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Drag Performers in the American North and South:
Identity and Resistance

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Abstract

In 2023, the state of Tennessee passed the adult cabaret act—more colloquially known as the 'drag ban.' This law prevented so-called 'adult' performances from taking place in public, in the presence of children, within 1000 feet of a school, public park, or place of worship. Drag performances have always been political. Drag symbolizes queerness, serving as not only an open declaration, but a celebration of said queerness as an immutable aspect of self and foundation of personal identity. By subverting traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, drag performers destabilize the assumed naturalness of gender identity and expression. Utilizing Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Memphis, Tennessee as two operating field sites, this research takes a comparative ethnographic approach to analyze how the changing political landscapes in the American North and South affects the identities of drag performers.

Introduction

I sit next to a pair of photographers at a small round table in a black painted bar in Michigan. The dance floor in front of us has been cleared out and red curtains drape over the wall to mimic the effect of a theater show. To my right, YouTube clips from previous seasons of RuPaul's *Drag Race* play on a projector with the volume turned off, leaving us to guess what music the drag queens are dancing to. On my left, the photographers are setting up lighting and discussing the best way to work without getting in the way of the performance. Glasses clink behind me, and I look around to see the bartender laughing as he mixes a drink in a rainbow shaker. The audience seating is mostly empty—allowing me to sit in the front row and count cash to make sure I grabbed enough from the ATM for the night. A comfortable chatter fills the room as people slowly filter in, the conversations drowning out the music playing from the speakers behind the stage. Drag shows are a uniquely sensory experience. From the construction of the stage to the layout of the audience, even as an audience member, one's body is pulled into the show before it can even begin. Without warning, the lights go dim and the chatter comes to a halt as an oversized disco ball lowers from the ceiling. The first few notes of a song begin to play, and I hold back a laugh as a black drag queen in a shimmery silver cocktail dress takes the stage and begins to lip-sync Cher's cover of "Walking in Memphis." The irony hits me like a stiletto hits the floor. I am more than seven hundred miles away from Tennessee- a fourteen-hour drive away from the city that inspired this research- but in that moment I was able to see exactly how clearly Memphis and Grand Rapids were connected, and how it was drag performers that facilitated that connection.

Without drag queens there would be no queer rights movement (Rothenberg, 2021). In 1969 a chorus of drag queens combated a police raid of Greenwich's Stonewall Inn, making history as the literal and metaphorical first bricks were thrown in protest. In 2023, a straight man (who dressed in drag in college) passed a ban across the state of Tennessee that required all "adult cabaret" be removed from public performance venues where children might be present. A year later, one of the world's largest and most popular performers is a female drag queen named Chappell Roan who brings local drag performers into her shows. Drag performers and performances hold a complicated place in current cultural discourse, as demonstrated by the above examples. Both lauded and criticized by national audiences, drag performers and performances are inherent representatives of queerness (Newton, 1979), symbolizing queer history and

subversion of traditional gender norms. It was this state of contemporary cultural discourse that inspired the course of this research.

For the purposes of this thesis, I define drag performers as individuals of any gender who adopt an exaggerated gendered persona for the purpose of entertaining audiences. These personas are physically displayed through costume choice, makeup, and styles of dance. While the most common impression of drag performers is that of cisgender gay men dressed in an overly feminine style (wigs, heels, and showgirl dresses), this research studied all performers and performances, regardless of the gender (perceived or otherwise) of the performer. With exceptions (such as during pride month and for specially booked events), drag is most often performed in queer bars. Queer bars contain a special meaning for those in the LGBTQ+ community, often serving as safe havens for those who cannot openly express non-normative sexual or gendered identities. Given the cultural meaning of the queer bar, they serve as key sites for the development of collective identity among drag performers.

There is a plethora of existing research surrounding drag performers and identity (see, Butler 1993, Taylor et. Al, 2015, Kaminsky & Taylor, 2008), however, there is very little existing research that discusses drag performers in a national context. In this thesis, I argue that the 2023 Tennessee drag ban (which will be discussed later) served as an inciting event for the creation of a collective drag identity among performers in the American North and South. I further argue that discourse and political rhetoric intersected and affected the ways in which performers in both geopolitical environments perceived themselves as individuals and as members of a drag community. My original research questions were: How do actively changing laws affect drag queens on personal, social, and economic levels? How do these laws affect the way they perceive themselves? Do performers see drag primarily as an identity or a source of income? Does drag performance shape the way that one views their own gender? Resistance was not among my original questions, but it emerged as a strong theme throughout my research that I believe to be essential in discussing the identities of performers. While not every performance is explicitly political, when one's identity as a performer is being threatened, performance becomes a political act that asserts an individual's personal identity while situating them as belonging to a collective.

Divided into four sections, I discuss identity and its connection to resistance among drag performers by comparing two main research sites: Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Memphis, Tennessee. The first section introduces previous theoretical literature surrounding drag performers, gender,

collective identity, and performance. The second section discusses the anthropological methods used throughout the fieldwork and research process. The third section discusses the ways in which drag performers created a collective drag identity in reaction to changing laws that sought to prohibit drag performances, while at the same time asserting their own personal racial and gendered identities to operate as resistance on an individual level. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the collective identity established by drag performers, and implications for the future of drag.

Literature Review

Drag and its performers do not exist in a historical vacuum. The first known drag performer in American history was a former slave by the name of William Dorsey Swann (Shane, 2023). In the late 1880s in Washington DC, Swann created what are now considered to be the first drag balls. These balls– held in secret due to the fear of police raids– included cross-dressing, dancing, and competitions. In mimicry of the antebellum era "cakewalks," where black dancers would mimic the attitudes and mannerisms of white men and compete to win cake; Swann's resistance dances allowed performers the chance to be crowned "queen" for the evening. Swann died in 1925, but his drag balls have lived on to the modern era, visible in vogue halls and drag shows every week at local bars across the country. From its conception, drag has been an act of protest by queer people and people of color, and it has been a key site in the formation and development of individual identity, collective identity, and queer culture through performance. As the central questions surrounding my research were located around the theme of identity, I utilized a historical literature review in combination with feminist theory, queer theory, and performance theory to argue how sites of political contention serve as a foundational site for the formation of a collective identity among drag performers.

Collective identity, according to Cristina Fominaya, is centered around collective action. Collective identity is a process that involves "cognitive definitions about ends, means, and the field of action" (Fominaya, 2010). This is central to my examination of collective identity, as it allows for variation between the motivations of individual actors. Individuals do not necessarily have to agree on ideologies, beliefs, interests, or goals to come together in the name of collective action for a social movement. Furthermore, when collective identity is created in social movements, it tends to define itself in opposition to dominant cultural practices. A key aspect of collective identity- especially as used in relation to drag performers- is that there is significant overlap between personal and social identities and

collective identity. When it is identity itself that is being threatened by political and legal forces, this becomes essential to understanding the way that identity is formed among drag performers.

Identity is inherently political- queer identity even more so. Esther Newton first brought drag into the anthropological arena with her book "Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America." Written a mere ten years after the Stonewall riots, Newton spent two years conducting field-work on drag queens as they performed and lived their daily lives. Newton's female impersonator is the glamorous and melancholy urbanite-disillusioned, cynical, and yet still on stage every other night. For these queens "exploitative sexuality is the root and framework of all human motivation" (Newton, 1979) and the polar division between male and female is the most fundamental distinction in human existence. Newton locates the formation of collective identity among her female impersonators in oppression and collective longing. These female impersonators are, inherently, impersonators. They perceive themselves as morally and sexually polluted and– understanding themselves to be lacking in comparison to the masculine ideal– seek fulfillment through performative Hollywood-style high-femininity. While "Mother Camp" may have been revolutionary for its time, in the 45 years since it was written, drag has left the underground dive bars and joined the national conversation. While I disagree with Newton's conclusion of drag performers as melancholic of their queerness, I do agree with her finding that collective identity among drag performers emerges from situations of oppression.

Drawing on their ethnography conducted at the 801 bar in the Florida Keys (Rupp & Taylor, 2015) Rupp, Taylor and Gamson (2015) explore collective identity among Florida drag queens as formed and displayed through acts of protests. Their findings "illuminate the way cultural performances can be used as political tactics: their role in contesting the dominant order, the degree of intentionality involved, and the kinds of collective identity work they embody." They expand on this to claim that collective identity is created among drag queens through deliberately political performances. Drawing on Newton, the authors theorize that the body of the drag queens as performance artists is used to draw attention to the social construction of gender and sexuality while contesting dominant gender roles. In this way, collective identity among drag performers is embodied through the act of performance. As identity and performance are both political, the body becomes a site of both protest and politics.

It is nearly impossible to discuss identity and performance without mentioning Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Butler's theory is a foundational theoretical grounding in feminist and queer studies, providing a philosophical and theoretical basis for understanding gender as it is expressed, embodied, and enacted in daily life. Gender performativity- according to Butler- is the way that one enacts gender through their choices, movements, bodily decor, etc, through a "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 2017). Gender is thus constituted of a series of conscious and unconscious efforts conducted by an individual in accordance with (or in direct opposition to) the social norms of appropriate gender expression.

> "My suggestion is that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time. From a feminist point of view, one might try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence, or fact, whether natural or linguistic" (Butler, 2017).

Butler cites their theory as inherently political, as gender is a site upon which cultural power is exerted and norms are enforced. In their later piece "Gender Trouble," Butler elaborates on manners in which performativity and drag intertwine to show the lack of connection between gender and sex. Responding directly to Newton's "Mother Camp," Butler claims that drag as a literal performance capitalizes upon the dissonance of bodily autonomy of the performer and the gender being performed. Drag thus demonstrates the imitative structure of gender and the acts that constitute it (Butler, 1999). "If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer," Butler says, "and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender and sex and performance" (Butler, 1999). This theory was essential to the development of my research questions and my approach to understanding identity. I utilize Butler's theories to discuss both individual and collective identity among performers, as understanding performativity as different from– but related to– literal performance. This theory allows one to understand the importance of gender performativity for those of non-normative gender identities in the development of one's personal identity, but also allows for an understanding of how performativity connects with performance to help create collective identity.

Marlon Bailey delves into queer performance theory in his 2013 ethnography, "Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Heder, Performance, and Ball-

room Culture in Detroit." While not studying drag performers, the location of the ethnography (a mere three hours away from where my own fieldwork was conducted), the theoretical basis of performance and gender theory, and the significance of cultural history embodied through dance (ie. conscious performative acts) were essential in the creation of my fieldwork and the construction of my findings. Bailey's work dives deep into the world of ballroom culture first made visible to the world in Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary, "Paris is Burning." Ballroom culture is primarily made up of queer BIPOC, and as such, ethnic, cultural, gendered, and sexual identity are present in every aspect of an individual's performance. As Bailey puts it, "Performance makes it possible to revise, negotiate, and reconstitute gender and sexual roles and relations while constructing a more open minoritarian social sphere" (Bailey, 2013).

Vogue dancing– consisting of fluid, whole-body movements including arm control, body awareness, and understanding of musical beats, rhythm, and syncopation– is considered to be one of the most important aspects of ballroom culture. Emerging from African diasporic dance traditions in combination with house and hip-hop music, vogue dance symbolizes racial and cultural identity through its music and movement. However, it also produces new forms of collective identity through its continued use in ballroom culture and its spread into the wider world as a recognized form of dance. Having been appropriated from ballroom, vogue is often used in drag performances as a "showstopper," containing some of the most dynamic dance moves and the best potential for audience interaction. While not often recognized by non-POC audience members, vogue as used in drag often displays the cultural and historical connections between ballroom, BIPOC, and drag. As such, when utilized in drag, vogue dance serves as a way in which collective history and identity is embodied and reproduced through conscious performative acts.

Using the above authors in conversation, I explore the ways that individual identity is constitutive of collective identity by analyzing the ways that drag performers assert their own non-normative gendered, racial, and cultural identities through literal performances on stage to serve as a quotidian act of resistance that assists in the formation of a national drag identity in the face of political and legal contestation.

Methods

The original aim of my thesis and the construction of this research was to understand how changing laws that directly targeted drag performers affected the formation of identity of said performers by comparing two

sites in the American North and South. This research was conducted over the course of three months, from June to August 2024, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Memphis, Tennessee. The respective cities were chosen for both their political uniqueness and my own personal connection to each location. Grand Rapids and Memphis present interesting research sites due to their political contrast to the states they are situated in.

Grand Rapids is a relatively conservative city in one of the "blue wall" states, where Memphis is often called the "blue dot" of conservative Tennessee. It was members of the Memphis-based drag theater troupe "Friends of George" who were responsible for suing the state of Tennessee for the drag ban that occurred in 2023 (Kashiwagi, 2023), making the location more than suitable for fieldwork surrounding drag and identity politics. Grand Rapids is situated in a political context where the governor of the state has followed in the opposite direction of Tennessee's current governor, and has signed into state policy a series of laws that protect LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination (HRC Staff, 2023). As such, Grand Rapids made for a fascinating environment from which to conduct comparative analysis. Given the geopolitics of each city, they served as ideal sites for research surrounding politics and collective identity.

Following in the tradition of anthropology, my fieldwork took the form of an introductory-style participant observation. Participant observation is a method in which the researcher actively participates in the culture or community they are studying, thus allowing them to gain both an inside and outside perspective on the way individual cultures function (Bernard, 2017). Participant observation allows for a more subjective approach to qualitative data collection and analysis, as the positionality of the researcher is something explored in both the research as well as the final product. While a true participatory research model would have required me to perform in drag myself, the time limit in place for this project as well as my own unfamiliarity with this model of fieldwork limited me from that aspect of participant observation. As such, my participation and engagement with performers was mostly from the perspective of an audience member. This allowed me to examine interactions between performers and audience members while shows were occurring, and to build rapport with the performers by becoming a regular attendee.

I was not sure what to expect from my first night in the field. Despite having grown up in Grand Rapids, I had only ever heard of this bar from older queer people. Rumors Nightclub is Grand Rapids' oldest queer bar and one of the only places where drag shows occur on a weekly basis. Given the historical importance of Rumors to the local LGBT+ community,

it served as my primary research site while in Michigan. I would arrive approximately twenty to thirty minutes before the beginning of the show so I could get seating close to the stage and speak with bar regulars while waiting for the show to begin. Despite being the oldest queer nightclub in the city, Rumors is not large. Consisting of a bar (decorated in rainbow bottles of Absolut Vodka), 15 small tables, a projector beaming RuPaul reruns and Lady Gaga concerts, and a mirrored wall decorated in red curtains before every show; the space is constructed so that people only have two things to look at upon entering: the stage and the bar. The construction of the space is designed to promote audience interaction with performers and performances, as the stage is visible from every angle of the club. Shows at Rumors run from 10pm to 12am, with an open dance floor from midnight to 3am where a DJ in drag plays pop music until closing time.

When in Memphis, I conducted the majority of my fieldwork at Atomic Rose—the only queer bar on Beale Street. The show start times would vary each week, but usually starting between 10pm and 11pm, but always ending by midnight. Drag performers could be found at the bar before shows in full getup, and were more than willing to take pictures with tourists and bachelorette parties stopping by Beale for the night. As far as I could tell, Atomic Rose had few regulars, and instead relied on the Beale Street bar-hopping tradition to draw in audience members each week. The nightclub is rather large, combining a bar-style restaurant with a chic nightclub. There are two bars where patrons can order drinks, multiple sets of tables, and a T-shaped stage with two steps that lead down to the permanent dance floor. Paintings of queer icons such as RuPaul, Ariana Grande, Selena Gomez, John Lennon, and Gloria Gaynor line the dark-painted walls. However, the real attention-grabber is the large golden throne at the entrance. With a multicolored spotlight always aimed at the chair, it is common to see both performers and guests resting on the throne to watch the show.

I conducted four semi-formal interviews over the course of three months. As drag is a politically sensitive topic (especially since my research took place in the months prior to the 2024 US election) my interlocutors were given the option whether to allow their personal information to be used in the course of the research prior to the start of their interviews. They were encouraged to ask questions off the record prior to and immediately following the interview, and they were also given copies of the recording transcript to edit or comment on as they felt necessary. Importantly, the two performers from Tennessee requested I use pseudonyms rather than their real performance names. Due to the contentious legal status of

drag in Tennessee, it was important to both myself as a researcher and to my interlocutors that their safety was protected above all else. Both interviewees from Grand Rapids requested their real performance names be used in anything related to this research. The questions for the semi-formal interview were based off of a pre-written, IRB approved interview guide, but said questions were often altered based on the answers each participant gave. As such, the interviews often took the form of a conversation, with three out of the four interviews lasting for over an hour. Due to the fact that I was frequently travelling between states and all my interlocutors had one (or more) jobs outside of performing, three of the interviews were conducted over a password-locked zoom call, with the singular in-person interview taking place in a location of the interlocutor's preference.

It should be noted that personal pronouns are a complicated matter to cover when working with performers, as they often use different pronouns when on and off stage. To respect the privacy and the individual gender identification of my interlocutors and research participants, I will be referring to the individuals by the pronouns they prefer to use while in drag.

Lastly, the term "community" is utilized multiple times throughout this piece in relation to the queer community and drag community. Drawing on Neal Carnes, I define "community" as a people connected through conscious solidarity where deeply shared identity serves to bind people together (Carnes 2019).

Discussion

It is 9:30 at night and the show has yet to start. I made a mistake, believing that the show started earlier in the night than it did, and now I have no other choice but to wait until the audience filters into the club. It is the middle of Pride Month and, perhaps more importantly, only a year since the drag ban was repealed in Tennessee. There is no question that there will be an audience tonight. The only question is a matter of when they will get here. The air is filled with the scent of smoke, fries, and sweat, and pop music blares through the jumbo speakers on either side of the stage. I approach the bar and come to stand next to two towering drag queens, working up the nerve to introduce myself. Zahara Dessert wears a Vegas-showgirl style glittery dress and downs a shot as I speak to Brooklyn Oldshore, a queen with a large-than-life white wig and a polka dot dress. Zahara turns her focus to me, her makeup-accentuated gaze intense as I ask about what they thought about last year's drag ban and the new series of anti-transgender bills being proposed in Tennessee's courts. Brooklyn paused before answering,

"I hope," she said, looking away from me to wave at the bartender, "that in a few years we will be able to laugh about all this." On hearing Brooklyn's answer, Zahara's nose scrunched up, and a look of unease came over her. "What?" Brooklyn asked, turning to face Zahara fully, "you don't think so?"

Zahara's voice was quiet as she answered, "I don't think I can agree with you here."

Season 15 of RuPaul's *Drag Race* ended just as the 2023 Tennessee Senate Bill 662 and House Bill 30- known as the "Adult Cabaret Act" or "Drag Ban" was passed into state law. In the season finale, RuPaul Charles, host, judge, and founder of RuPaul's drag race announced a fund-raising partnership with the ACLU and the creation of a Drag Defense Fund- all dedicated to combating the state of Tennessee in defense of drag performers across the nation (Silver, 2023). While the ban was repealed mere months after it was signed into law- having been deemed unconstitutional by the courts- the effects of the ban linger in the drag community today. As demonstrated by the introductory vignette, individual performers vary on whether the ban set a precedent for future lawmaking practice both in the state of Tennessee and on a national scale. However, simply because individual actors disagree on the long-term effects of the ban does not mean that the drag community is divided. My first finding indicates that oppressive laws served as an inciting event for the creation of a collective drag identity through cultural discourse and political performances as acts of protest.

A year after the drag ban was brought down in court, Polara Polloi hosted a family friendly drag show in Memphis to celebrate Pride Month. Dressed in a rainbow tutu, Polara sat in the front of the room with her son on her lap as she read aloud a story about a child realizing they were transgender. As a burlesque dancer, drag queen, showrunner, and a mother, Polara was eager to participate in this project. Polara is the primary showrunner of a local Memphis drag troupe (whose name I have omitted for the sake of confidentiality) and thus is in charge of not only arranging shows with various venues, but also with organizing performers. During the 2023 drag ban, Polara decided to organize a family-friendly drag show to protest and challenge the idea present among Tennessee legislators that drag was inherently unsuitable for children. When asked about this show, Polara commented, "people [were] like, you shouldn't do drag in front of kids. And I'm like, well, I do. And it is perfectly safe, I promise."

Polara does not see the expression of her gendered identity as a performer as one that is inappropriate or unsuitable for young audiences, and

instead of retreating under political scrutiny, Polara decided to rally among her community and unite them through a protest event- despite knowing the possible consequences for hosting said event. In Polara's case, collective identity was created and reinforced through deliberately political performances. Collective identity is often centered upon direct engagement, and as such, action tactics such as protest shows create a site in which collective identity can be centered (Fominaya, 2010). This performance- to use Butler's terms- served to demonstrate the performative and political nature of gender by literally placing it on a stage and creating collective assertions of non-normative gender expression as an act of protest. This demonstrated collective identity by uniting performances through the ideology of drag and expressions of varying gender performances being suitable to be seen and understood by younger audiences- directly challenging the very nature of the Tennessee drag ban.

Seven hundred miles and two months away in Grand Rapids, I sit in a bar with a drag king named Cocky Divine. A black trans man from Detroit, Cocky is in love with both his drag and his community. He can be found most Sunday nights performing a slow strip-show at Rumors Nightclub, where he proudly reveals his top-surgery scars to an ecstatic crowd. He drinks wine and I snack on popcorn as he talks about the fear and anger he felt upon learning that members of his community were being threatened in Tennessee. "At one point," Cocky said, "we all wanted to go down to Tennessee and march in drag and be there […] Because these people [drag performers] aren't doing anything in their lives but living their life like you are. […] I was nervous for those people there, and what the bill meant for everybody else."

What this quote demonstrates is that Cocky- and other drag performers- feel a sense of community and connection with performers across the country. This sense of community was heightened with the threat posed against drag performers and encouraged the formation of a collective identity to serve as a site upon which protests could be built.

Kaminsky and Taylor (2008) claim that "Collective identity is negotiated over the life course of a movement in response to changes in the political context." Not only does it define the collective, it acknowledges some sort of injustice that has been committed against them, and attributes the blame to structural causes. What I found throughout the course of my fieldwork was that collective identity among drag performers was created by threats of political oppression—as demonstrated by Cocky's desire to mobilize drag performers—but collective identity was maintained through community-oriented political action.

Fundraising performances were a common occurrence in both Grand Rapids and Memphis. These shows demonstrated alignment with both the local and national LGBTQ+ community through their choice of performers and the organizations who received the donations after the shows. In Grand Rapids, a common fund-raiser was "Kamikaze night." This performance invited both amateur and professional drag performers to lip-sync, dance, and compete. These competitions mimicked RuPaul's *Drag Race*'s "lip-sync for your life," where performers must dance and lip-sync to win tips from the crowd. Whoever received the most tips at the end of the night would be deemed the winner of the competition. More importantly though, all the tips given to the performers throughout the course of the fund-raiser were donated to charity at the end of the night. These fund-raising shows serve to reveal to the audience members the current threats facing the LGBTQ+ community (and thus, the threats facing the performers themselves) and simultaneously operate as a form of identity expression and community acknowledgment. These types of performances further serve as a strategy to create feelings of belonging and collectivity among sympathizers and potential allies in the audience (Rupp & Taylor, 2008). Furthermore these performances are "staged to solicit strong emotion and are experienced by the audience as play rather than as serious, which allows them to attract participants who might not otherwise attend a political event" (Taylor, Rupp, & Gamson, 2015).

The time period in which this research was conducted is not irrelevant. My fieldwork took place in the months before the United States election, and as such, politics were often brought into the field whether in performances or in interviews. During the Grand Rapids Pride festival, a drag queen brought a democratic political candidate running for senate to the main stage and danced with him. The same candidate was brought up later that week in a show where the drag performers encouraged the audience to vote by creating a call and response of "Vote! Drag! Vote!" In both Michigan and Tennessee, the drag ban was used as an example of what would happen if Democrats did not win the election. In these discussions, queens would often use the word "we" when speaking. "I may not like Joe Biden," a queen commented at a performance in a public park, "but he's the best chance *we've* got. So go vote this November!" (emphasis added). In this case, the use of the word "we" indicated not just a conversation between the audience and the performing queen, but also an alignment and solidarity with drag performers across the country. These drag performances forge collective identity among performers "through the articulation of boundaries and community among those engaged in the performance," (Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson, 2015).

While collective identity was formed through alliance with specific political causes, it was also demonstrated through the active disavowal of political actors who were perceived to threaten the LGBTQ+ community and those who aligned themselves with said actors. When one audience member at Rumors expressed their conservative political affiliation, the evening's showrunner yelled into the audience, "Donald Trump is a damn fool. A racist fool. A misogynistic fool. A -phobic fool. A damn fool- and we all hate you." This statement was followed by cheering from the crowd as the offending audience member left the premises. Anger and fear were present in every interview I conducted with drag performers, however, the geopolitical context of each performer's primary location changed which emotion was most present. Performers in Grand Rapids (like the example above) demonstrated high levels of anger and indignity, where Memphis performers who were active in the drag scene during the 2023 drag ban expressed fear over the potential future of drag. As Oxy Daze, a non-binary performer based out of Memphis explained,

> "It was very scary because I had just found a site for myself. […] I had grown up very conservative and religious, and I had found a safe place for myself. And I thought it was gonna get taken away. […] It was scary to perform during that time, like I was going to have a target on my back just because I am who I am."

Collective identity defines itself in contrast to its relationship with other in the specific context in which they exist (Fominaya, 2010). When it comes to politically targeted minority groups such as drag performers, anger and fear provide a deeper basis for the formation and consolidation of group identity and solidarity. Emotions are essential in using collective identity as a basis for action, as emotional ties between actors can help them maintain their involvement in said actions, and help them overcome the effects of oppression (Fominaya, 2010). It is these emotions that serve as a functional starting point for the utilization of identity as a form of collective and individual resistance.

My second finding centers around the individual identities of drag performers and their connection to resistance. Where above I discuss the manners in which collective identity is formed through resistant narratives and actions, I now discuss how the assertion of drag performers' individual identities serve as quotidian acts of resistance. Drag operates as a microcosm of wider cultural norms, but in the face of political contestation, assertions and presentations of non-normative identities serve to establish said presentations as acts of protest. Drag is a political mode of critical performance where the categories of race and class intersect with gender and performativity through performance (Greene, 2021). These performances

solicit strong emotions among audience members in order to draw them into the world of drag-as-politics. At the same time, these performances are heightened by the individual performers, who assert their personal racial, cultural, and gendered identities during their performances as modes of self-validation and acts of resistance against those who would seek to regulate said non-normative identities.

Throughout my fieldwork, interlocutors expressed that their drag personas could not be separated from their individual, non-performing selves.

> "Building a drag persona is less contrived than it might appear. You don't make a mood board or cut and stick your idealized drag into your scrapbook. It's much more natural, a kind of slow unfurling of all the references you adored as a kid, a teen, an adult; an expansion and performance of all the things you are desperate to be," (Rasmussen & Rasmussen, 2020).

Every drag performer I spoke with made a similar claim to Rasmussen when asked about their drag personas. To them, their drag personas were not brand new, completely independent characters, but extensions and exaggerations of who they already are. However, these individual identities were displayed differently by performers of different racial, cultural, and gendered identities. These individual identities intersect in complicated and multifaceted ways, and serve as sites for both individual acts of resistance and for the development of collective identity among performers.

Ethnic and cultural identity are commonly displayed in drag performances through makeup, clothing, song choice, and dance styles. Mimi, known as the Xicana goddess of Grand Rapids, is a transgender Mexican woman. A fashion student, Mimi makes her own clothing, often copying flamenco and salsa-style dresses that allow her to incorporate traditional Latin American dances into her performances. Mimi's songs of choice often demonstrate her pride in her Mexican heritage, as she chooses classic Spanish love ballads (and once, notably, the Macarena). Mimi will often encourage audience members to sing in Spanish as she dances both on stage and among crowd members. In these performances, Mimi combines her gendered and cultural identities in what Butler would call a series of consciously performative acts that serve to demonstrate the complex nature of non-normative identities among drag performers.

Introduced on stage by Brooklyn Oldshore as the "epitome of drag," Geneva Convent is a Black drag queen in Memphis. Geneva is the type of glamor-drag goddess one would expect to see on RuPaul's *Drag Race*—or as a face in a beauty pageant. Geneva is always seen in a full-length and

bejeweled bodycon ballgown, earrings larger than the palm of a hand, and an opulent curly wig that goes down to her thighs. She does not dance, but instead saunters slowly around the dance floor, lip-syncing to Whitney Houston, Donna Summer, and R&B classics.

According to Marlon Bailey, drag and other gender-bending performances are fundamental to Black LGBTQ+ cultures. Bailey identifies the most important part of Black drag as recognizability. Performances must be recognizable by members of the Black community to be appreciated, and as such, impersonations of Black female singers and divas (such as Geneva's imitations of Whitney Houston) are enjoyed because they are understood and adored by Black audience members.

Both these examples demonstrate alignment with the performer's personal racial and cultural identities that are affirmed through their performances and interactions with their audiences (Bailey, 2013). Both Mimi and Geneva serve as examples for a common theme found throughout the course of my fieldwork. The drag performed by people of color serves various purposes. It challenges wider cultural norms of race (Tucket, 2023) and– in the case of my interlocutors– operates as a platform to manifest their voices politically. The drag personas of both Mimi and Geneva display similar levels of pride in their statuses as people of color.

However, in the midst of a culture where a black woman is running for president, performances that demonstrate pride in one's racial and ethnic heritage operate as an identity level of resistance to racist and sexist political and cultural discourse.

It would be a mistake to discuss the individual identities of drag performers without discussing the relationship between gender, performance, and performativity as they are related to protest. These frameworks influenced findings throughout my fieldwork and research by demonstrating not only the fluid nature of gender identification among performers, but also by creating the idea of protest and resistance as intimately connected to the daily lives of those with non-normative gender identities.

In 2023, US legislators introduced over four-hundred bills targeting LGBTQ+ (but mainly transgender) individuals (Butler, 2024). In these bills, the words "gender" and "gender ideology" can be found in most of them. 2023 saw Tennessee with two such bills: the aforementioned drag ban, and SB1– a bill that prohibits individuals under the age of eighteen from receiving gender-affirming care (Branstetter, 2024). SB1 is currently being reviewed by the Supreme Court, which will establish whether the limits placed by the state of Tennessee violate the constitution under the

Equal protections clause. In states where gender-affirming care is restricted, demonstrations of non-normative gender identities operate as public declarations of resistance against structures of oppressive power. In the national context, where access to gender-affirming care is a site of contention among legislators, these same displays represent open challenges to what Butler (2024) calls "abusive laws."

Cocky Divine makes his transness evident in every performance. Whether through the reveal of top-surgery scars, through outright declaration, or through symbolic acts– such as bringing a transgender flag on stage– there is never a question as to Cocky's identity. Cocky's drag is not always explicitly political, but his individual identity as a Black transgender man is so heavily politicized that any action he does can be interpreted as a performative act of protest. For Cocky, performance and gender performativity are so connected as to be nearly indistinguishable from one another. Cocky's drag thus constitutes a "complex and fluid act of identity expression where male and drag personas overlap and some aspects of performance are experienced as more natural than others," (Greene, 2021).

Oxy Daze made similar claims when asked about her drag persona:

> "When I'm performing, I don't like to have any sort of gender expression. I don't have to be like: this part of Oxy is male, this part is female. I'm a drag king. I'm a drag queen. I just say I do drag and I dress how [whatever] inspires me and I perform. So through drag I kind of found a way to perform and be queer at the same time."

While not all drag performers are transgender, all drag performances are displays of gender performativity. Butler claims that gender as expressed by drag performers suggests a dissonance between sex and gender and sex and performance" (Butler, 1999). For both Cocky and Oxy, it is their daily existence that is being challenged by the wave of anti-LGBTQ+ laws, and as such, demonstrating their gendered identities through conscious acts of performance serves as examples of both resistance and protest at the identity level.

Outside of drag, Cherry Poppins identifies as a cisgender gay man. "My big thing is," she said in an interview, "I want to look like a drag queen, not necessarily a real woman. My drag is female presenting, but I don't want people to think "that could be a man, could be a woman." I want to look like a drag queen." Cherry's drag serves to demonstrate the imitative and inherently performative nature of gender. By stating that she wants to be perceived not as a real woman, but as a drag queen, Cherry demonstrates another layer of the complicated intersections between

gender and performance. Cherry's drag reflects Newton's assertion that the drag queen symbolizes an open declaration and celebration of homosexuality, as well as Butler's central claim that drag reveals the inherently imitative nature of gender.

Despite the differences in their gender identities, all three of the individuals in the above examples identify as drag performers. In each case, the performer's drag personas were shaped by their intersecting racial, cultural, and gendered identities, but they identified as part of a collective that was threatened by the increase in oppressive laws that would target members of their community across the nation. Bailey (2013) theorizes performances as a form of cultural labor, in which performances operate as work that produces culture as a product that is then reaffirmed through community engagement. In attempting to regulate drag performers in Tennessee, legislators inadvertently assisted in creating a national collective drag identity that was centered in resistance through performances of non-normative identities. These performances served as cultural labor to create resistance and protest as key aspects of drag.

Conclusion

A notable limitation of this research was the sample size of the research participants. Due to fear of the changing political status of the state of Tennessee, many performers expressed hesitancy over participating in any sort of research project that draws attention to them as individuals. Safety was a large concern for my interlocutors, and in an election year, many were not certain that their words would not come back to haunt them later. As such, there was only an exceptionally brave few who were willing to meet with me for interviews. Furthermore, more time in the field would have been beneficial for this project, instead of constraining participant observation to three months between academic semesters. Many performers I spoke to were interested in participating in this research, but were limited in their capabilities due to the heightened demand for drag performances during the summer months when this research took place (Pride Month and July 4th are exceedingly busy times for drag performers).

Lastly—as mentioned in the introduction of this piece—there is very little anthropological work on drag performers and collective identity, and there is none that I could find that takes a comparative approach to collective identity of drag on a national scale. Future research on this topic should consider the way wider political challenges affect the way that drag performers perceive the state of their community. Further research should

also examine how identification and connection with a specific location affects the way that performers perceive their relationships between themselves, their communities, and the law.

Despite the repeal of the drag ban in 2023, the collective identity among drag performers was maintained across both field sites, allowing performers to identify each other as part of a community who- even if they held disagreements- were united against threats of censorship and political oppression that would see their labor and their community regulated. Drag performers do not exist in a cultural and historical vacuum. They are not a singular subculture existing outside of heteronormative culture. One cannot separate a performer's drag persona from their independent and multifaceted selves.

Identity is political. Queer identity even more so. The results of this study indicate that the identities of individual drag performers intersect on multiple levels to function as quotidian acts of resistance to oppression in the face of political discourse that would threaten their very existence. In the context of the 2023 Tennessee drag ban, the individual identities of performers helped make up a national collective identity of drag performers that is centered in resistance. This community culture of resistance consisted of acts of outright protest: such as organizing shows in direct opposition of the law, speaking at the Tennessee Capitol in defense of drag, and mobilizing national support through social media. However, for many drag performers, resistance also consisted of refusing to change their lifestyles and identities and instead choosing to continue existing in and out of drag as symbols of presence and of the queer community. While not every drag performance is explicitly political, when it is one's lifestyle and identity as a performer that is being threatened by forces outside of their control, performance becomes a political act that asserts an individual's personal identity while situating them among a collective.

This thesis demonstrates that collective identity among drag performers is both a process that is negotiated by individual performers and their personal identities, but also a product of political oppression that creates a collective drag identity. This thesis also demonstrates that identity serves as a site upon which resistance and protest is built. Despite their individual differences, drag performers across the country were able to use their identities as performers as common ground to demonstrate support for individuals in Tennessee who were being oppressed. Most importantly, this thesis demonstrates that the attempts by the state of Tennessee to ban drag performances did not work. Drag performers are still active and present

in Tennessee, and in the state's attempt to repress drag, they inadvertently created a strong sense of community and collective identification among performers across the country.

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