



# Performing Gender and Sexuality



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# Overture

ALLEN B. BAYLOSIS

When does one start thinking about performance? Or how do we use ‘performance’ as a mode of thinking? These are the questions the students of CSIS 450 faced as they were tasked with contributing to this anthology on the field of performance studies. This digital book offers a collection of essays developed by students in CSIS 450: Topics in Critical Studies in Sexuality at the University of British Columbia – Vancouver Campus. These essays are the outputs of a course assignment using a set of teaching and learning practices that involve open educational resources and students-as-creators, a practice known as open pedagogy.

The course introduces students to different frameworks and lenses to look at performances that defy gender and sexual normativity in different parts of the globe. It invites students to investigate how “drag” can simultaneously reflect, reinforce, and resist ideologies from mainstream cultures and look for instances of queer joyful defiance and gender euphoria in gender-bending popular public performances. Students also learn to acknowledge the moments in which cross-dressing serves as a means of reinforcing normativity and policing gender identities, sexualities, and embodiments. This collection of essays is a culmination of the students’ learning throughout the course and their effort to openly share what they have learned in a visual and textual format. From the course title “Drag Around the World,” the students have expanded their notion of what they view as performance—exploring various modes of performances which one would witness and experience in everyday life—by examining how their chosen aesthetic objects are analyzed.

The key here is all about framing a performance. In *Performance*, performance scholar Diana Taylor attunes our attention to how one could frame something as a performance. This is where the

confusion that “is everything a performance” becomes apparent and then enlightened. As Richard Schechner writes, the *is* and *as* dichotomy of framing a performance as *is* or *as* is indeed crucial, with the former as descriptive and the latter as analytical. (Schechner 1985) The performance responds to the activities showcased on a stage with an audience: theatre, sports, recital, opera, and concert. But when we apply the *approach as performance*, it gives us the possibility of treating any event, aesthetic praxis, and phenomenon as a performance. There is now slippage that anything could be analyzed as a performance, but the question we are more invested in is asking whether such a “thing” is worth analyzing. Thus, the “framing” and the “performance” are two considerations the contributors factored into their essays. The performance object of analysis is indeed critical for students as it needs to be of interest yet relevant to the course’s theme. The course’s main objective is to explore how not only femininity and/or masculinity are being recreated, reaffirmed, or mocked in different performances, but also ideas (and ideals) about race, class, body shapes and abilities, national and local belonging, and ethnicity.

This collection of essays is a “point-in-time” in the process of students learning, understanding, and engaging with complex topics of gender and sexuality identity. Student contributors signed an author agreement allowing their work to be shared openly online. Some names and identities were protected using pseudonyms; however, positionality statements have been included in many of the chapters to better understand the context and lenses from which the authors engage with the material and construct their essays. We begin with Emerson Boldt’s essay, which examines RuPaul’s Drag Race Season 4 contestant Milan through an intersectional lens of resistance in mainstream drag culture. Next, Lauren de Vries explores the notion of camp in Noel Gruber’s performance, *Noel’s Lament*. Jared Khalifa offers an essay that focuses on how the non/wearing of leotards has been used as a political statement in women’s gymnastics. Jules Kyi provides an

examination of how drag performances in Myanmar become a platform for anti-authoritarian resistance. A comparative reading of Sasha Colby's influence on the drag competition Miss Continental will be offered by Clarke<sup>59</sup>. There will also be a chapter on archival research on condom use in the 1980s based on gay erotica book *Entertainment for a Master* (1986) by John Preston. Aidan Pau highlights the importance of the drag king scene in Vancouver as they gravitate towards the BOOK DRAG KINGS project by Vancouver-based drag kings. Lastly, xinze wang explores the notion of gender performance as embodied in East Asian cosplayers. Due to the wide range of aesthetic objects student contributors engaged with, the performances offered here are not only the 'matter' of the course. Instead, the students need to explore and demonstrate how their respective performances 'matter.' *And now, it is time for us to raise the curtains.*

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# Performing Beyond the Binary with Milan: Gender-Diversity, Race, and Resistance in Mainstream Drag Culture

EMERSON BOLDT

## I. Opening

In this chapter, I will be engaging with a performance on season four of RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR) featuring drag artist Milan (pictured in figure 1) (Delaberry 2018). RPDR is a reality television drag competition series featuring a select group of drag queens (Upadhyay 2019). In the series, participants compete for a cash prize and the title of "America's Next Drag Superstar" (Upadhyay 2019). RPDR is mainstream, providing a platform to both popularize and normalize drag (Upadhyay 2019). Despite this, RPDR has demonstrated a tendency to subordinate racialized and gender-diverse performers while exclusively showcasing cisgender, gay, male drag queens (Upadhyay 2019). In doing so, the show reinforces binary notions of what drag is and what drag is not (Heim 2012; Upadhyay 2019). To exemplify this theory, I will discuss one particular performance on RPDR by Milan, a Black, gender-diverse drag artist. Milan's performance was inspired by singer-songwriter Janelle Monae (picture in figure 2) who, like Milan, is a Black, gender-diverse performer (Heim 2012; StyleLikeU 2023). Disappointingly, the judge panel critiqued Milan's performance and

drag look as ‘manish’ and drag-king-adjacent (Heim 2012; Delaberry 2018). These comments both reflected and reinforced the reductive notions about drag and gender that are so pervasive in mainstream drag culture (Upadhyay 2019). Many of the show’s viewers, such as myself, were disheartened by this feedback as well. The audience expressed anger towards the judges and their close-minded critiques (Heim 2012). Milan’s performance therefore demonstrates the exclusionary nature of mainstream drag spheres like RPDR, exposing the show’s disproportionate scrutiny of gender-diverse and racialized drag performers (Upadhyay 2019). In doing so, the show does not subvert stereotypes rather, it serves to reinforce the White, heteronormative, and binary notions of drag (Heim 2012). Moreover, Milan’s performance took place in 2012 and at the time, Janelle Monae (pictured below) identified as female, however, they have since self-identified as non-binary (StyleLikeU 2023). Thus, I will be drawing attention to both racialized femininity and gender-diversity being disproportionately scrutinised in Western culture and the mainstream drag sphere by discussing Milan’s performance on RPDR.



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here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/dragaroundtheworld/?p=283#oembed-1>

## II. Introduction

This essay analyzes Milan's Monae-inspired performance on RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR) through the lens of Black queer theory and performance studies, highlighting drag as both an artistic mode, and as a form of political activism. I will draw on Richard Schechner's (2020) framework of



*Figure 1 – Janelle Monáe performing at the 2009 Reeperbahn Festival.*

performance studies, which provides a valuable framework for analyzing drag performance by highlighting how identity, gender, and culture are constructed, performed, and challenged. This perspective allows us to view drag beyond entertainment, understanding it as a subversive act that disrupts stereotypes and challenges power imbalances (Schechner 2020). Moreover, I will engage with Judith Butler's (1999) *Gender Trouble*, which critiques fixed or binary notions of gender, arguing that gender is a cultural construct that involves performance. Milan's performance illustrates Butler's (1999) theory of gender performativity by challenging the show's reliance on binary norms and expectations of drag. While Butler's work has been seminal in queer theory, it largely overlooks the intersections of race and nationality with gender performativity. To address this gap, I will expand Butler's theory by incorporating scholarship on drag and gender in non-Western and non-White contexts (Han 2023; Sastry 2025). Through this approach, I will explore how Milan's performance challenges both RPDR's adherence to binary drag norms and broader cultural expectations of gender and race (Heim 2012).

### III. Theoretical Framework

#### **What is Black Queer Theory?**

My discussion will be guided through the application of Black Queer Theory (BQT), a theoretical framework. BQT is a critical interdisciplinary framework that examines the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and other axes of identity. Specifically, BQT focuses on the lived experiences, cultural expressions, and political struggles of Black queer individuals. BQT draws from and critiques both Black Studies and Queer Theory. BQT attempts to address the ways in which Black Studies and Queer Theory have historically marginalized or excluded Black queer voices. At its core, BQT is deeply rooted in intersectionality, which examines the way that systems of oppression intersect and overlap. BQT thus applies intersectional frameworks to explore how race and sexuality are not separate but interconnected, shaping unique lived experiences, such as Milan's.

#### **How Does it Differ from Queer Theory?**

Historically, Traditional Queer Theory (QT) has been centred in white, Western, and often male perspectives. Consequently, QT has been criticized for treating sexuality as a singular issue, often neglecting its intersection with social categories like race, class, and gender. BQT therefore critiques QT's universalization of queer experiences. As a framework, it insists upon

grounding its theory in the lived realities of people who inhabit multiple marginalized identities.

### **How Does it Differ from Black Studies?**

While Black Studies traditionally centers Black identity and experience, it has historically prioritized heteronormative and patriarchal narratives. Early Black Studies focused on restoring the Black family unit, which was compromised through processes such as slavery, segregation, and systemic oppression. The Black familial model, however, is rooted in heteropatriarchal frameworks which naturalize and essentialize heterosexuality and binary gender roles. Thus, BQT challenges this structural neglect of sexual and gender-based diversity by reiterating Black queer, trans, and non-binary individuals' role in restoring and representing the Black community.

### **How Does it Inform & Relate to Performance Studies?**

Black Queer Theory and Performance Studies (PS) have a deep, mutually influential relationship, particularly in terms of their discourses on embodiment, identity, and visibility. This chapter will employ both theoretical frameworks to describe performance as a mode of disidentification and resistance or survival. Performance serves both as a mode of resistance and a means of asserting presence or agency within historically exclusive or marginalizing spaces. Thus, both BQT and PS offer tools for better representing or navigating Blackness and queerness in the mainstream sphere.

## IV. Gendered & Racial Performativities

Schechner's chapter "Performance Studies: An Introduction" conceptualizes performance as an ongoing, ritualized, and socially meaningful practice that manifests in various forms (2020). Drag artists similarly embody and enact their personas across diverse settings, styles, and social contexts. For instance, Milan adopts their birth name, Dwayne Cooper, when out of drag (Schechner 2020). This illustrates the fluid, yet ritualised nature of Milan's identity as a performer (Schechner 2020). In his chapter, Schechner (2020) outlines nine types of performance, among them is art-based performance. Schechner (2020) defines art-based performance as a creative, intentional act designed to engage both performer and spectator (2020). Milan's performance aligns with this style, because it is an engaging performance which serves as a creative intervention to dominant cultural norms regarding race, gender, and drag. Schechner (2020) further describes performance as a rehearsed, repeatable, and socially meaningful act. In the same sense, drag involves the deliberate performance and repetition of culturally recognized gendered symbols and behaviors that both reflect and challenge social norms around identity, sexuality, and power. Thus, Milan's use of drag to actively subvert and disrupt normative expectations around race, gender, and sexuality exemplifies Schechner's insights into performance as a socially meaningful, ritualized act. This framework not only highlights the subversive potential of Milan's performance but also reveals how their drag operates as a mode of resistance to the binary norms or expectations imposed in mainstream drag culture (Schechner 2020).

Judith Butler's (1999) chapter "Subversive Bodily Acts" in her novel *Gender Trouble* describes gender as a performance, contesting that gendered constructs are culturally imposed (Butler 1999). Butler (1999) argues that the notion of an "innate" gender is illusionary, and represents an idea centralized in society to reinforce notions of heterosexual and patriarchal dominance. Thus, Butler (1999) rejects

the idea that gender is who we are rather, describing gender as something we do. This means that gender is performed or enacted through ritualized behaviours and modes of expression like clothing or language (Butler 1999). In queer theory, Butler's (1999) work has been described as groundbreaking. Butler's work has contributed significantly to the representation of gender diversity and drag in academia. However, Butler's novel has also been critiqued for putting forward a limitative discussion of gender performativity. This critique stems from Butler's (1999) generalization of drag in Western and non-Western contexts. Further, the novel disregards intersections of race with gender and sexuality, putting forth a somewhat narrow description of gender performativity. Thus, in the following sections, I will engage with discussions of drag, race, and gender in non-White and non-Western spheres to demonstrate the relevancy of race and geography in discussions of drag and gender performativity (Han 2023; Sastry 2025).

## V. Performing Vs Perceiving Gender in Western Contexts



Figure 2 – Season 2 cast of *The Boulet Brothers Dragula*.

Monáe is well-known for her signature style which has ranged from tuxedos to formal gowns, deliberately blending and subverting traditional gendered fashion norms.

Milan's performance therefore paid homage to Monáe's subversive use of traditionally "male" apparel, as a form of gender nonconformity and self-expression (Heim 2012). However, when the judge's shared their feedback, Milan was met with remarks like, "you had so much reverence for Janelle Monáe, but I see you as a man," and "bottom line, it's still a drag queen competition, and you're giving us drag king" (Heim 2012).

There are several problems with this feedback. Firstly, these comments reflect the pervasiveness of gender biases and restrictive expectations in mainstream drag culture (Heim 2012; Upadhyay 2019). Notions like these reinforce fixed, binary assumptions of what drag should look like and who is permitted to perform it (Heim 2012; Upadhyay 2019). Some mainstream series have, however, demonstrated their capacity to subvert these biases and expectations, such as *The Boulet Brothers Dragula* (pictured in figure 3) (Prins 2021). The series has contributed to increasing the visibility of alternative or diverse bodies in the mainstream by engaging with “monstrous” themes and steering clear of polishedness (Prins 2021). Moreover, given that Monae publicly identified as female at the time, the judge’s feedback reflected and reinforced harmful perceptions of Black femininity (hooks 2015). Within the context of colonization, Black women have historically been denied their womanhood, subjecting them to both gendered and racialized forms of oppression (hooks 2015). Thus, the judge panel’s perceptions of Milan’s homage to a Black woman as “manish” and drag king-adjacent were incredibly harmful, and disheartening to witness as a fan of the franchise.

Black feminist scholar, bell hooks (2015), examines the intersection of sexism and racism through the lens of Black women's suffrage in her book *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. In her book, hooks compares the historic experience of both racialized men and racialized women (2015). hooks argues that gender adversely impacts the experience of racialized women (2015). This is exemplified in a quote by Linda Brent (pictured in figure 4), a female survivor of slavery in the US, which reads: "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far



*Figure 3 – Harriet Jacobs (AKA Linda Brent) who escaped slavery in 1835 and went on to become an acclaimed abolitionist and author.*

more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and suffering, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (hooks 2015, pp. 24). This quote reveals the intersectional nature of oppression, demonstrating how gender and race act together to uniquely shape the experiences of racialized women and gender-diverse people. This is demonstrated in the panel's judgment of Milan's performance; when their homage to a celebrated black, female is described as 'manish'(hooks 2015). Despite their dually marginalized social positioning, Black women in colonial North America have historically been assigned similar roles to their Black male counterparts (e.g., Field labour) (hooks 2015). During enslavement, the roles which enslaved Black men and women occupied were read as "masculine" in dominant Western society (hooks 2015). Consequently, many anti-Black, sexist stereotypes emerged during the era of slavery which positioned Black women as "masculinized sub-human creatures" (hooks 2015,

pp. 86). These enduring stereotypes continue to shape contemporary perceptions of Black gender expression, as reflected in the RPDR judges' perceptions of Milan's performance, revealing how colonial, racist, and sexist logics persist in mainstream queer spaces (hooks 2015).

## VI. Performing & Perceiving Gender Outside of Western Contexts

As I explored subversive drag performances in Western contexts, I grew curious about drag aesthetics and gender performativity outside of Western contexts. During my research, I became familiarised with Patruni Sastry (pictured in figure 5), an Indian expressionist dancer, folk singer, and transimal drag artist. Like Milan, Sastry is a BIPOC, gender-diverse drag queen who has dedicated much of their career to resisting Western-imposed norms regarding gender and sexuality. Sastry's (2025) work demonstrates that such norms are less often enforced in non-

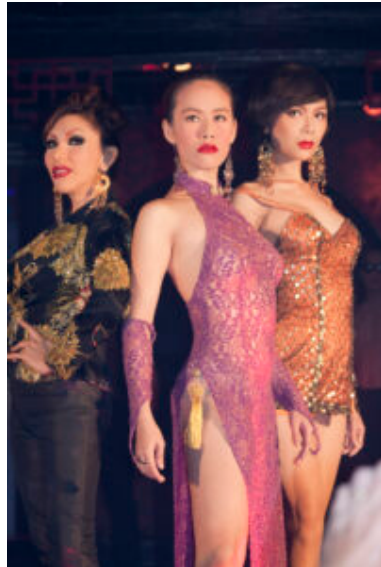


Figure 4 - Indian expressionist dancer, folk singer, and transimal drag artist, Patruni Sastry photographed by Manab Das (2021).

Western contexts, allowing performers to express themselves more freely. In a recent blog post, Sastry (2025) discussed their introduction to the construct of gender at the age of 13 and the subsequent confusion which followed (Sastry 2025). Upon this

revelation, Sastry (2025) became immersed in the culture of drag, describing it as a form of resistance to gendered constructs and norms. Sastry (2025) also describes drag as gender-critical, meaning, it is intended to subvert fixed or binary notions of gender and performativity. Thus, by performing drag, Sastry (2025) is able to take part in larger discourses surrounding gender, drag, and authenticity. I feel this reflection is relevant to the feedback Milan received because it highlights the way that gendered constructs disrupt an individual's ability to express themselves authentically. In their post, Sastry (2025) implores people to embrace their “gender anarchy” and to transgress the norms imposed on people's gender, sexuality, and drag performances. In doing so, they demonstrate that drag can be a site of political activism, personal development, and identity expression (Sastry 2025).

Winter Han's (2023) chapter “The Fierce World of Gay Asian Drag” examines male femininities and drag performances outside of Western contexts. The chapter explores drag as a form of resistance against Whiteness, masculinity, and the mainstream (Han 2023). These insights are valuable, given that drag has been sensationalized in recent decades due to mainstream Western portrayals like American Drag Race (Upadhyay 2019). While RPDR has a significant influence on global perceptions of drag, the program continues to solely



*Figure 5 – Gender performativity in non-Western contexts, exemplified in the Calypso Club's (2021) “Ladyboy” Drag Show at the Asia Hotel in Bangkok.*

represent cisgendered gay male drag queens (Upadhyay 2019). (Han 2023) explains that gay Asian men are frequently feminized and marginalized due to racial stereotypes and disproportionate representations of Whiteness and Western ideas of masculinity in the mainstream. This conceptualization is similar to that of Butler's (1999) as it relates to the historical masculinization of Black women by colonial culture and discourse. Instead of resisting these stereotypes, many gay Asian drag queens embrace and redefine their perceived femininity, challenging Western-imposed norms (Han 2023). By adopting and exaggerating femininity, gay Asian drag queens subvert traditional beauty standards and racialized gender expectations (Han 2023). Like Sastry (2025), Han (2023) describes drag and cross-dressing culture in Asia. Unlike their Western counterparts, Han (2023) contends that Asian drag and cross-dressing are used to dissociate from gender and race-based stereotypes. Further, both Sastry (2025) and Han (2023) criticize the centralization of masculinity in gay male culture, and its vilification in drag queen culture. Both authors assert that this idea of "masculinity" is Western-imposed and that it disproportionately excludes and marginalizes racialized queer men (Han 2023; Sastry 2025).

## VII. Conclusion

To conclude, Milan's performance on RPDR highlights the complexities of gender and racial performativity within mainstream drag culture. The judge's feedback undermined Milan's tribute to Janelle Monáe by deeming it as "manish" and "drag-king-adjacent," (Upadhyay 2019). This reflects a broader pattern in Western mainstream drag culture of marginalizing gender-diverse and racialized drag performers (Upadhyay 2019). By imposing rigid, binary notions of gender and drag, RPDR not only reinforces normative ideals of what drag should look like, but also perpetuates

harmful stereotypes about Black femininity and gender diversity (Heim 2012; hooks 2015). By employing performative and Black queer theoretical frameworks in this chapter, I have exemplified Milan's performance as a subversive act that challenged pervasive norms around gender, race, and drag (Schechner 2020; Butler 1999; hooks 2015). Additionally, by comparing cultural attitudes toward non-White and non-Western drag performances, such as by Sastry, with the judges' perceptions of Milan's drag, I have underscored the ways in which drag can either subvert or adhere to notions of heteronormativity and White-supremacy (Sastry 2025; Upadhyay 2019). Thus, this chapter serves as both a critique and call to decolonize mainstream drag culture, highlighting and embracing its potential to represent a broad spectrum of gender and racial identities (Upadhyay 2019; hooks 2015).

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# Gender Performance, Drag, and Camp in "Noel's Lament"

LAUREN DE VRIES

## Introduction: Noel Gruber and the Power of Performance

The stage is dimly lit, a single spotlight illuminating Noel Gruber as he transforms from his school uniform into a delicate slip dress and wig. He moves with an exaggerated elegance, striking dramatic poses as he croons about a doomed love affair in postwar France. His voice, both longing and theatrical, transforms the high school chamber choir stage into a smoky Parisian cabaret. He is no longer a small-town Canadian teenager — he is Monique Gibeau, a tragic heroine lost in a fantasy of romance and suffering.

This moment from *Ride the Cyclone* is more than just a song, it is a performance in every sense of the word. Noel Gruber's transformation into Monique Gibeau is not about being a woman, but about performing a stylized version of femininity. His gestures, vocal inflections, and aesthetic choices are all carefully constructed acts, layered with artifice and theatricality. In this way, *Noel's Lament* exemplifies what Richard Schechner (2020) calls restored behavior, a performance that is rehearsed, repeated, and shaped by cultural memory. Noel Gruber does not create his identity from nothing; instead, he pulls from a collection of aesthetic references, constructing his femininity through borrowed gestures, costume and voice.

In *Gender Trouble* (1999), Judith Butler argues that gender is not something one is, but something one does. It is a continuous and stylized repetition of acts, gestures, and behaviors that create the illusion of a stable identity. Rather than being an innate, fixed essence, gender is performative: it is constructed through cultural norms and sustained through repetition. Judith Butler challenges binary thinking about gender and suggests that drag and theatrical performance expose the artificiality of these categories by exaggerating them. In this framework, Noel Gruber's transformation into Monique Gibeau in *Ride the Cyclone* is not a parody of femininity but a subversive reenactment of gender norms that both critiques and reclaims them. By highlighting the constructedness of gender, Noel Gruber's performance illustrates Judith Butler's idea that identity is never fixed, but always being (re)performed.

## Camp as Queer Expression: Excess as Art and Identity

This performance aligns with “camp”, as defined by Susan Sontag (1964), which thrives on excess, theatricality, and the blurring of sincerity and parody. To further understand Noel Gruber's stylized femininity, we can turn to camp as both a cultural sensibility and a queer strategy. Rather than striving for realism, Noel Gruber leans into artificiality. This echoes Galyna Kotliuk's (2023) argument that theatrical femininity can simultaneously critique and celebrate

gender norms. Richard Dyer (2002) expands on this by framing camp as not only an aesthetic, but a survival mechanism; a way for queer individuals to endure heteronormative spaces by embracing their theatricality, parody, and excess. For Noel Gruber, adopting Monique Gibeau's tragic persona isn't just about performance, it's about channeling his queer identity through the deeply felt, yet exaggerated, lens of camp.

Through camp, historical references, and vocal stylization, Noel's *Lament* subverts traditional gender roles. Using Judith Butler's (1999) gender performativity, Susan Sontag's (1964) camp aesthetics, and Richard Schechner's (2020) theories of performance, I argue that Noel Gruber's transformation is not just comedic but a meaningful exploration of identity, artifice and self-expression.

## Gender in the Voice: Auditory Performance and Vocal Transformation

Noel Gruber's transformation into Monique Gibeau is constructed not only through costume and movement but also through his voice. This dimension of performance deserves focused attention, as the auditory elements alone reveal the careful construction of gender. His vocal performance exemplifies how gender is enacted through stylized repetition, aligning with Judith Butler's (1999) theory of gender performativity. Noel Gruber's voice, in all its exaggerated, dramatic glory, plays a key role in shaping his gendered self-expression.



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here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/dragaroundtheworld/?p=285#oembed-2>

The official Spotify recording of *Noel's Lament* (2021) removes the visual elements of the performance, leaving only the vocal delivery to convey Noel Gruber's transformation. His voice is carefully crafted – breathy, delicate, and emotionally indulgent – mirroring the stylized femininity of many tragic divas. This is a great place to start when considering the many aspects of this performance, as it allows the listener to create their own image in their mind based on the voice and lyrics alone, showing the true power of music in performance. Gillian Rodger (2004) argues that vocal manipulation allows performers to play with gender identity by adopting qualities that may not align with their physical presentation. Noel Gruber's voice as Monique Gibeau is a wonderful example of this, as his feminine vocal style does not align with his everyday self. Vocal shifts like changes in pitch, tone and phrasing, can blur the lines between masculine and feminine-coded performances. The musicality of the song further reinforces the construction of femininity. The soft vibrato, the elongated syllables, and the controlled phrasing all contribute to an aesthetic of theatrical excess. According to Susan Sontag (1964), camp is characterized by embracing style over content, and Noel Gruber's vocal performance embodies this principle. He does not aim to realistically imitate a woman's voice but to craft an exaggerated, performative femininity. This allows him to immerse himself in the fantasy of Monique Gibeau, embracing a form of gender expression that is both playful and deeply personal.

By focusing on the auditory aspects of *Noel's Lament*, it becomes clear that Noel Gruber's voice is a central tool in his gendered self-expression. His vocal performance is not a naturalized expression of femininity, but a carefully crafted act that aligns with both Gillian Rodger's (2004) vocal cross-dressing and Susan Sontag's (1964) camp

aesthetics. Through pitch, tone, and stylization, Noel Gruber constructs a persona that is both hyper-feminine and deeply theatrical, emphasizing that gender, much like performance itself, is an act of continuous creation. While sound plays a critical role, it is Noel Gruber's physical presence – his posture, gesture, and choreography – that completes his transformation on stage.

## Embodied Performance: Movement, Gesture, and Drag History



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The physical elements of the performance such as the gestures, posture, and movement, are essential when analyzing the content of *Noel's Lament*. The above Instagram post (2018) from Khobly Wardell's personal account captures a single, theatrical moment from *Noel's Lament*. In the image, Wardell's pose is exaggerated, his body angled dramatically, and his expression filled with longing. While these elements can be seen in the video recording of the performance, this still allows for more detail to be clearly seen. As it was posted by the original actor, it also highlights that this moment was important to him.



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The full video recording of Noel's *Lament* further illustrates how Noel Gruber's transformation into Monique Gibeau relies on carefully choreographed movement. Each performance of this song will be unique, as that is the nature of performance. Since this performance is from a musical, it was challenging to find high quality recordings of this song. This video was selected as it includes the full song and has a quality high enough to understand each of the visual elements. Throughout the song, his physicality is intentional, using slow and deliberate hand movements and shifting between poised elegance and exaggerated longing. His fluid hand gestures mimic the delicate, exaggerated femininity often seen in classical Hollywood actresses, further aligning his performance with established tropes of feminine theatricality. Through this video, we can experience the lighting, the stage positioning, and the reactions and contributions of the other characters, and examine how they contribute to the construction of Noel Gruber's fantasy.

Richard Schechner (2020) argues that all performance is twice-behaved behavior, or an act that has been rehearsed, repeated, and stylized over time. Noel Gruber's femininity is not spontaneous but constructed through a series of learned gestures, which he consciously adopts to embody Monique Gibeau. Performance can be transformative. Here, Noel Gruber is not just an act of gender performance, but an act of self-exploration. The conventions of theatricality allow him to live in his fantasy, even for only a moment. Laurence Senelick (2000) notes that theatrical drag throughout history has functioned not only to entertain but to disrupt gender hierarchies by exaggerating and exposing them.

By analyzing the physical aspects of Noel Gruber's performance,

it becomes clear that his transformation into Monique Gibeau is deeply rooted in embodied performance. Noel Gruber's femininity is a carefully curated performance, reminiscent of many historical examples of fashion and gender subversion. To more fully situate this performance within a larger cultural tradition, we must explore how historical and theatrical references shape Noel Gruber's choices.

## **Historical Echoes: Fashion, Flappers, and Musical Lineage**

Noel Gruber's transformation into Monique Gibeau does not exist in a vacuum, it draws upon a rich history of gendered performance, particularly within music, theater, and fashion. His aesthetic choices, from the slip dress to his exaggerated gestures, align with past forms of gender subversion, demonstrating how contemporary gender play is informed by historical traditions.



*A woman dressed in a 1920s flapper style.*

The image of a 1920s flapper provides an important visual reference point for understanding Noel Gruber's aesthetic choices. While he places Monique Gibeau in "post-war France", his outfit, hairstyle, and overall presentation are more reminiscent of the flapper era. Flappers embraced short hair, loose dresses, and a playful femininity that rejected traditional modesty. The style choices also evoke the costuming choices from the musical Chicago, which draws

heavily on the 1920s flapper style to portray women who embrace sexuality, ambition, and spectacle (Fierberg 2020). The costume designer William Ivey Long emphasized how sleek, minimal black outfits reveal the performers' movement and character. Noel Gruber's costuming similarly uses this historical visual language to construct a gendered fantasy that is performative, glamorous, and emotionally charged. Galyna Kotliuk (2023) argues that drag and gendered performance often rely on past eras for inspiration, reinterpreting historical styles in ways that challenge contemporary gender norms. These references can be both nostalgic and transgressive. Noel Gruber's dress, wig, and heels connect his performance to the historical lineage of women who challenged gendered expectations. While Noel Gruber's aesthetic borrows from historical femininity, his performance also aligns with the gender subversion found in popular music.

Annie Lennox's 1987 performance, in which she dressed as Elvis Presley, provides a striking parallel to Noel Gruber's transformation into Monique Gibeau. Gillian Rodger (2004) introduces the concept of vocal cross-dressing, referring to the idea that singers can challenge gender norms not only through appearance but also through vocal performance. Lennox, for example, adopts the deep, commanding voice of a male rock icon while maintaining a



Annie Lennox dressed as Elvis Presley for her 1987 Rock am Ring performance.

sense of theatricality. This performance is not just an impersonation but a deliberate exaggeration of gendered traits, making it an act of both homage and parody. Gender performance in music is often about occupying an in-between space, where artists can play with expectations rather than conforming to them. By situating Noel Gruber's performance within historical and musical contents, this section demonstrates that *Noel's Lament* is not just a singular act of gender play but part of a larger tradition. It also acts to reinforce the argument that this performance is both deeply personal and a part of a broader cultural history of theatrical gender expression.

## Conclusion: Monique Gibeau, Performance, and the Queer Self

*Noel's Lament* is more than just a song, it is a theatrical exploration of gender, artifice, and self-expression. Through vocal stylization, exaggerated physicality, and historical references, Noel Gruber

constructs a femininity that is not meant to be realistic but rather performative, aligning with theories of gender as a repeated, stylized act (Butler 1999). His performance, shaped by camp aesthetics (Sontag 1964) and Richard Schechner's (2020) concept of restored behavior, demonstrates how gender is not something innate but something enacted, borrowed, and reinterpreted. The auditory elements of his performance, from the breathy delicacy of his voice to the emotional excess of his phrasing show how even without visual cues, gender can be communicated and manipulated through sound (Rodger 2004). Meanwhile, the visual aspects of elegance, choreographed movement, and historical femininity situate this transformation within a broader cultural history of gendered performance.

By examining *Noel's Lament* through multiple lenses it becomes clear that Noel Gruber's transformation into Monique Gibeau is not simply about playing dress-up. It is an act of artistic self-exploration that allows him to embrace a fantasy of femininity that he is not allowed in his own life (Wardell 2017). *Ride the Cyclone* presents a character who does not fit into strict binaries, instead embracing theatricality as a means of self-definition. Through this analysis, I have come to appreciate the ways in which theatrical gender expression can be a powerful means of questioning, critiquing, and celebrating identity. *Noel's Lament* ultimately reveals how theatrical performance can open space for queer self-fashioning and emotional truth through aspects of sincerity, camp, and subversion.

## Author Positionality Statement – Lauren de Vries

My name is Lauren de Vries (they/them) and I am a fourth year psychology student at UBC. As a queer person who loves musical theater, this project was perfectly in my wheelhouse and allowed me to dive into research that I had not previously encountered. I identify as nonbinary and have always been drawn to narratives that challenge binary understandings of gender. This research process gave me the opportunity to critically engage with performances I enjoy while applying theoretical frameworks that resonate with my own experiences. My interpretation is shaped by my identity, passions, and a desire to see queer expression celebrated and understood in all its complexity. *Ride the Cyclone* stands out for its diverse musicality and characters, offering for a wide variety of research opportunities. This project only scratched the surface of what *Ride the Cyclone* has to offer.

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# Where Are the Legs On My Leotard?

JARED KHALIFA

Gymnasts are widely regarded as some of the most elite athletes among Olympic sports. However, Women's Artistic Gymnastics (WAG) has recently been under a more critical magnified glass. The cultural and institutional structures of the sport have been questioned for normalizing the sexualization of its female athletes. In 2018, USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar was sentenced for sexually abusing 172 gymnasts (Wellman et al. 2020). These tragic events initiated broader discourse, including the perspectives of Nassar's victims, on how the sport renders women vulnerable to abuse, undermines their autonomy, and projects sociocultural norms defined through the male gaze (Associated Press 2021). In addition to many of Nassar's victims making public statements during and following the trial, gymnasts from other countries have also contributed to the protest towards desexualizing and protecting women in gymnastics.

## Challenging the Sport on the Olympic Stage

Tokyo 2020 marked the first Olympic Games since Nassar's trial and remains an active topic within broader discourse. Among other concerns is the consideration for gymnasts' uniforms contributing to the sexualization of their bodies. Female gymnasts typically compete wearing bikini cut leotards that reveal their legs from inner thigh seam down. The conflict of being judged on technical skills while competing in exposing attire blurs the line between judging physical performance and physical aesthetic. At the 2020 Olympic

Games, the German WAG Team chose to take a stand to this by competing in unitards. The Gymnastics Federation affirmed their position by stating how their intentions were to deliberately protest the sexualization of female gymnasts' bodies (Lewis 2021).



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#### *German 2020 Olympic WAG Team Podium Training Photo*

In contrast to traditional leotards, unitards provide full coverage of the torso and legs and are typically designed to accommodate individuals with religious or cultural consideration. This made the circumstances of the German team particularly unique as none of them required these accommodations yet were the only collective team at the Olympics to wear this style (Associated Press 2021). In the following video from the German Olympic trials, one month prior to the Games, Olympic veterans Kim Bui, Elisabeth Seitz, and Sarah Voss are shown competing in unitards on their own accord, expressing their desires to promote greater autonomy for female gymnasts (CTGN 2021). During this event, they further voiced concerns about how their bodies can be captured and presented in media and highlighted score deductions for adjusting leotards during competition – even if necessary to avoid inappropriate exposure.



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To better situate the German WAG Team's 2020 Olympic Performance, examining the theoretical foundations of the sport aids in a more comprehensive analysis. The following research explores the history of WAG as a sexist sport, the characteristics that constitute gymnastics as a form of performance and draws on feminist theory to bring attention to how the sport allows for the sexualization and objectification of women. Together, the German WAG team's performance can be interpreted as a resistance of the male gaze through the assertion of women's autonomy, thereby challenging the gender norm embedded in sport and society.

## The History of WAG as a Sexist Sport

Understanding the history of women's gymnastics is paramount for contextualizing its contemporary developments. From WAG's 1928 Olympic debut (United States Olympic & Paralympic Museum 2023), the sport's trajectory reflects many social and institutional values. This historical analysis establishes the foundation for examining the German WAG teams 2020 performance by outlining the sport's sexist structure, its aesthetic and technical evolution, and the ways gymnasts have conformed to or challenged its embedded gender norms.

In addition to gender segregated categories, men and women largely compete on different apparatuses. Men's events include the horizontal bar, rings, parallel bars, pommel horse, vault, and floor, while women compete on the balance beam, uneven bars, vault, and floor. Vault is the only apparatus closely shared. Although both compete on floor, women are required to perform to music and

include dance elements, whereas men are not permitted to incorporate these. Prior to the 1928 recognition of WAG, women trained on the same apparatuses as men. The balance beam and uneven bars were then created as modified apparatuses to align with performance qualities associated with femininity such as beauty, passivity, and grace (International Gymnastics Federation 2020). The International Olympic Committee (IOC) subsequently deemed WAG a suitable sport for women and circumvented comparisons to men.

The 1970s marked a transition that many saw as WAG's golden era (Cervin 2020). Traditional WAG emphasized elegance and balletic movements (Cervin 2020), whereas women during this time began competing powerful, dynamic skills, conventionally reserved for men (Cervin 2020). This redirected the sport towards younger, smaller, physically resilient athletes rather than physiques conveying sexual maturity and appeal (Cervin 2015). This evolution coupled the need for uniforms that prioritized function over aesthetic, encouraging the rise of the leotard (Cervin 2015). This eliminated two-piece, waist exposing uniforms, and designs accentuating curves and feminine features. The following video comparison between 1950s/60s and 2016 gymnastics illustrates these shifts:



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In recent years, gymnasts have increasingly challenged broader gender norms, including age related expectations. Oksana Chusovikita, a 49-year-old, eight-time Olympian and three-time medalist, has been a spearheading example of this. Although her

success defies the stereotype that gymnastics is a young girls' sport, the media continues to emphasize her personal life and role as a mother over her quality of gymnastics (Allain & Dotto 2023). This continues to isolate athletes that exceed age expectations and reinforces the sport's gender norms (Allain & Dotto 2023).

On March 8, 2025, Chusovitina won gold on the vault at the Baku World Cup (GymnasticsResults.com 2025). Joining her on the podium are 30-year-old silver medalist, Teja Belak, and 31-year-old bronze medalist, Tjasa Kysselef.



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### *Medalists Podium at the 2025 Baku World Cup*

In contrast to the 2024 Baku World Cup, the vault podium included 18-year-old Valentina Georgieva (gold), 21-year-old An Chang-ok (silver) and 20-year-old Karla Navas (bronze) (GymnasticsResults.com 2024). The average age of the 2024 vault medalists was 19.67 years old, versus 36.67 years old. Despite selective media coverage as indicated by Allain and Dotto, female gymnasts exceeding the conventional age range are not only competing, but also succeeding at an elite level. Women's gymnastics has evidently undergone a significant yet gradual transformation over the past century. Gender norms have dictated apparatus creation, competitive standards, and performance characteristics. The sports history sets the stage for analyzing how and why the German WAG team's performance challenges gender normativity.

## Gymnasts as Competitors and Performers

Utilizing a performance studies analysis of the German WAG team is essential for defining what constitutes this as a performance. Drawing on the theories of Richard Schechner, Ervin Goffman, and Paul Kuntz, gymnastics can be interpreted as a form of performance that intersects athletics and art (Goffman 1959, Kuntz 1974, Schechner 2020). Schechner articulates the parallels between theatre and sports such as actors to athletes, audiences to spectators, and costumes to uniforms. In addition to comparing roles and aesthetic characteristics, he addresses the challenges of performance studies when confronted with how to identify performances throughout cultures and time, which McAuley refers to as a “field without limitations” (Schechner 2020). McAuley uses Schechner’s idea of restored behaviors – “a set of actions that can be repeated, revised and reinterpreted” (Schechner 2020) – to define performances. This framework applies to gymnastics through its systematically regulated skills, routines, judging, and rules. Kuntz elaborates on certain aesthetic components, positioning gymnasts as artists shaped by beauty standards and judged on the execution of them (Kuntz 1974). He argues that sports aim to win, and the arts aim to exhibit beauty, however, gymnastics intersects both (Kuntz 27). Demonstrating this conflict is 1960s-70s male gymnast Neal Shartar, who argued that a gymnast’s beauty is rooted in performing gymnastics itself, rather than conforming to aesthetic standards used to quantify it. As an act of resistance, Shatar refused to cut his hair to meet the men’s guidelines set by his coaches, and consequently his scholarship to the University of Georgia’s was revoked. This incident coincides with Goffman’s performer-audience relationship theory, emphasizing the reciprocal influence of one role on the other (Goffman 1959). In sport, this relationship shapes how athletes perform based on spectator expectation, and how spectators may respond under normative influences. Collectively, the theories of Schechner, Kuntz, and Goffman frame

gymnastics as a gendered performance, positioning athletes to either conform to or challenge the sport's norms.

## Examining Women's Gymnastics Through Feminist Theory

Circumstantially and historically examining athletes such as Chusovitina, Shatar, and now the German WAG team, underscores the value of utilizing feminist theory to analyze the 2020 Tokyo performance. Considering social, cultural, and institutional influences, their performance can be acknowledged as a resistance of the male gaze and an assertion of women's autonomy.

Paving way for this discussion, Laura Mulvey builds on Freud's theory of sexuality, associating activity with masculinity and passivity with femininity (Oliver 2017). This concept defines the idea of the male gaze – initially used to analyze how films represent women from the perspective and desires of heterosexual men (King 2020). She emphasizes that depicting women as passive leads to acts of voyeurism and fetishism, consequently subjecting their bodies to being viewed as desired objects of possession (Oliver 2017). The binary structure of gymnastics which has remained consistent over time is an example of how the male gaze has shaped the way sport are performed. WAG was approved by the IOC in 1928 because it was seen as an appropriate sport that upheld the image of society's ideal woman – beautiful, graceful, and elegant. Gymnasts are still restricted to competing on gender specific apparatuses, abiding by the rules pertain to them, and expected to compete in traditional uniforms. Thus, the German WAG team competing in non-traditional unitards actively resists the male gaze.

Expanding on the concept of male, objectification theory is used to describe the psychological ramifications women experience from continual exposure to objectifying perspectives, resulting in self-

objectification (Nezlek et al. 2014). Supporting this theory is a study by Nezlek et al., which showed images of athletes in sexualized and non-sexualized manners to a group of participants, then asked each participant to rate these athletes' perceived attractiveness and competence. Findings were that athletes in sexualized images were viewed as more attractive but less competent in comparison to athletes in non-sexualized images. Generally, these responses were amplified when shown female athletes (Nezlek et al. 2014). This feedback loop demonstrates how the male gaze provokes objectification and supports Goffman's perceptive of performer-audience reciprocity. In the context of gymnastics, the roles of spectators, fans, judges, and commentators all individually and uniformly embody the role of the audience. The audience members, like the study participants, may form and project their own interpretations of an athlete's performance and contributing to the objectification cycle.

The concept of objectification is indicative of Shatar's perspective on gymnastics. The German team defying traditional leotards asserts that their bodies are not objectifiable and seeks to bring focus back to the beauty of the sport itself, as he notably advocated for. There are however more critical perspectives, such as those by Toby Slade. He additionally critiques that the German team's performance is an oversimplification for a larger, more complex problem. Choosing to cover their bodies may suggest it is women's responsibility respond and create a solution, rather than the focal point being on dismantling the systems that allow for objectification to occur (Slade 2021).

These feminist frameworks help in analyzing the chronological evolution of WAG. As athletic demands of WAG in the 1970s shifted from traditionally feminine performance characteristics, the aesthetic image shifted towards younger, more child-like athletes (Cervin 2015). Gymnastics historian, Georgia Cervin, acknowledges this era as propelling the desexualization of female gymnasts (Cervin 2015). The technical advancements which led to prioritizing younger and physically resilient athletes aided in dissolving the sexualized image that was previously upheld. As the first female gymnast to score a perfect ten, Nadia Comaneci became the standard for perfection. Not only was the technical quality of her gymnastics idolized, but also the aesthetic qualities she possessed. Her physique, age, demeanor, and attire worn were elements associated with achieving perfection, echoing the idea of physical perfection socially expected of women. The contrast in technical and aesthetic elements becomes evident when comparing the 1950s/60s gymnasts to that of Nadia Comaneci at the 1976 Olympics:



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During this time, Nadia was a young, petite, slender, and dynamic gymnast. She competed technically advanced skills for women during this era, and still aesthetically exuded youth and femininity. This dichotomy is

reminiscent of Jan Felshin's theory of the feminine apologetic, which acknowledges how female athletes may emphasize their femininity to compensate for performing traditionally masculine skills (Heywood et al. 1999). The German team wearing uniforms which eliminate a visually recognizably characteristic of the women's gymnastics while performing dynamic, strength-based skills, opposes the feminine apologetic that women in sports have historically taken on.

## Conclusion

Historically, WAG uniforms accentuated sexual maturity and only transitioned towards functionality in the 1970s. Why is it then, the German team in 2020 labelled the same leotards attributed to desexualizing the sport as leading to the sexualization of their bodies? This can be viewed through Schechner's theory that a performance has different meaning and interpretation based on its time and culture. Bikini style leotards may not be sexualized on young girls due to

ethical, sociocultural, and legal norms that govern perception of children in this context. In present day, as Olympic gymnasts are typically older, these leotards often expose features associated with adult femininity and become socially normalized as objects of sexualization.

Analyzing the German team's performance requires an interdisciplinary perspective and lends opportunity for integrating feminist theory, history, and performance studies. Even while subject to critique, the unitards worn by the German WAG team at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics was a display of reclaiming bodily autonomy and resisting sexualization through the male gaze.

## Author Positionality Statement — Jared Khalifa

Jared Khalifa (he/him) is a fourth-year BA Interdisciplinary Studies: Health Accessibility student at the University of British Columbia. Through the thematic stream, his program focuses encompass the social justice and social science factors that contribute to healthcare – and has a particular interest in the intersection between gender studies and sports medicine. In addition to his academic pursuits, Jared has had an extensive career as a dancer, circus artist, gymnast, and teacher. As an athlete on the Canadian Tumbling and Trampoline Team, Jared has earned multiple Junior Canadian titles, International and World Cup medals. Eventually, his passions for gymnastics, dance, and theatre merged through his work with Cirque Du Soleil. Among touring North America on, OVO, and playing the lead character of Red Bird in the Las Vegas Residency, *Mystere*, Jared has also worked widely in film, television, and taught on both local and international scales. He currently acts on the UBCP/ACTRA Dance and Choreography Committee and is enthusiastic about cultivating community and supporting emerging artists. Through his combined professional and academic experiences, Jared strives to blend his expertise in sports and entertainment,

alongside his interests in healthcare advocacy, accessibility and commitment to serving queer and marginalized communities.

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# Drag as Anti-Authoritarian Resistance

## *Examining the Revolutionary Capacities of Queer Performance in Myanmar*

JULES KYI

### Introduction

As the music begins, Emi Grate looks out at the audience, coming into the light to reveal a traditional Burmese outfit, bedazzled. She takes a deep breath before beginning to sing, her live vocals debuting with the line “it won’t be easy”. Her performance toes the line between emotional and satirical as she performs her take on “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina”, instead coining it “Don’t Cry for Me, My Dear Burma” (Grate 2024). She plays with the original lyrics, singing “all you will see is the boy you once knew, although he’s dressed up as a girl – and don’t I look good?” She raises her arms in the air as she proclaims that she chose freedom. Emi is a drag artist from Mandalay, Myanmar<sup>1</sup>, now active in the drag scene in Brooklyn, USA. Her choice of freedo

m is evident in her playful drag name, her “choice” was to migrate, or to leave. Moving forwards, Emi alters the lyric “my mad existence” to “my queer existence”, proclaiming that her love for Burma persists

1. this piece, the terms Myanmar/Burma, Myanmar/Burmese may be used interchangeably, to reflect the language used by Myanmar people.

beyond the barriers presented by her queerness within the state. She closes with her hands to the air and spotlight, surrounded by trumpeting music and uproarious applause.



Figure 1 – Grate, Emi. *Don't Cry for Me, My Dear Burma* (2024).

This moving piece, first introduced in 2016, was performed again when Emi appeared at Dragistan, her work reflecting upon the past several years of post-coup violence throughout the state of Myanmar. This piece, and its growth throughout Emi's performances in 2016, 2019, and 2024, will be explored with the aim of further understanding of how Emi merges identity and performance through this emotional work. Considering Richard Schechner's seven functions of performance, I want to focus on Emi's work as

created to heal and to make or foster community (Schechner 2020), specifically within the unique authoritarian political environment of Myanmar.

In Myanmar, discussions and experiences of gender performance are fraught with prejudice and suppression. Still, Myanmar people hold their own language of defining and situating queerness, as well as a long history of community activism. In 2021, democratic leadership was overthrown in a violent coup (Ratcliffe 2024). Since then, freedom of expression and gathering has been extremely limited, and LGBTQ+ persecution has been further solidified (Poore 2021). This background leads to the key question of to what extent

does drag performance play a role in anti-authoritarian sociopolitical movements in Myanmar? Here, it will be asserted that Myanmar drag exists as anti-authoritarian political resistance with the capacity to build community and inspire protest amongst repressive military violence.

### [Dragistan – Emi Grate 2024](#)

To establish my own positionality in relation to this subject, I am a queer Burmese-Canadian undergraduate student. I was born in Canada, to a father born and raised in Yangon, Myanmar. In my early youth, I visited Myanmar, where many of my family members and loved ones still reside. Since the military coup, I have not been able to return. This research therefore exists from an insider-outsider standpoint. Additionally, my research compiles both direct testimony from interviewing and corresponding with Emi Grate, alongside additional literature.

## Literature Review

Existing literature surrounding LGBTQ+ people in Myanmar highlights the role of queer people in political activism. The Politics of Love in Myanmar

introduces and defines key terms used to identify LGBTQ+ people in the State, while also identifying queer political mobilizations (Chua 2018). Similarly, Gender Construction, Inequality, and LGBT Participation in the Politics of Myanmar discusses the blockades to political participation for LGBTQ+ people, while also aiming to understand gender as a performance within Myanmar (Nant Mu Say 2024).

In Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Minorities in Transition,



*Figure 2 – Sun, Maung. LGBT Protestors in front of Cityhall roadblock Yangon. 2021.*

the dichotomous language of non-normative identity in Myanmar is unpacked, asserting that the status you are accorded is greatly dependent on your perception as what Western notions would refer to as “top” or “bottom” (Chua and Gilbert 2015).

Further repositioning drag outside of normative Western understandings, Rafael Ramirez (2024) identifies the importance of drag as anticolonial, engaging in research within the Filipino drag scene. This analysis evidences how drag has been co-opted in the West for profit, without consideration of its political and revolutionary power. In a similar vein of anticolonial scholarship, Winter Han (2023) contributes that Asian drag queens experience intersecting forms of oppression, but also argues that drag presents a valuable opening for performers to feel “attractive and desirable within a context that defines them as neither”.

Once again considering comparable projects, Yue et al. (2010) discuss the situation of Asian drag queens in Australia – a physical border-crossing that can provide relevant insights on Emi Grate’s positionality as a Myanmar performer now living in the Global North. Yue et al. identify that the traversing of boundaries by Asian drag queens is often both concrete and metaphorical, a shift in physical positioning and outside of enforced norms.



Figure 3 – Ninjastrikers. Protest against military coup. 2021.

While there is evidently existing (albeit limited) literature regarding LGBTQ+ existence in Myanmar, this can not be equated with Myanmar drag research. There are present academic discussions taking place concerning

political movements and activism in the LGBTQ+ sphere, but there is a notable gap where I wish to situate my work, surrounding the capacity of drag to play a meaningful role in political resistance and constructing hope amongst authoritarianism. In particular,

discourse on Myanmar drag in academia is virtually nonexistent, an absence that is concerning due to the large population of people that this conversation is relevant to. Therefore, this research aims to build upon investigations of queer Myanmar politics to establish a direct dialogue around Myanmar drag and political empowerment.

## Queer Terminology in Myanmar

In understanding dynamics of queerness and political engagement in Myanmar, it is important to decenter Western notions of LGBTQ+ terminology. Instead, labels often used in Burma to denote non-normative expression of gender/sexuality include *apwint*, *apôn*, and *thu nge*. *Apwint*, meaning open, indicates an individual assigned male at birth who presents feminine (this term is often applied to drag performers).

Alternatively, an *apôn*, or “hider” is someone who is both assigned male and presents masculine, but has an emotional association with femininity. *Thu nge*, or “guy”, holds a dual meaning, implying heterosexuality but also the perceived ‘male’ role in sexuality; a penetrating-penetrated dynamic is evident in Burmese LGBTQ+ vocabulary. Each of these terms implicates gender/sexuality (a united concept in Myanmar) as a performed role. This can be considered alongside Judith Butler’s (2015) assertion that “gender is prompted by obligatory norms [...] gender is thus always a negotiation with power”. Linking these ideas to drag, gender and performance are linked in Burmese linguistics, and

experimenting/playing with gender holds capacity to challenge dominant power structures.

## Queer Political Engagement in Myanmar

Frontier Myanmar, an anti-junta publication, called LGBTQ+ revolutionaries Myanmar's "rainbow heroes" (Frontier 2023). In the aftermath of the 2021 military coup, queer folks experienced abuse and torture while fighting for the restoration of democracy. In Burmese, terms of gender and sexuality are more intertwined than in English, and the community is tirelessly advocating for basic rights, without the space to consider LGBTQ+ discourses that may exist in Western contexts. In light of this, it is important to recognize that while "is drag queer?" may be a fraught question in other sociopolitical contexts, the answer within Myanmar is a definitive yes. For Emi, queerness, being Burmese, and performance are intertwined: "[My drag] stories sooner or later involve Burma because that's who I am" (Grate 2025).



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online*

here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/dragaroundtheworld/?p=289#audio-289-1>

Emi immigrated before the coup, first to study theatre in America, then remaining in America through seeking asylum. Her drag is often connected to politics and engagement, with Emi stating “I’ve been able to perform within Burmese circles, and I’ve also been performing in Burmese outside Burmese circles. The way I’ve gotten involved with political



Figure 4 – Grate, Emi. *Don’t Cry for Me, My Dear Burma*. 2019.

revolutionary activism is that this time, it’s all hands on deck. [...] So I feel like this love letter act I’ve created has been seen and heard a little more” (Grate 2025). *Don’t Cry for Me, My Dear Burma*, the love letter Emi makes reference to, evidences the kinship of queer and Burmese identity.

Under the junta, queer folks and drag performers are subject to isolation and repression. In an interview with XXJudgement (2021), Emi Grate says that before immigrating, she “knew of crossdressers. [She] knew that they were a social class that we don’t interact with”. Today, internet connection and international communication is expensive and difficult to come by. Therefore, drag performers within Myanmar face challenges in building a platform, or finding safe spaces for expression. It is important to consider the role of queer populations in Myanmar political activism to emphasize the community’s desire for community and justice. Prior to the coup, activists felt hopeful about a future progressive LGBTQ+ legislation, and in 2019 the city of Yangon hosted a “Drag Queen Olympics” (Thet Su 2019). Post-coup, however, discussing or disseminating drag performances is not only difficult, it is dangerous.

Here, we can establish that the queer community as a whole in Myanmar plays a key role in countering the ongoing violence

occurring in the military state. Further, we can then question the specific role of drag in opposing oppressive regimes.

## Drag Revolution in Authoritarian Contexts

“Drag performers should be of interest to political science because they are community leaders, activists, issue leaders, celebrities, and often the target of significant political backlash” (Kammerer Jr., Michelson & Harrison 2025). Looking at Myanmar politics, drag by Myanmar performers or within Myanmar can be situated as an act of resistance against authoritarian governance. Under the military dictatorship, to be visibly queer is to risk imprisonment. Further, Burmese bodies engaging in drag are challenging colonial boundaries of drag: “drag becomes a moment to turn these violent projects on their heads, to wield these imperial histories for small, but not inconsequential gain” (Khubchandani 2023, 64). Performing drag of colour is a defiant act in opposition to wider global frameworks of injustice and Western-centrism which perpetuate Myanmar’s crises.

Studying drag in the Myanmar context is far from simple, as media rarely flows in or out, amongst heavy and arbitrary censorship. However, comparable political contexts can offer insight into the anti-authoritarian potential of drag. Castellano, Rios, and Ferreirinho (2022) present applicable evidence to how, within the Brazilian context, conservative governments take advantage of the highly visible performances of drag to engage in fear-mongering surrounding LGBTQ+ populations.

Moreover, Emi uses elements of Burmese culture in her drag performance as a revolutionary assertion of healing and comfort, in opposition to authoritarianism. Examining Emi’s performances, elements of Burmese fashion can be found. Emi speaks on this choice, saying “My gender exploration started with comfort seeking

behaviour, like there's a specific sense to my mother's vanity with Thanaka (Burmese cosmetic cream shown in Figure 5) and the L'Oreal and Olay that she uses [...] We think of drag



Figure 5 – BrainIndependent, Thanaka Cosmetic Paste. 2018.

as, like hair, makeup, fashion because those are the clearest markers of gender. I also like to think of scent and texture as part of the gender experience.” Whilst authoritarianism “positively predicts antagonism toward rights for minority groups” (Miller et. al 2017), we

can assert through the framework of Schechner (2020), that drag performance has the capacity to facilitate healing.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

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## Imagining Myanmar Drag Futures

In Emi Grate's performance, a desire to reconnect with Myanmar, and for the country to feel her persevering love for the culture and people is evident. After leaving Myanmar, Emi has had the ability

to connect with and ignite passion in queer Southeast Asian communities across geographical zones. The potential of drag and performance to foster community is evidenced in her biography written by Tamar Sella, which states that Emi utilizes “her own upbringing and cultural background to validate and celebrate queerness” (Sella 2020).

Envisioning a future of anti-authoritarian drag in relation to Myanmar, drag can destabilize the future of colonial governance and oppression. Per Khubchandani (2023, 151), “drag can mobilize the aesthetics of gender, race, Indigeniety, class, and disability to recall and speak back to multiple and overlapping legacies of colonialism.” Drag is artful and adaptive, meaning it can morph to recognize and address the context its enactments operate in. Khubchandani (2023) further emphasizes that the play of decolonial drag makes evident the possibilities of a world beyond violence or injustice.

## Conclusion

LGBTQ+ folks play a pivotal role in political movements within Myanmar’s military state, countering authoritarian violence and fighting for progressive policy and restoration of democratic governance. Further, Myanmar drag and drag within authoritarian states stands as performed acts of resistance, visibly refusing to be silenced. In the case of Emi Grate, since coming to the U.S. in 2011 and seeking asylum (Sella 2020), she continues to perform her calls for justice for Burma. Moreover, drag in/in relation to Myanmar has a future filled with potential for further community, unity, and justice-seeking. Ultimately, this research aims to express the capacity of drag to play a meaningful role in political resistance and constructing hope amongst authoritarianism.

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# The Untold Influence of Sasha Colby in Miss Continental on Contemporary Drag Performance

CLARKE<sup>59</sup>

In the dim, smoky warmth of the Baton Show Lounge in Chicago, the audience holds its collective breath. Anticipation thrums through the room like a low hum. Then suddenly, the spotlight blazes to life, slicing through the darkness and locking onto center stage. Standing there, poised and radiant, is Sasha Colby, about to make history at the 2012 Miss Continental pageant. Before she even moves, her presence fills the space: regal, magnetic, undeniable. Every glance, every subtle tilt of her head commands attention, weaving a silent spell over the crowd. Then, the music drops, a powerful, rhythmic pulse, and Sasha springs into motion.

What follows is not just a performance, but an act of pure mastery. With each fluid movement, she blurs the line between choreography and storytelling, embodying a living, breathing narrative of strength, grace, and vulnerability. Her transitions are seamless; her precision, razor-sharp. Every extension of her body, every lyrical gesture, channels a vision of femininity that feels at once timeless and revolutionary. The audience is spellbound, witnessing not just a contestant, but an artist at the absolute peak of her craft (Kalani Productions, 2023).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANVZdk9oDBE>

**Video 1.** *Sasha Colby in the talent competition at Miss Continental 2012* (Kalani Productions, 2023)

By the time her Talent routine concludes, the audience erupts in applause. Colby is then crowned Miss Continental, securing her place in drag pageant history.

More than just a personal triumph, Colby's performance throughout Miss Continental exemplifies a tradition of trans excellence in pageantry that has long shaped contemporary drag aesthetics (Greene, 2020), a lineage often underrepresented in mainstream drag narratives. Drag is more than entertainment; it is a performative act that challenges, redefines, and sometimes affirms gender. Performance theorist Richard Schechner defines performance as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Schechner, 2020, p. 3). Drag, especially in its pageant form, embodies what Schechner calls "restored behavior:" ritualized, culturally embedded action that carries social memory. Colby's performance, and those of other trans pageant queens, are examples of this restored behavior: highly intentional performances shaped by generational practice, cultural heritage, and political resistance.

This project uses Colby's engagement in Miss Continental 2012 as a case study to explore the overlooked influences of trans-inclusive drag pageantry in shaping modern drag culture. Rather than arguing that Colby's performance was a singular rupture or unprecedented breakthrough, it's contended that the performance shows the aesthetic, cultural, and political power of trans drag lineage.

While many Miss Continental winners have shaped the pageant's legacy, Colby offers a particularly generative lens through which to explore trans drag excellence. Intellectually, her performance aligns closely with key performance theory concepts such as restored

behavior and gender performativity. Culturally, Colby's recent rise in mainstream media has reignited interest in her early performances, inviting deeper reflection on her artistic roots and their influence on contemporary drag. Practically, the availability of well-documented footage and interviews allows for a detailed and rigorous analysis that is not possible for many earlier pageant performers. Colby's cultural heritage as a Native Hawaiian performer also brings even further depth to her drag. Her performances often integrate hula-inspired movement, ancestral embodiment, and a spiritual presence that reflects Indigenous philosophies (Hajibayova and Buente 2017). These elements challenge white-centric drag aesthetics and expand the cultural vocabularies of femininity and performance (Greene, 2020).

In *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Richard Schechner defines performance as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (2020, p. 3). In his theory of "restored behavior," performance becomes a repeated, ritualized act embedded in cultural memory. Colby's performance in Miss Continental embodies this repetition. Her lip-sync, choreography, and aesthetics are part of an archive of embodied queer knowledge, rehearsed and refined. Schechner's framework allows us to see Colby's drag not simply as entertainment, but as ritual. It is both intentional and historical. By stepping onto that stage in 2012, Colby was engaging in an act of cultural transmission, what Diana Taylor calls the repertoire (Taylor, 2003). Her performance is the embodiment of trans pageant culture: deliberate, precise, and deeply rooted in resistance and self-determination.

The history of Miss Continental, founded in 1980 by Jim Flint, is one of both visibility and marginalization. Unlike many drag competitions that historically excluded trans women, Miss Continental has long welcomed trans performers, offering a platform for their artistry in a space that values grace, beauty, and precision. Documentaries such as *The Queen* (Simon, 1968) and *The*

*Queens* (Saxenmeyer, 2018) provide insight into the cultural impact of these pageants. *The Queen* captures the backstage tension and social hierarchy of a 1960s New York drag pageant, exposing the racism and transphobia that would lead Crystal LaBeija to co-found the House of LaBeija and reinvent the ball culture movement (Simon, 1968). Decades later, *The Queens* follows Miss Continental as a whole, showcasing how pageantry fosters community, resilience, and excellence (Saxenmeyer, 2018).

Colby's performance stands out not because it reflects a new style, but because it ingrains these inherited aesthetics with her personal story and cultural grounding. She performs not simply drag, but drag as a trans Hawaiian woman. The attention to narrative choreography and costuming reflects decades of Miss Continental tradition, while also queering and decolonizing its expectations. In comparison to earlier winners such as Erica Andrews (2004) or Mokha Montrese (2009), Colby's performance continues the legacy of elegance and emotional engagement while incorporating gestures rooted in hula and evoking mana (spiritual power). In later winner's performances such as Stasha Sanchez (2013), one can trace Colby's influence in the integration of storytelling and affective movement. Thus, Colby's performance throughout the competition is not an isolated innovation but part of a continuum of excellence in trans-inclusive drag.

While much of Colby's power lies in her physical performance, the Q&A portion of the competition highlights another essential aspect of her drag: her voice. In this quieter but equally impactful moment, Colby demonstrates reflection, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence. Speaking as a trans Hawaiian woman on a national stage, she conveys a message of pride, resilience, and purpose, grounding her artistry in lived experience. The Q&A serves not just as a formal requirement of the pageant, but as a rhetorical performance, one that reveals the intellect and intention behind her stage presence. In that moment, Colby doesn't just represent herself, she becomes a spokesperson for a lineage of trans drag

performers whose contributions have too often been overlooked. The video below captures the depth of her poise and the sincerity of her message, adding yet another dimension to her multidimensional presence throughout the competition.

[https://youtu.be/jkoD\\_oIKjQ?t=683](https://youtu.be/jkoD_oIKjQ?t=683)

**Video 2.** Sasha Colby responds during the Q&A portion of Miss Continental 2012 (Kalani Productions, 2023)

Miss Continental has become the most prestigious drag queen pageant system in the world, and its influence extends far beyond the stage in Chicago. Miss Continental's legacy is far-reaching and deeply embedded in global drag communities. This isn't just a prestigious title, it is a cultural institution that continues to shape how drag is performed, valued, and remembered around the world. Nearly every major drag scene today, from North America to Southeast Asia, reflects the aesthetic signatures and stage presentation that Miss Continental has refined and popularized over the past four decades. From the Haus of Andrews lineage to performers like Candis Cayne and Brooke Lynn Hytes, the competition has nurtured some of drag's most recognizable and respected figures, many of whom have gone on to become icons in their own right.

The system's influence is also intergenerational and intercontinental. Queens trained in the Continental tradition pass on their knowledge through houses, mentorships, and workshops, creating a lineage of shared aesthetics and values that transcend national borders. The pageant's openness to trans performers helped carve a space where trans excellence is not just accepted but celebrated. By accepting trans women when other systems excluded them, Miss Continental expanded the definition of what drag, and who gets to be excellent at it. In this way, Miss Continental acts not just as a stage but as an anchor for global drag. It teaches us that drag is not just individual artistry but collective memory. Colby's performance is one thread in this larger tapestry, and by

analyzing it, we uncover the broader network of influence that the Miss Continental pageant continues to exert worldwide.

In 2023, Colby returned to the spotlight and captivated a mainstream television audience by winning Season 15 of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Her win marked a pivotal moment in drag history: not only was she a seasoned pageant queen and former Miss Continental, but she also became the first openly trans woman to win the American version of the show. Colby's presence on *RuPaul's Drag Race* extended beyond performance, she used her platform to educate audiences about trans joy, spirituality, and cultural pride. Her storytelling in confessionals, runway statements, and interviews contributed to a broader public understanding of trans drag as both art and identity. By embodying authenticity and confidence on a global stage, Colby brought visibility to trans pageant excellence and inspired a new generation of performers and viewers. In a media landscape where trans bodies are often politicized or erased, her victory offered not only representation but reclamation, an invitation to witness the full spectrum of trans artistry in motion.

Mainstream platforms like *RuPaul's Drag Race* have often failed to adequately credit the pageant traditions and trans performers that laid the groundwork for the show's aesthetics (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017). While the program has elevated drag visibility, it has also contributed to the commercialization and flattening of drag into digestible television tropes. It is argued that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has commodified drag by prioritizing spectacle over historical continuity (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017). Colby's presence on the show challenges this tendency. When she re-wore her 2012 Miss Continental gown during Season 15 of *Drag Race*, she performed a kind of archival drag, reinvoking a moment of personal and community significance rather than pandering to the show's emphasis on novelty.

High-end designers have cited drag queens, particularly those from

trans-inclusive pageants, as inspirations for their work (Greene, 2020). Further, academic studies on gender performance highlight how drag artists refine their personas, describing drag as a “constructed theology of identity” (Alexander, 2003, p. 349). Colby’s embodiment of femininity aligns with this framework, demonstrating how pageant queens redefine the art of drag.

Today, drag continues to evolve alongside social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where digital drag performances allow artists to reach global audiences. This evolution raises critical questions about the future of pageantry. Will digital content replace live competition? Can institutions like Miss Continental retain relevance without sacrificing their historical integrity? What does trans-inclusive pageantry offer that digital fame cannot? Colby’s continued relevance in both digital and live drag performance offers insight. Her artistry demonstrates that even in a rapidly changing landscape, the core elements of drag, remain vital. Colby not only continues to perform, she continues to teach. Her recent appearance introducing pop artist Chappell Roan at the 2024 MTV Video Music Awards communicates how trans drag is increasingly shaping mainstream aesthetics, even outside explicitly queer spaces:



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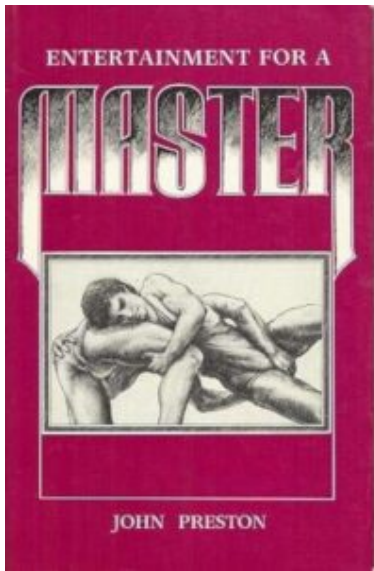
here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/dragaroundtheworld/?p=290#oembed-1>

**Video 3.** Sasha Colby introduces Chappell Roan at the 2024 MTV Video Music Awards (MTV, 2024).

As drag becomes more embedded in pop culture, performers like Colby serve as essential reminders of drag’s radical, Indigenous,

and trans roots. The oral traditions of trans queens are invaluable to understanding drag history. Sasha Colby's performance in the Miss Continental pageant embodies the power of drag as art, ritual, and resistance. It bridges history and innovation, trans identity and cultural storytelling, glamour and groundedness. *Her drag is not just about illusion or beauty; it is about truth. In performing herself, Colby performs for many: her culture, her lineage, and her community. Her legacy is not hers alone, but one that ripples across generations, platforms, and stages. To reclaim the significance of trans-inclusive pageantry is to reclaim a central chapter of drag history.*

# Safe and Sexy: Condom Use in 1980s Erotica as Resistance



In a scene from John Preston's 1986 gay erotica book *Entertainment for a Master*, two men are made to wrestle naked in front of an aroused audience of wealthy sexual sadists. The loser is then required to receive oral and anal sex from the winner, while the audience watches and enjoys. The power imbalance between the winner and the loser, and the audience and the wrestlers is deeply eroticized (Preston 1986, 18). In his book, Preston eloquently draws the reader into a world of

sadomasochistic fantasies, transgressive enough that he feels the need to frequently defend the ethical impulses behind them. Though, peculiarly, despite these scenes being intentionally transgressive, there is always a strong emphasis on strictly following the rules of condom use. While condoms serve a practical purpose in video pornography, there is seemingly no need in literary erotica. Yet Preston not only depicts condoms, he makes them sexy, incorporating them into his world of desire. The narrator in *Entertainment for a Master* describes in detail how the loser of the match carefully unwraps and applies a condom, noting how it “stretches glistening over the tight skin” (Preston 1986, 18).

The meticulous description of condom use in *Entertainment for a*

*Master* can be usefully analyzed as a performance, according to the work of Richard Schechner, a specialist in performance studies. Something is a performance when it is commonly culturally understood as such, but can be studied as a performance when we are “asking performance questions” (Schechner 2020, 12). These questions pertain to who the audience is, the effects this has on them, and the ways in which condom use is “staged.” In analyzing this as a performance, a handful of sentences in Preston’s book reveal a great deal about the history of community-led safe sex discourses amidst the devastation wrought by the AIDS crisis. At a time when public health discourses often sought to stigmatize gay men who failed to use condoms, promoting condom use through discourses of pleasure is quite profound.

I argue that the performance of condom use in John Preston’s 1986 literary erotica *Entertainment for a Master* resists moralizing HIV prevention discourses during the AIDS crisis, supporting a culture of community-led safe sex discourses that work *with* gay men’s needs and desires, rather than policing them. To adequately analyze the performance of condom use in *Entertainment for a Master*, it is necessary that we first contextualize it, giving us clues as to what it *does*. Firstly, I do this by highlighting the framework of biopower to better understand the stigmatizing discourses Preston was responding to, followed by a few examples of these discourses. Then, I look to Preston’s other works, where he more explicitly describes how his erotica resists these stigmatizing discourses. Finally, I analyze the performance of condom use in *Entertainment for a Master* in depth, demonstrating how he resists stigmatizing discourses by eroticizing safe sex.

## Why This Matters

Highlighting the history of community-led safe sex discourses is

particularly important as safe sex “has been alienated from gay men by the public health establishment” (Haperlin 2015, 220). Public health discourses have a history of taking grassroots HIV prevention strategies, such as condom use, and turning them against gay men by stigmatizing those who fail to use condoms or have multiple sexual partners (Haperlin 2015, 220). This is explained by the theoretical framework employed by scholars who study HIV prevention discourses through biopolitical theory.

*Biopower/politics*

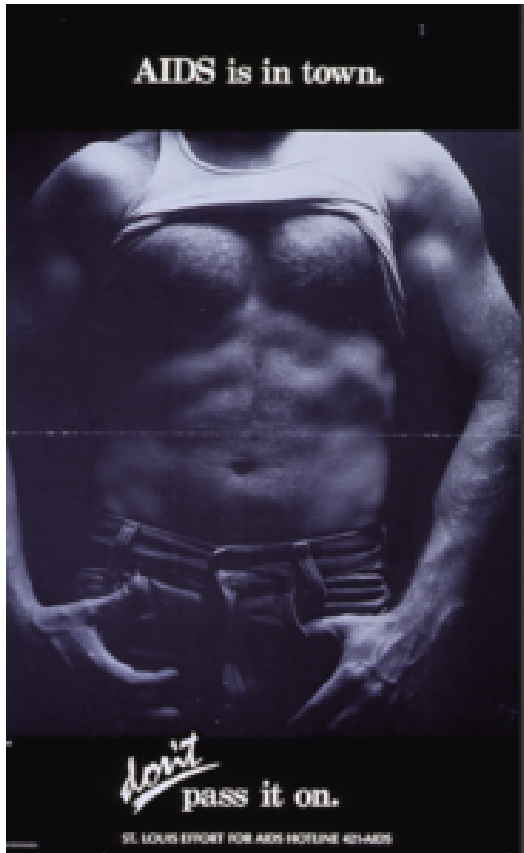
The concept of biopower comes from the work of Michel Foucault, looking at the diffuse operation of power embedded in norms and discourses to foster certain lives over others. More powerful voices have a disproportionate ability to dictate which lives get to be considered “normal,” and which are considered “deviant.” The construction of subjectivities, those social categories that we are understood through and understand ourselves through, is crucial in this task of separating out the “normal” body to be fostered (Foucault 1976, 136-139).

This scholarship is largely a response to the trend toward assimilatory gay activism that emerged in America in the 1970s and 1980s, which asserted that gay men should be included in dominant institutions such as marriage and markets (Ferguson 2018, 5; Martinez-Lacabe 2020, 11). In the process of assimilation, discursive boundaries were set, distinguishing between “normal” gay subjects who could be assimilated and those to be disallowed (Dean 2009, 20; Ferguson 2018, 28-32). The scholarly framework I employ critiques this division and suggests that public health discourses imposed

“safe sex” as a central marker of responsible gayness for the purposes of constructing this divide (Adam 2005, 334, 344-345; Aturk 2020, 8-9; Brisson 2016, 347-348; Race 2007, 100-105; Schubert 2020, 225-227; Thomann 2018, 999). Raising the history of grassroots safe sex discourses thus highlights an alternative path to safe sex education, which does not involve a moralizing framework that stigmatizes those who do not use condoms. Rather, grassroots efforts engage with gay men on their own terms, addressing their needs and desires. Thus, this biopolitical framework illuminates how the performance of condom use in *Entertainment for a Master* is not inconsequential. It pushes back against the workings of biopower and moralizing HIV prevention discourses.

## Moralizing Discourses During the Crisis

During the 1980s, as Preston was writing *Entertainment For a Master*, public health agencies and (occasionally) AIDS activists groups were producing HIV prevention discourses that sought to construct the “bad” gay man in opposition to the “good” gay man who was “monogamous, ideally married, or practice only safe sex and remain HIV- at any cost” (Atuk 2008, 8). The figure of the “bad” gay man was often actively constructed through fear-mongering advertising, evident in archived posters from the period. While Preston lived and wrote in Maine and the examples I highlight are from Missouri and Texas, they demonstrate the types of discourses going around America more broadly at the time.



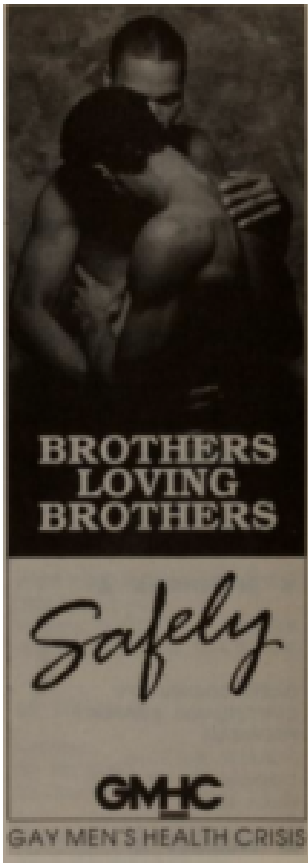
This poster comes from the Missouri AIDS activist group St.Louis Effort For AIDS sometime during the 1980s. Analyzed as a performance, we can see how it serves to actively construct the figure of the reckless gay man, as the threat of AIDS transmission is personified. This poster gives the threat of AIDS a corporeal form, with the words “AIDS is in town” replacing what would be a face on a disembodied torso. AIDS is not presented as a virus, but a personage. This contributes to discourses that categorize

certain “reckless” gay men as disease vectors and essentially walking viruses.



This poster by the Dallas County (Texas) Health Department from the same period further contributes to the stigmatization of those considered promiscuous, part of a broader discourse through which the “irresponsible” gay men is constructed. It warns that having multiple sexual partners (“sleeping around”) will get you a “bad reputation,” shaming gay men who are not adhering to strict monogamy. These posters support the theories presented by scholars on biopolitics and HIV prevention discourses, and highlight the types of messaging Preston was responding to at the time.

## What Preston's Other Works Reveal



These images come from Preston's *The Big Gay Book*, in sections advising on safe sex and AIDS advocacy. They emphasize love and desire, contrasting sharply with the fear mongering posters shown above.

Preston's non-fiction demonstrates implicitly and explicitly that he sought to create his own safe sex material because of his issues with these moralizing HIV prevention discourses. His issues with the biopolitical divide that these discourses constructed is implicitly evident in his 1989 book *Personal dispatches: writers confront AIDS*. This book is a collection of pieces by prominent gay writers, detailing their experiences living and writing during the AIDS crisis. In one chapter, author Scott Tucker embarks on a scalding critique of the moralizing divide being constructed between “good” gay men

who engage in safe monogamous sex, and “bad” gay men who do not. Tucker (1989, 124) notes:

“Good gays can find a place in this society if we play by the rules of marriage and monogamy – and presumably by the rules of adultery and divorce. Bad gays will remain outsiders, identified with promiscuity and plague.”

We can assume that Preston, as the collator of the book, shares in some way with Tucker’s frustrations. Preston’s views are then made even more explicit in the section on gay men’s sexual health in his 1993 book *My Life as a Pornographer: & other indecent acts*. In a scalding critique, he highlights the issues with these moralizing HIV prevention discourses as “almost to prove how little gay men’s sexual needs and desires were understood, there were many declarations that gay men should simply become monogamous” (Preston 1993, 162). As these suggestions rarely acknowledge gay men’s needs and desires, Preston suggests that safe sex education must be developed *by gay men for gay men* “with a point of view developed from our own experiences” (Preston 1993, 162). He states quite explicitly that this was his “motivation to begin writing safe sex materials...[after having] seen the effects of the first wave of sex-negative messaging” (Preston 1993, 163). Thus, by looking at his other non-fiction works, we can see that John Preston was critical of the moralizing biopolitical divide between “good” gay men and “bad” gay men, and that this drove him to create sex-positive safe sex materials that sought to actively acknowledge gay men’s wants and needs.

## What This Teaches Us About *Entertainment For a Master*

Preston used literary erotica as a medium for better safe sex education that sought to work with gay men’s desires rather than

stigmatizing them. Safe sex wasn't imposed by Preston, it was eroticized. This is evident in the performance of condom use in *Entertainment for a Master*. Safe sex is made sexy, as Preston uses condoms in the book to build anticipation for the penetrative sex to come. In one scene, he describes how a character puts a condom on another character with drawn out narrative timing. He builds this erotic tension by describing how "he carefully opened the foil and pulled out the latex...[working] at it carefully and methodically until the entire shaft was covered" (Preston 1986, 51). To then really drive home the tension and anticipation that condom use brings, the character notes how they "could both make out the seeping precum as it was pressed up against latex" (Preston 1986, 51). In addition to being an erotic tool for building anticipation, the condom itself is eroticized in the book. This is evident in the scene described at the beginning of this piece, as Preston notes how the condom "stretches glistening over the tight skin" (Preston 1986, 18). Thus, condoms are deliberately eroticized in *Entertainment for a Master*, incorporating gay men's desires into safe sex education.

## Why This *Still* Matters

While condom use in Preston's erotica reveals little on its own, understanding it as a performance, contextualized within the stigmatizing discourses he was exposed to and his broader works, allows us to more comprehensively analyze what it *does*. This performance resists moralizing HIV prevention discourses during the AIDS crisis and importantly contributes to community-led safe sex discourses that take gay men's needs and desires seriously. Although Preston was writing during a flurry of discourses around AIDS, these community-led safe sex discourses are no less important today than they were during the 1980s. In 2011, the New York Department of Health ran an ad campaign called "It's Never

Just HIV,” highlighting how stigmatizing HIV prevention discourses in America have continued into the 21st century.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/dragaroundtheworld/?p=292#oembed-1>

This video from the campaign depicts several men, presumably gay, looking mournful and ashamed. It then cuts to a body scan of one of these men, zooming in on a grotesque image of a cancerous anus. When contextualized within the history of stigmatizing HIV prevention discourses, the fear mongering in this ad is clearly directed at “irresponsible” gay men. The bizarre assumption of this video is that gay men engaging in unsafe sex are so reckless that the threat of AIDS is not, in and of itself, enough to motivate them to use condoms. They are presumably unperturbed by AIDS and therefore need to be frightened with the message: “it’s never just HIV.” This highlights how community-led safe sex discourses are as vital now as they were when Preston was writing. The solution to the epidemic is not found in shaming gay men as reckless hedonists. If we are truly committed to their wellbeing, our discourses on safe sex must take gay mens wants and needs seriously.

## Media Attributions

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# Booked and Blessed: Drag Kinging in Vancouver

AIDAN PAU



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here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/dragaroundtheworld/?p=305#oembed-1>

The Birdhouse – a warehouse converted into a performance space in Vancouver – is bustling with drag performers on the overcast day, September 24, 2024. The crowd is sparkly and filled with laughter as around twenty of Vancouver’s drag kings and even a visiting drag king from Toronto chat and occasionally step away to have their photos taken with [Ray McEachern](#) and [Dayna](#) in the [Tiny Dog Studio](#), holding a sign saying “long live kings”. I stand amongst drag kings I idolize, tempering down feelings of imposter syndrome. As I look around, I see performers with perfectly contoured muscles, long dramatic coats, and sky-high platform shoes, boots and high heels. The event was organized by the LONG LIVE KINGS collective consisting of [SKIM](#), [Jei](#), [Percy Pegg](#) and [Velvet Ryder](#), celebrating a year of the drag show [King Sized](#). The conversation is jovial as people meet each other for the first time or make jokes with friends. The sounds echo throughout the warehouse as heels click-clack against the concrete ground of the Birdhouse. Overhead hangs the sculpture in honour of King Fisher made by SKIM. A deep blue bird with yellow accents; the favourite bird of King Fisher and his namesake. *King Sized* exists in part as a memorial for him.

Throughout the joy of the evening, it is also a space of honouring King Fisher.

The performers are moved outside, the slight hint of the sunset peaking through the clouds. Each performer is given a closeup where they show off their makeup and outfit. The crowd of kings cheer on each other as the camera zooms in on each individual. The final shot is taken as a drone flies up and away; coming down and doing a few more takes, flying up again. Afterwards, some of the kings go off to get dinner at a nearby restaurant, still in drag, exciting the patrons of said restaurant.



*Photo collage from the BOOK DRAG KINGS project.*

The BOOK DRAG KINGS video features a multitude of Vancouver’s best drag kings. In a sense of defiance to shows often only having one drag king in the cast of a drag show, the video showcases how many drag performers are in the city. The video cuts between closeup shots of the drag kings and a zoom out shot showcasing the group of kings as a whole. Near the end of the video, additional cuts of a close up of the BOOK DRAG KINGS sign are added on until the cuts stop as the video concludes in a slow zoom out to an aerial shot of the group of drag kings. The music is intense, creating a slow build up of tension as more and more kings are featured in the video before breaking the tension along with the crowd shot of all the performers.

This video is a performance of how drag is a form of play and how, according to performance scholar Richard Schechner... “[p]lay gives people a chance to temporarily experience the taboo, the excessive,

and the risky” (Schechner, 2020, 122). All the drag kings in the video have makeup and costumes that play with concepts of masculinity in ways of glamour, horror and opulence. The video can fulfil all seven aspects of performance identified by Schechner, those being “to entertain, to create beauty, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach or persuade, to deal with the sacred and the demonic” (Schechner, 2020, 19). The media of a video posted on social media is a form of entertainment, the showcasing of drag kings highlights the beauty of drag, drag kinging can be a space to explore gender and sexual identity, the video is a celebration of drag kings as a community within a community, *King Sized* as a whole has been a process of healing as it has its origins in grief, the video is a call on for the wider drag community to expand their ideas of drag to be beyond the conventional feminine, and certain kings in the video invoke sacred and demonic aesthetics such as SKIM and Anya Anomaly’s monstrous drag, and Velvet Ryder’s angelic drag. The video and the coinciding photo series documenting each individual king is a performance with a message. A simple one that bears repeating. To book drag kings. The video is a celebration of the art of drag kinging and brings attention to the underrepresentation of drag kings when thinking of drag as a whole.

## Defining Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic Masculinity is the idea that there is a proper way to be a man. It also encompasses the idea that men naturally are in roles of dominance in relationship to women and other marginalized forms of masculinity and gender expression. In essence, certain traits deemed

masculine are held in higher regard in a way that constructs a hierarchy, with the idea of dominant men are at the top (Kirch, 2008, 671).

## **Defining Queer Theory**

Queer theory is a way of thinking that challenges the assumptions we make about gender and sexuality. In practice, it is the study of gender and sexuality beyond the 'norms' of cisgender and heterosexuality. It is based on the work of scholars like Judith Butler, D. A. Miller, Eve Sedgwick, and Michael Warner (The Encyclopedia of Political Science, 2011, 1412).

## Why No Kings?



Photo of Percy Pegg from the BOOK DRAG KINGS project.

The obvious answer is that there is currently no [Rupaul's Drag Race](#) equivalent for drag kings as time of writing this essay. Kings have been featured on shows like [Dragula](#) and [Call Me Mother](#), but in general, drag kings receive less exposure than drag queens. There is a misconception that drag kings are not as interesting as drag queens. SKIM has talked about how people have tokenized him with backhanded compliments like “[y]ou were really good for a Drag King” and “It was so unexpected!” (skimisking, 2023).

These comments expose a lack of engagement with drag kings and how some people assume that there is a hierarchy to drag, with kinging seen as a lesser form of drag when compared to drag queens.

It is assumed that since masculinity in the mainstream is used to oppress others via patriarchy and the enforcement of male dominance that a performance of masculinity is complicit in or celebrates certain ideas of hegemonic masculinity (Basiliere, 2019, 979). In the video, there are drag kings who inhabit a multitude of different kinds of masculinities from perspectives beyond the idea of hegemonic masculinity. Drag kings in Vancouver encompass many different gender identities. Some are non-binary, trans, women, men; just like drag queening, drag kinging is not limited to any specific gender. As such “[w]hen drag kings perform masculinity with bodies that are explicitly marked as not hegemonically

masculine, they are not celebrating the norms of masculine dominance” (Basiliere, 2019, 999) but rather are a challenge to patriarchy itself by removing masculinity from perceived binaries and hierarchies. The outfits of all the drag kings in the video reveals different ways of expressing masculinity beyond hegemonic ideas of masculinity. The kings take inspiration from their cultures, some express their sexuality, others horror and monstrosity, and some in gentlemanliness expressed by dapper attire. The sheer amount of different kings in the video challenges hegemonic masculinity because it shows that there is no singular correct way to be masculine. While drag kings have been less visible than drag queens, their invisibility exposes the possibility of how drag kings can inform how we interact with drag and gender as a whole. LONG LIVE KINGS project shows how the process of increasing the visibility of drag kings can be a process that creates spaces for more queer people.

## Why We Need (more) Drag Kings

Drag kings are not a novel concept. Drag King have existed long before drag was widely televised. Male impersonation has existed in many capacities and differing contexts. Pictured to the right is Vesta Tilley a British male impersonator from 1895 and pictured below is the Takarazuka Revue, an all female musical theatre group where women played both male and female characters.



*Photo of Vesta Tilley, a male impersonator, 1895.*

Drag kinging has also coincided with drag queens in the more contemporary drag era as well. Starting in 1996, a group of lesbians formed the Mambo Drag Kings in Montreal (Ayoup and Podmore, 2003, 52). According to Colleen Ayoup and Julie Podmore, the MDKs were accepted within queer spaces “such as within a drag show or during a lesbian-dominated event, the MDKs have been well received (if not admired) by gay men in the audience [however in] gay male spaces where masculinity dominates and is eroticised, [...] they do not always fit the bill” (Ayoup and Podmore, 2003, 62). There is a sense of discomfort when performing within spaces certain spaces like those identified by MDKs (Ayoup and Podmore, 2023, 62). SKIM has discussed online as to how being the only drag king in a drag show is exhausting as the spaces can be unwelcoming to drag kings (skimisking, 2023). These accounts from both MDKs and SKIM reveal

how certain queer people like transgender, non-binary and lesbian individuals are not always included in spaces thought of as queer.

Queerness encompasses many gender and sexual identities, and the LONG LIVE KINGS project helps create spaces for parts of the queer community that may receive less space. The LONG LIVE KINGS project is a demand, making sure kings are properly included when thinking of drag spaces. By demanding that drag shows consistently have more than one drag king on cast, it ensures that the work of education and keeping spaces safe for drag kings is not placed onto one person (skimisking, 2023) and allows drag kings to not feel isolated. The space has often been inclusive of lesbians with SKIM often declaring “I love lesbians” on the microphone at *King Sized*. Drag kinging is not new but treating it as such shows how drag kings do not have the visibility they deserve. By having more drag kings, it ensures that more people can engage with them, as drag kinging offers an important introspective on gender and masculinity.

The lack of space for drag kings identified by the project is a symptom of a wider issue. Drag kings often unpack masculinity in a way that “North American mainstream society is not only less familiar and less comfortable seeing women claim a masculine subject position, but also less willing to see masculinity be deconstructed and exposed as a performance” (Ayoup and Podmore, 2003, 64). This is rooted in the naturalization of hegemonic masculinity. Being raised under patriarchy, masculinity is seen as a norm and naturally deserving of positions of power. Drag kinging is a direct challenge to hegemonic masculinity as it “challenges the hierarchical social order of gendered practices” (Anzani et al., 2022, 541) by revealing the constructed nature of masculinity. This aversion to the deconstruction of masculinity performed by drag kings highlights the need for more drag kings as “[d]rag kings’ ability to view gender from various standpoints enables them to alter meanings and expectations of what it means to be a man, woman, or something in between” (Baker and Kelly, 2016, 49).

Drag kinging brings in more flexibility around queerness and for some can be an exploration into gender. SKIM has expressed how drag kinging has been a way for Romi Kim – SKIM’s name out of drag – to explore masculinity, as SKIM uses he/him pronouns while Romi Kim identifies as a non-binary lesbian and uses they/them pronouns. Masculinity needs to be deconstructed as hegemonic masculinity has done harm to not just the queer community but beyond as well. Trying to force people to fit into certain constructed gendered expectations creates a hierarchy with certain constructions of gender being above others, which can be used to oppress others. By showing the multitude of different drag kings in Vancouver, the LONG LIVE KINGS project shows the multiple different ways masculinity is being performed, allowing for a more inclusive idea of masculinity and gender as a whole.



*Photo of Takarazuka Revue in a production of “Fine Romance”.*

## How *Long Live Kings* Effectively Communicates the Need for Drag Kings



Photo of SKIM from the BOOK DRAG KINGS project.

The Long Live Kings collective consisting of SKIM, Percy Pegg and Jei So has been the driving force behind the BOOK DRAG KINGS project along with producing the show *King Sized*. These projects have been a call on for the wider drag community to consider drag kings as equals in the drag world and does so in a practice that allows for anger and grief, but also joy and celebration, making a well-balanced and robust movement. By using performance to showcase drag kings, this continues the practice of how “[a]s a queer

leisure activity, drag performances straddle [a] divide, oscillating between the dual functions of bringing people together in a community and setting out political goals for those convened” (Barnett and Johnson, 2017, 691). By bringing so many drag kings together, the project and *King Sized*, empowers drag kings. Instead of kings being booked individually and separate from each other, *King Sized* has brought drag kings together and shows how “doing drag in a group with an oppositional collective identity, feminist political commitment, and practices can harness drag’s disruptive power” (Shapiro, 2007, 267) as more drag shows around Vancouver platform drag kings. These projects have brought drag kings around Vancouver together fostering a sense of community and support.

There is a sense of anger and grief in the BOOK DRAG KINGS

video with the choice of music. The expressing of anger shows how drag can be positioned to both entertain and express an important message. Anger can be exhausting as “those of us who experience rage most acutely and frequently are also often those of us impacted by the politics of communal exclusion” (Malatino, 2021, 838) leading to burn out. The grief is held by the performers as *King Sized* and the BOOK DRAG KINGS project exist as a result of Jayme Andrews who performed as King Fisher’s passing in 2023. The Long Live Kings collective has effectively used anger and grief alongside joy to “[amplify] the voices of underrepresented drag artists, turning grief into a movement for equality and solidarity” (skimisking et al., 2025). The project is a precise use of anger and thus is a critique of queer spaces in Vancouver and beyond in a way that does not involve infighting as it primes the viewer to listen to the content without becoming defensive (Lorde, 1981, 5). This is in contrast as to how in the past, Vancouver’s queer scene has an issue of call-outs which make it difficult to plan events as shaming and disposability can be tiring (Stillwagon and Ghaziani, 2019, 888). The video and photo series does not engage in call-outs that shame past actions but rather provides practices to make effective changes for the future. The Long Live Kings collective has created an effective performance that highlights the importance of drag kings in a way that fosters solidarity rather than furthers the division it fights against by expressing anger and grief, but using it to fuel drag and create spaces of joy and healing.

## Conclusion: Book Drag Kings!

The work that the Long Live Kings collective has been doing has been inspiring because it brings to the forefront the political potentials of drag kings. By expanding ideas of drag and forging connections, Long Live Kings has created a strong, supportive fan base that has already impacted Vancouver's drag scene and is currently working on a video series about drag kings to spread their message on a global scale. The series is set to



*Jay Walk King.*

release in June 2025. The BOOK

DRAG KING video and photo series project then can be seen both as a celebration of how far we have come in the past year and the beginning of expanding ideas beyond the local to make an impact on the global scale. Drag kings have always been an important part of drag culture, and platforming them helps ensure the fight for queer liberation is one that includes everyone. This project has its origins in grief with the loss of King Fisher and in his memory is a movement created to honour drag kings like him.

## Author Positionality Statement – Aidan Pau/Carrie Oki Doki/Jay Walk King

I am a Chinese diaspora drag diva currently performing in so-called “Vancouver”. My drag often takes notes from vintage aesthetics, I make



almost everything I wear myself and I hope to make costumes for the drag scene professionally one day. While I primarily perform as a drag queen/thing known as Carrie Oki Doki, I always love exploring the masculinities I often shift away from as a feminine, non-binary individual. Jay Walk King has been my way of reclaiming masculinity on my own terms. I have had a lot of imposter syndromes while writing this essay as I do not want to take up too much space as I do acknowledge that I primarily perform as a drag queen/thing. Drag for me has been a way to see how self-expression can resonate with others. I love the humour, the joy and the rage that a drag performer can embody. I am so honoured to have performed at a King Sized and to have been included in this project as a whole.

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# The Performance of Gender in East Asian Cosplay: A Conversation with a Cosplayer—Masculinity, Femininity, and the Rise of Weiniang

XINZE WANG



*A picture of Xiao Le posted on the internet about her cosplay content.*

“Only when I cosplay do I feel like I am truly myself. I don’t like who I am in my daily life, but once I step into the world of cosplay, I become incredibly confident,” said Xiao Le, a cosplayer from southern China whom I interviewed. XiaoLe is currently a university student and also runs her own online accounts. Despite her significant online popularity, she rarely interacts with people in real life and often experiences a profound disconnect between her online persona and her everyday self. Xiao Le further mentioned that she feels deeply entrenched in a rigidly binary gender system, a belief she personally accepts. To her, biological sex is one’s innate gender—a common perspective in Asian societies. To be honest, as someone who has also grown up within a binary gender society, my own understanding of gender diversity is quite limited. Consequently, my exploration of cosplay primarily adheres to the gender binary. Throughout my exploration, I discovered cosplay to be a unique cultural phenomenon in Asia. In many East Asian societies, male masculinity often comes under scrutiny. Men who exhibit traits perceived as feminine or artistic typically face social rejection or even hostility. Scholar Yen Ling Shek notes, “Asian cultural values, such as humility and communalism, were feminized and challenged the appropriateness of traits in hegemonic masculinity such as confidence, individualism, and competition.”<sup>1</sup> Within this context, cosplay serves as a unique outlet. In cosplay communities, many Asianmen freely explore gender expression, including portraying female characters, thereby escaping societal criticism regarding their masculinity. Cosplay culture grants Asian men unprecedented freedom, offering broader spaces to authentically express themselves, thus challenging traditional gender norms. For Xiao Le, although her cosplay is within the same gender, it remains a significant method of identity exploration. When performing as an anime character, she adopts the character’s mindset, demonstrating the performer’s creative engagement with the role.

Under the dazzling lights of anime conventions and within the

virtual spaces of streaming platforms, a fascinating transformation is taking place: ordinary individuals become fantastical characters, stepping into identities that defy conventional social expectations. Cosplay is far more than simply donning costumes; it is a dynamic act of performance that fuses identity, gender, and self-expression. In East Asian countries such as China, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, cosplay has increasingly become a powerful medium through which individuals challenge and explore traditional binary gender norms. Whether through the exaggerated feminization of Weiniang (伪娘) performances or the gender-fluid practice of crossplay, cosplay blurs the lines between reality and fiction, questioning what it means to “perform gender.”

This paper, drawing on Richard Schechner’s (2002) theory of performance, conceptualizes cosplay as a form of performance that simultaneously subverts and reinforces traditional gender binaries. By analyzing cases of cross-gender performance, produsage (productive usage), and the commercialization of gendered performances, this paper argues that cosplay is not merely entertainment; it serves as a window into the complex interactions between identity, culture, and expression in East Asian societies.

## Introduction

Schechner (2002) defines performance as a repetitive act situated within a cultural framework, involving audience interaction, embodiment, and a state of liminality. Cosplay embodies these elements, allowing individuals to temporarily enter alternative identities, often centered around gender expectations. This paper proposes that cosplay constitutes a gendered form of performance that, through cross-gender roleplay and commercialization, provides individuals in East Asia with a gentle means to engage with, and at times transgress, gender limitations, offering a pathway to more authentic self-expression.

This paper centers on the lived experiences of Xiaole, a participant within cosplay culture, whose personal accounts provide an insider’s view into this phenomenon. While acknowledging the inherent subjectivity of such a perspective, this exploration offers insight into what I believe cosplay fundamentally represents.

## Case Study 1: Crossplay and Gender Performance

One of the most prominent expressions of gender performance in cosplay is crossplay—the practice of portraying characters of a different gender. Leng (2013), drawing upon Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, argues that male crossplayers, by exaggerating traditional feminine traits, clearly expose the socially constructed nature of gender.

Similarly, Galbraith (2013) notes that cosplay in Japan and Australia provides a “safe space” for exploring gender identities. Xiaole’s experiences strongly align with this observation. In her view, wearing a cosplay costume transforms her, granting her confidence and courage to showcase herself on online platforms. Cosplay costumes offer her a space for self-presentation that is free from the constraints and judgments tied to her everyday identity.

The interview with cosplayer Scoot, featured in the video similarly highlights this transformative process—from initial self-doubt to authentic self-expression through cosplay performances related to gaming characters. For many, cosplay represents an act of embodying an ACG (anime, comics, games) character, offering a temporary escape from the limitations of their biological bodies and allowing them to live as the characters they aspire to become.



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/dragaroundtheworld/?p=307#oembed-1>*

In East Asia, as ACG culture moves from a marginalized subculture into an increasingly socially recognized arena, cosplay performances have become more widely accepted by mainstream audiences. This growing acceptance enables performers to use cosplay as a protected space, temporarily shedding their everyday identities and becoming the characters they choose to embody.

## Case Study 2: Prodosage in Gender Performance

In Cosplay culture, the reproduction of costumes is merely the surface; the core lies in the creative reinterpretation of characters and the rearticulation of cultural meanings. As an experienced cosplayer, Xiaole points out that Cosplay is not limited to the replication of costumes; rather, it is a process of creative reconstruction of characters through individual understanding and interpretation. This phenomenon has been conceptualized by Nichols (2019) as “produsage”—a fusion of production and usage. Through produsage, cosplayers not only consume the original culture but also actively participate in its reproduction, challenging existing gender and power structures, particularly the traditionally male-dominated discursive systems.

An illustrative example of this cultural mechanism can be observed at the 2021 China International Cartoon & Game Expo (CCG Expo), in the Cosplay of Genshin Impact characters Venti and Klee. Venti, a male character with delicate, feminine features and ambiguous gender characteristics, is often portrayed by female cosplayers;

conversely, Klee, a young female character, is frequently cross-played by male cosplayers. This mismatch between character and performer genders indicates that, within Cosplay culture, gender boundaries are deliberately blurred, shifting the focus of performance towards the traits of the character itself rather than the biological sex of the performer.



*The cosplay of Genshin character Venti (left) and Keli (right).*

In particular, Venti's case demonstrates the high degree of inclusivity and flexibility regarding cross-gender performance within ACG (anime, comics, and games) culture. By reinterpreting characters, cosplayers explore gender fluidity and transcend the performative constraints of

the traditional binary gender framework. Masculinity, in this context, is de-emphasized and no longer serves as the singular ideal. The freedom of gender performance holds special significance in East Asian cultural environments, where Cosplay culture functions as a “safe space” that embraces diversity and non-normative gender expressions.

Although academic research on this phenomenon remains limited, emerging trends suggest that the male demographic within China's ACG community is undergoing a process of social elitization. Unlike traditional Western standards of masculinity, which emphasize strength and ruggedness, China's elite ACG-affiliated males often possess characteristics such as coming from upper-middle-class backgrounds, achieving outstanding academic results, graduating from top domestic or international universities, and sometimes participating in international STEM competitions (such as the International Olympiad). These attributes have formed a unique synergy with ACG culture.

This phenomenon suggests a subtle shift in the definition of “successful masculinity” within East Asian societies. The close interaction between mainstream pathways to success and ACG culture has enabled men to embody traits such as humility and sensitivity—qualities traditionally marginalized in masculine ideals—thus gradually pushing ACG culture from a niche interest into broader societal acceptance. This cultural transformation not only broadens the modes of masculine expression but also elevates the societal recognition of ACG culture, making it an integral part of contemporary East Asian cultural shifts.

### Case Study 3: *Weiniang* and the Commercialization of Gender Performance

During conversations with Xiaole, we touched upon the topic of *nanniang* (male-to-female cosplayers), an especially intriguing group. The phenomenon of *Weiniang* (伪娘)—a uniquely East Asian manifestation of feminized male cosplay—demonstrates the commercialization dimension of gender performance within cosplay culture. Chao (2017) analyzed the “Alice Cos Group” as an example of how this group leveraged Japan’s *Kawaii* culture and Korea’s *Aegyo* culture to successfully commercialize gender performance through online platforms, television programs, and merchandise sales.



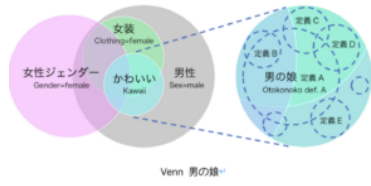
Picture of Alice Cos Group.

Much like Western drag shows, *Weiniang* performances illustrate how male cross-gender expression can be monetized and transformed into an economic asset.

The conceptual framework of Otokonoko (男の娘) further visualizes the theory of male

feminization within East Asian culture. Central to the identity of Weiniang performers is the concept of *kawaii* (meaning “cute” in Japanese). Possessing *kawaii* traits is essential; within this framework, the Weiniang community encompasses cross-dressing, feminine cognitive styles, and sometimes even gender transitioning. These facets enable male performers within Weiniang culture to express themselves and assert confidence in their identities.

Weiniang performances are typically closely connected with ACG (anime, comics, games) culture, incorporating numerous cosplay elements. These elements allow cosplay and ACG audiences—already familiar with nontraditional expressions—to be more



*Multi-layered Venn diagram explaining the Japanese gender concept known as “otoko no ko.”*

accepting of male performers who display few traditional masculine traits. In the context of China, it is notable that the world’s most valuable companies related to ACG-based online gaming and streaming are Chinese enterprises: miHoYo and Bilibili, respectively. As previously mentioned, characters like Venti and Klee, who are frequently portrayed in cosplay, originate from miHoYo’s game Genshin Impact. According to Cao and Yang (2025), the commercial success of major entertainment companies such as miHoYo represents the successful commercialization of ACG culture. Consequently, cosplay-related commercial activities have become increasingly diversified. Through the incorporation of localized cultural elements, an expanding number of people are gradually accepting these commercialized cultural performances, including those featuring reduced expressions of traditional masculinity and Weiniang performances. Furthermore, as Yin, Yiyi, and Anthony Fung (2017) observe, Bilibili—originally a niche platform focused on subcultural content—successfully completed its IPO on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange and has achieved significant market valuation.

This demonstrates that in East Asia, the commercialization of subcultural content is becoming an increasingly important and mainstream phenomenon.

## Conclusion

This paper examines cosplay as a transformative mode of gender performance within East Asian societies, emphasizing three main dimensions: crossplay, produsage, and commercialization. Based on Richard Schechner's (2002) performance theory, cosplay is analyzed as both a subversive and reconstructive practice that challenges and occasionally reinforces traditional gender binaries. Drawing on first-hand experiences, particularly through the case study of cosplayer Xiaole, the paper highlights how cosplay allows individuals to engage with gender fluidity in a culturally resonant and personally empowering way. Crossplay, the act of portraying a character of a different gender, reveals the socially constructed nature of gender roles by emphasizing character traits over biological sex. Studies by Leng (2013) and Galbraith (2013) demonstrate that cosplay provides a "safe space" for experimenting with gender identity, a phenomenon strongly reflected in Xiaole's own transformation when performing cosplay. The concept of produsage, articulated by Nichols (2019), shows how cosplayers not only consume but also creatively re-produce cultural products, actively participating in the reshaping of ACG culture. This dynamic is visible in the cross-gender interpretations of popular characters like Venti and Klee at events like the 2021 China International Cartoon & Game Expo. Further, the commercialization of gender performance—especially through the phenomenon of Weiniang—reflects broader shifts in cultural values. Drawing on Chao (2017) and supported by observations from Cao and Yang (2025) and Yin and Fung (2017), the paper shows that companies like miHoYo and Bilibili have turned subcultural practices into

mainstream economic successes, signaling growing societal acceptance of nontraditional masculinity and gender expression. Overall, cosplay emerges as a vibrant medium that not only entertains but also challenges, redefines, and expands notions of gender, identity, and cultural participation across contemporary East Asian societies.

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