



**You're Born Naked and the Rest is Drag:  
A Social Inquiry of Drag Queen Culture and Identity in New  
York City**

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## **Introduction**

“It is first important to understand what drag queens are not.”

Me, in the first draft of this proposal.

Drag is complicated.

This proposal began as a plain inquiry into the phenomena of drag as I understood it. It became a complex and deeply challenging unpacking of a century of hushed and often misunderstood culture. Drag cannot be understood without an understanding of the history of the modern Westernized homosexual identity, nor can it be explained without truly connecting to the concept of “camp,” nor can it be thoughtfully discoursed without first embracing the studies of gender performativity and the questioning of all gender binaries. In essence, to understand drag for the purposes of social inquiry, I learned that I must understand that drag’s pure purpose is to challenge every construct it encounters. Therefore, I needed to be willing and ready to discard (or at least dismantle) everything I thought I knew about drag, homosexuality, gender, and the cultural phenomena that emerged at their intersections.

It is still important to understand what drag queens are *not*. In the context of this inquiry, I will not be connecting drag to historical occurrences of cross-dressing: for the stage, à la Shakespeare, or for comedic character purposes, à la comedian Barry Humphries’ character Dame Edna, or as a drag-as-a-disguise trope seen in film and TV à la Tom Hank’s character in the show *Bosom Buddies* or Robin William’s character in the film *Mrs. Doubtfire*. The contemporary drag queen is not a man who dresses in women’s clothing for sexual thrills, and one’s desire to perform drag is not inherently linked to the performer’s sexuality or gender expression (i.e., drag queens are not transgender women and drag is not a sexual or gender identity).

It seems important to express these distinctions for the purposes of educating a broad audience— this background information may help readers understand this research project by providing a necessary context. But ironically, the need to categorize and distinguish boundaries and borders is precisely what drag aims to manipulate. Among the communities that drag situates itself, in its many iterations, there is rarely a need to explain, categorize or define. Drag can be anything to anyone. It can be an art form, a method of individual expression. It can be avant-garde and disruptive. It can celebrate pageantry and traditional standards of feminine beauty. I enjoy a definition of drag as stated by a performer named April Carrion on a recent #TransformationTuesday post to her Instagram account: “Drag is about having fun, and just transforming yourself into whatever the fuck you want to be.”

### ***Background***

“Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman.’ To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater. Camp is the triumph of the epicene style. (The convertibility of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ ‘person’ and ‘thing.’) But all style, that is, artifice, is, ultimately, epicene. Life is not stylish. Neither is nature.” Susan Sontag, *Notes on “Camp.”*

“There is no original or primary gender a drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.” Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

“Ego loves identity. Drag mocks identity. Ego hates drag.” RuPaul Charles

Drag, to be defined very simply, is usually the practice of a gay man assuming an exaggerated female gendered persona. Usually, drag is a performance of some kind, as it is rooted in theatricality. Therefore, drag can be considered the performance of gender via an exaggerated presentation. There are no hard and fast rules for drag—probably because it came into existence as a counter-culture within homosexual communities, looking to celebrate the “camp” aesthetic. Camp might be the only foundation upon which drag performance is upheld. American author Susan Sontag wrote an essay in 1964, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” which calls out its key elements: *artifice, frivolity, naive middle-class pretentiousness*, and ‘shocking’ *excess*. Camp, as Sontag describes it, is the gay man’s version of high art and pretense. As homosexuality was considered a perversion of the norm (from the turn of the 20th century), the collective homosexual culture was similarly subverted from the mainstream “straight” way of being. While high culture fawned over fine art, serious works and ego of beauty, camp sought to flip it on its head; camp came to embrace silliness and humor over seriousness and earnestness, find the beauty in ugliness, and the absurdity of “style.” Camp pokes holes into all the constructs of fine culture by questioning and mocking value placed on authenticity. Camp challenges authenticity by arguing that authenticity is merely a construct, an artifice. But instead of judging culture for its high standards and rules, camp makes fun of it by mimicking it. Mimicry, wit and exaggerated frivolity have thusly become the cornerstone of “traditional” early drag, as it still does today.

Drag queens, in this context, are the natural extension and embodiment of camp. Camp, in the pre-gay rights movement era, justified effeminacy among gay men. The parody of the overtly feminine, as seen in old Hollywood and other aspects of high glamour, and the acceptance of the coy, feminine gay male identity is what allowed drag queens to become part of the camp cultural pattern. As the male performer dresses and behaves as female, the “authenticity” of this performance is lauded and celebrated. This balance of both embodying and making fun of the authentic is still alive today in

contemporary drag (referred to as “realness,” i.e., presenting via drag the persona of an assumed “real” identity.)<sup>1</sup>

While the tradition of drag queens began as a theatrical, over the top tribute to female glamour, queens have had the latitude to experiment with different types of drag. Because drag eschews seriousness and labels, many forms and styles have emerged from subculture trends, regions, social and political movements, and from any source of inspiration a drag performer may find. Since drag queens have license to parody, remix and reimagine identities, gendered or otherwise, there are countless forms and styles of drag in the world. The most common style of drag one might see is that of female impersonation coupled with some mode of performance: lip synching, dancing, emceeing, hosting or performing comedy are standard skills a drag queen might possess. As such, performing drag is usually (or can lead to) a profession, wherein the drag queen earns money from her performances and appearances. Some queens are able to “do drag” as a full-time job, while others do it as a supplement to their day jobs; some drag queens will talk about their “boy jobs,” “boy lives,” and even “boy names” to differentiate themselves from their drag persona and profession.

Since the gay rights movement of the 1970s, drag queens have a functional role within gay communities worldwide by hosting gay pride events and/or performing their act in the gay nightclub circuit. Fewer find success and stardom beyond the cult scene. RuPaul Charles, better known by her drag name RuPaul, became the first quintessential drag queen to break into the mainstream in the early 1990s as a pop culture icon, singer and TV show host, hitting her stride as a campy but approachable character adored by the MTV generation. Due to her prominent visibility and a brand of drag that appeals to wide

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<sup>1</sup> RuPaul on realness in a 2015 interview with *Billboard* magazine: “When drag talks about realness, it's always with a wink because, you know, here I am, a drag queen talking about looking and feeling real, which is the joke itself.” Realness is also a benchmark of critique when drag queens compete in balls. Queens may be asked to present “realness” looks by category, such as “executive realness,” “Valley Girl realness,” “Catholic school realness,” etc. Realness connotes the mimicry of a persona, which therefore challenges said persona’s inherent authenticity.

audiences, RuPaul is the most recognized professional drag performer in the Western hemisphere. Her story is unique in that she leveraged her credibility as queen well-versed in camp and drag history (herstory, as calls it) with her fierce dedication breaking into the mainstream world of entertainment, mainly by capitalizing on the power of the gay communities and her stunning good looks— in the 1990s, she was a campy version of the stereotypical 90s supermodel with her 7-foot stature and fashion-forward appearance.

Today, RuPaul is responsible for taking drag as far beyond the strictly gay community as it's ever been with *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a television reality show on the Logo network that calls upon the drag queens of America to audition and compete for a chance to become "America's Next Drag Superstar." Her television contest series has drawn interest from a wide variety of drag performers around the United States, proving that some drag performers do have aspirations for fame and visibility beyond their subcultural niches.

Presently, the drag queen landscape is varied and at times in conflict. Taking all factors into consideration, drag queendom is a world of its own with a language, philosophy, and industry that can encompass endless variations and styles— which could (and sometimes does) create a rift among drag performers with opposing beliefs about what drag should be. While RuPaul and her TV show have brought drag into homes all over the nation, it still only features certain types of drag that have some kind of commercial appeal, leaving out more controversial or otherwise alternatively motivated drag queens. And within gay communities, some skewer drag queens for making too light the issues of gender identity; other, more radical opinions suggest that drag is a sexist mockery of women akin to the way blackface mocks and demeans African-Americans.

The purpose of this research project will be to explore a sample of drag performers based in New York City, a place with a high concentration of various types of drag styles. Through field observation and focus groups with participants, I hope to create a detailed account of what it is like to live and perform as a drag queen in this new era of multifarious outlets, with an intention to understand how working drag performers feel about the current drag landscape and how see themselves fitting (or not fitting) into the drag movement.

### ***Motivations***

“Despite the excellent work being created by these gay men, it seems culturally telling that these artists still only appeal to certain kinds of ‘niche’ audiences. While stars like Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, or even Ariana Grande have made entire careers with pro-gay messages and hyper-fashion, the queens who inspire them remain (relatively) obscure—at least to straight audiences. What are the cultural factors that allow for this kind of disproportionate success? Is the world still not ready for mainstream international drag superstars?” Writer Eric Shorey for MTV Iggy, an MTV blog dedicated to bringing global music and pop culture trends to the US, *Drag Queens Have Inspired Scores of Mainstream Pop Stars. When Will They Get Their Dues?* June 29, 2015.

The reasons that motivate me to conduct this research assignment are both personal and pragmatic. I have been a fan of drag queens and gender performance since I was a young girl; I’ve always been a part of theater, I’ve been an amateur makeup artist and costumer for as long as I can remember and I recall being dazzled by RuPaul during her rise to fame in the 1990s. When RuPaul’s Drag Race hit the airwaves when I was a college undergrad, my interest in drag developed into an obsession that’s led me to numerous drag shows and actively following my favorite performers on social media. RuPaul, who at age

55, has taken it upon herself to educate all peoples about drag as a philosophy and an art form, famously coining the quote, “You’re born naked, and the rest is drag.” I count RuPaul among my personal idols. Drag, via RuPaul’s accessibility, has helped shape the way I view and express my own gender identity.

Academically, I am motivated by the study of gender performance and representation. Gender theorist Judith Butler, essayist Susan Sontag, cultural theorist Stuart Hall and others have inspired me to explore how the media perpetuates our collective concept of what gender “looks” like and the performative nature of gender identity. I am impassioned to dig into these theories through the frame of drag as not only gender performance, but as a critique of how gay men relate to/expand upon traditional tropes of femininity through their drag. In a touching video piece for *The Atlantic* by Tony Franklin, a queen says of masculinity, “What does make a man a man? It's certainly not just a penis that makes a man a man. It's about just being you. Whatever that means.” For some queens, transforming into a confident woman is a form of therapy, sprung from faced hardships as a result of their homosexuality and to cope with internalized self-loathing from their childhoods, which adds a new dimension for motivations as to why some gay men adopt drag personas.

The city of New York presents an undeniable opportunity to observe the world of drag performance. New York City is one of the drag capitals of the world, with a lengthy list of drag clubs, including the famous Stonewall, a bar that serves as the birthplace of the gay rights movement. Many accounts of the infamous Stonewall riot cite a drag queen (although she is sometimes referred to and remembered as a transwoman and not a drag queen) and activist named Marsha P. Johnson as the main inciter of retaliation against those harassing the gay community members during the riot.

Finally, I believe the timing of this study is ideal. Drag queens are more ubiquitous than ever before, with shows like *Drag Race* dominating the ratings and capturing a wide audience demographic. Yet drag is still not a “mainstream” art form, as it is still a niche within the gay culture and challenged by intolerance from the anti-gay agenda, and even from within the gay community itself. Drag performers are still risking their lives in some parts of the country as they are often targeted for assault and other hate crimes. The drag industry is as diverse as it’s ever been, with some performers reaching for the spotlight, while others reject the notion that drag should be mainstream at all.

### ***Research Questions***

My big Q will be broad, since I intend to work with a variety of participants who may or may not ascribe to the same beliefs about drag. 1. “What is it like to perform drag in New York City?” Depending on the feedback and willingness of my participants, I am interested to ask questions pertaining to the recent increase of the widening visibility of drag queens in the mainstream media, and the role that females play in their drag art form. 2. “How does achieving fame factor into your goals as a drag performer? What is your ambition as a drag performer? 3. “How, if at all, do cisgendered women fit into the world of drag? How do you interpret femininity as a drag performer?” My goal will be to collect the opinions and stories of different drag performers who will undoubtedly have varied experiences and ambitions. I want to create a mosaic of different characters, both in and out of drag, that shows the diversity of this community and the potential disparities that may arise among the different participants. Since no two drag performers are completely alike, these questions should help illustrate the struggles, goals, histories, and philosophies that define the collective drag lifestyle.

### ***Methods***

I will be using observational fieldwork and semi structured focus groups to conduct my research. I have begun contacting individual potential participants, who perform some iteration of drag within New York City. Observational field work will take place with participants both in and out of drag, within their personal spaces as “boys” and in their professional environments as “queens.” Whenever possible, I would like to try a focus group where participants may interact with one another throughout. I believe this will give me information that works well with my line of questions, since I am interested in gathering the differences and similarities of topics among drag queens. Observing a group of participants would likely lead to more rich and expository information than a one-on-one semi structured interview.

### ***Potential Outcomes***

My hope is that the outcome of this research project will be to paint a thorough picture of the current, contemporary world of drag performers. I hope to specifically shine a light on any grievances or misconceptions that mainstream drag has portrayed since RuPaul and her queens have dominated the drag world outside of the gay community. I want to see what drag performers who are not interested in fame are doing with their art, what veterans think of newer kinds of drag, and truly understand why individuals are compelled to take part in this quirky art form. Drag requires intense passion and dedication, and I hope to use this research to add more layers and nuance to the public’s opinion of what drag queens are all about. It will ideally be a study of individual participants, their unique communities within New York City, and their philosophies about gender performance, femininity/masculinity, and make meaning of how drag performance fits into the cultural theory of representation.

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## ***Challenges***

The first great challenge for this project was to find willing participants. My initial plan was to find people I know personally, friends of mine, who have direct connections to drag performers in NYC. This idea seemed appealing because it felt like the most likely scenario to connect with drag queens as quickly as possible, using the mutual friend to gain more comfort with me, a stranger with an intimidating research project. I contacted those friends of mine and was met with positivity and helpfulness. They gave me the names I needed. One friend in particular, whom I went to college with and have quite the history with, is now out-of-the-closet and quite immersed in the Manhattan Hell's Kitchen drag scene. He put me in touch with a dear friend of his— a very popular and busy drag queen whose website boasts that they work 8 days a week. This drag queen and I had met once before; he was working the door as a “bouncer” at a big gay rooftop party in Midtown a few summers ago and because of our mutual friend I was able to cut the line. I was extremely relieved to have his interest in my project when I reached out and pitched the idea of us hanging out to talk about drag.

Unfortunately, this high-profile queen was either too busy or too skeptical (perhaps both) when it came time to actually meet. He seemed concerned about appearing on camera; I assured him I wouldn't be filming, simply documenting our chats with either a sound recorder or with notes, whichever he felt most comfortable with. I even suggested that he remain anonymous if that helped ease his concerns— I inferred that he might want to stay off the record if his opinions somehow came in conflict with his persona and work life. Alas, when I proposed being “off the record” or anonymous, I stopped hearing from him altogether. I might have scared him off with a certain tone of intensity; certainly I wasn't an average interviewer like he is accustomed to. I tried to salvage the serious tone of my pitch but acting extra informal and apologetic via text: there was a lot of “of course!” “lol!” “:)” “thank you so much!” and “sorry to be a bother!” I don't like striking this tone, particularly when it comes to work, but it

seemed like the only way to stay casual, friendly, and accessible. I knew I was asking a lot of my participants: spending time with me, answering personal questions, committing to the uncertainty of my product and essentially eating up whatever free time they had that they could be spending on themselves.

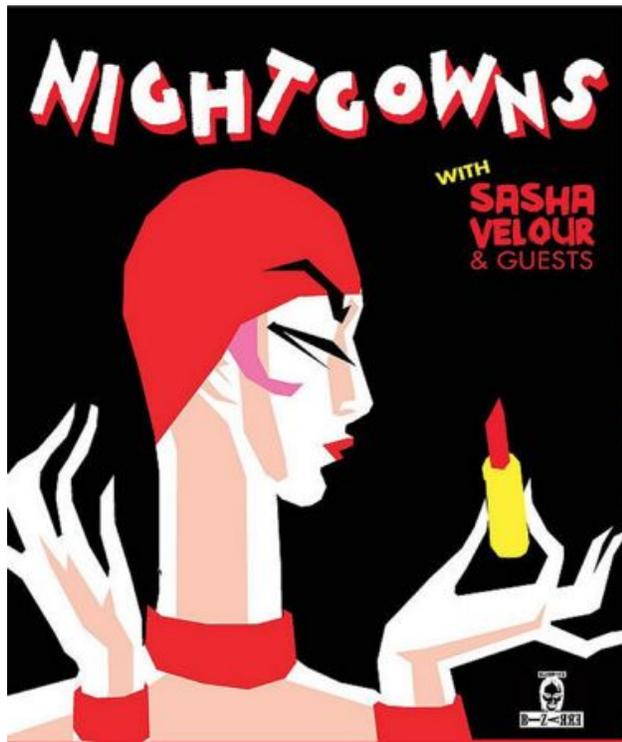
When my first potential participant stopped responding to me, I started to ask everyone and anyone I knew for suggestions. I also knew I needed to seek out drag shows on my own and start taking ethnographic field notes about different performances and performance spaces. I did this by simply sitting down on my computer and searching for drag shows around the city. I live in Brooklyn, so I knew that it would be most convenient and likely less expensive to seek shows closer to me, in Williamsburg and Bushwick, where I had been told to find drag shows by classmates and peers who knew better than I.

Later on, after I did find and connect with my first participant, he suggest a handful of other drag queens, friends of his, to reach out to. This was a veritable goldmine for me; I was really excited. This time, I had the endorsement of a drag queen they knew who could confirm what I was doing and that I was a nice person to talk with. However, I was foiled by Facebook's new messaging feature. I added each of these drag queens, and other queens who were recommended to be through friends at The New School, on Facebook, and then sent them a message through Facebook Messenger. Unfortunately, out of about 10 cold-call messages, only 1 responded. Luckily, the one who did respond became one of my participants. However, I was very discouraged about the lack of responses I received from the 9 others. As it turns out, if you send a Facebook message to someone who hasn't yet accepted your friend request, the message is filtered into an "Other" inbox and not into their actual "Inbox." This was the case for almost every drag queen I contacted: I sent the friend request and followed it with a message.

Had I waited for them to accept my friend request, as all of them did eventually, and *then* sent my message, they would have seen it right away. Weeks after my fieldwork is over, I am still getting messages from some of these queens saying “I didn’t see this message before, are you still working on your project?”

### ***Ethnography***

As I stated in the previous section, I began seeking out drag shows in Brooklyn in order to take field notes about the environment for various drag performances around the city. The first and only place I was able to check out is a well-known drag bar in Bushwick, Brooklyn called Bizarre. Friends of mine had



raved about how cool Bizarre is, and that it’s a really lovely bar with that catered to a queer scene. I simply visited Bizarre’s website and tried to pick a drag performance (there were a few scattered throughout the month of November) that aligned with my schedule. I settled on a show called “Nightgowns,” which was listed as a drag show but with very little information on the website. It took place on a Thursday night, not too far from me, and it was taking place that very week. I decided to check that one out. This was the flyer posted to the website.

I went to see Nightgowns, and was a bit surprised at what I found. My initial reaction to the bar itself was that it was just like every non-dive hipster bar in Brooklyn: artsy and quirky decor like a stuffed and mounted deer bust and lamps made to look like ladies’ legs, exposed (fake?) brick interior walls and a

lofted DJ booth, a rustic wooden bar with fancy antique taps and a retro mirror behind the liquor shelves. There was an experimental art film being projected against the brick wall, making whatever film being projected impossible to see clearly. The bartenders were handsome males in tight black t-shirts and every cocktail on the menu was “elevated.”

I noticed who was in attendance: a very typical sample of Bushwick bar-goers. This means hipsters of various shapes and sizes, folks with interesting haircuts and dramatic eye makeup and glasses, bulky sweaters and neutral winter coats, very few people of color, and a small group of older queer people, perhaps gay men and lesbian women who appeared in their 40s or 50s, who stuck out among the 20-something dominant crowd. It’s not particularly charming or accurate to assume who’s gay and who isn’t based on their looks alone, but with a bit of eavesdropping and subtle staring, I was able to at least surmise that there were quite a few not-seemingly-gay folk in the crowd as well: girls and guys who seemed coupled, stony-faced guys who seemed a bit out of their zone and not engaging with others, packs of girls who stuck together (all of whom could have certainly been queer but also might not have been). The house was packed. I could barely find a place to stand when I entered a half-hour after the show had begun. To me, based on the somewhat diverse crowd, I imagined that this show was not just playing to the friends of the performers. Since it was so crowded and the show took up much of front of the house, it was clear that Nightgowns had drawn in this big audience. Everyone was focused on the stage.

The show immediately revealed itself to be rather unique. Nightgowns had a host, Sasha Velour, whose look was a cross between Nosferatu and Rita Hayworth, part old Hollywood siren and part horror character. Sasha’s look was striking and artistic, but his tone as the MC was pretty calm and humorous. He introduced first a more avant-garde type queen, who performed in a sloppy female drag with a

rambling, intentionally bizarre stream-of-conscious style routine. Before I knew it, this queen, who goes by Glace Chase, was stripping down into her underwear and jumping from the stage onto the table of the older patrons I had noticed earlier. She was sweaty and disheveled, but it was clearly part of her act. The following performance was by a drag king, aka a female who performs as a male character. This king, named Oliver Fist, also performed a striptease to music, slowly revealing her nude bodysuit illusion. Eventually, Sasha took the stage. Sasha performed a routine wearing all black and brandishing a giant black umbrella. The song was about being strange, and Sasha began presenting large white cards with cartoon illustrations, all choreographed to the music. The illustrations were pretty remarkable, like gothic cartoons that were synchronized to the lyrics of the song. Sasha brandished and tossed each card along with the music, presenting us with a real-time animated cartoon. He collected the cards in the upside down umbrella, then passed them around. It was a rousing and uplifting performance, thumping that it's good to be strange and to rejoice in whatever makes you weird. The crowd went wild.

The final performance of the night took us back to Glace Chase, the disheveled queen from earlier. She was in a terrible 90s-style skirt suit and was on a long ramble with a PowerPoint presentation behind her, pretending to be recruiting us all to work for her gay travel agency. The satire was funny, if not a bit uncomfortably unhinged, which was clearly Glace's MO. However, the ramblings about a fake gay cruise line slowly transitioned into an honest and frighteningly somber monologue about the Act Up! movement, an organization created to fight anti-AIDs legislation and devoted to memorializing the casualties of the AIDs epidemic that killed countless gay men. Glace had the entire room gripped as she played slide after slide of dead gay men in clear coffins, being carried through the streets of New York City, their caskets adorned with flowers and handwritten notes. Glace told us the names of some gay men who had decided to dedicate their deaths to the Act Up protests, asking for their dead bodies to be used as public symbols of the inaction the lawmakers were taking about AIDs legislation. Glace, in

her shaky voice, held down the stage despite the emotion taking over her, and reminded us all that we cannot take their deaths for granted for the lifestyles we lead today. Directed at the gay men in particular, she reminded us to be less casual about unprotected sex and the blasé, party-centric environment most gay guys enjoy nowadays, free of fear from a killer disease and our governments' lack of interest in protecting those gay lives. She ended her performance by asking us to take the hands of whoever was next to us and join her in a song. I took the hand of the woman standing next to me and we all listened as Glace began singing a slow a-capella rendition of "It's Raining Men" by The Weather Girls. The audience went from the brink of tears to hysterical laughter, then riotous singing. Sasha took the stage once more to bid us farewell, to remind us of loss and tragedy, to encourage us to stick by our beliefs and the people we love, and to never take what we have for granted. It was really beautiful.

I had to take a chance and contact Sasha, to see if he would participate in my research and talk with me. To my delight, Sasha enthusiastically said yes, and was excited to talk about my questions.

#### 1. Sasha Velour

Sasha is his real name, too. He is a really smart, academic feminist-type, working graphic designer and cartoonist. Sasha told me his drag look is sort of extreme, feminine but with freakish influences, a bit cartoonish, artistic, and glamorous. He is also really passionate about queer communities and raising awareness about...everything. He thinks drag queens could be more political, more educated when they get on stage. "I try really hard to not sound stupid when I'm on the mic," he says. He also believes drag queens should create something. It shouldn't just be for the sake of fun, but he has no malice for those who do drag just for fun. Not everyone is going to stray from the average drag show, and he loves all kinds of drag. He just feels compelled to be a bit more "out there" with his message than most queens do, although he notes that many are hungry for his version of drag. He just launched an alternative drag

magazine called VYM. He also hosts Nightgowns once a month at Bizarre, which he curates to be thematic, interesting, and inclusive of a wide variety of his drag friends.

Sasha is an artist, period. We talked about how, in his ideas of drag being more responsible for creating something new, “adding to the conversation” as he put it, that he therefore believes drag is an art form akin to other visual or performing artists. He believes so, and I think so too. It’s the performance of gender, situated in the queer world. He calls drag a utopia, where anyone, particularly queer people, can live out their fantasies of self. Challenging the binaries and expectations of gender and beauty are of utmost importance.

We had so much in common in terms of my questions and thoughts on drag; it was really kismet that we met. I was struck by how emotional and powerful his messages were where he snuck them in between sex jokes on stage. The performance I saw was dedicated to losing loved ones; he spoke to me about the passing of his feminist mother and how she discouraged him from drag at a young age because it was misogynistic, of all things. We really laughed at that one. He said his mother wore no makeup nor heels, so he had to dress up in modest dresses and fancy hats. We talked about Glace Chase’s surprisingly powerful finale performance, which he said was his favorite part of the show. We talked about how Nightgowns will hopefully become recognized as the thinkpiece of drag shows, certainly not your average NYC drag show, but not something somber, dry, or off-putting. It captures the camp and fun of a drag show, but it has meaningful content, be it political, artistic, or otherwise.

Sasha and I spoke in a tiny cramped cafe in the East Village after some emailing and I recorded the 1.5 hour conversation. He gave me everything I could have wanted for this project and so much more,

including a free copy of his magazine, which is so beautiful and perfect for this project, I thanked him dozens of times.

As far as fame and “mainstreaming,” Sasha said he’d love to take a chance and audition for RuPaul’s Drag Race, of which he is a huge fan (“who isn’t?” he says), but doubts they’d want him. He expressed to me that even though he would hope the RuPaul Drag Race people would want his challenging and alternative style of drag (drag with a social, artistic message, emotional and thoughtful), they’d probably not want him, because that’s not what the show is about. It’s a show to gain fans and make profits, and the queens are asked to perform silly challenges, not represent their body of work. For those reasons, Sasha doubts he’d get picked or go very far, but it would certainly be worth it to get his message out there and challenge the conversation about drag queens and what people expect of them.

He had very interesting things to say about femininity in drag– the perplexing, often unavoidable misogyny that comes from imitating the looks of women can lead to unfair or skewed representations of female beauty. He put it to me like this: “When I perform, even though I don’t look traditionally female, I still strive for that illusion. I shave my chest, my arms, my legs, I wear body pads. But would I ever expect my female friends to do the same, shave their body hair, have perfect makeup and cinch their waists? Of course not. It’s a troubling double standard.” He says some queens mock/deride women who don’t look as good as they do. It’s not the norm, of course, but it happens. He takes issue with that. Sasha doesn’t do drag to promote his outer beauty, and is dissatisfied with drag queens for whom that is their sole purpose. This plays into his “drag as utopian” thinking, where anyone can be themselves without fear of judgement.

By far, this interview was the most interesting, because Sasha had very strong (but polite and open-minded) views about the questions I asked. We happened to agree on many things, and he made me feel so comfortable within this context/community, which matters a lot to me because I'm not a part of this community. He really helped me feel like I could be a part of this conversation, most of all because he believed in this academic research. And because drag is really for everybody. He smiled when I asked if cisgendered women have a place in drag, and he said "of course." He's thought-provoking and lovely and very nice and has incredible aesthetic taste, and I'm very lucky to have met him.

## 2. Severely Mame

My second drag participant calls herself Severely Mame, or Mame, even though her boy name is Shane. Mame is inspired by beauty, witchcraft, burlesque, all things vintage, and occult themes. Her look is partly Dita von Teese and partly Joan Crawford, borrowing heavily from the campy character Auntie Mame from the 1955 book of the same name. She is also a Bushwick queen and pretty well established as a professional drag queen. She and I connected through Instagram. I had noticed a friend of mine posting photos with Mame and started following Mame, too. I sent her a direct message through Instagram, and she responded with interest, lucky for me.

I met with Mame at her apartment in Bushwick with plans to travel to The New School (our mutual friend teaches an undergraduate feminism course) where Mame would be guest speaking and I would be observing.

This all happened that day:

- Daytime drag (rare)

- No cell reception in his basement apartment, which was filled with vintage clothing and accessories and lots of witchcraft stuff
- A long walk in the drizzle through Bushwick to catch the L train
- A broken high heel (Mame's), which led us back to the apartment
- Canceling/rescheduling the class at TNS
- Mame calling up a photographer friend in the area to make use of his full drag look at noon
- Said photoshoot, which took place a few blocks away from Mame's apartment
- Another call to a musician who is helping arrange Mame's next solo show, and then more scrambling on foot in full drag in Bushwick.

Unfortunately, I never got to really ask Mame the questions I had intended, but we did spend some great quality time getting to know each other and getting a feel for Mame's drag personality and feelings. I had hoped to reconnect with her and follow up, but she became flaky and busy, so I just resigned that idea. She works so much, at least one or two gigs a day.

Mame doesn't really perform her own shows lately, but is planning to. She works a lot though; she says she works during the day at a hair salon and at least 2 nights a week in drag, but way more than 2 nights a week lately. She finds that she's booked a lot to host events or parties at cool hotels in Manhattan like The Jane or The Standard, but doesn't really have to do anything but get pretty and hang out. She wants to get back into more shows, as she's done in the past. She's currently more of a nightlife personality, sometimes a spectacle for people to look at while they drink.

The most interesting things Mame told me:

- She feels more comfortable in drag than out of drag these days.

- At the same time, it's depressing to be loved and popular for her drag persona, which is really an alter-ego, and not for Shane.
- She does think this is ok though, because if she ever blows up as a drag performer, she'll be comfortable as Severely Mame, and hopefully be able to really separate her drag life from her boy life.
- She says yes to almost every opportunity that comes her way, even if she's unsure if she can do it. That's basically how she got into drag in the first place— she had to fill a spot at a show and was asked to step up.
- She likes being a beautiful drag queen and doesn't really feel the love among the other, more alternative Bushwick queens. She's not really into bearded ladies, unless you really, really commit to the drag lifestyle. She very much lives drag. Even as a boy, she's made up with hair and femme clothes.
- She prefers to be called Mame, referred to as she, but doesn't really get into the politics of it. It's just a drag thing.
- She doesn't like that some queens only do drag to be a part of the built-in community. You have to "commit" to drag.
- *Watching her hike around in a broken heel was enough proof for me that Mame is 100% committed.* I take this commitment to mean committed to the physical transformation of drag.
- She thinks drag is so mainstream now thanks to RuPaul's Drag Race that too many guys think they can do drag, and it's making drag way less cool. By cool, she means underground and subversive. She thinks the next cool thing will be "actual women, on the hoods of cars, like in the 90s and 80s, Tawny Kitaen and Pamela Anderson, high femme sexed up looks on real women." I didn't have time to ask her more about what she meant by this.

- She talked about being photographed by nightclub photographers and that being photographed is mostly what her job is (most of them only post the good pictures, or retake them on the spot if they're not so hot).

I get the impression that Mame is deep in the “scene” of these really hyped party people in the drag world and the nightlife world. Mame is not *just* a done-up goth drag doll, but she is working as one now. It's good and bad, but mostly good. It's a means to an end, and she's not really complaining, but she is sometimes questioning.

Mame is a growing fixture in the drag/nightlife/party scene in NYC, mostly in Manhattan, and rubs shoulders with a lot of the RuPaul's Drag Race queens (and other notable figures in the queer/drag/modeling world). Although I didn't get a chance to ask her, I wonder if she is the kind of queen who could or would compete on Drag Race; she has the curated, dedicated look, the social finesse, the recognition among her scene, and that's important. Does she impart something different? Does it matter? I don't know. I think she'd kill on Drag Race, and I'd cheer her on.

Even though we didn't get to talk formally, I had fun with her. I'm honestly a bit shocked more than anything that she let me into her world so intimately as a complete stranger. Sitting on her bed while she got dressed was pretty unique for me. I can't help but try to make meaning from that kind of shrouded vulnerability, to be so open with me, so intimate, but behind the mask of Mame. She is often interviewed and featured for things, so I knew she wasn't turned off the idea of me ( I was referred to as “the interviewer” by the photographer whose studio we went to) but I am was keen to actually ask my probing questions. However, that time never came. I regret never following up with her; I imagine her true, deep feelings and beliefs on drag would have shined brightly in this project.

### 3. Pearl Harbor

The third and final participant in my research is a queen who goes by the name of Pearl Harbor, but whose real name is Wo Chan. Wo is a Chinese drag queen by way of Virginia, but their current status is that of an immigrant facing deportation. Wo (who prefers the pronoun they and says they don't currently have the right words to describe their gender) is predominantly known for their poetry; they perform poetry frequently out of drag and is rooted in their poetry artform. The drag persona came later, but immigration status and nationhood is a theme that runs throughout both of their mediums. Wo is a friend and fellow performer alongside Sasha Velour, and it was Sasha who gave me their information. Wo was the sole responder to my frantic Facebook messaging and was also happy to help me and answer my questions.

Wo and I met at a restaurant in the Boerum Hill area of Brooklyn and got some lunch; I was a bit nervous to meet them for the first time over a meal and record our conversation, but it worked out very well. Wo is young and opinionated, and I have to say, comes off a bit jaded. I can't blame them— living with the real threat of deportation on a daily basis and being forced to embrace the not-so-fun aspects of living as a queer person of color, unable to be “joyfully ignorant” (a term that Wo uses frequently, but more on that soon), is an emerging theme in their life. That's the tone our talk took: that of a disdain for the joyful ignorance of drag. The boring, unoriginal, and ignorant drag they see in Manhattan-style drag is something they had to come to terms with they first moved to NYC from Virginia to do drag. Wo tells me of their early days wanting to do drag in rural Virginia where they were raised, and historically traditional drag was the only scene: glitzy femme over-the-top looks, standard comical and glamorous performances, drag mothers (more seasoned queens who “adopt” and train younger ones) and drag houses (when a drag mother has multiple drag children, the children typically take the mother's last name and they form a “house” or family).

Wo says that they were never interested in that kind of drag and moved to NYC to seek out more experimental and less rigid styles of drag. They taught themselves makeup by watching Youtube and found they looked really good as a girl after months of practice (“I thought I was officially a drag queen once I could pass myself off as a girl to strangers on webcam!”) and found that the Manhattan “working” queens were fond of their look. Wo, however, wasn’t fond of the Manhattan scene after long– they were too jaded by the struggles of the marginalized to live within the joyfully ignorant world of party drag. They told me an anecdote about spending \$80 on a nice wig and then exiting the store to see a homeless person begging for food. What’s cool or fun about that?, Wo asks. Nothing, I reply. I can feel the discomfort as the truth is revealed in front of me.

That’s why Wo’s drag is so political; art imitates life. Wo talks fondly about their drag collective called Switch ‘n Play, which is based in Brooklyn and is dedicated to making drag a safe space for all who enter and want to perform. Wo’s drag, similar to Sasha’s, needs to tell a story, make people think, and force you to feel something. Otherwise, they say, “BORING.” So we talk more about Drag Race, a point of contention I’m noticing for these alternatively-motivated drag queens; RPDR is undoubtedly the loudest voice in making drag more universal and public, but the voice is telling such a narrow narrative. Wo, like the others, doesn’t blame the show for its point of view, but they do criticize the messages that are being sent all over the world: namely, that there is only a very specific way to do drag. Wo thinks they’d make onto the show (“I know I’ve got a marketable look and talent isn’t an issue– oh god, how cocky does that sound?!”) and would revel in an opportunity to reach a larger audience and, dare I say it, become famous. But a radicalized drag queen who faces real, ugly issues in their life that bleeds into their drag persona, who can’t help but criticize the brainlessness of most mainstream drag, who admits

to me that they don't even like wearing makeup or partying in drag ("I'm shy") likely would regret going on a TV contest show that forces them to do and be the things they find fault with.

As we talk about misogyny in drag, Wo brings up the underrepresented drag king community, something they feel strongly needs more attention. "There are so many great drag kings who are so talented, but mainstream audiences don't know and don't care." That opens up a whole new concept for me to ponder. The most interesting point Wo brings up with me over our 1.5 hour lunch is that of drag mocking others with racism or bigotry. With drag, I say, it seems that there is a license to parody— does that ever go too far? "Joyful ignorance," Wo states again. Yes, drag is satire, and it can certainly dip into offensive, but it's just so rare that a marginalized group like gay men (gay men in dresses, no less) are tapped as being offenders. "Undoubtedly, I will go see drag in Manhattan and find a white guy dressed in a kimono, bowing, and that's why I hate seeing drag in Manhattan." Wo breaks it down to me like this: within satire, you can punch up or punch down— why would you want to punch down on a group that's already "down?" We agree, yes, it's one thing to mimic and make fun of rich white ladies as drag queens are known to do, but would a drag queen dress as a Syrian refugee and make fun of them? Probably not. But why not?, I challenge them. If drag is linked to parody, why can't they "punch down?" I refer to a RPDR contestant who, after their season ended, was found to be controversial for an unaired Snatch Game<sup>2</sup> impersonation of Anne Frank, which was met with a mixture of abhorrence and fits of laughter, depending on who you asked. "You could, of course," says Wo, "but why would you? That's not even bad taste, it's just bad."

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<sup>2</sup> "Snatch Game" is a take on Match Game, a classic TV show where guests must answer fill-in-the-blank questions with help from a panel of celebrities. On every season of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the queens are asked to present their best celebrity impersonations for a campy version of Match Game, called Snatch Game.

Our lunch ends with Wo admitting to me that they no longer watch RuPaul's Drag Race because they go sick of it, and invites me to an upcoming poetry reading where they hope to be allowed to perform in drag. I leave with a sense of Wo's drag as an artistic medium that's cursed with this joyful ignorance; for Wo, it's not just a good time, it's real life and it's important to take seriously. I left feeling heavy with their jaded take on drag, their personal insights of where their own community has let them down. I can tell that it must be frustrating and difficult to do the drag they want, but finds solace at least within the walls of a small drag collective in Brooklyn.

### ***Reflections***

I knew I was taking on a monumental task with the questions I had in mind for my participants to answer. I really didn't know how hard it would be to juggle a full semester, a job, and a research project that had me stalking nightlife personalities during their sleepy days and trying to fit shows into my weeknights after homework and before bedtime. I was hoping to find queens from both the "Manhattan Side," the traditional drag found in lounges and at bingo nights, the inoffensive stuff I grew up with and see on TV, and the alternative "Brooklyn Side" queens who rebel and don't fit into any prescribed genre, who push against the mainstream.

I ended up with three queens from Brooklyn, who all are trying to find their way, reconciling the drag they love and grew up with (RuPaul herself) with the type of drag they crave to perform. Sasha seems like he's on a great track: Nightgowns is becoming more popular (the Christmas Nightgowns show was just voted "10 Best Things to See" by Time Out New York), VYM is a beautiful thinkpiece of drag literature that the world desperately needs, and his personality is calm, pleasant, and focused. Sasha believes it's not enough to be the change you want to see in the world, you need to be able to talk about

it, share it, explain it and create spaces for it. I'm so proud of Sasha and will continue to sing his praises; long live Sasha Velour.

Severely Mame is working constantly and serving gorgeous looks around Brooklyn and Manhattan, gaining steam and publicity and just performed her first solo show in a while in Brooklyn. While Mame seems to really differ from my other two participants, I think she represents a facet of the "club kid" movement that made NYC so infamous in the 1980s and 1990s, the same scene that made drag queens and RuPaul herself popular as nightclub fixtures. They serve really over the top and inspired looks; Mame's look being the occult fashion-forward goth pin up babe she is. She hosts and emcees alongside some of the most creative and eye-popping visually motivated drag queens in New York today; her Instagram account is incredible look after incredible look. I know she mentioned that the Mame vs. Shane dynamic is wearing on her, but I do think that she is loving that she's been embraced by the scene that craves her look and her attitude. If she feels at her best when in drag and her drag looks amazing and she's being paid to dress up all the time, I'd say she's doing really well. There's room for everyone, and the NYC club scene is loving her.

And then there's Pearl Harbor, aka Wo, who doesn't even register to me as a drag queen named Pearl Harbor, to be honest. I see Wo as a the most human and disruptive voice in drag, and someone who takes drag so far away from being a female impersonator. I ask them, why perform in drag at all? Wo told me that drag began as the performance of gender, but it means so much more. I wonder for how much longer they will continue to do drag, or if Switch 'n Play will keep their love of drag alive and satisfied. Wo recently performed a show with the group and looked amazing, and is hopefully enjoying themselves. I can't help but feel heavy when I think about Wo's plight fighting deportation and that joyful ignorance they brought up so often.

I don't know that I broke any ground with this pilot study, but I do feel like I've at least educated myself, and maybe my classmates about what lies beyond the mainstream representations of drag. The irony is that the "mainstream" version of drag that's on TV is extremely subversive to exist at all. No one thought drag would become palatable to non-gay audiences, and RuPaul was able to pull it off with a wink, by appearing so accessible as a 7 foot tall man in a dress. Because Ru had to be charming, beautiful and unoffendable, she was able to grab the formidable amount of fame (and now, influence) she has today. I bet Ru is accepting and encouraging of the drag artists you can find in Brooklyn, even if they couldn't be cast on her TV show.

I feel like I'm more confused now than ever about what drag "is." Seeing so many strong points of view, views that conflict with one another at times, from practitioners who live and breathe their art have only complicated the narrative I was attempting to construct. But in a way, the only narrative that matters is that drag is whatever the hell you want it to be, and no one seems to be disputing that. Taste levels and motivations vary, but the precedent is still that drag is an empty vessel for you to fill. Or, that the expression of gender is inherent in all of us, it's just the queer drag queens feel more motivated and frustrated for not seeing what they feel inside on the outside, and they need to have a space to express, explore, and perform that. It's too hard to define, but it's something like that. If we are all empty vessels, and if we choose to believe in Judith Butler's controversial theory that no one is *born* with a gender identity, then we are all performing a drag in some way or another.

I found myself relating to my participants within this frame; my own gender identity matches my biological sex (for the most part), but as a femme woman, it doesn't make my gender any less of a performance. It's not like I don't *choose* to present the way I do, to spend time painting on the face and

dressing up the body to appear as the female I am. This vocabulary helps me communicate the feelings I've always felt, and helps explain the strong tie I've felt to drag ever since I learned about it as a young girl. I still do believe that we're all born naked and the rest is drag.

I'm glad that my project became a study of a few alternative drag queens who challenge the new mainstream norm. I envision a documentary with Sasha and Wo and Mame, and hopefully others who can speak their story and show us their art and tell us why they are still compelled to perform in drag as they do. As Sasha stated, there needs to be a voice that's just as loud about different kinds of drag. As Wo said, they wish someone like them could be on TV telling little gay kids in rural Virginia that you don't have to compromise your art and to express yourself however you want, and here's an example. I would love to help make this wish into a reality and bring these stories to a wide audience, and see who else is out there, eager to connect and show us what they've got. I think that time is upon us.

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