

ALIEN FEMININITIES: TRANSCENDING GENDER THROUGH DRAG IN AN
AESTHETICALLY RESTRICTIVE CULTURE

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Alien Femininities: Transcending Gender through Drag in an Aesthetically Restrictive Culture.

In this dissertation, I conceptualize femininities not as a static category of gender performance, but as a set of shifting configurations of dress, cosmetics, bodily comportment, and behaviors inflected by race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age, body size/shape, and facial beauty. Non-cisgender-male drag queens who embody exaggerated forms of femininity defend their contested participation in drag culture by defining drag as *a multi-gender queer culture based on the staged exaggeration of quotidian gender*, against mainstream definitions of drag as the cross-gender performance of a (cis) man dressing up as a (cis) woman. Because these queens are subject to sex-gendered double standards for the intracultural legitimation of their temporary accomplishment of the queer gender Drag Queen, many queens incorporate stylistic elements based on aliens and other fantastical creatures as a form of *aesthetic overcompensation* to preempt critiques from audiences and cis male drag queens. The embodiment of *alien femininities* also enables the participants in this research to temporarily transcend cultural restrictions on aesthetics and self-presentation, especially those based on quotidian gender, which they conceptualize through a framework of *trans-inclusionary gender essentialism*. Through this discourse of gender, participants and I consider together the political potentialities of *femme*, a quotidian queer gender, and *alien femininities*, a temporarily-

embodied queer gender, excavating a *ripple-effect theory of social change* in which feelings at the micro level animate interactional and (sub)cultural shifts at the meso level which then ripple outward and upward to restructure and, hopefully, help dismantle systems of normalizing power at the macro level.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Literature Review	3
Theories of Gender	4
Femininities	8
Subcultures	16
Femme	19
Embodiment	24
Beauty	28
Fashion.....	33
Liberation.....	36
Case: Discourses of Drag and Gender among Drag Queens Who Are Not Cisgender Men.....	39
Method.....	45
Participant Demographics.....	47
Notes on Language and Form in the Dissertation	48
II. CHAPTER ONE: WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT DRAG.....	52
“‘That Old Creeper Dude with a Dress’”: What Drag is <i>Not</i>	56
Mainstream Foil 1: Straight Folks	58
Mainstream Foil 2: Gay Folx	64
Mainstream Foil 3: Radical Feminists.....	65
“‘It’s Kind of a Moving Target’”: Drag as “‘Hard to Pin Down’”	68

Chapter	Page
Drag as a Moving Target: Context-Dependence (Queer Bars Instagram)	70
Drag as a Moving Target: Many Types of Drag.....	75
Types of Drag: Group 1, Intelligible Queens.....	76
Types of Drag: Group 2, Campy Queens.....	77
Types of Drag: Group 3, Alternative Queens.....	78
“Paint for the Back Row”: The Drag Queen Look as the Staged Exaggeration of Quotidian Womanhood	80
The Drag Queen Look.....	81
Sex-Gendered Double Standards for Cultural Legitimation as a Drag Queen....	87
“T’ve Belonged Here Since the Beginning”: Drag as a Multi-Gender Queer Culture	94
III. CHAPTER TWO: ALIEN FEMININITIES GENDER IS A HUMAN PROBLEM	105
Trans-Inclusionary Gender Essentialism (TIGE).....	109
TIGE Principle 1: Gender Diversity Is Self-Evident.....	109
TIGE Principle 2: Gender Is Unfixed and Nonbinary.....	110
TIGE Principle 3: Gender Is Produced In, On, and With the Body	112
Woman.....	119
Woman as the Psychic and Linguistic Referent for Femininity	119
Woman as Defined through the “Feminine” Body.....	123
Woman as the Specter of the Straight White Girl.....	128
Femininity.....	130

Chapter	Page
Femme	134
Alien Femininities: An Escape from Gender, aka “Earth’s Bullshit”	136
Alien Femininities as Intelligibly Humanoid	137
Aliens as Fantastical and Not Bound by Human Constraints.....	140
Aliens as Futuristic.....	142
IV. CHAPTER THREE: POLITICAL POTENTIALITIES OF FEMME AND ALIEN FEMININITIES.....	146
Micro-Level.....	150
Micro-Affective Dimensions of Femininities: Fun	151
Micro-Affective Dimensions of Femininities: Personal Empowerment after Experiencing Gender Trauma	158
Meso-Level.....	168
Meso Dimensions of Femininities: Explicit (Intersectional) Feminism	170
Meso Dimensions of Femininities: Existence as Resistance	183
Macro-Level.....	192
Destabilizing Macro Systems of Power: White Supremacy	193
Rehabilitating Femininities as Antiracism.....	193
Reinforcing White Standards of Beauty through Contouring	195
Destabilizing Macro Systems of Power: Gender.....	198
Strategy: Total Gender Unintelligibility.....	199
Strategy: Seeking Gendered Misperception.....	200
Destabilizing Macro Systems of Power: Sexual Identity	203
Boundary: No Cishets.....	204

Chapter	Page
Boundary: Everybody Welcome.....	205
From Micro to Macro?: Considering the Mainstreaming of Drag.....	210
V. CONCLUSION: TO THE MACRO LEVEL AND BEYOND TOWARD AN ASYMPTOTIC VISION OF LIBERATION.....	218
VI. APPENDICES.....	236
A. QUEENING TERMINOLOGY.....	236
B. QUEENING CONTROVERSIES.....	240
C. POSITIONALITY	242
REFERENCES CITED.....	246

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Figure 1: <i>Folx</i> on Urban Dictionary.....	50
2. Figure 2: Pageant Queen.....	77
3. Figure 3: Fishy Queen.....	77
4. Figure 4: (Very) Femme Queen	77
5. Figure 5: Latin Queen.....	77
6. Figure 6: Comedy Queen	77
7. Figure 7: Campy Queen.....	77
8. Figure 8: Cakey Queen	78
9. Figure 9: Broadway Queen	78
10. Figure 10: Alternative Queen	79
11. Figure 11: Goth Queen	79
12. Figure 12: Genderfuck Queen.....	79
13. Figure 13: Experimental Queen	79
14. Figure 14: Performance Art Drag.....	79
15. Figure 15: Weird Queen	79
16. Figure 16: Trixie Mattel	82
17. Figure 17: Cyberpop	85
18. Figure 18: Lolita.....	85

Figure	Page
19. Figure 19: Farrah Moan.....	128
20. Figure 20: Alien Femininity 1	139
21. Figure 21: Alien Femininity 2	139
22. Figure 22: Alien Femininity 3	139
23. Figure 23: Alien Femininity 4	139
24. Figure 24: Alien Femininity 5	139
25. Figure 25: Alien Femininity 6	139
26. Figure 26: Alien Femininity 7	139
27. Figure 27: Angie 1	167
28. Figure 28: Angie 2	167
29. Figure 29: Daphne’s Twitter Exchange part 1	172
30. Figure 30: Daphne’s Twitter Exchange part 2.....	173
31. Figure 31: Sharon Needles.....	176
32. Figure 32: Paramore.....	176
33. Figure 33: Nina	190
34. Figure 34: Contouring by @DressYourFace	196

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Table 1: Gender, Sexuality, and Race of Participants	48
2. Table 2: Foils.....	58
2. Table 3: Criticisms and Defenses of Non-Cis-Male Drag Queens.....	241

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, strands of sociology and queer theory have attempted to elaborate the links between the symbolic and the material; what effects, if any, can symbolic challenges to power have on more material, structural manifestations of that power? Are symbolic challenges always reincorporated into normative and legible forms of social life through processes of commodification and commercialization (Hebdige 1979)? Might they simply facilitate new, “softer” forms of power (Bridges 2014, Messner 2011) or end up reinscribing other types of inequality (Wilkins 2008)? Or do they hold the potential to radically resignify both dominant and abject subject positions, thus destabilizing systems of inequality based around “the normal” (Butler 1990, 1993)? Furthermore, must sociologists find an explicit causal link between symbolic challenges to power and material changes in structural inequalities in order to proclaim such symbolic acts meaningful?

To answer these questions, I position my research on the embodied femininities of non-cis-male drag queens in conversation with queer theorists and philosophers, who tend to overemphasize the potential of “gender play” to destabilize normative gender and sexuality (Butler 1990, Halberstam 1998), and with sociologists, who are more skeptical of the potential of aesthetic shifts to transform larger structures of inequality (Pascoe 2007, Bridges 2014, Wilkins 2008). Though they differ in their estimation of the efficacy of gender performances to dismantle systems of power, both perspectives tend to focus on the instances of gender play that are most obviously transgressive, particularly female masculinity, male femininity, drag, and trans.

One of the primary unacknowledged assumptions in contemporary postmodern queer and feminist theory is the premise that gender play and gender transgression

necessarily indicate a “mismatch” or “swap” between sexed bodies and gender performances, i.e., female masculinity, male femininity, butch-femme relationships, and drag performances. I ask a related but somewhat different question: how might gender performances that are not automatically read as transgressive of normative gender – women and femmes performing femininities as drag queens – be theorized as potentially useful in the struggle against gender oppression? Historically there has been a dearth of social research on femininities, in contrast to an explosion of research on masculinities (Pascoe and Bridges 2015). The relative omission of a sustained intellectual engagement with femininities in the literature reflects unacknowledged sexist understandings of femininity as natural, passive, and complicit with men’s power. My project is not only an analysis of the ways gender performances can and cannot ameliorate structural gender inequality, but is also a corrective to sociology’s implicit privileging of men’s issues over women’s. This is not to say that masculinity is the natural province of men while femininity is relegated to women; rather, masculinity is culturally associated with maleness, and femininity with femaleness, hence the extra focus masculinity receives in the academy.

In this project, I put queer theorists’ and sociologists’ arguments regarding aesthetic challenges to normative power in conversation with black queer feminist theorists who emphasize the importance of organizing solidarity and resistance to oppression on the basis of proximity to *normalizing power writ large* (Cohen 1997) – that is, power that operates through constructing a “master binary” of normal/deviant which supersedes its various inflections such as heteronormativity (Collins 2005). By analyzing data from social media, online newspaper articles, participant observation at drag shows, and interviews with drag queens who are not cisgender men, I argue that femininities have the potential to shift broad

systems of power through a *ripple-effect model of social change*. This model proposes that feelings of fun, pleasure, and empowerment derived from performing semi-autonomous versions of gender – particularly, *femme* and *alien femininities* - animate non-cis-male drag queens to act in and on, and thus potentially destabilize, broader systems of normalizing power in ways they otherwise might not.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This project builds on the literature on gender, subcultures, and embodiment to analyze the political potentialities of some types of gendered performance, specifically *femme* and *alien femininities*. Theories of and relating to gender – including essentialist, social-constructionist, queer/poststructural, and intersectional – provide an interesting theoretical knot for scholars to disentangle, due to their differing estimations of the causes of gender oppression, the forms that it takes, and the proper ways to solve it. I turn to black (queer) feminist theories of gender and power to help loosen that knot and clarify the workings of gender, race, sexuality, and power writ large. I engage literatures on identity and subcultures to think through the ways and reasons aesthetic, symbolic, and embodied challenges to power are enacted by subcultural members, including queer femmes and drag queens, and what their political effects may be. Running throughout my engagement with all these literatures and theoretical frameworks is the question of embodiment and liberation – (how) might we understand how power and inequalities work in, on, and through the body and (how) might we theorize the political implications of purposefully feminine forms of embodiment?

Theories of Gender

Sociologists and queer theorists tend to understand gender and sexuality to be socially constructed (Lorber and Farrell 1991) as opposed to an inherent, essential feature of human beings; that is, their meanings and configurations vary across time and space and exist in mutually influential relationships with each other and with other social structures (Butler 1990). Early social construction theory conceptualized gender as a set of complementary “sex roles” for men and women (Hochschild 1973). This inherently functionalist perspective renders itself apolitical in that if sex roles are necessary for the functioning of society, then society itself depends upon the continued subordination of women. Sex roles researchers often conflate sex with gender, such that any account of women’s place in society becomes implicitly essentialized within their biological femaleness. In 1975, Gayle Rubin made a monumental contribution to the academic study of gender by positing a sex/gender system in which she theorizes biological sex (e.g., male and female genitalia, chromosomes, etc.) as distinct from gender, a set of cultural meanings imputed onto biological sex differences. Rubin’s radical feminist contemporaries MacKinnon (2001), Dworkin (1997), and Jeffreys (1996) further define gender as an oppressive, heteropatriarchal institution imputed onto biological sex differences between men and women in the service of men’s dominance and women’s subjugation. According to these scholars, gender is a function of sexuality, such that “women” as a group are defined by their subordinated position to men within a heteropatriarchal regime. In their view, the liberation of women can only come along with women’s liberation from the “straightjacket of gender” (Rubin 1975). In Rubin’s later work, she begins to criticize the radical feminist theoretical project; while she acknowledges that “much of the oppression of women is borne by, mediated through, and constituted within

sexuality,” she argues that feminist analyses of sexuality often result in conservative conclusions which can only offer new ways to repress women’s agency (1984).

West and Zimmerman (1987) posit that gender is not an essential feature of human existence, but rather is “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (1987:127).

Furthermore, as symbolic interaction teaches us, identities – including gender identities – are always intersubjectively produced (Mead 1934, Blumer 1969, Meadow 2018) and subject to the judgment and interpretation of one’s audience, i.e., interactional partners (Goffman 1959). Possible misinterpretations, a refusal to engage with new ideas, hostility, or confusion between gendered individuals in interaction, then, throw a wrench into the mix for scholars thinking through the ways identities can and cannot contribute to liberation from normalizing power. For instance, in a situation in which the definition of the situation is not shared, and in which the meanings interactional participants assign to the interaction are varied, how are we to understand the potential political and social reverberations that may come from such an interaction? This question is especially important in a discussion of current drag culture, in which drag is conceptualized in various ways by various constituencies to various, and frequently conflicting, political ends. In this way, understanding different actors’ definitions of a given situation is crucial to understanding the political import of both individual behaviors and interpersonal interactions.

In order to demonstrate competence as practitioners of their culture, men and women must “do” gender in a way that is legible to themselves and others. Through social interaction, gender comes to be seen as natural and inevitable. Fundamental to West and Zimmerman’s formulation is accountability, or the idea that individuals know that others will

judge their behavior as either gender-appropriate or -inappropriate (1987), and that this knowledge shapes behaviors consciously and unconsciously (Hollander 2013). Importantly, individuals do not become genderless when they are alone; they assess their own behavior according to gender expectations (Hollander 2013, Foucault 1978). It is through accountability that West and Zimmerman link individual practice to social structure (Hollander 2013). Crucially, individuals are held accountable to both normative ideals and situated expectations; more specifically, normative ideals are always mediated and experienced through localized, situated expectations for appropriately gendered behavior (Jocelyn Hollander, personal communication, February 16, 2016). As West and Zimmerman write, “Women can be seen as unfeminine, but that does not make them ‘unfemale’” (1987:134). While the authors do not thoroughly theorize doing gender as an embodied process, the interplay between normative ideals and situated accomplishments makes clear that the successful accomplishment of *gender* depends on one’s body being legible as a particular *sex*.

Because feminist theories of gender have been so thoroughly framed around Rubin’s (1975) distinction between sex as biological and gender as cultural, the sociology of gender has tended to cede all discussions of sex and the body to other disciplines. However, queer and critical feminist theory allow us to focus on the materiality of the body (Butler 1993) without abandoning social construction theories of gender and sexuality (Balogun 2015, personal communication, meeting). According to Butler, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1990). By showing that the experience of having a body - “embodiment” - is mediated by normative schemas of

sex, gender, and sexuality, Butler argues that intelligible subjects and bodies are constructed *through* the processes of being sexed and gendered (Butler 1990). That is, sex is “always already gender,” and “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (Butler 1990). Crucially, Butler indicts language and grammar themselves in the difficulty of thinking about how embodied subjects are created, because grammar presupposes an agent or subject in every action. Butler (1993) proposes the idea that “a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names,” and thus moves beyond the simplistic vision of agency as voluntarism, upon which the essentialist-social constructionist debate rests. Rather than simply arguing the (sexed) body is constructed, which is itself a radical and controversial contention, Butler (1993) reformulates of the concept of social “construction.” In doing so, she transcends the essentialism-constructionism debate about gender as well as the problematic feminist insistence that sex is biological while gender is social (Rubin 1975). In such an account, the sexed body is experienced *phenomenologically* (Salamon 2010) as both the conductor and the result of gender.

Intersectionality provides an exciting arena in which sociologists may remain dedicated to one of sociology’s central projects - documenting persistent, durable patterns of inequality - while also incorporating the spirit of queer theory, which seeks to interrogate the coherence of the categories upon which those inequalities depend. Intersectionality is an analytical approach to the study of inequalities that conceptualizes different forms of inequality as mutually constitutive and mutually transformative (Crenshaw 1991). For example, sexism and racism are two axes of inequality that function differently, but converge in certain institutions, like the workplace, and in individual experiences, like those of black women whose experiences of sexism and racism are qualitatively different than those of both white

women and black men (Crenshaw 1991). Thus, to theorize femininities *per se* is to miss the ways gender is fundamentally constituted through and transformed by other categories of social difference such as race, age, and body size, and further that the construction of “normal” subjects of power is racialized such that whiteness is central to the construction of “normal” gender and sexuality (see Ward, 2015, on sexual cultures among white men, as well as Hammonds, 1994, and Krell, 2017, on the relational construction of black and white women’s sexualities).

Intersectionality has been critiqued as a complicated and hard-to-define approach to research and theory (McCall 2005). Furthermore, queer theorists worry that intersectional analyses of power, with their emphases on categories of inequality, may reify the very categories that queer theory seeks to deconstruct (Butler 1990). While sociologists should avoid reifying socially constructed categories of difference (Lorber 1996), we must also acknowledge them as provisionally “real” - as “necessary fictions” (Weeks 1995) - insofar as they have psychic and material effects on people’s lives (Collins 2005, Crenshaw 1991, McCall 2005, Stein 1997). Following this train of thought, I conceptualize femininities not as a static category of gender performance, but as a set of shifting configurations of dress, cosmetics, bodily comportment, and behaviors inflected by race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age, body size/shape, and facial beauty.

Femininities

An essentialist view of femininity holds that women as a group are constituted through their biological femaleness, which predisposes us to such feminine personality characteristics and behavioral tendencies as empathy, emotionality, irrationality. This gender

essentialism also rests on a foundation of sexual essentialism; individuals are presumed to be biologically heterosexual, such that one major project of women's femininity is to render themselves attractive to men. Cultural feminists such as Ortner (1974) argue that men's and women's differences may arise not through biology but through differential gender socialization, and further that many of the characteristics of conventional femininity – e.g., women's "ethic of care" (Gilligan 1982) and nurturing spirit – are beneficial to society. Essentialist and cultural-feminist perspectives on women's and men's gender differences have been criticized for universalizing and generalizing women's experiences with femininity, for explicitly and implicitly arguing for the continuation of a system of gender that disadvantages women, and for failing to indict men for their complicity in and enactment of sexism in society (Irving 1998). Some gender theorists are partially essentialist in their understandings of femininity, such as Brownmiller who in *Against Our Will* (1975) theorized biological sex differences as a primary reason for women's vulnerability to rape but also parlayed that ostensibly biologically-determinist argument into a highly sociological understanding of rape as a gendered tool of social power consciously enacted by men for the purposes of dominance and control; likewise, in her later book *Femininity* (1984), Brownmiller writes, "Women are all female impersonators to some degree," thus acknowledging the social construction of gender while still firmly locating a major source of women's oppression in the embodied state of biological femaleness. This combination of biological determinism and social constructionism to produce a multifaceted understanding of femininity/ies is reflected in contemporary discourses of gender that seek to both de-link gender identity from the body as well as validate the gendered subjectivities of trans folk,

many of whom understand their gender to emanate from some combination of biology, genetics, and/or essential self along with gender socialization (Meadow 2018).

In contrast, radical and liberal feminist theorists conceptualize femininity as unilaterally harmful to women, as one of men's primary tools to subordinate women under a system of heterosexual patriarchy (Jeffreys 1996, MacKinnon 2001, Dworkin 1997). According to these feminists, even femininity expressed within lesbian butch-femme relationships, which contain no element of biological male sexuality, is oppressive to women because such relationships purportedly mimic heterosexuality (Jeffreys 1996). In the radical feminist framework, any woman who embraces femininity is a cultural dupe who enables her own gendered harm; the solution is for women to eschew femininity in favor of more androgynous or masculine styles of gender presentation. Jeffreys (2005) argues that the accoutrements of feminine beauty (e.g., lipstick, high heels) in Western societies are akin to "harmful cultural practices" in other areas of the globe, including female genital cutting. In her view, then, women's liberation can only come along with the demise of beauty culture (Harris-Moore 2014). The types of clothing that are available to and commonly worn by women, such as corsets and bras, have historically tended to emphasize or exaggerate the difference in ideal body shapes between men and women (see Wade 2013 on gender as exaggerated sexual dimorphism), thus arguably maintaining women's subordination to men (Entwistle 2000). Ironically, radical feminist arguments against femininity tend to strike a tenuous balance between social constructionist understandings of gender, which point toward the possibility of women's liberation from gendered oppression, and essentialist views of gender, which encourage women to shed the trappings of femininity to embrace their natural femaleness (Blackman and Perry 1990). Crucially, these ostensibly feminist

arguments revert to understandings of androgyny and masculinity as natural in order to construct femininity as *artificial*.

As part of her groundbreaking work on hegemonic masculinity (1987, 1995), Connell theorizes *emphasized femininity* as a type of gender performance in which women¹ are “oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (184). Because women’s social power cannot equal men’s in Connell’s framework, there is no such thing as hegemonic femininity (1987). This perspective neglects to theorize femininities thoroughly and does not fully consider the ways various femininities operate differently from one another (Schipper 2007, Budgeon 2013). Importantly, while most sociologists associate Connell’s treatment of femininity with the concept of emphasized femininity in particular, she set this femininity amongst many other possible enactments of femininity which are not oriented toward sustaining hegemonic relations between masculinity and femininity (Budgeon 2013, Schipper 2007, Bridges, personal communication, 2020) and thus makes space for new femininities to possibly alter and destabilize hegemonic masculinity and gender relations writ large.

Schipper (2007) argues for the existence of a hegemonic femininity because women who do not meet dominant standards for femininity are often ridiculed, shamed, or otherwise mistreated. Though she understands hegemonic femininity to be dominant among femininities, she concedes that hegemonic femininity is still locked in subordination to hegemonic masculinity. Linking femininities to heterosexuality, Schipper locates the

¹ Because the vast majority of sociological gender scholarship deals, usually implicitly, only with cisgender women, the majority of this literature review will be about cisgender women, though the rest of the dissertation deals heavily with non-binary and trans folk’s genders.

significance of the gender categories “man” and “woman” in the “idealized quality content” of those categories, that is, the “qualities members of each gender category should and are assumed to possess” (2007:90). She follows Butler’s (1990) insistence that the *heterosexual matrix* is grounded in a binary of oppositionally-defined masculine men and feminine women. Those women who do not meet the standards of normative heterosexual femininity – whether because they are queer/lesbian or for other reasons - enact what Schippers calls “pariah femininities.” Fascinatingly, pariah femininities may *look* quite similar to hegemonic femininity, as in the case of some high-femme queer women; thus, it is one purpose of this paper to tease out the relationships between gender identity, gendered appearance, and the body as a site of politics. To this point, Moore (2011) discusses the potential of black lesbian culture, in which sexual desire and romantic relationships are largely structured around a masculine-feminine dichotomy, to transform heterosexual models “in specifically lesbian interactions that define and affirm women’s sexual desire and embody women’s sexual autonomy” (82-83). Some “lipstick” lesbians (akin to femmes) themselves argue that by incorporating aspects of a heterosexual feminine aesthetic, but having sexual and romantic relationships with women, they are reappropriating the trappings of femininity in an empowering and subversive way (Blackman and Perry 1990). While these arguments are compelling, many of them (particularly Butler’s) lack empirical evidence to bolster their claims. Researchers in various fields have taken up this question by testing the capacity of bodies, identities, and practices to subvert normative systems of gender, race, and sexuality.

Femininities are also a vehicle for racialized nation-building projects. The pinup girls of the 1940s and 1950s, whose aesthetic styles inspire the contemporary resurgence of pinup style, represent “a femininity that is explicitly linked with the nation” (Musser 2016:58)

through their embodiment of white, middle-class, innocent, ‘healthy’ sexuality (Meyerowitz 1996). Within the US, Espiritú (2001) finds that Filipina women resist discourses of white racial superiority by constructing a chaste feminine identity for themselves and their daughters, which they contrast with their perception of white American women’s sexual immorality. As Wilkins (2008) notes, “Much of the burden for performing racialized sexual purity rests on girls and women.” Gendered and racialized nation-building is present also in Nigeria among beauty pageant contestants (Balogun 2012), in Indonesia among young fashion consumers (Luvaas 2013), and in Barbados among pink-collar data-entry workers (Freeman 2000).

Not only are femininities underrepresented in the sociological and queer literatures, but there is a lack of consensus regarding what we are talking about when we talk about “femininities.” Various meanings of the term “femininity” within gender studies include: femininity as an embodied state of smallness (Rand 2012), femininity as a configuration of gendered traits such as soft-spokenness and deference delivered in a high-pitched voice (Lagos 2019, Sorokowski et al. 2019, Moore 2011), femininity as a style of dress (Blair and Hoskin 2014), femininity as a culturally imposed role complementary to masculinity (Jeffreys 1996), and femininity as a set of stereotypical images of heterosexual women (Loulan 1990). It is important, then, for scholars to be explicit about what they mean when they say “femininity.” In this project, I concentrate on the aesthetic aspects of intentionally feminine gender performances – makeup, hairstyles, dress, fashion. These are, of course, intimately linked with other aspects of what scholars call “femininity,” such as race, the body, and behavior, but the aesthetic aspects of feminine gender performances are the central concern of my analysis. Due to their significant capacity for malleability and rapid rearrangement,

makeup, hairstyles, dress, and fashion are ideal topics to consider when investigating the links between the symbolic and the material.

Scholars have increasingly begun to pay attention to *affect* – i.e., feelings and emotions – in discussions of the power of stylized embodiment to transform systems of inequality (or not). For instance, in her research on Barbadian pink-collar informatics’ workers sartorial practices, Freeman (2000) combines perspectives that view femininities as a form of class reproduction with those that emphasize women’s agency in choosing fashions to argue that pink-collar Barbadian women “both contest and consent to local, class-based, and international corporate values” (2000:235) by differentiating themselves from factory workers through stylish dress:

While social advancement in any real sense may be improbable in the data entry operators’ experience of ‘dressing for success,’ I found that pure pleasure in creating and putting together distinctive combinations of colors, materials, and styles was also a central aspect of the concern for dress and fashion. Additionally, while these women know that they are not truly professional workers, they enjoy looking like them, and when they look like them, they come to feel themselves to be different” (2000: 236).

We can see elements of *fun* and *gender play* in Freeman’s above analysis of pink-collar femininities. Contemporary social theorists have begun to counter normative cultural assumptions that link “play” with children and “work” with adults (see brown, 2019, *Pleasure Activism*). Adult play has the ability to highlight various forms of status tensions within society, as Geertz (1972) documents among Balinese cockfighters. Thorne (1993) details the ways children are active agents of gender socialization; her formulation is easily transposed onto adult play wherein gender meanings are intentionally and unintentionally produced, contested, and reinscribed. Might fashion, style, and other symbolic practices be emotionally valuable in ways that are not legible if scholars only legitimate certain types of effects as

meaningful (see McCann's 2018 case for an "affective turn" in the study of femininities)? Importantly, emotions are felt in the body, and furthermore, embodiment is a central component of both the daily enactment of femininities by individuals and in the performance of drag.

The experience of femininity is certainly laden with a wide range of emotions. While essentialist understandings of gender construct the practice of femininity as inextricable from female bodies, the feminine gender performances of transgender and nonbinary individuals make clear that femininity is not restricted to people born with vaginas. Much of the literature on trans women is about trans women's vulnerability to violence and only marginally discusses trans women's constructions of femininity. A notable exception which discusses both of these themes is Yavorsky and Sayer's (2013) "Doing Fear," in which the authors theorize trans women's embodiment of heterosexual femininity. Though the trans women in this study were large-statured and socialized as males, they *feared* that they would not be able to fend off a violent attacker post-transition. The authors identify this fear of victimization as a central element of heterosexual femininity, which depicts women as weak and vulnerable. Because trans women are subject to heightened regulation and policing of their gender performances, "doing fear" is one way these women may affirm their gender to others, including their male partners.

Doing femininity also has the ability to give people pleasure (Rand 2012, Mears 2011, Etkoff 1999), particularly among women of color for whom self-representation is often seen as a radical act (Collins 1990, Moore 2006). However, while the expansion of the bounds of beauty may be a laudable goal, it is unclear how beauty can exist without ugliness, and how women's choices about beauty can be divorced from a heterosexual market in which men

judge women's physical value. As Bordo (1999) argues, scholarly discussions of women's agency regarding femininity often become little more than "rhetorical cheerleading" (24). Because "choices are not made in a vacuum" (Harris-Moore 2014), any sociological interrogation of femininity, then, must avoid the feel-good penchant to uncritically champion beauty's empowerment potential while also not disregarding the meaningfulness of the (limited, certainly) choices women and other marginalized folk do make about our bodies.

Subcultures

Subcultures are patterned configurations of style and behavior that subcultural members purposefully deploy to challenge aspects of the dominant culture (Hebdige 1979) and to solve problems in their own lives (Wilkins 2008). By taking mundane or stigmatized objects and infusing them with new meanings, subcultures attempt to subvert hegemonic cultural messages (Hebdige 1979), as in the Black Power movement's reclamation of natural hairstyles or butch-femme couples' reappropriation and mutation of the gendered styles of heterosexuality. In doing so, "the subcultural stylist gives the lie to what Althusser has called the 'false obviousness of everyday practice'" (Hebdige 1979:102). Thus, some scholars conclude that subcultural resignification practices have the potential to disrupt the systems of normativity upon which cultural reproduction depends (Butler 1990).

The particular styles of subcultures indicate issues they are trying to resolve (Wilkins 2008); for instance, Entwistle (2000) discusses working-class dandies, whose attention to finer and minute details of fashion indicates a desire for upward social mobility. Similarly, Wilkins finds that young white people tend to gravitate toward subcultures that make them

feel “cool” while also helping them to “establish a meaningful cultural identity when whiteness seems to have no culture” (2008:249). Through involvement in Puerto Rican hip-hop circles, goth communities, and Christian youth groups, these subcultural members create collective identities that are exciting and that allow them to push against what they perceive to be the “limitations of whiteness” (Wilkins 2008:239).

Since the early 2000s, one of the primary ways subcultures have formed is on the internet (Ito et al. 2009). Because online communities are not limited by geographic considerations, individuals can find many others with similar interests and identities and, through online social interaction, form collective identities (Herrera 2018, Pham 2015, Findlay 2015). Online presentations of self allow marginalized individuals, such as fat women (Peters 2014) to create their own “narrations” or “stories” of the self (Titton 2015, Giddens 1991, Rocamora 2011). This process has its roots in earlier subcultural practices through which “African American dandies, Chicano zoot suiters, and McIntosh-class Filipino dancehall patrons” used fashion to construct identities in opposition to a racist mainstream culture (Pham 2015:227). Indeed, “alternative” fashions like J-Fashion, punk style, and the intentional gender non-conformity associated with queerness are central components of subcultural challenges to systems of normalizing power.

Even as subcultural members enact striking aesthetic challenges to hegemonic discourses, their resignification practices do not materialize in a vacuum. For example, Rocamora (2011) argues that while women may construct empowering narratives of self through fashion blogs, at the same time their cameras, blogs, and computer screens become Foucaultian tools of self-surveillance, “yet one more instrument imposing on women the panoptic control which mirrors and the masculine gaze subject them to” (418). In this way,

dominant discourses of gender and sexism may infiltrate women's subcultural collective identity constructions. Moreover, access to subcultural practices in the first place can be limited by one's pre-existing ascribed characteristics such as race, gender, and age; Wilkins (2008), for instance, argues that white goths are able to resist the sexual mores and clothing styles of white, middle-class culture precisely because their white, middle-class origins protect them from ramifications that working-class or poor people of color face for enacting similar sexual practices and sartorial choices.

Indeed, subcultural members usually wield less social power than do members of more dominant cultural groups, which potentially limits the capacity of their symbolic challenges to result in structural and material changes (Hebdige 1979). Often, subcultural discourses are reincorporated into dominant cultural narratives through a "continual process of recuperation" (Hebdige 1979:94) which includes commodification, relabeling, and/or redefinition of subcultural style and practices. For instance, Schiermer (2010) argues that the *camp* sensibility, which includes elements of irony, parody, and tackiness, originated in the queer community but is now a major part of youth fashion culture in general and has thus lost its connection to queers' intentions to subvert normative culture. Because of the messiness of the interplay between subcultural resignification and dominant recuperation processes, Hebdige (1979) uses the term "noise" "to describe the challenge to symbolic order that [subcultural] styles are seen to constitute" (133). Thus, a more thorough discussion of the relationship between symbolic challenges to power and material changes in systems of inequality is necessary to think through the roles subcultural performances of femininity may or may not play in dismantling normative systems of gender, race, and sexuality.

Femme

Femme is one example of a subcultural styling of the body intended to challenge systems of power. *Femme* is an identity adopted by some queer individuals whose gender presentation incorporates elements of femininity (Hoskin 2013); femmes may explicitly disavow certain aspects of femininity that are linked to women's subordination to men, such as heterosexuality and meekness (Harris and Crocker 1997). Queer femmes are non-heterosexual individuals whose gender performances are readably feminine, whether through clothing choices (e.g., dresses, high heels, floral patterns, jewelry, lingerie), the use of cosmetics and makeup, feminine hairstyles (e.g., long hair or hair that is otherwise clearly cut in a "women's" style, the use of barrettes or headbands), and/or bodily comportment (e.g., crossed legs when sitting). Importantly, all of these elements of femme are raced and intersect with other axes of inequality and identity; for example, black femmes are more likely than white femmes to have very short or no hair (Moore 2011). Moreover, any femme may incorporate any combination of these and other aspects of femme style, such that there is no single list of femme attributes.

In her review of Sandra Bem's classic psychological work that ranked individuals on masculine and feminine scales and found that many people score highly on scales of both masculinity *and* femininity, Sedgwick (1995) writes, "some people are just more gender-y than others." As Jed Bell argues, "some people have a lot of gender: if you're one of those people, the outfit is crucial to being properly expressed" (quoted in Rand 2012:251). In emphasizing the potential of clothes to enable self-expression, "third-wave" feminists divorce women's fashion, and particularly "lipstick lesbian" or femme fashion, from the

male gaze, arguing that “using the feminine to attract women rather than men, these women flirt with the symbols of heterosexuality, constantly changing their meaning within the context of a lesbian subculture” (Blackman and Perry 1990:69). In other words, according to these arguments, femininities can be reconfigured and resignified to purposefully attract the sexual attention of women, as opposed to that of men, thus eliminating the radical feminist concern that all expressions of femininity are just another way to oppress women under patriarchy. As many femmes are visually indistinguishable from heterosexual women, it’s unclear how cleanly women’s fashion can actually be divorced from the male gaze, though Hemmings (1999) argues that the femme’s potential to subvert normative gender and sexuality is grounded precisely *within* femme invisibility, through which “the femme raises the possibility that all feminine women are potentially homosexual” (Musser 2016:57). One question for researchers of fashion and femininities should be whether women’s fashion choices *must be* separated from the male gaze to be fun, empowering, and celebrated.

Even as these third-wave feminists argue for a reconceptualization of femininity as one of the ways women can create sexual cultures with other women, there remains a premium on masculinity, or at least androgyny, within queer culture (Esterberg 1996, Krakauer and Rose 2002, Kennedy and Davis 1989, Blair and Hoskin 2014). This privileging of masculine fashion and embodiment can be traced to both a white, lesbian-feminist ideology of essential difference from heterosexual women and culture (Loulan 1990) as well as a queer politics of visibility (Morgan 1993). Indeed, if queer cultural politics are based around confronting mainstream heteronormative society with our visible queerness, then “where, in this landscape and enterprise, does the femme fit?” (Morgan 1993:46). Femmes’ gender presentations and sexual identities are often defined and given meaning in relation to

heterosexual men's and butch women's gender and sexualities (Blair and Hoskin 2014). For instance, while femmes may be readable as queer if we appear in public with a butch partner, a "butchless femme" (Morgan 1993) is assumed to be heterosexual. Even in ostensibly femme-positive literature, butch identity is given more page space, and authors like Kennedy and Davis (1989) tend to locate most of the politically subversive potential of butch-femme relationships in the "female masculinity" (Halberstam 1998) of the butch partner. Blair and Hoskin (2014) theorize this phenomenon as a reflection of "femininity's tendency, especially expressed by those assigned female at birth, to masquerade as a non-identity, as opposed to a self-actualised or chosen identity" (7).

As trans, queer, and male femmes can attest, to identify as femme, one does not necessarily need a female body or lesbian identity (Hoskin 2013, Rand 2012). Indeed, a female body is not necessary for *any* performance of femininity, except normative femininity, as femininity is culturally associated with femaleness and womanhood. Though femme is often defined in relation to *butch* within lesbian communities (Stein 1997), many femmes do not see their gendered sexual identities as dependent on partnerships with butches (Blair and Hoskin 2014). Because of femininity's symbolic relationship to masculinity (Connell 1987, Schippers 2007), femmes are often suspected by both queers and heterosexuals of being secretly or latently heterosexual (Stein 1997, Moore 2011, Loulan 1990, Blair and Hoskin 2014). While some scholars argue that "femme is distinct from femininity in its failure or refusal to approximate patriarchal norms of femininity" (Blair and Hoskin 2014:4), many people cannot visually distinguish between queer femmes and heterosexual feminine women; this fact muddies the ways scholars conceptualize gendered and sexualized dynamics of power and privilege.

While femme aesthetics are fluid, and there is no single way to define femme style, certain stylistic elements appear repeatedly in femmes' presentations of self. Here Moore (2011) describes femme style among both black and non-black femmes: "dresses or skirts, form-fitting jeans, tops that are low cut or that show cleavage, makeup, jewelry, and accessories such as purses" (71). She notes that black femmes in particular are likely to have short or 'natural' hair and wear clothes inspired by African styles. Queerness is often culturally associated with whiteness (Riggs 2010); black femmes' presentations of self thus incorporate elements of both their racial and sexual identities to communicate that they belong "to Black as well as gay cultures and...refuse to give up either one" (Moore 2011:71). Though Moore's descriptions of femme style sound in many ways consistent with conventional femininity, some femmes exhibit a particularly exaggerated or "queered" form of feminine fashion, hinting at a queer parody of normative gender (Butler 1990). This "high femme" style often incorporates such elements as unshaven legs/underarms, drag-queen-inspired makeup, bold or unconventional combinations of colors and patterns, visible tattoos and body piercings, rainbow-printed accessories, etc.

Moreover, scholars link this "femi-negativity" or "femmephobia" within queer circles to broader cultural patterns of misogyny and "woman hating" (Loulan 1990:88, Blair and Hoskin 2014). Indeed, effemiphobia, or "the fear and hatred of effeminate behavior" (Hartinger 2009) is common within gay male culture. Both masculine gay men and black men on the "down low" construct their gendered sexual identities explicitly in rejection of more "queeny types," who are stigmatized for their performances of femininity (McCune 2014). Thus, femmephobia renders masculinity dominant and femininity subordinate even within a sexually stigmatized group - gay men - that members of the dominant culture often

construct as pathologically associated with femininity. Any feminist or queer discussion around dismantling normative gender and sexuality should, then, address whether the denigration of femininities may help to perpetuate, as opposed to eliminate, sexism.

Drag, and drag queens in particular, have been the subject of scholarly debate regarding gender, sexuality, race, and inequalities within and beyond queer culture. Queer and poststructural theorists such as Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam have long theorized the political potential of drag – usually written about with an understanding that drag is a cross-gender performance done by cisgender men – to destabilize systems of inequality, heteronormativity in particular (Butler 1990, Butler 1993, Halberstam 1998) by exposing the constructedness of all gender. Rupp and Taylor, in their iconic 2003 ethnography *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, theorize the ways drag queens upset audiences’ thinking about sex, gender, and sexuality and create a subcultural community where gender is unfixed and takes on a life of its own, such that intracultural nonbinary (i.e., neither “male” nor “female”) gender categories like *Drag Queen* enable various configurations of embodied gender practice to emerge. Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010) conceptualize drag queens as “admired yet alienated performers” who, although they experience stigma as drag queens, also feel a sense of personal empowerment through the feminine styling of the body, income generated from paid bookings and tips, and feelings of “situational power” in the drag scene. While most literature on drag deals with cis male drag queens, there have been some explorations of drag kinging as in Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* (1998) and Rupp, Shapiro, and Taylor’s “Drag Queens and Drag Kings: The Difference Gender Makes,” both of which conceptualize both drag queening and drag kinging as offering a critique of heteronormativity, the gender binary, and masculinity in particular. I find the literature on cis male drag queens and cis

women drag queens, which consistently finds such practices to be at least partially effective challenges to systems of power, an invitation to explore the political implications of other configurations of sex, gender, embodiment, and drag. To be clear, I am not positioning this project vis-à-vis the literature on drag, per se. Rather, I am co-theorizing with non-cis-male drag queens some of the political potentialities of feminine embodiment.

Embodiment

Embodiment – the experience of having a body in society – allows us to analyze some of its critical components – the sex-gendered body, beauty, and fashion – in concert with one another. Entwistle (2000) locates myths about the legibility of bodies to nineteenth-century bourgeois culture, which emphasized individualism and “the search for inner truth behind the mask of appearance” (121). This cult of individualism, alongside the increasing professionalization of medicine, led to a cultural understanding of bodies as the container of the self (Burkitt 1991). Bodies communicate messages about us: our class status influences their size and shape (Bourdieu 1984), AFABs² curves (or lack thereof) are taken as an evidence of the level of our sexual desire (Mears 2011), black women’s skin color, hair, and facial features are assumed to reveal their innate hypersexuality (Collins 1990), even women’s small feet and thinness are perceived as symbols of moral virtue (Rand 2012). Those whose social positions are constructed as outside the normal (women, people of color, queers, people with disabilities) are conflated with our bodies in a way that constructs us as closer to

² AFAB = assigned female at birth. AMAB = assigned male at birth. These terms are used to move away from prior rhetoric of being “born as a boy” or “born as a girl” in an attempt to better linguistically represent trans people’s experiences of coercive sexing and gendering.

nature and thus, further from rationality, morality and intelligence (Ruggerone 2006, Howson 2013). Howson identifies three elements of a sociological approach to the body: 1) the body cannot be analytically separated from culture or society, 2) in modern cultures, the body is a target of social control and discipline, and 3) “the body is not only a material object on which social and political processes operate, but also forms the basis of social experience and action” (2013:13).

Thus, while not reducing women’s oppression to their bodies, sociologists can theorize the ways women’s experiences of both sexism and empowerment are mediated through their experiences of their bodies, and vice versa. Many of the ways women are subjected to social control are borne through the bodily requirements of a feminine gender performance; thinness is one of the primary constitutive elements of Western embodied femininity (Harris-Moore 2014). Fat women thus perform a kind of failed femininity (Peters 2014), marginalized femininity (Schippers 2007), or even a failed morality that is linked to thinness (Gerber 2012). Mears (2011) finds that even very thin fashion models often do not meet the stated body measurement requirements of modeling agencies. Fascinatingly, everyone in the modeling industry knows that dishonesty about one’s measurements is rampant; these measurements, then, are “floating norms...fleeting, aesthetic visions of femininity” (92). Thin or not, even their bodily movements are restricted: Young (1990) theorizes an invisible bounded space that confines women’s bodies, within which we move as feminine “closed bodies.” Individuals’ perceptions of their own gender and sexuality are produced through their experiences of their bodies; among masculine-identified lesbians who wish to avoid femininity, Esterberg (1996) finds that those whose bodies more closely approximate an ideal male body type (e.g., tall, slim hips and small breasts) emphasize their bodies as

constitutive of their lesbian identities, while those whose bodies more obviously betray their femaleness (e.g., those who are short or have bigger hips and breasts) “interpret other aspects of themselves as seeming especially lesbian.”

Entwistle (2000) links fashion to the body through the concept of *situated bodily practice* in which “fashion articulates the body, producing discourses on the body which are translated into dress through the bodily practices of dressing on the part of individuals...[such that] fashion becomes embodied” (2000:4). Among anthropologists, there is wide consensus that all human cultures adorn bodies in some way; this has been taken as evidence that bodies become socially meaningful through adornment with makeup, jewelry, and clothes (Entwistle 2000). One of the primary ways bodies are given social meaning is through gendering (Butler 1993). Normative codes for men’s and women’s dress ensure that clothing serves as a proxy for sex, such that we assume to know the truth of someone’s body by looking at their clothes (West and Zimmerman 1987), even as these clothes conceal the genitals and sometimes dramatically alter the shape of the body through corsetry, binding, padding, cinching, or other types of shaping.

The types of clothing that are available for certain bodies differ not only by gender but also by body size; most clothing designers do not make clothing for fat bodies (Kristjansson 2014), and most of the clothing that is available to fat consumers attempts to hide the body and thus “further[s] a kind of moral typology through which the design of the clothing conflates the wearer with her conservative dress” (Colls 2006, quoted in Peters 2014). Furthermore, fat women are perceived by others as unsophisticated consumers (Kristjansson 2014) who do care little about fashion, have low self-esteem, and prefer comfort over attractiveness in clothing styles (Heitmeyer and Rutherford-Black 2000). In other words,

sexuality and attractiveness are culturally linked to thin bodies, such that the limited amount of clothing designed for fat bodies both presumes and reifies stereotypes of fat women as asexual and unattractive. Indeed, the meaning of fatness itself is contested territory even among those who decry the fashion industry's discrimination against body size. This debate is evident in scholars' use of language, particularly the choices they make between such terms as plus-size, obese, corpulent, and fat. Almond (2013) argues that the term "voluptuous," when used to refer to women in plus-size fashion, is "a more palatable way to repackage and reconceptualize the larger-sized" (197). Implicit in Almond's linguistic judgment is the assumption that fatness is a bad thing. In contrast, many fat studies activists and scholars have reclaimed the word "fat" in much the same way as queers have reclaimed "queer" (Peters 2014, Pausé et al. 2014).

Pause et al. 2014 argue that fat bodies *are* queer, in that both fatness and queerness are constructed as abject and outside the normal, have been "medicalised, pathologised, and stigmatised" (3), have been the target of moral panics about their threat to social order, and because compulsory thinness and normative heterosexuality are mutually constitutive. In those fat fashion consumers who purposefully defy such stereotypes by writing "fatshion" blogs, holding community fashion events, and "cobbling together a look from the scattered resources available and becoming more brave about appearing in ways that defy the 'tasteful' intensions of the commodities of corpulence" (LeBesco 2004:73), Therefore, fat bodies, especially fashionable fat bodies, may disrupt norms about sexual(ized) bodies, beauty, and heterosexuality. However, while Pausé et al. (2014) analogize fatness to queerness and celebrate fat bodies' potential to "challenge and disrupt – that is to say, queer – the disciplinary power of normative categories" (5) such as thinness, it is unclear how this

process unfolds in the real world. This question in the literature makes space for my exploration in this project of the viability of visibility-based strategies for challenging systems of normalizing power through intentionally non-normative or abject forms of embodiment.

Beauty

In general, sociology lacks a systematic analysis of (facial) beauty as a vector of systemic discrimination, although theorists have long emphasized normative western beauty standards of bloneness, thinness, etc. Wolf (1991) theorizes beauty as a cultural “myth” deployed against women to prop up men’s dominance in society. According to Wolf, this myth has grown more prevalent in the United States as a reaction to women’s economic and social gains since the mid-twentieth century, though her argument is somewhat stymied by the fact that many women, such as poor women and women of color, have not had access to the same advances of middle-class white women and yet are disproportionately burdened by a beauty myth that privileges middle- and upper-class white standards of beauty (Collins 1990, Craig 2002). While some argue that beauty is a concept hardwired into our brains as a biological adaptation to maximize reproduction (Etkoff 1999), the social character of beauty is evident in shifting standards of beauty across time and space, as well as in the presence of beauty cultures among queer and trans people who, by and large, are not seeking partners with whom we can sexually reproduce. This project interrogates the social implications of beauty, particularly for women who purposefully configure feminine gender performances.

Femininity is intimately linked with standards of beauty. Women are expected to comport and dress themselves in the trappings of femininity (e.g., makeup, dresses and skirts or at least clothing that is clearly made for women, jewelry and accessories) and experience

social rewards for doing so (Kwan and Trautner 2009). *Beautiful* women who do these things receive social privileges to a greater degree than do average-looking or unattractive women. Kwan and Trautner (2009) write that beautiful women are perceived to be good, talented, smart, and happy, and are more likely to be hired and promoted in the workplace. Thus, one of the primary ways that femininities provide women with access to power and privilege is through physical beauty. For instance, scholars find that performances of femininities enable beauty pageant contestants to adopt a jet-setting, glamorous lifestyle (Balogun 2012) and physically attractive, feminine lesbians with high-status occupations to suffer less hostility and harassment in the workplace (Moore 2011). This phenomenon is raced as well as gendered: forms of symbolic capital such as beauty and femininity may be especially important for those who occupy marginalized social positions (Pascoe 2007, Goffman 1963). In other words, being physically attractive and conforming to gender expectations may position some women closer to cultural notions of the normal and thus, in closer proximity to social power of various types.

Beauty is also a kind of bodily capital (Hoang 2011, Kwan 2010) which women can trade for access to men's greater economic capital within a field of heterosexual marriage. Meyers (2002) observes, "For women, to know oneself is to know one's appearance and the worth of that appearance in the parallel economy of heterosexual partnership" (115). Of course, some performances of femininities, even by beautiful women, will not result in financial gain, especially those of black women, who are not often the recipients of white men's marriage proposals (Collins 1990) and queer femme women who partner with other women, who do not benefit from an economic system that privileges men (Moore 2011).

As women gain increasing access to economic and occupational opportunities apart

from their relationships with men, scholars argue images of female beauty have been deployed more strictly and heavily on women as a form of backlash to feminist advances (Wolf 1991). In this way, “visual appearances that conform to ideals and norms of beauty provide access to public life” (Howson 2013:129), such that to be ugly or, at the very least, not beautiful is to be subject to both overt and covert forms of discrimination.

Access to normative standards of beauty is distributed unequally in the United States; while beauty is famously difficult to analyze sociologically (Mears 2011), we do know that hegemonic feminine beauty undeniably privileges bloneness and whiteness (Wolf 1991). Because the standards for hegemonic femininity are racially coded as white, women of color cannot meet them (Collins 1990). The inability of black women to achieve normative standards of white female beauty leads to psychological distress, as well as embodied resistance practices, among some black women (Collins 1990). In a culture that most values women with flawless white skin, shiny blonde hair, symmetrical faces, and thin bodies outfitted in fashionable clothes, the highest levels of beauty are unachievable without money and time to dedicate to beauty work (Harris-Moore 2014). Race and class covary extensively, such that white women are more likely than women of color to have the means to achieve hegemonic femininity. An intersectional analysis of black women’s femininities thus understands black women as excluded from hegemonic femininity and its closer links to men’s power; however, this exclusion has created space for black women to create a self-imposed femininity “associated...with power, independence, and leadership” (Moore 2011:72) as opposed to frailness, daintiness, submission, dependence, and weakness. Black women’s self-definition in terms of gender and racial identities is an important component of their resistance to oppression (Collins 1990).

While black women are routinely excluded from the highest standards of beauty in the United States, other women of color can approximate some of these standards. Rhodes et al. 2005 find that computer-generated, mixed-race Caucasian and Japanese women's faces are rated more attractive than fully Caucasian or Japanese faces by both Caucasian and Japanese participants. Additionally, Latina women in the United States are often positioned in a sort of middle-ground between black and white women, particularly in Hollywood films (Ovalle 2011). Light-skinned Latinas in Hollywood are "mythologized as sexual and assertive" (2011:2), yet their non-blackness and proximity to white standards of beauty allow them to remain "accessible to white audiences" (2011:8). Mears (2011) similarly finds that high-end fashion models who are not white are most successful under the following circumstances: either they approximate whiteness (as in Ovalle's analysis of Hollywood Latinas), or they exemplify the "exotic ethnic look...[a] radical departure from the white frame" (2011:199). Mears gives South Sudanese supermodel Alek Wek as an example: Wek's very dark skin and shaved head are often fetishized or exoticized within fashion editorials. While her presence in fashion campaigns signals her status as a beautiful woman, her beauty is always cast through the lens of exotic otherness, a process which leaves the whiteness of beauty standards undisturbed. Furthermore, women are often held to a higher moral standard than men are (Espiritú 2001, Baumann 2008), and this raced and gendered moral double standard is visible within beauty culture. Baumann (2008) finds that the complexions of women models of all races tends to be lighter overall than for models who are men. Baumann links this gendered difference in "complexion ideals" to historical relationships between color and morality that associate whiteness with innocence and purity and darkness to villainy and danger. In these ways, we can see that although non-white women may be considered

beautiful, beauty as a cultural norm in the United States is still white.

Importantly, scholars must look to the ways non-cisgender femininities are constituted not only through gender but also through other axes of social difference. Reddy (2005) criticizes western scholars for misunderstanding the feminine gender performances of Indian hijras – “phenotypic men who wear female clothing and, ideally, renounce sexual desire and practice by undergoing a sacrificial...excision of the penis and testicles” (2) – as simply an exotic case of an eastern “third sex.” Reddy details the ways hijras’ perceptions of their own and others’ gender identities are formed through considerations of class, clothing, religion, and status. Reddy concludes that hijra femininities have the potential both to reinscribe Indian gender categories through their heavy use of cosmetics and beauty practices in a quest to look like cisgender women and to challenge these gender categories through their nonbinary gender identities and disruptive practices such as publicly lifting their saris to reveal their (castrated) genitals to onlookers. These examples show that not only is femininity gendered and racialized, but that racialized femininities hold significance for national identities, beyond the scope of what is commonly considered the realm of gender.

Thus, we can see in the literature that one of the most contentious debates within feminism is the question of femininity itself, especially feminine beauty (Loulan 1990, Wolf 1991, Collins 1990). Is beauty simply “the institutionalization of the male gaze” (Howson 2013:129)? Is beauty culture an avenue of empowerment for women and gender non-conforming people disadvantaged by a system of men’s dominance (Collins 1990)? Can the bounds of beauty be expanded such that all women might be considered beautiful, destroying the beauty myth’s stranglehold on women’s advancement in society (Wolf 1991)?

Or is “beauty” itself always already defined against “ugliness” (Ovalle, 2016, personal communication) and therefore, inherently regulatory?

Fashion

Blumer’s (1969) lament that sociologists view fashion as irrational and socially inconsequential still held in 2000, when Entwistle wrote that fashion is perceived within sociology as trivial, silly, feminine, and located within the arts and thus outside the purview of sociology. Even today, fashion remains a marginal area of study within sociology, despite the fact that social theorists have been theorizing fashion since at least 1899, when Veblen published *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In this iconic work Veblen argues that fashion is a function of class; with their excess money and avoidance of physical labor, the rich “conspicuously consume” fashions that would be impractical for the working class, who have less money and who must use their bodies for labor. Simmel (1957) also links fashion to class, detailing a trickle-down economy of fashion in which the upper classes choose a fashion, the working classes imitate it, the upper classes choose a new fashion so as to differentiate themselves from the working class, and the cycle continues. Importantly, Simmel begins to theorize the relationship between gender and fashion, arguing that women’s greater interest in fashion derives from women’s inability to achieve distinction in other, more public realms of society.

While Veblen’s (1899) and Simmel’s (1957) emphases on the intersections of fashion, class, and gender have formed the basis for much of today’s fashion research, their models have been critiqued as overly simplistic. Indeed, one major critique of the trickle-down theory of fashion is that many of today’s top fashions originated in working-class and poor

communities of color and have trickled upward into popular and high fashion (Crane 2000). Blumer (1969) argues that Simmel and others do not properly emphasize the role of modernity in fragmenting identities. Along with the economic and societal shifts of modernity comes a fragmentation of social roles and personal identities; according to Blumer's functionalist argument, fashion is a system of "collective selection," not class differentiation. In a fragmented modern society, fashion "provides a basis for a common approach to a world and for handling and digesting the experiences the world yields [and] should be recognized as a central mechanism in forming social order" (1969:290). Entwistle echoes Blumer when she argues that "the modern self is increasingly aware of itself, including its appearance, and able to intervene and act upon it" (2000:74). In this way, fashion in the context of modernity can be understood as serving a necessary function— the reorientation of the fragmented self toward a collective society.

A more critical perspective comes from Bourdieu (1984), who argues that taste, as "one obvious manifestation of the habitus" (Entwistle 2000:36), is a mechanism of not only class differentiation but class reproduction. Many class-based forms of fashion, such as uniforms, operate as a form of social control (Crane 2000) and unpaid labor, as workers are expected to orient their dress and discipline their bodies to an industry's, their employer's, or their own sense of how someone in their occupation should dress (Freeman 2000).

Fashion communicates messages about the wearer. There are many ways that women use clothing to signify sexual desire for other women (Morgan 1993), primarily through wearing masculine clothing as a "conscious statement of gay identity" (Blackman and Perry 1990:67). Even lesbians who prefer to dress in feminine fashions like dresses and high heels sometimes purposefully alter their gender performances to be more masculine, for example

wearing looser, more casual clothing, in order to communicate their lesbianness (Krakauer and Rose 2002, Blair and Hoskin 2014). While these women are often perceived as lesbians as a result of this aesthetic shift, their new, more “butch” fashion choices often feel inauthentic and uncomfortable (Blair and Hoskin 2014). Thus, while an androgynous or masculine wardrobe may communicate group membership to other lesbians, clothing such as baggy pants, tank tops, and sneakers may operate as a regulatory ideal through which lesbians, in their efforts to distance themselves from the male gaze, are subjected to another, specifically queer, oppression (Loulan 1990).

Not only does fashion communicate information about class, gender, and sexuality, but also about race and nationality. Clothing has the power to make or break ties with national identity: in the nineteenth century, as massive waves of immigrants arrived in the United States, these newcomers “divested themselves of their traditional clothing as soon as they arrived, using clothes as a means of discarding their previous identities and establishing new ones” (Crane 2000:5), and Runkle (2004) finds that many Indian beauty pageant contestants who had never before worn a sari nevertheless did so as a method of emphasizing their Indianness for the purposes of the pageant. Blackman and Perry (1990) argue that black lesbians’ distinctive style purposefully emphasizes both black and lesbian cultures as a personal and political statement. As a response to (primarily white) feminism’s privileging of androgynous fashions, some feminists in the 1990s began to argue for a reconceptualization of fashion as fun and empowering (Moore 2011, Ruggerone 2006, Blackman and Perry 1990). These examples illustrate that clothing may be deployed as a form of purposeful identity work in which the wearer communicates messages about race and belonging to others.

Whether identity work through fashion is intentional or not, “the artifice of dress serves as the outermost marker of identity” (Peters 2014). People expect others to dress as who they “really are,” with an understanding that certain types of clothing are appropriate only for certain genders, races, and other categories of people; those who do not follow this expectation are often punished socially and at work (Crane 2000) or ridiculed and labeled as “wannabes” (Wilkins 2008). Transgender and other gender nonconforming individuals who do not “pass” as cisgender are even subject to violence for violating dominant cultural norms about who can wear what (Schilt and Westbrook 2009); these norms are inextricably linked to an uncompromising binary understanding of male and female bodies and, by extension, male and female *selves*.

Liberation

I frame this research project within an ongoing debate among queer theorists and social scientists regarding the value of symbolic challenges to systems of power. In a rejection of what she calls Foucault’s “slave morality,” Butler (1993) is hopeful that various types of gender play, including “abject bodies,” butch-femme relationships, and drag performances, might be useful in the service of subverting normative gender and sexuality. According to Butler, power is omnipresent, constituted through every performative act, and works through “the production of an ‘outside,’” (1993:22), such that those bodies and subjects which fail to conform to normative standards are constructed as outside the normal. Because normative bodies are defined in opposition to abject bodies, implied by Butler to be trans and/or intersex, abject bodies haunt and threaten to destabilize the regime of normative embodiment. For Butler, such bodies are “an enabling disruption, the occasion

for a radical rearticulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all” (1993).

Scholars have, on the other hand, documented many empirical limitations to arguments about the radical subversive potential of nonnormative bodies and identities. West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that “insofar as a sex category is used as a fundamental criterion for differentiation, doing gender is unavoidable” (145). In their view, because *any* behavior or practice can be assessed for gender accountability through the lens of sex category, failing to “do gender appropriately” (146) puts us at risk of being called to account for our behavior but leaves the fundamental gender system intact. Pascoe (2007) and Bridges (2014) utilize empirical data to test Butler’s (1990, 1993) claims about the radical possibilities of gender parody and play. In her ethnography of adolescent masculinity in high school, Pascoe (2007) argues that while high schoolers engage in discursive practices that both denaturalize the link between sexed bodies and gender performances and renaturalize the relationship between masculinity and male bodies (Pascoe 2007). By theorizing the concept of “sexual aesthetics” as “cultural and stylistic distinctions used to delineate boundaries between gay and straight cultures and individuals,” Bridges (2014) illustrates how heterosexual men who identify aspects of themselves as “gay” retain heterosexual privileges by reinforcing the “otherness” of gay men (2014). Both authors conclude that in the absence of a politicized understanding of how gender and sexuality are linked to systems of inequality, seemingly progressive practices of gender play do not necessarily disrupt normative systems of gender and sexuality (Pascoe 2007, Bridges 2014).

With the exception of radical feminist theorists, who posit the elimination of gender as the *only* method of eradicating gender and sexual inequality (Rubin 1975, MacKinnon 2001,

Jeffreys 1996), most scholars seem to see at least some political potential in symbolic challenges to power. How do we then move from a symbolic to a material or structural change to society? Some feminists suggest that expanding the definition of the normal is a step toward reducing inequalities, as in Wolf's (1991) and Collins's (1990) arguments that expanding the definition of beauty beyond its current white, thin, middle-to-upper-class ideal paves the way for a reduction in the material harm women experience. However, since beauty cannot exist without its opposite, ugliness, it's unlikely that an expansion of the terms of beauty will meaningfully reduce the forms of sexism and racism that are predicated on valuing women's attractiveness. D'Emilio gives one possible example: in his discussion of non-normative family structures created by queer people, he advocates for the creation of programs that enable people to live outside the nuclear family, which, in his argument, is one of the primary ways capitalism exerts material control over individuals' affective lives (1992). D'Emilio's suggestion thus shows how the disruptive potential of non-binary sexual identities and relationship structures might expand beyond the individual, symbolic level to a more structural level.

Certainly, no single body, identity, practice, or political action is sufficient to transform the larger society. Butler (1990) argues that "power can be neither withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed" (124); the redeployment of power is thus not "a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure" (241). With this in mind, I present some conclusions and questions raised from this literature review that guided my research in this project. First, it is crucial to tease out the relationships between the social locations of actors, the configurations of identities and practices they perform, and the efficacy of those performances both in achieving their

own goals and in transforming material structures of inequality. Second, an intersectional focus on performances of gender and other identities is necessary to discern the meanings of symbolic challenges to power and to recognize that not all symbolic challenges are equally available or “doable” for all people (Wilkins 2008, Pascoe 2007). Third, a focus on the intentions of social actors is insufficient; in order to understand the capacity of those actors’ performances to materially change society, we must also consider how their performances are received and interpreted by others (Richardson 1996). Lastly, the question remains whether scholars *must* find a causal or reciprocal relationship between symbolic challenges to power and material changes in power structures for such symbolic challenges to be proclaimed meaningful.

CASE: Discourses of Drag and Gender among Drag Queens Who Are Not Cisgender Men

This dissertation is about how drag queens who are not cisgender men conceptualize drag and gender and defend their participation in drag culture on those bases. I remember the moment I learned that women could be drag queens³. Several years ago, I wrote a post on Facebook lamenting that I could never be a drag queen, given that I am not a man. An acquaintance of mine, a cis gay man, commented on the post that, in fact, women drag queens exist, and they are called “bioqueens.” I was floored by this knowledge but, given that I don’t particularly enjoy going out at night, I never parlayed it into an actual career in the local drag scene, most of which happens in late-night shows at queer bars. This new

³ At the time, I did not use the language of “cisgender” but that is definitely what I meant when I said “women” in this context. Now I understand that my original question reflected a total lack of knowledge that some drag queens are trans women, even though many people think of “drag queen” and “trans woman” as mutually exclusive.

knowledge of bioqueens continued to percolate in the back of my mind while I read for my comprehensive exam in sexualities. As many of the readings emphasized that the political potential of gendered performances lay in a mismatch between assigned sex at birth and expected gender performance (i.e., Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*, 1998), I began to wonder whether the liberatory political potential of "matched" sex-gender performances (i.e., women performing their expected gender – femininity) signified gender theorists' implicit understanding that such performances *have* no liberatory political potential. Thinking through this curious silence reminded me of that moment on Facebook when I learned that "bioqueens" existed: in that moment, I had not thought to question whether (cis women) bioqueens' drag performances were more or less radical than those of cis male drag queens. Now, through their constant focus on sex-gender mismatches, the feminist, queer, and sociological literatures were implying that the social and political meaning of "bioqueen drag" might be quite different from that of cis male drag queens, who have been the subjects of the vast majority of academic and pop-culture literature written about drag. This question motivated me to conduct my dissertation research on the femininity practices of "bioqueens."⁴

There is little sociological literature on bioqueens, except when they are conceptualized, by virtue of their cisgender female bodies, as variants of drag kings (Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro 2010, Shapiro 2007). Bioqueens' drag personas are unique because, as

⁴ More accurately, this question motivated me to conduct my dissertation research on the femininity practices of bioqueens, queer femmes, contemporary pinup girls, and burlesque performers, as designed in my successfully-defended dissertation proposal. However, as I began researching and talking to queens, I quickly realized that there was more than enough material and questions generated just with queens to fill out a dissertation and more. At this point, I decided to focus on queens only.

participants in this research told me again and again, drag is popularly understood to be predicated on a mismatch between one's "true" gender and one's on-stage gender (i.e., the idea that cisgender women perform as masculine drag kings while cisgender men perform as feminine drag queens). Flipping this dynamic, bioqueens' drag performances are more similar to those of male drag queens than they are to those of drag kings: they parody, embody, express, or otherwise perform femininity through the use of high-pitched voices, exaggerated body shaping, drag-style makeup, and frilly, sparkly, and otherwise ostentatious clothing⁵. In further support of analytically decoupling the performances of drag kings and bioqueens, Scheper (2007) argues that "queen has connotations of feminist camp as a riff on the male homosexual queen and drag queen and challenges their propriety claim on femme performance while also signaling the figure of the drag queen as a source of femme performance knowledge" (99). In this way, bioqueens' performances of hyperfemininity are much more closely aligned with the hyperfeminine performances of drag queens than with the masculine performances of drag kings, regardless of the fact that drag kings and bioqueens (usually) share the experience of being assigned female at birth (hereafter in this research, AFAB). At the outset of this research I understood bioqueens to be definitionally cisgender, i.e., I understood the term "bioqueen" to refer to a cisgender woman who performs feminine drag. Through the 52 interviews I conducted with 50 queens and queen-adjacent folk for this research, I've since come to realize that many people who include themselves under the banner of "bioqueen" are not cisgender women. While some

⁵ I am speaking in generalities here – as we will learn in this dissertation, there exists virtually no conceptual limit to what some drag performers will consider "drag," and thus any attempt to define it by its constituent parts is frustratingly futile.

participants in this research did indeed give me that definition when asked, in vernacular usage, “bioqueen” can refer to any gender of queen who is not a cisgender man (mainly cisgender women, but also trans women, trans men, and nonbinary folk)⁶.

Non-cis-male queens’ participation in drag culture is hotly debated, particularly among cisgender gay men who argue that, among other things, 1) bioqueens/women are culturally appropriating drag from gay men, 2) bioqueens do bad/boring drag because there is no real physical transformation “from” one sex-gender “to” another, 3) bioqueens/women are naturally feminine and thus have an advantage in queening, 4) bioqueens simply, definitionally speaking, are not drag queens at all, because drag queens are (cis) men, and 5) women, particularly straight women, are incompetent in matters of queer culture and thus do not belong in queer spaces like drag shows. While many cis male drag queens (hereafter *CMDQs*) bristle when non-cis-male queens perform drag at all, some folk in the drag scene are okay with non-cis-male queens as long as they don’t call themselves drag queens. However, most non-cis-male queens take umbrage at the idea that they should be called anything other than “drag queen,” theorizing that such a linguistic differentiation from drag queens is borne of a sexist devaluation of non-cis-male drag queens and AFABs and women more generally. This argument is reminiscent of the debate over the terminology of “marriage” versus “civil union” or “domestic partnership” prior to the nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States in 2015. I noted 23 terms participants used to describe non-cis-male performers during interviews for this project⁷:

⁶ Other terms – the most popular of which are faux queen, hyperqueen, and femme queen – are primarily critiqued on the basis that they differentiate drag performers on the basis of sex-gender.

⁷ These are listed in order of frequency coded for “bioqueen term” or “drag queen term”, however this does not represent the frequency with which any particular term was used in conversation. When

- | | | |
|----------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Bioqueen | | |
| 2. Drag queen | 10. Female drag | 18. Femme |
| 3. Faux queen | performer | performer |
| 4. Hyperqueen | 11. Queen | 19. Drag diva |
| 5. Femme queen | 12. Ladyqueen | 20. Female performer |
| 6. Drag artist | 13. AFAB queen | 21. Femme fatale |
| 7. Diva | 14. Drag performer | 22. Femme |
| 8. Cis queen | 15. Drag entertainer | entertainer |
| 9. Female drag | 16. Club kid | 23. Female performer |
| queen | 17. Drag queer | |

For more on the terminology of “bioqueen,” please refer to Appendix A. For more on CMDQs’ and participants’ debates regarding who can and should do drag, and why, please refer to Appendix B.

Both “drag queen” and “bioqueen” function as *boundary objects* online (mainly as hashtags) and offline (mainly in the ways queens described themselves and others). Though a boundary object may carry various meanings in different social worlds or to various individuals, its “structure is common enough to more than one world to make [it] recognizable, a means of translation” (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 393). As I have theorized, well-known identity terms like “lesbian” gain currency as labels which approximate, but do not fully encompass, the meaning the person using them intends to convey (Herrera 2018).

I coded something “term” (i.e., code “bioqueen term” rather than code “bioqueen”) it either meant a) the term itself was being discussed, b) the term was used in an interesting or definitional way, or c) I found a term in itself notable when it was mentioned.

As boundary objects (Star and Griesemer 1989), then, the understood meaning of such terms is close enough to what the user means and is comprehensible enough to the other(s) in the interaction that social interaction is able to proceed because the definition of the situation (Goffman 1959) remains coherent enough. The downside to this is that people who would rather not self-identify, or who would rather use a less-well-known term, feel “boxed in” to using the terms with greatest currency to facilitate easier social interaction and to be maximally intelligible to others. Thus, the use of such terms as “lesbian” can feel both constraining and legitimizing to people whom we might understand as lesbian-adjacent. In the context of this project, then, drag queen operates as a boundary object when queens’ interactional partners know what a drag queen is, but have never heard of a “bioqueen” (or other term for a non-cis-male performer). In the form of a hashtag, #dragqueen operates as a boundary object for queens who seek to gain followers and/or likes, comments, and attention for their photos. Because few people are aware that “bioqueens” exist, participants worry that if they only use the terms that are more frequently afforded them offline, e.g., bioqueen, faux queen, hyperqueen, femme queen (i.e., anything but drag queen), many fewer people will encounter their photos on Instagram.

All of these swirling debates around who can and should participate in drag came to a head on March 3, 2018 (during the middle of my data collection and scheduled interviews) when *The Guardian* published an interview with RuPaul, “The Most Famous Drag Queen in the World,” in which RuPaul said she would not allow a cisgender woman to participate in her reality show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*⁸, because “Drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of

⁸ *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is a reality drag-competition that began airing on a gay TV channel, Logo, in 2009 and moved to a more mainstream pop culture channel, VH1, in 2017. Each season features a

irony once it's not men doing it, because at its core it's a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture. So for men to do it, it's really punk rock, because it's a real rejection of masculinity.” Such intense controversy arose from this interview and various queens’ responses to it that I collected additional data about the controversy itself and will discuss the mainstreaming of drag – or at least, one particular type of drag – on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in chapter three of this dissertation as part of a broader consideration of the politics of feminine embodiment.

METHOD

This dissertation research involved a combination of ethnographic fieldwork – including participant observation at drag shows, fieldnotes, and in-depth semi-structured interviews – as well as content analysis of online images, social media posts, comments, and newspaper articles. Because non-cis-male queens are widely dispersed geographically, I did not narrow this project to any particular region, so most interviews took place via Skype or telephone, with a few happening face-to-face in Eugene, Oregon. I found interview participants by searching drag-related hashtags on Instagram used frequently by non-cis-male queens, taking screenshots of the 9 most recently posted photographs on that page, and sending private messages to the user who posted the most recent photograph on each hashtag page. I began by first searching hashtags I knew about prior to data collection or could guess would be popular, i.e., #bioqueen and #femaledragqueen. This method resulted in me collecting 919 images off 9 hashtags, which I will not list here, because the number of

cast of drag queens who are eliminated through drag-related challenges one by one until a final winner is crowned “America’s Next Drag Superstar.”

posts on some of them is so small that revealing them could break the confidentiality of some of my participants who use those hashtags.

I conducted a total of 52 interviews ranging from 49-175 minutes (averaging 81 minutes), for a total of 4228 minutes (approximately 70 hours) of interviews. I also analyzed 919 images collected from drag-related hashtags on Instagram and 76 Facebook comments on a public post I was directed to look at by a participant for more insight on “the bioqueen debate.” After RuPaul’s controversial interview came out in *The Guardian*, I coded that interview along with 3 follow-up articles in *The Guardian* and other news outlets as well as a total of 505 comments on those 4 articles. Finally, I analyzed Twitter users’ replies to 6 tweets RuPaul posted during the firestorm with the help of my techy cousin Justin Hutchens, who ran a program that collected every 20th tweet-reply for a total of 206 tweets.

I recorded and transcribed all interviews myself and coded the transcripts, along with all other collected data, using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. I first coded all data line-by-line; this produced 1576 separate codes, which I then whittled to 64 codes by combining similar themes. I then recoded all 52 interviews and other data with these 64 codes, adding new codes to my code list as they emerged through my second round of coding. This process resulted in a final tally of 91 codes which I grouped into 11 primary emergent themes in the data:

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------|------------------|
| 1. Community and
the Self | 3. Drag | 7. Miscellaneous |
| 2. Demographic
Information | 4. Embodiment | 8. Politics |
| | 5. Emotions | 9. Sexuality |
| | 6. Gender | 10. Spaces |

11. Trauma

Several of these themes became primary chapter topics for this dissertation, and all of them appear in some form in this report of my research.

Participant Demographics

I interviewed 50 total participants in 52 separate interviews (two participants were interviewed twice). Participants ranged in age from 17-44, with an average age of 26. All participants except two resided in the United States (exceptions: two participants from the large, western, primarily-English-speaking cities of London and Toronto). 4 participants were AMAB, 46 were AFAB. The other salient demographic characteristics for this research emerged as gender, sexual identity, and race – please note that for all of these characteristics, participants could (and many did) choose more than one option, so totals will not add up to 50.

Although my sample is quite cisgender-leaning at 67% cis women, it probably represents the gender breakdown of bioqueens fairly well, and definitely has a lower proportion of cisgender participants than most gender research in sociology. There were 5 straight-identifying participants in the study, which reflects the overwhelming but not universal majority of queer people in the drag scene. The racial makeup of my sample is concerning, with 72.5% of participants identifying as white. While my insider knowledge and observation of non-cis-male queens in the drag scene and on Instagram would lead me to conclude that most non-cis-male queens are indeed white, this does not mean the racial makeup of my sample is absolved of its whiteness. Rather, because of the white-leaning demographics of

this dissertation research, I have understood it both as an ethical and analytical imperative to think through the ways white supremacy and racism appeared as themes in the data as well as in my and participants’ strategies for achieving liberation from normalizing power. In other words, I have sought to make race a “nuclear frame” (Ovalle, 2015, Ethnic Studies panel discussion) through which I adjudicate the claims made by participants and myself with regard to the political potentialities of *femme* and *alien femininities* in this project.

Gender		Sexuality		Race	
Category	Number of Participants	Category	Number of Participants	Category	Number of Participants
Cisgender woman	34 (67%)	Queer	28	White	37 (72.5%)
Femme	26	Bisexual	15	Black	4
Nonbinary	10	Pansexual	12	Latina	3
Genderfluid	7	Lesbian	8	Latina, white	2
Gender non-conforming	7	Gay	7	Black, white	2
Genderqueer	6	Straight	5 (9.8%)	Filipina, white	1
Transgender	4	Asexual	4	South Asian, white	1
fTransgender woman	2	Polyamorous	2	Native American, Japanese, white	1
Agender	2	Bi-straight	1	Asian American	1
Hijra	1	Refused label	1		
Androgynous	1				
Cisgender man	1				
Notes:		Notes:		Notes:	

Table 1. Gender, Sexuality, and Race of Participants

Notes on Language and Form in the Dissertation

This dissertation research began with an ontological question: what are the political potentialities of femininities to effect changes in macro systems of inequality? As I began collecting data, however, a more epistemological focus emerged: what do non-cis-male

queens *think* are the political potentialities of femininities to effect changes in macro systems of inequality? As a reflection of this shift, which occurred organically as participants and I discussed such themes in our semi-structured interviews, I have elected to make some methodological choices:

- I have many long quotes in this dissertation – longer than most sociologists would usually include. This choice reflects my growing interdisciplinary and political engagement with black (queer) feminist theories that emphasize lay people (particularly those with experiences of marginalization, particularly black women) as producers of knowledge and social theorists in their own right. Thus, I am reticent to overanalyze quotes, and would prefer to let the quotes speak for themselves, and add my interpretations of the quotes afterward. These quotes often end with me rephrasing what a participant has said, in order to “try out” my interpretation with participants, i.e., my co-social-theorists, and the participant giving their approval of my interpretation. I have only included quotes in which I perceived the participant to be in strong, clear agreement with my interpretation, based on their phrasing and/or the inflection of their voice. (See E. Patrick Johnson’s *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.* for a further explanation of the choice to keep very long quotes intact, 2018).
- For the same reason, I frequently use the language of “theorizing” and “co-theorizing” where most sociologists might use “analyzing.” This is a nod to black feminist understandings of subjugated people – black women in particular – as social theorists (see Patricia Hill Collins’s 1990 explanation of *Black Feminist Thought*.)

- While the analytic separation (or not) of sex, gender, and sexuality remain contested in theories of each (see Rubin 1975, Lorber 1989), I do not adjudicate in great detail the distinctions between sex, gender, and sexuality, because participants often discussed them as conflated phenomena and because this conflation itself is central to their and CMDQs’ discourses of drag. In other words, where I use the term “sex-gender-sexuality,” for instance, it is because the conflation of sex-gender-sexuality renders the amalgam sex-gender-sexuality the actual analytic unit that is important in that sentence.
- I use the contemporary queer slang “folx” to describe groups of marginalized people. A definition posted by username Fxnd on Urban Dictionary (a popular website which features user-submitted definitions of slang terms) is instructive here. The accuracy (or lack thereof) of the post is less important than the fact that it encapsulates a common vernacular usage of the term “folx”:

folx

An alternate spelling of the noun "folks," first used in 2001 and popularized by tumblr in 2016. Mainstream and academic use is growing after adoption of the term by LGBTQ+ people, especially LGBTQ+ persons of color.

Use of the "X" emphasizes the existence of [binary gender](#) systems (especially in indigenous communities) and suggests support of and [solidarity](#) with people who are oppressed and/or [marginalized](#).

[Increasing protection](#) for the most [vulnerable](#) folx in our society increases protection for us all.

[#lgbtq](#) [#poc](#) [#feminisim](#) [#trans](#) [#inclusive](#) [#diversity](#) [#gender](#) [#gender-neutral](#) [#indigenous](#) [#martinalized](#)

by [fxnd](#) April 25, 2019

Figure 1. *Folx* on Urban Dictionary

- Throughout this dissertation I use she/her pronouns for all queens except where another pronoun is explicitly necessitated (i.e., if a participant uses they/them, or if I

am talking about someone who uses he/him). In the case of a generic pronoun to refer to any queen (as in the sentence connected to this footnote), I will use “she,” following the queer cultural practice of referring to Drag Queens as “she,” especially while they are in drag but frequently when they are out of drag as well. This is a different approach than another one I considered, which was to use “they” as the generic pronoun for this dissertation, out of a political desire to normalize extrabinary genders. However, I felt that the cultural associations between femininity and she/her pronouns combined with the queernormative practice of she-ing drag queens made the generic use of she/her pronouns a better choice for this dissertation.

- I use the language of “we” when I myself am a member of that group (i.e., queer femmes) and “they” when I am not. This is a nod to reflexive methodologies which understand the self as always implicated in research and do not pretend to deny the relevance of one’s own subjectivity to one’s research. Some social scientists might express concern that because I am queer and femme, I cannot offer ‘objective’ conclusions about the femininity practices of queer femmes. Against this concern I offer the now well-established argument that objectivity in research is not only impossible but also unnecessary for the production of knowledge (Collins 1990, Boellstorff et al. 2012). While my personal experience as a queer femme piqued my interest in this research topic in the first place, it cannot substitute for the rigorous and “careful research design, intensive data collection, and extended data analysis” (Boellstorff et al. 2012) that have characterized this ethnographic dissertation. For more on my positionality please see Appendix C.

II. CHAPTER ONE: WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT DRAG

I. **“That Old Creeper Dude with a Dress”:** What Drag is *Not*

- a. Mainstream Foil 1: Straight Folks
- b. Mainstream Foil 2: Gay Folx
- c. Mainstream Foil 3: Radical Feminists

II. **“It’s Kind of a Moving Target”:** Drag as **“Hard to Pin Down”**

- a. Drag as a Moving Target: Context-Dependence (Queer Bars | Instagram)
- b. Drag as a Moving Target: Many Types of Drag
 - i. Types of Drag: Group 1, Intelligible Queens*
 - ii. Types of Drag: Group 2, Campy Queens*
 - iii. Types of Drag: Group 3, Alternative Queens*

III. **“Paint for the Back Row”:** The Drag Queen Look as the Staged Exaggeration of Quotidian Womanhood

- a. The Drag Queen Look
- b. Sex-Gendered Double Standards for Cultural Legitimation as a Drag Queen

IV. **“I’ve Belonged Here Since the Beginning”:** Drag as a Multi-Gender Queer Culture

- a. Participants define drag as a multi-gender queer culture based on the staged exaggeration of quotidian gender.

CHAPTER ONE: WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT DRAG

We’re all born naked and the rest is drag.

-RuPaul, “The World’s Most Famous Drag Queen”

A couple of people in the community started to tell me, “Hey, you should probably try this drag thing.” I was like, “Oh whatever,” because I thought that it was just pageant-y kind of female impersonation drag. I’ll give you a definition: I think that the difference between generic, regular, historical drag and the alternative drag that’s happening now is that there’s a difference between female impersonation and art through gender.

-Franki (20, white, queer, femme, nonbinary, agender, Texas)

“What is drag?” is one of those questions that seems simple until you try to answer it. Participants in this study struggled mightily to define drag and even sometimes told me it can be “anything.” While the idea of drag being limitless in this way is intriguing on a theoretical level, there remains the problem of how to know what we are even talking about when we talk about drag. I will interrogate the discourses swirling around non-cis-male queens’ contested participation in drag culture, with the primary goal of understanding how “drag queen” and “drag” are conceptualized by various queer constituencies to different ends. Stated in plain terms: these controversies attempt to adjudicate to whom drag belongs, and why. Thus, sociologists who seek to understand how, why, and with what results (sub)cultural boundaries are drawn must interrogate the discourses that produce such boundaries.

In this chapter, I argue that Drag Queen⁹ is its own temporarily embodied gender category within the drag scene (see Rupp and Taylor 2003). Drag queens of all assigned

⁹ Where the term Drag Queen is capitalized, I am referring to the queer gender category of Drag Queen. Where it is not capitalized (i.e., drag queen) I am referring to a person who is a drag queen.

sexes, genders, and sexual identities are held accountable to situated intracultural norms and expectations vis-à-vis the forms of embodiment, behavior, and aesthetics considered appropriate for Drag Queens (see West and Zimmerman 1987), though importantly these standards differ based on an individual's presumed sex category, gender, and sexual identity.¹⁰ Consequently, many of these non-cis-male queens go “above and beyond” in their drag looks to preempt critiques that they, by virtue of “already” being women/AFAB, cannot do “good” drag. I argue that Drag Queen, therefore, is a moving target – a *boundary object* (Star and Griesemer 1989) whose definition is somewhat flexible, but not flexible enough to contain all of its competing definitions and therefore not plastic enough to prevent sometimes-significant ruptures to queer social interaction. These interactional rupture points manifest as queer cultural debates regarding who can and should be drag queens on the basis of the sex-gender-sexual identities of the performer in question. My analysis of these conflicting discourses reveals that conflicting definitions of Drag (Queen) are deployed by drag queens of various sex-gender-sexualities to regulate claims to queer cultural membership and, consequently, access to queer spaces. I find that participants rebut these critiques through defining *drag* writ large as a *multi-gender queer culture that is based on the staged exaggeration of quotidian gender*. I advance quotidian gender as a complementary concept and foil to staged gender. Both quotidian and staged gender are “performed”: quotidian gender is “performed” in the Goffmanian dramaturgical sense that individuals are always performing in interaction (i.e., in everyday, *quotidian*, life) while *drag* is more self-consciously

¹⁰ This is important because in West and Zimmerman's original 1987 formulation of “Doing Gender” it is basically impossible for members of different sex categories to attempt to accomplish the same gender, i.e., their claim that a woman may be perceived as unfeminine but not unfemale. This is one way my argument adds to the literature on gender in interaction.

“performed” (i.e., as performance art and entertainment) on the drag stage. This reframing of drag as the staged exaggeration of quotidian gender allows participants in this project to justify their participation in drag as non-cis-male queens. Importantly, all of these discourses are somewhat internally inconsistent and contain points of logical rupture where they can be challenged and renegotiated.

Although the queens I spoke with struggled to articulate “drag” in affirmative terms, participants did define it against three *mainstream foil definitions* of Drag Queen, espoused by cisgender straight (“cishet¹¹”) people, cisgender gay men, and radical¹² feminists respectively, all of which conceptualize a Drag Queen as “a man dressing up as a woman” but, importantly, provide differing interpretations of this cross-gender performance. Against the three foils’ prescriptive definition of Drag Queen, participants argued drag cannot be pinned down to any one definition, location, or aesthetic, and accordingly described to me many types of drag queen styles. I sorted the types of Drag Queen participants mentioned into three groups: 1) most intelligible to mainstream audiences, 2) campy queens, and 3) alternative queens. Despite this wide variety of drag queen styles, a subculturally legible “Drag Queen look” does exist. The successful achievement of *the Drag Queen look* is central to the intracultural legitimation of any performer as a “real” or “good” queen but becomes

¹¹ Cishet is shorthand for “cisgender heterosexual” and is often used by queer people to insult straight people.

¹² Participants in this research use the term “radical feminist” in a contemporary vernacular way to refer to “trans-exclusionary radical feminists” or TERFs, a branch of feminists which conceptualize trans women’s gender as an extension of male dominance and whose ideology does not altogether correspond to academic understandings of the genealogy of “radical feminism.” Some elements of TERFy feminism are closer to academic conceptualizations of “cultural feminism.” For the rest of the dissertation, when I refer to “radical feminists” I will be referring to the anti-drag, anti-trans branch of feminists participants colloquially refer to as “radical feminists.”

particularly salient in the case of women and AFAB performers who are frequently held accountable to a higher aesthetic standard before being granted the subcultural status of “real” Drag Queen. Because queer cultural discourses of drag frequently involve a discussion of gender as a constitutive element of drag, in chapter two, I will parlay participants’ understandings of what *drag* is into a discussion of how participants theorized what *gender* is. “That old creeper dude with a dress”¹³: What Drag Is *Not*

During the research for this project, I repeatedly encountered conflicting discourses of what drag *is* that generated controversies that frustrated me as a researcher seeking to understand them because they seemed to talk past one another rather than operating on the same set of shared terms of engagement, invoking different claims regarding the history and definition of drag as well as constructing different groups as the architects, practitioners, and intended beneficiaries of drag. Participants were unable to coherently answer “what is a drag queen,” but the idea that there are debates over what one is means it is a *boundary object* with some sort of operational definition in the drag scene. I argue that in queer spaces, Drag Queen is its own gender (Rupp and Taylor 2003), subject to the same processes of accountability as quotidian gender in the broader world. As Meadow (2018) theorizes, “To *be a gender*, in a social sense, is to incorporate a self-understanding, along with the recognition of that understanding, into the space of interaction, and then to appeal to the forms of institutional validation that scaffold and organize collective life” (218, emphasis in original). In the drag scene, validation that one *is a Drag Queen* manifests in the form of social

¹³ Quote from Aaron, a 24-year-old “mixed black and white” cisgender gay man in Colorado who volunteers as a club promoter for drag shows that include “faux queens,” the term for non-cis-male queens most frequently used in his community. He was explaining what mainstream (straight) audiences think of Drag Queens.

acceptance, access to queer spaces, and bookings in drag shows (ideally, paid bookings), all of which are unevenly distributed according to intracultural inequalities based on sex-gender-sexuality that privilege cisgender male drag queens (CMDQs).

In our in-depth interviews, rather than affirmatively defining drag as such, participants arrived at their definitions of drag primarily through (implicitly) defining drag in the negative, as *not* something else. Often this took the form of a participant queen telling me about criticisms she'd heard about her participation in drag culture, identifying perceived logical errors or political flaws in those criticisms, and rebutting them in such a way as to reveal the contours of her own working theory of what drag is. Three “foil¹⁴ definitions” emerged in conversations with participants about *other people's* understandings of drag: 1) what I am calling a “mainstream straight” definition of drag, which is that drag is the comedic and entertaining, yet somewhat freakish, practice of a likely troubled gay man dressing up as a woman; 2) a “mainstream gay” definition of drag as a comedic and entertaining challenge to restrictive gender (especially normative masculinity) that entails a cisgender gay man dressing up as a woman; and 3) a radical¹⁵ feminist, often TERFy, understanding of drag as the inherently misogynistic and offensive practice of a man dressing up as a woman. Fascinatingly, each of these foils basically defines drag in the same way – as a practice of cross-gender performance (i.e., “crossdressing”) in which a man

¹⁴ “Foil” being used in the literary criticism sense, as in “opposite” or as in “the straw argument against which to construct one’s own argument.” Importantly, for the most part, my research cannot show these actual arguments being made in the real world. I am only able to see how these arguments sometimes happen online (though I am unable to confirm the demographic characteristics of the folk making them) and, most plainly, how these arguments are received, interpreted, rebutted, and challenged by the participant queens in this study.

¹⁵ “Radical” used here in the colloquial way, referencing participants’ vernacular use of “radical feminism” as a term to describe feminists who are transphobic and/or femmephobic

dresses as a woman. Where these foils depart from one another is in their interpretations of the value, meaning, and (political) import of this practice. Each of these foils as written up in this project should be understood to represent an “ideal type” à la Max Weber – in other words, I present these foils here as they were presented to me by queens during interviews, not as ontological realities. Accordingly, they should be understood to be part of these queens’ definition of the situation (Goffman 1959), because even though the queens I spoke with do not understand drag in the ways these foils do, queens do use their own interpretation and construction of these foils in their own discourses to justify and defend their own participation in drag culture.

	Foil 1: Mainstream Straight	Foil 2: Mainstream Gay	Foil 3: Radical Feminist
What is drag?	Crossdressing: a [gay, cis] man dressing up as a woman for the purposes of entertainment	Crossdressing: a [gay, cis] man dressing up as a woman for the purposes of entertainment	Crossdressing: a [gay, cis] man dressing up as a woman for the purposes of entertainment
Gender ideology	Cisnormative, binary	Cisnormative, binary	Cisnormative, binary
Value judgment applied to drag:	Comedic, freakish, seedy	Comedic, liberatory	Offensive, misogynistic, analogous to blackface

Table 2. Foils

What Drag is *Not*: Foil 1, Straight Folks

Firstly, the participants in this research perceived straight audiences to understand drag as *the comedic and entertaining, yet somewhat freakish, practice of a likely troubled gay man dressing up as a woman*. Many participants cited *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as *the* primary reason straight audiences are becoming more familiar with the traditionally queer cultural practice of drag.

Janet is a 30-year-old white bisexual and polyamorous cisgender woman queen in the Pacific Northwest who explained this to me:

Andrea: Why do you think that RuPaul's Drag Race is so popular, while we're on the subject?

Janet: Um, well for the LGBTQ community, it's kind of like an achievement. We made it to prime-time television...But I think for everyone else who doesn't quite know what [drag] is, I think it's a way for them to privately look into this thing that they view as weird and abnormal. I mean, it's kind of like this, you know, "Oh my gosh, I get to watch men turn themselves into women in the privacy of my own home and (laughs) not have anyone judge me."

Andrea: Right, yeah, so it's almost like a spectacle without people having to actually go to a drag show.

Janet: Yeah, mmmm, they can go to a drag show in the privacy of their own home.

Janet's comments illustrate many queens' understanding that straight people tend to make negative value judgments of drag as "weird" and "abnormal" which would make them reluctant to engage with queer culture in physical space, making *RuPaul's Drag Race* a window into an abject world they may never have had access to before. The question of what effects this increased but limited visibility for drag might have on the future of drag, queer culture, and systems of inequality will be further explored later in the dissertation. *RuPaul's Drag Race* has long suffered criticisms that it features only a narrow segment of drag – mostly performers who are more-or-less female impersonators, like RuPaul herself. Diana, a 26-year-old black lesbian cisgender woman queen in Colorado, explained that even as the show has begun to include a wider range of drag aesthetics, this aesthetic expansion does not necessarily correlate with an expansion in straight audiences' perceptions of what drag is and can be:

Diana: They [straight people who watch Drag Race] are gonna get like - Sasha Velour, who just won, they're gonna get their artsy queens, and you know the

sickening queens and all that, but they're not gonna see a drag king. Ru's already said he's not gonna do it. They're not gonna do a femme queen ... So yes they are being exposed to drag but on the other end they're being exposed to a limited side of drag. Extremely limited. (laughs) When the definition of drag is pretty much "man to woman transformation," and when you have someone like my friend Heavy Cream [who] is actually a bearded queen. And when you're doing drag and you have a full beard and hairy arms and a hairy chest, people are gonna be like "What the hell is he doing?" I think it's beautiful. He puts colored dye [on his beard] and goes out there and is painted like a full drag queen, he just looks amazing and does what he does, but I think a regular audience wouldn't (pause) get it. People would be like, "What the hell is this?"

Andrea: So there's something that's like, easily understandable about the drag that we see on Drag Race, that it's a man to a woman, people get that. But there's so much to drag than that and that for you is still not mainstream.

Diana: Right, yeah, exactly.

Straight audiences' perceptions of drag are not value-neutral, as Diana hinted by characterizing their response to Heavy Cream as "What the hell is this?" While "cross-dressing" is often viewed as humorous and ridiculous, hence its entertainment value, drag as a practice and culture is often viewed in an even more negative light, as seedy, underground, and/or otherwise repugnant. Participants in this study largely theorized these negative perceptions as manifestations of the stigma attached to abject sex-gender, and, aesthetic restrictions more broadly, in a (hetero)normative society. 12 participants mentioned this theme, including Alisha, a 24-year-old¹⁶ "white-passing" desi and white queer genderqueer trans woman drag performer in the Pacific Northwest who is Janet's drag mother. Alisha was one of several queens to complain that mainstream straight audiences do not understand the full complexity of drag, and further that these misunderstandings are harmful because

¹⁶ The fact that Alisha (24) is 6 years younger than her drag daughter Janet (30) is one fun and interesting indication of the ways drag houses refashion normative ideas of "family" for queer purposes

they reflect and reinforce cisnormativity and transphobia in society. Alisha does not seek to “pass” as a cis woman in her everyday life and performs a “genderfuck” type of drag that seeks to explode audiences’ ideas of binary gender, so her feminine embodiment and drag are often criticized for not meeting mainstream audiences’ expectations for what “good” drag is:

Andrea: So you had said that sometimes you feel like you might not be meeting certain standards that people expect of a Drag Queen, um, and could you say a little bit more about that?

Alisha: Sure, so, there’s certain aesthetics and traditions that are often associated with drag. People often look at drag as just the, like, hyper-femme campy thing, like, you traditionally saw in the mainstream of what was visible in drag. You know, they’re thinking like, big hair, pads, super feminizing things, high heels, extreme makeup aesthetics and stuff like that, and I think that there’s an expectation for how your body’s supposed to look, that you’re supposed to look totally femme, that you’re trying to pass as a cis woman, and [begins to speak very slowly with long pauses] I think that that (pause) idea is (pause)- [resumes normal speech pattern] You know, some people do drag that way, and that is real. It’s probably the most visible kind of drag. However, it’s definitely not the end of the conversation and it was never the beginning of that conversation – you know what I mean? Because drag is more about pause being like, being something, it’s not necessarily about just being a woman... drag performers have always performed, competed, and presented in a myriad of gendered ways. ... But unfortunately most people’s perception of drag is that you are some tall glamazonian man in a dress and that’s really harmful to a lot of drag performers who don’t fit that mold because it becomes extremely difficult to become successful in this industry where there is a huge perception of what you need to be and look like and do, and there’s often pressure to learn how to do drag in a certain way, in a certain kind of formula, and the formula just doesn’t fit for everybody that does drag, and I think that that’s really difficult, especially as a transgender woman.

Alisha argues that subcultural standards of drag reproduce transphobia through privileging cis men and cis-passing performers, rendering nonnormative feminine embodiment unintelligible to mainstream audiences. Aaron is a 24-year-old “mixed black and white” cisgender gay man in Colorado who volunteers as a club promoter for drag shows that include “faux queens,” the term for non-cis-male queens most frequently used in his

community. Here he illustrates the mutual construction of (hetero)normative sex-gender and sexuality through identifying straight audiences' (mis)perception of "cross-dressing" (a non-normative gender behavior) as a creepy "fetish" (a non-normative sexual desire):

Andrea: And what is it about drag that makes some people uncomfortable? Like why?

Aaron: Um, I think it's the fact that they're men – um – men in women's clothing. Cuz if you close your eyes – or if you had people close their eyes and I said "men in women's clothing" they would think like, that old creeper dude with the dress.

Andrea: Right.

Aaron: With no makeup or anything. And I think that's what they get the idea of, or they think it's some kind of fetish. I've heard that a lot too.

One story from a queen in this study illustrates Aaron's point that mainstream straight people tend to perceive drag as negatively associated with stigmatized forms of sexuality: Fannie is a 24-year-old white bisexual cisgender woman queen who works as a schoolteacher in Texas whose middle-school students found her drag Instagram and mistook her for a stripper. She had gone to great lengths to make sure no one at her school could find the account, based on her fear that straight administrators, students, and/or their parents would be unfamiliar with drag and perceive her drag performances as vulgar and/or sexually inappropriate, especially for a schoolteacher. Her students did indeed find the account, and she ended up finding herself having to explain to her principal, her students, and their parents that although videos on her Instagram account included recordings of her accepting dollar tips onstage during sexually-inflected performances, she is "not a stripper."

Fannie: Everybody thinks that drag is obscene and vulgar. ... And it's just, I dunno, um, I think some of the misconceptions are true (pause) but that's not a bad thing, you know?

Andrea: Right, so maybe [drag] is obscene and vulgar sometimes but that doesn't have to be a negative thing?

Fannie: Right, or that it's only men or that you have to be gay. ... I know that some people think that every drag queen is transitioning, and that's not true. ... Um, that every drag queen has problems and they're just trying to cope with problems, you know, like, it's not necessarily that. Not everybody comes from like, a broken family or anything. You know, some do [and] some don't.

Here Fannie linked several forms of deviance together in her description of the mainstream straight foil definition of drag: “transitioning” (read: being trans), “problems” (read: mental health or substance abuse issues, which other participants also mentioned as common misconceptions held by straight people), coming from a “broken family” (read: lacking the social status of belonging to a heteronormative nuclear family). She listed these alongside another common grievance the queens in this study had with all three mainstream foil definitions of drag, namely that “it’s only men” and that “you have to be gay,” thus making discursive room for her own and other non-cis-male queens’ successful accomplishment of the specifically queer gender Drag Queen. Importantly, Fannie’s quote, in combination with the various types of stigma described by non-cis-male queens in this study, suggests that the types of stigmatized sexuality experienced by cis male queens (as found by Berkowitz and Belgrave 2010), e.g., being seen as a creepy fetishist, differs from the types of stigmatized sexuality experienced by the overwhelmingly AFAB, women, femme, and/or nonbinary queens in this study, e.g. objectification and being misperceived as exotic dancers. Here again we see the ways drag queening is experienced differently according to various axes of identity and inequality.

What Drag is *Not*: Mainstream Foil 2, Gay Folx

Secondly, the queens I spoke with believed that for most gay audiences, drag is conceptualized as a *comedic and entertaining challenge to oppressive gender (especially normative masculinity) which entails a cisgender gay man dressing up as a woman*. Importantly, the definition of Drag (Queen) here is not different than the one mainstream straight audiences espouse, but the value judgments are quite different. Whereas straight audiences understand “cross-dressing” to be freakish and deviant, mainstream gay audiences, according to many participants in this study, understand “cross-dressing” in a more positive light. While many participants in this study believed that drag performed by cis male drag queens (CMDQs) is a liberatory act against normative gender, a crucial difference between participants’ and CMDQs’ discourses is that while most participants believe CMDQs’ cross-gender drag performances are *one* form of liberatory practice through drag *among many possible ones*, (some) CMDQs – including, most famously, RuPaul – believe drag *can only be* liberatory when it’s being done by a man.

As recently as March 2018, during the middle of my data collection for this project, RuPaul caused a major ruckus in the drag world and among the participants of this study when she told *The Guardian*, “Drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it’s not men doing it, because at its core it’s a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture. So for men to do it, it’s really punk rock, because it’s a real rejection of masculinity.” This quote reveals the binary underpinnings of the cisnormative gender ideology that undergirds arguments like this from RuPaul and other CMDQs. RuPaul’s quote here also has a temporal component: her understanding that drag was created by (cisgender gay) men to be performed by (cisgender gay) men for the benefit of (cisgender

gay) men is evidenced by her comment that drag “loses” its punk-rock-ness “once” it’s not men doing it. Lily, a 37-year-old, white, pansexual, polyamorous cis woman queen in Indiana, added a bit of nuance to this idea during our interview by arguing that “drag as we know it *started* as gay men dressing as women. It was a buck to that social norm, that toxic masculinity, and what it meant to be a man” [emphasis added]. Unlike RuPaul, however, Lily made space for drag to have become other things since its inception, such as, like many queens in my study suggested, a challenge to the idea of “gender” itself. This reframing of the trajectory of drag history enables the queens in this study to share one foundational premise of CMDQs’ boundary-making discourse – that drag was created by men, for men – while also challenging CDMQs’ gatekeeping practices that seek to deny other queens access to participation in drag.

What Drag is *Not*: Foil 3, Radical Feminists

RuPaul’s argument that drag is a challenge to “male-dominated culture” brings us to the third foil definition of drag, which is the radical feminist, often TERFy, understanding of *drag as the inherently misogynistic and offensive practice of a man dressing up as a woman*. This third extant discourse of drag as misogynistic sits at the nexus of the threads of my project, which interrogates feminist and queer theories of sex-gender-sexuality to understand women’s and other gender-marginalized folk’s participation in drag culture. Put another way: is drag misogynistic, and if so, why would women participate in it? Because none of the participants in this study believed drag to be inherently misogynistic (otherwise, they would likely not participate in it), much of my data for this third foil comes from readers’ comments on RuPaul’s interview with *The Guardian*, mentioned earlier in the chapter, in which she claimed

drag is only “punk rock” if (cis) men do it. Importantly, it was clear through context clues that *Guardian* commenters were discussing Drag (Queening) as a practice performed by men only – almost the entirety of the discourse in the comments on RuPaul’s interview focused on men’s and AMAB trans women’s drag, which shows that although the queens in my study took umbrage at RuPaul’s comments regarding who can and should do drag, and became embroiled in their own discourse around it, drag performed by women, nonbinary folk, and AFABs is not even on the radar of most people debating about the meanings and political potential of drag. The fact that many people do not know non-cis-male queens even exist makes it especially difficult for such queens to successfully accomplish the queer gender Drag Queen within *and* beyond the drag scene itself.

One person who commented on the *Guardian* interview, username MahalaM, rebutted RuPaul’s comment that drag is “a big f-you to male-dominated culture” by retorting, “Apart from providing comedy, drag is a big f-you to women everywhere. A mockery and appropriation of the feminine by men who are literally too uncomfortable to stand in their own shoes.” Username Person77 echoed, “There’s nothing subversive about drag. It’s usually entitled men caricaturing women, and mocking them based on their physical characteristics. It’s just a subtle means of expressing total contempt.” Username ID9735781’s explanation of misogyny in drag culture began as a seemingly pro-drag response to another commenter’s slightly snarky question about the purpose and merits of drag, but ended in the conclusion that, despite the possibility that drag might “subvert traditional masculinity,” it is, at its core, inherently misogynistic:

Buryvanhire: Why does this guy’s ‘art’ have to be a big F-you to other people’s worldview rather than be appreciated for its own merits?

ID9735781 [threaded reply]: I think it's because it's a kind of costume that subverts traditional masculinity. A man in a dress acting like a woman. In the UK and in many other cultures in the world, a gay man could be legally tortured and imprisoned. Some were sent to institutions and ostracized by society. You had to be brave to dress as a woman because of the risks. So much so that drag culture had its own houses that were ersatz families as it was the norm to be kicked out of yours. A lot of women don't like drag because they see it as mocking women, accentuating female stereotypes as 'bitches' and having 'cat fights' and because women traditionally have been the world's scapegoats and can't take the costume off. Drag queens have derogatory names for women which were brought up in the article. 'Oh that bitch is cunt, she is pure cunt.' 'Cunt' being a woman. There is a deep misogyny inherent in drag culture. Another name is 'fishy' because of women's smelly vaginas. These men seem to hate women as much as patriarchy seems to hate women and are part of the problem. They subvert patriarchy by conforming to it in a dress and wig. They are too busy punching down to notice.

While none of the participants in this study believed drag to be *inherently* misogynistic, many agreed that drag *can* be performed misogynistically, as Em (27, white, Jewish, asexual, nonbinary, genderfluid queen in New York City who identifies under the trans umbrella) related to me:

Em: I think a lot of people kind of have this misunderstanding about what drag is or what the purpose of it is? Um, that there's even people who've compared it to like the woman version of blackface? Where it's just like, men putting on dresses as a joke or as a mockery, which, I'm sure those people exist? But in my experience, it's not really the case that even the male queens that I know, it, they're taking something within themselves and putting it on the outside, like it's an authentic part of them rather than a costume? Um, so, I don't think pause you have to be male to be able to embrace your (pause) flamboyant and theatrical side of yourself, you know? ... I think everyone, *especially* people who've been socialized as female or feminine and who've had femininity forced on them, *should* be able to reclaim and perform that femininity in a way that feels comfortable to them, um, and to say that women can't access this thing that men are doing inspired by women is a little crazy.

Em's comments reflect an engagement with discourses around who has a rightful claim to feminine embodiment, a consideration which holds massive implications for an analysis of the political potentialities of drag femininities. Em disavows the radical feminist argument that drag is akin to blackface by deconstructing the analogy: Em implies that whereas

blackface is a mocking impersonation of one group (black people) by a more powerful group (white people), drag cannot be analogous to such a situation, even though men enjoy more social power than do women, because femininity is not something that only women have. In other words, there is no blackness inside white people seeking reclamation and expression onstage, and thus the only meaning of blackface can be mockery; in contrast, people of all assigned sexes and genders have femininity “within themselves” and, according to Em, they should be able to express it onstage. Femininity, and quotidian gender more broadly, as something one “has” or “feels” will be further explored in the next chapter.

“It is kind of a moving target”: Drag as Hard to “Pin Down”¹⁷

Given the ways in which drag culture is perceived by mainstream audiences, straight and gay alike, the queens in this study engage in boundary work around sex, gender, and sexuality to expand and rupture those (mis)perceptions in ways that account for and legitimate their work as drag queens (Balogun, personal communication, 2020). The questions of what drag is and what a “good,” “real,” Drag Queen is remain murky and contested, but these discursive rupture points likely only strengthen participants’ case for their own participation in drag: if drag can be anything, or can at least be a lot of things, then there is more space to theorize the ways feminine drag can be performed by Drag Queens of various sexes, genders, and sexualities. Crucially, while several queens stated explicitly that drag is impossible to define and/or could not define it, *all* queens in this study made

¹⁷ Quotes from Veronica (44, white, “straight, but culturally queer,” cis woman, Bay Area)

statements that revealed implicitly or explicitly their working definitions of drag and their working definitions of the drag situation.

Through in-depth interviews, participant observation at drag shows, and online data collection I found several strains of the idea that drag is indefinable. One form of this idea is that drag can be anything – this is the explicit, politically-inflected abdication of any responsibility or ability to define drag in any terms due to a belief that defining gendered terms is to prescribe gender and thus, to perpetuate gender oppression. For instance, in a broader discussion of the double standard that many non-cis-male queens experience regarding what “counts” as (good) drag, Chelsea (19, white, lesbian, cis woman, upper Midwest) and I were discussing criticisms that some CDMQ lob against other queens, arguing that non-cis-male queens do not do draggy enough makeup to look like “real” drag queens. To this point, Chelsea simply stated, “I think a woman can do whatever makeup she wants and call it drag.” This statement rings polemical rather than analytical, based on a political refusal to prescribe specific standards for the successful accomplishment of Drag Queen, particularly for women who, as will be shown later in this chapter, are subject to more stringent intracultural aesthetic requirements than are CMDQs. While it’s interesting on a political level to imagine what would happen to gender if we all agreed to let every single individual define it for themselves, there is something to the idea that we do *know* femininity when we see it. According to most queens in this study, we do *know* drag when we see it, even if we can’t articulate how we know¹⁸.

¹⁸ This is reminiscent of 1964 Supreme Court case *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, which sought to adjudicate obscenity laws with regard to pornography. In his concurring opinion, Justice Potter Stewart wrote famously, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be

Drag as a Moving Target: Context-Dependence (Queer Bars | Instagram)

A second way that drag is hard to define is that, according to many queens in this study, whether something is drag or not is context-dependent. Mostly these comments reflected an understanding that drag is a specifically queer cultural and artistic practice that happens in queer spaces – usually bars – as distinct from quotidian gender, which happens all the time, everyday, everywhere. I hashed this out with Alisha (24, “white-passing” desi and white queer genderqueer trans woman, Pacific Northwest) who at the time of our interview was an undergraduate Women’s and Gender Studies major. We struggled through it:

Andrea: So we have on the one hand the RuPaul quote [“We’re all born naked and the rest is drag.”], or the queer theory idea that all gender is drag, but then on the other hand we sort of have this other thing that’s happening that when we’re talking about drag we’re not usually meaning to talk about everybody in the world doing their gender all the time [i.e., quotidian gender]. So do you-

Alisha: Yeah I guess that’s true, there is a distinction in the theoretical versus like, what we really consider drag. There’s a distinction that like, gender performance artists are drag. Like, that’s drag.

Andrea: Mhmm, yeah, and at the risk of like, pushing too hard [on this question] – earlier you said you used to go out as a club kid¹⁹ in drag but you weren’t performing onstage. Is that still drag?

Alisha: I think- yeah! ...I think that there is a (pause) kind of a formulaic- there is like, more of a homogenous community of individuals who use the terminology that they are drag performers. Because they are doing gendered performance art. And

embraced within that shorthand description [of “obscenity”]; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it.”

¹⁹ Another explanation of club kids comes from Virginia (19, white, pansexual, nonbinary, genderfluid, New York state) is that they are folx who “get in drag and go to drag shows” as audience members, rather than performers, is representative of the ways queens in this study defined club kids, the major distinction here being that drag queens are usually understood to perform onstage while club kids stay in the audience.

that is what most folks would probably apply to it...and that is something that is (pause) more like, socially agreed upon...like those kind of people that perform at a club. [emphasis in original]

While working through this conundrum together, Alisha and I landed on the idea that context is important when distinguishing drag from quotidian gender practice insofar as there is a more or less “homogenous community” of people (i.e., queers and/or gays) who all sort of understand that when they say “drag,” they are referring to staged performance art.

A third way participants in this study thought of drag as context-dependent was whether or not the drag is performed onstage at a live drag show or whether the “drag” is simply a hair-and-makeup look posted on Instagram. This latter scenario, in which a self-identified queen posts looks on her Instagram account, is often derided by live-performance queens who pejoratively call such social media users “Instagram queens.” Instagram queens, in other words, fail to successfully achieve the queer gender Drag Queen among some segments of the queer community, although this perspective was not shared by all the queens I spoke with. Here, quotes from Chelsea, Jennifer, Angie, and Franki illustrate various sides to this debate:

Chelsea: Some people do drag where they don’t perform and they just like, have an Instagram account and that’s completely valid.

This first quote from Chelsea (19, white, lesbian, cis woman, upper Midwest) is a straightforward defense of the right of “Instagram queens” to call themselves drag queens. Recall that earlier in this chapter Chelsea espoused the fullest version of the deconstructionist (non)definition of drag, i.e., that drag can be *anything*. Thus, her perspective that Instagram queens are real Drag Queens is logically consistent with her earlier comments.

Most queens in this study, however, either felt that queens who do not perform onstage are “real” Drag Queens, or at least qualified their support for Instagram queens by saying either that after practicing at home and/or online, eventually they should try to perform onstage, and/or that Instagram queens are a somewhat lesser form of queen – in this discourse of drag, perhaps we could think of them as drag queens, but not Drag Queens – situationally approximating, but not fully meeting the situated norms and expectations for the temporarily embodied queer gender of Drag Queen.

Jennifer: Performance counts for a whole lot of it. I think that there are two very different sides to drag and one would be the performance and the other would be the look and the paint, which you might get on the Instagram queens, because there are so many drag queens on Instagram who are just looks. And they’re amazing, incredible, inspiring looks, but they might not perform. And so I think for a woman, if she’s just on Instagram doing these beautiful feminine looks – well, is this makeup art or is this drag? Because there’s no performance to sort of back that up and to give credibility to that art form.

Andrea: So for you the difference between doing makeup art and drag is the physical performance of it?

Jennifer: Yeah.

Jennifer is a 31-year-old, white, pansexual “female, but I sometimes forget what gender I am” queen in London. Jennifer is known for telling intricate stories with her drag performances, which may explain, in part, why she finds performance itself such an integral part of drag. One of many performances she described to me included an anti-Trump performance in which she mocks Donald J. Trump’s claims that he is a self-made billionaire whose father “only” lent him a million dollars to get him started. This performance includes an ironic rags-to-riches song, a “really weird mix” [of] “drag-queen-drag-king burlesque” in which Jennifer strips down to LED-lit dollar-sign nipple tassels, an “assless” jock strap revealing the words “pussy grabber” written on her butt cheeks, and a pair of handheld fans

which are themselves tiny hands, to make fun of Trump's obsession with the size of his hands, among other elements of performance art. It's clear that Jennifer would not be able to achieve the same effect without a *staged* performance.

Angie (28, black, "bi-straight," cis woman, Florida) did not become part of the queer community until well into her 20s. Throughout an incredible interview longer than two hours she rapidly and repeatedly connected various social issues together in ways I had not considered prior to speaking with her and that were different than the ways many other queens in this study thought about things:

Angie: You can be called a queen all you want but are you doing queen things? "I'm a drag queen, I'm a drag queen." There are drag queens around here that are not being booked. You're at home planning your makeup. I don't want that.

Andrea: And so what do you think about that, people who call themselves drag queens but who just do it at home?

Angie: Like the Instagram queens now?

Andrea: Uh huh, uh huh.

Angie: Like [other queen's name] basically.

Andrea: I'm not naming names. (laughs)

Angie: Good lord (laughs). I don't knock it. That's how I started, sitting at home playing with my makeup. But ... it's about the *hustle*. It's about the hustle for me. It's about queens that have literally, like, some of them have had to sit on they ass to be drag queens. It's about the respect, it's about the hard work put into it, not about sitting at home putting on your damn Jeffree Star highlighter and calling yourself a drag queen. I'm just being honest!

Andrea: (laughs) Yeah, yeah.

Angie: It is about getting your ass *up* and like – you can say, "Oh my gosh, how dare they kill all these trans women in America," but yet you don't participate in nothing. It's just the same way with thoughts and prayers. It does nothing. ... Don't say you're a part of a community and you sitting at home doing nothing but say "Oh I

support you, da-da-da-da-da,” from Facebook, but you ain’t never at nothing.
[emphasis in original]

Whereas most queens who require staged performances to be part of their definition of drag felt this way because they themselves are stage performers and meant to discursively distance themselves from what they perceived as the easier practice of simply posting looks online, Angie made performance, as a definitional requirement of drag, explicitly moral and political. She used herself as an example: she admitted to me that prior to engaging with her local queer community, she knew nothing about cissexism and the epidemic of transphobic violence against black trans femmes and women in particular. She told me it took her becoming a part of this community and physically showing up to activist events to understand the gravity of the situation. For her, performance is integral to the definition of drag because she believes you must physically *show up* to a community in order to claim you are a part of it, and furthermore that hustling and working hard as a drag queen is what entitles you to both the term “queen” and the respect that comes with it.

Andrea: I’m wondering what you think about when people do drag looks at home and take photos and they don’t go out?

Franki: I mean, I think that it’s good for Instagram content, it’s good for your business, if you’re considering drag to be something you wanna do professionally, um, but I think when you look at drag history and culture (pause), if you’re not a performer then are you a drag queen, in a way? Because I consider drag to be a gender performance. And if you’re not performing, then what are you doing? Which is interesting. But obviously, with the advent of social media, if you’re performing *on* Instagram, like, you could perform in your living room. I mean, it’s definitely still drag. I just think that (pause) the energy of the community is what is really special about drag for me, personally.

Franki is a 20-year-old, white, queer, femme, nonbinary, agender drag performer in Texas whose perspective is representative of those queens who hedged and sought not to denigrate Instagram queens, while also explaining that for herself personally, “the energy of the [in-

person] community is what is really special about drag.” This perspective is also relevant to many queens’ anxieties about how drag culture is shifting out of physical queer spaces and changing in the age of social media and the unprecedented and wild popularity of the reality TV competition *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. This shift will be further explored later, during my discussion of the political meanings and potentialities of drag, both per se, and specifically in the current cultural milieu in which queens find themselves. Overall the above perspectives show the ways in which drag is hard to define in the first place, and even more difficult to define when one considers the many contexts in which things some people call “drag” might exist.

Drag as a Moving Target: Many Types of Drag

As a further illustration of the idea that drag is hard to define, participants tended to separate Drag Queens into types, with 14 different types being mentioned by participants. I grouped these 14 types into 3 broader groups based on the ways participants described them: 1) intelligible, 2) campy, and 3) alternative. For the sake of illustrating how these terms are circulated to describe different types of drag, and to show the importance of aesthetics in differentiating different types of drag, I looked up these 14 types of queens using the hashtag function on Instagram, photographs of which are included in each of the three sections below. I chose representative photographs based on a combination of the way participants described these types of drag to me and my own acquired knowledge of drag culture through audience participant observation and this dissertation research project.²⁰ Importantly I did

²⁰ Fascinatingly, while I could reliably type in #[blank]queen and find good representative photographs of a given type of drag for the first two groups of drag types (most intelligible to

not seek photos of non-cis-male queens specifically because I refuse to guess the assigned sex at birth of any of the drag performers whose photos appeared in my hashtag searches.

Types of Drag: Group 1, Intelligible Queens (40 mentions overall)

The types of drag queens in this study believed to be the most intelligible to mainstream audiences were pageant queens (22 mentions) fishy queens (12 mentions), very femme queens (2 mentions), and Latin queens (2 mentions). I theorize that “intelligible” emerged as a salient category of drag because participants’ discussions of their own participation in drag culture frequently centered around non-cis-male queens’ ostensible unintelligibility to mainstream audiences, which many CMDQs argue renders them poor drag queens, a claim which many participants rebutted by arguing that less intelligible types of drag (i.e., those further away from the mainstream foil definitions of drag as a man dressing up as a woman) have greater potential to destabilize systems of (hetero)normativity than do the types of drag that are most digestible to mainstream audiences.

mainstream audiences and campy queens), I frequently got few or no results when searching for the alternative types of drag in the format #[blank]queen. I then realized that because alternative drag is predicated on resisting the gender binary more so than the other two groups of drag types, many performers who do alternative drag don’t always use the term “queen” to describe their drag looks. I found representative photos for these types of drag by searching hashtags such as #[blank]drag rather than #[blank]queen.



Figure 2: Pageant queen



Figure 3: Fishy²¹ queen



Figure 4: Very) Femme queen



Figure 5: Latin queen

Types of Drag: Group 2, Campy Queens (37 mentions overall)

I have grouped comedy queens (23 mentions), campy queens (9 mentions), Broadway queens (4 mentions), and cakey²² queens (1 mention) under the rubric of “camp.”

²¹ “Fish” is drag slang for passing as, or appearing to be, a cis woman. The term references misogynistic tropes about the smell of vaginas, although it is contemporarily generally understood among drag performers to be a compliment for any drag queen of any assigned sex and gender.
²² “Cake” when used as a term in the drag scene and by makeup enthusiasts more generally refers to the use of a lot of foundation, concealer, and face powder to achieve a “flawless” look on the skin. The goal of “cakey” makeup or “cakeface” is not the illusion of a *naturally* flawless face but rather the appearance of a heavily made-up face where “flaws” such as pores, acne, and the shadows of one’s facial hair have been intentionally painted over.



Figure 6: Comedy queen



Figure 7: Campy queen



Figure 8: Cakey queen



Figure 9: Broadway queen

Participants described these styles as exaggerated to an absurd and/or comedic degree, which is a foundational element of the queer cultural tendency toward *camp*, which Sontag (1964) describes as “a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous... Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much’” (see also Halberstam 1998). Accordingly, the types of drag I categorize as Campy satirize and thus call into question the seriousness and realness of gender through comedically exaggerated mockery.

Types of Drag: Group 3, Alternative Queens (117 mentions overall)

By far, the largest group of Drag Queen types mentioned by participants in this study were alternative types of drag. Alternative queens (49 mentions), genderfuckers (46

mentions), performance artists (16 mentions), experimental queens (2 mentions), goth queens (2 mentions), and weird queens (2 mentions).



Figure 10: Alternative queen



Figure 11: Goth queen

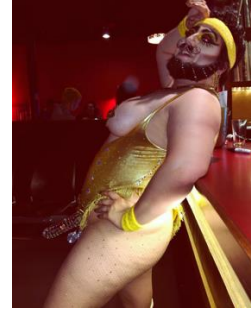


Figure 12: Genderfuck queen



Figure 13: Experimental queen



Figure 14: Performance art drag



Figure 15: Weird queen

I argue that the reason the queens in this study talked about alternative types of Drag Queens more than any other type is that non-cis-male queens are particularly invested in exploding traditional and/or mainstream ideas of what drag is and can be, in the interest of defending their own participation in drag culture. A wide range of looks are represented in these photos of the 14 types of Drag Queen mentioned by participants, running the gamut from looks that wouldn't be out of place in a fast fashion catalog (see: #fishyqueen above, a picture from a performer whom I know to be AMAB from other posts on their profile, which is relevant insofar as the term "fishy" is concerned), to looks that are not intelligibly human (see: #weirdqueen above, in which a performer has colored her entire visible body

green, a common sight in alternative drag performances). Indeed, drag looks based on aliens, mermaids, demons, and other fantastical creatures are popular among the “alternative” queens I interviewed for this study, a theme which I will return to in detail in the next chapter.

Even taking into account the diversity of Drag Queen types, participants and I agreed that we know drag when we see it. Alisha and I eventually arrived at this somewhat unsatisfying (non)definition of drag:

Andrea: So we have sort of, like a bunch of elements that come together in various configurations to become drag but they might not always be there, maybe.

Alisha: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

So if we know it when we see it, and we see it in the photos above, and if achieving the right type of aesthetic is central to being validated as a “real,” “good” Drag Queen, what can we say drag *looks* like? In other words, what, if anything, ties all these looks together as the boundary object *Drag*?

“Paint for the Back Row”²³: The Drag Queen Look as the Staged Exaggeration of Quotidian Gender

The most common definitional requirement queens in this study gave for drag was *the staged exaggeration of gender*, and for Drag Queens specifically, the staged exaggeration of quotidian femininity. Participants described to me the effort they took to achieve the Drag Queen look, including several hours of makeup, hairstyling, padding the body, and dressing

²³ Quote by Trixie Mattel, repeated in an interview by Tracy, 23, “mixed-race” Native American, Japanese, and white, gay, lesbian, queer, cis woman, Midwest

before each show. Crucially, an examination of the sex-gendered double standards for the Drag Queen look – namely, the idea that non-cis-male drag queens must or at least should go “above and beyond” in their staged exaggerations of femininity, relative to those of CMDQs – reveals the largest rupture point in queer cultural discourses of Drag Queens, the point at which the boundary object Drag Queen can no longer contain its competing definitions, and social interaction between folx on opposing sides of these discourses cannot proceed without significant hostility, gatekeeping, and, frequently, vociferous public debate.

The Drag Queen Look

In the first place, nearly all participants agreed that a profound physical transformation from what one’s body and face look like out of drag to the Drag Queen look is a necessary condition of drag. Crystal (27, white, queer, bisexual, cis woman queen in Colorado) stated this point explicitly:

I always start with contacts and go for that full transformation. I feel like if any part of the look is not “drag queen,” if it stays like, Crystal, instead of [Crystal’s drag name], then it kind of loses that aspect, so I try to change as much as I can. Um, but I’ll do contacts, there’s just layers and layers of makeup. I typically look up other performers’ makeups and I sit and scroll through Instagram for hours while I’m doing my makeup, just looking at how other people have painted their face, and then it’s just layers and layers of blending and nine or ten different colors in just your cheek contour ... I do glue my eyebrows down and completely redraw them and that gives you a chance to make your eyes a lot bigger. You can get that more exaggerated appearance, which I feel like is a big part of drag, just having everything way overdone. So it’s really just emphasizing everything, just taking the time to make your eyelid look twice the size, bring your eyebrows halfway up your forehead, overpaint your lips, make your cheek contour harsh and dark. Like I said, just trying to change as much of that appearance as possible and completely reshape who you are.

As Crystal suggests above, a good, draggy transformation is based on wearing a *lot* of makeup – this is a situated norm for the queer gender Drag Queen, which is a clear linear

exaggeration of the western quotidian gender norm that appropriately feminine women wear makeup, but not too much. Tracy (23, “mixed-race” Native American, Japanese, and white, gay, lesbian, queer, cis woman, Midwest) told me:

My favorite thing to say – and I believe Trixie Mattel²⁴ is the one that said it – [is] ‘Paint for the back row.’ And that’s what I like to do, like I like to make everything look bigger. If you’re in the front row I’m gonna look fake, but if you’re in the back you’re gonna say “Oh, that’s a really good lookin’ woman up there.” (laughs) ... I use 301 lashes and I wear two pairs of those at a time. I take my [eyeliner] wing super far, like almost to the edge of my face, so that it can be seen back there [in the back row], to make my eyelid look larger. I glue my eyebrows down and make my [eyelid] crease higher, and then make my brows higher of course. ... I’m a woman dressed as a man dressed as a woman trying to look like a woman (laughs) so my goal is, when people see me, that they *don’t* know I’m a real [cis] girl. Like I want them to think, “Oh, that’s a drag queen right there.” Like I want them to think I’m a man and then when they come speak to me, “Oh, you look like a queen, you were painted like a queen, I had no idea.” That’s the goal.

²⁴ Figure 16: Trixie Mattel is a cis male drag queen most famous for appearing on RuPaul’s Drag Race. She is known for her very exaggerated makeup, which she does in a recognizable signature style.



Here Tracy combined several of the elements of the Drag Queen look, including: lots of makeup, false eyelashes (301 lashes were mentioned in particular by several participants), glued-down and redrawn eyebrows, and the idea that the ideal drag queen look, especially for a non-cis-male queen, is a look that makes audience members (mis)perceive them as men in drag, which participants conceptualize as an enabling opportunity for non-cis-male queens who are “painted like a [cis male drag] queen” to disrupt audience members’ preconceived notions of who can, does, and should do drag. This claim to the political potentiality of intentional gendered misperception will be further explored in chapter three of this dissertation, along with other visibility-based strategies for achieving gender liberation.

Carly is a 19-year-old queer, bisexual, pansexual queen who identifies as a cis woman but wanted me to know they “dress like a guy sometimes,” thus showing the degree to which external gender presentation influences gender identity for many people, even cisgender people. Carly lived in North Carolina at the time of our interview but did most of their queening in Florida, where they lived previously. I asked them to take me through, step-by-step, how they created the drag queen look on their face:

You have to like, put on super thick foundation to make it look like you never had eyebrows to begin with, it's like a mess. And then you have to start with baking²⁵ your face with all this contour, all this highlight, and you gotta find a placement for your eyebrows and then once you find that placement for your eyebrows then you gotta start on your eye makeup. And then you gotta make sure you contour where

²⁵ Baking is a makeup technique in which excess amounts of loose face powder are packed onto wet foundation or concealer which has been applied to the face. The excess loose powder is left on the skin for several minutes (often upwards of half an hour) and then dusted away, leaving a flawless skin effect that is less likely to sweat off or be wiped away during a performance. In recent years, particularly due to the advent of Instagram and YouTube makeup tutorials, this practice has moved beyond the drag scene and is now practiced by many “regular” makeup users. The extent to which drag aesthetics have influenced more quotidian sectors of beauty culture is a theme I encourage future researchers of drag and/or femininities to explore.

your eyebrows were, and then like, connect your nose [to your newly painted-on eyebrows] and make it look smaller, more feminine. Even though I'm already a girl, you still have to make yourself look even more feminine. You have to literally make yourself look like you're a guy that's trying to look like a woman instead of a woman that's trying to look like even more of a woman, so it just- it takes a while. Like there's a lot of powder everywhere (laughs) and glitter everywhere.

Here, Carly echoed Tracy's comments about wanting to look like a man who wants to look like a woman. Here we see evidence of Baudrillard's postmodern concept of the simulacrum (1981), or "a copy of a copy which has no original." First, Carly described the process of concealing their eyebrows to make it look like they "never had eyebrows to begin with," a comment that gets at the ideas of realness, fakeness, and even what a *human* face looks like. Most of the makeup techniques they described involve completely changing the look and shape of the facial features, such that a successful Drag Queen look renders the face underneath the makeup unknowable. To its fullest extent, the goal of this type of makeup application, according to Tracy and Carly, among other participants, is not simply to look like a woman (as the idea of drag as female impersonation would suggest), but rather to look like someone who is not a woman in the first place. Indeed, the idea that some non-cis-male queens seek to look like "a guy that's trying to look like a woman" was repeated several times in interviews for this project.

Carly ends their description of the drag queen look with laughter and the visual imagery of a "mess" of powder and glitter everywhere. Glitter in particular seems to be a constitutive element of many queens' aesthetic definitions of drag and was mentioned by 12 queens. Glitter is sparkly, ostentatious, and associated with queer performance and spectacle, and is itself one of the primary ways queens in this study created embodied forms of exaggerated femininity in their drag. Vanessa is a 22-year-old, queer, bisexual white queen in

North Carolina who also described their gender and sexuality as “everything under the sun.” During a broader conversation about the many fashions they wear, including J-fashions like cyberpop (a futuristic, alien-esque sci fi look²⁶) and Lolita (an alternative fashion style that Vanessa conceptualizes as a way to avoid the male gaze because, although it is named after Nabokov’s famous character in his decidedly male-gazey novel of the same name, it does not conform to contemporary expectations of what a “sexy” adult woman looks like²⁷), they specified glitter as a stylistic element that was specifically *drag* to them: “When I do stacked lashes and glitter and everything, that to me is like, that’s like drag. That is definitely

²⁶ Figure 17: Example of cyberpop:



²⁷ Figure 18: Example of Lolita:



bioqueen.” By “stacked lashes,” Vanessa was referring to a practice common among drag queens of wearing multiple pairs of false eyelashes at once, which is itself another quite linear form of exaggeration of the western quotidian gender ideal that feminine women have full, dark eyelashes. Indeed, the normatively feminine practice of wearing mascara is itself a slight exaggeration of the wearer’s physical features, illustrating how drag is an exaggeration of quotidian gender, which is itself an exaggeration of (and, in some cases, wholesale creation of) perceived sex differences.

Nina, a 24-year-old queer, straight, “borderline asexual” Latina cis woman queen from the Bay Area, used the successful achievement of the Drag Queen look as evidence that non-cis-male queens should be taken seriously as real drag queens, successful in this case being that such a queen is visually indistinguishable from a CMDQ. She condemned the common practice of drag show emcees (usually CMDQs) introducing non-cis-male queens *as* “bioqueens”, and thus arguably marking them as inferior performers, before their numbers onstage:

[Non-cis-male queens] shouldn't be [called] hyper, faux, or bio. Like, if you're a woman in drag, most of them look like [cis male] drag queens. They aren't gonna get clocked as a woman in drag, and it's weird to announce somebody as a woman, if you're interacting with somebody you can tell, you don't need to ask.

Of note here is that while Nina argued “most” non-cis-male queens are visually indistinguishable from CMDQs, she does concede that in the course of interpersonal interaction, “you can tell” the difference between them and a CMDQ. This suggests that something other than appearance still separates AMABs from AFABs, whether this distinction be based on bodily comportment, personality, verbal disclosure, or voice. In chapter 2 I will discuss how gender, and more specifically femininity, is done not only *on* the

body through style, adornment, and aesthetics, but also *with* the body through voice, comportment, and behavior, a point which reflects Nina's understanding of "womanhood" as occurring on multiple levels of interaction and observation.

Sex-Gendered Double Standards for Cultural Legitimation as a Drag Queen

One issue here when it comes to defining drag is that while certain looks – like those involving “glitter everywhere” - tend to be intelligible as drag, there exists no one standard set of criteria for the achievement of (good) drag. Thus drag is a moving target, a floating signifier, a flexible (but not infinitely so) boundary object whose meaning is constructed and deployed by different queer constituencies toward different aims. Whether certain aesthetic practices and modes of embodiment are considered “drag” shifts depending on who is doing the drag, what the venue is, and even based on what is most politically expedient for the speaker in the moment according to the boundary they are trying to draw around this queer cultural practice.

Earlier we saw a quote from Chelsea (19, white, lesbian, cis woman, upper Midwest) in which she defended women's right to define drag in whatever way they want. While that quote ostensibly supports the idea that drag can be *anything*, the point she was making about *women's* right, in particular, to define their own drag reveals that she feels there is a more specific point to make about the indefinability of drag, namely that many folks in the drag scene, particularly CMDQs, hold (and sometimes enforce) different standards for women's drag than men's. Chelsea further explained,

I think women have to work 10 times as hard, um, to be accepted in the drag community, to be taken seriously. It's like, if you're a girl, they feel like you have to

like, make yourself alien and like, dress into a ridiculous- be like the *best*, and play the violin, and just all these things. You have to do so much more, and there are a lot of men who do drag who dress up as Britney Spears and do splits, like (pause) if a woman did that in drag, that's still valid and that's still great drag, but they would be shut down so fast.

Here, Chelsea complained that in order to receive cultural legitimation as a Drag Queen, she and other women queens have to make themselves into “aliens” and be “ridiculous,” a type of strategic aesthetic overcompensation I will take up in the next chapter when I theorize the meanings of participants’ alien femininities on the drag stage. Many of the queens I spoke with decried what they interpret as double standards with regard to what “counts” as “real” or “good” drag. Many of the criticisms that CMDQs and others lob at participants’ claims to drag culture center on the idea that women²⁸ cannot produce drag as good as that performed by CMDQs. There are a few versions of this critique, the most common of which is that women are already feminine in body and/or comportment and thus do not have to put in as much effort as CMDQs to produce a (hyper)feminine drag look. Cassandra (20, Asian American, gay, lesbian, queer, bisexual, nonbinary, genderfluid, upper Midwest) is a queen and professional makeup artist who told me that non-cis-male queens are accused of “cheating” when they do drag, for this reason. Lily (37, white, pansexual, polyamorous cis woman queen in Indiana) told me CMDQs have “flat out told” her “multiple times” that doing drag is easier for her because she’s a woman. She described to me a situation in which she had been a regular “cast member” in a recurring drag show until a new show director was hired:

²⁸ I use intentionally reductive gendered language here because the criticisms are almost always lobbed at “women” drag queens, regardless of the actual gender identity or assigned sex of the queens being criticized.

When the show director changed, they just canceled everybody that was on cast without telling us. Like the new flier came out Monday for the show on Saturday and my lover messages me and goes, 'Baby, why aren't you on the flier?' and I went, 'What?'" Lily went on to explain to me that the new show director told her, "You're not good enough to be on my cast.

Lily further explained that although the new show director said her makeup and costuming weren't up to snuff, she also knew that this director had never booked an AFAB queen in any of her shows without being pressured to do so by a bar owner.

Andrea: So you think that was the real reason that she didn't want you on the show?

Lily: Yeah, to be honest with you, and knowing her in the community, I know it is. You know when someone doesn't have to say something aloud because their actions speak louder than what they say? Yeah, it's one of those. Two and two came together and did not give me eight. (laughs)

Andrea: Right, right, and is this person, um, is this person we're talking about a gay man [CMDQ]?²⁹

Lily: Yes.

Because as a researcher I am more interested in the ways participants perceive such criticisms and construct discourses in response to them than in the actual words CMDQs use, I circled back to the original way Lily had introduced me to this situation, which had to do with the criticism that women queens are already feminine:

Andrea: So why do you think that they think it's easier for you because you are a woman, like, what actually makes it easier, do *they* think?

Lily: Well, what I have been told is because I don't have to pad to have a feminine body.

Andrea: Uh huh.

²⁹ I asked this question because most critiques of non-cis-male queens come from CMDQs, yet there is an intriguing lack of continuity in pronoun usage for CMDQs. Many of the queens I spoke to switched fluidly between he-ing and she-ing CMDQs and it was frequently unclear to me what the gender of any given person was in conversation – which is itself a fascinating data point for future research on queer methodologies.

Queens in this study used the imagined continuum to rebut the double standards for queening and to justify their participation in drag culture by arguing that although they, as women and/or AFABs, are beginning their physical transformation at a different (i.e., more feminine) starting point on the imagined continuum of gender, when they achieve the Drag Queen look through effort and skill, they are traveling the same or greater “distance” on the continuum as do cis male drag queens. This is illustrated by the following exchange I had with Fannie (24, white, bisexual, cisgender woman queen in Texas) about exaggeration as a constitutive element of drag:

Fannie: I think that men have to work just as hard to look like a woman as I have to do to look like my exaggerated form [in drag]. You know?

Andrea: Yeah, so you’re moving the same distance, but you have different starting points maybe?

Fannie: That’s a really good way to phrase it.

Aaron, a 24-year-old “mixed black and white” cisgender gay man in Colorado who volunteers as a club promoter for drag shows that purposefully include “faux queens,” described the exaggeration of quotidian femininity as a constitutive element of drag that is *particularly* important for non-cis-male queens, who he told me have more to prove to audiences who may be skeptical that their drag performances will be good or worthwhile entertainment:

Drag is about going over the top with your makeup, hair, costume, performance, everything. You have to basically tell a story, put out your emotions however you wanna perform, and you have to go big. ... It needs to be big and bold and everything. It’s the exagger – it’s literally an exaggeration of gender. And so it needs to portray that. If it’s not exaggerated enough it’s not draggy enough. ... If you cover your brows and do a new eye, that’s like, the beginning of drag. Like, if you do bigger lips, that’s the beginning of drag. If you contour your face in the morning, that is the first step to drag.

In this way, the requirements for the successful accomplishment of Drag Queen are shown to be different for CMDQs and non-cis-male drag queens, revealing a sex-gendered double standard and a rupture point in Drag Queen's ability to circulate as a coherent concept, i.e., *boundary object*, in the drag scene. Accordingly, aesthetic overcompensation (i.e., creating hyperfeminine and/or alien-esque looks that go way beyond the amorphous borderline between the quotidian Woman and the temporary queer gender Drag Queen) is a strategy that many participants described to me to ensure that they are taken seriously as culturally competent and legitimate drag performers. Veronica (44, white, "straight, but culturally queer" cis woman drag performance artist in the Bay Area) below, discursively distanced herself from new non-cis-male queens who, by failing to aesthetically overcompensate, fail to adhere to the situated norms for achieving the Drag Queen look:

[Drag] is kind of a moving target. I do still think though, if someone - and this happens - you have newbies, especially in the faux queen pageant, where you have a woman who's like [affects high-pitched nasal voice] "I'm gonna do the faux queen pageant!" [end voice] She like, puts on a wig and some lipstick and some eyelashes and it's like, mmm, you gotta push it a little farther than that. You have to, if this is gonna be drag, push it farther.

Beyond queens who are perceived as not trying hard enough, and thus tarnishing by presumed association the reputations of more established queens like Veronica, gendered double standards for drag expectations remain. Indeed, what truly reveals this double standard is the fact that although non-cis-male queens are frequently criticized for presumably already having curvy bodies and thus not needing to pad to achieve an hourglass Drag Queen figure, many CMDQs do not pad or change their body shape either, as illustrated in the following exchange I had with Em, a 27-year-old white, Jewish, asexual, nonbinary, genderfluid queen in New York City who identifies under the trans umbrella:

Em: There is this weird [idea] like, [as an AFAB performer] you're not a real drag queen because you don't have to do this and this and this. But like, there's male queens who don't pad or tuck [their penises], so why is that put on us as a requirement when it's not a requirement for them?

Andrea: Well, do you have a guess at the answer to that question?

Em: Misogyny. (laughs)

Andrea: (laughs) Right.

Em: Just gatekeeping. Trying to find excuses for why we shouldn't be able to play with them.

Andrea: Uh huh, so for you it sort of feels like they're grasping at things that they can hold onto to keep drag for themselves?

Em: Yeah. There's even the whole acronym [from] Shakespearean [times], that it means men "dressed as a girl."³⁰ Which is an urban legend and not even true, but people will still hold onto it just as an excuse to keep people out.

So here we see the ways that not only do participants challenge the logic behind CMDQs' conflicting definitions of the situation, resulting in discourses that sometimes frustratingly talk past one another, many participants believe that such criticisms are merely *ex post facto* rationalizations for CMDQs to gatekeep drag culture and enact misogyny and sexism toward AFABs, femmes, and women. In this way, discourses of the Drag Queen look reveal a point of rupture in different queer constituencies' respective definitions of the drag situation (Goffman 1959), all of which have implications for how claims to queer cultural membership and, consequently, queer space and opportunities for paid bookings are adjudicated. It's difficult to imagine how queer cultural members can adjudicate non-cis-male queens' claims and those of CMDQs against one another in the absence of a shared

³⁰Em is referring to the history some folk give of drag, which is that the word "drag" originally came from the phrase "Dressed as a girl." This acronym was mentioned by 5 queens in this study.

definition of the situation to work off of, which I argue is one reason the debate over non-cis-male queens' participation in drag culture continues to roil in queer culture.

“I’ve Belonged Here Since the Beginning”: Drag as a Multi-Gender Queer Culture

While “drag” itself may be impossible to define, the queens in this study were, without exception, invested in the idea that whatever drag is, it is, has been, and should be practiced by queers of all sex-genders (and maybe even straight folks, according to some participants). Queens in my study tended to emphasize their preferred queer cultural boundaries in three ways: first, that queer space be open to only queers of all genders; second, that queer space be open to queers of all genders and some (respectful) straight people; or third, that the idea of “queer space” is inherently discriminatory and thus all spaces should be open to people of all genders and sexual identities. All three of these are based on a nonbinary gender ideology, which makes sense insofar as the inherent cisnormativity of CMDQs’ opposing discourse is arguably *the crux* of CMDQs’ conclusions that only (cisgender) gay men should be able to do drag. Importantly, whereas the first CMDQ discourse is intrinsically linked to one particular definition of drag, participants’ understandings of what drag is do not necessarily correspond to a particular definition of drag *other than* that drag is now and/or has always been a *multi-gender queer culture*.

This point undergirds participants’ collective definition of the situation that drag is an amorphous practice that is the province of queer people of all assigned sexes at birth and genders – a definition of the situation which contradicts that of CMDQs’ and which allows participants to defend their claims to queer cultural membership and queer spaces like the drag stage. In this case, participants’ and CMDQs’ discourses are talking past one another at

two rupture points – one, they disagree on the history of drag (i.e., how and why it was begun and for whom) and two, they disagree on what drag *is*. Without coming to a shared set of terms of engagement, it’s difficult to see how these conflicting definitions of the situation can be resolved. The inability of the boundary objects “drag” and Drag Queen to contain the wide disparity in conflicting definitions of the drag situation is the reason such intense intracultural debates endure regarding non-cis-male drag queens and many CMDQs’ efforts to deny them access to the drag stage.

Against such gatekeeping practices, queens spoke back against criticisms that suggest that they are appropriating drag culture from its ostensibly rightful owners, cis gay men. 20 participants mentioned having been accused of cultural appropriation by cis gay men, or having heard this criticism directed toward other non-cis-male queens. Lily (37, white, pansexual, polyamorous cis woman queen in Indiana), whom we heard from earlier in this chapter, drew the boundaries of drag culture around gay identity more broadly, rather than narrowly like CMDQs’ boundaries which encircle only cis gay men: “They [the CMDQs who have criticized Lily’s participation in drag culture] were like, ‘Oh, well, it’s gay culture.’ And I’m like, ‘Well, I’m not straight, so how am I appropriating my own culture?’” Because Lily invokes her own gayness (or, at least, not-straight-ness) as part-and-parcel of her claim to ownership over drag culture, drawing boundaries around queer sexual identity as *the* deciding factor in who should be allowed to participate in drag. Thus, Lily implicitly defined *drag as a multi-gender queer – not just gay – culture* by invoking queerness writ large as the legitimating factor. Furthermore, by implying that anyone who is “not straight” should have access to “gay culture”, Lily constructs queer identity writ large as its own category in opposition to straightness.

Jessica (28, white, cis queer femme queen in Toronto) locates the boundaries of drag culture by similarly invoking queerness, as well as adding a historical component wherein she argues that non-men have always been a part of queer culture:

They [CMDQs] will do things like [say], “Well a woman didn’t throw the first brick at Stonewall.” And I’m like, “Okay, well a trans POC woman [Marsha P. Johnson] did.” And then if you actually read the personal accounts from people who were at Stonewall they’ll say “Oh and my friend picked me up off the ground because *she* saw me bleeding – the women were everywhere! And it seems like a lack of research and a lack of education, but that’s also – it’s not even always the individual’s fault. The resources aren’t out there. History is called history for a reason. And it’s because people wanna...it was MEN writing it and they wanted to talk about men’s experiences and hear about other men’s experiences and make sure that future generations knew what *men* went through. So there’s not a lot of queer female history going on. Um, it’s out there but it’s hard to find. It’s more personal accounts. So, I mean, there’s a, I was watching a documentary, totally can’t remember what it’s called because I didn’t make it through the whole thing before we had to leave. My friend’s mom called me downstairs and she was like “I found this documentary about, um, burlesque dancers, and um, Vegas show girls” and it was sort of exploring the weird line between what’s a Vegas showgirl and what’s a burlesque dancer, are they the same or are they different? That kinda thing. But, for the 15 or however minutes I was watching it, I think three out of the four women said “So me and my drag troupe, when I got up into drag” - they were drag queens, they were taken in by drag queens, they had drag mothers, they had drag families, but (pause) hyperqueen, faux queen, bioqueen, female drag queen – the terms didn’t exist. So, if you were a woman you were burlesque, if you were a man, you were drag. You were doing the same thing. It was just a lack of vocabulary and a delineation based on sex and gender. Even in the queer community. So they were drag queens! They were bioqueens but they just didn’t have the word “female drag queen” or “hyperqueen” to say it. But they were all talking about “Oh yeah, I have a box of drag in my garage still, it’s been sitting there for 60 years.” Yeah. [emphasis in original]

In this quote Jessica constructs a more expansive definition of “woman” than the cisnormative gender ideology that undergirds CMDQs’ claims to drag history and culture as seen in Table X: Foils. Jessica invokes contemporary understandings of Marsha P. Johnson as a black trans woman drag queen (as opposed to a CMDQ) who “threw the first brick at Stonewall,” to push back against cis men’s tendency to center men’s experiences in accounts of queer history, and to use that erroneously male-centered history as the bedrock of their

own claims of ownership over drag and queer culture more broadly. Jessica also points to the sex-gendered boundary work involved in defining drag and burlesque as adjacent, but not identical, practices, and hints toward the French-philosophical concept of *interpellation* (Althusser 1970), which features in the queer poststructural work of Foucault and Butler, part of which deals with the idea that we understand ourselves according to the discourses available to us. In this way, while women burlesque performers were able to identify the actual garments and costumes they wore as “a box of drag in my garage still,” they did not understand themselves to be drag queens because existing discourses and vocabularies of sex, gender, drag, and burlesque necessitated that they identify as something else – burlesque performers and showgirls. This boundary work reinforces the notion that drag is a cross-gender performance enacted by a cisgender man, and furthermore that self-consciously performed hyper-femininity cannot be culturally imaginable as “queer” and thus finds a space within the more heterosexual worlds of Vegas showgirls and burlesque dancers. This discursive rupture manifests still today in swirling intracultural queer discourses of who can and should do drag.

The following quote from the same interview with Jessica shows the ways participants in this research implicitly draw and redraw boundaries and shift between them as they delineate the contours of drag and queer culture in various ways toward various ends:

If you actually look back into the history of drag and the history of the queer community, even back when it was just called “the gay community,” (pause) women (pause) queer women and actually a lot of cisgendered [sic] straight women (pause) - maybe not the yelling “Woo girl!” bachelorette party straight women, but, you know, the people who are self-reflexive enough to know how to behave in spaces ... um, *they* have always been an inherent part of the queer and more specifically the drag community. [emphasis in original]

This is a dense quote packed with a lot of ideas that are more difficult to discern textually than in the course of Jessica's verbal cadence of speech. The first thing Jessica made commentary on is the shift in terminology from "gay" (and/or "lesbian") to "queer" as a descriptor of sexual minority culture(s). Some scholars and queer activists argue that such a linguistic shift makes space for nonbinary modes of understanding gender and sexuality, such that "queer" community is discursively (and thus, some would argue, ontologically) more inclusive of gender- and sexual nonnormativity. On its face then this linguistic distinction is the first way Jessica was making space for her own, and other AFABs' and cis women's participation in drag culture. Next, Jessica began to speak very slowly, with long pauses between words as she thought through which distinctions and qualifiers were important for her to make between "women," "queer women," "cisgendered [sic] straight women," "bachelorette party straight women," and "people who are self-reflexive enough to know how to behave in [queer] spaces." Luckily for me as a researcher, Jessica's out-loud thought process here was fairly evident to me as she moved from speaking about one group of people – "women" – and ended up at the end of her sentence talking about "people who are self-reflexive enough to know how to behave in [queer] spaces."

My interpretation of this chain-link of gender categories is that Jessica was originally going to make a point that women have always been a part of drag culture, but she began to anticipate common objections to her claim (e.g., some cis gay men's claims that straight women are brand new, badly behaved invaders into queer spaces). As she did so, she began qualifying and narrowing the group of people whom she most specifically meant to include in drag culture ("self-reflexive people"). By landing on "people" and their *behavior*, ultimately, Jessica dropped gender, and even identity more broadly, from her formulation altogether as

she made the claim that drag culture is not the sole province of (gay) men but rather that of “people” who know how to behave in queer spaces. Thus Jessica’s criteria for membership in drag culture is not based simply on gender or sexual identity, but rather on some mixture of gender, sexual identity, and queer cultural competence (see Jane Ward’s discussion of *sexual cultures*, 2015)

Since accusations of cultural appropriation were one of the main criticisms queens in this research told me they had fielded from others, particularly from cis gay men, Jessica’s comment does important conceptual work in linking the linguistic shift from “gay” to “queer” community – arguably a move against stable and binary gender and sexual identities – to an attendant recognition that the community called “gay” was never actually (just) gay. Rather, it was and has been queer, at least in terms of the myriad gendered and sexual modes of being to be found among its members. In so doing, she spoke back against criticisms that suggest that non-cis-male queens are appropriating drag culture from its ostensibly rightful owners, cis gay men, and thus redrew the boundaries of drag to construct it as a multi-gender queer – not just gay – culture.

While many CMDQs lobbed accusations of cultural appropriation and drew boundaries around drag culture on the basis of cis gay men’s history of gendered and sexual marginalization, some participants in this study situated queer history within a broader western cultural history of devaluing femininity writ large, and thus turned CMDQs’ claims of cultural appropriation on their head. These queens argued that even if gay men created the cultural practice of “drag” as we know it today (and the truth of this point is certainly debatable if not totally unknowable), that femininity, ostensibly the main constitutive element of a drag queen’s performance, actually belongs to AFABs and/or women by virtue

of it having been forcibly imposed upon them in society. Some queens harkened all the way back to ancient Greece and/or Shakespearean England to construct a collective counterhistory of “drag,” or at least the theatrical performance of feminine embodiment, as something that only men did because women were barred from performing onstage. The queens in my research who mounted this defense were adamant that, even if we accept the premise that drag culture was started and developed by cis gay men, it extends from a long tradition of sexist discrimination in the arts, and thus, it is unethical and sexist to continue to deny women access to stage performances.

The queens who use this defense find it distasteful at the least, and misogynistic at the worst, that cis men would seek to deny AFABs and/or women any opportunity to perform femininity. This contention is illustrated below by Nina, a 24-year-old queer-straight-“borderline asexual” Latina cis woman queen from the Bay Area:

Gay men, mostly, it's always like, a straight white man – err, a gay white man trying to make the argument, usually all the time: ‘This is a gay art form, queer art form, made just for us. You [women] should not be participating in it.’ This is just stuff that I see, not stuff that has actually been directed towards me, which I think is pretty funny, but uh, does not make sense to me whatsoever. You're literally defining an art form that takes the identity that we were born into and then tells us we can't participate in it.

Nina’s absolutely fascinating slip of the tongue, in which she first said “straight white man” before correcting herself to “gay white man,” demonstrates the extent to which she sees whiteness and maleness as representative of gatekeeping power. According to Zerubavel (1996), “Freudian slips” reveal processes of categorization, as in the example of a (white) person erroneously calling a black person the name of another black person who works in the same predominantly white office, thus revealing (black) race to be salient in the way that white person categorizes and relates to those two (black) individuals. The archetypal figure

of the “straight white man” is often invoked in progressive politics as the embodiment of social power; in this case, then, the fact that Nina accidentally invoked this figure in a discussion of *gay* white men’s gatekeeping practices suggests the presence of wide gaps in subcultural power on the basis of sex-gender and race within the drag scene, which Nina has mentally categorized according to proximity to power writ large, rather than by identity as such. Jessica (44, white, “straight, but culturally queer” cis woman drag performance artist in the Bay Area) illustrated this rupture between CMDQs’ and other queens’ discourses of drag culture when she decried

the hypocrisy and irony of people telling me, as not only a feminine-born person, a feminine-raised person, and a currently feminine-performing person, in both day life and drag, ‘*You’re* appropriating culture that centers upon, celebrates, and empowers femininity, but I as a cisgendered [sic] male person who benefits inherently – regardless of, you know, maybe being bullied in high school and that kinda thing, but being and presenting male comes with a certain inherent systemic male privilege that a lot of people don’t want to check because they feel personally victimized when in reality we’re talking about social systems here...they’ll somehow view men doing drag as women as acceptable, but women doing drag as women is appropriation in some way...they’ll go into ‘well, in a gay space and how we understand modern drag, people who performed as drag queens were inherently men in male spaces and they sought these all-male spaces as a refuge against normative culture.’ But can you see how there’s a complete absence there of [the fact that] there have always been queer or gay women and you’re talking about the history of the queer community as *men* in *male* spaces so where were the queer women? Either you were excluding us or we were there and you’re just not acknowledging our existence...’you find accounts of the women who in the HIV epidemic in New York City were the ones caring for the queens who had been kicked out of their homes because they did drag and were gay...a lot of that gets overlooked in favor of just being like, ‘Yep but you’re in a *gay* space at a *gay* bar and you’re a *woman* so you don’t necessarily belong here.’ And I’m like, ‘Oh no, I’ve belonged here since the beginning.’ [emphasis in original]

Nina’s and Jessica’s comments indicate that while CMDQs, and cis gay men more generally, have experienced and continue to experience femmephobia, homophobia, and marginalization in society, they still retain systemic gendered advantages over women, femmes, and AFABs in the drag scene, and that, furthermore, the homophobia CMDQs

suffer in broader society and seek to combat through drag is reflective of the misogyny that women, femmes, and AFABs experience both within *and* beyond drag culture.

I began this chapter thinking about how to understand what “drag” is through the lenses of Goffman’s concept of the definition of the situation (1959) and Star and Griesemer’s concept of boundary objects (1989), both of which are foundational to the process of social interaction. That the definition of Drag (Queen) is partially a matter of interpretation, and that these interpretations are used as the basis for queer cultural gatekeeping in the drag scene, shows the importance of the definition of the situation in constructing discourses about the liberatory political potential (or lack thereof) of cross-gender performances in general and drag in particular. Crucial to this point is the fact that while the three “foil” definitions of drag define the practice of drag virtually identically, they assign differing value judgments to it and identify its stakeholder constituencies differently. Insofar as the definition of the situation in any circumstance of inequality impacts the strategies social actors will undertake to eradicate that inequality, the ways drag queens and their audiences of all genders define and understand “drag” will have import for the ways those social actors define the boundaries and norms of drag culture and queer culture more broadly.

When the definition of the situation and its attendant boundary objects are functioning smoothly, with manageably small differences in interpretation, social interaction can unfold relatively unproblematically. However, when the disparities between definitions are too great for the limited plasticity of the boundary object to accommodate, conflicting discourses begin to talk past one another because they lack enough shared terms of engagement, revealing disjunctures in the social construction of reality. In the case of the

drag scene, the definition of “drag” is a boundary object which, in practice, can usually accommodate differences in meaning between social actors. However, in today’s shifting milieu of queerness, where queer bars are being squeezed out through gentrification (Mattson 2015, Orne 2015, Baldor 2019), queer culture is increasingly available for consumption and participation online and on TV (Herrera 2018, Duguay 2014), and gender ideologies and possibilities for embodiment are ostensibly expanding beyond the historical western sex-gender system (Rubin 1975, Meadow 2018), interactional processes of boundary-making become more fraught and pronounced, such that different definitions of the situation can escalate into heated debates about who “belongs” in the drag scene and who “owns” feminine embodiment. According to the queens in this study, whereas CMDQs tend to construct the boundaries of queer cultural ownership around their own group (cis gay men) as the primary architects, historical practitioners, and intended beneficiaries of drag, the participants in my study rejected and redrew these boundaries in one of three ways, to either: include queers of all genders, but not straight people; include queers of all genders, and some culturally competent straight people; or eliminate the boundary entirely such that *anybody* can and should participate in the multi-gender queer culture that is *drag*.

While many non-cis-male drag queens are not “women,” most of the controversies and public discourses around who can/should do drag that I discussed in this chapter referenced “men” and “women” as the competing stakeholders with regard to what drag is. Indeed, this is another rupture point in the discourses swirling around who can and should be a Drag Queen: whereas, according to the queens I spoke with, many or even most CMDQs base their boundary-making processes around drag on an understanding of “men” and “women,” other queens tend to reject the binary premise of CMDQs’ discourse and

instead emphasize gender expansiveness and transgender possibilities in their own definition of the drag as a *multi-gender queer culture based on the staged exaggeration of quotidian gender*. Because the quotidian gender category Woman is central to what *drag* is, in the next chapter I will explore participants' understandings of what *gender* is to gain a fuller understanding of how Drag Queen is temporarily accomplished and, in some cases, transcended in the drag scene.

III. CHAPTER TWO: “TAKING FEMININITY SO FAR IN ONE DIRECTION
THAT IT FALLS OFF THE PLANET” | ALIEN FEMININITIES

I. **Trans-Inclusionary Gender Essentialism (TIGE)**

- a. TIGE principle 1: Gender diversity is self-evident (especially in queer spaces)
- b. TIGE principle 2: Gender is unfixed and nonbinary
- c. TIGE Principle 3: Gender is produced in, on, and with the body
 - i. *Gender In the Body: The feeling of gender*
 - ii. *Gender On the Body: Clothing, makeup, adornment, style, hairstyling*
 - iii. *Gender With the Body: Comportment, voice, activities*

II. **Woman**

- a. Woman as the linguistic and psychic referent for femininity
- b. Woman as defined through the “feminine body”
 - i. *Breasts*
 - ii. *Fish*
 - iii. *Reproductive capacity*
 - iv. *Curvy Body Shape*
 - v. *Face*
- c. Woman as the specter of the straight white girl

III. **Femininity**

IV. **Femme**

V. **Alien Femininities: An Escape from Gender, aka “Earth’s Bullshit”³¹**

- a. Alien femininities as intelligibly humanoid
- b. Aliens as fantastical and not bound by human constraints
- c. Aliens as futuristic

³¹ Quote from Arin (22, white, queer, nonbinary, transgender, California)

CHAPTER TWO: “TAKING FEMININITY SO FAR IN ONE DIRECTION THAT IT FALLS OFF THE PLANET³²” | ALIEN FEMININITIES

Andrea: I’m really curious about like, the alien thing [you mentioned] too, so what is it about like the alien vibe that is interesting to you?

Arin: Um, they’re like, so elusive, you know? It’s like, people have been talking about them for hundreds of years like, “Oh there’s aliens, Area 51” and all that stuff. And there’s so many different versions of aliens like, going around, that some people are like, “Oh, they look like us...sort of. You know, they still look humanoid and then there are others where they’re like, tiny little green people, and I just think that there are so many different ways that you can play with that and each look is gonna be different. And I really love the idea of being like, out of this world.

Andrea: Yeah! Yeah, why do you think that’s so appealing to you?

Arin: I think because for a really long time I didn’t feel like I fit in on this one?

In the previous chapter I argued that ideas of *gender*, *femininity*, and *womanhood* are central to conflicting definitions of drag. Now, I will show that the primary way queens in this study conceptualized gender was through the framework of what I am calling *trans-inclusionary gender essentialism*, or TIGE, which is based on three major premises: 1) gender diversity is self-evident; 2) gender is nonbinary and unfixed; 3) gender is produced in, on, and with the body. This means that while gender, according to the queens in this study, is divorced from sex and bodies, it is still something that is *felt* inside oneself – an essence. It’s

³² Quote from Amanda (31, white, bisexual, white, cis queer femme in Arizona)

important to distinguish this discourse of gender from trans-*exclusionary* models of gender that reject the gender identity claims of transgender people (i.e., those of trans-exclusionary radical feminists or “TERFs” as described in the introductory chapter of this project). Crucially, TIGE allows queens to justify their participation in drag by differentiating drag from quotidian gender. Whereas gender is something individuals have “all the time”³³, and furthermore whereas gender diversity is self-evident in queer culture³⁴, drag is a staged performance based off the *baseline* of that quotidian gender. TIGE somewhat contradicts with social constructionist theories of gender and sexualities, a rupture point that is crucial for gender and sexualities theorists to explore. In this chapter I will describe the discourse of trans-inclusionary gender essentialism (TIGE) insofar as participants engage in it to define “gender” per se. Then I will discuss “woman” as a particular gender – arguably *the* salient gender category with regard to drag culture. *Woman*, I will show, is defined in normative terms that reference femaleness and femininity. Against this normative feminine womanhood, the queens in this study enact two primary semiautonomous gender options: *femme* and *alien*. These intentionally constructed genders allow the queens in this study to embody personas that are legibly “feminine” but not beholden to binary gender and, in the case of alien femininities, not even totally “human.” Importantly, aliens are humanoid creatures who thus exist partially outside the strictures of compulsory normative feminine womanhood. Both *femme* and *alien femininities* were constructed by participants who had experienced *gender trauma*, which I conceptualize in two primary ways: coercive gendering (i.e., they felt uncomfortable with the normative expectations of the gender they were

³³ Quote from Kendra, 22, white, queer, bisexual, cis woman, Pacific Northwest

³⁴ Quote from Jessica, 28, white, cis queer femme queen in Toronto

expected to perform) and/or gendered (sexual) violence in childhood as opportunities to enact feminine gender in an autonomous – or at least semi-autonomous – way. Gender trauma will be analyzed in further detail in the next chapter during my discussion of participants’ understandings of the micro, meso, and macropolitical implications of *femme* and *alien femininities*.

Although drag as the staged exaggeration of gender is defined against its everyday counterpart, *quotidian gender*, in practice it is actually very difficult to demarcate the difference between the two. To illustrate the ways “drag” and “gender” extensively overlap as concepts, below is an excerpt from an absorbing conversation I had with Veronica, a 44-year-old “straight, but culturally queer” white cis woman performance artist with more than two decades of experience queening in the Bay Area’s drag scene. In this quote, Veronica and I struggled to distinguish “drag” from (quotidian) “gender” through the conceptual language of “performance”:

Veronica: An important part of the definition of drag for me [is] it's gotta be in some way exaggerated. There can be subtlety in the performance, but I don't think in general it is a subtle form. I think, extremity of gesture, extremity of look, extremity of feeling also defines drag. I feel like this is why sometimes drag king performance, you know masculine performance, is a little harder to ... it can be not as ostentatious and therefore not as interesting sometimes because ... masculine performance is actually a performance of like, blending in somehow, you know, and non-spectacle, and non-ostentatiousness. Whereas feminine performance is about, you know, there's something over the top, so sort of a pushing of performance.

Andrea: And when you say “feminine performance,” are you speaking generally of gender performance in life, or are you speaking of –

Veronica: Oh sorry, I mean performing, like – I don't mean gender performance in everyday life, but like, uhhh, yeah, performing, the performance on stage of the exaggerated aspects of what we assume to be a gender. (laughs) Uuuuggghhh! (laughs)

Here Veronica hinted at the social construction of quotidian gender by defining drag as the exaggeration of “what we assume to be a gender,” thus defining drag as a sort of simulacrum, or “a copy of a copy which has no original” (Baudrillard 1981). By defining drag as a staged exaggeration of a gender category that is itself socially constructed, i.e., not “real,” Veronica moves beyond an understanding of drag as “men dressing up as women” by calling into question the coherence of the quotidian gender category of Woman in the first place.

Trans-Inclusionary Gender Essentialism (TIGE)

Participants discussed gender writ large in terms of a discourse of trans-inclusionary gender essentialism (TIGE). While participants did not discuss gender in exactly those terms, I have identified the main parameters of this overarching discourse by piecing together many comments made by participants with regard to gender, womanhood, femininity, and drag.

TIGE has three main elements:

1. Gender diversity (especially in queer spaces) is self-evident, therefore
2. Gender is unfixed and nonbinary, and
3. Gender is produced in, on, and with the body.

TIGE principle 1: Gender diversity is self-evident (especially in queer spaces)

Participants described queer spaces as overflowing with obvious and demonstrably benign gender diversity. As Jessica (28, white, cis queer femme queen in Toronto) told me about gender in her queer community:

I've seen so many people move along the scale, so like, if you look at gender or identity or even sexuality as a series of spectrums (pause) aaaaand, you know, people think either that you fixate at one end or you fixate at the other end or you fixate in the middle. I just can't – I look around and can't believe that (laughs). Because there's people shifting as they please, back and forth and maybe they fixate and maybe they shift way down as femme and then they go back and they fixate and maybe they fixate for some years and then they shift a little, and then they stay there, and I, I just, or maybe they shift all the time, I just, yeah. I feel like that's just a more, for meeee, a more accessible idea of gender and identity, because it just makes more sense with what I'm seeing people do. [emphasis in original]

The queens I spoke with, like Jessica above, viewed this gender diversity unproblematically; that is, they did not pathologize it and thus constructed it as benign and not in need of correction. This view of gender diversity as mundane and unremarkable is reflective of a cultural shift in how gender nonconformity is viewed, which Meadow (2018) explains as follows: “Now, atypical gender is understood not as a failure of gender but as a form of gender. One might say, it now marks the insufficiency of the gender category itself. Gender nonconformity used to be the debris that marked psychopathology; now it is the material that constitutes social identity” (216). Meadow’s analysis here hints at the ways abject gender(s) can be recuperated (Hebdige 1979) into normative discourses that do not liberate everyone from the force of normalizing power but rather redirect it toward other and new forms of the abject. Recuperation is a danger always lurking around the corner of every social movement; therefore, scholars and activists would do well to think through the possible unintended consequences of any strategy for liberation from normalizing power.

TIGE principle 2: Gender is unfixed and nonbinary

Given the self-evident nature of benign gender variation, and in some cases their own nonnormative genders, the queens I spoke with understood gender to be unfixed (that

is, able to change over the life course) and nonbinary (that is, not limited to two discrete categories of male and female). Importantly, if gender is unfixed and nonbinary, that means that TIGE cannot be reconciled with a “no-cishets” approach to boundary-making in queer spaces, because one must assume that cishet people may not remain cishet after being exposed to other gendered possibilities in a queer space. Some queens even discussed the ways their own gender shifts over time.

Shelley (22, white, gay, queer, bisexual, nonbinary, genderfluid, Rhode Island) described their genderfluid identity to me at the beginning of our interview in the following way:

I don't necessarily feel like, tied down to any one particular gender identity or expression for myself? Um, so like some days I might present more masculine, some days I might present more feminine, or like, sometimes it's like, (chuckles) in the range of a couple hours and I'm just like, oof!

While Shelley identifies as nonbinary and genderfluid, and thus we may expect them to describe their gender as unfixed, Janet (30, white, bisexual and polyamorous cisgender woman queen in the Pacific Northwest) illustrated that according to a TIGE perspective, cis people's gender can be unfixed and shift over time as well:

When I am in a relationship with a female I tend to be a bit more of my *femme* self, a bit more...like a boss-ass bitch. Um, and so I tend to be more of that in my relationships with women. I tend to be more of the lead in my relationships with women, whereas, in relationships with men I tend to fall back on my *feminine* side, and I tend to default more to the man. Um, and so to me it is a little bit linked to my sexuality just because those aspects do come out really depending on who I'm with.

Here Janet points to the mutual construction of gender and sexuality, particularly in interaction, as well as the distinction many participants made between *femme*, as a self-consciously chosen semi-autonomous gender, and femininity, as a more normative

configuration of gender which reinforces the power of men and masculinity, a distinction which will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

TIGE Principle 3: Gender is produced in, on, and with the body

Gender *In* the Body: The Feeling of Gender

In TIGE, gender emanates from several sources. Following my interviews with the queens in this study, I have conceptualized the production of gender in TIGE as occurring *in, on, and with the body*. Firstly, gender *in* the body refers to those elements of gender that are based in some inherent core part of a person's being. In other words, this part of gender is the "essence" in "trans-inclusionary gender essentialism". For instance, Jessica (28, white, cis queer femme queen in Toronto) described "people who, you know, feel nothing without their femininity, it's *so* inherent and ingrained in them. That is how they express themselves." Kendra (22, white, queer, bisexual, cis woman, Pacific Northwest) artfully illustrated how gender essentialism – the idea that gender is something essential that one feels in the self – is not inherently trans-exclusionary or based on a binary gender ideology:

Andrea: So a couple of times in the interview you've talked about sort of, "between" and "external" [relative to the gender binary]. Can you talk to me a little bit about that idea?

Kendra: Yeah, like I don't think of gender as being one or the other, or like, in between. Like there is a spectrum of gender but then there's also gender I think that doesn't correlate to any of that. Um, there are people who don't feel like they're in between two points, those two points aren't even relevant to like, how they feel. Um, obviously I don't feel that way and so I don't, like, know what that experience would be like. Um, so I don't know if I'm sort of necessarily describing it as well as I could be, but, I know that there are people for whom that is their reality.

Importantly, Kendra theorizes that she cannot know how people who experience their gender as external to the binary "feel," given her own gender identity as a cis woman. This

further demonstrates the core nature of gender essence in TIGE by implying that the feeling of gender is so inherent to the individual that we are categorically unable to know how someone else's gender feels to them. Thus, in TIGE, at least part, if not all, of one's gender identity emanates from a core feeling, or sense of self, as one gender or another (or more than one). This is a phenomenological understanding of gender, in that the "felt sense" of gender "delivers the body to consciousness" (Salamon 2010). Meadow (2018) explains that this means that gender "is a product of and subject to cultural conventions, but it is also a structuring principle of psychic life, infinitely real to its possessor" (250). Importantly, while "essentialism" has come to be synonymous with "anti-transgender" or "binary" in some theoretical circles, essentialist understandings of gender are not anathema to validation of trans subjectivities. In fact they are wholly compatible if gender identity is divorced from sex assigned at birth – thus, *anybody* with *any body* may identify as *any gender* based on their *deeply felt* sense of self. In foregrounding subjectivity and feelings as what constitute the realness of gender, a trans-inclusionary gender essentialism makes meaning of gender outside a framework of biological determinism (Balogun 2020, personal communication). Indeed, Meadow (2018) argues that essentialist discourses of gender render transgender children more, not less, intelligible to their parents: "The notion that 'gender identity,' or the felt sense of gender subjectivity is fundamental, immutable, and not tied to the materiality of the body makes it possible for parents to begin to understand some children to be transgender and to alter their social environments to accommodate that subjectivity" (19). While Meadow's respondents constructed discourses of *immutable* essential gender subjectivity – an important distinction from my own participants, who largely understood the essence of gender to be changeable over the life course, at least for some people – Meadow's research

still makes clear that essentialist discourses of gender are not at all, in fact, incompatible with increasing acceptance of and recognition for trans people. What remains to be seen is whether such intelligibility will ultimately contribute to trans folk's (and everyone's) liberation from gendered systems of normalizing power, or whether it will reincorporate trans bodies and identities into newly expanded, but still regulatory, gender categories.

Gender *On* the Body: Clothing, Makeup, Adornment, Hairstyling

No queens in this study constructed gender as wholly essential; rather, the essential nature of gender identity was understood to work in tandem with other more external modes of gender *on* the body like bodily adornment to produce and/or represent one's gender. Meaningfully for this research, in mainstream western gender ideology, gender expression *on* the body is constructed as representative, in other words, as indicative of other inner truths, including sex category, personality characteristics, class positions, racial subjectivities, and sexual desires (Moore 2006, West and Zimmerman 1987, Esterberg 1996, Freeman 2000). Alex, a 21-year-old Filipina and white queer, genderfluid, pansexual queen in Texas illustrated the heterosexual nature of normative constructions of women and femininity when they described how these associations are used by CMDQs to deny others access to queer spaces:

Andrea: Why do you think people think that women or people who were born female aren't really doing drag?

Alex: Um, there's a lot of misogyny in the gay community, and I think that it's the biggest factor. Obviously like, a gay man in a bar is going to automatically look at, like, a woman and be like, 'Oh, well you don't belong here. You don't look like a stereotypical lesbian.' So, um, like if I'm in drag, all you see is like, the back of me. And depending on whatever color hair [I'm wearing as a wig], it's not [the look of a] stereotypical lesbian, so automatically they're like, 'What the fuck.'"

Here Alex illustrates that certain elements of stylized embodiment, including in particular recognizably feminine aesthetics, are frequently not considered queer on a body read as AFAB. CMDQ's rejection of legibly-feminine Alex as "not a stereotypical lesbian," then, points to the ways gender done *on* the body is socially perceived as representative (see Whitehead and Thomas 2013), that is, of corresponding to some core truth located further inside the body, in this case Alex's presumed straightness. By looking at these gendered systems of normalizing power that operate in the bar, we see that normalizing discourses of gender both *in* and *on* the body combine to regulate access to queer spaces through conflating visible gender nonconformity with homosexuality and thus rendering queer femmes invisible in both the drag scene and broader society.

Gender *With*³⁵ the Body: Comportment, Voice, Activities

Importantly, the body is an active participant in the production of gender within a discourse of TIGE; rather than (only) being a vessel or blank slate for gender expression, the body and elements of physicality contribute to the production of gender. One way this happens is through simple *physical presence* in a particular space. Building off the idea that gender is unfixed, some queens explicitly connected one's physical presence – that is, one's IRL³⁶ participation – in a queer space as having a potentially queering effect on one's gender

³⁵ I considered "through" and "via" but decided to use "with" because "with" constructs the body as a more active participant in the production of gender, rather than simply a vessel for gender expression.

³⁶ "In real life" as contrasted with online modes of community participation – I used the acronym IRL here because the fact that "IRL" is its own known concept represents the way offline and online interactions are discursively constructed against one another by internet users of all stripes.

and/or sexual identity. This is one way we do not usually think of embodiment, but simple *physical presence in a space* actually figured quite heavily into these queens' understandings of gender non-fixity, because it was paired with a (sometimes even hopeful) understanding of the "ripple effect" that seeing nonnormative genders may have on someone who theretofore had never considered gender per se very much. As Meadow (2018) argues, "the genders of others come to influence our own sense of self, and the possibilities we believe exist for the children in our lives" (13). While Meadow's work focuses explicitly on the ways trans children and their parents come to understand gender, the point still stands that our understandings of what is possible are mediated by what we have seen others be able to achieve; in this way, the gendered body is itself a political symbol, and thus is itself a co-producer of gender and, crucially, gender *change*. Ipso facto, any attempt to analyze femininities apart from their political implications is partial and likely misguided.

Part of normative sex-gender-sexuality is idea that not only do normative sex-gender-sexuality covary, such that normal adult males are heterosexual men and normal adult females are heterosexual women (see Freud 1905), but also that these positionalities are immutable and innate. However, there is ample evidence in my data that theretofore cisgender, heterosexual individuals who may enter the drag scene believing in binary normative sex-gender-sexuality – or at least not having given it much or any thought before – may not remain cishet once they've participated in queer culture and seen the self-evident diversity of genders and sexual desires and identities. This idea will be further explored in chapter three of this project, which deals in part with the ways queers construct community boundaries and whether those boundaries help or hinder in the queer project of liberation from normalizing systems of inequality.

Other ways the body coproduces gender in TIGE include bodily comportment and voice, which some queens lamented “gave them away” as women and/or AFABs even when the gender *on* their body – that is, their drag – was visually indistinguishable from that of a cis man queen, as Nina did in chapter one. Indeed, scholars have found that voice remains a persistent way to categorize people by gender (Lagos 2019, Sorokowski et al. 2019).

Fascinatingly, many of the queens in this study used a particularly recognizable high-pitched, breathy, silly-sounding, valley-girl-esque voice to deride, or otherwise discursively distance themselves from, *other* women. 17 participants shifted their voice in this way a total of 53 times during our interviews. This use of feminine voice as derision shows the ways even those who would disavow femmephobia sometimes engage in it at the possible expense of other feminine-coded people. Veronica (44, white, “straight, but culturally queer” cis woman drag performance artist in the Bay Area) has been performing as a queen since the 1990s. She described herself at the beginning of our interview as heterosexual, married to a cis man, “but culturally queer”:

Veronica: (laughs) This idea of [affects purposefully high-pitched nasal “valley girl” voice], “Goin out with the girlsssss!” [end voice] You know, even though I’m a total feminist, that particular socialization of heterofemininity is like, so not, um, (long pause) anything I’ve ever identified with, and conversely I’ve always been around gay culture, and gay - gay men, and um, those have been queer folks, the artsy kids, and the gay kids were always my friends growing up and like, my social circle.

This is fascinating because while a majority of queens in this study identified as queer (31), and only 6 identified as straight, cis men queens’ discourses against others’ participation in drag rest at least in part on an idea of “woman” as cisgender and heterosexual that is not congruent with the identities of many, or even most (as my sample suggests) non-cis-male queens. In this way, regardless of political ideology with regard to who *belongs* in the drag

scene and who *owns* queer culture, CMDQs' discourses seem to be simply factually inaccurate. What makes Veronica's comment so fascinating in particular is that she herself *is* a straight white woman – the exact confluence of identities that is most vehemently pushed out of the drag scene by CMDQs and even some non-cis-male queens. Veronica's "cultural queerness" (i.e., queer cultural competence), long history in the West Coast drag scene and in queer clubs, and affiliation with "artsy" gay friends as a child is easily reconcilable with the comments made by Jessica (28, white, cis queer femme queen in Toronto) in chapter one, in which Jessica argued that there should be space for "the people who are self-reflexive enough to know how to behave in [queer] spaces," and that culturally competent people should not be denied access to queer spaces on the basis of gender or sexual identity. By invoking the unfixity and nonbinary nature of gender *in* the body, the profound physical transformation that drag effects *on* the body, and IRL participation in drag spaces *with* the body, the queens in this study legitimate their own participation in drag culture while also distancing themselves from the specter of other women. This process of discursive distancing as a mode of gender accomplishment is reminiscent of the ways high school boys play discursive "hot potato" with the specter of the fag, repudiating it and directing it toward other boys in order to achieve masculine status (Pascoe 2007). This pattern reflects queens' partial adoption of Cohen's (1997) strategy of organizing queer community and solidarity on the basis of proximity to normalizing power writ large – while some queens' insistence that queer spaces be open to culturally competent attendees of all genders and sexualities, their discursive distancing away from other gender-marginalized people (i.e., straight women) shows that marginalization in and of itself, even on the basis of gender, is not sufficient for

some queens to extend solidarity (or, among those who espouse a “no-cishets” approach to community, access to queer space).

Woman

In the above section I described how participants constructed “gender” writ large within a discourse of trans-inclusionary gender essentialism. One gender category in particular – “woman” – is particularly salient in discussions of drag. Indeed, “woman” is arguably *the* salient gender category for drag queening. “Woman” was constructed by the queens in this study in three primary ways:

1. “Woman” is the linguistic and psychic referent for, and is frequently conflated with, “femininity.”
2. Per this conflation, “woman” is defined through the “feminine” body, which is
3. *Normatively* associated with womanhood, i.e., “woman” is the specter of the *straight white girl*.

Woman as the psychic and linguistic referent for femininity

Firstly, “woman” appeared frequently throughout our in-depth interviews as both the linguistic and psychic referent for “femininity,” even among participants who otherwise sought to fully denaturalize the links between sex, gender, and embodiment. The normative construction of the “feminine” body and its performance of normative white cishet femininity combine to produce a discursive construction of “woman” that is a linguistic and psychic referent, and even sometimes a stand-in/metonym, for *femininity*. For example, the phrase “real girl” to refer to a cisgender female person is often understood to be

problematically cisnormative in queer and trans communities, and yet it was used by several cis woman queens who professed themselves to be allies to their “trans sisters.”¹² participants used the phrase “real girl” or synonymous phrases (e.g., “actual girl”) 21 times in the interviews I conducted for this project. This shows that even among queens who are verbally and in their activism supportive of trans women’s claim to womanhood, it is difficult to think outside the terms of binary sex-gender when attempting to articulate nuanced ideas about sex, gender and bodies, and furthermore that womanhood is a social construction defined circularly in a loop along with femininity. This is reminiscent of white people’s inability to talk coherently about race in Bonilla-Silva’s analyses of colorblind racism. This is also relevant to the fact that while many participants do not identify as women and/or were not AFAB, most of the controversies within and outside of drag communities regarding what is drag and who can/should participate in it are based on a binary division of “males/men” and “females/women.”

When I pressed with follow-up questions about femininity, participants who told me they did indeed consider themselves a feminine person frequently couched their answer in terms of womanhood and/or “girly-girliness,” like Janet (30, white, bisexual and polyamorous cisgender woman queen in the Pacific Northwest) did, below:

Andrea: Do you consider yourself a feminine person, generally?

Janet: I do...I am such a girly girl (laughs). I love clothes, I love shoes, I love makeup, I’m kind of a makeup hoarder. I just, I love being. A woman, I love being a girl. And (pause) I am (pause) – I am so lucky that I was born into a body that I *so* identify with, um, because I cannot imagine, you know how sometimes you kinda think, “I’m in the woods, I’m on a hike, if only I had a penis [to pee arguably more easily.” I’ve never even thought that (laughs). I wouldn’t, like, I’m happy to squat because that means I don’t have to be a guy (laughs). I am very femme (laughs). I am *so* girl.

Janet was also one of the most adamantly pro-trans participants I spoke with: her drag mother Alisha is a genderqueer trans woman, and Janet uses the term “cis queen” to describe herself while avoiding what she perceives as the trans-exclusionary connotation of the term “bioqueen”:

Janet: When I am performing in drag I actually use the term cis queen, because um, I am a cisgendered [sic] female performer performing as a drag queen, so, I personally don't like the term bioqueen because (pause) I don't think that it's an accurate representation of (pause) someone who was born female. Because honestly a transgender person can also be a bioqueen, because biologically if they have gone through, uh, sexual reassignment surgery, um, they do have the biological aspects of a female as well. So um, I prefer the term cis queen just because I was born a cisgendered [sic] female and I do perform as a drag queen.

Because Janet had so forcefully delinked sex and embodiment from gender earlier in our interview, I wanted to press her on this point, which she amended after I asked her about it:

Andrea: So, a couple of times you've mentioned sex reassignment surgery and I'm wondering um, do you think that uh, a trans woman who hasn't had sex reassignment surgery could also be a bioqueen?

Janet: I think so, yeah. I mean if they feel that they were not born- In my opinion, if you feel that you (pause) should have- and I'm gonna use [a word], I'm sorry I was a premed biology major -

Andrea: no worries (laughs)

Janet: If you feel like you should have had a vagina and that biologically is who you should have been but you were not born that way or you cannot have the means or whatever to have that (pause) done or have that made a reality for you, I think that you pause are still biologically female within your own psyche. Um, I just, I feel like, saying, “Because you have male genitalia does not make you biologically a woman,” um, when in your mind you are, I think that that is (pause) a hurtful thing to say to someone who is trans, and I think it's kind of demeaning to someone. And it goes back to, you know, that body dysmorphia [sic]³⁷, it really feeds that body dysmorphia (pause) thing... I am a woman because I was born a woman. and because I believe I am a woman. and I believe that, my house mother is a woman because she was born with the mentality of she is a woman. she may not have been born with parts, but, she is a woman on the inside and that's what counts.

³⁷ I believe Janet was meaning to refer to gender dysphoria here, not body dysmorphic disorder.

So here we see that even Janet, who went to great lengths to defend her drag mother Alisha's claim to womanhood on the basis of subjectivity and feeling rather than bodies, still used "woman" and "girl" as referents for "femininity," and further still, understands genitalia to be at least somewhat relevant in – if not exhaustive for – for discussions of drag terminology and womanhood more broadly. Janet's many thoughtful pauses show how she was carefully navigating internally inconsistent discourses of womanhood, and the confluence of her sometimes-contradictory ideas here reflects the ways participants in this study, for the most part, sought to express trans-inclusiveness to me verbally, while also engaging in discourses which could be construed as cisnormative at worst, or at least reinforcing of cultural associations between (assigned) femaleness, femininity, and womanhood.

The frequency with which even very trans-inclusive queens – including queens who are trans themselves – in this research conflate "woman" with normative (hetero)femininity was surprising to me. Importantly, I do not seek to impugn the allyship of any participant, but rather seek to explore the inconsistencies inherent in all discourses of gender. I argue this conflation of womanhood with femininity, and cisness with "realness" persists even among those who would profess to disavow it because, as Butler and many others have suggested, language structures not only the process by which we become subjects (Foucault 1982) and our attendant habituses (Bourdieu 1984) but also our ability to articulate different modes of being which are rendered unintelligible, unknowable, and unspeakable within current discourses. Put another way, we understand ourselves and the world around us according to the discourses that are available to us. Given this truth, it is easy to see why even the participants most adamantly in favor of trans people's claims to their own gender(s)

fell back on using “female” and “woman” as referents for femininity – whether they meant to or realized they were doing it or not.

Woman as defined through the “feminine body”

Secondly, normative ideas of what women’s bodies look like figured heavily in my interviews with participants, with breasts, vaginas, reproductive capacity i.e., the womb, the face, and the hourglass figure being the most commonly invoked indicators of femininity and womanhood.

Breasts

Some participants matter-of-factly defined “breasts” as a “woman’s” body part, as Winona (25, white, gay, lesbian, queer, cis woman, Texas) did in responding to CMDQs’ critiques of other queens, which she partially acknowledged as well-founded:

Well [pause] I guess, I mean I underst- I mean, I have a woman’s body, you know, like, I still pad to exaggerate it, but that’s something, definitely. Because (pause) you know like, a lot of men think like, “Oh you already have an hourglass figure and an ass that I don’t.” You know, I still pad and like, can’t breathe all night just like them. I have boobs but to be honest I don’t like to like, try and do too much [with them, in drag]. Like, I would almost rather hide them and have people question if they were real or not?

Indeed, several AFAB and/or cis woman queens told me that while they prefer for audiences not to be told, or not to be able to perceive, that they are any different than CMDQs, their breasts reveal their AFAB status, like Kitty (30, white, queer, bisexual, pansexual, cis woman, Ohio), who told me “I’m five-foot-one with a very, very large chest, so people are probably not going to assume that I am a male drag queen.” Roxy (27, “white and Hispanic”, straight, cis woman, Pacific Northwest), Janet’s drag sister and Alisha’s other

drag daughter, has also worked as an exotic dancer. She told me about an instance where she was, in fact, mistaken for a cis man in drag (something that has happened to several queens in this study and which is often sought after as a goal):

Andrea: So she mistook you for a male drag queen... and how did you feel when she sort of, made that mistake?

Roxy: Well, I thought. It was pretty funny, yeah, [she was] just like – “Yeah I thought you were like me, like, you look so good, you’re so pretty I thought you were a real woman.” And like, I mean, I have a 38DD [bra size] and my boobs were out, so (pause) – musta been a pretty good pair of fake boobs. (laughs)

Here part of the comedy for Roxy is that her breasts should have “outed” her as a “real” woman to this audience member. This means Roxy was connecting the embodied experience of having (large) breasts with womanhood, even as she, like her drag sister Janet, was explicitly supportive of their transgender drag mother Alisha’s claim to womanhood. Like Roxy, Lindsey (24, white, straight, cis woman queen in Florida) lamented that her breasts are the *only* thing that enable audience members to clock her as a “woman”:

I don’t want people to look at me because I’m a woman doing drag and think I’m different from anyone else. Cuz when I’m in a line – like, last night I was the only bioqueen performing. Look at me in a line of other people [CMDQs specifically], the only thing they [audience members] know is, “Oh, well, she has boobs.”

Lindsey knows that audiences mostly understand drag to be a cross-gender performance enacted by a cisgender man and wants to avoid being labeled an inferior queen because she is a woman. Importantly, Lindsey identifies her breasts as the giveaway, thus showing the extent to which she expects audiences to associate her (seemingly “real”) breasts with cisgender womanhood.

Fish

Ironically, CMDQs often seek to be perceived as women, using the term “fishy” to describe CMDQs who could “pass” as cisgender women:

Andrea: So I’ve heard you use this term “fishy” or “fish” a couple times.

Jennifer: Yeah.

Andrea: Could you describe what that means, to me?

Jennifer: (laughs) It’s just what I’ve picked up around hanging out with other drag queens. Um, it’s such a rude term really, when you break it down. It’s funny how insulting terms can lose their meaning if they’re used again and again and again, and I feel like it’s – I feel like it could – I feel like it *is* insulting, but um, the context it’s used in has changed to a level where it [fish] means to be *so* feminine, *so* passable as a woman. And I know, like, I know for a fact that none of my drag family uses it as an insult. It’s just pure compliment, but every now and then [I’m] sort of just like, “Well, they do know it doesn’t smell like fish right?”

Here Jennifer (31, white, pansexual “female, but I sometimes forget what gender I am,” pansexual queen in London) explains the origins of the term “fish/y,” which are linked with cisnormative assumptions that women have vaginas.

Reproductive capacity

Vaginas (or as some queens put it, *pussies*) also figured into participants’ definitions of women through the idea of childbirth as a constitutive element of womanhood, women’s strength, and femininity’s value:

Tina (34, black, queer, pansexual, cis woman, Arizona): To me toxic masculinity is a nasty, nasty thing. And toxic masculinity will kill femininity because men are so scared of being anything that is opposite of soft or weak, and when they think of femininity that’s what they look at. “It’s soft, it’s weak, it’s not as strong, it’s not as smart, it’s not as powerful.” There are women out there that are 10 times more powerful than most men. There are women out there that are stronger, smarter, faster, (pause) better than men at things, but they will never get the same recognition because they are women. And they’re always gonna be deemed as less-than. So for me, when people think of femininity, I don’t think of femininity as a negative thing.

I've never thought of it [that way]. When somebody used to say, "Oh you're a pussy," I need [them] to find another insult because a pussy is a strong thing, it gives birth to people, they birth nations, so before you call somebody a pussy I'm gonna need you to find a different insult, cuz you tap a man in the nuts he's going *downnn* like a rock in water. [emphasis in original]

In her above comment, Tina seeks to rehabilitate femininity's value relative to (toxic) masculinity's by invoking the physical strength of the vagina to give birth. This illustrates the ways participants sometimes reinforced cisnormative binary gender in an attempt to combat misogyny, especially through their descriptions of women's body parts.

Curvy Body Shape

Yvette (36, white, queer, cis woman, Los Angeles) intriguingly linked women with curvy figures, but delinked both women and curvy figures from femininity: "I personally love curvy bodies. I love the shape of a typical woman. I'm attracted to that. I find that beautiful, but I don't think that because you have curves you feel femininity." Chelsea (19, white, lesbian, cis woman, upper Midwest) linked such associations between womanhood and hourglass figures to the reproduction of gendered norms through aesthetic standards in drag:

Andrea: Why do you think people have the expectation that um, that you're supposed to pad [in drag]?

Chelsea: I think it's all about getting the stereotypical womanly figure. And I think just having that (pause) expectation of having that figure is saying that all women should look like this. And I just think that's ridiculous.

Here Chelsea acknowledges that hourglass figures are "stereotypical" and further links this stereotype to the drag queen look, arguing that expecting drag queens to pad to achieve the hourglass figure helps to reinforce "ridiculous" gendered beauty standards. In this way she makes the beginnings of a visibility-based ripple-effect argument for how social change

occurs, which I will explore in chapter three along with other modes of reinforcing and/or destabilizing systems of normalizing power.

Face

Tracy (23, “mixed-race” Native American, Japanese, and white, gay, lesbian, queer, cis woman, Midwest) used the idea of a “woman’s” face to explain to me why exaggeration is an integral part of drag:

Tracy: I use 301 lashes and I wear two pairs of those at a time, and I take my [eyeliner] wing super far, like almost to the edge of my face, so that it can be seen back there [in the back row of the audience], to make my eyelid look larger. And I glue my eyebrows down and make my crease higher, and then make my brows higher of course.

Andrea: And why do you think that exaggeration is like, part of drag?

Tracy: Um, I think it really started because, you know, most men, their brows are lower and they don’t have – some don’t have as defined [of] cheekbones and stuff, and that’s what they’re trying to give, is the illusion of being a woman, so I think that’s how that started.

Crucially, the body parts most frequently invoked in the discursive construction of the feminine woman’s body were not chosen at random; rather, they represent some of the body parts most normatively associated with gender and exaggerated sexual dimorphism (see Wade 2013) in western societies. This leads us to think about how “woman” is inherently a normative and normalizing construction that exists both external to and internal to the body: within a discourse of TIGE, “woman” can be conflated with broad discourses of “feminine” body parts *and* be defined through feelings, essence, and identity. Feminine embodiment, in TIGE, is a felt subjectivity that covaries with but does not (necessarily) wholly overlap with the body as such, as it is materially constituted. The materiality of the body is instead *mediated* by the internal, felt subjectivity of gendered embodiment as well as by external, normalizing

discourses of gender in society that gender bodies in particular ways (see Butler 1993 for more on “the body” as discursively produced).

Woman as the specter of the straight white girl

Thirdly, then, queens constructed “woman” in terms of normativity, providing me with a collective description of an amalgamated figure I am calling the specter of the *straight white girl*. Importantly, references to “women’s” bodies are not random, but rather draw from *normative* ideologies about sex, gender, and bodies. The cis, feminine nature of the discursive construction of “woman” is clear in the above examples of embodiment, where womanhood is constructed as (at least sometimes) equivalent with female embodiment and femininity.

Brigitte (21, Latina/white, bisexual, trans woman queen in the Pacific Northwest) is a Brazilian immigrant to the United States who told me she is considered white in Brazil, but Latina in the United States. Below, she illustrates how whiteness also figures into participants’ constructions of “woman”:

Brigitte: Farrah Moan³⁸, yeah, love her, love her so much.

Andrea: And what is it about her look that speaks to you?

³⁸ Figure 19. Farrah Moan is a famous white fishy drag queen who has appeared on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*:



Brigitte: It is totally that high femme look. Um, when she does drag, she (pause) goes for that like, (pause) porcelain skin, really big eyes, um, like, Marilyn Monroe hair.

Andrea: Mhmm.

Brigitte: She just, I think she just takes what she likes most about, like, feminine icons? And tries to emulate them.

We can see above that Brigitte is constructing porcelain skin as a building block of feminine “icons” like Marilyn Monroe – thus revealing whiteness as an integral part of the figure of the normative woman who is a referent for femininity. This illustrates how within the discourses swirling around non-cis-male drag queens’ participation in drag, “woman” is a referent, or metonym, for the most *normative* version of a woman – cisgender, heterosexual, white, and, of course, feminine. I am calling this construction the specter of the straight white girl, based on the ways participants referenced those characteristics in particular to describe (the normative) woman, a figure my cultural contemporaries may recognize as the “basic bitch.”

Above all else, the straight white girl is competent in matters of heteronormative society – that is, her achievement of normative femininity – being a *normal woman* – signals her adult cultural competence in an aesthetically restrictive society. At the same time, she is *so* incompetent in matters of queer culture that participants frequently sought to discursively distance themselves from her for fear of calling into question – on the basis of a presumed affiliation among all women with the straight white girl – their own participation in drag culture. When I asked Sasha (20, “black mixed race,” pansexual, nonbinary, genderqueer,

gender nonconforming, Florida) why so many CDMQs are hostile to non-cis-male queens (the term Sasha uses is “femme queen”):

I, I’ve been trying to figure that out, because for me, like, I don’t know, also a lot of people that are not familiar with like, femme queens, they assume that all assigned-female-at-birth entertainers are like, cis, and that they’re straight and that they’re like, not part of the community basically. So I don’t know if they feel like, like these females are coming in, or these performers are coming in as like outsiders, and they’re tryna like, infiltrate the drag system. (chuckles) Like I have no idea, I’m not sure what goes on in their heads cuz you know, in my head, this is my community, and I love drag, and I would just love to a part and just to kind of be integrated with everybody, even if I am a little bit different by birth, you know? But for other people, I, I wish I knew why it was like SO like, crazy (chuckles)

In Sasha’s comment we can see evidence of the cisgender, heterosexual construction of “woman” in CDMQs’ discourse, a construction which serves to contaminate such queens in CDMQs’ eyes by virtue of non-cis-male queens’ presumed affiliation, affinity, or sameness with cisgender straight women, who are understood to be unwelcome interlopers in the drag scene. This presumed association was a concern for many participants who purposefully sought to distance themselves from the straight white girl by deriding this figure. All of this taken together means, then, that “woman” is the salient gender category in drag in (at least) two ways – first, by being the quotidian baseline from which drag queens exaggerate/extrapolate to produce drag, and second, by appearing as the central figure – constructed according to political necessity in the moment – in conflicting discourses about who belongs in queer spaces and who can and should do drag.

Femininity

The ways the queens in this study talk about “women” in terms of embodied normative femininity makes visible the social construction of gender and the difficulty of

“undoing” or even “redoing” it (Connell 2010). For example, one of the first questions I asked every participant was whether they considered themselves a feminine person. No matter their answer, I followed up with a question phrased something like, “And what does that mean to you? Being a ‘feminine person?’” While “femininity” often covaried with its frequent referent “woman” in participants’ casual speech, most participants also took great pains to make clear to me that femininity is a type of gender that can be performed on any type of body, by any gender of person. Most participants balked at my request that they define “femininity” for me, and struggled to do so. I heard many versions of “that’s a hard question”:

(Rapid intake of breath) Oh my god. Um. (Pause). That’s a deep, hard-hitting question there. (laughs)

-Penelope, 21, white, queer, pansexual, cis woman, Florida

Ummm, that’s a good question. (Pause) I’ve never thought about that before. Ooooh. Good one. That’s a good one!

-Jessica, 28, white, cis woman, queer femme, Toronto

I don’t, I don’t really know. That’s a hard question. Um, yeah, I dunno. I think I’m gonna pass on that one for now, might come back to it later.

-Roxy, 27, “white and Hispanic”, straight, cis woman, Pacific Northwest

Hmmm. (Pause) That is a very hard question.

-Yvette, 36, white, queer, cis woman, Los Angeles

Oh, oof, that’s a loaded question, I feel. (laughs)

-Cassandra, 20, Asian American, gay, lesbian, queer, bisexual, nonbinary, genderfluid, upper Midwest

(Surprised, low voice) Ooooh. That’s a good question. (end voice) That’s hard.

-Christina, 21, white, gay, lesbian, queer, nonbinary, Colorado

Mm, that’s a hard question. (Pause) I don’t really know.

-Em, 27, Jewish, white, asexual, nonbinary, genderfluid, identifies under the trans umbrella, New York City

Oof!

-Moirira, 23, white, pansexual, cis woman, Virginia

These quotes are reminiscent of the times in chapter one when participants refused to define “drag” for political reasons, i.e., they wanted to adhere to a deconstructionist reading of sex, gender, and sexuality. As a researcher, again, I was vexed by everyone’s seeming unwillingness or inability to just *tell me what femininity is* – including my own inability to define it. However, what belies femininity’s ostensible indefinability is its legibility – very much like “drag,” we somehow know it when we see it, even if we can’t articulate how or why. In this way, while femininity may be impossible to define as one thing in particular, it is also constrained by available discourses and ideologies, like a) linguistically and psychically, “woman” and “female” are frequent referents and stand-ins (metonyms) for “femininity,” and b) femininity, in a binary gender order, must always be *not* masculinity, and thus is in some ways dependent on masculinity for its definition.

Femininity was frequently defined through references to clothes, makeup, hair, and feminine-coded interests like playing with dolls. Because these definitions are so thoroughly congruent with well-known normative understandings of femininity I will not spend a lot of time on them here. The following quote from Amanda (31, white, bisexual, white, cis queer femme in Arizona) illustrates one such description of femininity:

Choosing to wear like, exaggerated expressions of femininity for me feels ... the way that I do my gender is very girly and like, I like makeup and high-heels and those things, for *me*, um, are a way that I express my gender. But obviously, not all women feel that that’s what makes them a woman or feel like they’re less of a woman if they don’t do that. Um, you know, it’s not up to *me* to, you know, dictate how other people *do* their gender but for *me* those things relate to how I am like, a woman in the world. [emphasis in original]

Discourses that attempt to undo or redo gender are always in conversation with normative binary gender ideology, and they sometimes seek to radically redefine the terms of gender

writ large. For example, 13 of the participants in this research described femininity to me either as “strong,” a “source of strength,” “powerful,” or “a source of power.” For example, earlier in this chapter, Tina (34, black, queer, pansexual, cis woman, Arizona) defined women partially through reproductive capacity, i.e., pussies that give birth, which she linked to *femininity’s* superior strength over masculinity. Another example comes from Franki (20, white, queer, femme, nonbinary, agender drag performer in Texas) who described to me the various hardships the women in their family have gone through, particularly at the hands of masculine people: “I view femininity as strength, and actually masculinity as weakness, in a way, because of my experience with people who are feminine in my life.” Franki used their family members’ resilience to construct a new understanding of femininity as strength and power.

Some participants’ conceptualizations of femininity as strong and powerful were based on cisnormative assumptions about women, femininity, and childbirth, which may render this particular reframing of femininity as insufficient to destabilize normative systems of binary gender, as evidenced by Petunia (24, white, queer, cis woman, New York City), who argued that there is “a certain power in femininity” because “the world would not exist without the woman...they’re the ones birthing and creating.” So within a normative oppositional binary western gender order, masculinity is constructed as strong while femininity is constructed as weak, leading some queens to seek to recuperate (Hebdige 1979) femininity in a way that feels personally empowering, although it is unclear on an analytical level whether and how such stark re-definitions of gendered concepts, particularly those still based in a binary gender ideology, would/could effect broader societal shifts in normative

systems of gender. This point will be further explored as one manifestation of the micro (i.e., individual-level) political potentialities of drag femininities in chapter three.

Femme

While many queens defined femininity in similar ways as does the normative binary gender ideology, they imbued it with alternative meanings. Of particular note is the insistence of many of my participants that “femme” be distinguished from “feminine.” Among the queens I interviewed, several were adamant that femme is its own (quotidian) gender identity, equivalent to “man” or “woman.” When this was stressed to me, it usually accompanied an insistence that femme is a specifically queer gender identity, distinct from both (straight) “woman” and AFAB, deriving from butch-femme cultures in decades past. In particular, Sabrina (28, white, lesbian, queer, genderfluid and “woman-aligned” nonbinary, Maryland) who has a PhD and enjoys a large internet following on multiple social media platforms for their femme-based profiles, illustrates the expansiveness with which they viewed *femme* as opposed to the restrictions of *femininity*:

Femme for me is everything and anything it wants to be. Um, femme is queer, femme is antiracist, femme is anticapitalist, femme is feminist, femme is inherently political. Um, femme is like, about pleasure, abundance, radiance, joy, but also grief and crying in public and pain you think will never end. Um, I think femme can mean death, but femme is also a future. It’s like a hope and a chance, because it’s like limitless, it’s ambiguity, and it’s incohesiveness. Um, in all of its complexities and challenges and complications. Um, what I love about femme is that it defies even being defined and I respect that about femmes and femme. But *my* femme is messy pink lipstick and technicolor hair and cat dresses and combat boots and lots of pastel baby pink. Um, my femme is survivor solidarity and queer magic. Um, joyous resistance, healing as revenge. Thriving just like everything else. My femme is a flower blooming between cracks of concrete, as cliché as that is. So, I like mentioned earlier for me feminine, means (big sigh) um, like, not-consensual, put-on-you expectations about what it means to be a cisgender woman, with all those histories of violence and oppression, like, informing those performances and visuals and

aesthetics. And, femme is (pause) a whole galaxy of meaning and it's something that was given to us by first butch-femme culture and then transformed to include anyone and everyone who identifies and aligns themselves with queer femininities. Um, I also think that femme is explicitly queer, like, which is a big difference between feminine.

Like the queer femmes in Hannah McCann's (2018) study, the femmes in my study constructed their own gender expressions as more intentional and thus ostensibly less normative and oppressive than what they perceive as the heteronormative femininities of straight (white) women who are duped by binary gender ideology into believing they naturally are, and/or must be, feminine, at least in part for the enjoyment of (cis) men. Brigitte (21, Latina/white, bisexual, trans woman queen in the Pacific Northwest) and I co-theorized around this thought when she argued that in order to identify as femme, someone inherently needs to have thought about their gender in an intentional way, otherwise they would not have such a particularly gendered identity as femme:

Andrea: So would you say there's something maybe like, different about a queer femininity or a straight femininity or something?

Brigitte: I super see what you're saying. Um, I think that the difference is that if you (pause)- if you use femme as an identity then you recognize that not all people (pause) need to or want to (pause) like, identify with that same pause sort of (long pause) I dunno how to say this. (pause) Okay: if someone identifies as femme, then they probably acknowledge that gender is more of a spectrum than like, (pause) just if you're a boy you're gonna be masculine, if you're a girl, you're gonna be feminine.

Andrea: Mhmm!

Brigitte: It kind of implies that there's more choice for everyone.

Andrea: Yeah!

Brigitte: And whatever their choice, it's okay.

Andrea: That to identify as femme on purpose means that you're kind of like, doing your gender on purpose in a way?

Brigitte: Yeah – yeah – you’ve thought about your gender and what you like about how to express yourself.

Through invocations to intentionality and gender (semi)autonomy, femme-identifying participants like Brigitte were careful to argue that while femme and femininity might *look* the same, they are intrinsically different, in politically important ways. I will further explore this contention in chapter three.

Alien Femininities: An Escape from Gender, aka “Earth’s Bullshit”³⁹

Through embodying *femme* as an intentionally enacted, semi-autonomous gender identity, participants sought to transcend the strictures of normative femininity, although they often had the expectations of binary gender imputed back onto them despite their objections or alternative identities. Indeed, femme is recognizable within a framework of TIGE as a nonbinary, deeply felt sense of gender, which distinguishes it from drag insofar as femme quotidian gender is, for the most part, understood as something one has “all the time”⁴⁰ whereas Drag (Queen) is a temporary accomplishment of a temporary queer gender category. This means that femme is subject to the same types of gender assessments and procedures of accountability in daily social interaction as are other genders like “woman.” In this way, while femme often *feels* empowering to femmes (a point which will be further explored in the “micro” political potentialities section of chapter three), it does not allow femmes to fully transcend normative gender in their day-to-day lives.

³⁹ Quote from Arin (22, white, queer, nonbinary, transgender, California)

⁴⁰ Quote from Kendra (22, white, queer, bisexual, cis woman, Pacific Northwest)

But – this point raises the question – why *aliens* and other fantastical creatures as the route to extend beyond “womanhood” as the end goal of legitimate drag? As my dissertation committee chair CJ Pascoe asked me, why aliens and not “like, a sexy lady *house*?” To answer this question we must look back on the subcultures literature, which argues that the particular styles subcultural members adopt are indicative of cultural and identity-based issues they are attempting to navigate or resolve through embodiment (Wilkins 2008, Hebdige 1979). Along this vein, I theorize three primary reasons alien femininities appeared in my data more than any other humanoid creature or non-human drag costume:

- 1) Aliens are humanoid and thus more intelligibly gendered than a “house,” for instance, which allows alien femininities to be still in intelligible conversation with, and thus able to more coherently push and pull on, normative gender ideology.
- 2) Aliens are fantastical, and thus not bound by human issues and human concerns like physical space, social injustice, and binary gender ideology.
- 3) Aliens are coded as futuristic in US society, which means they are ideal figures through which to imagine gender transformations, the future of gender liberation, and the political potential of symbolic transgressions to the gender order.

Alien femininities as intelligibly humanoid

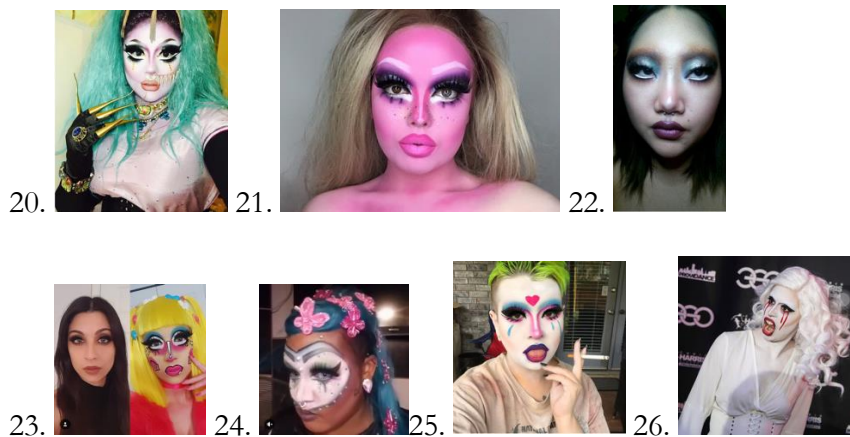
Alien femininities functioned in much the same way as femme insofar as queens intentionally constructed them as a method of transcending the strictures of normative gender. However, important differences between femme include a) that femme is a fully *human* gender identity, as opposed to the *humanoid* nature of alien femininities and b) that while femme is held to be an authentic, deeply felt, all-the-time gender identity, alien

femininities are explicitly temporary, existing only as long as the queen in question stays in drag. These differences have important implications for the respective ways femme and alien femininities enable the queens in this study to transcend normative gender – or not. Most importantly, while femme is a more inhabitable gender for daily life than “alien” in the aesthetically restrictive culture of US society, and thus may be a more doable option for semi-autonomous gender on a day-to-day basis, the fact that it is frequently visually indistinguishable from cis het femininity renders femmes subject to many of the same oppressive interactional and behavioral expectations as other feminine-coded people such as women. For instance, Elizabeth (25, white, bisexual queer femme pinup in Ohio who identified as a cis woman during our interview but later updated their Instagram to reflect a gender identity of nonbinary/trans) described themselves as currently very femme, visually, which granted them a certain amount of heteronormative privilege relative to the homophobia they had previously experienced as a more butch-presenting person, but said their femme presentation also rendered them invisible to other queer people as well as subject to misogynistic violence:

[Looking femme] does grant a certain amount of privilege but then at the same time...there's also being a regular target because of being a woman and you know, potentially being sexually assaulted and whatnot. Um, so it's like a double-edged sword, both ways, but at least when I was out and very masculine, I had the automatic kind of community that now is much more difficult [to find].

Alien femininities, on the other hand, are unmistakably different from normative quotidian feminine gender expression by virtue of their incorporation of non-human physicality. Crucially, these alien femininities are still legibly feminine, because they are being enacted as part of a *humanoid* persona – in other words, the queens have not gone “full alien,” but rather mix-and-match elements of alien and human-feminine aesthetics to

produce a new gender: *alien femininity*. This new gender enables the queens in this study to experience a fuller (if more temporary) rupture – and even catharsis – from gendered systems of normalizing power. Below are some Instagram posts from participants in this research (and one public post by a queen who did not participate but whose look was inspired by a participant) doing alien drag, several of which were captioned by participants with sarcastic comments like “There’s no transformation, you’re just a girl wearing makeup” (Daphne, 26, white, queer, asexual, questioning about romantic attraction, cis woman, Florida) and “Where’s the transformation, sis?” (Cassandra, 20, Asian American, gay, lesbian, queer, bisexual, nonbinary, genderfluid, upper Midwest, and Shelley, 22, white, gay, queer, bisexual, nonbinary, genderfluid, Rhode Island), thus indicating that part of the reason for doing alien aesthetics in drag is to aesthetically overcompensate their femininity in order to be legitimated as real drag queens:



Figures 20-26. Alien Femininities⁴¹

⁴¹ I am reluctant to identify these pictures even by pseudonym for confidentiality concerns, due to the small overall numbers of non-cis-male queens.

Aliens as fantastical and not bound by human constraints

Spatial metaphors for gender predominated in participants' discussions of gender, femininity, womanhood, and drag. By "spatial metaphor" I mean a description of gendered concepts (including gender itself) using the language of physical space or properties. Examples include gender as a "continuum," femme as a "galaxy of meaning,"⁴² and nonbinary gender identities as "outside," "above and beyond" the gender binary, or as existing in a synesthetic "grey area" between the closed-system, "black and white," binary gender identities of *man* and *woman*.

I bring up spatial metaphors for gender because they contain an inherent physicality to them; they retain a concreteness through their reference to physical space. This linguistic argument has import for how we might sociologically understand the ways spatial metaphors – and tangibility, physicality more broadly – figure in to the ways queens conceive of dismantling systems of inequality through drag. Most importantly: participants largely spoke of (normative) gender in spatial, physical terms, referencing a rigidness they sought to transcend through alien femininities. Aliens were the most commonly mentioned fantastical creature that participants sought to embody in their drag, although others, including unicorns, mermaids, and demons, also appeared during interviews. Stylized humanoid personas, including clowns, princesses, and the Sugar Plum Fairy from Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*, were also mentioned frequently in interviews, as well as inanimate phenomena like cupcakes, drawings of women, and cartoons.

⁴² Quote from Sabrina (28, white, lesbian, queer, genderfluid and "woman-aligned" nonbinary, Maryland)

Earlier in this chapter Kendra (22, white, queer, bisexual, cis woman, Pacific Northwest) commented that many people feel their gender as external to the gender binary.

After making that point, she elaborated:

Kendra: I know that there are people for whom that is their reality and so, um, I think that, that drag can also come from there too, in that though there's no reason that they should feel like they have to squeeze themselves into that spectrum [between the poles of "man" and "woman"] in order to participate in doing drag. What [Savannah⁴³] is doing is sort of this alien type of experience and so, for her that might be a way of being sort of, yeah, getting outside of this gender binary for a little while and doing something completely different.

What links all these together is that they are human-ish, but not quite, which led me to wonder whether by transcending humanness in their drag performances, participants were also seeking to escape human *problems*. After initial coding revealed alien aesthetics to be an important theme, I recoded all instances where non-human creatures were mentioned and discovered that queens use alien aesthetics to construct their own autonomous versions of gender and femininity which are self-defined yet constrained by available discourses, nostalgic yet forward-thinking, and which allow queens to escape what they perceive to be the unfair beauty standards, need for (men's) affirmation, and banality of normative gender and femininity.

More broadly, participants told me alien aesthetics are an escape from earth's "bullshit," including politics (several mentioned the election of Donald J. Trump to the presidency of the United States) and even gender *per se*. Another more instrumental, strategic reason they used alien aesthetics in their drag was to make sure their drag was draggy enough, since, as we have established the line between "woman" and "drag queen" is

⁴³ Kendra referred to another participant, Savannah, by Savannah's drag name here.

unknowable, and furthermore that many CMDQs deride other queens' drag on the basis that they (still) look like "regular women." Christina (21, white, gay, lesbian, queer, nonbinary, Colorado) describes the ways alien femininities riff on, but go beyond, the femininity of a "feminine woman":

I still, I love femininity, like, I think femininity is so much more beautiful and so much stronger than masculinity any day, which is ironic because I do identify- err, I do present more masculine, but I love, um, one of the reasons I presented more masculine was just because I don't get harassed by men as often. Like I really don't, um, when I was feminine I, you know, it's really hard to be a feminine person in our society because of how predatory people can be and so presenting more masculine gives me more power in everyday life, but as soon as I'm feminine and dress up and put on a wig and makeup, you know, there's such a beautiful power that femininity has because there's such creative power to it and you know there's um, there's so much more you can do with femininity in my opinion, because it's so unexplored and it's been so confined in our society for so long. And to be feminine in my own way and on my own accord [in drag], and maybe not dressed up as a feminine woman but like, I dress up as feminine, like, demons, and I dress up as these feminine characters that aren't necessarily like everyday women, I feel like there's a huge power to being feminine on my own time, and not being able- and not like doing it in everyday life to be put in a box if that kinda makes sense.

Following Christina's thinking here, then, we might imagine and theorize that fantastical creatures like mermaids and aliens escape such concerns – and therefore allow these queens a temporary respite from earthly problems like sexism – precisely because they are presumably not – or less – bound or constrained by spatial and physical limits in the same ways humans are.

Aliens as futuristic

Most importantly, the crux of my argument about alien femininities is that through their cultural association with futurism, they point to a way forward, out of oppression and "Earth's bullshit" toward a state of liberation from normalizing power. Black queer feminist

theorists in particular have utilized Afrofuturism, science fiction, and speculation to theorize liberation. Imagining new futures, in this body of work, is just as important as excavating painful and oppressive histories, because so much of black (queer, trans) women's history has been forcibly invisibilized and thus cannot provide a thorough groundwork for theorizing liberation on its own. This truth is a major reason to reject the positivist premise that scholar-activists must be able to measure the full contours of a social problem before theorizing ways to solve it – such a position would render black women's liberation impossible because their experiences of coercive gendering, racialization, and sexualization (i.e., their subjugated knowledges) have been erased, glossed over, rewritten, and flat-out lied about by white people (Collins 1990, Spillers 1987, Edwards 2015, Clarke 1983). Thus, black feminists argue, continuing to exist into the future in and of itself (Lorde 1983), as well as imaginatively exploring future possibilities, is not only important but functionally necessary to theorize and act toward black liberation (Cooper 2015, Edwards 2015, Hammonds 1994).

Indeed, alien aesthetics were sometimes linked in participants' interviews with being futuristic. Vanessa (22, white, bisexual cis woman queen in North Carolina) described their sci-fi “cyber pop” looks as akin to the aesthetic of *The Fifth Element*, a “bright, happy, the vibrant futuristic movie” which they contrasted with the “drab” aesthetic of other futuristic movies like *The Matrix*. Likewise, Franki (20, white, queer, femme, nonbinary, agender drag performer in Texas) described their drag character to me as “the most human and the least human drag character”:

Franki: So, I do things that are weird with my drag makeup, like I choose not to blend, I choose to use odd colors or no color, I actually skip blush a lot of times because I feel like it makes my face look less alive, um, and that's an attribute for my character...I'm high energy, um, kind of high-concept, futuristic...

Andrea: And I'm wondering if you can sort of talk me through why that appeals to you, that sort of alien aesthetic or that not-human idea?

Franki: Yeah, I mean I think it's because as a queer person I am alienated from a lot of situations, people, ideals, and it's sort of like, reclaiming that in a way? Like, oh yeah I'm definitely an alien, look, I have guts coming out of my stomach. Like, it's kind of a way to poke fun at it and really kind of embrace my otherness. Um, I love the word alien, I think it's really fun... I think my character is definitely not of this world, necessarily? But really wants to be a part of this world.

So we see that participants related several reasons for incorporating alien aesthetics into their drag. Franki's explanation, above, was particularly moving for me to hear. We can imagine a lonely alien, different from everyone, and wishing desperately to fit in without losing the "otherness" that makes them special. How, then, might we understand alien femininities as a lens toward the future, which reflects and makes visible the problems of the present?

Black queer feminist theorists in particular have utilized futurism, science fiction, and speculation to theorize liberation. Imagining new futures, in this body of work, is just as important as excavating painful and oppressive histories, because so much of black (queer, trans) women's history has been forcibly invisibilized and thus cannot provide a thorough groundwork for theorizing liberation on its own. This truth is a major reason to reject the positivist premise that scholar-activists must be able to measure the full contours of a social problem before theorizing ways to solve it – such a position would render black women's liberation impossible because their experiences of coercive gendering, racialization, and sexualization (i.e., their subjugated knowledges) have been erased, glossed over, rewritten, and flat-out lied about by white people (Collins 1990, Spillers 1987, Edwards 2015, Clarke 1983). Thus, black feminists argue, continuing to exist into the future in and of itself (Lorde 1983), as well as imaginatively exploring future possibilities, is not only important but functionally necessary to theorize and act toward black liberation (Cooper 2015, Edwards

2015, Hammonds 1994).

In this chapter I showed the complexity of participants' discourses of gender, which alternately drew on both a binary model of gender wherein gender (feminine woman/masculine man) covaries with sex (female/male) and on nonbinary models of gender which encapsulate virtually infinite modes of gender identity, expression, and performance, sometimes even in the same breath. Participants' primary discourse of gender, trans-inclusionary gender essentialism (TIGE), points to the limitations of a *totally* social constructionist model of gender, which is espoused by some feminists, queer theorists, and sociologists and posits *no* truly internal essence of gender other than that which is formed through socialization or subjectification. In other words, these queens' understandings of quotidian gender clash with both the feminist sex-gender distinction (Rubin 1975) and the poststructural claim that there is no prediscursive body (Butler 1990, 1993). Importantly, TIGE allows us to consider affect, i.e., feelings and emotions, as a core element of gender as well as a potential motivating for social change. In the next chapter, I'll consider the political potentialities of *femme* and *alien femininities* and think through participants' estimations of their ability to destabilize normative systems of sex, gender, race, and sexuality within and beyond the drag scene.

IV. CHAPTER THREE: POLITICAL POTENTIALITIES OF FEMME AND ALIEN FEMININITIES

I. **Micro**

- a. Micro-Affective Dimensions of Femininities: Fun
- b. Micro-Affective Dimensions of Femininities: Personal Empowerment after Experiencing Gender Trauma

II. **Meso**

- a. Meso Dimensions of Femininities: Explicit (Intersectional) Feminism
- b. Meso Dimensions of Femininities: Existence as Resistance

III. **Macro**

- a. Destabilizing Macro Systems of Power: White Supremacy
 - i. Rehabilitating Femininities as Antiracism
 - ii. Reinforcing White Standards of Beauty through Contouring
- b. Destabilizing Macro Systems of Power: Gender
 - i. Strategy: Total Gender Unintelligibility
 - ii. Strategy: Seeking Gendered Misperception
- c. Destabilizing Macro Systems of Power: Sexual Identity
 - i. Boundary: No Cishets
 - ii. Boundary: Everybody Welcome

IV. From Micro to Macro?: Considering the Mainstreaming of Drag

CHAPTER THREE: POLITICAL POTENTIALITIES OF FEMME AND ALIEN FEMININITIES

Drag is a big f-you to male-dominated society.

-RuPaul, “The World’s Most Famous Drag Queen”

“Drag is kind of like (pause) a big f-you to gender society...

You’re kind of like, saying f-you to gender stereotypes.”

-Moirra (23, white, pansexual, cis woman, Virginia)

Throughout the interview process, questions arose for me in thinking through the ways participants’ conceptualizations of gender may be relevant to the ways they and other scholars strategize toward liberation. Firstly, I wondered whether social change agents necessarily have to fully understand what gender “is” to be able to effectively subvert it? On

the one hand, the claim that in order to effectively solve a problem we must first identify what the problem is and how it operates makes *prima facie* sense. On the other hand, feminist, queer, and postmodern modes of theorizing gender (and reflexive, anti-positivist methodologies more generally) raise the question of whether a complex social problem like gender – or power writ large – is knowable in the first place. If we follow these two points, then, it would seem that if gender is unknowable, then it is unsolvable. To write frankly, this is not a political position that I am willing to engage seriously with; though it flows from a different conceptual source, it is reminiscent of what Butler (1990) criticizes as Foucault’s “slave morality,” a somewhat nihilistic and ultimately apolitical perspective which renders liberation conceptually impossible. Thus, a more useful question for sociologists interested in reducing gendered inequalities is: in the absence of knowing fully our enemy – as Cohen would say, “normalizing power” writ large - how can we act against it?

In this chapter I will discuss the ways participants in this study theorized the political potential of gendered enactments – most particularly the semi-autonomous genders of *femme* and *alien femininities* – to destabilize systems of normalizing power at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Since the full workings of normalizing power are unknowable – given that, among other reasons, subjects who would resist it are constituted by it (Foucault 1978, Butler 1990) – I am theorizing the plausible political potential of *femme* and *alien femininities* to *contribute to* liberation, rather than analyzing whether these femininities are “liberatory” as such.

West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that ideological movements like feminism can provide the “impetus to question existing arrangements and the social support [e.g., legislative changes] for individuals to explore alternatives to them” (1987:22). As an

imperfect metric for gauging participants' interest in liberation from gendered inequalities, I asked all participants whether they identified as feminist. 39 participants explicitly identified as feminist. An additional 4 identified in what I interpreted as feminist-adjacent ways, which took two forms: a) participants who ambivalently identified with feminism but felt feminists are too "extreme", and b) participants who ambivalently identified with feminism but distanced themselves from the term *feminism* due to it having been tainted by TERF activists. 4 participants identified as not-feminist; their perspectives on social change are important but will not be the focus of this chapter or dissertation, given their relative lack of interest in effecting social change to reduce gendered inequalities as well as their very small number relative to feminist and feminist-adjacent participants. The feminist-identifying queens I spoke with by and large conceptualized their feminism as intersectional and as combating community-level injustices based on, primarily, race (racism and white supremacy), and gender (femmephobia, misogyny, transphobia). The primary ways they enacted this feminism were in their verbal interactions with others in the drag scene (both audience members and other performers), their performances onstage, and their online posts. I theorize these interactions as a bridge between the micro-affective level of feeling and the meso level of community values and norms.

The bedrock of many queens' claims for the political potential of femme and alien femininities is what I am calling the *ripple effect* – the idea that feelings and actions at the micro level will ripple out at the meso level to affect other community members' perceptions of race, gender, and sexuality, their own identities, and the possibilities these others imagine for inhabiting the world and their own bodies. Importantly, the idea of a ripple effect helps us construct conceptual bridges that can explain how social change occurs and reverberates

among levels of society: following participants' conceptualizations of the ripple effect, I theorize that (symbolic) interaction between social actors, which is typically considered mostly to be the province of microsociology, is a bridge *between* the ultramicro level of embodied, felt, and lived experience of individuals and the meso level of community and organizations because – as participants also argue – such interactions are not only built upon but also reshape community-level norms, values, and practices. In the conclusion of this project I will explore the feasibility of a ripple effect that extends all the way to macro-level systems of inequality.

At the micro level, participants theorized the political potential of femme and alien femininities in terms of *fun* and *personal empowerment*, which they primarily described through affective language and which took two main forms: the reclamation of feminine embodiment after a) coercive gendering by their families and normalizing power writ large and/or b) gendered and/or sexual abuse and trauma. At the meso level, the queens I interviewed cited the *visibility of non-normative genders and sexualities* in the drag scene as a catalyzing force for community members to rethink binary systems of gender and identify with non-normative genders and sexualities and viewed their participation in drag culture as *combating racism, misogyny/femmephobia, and transphobia in the queer community*. At the macro level, participants suggested ways femme and alien femininities might serve to *destabilize normalizing systems of power* through a conscious rejection of white supremacist logics of binary gender and sexuality. At the end of this chapter, I consider the mainstreaming of drag via *RuPaul's Drag Race* as one way to explore the ripple effects between micro, meso, and macro levels of social life.

MICRO

In *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Presentation*, one of the relatively few recent sociological treatises on femininity per se, McCann (2018) argues that much discourse regarding femininity suffers from an overly narrow focus on a politics of representation that is concerned with what the feminine body *means* for the future of gender oppression. Against this political-representational focus, McCann offers affective questions around what the feminine body (*can*) *do* and how it *feels*, through which she aims to “queer” femininity by exploring it beyond its relationship to gender normativity. However, in shifting questions of politics toward questions of affect, McCann does not altogether defend why an affective analysis of femininities is incompatible with a simultaneous analysis of femininities as always political and implicated in systems of gender oppression.

McCann presents affect and politics as mutually exclusive focuses between which scholars must choose, a perspective echoed by an internet user called Evluon, who commented on the controversial interview in *The Guardian* in which RuPaul proclaimed “drag is a big f-you to male-dominated culture.” Evluon wrote, “You can’t politicise everything, drag is just fun. Nothing more nothing less. Its been around in showbiz since time immemorial.” Rather than understanding, as do McCann and Evluon, politics and fun to be mutually exclusive, I understand femininities – and even fun itself – to *always* be built upon and implicated in political pasts and futures. This perspective is not incompatible with a lens toward affect and how femininities are embodied and felt by their doers. Within participants’ framework of trans-inclusive gender essentialism (TIGE), feelings are what constitutes the realness of gender for individuals; accordingly, I further argue that affect is what animates individuals at the micro level of embodiment, identity, and feeling to act on

meso-level communities and macro-level structures to challenge inequalities based on gender, race, and sexuality, among others. Because of this *ripple effect* among levels of inequality and political action, my discussion of the meso- and macropolitical potentialities of femininities must analyze the ways femme and alien femininities *feel* to their doers at the micro level.

Micro-Affective Dimensions of Femininities: Fun

One way femme and alien femininities feel is fun. Part of what was so fun about drag femininities for the participants in this research was the ability to dramatically change the way they looked. Petunia, (24, white, queer, cis woman, New York City), told me:

Petunia: So my face is naturally pretty round, um, the contour kind of just (pause)- it makes my cheekbones look higher, kind of makes my face look a little longer and stand out a little bit more. Where like, in my day-to-day basis I'm kind of like a moon face (laughs) so it, yeah, it kind of, it just gives my face more shape and makes it look sharp.

Andrea: Mhmm and so why is sort of that sharper look um, something that you would wanna go for in drag?

Petunia: Well (pause) it's, uh, I like the idea of completely changing what my face looks like. I feel like (pause) a big part of drag is the transformation, so (pause) to be able to almost change like, the bone structure in your face with makeup is, it's so fun. Especially because (pause) um, a big misconception- I dunno if you've read any of the RuPaul articles that have been out that haven't been so good, um, where he mentions that uh, trans queen and female-identified or (pause) non-male cis queens in general um, it's not enough of a transformation? Which (pause) is kind of BS... there are a lot (pause) of, you know, AFAB [and?] trans queens that (pause) are SO far from (pause) looking (pause) like their original selves. Yeah... (pause) I- it's fun. It's a lot of fun. It feels very powerful.

Andrea: Mhmm.

Petunia: And like, you know, sometimes I make a little bit of money.

Politics and fun are explicitly linked here in Petunia's comments. Petunia cites one of the most fun aspects of drag femininities as the ability to physically transform oneself; note that the specific way Petunia seeks to transform their face is through making it sharper and less round – could this be an instance of internalized fatphobia, or at least a reference to a beauty standard that is not achievable for all people in everyday life (where, due to normalizing cultural restrictions on aesthetics, there are stricter norms regarding how much and what type of makeup individuals may wear without social repercussions)? If so, it would be evidence of one of the unintended consequences of even intentionally-produced, semi-autonomous femininities: the reinforcement of certain standards of appearance that are not meetable for all people and are thus inherently implicated in the reinforcement of systems of normalizing power even on a very micro scale of personal choices regarding style and embodiment. Furthermore, it would be evidence of the inextricability of politics from both affect and (gender) presentation.

Some participants explicitly linked the *fun* of femme and alien femininities with their experiences of being disabled femmes in the world. Amanda (31, white, bisexual, white, cis queer femme in Arizona) incorporates her mental health disability into her burlesque performances as a queer femme. She finds the expression of exaggerated femininity alongside political messaging a particularly fun way to make a political statement onstage. Amanda described to me the following act in which she links feminism, femininity, fun, and politics to construct a performance that resonates from her experience as a disabled queer femme with bipolar disorder:

Amanda: I liked the idea of a housewife, like, so I drank from like, a Jack Daniels bottle during the performance, and it's the idea of like, I don't even know what you would call it. Like, I was like a subversive housewife. Like the whole idea of like, the

50s, and like, uh, who was it? Um, the person who wrote um, *The Feminine Mystique* – her –

Andrea: Betty Friedan?

Amanda: The problem that has no name!⁴⁴ Um, yeah, the idea of like, all these dissatisfied housewives turning to pills. But also in the burlesque performance you are titillating but also having fun, so I came up with this idea of this like, wild, pillled-out housewife. And so basically like in the performance, I have like a basket of laundry, and I'm like, holding laundry and then I pull out this like, giant pill bottle and like, shake it and I'm like, "Ooooh" and like, and like take pills and then like, put them down with Jack [Daniels whiskey], and then like, start my own little like, party, and undressing and whatever, and continue to like, take pills and get really into it. And the performance gets bigger and more clothes will come off and stuff like that. Um, and I used this dubstep song, um, that I can't remember the name of, but the refrain of the song is – it's a very sexy song, but the refrain has to do with um, breaking down and like, the cracks begin to show... It was a really fun show and it was really well-received and I, like- yeah, it was great.

Andrea: Yeah, so how does it, um, how does it feel to be combining elements of sexuality with something um, more like, political or like, serious? Does that make-

Amanda: Yeah! Um (pause) it feels really like, fun and interesting and (pause) in the sense that like, being down with yourself and getting naked in front of people can definitely be considered like, a political act? Um, infusing that narrative with whatever kind of like, story you want to tell, is, um, powerful! Because you have control over that performance. In this very constructed and like, deliberate way.

In Amanda's quote we see evidence of the point I made in chapter two when I argued that participants in this research construct *femme* as an intentional, semi-autonomous gender in response to gendered marginalization – in this case, Amanda enjoys having “control” over her performance of gender and disability onstage, which makes her feel empowered.

Cassandra (20, Asian American, gay, lesbian, queer, bisexual, nonbinary, genderfluid, upper Midwest) described femininity – particularly her alien drag looks – in the following way:

I have like, muscular dystrophy, so I've always been like, very physically different from like, all of my peers and people that I know. And so (pause) like, as a child

⁴⁴ This is a famous concept from *The Feminine Mystique* in which Friedan is describing housewives' inability to articulate their dissatisfaction with their lot in life.

people would always like, you know, stare at me. And now that I'm in a chair like, people- (laughs) they continually stare at me, and I guess like, I just was like, well if you're gonna look, I may as well just give 'em something to look at that's not my disability, you know? (chuckles) But I think that's maybe why I want to look so, like – have dyed hair and fun makeup and like, interesting clothing, cuz not only does it make, you know, me feel good, but it shows the people who may think certain things about people with disabilities that it's like, we can have fun and we are fun and we do go out and we wear makeup and awesome clothes (chuckles) and we are, you know, people, you know! And I think, I think that's where it comes from.

Interestingly, Cassandra, who is also a professional makeup artist, seeks a recognition of her sameness with non-disabled others *not* through expressing aesthetic sameness with them but rather through putting together intentionally “fun” alien looks, i.e., *not* through capitulating to normative beauty standards but rather through challenging and tweaking them through the symbolism of her disabled femme embodiment. In this way, she implicitly constructs autonomy/self-definition – not being aesthetically normal – as the axis of sameness with non-disabled others that she seeks to demonstrate through femme and alien femininity. As a wheelchair user, Cassandra has limited access to normative standards of beauty that are based in part on ablebodiedness. By resisting the ways others would construct and interpret her with their non-disabled gaze, she turns the gaze back on non-disabled people, thus marking, problematizing, and challenging normative discourses that construct disabled people as living tragic lives devoid of fun and autonomy. In this way, having fun through femme and alien femininity – and showing it on and with the body – is a micro-affective phenomenon which becomes translated into a challenge to normative macro-systems of power that marginalize disabled people. Indeed, it is this sense of doing femininity as *fun* at the micro-level that animates many queens' participation in the drag scene both on- and offline – which, as will be shown in the rest of this chapter, has ripple-effects that may shift, reinforce, and/or destabilize systems of normalizing power at the meso and macro levels.

It's important to note that some queens categorically denied any major political implications or intentions for their drag, as Sarah (28, gay, lesbian, bisexual, white, "sometimes I want to be a boy but I'm comfortable with myself and I like myself," Colorado) did below during our discussion of some feminists' critiques of drag:

I think it's just stupid that people are trying to tell each other what to do. Just like, do your own thing. Because that's the thing like, I am so annoyed with like, politically correct people because like, all they're doing is making a bunch of rules and like, it's just crazy. Like, drag queens are always gonna offend people, and, like, because we're just having fun. And like, we [queers] get offended by like, straight people and shit like that. Like I think that everybody needs to just stop being so serious. Like, we need to be at least aware and like trying to be politically correct, but you really don't need to like, nitpick every little thing.

Here, as in McCann's (2018) argument and in Evluon's comment on RuPaul's interview in *The Guardian* earlier in this chapter, "fun" and "politics" are constructed as mutually exclusive, with *fun* furthermore serving as Sarah's justification for the value of drag. In recent decades queer theorists have theorized a politics of pleasure or "pleasure activism" (brown 2019). One question that arises from an understanding of femininities as affectively fun at the micro level is whether fun – i.e., pleasure – in and of itself is sufficient to not throw the baby out with the bathwater, that is, to not throw gender (and, consequently, femininity) out altogether in our quest for liberation from gendered systems of normalizing power. In other words, is having fun a political act even when it is not intended to be so by some drag queens like Sarah, above? If so, what is the political value of having fun to contribute to our collective liberation from systems of normalizing power, particularly if that fun is constructed as *apolitical*? For instance, Pham (2015) argues that Black style under slavery, "dandyism" and other modes of fancy dress have been important tools of resistance for people of color in the United States; disregarding ostentatious dress among marginalized

people as mere vanity, Pham argues, ignores the subversive potential of marginalized people constructing their own pleasurable self-representations. Later in this chapter I will argue that affect – in this case, a sense of fun and pleasure at the micro level – is what motivates individuals to act in and on systems of normalizing power at the meso and macro levels. Thus, I will argue, to *feel* gender at all is to already be politicized.

In her discussion of the discourses swirling around transgender children, Meadow (2018) laments that nonnormative gender is often conceptualized as a negative adaptation to traumatic circumstances like abuse: “If it is possible to understand gender as an ‘improvisational possibility within a scene of constraint’ [Butler], relational and produced through the interaction of individuals, it’s not a huge leap to imagine that some forms of gender could be made of scar tissue, produced as much by trauma as by tenderness. But it’s a quick and dangerous slide from thinking about gender deviance as compensatory and thinking it pathological. And if gender deviance is a maladaptation, then those of us with atypical gender presentations are, in fact, damaged goods” (2018: 90). The idea of *femme* and alien femininities as personally empowering provides us one way to think through Meadow’s rumination on gender as a positive adaptation without slipping into a discourse of gender nonnormative folk as “damaged goods.” On the one hand, *femme*, a form of nonnormative gender at least insofar as it is not coupled with heterosexuality, is conceptualized by participants in this research as a deeply felt sense of “real” quotidian gender, both emanating from and influencing participants’ emotions, bodies, and gendered senses of self. As Kendra (22, white, queer, bisexual, cis woman, Pacific Northwest) told me, gender is something individuals have “all the time” and thus operates and is understood by most queens in this study in terms of realness and authenticity. Alien femininities, as

opposed to the quotidian nature of *femme*, are understood by the queens to be *temporary* enactments of gender linked to, but not reducible to or totally overlapping with, their “real” senses of themselves as gendered (or agender) people. In this way, alien femininities may be understood to be positive adaptations to trauma which do not indicate that their performers are “damaged goods,” insofar as alien femininities are not taken to be actual representations of queens’ “real” gender feelings. On the other hand, thinking of only alien femininities and not *femme* as positive adaptations without the implication of damaged goods raises the specter of Meadow’s original fear that acknowledging that gender – one’s deeply felt sense of self, in this case *femme* – may sometimes be an adaptation to trauma undertaken by individuals whose nonnormative gender makes them damaged goods. A wrinkle here is that *femme* is not always or even usually *interpreted by others* as nonnormative, insofar as it is often visually indistinguishable from normative heterofemininity, which points to the importance of visibility for thinking through the political import of gender play. Such visibility may be present when *femme* is performed by a trans person who does not “pass” as cisgender, thus visibly decoupling assigned sex category from gender. It may also be achieved by strategically outing oneself, a cisgender woman queer *femme*, as non-heterosexual, the function of which would be to raise “the possibility that all feminine women are potentially homosexual” (Musser 2016:57) and thus call into question the stability of the normalizing heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990) that constructs heterosexuality, femininity, and womanhood as covarying. Crucially, participants’ primary discourse of gender, trans-inclusive gender essentialism (TIGE) conceptualizes nonnormative gender as unremarkable, self-evident, and benign, which in and of itself speaks back to the argument that nonnormative gender is a *maladaptive* response to trauma.

Micro-Affective Dimensions of Femininities: Personal Empowerment after Experiencing Gender Trauma

In addition to feeling fun, femme and alien femininities feel personally empowering to many queens. Participants spoke of doing gender in these ways as “reclaiming” and/or expressing femininity in a form that carries less risk of sexualization/objectification by men than does normative (hetero)femininity, as shown by Christina (21, white, gay, lesbian, queer, nonbinary, Colorado):

Andrea: So what is it about not being an object of desire that you find to feel more empowering [than being an object of desire]?

Christina: Um, I think of, you know, we are taught that femininity is *for* men, [that] femininity and how women dress and how feminine women present, it's for the male gaze and it's to get men. And even in like, you know, movies that are supposed to be pro-women, you know, like women are strong [in them], but like, they use their uh, femininity to get the, like, to allure men, and it's always from a male gaze. And so like, my character, like, she is a lesbian character. When I am performing, I like, I incorporate my girlfriend in it a lot, just because I want my drag to be more a female gaze and like, um, for like, a lesbian gaze is what I really like. Because there really isn't, this doesn't really exist – a lot of drag is, you know, completely for the male gaze, and um, I don't, really like. I don't like that. And so I think, you know, not being an object of desire and by not, um, allowing any type of – cuz when you're an object of desire it's like someone has power over you. And so to realize that you're not an object of desire and maybe you're just an object of desire for yourself, just like the way you're feeling and you're just dressing for yourself, um, it's an extremely powerful experience, and I don't think a lot of people get to experience that. [emphasis in original]

Importantly Christina implicitly indicts two different forms of the male gaze as disempowering for non-cis-male drag queens: the male gaze of desire (implying *heterosexual* men's sexualization of women) and the *gay* male gaze that is dominant in the drag scene, which is based not on a desire for (cis) women's bodies but rather on a sexualizing-privileging of (cis) men's bodies in queer spaces. In this way, Christina's comments give

nuance to the debate surrounding the *Guardian* interview wherein RuPaul claimed drag challenges “male-dominated culture,” and then non-cis-male queens retorted that RuPaul herself reinforces male domination in queer spaces by privileging drag queens who are cis men. By incorporating their girlfriend in their drag, Christina intentionally lesbianizes their drag performances and links their intentional construction of exaggerated femme/ininity at the micro-affective level to both meso- and macro-level norms and inequalities based on gender and sexuality.

Sabrina (28, white, lesbian, queer, genderfluid and “woman-aligned” nonbinary, Maryland) described *femme* to me as an “explicitly queer,” empowered, autonomous gender distinct from femininity, which they defined as “expectations about like what it means to be a cisgender woman, that’s like rooted in histories of like, white supremacy, classism, heteropatriarchy, ableism, capitalism, and so on. So I feel really resistant to identifying as a feminine [as opposed to femme] person.” They described their affective experience of *femme* in the following way:

Sabrina: Like, wearing dresses, stuff like that, like, I um, I like these things because I feel like I’m forced to, but because I’m forced to like them but I’m not supposed to like them, because I’m being forced to? If that makes sense? And this [being femme] is a way of me saying, “Fuck you” and taking that back and saving it [femme] as a source of pleasure instead of as a source of pain and shame.

Andrea: Absolutely, I totally, that totally makes sense to me. And so I’m wondering I guess like, as a follow-up to that, um, if someone were to ask you – so people are interpreting you as being feminine [as opposed to femme] because these things are associated with femininity and women, and I’m wondering what you would say to them if they asked you, um, “How is what you are doing with, you know, dresses and makeup and stuff, how is that different than a woman who’s doing it, um, sort of because she’s *supposed* to be feminine? What’s sort of different about the way you do it?”

Sabrina: People love to ask me that all the time actually. (chuckles)

Andrea: Oh really?

Sabrina: (laughs) So um, yeah, let me think for a minute. So, I don't wanna like, shame or blame women who are doing it because they're expected to do it, because like, um, that's like, a really sad and like, violent and scary place to be sometimes. And I empathize and extend solidarity and compassion to women and feminine peop- and femmes, regardless of where we are at. Um, but for me, I think the difference is that like, I use objects and like (pause)- performances and identifiers and distinguishers have, um, a different meaning for me and a different history. Um, they're embedded with something that is, um, not deeper but different. Um, and that may not seem visible on the surface but when you experience like, life as a queer femme wearing a dress and wearing two pink bags and wearing lip- like, really amazing makeup today (laughs), um, people like, I dunno. Like all of us experience a lot of violence just in different ways and I think the ways I experience violence um, are different, and so are the ways I experience femininity and wearing a dress and liking pink.

Andrea: Mhmm okay yeah, so what's different for you is that you have imbued these symbols like makeup or you know dresses and things like that, um, with like a feminist meaning and so it becomes a source of power for you?

Sabrina: Yeah! Yeah. [emphasis in original]

Here Sabrina and I co-theorize *affect* as the mechanism through which femme empowers them at the micro level. Sabrina argues that the political value of affect exists independently of its (in)visibility to others, a rhetorical move which speaks to the political import of fun to *animate* individuals to act in the world in ways that affect meso- and macro-level systems of normalizing power. This argument challenges radical feminist arguments that queer femininities (in particular those of butch-femme femmes), by virtue of their sometimes-visual-indistinguishability from heterosexual femininities, are simple mimics of heteronormative gender (Jeffreys 1996, Richardson 1996).

As Sabrina made clear, participants' focus on empowerment reveals the ways they experience marginalization. Absent marginalization, empowerment would not – could not – be necessary. The queens in this project recounted two primary ways enacting femininities

re-empowered them post- and/or simultaneously with gendered marginalization: they “reclaimed”⁴⁵ femininities after a) experiencing gendered and/or sexual abuse and trauma earlier in life, and/or b) having experienced coercive gendering and gender policing in their families and in society as painful, harmful, constraining, or otherwise unwanted.

After I asked Aida (42, Latina, straight, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, Massachusetts) whether she had been a feminine person all her life, she shared with me the different meanings femininity has held for her over the course of her life:

Aida: I was always a tomboy. I did boys’ sports throughout high school. I was never-I left that [femininity] alone to my other sisters, because there’s a back history: I was molested when I was young.

Andrea: Oh I’m so sorry.

Aida: So I always covered myself up from looking pretty. So now as an adult I’m trying to break that stereotype of hiding.

Andrea: Right.

Aida: That’s what caused the, um, tomboyish, you know, be more like a boy, act like a boy, and you don’t get the looks, of how men look at women. Especially in a Hispanic culture that almost- men see women as objects... They don’t see the person. But back in that generation, the 80s, 90s, it was still those machismo men.

I then asked Aida, whose everyday aesthetic style leans masculine, why the drag scene was where she chose to express femininity:

Aida: It’s also a safe environment.

Andrea: In a safe environment, yeah.

Aida: Yes.

Andrea: And what feels safer in this environment?

⁴⁵ Jennifer, Jessica, Alisha, Daphne, and Em used this specific language of reclamation, while other participants expressed similar sentiments without using the specific term “reclaim.”

Aida: Because the lesbians respect me, and they know I'm straight, so they won't even try. And gay men definitely aren't attracted to women, so, so I feel like it's more of a family than it is a competition or, for profit and things. Because I don't be doing it for profit.⁴⁶

Aida's quote returns us to the theme of the male gaze that I discussed in the previous section. Janet (30, white, bisexual and polyamorous cisgender woman queen in the Pacific Northwest) told me she "grew up in a Mormon household with an abusive parent" and that her intentionally hypersexual, confident, and sometimes "creepy" drag character "kind of grew out of everything [she] was forced to repress as a child." Themes of trauma, femininity, shame, and embodiment returned over and over again in our interview. Janet specifically linked her reclamation of femininity after trauma and its attendant feelings of self-empowerment to her justification for her participation in drag culture, an argument that links to Cohen's (1997) conceptualization of a broad, wide net of solidarity across different forms of marginalization, sexual and otherwise:

Janet: Unfortunately even in the drag community, cis [women] queens are still not seen as legitimate drag queens, and so for them [cis gay men] even it's, it's kind of offensive [to them] for me to say, "Oh I'm a drag queen," when I don't have to tuck or alter my body in order to look and appear as a woman.

Andrea: Yeah and um, what's your response to that, how do you feel about those thoughts?

Janet: Um (pause), it is a little (pause) hurtful, and I do feel almost a sense of shame sometimes, um, but it's something I'm overcoming. Because (pause) the reason I (pause) do drag, and that I accentuate um, my feminine persona is that um, I have had experiences, I was abused as a child and I didn't have control over my body. I didn't get to say who could touch me when where and how, and I am really now in my adult years embracing my body as a woman. And I get to perform as very much still a woman and I get to say how I use my body, when I use my body, like, where, and if you can touch me or not. Um, that is, very much so, what has led me to be my drag persona.

⁴⁶ It's interesting to note that Aida's quote here is an example of discursive bisexual erasure.

...

Andrea: Can you tell me a little bit about creepy drag and, and why that interests you?

Janet: Yeah so for me it's um, it's being able to (pause) – I've, I've always kind of felt like I was (pause) mentally off, a little mentally damaged because of my past. And for me then [I'm] able to bring out that damage and express it, that weirdness that might have happened because of what happened to me as a child.

...

Andrea: What is it that you love about those things, like makeup, getting dressed – what is it about those things that makes you so happy?

Janet: Um, I think it's a way for me to express “me” as a person, um, as far as makeup goes. I am (pause) I am a biology major, I did do biology, but I also minored in the arts. I have a very creative side as well as my logical scientific side, um, and so makeup is- you literally get to paint on yourself everyday. That's what you're doing, you're painting, you're creating, You're coming up with something. You can come up with something new every day. Um, and you don't need a canvas for it cuz your canvas is this thing that's attached to you. And uh, so for me it's a lot about creativity and just expressing myself as I never could. I think it goes back to my childhood again. I've actually never thought about this, you're making me think about things...I think it goes back to my childhood where I, I didn't have control over the clothes I had, I couldn't wear makeup at home, you know? Um, I, (pause) I am now getting to express and explore the things that I like and the things that make me happy and it's a bunch of girly stuff.

Here Janet is not only referring to the trauma of the abuse she suffered in her childhood home but also more generally to gendered expectations for appearance. In her conservative Mormon household, while she was expected to dress in girls' clothes, she was not allowed to wear makeup or what her parents considered to be revealing clothing. Furthermore, in another part of our interview Janet told me part of the reason her hypersexual drag persona felt so empowering is that it allowed her to experience her “plus-sized” body in positive ways:

Andrea: You were saying now you're more comfortable wearing tighter clothes, now you're more comfortable with your body, um, than you were before you did drag, so

what was it, um, you know, previously that would sort of lead you to not want to wear tighter clothes or things like that?

Janet: Well I am overweight, I am plus-sized, and so growing up part of the abuse I did go through was emotional and um, verbal abuse about my body and about my weight and about how I appeared and how I looked. And it very much so made me go into my shell and not be comfortable with my body and how it appeared to other people, and it made me feel like I needed to hide it, um, and feel that shame of showing my body in any way shape or form. (pause) And so, now I mean yes (pause) I am a female and I do have, you know, concerns about parts of my body. I am still overweight, um, but there are parts of my body that now I love, and I'll show off anytime I want to. (laughs) I like them.

Andrea: That's great, yeah.

Janet: Um, and that's kinda where the tighter clothes come in, um, there are definitely um, clothes I will not wear because I feel like they're too tight in areas that I'm still not comfortable with. Um, but there are- there are definitely clothes that I have that accentuate those things that I like to show off.

Andrea: And so for you, that change, you can definitely link it to drag and gaining more body confidence through drag?

Janet: Oh yeah.

Janet's comments show why as an adult she found it empowering to build a drag persona based on these childhood experiences of trauma and coercive gendering. Importantly, her comment that "I am a female and I do have, you know, concerns about parts of my body" reflects some of the claims I made in chapter two, namely a) that even explicitly trans-inclusive cis women participants use "female" as a referent for "woman" and b) that many participants defined womanhood in terms of being subject to the oppressive standards of beauty culture. Thus, by attending to the linkages between affect, embodiment, and gendered marginalization, we can begin to see the ways micro-level phenomena such as feelings *animate* doers of femininity to act in and on the world in new ways that may shift the workings of normalizing systems of gender.

Indeed, nearly all participants mentioned having experienced the force of coercive gendering (that is, the expectation that individuals will behave in ways that are considered appropriate for their assigned sex category or else face social consequences ranging from “looks” to violence). Both AFAB and AMAB women, femmes, and nonbinary participants, even those who had enjoyed embodying femininity for their entire lives, discussed the normative expectations for feminine appearance as oppressive, constraining, harmful, difficult to meet, or otherwise problematic. One of the most evocative narratives of a queen reclaiming femininity on the drag stage in response to coercive gendering came from Angie (28, black, “bi-straight,” cis woman, Florida). Angie is a single mother of three children (5-year-old identical triplets) who has utilized public assistance programs off and on. Having been subjected to controlling images of herself as a poor, black, hyper-fertile “welfare queen” (Collins 1990), Angie found the practice of drag to be a particularly powerful way for her to self-define and to make money toward the survival of the people she loves most – her children and her drag family:

Angie: I usually feel unstoppable as regular me, but in drag me, like, you can’t touch me. You cannot touch me. You can’t tell me nothing. I’m unstoppable.

Andrea: Yeah so you’re like, an amplified version of yourself.

Angie: Yes I’m a complete amplified- I’m boujee, I have a hand fan cuz I don’t wanna get hot (laughs) and a ton of makeup and a ton of drag... Um, the differences between “day me” and “nighttime [drag] me” – and I’ve never admitted this, and you might be the first person that actually hear it without me crying cuz usually I be ready to just bust out into tears – day me, day me deals with a lot of depression. Day me questions a lot of things that I do myself. I question my motherhood sometimes. Uh (pause) I feel like I’m not good enough sometimes... It’s just, my daytime me requires so much, because the world- people think I’m superwoman. Just because I have three children. You have to understand I went from zero to three kids [at one time]. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. I don’t.

Andrea: Yeah, that must be so hard. I had one at a time and I know how hard that was, so I can absolutely like- I'm here with you for that struggle. I know I don't know your struggle but I'm here with you.

Angie: I mean... it got to a point where it was the only thing putting food in my kids' mouth. I wasn't even eating cuz I (pause), cuz I wasn't getting food stamps. I'm not this statistic that the world makes me. I'm not. I was not. I'm just now getting food stamps. And I go back to work, so – I be making too much money [now], so they gonna be taking that away from me. So this statistic that the world makes me, I'm *not*. And it's like, "What? Just cuz I'm black don't mean I'm broke." ...I don't care what you got to say. I don't care about your opinion [when I'm in drag]... But, regular me, I'm just like, ugh. [sighs]

Andrea: Yeah and so, so does like, so drag, you've described it as like an escape or as a place where you can sort of prove that you're not what the world thinks you are, right?

Angie: Mhmm, I'm more.

Andrea: And more, right, exactly. And so does any of that sort of, confidence and like, you know, "I'm gonna be who I wanna be," does any of that sort of attitude, since you've been doing drag, does that ever carry back over into day Angie? Or is it something that you can only feel um, when you're in drag?

Angie: Um, it's moving over, it has moved over into my day Angie, like where I live now is Trump land (laughs) so if you're gay, and you live here, you're closeted. Um, there's no gay bars here. There's one... in Pensacola and I personally went to the gay bar in Pensacola with my drag mother. I'm good at business, so I'll introduce myself [to the bar manager] and I can say "Hey, I am a bioqueen, I do perform, I do it here locally." He didn't seem like he was interested. [I said] "Okay since you're not interested in me, hey, this is my drag mother [a cis male drag queen]. This is one of the top performers in [large Florida city]. You're either gonna book me or you're gonna book my drag mother."

Andrea: Right, right, so at least you can do something for your family though then.

Angie: For my family. We're gonna eat, regardless. [emphasis in original]

Angie is part of a particularly tight drag family, some of whom are cis white gay men who have even opened their doors to her and her children when they had nowhere else to live. She linked her experience of being coercively defined in pejorative ways based on her race

and gender to the healing and confidence she has gained through performing exaggerated versions of alien femininity onstage.



Figures 27 and 28: some of Angie's "out of this world"⁴⁷ looks

Importantly, Angie's story is further illustration of Cohen's (1997) understanding of sexual normativity as operating on, marginalizing, and traumatizing many *heterosexuals* as well as queers, thus exploding the (white) queer understanding of sexual normativity as operating

⁴⁷ Angie captioned the photo in Figure 28 "outta this world beauty"

on a (raceless, classless) homo-hetero binary. Angie identified as heterosexual before participating in drag, and now identifies as “bi-straight,” though she told me she is mostly heterosexual, and when she spoke about dating in the future, she spoke about dating men. Angie discussed with me the pressures of being pejoratively defined as a working-class black single mother, a controlling image (Collins 1990) that is decidedly *heterosexual*. Cohen theorizes “a politics where the *nonnormative* and *marginal* position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work” (1997: 438, emphasis in original). By positioning welfare queens (constructed in popular discourse as heterosexual) alongside the queer figures of punks and bulldaggers, Cohen makes theoretical space in a radical politics of sexual liberation for folx like Angie, whose experience of intersecting marginalizations cannot be illuminated by white queer theory and which challenges meso-level (white) queer-cultural boundary-making processes based on the exclusion of women and straight people from queer spaces.

MESO

In Angie’s quote above about her difficulty getting booked as a “bioqueen” in Pensacola, we find evidence of what many queens I spoke with consider to be rampant misogyny in the drag scene and queer culture more broadly. Participants in this research claimed that through dual mechanisms of *explicit (intersectional) feminism* and the very fact of *their existence as non-cis-male drag queens* they help to combat social ills including misogyny, racism, femmephobia, and transphobia in the drag scene. The following discussion I had with Tina (34, black, queer, pansexual, cis woman, Arizona) illustrates some of these inequalities in the queer community:

Tina: Because it's not a conversation people are having, I make it a point to have that conversation [about racism].

Andrea: Mhmm, mhmm.

Tina: Just because you're not talking about it doesn't mean it doesn't need to be talked about. But I'll talk about it, and then it turns into [people saying,] "Oh you're making everything about race," and it's like, "No, I'm making it a conversation that needs to happen. You don't wanna have it, that's fine, but I'm gonna talk about it."

Andrea: Mhmm, have you had these difficult conversations when people are telling you you're making it about race, is that people like, in person or on the internet, like, where are you having these conversations?

Tina: It's usually in person, people in person don't tend to tell me I'm making it all about race, but behind the keyboard people are really bold, and they'll tell me I'm racist and they'll tell me I'm making it about race so I'm like, "I'm not racist." And then I have to school them about what "racist" actually means and so in breaking that down I have to explain to them that if you're white I cannot be racist against you. I can be discriminatory, I can be uh, I can be uh, god what's the word I'm looking for, I can be stereotypical, I can be uh, prejudiced, but I cannot be racist. Racist is the definition of thinking my race is superior [in order] to put another race down, and there is no history EVER that the black race has ever been able to put down the white race. So don't tell me I'm racist. You can tell me everything else but I'm not racist and it's impossible for me to be racist against a white person. Now [toward] another minority, yes.

Andrea: Mhmm, mhmm.

Tina: And I've had to explain that to people: black people can be racist toward other minorities. We just cannot be racist against white people... And when I say that, that throws people into a whole tizzy... it's like [high pitched, derisive voice] "What do you mean! You're racist for saying that! [end voice]" [and I reply] "No I'm not racist for saying that, you're stupid, so." (laughs)

Andrea: Yeah and so like, is it like white queer people or white people in the drag community who are telling you this? Or is it like other white people [not in the community]?

Tina: All of the above. I get white queer people, I get white cisgendered [sic] gay men, I get (pause) straight white men. It's a lot of white men usually. (laughs)

Andrea: Yeah. (laughs)

Tina: I usually notice the people I tend to piss off are white men and I'm okay with that. Like it doesn't bother me, and they're like, "You're gonna piss this [other] person off." [And I'm like] "Okay!" They're gonna know better for the next time they say something to somebody else. So I may piss off so-and-so...I don't care about pissing them off.

Here Tina theorized meso-level racism in a nuanced way, indicting white (queer) men in particular for exhibiting it toward her and others in the drag scene. Importantly, she hinted at a ripple-effect model of social change in her final comment above: while she may anger people with her antiracist efforts in the queer community, she anticipated that in the future people will act differently in the world after having heard her perspective. In this way, she is willing to take one for the team, so to speak, and bear the brunt of white men's anger to improve the queer community for other folx of color in the future.

Meso Dimensions of Femininities: Explicit (Intersectional) Feminism

One instance of a participant in this study using feminism to explicitly combat what she perceived as meso-level values of misogyny and transphobia in the drag scene comes from Daphne (26, white, queer, asexual, questioning about romantic attraction, cis woman, Florida), a relatively famous queen whose drag often incorporates elements of alien aesthetics and/or futurism:

Andrea: So, um, I'm sure that you're probably familiar, um, with sort of RuPaul's comments about who can and can't be a drag queen on his show, are you familiar with that whole thing?

Daphne: Yep, I was, um, one of the first people to post the screenshots on Twitter.

Andrea: I'm wondering if you could sort of give me sort of what were you feeling when you read those comments and how, how you've responded?

Daphne: Okay. So. Um, when the article came out it was by *The Guardian* and the title of the article, I don't remember the exact title, but it was something along the lines of "Drag Is a Big F-You to Male-Dominated Culture."

Andrea: Right.

Daphne: And I remember seeing that headline and thinking just, "Wow, that is, that is awesome, I can't wait to read this article." So I pulled it up, started off well-enough, and then it gets to the paragraph, not even that far in (laughs) where RuPaul talks about how drag is really punk rock when a man does it because it's a direct rejection of masculinity, is what he said. And (pause) I get that. I appreciate that when men do drag it's a direct rejection of masculinity. And I think that there's a huge value in that. However, I also think that there's value in a woman doing drag and reclaiming her own femininity (pause) in a society that's constantly telling women how they need to be. Um, so, I do think that drag is punk rock when men do it but I also think that drag is punk rock when anybody does it. So, that was my first little [moment of], "Ehh, I don't really agree with that statement" but I kept reading. The point where I stopped reading was in the very next paragraph where an interviewer asked if RuPaul would ever have a post-op trans woman on his show, and his response was essentially (pause), "I don't think I would. [Daphne affects a catty, high-pitched voice and impersonates RuPaul] It's okay that I had Peppermint on the show because she didn't have titties. Titties are where I draw the line [end voice]." And of course that's not an exact quote but that's essentially what the article was saying. So I stopped reading, I screenshotted that paragraph and the previous one, and I posted them on, I think it was Facebook and Twitter, with the caption "Wow, what a disappointing read." And I didn't expect that me posting that, I did not expect that to blow up as much as it did. Um, it wound up getting thousands of retweets and tons of replies, lots of angry people in my inbox, lots of angry people on my Facebook, lots of discussions I wasn't expecting to have, but in having a lot of those discussions I feel like I've kind of been able to better form my opinion on this whole thing and I guess what I kept coming back to and what made me so angry was that the title of the article, which was also a quote from the article, was that drag is a big f-you to a male-dominated culture. And it made me so angry (laughs) in that same article where RuPaul said that awesome quote, he essentially turned drag into a male-dominated culture and stated that it is and should be a male-dominated culture. And a lot of people have given me criticism, saying [high-pitched catty voice] "Oh you're just bitter you can't be on the show," or "Why don't you make your own show," or "It's RuPaul and he can have whoever on his show he wants [end voice]" and I'm not disagreeing with that. RuPaul is- it's his show, he can do whatever he wants with it. Like I said earlier, if RuPaul defines drag as a man dressing up as a woman then he's more than entitled to that definition and maybe queens like me don't fit in it and that's totally fine. What the issue I took with it is that RuPaul is such a prominent voice and such an important voice to the drag community and what he says holds such a weight with the people who may not know of drag outside of his show. So when he says things like that, even if that's not the point, it does

directly impact (pause) the perceived validity of what I do and it can also potentially impact my ability to be successful at it, so that's really the issue I took with it. It's not about the show.

Some illustrative examples of Daphne's tweets and exchanges follow:








It gets exhausting having to argue with people over this, so I'm just going to make a post. It's RuPaul's show and he can cast whoever he wants. I'm not upset about that. I'm just disappointed because RuPaul's opinion holds a lot of weight and his words were really invalidating.

11:25 AM · Mar 3, 2018 · [Twitter for Android](#)

87 Retweets **552** Likes














Mar 3, 2018



I have a lot of respect for RuPaul and all that he's accomplished in his career. I love RuPaul's Drag Race and I'll continue to watch it. But I disagree with the points that were made in that interview and I'm going to stand up for women (trans or cis) in the drag industry.

 7

 129

 482



Figure 29. Daphne's Twitter Exchange part 1



Figure 30. Daphne’s Twitter Exchange part 2

Notes:

None of the likes on Daphne’s tweets, above, came from the user with which she was conversing.

“Trixie” refers to Trixie Mattel, a cis male drag queen most famous for appearing on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

In our interview, Daphne linked her “disappointment” and “anger” at RuPaul’s comments to her “ability to be successful” as a drag queen – in other words, Daphne is making a causal argument that links micro-affect (feelings of disappointment and anger) to meso- and macro-level gender norms and values that structure unequal access to queer performance spaces and thus influence Daphne’s *material* reality as a queer woman who queens for a living.

Indeed, as Virginia (19, white, pansexual, nonbinary, genderfluid, New York state) exasperatedly explained in another interview:

How do we [AFABs] have like any advantage when we don’t even get taken seriously at all? Like I just don’t think I have an easy time getting gigs and actually going out and performing *because* I am a woman doing drag. But if I were a man I *would* have the advantage because even if I were a really shitty looking queen I would still be a man in a dress and that’s funnier to people. [emphasis in original]

So we can see that while many CMDQs argue that being AFAB and/or women makes drag queening “easier” in some ways, participants respond to this criticism by saying that due to misogynistic and transphobic queer cultural norms and values, which are often manifested as sexed and gendered double standards in booking fees and access to performance spaces, non-cis-male queens struggle to get bookings in a drag culture where gay men tend to run the show – pun intended.

It’s certainly difficult if not impossible to know what the ultimate impact of Daphne’s tweets could be on misogyny and transphobia in the drag community and/or systems of normalizing power writ large, especially given that we can’t know who or how many people read these tweets, not to mention how the recipient of Daphne’s final comment left the exchange feeling or what they ended up thinking. However, I find it implausible that large, heated community discussions about gender (especially those that are semi- archived and made more widely visible through the internet) will have *no* effect on the

shifting (or not) of gendered norms and values. Again, structures of inequality – while a useful heuristic for sociological analysis – are not sentient entities and do not change themselves; rather, individuals change them by acting in and on them.⁴⁸ In this way, through Daphne’s tweets and her explanation of them, we can see the beginnings of a ripple-effect from the micro to the meso and macro that may help explain some reasons for gendered patterns of inequality both discursive and material. Accordingly, I argue that *feeling* disappointment and anger *animated* Daphne to make online posts challenging RuPaul’s definition of the drag situation, which she reasonably argued could have material consequences for her ability to generate income.

While Daphne primarily made analytic claims with regard to gender, other participants hypothesized the effects their performances in the drag scene might have on race and white supremacy. A conversation I had with Moira (23, white, pansexual, cis woman, Virginia) illustrates the complexity of adjudicating the political potentialities and meanings of any particular iteration of femme/ininities. This excerpt is long because it stretches through several parts of our conversation and because it links together various themes from this research, including alien femininities, intersectionality, politics, and the ripple-effects that participants argue their performances have on systems of normalizing power:

⁴⁸ Importantly, I am not making an argument for agency-as-voluntarism. Rather, I understand individuals to act in and on structures and discourses in performative ways through which social realities emerge, à la Butler and Foucault. However, such a perspective does not preclude voluntaristic action.

Moira: Um, I, I do a lot of different kinds of stuff, I um, sigh, I try to stay more on like the spooky side of drag... I like doing Sharon Needles⁴⁹ songs and Paramore⁵⁰ and stuff like that... Um, I, the first time I performed I did, um, a political number, I did [the song] “Dear Mr. President” by Pink. Um, I have a show tonight where I’m doing (pause) um a political thing about Black Lives Matter and the um- I’m from Charlottesville, so that’s the August 12 [2017] Klan rally that happened here...

Andrea: So I guess first- why do you think you’re drawn to the spookiness, what is it about the spookiness of drag that um, you lean toward?

⁴⁹ Figure 30. Sharon Needles is a famously spooky drag queen who appeared on RuPaul’s Drag Race:



⁵⁰ Figure 31. Paramore is an alternative/emo band:



Moira: I grew up kind of like an emo scene kid so kind of in that (pause) darker side of things, um, that's the kind of music I'm drawn to, um, and I think spooky drag is so much fun, like Halloween is awesome, and when you do drag you get to pretend it's Halloween every day, like, regardless of what kind of drag you do, you're playing dress up, and that's what Halloween's all about, so I think it's awesome to portray the spooky side of it and you can still be beautiful but still be kind of scary at the same time. I think that's very interesting, I like that.

Andrea: That is interesting! And okay yeah, so you also mentioned that um, you've done more political performances, um, and so I'd love to hear more about that...

Moira: Yeah... it's really important. Drag is political, whether you're doing a political statement or not, just, being dressed up in drag is kind of like (pause) a big f-you to gender society, you know...it's also fun and campy, but to be able to (pause) move people with your performances is (pause) just as fun as them being excited that you can do a death drop.

Andrea: Yeah and so can you describe to me a little bit more about how um, you know drag is inherently political?

Moira: I think (pause) um, I think it's just, it's not the normal, and it's not what people expect, so by branching out and being that hyperfeminine person, you're kind of like, saying f-you to gender stereotypes in, you know, the communities that don't want (pause) you know, LGBTs to have rights, and stuff like that. You're saying, "I'm here, I'm queer, and you're gonna watch!" And like, it's awesome. (chuckles)

...

Andrea: So I'm wondering, going back to some of your specific political performances, like um, the Dear Mr. President [song] and Black Lives Matter, and you mentioned of course the white supremacist rally, and so why does it feel like those messages in particular are something you want to get across with your drag?

Moira: Um I think right now it's super important to, um, not just make drag pause something fun and dancy. I think it's important because pause when, when people are at a show they're not necessarily thinking about what else is going on in the world, they're hanging out and enjoying that show but they need to be reminded that you need to go out and vote. This political situation we're in right now (pause) is because (pause) people either didn't vote they said they were gonna vote or didn't vote whatsoever and we have a chance to change that. And the community that watches drag here is relatively young, um, so like I think it's important to let people know that you *can* make a difference in the political system and if we all stand together as the LGBT community, we can, we *can* make this world a better place for us. ...

Andrea: Yeah and so, um, I know this might be like a, you know, a sensitive topic but I am wondering a little bit about um, that rally, and I'm wondering if that was a topic of conversation or if it ever came up at any drag shows or anything, sort of the events surrounding that rally?

Moira: So um, that happened August 12th of 2017 and um, our [gay] Pride rally here in Charlottesville is always the second week of September, um, so, the wound was still very fresh when we had Pride... We're almost coming up on the year anniversary of it happening and this past weekend I was in DC volunteering with the noh8 campaign and we were talking to the guys that run the noh8 campaign and he was like, "Do you think that rally has people misinterpreting what Charlottesville is?" And that is 100% correct. The people that were at the rally are not *from* Charlottesville. It's not like we're a Klan city and we decided to have a party, like, these people came from all over the country and destroyed our town, and, we need to let people know that that's not what Charlottesville is, and if I can do that through a performance in drag then that's the way I'm gonna do it.

Andrea: Yeah and so are you planning to do that?

Moira: Yeah so I'm competing tonight at a talent night again at [drag bar] -

Andrea: Oh tonight! Thanks for talking to me this afternoon (laughs)

Moira: Yeah (laughs) I still have a couple hours before I have to get ready so we're in no rush or anything (laughs) but yeah, I have made a um, mashup of the song um, "They Don't Really Care about Us" by Michael Jackson which is my all-time favorite Michael Jackson song, and I have inserts of Ellen DeGeneres talking about what happened on August 12, and then I have Terry McAuliffe, who is our governor, making a statement to the white supremacists and at the very end of it I have Heather Heyer's⁵¹ mom um, talking about how if you're not outraged, you're not paying attention, and how we need to pay attention to figure out what we can do to make a difference....

Andrea: Yeah that's really interesting! So some people might be surprised that a white person is doing a drag performance about race and I'm wondering what you'd say back to that person?

Moira: Yeah I've thought about that as well, um, because I also have the three people speaking during the piece are also all white so I do have this fear that it would be whitewashed if you know what I mean. Um, but I think that people are going to be more um, (pause) excited and proud of the movement that I'm trying to get across that they're not gonna care that it's coming from (pause) a white person. And, yes, I don't technically know the hate that African Americans go through on a day-to-day basis. Or

⁵¹ Heather Heyer, a white counter-protester, was murdered by a white supremacist at this rally.

even when the Klan rally was here, I don't know how they all personally felt, but I know how I felt, and I know how I feel about Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter and Trans Lives Matter and, I, I do have the fear that people are gonna misinterpret it because I am a white woman, but I think that people will be (pause) more emotional in the fact that somebody's actually taking a stance on this and trying to say something about it, than worrying about my skin color.

Andrea: Yeah no, thanks for explaining that. And so I'm interested in something you said in there too which is you said, um, that, I forget how you phrased it but you sort of said "Black Lives Matter, All Lives Matter, and Trans Lives Matter", and I'm wondering how are you connecting those together in your mind?

Mora: Um, because we're all, we're all people. It doesn't – skin color, gender, doesn't matter, ever. Like if you, if you think black lives matter you should also care that female lives matter, that trans lives matter. To me the LGBT community is more than just people that are gay, it's also the allies, and African American allies, Hispanic allies, you know, white allies, we're all, all the LGBT community is a rainbow of race and we need to accept [that] if you think lesbian lives matter you also need to care about Hispanic lives. If you think that your community is something that you need to protect then you need to be protecting everybody's community.

There's a lot to unpack about Moira's comments. First, Moira links together "spooky" drag, emo (short for "emotional") music, and political drag in opposition to drag that is "just" "fun and dancy." Importantly, she does not construct fun and politics as mutually exclusive, but rather through the use of the word "just," she constructs a political message as something additional you can add onto drag, which is already fun. In other words, drag is already fun, and because it's something Moira is already doing for fun, it lends itself to the incorporation of explicitly political messages when she feels so moved. In this way, we can see evidence that affect – i.e., fun – at the micro level animates drag performances which some queens theorize may have the political potential to affect meso- and macro-level norms and systems of inequality. Secondly, Moira makes an important rhetorical shift when she riffs (it's not clear whether intentionally or unintentionally) on RuPaul's quote that "drag is a big f-you to male-dominated culture." Moira instead says, "Drag is a big f-you to gender

society,” a reframe which recasts the definition of the drag situation to define the purpose of drag as exploding gender altogether – transcending it – rather than flipping it temporarily. Third, she conceptualizes her political message in terms of electoral politics – a contested strategy among those who seek liberation for gay and/or queer people. Fourth, Moira’s Black Lives Matter performance is rich for intersectional sociological analysis. I was interested in how Moira theorized her own whiteness in the context of her performance, so I asked her about it. She told me she was a bit concerned about having a lot of white voices in her performance, but ultimately slipped into language akin to the colorblind racism Bonilla-Silva (2009) encountered among his white respondents (“I think that people will be (pause) more emotional in the fact that somebody’s actually taking a stance on this and trying to say something about it, than worrying about my skin color”). Moira also briefly engaged in a discourse of “All Lives Matter,” which perhaps shows a lack of long-term familiarity or engagement with the Black Lives Matter movement, given the movement’s prevailing and sustained critiques of the phrase “all lives matter” in racial discourse. Fascinatingly, throughout her comments Moira shifted from saying “black lives matter, all lives matter, trans lives matter” to “black lives matter, *female* lives matter, trans lives matter” – does this mean she is implicitly coding “female” as “white” as did other participants in chapter two? Or, perhaps did she catch herself saying “all lives matter,” realize that that phrasing is not seen as “woke,” and self-correct to another relevant axis of inequality? To that point, we may be able to view Moira’s performatively antiracist stance as a discursive “distancing maneuver” (Balogun, 2020, personal communication) through which Moira repudiates the specter of the basic straight white girl, a figure whose normative politics and ideologies make her culturally unfit for queer spaces.

None of this is meant as an indictment of Moira's or any participants' individual intentions, which in Moira's case were to combat racism and white supremacy in her alien drag performances. Social meaning is always interactionally produced (Goffman 1959), and in this case the meaning and political import of Moira's Black Lives Matter performance emerges from the interplay among Moira's intentions, her actions, how audiences perceive them, and the habituses that all participants in the drag scene bring to it (Bourdieu 1977). However, the constructive critiques some antiracists may direct at some elements of her performance (its centering of white voices alongside Moira's possible newness to the Black Lives Matter movement, for instance) do raise the question of – who decides which political messages should be performed on the drag stage, and how they should be communicated? Because drag performances are inherently an amplified platform for one's ideas, given that they are usually performed for a watchful audience, and because systemic racism, misogyny, and transphobia permeate queer culture, which gives white people, men, and/or cis people easier access to performance spaces and bookings, it is concerning that the political messages of those with the most power already are likeliest to be heard on the drag stage. This is one major possible hindrance to the political potential of participants' alien femme/ininities to contribute to our collective liberation from systems of normalizing power – and perhaps a possible hindrance to any political strategy which does not take representation into account.

Fascinating and crucial to point out during any discussion of the political potential of femininities is that, while I have never performed in drag, I am a relative insider in these interviews and conversations, a queer cultural member whose way of seeing the world *indeed has changed* through my interactions with the queens in this study. The conversations I have

had with these participants have influenced my behavior in the world in, I'm sure, uncountable, unknowable ways, but I am certain of at least one instance where this was true:

During the interviewing period of this research in the summer of 2018, I presented some of my preliminary findings at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Philadelphia. Transmisogynoir and black trans women's experiences in queer spaces had been coming up over and over again in my interviews, and I was deep in thinking about (and presenting research on) issues of racialized and gendered inequalities in queer spaces. While in Philadelphia, I was traveling alone on the public SEPTA train with a few others scattered around my train car, including two people who were traveling together – in my estimation, they were two cis white men around age 50 who looked to be business associates. At one of our stops, two more people got on, a pair of friends whom I perceived to be black trans women/femmes in their 30s or 40s. They chose seats further down in the train car and from where they sat they couldn't see what I could see – the two grown men near me making faces at each other, alternately amused and disgusted, stifling giggles. The women got off the train a few stops later. Right after they exited, the men let their giggles loose and made snarky comments – truthfully I no longer remember what they said because I felt so heated and angry. I raised my voice at them and delivered some poorly crafted defense of the women that they were just living their lives and nobody needed or wanted to hear the shit these men had to say about them. I was shaking with anger and it was not my most articulate moment. The men looked at me, surprised, and seemed to think I was overreacting, but they did quiet down and got off the train a couple stops later while I stared at my phone and vented on Twitter. No one else on the train said anything or reacted to the exchange. Again, it's hard to know what effect, if any, this interaction between me, a white

queer femme (likely perceived as a straight white woman during the interaction), and two cis white men had on the gender ideology of anybody in that train car. However, I recount this story not to be offered ally cookies⁵² but rather to indicate one count of anecdotal empirical evidence that micro-level intracultural social interactions among queers in queer spaces (in this case, among two queers in the virtual space of our interview) do indeed ripple outward and upward out of those spaces into more normative situations, especially when animated by feelings at the micro-affective level, *perhaps* to the effect of challenging macro structures of normalizing power (at least a little bit, hopefully).

Meso Dimensions of Femininities: Existence as Resistance

Several queens argued that simply by existing as themselves in the drag scene – a micro-level phenomenon based on individual embodiment, identity, appearance, and physical location – they are enabling and enacting community-level changes in inequalities based on race and gender. The idea of existence in and of itself as fundamentally a challenge to one’s oppressors has a rich history particularly in black feminist thought and in occupied Palestine. For instance, Audre Lorde famously wrote, “Caring for myself is not self-

⁵² Throughout the interviews for this project, Peppermint and Marsha P. Johnson, two black trans women drag queens (and, many would argue, queer movement leaders), were invoked by many participants to bolster various arguments, as earlier in Daphne’s comments. These arguments seemed to me to be made in absolute good faith, often even with a sense of queer-cultural reverence for our queer elders, but they, and my own recounting of this story on the train, did make me think about what Snorton and Haritaworn (2013) call a “trans necropolitics,” in which discourses of black trans women’s vulnerabilities to violence and death are marshalled in the service of homonormative and white supremacist social projects. In this case, we might ask, what homonormative social projects may be served when the mostly white, mostly cisgender queens I spoke with invoked Peppermint and Johnson in the justifications they offered for their own participation in drag culture, or when Moira invoked the phrasing of “Black Lives Matter” and “Trans Lives Matter” in an all-white performance against racism, or when I recount the story of the transmisogynoir I witnessed on the train?

indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare,” and “Existence as Resistance” is the name of a New York City activist group who use hip hop and art to organize Palestinian and black folx against Israel’s occupation of Palestine. In the drag scene, existence as resistance is fundamentally a *visibility* argument – the thinking goes, by embodying new, marginalized, taboo, abject, or otherwise nonnormative modes of being onstage (or in an online post), they are expanding other community members’ senses of possibility in an aesthetically and otherwise restrictive regulatory culture:

[Drag] is about pushing the boundaries and fucking with people’s idea about something even beyond gender. It’s about being this like, this radical push against (pause) identity, in regards to identity politics. So, um, you know, you don’t see someone walking down the street normally with like, three-foot-tall (pause), you know – a costume that goes out, you know, five feet surrounding you (chuckles). Or you don’t see someone wearing like, glittered abstract aesthetics and bodily expressions, um, all the time. I think that it’s about kind of bringing the weird and the queer to the forefront of people’s perceptions and what you’re doing and art.

Alisha (24, “white-passing” desi and white queer genderqueer trans woman drag performer in the Pacific Northwest) above is speaking about being nonnormative “walking down the street,” a location she did not choose at random. Rather, “walking down the street” is invoked as a reference to the gendered expectations for normal people in an aesthetically restrictive culture. 38 participants mentioned their strained relationship to normative spaces and places a total of 121 times, with the 10 most frequently referenced places being their homes of origin (52 mentions), workplaces (23 mentions), schools and universities (18 mentions), “out on the street” (11 mentions), the mall (9 mentions), straight bars (8 mentions), the grocery store (7 mentions), public transit (6 mentions), “in public” (4 mentions), and restaurants (4 mentions). Alisha suggested that because greater aesthetic restrictions exist in such normative spaces, the drag stage becomes an arena in which

strategies for gender liberation that rely on the aesthetic sensibilities of “the weird and the queer” become tenable. Crucially, Alisha says that drag is “about something even beyond gender,” a radical push against “identity” per se, further underlining the fact that the aesthetic restrictions in our society are gendered but are not reducible to gender, a point that dovetails well with Cohen’s framework of organizing community and solidarity on the basis of proximity to normalizing power writ large. In the conclusion to this chapter I will further explore the ways visibility-based strategies may contribute to, as well as possibly reinforce, macro systems of inequality.

Other participants invoked a similar visibility argument in regard to their claims that embodying femme and/or alien femininities specifically in the drag scene on- and offline combats racism, misogyny, femmephobia, and transphobia at – I am theorizing – the meso level. For instance, Vanessa (22, white, bisexual cis woman queen in North Carolina), has a fairly large presence of followers on social media, particularly on Tumblr and Instagram, where she posts near-daily photographs of her outfits with the intention of inspiring others toward sharing their own weirdness and being kinder toward that of others, linking this to a gendered historical argument about the ripple-effect of nonnormative visibility and invoking the body as a site of political change:

You have to have the people who paved the way, so it's like – think about the first women who wore pants, in the 18th century. They probably caused a huge stir but look at where we're at now. So that's why I support and encourage other people to dress up so it can be a safer environment when people get more used to it. Because when you think about, I think um, like the early 2000s, late 90s, Sophia Lancaster was a woman in the UK that her and her partner were both very goth and very dressed up, and they both got attacked by, you know, some drunk dudes, and she actually got killed, beaten to death, protecting her boyfriend. And her mother created this foundation to raise awareness against hate crimes against those like in the LGBT community or the alternative community to spread awareness and now we're in an age where you can dress goth and you can go out and be comfortable and safe for

the most part, um, and that's something that's really passionate for me, is to help spread awareness and kind of get more people, you know, into expressing themselves and more comfortable with that idea.

Sophia Lancaster's murder in 2007 has been argued by some to be a hate crime (Price 2013), which speaks to our collective difficulties around conceptualizing identity in western societies: what modes of being do we decide should be (ostensibly) protected by hate crimes laws, and which modes of being do we decide should be adopted at one's own risk? An earnest question: how is being killed for being "goth" different than being killed for being queer or trans, both of which are identities which are (sometimes) non-normatively visible on the body? If we accept that religion should be a protected category, then our answer cannot be based in an adjudication of the essential nature (or not) of gender or sexuality. There are important considerations about relative risk of violence with regard to race and "alternative" modes of self-presentation (particularly the whiteness that protects many goths from even more profound social stigma, as found by Wilkins, 2008) and embodiment (particularly for black trans women who do not "pass" as cisgender women). Vanessa's linking of (white goth) Sophia Lancaster's murder with the (sometimes violent) gender policing experienced by queer people shows the wide-reaching nature of our aesthetically restrictive culture which is highly gendered but not reducible to either gender, sexuality, or race. Vanessa's argument here, then, fits well within Cohen's (1997) framework of a queer solidarity based around proximity to normalizing power writ large, rather than on a homo-hetero binary of sexual identity only.⁵³ Indeed, it would seem to bear out that if we sought to

⁵³ Other types of queer-adjacent non-normative sexuality which are sometimes (often with much debate) included in a wide net of queer community and solidarity are asexuality, BDSM, and polyamory among people who experience the relative privilege of being perceived by others as heterosexual, e.g., heterosexual BDSM enthusiasts or straight people in "open marriages."

reduce restrictions on aesthetics and embodiment writ large that appearance-based forms of gender policing would also be reduced, thus representing a possible shift in normative systems of sex-gender-sexuality. However, this perspective may fall into the trap of erasing different forms of marginalization that attend different types of aesthetic non-normativity, a point which will be further explored in the conclusion to this project.

Christina, (21, white, gay, lesbian, queer, nonbinary, Colorado) described the way their existence, especially when combined with that of their performance assistant who does not fit the queer cultural ideal, is “political”:

Christina: I feel like, you know, just my existence as like, a nonbinary lesbian, is political. Um, you know, just my acts of having my girlfriend help me onstage and not like, a beautiful white cis gay male, I think that is political in the drag community itself. Um, I think whenever you do something outside the norm, especially in this political climate, it is gonna be political whether you try or not.

Andrea: Mhmm absolutely, so can you say a little bit more about what you mean by – you referenced this political climate?

Christina: Um, I mean we’re dealing with a lot of, uh, you know like, our government’s definitely run by Republicans and people who have been hateful towards my community and who I am as a human being and don’t want me to have rights and you know, don’t even want human beings to have rights. And so, when I say like, “this political climate,” I feel like the Obama era there was such a beautiful like, kind of a bubble of an idea of progression and then uh, when Trump was elected it just stopped. And I feel like it shook everyone because we realized we weren’t living in like, as safe of a country as we had thought with the Obama administration.

Importantly, Christina constructed the politicization of their girlfriend’s existence as resisting not only macro-level norms but also specifically the meso-level gay beauty norm of the “beautiful white cis gay male.” Further, it’s interesting that Christina referenced the Obama administration as a bubble of progression and safety for the queer community, given that President Obama was resistant to same-sex marriage throughout much of his political career

and presidency and has been labeled “Deporter in Chief” for the vast numbers of deportations – primarily of Latinx immigrants – that occurred under his tenure in office. It’s possible that Christina meant to invoke Obama as a symbol of progress rather than to identify him specifically as its harbinger, though Christina’s whiteness cannot be incidental to this framing. Thus, in thinking through existence as resistance, the identity and embodiment of the person doing the resisting through existing seem to have crucial import for the ways that individual may resist – or reinforce – certain structures of power by merely existing. As Amanda, a (31, white, bisexual, white, cis queer femme in Arizona) burlesque performer wondered aloud to me as she was describing the diversity of bodies that appear onstage in her local queer burlesque community:

Amanda: I’m like a size 8, 10. I’m white. So I don’t know how subversive I can really claim to be.

Andrea: Yeah so that’s interesting, so there’s something about like - you could be moving your body or wearing the same thing as somebody else, but depending on certain, sort of, changeable or unchangeable factors about your*self*, it can be more or less subversive. Does that make sense?

Amanda: Maybe! Yeah, I guess based, how, how different it is than like, the norm, maybe.

Importantly, Amanda and I were intentionally co-theorizing here – wondering aloud – so where we landed may not represent Amanda’s final thoughts on my question. However I am still using this exchange as a conceptual jumping-off point for thinking through the ways existence as resistance is and is not a viable political strategy in the world. Given this understanding of the ways the meanings of acts shift on the basis of who performs the acts, we may theorize that existence as resistance only operates when someone activates a marginalized part of their identity to be visible in the face of cultural hostility. In other

words, a white person could not act against racism through merely existing, similar to the way a cis person cannot act against transphobia through merely existing, whereas we might – along with participants – theorize that the existence (or, *survival*, as Lorde conceptualizes it) of marginalized people does de facto resist normalizing power through demonstrating nonnormative possibilities for being. Indeed we may theorize whether the existence of cis people at all, for instance, may in and of itself reinforce cisnormativity.

Perhaps accordingly, existence as resistance was a theme especially invoked by participants of color in this research. Nina (24, queer, straight, “borderline asexual” Latina cis woman queen in the Bay Area) weaves together the micro level of gender, sexual, and racial identities, the macro level of political climate, and the meso level of queer cultural spaces to argue that her persistent physical presence onstage in the face of cultural hostility to her very personhood is politicized:

Nina: I think being a woman, and a woman of color, doing an art form in a political climate that isn't forgiving to either one of those identifications, and then doing it in a queer space which is also another strike on top of woman of color and woman and queer performance artist, um, it's definitely a political statement whether or not you're performing political numbers or doing something politically driven. You're doing something that isn't necessarily looked upon well by a great majority of the population, so it's uh, definitely a political statement in itself.

Andrea: Yeah, so for you, the fact that you're doing this is political already even if the song you're doing or the performance piece you're doing onstage isn't explicitly about, like, a political issue.

Nina: Your existence in itself is political.

Nina is a well-known queen whose drag aesthetic pushes the boundaries of human appearance and might be considered humanoid, in that she is recognizably feminine but her look incorporates such nonhuman elements as body paint from the ROYGBIV spectrum, fantastical wigs and rhinestones glued on her face, as well as Nina's desire to look like a

“cupcake.” Another participant in this research described Nina’s drag as “so (pause) picturesque... it’s so beautiful, it’s so cool.” Importantly, Nina recounted for me how she refuses to dilute her frilly feminine aesthetic with “badass” or “edgy” or “masculine” elements, perceiving many femme’s and feminine people’s propensity to do so as an expression of internalized or coerced femmephobia. Thus, on a simple aesthetic level, the visibility of a totally feminine drag queen look shows audiences, in Nina’s estimation, that Nina is proud to be *very* feminine and does not seek to recuperate her femininity back into queer norms for AFABs, which tend to glorify at least some form of aesthetic masculinization. Nina also frustratedly told me that in regular life she is frequently considered racially ambiguous, with people often mistaking her as Asian or another race, though she identifies as Latina and her parents are Mexican immigrants⁵⁴. We might theorize then that one way Nina speaks back to others’ persistent (mis)racialization of her sexed body is through alienizing it, i.e., by opting-out of the earth-based conversation around difference and power and instead creating a new drag self whose aesthetics exceed and reject the terms of human sex, gender, sexuality, and race:



Figure 33. Instagram post by Nina as herself (center) flanked by pictures of her alien drag queen looks

⁵⁴ Of course, there are Mexicans and other Latinx folk of Asian descent, but Nina did not describe her race/ethnicity to me in this way.

Alisha (24, “white-passing” desi and white queer genderqueer trans woman drag performer in the Pacific Northwest) echoed and provided a powerful example of Nina’s idea of existence as resistance in her insightful analysis of the ways her own very existence as a queer, genderqueer, trans, feminine, Muslim, hijabi drag queen explodes what audiences think they know about gender, sexuality, race, and religion. She impressed upon me the importance of drag as a space where marginalized people can self-determine and change perceptions at the meso and macro levels:

Andrea: It sounds like this experience really created something for you and for your fellow Muslim queer and trans community, and so I’m wondering sort of, what do you think that this type of performance um, can do for the non-Muslim people in the room or the people who haven’t questioned westernized ideas of queerness? What could your performance, or what did this performance do for them, do you think?

Alisha: I think that it is the start of a process of dismantling their own oppressive kinds of perceptions surrounding um, queerness and spirituality and religion. Because like I was saying, because it’s like, in their face. They have to deal with it. Like, they have to sit through this three-and-a-half-minute hijabi rap about chuckles about you know these things and I think that you know, that, that’s a big step for those folks, often you know, people pause don’t know that resources to kind of utilize to kind of learn about stuff like that or they don’t want to, and so that is something, you’re creating a resource by doing this, by letting them know hey I exist, like um, just that narrative that you can ascribe alone, um, can be very life changing for these people, you know there have been times I’ve performed as [drag name⁵⁵] that people just come up and tell you, “Oh, I didn’t think you existed.” And that’s, you know, even though it’s kinda shitty, like, they ought to have known, but it definitely like, changes their perception of it. Because, you know, seeing – it’s one thing to hear about like, queer Muslim people existing, but it’s a totally other thing when they finally meet somebody who’s like, very queer, very trans, very like, still is Muslim or still identifies as Muslim, and so I think that that’s important. I think too that it’s important because it destabilizes standards of how people understand Islam. People think that all Muslims prescribe [sic] to all of the religious laws and the idea of like, a contemporary Muslim is nonexistent for a lot of people in and out of the queer community. So it provides people more of a real perspective on the non-monolithic variety of expression in Islam, and that like, Muslims are super queer and

⁵⁵ Alisha’s drag name for these performances is an intentionally sexual, pun-based riff on the word “hijab”

radical and (pause) aren't modest um, or, fuck with constructs of modesty. Like, I was wearing underwear and short shorts and hijab, and that's a stark kind of aesthetics because it doesn't fit the mold. But because of how you're fucking with those standards, it leads to people taking a step back and being like, "Oh, it's not just this thing." I think especially with the identity politics around modesty in Islam like, that is a super important conversation to start a dialogue that we're seeing play itself out on the stage. It's really important because they can no longer say that they look at hijabis as this like oppressed fragile femme body, like that's an empowered, sexual, visible, and independent kind of expression. Hopefully they would see that.

Alisha makes plain that on a very basic level, many non-Muslims simply *do not even know* that "contemporary Muslims" – who, in Alisha's characterization are radical, queer, trans, empowered, sexual, and independent – even exist in the world. Importantly, Alisha is locating the disruption to this sort of ignorant Islamophobia in her very own body: by existing as herself, embodying contemporary Islam, she herself "destabilizes standards of how people understand Islam." In this case it becomes clear that visibility – *in and of itself* – may have powerful effects on the ways queer cultural members – and visitors – view the world, marginalized communities (in this case, Muslims, queers, and trans folx in particular), and possibly act on their new understandings to affect systems of normalizing power, an argument which leads me to consider the ways participants strategized toward enacting social change at the macro level.

MACRO

Participants regularly brought up macro systems of normalizing power during our interviews, primarily those based on race, gender (both sexism writ large and cissexism more specifically), and sexual identity. Some queens wove these systems together in spectacularly intersectional analyses of their own experiences of femininity in and out of the drag scene

and used these experiences as the basis for strategizing toward our collective liberation from these systems of power.

Destabilizing Macro Systems of Power: White Supremacy

Rehabilitating Femininities as Antiracism

Several participants of color linked their experiences of gender explicitly to their experiences of being racialized. Tina (34, black, queer, pansexual, cis woman, Arizona) theorized that the rehabilitation of femininity among all genders of people, particularly black people, serves to destabilize a macro-cultural system of gendered white supremacy through a rejection of “traditional gender stereotypes”:

Andrea: So in your regular life you're not super interested in feminine things. So how come you're drawn to those things in drag?

Tina: (pause) Um, because it gives me that chance to be a feminine person that I'm not in daily life...Being a female (pause), um, it was very much a negative thing for me [growing up]. Girls had to be this, girls had to be that. I had four younger brothers...so I automatically thought I couldn't be soft with them, and also them growing up as black men they weren't trained to be soft, they weren't allowed to be sensitive, so in my head was already embedded like, I can't be soft with them. Now with them as grown men, when you try to get them to show emotion it's a tug of war...I have three daughters and a son, so I had to learn with my own children and my nieces and nephews that I can't (pause) um, (pause) I can't put those things on my son or my nephew...My son loves the color pink and red, he likes to watch me get dressed and do my makeup, he's put on my clothes before. I don't get upset about that. I look at it [as] whatever makes my kids happy makes me happy. If they're happy I'm gonna let them be happy. I'm not gonna force traditional gender stereotypes on my children the way that was put on us...In the black community black men are supposed to be strong and not show emotion and not be weak. Not only them being men, them being *black* men. And that's something that goes back to slavery, that black men were supposed to be strong and powerful and not show any type of emotion, and if you did you were weak, and you were beaten for it. So that's just something that generationally has been passed down through the black community. So if there are black men who are effeminate or soft or sensitive they're automatically considered bitches or punks. And I'm like, “No! That's a horrible stereotype. We need to break that.”

Andrea: Cuz for you, what you're saying is that that idea actually comes from white supremacy, am I understanding you correctly?

Tina: Yeah! [emphasis in original]

In her comments above, Tina incisively critiqued binary gender ideologies for being a tool of white supremacy, implying that (black) men's femmephobia serves to marginalize not only women but all black people by drawing on and reinforcing racist controlling images dating back to the enslavement of African people. She recounted rejecting feminine modes of being in order to escape the strictures of coercive gendering, as did other queens whose comments we saw earlier in this chapter, as well as to connect with her brothers in a manner appropriate for their race and gender. Lamenting both her and her brothers' rejection of femininity as a function of internalized white supremacy, she proffered two ways the conscious adoption of feminine traits might serve to destabilize the hold that a macro-level system of racial inequality has over the micro-affective feelings and behaviors of black people: first, her own conscious and intentional adoption of drag femininity onstage as a femme queen, and second, her commitment to not coercively masculinizing the black boys in her life. Crucially, Tina cited "happiness" as the opposite of being subjected to racialized expectations for feminine and masculine behavior, rendering Tina's framework here a *phenomenological* and *affective* theorizing of liberation from normalizing power. Tina's analysis is consistent with Cohen's descriptions of the ways all forms of black gender and sexuality – even heterosexuality – are pathologized in the service of white supremacy, indicting the "system of state-sanctioned, white male, upper-class, heterosexual domination that forced these presumably *heterosexual* [black] men and women to endure a history of rape, lynching,

and other forms of physical and mental terrorism” (1997). In order to combat white supremacy, then, Tina and Cathy J. Cohen both argue that we must reject strategies for liberation which do not take into account the ways gender, sexuality, and race are co-constitutive and that those forms of black gender and sexuality which are perceived to threaten white supremacy are most subject to pathologization and marginalization. Indeed, Cohen cites the “bitches” and “punks” Tina mentions as subject positions from which emanates “the radical potential of queer politics” (1997). Importantly, Tina is making a ripple-effect argument that her own changed behavior at the micro-affective level will cause a shift in the micro-affective experiences of her son and nephew, with the possible result of challenging and destabilizing white supremacy at the macro level, a claim which I will further explore in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

Reinforcing White Standards of Beauty through Contouring

Another way to think through femme and alien femininities’ political potentialities to subvert and/or reinforce white supremacy is to examine racialized standards of beauty in the drag scene. Most of the queens I spoke with mentioned contouring as an integral part of achieving the drag queen look. Contouring is a makeup application skill that is difficult to master and involves using at least two, but usually more, different shades of foundation (base), concealer, powder, blush, and highlighting powder or cream to exaggerate and/or

change the contours of one's facial structure⁵⁶. In general, the goal is to make one's facial features stand out more by making shadows darker and more pronounced (for example, the hollows of the cheeks) and highlighting places where light would naturally hit the face (for example, the top of the cheekbones), producing the visual effect of a sharper, more angular facial structure, particularly in the area of the nose, cheeks, and jaw. This makeup technique has existed among stage performers since time immemorial but has gained mainstream traction among makeup users and beauty enthusiasts in recent years since the parallel advent of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and online makeup tutorials by makeup artists and drag queens. Em (27, white, Jewish, asexual, nonbinary, genderfluid queen in New York City who identifies under the trans umbrella) is a costume designer and drag queen who designs high-end outfits for other drag queens, including several *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestants. At the beginning of

⁵⁶ Figure 34: Step-by-step example of contouring by well-known Instagram makeup artist



@DressYourFace

our interview, Em identified themselves as white and also specified a Jewish ethnoracial identity that was partially informed by their experience of looking Jewish (i.e., not “passing” as “just” white in the world). Em and I had a conversation about the racial implications of contouring and how meso-level standards for the drag queen look may serve to reinforce systems of normalizing power particularly around race and beauty:

Andrea: I’m wondering if being Jewish has impacted your experience doing drag?

Em: Hmm. (pause) I do think (pause) on a more abstract level that like, Judaism kind of hammers this thing into you that like, if *you* don’t do something, then who will? And like, you know, changing the world and making a difference. So I think my view of like (pause) everything, has to have a message, and everything should be like, [about] helping people... Um, and then just like, on a more like, stereotypical, superficial level, I have a really hard time with my nose contour (laughs) because there’s like, this way that everyone thinks that like, drag noses are supposed to look. And like, because of the way my nose is structured I have a really hard time getting it to look right. And it’s like, you know, five or six years later [since starting drag], the one part of my makeup that I’m still really insecure about.

Andrea: And so can you describe to me this ideal drag nose that people feel like drag queens need to have?

Em: Just like, very (pause) straight, small, trim, button nose. Like, I have a large bridge to my nose and it’s like, long and pointy and it’s hard to get it to look like that shape. But I’m right now at a point where it’ll look like that from the front, but from the side, there’s no way to make it look any smaller.

Andrea: Have you considered – like would you ever consider not contouring your nose or doing it in a different way?

Em: I’ve played around with it...but it’s still hard to get the lines to look right? But there’s also been a lot of discussions about like, black queens who have naturally broad noses, and is asking them to contour down to this like, thin little strip with a button nose at the end, like, is that racist? Is that perpetuating white beauty standards? So, there are queens who’ve pushed back against that and embraced having a broader, flatter nose.

Andrea: Mhmm, and what do you think about that question? Like, do you think that racism plays a factor in that?

Em: [resignedly] Yeah. Um, and then there's the whole issue of finding beauty products for darker skin. I know a lot of queens who paint way lighter than their actual skin is, just because like, it's not available, or because they were told that it looks better. And as a costume designer I have a lot of problems because the nude mesh that I use, for like, illusion costumes only comes in one dark skin tone, and it's lighter than any of my dark-skinned clients. Like a tan white person could wear it. So then when these queens get on [*RuPaul's*] *Drag Race* and are read⁵⁷ for like, their tights not matching, it's like, what do you want them to do? Hand-dye all of their stuff because it doesn't exist?

Em made a ripple-effect argument by pointing out the possible negative effects beauty norms for drag queens (a small “button nose”, among others), which are micro-level in the sense of beauty practices and meso-level in the sense of community standards for appearance, might have on a macro scale (the perpetuation of “white beauty standards”). Importantly, Em identified feeling “insecure” as the micro-affective manifestation of their own failure as a Jewish-looking person to meet these norms. Further, Em made space for the possibility of destabilizing macro systems of normalizing power by arguing that black queens who refuse to contour their noses to a “whiter⁵⁸” shape are pushing back, i.e., resisting such racialized standards for drag queens and for beauty writ large.

Destabilizing Macro Systems of Power: Gender

Gender intelligibility (i.e., the ability for others to perceive one's gender accurately based on one's embodiment) was a recurring theme in participants' discussions of the ways

⁵⁷ Being “read” is drag slang for being criticized harshly, sometimes in a humorous, tough-love sort of way. Reading (i.e., criticizing others with sharp wit) is often considered a hallmark skill of a good drag queen. “The Library Is Open” is a recurring segment of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in which contestants are challenged to “read” each other's drag looks and personality.

⁵⁸ Of course, discrete racial categories do not exist and there are no physical traits exclusive to any one racial group. However, prominent nose bridges and “broader, flatter” noses are commonly associated in western discourses of race and beauty as characteristic of Jewish and black people, respectively.

they sought to challenge gendered systems of inequality through drag. The queens I spoke with related to me two divergent strategies for destabilizing gender at the macro level: they purposefully styled their bodies in ways that would, ideally, 1) render them totally unintelligible to audiences as one gender or another and/or 2) make audiences (mis)perceive them as cis-male drag queens.

Strategy: Total Gender Unintelligibility

The first strategy – styling the body in *alien femininities* and/or other “genderfucking” ways – calls to mind the phrase “Not gay as in happy but queer as in fuck you,” in that it refuses assimilation into the boundaries of intelligibility. In other words, this strategy refuses a struggle for rights and recognition on the basis of being (nearly) “normal” in favor of causing gender chaos and confusion with the goal of destabilizing not only gender *oppression* but gender *per se*. Alien femininities are one particularly visible form of intentional unintelligibility that is based on a rejection of the terms of *human* gender, as theorized in chapter two, and below by Jennifer and Francine:

I want to create that performance where people can be like, ‘I don’t know what I just saw, because I don’t know how to categorize it. But maybe I don’t need to categorize it.’ (Jennifer, 31, white, pansexual, “female but sometimes I forget what gender I am,” London)

You should be kinda confused when you look at me. I think that’s kind of exciting. (Shannon, 20, white, queer, genderqueer, nonbinary, Pennsylvania)

In these comments Jennifer and Shannon articulated a politics of destabilizing processes of gender categorization, a macro-level phenomenon that they seek to challenge by confusing others, interactionally, through their own embodiment. The ripple effect here comes in the

form of others' changed behavior after having had their perception of gender as something coherent and knowable disrupted in the drag scene.

Strategy: Seeking Gendered Misperception

The other strategy participants described as a challenge to normative gender at the macro level was not to seek total gender unintelligibility, as did Jennifer and Shannon, above, but rather to intentionally try to be misperceived as a CMDQ or trans woman drag queen by doing everything possible to be visually indistinguishable from an AMAB drag queen. Importantly, this strategy is only available to AFAB people as a method of destabilizing gender, as it rests on the AFAB queen eventually revealing her “true” gender underneath the drag, and thus it inherently rests on a binary understanding of gender even as it seeks to challenge gender writ large. Indeed, the AMAB trans femmes I spoke with, on the other hand, decidedly did *not* want to be misperceived as male or even, in some cases, as AMAB. The thinking behind this strategy of intentionally trying to be misperceived is the AFAB's gender revelation will shock audience members out of their beliefs about “men” and “women,” which, some queens argued, may actually do more to dismantle normative gender than the near-total gender unintelligibility sought by the first group:

At the bars people will approach me and be like, “Oh, are you a *real* girl or are you a trans woman?” And I'm like, “No, I'm a real girl.” So, that's a big compliment to me. Because it's like – okay, so I look like a drag queen so I'm *confusing* you.” (Lindsey, 25, white, straight, cis woman, Florida) [emphasis in original]

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Angie: If you knew me [personally], you knew I was a [cis] girl. You knew I had triplets at home. If you didn't know me, you'd question. But they [audience members] were scared to ask me. So they would wait until I get done performing and they'd be like, “Are you real fish?” And I'll be like (laughs), “What do you think?”

...I had to like, really show my maternity pictures to show that I was a real girl, and they're just like, "Oh my god, I wouldn't have ever known. You really look like trans drag fish to me." And I would get compliments from that...When people meet me and I say, "I'm a bioqueen" and they're like, "No you're not" – that to me is the mindfuck there. *That's* the mindfuck.

Andrea: It's even like, more, like you can, what am I even tryna say? Like you can fuck with people's expectations about gender *even more* as a bioqueen?

Angie: Mhmm!

Andrea: Than as a drag queen.

Angie: Yes! And it goes the same way in my regular life. If you look at a picture of me, you see my long nails, you think – "Long nails, all this weave, whatever, all this makeup, oh she ratchet." But you meet me, I'm very articulate, I'm, you know, hablo español un poco⁵⁹, I can speak Spanish too. And it's like, just cuz you lookin at the outside, so you don't know about the *person*." (Angie, 28, black, "bi-straight," cis woman, Florida) [emphasis in original]

Because cis women are held up as the standard for feminine beauty in western society, it is striking that multiple cis women participants mentioned wanting to look like trans women. Notably, they tended to use the language of "real girl" as discussed in chapter two, though it seems like participants may be reproducing that language by quoting the audience members who questioned their gender and not themselves intending to traffic in cisnormative understandings of cis women as "realer" women than trans women. Crucially, though, these cis women queens wanted to look like trans women *while in drag*, not in their day-to-day quotidian lives, a distinction which merits consideration because it shows the ways standards for the drag queen look reflect and sometimes reinforce normative beauty standards but are not reducible to them. In this case, wanting to look like a trans woman can be seen either a self-serving mechanism for self-promotion as a "real" or "good" drag queen in a drag scene

⁵⁹ "I speak a little Spanish"

where meso-level beauty norms privilege AMAB embodiment, and/or as a radical method of destabilizing the links between female bodies, feminine beauty, and gendered access to queer space.

The distinction between these two groups' strategies is reminiscent of debates between queer deconstructionists who would prefer everyone default to they/them pronouns and (radical) feminists who argue that the real-world operation of the patriarchy in oppressing women as a group means that a universalized they/them pronoun will serve to render women's gendered oppression invisible, a debate which, coincidentally, animated the email listserv of Sociologists for Women in Society during the data collection period for this project. Fausto-Sterling (2000) suggests, through her own sort of visibility argument, that an expansion in the catalog of intelligible bodies will result in fewer (formerly) unintelligible bodies being defined as abject and subsequently marginalized on that basis, arguing "if we choose, over a period of time, to let mixed-gender bodies and altered patterns of gender-related behavior become visible, we will have, willy-nilly, chosen to change the rules of cultural intelligibility" (76). In this framework, "intelligibility" is at once a moving target as well as a possible provocateur of social change: if we theorize gender intelligibility (or lack thereof) to be the basis of gendered social stigma, coercive gendering, and gendered violence, it then follows that a shift in what is "intelligible" will effect a shift in which bodies bear the brunt of gendered stigma. However, this argument would eventually reach an asymptotic breaking point – if all forms of gender are eventually recuperated into intelligibility, it would seem to me that gender intelligibility would cease to exist as a concept, as the idea of intelligibility rests on categorization processes that are inherently and necessarily regulatory. In other words, gender itself as a legible concept writ large relies on

the constitutive outside of unintelligible forms of gender, similar to the way identity-based movements eventually “self-destruct” as they reach their goals of incorporation into society (Gamson 1995).

Destabilizing Macro Systems of Power: Sexual Identity

The contestations over queer space evident in participants’ debates with CMDQs revealed two different political strategies for destabilizing inequalities based on sexual identity, specifically heteronormativity, through drag: first, a No Cishets policy designed to keep queer spaces queer, and second, an Everybody Welcome policy designed to, ideally, turn the cishets queer. In both of these strategies, *visibility* is thought to play a key role in the march toward liberation from heteronormativity, acting as a bridge between meso-level community demographics and the destabilization – and/or reinforcement – of macro systems of power based on sexuality. As a queer person myself, I am invested in this debate around the boundaries of queer space, and my immediate reaction was to want to keep queer spaces queer, with limited or zero straight people in attendance, mainly for my own feelings of comfort. Throughout this research project I wrestled with that boundary, especially as I became more familiar with black queer feminist literature like that of Cathy J. Cohen who argues for a reorganization of queer solidarity politics on the basis of one’s proximity to power writ large. Additionally, my conversations with participants regarding who should and should not be allowed in queer spaces, and on what bases, allowed me to think through – and, ultimately, change – my position.

“They Basically Treat the Gay Space Like They’re at the Zoo”⁶⁰: The No Cishets Policy

One strategy the queens in this study devised to contribute to queer liberation from systems of power based on sexuality was to argue that straight people should be barred from accessing queer space on account of their bad behavior (taking over queer spaces with bachelorette parties touching drag queens’ bodies were frequently mentioned), lack of queer cultural competence (i.e., not knowing tipping etiquette or the au courant identity terminology), and/or lack of familiarity, as cishet people, with the struggles and marginalization that queer folx go through. We can see many elements of the specter of the straight white girl appearing in these arguments for a No Cishets policy. By keeping queer spaces queer, some queens argued, queer people could stay safe from the heterosexualizing and pathologizing presence of cishet people (see Orne 2015), which purportedly strengthens queer people as a community and thus presumably weakens the force of heterosexuality by preventing it from polluting the community and solidarity of queer space. Shannon (20, white, queer, genderqueer, nonbinary, Pennsylvania) argued:

There’s like a huge amount of self-, like, loathing, that you have to work though [as a queer person], and drag’s a really good outlet for that, I think, because it lets you meet people that are like you and who have gone through the same thing, and when you walk into a drag show as a performer and you look at the other performers, there’s like, a mutual respect of “You are in some way LGBT+, and so am I, and we have a set of shared experiences based on that, whatever those experiences might be.” So when a straight person thinks that drag is for them, I find it kind of insulting.

Shannon’s argument for the No Cishets policy for queer spaces, in the drag scene in particular, rests on an understanding of sexual marginalization as operating on a binary axis

⁶⁰ Quote from Shannon (20, white, queer, genderqueer, nonbinary, Pennsylvania)

of straight/LGBT+, a perspective reminiscent of Sedgwick's (1993) argument that the primary axis of difference in western society is heterosexual/homosexual. In this framework there is a presumed sameness, particularly with regard to experiences of sexual marginalization, shared by all queer people as contrasted with all straight people. However, Collins (2005) helps bring queer theory out of its white focus on sexuality and argues the master binary overlaying all others in the contemporary system of normativity in the United States is normal/deviant, a much more intersectional and convincing framework for understanding inequality systems. Collins's argument resonates with Cohen's (1997) entreaty for scholars and activists to form broad-based coalitions of solidarity and strategize for queer liberation on the basis of proximity to normalizing power writ large, rather than on the basis of sexual identity itself. Cohen argues, "I emphasize the marginalized position of some who embrace heterosexual identities [for instance, "welfare queens"] not because I want to lead any great crusade to understand more fully the plight of 'the heterosexual.' Rather, I recognize the potential for shared resistance with such individuals" made possible by a reframing of the concepts of queerness, normativity, and proximity to power (1997: 452).

"When you see it portrayed in front of you, it gives language to it, it gives it a physical embodiment"⁶¹: The Everybody Welcome Policy

Cohen's plea for a broader politics of queer solidarity provides a useful framework for understanding the second strategy for destabilizing systems of sexuality, which was much more frequently espoused than the No Cishets policy for regulating access to queer space, even among queens who were dubious of many straight people's ability to act appropriately

⁶¹ Quote from Sasha (20, "black mixed race," pansexual, nonbinary, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, Florida)

in a queer space. This second strategy was an “Everybody Welcome” approach to (not) regulating access to queer space. Often, queens drew on their own experiences of marginalization by CMDQs in queer space to argue that queer people, and particularly non-cis-male drag queens, by virtue of having been marginalized themselves on the basis of sex-gender-sexuality, should not attempt to deny others that same access to drag. Accordingly, most queens who defended women’s and AFABs’ participation in gay culture against CMDQs’ narrow boundary-making processes also believed straight people should be accepted into drag and queer spaces. Tracy (23, “mixed-race” Native American, Japanese, and white, gay, lesbian, queer, cis woman, Midwest) told me:

I feel like *anyone* who’s interested should be able to [do drag], uh, but at the same time sometimes it’s kind of awkward cuz *they [straight people]* don’t know how to really act around *gay people* and sometimes they’ll pick up the mannerisms – which, *I* pick up mannerisms of *gay men* and sometimes gay men think I’m being catty or they don’t like it. (pause) And so they’re like “Oh no girl, you need to quit,” but that’s just how I talk now. It’s when I’m around people, that’s how I talk to people when I’m in drag. (pause) I feel like, anyone can do drag, gay or straight, you know, so, I think it just (pause) depends on who you’re performing with and who your group is. [emphasis added]

It is interesting to note the various identity groups and their shifting contours in Tracy’s comment: anyone (regardless of sexuality), straight people, gay people, gay men, and queer women. In Tracy’s formulation above, it is “awkward” when straight people pick up gay men’s mannerisms in queer spaces, but unproblematic when she, a gay/lesbian/queer woman, picks up the same mannerisms. Presumably, then, according to Tracy, while gay men draw a boundary around only themselves as a group and distance themselves from both straight people and queers of other genders, Tracy redraws the subcultural boundary to include her own queer gender identity in the “in-group” of drag. Shifting the boundaries in this way enables Tracy, a queer cis woman, to construct her own participation in drag as

culturally authentic, even as she hints that her drag persona contains elements she “picks up” from gay men, while still rendering suspect straight people who pick up the same mannerisms.

Furthermore, some queens argued, as part of a discourse of TIGE, that because gender and sexuality are unfixed over the life course, cishet people who enter the drag scene may not always remain cishet, particularly after having seen the self-evident and benign gender and sexual diversity in queer spaces. Part of normative ideology with regard to sex-gender-sexuality is idea that not only do normative sex-gender-sexuality covary, such that normal adult males are heterosexual men and normal adult females are heterosexual women (see Freud 1905), but also that these positionalities are immutable and innate. However, there was evidence in my interviews with queens that theretofore cisgender, heterosexual individuals who may have entered the drag scene believing in binary normative sex-gender-sexuality – or at least not having given it much or any thought before – may not remain cishet after having participated in queer culture and having seen the self-evident diversity of genders and sexual desires and identities. Crucially, this shifting of identities over time can be used to bolster either a *social constructionist* argument re: sex-gender-sexuality, in that identities are shown to be mutable, or a (*trans-inclusionary*) *essentialist* argument re: sex-gender-sexuality, in that some folx may argue that this shifting of identities just reflects individuals finally “accepting” the inner truth about their “real” sex-gender-sexuality. Angie (28, black, “bi-straight,” cis woman, Florida) is example of this phenomenon of shifting identities in the queer scene: she told me that while she identified as cisgender and heterosexual before entering the drag scene, she now identifies as “bi-straight” and is questioning whether she is totally cisgender as well. I spoke with Angie’s drag sister, Sasha, who recounted a story

about, I believe, Angie, although I cannot know for sure because Sasha did not name Angie specifically. Sasha told (presumably) Angie's story in defense of the Everybody Welcome policy:

Sasha: I feel like allies [should get to be in queer spaces]. I'm only speaking this because I know someone personally: *before* [participating in drag] she was cisgender and heterosexual but then, getting to know her longer, she kind of shifted to (pause) like, questioning her own sexuality and her own gender identity as well. But before that, she was, you know, a cisgender woman and um, a heterosexual. So when I think of "everybody" [welcome], I'm thinking of her, because she was *in* the community. She was a femme queen, and then she *did* belong in the community because she was physically in it. She was part of all of the, like, events. She was, you know, *in* the community, whether it be with the letters [LGBTQ+] or not, she was physically in the community, so that's why I would say she's a part of the community.

Andrea: Yeah, she showed up. (laughs)

Sasha: Yeah, exactly, she showed up, she was physically- she was there.

Andrea: Yeah, well, and that's a really interesting idea, *because*, like, um, I know you can't speak for another person necessarily-

Sasha: Mhmm.

Andrea: But it sounds like – so she started coming to this community identifying as a heterosexual cisgender person and then like, started to rethink that over time. And it sounds like – I mean, tell me if I'm wrong – but do you think that part of that was *through* participation in this community, she started to think differently about things?

Sasha: Yeah, I could say [that]. Cuz even for myself, just being exposed to more things [like non-normative genders and sexualities], it kind of- it really is just like, a thing where [I thought], "Okay, this is okay." Because even all the things that you feel, not everybody knows what you feel, and then a lot of times the things that you feel, you kind of just give a shrug to it, cuz it's just your feeling. But then when you see it represented in front of you physically, that's what it's kind of like, "Oh, this is deeper, or it's more than what I was just thinking," you know? You can't just brush off your identity [anymore], or brush off, you know, how you feel about yourself?... When you see it portrayed in front of you it gives language to it. It gives a physical, like, embodiment of it.

Andrea: Right okay, so I'm trying to think through this, and so, lemme know what you think about this idea cuz it's the first time I'm thinking about it this way. (laughs)

Sasha: Okay. (laughs)

Andrea: So it sounds like the people who would feel like a straight person or a cisgender person should *not* be in the community or should *not* do drag, sort of think of that [straightness and cisness] as something that is like a static, unchanging thing about a person, like, “You’re straight. You shouldn’t be here.”

Sasha: Mhmm, yeah.

Andrea: Whereas from your perspective, it sounds like you’re saying- you’re leaving open the possibility that those people might not always remain straight and cisgender, and how else might they figure that out if they never see it in front of them?

Sasha: That’s very – that – yes. Mhmm.

Andrea: Whoa, cuz that’s really interesting, cuz that’s like the first time I’ve heard someone talk about the presence of straight people in queer spaces that way, so that’s a really interesting idea to me.

Sasha: Yeah! [emphasis in original]

I can honestly say as a researcher who prioritizes the co-construction of theory between me and the folk I interview, whom black (queer) feminist theory has taught me to regard as co-social theorists (Collins 1990, Johnson 2018), that this conversation immediately and forcefully shifted my perspective on regulating cishet people’s access to queer spaces. The moment Sasha and I co-produced a theory of queer boundaries that did not rely on a concept of a stable, inherent, presocial or otherwise immutable sex-gender-sexuality, I became convinced that a No Cishets boundary around queer space is doomed to fail at facilitating queer liberation because a) it relies on an reading of sexuality and gender as immutable and made up of discrete categories, which as a sociologist I do not espouse, and b) it is based, as is much white queer theory and white queer politics, on a simplistic, reductive, and ultimately antiblack construction of a community/solidarity politics based on understanding sexual oppression as done by all straight people to all queer people. In other

words, it suffers from the same nonintersectional fallacy as do radical feminist conceptualizations of patriarchy as a universal system of (male) men's domination of (female) women, both of which are conceptualized to be discrete and immutable subject positions.

FROM MICRO TO MACRO?: Considering the Mainstreaming of Drag

At the outset of this project I felt adamant that I would not discuss RuPaul or *RuPaul's Drag Race* in any major detail, given the overwhelming disproportionate attention cis men in general and RuPaul specifically have already garnered from scholars of gender and drag, respectively. I wanted to offer my project about non-cis-male queens to the literature as one small partial corrective to these trends, but I have found it impossible to write this dissertation without considering RuPaul and *RuPaul's Drag Race* as unavoidable figures in the current cultural milieu that surrounds drag. RuPaul's name was raised during every single interview for this project, and while I still resisted organizing the entire dissertation through a framework where RuPaul was central to the argument, the relative mainstreaming of drag in the twenty-first century – almost solely because of *RuPaul's Drag Race* – has admittedly provided a timely opportunity to think through the ambivalence of both identity- and visibility-based strategies for organizing community, solidarity and liberation. With regard to identity, *RuPaul's Drag Race* features AMAB queens only, the overwhelming majority of whom are cis men. The few trans women RuPaul has allowed to compete on the show (e.g., Peppermint, who has been mentioned earlier in this dissertation) had not had any gender affirmation surgery at the time of appearing on the show, a central reason RuPaul allowed them to compete. With regard to visibility, the quick-rising popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race*

among not only gay but increasingly straight audiences has led many queers and drag queens to speculate about what effects the mainstreaming of drag, led by *RuPaul's Drag Race* and Mama Ru herself, will have on systems of normalizing power within and beyond the drag scene.

Participants and I discussed the ways that before *RuPaul's Drag Race* began, there used to be less contact, i.e., visibility, between queers and straights, whereas now audiences who would not attend a drag show in person have another way of experiencing drag. We might understand this as meso-level segregation by sexual identity. Diana (26, black, lesbian, cis woman, Colorado) illustrates the ways drag as a performance art has become more intelligible to previously unfamiliar straight audiences:

For the longest time, my mom and my grandma thought I was a stripper. (laughs) When I started drag (laughs) they were like, “Tell us you’re a stripper. We won’t be mad.” And I’m like, “No, I’m a drag queen.” [And they were like,] “Okay, wink wink.” But like, the fact that this [*RuPaul's Drag Race*] even being on VH1, my grandma happened to flip past it last year and she’s like, “Hey, there’s those drag people you like on TV.” Like, one part of that’s good, so my parents don’t worry about me [being a stripper] for the rest of my life, that part is good.

In another part of our interview, Diana mentioned being raised by her Haitian Muslim father and feeling like she was more sexually conservative than the rest of her queer cultural counterparts, for instance feeling very invested in the political goal of marriage equality at the same moment she felt like it became *de rigueur* in queer spaces to decry legal marriage and monogamy in favor of relationship anarchy and polyamory. Relatedly, Diana’s comment above illustrates her desire to discursively distance herself from sex workers, a form of boundary-making that we might question according to Cohen’s broader framework of community and solidarity, which would, in this case, fold sex workers and polyamorous folk

into the wide net of folx marginalized by normalizing systems of power based on sexuality. On the other hand, Diana framed the mainstreaming of drag positively in this way, seeing the normalization of drag in her conservative family's purview as a relief. Recall Fannie (24, white, bisexual, cisgender woman queen in Texas) from chapter one, a schoolteacher who felt she had to distinguish drag from stripping in order to keep her job; while the mainstreaming of drag may make some types of queer culture more visible and even more *normal* in society, Fannie's and Diana's discursive distancing from sex workers illustrate that not all forms of marginalized sexuality will be liberated from oppression via drag's increased visibility alone.

Janet (30, white, bisexual and polyamorous, cis woman, Pacific Northwest) argued that televising *RuPaul's Drag Race* protected these straight audiences from the stigma associated with actually physically going to a drag show in a queer bar in the following quote that also appeared in chapter one to introduce the mainstream straight foil definition of drag:

Janet: I think it's a way for them [straight people] to privately (pause) look into this thing that they view as weird and abnormal. I mean, it's kind of like this, you know, "Oh my gosh, I get to (pause) watch men turn themselves into women in the privacy of my own home and (laughs) not have anyone judge me."

Andrea: Right, yeah, so it's almost like a spectacle without people having to actually go to a drag show.

Janet: Yeah, mmmm. They can go to a drag show in the privacy of their own home.

We might theorize that allowing straight audiences to experience drag without the attendant stigma of experiencing queer space further reinforces straight people's distance from queerness and continues to mark queers as "other" without actually disrupting systems of inequality in the material world. Arin (22, white, queer, nonbinary, transgender, California)

further specified the reason they believed *RuPaul's Drag Race* presented a rare opportunity for straight men to experience drag without having their heterosexual status called into question:

I think [*Ru Paul's*] *Drag Race* is going mainstream, because, you know, even straight men are fascinated by it...I think also a lot of straight men are worried about going to see a drag queen in person and having them, like, touch their hand when they take the dollar, that they're gonna be like sexually confused...Yeah, someone who has the same genitalia as them (chuckles), who's like, the same gender, almost, and it's like...they're afraid that if they're [at a drag show] in person that it's gonna be, you know, they're gonna have those "real" feelings.

Thus, in Arin's estimation, *RuPaul's Drag Race* allows straight men a way to avoid the possibility that they may be heterosexual. Because many participants argued that physically being in queer space is a possible catalyst to rethinking one's straightness and cisness, as in the case of Angie, Arin's point that straight men are spared this reorientation to the self when their engagement with drag and queer culture is only digital. This may be one way that identity is unmoved by visibility – a way that visibility functions differently IRL and via a screen.

Some viewed the mainstreaming of drag, and the bolstering effect some say it has had on audience sizes in queer bars, relatively unproblematically, like Lindsey (24, white, straight, cis woman queen in Florida), below:

I think because of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, there's a lot more um, straight or heterosexual people [who] have been coming out to the bars and being more entertained, which I think is great, because drag is just so much fun and I want everybody to love drag as much as I do. So, it's, it's a mixed crowd. It's always, you know, we have a lot of like bachelorettes that come in and stuff like that.

While Lindsey was happy that more people, including her fellow straight people, have become interested in drag through *RuPaul's Drag Race*, most queens I spoke with had critiques of RuPaul and/or her show, the most common of which was that through limited

representation, the mainstreaming effect of *RuPaul's Drag Race* came at a cost. Some of these representational costs are illustrated below:

Drag, it's not just one thing. It encompasses a whole realm of different kinds of performers and different kinds of artists and different kinds of makeup artists and stuff like that, and I definitely think that [*RuPaul's*] *Drag Race* has (pause) kind of warped that a little bit, because you don't necessarily *see* like, bioqueens...so I just think it's important for people to realize that drag isn't this one thing that only males can do. (Faith, 19, bisexual, nonbinary, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, Upper Midwest)

So on one hand, there's a huge newfound appreciation for drag, and there's so many more fans of the art and so many younger fans of the art, and I think that that's awesome. On the other hand, I've seen the way that it has shifted the dynamic of drag as a profession and the detriment that it's had to some local queens who've struggled to get a 50-dollar booking, where other queens [who have appeared on *RuPaul's Drag Race*] are able to get 5,000-dollar bookings and it's kind of crazy, this dichotomy of the Ru Girls⁶² versus the local queens. (Daphne, 26, white, queer, asexual, questioning about romantic attraction, cis woman, Florida)

RuPaul will book a fat girl. That's great. He'll have a fat girl on his competition, but has one won yet? Like. (laughs) Has the big girl gotten the shine yet? No. She's usually just there for the laughter. (Diana, 26, black, lesbian, cis woman, Colorado)

It's become very common for (pause) white men to be dominant in this art, if that makes sense, like, there are probably ten white gay male queens for every one person of color queen, or for every one trans queen. It's just (pause) dominance based on number, basically. Like, if you watch *RuPaul's Drag Race* and nine out of the ten queens are white or white-passing and there's only one person of color, clearly you're gonna think that the white queens have more standing or more- (pause) I don't wanna say that they're more important, but it- it sends an image of unbalanced equality. (Kitty, 30, white, queer, bisexual, pansexual, cis woman, Ohio)

Other queens argued that RuPaul misuses her platform as the world's most famous drag queen and de facto cultural ambassador for drag by behaving in problematic ways herself:

So, RuPaul is somebody that the queer community kind of worships in a way, and like, don't get me wrong, you gotta love Mama Ru if you love drag, but, at the same time, he has put out some really, really questionable, uh, commentary, and songs in his music career. There was a song, I think it was called "Tranny Chaser", which (pause) is not okay at all because there are trans people who do drag, and that is not

⁶² "Ru Girl" is queer slang for a drag queen who has competed on *RuPaul's Drag Race*

a word that drag queens, by virtue of being drag queens, can just take, because if you're not trans you don't get to use it, for the same reason that if you're not a gay person you can't use the words fag or dyke or whatever. So there are some really problematic themes in terms of that, and also, it's kinda one of those things where it [*RuPaul's Drag Race*] definitely favors a specific kind of drag. (Shannon, 20, white, queer, genderqueer, nonbinary, Pennsylvania)

He [RuPaul] is literally (pause) the one making us mainstream, I suppose? Um, I read a really interesting article that one of my friends sent me about like, how RuPaul initially was very like, in like the early 90s, kind of volatile, talking about race, um, and now he's very much reserved in the fact that he's like, (pause) I dunno, and it's like, obviously not my place to have like, that kind of conversation [about RuPaul's racial politics], but he (pause) kind of, (pause) is quiet around white people in order to get more opportunities that are problematic,... Um and I think he's the same way about drag too, like, he doesn't want to upset a majority [of audiences] with his drag. He wants a majority to love his drag without there being any sort of initial (pause) like, shock to the system. (Franki, 20, white, queer, femme, nonbinary, agender, Texas)

Through considering the mainstreaming of drag through the widespread popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, we see the ambivalence of both identity- and visibility-based strategies for liberation. On the one hand, RuPaul makes an argument that drag performed by cis men is inherently political, an inherent challenge to a system of men's dominance in society. This argument is difficult to deny, insofar as merely seeing cis men who want to, choose to, relinquish the trappings of masculinity in favor of embodying femininity (even if just temporarily) is an articulation of self-evident visibility of the radical possibilities of nonnormative embodiment, of denying normativity. Importantly, this understanding of *visibility* is based on gatekeeping practices with regard to *identity*, wherein the identity of the performer is central to the meaning of that performer's visible feminine embodiment. In other words, in the RuPaul-esque argument of the political potentialities of drag femininities, the meaning of what is *visible* is determined by the *identity* of the performer. As participants pointed out above, there are pros and cons to mainstreaming the RuPaul version of drag,

making it an especially rich illustration of the complicated nature of femininities' political potential.

Em (27, white, Jewish, asexual, nonbinary, genderfluid queen in New York City who identifies under the trans umbrella) mentioned an intriguing strategy for not throwing the baby out with the bathwater when it comes to RuPaul and RuPaul's Drag Race, a strategy which acknowledges the centrality of visibility to a ripple-effects model of social change, but which neutralizes some of the ways participants believe RuPaul's privileging of cis men reproduces meso- and macro-level systems of inequality based on sex-gender-sexuality:

[*RuPaul's Drag Race*] is not really this subversive, secret, niche thing that it used to be? (Pause) But at the same time there are these corners of the community, like the transgender and the gender nonconforming people, who still don't have access to that. And I actually had a conversation with Acid Betty⁶³ like two, two and a half years ago, where she said she wanted to see women and gender nonconforming people on the show, because that's the way that you would make it subversive again. Because then it would, you know- people have become comfortable with the idea that a man can dress as a woman, but then to turn that on its head and be like, "It's not about this 'going from one to the other', it's something more complex than that." Then that challenges everyone's ideas again and makes it more interesting and subversive.

In their comments, Em hinted at a ripple-effect model of social change based on the idea that we can and should push on power until it becomes smaller – that increasingly more abject things can be pulled into intelligibility. Importantly, Em doesn't suggest that "a man dressing as a woman" has been fully recuperated as *normal*, but that folks *feel* comfortable with the idea – a micro-affective experience that *may* animate them to behave in less oppressive ways in the world. Em also places herself and other non-cis-male queens at the very forefront of gender liberation. Importantly, it is not inevitable that this would be the

⁶³ Acid Betty is a cis male drag queen who is most famous for appearing on *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

case; some might argue that, given the intersectional social construction of gender and the centrality of these queens' arguments regarding visibility, it would be equally or more important to have a show with only contestants of color, and/or only disabled contestants, for example.

Indeed, Crimp (1992) implores us to understand identities as relationally produced and remade through political work, a perspective which enables us to see the ways cishet people's desires, behaviors, and identities may be transformed through engagement with queer spaces IRL and digitally. However, it remains to be seen whether an Everybody Welcome policy and/or increased visibility through *RuPaul's Drag Race* can truly effect change at the macro level of sexual marginalization, even as these strategies (may) invite cishet folks to think differently about sex-gender-sexuality. As Meadow (2018) writes, "Acceptance of mobility between categories does not necessarily destabilize the categories themselves, or even the boundaries between them. Indeed, it might fortify, or at least clarify, them" (225). In the next chapter, I will further estimate the value of identity-based and visibility-based strategies for resisting systems of normalizing power.

V. CONCLUSION: TO THE MACRO LEVEL AND BEYOND | TOWARD AN
ASYMPTOTIC VISION OF LIBERATION

Drag Show: *Death of Glitter*
Saturday, December 30, 2017
The Wayward Lamb – Eugene, Oregon
Late, Cold, Dark

I had had an extensive thought process with myself that evening about whether it was safe for me to go out alone in a slutty outfit. I wanted to wear something extravagant and weird so I would feel queerer on one of the rare occasions, after having become a parent, that I was able to be – i.e., look like – a queer person in public. I decide to text my friend Ursula who is planning to meet me at the show later, to ask them if they want to meet at the parking garage downtown to walk together to The Wayward Lamb, Eugene’s only queer bar. “Yes.”

At the bar, I remark to Ursula that this may be one time that people will look at us together – two queer femmes – and think we are both queer because of (in spite of?) how we look. I’m wearing a black strappy bralette as my top, an elastic black and white polka dot pencil skirt, sheer black pantyhose, black floral print platforms, and a see-through black-and-gold-beaded sweater that is more “net” than actual garment. My eyebrows – which are shaven clean off – are painted turquoise halfway up my forehead, and my lips are overdrawn in matte black paint. Ursula wears a tight black dress with several strategically-placed cutouts, enough expertly-applied cheekbone contouring to rival my own, and chunky reflective boots covered all over with metallic embroidery thread in a floral pattern of primary colors. There’s no coat check, so we have to stash our coats on hooks under the bar and hope no one steals them. I’m annoyed because don’t want to lose track of my favorite coat under a slightly wet gay bar that was last cleaned who-knows-when. I almost hadn’t even brought it, but I had ultimately strategized to wear it over my bralette to try to stave off any cat-calling downtown. Nobody said anything to us during our block-and-a-half walk from the parking garage to the bar.

We order our drinks and turn around to check out the space. It’s dark, with the walls painted black, and a small stage rises from the wall to our left. In front of the stage sit three small round tables, only one of which is populated, by four people - two straight-seeming white couples in their late 30s or 40s who seem out of place at the queer bar in their official Oregon Ducks gear. Everyone else is either milling around the bar, whispering in someone’s ear in a corner of the room, or smoking outside. One of the Oregon guys at the table looks at Ursula and I, and I can tell he’s evaluating our appearance. I shift away from his gaze.

The lights go down. It’s time for *Death of Glitter*. The first queen to come out is Flighta Tendant, the host of the show. Her larger-than-life red hair wobbles a bit and she tells us to get ready for “an amazing night of genderfuck.” I start silently guessing about her assigned sex at birth and then admonish myself - this show, which features queens of a variety of sex-gender-sexualities, is supposed to be about *disrupting* the idea that you can “tell” someone’s

assigned sex just by looking at them. While she's hyping up the crowd for the show, one of the Oregon guys – not the one whom I previously noticed looking at us, the other one – moseys up to the bar and squeezes between me and Ursula to order his drink. Ursula and I shoot looks at each other and Ursula marches a half-circle around the Oregon guy to rejoin me at the bar. We overhear him next to us, clearly drunk by the sheer volume of his voice, arguing with the bartender about the number of drinks he's ordered versus how many he's been handed.

As the drag show continues, Ursula leans in to me and whispers, "You heard what he said to us right?"

"No, what?"

"He said, '*SOME*body needs to get in between you two.'"

That line, which Ursula told me the man delivered "suggestively," inspired a miniature rage inside me. *We are being sexually harassed by a drunk straight guy at a drag show in our own bar! Fuck this guy.* That my anger at being harassed was not solely based in a feminist critique of the male gaze, but also in a sense of my own symbolic ownership of this drag show and bar as a queer femme, not to mention my failure to notice (until later) Ursula's and my shared whiteness with the Oregon guy, speaks to a roiling debate among queers today: who is the queer bar – the drag show – for? And why? It turns out that this question reflects contested discourses around not only sex, gender, and sexuality but also race and space as well.

In this dissertation, I have conceptualized femininities not as a static category of gender performance, but as a set of shifting configurations of dress, cosmetics, bodily comportment, and behaviors inflected by race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age, body size/shape, and facial beauty. Non-cis-male drag queens who embody exaggerated forms of femininity defend their contested participation in drag culture by defining drag as *a multi-*

gender queer culture based on the staged exaggeration of quotidian gender, against mainstream definitions of drag as the cross-gender performance of a (cis) man dressing up as a (cis) woman. Because these queens are subject to sex-gendered double standards for the intracultural legitimation of their temporary accomplishment of the queer gender Drag Queen, many queens incorporate stylistic elements based on aliens and other fantastical creatures as a form of *aesthetic overcompensation* to preempt critiques from audiences and cis male drag queens. The embodiment of *alien femininities* also enables the participants in this research to temporarily transcend cultural restrictions on aesthetics and self-presentation, especially those based on quotidian gender, which they conceptualize through a framework of *trans-inclusionary gender essentialism*. Through this discourse of gender, participants and I considered together the political potentialities of *femme*, a quotidian queer gender, and *alien femininities*, a temporarily-embodied queer gender, excavating a *ripple-effect theory of social change* in which feelings at the micro level animate interactional and (sub)cultural shifts at the meso level which then ripple outward and upward to restructure and, hopefully, help dismantle systems of normalizing power at the macro level.

A number of broader questions are raised by the findings of this research, which has interrogated the political potentialities of femininities according to a narrow set of non-cis-male drag queens. For example, how do we as scholars and activists theorize and adjudicate the political potentiality of anything? I argue that, first, we must correctly identify the problem, even if we cannot know its full contours. Second, we must design our goal – what we are trying to achieve – based on what we know about the particular contours of that problem. Thirdly, we must design our political strategies on the basis of that problem and that goal. Finally, we should be able to adjudicate whether and with what possible

unintended consequences a given strategy can move the needle on the problem, toward the goal.

Accordingly, I argue that while any political strategy or discursive challenge to power, by asserting itself, ultimately risks recuperation back into mainstream ideologies (Hebdige 1979), and that although we can never fully apprehend nor totally resist normalizing power (Foucault 1978, Butler 1990, Cohen 1997), the journey toward justice only ever happens in herky-jerky fashion, with fits and starts and inevitable stumbles. If we are constituted by that which we would seek to challenge, we may never achieve true liberation from the pressures of normativity, but neither can we abandon the work toward that goal if we take seriously the traumas felt by those of us – most of us? – who are marginalized by normalizing power⁶⁴. While we can never hope to end the embodied harms of normalizing power absent structural change in systems of race, gender, and sexuality, my research into various arguments for and against the political potentialities of drag to lessen gender oppression, along with my growing engagement with black (queer) feminist theories of liberation has led me to conclude that the problem to be solved is normalizing power *writ large*, which I argue is manifested in part as an *aesthetically restrictive culture*, which, as participants convey, causes gender trauma. So whereas gender trauma is the *problem*, I conceptualize one facet of liberation from normalizing power – i.e., a *goal* – to be the absence of gender trauma. According to this estimation of the problem and goal, participants and I have proffered a *ripple-effect model of social change*. In sociological terms, a ripple-effect model understands social structures to be a

⁶⁴ This is a riff on a line from Cathy J. Cohen’s 1997 piece “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?”: “Who, we might ask, is truly on the outside of heteronormative power - maybe most of us?”

useful heuristic for examining patterns of inequality, but only insofar as they do not obscure or invisibilize the fact that, fundamentally, all social change happens when individuals act. In cut-and-dry terms:

- ♥ Absent structural change, liberation from normalizing power cannot happen, and
- ♥ Absent individual change, structural change cannot happen, therefore
- ♥ Any radical theory of the politics of social change must engage the level of the individual whose *feelings* animate them to act in and on the world.

So while one of the insights the discipline of sociology has given us is that structures and institutions are certainly more than the sum of the individual actors who constitute them (Durkheim 1912), political activism must engage the level of the individual who would identify and feel and act in and on the world. By excavating the ways participants theorize a ripple-effect understanding of social change, I argue that drag queens' claims that their individual enactments of gender can and will extend outward to influence normalizing systems of race, gender, and sexuality are not only plausible but likely. Importantly, my data in this dissertation deals primarily with the discourses, beliefs, feelings, and political strategies of drag queens, and as such, it cannot help me adjudicate which strategies will actually be the best practices towards ending inequalities. However, future researchers can and should put this model of the politics of femininities in conversation with social movements literature and empirical data about persistence and change in gendered and sexual inequalities.

Thinking through Identity-Based Strategies for Community, Solidarity and Liberation

Two major points of rupture appeared in conflicting discourses swirling around to whom drag belongs, and why: identity and visibility. Identity, particularly sex-gender-sexual identities, appeared as a rupture point in the moments when cis male drag queens would argue, based on a cisnormative, binary understanding of sex-gender-sexuality, that drag, being the practice of a man dressing up as a woman, can be practiced only by (cis) men. In their rebuttals, non-cis-male queens tended to refuse the definitional premises put forth by CMDQs, arguing not only that (cis) women should be allowed to do drag but that *any* gender of person should be able to do *drag*, which non-cis-male queens defined according to different criteria – i.e., queer identity and women’s history writ large – than did CMDQs. In these moments of rupture, the boundary object Drag Queen no longer contains its conflicting definitions well enough for social interaction to proceed, and intracultural debates, gatekeeping practices, and hostility emerge as queer cultural members jockey for access to queer space, intracultural legitimation, and even material resources such as paid bookings in drag shows. Identity, as a discursive rupture point in the drag scene, leads us to consider with new evidence the scholarly debate surrounding identity politics as discussed in the introductory chapter to this research. In other words, (when and how) are stable collective identities necessary and/or useful for social action and social change?

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of sexual identity categories, such that the group of non-heterosexual people who used to be called “lesbian and gay” is now known in some activist and scholarly circles as the “LGBTQIAA2S*” community. Because normative sexuality rests so thoroughly of understandings of sexuality as either homo- or heterosexual identity, expressions of sexuality that disrupt this binary may have the potential to dismantle normative schemas of gender and sexuality (Namaste 1994, Klesse 2014).

Klesse (2014) and Scherrer (2008) document the identity work of polyamorous and asexual individuals, respectively. Klesse contends that polyamory, which is experienced by some individuals as a sexual orientation, has the potential to disrupt normative sexuality. Scherrer (2008) argues that because sexuality is considered a normal and important part of selfhood, “individuals who do not experience sexual attraction, and who embrace an asexual identity, are in a unique position to inform the social construction of sexuality” (621). What is particularly interesting about polyamorous and asexual identities is that they are not based (only) on gendered object choice, which has been the dominant way of understanding sexual orientation since the nineteenth century (Foucault 1978). However, as Klesse (2014) warns, the adoption of any sexual preference as an identity-based “sexual orientation” has the power to reify essentialist understandings of sexuality as a pre-social condition, which may render the dismantling of normative sexuality more difficult.

On the one hand, as postmodern theory teaches us, to be a person in the world is to have an identity – to undergo a continual process of subjectification. This means identity is all around us as a ready medium for cultivating resistance. Identities are also frequently strongly *felt*, that is, they are important to individuals on a micro-affective level – this is a foundational premise for TIGE. Furthermore, and perhaps most excitingly, non-normative identities may exist outside of the ideological workings of power and may thus be able to performatively act back on power from an athwart position (Edwards 2015). For example, while CMDQs’ queer gatekeeping practices are based on a cisnormative binary of men and women that seeks to deny queer cultural access to *women* as a group, many non-cis-male queens are not in fact cis women and thus may press upon CMDQs’ arguments by destabilizing the coherence of the gender binary upon which such arguments rest. Franki

(20, white, queer, femme, nonbinary, agender, Texas) is a nonbinary AMAB drag queen whose experience in the drag scene may speak to this possibility. Franki performs intentionally weird, strange, abject, genderfuck drag while embodying a futuristic, alien-like drag persona. Franki takes a lot of heat from their local drag community for doing drag that is too strange and not intelligible enough to mainstream audiences, but because Franki is AMAB, everyone (mis)perceives them as a cisgender man. Thus, Franki does *not* experience criticism for participating in drag as a non-cis-male queen according to discourses which conceptualize the drag debate in terms of “men” and “women.” In one way, Franki’s AMAB status gets them a foot in the door to performances and paid bookings they may not otherwise receive if they were AFAB. Therefore, Franki’s genderfuck performances on the drag stage may be an enabling disruption to binary gender insofar as audiences are able to read them as such, although we may wonder whether audiences will “benefit” from the full force of Franki’s genderfuck message if they perceive Franki to be a conventional CMDQ. In other words, Franki’s combination of identity and embodiment renders them invisible in discourses of who can and should do drag, but it is this same invisibility that enables them to have a platform to fuck with people’s binary gender ideologies from the drag stage – *if* audiences are willing and able to interpret that message as Franki intends it. Indeed, although I reject the white supremacist, cisnormative, transphobic, and sex-negative premises of many radical feminists’ arguments against the practice of drag, I do take seriously their analytical questions regarding the interplay between performers’ intentions, audiences’ interpretations of those performances (see Richardson 1996, Jeffreys 1996), and how that interplay affects the continuing social construction of sex-gender-sexuality and race in the drag scene and beyond.

Even among those who remain skeptical of identity-based strategies for liberation – including myself – there should be a willingness to understand that no theory or strategy of social action is total, and that many kinds of political and performative action may press on power in fits and starts. Indeed, there may be good reasons for identity-based strategies and boundaries. For example, many women, femmes, and AFABs of all genders and sexual identities have given straight men’s oppressive and forceful sexual harassment in straight bars as one reason they prefer to go to gay bars (although, as my experience with Ursula at the beginning of this chapter shows, this is not a foolproof method of avoiding straight men’s harassment). As part of their defense of drag as a *multi-gender queer culture*, Uma (22, white, asexual, aromantic, nonbinary, Midwest) told me they feel safer in queer bars than in straight ones:

Uma: Drag is still a predominantly queer art form. Like, queer people created drag and drag is done in queer spaces. ... I’d really like to see drag expand [to include more straight performers and audience members] but I think it’s important to recognize that it was created in queer spaces and it should remain predominantly in queer spaces? At least in my opinion. Because like a queer space- I just feel a lot safer than just going into a straight bar.

Andrea: Mm, and what makes you feel safer about it?

Uma: Because straight bars kinda creep me out, to be totally honest. (laughs) Because you just don’t know. I’ve- maybe just being an AFAB person, like, a lot of guys catcall. ... Like, my past trauma has been with a man.

Andrea: Yeah, yeah, and so even though there are men in a queer space, you don’t feel that same fear?

Uma: Yeah, not really, because if you’re in a queer space you’re more accepting of different people.

So here Uma emphasized that beyond defending their participation in drag based on the ostensibly simple fact that drag has historically been practiced in queer spaces, Uma also

pointed out that queer spaces are safer for AFABs who experience harassment and possible violence from (cis) men in straight spaces. Uma has experienced traumatic episodes at the hands of men, yet feels safe among men in queer spaces, which suggests that the relative safety of queer spaces as compared to straight spaces that Uma perceives is based not simply on the sex-gender-sexuality of the people there, but additionally on what Uma perceives to be a queer cultural value of acceptance. So whereas CMDQs' claims to cultural ownership over drag are based primarily on sex-gender-sexual identity and drag history, participants' claims regarding who "owns" drag are based on a complex and shifting mixture of criteria, including but not limited to sex-gender-sexual *identity*, drag history, and behavior/queer cultural competence.

On the other hand, I admit to being skeptical, or at least wary, of identity-based strategies for liberation, as I understand subjectification and, as a corollary, identification, to always be mired in the construction of normal and deviant modes of being which necessarily oppress on this basis (Foucault 1978, Butler 1990). For one thing, single-axis identity-based strategies do not lend themselves easily to intersectional forms of community and solidarity, as black feminists have argued for decades (see the Combahee River Collective's *Black Feminist Statement*, 1977), having themselves been subject to, among other intersections of power, the impossible choice between solidarity with (racist) white women or solidarity with (sexist) black men, in mainstream feminist and civil rights movements which have organized community membership on the basis of a single axis of identity. Although the collective famously rejected single-axis formulations of oppression, "they did align their politics with their multiple identities and engage with forms of identity politics" (Balogun 2020, personal communication). The Combahee River Collective were thus both animated by their

subjectively experienced identities to act in and on the world and skeptical of any politics that does not take into account multiple forms of marginalization. This perspective dovetails with participants' understandings of a ripple effect model of social change and makes space for Cohen's broadening of "queer" identity. Cohen (1997) argues the concretization of "queer" as an identity in opposition to "straight" reinforces white supremacy by failing to organize solidarity on the basis of proximity to normalizing power writ large, which would enable a broader, more inclusive, more effective challenge to (sexual) oppression by taking into account the ways that normative systems of racism construct all people of color as sexually deviant.

In this study, discourses that undergird competing claims around who gets to participate in drag culture unfold primarily on the basis of sex-gender-sexuality, and race is rarely considered during discussions of who has access to queer space and why, especially among white queens. Indeed, the participants of color I spoke with identified racism, and being disadvantaged and excluded on the basis of race, as a persistent problem in the drag scene, as shown in chapter three. Though the white participants of my study rarely mentioned race until I brought it up explicitly, claims to queer cultural membership which foreground sex-gender-sexuality as a basis for inclusion into and/or exclusion from drag, and which posit the primary stakeholders of queer politics as "men" and "women," are racialized from the start and reflect an understanding of *queer* as an identity category in opposition to *straight*, as well as sex-gender-sexual oppression as operating in a binary formulation that may serve to erase shared forms of marginalization among people identifying as queer and heterosexual. To this point, Cohen argues the "punk," the "bulldagger," and the "welfare queen" are black figures who are representative of the ways

black people's sexuality – even *heterosexuality* – are rendered abject and used as reasons to surveil, disadvantage, and enact violence upon black people. Thus, Cohen's framework for a truly radical queer politics presents a resounding critique of reductive identity-based strategies for organizing community and solidarity in queer spaces.

In terms of practicality and doability, even if we *wanted* to organize community (and, as one consequence, access to queer space and the drag stage) on the basis of sex-gender-sexual identity, identity-based strategies are inefficient and virtually impossible to enforce. While The Wayward Lamb, the bar where Ursula and I saw *Death of Glitter*, was certainly a queer-coded space⁶⁵, complete with rainbow flags, drag shows, and *RuPaul's Drag Race*-themed events, the (cis, gay, white, male) owner of the bar, whom I used to know as an acquaintance, told me he would not and indeed could not enforce a queers-only policy for the space because there is no way to know if someone is “really” queer and/or trans. I further argue it is unethical to require that someone out themselves as such anyway. Thus, while the No-Cishets policy for queer space is attractive to me on an emotional level as a queer person who, truth be told, would sometimes enjoy a guarantee that a space has no cishet men in it, it's ultimately neither a very useful nor a practicable strategy in the quest for liberation from normalizing power.

Thinking through Visibility-Based Strategies for Community, Solidarity and Liberation

⁶⁵ This bar, which was frequently criticized in the community for being too cis-male-centric, has since closed down and reopened under new ownership as a new queer-coded bar called Spectrum. The owner of Spectrum has expressed publicly that the new name is intended to reference the full variety of sex-gender-sexualities, as opposed to only cis gay men.

Many of the arguments participants made for the ripple-effect model of social change were based in the idea of visibility as inherently political, an idea which has roots in many strands of political action including black (queer) feminism, which emphasizes the radicalizing effect of “seeing the self in others” (Smith 1982, Clarke 1981, Collins 1991, Spillers 1987, Johnson 2018), the queer movement, which has conceptualized “coming out” as a political act of visibility and which valorizes visible forms of nonnormative styling of the body, and some branches of the feminist movement which have argued that women’s increased representation (i.e., visibility) in positions of power will result in a broad-based culture shift in gender norms. Butler (1993) implies the very acknowledgement of the existence of such bodies would do much toward dismantling normative gender by denaturalizing cultural understandings of sex and gender to expose “the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original” (Butler 1993). Fausto-Sterling (2000) similarly posits that “if we choose, over a period of time, to let mixed-gender bodies and altered patterns of gender-related behavior become visible, we will have, willy-nilly, chosen to change the rules of cultural intelligibility” (76).

Kessler’s (1990) analysis of doctors’ treatment of intersex infants and Roen’s (2002) discussion of transgender “passing” shed some doubt that the mere existence or visibility of abject bodies will disrupt the gender regime. Kessler (1990) reports that physicians and parents erroneously cling to the belief that “gender consists of two exclusive types” (25) and that this belief “is maintained and perpetuated by the medical community in the face of incontrovertible physical evidence that this is not mandated by biology” (25). Roen (2002) argues that because of the extremely high relative risk of violence transgender individuals face, “passing” as cisgender is often required for survival. Against a queer political hierarchy

where transgenderism (as opposed to transsexualism) is seen as trendier and more radical, Roen argues for a more generous understanding of passing among trans people. Kessler (1990) and Roen (2002) indicate that within a highly regulatory system of gender, those whose bodies and/or genders are unintelligible or non-normative often involuntarily have gender imputed onto them or risk violence for publicly flouting the binary gender system. Furthermore, the transgender challenge to the gender binary risks being “recuperated” (Hebdige 1979) back into the normative gender binary through medicalized discourses of trans people as “trapped in the wrong body” (Gamson 1995:399). Thus, Butler’s (1990, 1993) and Fausto-Sterling’s (2000) optimism about the disruption abject bodies pose to normative power may be overstated, and in addition, may place too heavy a burden on intersex and trans people to be the standard bearers of dismantling the gender regime.

Some ways that visibility may be useful as a political strategy are that visibility is self-evident, i.e., you see something or you don’t, and if you see something, you know for sure it must exist. For instance, earlier in the dissertation Alisha lamented that most folks don’t know that “contemporary” (i.e., sexual, independent, modern) Muslims even exist, and her visibility as precisely that knocks audiences out of their ignorance in a very basic way. Another way the self-evident nature of visibility can be seen is in participants’ discourses of TIGE, which emphasize the benign and unremarkable character of the self-evident diversity of sex-gender-sexualities in the drag scene. Furthermore, visibility is a strategy that can be done in, on, and with the body at the micro-individual level, which renders visibility strategies possibly more democratic, i.e., more doable, than some other forms of political action, as well as more concrete to think through and design than the more abstract, theoretical, and amorphous task of designing political strategies at the macro-structural level.

However, once something is visible it is more likely subject to recuperation into normalizing discourses (Hebdige 1979) and, as many scholars have argued (see Halberstam 1998, Roen 2002, Whitehead and Thomas 2013), the visibility or existence of a new form of gender does not necessarily destabilize gender's power over quotidian life. To this point, in her exploration of the politics of trans children's subjectivities, Tey Meadow writes, "It may look like gender is becoming more fluid, but in fact it is becoming more highly differentiated. Transgender children may well be the harbingers of a new gender order, but it will be one in which complex configurations of sexuality and gender get articulated in ever more nuanced ways. As the binary gender system shifts, we look to one another for clues about what comes next. We are all studying one another. We are all gendering one another. We all carry a gendered subjectivity, but we live that subjectivity intersubjectively. Gender is not merely something we do. It is something done to us, with us. It does and undoes us, constrains and constitutes us. It is some of the most basic material of social life" (2018: 226). In this way – in the ways gender and indeed many forms of identity are done at least partially intersubjectively - there may be unintended consequences to strategies based on (gendered) visibility, including the reinforcement of beauty norms as in the example of facial contouring from chapter three, and in the longstanding queer femme grievance regarding femme invisibility in both queer and straight communities. Indeed, visibility-based strategies may work best – or perhaps may *only* work – for the most obviously, literally, *visible* forms of embodied difference. Indeed, femme is frequently invisible as a quotidian queer gender, although it is indeed nonnormative at least insofar as it is divorced from heterosexual identification. For this reason, femme's ostensible challenge to (hetero)normativity – which is based on the combination of visibility with a particular identity – can only be made visible

through strategic and ongoing “coming out” or through proximity to other queers (usually masculine-presenting AFAB queers or, in some cases, a critical mass of alternative-enough queer femmes in the right context, as in the case of Ursula and me at the drag show).

Furthermore, (white) queer culture’s ethic of spectacle may be exclusionary or otherwise unappealing to black and brown queers who are hyper-surveilled and constructed as deviant already (see McCune 2014). Thus, one consequence of visibility-based strategies may be the further entrenchment of racial divides in community building and solidarity, and, accordingly, white supremacy among queers.

Both identity-based and visibility-based strategies for social change are based on the idea that simply “being” something does political work. While this point may indeed withstand further analytic scrutiny, and is part of my argument in this very dissertation, scholars and activists must also attend to a possible danger of locating the self as a/the primary site of one’s politics: depoliticization, or, as Hannah McCann convincingly argues, the neoliberal⁶⁶ distortion of the feminist slogan “the personal is political.” Indeed, a strand of thought that undergirded many participants’ defenses of their femme and alien feminine gender presentations was the rhetoric of individual choice. I argue that this brand of choice feminism, which argues any choice a woman (or marginalized person of any kind) makes is beyond reproach, can reductively affirm all choices as equally valid and thus depoliticize individuals and their actions in the world. For instance, Vanessa (22, white, bisexual cis

⁶⁶ In this sense, “neoliberal” refers to the trend of public forms of social life increasingly being made the responsibility of individuals and/or private families. Here, McCann refers to a “neoliberal” relocation of the site of political action from the public sphere to the private sphere and, finally, to the individual self.

woman queen in North Carolina) defended her exaggerated femininity in and out of drag by saying:

It's a feminist choice to be a mother just like it would be a feminist choice to be, you know, an executive. . . I'm wearing this type of femininity for myself because I love the aesthetics, and that is really a feminist choice and that's very empowering for me and you know, [other people] have every right to wear what they want to wear just like I do.

Vanessa's comment is but one representative comment of 70 instances during this research where a participant in this research made a comment I identified as based in the rhetoric of choice feminism. One goal of liberation from an aesthetically restrictive culture should certainly be expanded choices for styling the body, as so artfully articulated by Vanessa's earlier spirited defense of alternative fashions and mourning of goth fashion enthusiast Sophia Lancaster. However, as constraints on embodiment are a primary cause of gender trauma, it is concerning that macro-level feminist critiques of beauty culture and norms for feminine appearance may be subsumed under a more relativistic and individualistic ethic of choice that doesn't take broad patterns of inequality based on appearance into account. Choice feminism represents the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater when it comes to taking an affective turn in the study of femininities and theories of social change: we must attend to the centrality of feelings and affect in motivating individuals to act in and on the world without losing sight of the broader systems of inequality that both constitute individuals and may, hopefully, be reconstituted in less harmful ways over time by those same individuals.

I'd like to close this dissertation with a quote by Ursula K. Le Guin: "We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings." As this research has shown, gender is a

human problem. Humans can resist and change it – but one of the ways drag queens attempt to shift the workings of this uniquely human problem is by escaping, temporarily, their humanness. That transcending gender means to transcend one’s human embodiment is a remarkable illustration of the postmodern: we are constituted by that which we would seek to resist, an inescapable truth that renders absolute liberation from regulatory subjectification impossible. That being said – by better apprehending the problem (normalizing power writ large), strategizing resistance accordingly (broadly organizing community and solidarity on the basis of proximity to normalizing power, à la Cohen 1997), and maybe at least having fun while we are doing it (by attending to the ways pleasure, play, and affect animate us to act in and on the world), we can and will shift power to, hopefully, oppress fewer people in fewer ways. This is an asymptotic vision of justice and liberation, necessarily bound by the limits of my own imagination as a subject of contemporary power, in which we push on power further and further until it becomes smaller and weaker, smaller and weaker, smaller and weaker. This asymptotic vision of liberation rejects nihilism, rejects Foucault’s “slave morality,” in favor of performing the “difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure” (Butler 1990, 1993). Drag queens draw on the material and psychic trappings of femininities to resist and change systems of power, in herky-jerky fashion, with fits and starts, and they have fun doing it. May we all find ways to experience such spectacular pleasure in the struggle for liberation.

APPENDIX A: QUEENING TERMINOLOGY

Bioqueen is the term most frequently used in on- and offline contexts to refer to non-cis-male queens, however, it is hotly debated as potentially trans-exclusionary in its reference to “bio”logical femaleness and/or possibly sexist in its differentiation of drag queens on the basis of sex-gender. Some of the most vocal critics of the term bioqueen are cis women drag performers who have heard critiques of the term bioqueen from others and circulate them a) as a method of virtue signaling, i.e., because they feel they must because these are the critiques du jour in queer culture, or b) because they earnestly seek to be trans-inclusive. Interestingly, Brigitte, one trans woman participant I spoke with about the term bioqueen told me that she sometimes prefers to use the term bioqueen so audience members and others don’t misgender her as a man:

Andrea: I’m wondering if you would ever think about calling yourself drag queen or what you think about that idea of women calling themselves drag queens?

Brigitte: Umm, I wouldn’t personally, because, I don’t really like...uhhh...I don’t like when people notice that I used to be a boy, and so personally, I wouldn’t use “drag queen” because it has that sort of connotation that – this is a man dressing up as a woman. Um, but, I’m not like, offended if someone calls me that either.

I later asked another trans woman participant, Alisha, about the fear of misgendering that Brigitte describes above. Alisha, who heads a drag house (drag family) in the Pacific Northwest, uses the terms “drag queen” to describe herself and “cis queen” to describe her cis women drag daughters Janet and Roxy, who also participated in this project. Although Alisha prefers the term drag queen over bioqueen, Alisha validated and affirmed the fear Brigitte related to me:

Alisha: Okay so, that [fear of being misgendered as a man] is very real, that’s something that I am hearing all the time, and that goes back to the conversation

around um, like drag queens being the standard in drag. What people think a drag queen often is as a guy, you know, or an AMAB person performing as a woman...I can see and understand how that [calling oneself a bioqueen] would be very reaffirming for a trans performer, and I think that my biggest issue with [the term] bioqueen is that non-trans performers and non-intersex performers use that language. So I think for trans performers that's maybe a really important form of lingual recognition, because it allows you to...more heavily assert that...you *are* a bioqueen because you *are* a woman. Um, so I think that that, I definitely understand how that could be reaffirming. (emphasis in original)

Andrea: So you could be doing the same thing, or saying the same thing, as somebody else [in this case, using the term 'bioqueen'], but it means something very different based on who you are?

Alisha: Yes.

Thus here, Alisha gets at the heart of the tension between modern identity politics, in other words political mobilization on the basis of identity group membership, and postmodern deconstructionist politics, which seeks to interrogate the coherence of the very categories upon which identity politics depend. Here, Alisha affirms that some trans women like Brigitte prefer the term bioqueen as a form of “lingual recognition” of their womanhood, and indeed posits that the meanings of utterances *actually change* depending on who utters them. Following this, then, Alisha ties it all back together and again reaffirms that in such a context, a trans woman’s reclamation of the term “bioqueen” is a valid justification of the use of the term, whereas a cis woman, who presumably exists outside of such legitimating dynamics, should not use the term.

Some participants in this research simply disliked the *sound* of the word bioqueen.

Veronica*, the most experienced queen in my research, told me:

Veronica: *Bioqueen*, I don't know, it just sounds like, like a composting bin or like, laughs, you know, a brand of organic, European organic yogurt or something, I don't know. (laughs)

Andrea: (laughs) Oh, oh it does.

Veronica: It's like oh, "bio"... but I think it's funny. I mean if you're a biologist and call yourself a bioqueen that'd be cute. But, yeah. So, so, [I call myself a] drag queen.

For Veronica and others with similar critiques of the term, the sterile, medicalized sound of "bioqueen" is incongruent with the campy, fun nature of drag, which is absurd on purpose (see Sontag 1964 for more on *camp*). The association these queens make between the prefix "bio" and the biological/medical sciences is no accident. The term "bioqueen," through its reference (somewhere between implicit and explicit) to "biological womanhood" or perhaps more appropriately "biological femaleness" (though Judith Butler would argue they are one and the same, as sex is "always already gender"), harkens to the prevailing ideology of gender essentialism in western societies which posits that there is something "to" womanhood that resides in the biological makeup of "the" female body, a binary formulation of sex-gender which, as I show in chapters two and three, causes *gender trauma*.

Bioqueen operates as a boundary object between those people who are already aware that non-cis-male drag queens exist. Some of those people use or prefer other terms, like hyperqueen or faux queen, but most frequently use bioqueen to describe a non-cis-male drag queen (or sometimes more specifically a cis woman queen) because that is the most commonly known term for that phenomenon. #bioqueen functions in a similar way, in that, as a hashtag, #bioqueen is rarely used without being accompanied by #dragqueen, because participants worry that not enough people are even aware of the phenomenon of bioqueens to search a hashtag for it. By the same token, most participants did not use #dragqueen and/or other non-gendered drag terms (i.e., terms that don't implicitly or explicitly refer to non-cis-male queens) like #queen or #dragperformer without also using gendered performer

terms like #bioqueen, #fauxqueen, etc. In this way they were hedging their bets and casting a wider net with which to catch followers and attention. These queens are strategizing on the interface of Instagram to market their drag online.

Those queens who do use non-gendered terms as hashtags (e.g., #dragqueen) in the absence of gendered terms (e.g., #bioqueen) tend to do so for political-ideological reasons. Some queens refused to identify as bioqueens during the demographic questionnaire portion of our interview (sometimes refusing to identify as any of the female-coded terms for drag performers) either a) as a stand against trans-exclusionism and/or b) because they feel that using bioqueen devalues their art and performances of drag. Interestingly, however, most of the queens who understand the term “bioqueen” to be trans-exclusionary, even those who avoid using the term offline, use it as a hashtag (in addition to many other hashtags for different drag terms). This contradiction may reflect one or more of a few truths – 1) whatever reticence these queens feel about engaging in transphobic language (as defined by themselves!), it is overridden by their desire to gain followers and attention for their drag. In other words, marketing of the *self* trumps inclusion of the *other*, and/or 2) these queens don’t really feel like bioqueen is (*that?*) trans-exclusionary and only say so as a method of virtue-signaling to others in their community and quite possibly to me, the researcher.

APPENDIX B: QUEENING CONTROVERSIES

Criticisms (in order of frequency of mentions by research participants)	Defenses (in order of frequency of mentions by research participants)
<p>VI. Women and AFAB queens are already feminine and thus don't have to try as hard to achieve a "good" drag look (98 mentions)</p>	<p>A. Women/AFAB queens put in as much or more effort than cis men drag queens (CMDQs) (72 mentions)</p> <p>B. The "Caster Semenya argument" – there are infinite possible (dis)advantages individual performers will have, of which body composition is just one. I.e., Caster Semenya's higher-than-average testosterone levels are only one (highly gendered) example of the ways an elite athlete's body might be atypical and thus advantageous (45)</p> <p>C. Discrimination and double standards make queening actually harder for women and AFAB queens than for CMDQs (44)</p> <p>D. It's hard to be a woman/femme/AFAB all the time in regular life, so WAQs' "net" level of sex-gender-related difficulty is higher than that of CMDQ (12)</p> <p>E. Not all AFABs have curvy/feminine bodies (6)</p>
<p>VII. Women's and AFABs' drag is bad/boring because there is no/not enough of a gendered physical transformation, especially regarding body shape. Often phrased as "Where's the transformation, sis?"</p>	<p>A. Many AFABs use body padding to drastically change their body shape (27)</p> <p>B. Many women and AFAB queens "put on a good show" (31)</p> <p>C. Many women and AFAB queens create drag characters quite different from their everyday personas (21)</p> <p>D. Many CMDQs don't pad or change their body shape either (10)</p> <p>E. Many CMDQs don't tuck their penises either (4)</p> <p>F. Many women and AFAB queens glue down/shave their eyebrows, which is commonly understood as an indicator of a commitment to physical transformation (3)</p>

<p>VIII. Women and AFABs are culturally appropriate drag, including cultural references, paid bookings, and physical space, from CMDQs (49)</p>	<p>A. Queer culture includes/has always included women and AFABs (28) B. By virtue of having been coercively gendered feminine, women and AFABs are the rightful owners and bearers of femininity (23) C. Drag originated in ancient Greece and/ or Shakespearean England as the misogynistic practice of excluding women from the stage, and thus CMDQs are themselves appropriating femininity from women and AFABs (9)</p>
<p>IX. Women and AFABs are definitionally not drag queens, because drag is (some version of) female impersonation by men. Only CMDQs are “real” drag queens (49)</p>	<p>A. Drag can be lots of things beyond simple female impersonation by men (46) B. Saying who is and is not a drag queen on the basis of sex-gender and/or embodiment is discrimination, which is sexist (32) C. Saying who is and is not a drag queen on the basis of sex-gender and/or embodiment assumes (binary) gender emanates from bodies, which is inaccurate (15) D. Drag is art, and anybody can be an artist (5) E. Many women and AFAB queens get paid to perform as drag queens, so that seems to meet the definitional requirements of “drag queen” (3) F. There’s simply no compelling counterargument for why women and AFAB queens aren’t or shouldn’t be drag queens (2)</p>
<p>X. Women/AFABs, particularly (white) straight cis women, are incompetent in matters of queer culture and thus should stay out of queer spaces like drag shows (41)</p>	<p>A. Many/most women and AFAB queens are not incompetent in matters of queer culture and have a strong appreciation for drag and its history and culture (18) B. Many/most women and AFAB queens are not straight, white, and/or cis (6)</p>

Table 3. Criticisms and Defenses of Non-Cis-Male Drag Queens

APPENDIX C: POSITIONALITY

Here I offer some further notes about my positionality in this research, both as a sociologist and as a gendered person. Most participants, all of whom had access to my then-public Instagram profile, seemed to understand me as a queer femme college student writing a big paper for school. In video interviews, I always wore my daily full face of makeup, which is much more makeup than most people wear and includes full highlight-and-contour and brightly colored eyebrows, usually pink+purple or green+turquoise. I imagine most participants saw me as a white person, although it is not uncommon for people to mistake me as Latinx when they learn my name is Andrea Herrera. I have never performed in drag nor considered myself a drag queen, although my own makeup style is undeniably influenced by my participation in queer culture and was noticed by participants, many of whom asked me if I had ever, or would ever, do drag. I replied that I have no interest in performing onstage myself, but I do love the aesthetics of it. I am peripheral to this community insofar as we sometimes share spaces (both online and in-person), we share gendered beauty practices, and we frequently share identities and ideologies, but I am not a drag queen and thus, not truly a member of this community myself. However, I do think being culturally adjacent to this community, as a queer femme, lent me credibility to participants, many of whom shared with me that it felt good to talk about femininities at a high level with someone whom they felt understood them and their perspectives.

Participants' comments to that effect were one of the impetuses to shift this project from an ontological one about political potentialities to a more epistemological one about what queens *think* about political potentialities. I noticed and heard that participants enjoyed theorizing gender and femininities with me, I also enjoyed it, and so our cultural closeness as

co-practitioners of adjacent forms of exaggerated queer femininity lent itself to co-theorizing gender in a way that greatly impacted, if not determined, the form this dissertation ultimately took.

I took pains to counterbalance two specific elements of my own personality and positionality during the research process. First, I am a “theory person” (CJ Pascoe, personal communication, many times over), meaning that I tend to think a bit abstractly, metaphorically, in the clouds, and I sometimes become untethered from the material world in my analysis of my own data and social patterns generally. In this way, I understand myself to have a propensity for some of the most glaring weaknesses of (white) queer theory, postmodern philosophy, and poststructuralism – most specifically that my thinking is too discursive, too “down the rabbit hole,” too deconstructive, and not sufficiently concerned with material realities and the real-life functioning of inequalities. Secondly, I have an emotional investment in queerness and femininity. I am usually viscerally resistant to labeling my gender and/or sexuality as anything more specific than “queer,” which follows from my poststructural philosophical tendencies, but I also *feel* feminine in a way I cannot articulate any better than the queens I spoke with could. The closest I’ve gotten so far is my Instagram bio, which states that I am “not a woman but I play one in real life.” As Eve Sedgwick would say, I am just more gender-y than most other people. The reason I bring this up is because queerness and femininity do make me *feel* things like joy, desire, and frustration, a fact which has inevitable import for any of my work on gender and sexuality and especially for this analysis of femininities.

Over the course of this project I have tried to counterbalance these two elements of my positionality to strengthen the findings of this research. For example, I made sure to

connect my overarching concept of the ripple-effect model of social change to material inequalities in the drag scene, including access to queer space (and as corollaries, queer cultural membership and possibly greater bodily safety due to the absence of cishet men) and paid bookings and tipped performances (and thus income, food, rent). I also understand my focus on embodiment itself to be material: feelings are felt in the body, by the body, with the body, and the body itself has access to queer spaces or it doesn't. In these ways and others I have tried to bring in a material element to my admittedly abstract modes of thought.

My review of Hannah McCann's 2018 book *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Presentation* illustrates my credibility as a femme researcher of femmes and femininity (Herrera 2019). In that review, I wrote that McCann did not thoroughly acknowledge her own pre-existing investment in femininity, in a way that ultimately weakened her argument:

McCann's early claim that femininity is inherently neither problematic nor good is rendered tenuous throughout the rest of the book, as her goal of "making feminine lives more livable" (13) seems to stem not from an intellectually curious position regarding femininity's capacity to do harm and/or good, but rather from a predetermination that femininity indeed has value, and further that "utopian femininity" (7) is something that should be figured into "radical possibilities for the future" (37). While such positions may indeed withstand future analytic scrutiny, in this book they often appear more ideological than analytic, based on a predetermination that femininity should be recuperated. Thus, in shifting questions of politics toward questions of affect, McCann does not altogether defend why an affective analysis of femininity is incompatible with a simultaneous analysis of femininities as always political and implicated in systems of gender oppression.

Accordingly, my assessment of my own positionality with regard to my emotional investment in femininities is that I *want* McCann to be right, insofar as any of us *want* to believe that our own practices, particularly those which bring us pleasure and joy, are not implicated in the perpetuation of inequalities. However, as a theorist of inequalities, I know

that we are all implicated in furthering oppression at nearly every moment, whether voluntaristically or not, so radical feminist critiques of feminine embodiment do give me pause. “Choice feminism,” in which AFABs’ and/or women’s and/or gender-marginalized folx’s choices (e.g., the choice to style the body as feminine) are constructed as beyond reproach, does not sufficiently address radical feminists’ concerns and yet it is the answer most frequently proffered by those in this study (and indeed in McCann’s) as a rebuttal to those concerns. This means my project is biased toward (i.e., in favor of) femininities, insofar as I *want* there to be a sufficient rebuttal to “femi-negativity,” because I *like* femininity. For this reason, I designed a project that might provide such an answer, were it to emerge from the data. However, I have counterbalanced this bias by purposefully training a critical lens on the moments in which participants uncritically championed feminine embodiment using the rhetoric of choice feminism, and I have taken care to judiciously think through the limitations of each argument I’ve made for the radical political potentiality of feminine embodiment to challenge systems of normalizing power.

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