls under Fair Use for educational purposes, it also prevents me from being able to screen the film outside the classroom or monetize any ad revenue generated on *YouTube* for the same reason.

The film presents a story of a gender non-conforming person and their journey of becoming. We hear their words as they journal their thoughts and see their concerns and dreams come to life through lip-synched performance. From the deliberately self-aware inclusion of “What Was I Made For?” from the *Barbie* (2023) film soundtrack, that has become vastly overdone on drag stages across the country, to live clips from my SEM performance from October 2023, I worked to juxtapose absurdity with seriousness. When screening the film for a group of undergraduate students in March 2024, they expressed their healthy discomfort of not always knowing when the fourth wall was being broken and to what degree they should “participate” in the digital performance. For example, when my character says “Will all that are able, please rise and join in,” to whom am I speaking? An unseen, in-film audience? The IRL audience? Is it a metaphor? A command? Further, whose voice is performing? What self is on the stage at a given moment? My goal was to bring interperformativity to the forefront as an intentional practice. What is gained by believing it is my off-stage self speaking? In what ways do we benefit from an in-world, imaginary character breaking the fourth wall alongside an in-world “real” character doing the same? What can we learn about ourselves and our situations

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<sup>100</sup> I obtained the rights for the intro and outro audio clips but intend to one day replace them with original composition. There are also moments of silence throughout that I hope to eventually change to my own original music.



when we allow for a moment of laughter immediately followed by a warning of ultra-conservative politics and abuse?

As a non-binary person, my work is necessarily personal and in search of community liberation. How may we decolonize binary perspectives where non-binary people are deprived of legitimacy and safety? How can we become grounded as fully realized people in history? Like this dissertation, I see *Living Loud* as a launch point toward a larger endeavor to amass trans and non-binary knowledge and history, and recontextualize our understanding of gender inquiry and performance in musicology. It is also in response to something my community lacks. As I have shown, non-binary people do not have centralized, archival knowledge or performance history passed down through generations. Instead, we have fragments of gender non-conforming biography and art found sparingly amidst a binary catalog where we are deemed Other, if noticed at all. We must engage communities through media legible and accessible to all. *Living Loud* takes up social justice as not merely a subject referenced in a footnote or a descriptive ethnographic account, but aims to become an embodied discourse for the artist and audience alike. One of my hopes is to create works that I would have wanted to experience as a younger queer scholar navigating a world that, even in 2024, often denies my very existence. My art shows younger generations that non-binary adults do exist, and there is joy. Many in my community have expressed how drag saved their lives. It has been an avenue where they could abandon their anxieties, explore their desires, and find a home that accepted and uplifted their journey through gender. This project is an opportunity to expand traditional ethnomusicological modes of education while likewise impacting the queer community. In continuing the call for a trans epistemology and genre-breaking scholarship, I recognize *Living Loud* and this dissertation as windows through which we can see trans dreams conferred.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

In one of the surveys I sent out to performers, I asked what they thought was the most pressing concern for the drag community right now.<sup>101</sup> Their responses were overwhelmingly aimed at trans\* safety. As Mochi said, it is all about “making sure we’re not erased from existence and killed.” Likewise, CYREEL said that our work is about “protecting Trans people and protecting ourselves.” Johnny Rocket went further:

I am incredibly frightened by the “culture war” in America, and legal attacks on the queer and drag communities. The violence against queer people and drag may seem separate—but they are one and the same. It is crucial that we fight bans against drag, healthcare (trans, reproductive, and otherwise), trans athletes, ... the list, sadly, goes on.

Epithet expressed her frustration with how drag performance is commonly used as a proxy for transgender for conservatives. She is tired of:

Being scapegoated to target trans folks, people getting a free pass to harass and threaten us under the guise of free speech, and club owners expecting top tier drag while not paying a dollar to their talent.

Fearless Amaretto pointed to difficulties within the community, itself. The problem lies with:

Politics vs. community. We already are losing so many queer spaces (especially black and bipoc spaces) and the stages we have often get white washed or get sprinkled with the same 5 black tokens on rotation. There’s not a shortage of black and poc performers, and saying “none of them applied” is a cop out. Contact people, reach out. That’s how you meet people and create community.

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<sup>101</sup> “Drag Performance Practice.” *Qualtrics*. Apr 2024.

I also asked performers about their level of knowledge about drag history. With 0 being “Not Well At All” and 5 as “Extremely Well,” over 70% responded with a 3 or less. No one answered with a 5. In the follow-up question, I asked about what they would like to learn. There were three main trends spread evenly among responses. First, many inquired about drag traditions around the world and alternative styles within the U.S (as opposed to the Rupaulification of styles). That said, this response was largely from non-U.S. and digital-first performers. Second, quite a few monarchs pointed to ballroom since it has taken on new popularity in culture in the last few years. Finally, many performers hoped to learn more about early-to-mid 20th century drag, with one also suggesting “a one-stop resource for accurate drag history, I seem to only find in piecemeal through other drag artists or through some social media.”

Following the dissertation, I have my own research and publication goals inspired by my interests as well as the community responses. Having dived into the philosophical and sensational side of hapticality in both Chapters 3 and 4, I would like to pursue the topic further in a book about ethnographic drag analysis. In my second book, I would like to begin the task of compiling U.S. drag history within the middle decades of the 20th century. In writing the dissertation, I came across countless “dead ends” where we simply do not have data, or at least not any that is published. The Queer Music Heritage and Digital Transgender Archives, in particular, would be great places to begin further chronological work, but it will take a comprehensive view of each to begin crafting a picture. One direction that I found that I believe would be fruitful is to research further into the greater Boston area social networks where Cherrystone and The Tiffany Club flourished. Chicago is another viable location due to the Gerber/Hart Library & Archives. Where this sort of work falls short, is that it does not provide a

picture of non-urban drag. But as Rogers (2018) has shown, drag takes on an especially important role for rural identity formation. I am particularly interested in the transition from live singing to lip synching.

## **Conclusion**

In synthesizing the diverse trajectories of euphoria, drag performance, archival interpretation, and the digital evolution of drag throughout this dissertation, I have arrived at a multi-dimensional appreciation of gender diversity and representation that weaves together sensation, performance, and the continuous journey of identity formation. The exploration of gender euphoria as an affective state blends forward-looking aspirations with a respect for the nuanced past and present of queer lives. In Chapter 2, I show that through theorists like Muñoz, we are invited to reimagine a future where the dichotomies of relational versus anti-relational stances no longer confine, but instead, they broaden the scope of identities. This forward momentum recognizes the symbiotic relationship between euphoria and the potential for a more inclusive and queer-affirming society, while also considering the transformative disruption it may cause in normative structures.

Drag performance extends far beyond the stage; even the definition of “stage” can change according to the community. It exists as a resonant interplay between performer and audience, all tied together with forms of empathy. In Chapter 3, I argued that the dynamic exchange of affective energy and shared experience becomes a lifeline that nourishes both on- and off-stage subjectivities. It is in the loudness of this interaction that a community hears its reflection and through the same loudness they may return their recognition and understanding. This critical

exchange, informed as much by somatics as by cultural and emotional forces, redefines the drag show as a mutual experience of self-affirmation and collective narrative-building.

In Chapter 4, I showed how archival research brings forth its own intricacies and may reveal how silence can speak volumes. It is through the gaps and whispers of the past that the present finds its textures and layers. The careful interpretation of archival material like the photographs found in *Queer Music Heritage* not only paints a rich picture of the diversity of experiences within the queer community but also suggests that our engagements with these histories are sensory and evocative, transcending mere visual representation. This new lens challenges the silence of the archives as simply an absence of sound and recasts it as a canvas for engaging with the echoes of identities long gone; thereby, shaping both contemporary understanding and future perspectives. By engaging with what has been left unsaid, undocumentable feelings and experiences emerge, allowing us to consider the past in a way that heightens the sensory and affective engagement of the performer and scholar alike.

The shift to digital venues such as *Twitch* has further diversified the landscape of drag. As I showed in Chapter 5, digital recording technology acts as a mirror against which drag artists fine-tune their performances and simultaneously engage in the process of self-discovery and self-creation. This mirror is not for introspection alone; rather, it serves as a mediator that enables the confluence of artist intention and audience perception. Drag artists, by streaming their art, participate in an act of co-creation and blur the boundaries between the creator and the consumer, all while navigating the dualities of their digital and physical realities.

Through this dissertation, I have shown that drag, in its in-person, recorded, live-streamed, and archived forms, is a powerful tool for actualization and is a means for both performers and the community to self-regulate and resonate within a transformative space.

Gender euphoria in performance emerges, not as a static goal, but as an ongoing process that interweaves the past and the present, drawing on diverse theoretical insights to create a unique, shared future. This future is one in which joy, empathy, and loud self-expression function as resonant forces against silence and move beyond the binaries of conformity and rebellion into new territories of collective queer existence. Euphoria is not just an endpoint; it is an ever-present potentiality that propels the narrative of non-binary existence forward.

Drag performance comes to life as an embodiment of interperformativity, an interplay of actions, reactions, and a mutual transformation between the audience and the performer. This dialogue, underpinned by the auditory and sensorial phenomena of loudness and resonance, asserts its place as an affective exchange. It is within this reciprocity that the dual nature of drag unfolds, demonstrating the multisensory dimension of musical performance that the dissertation has examined. Sensation as experienced through drag becomes a conduit for a deeper empathetic connection between individuals within this creative exchange.

My goal has been to guide us through an exploration of non-binary drag as an intersection of musicology, sensation, and (inter)performativity in order to uncover the dynamic layers of this art form. I have posited that the musical moments of drag performance are central to understanding some of the trans\* experience and history. I have aimed to reveal how euphoria, empathy, and emotional resonance have shaped a community's collective consciousness. Through this intricate interplay of sound, silence, and shared narratives, non-binary drag emerges not only as a genre of performance but also as an engaging sensorium that challenges, articulates, and celebrates the multiplicity of identity within a vibrant cultural context. Through drag, artists uplift. They free. They teach and they heal. Through drag we come together and learn to be ourselves.

*Thank you, drag.*

# Appendix

## Appendix A

### Stream Queens Code of Conduct



Figure 7.1 Stream Queens Title Banner

Stream Queens is a community of Drag artists on Twitch. Our mission is to unify the Drag Kings, Queens, Characters, and Creatures of Twitch!

As a member of the Stream Queens team and its community, you are a direct representative of the team and community on the Twitch platform, and are expected to abide by the following Code of Conduct to best represent and uplift the art of drag!

#### **I. Requirements of Membership**

Members must be at least 18 years of age.

Drag-forward content and branding on Twitch channel.

Passion for expanding and nurturing strong and diverse Drag representation on the Twitch platform.

#### **II. General Conduct**

Members are expected to remain respectful of fellow team members at all times.



Members are expected to refrain from partaking in any Racist, Transphobic, Sexist, Homophobic, and otherwise damaging language and/or activities.

This includes but is not limited to: - Use of slurs.

- Engaging in microaggressions.
- Using transphobic language.

Members are expected to refrain from engaging in bullying and targeted harassment of Twitch users.

This includes but is not limited to:

- Harassment of Twitch users openly on stream.
- Calling upon community members, or team members, to engage in harassment of Twitch users.
- Continuous and escalated arguing.

Members are suggested to maintain presence in the Official Discord server to receive announcements, updates, and access to team events.

### **III. Social Media Conduct**

Members are expected to remain respectful of other team members outside of the Twitch platform at all times.

Prohibited behaviors include but are not limited to:

- Subtweeting in reference to team members.
- Generating negative targeted commentary in reference to team members without contacting team leadership or exploring proper infraction escalation channels detailed in section VI.

All team members represent the team in the public eye on their socials, and therefore should be mindful of what they post and how they interact with the public.

Prohibited behaviors and content includes but is not limited to:

- Propagating and/or sharing imagery or content deemed hateful, or that promotes hate speech towards any marginalized group.
- Instigating or participating in harassment of other streamers, community members, or users of the social media site.

### **IV. Content Expectations**

All team members are bound by the Twitch Terms of Service when streaming on Twitch, and are encouraged to familiarize themselves with those terms.

Members are expected to incorporate drag regularly in their content/schedule, and maintain a library of VODs and/or highlights featuring drag content on their channel.

All members are asked to utilize !streamqueens or similar bot command with link to team page/team bio, including a small blurb about the team including the team's tagline.

Example:

- *Looking for more drag on Twitch? Check out Team Stream Queens, an all-drag troupe of Kings, Queens, Characters & Creatures who showcase their art live on Twitch! Meet them all at streamqueens.net*

Visual assets on stream (panels, emotes, etc) are subject to the same standards cited in the "General Conduct" section of the Code of Conduct, and should not contain any offensive imagery or speech.

## **V. Events and Game Nights**

Members are encouraged to organize streaming events with other team members to play games, chat, etc. on Twitch through Discord.

When organizing a personal event with non-team members, or an event that excludes some team members from sign-ups, do not label the event as a Stream Queens event, and refrain from incorporating Stream Queens branding into its promotional materials.

- You may utilize the Stream Queens assets as identifiers for individual participants in non-official events.

All team members possess the ability to host official events that may utilize official team visual assets, as well as receive promotion on official team socials. Members interested in hosting an official event, or in need of assistance in organizing said event, may contact @DEERE or @Momager roles for more information.

Members hosting an official team event must incorporate official Stream Queens assets into promotion.

Requirements to qualify as an official event are the following:

- Sign ups must be open to all current members.
- Events with limited participation must have participants selected via first come first serve basis, or raffle system that allows all current members to enter.

Members participating in events, private or official, are expected to keep the Code of Conduct in mind, treat participating members and users with respect, and remember that events should be fun for everyone involved.

## **VI. Reporting and Escalations**

Members experiencing conflicts and/or issues with other members are encouraged to contact and begin a dialogue with the member in question if possible.

If a resolution for personal conflict is not achievable by communication, or if you are not comfortable initiating a dialogue, utilize the Stream Queens Suggestions & Concerns Google Survey to express concerns, or contact @DEERE or @Momager roles directly.

Members that observe blatant infractions of the Code of Conduct on the Twitch platform, socials, or Discord, are encouraged to contact management immediately by utilizing the Stream Queens Suggestions & Concerns Google Survey to express concerns, or by contacting @DEERE or the @Momager roles directly.

## **VII. Conflict Resolution**

When mediating conflicts, matters will be discussed privately with the individuals involved in order to respect the privacy of all parties.

Information regarding conflicts will be presented to team members on a need to know basis.

Information regarding extreme Code of Conduct infractions that end in dismissal may result in distribution of information in a statement within the team internally, or publicly on official team socials.

## **VIII. Infractions and Discipline**

Team leadership will use their discretion for the handling of infractions of the Code of Conduct.

Discipline for infractions may consist of:

- Verbal/Written warning.
- Recording of infraction on a rolling strike system.
- Removal from team.

Rolling strike system for infractions:

When a team member receives a minor infraction, they will be given 1 strike. Each strike has a 6 month duration before being removed. Team members exceeding 3 active rolling strikes will be subject to removal.

*Any questions or concerns regarding these terms, or for general feedback purposes, team management can be contacted on Discord.*

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