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## Drag Performers vs RuPaul's Drag Race: A Sociological Study

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**Drag Performers vs *RuPaul's Drag***  
***Race: A Sociological Study***

**Sydney Shanley**



Thank you to all the amazing performers that I interviewed. Without you this project would not be possible. I was continually taken aback by the depth of the responses and I feel incredibly lucky to have been the one to hear it all.





# **The Project**

**This book looks towards the future of drag by examining its past presence in media, its current occupation in the mainstream, and local drag performers' opinions on and experiences with drag.**

**In media, drag performers are represented on a broad spectrum, ranging from authoritarian mother figure to altruistic earth angel. Reactions from audiences are equally widespread, and often depend on the demographic of the viewers. The representation and reception of drag has shifted over time, frequently reflecting the evolution of heteronormativity, or the ideology of cisgender heterosexuality and its corresponding gender roles.**





*Three Stooges*

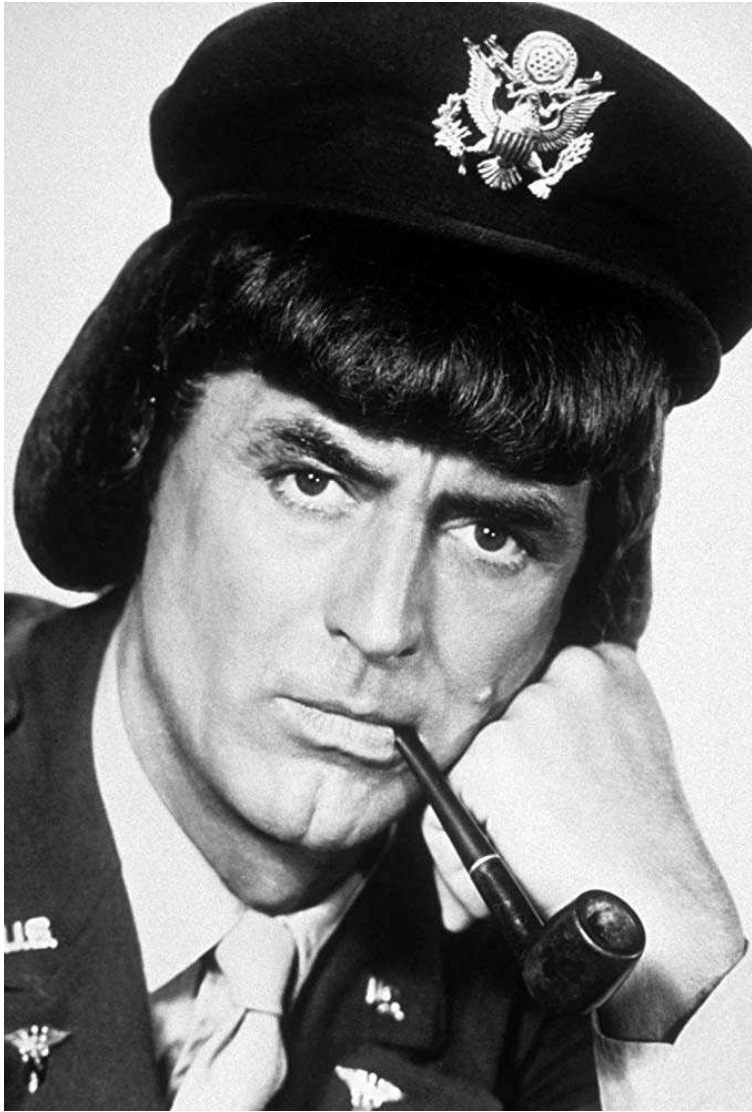


*To Wong Foo*

Often, the changes in drag reflected the shifting views of women in society. During World War II, women were forced to work in factories in the men's absence, work previously dominated by men and barred from women. So when the men returned from war, they came home to family able to thrive without the sacred, powerful role of the father. The disconnect between men and women caused a "crisis in masculinity" (Noe, 2001, 21). The female characters played by male actors greatly reflected the frustration and disdain for women, as the female characters were frequently represented as humiliating, and were mocked by cis men and women in the films (Elledge, 2010, 52). Drag acts as social commentary, and the view of women was heavily satirized and cheapened through drag.



Charlie Chaplin in *A Woman*



Cary Grant in *I Was a Male War Bride*

This image of women and the use of drag was only heightened by the enactment of The Production Code of 1934, in which the self-censorship trend was greatly exaggerated, and film could not carry any hint of sexual perversion. Drag queens that were young, and could “pass” as cis females were deemed perverse and barred from film. The Production Code left only drag performances that were matronly and clearly maintained a cis, heterosexual male identity (Bell-Metereau, 1985, 28). Drag greatly suffered during this time due to the assumption that existing outside the heteronormative was inherently perverse, causing decades of ingenuity and shallow humor. The drag queens that gained mainstream popularity were contained within the heteronormative. Instead of expanding the idea of the norm, these shallow depictions of drag were simply tacked onto the already accepted norm. Presenting safe, passive drag performers supported traditional values and showed, at best, that “others” could be accumulated onto the norm if they are polite and friendly enough.

CONRAD RUSSELL

HOLLIS McLAREN



**outrageous!**

*The Big Time has  
never been so close  
as far out.*

**After the Production Code was left behind, drag began to take on a more respectful representation, becoming more inclusive without erasing oppositional aspects. The new era of drag finally showed mainstream audiences that groups outside of the norm are still human. Films beginning in the late 1970's, like *Outrageous!*, depicted drag queens as fellow human beings who experienced a range of emotions, hardship, and happiness like the heteronormative protagonists that audiences are so accustomed to (Harris, 1995, 68). Instead of perceiving drag queens as “other”, deviant, or perverse, they are presented as just another subculture. By creating a drag queen character that mainstream audiences can relate to, otherwise dismissive viewers are able to summon sympathy for the misunderstood.**





Not only was Middle America able to open up to drag, but the easily-influenced, sexually confused youth, as well. Younger generations were most notably fascinated with *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The young audiences were drawn to the outrageous drag queen protagonist because their own discovery of their sexual and gender identities. Frank N. Furter acted as an escape from heteronormativity as someone whose gender identity is never overtly discussed and whose fluid sexuality is displayed openly. The popularity of *Rocky Horror* signaled a change in the gender binary and the representation of drag performance (Bell-Metereau, 1985, 66). The shift towards greater acceptance of the LGBT community and those within it is reflected in the more light-hearted, more fearless characters drag queens take on.



*To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything!* Julie Newmar, takes the concept of sweet drag queen to the extreme, and represents them as angels come to save a small, conservative town. The characters in *To Wong Foo*, especially the protagonist Vida, teach the small town citizens and the audience that one must always take the moral high ground, including accepting marginalized groups. The humor of the film allows for the serious topics of gender identity and sexuality to be de-weaponized, becoming just another dinner table talk. The humorous, likable drag queen characters act as friendly vessels to push audiences towards acceptance of the “other” groups without tearing down “family values” (Elledge, 2010, 47). By using the dissonance between gender and sex as a joke, the audience is able to recognize the complexity of identity without politically driven resistance. Drag provides comfort for those searching for their own sexual and gender identities, by showing that fluidity exists despite the strict rules of heteronormativity. Such characters prove to a new generation, under less conservative control, that identities outside the norm are not to be persecuted, but to be enjoyed.





Though the majority of drag representation in mainstream film are relatively family-friendly, some fervent queer political figures slip through the cracks. Especially in the form of director John Waters's superstar Divine in the family-oriented film *Hairspray*. The queer politics are embodied by Divine as the protagonist's mother. Their performance exposes and satirizes the American Dream and the racial politics within it, making the film quite oppositional (Woodward, 2012, 125). In *Hairspray* the marginalized identities of minorities and drag queens cannot participate in the world reserved for conservative Middle America.





**Marginalized groups, like drag queens, are often edited in films to conform into something non-threatening and non-offensive, like in *To Wong Foo*, but Waters disagrees. He once said in an interview, “I liked drag queens that made people nervous. I’m against family-friendly drag queens,” (Woodward, 2012, 126). Queer political figures often disagree with the “family-friendly” representation of drag queens in film, in which they uphold heteronormativity. The non-threatening, obviously male characters in mainstream film work to make conservative viewers more comfortable with breaking heteronormativity at their own pace (Woodward, 2012, 121). Divine’s revolting, dog-poop-eating character in *Pink Flamingos* shows drag as something campy, dirty, and nasty. John Waters’ films were never made to be palatable to mainstream audiences. Queer characters that are made for mainstream audiences are far from the queer characters made for queer audiences. There is debate between appealing to mainstream audiences in order to gain acceptance and representing drag in the way the queer community desires. It is a choice between watering down queer identities in favor of assimilation and being genuine yet rejected.**







Contestants from various seasons of *Drag Race*

The battle between queer and mainstream is embodied by the TV shows *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Dragula*. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a reality series that revolves around weekly competitions ranging from singing to dancing to fashion design to comedy. Every week one drag queen wins the competition and one is eliminated based on their performance that week. The series aims to identify the most well-rounded, most entertaining drag queen in the season. It is currently on its eleventh season and has had four seasons of *All Stars*, which is a collection of queens fans loved that did not win previous seasons. In total, there have been 140 contestants on the series (“List”, 2019). *Drag Race* has achieved mainstream popularity and is now on the well-known, widely-watched channel VH1: RuPaul is now a household name. The show has won four Emmy's, including Ru's two hosting awards. An appearance on the show guarantees success as a drag performer. “Ru girls” are immediately booked for world tours, sell merchandise with their faces and catchphrases, and appear at DragCon where they are paid to meet and greet their fans. Many Ru girls also frequently pursue careers in music, modeling, or even appear on other popular TV shows. Shangela, who appeared on season 2 and 3 and *All Stars 3*, was in *A Star is Born* and became the first drag queen to walk the red carpet at the Oscars.



**Drag performers were formally an underground queer subculture, but *Drag Race* has launched its participants and host into stardom. Now, straight audiences make up a large proportion of *Drag Race* fans and contribute a huge amount of money to the drag industry. The show caters to its straight audience by producing the “family friendly drag queens” that Waters is against. Ru girls frequently remind audiences that they are cis, gay men out of drag. While there have been gender non-conforming and trans participants, their gender identity is not discussed during the episodes. The only time this was broken was when trans contestant Gia Gunn was on *All Stars* season 4.**

**She was brought on after viewers were overwhelmingly critical of RuPaul’s stance against trans contestants. Otherwise, the participants are shown out of drag with very little clothing on every single episode, which reasserts their maleness. Many contestants, especially the popular ones, are conventionally attractive in and out of drag. Heteronormative audiences can assimilate Ru girls into the dominant ideology because they are only temporarily non-conforming and their true identities are as cis men. *Drag Race* sacrifices queer authenticity to gain heteronormative acceptance.**



Pearl in and out of drag



Valentina in and out of drag



Gia Gunn



**DRACULA**





*Dragula* loses heteronormative acceptance by maintaining queer authenticity, so it far less popular than *Drag Race* and is not available on mainstream TV. Episodes are available to purchase on YouTube and Amazon Prime, making it far less accessible and far less popular than *Drag Race*. *Dragula* is also a competition show, but is far more spooky, grimy, and gorey. While Ru girls are dancing and singing, *Dragula* participants are eating brains, wrestling in mud, and being buried alive in coffins. The series is hosted by The Boulet Brothers, who are two drag queens in a relationship with each other (“Boulet”, 2019). The challenges in *Dragula* are similar to Divine’s gut-wrenching performances in Waters’ films. The show is not made for heteronormative audiences to grow to accept queer people and does not attempt to reach out to straight people like *Drag Race* does. The difference in audience has created a clear disparity in success between the two shows: winners of *Dragula* do not receive the international attention that eliminated Ru girls do. Heteronormativity has caused queer TV to choose between success and authenticity, and queer audiences are noticing which shows choose authenticity.

# Purpose

**I am deeply interested in the choice between success and authenticity and how it has affected *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Its success has been widely celebrated as a queer victory. The fact that drag queens are not only represented on a mainstream channel, but are now able to achieve success and fame purely from drag is unprecedented. The show's popularity with straight audiences and assimilation into the heteronormative ideology has been seen as a step towards the acceptance of the entire queer community; I wanted to know if local drag performers agreed with this stance.**

**I have appreciated drag for a long time, attended many shows at the local gay bar, Rumors, at Grand Valley, and have watched the entirety of *Drag Race*.**

**Like many fans of drag, I had never spent time with drag performers, so I wanted to learn about their identities and how their identities interact with their drag. I attempted to find research on drag performers' opinions on *Drag Race* and could not find any, so I felt I could fill the gap. I wanted to interview local drag performers in order to learn about their identities, the role of drag in their lives, and their opinions on *Drag Race* and use their responses as the core of my project.**

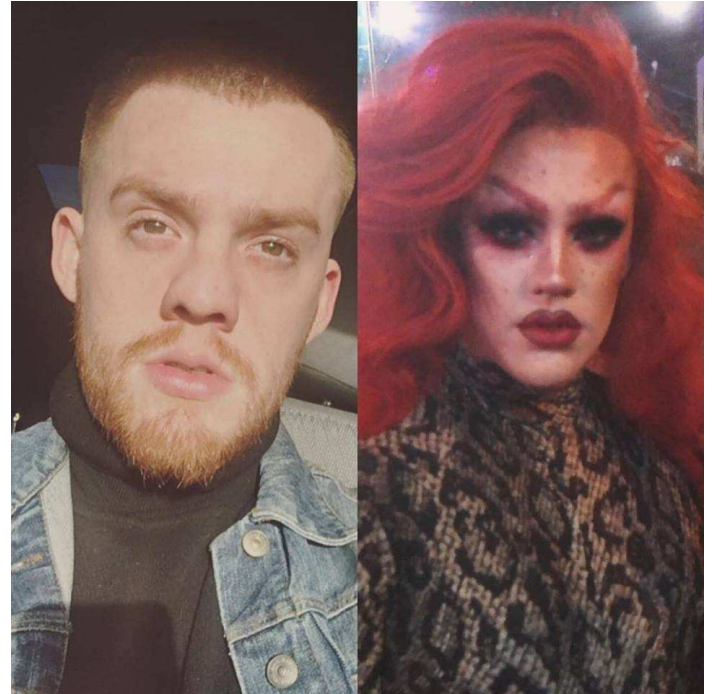
## **Methods**

**I interviewed 6 drag performers in 5 sessions ranging in length from 48 minutes to 2 hours. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by me. The interviews were semi-structured, as I had questions that I asked every performer but asked additional probing questions based on their responses. I used both purposive and snowballing recruitment techniques, because I reached out to the Rumors management for initial contact with performers then asked individuals, after interviewing, to give my information to fellow performers. After transcribing the interviews, I noticed patterns in their responses and grouped my findings according to these patterns. My project is limited in that those interviewed are predominantly white and young, under 30. Those interviewed are diverse in experience and gender identity. There is a mix of different types of drag and drag identities.**

# The Performers



**Shane/Miss Moscato**

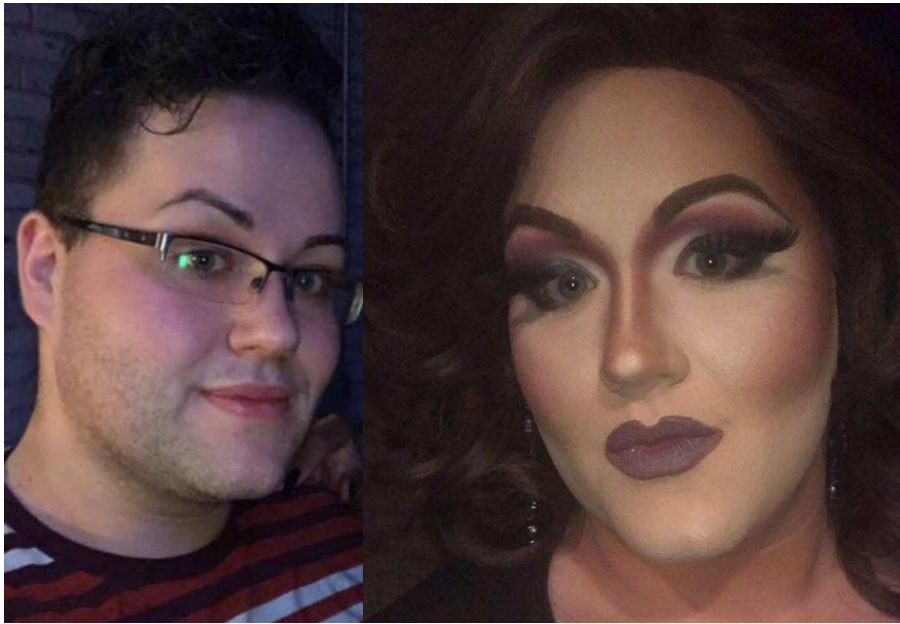


**Nate/Ginger Ambrosia**



**Bux/Star Buxom**





**Tyler/Trixie V.**



**Rachel/Jack Dup**



**Kaylee/Salem Massacre**



# Findings

- **Gender Performativity**
- **The Power of Representation**
- **Exclusion**
- **The Fascination with Drag**
- **Misconceptions**
- **What Makes it All Worth it?**
- **The Future of Drag**

**Each section will be followed by a quote from every performer pertaining to the topic. Not all topics were explicitly addressed during the interview, some were just common themes brought up by the performers. Queer theory will be used to support the more complex topics, while others will be entirely discussed through the viewpoint of the performers.**

# Gender performativity

**Drag challenges the concept of a gender binary and plays up the performative nature of gender roles. The definition of gender is messy. Judith Butler asserts that “‘gender’ is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effort of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence,” (Butler, 1990, 25). She theorizes that gender is not an inherent state of being, but rather a constant state of upkeep. One must perform socially constructed gender norms constantly, which are not inborn or natural, like they are often perceived to be. Gender norms are acts that everyone is socialized to do, so gender is a performance. By performing gender, it reinforces norms and naturalizes them, so they continue to be performed. Female and male attributes are not innately defined, but created.**

**To right: paintings done by Bux**

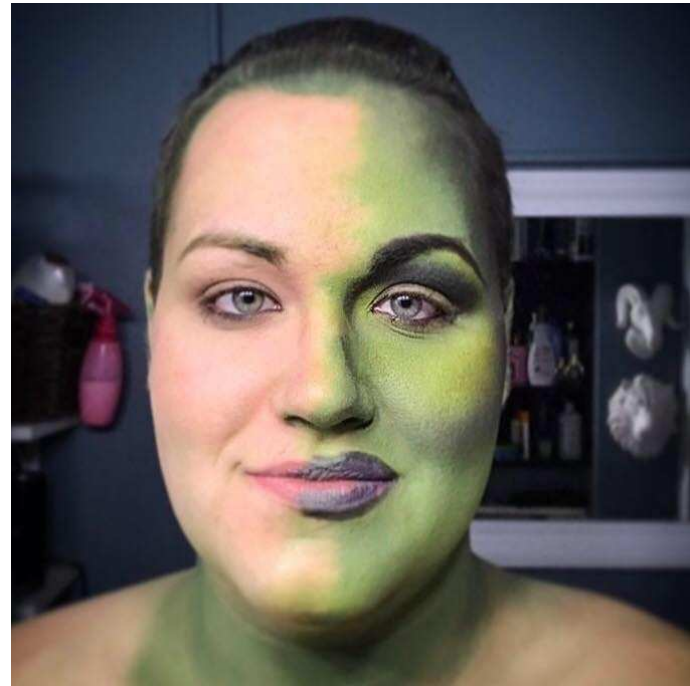








Bux/Star Buxom



Tyler/Trixie V.

Drag exposes the performativity of gender by literally performing gender. The overlapping of real and performed gender also challenges the concepts of identity, because by separating and dramatizing the individual performative concepts, they lose importance and meaning, becoming an act, a joke. By trivializing what it means to have a heteronormative identity, heteronormativity becomes superfluous. By seeing sex and gender disconnected, when they are usually considered an inseparable biological pair, viewers must consider them individual entities rather than intrinsically conjoined. The constrictive gender binary becomes a spectrum, in which gender fluidity becomes possible. By employing a range of gender identities, the heterosexually created gender roles become obsolete. Without the rigid list of associations with being “female” or “male” people of all sexes, genders, and in-between are free to all modes of self-expression. Being exposed to identities outside the cis forces audiences to consider what gender really means, and if their gender identity is simply a product of constructed gender roles. The drag performer also questions their place between the real and the performed in attempt to find their true gender identity.

## Shane

For a while, and I think I can say this for a lot of people who do drag is that at first I questioned my gender identity- whether I was trans or not. And then I found drag and like, I was like I'm not trans. Like I love everything. But, drag is definitely a way for me to express my very feminine side- my very, very feminine side.







## Bux

I saw *Rocky Horror Picture Show* when I was way younger than I should have been to see it and kind of was obsessed with Frank N. Furter and that whole aesthetic for my whole life. Crossdressers- anything that had to do with a transformation from one gender to another. My other favorite movie as a kid was *Victor Victoria*, which is like this great like woman pretending to be a man, pretending to be a woman. Like it's more along the lines of where I think I fall in the, the world.





## Nate

Before drag happened, I think I was really uncomfortable in general being like okay with being a boy. So like in the men's restroom it's like- it still is always uncomfortable 'cause men are creepy. But being able to like be masculine in some way, like having- I'd never have facial hair, I was like, I don't want facial hair, I don't want like to like dress masculine in any way. I'm going to be like super feminine, blah blah blah. And after I started doing drag I was like, oh my God, being a boy is also a costume.





## Kaylee

I felt comfortable with [being called bio queen] because I liked that it made me shine and it was different. And then I started realizing that I felt uncomfortable with it because I didn't want to feel like outer or I didn't want to feel like there's a different word for it because I'm doing drag, you know. I stopped using bio queen and started using drag queen. And then as we rolled out the Art is a Drag series and coming out as gender neutral, I felt like I'm okay with drag queen. But I realized especially, focusing on like the makeup artistry behind it- I now go by drag artist because it lacks a gender and it focuses on the art behind it versus assigning a gender to it.



## Rachel

So then I started doing like masculine, like drag king stuff and that really helped me explore my femininity and my masculinity. So then I kept doing drag and then I came out and I identified as gender neutral. And then later on I feel like the like being gender neutral didn't quite resonate with me anymore. And it might be because like my drag character is like kind of metro sexual, like I dunno, I kind of go right in the middle between masculinity and femininity.

I've like fully grasped and accepted that I kind of am like all over the place with my gender. But drag was a great way for me to explore that masculine side of me and helped me figure out like, okay, I feel like I'm not comfortable with any gender.





## **Tyler**

I think of gender identity and sexuality very, very closely in my mind, where they're both really fluid. I don't believe that there are- obviously, I don't believe that there is just male or female. I think you can be anywhere across the spectrum, anywhere you feel comfortable, anywhere you want to be and certain days it can fluctuate and it can be different.



# **The Power of Representation**

**Drag performers face discrimination as part of the queer community, but there is also discrimination within the queer community and even within the drag community. There is a hierarchy of privilege within the queer community: the cis white people are at the top and the trans people of color are at the bottom. It is difficult to understand how someone could simultaneously experience privilege and oppression, because identities are frequently seen in a binary. Someone is either white or non-white, male or female, gay or straight. Kimberle Crenshaw noticed this binary and created the concept of intersectionality in response. A gay transwoman of color experiences several intersecting systems of oppression; therefore, her oppression cannot be viewed in the same way as a gay, cis white woman's. Intersectionality is analyzing social problems through the lens of multiple, intersecting systems of oppression: racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. It also considers the unique positions people hold within groups, like ability, citizenship, and class (Crenshaw, 1991, 1240-1).**

**The most privileged members of the queer community receive the most media representation while the most oppressed continue to be neglected by both mainstream and queer communities. *RuPaul's Drag Race* often gives voice to the drag queens that most align with the dominant ideology: white heteronormative values. The white, attractive (both in and out of drag), cis gay men that mainstream audiences would find the least offensive and most entertaining are frequently the ones that become the most successful. *Drag Race* exposes the bittersweet nature of queer representation: mainstream audiences become more accepting of queer people, but only the most privileged of the queer community. While *Drag Race* may produce some acceptance, it also reproduces the marginalization of those within the queer community that experience multiple, intersecting systems of oppression.**

## Shane

Like Eris who does the clown makeup. You don't see that on *Drag Race*, really. And I wish that you could see more of that. I wish that one day... I mean they have hints of it like Sasha Velour who won season 9. She was kinda that very bald queen, very out of the box. I think it's starting to evolve more into that, but it definitely isn't there yet.

Top: Eris with Bux  
Bottom: Sasha Velour





## **Bux**

It's like taste this and then full exposure. And I think that's just what we have to do in society to start bridging those gaps of like, here's something that's fairly palatable. It's not too outside of your realm of thinking. It's not so radical that it's going to blow your mind open. It's very simplistic on the scale of our community and what's going on. Taste this first. Okay, here's Acid Betty. She's a little bit extra. Let's see if you can handle her and then start, you know, blowing the world open.

Acid Betty, *Drag Race* contestant season 8



## Nate

The show's owned actually by two white men. The whole channel, the whole, excuse me, the whole production "World of Wonder" is owned by them. So the Youtube shows, the TV show, *Untucked*, which is the after show- all of that. It's a good show. And it definitely- they're doing like fuck Trump as their musical this week is like the theme. All of that is like perfect for TV, but it's sort of like the vanilla watered down version. It's not like Divine, if you know who that is, or like any of these people who were like, no, actually, fuck you. It's none of that. It's very like pleasant and it's easy to view.



The fake Trump from the "Trump the Rusical" episode



## Kaylee

So it just feels like everyone kind of has the same- also body shapes. Like you don't see other than like Eureka O'Hara and Kimchi, like there's still a lot of the same silhouettes. There's like Silky Ganache this season. Like she's the only big girl I can think of on the season. But you notice there's only one every season, maybe two.



Right: Kim Chi, Left:  
Eureka O'Hara, Bottom:  
entire current season



## Rachel

I feel like now like, because of *Drag Race*, because there's such a high expectation for the queens, it's creating this gap between local, DIY level queens and then like I'm making music, I have a million giant rhinestone gowns. There's like this gap between local, independent performers and then like I'm on TV performers. There's no representation for the indie, DIY performers now. At least I don't feel like there is other than Yvie.



Yvie Oddly, current contestant

## Tyler

I think it really boils back down to- I think people need to understand that there's so many facets of drag that we need to understand that you're not going to see what you expect to see because you're a fan of *Drag Race*. Like a queen can come out and they can do a performance of a ballad and... make more money on that number, than they could coming out and doing death drops or the splits or whatever because at the end of the day it's a live performance. And it's not all about just being the energizer bunny, basically. Like it's not about just coming out here and running around in circles. It's about encompassing- like encompassing that whole overall being of who your alter ego is.



Laganja Estranja, contestant season 6, is famous for death drops and splits



# **Exclusion**

**Drag queens are discriminated against for being too feminine or for assumptions that they identify as trans. Drag kings and drag performers that identify as gender nonconforming are almost completely erased. Performers of color, fat performers, performers that do looks that do not conform to the title “female impersonation”, and performers that are not cis gay men are all discriminated against within the drag community. As a marginalized group, the queer community is normally thought of as supportive and tight knit, fighting for each other’s rights. Unfortunately, the queer community has marginalized its own members to the point where every subgroup has its own increasingly marginalized subgroups.**

**RuPaul said in an interview in March 2018 that “Drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it’s not men doing it, because at its core it’s a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture. So for men to do it, it’s really punk rock, because it’s a real rejection of masculinity” (Aitkenhead). When asked if he would allow a transitioned transwoman to compete on *Drag Race*, he responded: “Probably not. You can identify as a woman and say you’re transitioning, but it changes once you start changing your body. It takes on a different thing; it changes the whole concept of what we’re doing” (Aitkenhead, 2018).**

**After the interview, RuPaul stood by his words, comparing transwomen's participation in *Drag Race* to steroid-abusing athletes in the Olympics. Drag Race is, essentially, the Olympics of drag, so it should be held to a high standard. However, the standard should be much higher than the exclusion of trans people and the idea that transitioning legitimizes their gender.**



@RuPaul

Follow

You can take performance enhancing drugs and still be an athlete, just not in the Olympics.



9:17 AM - 5 Mar 2018

580 Retweets 4,590 Likes



1.5K 580 4.6K

## Shane

Because even in the gay community itself it's looked down upon to do drag. Like you're too gay pretty much. Like you're borderline trans, because even inside the gay community itself, the LGBT community itself, it really hates being judged by everybody outside of it, but they are so quick to judge everybody inside of it. That is so ridiculous. And I wish that that wasn't another misconception drawn upon within the gay community about drag queens, like they kinda put us in our own category. I wish that was something that they didn't do, because we're just like you, we just are fiercer, pretty much.

## Bux



Andora Te'Tee is current reigning Miss Gay America, one of the largest drag pageants in the country. It only allows cis men to compete.

Most of the pageants are assigned male at birth only. And what that means when you start to dissect that is that if you have transitioned into female and are on estrogen, doesn't matter how long, they could have been on estrogen for 10 years and have breast implants and have had plastic surgery and all of those things- you can still compete against anyone else who was assigned male at birth. So one factor in that is you're taking someone who's trans and just completely disregarding all of the work and fight that they've put into becoming female. And you're putting someone who presents every day up against cis men who you're then saying this competition is about creating a female illusion. They live that truth, that trans woman lives that truth. But if you are assigned female at birth, you cannot compete. Now that even means that if you are assigned female at birth and have transitioned into male- you have had top surgery, you're on T [testosterone], you have a beard that you're shaving. Like all of those things, you still can't compete in those competitions.



## Nate

I think within the queer alphabet soup, I think there are, when you start to pull apart like the different intersections of oppression and talk about all of that, I think the people that are more privileged within the alphabet soup start to push other people out. And that's been happening for a long time, because they're clinging onto like whatever they can in order to assert themselves. And I think that's kind of like the weird food chain mentality that we're animals and like all that shit.



## Kaylee

I would argue it's- obviously there is no mainstream drag king representation. I would love to see like a *Drag King Race*, that would be awesome. But now, because there's so many seasons of drag queens, on *Drag Race*, that there's a whole industry surrounding drag now and that caters to female impersonation, so to speak. And so you're not going to get so many, like, you know- you can buy blinged out tuxedos and fedoras. You find a lot of costumes and people lean towards making feminine shapes.

Images of DragCon, an annual drag meeting hosted by RuPaul focused on drag queens, especially Ru girls



## Rachel

So typically when I perform, I feel like I don't get nearly as much energy from the crowd as like I would like to. But then the queens that come out that are more like feminine and- what's the description I'm looking for- who can bounce around, who do dance numbers, and are more feminine. Like those are the queens that get a lot of tips and energy, you know, whereas me, a little chubby thing comes out and I don't really dance and blah, blah, blah. You know, I don't really get as much excitement.



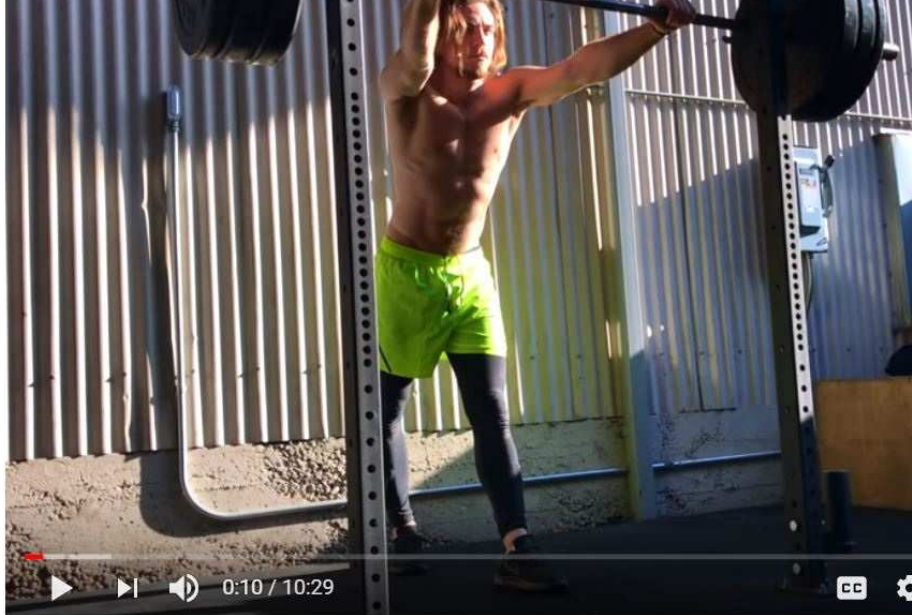
# Tyler

I wanted an overall polished, sleek look, but that's not to say that that is any better than somebody that comes out with no pads and chest hair and eyebrows to their hairline. You know, whatever. Everyone's drag is different. It's all about expression. And unless you're like coming out on stage and throwing up all over everything and making it literally like a nasty place to be, then there should be no issue with that. You know, people need to stop putting these boundaries up, and these barriers, and separating everyone. And we need to be more inclusive of other drag and other like- other visions, I guess is the best way to put it, because it's not just what we think is best.



# **The Fascination with Drag**

**Drag has been a part of the queer community for centuries, but has just recently become a fascination of straight audiences. The rise in popularity of *Drag Race* was sudden and somewhat unexpected. The celebration of its success has overshadowed the question of why it became successful. There is something drawing audiences, queer and straight alike, to drag. I asked the performers where they thought people's, especially straight people's, fascination with drag comes from.**



#dragrace #drag #makeuptutorial

### Sexy Straight Guy Becomes A Woman (Drag Queen Makeover)

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### Straight people just loooooove BenDeLaCreme

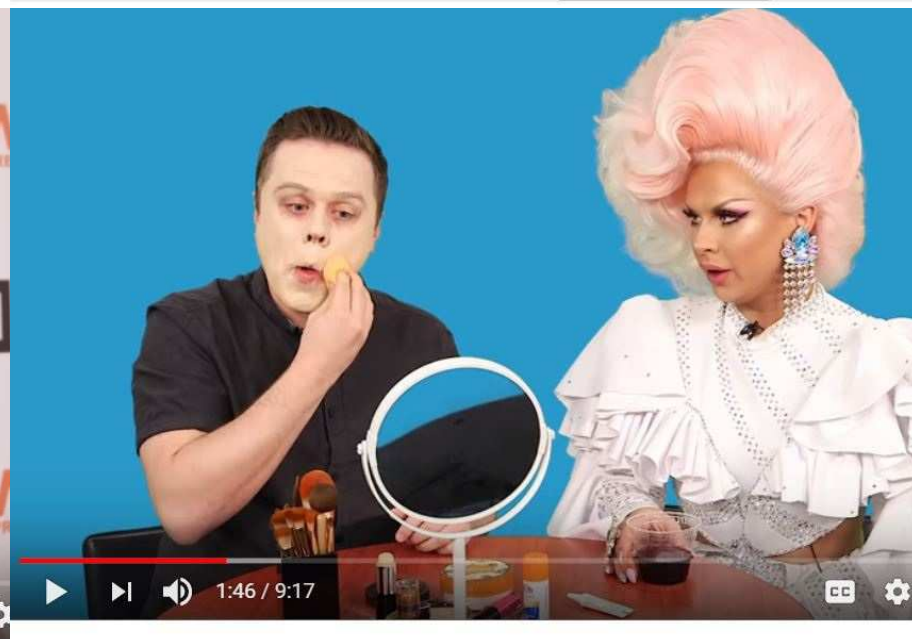
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#Drag #FarrahMoan #INSIDER

### A Straight Man Tries Drag Makeup With RuPaul's Farrah Moan

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## Shane

I think that their fascination comes with the how much more mainstream drag has become. Like Shangela at the Oscars. Movies about drag queens. Drag queens in popular movies, things like that. Drag queens like Ru who are worth millions of dollars. I just think it comes from the popularity and the mainstream media. You see Grand Rapids Drag Brunch on the news, it's getting out there. People are realizing, like, this is what we do. People are like, that's really interesting to us, and it used to just be real hush hush nobody talk about it. It just comes from the media and just being able to be out there.





## **Bux**

Like there's a certain archetype of people that are extremely drawn to those things because they closed off their own lives. And I can only say that and know that because that is the life I left to become who I am. Because I left the life that my mom wanted me to have, to be who I am and to have her disown me. Like I'm not the kid that she wanted. I think that the- I have talked to a lot of women who are in their forties and fifties and sixties and they just kind of stayed. They didn't go to the school they wanted to go to. They didn't follow the dream they wanted to follow. And I think the young girls who are grabbing onto *Drag Race*, I think that there is probably some of that same stuff still happening of like, man, I wish I could wear those colors or I could- wish I could wear makeup like that, I wish I could have crazy hair like that. And they don't see it as being something achievable or accepted in society. And so they're fantasizing through somebody else's life.



## Nate

So all of those jokes about things that really do happen to us, but like putting a spin on it and talking about gender and talking about all of that. I think people were very uncomfortable in the audience being like, “Oh shit.” Because then it makes you question like, is my gender real? Like do I even really feel that way? And of course you really feel that way and of course you really- but, in order to be maintained, you have to perform it. And I think that's what freaks people out about drag, because it's like “How is this possibly happening in front of me?”



## **Kaylee**

I think in straight culture it's more of a fascination or it's a more of a hatred than fascination of the idea of like, oh, that like, you know, to put it this way, but that faggot, made me think that he was a woman. And so it's that idea of like, oh, like you're a queer, you know, you're a fag or whatever. And you have made me believe something that you're not in, that, you know, ties into trans women. You've pissed me off because you've confused me sexually.

## Rachel

[Continuing from  
Kaylee]

Like, I can't believe  
that I'm attracted to  
you, but I'm not gay.  
But I'm pissed at you  
because I'm  
confused.



Farrah Moan, season 9, is known for  
looking like a cis woman

# Tyler

It's still taboo, not for everyone. It's definitely getting more mainstream and kind of getting its moment in the light. But there's still a lot of households and a lot of people and a lot of areas that- I don't want to say they frown upon it, but they don't really know what to think about it. They don't know how to process it. Nine times out of ten, if these people take the time to look at us as real people and not zoo animals, then I feel like it definitely, I don't want to say it completely opens up their minds, but it definitely- it makes them think.



# Misconceptions

**Drag performers are celebrated from afar. Viewers of *RuPaul's Drag Race* may have never attended a drag show or met a drag performer, yet are deeply fascinated with drag. The disconnect between the viewer and the viewed creates a gap between expectation and reality. Many fans of *Drag Race* only know what the series shows them, so their perceptions of drag do not align with reality. The series presents drag as glamorous, performers' talent as innate and somewhat effortless, and drag as an accessible hobby. The contrary is true: it is time-consuming, painful, expensive, and exhausting. Local drag performers do not have the funds that *Drag Race* stars do; most have full time jobs outside of drag and actually lose money from doing drag. The carefree, fun performances shown on the series convince viewers that anyone can do drag, effectively erasing the amount of work local performers put into their craft.**

Right: images of Violet Chachki, winner season 7, embodies the extreme nature of drag both physically and fiscally





## Shane

Like I have probably invested over 5 grand in drag. Whether it be- I mean if you include traveling to places and stuff. I would say well over 5 grand in drag in less than a year that I've done it.





## **Bux**

This is a art form that is extreme. It is hours of makeup, like standard drag makeup takes about two hours to do. Really good drag artists can do it in about an hour, but it's at least an hour of sitting in front of a mirror and putting on all of the contours and the layers and the- and then it takes at least 15 minutes to get into a costume and then your gluin' nails on and hoping that those don't come off and you're adjusting your wig and you're, there's so much that goes into the art form and that's the tying factor. It has nothing to do with where we were raised, who our partners are, what our genitalia looks like. Like that is not what makes drag. What makes drag is this incredibly complex, detail-oriented, expressive, just over the top performance art.



## Nate

But I do think that, at the same time, a lot of people in the show are very talented makeup, dance, singing, comedy wise. And that has set the bar extremely high for local performers to be all of those things. Luckily I am all those things. But, it's very hard for like young, queer people because then now there's an expectation that you have to be good at makeup and hair and you have to somehow have money for costumes with beads all over them and fancy tights and shoes and it's just all- and lashes and all of that stuff. It's unreal expectations I think. And I think- but I think people watch that and they're like, well, you should do, like, everyone should do drag.



## Kaylee

I think stamina is definitely something a lot of people don't consider. A lot of people are very good at what they do, so it looks simple other than like when you can see the beads of sweat and stuff, you know? But otherwise a lot of people are good at what they do. So it looks like- it's that fantasy element. It looks like this is how it exists. It's perfect on stage. So that must be- because obviously like a drag queen, if they've just finished a number, or a king, they're not hanging out on stage and you can't see them taking a fucking fan and you know, trying to like fan themselves off and fan their armpits and shit. That's all backstage.

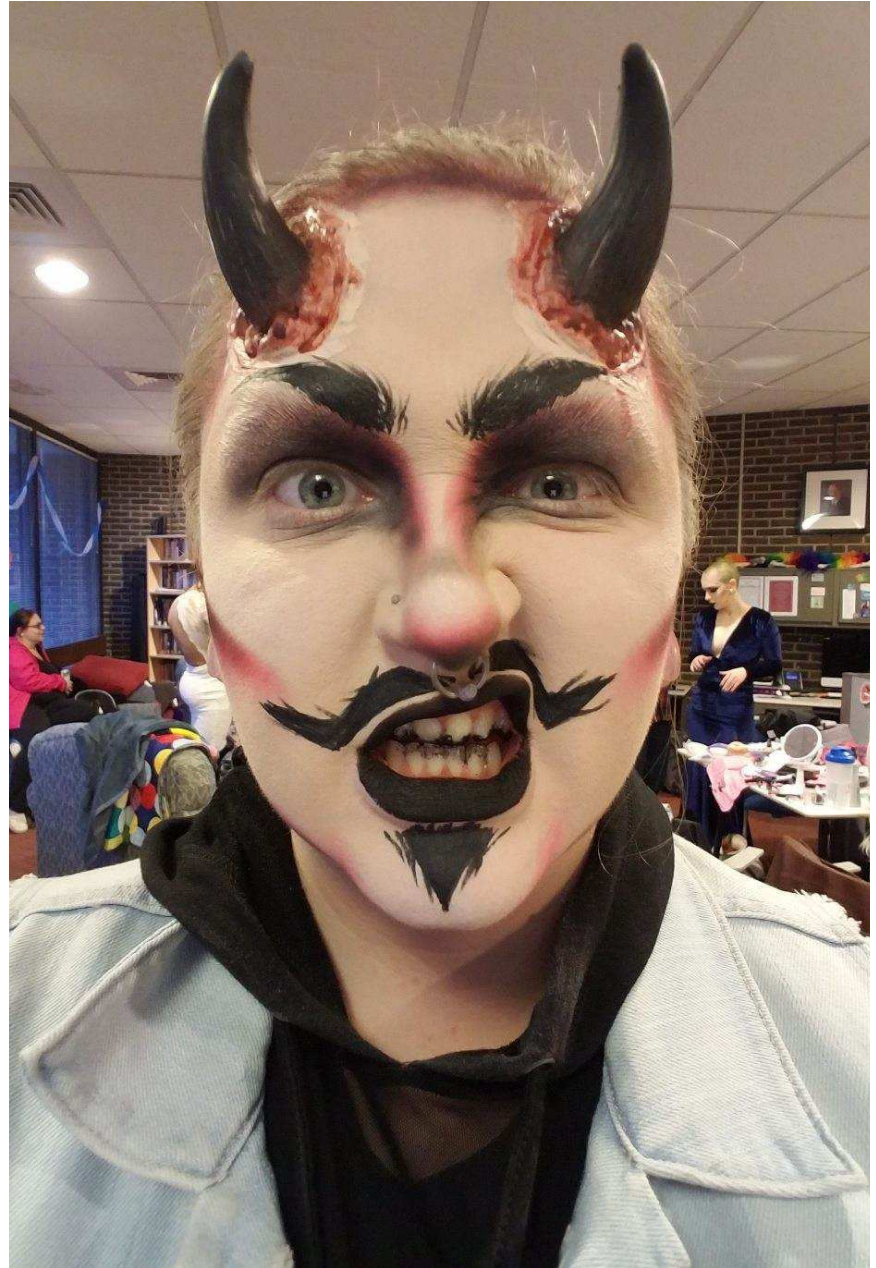


Kaylee as Salem  
Nate as Ginger  
Rachel as Jack



## Rachel

I think a lot of people that have seen *Drag Race* that has become their expectation for like, local queens. So then when, you know, quote unquote like normal or low budget, average performers, when they perform like people, and I'm guilty of doing this too before I started doing drag, it was like, they don't have as much as a big shtick or obviously they don't have enough money for, you know, a big thing. And I think it gives people this false sense of what drag always is.







## Tyler

I think people need to understand like you're not- like 95% of us are never going to get the opportunity that they did. So you need to understand that making a 100% full time career out of drag is not always a reality. It's a great hobby and can be something to fall back on during hard times. But the odds of making a full career out of it are not always that great. So I think that when people are like, oh my God, I want to be a drag queen because I watched *Drag Race*, they automatically assume that they're going to be able to go out and make tons of money with it. That's very rare.

# What Makes it All Worth It?

## Shane

Drag to me is like an escape. It's like we don't have to worry about when we're in drag about the gender norms, we don't have to worry about how people feel, how people look at us, how the gay community looks at us, or anything like that. It means acceptance. It just, I just I love it.







## **Bux**

So I've been a performer and I'd done costuming for as long as I can remember. And then when I was in, um, college, I started messing around with makeup. And so like all of the little pieces that I done, all my little hobbies all of a sudden found this home of like, they just all kind of like click together. And then I had drag.



## Nate

I think for some people it's- what I've noticed is that for some people drag is just to make other people happy. For some people it's a social justice thing. For me it's both. Because I know as someone who struggles with bouts of depression and codependency and all these other things- I love a comedy show, like watching it and I love listening to like funny jokes. And being a marginalized person, I love when the other marginalized people are speaking my truth. So I know that when I'm doing that and I see young gay kids or queer people and they hear that, hopefully they're laughing because not only is it probably funny, hopefully, but they hopefully also like hear their own voice telling other people who are not like them in the audience how it is.





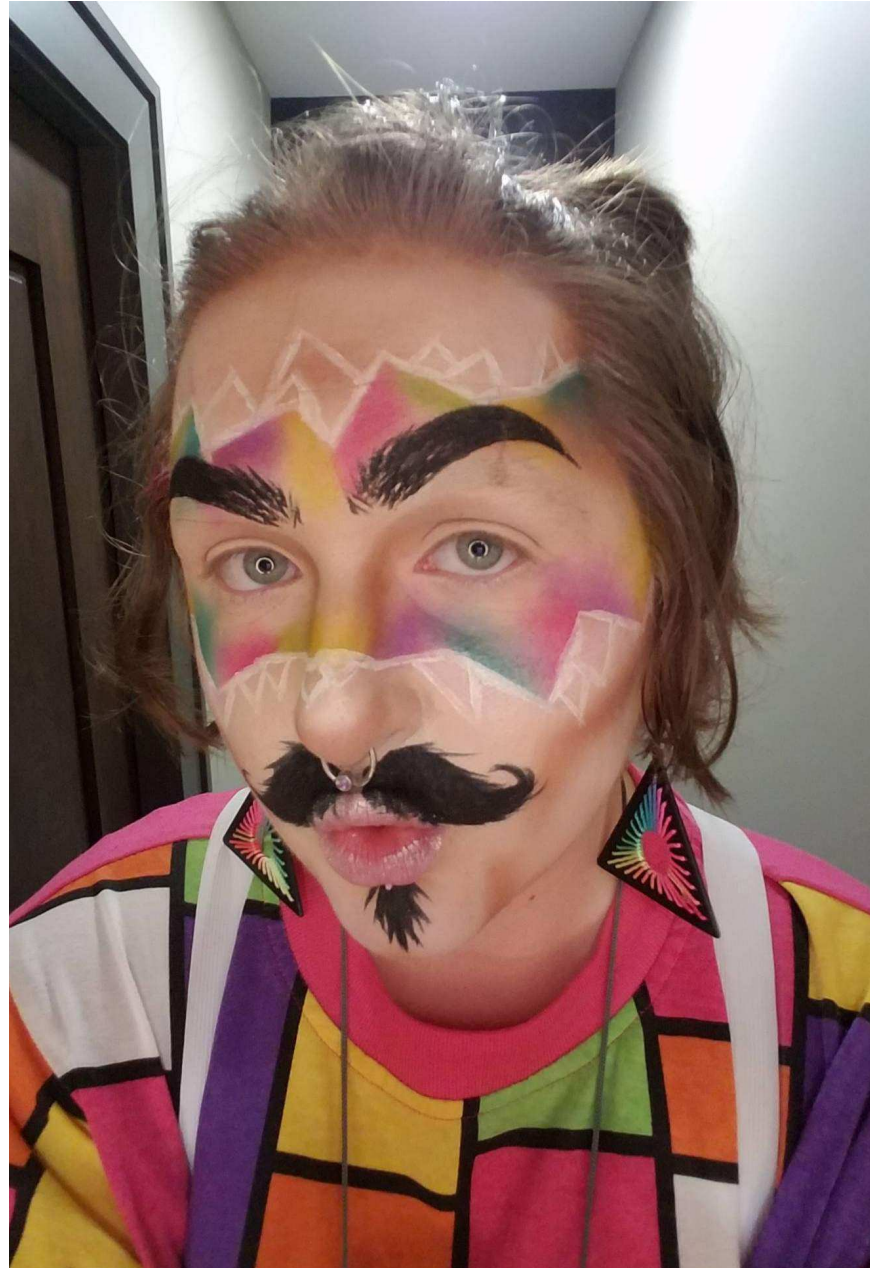
## Kaylee

But I think I just- I'm very theatrical. We're both very theatrical people, very comical. I like making people laugh. I like entertaining people and wowing people. So I think that's why I was drawn to the performance element. And I just- I could go into whole thing about this, but transformation is like the theme that all my studies through college pretty much took. And so I love the element of transformation and getting this new persona on and stuff, so I could go on for hours about that. But, I think the element of transformation was what drew me to drag.



## Rachel

I think I just really like, well yeah, the transformation, but also like being able to express yourself on like a whole new level. So like I wear a lot of very colorful things and stuff. So a lot of the shit that I would wear in drag were the exact same things I would wear outside, like normally. But I like the idea of taking what you already like and then just enhancing it more into something a little bit more bizarre and exaggerated.







## Tyler

I've always had like a knack for theater. I remember being in my very first theater production in like second grade, and then I kind of got away from it for a minute, and then I think it was fifth grade or sixth grade, something like that: I got into another one. And then I think my freshman year just kind of, you know, every couple of years I've worked with theater. And so I always loved being on stage and entertaining people and doing like things with a character and everything.

# The Future of Drag

## Shane

I don't think there's a right way to do drag. I think that people used to believe that there was a right way to do drag. But this new generation of drag queens, I would say my generation of drag queens has just brought it out of the box so much. It used to be very glamorous, pageant-y. Like, don't get me wrong- there are the glamorous and pageant-y girls, but now there's like the glamor, pageant-y, but there's like the spooky-ooky and like the campy, and so many different types of drag. I just think that everybody's drag is valid and everybody's drag is amazing in their own way.



Evah Destruction, a popular drag queen on Instagram



# I AM Jazz



## Bux

We are starting to see more shows and more things happen that are about our community. There are more shows that have gay characters. There's more shows that have trans characters. There are more movies coming out that are about our storylines. Like there's definitely a movement of acceptance. We have definitely busted down that wall.



Top: *I Am Jazz* stars a trans teenage girl  
Bottom: *Pose* stars three transwomen



## Nate

But I will go there and I will watch *Drag Race*. They have *Drag Race* viewing parties, which I use to host. It's like super packed in there, like a bunch of people come out. So yeah, the show has a huge impact, I mean especially now being on like a mainstream like VH1 and having all these super big celebrities as guests, judges, and all of that. It's really impacted the culture. So like even though RuPaul is trash as an individual, I think the show as like a cultural phenomenon has sort of maybe not done so much just to like change the culture. But I think it's softened the blow for a lot of queer people in like whatever space they may be in because it's like less, they're just seen as- like it's more normalized.



Lady Gaga on *Drag Race*



## Kaylee

*Dragula* brings back the spontaneous- the spontaneity, or the shock and awe of drag. I think it brings that element back that *Drag Race* used to but it doesn't really have that shock and awe, especially back in the day historically drag was like weird and you had to go back into this secret club and you had to have a password and shit to see drag queens and I don't think *Drag Race* quite nails that anymore. But *Dragula* is like that shocking wow I've never seen anything like that before it's surprising its weird its grotesque its punk and i think it brings back that element that drag is really supposed to in shock and awe.

Erika Klash, contestant on  
*Dragula* season 2

## Rachel

I guess I feel like drag will continue to be political and as more people start doing it, I believe drag is going to keep being more over the top—especially now that drag is in more public spaces than it used to be. I think it will continue to be an educational tool for people as well.



Grand Rapids Drag Brunch





## Tyler

And I think *Drag Race* has changed the expectation of what drag is and it is- I feel like that's a little bit more on the toxic side for old school drag. But everything is always changing. Everything's always changing, everything's always evolving. So we can't expect it to stay the same and we can't expect it to be old pageantry and this and that forever. Yeah. Um, I think it's totally cool to do new things and have new expectations of drag, but you still have to remember where you being allowed to do what you do came from.

Top: trans activists Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera during the Stonewall Riots  
Bottom: unknown drag queen during the Stonewall Riots

# Conclusions

*Drag Race* sacrifices queer authenticity in order to assimilate into heteronormativity. By appealing to mainstream, heteronormative audiences, the series must push forth the most privileged members of the queer community towards assimilation. The thin, white, conventionally attractive queens (in and out of drag) are often the fan favorites. The true state of the least privileged members of the queer community, trans, non-binary, people of color, disabled, etc., is not revealed to audiences, because the message would become too political for the mainstream. RuPaul acts as the gatekeeper for mainstream drag success: he is at the head of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and DragCon, both multi-million dollar projects. In order to be a celebrity-status drag queen, you must be on the show; so, who RuPaul chooses to give a platform is extremely significant. As mentioned, RuPaul spoke against having transwomen on the show because cis men doing drag is somehow a more powerful protest against masculinity. There has also never been a drag king on the show and he has made no mention of ever including them. Although some contestants have been non-binary/non-conforming, their gender identity is not discussed. The queer community mirrors this exclusion, as there is marginalization within it. Drag performers, trans people, non-binary/non-conforming people, people of color, women, immigrants, poor people, and disabled people are marginalized within the community.

The most privileged members are those that are given the most assimilatory rights like gay marriage, while homeless trans youth are trying to supply their basic needs. RuPaul is not a unique character in the queer community, sadly his views are quite common. It is difficult for me to even use the term “queer community” because it is not a united front, it does not fight for the rights of all its members, and it does not accept all of its members. As the gatekeeper of drag, RuPaul is in a difficult position. He is stripping drag of its political nature, neglecting its historical place in social justice movements, and is excluding queer identities from participating. But, he is also introducing heteronormative audiences to queerness that they would never experience otherwise. As John Waters would say, RuPaul is producing family-friendly drag queens. *Drag Race* has created a heteronormative tolerance for the most privileged members of the queer community, but has left the most oppressed behind, as the queer community is so apt to do. If the series was to become more political, discuss queer identity more, and talk openly about social issues, it could possibly lose a huge portion of its straight, white fanbase and might even lose its spot on VH1. The debate surrounding the choice between assimilation and authenticity is truly a debate between the most privileged and the most oppressed.



The sheer popularity of *Drag Race* has created misconceptions surrounding drag. Viewers of *Drag Race* may only know drag based on what they see on the screen, so their perceptions of drag is far from reality. The show presents drag as a fun hobby based in glamor: anyone is able to be a drag queen. The cost of makeup, clothes, shoes, wigs, and travel is very rarely discussed on the show. The time it takes to get into full drag is not addressed, and the audience is only shown short clips of the contestants getting ready with no sense of how long they are allotted. As the seasons have gone on, contestants come in with more and more expensive looks, and more and more are sent home for not investing enough money. Contestants with outfits made from cheap material are continually criticized by the judges and often do not last long in the competition. For the past few seasons, queens will often have their outfits and wigs custom made before coming onto the show. Contestants on the show must also be able to sing, dance, design, sew, act, and do comedy, as there are competitions for each throughout the show. They must lip-sync to a song against another contestant in order to save themselves from being eliminated if they do poorly in that week's competition. During these lip-syncs, they frequently do flips, back bends, splits, death drops, costume reveals, wig reveals, and use props.

Despite the extreme nature of these performances, the contestants are not shown sweating or struggling to breathe. Mistakes during the lip-sync are catastrophic: if a wig or shoe falls off and interrupts the performance the contestant is almost always eliminated. Fans of *Drag Race* that do not interact with local performers would assume that all drag performers are capable of achieving these expensive looks. Without a sense of cost or time, fans have unrealistic expectations for local performers, and therefore, may be disappointed by a hand-sewn leotard or wig from Amazon.com. They also may be let down when the performer does not do acrobatics during the lip-sync. Not surprisingly, mistakes happen during performances because performers are still human beings. Expectations for local performers are formed by this intensely elite population of performers that are edited professionally. The vulnerability and humanness of the contestants and the exhausting and challenging nature of drag is able to be edited away. Drag in real life takes a lot of sacrifice of time, energy, and money that every day people do not have. Local performers usually have full-time jobs outside of drag, some have children, some are in college, and they all have lives outside of drag. The show suggests that drag can be your whole life, and it can for a minority, but the overwhelming majority cannot live entirely off of drag. The message that I want to send to fans of *Drag Race* is that drag performers are still people. Just because they are entertaining, does not mean that they are purely entertainment.

*Drag Race* shows the closest drag can get to perfection, because it is the most elite platform for drag. Because the show is the gateway to drag success, queens are beginning to model their looks after the type of queen that gets on the show: polished, pretty, and petite. The same makeup and outfit looks are recognizable season after season, so fans are used to seeing a certain type of drag. Most notably, the drag performer is almost always a cis man performing as a drag queen. Fans confronted with local performers will see varieties of queer identities, body types, talents, and looks. *Drag Race* has streamlined their contestants, but the performers outside of the show continue to be incredibly diverse. Expectations for local performers do not match up to reality, because the show does not represent the full range of drag: it only presents the most entertaining, polished, pretty, expensive sliver.



The only way *Drag Race* can continue is if local drag scenes thrive. Supporting local drag performers is what will allow drag to have a future, for it to be more mainstream, for it to have a presence in media, and for performers to keep going on *Drag Race*. Drag is already entering more public spaces, outside of bars and clubs, and is becoming more accessible to people of all ages. In order for the progress to continue, local drag performers must be supported. Fans of *Drag Race* must become fans of drag: they need to see local performers and tip them fairly, they need to attend Drag Brunch, drag comedy, drag book readings, drag art shows, and all other drag events. They also need to accept all forms of drag, no matter how different it is from what they see on the show.

## **Kaylee:**

There's a huge difference between I'm a fan of *Rupaul's Drag Race* and I'm a fan of drag. So, huge difference between that. And people who are fans of *Rupaul's Drag Race* aren't, you know, you're not gonna see them at the local shows. They're only going to come around to Devos Center when there's the *Drag Race* tour that comes into town. You're not going to see them at the local club or the local shows paying a \$2 cover and tipping, you know, their queens. But there's the people who are fans of drag who want to support their local entertainers. And there's a lot of already drag kings and drag queens in the local scene that are fans of drag because they are drag performers. They understand that you have to support your local drag scene if you want *Drag Race* to thrive. And there's so many people I think that like *Drag Race* that don't understand that.

## **Tyler:**

These people are going to come out for the Ru girls or these big name entertainers or whatever. But then if it's just a regular night, they're going to stay home and they're not gonna come out unless it's like a big deal, I guess the best way to put it. Which then, turns around and I feel like takes away from your local girls who put in just as much effort, just as much money, just as much time as these entertainers- as these big name entertainers. What I like to tell people, and this is no disrespect to anyone who's been on the show, but the only difference between a Ru girl and a local girl is that they got an opportunity. Other than that, we all use the same kind of makeup. We use the same couch cushions for pads. Everybody uses the same duct tape. And I think that people are too busy like fawning over Ru girls or idolizing Ru girls to realize that you have equally amazing talent right in your own backyard.



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