

When The Lights Are Shining On Them: Drag Performance and Queer Communities in London

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I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

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Abstract

Drag performance is and continues to be intimately linked to queer communities. This thesis explores drag performances and queer communities in contemporary London. It argues that these performances offer fertile sites for the emergence and sustenance of queer communities, focussing on the work of twelve performers in contemporary London. Starting from the understanding that homophobic and transphobic violence is increasingly prevalent in the context of this study, it describes and theorises drag performance and its relation to the practice of queer communities both in response to and regardless of this violence. Overall, this thesis proposes that drag and the spaces in which these performances happen facilitate queer communities and as such are connected to queer modes of survival.

There has been a resurgence in drag performance in the UK both as a result of and a resistance to the rise in popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (World of Wonder, 2009). As a result of this show, drag performers and performances are being seen and understood on an international scale. This inquiry, however, argues for the importance of drag as live performance in bars, pubs and clubs, despite and because of the increase of these kinds of queer venues closing in major cities in the UK.

As a way of theorising these performances, this thesis proposes a 'queer-side eye' as an overarching methodological framework and tactic that recognises the complex and contingent ways in which the researcher is imbricated in the research. A queer side-eye is also a physical position in the world and describes not only a way of looking or watching – and being looked at – but also a playful attitude and position characterised by the acerbic wit of

drag performers. The tactic is constructed through field notes made from extensive observations. It is also connected to ideas of queering knowledge explored by Halberstam (2012) and Muñoz (2009), queer autoethnography proposed and practiced by Adams and Holman Jones (2008 & 2014) and Holman Jones and Harris (2019), and other modes of producing alternative knowledge in academic practice.

Alongside the significant new insights that a structure of a queer side-eye offers for the study of queer performance forms, this thesis argues for the importance of queer venues and drag performance in the context of homophobia and transphobia in contemporary London and beyond, arguing that drag performance offers queer forms of survival.

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Introduction

Scene 1

November 2009. I am standing in the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT), a queer venue in London, watching a drag performer whose name I did not know at the time perform a spoken word performance about Stonewall, camp and Judy Garland, set against Amy Winehouse's Back To Black. I am hit in the gut by the performance and do not know how to make sense of what I am feeling. I feel seen, recognised and understood, even as the references made throughout the act (to the performer being a post-drag queen, and even to certain aspects of the Stonewall riots) are new to me. I moved to London a few months earlier, after having grown up on a farm on the outskirts of a small town in Bedfordshire. I was eighteen years old and was studying drama. Like many before me, I found in drag performance references, representation, knowledges and feelings that I did not even know existed before I heard and saw them. Months later I found out the performer's name was Michael Twaits and discovered a video of the performance on YouTube.¹ I watched it over and over again, feeling the same surge of hunger and hope and anger and fear run through my gut and up my throat. At the time I did not know anything other than as a young gay boy watching this act, I felt seen. This act was the starting point of an obsession with drag performance. I began exploring other performances in London and finding similar feelings and similar reactions to other performers (if not all of them). Reflecting back on this starting point nearly ten years later, this inciting incident shaped the eventual development of this doctoral research, as I sought out other work

¹ The performance, and the version I became obsessed with, can be seen here at Wotever World (2011) *Stonewall – Michael Twaits*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-l10KpAOKU>, accessed 10/01/2019

that hit me in the gut in the same way this first performance did.

Scene 2

I am standing to the side of the stage, leaning against the shelf that rings the room so I can catch a glimpse of the audience as well as the performer. It is my favourite place. My vision is occasionally obscured by customers forcing their way through the crowd to use the loos, silhouettes floating in between the pulsing lights and me. The floor is littered with plastic cups and straws, and despite the heat of the room I think I see the remains of a discarded ice cube. It is much more nerve wracking being amidst the crowd. If I was behind the curtain at least I would know if something went wrong, had gone wrong, was going wrong, is going wrong. I pull out my phone to text and ask if everything is okay and then determinedly slip it back into my pocket. People in the space are dancing. There are kisses and touches, hands grabbed and looks shared. There is the glazed over expression caused by alcohol, and anticipation, and of being in this space at this time; a frantic tension building. Bodies weave their way through the crowd bringing more drinks and more kisses and more touches. Then it happens. The sound of a record cutting out which signals that it is about to begin. And time stops. There is an indrawn breath that ripples across the room, back and back and further and further and out the double doors and into the street. In this moment everything is frozen. I glance up at the stage. From the doorway that leads backstage the foot is appearing in a silver stilettoed heel. I glance back over the heads of the audience. Dust motes shine golden in the rays of light piercing the darkness of the room and illuminating the stage. Every face is turned forwards and upwards, bathed in those lights, dappled with disco ball reflections. This is an extended temporal gap that perhaps only I encounter. This temporal drag spreads out across the space and is gone

even before I breathe out the breath that I had just sucked in. It is in the space between the gasp and the exhalation, this space where potentialities come to life. It is in this space that the now is that much brighter. It is in this space, buoyed up by alcohol, or by the touch of that person's hand on the small of your back, or by being in the space, or by being loved, or by loving, or by breathing in, that the giddy potentiality of the future intoxicates our bodies. And the heels walk out on stage, we breath out, and time starts again.

This thesis brings together queer theories and drag performance alongside my own experiences of living and working on the drag and queer performance scene in London. Fundamentally, the research argues that drag offers opportunities for hope, resistance and survival at a time of increased precarity and danger for LGBTQ+ people. In paying attention to what happens on stages of LGBTQ+ venues when the lights are shining on performers it is also possible to see illuminated the pleasurable experiences and practices of queer communities that resist and challenge contemporary homophobic and transphobic experiences.

This research started from watching drag performance in pubs, bars and clubs and experiencing moments of community and collectivity. These moments were emotionally charged and full. The two scenes above, the first from the RVT in 2009 and the second from The Black Cap, a now closed LGBTQ+ venue in Camden (London), in around 2013 are creative accounts of my experiences of watching drag performance that I use to evidence my strong emotional response to drag performance work. This is where this research started, from a recognition that when watching drag *something was happening*, and this doctoral study has

been an attempt to account for this *something*. As I found myself seeing more and more drag performance and finally working with drag performers as a stagehand, promoter and producer, I encountered more and more experiences of drag performance that was profound, silly, engaging, interesting and full of emotion. At the same time, I started to recognise communities and collectivity emerging in these venues where drag was happening, as well as a drag performance scene emerging across multiple venues that was not being written about elsewhere.

In trying to account for these feelings, and the role of drag performance in the sustenance of queer communities, this research has led to a critical engagement with drag performance and queer studies in relation to my personal experiences to understand and explain these initial embodied moments. In doing this research, I have come to see the complex ways in which queer studies offers insights into queer performance forms, and vice versa, as well as exploring the relationship of these theories and performance practices to wider issues of queer politics and survival. This research locates new ways of reading and understanding drag performance through the development of a queer side-eye methodology, that locates hope and survival in drag without performing a hegemonising reading of this field and in so doing articulates and describes a drag performance scene that is yet to be fully accounted for in academic literature.

Opening this thesis with these two descriptive scenes is purposeful, it reflects material experiences that have been generative for me in terms of the research undertaken in this thesis. These two hopeful scenes reflect the importance of ideas of hope and survival in this

thinking. These personal accounts indicate the material effects of drag performance, and below I also highlight experiences of homophobia and transphobia that foreground the research. These creative accounts are intended to position myself at the centre of the work rather than as a researcher looking in at the area of research from the outside. This is important since I return to personal experiences as other ways of evidencing the experience of watching performance throughout this thesis. This thesis understands that 'Queerness is rarely complemented by evidence, or at least by traditional understandings of the term' (Muñoz, 2009: 65) and here I use the personal-as-evidence as a strategy I return to throughout this writing.

Scene 3

In the early hours of the morning during February 2014 my boyfriend (dressed in drag), a close friend (also in drag) and I were coming home after working in a club in Soho, London. We had got a taxi home and as we climbed out and walked towards our flat in a suburban part of North West London two men shouted homophobic comments at us. They approached us and continued being verbally abusive, eventually physically attacking us before one of them pulled out a knife and chased us down the street. We managed to get to our front door and slam it before phoning the police. Whilst an investigation was undertaken, the men were never found. Since this moment I have been shouted at on the street multiple times a year, spat at whilst walking to work, physically attacked whilst working on the door of a club and experienced several other violent moments as a result of my sexuality. This inciting incident has become emblematic of the growing levels of homophobia and transphobia that myself and my peers are subjected to, both verbal and physical, both on the street and online.

Scene 4

I am standing in The Black Cap in Camden after a show.² It is 12th April 2015. The working lights have just come on and the DJ has turned off the music. I am sitting on edge of the stage watching drag performers mingling with audience members and reluctant security guards asking people to leave. As far as everyone in the room is concerned, this is the last night on which the club will open and we have just seen the final performance on this iconic stage. I can almost hear the clacking heels of all the queens who have ever performed on this stage behind me. The show was emotional; my face is still damp with tears, my own and those of others to whom I clung during the last performances. An historic LGBTQ+ venue has been closed. It was a space I worked in as a producer and before that a space I frequented as a customer from when I moved to London in 2009, a space in which complex feelings of safety, community and home were felt by myself and many others. It remains closed at the time of writing in 2019.

This research is set against a context in which there has been a growing mainstream popularity of drag performance stimulated in part by *RuPaul's Drag Race* (World of Wonder, 2009). It is also a time of increasing levels of homophobia and transphobia and large numbers of queer venue closures in the UK during this period. These contexts are key to understanding the complex relationships between drag performance and queer communities, as well as the importance of ideas of survival and hope for queer people in 2019. In relation to these

² The Black Cap in Camden was well known as an historic and contemporary LGBTQ+ pub and club that was particularly known as a home to drag performance.

contexts, this research locates the potential to locate moments of survival and hope in and through drag and argues that it emerges through the pleasures and politics of audiences coming together for drag performance.

Much like I have material experiences of the emotional impact of drag performance, I am also materially implicated in this context through my experiences of homophobia and through working closely in queer venues that have closed. These experiences form my understanding of the importance of drag performance and queer communities for survival and I start from these contexts to highlight that the research is also contributing to wider politics of anti-homophobic and anti-transphobic discourses.

In my thinking I move across a range of queer and feminist thinking to inform my own work, with certain ideas and theorists coming in and out of focus as the thesis moves and develops. Chapter One and my Methodology section functions to give a wider overview of the fields of drag performance, communities and queer communities, queer theory (in particular queer temporalities) and queer methods and methodologies in relation to which this thesis is situated. Chapter Two to Five take different focusses and as such each draw on particular theoretical and methodological concepts related, variously, to Times, Venues, Bodies and Politics.

However, throughout each chapter and more broadly in the ethics and politics of my thinking, particular focus is drawn from the work of Sara Ahmed (2006, 2010, 2016, 2017), Alyson

Campbell and Stephen Farrier (2016), José Muñoz (1999, 2009), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993, 2002). Whilst there are other influences that run through my thinking at various moments and in various chapters, with certain ideas taking the forefront as certain aspects of my thinking come to the fore, these are the theorists that inform the over-arching thinking in my work in tangible ways through the amount they are cited and in less tangible ways through the over-arching ways in which they inform my academic, ethical and political practices. This research is intimately connected to ideas of how drag performance contributes to notions of queer survival and resistance in relation to increased homophobia and transphobia, as well as venue closures. Therefore , this thesis draws on queer research that addresses these issues directly and indirectly, with a particular connection to work which speaks to notions of hope and utopia which I unpack in more detail below.

From Ahmed's work I explore contemporary notions of affinity (2016, 2017) and hope (2010), as well as considerations of positionalities (2016) which I read as connected to Sedgwick's understandings of queer cultures and identities (1993) and reparative academic and embodied practices (2002). This notion of reparative-ness and affinity, which I explore as alongside-ness and beside-ness in my work, informs both the methodological and political underpinnings of my thesis, as well as my analysis of contemporary drag and queer performance work and communities. By this, I understand my research to be alongside other scholars from marginalised positions (female and feminist scholars, scholars of colour, trans and/or non-binary scholars) with whom I am in affinity, which is an important project of locating collective modes of resistance against homophobia and transphobia (and other modes of discrimination) that I might be contributing to. I also see this as an academic practice

of resisting what could be considered as dominant, hegemonic and potentially masculine modes of *doing academia* characterised by Sedgwick as “paranoid,” which I unpack further throughout my work. Rather than seeing this thesis as an attack on already existing canons of work, or indeed a defence of my own work, I instead see it as contributing to a range of discourse queer survival and hope in which I am alongside various other academics, writers and peers. Furthermore, this notion of alongside-ness and beside-ness in form my thinking of queer communities and queer performance communities in which I see a complex variety of performers and audience from different identities, positionalities and performances forms coming together to produce complex, messy and fluid moments of queer community.

From Campbell and Farrier (2016) I bring understandings of queer dramaturgies and their complex and contingent relationship to understandings of queer performance work. Whilst the work in their edited collection explores a broad range of performance and performance making practice, including focusing on drag, I draw from their work the importance of understanding the location and locate-ness of queer performance when writing about it. As such my focus on drag and queer performance work in London (and even then within a particular subculture of the London drag scene which I articulate further in Chapter One) is a political and ethical choice to pay attention to how queer performance emerges, produces meaning and facilitates community within particular locations. I am further informed by the ways in which Campbell and Farrier start from moments of performance as initial moments of feelings queer which, when articulated and understood through theories (which, importantly are also *felt*), comes together to produce queer understandings of queer work. As I unpack further below, in my own work I often start from intellectual explorations before

moving on to queer performance work and, whilst this could suggest a privileging of theory over practice, I suggest it instead reflects the ways in which my theoretical engagements (which were also emotional engagements in which I *felt* theory much like a *felt* performance) were vital in my understanding and articulation of the queer performance work I was seeing.

When I come to discuss performance work in more depth from Chapter Two onwards, I open with broader accounts of performance moments to articulate the key issues of each chapter, but turn to my theoretical underpinnings before focussing on specific moments of performance in each chapter. This reflects my intellectual process, which starts with feeling, mediated via often complex and multiple theorisations, to produce analyses and critiques of drag and queer performance work. Whilst the confines of a thesis requires a certain level of intellectual engagement reflect in the ordering of my thinking and research through this project, it is important to note that complex relationship between theory and practice in my research where theory and practice didn't often easily proceed or follow one another in a linear fashion. I note, however, that my intellectual engagements where the key ways in which I came to understand and articulate the often visceral and emotional experiences of drag and queer performance, and therefore order my Chapter's Two to Five to reflect that process of feeling (through) performances, theoretical engagements, and finally analyses.

I am informed greatly by the work of Muñoz both in his re-articulation of ideas of intersectionality (1999) which I use to inform my thinking of alongside-ness, affinity and solidarity, and in his understandings of utopias and queer utopias as both embodied moments of response in relation to aesthetic and performance work, and as a site of critical

engagement and critique from which potentialities for futurity and hope can be felt and articulated.

Utopia runs through this thinking in terms of the queer commitments in this work mostly foregrounded by the work of Muñoz's (2009) *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Utopia, and notions of utopia, are also present in my readings of performance and theory here, with utopia offering a key intellectual hook by which I think about what drag performance does, or has the potential to do, particularly in relation to the experience of queer communities. Whilst I unpack the particular queer lineage of temporalities and utopias in which my own research sits (and in particular how Muñoz's thinking influences my own) in Chapter One, it is important to note here the complications with this term, and in particular how this term might have an ambivalent relationship to notions of community and queer community even more so.

As Muñoz contests, 'Shouting down utopia is an easy move' (Muñoz, 2009: 10), and in particular that utopian theory (and utopian theorists) can easily be labelled with charges of 'naiveté, impracticality or lack of rigour' (Muñoz, 2009: 10). Muñoz, however, is not interested in forms of utopian thought that suggests the community or communitarian as 'an absolute value and of its negation as an alternative all-encompassing value' (10). For Muñoz, in resistance to the anti-relational theory or queer negativity (again explored in much more depth in my Chapter One with the work of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman), Muñoz proposes an understanding of queerness as 'collectivity' (11), and something which is 'primarily about futurity and hope' (11). I find myself politically and personally committed to these notions,

whilst also ambivalently connected what could be labelled the romance of community when considering queer utopianism.

Muñoz's insistence on utopia not as an uncritical site of social or cultural engagement, but instead as a commitment to the possibility of hope, utopia and collectivity in an increasingly idealised (and homophobic and transphobic) present, is resonant of my own understandings of utopia. I am not uncritically utopian, but instead engage with utopia as a critical tool through which to consider the possibilities and potentialities of queer performance. My encounters with performance in this thesis start with feelings of utopia I experienced when watching drag, and a recognition of similar experiences in the crowds around me through their often emotive and hyperbolic reactions. However, this does not mean that I do not see the issues with drag or queer performance, but instead seek to consider not only a critique of these performances, but also start to articulate arguments about what this performance work can do. Whilst on first glance this could be seen to be an uncritical exploration of these performance forms, I instead argue that it is precisely a critical utopian lens that allows me to see the potentialities of these performances and the potentialities of these utopian feelings, without ignoring the many issues that drag might have (and which I refer to in more depth in my chapter exploring drag performance in Chapter One).

This is particularly important for me when talking about the often low brow (and often low paid!) work of drag performance. Part of my utopian framework in this thesis is about lifting this work up in much the same way it has lifted me up, and finding ways to talk about it critically in academic contexts (following in the footsteps of writers such as Farrier (2016,

2017, 2019) and Edward and Farrier (2020) in particular but also numerous other writers about drag as explored further in Chapter One). This does not mean, however, that I am not also critical of the work that happens, but instead that rather than contributing to further discourses about the problematics of the work, I use a utopian framework to consider the possibilities and potentiality of drag in this contemporary moment. This does not mean these issues, critiques and conflicts do not exist, and indeed I underscore the complexities of the exclusionary nature of drag performance and queer communities at various moments throughout this thesis. However, my utopian framework names a commitment to locating the potentiality of this work in order to consider how drag performance might work to produce queer communities, whilst being aware of the ambivalent and contentious nature of these terms. Utopia, then, does not imply an uncomplicated or uncritical lens through which to view performance, but instead considers what performance work such as drag might *do* or *have the potential to do* in relation to queer communities.

Where Muñoz turns to Jean-Luc Nancy's (2000) *Being Singular Plural* as a key strategy to consider queer notions of collectivity (or queer as always already both collective and individual, relational and antirelational), I (re)turn to some foundational notions of performance studies to help frame my utopian commitments. I also (re)turn to a key feminist thinker to underscore the relationship between queer and feminist thinking that runs through my work, here citing the work of Jill Dolan. Dolan explores the notion of utopian performatives, which she argues

describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that it lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every

moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense (Dolan, 2005: 5)

This notion of utopian performativity is central to my thinking here, where this research started from this feeling that Dolan's writing helped me to articulate. These feelings, which I have learned to articulate within these utopian notions are central to my work and therefore the starting point from which much of my theorising about drag and queer performance, and queer theorising in general. Therefore, as I explored above, it is important to note that whilst much of this research started with an emotive and affective response to a bit of performance work, I was able to articulate these notions through my engagement with queer and feminist academic writing.

As Dolan notes, these moments of utopia are often small, ephemeral, difficult to hold on to, and part of this research has been articulating these moments through theory in order to consider how drag performance might contribute to notions of hope and utopia. This research has also been about being attuned to these hopeful and utopian moments, and learning how to attune myself to them. Therefore, my argument throughout is not that all drag performance has the potential to produce these utopian performatives that produce experiences of hope and queer communities. Instead, in this research I have been particularly attuned to these moments in drag performance in order to consider the potential for drag and queer communities.

Muñoz argues that seeking utopia, locating pathways towards queer hope and futurity, is by far the easiest path to take (in fact, it is often easier to argue it is merely frivolous, silly or

without critical rigour). It requires a careful commitment to ‘queer critique from a renewed and newly animated sense of the social’ (Muñoz, 2009: 18). Utopia is not the easy option; instead it requires a consistently renewed sense of commitment to the future as not only a possible location of queerness, but a concrete position in which queer (and queers) can survive. My utopian commitments are not separate from the experiences of homophobia and transphobia that I set out above, but instead are necessitated by them. Utopia is a commitment, and I use it both as a concept in order to insist on the possibility of hope, and as a framework to look at drag in particular ways to unpack how drag performance has the potential to produce moments of hope, collective and queer communities. My utopian analyses do not preclude negativities or complexities; however, I have often chosen work to which I have an initial strong emotional response as a fecund area from and through which to write. Therefore, whilst my analyses are often utopian and hopeful, these are one perspective on a broader set of analyses or explorations that might be produced in relation to the work. This commitment to utopia, however, is the writing out of a political commitment to hope, particularly at a time in which hope is difficult to find.

Methodology

In this thesis I move through ethnography, queer autoethnography, performance analysis and more to produce the analyses and critiques of drag performance and queer communities in London, as well as recognise and critique my own embedded position within the queer communities about which I am writing as a producer of performance events who also has personal relationships with the performers about whom I write. I bring my methodological explorations together as a “queer side-eye” which I use as an over-arching term to consider

not only the various ways in which I might work through and across these different methods, but also to consider the wider political considerations of doing queer research about queer things. Whilst there is not often clear or distinct moments in which one set of methods (for example, ethnography) emerges in relation to other methods, my queer side-eye facilitates an often promiscuous move across these methods in order to produce the theories in this thesis.

Therefore, Chapter One and my Methodology section function as a literature review, positioning myself within the existing scholarship surrounding drag performance, communities and queer communities, queer theories and queer methods and methodologies. Chapters Two, Three, Four and Five each function to focus in on particular intellectual ideas in relation to three different performers and moments of performance (with a specific focus on twelve performers in the thesis as whole). Each of these analysis chapters moves across ethnography, queer autoethnography, intellectual exploration and performance analysis in different ways. In form, they are similar, with each of these chapters starting from a creative account of a wider moment of performance before an in-depth exploration of particular intellectual terrains (Queer Times, Queer Venues, Queer Bodies and Queer Politics) before analysing three performers in relation to those intellectual grounds. The internal structure of each performance analysis is also similar, with creative accounts of the performance introducing the performer and providing creative explorations of their performance work amidst the analyses before conclusions are drawn.

Whilst each chapter moves across modes of working drawn from ethnography, queer autoethnography, and performance analysis that I articulate as a queer side-eye, I also engage the queer side-eye as a queer and political way of looking at the work (unpacked in more detail in my methodology section) which allows me to view the work in particular ways to produce focussed analyses of the queer performers I explore. In Chapter Two, *Queer Times*, this emerges through a queer mis- or re-reading of the word despite as a queer political framework through which I come to understand and articulate how drag performance and queer temporalities might come to work in relation to queer communities. In Chapter Three, *Queer Venues*, I produce an analysis of neoliberalism and gentrification in relation to the metaphoric and literal gestures made by queer performers. Here my queer sideways glance at the gestures of the performance allows for alternative engagements with these larger macro-political concepts. In Chapter Four, *Queer Bodies*, I bring together queer and feminist concepts from Elizabeth Freeman (2007) and Sara Ahmed (2010) to articulate “killjoy drag” using these intellectual ideas to understand how minority subjects in drag might work to resist and challenge dominant and restrictive discourses in drag performance. The killjoy drag performer is set up intellectually before I analyse three examples of killjoy drag performers from multiple identity positionalities and performance forms. Here, my queer side-eye allows me to look across performance forms and a political mode of consider how drag kings, queens and burlesque performers from multiple identities might speak to one another in robust ways. In Chapter Five, *Queer Politics*, I turn to notions of failure and silliness to consider how my own intellectual engagements and the drag performance work I explore can be frame as a mode of queer silliness which I articulate as a queer political practice, or a way of *doing politics queerly*. This thesis, then, uses queer and feminist intellectual practice extant methodologies such as ethnography and performance analyses, as well as these notions of

queer mis- or re-readings (Chapter Two), focusses on the gestural (Chapter Three), considering of killjoy drag practice (Chapter Four) and purposeful queer silliness (Chapter Five). I consider the queer side-eye as an overarching framework under which these notions sit, where the queer side-eye produces these practical and intellectual explorations by nature of the political and methodological considerations of being a queer researcher of queer things.

Therefore, throughout my chapters I move across intellectual modes of work in order to produce a varied and politically complex set of methods to look at (and theorise) queer work *queerly*. When writing about performance work I draw from methods of ethnography and autoethnography that I set in relation to queer and feminist intellectual explorations and performance analysis. I deploy and employ these methods strategically in order to continuously consider my role in relation to both the performance work, queer communities and academic practices that I am exploring. In accounting for my position, I both move to acknowledge the subjectivity of the work, and find ways to be circumspect about the knowledges I am producing, being aware of my own position and accounting for the complexities and importance of this position in the knowledges produced, as well as the issues that remain. The methods and methodologies do not often neatly line up, or happen in distinct and different parts of the thesis, but instead bleed into one another in a productive and messy way. Furthermore, I do not employ the term “queer side-eye” as a panacea or catchall solution to the issues of the subjectivity of the work. Rather, I use it to articulate the movements through these various methods and methodologies and as an over-arching way of accounting for my position, what it offers and what it restricts. These restrictions, however,

are also important because they speak to the focussed nature of the work and the importance of the located-ness of my thinking within specific pubs, bars and clubs in London and the drag performance and queer communities that emerge within them (as unpacked in more detail in Chapter One).

My queer side-eye describes these alternative, queer and non-frontal ways of looking, articulates the politics and practices of writing about communities in which you are embedded, and talk through and across multiple methodologies. Whilst this is outlined in greater detail in my Methodology section, I introduce it here in order to being to consider the queer ways in which this research has emerged.

Conclusions

This thesis starts with hope because of and despite the increasing levels of homophobia and transphobia and increasing venue closers. It insists on the concrete possibility of survival and hope, drawing from queer and feminist academic practices to underscore the importance of queer utopias and the experience of utopia for queer communities as well as the role that drag and queer performance plays in the practice of queer communities.

Methodologically, I mobilise the notion of the visual queer side-eye as an academic, ethical and political mode of exploring drag performance and queer communities. As the thesis concludes, I turn to other notions sensory modes of understanding to gesture towards the future of my queer thinking. Tuning to Ahmed's (2010) understanding of breathing in relation

to queer hope that I explore in more depth below and in my conclusion, I also consider other resonant images of breathiness or breathlessness. In understanding not being able to catch your breath as a state of both fear and pleasure, I want to re-invest breathing and hope with new narratives and new possibilities.

This research offers glimpses of utopian practices, drawing on the work of José Muñoz (2009) and his thinking around queerness as utopian and horizontal, for a future in which queers might not only hope through having space to breathe, but also have the freedom to be out of breath with pleasure and without fear. It suggests that drag performance facilitates a breathless hope that can interrupt the contemporary moment of homophobia and transphobia for queer people. It offers resistances and although it recognises that those resistances might be brief it stakes the claim that they illuminate alternatives to this contemporary moment. This thesis locates strategies for resistance, survival and hope in what gets illuminated when the lights are shining on drag performers on stage.

Navigating The Thesis

The research is organised into five chapters. The first chapter explores the intellectual and practical context of this research followed by a detailed outlining of my methodology. Chapters Two, Three, Four and Five each take specific intellectual and practical starting points (Times, Venues, Bodies, Politics) and explores them in relation to queer theories. Furthermore, each of these chapters explore three different performers and specific performances. Whilst the research formally started in 2014, I reflect on moments of

performance that preceded this, articulating a set of performances and ideas that occurred between 2009-2019.³

The following chapter, *Chapter One: Queer Backgrounds*, outlines in more depth contemporary context in which this thesis sits before exploring the underlying intellectual influences of the research from drag performance, queer communities, and queer studies. It sets up these key issues and debates, underlining the influences on this thesis and the intellectual, practical and political terrain in which the work is situated. In this initial chapter, I describe the drag scene about which I am writing, setting it in relation to contemporary theories and historical accounts of drag performance. In doing so I draw a link between drag performance and community, moving then to explore the complex relationship between queerness and community. I articulate queer communities as a practice, or something to be practiced, positioning pleasure as a key tactic that drag performance work can engage with or produce in order to generate and support queer communities. Finally, I explore the foundations of queer thinking in this thesis and focus on ideas surrounding queer time and temporalities, moving through notions of queer negativity and queer utopias to ground hope as a critical position in this thesis. This chapter brings this contextual thinking together before outlining my methodological impulses.

³ A more detailed chapter breakdown of my methodology and Chapters Two-Five follows my first chapter.

Chapter One: Queer Backgrounds

Introduction

2014. The Black Cap. Camden. Latrice Royale enters in a rhinestoned body suit and a short blonde wig. Rather than a high-energy number I was expecting, this one is low-key. She barely moves, but we move towards her, in relation to her, drawn closer. She reaches out a hand to each of us, tells us it is okay, that we will be okay, that she will be okay. I am struck by a feeling of love, even if I am unsure if that is the right word for what I am feeling. I try and articulate it to people again and again after it happened and words fail me. How do you write a death drop? I write in my notebook afterwards, even though Latrice did not death drop. How do you capture the politics and poetics of a wig reveal? another note says, even though she kept the same hair on for the whole performance. My heart is full, she is full, and the space is full of us and her. It is full or love, or what you will.

2018. The Clapham Grand. I am on my feet. I do not remember getting there or planning the guttural scream that spills out of my mouth as Latrice Royale kicks her shoes to the back of the stage and sprints around and around whilst lip lynching. She is breathless as we have the breath knocked out of us. I am furious, golden, and alive. It is as if just as I forgot what a drag queen could do or got tired of watching drag after so many years of standing in bars and trying to write about it, she slaps me around the face to remind me. She is here. I am here. We are here. Now get a grip.

The two creative accounts here document two experiences of seeing drag queen and alumni of *RPDR* Latrice Royale in two different venues five years apart, once at the start and once towards the end of my PhD. I place these here for two reasons. Firstly, I want to set up the fact that whilst I am critical of *RPDR* as a phenomenon and structure that I unpack in more detail below, I contest that individual performers who benefit from the successes of the show still have the potential to produce profound queer and drag work that speaks to the hopeful and resistive politics of this thesis. Secondly, I start with this reflection of Latrice's performance work as key examples of my personal experience of hope and utopia, anger and resistance, pleasure and survival when watching drag. Watching Latrice perform, as I have done on several occasions since I first met her in 2013, has often been a revitalising moment when I have been fatigued by research or the politics of drag. I start with Latrice both to indicate the pleasures and politics of watching her work, and as a hopeful gesture towards her work as a full of hope and utopian desires for survival.

Taking these utopian and hopeful reflections as a starting point, this chapter lays out the context of this thesis (increasing homophobia and transphobia, venue closures and a predominance of drag performance in contemporary London), before unpacking the three key areas of enquiry that are the groundwork of the research: drag performance, queer communities and queer studies. I turn first to this important socio-political context in order to outline these foregrounding issues in this research.

Contexts

It is only recently that there has been wider critical attention on the growing prevalence of homophobia and transphobia in the UK (see Marsh, Mohdin and McIntyre, 2019), and even then these recognitions are limited to particular geographical areas in relation to hate crime data. This thesis is focussed on London in particular, where I have been making an argument that there is an increase in homophobia since at least 2014. This is an argument which is often difficult to make when only looking at mainstream LGBTQ+ representations in the media or indeed at police and crime statistics. Whilst campaigners for equal rights proclaim the successes of the state in recognising gay marriage (and other forms of state-sanctioned modes of legitimacy), I am met weekly with stories of homophobic and transphobic abuse where those who do not conform to the stringent binary of male/female, or display anything other than heterosexual desire, are met with verbal and physical violence. All of this is happening despite a perceived increase in rights and safety for queer individuals in the UK.

I have argued elsewhere that this increase in homophobic and transphobic violence is happening but is not being properly or accurately recorded by the Metropolitan Police or other services (Parslow, 2019). Any increase in this violence is ascribed to 'the police improving their identification and recording of hate crime offences and more people coming forward to report these crimes rather than a genuine increase' (O'Neill, 2017: 7). I argue that this narrative is too simple and 'ignores the anecdotal evidence and quotidian lived experience for LGBTQ+ identifying people in the UK' (Parslow, 2019: 81). Whilst statistical figures suggest an increase in line with better recording and reporting of crime, anecdotal and

personal experiences suggest a perception that reporting a hate crime has no tangible effect.

Ultimately,

To only ascribe these increases in hate crimes against sexual orientation and transgender identity to more reporting and better recording, then, misses out on fully accounting for the everyday lived experience of being LGBTQ+ in our contemporary moment in the UK, a moment which I suggest is increasingly dangerous, increasingly intolerant, and, simply, increasingly homophobic and transphobic (Parslow, 2019: 81).

I make this clear because often when having these conversations, I am questioned about the veracity of these claims, rather than about the effects of the violence or what can be done about it. A Home Office report on Hate Crimes suggests a 27% increase in reported hate crimes targeted towards sexual orientation and a 32% increase in those crimes targeting transgender identity in 2017-2018 (Crown, 2018). The report clearly states that 'These large percentage increases across all three strands may suggest that increases are due to the improvements made by the police into their identification and recording of hate crime offences and more people coming forward to report these crimes rather than a genuine increase' (Crown, 2018: 14). Once again, the increases are not attributed to the material reality for queer people, even when the report notes only 53% of all hate crimes become known to the police. It is therefore possible to extrapolate that the figures presented in these reports can be doubled, at least, in order to reflect the reality of the situation. This data fails to account for the contemporary moment and fundamentally this homophobic and transphobic present is the first key context in which this thesis sits.

Alongside this, over the last 12 years in London LGBTQ+ bars and clubs have faced the increasing threat of closure. A report conducted by the University College London (UCL) Urban

Laboratory (UrbanLab) stated that ‘Since 2006, the number of LGBTQ+ venues in London has fallen from 125 to 53, a net loss of 58% of venues’ (Campkin and Marshall, 2017: 6). The report explores the context of these closures and the social, political and financial implications of them. Highlighted in particular is the negative impact the closure of venues has had on the communities that previously inhabited them. The report notes that ‘venues are important spaces for education and intergenerational exchange’ (Campkin & Marshall, 2017: 10) and in the research for the report ‘Anxiety and other negative emotional consequences of venue closures were consistently expressed’ (Campkin & Marshall, 2017: 10). Furthermore, ‘Spaces that are/were more community-oriented, rather than commercially driven, are considered vital and preferable by many within LGBTQ+ communities’ (Campkin & Marshall, 2017: 10). This foregrounds the importance of queer venues for queer communities. These venues are not considered just sites of consumption, but also of sociality, community, intergenerational exchange, learning about community and identity, and sexual desire.

Beyond being sites in and through which queer communities might be developed and maintained, these venues are often also perceived as sites of safety in an increasingly homophobic and transphobic present. The report continues:

The most valued LGBTQ+ spaces were experienced as non-judgemental places in which diverse gender identities and sexualities are affirmed, accepted and respected. These were sometimes described as “safe spaces”. What this means to individuals varies, according to personal preferences, experiences and the specific forms of discrimination and oppression that people are vulnerable to (e.g. transphobia, homophobia, racism, ableism) (Campkin & Marshall, 2017: 10).

It is important to note the perception that queer venues offer safety for queer people who might feel at risk of violence both in public (on the street, for example) and in non-queer

venues, whilst being aware that the notion of a safe space is by no means a simple term, but still once which holds resonance.⁴ This loss of queer venues is compounded by (and compounds) the rises in homophobia and transphobia, with this socio-political moment being one of increasing danger for queer people despite narratives of progress. A false perception of progress and safety erases the often dangerous and injurious present.

Together with these negative experiences, however, there is also an increasing interest and participation in drag that has emerged both because of and despite the televised drag competition *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR)*. For this thesis, the queer venues that are of interest are ones which house drag and queer performance, venues that have experienced growing popularity both as a result of the show and because audiences want to express a love of local drag to resist what is being perceived as a colonisation of local drag forms, or a negative globalisation or mainstream-isation of drag (see Adams, 2019).

RPDR is an American reality television competition in which drag queens compete for the title of America's Next Drag Superstar, all presided over by RuPaul. At the time of writing (2019), the show has produced eleven seasons, four seasons of All Stars in which popular performers return to compete in a more difficult version of the show, as well as international versions in Chile and Thailand. A UK version of the show has been filmed and airs on the BBC in the Autumn of 2019. Since it started, *RDPR* has gained mainstream success with both LGBTQ+ and mainstream audiences alike, bringing drag (or certain forms of drag) into the mainstream and

⁴ I unpack the complexity of safe spaces and safety in relation to queer communities below.

offering high levels of success to those who perform well on the show. As a producer of drag performance events who used to bring cast members of *RPDR* to perform in the UK, I saw first-hand the financial and critical achievements that these performers were able to make by touring and selling merchandise. Since around 2013, *RPDR* performers have been able to tour individually and in groups, initially selling out LGBTQ+ clubs and quickly moving to larger venues with audience members in their thousands.

These mainstream successes have enabled huge numbers of viewers to see drag, many of whom come to drag via the television show rather than from a live (and queer) performance form. Whilst bringing more audience members to drag, *RPDR* has also been criticized for erasing local performance practices and producing homogenized understandings of what drag could be (Chapman, 2018; Kelaidis, 2018; Ling, 2018; Moylan, 2018; Oliver, 2018). Not least this emerges because the show is a drag queen competition and therefore excludes kings or other more fluid forms of drag identification. In the wake of the announcement of a UK version of the show further criticisms of this homogenising force emerged (Levine, 2018; Jones, 2018) and contemporary commentators on social media around *RPDR* argue that the show privileges certain forms of drag and erases local nuances and difference in drag forms across the world in a move that reinforces normativities in what drag can be or do.

In a forthcoming chapter on *RPDR* and international influences I explore this idea in more depth as part of an edited collection on drag and contemporary practices (Edward and Farrier, 2020). In that chapter I lay out how complex notions of globalisation are often problematically assigned to explore how *RPDR* erases local drag forms and performances. Arguing for the

need to pay attention to the agency of performers, I suggest that *RPDR* offers both a productive engagement with the mainstream that might shine a light on problematic drag practices (such as racist, misogynist, and sexist forms, for example) as well as the programme potentially obscuring the work of different forms of drag at a local level. I insist on a nuanced debate about the effects of *RPDR* whilst being aware that for many performers the show feels like an imposition on their art.

Whilst there is room to consider the complicated relationship between globalisation and sexuality (Altman, 1997; Binnie, 2004; Eng, 2010; Povinelli and Chauncy, 2001; Spurlin, 2001) and globalisation and drag, the ways in which *RPDR* might relate to notions of globalisation is not so simple and an understanding of global drag practices is the focus of my thinking in areas outside of this thesis. I raise these issues here, however, to highlight the complex conversations emerging on the drag performance scene since *RPDR* started. All of the performers in this thesis are affected by *RPDR* in complex ways whether they acknowledge its influence or not. *RPDR* has changed the way drag is viewed by mainstream audiences, but it has also led to conversations about how drag might be regulated across positions of gender, race, sexuality and form, in complex and often injurious ways.⁵

The contemporary drag scene in London that I examine owes some of its success to *RPDR*, whilst also actively critiquing it. For example, performers that I explore such as Meth (Chapter Two), Ruby Wednesday (Chapter Three), Myra Dubois (Chapter Three), and Lilly Snatchdragon

⁵ I extend this discussion in Chapter Three.

(Chapter Four) gained attention from working with *RPDR* performers when they came to the UK. Furthermore, it has brought more audiences to drag performance and, whilst non-queer audiences populating drag shows is not without issue, it is also worth noting how other audiences who might be marginalised or unwelcome elsewhere (such as cis-presenting women, and children and young people) have found affinities in and through drag performance. Drag as a point of coming together, and of community, is something I extend below in my think through drag as a site of communality for both performers and audiences, although in this thesis my focus looks particularly at how queer audiences and performers come together as opposed to how drag is being invested in by non-queer audiences or in non-queer settings.

The Rest Is Drag

Beyond *RPDR*, this research sits in relation to extant studies on drag performance. Notable works such as Laurence Senelick's (2000) *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre*, Roger Baker's (1964) *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation on the Stage*, and Esther Newton's (1972) *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* have explored complex historical narratives and localised understandings of drag performance that set up engaging frameworks for the discussions in this thesis. Senelick's vast study provides a highly comprehensive history of drag and a long and in-depth account of drag and cross-dressing in, variously, shamanistic rituals, Japanese Kabuki Theatre, performances on early-modern English Stages and more contemporary Anglo-American drag settings. Baker's text, although more outmoded in relation to contemporary thinking around gender and sexuality, highlights a key set of practices in the UK drag performance scene, including work on stages such as The

Black Cap, a venue that housed some of the work explored in this thesis. The text was also re-published in 1994 with additional material by Peter Burton and Richard Smith, and an updated set of explorations, retitled *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts*. Newton's localised ethnographic study provides an in-depth exploration of a Chicago-based drag scene that highlights the importance and complexities of drag performance work within broader LGBTQ+ discourses, as well as the complex position of research/researcher that foreground some of my methodological thinking explored below.⁶ These texts provide insights into thinking around drag. The performance work that I explore sits both in relation to these histories and contexts as well as actively rejecting them. Many of the performers in this thesis would reject the idea that what they do is female impersonation (or, indeed, male impersonation), for example, as an outdated term that is bound up in certain modes of misogyny, particularly those performers who might identify or perform as female when off stage.⁷

Whilst I have cited these three major works as providing key insights into drag performance, there has also been a large number of other literature and research exploring drag in contemporary and historical settings. A special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* on drag kings, published simultaneously as an edited collection called *The Drag King Anthology* (Troka, LeBesco and Noble, 2002) includes analyses of drag kinging and lesbian desire, drag kings and

⁶ I go into more depth surrounding Newton's text and ethnographic methods in more detail in my exploration of my methodological framework.

⁷ Other queer historical texts consider the relationship between drag performance and drag as an enactment of gay or queer historical identity (even if/when problematically). For example, in Matt Houlbrook's (2006) *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures of the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* explorations of drag balls in pre- and inter-war London and their relationship to class and classed gay identities is explored. Whilst drag as a mode of dressing and performing identity off stage is fertile area of enquiry, I explore drag here as a performance form, simultaneously noting that the work of drag and the work of identity bleed into one another on and off stage in complex ways.

rearticulating masculinity and the performance of multiple masculinities, and focussed studies of kinging practices in the UK, Australia and beyond. Whilst Senelick's text does explore some aspect of drag kinging practice, it privileges drag queens, or forms of drag that are attempting to present or represent femaleness and femininity. Explorations of drag kinging and male impersonation practices can also be found in texts such as Sue Ellen-Case's (2009) *Feminist and Queer Performance, Critical Strategies*, Jack Halberstam and Del LaGrace Volcano (1999) *The Drag King Book*, as well as Halberstam's later work in *In A Queer Time And Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005). Historical and critical analyses of kinging such as these make links between drag king performance practice and lesbian and lesbian feminist histories, politics and desires, as well as modes of female masculinity that might challenge or indeed reinscribe masculine or hyper masculine forms of cultural identity.

Drag queens, overall, are more prolific in these literatures. A further special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* on drag queens, also published simultaneous as an edited collection entitled *The Drag Queen Anthology: The Absolutely Fabulous But Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators* (Schacht and Underwood, 2004), contains articles with explorations from female cross-dressing in World War II, to explorations of drag sexuality and race in South Africa, to studies of the relationship between drag and faith.

There has also been a number of publications exploring drag practice elsewhere in the *Journal of Homosexuality* with links between drag performance and queer theory (Alexander, 2003) and how drag performance can offer sites of exploration for gender and sexual fluidity (Enger and Maloney, 2016). Beyond this there have been more sociological explorations of the

relationship of gay men and drag queens (Berkowitz, Belgrave, and Halberstein, 2007) and sociolinguistic studies of drag queens' representations of gender and race in their performance work (Mann, 2011). Often these texts treat drag as exemplary of other ideas, such as gender identity or queer theory, or consider the sociological impacts of drag performance, rather than considering drag as a performance form and a distinctly queer performance form (Farrier, 2016) with its own histories, lineages and practices.

There are also an increasing number of texts exploring the relationship of drag performance and *RPDR*. This is a growing and extensive field of enquiry that moves from visual and communications studies through to cultural politics and feminist theories. Most importantly, there are critical interventions looking at how languages of drag come to regulate identities and performance forms across gender, racial and sexual boundaries (Edgar, 2011; Goldmark, 2015; González and Cavazos, 2016; Simmons, 2013; Strings and Bui, 2014). There is also an edited collection on *The Makeup of RuPaul's Drag Race: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows* (Daems, 2014). These explorations take to account the critical impact *RPDR* has had on wider popular culture, and the regulating effect that the show has had on the politics of queer identities more generally. The literature surrounding the show, however, often misses out on returning to drag as a performance form, reflecting the wider field of studies into drag performance which either explore sociological or cultural ideas of drag performance in contemporary popular culture, or take drag as exemplary of other issues.

More closely related to performance studies, Walsh's text *Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland* considers the work of drag performer and activist Panti Bliss (Walsh,

2016) and the edited collection *Queer Dramaturgies* (Campbell and Farrier, 2016) includes an exploration of drag lip synching and queer histories. These texts consider drag as a queer performance form and also consider how they relate to wider queer discourses and politics. Beyond this, my thinking of drag is heavily influenced by the work of Stephen Farrier (2016, 2017) and José Muñoz (2009), whose work considers the located-ness of drag performance within queer communities. Interestingly, however, in an exploration of queer theatre histories predominately in the UK and the USA, Farrier notes that 'Drag Performance is not often taken seriously but appears in important queer work. Drag might be missing in this history because it is lowbrow, popular and working-class' (Farrier, 2019:1578-9). The importance of drag performance within queer performance histories articulates another need for accounting for the work of drag performance, and a two volume forthcoming edited collection on drag performance edited by Farrier and Mark Edward is due to be released in 2020, with one volume exploring cotemporary drag practices and another looking at its histories. As indicated above, my contribution to this edited collection looks at the impact of *RPDR* on understandings and representations of local drag.

Whilst there are texts that speak to drag performance and queer communities, the field in general, if not exclusively, often resists or refuses to speak of drag queens and drag kings together, despite in my research these performers often working alongside one another. Furthermore, in literature surrounding drag queens, there is a persistent exclusion of the presence of trans and/or non-binary people in drag performance scenes. In literature exploring drag kings the presence and importance of trans and/or non-binary people is more

prevalent but is yet to be normalised or happen extensively to accurately recognise the role of trans and/or non-binary performers and discourses in this field.

It is important to note that drag queening and kinging have different historical positions and politics and therefore many of the historical and contemporary analyses and explorations of drag purposefully keep these figures separate 'so as not to disregard the importance of the differences in relation to these factors' (Farrier, 2017: 173). As Farrier notes in a discussion of the ways in which drag performance might be learnt in relation to international contexts of drag, 'Given the range of the kinds of work that might be seen as drag, it is understandable why academic discussion often treats drag kings and queens differently because they have different histories and traditions' (2017: 173). In many of the texts cited above, kinging and queening are distinct forms that, whilst sharing similarities, need to be articulated separately in order to not erase their complex differences. However, it is important to note that in the scene I explore the performers often slide between forms of kinging and queening, as well as between identity positions in relation to drag (such as female-identified performers performing in female drag) and performance forms such cabaret and burlesque, in ways that do not neatly cohere into one camp or the other. Therefore, in order to accurately represent this scene, it is appropriate to find ways to explore these practices concurrently, alongside one another, without reducing drag to a homogenous or amorphous site of performance that lacks local or historical significance.

In exploring particular emergences of drag practice and learning, Farrier notes the complexity of performance forms, identities and bodies that populate the audiences and stages of drag

shows:

Often present are a mix of genders and sexualities (some cis, some trans, some straight, gay, queer, some wearing their identities, literally, on their sleeve) and there is regularly a smattering of drag in the audience. This is a queer crowd, mixed and only partly decipherable to normative looks. On stage, all the acts have their own distinct flavour in relation to gender, sex and sexuality, which is often at the centre of their performances. The acts look different too and arouse diverse energies; yet despite the performance work appearing different in many ways, at some level it speaks a similar lexicon. Many of these performers refer to their acts as drag, or burlesque or cabaret [...] it begs the question, given the work and genders are diverse, what coheres the performances? Moreover, crucially, how can the work be spoken of and accounted for without crushing the diversity so vital to the heart of this work and community? (Farrier, 2017: 171-172).

The above description, drawn from a performance event at a bar called Her Upstairs in London, highlights the complexity of forms and identities that cohere around drag.⁸ This description locates the issue that informs my thinking on drag in this study, and particularly contemporary drag manifestations. My impulse to talk across and through a variety of drag performance forms, and broader performance practices such as cabaret and burlesque, as well as different identities and positionalities, comes from a desire to account for the complexity of the performance scene, whilst still recognising the localised moments of performance that emerge. Therefore, in each chapter I refer to three different performers and individual performances or moments of performance and lay out the contemporary resonance of this work. This is not to say that these performance works do not sit in a relationship to broader drag narratives, and I resist problematically positioning the local as a site of authentic queer embodiment against a homogenizing historical or globalising influence (Campbell and Farrier, 2016). Instead in paying attention to these local emergences, I aim to locate alliances, affinities and moments of resistance in which diverse forms of performance

⁸ I unpack my relationship to Her Upstairs in my Methodology section below.

and diverse identities might come together on and off stage to produce moments and practices of queer community.

This is a political decision, as much as a decision made to reflect the contemporary performance scene within which I locate my thinking. As Farrier notes:

Speaking of drag kings and queens together is the writing out of a political inclination, one that serves to look to what coheres these performances and performers in terms of a functioning community. Although, as it has been noted, the audiences and traditions of kinging and queening are different and the effects in the performance room follow this difference, there are places where kings and queens speak similar languages (Farrier, 2017: 185).

I locate my thinking alongside Farrier's impulse to find moments where these performers who exist across drag and queer performance categories might speak similar languages and find moments of affinity that do not reduce their work to homogenous understandings of drag that erase important differences.

The drag performances in thesis come from shows I saw in London between 2009 and 2019 and the scene I explore occupies a complex position in relation to broader drag narratives and discourses. I characterise this scene not as one which is bounded in one or even a few venues, although there are certainly some venues that I suggest would not welcome or be welcomed by many of the performers in this thesis. Nor is it necessarily easily recognisable from the outside, or even clearly articulatable from within. I argue that the performance work in the scene is often aware of the broader politics of drag and is committed to finding ways to represent the diversity of bodies, identities and forms that are available in drag performance. The scene is often explicitly anti-discrimination and will actively resist misogyny, racism and

other forms of exclusion that still emerge in and through drag performance. It is a scene which is clearly linked with and therefore attentive to the movements of the mainstream, and how shows such as *RPDR* impact on who gets to see and do drag. On a more basic level, it is a scene which borrows from cabaret forms in which shows will be led by a host or compere and populated by performers who will produce short form acts (usually three to eight minutes long) that can involve singing, lip synching, burlesque, dance, broad art making practices or any combination of these and more.

The scene is often populated by performers and audience members who actively and purposefully trouble any easy definition of gender, sexuality or performance form and therefore it is this coming together through and because of drag that is a key characteristic of the work. As I move through the thesis, I explore particular moments of drag performance practice across various venues in London, each time articulating the local resonance of the work in relation to broader queer theories and ideas. As I have tried to show in this section, however, any discussion of contemporary drag necessitates historical and global explorations as well and, whilst these broader narratives move beyond the scope of this thesis, I am aware of the tremors of historical and international moves that effect this thinking.

What is clear in both the contemporary scene I explore and some of the historic emergences of drag performance that are explored in other work on drag is their relationships to notions of community and family. Most notable is the aforementioned documentary *Paris Is Burning* which documents the House culture in which groups of queer and trans people, particularly queer and trans people of colour, would live and work together, usually cohering around a

mother-figure, as well as competing in competitions known as balls. This performance scene, which is also grounded heavily in black and Latinx subcultures as well as closely related to subcultural resistances to HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 90s in America, has been heavily explored and documented by academic and popular commentators (the FX show *Pose* (2019) most recently dramatized this scene) and the documentary has been explored and critiqued in depth (see Bailey, 2013; Butler, 1993; hooks, 1992; Prosser, 1998). Rather than re-produce these critiques here, I note the link between drag performance and queer communities, particularly where these communities might also resemble and re-produce problematic notions of the family or normative kinship forms that may also be exclusionary to queer people. I note also that participating in these Houses were also sites of economic and health-based survival in which young queers rejected by their families might be able to state a physical address in order to, for example, access healthcare support and treatment for HIV/AIDS related illnesses.⁹

Whilst the complex relationship of queerness, community and alternative families is one which has been explored to varying degrees in much of the research cited above, this thesis articulates the complexity of the relationship of drag to queer communities.¹⁰ Whilst not necessarily functioning as houses or families there is a clear relationship to drag performance happening on stage and the emergence of queer communities around these performance venues made up of performers and audiences. Having set up this understanding of the contemporary drag scene in London, what is clear is that it has an integral link to notions of

⁹ I return to Livingstone's documentary below when considering its relationship to ethnography in my methodology section.

¹⁰ For explorations of the relationship between queerness and family forms see Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments*.

queer communities, particularly as they function in relation to venues (closing *and* opening) and to the survival of and resistance to homophobia and transphobia. In order to explore these ideas further, I turn to an exploration of queer communities in order to explore their socio-political implications more clearly, particularly as they cohere around drag performance. This thinking of queer communities, however, is not simple and requires an engagement with the ways in which notions of togetherness and communality might sit in contrast to understandings of queerness and fluidity. I turn now to these arguments to being to unpack the ways in which queer communities can be understood and challenged in order to draw links between drag and community for my thinking.

Queer Communities

Any monolithic understanding of queer communities fails to account for the multiplicity or polyphony of what queer communities might be or look like. Whilst contemporary understandings of community resist ideas of fixity that queer understandings of community or belonging would challenge, there is still work to do to unpick the ways in which community can be figured as a site of safety for queers by underscoring the complexity of what this safety might do and who might be excluded from normative notions of community, even queer communities.

In this section I move through issues of problematic or toxic notions of community and gay community, and understandings of queer worldmaking, to suggest that conceiving of queer community as a practice (or something we might practice) helpfully re-engages with

community in and through notions of pleasure. In exploring these arguments, I propose the notion of queer communities as the practice of coming together, where coming together is a purposeful and playful suggestion of the role of pleasure in the experience of queer communities. The issues of queer communities lie in the potentially problematic homogeneity of the term and how notions of safety and comfort can come to iron out or smooth over the complexities and politics of queerness and how queerness can and should be informed by difference. The idea of queer community can be misunderstood as signifying something monolithic, whole and coherent, and even as separate from the practices or behaviours of individuals who exist in those communities. However, the opportunities in this term lies in its rejection of normativities and homogeneity, in thinking about queer communities as a practice and about the practices of queer communities. In thinking through the ways in which queer communities might be a practice, and in particular a pleasurable practice, I articulate an understanding of queer communities as resisting notions of fixity and unity that could work to defang it. Instead, in understanding queer worldmaking as situated within ideas of fluidity, I argue that queer communities can be understood as pleasurable, plural and full of potential.

Vered Amit (2002) argues that 'it is difficult to discern much in the way of coherence among the multitude of definitions, descriptions and claims of community which occur in quotidian conversation as well as within a variety of scholarly work' (Amit, 2002: 1). The term community is often casually used to describe a multiplicity of modes of cultural, social and political belonging through which people engage with one another. Terms such as the "gay community," the "LGBTQ+ community," and the "queer community," are often used

interchangeably to describe the various ways in which modes of collectivity form around understandings of sexuality. Discussions about the importance of LGBTQ+ communities have been mobilised extensively around campaigns to save LGBTQ+ venues that have been closed or threatened with closure in London, such as The Black Cap, The Joiners Arms and the Royal Vauxhall Tavern. In these cases, an appeal to community is linked to the appeals to save these physical spaces (see, for example, Segalov (2015) and Walters (2015)).

However, this call for community is not simple, or without its issues. In a study of the relationship of gay neighbourhoods to violence and policing in post-Stonewall New York, Christina B. Handhardt (2013) observes that ‘the demands of Greenwich Village residents and a mainstream antiviolence movement can look strikingly alike’ (Handhardt, 2013: 3). In the study, Handhardt explores a particular US context, here referring to how the desire for public safety and crime reduction by LGBT activists in and around Greenwich Village, a popular gay area in New York, were similar to calls for safety and crime reduction by often middle class heterosexual residents looking to clear sites of gay public intimacy and queer subcultural practices off the streets. Whilst this particular US context of post-Stonewall New York does not map easily onto other versions or understandings of queer communities, I use it here to indicate how calls to queer community can re-deploy heteronormative and homonormative assimilationist politics that can be actively exclusionary for many queer people.¹¹ The call for queer communities can be framed as a return to normative politics of inclusion that many

¹¹ Homonormativity was coined by Lisa Duggan (2002) in a chapter entitled ‘The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism’. It broadly describes the depoliticisation of gay and lesbian culture and the ways in which assimilationism and normative politics of inclusion and acceptability works to sanitise and erase radical queer politics. Homonormativity can be seen in the political desire to fit in to individual rights-based politics such as gay marriage or the right for LGBT people to serve in the armed forces.

queer people would critique. In other words, if queer communities signify a desire to fit in to a system which commits and allows violence towards queers, or actively erases them from public life, why is there a continued desire to engage in this term?

This could be reflective of classical understandings of community. Gerard Delanty's (2010) *Community* and Zygmunt Bauman's (2001) *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* set up clear and important discussions on classical conceptions of community and how they relate to contemporary politics. Bauman carefully sets up the relationship between safety and freedom in community, where the need for safety is often always already at the expense of freedom. Delanty sets up the key issues with community whilst outlining the importance of the ways in which communities and the term community has enduring appeal. His exploration of communication communities, drawing on Habermas's explorations of communicative action, goes some way to unpacking communities as sites of resistance to dominant modes of being, and broadly governmental and neoliberal systems.

However, by queer communities I am not referring to a gated community of artists, but a fluid collective of those engaged drag and queer performance who practice queer communities through coming together. Furthermore, even the most conservative understandings of community necessarily understand that community is not always fixed and bounded, but that communities are necessarily fluid. It is possible to see a community that emerges around a normative institution such as a church as shifting, changing and developing as members of the community leave, arrive or change. The issue is not that these understandings of

community imply fixity rather than fluidity and plurality, but instead that they imply normativity.

To resist returning to an understanding of queer communities that reifies normativity (in politics, identities and practices), it is important to consider who might be in those communities. Furthermore, it is not so simple a task as rejecting the term community, since it has an enduring appeal (Delanty, 2010), and it often deployed by the people about whom I am writing in this thesis. What is clear from my experiences is that this call for community is not always already a call to return to normative values, but about accounting for the importance of the opportunity for queer people to come together, in particular to watch performance. These queer people often occupy complex positions of queerness grounded in non- and anti-normativity, performing a 'mist of genders and sexualities' (Farrier, 2017: 171) rather than any coherent or fixed identity.

If there is a broader range of bodies and identities participating in and watching drag in this contemporary moment as I argued above, then any understanding of queer communities in relation to drag performance must account for this multiplicity of bodies, identities and forms. In considering the plurality, complexity and multiplicity of queer identities in queer communities, it is also important to consider how normative conceptions of community (and (homo)normative gay (male) communities) can also reproduce misogyny, transphobia and racism if the broader politics of identity and community is not brought to bear upon them. By this I suggest that if the issue with community is not fixity but normativity, then queer communities are sites that are formed in, through and because of difference out of a desire

to find connection and collectivity without ironing out the complex differences in identity that might be present at any show or in any venue.

The debates around bringing identities and people beyond gay men into discussions of queer communities has also emerged in drag performance communities. In particular, the idea of misogyny and racism in drag performance has been brought to the forefront of popular conversations with the proliferation of drag performers identifying across a spectrum of gender identities when in and out of drag. Drag performance artist Victoria Sin, whose ideas and work are explored in Chapter Five, expresses that

Femmephobia, misogyny and racism are huge problems within the gay community, as evidenced in the common grindr [a “dating” app for gay men often seeking sexual interactions] byline “no fats, no fems, no Asians’; in the underrepresentation of drag queens of colour, in the erasure or invalidation of the queer identity of feminine presenting cis passing women; in masc4masc gay culture; and in the fact that many gay men won’t date male drag queens (Sin, 2017: 25).

Sin presents a particularly toxic image of the gay, male community that can surround drag performance, one which is exclusionary of people of colour, trans and/or non-binary, female-identified and disabled people. If the gay community is always already perceived as misogynist, racist and transphobic, then locating strategies to resist these homonormative and exclusionary forms of community are integral in order to facilitate survival for queer subjects.

This thesis moves sideways from the idea of a gay community to consider the implications of what queer communities could be and how they might function around drag performance. It does so as a means of finding alternative pathways through these often-problematic

discourses explored above and aims to pay attention to the need for collectivity, coming together, and community as modes of resisting homophobia and transphobia. Therefore, whilst the words queer and community have complex histories, I also want to find strategies to consider the ways in which queer communities, and coming together, might be re-articulated in and through notions of pleasure as a practice (and something which needs to be practiced) as a productive re-engagement with understandings of community.

Whilst broader narratives of community offer insights into the ways in which queer communities might form and function, many of the discussions are about the idea of community or theory of community rather than what a practice of community might look like, or how a queer community might work. To start this discussion, I turn to the relationship of queer communities with geographies or spaces to help add clarity to these ideas of communities forming around particular locations.

For, Ingram, Bouthaillette and Retter (1997), queer communities are intricately and intimately connected to space, geography and environment: 'Queer space enables people with marginalised (homo)sexualities and identities to survive and to gradually expand their influence and opportunities to live fully' (Ingram *et al.*, 1997: 3). Whilst being aware of the problem of community in light of a politics of difference that frames many queer theories, the authors insist that

understanding the perceptions, ideas, and priorities that characterise each community and its relationship to its environment are necessary prerequisites to building effective affinities, which in turn can lead to new alliances between lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transsexuals, and other

groups of “sexual minorities” perceived by some to threaten the heteronormative status quo (Ingram *et al.*, 1997: 4).

In this understanding of queer community being linked to space there is a call for increased safety and security which is often inextricably coupled with decreased freedom (Bauman, 2001). What is useful in Ingram *et al.*'s thinking is a way in which affinities might be built across complex identity positions and that this might happen in and through venues and environments. I would extend this to argue that a diversity of bodies and identities coming together through drag performance, as well as specific identity groups coming together in venues to witness performance specifically articulated by and for them, offer strategies of building affinities between disparate groups. This is resonant of the practices of drag and community that I explored above and I extend these ideas here to suggest that queer venues offer the potential for a diversity of queer people to produce moments of community through the pleasure of coming together. This affinitive queer community is key to my thinking here. In Chapter Four I extend Sara Ahmed's (2016) notion of an “affinity of hammers” to consider how privilege, marginalisation and identity can emerge in multiple, complex and contentious ways, as well as how queer communities might come together in response to homophobia and transphobia. Here, however, these understandings of queer geographies as allowing a plurality of identities to come together and build affinities and queer communities is important to note because of the importance of physical venues as locations of coming together and queer communities.

This is key because of the closure of a large number of queer venues in London. Furthermore, whilst I recognise that not all queer venues (and indeed not all queer venues all the time) offer sites in which queer communities and the pleasures of coming together might be

experienced, I do note that paying attention to the specificities of drag performance also entails paying attention to the specificities of the locations in which drag performance happens. In doing so it is possible to locate strategies for resistance to homophobia and transphobia that emerge in these venues through the practice of queer communities, without reducing (or indeed hyperbolising) these queer venues and communities to generalised notions of community that do not pay attention to the specific practices (and discriminations) that emerge. Paying attention to these venues is also a strategy to resist reifying normative or normalising impulses in the desire for community, as well as assimilationist, homonormative politics of acceptability.

Thinking queer communities in relation to queer venues and geographies offers some key insights into how conceptions of plurality within queer communities can emerge. In trying to articulate how geographies might relate to queer communities, Ingram *et al* call for

queerer geographies and designs [...] not a single manifesto but the rough beginnings of many [...] Rather than [constructing] dogma, [...] seek new ways to link many different stories, valuing the contrasts and contradictions that may surface' (Ingram *et al.*, 1997: 12).

The call to seek the many rather than the singular offers a useful way to consider queer communities that do not render them as broad, unlocated or amorphous, or primarily gay male forms that exclude difference and propagate forms of homophobia and transphobia from outside LGBTQ+ communities. Instead, thinking through the ways in which communities might emerge because of drag performance in queer venues insists on paying attention to the particular temporal and geographic specificity of how queers might come together and practice communities; and in paying attention to how and when these queer communities emerge it is possible to locate strategies and tactics for other queer communities elsewhere.

This does not deny the ways in which these queer communities may extend beyond the venue or beyond the performance and moving forward I consider how practices of queer communities, or practicing queer communities, might produce sets of feelings that remain in the bodies of those who come together and offer opportunities to construct queer worlds and resistances beyond specific venues. This is a key way of considering the practice of queer communities and I turn now to queer world-making as a useful position to extend this discussion of the practice of queer communities, enabling the development of a polyphonic understanding of these communities in relation to queer venues and drag performance.

When writing about dance and club culture as a queer world-making practice in the USA, Fiona Buckland (2002) discusses her understanding of queer world-making as the following:

By using the term "world-making," I am not referring to the creation of a bordered culture with recognizable laws, populated by homogenous subjects, but rather, I mean a production in the moment of a space of creative, expressive, and transformative possibilities, which remained fluid and moving by means of the dancing body, as it improvised from moment to moment (Buckland, 2002: 4).

Queer world-making allows a conceptualisation of queer communities as continually fluid and moving rather than fixed, which offers the opportunity to account for how collectivity might emerge beyond a bounded community and might exist across venues and temporal locations in complex ways. Queer world-making offers a fertile intellectual ground that sits alongside the ideas of queer communities I explored above as contingent, unfixed, but resonant across multiple bodies, venues and performances in multiple ways. Queer world-making practices are informal, and for Buckland emerge in participation in and through dancing in clubs,

happening in non-formalised settings of entertainment and pleasure.

Understandings of queer world-making can also be seen in Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's (1998) description of what they term "criminal intimacies" in their article 'Sex In Public':

Queer and other insurgents have long striven, often dangerously or scandalously, to cultivate what good folks used to call criminal intimacies. We've developed relations and narratives that are only recognized as intimate in queer culture: girlfriends, gal pals, fuck buddies, tricks. Queer culture has learned not only how to sexualize these and other relations, but also to use them as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation. Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, property, or to the nation (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 558).

In this analysis, queer world-making becomes linked to the idea of queer as a counterpublic, or 'an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation' (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 558). There is a hopeful tone to these ideas and the informal and low-brow nature of these counter-publics sits alongside notions of queer communities emerging in and through drag performance work in pubs, bars and clubs. Whilst this thesis focuses less on the relations of public intimacies and sex that foreground much of Berlant and Warner's thinking, it is true that public intimacies and sex are present in these performances and the audiences that witness them, as well as being bound up in the ideas of pleasure that I propose as part of *coming together* as a purposeful pun on the pleasure of sexual climax and a reference to the pleasurable feeling of being in venues, with other queers, watching drag.

Queer world-making is also involved in the production of countercultural intimacies outside

of heteronormative ideals of family, domesticity and nation, where queer people who have been denied access to 'state, church, media, or private institutions' (Buckland, 2002: 3), are made 'worldless [and are] forced to create maps and spaces for themselves, without the support of these more traditional realms. In such circumstances, any queer lifeworld is itself a critique as well as a place from where participants critique these realms' (Buckland, 2002: 3). I consider these understandings in relation to the practice of queer communities that I articulate as emerging in queer venues. Whilst I am reluctant to name as radical an engagement with queer venues and an insistence on remaining in queer venues, since they are bound up in economies and neoliberal discourses of capital accumulation that also damage or exclude some queer subjects, there is an important recognition of the worlding practices of drag performance. Here I propose that the practice of drag inculcates the practice of queer communities and that in considering queer communities as a set of practices and potentially a set of worlding or world-making practices, rather than a fixed site or space, it is possible to locate contingent and multiple emergences of queer communities across and through venues, performances, audiences, performers, and bodies. In other words, drag performance potentially facilitates the emergence and practice of queer communities and since drag performances and performers often work across multiple venues (often on one night) this speaks to ideas of fluid and unfixed notions of queer communities.

Queer world-making, or making queer worlds, is a countercultural project of forging spaces and belonging in a world which has denied space and belonging to queer subjects, through actively exclusionary and violent homophobia and transphobia. There is an element of refusal in the act of queer world-making through drag performance. Here, I take the term "refusal"

from Muñoz's conception of queer aesthetics and queer utopianism, borrowing from the work of Herbert Marcuse, of art 'as [a] great refusal of an overarching here and now' (Muñoz, 2009: 133). In these understandings of queer world-making there is a refusal of normative modes of intimacy and belonging which allows for an unexpected engagement with normative politics of community. The element of refusal in queer world-making proposes an understanding of how people might come together *queerly* in and through pleasurable moments of watching and doing drag performance. In so doing, these moments of queer world-making and practicing queer communities resist dominant narratives of what community could be and allow queerer alternatives to emerge.

Whilst this thesis explored drag and queer communities in London between 2009 and 2019, there is potential resonance beyond these boundaries that could be extended with further research. I propose that these practices work, however consciously or unconsciously, to enact resistances to homophobic and transphobic violence and these complex queer relations and practices emerge around drag performance practices since the performance form not only has a resonance with queer histories of resistance, but often in its doing references (explicitly or not) hopeful and critical ways of being in the world in resistance to contemporary violence.

Berlant and Warner suggest that

Queer culture has found it necessary to develop this knowledge [of alternative modes of intimacy and belonging] in mobile sites of drag, youth culture, music, dance, parades, flaunting, and cruising - sites whose mobility makes them possible but also renders them hard to recognize as world making because they are so fragile and ephemeral (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 561).

This suggests that any queer world-making project is necessarily fluid and ephemeral because of how queer people engage in the social and how queer bodies are policed within heteronormativity. It is their very fluidity, ephemerality and mobility which allows queer world-making projects to endure. Although often ‘trivialised as “lifestyle”’ (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 561), Berlant and Warner propose these sites as producing complex and effective modes of being and belonging in the world. I argue in more depth in my section below exploring my methodology, and in Chapter Five, that one queer strategy of resistance and survival might be about finding strategies to fly under the radar. Here, then, queer communities as sets of fluid, contingent and locally resonant practices might offer an understanding of queers coming together that allows for moments of flying under the radar, learning when to duck and weave, and finding strategies for survival that are not always about being visible.

I propose that queer communities can and do emerge around particular venues, performances and ideas, but that they are not fixed in these geographic or temporal locations. They are produced and practiced through the pleasure of coming together through and because of drag performance and experiencing these pleasures can be articulated as moments of resistance to homophobia and transphobia. This practice of queer community is localised and contingent, but the feelings and pleasures that come with practicing do not disappear but instead remain and can be remembered by audiences and performers as both feelings and physical reactions, as well as practical strategies. These feelings might return again when at different shows with different performers, or at times when the people that produced the community are not around (for example, when experiencing violence on the

street) giving helpful reminders of hope, or practices of resistance, or of when and how to fly under the radar. Queer communities, and most importantly the practice of queer communities coming together through drag performance, offer queer modes of engagement with social forms that resist normativity and homogenisation but locate pleasure as a key and important site of critical engagement with the present. These practices can also be understood as purposefully pleasurable and playful modes of engaging with a homophobic and transphobic present.

Ann Cvetkovich (2003) proposes that 'Queer performance creates publics by bringing together live bodies in space, and the theatrical experience is not just about what's on stage but also about who's in the audience creating community' (Cvetkovich, 2003: 9). This resonates with my thinking around the importance of drag performance in the creation and development of queer communities and practices, where performance brings people together, where queer people come together. I propose that in paying attention to who is in the venues watching drag performance, it is possible to see forms of queer communities that are being practiced in, through and because of differences that resist a homogenised or homonormative understanding of community. In attending to these practices of community in relation to drag performance I describe complex and plural emergences of queer identities within queer communities as resisting homonormativity and the misogyny, racism, transphobia and other forms of discrimination that these normativities perpetuate.

This thesis rests on a contestation that drag performance helps to facilitate moments in which queer communities might be practiced. However, what is clear from any exploration of

community or queer community is that these terms are sites of ambivalence at best and often sites of exclusion and violence at worst. Texts such as Miranda Joseph's (2002) *Against the Romance of Community* have unpacked and critiqued classical and contemporary notions of community and particularly how communities come to function with and prop up problematic and injurious capitalist systems. Ridge, Minichiello and Plummer's (1997) 'Queer Connections: Community, "the Scene," and an Epidemic' amongst others has problematised any simple, stable or unproblematic notion of what a gay community might look like or how it might function. In my thinking around queer communities I do not wish to return to any uncomplicated, unproblematised or idealised understanding of what a queer community can be. However, I am also committed to articulating an understanding of queer community which does not merely assign it to an idolised and uncritical past. Like my thinking about queer utopias, however I am committed to locating moments of queer communities as essential to certain modes of queer survival and resilience. In so doing, I do not articulate queer communities as monolithic and fixed but as contingent and complex, and as something which must be practiced. I argue that queer communities are not unproblematic sites of collectivity but instead complex sites that for me in this research emerge around drag performance.

Therefore, I articulate one notion of queer communities amongst others and one which is primarily centred around experiences of pubs, bars and clubs, and those in London. I do not argue that this is the only site in which queer communities might be practiced and experienced; instead I suggest that these queer communities might be one place in which queer communities might emerge amidst a constellation of queer practices. Furthermore, these sites are not broad utopic places without issue, and can be exclusionary to those who

do not feel comfortable in spaces which are driven in large parts by the consumption of alcohol, the use of loud noises and flashing lights, and large crowds of people. I do think that these queer communities might be connected to other notions of queer communities that might emerge, where people might move across pubs, bars and clubs to other sites such as online communities, community centres, activist communities, and more. It is further of note that there are, for example, increasing calls for and the emergence of sites of queer engagement that are without alcohol or not centred around nightlife. I do not see these as hierarchically arranged, with one set of queer communities being more authentic than others but rather view this proliferation of sites of queer communities across locations and forms to be part of a queer practice which resists a monolithic understanding or articulation. This could be considered as a horizontal proliferation of queer communities across physical and digital sites, and this thesis explores just one of those sites. I focus here on bars, pubs and club both because they are historically particularly important (and problematic) sites of queer communities and because much drag work takes place in these settings, whilst understanding that these spaces do not represent all queers or all queer communities, but instead are articulate of particular localised emergences of queer communities.

Whilst pubs, bars and clubs are central sites for certain pleasures in relation to community, they are also complex sites of discomfort. Beyond this, these are not sites of apolitical engagement, with nightlife also being a place of political engagement, organisation and activism. As I move through my thinking in relation to performance, it is clear how often the politics of a performance is central to the experience of pleasure it produces, and vice versa. Pleasure is subjective, but it is also political. My focus on these venues, then, is not to exclude

other locations for queer communities or other ways in which queer communities might function or be practiced. Instead I offer pubs, bars and clubs as one site in which queer communities can be practiced, whilst being aware of the ambivalent relationship many queers might have to these sites. These are not utopian sites of queer communities, rather I use utopian ideas and thinking as a driving force to consider what potential pleasures and politics these venues might offer in relation to drag performance. I consider queer communities in these spaces as hopeful, and as one site of resistance and queer survival amidst a constellation of sites and practices. There is no monolithic queer community, but rather a complex and contingent set of queer communities, and through this thesis I am considering just one emergence and set of practices focussed on pubs, bars and clubs, and particularly these venues within a subculture in London.

Even within this focussed location, however, understanding and articulating any clear or limited picture of what the audiences in these venues might look like or function as. In many ways, this thesis starts from the position of an audience member (albeit one who eventually worked in these settings), but does not articulate what the audience is in any clear sense both because from a methodological sense my glances were often directed at the stage, and because doing so is beyond the confines of my thinking here. On a more practical level, however, trying to articulate any fixed or coherent understanding of the 'mist of genders and sexualities' (Farrier, 2017: 171) that are present in any performance is not possible or, potentially, ethical. I argue that the audiences are unfixed, with members moving across venues and performance events (and between the role of audience member and performer) in complex and nuanced ways, sometimes arriving at one event in one look or outfit on one

night and something entirely different somewhere else on another Audience's show attend one event at a venue may not attend another, or may only attend for part of a night before moving on elsewhere. The fixity of the audience cannot, by necessity and often by dint of the work explored, be described in any clear way. Sometimes this ability to be in a venue and perform different identities or modes of identity (without being *identified*) could speak to a key aspect of the utopian promise of these queer communities as practices and fluid rather than fixed. I articulate this not to deny the importance of accounting for the audience in the work (and the audience-as-community) but note that the audience are one nebulous part of an already nebulous queer community. I do not, for example, spend time exploring the bar staff, security staff, DJs and tech operators club prompters or stage hands who I argue also contribute to queer communities. My focus on the queer performance work and moments of drag performance and how it contributes to queer communities is articulated through my experience of this work as an audience member and community worker.

In these moments of drag performance and the experience of belonging or togetherness or pleasure that emerge within them, I argue that hopeful and alternatives might be glimpsed and felt. I propose that drag performance offers these glimpses of hope by generating the possibilities for coming together and that through these moments alternatives and resistance to an increasingly homophobic and transphobic present emerge. In order to account for these understandings of queer hope, I turn now to the underpinning ideas of queer and queer theories that inform the thinking of this thesis.

Queer Theories

Queer has been deployed as a critical term over the last thirty years in various settings, but most broadly to articulate an understanding of gender, sex and sexuality that rests outside the typically understood binaries of masculine or feminine, male or female, and homosexual or heterosexual (see Jagose, 1996; Sedgwick, 1993, Warner, 1993, 2000 for key examples of these arguments). More than this, however, queer theory has developed as a conceptual realm with roots in psychoanalysis and post-structuralism which now speaks to, and is being used as a critical tool within, fields as varied as gender studies (Butler, 1990, 1993), affect studies (Ahmed, 2006, 2010; Berlant, 2011; Sedgwick, 2002), transgender studies (Halberstam, 2005), literature, literary theory and criticism (Crimp, 1990; Sinfeld, 1994; Wojnarowicz, 1991), sociology (Seidman, 1996), global studies (Binnie, 2004; Puar, 2007), transnational and postcolonial studies (Altman 1997; Gopinath, 2005, Manalansan, 2003), international relations and international relations theory (Peterson, 2013; Weber, 1999, 2014, 2016), critical theory (Bersani, 1987, 1995; Duggan & Hunter, 1995; Edelman, 2004; Jagose; 1996; Muñoz, 1999, 2012; Sedgwick, 1990), social theory (Crimp, 1990; Dugan, 2003; Ruben, 1984; Warner, 1993) and performance and performance studies (Campbell and Farrier, 2016; Greer, 2012; Muñoz 1999, 2012; Walsh, 2016).

This list is by no means an exhaustive account of all the critical fields and texts that have emerged from and within queer studies but does provide an illustration of the extensive critical use of queer as a conceptual, theoretical and critical paradigm. In this thesis I turn to understandings of queer and queerness that relate to time and temporalities as a key area of enquiry since these ideas resonate with the hopeful impulses in my thinking around queer

survival and because there has been extant links drawn between these queer theories around temporality and drag and queer performance (see Campbell and Farrier, 2016).

I trace a particular temporal journey through ideas queer utopia and negativity to help frame these queer temporal discussions. This section traces some of the earlier moves in queer theories, before locating the particular move from ideas of queer negativity (often known as the anti-social turn in queer theory) through to notions of queer futurity and utopianism that challenged the preconditions of the anti-social turn. The importance of hope and futurity (intimately bound up in complex ways with time and temporalities) is a foundational gesture in this project and one that carries through the thesis as a critical mode and a starting place for this queer thinking. This notion of hope is indebted primarily to the work of José Muñoz (2009).

In his text *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz proposes queerness as something which is “not yet here”, as something “horizontal”:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an identity that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain (Muñoz, 2009: 1).

Muñoz imbues queer with an anticipatory energy and potentiality and locates queer as a hopeful energy. For Muñoz, queer names that which is out of reach, a future or utopia that may not be seen but can be felt. I consider this horizontal queerness as important, since it facilitates queerness as glow that can be felt and therefore potentially as something towards which queer people might face and for which queers might aim. This is also resonant of the

glow of stage slights and dappled glitter ball reflection bathing the audiences' faces as they look towards the stage in the creative account in the introduction to this thesis. I contend that if queerness is something towards which it is possible to face in order to locate hope, then facing towards the stage in a drag club is a good place to start. Whilst queerness might not yet be here, if it can be felt in things like the aesthetic (as Muñoz argues) then it is possible to locate feelings of queer utopias and engage with them in the present. I relate this directly to my experiences of drag performance, feeling moments of drag as utopian and hopeful, which have stayed with me.

In the text, Muñoz turns not just to performance but to quotidian acts and gestures, arguing that 'Certain performances of queer citizenship contain [...] an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present' (Muñoz, 2009: 49). This anticipatory illumination is one that figures queerness's potentiality for Muñoz, since it allows a thinking of queerness as 'not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future [and] an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world' (Muñoz, 2009: 1). Whilst for Muñoz these moments are often everyday acts, I consider these anticipatory and illuminatory potentialities as linked to drag performance on stages in queer venues.

In this thesis, the moments of performance I encounter often function in this way, providing a glimpse or flash of a queer potentiality in the context of an increasingly homophobic and transphobic present. These performances do not only have this illuminatory function,

however. They are not only about illuminating a better future, but they also act as a critique of the present, a refusal to accept it as good enough. There is an element of refusal in Muñoz's understanding of queerness, where refusal indicates a move or push away from a normative present, which happens in the moment of imagining another world. In this way, the idea of queerness as utopia, or as utopian longing, becomes not only an imagining of an alternative future (a utopia) but also a critique of the present. In other words, a critique of the present is inherent, is always already contained, in the imagining of a brighter future. Muñoz does not reject the future as a site of queer engagement but locates moments in which present acts illuminate queer potentialities. In the moment of refusal, queer possibilities emerge; queer is a *doing* here, rather than a being. To return to hope, if queer hope is about imagining alternative futures (or believing in the concrete possibility of them), then queer hope also simultaneously enacts a critique of the present.

Beyond Muñoz, I position these queer utopian and hopeful leanings in my own thinking alongside Eve Sedgwick's (1993) text *Tendencies*, in which she provides an interesting elaboration of the term queer and its use and importance in particular in the face of homophobia and high rates of queer suicide (1993: 1-2). Although written twenty-six years ago, the contemporary situation in London is still fraught with violence and homophobia that framed Sedgwick's past, US-based analysis and therefore the critical relevance of queer strategies of resistance and survival is still pertinent. In returning to Sedgwick's early formulations, I frame queer as an immediate and vital social project of safety and support in resistance to the increases in homophobia and transphobia outlined above. Sedgwick's work

is useful in considering queer as both a critique of or resistance to identity and a potential identity position – both a being and a doing.

In the chapter 'Queer and Now', Sedgwick refers to queer as:

the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality are not made (or *cannot* be made) to signify monolithically (Sedgwick, 1993: 8; original emphasis).

This notion of queer encompassing those subjectivities whose gender, sex and sexuality do not conform around traditionally accepted binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual, of queer signifying the in-between or the beyond, the both/and rather than the either/or, provides a helpful basis from which to begin to consider what queer can be and do. Queerness here is an identity or position that signifies beyond certain binaries, that slips between the gaps or around the edges of identity.

Here, queer thinking moved away from identarian or identity-based politics, resisting assimilationist politics which failed to account for the complexity of queer lives and the need for continued queer resistance despite rights-based gains. However, whilst I would resist the idea of queer as an identity necessarily, many of the performers I encounter would use queer to self-identify, both as a performance style and as a position they occupy in relation to identity. Sedgwick is helpful here in outlining the possibility of this in suggesting that

"Queer" seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation. A hypothesis worth making explicit: that there are important senses in which "queer" can signify only *when attached to the first person*. One possible corollary: that what it takes - all it takes - to make the description "queer" a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person (Sedgwick, 1993: 9; original emphasis).

Sedgwick helps to frame queerness in relation to identity by formulating it as grounded in a claim by the individual. Sedgwick offers an understanding of queerness as both a critique of identity as well as a position to be occupied in relation to identity. This positionality can be alongside the notion of queer hope described above where to hope is both to imagine an alternative future and to simultaneously critique the present; here using the term queer is both to claim a position of identity and simultaneously critique or resist a fixed notion of identity. It is both/and, rather than either/or; both an identity position and a resistance to identity. This is a useful framework for this thesis because it allows an account of those performers and performances that might use queer as a term of self-description, whilst also offering opportunities for critique and resistance. Most importantly, this offers an understanding queer and queerness that might function differently across different people, identities, performances and communities but still hold collective resonance in the desire to use the term. Queer can be multiplicitous, polyphonic and locally contingent, yet still hold collective resonance, potential for political efficacy and allow space for the development of communities as explored above.

Whilst this hopeful, community-oriented, future-facing understanding of queerness influences my thinking heavily, it is important to account for where these ideas emerged from. Whilst Sedgwick as a starting point offers a clear exploration of queer as both an identity position and a critique of identity, the line between these ideas and Muñoz's understanding of queer utopias as both a hope for the future and a critique of the present is not simple. Muñoz in particular is writing in resistance to understandings of queer negativity, the antirelational or antisocial turn in queer studies, most notably ascribed to Lee Edelman

(2004). I suggest these notions can also be found in earlier work, pre-dating Sedgwick's queer formations, by Leo Bersani.

In his essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987) Bersani tackles the subject of the representation of homosexual sex and homosexuality in relation to HIV and AIDS, particularly for gay men in the USA. Bersani uses work from Foucault (1980, 1985), as well as writers such as MacKinnon (1987) and Dworkin (1987), whose radical challenge of pornography turns towards sexual puritanism as an end to male phallic domination in sexual practices. He draws from and challenges these ideas through the work of theorists such as Weeks (1985), Rubin (1984) and Watney (1987) who propose gay life is distinctive in its radical pluralism and sexual diversity and argues instead for the value of powerlessness in the passive sex act (Bersani, 1987).

Arguing that phallogentrism, or the privileging of the masculine in the construction of meaning, denies this value of passivity, Bersani suggests that the value of the passive sex act lies in the 'radical disintegration and humiliation of the self' (Bersani, 1987: 24). Using Freud's (1905) *Three Essays on Sexuality*, he suggests that pleasure occurs when the organisation of the self is momentarily disrupted by sensations beyond psychic organisation. In other words, pleasure happens when the body is pressed beyond a certain threshold of endurance that shatters the psychic organisation and structures that he argues are the precondition of relations to the other.

Bersani's argument suggests that the gay passive sex act, and the pleasure taken in it has the potential to disrupt masculine phallogentric power structures. He argues that it is not the alternative relational forms which so revolt the heterosexual male, but the eroticisation and

pleasure in the loss of power and self-debasement¹². Finally, Bersani returns to a defence of gay male promiscuity, which was (and still is) lampooned in heterosexual representations of homosexuality and, at times, by its conservative and liberal homosexual counterparts, particularly in relation to HIV and AIDS. He argues in defence of gay promiscuity and the gay “obsession” with sex, not because of its subversive potential for masculinity or its demonstration of a radical pluralism but because ‘it never stops re-presenting the internalised phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice’ (Bersani, 1987: 30). Male homosexuality, for Bersani, advertises the pleasure of the self-shattering, the passive, the antirelational aspect of sex and sexuality.

If Bersani offers a commanding proposition for the antirational turn, then Lee Edelman provides a powerful exposition of queer negativity and paves a critique of reproductive futurity as a governing logic in contemporary neoliberal society. Edelman proposes that politics is figured in the image of the Child (as a figure representative of the future and heteronormativity) and is defined in terms of reproductive futurism,

terms that impose an illogical limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organising principle of communal relations (Edelman, 2004: 2).

¹² It is important to assert that these passive sex acts are not always radical acts of subversion for Bersani. When discussing the idea that the hyper-masculine “gay leather queen” has been presented as subverting macho masculinity and as such the obscure ways in which sexual acts *generate* politics (rather than being reflective of the expression or reflection of politics in sex), Bersani notes ‘If licking someone’s leather boots turns you (and him) on, neither of you is making a statement subversive of masculinity’ (Bersani, 1987: 14). It is important here to note that where the radical might be located is not clear, although the reliance on an active/passive binary is one which the queer strategies of this thesis necessarily disrupts. Furthermore, whilst this focus on sex and sex acts offers interesting engagements with political modes, there is (as is often the case with LGBT and queer writing) a focus on male homosexual forms that needs further extending, critiquing and unpacking.

Any politics, however radical its conception, is concerned with reproducing itself and is, Edelman argues, 'conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then attempts to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child' (Edelman, 2004: 3; original emphasis). Queerness, then, 'names the side of those *not* "fighting for the children," the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism' (Edelman, 2004: 3; original emphasis). Edelman proposes that to not fight for the children, or more clearly to oppose futurity as an organising or governing logic in society, is a queer project, even if an impossible one. He describes it as 'the impossible project of a queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics as such, which is also to say, that would oppose itself to the logic of opposition' (Edelman, 2004: 4).

Edelman claims that queer should to attempt to disentangle itself with a politics that functions around the idea of reproduction in order to challenge the organising logic of reproductive futurism which legitimates heterosexuality as originary. Queer negativity names a site which resists the future, where the future is only conceived in relation to normative forms. The future is articulated as a site of desire for the "good life" where the good life is one of heteronormative goals that may be impossible for or exclusionary to many queer subjects. Edelman locates queer resistance in a denial of this future as a site of investment for queers, since these futures (that are figured in the image of the Child and the actual child) are also forms which bind queer subjects into systems of productivity, reproduction and capitalist forms that queer may resist. Jasbir Puar (2007) marks this shift for queer subjects, where:

The result of the successes of queer incorporation into the domains of consumer markets and social recognition in the post-civil rights, late twentieth century, these various entries by queers into the biopolitical optimisation of life mark a shift, as homosexual bodies have been historically understood as endlessly cathected to death. In other words, there is a transition under way in how queer subjects are relating to nation states, particular in the United States, from being figures of death (i.e., the AIDS epidemic) to becoming tied to ideas of life and productivity (i.e., gay marriage and families) (Puar, 2007: xii).

Here Puar critiques this move from death to productivity and life, where to be recognised by the consumer market is to be folded into capitalist forms that sanitise and erase other queer forms of doing and being. For Edelman, the resistance of these neoliberal forms is in an active rejection of the future (and the Child) as a site of political engagement.

Both Bersani and Edelman's formulations posit radical engagements with the present as forms of queer critique, queer politics and queer resistance. The present becomes the site of struggle within queer negativity in which queer subjects might locate resistances to forms of politics and being that either frame queer lives within homophobic narratives or subsume queer politics into normative logics of reproduction. However, these ideas of queer negativity, whilst seductive, are not necessarily desirable for all queer subjects, with the rejection of a future being a particularly privileged set of political engagements.

For myself, many of my peers, and the performers who appear in this thesis, a rejection of futurity is not an option, since if the present is always already dangerous and inhospitable, then it is to the future, and an alternative future in which I locate hope and space for survival. This is not to say that hope is not in the present; it is felt in the present for the future. Imagining that the future can be different from the present also constitutes a reparative act of imagining that the past could also have happened differently that it did:

Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organise the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realise that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn could have happened different from the way it actually did (Sedgwick, 2002: 146).

Following Sedgwick, I argue that hope is not a monolithic concept but is only properly mobilised when considered complexly in multiple locations. In this thesis, one location of hope is in a queer future, or utopia, in which the failings of the present – a present in which queer and trans and/or non-binary people are increasingly at risk of physical and systemic violence – are abolished. To reject futurity does not account for the current present, or account for the complex ways in which queer subjects and queer performers might be engaging in futures in complex ways that might resist being folded into normative future logics. For Muñoz, a reinvestment in hope, utopia and futurity is also a reinvestment with collectivity and a critique of what Muñoz argues is ‘a distancing from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint to purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference’ (Muñoz, 2009: 10). For Muñoz, myself, and the performers in this thesis, the luxury of a single marker of difference is not always a possibility or a desire. Instead, in engaging with the plurality of identities, these queer understandings also engage with the plurality of hope and refuse to adhere to queer forms of being and doing in the world that do not also account for the complex ways in which markers of race, gender, class, disability and so on impact on how queerness is experienced, regulated and felt. In other words, following Muñoz’s queer utopias, I propose that an engagement with futurity is not always already an engaging with normative forms, but might also offer complex and unexpected engagements with what the past, present and future could look like for a plurality of identities and communities.

In *A Critical Enquiry Into Queer Utopias*, Angela Jones (2013) makes an impassioned argument against queer negativity.¹³ Jones not only draws on Diana Fuss (1990) to suggest that there is a privilege in this position of embracing the negative or the outside (a privilege not available to many queers) but also suggests that

For many people [...] we have no desire to throw people off cliffs (metaphorically or literally), let poor children die, live in a void as a parasitic element of society, or worse die Antigone's death. While some, including Edelman and his followers, may find this embrace of the negative empowering, we hold tight to the idea that we will not and cannot (Jones, 2013: 11).

Jones makes a compelling argument against Edelman's proposition of queer negativity and her understandings of queer futurity sit alongside my own utopian longings for queerness; longings which propel me towards Muñoz and his commitment to queer futurity. Here my commitment to utopia as a critical tool is aware, as Muñoz was, that 'Shouting down utopia is an easy move' (Muñoz, 2009: 10), whilst recognising that rejection of the future is not an option for many of the performers in this thesis, or myself; indeed, for hope to exist, the future has to be considered as a possibility.

However, in their recent text *Sex, or The Unbearable*, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman (2014) propose a re-engagement in the negative in order to 'show how negativity is not the opposite of politics, not a practice of withdrawal from contesting the terms or structures of existence, but rather a challenge to engage with politics in unexpected places and in unpredicted ways' (Berlant and Edelman, 2014: xvi). Negativity becomes not a withdrawal from the political, but

¹³ A number of authors have critiqued the antisocial thesis and Edelman's text in particular (including Dean (2006) and Muñoz (2009)). My work sits alongside Jones's text explicitly since it traces a similar temporal map of queer theory, as well as being as committed to hope and utopias.

instead a re-engagement with the political (and here the political seems to also signify the present) in unexpected and unwanted ways.

If negativity is not just a rejection of the political and the social but is about an unexpected re-engagement with the political, then there is potential for notions of queer utopias and queer negativity to sit together in complex ways, which allows a particularly queer rejection of these terms as binaries. In Jack Halberstam's (2011) *The Queer Art of Failure* there is a resonant articulation. In the beginning of the text Halberstam asks: 'What is the alternative [...] to cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other?' (Halberstam, 2011: 1). Their project starts with the question 'What is the alternative?' (Halberstam, 2011: 2) and that question precludes the book as a radical utopian project which '[continues] to search for different ways of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer subject' (Halberstam, 2011: 2). The book does not blindly head towards utopia but aims to '[lose] the idealism of hope in order to gain wisdom and a new, spongy relation to life, culture, knowledge, and pleasure' (Halberstam, 2011: 2).¹⁴

This could be understood as one of the ways in which queer utopianism and negativity might sit alongside one another. Indeed, Muñoz's utopian commitments start from the contestation that 'this world is not enough' (Muñoz, 2009: 1), that indeed something is lacking in the present for queer subjects. Simultaneously, it is important to avoid a formulation of hope

¹⁴ I return to Halberstam's understandings of queer failure when unpacking my methodological underpinnings below, and again in Chapter Five, where I mobilise low theory and queer failure in an exploration of the politics and potential of queer silliness in academia and performance.

which resigns happiness to an unreachable future (Ahmed 2010), remaining angry at the failings of this present, or a present (or future) in which queers politics is assimilationist politics. Rather than re-assert a binary of hope and anger, present and futurity, negativity and utopia, I propose a perpetual oscillation between these forms, and a rejection of a binary.

Here I return to Bersani's essay in which he argues that 'it is also important to say that, morally, the only *necessary* response to all of this [the media representation and insufficient government responses to HIV/AIDS] is rage' (Bersani, 1987: 6). This thesis does not just reject the future as an always already non-queer site of neoliberal assimilation or reject the present as a site of homophobic and transphobic violence that is inhospitable for queer subjects. Instead, it insists that the present makes space for queers and allows queers to thrive and locates in drag performance strategies for alternative futures that can be mobilised in the present. This thesis feels the hope for the future in performance, locates queer utopias in drag and queer performance work and uses it to articulate queer strategies for survival in an increasingly dangerous present.

In bringing these notions of queer utopia and negativity together, I turn to Jill Dolan's (2005) understanding of utopian performatives, which

describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that it lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense (Dolan, 2005: 5).

This understanding of utopian performativity resonates with my own and Muñoz's ideas surrounding the potential to locate hope and resistance and practices of survival in drag and queer performance. For Dolan, utopia should be considered as 'processual, as an index to the possible, to the "what if," rather than a more restrictive, finite image of the "what should be"' (Dolan, 2005: 13). This project cruises the line between hope and anger, negativity and utopia. It basks in the glow of a queer utopia in which alternative modes of being, doing, belonging and living have the potential to be briefly illuminated by moments of drag and queer performance practice. Simultaneously, this thinking is propelled by anger at the failings of the now to engage in unexpected and unwanted ways with the present. It refuses a monolithic understanding of hope or collectivity as anticritical, but instead articulates the complex ways in which queerness intersects with other markers of identity such as race, gender, class, disability and more. I argue that the drag performance I write about in this thesis has the potential to offer both a critique of the present and a hopeful engagement with the future as possible for queers.

Conclusions

I argue that drag performance in contemporary London, and the queer venues in which drag performance happens, offers fertile sites for the production and maintenance of queer communities. These communities are complex and emerge in and through the pleasures of coming together for drag performance, where performance offers a site of togetherness or belonging that does not erase or subsume individual engagements with queer identities or critiques of identity. Drag performance facilitates queer communities despite difference, through difference and because of difference. Queer communities are contingent,

polyphonous and complex and drag performance offers key sites of social and political engagement both for and with these communities that facilitates strategies and tactics of survival for queer people in an increasingly homophobic and transphobic present.

Chapter Breakdown

Having laid out the practical and intellectual contexts of my thinking in this thesis, I now move to lay out the methodological considerations of this work before turning to four chapters which analyse and unpack key ideas and performances within my enquiry. In the next section, *Methodology: A Queer Side-Eye*, I lay out the methodological underpinnings and commitments of the thesis, in particular the implications of writing about a community of which I am a part and performers with whom I have close personal relationships. I characterise a queer side-eye as methodological tactic in relation to extant forms such as queer autoethnography and feminist writing practices. The section articulates my queer side-eye as a queer methodological tactic of refusing to look straight at performance. A queer side-eye can be articulated as a political position of affinity with other scholars who might occupy marginalised positions within and outside of academia that work to resist normativities in research and politics that perpetuate homophobic and transphobic, racist, misogynist and other oppressive ideologies. This section underscores the methodological and political commitments before outlining the ethical considerations of this research

In *Chapter Two: Queer Times* I explore the work of Mzz Kimberly, Meth and Virgin Xtravanzah. I return to ideas of queer times and temporalities in performance, setting up a

relationship between drag and time/temporalities, and considering strategies in my thinking of being on edge and looking at the edge of performance and theory. I consider ideas of visibility *despite* violence, performing a purposeful misreading of the idea of despite where drag performance happens *despite, in spite of, and to spite* the increases in homophobia and transphobia. In these analyses and explorations, I consider how utopia might be imagined and glimpsed in drag and queer performance work through engagements with utopian performativity, temporal interruptions and the injunction to imagine utopia, returning to ideas of breath and breathing in relation to hope that inform my queer hopeful impulses.

In *Chapter Three: Queer Venues*, I look specifically at queer venues in London and examine the work of Sadie Sinner and the Cocoa Butter Club, Ruby Wednesday and Myra Dubois. Having accounted for venue closure in Chapter Two, here I also explore the opening of venues such as The Glory and Her Upstairs, as well spaces that have been successfully saved from closure such as The RVT. I argue these closures and openings can be understood within contexts and concepts of contemporary neoliberalism and gentrification. This context is also one in which drag performance work emerges, and therefore the economic field in which drag and queer performance sits. Therefore, this analysis offers an exploration of the economies of drag performance in contemporary London. I consider the three performers to explore how these venues function, as well as looking at particular themes of protest, queer reference systems, and the importance of venues for the emergence of specific spaces that cater for and celebrate minority and marginalised groups with broader queer cultures. I consider the gestural here (the physical and metaphoric gestures that performers make) as a useful way of maintaining the edgy position articulated in Chapter Two and as a way of mobilising my

queer side-eye in academic enquiry. I consider the ways in which physical and metaphorical gestures upon stages function in relation to broader narratives of LGBTQ+ venue closures and openings.

To extend and challenge these ideas in *Chapter Four: Queer Bodies* I turn to the work of Lilly Snatchdragon, LoUis CYfer, and Michael Twaits. I explore contemporary debates surrounding marginalised identities and bodies in drag performance practice such as female-identified drag queens, trans and/or non-binary people and people of colour, particularly in the wake of RuPaul Charles's misinformed comments around trans identities in drag (Aitkenhead, 2018). I make a case for the importance of marginalised identities in drag performance and foreground how performers challenge normativities and violence outside drag and queer performance work, and within drag. I set up the idea, moving through Freeman's (2010) work on temporal drag and Ahmed's (2010) conception of the feminist killjoy, of killjoy drag. I propose killjoy drag as a particular form of drag that might emerge in and through (although not limited to) marginalised performers, understanding it as connected to my queer side-eye's emergence in theory and performance. Here killjoy drag allows a queer side-eye to emerge not just as a glance sideways, but also as an "eye-role", and I consider how the queer side-eye might use an eye-roll (and being a killjoy) as a political tactic. Killjoy drag performance functions by dragging backwards, by digging in heels or boots (or whatever footwear is being worn) and refusing to be dragged forward by a tide of progress that ignores the continuing material inequalities for many queer people. Looking at the three performers, I move through the complex ways in which killjoy drag might emerge in relationship to race and gender in performance, occupying positionalities of female-ness and trans and/or non-

binary-ness in drag performance, as well as a position of post-drag as a fecund positionality for cis-performers to occupy in order to challenge and critique the ways in which cis-ness might emerge in drag performance practice. Throughout I explore how the politics that emerges in this work directly and actively states the issues at play; the killjoy drag performer engages the side-eye (and the eye-roll) as a method to name the issues at play and refuse to move on.

In *Chapter Five: Queer Politics*, I look at the work of Fagulous, Herr, and Victoria Sin. I explore how a queer politics can emerge through failure and silliness in both form and content. Throughout, I explore silly performance practice, and consider how the performers invest in queer histories, silly histories and the quotidian, understanding this investment as a queer tactic that I also consider as part of my queer side-eye. I start by exploring the politics of queer failure, and examples of queer failure in the academic work of Freeman (2007), Muñoz (2009) and most notably Jack Halberstam (2011). I argue that it is important to pay attention to the material consequences of failure for queers, before moving to think about silliness as something that engages with these notions of failure and silliness but does not do so in a way that means the material consequences of this failing are obscured. I propose silliness and investment in the quotidian, mundane and silly as part of my academic and practical queer side-eye. In exploring these three performers, I examine how queer silliness runs through their performance work as a key method of resisting homophobia and transphobia. This emerges in performance by being purposefully silly in the face of violence, by refusing the demand to deal directly with violence as a refusal of the burden of representation, and finally by insisting upon locating alternatives and other worlds in performance.

Methodology: A Queer Side-Eye

Introduction: Developing My Queer Side-Eye

This thesis started from watching drag performance, reading theories that contextualised, supported and challenged my understandings of performance work, and writing about those performances. In many ways it involved a traditional or reasonably normative set of intellectual explorations in order to read performance and understand how drag performance might relate to queer communities. This starting point became complicated by the fact that I was involved personally and professionally in the drag performance scene about which I was writing, and therefore accounting for these implications became imperative, leading to a more complex understanding of how I went about doing this research. To articulate these processes, I use the idea of a queer side-eye as a methodological strategy that runs through my thinking in this research. A queer side-eye extends through this thesis to become a research methodology, a political and ethical positionality or imperative that I propose other researchers can take up, and something that helps me to understand what drag performers do. I also consider a queer side-eye as articulating certain tactics and strategies that queer people engage in to survive. This section outlines the context, politics and development of this research methodology, articulating it both as a research methodology and set of political and material strategies to resist and challenge homophobia and transphobia.

In developing a research methodology and accounting for my position within the community I was writing about, I wanted to resist readings or intellectual modes that would hegemonise performers and communities or would impose straight or heteronormative readings onto

them. I wanted to find queer ways to talk about queer things. Furthermore, as the research developed, I was increasingly aware of the precarious and dangerous socio-political position for queer people. As I attempted to locate ways to survive for queer people in drag performance (in both doing and watching drag) I considered strategies and tactics to survive that I saw emerging in drag performance. I found links in my thinking between the strategies and tactics of survival I was uncovering in drag performance such as visibility, gestures, eye-rolls and silliness (each of which is unpacked in the following four chapters), and the tactics and strategies of my queer side-eye that I was starting to articulate as my methodology.

A queer side-eye became something I was doing towards performance in order to articulate the ways in which I was implicated in the communities I was researching, an intellectual strategy to avoid dominant, hegemonising and heteronormative modes of reading performance, and something (or a set of strategies) that I characterised performers were also engaging in. Through this I articulated my queer side-eye as a methodological, intellectual and performance-based strategies. In bringing these ideas together I was able to return to myself and my position in the work to consider how my queer side-eye is also a strategy and tactic that I employ to survive, having learnt from watching performance, reading performance, reading other intellectual and methodological strategies, and continuing to survive as a queer person in an increasingly phobic present.

My queer side-eye then, is made up of tactics and strategies that I might employ and deploy both to unpack, analyse and read drag (and be read by drag) and that I might employ to resist and survive. There is a complex relationship here between queer side-eye as a queer

intellectual strategy I employ to read performance (connected to extant methodologies unpacked below), a practical set of strategies I and other queers might engage in to survive, and a set of strategies that I locate within drag performance work. In this section I consider the ways in which queer side-eye is connected to extant intellectual and methodological forms, moving through my thinking around these ideas and articulating both my personal queer side-eye, as well as locating ways a queer side-eye is a transferable methodological and practical mode.

The queer side-eye reveals particular intellectual, performance-based and practical strategies and practices through my reading of drag performance in the chapters that follow. In Chapter Two I explore a purposeful misreading of the word “despite” and consider how drag performance offers a strategy of being visible despite, in spite of and despite homophobic and transphobic violence through a queer reading of the politics of visibility. I consider the politics and pleasures of being on edge here, where to be on edge, or maintain a position of edginess, is both a suspicious position of attempting to locate or prevent danger, and a pleasurable position linked to notions of coming together in relation to queer communities. It is also an academic strategy at looking at the edge, or the periphery, of performance to locate alternatives to dominant, heteronormative, straight readings. Chapter Three continues this glance at the periphery of performance, using my queer side-eye to explore the gestural (physical and metaphorical gestures) in performance and locate in the gestures that the performers make moments of hope and resistance, where a queer side-eye becomes a strategy for finding hope in unexpected places. In Chapter Four my queer side-eye given at performance locates examples of killjoy drag performance and considers how queer side-eyes

might become queer eye-rolls, where the drag performer who occupies complex marginal positions in relation to queerness uses the eye roll as a way of challenging or resisting contemporary assimilationist and homonormative politics, as well as homophobia and transphobia. Finally, in Chapter Five, my queer side-eye locates silliness as a strategy of resisting homophobia and transphobia by a refusal to be serious; here a queer side-eye is articulated as a silly academic strategy, silly performance strategy, and as a way of engaging in silly things in the everyday in order to find strategies to resist, refuse and survive.

As you can see from these examples, a queer side-eye moves complexly between academic, methodological, performance and quotidian modes and methods in order to come together to articulate strategies that resist hegemonic modes of understanding drag and locates strategies of survival in this homophobic and transphobic present. The methods, practices and politics that make up my queer side-eye are not fixed and do not come together to produce a coherent queer side-eye methodology. Instead I articulate a queer side-eye as a position which refuses to look straight as necessitated by the researcher's position in relation to the research. Furthermore, due to the position of the researcher (the disciplinary position, as well as geographical and temporal position), it involves a plurality and variety of different methods. As such, whilst my queer side-eye involves ethnographic and queer autoethnographic methods explored further below and is positioned in relation to the work of drag performers and their performance practices, someone else might engage with different methods and practices due to their position. The politics of the queer side-eye remains – a politics of alongside-ness, affinity and a recognition of the complex ways in which marginalised subjects might work together to chip away at hegemonic academic and politics

systems – whilst the academic and practical methods are necessarily contingent on the disciplinary, geographical, temporal and identity position of the researcher and maker.

My queer side-eye is not a panacea for the issues of objectivity or subjectivity in my work, however. In other words, there are limits to what the side-eye can see. I am clearly intricately bound up in the work and communities I am making and my utopian understandings of drag performance and its potentialities, and of queer communities, are mediated by my locatedness within them, and arguably often produced by them. My queer side-eye is both an attempt to understand my position within the work as a queer researcher, writer and producer and to consider both what this position allows me to see that others may not and what it restricts.

A queer side-eye might also offer opportunities to put myself 'on hold' (Stockton, 2009) or find moments of to be distanced and circumspect in order to see the complexities, issues and challenges of the drag and community work that I explore. Whilst I think it is generally impossible to put myself or my identity "on hold" or to "hold myself off" in order to produce objective analyses of performance, a queer side-eye is also an attempt to consider political positions that I occupy and to mitigate them where possible by providing intellectual and practical strategies of analysis, and critical distance and focus. As I go on to articulate in more detail below, and throughout this thesis, my queer side-eye is not fixed but is instead moves across different methods and methods, intellectual and political positions as necessitated by the performance work I explore. Methods such as ethnography and queer autoethnography, as unpacked below, already unpack the complexities of researching when embedded with a

community or within a community of which you are a member. Queer and feminist methodologies, and other non-frontal modes of looking from feminist and scholars of colour, again allow for considerations of the identity of the researcher in the research, what this offers and what it hinders. And finally, the queer theories that run through my work offer extant studies in which the researcher uses their positionality as a starting point to think about alternative modes of being in the world, and as a position from which to build critique. It can be useful to consider the queer side-eye as an alternative way of looking to avoid looking straight; this might involve zooming in closely to look at one part of a theory or performance work, or looking at it side-ways to see what other ideas might be produced. Ultimately, my queer side-eye is mobilised throughout this thesis in relation to theories, methods and feelings that emerge in relation to the key intellectual ideas explored in each chapter.

Through this, however, I am aware that my position as a producer and maker and my close personal relationship to many of the performers in this thesis, as well as the embedded position I am writing from as within the community and within the audience of the performance work happens, is an unavoidable methodological issue. My queer side-eye, including the methodological and academic resources that I draw from to articulate it, works at some level to mitigate these issues and allow me to be circumspect in my explorations of these often emotional and personally resonant experiences. However, I am writing from a position which already seeks to find the hope and utopia in this work and, whilst I articulated the importance of this utopian position in the Introduction to this thesis, I am also positioned in a way in which I am more likely to see this hope and feel these utopias. I am committed to

these communities surviving on a personal level, and therefore within and through my imbrication in these performance works and communities I am arguably more likely to be attuned to these hopeful and utopian moments. However, my queer side-eye offers strategies to work through these issues, as well as make the argument that I am also in a good position – imbricated as I am – to recognise the potential and the hope in the performance work I explore.

In the following analysis, I firstly outline the positionality of a queer side-eye in relation to ideas of not looking straight, notions of alongside-ness and beside-ness, queer knowledge formations and extant ideas of sideways glances and other non-frontal modes of looking in academia. Then, to characterise the specificities of my queer side-eye, I turn to ideas of ethnography, autoethnography and queer autoethnography as academic modes that are connected to my queer side-eye in particular due to histories of ethnographic practice in academic literature surrounding drag performance and communities and to the use of creative writing to evidence queer lives and experiences. Having set up the conditions of a queer side-eye and located my queer side-eye specifically, I outline my position in this research before turning to the ethical considerations of this position in relation to the methodological implications of a queer side-eye.

Not Looking Straight

I understand “not looking straight” both as a description of how I watch drag performance because I am often not physically facing the stage straight on due to working at shows (I

unpack this further below), and as a tactical strategy of avoiding hegemonic modes of academic practice that might uphold homophobic, transphobic, racist, classist and sexist ideologies. Refusing to straight finds tactics and strategies of playfully resisting these hegemonic forms, drawing from Halberstam (2011), and finding other pathways through academic labour. Not looking straight signifies that I am also looked at in the research in much the same way that audiences are looked at by drag performers. The audiences very rarely just get to sit back and watch the show in the dark but are visible to performers and other audience members. Finally, not looking straight also indicates that as a researcher I am visible in the research or the spaces in which I work and research. I am visible precisely because I do not look – as in appear – straight. Not looking straight is a physical position or orientation in a space, a way of orienting or being oriented, as well as something which might be disorienting.

This idea of orientation is drawn from Ahmed's (2006) *Queer Phenomenology* in which she questions 'how it is that we come to find our way in a world that acquires new shapes, depending on which way we turn' (Ahmed, 2006: 1). For Ahmed, a re-thinking of the relationship between sexual orientation, queerness, and desire necessitates a critical engagement with how subjects are oriented and *disoriented* in spaces: 'If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as "who" or "what" we inhabit space with' (Ahmed, 2006: 1). This resonates with my queer side-eye, where a queer side-eye is a way of looking at queer things and looking at queer things in a queer way. A queer side-eye necessitates a queer orientation because it refuses to (and, indeed, cannot) look straight.

There are resonances of these ideas in Fintan Walsh's (2016) *Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland: Dissent and Disorientation*. Linking notions of disorientation to the precarious effects of global neoliberalism, Walsh articulates disorientation as 'sexual, spatial, cultural and temporal relationships of being off course or out of synch with the world as it is' (Walsh, 2016: 15). Whilst recognising its negative effects, he locates a hopeful rehabilitation of disorientation as bound up with potential, considering it as 'the source of social pleasure, cultural opportunity and political possibility, or as the stir of curiosity and worldly wonder, it can supply the preconditions for new forms of intimacy, support participation and belonging to emerge' (Walsh, 2016: 15). This notion of disorientation, connected to Ahmed's work, extends the political, ethical and social possibilities of being out of place, out of time and out of synch.

My queer side-eye is alongside these ideas and necessitates an always already disoriented position in relation to dominant modes of being. For Walsh, 'Paying attention to disorientation allows us to chart the unpredictable trajectories of those whose desire does not follow straight lines, instead swerving off course for other people, objects, places and words, including those not yet made' (Walsh, 2016: 15). In paying attention to how drag and queer performance work disorients me, it is possible to locate other modes of being in the world, and alternative practices of community and survival. If 'disorientation is also ripe with the kind of promise and potential which can be life-giving' (Walsh, 2016: 140), then understanding the disorienting effect of drag and queer performance is also a political project of understanding alternative practices of hope. Here, a queer side-eye is about being

attentive to the material effects of these disorientations, and being open to being disoriented, to understanding the politics and potential of not looking straight.

In relation to drag performance, a queer side-eye is also a physical position in the world and describes not only a way of looking or watching – and being looked at – but also a playful attitude and position characterised by the acerbic wit of drag performers. In this thesis, the tactic is constructed through field notes made from extensive observations of drag performance, and emerges most prominently in the thinking through italicised accounts of the experience of watching drag performance and experiencing queer communities, whilst also being present in complex ways in how I position myself alongside other theorists and practitioners, and in affinity with them (Ahmed, 2016). I argue that the queer side-eye emerges in this academic practice and therefore is made up from a set of extant methods involving queer and alternative modes of doing theory (including feminist scholarship and scholarship produced by people of colour), ethnography and queer autoethnography, as well as a politics of affinity. Whilst my queer side-eye draws on extant methods and practices, and drag performance, it maintains the politics of affinity that foregrounds this thinking and allows me to articulate my political position with the research as alongside or beside other marginalised voices and writers.

Orientations, Positions, Peripheries

A queer side-eye necessitates a position. To put it another way, to glance sideways at something presupposes a position in a space in relation to others, a way of looking, a

particular orientation. It is also generated by the position that I occupied in space because of the work I often do in relation to performance means I am never looking at the stage directly from the front, or straight on. A queer side-eye both generates and is generated by a position of alongside-ness. This orientation indicates not only a physical orientation, but also a cognitive and emotional one. Therefore, whilst a queer side-eye might indicate my physical position in the space it also indicates a mode of looking, and of feeling, in venues where drag and queer performance is happening. I am complexly – physically, emotionally, intellectually – beside and alongside the performers and communities I am accounting for in this thesis.

Sedgwick (2002) discusses being beside as an alternative way of thinking theoretically: '*Beside* is an interesting preposition [...] because there's nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them' (Sedgwick, 2002: 8; original emphasis). Thinking (and being) beside resists dualistic thinking and involves setting elements (such as creative writing, academic practice and drag performance) beside one another in non-hierarchical ways. Beside characterises a key political impulse of my queer side-eye, where as a researcher I sit alongside multiple and complex other modes of thinking, drawing affinities with other marginalised voices. Ahmed (2016) articulates this political position in the development of the idea of an "affinity of hammers" that she extends as part of a discussion of lesbian and lesbian feminist support of trans and transfeminine politics. For Ahmed

An affinity of hammers is an affinity that is acquired; we became attracted to those who chip away at the worlds that accommodate our bodies [...] We have to take a chance to combine our forces. There is nothing necessary about a combination. In chipping away, we come into contact with those who are stopped by what allowed us to pass through. We happen upon each

other. We witness the work each other is doing, and we recognise each other. And we take up arms when we combine our forces. We speak up; we rise up. Chip, chip, chip: an affinity of hammers is what we are working toward (Ahmed, 2016: 32-3).

This articulates how the alongside-ness of a queer side-eye informs the thinking and academic practice; in particular finding affinities with writers, academics and performers who might occupy positions that chime alongside queer experiences in order to create loci of resistance and support in relation to dominant or oppressive modes of academic and creative practice. A queer side-eye is about recognising who is alongside offering and needing support. Here, it is also about locating the places that need chipping away that my position of privilege allows me to access.

This could be understood as the experience of intersectionality:

It is about ups and downs, stopping and starting; how we pass through at one moment while being stopped at another, depending on who is receiving us, depending on who is being received through us. An affinity of hammers does not assume we will automatically be attuned to others who are stopped by what allows us to pass through, even when we ourselves have the experience of being stopped. We have to acquire that affinity. It is what we work towards (Ahmed, 2016: 23)

There is an important recognition of the labour of becoming attuned to these hammerings and walls; I link this to my understanding of queer communities as practised, or something that needs to be practiced. Affinities, communities and coalitions need to be practiced, and my queer side-eye is a strategy that needs to be practised. This is crucial, since it relates not just to the performance work I am exploring, or the labour of other performers to find and practice these affinities in relation to their peers, but also my own position as an academic and producer. A fundamental part of this research and writing has been finding these

affinities, recognising my positions of privilege and marginality within both this academic work and the broader queer community (particularly where these fields cross over), and using this position to both represent and critically engage with performance work that is not always being spoken about in academic discourse. I consciously occupy this position, finding moments to bring these performers in academic discourses, and finding other moments in which myself and the performers I work with can chime together to resist dominant modes of identity, performance, or, indeed, academia. This is fundamentally about being beside and alongside other marginalised identities in complex ways.

These understandings of beside and alongside-ness are resonant of Butler's (2004) explorations of grief, grieving and being beside oneself. As Butler insightfully states: 'Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, then we're missing something' (Butler, 2004: 23). There is, in this sense of being undone, also a sense of being moved beyond ourselves in the moment of encountering another, a moment of disorientation and even dispossession.

However, for Butler:

This possibility does not dispute the fact of my autonomy, but it does qualify that claim through recourse to the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the way in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own' (Butler, 2004: 28).

The ways in which queer cultures and bodies might be formed in and through violence is complex, and these ideas run through this thinking. However, I draw from this idea of being beyond myself in Butler's thinking as a key impulse of a queer side-eye as a mode of recognising others in the understanding of and development of ideas. Here, the queer side-eye necessitates a glance sideways to see who I am beside, who I am alongside, and in so

doing it recognises who I am in affinity with and who I can support, as well as who can support me. It is a key ethical practice of academic labour (even if that labour is not always recognised) that is also inculcated in practices of survival in an increasingly homophobic and transphobic present that is also bound up in my often-informal labours in relation to drag performance which I unpack below.

My queer side-eye is connected to these academic modes of beside and alongside-ness, which are grounded in queer and feminist understandings of politics and academic labour. More explicitly, I draw from extant understandings of queer methods in academic practice in the work of Halberstam and Muñoz, who both negotiate academic practices through the personal and the popular in their thinking.

Queering Knowledge, or Knowing Queerly

I draw in particular from Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, in which sources range '...from children's animation to avant-garde performance and queer art to think about ways of being and knowing that stand outside of conventional understandings of success' (Halberstam, 2011: 2). The wide range of source materials Halberstam employs, often sources which are deemed non-academic or critical, provide the reader with an opportunity to engage through multiple different lenses with the concepts of queerness and failure explored. They argue that 'Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world' (Halberstam, 2011: 2/3). There is potential in avoiding being taken seriously, since

[b]eing taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours' (Halberstam, 2011: 6).

There are useful methods and methodological strategies in Halberstam's text that provide insights into resisting hegemonic academic practices and normativities, in particular through an articulation of "low theory"¹⁵. Halberstam argues that

we can think about low theory as a mode of accessibility, but we might also think about it as a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the high in high theory' (Halberstam, 2011: 16).

Low theory comes from an assemblage of numerous different texts and theories to work outside academic hierarchies insisted upon by traditional academic discourse. Whilst reinscribing a binary of low/high theory is problematic, in drawing from popular culture texts Halberstam is able to highlight different ways of locating queer knowledges in and through popular culture and alternative texts. Although I draw from academic practices now well respected within the academy (Halberstam's included), I engage low theory through placing these texts alongside personal narratives and creative accounts of drag performance, and the "low" or popular work of pub, bar and club drag performance.

Muñoz also reflects upon the use of the personal in queer academic research, suggesting that:

...my writing brings in my own personal experience as another way to ground historical queer sites with lived queer experience. My intention in this aspect of the writing is not simply to wax anecdotally but, instead, to reach for other modes of associative argumentation and evidencing. Thus,

¹⁵ In Chapter Five I unpack further this idea of queer failure, as well as the potential issues with failure as a queer methodology.

when considering the work of a contemporary club performer such as Kevin Aviance, I engage a poem by Elizabeth Bishop and a personal recollection about movement and gender identity' (Muñoz, 2009: 4).

This positions the personal as an insightful location for producing queer knowledges, and my use of personal experiences of homophobia as well as more extensive creative explorations of witnessing drag performance is part of this tactic. I borrow from these methods in my own work under the rubric of a queer side-eye. For example, when exploring the work of Meth in Chapter Two, I locate moments of utopian hope in her lip synching a quote from a fantasy film due to my relationship of that act to the closure of *The Black Cap*, and position that thinking more broadly in relation to discourses around queer time and utopias and the history of queer performance re-purposing popular culture. Here, the personal becomes a fertile site for launching these academic and political enquiries, and I start from these creative accounts of performance as another way of accessing the performances for the reader, but also as a way of evidencing my experiences of them in relation to the hopeful and utopian groundwork of this thesis.¹⁶ The use of creative accounts and alternative modes of academic practice is resonant of other extant forms, and I unpack other key practices now to consider how the queer side-eye is implicated in other modes of resistive and critical academic practices and methods before turning to the specificities of my queer side-eye as an academic practice.

Side-Eyes, Backwards and Side-ways Glances

My queer side-eye is not the only articulation of these alternative forms of academic practice in relation to critical debates around queerness and other identities. This work is connected

¹⁶ I have also provided images of these performers in text, as well as links to public documents (usually YouTube videos) of the performances where possible.

to other academic modes, particularly those generated from and by other marginalised identities and positions.

There are extant explorations of other ways of looking and being beyond straight, dominant or normative modes. Whilst I have already explored how Ahmed, Butler and Sedgwick consider these notions in their work, there is useful critiques to be found in the work of Kathryn Bond Stockton's (2009) *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* and Mark Turner's (2003) *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London*. In content, both texts' focus on queer subjects and queer theories is important within the context of my own thinking. However, of particular note is the conceptions of sideways and backward growing and glancing that is formulated in each text as both a critical methodological mode and a queer way of understanding the work they are exploring (and a way of understanding the queer work they are exploring).

Of value in Turner's text is the uncertainty of the glance. This is both the uncertainty of the historical looks towards cruising at recognising cruising or gay practices and the uncertainty of the glances themselves within cruising practice where it is often difficult to know if the glance is a cruising glance or, indeed, one of suspicion, an idea which I connect to my queer side-eye below. His exploration of moments of cruising in history also understand the importance of location and located-ness where his study focusses across New York and London, whilst being aware of the intricacies of these geographical positions and the focus of his work on men. He also reads these notions carefully (he is full of care for them) as a contemporary reader, alongside his own and other contemporary understandings of what cruising might be or look like. His own backward glances at historical texts is a playful re-

engagement with the glance as an embodied and academic mode, and is playfully reminiscent of the backward glance as a movement, gesture or code of cruising practices. I read this as connected to my notion of the queer side-eye, where I use the metaphor of a side-ways glance to articulate the idea of not looking straight at performance work or theory, or to find ways to look queerly.

The backward glances in Turner's text (both the ones he analyses, and the academic ones he does) are open to the notion of mis-recognition, playfulness and uncertainty that I read as connected to my methodological impulses. I aim in my writing to find ways of glancing sideways at theory and performance to both productively critique my position in the writing and the research, to find opportunities to look at myself, and to find ways to look critically and queerly at the drag and queer work explored. All of these glances, however, are necessarily contingent on my position in the space and as I develop my queer side-eye throughout this thesis I am aware of how my particular position and orientation produces certain knowledges and understandings that others may not or cannot see. In trying to articulate my position and my academic practice as a queer side-eye, then, there is the potential that I miss out on the bigger picture, or only producing particularly localised understandings and analyses that do not apply beyond my own codified and particular experience of the work. I argue, however, that there is an attempt in my queer side-eye to also be self-reflexive and more broadly to find strategies to look at the work critically and not produce overly romanticised or rose-tinted glances. As I explored in relation to queer utopias and queer communities in my Introduction and Chapter One, I am committed to hopeful and utopian understandings of drag performance and queer communities, but these are not naïve

analyses but instead analyses built on an attentiveness to the potential for hope and survival in low brow, quotidian work and practices. My queer side-ways glances, then, offer chances to be critical without losing sight (and site) of myself and my positionality and how this affects and produces the analyses I make.

Stockton's text finds ways to be both hopeful and critical of her subject matter. Her text explores the queerness of children and childhood, considering how not only the figure of the ghostly gay child (both the ghost of gay children by which the concept of the Child is haunted, and the ghost of gay children queers might be haunted by) but also how childness in and of itself is often a queer thing, a queer experience, characterised by and as queerness. Stockton conceives of the queer child (or even the gay child) as put on hold, and queerness as something which grows sideways rather than up. Queering the idea of growth which is characterised by normative ideas of development and temporality, she instead argues for an understanding of growing sideways as accumulation of ideas, or recognising the 'width of a person's experiences of ideas' (2009: 11).

In this understanding children and adults are not so separate, but instead come into contact in complex ways, with a key notion being that 'it's a mistake to take innocence straight' (2009: 12) underscoring her thinking of development and growing up as inherently bound up with normativity. Within these exciting and challenging notions of queerness and childhood is an exploration of the need to explore and understand metaphor and how it is used, where Stockton proposed a need to 'do what children are often shown as doing: approach their

destinations, delay, swerve, delay; ride on a metaphor they tend to make material and so imagine relations of their own' (2009: 15). Here, this notion of playing with a metaphor is something that I read as connected to Ahmed's linguistic playfulness in her own work and something which I explore further in my own academic practice at various moments in this thesis, but particular in Chapter Two when playing with the etymology of the word "despite" and in Chapter Four in my development of the notion of "killjoy drag". I see these as queer strategies and practices alongside which my work is positioned.

Moving away from her direct critique of childhood studies, I am interested in how my queer side-eye is connected to these notions, where the queer side-eye is an opportunity to put myself "on hold" in order to see the work which is happening and begin to analyse and reflect upon it in relation to broader intellectual ideas. This is not a simple process, however, and something which occurs in my writing in a complex way as I try to account for my position as embedded whilst also aiming towards critical distance to reflect upon the politics and ethics of the work being made (and my relationship to it). Being put "on hold" however, is not a catchall get out for the problematics of my position in the work, but instead offers a chance of articulating how my queer side-eye is a complex position of being in the community I am write about, embedded complexly in relation to the work, and also theorising about it and alongside it. As well as this intricate notion of being "on hold" the notion of sideways is connected to my side-eye. Where Stockton uses it to articulate a queer form of growth, she is also clear to position how her enquiry often looks at what is "beside" history (or accepted history), understanding how it is possible to locate sites and understandings of queerness in the past in places such as literature.

Both Stockton and Turner explore fiction, and in particular literature, as a site to locate alternative and other desires. Their backward glances (in Turner's words) or sideways growths (in Stockton's) glance explicitly at these fictional sites of possibility and potentiality beyond accepted histories, theories and canons, in much the same way Sedgwick proposes queer experiences of youth (or experience of queer youth) as bound up with locating sites of sustenance and survival in locations such as film, television and literature which may bear no necessary relation to queer or sexuality. These glance, for Turner and Stockton, are also about locating "evidence" in queer places, or broadening our definition of what evidence might look like, a project connected to my own thinking both in my impulse to locate hope, survival and resistance within drag performance, and locate evidence for these experiences in the personal; an impulse echoed in explorations of queer autoethnography explored below. These other modes of looking, beyond frontal or straight modes are also connected to writing and academic practices by feminist scholars and queer scholars of colour.

Josh Trey Barnett and Brandon S. Killen (2018) explore the role of the glance and looking in the construction of queer worlds and world-making in their text "Catching Sight: Queer Worldmaking in a Glance", in particular starting from the visual image of a side-eye being given at the swearing into office of Mike Pence, the Vice President of the USA at the time of writing. E. Patrick Johnson (2016) explores the relationship of alternative forms of knowledge production in black and queer subcultural practices and academia in the edited collection *No Tea, No Shade: New Writing In Black Queer Studies*, in which authors in the collection draw from black and queer vernaculars and subcultural practices to manoeuvre within hegemonic,

white academic spaces. These texts are purposefully playful yet insist upon the need for clear engagements with alternative forms and activism in academic labour. Authors in the collection refer to particular ballrooms cultures such as those evidenced in *Paris Is Burning*, with death drops and reads (rather than readings) referred to (Stokes, 2018:149) as purposeful engagements with alternative modes of producing knowledge in academic practice.¹⁷

Resonances of alternative academic methods are also present in feminist writing practices which engage in playful, affective and alternative ways of evidencing the personal and political in academic labour. This can be seen in the work of writers such as Helene Cixous (see Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, 1997) who uses boxes of creative texts as “windows” which ‘give onto Hélène Cixous’s notebooks’ (Cixous and Calle-Gruber, 1997: 2) to produce writing that that ‘speaks with many voices and in different registers, allowing the reader myriad entries into the rich diversity of Cixous’s works’ (Cixous and Calle-Gruber, 1997: n.p.). It can also be seen in work of Julia Kristeva (1965), in particular who’s essay ‘Stabat Mater’ explores the maternal in relation to Christian discourses of the virgin, alongside feminist critiques of the mother and her personal experience of motherhood, with the academic writing sitting alongside the personal exploration in two columns laying alongside one another.

¹⁷ I return to the idea of “reading” below in exploring my queer side-eye as a method of reading and being read in relation to drag performance, and the particular subcultural practice of reading in drag.

These are extant alternative and resistive academic forms within normative academic practices that runs through scholarship from people of colour, feminists and queers.¹⁸ Queer side-eye is set alongside these modes. I make a link here between these ideas and the exploration of collective understandings of queer theories in Muñoz's work explored in Chapter One, which refuses to set sexuality as a sovereign form of difference, but recognises the complex ways in which sexuality, race, gender, class, disability and so on intersect to produce complex and plural oppressions and critical modes of resistance. I recognise that I am indebted to the work of scholars, artists and activists who work at the intersection of these fields, and that I am afforded much of my thinking around alternative modes of intellectual engagement because of the work of these marginalised scholars alongside whom I position myself politically and academically. I acknowledge that my position as a white scholar in particular affords me the privilege to move through institutional boundaries by which my colleagues of colour are stopped and have a responsibility in my own practice to chip away at the walls that perpetuate racist hegemonies. I articulate my queer side-eye as one strategy of beginning this work at this stage in my academic career.

Whilst I am not borrowing directly from the texts explored above, nor necessarily considering their intellectual positions or theories, I nonetheless consider them as a lineage of form. I employ creative accounts of the experience of watching drag performance as italicised blocks of text that act as a starting point for each exploration of performance. These italicised blocks of creative writing should be engaged with by the reader as creative accounts of my

¹⁸ For example, in Chapter Two when discussing the work of Virgin Xtravaganzah, I return to Sedgwick's work, and in particular her queer and feminist approach of reparative reading, which I understand as connected to these ideas.

experience of watching performance, as a mode of capturing not the performance necessarily (although this may happen in part) but instead the embodied experience of it as an audience member, albeit an audience member who is oriented in the performance space in a particular way. These accounts evidence the experience of watching the drag and queer performances, and offer another way into these performances alongside images, some videos and my academic readings (or reads). In making them and in generating these responses which evidence the experiences of watching drag performance I engaged in a set of methods that are connected to both ethnography and autoethnography. The explorations of the side-eye explored so far outline the particular ways in which a queer side-eye emerges practically and politically and can be taken up by other researchers as a now extant methodological and political form. To unpack the conditions of my queer side-eye specifically, as grounded and located within my particular position (disciplinary, socio-political and academic position), I turn to methods of ethnography and autoethnography, both due to the history of ethnographic practices in analyses of drag performance and drag communities and through the ways in which the use of creative writing and accounts emerge in autoethnographic and queer autoethnographic practices.

Ethnography

This thesis is connected to ideas of ethnography and ethnographic practices such as observation, participant observation, and field work. However, the histories of ethnography as ‘a descriptive account of a community or culture, usually one located outside the West’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 1) problematise my engagement with these methods, since I am writing about a community in the West, and one of which I am a member. Ethnography

as a practice has shifted from its colonial roots, with centres such as the Chicago School documenting ‘the range of different patterns of life to be found in the city and how these were shaped by the developing urban ecology’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 2). However, whilst the shift from colonial studies of other cultures to localised studies which pay attention to the particular hierarchies, privileges and ethics of ethnographic practices has allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the implications of doing ethnography, there is still a return to normativities of understanding as well as to potentially problematic defining and articulating of communities that this queer research resists. Nevertheless, my queer side-eye is connected to ethnographic methods since these inform my research practice: I spent time in bars watching shows (observation) and helping to make shows (participant observation) and took notes (field notes).

There is also an extant history of drag studies that engage with ethnographic practices. Newton’s *Mother Camp* and Livingstone’s documentary *Paris Is Burning* are two differing ethnographic approaches alongside which this thesis sits. *Paris is Burning*, whilst a film documentary rather than written ethnographic study, does detail a particular emergence of drag culture and performance: the drag balls in New York in the 1980s. bell hooks (1992) reminds us that the camera allows the director, Livingstone, to absent herself from the act and appear to be creating an ethnographic documentary without paying attention to the particular importance of race, as well as her position as “maker” – and the privileged positions she inhabits as a white woman – has on the documentary. Butler (1993) urges us to carefully consider the role that *ethnicity* plays, something she argues that both hooks and Livingstone

fail to do when reflecting the place of the Latinx participants in drag balls and the documentary.

Whilst Livingstone's documentary has been afforded almost legendary status within the drag history, a status bestowed in no small amount by *RPDR*, it is important to remember the issues that have emerged around it such as the position of Livingstone as director/ethnographer and outsider, and the complex representations of race, ethnicity, class and violence in which she is situated and, importantly, not situated. It is key to pay attention to the role of the ethnographer or researcher in the production of knowledge about particular communities. I do this through considering how my access to these communities allows me key insights in the research that an outsider would not necessarily see, considering my position beside, alongside and within these queer communities as a precondition of the research.

Newton's *Mother Camp* traces an ethnographic account of drag performance culture and communities in the USA between 1965-6. Described by the author as 'traditional anthropological field work' (Newton, 1972: 132), this text uses recorded interviews, observations, and images, as well as ethnographic methods such as technical drawings of performance spaces to produce an account of drag performers, trans people, and sex workers in this particular setting. This account explores the individual lived experience of the people within the community and recognises the issues at play in conducting this research, with the author's role as outsider and how she accessed certain performers and the ability to record performances due to technology being key issues. Traditional ethnographic processes and languages can be seen in describing her lead participant as an 'informant' (Newton, 1972:

133) and attempting (yet often failing) to maintain a critical distance as observer. These traditional methods also produced traditional understandings, with the often-rigid categorisation of acts down certain formic lines (comedy and glamour, for example) and performers within certain binaries (male/female, masculine/feminine) demonstrating descriptions of drag that many contemporary drag performers and audiences would challenge.

Of interest in Newton's study for a queer side-eye approach are the moments in which the traditional role of the ethnographer breaks down. When discussing the field methods employed, Newton considered her 'own role to include a great deal of participation, which would have been difficult to avoid in any case' (Newton, 1972: 134), stating that she would be involved in the production of shows by 'pulling curtains, running messages for performers, and bringing in drinks and french fries from the restaurant across the street' (Newton, 1972: 134). Newton's role within the community she was writing about is resonant of some of my own experiences of being a researcher within a community, where my involvement with performers eventually (and inevitably) led to helping out back-, on- and beside the stage. However, for me this participation did not emerge after or because of my research but rather preceded it.

Newton's study describes an extant set of methods for studying a particular community. However, it is clear from the knowledge produced that this method would not be appropriate for the more fluid engagements with drag, gender, sexuality and performance that characterise many of the performers about which I am writing. Furthermore, I make no

attempt to separate my own role as researcher from my role in the community and rather attest that my own position within the community (as participant and as particular acts of what I think of as the practice of community) is the very precondition for the possibility of my research. The traditional narrative of ethnography, then, starts to become unpicked when I consider my role in relation to those about whom I am writing (performers and audiences). This is not to say, however, that I am not borrowing from ethnography in places.

In order to take account of the instances of performance about which I am writing, I engage in a form of participant observation, a method of observing whilst participating or finding 'some role in the field being studied' (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007: 4). Whilst I do not have to find a role since I am already arguably part of the "field", it has been argued that even in this case of being already embedded in the "field," the role of the ethnographer will need to be 'negotiated and renegotiated with the people being studied' (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007: 4). Clearly this is the case, however, rather than a formal process, this negotiation of my role often happened in relation to the ways in which I might be positioned in the space, as well as in relation to the particular specific needs of performers and audiences at a particular time.¹⁹ Whilst methods of ethnography inform part of my queer side-eye and I borrow from ethnographic methods such as observation and participant observation, there are limits to the knowledges this form produces. In accounting more for the particular personal position that I occupy in my research, I turn to ideas of autoethnography and queer

¹⁹ In any particular show or performance event, I may find myself in various positions as a stage hand, the source of a joke, a shoulder to cry on, a sounding board for a particular idea or, in one particular case, clearing up the cardboard remnants of a model city that a performer dressed as a giant lizard had destroyed. I unpack this position in more detail below.

autoethnography as extant research forms that allow for a consideration of these personal implications.

(Queer) Autoethnography

One methodological approach that attends to the personal in research is autoethnography. Autoethnography has been described as ‘...stories of/about the self told through the lens of culture’ (Adams *et al*, 2015: 1) and ‘...the method and product of writing about personal lived experiences and their relationship to culture’ (Boylorb & Orb (eds), 2014: 17).²⁰ Autoethnography blurs the boundary between the personal and the political in social research, as well as binaries of objective/subjective and observer/observed, and offers methods of writing through being in the communities being researched. Adams *et al* suggest that ‘if our task as researchers [...] is to study the social lives of humans, then we cannot relegate elements of human lives or experiences to the periphery, nor can we bracket out the ways our lives are intertwined with our research projects and participants’ (Adams *et al*, 2015: 8-9). Autoethnography offers a method of writing about the fields of research without precluding ourselves as researchers in these fields.

Criticisms of autoethnography as unreliable or invalid have been levelled at autoethnographers by more traditional ethnographers, social scientists and qualitative researchers (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). My concerns with this methodology come from particular descriptions of and reasons for doing autoethnography. Ellis and Bochner (2000)

²⁰ There have been several texts and articles which have contributed to the scholarship of historicising autoethnography, as well as describing various ways of doing autoethnography. See Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2015), Boylorn & Orbe (2014), Ellis and Bochner in Denzin and Lincoln (eds.) (2000), Harris and Holman Jones (2019).

suggest that 'Autoethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 738). There appears to be an unquestioned assumption about the power or effectiveness of autoethnography which presents a problematically coherent image of what autoethnography could do or be. My work does not necessarily make claims to "meaningful" engagements, but instead offers modes of engaging with performance and queer communities that might open up different modes of being and doing research, and produce different knowledges, that resists hegemonic practices and ideas or looking straight.

Whilst I maintain these scepticisms, turning to autoethnography as a particularly queer method is a useful area for further enquiry:

Autoethnography, as method, allows a person to document perpetual journeys of self-understanding, allows her or him to produce queer texts. A queer autoethnography also encourages us to think through and out of our categories for interaction and to take advantage of language's failure to capture or contain selves, ways of relating, and subjugated knowledges (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008: 382).

Considering autoethnography as a methodology which accounts for the complicated and processual nature of queer subjectivities helpfully positions the method as a fecund area for queer research. Adams and Holman Jones go on to argue for the value of narrative, which for them constitutes autoethnography as queer:

These are stories of pleasure, of gratification, of the mundane, as they intersect, crisscrossing rhizomatically with stories of subjugation, abuse, and oppression. One of the most ready forms for such a telling is found in the narrative accounts of our lives. And so, autoethnography is queer. Saying so means taking a stand on a poetics of change. Saying so treats identities and communities as a performative, relational accomplishment (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008: 385).

By telling the stories of our lives, they argue it is possible to account for performative and relational understandings of identity and community that are characterised in queer studies. When writing queer autoethnography to speak about wider understandings of identity, community and culture, they also suggest the researcher might be authoring narratives of risk and violence. In my own research, I often find myself situating my engagement in drag performance alongside my experiences of homophobia, which means (re)engaging with these narratives of violence. Holman Jones and Adams argue for ‘...the importance of risking ourselves in moments of unknowingness, the necessity of resisting offers of certainty and stability, and the flattery of legitimacy’ (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008: 387). By taking the risk to author these moments of unknowingness, a queer autoethnography allows an author to rest in the not-known and to account for the fleetingness and ephemerality which can characterise queer understandings of identity and community. I use the creative accounts of my experiences of performance to capture not only those experiences, but also highlight the specific temporal specificity of the performance work I research.

Harris and Holman Jones (2019) explore queer autoethnography and suggest that autoethnographic practices are always intersectional projects that resist hierarchies of knowledge that reproduce racist, xenophobic, misogynist, heteronormative, ableist and ageist normativities within academia (Harris and Holman Jones, 2019). Furthermore, autoethnography necessitates an engagement of critical theories with a socio-political framework that is fundamentally about finding moments for change or transformation. The socio-political impulses in these ideas are resonant of the ways in which I frame my thinking in this thesis as one mode within a constellation of practices that can challenge and resist homophobia and transphobia, alongside the drag performance I research. The authors point

to the radical potential of queering autoethnography, and the ethical and empathic questions that surround all social research, suggesting that

Queering autoethnography might enable us to consider [questions] of possibility and responsibility, creating a mode of engagement that addresses the consequences of crafting life for those of us who have been systematically excluded from culture within the larger world of repercussions (Harris and Holman Jones, 2009: 5).

This resonates with the ethical and political implications of my queer side-eye as a strategy of survival within a homophobic and transphobic straight present, and a resistive practice in affinity with other marginalised and resistive academic and political forms. I suggest that in locating world-making practices in drag performance there is an ethical and critical responsibility to account for the complexities of those moments, and that queer autoethnography offers a politics of doing so.

In my research, these complex political moments involved being attentive to watching performance, aware of when it made me feel, moved me, pushed me, challenged me, and running away to take notes after it did. In the writing, these experiences of watching performance start all of my thinking, evidenced through creative accounts of these performances, and allowing reflections of theory that resonate with these ideas to inform and challenge my own understandings of and engagements with the work. This is part of a queer side-eye method since it necessitates laying alongside one another personal experiences of performance, broader socio-political implications, and moments of theory that have a wider intellectual impact in order to produce new ideas and new ways of knowing and understanding drag performance and queer communities. Alongside the ethnographic methods of gathering data explored above, my queer side-eye is also connected to the political impulses of the politics and ethics of queer(ing) autoethnography through placing

the research at the heart of the research, building narratives and creative accounts of key research moments, and locating strategies for survival and resistance in and through research and writing. In bringing these methods of gathering and articulating the “data” of my research (drag performance and my experiences of drag performance, in the broadest sense) and critiquing the emergence of normativities within these forms I articulate my queer side-eye as committed to locating alternative pathways through research, locating ways of not looking straight.

These notions of ethnography, autoethnography and queer autoethnography inform my particular queer side-eye due to the ways in which these forms, ethnography in particular, have been used to explore drag and communities, and due to creative writing often being employed in, through and as autoethnography and queer autoethnography. These modes of research that are connected to my own practice in relation to drag performance, as a producer, promoter and audience member. These evidences in the form of creative writing and accounts of performance, form part of my queer side-eye alongside the socio-political impulses explored above and as the thesis develops I weave together modes of understanding my queer side-eye as academic method (a way of reading drag), as conceptualising my position as researcher within the community I research, as a way of understandings how drag performers facilitate queer community and modes of survival through performance, and as a quotidian mode of survival in an increasingly homophobic and transphobic straight present. To unpack in more detail the ways in which I am implicated in the work I am writing about, and to contextualise some of these important conversations around the politics and ethics of my involvement in the community and the access this allows me to performers and ways of

queer research, I now unpack my own position within the scene before concluding my methodological grounding and turning to the ethical considerations of the research.

Me in the Research

Mark Anthony looks at me, or at least I think he does. The king smiled. It is a roast. I know what is coming. "And then there's BoyfriendJoe," he says. "He's doing a PhD in queer studies. He co-owns a gay bar. He's so right on." I think that is what he said anyway. Something like that. But it is the next part that sits in my head. Resounding both scathingly and lovingly. "So, I bet for him, then, PhD must stand for Pretentious Hipster Dickhead."²¹

As already indicated, I have worked with drag performers as an assistant, general dogs' body, helper, stage manager and promotor and producer since around 2011 and have been seeing drag performance as an audience member from around 2009. In that time, both prior to and during this research, I have come to be close personal friends with many of the performers featured in this thesis and developed close personal relationships with many of them, including marrying Meth, who is featured in Chapter Two. It is of note, however, that Meth and I met many years before this research started.

²¹ I became known on the drag performance scene as BoyfriendJoe or #BoyfriendJoe after a television documentary entitled *Drag Queens of London* (2014) featured an episode that followed a group of performers I worked with heavily at the time, including my boyfriend. Whenever I briefly appeared on screen the voiceover on the show would refer to me as "Boyfriend Joe" and when this was picked up by the performer Manila Luzon during a screening, the name stuck.

In working as a producer, myself and Meth made a name for ourselves by booking US-based stars of *RPDR* to perform in the UK in large sell out shows at The Black Cap in Camden between 2013 and 2015, and then at The Eagle in Vauxhall in 2015 after the Black Cap had closed. During this time, we were also featured on a documentary *Drag Queens of London* (The Connected Set, 2014) that gained attention in the UK and beyond. Whilst continuing to work as a producer, promotor and general drag performer's assistant between 2015 and 2016, myself and Meth, alongside a business partner, eventually opened a venue in Camden called Her Upstairs. Whilst open between 2016 and 2018 it was known as a drag performance venue that held diverse performance events for specific parts of the queer community and supported up and coming performers. Throughout this time, I have continued to get to know, work with, and support many drag performers in this thesis and more generally in the "scene" that I articulate above.

It is important to make the informal nature of this labour clear here. This work could involve things such as working on the door of an event in a warehouse, going on stage to pour milk over a performer in a paddling pool whilst they danced, cleaning up a burlesque performer's discarded clothes, working behind a bar, doing the sound and lighting for a show, or simply sitting backstage and talking a performer through their performance. I consider these acts as part of the labour or practice of community, as necessary as moments of making drag (and community) work. I lay out this personal position to complicate any easy boundary between research and researcher. I am clearly bound up in the performance work, performers and communities that I am writing about and this means that I can offer key insights into these debates as a cultural worker within the field of contemporary drag performance in London.

As my explorations of a queer side-eye explore, being imbricated in this world offers insights into the “scene” that outsiders may not recognise, but also complicates any easy insider/outsider binary that conventional or dominant research strategies might propose as productive. I am complexly and intimately beside and alongside the work I am doing and I am implicated in the research; the conclusions I draw about hope, resistance and survival pertain to me as part of the queer communities about which I am writing. Furthermore, I am positioned often away from, alongside or beside the stage physically; I very rarely watch drag performance straight. However, in watching out of the corner of my eye, in watching queerly, I attest that other, more vibrant and more hopeful things might be illuminated when the lights are shining on drag performers on stage.

Conclusions

This section has outlined the methodological impulses of this work, articulating a queer side-eye as critical position or orientation, and as a method that draws on extant ideas of ethnography and queer autoethnography and queer modes of evidence and research. I also accounted for how this position is bound up in the politics of affinity, acknowledging the ways in which my queer side-eye is indebted to work of feminist scholars and scholars of colour who precede me and work alongside me. The politics of a side-eye, its articulation as a mode of affinity and of alongside-ness as an ethical and political desire, is the starting point from which the work develops, and whilst my queer side-eye necessitates engagements with particular academic practices and methods due to my disciplinary, geographic, temporal and identity position, other queer side-eyes will demand other methods of working for other researchers, whilst remaining committed to this politics of affinity and alongside-ness.

Beyond socio-political issues that frame my discussion of the side-eye, I have also worked to consider how the side-eye is determined by my positions within the venues and performance communities about which I am writing. I have articulated through my explorations of ethnography and queer autoethnography, as well as extant queer and feminist academic practices, the ways in which the personal and often embedded position of the academic within the subjects and contexts about which they are writing is often central to the claims they are making. This is not without issues however, and whilst my explorations here have worked to understand how I also locate moments for critical distance and critical thinking about the performance work and communities I explore, it is clear there are limits to what they side-eye can see. I am not, however, claiming an unbiased position in my work or claiming that the side-eye offers a way out of these embedded positionalities. Instead, I suggest it offers a way of accounting for my position in the space, whilst also locating opportunities to consider more broadly how queer researchers might go about researching queer things. The queer side-eye acknowledges my position, often an embedded and messy position in the centre of the action but more usually one at the side of the action, and as such I articulate it as a way of being both in and out of the action simultaneously, where the position of both/and is connected to queer theoretical lineages explored above.

There are two corollaries things that it is important to make clear about a queer side-eye. Firstly, it is also an act of suspicion, of paranoia, and even self-defence. By this, I suggest that a queer sideways glance also relates to a queer experience of violence, or more specifically of necessarily being aware of what is on the periphery for fear of violence. Butler asserts that

...we [queer people] are, as a community, subjected to violence, even if some of us individually haven't been [...] this means that we are constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies; we are constituted as fields of desire and physical vulnerability (Butler, 2004: 18).

In accepting as part of a queer experience a relationship to violence and vulnerability – which is not, importantly, a relationship to victimhood – it is also necessary to understand a queer side-eye as part of a defence mechanism, an embodied tactic of being aware of who or what is at the periphery at all times. It is a position that necessitates being on edge.

Secondly, the queer side-eye could be perceived as an exclusionary tactic. I suggest this out of concern that the experience of being given the side-eye whilst on the periphery could be a moment of rejection and suspicion. This is intimately linked, I argue, to concepts of “reading” and “throwing shade” which connect to drag performance forms in North America.²² In *Paris is Burning*, Dorian Corey, a drag artist featured in the film, suggests that ‘You get in a smart crack, and everyone laughs and kiki because you've found a flaw and exaggerated it, then you've got a good read going’ (Corey in Livingstone, 1990) whereas ‘Shade is I do not tell you you're ugly but I do not have to tell you because you know you're ugly ... and that's shade’ (Corey in Livingstone, 1990). For the performers in *Paris is Burning*, reading and throwing shade is part of their embodied experience of drag, a mode of insulting, picking out flaws and, ultimately, humour. Reading is also a mode of recognising who or what is in your community, since it is clear from my experiences of working with performers that a performer would not

²² These ideas have also now spread globally due to *RPDR* which regularly refers to shade and reading, as well as Livingstone's documentary. It is important to note that there are also inherent issues with the ways in which drag and queer languages that are inherently bound up in black and trans queer cultures become appropriated or unproblematically reproduced by, for example, white performers in the UK (see Farrier, 2016, 2017). This thesis resists this but recognises that the queer side-eye sits alongside these drag practices that have become more ubiquitous (however problematically) in the wake of *RPDR* and globalized drag discourses.

“read” someone they did not like. Therefore, the insult levelled at me above is also an articulation of my place within the community; in being read, in being seen, I was also being brought into the community, or recognised as alongside the performers. I read, and in so doing, I am read. To locate my queer side-eye as part of a practice of reading and throwing shade, then, is not to name it as an exclusionary glance but rather a gesture of opening out, a sideways glance not only to see what violence is on the periphery, but also to see who might be there and might need welcoming in. A queer side eye is on edge, *hopefully*.

My queer side-eye emerges in this writing through creative accounts of performance and setting them alongside queer intellectual texts. I engage a queer side-eye as a critical academic and practical mode of engaging with drag and queer performance. I remain committed to understanding the ways in which the particular temporal and geographic specificities of queer performance work impacts on the understanding, meaning making and embodied experience of the work (Farrier & Campbell, 2016). I focus on individual iterations of the short-form performances at which I have been present when drawing out my creative accounts. Whilst these performances take place multiple times in different venues, by focusing on these individual iterations I produce different explorations of the effects of the work. Whilst it is certainly possible that these moments of performance can produce similar effects in other venues at different times – and may well have done for me on multiple occasions – a focus on specific moments facilitates explorations of the work in such a way as to fully interrogate the implications of what it means to be in these venues in these moments of performance.

I articulate a queer side-eye as a key form of new knowledge in this thesis as a mode of looking at and understanding queer work that pays attention to the ways in which the research and researcher of queer performance are often bound up in one another in complex ways, and pays attention to strategies of not looking straight as a critical tool for queer researchers that chimes in affinity with other marginalised subjects and research positions. A queer side-eye necessitates a political and ethical engagement with critical practices that resist and challenge hegemonic academic forms and offers a playful engagement with extant methods from plural sources that are linked intimately to the specific locations of the research and researcher. In looking sideways, in a queer sideways glance, it is possible to see new, different and alternative things emerge in the theories and performance work about which I am writing. In giving a queer side-eye to theory, performance, and myself, I engage critically and queerly with drag performance and queer theories to consider ideas at the periphery, on the edge.

A Note On Ethics

As part of this research process, the ethics of the research has been continually interrogated informally in conversations between myself, my supervisors, and other members of the research degrees cohort and staff team at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (Central). Whilst laying out the ethics of a doctoral thesis in this way is not usual, I wanted to unpack the institutional and personal ethical process due to my personal imbrication in the community about whom I am writing in order to outline how I have negotiated these ethical processes and institutional imperatives whilst maintaining the queerness of the research.

The ethical guidelines at Central ensure a robust ethical research process drawing on key principles of best research conduct. In particular, Central refers to the Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life who maintain the following principles: 'selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, leadership' (The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, 2016: 6). In developing a research framework from these principles, we are asked to consider the following key tenets in all research practice and design:

care and avoidance of harm; honesty and openness; accountability and appropriate documentation; confidentiality; informed consent; avoidance of conflicts of interest; compliance with the law and relevant codes of conduct; due acknowledgement of collaborators, informants, participants or other contributors (The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, 2016: 6-7).

These principles guided my research design and conduct, with particular care being taken to ensure that I had open and honest conversations with those about whom I was writing and researching, whilst being aware that I was writing about performance work that was accessible in the public domain. Since I have been present and active on the drag performance scene throughout most of this research, performers and audiences have been able to talk to me about the work, something that many have done as I was reasonably visible and well known as one of the owners of a successful queer venue and a producer of some large performance events. Therefore, an informal part of this research process has been talking about my research to anyone who had questions and I consider this part of a set of informal ethical practices of being alongside the people and communities about whom I am writing which is fundamentally bound up in the process of my queer side-eye approach. My queer side-eye then, necessitates a set of ethical practices that are bound up in the conditions and principles of research ethics and integrity.

Beyond these informal processes, I also underwent a formal ethical review in which I laid out the potential ethical issues in my research. Of particular note is the complexity of my personal position in relation to the performers I write about and the added complication of having a certain level of financial responsibility for the bar Her Upstairs when it was operating. There was a particular concern about this issue of payment, where it could be perceived by performers that I was paying them for a performance that I would then go on to write about. Whilst I never paid any performers directly and was clear that this was the case from when we opened, I was indirectly linked to the finance of the venue as one of the owners of the space. Therefore, there is a potential conflict of interest arising when there are performances that are included in my research that it could be argued I have indirectly financed.

In order to address this, I ensured that I never directly paid performers. Furthermore, whilst I was publicly involved with the venue, I was not involved with the operational and day-to-day running of the space. My business partners made all decisions as to events management and therefore as to what performances happen, and as such any research-based discoveries at Her Upstairs happened in a similar fashion as in a venue I did not have a formal connection with; as a serendipitous encounter or an intellectual hunch.

Performers in the venue were fully aware of my position as a PhD candidate, as well as the fact that they might feature as part of the research itself. I have strived to ensure that my research is clear to those about whom I am writing and regularly discuss my work with performers who work within the community as a point of good practice as well as due to the intellectual curiosity of the community around me. Furthermore, the performances I write

about are short-form “acts,” that are rarely longer than ten minutes in length, and which can and may well have happened in various venues multiple times (including multiple separate times at Her Upstairs). These acts, then, are not commissioned by Her Upstairs, but rather are paid for as fully formed performances developed by the performers themselves.

Finally, the venue is culturally significant for the community about which I am writing. Camden Town was known for having one particular space catering for LGBTQ+ customers; The Black Cap. The Black Cap, as already mentioned, was an historic LGBTQ+ pub, club and performance venue that was closed on 13th April 2015. The community that attended the venue were left with few venues they could attend and feel safe or feel comfortable to express their sexuality openly. After around six months a space called Bloc Bar was opened in Camden Town that, after a year of operation, had to close. Bloc Bar was the same site at which we opened Her Upstairs, and was attended, in part, by people who would previously be found at The Black Cap. This brief history is of note because it attests to the significance of Her Upstairs for the community about which I am writing and of which I am a part. Therefore, to not write about Her Upstairs and the performances that happen in this venue would be to ignore a significant development in the research area.²³

The Research Ethics Subcommittee sought further information regarding the implications if the performance had been performed *for the first time* at Her Upstairs as to whether that made a difference to the ethics of the research. The committee also questioned whether it

²³ It is also of note that Her Upstairs had to close in August 2018. Whilst a significant event, the research in this thesis finished prior to this and due to my own close emotional involvement in the venue I do not yet have critical distance to provide effective or useful analysis.

was clear to performers that I was not paying them for performances that I may then go on to research if I did not physically pay them myself, since I was so imbricated in the venue. In the first instance I noted that due to the nature of the “gig economy” in which many of the performers about whom I write participate, it is often difficult to know prior to seeing a performance at the venue whether or not it is the first time being performed there. However, I was able to confirm once I finalised my examples of practice that for those performance which occurred at Her Upstairs three of them were technically performed for the first time there: Sadie Sinner and the Cocoa Butter Club explored in Chapter Three was started and developed to initially be a performance event at Her Upstairs although quickly extended to other venues and maintained independent financial stability, LoUis CYfer’s performance included in Chapter Four only happened at Her Upstairs and was an unplanned performance at a charity fundraising event, and Herr’s performance in Chapter Five was first performed at Her Upstairs but quickly went on to become one of her most well-known performances that she has performed across the UK. The rest of the work in this thesis took place in other venues first or in other venues entirely. Furthermore, to avoid writing about Her Upstairs in its entirety would be remiss since it is one of a decreasing pool of venues currently providing space for the drag performance work that is the focus of this thesis.

With regards to the second point, whilst for some performers the line between myself and the other business owners will be blurred enough to consider payment from one venue director to be a payment from all venue directors, this is something I was happy to discuss with every performer about whom I write in order to make it clear to them. Beyond this, it is important to note that, due to the often precarious nature of the economies in which these

performers work (with work often being irregular or poorly paid, as well as happening in a decreasing number of spaces), that to not pay and financially support performers who I include in my research would present more explicit ethical issues.

The Research Ethics Subcommittee approved these conditions and practices, and I continued to work and develop the research. As noted above, these formal processes grew out of the more informal ethical position that was the starting point for the research, which was honed by conversations with my supervisors, peers and training staff on the Research Degrees Programme and which helped to form the basis of my affinitive practice as part of my queer side-eye approach. A queer side-eye, then, necessitates a complex ethical consideration of my personal position in the research and I articulate it as a careful position (one which is literally full-of-care) that is bound up in research ethics and integrity explored above but also which flows through all aspects of the process from the initial academic research, to experiences of field work, note taking and creative writing, to the final writing up of the thesis.

Robust ethical practice is the starting point from which my queer side-eye and the research as a whole begins, and having laid out this ethical starting point and the political, academic and performance practices that form the queer side-eye, I now move to being exploring the performance work that has informed this thinking. I start in Chapter Two by exploring the work of Mzz Kimberley, Meth and Virgin Xtravaganzah, returning to some of the ideas of queer temporalities outlined in Chapter One, and consider how visibility despite homophobia and transphobia in and through drag performance emerges through moments of temporal disjunction.

Chapter Two: Queer Times

Introduction

We have been through the performance, we have lived it and breathed it in, we are holding the feeling of it in our bodies, we hold it in the way we sit, in the way we cling to the hand of the person next to us, in the hand that comes up to cover our mouths as if to hold the feeling inside of us. We breathe in and hold our breaths, capturing for that brief moment a memory of that experience of being lifted above the now, of witnessing and feeling the bright, heady realness of a somewhere else. Intoxicated by utopia, we forget ourselves. We breath out and, as the last notes of the piano fades, we clap our hands and raise our voices, cheering and letting it all go. We leave the space, we go home, we live our lives. Maybe we go to work or to school. Maybe we go for coffee with a friend or spend the day alone. Perhaps there is a haunting of a smile across our faces, or a spring in our step. A sad laugh at the opening notes of a particular song that day, or just a feeling that the images you are seeing are a bit sharper or brighter or clearer or more visible.

For the next few days, I think I catch them out of the corner of my eyes, hear a laugh on the edge of my hearing, think I see them leave the stage or walk around a corner at the edge of my vision. I am on edge for the sound of their voice, for the sound of that song and for the feeling of that night once more. On edge in anticipation to be taken to that place again and buoyed up in that way. On edge, edgy, edging forwards to try and capture once more the feeling of that moment.

The creative account above was written in response to seeing legendary queer performance artist Justin Vivian Bond perform in London's Southbank Centre in 2015. Whilst not directly drag, the performance work is referential of the drag performance in this thesis and sits broadly within ideas of queer performance practice alongside which I position all the work in my research. This chapter takes up the issues of drag performance and queer communities, and importantly taking up notions of understanding how drag performance might stage ideas of hope and utopia and facilitate audiences to imagine utopia. It starts from notions of queer temporalities that emerged in Chapter One, drawing from the work of Halberstam, Freeman and Muñoz to engage with hopeful futures, pasts and presents and locate ways for drag performance to resist homophobia and transphobia and offer strategies for hope, resistance and survival in the present.

This chapter takes up the ideas of edginess and being on edge that emerge in the creative writing above. In mobilising this edgy position, I start this chapter by glancing side-ways at two critical ideas. Firstly, I explore the idea that the performance work in this chapter takes a position of "despite": in particular where drag performance might be considered as remaining visible despite violence (as is articulated explicitly in relation to Meth's work below, but also arguably all of the performance work in this thesis). In looking at the edges of the word despite, I purposefully misread it by locating potential in being visible, in spite of and even to spite violence. I consider the complexities of this idea before turning to complex relationships between visibility, violence and privilege, looking at the edge of these ideas to consider how being invisible might be about occupying a position of privilege. I bring these ideas together when turning to the moments of performance, considering creative accounts and academic

enquiries that elucidate how utopia can be imagined in and through drag performance and how a hopeful and utopian glance at the work of drag, through ideas of queer times and temporalities, produces a hopeful and utopian set of practices that help resist and challenge contemporary homophobia and transphobia.

Starting from the creative account I consider being on edge as a critical framework to think about my queer side-eye, where my queer side-eye necessitates looking at the edge of performance and theory, and also being on edge, which might be both about being in anticipation, and being on edge for danger. This chapter takes the ideas of queer times and temporalities that emerged in my thinking through queer studies in Chapter One and considers the ways in which thinking through queer times and temporalities produces hopeful and utopian engagements with drag performance in which queer communities can be glimpsed. Throughout, I mobilise my queer side-eye to consider what emerges when we look at the periphery, or around the edge of, drag performance. My queer side-eye here necessitates remaining on edge and on the edge, where being on the edge indicates a pleasurable position of playful academic enquiry relating to the pleasures of coming together as part of queer communities. It also indicates a position of safety, where I might be on edge in relation to potential danger. Finally, it indicates a position in the space (where I am often on the edge of the performance space when watching drag) and an academic position, where I glance around the edges of theory and practice in order to see what queer knowledges might be produced.

As explored in Chapter One, time and temporalities have been central to queer theoretical projects arguably since the earliest queer conceptions (Butler, 1993; Halperin, 1995; Jagose, 1996). Thinking around the ways in which queer subcultures offer alternative modes of engaging with organising, normative life markers such as marriage and reproduction (Halberstam, 2005) have progressed alongside explorations of the ways in which futurities and utopias offer fecund and vital sites of engaging with and critiquing the present (Buckland, 2002; Muñoz, 2009). These normative logics have been termed 'chrononormativity' (Freeman, 2007) and 'straight time' (Muñoz, 2009), recognising the ways in which understandings of time and temporalities reify normative modes of being in the world as natural or unquestionable. Freeman, Halberstam and Muñoz are central theorists in considering what queer and queerness might offer as sites of resistance to these normative modes of existence. Queer engagements with time and temporalities offer ways of critiquing these normative modes, offering strategies to resist heteronormativity and the forms of oppression (including homophobia and transphobia) that it produces. These temporal critiques range from extended adolescence (Halberstam, 2005) to finding strategies for alternative futures in the past (Freeman, 2007) through to engaging in queer aesthetics to locate horizontal queer utopias (Muñoz, 2009).

This chapter takes temporal critique as its starting point, considering moments of performance that I argue imagine utopia and, in the moment of imagining, also enact a critique of the present. In this imagining, they also importantly render hope as possible. Drawing from three performances by three contemporary drag and cabaret artists, Mzz Kimberley, Meth and Virgin Xtravaganzah, I suggest that moments of performance in which

utopia might be felt (both individually and collectively) produce critical engagements with the now that insist upon hope and critique the present. I stay on edge when looking at this work and look at the edges of these performances through my queer side-eye to produce hopeful accounts of drag performance and queer communities.

Despite, In Spite Of, To Spite

One of the key understandings that runs through my thinking of these three performances is an engagement with the idea of *despite* as a critical mode, where being on stage and being present as a drag and queer performer *despite* violence, and *despite* venue closure, is a mode of visibility that challenges contemporary phobic discourses. *Despite* functions across two levels. Firstly, in relation to visibility, it functions as a critical mode of being which speaks to the idea of being together, of coming together in venues, of remaining visible on the streets, *despite* violence and the threat of violence. Secondly, I also characterise it as being *to spite* this violence. Here, *despite* offers a playful engagement with the present that I position as an embodied method that is part of my queer side-eye.

Despite takes as a starting point this visibility. To be *despite* something is to be in relation to something 'without being affected by [it]' (Oxford University Press, 1999: 389). I am not suggesting that this visibility is ever experienced without being affected by the implications of being visible, and therefore *despite* can also be helpfully understood as doing something *notwithstanding, regardless of, or in spite of*. Playfully, it might also be *to spite* something. In

other words, despite could also function as a mode of being visible and continuing to exist precisely because the existence of queer people is increasingly not desired.

The formal derivation of the word “despite,” used as both a noun and a verb, is as an expression of contempt. To hold something in despite, therefore, is ‘to hold [it] in contempt; to have or show contempt or scorn for [it]’ (Oxford University Press, 2017). This etymological distinction, whilst now archaic, is reminiscent of the explorations of “reading” and “throwing shade” as drag practices. I *read* despite here in this archaic sense, as a scornful, contemptuous and playful position and gesture. My queer side-eye offers opportunities to locate hope in moments of drag performance, and ways to hold other practices or politics (homophobic and transphobic ones, for example) in despite. To set something in despite is also emblematic of a mode of giving something a sideways glance, or a queer side eye, which I have characterised as both a mode of looking at the periphery to see who might be brought into the space, and a suspicious glance at the periphery as a mode of avoiding danger. To hold something in despite, then, might also be a suspicious glance, which is fundamentally about survival. To be in *despite* then is both a mode of doing a queer side-eye, and the reading of despite here activates the queer-side as an academic mode.²⁴

²⁴ This purposefully ambiguous etymology is resonant of Elizabeth Freeman’s (2007) etymological reading of belonging as a desire to “be-long” or ‘to long to be bigger not only spatially, but also temporally, to “hold out” a hand across time and touch the dead or those not born yet, to offer oneself beyond one’s own time’ (Freeman, 2007: 199). Whilst I explore this idea of belonging as theoretically relevant to my understandings of queer community in Chapter Three, here I understand this purposeful misreading as a queer (and queer academic) strategy that is both playful and interpretative, allowing for alternative readings and understandings which Muñoz (1999), drawing on the foundational queer work of Sedgwick (1994), understands as ‘constantly [finding] oneself thriving on sites where meaning does not properly “line up”’ (Muñoz, 1999: 78). This mode of purposeful misreading is both a queer academic strategy, and a mode of resistance, existence and survival (and, arguably, these three terms are not clearly separate for queer people), that underpins this thesis and is a strategy that my queer side-eye both sits alongside and purposefully borrows from.

Firstly, I will explore it as a mode of continued existence and visibility *despite* the increased threat of violence to queer bodies, before turning to this idea of despite in relation to hope. Whilst the binary of visibility/invisibility (and silence/not being able to speak) is often figured in relation to power and/or privilege, with being visible and having a voice perceived as a position of power, critiques of this simple binary challenge the idea that being invisible is always already a precarious or oppressed position. To be invisible, and to not have to speak, can be considered as a position of privilege. There is a privilege to not being seen. Alternatively, to be visible, and to have to speak (to, for example, defend oneself) could be a position of precariousness or risk.

This is resonant of Roland Barthes (1972) theorisation of “ex-nomination”, in which the bourgeoisie does not refer to itself as such (by name) as a process of naturalising ways of being, languages and politics, and therefore coming to represent a “normal” positionality. In not speaking about oneself or naming oneself, the status quo gets maintained. Critical race scholars have also positioned “whiteness” in relation to these ideas (see Dyer, 1997) in which whiteness becomes the norm against which other races are identified and as such regulated, perpetuating racist ideologies. Further explorations of these ideas could also be found in Adrienne Rich’s (1980) understanding of “compulsory heterosexuality” as a founding of heterosexuality as a set of norms which not only creates homosexuality as the other but also disempowers women more generally. Through these ideas, ex-nomination is about being unmarked by identity in various ways, experiencing modes of privilege that facilitate passing through (by dint of not being seen or marked by) barriers that others may be unable to pass.

Here, I extend this understanding from Ahmed's (2016) definition of privilege as

rather like contact dermatitis: we are inflamed by something when or because we come into contact with it. Privilege is also thus: being able to avoid contact with the cause of an inflammation. We could contrast contact dermatitis with eczema, which is often called a "basket category," used to describe skin conditions in which the cause of the inflammation is not known. With eczema it can feel as if you are the cause of your own inflammation, whether or not you are the cause, because there is no safe externality; nothing that can be eliminated to heal the skin or the situation (Ahmed, 2016: 27).

Here, privilege is experienced not as something tangible, but instead as the opposite, as not being affected by a thing or things. Privilege might manifest in not being affected, and whilst *being affected* can be articulated not as a negative thing (in much the same way Butler re-articulates vulnerability as a condition of queer experience(s) as explored above), there is also room to consider how the experience of privilege might also be an experience of being able to pass through without affect, notice, or harm.

Ahmed plays with this idea too, suggesting that

We can think of gender norms as places in which we dwell: some are more at home than others; some are unhoused by how others are at home. When we are talking about the policing of gender, we are talking about walls, those ways in which some are blocked from entry, from passing through [...]. An institutional wall is not something that we can simply point to: there it is, look! An institutional wall is not an actual wall that exists in front of everyone. It is a wall that comes up because of who you are or what you are trying to do. Walls that are experienced as tangible and hard by some, do not even exist for others (Ahmed, 2016: 32).

To be able to pass through, to not be marked in or as passing, or to not experience a wall, is a privileged ability to move through the world. Passing is also a purposefully playful re-engagement of passing in relation to gender and sexuality, where to pass within a binary of

male/female, or to pass as heterosexual, might indicate both a desirable end-point of a process of transition, or perhaps a tactic of survival that involves temporarily flying under the radar.²⁵ Not being seen becomes a privileged position that is articulated through access (to institutions, for example), lack of harm, and safety, in contrast to a visibility which opens the subject up to danger. However, there is also room to consider what this *marking* does.

The queer body, the body of a person of colour, the body that is perceived to perform a non-normative gender or sexuality, and so on, are bodies that are not afforded the privilege of being unseen. The queer person is marked, where being marked is also about being noticed, seen, and judged. These people are visible and are more likely to be policed, and subjected to violence; and, in Butlerian terms, be opened up to one another and to lives and bodies beyond their own. As Ahmed (2004) points out elsewhere

Queer pleasures are not just about the coming together of bodies in sexual intimacy. Queer bodies “gather” in spaces, through the pleasures of opening up to other bodies. These queer gatherings involve forms of activism; ways of claiming back the street, as well as the spaces of clubs, bars, parks and homes (Ahmed, 2004: 165).

I extend a discussion of the implication of queer bodies coming together in pubs and club in relation to Mzz Kimberley’s work below, and at various other points throughout the thesis, however here I unpack what this to consider what a queer exploration of being visible might be and might offer.

²⁵ See Chapter Five for an extension of this idea of flying under the radar as a queer tactic.

Whilst a mainstream, assimilationist gay politics such as the fight for equal marriage in the UK could be argued as being ultimately about gay invisibility through a process of fitting in, I would characterise a queer hope for liberation as being visible *despite* violence and *to spite* homophobic and transphobic violences and discourses that aim to erase queer lives or make them invisible. Whilst critiques of visibility as bound up in neoliberal discourses of individual rights can be seen in larger discussions in theatre and performance studies, in particular surrounding autobiographical performance (Heddon, 2008) or representational politics (Phelan, 1993), I propose that this visibility is not as simple as just appearing on stage and therefore appearing in the public, particularly because these performance events are often happening in venues that specifically cater for queer audiences. Instead, remaining visible *despite* violence marks a tactical decision that might be temporary, or happen at key moments when visibility might be possible, productive or safe, and also recognises moments where invisibility *despite* queer politics might also be a necessary tactic of survival through flying under the radar. As Ahmed notes in reference to the call for “debates” from Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERFs),

There cannot be dialogue when some at the table are in effect (and intent on) arguing for the elimination of others at the table. When you have “dialogue and debate” with those who wish to eliminate you from the conversation (because they do not recognize what is necessary for your survival, or because they do not even think your existence is possible), then “dialogue and debate” become a technique of elimination. A refusal to have some dialogues and some debates in this a key tactic for survival (Ahmed, 2016: 3).

Despite and visibility *despite* also recognises the important located-ness of these moments, arguing critically for understandings of visibility that pay attention to moments when visibility is a useful queer political tool, and moments when not being marked is also a tactic of survival

*that is equally important.*²⁶ Despite could be considered as a temporal phenomenon or tactic, one which is acutely aware of the temporal distinctions of the possibility of hope, and this is what I turn to explore in more depth now.

Throughout this thinking of despite, visibility and invisibility, has been the question of hope which runs through this thesis. Namely, if despite is about locating ways to engage with the present in unexpected ways in and through visibility, where is hope located? In other words, if the present is increasingly homophobic and transphobic, in what direction might a queer side-eye be looking in order to locate hope, happiness and survival for queer people?

Ahmed (2010) posits that 'Nostalgic and promissory forms of happiness belong under the same horizon, insofar as they imagine happiness as being somewhere other than where we are in the present' (Ahmed, 2010: 160-1). Drawing from Edelman's queer negativity (see Chapter One) and Michael D. Snediker's (2009) development of queer optimism, Ahmed's discussion provides a strategy to consider how hope might feature in the present. This does not, however, only locate hope and happiness in the present moment, for

when happiness is present, it can recede, becoming anxious, becoming the thing that we could lose in the unfolding of time. When happiness is present, we can become defensive, such that we retreat with fear from anyone or anything that threatens to take our happiness away (Ahmed, 2010: 161).

²⁶ Here I am not claiming that all queer people have invisibility as an option available to them and it is important to note that even temporary moments of invisibility or not being seen is a privileged position. Many of the performers about whom I write occupy a position in which their personas on and off stage are not distinct, and that their visibility on stage necessitates or produces both visibility and invisibility off stage that could be precarious and risky, as well as hopeful and liberating.

If happiness and hope cannot be located only in the past or the future, or solely held within the present, where can it be located without returning to Edelman's negativity that this thesis resists? Rather than locating hope monolithically in one singular location (past, present or future) a queer side-eye, and here specifically *despite* locates hope in multiple locations and moments *at the same time*, often those not clearly identifiable by straight modes of looking.²⁷ As I go on to argue below in Meth's practice, for example, a queer side-ways glance at her work locates her moment of visibility despite violence and hope despite violence in a lip synch performance containing quotes from action and fantasy films that have *no necessary connection* to queer cultures or liberation.

Instead, these moments of performance offer brief glimpses of hope by making hope a possibility *in the first place*. For, as Butler (2006) rightfully argues, 'the thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity' (Butler, 2006: 31). This suggests that to refuse a future, to disavow a politics of hope, or to claim anti-futurity, is always already a privileged position. Ahmed also follows this point, suggesting that 'Possibilities have to be recognised as possibilities to become possible' (Ahmed, 2010: 218).

For Ahmed, following Snediker's queer optimism, it is important to recognise that to embrace the negative is not *only* a negative move, but is still affirming something: negativity, or the present itself. By this, Ahmed suggests that the focus should not be on what is positively or

²⁷ "Straight modes of looking" refers to dominant modes of theorisation against which the queer side-eye is a queer mode of looking and doing theory.

negatively affirmed (or even on affirming positive or negative affects), but rather that it is important to 'read how positive and negative affects are distributed and how this distribution is pedagogic – we learn about affect by reading the how of its distribution' (Ahmed, 2010: 162). Ahmed signals a desire to understand not just what affects are by studying how they function, but how they are deployed and implemented, and what this says about broader systems of power and resistance.²⁸ In this instance, then, the desire is to explore how hope might be deployed; who gets to be hopeful, who has the capacity for hope, who is assigned a hopeful future (or present or, indeed, past)? I would extend this to also consider where hope might be located, particularly in places such as drag performance that might be read by dominant cultures, or straight readings, as “merely” entertainment or “just” frivolous performance acts.

For Ahmed, this is as much a political as theoretical move, a way of recognising the 'collective labour in the process of becoming conscious of class, race, and gendered forms of oppression, which involves a necessary estrangement from the present' (Ahmed, 2010: 162). Being aware of the ways in which hope and happiness function in relation to these temporal distinctions of past, present and future and how queer subjects become oriented in relation to these temporal logics as well as logics of hope and happiness is a key political and intellectual ground from which to critique present modes of oppression. To put it another way, by exploring, detailing and understanding the ways in which hope and happiness function in relation to normative temporalities, a queer project might revitalise and trouble

²⁸ Whilst notions of affect are tangential and often complimentary to my understanding of the experience of drag performance in places, this thesis is not oriented towards affect studies, but recognises that this field offers a broader intellectual terrain that could inform this thinking in the development of these ideas in the future.

understandings of hope and happiness to consider alternative ways of thinking *in futurity* without resigning hope and happiness to the realm of the future, or the past, or locating it solely within a paranoid present. Furthermore, even the thought of hope in the future as being a possibility is a thought in the present, which could generate pleasures in this present. I propose that hope should not be considered as located in one place, but in multiple (and unexpected) places and directions.

This is reflective of what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls cruel optimism. Berlant suggests that optimism, which is intimately related to hope, might be ‘an orientation toward the pleasure that is bound up in the activity of world-making, which may be hooked on futures, or not’ (Berlant, 2011: 14). This optimism is also linked inherently to pleasure, or the seeking of pleasure, which does not remain a simple relation. Rather, Berlant examines the

complexity of being bound to life. Even when it turns out to involve a cruel relation, it would be wrong to see optimism’s negativity as a symptom of an error, a perversion, damage, or a dark truth: optimism is, instead, a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently (Berlant, 2011: 14).

Berlant understands cruel optimism to be that which is both sustaining and damaging, recognising that those things to which we might attach ourselves, such as hope, happiness, and possibility, can both sustain us and be a site of injury. Here, visibility *despite* violence might be part of this system of cruel optimism where the desire to be visible or invisible is both a sustaining hope and something which is injurious or could lead to injury. Despite, as one political and material tactic in my queer side-eye, offers a way of engaging with present modes of homophobia and transphobia that is hopeful and wary. I argue these moments of despite and being *in spite of* are temporally specific acts of resistance and survival and, as I

examine in relation to the three performers below, drag performances offer moments of practicing this idea of despite, performing it, and embodying it in and through performance.

For Ahmed, exploring these complex relationships between hope and despair, optimism and pessimism, is key to understanding and developing ‘forms of politics that take as a starting point a critique of the world as it is, and a belief that the world can be different’ (Ahmed, 2010: 163). Despite offers a mode of doing this, by insisting on the visibility and vulnerability of queer bodies in this contemporary socio-political moment outlined in my introduction and Chapter One. This emerges through using visibility and vulnerability as a mode of critique, and survival, as well as recognising moments when survival might also require invisibilities.

Despite functions across two levels, both of which are about survival. Firstly, it functions as a mode of visibility (or an insistence on the possibility of visibility) and, secondly, as a temporally specific and contingent practice of survival that seeks moments of visibility *despite* violence, whilst recognising the privilege and precarity at play in this move. Here, I articulate despite as an embodied method of my queer side-eye, and through it I locate a strategy of resistance and survival through pleasure, anger and hope in drag performance, and in being in the world queerly. Despite also actively revitalises a project of hope by insisting on hope as a possibility *despite or in spite of* the present, and indeed *to spite it* or because of it. It offers a mode of engaging creatively and unexpectedly with the present by locating hope in complex and unexpected sites, allowing a utopian gesture towards the future or the past as a method of critiquing the present without articulating hope as unavailable in the present moment.

Having articulated this intellectual grounding, I now consider three moments of performance that start to extend and develop this idea. I start with the work of Mzz Kimberley who, in many ways, articulates the entirety of this thesis in one performance. I position her work in relation to Dolan's utopian performativity as a temporally specific location of hope, performed in particular by a trans person of colour. I then turn to drag artist, Meth, positioning her work in relation to these ideas of despite to explore what the performance *does* or has the potential to do for a wider queer politics. In particular I focus on one small moment in one performance, two words of a lip synch, as performing these temporally specific notions of despite. Finally, I consider the work of Virgin Xtravaganzah, exploring the complex temporalities at play in her performance, arguing that often the queer utopian potentiality of popular performance work such as drag cannot be seen when looking at it straight on, but rather might only be able to be glimpsed at the periphery. Finally, I bring these performances together to consider the complex and contingent ways in which queer temporalities might be activated in and through drag performance work as a mode of queer political critique and hope.

Mzz Kimberley

Here we are; I had dragged them here frustrated, wanting to get off the streets, forcing them out of the Nando's across the road early, moaning at them to whole way. We arrived and I took my first deep breath of the day. Even then I recognised that Pride felt complex, and not necessarily in a good way. I wanted to get here so badly because the streets, as packed as they were with gays and revellers, still felt suffocating, and not necessarily in a good way. As she

takes to the stage, I am dizzy from all the breaths I have taken, the lung-filling gasps I have sucked into my body. It is as packed and as sweaty here as it is anywhere else on Pride day, but for some reason that is still unintelligible to me it all just tastes sweeter. It hits the back of my throat as I turn to face the stage, the familiar feeling starting well up inside me already, starting at the pit of my stomach.

The show is full of energy; she is on roller-skates, the costumes light up, there is a crown that falls off, where is she now?! She's every woman, she's home, she's a bridge over troubled water. As she sits down on the edge of the stage, her legs resting on the steps, the mood lightens and gets heavier all at once. The opening notes fill the air and she makes eye contact with one audience member, or maybe all audience members, and she sings softly and quietly and slowly and sadly and warmly and hopefully and joyously. My heart breaks open, and not necessarily in a bad way.



Figure 1: Mzz Kimberley at Her Upstairs, 2018. Image: FDPhoto

Mzz Kimberley is a near-legendary cabaret and drag performer who has worked extensively on the performance scene in London and beyond, as well as having an extensive career in film, television and theatre.²⁹ She has worked in various LGBTQ+ nightlife settings across the UK and in more recent years has performed regularly on the London Pride Main Stage and been a head judge for the annual competition, Pride’s Got Talent, that works across LGBTQ+ nightlife venues in London to find an outstanding new performer to perform on the mainstage at London Pride (Mzz Kimberley, 2019). Beyond the cabaret, drag and performance world, Mzz Kimberley is also a patron of *cliniQ*, ‘an holistic sexual health and well-being service for all trans people, partners and friends’ (cliniQ, 2019).

²⁹ Meth, the drag performer I explore below, will often introduce Mzz Kimberley on stage by saying she is “legendary” by which I mean “she’s old”.

Mzz Kimberley is well-known and vocal as a trans woman of colour on the cabaret and drag performance scene. Her work is extensive, and she is a role model for younger performers as well as a young trans people and people of colour, and many other drag and cabaret performers. Her work often references these issues of identity and identification, although not always, and her success is in her live singing voice which is clearly well-trained and impressive. I have seen Mzz Kimberley perform individual numbers as part of a larger cabaret show or whole solo shows by herself in multiple venues across London. I have seen her perform songs which have been funny, controversial, moving, daring and technically excellent. In particular, I have seen her perform work which characterises many of the ideas in this thesis, and looking through notes made at various shows I attended throughout this thesis, it is possible that it was during Mzz Kimberley's' performances that I first felt the glimmers of the ideas of hope, utopia and resistance that run through this thesis. It is fitting, then, to start here since in many ways Mzz Kimberley's work could be said to capture my arguments about drag performance.

The act in question took place at a Pride event 2014 at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT), a legendary LGBTQ+ nightlife venue in London.³⁰ Whilst I am aware that the political position I have taken in this thesis necessitates a wariness about the resonance of Pride in contemporary London, which is often bound up in complex and contentious issues of corporate sponsorship and assimilationist politics, the RVT is known for working with performance curators Duckie and putting on an event known as Gay Shame which actively critiques these ideas (Royal Vauxhall Taverns, 2019). The year in question (2014) the Pride

³⁰ I contextualise the RVT in more detail in the Chapter Three.

event was hosted by Bar Wotever, an inclusive performance environment that particularly supports queer, trans and/or non-binary performers and audiences (Royal Vauxhall Tavern, 2019). Due to Bar Wotever's ethos, the critique of mainstream Pride's assimilationist politics remained.³¹

Mzz Kimberley performed a set that evening with various performances, singing numerous songs. The particular act in question had a lower energy than anything Mzz Kimberley had done up to that point, with performances on roller-skates, with costumes that lit up, and various other tricks that often characterise her work. For this number, Mzz Kimberley sat on stage and sang, mostly at one audience member, a cover of Aretha Franklin's (1967) version of "(You Make Me Feel Like A) Natural Woman".

This moment indicated a purposeful emotional shift in the performance, and I have no doubt the Mzz Kimberley planned for this raw moment at the end of a high-energy set in order to have such an emotional impact on the audience that I describe above. Temporally, then, within the arc of the show this act was a moment of disjunction that disrupted the high-energy narrative of the performances so far. This tonal and emotive shift insisted on attention being paid to the body of the performer on stage and not just the emotions being produced by the performances up to that point. By this, I suggest that as an audience we are confronted not just with the bold and vivacious drag and cabaret performer, but also the body of the

³¹ A version of this particular act can be seen at London Drag Shows (2018) *Mzz Kimberley - A Natural Woman @ Her Upstairs - 04/06/18*, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSJQM0OBTqQ>, accessed: 24/08/2019. This version is at Her Upstairs in 2018, but is indicative of the act I explore.

trans woman of colour simultaneously in this moment; another mode of visibility is taking place here.

Farrier (2013), in a discussion of temporalities in theatre and the relationship between bodies and characters on stage, starts to resolve issues of queer agency by insisting upon paying attention to the co-presence of bodies and characters simultaneously in performance. He argues that 'a focus on the body of the performer might, in some way, enable the holding of the solidity of the performer alongside simultaneous holding of the virtual character' (2013: 50).³² This moment in the performance, with Mzz Kimberley sitting on stage and singing at one audience member, insisted upon the presence of the body of the performer as well as the drag and cabaret performer who performed. Whilst the line between character and performer is not distinct for Mzz Kimberley or many of the performers in this thesis, audiences may not necessarily know that. This moment insisted upon the presence of the body of the performer (or the identity of the performer both on and off stage) and in this insistence there is a hopeful reminder of the ways in which being visible, or perhaps more clearly here, being *seen*, is an important part of queer survival. Here, I propose that in this moment of performance, particularly in her gaze resting on one audience member, there is a reciprocity of seeing that happens in which the performer on stage is seen and is seeing the audience. She is also seen seeing by the audience and she sees the audience seeing her.

³² I explore this idea further in relation to the work of Michel Twaits in Chapter Four and Fagulous in Chapter Five.

I draw this idea of “seeing” from feminist theatre practice and theory which, whilst not directly related to this work, sit alongside my thinking. Elaine Aston (1999) suggests that one mode of feminist theatre practice (and the move between feminist theories and practices) is about a ‘commitment to exploring different ways of representing or “seeing” gender; of making ourselves visible when we cannot be “seen” in dominant systems of social, cultural and theatrical representation’ (Aston, 1999: 18). The different negotiations of seeing and being seen that run through Aston’s ideas of feminist theatre practice are located in Mzz Kimberley’s work here, and I purposefully position her work within this lineage of feminist thinking. Mzz Kimberley sees the audience and is seen by the audience, she insists upon her body and identity on the stage and, as a trans woman of colour, her presence within queer communities and the drag performance scene is not a simple one but is certainly an important one.³³

Being seen and seeing herself being seen on a stage of a legendary queer venue on Pride is an important political act, even if for Mzz Kimberley and audiences at the RVT it was a regular occurrence. I recognise in this moment the importance of visibility despite narratives that, for example, would deny the place of trans women in discussions of drag. For Mzz Kimberley’s work, however, it is also important to recognise the importance of this visibility, even if the presence of Mzz Kimberley on Pride stages and mainstream stages as a trans woman of colour is a regular occurrence and as such taken for granted. In not taking Mzz Kimberley for granted, then, I insist again upon paying attention to the importance of her presence on stage and

³³ I explored this in Chapter One in relation to drag performance and extend this discussion in relation to normativities within drag in Chapter Four.

argue that her presence insists and continues to insist upon diverse work in drag and queer performance which is ultimately a utopian project.

Beyond the issue of representation here, I also return to the moment of performance itself, and one in which (as can be seen from the creative account above) was profoundly emotional. It was also formative in much of my thinking around queer utopian longings emerging in drag performance and in particular I argue that in the moment of performance I experienced a mode of breathing and being able to breathe that has helped to ground my experiences and understanding of queer hope in my body.

I am on the edge of my seat; or am I standing? Either way, as soon as she starts, I'm moved to my feet, to the edge of them, on my tip toes, trying to see every inch of her and the stage. She may just be looking at one person, but I feel like she is looking straight at me, at all of us, looking into our eyes and singing it for each one of us individually and all of us all at once. I am standing at the right-hand side of the stage at the back. I do not think Kim knows me yet, or if she does it is just as another face in the crowd, another tearful face in the corner of her eye. I breathe deeply, the sweat and alcohol and joy and hope hitting the back of my throat. The room surges alive as the song builds, whoops and scream and cheers erupting from throats that had waited with bated breath, exhaling gloriously in queer communion at her passion and her voice and her love.

There is, through both creative accounts of Mzz Kimberley's performance, a motif of breathing and breathiness that also runs through my thinking. This is resonant of Ahmed's understanding of breath and hope explored in my introduction, where having space to breathe is central to a project for queer hope (Ahmed, 2010). In reading Ahmed's formulation years after seeing Mzz Kimberley's performance I was struck by how this academic work described my own experiences of homophobia as restricting my breath, as well as the importance of queer venues and performances that allowed me to breathe more freely. This idea characterises some of the key thinking throughout this thesis, and I argue that in Mzz Kimberley's work, and in the act explored in particular, the audience (myself included) were offered the chance to take a deep, full breath. I argued in my introduction, following Ahmed, that being able to breathe deeply is a precondition of hope and that drag performance and the queer venues in which drag shows often happen offer opportunities for audiences and performers to take a deep breath. Being able to breathe deeply provides the opportunity to imagine, where not being able to catch your breath because of fear of violence, for example, limits capacity for hope and imagining utopias. Having space to breathe means having space to hope.

In Mzz Kimberley's work breath functions for her as a performer with the heaving breaths she has to take to hit technically challenging high notes being part of her work; she can be seen having to breathe heavily after each performance number. The slower number here amidst a cacophony of high-energy pieces was a breath in the overall show for the audience and for her. I also consider that in that moment it was as if the audience were breathing together, with one another and with Mzz Kimberley. We came together in that moment, a pleasurable

moment, and in so doing had a brief moment to breathe, imagine and hope. This is resonant of Dolan's utopian performativity, as a moment that was aesthetically and emotionally striking, and full of hope. This moment was emotionally voluminous and insisted upon a recognition of the complex relationships of bodies and identities in that space at that time. It also inculcated a moment of seeing and being seen in which we as audience and performers saw one another and saw one another seeing one another *despite* violences that might try and stop us coming to shows.

As I stressed above, in many ways Mzz Kimberley's work highlights my key argument in this thesis. Namely, that argument is that drag performance and the venues in which drag performance often happens offers opportunities for queer people to come together in and through moments of performance and in so doing have the opportunity to practice and realise queer communities and ultimately find modes of survival through queer hopes and utopias. In Mzz Kimberley's work I locate this through the breaths taken in her work, by the performer and the audience, and in particular through this one small moment of performance where the performer sits on stage, makes eye contact with an audience member, sees and is seen (and sees seeing and is seen seeing), and provides the space for a deep breath to happen.

In Mzz Kimberley work I have located hope and utopia in a moment of deep breathing, both in the performance moment and conceptually between audience and performer, arguing that there is an emotionally voluminous and intense engagement between audience and performer which facilitates hope and the imagination of a better future. I stood at the edge of the stage but was also moved to the edge of my seat and even to my tiptoes as I craned to

see the performance and was buoyed up by the hopeful feeling of the performance. Here, the metaphor of being on edge speaks to both my position in the space, how I look at the performance work intellectually, and to Dolan's utopian performativity. I extend this idea further in the following section as I turn to the work of Meth and consider one act in particular in which I locate on tiny moment as a temporal interruption that activates the ideas of "despite" explored above.

Meth

We are standing with her. Audience staring. In front of us, a nearly seven-foot tall drag queen, so poised and so dignified throughout this act, is hitching up the bottom of her gown. She shimmies it up, and cocks a leg over, and then mimes taking the reins of a horse. Is she really doing this? As she canters back and forth across the stage, the audience laugh and then cheer as it recognises the words she is lip synching.

"...I see in your eyes the same fear that would take the heart of me..."

We are swept up in the emotion of it; coerced, perhaps, into feeling, but also hit in the gut and dragged along with her, despite all that.

"...An hour of wolves, and shattered shields, when the Age of Men comes crashing down, but it is not this day!..."

I stand forward and always look around knowing what is coming yet feeling every time that feeling of pride surge through my chest. The speech continues and the audience are swept up as it ends and the crescendo of the song builds up and up and up, and then, just then, with one fell swoop it stops. For one brief moment of anticipation we are held in the palm of her hand, of each other's hands; held by and holding one another.

She opens her eyes and looks forward.

We breathe in deeply.

"For Frodo" she whispers.

We breathe out with a scream of anger and hope and adoration and joy and laughter.

We Roar.



Figure 2: Meth at Her Upstairs, 2017. Image: FDPhoto

Meth is known as a hostess and lip sync drag performer who works primarily in London and the UK but has an international profile in Europe and the USA. Meth is well known as a lip syncer, being described as an ‘exemplar of how performers develop their lip-synch skills and put them to use in performance’ (Farrier, 2016: 192) who ‘lip-synchs a juxtaposition of rock, heavy metal and rap-style music with the speech of well-known characters from television programmes (popular culture)’ (Farrier, 2016: 201). Meth’s performance work is well-known for splicing together popular songs with spoken word from television and film, or for playing with the format of songs by bringing together various different songs under the same theme.³⁴

³⁴ Well-known Meth acts include a version of Meredith Brook’s (2011) song “Bitch” with famously insulting and comic quotes from film and television or a version of “As Long As He Needs Me” from the musical *Oliver* (1960) in which the songs cuts out just before the final word “me” and is replaced by famous the final crescendos of other famous musical theatre songs that all finish with the word “me”.

Meth's act explored in the italicised section above, known as "Roar", is a performance in which the performer lip synchs Katy Perry's (2013) popular song of the same name interspersed with famous speeches from films which are colloquially known as epic speeches which might be characterised as mostly male-identified speakers giving speeches often before a battle or war scene.³⁵ This act, and much of Meth's work, engages with popular culture artefacts such as films, television programmes music and more, and purposefully and playful re-purposes them as sites of queer investment and hope. These ideas of popular culture as sites of queer investment and re-purposing appear again in this thesis below in this chapter in relation to Virgin Xtravaganzah and in the following chapter when looking at Myra Dubois as well as in my analysis of Herr in Chapter Five. In particular, this idea of popular culture and queer theories can be seen further in the work of Muñoz when talking about popular culture as a site in and through which queers can rehearse identities (Muñoz, 2009: 104), and as already explored in Halberstam's understanding of low theory as an engagement with forms of knowing and knowledge, and hope and survival, that locates hope in purposeful re-readings of popular cultural texts such as cartoons (Halberstam, 2011).

In this analysis I note these popular culture links, but argue that there is a useful analysis to be done in exploring the context of this act, before returning to the ideas of "despite" and in particular the temporal distinctiveness of moments of despite as one queer mode of survival

³⁵ A version of this performance taking place at Her Upstairs can be seen at London Drag Shows (2018) *Meth - Roar Mix @ Her Upstairs, London - 28/05/18*, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0xz_UpPtOs, accessed 24/08/2019

I characterise as a tactic within my queer side-eye. I do this through the exploration of one moment of the performance which I argue is also an intellectually purposeful queer sideways glance at the work. In this moment, I locate an embodied mode of critique in relation to homophobic violence that is temporally specific to these ideas of resistance and survival outlined above.

The significance of this act is not only in the performance form, but in the context in which it was created. In February of 2013, in the early hours of the morning and whilst in drag, Meth, a friend, and myself were confronted and subjected to acts of homophobic violence which culminated in being chased down the street by a man with a knife. This moment of violence forms part of the introduction to this thesis as an inciting incident that underscores this research. Whilst this is one isolated incident, this event has become personally emblematic of the contemporary rise in homophobic and transphobic violence in London. Whilst Meth did not necessarily make the act in response to this incident and to the broader emergence of rising homophobia and transphobia both in London and beyond, the act is often foregrounded by a speech which takes up discourses of remaining visible despite violence and the threat of violence, of staying strong and, using the song's title, roaring.

Whilst some would know this context, it is the live performance and the form of the performance which is hopeful and angry, and which informs my own utopian thinking about the work. By this I mean to locate the utopian longing (and critique) not only in the content and context of the performance, but also in the form and enactment of the performance. In understanding this act in relation to the double understanding of despite as considered

above, it is initially easy to see the links between the need to remain visible despite violence in Meth's act where the lyrics of the song and the call to arms in the spoken word moments incite and explore these ideas. However, in understanding the notion of despite as a temporally specific and contingent strategy of survival that recognises the possibility of hope, I want to explore one iteration of this performance in more detail and one moment of the act in particular (a moment where the performer lip synchs two words from a fantasy action film) as performing these ideas.

I am there beyond myself. The tears welling up in my eyes and falling down my cheeks are not allowed to fall. It is too early, she seems to whisper to me. You do not get to cry yet; you still need to fight. She reaches out from the audience and wipes the tears off my face; tender, but insistent.

I land back in my body with a crunch, aware of every part of me, and every part of everyone else pressed up against me. The lights shine out upon her, and upon us, we are furious and golden. My hands are clasped around the waists of two people either side of me, and I grip them tightly, grounding myself, as the music surges.

You do not get to cry yet; you still need to fight.

You do not get to cry yet; you still need to fight.

You do not get to cry yet...

She pauses. We pause. The moment stretches out infinitely as it has done time and time and time again, although this time I do not know when it is going to end. She has ridden about an imaginary horse, pretending to rally fictional troops to a fictional battle. A farcical moment that juxtaposes itself to the energy in the room. What once seemed playful, silly, stupid, somehow feels like the most serious thing that has ever happened on stage.

We drink in a deep breath, filled with smoke and fear and hope.

The particular iteration of this act took place on 12th April 2015 at The Black Cap in Camden. As previously discussed, The Black Cap was an historic LGBTQ+ pub, club and performance venue in Camden, London, which was closed on 13th April 2015. The performance of focus took place on the final night of the venue being open.

The Black Cap is one of a large number of venues which have closed or been threatened with closure over the last fifteen years, as already discussed in Chapter One.³⁶ This particular iteration of Meth's performance was one of the closing numbers of the evening. Whilst the closure was not public knowledge, the news had been hinted at enough for large crowds to gather and numerous performers to appear on the stage. During the performance I stood in the crowd, holding tightly to two close friends. The closing moments in the performance, in

³⁶ I discuss these venues closures, and the boarder socio-economic implication of them, in more detail in the next chapter.

which Meth lifts her hands up into the air as the song reaches its crescendo, is interrupted by the return of a spoken word line – “For Frodo” – from a speech lip synched previously in the performance. The reference is from epic fantasy film *The Lord of The Rings* (2003) and whilst it has no specific queer resonance, there is a deeper resonance here in the context of the performance. Standing in the crowd in an historic queer venue many of the audience knew was about to close was an undeniably affecting and moving experience and it is this moment that I want to draw out to consider further as a moment of despite.

The contents of the performance have the effect of affirming a particular mode of standing up and remaining visible which might be about vocalising and shouting back despite violence or the threat of violence. One method of resistance to this increase in violence is to remain visible and remain angry *despite* this violence and threat of violence or *to spite* those who might want to cause violence, and this is an argument that “Roar” makes through its content. However, despite is also a temporal distinction. Or, rather, it is important to note the temporal specificity of despite which involves recognising when visibility despite violence is not always already a viable tactic of queer resistance or queer survival but might be temporally contingent upon certain possibilities to emerge. Here I argue that Meth embodies a moment of this temporally specific despite-ness (or spitefulness) in this moment of lip synching the words “For Frodo”. As the song is interrupted and the single line is lip synched, the smooth temporal development of the performance and the lip synch is briefly interrupted. In that moment of disjunction, the normative organising temporal logic of progression is interrupted as well through a moment of humour and hope. There is pleasure

at seeing a well-timed and performed comedic moment and simultaneously a powerful interruption into narratives of homophobic and transphobic violence and venue closures.

Here I understand visibility as a temporally contingent strategy of survival (and as one strategy in the arsenal of the queer side-eye) and I argue that Meth's act both performs this mode of visibility and also stages the moment of temporal interruption. It locates hope both in remaining angry in the present (through roaring) whilst recognising and locating hope in multiple places (for example, in a thematically non-queer fantasy film) or in performance. A temporal interruption in the development of the song (through the line "For Frodo" interrupting a crescendo moment) serves as a jarring but pleasurable moment that reminds audiences of the unexpected ways queer subjects might and can engage with the present.

I argue this is also a moment in which a queer side-eye gets enacted on stage; Meth performs a queer sideways glance at the text (*The Lord of the Rings*) in order to locate hope, but she is also performing this method so the audience can also rehearse and perform their own cultural reinterpretation of these non-queer texts. I extend this idea below in relation to Virgin Xtravanzah's work. However, unlike Mzz Kimberley's performance in which utopia is imagined in the collective deep breath, Meth's act imagines utopia through a direct engagement with the present and in the temporal disruption of the narrative of the song that performs an unexpected engagement with the present. In its simplest formulation, Meth's act argues for visibility *despite* violence, for roaring in the face of homophobia and transphobia. More complexly, Meth's act stages hope for survival in the present *despite* violence (homophobic and transphobic violence, and the more systemic violence of queer

venue closures), insisting on the possibility of hope as a queer tactic, and using a sideways glance at popular cultural references such as films to locate hope in multiple and unusual places. In this particular moment of performance, I also attempt to mobilise my queer side-eye method to look playfully at the performance moment, locating a moment of hope in two words of a lip synch that I argue ultimately stages survival by staying visible through a moment of joy, silliness and pleasure.

I recognise the temporal specificity of locating the hope in this work, that the convergence of the location, the people in the room and on stage (what Campbell and Farrier (2016) refer to as the queer dramaturgy) all add to the emotional and queer experience of this work. I also propose that this hope lingers and returns across this performance when performed in other venues, on other stages and with other people; the act is well-known and often requested, and every time I have seen it, the emotional and physical responses return in complex ways.

Meth's act is a key example of the ways in which the temporal specificity of *despite* functions in performance, where the convergence of moments come together to produce feelings of hope *despite* violence. I have performed a queer side-ways glance at Meth's queer side-ways inclusion of popular culture references (both Meth and I are looking at the edge of our work), locating hope in this moment of performance as a purposefully serious engagement with something that is also purposefully silly.³⁷ Meth's work stages hope and resistance through visibility and through temporal playfulness, where Mzz Kimberly's performance work

³⁷ I extend this idea of silliness both in performance and academia in Chapter Five.

imagines utopia in and through an engagement with breath and hope, and an insistence on the body of the performer as present. To extend these ideas to examine other ways despite can function in performance, as well as other ways utopia might be imagined in and through drag, I turn to Virgin Xtravaganzah to further explore locate hope and queer resonances in unexpected places in drag performance, as well as considering how imagining utopia on stage might allow audiences to imagine utopia off stage.

Virgin Xtravaganzah

I always hold myself in a particular way, whenever I see things that push me like this. Hold myself.

Hold myself. My arms literally wrapped around my body, as if trying to keep myself together.

Entropy is just keeping it together, I heard, or trying is the point of life. And if we are bigger on the inside, maybe I am clutching myself to make sure I do not spill out, spill over, leak. But what would happen if I did?

I am aflame right now, burning, still afloat in a sea of rage that threatens to pull me under. How dare he come into my home and behave so thoughtlessly? But her voice ebbs the tide away and I clutch myself, hold myself together, hold myself in, and let her soften my edges. It

is no use fighting the current and as the chorus hits and we sing together, the room is ablaze with a righteous pacifism and a righteous belonging, leaving no one behind, like it or not.

I am just trying to offer her another chance to speak, she said, or was it another life. Her words ring hazy in my head as we sing along together, demanding better, or at least demanding different. The final note swells, and the dodgy sound system blurs the voice and the recording together until a near senseless susurrus surrounds us, and we surge to our feet.

If I must worship at her alter, I think to myself, I am not going to do it on my knees.



Figure 3: Virgin Xtravanzah Bloc Bar, 2016. Image: AbsolutQueer Photography

Virgin Xtravanzah is an American drag performer who works primarily in London and the UK. Her act is known as a parodic reinterpretation of the Virgin Mary, filtered through contemporary popular culture via pop music. Whilst this is the original focus of the

performance work, Virgin has developed into a complex character who performs both short form standalone acts as well as longer solo shows. Her main performance form is parodies and rewrites of contemporary popular music. The act that is the focus of this section is a rewritten version of the song *Hallelujah* (Cohen, 1984).³⁸ Whilst the original version of this song is by Leonard Cohen, Virgin uses Jeff Buckley's (2007) popular contemporary version. The song takes the premise of Virgin Xtravaganzah, as the Virgin Mary, leaving the church and discovering other holy words that other religious orders use. The audience are encouraged to sing along to the choruses of Hallelujah, L'Chaim, Somodicbe [sic], and Allahu Akbar whilst the verses tell of Virgin Xtravaganzah exploring the world and finding that whilst all these words sound different they are often misunderstood and misused and that fundamentally they are all trying to do the same thing. The message of unity and togetherness culminates in the line "the world doesn't have walls if we do not build them."

Whilst it is arguable that the message of unity and togetherness in the performance could be seen as naïve or uncritical, simplifying a complex socio-political situation and presenting an a-cultural and a-historical understanding of contemporary religious experience, there is something moving in the live experience of the form. The way in which we might be "moved" by performance, here, is borrowed from Campbell & Farrier's (2016) conception by which they suggest that they might be queerly moved by performance and 'hit [...] in the gut' (Campbell & Farrier, 2016: 2). They suggest that in their early experiences of queer performance they witnessed work that was 'excessive, flowing over meaning-making in the

³⁸ A version of this performance can be seen at: Virgin Mary and Friends (2016) *Virgin Xtravaganzah 'Hallelujah' by Jeff Buckley rewrite*, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0_vqXzF178, accessed 24/08/2019. This version takes place at Bethnal Green Working Men's Club, a well-known cabaret and queer performance venue, whereas the version I explore took place at Bloc Bar.

moment [...] they seemed paradoxically, both indecipherable and full of meaning at the same time; they were exciting and alluring and a bit dangerous' (Farrier and Campbell, 2016: 2-3). These discussions were queerly resonant for me; evoking and articulating my early experiences of both reading queer theory and watching queer performance, including drag. Whilst it is worth noting that being indecipherable and full of meaning are not necessarily mutually exclusive, here I argue that Virgin's work is meaningful – full of meaning – within the context in which it occurs.

Whilst Virgin's performance is not indecipherable – it is, in fact, extremely explicit in its meaning and intent – or particularly dangerous, there is in its live incarnation an excess of meaning that is difficult to pin down. I locate this excess in part in the religious connotations of both the performer and the act. Whilst images of the Virgin Mary have never been part of the queer 'cultural debris' (Freeman, 2010: xiii) that informed my queer attachments, it does have a particular queer resonance by which others have been informed.³⁹ Furthermore, the use of the song has a wider cultural resonance through popular culture, even if it is possible to ignore these religious connotations. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the act produces these emotional responses.

³⁹ Other texts explore the particular and complex relationship between Christian iconography, in particular the Virgin Mary, and queer cultures and identities. Martin F. Manalansan's (2003) text *Global Divas* explores the particular relationship of the figure of the Virgin Mary for South East Asian and in particular Filipino gay men, as well as the complex relationship Christianity and the figure of the Mother might have for the development of queer identities and shame. Other texts look more broadly at queer understandings or readings of spirituality (and in particular Christianity and Catholicism) such as Claudio Bardella's (2001) *Queer Spirituality* and Conner, Sparks and Sparks's (1997) *Cassell's Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Lore*. Whilst these texts explore the complex relationship of queer spirituality, that is not the focus of this chapter.

In this performance, I argue in the first instance that Virgin performs a reparative re-reading of this religious figure and this song that actively seeks to locate hope in a present moment. I then move to consider one moment of this performance in relation to one particular iteration, arguing that it acts to imagine utopia and in so doing locates hopeful modes of resistance and survival in popular culture and in popular performance forms. In doing this I also again propose that drag performances can imagine utopia and help an audience locate hope in multiple and often obscure places.

I draw the idea of a reparative re-imagining from Eve Sedgwick's (2002) understanding of reparative reading, in the chapter entitled *Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading*. She sets up an understanding of a paranoid reading as a form of criticism that has become synonymous with criticism itself. Her critique here is not of paranoid reading as a form of academic and social inquiry but rather that 'it seems [...] a great loss when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds' (Sedgwick, 2002: 126).⁴⁰

What Sedgwick is proposing is an opening up of what criticism might be (and what it might mean to be critical) in order to explore the possibilities that a reparative practice might offer for intellectual thinking and material and embodied practices of social engagement (for example, the labour of performance making, or the ways in which community might be built).

⁴⁰ I also consider my queer side-eye as alongside this idea of reparative reading, and my conceptualisation of this academic, socio-political and performance strategy is indebted to this thinking of reparative reading, which is connected to other modes of side-eye tactic explored in my methodology section.

Arguing that a paranoid position might be distinctly temporally normative, in both its desire to predict (or never be surprised) and its desire to expose, as well as in its prediction of tomorrow being the same as today, she turns instead to hope:

Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organise the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realise that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities that the past, in turn could have happened different from the way it actually did (Sedgwick, 2002: 146).

There is a queer temporality at play here in an insistence that things could have been, and might be, different. Furthermore, it raises the question of the uncertainty of pasts or histories, questioning that if it is not possible to know what might have happened or what *could have* happened, then what are the historiographical and social implications of imaging an alternative?

A reparative practice is one which makes room for hope and utopia, makes space for imagining alternatives, not only as a mode of re-imagining or re-vitalising complex, disjointed or problematic histories (and presents), but also as a mode of investing in these complex, disjointed and problematic narratives as potential sites of sustenance and survival. This is resonant of the ideas of possibilities explored above, where to locate hope as a possibility is to insist upon the possibility of hope:

What we can best learn from such [reparative] practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture - even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them (Sedgwick, 2002: 150-1).

The reparative gesture might re-vitalise potentially problematic objects or figures – such as the Virgin Mary – and locate in them modes of hope or survival. This is not simple, or easy, and the gravitational pull of normative modes such as religion are always exerted on queer re-interpretations of these forms. However, I suggest that in Virgin’s work there is a reparative gesture made towards this religious figure and this indicates that hope might be possible here, not universally and not all the time, but in complex and contingent moments in which queer audiences and performers come together. Hope in this instance not a broad, unlocated and oblique thing, but targeted, specific and temporally contingent. Therefore, the broad messages of “togetherness” preached in Virgin’s performance may initially seem a-political, but in paying attention to the particularities of this performance it is possible to attend to the particularities of the politics that emerge in and through it.

I argue that rather than a simple, naïve or generalised (re)appropriation of a religious figure, there is something here that is grounded more firmly in queer practices of reinterpretation. Muñoz argues that ‘Queer culture, in its music and iconography, often references salvation’ (Muñoz, 2009: 108). Salvation is present in Virgin’s performances, both for herself and for the audiences to which she sings. Spectators see her reaching for salvation, in her words and her gestures, and consequently reach for salvation themselves in the moment of coming together and singing along. Here salvation seem analogous to the ideas of hope that inform my thinking in this thesis and I return to hope, rather than salvation, as a strategy of resisting turning towards any further religious discourse here.⁴¹

⁴¹ I do not undertake a justification of Virgin’s relationship to or appropriation of religious iconography here because I am an atheist and I was not raised in a Christian household. Unlike some of my queer peers, I have neither a complex relationship to religion due to childhood enforcement of religious practices nor, as some of

My queer side-eye, and a sideways glance at Virgin's work, looks past, through or around the religious connotations, and allows a return to hope as the driving force of this thesis. Muñoz suggests that

...queer politics, in my understanding, needs a real dose of utopianism. Utopia lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity. It permits us to conceptualise new worlds and realities that are not irrevocably constrained by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and institutionalised state homophobia. More important, utopia offers us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*. (Muñoz, 2009: 35; original emphasis)

This imagining of utopia appears to be fundamentally about a refusal of the here and now as not good enough, a tacit demand for better. In Virgin's performance there is an element of a refusal; an always already moving away from, refusing of, the failings of a homophobic present. And in this refusal, utopia emerges.

Here the present is twofold; a queer, porous temporality is already at play. The character of Virgin Xtravaganzah is trapped in an ever-repeating cycle of pregnancy, giving birth and seeing her son die, trapped within a suffocating religious present. The body of the performer is simultaneously in a straight present is increasingly homophobic and transphobic and in which queer venues are being closed. As detailed above, Farrier (2013) discusses the complicated co-presence of the actual and the virtual, the character and the body, in theatre exploring how a return to the body and a focus on the body of the performer offers a moment of queer

my peers have developed, a need to appropriate or imbue religious figures with queer energy. Whilst there is an important discussion on the religious connotations of Virgin's work, that is not the focus of this chapter, since my queer side-eye does not take in the religious connotations in that way, but instead takes in the modes of hope and utopia that emerge in and through the performance.

utopic critique, or that 'a queer utopic vision of the possible can be enacted' (Farrier, 2013: 50). Whilst Farrier is particularly discussing the ways in which this brief moment serves as a mode of exploring the complex issue of queer agency, there are resonances here with the presence of the performer's body in Xtravaganzah's work. The co-presence of the character of Virgin Xtravaganzah, and the body of the performer herself, is complex, but the coherency of the narrative (of being trapped, yet yearning to escape, and even escaping) emerges alongside the discontinuity of the queer body of the performer. It exposes the possibility for change (and hope) in a material present. Put simply, if the Virgin can get out of the church, perhaps the queer performer and the queer audience can get out of the homophobic and transphobic present.

In that queer utopic moment of performance, a critique of the present is enacted. By imagining an alternative world Virgin simultaneously critiques the present. In that moment of critique, of refusal, the porously queer temporality of the present is exposed in the body of the performer on stage, and audience and performer can locate hope there. Queer hope is again located in an unexpected site, and arguably can only glimpsed when looking for it; my queer side-eye reveals this possibility. My queer side-eye offers another way of looking in order to locate hope in discontinuous, complex and unexpected sites.⁴² This might be a way of locating hope where it might not be sought (as a queer tactic of survival) and of hope flying under the radar. The queer side-eye, then, is here characterised both as an academic mode of seeking complex sites of critical engagement and a social mode of looking in which queer

⁴² In the next chapter I look at the work of Myra Dubois and consider how queer references and sets of references might be developed in relation to complex, discontinuous and unexpected sources.

audiences might locate hope, utopia and survival in places (such as Christian iconography) that it may not be thought to be found. The success of *Virgin* with queer audiences suggests this location of joy, pleasure and hope in this site.

There is a sense of anticipation in the space, even though I have seen this act multiple times. That feeling of the hairs rising on your arms; a shiver rising up your back. It is, distinctively, uncomfortable. I feel almost guilty for being so moved. But it makes a demand of me, of us, and demands we demand it of one another. It refuses to allow us the passivity of pessimism and insists upon a demand of the future; or at the very least an insistence or demand on futurity since that is all we have got left.

I am embarrassed to find utopia, here of all places. And embarrassed by how much I cling to it, want it to be here. I am grateful for the warm glow of hope that bathes me, even as I squirm, uncomfortable and discomfited in the heat it starts to blaze. The fire in me is stocked and like a balloon I am lifted up until I can see for miles, until I can glimpse in my raised gaze the potential for tomorrow. Praying that I do not get too high before the balloon pops, I give myself in to the soaring motions of the piece, allowing myself to be swept along to a destination I do not know, and possibly one I do not even want to go to.

In discussing how to locate this hope or utopia, Muñoz suggests that ‘Sometimes the utopian spectator needs to squint to see the anticipatory illumination promised by utopia, yet at other times, its visuality and (non)presence cannot be denied’ (Muñoz, 2009: 109). To consider the

visibility of utopia, it is important to consider the space in which the work happened; a bar space in Camden, London, called Bloc Bar. The lighting on stage was minimal and augmented by moving and flashing lights. The act, then, is not as easily seen as it would be in a more conventional performance space. Furthermore, the room is not dark, and therefore the audience and performers are able to see one another. Thinking through the complex ways in which I position myself in relation to this performance, I find myself only seeing the work out of the corner of my eye, because I am standing by the door to the dressing room checking that another performer would be ready to go on following this performance.⁴³ I am at the periphery of the performance, giving it a side-eye if you will, catching the edges of the work. I glimpse the work, rather than necessarily see it.

This is also reflective of the queer hopeful and utopian elements of the work. Rather than being clear for everyone to see, I suggest it might better be described as being glimpsed, briefly illuminated, or caught out of the corner of my eye. If anything, a queer utopia cannot be located in performance by looking *straight* at it, but instead might only be illuminated at the periphery, in the glow surrounding the performance (and here I am also thinking of the divine light that often surrounds the Virgin Mary in iconic visual representations), caught only briefly out of the corner of your eye, in a queer glance.

⁴³ I was undertaking the role of “Stage Manager” for this show, a role often employed in cabaret and drag performance events to mean someone who would take on a range of tasks, including: setting up a performer’s props on stage whilst a host fills time, tidying up after a performer has finished, making sure a performer was comfortable and had whatever drinks they needed, helping a performer get ready, and checking on and ensuring a performer was ready to go on stage. The role is often different depending on the venue, organiser, host, and so on, and it is often a role taken on inevitably by partners or loved ones of performers, or by younger or up-and-coming performers.

This is certainly the case for Virgin's performance. In looking at her act straight on, I am struck by the contentious and problematic ways togetherness and unity is figured without considering the complex socio-political contemporary moment. But to look at performance straight on misses out on the opportunity to explore what might emerge when you look at it *queerly*. To glance queerly at the performance, both physically not looking at it straight, but also to glance at it queerly alongside the complex intellectual terrain of queer utopias and temporalities laid out above, offers another way of seeing it. In this queer glance the queer utopian potentiality of the work is illuminated. It is possible to glimpse not just a naïve demand for togetherness, but instead a demand for a nuanced and moving utopian future beyond the confines of a straight present and to locate another unexpected site of hope.

The utopia that this performance imagines is not always visible when looking straight on, but a queer glance illuminates the utopian potentiality at the heart of the work. As is often the case with the popular forms of performance around which this thesis focuses, the queerness and queer political practice of the work is located in the presence of the body of the performer on stage, and the complex relationship between the body of the performer and the audiences, which is reflective of Campbell and Farrier's (2016) notion of queer dramaturgies. Whilst less easy to see, a queer sideways glance offers a method of glimpsing these moments of queer utopian potentiality, and this is the case in Virgin's work, where the queer utopian potentiality of the work is illuminated briefly at the site of the body of the performer in relation to the audience in the room with her.

Conclusions

I have found myself on edge throughout this chapter: at the edge of my seat, on my tiptoes, glancing at the periphery of performance, looking to see what might be illuminated around the edges of a show, in the glow reflecting off performers dresses, by glancing out of the corner of my eye to see what is happening, being taken to the edge of my feelings, held there, and looking around the edge to locate queerness, utopias and hope. This is both precarious, and pleasurable, and this notion of being on edge also links to the pleasurable experience of “coming together” that I articulate as part of the pleasure of queer communities: these are purposefully playful and euphemistic analogies.

Being on edge also indicates being open to the anticipatory illumination that Muñoz describes as the experience of queer utopias as horizontal. Being on edge might also be a paranoid position, or a position of safety that is part of my queer side-eye: I might be on edge pleurably whilst also on edge in anticipation of danger. Being on edge might also indicate another position: I am looking at the edges of definitions and ideas. I started by framing the queer utopian side-eye and claiming that *despite* was a function of this work, looking around the edges of definitions and etymologies of *despite* to produce queer understandings of this term as a tactic which is part of my queer side-eye. *Despite* names the process of being visible *despite* violence, or more playfully, *to spite* those who would cause us violence. It also names a temporally specific practice that insists upon the importance of locating hope not in one place but in multiple, often difficult to find, sites. Furthermore, through this discussion of *despite* and hope, I recognise the importance of the temporal specificity of hope and visibility, attesting to the need to understand when moments of invisibility (however privileged they

may be) are also necessary for queer survival. Ultimately, *despite* describes an embodied method of the queer side-eye in relation to modes of visibility, where this might also play with the edges of what visibility might be or look like.

In looking at the edges of Mzz Kimberly, I located in her work ideas of hope, utopia and breath that are the fundamental moves in this thesis. I suggested that in her performance work, when I am moved to the edge of my seat and even to my feet and tiptoes to see, it is possible to locate moments of deep breathing that allow hope to be felt, imagined and made possible. In Meth's work I located a specific practice of *despite* mainly through the use of spoken word lip synch, and in part through the lip synching of two words: "For Frodo". Here, *despite* became a pleasurable and playfully enactment of visibility, as well as a mode of locating hope *despite* violence, starting to claim the queer side-eye as a strategy of locating these forms of hope by looking to the edges of meaning making and around the edges of performance to consider what hope we might locate in alternative and multiple locations. I extended this idea of the queer side-eye in my exploration of Virgin Xtravaganzah's work arguing that in and through her work it is possible to locate moments of queer hope and utopia, but that this is often only possible when not looking at her work *straight*. Around the edges of Virgin's work, it is possible to see, much like the light around the Virgin Mary in religious depictions, a utopian glow that speaks to the possibility of queer utopias in Muñoz's thinking. Overall, this chapter has also staged a mode of my queer side-eye academically, insisting on looking sideways, queerly, and *at the edge* of performance and in so doing locating hope and survival in the wake of an increasingly homophobic and transphobic straight present. In the following chapter I continue this tactic, considering what looking out the corner of my eye, and looking

at the edges of performance, might offer to queer understandings of drag, in particular focussing in on the gestures of that drag performers make and the gestural languages of drag. To be on edge, at the edge and around the edges of performance is a tactic of my queer side-eye that allows for queer and hopeful glimpses of drag performance to emerge.

In insisting upon the importance of paying attention to individual iterations of these performances, I argue that it is vital to understand the complex ways in which these works function in relation to the particular temporal and spatial specifics of their happening. The times and venues that the work took place in have an impact on the experience of witnessing the work. It is important to note, however, that two of the venues discussed in the chapter, *The Black Cap* and *Bloc Bar*, are now closed, whilst the RVT has been under threat of closure at numerous points since 2014.⁴⁴ Therefore, whilst I locate hope in these moments, it is important to note that these socio-economic implications are still ongoing. This is a significant point since, as discussed above, these venues are part of a wider narrative of venue closures in London and beyond. The following chapter moves forward to account for these closures, as well as which venues have been opened, exploring the complex relationship between drag performance, queer venues, and the local (and potentially more national and international) economies in which they are imbricated. I look not just at venue closures and opening, but around the edges again, to see what is happening on and off stage and at the edges of queer venues (literally, at times, in the corners of rooms) and the performance work that happens

⁴⁴ As discussed above, *The Black Cap* closed on 13th April 2015 and has remained closed since, despite a vocal activist network fighting for its re-opening. *Bloc Bar*, which opened in Camden in July 2015 after *The Black Cap* had been closed and arguably in response to its closure, was closed in July 2017, re-opening briefly as *The Bloc* in September 2016 before finally closing and becoming another venue (*Them Downstairs*, a sister venue to *Her Upstairs*) in April 2017 before that closed August 2018. There is a complex narrative at play here that will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter, Chapter Three.

on stages to consider what understandings, experiences and queerness might be located when we remain at the edge.

Chapter Three: Queer Venues

Introduction

I am standing in my living room amidst the debris of Her Upstairs in August 2018, a bar that we have just had to clean out and close down. I am surrounded by boxes of photographs, costumes, trinkets and objects, and every surface is covered in wig heads and wigs of all colours. I look around, trying to imagine how we are going to fit any of it in our flat. I breathe deeply, smelling my own home and the dust that each picture frame and object has brought in from the bar. The portrait of Regina Fong, legendary drag performer whose image hung on the walls of The Black Cap until it closed in April 2015 and again on the walls of Her Upstairs, looks at me with a crooked smile as if to say "Again?". I sigh and start unpacking boxes, my hands filtering through the potted history of the venue that we managed to fit in a car. I do not know where to start; I did not know where to end.

Whilst the previous chapter considered the anticipatory, hopeful and utopian aspects of drag performance, locating moments of survival and queer communities in and through drag, this chapter starts from the observation that this hope and survival is challenged because the venues in which drag performance happens are increasingly closing or facing the threat of closure. As indicated in Chapter One, 'Since 2006, the number of LGBTQ+ venues in London has fallen from 125 to 53, a net loss of 58% of venues' (Campkin and Marshall, 2017: 6). This chapter explores the context of venue closures in London, accounting in part for the impact of these closures on the people and communities that inhabited these venues, as well as trying to problematise some of the narratives that surround closures. I move to consider

venues that have opened (or remained open) in recent years before considering the broader politics and processes of how queer people in venues labour to produce communities through doing and watching performance. I turn to three performances from Sadie Sinner, Ruby Wednesday, and Myra Dubois in order to consider the relationship of performers on stages to the production and maintenance of particular communities in these queer venues. In particular I consider the gestural in performance, both literal and metaphoric gestures made by performers, and locate another method of my queer side-eye in both the gestures that performers make and, following Muñoz (2009), queer interpretations of these gestures. I locate in the gestural another method of my queer side-eye, where I consider it as a gesture (physical and metaphorical) which might be about indicating disdain and suspicion or looking towards those who needs welcome in. Here, I position locating and focussing on the gestural in performance as connected to the idea of looking at the edge of performance that was laid out in the previous chapter. I understand this exploration the gestural potentialities of drag and queer performance as taking a queer side-eye at performance, or looking at the edges of drag, particularly in this chapter in relation to the broader narratives of neoliberalism and gentrification that inform my thinking below; in turning to the gestural in performance, I consider queer ways of critiquing these modes of neoliberal gentrification.

Ultimately, I argue for the importance of queer venues in the maintenance of queer communities. Although drag and queer performance increasingly happens in non-queer venues, the idea of “borrowing” these spaces from straight or heteronormative cultures does not have the same resonance as queer venues that specifically cater for queer audiences, since these venues also often contain physical and ephemeral queer histories that might

otherwise be lost. I suggest that these venues are sites of survival for queers, and sites of resistance, since they offer moments for queer people to breathe deeply and freely and in so doing become able to imagine, to hope and, ultimately, to survive.

Oh, Good. Let's Talk About Money

My use of venues as opposed to spaces in this thesis stems from a desire to insist upon the importance of these localised contexts for understanding queer performance work (Campbell and Farrier, 2016). Sociological and anthropological studies such as Christina B. Hanhardt's (2013) *Safe Space: Gay Neighbourhood History and the Politics of Violence*, Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands' (2003) *Urban Nightscapes: Youth Cultures, Pleasure Spaces and Corporate Power* and Eleanor Formby's (2017) *Exploring LGBT Spaces and Communities: Contrasting Identities, Belongings and Wellbeing* constitute some of the extant and expanding body of work that explicitly explores the ways in which LGBTQ+ spaces function. All do not just consider pubs, bars and clubs, but also community centres as well as alternative spaces and neighbourhoods. Whilst my focus on individual venues and the performances that happen in them must also include an understanding of the wider neighbourhoods and context in which these venues sit, my use of venues here makes a distinction between the pubs, bars and clubs that I focus on, and the broader context of LGBTQ+ spaces that these studies account for. To this end, queer venues could be considered as a subcategory of a broader system of queer spaces that queer communities might populate and desire.

Furthermore, the venues on which I focus are also venues that have stages (even if those stages may be temporary). I have argued elsewhere about the importance of starting from the stage in the understanding (and, indeed, construction) of LGBTQ+ venues (Parslow, 2018).

I draw these ideas from Muñoz's critique of stages as both the stages that queers might be figured as being stuck in by more conservative, right-wing cultures (it's just a stage!) and the stages that many queers continue to inhabit as performers across a broad spectrum of drag, burlesque, cabaret and queer performance. The stages that queers inhabit are important to the generation of queer identities, communities and cultures. Therefore, it is important to unpack the implication of what happens in the venues and what happens when these venues close.

Following Muñoz's suggestion that 'Popular culture is the stage where we rehearse our identities' (Muñoz, 2009: 104), I propose that queer venues which house drag performance work offer ways for queers to rehearse, learn and do their identities, as well as offering alternative modes of sociality, embodiment and historicity. Whilst Muñoz is talking in particular about popular cultural forms more broadly (including performance, live art, music and photography), I argue that this is particularly true of live drag performance in the context of this thesis. Drag performance offers sites in and through which identities might be rehearsed and done by both the performers doing the work and the audiences watching it.

Farrier (2016) explores live lip synching drag performance in particular and suggests that 'lip synching, along with pop culture and gossip, connects to the past' (Farrier, 2016: 200). Farrier draws a connection between pop culture and live performance, suggesting that these forms, often perceived as low cultural forms, are sites in and through which histories might be passed on by 'serving a non-heteronormative heritable link with the past' (Farrier, 2016: 198). Alongside this notion of history being passed on, there is also the notion that drag

performance 'generates a sense of community' (Farrier, 2016: 200). The thesis starts from the premise that drag performance offers particularly fertile sites for the emergence of queer communities and moments of connection, and therefore it follows that the venues in which these performances happen are bound up in these communities as well.

Beyond being sites in and through which queer cultures and communities might be transmitted, learnt and tried out, these venues are often also perceived as sites of "safety" in an increasingly homophobic and transphobic present. It is important to note the perception that queer venues offer safety for queer citizens who might feel at risk of violence both in public (on the street, for example) and in non-queer venues, whilst being aware that the notion of a "safe space" is a contested site that speaks to the challenges of security and freedom explored in my initial thinking around queer communities in Chapter One.

Felix Le Freak looks out to the audience and smiles. She is standing behind a piano and I know she is about to sing something absolutely awful and someone is probably going to write an awfully offended Facebook status about it before I wake up in the morning.

"This is a safe space," she says, "not a secure unit!"

As indicated in Chapter One, this issue of queer communities is that forms of communities around sexuality can reproduce repressive power structures such as misogyny, racism and transphobia, and that just describing communities as "safe" is not enough to combat this issue. It is too simple, however, to simply reject the notion of "safety", but important to

recognise the issues with this term. However, I propose that for queer communities to function, the work that needs to go into them, the labour of queer communities, requires facilitating spaces in which queers can breathe. I characterise the queer venues I focus on in this thesis not as safe spaces, but as venues in which queer people have the opportunity to breathe more freely, drawing from Ahmed's (2016) understanding of queer hope and breath outlined in my introduction. I follow Ahmed's assertion that breath allows us to hope and argue that queer venues and the drag performance that happens in them are one of the sites in which breath might come more easily. If this is the case, then the loss of these venues will have an enduring emotional impact on those individuals and communities that previously inhabited them. Considering queer venues as spaces in which queers can breathe, rather than as reductive "safe spaces," is a queer sideways glance at how these venues function that pays attention to the materiality of what it means to be in these venues and experience moments of hope and survival.

This is resonant of my discussions in Chapter One surrounding the complexities and politics of queer communities as uncomfortable yet important sites of safety and support for queer people in the climate of homophobia and transphobia. The politics of these venues, and the experiences of audiences and performers within them in relation to the important notions of survival that form the foundational ideas in this thesis are further troubled by ideas of economies, gentrification and neoliberalism in which queer venues are inextricably implicated. These complexities do not erase or ignore the importance of these queer venues, particularly when as articulated in Chapter One these venues are indicated as sites of importance for community building, inter-generational exchange and survival by queer people who populate them (Campkin and Marshall, 2017). However, even as these venues

function as these more complex sites, they are simultaneously bound up in complex economic issues

The music cuts abruptly and Meth stands poised, hands clutched in front of her, looking down disdainfully on the audience. The voice of the Dowager Countess from Downton Abbey booms across the space as Meth lip synchs, "Oh, good. Let's talk about money".

Just as Meth, or the Dowager Countess, wants us to talk about money, in order to understand these venue closures, it is important to address key debates surrounding economies, gentrification and neoliberalism to help contextualise them. Economies here function both in relation to economies of value, and in relation to money. It is important to note that drag performers and the venues in which they work are actively involved in an economy of value in which performers are seen, booked, and critically acclaimed. Furthermore, drag performers are also involved in money directly as performers are paid (and paid at various rates), and audiences are expected to buy tickets and purchase drinks to support both individuals and groups of performers, and venues themselves. The economies of value and finance run through drag performance, queer communities and the venues in which they function, and as such challenge some of these ideas of safety and community.

In the first instance economics and economies are inherently bound up in (and produce) systems of inequality and violence that many queer people are subject(ed) to. Therefore, considering how queer economies function (or, indeed, fail to function) necessitates an understanding and examination of the complex ways in which queers might be bound up in (and produce) systems of inequality and violence.

In *Queer Economics: A Reader*, Joyce Jacobsen and Adam Zeller (2007) argue that queer economics 'implies a more active critique of the field of economics rather than a simple description of a sub-division of interest within economics' (Jacobsen & Zeller, 2007: 2). As a growing field of study, the broader relationship between ideas of sexual orientations and queerness to heteronormative understandings of economies and economics is a fecund site of intellectual engagement. Borrowing from their understanding that queer economics names the 'examination of and response to the effects of heteronormativity both on economics outcomes and economics as a discipline' (Jacobsen & Zeller, 2007: 2), I turn to two broad issues in the specific relationship between queer venues in which drag performance occurs, and the economies that both sustain and threaten them: namely, neoliberalism and gentrification.

Neoliberalism and Gentrification

Whilst the fields of neoliberalism and gentrification are extensive, I draw specifically from Lisa Duggan's (2003) *The Twilight of Equality?* as a framing for neoliberalism and Sarah Schulman's (2012) *The Gentrification of the Mind* as a critical grounding for gentrification in order to explore the complex ways in which drag performance and queer venues are bound up in broader economic systems. These texts both refer to the implication of sexuality in relation to these structures. It is clear that both gentrification and neoliberalism are framed as being simply natural and logical processes in relation to economic issues, rather than being bound up in social and cultural inequalities that favour those consumers more likely to benefit big business and neoliberal political causes.

Duggan explores the relationship between neoliberalism, cultural politics, and democracy.

She argues that:

The most successful ruse of neoliberal dominance in both global and domestic affairs is the definition of *economic* policy as primarily a matter of neutral, technical expertise. This expertise is then presented as separate from *politics* and *culture*, and not properly subject to specifically political accountability or cultural critique. Opposition to material inequality is maligned as “class warfare,” while race, gender or sexual inequalities are dismissed as merely cultural, private, or trivial (Duggan, 2003: xiv; original emphasis).

Neoliberal politics frames economic decisions and successes or failures as neutral or natural, separating economic moves from political and socio-cultural ones, rather than accounting for the complex ways in which the spheres of politics, cultures and economics interrelate. Duggan’s understanding of neoliberalism within a US context identifies five phases in the ‘construction of neoliberal hegemony’ (Duggan, 2003: xii). Of particular note is the phases that attacked ‘downwardly redistributive social movements, especially the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, but including feminism, lesbian and gay liberation, and countercultural mobilizations’ whilst encouraging ‘pro-business activism’ (Duggan, 2003: xii) in the sixties and seventies. These social, political and economic moves then developed in the eighties and nineties as ‘attacks on public institutions and spaces for democratic public life, in alliance with religious moralists and racial nationalists’ (Duggan, 2003: xii). The final stage of this neoliberal process results in ‘emergent “multicultural,” neoliberal “equality” politics - a stripped-down, non-redistributed form of “equality” designed for global consumption during the twenty-first century, and compatible with continued upward redistribution of resources’ (Duggan, 2003: xii).

Neoliberal equality politics and political movements can be seen in contemporary campaigns for equal rights by LGBTQ+ advocacy groups such as the campaign for Equal Marriage in the UK, or the right for LGBTQ+ citizens to openly serve in the military in the USA. These debates, whilst important for many LGBTQ+ citizens, can be framed as assimilationist politics that are actively exclusionary to minority groups within the LGBTQ+ communities: ‘a rise in a particular notion of “gay rights” [...] is particularly dependent upon erasure of the political and economic rights of the most marginal’ (Conrad, 2014). Whilst framed as a natural development of LGBTQ+ politics, it is important to note that these assimilationist moves are often only available to or desired by those citizens who will always already benefit from a neoliberal, economic system; namely, those who are predominantly white, middle class and privileged. Therefore, whilst this fight for equal rights appears to be inclusive, it is a neoliberal political form that favours those who benefit from a privatised economic governance and inclusion into unequal national and international socio-economic systems.

Focusing in from a macro discussion of neoliberal economic and social policy in relation to identity politics which is the focus of Duggan’s work, as well as writers such as David Harvey (2007), Elizabeth A. Povinelli (2011), Garth Stahl (2011), and Oishik Sircar & Dipika Jain (2017) amongst others, I return to local manifestations of supposedly natural and inevitable economic developments that result in the closure (and, indeed, the opening) of queer venues.⁴⁵ In order to consider these manifestations, I turn to Schulman’s understanding of

⁴⁵ Whilst I am not creating a binary of local/global here in relation to queer performance and queer venues (see Campbell and Farrier, 2016), this thesis insistently returns to the local manifestations of performance forms as evidence of broader critical emergences within the field. Here I move to consider what an analysis of the closure and opening of bars in contemporary London can help us to understand about broader discourses of neoliberalism and gentrification.

gentrification in order to frame this phenomenon in relation to these discourses of neoliberalism.

Schulman's polemic on the role of gentrification on neighbourhoods and on artmaking, activism and ideas (particularly in New York), argues that gentrification denotes 'the influx of middle-class people to cities and neighbourhoods, displacing the lower-class worker residents' (Schulman, 2012: 24). Schulman draws this idea from Ruth Glass, who was particularly talking about London and working-class districts such as Islington (Glass, 1964). Schulman extends this idea to suggest that working-class migration from these areas are rarely neutral, and that the impetus to move 'can be political events as well as aggressive policy changes that push one community out while actively attracting another to replace it' (Schulman, 2012: 24).

Schulman's focus on New York in particular traces the shift from middle class suburban domesticity in the sixties and seventies to the gentrification and homogenisation of neighbourhoods in the seventies, eighties and nineties. She links this move not just to a gentrification of neighbourhoods with increasing rental costs that price out working-class residents, but also to an acceptability politics that 'literally replaces mix with homogeneity, it enforces itself through the repression of diverse expression' (Schulman, 2012: 28). For Schulman the

mirror of gentrification is representation in popular culture, increasingly only the gentrified get their stories told in mass ways. They look in the mirror and think it's a window, believing that corporate support for and inflation of their story is in fact a neutral and accurate picture of the world (Schulman, 2012: 28).

Whilst there are clear differences between the gentrification of New York in the seventies and eighties and the contemporary situation in London, there are resonant comparisons between Schulman's debates and contemporary situations that can be productively placed beside one another. As areas such as Camden become increasingly gentrified, with increasing numbers of expensive properties emerging alongside boutique businesses that appeal to increasingly middle-class tastes and sensibilities (Artefact, 2017; Ewens, 2017; Haydock, 2015; Watts, 2016) it is not surprising that landlords and businesses would prefer to own luxury apartments than queer venues. Firstly, this is due to the fact that queer venues may well be a riskier financial investment in the wake of the drop in '44% of UK nightclubs (2005-2015)' and '25% in UK pubs (2001-2016)' (Campkin & Marshall, 2017: 6). This is not to suggest a causal relationship here, that the closures of nightclubs and pubs has led to the increasing financial instability of the nightclub and pub scene in the UK, but rather to foreground that these processes of gentrification offer meaningful and statistical ways for landlords and breweries to justify the closure of venues in favour of financially stable choices.

Whilst the financial implication and result of these processes of gentrification are clear (the venues are closed and then either remain closed or get turned into high-priced apartments, or become more mainstream cafes or pub chains), the social, cultural and political impact of these changes is not always clear, in part because these processes of gentrification often appear to be coherent, logical and another stage of progression. It is clear that these processes of gentrification must be examined within Duggan's understanding of neoliberalism, which sets up economic decisions (and development) as being neutral and technical. Much like economic decision in neoliberal politics, gentrification is framed as natural, coherent, and inevitable (and good business sense) rather than bound up in social

and cultural inequalities that favour those consumers more likely to benefit from neoliberal assimilationist politics.

Contemporary economic policy is framed by neoliberal discourse as merely functional or inevitable. Following Duggan and Schulman, any exploration of the economic systems that lead to queer venues closing (and opening) is always already a cultural and political exploration; or, at the very least, it necessitates a cultural and political one. To do this, this chapter locates other ways of looking at economics, and as such necessitates a queer sideways glance at these economic conditions (and arguments) in order to uncover these social, cultural and political implications. This sideways glance involves drawing in my analysis of these global- and macro-economic emergences to explore the contemporary situation for specific London queer venues and exploring their particular resonance in relation to neoliberal gentrification. Whilst this offers the first mode of querying these narratives, I engage the queer side-eye more explicitly by bringing these discourses into critical relationship with individual moments of drag performance below, in particular the work of Ruby Wednesday, Myra Dubois and Sadie Sinner, setting them beside these broader narratives to explore the particular social, political and economic implications of queer venues in this contemporary moment.

Queer Venues Closing and Opening

The above analysis of neoliberal gentrification, in relation to the increased loss of queer nightlife spaces (Campkin and Marshall, 2017), paints a bleak picture of the contemporary situation for queer venues and drag performance in London. This is resonant of the opening moments of this thesis in which the closure of The Black Cap in Camden is an impetus for this

research. The closure of the venue in April 2015 was sudden for the community that attended the venue and the staff and performers who worked there. The campaign to re-open it was immediate and continues to this day, with various attempts to re-open the space under different names and as a different form of venue being fought by campaigners.⁴⁶ I highlighted in my introduction the particular emotional experience of loss and grief that the closure of this venue brought about. I position this personal experience of this venue closure alongside the conclusions drawn from Campkin and Marshall's report above. Those conclusions in particular highlight not just the loss of the physical space, but also the 'negative emotional consequences of venue closures' (Campkin and Marshall, 2017: 10), and I go on to examine this in more depth below in relation to Ruby Wednesday's performance.

However, in discussing the closure of venues what is often missed is the important venues that have been saved from closure and have been opened. Most notably in London is the campaign to save the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT), known as RVT Future. RVT Future is a 'campaign, made up of Tavern performers, promoters and regulars, [...] fighting to secure the future of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern as an LGBTQ pub and queer performance space' (RVT Future, 2018). This campaign has successfully resisted attempts to close the venue and change it into luxury accommodation over the last five years, galvanising community and political support in defence both of its historical importance to the LGBTQ+ community and its continuing importance for a diverse range of audiences.

⁴⁶ I was involved directly in starting the campaign to re-open the venue, known as "#WeAreTheBlackCap". I was actively involved in stopping two companies from trying to re-open the venue as a non-LGBTQ+ space, and I defended the maintenance of the status of the venue as an Asset of Community Value in legal proceedings with Camden Council. Whilst I am no longer involved with the campaign to re-open the venue, I am indelibly bound up in its closure both personally and publicly.

Beyond the protection of the RVT, two more notable venues have been opened. The first, The Glory in Haggerston (an area in East London that is broadly known for its alternative and edgy forms of drag, similar to that of Brooklyn in New York) was opened by four performers and promoters on the London and UK drag scene. Self-described as ‘a Queer and alternative East End pub, London nightlife spot and performance mecca’ (The Glory, 2018), it is well known for presenting a range of alternative performance events that represent a diversity of drag performance in London, including a hugely popular and well-respected drag competition called LipSync1000 and drag king competition Man Up. The Glory is well-known within the London queer community as being opened by queer people and queer performers, and this is central to its cultural significance in the contemporary scene, particularly in the wake of closures of queer venues when they are owned and ran by larger companies and breweries, such as Faucett Inn who owned and operated The Black Cap before its closure.

The second venue of significance to open in London is Her Upstairs. The venue is self-described as ‘a bar run for queer people by queer people [...] everyone and anyone who wants to enjoy our bar, enjoy our shows, and enjoy our and each other’s company’ (Her Upstairs, 2018). The venue was opened by myself, drag performer Meth (see Chapter Two) and George Anthony who is known for managing a number of gay and queer venues on the scene in London. Known as a venue supportive of new and emerging talent (particularly through a drag competition called Not Another Drag Competition), as well as working with established performers, what is most significant is also the work with dedicated nights of performance for particular sections of the community including trans and/or non-binary performers (BANTS Cabaret), queer people of colour (The Cocoa Butter Club), and female-identified

performers (LADS) (see Parslow, 2018). Similar to The Glory, Her Upstairs was popular as an independently-run venue rather than being linked to a brewery or big business.⁴⁷

Whilst these are two examples of venues being opened, and one example of a venue being protected, they are not meant to deny the particularly dangerous level of closures of queer venues in London, but to ensure the narrative of protection and opening is also clear. Furthermore, to follow the above desire to unpack not just the economic implications, but also the social and political implications, of venue closures, it is important to examine this in terms of the bars opening. By this, it is also important to be aware that whilst the social and political need for queer venues is key, the opening of a queer venue in a neighbourhood also entails economic implications and could be an effect of gentrification itself.

Gentrification is not just imposed upon queer neighbourhoods by external (straight) forces and to suggest this is the case would be to ignore the complex ways in which queer citizens are bound up in (and produce) these systems of gentrification and inequality. Indeed, processes of gentrification are often intrinsically linked to the emergence of middle-class LGBTQ+ people (and white, gay men and women in particular) arriving in an area. Furthermore, in the wake of many of these closures, the argument that these venues were no longer necessary in the wake of the 'the successes of queer incorporation into the domains of consumer markets and social recognition in the post-civil rights, late twentieth century' (Puar, 2007: xii) was a claim often made by certain middle-class gay commentators (BBC News

⁴⁷ It is important to reiterate that the venue has now closed (as of August 2018). This emerged after the research for this thesis finished, and as a researcher I need more intellectual space to unpack the social, political, economic and emotional impact of this closure than is available for me within the confines of a PhD.

Magazine, 2014; Fox, 2014; Tolliver, 2015).⁴⁸ This opinion fails to understand the complex intersections between sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion and other identity markers to feelings of safety in non-queer venues. This further highlights the ways in which gentrification (like privilege, and hetero- and homo-normativity) renders itself invisible, natural and inevitable in relation to ideas of ex-nomination in Chapter Two. Queers, then, are not always resistant to neoliberal gentrification and, indeed, can never fully extricate themselves from the monolithic narratives that neoliberal gentrification extolls.

Drawing from these arguments explored above, I bring them into a critical dialogue with the debates explored in my exploration of queer communities in Chapter One, with a particular focus not just on the ways in which queer venues supporting queer communities have closed, but also on how the pleasure of people coming together in a queer venue to watch drag performance demonstrates the significance and importance of queer venues for the maintenance and sustenance of queer communities. These pleasures do not deny the material consequences of venue closures, but instead find strategies and alternative pathways through these large debates to consider how local resistances to ideas of gentrification and neoliberalism might emerge in and through drag and queer performance, even when this is not the performers' intentions.

My analysis here has attempted to understand the social and economic conditions that lead to a contemporary situation in which so many queer venues in London can close. Whilst in

⁴⁸ During my time on the campaign to save The Black Cap, I sat in a meeting with an openly gay, white, middle class Public Relations representative working for a large national corporation who wanted to re-open The Black Cap as a non-LGBT chain venue who was openly extolling the value of not needing to go to gay bars any more since it was now so easy and safe to be gay in non-LGBT venues.

my previous chapter I set up a framework (“despite”) through which to consider the performance moments, in this chapter I instead explore a set of socio-economic conditions in order to account for a contemporary moment in drag and queer performance in London. Whilst this narrative is bleak, it is also important to note that alongside this contemporary position, there has also been a resurgence in the popularity of drag performance and in the number of drag performers in London and the rest of the UK, as well as potentially globally, as a result of the popularity of *RPDR*. Therefore, queer performance events are emerging in different venues, often non-queer venues or venues that are supportive of queer communities and performance without specifically catering to queer clientele. Whilst this transfer to non-queer spaces is not simple, and the loss of the ephemeral and affective histories of queer venues when they close and the material experiences of being in exclusively queer venues for queers is important to account for, it is important to acknowledge that this is often a form of straight allyship that should be applauded. However, these non-queer venues should be spaces that are being borrowed, rather than unilaterally replacing their queer counterparts.

Furthermore, the importance of queer venues is being explored and discussed within broader planning and community discourses. For example, between February and August 2019 the Whitechapel Gallery in London housed a Queer Spaces exhibition, exploring the development and issues within queer spaces in London since the 1980s (Whitechapel Gallery, 2019) and after the importance of its report on LGBTQ+ Nightlife Spaces in London, in April 2019 the UCL Urban Laboratory announced a new report in collaboration with Camden Council to explore the historical and contemporary resonance of LGBTQ+ daytime and night time spaces in that borough (UCL, 2019).

Queer venues have an enduring appeal despite their closures and despite the narratives of neoliberal gentrification drawn out above. I have outlined these narratives in order to explore the socio-economic situation for queer venues in London. What this analysis is missing, however, is an exploration of the ways in which performances emerge in, around and because of queer venues. Therefore, I turn to performance again as a way to foreground and extend the ideas explored in this section. In doing so I turn to the gestural in performance, material and metaphoric gestures, in order to explore the ways in which queer gestures might locate other pathways through these broader discussions of neoliberalism and gentrification. I turn firstly to the work of Sadie Sinner and the Cocoa Butter Club, particularly making a case for importance of queer performance events and venues that cater to minority groups within queer communities. I then turn to Ruby Wednesday and explore a performance that I position in relation to protest, and particularly to protesting against the closure of The Black Cap. Finally, I look at the work of Myra Dubois, extending ideas of queer references and resonances explored in Chapter Two, and return to ideas of pleasures and queer communities that I set up in Chapter One. Through these analyses I account for the enduring appeal of queer venues, locating the specific need for space to breathe for queer people as vital to projects of queer hope and survival.

Sadie Sinner, and The Cocoa Butter Club

The room is crowded, people sitting on chairs, the bar, on the floor. The crowd is avid and, unlike other events, utterly silent as she stands on the stage and sings. Her voice is fluent, effervescent, moving across the notes and octaves effortlessly. It drifts out into the space

powerfully and softly, wave upon wave crashing against the eager faces of the crowd like a slap and a caress all at once.

As one of the few white people in the room, I know I am a guest in this space; I feel held but know in many ways this is not for me; or at least not primarily for me, which is certainly another way to be confronted with my own privilege. This processing, however, does not happen in the moment, it only happens in retrospect. Instead the wave crashes into me relentlessly and the Songbird sings for herself and for the people in the room. Guest or not, I am here to listen.



Figure 4: Sadie Sinner at The Cocoa Butter Club at Her Upstairs, 2018: Image: AbsolutQueer Photography

The Cocoa Butter Club, a performance event and producing house founded and led by Sadie Sinner, is a performance collective aimed at celebrating and showcasing performers of colour

in the drag, burlesque and cabaret scene (The Cocoa Butter Club, 2018). Whilst it works primarily in London, there is also a group in Australia and the UK version works outside of London. Beyond an event in which performers of colour come together to celebrate their work on stage, Sadie has also expressed the importance of producing a show in which performers of colour can congregate backstage and share experiences and stories without the presence of white bodies. This is both celebratory, recognising the importance of shared experiences and references (as I explore further below in relation to the work of Myra Dubois) and about engendering feelings of safety. Whilst Sadie would not identify as a drag performer, her work as a cabaret performer and singer often happens alongside drag and other queer performers, as well as many who populate this thesis, and she also produces shows that consistently contain and champion drag performers.

There are extant studies of the relationship and intersection between queerness and race.⁴⁹ This thesis rests alongside these studies whilst being aware that as a white scholar using personal impetuses to explore the relationship of queer communities and drag performance work, there is a questionable need for my voice in a discussion surrounding race and sexuality and instead I should make room for artists and scholars of colour. It is important to note, however, that each chapter focusses on at least one performer of colour, not as a tokenistic gesture but merely to mark the variety of performers and performances that I see on the drag scene in contemporary London. To not mark this would be erasing the important of the

⁴⁹ See, for example, Alexander (2006), Barnard (2004), Gopinath (2005), Martinez (2012), Puar (2007), Riggs (2006) and specifically in performance see Adebayo (2016) and Muñoz (1999, 2009) for themes that intersect with the thinking in this chapter.

visibility and presence of performers of colour on the drag scene and do a disservice to the ways in which dedicated spaces for queer performers of colour are few.

Considering the queer side-eye as an embodied method, it is important to note that when glancing out of the corner of my eye the presence of queer performers of colour on the contemporary drag scene in London is both clear, but also that there is more work to do in order to make space(s) for a diversity of performers of colour.⁵⁰ As an academic, it is important for me to highlight queer performers of colour alongside white contemporaries. It is also important when talking about queer venues to highlight a performance event that works for performers and audiences of colour in order to account for the importance of this work.

When thinking specifically about the relationship between queerness and race in performance, I (re)turn to Muñoz (1999) and his text *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics* which explores the labour that emerges out of a critique of the debates surrounding essentialism and constructivism in identity. Drawing from the key work of feminist scholars of colour, Muñoz works through the ideas of ‘identities-in-difference’

⁵⁰ It is also important to consider that the racial politics of queerness do not subsume understandings of race into a homogenous category where all non-white performers are understood in a monolithic bracket. Instead, it is important to account for the complex ways in which race functions and intersects with queerness. In this chapter I focus on the Cocoa Butter Club and Sadie Sinner in particular as a focus on black drag and queer performance in the UK, whereas the previous chapter Mzz Kimberley was considered as an American trans woman of colour. In the next chapter, for example, Lilly Snatchdragon’s work is framed explicitly in relation to her South East Asian identity. Making space to outline these important specificities is a key part of this thesis, paying attention to the ways in which the queer side-eye necessarily takes in the localised and contingent intersections of identities and performance forms within which a performer is situated.

(Muñoz, 1999: 6) which come to emerge at the collision point between these essentialist and constructivist debates. Muñoz suggests that

This collision is precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation. In doing so, a representation contract is broken; the queer and the colored come into perception and the social order receives a hold that may reverberate loudly and widely, or in less dramatic, yet locally indispensable, ways (Muñoz, 1999: 6).

Muñoz's argument moves through the complex ways in which different modes of identity and identification emerge at the site of the body, in particular considering race and sexuality being performed at the site of the body as ontologically challenging a representational system that may only be able to see queerness or race individually, rather than as intimately bound up with one another. Drawing from intersectional analyses, it is important to note that for Muñoz these "identities-in-difference" emerge in their public performance and that 'their emergence is predicated on their ability to disidentify with the mass public and instead, through this disidentification, contribute to the function of a counterpublic sphere' (Muñoz, 1999: 7). This is also resonant of Muñoz's later explorations critiquing the idea of sexuality as a sovereign site of difference in modes of queer negativity in *Cruising Utopia* (2009). The Cocoa Butter Club is arguably a counterpublic site in which queer performers of colour come together in modes of performance and representation that disrupt (or, more purposefully, pay no heed to) white publics that only figure them as a racialised or sexualised subject and not as complexly both.

Whilst intersectionality may (arguably) be more ubiquitous today than at the time of Muñoz's text, his impulse to turn to those ideas is useful since it makes it clear that liberal identity

politics that segregate explorations of race, class, gender and sexuality are part of a narrativizing protocol that 'keep subjects from accessing identity' (Muñoz, 1999: 8). Instead Muñoz calls for a complex understanding of the ways in which race and sexuality function as sites of identification which goes beyond a 'soft multi-cultural *inclusion* of race and ethnicity' (Muñoz, 1999: 10). My move in this section is to highlight the importance of talking about race and ethnicity in relation to queerness, and highlight one important space in which queer performers of colour can come together, without reductively including the politics of race as an addendum to my theorisation just because I happen to also be working alongside queer performers of colour. Rather I suggest that issues of identity and race run through my thinking precisely because of my white-ness, and my white-ness informs my understanding of queerness and my experience of being in performance events such as The Cocoa Butter Club in complex ways. Furthermore, in turning to race and Muñoz's critiques, it is clear that the issues of neoliberalism and gentrification, framed as natural and inevitable, are also bound up in discussions of race that reproduce understandings of racial and sexual identities as separate.

Beyond the performers themselves, the performance event was also important in bringing together audiences who were primarily people of colour. This is important, since it returns to a simple formulation of producing queer performance work in queer venues. As a producer of drag performance and queer performance events, it is clear that who is on stage has a real determination on who is in the space (Parslow, 2018). Whilst at times this is related to form, where certain audiences prefer certain forms of performance and therefore will only attend events that showcase that form of performance, this is also intimately bound up with identity.

In writing about starting from the stage in the construction of queer venues, looking at Her Upstairs and my role in the relation of that venue as a starting point, I argue that ‘if we want queer bodies in our space, queer bodies need to be on our stage...if we want trans and/or non-binary [people], people of colour, female-identified people [...] then we must insist that this diversity of bodies must also appear on our stage’ (Parslow, 2018: 24). Drawing from Muñoz’s formulation of the stage as a performance platform as well as the temporal position queers are often told to get over, I argue that ‘the stages in which we dwell and the stages on which we dwell are key to the generation and prosperity of queer bodies, communities, identities, resistances, ideas, arguments, and more’ (Parslow, 2018: 24). I argue for the importance of diversity of bodies in queer performance events. However, beyond this there is also the need for performance events that include diverse sections of the queer community and that cater specifically for different sections of the community.

Whilst this could appear to be divisive, recognising the need for different minority positions not to only be guests in majority spaces, but also to claim ownership over those spaces was a key learning point when working at Her Upstairs; this work is vital to ensure diversity and representation within these venues. The Cocoa Butter Club is an example of how performers and audiences of colour are not just guests in predominantly white spaces, but also actively take over and claim ownership of a queer venue, even if it is for a limited amount of time. The Cocoa Butter Club initially worked at the now-closed Her Upstairs which also had nights dedicated to female-identified performers and trans and/or non-binary identified performers amongst others. All of these performance events not only increased the number of diverse

identity positions on stage but also in the audience. This in turn led to these audiences returning and populating the venue for other performance events that were not specifically created for them.

I argue that the importance of performers in queer venues is that they bring audiences into them. This is a simple proclamation but one which is important. It is also important to note that, just as the economic decisions to close or open queer venues are not devoid of cultural or political agendas, neither are cultural or political choices devoid of economic considerations or implications. By this, I mean that it is also true that if a diversity of performers brings a diversity of audiences into a venue, that also potentially brings a diversity of revenue streams and therefore has an economic benefit for the venue. Whilst it is cynical to suggest that this was the only reason for representing a wider diversity of performers in queer venues, it is certainly important to make that clear. Beyond the economic decisions, the ethical and artistic commitment to bringing performers of colour into queer venues is important to highlight and, as can be seen from the work of Sadie Sinner and The Cocoa Butter Club who produced an event at the London Wonderground (a large space on the Southbank in London known for producing large scale mainstream cabaret and circus performance), the visibility of performers of colour in queer venues can also lead to mainstream inclusion and awareness, as well as the complex issues that that mainstream attention engenders.

Sadie's performance work, and the work that emerges out of the Cocoa Butter Club, insists upon the visibility of queer performers of colour and audiences of colour in queer venues, not just as guests in predominantly white spaces, but as owners of those spaces with all the

cultural, political and economic complexities, issues and opportunities that “ownership” brings with it. These gestures are gestures of inclusion, metaphorical and material gestures that bring people of colour into these spaces in an attempt to locate ownership and belonging in, through and because of diversity.

Her voices never rests on one note but sings across, along, in, and through them.

She stakes her claim on the stage without shouting or stamping, but through the intractability of her presence. She has always been there, and we have always been here. Her voice is naturally re-verbed, it sounds like. She glides across the notes and the songs build and build and build but she never exerts effort and never asks for permission from us or from the song. She does not try to hit the notes, she arrives at the notes before the music does; ready, waiting, in control. This is her song, this is her stage, this is her show, this is her night.

The performance of focus took place at an impromptu event hosted at Her Upstairs that was headlined by alternative performer Amanda Palmer. Sadie performed the song *Sing* (Palmer, 2006) that was originally performed by Palmer as part of the band The Dresden Dolls. Sadie’s performance was one of a number of drag and queer performances that night that paid tribute to Palmer and The Dresden Dolls. Importantly, however, Sadie’s own style and voice impacted on the song and made it her own, and this was not an impersonation of Palmer’s song but instead a reinterpretation as Sadie interpreted the song through her own voice and style.

In my thinking surrounding Ruby Wednesday's work below, I consider the relationship between queerness and protest through the gestures Ruby makes in performance, however here, I consider the gestures of queerness and race that run through Sadie's work. These are both gestures towards important racialised texts and gesture towards of queers of colour in the venue, a welcoming gesture and a gesture of protection.⁵¹ Where Ruby's grasping gestures are staccato and frantic, Sadie is rooted to the stage, eyes often closed, and her gestures flow and move in a way that contrasts the urgency of Ruby's work. Her gestures speak to a comfort on the stage and not a demand for space, but rather an acceptance that this stage is there *for her*. When exploring the work of drag artist Kevin Aviance, and particular their gestures dancing and performing in club settings, Muñoz argues that

I am proposing that we might see something other than celebration in these moves – the strong trace of black and queer racialised survival, the way in which children need to imagine becoming Other in the face of conspiring cultural logics of white supremacy and heteronormativity. The gesture contains an articulate message for all to read, in this case a message of fabulousness and fantastical becoming. It also contains another message, one less articulated and more ephemeral but equally relevant to any understanding of queer gestures, gestures that, as I have argued, are often double- or multivalenced. So while the sort-sighted viewer of Aviance's voguing might see only the approximation of high-fashion glamour as he moves and gestures on the stage, others see/hear another tune, one of racialised self-enactment in the face of over-arching opposition (Muñoz, 2009: 80).

In Muñoz's approximation I see resonances of Sadie's work. In the description of the act above, an event which took place outside of The Cocoa Butter Club yet at Her Upstairs, Sadie's presence on the stage produces a vital and important moment of visibility for a queer woman

⁵¹ There was no video taken of this performance, however for an example of Sadie's work is available at Wotever World (2017) *Sadie Sinner Pride*, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5K7KtnTHw0A>, accessed 31/08/2019

of colour on the stage; this arguably reaches out beyond the stage to those in the audience and offers glimpses and enactments of the ways in which queers of colour take space on stages.

Resonant too is Muñoz's description of particular viewers seeing particular things. This reflects my own position that the queerly-oriented view sees and feels things in queer performance that the straight viewer cannot or will not – the queer side-eye illuminates things that a straight glance cannot see. Here, however, it is important to note that the side-eye is contingent upon the identity position of the researcher and audience member, and that as the researcher and audience member in this analysis, my queer side-eye occupies a position of white-ness that means potential politics, scripts and nuances that might be revealed to a queer person of colour may be obscured to me. This is not an attempt to undercut my own thinking here, nor to refuse responsibility to find other ways to see in relation to other identity positions. In fact, in this chapter and in the remainder of the thesis, I argue that my queer side-eye necessitates a constant re-positioning and re-orientation in relation to the work I am looking at in order to best see the potentialities of the work. However, it is also important to question whether as a white researcher and audience member, my queer side-eye is a mode of looking that is appropriate. This section does not propose to answer this question, but instead occupies this position purposefully tentatively, offering the images and feelings that my queer side-eye highlights, whilst also making it clear that my queer side-eye is a localised and personal position and therefore other side-eyes will inevitably illuminate other and more nuanced conclusions.

In Sadie's performance work, however, I argue the presence of a queer woman of colour on stage is and continues to be a mode of important visibility that stages both debates surrounding the need for better representation for queers of colour in drag performance and starts to generate these representations through ventures like the Cocoa Butter Club. Whilst there has been key improvements in the ways in which queers of colour and queer performers of colour are brought onto stages and are taking ownership over stages, this is a continuous ongoing issue that I interrogate further in the next chapter. For Sadie Sinner, her presence on these stages functions alongside Muñoz's understandings of Aviance's work as a performative engagement with visibility that insists upon the need for queer performers of colour to have dedicated spaces to be in and perform. Her work speaks to the need for queer venues to work with and create opportunities for queer performers of colour. These representations move out beyond the stage and beyond the space, and in the waves of this performance, queer performers and audiences of colour can locate strategies and gestures of survival. Moving away from Sadie's work now, I turn to Ruby Wednesday to consider my exploration of the gestural in performance, as well as what happens when drag and queer performance work moves beyond the border of queer venues.

Ruby Wednesday

I am obsessed with your arm. No. Not the one holding the microphone. The other one. The one that is free. The one that is holding onto the mic stand, but that never really rests there for very long. It is reaching, grasping, for something unknowable. Like a gravitational pull we are drawn in towards you, not just our hands reaching to clasp yours, but our chest, our hearts, our guts, pulled up and out, violent and tender all at once.

I zone in on each of your fingers, the almost claw-like motions captivating in the harsh stage lights. Each finger is reaching, prodding towards a future that is not yet here, lifting me up. I feel myself being hauled bodily from my seat now, like someone has a hook behind my diaphragm and is dragging me closer to the stage. I am not sure if I have moved physically, if I am moving towards the stage and am weaving my way between the round tables and you, or if I am still in my seat, back arched, thrust forward by my gut, by my heart, by my brain, and by the sheer feeling of the piece.

I zone in further, seeing only your cracked black nail varnish and tarnished cuticles. Your voice cracks as my heart breaks. Your nails loom large in my vision, blotting out the lights in the room, snuffing out the stars as the darkness descends. Five years, that's all we've got! you sing. In this moment it seems like those Five Years have been compressed into Five Minutes. Time is sped up or slowed down; I cannot quite tell, and you do not seem to care. Your hands reach out to put out the lights and the world stops spinning on its axis; for you, for David, for me, for them.



Figure 5: Ruby Wednesday at Her Upstairs, 2017. Image: AbsolutQueer Photography

Ruby Wednesday is a drag performer known for both her punk and rock-inspired live singing and her lip synching prowess. She has been known to work as part of a group, in particular a group known as the Family Fierce that also include Meth (see Chapter Two) and Lilly Snatchdragon (see Chapter Four), as well as one of the regular performers who worked at Her Upstairs. In her own right, she performs extensively on the scene in London and her work moves between burlesque and drag, as well as other performance work using fire, candles, and candlewax.

Ruby Wednesday's performance explored in the creative account above is a live singing version of David Bowie's (1972) *Five Years*. The performer sings to a backing track alone on stage with just a microphone, encouraging the audience to sing along to the repeated refrain of the words "Five Years". As the song ends, a heavy metal track kicks in and she begins an aggressive stripping routine in which she removes her clothes, throws herself about the stage,

and pours candlewax over herself before leaving the stage.⁵² I start with this static beginning and explore the gestural codes that Ruby employs, before considering the content of the lyrics in relation to the messy and violent ending of the performance in relation to forms of protest, linking this act to the protests to save The Black Cap.

As indicated, the first part of the performance is static, with only Ruby's free hand, the hand not gripping the microphone, moving and gesturing. In the moment of performance, it is this gesturing hand that is resonant. I consider the gestures of this performance and more specifically this hand as part of a queer mode of longing for lost queer venues. I read this performance as a utopian gesture, that is also a grasping or longing towards a past. Ruby's gestures throughout the performance are grasping, her free hand consistently reaching and failing to hold on to some unknown future. Within the context of the closure of The Black Cap, in witnessing Ruby's act after the closure of this venue I felt Ruby reaching back to the venue and reaching forward to a future that was currently unknown; particularly a future in which The Black Cap may or may not be re-opened, and the communities that found space there may or may not have locations to come together. The performance is hopeful and angry.

In focussing on the gestural in Ruby's performance I give a queer side-eye to the performance, looking at the edge, to locate alternative sites of hope and resistance. This sideways glance allows a focus on these gestural moments which is connected to the sideways glance at the performances in the previous chapter that illuminates alternative sites of hope for queer

⁵² A version of the version of this performance at the Bethnal Green Working Men's Club in London can be seen at Ruby Wednesday (2015) *Once Twice Five Times A Monster*, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytnZRmczdbA>, accessed 27/08/2019.

people through temporalities. Here, the gestural offers illuminations of queer hope and resistance that a queer side-eye allows the queerly-oriented viewer to witness and feel.

This focus on the gestural as a site of queer hope, utopia and resistance has extant form in the work of Muñoz. The gestural is important to Muñoz's understanding of queerness in which 'Queer utopia is a modality of critique that speaks to quotidian gestures as laden with potentiality' (Muñoz, 2009: 91). This potentiality located in the gesture is bound up in the discussion of hope and possibility that frame my queer thinking, as Muñoz suggests that:

for queers, the gesture and its aftermath, the ephemeral trace, matter more than traditional modes of evidencing lives and politics ... [we] know these moves as vast storehouses of queer history and futurity. We also must understand that after the gesture expires, its materiality has transformed into ephemera that are utterly necessary (Muñoz, 2009: 81).

I orient myself in relation to Muñoz's gestural considerations, arguing that this strategy of focusing on the gestural (and here I purposefully look at the gestures Ruby makes, as well as considering the "gesture" as an academic and metaphorical strategy) as a key site in which to locate queer hopes and resistances materially. Whilst for Muñoz the gestural is bound up in the quotidian, there is very little of the everyday in Ruby's gestures but instead a deliberately performed exaggerated and excessive reaching out. Her gesture is laden with loss and longing and the potential for a future in which queer venues are not being closed or threatened.

Ruby Wednesday is constantly reaching towards some not-yet-here, a future in which we are not surrounded by a homophobic and transphobic present. Her grasp is laden with potentiality; she is '...living within the queer temporality of the gestural...' (Muñoz, 2009: 91). In her gestures it is possible to be reminded of a critical mode of hope forged on collectivity

that maintains presence as a form of protest forged between audience and performer. By this I suggest that Ruby is not only reaching out to grasp some unknown future, but is also reaching out to the physical audience in the space to demand presence and articulate the importance of queer people occupying queer venues to both ensure they stay open and to act as a protest when they close. Whilst I go on to explore in more depth below the particular resonance of coming together that can be felt in Ruby's performance, I want to consider the disruptive element of the violent strip in the performance as resonant of extant modes of queer protest.

"A queer threw up at the sight of that," she sings. I wonder if it also is at the site of that. Where it happened. She is too much, excessive.

You are reaching out to pull us forward; your hand reaches into my mouth and down my throat, trying to get to the beating heart of me. Its sexy and disturbing, all at once; but then again, when is not it? I want it to end right now and I never want it to stop. You rustle across the protective tarpaulin, this slippery surface making you more precarious rather than safer. I do not know if I have moved backwards, but you feel like you are far away. For once, in a very long time, I am seeing the whole stage and seeing you take up space upon it.

You throw yourself across the stage furiously, covering yourself in wax and blood, bathing in it, doused in our desire and disgust. The big picture is almost worse than the close up, more frantic, more diabolic, and it feels like there is even less I can do about it, about you.

The above creative exploration starts from a line that Ruby sings, where a queer threw up at the sight of a cop kissing the feet of a priest (Bowie, 1972). Playing with this idea and glancing queerly at the lyrics, I also read this line as a queer throwing up at the site or location of this event. This queer strategy of purposeful misreading that I engaged with in Chapter Two through a queer reading of *despite*, allows me to inhabit the lyrics and performance in a different way. I suggest that this is resonant of protests to save queer venues from gentrification, where queers throw up and are thrown up at the locations of queer venues by being present and excessive and spilling over (or, indeed, vomiting) onto the streets (as is the case with *The Black Cap*) and into other venues. The performance that is accounted for here is a version that took place at the Bethnal Green's Working Men's Club, a venue that is known for hosting queer performance work but is not exclusively queer. This performance happening in this venue also speaks to the ways in which queer people and performance work moves and has to move beyond queer venues in order to survive, it is thrown up into and onto other venues, and the stains of its vomiting remains.

Ruby is throwing up both at the sight of queer venues closing, at the *site* of queer venues closing, and finally at other sites that they perform in. These are repeated moments of queer visibility in which the presence of the performer and the repeated spilling over of the performer beyond their own body and beyond the stage offer a profound recognition of the importance of queer people and performance in queer venues and beyond, for both the performer and the audiences and communities that emerge around the venues where this queer performance work occurs.

The excessive, messy, vomit-like finale culminates in Ruby aggressively stripping, throwing herself around the stage, covering herself in candlewax and disrupting the almost centred dignity of the song. Vomit has a history as a means of queer protest both in readings of queer protest and visibility and as a material method of protest (see Hughes, 2006; Jeppeson, 2010). It is also resonant of the closing section of Berlant and Warner's (1998) "Sex in Public" in which they discuss watching a live sex show in which a boy is force fed until he vomits. They suggest this display of eroticism sits so outside of hetero- and homo-normative conceptions of privacy, intimacy and sex – as well as understandings of gay sex, publics and shame – that it opens up exponentially the very means and meaning making by which queer modes of communality, intimacy, safety and support come to be (Berlant and Warner, 1998).

I read Ruby Wednesday's moment of excess in this thread, as a moving-beyond-herself to enact modes of queer being and belonging which resist redemptive and depoliticised modes of gay sociability; for example, modes of sociability which would claim that queer venues are no longer necessary in the wake of the success of rights-based political campaigns. With increases in homophobic and transphobic violence and the closure of queer venues, her queer performance work embodies a site of excessive visibility that moves not just to be visible in the room itself but also beyond the room, out onto the street and into other venues, or into venues no longer open.

When this performance first happened, I found it explicitly resonant of the closure of The Black Cap in Camden. As an initial part of the campaign to re-open the venue I organised vigils every weekend outside the venue, with people remaining visible and maintaining visibility on

the street not only to accentuate that we wanted the venue re-opened but also to highlight that without another LGBTQ+ focused venue in Camden Town many regular queer customers felt they had nowhere else to go. This performance became personally emblematic of the importance of this visibility for queer venues to survive and, although I have moved away from the work of re-opening the venue, this visibility remains an important part of the protests and campaign.⁵³ Ruby's excessive strip, the vomitlike ending to her performance, offers a particular insistent visibility of queerness and a critical engagement with the excessiveness of queer people and bodies in performance. This excessiveness is important because the gestures in the performance refuse to disappear and refuse to fade. This is key, this excessiveness is a way of indelibly marking these issues, as is clear in how these gestures remain in my memory of the performance. The utopian longings and critical anger rests in the performance, the venue and the people that are in the room. I argue that this excessiveness means the performance spills over and the politics of the performance remains. The vomit stains. It remains in my memory and in the memory of others, and it ensures that the performance and its effects endure long after it has finished. Beyond this moment of excess and visibility that articulates the importance of queer venues for the survival of queer people and queer communities, the performance also makes a repeated demand for collectivity, togetherness and belonging that is particularly important when considering the effects of queer people coming together for drag and queer performance work.

⁵³ There is an important project in unpicking this idea of visibility, where visibility is not always already a site of power, but also a site of vulnerability through which being seen means you might be more likely to be policed or attacked, which I explored in Chapter Two. Whilst queer visibility is proposed as an important project, it is also worth noting that on multiple occasions whilst standing on the vigil outside The Black Cap I experienced verbal homophobia.

Returning to the lyrics of the song, I read a demand for togetherness that is coupled with Ruby's grasping hand explored above. Despite the song's central focus, the discovery that the world is going to end in five years (Bowie, 1972), the constant returning use of "we" in the lyrics in phrases such as 'we've got five years, that's all we've got' (Bowie, 1972) draws audience and performer together into a moment of belonging beyond the performance moment itself.

I draw this idea of belonging from Elizabeth Freeman's writing, in which she suggests belonging might be to "be-long" or 'to long to be bigger not only spatially, but also temporally, to "hold out" a hand across time and touch the dead or those not born yet, to offer oneself beyond one's own time' (Freeman, 2007: 199). The queerly constructed false etymology (a purposeful misreading that I re-produce in my readings of despite in Chapter Two and sight/site above) that Freeman undertakes is playful, allowing a consideration of belonging as something not just framed within heteronormative familial ties, but as '...non-procreative corporeal transfer...' (Freeman, 2007: 306). This formulation helpfully turns away from belonging as a normative concept, and in relation to Ruby's work I consider how the demand for visibility in Ruby's gestural codes (her reaching and grasping towards the audience) and collectivity in her singing (her use of "we") come together to create a moment in which the audience are brought together in the space; their togetherness is sought after and demanded.

Freeman suggests that drag performance 'seems to be a matter of not only performing but also enacting, summoning, even willing "sympathy, friendship, or love" between the dead and the living' (Freeman, 2007: 309). This idea of a dead and living body being present in the

moment of drag performance (particularly a live body lip synching a dead one) has been indicated by Farrier above as 'serving a non-heteronormative heritable link with the past' (Farrier, 2016: 198). These ideas collide; the ways in which belonging can be about existing across time, and that knowledge may sit in the body and be transferred across bodies. I connect this to ideas of audiences coming together for drag and queer performance and in so doing sharing moments of together, feelings and experiences and producing moments of community and belonging.

In Ruby's work I locate a critically angry and critically hopeful generation of queer communities in which queer people come together excessively in order to produce gestures and ephemera of resistance and hope. I argue that Ruby's vomit-like performance contributes to a mode of queer visibility and a practice of queer communities by insisting on the complex ways in which queer communities might come together to protest and come together *in and through excess* in order to insist upon the need for queer venues and the importance of these queer venues as sites of hope and survival. This is a simple notion: Ruby's performance reminds us of the importance of queer venues and allows a consideration of visibility as a mode of queer protest that challenges what happens when queer venues close.

In Chapter One, when exploring queer communities, I articulated the simple but important formulation that one of the key ideas of queer communities that grounds this thinking is the process of coming together in a venue to watch drag and queer performance work. Whilst this is not the only way that queer communities emerge or function, it is the process that informs this thinking, although arguably online communities, non-performance-based social

gatherings such as attending clubs and dancing together (Buckland, 2002), and other social forms such as community groups, meetings and protests all contribute to the development and sustenance of queer communities. Rather, queer people coming together to watch drag performance is one practice alongside a constellation of practices through which queer communities emerge and develop. In order for this to happen, and for queer communities to survive, queer venues are important and integral sites of *coming together*.

Whilst Ruby Wednesday's performance highlights the significance of coming together in anger and insisting on the importance of visibility for the continuation of queer venues (and on the importance of queer venues for the survival of queer communities), I want to consider the ways in which coming together is pleasurable. Here I purposefully misread "coming together" as not just signifying people occupying a venue, but also as explicitly related to a pleasurable sexual act. Whilst not all instances of gathering in queer venues for performance is also about seeking sexual encounter, this is certainly the case for some, and using this idea of coming together for performance and pleasure offers another way of highlighting the importance of queer venues for queer performance and communities. To explore this idea further I turn to Myra Dubois and a performance that took place in The Black Cap in July 2014.

Myra Dubois

"Oh, I don't sing this bit..."

I have never laughed so much at someone doing so little. The sour expression does not shift as the audience slowly gets what is going on. As the slow realisation spreads out across the room voices chime in (even if they chime in out of tune). The cacophony of a-tonal shouting refuses to become one voice but instead remains polyphonic, yet discordant. Some kind of queer energy infuses us as we sing despite her, despite us.

I am transported back to childhood, sitting in my family's Nissan Prairie with my Mum as we both sing along to both parts. I am there and here, in the room; and it feels like everyone else is remembering too; is there with me, in that car, and in the room. Even though I feel like I am conforming to some gay male stereotype by knowing the words – By Singing Musical Theatre – I sing out with them all.



Figure 6: Myra Dubois at Her Upstairs, 2018. Image: FDPhoto

Myra's performance, a one-woman version of the duet *I Know Him So Well* from the musical *Chess* (Anderson, Rice and Ulvaeus, 1984) in which she only sings one part of duet, involves a large portion of the performance with the performer sits on stage in silence. The initial comedy of this moment, in which the performer is about to sing and then sits in silence until the first chorus, is extended throughout the first verse, before voices start joining in from the crowd filling in the silence from the stage.⁵⁴ I argue that this is a moment of coming together,

⁵⁴ A version of Myra's performance at The Black Cap in Camden can be seen at Erenthae (2014) *Myra Dubois at the Meth Lab opening for Bianca Del Rio pt 1*, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JQes-lvfYk&t=474s>, accessed 27/09/2019

both in terms of queer people and voices coming together to sing, but also in terms of the pleasure of recognising the song and getting to sing along together.

Ann Cvetkovich (2003) proposes that 'Queer performance creates publics by bringing together live bodies in space, and the theatrical experience is not just about what's on stage but also about who's in the audience creating community' (Cvetkovich, 2003: 9). Myra's act forces the audience to be together in the space, and to recognise that togetherness through singing together. Whilst communal singing is also resonant of more normative acts such as singing in church, I argue that in singing along in this setting there is a sense of collectivity and belonging that emerges through this process of recognising and reperforming a cultural object from popular culture.

Returning to Muñoz's assertion that popular culture is a stage on, in and through which queers have the chance to rehearse identities, I argue that the popular performance form of drag (here extended through the form of musical theatre) is a particular mode through which queer identities might be explored, circulated and rehearsed in a pleasurable way. This pleasure is both in coming together in queer venues and recognising people with shared values (in terms of the potential collective safety of a queer community), but also in the pleasure of recognising the reference and singing along.

*I do not know why I think I can sing the counter-melody after midnight after this much gin,
when I have never been able to get it right in broad daylight without a drop of alcohol in me.*

But standing here with you, watching this, has made me feel like I can probably do anything. Looking back, I am led to look back. I imagine we are standing here twenty years earlier singing along with Regina Fong as she stands on that stage; I am lost in the nostalgia of watching videos of her on YouTube and imagining myself in that crowd. I am there and here and there all at once. Here singing along, knowing him so well. There at my computer, twenty years old, watching Regina do the typewriter and wishing I could be in that crowd. And here, twenty years ago, ten years before I'd even be allowed in that venue, with my hands raised in a gay salute, pretending to type and ding. I look around at the young crowd and wonder if anyone else would get what I was talking about, hoping I am not alone in the nostalgia. I am back in the room, next to you, as the chorus kicks in and I take a deep breath, getting ready to shout, "MORE SECURITY!" at the top of my lungs with the rest of the crowd.

I propose that in Myra's act there is a moment of establishing potential queer references. Whilst this is not a universal queer reference, there is something complex emerging in this moment of coming together. When considering the pleasure and politics of getting the reference, there is something fundamentally about survival. Sedgwick (1993) argues that:

I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love (Sedgwick, 1993: 3).

There is in Myra's performance a personal recognition for me of a song I attached to that has a broader resonance to a set of proto-queer desires and longings that informed my own queer

adolescence.⁵⁵ Beyond my own experiences, I argue that in the moment of singing along with Myra to a song made famous by Elaine Paige and Barbara Dixon the audience come together in this collective re-performance of queer references. Whilst this could be argued to be a potentially gay, male reference (and also arguably makes a stereotypical link between gay men and musical theatre), I suggest that this moment does not just remain at this level of recognising and reperforming this one song, but instead offers a moment of coming together in recognition of shared experiences and languages that might be part of queer experience even if the full multiplicity of those languages (or references) are not present in the room at the moment. In other words, whilst this is one moment of coming together around a particular reference, it is resonant of broader queer references around which queer energies and hope can be located.

To unpack this idea, I return Sedgwick's thinking in her chapter "Queer and Now" that frames the earlier queer thinking in this work. As well as engaging with the particular idea of who queer teaching might be for, Sedgwick sparks an exploration of the implication of teaching queer things for queer people. In the chapter, she discusses setting up a Lesbian and Gay Studies class in an American university in 1986. What is most notable about this event is the anger of non-gay students when she revealed, in an interview with the university newspaper, that she had envisaged the class being primarily for students who defined as queer:

Their sense of entitlement as straight-defined students was so strong that they considered it an inalienable right to have all kinds of different lives, histories, cultures unfolded as if anthropologically in formats specifically

⁵⁵ Whilst not the focus of this thesis, the understanding of these proto-queer longings is drawn from Sedgwick's writing as a set of cultural texts and phenomena that I obsessed with as a child and a queer adolescent, and subsequently found myself learning and recognising as having broader queer resonance beyond me, or even just an explicit queer resonance, as I grew up. One of these is the song that Myra sings.

designed – designed from the ground up – for maximum legibility to themselves: they felt they should not so much as have to slow down the Mercedes to read the historical markers on the battlefield. That it was a field where the actual survival of other people in the class might at the very moment be at stake – where, indeed, in a variety of ways so might their own be – was hard to make notable to them among the permitted assumptions of their own liberal arts education (Sedgwick, 1993: 5).

Sedgwick eloquently describes the ways in which the teaching and learning of queer things (lives, histories, knowledges, references, cultures) can be about both education and survival, and indeed education and survival are often not separate for marginalised communities. My own experience of learning not only about queer references and histories, but also about queer theories and studies, was not only a process of engaging socially, historically and theoretically, but was also a fundamental process of learning about my identity and about alternative modes of thinking, doing, living and being in the world beyond a heteronormative model which I had assumed to be the only way. In other words, learning queer things offered modes of survival beyond an increasingly homophobic straight present. I bring this to my understanding of Myra's work in which I locate the possibility of learning queer references that also facilitated experiences of togetherness, belonging and community between myself and audience members.

Whilst this is a bold claim to make about singing along to a musical theatre number whilst Myra Dubois sits silently on stage, I propose that this moment speaks not just to the present moment of the performance but also to other moments of a recognition of queer belonging and togetherness through popular culture. In short, recognising that queer people might have shared references, meaning and identification in the broad, messy and excessive cultural texts which might be attached to in youth and beyond produces modes of engaging with popular

cultural texts that locates pleasurable connections between queers. This is also resonant of giving a queer side-eye to popular cultural texts to playfully locate queerness in them, such as Meth' work in relation to *Lord of The Rings* in Chapter Two. If this happens during moments of performance, then the pleasure of queer references is also about the pleasure of coming together in a space around shared, and even contentious, references and performances. Myra's performance is both about "I Know Him So Well" and about a broader recognition of the pleasures of coming together, and therefore the important pleasures of queer communities.⁵⁶

In Cvetkovich's formulation that queer performance creates communities and belonging not just in the performance but in the act of audiences coming together in the spaces in which they happen (queer venues, for this chapter) she borrows from Jill Dolan's (2005) understanding of utopian performatives. I would like to return once more to Dolan to consider utopian performatives as moments of performance in which utopia might be glimpsed in order to consider how community, politics and pleasure come into play. These understandings of queer performance produce conceptions of performance as integral to an act of imagining an alternative mode of being in the world (Muñoz, 2009). This imagining becomes an inherently political act for the people in these venues, and this political act of imagining an alternative, a utopia, 'offers us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what can and perhaps will be' (Muñoz, 2009: 35).

⁵⁶ The idea of gay and queer references being used and re-used in queer identifications and in performance is also explored in David M. Halperin's (2012) *How to be Gay*.

If a moment of queer community is experienced as a collective sensation of togetherness, as I have argued, then it is possible to consider that feeling as an example of a collective utopian performative. In being lifted up, audiences see beyond the confines of an increasingly homophobic and transphobic present for a brief moment and, illuminated in the glow of an alternative future, a utopia in Muñoz's terms, imagine an alternative present. The sensation remains, the embodied memory of that moment of queer community, and produces a 'kind of affective remain [...] a queer kind of evidence' (Schneider, 2011: 101) from which audiences can enact a queerer present, which is an inherently political act.

Pleasure is key to my thinking here, and the phrase "coming together" is purposefully euphemistic. It is important to highlight the pleasure at play is not only the pleasure of experiencing this togetherness and belonging (the result of the practising of community), but also in its doing when singing along, for example, and *joining in* (in the practising of community). There is a pleasure to watching performance, a pleasure to being in queer venues in the moment of performance, and therefore a pleasure to community. I argue that Myra's performance allows audiences to practice queer community by coming together and joining in with singing along.

However, there is potential here for pleasure and queer communities to appear as monolithic and amorphous, with an indistinguishable and politically naïve understanding of what queer communities might be or look like. These references could also be considered as insisting upon togetherness despite difference, ironing out the stickiness (Farrier, 2017), lumps and bumps that make queer communities more vibrant, interesting and diverse. Furthermore,

these queer references might seem proscriptive and inhibitive; they might suggest a set of texts (or a canon) that one needs to learn in order participate in these communities, texts that might only be resonant with or available to certain identities or parts of the community (for example, the link between gay men and musical theatre).

I acknowledge these limitations but suggest that I am not arguing for an amorphous togetherness but rather suggest that the queer texts in which investment is found in childhood and that return in adulthood may be complex and diverse and deeply personal. In mediating queer worlds, it is possible to locate queer connections with others who have shared queer archives or references, as well as those who do not, and revel in the connections and dissonances of these queer references and texts. It is a pleasurable engagement with dissonance as much as it is a pleasurable engagement with unity. Furthermore, I do not see the moment of joining in as requiring participation or same-ness (as can be seen in the atonal, dissonant, and out of tune singing along to Myra's act), but rather highlight moments in which queers can come together in, through and because of difference. This is a utopian claim, but one which I make because of experiences such as watching Myra's act and finding myself remembering the words to a song I forgot I knew, as well as experiences of staring at people singing along to a song or laughing along to a reference that I did not know or that held no reference for me.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ It is also true that witnessing these references being made in performance was also about learning some supposedly universal references as well. I would often write down quotes of spoken word lip synch, for example, that I would later go home and research like a good academic in order to understand the references that people were making in queer venues both inside and outside of performance. Therefore, I think I knew quotes of the films *Mean Girls* (2004) and *Mommie Dearest* (1981), for example, because I had seen so many drag performers use these lines in performances before I had ever seen the films.

In this section, I have focussed particularly on Myra Dubois using “I know Him So Well” as this is resonant of wider gay or queer references, resonant of watching videos of other drag performances in The Black Cap from before I was able to attend them (for example performances of Regina Fong), and speaks to how references might get used and re-used by gay and queer performers and audiences to locate alternative or excessive sites for investment and hope. Following Sedgwick, I argue that these sites are often popular cultural forms that may appear to be banal or quotidian, but that offer opportunities for togetherness, belonging, hope and survival for the queerly-oriented viewer. Therefore, in Myra’s act there is both the potential for amorphous and problematic modes of togetherness to emerge, but I propose that this is a straight reading of what is happening. Instead a polyphonic, complex and bumpy queer community emerges that does not reduce or subsume individuals and does not erase the complex differences and multiplicities of identities that exist (or can exist) within any queer venue.

To return to notions of gestures and the gestural, I understand the gestures in Myra’s work as gestures towards shared and dissonant queer pasts and references in which belonging and hope might be located. Rather than physical gestures, I locate these gestures metaphorically as Myra’s work and her form of drag gestures not only to these references but to other performers on the Black Cap stage as well. These references resist amorphous or homogenous forms of belonging, rather they recognise the complex ways in which queer people might come together pleasurably because of popular culture and in particular through drag performance.

Conclusions

In the material and metaphoric gestures of the performances explored in this chapter I have located modes of coming together in, through and because of drag performance to practice queer communities despite and because of the contemporary landscape of queer venues closing and opening. These gestures, staccato and grasping, camp and historic, fluid and protective, work in various ways in relation to broad socio-economic and political issues surrounding neoliberal gentrification. The work of Sadie Sinner, Ruby Wednesday and Myra Dubois do not sit outside of these macro-economic and political discourses, but in them I have located pathways and strategies of resistance that insist upon the importance of queer venues, representation and pleasure in generating queer communities and articulating practices of survival.

For Sadie Sinner and the Cocoa Butter Club, I argued that the importance and pleasure of this coming together also needed to be considered beyond an amorphous and generalised idea of a queer community in order to attest to the importance of diversity and difference, considering in particular the importance of dedicated spaces for minority groups within queer venues by insisting that the presence of diverse identities on stage is integral to ensuring the presence of diverse audiences in queer venues. For Ruby Wednesday's performance this was in the moment of protest against the closure of queer venues, audiences coming together in anger and protest and insisting on the presence of queer bodies in queer venues and beyond as part of the development of queer communities. Finally, for Myra Dubois, this coming together was intimately about pleasure; the pleasure of being in the room together, of singing

together, and of getting the reference (or not) as integral to the complex ways in which queer communities might be experienced and felt, as well as how those feelings remain. Finally

Ultimately, I argue for the importance of queer venues in the maintenance of queer communities. As I stated in the opening of this chapter, in the wake of venue closures more and more queer events are happening in non-queer spaces which queers are in for an evening or a few hours. Whilst an important insurgent tactic, I locate the necessity of specifically queer venues in relation to the contemporary moment of increased homophobia and transphobia. Queer venues are sites of resistance and survival for queers since they offer moments of deep and free breathing for queer people and in so doing facilitate practices of queer hope and survival.

Running through this discussion at various levels has been issues of queer identities, queer people, and queer bodies, with the section exploring Sadie Sinner and The Coca Butter Club insisting on issues of diversity and difference. In each case, however, whilst the venues remain important and even integral to the practicing of queer communities, it is the people that are also mediating and mediated by these venues. To extend and challenge these ideas, I consider the role of queer bodies in the following chapter, taking up the challenge of accounting for a diversity of bodies in drag performance and considering what these complex and diverse identity positions do in and for queer communities in contemporary London.

Chapter Four: Queer Bodies

Introduction

At the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, four performers put on a show to an audience made up of people who have come specifically for this event and others who have just wandered by the public café in which it is taking place. Hosted by Meth, explored in Chapter One, with performances from a female drag queen Scarlett O'Hora, trans-identified drag king Mark Anthony, and trans-identified drag king of colour Chiyo. The performers engage with lip synch work that is challenging, exploring ideas of gender, gender identity, power, abuse, desire and hope. That this show is happening in 2019 in this venue to an audience half of whom may have never seen drag before or only ever seen cis-male drag queens on TV or dames in pantomime is complex. The performances are sticky and profound and I am intimately aware of the bodies on stage and what they are doing to me and to the audience and to drag and to representation. The air is heavy, full of thoughts and feels and sweat and desire and standing by a grand piano in this grand hall to the side of the stage I am caught in the gazes of audiences members I know and people I have never seen before as my heart swells and my breath catches as each act builds on the next. This feels powerful and heady and intoxicating.

Where the previous chapter looked to venues, and the importance that queer venues has on the generation and sustenance of queer communities, this chapter returns to the body and the performer in order to explore the importance of queer bodies (and, specifically, marginalised bodies) in relation to queer communities. This chapter articulates the importance of a diversity of bodies in the contemporary drag and queer performance scene,

where the need to represent trans and/or non-binary people, people of colour and female-identified people is central, or should be central, to any contemporary project of queer communities. The above creative account describes a show I produced at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in April 2019 as part of a season of performances looking at music and comedy. I was asked by museum to bring a drag show and made a conscious decision to have a show populated by performers from a diversity of identity positions and performance forms. This impulse came from observations I have made as a producer of performance events about the importance of a diversity of bodies in drag and queer performance events in order to also ensure that there was a diversity of identities and bodied in the audience (Parslow, 2018). This chapter starts from these observations and ideas, unpacking the importance of diversity in drag, and how what bodies are on stage in drag and queer performance shows impacts on what bodies are in the audience. This call for more diverse bodies is not just a call for a tokenistic inclusion of identities, but instead recognises that diverse bodies in shows makes the shows more interesting; it makes the work better.

Whilst the use of the term bodies, as opposed to identities, could imply a turn to essentialist or essentialised ideas surrounding identity or even erase the identities of performance, I use it to indicate a turn to materialities and the important materialities of identity. This has important implications because the body of the performer on stage has material consequences in terms of representation (and who wants to come to see these performances) in relation to diverse identities, and material consequences in terms of regulation (in terms of which performers are welcomed to perform in which venues). Here, the use of the term queer bodies does not imply a desubjectivised body, nor does it imply the body as whole, coherent or fixed. Instead, the use of bodies insists on the ways in which

performers identities (and performance forms) are mediated by the perception of their bodies on stage, and vice versa. In other words, the very materiality of the body is what often produces, regulates and challenges the homophobia, transphobia and other forms of discrimination that frame this research. Therefore, in paying attention to, in attending to, the body of the performer, I discuss the ways in which the material consequences of identity mark and are marked by drag and queer performance forms, and how in examining these materialities and bodies it is possible to locate strategies for resistance and survival that contribute to this project.

In doing so, I consider the materiality of my queer side-eye, articulating the connection between my queer side-eye and a queer eye roll, before extending the ideas to consider the notion of a killjoy drag performer (I extend this discussion below). Here my queer side-eye, which is materially implicated in the body and its position in space, is connected to the ways in which marginalised bodies and subjects might critique dominant positions in society by giving them a queer side eye or rolling their eyes. Here the queer side-eye or eye roll is connected particular to non-cis, non-male and non-white subjectivities as an embodied strategy of critique.

I start by accounting for the importance of this diversity of bodies in drag performance, as well as engaging critically with contemporary popular discourses surrounding the inclusion of non-male, and non-cis performers in the drag scene, as well as the impact of other identity markers such as race and ethnicity on the performer and the performance form. I turn to Freeman's (2010) notion of "temporal drag," bringing it into a critical relationship with Ahmed's (2005) feminist killjoy, to propose killjoy drag as a critical and performative position

that marginalised drag performers inhabit to critique mainstream drag performance discourse and more broadly contemporary chrononormative and assimilationist politics.⁵⁸ Finishing this critical discussion with a return Ahmed's (2016) articulation of an "affinity of hammers" in relation to trans and feminist discourses and the relationship of privilege and intersectionality in feminist politics, I account for the complex ways in which myself as academic might sit in relation to this performance work, mobilising the queer side-eye as one method of sitting in affinity with academics, activists and performers to resist and hammer away at normative discourses that do not make space for a diversity of bodies and performance forms within drag performance. Ultimately, the performers I explore are both embedded within their localised performance moment, whilst more broadly speaking for the importance of a diversity of bodies in drag performance in order to attest to the importance of a diversity of form and producing more engaging and diverse drag practices within the queer performance scene.⁵⁹

This is not to suggest that previous chapters have not also dealt with the importance of returning to the body of the performer, since each exploration of performance insists upon

⁵⁸ Whilst the notion on "marginalised drag performers" appears conflictual, where all drag performers could be perceived as marginalised to some extent, I make a distinction between cis-gendered, white men performing as drag queens who occupy dominant positions in the contemporary drag and queer performance scene, and drag performance from across different forms of drag who do not occupy those dominant positions. I am aware and come to explore in more detail in relation to the work of Michael Twaiats below that ideas of marginality run through all drag work and that even the most normative of performers may have a complex relationship to gender, sexuality, and cis-ness. However, in accounting for the complexity and politics of the contemporary drag scene, it is important to highlight that the experiences of performers who occupy positions outside of or beyond these dominant categories are often marked by oppressions and violences in ways their more dominant peers are not. Therefore, I use the term marginalised here to highlight the material differences and inequalities that these performers experience.

⁵⁹ The question of form lies underneath many of these discussions in this chapter and, whilst it is touched upon in the discussions surrounding the performers, since they all engage in different "forms" of drag, it is the content of the performance that is more of the focus here. Whilst I am aware that form and content are intimately related, a formic discussion is undertaken in more depth in the next chapter on queer politics and drag performance, in which I locate the politics in some explicitly "silly" drag performance in the form itself, rather than necessarily the content.

the geographic and temporal locality of the work, and as such necessarily includes a focus on the individual performer and their body. Furthermore, I do not suggest that the analyses prior to this chapter have not dealt with issues of diversity or engaged with a diverse set of performers and performance practices.⁶⁰ Each chapter has dealt with different drag performances that include a diversity of identities, bodies and positionalities as well as forms of performance. This insistence on diversity does not appear from a desire “tick boxes,” but instead was a result of representing the diversity of performers currently working on the London drag performance scene. This thesis is reflective of the drag performance scene in London, and therefore any study of this scene must include this range of performers in order to represent it most accurately.

Furthermore, whilst it is possible to suggest that in 2019 there are numerous discussions surrounding diversity in drag performance and queer communities more generally in popular media (Al-Khadi, 2018; Edgar, 2011; Levin, 2018; Fontaine, 2018), there is an ongoing need to discuss, talk about in theory, and create spaces in which a diversity of drag forms and performers can take to the stage. This thesis is not separate from the representational system in which both different forms of drag performance and queer identities and identifications circulate. My experience of reading queer theory was as much a process of pleasure in seeing myself represented in theory as it was an intellectual process, and therefore I recognise the importance of representing a diversity of intellectual and performance forms, as well as identities, in order to contribute to this representational field, as well as more broadly the

⁶⁰ Amongst others, so far this thesis has explored a trans performer of colour, a female performer of colour, and a non-binary identifying performer, as well as complex intersections of drag and cabaret performance.

need to fully account for the vibrant scene in London. Therefore, this chapter turns to three performers – Lilly Snatchdragon, LoUis CYfer, and Michael Twaits – who all occupy various formic and identity positions in the London drag and queer performance scene. To make this case, I first consider key debates surrounding diversity in the contemporary drag scene.

Killjoy Drag

The most recent and largescale emergence of these discourses happened when RuPaul, host of *RPDR* suggested that “Drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it’s not men doing it” (Aitkenhead, 2018) and further went on to suggest that he would not accept a drag performer who had medically transitioned onto the television show in the future.⁶¹ RuPaul later tweeted that ‘You can take performance enhancing drugs and still be an athlete, just not in the Olympics’ (see Framke, 2018; McCague & Gerken, 2018), suggesting that medically transitioning would offer unfair advantages to trans-identifying women who wanted to enter the competition. RuPaul’s comments were misguided and not only relied on an understanding of trans and/or non-binary identities that were solely based on medical transition, but also failed to understand the very histories within which she places the show (for example, the presence of trans identities in Livingstone's (1990) *Paris is Burning*) as well as the contemporary moment in which there is an increasing visibility of drag done by performers who identify across a spectrum of gender and sexual identities.

⁶¹ Several *RPDR* contestants have come out as trans and/or non-binary or have transitioned after the show, and others have come out as trans and/or non-binary whilst on the show. Most recently, the performer Peppermint appeared as openly trans on the show, whilst RuPaul made the distinction that because she had not had breast implants at the time of recording, she was not medically “enhanced” to perform drag. However, since these comments, two openly trans performers have now re-appeared on the competition (during a seasonal “Holligay Special” (December, 2018) and more recently on *RuPaul’s Drag Race All Stars 4*) and RuPaul has appeared welcoming and supportive of their identities and stories. Whether this is due to pressure or a major attitude shift is unclear and, perhaps, does not matter.

Whilst RuPaul later apologised, it is still important to recognise the cultural significance or weight that these words had. Furthermore, whilst in the venues I talked about explored in the previous chapter female, trans and/or non-binary identifying performers and audiences are welcomed, encouraged to perform and even provided with their own performance events, this is not the case elsewhere. Therefore, whilst the comments could appear to be outdated, they are representative of forms of misogyny, transphobia and intolerance in certain parts of the LGBTQ+ community and performance community. This chapter accounts for the presence of non-male and non-cisgender bodies in drag performance work, arguing not only for the importance of these performers on queer stages and these bodies in queer venues, but also for the importance of talking about this work in queer performance theory.

In accounting for the importance of marginalised performers in the drag scene, I (re)turn to the work of Freeman (2010) that I referred to in Chapters One and Two and in particular “temporal drag” as a re-reading of drag in relation to identity politics and queer notions of fluidity. For Freeman, temporal drag describes the pull of lesbian feminism on queer theories where ‘even to entertain lesbian feminist ideas seems to somehow inexorably hearken back to essentialised bodies, normative visions of women’s sexuality, and single-issue identity politics that exclude people of colour, the working class, and the transgendered’ (Freeman, 2010: 62). Rather than confining these ideas to an anachronistic past, however, Freeman foregrounds the importance of ‘feminism and its histories’ (Freeman, 2010: 62) for many who are also committed to queer projects. The bind of lesbian feminism, where a bind ‘is both a problem and an attachment’ (Freeman, 2010: 62), is that the term is as much a temporal allocation as a group identity. Freeman considers drag not as emblematic of the performative

nature of gender, but as a temporal phenomenon, ‘as an excess, that is, of the signifier of “history”’ (Freeman, 2010: 62).

This notion of temporal drag and Freeman’s critique of the relationship between feminism and queer histories and identities troubles progress-based, future-oriented understandings of gay or queer politics.⁶² Temporal Drag offers a purposeful re-reading that allows a consideration of generationality, and the complex ways in which queer and feminist knowledges get passed on through activism (Freeman, 2007) and performance (Farrier, 2012, 2016, and see Chapter Three). It also understands the past as a fecund site in and through which to locate modes of living and survival in the present. Freeman critiques Butler’s (1990) conceptualisation of drag and gender performativity in which the performativity of gender is seen as a repetition without origin and ‘any backward-looking glances are “citational”’ (Freeman, 2010: 63), consolidating a phantasmatic originary gender. Instead Freeman suggests that citations of the past may also offer alternatives: ‘*Gender Trouble* disregards citations of the past that actually signal the presence of life lived otherwise than in the present’ (Freeman, 2010: 63). For Freeman, citing the past involves citing other ways of being that offer modes of survival and resistance in the present. The temporal drag of lesbian feminism on queer fluidity is a drag backwards, or re-orientation towards, sites of resistance and survival that may be present in prior modes of living and being.

⁶² Here “future-oriented, progress-based politics” does not refer to the utopian longings of the work of Muñoz (2009) and other utopian queer theorists alongside whom I position my thinking, but to assimilationist politics that works towards consolidating gay rights (such as the right to marry, adopt, or serve in the military), and future-oriented projects that insist that the future is always already better than the present, such as the “It Gets Better” campaign (It Gets Better, 2018). As discussed in Chapter One, these narratives are exclusionary for many queer-identifying subjects since they represent a future (and present) that is inaccessible and unwanted.

Freeman challenges the relationship of drag as central to understandings of gender (and queer) performativity not to devalue Butler's work, or refute the value of drag performance for queer cultures, but to consider the importance of how certain bodies might (re)produce and (re)present certain narratives, politics and histories in the present that appear anachronistic. She questions

Might some bodies, by registering on their very surface the co-presence of several historically contingent events, social movements, and/or collective pleasures, complicate or displace the centrality of *gender*-transitive drag to queer performativity theory? Might they articulate instead a kind of *temporal* transivity that does not leave feminism, femininity, or other so-called anachronisms behind? (Freeman, 2010: 53; original emphasis).

Importantly, for Freeman, the lesbian feminist and other supposedly essentialised and anachronistic identities and bodies exert a temporal drag on contemporary queer studies, and particularly notions of queer negativity. This troubles future-oriented, progress-based politics that many queer studies would resist. These anachronistic forms also challenge the framing of certain identity formations as "new" or "young" as I go on to explore in relation to non-binary identities below. Here, reinvigorating feminism as central to queer projects also articulates affinities between minority groups, something that is reflected not just in theory but also in the alliances that emerge on the performance scene between drag performers of various identities and forms.

Freeman considers how the past-ness of the past, in its anachronism, exerts a pull on a form of queer studies that disregards the importance of the materiality of history and the present for queer subjects who may be at risk of violence as much due to the other makers of identity they inhabit (their race, their trans-ness, lesbian-ness, female-ness) as due to their queerness. This is connected to Muñoz's (1999,2009) critique of particular forms of queer studies and

queer negativity explored in Chapter One. Whilst for many of the theories I explore, and many of the performers and communities I inhabit, the relationship between queerness and these other identity markers is often messy, Freeman's framework insists upon the importance of other identity markers that offer critiques and extensions of fluid understandings of queer identities. How might, for example, these identity markers co-exist in complex ways in, through and across the body of the performer that do not reduce material experiences of inequality within and outside of queer communities to understandings of queer identity that erases important identities and difference? Here, the materiality of the body, and how it is marked by identity in and through performance, remains essential, and therefore I return to the idea of the body (and materiality) as important loci for analysis.

To extend this, I turn to Campbell and Farrier's reparative (re-)reading of temporal drag, which they understand as a 'reparative way of rethinking ideas of identity in relation to queer fluidity' that 'offers new ways to combat the paralysing binary between gay identity politics and queer performativity' (Campbell & Farrier, 2016: 151/2). Here temporal drag is mobilised in order to consider how embodied moments of performance bring out the past (and the past-ness of the past) for performers and audiences, often explicitly staging past lives, politics and identities, but also often implicitly staging non-normative bodies (and their lives, politics and identities) in complex ways. For the drag performance work I explore, the temporal drag of non-normative bodies on stages of queer performance insists on the presence and importance of these bodies, on not forgetting the continued presence of racism, misogyny and transphobia within and beyond queer communities, *and* on offering the

possibility of showing lives lived beyond the confines of cis-gender, white, and implicitly or explicitly male modes that still dominate stages of queer performance.⁶³

Drawing from this formulation, I argue that the continued presence of bodies that (re)present people of colour, lesbian, feminist and trans and/or non-binary histories and presents in the drag performance scene make visible modes of racism, misogyny and transphobia by dragging back on future-oriented, progress-based narratives that erase continued precarity and risk for non-normative bodies. This is resonant of Ahmed's understanding of the feminist killjoy, as someone who kills joy or who "spoils" the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness' (Ahmed, 2010: 65). Considering the relationship of the killjoy to feminists and women of colour, Ahmed questions 'Does the feminist kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy?' (Ahmed, 2010: 65), going on to suggest that 'to be recognised as a feminist is to be assigned to a difficult category and a category of difficulty' (Ahmed, 2010: 66).

Here the feminist killjoy remains present in the face of misogyny, becoming difficult, becoming a problem. Ahmed makes a link between the feminist killjoy and the angry black

⁶³ I am aware that all drag performers may occupy complex and contradictory positions in relation to their own gender identities and performances, and that arguably even the most traditional of male-identifying drag queen may not comfortably occupy a cis-gender position. However, it is important to note that for some performers, their identity outside of drag as "male" and, if not "cis" then at the least gender conforming, is a position that consolidates their male identity, or gay male identity. Whilst this does not always function as a repressive move (for example, for a trans masculine performer, an assertion of male-ness may be hugely important) there are moments where the deployment of the male body in relation to drag queens moves to consolidate the position of cis-gendered men as dominant within drag. My argument here is that non-normative performers offer something to drag performance which does not come at the expense of (or, indeed the criticism of) these less marginalised performers (as is often assumed) but rather opens up more spaces for drag performance to resonate with queer lives and resist the violence and exclusion that also effects these normative performers.

woman, suggesting that the angry black woman can also 'kill feminist joy, for example by pointing out forms of racism within feminist politics' (Ahmed, 2010: 67). I set this idea of the killjoy alongside the visible queer body, where the non-normative bodies of performers who occupy intersectional positions of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and so on, maintain visibility and become difficult in the face of continued homophobia and transphobia and in the face of a future-oriented, progress-based queer politics that articulate improvements for queer subjects without recognising ongoing material inequalities. Here the drag of the killjoy, or killjoy drag, comes into play, with marginal subjects occupying embodied positions that insist upon talking about other bodies and other materialities on stage.⁶⁴

It is important, however, to resist where this formulation of temporal drag, and killjoy drag, frames these performers as merely representative of gender performativity or fluidity, since this intellectual move erases the material experience of performing and what these performances do. As Farrier argues, it is important to consider 'drag as a queer performance form, rather than as an activity that exemplifies theorising around gender performativity' (Farrier, 2016: 192). It is important to resist theorising the drag (or gravitational pull) that non-normative bodies exert upon normative queer modes and performance scenes, by highlighting the often injurious material and psychic experiences of inhabiting these positions, ranging from feelings of being booked for shows just to tick a diversity box to physical and verbal discrimination and violence.

⁶⁴ I note that the burden of this representation cannot always lie with these minority subjects, and whilst the work these performers produce may engage with this subject, it is also vital that more privileged queer subjects also expose and resist these violences and erasures.

In bringing together Freeman's temporal drag and Ahmed's feminist killjoy, I recognise the importance of material conditions of inequality. I deploy this intellectual term to ensure these material conditions remain present and consider how marginalised bodies in drag produce temporally and politically complex modes of performance that challenge normative assumptions surrounding the politics of drag and broader queer politics. Killjoy drag functions by insisting upon the visibility of marginalised bodies within drag performance and ensuring that normative and mainstream drag practices do not get carried away on a tide of progress that ignores contemporary inequalities for many drag performers and queer people.

This killjoy drag is not an extension of temporal drag as such, but rather a re-reading of it in relation to the figure of the feminist killjoy. I set these two terms beside one another, mobilising my queer side-eye to consider through a re-reading here rather than a misreading, to explore how the terms interact with one another and produce different ways of engaging with drag and queer performance. The drag, here, is not so much about turning back to the past to locate modes of survival for the present (although it might well be, as I explore in relation to the work of Michael Twai below) as it is about performers digging in their heels, boots or whatever footwear they choose to wear and insisting that attention is paid to both continuing inequality for marginalised bodies on the contemporary queer performance scene, and celebrating the rich work that is available. A killjoy drag performer resists the inexorable tide of progress that erases contemporary struggles for representation, visibility and recognition.

Whilst for Freeman temporal drag represents an anachronistic pressure exerted on queer by historic identities, in the contemporary drag and queer scene there is a false assumption that

these performers and identities are new. By this, I refer to debates that frame non-normative identities, and trans and/or non-binary identities, as new constructions. Rather than the temporal drag of the past exerting itself of the present, these identity and forms are often framed as having no history or past. These contemporary debates frame trans and/or non-binary identities as new phenomena, a tactic that is used to deny the legitimacy of these identities. Whilst not re-producing these injurious arguments here, it is important to recognise the ways in which these narratives seek to erase and cause violence towards trans and/or non-binary people.⁶⁵

Non-binary performance artist Travis Alabanza (2018) argues that framing non-binary identities as new erases the complex and rich history of gender non-conforming identities in non-White and non-Western cultures:

Did we mean to say “non-binary was new”, or did we just mean to say “non-binary is now something I see more white, western, middle class people talking about”. Gender cannot be separated from race, and we cannot ignore the power whiteness has to force defaults onto things, to erase histories, or to homogenise and flatten complex existences. White people, and whiteness, have a vivid history of colonising lands and spaces and taking things over. In some ways I am worried about how whiteness is managing to flatten, erase, and take over conversations around gender non-conformity and non-binary identities [...] Whiteness becomes a default in deciding when something exists, and with that erases the complex, nuanced and rich history of Black and brown people (Alabanza, 2018).

⁶⁵ I am not presenting a revisionist queer history that seeks to locate contemporary forms of sexuality and gender identity within histories that ‘[precede] our particular uses of that term [queer]’ (Campbell, 2016: 223), but rather seeking to locate ways to resist transphobic discourses that erase the presence of trans and/or non-binary identities within history, and discourses that position the presence of female, trans and/or non-binary, and other identities within drag performance as new. In doing so I make it clear that I am not exploring a new phenomenon here (of the drag performance scene explicitly representing other identities beyond cis-gendered, white men and/or drag queens), but rather documenting something that has a rich and diverse history in the UK and beyond.

I draw from Alabanza's article to make it clear that trans and non-binary identities are complexly bound up with race, and that these identities are not new. Extending this, I suggest that the presence of other bodies in drag (female, trans and/or non-binary, people of colour) are not new emergences, even though some discourses within the drag scene may try and suggest this is the case.⁶⁶ I make this clear in order to reflect that the contemporary position for many marginalised drag performers is one in which the legitimacy of their identities *and* their performance forms are called into question by being framed as "new," whilst simultaneously threatening the legitimacy of traditional drag performance forms. Ironically, it seems these new forms are framed both as not "real" forms of drag, whilst simultaneously threatening the very foundations on which drag is supposedly built.

These performers are contradictorily framed as new fads in which young people are engaging (ignoring the rich history of complex identities within drag *and* the importance of these forms and identities for young performers), whilst unquestioningly having the power to destabilise the political power of drag performance (misunderstanding the ways in which drag performance might work to both uphold and critique contemporary manifestations of gender (see Butler, 1990)). Whilst this is a trite analysis, it is seemingly the contradictory position trans and/or non-binary performers supposedly occupy, and an argument levelled at trans and non-binary identities more broadly in certain queer and feminist discourses. Whilst this

⁶⁶ Whilst formal evidence of these opinions beyond RuPaul's comments are not documented formally in academic or journalistic contexts, I have witnessed multiple events where the validity of other forms of drag beyond cis-gendered drag queens, or identities that challenge gender binaries, have been debated or ridiculed. Furthermore, these conversations have also emerged on social media at various moments over the last two years and this is something that was often brought to my attention during my time in relation to producing drag shows and at Her Upstairs.

does not simply map on to the experiences of female performers or performers of colour, these other minority positions can and have faced similar regulatory injunctions.

This section sought to outline a contemporary moment in which trans and non-binary performers, female performers, and performers of colour are often set in alterity to cis-, white and often male-identified drag queens. It is important to note that, firstly, as soon as you examine queer performance communities in London, these distinctions often break down and trouble one another in complex and multi-faceted ways and, secondly, that performers across a multiplicity of performance forms and identity often work beside one another in coalition to challenge and resist hierarchies of drag and identity that exclude marginalised bodies.

Whilst I propose killjoy drag as a political mode for performers who occupy marginal positions, this form of drag is not a distinct performance form for identities but is both an effect of the presence of these identities in drag performance, as well as something performers who occupy more normative positions can do. Even the most normative drag performers – and here I recognise the irony or even paradoxical formulation of a “normative drag performer” – can mobilise killjoy drag as a method to critique misogynist, transphobic and racist politics (and performers). Whilst killjoy drag might be an embodied position for marginalised performers, they are not the only performers who can dig their heels (or boots) in. Furthermore, drag as an aesthetic form as well as a performance form offers the opportunity for a playful engagement with identity and identity formations which means that assumptions about drag performers identities may often take for granted a normative identity underneath the aesthetic that is not actually the case. I suggest all drag performers might occupy potentially complex relationships to gender and that performers might occupy unmarked

identity positions that drag allows them to play with, conceal, heighten, or critique. Here, drag might offer an escape from quotidian regulations of identity.

On the night the Black Cap closed, after most of the public had been kicked out, performers who remained in the downstairs club climbed onto the bar and danced and sang and drank. Lined up down the bar were drag queens, drag kings, burlesque performers, celebrity impersonators, cabaret singers; they were joined in the space by bar staff, security guards, promoters, producers and other assorted community members. I was there, drinking foul gin out of a plastic cup, taking photos on my phone and unable to work out what to do next.

Furthermore, many of the queer performance communities about which I am writing contain a multiplicity of performance forms and identities simultaneously. The above description of the last night of the Black Cap attempted to briefly highlight that, and I would argue that since that moment in 2015 the imperative for gender and racial diversity in the drag scene has become an even more important, or discussed, issue. The performances I explore often occur in shows that contain performers from a variety of identity positions and performance forms, with female-identified lip synching drag performers performing alongside cis-gendered singing drag queens performing alongside transmasculine drag kings of colour performing spoken word poetry performing alongside female-identified burlesque performers taking their clothes off, and so on. There is a necessarily coalitional, affinitive force to this performance work which is integral to queer forms of community as explored through my earlier chapters. For this thinking, queer communities must be committed to anti-racist, anti-transphobic and anti-sexist projects and politics in order to survive, and the performers and

the performance work I talk about are all implicitly or explicitly bound up in those political moves.

The killjoy drag performer occupies a complex, political position in relation to a contemporary drag moment and wider queer political moment in which different identities are being challenged and subjected to violence from within and beyond queer communities. The work of killjoy drag is about insisting on recognising the importance of this diverse work in drag performance (both identity work and drag performance forms) and about refusing homonormative progress narratives that erase the continued material inequalities for minority queer identities. I suggest that my queer side-eye is connected to killjoy drag, where a killjoy drag performer might engage in a queer side-eye of their own as well as a queer eye-roll that I see as a corollary to my queer side-eye. A queer side-eye is also a way of seeing the labour of the killjoy drag performer. In moving through these ideas, my queer side-eye becomes a strategy of seeing, reading and being read by killjoy drag performers and performance, and I consider how marginalised bodies and identities in drag performance offer critiques of normativities within drag performance and beyond it, and occupy complex political positions connected ideas of visibility despite violence, and the pleasure of queer communities explored in Chapters Two and Three.

To extend these ideas, I turn to the work of Lilly Snatchdragon, LoUis CYfer, and Michael Twaits. In writing through and about their performance work I critically position myself in affinity with them. We stand alongside one another, each baring hammers, and find moments

to chip away and, whilst my hammer strokes may often strike in different places (and their hammer strokes may strike at different points to each other), we work collectively to chip away productively at systems of oppression and find more vibrant, more complex and more strategic modes of being and coming together queerly and practising queer communities.

Lilly Snatchdragon

The stage is in darkness, anticipation, the figures slowly appearing in silhouette as the figure in front is shadowed by the one behind, the one holding the chains. As each element is slowly revealed in a strip tease of cultural appropriation, (re)appropriation and (re(re))appropriation, the chains of the performer held back by the silent figure behind become bound up in the images on stage.

The female Asian performer on stage becomes the female Asian performer(s) and stage(s), actively occupying the position of the Western stereotype and in so doing smashing it to pieces, ripping away at the layers of appropriation as she rips away at the layers of her clothes. She insists upon her presence on the stage by insisting upon the presence of female Asian performers beyond the circulated images that emerge again and again in Harry Potter and Miss Saigon and so much more.

I am trapped in my seat, held in place by the performer who demands her visibility and the visibility of those who come before her and trail after her. The insistent presence forces us to take notice, to notice, to take note of, to make notes about, to denote and connote all the bodies that are ignored, all the ways in which Asian women are bound up within a

representational system that leaves them behind. They deserve better, and the stages on which Lilly stands need the representational anger with which this act is laden.



Figure 7: Lilly Snatchdragon at LADS at Her Upstairs, 2018. Image: AbsolutQueer Photography

Lilly Snatchdragon is an internationally renowned burlesque, cabaret and drag performer who has worked on the drag and queer performance scene in London and beyond. Her performance work engages with and actively critiques the representation of Asian women in performance and popular culture, commenting on how stereotypes of Asian women function both as actively racist and misogynist representations and how these stereotypes work to erase difference and produce a monolithically understood figure of the Asian woman. As journalist Ben Smoke describes

Switching between an affected "pan-Asian accent" (her mum is from Laos and Lilly spent part of her childhood in Thailand) to her cut glass speaking voice, she plays with the conceptions western audiences have of women from south-east Asia, bringing them along with her until they find themselves uncomfortably laughing at their own bigotry (Smoke, 2019).

Lilly works across the fields of drag, cabaret and burlesque, occupying multiple and fluid positions in these scenes which trouble the easy boundaries of what these performance forms might look like. She is also part of group of performers known as The Family Fierce, a collective of drag, cabaret and burlesque performers who all occupy varying gender and performance positions (Meth, discussed in Chapter Two and Ruby Wednesday, discussed in Chapter Three, are also members). She is a co-founder of performance collective LADS that celebrates female-identified performers in drag, cabaret and burlesque and has recently held a sold-out special event at The Bush Theatre in London and the RVT. Most recently, she co-founded the performance collective *The Bitten Peach* that celebrates Asian performers and performance practice in burlesque, cabaret, drag and beyond.

Beyond these collective affiliations, Lilly is an exceptionally talented performer who brings comedy and explicit politics to her work, often at the same time. Over the last two years she has been ranked within the 50 best burlesque performers in the world by 21st Century Burlesque Magazine, an internationally ranked and audience voted poll in which she was the highest ranked British-based performer in 2017 and the second highest in 2018 (21st Century Burlesque Magazine, 2018). Her performance work, producing work, and previous work as a stage manager means she is extremely well-respected on the performance scene in London and beyond as a committed and professional performer with an endearing stage presence that brings audiences in before confronting them with explicitly gendered and raced politics that challenge the easy assumptions of their often privileged and liberal worldviews.

The particular act in question, known as chains, is an act in which she 'lip syncs Rachel Rostad's spoken word poem "To JK Rowling, from Cho Chang" interspersed with the song "Chains" by Tina Arena, while wrapped in chains, in a five-minute performance that'll make your heart forget to beat' (Smoke, 2019).⁶⁷ The work, one of the most serious works in Lilly's oeuvre, brings together dance, burlesque stripping and recorded spoken word to critique homogenising representations of Asian women in popular culture. Lilly strips from a kimono, into a stylised and "sexy" ninja outfit, and more, all whilst being held back by another performer standing behind her with chains. The chains restrict her movement and stop her from being able to surge forward into the audience, physicalising the experience of the reductive representations of Asian women in popular culture, but also the ways in which the burden of representation falls to minority subjects and has the potential to restrict, or chain, the performance work they can engage in. Here, Lilly comments on the complicit ways in which western stereotypes of Asian women homogenise diverse and disparate identities, cultures and performance forms, and how performance work by Asian performers can come to stand in for all Asian (performance) culture.

For audiences, the work plays with familiarity through the tropes of burlesque, and the usual whoops and cheers occur in the early parts of the act (particularly in the chorus) when clothing is removed. This familiarity is quickly challenged as the tropes of burlesque are interrupted – the reveal of clothing is not for us, and where it is, it is not for pleasure (or at least not for the audience's pleasure) but to expose layers of stereotypes. Many of the performers about whom I write in this thesis work as burlesque performers as well as cabaret

⁶⁷ A version of this performance can be seen at Agent Burlesque (2016) *Lilly Snatchdragon 2nd Place The Burlesque Awards 2016 Chains*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPRrO4Wu4d8&t=289s>, accessed 28/08/2019.

and drag performers (or have worked as burlesque performers), and many (Lilly included) blur the lines between these forms in innovative and engaging ways. The shows that these performers work in often bring drag, burlesque and cabaret together, as already indicated above, and the lines between these types of performance are blurred for audiences and performers alike. Therefore, whilst this example of Lilly's work is grounded in burlesque, this performance form is not separate or distinct from the modes of drag and queer performance work explored so far, but crosses and mingles with these forms in multiple and complex ways. Simply put, Lilly's work is also drag. However, in accounting for the burlesque performance strategies at play here, a consideration of burlesque performance helpfully frames these discussions.

Contemporary thinking around burlesque performance makes the link between historic and contemporary economic and social depression in the US (and to a certain extent the UK) and the popularity of burlesque (Liepe-Levinson, 2002; Wilson, 2008). These accounts also pay attention to the relationship between feminist and post-feminist discourses and burlesque practice, where the move of female-identified bodies stripping on stage can amount to both the liberation and continued oppression of women. These accounts also outline the modes in which "new burlesque", "neo-burlesque" and even port-manteaux terms such as "queerlesque" come to recognise the role of burlesque within contemporary popular performance practices, and how burlesque as an art form interacts complexly with contemporary politics of gender and sexuality.

Lazlo Pearlman (2016) provides an historical and contemporary account of the shift into "New Burlesque" in his chapter "Kisses Cause Trouble Le Vrai Spectacle: Queering the

French/Frenching the Queer". In particular, the chapter notes that alternative New Burlesque 'use[s] tropes of striptease and sexy bodily display to challenge gender roles, body normativities, racisms, able-isms, size-isms and other mainstream cultural body and identity positions' (Pearlman, 2016: 56). Pearlman frames several categories of New Burlesque that looks at re-styling classic burlesque tropes, the alternative New Burlesque described in the quote above, and Gothic or Fetish Burlesque. Lilly's work falls more clearly into the fourth category of overtly political practice that 'uses the form to directly critique body image standards and sexual commodification of women's bodies' (Pearlman, 2016: 56). However, whilst Pearlman argues that this form of work is usually not seen in commercial burlesque shows and instead seen in more politicised performance spaces or conference settings, Lilly's work moves across and through these boundaries, with the Chains act in particular bringing overtly political work into more mainstream settings. Often her work, and this act, will be a direct (if often unplanned) intervention into more mainstream, and mostly white, settings. Whilst Lilly's work remains within the form of burlesque, with the reveal of her body as the final image, the work pushes the boundaries of the form in complex ways whilst still demonstrating the skill of burlesque throughout. Furthermore, just as Campbell and Farrier (2016) highlight that particular performance work might be framed as radical and queer depending on the geographic and temporal specificity of their emergence, I note here that even the most "mainstream" of burlesque forms can have a radical and queer potential. Even though I am claiming Lilly's work as having a complex queer potential in relation to mainstream forms, I recognise again the importance of paying attention to the specificity of this performance work. For Lilly through her practice of burlesque and the revelation of her female body in relation to sexualised and raced imagery, the work is often purposefully uncomfortable, actively challenging and necessarily sticky.

I characterise this performance of “Chains” as a particularly sticky and uncomfortable experience for the audience as the scene shifts between desire and discomfort – we are stuck in the room, stuck looking at the stage, pulled to it, just as the performer is stuck by this representation. This awkwardness and discomfort is activated by the performance. As Ahmed suggests:

To create awkwardness is to be read as being awkward. Making public comfort requires that certain bodies “go along with it”. To refuse to go along with it, to refuse the place in which you are placed, is to be seen as trouble, as causing discomfort for others. There is a political struggle about how we attribute good and bad feelings, which hesitates around the apparently simple question of who introduces what feelings to whom. Feelings can get stuck to certain bodies in the very way we describe spaces, situations, dramas. And bodies can get stuck depending on what feelings they get associated with (Ahmed, 2010: 68-9).

Lilly’s work sits within this discomfort, both in the performance moment for her and for the audience. I refer here in the first instance to the chains which attach to her wrists and restrict her movement and the black-clothed figure behind her holds them back. Within the performance Lilly is stuck on stage and stuck within certain canons of representation through her costumes. Through this, however, I am not suggesting Lilly is occupying an oppressed position on this stage; to do so would not take into account her agency as a performer and the decisions she has made in the creating and enacting the performance. She is actively occupying this stuck position and sticking to the stage. Here, I articulate Lilly’s work as a killjoy drag performance; Lilly refuses to move on, refuses to just “go along with it” by being stuck on stage and stuck to the stage.

The stickiness and discomfort is also present for the audience. The audience are stuck watching the performance, are not allowed to just watch the act as if it were any other act,

but are forced to pay attention to the layers of representation being stripped, stuck watching the chains pulling her backwards and in the most visceral moment of the work, stuck watching her vocalise her frustration as she shouts out in a guttural scream over the track. The audience is not given a chance to just pass the performer by or pass over the performer's body, gender, or race. Lilly creates this discomfort and gets the audience to stick with her, and stick to the points she is making, whether they want to or not.

Here, stickiness is activated as a useful political tool in much the same way Ahmed suggests in her thinking; Lilly creates discomfort and becomes the killjoy, the killjoy drag. Discomfort is a political tool, a way of forcing visibility and forcing recognition about her experiences as an Asian woman in the drag performance scene. Where Ahmed finds the stickiness as potentially grounded in negative affects being stuck to bodies in places, in Lilly's work this stickiness is mobilised as a performative tool that actively engages with the politics of her identity and her body. Lilly gets stuck, refuses to move on and in so doing animates a conversation around the representation of female Asian identities in performance and popular culture. Furthermore, the audience also get stuck, and stick to, the performance which potentially generates ideas of identification, communality, and community around particular performers and performance forms. Here, the audience getting stuck is both about engaging in sticky, complex or uncomfortable conversations and experiences surrounding diverse identities, and sticking to and getting stuck to performers through identification with these performers and a desire to support other and new forms.

Farrier also engages with the idea of stickiness in queer performance, particularly when engaging with theatrical pasts, for Farrier the work of British playwright Joe Orton. Farrier looks at ‘the ways in which it is possible to engage with sticky stories from the theatrical past to see in a general sense what impact past queers have on current ideas, especially when they appear problematically’ (Farrier, 2017: 2). For Farrier this stickiness appears when trying to locate the importance of historical figures within LGBTQ+ histories without reducing these histories to present or stabilised forms of visible queerness or sexuality, and without smoothing over the intricacies – and issues – that these queer histories and figures produced. Whilst a different analysis (and one that accounts for the racism and misogyny of Orton’s work), I extend this use of stickiness here and position it alongside Ahmed’s uncomfortable sticking to propose that Lilly’s practice is an act of sticking to the stage, with the desire to refuse to move on and refuse to iron over the bumpiness of the politics with which she is engaging. Lilly’s performance work presents her female Asian body as an interruption into the mostly white settings she inhabits, an interruption into narratives of progression that iron over the continued issues for female performers and female performers of colour in the drag, burlesque and cabaret scenes, and a refusal to not stick to her point and stick to the stage.

“Chains” functions as a performance of discomfort, a discomfort in and through which Lilly sticks to the stage and engages as a killjoy drag performer who refuses to be swept up in tides of progress that would iron over her experiences of oppression as an Asian woman. The performative enactment of her chains in the performance, with physical chains holding her back, become doubly representative of the chains (and burden) of representation, and of her refusal to move off the stage and insistence on her visibility as a performer. Within and

beyond the performance, Lilly's work intimately stages her own body and activates killjoy drag through comedy and burlesque, often making the audience laugh at her jokes and then realise they really should not have been laughing. Her work functions as one hammer within the affinities of hammers that many performers in this thesis wield.⁶⁸ Lilly is an exemplary performer whose work is skilful and challenging, and it is through the skilful use of burlesque that her work is able to reach out to and challenge mainstream audiences as well as function in more localised queer events. Through her work Lilly sticks to the stage and refuses to come unstuck, maintains her discomfort and her audience's discomfort as a critical mode of being on stage that foregrounds her body and identity (and in particular her gender and her race) as valid forms of drag performance, but more importantly as immovable and present forces within the drag and queer community. In Lilly's work, through her gender and race, she occupies a position of a killjoy drag performer, playing across forms as a drag queen, cabaret and burlesque performer. This is one activation of killjoy drag, through performance forms which rest in female and feminine representation. To extend and challenge this formulation of the killjoy drag performer, I want to explore how drag kings function in relation to these ideas, and how kinging fits into these formulations of drag performance explored so far. To do so, I turn to the work of LoUis CYfer to consider the relationship between kinging and performance in the contemporary drag scene.

⁶⁸ It is noteworthy that much of Lilly's work is coalitional and as part of collectives. As a minoritarian subject, whether consciously or unconsciously, Lilly finds coalitions with other performers who share her experiences and not. This is something that some, but not all, of the performers I explore in this thesis do, and it is interesting to note as another mode of engaging with queer performance practices and communities that stratifies in different ways across performers. Whilst this is beyond the confines of this thesis, I make a note of it as an important aspect of Lilly's work, and other performers in this thesis.

LoUis CYfer

It is like a collective wink. Or almost exactly the opposite.

What do I mean?

It is like he is winking at the whole audience, and every one of us thinks he is winking just at us, for us, towards us. And whilst we all know he probably cannot really see us past the bright stage lights, there is a small part of us (me) that think there is no one else in the room, it is just us. The air is palpable, thick, muddy, sweet, honey rich, we are on the edge of our seats (if we even had seats to begin with). The nonchalant use of the mic (not to mention to mic stand, the free hand resting lightly...) is an invitation to come closer, to come closer, to come together.



Figure 8: LoUis CYfer as King Rat in a Pantomime at Her Upstairs, 2018. Image: FDPhoto

LoUis CYfer is an actor and drag king performer who is known for both drag, cabaret, fringe and mainstream theatre and performance. LoUis achieved success on the drag and cabaret scene, working across traditional and alternative venues in London. LoUis won Drag Idol in 2014, a national competition in which performers compete to represent individual venues across the country before working towards a national final. LoUis had residencies in venues such as the Admiral Duncan in Soho, a more traditional drag performance venue, as well as performing in spaces such as The Black Cap and Her Upstairs previously mentioned in this thesis.

Beyond drag and cabaret, LoUis works with queer theatre company *Milk Presents*, in particular devising and performing in the touring shows “Joan” and “Bullish,” both of which explored themes of gender and gender non-binary identities in relation to historic figures (Joan of Arc) or historic stories (the Minotaur). Most recently LoUis was cast as a trans-identifying character in a touring production of Jon Britain’s (2015) *Rotterdam*. Whilst LoUis’s theatre work offers an interesting and challenging engagement with the relationship between forms of drag being brought into theatre spaces, the focus here is on LoUis’s work in cabaret and drag settings. This is to ensure clarity across these analyses, whereby bringing in theatrical re-interpretations of drag performance is a connected but sperate area for further enquiry. This is also because the work that LoUis engaged in with *Milk Presents* often blurred the boundaries between cabaret and theatre, with the character of LoUis CYfer leaking into the theatre performances. Therefore, any exploration of LoUis’s cabaret necessarily informs understandings of their theatre work. Here, I focus on one emergence of their performance work, during an impromptu performance at Her Upstairs.

The event itself was a fundraiser for a drag king performer, Flynn Rideherr, in order to fund their top surgery.⁶⁹ The event in itself was bound up both in discourses of trans and/or non-binary performers being present on the drag scene, but also wider conversations surrounding the representation of drag kings in larger or more mainstream settings. Whilst drag kinging has a rich and vibrant relationship with popular culture, there is understood to be a lack of broader representation and recognition of drag kings within mainstream drag cultures. In the first instance this is due to *RPDR* only being framed as a drag queen competition, but more thorough and political analyses also frame this lack of broader recognition as bound up in misogyny (since many drag king performers might be female-identified), transphobia (where many drag king performers may exist across a multiplicity of trans and/or non-binary identifications) and even lesbian erasure (where performance events including drag kings are often events that cater specifically for lesbian subcultures and therefore do not achieve mainstream attention). Whilst broad statements, these are sentiments shared by many drag kings and commentators upon it, alongside an awareness of the growing popularity and the historical and contemporary richness of the drag king performance scene (see Elks, 2019; Holden, 2015; Ontiveros, 2015; Paskett, 2018; Smith, 2017; Stephenson, 2016; Williams, 2013).

⁶⁹ Top surgery is 'a gender affirming procedure for transgender men and non-binary individuals that creates a masculine chest. Top Surgery involves breast removal (Subcutaneous Mastectomy) and male chest contouring, and may also include free nipple grafts, or nipple/areola resizing and repositioning' (Trans Media Network, 2019).

In academic contexts, the work of exploring drag king performance is often locally situated, accounting for the abundance of these drag king performance scenes, and often their relationship to lesbian, butch femme/female and/or transmasculine subcultures (see Halberstam, 2001, 2005, 2011; Volcano and Halberstam, 1999) and I explored the existing literature on drag kings in Chapter One. Whilst a fecund area of enquiry, my analysis of kinging performance places it within these cultural histories and contexts whilst recognising that in the drag scenes on which this thesis focusses these performers and scenes often blur and become indistinct with drag kings, queens and those in between all working together in shows. Importantly, this happens without losing the diverse set of practices, bodies, identities and audiences that often coheres around performance forms, so that in one show a plurality of audiences and queer communities can come together in, through and because of drag performance.

I recognise the distinct material realities of drag king performance as a form which is both bound up in female bodies and desire, trans and/or non-binary bodies and desire, and modes of female masculinity, whilst also taking to task the importance of recognising a contemporary scene in which drag kinging and queening, and cabaret and burlesque, often happen alongside on another. This is clear in LoUis's work as a performer (in winning a national drag competition more traditionally won by drag queens), and in the contemporary scene in London exemplified by the work of the performers in this thesis.

As I explore in Chapter One, Farrier argues that

Speaking of drag kings and queens together is the writing out of a political inclination, one that serves to look to what coheres these performances and performers in terms of a functioning community. Although, as it has been noted, the audiences and traditions of kinging and queening are different and the effects in the performance room follow this difference, there are places where kings and queens speak similar languages (Farrier, 2017: 185).

I follow this political impulse in my exploration of kinging here. I extend it in my understandings of drag where the bodies, identities and performance forms of the performers I write about occupy plural positions in relation to queer communities and politics, and come together and resonate in complex ways that allow for other understandings of queer communities to emerge in, through and around drag. This is not to iron out differences and diversities in performance, or to read drag homogenously across multiple bodies, identities and performance forms. Nor is it, as Farrier makes clear, ‘to collapse the differences [...], or to minimise or belittle the inequalities manifest in the work because it sits in our patriarchy, which manifests not only in impactful material ways, but also in other less visible ways’ (Farrier, 2019: 185). It is not possible to separate kinging from the material implications of patriarchies, even as the form itself often plays with, subverts and satirises the very patriarchal forms that oppress the bodies and identities that perform it. Furthermore, in suggesting that kinging and queening practices coming together across stages might also speak to the complex notions of queer community that inform this thesis I am not ‘only [seeing] community in a rosy glow’ (Farrier, 2016: 185) but recognise as well the ways in which homogenous understandings of “queer communities” can erase importance differences and diversities in the drag performance scene and the queer communities that emerge in and through it.

Instead, I suggest that in paying attention to how kings and queens (and, of course, those performers who slide across and through the gaps in between those identity and performance forms) *come together* on stages, it is possible to locate sites of playful and pleasurable engagement with communities and togetherness that resist and challenge homophobia and transphobia from outside and within LGBTQ+ communities. Here I extend the playful idea of “coming together” as euphemistically pleasurable, drawing from the image of the drag king making references to their “packed” genitalia. Here, packing refers to the practice of stuffing the crotch of the pants to simulate male genitalia. For LoUis this comes from a “kilogram of couscous [which] changes your centre of gravity. Quinoa is the best — it’s the small pieces, that’s why I snigger when I go past it now” (Parkinson in Urwin, 2015). In the often-hyperbolised performance of masculinity, LoUis is able to playfully engage with their packed crotch, and the pleasure that moves in and through their performance for themselves and their audiences is palpable in the room, both in terms of humour and in terms of desire.

I suggest LoUis’s work offers a mode in which this playful and pleasurable coming together is mobilised through a performance which generates both desire, comedy and belonging. In seeing this body on stage, there is representation of both a performance form and an identity which is not as regularly seen on stages of queer performance; the pleasure of seeing this work and the pleasure of the moment of desire *and* the pleasure of seeing those identities reflected in the audience, inculcates a moment of coming together which is intimately about the pleasure of being together in a venue. Here, pleasure is once again vital to the generation of queer communities. Queer communities generate and are generated by, in and through pleasure; and here pleasure is both a euphemistic and literal indication (feeling good, good

feelings and, obviously, sex) and an intellectual set of understandings that locates these feelings as part of a queer project of community and hope.

Whilst the move to consider kings and queens in relation to queer communities is always in danger of rose-tinted explorations, the insistence of the locality and materiality of these performers, performance forms and audiences resists these problematic impulses. Therefore, to understand the implication and effect of LoUis's kinging practice in relation to communities and pleasure, I return to the inciting performance moment explored creatively above to unpack and challenge these understandings of performance and community.

We were not expecting this one. It is a surprise. I was not even supposed to be here. I am at the end of the bar, pretending to be washing glasses so I can avoid talking to anyone, as far as I can remember. I am writing this all down after the event itself, I left my notepad in the dressing room that is filled with drag queens and I cannot be bothered to fight my way to it, so my memories will have to serve.

He is on stage unexpectedly anyway, the whole night is unexpected, I am not expecting to be there but I am. Cleaning glasses. And I clean the same glass slowly for the whole act, and do not notice that I am doing it. I probably ignored some people who wanted drinks as well. Oh well. They can wait.

It is a gay anthem (I think) and we are all waiting for the high note, and he delivers it easily, with one simple change, a simple basic on-the-note-but-oh-so-needed change. Give A Little Respect. To. Non-Binary. In another place at another time, it would have felt trite and under-cooked. But here, at this moment in this place after everything, its simple sweetness pierces straight to the heart of the matter, cuts across the noise (of the room and of social media) and gives us a simple moment of clarity.

In resisting ironing out the importance of diversity of forms and identities, I move to focus on one performance that took place at Her Upstairs in a mixed bill of performers raising money for a fellow drag king's, Flynn Rideherr's, top surgery. The performance by LoUis CYfer explored in these two creative accounts is a simple sung performance of *A Little Respect* by Erasure (1988). Instead of the final lyric of the chorus 'give a little respect to me' (Clarke and Bell, 1988), LoUis sings 'give a little respect to non-binary'.⁷⁰ This may seem a simple political move here, where simply replacing the lyric appears as a platitude that does nothing more than table a debate around the importance of representing non-binary identities in performance. However, Farrier and Campbell assert that what is understood as defanged or homonormative in one setting may be radically queer in another. Whilst the writers are referring to understandings of queer work in the UK that might appear to be defanged or

⁷⁰ This was an impromptu performance and I have not been able to locate any video documentation of it happening at Her Upstairs or elsewhere. You can see an example of LoUis's performance work at Planet Nation (2014) *Ultimate Planet Awards Performance by LoUis CYfer at After Party*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tr67iWB2iQY>, accessed 10/09/2019

domesticated which in more explicitly homophobic and transphobic contexts may occupy a mode of radical queer resistance, I extend this idea further to consider the complexities of the contemporary moment in which LoUis's work sits.

Anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and violence in the UK is particularly seen in the increases in transphobic discourses and violence from within and beyond the LGBTQ+ community since at least 2015 (see Ahmed, 2016), with vocal and dangerous anti-trans rhetoric being expounded in particular by Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERFs) and picked up by mainstream media in ways that frame debates that fundamentally set out to erase trans and non-binary identities. I do not re-circulate these narratives here, but point again to Ahmed's (2016) 'Affinity of Hammers' explored in my methodology since it succinctly both lays out the arguments and dismantles them, as well as points out the importance of coalition and affinity as a queer strategy for resistance and survival. I raise these arguments to make it clear that in talking about LoUis's work in what may seem to be a progressive present in the UK ignores the material contemporary implication for queer and trans people whose identities and right to exist are currently being challenged and "debated". Therefore, LoUis's work as a drag king and the subject matter in this act is more radical and challenging than it may at first appear.

In an interview after winning Drag Idol LoUis discussed the relationship between their identity and the drag form they engage with, suggesting that "'I think we can slip and slide in between. There's a whole field in the middle where you can play — drag is good for that'" (Parkinson in Urwin, 2015). Here LoUis makes it clear that their identity refuses a fixed binary and tries

to fit in the gaps between identities and that drag and the performance of gender that they engage in as a king is one way to play with this. Indeed, even in LoUis's name (LoUis CYfer) the capitalised letters spell out their out-of-drag name Lucy (Jane Parkinson). Whilst for certain traditional drag performers the relationship between character/act and identity is distinct, for many of the performers in this thesis, LoUis included, the line between those two positions (the everyday and the performance) is necessarily and purposefully blurred.⁷¹

This playfulness is one way that LoUis's kinging practice functions, with engagements with popular culture and well-known songs alongside light-hearted, playful and flirty audience interactions. They suggest that both kinging and the experience of gender is figured around discomfort, where "“You have to breathe into that discomfort but eventually, you get out the other end”" (Parkinson in Jupp, 2019). Here this discomfort emerges for some audiences in the moment of interaction, of being seen, but also in the seeing of a body on stage that does not conform either to stereotypes of drag or to the types of bodies they are used to seeing (even in the most progressive of venues). Breath also returns in these ideas, which resonates with the opening discussion of breath and hope I draw from Ahmed (2010); breathing into discomfort as a way of getting out of the other end might be a way of breathing through uncomfortable moments of homophobia and transphobia. However, linking this to Lilly's work above it might also be about learning how to breathe in discomfort, because discomfort is a productive position to occupy, or making people uncomfortable is the position you consistently occupy as a marginalised identity within heteronormative society, queer

⁷¹ Whilst I have known LoUis since around 2013, I would only ever refer to them as LoUis. In the case of most of the performers included in this research I would only ever use their performer names in public or private or have no idea what their names are out of drag.

communities, and drag performance communities. I argue that in stating the obvious in their act, in bringing the argument surrounding the representation and treatment of non-binary identities in and beyond the queer community to the forefront, LoUis mobilises discomfort as a critical tool in a playful way to refuse to slide into the background and to refuse to let the issue go. I extend this idea here with a discussion around the aesthetics of LoUis's kinging practice to consider the relationship between these ideas of discomfort in relation to Lilly Snatchdragon's work and the notion of a killjoy drag.

In an interview in which LoUis helped a female journalist get into male drag, LoUis talked about the application of stubble or false facial hair and the hiding or obscuring of the waste as part of the process of becoming a king. They suggested that "You're not trying to hide things, just to obscure the view" (Parkinson in Urwin, 2015). This adds a challenging sideways repositioning of the idea of visibility that has emerged up to this point. LoUis considers kinging practice as a process of obscuring (not hiding) that might be usefully reconfigured in relation to the notions of the killjoy explored above. Ahmed argues that 'The killjoy is one who comes between bodies that would be, or should be, in agreement' (Ahmed, 2010: 213). The obscuring practice of the king might also work to obscure tidy boundaries, lines of convergence, or debates that try to neatly package queer politics or queer identities into legible forms. This also challenges rosy views of queer communities that do not account for the material inequalities that might be at play and highlights negative responses to trans and non-binary people outside of queer communities and within them.

This mode of killjoy drag, a killjoy drag king, works through processes of obscuration to get in the way of agreements or debates that work to erase trans and non-binary bodies (for example agreements between TERFs and radical lesbian feminists that deny the validity of trans and/or non-binary identities). A killjoy drag king is not trying to be agreeable, but persistently visible, even if in that moment of visibility, the edges are purposefully, necessarily and playfully blurred. I argue that killjoy drag kinging plays with the notion of discomfort in much the same way as Lilly's practice does above, and that by leaning into this discomfort killjoy drag kings interrupt tidy understandings of queerness and community by actively staging the obscurity of their bodies and representations on stages, and by remaining present in queer venues. LoUis's work as a drag king blurs the boundaries of what kinging can be and who kinging is for, as well as actively staging an obscuring practice that is not about hiding but instead mobilises the notion of the killjoy as a productive disruption of queer politics and community that do not pay attention to the material inequalities at play for trans and non-binary identities.

Returning to the idea of pleasure, I argue that in LoUis's work pleasure is foregrounded both in the pleasurable experience of desire in watching their performance and in the blatant and uncomfortable way that they stick to (in much the same way Lilly sticks to) the stage, to their identities and to their politics. I argue that this act refuses a subtle engagement with politics and instead states the issue and activates the discomfort of the killjoy. Here the killjoy drag king comes to stand in affinity with Lilly's marginal practices as another mode of resistance to forms of drag and queerness that homogenise or iron out material inequalities for performers. Having said this, the work is not just about a moment of political antagonism, but

also a recognition of other bodies and identities in the room and the pleasure of singing about non-binary identities whilst non-binary people are in the room. The pleasure comes from a moment of recognition as well as from the pleasure the performer takes at being on stage and the pleasure of watching the performer on stage.

I do not make a distinction between pleasure and discomfort, where to be made uncomfortable is a pleasurable experience and something that is also present in Lilly's work. Killjoy drag, across Lilly and LoUis's performance work, actively engages with the politics of their identities on stage, refusing to be agreeable or to agree, and taking pleasure in sticking to and being stuck to the stage. The pleasure for the audience emerges in the recognition of these identities and the affinities that might be drawn from them, as well as the pleasures that appear in and through discomfort as a productive disruption of the tidy boundaries of queerness and queer communities. This discomfort and pleasure function as a corollary of my queer side-eye, which glances at others as a process of "reading" and as a mode of calling out inequalities within and beyond queer communities. The work of killjoy drag performers engages with discomfort and pleasure in tandem as collective strategies of queer politics and resistance that holds queer communities to accounts and refuses rose-tinted narratives of queerness and community. This is not always a dismantling effect, in fact in many ways it strengthens or adds depth to these communities. It is also about recognising the importance of spaces and performances that talk to the material experiences for marginalised subjects within queer communities. Killjoy drag, in relation to LoUis and Lilly's work, moves in and through discomfort and pleasure and engages a side-eye method of reading or critiquing queer communities through their practice. I also argue that in an extension of my queer side-

eye as a suspicious and “reading” glance, it also performs a queer eye-roll as a purposeful critique of and discomfort towards mainstream modes of queer engagement that ignore or perpetuate racist and transphobic norms.

In this section, LoUis’s kinging work provides a framework for engaging explicitly with the materialities of politics and refusing to be circumspect. As such, LoUis exemplifies this killjoy drag practice, and killjoy drag kinging in particular, as a mode of queer critical engagement with community and violence which refuses to come unstuck from the stage and engages in pleasure and discomfort, through a side-eye and an eye roll, that both critiques and enacts queer communities. In moving through Lilly and LoUis’s work I have identified key ways in which marginalised identities and bodies function across drag scenes and queer communities to both critique normativities and celebrate diversities. Whilst both Lilly and LoUis occupy these marginalised positions, it is also important to consider how privileged or centralised performers can work to challenge these normativities, since I think it is important not to locate resistance as only emerging (or possible) for marginalised subjects. Being in affinity in relation to Ahmed’s understanding is also about finding ways to name and use privilege to support and be in allyship with more marginalised peers. To explore how these ideas of queer bodies and killjoy drag can be mobilised for arguably more conventional drag performers, I now move to consider the work of performer Michael Twaits as a final critical example here that might offer both challenges to and an extension of the queer political modes explored so far.

Michael Twaits

The pauses in between each word stretch on for an eternity; the rhythm builds slowly. It is almost languid, the way she grins out at the audience. We are drawn in towards each word, hanging off each syllable as it is carefully eked out. It is simultaneously matter of fact and profound. You are talking directly to me, to us and then to any queer who will listen. The casual way you flick your hair back from your eyes, the nonchalant stance, the easy way you hold on to microphone betrays nothing of the weight of your words or the heaviness of this act. As it speeds up and up, I get lost in the words, lost in the feelings rising in my stomach, forgetting nearly everything.

In the months that follow I watch this act again and again and again on YouTube, trying to work out why it feels so important. I feel almost guilty, because I know I should not be so moved by something like this, by something that re-performs slightly dodgy histories or locates all queer liberation in a bar in New York. But I am. It is in my gut. And I do not know what to do about it.



Figure 9: Michael Twaits at the RVT, 2015. Image: AbsolutQueer Photography

Michael Twaits is an actor and drag performer who is well known on the London and UK drag scene for working with up and coming performers in a drag performance “school” called “The Art of Drag” (The Art of Drag/Michael Twaits, 2018), and for working extensively with Pride In London. Unlike the other two performers in this chapters, Michael occupies a position closer to normative conceptions of a drag queen, namely a cis-gendered male who performs in female drag. However, Michael’s work challenges and plays with norms of what a drag queen might be or look like. In the act in question, a spoken word piece about the Stonewall riots set against the background of Amy Winehouse’s (2006) *Black to Black*, they actively frame their performance style as a ‘post-drag queen: a man in a dress’ (Twait, 2013).⁷² The idea of “post” returns in Michael’s work as they describe themselves as ‘post-drag, post-feminist, post-giving-a-shit’ (Twait, 2013) and I articulate a useful set of strategies through this idea of “post-” that can be mobilised in relation to the discourses of the killjoy drag performer explored above.

Some of this act problematically re-circulates narratives around the Stonewall riots that frame them as the starting point of queer liberation across the world.⁷³ I focus instead on how the engagement with drag as a form functions as an active political choice to critique drag norms. I consider the “post-” of “post-drag” as a playful engagement with notions of killjoy drag and my queer side-eye as a purposeful disruption of drag expectations that challenges considerations of drag performance forms in a contemporary moment. This “post-” is

⁷² This was the performance which I reflected upon in the opening moments of this thesis and a version of it can be seen at fingerinthe pie (2015) *Michael Twaits - Back to Stonewall - Theatre Delicatessen*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6oShB4yAa8&t=110s>, accessed 29/08/2019.

⁷³ For an exploration of the complex ways in which Stonewall functions as a problematic moment framed within contemporary queer liberation see Armstrong and Crag (2006).

reminiscent of modes of “post-” deployed as a prefix to contemporary theatre and theory, such as “-modern,” “-dramatic,” and “-structural.” Rather than position this as another mode of “post-” I consider it in relation to the form of drag, where to be post-drag is to name a queer engagement with normative forms of drag.⁷⁴ I actively position “post-” as a critical queer tool mobilised by Michael that pays attention to the material queer experiences, insights and impulses drawn from the performer’s lived experience.

Here, Michael’s mobilisation of “post-drag” challenges forms of drag queening that parody women or make women the target of jokes. Michael actively critiques this, refusing to ‘make jokes about cunt’ (Twaits, 2013), whilst simultaneously positioning their own and broader queer identities in relation to classic understandings of gay identities being linked to Judy Garland.⁷⁵ However, this analysis resists a critique of the content of Michael’s performance which presents a potentially sanitised queer history in relation to Stonewall and the Stonewall riots. Rather than account for the politics of the content, then, I turn to the politics of what happens in the performance itself.

⁷⁴ I am also wary of aligning “queer” and “post-” as functioning in a similar way, since in my academic career my queer commitments have sometimes been reduced to conversations about a universalised experience of queerness as something that anyone can experience regardless of their sexuality, and that this might be inherently linked to strategies or post-structuralism and post-dramatic performance. I suggest that these alignments downplay the material experiences of queerness within and beyond the academy. I state this not to deny the link between, for example, queer performance and post-dramatic performance, but that intellectual moves to align queer strategies with “post-” strategies often fail to account for these material experience of queerness that imbue these social, political, theatrical and theoretical queer strategies.

⁷⁵ I will explore this idea in more detail in relation to the work of the drag performer, Fagulous, in the next chapter.

As the beat drives forward and the recognisable rhythms of Amy Winehouse flood the otherwise silent room the cheers of the crowd surge to meet to music. There is no getting away from this inexorable tide, and why would you want to? As the performers voice becomes more frantic, angrier, more driven, we are driven forward ourselves. As the performers voice matches the rhythm of the act, what started as spoken word becomes something more, and the skill of the performer and the labour of the performance is exposed for us, brought to the fore, as Michael is both onstage and beside herself, telling us how good she is. This does not make sense yet, but I am sure it will.

Michael's drag aesthetic both conforms to and plays with images of the glamorous, tall drag queen, with dresses, gowns and wigs used over a body without pads or shaved legs, to heighten stereotypes of the female form. Whilst some readings of this practice may still critique the use of female-ness or femininity as a form of performance, there is an active engagement with the limits of drag as a form here. The male-ness or masculinity in Michael's work is never lost in or subsumed by the female form, the character does not preclude or erase the body of the performer.

Here I draw from Farrier's understandings of traditional theatre performance which encourages an erasure of the body or identity of the performer in favour of the character. In insisting on a focus on the body of the performer in performance, Farrier proposes that it is possible to hold the physical body of the performer and the virtual character in performance simultaneously in a way that they do erase one another as a strategy to challenge the

problematic notions of queer virtuality that have plagued early queer studies and from which issues of drawing collectivity, community and agency emerged. Farrier's argument proposes that theatre offers a site of resistance to the virtuality of queer, and resistance to modes of homonormativity and the solidity of identity that are bound up in identity politics that queerness would resist. Instead, in performance, the co-presence of the body of the performer and the virtual of the character offer a utopian glimpse that resists a lack of agency in the virtual or a fixity in the body, and instead offers glimpses of alternatives in which these two modes are not reduced to one another or erased by one another (Farrier, 2013).

Whilst Farrier's arguments turns in particular to the work of Dickie Beau and to an extended spoken word lip synch performance of Judy Garland tapes, I align Michael's work with these ideas in which the tropes of the traditional drag queen are laid upon the still present body of the performer in a way that neither body nor character are erased.⁷⁶ I propose that in this performance Michael activates and mobilises a "post-" position, occupying the hyphen in drag performance in which the body or identity of the performer is not hidden behind the character and aesthetic of the drag character (even if it might be obscured in ways similar to LoUis's kinging practice explored above). Here, Michael's performance style sits in relation to many contemporary drag performers whose identity in and out of drag is not distinct, or who eschew the binary of in drag and out of drag. This is resonant both in Michael's choice of drag name (which is their name) and in the performance form which engages certain tropes of

⁷⁶ I note the emergence of Judy Garland here in two different examples of drag performance. These ideas of queer references are explored in my section on Myra Dubois in the previous chapter, and the engagement with queer figures from history will be explored in relation to Fagulous in Chapter Five.

drag but does not attempt to hide the ways in which their male-ness or masculinity also encroaches on, and enriches, their performance form.

Whilst it is important to note that Michael also occupies a level of cis-, male and white privilege that the other performers in the chapter do not, I position their work as another mode of killjoy that engages particular with the hyphen of “post-” (or “post-drag”) as a queer performance form that refuses to lose or erase the body (and therefore the politics that surround, stick to and attach to the body) in the moment of performance. I suggest Michael offers a strategy in which the body is co-present with the performance in complex ways, and that at the level of the body the drag performer always already occupies a complex position in relation to gender, identity and politics both despite and because of the positions of privilege they may also occupy. Furthermore, Michael’s work beyond this performance as a mentor and producer is one in which they champion newer and up-and-coming performers and extensively work with marginalised drag performers. Their work within the broader drag community is part of a system of affinity and allyship that works to hammer away at normativities with drag.

Michael’s drag functions alongside killjoy drag by refusing to let the body – and the privileges and oppressions that *come with the body* – disappear in the moment of performance. Whilst Lilly’s work produces a form of killjoy drag in relation to sticking to the discomfort of the audience, and LoUis’s work does so through the engagement with the materiality and pleasure of the body in performance, Michael’s work stages the body in performance as the

site in and through which politics inevitably emerges, and actively chooses to make this visible. In Michael's work, through an engagement with notions of "post-drag", there is the potential for an engagement with the politics of the body in drag performance work, underscoring the complex ways in which queer identities function in relation to drag performance, and allowing strategies to emerge for more "traditional" forms of drag performance to be read as also offering modes of resistance to homonormative, homophobic and transphobic politics.

Conclusions

The ways in which my queer side-eye might also be related to a queer eye-roll has ran through my thinking here as I consider how side-eye necessitates a way of looking that also potentially indicates derision or suspicion, and an eye-roll can contribute to this. In thinking through the work of Freeman and Ahmed, I articulate killjoy drag as a political and performance strategy connected to my queer side-eye that is linked to ideas of community and pleasure in drag performance. Here, my queer side-eye allows me to locate the politics across these performances, seeing them as resonant and connected without articulating them as the same or ironing out the important differences of their individual politics and materialities. I also articulate killjoy drag as connected to killjoy academic practice, something which I position myself and my research alongside. I suggest that my queer side-eye might also contain within it a queer eye-roll (or that one strategy or extension of my side-eye might be an eye-roll) which indicates a position of frustration and derision in relation to normative, homophobic and transphobic practices in academia and performance. Here, my queer side-eye explicitly

functions as a mode of critique of these normativities, as well as a strategy of finding hope and survival in drag performance.

Lilly, LoUis and Michael all occupy plural positions of killjoy drag in my formulations, sticking to the stage, refusing to come unstuck and engaging in pleasurable and uncomfortable forms of representation and politics. They stick to their points, refusing the move on; killjoy drag performers dig in their heels, boots, footwear, feet, and state the politics of their act clearly, refusing to move on. They remain angry, and importantly, refuse to get over it. The politics is present and stays present, clearly articulated in both the content of their performance and in the presence of their bodies on the stage.

This refusal to “get over it” challenges (homo)normativities at play within the drag scene, and homophobias and transphobias that are part of contemporary queer experiences. The stickiness of the killjoy drag performer refusing to get off the stage is bound up in the politics of happiness that Ahmed explores in her thinking around suffering, happiness and the feminist killjoy. She suggests that

The desire to move beyond suffering into reconciliation, the very will to “be over it” by asking others to “get over it,” means that those who persist in their unhappiness become causes of the unhappiness of many. Their suffering becomes transformed in our collective disappointment that we cannot simply put such histories behind us. Ethics cannot be about moving beyond pain towards happiness or joy without imposing new forms of suffering on those who do not or cannot move in this way (Ahmed, 2010: 216).

The killjoy drag performer engages with this ethical position and will not move on in the face of continued material inequalities. This position is one which insists upon paying attention to the materialities of violence in the present moment and finding new ways to engage with it through the creation of moments of affinity and collectivity in and through performance. Here, queer communities emerge around bodies, performers and performances, and venues and events that represent or cater specifically for marginalised part of the queer community (in a similar form at the Cocoa Butter Club explored in Chapter Three). These queer communities also cross-pollinate in complex ways, however, where performers such as those explored in this chapter occupy and stick to more mainstream stages as well as a mode of queer critique that refuses to “get over it” or “move on”. This stickiness is about discomfort in having to talk about difficult subject matters, and about the pleasure of different identities and different bodies *coming together* in venues in, for, around and because of drag performance. These are sticky moments and moments to stick to which are fundamental to my theorisations and experiences of queer communities as sites of political, social and cultural pleasures and politics.

Ideas of pleasure, discomfort and community are bound up in questions of politics and queer politics in and through drag performance and queer communities. The next chapter turns specifically to notions of queer politics to explore how failure and silliness might be mobilised as queer political forms in performance to resist the narratives of violence set up so far. In talking through these ideas, and moving through the work of Fagulous, Herr and Victoria Sin, I argue that queer silliness is a pertinent and timely political mode (and performance mode) amongst a constellation of resistive practices that allows queer subjects to resist pleurably and playfully (homo)normativities and homophobic and transphobic violence.

Chapter Five: Queer Politics

Introduction

Cheryl Hole does not usually sing. But today she does. Her voice belts out, her Essex accent is not hidden and she makes no pretence not to be who is she. It is somewhat of an unexpected move, but it is a pleasure to see. And through her I see other drag performers on other stages. As she stands on stage at Her Upstairs I the traces of drag performers on this stage, drag performers at The Black Cap, at The RVT, on television shows and in films. I see famous drag performers and end of the peer queens and panto dames and East London socialites. She prances about the stage unapologetically, she missed notes and discards the tune and returns. It is silly and joyful and pleasurable to watch. She is what she is singing I Am What I Am.

This chapter takes account of queer politics in drag performance. Whilst politics and queer politics runs through this thinking, where I locate resistance to homophobia and transphobia and to assimilationist and homonormative LGBT politics in and through drag performance, here I focus on how queer politics might emerge in the performances themselves. To do so, rather than look at work which might be read as explicitly political, I propose an exploration of drag performers who produce work that might seem, on the face of it, a-political and silly. I do this as a way another way of activating my queer side-eye, glancing side-ways at seemingly non-political performance work to locate moments of politics, and to explore how the politics in a performance can lie elsewhere than in its content by seeing what emerges if I look sideways at drag.

The above account of a performance, which took place in the semi-final of a drag competition I was judging, involved Cheryl Hole, who is most known for dancing and lip synching, singing *I Am What I Am* (Herman, 1983) from *La Cage Aux Folles*. The moment in and of itself is inconsequential. Cheryl sang with passion and pleasure and in watching it at the time I was reminded of all the other drag performers I had seen doing this song live, as well as lip synching versions of it by performers such as Shirley Bassey and Gloria Gaynor. It was a moment of connection between queer pasts and presents that was intimately hopeful and temporal, and I on reflecting upon it I was struck by how intensely political it felt. I have repeatedly questioned why this act felt political: what was so political about a drag queen from Essex singing a song that has been done by so many drag queens that it has almost become a parody of drag performance and a basic and problematic exponent of queer liberation? Despite these questions, the sense of its politics and its importance remained. This chapter starts from this point, trying to understand how the politics of a drag performance might emerge in unexpected places.

This chapter does not directly deal with queer politics in the way that performers such as Lilly Snatchdragon, LoUis CYfer and Michael Twaits did in the previous chapter. Rather I want to explore drag performance, and drag performances that are actively and deliberately *silly*, as a mode of *doing politics queerly*. I explore contemporary manifestations of queer failure in theory, drawing from Halberstam's (2010) *The Queer Art of Failure*, alongside Muñoz (2009) and Freeman (2010) who ground failure in their queer thinking. I draw these ideas together, proposing that failure is one critical mode that queer people can use to resist normative logics and futures, as well as increasing homophobia and transphobia. However, through this

discussion of failure, I remain attentive to an ethics of failure in a contemporary moment in which to fail for queers (to fail to be straight, to fail to fit in to normative expectations of gender and sexuality, and beyond) comes with material consequence; often verbally and physically violent consequences. I question who gets to fail safely? Who might be, or indeed have, a fail safe? And for which bodies, which identities, and which performers, might the idea of failure be too much of a risk?

Unpacking this, I move to consider silliness as a mode that might resonate with failure and offer modes of political and performance-based engagements that are attentive to this critical moment of homophobia and transphobia. This idea of queer silliness starts, as much of the thinking in this thesis does, from a formulation explored by Ahmed (2010), before considering how this queer silliness could be a vital mode of survival for queer people that emerges in and through drag performance work. Queer silliness could be a mode that performers engage in (and therefore something that audiences witness, explore and might re-perform), and a position that queer people inhabit. Finally, I turn to three performers, Fagulous, Herr, and Victoria Sin, and three small moments of performance in order to account for the ways in which this silliness might be mobilised in performance, who and how it might move, and what a silly queer politics might do in and to drag performance and queer communities.

I articulate queer silliness and purposeful silliness as another strategy I employ as part of my queer side-eye, in which as an academic mode I might be purposefully silly in how I look at performance (whether through an investment in its potential or through purposefully focussing on one small moment of performance). This mode of purposeful silliness is

connected modes of purposeful misreading and re-reading that emerged in the chapters above yet indicates a need through these forms of academic practice to locate silly, playful and unexpected ways to engage with our present moment. I also articulate this an embodied political mode as part of my queer side-eye, where I might engage in silliness as a mode of survival and resistance both because of, and importantly despite, homophobia and transphobia. Whilst silliness might also be a privileged strategy of not engaging with serious or important topics, I argue that in many cases it is a gesture towards survival and hope. Finally, throughout this chapter I invest in performance work that is silly, locating hope and practices of survival in frivolous and silly drag. This is resonant of how Sedgwick explores the texts and references to which queers might attach to in youth which I explored in relation to Myra Dubois's work and queer histories in Chapter Three. Sedgwick argues that

I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love (Sedgwick, 1993: 3).

I restate Sedgwick's argument here to highlight that in my academic practice in this chapter I am also investing these silly performances with both fascination and love, and with the potential to offer queer people modes of survival and resistance to a homophobic and transphobic present.

Furthermore, I locate an investment in popular cultural texts as sites of fascination or love in the work of Fagulous (through an engagement with popular and problematic figures in queer history such as Judy Garland and Liza Minelli) and Herr (through an investment contemporary

or anachronistic popular culture texts such as *EastEnders* and *Countdown*). Through this, I articulate this mode of investment, which is about imbuing these popular culture texts with fascination, love, and hope, as another strategy of my queer side-eye, both as an academic tactic of locating other forms of knowledge through drag performance and as an embodied strategy of locating alternative modes of queer survival through repurposing popular culture.

Queer Failure

There is an extant history of the study of failure in performance (Bailes, 2010; Phelan, 1993; Ridout, 2006) and the limits and excesses of failure in performance (Fisher and Katsouraki, 2018).⁷⁷ Intellectual strategies of failure have been linked to modes of performance making such as the post-dramatic work of Forced Entertainment and Goat Island. Failure is articulated as a fecund site for intellectual and performance practice, with groups such as ‘The Institute of Failure’ (Shooting Live Artists, 2002) emerging at the crossroads of academic enquiry and performance-based explorations in the UK. These modes of failure and performance articulate failure as a resistance to capitalist and production-based modes of enquiry and performance making that rest on the need for research and performance to be “useful”.

I depart from these ideas to consider the role of queer failure as a potential intellectual, performance-based and political tactic. I draw from the work of Freeman (2010), Halberstam

⁷⁷ Tony E. Fisher and Eve Katsouraki’s (2018) edited collection *Beyond Failure: New Essays on the Cultural Theory of Failure in Theatre and Performance* accounts for where discourses of failure and performance might go in future thinking. My own chapter in this collection “Come Here The Music Play: The Politics of Queer Failure and The Practices of Survival” explores queer failure in relation to the drag performance practice of Fagulous, who also features in this chapter. My thinking in the chapter of this thesis is drawn from my chapter in this edited collection but departs in order to consider the politics and ethics of who gets to fail safely, and to mobilise silliness as a queer mode in performance, and as a queer mode of doing politics.

(2011), and Muñoz (2009). For Freeman, failure is intimately related to the temporal experience of queerness and being “out of time” as a resistance to organising temporal logics she names as “chrononormativity” and to forms of queer negativity that this thesis explored in Chapter One. In *Time Binds* (2010) Freeman calls for queer projects that

trail behind actually existing social possibilities: to be interested in the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in fading light of whatever has been declared useless [...] I find myself emotionally compelled by the not-quite-queer-enough longing for form that turns us backward to prior moments, forward to embarrassing utopias, sideways to forms of being and belonging that seem, on the face of it, completely banal (Freeman, 2010: xiii).

Freeman explores the ways in which thinking around queerness and the queer negative thinking of Edelman (2004) miss out on the opportunity to consider “out of time” queer modes of being that might be available in prior moments and embarrassing utopias. Here, the failure to be “critical” (an idea I return to in relation to Halberstam’s thinking below) is a mode of resistance against logics which confine the past (or pasts) to redundancy and to modes of doing theory that are connected to the reparative methodological impulses of this thesis. Freeman does not mobilise failure directly, but failure imbues her project in its relationship to time and temporalities.

Muñoz also plays with failure, thinking through and beyond the idea of “straight time” as an organising logic similar to Freeman’s chrononormativity. For Muñoz, straight time is a temporal logic within which queers might be raised and against which failure might be mobilised as a mode of resistance (in Chapter Three, I explored Muñoz’s playful engagement of queerness as (on) a “stage”). He argues that ‘within straight time the queer can only fail,’ and therefore that ‘an aesthetic of failure can be productively occupied by the queer artist’

(Muñoz, 2009: 173/4). Muñoz proposes that embracing failure might be conceptualised as a mode of 'doing something else, that is, doing something else in relation to something that is missing in straight time's always already flawed temporal mapping practice' (Muñoz, 2009: 174).

Failure, here, becomes a position to occupy aesthetically that offers queer modes of hope beyond a present that is increasingly unsafe:

To fail, for Muñoz, is to refuse a stultifying straight present – a present that not only fits queer subjects into normative temporal structures that are often inaccessible (if not violent), but also a present in which queer bodies are increasingly subject to verbal and physical abuse – and to imagine an alternative. For Muñoz, then, to fail is part of a utopian project of hope (Parslow, 2019: 84).

The link between failure, hope and temporalities is key to Freeman and Muñoz's engagement with queer ideas, and I return to ideas of temporalities, futurities and pasts in my discussion of the performers' work below. Queer failure offers modes of resistance in and through which queer people might locate alternatives to increasingly dangerous straight presents.

These resistive practices emerge in aesthetic forms for Freeman and Muñoz, although they are also located as academic practices. Halberstam starts their text *The Queer Art of Failure* with a discussion on low theory that I outlined in my methodology. For Halberstam low theory is

a mode of accessibility, [but also] a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory (Halberstam, 2011: 16).

There is an important project in considering the complex ways in which alternative forms of knowledge might be found in sites and texts that are not always deemed serious or legitimate. Resonant of Freeman's turn back towards embarrassing utopias or banal knowledge formations, Halberstam suggests that low theory 'might constitute the name for a counterhegemonic form of theorizing, the theorization of alternatives within an undisciplined zone of knowledge production' (Halberstam, 2011: 18). Whilst Halberstam draws from cartoons and popular film texts, I argue that drag performance is one form of low theory, or a site in and through which low theories might be located. Furthermore, the purposefully silly forms of drag explored in this chapter allow for a consideration of alternative places to locate queer politics. Engaging in silly, frivolous practices offers an alternative engagement with politics that contributes to modes of queer survival, another tactic I locate within my queer side-eye.

It is important to note, however, that these low forms and theories 'do not make us better people or liberate us from the culture industry,' in fact they may implicate us more directly within neoliberal forms, 'but they might offer strange and anticapitalist logics of being and acting and knowing, and they will harbor covert and overt queer worlds' (Halberstam, 2011: 20/21). Drag performance does not operate outside of representational or economic systems which are injurious to queer subjects. What it might do, however, is offer alternative modes of engaging with homophobic and transphobic straight presents that provide moments, glimpses and hints at alternatives. Halberstam proposes that they

believe in low theory in popular places, in the small, the inconsequential, the antimonumental, the micro, the irrelevant; I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely. I seek to

provoke, annoy, bother, irritate, and amuse; I am chasing small projects, micropolitics, hunches, whims, fancies (Halberstam, 2011: 21).

I position this thesis alongside this thinking, considering the small, micro and fanciful engagement with politics and theory that emerges in and through drag performance work and queer theories. This is also resonant of the tactics of purposeful mis-readings and re-readings, of reading and being read, of the low and the inconsequential, which I articulate as methods that make up my queer side-eye.

Halberstam proposes the queer art of failure as a mode of flying under the radar, taking the path less travelled and finding alternative modes of being and doing with a contemporary world. Their exploration of failure does not shy away from the 'darker territories of failure associated with futility, sterility, emptiness, loss, negative affect in general, and modes of unbecoming' (Halberstam, 2011: 23). The book does not avoid the complex and sticky ways that failure also upholds normative modes of being and doing. Failure does not offer a catchall way out of violent systems that oppress queers. Instead, as I have argued in my own work, it offers glimpses of an alternative and might be one strategy amidst a constellation of queer practices of resistance and survival (Parslow, 2019). More importantly, like all the work considered in this thesis, failure must be considered within the contexts in which it arises. Failure is locally contingent, and who gets to fail and fail safely depends on complex interrelations of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, geographical location and more:

Queer failure [...] is never a simple task of choosing not to succeed. It is bound up indelibly with complex systems of regulation and violence that figure queer subjects in relation to forms of success (and acceptability) that are inculcated in normative social, cultural, and political forms of identification, including monogamy, marriage, reproduction, entering the

property market, and beyond (Parslow, 2019: 84).

Any discussion of failure is bound up in the ways in which normative logics impede upon the bodies and identities of those who fail, and the ways in which punishment for failure (failing to conform, failing to be read within any particular binary) often results in punishment. Therefore, it is important to question what privileges are at play in these ideas of failure? What identities and bodies can fail safely?

I turn here again to the work of queer performance artist Travis Alabanza who, in a poem published in the *Urban Pamphleteer* on “LGBTQ+ Night-time Spaces: Past, Present & Future,” asks the question: ‘I wonder who gets to death drop without the fear of dropping dead?’ (Alabanza, 2018: 28). Referring to the performance trope of the death drop which was popularised in the Ballroom scene most readily known from *Paris Is Burning*, a movement in which a performer throws themselves upwards and/or backwards to the ground usually to highlight a crescendo or key moment in a song, Alabanza questions the privilege at play in certain forms of queer performance practice. The death drop as a performative tool itself offers an interesting mode of exploration since it has historical links with voguing and drag ball culture, has subsequently been popularised by *RPDR*, and has since been exported across the world as a performance tool that drag performers use, many of whom unknowing that they are engaging in a cultural form inherently linked to black and trans bodies.⁷⁸ I draw a corollary between Alabanza’s question and my own. Where Alabanza is asking who can

⁷⁸ This has been explored in part by Farrier (2016, 2017) in looking at lip synching as a phenomenon grounded in/by historiography and erotohistoriography (Freeman, 2010) and the various ways in drag might be taught and learnt. I also explore the impact of *RPDR* and the internationalisation of drag practices in a chapter in a forthcoming two volume collection on drag performance edited by Mark Edward and Stephen Farrier (Bloomsbury, 2020).

engage in these cultural performance forms without increased risks of danger (and violence), I ask who can engage in the messy and frivolous modes of failure espoused by Halberstam and others *safely*? Who, in short, can fail safely? Who has a failsafe?

We might consider a failsafe as something that ensures lives are not endangered when something fails. This does not mean that failure cannot happen, importantly, but rather that when failure does happen, dangerous circumstances are mitigated. A failsafe might be a strategy put in place to ensure failure does not result in injury. However, for many queer people, a failsafe is not be an option: failure may always result in injury. For those who do not have a failsafe failure may not be optional; or if it is, it is an option that comes with material risks. Therefore, it is important to foreground that privilege functions here in relation to failure in complex ways.⁷⁹ Whilst Halberstam clearly notes the dark side of failure, I propose there is more room to consider the intersectional experience(s) that come hand-in-hand with failure, and argue that failure is not always a desirable, available or possible mode. This does not preclude complex or frivolous engagements with politics or violence but does propose that the material implications of failing for queers (and not just queer failure) need to be considered in these discussions.

⁷⁹ I note that concepts of “safety” and “safe spaces” in relation to “risk” and “risk taking” often signal a return to neoliberal modes of political and social productivity, whilst ideas of “safe spaces” have the potential to re-invigorate classical notions of community that curtail freedoms. As I indicated in Chapter One when exploring the potential for queer communities theoretically, I do not deny the potential for these languages and debates to be co-opted into rights-based productive politics in which queer subjects are inevitably folded into neoliberal narratives of safety and progression, or how often discussions about queer rights in the UK often extend and propagate racist, colonial and often Islamophobic discourses. However, beyond these intellectual and political considerations, there is a need to consider that whilst safety may be bound up in neoliberal debates, it is not always already set in a binary opposition to risk. Rather this chapter offers ways that risk might not always already result in violence. Here, risk becomes a political and performance method that does not preclude the idea of being safe, where being safe may simply be about a having space to breathe as I have explored at various moments in relation to Ahmed’s (2010) understanding of breath and hope.

A failsafe is also not always put into place by the people operating the object that fails. Thinking of the use of fuses in plugs, for example, these are designed into the object itself to mitigate danger; the failsafe is built into the design rather than an additional requirement of the object's use. In returning to notions of failure, safety and risk I propose that this is also an opportunity to consider the audience and the communities that might exist in a venue and around performers as one mode a failsafe. Here, rather than problematically considering queer venues as safe spaces, it is instead possible to consider queer communities as having a failsafe function for precarious performers. Audience's and communities might provide opportunities for precarious performers to take risks and risk failure on stage (whether that failure is disciplinary or performance-based or beyond), without that failure resulting in material consequences beyond the room itself. A queer community as failsafe facilitates failure whilst mitigating material consequences, understanding the precarity at play for marginalised performers and the risks of their presence in queer venues and beyond. This has the potential facilitate moments of failure and riskiness that I see performers engage in, and I argue that the presence of supportive queer communities as audiences can act as a built-in failsafe to allow performers to fail on stage.

Queer Silliness

Failure and performance, and failure and queerness, are broad models that respond to notions of the failsafe and the queer community as a failsafe for more precariously positioned performers. To ground this thinking further, I want to turn to a mode of failure and

performance that I understand as connected to ideas explored above but offering ways of considering the materialities of failure for queer people. I turn silliness as a method of political, practical and theoretical engagement. Bound up in failure in complex ways, and not devoid of similar issues, silliness offers certain embodied and political modes of being that also allows for queer subject to engage with politics and the social with agency. Silliness can be an active choice in performance, intellectual and political work where failure might be a position that is assigned. Whilst queer politics and studies is founded on reclaiming of the terms of injury (if queer people are doomed to failure, why not embrace failure?), there is room to find avenues and pathways through these terms to locate alternatives. For this chapter, I want to mobilise silliness as a term which might sit alongside, or in affinity with, modes and methods of queer failure proposed by Halberstam and others, and particularly resonates with the playful practices of drag. I also propose that queer silliness might function as a failsafe in certain circumstances, where silliness as method becomes a way of embracing failure whilst mitigating material consequences.

Silliness comes with its own baggage. Just as Muñoz reminds us how easy it is to critique ideas of utopia(s) as idealistic and naïve, Ahmed mobilises silliness as a political method, arguing that

We learn much from how the very idea of alternatives to global capitalism, comes across as silliness [...] The silly or ridiculous nature of alternatives teaches us not about the natures of those alternatives but about just how threatening it can be to imagine alternatives to a system that survives by grounding itself in inevitability' (Ahmed, 2010: 165).

Silliness already occupies a position of alterity and in so doing is critiqued as frivolous, a-political and weak, against which notions of neoliberalism and gentrification are framed as

natural, inevitable and serious. However, in purposefully occupying a position of silliness, other ways of being and doing in the world might emerge that challenge and resist normative forms of knowing and doing politics that exclude queer people. Ahmed goes on to suggest that

Silliness might be [an] example of worthless happiness. The etymology of silliness is striking. It comes from the word *sael*, originally meaning blessed, happy, or blissful. The word mutates over time; from blessed to pious, to innocent, to harmless, to pitiable, to weak and feeble. From the blessed to the feeble: we learn from the depressing nature of the genealogy of silliness' (Ahmed, 2010: 220).

Whilst Ahmed reframes silliness in relation to the promise of happiness, I draw from this genealogy to propose that feebleness and weakness might also be strategies linked to alternative modes of doing queer politics. I link this idea of weakness to the understandings of vulnerability proposed by Butler that I explored in relation to my queer side-eye. Butler argues that

each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies [...] Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure (Butler, 2004: 20).

Vulnerability is not set in a binary opposition to strength, where to be vulnerable is always already to be at risk of harm or damage or violence. Instead to be vulnerable is to be exposed to the other. For Butler, the very fact of this vulnerability is one of the pre-conditions of queerness:

...we [queer people] are, as a community, subjected to violence, even if some of us individually haven't been [...] this means that we are constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies; we are constituted as fields of desire and physical vulnerability (Butler, 2004: 18).

Butler reframes vulnerability here as bound up in experiences of queerness, where violence forms or constitutes part of a collective queer experience.⁸⁰ I draw a link here between these ideas and Ahmed's genealogy of silliness in and through ideas of weakness and feebleness. Whilst these are not synonyms – vulnerability is not a product of weakness – I am keen to re-frame or reclaim an understanding of weakness or feebleness as not a negative attribute, but another way of moving through the world, and a potential queer strategy of politics and performance.

Ahmed frames her discussion of silliness in relation to the film *Happy-Go-Lucky* and concludes that the main character '...refuses to keep her distance from suffering. The film shows that passivity can an ethical capacity: you have to be willing to be affected by others, to receive their influence' (Ahmed, 2010: 221). Whilst an active/passive binary is not the purview of this project, or Ahmed's, I find a resonance between this idea of passivity in Ahmed's thinking and vulnerability in Butler's work in and through which silliness (as feeble, fragile, weak) can be located as a mode of being and doing in the world that relies on an open-ness and an ethical responsibility to the other. Here, as a social and political mode, this resists the sovereignty of the complete subject that queer theory resists, but also the politics of individualism and the individual that contemporary neoliberal politics enshrines (Duggan, 2002).

⁸⁰ It is arguable that risk and violence gets reframed as productive of/for queer subjects, something which challenges the notions of safety and risk in relation to failure explored above. I am reluctant to move towards this conception so easily, however, since not only would a mode of queer silliness and/or failure resist anything being re-framed as productive, but also because this does not yet go far enough to allay the violence at play in contemporary culture. Rather, as I go on to argue, this vulnerability has an inherent link to risk that may result both in violence and liberation, and that these terms are not mutually exclusive. To be weak, to be vulnerable, to be at risk, is to risk both violence *and* queer connections and communities.

Beyond this, Ahmed suggests that ‘Silliness – and all the forms of happiness that are deemed superficial – can thus be instructive. In coming to value that which is not valued, and in finding joy in places that are not deemed worthy, we learn about the costs of value and worth’ (Ahmed, 2010: 222). In finding value in the worthless object, queer subjects locate other attachments or modes of attachments. Here I draw a link between the politics and references explored in Chapter Three in relation to the work of Myra Dubois and extend these ideas below in relation to Fagulous and their messy and anachronistic references and impressions.

I argue that all the performers below embrace silly archives and objects, a silly way of working, and silliness more generally. For Ahmed, ‘To embrace silliness is to embrace affects that would not ordinarily participate in affirmative or happiness ethics. Our unhappy archives are surprisingly full of silliness or other inappropriately positive affects’ (Ahmed, 2010: 222). Performing silly things, in silly ways, might be the simplest way to describe it. A purposeful silliness (or silliness-on-purpose) is a performance mode that all three performers below embrace. This silliness actively moves through vulnerability as an always already queer form of subjectivity that allows experiences of community and coming together to emerge through the experiences of violence that many queer people are subjected to. These ideas also make a common experience of these violences (whilst being aware of the complex and intersectional ways in which these violences sit on the bodies of queer subjects) as a mode of collective identification in and through which queer communities might be experienced. To be silly may be to be vulnerable, but also might be about being and *coming together* despite and because of these risks.

This silliness could be framed a lacking care, as not being careful or full of care, as being care-less. Instead I think of it as being careful, or rather full of care since 'freedom from care is also freedom to care, to respond to the world, to what comes up, without defending oneself or one's happiness against what comes up' (Ahmed, 2010: 222). Here the care-free attitude provides a strategy that does not preclude engaging politically or theoretically (or even carefully), for example, but opens up the possibility to be surprised.

This open-ness to surprise is resonant of Sedgwick's conception of paranoid and reparative reading which I explored in relation to the work of Virgin Xtravaganzah in Chapter Two. This paranoid mode, for Sedgwick, demands that 'there must be no bad surprises [and] learning of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise' (Sedgwick, 2002: 13). A reparative mode is open to surprise, because whilst surprises can be terrible, they can also be good. For Sedgwick this is bound up in hope, and an understanding that in realising that the past could have been different, that indeed the outcome could have been surprising, it is possible to also consider that the present and future could be different, surprising and hopeful.

The reparatively positioned reader can engage with the past, present and future in a way which does not seek only the violences and risks (although my queer side-eye can be considered as a paranoid as well as a reparative mode), but also looks for the opportunities, hopes and modes of survival. This sits alongside Freeman's re-invigoration of the past as a potentially fecund site for hope and critical engagement, whereby embarrassing utopias and pasts may offer tactics for hopeful and resistant ways of being in the present, an idea I explore

in relation to the anachronism in the performers' work below. Silliness might be considered as a reparative mode in and through which queer people can participate politically (and through performance) in order to produce alternative engagements with the present that are open to the surprise of hope.

Returning to Halberstam's thinking around low theory and queer failure, I ground these ideas in the importance of not taking myself too seriously:

Being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours. Indeed terms like *serious* and *rigorous* tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy (Halberstam, 2011: 6; original emphasis).

This chapter sits in relation to this idea, searching out the paths less travelled that might become available to queer people and queer academics in refusing to take ourselves (or our politics or our theories) too seriously. This queer mode of silliness finds detours on the normative map (a map that inevitably involves violence: "here be violence!") and as such locates strategies and modes for resistance.

Silliness is a method that does not ignore violence or ignore the threat of violence. Rather it sees violence, accounts for it, takes note of it, and continues dancing despite it. My queer side-eye is related both to Sedgwick's paranoid and reparative mode, where it is a mode of looking out of the corner of my eye to seek danger as well as others who might need

welcoming in. It is a mode of political engagement that slips and slides through the cracks, dodges and weaves, and refuses to get caught (or get caught up) by violent modes that try to stop it. Silliness might be about maintaining movement as a strategy of not getting stuck, not getting caught, and this is mobilised both intellectually and physically below with performers refusing to stick to the script (or refusing a script in the first place) and refusing to stay on stage. Silliness is a strategy of resistance, and one which allows movement in and through violence, refusing to ignore it, but refusing to let it stop the party.

It is also an academic mode, and a way of locating hope in and through performance. As Muñoz argues in relation to his explorations of the dance and drag performance work of Kevin Aviance "Queer dance is hard to catch, and it is meant to be hard to catch - it is supposed to slip through the fingers of those who would use knowledge against us. But it matters and takes on vast material weight for those of us who perform or draw important sustenance from performance' (Muñoz, 2009: 81). These silly, playful, frivolous and queer modes of performance often provide queer avenues for resistance, hope and survival, and my queer side-eye as an academic and political strategy is also another way of locating these survival modes in performance for the queerly oriented viewer. In articulating queer silliness as a purposefully frivolous political, performance and academic tactic that is another method I employ as part of my queer side-eye, I describe a mode of being in the world which locates pleasure (the pleasures of coming together, for example) in drag performance and academic practice that refuses to stop smiling laughing and dancing despite violence.⁸¹ In the readings

⁸¹ I return to this important point in my thinking about Fagulous, considering the idea that whilst the present is not currently good enough for queers to survive, it is important to demand that it should be.

of drag that follow, my queer side-eye locates silly politics and does silly politics, finding pathways through drag, queer theory and politics that are intimately about hope.

Fagulous

I saw Jackie Kennedy, introduce herself by saying "HI, I'm Jackie Kennedy, I saw my husband die today, what did you do?", sing Don't Rain On My Parade and on the line "one shot one gun shot and bang!" collapse into an audience members lap and finish the song there, in tears.

I saw Princess Diana lip synch to Don't Stop me Now, with the instrumental section cutting out to the sound of crashes and the squeals of car breaks, as the song finishes, she sighed and said, "oh fuck not again!"

I saw Theresa May sing I Want to Take You To A Gay Bar in a gay bar, being carried around the room by a boy clad head to toe in rubber.

I saw a projection of Judy Garland appear on a screen and shout "Liza! Liza, where are you?". I saw Liza Minelli (the same performer who is on the video screen as Judy) run on stage. I saw them interact, laugh, cry. I saw them sing Somewhere Over the Rainbow together.



Figure 10: Fagulous as Liza Minelli at Bloc Bar, 2016. Image: AbsolutQueer Photography

Fagulous is a cabaret and drag performer who is well known for using impersonations in her drag performance work, both LGBTQ+ icons such as Judy Garland and Liza Minelli, and problematic political figures such as Theresa May and Ann Widdicombe. In previous work I have characterised Fagulous as a 'self-described as a limp-wristed Julian Clary wannabe' (Parslow, 2019: 87). Notions of failure run through their work 'whether by forgetting what is coming up next and having to return to a scattered pile of cue cards, or their wig falling off

during a number, or their inability to stick to time during a show' (Parslow, 2019: 87). I want to consider the role of this impression or impersonation as a form of drag, characterising how Fagulous practices it and figuring these performances in relation to both Farrier's notions of the co-presence of body and character in queer performance and Freeman's understandings of erotohistoriography.

There is a phenomenon of popular celebrities being impersonated in drag performance. Often these celebrities already have gay or queer resonances such as Judy Garland, Liza Minelli, or Diana Ross, might inhabit a particular tragic position within popular culture, or might have a broader camp aesthetic or resonance that, whilst in many ways not explicitly gay or queer, may have an enduring appeal for LGBTQ+ people such as Kate Bush or Britney Spears. Already, however, these three categories start to merge into one another, depending on where audiences stand in relation to these figures and what energies they are invested with. For example, Britney Spears might be revered because of her camp style and energy, her tragic image in relation to her 2007 "breakdown", and her broader gay resonance from performing in Las Vegas and at LGBT Pride events. She might also be resonant because of experiences growing up with Britney as a proto-queer child, or completely lack any resonance because she was not part of any queer experience or youth. Whilst the idea of these gay or queer resonances are not without their issues and the idea of revering the tragic and highly problematic circumstances of "breakdowns" in figures such as Judy and Britney which often involved drug and alcohol abuse, and even more so abuse at the hands of men, it is important to note that these figures, resonances and investments endure.

This chapter does not propose a moral justification of the broader field of drag impersonations and queer investments in these tragic or problematic figures, although I note that whilst they initially appear to have a solely gay male resonance I suggest that in the advent of drag performance being seen by a diverse set of audiences and groups, these barriers start to erode. With drag performance forms and identity positions resisting any binaries of male/female and king/queen in much of my analyses here (if not all), I argue that these representations and impersonations come to speak across identity positions and performance forms in complex ways and offer meeting points for communal or collective investment. In considering how these impersonations function in contemporary drag performance scenes, I argue that Fagulous's work functions not only in a similar structure to Myra Dubois's work explored in Chapter Three as a mode of facilitating access to non-traditional queer histories, but also as a way of celebrating messy and discontinuous modes of accessing the past due to the often haphazard ways in which Fagulous presents the impersonations. Furthermore, these investments often imbue (or re-imbue) these figures with hope and potential and, much like Virgin Xtravanzah's re-invigoration of the Virgin Mary as a locating of queer hope and survival, offer ways of locating and re-locating hope in complex figures and celebrities.

Referring to some of the staple lines, characters and popular culture texts that many drag performers make reference to, alter-ego of East Village 1980s performance artist Ethyl Eichelberger, Minnie the Maid, is quoted by Senelick as once espousing the following monologue both revering and critiquing the references that drag acts might make:

For those of you who wanted a classy drag act - I'm sorry. But I'll do a little something for you so won't be disappointed. So here goes, classy drag act: Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just happy to see me what a dump blanch what a dump there's no business like show business the calla lilies are in bloom again falling in love again on the good ship lollipop stop in the name of love happy birthday mister president can we talk diamonds are a girl's best friend of course I just farted darling do you think I always smell like this o Nanine I van to be alone. I will not do Judy. She's sacred. You can do Judy - and your little dog too! (Minnie the Maid in Senelick, 2000: 431).

In this quote, there is an overload of these references both as a representation and a critique of the endless references made in drag performance to popular culture. In this quote alone there is references to figures such as Mae West, Bette Davis, Ethel Merman, Audrey Hepburn, Marlene Dietrich, Shirley Temple, The Supremes, Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland as Dorothy, The Wicked Witch of the West, and Greta Garbo. More contemporary performers would undoubtedly add Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Madonna, Britney, Ariana Grande, Nicki Minaj, and famous quotes from the televised series *RPDR* to this endless and ever-growing list. Interestingly for Fagulous's work, the choices of who they "impersonate" are usually anachronistic and drawn from a more classical drag "canon" (such as Liza or Judy) or from more contentious or unexpected political fields (such as Ann Widdicombe or Theresa May).

These references and impersonations, whilst bound up in representations that figure these people as "icons" and erase their bodies or materialities (Farrier, 2013), have an important effect on the ways in which they produce moments of queer resonance in performance. Whilst a fecund area of further enquiry is the broader ethical and political implication of these impersonations, my interest here is instead in how these impersonations, for Fagulous, never quite fully subsume the character (of either the person being impersonated or of Fagulous) or the body of the performer themselves.

Fagulous's impersonations are often approximations, purposeful broad strokes that provide a collective wink at the audience that suggests Fagulous knows this is not quite right, that indeed it might be problematic, but that they are going along with it just the same. I argue that in witnessing Fagulous's work the audience are never meant to lose sight of (or *the site of*) the body of the performer, or the construction of the character-impersonation that is constantly underway. In the examples laid out in my creative account above, the audience do not see a flawless impersonation of any of these figures, and purposefully so. Instead, the audience are exposed to the image of a young gay boy attempting to do these figures, never quite getting it right, and carrying on regardless. I argue that this offers a utopic glimpse of a queer future, not in a profound sense but at a localised level, in that it shows a performer having fun with themselves and their characters at a material level, and it articulates the co-presence of queer histories and presents in a profound way.

In exploring the line between body and character in mainstream theatre, Farrier argues

At once on stage there is the 'virtual' present in the character as well as a 'non-virtual' performer playing (this performer is ignored as demanded by the suspension of disbelief). This virtual/non-virtual co-presence is a site of queer utopia because it offers utopic structures that momentarily propose a resolution to the problem of queer and its relation to identity politics and queer agency (Farrier, 2013: 48–49).

As explored in the previous chapter, Farrier uses this analysis to resolve the complex problem of queer agency in its early formulations in resistance to identity politics. I argue there emerges a mode of queer historicising in and through the performance that exposes complex queer histories to audiences. It also facilitates an engagement with the past as a fecund site

for the location of other modes of queer living and survival (Freeman, 2007). These analyses insist upon returning to the body of the performer as the first term in thinking through queer work.

For Farrier, '[. . .] a focus on the body of the performer might, in some way, enable the holding of the solidity of the performer alongside simultaneous holding of the virtual character' (2013: 50). In Fagulous's work, the body of the performers always remains present and is never subsumed into the character. This is often because

the impersonations fail to ever be full impersonations but rather work as hints, nudges, and winks, approximations at character that give the audience the opportunity to fill in the blanks. Furthermore, however, Fagulous's body insists on being present by refusing to remain onstage, roaming through the audience, actively engaging with them with touch, eye-contact and direct address (all of which are ubiquitous tactics of queer cabaret performance) (Parslow, 2019: 88).

Fagulous engages with the virtual and the actual across multiple levels, with the virtual body of the character (Judy, Liza, Jackie Kennedy, Princess Diana, Theresa May) being layered haphazardly on top of their body, both in terms of often quick costume and wig changes live on stage and in the ways that they often slip in and out of character whether on stage or not. Farrier argues that the issue of queer agency in relation to notions of fluidity is challenged in this slippage between performer and character and offers a fecund site to consider the ways in which bodies work to resolve (or at least challenge) the idea of political and collective action in relation to queer notions of identity.

Farrier also examines the work of Dickie Beau and their performance of Judy Garland as a lip synch performance of found footage of Judy talking privately, arguing that Beau resists presenting Judy as an “icon” and instead returns to the body of the performer in a way that resists a simple re-figuring or recirculation of the figure of Judy that denies her agency. Whilst Fagulous’s work might engage less complexly with the politics of queer re-representations of these historic figures (and historical female figures), I argue there are complex moments of queer porous temporalities at play in their work that offers playful and silly moments of performance that resist contemporary instances of violence. Here I suggest that through a re-investment of these often anachronistic queer figures in their performance work, and through the refusal for character or body to ever disappear into one another, it is possible to understand the importance of queer presence and resistance against violence, and the need to remain visible despite violence. The past, here, might offer strategies for survival in the present, and performing these pasts might offer key moments of imagining survival in the present and the future.

Freeman (2007) suggests that drag performance ‘seems to be a matter of not only performing but also enacting, summoning, even willing ‘sympathy, friendship, or love between the dead and the living’ (Freeman, 2007: 309). In a later chapter looking more explicitly at queer history and drag performance, Farrier also proposes drag performance (specifically lip synching drag performance) as ‘serving a non-heteronormative heritable link with the past’ (Farrier, 2016: 198). Whilst not usually lip synch performance, in Fagulous’s performance practice the past and the present collide in complex ways, particularly in and through the fact that this young gay-identifying performer is engaging with certain anachronistic pasts that are often assumed

to be less relevant for contemporary gay or queer audiences (although I would argue this is not always the case). This complex temporality makes links between the past and the present through complex corporeal engagements that expose the audience to alternative pasts with the potential to consider alternative presents and futures being bound up in their drag work.

Fagulous's performance work offers a material encounter with these pasts in and through which audiences are offered glimpses of alternative modes of being and doing in the world, as well as alternative modes and methods of accessing queer histories. This is resonant of Freeman's notion of erotohistoriography, which explores a bodily and embodied method of *doing queer* history. For Freeman it foregrounds

the centrality of pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, in queer practices of encountering and documenting the past [using] the body to effect, figure, or perform that encounter [with the past in the present]. Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding' (Freeman, 2010: 95–96).

Freeman proposes that rather reaching back towards an inaccessible past, erotohistoriography names the pleasure of encountering that past always already in the present. Drag performance offers a particularly fecund site for the emergence of this idea since it is often engaging with an already porous temporality, particularly when working with historical figures that occupy a complex or contentious place with LGBTQ+ histories.⁸² However, in Fagulous's work, I argue that the failure to stay on stage, the failure to ever fully

⁸² Fagulous's impersonations of contemporary right-wing politicians such as Theresa May and Ann Widdicombe fall into an almost entirely separate rubric here in relation to queer references and resonances, becoming more like parody or satire, and this is not the focus of this research. Whilst there are elements of parody or satire in the queer impersonations Fagulous makes, the energy is directed in a different way.

get into character, and the silly energy that their performances are imbued with produce a playful erotohistoriography that not only produces a complex engagement with these queer pasts, but also locates within the past modes of survival and playfulness that resist contemporary manifestations of homophobia and transphobia.

The claims I make here are imbued with the utopic energy that frames my intellectual impulses in this thesis. Whilst the historic references Fagulous makes are complex and contingent on certain locally and globally resonant queer understandings (some of which may come with morally and ethically dubious strings or sticking points) I return to think about the performer as locating in these past moments modes of frivolity, silliness and fun in the moment of performance that engages with Freeman's erotohistoriography by locating in the present these embarrassing utopias and potentially finds in them tactics for alternative engagements with the present. To extend these ideas, I turn to a specific moment of performance in order to propose that Fagulous's engagement with a mode of queer silliness might emerge through being out of time and off the stage as a resistance to normative boundaries of performance and a mobilisation of this silly method as a (purposeful or not) critique of a contemporary homophobic or transphobic moment.

She enters from the back in a whirlwind, running frantically between chairs, singing in audiences' faces, and sitting on their laps, I do not think she ever makes it to the stage. Liza is blurry around the edges, Fagulous comes through despite her best efforts, or because of them. Come through, Fagulous! The old school cabaret style, the accent and the look come together as Fagulous-as-Liza tells us of her best friend Elsie who, after a life of pills and liquor, died as

the happiest corpse she had ever seen. We are invited to come hear the music play despite everything else, to spite everything else. And it is joyous and silly and playful, and it is happening just for us at this time, without anyone else getting to see it.

Fagulous and Liza merge without one ever becoming the other, like one of those optical illusions that is either a rabbit or a duck; if you look just right angle you might be able to see them both at the same time out of the corner of your eye. But which one is the rabbit and which one is the duck?

When impersonating Liza Minelli, Fagulous engages with archetypal drag impersonations as part of a lineage of drag performers *doing* Liza, and Liza is part of a queer lineage both because of this drag fascination, and due to her status as Judy Garland's daughter.⁸³ Rather than only a repetition of a staple of drag performance, there is something distinctly temporal going on in Fagulous's work. This version of Fagulous-as-Liza took place at an event at Her Upstairs where Fagulous regularly performed, in October 2017. I suggest that Fagulous is out of time, both in terms of the reference to Liza, which is anachronistic, and because her shows are always running over time. Here I playfully engage with the idea of temporality: the character is out of time since it is an anachronistic representation emerging in and through the body of Fagulous. Furthermore, more materially within the mechanics of the show, there is no more time left for the performance, and yet the show is still going on.⁸⁴

⁸³ You can see one version of Fagulous doing Liza at the RVT at Wotever World (2017) *Fagulous do Liza*, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=daM0gMZSmlQ>, accessed 31/08/2019

⁸⁴ Here I mobilise my queer side-eye within academia as a critical tool, and beyond it as Fagulous's friend and someone who has worked with them in professional settings. Here telling Fagulous they are out of time is meant

In my previous work on Fagulous, I proposed that they operated in a mode of refusal – a refusal to adhere to normative modes of representation in which the body disappears in relation to the virtual character, a refusal to stay on stage, a refusal to stick to time, and a refusal to stop coming to hear the music play (a reference to Liza and Fagulous-as-Liza singing *Life Is A Cabaret* (Kander and Ebb, 1972)) despite the threat of homophobia and transphobia (Parslow, 2019). This notion of refusal is drawn from Muñoz’s conception of the imagining of a queer utopia as a refusal of a stultifying straight present (Muñoz, 2009). Whilst this thinking is drawn from ideas of failure, and the idea that failure can be a refusal of the logics of success that are inherently violent for queer people, I turn slightly sideways from this thinking to return to queer silliness. I consider this as a mode that still engages with refusal, but also recognises that refusing a straight present does not offer an escape from it, but an alternative engagement with it (Berlant and Edelman, 2012).

I propose that Fagulous-as-Liza occupies a complex temporal and embodied position in which the co-presence of Fagulous and Liza is never resolved and that in the gaps and lapses between these two figures moments of queer hope can be glimpsed by performer and audience and from that positions of resistance might be mobilised. Returning to the materiality of Fagulous as a performer it is important to note that whilst these images of queer hope still offer a critique of the present, Fagulous steps off stage both as Liza and eventually as Fagulous, and takes the make-up off and returns to the present (as do all

as a purposefully playful “read” that positions my own engagement with drag performers as one which can be as silly, playful and scathing (where necessary) as the practice of drag performers on stage. Fagulous will, inevitably, “read” me back for this comment.

performers in this thesis, to various points and in various ways). Therefore, what I argue is not a panacea to homophobia and transphobia through this silliness, but that in continuing to get on stage (and, perhaps more importantly, get off stage both during and after the performance), Fagulous embodies a simultaneously past and present position of queer visibility despite violence, and queer silliness despite violence, linked to the notions of despite explored in Chapter Two.⁸⁵

The characterisation of Fagulous-as-Liza refusing to stay on stage and refusing to stick to time is still emergent through this understanding of queer silliness. I argue that queer silliness, and therefore moments of hope and resistance, might emerge in Fagulous-as-Liza realising that from 'cradle to tomb, it isn't that long a stay' (Kander and Ebb, 1972), and therefore remaining present and bringing the past into the present in frivolous and playful ways. This offers modes of resistance both to homophobia and transphobia, as well as more mainstream gay rights narratives that I critiqued in the previous chapter.

I am aware that there may be a subtle, and often barely visible, difference between failure (and refusal) and silliness (and resistance). In many ways these concepts could name the same thing. I think the subtle differences lies, however, in naming the present not as a site to be refused, but as something that is *not good enough* and that must change, locating modes of being in the present that can offer modalities of change. In articulating this, I return to Berlant

⁸⁵ There is also something intimately about time happening here in which the audience, in being bound up in a silly and frivolous moment of performance, have time to breathe and relax. The audience get an intermission, a break, a pause. I return to this idea of silly drag performance offering a temporal disjunction that facilitates a moment of breathing in relation to Herr's work below, linking it to my discussion of Meth in Chapter Two.

and Edelman's re-conception of queer negativity as 'a challenge to engage with politics in unexpected places and in unpredicted ways' (Berlant and Edelman, 2014: xvi). Whilst my early thinking in this thesis relied heavily on ideas of queer utopia that insisted that this world is not enough (Muñoz, 2009) I would here, through my conception Fagulous's work, extend this slightly to suggest that *it is important to demand that it is, or should be*. I mobilise silliness, and purposeful queer silliness, as a strategy that resists narratives of gay rights that suggest homophobia and transphobia is over and demands an engagement with the present that is about fighting against violence. This mobilisation of queer silliness also insists on a present in which queer people can breathe and hope (Ahmed, 2010), and be purposefully silly to locate other modes of being in the world that resist hetero- and homo-normative models.

My queer side-eye necessitates a queer sideways glance at this work which not only locates the silly, but also tries to *do silly things*. I purposefully invest in Fagulous as a performer here in relation to Sedgwick's formulation of investing in queer texts, locating modes of intellectual enquiry in and through their practice that illuminates how queer performance practice and drag performance work offers sites of resistance and survival for queers in the present. My queer side-eye here is also a tactic of queer investment which, following Halberstam, takes the silly seriously and locates within silliness practices of survival. I purposefully imbue Fagulous and Fagulous-as-Liza with a queer energy and hope and in so doing locate hope and utopia in their work. They in turn mobilise silliness as a performance strategy that offers utopian modes of queer hope in the present.

I continue with this silly enquiry (both an enquiry into silly things and an enquiry that takes a silly form or tone) by turning to the performer Herr. I locate Herr's practice within these ideas of queer silliness and consider the silly archives or references that Herr invests in (or the queer energy that Herr invests in silly archives), proposing the practice of Herr-ing as another mode of queer silliness in and through which to locate practices of survival. Here I characterise survival not as an ideal, but something that needs to be practiced, and I return to this idea both within Herr's work and Victoria Sin's work below.

Herr

I sometimes I wonder how she can get away with it. We are swept along in the tide of Herr energy, on a rollercoaster that none of us chose to get on but none of us want to get off. She is prancing about the stage, all legs and arms and limbs aplenty, out of control of her body, just as we are out of control of ours.

The stage lights illuminate Herr and Herr body moves across and through pop culture we thought we had forgotten, but do not remember ever learning. Who would have thought Janine from EastEnders could have ever made me as happy as I am now? And what good was all the research of all the queer performance artists across the world, when they did not think to look at Carol Vorderman or Molly Weasley? I am never going to look at Pirates of Penzance in the same way again, or Mash Potato, and if you told me Countdown was queer three years

ago I had have told you where to go but I have seen what Herr can do with GarageBand and that is why I am telling you about it.⁸⁶



Figure 11: Herr at Her Upstairs, 2017. Image: FDPhoto

Herr is a London-based drag performer, who also performs extensively across the UK and is known for her silly performance style and eclectic aesthetic. She works extensively with a loose family of performers who coalesced around Her Upstairs. In relation to this, she was known as the runner up of the first season of *Not Another Drag Competition* and the winner of *Not Another Drag Competition All Stars*, a drag competition held at Her Upstairs hosted, curated and mentored by Meth, the performer explored in Chapter Two.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ When writing this creative account from notes I had made of Herr's performances, I found myself emulating the style of Frank O'Hara's poetry, and in particular here there is resonance to the poem 'Having A Coke With You' (O'Hara, 1965). As a queer reference that I discovered in my teenage years, O'Hara's poetry has sometimes influenced my own creative writing style.

⁸⁷ *Not Another Drag Competition* ran for 5 seasons prior to the closure of Her Upstairs and was a popular drag competition that garnered critical attention for producing competent and well-rounded performers and welcomed drag queens and kings and others in different forms under the frame of drag. The entire competition format was purposefully referential of *RPDR* in a tongue in cheek way.

Beyond this venue and competition, however, Herr is a renowned and respected performer who has gained national attention for her playfulness, silliness and the ridiculousness of her choice of performance matter. Often her work references slightly anachronistic popular culture references. Herr often invests her performance work in quotidian or mundane popular culture forms such as the character of Janine from *EastEnders* or Molly Weasley from the *Harry Potter* franchise, or in perhaps her most well-known act, Carol Vorderman from *Countdown*. Often Herr's work is deceptively simple and takes one idea and explores it extensively, and at times makes arguably the most obvious creative decision. For example, in the act that uses audio clips from Molly Weasley who is known as an over-bearing but ferocious mother-figure, Herr intercuts these into the song *Momma Knows Best* by Jessie J (2011) and in her Carol Vorderman/*Countdown* act that I explore below, Herr takes an audio clip of Carol Vorderman uncontrollably laughing at a complicated sum during the numbers round of popular daytime television show *Countdown* and intersperses it into the song *Complicated* by Avril Lavigne (2002).

I argue that Herr's work mines one idea until there is nothing more left to do. It would be incorrect, however, to characterise it as simple; instead I propose that Herr has developed a practice, a way of working, that engages simple ideas in complex ways, and in so doing produces a set of practices that allow for a queer glance at popular culture that re-invests these texts with queer energies. I consider Herr not just as a performer (as a noun, if you will), but also consider the practice of Herr: what I characterise as Herr-ing. As I have already indicated, part of this Herr-ing involves an extensive investment in mundane or silly texts, and

it is worth noting that as part of my queer side-eye it could be argued that I am also performing a purposeful investment in Herr and Herr's practice just as I did with Fagulous's work above. Indeed, here I might be performing a Herr-ing of Herr. This purposefully loquacious intellectual strategy is arguably *a silly engagement with the silly* and a cumulative moment where my side-eye emerges as a strategy both in performance (Herr could arguably be engaging in a side-eye process in her use of popular culture) and in academic practice (I am engaging in a side-eye of Herr's side-eye). I am being deliberately obtuse here to consider the limits and blurry edges of my queer side-eye as method, to potentially expose how the side-eye might also be a silly academic practice related to Halberstam's low theory. Simply put, in Herr-ing Herr I might in fact be giving a queer side-eye to the queer side-eye.

In much the same way that it is often helpful to consider queer as a verb, as a doing, here I want to explore what a *doing* of Herr might be. In the first instance, Herr-ing is characterised through the investment of mundane or unexpected texts with a queer energy by using them in drag performance.⁸⁸ I characterise this in relation to Sedgwick's formulation about investments in complex and non-traditional texts as a vital mode of survival for queer youth that I considered in relation to Myra Dubois's performance in Chapter Three. Sedgwick considers how queer youth might locate cultural sustenance and survival in eccentric and excessive texts and sites, in sites where meaning does not have to be neat and tidy. There is resonance here to the use of alternative texts such as cartoons and popular films in Halberstam's enactment of "low theory". Therefore, the double valence of investment here

⁸⁸ I am not claiming that the use of all texts in drag performance inevitably means they are invested with a queer energy. Fagulous performing as right-wing politicians, for example, is certainly not part of this process of a queer investment. However, I do position Herr's investment as producing something queer which emerges in paying attention to her performance style and the venues in which the work takes place.

works through Herr's queer commitments with the mundane texts in her acts, and my queer investment in Herr's acts as sites of survival and sustenance. I propose Herr-ing as a specific practice that is also bound up in Herr's particular locale, in which she will often take texts that are temporally resonant with particular audiences, such as 1990s popular culture, or often particular age groups, such as the Harry Potter franchise. Herr-ing, then, is not a universal mode of survival, but comes into focus when explored within its temporal and geographical specificity. Herr and Herr-ing is not generalised, but located and specific.

Herr-ing, then, is the investment of mundane texts with queer energy. This queer energy emerges both through the performer on stage and becomes particularly resonant when audience and performer come together to take joy and re-invest in silly recent archives such as *Countdown* or Janine from *EastEnders*. Herr-ing is a practice of survival precisely because of the silliness of its doing; by this I mean that in the particular context of rising homophobia and transphobia and the loss of LGBTQ+ venues, the active decision to re-invest in these discontinuous, silly, playful and mundane sites of popular culture is an active rejection of these violent narratives, a silliness despite violence. Below I explore Victoria Sin and unpack the importance of refusing the burden of representation for minority subjects and argue something different is emerging than in Herr's work. Herr's performance is not necessarily about a refusal to engage with the complex issues of the contemporary mainstream and queer politics, but an active decision to glance side-ways at them (or not look at them at all) to find silly, frivolous and playful ways to engage with the present, and to locate alternative texts for queer engagement and invest them with a queer energy in and through drag performance. These texts, in Herr's performance work, become sites of survival precisely

because they resist exposing narratives of homophobia and transphobia; in simple terms Herr-ing might also be about locating moments of escape, and refusing to recirculate the injurious narratives of homophobia and transphobia.

It is important to note here the different ways in which this failure and silliness might function. Whilst the idea of silliness as a refusal to recirculate injurious narratives is important, and something which I return to below in my discussions of Victoria Sin, it is important to reflect that the conditions of survival, inequality and risk that form the social dynamics of my analysis of failure are also present on the stages that I am exploring. In paying attention to the relative social power that a performer like Herr might occupy, it is important to understand that when a performer occupies a position of relative privilege their choice of silly performance work could be seen as a way of avoiding talking about difficult topics by the very people who may be endowed with the power or authority to do so, and to do so without or with less risk. It is arguable that Herr might be able to fail, may have more in built safety mechanisms or a more robust failsafe, precisely because of her position than Victoria Sin, for example. Herr's silliness could be understood as a strategy of not taking risks even when those risks are fundamentally less risky than, for example, for performers of colour.

I note this, whilst also arguing that for audiences, who often occupy complex and diverse positionalities, the performance still contains the potential for hope and silliness not by necessarily facilitating risk and failure in the same way that Fagulous's work does but instead by offering an interruption into narratives of homophobia and transphobia, by giving the audience space to breathe. In many ways, this is also a temporal phenomenon similar to that

explored in relation to Meth's work in Chapter Two (which is interesting considering Meth and Herr's Mother-Daughter relationship) which interrupts cycles of negativity as a strategy of being silly precisely because of and despite violence. To ground this thinking further, and having set up Herr as a performer and Herr as a practice (Herr-ing), I now move to look more in-depth at one of Herr's performances to explore the context of one of these sites of queer investment, consider the limits of this practice and what specific details of this practice are required to allow for these emergences.

I am watching someone do nothing on stage. Listening. Waiting. There is intent in every movement, in every gesture, in every motion, in every shift of every muscle on the face. But also, she is doing nothing. The track goes on...

"yes"

The track goes on, she stands, turns around and mimes writing.

"yes"

She has said, and done, nothing. It is simple, and excessive, and perfectly done. We are hanging of her every breath, not that she would even be out of it at this stage. We recognise it, come to see it, and love her for the sheer stupidity of it.

“yes”

I am obsessed by this one line, this one moment of expertise. It is like all her work culminates in this moment and comes back to it again and again.

“yes”

She takes one thing, and she takes it as far as it can go.

As already eluded to above, the particular act in question involves lip synching Avril Lavigne’s (2002) song *Complicated* interspersed with a clip of Carol Vorderman reacting to a contestant on popular daytime television show *Countdown* completing a very convoluted and complicated sum.⁸⁹ The particular act that I am exploring took place during a night of performance at Her Upstairs that Herr hosted, supporting new and emerging drag and cabaret talent. Structurally the act is interesting since it intersperses the famous *Countdown* music and then the spoken word lip synch with the song, with the spoken word moments interrupting the chorus to the song at numerous points. This often means that audiences, many of whom recognise the song, will sing over the initial moments of the spoken word. The

⁸⁹ A version of this performance being performed at The Glory can be seen at London Drag Shows (2017) *HERR - Complicated/Countdown Mix @ The Glory, London - 05/07/2017*, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsol8vo6lcE>, accessed 31/08/2019.

performance of the song is frivolous and playful, with Herr often engaging emotionally with the lyrics and actively performing each lyric to the point where it becomes parodic. The spoken word sections involve more of Herr listening and reacting to the other voices in the track as they do lip synching Carol Vorderman, and therefore the use of body language and facial expressions are essential to the success of the performance. There are also extremely precise moments in which Herr must lip synch the word “yes” in the middle of a long stream of someone else talking, as well as some uncontrollable laughing that is often challenging to capture as a lip synch performer.

This is a technically complex and competent performance which demonstrates Herr’s ability to edit tracks, to interpret the performance through suddenly shifting styles from humour to mock seriousness, and to precisely lip synch a difficult bit of spoken word.⁹⁰ There is a pleasure in seeing a lip synch performance executed expertly, with clarity and perfect timing. On a material and technical level, audiences witness an expert lip syncher able to carefully plan, rehearse and execute her performances, and able to time her lip synching perfectly on stage. By itself, this is a pleasurable thing to watch for an audience, and something that I treasure seeing in drag performance, since lip synching is often perceived as a skill that it is presumed anyone can do, but which requires care, attention, and rehearsal. Indeed, Farrier describes lip synching as a ‘key technique in drag’s dramaturgical toolkit’ (Farrier, 2016: 292) and in Herr’s work there is expert evidence of this technique. The pleasure in watching, and clearly in doing, this performance comes initially through the pleasure of seeing someone

⁹⁰ In a later version of the performance, Herr has also added a video element to it in which as she mimes writing numbers up on the board as part of the *Countdown* spoken word lip synch that also appear on a projected screen as if she is writing them. The version I explore in this section does not contain this projected element.

engage in their craft expertly. Whilst this does not preclude messy and playful instances in Herr's work or ignore the idea that pleasure(s) can be found in less accomplished performance work, here I highlight the importance of these lip synching abilities as a technical craft that the drag performer hones and practices. This is also to highlight that whilst I am talking about the work as silly and frivolous, I am not claiming it is unskilled.

Beyond this recognition of the skilful undertaking of the performance, there is also a pleasurable engagement with popular culture in many of Herr's acts. Here, I return to Muñoz formulation that 'popular culture is the stage where we [queers] rehearse our identities' (Muñoz, 2009: 104) and suggest that in the queer investments Herr makes in popular cultural forms such as Avril Lavigne and *Countdown*, forms which have no inherent bearing on or relationship to queer cultures, there is an investment with popular culture as a site of investment and reinvigoration through queer forms of performance. Herr, in taking these mundane or quotidian archives and investing in them through performance, imbues these popular cultural recent pasts with a queer energy that remains for the audiences who see her work.

Herr's investment of these silly archives moves beyond her performance to the audiences who see it, and our engagement with the work produces silly and pleasurable inscriptions of these texts for us. This Herr-ing of things like Avril Lavigne and *Countdown* produce not just a playful re-engagement with popular culture, but also a pleasurable one in and through which communities, or moments of community, have the potential to form. Farrier goes on to consider 'drag as a material effort in the making of local community through a performance

practice that is co-mingled with popular culture' (Farrier, 2016: 192). Interestingly, Farrier considers Meth's work in relation to these ideas, and turning to Herr here adds another layer to this analysis since as already indicated Meth and Herr have a Mother-Daughter drag relationship; their work moves down pseudo-generational lines. However, what is important here is that in Herr's performance, audiences can come together in and around drag performance and re-member these moments of recent popular past with a queer energy. This then re-emerges through a clear knowledge of different performance work, with audiences knowing and requesting specific acts in show. Therefore, the traces and remains of these queer investments remain with audiences after performances have ended.

This is not to claim a broad utopian re-inscription of these silly archives, or even that after the performance I can watch *Countdown* and locate a queer energy into it; such a claim would take too literally the ways in which these queer investments might function. Instead I argue that in investing these silly or quotidian archives with a queer energy, Herr offers a method of working both in performance and beyond that locates strategies for finding small glimpses of queer hope (through silliness) in the everyday.

Here, Herr-ing is demonstrated and indeed trained in performance, with audiences witnessing her performance work, taking pleasure from it, and then finding potential strategies for locating queer hope in the quotidian. This is a tactic within my queer side-eye, in which a queer side-eye glances at popular cultural forms, forms that may on the face of it seem silly and mundane and not particularly queer, and re-inscribes them with a frivolous, playful and queer energy based on personal autobiographic investment and broader relations

to community.⁹¹ In Herr's work, there is an investment with the quotidian that locates queer energy and alternative forms of queer investment in mundane popular cultural texts and trains audiences to do it themselves. In so doing, Herr locates other places beyond coherent normative references to find queer energy and therefore glimpse other modes of being or belonging in the world that can then begin to produce moments of community. Herr's work playfully engages with the present and purposefully engages with embarrassing, outmoded or outdated texts from popular culture's past as a way of locating queerness in silly ways and silly places. It does not articulate a universal queer reference or an alternative archive of queer texts. Instead, Herr-ing is a doing which playfully engages with popular culture as a site of queer investment. In investing in these mundane texts, Herr re-invigorates a phobic present with queer potential, locating moments of escape and silliness despite and because of violence.

Like my reflections upon Fagulous's work, this exploration of Herr is purposefully utopic and purposefully silly. In exploring these works as an example of the enactment of my queer side-eye in performance, I am also engaging with a queer side-eye when looking at them, producing an almost obscured and blurry set of reflections that rely upon an embodied and localised set of experiences around having seen this performance work live. Whilst all of my analyses in this thesis rest on this assumption, and the creative accounts that frame each performer's work is an attempt to work through and evidence these live performance experiences, this is perhaps most difficult to locate in this work that is always already one

⁹¹ In my own experience, I have found that in which watching Herr's work I re-discovered a personal investment with texts such as *Chicken Run* for example, which also appear in Halberstam's analyses in *The Queer Art of Failure*.

step away from being serious or being direct. A queer sideways glance at work that is already glancing sideways itself has the potential to miss out on what is happening right in front of the viewer. However, I argue that glancing sideways may offer more interesting insights than looking at these works straight. Glancing sideways at Herr's work, and Herr's practice, has illuminated tactics for engaging with the social, as well as with mundane popular cultural texts and sites, as a specific queer engagement with the present that purposefully mobilises silliness and silly things as a playful resistance to and escape from a homophobic and transphobic straight present.

Here, Herr-ing is a practice, just as resistance is a practice and survival is a practice; something that must be practiced. Having explored Herr's practice, and the practice of Herr-ing, I articulate it as a doing, as processual and unfinished, and link it to queer modes of doing politics that must continue to be practiced. To extend and challenge these ideas, I look to the work of Victoria Sin, setting their performance work in an important context before moving to explore one act in relation to these silly ideas explored here.

Victoria Sin

There is a delightful moment in getting the performance. Or no. That is not quite it. Realising, quite suddenly, that this is it; this is all it is.

It does not represent anything. It is nothing more than the acts that are happening on stage. It does not leave the stage. It does not get better or worse or more or less than this. It is this

moment, their moment, my moment, and nothing else. It does not refer to anything. It is not making a point. It does not have a message or a political stance. It is not trying to tell you something or tell you not to do something. It is not representational, and it is not historic, or futuristic; it is barely even present. It is not telling you why or asking you to ask why. It is not allegorical, it is not a fable, it is not a story to frighten kids. It is not. THIS IS NOT A DRILL. THIS IS NOT A METAPHOR.



Figure 12: Victoria Sin at Her Upstairs, 2018: Image: AbsolutQueer Photography

Victoria Sin is an ‘artist using speculative fiction within performance, moving image, writing, and print to interrupt normative processes of desire, identification, and objectification’ (Victoria Sin, 2019). Whilst their artistic practice moves in, through and beyond drag they describe their engagement with drag as ‘a practice of purposeful embodiment questioning the reification and ascription of ideal images within technologies of representation and systems of looking’ (Victoria Sin, 2019). Their political positionality around their drag

performance rejects labels such as bio-queens or faux-queens that are often used to describe and self-describe performers who may identify as female out of drag, or who may have been assigned female at birth (AFAB), who perform as drag queens. Whilst for some performers in this thesis those descriptions are important and indeed sources of power and resistance, Sin locates them as an extension of misogyny in the gay and drag scene (Sin, 2018).

Sin makes it clear that 'drag's humour should be at the expense of gender, not women' (Sin, 2018: 25), positioning the political location that they occupy in their work as both a critique of gender and the violence that is often propagated towards female and femme people, and a critique of the ways in which certain drag queens in particular can make a joke of femaleness and femininity at the expense of those subjects who also occupy these material positions and experience violence because of them outside of drag as a performance form. They suggest that

As a drag queen, I am not pretending to be a woman; I'm intentionally performing femininity as presented and constructed by western mainstream media and iconography. These are images and attitudes that have been ingrained through social conditioning, which I have been unwittingly measured against, and which have been policed on my body throughout my life, so I refuse to entertain a discourse about whether women should be allowed to engage with these gender constructs as a drag queen (Sin, 2018: 25).

In positioning their practice and politics as a mode of occupying femininity both despite and because of the violences often directed at women, AFAB, female-identifying and femme individuals and communities, Sin articulates a complex position that returns to the founding concerns of queer failure in this chapter. Sin suggests that 'anyone who is a drag queen and performs femininity or their idea of womanhood should be aware of how many people are

systematically oppressed based on the gender constructs they perform in drag' (Sin, 2018: 25-6). This does not suggest that non-femme people should not do drag but should understand that just because a drag performer may be presenting a critique or construction of femininity in drag, they may also serve to prop up violent modes of gender and gender norms. This is something that Butler made clear in her early formulations of drag and gender performativity, that drag may serve as both a critique and reformulation of these gendered norms (Butler, 1990). Sin is not denying the importance or potential of all forms of drag, rather making a case for an understanding of the position of the performer and the direction or location of the joke or humour in drag performance.

Taking to task the often-commented idiom that certain younger performers or young queer communities and audiences might be too sensitive, or unable to take a joke, Sin argues that:

What these queens have to realise is that they are reproducing systems of violence that marginalised people within the queer community encounter in the wider world. Trans people take gender seriously because they are disproportionately killed as a result of the gender binary system that we as queen parody, because the violence they encounter because of transgressing the heterosexual matrix doesn't stop when they finish their gig and take off their drag (Sin, 2019: 26).

This is an important point that speaks not only to Sin's work but also to many of the performers in this thesis who do not often occupy a simple or coherent relation to gender, male-ness or female-ness. Beyond the importance of recognising that many performers in this contemporary scene perform a complex relationship to gender both on and off stage, this makes clear the need to recognise that while parodies still serve important purposes in contemporary drag performance, they do not ultimately act to devalue or decentre the violent ways in which gender might be policed. This is resonant of the ethical implications of

queer failure that started this chapter, where to fail cannot (and should not) be a panacea for queers, and where to fail may also come with violent consequences.

I foreground this thinking and argument in Sin's work because it is resonant of my arguments around queer failure. Sin positions their practice as consciously aware of its own limits, and consciously aware of the body that is ever-present below the parodies of femininity that they paint on their face and body. The politics that Sin has constructed around their on stage work is one which challenges misogyny, femme- and trans-phobia both within and beyond drag performance, and highlights the importance of engaging with the ways in which drag performance, when considered as a parody or playing-with of gender, can also serve as prop for normativity. Sin's politics foreground drag performance as having a radical potential, but also point to the ways in which parodies can also function as a policing tool for those already marginalised.

I set the context of this politics because it is important to determine that whilst I locate politics in the work of Fagulous and Herr, and their work is political, they may not wear their politics so explicitly both within and beyond drag performance. Therefore, when exploring Sin's work, this political foregrounding is important in order to understanding their performance work which, on the face of it, can be characterised as minimal, silly or pointless.

The disdainful glance she gives the audience is enough to pin us to our seat. It is like we do not deserve her, or she does not deserve the chore of being on the stage. The façade does not drop, the visage does not drop. We are tolerated even as she is adored.

Despite all this, the well-choreographed timing of the drop of the bread onto the chopping board, or the spreading of the butter with the meat cleaver, shows a thoughtfulness and care and attention. Every movement and every action and every I-am-too-good-for-this glance has been carefully planned to hit exactly the right beat at exactly the right moment.

The cleaver, somehow elegant despite its size so far, is suddenly brought down across the bread and processed cheese. It is casually offered to one of us, she even deigns to make eye contact. I cannot believe that is it. But I guess if you are going to make a sandwich, you may as well do it in a gown.

In drag performance work that happens in bars and pubs and clubs, Sin's work often engages in a simple idea that takes up the entire act.⁹² Whilst Herr's work could be characterised in a similar way, Sin takes it almost a step further into the mundane or quotidian. In the act explored above, perhaps Sin's best known or most well documented drag performance work taking place in club and cabaret settings, they make a sandwich whilst a jaunty song plays.

⁹² Sin's work also crosses over into live art and performance art. Often outside of pub/club settings Sin's work will engage with more complex forms and ideas, including considering science fiction, technology, the politics of representation, identity and more. I am particularly focusing on the work I have seen in less formalised settings here in line with the other work I examine since I think these settings offer different sites for the emergence of politics and performance communities that are specific and require a focused enquiry.

This version of the performance I explore took place at The Clapham Grand, a larger performance venue in south London which over recent years has housed larger scale drag performances from UK-based performers and some performers from the USA who are alumni of *RPDR*. This show Sin's act was programmed within was curated and hosted by the winner of *RPDR* Season Nine, Sasha Velour and also features Meth and Virgin Xtravaganzah. The entire act encompasses the making of this sandwich, with the revelation of the bread, the buttering of the bread with a large meat cleaver, the application of the processed cheese and the cutting of the sandwich in half all happening at key moments in the repetitive music. Sin is usually wearing a gown (often bejewelled), a breastplate, and her characteristic highly stylised make-up.⁹³

I position Sin's work across two fronts: firstly, as a refusal of the burden of representation, and secondly as a frivolous and silly engagement with the present that works in similar ways to the other performances in this chapter. I consider Sin's silliness as a queer strategy that still considers the material experiences of violence for queers, and yet still actively occupies this position as utopic.

In the first instance then, Sin's work refuses the burden of representation. In setting up Sin's politics above, I argue that their performance practice and their identity in performance are complexly co-emerging as a queer-identifying, femme-presenting person of colour. Their politics in other art works and in their discussions around drag performance call for the

⁹³ A version of this performance can be seen at Drag Coven (2018) *Nightgowns (9/28/18)* - Victoria Sin "Sandwich", Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IT8pCDq3B38>, accessed 31/08/2019

importance of recognising the intersectional issues at play for non-white and non-cis artists and audiences in the broader drag and queer scene. However, this politics is refused in performance. The performance work I examine here refuses the burden of representation with which their politics off stage or on other stages engages. There is a refusal or resistance for the work to be anything other than their body on stage doing the things they are doing, without a message or intent or political drive.

Whilst it is possible to suggest that simply their presence on stage produces a political comment about the need for the visibility of marginalised identities in drag performance, I would argue that their purposefully mundane acts coupled with the disdainful and bored glares they shoot at the audience actively moves to resist this by engaging a purposefully fruitless performance act that has no interest in the readings of race or gender that might be applied to it. Therefore, rather than being able to resist representation outright I suggest that these political representations, and the burden of representation that often falls on minority subjects, slide off Sin through their enactment of the mundane.

There is a potential reading of Sin's work in relation to Edelman's understanding of queer negativity (Edelman, 2004), of the work as existing always already in a present without future. However, this lacks the hopefulness of that imbues these queer silly practices. It is more characteristic of an unexpected engagement with the present (and with drag performance as a form) that Berlant and Edelman (2013) propose as the site of queer negative thinking in *Sex, or The Unbearable*. There is an almost romanticism of the present in these ideas, however,

that lacks a material engagement with the present moment for queers, and with the moment of queer performance.

In Sin's act then, a queer-identifying person of colour is coming on stage. They are dressed in a glamorous gown, covered in rhinestones, their hair is perfectly formed, and their make-up is excessive and sets their face in a scowl. The performance is happening whilst outside on the street more and more queer people are being subjected to violence and in the media the validity of trans and/or non-binary identities are being questioned leading to a precarious and often dangerous world for visibly queer and non-normative people in the UK. Inside the venue, Victoria Sin is on stage making a sandwich. This purposeful silliness is a key strategy that does not deny the existence of homophobia and transphobia outside of the walls, but it carries on making a sandwich anyway. Furthermore, whilst there could be an expectation to refer to the contemporary political scene, there is a utopic silliness in refusing to bring it up, and in refusing to allow those debates to intrude upon the silliness and playfulness within the room.

Whilst these analyses are verging on a conversation surrounding queer venues as "safe spaces" that I would resist, there is something utopic in this thinking that is fruitful. Just as Sin turns away from representational politics in their performance, or at least accepts it might happen but lets it slide right off of them in an insistence on the mundane, I argue that whilst a serious politics could be read onto Sin's performance, the silliness of the mundanity and the investment in the mundane as a queer performance strategy refuses to allow this to stick. In sticking to the silly and refusing to allow the stickiness of representational politics to coalesce

around the performance, Sin occupies a position of queer silliness that refuses to move beyond the moment of the performance, and occupies a purposefully mundane, quotidian and silly position.

I characterise this performance work as another mode of queer silliness in the vein of Fagulous's and Herr's practices, in that it offers a purposeful engagement with silly performance forms that resists the need for politics to emerge through the content of performance work but find ways to locate it elsewhere. Sin's work mobilises silliness as a utopian and frivolous form that shows glimpses of a mode of performance where these political conversations should not need to happen. It insists on a better present and future. In my glances at Sin's performance work here, I glimpse not just a re-investment with queer pasts that I saw in Fagulous's work, or with mundane archives in Herr's work, but with mundane acts. Here, Sin locates in the everyday, through an investment with the quotidian, a utopian set of practices that is fundamentally about insisting on and locating survival in the present. If survival is a practice then Sin's work starts practicing that through the quotidian, imbuing the everyday with hope as a site where survival can and must be practiced. My queer side-eye here locates this through an investment in this performer and this performance, my gaze sticks to the performance and locates in it a strategy and tactic for staying alive. Ultimately, Victoria Sin gestures towards a queer future in which making a sandwich on stage could just be making a sandwich on stage.

Conclusions

I started my reflections of this chapter with Cheryl Hole, now one of the contestants on the inaugural series of *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* (BBC, 2019), singing *I Am What I Am*. In thinking through why this act was political, despite it feeling silly and frivolous and even anachronistic. In trying to work through these initial feelings, I have turned to silliness as an academic, performance-based and political mode. I have invested in drag performance work here, imbuing these silly performances with queer hope as a political strategy of locating hope and survival through popular, low brow forms such as drag. I have been purposefully silly in my exploration of purposefully silly drag. I argue that silliness is a socio-political strategy that emerges in and through drag performance as a way of practicing different modes of survival in a phobic straight present. I also argue that silliness is political strategy of refusing this present where silliness, which is often relegated as a non-political site, needs to be re-invested as an embodied tactic to locate alternative modes of staying alive. Finally, I have also understood silliness as an academic strategy of refusing to be taken too seriously, and of engaging in low forms such as drag in a low way.

I suggest queer silliness becomes a method of drag performance practice, a critical tool that drag performers can and do employ as a queer political strategy that both produces and critiques modes of queer political doing. Returning to the idea of silliness and hope, I note how this engagement with queer silliness also makes queer silliness possible; or that queer silliness incites entertaining silliness as a possibility despite violence. Ahmed makes the simple but profound observation that 'Possibilities have to be recognized as possibilities to become

possible' (Ahmed, 2016: 218), and doing queer silliness makes queer silliness possible, or recognises it as a possibility.

I propose that queer silliness involves an engagement with this notion, since it renders possible the idea that there is a beyond homophobia and transphobia, a queer future or utopia in which silliness is a strategy that may not involve a political choice to avoid a threat. This silliness is also an engagement with vulnerability as a mode of being open to the other in Butlerian terms, and as a reparative mode open to surprise that inculcates tactics of ducking, weaving and dodging through a contemporary phobic present. Queer silliness is located in the practices of Fagulous, Herr and Victoria Sin, and in my queer sideways glances during this chapter, where engagements with queer silly academia and theorisation has purposefully imbued my thinking. Queer silliness offers purposeful strategies to playfully engage with the present, insisting on frivolity, mundanity and fun despite and even because of violence. It demands the concrete possibility of a hopeful, utopian future in which Liza Minelli can teach us to live in the present, Carol Vorderman can help us imagine queer liberation, and a sandwich could just be a sandwich.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored drag performance in contemporary London, looking at work that happened between 2009 and 2019, considering the ways in which queer communities emerge around sites where drag happens. Starting from a contemporary moment in which homophobic and transphobic violence is on the rise in the UK, and there has been a loss of LGBTQ+ venues in London since 2006, I argue that this is a vital moment to consider how forms of drag might offer strategies to resist, challenge and survive for queer people. Alongside this, the explosion in popularity of drag, and a large number of new drag performers emerging in the wake of *RPDR* means this is a fascinating time to explore where drag is and where it might be going. This contemporary moment in London – of venue closures, violence, and an explosion of drag – necessitates an in-depth study of the effects of drag and queer performance on the ways in which communities might emerge because of and despite the negative ramifications for queerness and queer performance. Whilst studies of drag pre-exist this work and inform my thinking, this thesis takes an extended and in-depth look at one particular “scene” in London and argues for the importance of paying attention to the particular local emerges of these drag performance and queer communities in order to understand the effects, opportunities and limitations of drag. To do this, after setting up the theoretical and practical framework of the thesis in Chapter One, I explored four key intellectual areas (Queer Times, Queer Venues, Queer Bodies, Queer Politics) in relation to twelve different performers and performances, each of which offer unique insights into the modes of performance that speak to, extend and challenge the queerly hopeful commitments of this thinking.

It is worth noting that the specificity of the work I have explored, drag performance in London between 2009 and 2019, means that the conclusions I have drawn are tempered by the restricted pool of work that I accessed. For example, had this research been undertaken in a place such as Blackpool, for example, the work made available to me and the conclusions that I drew would be different to these London-centric performance works. The conclusions are specific to London as a particular metropolis that demands particular sets of attention in order to fully account for the ways in which drag, economies, and violences emerge and function across venues and performers. Furthermore, even within London there are sections of the vast performance scene that are not accounted for here, including the East London alternative scene and the mainstream emergences of that scene in events such as *Sink the Pink*, or the more traditional drag performance that occurs in much of Soho. To explore the implication of this work elsewhere in London, the UK and beyond, would require further enquiries and more embodied experiences in other cities and locations. This thesis takes a particularly metrocentric exploration of drag and queer performance practices and as a queer who grew up in a rural setting in the UK I recognise this importance of extending this thinking to explorations of drag and queer performance (and queer communities) in rural settings in future research.

This work is also not an explicit historical or historiographic analysis and whilst throughout I am aware of the lineages of queer theory and drag performance in which both my own academic enquiry and the performance work explored sits, this research is grounded in an exploration of the present moment as particularly fecund and volatile to our understandings of queer communities and survival. In future research there is important work to be done to

create localised UK-based histories of drag performance that do not regulate the work to protectionist or even nationalist narratives, but that also pay particular attention to the localities and temporal specificities of drag performance, politics and queer liberation in the UK. This thesis has resisted overly generalised understandings of drag, claiming more importance in understanding localised practices at this stage, however an extension of this work could easily allow for a historiographic positioning UK-based drag performance within more wide-ranging and explicit historic narratives.

Finally, my own position in the work has meant that, with certain exceptions, many of the performers I have been exposed to are of a similar generation to myself or are my contemporaries on the scene. Whilst performers such as Mzz Kimberley could be argued to be of a different generation to many of the performers in the work, and Myra Dubois is arguably a more “traditional” drag performer, they both work across the scene I am writing about and in other venues and settings. The performance work in this thesis is all work I have seen live, and I did not always know when work I was seeing would end up in my thesis; therefore the work I was exposed to was determined by economic factors (what I could afford to see and what I would pay to see, as well as what I could use my networks to get in to see for free), social factors (who I was with and what was popular at the time), and identity-based factors (what sort of performers, performance and venues my own queer politics and queer commitments led me to being exposed to). I note that I occupy an intersectional position in my identity as a queer, white, working class, cis-male-presenting academic (with enough privilege garnered during my time in London to be able to undertake a PhD at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama). These positions necessitate that I will have access to

certain performance work more easily than others and have access to certain venues and spaces more easily than others, but also that certain work and venues may not speak to my identity positions or, indeed, tastes, and therefore may not have made it into this thesis.

I have made active attempts to account for this, however, by ensuring each chapter contained work by non-male, non-cis and non-white artists and academics. This is not just a tokenistic gesture, however, since to not include this work would mean that this thesis was unrepresentative of the vibrant, complex and diverse drag performance scene available in London. Furthermore, drag performance work is less and less siloed into separate performance events in this contemporary moment, in part because of a decrease in venues where this work happens, and therefore anyone who attends a drag show is likely to be exposed to different ranges, forms and practices of drag at any one event.

Therefore, whilst I have actively accounted for and mitigated the limits of my identity and socio-political and socio-economic positionality, these factors come into play in this thinking and into broader concerns within queer performance theory. In many cases, however, due to drag performance being at a critical moment in London, the exposure to other work often occurs, and is otherwise not difficult to seek out. This is something I have attempted to do throughout my thinking and analyses both to ensure the thesis speaks to a wider audience, but also to make this work more enjoyable for me as a researcher. Finally, whilst my positionality offers limitations to these conclusions, it also offers opportunities. I occupy a unique position as a producer of drag events, previous bar owner, and friend and loved one of many drag performers. This offers me unique insights and knowledges into this work

and my insider status is one of the key elements of my queer side-eye as an intellectual and practical strategy that I foreground as one of the significant new insights in this research.

Queer Side-Eye

This thesis understands a queer side-eye as an overarching methodological framework and tactic that recognises the complex and contingent ways in which the researcher is imbricated in the research. A queer side-eye is also a physical position in the world and describes not only a way of looking or watching – and being looked at – but also a playful attitude and positionality. A queer side-eye can be taken on by other researchers, since its political impulse is about being in affinity with other practitioners and researchers who are also committed to challenging and resisting contemporary normativities that perpetuate homophobic and transphobic, racist, misogynist and other oppressive forms. However, the tactics and strategies that make up any queer side-eye, academically and practically, depend on the particular location of the research. Therefore, my queer side-eye is intimately connected to the acerbic and playful wit of the drag performer in performance, where giving a queer side-eye also involves a mode of “reading”, as well as a paranoid and reparative glance at the periphery to locate danger and those in need of welcoming in. Academically, my queer side-eye is connected to other queer modes of doing theory and as such has emerged through tactics such as purposeful misreading (such as the reading of the term despite in Chapter One), through an exploration of the gestural in performance, to considerations of the queer eye-roll as a connected practice that I articulated in relation to a killjoy drag performer, and through a purposeful investment in silly forms of theory and performance. In these moments, I suggest that the queer side-eye functions as part of my academic methodology, but is also

something that performers engage in, and from this a set of tools and strategies that can be employed by queer people in aid of hope and survival.

I do not propose my queer side-eye as finished here, but instead argue that the strategies and functions of the side-eye that emerged in this thinking are one part of a broader catalogue of critical academic and performance-based practices. Namely, I suggest that further side-ways glances at my queer side-eye might produce further understandings of how the queer side-eye might function or other ways in which it can give a sideways glance. And if you have ever been caught in the side-ways glance of a drag performer, you will know exactly how uncomfortable it can be, and exactly how exciting.

The queer side-eye is not a finalised, bounded or finished queer academic practice, performance practice or resistive practice, but instead is one practice or set of practices amongst a constellation of queer practices of resistance to homophobia and transphobia, and to stifling straight or normative modes of knowledge production in the academy. My queer side-eye hopes to illuminate alternative queer modes, methods, tactics and strategies of being and doing in the world.

Drag Performance and Queer Communities

Throughout this thesis, particularly methodologically, I have used metaphoric and literal visual notions in order to articulate and understand the relationship between drag performance and queer communities. Moving forward, I am interested in how other sensory understandings might offer new insights into how queer communities can be conceived or

understood. In doing so, I (re)turn to Ahmed's notion of breath and hope to consider what these understandings can offer future thinking. I propose that drag and queer performance practices offer moments in which audiences and performers can breathe, particularly by engaging in queer strategies of survival through doing and watching drag performance. I draw this understanding from Sara Ahmed's formulation of breath and queer hope in which she suggests that

Maybe the point is that it is hard to struggle without aspirations [...] We could remember that the Latin root of the word aspiration means "to breathe." I think the struggle for a bearable life is the struggle for queers to have space to breathe. Having space to breathe, or being able to breathe freely [...], is an aspiration. With breath comes imagination. With breath comes possibility. If queer politics is about freedom, it might simply mean the freedom to breathe (Ahmed, 2010: 120).

I sit with this idea as a profound and embodied understanding of the importance of having space to breathe in order to be able to imagine and to hope. I extend this to suggest that often queers might struggle to find the chance to catch their breath because they experience feelings of danger (and actual, material danger) and that queer venues and drag performance practices offer brief moments in which queer subjects can breathe, imagine alternatives to this increasingly violent present, and hope.

Having space to breathe indicates having space the hope, to imagine alternatives to a stifling straight present, to consider ways to survive in the present. I argue that drag performance and the queer venues in which drag happens often provide queer people with the space to breathe, fill their lungs, and therefore find opportunities to imagine and hope. I also acknowledge that this academic articulation has also allowed me to breath more freely, both in terms of my academic practices (I have breathed through these ideas) and my embodied

and political practices outside of academia. This has articulated something about my own practice and the practices of the drag and queer performers I write about, that is profound. I am indebted to this idea, both in what it articulates, and in the fact that much of Ahmed's writing has allowed me space to breathe in and through my own academic development.

I also want to re-invest breathlessness here with something pleasurable, where to be out of breath might also be because of experiences of pleasure. In understanding not being able to catch your breath also as a state of pleasure (in whatever form that might come, but in particular in seeing profound and silly and playful and gorgeous drag performance work) I propose it is possible to re-invest breathing and hope with new narratives and new possibilities. Importantly, it might offer glimpses of utopian practices for a future in which queers might not only locate their hope by having space to breathe, but also have the freedom to be out of breath without fear. This is a utopian possibility, but it is one I insist is possible.

As I returned to Ahmed, I also return to Dolan's conception of utopian performativity, in which utopian performatives

describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that it lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense' (Dolan, 2005: 5).

Here I bring together Dolan's utopian impulses with Ahmed's breathy considerations, arguing that drag performance offers a breathy hope that interrupts or pierces the contemporary

moment of violence and homophobia for queer people. It offers resistances, and although it recognises that those resistances are not fixed or solid and they might be brief, it stakes the claim that they illuminate something else, an alternative. In these brief illuminations, alternatives might be seen, but also might be felt. Suddenly in performance and in the witnessing of drag performance it might be possible to be full of breath and roar and laugh and cry and shout and hope. I argue hope emerges through drag, because hope is a possibility.

This thesis has been purposefully hopeful and unapologetically utopian. I am reminded of the sad fact that Her Upstairs, framed as a new queer venue that offered hope in the light of so many closures, had to close its own doors permanently in the summer of 2018. Hope has its fragilities and hangovers, and the harsh lights of heteronormativity, neoliberal economics, and gentrification are often too bright to bear for queer people, even when queer people are complexly bound up in and even produce processes of gentrification and neoliberal identity politics. I am also reminded that homophobia and transphobia are still rising *despite* the increase in the amount of drag performers going out and working on the drag scene in London and despite all the arguments I have made so far. I am further reminded of the contemporary moment in the UK politically and in the media in which the rights for trans and/or non-binary people's existence are being challenged every day, and in which LGBTQ+ sex education as a necessity in schools is currently being debated once more. It is a time in which right-wing politics are being more normalised and a moment of global economic, political and social precarity and upheaval. Finding opportunities for hope is getting more and more difficult. It is also getting more and more important, and the need for hope at times of crisis, precarity

and danger is often clearer. These situations will only get worse, and the minority subjects I find myself in coalition with will continue to suffer, but also continue to hope.

We will, however, continue to fight, continue to laugh, and continue to dance and make work and perform. We will find strategies and modes to resist and learn when fighting is necessary and when the right thing to do is to bob, weave and duck. We will learn to fly under the radar as well as stay in their eyeline, sometimes at the same time. For queer movements and politics, drag performance and drag performers have often been at the forefront of political action. Whilst this is an often-idealised and often-simplified view of the role of drag in queer history, since they have also been figures of regressive or oppressive representations of gender identity for example, it is important to note how in this contemporary moment drag performers could offer locations of survival by using their platforms, their stages, to challenge dangerous rhetoric and mobilise political action, but also more simply to offer sites for joy, playfulness and pleasure despite and precisely because of increasing precarity and risk for queer people and performers.

Drag is not a panacea, and it is not without its problems, but it does offer opportunities for hope, resistance and survival, because when the lights are shining on them, who knows what else might be illuminated.

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