

DRAG IN OKLAHOMA: THE POWER OF PERFORMANCE

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## **Abstract**

The art of drag has been a staple in the entertainment industry for centuries and has become linked to the LGBTQ+ community. In recent years, the art evolved into a form of popular entertainment with drag performers appearing in shows across the US and in a variety of medias. This form of entertainment reached the state of Oklahoma in the 1970s. Although Oklahoma remains known for its conservative values and laws, drag has prospered in the two largest cities: Tulsa, and Oklahoma City. To understand drag in Oklahoma, I conducted interviews with fifteen performers in the state. These interviews helped to reveal the life of drag artists and the condition of the LGBTQ+ community in this conservative state.

Drag entertainers in Oklahoma have diversified in terms of style and type. My thesis explores how the art of drag expanded in conjunction with activism from the societal norms in Oklahoma. I hypothesized that through heteronormative oppression, the drag community of the state became unified and more inclusive resulting in a performance art unique to Oklahoma. The first chapter opens up a discussion of the published history of drag and the lack of research on the art in Oklahoma. Chapter two examines the influences of media on the entertainers. Chapters three, four, and five analyze the three distinct types of drag: Queen, King, and Diva. These last chapters examine more intimately the experiences of the performers in Oklahoma in relation to the oppression of the state. In the final chapters, I use the performers' interviews to strengthen my argument that drag in Oklahoma has become a unique art form as a direct result of their activism and unification against oppression.

“Drag in Oklahoma: The Power of Performance”

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## Introduction

From performance artists to pop culture idols, gender illusionists have entertained American audiences in different forms throughout history. In an attempt to understand the art, society created words to describe the performers and the style of amusement. The general public calls this type of entertainment, drag, defined as, “Clothing typical of one sex worn by a person of the opposite sex.”<sup>1</sup> The terms Drag Queen and Female Impersonator refer to “Individuals who publicly perform being a woman in front of an audience that knows they are men, regardless of how compellingly female ‘real’ they might otherwise appear.”<sup>2</sup> The art of gender illusion has long been intermingled with other terms such as transvestite, transsexual, and cross-dresser. These designations have different meanings than drag; however, they can intermingle with the entertainment. For example, transgender people can earn a living as a performer, and heterosexual men throughout history have cross-dressed for money or art. While these other terms exist, it can be problematic, the focus of this work will reside with the entertainment of impersonators and their role within the larger Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender, Queer, Plus (LGBTQ+) movement. This thesis contains analysis of drag artists who identify as transgender, to discuss the connection between drag and the current fight for transgender rights. This dialogue remains relevant due to the current political atmosphere of fear and hate, that threatens the few achievements towards equality the Oklahoma LGBTQ+ community gained. This scholarship serves as a microhistory of Oklahoma, in which to understand drag in middle America.

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Drag. Accessed July 29, 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/drag>.

<sup>2</sup> Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood, *The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Drag Queens and Female Impersonators* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 4.

The entertainment of female impersonation became socially acceptable because the theater banned participation of women in many countries.<sup>3</sup> The denial of women within these productions forced men to play these roles. Europe and Asia have long standing art forms that considered it normal for men to dress as women and societies that accepted the performances as normal.<sup>4</sup> In America, drag entertainment had its roots in burlesque and vaudeville shows which became a male-only audience.<sup>5</sup> After the popularity of these forms of entertainment waned the venue for drag performers turned towards cabaret. Following World War I (WWI) and during the Great Depression, many military men participated in or viewed drag shows. It became the last time the country would see drag as purely entertainment without bias.<sup>6</sup> After the Second World War (WWII), United States society changed, and as the country moved towards the 1950s, drag further aligned itself with LGBTQ+ communities, which started the cementation of Female Impersonators as going against cultural norms.<sup>7</sup> During this time in American society the LGBTQ+ community imitated hereto-normative behavior. Yet, not everyone believed they should hide and founded homosexual advancement groups the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis.<sup>8</sup> These groups helped to push gender illusion entertainment into alignment with other subjugated groups such as LGBTQ+, African Americans, and women.<sup>9</sup> Performances by Drag Queens became popular in homosexual bars as underground entertainment until the 1960s.

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<sup>3</sup> Rodger, Baker, *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation on the Stage* (London: Triton Books, 1968), 51/80.

<sup>4</sup> Baker, 52.

<sup>5</sup> Baker, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Baker, 81; Don Paulson and Rodger Simpson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah: A Gay Cabaret in Seattle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2/8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Paulson and Simpson, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Paulson and Simpson, 14.

<sup>9</sup> David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 232.

In this decade, several movements started from liberal peace marchers against the war in Vietnam to the sit-ins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The Gay Liberation movement affected drag and the performers the most because the art had become cemented into the LGBTQ+ community. It forced many in the LGBTQ+ community to act. With the historic events of June 1969, Drag Queens rose to the front of the movement.<sup>10</sup> The Stonewall riots of 1969 included the famous Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera who became the leading Queens in US history.<sup>11</sup> Historians credit this event with creating the Gay Pride parades and celebrations that occur annually in June.<sup>12</sup> Even though the struggle for equality continued, gender illusionists benefited from this era in which gay rights originated as drag performers rose to the forefront of the LGBTQ+ community.

In the years following Stonewall, gender illusionists began to perform in movies and host drag balls. The movie medium introduced drag to mainstream America. Due to its wide appeal and to the outstanding nature of the entertainment, gender illusionists became the headliners of the LGBTQ+ community. This connection revealed itself in many forms but none as impactful as the discovery of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). In the extreme throws of death and societal oppression, impersonators used their entertainment to fight for the cause.<sup>13</sup> By putting themselves at the forefront, the performers revealed a glimpse into the homosexual community and their struggles. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, in correlation to struggles taken on by the LGBTQ+ community, the African American populace fought social injustices as well. African Americans

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<sup>10</sup> Paulson and Simpson, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Carter, 64.

<sup>12</sup> Carter, 268.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffery Bennett and Isaac West, "United We Stand, Divided We Fall": AIDS, Amorettes, and the Tactical Repertoires of Drag," *Southern Communication Journal* 74 (July-September 2009): 301. Accessed June 20, 2016. DOI: 10.1080/10417940903060914.



began to raise their voices against police brutality after the recorded beating of Rodney King reached news outlets. Out of this surge of unrest, drag's community involvement rose steadily.

In the present time with the current social problems, drag performers have taken another stand for the oppressed LGBTQ+ community and others. In the late 2000s and the early 2010s, the United States witnessed the formation of the Black Lives Matter Movement along with the long fight for marriage equality. Impersonators have responded with varying forms of social protest. These social challenges throughout history prove the true nature of the drag performers: to use their form of entertainment for activism. US history concerning marginalized people and their movements in the twentieth and twenty-first century in some ways mirror the rise of drag performances as activism covertly presented as entertainment. Drag entertainers draw in crowds while using their performance to express their views on political and social issues facing the LGBTQ+ community.

The term activism means, "A doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue."<sup>14</sup> Historians who study drag have concluded that the art of gender illusion performs the basic restructuring of the gender norms.<sup>15</sup> Authors such as Judith Butler, Leila J. Rupp, and Verta Taylor have cemented the theory of activism within the greater structure of Female Impersonators in America. These leading authors created a blueprint for other historians to map out the historical path of drag entertainment. This theory of activism reveals the correlation between oppression and the social injustices they fight against. Impersonators have followed the same course of action they took with the police beatings of the 1990s and 2000s and the discovery of AIDS in the 1980s. The

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<sup>14</sup> Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Activism. Accessed July 29, 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/activism>.

<sup>15</sup> Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 6, 213; Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 218.

current social issues of transgender bathroom use, marriage equality, and the massacre at club Pulse have shown an increase representation of drag performers in both the media and public eye.<sup>16</sup>

This thesis acts as a microhistory, aims to uncover the connection of Oklahoma impersonators' activism through performance inside an oppressive state. This work will take the issues of gender illusionists in Oklahoma, specifically transgender rights and equality, to understand drag's activism against the growing anti-LGBTQ+ proposed legislation across the United States. The work builds upon the historians of Leila Rupp, Verta Taylor, Don Paulson, and Rodger Simpson. These historians created the basis of microhistorical study about drag. The focus of this work centers around Oklahoma and its artists discussing how they view and exhibit activism through their performances. This study examined the types of activism in Oklahoma with a discussion of how marginalization has helped transform drag into an art unique to other US locations. As one of the top states in anti-LGBTQ+ laws, the study of drag in Oklahoma has an increased importance as the country moves forward under President Donald Trump and his cabinet. From the research in Oklahoma, this work suggests the newest nationwide form of bigotry towards the transgender community will serve as the next challenge drag performers oppose through activism. Over the course of several months, I conducted fifteen interviews and viewed five performances first-hand. From my research, this thesis will uncover the subversive nature of drag compared to the social norms within the state and reveal how an oppressive political and social environment created a distinct Oklahoman drag entertainment.

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<sup>16</sup> Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Ruling Makes Same-Sex Marriage a Right Nationwide," *New York Times* (June 26, 2015). Accessed July 29, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/27/us/supreme-court-same-sex-marriage.html/> Ariel Zambelich and Alyson Hurt, "3 Hours in Orlando: Piecing Together an Attack and its Aftermath," *National Public Radio*. (June 26, 2016). Accessed July 29, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/2016/06/16/482322488/orlando-shooting-what-happened-update/> The Editorial Board, "The Truth of 'Black Lives Matter,'" *New York Times* (September 23, 2015). Accessed July 29, 2016. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/04/opinion/the-truth-of-black-lives-matter.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/04/opinion/the-truth-of-black-lives-matter.html?_r=0).

The first section of this thesis will provide a historiography of drag. This chapter will show the minimal scholarly research about it and that the available information deals with coastal states. For the subject of drag to be complete, it must include the American citizens from the middle of the country. This thesis aims to understand the comparisons and differentiations of Oklahoma drag to the existing research. This chapter discusses the different theories that evolved surrounding the history of drag and this thesis agrees with Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor. Rupp and Taylor argued that drag performances have the ability to promote social activism, and through interviews, I have come to the same conclusion about Oklahoma entertainers. This thesis describes how the oppression in Oklahoma has compelled drag artists towards activism, and how it modified the entertainment in the state to something uniquely its own.

The second chapter of analysis centers on the media, which provided crucial information to understand drag in Oklahoma. Since the state of Oklahoma is situated metaphorically on the buckle of the so-called 'Bible belt' of America, many impersonators only found out about the entertainment through the media. Through movies, music, television, and the Internet, this section will outline what and how these works have impacted drag performers in Oklahoma. It remains crucial to this thesis to understand all of the factors that helped to create this distinctive art form in the state. To many of the impersonators these films or music have acted as an outlet and a safety net. As discussed within the chapter the media has helped the oppressed LGBTQ+ community of Oklahoma to grow their own art, to understand that they are not alone, and aid in connecting with one another.

The third section begins the in-depth interviews of Oklahoma performers beginning with the most well-known type, Drag Queens. Drag Queens are males that impersonate a female to entertain an audience. Queens dominate the entertainment yet their history within Oklahoma

lacks representation. This section seeks to uncover the true thoughts, ideas, and beliefs of these performers within the state. These entertainers discussed the ways they began performing and what hardships they faced because of it. They explained the power that entertaining gives them to express themselves and bring the community closer together. The chapter explains how Oklahoma Queens use performance art to change their situation within the state through social and political activism, providing sanctuary, and one-on-one alteration of the conservative mindset within the state. This section will also detail the harassment, fear, and laws the Oklahoma drag performers face. Through interviews, the Queens prove how this oppression has forced them into a leadership role in the LGBTQ+ community and how the art of drag has blossomed into something vastly different from the surrounding states.

The fourth chapter dives into a lesser known form of drag, Kings. Drag Kings are females that impersonate males for entertainment. Drag Kings have not had the privilege of achieving the same media sensation as Queens, but they have secured their place within Oklahoma. The ones interviewed provided knowledge on how Kings came to prosper in this state and explained how they first began performing. They describe the condition of Drag Kings over fifteen years ago to the present and reveal what has changed and what has stayed the same. Kings suffered much of the same oppression from citizens and explained the fear they face living in the state. Although the Kings experienced a harder road towards representation in drag, they continue with many of the actions associated with other drag performers such as, using their performances to educate the LGBTQ+ community, becoming the voice fight for change, and providing sanctuary for others. The chapter shines light on the subjugation within the state which the Kings responded to with the national Brotherhood community, created to focus on helping each other succeed. This

section proves how varied and prosperous drag has become due to Oklahoma's victimization of the LGBTQ+ community.

The final chapter deals with the newest type of drag, Diva. Divas are women that perform as men impersonating women for entertainment. Divas have only recently entered the drag scene and their presence has been met with disdain. This section illustrated how Divas started performing and how they have had to work twice as hard for other artists to recognize them as valued entertainers in Oklahoma. Similar to other performers, Divas revealed how they first began entertaining and how they have promoted their style of drag within Oklahoma. They explained how even though they had to push for a place to perform in the state it remains one of the only locations where Divas can prosper. Through interviews Divas described the environment of the state along with the oppression they encountered and how they combat it. Divas also use their art to express their emotions with political situations, to connect with the greater LGBTQ+ community, and to keep leading the fight for equality. These performers prove how varied and accepting drag has become in Oklahoma due to the state's subjugation of the larger LGBTQ+ community. The Divas' bookings at venues demonstrate how the drag community has risen out of strife into unity and how the art has developed into a drag unique to Oklahoma.

One of the subsections of this thesis deals with the connection between drag performers and their LGBTQ+ allies, transgender citizens. Transgender performers have long since been a part of the drag world. In the larger LGBTQ+ community, transgender people remain alienated but in Oklahoma there seems to have been the opposite effect. Through research I found that many of the clubs in this state have transgender performers from both the King and Queen side of impersonation, with several emcees being openly transgender. This thesis contains interviews

from transgender entertainers and seeks to explain their own experiences within the state as drag performers. This research examined transgender issues, but it categorized the performers by their drag type to discuss the art form as a whole.

This thesis feels even more pertinent in light of present discriminatory political actions such as North Carolina's bathroom bill (HB2), and the intended oppression against transgender persons living in that state. In addition, this work answers the question of how drag exists in a southern state with a history of discrimination and violence against minorities, especially the so-called "effeminate" ones. From this microhistorical approach, the greater world of drag reveals itself and the understanding of the nature of subversion. The basis for this thesis demonstrates how resistance can be found anywhere in America especially within the suppressed minority groups.

This scholarship differs from all the other histories about the subject of drag, but relies on the work of Leila Rupp, Verta Taylor, Don Paulson, and Rodger Simpson. They approached their research from a microhistory angle. These books revealed a deeper look into the broad world of drag. Rupp and Taylor wrote *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* about one club in Key West, Florida, during the early 2000s, and they discovered that through an analysis of their performances and events, the impersonators actually expressed subversive messages to the public. This study revealed the use of drag as a form of social protest. This thesis differs from their book because of the location, variety, and the specific oppression involved with Oklahoma's unique geography. Oklahoma's issues contrast Key West in popularity, public influence, and violence but the introduction of activism serves as the building blocks to understand the activism within the types of illusion enacted in Oklahoma. Historians Paulson and Simpson wrote their work on a specific cabaret in Seattle, Washington during the 1940s. They

argued that the city's social and cultural atmosphere created and unified the Drag Queens with the LGBTQ+ community for safety and family. This work used the location to understand the issues and freedoms accessible to the Female Impersonators. This thesis will concentrate on one state instead of one club or one town and the events that occur within it. The similarities stop there because this paper found that performance subverts the gender roles and power structure; yet, it also understands that the club life creates familial feelings and attachments for the performers and the audience that comes week after week to see them. This thesis has built upon the previous scholarship to analyze a section of history unknown to many and to detail the unique, varied, and socially conscious nature of Oklahoma drag. The importance of this research resides in the analysis of anti-LGBTQ+ Oklahoma to understand the future of drag within President Trump's America.

## **Chapter One: Historiography of Drag**

Drag entered the performing arts as far back as Ancient Greece and the Elizabethan Age. Men played the female characters due to paternalistic gender roles that banned women from participation as artists. Once the governing bodies of performance entertainment accepted women into the art, the Female Impersonators fell out of the mainstream and evolved into the drag art of today.

In the 1960s, scholarship distanced itself from the older top down approach to history into a new and growing field, in which drag first became a legitimate study. From that point onward, historians have published the art, lives, and history of drag entertainers. Although the subject lacks the richness found in African American and American Women's history, the study of drag itself has developed depth and variety from the scholarship. Historians, philosophical writers, and anthropologists combined their studies to diversify the subject of drag and its historiography. Scholarship of impersonation has not always agreed on their conclusions. Indeed, no works exist about the art in relation to Oklahoma. There have been overarching themes and focuses of the many works that map the pattern of growth within drag history. The writers of drag's history draw from outside social factors that mold and reshape the current published work.

These changes in America's social life form the research presented in this chapter. With the changing social mindset of the 1960s, the first theme appeared and argued for the acceptance of the art form and explained the struggle in the performers' lives due to the intolerance of the entertainment. It changed as the study took off in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The HIV and AIDS epidemic combined with popular media created this resurgence in the study. This historiography era created the themes that range from life being drag, activism, and unity. The third and most recent history of drag occurred alongside the resurgence and



acceptance of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+) rights in the 2000s to 2010s. New historians added the focus on activism for gender identity to the historiography. These three periods of history show the trends of scholarship and reveal the social struggles during each time frame that created the historiography of drag. Time, sexual liberation, and the broadening of scholarship altered the themes and theories that comprise drag historiography.

### **From Intolerance to Acceptance**

In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) published the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM I), which officially labeled homosexuals as having sociopathic personality disturbances.<sup>17</sup> It allowed many states to pass laws forbidding homosexual acts and created a certain stigma that the first historians targeted and deconstructed in regards to drag performances. The medical correlation combined with 1960s social movements fused together to create the two themes of the first era of female impersonation history. Drag as legitimate art and the struggle of acceptance became the focus of early historians, following in the footsteps of other minority writers, to publish about the issues and lives of the people who traditionally never make it into history.

The most impactful historian of the years prior to 1969, Rodger Baker. Baker based his work *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation on the Stage* on the limited previous publications on the subject, specifically about transsexuals. *Mr. Madam* by Kenneth Marlowe tells the story of his relationship with drag as a transsexual woman, the medical book of Eugene De Savitsch entitled *Homosexuality, Transvestism, and Change of Sex* in which the author argues for gender reassignment surgery, and *Man into Woman* by Gilbert Oakley another medical work but with a focus on the case study of one transsexual woman Lili, all formed the backbone for

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<sup>17</sup> “The Declassification of Homosexuality by the American Psychiatric Association,” *LGBT Mental Health Syllabus*. Accessed July 25, 2016. [http://www.aglp.org/gap/1\\_history/#declassification](http://www.aglp.org/gap/1_history/#declassification).

*Drag*.<sup>18</sup> Baker broke down the walls of the scholarship on drag and connected impersonation to the theater cementing the focus of his book as a history of entertainment.<sup>19</sup> His work founded the historical thought of drag as a legitimate art form important enough to warrant serious study. The author diverted from the medical and moral aspects common during that time by deliberately staying out of the realm of science and sexuality. He instead tried to answer the question of why “this unique art has survived almost unchanged for forty generations... weathering every kind of storm and pressure in the process.”<sup>20</sup> Although Baker wrote from the United Kingdom and the basis for his work centered around British drag, he included two chapters about drag in America. The writer explained that US drag performances originated not in the rich history of theater, but in burlesque and minstrel forms of entertainment.<sup>21</sup> The burlesque of early twentieth century America emphasized sex and began to exclude women for an all-male audience, While the minstrel shows only employed men and they impersonated the female stereotype of “mammy” in African American society.<sup>22</sup> Baker argued that America came into drag unprejudiced and seemed to welcome it.<sup>23</sup> He pointed to the success and acceptance of Julian Eltinge who performed the 1930s, the record number of Female Impersonators in vaudeville, and the traveling drag troupe called the Jewel Box Review, which garnered fame after World War II.<sup>24</sup> The author detailed the traditional American drag as, “brassy speed and the quick vulgarity of vaudeville and burlesque” with the ability of not taking themselves too seriously.<sup>25</sup> From these two chapters Baker published the very beginning of American drag historiography by reshaping the subject to an art

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Baker, *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation on the Stage* (London: Triton Books, 1968), 249-250.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 161, 211.

<sup>22</sup> Baker, 161, 211. / Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, *Darkest America Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 11.

<sup>23</sup> Baker, 210.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 210-213, 219.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 220-221.

form and describing the contents of the entertainment. It gave future historians the base they would need to continue the scholastic discussion on drag in the US. Because of him, historians began to accept the legitimacy of drag as an art form, shown by the subsequent publications on the subject, and American scholars started to question the medical community and the lives of these performers. The timing of Baker's book aligned itself with the most substantial change of social structure in the United States.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, America found itself in the midst of major social change. From the sit-ins and protests of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) with their more revolutionary counterpart the Black Panthers to the marches of the National Organization for Women (NOW), social change for minorities showed great progress. Yet, homosexual entertainers saw little change from these movements. In 1964, San Francisco had California Hall where the Council of Religion and the Homosexual (CRH) informed law enforcement of a New Year's Eve drag ball in which the police then arrested, humiliated, and oppressed several attendees and the event organizers.<sup>26</sup> The last break came from the Stonewall Inn riots in New York City (NYC) in June of 1969. This event changed LGBTQ+ history due to its location because NYC had an activist population with specialized leadership skills, the location of two significant media outlets, and the club stood in the heart of the city's LGBTQ+ community.<sup>27</sup> From these three days of riots came a new spirit of pride for the LGBTQ+ community that helped to ignite the scholarship of drag and its correlation as a minority who has struggled.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2004), 105.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 257-258.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 266.

During the wave of social change, author and anthropologist Esther Newton published her work *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* in 1972. Newton first wrote it for her dissertation in 1968 but after the events of 1969, she published her book with all new conclusions citing her middle-class blindness for her old thoughts.<sup>29</sup> The author argued that while the entertainment of Drag Queens remains a legitimate performance art, the problem comes with American society where they struggle to find acceptance.<sup>30</sup> In her revised work she built upon Baker's book by analyzing the art form as a job citing that "Americanism," the social goal of being young, white, and male, directly affects those males who have effeminate jobs therefore society deems them as not one hundred percent American.<sup>31</sup> She described the plight of impersonators she ran across, which offered depth to the discussion of drag with her differentiation between stage and street performers, record and singing acts, and a continuation of Baker's glamour and camp drag.<sup>32</sup> Drag artists refer to an impersonator who performances center on comedy as camp. In her work, Newton, created two important subjects within the history of drag the notion of camp and the notion of homosexuality being intrinsically linked to the performance. Her focus on camp opened a new world for other historians and she described it as being one of the most "striking features of homosexual culture."<sup>33</sup> While Baker distanced his work from sexuality, Newton stated that "the Female Impersonator has two fundamental and inseparable parts, show business and homosexuality" and called the Drag Queen a status in the context of the homosexual culture similar to blues for African Americans.<sup>34</sup> She made connections to minorities throughout her work and strengthened her thesis on the struggle of

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<sup>29</sup> Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Impersonators in America* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1972), xi-xiii.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 1-2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 97. /46-54.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

non-acceptance. Although the author described the need for acceptance, she used words such as deviant to describe the men and seems to have focused on Queen's drug addictions and poor living conditions. One impersonator describes, "It isn't a nice way of life, simply because it isn't an acceptable way of life."<sup>35</sup> In her conclusion, Newton termed the "outsideness" the impersonators felt as isolation.<sup>36</sup> She compared it to jumping off the bridge of society and described the problem in which the masses welcomed the performance as an art form, but rejected the homosexual Drag Queen's life as legitimate.<sup>37</sup> Newton opened doors for American historians to focus on the social issues of acceptance and homosexual legitimacy within the larger general public. After Newton's work the scholarship hit a calm, but drag continued as performance art.

### **Life is a Stage and We Are All in Drag**

Newton and Baker dominated the literature on drag into the late 1970s and early 1980s. The intense desire for social change calmed when the APA removed homosexuality from mental disorders in the DSM III in 1973, and by 1987, the DSM III included no mention of it at all.<sup>38</sup> All of the movements so active in the late 1960s diminished from the scholarship as the study of history began to change again. Yet, drag reappeared with a resurgence of social issues because of one biological virus. The appearance of HIV and AIDS in the early 1980s destroyed many communities across the world, but in America, the virus decimated the homosexual population.<sup>39</sup> On July 3, 1981, the *New York Times* published an article entitled, "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals," from this point onward 'gay cancer' and other incorrect theories about the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 129, 131.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>38</sup> "The History of Psychiatry & Homosexuality," *LGBT Mental Health Syllabus*. Accessed July 25, 2016.

[http://www.aglp.org/gap/1\\_history/](http://www.aglp.org/gap/1_history/).

<sup>39</sup> "Timeline of AIDS," AIDS.gov. Accessed November 24, 2015. <https://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline/>.

LGBTQ+ community flourished.<sup>40</sup> Scholars then questioned societal barriers such as gender and sex, and the themes of this movement attempted to transcend this notion. The themes of the 1990s correlate some societal issues to their scholarship beginning with the notion that life is drag, the special unity performed with and by Drag Queens, and the counterculture role models. This period of history served to greatly broaden how scholars thought, wrote, and recorded drag history. Some of the main historians and their theories have endured to the present, such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

Drag, along with transgender issues, resurged in scholarship through psychology, and authors began to dismantle socially accepted structures. Writers, such as Peter Burke, Jan Stets, Sheldon Stryker, Michael Hogg, and Dominic Abrams, laid down the initial path to strip gender norms. By 1990, the subject of drag had a new dominant author in Judith Butler who wrote to question how far gender realities could go while presenting the idea that genders could be fluid for some people. In the author's first book publication, she argued that people perform gender stating, "Gender is an act," in which the externalization lays within the hands of the expresser.<sup>41</sup> Butler continued to explain how culture constructed these "laws" of gender by dismantling the common notion that bodies and biology define a person's preferred gender.<sup>42</sup> Her theory opened dialogue between historians and psychologists that essentially bridged the gap between the studies. For her argument of the art of drag, she borrowed from and expanded upon Newton's idea. Instead of simply accepting the differences of body and gender as Newton does, Butler expanded the action that occurs in drag performances. She stated that gender impersonators completely destroy the difference between the outer and the inner psychic space while mocking

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), xxvi, 200, 202.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 11.

the existence of the structure of gender and its idea of a true identity.<sup>43</sup> Throughout the section of her work on these performances, she connected them to her thesis by proving the nature of drag displays the imitative structure of gender.<sup>44</sup> The author took from a variety of scholars such as feminist creator Simone de Beauvoir. Butler started with de Beauvoir's statement, "one is not born a woman, but rather, becomes one," to prove her argument of gender's agency and construction.<sup>45</sup> Her theory on gender revitalized the subject of drag with scholars and impersonators themselves agreeing and building from her publication. For example, authors of *Guy to Goddess*, Rosamond Norbury and Bill Richardson wrote the first of the major publications to agree with Butler's thesis. They used oral histories from Drag Queens where one interviewee compared the art of impersonation to performing as a clown revealing the changeable notion of gender itself.<sup>46</sup> These works helped the study of drag become multidimensional in scholarship and officially ended the psychological viewpoints of disease or psychosis perpetuated by over thirty years of incorrect DSM's. Even though Butler and other authors work on gender blurred the static views of LGBTQ+ rights, social and cultural tensions began to reach a breaking point in America.

Social issues began to rise in early 1990s in America. The inequalities within the US culture showed themselves in the popularization of police brutality against African Americans with the video of police beating Rodney King and the equal pay movement for women.<sup>47</sup> Similar to the movements of the 1960s, minority history emerged again to stand against persecution.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 186.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 187.

<sup>45</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. E. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1973), 301. / Butler, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Rosamond Norbury and Bill Richardson, *Guy to Goddess* (Toronto: Whitecap Books, 1994), 94.

<sup>47</sup> "Video of Rodney King Beaten by Police Released," ABC News (March 7, 1991). Accessed November 24, 2015. <http://abcnews.go.com/Archives/video/march-1991-rodney-king-videotape-9758031>. / National Equal Pay Task Force, *Fifty Years After the Equal Pay Act: Accessing the Past and Taking Stock of the Future* (Washington D.C.: The White House, June 2013), 16.

These issues of inequality appeared in publications yet, this time the authors focused on the hardships minority groups faced throughout history in an effort to materialize the desired social change. From these events, the scholarship of drag changed to formulate a unified vision of themselves. Instead of the narrative published by Newton that highlighted the combative nature of performers amongst themselves and the homosexual populous, authors began to argue for a unique bond between these impersonators and the LGBTQ+ community in the face of oppression.

Historians Don Paulson and Rodger Simpson wrote a microhistory of a drag cabaret active in the 1940s to introduce the audience with the past grievances and unified survival of Drag Queens and their art. The book describes a cabaret in Seattle, Washington, named The Garden of Allah where its location facilitated the existence of drag shows. Paulson and Simpson devoted one chapter to the history of female performers in Seattle during the 1930s following the art from joining in with burlesque to running the “bar girls” (B-girls) out of business.<sup>48</sup> The authors provided firsthand accounts of the fears members of the LGBTQ+ community had while finding their homosexual identities and how the cabaret became essential to their social existence.<sup>49</sup> These writers included other minorities in the book that engaged and participated within the LGBTQ+ community, such as a heterosexual woman performing with the Queens and the African American-ran afterhours bars.<sup>50</sup> They argued that the change in drag performance to lip-syncing, Senator Joseph McCarthy’s banning the military from such establishments, and the ever rising demands made by the musicians’ union eventually caused the cabaret to close in 1956, but that in its prime the Garden transformed the LGBTQ+ community. The authors

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<sup>48</sup> Don Paulson and Rodger Simpson, *An Evening at The Garden of Allah: A Gay Cabaret in Seattle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 23, 28.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 91-92.



claimed the cabaret became an “oasis” for its members when crossing the “hot desert of homosexual life.”<sup>51</sup> They reasserted the notion of unity where the writers proved that the club emerged as a voice against the disdain of the workplace and a place to find inspiration, love, companionship, understanding, and a common bond, which grew into one big family.<sup>52</sup> Paulson and Simpson demonstrated the rich of the history of drag and called for unity towards social issues. This theme persisted into the second half of the decade.

During the latter half of the 1990s, the social structure began to change where unity emerged as a large movement across gender, racial, and class boundaries. Several media and other social outlets began to highlight female performers, and the art became more integrated into heterosexual society. The scholarship followed this surge of interest when one Female Impersonator wrote her autobiography, which transformed the future of drag history. In 1996, RuPaul Charles published his first book, which detailed his life growing up as a homosexual African American man who liked to do drag and while the work ranged from makeup tips to tucking, it followed the same themes of past historians. RuPaul combined the themes of Butler where every person does drag with Paulson and Simpson’s vision of unity from hardship. The author cemented this mixture in the preface of the book when he wrote his purpose for publication,

I wanted to show the human being that lives inside of me, the human being that lives inside us all...as a Drag Queen, people generally see me as some kind of thing or freak with a sex fetish...drag for me is showtime...And like all professionals, I love my uniform...we’re all born naked and the rest is drag.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 166-167.

<sup>53</sup> RuPaul Charles, *Lettin It All Hang Out: An Autobiography* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), II-III.

The last line became RuPaul's catch phrase, and as his status as a performer rose, the study of drag changed again. Although RuPaul built upon the theories of other historians in his book, his affect on the media transformed the performance art to a counterculture role model.

Suddenly, most of American culture of the 1990s positively viewed impersonators, and their art became a pop culture phenomenon while authors and other Drag Queens took notice and attempted to cash in on it. With the creation of New York's Wigstock, author Julian Fleisher wrote her book in a similar microhistory fashion as Paulson and Simpson, but she focused on the Drag Queens who frequented the club Pyramid in New York City (NYC) during the "age of fabulousness."<sup>54</sup> In this work, the author attempted to answer how drag has become a powerful form of entertainment with the ability to tap into human fear and anxiety.<sup>55</sup> Fleisher delved into the past of NYC and the drag troupes, such as the traveling San Francisco-based Cockettes to the homegrown Hot Peaches.<sup>56</sup> She discussed the events at Stonewall Inn and the leading gender illusionists, such as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia (Ray) Rivera both present at the riots.<sup>57</sup> Within her book, she answered her own question of why drag has become so popular in her chapter entitled the Queening of America. The author reasoned that New York maintains a hegemonic relationship to the rest of the country and that once a performance gets recognition within the state, then the rest of America takes five to ten years to catch up.<sup>58</sup> She discussed the different forms of media presented in the early 1990s which eventually led to the resurgence in popularity and interest in female impersonation, because they "pulled back the curtain" to reveal these artists who manufactured the "ideals of so-called womanhood."<sup>59</sup> Fleisher concluded that

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<sup>54</sup> Julian Fleisher, *The Drag Queens of New York: An Illustrated Field Guide* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 7.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 37-40.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

the homosexual culture has just reached its adolescence and that the popularization of drag has signified its transformation.<sup>60</sup> Even though her work seemed campy, Fleisher became one of the first authors to try to understand drag through the media, history, and oral interviews. Media-centered forms of research would resurface in later works the media grew in popularity and number over time. The success of the author's work came from how she explained American culture's new-found fascination with drag during a time when the majority of the country wanted to know why RuPaul appeared on the MTV Music Awards, or why Lady Chablis performed in a Clint Eastwood movie.

Lady Chablis wrote her autobiography in 1996, and in 1997 she appeared in the movie *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Chablis's work emerged in the rush of drag's popularity, but because of her fame she decided to come out to the public about her true gender identity and became one of the first openly transgender male-to-female Drag Queens in the public media.<sup>61</sup> Even though Chablis chose not to write about gender or the many theories surrounding it, her book symbolized a shift in drag as a study back to the very beginning. The tide had turned back in the historiography to question once again the social structures of gender and power.

In the early 1990s, the historians focused on female drag with only Butler giving a slight nod to the aspect of male performances; however, by 1998, the study of drag embraced Male Impersonators. Judith Halberstam, now officially Jack, wrote his groundbreaking work *Female Masculinity* to analyze the construction of masculinity and built upon the notions of Butler and others in assuming the expression of masculinity differs from maleness.<sup>62</sup> Halberstam combined

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 93.

<sup>61</sup> Lady Chablis, *The Autobiography of Hiding My Candy: The Grand Empress of Savannah The Lady Chablis* (New York: Pocket Books, 1996), 13.

<sup>62</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998), 1-2.

fictional books, film, and personal knowledge to analyze the idea of masculinity while focusing on the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality.<sup>63</sup> He examined how society views the heroic masculine white male rebel in the media with characters, such as James Bond, to analyze how society fails to accept other forms of rebelling.<sup>64</sup> He discussed the different forms of female masculinity with the stone butch and the raging bull dyke claiming the latter as the proposed champion to win the fight for masculinity.<sup>65</sup>

In accordance with the title, the publication centers around the woman because Halberstam states that female masculinity offers “us all a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity.”<sup>66</sup> The author used the works that questioned gender and its construction; however, he analyzed it from the oppressed standpoint of women contingent with his large bias. He argued in his thesis that the reason masculinity became intertwined with maleness occurred due to the constant dismissal of the female masculine so much so that women “are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinities may appear to be the real thing.”<sup>67</sup> One of the lasting impacts of Halberstam’s work laid with his discussion of “the bathroom problem” in which he observed flourishes the gender binary that limits the range of pronoun identifications, which America seems to think it accepts.<sup>68</sup> This section intended to break the walls of illusion down from the counterculture era where drag became idolized to reveal the realities of the continued fight to deconstruct gender. Nonetheless, in the present the bathroom problem has reached a literal meaning with varied opinions with contested arguments; yet, this work cemented Halberstam as one of the leaders of gender and

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 3-5.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 42-43.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 22-25.

identity in the study of drag and transgender culture. This trend of research through media would continue on past Halberstam and Fleisher.

Historians, Robert Allen Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus, looked at drag and gender through the lens of movies. In their article published in the journal *Critical Studies in Media Communication* they claim that people could live actual drag experiences through films because it allows for easier accessibility to the public.<sup>69</sup> Brookey and Westerfelhaus centered their research on films, such as *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Pricilla Queen of the Desert*, and most importantly *To Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar*.<sup>70</sup> In their analysis of *To Wong Foo*, they argue that the film runs the historical narrative of a Western movie that uses the American monomyth, which they described as a loner hero with unbreakable moral integrity on a quest for justice who enters a town beaten down by a threat, and through violent force, the hero defends the city from the threat and then leaves as if never there.<sup>71</sup> Both authors ultimately stated that sexual minorities have often been exiled from the mainstream media thus forcing images of Drag Queens to adopt the female signifiers and perform a shared experience for the mainstream audience.<sup>72</sup> This work centered on the ability of media to change culture and its boundaries and used it as its base, but it argues that sexual minorities still had to play by the gender binary rules of film.<sup>73</sup> In the new decade, the historiography of American impersonation halted for a major event in US history.

### **Activism Through Drag**

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<sup>69</sup> Robert Allen Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus, "Pistols and Petticoats, Piety and Purity: To Wong Foo, the Queering of the American Monomyth, and the Marginalizing Discourse of Deification," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 (June 1, 2001): 142. Accessed June 20, 2016. DOI: 10.1080/07393180128080.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 144-145.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 154-155.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 142-143.

The social atmosphere of the 1990s transformed dramatically in the early 2000s due to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.<sup>74</sup> During the event and its aftermath, the American scholarship of drag went silent. After a few years, historians returned to the history of drag albeit with a new dominating theme. The years that followed, brought in many historians with the same overarching argument of activism created and nourished by Female Impersonators. Authors proved this notion that drag performers precipitated the change from the gender structure to social protest subversion for the larger LGBTQ+ community.

The field briefly waited before impersonation historians Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor published their own theory of activism in 2003. These women used the same microhistorical approach to their work that Paulson and Simpson took in their book. In *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, Rupp and Taylor analyzed the Club 801 in Key West, Florida. They interviewed club patrons and performers extensively.<sup>75</sup> In this first work introducing the concept of activism, the authors argued that drag has the ability to serve as a catalyst for substantial change in the values, identities, and customs of the twenty-first century.<sup>76</sup> Rupp and Taylor established an intimate relationship with the performers they interviewed and even let the Queens put them in drag.<sup>77</sup> The authors made a connection between having sexual intercourse and the act of becoming a Drag Queen, and they explained that Female Impersonators universally identified as homosexual.<sup>78</sup> The women asked the performers how they began the profession, and a large portion of them answered with their first homosexual encounter.<sup>79</sup> The book offers a brief history

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<sup>74</sup> George W. Bush, "Statement by President George W. Bush in His Address to the Nation" September 11, 2001. Accessed July 29, 2016. <https://www.911memorial.org/sites/all/files/Statement%20by%20President%20Bush%20in%20His%20Address%20to%20the%20Nation.pdf>.

<sup>75</sup> Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 6, 213.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

of Key West and the club focusing on its location where tourism with Cuban and Bahamian immigration culminated in the city's "flamboyant mixture of cultures."<sup>80</sup> At the cabaret, the Queens had a duty to go out onto the street and get people to come see the show, the authors used this section to show the violence and oppression they faced when doing so and the varied reactions by the Queens.<sup>81</sup> Rupp and Taylor proved that Drag Queens engage in activism performances with their chapter on benefits. Within this section the authors discussed the multitude of charity fundraisers that the club held and the impersonators worked. The writers began listing the fundraising events for AIDS such as; the Bed Race, Queen Mother raising money and awareness for the LGBTQ+ community, Memorial Day where the proceeds went to the American Red Cross, Fantasy Fest a contest where the winner raises the most money for AIDS, and Return to Oz a club production fundraiser for the Key West Gay and Lesbian Community Center.<sup>82</sup> They described it as the mixture of celebrity and hostility where the two overlap due to the prominent nature of the performers at these community events.<sup>83</sup>

The authors added to the works of Butler and others by describing the different sections of the performances and how they brought into question the standard categories of gender and sexual preference.<sup>84</sup> Rupp and Taylor continued in Newton's path with a deep examination of drag as a low-income profession.<sup>85</sup> This work embraced many of the past theories and information in the short history of drag, but brought in a new conclusion about activism. They broke down Female Impersonator performances into three categories to determine how drag performs protest. These categories included some that embraced the traditional images of

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 57-61.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 69-74.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 105.

heterosexuality and femininity, while more directly reject the gender structure, and the others transform femininity and heterosexuality into something else where the performance presents more than just entertainment.<sup>86</sup> The historians watched many performances and explained how through audience interaction the Drag Queens could cross sexual boundaries with jokes and banter while preying on the straight white men.<sup>87</sup> They discussed the instances when the performers transitioned from simple grabbing and touching to stripping a man on stage in addition to examining vulgar speech used in the shows, the discussion of LGBTQ+ community issues, and issues of race and ethnicity.<sup>88</sup> The writers considered these performances evidence about the political commentary and subversive nature of their activism.<sup>89</sup> Rupp and Taylor argued that the 801 Cabaret performers created a family within themselves, the few regulars, and the frequent vacationers. Without generalizing, they analyzed the fighting and bickering between the Female Impersonators, but also concluded that the women stick together and feel close to one another.<sup>90</sup> The authors discussed the divisions within the club similar to LGBTQ+ life in which lesbians think the Queens mock real women and the homosexual men who fear or get hostile to drag.<sup>91</sup> In their conclusion, the historians made it their aim to answer Butlers question of what makes parodic repetitions disruptive which become recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony. Rupp and Taylor derived their answer from music and theater as avenues to mobilize protests because they served as a means to articulate grievances, a tactic used by the LGBTQ+ community and other movements in the past.<sup>92</sup> They came to the theory that Drag Queens forged a collective identity that manipulates and reinterprets group boundaries and critiques mainstream

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 116-117.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 134-135.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 139-144.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 158, 162, 171.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 187-188.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 213.



heterosexuality and gender norms. These performances gain political advancement because they draw in the straight men whom they mock.<sup>93</sup> The next year, researchers would compare their work to one of the foremost theorists as more scholars began to write about activism in female impersonation.

Butler returned to the scholarship in her 2004 work entitled *Undoing Gender*. This piece responded to the theory of activism within the study of drag and more broadly gender. While the book mainly focused on transgender, non-gender, and both gender people, Butler added a section on the outcome of the performances by gender illusionists. The author expanded her previous work with an examination how artists perform gender in conjunction with how it resignifies itself in communal terms.<sup>94</sup> From it, she argued that drag performers live in a community which creates a cultural fantasy life where together each person can find recognition and ward off violence, transphobia, and racism.<sup>95</sup> She theorized that the fear in which they live produces a need for survival, especially for racial minorities, that historians cannot remove from the culture of fantasy.<sup>96</sup> Butler explained that it allows people to imagine themselves differently, and the practice of drag forces the public to question the contemporary notions of reality and show them how to build different ones.<sup>97</sup> She argued that the art of drag not only actively subverts the reality of gender, but also reveals why they fight for equality pointing to the social control and dehumanizing violence of impersonator performers.<sup>98</sup> The author continued to analyze the affects of being an unreal woman on a person or a group, and she concluded that drag not only has the ability to be subversive and pleasurable yet also allegorizes the consequential ways society

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 219.

<sup>94</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 216.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 216.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 216.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 216-217.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 217.

reproduces reality and contests it.<sup>99</sup> Her last words in the book stress that the LGBTQ+ community must unite in the form of political labor to fight for equality.<sup>100</sup> This work served as one of the first accounts of activism from the historians in response to Rupp and Taylor. Butler built upon her previous work while differentiating herself to provide a solid theory on which others later modeled their argument. Author Ragan Rhyne agreed with Butler but focused his work on the racial aspect of whiteness and champions the performance of camp to help denaturalize and challenge the power of whiteness.<sup>101</sup>

In 2004, another pair of historians, Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood, wrote an article on the world of female impersonation. These historians continued to deconstruct gender through performance on Butler's foundation. They examined the transgressive limits and subversive possibilities of drag alongside the impact of race, gender, class, and religion explaining how these differences affect the interpretation of their art.<sup>102</sup> In the article, the authors wrote about some of the American history of drag and how the clubs performances of the present resemble the molly houses of the 1700s.<sup>103</sup> They described how the study of impersonators offers a glimpse into the cultural values of the society in which Drag Queens perform and analyze the relationship between the female gender illusionist and masculinity.<sup>104</sup> While Schacht and Underwood agreed with the destabilization aspects of drag performances, they argued against them being transgressive or undermining one hundred percent of the time.<sup>105</sup> They explain that subversion only happens in the context of the performer in relation to the audience and that

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 231.

<sup>101</sup> Ragar Rhyne, "Racializing White Drag," *Journal of Homosexuality* 46 (February 1, 2004): 181. Accessed June 20, 2016. DOI: 10.1300/J082v46n03\_11.

<sup>102</sup> Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood, "The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators," *Journal of Homosexuality* 46 (2004): 2. Accessed June 20, 2016. DOI: 10.1300/J082v46n03\_01.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 6-8.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 12.

certain styles of drag rarely produce political activism with the different compositions of crowds.<sup>106</sup> These writers stated that most impersonator acts combine gender disruption with status quo politics.<sup>107</sup> The authors analyzed the proponents of drag activism for LGBTQ+, but claimed drag failed at the cross sections of race, class, and sexism and sometimes even promoting these oppressions.<sup>108</sup> Schact and Underwood defined true subversive acts as “Those that systematically attempt to overthrow or undermine existing political structures.”<sup>109</sup> From this definition, the authors argued that the art of drag appears more transgressive than directly subversive; however, they recognized the ability for individual impersonators to perform subversive acts concerning gender, race, and drag equality.<sup>110</sup> These historians built upon Butler and Rupp and Taylor’s work on activism proving that drag has the ability to change gender and social norms.

The following year Rupp and Taylor published an article entitled *When the Girls are Men*, in which they described their interaction with the 801 performers as unusual due to their sexual orientation. They stated that being homosexuals helped them further research the drag world and described how lesbians spending time with a bunch of Drag Queens seemed like “Strangers in a strange land.”<sup>111</sup> The historians then went over some information from their book on the nightclub and concluded that Drag Queens play with and deconstruct gender and sexual categories through the vulgarity of their performances. The authors explained that by using these expressions the Female Impersonators categorized people to then turn around and tear down the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>111</sup> Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, “When Girls are Men: Negotiating Gender and Sexual Dynamics in a Study of Drag Queens,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30 (Summer 2005): 2115. DOI: 10.1086/428421.

gender boundaries.<sup>112</sup> Rupp and Taylor concluded these vulgarities force the audience to wear whatever sexual and gender label they represent because the Drag Queens have to deal with their own socially unaccepted life and that this practice reveals the profound activism Female Impersonators do for homosexual and transgender identities.<sup>113</sup> This work built upon their original piece and combined new notions of activism with the interaction of drag and the LGBTQ+ community. However, this research on Oklahoma will push the theory to analyze how oppression creates social activism through drag and how that helped to evolve a drag unique to the state. The scholarship of drag experienced another lull in publications until the late 2000s and early 2010s.

The social and cultural unrest within the United States created a windstorm of movements. The police brutality against African Americans resurfaced to the public's attention, and the maltreatment of transgender people along with the rising issue of marriage equality created the need for more history on drag. Impactful events altered their fight, such as California's overturning the ban on gay marriage in 2008 and Proposition 8 in 2013, that attempted to reinstate it.<sup>114</sup> The issue finally ended with the Supreme Court ruling that allowed marriage equality across the United States in 2015.<sup>115</sup> Through historians, the study of how the LGBTQ+ community continues to deal with and fight for equality, which the activist theory of drag persists. Nonetheless, the new and current wave of historiography on drag remains incomplete because it continues to grow. The scholarship of this new era contains a mixture of

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 2133.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 2133.

<sup>114</sup> Adam Liptak, "California Supreme Court Overturns Gay Marriage Ban," *New York Times* (May 16, 2008). Accessed July 29, 2016. [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/16/us/16marriage.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/16/us/16marriage.html?_r=0). / Bill Mears, "Supreme Court Dismisses California's Proposition 8 Appeal," *CNN* (June 27, 2013). Accessed July 29, 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/26/politics/scotus-prop-8/>.

<sup>115</sup> Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Ruling Makes Same-Sex Marriage a Right Nationwide," *New York Times* (June 26, 2015). Accessed July 29, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/27/us/supreme-court-same-sex-marriage.html>.

the many different theories before it along with the destruction of gender norms, drag being life, counterculture role models, unity, the hardships of homosexual life all under the umbrella of activism by expanding the meanings and examples of social protest.

Author Karen Kraulik published one of the first activism articles in the latter part of the 2000s and focused her research on one performer Ryan Landry and his lazy aesthetic known as booger drag. Kraulik based her work on the disidentification argument of Muñoz and describes Landry's acts as disidentifactory performances.<sup>116</sup> The author argued that by following events in LGBTQ+ history alongside Female Impersonator performances reveals the true queer potential and compromises in its activism.<sup>117</sup> She used Landry to research how he confronted social inequalities and argued that through drag he reconfigured the normative narrative.<sup>118</sup> Kraulik recognized the main theme of the interviews with Landry and stated that they all had to do with survival where the performer had linked the theater and performance with a fantasy away from the homophobic condition of reality.<sup>119</sup> She concluded that Landry's booger drag fits the performance politics suited to the city he entertains where he enacts brazen narratives to influence middle-class LGBTQ+ members to quit trying to assimilate, and the author asserted that all drag can send a message, but the performers choose motivation for LGBTQ+ equality.<sup>120</sup> Other authors began to comprise theoretical mixtures within activism.

Historians, such as authors Jeffery Bennett and Isaac West, developed multi-activist theories to include unity. In their article, they discussed the Atlanta-based drag troupe, the

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<sup>116</sup> Karen C. Kraulik, "A Class Act: Ryan Landry and the Politics of Booger Drag," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbians and Gay Studies* 15 (January 1, 2009): 4. Accessed June 25, 2016. DOI: 10.1215/10642684-2008-017.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

Amorettes, and their activism through unity.<sup>121</sup> The authors argued that the Amorettes' work made the troupe more than entertainment, and in fact they theorized that the Queens continue the tradition of "constituting audiences as agentic subjects capable of addressing social exigencies that threaten their ability to live meaningful lives."<sup>122</sup> The work presented the idea that the troupe found they could use their artistic expression as a productive response to AIDS.<sup>123</sup> Bennet and West provided research as to why the Amorettes could become so popular and accepted in Georgia. First, they explained the intensity of the HIV outbreak in the South and what it did to the people, the institutionalization of drag balls, and the troupe's use of camp to take the seriousness away.<sup>124</sup> The historians discussed how these performances made the audience think and injected them with ideas of political community.<sup>125</sup> The authors concluded that the Amorettes performance of camp reiterates a grotesque version of their bodies that remains similar to the grotesque abjection of generations of homosexual men.<sup>126</sup> Bennett and West published literal activism done by Drag Queens in the wake of AIDS that combined the historical theories of Paulson and Simpson within the current umbrella of scholarship.

Rupp and Taylor published an article focusing on the how both Drag Queens and Kings engage in political work by performing gender in their 2010 article *Drag Queens and Drag Kings*. They argued that the field of drag lacks scholarly information on Drag Kings, and that their performances differs in context and style from the Female Impersonators.<sup>127</sup> Through their

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<sup>121</sup> Jeffery Bennett and Isaac West, "'United We Stand, Divided We Fall': AIDS, Amorettes, and the Tactical Repertoires of Drag," *Southern Communication Journal* 74 (July-September 2009): 300. Accessed June 20, 2016. DOI: 10.1080/10417940903060914.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 300.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 301.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 303-305.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 308.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 311.

<sup>127</sup> Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, "Drag Queens and Drag Kings: The Difference Gender Makes," *Sexualities* 13 (June 2010): 276. Accessed June 20, 2016. DOI: 10.1177/1363460709352725.

research the authors found that the Kings came to the art of drag differently than the Queens. While the Queens all linked the desire to begin impersonation through sexual acts, Rupp and Taylor found that the Kings came to drag from a desire to seek out a queer community with performance opportunities and more often with someone they knew as a member.<sup>128</sup> The historians discovered that the Kings had a collective and purposeful performance of political collective consciousness where the Queens came upon social protest through arousal outside the audiences' traditional desire.<sup>129</sup> They concluded that both forms of gender illusionists challenge the hegemonic gender and heteronormativity of society and with the use of entertainment they educate and create unity from the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>130</sup> It also showed activism from two genders in an attempt to even out the historical works on drag; however, the future scholarship of female impersonation stayed in the forefront of the publications.

Author Katie Horowitz considered the question of the lack of Kings represented in the history of drag, a similar vein to the Rupp and Taylor's work three years earlier. In this work, she argued that in no way can historians state that Drag Kings relate as the counterpart for Drag Queens.<sup>131</sup> Although the topic of male drag hit similar points to Rupp and Taylor, Horowitz disagreed with their argument that the performances must justify themselves as political.<sup>132</sup> She proved that instead the art of drag does more for gender identity, both on and off stage, than any book or article could disclose.<sup>133</sup> The historian also argued against Butler's notion of keeping the performance aligned the performative in which Horowitz created her paradigm to separate

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 282.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 285-286.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 290.

<sup>131</sup> Katie R. Horowitz, "The Trouble with 'Queerness': Drag and the Making of Two Cultures," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38 (Winter 2013): 306. Accessed June 20, 2016. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/vortex3.uco.edu:2050/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=34af941d-4327-4d72-8250-88236c98355f%40sessionmgr4010&vid=2&hid=4204>.

<sup>132</sup> Horowitz, 311.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 311.

them.<sup>134</sup> She also considered Halberstam's theory as having too narrow of a focus when it came to who counted as queer.<sup>135</sup> The work concluded with the author's message of activism wherein she advocated for the joining together of the LGBTQ+ community to tackle social justice.<sup>136</sup> The publication of this work revealed the new trend stemming from the inequality still permeating the United States of the present.

The middle half of the 2010s saw marches and mass shootings of many different minorities for varied reasons. The US LGBTQ+ community experienced the police brutality of the Black Lives Matter movement to the massacre at Pulse nightclub. From these oppressive events in the present to the ones of the early twentieth century, the history of drag has followed a pattern of social unrest. The 1960s and 1970s introduced minority history attempting to view the world from a bottom-up approach while the civil rights, female rights, and gay liberation movements occurred. From the stigma placed upon homosexuals through AIDS and the police brutality of Rodney King the 1990s created a resurgence in the study. These theories revealed the issues that the LGBTQ+ communities faced as societal minorities so the works published aimed to understand, normalize, admire, and unite drag culture. The early 2000s saw the emergence of terrorist attacks on American soil and the scholars focused on activism with vengeance. During this period, all the publications refocused towards positivity and the ability to create change by nonviolent means. Once many authors agreed on the theory of activism the works of the historians of the late 2000s into the 2010s pushed the boundaries further. However, the scholarship lacks locational information such as studies about Oklahoma and other middle

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 320.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 322.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 324.



American states. This thesis will analyze the social awareness spread through drag and uncover how marginalization caused activism in Oklahoma resulting in a varied style unique to the state.

## **Conclusion**

That gap of information reveals a critical need for this work for places such as Oklahoma in which conservative values mix with big city entertainments. This historian will attempt to analyze the history of impersonation building upon the microhistorical works of Don Paulson, Rodger Simpson, Leila Rupp, and Verta Taylor, with the activism focus of Judith Butler, Leila Rupp, and Verta Taylor. This thesis will add crucial information regarding the history of the LGBTQ+ community within Oklahoma through drag performers and compare the artists' expression of social activism to the oppression dealt by the state and its citizens. The research focuses on how the activism has expanded drag making it exponentially different than other drag in the US. This work researches the daily life of drag performers in Oklahoma, with analysis this study can reveal the broader lives of entertainers in middle America. The inspiration of this work came from a love of drag entertainment, the larger than life component of the Queens' personas, and the desire for equality among the younger generation of America. Inspiration changed to research once the scholarship incorrectly matched the unique experiences of Oklahomans and the LGBTQ+ community in comparison to the greater America shown through interviews. This scholarship will uncover how in a conservative ant-LGBTQ+ state drag blossomed and how it can relate to the current anti-transgender political climate across the US. As the history of drag continues forward, the historians will begin to analyze social events and the reaction to them in different parts of the US and their thoughts to create the new theories that will make modern waves and patterns of thought throughout the publication of drag.

## Chapter Two: A Brief History of Drag in the American Media and its Effect on the Impersonators of Oklahoma

From late nightclub shows, television, and movies, drag performers have entered upon America's social scene and given insight to their collective actions that blur the lines of cultural and political movements.<sup>137</sup> Drag refers to, "Clothing more conventionally worn by the opposite sex."<sup>138</sup> The terms Drag Queen and Female Impersonator refer to, "Individuals who publicly perform being a woman in front of an audience that knows they are men, regardless of how compellingly female 'real' they might otherwise appear."<sup>139</sup> These performers have produced entertainment for American audiences since the early 1900s; however, the 1960s changed everything. The extensive social and political distress of the late 1960s forced the drag subculture to step up and lead the fight for LGBTQ+ equality. Historically, the LGBTQ+ community had looked down upon Female Impersonators, but when social issues arose, the performers took center stage. Drag performers became the forefront of the LGBTQ+ entertainment industry by fighting for equality from the 1960s to the early twenty-first century and reacting from societal issues that demonstrated a microhistory of the greater American media. This this chapter proves how the drag media changed and bent to the societal issues of the country and how the media has impacted the marginalized performers' lives in Oklahoma. This chapter used interviews of impersonators to demonstrate the true affect of drag media in a conservative community and how it has helped to create Oklahoma's unique drag.

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<sup>137</sup> Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>138</sup> New Oxford American Dictionary. 2nd ed. Edited by Erin McKean. New York: *Oxford University Press*, 2005. "Drag." <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/drag>.

<sup>139</sup> Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood, *The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Drag Queens and Female Impersonators* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 4.

Throughout history men have dressed as women for audiences as entertainment.<sup>140</sup> This type of performance art in early twentieth century America ranged from theatre Drag Queens, such as Julian Eltinge to minstrel troupes where men played the stereotypical mammies.<sup>141</sup> In conjunction with other histories of people of color, scholars only thought of drag as a serious form of entertainment after the early 1970s with the influential and tumultuous societal events of the late 1960s.

### 1960s-1970s

In the early 1960s, Drag Queens began as an underground subculture with only a few places featuring shows. Danny Garvin recalled, “There were no safe places, the only option you had was a bar.”<sup>142</sup> To deepen the hardships of limited venues, the laws of the 1960s made it an illegal act to dress in the clothes of the opposite sex, and individuals had to wear at least three articles of clothing assigned to their gender.<sup>143</sup> By 1969, many Drag Queens and homosexual men began to feel the pressure for meaningful change building within their own community.<sup>144</sup> It culminated with the Stonewall Inn riots on June 28 in New York City’s Greenwich Village.<sup>145</sup> The violence erupted at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar, in response to the overwhelming pressure to riot for equality within America at the time as Roy McCarthy recalled, “You gotta understand

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<sup>140</sup> Roger Baker, *Drag: The History of Female Impersonation on the Stage* (London: Triton Books, 1968), 17.

<sup>141</sup> “The Theatres,” *The Advocate: America’s Jewish Journal* 41 (April 1, 1911): 234. Accessed November 24, 2015. <https://books.google.com/books?id=W0gcAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA234&lpg=PA234&dq=julian+eltinge+the+fascinating+widow&source=bl&ots=tTmMegfYeH&sig=ePP7R1qQs4OhuosWciNh-s65PZ8&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjYpNLg8LHJAhXFKCYKHRVJC8EQ6AEIYDAQ#v=onepage&q=julian%20eltinge%20the%20fascinating%20widow&f=false>; Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 11.

<sup>142</sup> Danny Garvin, *Pay it No Mind: The Life and Times of Marsha P. Johnson*, (2012) 7:55-8:03. Accessed November 24, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo0nYv9QIj4>.

<sup>143</sup> Robert Daigle, “Stonewall: The Lost Chapter of Modern History” *Northeastern University Writing*. Accessed November 23, 2015. <http://www.northeastern.edu/nuwriting/stonewall-the-lost-chapter-of-modern-history/>.

<sup>144</sup> Roy McCarthy, interview by Cristan Williams, *The Transadvocate*, February 18, 2013. Accessed November 24, 2015. [http://www.transadvocate.com/interview-with-an-actual-stonewall-riot-veteran-the-ciswashing-of-stonewall-must-end\\_n\\_8750.html](http://www.transadvocate.com/interview-with-an-actual-stonewall-riot-veteran-the-ciswashing-of-stonewall-must-end_n_8750.html).

<sup>145</sup> “4 Policemen Hurt in Village Raid,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1969. Accessed November 24, 2015. <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/eresources/exhibitions/sw25/case1.html>.

where everybody's head politically was at that time. We're talking late 60s-1969. We're talking about a period of time when it was not only okay, but fashionable to riot against authority thanks to the Vietnam War, and to the Civil Rights riots a year before."<sup>146</sup> During this event one of the leaders of the riot, Marsha P. Johnson, an original Stonewall drag girl, yelled that she had her civil rights as she threw a shot glass into a mirror, which began the rise of Female Impersonators as leaders in the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>147</sup> Once the riots occurred, the media started to change and low budget Drag Queen films gained attention and popularity.

Actor Harris Glen Milstead, also known as Divine, with his friend and director John Waters transformed the silver screen for generations to come. In the late 1960s, they began working together to produce low quality films, and in 1972, they released a film entitled *Pink Flamingos* that expressed the violence Drag Queens suffered and played on the sick sexual-deviant creatures the straight community considered them.<sup>148</sup> In *Pink Flamingos*, the main character Babs Johnson (Divine) wields a gun and travels with her terrifying family who compete for filthiest person alive all while she wears a tight fitting mermaid gown.<sup>149</sup> The film portrayed despicable acts for this competition, including a baby adoption ring, a voyeur with a taste for animal violence, and the impregnation of an unconscious kidnapped woman.<sup>150</sup> *Pink Flamingos* heavily dramatizes these horrendous acts so the audience understands the sarcasm and comedic intentions. It, and their next film *Female Trouble* released in 1974, gained a large following within and outside of the homosexual community.<sup>151</sup> These movies initiated the fight for equality, influenced the American general population, and even sparked smaller films that

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<sup>146</sup> McCarthy.

<sup>147</sup> Carter, 16:11-16:16.

<sup>148</sup> *I am Divine*, directed by Jeffrey Schwarz (2013, Automat Pictures) Accessed October 2, 2015. <http://www.divinemovie.com/>.

<sup>149</sup> *Pink Flamingos*, directed by John Waters (1972) DVD.

<sup>150</sup> *Pink Flamingos*.

<sup>151</sup> *Female Trouble*, directed by John Waters (1974) DVD.

would become cult classics. Other films that continued the genre increased the attention of the drag subculture, such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* released in 1975. The plot attacks the values of the heterosexual lifestyle by having a cis-couple find their way to the house of a transvestite and fall prey to sexual deviant acts.<sup>152</sup> The film had low turnout initially; however, it quickly evolved into a cult classic. As seen through these three productions, America became more open socially after the mid-1970s. In conjunction with the attitudes shown by these films, the country ended the Vietnam War, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its lists in 1973, and the riots at Stonewall culminated into a National Gay Pride Day.<sup>153</sup> The media attention on the Drag Queens waned until the LGBTQ+ community needed them at their forefront to fight a greater battle; one that cost dignity and lives.

In 1981, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published findings on the AIDS virus, but it took three years to understand the cause.<sup>154</sup> The time in-between created a massive break in relations between the heterosexual and the homosexual communities as well as a massive unmasked killer virus destroying the LGBTQ+ populous itself.<sup>155</sup> While in real life the homosexual community fought off discrimination and misinformation concerning HIV, the media turned towards a more wholesome view. The cornerstone of 1980s entertainment harkened back to a unified America where issues of race, gender, and sexuality fell to the wayside.<sup>156</sup> Although as with every trend, pushback occurred started by drag media in the 1980s.

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<sup>152</sup> *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, directed by Jim Sharman (1975). DVD.

<sup>153</sup> Rebecca J. Rosen, "A Glimpse into 1970s Gay Activism" *The Atlantic* (February 26, 2014). Accessed October 2, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/02/a-glimpse-into-1970s-gay-activism/284077/>; "About LGBT Pride Month," Library of Congress. Accessed October 2, 2015. <http://www.loc.gov/lgbt/about.html>.

<sup>154</sup> "Timeline of AIDS," AIDS.gov. Accessed November 24, 2015. <https://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline/>.

<sup>155</sup> Julian Fleisher, *The Drag Queens of New York: An Illustrated Field Guide* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 39.

<sup>156</sup> David Sirota, *Back to Our Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now- Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Everything* (New York: Ballantine, 2011), 219.

## 1980s

In the 1980s, the entertainment avenue of Drag Queens changed from being a shock-centered media into movies with an uplifting and moral plotline or theme. This idea to present Drag Queens and homosexual men as everyday people became essential to the fight for equality in the wake of the discovery of HIV. It also occurred in the media while adhering to the social norms within mainstream media of the time. The Cold War pushed these values of unity within America onto the media, and in order for Female Impersonators to gain recognition again they would have to create films with a humanizing tone.

The beginning of media portraying a wholesome family with Drag Queens started with well-known straight men portraying Female Impersonators. The most successful example *Tootsie* starring Dustin Hoffman as Dorothy premiered in theaters in 1982. This film follows an out of work actor who finds a loophole to get on a soap opera by cross-dressing as a woman, but he falls in love with a female coworker.<sup>157</sup> Although the film brought the concept of Drag Queens back into mainstream America, it forced the art form into a heteronormative box with a straight main character who only faces one hardship transforming into the Female Impersonator. These two factors made the plot of the movie easily identifiable to the heterosexual populace without breaking away from the traditional male and family values. This film challenged the societal oppression of women when Dorothy stands up to another character, which led to the biological female cast to start confronting issues within their own lives.<sup>158</sup> The producers kept the film within a comedic arena and even used the cover to suggest unity and American morals when they depicted the main character dressed in drag behind a large American flag.<sup>159</sup> This

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<sup>157</sup> *Tootsie*, directed by Sydney Pollack (1982) DVD.

<sup>158</sup> *Tootsie*.

<sup>159</sup> *Tootsie*.

theme continued well into the late 1980s and remade the shock version of drag into a human form.

In 1988, John Waters and Divine released the best-selling movie of their careers that defied their previous works and focused on a relatable family structure. Their film, *Hairspray*, grew to such hype that most of the American population viewed the film. The movie set its scene in the early 1960s, harking back to a traditional American time, and Divine plays a straight woman, the main character's mother.<sup>160</sup> All these aspects fit the film into the traditional mold of the mainstream media for the 1980s; however, the movie had a twist concerning civil rights and equality in which the big dance station banned African Americans from the show.<sup>161</sup> This movie became one of the first works that put an openly homosexual man as a parent, but also portraying a loving, caring, and protective one that would prove similar to most of the audiences' own familial experiences.<sup>162</sup> This work revealed the underlying social problems brewing once again in America from issues of race, body issues, and sexuality packaged into a family value film. It sparked the turning point where drag entertainment stepped back into the mainstream media and the fight for social justice.

America in the late 1980s saw a crash of former values when violence broke out again amongst the general population. It included the end of the Cold War and a massive police brutality against African Americans from the Virginia Beach Riots of 1989 to the video of Rodney King in the Los Angeles riots shown all over the country.<sup>163</sup> As described before during the late 1960s, this time of social turmoil created a larger presence of Drag Queens within the

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<sup>160</sup> *Hairspray*, directed by John Waters (1988) DVD.

<sup>161</sup> *Hairspray*.

<sup>162</sup> *Hairspray*.

<sup>163</sup> B. Drummond Ayers, "Virginia Beach is Quiet After Violence," *New York Times* (September 5, 1989). Accessed October 2, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/09/05/us/virginia-beach-is-quiet-after-violence.html>; "Video of Rodney King Beaten by Police Released," ABC News (March 7, 1991). Accessed November 24, 2015. <http://abcnews.go.com/Archives/video/march-1991-rodney-king-videotape-9758031>.

LGBTQ+ community that would help fight for equality with the rise of the African American Drag Queen to the popular screen in the 1990s, which represented a new pushback from the traditional masculine hierarchy.

### **1990s**

One documentary released in 1991 entitled *Paris is Burning* broke down the traditional barriers and publicized the hardships that continued within the drag community. It followed several African American Queens and revealed the life behind the makeup.<sup>164</sup> The main characters all belonged to the ball scene instead of the club to show a different aspect of the entertainment. The director Jennie Livingston shot the film in such a way that it blatantly linked the LGBTQ+ plight to the African American one through the underground drag ball scene of New York.<sup>165</sup> For the first time, Queens of color stepped to the forefront of the media fighting for racial and sexual equality built upon the social issues of the decade.

In 1993, an underground Drag Queen sensation released his album *Supermodel of the World*, which skyrocketed RuPaul Charles into radios across the country.<sup>166</sup> RuPaul broke barriers with his message that promoted equality as he stated,

I wanted to show the human being that lives inside of me, the human being that lives inside us all...as a Drag Queen, people generally see me as some kind of thing or freak with a sex fetish...Drag for me is showtime...And like all professionals, I love my uniform...we're all born naked and the rest is drag.<sup>167</sup>

With RuPaul's different angle on the push for equality, the Drag Queen performance art redirected itself, once again, for the mid-90s social issues. The popularity of his work generated more media producing images of Drag Queens of color leading the fight for acceptance.

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<sup>164</sup> *Paris is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston (1991) Netflix.

<sup>165</sup> *Paris is Burning*.

<sup>166</sup> RuPaul Charles, *Lettin It All Hang Out: An Autobiography* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 141.

<sup>167</sup> RuPaul, II-III.



Well-known actors Patrick Swayze, Westley Snipes, and John Leguizamo entertained audiences in drag with their 1995 film *To Wong Fu Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*. This work follows three Drag Queens traveling across America who break down in a small town where they change the minds of the citizens and educate them on Queens.<sup>168</sup> The plot line touched on the issues of race with each of the Queens representing a different ethnicity, and they are shown falling in love with men, which ended the comedic roles of drag and forced the audience to see them as humans. In keeping with the new crusade for equality, the three main characters, mostly, peacefully get the small town to welcome and love them for who they are.<sup>169</sup> This message spread, and many other Drag Queens became household names outside of the LGBTQ+ community, such as Lady Chablis, a widely popular Drag Queen emcee who later came out as transsexual and encouraged others to look past her physical being.<sup>170</sup> She starred alongside Kevin Spacey and John Cusack in the Clint Eastwood's 1997 film *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*.<sup>171</sup> This movie focused on a journalist covering the story of a murder and the surrounding eccentrics he encounters, such as the comedic Drag Queen Chablis Deveau.<sup>172</sup> The fame of the director brought this film to the eyes of the mainstream audience. Even though Chablis revealed her sexual identity as female, she rallied for the performers of drag believing that the general public should give them the respect that the art form deserves.<sup>173</sup> The 1990s drive for equality had forever changed the Drag Queen world; however, the mainstream media increasingly focused less on the smaller issues. Social movements changed after the attacks on September 11, 2001. It pushed the media to coerce the American public to come together as one

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<sup>168</sup> *To Wong Fu Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, directed by Beeban Kidron (1995) DVD.

<sup>169</sup> *To Wong Fu*.

<sup>170</sup> Lady Chablis, *The Autobiography of Hiding My Candy: The Grand Empress of Savannah The Lady Chablis* (New York: Pocket Books, 1996), 13.

<sup>171</sup> *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, Directed by Clint Eastwood (1997) DVD.

<sup>172</sup> *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*.

<sup>173</sup> Chablis, 156.

community. The early 2000s saw the addition of comedy in film to continue the community genre that the media demanded. In the late 2000s, social turmoil increased, and the drag media followed up with resistance towards equality.

### **2000s- 2010s**

After the initial shock wave with the war on terrorism, film promoted unity and happy feelings so the drag movies used a comedic approach. In 2003, an indie movie released called *Killer Drag Queens on Dope* starring Alexis Arquette.<sup>174</sup> This movie portrayed two Female Impersonators and their dual jobs as contract assassins, in which they get into comedic dilemmas such as some of the gangsters hired to take them out end up falling for them.<sup>175</sup> It spoofed the stereotypes of drag performers on drugs and the misconceptions of what the American populace considered to be drag entertainers' jobs.<sup>176</sup> With this angle, the film showed the intrinsically oppressive views common with this country. Social justice issues arose again, and the late 2000s showed a variety; from the beginnings of increased police brutality with the murder of Oscar Grant III in 2008, more mass shootings like the 2009 Fort Hood shooting, and the continued murder of homosexual men, such as Larry King, in America.<sup>177</sup> Pressures boiled around all of these topics and the Drag Queens wasted no time. In 2009, RuPaul launched her show *RuPaul's DragRace*.<sup>178</sup> It took a couple years, but by 2012, the show grew with mass appeal across the country, and once again Drag Queens became a media favorite. The show tackled issues, such as

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<sup>174</sup> *Killer Drag Queens on Dope*, directed by Lazar Saric (2003) DVD.

<sup>175</sup> *Killer Drag Queens on Dope*.

<sup>176</sup> *Killer Drag Queens on Dope*.

<sup>177</sup> Jesse McKinley, "In California, Protests After Man Dies at Hands of Transit Police," *New York Times* (January 8, 2009). Accessed November 24, 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/09/us/09oakland.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/09/us/09oakland.html?_r=0); Robert D. McFadden, "Army Doctor Held in Ft. Hood Rampage," *New York Times* (November 5, 2009). Accessed November 24, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/06/us/06forthood.html>; Jim Dubreuil, "Boy Who Shot Classmate at Age 14 Will be Retried as Adult," *ABC News* (October 5, 2011). Accessed November 24, 2015. <http://abcnews.go.com/US/eighth-grade-shooting-larry-king-brandon-mcinerney-boys/story?id=14666577>.

<sup>178</sup> *RuPaul's DragRace*, Logo TV.

marriage equality, AIDS, and transgender rights.<sup>179</sup> By the early 2010s media changed, and more online resources developed the Drag Queens evolved along with it.

The production company World of Wonder (WOW) who produces *RuPaul's Drag Race*, released its own channel on YouTube, which allowed more media interactions between the Queens and the general public. Many other hit Internet shows with Drag Queens have emerged such as *Hey Qween*, a fun show that interviews LGBTQ+ and drag celebrities with topics that range from sexual positions to the fight against homophobia.<sup>180</sup> Others include *Alyssa's Secret*, Alaska Thunderfuck's *After Show*, *Willam's Beatdown*, and *Don't Teach Yo' Mama How to do Sex. She Knows*.<sup>181</sup> The Internet created a variety of social media platforms for the artists of drag.

Now the artists can create and grow their fan base through most of the same apps that average everyday Americans use, such as Snapchat, Periscope, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. National and local drag performers use these platforms to garner more attention for a variety of events such as benefits, pageants, shows, and community events. The more famous artists even use their popularity to help out their drag family by posting about their friends' shows and pages to give their fan base access to another performer they admire.<sup>182</sup> Facebook specifically helps drag move towards the mainstream with their "People You May Know" section of the website.<sup>183</sup> This tool analyzes your friends and their friends and shows up in the

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<sup>179</sup> *RuPaul's DragRace*, Logo TV "Dragazines," "Mac Viva Glam Challenge"; "Draggle Rock."

<sup>180</sup> *Hey Qween*. Accessed September 18, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCStjBZ-91yduQVNtsBkjjJQ>.

<sup>181</sup> *Alyssa Secret*, "Alyssa's Favorite Things," WowPresents, November 9, 2015. Accessed November 24, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8uvZjzHLpo&list=PLhgFEi9aNUb0FmqjGqcLocaAQDcX5rpEt&index=1>;

*After Show*, "Denver Fan Favorites," Alaska Thunderfuck, September 29, 2015. Accessed November 24, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27rStHYjmNU>; *Willam's Beatdown*, "Episode 1 with Willam," Willam Belli,

July 25, 2014. Accessed November 24, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JQeCUKovlg>; *Don't Teach Yo' Mama How to do Sex. She Knows*, "Episode 01," WeloveKatya, June 11, 2015. Accessed November 24, 2015.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ioxi\\_BNcZy8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ioxi_BNcZy8).

<sup>182</sup> Theonlyalaska5000, "Thank you @Morganmcmichaels for this photo," *Instagram*, September 16, 2016.

<http://www.instagram.com/p/BKjvDpfA6GP>.

<sup>183</sup> [Http://www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com).

owners' page as recommendations that they might have interest in. These suggestions allow people who have never been to a show to see drag artists just by association with a mutual friend. Each of these websites serves the purpose of letting the Drag Queens speak out for the community, and once the LGBTQ+ community won its battle for marriage in 2015, the media centered its focus on the homosexual figurehead of the Drag Queen.<sup>184</sup>

In the wake of the significant Supreme Court ruling of *Obergefell vs. Hodges*, Miley Cyrus hosted the 2015 MTV Video Music Awards, and in the night's performance, many the famous Drag Queens such as Willam, Gia Gunn, Laganja Estranja, Alyssa Edwards, Shangela Laquifa Wadley, Carmen Carrera, and Pearl surrounded her on stage.<sup>185</sup> The newest fight came with atrocities aimed at transgender people in the LGBTQ+ community. The MTV Awards spotlighted Carmen Carrera, a well-known transgender drag performer who appeared on RuPaul's competition show.<sup>186</sup> Transgender issues sparked a variety of transgender starlets such as the Netflix original show *Orange is the New Black* with Laverne Cox and the TLC show *I am Jazz* starring Jazz Jennings.<sup>187</sup> Current Drag Queens hold a presence within the average American household and have helped provide a leading stance for the transgender and LGBTQ+ community.

Female Impersonators transitioned from a subculture of entertainment into the lime light with the LGBTQ+ community's support. The rise and fall of the popularity of drag can be shown

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<sup>184</sup> Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Ruling Makes Same-Sex Marriage a Right Nationwide," *New York Times* (June 26, 2015) Accessed November 24, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/27/us/supreme-court-same-sex-marriage.html>.

<sup>185</sup> MTV, "VMA 360: Miley Cyrus Performs DOOO IT," MTV, September 9, 2015. Accessed November 24, 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0rew6N\\_cS0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0rew6N_cS0).

<sup>186</sup> Katy Steinmetz, "Carmen Carrera Is Ready to Be Victoria's Secret's First Transgender 'Angel'," *Time Magazine*, October 26, 2015. Accessed November 13, 2016, <http://time.com/4084038/carmen-carrera-transgender-victorias-secret-model-actress/>.

<sup>187</sup> *I am Jazz*, "The Hate is Real," Season 2 Episode 1, TLC, June 6, 2016; *Orange is the New Black*, "Don't Make Me Come Back There," Season 3 Episode 12, Netflix, June 11, 2015.

through the amount of media produced. By watching drag centered movies and TV, a microhistory of the social struggles within America appears with a broader meaning. Drag entertainers have been at the forefront of the equality fight, which demonstrates the importance of drag in the LGBTQ+ community with the rise of transgender rights. The Drag performers in the media have embraced the cause and take a stance on it just as they have on many other issues of equality. Essentially, the history of drag popularity within the media remains intrinsically tied to social strife, and this leading role has given them a mainstream voice, which cyclically gains them more entertainment attention. The media show the American populace how to subvert societal oppression and Oklahoma drag performers exhibit this.

### **The Media and Its Impact on Oklahoma Drag**

The presence and impact of drag in mainstream American media furthers the analysis of the impersonation community of Oklahoma. The media on local drag spreads across a variety of platforms including movies, television, music, and the Internet. To understand the complete history of the LGBTQ+ community in Oklahoma, a study must include a discussion on the power of mainstream influences that reach the eyes and ears of local artists and their audiences. Compared to the media, when the locals embrace or reject a media it demonstrates the social issues paramount to that area during a specific time. For the analysis of this paper, the subjects will include drag performers from Oklahoma in 2016-2017. These artist interviews described the value and impact that the American media has had in their own lives and the lives of those around them. The silver screen remains one of the largest subsets of American media with its ability to reach across the nation. Yet, the opinions of drag performers in Oklahoma vary extensively as to its benefit towards the greater LGBTQ+ community and specifically the impersonators. The importance of this chapter lies with the discussion of how the media became

an outlet for performers in a conservative state and its impact on the evolution of Oklahoma drag.

### **Oklahoma Drag and Film**

Film has brought drag to mainstream America through oddball comedies, moral stories, and bizarre cult classics. The multitude of drag movies created throughout the years created differing sentiments about impersonation within film. The first impression addressed dealt with the negative aspects of film, and how some have interpreted them as inadequate representation of the LGBTQ+ community. Drag Queen Allison Underland described American film's portrayal of impersonation as poorly executed.<sup>188</sup> He explained that even though these movies bring drag safely into the family home, they still lack LGBTQ+ representation because a prevailing number of straight actors assume homosexual roles in films.<sup>189</sup> He explained that if the silver screen continues this path, it will neither gain a true representation of drag nor the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>190</sup> Many other performers agreed and cited *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Hairspray* (2007) as examples of this problem.<sup>191</sup>

Some artists described the movies as lacking reality. One of them, Drag Diva Harper Valley, wished the film industry would tackle more projects without interpreting drag performers as perverse or confusing drag with cross-dressing.<sup>192</sup> Going along with this idea of inconsistency, one transgender King described his issue with the overt and crazy nature portrayed in films. He clarified his statement using the example of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, in which he argued that

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<sup>188</sup> Rob Bond, interview by Stephanie Allen, November 12, 2016, Women's Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Rob Bond; Kale Alexander, interview by Stephanie Allen, November 18, 2016, Women's Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>192</sup> Emily Carpenter, interview by Stephanie Allen, November 19, 2016, Women's Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

many Americans interpret that extravagant image and extreme persona as a direct translation of the activities and personalities of drag performers within the Oklahoma.<sup>193</sup> Female Impersonator Entity summed up the missing piece most films fail to provide, “If you took the entirety of media, drag has made a small cameo” where the producers direct the perspective to that of a straight audience.<sup>194</sup> He argued his point by comparing *To Wong Foo* to *Paris is Burning* where in the latter, the film gave the impersonators agency, and therefore, it created a more authentic representation of this art form.<sup>195</sup> These performers’ analysis demonstrate how some members of the drag community view the films as inaccurate examples of their culture and lives. Other artists found solace and humor from films and argue, like Entity, that some movies communicate accurate and respectful representations of the entertainment.

As with all media, no one holds the same opinion, and the same goes for drag films. Several interviewed participants argued that some films have an overwhelmingly positive aspect about them and that they show certain true aspects of drag and the greater LGBTQ+ community in Oklahoma. One of the performers, Scarlett Kay Paige, described the uncanny comparisons between the small towns in Oklahoma to the one shown in *To Wong Foo*.<sup>196</sup> She grew up in one of the small towns and described similar experiences with people from her hometown.<sup>197</sup> Scarlett disputed the first of the points about the negative aspects, and instead insisted that because of the courage of the straight actors, the movie made history by making light of gender and sexuality.<sup>198</sup> She specifically acknowledged the actor Patrick Swayze, who the tabloids

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<sup>193</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer, interview by Stephanie Allen, December 19, 2016, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>194</sup> Levi Pennington, interview by Stephanie Allen, December 2, 2016, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>195</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>196</sup> Larissa Cheri, interview by Stephanie Allen, January 6, 2017, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

promoted as a womanizer, and his dedication to wear heels and a dress.<sup>199</sup> She claimed she felt a “personable sense of real life because they struggled with real life during the movie... with sheriffs chasing them because they were wanted because they were Drag Queens” because of the three actors’ quality.<sup>200</sup> Diva Karma Marie Lee Paige explained that the directors of the movie did not make a parody and instead made a real life situation where after watching that film when one steps into the drag community they understand that they succeeded with its representation.<sup>201</sup> Fellow Diva Ivy agreed that the film depicted a plausible event within the drag community of Oklahoma.<sup>202</sup>

Other performers argued for the smaller positive impacts that occur through mainstream films on drag. Artist Miley Tucker stated that the best thing about the family friendly works centers on the aspect that the idea of drag makes its way into the American homes.<sup>203</sup> Miley also elaborated on his hopes that the casting homosexuals for gay character roles will continue citing the recent popular push for LGBTQ+ equality.<sup>204</sup> Several films concerning drag used humor to approach to the story, and some performers regarded that as a positive representation. Artist Stacy McBride O’Neil, used the movie *Boat Trip* to argue his point, by stating that the film portrays the performers as the entertainment, the humor, and that demonstrates exactly what impersonators do in their shows.<sup>205</sup> He went on to include the additional positive aspect of the

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Cassandra Florentine, interview by Stephanie Allen, January 6, 2017, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>202</sup> Ariel Morgan, interview by Stephanie Allen, January 6, 2017, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>203</sup> Chris Hutchins, interview by Stephanie Allen, November 12, 2016, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Steven Havard, interview by Stephanie Allen, January 11, 2017, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.



main character finding love in a movie that has Female Impersonators as a major plot twist.<sup>206</sup> Many of the entertainers recalled these films as positive because they relate to something about the movie or the characters. Through analysis, one can understand that Oklahoma has influenced their views. For example, the negative outlooks base themselves on real life examples of artists that actual performers do not see enough of and they want more representation. Whereas the ones who find something to identify with within these works, latch onto the films as guides to help them along the obstacle course of gender so dominant in Oklahoma society. The issue on films remains somewhat equally divided; however, some entertainers hold differing thoughts on the subject drag television.

### **Oklahoma Drag and Television**

Television has the unique ability to come into the family home and impact a wider variety of people simply due to the availability of the media. The popularity of television allows for positive and negative roles for drag performers and the greater LGBTQ+ community. Some of the entertainers argued that the bulk of the characters who appear on television portray drag unjustly. One of the bigger issues, not seen in films, centers around the transgender community. Female impersonator Venetia Iman Paige argued that the violence and degradation of transgender women remains prevalent within television, specifically crime shows.<sup>207</sup> She explained how she had a social media argument with another woman about transgender rights, and that because of television, this woman had an incorrect interpretation of transgender people.<sup>208</sup> It seemed that the main negative feedback about television concerned the newest

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Venetia Iman, interviewed by Stephanie Allen, November 18, 2016, Women's Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

social equality issue of transgender because the bulk of drag performers see the small screen as having done a far better representation overall.

Some of the positive impacts of television come from the visibility of drag, transgender, and homosexual characters along with the realistic story lines. Many drag performers claim to have come to an understanding of themselves, their sexuality, and/or their gender through film due to the lack of interaction within the conservative state of Oklahoma. On the issue of gender, transgender man Avery Paige described how through watching the show *The L Word* he found out what transgender meant and realized that the nation had other people like himself.<sup>209</sup> Many other artists agreed that the content aimed at younger generations provided appropriate representation, and several mentioned the show *Glee* and its episodes on LGBTQ+ issues.<sup>210</sup> The discussion of television sparked some of the same reasoning as the film section. Stacey insisted that one of the longest and most impactful television shows on the LGBTQ+ community and drag came from *Will and Grace*.<sup>211</sup> He explained that the show proved how all members of the LGBTQ+ community held down normal American lives, and to further his point, he described the show as the homosexual version of *Friends* that depicted the average straight American.<sup>212</sup> The importance of a larger representation and fair drag roles within television correlates with the current shift towards equality within the media. Yet, any discussion of drag television must not exclude the impactful reality show, *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR)*.

As previously discussed within this chapter, Drag Queen RuPaul remains one of the most iconic entertainers in American media, and all performers have an opinion. Most of the artists

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<sup>209</sup> Kale Alexander, interview by Stephanie Allen, November 18, 2016, Women's Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>210</sup> Chris Hutchins; Rob Bond; Kale Alexander; Venetia Iman.

<sup>211</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

stated that the show has had both a negative and positive impact on the drag community of Oklahoma. Many of the claims regarding negative points stem from the issues of knowledge. Miley argued that newcomers to drag will watch the show and think that they know all the secrets and that they can perform as well as a seasoned veteran entertainer.<sup>213</sup> He stated that drag has more to it than the show reveals and that performing takes practice along with all of the trade skills needed to make someone proficient.<sup>214</sup> Club host Venetia exclaimed, “RuPaul’s made drag very cheap” because people now think that just by putting on makeup that’s all they need to do drag.<sup>215</sup> She argued that because some of the drag artists on the show do their performances in regular street clothes, many boys show up to the club in mall clothes, eyeliner, and lip-gloss and think that will get them gigs. Venetia stressed that to make it in Oklahoma or anywhere, the performer must invest in their drag and then their drag will do the same for them.<sup>216</sup> Some stated that the show brought people to the drag community, increased the competition for gigs, and revealed the repetitive nature of acts to those who have only watched the show.<sup>217</sup> Others reiterated the notion that from the show newcomers will come to clubs and shows thinking everyone can do drag and not have to work for it.<sup>218</sup>

Alongside the issue of not having enough practice, the reality part of the show, which could give the audience an incorrect representation of drag, also concerned them. Transgender impersonator Shire Paige argued that the show revealed how some entertainers can be catty and cut-throat, and that people who have never experienced drag at clubs or pageants might assume that all drag artists act the same way.<sup>219</sup> Pageant Diva Karma agreed with this sentiment and

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<sup>213</sup> Miley Tucker.

<sup>214</sup> Miley Tucker.

<sup>215</sup> Venetia Iman.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>218</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>219</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

stated that the show broadcasts an incorrect view of how drag competitions work, and that someone who had no idea about the entertainment would miss the truth.<sup>220</sup> Karma explained that in drag pageants, the artists instead help each other out more than one would think.<sup>221</sup> Even though most of the performers had something bad to say about the show and the impact felt within Oklahoma, many of them had something good to say about it as well. Many of the positive effects of *RPDR* stem from the wide visibility and popularity of the show.

RuPaul laid the groundwork in the 1990s, and now has reaped the rewards as the host of his own competition show. From his star status, the show skyrocketed in marketability. Stacey stated that the show's popularity allows the average American to see a drag performer as a regular human being.<sup>222</sup> Most relatable for Oklahomans, Harper Valley disclosed that in her small hometowns no LGBTQ+ bars existed, and she could only see drag on television.<sup>223</sup> The show not only brought the art form into mainstream, but also revealed an array of drag artists, which Allison argued, Oklahoma needs.<sup>224</sup> Drag performer Entity stated that since his art consists of a more androgynous look, if he had come out before the show he would have booked two gigs and never be heard from again, but since *RPDR* popularizes odd and more creative entertainers, Oklahoma bars and clubs accept his own interpretation now.<sup>225</sup> Others thought that since the show has such a following, it could change the social and political situation of drag and the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>226</sup> In a direct contradiction from many of the negative views, King Shire explained that the show revealed just how hard the performers work to create an outfit,

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<sup>220</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>223</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>224</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>225</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>226</sup> Kale Alexander.

choreograph their number, and learn the lyrics.<sup>227</sup> He clarified that by watching the show, the audience sees how much effort entertainers put into their art, and it acknowledges their own hard work.<sup>228</sup> Whatever the opinion good or bad, *RPDR* forever changed the Oklahoma drag scene as many viewers receive their first taste of the entertainment through the show. Yet, movies and television make up only a small portion of drag media. Unlike mainstream visual media, the music industry has revealed the LGBTQ+ culture to America for decades.

### **Oklahoma Drag and Music**

Many of the drag performers in Oklahoma have a direct connection to music and stated that the promotion of impersonators through popular artists has had a positive impact on them. Miley and Allison argued that some artists have attempted to shine a light on drag to bring it into the mainstream, citing the 2015 MTV Music Awards with Miley Cyrus.<sup>229</sup> Allison explained that he personally loves when famous performers show up in music videos.<sup>230</sup> Miley furthered his idea when he detailed his excitement for a fellow performer to learn about these inconspicuous glimpses into drag culture.<sup>231</sup> Venetia argued that Madonna played a huge part to reveal the drag scene to mainstream America and cited the “Vouge” video that documented the 1980s New York City Balls and what the entertainment actually looked like.<sup>232</sup> Harper claimed the inclusion of drag in music benefits both parties by introducing impersonator fans to a different performer and vice versa, essentially labeling it a collaboration of artists.<sup>233</sup> She continued to describe how, as a

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<sup>227</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Rob Bond; Chris Hutchins.

<sup>230</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>231</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>232</sup> Venetia Iman.

<sup>233</sup> Emily Carpenter.

performer, she forgets how niche the community seems to others, and so seeing drag in music appears normalized.<sup>234</sup>

In agreement with Harper, Drag Queen Entity stated that rather than shine a light into the LGBTQ+ community, the artists just saw another performer that inspired them, so they want to collaborate.<sup>235</sup> King Shire divulged that the combination of different media built the first blocks towards equality, citing Lady Gaga's "Born this Way."<sup>236</sup> Scarlett believed that some artists genuinely had grand intentions to show how drag and other members of the LGBTQ+ community live a normal everyday life and how people should treat with them with equality.<sup>237</sup> She also argued the other side stating how some artists only include drag performers because they know LGBTQ+ makes up a majority of their fan base.<sup>238</sup> Stacey spoke about the courage it takes for entertainers to add drag performers to their music when some artists careers died from coming out as homosexual, such as Lance Bass.<sup>239</sup> Although music remains one of the earliest forms of media, drag has populated the newest form, Internet.

### **Oklahoma Drag and Internet**

The Internet offers a wider audience range than any of the previous medias, and therefore, it can be the most impactful for places like Oklahoma. Miley stated that drag social media has a "huge" impact on the Oklahoma LGBTQ+ community.<sup>240</sup> Allison explained that performers might double their fan base when using the Internet, and that in these circumstances, people can see the posts for benefits and political bills and really make a difference.<sup>241</sup> Venetia

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>236</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

<sup>237</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>240</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>241</sup> Rob Bond.

and Avery both agreed that through watching pageants online they improve their art and see their drag idols compete, which creates a larger sense of community.<sup>242</sup> Avery also explained that, for the most part, the Internet lacks a lot of shows for Kings and generally the channels cater to Queens.<sup>243</sup> Some performers, like Entity, stated that the interest has become the goal and the ticket to gaining fans and followers.<sup>244</sup> He also added that it allows people to explore their creativity and evolved into “the name of the game” for serious performers.<sup>245</sup> Entity described how the Internet gives drag fans without the availability to attend a show consistent nourishment and access.<sup>246</sup> Stacey discussed his own dealing with social media in agreement with Entity. Queen Stacey stated that through the Internet he gained and secured a fan base because he kept them informed about the latest shows, then they like the post and share it to their friends, which continues the cycle.<sup>247</sup> He added that the Internet has pushed the acceptance of drag by showing that impersonators live normal lives and that entertainment remains the base of all performances.<sup>248</sup>

One Diva has a special involvement with drag Internet in which she not only competes in some, but also judges others.<sup>249</sup> Harper entered in the Reddit r/drag yearly competition where the contestants send in their videos and the community votes.<sup>250</sup> She asserted that newcomers to drag use it as a safe way to explore their art form.<sup>251</sup> It also allows people with a passing interest to look at performer’s social media profiles and possibly inspires them to go to a show.<sup>252</sup> King

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<sup>242</sup> Venetia Iman; Kale Alexander.

<sup>243</sup> Kale Alexander.

<sup>244</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

Shire stated that since the Internet has a large number of drag channels and shows, the content must have an original concept to garner any real attention.<sup>253</sup> He added that when people create their own channels with little effort in their look or show, it brings down the drag community as a whole.<sup>254</sup> Karma agreed with Shire and commented that when people see something not up to par, they seem less likely to visit a drag show in the future.<sup>255</sup> Scarlett explained that some parts of drag Internet could be negative with the comments that people leave, but that it also has a positive effect with people gaining hope in their own life after they see someone else going for their dream.<sup>256</sup> The Internet has taken over America as one of the top forms of media, and Oklahoma drag performers have taken notice.

Throughout mainstream media history, drag has risen and fallen in popularity, and today, it has become one of the favored types of entertainment. The interviews showed the media's large effect on the Oklahoma drag community. Oklahomans who do drag consider it a vital determiner in what becomes an accepted type of art form and how the LGBTQ+ youth and adults consume and explore the entertainment in safety. One of the biggest realizations with this study consisted of the social and political situation of Oklahoma where the drag community brings together the LGBTQ+ community within a safe environment with the power to help further the fight for equality. From this familial relationship drag in Oklahoma has transformed into an inclusive and unique entertainment compared to other locations.

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<sup>253</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>256</sup> Larissa Cheri.



### **Chapter Three: Going to Drag Church: Drag Queens in Oklahoma**

One Sunday morning in March, I visited the drag nightclub The Boom in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Normally, clubs where impersonators perform open later in the day; however, this one has a special daytime event entitled The Sunday Gospel Brunch. Setup similar to a dinner theater, but once those curtains rose, I knew this show had nothing in common with any other drag venue. The red curtains hung on the circular stage that showcased two Drag Queens wearing pulpit robes with a picture of the Virgin Mary and a statue of the praying hands on top of their alter/desk. The show transpired in a similar fashion to that of a regular southern Christian Church. First, the event began with praise and worship to renditions of the Johnny Cash's "Do Lord" and Hank Williams' "I Saw the Light." Afterwards, the Queens announced the Sunday gospel news, which many churches use to inform the congregation on the happenings within the community. Next came the communion for the birthdays of the week where instead of blessed wine and a cracker the participants received a vodka shot. Then the two Queens held a sing along akin to the choir-led worship sections in a regular church. As a reward for participating, the choir received a shot. Bible study followed the sing along where one of the Queens picked an audience member to take a quiz comparable to the short classes held before the service in church. Finally, the gospel brunch ended with a segment they called heavenly thoughts where they provided uplifting words to the congregation and then sang another song. This show demonstrated the unquestionable rarity of Drag Queens in Oklahoma.

Drag in Oklahoma contains similar qualities to drag in other states such as that the Drag Queens remain the highlight of the art. Unlike other places, though, Drag Queens from Oklahoma consistently face religious conservative opposition, and instead of rejecting it, the performers embraced Christianity and created an art unique to Oklahoma. This chapter will

examine the experiences of Drag Queens in Oklahoma regarding how they started in this entertainment, the problems they face within the LGBTQ+ community, how they continue to fight for equality, and what they see as the future of drag in this state. These issues combined to create a clear image of the life of Drag Queens in Oklahoma and proved that due to the oppressive nature of the state the drag community has become all-encompassing and unique. Drag in Oklahoma holds a distinct difference from the art in other states because when the entertainment should have faded away, it broadened and unified. Specifically, as LGBTQ+ venues have been shut down and performers harassed in public, the drag community could see the end in sight. Instead of falling back, they changed up the routine and included different styles and types of drag, which created a drag rebirth. From opening youth clubs and including Kings and Divas to holding weekly church services, Oklahoma drag set itself apart from any other state and flourished. The LGBTQ+ bar in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Majestic, has ranked as the top dance club to go to in the city for many years. The Sunday Gospel Brunch has become so popular that anyone wanting to attend must reserve a seat beforehand, and Divas and Kings perform alongside the Queens to offer a diverse entertainment inclusive to all who want to participate.

### **What is a Drag Queen?**

A Drag Queen is a male that impersonates a woman through performance art; however, that may not always be the case.<sup>257</sup> Many people fail to understand the difference between being a Drag Queen and being transgender. Drag performer Allison Underland explained the contrast as, “Drag is an art form and being trans is a lifestyle. Being trans and being a Drag Queen is possible.”<sup>258</sup> Venetia Iman Paige agreed and simplified it to her own life as a transgender Queen,

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<sup>257</sup> Steven Havard, interview by Stephanie Allen, January 11, 2017, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>258</sup> Rob Bond, interview by Stephanie Allen, November 12, 2016, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

“Drag is something that you do, being trans is something you live by.”<sup>259</sup> Entity broke the definition down even further to say, “Drag is more about the performance and parody of gender or the use of gender as a tool, a medium for art. Whereas transgender identity is about just that, identity.”<sup>260</sup> Venetia expressed her disdain for people who question her job choice based on her gender. She recounted some of the unpleasant things said to her because of a misunderstanding of her role as a Queen with her gender identity. People ask her why she does drag if she considers herself a transgender woman, or they tell her she cannot really be a Drag Queen and transgender. She stated, “I don’t wear this much makeup to go the mall.”<sup>261</sup> Allison explained that people used the term, drag, for anyone who performs and that even cross-dressers and women can be drag entertainers.<sup>262</sup> Artist Miley Tucker clarified that drag is the umbrella term for what they do and that Kings, Queens, and Divas are just subsets of the larger group.<sup>263</sup> This chapter will include transgender performers in the discussion of drag, but the focus will be on the art and not specifically gender identity.

### **Journey to Becoming an Oklahoma Drag Queen**

The interviewed Drag Queens in Oklahoma came from all different types of backgrounds with ages running from twenty to thirty-six.<sup>264</sup> Many considered themselves working class, and their ethnicities included Native American, African American and Caucasian mixtures, as well as White.<sup>265</sup> Some of them have full-time employment while others work part-time jobs with full-

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<sup>259</sup> Venetia Iman, interviewed by Stephanie Allen, November 18, 2016, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>260</sup> Levi Pennington, interview by Stephanie Allen, December 2, 2016, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>261</sup> Venetia Iman.

<sup>262</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>263</sup> Chris Hutchins, interview by Stephanie Allen, November 12, 2016, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>264</sup> Venetia Iman; Steven Havard.

<sup>265</sup> Derrick Allen Young, interview by Stephanie Allen, January 8, 2017, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma; Zachary Hale, interview by Stephanie Allen, February 19, 2017, Women’s

time hours. Religiously, the majority of the impersonators have no affiliation with a certain belief, while a few consider themselves spiritual or agnostic. The Queens interviewed expressed their political association as Democrat or none, while many of them have had formal educations as high as a Master's degree.<sup>266</sup> Yet, no matter the differences in their life experiences, they all found their passion for drag.

Their first time in drag remains an important date in the minds of many of the performers. Miley and Allison remember the date specifically, and Miley explained why he recalled the momentous occasion as, "It's like your own birthday, so you'll never forget it."<sup>267</sup> Venetia added that she remembers because when she performs, many of the other artists ask each other how long they have been doing drag.<sup>268</sup> Oklahoman Queens started performing a variety of different ways. Stacey McBride O'Neil began with a dare from his friends on Halloween.<sup>269</sup> Entity began at a bachelorette party, in which he participated as the comedy act in drag.<sup>270</sup> Some of the younger Queens, such as Miley and Allison, began after watching the television show *RuPaul's Drag Race*.<sup>271</sup> Miley explained that he grew up sheltered in a conservative home where they never discussed homosexuality in a positive light.<sup>272</sup> He had to watch the show at his friend's house in the middle of the night and then fell in love with the art.<sup>273</sup> Miley and Venetia both stated that they had never seen drag before they moved to Oklahoma. Venetia revealed that the LGBTQ+ youth clubs allowed her to see the entertainment for the first time, and she knew she

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Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma; Venetia Iman; Chris Hutchins; Levi Pennington; Rob Bond; Steven Havard.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>268</sup> Venetia Iman.

<sup>269</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>270</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>271</sup> Chris Hutchins; Rob Bond.

<sup>272</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>273</sup> Chris Hutchins.

wanted to do it.<sup>274</sup> One important aspect of Oklahoma lays in its gay youth clubs, such as the Wreck Room in Oklahoma City and Open Arms Youth Project (OYP) in Tulsa, Oklahoma. One of the Queens interviewed explained the beginnings of OYP.

Aarayah Sunshine discussed how he got into drag and how it correlated with the opening of Tulsa's LGBTQ+ youth club OYP. He recounted how he knew his sexuality and looked through the phone book and came across an LGBTQ+ group held at a church.<sup>275</sup> Because seventy-nine percent of Oklahoma citizens consider themselves to be Christian, much of the social norm for the state lies with the church.<sup>276</sup> Although rare, these churches give the LGBTQ+ performers a sense of acceptance and belonging unique to Oklahoma society. Aarayah had to lie to his mother about why he wanted to go to church for her to drive him there.<sup>277</sup> In the group, several of them have become well-known drag artists. Aarayah stated that no one did drag and that the idea never cross their minds at the time. The church lost their lease on the building behind it, so they moved the youth group to the Pride Center around 21<sup>st</sup> and Peoria in Tulsa. A local drag bar became the youth group's new neighbors and from that, drag gradually became involved with the club. He explained that at first he hated Drag Queens and just went because he wanted a place to feel accepted. His views changed one day when one of his makeup instructors at his modeling classes showed Aarayah pictures of himself in drag. Aarayah could not believe how far the transformation went that he could barely recognize the woman in the Polaroid as his instructor. That moment correlated with the beginnings of the youth group talking about adding drag to their meetings, and Aarayah became intrigued. OYP began drag entertainment sixteen

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<sup>274</sup> Venetia Iman.

<sup>275</sup> Derrick Allen Young.

<sup>276</sup> "Religious Landscape Study: Adults in Oklahoma," *Pew Research Center*. Accessed March 26, 2017. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/oklahoma/>.

<sup>277</sup> Derrick Allen Young.

years ago, with an event called Wild Hearts Ball. Aarayah described how some of the young performers, including him, borrowed clothing from their sisters and moms to perform.<sup>278</sup> His experience proved the importance of these youth groups in such a conservative state for young LGBTQ+ teenagers to go for acceptance and get answers to questions that their families declined to ask. This sense of community demonstrated the close and familial relationships that form when doing drag in Oklahoma. All of the performers interviewed stated that they have created drag families because in Oklahoma, it is common for families to disown or kick out LGBTQ+ children when they come out. It remains so prevalent that at Majestic there is an older female patron who accepts youths when their families evict them from their homes. These self-made family relations help performers in drag, but most of all in real life.

One of the first friendships made through drag comes in the form of drag families. Venetia described how she learned to perfect her makeup, clothes, and hair from her drag family. Stacey explained that in the drag world, “There has always been somebody there to help in one way or another.”<sup>279</sup> Miley detailed how he came upon his own drag family. He had posted photos of himself in drag, and his drag mom found him on Facebook and told him had potential, which Miley credits him really starting drag.<sup>280</sup> Zoey Vanity-Matrix lives with his drag mom and stated that she found him and realized his enthusiasm and drive for the art. Through the guidance of his drag mom, he created his own unique rock and horror look that many venues had never seen. He explained their relationship, “You know we’ve helped each other out and we’ve kind of learned how to do a lot of the stuff with each other. We learned pageant stuff together, we learned how to stone together.”<sup>281</sup> His drag mom Damien Matrix recalled the first time she helped him, “Guess

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<sup>278</sup> Derrick Allen Young.

<sup>279</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>280</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>281</sup> Zachary Hale.

we need to throw some rhinestones on this shit, we need to figure out how to do this little buddy.”<sup>282</sup> A few of the Queens, such as Entity, learned from watching the other performers. Some impersonators have involved themselves in the drag world since childhood. Entity has a sister who judged drag pageants, and at eight years old, he met his first Queen and fell in love with the makeup and costumes. He even displayed a poster in his room of the Miss Gay Oklahoma of that year.<sup>283</sup> Whether it came from a love of theater, friends, or family, each of these entertainers found and embraced the art form. Many of them explained that performing in drag gave them the ability to explore their own emotions and develop their creativity.

### **The Power of Performance**

The impersonators expressed that drag helps them deal with their own emotions and described how important drag has become to their everyday lives. Entity explained how many of the performers that begin in drag feel fear and trepidation, “First off, whether or not they’ll accept you doing it in the first place. It gets in the way of dating a lot. Or on top of that, if you’re in a group of people who you know will accept you doing drag, will they accept the type that you do?”<sup>284</sup> Entity quickly added, on the other hand, performing also produces the emotions of liberation.<sup>285</sup> Venetia expressed that she can go through all of the emotions when performing because it just depends on the day and how she felt at that moment. She described that drag can be an outlet for her emotions because if she felt sad or angry, she would perform a song that matched her feelings.<sup>286</sup> In agreement with Venetia, Stacey expounded upon this by discussing the process of getting ready for a show. He stated that the performer must connect with the song

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<sup>282</sup> Shannon Gritte, interview by Stephanie Allen, February 19, 2017, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>283</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>284</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>285</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>286</sup> Venetia Iman.

choice, which makes it hard to pick a song weeks in advance without knowing how he will feel the day of the show. Stacey used the example of his unfortunate breakup with a long-term partner where for several shows afterwards he did love and breakup numbers. Stacey comes from a theater background as well and explained that performing remains an artful expression.<sup>287</sup> He compared drag to ballet and Cirque du Soleil stating that each person has their own way to express their art.<sup>288</sup> Some Queens, such as Zoey, hold a deep connection to the songs they perform. Zoey clarified that since the state considers him disabled, sometimes he cannot go out and perform whenever he wants, so that the song choices for him remain deeply personal. He described his go to song as one that relates to how he feels as a disabled person, and when he performs that number, he expresses his actual feelings onstage and feels safe because no one else in the venue will know.<sup>289</sup>

When questioned about the emotions associated with drag, Allison stated that he felt “exhaustion” and “excited nervous.”<sup>290</sup> I have seen him perform and I commented that he appeared calm on stage. He explained that he always feels nervous especially when going to a new venue, but that to combat the nerves, he performs numbers that he has done several times before.<sup>291</sup> Miley quickly added that in the past when Allison chose a song with a heavy dance section, he would get so nervous, because he cannot dance well, that he stood and faced the audience with his hands in the air as if he had given up.<sup>292</sup> Unlike Allison, Miley’s nerves affect him differently saying that since he has a background in theater, the nerves give him a familiar adrenaline rush that helps him perform.<sup>293</sup> Some venues heighten the Queens nerves by removing

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<sup>287</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>288</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>289</sup> Zachary Hale.

<sup>290</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>291</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>292</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.



them from the stage if they freeze up and forget the lyrics.<sup>294</sup> Miley addressed it by stating that he has seen many Facebook posts from these venues that state if the performers do not know the words to their songs that they should not even come.<sup>295</sup> He explained that lip-syncing remains the most important part of a drag performance, so he agreed with the venues decisions because he thinks not knowing the words show they have put no real effort into doing drag and could hurt the business.<sup>296</sup> Allison added that when people go to a show, they want a performance and stated, “Why would I want to sit at a bar and basically stare at you ‘mash potatoes’ in your mouth?”<sup>297</sup> Miley expressed that this type of attitude only applies towards lip-syncing not dancing and connecting with the audience.<sup>298</sup> He added that not everyone knows how to dance, but that will not make a performance bad; however, not knowing the words to a song will.<sup>299</sup> Expressing one’s emotions on stage remained a consistent theme found within the entertainment across the nation. Each performer conveys their feelings in a unique way, and this diversity can be found within and outside of Oklahoma. Beyond emotions, the Queens of Oklahoma also described the comradery within the drag community and how performances display it.

Venetia, a former emcee at the Tulsa club Majestic, described her other responsibilities at the venue outside of performing. She stated that she feels required to make everyone there feel at home and leave with a smile on their face. Venetia explained that in this industry there remains a greater responsibility to other performers. She stated that since she does run the show that she feels the desire to help people with their drag outfits, makeup, or performances. Venetia said the impersonators in her show have become her drag family, so they always come up to her and ask

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<sup>294</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>295</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>298</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

questions or her opinion on a certain outfit or idea.<sup>300</sup> Entity takes it upon himself to build up the crowd.<sup>301</sup> Since he performs a different type of drag, he believes that he can bring people to a venue that would not ordinarily come.<sup>302</sup> Other Queens such as Allison and Miley agreed that the key point to being a seasoned performer lies in the responsibility to uplift the other entertainers.<sup>303</sup> Allison called it their “duty” as fellow performers to support each other during talent nights where new Queens take the stage, for instance.<sup>304</sup> Allison added that when a Queen performs poorly, they still applaud that person for having the guts to attempt it. He stated that if a performer feels bad about their show that he will still compliment them, but add constructive critiques to help them improve their art especially if they want to do drag seriously.<sup>305</sup> Miley explained that he would never tell someone that they did bad, but that he genuinely wants to help them get better, and he stated that his aid gained him several drag daughters.<sup>306</sup> Miley added that if he meets someone who has an interest in drag, he offers up his skills in makeup or costumes because he believes that everyone should do drag at least once in their lives.<sup>307</sup> Although there remain difficulties in performing drag in general, the Queens of Oklahoma have another big division within their group that makes entertaining difficult for some.

### **Pageant versus Counterculture**

As with every group of entertainment, different types and styles exist, and Oklahoma drag has a reputation of being one of the pageant focused states, which can make it hard for other performers that only want to do stage performances or fail to fit into that mold. The traditional

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<sup>300</sup> Venetia Iman.

<sup>301</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Rob Bond; Chris Hutchins.

<sup>304</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

mold of drag in Oklahoma consists of big hair, gowns, and performing ballads.<sup>308</sup> Other entertainers who do more abstract gender illusion experience a harder time getting booked at clubs.<sup>309</sup> Miley and Allison explained that drag in Oklahoma has become used to this pageant style of performances, and genderqueer styles have just begun to gain legitimacy as art.<sup>310</sup> One Queen I interviewed defined the three terms applicable to an Oklahoma impersonator; pageant, show, and charity Queen.<sup>311</sup> Stacey, a more well-known Queen, defined a pageant Queen as someone “that primarily only performs in pageantry.”<sup>312</sup> He went on, “Then you have your...show Queens that all they do is do different shows at bars and venues.”<sup>313</sup> Lastly, Stacey explained that charity Queen “is a drag entertainer that primarily all the drag that they do is for a charity function of some sort.”<sup>314</sup> Several Queens participate in all three types, but many declared themselves as mostly one of the three.<sup>315</sup> Oklahoma drag currently favors the pageant Queen, which remains the traditional form of the art. The state has several performers that support pageantry and see the good side of competition.

At the age twenty, Venetia became one of the youngest Queen to host her own show at Majestic and credits pageantry for her success.<sup>316</sup> She explained that pageants offer the performers an education not only in looks, style, and stage presence, but also the history of drag. She discussed how drag pageants have been around for over thirty years and hold an important role within the drag community. Although she has hosted and performed in pageants, she has never competed for a national or state title because of her age. She once held the title of the

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Chris Hutchins; Rob Bond.

<sup>311</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> Venetia Iman.

youth bar Miss OYP; however, she refused to consider it an actual pageant. She listed some of the major Drag Queen pageants as Miss Continental, Miss EOY (Entertainer of the Year), Miss US of A, ANS (American National Star), and International Show Queen. Venetia clearly supports pageants and stated that while many other Queens think impersonators from the television or movies show the pinnacle of drag, for her the top of the profession would be holding a national or international title because “those are things that matter to me.”<sup>317</sup> She gave an example of the time she met Alyssa Edwards of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* fame. She stated that everyone else around her kept talking about how well Edwards had done on the show and his YouTube channel, but Venetia just wanted to meet the former Miss US of A and Miss Gay America.<sup>318</sup> Many of the Oklahoman Queens, such as Stacey, think pageants enable them to grow as an impersonator and bond with the larger community, but would not consider themselves to be a pageant Queen. Stacey has participated in all three types of drag, but choose not to classify himself in one category.<sup>319</sup> When I first interviewed him, he just returned from a pageant. Stacey explained that pageantry shows the impersonators’ willingness to grow their art and that these days so many people try to show up for talent nights with no effort put into their craft.<sup>320</sup> It shows the nature of the opposing traditional style of drag within Oklahoma. Many traditional Queens think drag without big hair and a sequenced gown exhibits minimal effort.<sup>321</sup> Venetia clarified that performers grow from participating in pageantry, winning the lower level competitions, fundraising for pageant expenses, and learning how to publicly speak for the

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Rob Bond.

panel.<sup>322</sup> The most common connection with having that training came with the traditional look of pageantry.

In the type of drag defined as show, the younger generations have attempted to reshape the pageantry values and definitions of drag.<sup>323</sup> In Oklahoma, the pageant world helps to connect one another; however, it stifles competition as pageant Queens book similar performers. Artists who desire to express themselves differently have found difficulties within the state. Miley expressed that to get any regular booking at a venue in Oklahoma they have to have competed or held a title. He described the situation of drag as, “We’re kind of set back here in Oklahoma.”<sup>324</sup> He revealed how in this state the non-traditional looks or performances of surrounding states remain fringe.<sup>325</sup> Allison said, “You can go to all of the four different bars (in Oklahoma City) that all have drag and there is always going to be someone who does that (pageant drag) or multiple people who do that.”<sup>326</sup> Zoey explained that through his own experiences he had no idea that Queens could have a darker side or perform rock songs because many of the Oklahoma performers do not entertain that way. He stated that he had always wanted to do performances like that, but since he never saw any Queens do it, he thought he could not. Zoey thought this way until he saw his future drag mom perform.<sup>327</sup> He stated that his drag mom looked at him and said, “No...do whatever the hell you want. Fuck those bitches.”<sup>328</sup> Allison added that only recently in Oklahoma a performer can get gigs without doing “boring” pretty pageant. He said Oklahoma drag has changed within the past couple years to where Queens can rise in popularity

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<sup>322</sup> Venetia Iman.

<sup>323</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>324</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>327</sup> Zachary Hale,

<sup>328</sup> Zachary Hale; Shannon Gritte, interview by Stephanie Allen, February 19, 2017, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

with different styles, and the amount of variety shocks him.<sup>329</sup> Miley explained how the bulk of drag in Oklahoma has a basis in pageantry that comes with a certain pretty look and ballad songs. It encourages him to try something new when sees people perform a different style. He wants Oklahoma drag to break the mold of the pageantry-dominated system.<sup>330</sup> Allison thinks that within ten years, the younger generations of drag with different styles will lead the drag community, and the focus on pageantry will have faded away. He believed that when someone performs differently, it brings a lot of fun to the venue and the crowd has become receptive to it because it is new and unconventional.<sup>331</sup> Allison specifically mentioned the artist Entity when he discussed nontraditional shows and referred to him as the counterculture leader of drag in Oklahoma.<sup>332</sup>

Entity started his career with the group, the Bang Bang Queer Punk Variety Show. This group specialized in what they call “counterculture drag” in Oklahoma and mainly performed at the HiLo club in Oklahoma City. Since pageantry currently dominates most clubs, Entity described how this group allows a venue for people to perform unusual drag and accepts many newcomers. He explained that many nightclubs refuse to allow him to perform on their stage. Entity used the example of The Boom, where they have many rules and put limitations on the drag they promote.<sup>333</sup> In chapter three, this work will go into further detail about some of the unpermitted drag at The Boom. Many clubs limit their performers, but others allow almost anything in their shows.

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<sup>329</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>330</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>331</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Levi Pennington.

Zoey has a unique style of counterculture where he performs to rock and horror music.<sup>334</sup> He stated the he does not try to fit in with the crowd and enjoys what he does on stage. Although Zoey clarified that although he does do some comedy numbers that tend to please the whole crowd, he mostly performs what he wants. He described that his art remains a different type of creativity than you can see when going out to watch drag.<sup>335</sup> He gave an example of one of his shows where he performed “Someone Like You” by Adele but renamed it “Someone Like You Killed Your Family” and he explained the scene:

So, I walked in on this family eating dinner, and I wanted to be a part of it so I pushed the wife out of the way. There all looking at me weird and the wife hits me in the face and then I, you know, off their families slowly and then make out with the dad on stage and then shoot him in the face.<sup>336</sup>

He remembered that his number went over very well with the audience, and he made a lot of money that night.<sup>337</sup> Oklahoma drag seems to be transitioning into a more varied entertainment where each impersonator performs uniquely. This work argues that the differing performances have evolved from the threats to the drag community such as the closing of clubs and the continued oppression by the state community. Although a division remains within the drag community, the larger issue comes from conservative citizens and government of the state in regards to marriage equality, same-sex adoption, and what constitutes a hate crime.

### **How to Survive in Oklahoma as a Drag Queen**

Oklahoma remains a very conservative state, an obstacle to the equality of the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>338</sup> Take for example the issue over marriage equality and same sex adoption. In

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<sup>334</sup> Zachary Hale.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Josh Dulaney, “Oklahoma ranks last on equality issues, LGBTQ groups say,” *NewsOk* (February 4, 2017). Accessed March 28, 2017. <http://newsok.com/article/5536874>.

2004, California and Massachusetts voted to allow civil unions. In response, Oklahoma proposed a joint resolution to amend the state constitution that would ensure that heteronormative values remained the same.<sup>339</sup> It passed, and the constitution of Oklahoma defined marriage as:

Marriage in this state shall consist only of the union of one man and one woman. Neither this Constitution nor any other provision of law shall be construed to require that marital status or the legal incidents thereof be conferred upon unmarried couples or groups. A marriage between persons of the same gender performed in another state shall not be recognized as valid and binding in this state as of the date of the marriage.<sup>340</sup>

Oklahoma further oppressed the LGBTQ+ community with the approval of House Bill 1821, the same year, that denied same sex couples the right to adoption stating, “Except that, this state, any of its agencies, or any court of this state shall not recognize an adoption by more than one individual of the same sex from any other state or foreign jurisdiction.”<sup>341</sup> It remains but an example of the larger issues that the drag and LGBTQ+ community face daily living in this state.

In 2015, the United States passed the Marriage Equality Act that allowed same sex couples to marry.<sup>342</sup> It became one of the important events in LGBTQ+ history and many people in Oklahoma never imagined they would get that right. Stacey explained that he never thought he would see it happen nationwide in his lifetime.<sup>343</sup> He involved himself with the legal process in Oklahoma and he stated, “Me being able to legally marry somebody that I love, should not impact your relationship with you and your husband... The sanctity of marriage is not challenged.”<sup>344</sup> Venetia explained that since she identifies as transgender and has a relationship

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<sup>339</sup> Oklahoma, Legislature, Senate, Senate Joint Resolution 38, 2004. *Second Session of the Forty-Ninth Legislature*. Accessed January 30, 2017. [http://www.oklegislature.gov/cf\\_pdf/2003-04%20INT/sres/sjr38%20int.pdf](http://www.oklegislature.gov/cf_pdf/2003-04%20INT/sres/sjr38%20int.pdf).

<sup>340</sup> Oklahoma, Legislature, Senate, Senate Joint Resolution 38, 2004, *Second Session of the Forty-Ninth Legislature*. Accessed January 30, 2017. [http://www.oklegislature.gov/cf\\_pdf/2003-04%20INT/sres/sjr38%20int.pdf](http://www.oklegislature.gov/cf_pdf/2003-04%20INT/sres/sjr38%20int.pdf).

<sup>341</sup> Oklahoma, Legislature, House of Representatives, House Concurrent Resolution 1078, 2006, *Second Session of the Fiftieth Legislature*. Accessed January 30, 2017. [http://www.oklegislature.gov/cf\\_pdf/2005-06%20INT/hres/HCR1078%20int.pdf](http://www.oklegislature.gov/cf_pdf/2005-06%20INT/hres/HCR1078%20int.pdf).

<sup>342</sup> Adam Liptak, “Supreme Court Ruling Makes Same-Sex Marriage a Right Nationwide,” *New York Times* (June 26, 2015) Accessed November 24, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/27/us/supreme-court-same-sex->.

<sup>343</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.



with a man that the Marriage Equality Act had little impact on her, but that she understands its significance for her friends and family.<sup>345</sup> Miley and Allison agreed and added that just because it had no impact their own personal lives that does not make the Act any less important.<sup>346</sup> Entity described how the passing actually affected him more than he thought it would.<sup>347</sup> He explained that he always thought that marriage equality made for a good cornerstone to rally behind, but he never saw it as an actual goal. He believed that the LGBTQ+ community had more pressing and obtainable issues, such as funding for AIDS research. He described the mindset that came from living in a conservative state, “I think when you grow up with this idea that you’ll never be able to get married even if you want to it feeds this culture of self-flagellation and promiscuity...If you know you’re never going to get married, how else would you behave?”<sup>348</sup> He clarified that it all changed when it became an actual law, and he found himself crying even though he never expected to. Now LGBTQ+ children will grow up with that option on the table.<sup>349</sup> Beyond the Marriage Equality Act and the action necessary to pass it, the drag community of Oklahoma faced other instances of oppression.

Almost all of the Drag Queens I interviewed expressed some form of fear about being openly a part of the LGBTQ+ community within Oklahoma. Only two cities in Oklahoma accept progressive ideas: Oklahoma City and Tulsa, but almost all of the Queens still worry about physical violence when outside of their venues. Miley described how he always changes or will not get out of his car in more than the surrounding area of the club he performs at in full drag.<sup>350</sup> He thinks hate in Oklahoma still needs addressed, not just the familiar hate of name calling and

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<sup>345</sup> Venetia Iman.

<sup>346</sup> Chris Hutchins; Rob Bond.

<sup>347</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Chris Hutchins.

threats, but of equality within the larger state community.<sup>351</sup> Allison described how unsafe he feels when dressed in drag outside of LGBTQ+ venues.<sup>352</sup> He stated that he would never go into a Walmart because he cannot be sure of his safety, but he would go to a drive thru because he believes that the car guards him.<sup>353</sup> Zoey agreed with this sentiment and added that because he has no control of the situation in a public setting where there could potentially be eight guys that want to assault him for doing drag.<sup>354</sup> These Queens have to watch their backs for unknown and known people.

In Oklahoma, many families consider themselves religiously Christian whereas many Queens do not. These performers must reconcile their family with how they want to live. Miley feels he has to hide his lifestyle from his parents.<sup>355</sup> He explained that he came from a very straight Christian family and that his mother and father know he has done drag, yet he still keeps his life secret from them. When he came out, his parents disowned him for a while because “they do not approve of me at all... doing this.”<sup>356</sup> Stacey experienced some of the same issues with his family, but the school newspaper boldly published his picture exclaiming how the high school had its first gay drum major and outed him.<sup>357</sup> Stacey stated that he chose not to come out to his parents at the time because he knew they would not approve. He lied and his father sued the paper and getting a retraction of the article, but Stacey waited until he moved out and turned eighteen to let them know.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> Zachary Hale.

<sup>355</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

Although the familial rejection occurs too often in Oklahoma, some Queens' families do accept their drag children and their sexuality. Allison stated that his mom loves him and attends his performances; while Miley added that he reconnected with his birth mother and that she and his step-dad come to support his shows.<sup>359</sup> Allison gave an example of his family's alliance by telling me his personal quote, "You are not my mom, you are not my dad, you are not my family. I don't care what you think."<sup>360</sup> He explained the importance of the phrase, now when someone comes up to him and says something nasty he can go home and know his mom loves him.<sup>361</sup> Due to Christianity's problem with homosexuality, families have been torn apart with love for the child on one side and the belief of an immoral practice on the other. These interviews proved how integral religion remains to Oklahoma families and how it affects Drag Queens. Some performers, such as Allison, have different stories. Not all churches condemn members of the LGBTQ+ community likewise some families in Oklahoma readily accept the art. The problem drag has with religious views spread further than just family issues, and in fact, in Oklahoma one can always expect protestors at Pride events.

The Bible comes up a lot within Oklahoma's discussion of the LGBTQ+ community. Miley discussed that since he grew up in the church he "knows the Bible like the back of my hand."<sup>362</sup> He used an example of coming upon a protester at Pride and stated that since he knows the scripture that "you're just picking and choosing what you want. Because I'm sure you're divorced or something... Literally, no sin is more than the other."<sup>363</sup> He continued to explain how he dislikes any religion forced on him so he refuses to push him being gay on someone.

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<sup>359</sup> Rob Bond; Chris Hutchins.

<sup>360</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

Miley became reminded of a meme, that he chooses to live by, “You’re entitled to your wrong opinion.”<sup>364</sup> Although no one can change the minds of the protesters, sometimes Queens can personally alter an opinion when they come upon hate. The Sunday Gospel Brunch proved Miley’s argument. The service playfully mixes Christian beliefs with the entertainment of drag, and the interaction with the crowd gives performers the ability to lessen the hate. For the traditional Oklahoman going to church, it remains the equivalent of being a good person, and this church service allowed drag to become integrated with the “good person” ideal through one-on-one interaction.

In the everyday lives of Queens in Oklahoma, they run into nonviolent harassment with their coworkers or the people on social media pages. Miley explained how sometimes when a male finds out his sexuality, they become disgusted or automatically think that he will now find them attractive and attempt sexual advances.<sup>365</sup> Allison described how he came upon one of his coworkers who feared if he went to a gay club that he would be approached.<sup>366</sup> Allison assured his coworker that he would not be hit on and the man went one night. He gave a recap of the conversation, “I was like ‘how was it?’ He goes ‘its fine. I just stood in a corner.’ I was like ‘yeah, nobody hit on you, did they?’ And he goes ‘not really.’ ...I was like ‘tell your friends.’”<sup>367</sup> Venetia had some woman message her on Facebook to talk about the transgender bathroom issue.<sup>368</sup> Throughout the argument, the other lady had no idea that she had been talking to a transgender woman. When Venetia asked the woman if she knew she had been messaging with a

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<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>366</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Venetia Iman.

transgender woman this whole time, the lady responded with immense disdain.<sup>369</sup> Although a lot of oppression occurs in Oklahoma, the state also has many accepting portions of its population.

### **Leading the Fight Towards Equality**

Drag Queens of Oklahoma have the ability to speak out and lead the charge on multiple social issues. Many of the impersonators recognized their role as a performer affects their own LGBTQ+ community within Oklahoma. Many issues remain that the drag world must deal with especially in regards to the recent 2016 Presidential Election. Election years tend to spark a political wave within art. Regarding politics, Zoey intensely believed that social awareness remains a crucial part of the entertainment.<sup>370</sup> He described that he has just watched a taping of a drag show where the performer did a number about Betsy Devos. He himself performed acts about politics. Zoey's performance centered around Oklahoma Governor Mary Fallin.<sup>371</sup> He recounted his number where he had a large poster of Fallin with "Fuck Mary" written on it. Throughout the act, he stabbed the picture over and over with a fetish dagger.<sup>372</sup> Many of the entertainers in Oklahoma realized their impact on the state's LGBTQ+ community.

The interviews I conducted revealed that the Queens in Oklahoma know they have a voice and can speak for the LGBTQ+ community. Miley explained that drag has become advocates for the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>373</sup> Allison added that being in the spotlight reinforces it.<sup>374</sup> Entity expressed that Drag Queens have a role to ground the community and remind them of the origins and strides made from the equality movement.<sup>375</sup> Zoey believed that drag performers still have the same importance as they have had throughout history and must guide

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Zachary Hale.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>374</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>375</sup> Levi Pennington.

people to let them know that “hey its cool, you can be a homo. No one cares. They’ll get over it.”<sup>376</sup> Stacey believes that drag promotes social awareness instead of social protest.<sup>377</sup> Stacey involves himself with many organizations to attend benefits for different causes and spreads awareness through them.<sup>378</sup> Venetia explained that these benefits have the power to help members of the LGBTQ+ community on a personal level, but refuses to believe that drag could spread actual change.<sup>379</sup> Allison argued that he has seen a variety of social and political shows, and he believes these messages can educate the young LGBTQ+ community who might not care to know about certain issues.<sup>380</sup> In Oklahoma, many of the Queens believe that their art can come in any form they desire including fighting for equality.

One Queen felt that some of the implications of such equality has negatively effects along with all the good. Stacey explained that since the barriers of oppression have lessened, everyone can go anywhere.<sup>381</sup> He clarified that now many people feel safe in any club they visit. Stacey described the LGBTQ+ club scene of the past where no member of that community felt safe entering a straight bar. Now, the general public accepts them and it hurts LGBTQ+ bars. He recounted how many bars have closed or decreased their open days in contrast to when he first moved to Oklahoma when bars opened seven days a week. Stacey argued that these bars have suffered due to equality because now LGBTQ+ members can go any venue.<sup>382</sup> Entity stated that the most interesting part of this movement revealed that straight clubs now book drag shows.<sup>383</sup> He described shows he has attended where all of the women commented on how pretty he did his

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<sup>376</sup> Zachary Hale.

<sup>377</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Venetia Iman.

<sup>380</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>381</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> Levi Pennington.

makeup or his outfit and men seemed entertained.<sup>384</sup> Stacey argued that this has become bad for the LGBTQ+ venue's business because previously him and others thought of the gay club as the only safe spot for them to hang out.<sup>385</sup> He listed all of the clubs in Oklahoma forced to close, and recently many, such as TNT and Renegade both in Tulsa, shut down on the weekdays due to lack of business. He fears that drag ends in the LGBTQ+ clubs unless the owners do something to draw in crowds again.<sup>386</sup> The future of drag in Oklahoma remains an unanswered question.

### **The Future of Drag Queens in Oklahoma**

Many drag performers in Oklahoma remain hopeful that drag will prosper due to the ever-changing nature of the art form. Miley and Allison both think the level of variety in Oklahoma will broaden and veer away from the pageantry or the domination of pageantry.<sup>387</sup> Miley wants Oklahoma to let people be themselves and show it through their drag.<sup>388</sup> Entity instead thinks drag should keep the foundation of pageantry, but diversify to include “weird and gender-fuck Drag Queens.”<sup>389</sup> He stated that it would produce a uniquely Oklahoman aesthetic where these androgynous Queens have been taught and raised by pageant impersonators.<sup>390</sup> Venetia foresaw the future of drag as younger and more diverse.<sup>391</sup> She explained that it seems with every passing year more Kings and Divas come to drag.<sup>392</sup> Entity believes that the future of drag will help to end the racism and transgender phobia within both the LGBTQ+ community and the state.<sup>393</sup> He added the LGBTQ+ community the future should align itself with other

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

<sup>385</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>386</sup> Steven Havard.

<sup>387</sup> Chris Hutchins; Rob Bond.

<sup>388</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>389</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

<sup>391</sup> Venetia Iman.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> Levi Pennington.

minorities because he thinks their movement has come a lot further along than many of the other social issues because homosexual people can be white males. He expressed, “It’s not fair to keep that victory to ourselves.”<sup>394</sup>

I asked the Queens what they thought remained the most important reason drag should continue. Allison argued that for transgender people drag can be an outlet or trial for them to decide if they truly want that lifestyle.<sup>395</sup> Entity agreed and stated that drag reminds people that gender can be mocked, not identity.<sup>396</sup> Allison explained drag gives its members a place to be free and safe.<sup>397</sup> Zoey added that drag helps odd people find families and realize “they’re not the only freak in the world.”<sup>398</sup> He believed that drag and LGBTQ+ venues must continue until they have complete acceptance.<sup>399</sup> Miley stated that drag must continue to achieve equality and Queens still need to perform and advocate for the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>400</sup> Venetia concluded that drag remains a large part of the LGBTQ+ history and helps unite the community.<sup>401</sup> Entity agreed with Venetia and placed historical importance on drag continuing when he said, “There is no gay history without Drag Queens.”<sup>402</sup> Stacey surmised that drag, “Is what has supported this gay community for so long. It has been the entertainment value of our community.”<sup>403</sup> The future of drag remains an important issue among the Queens of Oklahoma. These interviews revealed the problems drag performers face within the LGBTQ+, drag community, and the state, which allowed for an understanding of the daily lives of these entertainers.

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<sup>394</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>395</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>396</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>397</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>398</sup> Zachary Hale.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>401</sup> Venetia Iman.

<sup>402</sup> Levi Pennington.

<sup>403</sup> Steven Havard.



This chapter on drag explored how the Queens of Oklahoma live, think, and perform. The first section expressed how people in Oklahoma began to perform often in Oklahoma's two different youth clubs that allowed LGBTQ+ teenagers to figure out their own identity and introduced them to the art. This chapter reviewed the internal divisions within drag in Oklahoma and how this competition spawned a variety of styles and created a unique entertainment. It then discussed the oppression performers and the LGBTQ+ community faced from citizens and lawmakers. The interviews proved how throughout the struggles many impersonators face, they united and argued that it helped drag become stronger as an entertainment in Oklahoma. The Queens showed their deep connection to transgender rights and how they promote awareness for the community. In this chapter I have found out how the performers attempt social change and that no two Queens spread awareness the same. The contents of the chapter have proven that the oppressive nature of the state has impacted the drag community and it has since developed into a unique group belonging to Oklahoma.

## Chapter Four: The Brotherhood: Drag Kings of Oklahoma

### What is a Drag King?

In 2008, on a Thursday drag night at the local bar Majestic in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a new performer took the stage. She had electrical tape placed over her areolas in the shape of an X and she lip-synced to a rock song. At this point, the majority of the performers considered themselves Drag Queens. I remember this to be the first time I saw a King. When I returned to the bar in 2016, the lineup had changed dramatically. Whereas before Queens dominated the scene, now Kings made up for half of the talent and one King even hosts the show on Sundays.<sup>404</sup> The same transformation occurred in Oklahoma City. King Damian Matrix began her drag in 2001 at the youth LGBTQ+ club Wreck Room in Oklahoma City, as the first and only King in the venue.<sup>405</sup> Now, she serves on King pageants, judges male entertainer contests, and performs with many other Male Impersonators in OKC.<sup>406</sup>

In the conventional definition, a King must have been born as a woman and perform as a man.<sup>407</sup> Yet, drag in Oklahoma has begun to blur the gender lines, but traditionally, “a King is a male entertainer.”<sup>408</sup> Now someone can take hormones or they can be legally transgender and still perform as a King.<sup>409</sup> Transgender King Shire, described his point of view on the subject and he stated that pageantry has very clear lines of performance titles where since he is transgender he must enter the male entertainer contest of the pageant.<sup>410</sup> However at club shows, titles have no tie to a person’s gender. He normally considers himself a King, but some venues force him to

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<sup>404</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer, interview by Stephanie Allen, December 19, 2016, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>405</sup> Shannon Gritte, interview by Stephanie Allen, February 19, 2017, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

<sup>408</sup> Shannon Gritte.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid.

<sup>410</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

use the term male entertainer or Divo because of his gender identity. Many states contain high percentages of transgender performers, and they find the term King to be incorrect or disrespectful and prefer to be known as Male Entertainers.<sup>411</sup> Fellow transgender King Avery Paige argued that his gender identity has no connection with his drag, and that he hates when people bring it up.<sup>412</sup> Like Shire, he experienced people arguing over terminology based on his gender, but to him the two terms mean the same thing.<sup>413</sup> This chapter will use the terms King, Male Entertainer, and Male Illusionist interchangeably to describe these performers and the type of drag they do. This work will also refer to these entertainers with the pronoun of their choosing. This section provides interviews to explore the experiences of Kings in Oklahoma. It focuses on how the entertainers became Kings, their differentiating performance styles, their struggles of living in Oklahoma, how they continue the fight for equality, and how their oppression has helped to create the brotherhood. Finally, this portion will discuss the future of Drag Kings in Oklahoma and their importance within the state and the greater America. The oppressive nature of Oklahoma created a convergence of drag performers, in which the art diversified and grew more inclusive.

### **Who are the Kings of Oklahoma?**

In Oklahoma, Kings have evolved into an integral part of drag shows; yet, similar to Queens and Divas, no two Male Entertainers are alike. From the interviews, the Kings ages range from twenty-five to thirty-three and that trend showed how Kings tend to be older performers.<sup>414</sup> As far as ethnicities go they varied from Latino, Italian-American, African American, mixed

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

<sup>412</sup> Kale Alexander Hayes, interview by Stephanie Allen, November 18, 2016, Women's Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid.

<sup>414</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer; Kale Alexander Hayes; Shannon Gritte; Nichole Grooms, interview by Stephanie Allen, February 19, 2017, Women's Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

race, and Caucasian. Many of the Kings defined themselves as working or middle class, and they hold jobs that range from car rental agents to professional clarinet players. In regards to religion, the Kings in the interviews showed a split: some have no religious belief and others believe in a spiritual power without any specific affiliation. Most Male Entertainers earned their high school diploma or attended college, while one King has two Masters degrees. Politically, they vary between Independent, Democrat, and others refrain from aligning themselves with any party. Unlike many of the other drag participants, Kings differ in their sexual orientations. For sexuality, the kings differed with one being a lesbian, another straight, and others adhere to no specific title. As for the Kings' relationship statuses, two are going through a divorce and others remain in partnered relationships. None of the Kings I interviewed considered themselves single.<sup>415</sup> Although their sexual orientation varies from the norm of drag performers, Kings still have a direct connection with the LGBTQ+ community within Oklahoma and the greater America.

### **Becoming an Oklahoma King**

Drag Kings in Oklahoma began performing for differing reasons and through an assortment of ways, but each started through a connection with the state's LGBTQ+ community. Avery began in February 2012 after moving back to Oklahoma from Little Rock, Arkansas.<sup>416</sup> He explained he came out as transgender first and that the clubs in that city frowned upon transgender people who performed in drag. When he returned to Oklahoma, his cousin took him to Majestic to meet transgender entertainers, and from that experience, he realized he could do

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<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

<sup>416</sup> Kale Alexander Hayes.

drag. Avery's new friends wanted him to perform, so he told them that when the new year came he would do it, and he has entertained ever since.<sup>417</sup>

The LGBTQ+ clubs created a safe space for its patrons, and many Kings credit their start with drag from watching the shows at a venue. On his eighteenth birthday in 2008, Shire went to a drag venue and saw his first show, that the next week he signed up for the talent night.<sup>418</sup> He described his memory, "I walked into the bar...and I turned, and someone who now is one of my best friends, was on stage at the time and he was dancing. He was all shiny and sparkly and I was like 'that looks fun.' And I saw a couple other entertainers...and I was just 'like this is something I have to do.'"<sup>419</sup> Shire loved music without any mastery of an instrument, so the notion of drag drew him with the ability to express himself through music. He described how with drag a performer can succeed without complete comprehension of any one aspect of music.<sup>420</sup> Damian began to perform at seventeen years old after attending the LGBTQ+ youth club the Wreck Room.<sup>421</sup> She regularly attended the club for two years, sneaking in at fifteen one year shy of the age limit for the club. Damian watched Trinity Matrix, a Drag Queen, perform odd shows, and she identified with Trinity's shows because she loved performance art. Trinity became her drag mom, and once Damian decided to attempt drag she backed out due to her anxiety, but Trinity pushed her to try again. They planned a date a few weeks later, and this time they would perform together. Damian explained how she feared that she would perform terribly because she knew no other Kings with whom to compare herself, so she "winged it."<sup>422</sup> Instead, the crowd loved it,

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

<sup>418</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

<sup>421</sup> Shannon Gritte.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

and they performed an encore. Damian also described how only later she realized that her desire to do drag came from some of the gender identity conflicts she had.<sup>423</sup>

King Bastian Cox started to perform in 2012.<sup>424</sup> Her friend had tickets to a lesbian bar's workshop, Sue Ellen's in Dallas, Texas, on King makeup, but the friend could not attend and asked Bastian to go in her place. When she went, Bastian assumed she could never physically perform as a King due to her hourglass shape and her large breasts. Nonetheless, the workshop inspired her to go home and play with her makeup. Several weeks later, one of her friends planned to perform in a benefit show at the same bar and asked if she wanted to join. Bastian stated that she "was hooked" after that first performance.<sup>425</sup> Each performer had a different experience becoming a King, but two themes repeated themselves; a love of art and a sense community. This LGBTQ+ communal encouragement of Kings showed how drag entertainment has begun to diversify and thrive in Oklahoma.

### **Kings Fight for Their Place in Oklahoma**

At first, the art of Drag Kings lacked respect or popularity in Oklahoma and the larger United States. According to the people I interviewed, Kings lacked a secure place in drag until the early 2000s and they continued to have to fight for recognition as a legitimate form of entertainment. Unlike Queens who had performers to watch and drag moms to educate them, many of the Kings developed their art on their own. Damian described how Kings began in Oklahoma because she led some of the initial steps for equality. She became the first King to perform at the Wreck Room.<sup>426</sup> When Damian began entertaining, she had no one to watch nor

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> Nichole Grooms, interview by Stephanie Allen, February 19, 2017, Women's Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Shannon Gritte.

any comparisons. When she started, one Queen approached her about being her mentor/drag mom, but she only taught Damian how to put in contacts. Yet, she assisted her in other ways as well. A performer's first drag family dictates where they can work and their bookings, a critical part of a drag entertainer's job.<sup>427</sup>

After Avery started drag he found a drag mom, but she could only help so much because the two performances differed greatly.<sup>428</sup> When it came to the stage, it forced him to figure it out on his own.<sup>429</sup> The atmosphere remained hard to break into compared to Drag Queens. Shire explained that when he first started he would go to all of the shows and observe the other Male Entertainers to see what they did and how they performed with the crowd.<sup>430</sup> He described how much the art has changed since his beginning because many of the Kings refrained from contouring their face with makeup and or do facial hair in Oklahoma. King's performances revolved around simple costuming. He discussed that when he first started, Kings wore simple t-shirts that matched their shoes whereas now he performs in a blue sequined suit. Since Kings refused to wear any makeup or do much costuming, "There was kind of a rule, they're on their own when it came to Kings. The Queens did not really accept us at first. They did not do a whole lot of reaching out."<sup>431</sup> Queens enjoyed the monopoly they had on drag in Oklahoma and failed to understand the entertainment value of Kings. He received help from one of the Queens, Tamia St. James, who went out of her way to teach him the simple things that venues and performers needed and what not to do when on stage. Tamia coming up to him remained a rarity during the first years of him doing drag.<sup>432</sup> Shire remembered the first Oklahoma FMI (Female Male

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<sup>427</sup> Shannon Gritte.

<sup>428</sup> Kale Alexander Hayes.

<sup>429</sup> Kale Alexander Hayes.

<sup>430</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

<sup>431</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

Illusionist), Michael. He described Male Illusionist as a discriminatory title for transgender performers because it defines them as someone who is not male, performing as one. Male Illusionist (MI) pageants came from these outdated titles and that the change occurred within his own involvement in the art. He explained how thankful he remains to have seen the growth of Kings in Oklahoma, because some of the surrounding states still refuse to let Kings perform. He stated that these places remain content with their Queens and do not see the appeal that Kings provide.<sup>433</sup>

When Bastian became a new King, she received no help from her fellow performers at all.<sup>434</sup> Everyone just guessed and tried to do their best. Most performers told her, “Well you could go to Goodwill and find a suit.”<sup>435</sup> Bastian explained that most of the first performers she would classify as more masculine women or transgender men so they just pulled things from out of their closets before a performance. She watched the top of the industry, the Queens, and tried to learn their tricks because “if you want to be the best you should know what the best looks like.”<sup>436</sup> Bastian wanted to keep people coming back. She learned to sew and make her own costumes from the Internet because no King shops existed, and she has a very womanly figure. When she wanted more help, she entered national competitions to meet some of the Kings from around the US. A bar contest allowed her to meet Damian, who offered to help her if she wanted it, and created friendship, which turned into a partnership.<sup>437</sup> Although the industry started roughly in Oklahoma, the Kings have grown and become a staple in the drag community. It required them to prove themselves before others saw their legitimacy. From that pressure, the

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> Nichole Grooms.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid.



Kings aligned themselves together more so than any other drag subsect. Despite this suppression from within the drag community, the Oklahoma performers responded with unity and then flourished. One of the most important aspects to drag lies within the art's ability to convey emotion to the audience.

### **How Oklahoma Kings use their Persona to Emote Emotions in Performances**

A similar quality to all drag performers remains the ability to convey emotion through performance. Many of the Oklahoma Drag Queens revealed how they developed a drag persona to help them express their own emotions and create exciting entertainment for the LGBTQ+ community. Avery stated that his drag persona derived from his own identity, he explained that he wanted to perform as himself with his own name but that due to another entertainer with a similar name that he had to choose a different one.<sup>438</sup> His own art evolved from a lack of ability to dance which his performances remain starkly different because he does not dance and instead focuses on crowd interaction and “feeling” the lyrics.<sup>439</sup> Avery described that in his shows he tries to incorporate a story to convey a certain emotion to the audience but that he cannot do it every time because it can get tiring. He explained that performing emotions remains the best part about doing drag “because any type of emotion you go through in your life you can let it out on that stage. There’s a song for everything.”<sup>440</sup>

Shire stated that he created his own persona from a joke with the name Shire VonCunt.<sup>441</sup> The Shire came from his love of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien mixed with his height.<sup>442</sup> The VonCunt came from a sexual play on words from the t-shirts him and his

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<sup>438</sup> Kale Alexander Hayes.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

friends used to make called cuntalicious. He revealed that his drag persona has the opposite personality of himself. He stated, “I keep to myself for the most part. I have my certain friends that I hang out with and that’s about it. Shire is just very outgoing, fun, and all about having a party and whatnot. I’ve grown out of that in my normal life so it’s kind of like a separation.”<sup>443</sup>

Shire described his performances as ever changing and that some weeks he can come in knowing what he will do because he feels a certain way and want to express that and that other times he just wants to get the crowd hyped and do a party song. He insisted that he uses emotions to keep him humble in drag because the feelings remind him of where he came from and how he became comfortable with himself. Shire explained that he turns to drag for a lot of things that go on in his life “relationship wise, whether it be things I’m going through with my friends, just general stresses of life, and just general things to overcome. Drag is definitely a really good outlet for any emotion you might come across.”<sup>444</sup> He recounted how he expels his emotions through songs such as when he feels angry he performs rock or screamo and he does hip-hop when confident. He described how drag allows him to experience negative emotions in a productive and positive way. He told me how performing emotions can be the hardest part of the show. He proved his statement with an example of how when he does a dance or party song the crowd already feels that mood by being at a bar watching a show but, that when he does an emotional number all of the feelings have to come from him and he has to do it in a way that the audience will be receptive to it even though they did not come to the venue in that mindset.<sup>445</sup>

Damian described the connection between her emotions and her performances. She explained that if she does not feel a certain event, song, or venue then she will not perform.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> Shannon Gritte.

She went on to describe how she refuses to go to most themed events because that does not correlate with the type of drag she enjoys or what she wants to show on stage. She stated, “Drag is very personal to me. It’s like if you were to take something and turn it into a five-minute short film. It’s like a beginning, a middle, and an end with a range of emotions. Whether it’s like...psychotic to sad to happy to crazy or somewhere in the middle.”<sup>447</sup> She developed her drag persona from trying to figure out names and the film *The Omen* came on and she decided on the name Damian.<sup>448</sup> She explained that the name correlates to the Devil and that it represents what she does in her drag. Her drag differs from her own personal life because she considers herself to be a calm person with an interest in horror however, her persona performs violent shows. She expressed that she loves performance art and the darker the entertainment the more she enjoys it so her King persona has that twist to it.<sup>449</sup> Damian’s drag uses the Christian religion prevalent in majority of the state but her art showcases the bad side. Her shows played on the religious notion that condemns all homosexuals to an eternity in Hell. By spinning the subject as enjoying or embracing Hell Damian flips the traditional mindset and turns the insult on its head. The art she does teases the religious line much like the Sunday Gospel Brunch where they play on the good side of the Christian religion.

Bastian explained that normally she remains very guarded and that doing drag has allowed her to be herself but safely behind a mask. She stated, “I could be me but, nobody would know it was me.”<sup>450</sup> She expressed that she loves to make the audience feel something because of what she does on stage. She described that aspect drew her to both drag and classical music.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Shannon Gritte.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

<sup>450</sup> Nichole Grooms.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

Her persona came from her love of classic music and the artists so her name came from a pun on the musician Johann Sebastian Bach. Bastian recounted another aspect of the emotions that she encounters with drag and stated that the emotions offstage remain just as important to the art because it helps create a sense of community. Her contact with the LGBTQ+ and pageant community she realized has taken that wall that kept her guarded and turned it into a veil.<sup>452</sup> The multitude of Kings created several different ways to express similar emotions and that impacts the type of shows they do.

### **Type of King Performances**

The Kings in Oklahoma do not follow a set path when it comes to their types of performances and instead have created a range of art as varied as the people behind the makeup. Bastian described her style as traditional.<sup>453</sup> She explained that she embodies Fred Astaire with a lot of jazz music and Michael Bublé. She communicated how the character work that she does used to be the norm for Kings but, now when she goes to a competition her art remains rare. She recounted that the majority of the King performances have rock or hip-hop numbers so her tap-dancing routine, although not unheard-of, offers a refreshing break. She also does a lot of comedy shows. Bastian proclaimed that since Damian became a part of the King entertainment that she saw drag change dramatically towards more of a metal style.<sup>454</sup>

Damian remains well-known for her shock and horror shows. Damian recalled her first show that she did with her drag mom. They performed to “A Daisy Chain for Satan” by Thrill Kill Kult in which they ripped up a bunny.<sup>455</sup> Then her mom had jumper cables attached to fake breasts and had Damian tied up in a chair and at the end of the act they fought. She described one

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid.

<sup>455</sup> Shannon Gritte.

of the most hated talents she did at one pageant that she loved that most did not. Damian explained that her number followed the story of a serial killer that fell in love. She had someone chained to a cinderblock with a ball gag with the song “I want you to want me” by Lobo. Finally, it concluded with “Hurt” by Nine Inch Nails where if the killer could not have the person then no one would and she portrayed the killer as sad because she had to kill the person she loved.<sup>456</sup>

Damian has since learned that she had to tone down her violence and keep her drag commercially non-commercial.<sup>457</sup> She has found that an audience will accept her violent art if done a certain way. Damian revealed that a performer has to express themselves through drag enough to where the audience will understand their show, but also do outlandish bits to keep the patrons coming back. She described this as a process of finding a popular song and using that as an opener, then do whatever she wants in the middle because no one remembers that, and finally end with another popular song. Damian explained that her shows go over the best in fetish venues where those people have such open minds they see her entertainment as performance art and not gore for fun. She argued that although, some states tend to not respect alternative types of drag that if someone puts their all into it that their performance then people will honor it. She stated, “If you believe in what you’re selling then people will buy it.”<sup>458</sup> Damian thinks that many people have a fear of death and from that they shy away from her type of drag. She explained that she has come to terms with the two absolute facts about life in Oklahoma, “you will pay your taxes and you will die.”<sup>459</sup> Although many of the Kings do not share the same extreme style as Damian they all share the same desire to keep the audience guessing as well as entertained.

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid.

Shire explained that by looking at him many people think that he will do R&B or hip-hop but that could not be further from his personal taste in music.<sup>460</sup> Shire loves Indie music but recognized that those songs do not do well in bars. He described how most audiences will not get into a show if they do not know the music. Shire stated that sometimes the different crowds will impact what type of performance he does. He recounted that he will watch the audience before a show and see what they dance to and try to feel them out before he performs. He disclosed that since he hosts one of the shows it can be easier for him to get a feel of the crowd than many of the other performers. He described his own style as unique because he veers away from hip-hop or rock and he varies his performances all the time. Shire affirmed that with some performers, such as Damian, the audience knows what to expect every time so he tries to break that cycle and switch it up. He made sure to express that if someone finds their niche and wants to stick with it that he has no problem with that but he has a desire to keep the crowd guessing at every show. He argued that he has been granted the opportunity to see so many different types of drag and others only learn from one family and he believes that has something to do with his goal as a King. Shire also explained that his drag remains less flamboyant than some of the other types of performances in Oklahoma. Shire has traveled the nation doing drag and he described how in some places the Kings see him and admire his costuming or makeup and he stated that when he goes to those places it reminds him of when he first started in Oklahoma. He asserted that in these places the King entertainment has just never grown like it has in Oklahoma. Shire expressed how grateful he feels that he had the opportunity to do drag in this state because the community allowed the Kings to grow and become valued entertainment.<sup>461</sup> Many of the performers I interviewed argued that Oklahoma Kings have grown because of them consistently

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<sup>460</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

helping each other within their own drag subsect. This presented the Kings circular flow; from this collectiveness, the art has evolved and from the evolution has become widely accepted within the drag community and from the acceptance the LGBTQ+ community has become more united and unique.

Avery also takes into account the audience at the venue, he explained that since he mainly performs at Majestic his crowds have plenty of straight people in them and that he tries to make his shows appeal to everyone.<sup>462</sup> He stated that since he has performed all over the country that he has met several other Kings and that he believes that Oklahoma has the best ones. He continued by arguing that this state has the best mentors and opportunities for growth than many of the other states do for Kings. Avery gave an example of how some Kings come to Oklahoma to perform and they say to him that they do well in their home state, but they do poorly in this state because the art has advanced so much further than where they come from. He described how in Oklahoma the King community remains so tight-knit that it helps the performers expand and push the boundaries. Avery gave an example of Texas and how that state “lives” for Queens so the Kings do not get stage time and without that they cannot get better.<sup>463</sup> Kings in Oklahoma have had to fight for themselves on two fronts. On one side, they had to prove themselves as entertainers to the dominant Queens and on the other they must still push against the conservative norms of the state. Even though the Kings had to strive for where they are now there remain many middle American states where Kings have not been able to break the barrier. These interviews showcased how Oklahoma Kings helped to vary the drag community.

### **Being a King in Conservative Oklahoma**

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<sup>462</sup> Kale Alexander Hayes.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

The state of Oklahoma has historically not been kind to minorities especially members of the LGBTQ+ community. In 2016, Oklahoma introduced twenty-seven bills aimed to discriminate the LGBTQ+ of this state coined the ‘slate of hate.’<sup>464</sup> Although the legislature did not pass the bills it remains an example of where the majority of the citizens lie on equality issues.<sup>465</sup> Damian recounted that when she first started doing drag at seventeen, she had to fear for her life.<sup>466</sup> She described, “Everywhere you went you got fag bashed, you got gay bashed everywhere. Like people would throw shit at you, people try to fight you.”<sup>467</sup> Damian used an example of what happened to her drag son when he first began to perform. Her son would have people throw things at him, try to assault him, and once someone tried to pluck the contacts out of his eyes. Even to this day Damian has had death threats and once had to hire security to follow her around at an event after these threats had her confined to her car. She described how her mindset has changed from these experiences and now she believes that she will fight back because she should not have to change her life because of what someone else thinks. Damian recognized that she has a figure that can be intimidating and that her own personality gives her the ability to confront these people who harass her but that others do not have that option. She explained that Oklahoma citizens reacted differently when she first began but argued that under President Obama’s administration the hate took a secretive approach and that she believes that she has come to see it come out of the shadows once again with the current President Trump. Damian revealed how people will stop doing things overtly if looked down upon by the government and they just act like they accept you. She stated, “They secretly don’t accept you,

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<sup>464</sup> HRC staff, “While Anti-LGBT Bills Progress Across Nation, Oklahoma’s ‘Slate of Hate’ is Defeated,” *Human Rights Campaign* (March 11, 2016) Accessed January 23, 2017. <http://www.hrc.org/blog/while-anti-lgbt-bills-progress-across-nation-oklahomas-slate-of-hate-is-def>.

<sup>465</sup> HRC staff, “While Anti-LGBT Bills Progress Across Nation, Oklahoma’s ‘Slate of Hate’ is Defeated.”

<sup>466</sup> Shannon Gritte.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.



they never did. It was just socially acceptable to act socially acceptable and accepting. But now you have... the leader spewing like fuck gay people, fuck fags. Now the internal feelings and thoughts for race, homosexuals, and trans people, that shit never went away. It just got put in a nice little package for eight years.”<sup>468</sup>

Damian described how in Oklahoma’s smaller towns even the government could not subdue the hate and she explained her one encounter at a gas station in Antlers, Oklahoma.<sup>469</sup> She stated that she rode to the city with her parents and that when Damian went into the gas station a red pickup truck with a few men in it had pulled away but swung back around when they saw her. She explained that had her parents, who both had licenses to carry, not shown off their own nine millimeters at the driver and told them to leave, that she has no idea what would have happened to her. Damian recounted that when going into small towns Kings and other LGBTQ+ community members have to be careful because one cannot be sure of their safety.<sup>470</sup> Bastian added that she will not stop in a gas station in drag, period, no matter where she is in Oklahoma. She recognized that she does not completely pass as a man in drag so she would never take the chance.<sup>471</sup> Bastian has encountered her own problems even outside of drag for looking like a lesbian.<sup>472</sup> She recounted one time she drove to Dallas, Texas and on her way there she experienced a confrontation. She stated, “I stopped at a stop light, and these idiots next to me... started yelling ‘are you a man or a woman?’”<sup>473</sup> Bastian explained that this harassment has started up again with the discussion of the transgender bathroom rights and that “it has made people assholes, and assumptive ones at that.”<sup>474</sup> Avery argued that just because some things

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

<sup>471</sup> Nichole Grooms.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

have gotten better over time in Oklahoma that other things have become worse.<sup>475</sup> He stated that Oklahoma always teeter-totters between accepting and not. He explained that hate remains one of the main things he would like to change within the state about the LGBTQ+ community. Avery added that he will not let some hate bother him, such as the protesters at the Gay Pride Parade, because he believes everyone should be able to express their own opinion and those protesters do not hurt anyone physically. He described, although he cannot understand why they do it, that he sees drag performers' activism as no different from the protestors because they essentially do the same thing just for different purposes.<sup>476</sup> Although the state has a propensity to marginalize the LGBTQ+ and drag community the Kings have several ways of fighting for equality.

### **The Brotherhood**

The oppressive nature of Oklahoma has granted the Kings one of their greatest allies, themselves. Many of the Kings that I interviewed had deep connections with their fellow performers. Within the drag community of Oklahoma, the Kings have created a familial mindset when it comes to pageants and performances. Bastian exclaimed that Damian has to be one of the largest King mentors in the state.<sup>477</sup> Damian agreed with Bastian's statement however, she explained why she aims to help others by discussing the drag scene of the past.<sup>478</sup> She argued that the young people of the drag community now would not have survived if they had started when she did. She described the atmosphere of drag as cutthroat and that performers would test out the new ones to see if they would make it. She recounted one incident that cemented her as worthy to perform, one day her and her drag mom sat together in the changing room. Her mother

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<sup>475</sup> Kale Alexander Hayes.

<sup>476</sup> Kale Alexander Hayes.

<sup>477</sup> Nichole Grooms.

<sup>478</sup> Shannon Gritte.

with no prior warning slapped her so Damian punched her drag mom. That moment allowed her to perform and the other entertainers then saw Damian as a real artist. Damian explained that when she started the entertainers wanted to know if the newest artist could handle it in the business and one of the tests would be to see if the performer would stand up for themselves or let anyone bully them.<sup>479</sup> She has noted that now she considers the atmosphere as coddling compared to what it had been before however, she loves lifting people up and taking people under her wing.<sup>480</sup>

Shire added to the discussion of the notion of trying to help every King become a better performer.<sup>481</sup> He described the notion of the brotherhood that exists at pageants. He stated the aim of the brotherhood centers around helping each other grow, “If I were to win, I know that I genuinely won because everyone brought their A-game and my A-game was better than that.”<sup>482</sup> Shire gave an example of how the brotherhood works at his most recent time at a pageant where one of the contestant’s set broke right before he should be going to perform. Shire stated that everyone ran off to find something that could help, he continued that one person brought duck-tape, another brought in extra foam from their car, and someone else had a hot glue gun. He also noted one of the better aspects of the brotherhood came from the familial connection between the contestants, he explained that these bonds not only help a King better their art it also gives them a chance to grow their drag family.<sup>483</sup> Avery expressed his own experience with the brotherhood and how he see this helpful relationship in many of the clubs in Oklahoma.<sup>484</sup> He described how

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<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

<sup>481</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid.

<sup>484</sup> Kale Alexander Hayes.

he never forgets his laptop because at the bar something always goes wrong with a performers music so he wants to have a replacement for them ready and waiting.<sup>485</sup>

Shire also stated that his brotherhood of closeness transcends pageants and the stage and can actually help families.<sup>486</sup> Shire used to work at the club TNT Tulsa, Oklahoma and stated that the group of Kings became really good friends. One of his fellow entertainers passed away and they all came to the hospital and decided to do a drag benefit for the family's hospital expenses. He described the dual emotions of sadness because of the loss and happiness because everyone had come together to do this for the family. He disclosed how the brotherhood helped the grieving parents accept their son's choices. Shire explained that his family did not fully support him being transgender but, when they attended the benefit to pay for their son's hospital expenses they seemed very supportive. He went on to recount how the family had only gone to see their son perform once before and they just sat in the corner but, for the benefit they interacted with the crowd and entertainers and genuinely had a good time. He argued that this showed how the brotherhood has impacted lives beyond the immediate Kings that join. When Shire performs in areas of the country where Kings have been left behind he tries to help them and keep in contact with them to broaden the brotherhood further.<sup>487</sup> Although the brotherhood remains a huge factor in changing empowering the Kings there remain other unusual places the entertainers have found acceptance in Oklahoma.

Shire explained a portion of his teenage life where he found himself wanting to go to church.<sup>488</sup> At Florence Street Baptist Church, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma the youth group promoted radical acceptance for a Christian place of worship in the state. Shire attended this

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<sup>485</sup> Ibid.

<sup>486</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

church and described how the congregation welcomed him after he came out as part of the LGBTQ+ community. He cautioned that few churches in the state have similar views and that he lucked out by knowing that he could go to church and be a transgender person.<sup>489</sup> Even though Kings have come together in solidarity in Oklahoma for a better tomorrow they have other actions that help obtain equality within the state.

### **Kings Fight for Equality**

The LGBTQ+ community has rallied around drag entertainers for years, and the Kings all explained their part in the fight for equality. In Tulsa, the LGBTQ+ community celebrates Gay Pride every year. Shire told me how important he believes this event to be.<sup>490</sup> He described his first time at Pride: “This group of little kids came up to me. One of our regulars at the bar would go home and the kids would be like ‘Oh, I want to see what this person did.’ They came up to me and Jay after our performances and they were like ‘Oh we always get to watch your videos but never got to see you perform before. And that was the coolest thing ever!’ That was just really heartwarming.”<sup>491</sup> He realized that his shows affect not just the people who attend the bar, but they reach a wide audience, and kids look up to him. Being a role model for these children and knowing that the Pride event teaches people of all ages about acceptance and equality offered him fulfillment.<sup>492</sup> Shire’s belief on changing minds of people goes further than performing.

Recently the issue of transgender bathroom laws caused a lot of hate within the Oklahoma community, and Shire explained how he faced opposition, but through direct

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid.

communication, understanding can occur.<sup>493</sup> He visited Target the day the company made its announcement on the issue:

This woman was in there...and she was screaming at an employee about this... And she was like ‘That’s just disgusting. How could you allow someone like that in the bathroom?’ So I walked up and I was like ‘So you know you’ve done so much research, obviously, so what you’re saying is that you would prefer me to go to the bathroom with your daughter.’ She was like ‘That’s not what I’m saying at all.’ I said ‘No, you are... I was born a female.’

The woman had no idea he identified as transgender and asked him to show her his ID to prove it. After he told her, they had a long conversation about transgender people, and he informed her about what transgender meant and humanized the issue. Through one-on-one interactions with others, they can reach an understanding. He uses this tactic to fight for equality within Oklahoma.<sup>494</sup>

Bastian has a clear view of the impact of drag both within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community. She believed Kings and other drag performers remain the mouthpiece and voice the problems of the LGBTQ+ community to the state and nation, while at the same time they educate the community about issues they might not understand.<sup>495</sup> In regards to the responsibilities of Kings in the LGBTQ+ community, “As entertainers part of our job is to let people know that they are good enough. Regardless of whether that’s as an entertainer or just as a human...The drag community is very intermixed with the trans community...People find solace in the drag community because they don’t feel isolated.”<sup>496</sup> As drag entertainers, they have become the relatable factor to people, and the voice to say “welcome” to the youth.<sup>497</sup> Damian agreed and argued that if a new King has no desire to mentor others, then that performer

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<sup>493</sup> Ibid.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

<sup>495</sup> Nichole Grooms.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

<sup>497</sup> Ibid.

should never join the drag community because that remains a large part of their job.<sup>498</sup> Bastian stated that she does not know a single person without emotional turmoil and that Kings have to be there to say, “We’re all fucked up a little bit...and saying it’s okay me too.”<sup>499</sup> The community has a responsibility to include and to accept all, including race too.<sup>500</sup> The biggest demographic of drag performers in Oklahoma is African Americans.<sup>501</sup> Of African American and Mexican descent, King Shire declared that racism plays no part in the drag world.<sup>502</sup> Bastian has seen bouncers escort people out of the club and asked them never to return for being racist.<sup>503</sup>

Damian used her own drag to protest racism. She performed a show in response to Arizona’s attempt to pass a law that would deport or hold anyone without an ID if they had “brown skin.”<sup>504</sup> Artists will always perform political numbers at venues, and she herself performed multiple President George Bush and Oklahoma Governor Mary Fallin shows.<sup>505</sup> Bastian even watched a “Fuck Trump” number.<sup>506</sup> Activism remains a large part of the drag community with a recent rise in political and social commentary numbers on transgender, gay, veteran, and bullying issues.<sup>507</sup> Damian warned others that when she does political numbers, she must prepare for backlash and has had people break her set because of a show.<sup>508</sup> As members of the LGBTQ+ community, the Kings need to realize the fleeting nature of their equality, so participation movements remains crucial, not just for themselves, but for other minorities as

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<sup>498</sup> Shannon Gritte.

<sup>499</sup> Nichole Grooms.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Shannon Gritte.

<sup>502</sup> Laura/Liam Wafer.

<sup>503</sup> Nichole Grooms.

<sup>504</sup> Shannon Gritte.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid.

<sup>506</sup> Nichole Grooms.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid.

<sup>508</sup> Shannon Gritte.

well.<sup>509</sup> Sadly, Bastian believes the LGBTQ+ community put itself in preservation mode. She recognized that it can be hard to fight for things when their own community struggles to survive, but that these other minorities represent a large portion of their own people.<sup>510</sup>

### **The Future of Drag in Oklahoma**

With the hateful rhetoric of President Donald Trump, some Kings exhibit a bleak outlook on the future of drag within Oklahoma. Bastian worried the President could take away much of the LGBTQ+ community's progress.<sup>511</sup> Damian felt no fear at all.<sup>512</sup> Bastian explained to Damian that because of her looks she would never be put in such a predicament, but that she has to realize that most of the LGBTQ+ community feels differently.<sup>513</sup> Damian always believed in a social dystopia where she must prepare for oppression because she considers hate an intrinsic part of people and they only need the "okay" to express it.<sup>514</sup> Bastian agreed and thought these past couple years convinced people to believe that American society will tolerate that type of behavior.<sup>515</sup> Political issues aside, Damian remains hopeful that Kings will continue to become more popular within the drag community.<sup>516</sup> They must carry on because there will always be "strange little gay people out there who want to figure out their gender or do a small short film."<sup>517</sup> The importance lies in letting them know they do not have to do this alone.<sup>518</sup>

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<sup>509</sup> Nichole Grooms.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid.

<sup>512</sup> Shannon Gritte.

<sup>513</sup> Nichole Grooms.

<sup>514</sup> Shannon Gritte.

<sup>515</sup> Nichole Grooms.

<sup>516</sup> Shannon Gritte.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid.



Avery agreed and stated that the drag community brings people together.<sup>519</sup> The King pageants change lives and help many performers find their way in life.<sup>520</sup> In the future, both drag and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole will rise up and help the transgender people fight for equality. Since drag remains intertwined with the transgender community, the personal connection between performers and the patrons will help inform others about transgender rights and hopefully inspire change. Shire wants the Kings of the future to evolve further than he has personally seen so far. Drag offers performers an escape to find a safe place to be themselves and express things that they lack the ability to in their everyday lives. The art serves two purposes: it pays the owners and provides the patrons with a place to forget their problems.<sup>521</sup>

The Kings of Oklahoma found their own spot in the drag community and rallied together to better themselves. Although they faced certain hardships from their own community, they persevered to fight the larger injustices. Throughout this chapter, the Kings proved how despite Oklahoma's oppression, they flourished and varied as a community. Many other states have the similar conservative values; however, the drag in this state reacted differently. Instead of slowing down, it increased in popularity and grew in several directions to include Kings becoming remarkably different than the rest of America. The Kings have also revealed how important the transgender rights campaign remains to drag performers in Oklahoma.

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<sup>519</sup> Kale Alexander Hayes.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Five: Divas, Faux, and Bio-Queens Take Oklahoma

### What is a Diva

One Sunday night in May, I attended Tulsa's Majestic nightclub. While I watched the drag show, a six foot plus entertainer stepped onto the stage. Nothing seemed out of place until the artist began to perform. Amongst ourselves, my friends and I wondered about the gender of the impersonator. The performer, Scarlette, painted her face with over embellished makeup, wore a vibrant dress with padding, and adorned her hair with a wig. She also looked genuinely feminine. At this particular venue, transgender entertainers perform as Kings and Queens, but this artist diverged from the conventional binary structure. After her song, I approached her, and she described her type of drag as Diva. Through a later interview, Scarlette Kay Paige explained the words Diva/Faux/Bio-Queen as, "We're women, impersonating a man, impersonating a woman. So, we're pretending to be a boy (that is) pretending to be a girl."<sup>522</sup> Divas have emerged onto the drag scene in Oklahoma amid an ever-changing art form. This chapter explores the daily life of these performers and how Oklahoma affects their life, and where their type of drag stands in the context of Oklahoma's LGBTQ+ community. From these interviews, Divas described how living in conservative Oklahoma produces a variety of expressive drag forms and fellowship within the LGBTQ+ community. The conservative legislators and citizens of Oklahoma forced Divas and the larger LGBTQ+ drag community to become inclusive, varied, and unique compared to impersonators in the rest of America.

The Divas in Oklahoma come from large and small towns and display differentiating views on many issues concerning their art form and the local society in which they entertain. This chapter examined Divas of a variety of races and ethnicities including Caucasian, Native

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<sup>522</sup> Larissa Cheri, interview by Stephanie Allen, January 6, 2017, Women's Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

American, and African American. These women, although participating in a parody of an impersonation, represent the LGBTQ+ community with orientations range from bi-sexual to pan-sexual, which one defined as, “You love the person for their personality not necessarily what’s in between their legs or in their pants.”<sup>523</sup> Their ages range from eighteen to twenty-six, which means Divas tend to be younger than Drag Queens.<sup>524</sup> The Bio-Queens of Oklahoma are younger because the art form only recently emerged in this state.<sup>525</sup> This chapter will explain how Divas fit into the larger Oklahoma drag scene and describe the successes, failures, and comradery of the performance art. These Divas recount how they became involved, how they push for equality, and how they see the future of drag in Oklahoma and the greater America. These points will help prove how performing in Oklahoma has created a unique drag scene whereby the impersonators have developed a distinctive drag from solid bonds due to the oppressive nature of the state.

### **Its Hard Out Here for a Diva**

Due to the recent development, Divas often face opposition from the local club scene and the larger American media. Legendary performer RuPaul replied to a question about Faux Queens appearing on his show, he stated, “That show already exists. It’s called #MissUniverse.”<sup>526</sup> While in Oklahoma, a few drag clubs allow women to perform as Divas.<sup>527</sup>

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

<sup>524</sup> Larissa Cheri; Cassondra Florentine, interview by Stephanie Allen, January 6, 2017, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma; Ariel Morgan, interview by Stephanie Allen, January 6, 2017, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma; Emily Carpenter, interview by Stephanie Allen, November 19, 2016, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>525</sup> Chris Hutchins, interview by Stephanie Allen, November 12, 2016, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>526</sup> RuPaul @RuPaul, Twitter post, March 31, 2016, 5:14pm. <https://twitter.com/RuPaul>; Abir @Shumiley, Twitter post, March 31, 2016, 1:05pm. <https://twitter.com/shumiley>. Response to “When Will we see a female drag queen on RPDR? #RuPaul You once said you accept all genders yet so far we’ve only gotten men.”

<sup>527</sup> Rob Bond, interview by Stephanie Allen, November 12, 2016, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

The Boom, an LGBTQ+ venue in Oklahoma City, banned Divas from performing in the venue.<sup>528</sup> An employee of that club said the blockage resulted from a lack of performer quality, which lost customers, and therefore, money.<sup>529</sup> After only two years, another LGBTQ+ teen club OYP in Tulsa stopped their Diva pageant due to inadequate funding.<sup>530</sup> It stems from a belief where the Drag Queens think Divas “make a fool of themselves... and it’s kind of like they’re making fun of us.”<sup>531</sup> A stigma has become attached to Divas, it asserts they do not have to work as hard as other impersonators, due to their birth gender, and therefore need to put extreme effort into their art.<sup>532</sup> Allison Underland justified this claim with his own experiences working with Divas:

A majority of the Divas were normal girls, got off work in their normal eyeliner, day make-up, and they might have darkened their eyeshadow a little bit. Threw on this wig that they had from Halloween two years ago, and would wear normal clothes and just go out there... that is your drag but I do not agree with it. Its disrespectful I feel like.<sup>533</sup>

He acknowledged that the few Divas who put in effort come from a theatre background and hypothesized because of the lack of opportunity in Oklahoma to become involved in the American popular entertainment industry, many women look for other venues to practice their craft and they find drag.<sup>534</sup> The Divas in the state recognize this stigma and admitted that as a group they must work harder to attain legitimacy.

In the Oklahoma LGBTQ+ entertainment scene the newest edition, Divas, have begun to fight off the poor reputation attributed to them. Entertainer Harper Valley specifically mentioned that her gender has been pointed out more in Oklahoma than many of the other states in which

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<sup>528</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid.

<sup>530</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>531</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>532</sup> Chris Hutchins.

<sup>533</sup> Rob Bond.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid.

she has performed.<sup>535</sup> She considered herself a Drag Queen, but has edited her title to, Lady Queen, because many places will not book her as a Queen. Even if venues accept the other terms of Diva, Faux-Queen, or Bio-Queen, they adamantly argue, “You are not a Drag Queen, don’t call yourself that.”<sup>536</sup> When told that fellow performers consider her a Drag Queen, it made her feel good. Women still have to try to find their place within the LGBTQ+ community, but venues have begun to change as the audience became more receptive to their art.<sup>537</sup> The terminology issue exists as just one example of the barriers Divas face in Oklahoma.

As mentioned by Drag Queens like Allison, Divas encounter a misrepresentation of work ethic. In the United States, drag retains a hyper-focus on aesthetics rather than impersonation whereas, in other countries, performance and comedy decide success.<sup>538</sup> Oklahoma drag displayed this the internal conflict between traditional pageant and the unconventional stage discussed in the Drag Queen chapter.<sup>539</sup> Yet, the goal of performing as a man impersonating a woman, takes a lot of work to achieve. As Karma Marie Lee Paige bluntly stated, “We have to work harder than everybody else, as a Diva.”<sup>540</sup> Because they impersonate two genders, they must over-exaggerate everything and not just accentuate their feminine features.<sup>541</sup> Scarlette expressed, “That’s hard, it’s difficult...there’s a lot to it rather than just physical, it’s emotional, it’s mental. Like you have to put yourself in that position to think like that so that so you can achieve that goal.”<sup>542</sup> Diva Ivy agreed that the quality of performance has a strong mental and

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<sup>535</sup> Emily Carpenter, interview by Stephanie Allen, November 19, 2016, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid.

<sup>539</sup> Rob Bond; Chris Hutchins; Venetia Iman, interviewed by Stephanie Allen, November 18, 2016, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>540</sup> Cassondra Florentine, interview by Stephanie Allen, January 6, 2017, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>541</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid.

emotional aspect.<sup>543</sup> Before a drag routine, all day Scarlett thinks of herself as her character to get into that mindset because her entertainer personality differs so greatly from her real one.<sup>544</sup> Karma called it her “drag breakdown.”<sup>545</sup> Feminist theorists, such as Judith Butler, discussed the idea that gender is just a performance.<sup>546</sup> Through the interviews, the Divas furthered that statement as they condition themselves to behave and perform to match the gender they perform on stage. Although Oklahoma Faux Queens and their allies currently fight for equal respect within the drag community, for the first time the state might be ahead of the curve.

### **Oklahoma’s Acceptance of Divas**

Even though the Diva scene may seem sparse and oppressive when compared to other states, the Oklahoma drag community appears diverse and inclusive.<sup>547</sup> When Scarlett traveled, she found places that refuse either Divas, Queens, or Kings which proved the unique unity of Oklahoma.<sup>548</sup> She recounted her latest pageant hosted in Missouri, where only one club allowed Divas with a Faux Queen as the sole performer. Oklahoma remains as one of the largest Diva acceptance states.<sup>549</sup> Karma described when she went to a show in Dallas as the only Diva entertainer, the club prohibited her performance.<sup>550</sup> She even had to explain the Diva type of drag to some of the patrons when they approached her about her gender.<sup>551</sup> Although the drag scene in Oklahoma attempts to divide and label the types of drag, other injustices impact all entertainers equally.

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<sup>543</sup> Ariel Morgan, interview by Stephanie Allen, January 6, 2017, Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Edmond, Oklahoma.

<sup>544</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>545</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>546</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 200.

<sup>547</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>548</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid.

<sup>550</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid.

## The Ups and Downs of Performing

Divas, as well as other drag performers, express the unique emotional features the art form provides. Drag provides an emotional release for many of its artists, including Bio-Queens, and it ranges from the ability to become someone else to a healthy release of emotions through song choice and performance. The Divas explained how they used and benefited from the emotions of performing in drag. Ivy stated that in drag the problems of life fade away, which allows her to enjoy that moment on stage without dwelling on those issues.<sup>552</sup> In her mind for that brief time, she becomes a different person.<sup>553</sup>

Harper described the most common emotion of drag performers, confidence.<sup>554</sup> Tying in with Scarlett's statement of differences between the performer and the character, Harper said, "I've noticed my confidence changes a lot. I'm typically introverted and I become like a total extrovert in drag. All the good things that you think are inside yourself but maybe not coming across all the time."<sup>555</sup> She clarified that she felt smart, sexy, and strong.<sup>556</sup> Scarlett recounted her emotional range with drag; nervous, excitement, anger, sadness, confidence and defeat.<sup>557</sup> Emotion remains the number one thing a performer wants to have on stage.<sup>558</sup> Ivy added that she believed if she had no attachment to the song, the audience would see a poor performance.<sup>559</sup> Karma brought up the stressful emotions associated with the pageant aspect of drag.<sup>560</sup> Fellow pageant winner Scarlett explained that the stress comes from putting themselves out there to

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<sup>552</sup> Ariel Morgan.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid.

<sup>554</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid.

<sup>556</sup> Ibid.

<sup>557</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>558</sup> Cassandra Florentine.

<sup>559</sup> Ariel Morgan.

<sup>560</sup> Cassandra Florentine.

have the audience and judges talk about and critique them.<sup>561</sup> Some people freak out and end up no longer pursuing higher ranked pageants after they win a local one because of the stress that gets to them.<sup>562</sup>

Scarlette, Ivy, and Karma all described sisterhood as another emotion associated with pageants. The sisterhood in pageants decreases the stress because it reminds each contestant, “You never do it on your own.”<sup>563</sup> She explained the sisterhood aims help each other out at competitions. Scarlette gave a scenario of the teamwork seen at pageants, “Your stones fall off in the middle of the pageant and your about to go on stage for gown? Let me grab a glue gun...and we’ll fix it.”<sup>564</sup> She thought it would be a world of catty women, but when she stepped into the venue for registration, she realized her incorrect assumption.<sup>565</sup> Ivy added that she encountered no rudeness in her pageant, and Karma explained that no one stands off to the side; instead everyone meets and greets one another.<sup>566</sup> Scarlette hypothesized that if they analyzed the cheering audience, they would find that the fellow contestants cheered the loudest.<sup>567</sup> These pageants remain one of the best ways to meet and make professional connections with other Divas from all across America.<sup>568</sup> Due to the limited number of the Diva pageants, women from all over the US will travel by greyhound bus, if necessary, to compete.<sup>569</sup> While pageants stand as the cornerstone in Oklahoma, many others have turned to the Internet for that drag sisterhood.

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<sup>561</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>562</sup> Larissa Cheri; Ariel Morgan.

<sup>563</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid.

<sup>565</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>566</sup> Ariel Morgan; Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>567</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>568</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>569</sup> Larissa Cheri.



Diva Harper performs on stage and judges competitions, but she focuses her art form more on the Internet.<sup>570</sup> Harper mentors other forthcoming Divas and Drag Queens for online competitions, and since performers start at a young age now, they need the guidance. She became involved with Internet drag contests through an online website called Reddit, which had a subreddit in which she competed in a lip-sync competition. One of her fellow contestants entered an online drag contest and recommended it to her because they let women participate. These online competitions help them advance through the practice, feedback, and development of a fan base, but a new group with no experience performing for a live audience organized. Internet drag also provides a veil of safety.<sup>571</sup> For the younger and rural generation of Divas, the online drag scene helped them ease into the art with anonymity, which proves essential for some of the smaller towns in Oklahoma where no LGBTQ+ clubs exist.<sup>572</sup> For some, online drag brings the entertainer to similar emotional boundaries as stage performances.<sup>573</sup> Through the pageant, stage, and Internet drag scenes, one statement remains true, “I don’t think you can do drag without emotion.”<sup>574</sup> While it gave all Oklahoma Divas a reason to keep performing, an important aspect of their story lies with how they began.

### **How One Becomes a Diva**

All drag performers, including Divas, must start somewhere. The first show for every entertainer remains a special memory, and many drag performers, such as Scarlett, remember the day, month, year, club, and the circumstance of their start. Others, however, just remember the year or what they were wearing, like Harper. It all depends on what they considered

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<sup>570</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>571</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>572</sup> Ibid.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid.

<sup>574</sup> Larissa Cheri.

significant. Scarlette remembered started drag on September 7, 2013, while Karma remembered just the month, but with further questioning stated October 24, 2013 as her first performance.<sup>575</sup> Scarlette, Ivy, and Karma all gained their interest in drag when they attended the Tulsa LGBTQ+ youth club OYP.<sup>576</sup> Scarlette recounted her first time seeing a Drag Queen, Tamia St. James, and she came home with a lip kiss print on her chest.<sup>577</sup> She claimed that the interaction between herself and Tamia became her drive. She stated that she could tell Tamia behaved genuinely. Scarlette realized that she wanted to do something like drag and be cool like Tamia.<sup>578</sup> Karma saw her first show after Scarlette brought her to OYP.<sup>579</sup> Ivy had some of her friends tell her about the club and she went and saw Karma and Scarlette perform.<sup>580</sup> Once she started going to the club's youth group meetings, she finally sat down with Scarlette and discussed it, then attended shows consecutively for a couple weeks before she worked through the nerves to perform because it "looked like so much fun."<sup>581</sup> Some performers like Ivy began under the guidance of a few people but really grew as an entertainer through learning on her own. Others like Scarlette and Karma have drag moms and a drag family.<sup>582</sup> Karma and Scarlette share the same drag mom, Brooklyn who taught them how to paint.<sup>583</sup> They even have a drag aunt, Sarah, who taught them about costuming.<sup>584</sup> Scarlette and Karma both attended the required workshops to learn performing skills and to prove that they both took the entertainment seriously.<sup>585</sup> For Divas and other drag artists, just watching and asking seasoned performers questions helped

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<sup>575</sup> Larissa Cheri.; Cassandra Florentine.

<sup>576</sup> Larissa Cheri; Cassandra Florentine; Ariel Morgan.

<sup>577</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>578</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>579</sup> Cassandra Florentine.

<sup>580</sup> Ariel Morgan.

<sup>581</sup> Ibid.

<sup>582</sup> Ariel Morgan; Larissa Cheri; Cassandra Florentine.

<sup>583</sup> Cassandra Florentine.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid.

<sup>585</sup> Larissa Cheri.

them learn the most.<sup>586</sup> Understanding how Divas started remains essential to the comprehension of their lives and how much adversity they faced in the beginning. This section displayed the familial relationships that grow in the drag community. Although, these three Divas started in similar and more traditional routes to learning drag, one of the women interviewed approached it differently.

Harper began her journey with the television show *RuPaul's Drag Race*.<sup>587</sup> Once she watched it, she became hooked and started to find a community that would share her love of the show. She found herself on the Reddit website on the subreddit r/RuPaulsDragRace. From it, she started online performing in 2014 and incorporated drag into more of her lip-syncing videos, and she fell in love with the art. Once she evolved into a staple on the Internet drag scene, some of her fellow performers talked her into performing live. Now, she travels to do shows in addition to her online art. Unlike many performers, no teacher or drag mom mentored her. Instead, Harper claimed that she began with a higher-level painting (the act of putting on drag makeup) skills than most beginners through her previous hobby of special effects makeup. When she started drag, she incorporated those techniques into her aesthetic, and her drag evolved through watching tutorials and others.<sup>588</sup> Despite her atypical approach, Harper has risen to a well-known status in Oklahoma. No matter how Divas learn they still grow as entertainers and perform across the state.

### **Diva Drag, Not Just for the LGBTQ+ Community**

Divas perform to a unique audience in Oklahoma. The venues in which Divas entertain in Oklahoma range from mainly LGBTQ+ patrons to a crowd of mixed sexual orientations. The

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<sup>586</sup> Ibid.

<sup>587</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>588</sup> Ibid.

LGBTQ+ community comprises most of Harper's audience with a few straight people intermingled.<sup>589</sup> Although her audience remains mostly part of the community, a significant straight portion attends. Performers receive bookings and invitations to go to a variety of different venues, including straight bars. A straight audience gains the same thing from a drag show as the LGBTQ+ audience does, a fun and bigger than life entertainment. Harper theorized that a drag show displays similar features as reality television or soap operas because of the comparable level of drama and entertainment. Anybody exposed to drag will realize that "it's all in good fun," and it has as much value as any performing act.<sup>590</sup>

Scarlette, Ivy, and Karma each perform at the Tulsa nightclub Majestic, and all three Divas agreed with Harper's assumption that the LGBTQ+ community of Oklahoma makes up the largest part of their audience, but argued that the venue that they work in has a mainly mixed crowd.<sup>591</sup> Ivy speculated the audience population to be twenty-five to seventy-five on any given night.<sup>592</sup> Karma surmised that any straight person at a show has some connection to someone already there.<sup>593</sup> She used the example of family members that come to certain shows, her parents and siblings only come to the club to see her perform.<sup>594</sup> The club gets a lot of straight people because most homosexual men have a heterosexual woman as a best friend.<sup>595</sup> When straight women come to the venue, it brings the heterosexual men. Scarlette described how some of the straight audience members react to seeing a drag show with shock and awe and "would be on the side of the stage, just getting their life."<sup>596</sup> She compared it to the other instances where

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<sup>589</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>590</sup> Ibid.

<sup>591</sup> Larissa Cheri; Ariel Morgan; Cassandra Florentine.

<sup>592</sup> Ariel Morgan.

<sup>593</sup> Cassandra Florentine.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid.

<sup>595</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>596</sup> Larissa Cheri.

the heterosexual men will just stand to the side and then wait for an attractive female to walk by only to find out the lady identifies as a lesbian. Straight people also come to the venue because they have been hopping bars all night or they come from out of town and see Majestic advertised. Scarlett's main goal, no matter the sexual identity of the audience, remains to show them that they can do something fun with their life. She will go up to a straight person and perform just as she would a member of the LGBTQ+ community because "I might make you a little uncomfortable, but we both gonna laugh before I walk away."<sup>597</sup> Karma added that sometimes they will be on their phones, and she feels compelled to get their attention because once she has it, she will not lose it.<sup>598</sup> She explained her interpretation of the straight audiences' reaction as "Oh my gosh! She just violated me, I gotta keep watching her or she'll do it again."<sup>599</sup> These statements proved that the drag performers know they have a job to represent their community to the heterosexuals in attendance. In their position, they have the ability to change the minds of people and push them towards acceptance. Scarlett argued that all ages and sexualities can enjoy a drag show and provided a story from her involvement with the 2016 Tahlequah Equality as an example.<sup>600</sup>

Oklahomans compare Tahlequah Equality in Tahlequah as a version of a Pride parade.<sup>601</sup> It invites people of all ages, including families and children, to participate. Scarlett described how she had children coming up to tip her and said, "It was cool to see somebody not more than six years old look at a LGBTQ+ drag performer and not think anything of it. Just another person in pretty makeup and a pretty dress. That's all she was thinking, and for me that's innocence."<sup>602</sup>

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<sup>597</sup> Ibid.

<sup>598</sup> Cassondra Florentine; Larissa Cheri.

<sup>599</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>600</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>601</sup> Ibid.

<sup>602</sup> Ibid.

For her, the innocence of drag keeps it from being solely a gay event.<sup>603</sup> Karma explained that people get pure enjoyment from a drag show.<sup>604</sup> Ivy used her little sister's account of why she enjoys watching drag because she has never seen something like it before, and it offers a different perspective on the entertainment.<sup>605</sup> Scarlett followed up with her own family story of how her older sister will come to the bar and watch her perform and how she believes having someone involved in drag changes most heterosexual's views on the art form.<sup>606</sup> Through performances, Divas can allow someone to understand the entertainment value of the art and not focus on the morality of undoing the gender binary. Some Oklahoma Divas perform to help restructure the way in which the majority of the state thinks about the LGBTQ+ community and drag.

Through living in Oklahoma, these Divas have come across protestors and other conservative-focused oppression. Many of the Divas interviewed explained how drag breaks down barriers with a fun and entertaining art.<sup>607</sup> Scarlett said when her sister learned about the passing of her homosexual uncle from AIDS, she spoke hateful words and thought poorly of the LGBTQ+ community. Yet, several years later when Scarlett came out to her not only as a pan-sexual but also as a drag performer, her sister overcame her own ideals and went to one of her shows.<sup>608</sup> Scarlett recounted that it must have been hard for her sister to see her half naked on stage with a lot of makeup, but since they had such a connection her sister altered her views.<sup>609</sup> Scarlett explained her sister's reaction as, "I know that person, that's my person."<sup>610</sup> Drag helps

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<sup>603</sup> Ibid.

<sup>604</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>605</sup> Ariel Morgan.

<sup>606</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>607</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>608</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid.

people bring themselves out of their comfort zone.<sup>611</sup> Ivy described it as helping people open their eyes.<sup>612</sup> Her grandmother and other family members first denounced her as an abomination, but after seeing some of her work, they started to ask questions and become interested.<sup>613</sup> Scarlett argued drag can help everyone in Oklahoma accept different people.<sup>614</sup> Her point demonstrated how through personal connections with people who have differing ideas tends to help them realize the entertainer's humanity. The notion of humanity for a person in a minority group aids in the conservative realization of equality for all. Along with the restructuring of the family mindset, drag also offers a soapbox for the Divas to help push for change within Oklahoma.

### **How Divas Survive in Oklahoma**

Oklahoma has a long history of conservative values and LGBTQ+ oppression. For Divas and other drag performers the spotlight of the stage serves a dual purpose. One entertains and promotes the community, while the other focuses to change the existing challenges to equality. In Oklahoma, the LGBTQ+ community continues to fight hard for equality. Scarlett explained, "Oklahoma is a very, very conservative state."<sup>615</sup> Ivy described Oklahoma as the Bible state.<sup>616</sup> It enables most of its residents to have closed minds when it comes to LGBTQ+ issues.<sup>617</sup> When asked if she thought the conservative nature of Oklahoma has impacted the LGBTQ+ community, Scarlett agreed that it made them more blended and collective.<sup>618</sup> With these closed minds, sometimes the people of Oklahoma react negatively to any aspect of the LGBTQ+

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<sup>611</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>612</sup> Ariel Morgan.

<sup>613</sup> Ibid.

<sup>614</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>615</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>616</sup> Ariel Morgan.

<sup>617</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>618</sup> Ibid.

population.<sup>619</sup> Karma thought that people have a lot of questions when they see Divas or drag in general and that the interaction between the two helps to solve issues of hate from the unknown.<sup>620</sup> Drag can influence people to accept that people have differences in many aspects of life.<sup>621</sup> Nonetheless, living in Oklahoma remains toxic to many drag performers and impedes their ability to live equally, even among family members.

Many times, the family of a drag performer turn their backs on them. Ivy explained how she told her grandmother the news in the car, and when they arrived at the local convenience store, QuikTrip, she went in to use the restroom only to discover she had been left. When Ivy called her grandmother to ask what happened, she replied that she would never allow Ivy to ride in her car again.<sup>622</sup> Harper described the multitude of people whose family kick them out of their home for being homosexual or doing drag.<sup>623</sup> The issues Divas and members of the LGBTQ+ community have with family pale in comparison to the vulnerability they experience with the public.

Racism has its own place with the issues of Divas and drag in Oklahoma. Harper described how race still impacts the LGBTQ+ dating scene, but it holds no bearing on bookings or professional related incidents.<sup>624</sup> Scarlett, Ivy, and Karma stated that race has no place within the Diva community.<sup>625</sup> They all stated that they have never personally seen or heard about race being an issue. Karma classified her race as mixed, and since she had nothing to say about racism, this author presumes that in the Diva sector, racism remains hidden or at a very low level in Oklahoma. Perhaps though, the view of the Divas could be different because all of the

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<sup>619</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>620</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>621</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>622</sup> Ibid.

<sup>623</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>624</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>625</sup> Larissa Cheri; Ariel Morgan; Cassondra Florentine.



interviewed Divas perform drag in one of the two major cities in Oklahoma where races mix often. It proved how through strife Oklahoma Divas come together and raise each other up instead of breaking each other down.

Scarlette explained that she sees the most issues in Oklahoma when she goes to public places still in drag after she has performed.<sup>626</sup> When in public, Ivy receives reactions that range from odd looks to hostile comments.<sup>627</sup> Karma stated, “They say shitty things, hateful things, disgusting things.”<sup>628</sup> Scarlette argued these negative reactions shock her because she left a safe place where people understand her art and accept her for it.<sup>629</sup> As she pumped her gas at QuikTrip next to “an old red-neck trucker,” he looked at her and his face turned red with his jaw clenched. When Scarlette tried to ask him why he seemed so mad, he cut her off and replied, “Don’t talk to me.” She reacted by trying to figure out how she had offended him, he replied with, “You’re disgusting,” and put down the pump and drove off.<sup>630</sup> The immediate switch of reality in Oklahoma jars some people, and Ivy added that these incidents terrify her.<sup>631</sup> Scarlette compared the drag scene in Oklahoma to that of the setup of the movie *To Wong Foo*.<sup>632</sup> She clarified that she comes from a small town in Oklahoma where sheriffs might chase performers and other members of the LGBTQ+ community out of the city.<sup>633</sup> Divas feel a certain pressure to change the state and that aim remains high on their list.

### **“We Have to Make Sure They are Not the Only Ones Throwing Bricks Anymore”: Divas Fight for Equality**

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<sup>626</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>627</sup> Ariel Morgan.

<sup>628</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>629</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid.

<sup>631</sup> Larissa Cheri; Ariel Morgan.

<sup>632</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>633</sup> Ibid.

When asked if they think of drag as purely entertainment, each of the Divas described the responsibility of being the mouthpiece of the LGBTQ+ community. Harper stated, “On the surface it definitely seems like it’s just entertainment, but I think drag is used to spread a lot of awareness.”<sup>634</sup> Drag performers always pushed the envelope and spread their message when other people refused to speak.<sup>635</sup> Scarlett said, “Without that movement [Stonewall], we wouldn’t be able to freely walk around, we wouldn’t be able to do drag. We would get beaten or killed because of it, because we were different.”<sup>636</sup> Drag in Oklahoma would never have reached its current popularity and quality.<sup>637</sup> Drag stemmed from LGBTQ+ people wanting to be different, and that without Stonewall, the entertainment might never have evolved to include Bio-Queens.<sup>638</sup> Divas in Oklahoma tend to speak out from the stage about state issues as well as greater national social issues.

One of the biggest issues to affect the LGBTQ+ community recently originated with the rise of hate during the Presidential Election of 2016. Harper performs spoken word lip-syncs as her own way of explicitly promoting awareness to an issue.<sup>639</sup> The week prior to her performance in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Presidential Election finished, and she realized a few of her LGBTQ+ friends voted for Donald Trump. Her skit consisted of a spoken word where two people have a phone conversation and one reveals to the other that they voted for Trump, then the scene transforms into Lilly Allen’s song, “Fuck You.”<sup>640</sup> Ivy had to sit her grandmother down and explain to her why she felt hurt when she found out she voted for Trump.<sup>641</sup> Scarlett

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<sup>634</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>635</sup> Ibid.

<sup>636</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>637</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>638</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>639</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>640</sup> Ibid.

<sup>641</sup> Ariel Morgan.

also recounted her own experience during the election. She cried when America elected him and felt that it has changed her life tremendously.<sup>642</sup> More people have expressed hatred, especially in Oklahoma, because they have Trump supporting this hate.<sup>643</sup> She stated, “He’s feeding it.”<sup>644</sup> The President and his followers get to decide if “we’re people or not.”<sup>645</sup> Karma validated the concerning issues for LGBTQ+ community in America and Oklahoma. Many of the other participants responded similarly because in Oklahoma, the state government consistently perceived members of the LGBTQ+ community as unworthy of equality.<sup>646</sup> Karma’s quote rings true to the historical past of oppression where the abused become an ‘it’ and not a person.

Scarlette described her outlook on the future that now if she has children and any one of them identifies as a homosexual, they will feel scared to come out for fear of physical violence supported by the president.<sup>647</sup> Scarlette explained how during this election a recording of President Trump came out in which he blatantly promoted his sexual assault on women by touching them on their vaginas.<sup>648</sup> Scarlette works as a waitress, and one night during the campaign one of her customers attempt to grab her genital area.<sup>649</sup> He stated, “If my President could do it, I could do it.”<sup>650</sup> The customer refused to leave based on his belief and exited only after Scarlette’s manager threatened to call the cops and file sexual assault charges. Scarlette

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<sup>642</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>643</sup> Ibid.

<sup>644</sup> Ibid.

<sup>645</sup> Ariel Morgan.

<sup>646</sup> HRC staff, “While Anti-LGBT Bills Progress Across Nation, Oklahoma’s ‘Slate of Hate’ is Defeated,” *Human Rights Campaign* (March 11, 2016) Accessed January 23, 2017. <http://www.hrc.org/blog/while-anti-lgbt-bills-progress-across-nation-oklahomas-slate-of-hate-is-def>.

<sup>647</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid.

<sup>649</sup> Ibid.

<sup>650</sup> Ibid.

explained that this political issue ties in with others on her list of social changes need in Oklahoma.<sup>651</sup>

The Divas all agreed on the importance of their ability to inspire and promote issues that challenge them and the LGBTQ+ community of Oklahoma through the media. Scarlett recounted that promoting benefit shows for people and participating in charities remains one of the traditional mainframes of tangible change Divas can make.<sup>652</sup> Through social media, Divas gain fans and then promote their own agendas as well.<sup>653</sup> Karma she finds more people who do drag and can see how they perform and post social issues and attempts to implement those new ideas on her own media page.<sup>654</sup> Divas revealed to audiences the close-knit nature of the drag community in Oklahoma.

The Divas in Oklahoma displayed a partnership and solidarity towards the transgender community of this state and expressed their issues with transgender-oppression. Harper stated that transgender women of color have brought about more social change than the rest of the LGBTQ+ community, and drag performers have an obligation to stand up for them especially since it has become a political issue.<sup>655</sup> She referenced the Stonewall riots of 1969 and stated we have to make the fight for equality continue and “make sure they are not the only ones throwing bricks anymore.”<sup>656</sup> Both Scarlett and Karma have partners who consider themselves transgender, and Scarlett explained the importance of the relationship between drag and transgender.<sup>657</sup> She watched her fiancé begin his transition performing as a King and firmly believes drag helped him experiment with coming out as transgender, which gave him the

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<sup>651</sup> Ibid.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid.

<sup>653</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>654</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>655</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>656</sup> Ibid.

<sup>657</sup> Larissa Cheri; Cassondra Florentine.

confidence to fully declare his gender.<sup>658</sup> Drag leads back to real life and helps people open their eyes.<sup>659</sup>

Since Divas work so closely with transgender performers, they have a special connection and tend to take offense when discussing their inequalities. Harper said, “There are so many people that are so important to me in my life that are trans. The thought of any of them being treated poorly because of that just sends me into like a blind rage.”<sup>660</sup> When asked about the North Carolina bathroom issue, the Divas all agree bodily functions should not be banned because of gender.<sup>661</sup> Karma stated, “It’s ridiculous.”<sup>662</sup> Harper proclaimed, “It’s absolutely stupid.”<sup>663</sup> Ivy described her view as if someone has to use the bathroom, a business should allow them to use whichever one they want because they just have to urinate.<sup>664</sup> Scarlett asked, “Why does some state official care what’s in my pants? Really, honestly, I could pop a squat right here and pee on the floor. You would have to clean it up, I would not. If you want to ID me, you can watch me.”<sup>665</sup> Karma brought up the understated issue of having both parts, or being intersexual.<sup>666</sup> She thinks people with that chromosomal difference have the ability to pick which gender they live as, and people should give the same respect to transgender people.<sup>667</sup> Even if she had uptight and conservative views, the point remains that other people’s gender has nothing to do with her, and at the end of it all, she should only care about her genitalia.<sup>668</sup> Harper added that

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<sup>658</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>659</sup> Ibid.

<sup>660</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>661</sup> Larissa Cheri; Cassandra Florentine; Ariel Morgan; Emily Carpenter.

<sup>662</sup> Cassandra Florentine.

<sup>663</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>664</sup> Ariel Morgan.

<sup>665</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>666</sup> Cassandra Florentine.

<sup>667</sup> Ibid.

<sup>668</sup> Larissa Cheri.

people made it an issue when no one had a problem previously.<sup>669</sup> She proclaimed, “We need to make sure we’re speaking out and speaking often.”<sup>670</sup> Harper explained when people delve deeper into the drag community, they see transgender people make up a large portion of their coworkers, and that the transgender group remains the most vulnerable of the LGBTQ+ family. Harper affirmed that when it comes to acceptance of transgender people, no group in Oklahoma or America has a larger community than drag and fans of drag.<sup>671</sup> Along with horrendous actions to oppress the LGBTQ+ community, the Divas talked in detail about one large event that helped them gain a major stride for equality.

On June 26, 2015, the US Supreme Court passed the Marriage Equality Act that legalized same sex marriages.<sup>672</sup> This nationwide event significantly affected the Divas of Oklahoma. Harper recounted the moment when she found out the ruling where, at work, she locked herself in a little closet and just cried happy tears for a while.<sup>673</sup> Growing up, she never thought she would see the right to marry brought here when the LGBTQ+ community still fights against anti-discrimination laws. Harper referred to past experiences with other states revoking marriage equality, but since it occurred on a national level, it will be much harder to take a step backwards now.<sup>674</sup> Scarlett recalled her experience with the same elation as Harper and interpreted her feeling as “electricity.”<sup>675</sup> Once she found out she started crying and running through her house screaming at the top of her lungs, “I proved you wrong!”<sup>676</sup> Scarlett yelled those words to her

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<sup>669</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>670</sup> Ibid.

<sup>671</sup> Ibid.

<sup>672</sup> Adam Liptak, “Supreme Court Ruling Makes Same-Sex Marriage a Right Nationwide,” *New York Times* (June 26, 2015) Accessed November 24, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/27/us/supreme-court-same-sex-marriage.html>.

<sup>673</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>674</sup> Ibid.

<sup>675</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>676</sup> Ibid.

step-father because he told her that it would never happen “because we live in Oklahoma, it was never going to be federally legalized.”<sup>677</sup> She explained the shock that she felt because living in this state forced her to meet many people who believe gay and lesbian couples should never marry. She revealed her passion when she said, “They believe that, a decent human being having the same right to love as them is wrong. Because it’s going to threaten the sanctity of their marriage.”<sup>678</sup> Ivy described her interaction with her grandmother when she found out about the news and explained that she tried to reason with her grandmother and said, if she wants to love a woman or a man that she should be able to do so: “let me do me, I let you do you.”<sup>679</sup> Karma added that no matter someone’s gender she just wanted to love them.<sup>680</sup> Acceptance, equality, and entertainment comprise the basis of the Divas of Oklahoma performances; however, they have their eyes on the future.

### **The Future of Divas in Oklahoma and America**

Oklahoma Divas have varied views on their future in drag and as a part of the LGBTQ+ community in the state. Truthfully, Scarlette proclaimed that since drag changes every day, she has no way of knowing what the future will bring to the art.<sup>681</sup> Ivy explained that performers change over time and constantly come up with new styles of their entertainment.<sup>682</sup> Karma pointed to her drag character Grandma Peaches, which as she explained, no one had ever done before since she had earned the reputation as the hip hop artist.<sup>683</sup> Harper desired more weird and eccentric drag coming to Oklahoma.<sup>684</sup> She believed that going forward that the state will break

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<sup>677</sup> Ibid.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid.

<sup>679</sup> Ariel Morgan.

<sup>680</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>681</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>682</sup> Ariel Morgan.

<sup>683</sup> Cassondra Florentine.

<sup>684</sup> Emily Carpenter.

away from the pageant system and that it will be the online competitions force them out. Harper proclaimed that now the LGBTQ+ community and fans no longer have to go out to a club or a pageant to see quality impersonation because the Internet has such a following and a large variety. She explained how the number of drag performers doing unconventional things will start to rub off on the entertainers of Oklahoma.<sup>685</sup> From their hopes for the future of drag, these Divas justified the importance of the continuance of the art.

Drag remains a significant art form within the LGBTQ+ community that adds a substantial value to the group as a whole, especially within Oklahoma. Harper explained how it helps people find an outlet to express frustrations with gender, identity, and the community.<sup>686</sup> She said no one wants to listen to someone discuss feminine discourse but if brought to them through entertainment they will.<sup>687</sup> The audience that shows up for Diva shows witnesses a variety of feminist theories, one of the biggest being the denigration of the feminine first discussed in Betty Friedan's 1963, *The Feminine Mystique*.<sup>688</sup> For the Divas, one could argue they self-denigrate when they pretend to be a man being a woman because the gender hierarchy remains supplanted even within the LGBTQ+ community. Harper argued that the LGBTQ+ community needs Divas and other drag performers as sounding boards to learn and understand important social issues.<sup>689</sup> Scarlett described how drag helps her release emotions.<sup>690</sup> She stated that when she feels sad, she will perform a sad song and force herself to feel that pain and put it out on the table.<sup>691</sup> Ivy described it as self-therapy because she used to cry all the time, but since

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<sup>685</sup> Ibid.

<sup>686</sup> Ibid.

<sup>687</sup> Ibid.

<sup>688</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963).

<sup>689</sup> Emily Carpenter.

<sup>690</sup> Larissa Cheri.

<sup>691</sup> Ibid.



she has drag she no longer needs to sit at home and cry; instead, she will just go and perform.<sup>692</sup>  
When Divas perform their emotions, they do so in the safety of their local LGBTQ+ community.<sup>693</sup>

The Divas of Oklahoma proved to be unique in their style of drag, but quite similar to each other in views and experiences. The state affected each one of them differently, and yet, a similar trend shone through about flourishing under pressure. The conservative values of Oklahoma helped the Divas and drag performers become closer together, fight for one another, and educate their community on political and social issues affecting them. Although a rift remains regarding the terms for these entertainers, Divas rose in popularity as a staple in the Oklahoma drag scene that pushes the boundaries of its Midwestern setting.

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<sup>692</sup> Ibid.

<sup>693</sup> Ibid.

## **Conclusion**

This research built upon itself through the research guided by my professors and classmates at the University of Central Oklahoma. As I examined impersonation as popular entertainment, I gravitated towards the history of Oklahoma drag. This interest set me down a path of reading the published works and finding that the history of drag failed to include any information about the middle states nor Oklahoma. Through research, this work has proven that a large portion of American drag history has been neglected, especially within conservative states. It represents my attempt to change that and to preserve the history of drag in Oklahoma. Through interviews and personal experiences, this work demonstrates that drag has flourished through the oppression and has become one of the most varied and unique places for drag performers. The research of this state remains exceptionally important because Oklahoma remains active in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and accepts violent behavior towards the community. These actions combined with the hate speech from the President Donald Trump and his followers prove the necessity of this scholarship.

My research began with reading all of the published historical works on drag. Oklahoma has no books dedicated towards its drag artists and neither does any of the surrounding states. In this section over historiography I have proven Oklahoma drag to be different than any other published scholarship. This work potentially shows a microhistory of the issues faced by drag entertainers across the southern conservative majority states. Although, the study of drag in Oklahoma has proven distinctive from the entertainment in other states, the interviews share the connection of oppressive governments and social norms. This section also clarified how drag artists use shows as a form of activism in which the performers can educate and rally the LGBTQ+ community in their fight for equality.

To understand the outside influences, I researched the impact that different forms of media have on the Oklahoma entertainers and compared them to the greater American issues. This section had the drag performers respond to the media forms of music, movies, television, and the Internet. The interviews proved how instrumental these types of media have been to drag entertainers living in Oklahoma. They argued that the media has helped them find themselves in a state where they go against the social norm. These performers proved that the media has impacted their lives and how they perform drag. The research asserts that the media remains a tool for activism that may prove essential for the Oklahoma LGBTQ+ community's survival of the current political swing. While demonstrating the oppressive nature of Oklahoma this chapter proved that drag flourished within this environment.

The third chapter began the discussion of the three different types of drag. This section illustrated the lives of Oklahoma Drag Queens through interviews. I believe that this work needed personal stories to completely understand the performers and their art. These Queens from Oklahoma helped demonstrate my argument that many became stronger through adversity through an open discussion of the violence they face daily. This chapter provided evidence from legislation to personal stories to describe the situation drag and its performers have been put through due to dominant conservative ideology and power. In performances, the Queens have shown that they do promote activism and attempt to keep a safe place for the rest of the LGBTQ+ community to get away from the issues they face in Oklahoma. This chapter proved that the Queens of Oklahoma have grown as a group to include a multitude of different styles that number well beyond any of the surrounding states that they have performed in. The interviews showed how Oklahoma's laws and policies have impacted them and therefore they have become larger activists and more unique group than ever before. This research

demonstrated the lack of scholarship on Queens in middle America and how such research helps to understand the issues the LGBTQ+ communities face.

The fourth chapter dealt with Kings and their role in Oklahoma drag. I decided to interview each distinct type of drag to understand the issues faced by the differentiations. Kings remain one of the more unique aspects of Oklahoma drag because they have equal access to shows and venues. Through interviews the Kings have proved my argument that the acceptance and popularity of their drag has become one of Oklahoma's defining features in the entertainment. The Kings offered a window into their lives and performances. The interviews proved how the Kings and other drag performers have become a group to offer support for the LGBTQ+ community. The chapter presented the lives of several Oklahoma King performers to promote that research on how the history of drag entertainment can reveal the social injustices aimed at the LGBTQ+ community within middle America.

The fifth chapter discussed the newest type of drag, Divas. I researched this type of drag to understand the drag community of Oklahoma as a whole. Through interviews the section explained how Divas came to perform in Oklahoma and the obstacles they had to overcome to become legitimized in the art. The Divas expressed their own personal instances of strife with family and work that showed how Oklahoma's social norms have impacted their lives. The interviews demonstrated the different lives Divas have in Oklahoma versus surrounding states specifically concerning the acceptance and popularity of performances. The Divas of this state adhere to my activism theory in regards to trying to bring up a new generation who will see the LGBTQ+ community as normal and drag as valuable entertainment. With this chapter I proved that other performers have accepted Divas into the drag community from the shared marginalized experiences and from this inclusion Divas have made Oklahoma drag truly unique.

This thesis represents the only research on Divas and serves to open the discussion of drag to the greater US.

Oklahoma has an abysmal track record in attempting to pass anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. This thesis presents itself during a change of leadership that could have far reaching impacts for drag performers and the LGBTQ+ community not only in Oklahoma but across the nation. Many of the entertainers I interviewed have expressed some fear or resentment towards the actions and statements made from newly elected President Donald Trump and his cabinet. This new presidency has brought out cause for alarm in the drag community and most importantly for those who identify as transgender. In Oklahoma, the transgender performers make up a significant portion of the entertainment and therefore the drag community of the state has taken on the issue as their own. Several of the people I interviewed expressed their own personal connections with transgender people and truly desire equality for all. Drag performers know the state has a history of anti-LGBTQ+ laws and recognized the threat that decisions concerning transgender rights in other states could have in Oklahoma. Recently their predictions have proven true with the OKC bathroom sign controversy. The restaurant Steak and Catfish Barn located in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma posted their own sign regarding transgender people that implied violence if they chose the wrong restroom.<sup>694</sup> The threat to transgender people in Oklahoma demonstrated the importance for works such as this to humanize the art of drag and its performers. Queens, Kings, and Divas of Oklahoma refuse to stop their fight for equality as members of the LGBTQ+ or drag community. The hardships they faced have not deterred them in protecting their communities. From this research, one can only assume this next step towards

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<sup>694</sup> Kristen Shanahan, "Oklahoma City Restaurant's Transgender Bathroom Sign Causing Controversy," *KFOR News*, March 15, 2017. Accessed March 20, 2017. <http://kfor.com/2017/03/15/oklahoma-city-restaurants-transgender-bathroom-sign-causing-controversy/>.

equality will further differentiate the drag performers in Oklahoma from the rest of the country. However, this thesis might provide a glimpse into the social issues drag performers in other states in middle-America currently face.

Throughout the history of drag, Oklahoma performers have their own venues and talent yet no scholarly works studied have it. I began researching the unique and common aspects of drag in Oklahoma and hopefully other authors will find the subject worthy of more study. The fifteen entertainers interviewed offered insight into Oklahoma drag and the LGBTQ+ community. One must not generalize all performers based on these interviews. These performers allowed the outside world to understand their art and the personal issues that result from living in this state. From these personal accounts, this thesis grew into a work dedicated to detailing the unique nature of Oklahoma drag and to respecting the different ways they push back against the hatred grown in the conservative state. The last section of each chapters dealt with what the performers expect for the future of drag in Oklahoma. Their answers proved a particular fear for the future, but also hope because of their community's resiliency. One thing remains certain, the future for drag in Oklahoma will be a community effort.

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