Light Shines Earnest, a full length play by William James Burke and Divergent Drag Aesthetics — Interrogating the Reaches of Gender and Gendered Imagery in Drag Performance

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William James Burke
Honor Scholar Program Senior Project, 2017

*Light Shines Earnest*, a full length play by William James Burke

and

Divergent Drag Aesthetics — Interrogating the Reaches of Gender and Gendered Imagery in Drag Performance

Sponsor: Steve Timm
Committee: Meryl Altman, CJ Gomulka, Susan Anthony
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Note

Bound here are two portions of one project: *Light Shines Earnest*, a full length play, and “Divergent Drag Aesthetics—Interrogating the Reaches of Gender and Gendered Imagery in Drag Performance,” an accompanying research component. Together, they embody two semesters worth of creative and scholarly work towards the completion of my Honor Scholar Thesis. These two pieces, while individual in nature, are inextricably linked. The writing process volleyed ideas across medium, resulting in two pieces that share, at their core, an interest in drag imagery and drag identity. However, the play interrogates more fully aspects untouchable in the attached essay, and vice-versa. Much of the intellectual energy in *Light Shines Earnest* takes root in “Divergent Drag Aesthetics”—indeed, at times, Rebecca becomes the voice of my research, a direct thematic tie-in, philosophizing, lecturing, borrowing in both verbiage and knowledge from my scholarly work.

In order to maintain the integrity and singularity of both pieces, I have opted for separate pagination.
Light Shines Earnest

A full-length play

By William James Burke
Cast of Characters
Sam       Mid-late twenties
Jess      Mid-late twenties
Quinn     Late twenties
Rebecca   Mid-late twenties
Drag Queen Fifties, *The Essence of Drag*
Mother    Early-mid fifties

Set
The bathtub is always present—not necessarily center stage, but there, visible.
Everything else appears in abstraction—the bathroom, the wig shop, the apartment, the
gallery.
These spaces should feel fully realized—immersive, but sparse, delicate, but impressive.

Psychological Interlude
This interlude should be broken—serene, but something off.
There should be a sense of peace—urgent, but impossibly calm.

Hardly Visible Spirit Under [de]Construction
The painting and its accessories should be completely visible at times—hauntingly beautiful
and messy, large. It should feature black paint.
We should see it as it grows toward completion.
PROLOGUE

Darkness.

Flashes of absurd light, color.

The feeling of flying -- then falling --

falling -- falling --

The sound of a large splash, of a bathtub being filled and then emptied, filled and then emptied, then --

Long, slow breathing

and slow, slow light.

SAM gasps in the bathtub. He is sopping and clothed. His makeup runs, he wears a cheap dress.

SAM

Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*

Sam hoists himself out of the tub. He drips. He unstops the tub and removes a tangled wig, rings it out over the tub.

SAM (CONT'D)

It was a shitty fucking wig anyway.

Sam hangs the wig on the edge of the tub.

He removes the dress. Sequins and glitter and feathers stick to his skin. He wears a small pair of compression shorts. He wrings the dress out. It loses sequins, they flutter into the tub. He hangs the dress over a chair.
Sam grabs a glass, fills it from the tub’s faucet. He drinks. He sits in the chair. He breathes.

A long pause. Silence.

Then -- an abrupt knocking, oddly resonant, booming.

JESS
Sam? Are you in there?

SAM
Fuck--

Sam looks in a mirror. His face is run with streaks of black and blue and pink.

JESS
Sam?

SAM
Yeah -- yeah, I am--

He grabs a towel, wets it in the tub, and scrubs his face.

JESS
Are you almost done? Becca’ll be here soon.

SAM
Sure thing --

He throws the wig and dress into a trunk, he looks in a mirror, his face still streaked with makeup, his torso still spotted with sequins and glitter.

SAM (CONT’D)
Fuck --

JESS
Is my jacket on the hook in there?
I don’t know --

Sam throws on a shirt.

I’m just gonna check --

Sam turns away, bends over the tub, scrubbing.

Jess enters through the doorway.

Did you go for a run this morning?

Jess (CONT’D)

What?

Jess

Running, did you run? You’re wearing your shorts --

Sam

Oh -- yeah, yes -- Sorry, did you want to go?

Jess

No -- I just didn’t hear you get up --

Sam

Oh --

Sam looks up from the tub. He faces away from Jess. His face is much cleaner, only a faint shadow of makeup.

Jess finds her jacket.

I love these shorts --

Jess

You do?

Sam

You used to wear them to dinner in college, after running -- show off the ass.

Jess grabs Sam’s ass.
They kiss, a moment of sincerity.

SAM
I just have to brush my teeth and throw some clothes on -- jeans OK?

JESS
Becca said casual, only a couple people’ll be there.

SAM
Great --

JESS
Giddy up!

Jess slaps Sam’s ass, exits.

Sam looks in the mirror, wipes his face some more, useless.

SAM
Fuck it --

Sam shoves the trunk out of sight.

A moment, something turns, runs.

Then--

Moonlight pours in from somewhere, a window. The sound of rushing water.

Sam pulls the trunk in front of him, kneels. He opens the trunk and searches for something. He draws a tube of lipstick and a hand mirror. Slowly, he applies the lipstick. He stares at himself, taken.

He removes the dress he was wearing earlier, now clean and dry.

Jess enters.

JESS
Sam -- Becca’s here --
Jess looks around. She cannot see Sam.
REBECCA appears. She cannot see Sam.

REBECCA

Hurry it up --

Sam strips his clothes and puts on the dress. He takes his time. He finds something.

Jess and Becca look around for a long moment.

Sam removes the wig from earlier, now dry and styled. He places it on his head and stares into the mirror.

A long moment.
SCENE 1

Three hundred different wigs, empty wig heads, bobby pins.

Sam pokes around the wigs. He pulls out a crumpled piece of paper, compares.

QUINN enters in half drag; wig, light makeup.

QUINN

I’ve never seen you before.

SAM

Are you surprised?

QUINN

Not particularly.

SAM

I imagine you don’t get too many repeat customers.

QUINN

On the contrary -- you’re the anomaly. Quinn. How do you do?

SAM

I’m looking for a wig -- like this one.

Sam hands Quinn the crumpled paper.

QUINN

You certainly don’t mess around.

SAM

I’m sorry?

Quinn pulls off his wig. Takes the paper from Sam.
QUINN
They’re sorted first by color, then by style. Does it have to be blonde?

SAM
Yeah, I think so--

QUINN
Then it’ll be over here. Though I’m not sure it’s your best choice, blonde isn’t really your color.

SAM
It’s not for me--

QUINN
Who then?

SAM
A friend -- she’s opening a gallery, it’s for one of her pieces.

QUINN
She going to wear it?

SAM
No clue -- I wouldn’t be surprised -- though she’s more of a painter than a performer.

‘We are our hair.’
You an artist too?

QUINN

SAM
No -- no. I work in finance -- I’m just helping her out with the books, buying the wigs, that kind of stuff.

Good friend.

Pause. Long, awkward.

SAM
So. You wear that -- this -- stuff?

QUINN
It would appear that way, yes.
Sam looks around, runs his fingers through one of the wigs.

Careful with that, it’s real hair.

QUINN (CONT’D)

Really?

SAM

For our more down to earth clients.

QUINN

You get a lot of those?

SAM

A few. We can’t all be Queens.

Pause.

SAM

Why do you do it?

QUINN

Do what?

Sam looks at Quinn. Quinn challenges.

SAM

The makeup, the wig, all that--

QUINN

Hazard a guess.

SAM

You like a nice breeze?

QUINN

Yeah -- that’s it.

SAM

Sorry --

QUINN

No, no -- let it rain.
I’ve just never met someone --

Oh I’m sure you have -- we don’t exactly thrive in the daylight.

Sam examines, Quinn gives in.

We can all tell you how we ended up in our mother’s pantyhose but the why is harder to pin down. Sometimes you just don’t know.

Oh --

Always our mothers isn’t it? Funny.

How old were you?

Too young to understand and too old to stop myself from doing it again.

That’s a little depressing.

That’s life. The wig’s going to be 92.37. Cash or credit?

That much?

It’s a *fine* wig.

Credit.

Receipt?
SAM
Yes -- itemized -- it’s a write off.

They exchange paper and pen. Sam signs.

QUINN
You should try it sometime.

SAM
Life?

QUINN
Drag. You’ve got the bones for it.

SAM
I don’t really think it’s up my alley.

QUINN
Accountants make good queens -- there’s a lot of repression there.

SAM
I’m sure some --

Quinn silences Sam with a finger to his lips. He puts a second wig and a small card into a bag, slides it to Sam.

QUINN
On the house. Brown’s more your color.

Quinn exits into the wigs.
SCENE 2

Sam and Jess, home.

Jess in bed, reading Roxane Gay’s *Bad Feminist*.

Sam, undressing.

‘Bad Feminist?’
Sounds dirty.

I wish.

Not good?

No, it is.
She’s funny, it’s depressing.

Are you a bad feminist?

I don’t know -- probably.

Could you be a bad feminist?

Shut up.

How was work?

Fine.
Vampiric.

That bad?
No--
Yes.
No--
I’m being a bitch.
I’m writing.

You’re writing.

I’ll be out of town in a couple weeks, on assignment, something upstate. Finger lakes, maybe?

They’re gorges!

Waterfalls on waterfalls.
Wanna come?

Maybe. Get me the details first, I’ll check.

Sam exits for a moment, returns, a toothbrush hanging from his mouth.

Have you written anything else?

Bits and pieces.
Apparently Becca knows an editor -- a small literary publication, San Francisco, I think? She wants me to submit.

Are you gonna do it?

Maybe, if I have something.

You should.
I’m trying, I am.

Pause.

Sam exits

Jess reads.

Sam returns.

I think I made a mistake.

What?

I don’t know -- I just don’t like closed doors.
I see them, all the time now, when I look back, when I look ahead.
I’m in a glass room with a bunch of glass doors and I can see past it all but they won’t budge.
I just want this to be right. This, everything.

Sam gets into bed with Jess, close.

They touch.

Even if it isn’t -- right, I mean -- I think it could be.
I like you worrying. It means we’re doing something. That we can change, do overs or something.

Sam kisses Jess for a long moment.

They see each other, they lie down, face to face.

They sleep.

Time passes.

A long moment, darkness.
Then -- the sound of water dripping, slowly.

Moonlight from above, beautiful light, color.

Sam sits up, carefully. He looks around. He gets out of bed.

He slides a box from underneath the bed, opens it, pulls out the wig.

He goes to a mirror, cradling the wig in his hands.

He sees.

He stares.

He goes to the bathtub.

Swift darkness.
SCENE 3

Three hundred different wigs, empty wig heads, bobby pins.

A counter, a mirror, stools.

Sam wanders.

QUINN

Need another wig?

SAM

No.

QUINN

Didn’t think so.

SAM

Yeah?

QUINN

You have a look about you, it doesn’t say ‘fuck I need a wig, this fine Friday afternoon,’ it says something else.

SAM

What?

QUINN

Give me a second, it’s coming. Something precious -- God, you’re trying your damndest to come off all collected like. Something’s got you. Cool it.

SAM

You put your card in the bag, with the wig.

QUINN

That I did. I thought your friend might want to know where she got her wig.

SAM

Oh -- oh, yeah.
Yeah.

She liked it -- the wig -- it’s gonna work, I think.

Good, it’s nice to know it’s got a good home. You’d be surprised what kind of people come in here for a wig.

Oh?

Pedophiles, murderers--

OK-- (Interrupting, dismissive)

A joke.

Pause.

You came here, for a reason.

Yes.

Good. Sit.

Quinn motions to a stool, in front of a large mirror.

Sam waits, sits.

The wigs turn, maybe bobby pins fall, Quinn disappears for a moment, digs, returns with a tackle box.

Brighter, warmer light.
Quinn searches for something in the tackle box.

SAM
I just want to know -- I guess I --
You said that’s it’s hard to tell, that you didn’t really know why.

QUINN
You want to know the point.
You’re stuck. You’re stuck and you can’t stop thinking.

Pause.

QUINN (CONT’D)
Tell me -- what do you think?

SAM
If I knew, I wouldn’t have come here--

QUINN
Yes. You would have.
You didn’t come here to ask me a question.

SAM
I think I --
I tried -- I tried the wig on --

QUINN
There it is.

SAM
In the bathroom, at midnight, or one, or something.
I put it on, and some lipstick -- my girlfriend’s -- it was light, peach something, and I just sat there but I didn’t look, I didn’t look in the mirror, for a while.
And then I did. And I couldn’t figure it out, I couldn’t see, me, or I could, or it was different, I don’t know.
But you gave me the wig, you said--

QUINN
I know.
Quinn touches Sam, friendly, calm, platonic.
They don’t hug.
Some peace.

QUINN (CONT’D)
I know the feeling -- a random queen whispering about how you’ve got the bones, plants a seed. There’s something spiritual about it, passing it down, seeing it, from afar, pointing it out, planting. I don’t know if this is the right sort of recruitment. But you’ve got the bones and I saw it, something, in you, a trace of me or us, a sort of memory I guess, flashing across your face, for a moment. I don’t know.

I’m sorry -- but -- I was right. You’re here, you followed the crumbs.

SAM
I just want to get it, I guess.

QUINN
Sometimes it’s nice, not knowing.
Free.

Pause.

QUINN (CONT’D)
So, girlfriend, huh?

SAM
Yeah -- I -- Yes. Three years.

QUINN
I wasn’t right about everything.

SAM
You thought I was --

QUINN
It’s not common, but it happens. Nothing wrong with it.

SAM
It’s still weird, I guess.

QUINN
It’s all weird -- you’re no exception. Plus, you’re cute. Look straight ahead. I wanna try this out.
SAM
I’m not sure I want to, here -- are you busy, this time of day?

QUINN
The people who frequent this little boutique aren’t about to judge you for wearing a wig. Sit still.

Sam straightens up, looks ahead into the mirror.

Quinn ruffles Sam’s hair. He takes a couple hair ties from the tackle box and begins to tie small ponytails into Sam’s hair.

SAM

Is this --

QUINN

Uh-uh, just watch.

Quinn pulls the ponytails tight, the tops flay outward. He puts a headband on Sam, pins it in place. Then, a net cap and a wig cap. He flattens the lines, removes creases, bumps.

Sam is a student.

Quinn walks into the wigs, fingers on hair, questions. He returns with a brown lace-front wig, fuller and more structural than the one from before.

He looks at Sam in the mirror, he slides the wig on, front to back. He pins. This is almost religious.

Quinn readjusts.

A long, silent moment.

Brown is your color.

QUINN (CONT’D)

Pause.
Sam looking.

QUINN (CONT’D)
You’re only as good as your wig prep. Ponytails, headband, net cap, wig cap. Lace front, front to back. Pins. Remember that.

SAM
I just kind of threw the other one on -- flattened my hair a bit and stuck it on.

QUINN
It’s a start. You’ll want to keep all this. And here, it’s cheap but it’ll do, for now. Turn here.

Quinn hands Sam a cheap dress, sequins, feathers.

Sam turns on the stool, faces away from the mirror.

Quinn chooses a lipstick color from the tackle box, begins applying.

QUINN (CONT’D)
Go home, look up makeup tutorials. There are a bunch, some better than others, go for the simpler ones. Watch, replicate, and pray to Jesus that girlfriend of yours doesn’t miss her makeup. Together -- blot. Good.

A moment, Quinn exits into the wigs.

Moonlight from above, the sound of rushing water.

Beautiful light.

Darkness.
SCENE 4

The gallery.

Strange shadows, strange shapes under strange sheets.

Rebecca in a smock in front of a large canvas. She paints with a tangled wig.

A loud buzzer from far off.

She drops the wig, wipes her hands on her smock, presses a button on the wall, and returns to painting.

A long moment.

Quinn enters.

QUINN

Rebecca?

REBECCA

Yes --

QUINN

Good. I’m Quinn. Pleasure to meet you. This for the opening?

REBECCA

Yes -- uh -- who are you?

QUINN

I’m Quinn --

REBECCA

I got that part --

QUINN

A friend of Sam’s.
Oh. Is he coming?

He is -- he’s just a little nervous.

Nervous?

He’s got something to tell you -- well, show you -- he needed a little nudge.

Where is he?

Falling a little slower than anticipated. He’s in the hall, it might be a while.

Sam?

(Calling to him)

Shhh -- give him a minute.

A moment.

Rebecca puts the wig down.

Is that my wig?

What?

The wig -- where’d you get it?

Sam picked it up for me --
QUINN
No shit -- if I knew you were going to ruin it I wouldn’t have sold it to him.

REBECCA
It’s for a piece --

QUINN
Obviously --

REBECCA
So it’s not ruined.

QUINN
By your definition.

Pause.

Quinn examines the painting.

REBECCA
It’s called *Hardly Visible Spirit Under [de]Construction* -- there are six canvases, all of them painted with unconventional methods -- hair brushes, scrunchies, scarves, *a wig* -- I used 600 bobby pins for one of them.

QUINN
The young artist, convention be damned. What’s it mean?

REBECCA
I got a grant for contemporary work dealing with cancer survival -- a little overdone, probably -- but it’s ultimately about rebirth -- all of these things destroyed, your wig ruined, hair, skin, but they live on elsewhere, on the canvas, in the paint. It’s vaguely spiritual.

A long moment as Quinn surveys the piece.

Sam enters in drag. He is silent and far away.

Quinn notices, quickly.

QUINN
Look at me.

(to Rebecca)

REBECCA
What?
QUINN
Don’t turn around, just look at me.

SAM
Rebecca -- don’t turn around yet --

REBECCA
What’s going on?

SAM
I just need you to not look -- until I say so, OK?

REBECCA
Are you OK?

SAM
Yes, I’m fine.
This is just -- when you turn around, I just need you to see me.

REBECCA
OK--

SAM
I mean see me see me. Just your eyes, on me.

REBECCA
Fine -- fine --

A long moment. Minutes. Sam stands behind Rebecca, looming, but small, haunting, but
delicate.

SAM
OK.

Rebecca turns.

REBECCA
Oh.

A long moment as Rebecca sees Sam.

A longer moment as Sam sees Rebecca seeing
Sam.
REBECCA (CONT'D)

F-- fuck, Sam -- you scared me.

SAM

I didn’t mean to -- I just needed to -- what d’you see?

REBECCA

I don’t know -- you’re wearing a dress and a wig.

SAM

I am.

REBECCA

OK.

SAM

And?

REBECCA

And? I don’t know.

SAM

OK.

Pause.

Rebecca makes a decision, she finds something.

REBECCA

It’s fine. Did you think I’d make a big deal about this?

SAM

No -- I wasn’t sure -- it’s just a step, I guess, a risk. I just needed to show someone, to be here, like this.

REBECCA

So, is this -- is it a -- I don’t really know how to. I see -- but, I don’t, I don’t know exactly what it means.

SAM

Oh -- I haven’t --

Drag. Just drag.

I -- I’m not sure what this is, honestly, but -- I like it? I guess. And I haven’t stopped, yet. There’s a club, Quinn told me about it, he performs there -- but I haven't gone.
He had to get your blessing first.

SAM

I just wanted to show you.

REBECCA

When did you start?

SAM

Not that long ago -- two, three weeks -- a little after I bought you the wig.

QUINN

He came into my shop, alone, frightened, and I said ‘well fuck me up, isn’t this a queen in the making.’

SAM

He wasn’t that aggressive, he hinted --

QUINN

I planted the seed and a flower bloomed -- a gorgeous blossom, messy, but gorgeous.
SCENE 5

Sam and Jess, home.

Sam on a couch, in a bed, working.

Jess enters, dressing.

JESS
Have you seen a tube of lipstick, it’s light pink?

SAM
No -- I haven’t.

JESS
I swore it was in the basket in there.

SAM
You have more, right?

JESS
Of course, but --

SAM
I can look around --

JESS
No, no need. I’ll just grab something else.

Jess exits for a moment, returns.

She applies makeup into a mirror.

SAM
Are we doing anything Friday?

JESS
I don’t know, are we?

Pause.
SAM
Rebecca said something about a show -- late, I think.

JESS
Oh?

SAM
Yeah -- at a club. A drag show.

JESS
Oh. Why?

SAM
What d’you mean?

JESS
I don’t know --

SAM
So no?

JESS
Do you want to go?

SAM
I mean -- I’ve never been to one -- I don’t know.

JESS
I’ve been to a couple, they’re fine -- Chris, from school, remember him? -- I don’t know if you ever met -- he did drag, Moon something, I think. He’s great, married now, a guy in the theatre --

SAM
And?

JESS
I don’t know, I only went a couple times -- He was funny, he looked kind of freaky though -- his eyes were big, it was kind of like a cartoon woman, everything blown up. He danced and sang -- or lip synced, I guess, I don’t think he could actually sing. It was fun.

SAM
You didn’t like it?
JESS

No --
I don’t know.
I was just weirded out by it -- a guy but a girl but a guy --
I just think, or I thought, at least, I’d rather not be parodied by a guy in heels.

Especially today, with everything going on, I guess it just feels like a step back or something.

SAM

Yeah.

JESS

But I don’t know.
I guess I haven’t really thought about it.

SAM

We don’t have to go --

JESS

No -- no -- we should. Becca probably needs a break.
How’s everything going?

SAM

Fine -- as far as I can tell.
The books are balanced.
They started installing pieces yesterday, I think, but she’s still waiting on a couple deliveries.

JESS

Is she freaking out?

SAM

She’s remarkably calm.

JESS

Must be all the painting. *Soothing for the soul.*
SCENE 6

A classroom.

Slides of several of Grayson Perry’s pieces projected behind Rebecca.

REBECCA

These pieces are all by an English artist named Grayson Perry. Write his name down, look him up, really interesting work. He’s not often covered, it’s a shame. He’s contemporary -- obviously -- and he’s garnered quite a bit of notoriety for his scathing sociopolitical critiques -- “the social critic from hell” as one critic puts it. His pieces all have a couple things in common -- they’re markedly neoclassical pieces, at least in form. The vases, sculpted in the style of traditional Grecian urns -- the tapestries, too, harken back to not only ancient Greek textiles but also the textiles of the wealthy European Renaissance. Perry is a prime example of mixing form and content -- his content is almost always contemporary -- it’s in this juxtaposition of the contemporary content -- often iconography of modernity, mundane everyday life, magazine photos, same sex couples, advertisements -- with the neoclassical form that Perry’s social critique is formed. In effect, Perry is debasing the classics -- if any of you know your theatre history, it’s vaguely Artaudian, ‘no more master pieces’ -- taking traditionally wealthy, classical forms and reducing them, producing them with quote-unquote ‘baser,’ more uncomfortable, more contemporary imagery. His Walthamstow Tapestry -- for instance -- depicts the odyssey of life, from birth to death. See -- on the left -- the mother, turning in on herself, mid bloody childbirth. Notice the blood follows -- our mother’s blood clings to us beyond birth. Then, the stages of man -- childhood, young adulthood, adulthood, old age, and then finally death on the far right. All the while, if we zoom in, we can see brand names woven into and around the images, sewn into the very fabric of our lives.

I bring this up as an introduction to what I’d like to call avant-garde neoclassicism. I’d like us to talk about the far reaches of the classical form. In some ways, we can’t escape it -- we can’t escape the form, we can’t escape our art. Perry, on top of -- or perhaps alongside of -- his artistic work, has a female alter-ego, a drag persona, though to some I don’t think it’s considered drag exactly -- he himself identifies as a transvestite I believe. The point being, he -- at times -- wears women’s clothing and goes by the name Claire. Is this sexuality? Is it gender? Or, is it an extension of his art -- a reworking, perhaps, of the classical form -- the human body, the male figure -- with contemporary imagery. I don’t think we have to be exclusive here -- and perhaps we shouldn’t be. I’ve added a couple articles on Perry to our readings for this week -- along with some pieces on performance art and drag performance. Start those and we’ll continue our discussion next class.
Thank you -- have a great weekend.
SCENE 7

Rebecca, Jess, and Sam in front of “Hardly Visible Spirit Under de[Construction].”

Paint cans, trays.

Hair accessories strewn.

REBECCA

What d’you guys think?

SAM

I think it’s kind of creepy --

JESS

I love it --

REBECCA

Creepy?

SAM

The wig at least --

JESS

Was it human hair?

REBECCA

God no -- at least I don’t think so -- was it?

SAM

I don’t think so --
It’s just, hanging there -- I don’t know, it’s like a scalp.

JESS

I think that’s the point.

REBECCA

It is --

SAM

I didn’t say I didn’t like it, it’s just creepy. Like all of these things are not supposed to be what they are -- or like they are what they are but they aren’t.
JESS
What are they *supposed* to be.

SAM
I don’t know, I can’t tell.

JESS
I just like that you can see the dirt. It's visible destruction, it's not hiding anything.

REBECCA
I have to figure out where it’s going -- the preparator is coming Wednesday to finish hanging.

JESS
I like it here.

REBECCA
I’ve got another piece coming tomorrow, a friend from school, she’s living in Budapest now.

SAM
Which one is that?

REBECCA
“Superimposition, Shape and Body” -- it’s a series of paintings and a few sculptures -- they jut out of the canvases, it’s amazing --

JESS
All the way from Budapest?

SAM
She donated it -- we still had to pay to ship it.

REBECCA
It’s worth it.

JESS
Well don’t hide this one -- grant money hard at work.

REBECCA
I’m gonna run this stuff to storage.
I think it’s done -- like *done*, done.
Then dinner?

Yeah, give me a minute.

Rebecca gathers the paint cans, trays, accessories.

She exits.

Where should we go?

Actually, I can’t--

What?

I have to run -- I’m supposed to have dinner with a client, it was scheduled last minute, late last night.

Cancel?

Not this time.

How long do you think?

An hour, hour and a half? I can meet you for drinks after.

Sure -- I’ll let you know where we go.

Sorry --

No, no -- it’s fine.
SAM

Great. Tell Becca I said ‘bye.’

Sam kisses Jess on the cheek, exits.

Jess alone.
SCENE 8

Sam preparing.

He wears drag makeup, slightly sloppy, new, one of many attempts.

A buzzer rings, Sam presses a button, opens a door.

Quinn enters, out of drag, carrying several bags.

Quinn looks at Sam. Sam looks at Quinn, open.

QUINN
Not bad. The eyes are better, and the contour. We’ll clean you up eventually.
Nice place, very Bateman meets Bushwick.

SAM
Not what you expected?

QUINN
Not what I’m used to. Us queens like things a little more rough around the edges. Who needs an elevator?
Your girlfriend home?

SAM
She’s on a trip, a work thing, upstate.

What’s she do?

QUINN

SAM
She’s a writer, for a small magazine, lifestyle stuff. She’s writing a travel piece, ‘upstate getaways,’ something like that. She’s in Ithaca this weekend, a bed and breakfast I think, The Finger Lakes, supposed to be beautiful, gorges and waterfalls.

Quinn examines a photo, two, three.

QUINN
This her?
SAM
We were at an exhibition, a friend of Becca’s.

QUINN
You guys meet at school?

SAM
Yeah -- no -- we went to the same college, but didn’t really know each other. Well, I guess she knew me, knew of me, but we ran in different circles. We met up a couple years ago -- she was profiling Rebecca.

QUINN
Star crossed lovers.

SAM
You’d like her. She had a friend, in college, that did drag.

Yeah?

SAM
I didn’t know him.

QUINN
That bodes well, the friend. She’s OK with it.

SAM
I wouldn’t go that far -- it’s -- different.

I guess.

SAM
She’s not sold on the ethics --

One of those.

Yeah.

Short pause.

QUINN
She won’t be back though, bursting in?
SAM
No, no. We talked earlier.

QUINN
Good.

Pause.

QUINN (CONT’D)
You *should* tell her, though. Soon. Sooner.

SAM
I know, I know.
I just --

QUINN
It'll only get messier.

A long moment.

Space, between them or around them or both.

SAM
Did anyone, did you lose anyone, after you, you know?

QUINN
Knowing won’t help.

Pause.

QUINN (CONT’D)
No mom, no dad. Now, at least. We tried for a while, the whole ‘don’t ask, ‘don’t tell’ thing, Clinton’s orders. It didn’t work, it wears on you, hiding. But I don’t think parents are a good barometer, a different generation. They’ve got different rules.

SAM
I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have --

QUINN
No -- it’s my gig, the wise old sage, the den mother.

Pause.

SAM
So, what’d you bring?
Quinn opens bags, boxes.

Garment bags, shoes, wigs.

QUINN
Old shit, stuff I stopped wearing a decade ago, but you got to start somewhere.

He shows them off.

S A M
Dresses?

QUINN
A couple, and -- gasp -- a pant suit. Working woman sort of thing, sitting pretty.

S A M
A pant suit?

QUINN
A risk -- some queens would tear you apart -- but you’re new, you’ve got some breathing room. See?

Quinn displays a pant suit -- exotic, but clean, classic, but modern.

Long pause.

QUINN (CONT’D)

Well?

S A M
I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.

QUINN
Just strip -- we’ll see what it’s like on you -- come on --

S A M
Here, give me a minute --

Sam moves to leave.

QUINN
Seriously? Uh-uh, you’re about to try on a woman’s pant suit in front of a guy who wears dresses and heels at night and you’re worried about showing off your underwear? Strip.
Sam hesitates. Then unbuttons his shirt, slides out of his shoes, pants.

He stands, smaller, in boxers, for a moment.

QUINN (CONT’D)
Boxers? I didn’t realize people still wore boxers, the bunching.
Do you have anything tighter? Briefs?

SAM
I’ve got some compression shorts, for running.

QUINN
Praise Jesus! Go, go!

Quinn waves Sam away, he exits.

A moment.

Quinn glances around the apartment, sees it.

Sam returns, compressed.

Quinn looks at Sam, sees him.

QUINN (CONT’D)
Well, I do blush, veritably so.
Turn --

Sam turns, fast, awkward.

QUINN (CONT’D)
Slower--

Sam turns again, slower.

QUINN (CONT’D)
You’ve got body, I’ll give you that.

Sam fidgets.

An awkward moment.
Unlace the strings, will you?

SAM
Sorry, it’s just -- I don’t know -- awkward.

Quinn challenges.

You run?

QUINN
Hmmmm. Locker room, everyday, six thirty? Fifteen, twenty other guys, everyone all sweaty, compression shorts, jockstraps, some guys don’t wear anything, huh?
But no lace fronts, and no dance belts, no cinched waists, so you’ve got nothing to fear.
You can see Johnny’s dick, and he sure as hell can see yours, as long its through some steam and as long as you run a mile or two first. That about right?

SAM
That’s not fair --

QUINN
I know it’s not fair, but it’s pretty funny. I admire the heterosexual spirit sometimes, there’s something so blind there it’s pure.
Here --

Quinn throws Sam the jacket.

SAM
Is there a shirt?

QUINN
Nope, you wear it open, with a bra. Flaunt what your mama gave you.
And the pants--

Quinn gives Sam the pants, Sam dresses.
QUINN (CONT’D)
We’ll talk tucking another time, I got a feeling you aren’t ready for that gem yet.

What do you think?

SAM
I think it’s cool -- more subtle than I thought --

QUINN
Just you wait --
Where’s the stuff I gave you?

SAM
In a trunk, in the other room.

QUINN
I think that wig’ll do. If not, I brought another.

Sam exits again. Quinn searches. Sam returns with the wig and wig head, a small box of materials.

QUINN (CONT’D)
Wig prep -- show me you’re a good student.

Sam lays everything on a table, prepares, remembers.

He begins, slowly, to tie his hair, wrap it, pin it. Quinn helps here and there, corrects, guides. This is a pure moment, a passing of a torch, a recovery.

QUINN (CONT’D)
Mama’s proud.
Try out the wig.

Sam puts on the wig, pins it in place.

QUINN (CONT’D)
Well, you’ve almost got a look. Almost.

Pause, light hearted. Maybe Sam spins.

Then --
The buzzer, long and loud.

Sam goes to the button.

SAM
That’s Rebecca, I think, with the food. She got a little of everything, Chinese, Indian, Thai--

QUINN
Beaucoup, beaucoup--

Silence.

Then knocking.

Sam opens the door.

Rebecca enters, carrying bags of take out.

REBECCA
Well look at you. Hilary meets Harlot, an interesting choice.

QUINN
I take all the credit.

REBECCA
You done good, Quinn, you done good.

QUINN
Thank you.

Rebecca starts unpacking the food.

Food and wine.

QUINN
No expense spared.

SAM
Rebecca’s a giver, get used to it.

QUINN
I’ll try my damndest.

REBECCA
It’s nothing.
It helps when you’re loaded.

REBECCA

Sam--

QUINN

I figured as much.

REBECCA

I’m not loaded.

SAM

By her definition--

REBECCA

I inherited a bit of money --

SAM

There’s no shame in having money. You’re one of the good ones.

QUINN

As long as you understand where you are --

SAM

She does.

REBECCA

Are we done?

SAM

Don’t get so self conscious.

QUINN

One must never talk of money, darling, it’s gauche.

Laughter.

They open the food, pass it around.

QUINN (CONT’D)

How’s school?
REBECCA
Nothing special, eating up time. My students, well -- they’re students. Actually -- I’m talking about drag, drag performance -- in one of my classes. You guys kind of, you started me thinking about it, through an art lens, not so much a critique as an analysis.

QUINN
Just what we need --

REBECCA
Seriously, I think it’s cool. I’m trying, I think, to get a couple drag queens in, a discussion or a panel or something.

QUINN
Why?

REBECCA
Something live, in person. It’s hard to discuss this stuff in the abstract. There are questions, too. It’s just an idea.

QUINN
Well -- if you want I can give you some names, Art Queens, I know some people who do this sort of thing occasionally.

REBECCA
You aren’t interested?

QUINN
I’ve got nothing to say.

SAM
That’s new.

QUINN
Watch it -- I’m in charge of your look.

REBECCA
Just think about it.

A phone rings, in the distance.

SAM
Oh --

Sam looks around.
He takes off the wig, rushes off.

REBECCA

Jess --

Pause.

QUINN

What d’you think?

REBECCA

About?

QUINN

Everything.

REBECCA

I like the pant suit, it’s fresh. And the wig. Sam’s digging himself a hole.

QUINN

Deeper by the second.

A long moment.

Sam returns, wig in hand, messy.

REBECCA

Jess?

SAM

Yeah.

QUINN

Everything good?

SAM

Yeah.

QUINN

Good.

Pause.

Sam hastily resets the wig.
SAM
So. You like everything? The pant suit, this -- look?

REBECCA
Yes.

QUINN
I think you’ll stun.

SAM
I’m not worried about *stunning* --

REBECCA
You shouldn’t be worried at all.

SAM
Well fuck that.

QUINN
You’ll be great, period.
SCENE 9

The gallery, revealed, unveiled.

People and paintings.

Glass and light, figures.

Rebecca, attended.

REBECCA
We understand, I think, that I am an exception to a very unfortunate rule, and that there are many like me -- unlike me -- who don’t get to have this -- that don’t enjoy this level of -- who dream and dream and dream, only to dream.

I want to take a moment to recognize the incredible art that goes unnoticed -- be it taboo, or transgressive -- the art shoved into corners and darkness. We live in a world of incredible beauty -- we are surrounded by artists, by art. I’d like -- really, I’d love -- for this place, a small chunk of space, light, to stand open, for that, for everyone, for art.

Thank you guys, again -- enjoy -- *drink* -- thank you.

Applause, from around, above, below, beyond.

QUINN
Modesty befits you --

REBECCA
Was it OK?

QUINN
*Supremely.* Let this place be a beacon, huh? A statue of liberty for the art world.

REBECCA
If only.
Have you seen Sam?

QUINN
I have not -- he said he’d be late, late-ishly.

REBECCA
Why?
Unknown.

QUINN

He missed the speech --

REBECCA

He proofread the speech--

QUINN

I know, I know --

REBECCA


QUINN

I still don’t get this one.

REBECCA

You’re just still upset I ruined your wig.

QUINN

Maybe.

REBECCA

Life into death into life.
Hope.

Pause.

Jess approaches.

JESS
The magazine wouldn’t let me cover you -- conflict of interest -- but they’re sending someone later in the week, just a heads up. It’ll glow, I’m sure.

REBECCA

Great, thank you.

JESS
Really, congrats. It’s amazing --

REBECCA

Thank you.

Pause.
JESS
You should have put this one up front -- it’s better, one of your best, I think.

QUINN
You like it?

JESS
It’s new, it’s dirty. There’s something so sad about it.

QUINN
All the wasted hair accessories, it’s a tomb.

JESS
Not a bad thing, for a piece about cancer.

QUINN
Touché.
Quinn.

JESS
Jess.

A moment.

Quinn and Jess, Jess and Quinn.

They shake hands, part.

JESS (CONT’D)

Do you know where Sam is?

REBECCA
No, no I figured -- you don’t?

JESS
Nope.

Pause.

Quinn deciding.

QUINN
He said he’d be late --
JESS
Oh -- you -- you’re a friend of Sam’s?

QUINN
Yes. Young, from around.

JESS
Did he tell you why?

QUINN
No, just late.
I’m surprised he didn’t tell you.

JESS
Yeah.

QUINN
Either of you want a drink?

JESS
No--

REBECCA
I’m good--

Quinn nods, walks away.

JESS
Do you know him?

REBECCA
Yes -- he’s -- Sam met him, in a store, a month, two months ago. He’s cool --

JESS
What store?

REBECCA
A wig shop -- he sold us that wig --

JESS
Oh.

REBECCA
You’d like him -- he’s a queen.
A long moment of Jess looking, not seeing, looking.

Then the sound of rushing water, drains unstopping, unplugging.

Beautiful light, color, from above, through windows.

The paintings vibrate, glass vibrates, hums.

Sam enters, through a crowd, in full drag.

A dress, a wig, heels, lines, contours.

He is full, fuller.

More light, more water.

Then silence, stillness.

A long moment.

Then a sudden shattering, fracturing. Water running backwards, stopping.

Then darkness, light shrinking, shrinking.

And Sam, in small, pale light.

Alone.

Darkness.
[PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERLUDE]

Strange colored light; blue, white, purple.

The bathtub, overturned, hangs from the ceiling.

Water pours from it onto the stage.

Sam stands under the water, strangely calm.

He steps out.

SAM
Where am I?

DRAG QUEEN
The in-between. A tomorrow and a today; where water falls and light shines earnest.

SAM
The in-between.

DRAG QUEEN
Spacial ambiguity, a mind in ether. The drag club of our dreams.

SAM
Am I dreaming?

DRAG QUEEN
Maybe. We all come here, somehow, sometime.

SAM
We?

DRAG QUEEN
The queens proverbial. A right of passage, a test of will.

SAM
I don’t understand.

DRAG QUEEN
You don’t have to, but I think you will.
Most of us do.
Drag Queen kisses Sam on the cheek, exits suddenly.

Sam is alone for a long moment.

Then, from far off--

MOTHER

Sam!

Sam?

Sam’s mother enters.

She looks strange, like she’s standing behind a sheet of falling water, like she’s looking into a broken mirror. Big eyes, stripes, a frown.

MOTHER (CONT’D)

Sam.

Mom--

Can you help?

What?

Help--

With what?

MOTHER

I don’t know -- something -- I can’t remember.

You know -- I thought I was the only one up here. The air gets real thin and you don’t think you’ll make it and you think ‘what about the dust and the gravity,’ but it’s not as hard as those men make it seem, no need for fire, or numbers. People are small, real small. From up here, no one exists.

Flowers -- I think -- flowers, the moon.
SAM

Mom--

Sam’s mother exists suddenly.

Quinn enters, in drag.

He wears a massive wig.

QUINN

It’s always our mothers, isn’t it? Something about mothers and gay boys, fascinating, I
think. Do we want to be women? Or do we just want to fuck our dads?
What do you think?

SAM

I -- I don’t know --
How did you get here, how did we --

QUINN

So many questions, so many.

SAM

Yes.

QUINN

Sometimes silence is the best answer, whispering too.

SAM

What?

QUINN

Do you like this wig? It’s new.

Pause.

SAM

It’s -- yes -- it’s nice, it’s great.

QUINN

I’m experimenting with volume, color just isn’t enough.

SAM

OK --
QUINN
You need to let go, a mind in ether.
Let the water fall.

MOTHER
Flowers --

QUINN (CONT'D)
Mothers, the gays--

Sam’s mother enters, bushels of flowers,
marigolds, snapdragons, tulips.

QUINN (CONT’D)
Hello.

MOTHER
Who’re you?

QUINN
Quinn, a friend of Sam’s. Temptation in action.

MOTHER
Sam’s friend -- Sam’s -- Oh, I think I -- blonde hair, bright -- I always did like you, Quinn, you were always so nice.
Do you want one?

Sam’s mother extends a flower, two.

QUINN
Of course--

Quinn takes a flower, two.

Quinn puts them in his hair.

MOTHER
Beautiful -- you’ve got such beautiful hair -- and big.

QUINN
I try, I try.
Thank you for the flowers.

Quinn exits.

MOTHER
Strange.
I feel -- I remember her, sometimes, but it’s hard.
Like she’s fading away, like I knew her but under something.
How do you know her?

SAM
We met at a shop, I was buying something for --

MOTHER
Oh!
We need to arrange these, I think, before your father gets home.
He’ll want them arranged.

SAM
Will he?

MOTHER
Oh yes -- for dinner, green beans I think, from the cooking channel. She told me how, she
looked at me -- boil them, blanche them, butter and pepper, flowers on the table.
Are you hungry?

SAM
Yes mom --

MOTHER
Work on these, Sam, please. I need to get the -- I think we still need -- I can’t remember,
but we need it.

Sam’s mother exits.

Sam alone.

A moment of silence, confusion. Then peace.

Sam plays with the flowers, gives up. He
wanders, he palms the water falling from the tub.

A longer moment, looking around, silent.

Rebecca, from afar.

Art projected, a podium.

A chair. Sam sits.
Is this sexuality? Is this gender? Lacan gives us ‘the real,’ vague and -- difficult. It’s Lacan, he’s French, he’s difficult, he’s a bit of a homophobe. But he talks about ‘the real,’ a sort of unknown, unknowable, essence, a truth beyond our comprehension. Everything else is just symbol -- our lives, our paintings, sculptures. I think this -- drag, dressing as a woman, getting off on wearing a skirt -- I’m interested in discussing this as a moment of disruption, a moment where we see the real in action, in motion. Perhaps a window has been opened, perhaps, in the slipping on of a dress, we get a glimpse at the truth, about these people, about their lives.

I have friends that do drag, one straight friend, dating a woman for three years. What do we learn about him, in a dress, that we don’t learn, in a suit, a jacket? He’s telling us something, his lipstick, his lips don’t move, but he’s telling us. And we need to listen.

Sam raises his hand.

REBECCA (CONT’D)

You -- in the back.

SAM

What?

REBECCA

You have a question?

SAM

Uh -- yes, yeah.

Pause.

SAM (CONT’D)

What if he’s not saying anything?

REBECCA

I don’t think that’s possible, at least not -- we all say things and we all mean things. We can’t exist beyond discourse.

What do you think he’s saying?

SAM

I don’t know. Maybe he doesn’t either. Maybe we should all be listening for silence.

REBECCA

Maybe.
Rebecca exits, Drag Queen enters.

You *are* a messy queen.

I’m new to this.

Yes.
How’s that working out?

Well, I’m here.

Yes you are.

I still don’t understand. But the water falls, fills the cracks, I think.

Water does wonders.
Bathtubs -- glitter and feathers.
An in between.

I like to watch the colors run -- when your face hits the water there are drops of color, everything smears.

Like painting with our eyelashes.

Yeah.

Pause.

You’re a rare one, you. I kind of like it.

Rare?

You’re just waiting for the world to fall away, terrified. Maybe it already has.
SAM
Has it?

DRAG QUEEN
Maybe. Maybe not. I have a hunch you’ll figure it out very soon.

SAM
Oh.

DRAG QUEEN
Don’t worry. It’s never as bad as we think -- unless it’s worse.

SAM
Unless it’s worse.

Jess enters, open.
She doesn’t wear much, underwear, a towel.
Drag Queen exits, knowing.

JESS
There you are.

Jess.

JESS
I see you now. See see you.

SAM
I’m sorry --

JESS
Good.
I don’t care.

SAM
You don’t?

JESS
We all like to open windows, I think, and doors.

Jess approaches, slowly.
She drops something, her towel, her hair.
She is searching for something.

She wears nothing.

Quinn appears, under falling water, naked and beautiful.

QUINN

I like fresh air too.

Silence.

Sam sees Jess, Sam sees Quinn.

Jess sees Sam, Jess sees Sam seeing Quinn.

Quinn sees.

The sound of water falling, water splashing on stage, on Quinn.

A moment of profound sensuality, sexuality. The three meet in a dance, an experience, they swim or dive or move in something, from something, toward something. They touch each other, together. Sam is enveloped, confused, content.

They continue as--

Mother enters and begins hastily to arrange the flowers.

MOTHER

Children always -- I think, children -- why do they do this? I don’t -- remember the beach? There was sun -- and you -- you didn’t need anything, and we didn’t need -- we didn’t -- children, I think, always disappoint, always, their job is to -- challenge.

Remember the beach? I think you -- I think you wore red trunks, you were so small, we shouldn’t have, we should have tried -- we forgot the sunscreen, red blotches, I’m so sorry -- Sam, I’m so sorry.

Your father -- and the -- you swelled up, puffy, your skin was so -- but everything was so quiet and I couldn’t -- I didn’t --

Dinner is almost ready -- green beans, green beans -- butter and pepper. Wash up.
My hands are already clean --

Who’re you?

Something far off.

Far -- off?

You’ll see, a train on the tracks.

Tumbling forward.

Tumbling forward, faster than you know.

I’m afraid.

Of something -- something I can’t know -- something to be, someplace, in time.

We all are, honey. We all are.

Drag Queen considers.

I like the tulips better.

I know -- people hate tulips, they’re cheap, they die easy. But I think they’re alright.

Drag Queen takes a tulip.

Mother finishes her arrangement, leaves.

Sam, under the bathtub, under the water.

Quinn and Jess are gone.
DRAG QUEEN (CONT’D)
What d’you think? Are we gonna be alright?
SCENE 10

The world, reassembled.

A large closet.

Unpainted canvases, pillars, sheets, deconstructed walls, paint, fragmented art.

Sam alone, in drag.

Then--

Jess enters, waits.

What is this?

Jess

This isn’t anything, it’s just--

SAM

It’s something, obviously.

Jess--

JESS

No -- what is this.

Pause.

SAM

I do this sometimes, now.

JESS

Sometimes, now?

SAM

Yes.

JESS

That doesn’t answer the question.
I know, but --

Answer it.

I’m in a dress, what do you think?

I don’t know! That’s the problem, I don’t know!

I walked into a shop and I saw something and I thought -- that there was something there -- something, I don’t know -- and so I tried it -- just the dressing, the makeup, just that.

I still don’t know what that means -- you haven’t told me anything that I can’t see for myself.

Quinn is a drag queen -- and I tried it -- and I liked it. Like it.

Quinn is --

A drag queen! He wears dresses, and wigs, and makeup and you hate it, I know, you hate it because it’s unethical and weird, but I like it.

Oh fuck you -- drag isn’t the problem--

Yeah right--

Right.
You can’t do this. You can’t shut down, pretend that there aren’t any boundaries, that you don’t have to play by the rules.

I didn’t know what to do!
How long?  

JESS

What?  

SAM

How long have you been doing it?  

JESS

That doesn't matter.  

SAM

Yes. It does.  

JESS

Pause.

SAM

Two months. A little longer.  

JESS

Two months.

SAM

Yes.

JESS

You’ve been doing this for two months.

SAM

I didn’t know how to tell you --

JESS

What does that mean, ‘you didn’t know how to tell me’ what does that mean -- you just say it --

SAM

I don’t know --

JESS

It’s you and me -- we -- us -- I don’t know what’s so fucking difficult about that.

SAM

I know -- I know I should have --
Yes. You should have.

Rebecca and Quinn rush in.

A moment.

Jess --

Did you know?

What?

Did you know about this?

Yes.

I can’t believe this --

It's not -- let’s just talk -- it's not a big deal.

Yes, Sam, it is. I still don’t know what this is -- I don’t know what you’re doing, I don’t know what you’ve been doing. All of you have been, you’ve been hiding things, lying -- We can’t --

Three years, Sam!

Jess notices Quinn.

A realization.

Oh my god.

Oh my god -- the two of you.
What?

No, Jess, no.

God, no, no.
I wish --

Quinn --

We’re friends, mother and daughter.

Quinn you’re not helping.

Jess I think we just need to --

Go--

What?

Leave -- get the fuck out of this closet, go back to your opening. You too.

Jess.

Go. Now.

Rebecca and Quinn wait, they leave.

A long moment.

JESS (CONT’D)

There is a whole room full of people out there, strangers you’ve never met, I’ve never met. And they, at the same time as me, found out that you like to wear dresses.
Pause.

JESS (CONT'D)

I thought I knew who you were.
And I thought -- I thought you knew who I was.

A moment, brief.

Jess exits.

Sam alone.
SCENE 11

A classroom.

Art projected on a large screen.

Quinn, in drag, at a podium.

Rebecca looking on.

QUINN
Rebecca’s -- your professor’s -- question is an interesting one, for me, at least, on the inside of this whole thing. You just don’t do anything -- we just don’t do drag.

We’ve got a queer community -- us queens were some of the first to throw stones, we’ve been there thick and thin -- and so this community has nurtured us and we sure as hell have nurtured it right back. But from the outside that complicates things -- you’ve got straight people looking in -- they see people like Perry or RuPaul even, and they see -- Gay. Drag has become a big old feather in the gay hat, a marker, a sign. Well, for some, that’s true, sure as hell. Guilty as charged. But the problem -- as I see it -- is now we’ve got boxes--drag as an identity -- just an identity. Let me tell you, drag isn’t just anything.

I personally say -- reject everything concrete. Nothing is concrete and nothing is all that clear. Muddle things up -- get messy. That’s drag.

Quinn steps away.

REBECCA

Thank you, Quinn.

I want to revisit Perry -- and I want to add some tension to our initial thoughts about him. My question is -- is Perry a drag queen? Is what Perry does drag?

I want to strip away identity -- we know Perry is straight, and we know that he identifies as a transvestite, not a queen. Perry is an artist who, on occasion, dresses as a woman, a female alter ego. Is this drag?

We’re concerned, generally, with what we are told is ‘fine art’ -- there’s a standard, some sort of critical barometer -- that tells us what to study. Now -- I know -- I left that barometer a long time ago -- I don’t think these terms -- high art, low art -- there’s so much blending, these days, there so much overlap, we all like everything -- that these terms don’t mean anything, anymore. For me, at least. And I hope, for you too.
But -- does the line of quote-unquote fine art preclude the inclusion of drag, prohibit it, even? Does Perry’s position as an artist -- a well-regarded one -- does his role distance him from drag -- or, perhaps, from what we think of as ‘drag’ and ‘drag queen?’ Is his wearing a dress different, somehow, from Divine -- or, than say, RuPaul -- is there a difference? Is he just an artist, extending his art, living in it? And does this make it “not drag?”

Avant-garde neoclassicism -- a refashioning of the classical form -- the male -- or the female -- body, with modern day iconography. I stand by this -- I think, certainly, we can think of drag through this lens while not stripping it of its heart. Resist identity configurations, see an art form, performance art, perhaps.

Thank you everyone -- and thank you Quinn. Have a good weekend.

The screen goes black, Rebecca and Quinn wait for a moment.

Sam enters.

REBECCA (CONT’D)

Hey.

SAM

Hey.

REBECCA

How’re you?

SAM

Good -- I’m good.

REBECCA

Good.

QUINN

You missed a damn good lecture.

SAM

I could hear a bit, in the hall.

REBECCA

My students loved him--
QUINN
They were just excited to see something other than paintings--

Pause.

SAM
How’s everything at the gallery?

REBECCA
Fine -- a lot of press days -- interviews, tours. Numbers have dropped slightly, but we expected that.

SAM
Good, good.

Pause.

QUINN
I was telling Rebecca -- I’m performing next week, at Industry --

SAM
Which one’s that?

QUINN
It’s the one. On West 52nd -- you should come.

SAM
Your standard?

QUINN
I’ve tweaked it a bit, gotta keep them on their toes -- ‘Straight Up” instead of “Believe,” “Donatella” instead of ‘Material Girl,” that kind of thing.

SAM
Yeah, yeah, of course --

Pause.

SAM (CONT’D)
So -- have you talked to Jess?

REBECCA
She won’t answer -- I’ve tried --
QUINN
Give her time --

REBECCA
How’s everything at home?

SAM
Quiet.

Pause.

SAM (CONT’D)
Who’s Lacan?

REBECCA
What?

SAM
Lacan -- something about symbols, I think?

REBECCA
He was a French psychoanalyst, post-structuralism -- think Freud. Just as bad, really, more of an asshole -- men and women have their own pre-designed places, we cannot know what’s truly real because we live in the symbolic world. He has a bunch of different stuff.

SAM
Oh.

REBECCA
Why?

SAM
I just -- heard his name. I thought he might -- I’m just -- confused.

REBECCA
Take him with a grain of salt -- everybody does.

Pause.

REBECCA (CONT’D)
I’m gonna run this stuff to my office --

Rebecca gathers her notes, some canvases, and exits.
Pause.

SAM
Do you know any straight queens?

QUINN
It doesn’t matter.

SAM
I know.

QUINN
Good.
Personally, two, I think -- three including you.

A long, silent moment.

Quinn looks at Sam, hard and sad.

QUINN (CONT’D)
Things will settle, Sam.

Maybe not in the way you think -- or want -- but they’ll settle.
SCENE 12

Three hundred wigs, empty wig heads, bobby pins.

Quinn in half drag, hair prepped, but no wig. He stands at the counter with a tea kettle, waiting.

Jess wanders, poking around the wigs, quiet.

QUINN
You are one crazy cool queen, showing up here. Unpredictable -- that’s a quality to have. I figured myself last on your list of people to see.

JESS
Maybe you were.

QUINN
Short list then.

Jess shrugs. Maybe a wry smile.

QUINN (CONT’D)
Coffee? Tea?

JESS
No thanks.

QUINN
Suit yourself. I got a feeling we’re both gonna need some soothing some time soon.

He begins to pour a cup.

QUINN (CONT’D)
Oolong. Stress management and weight control, perfect for women, real and fake.

JESS
Are these all real hair?
QUINN
Some are, some aren’t. We don’t just sell to queens -- cancer patients, old ladies. They all have preferences.

JESS
There’s something cool about them, disembodied. It’s like they’ve been separated from something.

QUINN
We’re all just out there, bald, balding, searching for our hair. The wigs are cool, yeah. But they look better on. A transformation -- they go from these limp piles to something else, bigger, sculptures, really.

JESS
You sound like Rebecca.

QUINN
You make that sound like a bad thing.

JESS
Right now it is.

Pause.

QUINN
Don’t take it out on them.

JESS
I don’t want to talk about this.

QUINN
I think you do.

JESS
Well you’re wrong.

QUINN
OK. I’m wrong.

Pause.

JESS
What’s with the half face?

QUINN
You caught me at a bad time. I’m in process.
Can I watch?

Watch what?

The process, whatever you do next.

Quinn takes a moment, he questions.

Crazy cool.

Quinn exits into the wigs, returns with a tackle box, a wig.

I’m actually almost done.

Really?

What? Can’t you tell?

It’s less makeup than I thought.

Some of us are more subtle than others.

It’s just tonight’s look, I’ve got a show.

Quinn checks himself in the mirror, repositions a couple pins.

Jess looks on, curious, guarded.

Quinn bends slightly, slides on his wig. This is a dance -- elegant and practiced. He polishes, primped.
Voila. Lulu Caramel at your service.

Maybe Quinn bows, extends a hand.

JESS
Why are the names always so *stupid*?

Could you do better?

QUINN
How about Rachel? Dianne?

QUINN
Where’s the artistry?

JESS
In your face.

QUINN
Touché.

JESS
You look good. Different, I can hardly tell it’s you.

QUINN
I’ve got a lot of practice.

JESS
I suppose that’s the point, though. Hiding.

QUINN
You’d be surprised.

JESS
Am I wrong?

QUINN
Maybe dig a little deeper.

Long pause.

Jess examines Quinn, the wigs.
JESS
I think --
I don’t like closed doors -- and -- I think you might have just --
I have to go.

Jess starts to leave.

QUINN
Hey --
He wanted to tell you.

JESS
How do you know?

QUINN
I guess I don’t.
But he did.

JESS
Yeah.

Jess exits.

Quinn alone.
SCENE 13

Cold moonlight. The bathtub.

Sam, in drag.

He fills the tub slowly, tests the water.

He slips out of his dress and slides into the tub.

Silence and shadow.

Then, a shallow knock. Sam slides slowly deeper into the tub.

Jess enters.

JESS

Hey.

SAM

Hey.

Jess sits somewhere, far from the tub.

JESS

How are you?

SAM

I’m fine.

JESS

Good.

Pause.

JESS (CONT’D)

Becca called --

SAM

You answered?
JESS
Yes.
They’ve found a new donor, a woman who came to the opening, she was impressed, I guess. She wanted you to know, she’ll need help --

SAM
What else?

JESS
Nothing --

SAM
That’s all you talked about?

JESS
Yeah.

SAM
Oh.

OK.

Pause.

SAM (CONT’D)
How big’s the donation?

JESS
I don’t know -- she just said ‘decent’--

SAM
It’s small then--

JESS
Probably.
She’ll want to come over.

SAM
I’ll just -- I can just go to the gallery, find her there.

JESS
OK.
And you remember? -- I’m out of town next week, for the magazine.

SAM
Oh -- yeah -- Boston?
JESS
Yeah, a piece on historical cities. Comparing histories, how cities inhabit them.

SAM

Sounds cool.

JESS
Yeah -- it should be.

Pause.

JESS (CONT'D)
So -- you performed, tonight?

SAM
No, I -- I just went to watch. Quinn performed.

JESS
Oh.
How was it?

SAM
She was good, he is good.
She’s been doing this for a while.

JESS
Are you going to perform?

SAM
I don’t know -- eventually --

Sam slides under the water, waits a moment, and rises again. His makeup runs in beautiful streaks, colorful ribbons. Color hits the water.

A moment.

JESS
Woah.

SAM
Yeah.

JESS
That’s so weird.
Weird?

It’s just all over --

Yeah, it’s a mess.

I like it -- the colors running.

You -- I do too. I sit here a lot, like this.

I just see -- I can almost see you. Like you’re in the middle or something.

Long pause.

I don’t like not being able to tell who you are. When you -- with everything on -- I see someone completely different, this person, a woman, kind of.

Oh --

But you’re in between right now. I can see -- both -- you, and this person I’ve never met.

It’s weird. Comforting.

Yeah -- I like being in the middle.

Pause.

Can I ask -- what made you want to?

Pause.

It’s just -- a feeling. Something I see, or want, or something.
JESS
I’m just -- confused.

SAM
Yeah -- I am too -- or, I was. 
I still am.

Jess kisses Sam for a long moment.

JESS
I think we need to stew for a little bit, just sit still.

SAM
I think that makes sense.

JESS
And I think you need to start talking more -- about this -- to me.

SAM
Yeah.

JESS
Yeah.

Jess kisses Sam again, exits back into the apartment.

Sam alone.
SCENE 14

Quinn in the gallery, alone.

He sits, looks up at *Hardly Visible Spirit Under de[Construction]*, ponders.

Jess enters, waits.

She sits.

They exist together, for a moment, silent.

JESS

Becca’s the real deal, isn’t she.

QUINN

Yes.

JESS

I used to -- doubt that -- I think. She never had to worry -- but painting? I don’t know, you see a lot of painters. Terminal hypocrisy, I guess, the writer calling the painter black.

That sounded bad.

QUINN

Yes, it did.

I didn’t get this piece -- I saw her painting it and she told me what it was all about -- but I didn’t get it. But now I --

I don’t get a lot of things. I don’t get you.

JESS

Me?

QUINN

Yes.

JESS

I’m not mad at you -- anymore at least -- And I’m not mad at him, now.
QUINN
I’ve seen a lot of horrible things happen to us -- down right dirty, horrible things. People leave -- like that. You discover something and you lose something else. You try to grasp at what’s real, what you feel is true. And somehow, for some people, that isn’t enough. Or it’s too much. Probably too much.

So I’m surprised -- but I’m not.

A long, silent pause.

JESS
How’d you know -- that he’d want to?

QUINN
He asked me the same question.
Everyone wants to know why and how.

I just -- looked at him. And I saw something -- a little bit of me, a little bit of the one that came before me.
We are descendents, we are carrying a torch that has fought to remain lit, to keep up this tiny circle of light, moving forward, always. It’s selfish -- we see and we do -- But they need it, just like we do, they need it.

JESS
Do they?

QUINN
I hope so -- I really do.

Sam did -- didn’t he?

JESS
I think so.

Pause.

JESS (CONT’D)
I’ve known Sam for three years -- more, really. We’ve lived together, slept together. We share clothes. His family’s nice -- better than mine. I know him -- knew him, I guess. But I still couldn’t -- You were able to see something -- something I’ve never -- I couldn’t, didn’t see.

If he needed this -- I couldn’t give it to him.
QUINN

That doesn't mean anything.

JESS

It does.

Short pause.

QUINN

You are too good. Too good.

Pause.

QUINN (CONT’D)


Bits and pieces die and we are reborn, transformed, with new and other pieces. It’s like she knew.

I don’t think you have much to worry about. We all change each other, all the time, sometimes more, sometimes less. The only thing you’ve got to do is lock up your lipstick and pray he doesn’t find the key.

A long moment.

Jess leans in, her head on Quinn’s shoulder.

They stare at the painting, they close their eyes.

Sam enters, in drag, and goes to the bathtub.

He strips, he slips into the tub.

He slowly slides under the water, waits a moment, resurfaces.

His makeup runs, beautiful colors, streaks.

Color and light, light and color.

Darkness.
Divergent Drag Aesthetics—
Interrogating the Reaches of Gender and Gendered Imagery in Drag Performance

William James Burke
On June 28, 1969, a collection of drag queens, hustlers, and gay street kids spurred a riot outside of the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, marking a definitive beginning to the gay rights movement (Carter, 163-6). In the near half-century since, progress toward queer equality has been, to some, prolific—the fight for marriage equality has been fought and won, certain civil rights protections have been afforded to the queer community, acceptance is on the rise. These steps forward, in addition to helping solidify some sense of equality, have ushered in renewed critical energy focused on certain elements of queerness, queer communities, and queer performance.

Indeed, it appears that such a minoritarian position, thus inhabited, has cultivated a certain sense of liberty from within, around; minoritarian cultural practices have, at times, been afforded certain liberties in terms of social justice ethics. Empowerment oftentimes blurs reasoning, offers allowances. This phenomenon became strikingly clear to me when a friend and I gleefully and guiltily discovered RuPaul’s Drag Race, a reality television competition interested in crowning ‘America’s Next Drag Superstar.’ The show is hosted by RuPaul, perhaps the most influential drag queen to date, and pits drag queens against each other in challenges ranging from celebrity impersonation to sewing and garment design. It’s funny and hearty—RuPaul plays the part of den mother, sagely guiding the next generation of drag queens, offering advice and admonishment where appropriate.

My friend and I were swiftly intoxicated. We talked queens—we liked Violet Chachki, but questioned her winning the crown; Ginger Minge was consistent, but not consistent enough to win; Pearl Liason was the coolest, if not occasionally underwhelming and distant. We broke queens down into looks, performances—Violet’s fall reveal look was stunning, dramatic; Chad
Michael’s Cher was incomparable. We gushed. But, we conceded, too, that our fascination with Drag Race was not without question, without guilt. On some level we understood that drag performance imagined gender in a way dissonant with our understandings of gender equality and feminism. These were men, some socially privileged, defining their own version of womanhood, performing it, recycling stereotypes and aesthetics found traditionally problematic when donning a feminist lens. The femininity depicted was oftentimes flagrant, campy, and sexualized; aesthetics were pushed to extremes—cartoonish, derogatory. What exactly were these men saying about women in these performances, if anything? What did these performances have to do with gender? Were these performances justifiable? If so, how?

Contemporary sociologists and feminist and queer scholars have, in the past forty years or so, begun posing such questions, offering more pointed critique of drag and cross-gender performance. We might consider social progress as stimulus for critique; when minoritarian positions falter, when acceptance is gained, liberty extends only so far—to what extent does the queer community need bold, provocative performances, such as drag, when the gay rights movement has positioned queer peoples more favorably in society?

Historically speaking, gender-bending performance has existed beyond queerness, both out of comedy and questionable necessity, since the Greeks. Theatrical tradition has a rich and problematic history of denying women stage presence for the sake of gender-bent male performances; such history was integral in laying the groundwork for the slow, evolutionary creation of drag performance. Circus performances of the late eighteenth, early-nineteenth century (and most likely earlier), for instance, featured male acrobats and equestrians in female garb, as audiences found “more thrill in beholding a young girl carrying out perilous or difficult
feats” (Senelick 296). Minstrel shows of the early nineteenth century also featured cross-dressing men, performing the “wench role” (297). These performances were racially charged and derogatory, but oftentimes required aesthetically realistic portrayals of black women—“creating an illusion of naturalness” was tantamount to minstrelsy at this time (298).

It would be imprecise, however, to claim that drag evolved directly from such performances. Rather, minstrel shows, school and circus performances, and dame comedians, coupled with a rich history of prohibiting female performance on the stage and a reliance on male-crossdressers theatrically, worked over time to desensitize audiences to cross dressing.

These connections to performance, though, are somewhat limited, as “[female] glamour impersonation was not so much a natural evolution from pre-existing models as an offshoot of a thriving transvestite demi-monde” (302). Thus, previous performance traditions provided thematic desensitization, offering space and time for the slight mainstreaming of somewhat ‘taboo’ behaviors, but drag tradition grew more evidently out of an early ‘queer’ community. By 1850, the term ‘drag’ came to be associated with queerness, connoting “the drag of a gown with a train,” and meaning “to wear female attire to solicit men” (302).

By 1860, cross dressing performances, specifically female impersonators, were a staple of entertainment culture (296), appearing in variety acts, vaudeville, musical theatre acts, and comedy specials. However, these performances, as might be assumed, took root in comedy and oftentimes rejected personal expressivity. That is to say, performers, especially as cases of female impersonation grew more distant from their origins in transvestism, resisted linking their knack for wearing dresses to any sort of queer identity. Take, for instance, Julian Eltinge, one of the

1 Aesthetically and only aesthetically. While aesthetic realness or naturalness was important, minstrel shows relied on insulting, derogatory, and caricature-based representations of black people.
most prolific female impersonators of the early twentieth century, known for work on the stage and screen and for the *Julian Eltinge Magazine and Beauty Hints*. Publicity revolving around Eltinge’s fame focused on traditional masculinity and worked “to deflect any suspicion of ‘abnormal’ tendencies on his part,” in an effort to “clear him of the average female impersonator’s unsavory personal reputation” (310). At this time, there existed a clear desire to distance the tradition of female impersonation from queerness, homosexuality (309-10).

These early drag performances, did, however, stray into certain modes of female empowerment; as sociocultural standards concerning sex and gender were beginning to change, female impersonators inhabited roles of “gender intermediacy” (310), allowing them to “serve as [middlemen] between traditional standards of curried comeliness and the new ideal of ‘masculinized’ femininity” (310). In other words, as the roles of men and women began slowly to blur, impersonations physicalized this ideological shift, providing a serviceable outlet for those interested in supporting this progression. The characters presented were situated firmly between male and female—physically and aesthetically female, but endowed with social and cultural power expressly masculine. These performances, however, were not entirely progressive, both in historical and contemporary terms, as the power and might of the characters portrayed took root in the underlying masculinity of the performers (310), not in independent female empowerment.

Thus, drag, to some extent, carries historical connections to performance tradition—circuses, minstrel shows, vaudeville, musical theatre, and comedy reviews. Theatricality and performance are, and have been, woven into the evolutionary fabric of drag. However, if we are to continue interrogating drag as *performative*—queer performance, or as a performance of queerness—it is perhaps first prudent to come to some sort of conclusion on what constitutes
'performance’ tout court. Sociologist Erving Goffman gives a relatively overarching definition in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, noting that a “‘performance’ may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way the other participants” (Goffman 15-16). In this definition we come to understand several basic constants of performance—there exists a body performing, either individual or collective (“participant”), in front of, for, or around an audience (“other participants”). Goffman notes that these “other participants” contribute to “performances as the audience, observers, or co-participants” (15-16)—they are actively involved as watchers, listeners, or doers by this definition of performance. Moreover, we come to understand that performance involves the propagation of change; the participant’s goal is to ‘influence,’ to modify, to sway, to enlighten.

David Roman’s work continues this thread, focusing on the intersection of queerness and performance. He describes performance as an integral part of human existence, noting that it “shapes and transforms the way we understand and experience our lives” (Roman 377). In this way, performance is reflective and critical of its own social, historical, political, and economic contexts (377); performance positions itself perfectly between the mundane, the everyday, and the ‘other.’ It relies on both, critiquing, constructing, and deconstructing norms.

Richard Schechner, scholar of performance studies, expands and explodes Goffman’s definition, presenting a vastly more complex yet distinctively more nuanced understanding of performance. The crux of his argument rests on an all-inclusive conceptualization of performance, a conceptualization that includes the quotidian, ranging from formal theatrical presentation to the lived practice of everyday life. He notes:
Performances mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories. Performances—of art, rituals, or ordinary life—are made of ‘twice-behaved behaviors,’ ‘restored behaviors,’ performed actions that people train to do, that they practice and rehearse. That training and conscious effort go into making art is clear. But everyday life also involves years of training, of learning appropriate bits of behavior, of finding how to adjust and perform one’s life in relation to social and personal circumstances. (22-23)

Important to Schechner, and to our interrogation of drag as performance, are the fundamental functions of performance—what performances do, how they serve larger systems. He argues for seven functions: “To entertain, to make something that is beautiful, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach, persuade or convince, and to deal with the sacred and/or the demonic” (28). It’s important to note that Schechner does not argue for any sort of mutual exclusivity; singular performances can have varied and intersecting functions, depending on the culture, geographic location, community, identity of participants, etc.

Thus, it is somewhat easy to see how and why drag might be considered a queer performance. At its most basic level, drag is entertainment, performative—queens are comics, singers, dancers, gymnasts, impersonators, and makeup artists. The use of drag as an exploration of sexuality and gender links drag to identity [trans]formation. Overtime, drag has become a demarkation of queerness—we’ve already noted that drag had early roots in transvestism, that queens were some of the first queer individuals to revolt against queer oppression. These details place drag as historically involved in the building and bolstering of queer communities.

Both Goffman and Schechner allude, in some form or another, to ‘other participants,’ audiences that seek entertainment, community, affirmation, identification, etc. This inclusion of
‘other participants’ aligns squarely with John Clum’s examination of potentialities in queer performance. He asserts that the audiences and their ideologies actually enable performances and performative texts—for Clum, the emotional and intellectual ‘baggage’ audiences bring into the performance space intrinsically affects the creation, transference, and resonance of thematic ideas (Clum, Acting Gay, 4). Schechner’s insistence on context is well maintained in Clum’s argument—for a performance to be successful, and for a performance to be successfully analyzed, the given context must, at the very least, be understood. For drag performance, the ‘other participants’ are in ways just as important as the drag performers themselves. Amidst performance, a strange feedback loop is created, wherein audience members seek entertainment, community, and affirmation—they bring into the room their own personal and social identities. These identities in turn effect how and how well drag performers can entertain, build community, and affirm their audience.

Thus, it becomes prudent to consider the intended audience for a given performance. A distinction must be made between who said performance is for and who actually attends said performance. Clum speaks to this distinction in his discussion of gay narratives created for gay peoples and gay narratives created for straight peoples; the former focuses on constructing a communal identity, the latter on “garnering understanding from a heterosexual audience” (Clum, “Cultural,” 170). We might consider how a drag show could and would change given either a predominantly gay or predominantly straight audience. Both performances would undoubtedly still focus on entertainment, but a predominantly straight audience might shift intent away from community building and towards inclusivity, camaraderie, and the creation of mutual
understanding. In other words, communication switches from intra-group communication to extra-group communication; different rules may apply and different goals may be evident.

José Esteban Muñoz, scholar of queerness, speaks specifically to queer performance for queer individuals. He refers to these performances as “minoritarian performances”—“performances both theatrical and quotidian [that] transport us across symbolic space, inserting us in a coterminous time when we witness new formations within the present and the future” (56). Minoritarian performances provide moments of symbolic prescience wherein queer individuals might imagine a better world to come, a sort of queer utopia. It’s important to note that Muñoz’s discussion of performance starts with a base very similar to Goffman and Schechner—performance includes both the theatrical/presentational (drag performance, dramatic performance) and the mundane/quotidian (daily gender performance, queer sex). Moreover, performance for Muñoz is more than ephemeral; performance carries with it a potentiality for discursive residue. Muñoz resists traditional performance studies’ conceptions that claim “act[s] exist only during [their] actual duration” (71); he claims that “ephemera remain,” at once both absent and present, ultimately “disrupting a predictable metaphysics of presence” (71). Queer performance, and by extension drag performance, then, produces ephemera, waves, residues, that push beyond the performance itself. In this way, the definition of context is broadened—it is not just the performance, not just the attending audience, that build affect. The mere existence of queer performance produces ripples of transgressive energy (ephemera) that help to disrupt the hegemonic.

Scholars have postulated the existence of two divergent impulses in queer narrative, impulses that highlight a split in both theory and action for the ‘queer community.’ The first
impulse, the “anarchic impulse,” describes narrative and performance that work to “ridicule ‘straight’ society and its institutions” in an effort to produce “creative chaos which [then ultimately] allows free expression of sexual impulses” (Clum, “Culture,” 170). Anarchic texts are texts that wholeheartedly embrace and find pride in the difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality; these texts favor bold, liberal statements of sexuality and, by extension, queerness. Conversely, “the domestic impulse” promotes the “assimilation [of queer peoples] through domestication” and affirms “a commonality with the ‘straight audience’” through a “celebration of gay marriage or ‘family’” (Clum, “Culture,” 170). Works that rely on the domestic impulse deemphasize the difference between queer identities and straight identities, claiming a common humanity and a similarity in lifelong goals. The assimilationist ideology, in conjunction with a focus on the right to marry within the broader socio-political sphere, “can be seen as an attempt to normalize gay and lesbian culture by associating it with the most traditionally recognized forms of national duty and social and civic responsibility [i.e. marriage, the military]” (Roman 376). This reaction to queerness from within the ‘queer community’ has been and is present since the first moments of queer empowerment. Indeed, it has spurred, and still continues to spur, resistance to the loudest expressions of queerness—drag performance, pride parades, etc.

Whether drag carries anarchist or domestic impulses is a question of theory, both feminist and queer. Modern scholarship has been divided as intersecting interests shade exactly how drag performance is analyzed and interpreted—through a performance lens, a queer lens, or a feminist lens? Indeed, we might question how these lenses intersect, or, perhaps, if these lenses differ.
Schechner’s insistence that everyday life is performative—that our daily actions constitute performed rituals adhering to larger social norms—calls on Judith Butler’s deconstruction of gender and gender performance. Indeed, Butler conceptualizes gender as performance. She describes gender as a “ritual social drama [that] requires a performance that is repeated” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 140), a “reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (140). In this way, we come to understand how drag performance has theoretical roots in both performance studies and queer theory. Gender performance, then, depending on circumstance, can be both quotidian and theatrical in nature.

Such a statement, however, poses questions of identity and self-reflexivity. Butler describes a system in which there is no ‘true gender;’ rather, gender is a performance based on sociocultural forces. In this system, the body and the self are compelled to adhere to societal strictures that position heterosexuality and heterosexual reproduction as the prime locus for gender identity. Within this system, concepts of maleness or femaleness are constructed by the male’s relation to the female, and vice-versa, by what is deemed appropriate for the male or the female when considering traditional heteronormative gender roles. Butler describes a “gendered body,” created through “presence and absence on the body’s surface” (135)—the presence of socially acceptable attributes, the absence of socially unacceptable attributes. In this way, gender is merely the performance, the imitation, of a fantasy constructed by heteronormative socio-cultural forces. We begin, then, to see how drag might be classified as a heightened version of daily gender performance. Such a statement is in accordance with a common expression on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*—“We’re born naked and the rest is drag.”
Butler insists that the system of prescribed gender performatives “conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts [where] gender does not follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender” (135-6). In other words, the construction and perpetuation of a heteronormative worldview creates a system in which the complexities of gender and sexuality are quieted while queer identities, divergent from the heteronormative gender-sex binary, are simultaneously made ‘other.’

Thus is the basis for Butler’s transgressive perspective on drag performance. Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, describes the “fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality” (5), laying the foundation for theories of transgression. At the center of Foucault’s foundation are *power* and *pleasure*, interwoven structures that cull and call the individual and the collective, the governing and the governed. Foucault suggests a combative tension between pleasure from exerting and pleasure from resisting—

…the pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting. (*History of Sexuality Volume I*, 45)

This tension provides space for transgression; this pleasure, motivation. When the individual, oppressed by the collective, finds pleasure in obstructing, dampening, then the power of the

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2 It’s worth noting that while Butler is making a defense of drag, she maintains that there is room within drag performance to further the progression of the hegemonic sex-gender binary.
hegemonic collective falters. Even more so, when ‘pleasure in obstructing’ manifests itself in the breaking of custom, of norm, of regulation, legislation, or rule, true transgression occurs.


In original form, Dolan resists queer assimilation into the hegemonic, heterosexual regime; she resists allowing queer identities to be “commodified and neutralized by dominant ideology” (Dolan 265); she resists “bourgeois realism” that seeks only to assert a “moral and sexual bipolarity” wherein there exist the rigid structures of “right/wrong, good/bad, and male/female” (267). Dolan resists the creation and perpetuation of the heteronormative fantasy and posits potent, present, and transgressive queer performance as remedy. Dolan’s conceptualization of transgression is entirely focused on reclaiming a sexuality once labeled perverse: “Making visible gay or lesbian bodies in motion,” she states, “is perhaps one of the most radical ways to disrupt dominant cultural discourse on sexuality and gender” (267). It’s worth noting, here, that in her 1993 version Dolan champions explicit, pornographic depictions of queer sexuality—she seeks “bodies in motion,” she wants these bodies “engaged in sex acts” (267) as a way of opposing traditional, furtive representations of queerness where queerness is “described but not performed” (268).

In revisiting these sentiments, Dolan softens her approach; explicit, pornographic performance no longer embodies the end-all-be-all for Dolan. Her self-critique highlights a
pronounced malleability, a renewed focus on context alongside content; she questions, ultimately, what true transgression means and whether it is possible, in our current climates, to truly transgress—“what ‘assimilative’ or ‘transgressive’ means can only be read in context,” their meanings are “never secure, but always changing, shifting, held up for debate and dissent” (334). Just as performance, so is transgression contextual. Particularly important for our discussion, Dolan warns against arguing along lines of a ‘national queer community’—a community, she argues, that doesn’t truly exist, that doesn’t share a set of core values, that doesn’t have a core list of desires (335). If no such community exists—if queerness is simply an umbrella term, if the queer community is simply a loose collection of individuals, then identifying, analyzing, and defining queer performance becomes more complicated. For whom and to whom do queer performances speak? Who do queer performances represent? And how do these performances, so queerly defined, interact with other theoretical and personal frameworks?

Regardless, clear merit still exists in pursuing the performativity of queerness, the transgression of traditional lines of gender and sexuality through performance. Upon extrapolating Dolan’s conceptualization of queer representation, we find it possible to engage with drag performance as a mode of transgressive performance. Drag performances riff on certain normative and anti-normative representations of gender and sexuality; they embody the transgression of sociocultural norms in a defiant, physical, and visible sense; they put queer bodies in motion, much like the sex acts alluded to in Dolan’s original essay, rejecting ‘bourgeois realism,’ actively flaunting anti-realist sentiments in their portrayals of sex and gender.

Following this train of transgressive interpretations, Butler channels Foucault in her discussion of drag as gendered performance, insisting that if gender is indeed a sort of fantastic
performance, a performance grasping desperately at some overlying fantasy, then space exists to deconstruct it, subvert it, and transgress. She argues that in drawing a “distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (Gender Trouble, 137), drag performance “reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (137). Because no ‘true gender’ exists—because all womanhood is simply a manifestation of hegemonic fantasy—when male performers fashion themselves as women, holding to the same standards as quote unquote ‘real women,’ they call attention to the absurdity of said standards and subvert the hegemonic system from within.

The question of truth, of ‘the real,’ is an important one. Lacan\(^3\) situates ‘the real’ in opposition to ‘the symbolic’ and ‘the imaginary;’ the real can be experienced only in fleeting moments—disasters, distortions of the symbolic. Our worldview is entirely symbolic; our sight, our understanding, are unable to break past entrenched symbolism to what is ‘real’ or ‘true,’ so that we, the subject, “live inescapably in a mental world” (Fortier 91). In other words, our ‘real’ is amassed outside of ‘the real,’ a product of symbolism and language. Concurrently, ‘the real’ is unable to be grasped by the symbolic or the imaginary, the real is that “which escapes these registers…which exists independently of language and is therefore inaccessible to language [symbol] and the linguistic subject” (91). Thus, what exists beyond our language or symbology can be attributed ‘truth.’ This holds with Butler’s framing of gender as performative, and ‘real’ gender being unknown, masked behind a symbolic performance of ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ We might, then, consider drag performance a Lacanian distortion of the symbolic through a refashioning of the symbolic, just as Butler positions drag performance as a transgressive

\(^3\) It’s important to note that the use of Lacan here is limited exclusively to his concepts of ‘the real’ and ‘the symbolic;’ I use these concepts in spite of other, more heteronormative Lacanian writings.
reworking of gendered symbolism. Drag performance addresses ‘the symbolic,’ splits it, revealing, fleetingly, ‘the real’—an absence of what we might call ‘true’ gender.

Although Butler’s interpretation has saturated, somewhat, fields of queer and feminist theory, opposing conceptualizations have surfaced of late. Steven Schacht, a sociologist who’s dedicated most of his work to studies of masculinity, queerness, and feminism, argues that drag queens are “gender royalists” who perpetuate and support existing gender inequalities (Schacht, “Turnabout,” 2). Here, drag performance is nothing more than dominant, hegemonic masculinity defining and claiming ownership over femininity. The tension arises from intersections of power, wherein ‘the feminine’ lacks the social power and privilege of ‘the masculine,’ allowing ‘the masculine’ to commandeer femininity for purposes of parody and entertainment. Further, Schacht argues that drag queens capitalize on feminine attributes that often act as markers of social inequity, especially those attributes seemingly dictated by patriarchal forces—perceived and practiced sexuality, physical appearance, decorum, etc. In this way, ‘the masculine’ is refashioning the problematic as entertaining. Schacht argues that the inverse—‘the feminine’ refashioning problematic elements of ‘the masculine’—is not possible, considering the former lacks the privilege and power of the latter. Said privilege and power allows male drag queens to strip themselves of culpability and ignore the deeply entrenched roots of patriarchal inequality (Schacht “Turnabout,” Schacht “Gay Masculinities”).

Schacht’s ‘gender royalty’ argument is perhaps most poignant when considering stereotypically ‘traditional’ genres of drag performance—those genres that focus on performing womanhood as ‘accurately’ as possible. These performances use beauty, body shape, hair, makeup, and poise as demarkations of femininity; they intentionally use traditionally gendered
and potentially problematic portrayals of womanhood as their foundation. In this way, drag performances might *loosely* carry ‘domestic’ impulses in that, even while transgressing certain gender boundaries, drag queens are still enforcing vaguely heteronormative, potentially patriarchal ideals of gender.

Considerations of the Lacanian real encourage a potential shift *away* from Schacht, a move that forces a revisiting of one of our initial questions—What does drag have to do with gender? If, by way of Butler and Lacan, a ‘true gender’ does not exist; if gender is simply a construct, a gendering of naturally non-gendered bodies; if there is no ‘woman’ and no ‘man,’ no ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine,’ then drag is divorced entirely from gender—a performance, theatricality, unhinged from the question of ‘male or female?’ In considering such a potentiality, we come to understand Schacht’s importance: in the face of this Butler argument, which works to position some theoretical distance between drag performance and gender performance by way of transgression and usurpation of norms, Schacht keeps drag tethered to gender.

These considerations call for a reappraisal of foundations, a questioning of what we have laid forth so far. Definitions of performance are at the center of this argument—gender as performance, drag as performance, life, to a certain extent, as performance. However, we must interrogate whether performance is an all encompassing term, whether or not this term has, or needs, subcategories.

Butler, like Dolan, revisits her initial parsing of queer performance. In her second book, *Bodies that Matter* (1993), she reexamines drag and gender performances, arguing, ultimately, that a line exists between everyday performance of gender (performativity) and queer performance as discourse (performance). Butler defines performativity as the “forcible citation of
a norm;” citation not by choice, but by social mandate wherein we are “compelled to cite the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject” (Bodies that Matter, 232). Note the relation to Schechner’s “twice behaved behaviors” (232-3), actions, norms, repeatedly performed in everyday life. Conversely, performance “works to conceal, if not disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious” (Bodies that Matter, 234). Butler notes that in performance potential for an appraisal of daily performed norms emerges. Performativity is a lived process, a daily referencing of norms; performance, though, carries discursive power to conceal and or reject the forces that work around, above, and beyond the performer.

We might interrogate this distinction more fully in examining Bertolt Brecht’s gestus — “both gist and gesture” (Willet 42), both “attitude [and] a single aspect of an attitude, expressible in words or actions” (42). Carried in action, whole truisms land on and in the audience; revelations occur with the strutting of a runway, with the dead drop, with the flick of the tongue or kick of the lip. Implicit in this demonstration of attitude is reflection, appraisal, and perhaps disavowal. Brechtian technique hinges on social commentary, on the construction and propagation of sociopolitical critique through gestus, through performance. Drag performance, then, is itself Brechtian in that it actively calls attention to gender dissonances—‘man as woman,’ ‘woman as man”—as a form of social critique, a disavowal of social norms.

Credit must be given to Muñoz for making the link between Brechtian gestus and queer performance. Muñoz suggests a discursive power within gestus, moments in performance that “[interrupt] the normative flow of time and movement” (Muñoz 87), offering glimpses at a ‘queer utopia.’ These gestures “transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture,” they offer snapshots of “queer
communication, survival, and self-making” (74-5), they “transmit and amplify the pleasures of queerness, the joys of gender dissidence, of willfully making one’s own way against the stream of a crushing heteronormative tide” (74). In this way, gestures of queer performance are proclamations, the claiming of time and space in the name of queerness. Thus, if these performances, considered Brechtian, are tethered to intellectual critique—if they insist on appraising, reiterating the daily, not simply repeating it—then they are directly linked to Butler’s conceptualization of performance, distinct from quotidian, lived performativity.

Butler also makes note of an “expressive model of drag,” a model “which holds that some interior truth is exteriorized in performance” (Butler, Bodies that Matter, 234). In other words, some drag exists as an act of needed personal expression—expression of an inner truth that finds no clean place in normative social environments. This approach is one of psychoanalysis, interrogating the limits set on the psyche in terms of exteriorization—what gender is being performed, what that gendered performance signifies internally in terms of identity, and what performance is ultimately ‘allowed’ or ‘disallowed’ (234) individually or collectively. The extent to which a drag performance is ‘expressive’ of an internal grappling with identity serves as a slight rebuttal to Schacht’s claim of gender-colonization; if, indeed, drag is a mode of self expression, a way of navigating questions of gender-identity and ultimately exteriorizing said questions in performance, then its connection to hegemonic power is not without limits—can we, and should we, police the expression of queer identities?

However, this ‘expressive’ mode of drag is far from the only mode; indeed, defining exactly what constitutes a drag performance is largely dependent on who is performing and where performances take place. David Valentine, queer ethnographer, asserts that drag “can
index a variety of practices, identities, desires, and organizations of gender and sexuality” as it “escapes a neat definition when you begin to look at the social contexts” (Valentine, 94, emphasis added) of performance. His ethnography and analysis of the ‘transgendered community’ locates divergent, experiential definitions of drag performance in the blurring of identifiers ‘gay,’ ‘transgender,’ ‘transexual,’ and ‘drag queen/king.’ He points to specific instances of definitional blurring—a drag ball at Clubhouse, a la Paris is Burning, the Imperial Court’s Night of a Thousand Gowns, and a dinner with Crossdressers International, three definitively queer events with distinctly different interpretations of drag.

Drag Balls are segmented into rigorously patrolled though still somewhat malleable categories of performance. Of primary concern for this analysis are performances that affect femininity from male-bodied individuals—drag queens, in rudimentary terms. Feminine portrayals are bifurcated into categories: “butch queens up in drag,” traditionally masculine gay men performing femininity, and “fem queens,” traditionally feminine gay men performing femininity (77). ‘Realness,’ a grading mechanism that requires “one to look as much like one’s chosen gender as possible,” marks achievement through the mimicking of certain aesthetics—“schoolgirl, runway model,” for example (80-1). In other words, a ‘butch queen up in drag’ might be attempting to perform ‘schoolgirl realness.’ Importantly, Valentine notes that this iteration of drag performance tethers gender identity and sexuality tightly to drag performance. One’s identity—‘butch queen,’ for instance—is integral to what category of drag one performs—‘butch queen up in drag,’ ‘butch queen vogueing fem,’ etc., etc. (83). Alongside portrayals of femininity are equally numerous portrayals of masculinity; butches, “female bodied masculine persons” and butch queens (not up in drag) “approximate the appearance and manner of a
straight man” (80). Thus, drag in this context is not exclusive to performing femininity; here, men and women can perform certain forms of both masculinity and femininity. Realness, however, is consistently the end goal. These performances are, or can be, both expressive and theatrical.

Conversely, Valentine describes the Night of a Thousand Gowns, a philanthropy event for the Imperial Court, “an organization whose membership is made up of mainly white, self-identified gay men who do performative drag” (90, emphasis added). Drag, for the Imperial Court and its members, is situated firmly in the “realm of art and performance” and “has no implications for…gender identity or sexual practice/desire/identity” (90). As with the Drag Ball at Clubhouse, drag, here, is not restricted to cross-gender performance. Rather, drag can mean “dressing as particular kinds of men, usually with historical military references” (90).

Valentine also addresses Crossdressers International, an organization of mostly straight, oftentimes married men who derive either erotic or expressive pleasure from dressing opposite their self-claimed gender identity. These men resist, to some extent, drag as an identifier. Though they may reference drag as a process of crossdressing, they resist the theatricality of drag performance and they explicitly distinguish their everyday ‘male’ identity from their done up ‘female’ identity (88), placing this iteration of female impersonation somewhere between the drag ball scene and the Imperial Court ball. This position helps to draw a distinction between expressive drag and performative drag, though such a distinction is muddled by previously addressed categories performativity and performance. Expressive drag, tethered in some fashion

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4 This expansive understanding of drag is showcased in Jennie Livingston’s Paris is Burning, where judged categories such “Executive Realness” and “Town and Country” involve performing certain types of masculinity, oftentimes informed by class divides.
to gender identity, reflects performativity—an identity is being performed, cited. Performative
drag, on the other hand, is theatrical and artistic in focus, reflecting performance and somewhat resisting identity configurations. These distinctions are theoretical and carry no mutual
exclusivity—expressive drag can be performative in nature, performative drag can be expressive.
This sort of conceptualization of drag performance focuses on intent rather than aesthetic,
completely dependent on what individual performers find in drag performance, not how they find it.

While this analysis does not deal with instances of male-to-male and female-to-male drag, these distinctions help explode our conception of drag and drag performance, especially in the face of Schacht’s critique. Drag, in these contexts, resists both a singular definition and a singular gender expression or performance. Such an explosion assists in moving towards a theorization of drag performance that leaves room for evolution and change; indeed, if, as I’ve noted, drag has some evolutionary roots in both theatrical performance and queerness, then the merging of these two modes in contemporary drag is not surprising.

In Paris is Burning (1990), Pepper Labeija describes the evolution of drag in terms of a search for new aesthetic reaches. She notes:

When I first started going to balls it was all about drag queens and they were interested in looking like Las Vegas showgirls—back pieces, tail pieces, feathers, beads, and all that—but as the seventies rolled around the things started changing. It started coming down to just wanting to look like gorgeous movie stars, like Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and now they’ve went from that to trying to look like models. (00:11:21-00:11:42)

Similarly, Dorian Corey describes shifts in drag aesthetic and ball culture as typical of
generational shifts, authority passed down to (or seized by) drag newcomers. She notes that drag
categories (‘Town and Country,’ ‘Executive Realness,’ etc) grew out of inclusionary principles,
an interest in performance space for everyone. She notes:

Either you've got a nice body, or you are very fashionable, or you're very pretty, or you're
very real-looking, but there's always something there for everyone. And that's what keeps
them all coming. And it's like in nature—I’m such a nature fan—the young ones are
always bucking to move the old bulls out of the way. That's why they change and go
through all these mad categories. (00:12:12-00:12:40)

With these remarks, Corey makes it clear that the drag shows of her present are largely different
from the drag shows of her past—“and the children now,” she says, “most of them, 75 percent of
them, wouldn’t know what a ball was if it knocked them in the head” (00:11:10-00:11:20).

These statements serve to locate the sort of evolutionary progression present in all forms
of creation; indeed, in knowing this progression, we can begin to look at the current state of drag
performance—contemporary drag—in a way that merges the the historical with the evolutionary,
the performative with the expressive. Certainly, vestiges of what Corey might consider the drag
of her past still live on in venues like the Clubhouse mentioned by Valentine; aesthetics, too,
have continued to shift and change now, just as Labeija noted then.

This evolution has been, to some extent, monitored, restricted, and facilitated by
influential members of the quote-unquote ‘queer community’—gatekeepers and trendsetters, of
sorts. RuPaul, arguably the most successful drag queen to date, given the power to drastically
change the economics of drag with *RuPaul's Drag Race*\(^5\), has perhaps exerted the most influence over the progression of drag culture and drag aesthetic. Her critical barometer controls which queens join the cast and which queens are successful; her adjudicating, disseminated internationally via television and streaming, helps to set a standard for drag aesthetics in general. Indeed, in an interview with i-D Magazine concerning Drag Race, its merits, and its purpose, RuPaul noted:

> When we started *RuPaul's Drag Race*, we had to set the standard for an audience who may not have been familiar with drag. So we started with the fundamentals and chose characters who were the basis of drag culture. And then as the years have gone on, we've added more eccentric characters. I think season four is the first time we introduced gender fuck drag. (RuPaul)

RuPaul, here, is educator and gatekeeper—Drag Race is drag, appearing on Drag Race legitimizes the ‘eccentric,’ more niche forms of drag performance, allowing for the aforementioned evolution of drag aesthetics.

Her mentioning of ‘gender fuck’ is important for this discussion, as traditional scholarship on specific genres of contemporary drag performance is currently lacking. Drag performance, outside of drag balls, has developed its own set of categories for differentiating drag queen from drag queen, drag performance from drag performance. These categories are too myriad and too malleable to assemble definitively; they have their roots not in scholarship, but in

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\(^5\) *RuPaul's Drag Race* has, to a certain extent, monetized drag performance by fashioning queens into national and international celebrities. Drag queens successful on Drag Race continue on to world tours, sponsorships, and advertising deals.
community, formed by queens and their fans. But they are nonetheless important in fashioning an understanding of how contemporary drag performance intersects with gender.

RuPaul defines ‘gender fuck’ drag, vaguely, as “smeared lipstick and combat boots and torn wedding dresses, like ‘F-you!’” (RuPaul, “RuPaul talks gender fuck”); it’s somewhat of a catchall term, used to describe divergent drag aesthetics, sometimes messier and less polished, and ultimately more avant-garde than other examples of drag. It deals explicitly with the blurring of traditional feminine and masculine aesthetics, usurping gender norms of both everyday gender performance and formal drag performance. In this way, it, at times, appears entirely distant from gender, while at others appearing entirely immersed in gender. The queen referred to in RuPaul’s interview is Sharon Needles (Figure 1), winner of Drag Race Season 4, and perhaps the most prominent ‘gender fuck’ drag queen to date. She’s best known for her merging of female couture with fright and horror aesthetics (Figure 2); her looks range from strikingly feminine to completely nonhuman (Figure 3).

I’d like to situate ‘gender fuck’ drag at the center of our discussion of gender in contemporary drag performance, for it pushes Butler’s main argument in favor of drag performance to an aesthetic extreme, seemingly removing gender from the conversation entirely. In doing so, we refute Schacht’s claim on gender royalty, gender colonialism—if there is no apparent reference to gender in performance, then there is no gender to colonize. Indeed, where does gender exist in Sharron Needle’s presentation of a bloody goblin on Season 4 of Drag Race? Moreover, considering ‘gender fuck’ drag also poses a sort of utopian potentiality when considering the evolutionary principles remarked upon above—the most contemporary shifts in drag aesthetic, the most current evolution, may pose a drag future devoid of gendered
performance entirely. ‘Gender fuck’ drag seems to reflect what Butler deems ‘performance;’ it is not (necessarily) expressive in terms of gender or sexual identity, it is expressive in terms of theatricality and artistic vision.

Two seasons after Sharron Needles opened the door for other, more niche drag aesthetics, RuPaul’s Drag Race saw Milk join its ranks. To a certain extent, Milk epitomizes contemporary drag, blurring the lines even further than Needles. Based in NYC, her work, florescent, even in the colorful world of drag, openly and actively tests the traditional gender binary, calling to mind the possible internal subversion proposed by Butler. Milk’s website conflates versions of the self: Daniel Donigan (Figure 5), the man behind the makeup, “Sandra Sassypants,” a someone in between, an ‘also known as,’ and Milk, the drag queen persona. Milk/Sandra/Dan play with gender consistently—it’s “his her life,” not strictly his, or strictly hers; Dan didn’t create his drag troupe, he “breast-formed” it (Donigan). Indeed, Milk is a self proclaimed ‘gender fuck’ drag queen (Figure 6), purposefully working within an aesthetic that denounces traditional gender presentations.

Specifically interesting for this discussion of gender is Milk’s use of facial hair (Figure 7, Figure 8). In donning a beard or mustache, Milk seemingly embodies Butler’s argument; in performing drag, in donning the clothes and makeup traditionally donned by women, Milk situates herself within the feminine. Suspended somewhere above, or in front of, or on top of, Daniel’s male body is an illusionary ‘female’—we are inclined to see ‘woman’ in the subtext, to read contoured cheekbones and sharp lip-lines as ‘womanly.’ And indeed we do. However, this suspension is disturbed, interrupted, with the placement of facial hair. Simply put, the illusion is broken, called to our attention. We recognize that while Milk is a ‘woman,’ she is simultaneously
a ‘man.’ This recognition, then, assists in breaking down the gender binary, distancing us from the hegemonic, male-centric fantasy of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ posed in Butler’s argument.

Figure 6 shows ‘gender fuck’ drag taken to an extreme, similar to Needles’ goblin couture in Figure 3. It’s in these more extreme examples of drag performance and aesthetic that analysis becomes more complicated, more nuanced, as an ‘illusionary female’ is seemingly non-present. Milk is not wearing a wig or a dress; her makeup is more face paint than anything—blotches of brilliant color, color blocking, zig-zagging lines. Figure 9 offers another interesting example—an androgynous wig, blue skin, blown up features, but, again, not exactly feminine. These looks are not off-norm for Milk, though they may be some of her more extreme; they show no express dedication to maintaining the feminine illusion, they seem entirely distant from gender, they appear closer to theatrical costume than what comes to mind when considering ‘drag.’

We might also look at moments of complete upheaval, moments where drag becomes something utterly different, utterly new. Consider Figure 10, Milk walking the runway in Season Six, Episode Five of RuPaul’s Drag Race, dressed as ‘Workroom Ru,’ RuPaul out of drag. The challenge for this particular runway was to recreate a classic RuPaul look; Milk was the only queen to opt into male garb, a controversial choice in a competition relatively new to ‘gender fuck’ performances. In such a performance there is no blurring of gender; we see no illusionary female. Rather, we see man dressing as man.

In these specific, more extreme iterations of drag performance, Schacht’s argument seems misplaced, if not somewhat irrelevant. What sort of gendered hierarchy is drag perpetuating when seemingly stripped of gender completely? Similar implications exist in terms of our Butler argument—can drag still be considered transgressive, subversive, if gender is no longer an
element at play? What norms, then, are being transgressed? How are these performances abandoning the symbolic and grasping at ‘the real?’ These questions are potentially reconciled in a reexamination of the ‘gender fuck’ argument thus far.

I’ve situated ‘gender fuck’ as an upheaval, a rejection of traditionally gendered drag aesthetics, something that distances drag from gender entirely. However, ‘gender fuck’ drag performance is, as its name connotes, still tethered to gender, inseparable. Certain ‘gender fuck’ performances, such as Milk’s bearded looks, situate gender at their core, creating a commentary on traditionally un-blurred lines and strict gender roles. Others, however, are more distant from gender—Sharron Needle’s goblin, for instance—but are still considered ‘gender fuck.’ Distanced from traditional drag-gender alignments (male as female, in this case), these looks are positioned to provide and internal critique of drag aesthetics, questioning its reliance on gender all together and thus directly interested in gender representation.

We must look critically at the images presented in ‘gender fuck’ performance, note that these performances are still drag; we must remember drag’s roots, their vestiges. One must only look critically at certain examples of ‘gender fuck’ performance to glimpse remnants of drag history, to see where drag still carries traces of Schacht’s ‘gender royalty’ argument. Even as, in Figure 6, Milk deconstructs traditional drag aesthetics, even as she touts “#genderfucknormal,” she still wears opera gloves and stiletto heels. Sharron Needles’ goblin couture in Figure 3 still has a cinched waist and wears high heels shoes. Clearly, in some iterations of ‘gender fuck’ performance, queens are still imagining womanhood in a certain light, with a certain aesthetic and context.
Indeed, even in the absence of gendered imagery, gendered language is still shockingly present. As Sharron Needles walked the runway in post-apocalyptic goblin garb, comments were consistent in gender—“Oh she’s bleeding” (00:46:40-00:46:41, emphasis added), “I hope she’s wearing a dental dam” (00:46:46-00:46:48, emphasis added), and “Anyone told her about fluoride toothpaste?” (00:47:03-00:47:05, emphasis added). Milk received similar, though perhaps more apt, commentary dressed as male RuPaul—“Lady looks like a dude” (00:29:59-00:30:01). Drag, here, exists as an inhabited state of womanhood, a character, a persona, present beyond aesthetic. No matter the imagery—whether man or a woman, human or creature, realistic or cartoon, the underlying character is still classified as ‘woman.’ This dimension makes it expressly difficult to support a discussion of drag distant from gender representation. Indeed, how can such a conversation exist, prevail, if the very state of being a ‘drag queen’ is inherently gendered ‘female?’

Moreover, it’s important to note that ‘gender fuck’ performance is still a somewhat niche genre of drag. The standard, if we can even assume a ‘standard’ exists,’ aligns with what might come to mind when imagining ‘drag queen’—a man donning garb linked to traditional and stereotypically feminine aesthetics. These queens are ‘fishy queens,’ serving ‘fem realness,’ a la the drag ball categories previously discussed. Courtney Act (Figure 11, Figure 12), for instance, is known for her female illusions, her striking resemblance to a quote-unquote ‘real’ woman—she wears chic, polished ensembles, her waist is cinched, her makeup sculpts her face near perfectly. Act’s aesthetic clearly embodies elements of Schacht’s argument; she grasps at realistic female impersonation, her image borrows from traditional feminine ideals, but she is, ultimately, a man deciding what ‘realistic female’ means, what these feminine ideals even are. Her looks
swiftly become couched in stereotype, feminine archetype—she is the blonde bombshell, scantily clad, glamorous. This is, by Act’s definition, idealized womanhood.

Act’s perfection, her realness, is thrown into sharp contrast when juxtaposed against Trixie Mattel (Figure 13, Figure 14), a queen with a more extreme, more niche aesthetic—makeup blown up to exaggerate stereotypically feminine features, like her larger-than-life doe-eyes, thick, full eyelashes, and obvious contour. Mattel is not exactly ‘gender fuck,’ though she certainly has more avant-garde influences. She’s situated somewhere in between; her looks, starkly divergent from Act’s, are still more definitively tied to a female aesthetic than looks served by Milk. Such intermediacy provides an interesting caveat to our Schacht-Butler dichotomy, as Mattel’s aesthetic easily aligns with both theoretical camps. On some level, Mattel is working with obvious gendered aesthetics, drawing attention to unrealistic expectations, absurd beauty standards, feminine markers. Her donning such extreme makeup places a discussion of gendered aesthetics at the forefront, pointing to gender as an inhabited construct, rather than natural state, a la Butler’s argument. When we see her overdrawn eyes, her puffy lips, we are reminded of the absurdity of such aesthetic standards, we recognize established distinctions between performer and costume, man and woman. Conversely, a certain level of glamorization exists in Mattel’s looks, making it unclear whether she is mocking the employed gender conventions or reveling in them. Schacht points to power differentials—when maleness has imposed such conventions, a man glamorizing and heightening systems of oppression on some level beneficial to him becomes ‘gender royalty.’

These distinctions inspire a revisiting of our earlier discussion of ‘other participants’ in drag performances—audiences, viewers, those that receive and interpret. Perceptions of Mattel’s
drag performance are not intrinsic; nothing specific points to one interpretation, the other. The deciding voice on theoretical critique, interpretation, lies within the audience, outside of the performer’s grasp. The baggage and histories carried into the performance venue, the historical context, sociopolitical environment, and geographical location, shape and sharpen the eyes drawn on individual performances, thus making it difficult to mark definitively the carried, delivered, message of gender performance in drag. Distinctions are not easy to make—this is not an issue of intra and extra community opinion, drag is not always given a free pass from within the quote-unquote ‘queer community.’ Rather, it is, as I’ve shown here, an issue of lenses, frameworks.

This discussion of drag performance has taken two theoretical foundations—foundations that stand in stark contrast to one another, one critical, one forgiving of drag performance and its ethical limitations. We play a game of twos—Butler and Schacht, ‘gender fuck’ and ‘traditional,’ Milk and Courtney Act. As is clear in this discussion, these foundations are difficult to reconcile. We question, then, whether or not reconciliation is the prime goal, whether these two theoretical frameworks are meant to exist side by side, shading each other, resisting each other. In such a consideration, we come very close to refusing any sort of universally understood, internally evident interpretation of drag—drag as hierarchical, drag as transgressive, drag as. Indeed, it’s impossible to make such statements about the whole of drag performance, as there exists no such monolith.

Given the nuances of drag performance, the genres explored here, we might begin to take a less conglomerated look at drag; we might look at individual instances of drag performance, at certain moments of transgression and certain moments of ‘gender royalty,’ rather than at drag
performance en masse. Such a viewpoint provides for a more nuanced examination—we might consider how genre is important elsewhere, how conglomerated analyses of other performative, theatrical, and creative modes are virtually nonexistent, or at least unrealistic. Drag performance has, to a certain extent, been analyzed and critiqued as one performative mode—a mode inseparable from gender and sex, a mode without genre. But genre is immensely important to the nuances of gender performance in drag, as has been noted here. Of course, one might argue that drag as a collective form, on some level, intersects with gender more directly than say, film, painting. But such a statement minimizes gender, alleviates the gendered tension under which we all live. Butler’s argument for gender as a construct imagines a world in which gender is inescapable—just as we cannot function outside of discourse, we cannot function outside of the prescribed gender-sex binary (Butler, *Gender Trouble*). Thus, drag may be considered all about gender, not about gender at all—just as life may be all gender, and none at all.

At the beginning of this discussion, I outlined a historical perspective—drag as it evolved from certain performance traditions, certain communities. I mention history not only to provide needed background, but also to emphasize the fact that this argument, and drag performance, are shaped by context. As Dolan noted in her revisions of “Practicing Cultural Disruptions,” time is inseparable from content, context paramount to understanding perspectives, critiques. This argument will not maintain its meaning in time; Butler’s position was shaped by her historical context, as was Schacht’s, as is mine. It is thus prudent not to hold ourselves to singular theoretical frameworks, lenses, when analyzing the discursive possibilities of drag performance. In returning to Schechner, we might understand how an argument that lacks a certain mutual exclusivity might benefit our reading of gender in drag performance. It might be prudent to
maintain this game of twos, to uphold the above dichotomy—in other words, we might understand drag as occasionally transgressive, occasionally hegemonic, in nature. Schechner notes that performance, performances, can have multiple, intersecting motivations—entertainment, identity formation, community building. Drag of all shapes and colors works toward these ends, and, indeed, towards ends of avowal, disavowal, of gendered norms—simultaneously, at times, independently, at others. Context exists as a final variable, shaping how, and why, and if, these discourses are potent and powerful—if it lasts or evaporates, ephemeral.
Appendix

Figure 1. Sharron Needles for OUT Magazine, named Stylemaker of the year, 2012

Figure 2. Sharron Needles.
Figure 3. Sharron Needles, RuPaul’s Drag Race, Season 4, Episode 1, “RuPocalypse Now”

Figure 4. Milk, in drag. November 16, 2016

Figure 5. Daniel Donigan, out of drag. February, 2017.
Figure 6. Milk’s Instagram, where she touts: “In my own milky corner, in my own milky chair #genderfucknormal.” February 3, 2016

Figure 7. ‘She’s Babsy, huh?!’ April 15, 2014

Figure 8. ‘have yourself a hairy little Christmas.’ December 15, 2014
Figure 9. ‘bippity, boppity, blue.’ August 12, 2016

Figure 10. Milk as ‘Work Room Ru,’ RuPaul’s Drag Race, Season 7, Episode 5.
Figure 11. Courtney Act, October 29, 2016

Figure 12. Courtney Act, November 28, 2016

Figure 13. Left, Trixie Mattel, Right, Courtney Act, February 8, 2017
Figure 14. Trixie Mattel, June 23, 2016.
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This discussion of gendered drag performance has dangerously lacked mention of intersectionality. With all our talk of context, it is vitally important to recognize that gender does not exist independent of other social identities; we do not just perform gender, we perform gender along the bias of our other, intersecting identities—race, class, sexuality, etc., etc. While *Light Shines Earnest* attempts to interrogate the intersection of sexuality with drag performance, race has been somewhat absent from both of these discussions. Thus, a more nuanced approach might consider the relevancies of certain racialized aspects of drag performance. Indeed, already we’ve noted minstrelsy in the evolutionary fabric of drag; Milk, in Figure 9, appears to be unconsciously (we can hope, assume) referencing aesthetics of blackface. What issues arise when considering gender non-distinct from race, when we look at the intersection of these identities in drag performance?