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**The Time Has Come, For You to Lip-Sync, For Your Identity: Bridging the Queer  
Gap Between Theory and Practice**

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## Abstract

The humanities seem to want to specialize in capturing the human experience in their socio-cultural context. It seems, however, that throughout the past decades, certain experiences are harder to academically pin down than others. The critique posed by queer people on queer theory is one example of this discrepancy.

Judith Butler, Maggie Nelson, Sara Ahmed and Crystal Rasmussen are some authors who intellectually capture the experience of queerness. Especially Butler has received critique throughout her career that her description of queerness had very little to do with the real-lived experience of queer people. But, her work showed seminal in the deconstruction of gender identity, as did the works by the other mentioned authors. Despite the important works produced by these authors, it is still difficult to find academic works that are written with a ‘bottom-up’ approach: where the voices of oppressed groups are taken for the truth they speak, while academic references are only there to support their claims.

In this thesis, I utilize this ‘bottom-up’ approach, testing through my case study—namely, the experiences of Dutch drag queens, specifically how they experience topics around lip-sync performances—to what extent their lived experience is in accordance with the theoretical works by which they are framed. Through interviews with Dutch drag queens, by attending drag shows, and by critically reviewing academic literature, I will test the discrepancy, or parallel, between the theory, and practice.

I answer my research question in three parts; first, I measure the experiences of the drag queens and queerness, while assessing texts deriving from queer theory. Second, I asked the participants about their drag persona and representation, while looking at texts on audience participation, drag, and misogyny. Third, I asked the drag queens specifically about music, while analysing texts written from a musicological perspective, on canonization, camp, and lip-sync analysis.

With this research, I want to contribute to an innovative way of conducting academic research; by creating space for marginalized voices to be the main creator of knowledge in academic research.

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## Introduction

How does one get across the fact that the best way to find out how people feel about their gender or their sexuality—or anything else, really—is to listen to what they tell you, and to try to treat them accordingly, without shellacking over their version of reality with yours?<sup>1</sup>

This quote by Nelson summarizes the critique that queer people have posed to queer theory: the discrepancy between the theorisation of queerness and the actual lived experience of queer people. In our current world—and with that I mean the Western society that I grew up in, and that offers me academic works—individualization and destabilization tend to take control over discussions on identity.<sup>2</sup> So it would seem difficult for an academic branch to cater to this subjective individuality, although queer studies did try to achieve part of that goal. It is important to occupy spaces where there was no room for oppressed voices, but what if those voices are being mis-represented or mis-interpreted?

One author who is famous for both her reconceptualization of gender, as she is known for her opaque way of writing about it, even when speaking from her own experience, is Judith Butler. She famously conceptualised the theory behind the performativity of gender, coined in her seminal books *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*.<sup>3</sup> However, some scholars have pointed out that these books, together with others stemming from queer studies, do not fully coincide with queer lived experience. One author who, notoriously, critiqued this discrepancy is Martha C. Nussbaum. In her article “The Professor of Parody: the Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler,” Nussbaum gave an account of feminism and academia in practice, mostly focusing on how academic feminists try to deal with practical, “real” and “lived” issues, and stating that this is not displayed in the resulting work.<sup>4</sup> Nussbaum gives a reason for this tendency in feminist academia that leans “toward a type of verbal and symbolic politics that makes only the flimsiest of connections with the real situation of real women.”<sup>5</sup> “The Professor of Parody” is dated, since it is written twenty years ago, which is illustrated by Nussbaum’s choice in generalizing “women” as the marginalised group. Today, the importance of categorising “women” as synonymous to “biological women” is renounced by a more inclusive tendency in academia that focuses less on the gender binary. The tendency in feminist academia to theorize while disregarding practical issues, however, still stands. There are still multiple oppressed groups beyond the gender binary that try to find their way into adding their voices to the story. Such a group—queer people—does not feel fully represented by the academic literature written on the queer community and its experience, as authors like Ahmed, Mari Ruti and

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (London: Melville House UK), 2016, 66.

<sup>2</sup> Social media individualizes a person, while feminist theory is at its deconstructive ‘wave’, where terms are being dissected and reinterpreted.

<sup>3</sup> See the seminal works Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody,” *The New Republic* 220, no. 8 (1999): 37.

<sup>5</sup> Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody,” 38.

Maggie Nelson wrote about.<sup>6</sup> That being said, I do not want to negate the works that are building bridges between the academic treatment and actual experiences of queer people, especially since this critique I pose here is not new. Queer studies as a discipline is taking up an increasing part of academia, and feminist and queer perspectives are added in multiple disciplines. However, critiques like the one Nussbaum stresses are still very much present in queer studies. Fortunately, there does seem to be an accumulating momentum for the mainstream acceptance of queer identities on the global stage, with shows like *Queer Eye* and *RuPaul's Drag Race* as important leaders in the media.<sup>7</sup> *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a televised competition between drag queens, hosted by arguably the most famous commercial drag queen, RuPaul, creates a growing visibility of non-normative identities. When *RuPaul's Drag Race* was added to Netflix, hundreds of thousands of viewers, me included, were enamoured by the glitter and glamour of drag culture. From the fabulousness displayed through costumes and make up, to witty performances and high-quality lip-syncing battles: nothing seemed to be too absurd or over the top for the show. My interest was not merely fuelled by the high entertainment value of *RuPaul's Drag Race*; the show seemed to bring together many themes that I have been exploring in my academic work. For example, the participants exhibited multiple gender identities, from people who identify as cis males and perform as women—like the host of the show, RuPaul—to people whose identities are gender fluid and non-binary.<sup>8</sup> This display of multiple genders, and the seeming acceptance of them by the audience (judging by the high viewers numbers and the number of seasons the show keeps producing) was one of the reasons I started considering the subject of drag queens as my research topic. Another is music, which plays an important role during a lip-syncing performance and, as I will argue, is used by drag queens to enact a queer or a non-conforming identity. Merging the discrepancy between queer lived experience and queer theory with my interest for lip-sync performances of drag queens, I wanted to interview Dutch drag queens to use their experiences as the guideline of my research. As a result, I pose the question: in what ways are the experiences of Dutch drag queens lip-syncing performances in accordance with the theoretical works by which they are framed?<sup>9</sup>

I am aware of and agree with current statements that intersectional feminism is the only feminism, which is why I acknowledge my focus on gender identity in this thesis over other parts of one's identity, like race, ethnicity, class and age.<sup>10</sup> Although my focus might not seem intersectional at first sight, the drag

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), Nelson, *The Argonauts*, Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subjects* (New York Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> The Netflix series *Queer Eye* aired for the first time on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018, being a spin off from *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a movie about five homosexuals making over the life of a heterosexual. The show created a lot of buzz online, and was acknowledged for their efforts by winning an Emmy this year.

<sup>8</sup> Natalie Wynn, *Pronouns*. YouTube video. ContraPoints, 2018, <https://youtu.be/9bbINLWtMKI>. 20.02. "Gender non-conforming men who perform femme but use male pronouns."

<sup>9</sup> Since 'queer' is a fluid concept, a clear definition is hard to find, and the term is used to refer to many parts of one's identity, like gender or sexuality. For me, when using the words 'queer identity' in this thesis I mostly talk about gender identity. For a more elaborate explanation, see the paragraph below.

<sup>10</sup> The term 'intersectionality' was coined by Kimberlè Crenshaw, and is elaborated on in the chapter on queerness. See: Kimberlè Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (July 1991): 1241–99.

queens I interviewed live an intersectional live, where all of the axes of difference play a role in the level of queerness in their identity. Furthermore, my own position as a researcher plays an undeniable role in this research: although I do not believe in rigid ‘100 percent’ identities, I do have a conform gender identity and sexuality.<sup>11</sup> Being aware of my position, however, offers me a place to start researching from, as Haraway provided me with a context to think about my ‘situated knowledge.’<sup>12</sup> Below, I offer an elaboration on my positionality, where after I shortly describe the intentions of each chapter.

As a method, I combine an analysis of interviews with a critical review of literature, therefore bridging the gap between the theory and practice of writing about a (queer) drag performer. Thus, my research will focus on the lived experience of drag queens, illuminating how drag queens use and value music during lip-syncing, and what relation music has to their queer identity. Because of the scope of this research, I will look at Dutch drag queens, which offers me a multiplicity of perspectives. Therefore, the drag queens whom I approached are the ones that perform with a lip-syncing element, are diverse in (intersectional) identification, and were willing and able to open up about their lived experience. The reason why I focus on the lived experience, is because the existing discrepancy between queer theory and lived queer identity, as I mentioned above, and my wish to contribute to a different, more inclusive academic world. The next two paragraphs shortly show how I approach these two directions of my method.

I am using the framework offered by Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* to connect the perspectives provided by the participants of the interviews with the discourse surrounding queer theory. As Ahmed puts it, “phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds.”<sup>13</sup> Ahmed’s perspectives are important in this thesis, because she has spoken about queerness from an academic perspective, while offering simultaneously an insider’s perspective as a queer person.<sup>14</sup> The connection between queer theory and lived experience come together in such an author. The risk of speaking for others is prevalent in academia, which is a risk I am taking into account, and thus one of the reasons I include queer voices from both the academic perspective, as the people I interview. Because, “by bringing what is ‘behind’ to the front, we might queer phenomenology by creating a new angle, in part by reading for the angle of the writing, in the ‘what’ that appears.”<sup>15</sup> And this new angle is exactly something I aim for in this thesis: a way to combine theory with practice that moves beyond the binary.

Besides a critical inquiry in academic literature, as a methodology, I generally use qualitative research in the form of interviews with Dutch drag queens. Since I advocate that there is a discrepancy

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<sup>11</sup> With ‘100 percent’ identities, I mean the belief that identity is a rigid thing, opposed to, for example, the fluid state of gender and sexuality.

<sup>12</sup> Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.

<sup>13</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, 2.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Sara Ahmed, “Queer Use,” *Feminist Kill Joy* (blog), November 8, 2018, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2018/11/08/queer-use/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 4.

between queer theory and lived queer experience, I want to make sure the actual experiences of drag queens are the main line of arguments in my thesis. Therefore, the answers provided by the interviewed drag queens will function as the backbone of each chapter, supported by academic theories that take on a subordinate part of the research. This methodology offers me another way into academia, where I look for an intersection between empirical and academic knowledge production. Besides this general method, I also employ methods that form the sub parts of my questions, as explained in my respective chapters, namely audience observation.

### *Positionality of the author*

My intention was to use the academic space that was available to me through writing a thesis for queer voices to be heard. Notwithstanding my intentions, the reality showed that ‘offering a space’ was not enough, I needed to make room for myself as a researcher as well. The acknowledgement I want to make room for here, is that I cannot identify as queer, but I can act as an ally.<sup>16</sup> In practice, it means that I acknowledge my privileged position in society, and using that position to provide a space that is dedicated to, and more importantly, occupied by queer voices. As I was taught through gender studies and postcolonial studies, there is no such thing as one objective truth, so by acknowledging my own position and subjectivity, I want to stay open for any discussion or further research that people deem just.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, I ensured that a lot the things the reader will come across in this thesis will be spoken by queer people in- and outside of academia. Contrarily, I have to use my own voice and interpretations to take this research in a certain direction, but I am fully acknowledging my position and the difficulty it took finding a middle ground between my own voice, and the voice of the people I wanted to focus on.

### *An Introduction to the Chapters*

In order to explore how drag queens use music to create a queer identity, I map out three possible aspects, or elements, that enable this identification, each detailed in a separate thesis chapter: the premise of queerness, drag and representation (both online and offline), and the role and value of music during lip-syncing. In what follows, I will briefly discuss each aspect, and offer terms with the definitions I chose to work with in this thesis. In the first chapter, I want to tackle the connotations connected to queer in our current time. Since I am part of a generation that uses social media platforms like Twitter as an activist endeavour, I want to use a tweet that was posted on June 5<sup>th</sup> of this year, by Leo (username @butchrose), who says:

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<sup>16</sup> I am aware of the discussions around the word ‘ally’ as an identity instead of an action. I want to follow by the words of Timothy Murphy, who says: “To act as an ally is essentially an act of [kenosis](#). It involves acts of burning away some of our privilege by using our socially-derived status to speak, walk, or object to some oppressive practice or value.” See Timothy Murphy, “Ally Is Action, Not an Identity,” *Huffpost* (blog), November 12, 2016. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ally-is-action-not-an-identity\\_b\\_8536518?guccounter=1](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ally-is-action-not-an-identity_b_8536518?guccounter=1).

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion on knowledge production and moving beyond one objective truth, see, for example, Adrienne Rich, “Notes Toward a Politics of Location,” in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*, ed. Adrienne Rich (London and New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), 210-31.



Q\*eer has been stripped down of any radicalness because it's been watered down by academia and mainstreamed to the point where cishets [cis-gender heterosexuals] feel comfortable using it and tldr [too long, didn't read, which in this context means: from here on, I am telling you the most important point] don't just throw that word around as if it still doesn't carry negative connotations for ppl in the community.<sup>18</sup>

While taking this opinion into account, defining 'queer' proved difficult, but Robert J. Hill's definition fits the purpose of my research most closely, and I therefore use his conceptualisation of the term. Hill sees "queer" as "a particular form of political dissidence that blurs the dominant binary gender distinction of male and female."<sup>19</sup> Besides the nuances that Hill does not mention (mostly the concept of 'non-binary'), the most important part of his definition is the "political dissidence that blurs the dominant binar[ies]," because for most queer people, living out their identity is always political.<sup>20</sup> Scholars in disability studies have long pointed out that some bodies are entitled to sound and some are not. Here, I find a parallel to my thesis, and therefore, I argue for the convergence of queer and disability studies. Both disciplines started by noticing where oppressions took place and how they were societally constructed, before moving towards a more practical, even deconstructive theorisation of the subjects of the discipline. As proposed by Yvon Bonenfant, *who* gets to express a certain thing is also subject to hierarchies and social oppression.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, I am using Nelson's *The Argonauts* and Rasmussen's *Diary of a Drag Queen* as the backbone of the discussion on queer theory versus actually being queer in today's world. As I mentioned in the introduction, Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* provides the more academic point of view of a queer scholar. Furthermore, the works of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Mitchell Morris provide me with two other important perspectives—namely because both authors question and criticise the binary oppositions of "modern homo/heterosexual definition" within critical cultural analysis, thereby expanding my understanding of queer workings in academia.<sup>22</sup> These perspectives on drag, and queerness are used to support the answers provided by the interviewed drag queens.

The second chapter is dedicated to drag and representation. Because of the importance and global reach of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I am using some space to look at the implications of the show through a critical review that both acknowledges the efforts, and criticises its shortcomings, such as transphobic and racist remarks RuPaul made in the past.<sup>23</sup> However, my research will focus on the lived experiences of drag queens and live performances, therefore moving away from the medium of television and the complexities of *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a progressive but commercial show. Additionally, I will focus on

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<sup>18</sup> Leo (@butchrose\_), Twitter, June 5, 2019. Posted on Instagram by @unapologeticallynotintoyou.

<sup>19</sup> Robert J. Hill, "Activism as Practice: Some Queer Considerations," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 102 (2004): 85.

<sup>20</sup> Hill, "Activism as Practice," 85.

<sup>21</sup> Yvon Bonenfant, "Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres," *Performance Research* 15, no. 3 (2010): 74–80.

<sup>22</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, 1.

<sup>23</sup> A more elaborative response to RuPaul's remarks can be found in the second chapter.

audience participation by conducting some ethnographic research, specifically participant observation: I attend drag shows and report audience's reaction to the lip-syncing segment. When I visited a drag performance, I noticed for example how people are using mobile phones to record, take photos or post on social media during the lip-syncing part.

Next, I will look at multiple expressions of style connected to gender identity created by drag queens. As I mentioned above, presenting as "femme" but identifying as male is one of the many identity forms drag queens might live out. Furthermore, I analyse critiques posed on drag, such as the claim that drag is misogynist. Finally, I look at how Dutch drag queens represent themselves on social media, taking the audience reception into account. What do they choose to show? And what considerations do drag queens make for choosing the parts of the performance they put online?

The final chapter of this thesis comprises the theme of music, and the ways music facilitates queer identities. The accumulating amount of academic articles and book chapters, with an entire book devoted to *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a cherry on top, reveals the general interest in, and value of the topic of lip-syncing. Texts have been written on the intersection between music and queerness, lip-syncing by drag queens, and the ability of queer studies to provide a platform within musicology for underrepresented perspectives. Yet, the evaluation of the ways in which music enables or supports a queer identity during a lip-syncing performance is missing from these texts. This chapter wants to add to this understanding.

As a concept and the discourse surrounding it, music seems to have developed along the same lines as gender identity: in the past three decades, the status of music has been contested and the boundaries liquified in order to increase inclusivity in both definitions and researched identities. In addition, in the past few decades, research on music's effect on human emotion increased, especially since neuro-scientific approaches to music gained more popularity.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, my hypotheses is that the musical part of drag offers a queer space that in other parts of a drag performance is less feasible.<sup>25</sup> Although lip-syncing as a practice has had different connotations throughout time, where its status as appropriation of a playback was associated with financial gain and dismissed in the name of the phallogocentric understanding of authenticity, it is now appreciated through drag culture.<sup>26</sup> Both in *RuPaul's Drag Race* and in live drag shows, lip-syncing is an integral part of the skill set a drag queen should acquire. Besides music and lip-syncing, this chapter will answer several other questions dealing with the

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<sup>24</sup> See for example handbooks like Patrick N. Juslin, and John Sloboda, *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. David Huron also wrote many texts on music and emotion.

<sup>25</sup> As I discuss below, the musical part I refer to here is the lip-syncing part, which the drag queens I interviewed referred to as the 'performance' part of a drag show.

<sup>26</sup> Discussions on authenticity (or historically informed performances) and male versus female creation are too extensive to deal with in this thesis. For further information, I would refer to Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays*, ed. Linda Nochlin (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 147-58, Paul G. Woodford, "Music, Reason, Democracy, and the Construction of Gender," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 35, no 3 (Autumn 2001), 73-86, and Nicholas Cook, "Music as Performance," in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

problem of camp, canonization, and the voice's queer potential.<sup>27</sup> Throughout all chapters, I touch upon these concepts, but the main focus of the concepts lies in its connection to music. These focus points will lead to questions like: what considerations guide drag queens' choice of music for their lip-sync performance? Is there such a thing as unsuitable music for lip-syncing? And what value do drag queens attach to the music during their performance?

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<sup>27</sup> The elaboration of 'camp' will be handled in the chapter on music, but with 'camp', I engage with the way the term evolved, stemming from Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp,'" see Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 53-65.

## Queerness

### *Introduction to that What Matters*

As both Judith Butler and Roxane Gay attest, in life, it is all about that what *matters*.<sup>28</sup> These two writers can be considered nearly polar opposites on the continuum that is feminism. Butler is a philosopher with a body of work that is as dense as it is ground-breaking, and Gay is writing from a much more ‘practical’ position as a cultural critic, who infuses her work clearly with her everyday experience as a “bad feminist.”<sup>29</sup> But when push comes to shove, they both see what *matters*. The following chapter contributes to that what matters, to the queer voices that are erased so easily while they should arguably be the loudest voices in the discussions. That being said, my personal involvement in the issues at hand comes from a particular, ‘second-hand’ position, because I am not a drag performer, and I cannot say I fully identify as queer. Because, as Morris warns, “you can only use the term if it applies to you as well.”<sup>30</sup> My position as a scholar is permeated with feminist thought, and the drag culture seemed a fundamental place to research the intersections of my multiple academic interests. Additionally, although I cannot fully claim a queer identity, I am an LGBTQI+-ally, where I aim to carry out multiple activism within my personal and academic practices. Nelson describes in her book the tension that this puts out, for example when the author talks about: “Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick [who] wanted to make way for *queer* to hold all kinds of resistances and fracturings and mismatches that have little or nothing to do with sexual orientation.”<sup>31</sup> Nelson considers Sedgwick as someone who identifies as queer, while falling into cis-gender norms, or at least having a normative relationship for a long time, but stresses how the person in real life is always different than one claims to be on page. Nelson additionally notes that writing produces some kind of performativity in one’s identity, but “when it comes to my own writing, if I insist that there is a persona or a performativity at work, I don’t mean to say that I’m not myself in my writing, or that my writing somehow isn’t me.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, I am aware of my position as a scholar, and a writer when engaging in queer matters. Throughout this thesis, I keep revisiting my particular position, to reflect on any potential shortcomings, assumptions or prejudices on my side.

### *Defining Queer(ness)*

One of the premises of queerness is that it is difficult to define, or to find consensus over one definition, which makes finding even a working definition hard to do. Therefore, I offer definitions of queerness and queer theory that I will work with in this thesis. As I mentioned in my introduction, in this thesis I use Hill’s definition of “queer” as “a particular form of political dissidence that blurs the dominant binary gender distinction of male and female.”<sup>33</sup> Most of the texts I am using in this chapter, but also

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<sup>28</sup> See Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, and Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Gay, *Bad Feminist*. Besides this compilation of essays, Gay wrote multiple influential works of fiction and is outspoken activist on her social media platforms.

<sup>30</sup> Morris, “On Gaily Reading Music,” 62 (in footnote 27).

<sup>31</sup> Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 35.

<sup>32</sup> Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 75.

<sup>33</sup> Hill, “Activism as Practice,” 85.

throughout my thesis, are written by queer-identifying authors, which is important for this research, as I aim to centre their voices. The existing tension between queer theory and lived queer experience is one of the reasons I use a lot of queer-identifying authors, because, in Sedgwick's words; "it would make sense—if one had the choice—not to cultivate the necessity of a systematic, self-accelerating split between what one is doing and the reasons one does it."<sup>34</sup> Although exactly this happens in the discrepancies that are created by queer theory, Sedgwick seems to, perhaps unconsciously, be aware of the discrepancy in mentioning the split. Being queer and writing about queer theory, then, can be one answer to closing the gap between theory and practice. But as Nelson warns: "you may keep saying that you only speak for yourself, but your very presence in the public sphere begins to congeal difference into a single figure, and pressure begins to bear down hard upon it."<sup>35</sup> Therefore, while academic texts on queerness and analysing the interviews with drag queens, I am aware that authors still speak only from their own position, and are critiqued, pointed out, and grow from them individually.

### *Putting Queer into Practice*

Hill poses multiple challenging questions connected to the overlap that exists when working between queer theory and practice, of which one is particularly fruitful to keep in mind in my research: "what if advocacy work is more about the cultural capital, privilege, and elitism of the one working for justice than getting out of the way of the dreams, desires, pleasures, joys, and angers of the 'rescued?'"<sup>36</sup> It is important to keep posing such a question, in order to stay critical of my own privilege and position, and to keep reassessing my point of view. But it also allows me to take on the challenge to critique 'the cultural capital, privilege, and elitism' that is so present within the humanities. Hill offers some practical advice when engaging in such matters; "queer practice [is] assisting in the creation of new narratives that challenge what can be said and that interrogate taboos around sexuality, notions of the body, and identity for all groups."<sup>37</sup> This applies to any person engaging with queer people, and, in a way, Hill's remark affirms the role of drag queens to create a safe space for all identities. Most importantly, though, "queer visibility is a quintessential and necessary political act and a critical practice in itself."<sup>38</sup> In one of the participants very similar words, "being queer is a political act in and of itself."<sup>39</sup> Violence against queer advocacies are well known in drag and transgender communities, and the slogan "I am not free until we're all free" is seen at many prides and protests.<sup>40</sup> It proves that the political and physical violence done to

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<sup>34</sup> Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 144-5.

<sup>35</sup> Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 92.

<sup>36</sup> Hill, "Activism as Practice," 88.

<sup>37</sup> Hill, "Activism as Practice," 90.

<sup>38</sup> Hill, "Activism as Practice," 92.

<sup>39</sup> Tom ten Hove, interview, April 10, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> The quote can be lead back to Audre Lorde's "The Uses of Anger," a key note speech that later appeared in her book *Sister Outsider*: "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own." See Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," in *Sister Outsider*, ed. Audre Lorde (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 132-33.

members of these groups is still very much present. I claim that drag queens offer a site for queerness to phantom queer people to feel safe and accepted, by very visible showing that it is okay to be different, it is okay to be queer.

Queer visibility is surely put forward by author and drag queen Crystal Rasmussen, who connects fluidity to queerness. Besides the fact that the whole book is coated in queer experience, in one of her entries in *Diary of a Drag Queen*, Crystal specifically discusses queerness, where she comes to a definition that is paradoxical by nature: “queerness is by definition indefinable.”<sup>41</sup> Crystal takes the reader through a very compact history of queerness, namely first as “the attempt to reclaim the slurs of bigots [...] as terms of respect and affection,” to the academic branch that discusses binary oppositions and hierarchies.<sup>42</sup> Queer is, additionally, a contested term, as I mentioned within the context of the tweet I referred to earlier. The term seems to undergo a process of re-evaluation and deconstruction, where different groups reject or appropriate the term for different reasons. One reason for this tendency is offered by Hill, who adds to his definition of ‘queer’: “by *queer* I refer to living out the notion that we can never adequately identify or codify identity; rather, it is about contingent knowledge whose meanings we must constantly reevaluate and reinterpret.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, “queer is about being politically, culturally, and socially dissident.”<sup>44</sup> I, additionally, realize that using the term ‘queer’ does create an opposing effect to ‘non-queer’ or ‘normative’ people. Sedgwick mentions the construction of one term only in *opposition* to another, in contextualizing her “deconstructive strategy.”<sup>45</sup> In this sense, I believe that ‘queer’ is not only an identity that opposes a normative identity, but queer can be used as a way of thinking, or a lens through which one can look. In that regard, providing a ‘queer’ reading, a concept I derived from Morris’ “gay reading,” can change the way language is used to comprehend the world around us. A telling example, given by Morris, is “gay people’s persistent habit of reversing pronouns for concealment and fun.”<sup>46</sup> Sedgwick uses a similar theorisation of queer reading, which, exactly *because* of its nature, enables another way of reading that steers clear from paranoia.<sup>47</sup> The practice of paranoid reading in the humanities has been going on for quite some time now, and is a reflection of the way society views and talks about its human subjects. Sedgwick continues: “what we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.”<sup>48</sup> I argue that drag queens, contrarily, offer reparative readings of and for their community.

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<sup>41</sup> Crystal Rasmussen, *Diary of a Drag Queen* (London: Ebury Press), 2019, 205. I am using the pronoun ‘she,’ and refer to the writer as Crystal, because the female pronoun is the way Tom refers to their drag persona, and Crystal is the one who wrote the book. Tom identifies as non-binary.

<sup>42</sup> Mitchell Morris, “On Gaily Reading Music,” in *Repercussions* 1, no. 1 (spring 1992): 58.

<sup>43</sup> Hill, “Activism as Practice,” 87.

<sup>44</sup> Hill, “Activism as Practice,” 87.

<sup>45</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Morris, “On Gaily Reading Music,” 58.

<sup>47</sup> Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 147.

<sup>48</sup> Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 150-1.

Moving on to queer theory, I use, again, a definition as offered by Hill:

[...] a lens that mediates my activism as praxis, [...] a complex set of notions, a field of research and inquiry, and a process of action. It is rooted in a self-reflexive social, cultural, political, and historical context that acknowledges the legacy of feminism, lesbian and gay studies, and activism, as well as current trends in poststructuralism and critical postmodernism.<sup>49</sup>

Besides the general nature of this definition, to me, Hill claims to be using queer theory as an activist, but queer theory is usually perceived by queer people as insufficient in portraying their lived experience. I do not have a perfect solution for sufficiently portraying queer lived experience, but I do argue that the way I constructed my research aids in building a bridge between theory and practice. By taking my case study, namely the experiences of Dutch drag queens during their lip-sync performances, as a way for drag queens to *reflect* on their queer identity, I am still able to use the theoretical framework as offered by academia, and test these two points of view in compatibility. Hill offers some practical tools when using queer theory: “destabilizing and challenging assumptions is inherent in the very concept of queer theory; it troubles the mainstream understandings of gender and human sexuality. It is self-conscious, deliberate pulling apart of ideas of normality, with the ultimate goal of challenging identity.”<sup>50</sup> For the author, using queer theory in practice offers him four things: “subvert dominant notions; trouble assumptions; bring rigorous scepticism to so-called regimes of truth; and contest the tendency to domesticate, colonize, and sanitize difference.”<sup>51</sup> I can use these pillars as a language to describe some of the strategies used by drag queens when lip-syncing.

The following part of this chapter tries to tackle the fluidity of queerness, while simultaneously providing a text that is supposed to be read. With this, I mean that previous texts dared me to think beyond chronology, which is what I will do, while at the same time retaining a train of thought that makes sense to the reader. To accomplish a non-chronological, but readable text, I am using the answers as provided by the drag queens as a starting point out of which a theoretical discussion will develop. The academic texts I read will therefore contribute to the statements that come forth out of the interviews, instead of working the other way around. I wanted to steer clear from a top-down approach, where the academic texts would lead the arguments (usually by a literature review that the researcher builds up chronologically) but instead let the information as provided by the drag queens take the upper hand. The arguments that flow out of this approach are therefore originating from the answer provided by the participants, coupled by me, the researcher, to academic literature that either confirms the statements, or is in tension with them. Thus, the overarching premise of this thesis, and therefore, my conclusions, will

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<sup>49</sup> Hill, “Activism as Practice,” 85.

<sup>50</sup> Hill, “Activism as Practice,” 86.

<sup>51</sup> Hill, “Activism as Practice,” 86.

cover the ways in which the lived experience coincides with academic texts on the same subject. The next part of this chapter starts with an elaboration on queerness as an identity and as an academic avenue.

*An Illustrative Discussion between Queer Theory and Lived Queer Experience*

To elaborate on discussions that have been taking place concerning the tension between queer theory and queer lived experience, I want to begin by stressing that this thesis is in no way meant to reform academia, as I believe those kind of ground-breaking works are always connected to their socio-cultural context, and connected to each other. My writing did not take place in a vacuum, and per Sedgwick's advice I note that "a point of the book is *not to know* how far its insights and projects are generalizable," to not assume any implications or results my work might have.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, my thesis is part of larger discussions on gender, sexuality and identity politics, where authors wrote seminal works, were critiqued, and wrote seminal works again. Judith Peraino, for example, mentions this larger discussion in her article from 2013, where she identifies "an increased tension between theory and politics."<sup>53</sup> An important example of seminal works that turned out to be a ground-breaking dialogue is, as I mentioned in my introduction, the critique posed on Butler by Nussbaum. The discussion took place right before the turn of this century, which provides me with enough distance to have a historical perspective on it, while still using the discussion as an example of the gap between queer theory and queer lived experience. Nussbaum starts her critique with a tendency in feminist academia that still stands, mostly in the fact that queer people do not feel represented by the academic literature written on their situation.<sup>54</sup> Nussbaum critically speaks about this "symbolic" branch of feminism, noting that members of this group do not enable real change, and as a result, only critique the current society with their wit.<sup>55</sup> This, again, Nussbaum connects to the "recent prominence of French post-modernist thought," which was recent back then, but is still recent today, where one cannot go to an academic conference in the humanities without hearing about at least one white, French philosopher.<sup>56</sup> Or, if I take this thought further, from the moment a student enters a humanities program at a university in the West, the syllabi are filled with the same people, stemming from the same philosophical traditions.<sup>57</sup> As a result, those traditions are being upheld by a system that prioritizes the people coming from that particular philosophical tradition, which leads students to believe they are only taken seriously when engaging with

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<sup>52</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 12.

<sup>53</sup> Judith Peraino, "The Same, But Different: Sexuality and Musicology, Then and Now," ed. by Judith Peraino and Suzanne G. Cusick, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Music and Sexuality, 66, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 827. Peraino focuses in her context on the need to categorise to conform legislations, which causes the tension to which "the very binary of normative/non-normative breaks down under scrutiny, especially with increasing attention paid to how sexuality is enmeshed with other embodied experiences that condition subjectivity." In Peraino, "The Same, but Different," 827.

<sup>54</sup> Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody," 28.

<sup>55</sup> Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody," 28.

<sup>56</sup> Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody," 28.

<sup>57</sup> See for example the case of Cambridge, where the university was critiqued for their use of predominantly white men in their syllabi, which instigated a call for 'decolonizing' their curriculum.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/oct/25/cambridge-academics-seek-to-decolonise-english-syllabus>.



these traditions in their work. Nomi Epstein gave a talk during *Eavesdropping*, a symposium on women in/and music in London in 2018, in which she commented on this practice. Epstein offered a simple form of activism through putting together a bibliography: to break the chain of who gets quoted, a scholar could apply a gender/identity quota when constructing a bibliography.<sup>58</sup> Because academics reference each other, but also go through a bibliography, the long-term result would be a more diverse academic world. In her book *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed points to the same solution: “Feminism is at stake in how we generate knowledge; in how we write, in who we cite.”<sup>59</sup> Ahmed sees “citation [as] feminist memory”, and therefore she “do[es] not cite any white men.”<sup>60</sup> In the same vein, Nussbaum claims that the influence of thinkers like Foucault lead feminists to believe that participating in a freedom movement only perpetuates power structures that lie within. In line with Ahmed, Nussbaum’s claim that through a knowledge production that consists out of writing, an academic can only do so much when referring always to the same people, because it does not set you free. In a way, academia still perpetuates the same power constructs by giving intellectual preference to the same philosophers, who sport similar identities (namely white and male). The way, then, according to Nussbaum, Butler *does* offer practical sites in feminist academia, is by parodying the intellectual preferred philosophers, to achieve “some ways of making fun [that] are subversive assaults on the original norms.”<sup>61</sup> Parodic performances is something I touch upon in this thesis too, but works different in nowadays drag community.

Nussbaum sees Butler’s work as “ponderous and obscure,” mostly because of the many theorists Butler refers to, without reflecting on her position on the points of the theorists, merely using them for the benefit of her own argument. Strikingly, Nussbaum alludes to Butler’s text as a form of—what Sedgwick a few years later will theorise as—“paranoid reading.”<sup>62</sup> Nussbaum claims that “mystification as well as hierarchy are the tools of [Butler’s] practice, a mystification that eludes criticism because it makes few definite claims.”<sup>63</sup> A warning that is posed by Sedgwick on this type of thinking is when engaging “in sexual-political thinking of the deconstructive understanding that particular insights generate, are lined with, and at the same time are themselves structures by particular opacities.”<sup>64</sup> Nussbaum claims Butler is unaware of these opacities, boldly stating that Butler’s “obscurity creates an aura of importance,” because the reader cannot follow the text easily.<sup>65</sup> The broader claims Nussbaum makes over the pages is that clarity of writing and an author’s “uncertainty” can make a reader swallow even the most bitter philosophical pill. So, as Nussbaum argues, Butler’s theories fail to grant agency to the self, therefore “never destabiliz[ing] the larger system,” which begs the question: what would destabilize the larger

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<sup>58</sup> Nomi Epstein, “Transforming the List: Activism through Bibliography,” London: Juliet Fraser, supported by the Hinrichsen Foundation and the Music & Letters Trust, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

<sup>60</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 11.

<sup>61</sup> Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody,” 40.

<sup>62</sup> See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-51.

<sup>63</sup> Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody,” 40.

<sup>64</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody,” 39.

system.<sup>66</sup> Nussbaum herself offers “parodic performances” as one way to destabilize gender norms, and shows the ways in which Butler does not back this method up.<sup>67</sup> The biggest fault in Butler’s work, according to Nussbaum, is the “quietism” that originates from this parodic re-enacting, and Nussbaum urges Butler, and feminists alike, to get off the ivory tower that is academia, and concern themselves with day-to-day struggles women all over the world are coping with.

However, as time has told, this is easier said than done, and I believe that in her later work, Butler contributed to this cause more than Nussbaum anticipated on when writing her critique. Butler’s earlier work even led to change “because people did not rest content with parodic performance: they demanded, and to some extent they got, social upheaval.”<sup>68</sup> I believe this argument connects particularly well to drag, but from the opposite point of view: by participating in parodic performance, drag queens enable social upheaval. Some interesting questions Nussbaum poses, particularly for my research, are: “isn’t hierarchy in drag still hierarchy? And is it really true [...] that domination and subordination are the roles that women must play in every sphere, and if not subordination, then mannish domination?”<sup>69</sup> This well-fitting remark poses a larger question of critique that Butler’s work often received: even when you are aware of the workings of parodic re-enacting, are you still perpetuating the power relations that oppressed you in the first place? Drag has a specific role here, a role that also changed since the time Nussbaum wrote her critique. In 1993, Butler wrote *Bodies that Matter*, which turned out to be a seminal work in body and identity politics. There is a particular chapter dedicated to drag, of which I discuss the most important points for my research in the chapter on drag and representation, but first, I now discuss the most important findings brought in by the participants of my research.

### *Method*

“That Lip-Synching Feeling: Drag Performance as Digging the Past” by Stephen Farrier, shows that in the local study of drag, in Farrier’s case, South East England, each drag show offers specific insights in the local “pop culture, gay or queer culture,” and the author wants to make sure that one type of lip-synching does not become “emblematic of all drag.”<sup>70</sup> On the one hand, taking Farrier’s advice, I want to stress that I am referencing the Dutch drag scene, which to me was quite obscure before engaging with it. I assumed most of the drag culture would centre around Amsterdam, which was true to a certain

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<sup>66</sup> Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody,” 39. I use the term ‘agency’ here as described in the Oxford Dictionary of Gender Studies as “A concept much used in political theory, sociology, and philosophy to refer to the possibility a person has to act in a particular context.” See Gabriele Griffin, “Agency,” in *A Dictionary of Gender Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). ‘Agency’, as a term, has been contested and re-used while developing along the same lines as feminist and critical theory. For example, debates about decolonization have influenced what the term means connected to particular oppressed societal groups.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 41. A ‘parodic performance’ comes from Nussbaum’s assessment of the status of feminism in the USA around the time the article was written, defined as “symbolic verbal politics,” and strongly connected to “French post-modernist thought.” See Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody,” 38.

<sup>68</sup> Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody,” 43.

<sup>69</sup> Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody,” 44.

<sup>70</sup> Stephen Farrier, “That Lip-Synching Feeling: Drag Performance as Digging the Past,” in *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer*, ed. by Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 194 & 201.

extent, but I did not anticipate the scope, both geographically and symbolically that the Dutch drag scene entailed. Therefore, I stress that this research is not one about local drag scenes, but instead focuses more on the individual drag queens.

I found the participants of my interviews as drag queens offered themselves through social media, which I used as an entry point into the drag scene. I began by searching for articles that mentioned Dutch drag queens, then, by researching social media platforms, like Facebook, but mostly using Instagram, I got to know which drag queens were active. Through their social media network, I found a pool of fifteen drag queens, and through Instagram I invited them for the interviews. Six of them responded, of which two participated as a couple who both do drag, and these drag queens together became the final participants of my research.

### *Drag Queens and Queerness*

So how do the interviewed drag queens experience their queerness? Before trying to answer this question, I want to clarify that identity politics and the societal role of the identity were not always acknowledged as research subjects.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, the language that is used to describe certain identities has only recently been formed, as are some theories that conceptualize the interplay of different parts of one identity. Besides the fact that all parts of one's identity are at interplay, queerness is generally connected to sex and gender. Nelson, for example, quotes Denise Riley, who notes that "it's not possible to live twenty-four hours a day soaked in the immediate awareness of one's sex. Gendered self-consciousness has, mercifully, a flickering nature."<sup>72</sup> This 'flickering nature,' the instability offered by gender, is how Ahmed connects phenomenology to queerness, and how a lot of authors connect their theory to the fluid characteristic of queerness.<sup>73</sup> And indeed, it offers a way to think about gender beyond the physical manifestation, where the conscious awareness of multiple parts of one's identity is also something that can turn on and off. Think of situations where your gender plays a role, like going into a certain bathroom that is assigned to a gender, but also more complex and contested ones, like a surprised reaction a woman surgeon gets when she specifies her profession.<sup>74</sup> In these reactions, the gender you possess, or the one you portray to the outside world, is reflected back to you.

Crystal connects the academic treatment of queerness with the experience of living a queer life, by saying: "but, for most of us (well, me at least), queerness doesn't live in lofty theory books or the vocal

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<sup>71</sup> With identity politics, I mean "a political disposition and political arguments founded on particular traits or interests concerning a specific group of people. Often centring on gender, race, ethnicity, or religious beliefs, identity politics has been concerned with making political claims based on group identities that share these traits or interests." See Gabriele Griffin, "Identity Politics" in *A Dictionary of Gender Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 17. See also Denise Riley, "Bodies, Identities, Feminisms," in *"Am I That Name?": Language, Discourse, Society*, ed. Denise Riley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), 96.

<sup>73</sup> Phenomenology is "A philosophical movement based on the investigation of 'phenomena' (i.e. things as apprehended by consciousness) rather than on the existence of anything outside of human consciousness." See Chris Baldick, "Phenomenology," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). The term is extensively employed in literary studies, making its way into other disciplines of the humanities, where Ahmed took it into the domain of gender studies.

<sup>74</sup> These are merely a few examples, but almost everything in our current society is gendered in the sense of jobs, clothing, and the language that we use.

chords of bullies. It lives, instead, in everything we do and say and feel. For me everything feels queer because my experience of it is queer.”<sup>75</sup> The way Crystal approaches her experience versus that of others, I think, is exemplary of queer writing, which means writing with an inclusion without forcing into a particular experience that might not be the same for all queer people. In this sense, her text is more descriptive than it is prescriptive, again, one of the ways in which queerness can be used as a lens, in Crystal’s case, living a queer life enables her to write in a queer way.

### *Voices that Matter – Experiences of Dutch Drag Queens*

To see how Dutch drag queens experience their queerness, I now turn to the answers provided by six drag queens that were interviewed in the period of April and May 2019. The participants of the interviews were asked to fill out a consent form, where they also indicated if they wanted to be referred to by their real name, or as anonymous. They all agreed on using their real name, and for the purpose of clarity, I will use their last name.

The drag queens come from different socio-geographical, economic and, cultural backgrounds, but have in common that they have all been involved in drag for a few years already. Their geographical location differs: two perform in Groningen (Franklin Bernabela and Tom ten Hove), two mostly in Amsterdam, although both of them were born outside of the ‘randstad’ (Tom Haegens and Pieter Roberts, respectively in Zeeland and Limburg) and two live in Utrecht (Bjorn Berendsen and Maarten Klaassen).<sup>76</sup> Although the participants live in different parts of the Netherlands, while talking to them, it became evident that Amsterdam is the centre of the drag scene in the Netherlands.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, the only participant who earns their income as a full-time drag queen, lives and works in Amsterdam. But since drag has become a popular form of entertainment, all queens indicate that they are being hired for private parties that take place all over the Netherlands, from birthday parties to big company events. Although I did not ask the participants about specific identity traits, such as their age or their cultural background, I estimate the drag queens’ ages range between 20 and 40 years of age. All of them are Dutch, which became clear when I engaged with the participants about the possibility for them to answer in English. Some participants were reluctant to answer in English, because they thought they could voice themselves better in their mother tongue, Dutch, but in the end, all interviews were in English. One of them is a person of colour (Bernabela), where he, I assume, has a migration background. Although these parts of their identities were not discussed in the interviews, it does play a part and might influence their experience of queerness. Butler brings in the importance of ethnicity as one of the axes of identity that

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<sup>75</sup> Rasmussen, *Diary of a Drag Queen*, 205-6.

<sup>76</sup> The ‘randstad’ encapsulates the largest cities of the Netherlands, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Den Haag, and Utrecht, and their sub areas.

<sup>77</sup> Because of the scope of this research, I cannot offer any conclusive differences between the different cities where the interviewed drag queens participated in the drag scene. This would, however, be an interesting point of departure for further research.

enables oppression, which is why I am mentioning Bernabela's assumed background, since it could influence his experience of queerness.<sup>78</sup>

Another part of the participants' identity that was not touched upon in the interviews was class; although during the interviews the matter of income sometimes came up, the class differences between the interviewed drag queens stayed somewhat opaque. Some mentioned their upbringing or education, some even their current jobs, which only leads me to conclude that there are class differences among the participants.

### *Dutch Drag Queens on Gender Identity*

The way the drag queens I interviewed experience queerness differs. My first question on queerness was bluntly if the participants felt like they had a queer identity. Two of the drag queens were outspoken about identifying as cis-gender (meaning a gender conforming identity) in answering the question, but did mention that their identity as a drag queen "blur the lines."<sup>79</sup> Bernabela started his interview with a strong statement about being cis-gender, but already began nuancing himself when he continued describing, for example, the things he thinks of during the day.<sup>80</sup> He mentioned clothes and make-up as topics that occupy his mind, which are mostly perceived as 'feminine' topics.<sup>81</sup> Bernabela also said that as a drag queen, "you spend a lot of time with both genders, not only on stage but in life, also," comparing gender identity to a scale, where the complete opposites would be 'male' and 'female', and the needle moving in between those binaries, with drag as the middle point.<sup>82</sup> Seeing gender identity as a spectrum with two opposing ends, where people float somewhere in between, is also mentioned by Berendsen.<sup>83</sup> Both Berendsen and ten Hove additionally connected gender identity and sexual preference to their personal definition of 'queer,' which is a thought that is reflected in the academic treatment of queerness, to which I return later.<sup>84</sup>

### *Fitting a Box*

Almost all participants used the allegory of the 'box' when answering the questions on queerness. Roberts answered the same question I discuss above, with also an emphasis on sexuality, but emphasising that he does not like to put himself "into one of those categories, boxes."<sup>85</sup> Ten Hove additionally talked about the "boxes," connecting it to queerness, as "mostly moving away from traditional perceptions of identity in general [where] you don't live outside of the box, because there is no box."<sup>86</sup> Haegens also

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<sup>78</sup> Judith Butler, "Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion," in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, ed. by Judith Butler, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 92-3.

<sup>79</sup> Franklin Bernabela, interview, April 10, 2019. Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>80</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>81</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>82</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>83</sup> Bjorn Berendsen, and Maarten Klaassen, interview, May 30, 2019.

<sup>84</sup> See for example the quote from Sedgwick mentioned above, where she urges we move beyond a queer identity that is merely connected to sexuality.

<sup>85</sup> Pieter Roberts, interview, May 20, 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

spoke about “floating in the middle,” which alludes to the general conception that there are two ‘main’ genders, a binary opposition.<sup>87</sup> Roberts, too, mentioned the box, when trying to define queer as “everything that is [...] out of the box?”, while questioning what it exactly is that is *in* the box, which fits the difficulty of the question: it has no set boundaries. The same is emphasised by ten Hove, who mentioned that “[queer] is not supposed to be defined,” and that “queerness is very linked to intersectionality.”<sup>88</sup> Here, ten Hove brought in the term ‘intersectionality’, coined by Kimberlè Crenshaw in her seminal work “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.”<sup>89</sup> Afterwards, Tom went into the prejudices connected to each box: “...the drag box conjures up all different kinds of connotations, immediately [...] but it has become very exhausting for me to *think* in all those types of boxes,” coming to the conclusion that “to me, queerness or queer identity is letting go of everything you think that defines you, and just being you, rather than being anything people think you are. [...] I think queerness more so describes my perception of life and perception of people, rather than my perception of myself.”<sup>90</sup> Ten Hove advocated that “it’s about unboxing things.”<sup>91</sup> The fact that all the drag queens mention ‘boxes’ and categories remind me of Ahmed’s description of putting something in brackets. She claims that this “act of ‘putting aside’ might also confirm the fantasy of a subject who is transcendent, who places himself above the contingent world of social matter, a world that differentiates objects and subjects according to how they already appear.”<sup>92</sup> There is a notable tension going on in this statement when applied to drag queens: because the drag queen “already appears” to be deliberately different, over the top feminine, it also already transcends “the world of social matter,” while at the same time deliberately hiding the fact that under all the layers of make-up; they are men.<sup>93</sup> Or, at least, that is what the participants of my research stated, because not every drag queen is identifying as male. The make-up, however, does pose a literal layer on the drag queen that, in a day-to-day setting, would not be there, or, at least, differently used or interpreted.

Haegens saw queer as more connected to other people, than to his own identity per se:

I think [queer] is some kind of safe word, to make yourself...to explain yourself to people who don’t necessarily know what queer culture is about [...] just to cover all the basis. For me, it’s a very broad concept, I think of everything not straight by the book, or not gay by the book, not a drag queen by the book, just anything in between.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Tom Haegens, interview, April 25, 2019. Additionally, the feeling of ‘floating in between’ is a concept that is discussed regularly in transgender studies.

<sup>88</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>89</sup> Kimberlè Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (July 1991): 1241–99.

<sup>90</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>91</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>92</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 33.

<sup>93</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 33.

<sup>94</sup> Haegens, interview.

Haegens also mentioned that he is not consciously putting ‘queer’ together with his lived identity, just as Roberts, who said “I am who I am, and I do what I do, what I like.”<sup>95</sup>

*Agency and the Drag Persona*

I was not the first person to interview the drag queens, and some participants commented on the stereotypical, ignorant questions they tend to get, where the interviewer asked things like: “do you want to be a woman?”<sup>96</sup> “No,” said ten Hove, who commented on this prejudice, “I want to be a drag queen.”<sup>97</sup> The fact that the participants categorised drag as a whole new, separate identity says enough.<sup>98</sup> As Butler states,

one might be tempted to argue that drag is not related to the ridicule or degradation or appropriation of women: when it is men in drag as women, what we have is the destabilization of gender itself, a destabilization that is denaturalizing and that calls into question the claims of normativity and originality by which gender and sexual oppression sometimes operate.<sup>99</sup>

Here, Butler touches upon one of the biggest critiques posed on drag: the assumption that drag is merely men, parodying women. In line with this thought, Anna Poletti discusses that the drag analysed by Butler is an example of a focus on heteronormative relations in society, where the binary was still *upheld* by the drag queens. Butler wonders “whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms,” saying that “drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality.”<sup>100</sup> The critique continues: “at best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power than one opposes.”<sup>101</sup>

Similar critique is voiced by multiple authors, such as Poletti, but also Meredith Heller, and Elizabeth Kaminski and Verta Taylor. Stemming from the ballroom scene, drag denotes both “changeable” and “unchangeable” identities, and in Heller’s words, drag is a “theatrical gender-bending [that] is also canonically defined as a fictive gender act that opposes the real identity of the actor,” which is produced through “sex essentialism.”<sup>102</sup> Heller poses a critique on that part of drag, broadening the scope of what drag entails to move away from merely reaffirming cis gender identities. Poletti delineates that in drag, with an eye on queerness, resides

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<sup>95</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>96</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>97</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>98</sup> Butler, “Gender is Burning,” 87.

<sup>99</sup> Butler, “Gender is Burning,” 87.

<sup>100</sup> Butler, “Gender Is Burning,” 85.

<sup>101</sup> Butler, “Gender Is Burning,” 85.

<sup>102</sup> Heller, “RuPaul Realness,” 3.

a proliferation of terms for resisting naturalized gender categories [that] have evolved in queer cultures; terms such as trans, gender-queer, nonbinary and gender fluid are utilized alongside longer standing terms such as butch and femme. These newer terms explicitly name—and seek to make intelligible—gender identities that bear little relation to the gendered binary and refigure that supposed stability of the body as the material foundation for identity.<sup>103</sup>

She continues:

This new form of drag, underpinned by subcultural ideas about queering gender by disrupting a view of the body as an immutable fact of identity, has become a key point of contact between queer cultures and popular culture, where queer world-making practices [...] interact with the institutional and representational cultures that maintain a commitment to the facticity of heterosexuality and gendered identity as an organizing principle.<sup>104</sup>

These examples move away from the societal binary man-woman, and are in opposition to the traditional way of ‘doing’ drag, as it originated at the New York balls in the 1980’s. In these balls, traditionally lower class, trans people of colour tried to ‘pass’ as biological women.<sup>105</sup> In ten Hove’s words, “drag and trans identities used to be much closer together.”<sup>106</sup> Sedgwick lists the contradictions in the modern understanding of the binary of sexualities, namely “the contradiction between seeing same-sex object choice on the one hand as a matter of *liminality* or *transitivity* between genders, and seeing in on the other hand as reflecting an impulse of separatism—though by no means necessarily political separatism—within each gender.”<sup>107</sup> I argue that this contradiction is visible in drag shows, which the next part of the chapter shows.

### *The Value of Queerness in Drag*

The next questions I posed were “what does queerness mean to you?”, and “does your queer identity come to an expression in your drag?”, which proved to create more nuanced and uncertain answers.<sup>108</sup> Where the previous question brought forth quite well-rounded answers, this question that connects queerness to drag resulted in answers that interrogated the gender boundaries. Bernabela, for example, said his drag is “emphasizing the fact that gender is kind of changeable.”<sup>109</sup> Two people answered that queerness in their drag meant “what at the time, for me, is the perfect image of a human being,” and that “sometimes it’s not even human,” thereby moving away from the gender binary.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Anna Poletti, “The Fiction of Identity: Drag, Affect, Genres, Facticity,” *Frame* 31, no. 2 (November 2018): 40.

<sup>104</sup> Poletti, “The Fiction of Identity,” 40-1. See also Lauren Berlant, and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 558.

<sup>105</sup> Butler, “Gender is Burning,” 88.

<sup>106</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>107</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1-2. Emphasis mine.

<sup>108</sup> I came to realize that the term ‘queer’ as used in my research is somewhat a contested one, which was affirmed by the participants, who mostly did not use the term in connection to their identity. For clarity’s sake, however, I will use the term throughout this thesis, for lack of a better term on my part.

<sup>109</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>110</sup> Haegens, interview. Bernabela, interview.



Roberts referred to himself in drag, by noting that “when I’m on stage, I am a freak for a lot of people: I’m dressed like a woman,” which he connects to a queer identity, because to him “every drag queen is queer.”<sup>111</sup> Roberts elaborated: “on stage, that’s the best thing, to show your drag and show your identity,” so for him, doing drag is living out your identity.<sup>112</sup> Ten Hove had the same idea about drag and queerness, where he states: “I think that drag *has* to be queer, it cannot *not* be queer, because you’re automatically diffusing the lines between stereotypical gender-expressions.”<sup>113</sup> Haegens confirmed this idea, where he says: “for me, there are no rules, or no stigmas, or no eras, no music styles [...] I just take everything around me that I like and put it into one that I think forms an identity.”<sup>114</sup>

### *Can a Song be Queer?*

Bernabela referred to the history of the LGBTQ community when dealing with the question about queerness and drag. Farrier discusses this too in his article, in the way in which drag queens connect to their queer history by using particular songs. Farrier advocates that lip-syncing is “a key technique in drag’s dramaturgical toolkit, proposing that drag performance in specific locations serves to communicate or exchange historical material related to local LGBTQ communities without recourse to heteronormative structures of heritability.”<sup>115</sup> Bernabela stressed that he “love[s] queer culture and the gay, LGBT culture that we have,” incorporating part of that history into his drag shows.<sup>116</sup> In their research on lip-syncing and collective identity, Kaminski and Taylor note that a “song [can] conjure up memories of the past, awaken emotions that ordinarily lurk far beneath the surface, and create feelings of common purpose even among individuals with to previous connection to each other.”<sup>117</sup> Ahmed’s exploration of “paternal relationships” between disciplines proves helpful to think through and beyond heteronormative constructions of heritability: when you become a drag queen, you usually obtain a ‘drag mother,’ whom is usually the head of a certain house, carrying a family name.<sup>118</sup> The ‘family resemblance’ is part of the written paths that you must *not* deviate from, even though doing drag itself is a way of deviating. Nevertheless, the way these family relations are forged are completely different than the one’s a person is born into, therefore, drag offers a queer space of belonging and learning family values.

Additionally, Farrier takes the sentiment expressed by Bernabela further, focusing in his text on the temporality of the practice of lip-syncing as a way in which queer communities can refute traditions from the normative culture and create an alternative form of living. Lip-syncing is one way in which this happens, for example, by using music from the past to tell a message of empowerment in current times.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>112</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>113</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>114</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>115</sup> Farrier, “That Lip-Syncing Feeling,” 192.

<sup>116</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>117</sup> Elizabeth Kaminski, and Verta Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Syncing Up Here: Music and Collective Identity in Drag Performances,” in *Identity Work in Social Movements*, ed. J. Reger, D. J. Myers, and R. L. Einwohner, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 70.

<sup>118</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 22.

<sup>119</sup> Farrier, “That Lip-Syncing Feeling,” 198.

Berendsen, however, sees a clear connection between queerness and a particular song, when he notes that “one song is more queer than the other.”<sup>120</sup> Berendsen complemented this thought by talking about the movements connected to a certain song: if he lip-syncs to a ballad, it is harder to incorporate more feminine movements, just as the outfit you wear can hamper the queer effect connected to this embodied state.<sup>121</sup> Nadine Hubbs additionally argues that some songs work well in a queer context, because they are representative for the voice of the “little people.”<sup>122</sup> This, she says, offers a way for audiences who need it, to identify with the character portrayed.

Another similarity I noticed, was that almost all drag queens connected their experience of queerness during a lip-sync performance to the reaction, or even the fact that there is, the audience. Ten Hove said in his answer: “I think it’s a co-construction between the performer and the audience.”<sup>123</sup> Roberts mentioned the importance of the audience by saying: “I want the crowd to be entertained.”<sup>124</sup> Haegens added: “the way I feel, the way I look, the way I see people enjoy, the way I see people be mesmerized, be confused, be happy, be weird. It just gives me energy to see people’s reaction.”<sup>125</sup> Klaassen and Berendsen connected the audience reception to the choice of song, where “the lyrics, or because of the person who sings it is more queer, or the subject is more queer, so you start to make it more queer [...] yourself.”<sup>126</sup> Later, when the couple speak about queerness and lip-syncing, they mentioned the audience again, in the context of energy: “sometimes the energy is really high, and usually then, the queerness will probably be more...because you get the energy from the audience, and you will move different, you will give more energy back.”<sup>127</sup> As Berendsen’s statement on the queerness of a song, here, he seemed to connect queerness to an embodied state where he feels more feminine. Klaassen elaborated that he feels

[...] more feminine when I am in drag, and that is a transformation that you go through, when [...] I’m going from Klaassen to Amy, you can notice that some things are changing, because when I’m doing my make-up—you told me this also [referring to Berendsen] last night—there’s a moment when I go to the mirror and I’m like [at this point, Klaassen strikes a pose, as if he’s looking at himself in the mirror], and I don’t do that in my normal [routine].<sup>128</sup>

As Ahmed states, “we could say that history ‘happens’ in the very repetition of gestures, which is what gives bodies their tendencies.”<sup>129</sup> The history of womanhood is, in a way, re-enacted through drag.

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<sup>120</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>121</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>122</sup> Nadine Hubbs, “I Will Survive’: Musical Mappings of Queer Social Space in a Disco Anthem,” *Popular Music* 26, no. 2 (2007): 236.

<sup>123</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>124</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>125</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>126</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>127</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>128</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>129</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 56.

The feminine gestures are worked out extravagantly, while the performing of femininity has its own history that is engaged with on the stage. Because of the “repetition of gestures,” that through “effort [...] becomes effortless—is precisely what makes history disappear in the moment of its enactment,” bodies and gestures are perceived in a certain way that is socio-historically specific.<sup>130</sup> This process is mirrored in drag: audiences started to accept drag only in a specific time, where drag shows were much more visible through shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.<sup>131</sup> In addition to this thought, Butler ponders: “one might consider that identification is always an ambivalent process,” which I think connects well to the point Klaassen made in the quote above. At a certain point, one to two hours into doing drag make-up, Klaassen suddenly *feels* different, he has access to a confidence that he does not have when he is out of drag. Butler continues with:

Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated. [...] They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely.<sup>132</sup>

This quote, together with the statement put forward by Klaassen and Berendsen, refer back to the general critique drag endures regularly: if Klaassen and Berendsen mimic the movements of a gender-binary, namely normative femininity, does this then perpetuate the embodied stereotype connected to women? I believe, however, the drag couple mention these in full understanding that, because they are men, the movements, even though stereotypically feminine, move them into queer territory, to which the music is of aid.

Roberts, and most of the other interviewed queens (all, except Haegens) did not identify as queer in his day-to-day life, although ten Hove has mentioned that he might not be queer in his day-to-day look, but *is* queer in his behaviour. Ten Hove elaborated: “my queerness in that sense would express itself in the fact that I’m not very judgemental towards people, in general, and I try to keep an open mind.”<sup>133</sup> For me, this creates tension between ten Hove’s day-to-day persona, and his drag persona. As I mention in the next chapter, misogyny has had a particular place in drag, whether it was posed as a critique on drag, or bordering on irony. By mentioning his queerness as an approach to other people, ten Hove seems to live a life of acceptance, while his drag persona “hates everyone.”<sup>134</sup> Haegens, on the other hand, has his queerness seeping into his physical appearance. He described his day-to-day look as “always floating in the middle, people are always looking twice. [...] people are always like: ‘*what* is that?’”<sup>135</sup> Besides Butler,

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<sup>130</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 56.

<sup>131</sup> The way in which the show creates space is discussed further in the chapter on drag.

<sup>132</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 56.

<sup>133</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>134</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>135</sup> Haegens, interview.

Poletti references the fictionality of gender, when talking about “queer lives and identities [that] have long been a force for challenging and reshaping common-sense ideas of why and how particular ‘facts’ are taken for the truth of identity.”<sup>136</sup> In a way, that is exactly the reason why I chose drag as a research subject, because it contests and disrupts normative forms of identity, as the way people think about gender. Klaassen, contrarily, said: “I don’t really identify as queer. I see myself as LGBT, and I think LGBT is part of queer, the queer community, but I don’t see myself as a queer person.” Berendsen agreed: “yeah, but it’s also because we never use that word, it’s not so common to use it for ourselves.”<sup>137</sup> This connects to the opinion expressed earlier in this chapter that having a language to describe certain developments is of great importance in the queer community. To sum up these opinions, drag performers have had a complicated history of using drag to either confirm or disrupt normative ideas about gender identity. Drag itself went through multiple changes, of which multiple I engage with in this research.

### *The Expression of Queerness During a Lip-Sync Performance*

When I came to my final question, which was essentially my core research question, I had already been talking with the drag queens for quite some time (ranging between 25 minutes and an hour and a half). The answers as proposed by the drag queens were therefore on the one hand almost a summary, or reflection, of the answers they gave before, while on the other they proved to be a well-thought out consideration of queerness during their respective lip-sync performance. In general, it is most common to lip-sync to songs either sang by female singers, or by drag queens. Contrarily to the others, Berendsen and Klaassen did not seem to share this idea of ‘challenging and reshaping’ ideas about gender during a lip-sync performance. Berendsen even bluntly stated: “I don’t really see the relation with lip-syncing, because it doesn’t have to be connected to queer [...] it’s really over the top, and it’s really sassy, but it’s not necessarily connected.”<sup>138</sup> Bernabela returned to his opinion on the importance of knowing the history of queer culture. He connects this to the audience’s knowledge of queer culture, and what is considered as pillars of queer music, which is something he could plug into during a lip-sync performance.<sup>139</sup> Ten Hove had a similar conviction; when he discussed doing “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor (one of the most famous ‘gay anthems’), he says that as a result, “you create a queer space with drag.”<sup>140</sup> Roberts was the only one who, during the interview, actively engaged with the aspect of the female voice in the music, even stressing the importance of using the female voice during a lip-sync performance.<sup>141</sup> When I engaged with that answer, and asked if that meant he would never lip-sync to a male voice, he did mention the use of songs as sung by drag queens, so male voices but performed as their female counterpart.<sup>142</sup> Haegens

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<sup>136</sup> Poletti, “The Fiction of Identity,” 37.

<sup>137</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>138</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>139</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>140</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>141</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>142</sup> Roberts, interview.

added to this that songs that use “gay or queer slang” can connect to the audience, because they get the reference, they know the language.<sup>143</sup> Farrier can add that “quotidian knowledges in the context of queer temporalities reveal a structure that enables a passing on of historical material that does not engage a temporal normativity that values ‘high-ranking’ historical knowledge.”<sup>144</sup> With this, the author means that quoting—which, in lip-syncing, means using a certain song because of its lyrics, or socio-cultural context—teaches younger queer audience members, or new drag queens, what the history of queer songs is.

Klaassen and Berendsen also rated the level of queerness in each song, concluding: “so the song really helps to feel more queer, or act more queer, like, more feminine, queer.”<sup>145</sup> As I mentioned in my introduction, lip-syncing itself held a changing position within the reception: just like pop-artists who lip-synced to music that was supposed to be live, the live performance was held in a higher esteem than their lip-synced equivalent. But, as Farrier argues through Carol Langley, lip-syncing was never merely the inability of drag queens to sing live, but lip-syncing “appropriates the feminine voice; foregrounds the choreographic aspect of drag; serves as a vehicle of recognition; produces texture, layering and complexity; makes a political statement; and serves as a marker for the tradition of the reveal.”<sup>146</sup> Therefore, lip-syncing (to female voices) conjure up much more than merely entertainment: it meshes it with politics, as I further discuss in the next chapter on drag and representation.

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<sup>143</sup> Haegens, interview. More on the language used in drag is explained in the chapter on drag and representation.

<sup>144</sup> Farrier, “That Lip-Syncing Feeling,” 199.

<sup>145</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>146</sup> Farrier, “That Lip-Syncing Feeling,” 195. See also Carol Langley, “Borrowed Voice: The Art of Lip-Syncing in Sydney Drag,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 48 (2006): 9-12.

## Drag and Representation

If there is to be a *queerness* in musicology, if the academic discourse on music is to accept and retain the tint of other speech, then we must constantly bring questions of reception and interpretation to the fore.<sup>147</sup>

A lot of the complexities of gender, language, identity, and expression get played out in the world of drag.<sup>148</sup>

Without labelling drag as the “epitome of gender performativity,” as Farrier warns me in his chapter, drag is a fruitful site to debunk hegemony in Western culture.<sup>149</sup> On the other hand, “if gender shapes what we ‘do do,’ then it shapes what we can do. Gender could thus be described as a bodily orientation, a way in which bodies get directed by their actions over time.”<sup>150</sup> I argue that this has happened in drag over the past few decades, up to the point that the genderbending/genderfuck movement within drag is an utopian prediction of what gender potentially could be.

Ever since the 1980’s, drag shows have been a consistent part of the gay scenes in multiple parts of the United States, where “drag performances have been an important gay and lesbian movement tactical repertoire that melds politics and entertainment to challenge conventional understanding of gender and sexuality and to illuminate gay life for mainstream heterosexual audiences.”<sup>151</sup> Although this statement seems both noble and necessary, the point Kaminski and Taylor make does not completely coincide with the sentiment expressed by the participants of my research. More so, it might have been the case that drag does all the things as mentioned in the quote above, but ‘challeng[ing] conventional understanding of gender and sexuality’ could also be an effect, from which the cause was more to create a community where queer/non-binary people felt safe. Of course, this differs per time period, but looking at drag presently, and looking at it over a decade ago, it becomes evident that the effect as described by Kaminski and Taylor may not have been the initial intention of the drag queen performing nowadays. However, drag shows have had these effects on audiences, intentional or unintentional, being it mediated through *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, or in local bars.

So how do drag queens achieve this mixture of politics and entertainment? In a very practical sense, most drag shows that I have seen, been to, or read descriptions of in academic literature, consist of multiple parts that can be categorised broadly in two main aspects: hosting and performing. Drag queens use performing synonymously with lip-syncing, while lip-syncing can consist of a musical aspect (live singing or lip-syncing), dancing, acrobatics, and so forth. Hosting is used to connect different parts of the show, where humour is used to make fun of the audience, and the drag queens themselves. Both of these categories are analysed in this chapter, and measured by their ‘mixture of politics and entertainment.’

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<sup>147</sup> Morris, “On Gaily Reading Music,” 49.

<sup>148</sup> Natalie Wynn/ContraPoints, “Pronouns,” YouTube video, November 2, 2018, <https://youtu.be/9bbINLWtMKI>.

<sup>149</sup> Farrier, “That Lip-Synching Feeling,” 194.

<sup>150</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 60.

<sup>151</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 49.

According to the academic literature, drag shows mix politics and entertainment by “tak[ing] up space that they were not intended to inhabit, [where after] something other than the reproduction of the facts of the matter happens. The hope that reproduction fails is the hope for new impressions, for new lines to emerge, new objects, or even new bodies.”<sup>152</sup> By taking the stage, dressed in drag, drag queens not only question, but parody and change normative gender identities. In order to “create new folds” in certain spaces, you need “orientation [that] is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space.”<sup>153</sup> Drag performers play important roles in showcasing alternative, non-normative identities for the bigger (heterosexual) audience. The performance of queerness and gender identity through drag can therefore be seen as “mechanism of subversion.”<sup>154</sup> Moreover, “attempts to undermine hegemonic (sex)ual identity formation are part of the long and celebrated history of drag,” although race still needs to be taken into careful consideration.<sup>155</sup> Morris sees a potential in drag shows (probably not the televised one, especially considering this article was written in 1992) to, “produce a counter-truth to the established orders of compulsory heterosexuality and unambiguous, unalterable gender identity.”<sup>156</sup> It seems that the academic researchers concerned with drag see the potentials to change the world.

The role of the drag queen as entertainer plays an important part in this chapter, because “performativity is not a consciously chosen set of actions, but an unconscious, compelled response to the requirement to give a legible ‘account of oneself’ in order to be recognized as a member of the social field.”<sup>157</sup> As Ahmed poses, in general “phenomenology turns us towards things, in terms of how they reveal themselves in the present.”<sup>158</sup> Taking queer phenomenology seems suitable for discussing drag queens, because the object, the reveal, and the nearness all seem appropriate when thinking about a drag show. The object in this case is drag, the reveal is the way drag queens question gender identities, and the nearness is the interrelation between the audience and the performer. By thinking through these proximities, Ahmed creates a *queer* phenomenology, one that takes the object into its social space. Of course, drag queens are not “things” or “objects”, but as I argue, the drag as performance can be seen as the object of entertainment. If you look at drag queens in this way, they are “an effect of ‘bringing forth,’ where the ‘bringing forth’ is a question of the determination of form: the object itself has been shaped for something, *which means it takes the shape of what it is for.*”<sup>159</sup> Thus, “phenomenology helps us to explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture, and their gestures.”<sup>160</sup> Ahmed’s thought, in a way, opposes Sedgwick’s theorisation of paranoia, because paranoia “is drawn toward and tends to construct symmetrical relations, in particular, symmetrical epistemologies,”

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<sup>152</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 62.

<sup>153</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 11.

<sup>154</sup> Alana Kumbier, “One Body, Some Genders: Drag Performances and Technologies,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 43, no. 3/4 (2002): 194.

<sup>155</sup> Sabrina Strings, and Long T. Bui, “‘She Is Not Acting, She Is’: The Conflict Between Gender and Racial Realness on RuPaul’s Drag Race,” *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 5 (2014): 832.

<sup>156</sup> Morris, “On Gaily Reading Music,” 60.

<sup>157</sup> Poletti, “The Fiction of Identity,” 42.

<sup>158</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 39.

<sup>159</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 46. Emphasis in original.

<sup>160</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 56.

which Ahmed mentions is exactly what a queer epistemology does not do.<sup>161</sup> This leads me to think that Ahmed's conceptualisation of a queer phenomenology might be a potential answer to the paranoid reading that most academic disciplines in the humanities have come to take as their general approach to research, as is mentioned in the first chapter. In addition, Hill connects queer and postmodern perspectives because of "the refusal to be positioned as solitary and intact [...] Queer epistemology leads to the belief that we can know nothing with certitude or finiteness."<sup>162</sup> When looking back at the answer provided by the participants, the same sentiment comes to the fore. However, the awareness of the drag queens of this practice was not discussed elaborately.

### *The Downside of Drag – Some Critiques*

Besides the perpetuation of heteronormative binaries, as discussed above, drag has been critiqued in and outside of academia for misogynistic tendencies, of which I discuss some important points below. Drag queens tend to speak their mind in a way that in day-to-day social settings would be deemed inappropriate, and even unthinkable. Ten Hove referred to the cynicism and irony that is used in drag, where he connected irony to drag, and to queerness.

Though, there is of course, also a lot of criticism on drag, that it is misogynistic, which I think is a really funny criticism, like: no? (laughs) In drag I hate everyone, not just women, I'm not misogynistic, or I am, and racist and xenophobic and whatever. Because it's part of... sometimes people don't see that it's subversive rather than, it's ironic. You comment on things, with your performances, with your acts, with your looks, with what you say, you comment on all those boxes that people are trying to keep together.[...] but if you don't know what the opposite is, you can't recognize it. So drag is always, to me, it's always queer. But if you don't see why it's queer, you won't understand it.<sup>163</sup>

Bernabela confirmed what Ten Hove said about irony and misogyny. He reflected:

I think a lot of people, they call their drag their "alter ego", because they kind of feel that the drag is somebody else, and they completely change. Some people use it as an excuse to misbehave, or to do other...not misbehave in a bad way, but you kind of get a chance to say what you want, to make fun of people, or have fun with people which you would normally not do.<sup>164</sup>

Besides hosting, which can be considered as the talking-part of a drag show, drag queens could also choose songs in their lip-sync performances that "mock, critique, and *disidentify* with heterosexuality, creating a space that challenges heteronormativity."<sup>165</sup> Similar to lip-syncing practitioners, Rob Drew interviewed karaoke performers who put forward that changing the song or performance is the way to go

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<sup>161</sup> Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 126.

<sup>162</sup> Hill, "Activism as Practice," 87.

<sup>163</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>164</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>165</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, "We're Not Just Lip-Syncing Up Here," 56. Emphasis in original.



for current karaoke performances. Drew says this can lead to “breaking form”—which he defines as “interrupting the flow of activity through laughter, sarcasm, or parody”—“seemed almost obligatory; paradoxically, it functioned to distance performers not just from their particular song choices but also from the very performance practice in which they were engaged.”<sup>166</sup> Another parallel emerges: drag queens who break form during a lip-sync performance for either comedic reasons or to change songs.<sup>167</sup> I argue, however, the opposite of Drew, in the sense that drag queens actually engage more with the song and its context by playing with the format. There is one very obvious reason why karaoke, and lip-sync performers alike ‘break form’: “we see as early as Aristotle that idea that an easy way for a speaker to make his audience laugh is to create an expectation and then violate it,” as Freya Jarman-Ivens puts it.<sup>168</sup> A question that arises is the origin of laughter: what is the subject the audience (and most times, the performers themselves) are laughing about?<sup>169</sup> To connect this to the equal subject positions Morris describes, which I touch upon in the previous chapter; there is a tension between the audience and the performer, where a mutual understanding of each other’s cultural and political background is almost essential for the ways in which jokes land.

Being playful on stage brings up multiple concepts connected to play: Drew brings in “cheat” and “spoil-sport”, concepts coined by Johan Huizinga in 1950, which demarcates the level of irony or to what extent performers are ‘above’ the game.<sup>170</sup> I argue that during lip-syncing in drag shows, the queens display the same concept as the “middle-class performers” in Drew’s research, namely the “spoil-sport,” because the queens play so much with expectations and stereotypes that they “shatter the play world itself,” as Drew quoted from Huizinga.<sup>171</sup> Contrarily, where the middle-class karaoke performers “expressed disdain for the game and overturned it in the act of playing it”—which in a way transforms karaoke to a new level of performance and entertainment—I argue that drag queens do not “express disdain”, but “overturn” the performance by hyper exaggeration.<sup>172</sup> Additionally, the jokes drag queens use, with their specific connotations, and the music they choose, all contribute to a queering of the drag stage, as I propose.

In his conclusion, Drew says that “irony, no less than taste and class confusion, is an oft-noted hallmark of our postmodern age. While laughter can signify empathy and insight, ironic laughter more often implies distance and alienation.”<sup>173</sup> Here lies a big difference with lip-syncing during a drag show: although irony (or is it cynicism?) is celebrated and often performed, the purpose of the music and performance is to bring an audience closer together with both the performer and each other, as the

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<sup>166</sup> Rob Drew, “Once More, With Irony’: Karaoke and Social Class,” *Leisure Studies* 24, no. 4 (2005): 377.

<sup>167</sup> During an episode of UNHhhh, a YouTube show produced by World of Wonder, where drag queens Trixie Mattel and Katya Zamalodchikova discuss random subjects, they give the example of a telephone ringing to interrupt a lip-sync performance for comedic effect.

<sup>168</sup> Freya Jarman, “Watch My Lips: The Limits of Camp in Lip-Syncing Scenes,” in *Music and Camp*, ed. Christopher Moore and Philip Purvis (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 99-100.

<sup>169</sup> Drew, “Once More, With Irony,” 377-8.

<sup>170</sup> Drew, “Once More, With Irony,” 378. See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950).

<sup>171</sup> Drew, “Once More, With Irony,” 378. See Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 11.

<sup>172</sup> Drew, “Once More, With Irony,” 378.

<sup>173</sup> Drew, “Once More, With Irony,” 381.

participants confirmed. In Butler's discussion of misogyny in drag, she brings in bell hooks' analysis of *Paris is Burning*, but says that "the problem with the analysis of drag as only misogyny is, of course, that it figures male-to-female transsexuality, cross-dressing, and drag as male homosexual activities—which they are not always—and it further diagnoses male homosexuality as rooted in misogyny."<sup>174</sup> Butler therefore seems aware of the changes drag went through; from the 'passing' at New York balls, to a more critical and ironic performance of gender in later years. This tendency is still very much present in current drag practices, as is exemplified by Berendsen and Klaassen, who mentioned the use of irony and cynicism when discussing their drag persona's. Berendsen said: "everything you do [in drag], and on the one hand it's deliberately, and on the other, things just happen, because you feel free and confident and you are more or less not yourself [...] because you cannot be held responsible, because Victoria (Viper, Berendsen's drag persona) is not a person."<sup>175</sup>

Farrier responds to the matter of irony when he mentions that "gossip and other low-forms have historically been modes and cultural sites where queer people have found a language, and this connects gossip to popular forms as a lexicon circulating in queer places."<sup>176</sup> The language specific to queer circles, as referred to by Farrier, is something the drag queens mention too, as I discussed in the previous chapter. However, as Crystal confesses when talking about drag in her autobiography, drag appropriates Black women's vernacular and culture, and she describes the feeling of contrast when discussing drag in general.<sup>177</sup> If the matter of language is taken back to times before *RuPaul's Drag Race*, drag shows—through the use of certain music—attributed a great deal to the dispersion of queer language as well to the dispersion of queer experiences. Kaminski and Taylor claim that "drag queens include in their repertoire songs that *educate* heterosexual members of the audience about the experiences and grievances of gay men, lesbians, and transgendered individuals."<sup>178</sup>

The implications that come with irony and cynicism in drag will be discussed further below. Here, I want to elaborate on the connection between the change in persona and queerness. Morris mentions the practice of "reading", which is what Berendsen refers to the unaccountability he has as Victoria. A definition of the term is offered by Dorian Corey, a participant in Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* documentary, where Corey conceptualizes 'reading' as "the real art form of insult."<sup>179</sup> Morris adds: "to read is to put down, to tell off, most typically by finding a flaw of appearance or behavior and magnify it. Reading is good precisely to the degree that it is unexpected, virtuosic: its purpose is to dazzle both the one being read and those watching the process."<sup>180</sup> But, Morris notes that "a 'read' is not simply any

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<sup>174</sup> Butler, "Gender is Burning," 86. *Paris is Burning* is discussed below.

<sup>175</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>176</sup> Farrier, "That Lip-Syncing Feeling," 197.

<sup>177</sup> Rasmussen, *Diary of a Drag Queen*, 298. I use the no capital in 'black,' because that is how the author uses it, but there is a whole set of implications connected to this, of which a discussion here would be too extensive to handle.

<sup>178</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, "We're Not Just Lip-Syncing Up Here," 56.

<sup>179</sup> Jennie Livingston, *Paris is Burning*, 1990. This critically acclaimed documentary on the New York's drag scene is the first of its kind. It shows the experiences of Black and Latina (trans) women, participating in the drag balls of the 1980's.

<sup>180</sup> Morris, "On Gaily Reading Music," 56.

particularly stylish or well executed insult; it depends on both parties being in essentially the *same subject position* [...] their senses of themselves derive from a shared class, race, gender, sexual orientation and so forth.”<sup>181</sup> In this sense, *intersectionality* plays an important role in the practice of reading: a drag queen who occupies a queer identity, might read the audience, a queer crowd. But as most participants of the interviews contested, the audience is not always queer. So what would that do to the relationship between ‘both parties’, as mentioned by Morris? Ten Hove elaborated:

When you are in a queer space where everybody understand [the] references, if you combine those references in that queer space, the music adds to the embodiment of the queer space. [...] All the queer people in the audience have a shared perception of the stereotypical straight, white girl. So when you make a joke like that, it’s a shared joke, and that’s why it’s funny. Because if you make a joke that nobody gets, [...] it sounds really superficial, [...] but you have to have a shared experience. It’s funny that such a large group of people have that at the same time, because that shows that it really is a community, and very obscure references are understood by a large group of people at the same time, which to a straight audience, would be very obscure.<sup>182</sup>

One example I want to give here is of an event that occurred during a drag show I visited. During her *Skinny Legend* show, drag queen Trixie Mattel addressed the ‘white girls’ in the audience, referring to the ‘basic bitch’ stigma of the white, heterosexual girl who doesn’t really know the inside information of gay culture. I can link this to Butler’s theory that “the call [was] formative, if not *performative*, precisely because it initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject.”<sup>183</sup> In a way, then, Butler’s theory allows me to think that through cynicism, Trixie Mattel turned the roles around, making the audience the subject of that joke, and therefore, of that moment. Connecting this thought, then, to identity politics, Poletti utilizes theories of the body by Jasbir K. Puar to construct identity claims along “personal” and “impersonal” lines, where identity is both “*read* as much as it is lived.”<sup>184</sup> Drag, in this sense, can have an uncanny effect: the uninformed observer might “read” a body as feminine, while the initiate knows the secret identity that is hidden under all the glitter and glamour. Reading more about queerness keeps reminding me of the telling history of ball rooms, where trans women got the opportunity to try out to what extent they would “pass” as biological women in their day to day lives. The effect of ‘reading’ the body of a drag performer then and now therefore differs, while traditions of ‘reading’ as well-constructed insults do still prevail. To conclude this thought with Morris,

The ambivalence of gay reading is culturally overdetermined: by the old threshold model of gender identity, in which being gay automatically translates as being neither man nor woman, but somehow both; by the very nature of drag, where a man in a woman’s dress could signal a hyper-

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<sup>181</sup> Morris, “On Gaily Reading Music,” 56.

<sup>182</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>183</sup> Judith Butler, “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Judith Butler (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 82.

<sup>184</sup> Poletti, “The Fiction of Identity,” 35–7. See also Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, revised ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 159–62.

masculine mockery of the idea of femininity or an affinity with the abjection that femininity embodies; [...] by the shifty effect of sentimentality in which admiration and contempt become almost identical.<sup>185</sup>

Parody can furthermore be used as another strategy, namely to “parody traditional codes of femininity and masculinity,” which Kaminski and Taylor describe as the practice of “disidentification,” as conceptualised by José Esteban Muñoz.<sup>186</sup> The authors explain this as “a strategy of transforming culture from within by taking dominant cultural symbols and working against them to critique hegemonic roles and identities and create new identities.”<sup>187</sup> This is confirmed by Alana Kumbier, who sees her performance as a drag queen not as “mocked or imitated femininity in a shallow way (this is a claim that has been levied against drag queen performance in general); rather, I believe they allowed me to parody certain culturally scripted gender roles and to bolster my own sense of myself as a desiring, desirable subject on my own queer terms.”<sup>188</sup>

The televised drag show carries similar tendencies, which can be critiqued by using Nicole K. Hladky’s analysis of *TransGeneration*; even when the show is discussing important points about transgenderism, it perpetuates certain stereotypes connected to trans people, and reaffirms the gender binary, so that the analysed show “might potentially disempower transgender individuals, particularly those embodying a queer notion of gender.”<sup>189</sup> *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is a show for which it is needed to consider these issues, as it introduces a large audience not only to queer, but also to transgender people.<sup>190</sup> But does it perpetuate certain stereotypes, by for example, sensationalising the “coming out” of a transgender person on the show?

### *Some Reflections on RuPaul’s Drag Race*

To not negate the importance *RuPaul’s Drag Race* had on the visibility and general acceptance of drag in Western popular culture, I am spending some space on a discussions of the show on the neoliberal tendencies it displays, and on the role of race. Thinking further on the previous mentioned language connected to drag communities; shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* quite literally teach the masses a particular jargon. But, warns Heller: “ballroom vernacular must be contextualized as an appropriation of minoritarian content by individuals (both producers and contestants) that are deeply invested in its commercial resonance.”<sup>191</sup> The ways in which drag culture is transmitted nowadays, has a lot to do with

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<sup>185</sup> Morris, “On Gaily Reading Music,” 57-8.

<sup>186</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 63. See also José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11-2.

<sup>187</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 63.

<sup>188</sup> Kumbier, “One Body, Some Genders,” 196.

<sup>189</sup> Nicole K. Hladky, “The Construction of Queer and the Conferring of Voice: Empowering and Disempowering Portrayals of Transgenderism on *TransGeneration*,” in *Queer Media Images: LGBT Perspectives*, by Theresa Carilli and Jane Campbell (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2013): 109.

<sup>190</sup> As posted on a RuPaul Drag Race fan page, there are currently 8 drag queens who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. See “Transgender Queens,” Community content, *RuPaul’s Drag Race Wiki* (blog), July 2019. [https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Transgender\\_Queens](https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Transgender_Queens).

<sup>191</sup> Heller, “RuPaul Realness,” 6.

popular mass media. Shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* do make it much more accessible, and maybe therefore, much more accepted to use a particular language or look a particular way.<sup>192</sup> Research, like the one conducted by Hladky, has shown that contestants on televised commercial competitions are more likely to gain success after proudly standing for their minority position, using it to strongly identify with. Taking this further to include sexuality, Heller lists the ways in which RuPaul accommodates queer identities during the show (for example, “if you can’t love yourself, how in the hell are you gonna love somebody else?”), but as shown through multiple critiques and interviews, RuPaul has not always been accommodating to queer people.<sup>193</sup> Even nowadays, after receiving such critiques, RuPaul’s sincerity of the matter of transsexuals being drag queens is still questionable.

The accessibility of queer identities through popular media is confirmed by Hladky, who attests that the way in which LGBT(QI+)<sup>194</sup> characters are portrayed, as confirmed by research, has a big influence on people’s attitude towards LGBT(QI+) people in real life.<sup>195</sup> As Poletti advocates: “one specific place where a highly visible site of queering identity has become a space for pedagogy and negotiation around the identity categories of race and gender.”<sup>196</sup> To create a space that shows queer identities are being accepted, and to have a big platform to teach mass audiences what drag is about, is also at work *RuPaul's Drag Race* fulfils in popular media. To summarize, the heightened visibility of drag enables audiences and academics alike “to reconsider drag as an invitation to audiences to think differently about the relationship between the body, gender, and identity.”<sup>197</sup>

As I mentioned in my chapter on queerness, *RuPaul's Drag Race's* exposure of fluid gender identities has afforded more acceptance of these identities into normative society. Heller delineates, in her analysis of “RuPaul realness” that, concerning gender, “realness names a specific theatrical gender-bending methodology performers deploy at a ball to unmark their bodies as sexually queer and/or ‘gender non-conforming or as transgender’ and visually present themselves within a racially and socio-economically specific form of heteronormativity they do not personally embody.”<sup>198</sup> While the term ‘realness’ originates from the New York ballroom scene,<sup>199</sup> it is deployed today in popular culture, thanks to shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, to “linguistically [...] denote an unusually creative or unique gender-bending look.”<sup>200</sup> Heller links the new, current use of “realness” to neoliberalism, “that publicly embracing one’s identity

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<sup>192</sup> Farrier, “That Lip-Syncing Feeling,” 203.

<sup>193</sup> See, for example, RuPaul’s comments on transgender contestants, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/mar/08/rupaul-drag-race-transgender-performers-diversity>.

<sup>194</sup> I added QI+ in between brackets because Hladky uses the term “LGBT,” while I think it is important to add the more and more accepted letters Q (Queer), I (Intersex) and the plus, indicating more possible identifications.

<sup>195</sup> Hladky, “The Construction of Queer and the Conferring of Voice,” 102-3.

<sup>196</sup> Poletti, “The Fiction of Identity,” 37.

<sup>197</sup> Poletti, “The Fiction of Identity,” 41.

<sup>198</sup> Meredith Heller, “RuPaul Realness: The Neoliberal Resignification of Ballroom Discourse,” *Social Semiotics*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2018.1547490>.

<sup>199</sup> As Butler delineates in her chapter, “In the drag ball productions of realness, we witness and produce the phantasmatic constitution of a subject, a subject who repeats and mimes the legitimating norms by which it itself has been degraded, a subject founded in the project of mastery that compels and disrupts its own repetitions.” In Butler, “Gender is Burning,” 89-90.

<sup>200</sup> Heller, “RuPaul Realness,” 2.

differences is economically and culturally beneficial.”<sup>201</sup> Mostly, Heller sees the use of, what she calls, “RuPaul realness” as a way for the queens to market themselves, making realness more about profit and fitting into popular culture than the original meaning connected to the New York ballroom scene. The way the queens employ a neoliberal view of “realness” is “by framing successful contestants as those that understand how valuable their embodied differences are,” instead of the traditional “form of theatrics wherein performers mimic the look and demeanor of’ the privileged part of society, as a “response to pervasive racism in the 1960s and 1970s drag queen pageants in the US.”<sup>202</sup> The way in which contestants on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* “model neoliberal identity politics [is] by making pride-based statements about their non-white racial or other marginalized identity designations.”<sup>203</sup> Heller’s claim is one that haunts me on every project I conduct on empowerment and popular culture: “that the widespread circulation of this resignified term [being, ‘realness’] maintains hegemonic power practices: realness has become a polemical discourse that delegitimizes the lived realities and success methods of the very individuals that created the term.”<sup>204</sup> Namely, when the Monki launches new collections that use the word “feminist” and feminist voices in and on their clothing line, does that enable empowerment? Or does it just contribute to the capitalist workings of multinationals that feminist thought fights against? In Butler’s view, “the contest (which we might read as a ‘contesting of realness’)” where *RuPaul’s Drag Race* originated from, the balls, “involves the phantasmatic attempt to approximate realness, but it also exposes the norms that regulate realness as *themselves* phantasmatically instituted and sustained.”<sup>205</sup> Butler continues “the subject is the incoherent and mobilized imbrication of identifications; it is constituted in and through the iterability of its performance, a repetition which works at once to legitimate and delegitimize the realness norms by which it is produced. [...] The performance is thus a kind of talking back, one that remains largely constrained by the terms of the original assaignment.”<sup>206</sup> In this way, what the Monki does through their clothing line is merely for commercial gain, while drag queens find a way in their performance to critique the same stereotypes they portray.

The notion of *feeling real*, in or out of drag, identifying as queer or not, is well put by Nelson, who noticed

One can aspire to feel real, one can help others feel real, and one can oneself feel real—a feeling Winnicott describes as the collected, primary sensation of aliveness, ‘the aliveness of the body tissues and working of body-functions, including the heart’s action and breathing,’ which makes spontaneous gesture possible. For Winnicott, feeling real is not reactive to external stimuli, nor is

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<sup>201</sup> Heller, “RuPaul Realness,” 2.

<sup>202</sup> Heller, “RuPaul Realness,” 2-3.

<sup>203</sup> Heller, “RuPaul Realness,” 3.

<sup>204</sup> Heller, “RuPaul Realness,” 3.

<sup>205</sup> Butler, “Gender is Burning,” 89. Emphasis in original.

<sup>206</sup> Butler, “Gender is Burning,” 90.

it an identity. It is a sensation—a sensation that spreads. Among other things, it makes one want to live.<sup>207</sup>

When comparing this idea of ‘realness’, as described by Nelson, to ‘RuPaul realness,’ there is a parallel to be made that connects the concept to the queer identity: feeling real is about a feeling from *inside*, not what gender you portray from outside, but the genuine identity that is inside the vessel that is the body. In sum, “thinking more specifically about the aesthetics and poetics of queering gender by bringing drag into heteronormative media sites highlights the complexity and difficulty of this conundrum,” proposes Poletti.<sup>208</sup> Because I should not forget that media, and the theatre world, bars, etcetera, for that matter, are all still part of the patriarchal structure of the cultural part of our society.

Heller touches upon the issue of race in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, which is taken further by Sabrina Strings and Long T. Bui, who discuss the “Racial Realness on RuPaul’s Drag Race.”<sup>209</sup> The authors begin with a statement that seeps into my research: “in feminist media scholarship, there continues to be a great deal of commentary about women’s marginalization and male privilege that fails to mention race.”<sup>210</sup> Without getting caught in this premise of white versus black feminism, and since I am not handling a heavily montaged and mediated show, I cannot elaborate too extensively on the matter. However, I think it is important to exemplify with a quote how these authors engaged with the inherent racism on the show: “As a genre [namely, reality TV] of programming that purports to represent that which is ‘real,’ reality TV has been known to contribute to the naturalization of stereotypes, often done in an effort to create gossip-worthy moments on a show.”<sup>211</sup> This “racial commodification” is particularly present in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, because there is an “emphasis on performativity and masquerade (inherent in drag) that purportedly makes stepping *outside* the bounds of normativity the requirement for a show-stopping routine.”<sup>212</sup>

#### *From Feeling Real to Being Real*

Crystal writes that drag is imperfect, just as other parts of culture or identity are imperfect, continuing with popular culture’s current obsession with drag.<sup>213</sup> At first, Crystal answers the question “why is there such a fuss about drag?” with “I’ve never really thought about it other than just saying, RuPaul, obviously. [...] Is it the sequins? The wigs? The make-up?”<sup>214</sup> Poletti adds that through these materials, “drag deploys fictionality in relation to gender [...] in order to render gender hyperbolic.”<sup>215</sup> But

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<sup>207</sup> Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 17. See also Donald W. Winnicott, “Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self,” in *The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*, ed. Donald W. Winnicott, (New York: Routledge, 1965), 148-9.

<sup>208</sup> Poletti, “The Fiction of Identity,” 43.

<sup>209</sup> Strings, and Bui, “‘She Is Not Acting, She Is,’” 822–36.

<sup>210</sup> Strings and Bui, “‘She Is Not Acting, She Is,’” 822.

<sup>211</sup> Strings and Bui, “‘She Is Not Acting, She Is,’” 824.

<sup>212</sup> Strings and Bui, “‘She Is Not Acting, She Is,’” 824.

<sup>213</sup> Rasmussen, *Diary of a Drag Queen*, 299.

<sup>214</sup> Rasmussen, *Diary of a Drag Queen*, 299.

<sup>215</sup> Poletti, “The Fiction of Identity,” 38.

it is not merely about “buying and wearing [...] these fabulous, subversive, glittering markers. [...] it’s about what donning them means. Drag comes from a place of absolute need.”<sup>216</sup> Rather, Crystal sees drag as a necessity to escape identity roles that society created for you while feeling you do not fit any, for fitting in by being subversive, creating your own identity, which is “why people who come to drag often devote their lives to it.”<sup>217</sup> The lack of glamour for starting drag queens is something almost every drag queen I interviewed affirmed, which becomes apparent below.

### *Becoming a Queen – Discovering a Drag Identity*

The participants of my research found different entries into drag, and it is apparent that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* plays a big role in the visibility of drag within popular culture. Besides the viewer numbers and professional acknowledgements the show enjoys, it enables a whole new generation of drag queens to emerge. For Klaassen, he went from being a fan of the TV series, to seeing a show of the *RuPaul’s Drag Race* contestants live in Amsterdam, which he visited dressed in drag, “just to see how people react when you are in drag, because you’re somebody else, and how it makes me feel being a drag queen, or a woman, but... a drag queen.”<sup>218</sup> Klaassen and Berendsen described their first outing as drag queens as pleasurable, they received “really positive, and really good reactions.”<sup>219</sup> The same positive response connected to the drag scene was expressed by Haegens, who felt very different growing up, and experienced bullying in his youth. He went looking for an “outlet,” through which he would be able to fit in.<sup>220</sup> For Haegens, watching his mom do make-up, and reading his sister’s fashion magazines, he was “always drawing a certain type of woman,” which in the end, he started to draw on himself.<sup>221</sup> Interestingly, Haegens described that what he does, he does not “necessarily consider as drag,” because he plays more with the lines between his own femininity, and crosses boundaries in doing so. In a way, it would then seem as if Haegens would fit more into the tradition of ‘passing’ as a biological woman, as he said he does not want to be “the typical drag queen with the nails, with the pads, with the boobs, with the big hair.”<sup>222</sup> As I discuss below, Haegens’ method of drag is derived from the ballroom tradition, so being more about ‘passing’ makes sense, since that is the tradition that classic ballroom shows adhere to. In this sense, Haegens falls right into one of the results drag can have, according to the academic literature, namely “by juxtaposing women’s voices, feminine clothing, and makeup with men’s bodies and masculine gestures, drag queens blur these distinctions and force the audience to think beyond binary categorization.”<sup>223</sup> However, this remark on the one hand fits Haegens, because, as discussed in the first chapter, he also wears make-up on a day-to-day basis, thereby blurring the lines of his own femininity and the one

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<sup>216</sup> Rasmussen, *Diary of a Drag Queen*, 300.

<sup>217</sup> Rasmussen, *Diary of a Drag Queen*, 300.

<sup>218</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>219</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>220</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>221</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>222</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>223</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Syncing Up Here,” 64.



expressed in drag. On the other hand, it questions what ‘drag’ exactly is: confirming or debunking female stereotypes?

These remarks, coupled with the origins of the traditional ballroom scene, seem quite paradoxical. Butler writes that “this effect is itself the result of an embodiment of norms, a reiteration of norms, an impersonation of a racial and class norm, a norm which is at once a figure, a figure of a body, which is no particular body, but a morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance, but which no performance fully approximates.”<sup>224</sup> I find morphology a very effective concept to think through not only drag, but also body politics. How much space a body can take up is dependent on what kind of body it is: female, coloured, fat bodies tend to take up more space in society’s eyes than the others. Butler connects this to “reading,” which is the visual discrepancy between what one wants to portray, and what is actually visible: does it work? Is it believable? Reading in this sense is quite different than the one proposed by Morris, as discussed earlier.

Bernabela connected to drag through the clubbing scene, especially in Amsterdam, where “people like to dress up, they like to be a little bit more flamboyant: make-up, wigs, outfits,” which he took “further and further [until it] became drag.”<sup>225</sup> He added that he is “very much inspired by drag queens,” and that a big part of the enjoyment of drag is to “see other drag queens.”<sup>226</sup>

For Ten Hove, the entry in drag was a love for musical theatre, because, in his words, “I love being on stage, and performing, and just theatre in general.”<sup>227</sup> However, this did not solely trigger his interest in drag; his interest in drag really peaked when he saw *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.<sup>228</sup> Ten Hove’s drag persona did not blossom fully, yet, until he moved to Utrecht, since drag thrived much more in the bigger cities of the Netherlands than in the peripheral areas.<sup>229</sup> Theatrics is also what persuaded Roberts to try drag. More specifically, he was asked “to participate in a show ballet *as* a woman.”<sup>230</sup> At first, he was not so eager to do so, but after trying it once, he had a good experience. Interestingly, Roberts expressed he “had some strange feelings about drag queens in my early twenties,” which is amusing to think back on, since he is now a well-known drag queens in the Netherlands.<sup>231</sup>

So, why did the participants continue with drag? Ten Hove mentioned that drag became (more) fun when he started to ask money for it, which, according to him, he could mostly do exactly *because* he sings live.<sup>232</sup> Klaassen and Berendsen elaborated on their reason, namely that they do drag because it is fun, which it should be, since they do drag on top of their 40-hour working week. Crystal agrees, saying that

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<sup>224</sup> Butler, “Gender is Burning,” 88.

<sup>225</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>226</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>227</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>228</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>229</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>230</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>231</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>232</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

[...] while drag is probably the most fun you can have with your clothes on, the fuss is about more than just fun. It's about love – for yourself, for your siblings. It's about giving back to people, and saving a bit for yourself. It's about being the most glorious person in the room, while pulling everyone up to your level. It's about proving that, while you might be an outcast, you're quicker, cooler, funnier than the people on the inside. It's about proving that being a misfit is the best place to be. It's about showing there's hope, and that happiness and power aren't the stronghold of those in power. We have it, so much of it, in abundance. And we actually deserve it.<sup>233</sup>

Berendsen and Klaassen were very outspoken about the social impact drag has, and the fact that they want to initiate social change. In Berendsen's words:

[drag] gives you the opportunity to contribute to society in some way. Like, you are on stage, you have the mic, you can say anything, especially on big stages, when you're not only among queer people. It's also a possibility to go out and give a message, and to tell people how you think the world works and what is wrong with it. So by doing drag, that gives you access to those stages and those possibilities, which is also important to me, and I think to you (Klaassen) as well.<sup>234</sup>

To which Klaassen added: "yeah, yeah, and I also think, even when you're not on a stage, you still contribute, because you walk on the street in drag, and people will see you, and it helps for the visibility of drag queens, but also LGBT community."<sup>235</sup>

Klaassen and Berendsen stressed the importance of showing "that difference exists," and that people "should stop thinking in boxes, giving people labels."<sup>236</sup> Interestingly, the drag couple chooses drag as their vessel to live out the message, in a different way than they do in their day-to-day lives. Haegens, however, was the only person who wears make-up "nine days out of ten," and sports "drag clothes in my day to day life, and I am always just thinking about it."<sup>237</sup> As mentioned in the chapter on queerness, Haegens spoke about living with a queer identity, therefore showing that Haegens fuses his day-to-day identity with his drag identity, living it out simultaneously. So, in this sense, Haegens shows that "traditionally 'feminine' accoutrements and modes of presentation, when used in particular ways, can be as disruptively queer as other modes of genderqueer presentation."<sup>238</sup> Kumbier, speaking from another perspective than most of my interviewed subjects in this research, touches upon the big critique on drag, namely that it works within the binary gender system of the patriarchal society. But, as Kumbier shows with this quote, a certain gender representation works only in certain contexts, where in others, they can be found disruptive. I argue that drag disrupts rather than confirms the gender identities present in our patriarchal society.

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<sup>233</sup> Rasmussen, *Diary of a Drag Queen*, 300.

<sup>234</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>235</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>236</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>237</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>238</sup> Kumbier, "One Body, Some Genders," 194.

In this part of my research, the participants engaged with questions on the origin of their drag persona's. The way in which drag queens value drag, and the amount of time it occupies their mind, covers a variety of gradations when it comes to time. Notably, most of the participants mention drag as being constantly on their minds, while others tend to focus on drag only when they have a performance coming up. Most drag queens mention the amount of hours they spend on their drag persona's, and how these hours are filled. Almost all drag queens that participated in my research mentioned making their own costumes and dresses, besides spending time on learning lip-syncs and choreographies. Ten Hove, contrarily, can let weeks pass by without even thinking about drag, which he mostly attributes to the fact that "for me, it's not my main job, I do it on the side."<sup>239</sup> Most participants mentioned the creative aspect of drag as the core value in their day-to-day life. Drag was seen as a creative output, where the participants said they could utilize their "creative talents."<sup>240</sup> This might be mostly true for Roberts, who not only uses drag as his creative outlet, but has drag as his "main job, [while also having] a studio; I design costumes for a lot of queens in this country, and city, so it's a daily job. Drag is always on my mind."<sup>241</sup> Bernabela, too, mentioned how drag "is my way of expressing my creativity."<sup>242</sup>

Another aspect the participants of my research mentioned on living a drag life, is the social network that is connected to being a drag queen. Berendsen mentioned that "there is a big social part to it. You get to meet a lot of people," on top of which Klaassen added: "we made some friends."<sup>243</sup> This coincides with Bernabela's motivation for doing drag, seeing and meeting other drag queens, as I mentioned above.

When I initially constructed the question "in what ways do you interpret your drag identity?", my angle was mostly for the drag queens to offer a self-reflection that could offer insight into their queer identity. However, the participants gave concise answers, as if they had answered this question a hundred times before, or maybe extensively reflected on their drag identity. Just to give an idea of the terms they used to describe themselves, I now go through the respective self-identifications of the participants. Klaassen and Berendsen called their drag "classic" and "traditional," with which they meant that they were "really going for the feminine look [...] the female shape."<sup>244</sup> Haegens, in contrast, comes from the ballroom tradition, so 'face' and the look were of much higher priority to him than the performing/lip-syncing part especially in the beginning.<sup>245</sup> Additionally, he believed he is booked for what he enjoys most

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<sup>239</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>240</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>241</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>242</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>243</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>244</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>245</sup> Haegens, interview.

and does best: “socialize and talk to people.”<sup>246</sup> Kumbier would agree, seeing that she “consider[s] drag to be a social technology that challenges discourses and practices which perpetuate the ‘naturalness’ of binary systems of gender and sexuality, and [she] consider[s] technologies of drag performances [...] instrumental in the process of embodying and appropriating multiple genders.”<sup>247</sup>

Roberts’s drag persona Patty Pam Pam is well-known for her many (self-made) outfits. In that sense, Patty Pam Pam is a walking commercial for Roberts’s business. Not surprisingly, Roberts sees his drag persona as a brand, while using words like “fashion, young, classy,” but also noting that “I can dress like a clown, and still be that fashionable Patty Pam Pam.”<sup>248</sup> Ten Hove defined himself mostly through his live singing, which to him “is a discerning factor.”<sup>249</sup> He summed up that in drag, he is a “singing, funny, friendly bitch,” specifically mentioning that “I don’t need to look like an amazing beautiful woman. I wanna look like a good-looking drag queen, which doesn’t have to necessarily be pretty.”<sup>250</sup> In this sense, he is opposite to Haegens; while they both love to host, for Haegens, being beautiful, or conforming to certain beauty standards (mostly his own) is a large part of hosting, while ten Hove prides himself on his humour and ability to sing live. Bernabela picked up on the aspect of beauty too, where he defines his drag persona as “a look-queen,” elaborating that

It’s all about the look, but I don’t wanna look beautiful—okay I always think I’m beautiful—but I want to make an outfit, to make a head piece, to do my hair, and think about the whole look. To do something extravagant when it comes to my fashion, to my hair, to my make-up, so my drag is highly focused on the way I look on the outside, so to speak. I do a lot of other things, but I personally find my strong points are in my looks.<sup>251</sup>

So, Haegens here seems to be the only participant who actively pursues ‘realness,’ which would indicate, in the historical meaning of the term, that he is looking to ‘pass’ as a biological woman. However, although “realness” as a term from the traditional ballroom scene works with “heteronormative cultural imperative[s],” it does so to critique them.<sup>252</sup> “Drag’s canonical connotation that gender illusion contrasts with lived gender,” is an important part of my research.<sup>253</sup> As Natalie Wynn—better known as YouTube vlogger ContraPoints—explains, there are multiple identities lived through the performance of a drag queen’s show.<sup>254</sup> How a drag queen lives in her off-stage life, is not always as a cis man (like RuPaul does), nor could her performance merely be read for “passing” as a ‘real’ woman. Instead, the nuances that are

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<sup>246</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>247</sup> Kumbier, “One Body, Some Genders,” 193. Kumbier herself occupies an interesting position, since she is herself both a drag king and drag queen, besides being an academic.

<sup>248</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>249</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>250</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>251</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>252</sup> Heller, “RuPaul Realness,” 4.

<sup>253</sup> Heller, “RuPaul Realness,” 4.

<sup>254</sup> Natalie Wynn/ContraPoints, “Pronouns,” YouTube video, November 2, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bbINLWtMKI&t=1417s>.

embedded in drag performances are explored during, for example, lip-syncing, as is my argument. Heller makes an important point when making the distinction between performing a cis gender woman on stage, and performing “femme queen realness,” where the latter “is not wholly representative of the performer’s reality and should be taken as a theatrical endeavor accomplished for a specific, time-bounded goal [...] due to her being a really skilled performer,” where her lived experience most likely is “some socially queer form of identity.”<sup>255</sup> Heller notes that in this sense, ‘passing’ is a better understanding of the category ‘femme queen realness’ than ‘drag,’ because it denotes an inner state of being, instead of a performance. Heller’s argument fits well with Haegens’ explained reality, because he is occupied with his form of drag all the time, redefining gender boundaries as much in his day-to-day life, as on stage. Moreover, some participants, in answering this question, talked about the process they went through in their drag. For example, Klaassen and Berendsen started out with a really ‘traditional’ style wigs, but moved to more experimental wig shapes.<sup>256</sup> Haegens noticed he grew from a look-focused queen to an all-round performer, always thinking about looks, combined with music, in his words: “I want to share as much as possible what’s going on in my mind, because I think it’s *lit*.”<sup>257</sup> The “perpetual reidealization” of identity that is offered through drag, then, is something most of the participants seemed to agree with.<sup>258</sup>

#### *Embodied Experience of Drag Queens*

When I constructed this next question, it was fuelled with academic theories that analysed the physical body of a drag queen within the performative space of the stage. Contrarily, when I asked the question on embodiment to my participants, the drag queens tended to focus on the physical sensation of the actions that it takes to *become* their drag persona. Things like panty hoses, corsets and high heels were aspects of the discomfort all of them touched upon in their answers. During most of the interviews, I tried to engage a little more, and the participants gave notable insights on their specific embodied experiences during lip-sync performances. Both Berendsen and Klaassen, as ten Hove, and Bernabela commented on the uncomfortable status of being in drag. Berendsen and Klaassen wear corsets and breastplates, but also five pairs of panty hose to keep the padding in place, “so it’s tights, and it’s pulling your toes.”<sup>259</sup> Contrarily, Haegens mentioned the pleasure he obtains from wearing “really, really tight corsets.” He elaborates

You see a lot of latex and the dominatrix in my drag, so I kind of like pain. So the corsets really make me feel good, it reminds me to keep up my posture, it’s a reminder that I’m in drag, so that I don’t slouch [...] because I also *love* to wear the highest heels as possible, [...] It’s like a constant reminder to present myself in the best way possible, it’s also that I’m trying to ... just that I want the audience to see or feel the way I do, because when you *see* such a tiny corset, or when you see

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<sup>255</sup> Heller, “RuPaul Realness,” 4.

<sup>256</sup> Klaassen and Berendsen, interview.

<sup>257</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>258</sup> Butler, “Gender is Burning,” 88.

<sup>259</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

such high heels, you're like: "ah that must hurt so much," so they kind of live in, they kind of get you. Or people are like: "How are you doing that?", or "why are you doing that?" It really excites me to push it a little extra sometimes, so much, my body feels, for me, there is no better feeling than being in drag in an outfit or a look that I really stand behind, or that I really believe in. I don't drink or do anything when I'm in drag, just all the energy that I need I get from just looking at myself in the window, in somebody's phone, in the reflection of whatever. That gives me that high, that excitement, that makes it so worthy for me.<sup>260</sup>

Haegens was the only participant who connected the feeling of being in drag directly to his drag persona; the leather, dominatrix look that went with really tiny corsets, but also the pseudo-masochistic sensation of pain. Ten Hove, on the other hand, notes that "the funny thing is, my toes never hurt when I perform," only when he is done performing does he notice the discomfort in his body.<sup>261</sup> Furthermore, Ten Hove touches upon something that I discussed in the previous chapter: that certain details in a drag look contribute to a more feminine feeling, and as a result, more feminine gestures. In the first chapter, I connected this mostly to the change Klaassen went through when putting on his drag make-up, but ten Hove connected this to the physicality of an embodied performance. For example, he mentioned heels and lashes as "the finishing touches, [that] it's all the little things combined that make a queen."<sup>262</sup> In sum, drag provokes, or even asks for, a certain type of body, that is described by Morris as "the grotesque body [that] is a form of desire, bought with pain, to be enjoyed despite its costs."<sup>263</sup>

The more intangible feeling that arise with the increased feeling of femininity is something that Roberts, for example, does feel, but does not know how to accurately describe.<sup>264</sup> Berendsen started listing things that make him uncomfortable in drag, which are the things that give him his female shape, on which he continued, "so does it feel different? It probably does; I'm more aware of my body, because of the [feminized] movements."<sup>265</sup> Afterwards, Berendsen and Klaassen engaged in a small discussion if they felt like their body in drag was still feeling the same as out of drag, or, if the fact that their body *looks* different, makes them accept it as part of their own body. Interestingly, Klaassen remarked the action of touching your padded body as if it is your own during a lip-sync, because the audience cannot *see* the pads for what they are; they *believe* you are touching your real body.<sup>266</sup> The confidence that coincides with the look, is described by Roberts, who notices that he is more confident during a lip-sync on stage, than during the hosting part of a show.<sup>267</sup> He tries to catch the feeling, by reflecting: "sometimes I get the question: 'do you feel feminine?', 'do you feel like a woman?' No, I don't, I feel fabulous. So that's the

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<sup>260</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>261</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>262</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>263</sup> Morris, "On Gaily Reading Music," 60.

<sup>264</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>265</sup> Berendsen, interview.

<sup>266</sup> Klaassen, interview.

<sup>267</sup> Roberts, interview.

difference, it's more about confidence than about feeling like a woman."<sup>268</sup> Bernabela confirmed this statement, saying that

When it comes to lip-syncing, you're on stage, you kind of really have to show a little bit...to be more reassured of yourself, to not be too scared, too timid. [...] So you have to be confident, it doesn't matter what you do, but it really has to...you have to evoke the power that you have at that moment. A good lip-sync has [...], whatever you're doing, you have to really go for it, a 100 percent.<sup>269</sup>

The intangible feeling that comes with the transformation of the man into the drag queen is intrinsically connected to the participants' identities. So when I look at *RuPaul's Drag Race* compared to the live shows, I see a similarity that Strings and Bui contextualised, where "unlike gender, race for the black/brown participants is viewed as fixed and embodied."<sup>270</sup> And unlike drag, drag queens cannot take off their race, it is something they wear at all times.

### *Being Social – Social Media Representation*

Representation matters, and the agency that is afforded to drag queens through social media has never been bigger. The physical space of the stage acts as the literal exposition of queerness, allowing audiences to 'accept' non-normative identities quicker, which gets reflected on social media.<sup>271</sup> The question I constructed to inquire about social media use, specifically the self-representation of drag queens on platforms like Instagram, in practice turned out to evoke obvious answers, according to the participants. Social media, nowadays, is used by many artists and performers, because you can show your whole portfolio with a click of a button on your smartphone. Haegens noticed this trend too, advocating that "Instagram is your business card; barely anyone is walking around with a paper one, and you just have to show what you do for bars to book you, for clubs to book you. They have to see what you deliver, what you do, what you stand for."<sup>272</sup>

Haegens used the allegory of lip-syncing as performing, as all participants did, saying that in order for venues to book you, they have to see you *perform*.<sup>273</sup> Ten Hove responded to this by saying that, especially for "international queens, I would say it is also a commercial reason, because: you don't want to broadcast all your jokes, because then you won't be able to use them in your next show!"<sup>274</sup> Berendsen reflected on the amount of lip-sync versus the amount of speeches, concluding that the number of times you perform either, should be reflected in what you show on social media.<sup>275</sup> Not only should the number

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<sup>268</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>269</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>270</sup> Strings and Bui, "She Is Not Acting, She Is," 831.

<sup>271</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 61-2.

<sup>272</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>273</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>274</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>275</sup> Berendsen, interview.

coincide with reality, social media representation, according to Berendsen, should also show innovativeness and variety.<sup>276</sup>

As put forward by Jarman-Ivens, multiple trends on social media and internet platforms lay bare the ironic status lip-syncing has acquired in recent years. The connection I could make between Jarman-Ivens' article and lip-syncing of drag queens, is that "it is clear to the viewing audience *and* acknowledged within the film's diegesis that a theatrical act is taking place, a performance of one body's mouth to another's voice."<sup>277</sup> Thus, both the content of what a lip-sync *is*, and how it is portrayed on the social media platform, is acknowledged by the audience.

Berendsen noted the audience's behaviour whenever the host announced a lip-sync performance, "the phones go up and they start recording."<sup>278</sup> So, the audience seems to have some agency in dictating what content drag queens can use for their social media platform. Although the final decision what goes online is still that of the queens, without the audience recording them, they would have to go out of their way to record a performance.

### *The Importance of the Audience – Interacting*

Without an audience, there is no show, so also no drag show. As some participants remark, the role of a drag queen is to entertain, and performing (or lip-syncing) is entertaining. The audience plays a big part when choosing songs, according to the interviewed drag queens. Although some theories I mention in this chapter do not coincide with the lived experience of these drag queens, the general conviction is that they do "include songs that facilitate *interaction* between gay and nongay members of the audience so that heterosexuals are integrated into the performances, even as they are made aware of their presence, criticized, and held accountable for the oppression of gays and lesbians."<sup>279</sup> As I argued above, the drag queens confirmed mostly the part of this statement where all audience members are being engaged with the performance. Bernabela mentioned the audience too, saying that "[...] if the audience is participating, and is liking your performance, it also makes you feel better, and you feel more confident in your performance. That is something that you wouldn't get if you're just at home practicing your lip-syncs."<sup>280</sup> Bernabela's remark, then, lines up with the academic discussion on drag audiences, "where a lot of audience members pointed to the value of entertainment and the ability that had to bring people closer together, to feel more connected."<sup>281</sup> Thus, the interaction plays a key role between the audience and the drag performer. As Ahmed contextualizes, (performing) bodies do not merely orientate themselves by the positionality in a room, or the relative distance between objects, but through a "responsiveness."<sup>282</sup> The audience participation can be facilitated through the music chosen by the drag queen. By bringing in

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<sup>276</sup> Berendsen, interview.

<sup>277</sup> Jarman, "Watch My Lips," 96.

<sup>278</sup> Berendsen, interview.

<sup>279</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, "We're Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here," 56.

<sup>280</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>281</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, "We're Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here," 55.

<sup>282</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 9.



“popular songs into the shows, audience members often respond to the familiar music by dancing and singing along, sometimes even jumping on the stage to perform, thereby becoming part of the act themselves.”<sup>283</sup> As Farrier notes, “gay culture is ‘often forgotten’, and it is through ‘participation’ that queer people get to know their culture and which of their histories are remembered and memorialised.”<sup>284</sup>

*Performing Space – the Stage*

When interviewing my first participant, Bernabela, I became curious about the aspect of the stage. Bernabela’s answers were indicating that drag is something you cannot simply turn off when you are not performing. So when I asked if drag is something that needs a physical stage, he answered

For me, it does make a difference. If you’re talking about performing. Because I do think that, when you’re on stage, there is a lot more that comes with it that you don’t get when you lip-sync at home. There is kind of a pressure to perform, you feel kind of nervous, and that maybe helps. But also, the stage lights, the audience, people looking at you. There is a lot more pressure that, for me, kind of helps the performance.<sup>285</sup>

Additionally, Ahmed uses a queer phenomenology, which provides me with a link between the interrelation of the (performance) space and the (performing) bodies. According to Ahmed, “phenomenology reminds us that spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body.”<sup>286</sup> I think it is important for my research to keep coming back to the body, to keep the body in mind when talking about drag queens. Besides the Cartesian mind/body split that has been extensively analysed in recent feminist theory, the striking relationship between body and mind that exists during a drag performance offers, to me, a fruitful insight in queer identity. Furthermore,

...drag’s reliance on highlighting and disrupting the naturalized relationship between the sexed body and gender using fictionality occurs with larger discursive structures that shape how audiences receive the performance in ways that a rhetorical approach cannot account for. [...] drag as a form of communication that is intended, and which exceeds those intentions. [...] it is only by thinking the fact and fiction of identity at the level of personal (embodied and intended) and the impersonal (discursive) that we can begin to grasp the complex and shifting practices through which identity is produced and reworked. Drag is particularly well-placed, at this cultural and political moment, to hold open gender as a fact-producing discourse for critical reflection, while never fully exceeding the logic it seeks to disrupt.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 66.

<sup>284</sup> Farrier, “That Lip-Synching Feeling,” 199.

<sup>285</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>286</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 9.

<sup>287</sup> Poletti, “The Fiction of Identity,” 39.

And this is why drag takes place on a stage, to “never fully exceed” the place of the disruption of gender identity. When I explain my research to others, people often ask me what the difference is between transvestites and drag queens, to which I usually answer that drag has a big show component, that it is performed, for an audience to see. Now, I fully realize that this is much more nuanced, where non-binary people can be in “drag” when they go out to the supermarket, or for just being at home. However, as the drag queens themselves answered during their interviews: the audience plays a key role in a drag performance, so the show element is critical for many of my participants. But then again, at this time and place, gender identity might be spilling out, exceeding the space where people were getting comfortable with non-binary identities.

Moreover, in thinking through queer spaces and identities, I believe too that the audience is an integral part of the drag experience. As Ahmed puts it, “bodies as well as objects take shape through being orientated toward each other, as an orientation that may be experienced as the co-habitation or sharing of space. Bodies are hence shaped by contact with objects and with others, with ‘what’ is near enough to be reached. Bodies may even take shape through such contact, or take the shape of that contact.”<sup>288</sup> When Ahmed describes how “the body orientates itself by lining itself up with the direction of the space it inhabits,” which, for drag queens, could mean that queer orientation is possible exactly *because* of how the queen orients herself on the stage.<sup>289</sup> Then again, “if space is orientated, then what appears depends on one’s point of view,” argues Ahmed, which means that thinking through this method “opens up how spatial perceptions come to matter and be directed as matter.”<sup>290</sup> Coming back to identity politics, Ahmed shows how “‘orientations’ depend on taking points of view as given,” which is important to keep in mind in both my topic, and academia in general.<sup>291</sup> When drag queens are “feeling the fantasy,” this embody, or live out their point of view. Just as the audience, albeit for a moment, accepts the men to be women, the drag queen herself changes her point of view from man to woman/queer, therefore changing their orientation. Furthermore, the act of “turning” to the stage, might perpetuate this orientation, making the decision of the performer a conscious one.<sup>292</sup>

Haegens brings back the vernacular connected to queer communities, and how this connects to the (general) audience:

Everybody knows what “vogue” is, and when they hear that, they are like: “o I know that, I know that,” and they just pay more attention. Also, songs that are really big world-wide, like anything Beyoncé, I personally do not perform to Beyoncé, but things like that, people know it, so they are more interacting, dancing with the music, lip-syncing themselves, while watching you do it. I think music and queer identity is basically one.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 54.

<sup>289</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 12.

<sup>290</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 12.

<sup>291</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 14.

<sup>292</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 15.

<sup>293</sup> Haegens, interview.

One of the ways in which Haegens uses popular music, is described in the academic literature: “drag performers are able to maintain this sense of solidarity by using popular songs to facilitate interaction between audience members.”<sup>294</sup> Kaminski and Taylor bring in Tia DeNora, who in her 2000 article, “notes that music can elicit social behaviors and can therefore be considered a cultural script for interactions.”<sup>295</sup> In our current media culture, Drew’s demarcation of “the contemporary, urban middle-class” as people who create the “blurring of cultural boundaries,” results in a place where the commercial world is no longer seen as reducing one’s status.<sup>296</sup> The acceptance of commercial culture is of importance here, because one underlying question in this research interrogates the motivation of commercial tv shows, and such, to genuinely want to provoke change, instead of just getting their viewers rates up. This begs a consideration not only *if* an audience would consume drag as a cultural product, but in which ways audiences do so.

#### *A Broken Connection – the Normative Audience*

As all participants stressed during the interviews: no drag show without an audience. And the audience reception plays a big role, especially in lip-syncing performances. As Drew notices, the performer aims to end a song by “look[ing] into the mirror of the audience and saw his [/her] image reflected back approvingly.”<sup>297</sup> However, when the very particular relationship between the drag performer and audience is broken, the fantasy is gone and the position of the drag queen completely changes. When engaging with a heterosexual audience, there is an even more delicate relationship at play, where sexualized performances are accepted, even by a heterosexual audience, because of the music’s “sexualized script.”<sup>298</sup> This sexual arousal, that moves beyond homophobic responses, is broken as soon as the drag performer is “out of synch with the music.”<sup>299</sup> This makes me think of my reflection on drag and sexuality; on the one hand, drag queens can behave in extremely sexual matters, on the other hand, their actual genitals are, literally, tucked away, so any sexual action with those genitals cannot be performed. So my hypotheses, or question, is to what extent the audience is aware of the intricacies that go into creating a drag body. Kaminski and Taylor conclude that “the sexualized interaction and arousal between audience members and drag performers bridges divides based on gender and sexuality categories.”<sup>300</sup> I always wonder to what extent that is true nowadays, since sexuality can still be perceived by certain individuals as a rigid thing. When drag becomes more popular, heterosexual audiences tend to want to check it out. For example, popular Dutch websites like “In de Buurt” mention a drag show, and different types of audiences are

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<sup>294</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 65.

<sup>295</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 65-66. See also Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, ed. by Tia DeNora (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>296</sup> Drew, “Once More, With Irony,” 373.

<sup>297</sup> Drew, “Once More, With Irony,” 372.

<sup>298</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 67.

<sup>299</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 67.

<sup>300</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 67.

attracted to attend a drag show, maybe even for the first time.<sup>301</sup> What would it mean for these new audience members to, almost accidentally, come across drag, and fluid gender identities and sexualities?

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<sup>301</sup> See Faayyaz van Dijk, “Drag Queens en Bingo! Dat Klinkt Als een Dolle Boel en Jij Kunt Er Bij Zijn.” *In de Buurt Rotterdam* (blog), February 26, 2019. <https://indebuurt.nl/rotterdam/doen/drag-queens-en-bingo-dat-klinkt-als-een-dolle-boel-en-jij-kunt-er-bij-zijn~83045/>.

## Music

*And now for the performing part: que the music!*

When I discussed lip-syncing with the drag queens, the value of music was clear: of course the participants needed music, how else were they supposed to lip-sync?<sup>302</sup> However, when asked to elaborate, the participants addressed the musical element, which is the focus of my research, revealing the music to be the locus of the queer performance. As proposed by Farrier: “there is a clear connection between meaning-making and politics in lip-syncing.”<sup>303</sup> More so, in the words of Kaminski and Taylor, “musical performances facilitate identity work by building a sense of solidarity among diverse constituencies.”<sup>304</sup> These authors focus in their research on lip-syncing, showing the potential of music to build a community. Thus, theoretically, it seems as if music contributes a great deal to identity politics in drag shows.

The drag queens I interviewed answered questions about the value of music, their choice of music, and the craft of lip-syncing. Besides music and lip-syncing, I looked for their opinions on the voice as queer potential, and canonization. I choose this direction, because of the existing tradition in academic scholarship that focuses on the embodied experience of the voice.

### *The Voice as Queer Potential*

Scholars—such as Carolyn Abbate, Bonenfant, and Brian Kane—have analysed the voice from multiple angles, both as a source of sound (the voice within the human body) and the effect of the voice (vibrating air).<sup>305</sup> However, according to Bonenfant, the academic attention given to “queer performatives in sound” is rather small, although the queer potential of the voice could prove indispensable when researching particular practices, such as lip-syncing.<sup>306</sup> As Bonenfant states; there is a “political dynamics of timbral exchange” at play, where power relations decide who gets “to create sensation in the social sphere, and thus fully manifest one’s sensorial existence amongst that of others.”<sup>307</sup> Hence, Bonenfant not only claims music and sound as indispensable for identity politics in drag, but also notices the hierarchies at play, which is a thought I follow in what comes next.

Similar hierarchies as the one discussed by Bonenfant, are visible within Western culture; for example, when engaging with disability studies, it becomes quite clear who is entitled to sound and who is not. One telling example is given by Lennard Davis, who argued in his influential book *Enforcing Normalcy*, how in the west, vision is always valued over the other senses.<sup>308</sup> When I extend this to music, deaf

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<sup>302</sup> Roberts plainly said during his interview: “because without music, I can’t lip-sync.” Roberts, interview.

<sup>303</sup> Farrier, “That Lip-Syncing Feeling,” 204-5.

<sup>304</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Syncing Up Here,” 48.

<sup>305</sup> See Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), Yvon Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” *Performance Research* 15, no. 3 (2010): 74–80, and Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>306</sup> Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” 74.

<sup>307</sup> Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” 74.

<sup>308</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London and New York: Verso, 1995).

composer Christine Sun Kim mentions how she always thought being deaf meant she was not allowed to be part of the sound world.<sup>309</sup> As an academic, focusing on music, Peraino remarks that “the aural dimension of gender and sexuality—voice and music—have haunted the margins of theory, but have seldom factored as centrally as the visual.”<sup>310</sup> Here, Peraino is referring to Butler, who similarly falls short by preferring the visual over the aural component.<sup>311</sup> But, as Peraino strongly states, “the voice itself is most often used and received as a vehicle for language, [... but] in reality, the voice becomes more primary in the determination of gender.”<sup>312</sup> She continues on, claiming that “the singing voice, however, seems to open the doors of gender with the opening of the throat.”<sup>313</sup> I argue that the voice in drag is an important way in which the fluidity of gender is approached. Through lip-syncing and the use of the drag queens’ own, lower register voice, the gender identity is destabilized. On the voice—and as I argue, also the lip-synced one—Peraino advocates that “the words she says may not be her own, they may be culturally predetermined and rehearsed, but the sound of those words bears an indelible stamp.”<sup>314</sup>

However, there seems to be a preconception in academia that assumes lip-sync performers do not ‘authentically’ voice the feeling or opinion of the performing drag queen. Farrier conceptualises that drag queens “give so much stage time to other people’s voices through lip-syncing,” referring to lip-syncing as a “de-voiced” practice.<sup>315</sup> I argue that the drag queens use particular voices to fit their message, therefore, the practice is not so much ‘de-voiced’ as it is ‘re-voiced,’ especially considering the socio-historical connotations these songs announce. Below, I elaborate on this ‘re-voiced’ practice, by bringing in the results of some self-reflections of the interviewed drag queens.

### *Performing a Lip-Sync: Drag Queens on Music*

As discussed in the previous chapter, music, according to the participants, had some effect on queerness. This could have to do with, as Nadine Hubbs describes: “music’s mysterious, often subliminal, seemingly inscrutable powers, [which] we might expect special potency to attach to musical markers of difference – that these would be potently threatening or potently cathartic, depending on the perceiver.”<sup>316</sup> In the case of drag queens, the message is not so much subliminal, as it is intentional: I argue that drag queens use music for particular reasons, and to express particular parts of their identity. Kaminski and Taylor even go as far to claim that “music and song [in drag performances] are used both to build solidarity and collective agency among gays and lesbians to forge connections with heterosexuals.”<sup>317</sup> To

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<sup>309</sup> In her interview, Kim says “I was born deaf, and I was taught to believe that sound wasn’t part of my life. See Christine Sun Kim, *The Enchanting Music of Sign Language*. YouTube, November 15, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Euof4PnjDk>.

<sup>310</sup> Judith A. Peraino, “Listening to Gender: A Repsonse to Judith Halberstam,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, 2007, 59.

<sup>311</sup> Peraino, “Listening to Gender,” 59.

<sup>312</sup> Peraino, “Listening to Gender,” 62.

<sup>313</sup> Peraino, “Listening to Gender,” 63.

<sup>314</sup> Peraino, “Listening to Gender,” 63.

<sup>315</sup> Farrier, “That Lip-Syncing Feeling,” 195.

<sup>316</sup> Hubbs, “I Will Survive,” 234.

<sup>317</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Syncing Up Here,” 49.

some extent, the participants of my research agreed on this, but had other focus points and reasons for picking certain songs over others.

‘Lip-syncing’ and ‘performing’ were interchangeable terms according to the participants of my research. The drag queens often referred to ‘performing’ when they discussed the lip-syncing practices, and Haegens even commented on this practice by claiming “performing is what drag is about.”<sup>318</sup> Ten Hove added to the importance, when he said: “I think there’s a lot of pressure on being able to lip-sync, well, because that’s the quintessential part of drag.”<sup>319</sup> Berendsen contributed that “people consider a drag queen show as lip-sync performances, connected by a speech, or talk, or just some fun, in between.”<sup>320</sup> Bernabela confirmed that “the drag shows consist out of lip-syncing.”<sup>321</sup> Or, as Roberts said, “that’s the *act*.”<sup>322</sup>

When I asked what music value had for a lip-sync performance, Haegens answered that it meant “everything.”<sup>323</sup> He continued:

[...] it [the music] decides what vibe you’re going for, it decides how you want to grab the audience’s attention. For me, it decides the way I feel, always when I perform to a song, I *live* in that three or four minutes [...] When I perform I have everything organised, I have a whole storyline based on a song, a whole vibe, a whole outfit, the whole look, I just want people to be drawn to it, to be sucked into it, with me, because I’m always so living and so involved in the music. I always really...the music I perform to [...] it really gets me, so I want people to see what’s going on between my ears. [...] Just everything combined together with the music, the music finishes what I do. Usually it’s the starting point and the finishing point.<sup>324</sup>

In addition to the role of the music, I asked for the reasons the participants based their song selection for performing. In response, ten Hove summarised clearly that “there is no specific successful music for drag, because drag is not homogenous [...], so the music for drags is not homogenous either.”<sup>325</sup> Contrarily, in academic literature, Kaminski and Taylor seemed to point out that “drag queens select numbers that depict real-life experiences of gay men and lesbians and play upon the audience’s emotions so that the music facilitates the forging of community.”<sup>326</sup> The authors mention ‘real-life experiences’ as a priority, but the participants of my research seem to place their own taste higher than portraying their ‘real-life experiences.’

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<sup>318</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>319</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>320</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>321</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>322</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>323</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>324</sup> Haegens, interview..

<sup>325</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>326</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 68.

Although their answers varied, all participants pointed to the importance of the venue and the audience when picking out songs for lip-sync performances.<sup>327</sup> Other considerations when choosing their performance music were the time of the performance, and the position it held within the order of a night. Haegens summarizes

It depends on where you're performing; are you in a club where people are hyped, where people are dancing; you don't want to do a really slow number. Or at the end of the night, for example, you do some Mariah Carey, or Whitney Houston that everybody knows, because it's the end of the night, it's nice. But when you're in a club you want to do something with more beat.<sup>328</sup>

Additionally, Roberts mentioned the day in the week, where he argued that performers should take the working schedule of the audience into account, saying: "Sunday, people are going out and it's the end of the weekend, everyone has to work again, so I can do a dramatic ballad."<sup>329</sup> Not only is Roberts here referring to the kind of tempo or feel a song should have, he is also pointing to the drama connected to the end of the weekend. Bernabela mentioned time too, specifically the time of night, giving an example that "at three [o'clock in the morning], people are not as receptive anymore, they're ready to go home, or they just want to see the end of the show."<sup>330</sup> Additionally, Bernabela linked the choice of music to the venue, specifically mentioning the size of the stage as a consideration, where, besides sound, "if you're in a small bar, the audience's reception is way different than in a bigger place."<sup>331</sup> This does not reflect the academic analysis of disco songs used for lip-syncing, where, for example, Hubbs places great importance on the lyrical meaning of a song.<sup>332</sup> The drag queens I interviewed, however, did not mention lyrical content at all in their answers.

Almost all drag queens pointed to the fact that being a drag queen, equals being an entertainer, meaning that during a performance, you should be accommodating your audience when picking out the music. According to Berendsen and Klaassen, the type of drag performer is also an important factor. Each individual drag queen has her own strengths, so lip-sync performances can focus on dance, physical preciseness (which is needed for, for example, a ballad), or textual parts.<sup>333</sup> Ten Hove posed an interesting question when asked if the audience's reactions or opinions played any role in choosing the music for a lip-sync performance: "you have to look at the goal [...]: you have to entertain. Does that mean you have to entertain people with their specific tastes?"<sup>334</sup> According to him, choosing the right music for a lip-sync is about being aware your own strengths, while "tak[ing] your audience into account, but I think it's more important to take yourself into account in relation to the audience."<sup>335</sup> In that way, Ten Hove claimed, you

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<sup>327</sup> See for example the interview with Haegens.

<sup>328</sup> Haegens, interview.

<sup>329</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>330</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>331</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>332</sup> Hubbs, "I Will Survive," 238-9.

<sup>333</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>334</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>335</sup> Ten Hove, interview.



“turn the performance into something they [the audience] could enjoy,” because he argues “you have to find a way to bridge the gap between you and the audience.”<sup>336</sup> Thus, the ‘better’ music in that sense, means also the music that fits the drag queen best. Bernabela confirmed this, noting too that a queen should know her own strengths and play into them.<sup>337</sup>

Berendsen mentioned that the choice of song “is somewhat underrated, [...] because it’s *really* important to think about what song am I going to perform for what audience.”<sup>338</sup> Berendsen agreed with Haegens, saying that the primary importance for the choice of music is the audience, and giving secondary importance to the venue, the kind of event and the time.<sup>339</sup> Klaassen added he wonders before a performance if there is a “good variation between the different songs,” because “you have to have a good mix of different types of songs to get a different energy.”<sup>340</sup> Then, the two participants described the process of picking songs, which they indicate is a long, and intensive job that demands a lot of juggling of priorities when thinking ahead of a performance.<sup>341</sup> Bernabela was the only one who bluntly mentioned his own taste as a highly important, but not only, aspect when picking out songs to lip-sync to.<sup>342</sup> But both Bernabela and Haegens see the combination of song and look as an important factor when deciding what they respectively choose to do.<sup>343</sup>

#### *The Art and Craft of Lip-Syncing – Giving Space to the Queer Voice*

Before discussing the lip-syncing practice according to the participants of my interview, I want to mention that the two practices in singing—live singing and lip-syncing—equally contribute to the deconstruction of gender identity. The voice can be seen as a queer vessel, especially, according to Peraino, the singing voice, to move beyond the “binary gender system.”<sup>344</sup> Peraino wonders if it can even “offer an escape from that system.”<sup>345</sup> This echoes the remark ten Hove made about his singing voice; that it’s either very low, like his speaking voice, or really high, which he could reach when singing classical music. Being dressed in drag, and utilizing both of those registers, enables the move away from ‘binary gender systems,’ I would argue. Another example is the artist Sylvester, who blurs the gender binary with his falsetto voice. Peraino responds, here, to Jack Halberstam’s chapter “Queer Voices and Musical Genders,” mentioning how “[Sylvester’s] vocal breaks sound the moments when gender itself breaks down, when expectations of an alignment between voice and gender are thwarted, and we begin to wonder whether the categories ‘male’ and ‘female’ can even be applied.”<sup>346</sup> Peraino summarizes

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<sup>336</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>337</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>338</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>339</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>340</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>341</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>342</sup> Bernabela, interview.

<sup>343</sup> Bernabela, interview. Haegens, interview.

<sup>344</sup> Peraino, “Listening to Gender,” 63.

<sup>345</sup> Peraino, “Listening to Gender,” 63.

<sup>346</sup> Peraino, “Listening to Gender,” 63.

Halberstam's point "about cover songs and cover voices as a mode of sincere performance that creates queer identifications and community across historical moments."<sup>347</sup> I would argue that 'covering' a song, and lip-syncing to a song have similar effects. Namely, a lip-sync performance can be interpreted by the audience as 'sincere performance that creates queer identifications,' through the use of particular songs that carry a connotation for queer audiences.

Focusing more on lip-syncing, a productive concept to use is the "archived body", as conceptualised by Bonenfant.<sup>348</sup> Bonenfant re-appropriates Steven Connor's concept of the "vocalic body" to describe the process that happens when you perceive a human voice: you know it originates from a body, but when the voice reaches your ear, it has already left that particular body.<sup>349</sup> Bonenfant's term of "the archived body" is helpful in my research of drag queens and their 'borrowed' voices; not only the feminine voices matters, but also the position the artist occupies in queer history.<sup>350</sup>

Thus, the voice is an important participant in my research: the literal voice of the singers that are being lip-synced to by the drag queens, versus the metaphoric, or abstract voice of the drag queens that through lip-syncing creates a queer identity. As I mention above, the act of lip-syncing is seen as a 'devoiced' practice in academic literature, but, according to Farrier, "although the body in the performance is not often the originator of the language delivered [...] or the voice making that speech [...], the queens are in the process of communicating and, ironically, speaking."<sup>351</sup> Besides the embodied aspects of the voice, being produced by a human and heard by another, "it is also distinctly not bodily, operating in the space between two bodies as sound waves; it must make the journey from my body to yours and exist at some point in this no man's land."<sup>352</sup> This "no man's land," I argue, is the space where a queer identity can flourish. Jarman-Ivens elaborates, drawing on Saussure's semiotic analysis, on the (dis)embodied relationship of the voice and the bodies, summarising that "what is important in the ontology of the voice is its capacity always-already to detach the signifier of the vocal wave form from the signified of the identity of the voice's producer, and in turn to keep open the possibility for multiple gender identities."<sup>353</sup> So, she concludes, the voice moves in a "third space," which she identifies as "queer."<sup>354</sup> In the same vein, the music the drag queens chooses for a lip-sync performance is important exactly because it substitutes, or creates space, where there socially was none. In Bonenfant's words, the voice is "social, because it can reach out and touch multiplicities of bodies rather than just one or a few."<sup>355</sup> Bonenfant, here, moves away from a literal meaning, while still playing into the social space that is occupied by an audience, but with a

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<sup>347</sup> Peraino, "Listening to Gender," 63. See Jack Halberstam, "Queer Voices and Musical Genders," in *O Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2007), 193-95.

<sup>348</sup> Bonenfant, "Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres," 75-6.

<sup>349</sup> Bonenfant, "Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres," 75-6. See also Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>350</sup> Bonenfant, "Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres," 75-6.

<sup>351</sup> Farrier, "That Lip-Syncing Feeling," 205.

<sup>352</sup> Freya Jarman-Ivens, "Coda: To Queer or Not To Queer?" in *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 163-4.

<sup>353</sup> Jarman-Ivens, "Coda: To Queer or Not To Queer?" 163-4.

<sup>354</sup> Jarman-Ivens, "Coda: To Queer or Not To Queer?" 163-4.

<sup>355</sup> Bonenfant, "Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres," 77.

particular intention. For example, some drag queens spoke about a queer audience, coming together with similar mindsets and convictions. Jarman-Ivens, in her book on the queerness of the voice, introduces her subject by highlighting the “particular potential to call its listener into a peculiarly intense relationship with itself [that offer a site for] queer spaces opened up by the voice.”<sup>356</sup> Jarman-Ivens takes this thought further, stating “that the voice both serves and exceeds the semiotics and syntax of the spoken word; it articulates semiotic meaning and, in its bodily nature, offers both another dimension to that meaning and another meaning altogether.”<sup>357</sup> She takes Roland Barthes’ conceptualisation of “pheno-song,” and theorises it as everything outside of what the voice communicates through language.<sup>358</sup> So, the voice can touch the audience, but where Barthes, according to Bonenfant, focuses on the deep “penetration” of the voice, a focus on timbre enables alternative ways of feeling to emerge, something that is in itself, queer.<sup>359</sup> Bonenfant, therefore, moves away even from language, focusing on the bodily characteristics of the voice, or even more so, the resulted sounds produced by a voice. At first sight, then, using these theories on the voice seem displaced when talking about a lip-sync performance. However, lip-syncing ‘works’ because the audience’s decision to “willingly [...] suspend any disbelief to the contrary,” which results in similar tendencies that the authors above endorse.<sup>360</sup> Ten Hove added a remark about lip-sync performances where the audience starts clapping during the final note a drag queen ‘sings’, which he thought was kind of silly, since the drag queen is not *actually* singing.<sup>361</sup> Only, the audience was probably submerged in the performance, therefore reacting to the end note as they would when someone was singing live, and in that sense confirming Berendsen and Klaassen’s statement about a successful lip-sync.

Zooming further in on lip-syncing, Jarman-Ivens’ thoughts on the relationship between camp and lip-syncing might prove useful for my own analysis, where she sees “the effect of the scenes tend to cohere around the theatricalization of the relationship (either the connection or disconnection) between the syncer’s body and the voice being synced, and this theatricalization works in such a way to open up camp potential.”<sup>362</sup> Jarman-Ivens utilizes Michel Chion’s “*acousmètre*” to describe the process of assigning a voice to a body, even if that body is obviously not the source of the voice.<sup>363</sup> But, as Jarman-Ivens states, this is not only accepted by the perceiver, “the viewer orientates him- or her-self *in relation* to the gap [between body and voice].”<sup>364</sup> Here, the audience of a drag performance take on their role as participants, because without the audience, there would be no drag show, as I mention above.

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<sup>356</sup> Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices*, 2.

<sup>357</sup> Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices*, 4.

<sup>358</sup> Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices*, 5. See also Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *Image Music Text*, ed. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 179-189.

<sup>359</sup> Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” 77. See also Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice.”

<sup>360</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 95. This reminds me of the “original songs” drag queens lip-sync to in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, where sometimes the songwriter, Lucian Piane in this example, plays with the expectation by having one word or lyric sung in a really low register, as if a tip of the veil is lifted.

<sup>361</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>362</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 100-1. More on camp is discussed below.

<sup>363</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 103. See also Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound On Screen*. Trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>364</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 105-6.

Berendsen and Klaassen discussed the pressure that is on lip-sync performances, because “everything is done already,” to have to have an original angle or approach.<sup>365</sup> They elaborated on audience expectations, of which one idea, as posed by Jarman-Ivens, is “to create an expectation and then violate it.”<sup>366</sup> The disorientation that happens when watching a lip-sync for the first time, I argue, is another expression of queerness, because “queer needs to disorient, and to attune to and through that disorientation.”<sup>367</sup> Similar to Sedgwick’s definition of “queer” I mentioned above, Jarman-Ivens’ definition does not merely reference homosexuality, which often is used as a synonym, but also seeing queer as “a way of doing in the world that disrupts, troubles, questions, and challenges.”<sup>368</sup> All these thoughts comprise to expectations and the disruption of expectations, a topic most participants referred to during their interviews, in one way or another. With the disruption of expectations, I specifically mean how the quality of a lip-sync performance can make an audience believe the performance is actually taking place in that moment, and then suddenly break that illusion. As Poletti takes Halberstam’s thoughts on drag, she notes that “drag plays with identity by heightening the audience’s attention to discontinuity,” where “in drag performance [...] incongruence becomes the site of creativity’ rather than revealing disfunction or pathology.”<sup>369</sup> In drag, then, identity politics are never too far away.

This perspective is added besides the effort it takes to physically prepare for a lip-sync, from “learning the lyrics, and [knowing] exactly when there’s a little breathing moment that you hear in the song that you have to do.”<sup>370</sup> Characteristics of a technically ‘perfect’ lip-sync are listed by Farrier on the basis of his observations of the drag queen Meth: “replicating the completion of the word,” “mouth noises, which include non-language sounds such as lip-smacking, audible intakes of breath and vibrato in singing,” and “focus on breath.”<sup>371</sup> The particularities of the singing voice are not simply mimicked; the voice has a potential as a queer vessel, and as Bonenfant argues, this has mostly to do with timbre. Timbre is connected to our “lived experience,” the quality of a sound that listeners engage with on a more subjective level.<sup>372</sup> More importantly, Bonenfant connects timbre to “our sensual relationship” to the source that produces the sound.<sup>373</sup> This is particularly relevant to the study of drag queen performances because their voices, on the surface, *seem* disembodied, since the practice of lip-syncing requires the performer to use a voice that is not their own. However, I argue that drag queens use particular songs that

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<sup>365</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>366</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 99-100.

<sup>367</sup> Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” 78.

<sup>368</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 99.

<sup>369</sup> Poletti, “The Fiction of Identity,” 38. See also Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

<sup>370</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>371</sup> Farrier, “That Lip-Syncing Feeling,” 202.

<sup>372</sup> Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” 75.

<sup>373</sup> Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” 75.

provide a particular voice *because* of their timbre, although this is never explicitly confirmed by the participants of my research.<sup>374</sup>

In my interviews, the mimicking of real singing during a lip-sync performance was mentioned by ten Hove, but he took it further, saying that he enjoyed the more comedic side of lip-syncing, instead of the physically perfect mimicking. Strikingly, he is the only participant in my research who regularly sings live; his lip-sync performances are marginal compared to his live performances. As a goal, ten Hove adds comedy to his lip-sync performances, which results in him being more “aware of what my face does, not just my lip-syncing, but my whole expression.”<sup>375</sup> The embodied experience thus originates from a performance perspective to achieve a comedic effect, instead of mimicking a natural singing performance. Drew discusses the “mimetic” nature of karaoke, which parallels with lip-syncing. The way in which music is defined, as the creative expression of one’s imaginative mind, poured out into a live moment, preferably notated, does not fit for karaoke, nor does it fit lip-syncing. “Karaoke involves what Goffman (1974) famously called a ‘keying,’ a transformation of a pre-existing activity into something patterned upon yet different from itself.”<sup>376</sup> Where karaoke offers an instrumental back drop where performers can, but are not obligated to, reproduce the exact lyrics of a pre-recorded pop song, lip-syncing focuses on the exact reproduction of the pre-recorded lyrics, and move beyond to include melisma’s and other vocal expressions. In this sense, searching the boundaries within a lip-sync performance can prove to be more of a challenge, but can also add to the comedic effect. Think, for example, of all the singers who mimic Mariah Carey when belting a note, holding one pointer finger in their ear and showing the melisma’s in the air with the other. For this reason, Jarman-Ivens connects lip-syncing to camp, because the action offers certain “qualities of camp, humor, and queer” to emerge.<sup>377</sup> For my research, Jarman-Ivens’ listing of “the body, and the gap between it and the voice; the voice and all of its ideological baggage; recorded sound,” are three out of the four mentioned “elements” that are of interest to me.<sup>378</sup> As Jarman-Ivens continues, “the voice occupies a peculiarly privileged place in our sonic worlds, deemed as it is to be expressive of the ‘self.’”<sup>379</sup> When thinking about drag queens, their chosen voice substitutes for their biological voice, therefore offering an opportunity to portray a more ‘authentic’ self: one that speaks for their queerness.

Roberts also sometimes sings live, but is known specifically for lip-syncing. For him, it boils down to the performance, because, in his words, “I like to perform, whatever it is. Lip-syncing is the thing I do most, because I’m not a singer.”<sup>380</sup> However, he mentioned that when he sometimes does sing live, that he even writes his own songs, but notably, he only sings live *as* Patty Pam Pam. Thus, although Roberts stated multiple times that he himself is not a singer, in drag, “I can do so much more than out of drag,”

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<sup>374</sup> Except for Roberts, who describes his use of covers, specifically for the fact they are sung by female voices.

<sup>375</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>376</sup> Drew, “Once More, With Irony,” 378. See also Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

<sup>377</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 104.

<sup>378</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 104-5.

<sup>379</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 104-5.

<sup>380</sup> Roberts, interview.

which can be attributed to the elevated feeling of confidence that I discuss in the section on embodiment.<sup>381</sup>

### *Emotional Baggage – Added Values*

Besides the effort that it takes to get the words down, Klaassen and Berendsen stressed that “getting the emotion across” is another important part of lip-syncing, and, not unimportantly, “to have the *correct* emotion.”<sup>382</sup> A successful lip-sync, according to the drag couple, is one where people give feedback like: “I got goose bumps, or: I really felt it, what you were telling [with the lip-sync].”<sup>383</sup> In an academic study on music during drag performances, Kaminski and Taylor remark that audience members described being emotional after hearing “What Makes a Man a Man,” a central element of teaching heterosexual audiences about gay culture and the discrimination they encounter.<sup>384</sup> The authors discuss the intentional choice of song by drag queens to educate an audience, but since this is not reflected in the opinions posed by the participants, the discrepancy enables me to look further for explanations.

Interestingly, the drag couple connected the way a lip-sync can go wrong to the kind of queen who is performing it. For example, a comedy queen could make fun of the mistakes she makes during her lip-sync, because lip-sync performances itself are not what she is known for.<sup>385</sup> Ten Hove offered a similar point of view, connecting a lip-sync performance to his tendency to perform with live musical numbers. He says that “you have to find a balance between what you like to do, what do you really enjoy to do, and what does the audience enjoy to see?”<sup>386</sup> For ten Hove, it is not merely about the audience, but also about the assets of the drag queen. He summed up his thoughts by saying:

I’d rather, if you do something that you enjoy, and people see that, they automatically enjoy the fact that you like it, but there’s a tension there. You can take it too far, [...] because if you do something completely weird, and they don’t get it... If you can’t cross the bridge of: ‘I don’t get it but I like it,’ if you don’t get to the part: ‘but I like it,’ than the whole construct breaks down as well.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Roberts, interview.

<sup>382</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview. Emphasis added by the author.

<sup>383</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>384</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Syncing Up Here,” 61. However, I do think the audience today is generally made up of mostly allies, so imagining homophobic people entering a drag bar, as described in the research, unlikely. In this sense, it is definitely about teaching, but maybe not so much about exposure and normalisation of different gender identities and sexualities.

<sup>385</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview. I experienced this phenomenon first-hand during Trixie Mattel’s show: Trixie Mattel is known for her comedy and her live singing, lip-syncing is thus secondary to her drag persona. During her *Skinny Legend* show (2019), Trixie Mattel lip-synced an elaborate speech of fellow-drag star Jasmine Masters, but messed up some of the words, and immediately after commenting on the fact that she messed up that bit.

<sup>386</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>387</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

What Ten Hove talks about here, refers to the delicate balance between the audience and the performer; while the drag queen can use her assets to get away with something she herself likes to do, the audience needs to always be taken into account.

### *The Drag Canon(ization)*

To contextualize the next part of this chapter, I now get into the history of lip-syncing as a development into an integral part of drag. Kaminski and Taylor offer a brief history of the activity; at first, drag performances were rich in number and content, where drag queens (like cabaret) were supposed to sing live.

However, the repression of gay culture following World War II led some areas to ban female impersonation in cafes, restaurants, and other establishments, and female impersonators in some cities had to carry cabaret cards to prove they were performers. The legal restrictions against crossdressing entertainers channelled drag performances into more disreputable commercial establishments that catered more exclusively to gay crowds. These gay clubs employed younger, more marginal, and confrontational “street impersonators” who would lip-synch to recorded music.<sup>388</sup>

Ten Hove contextualized lip-syncing as a practice that got more popular in the 1990s, with big drag festivals like Lady Bunny’s Wig Stock,<sup>389</sup> but said he is not sure what caused the growth in the importance of lip-syncing as a part of drag.<sup>390</sup> This remark helps to highlight that within lip-syncing, a certain pool of songs was created, where one particular song could pop up during multiple lip-sync performances, before entering in the ‘queer canon.’ Disco inhabits a particular place within the history of queer communities, and queer social spaces. According to Hubbs, “gay men and lesbians, drag queens and ‘fag hangs’ were all part of the 1970s-1980s disco scene in countless queer locales, whether or not at disco’s New York debut.”<sup>391</sup> Kaminski and Taylor add that “the continued popularity of disco in gay culture is likely due to an historical association: the emergence of disco coincided with the elaboration of gay institutions across the United States in the 1970s. These songs enhance gay solidarity by reinforcing a sense of common history.”<sup>392</sup> Songs were used with lyrics that speak to drag queens through themes of “sexual liberation, assertiveness, and pride,” which are in contrast with the shame gay people had to endure at the time before, during, and still after the disco era.<sup>393</sup> In her analysis of disco, Hubbs employs the term “signifying,” also drawing on semiotic analysis, where she uses the reconceptualised term

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<sup>388</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 51.

<sup>389</sup> Described by Kaminski and Taylor as “a ‘dragstravaganza’ held annually between 1983 and 2002 in New York City that attracted drag performers, gay men, lesbians, and transgendered individuals.” See Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 60.

<sup>390</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>391</sup> Hubbs, “I Will Survive,” 232.

<sup>392</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 58.

<sup>393</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here,” 58.

“Signifyin(g),” as coined by Henry Jr. Gates.<sup>394</sup> Hubbs describes the term as “a style-focused, troping, double-voiced mode of discourse that juxtaposes playful performativity and serious intent, and has functioned centrally in African-American discursive culture.”<sup>395</sup> Connected to this, Hubbs indicates the African-American people involved in the music production of disco music, and “queer culture’s long, admiring engagement with African-American Signifyin(g) and testifyin’ speech, which has fundamentally influenced camp expressive modes.”<sup>396</sup> Through these references, Hubbs claims that insiders would ‘get’ the message that is perceivable in these double-voices, while outsiders could not. This has important connections to the previous chapter, where the drag queens elaborated on the language they use in their shows, but that is also present in the music they lip-sync to. Important to note here, once again, is how the relationship between the audience and the performers is constructed; when the audience is aware of certain tropes that come with the use of particular language, the relationship between audience and performer works differently. While the drag queens might use particular music using that language for empowerment, if it is not perceived as such by an audience, it might not work empowering. One of the ways in which this empowerment might be achieved is by the use of popular songs, because “by utilizing popular songs—frequently, songs that depict romanticized portrayals of heterosexuality—drag performances invoke hegemonic sexual scripts and symbols to draw in audience members. However, these dominant cultural codes are simultaneously criticized, resisted, and undermined.”<sup>397</sup> In conclusion, through these historical tendencies, I can track some sort of canonization in the history of lip-syncing.

But how do drag queens experience this canon nowadays? One way drag queens might experience the canon now is through a collective sense of communal history. As I mentioned in my previous chapter, lip-syncing is an important vessel to transport queer knowledge from one generation to the next. For example, important celebrities that get synced “form a trope, a stock or mythical character through which the present performance links, via a voice singing in that past, to the past without making it fully present.”<sup>398</sup> Queer knowledge production is also reflected in the way in which gay/queer culture might perpetuate their heritage: unlike traditional family hierarchies, the heritage is passed down through the repetition of certain traditions by queer people. Which music one uses for a lip-sync is one of the traditions that is passed down by queer communities. This musical heritage assists in creating a canon, which, in itself, is a conflicting body of work where power relations and hierarchies can thrive. But because this particular canon exists out of music that is either deemed ‘low-brow,’ or is created by queer artists, it might fall outside of the structural hierarchies that it could possibly form. I here draw a parallel to Drew’s article, where he follows the history of karaoke, in particular the reception history, pointing to the hierarchies within music, where “karaoke was compared unfavourably to live music, or even accused, as so

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<sup>394</sup> Hubbs, “I Will Survive,” 237. See also Henry Jr. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>395</sup> Hubbs, “I Will Survive,” 237.

<sup>396</sup> Hubbs, “I Will Survive,” 237.

<sup>397</sup> Additional important models can be found in Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Syncing Up Here,” 69.

<sup>398</sup> Farrier, “That Lip-Syncing Feeling,” 205.



many music technologies have been accused (Frith, 1986), of diluting or replacing live music.”<sup>399</sup> These views are now outdated, as I stated before; just as lip-syncing stands on its own as a particular type of performance, demanding many skills of a performer, karaoke’s appreciation has changed over time. It is, then, productive to think about music technologies replacing live music, because of the peculiar way a lip-syncing performance plays with liveness. The voices of the past, as mentioned by authors who write about lip-syncing, especially in the drag queen context, merge with the performance that takes place in the now. An example of this is merging is ten Hove’s discussion of his lip-sync performance, where he mixes classical music with other, more generally perceived low-brow music genres.<sup>400</sup> Another function of choosing particular songs to lip-sync to is explained by Peraino, who, when referring to Prince’s cover of Sinead O’Conner notes that “instead of competition, what emerges is a line of affiliation that ties male voices to female voices and creates queer sentiments across time and space.”<sup>401</sup> The matter of covers is a different one than numbers drag queens choose to lip-sync to, but Peraino’s statement accurately describes the perpetuation of certain music that is taken by other performers, which is confirmed by Kaminski and Taylor’s research. These author states that “by utilizing songs by such ‘powerful women’ [...] [a drag queen] replaces hegemonic definitions of gender with new definitions of femininity.”<sup>402</sup>

So, canonization in itself is now somewhat of a contested practice, with its own set of hierarchies and prejudices, which normally allows only certain artists to enter the canon.<sup>403</sup> However, in the context of this particular research, thinking about canonization within a marginalized group in Western society can offer some insight in renouncing hegemonic structures in the music industry. A full discussion of the practice of canonization would ultimately require a separate study, so here, I limit my discussion to the way in which the participating drag queens engaged with specific, ‘canonical’ music, including ‘gay anthems,’<sup>404</sup> or songs that drag queens mention as being popular within queer communities.<sup>405</sup> Furthermore, there are songs categorised by Kaminski and Taylor to entail “widely known popular songs and show tunes that tap into the experiences of heterosexual audience members,” to “create a second level of collective identity and sense of unity across identity categories.”<sup>406</sup> Although equally important, the participants of my research did not mention the deliberate choice of music to actively engage with the heterosexual audience, therefore, my hypotheses is that the participants utilised the drag canon, as it exists

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<sup>399</sup> Drew, “Once More, With Irony,” 376. See also Simon Frith, “Art Versus Technology: The Strange Case of Popular Music,” *Media, Culture, and Society* 8 (1986): 263–79.

<sup>400</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>401</sup> Peraino, “Listening to Gender,” 64.

<sup>402</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Syncing Up Here,” 64.

<sup>403</sup> One seminal example of an author engaged with this topic is Marcia Citron. See Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

<sup>404</sup> In my research, I deploy Kaminski and Taylor’s definition of the gay anthem, namely as “songs [that] enhance a feeling of solidarity among gays and lesbians through their familiarity and appeal to common experiences.” See Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Syncing Up Here,” 58.

<sup>405</sup> There is even a Wikipedia entry for ‘gay anthem’, and Billboard made a list of ‘gay anthems’ too. See <https://www.billboard.com/photos/7408710/gay-anthems-lgbt-pride-top-songs>. I do want to point out that Patrick Crowley, the editor who was behind many queer articles and lists for Billboard, was fired after accusations of sexual harassment. For this, see <https://www.buzzfeed.com/patrickstrudwick/these-instagram-messages-led-to-a-billboard-magazine-editor>.

<sup>406</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, “We’re Not Just Lip-Syncing Up Here,” 54.

today.<sup>407</sup> Again, a tendency in academia is incongruent with the tendencies described by the participants of my research. However, some authors seem to create connections between theory and practice. For example Kumbier, as a drag performer, an academic, and queer, provides a fruitful intersection of parts of one's identity. She describes the use of popular music "for the expression of the desires that pop culture does not anticipate, endorse, or provide space for. The very expression of these desires in a public way is subversive."<sup>408</sup>

So, how did the, what I call, drag canon, come to be? Kaminski and Taylor track the history of music used in drag, where from the 1960s on, "performers began to appropriate a fairly standard repertoire of songs made up of mainstream popular music, show tunes, and songs with explicitly gay lyrics."<sup>409</sup> Other authors take disco as emblematic of the connection between the queer musical canon and gender identity. Nelson mentions Aretha Franklin's version of "You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman," linking it to Butler, and saying that "some people find pleasure in aligning themselves with an identity."<sup>410</sup> It is a notable choice that Nelson picks this particular song, because, as Hubbs argues about Gloria Gaynor's disco hit "I Will Survive," these songs function as "archetypal emblem of disco as a musico-social movement born of and bespeaking a cross-subcultural mingling in the margins."<sup>411</sup> Hubbs continues by analysing the song, looking through "a rich interplay of musical and verbal discourses of difference, yielding a pop-cultural trope whose residual signs of otherness were perceptible."<sup>412</sup> I argue that this is the function that most, maybe all, disco songs that are part of the queer/gay canon fulfil, and is something that was also touched upon during the interviews. In addition, Hubbs takes Hamm's statement—"the most truly interracial popular music since early rock 'n' roll" is disco—further, saying that "while it may be true, this statement, constructing a coalition *across* racial difference, omits the further relevant subject inflections, of gender and sexuality, by which disco constituted a coalition *around* shared experiences of difference, including stigmatisation, marginalisation and invisibilisation."<sup>413</sup> My argument would be that this particular part of disco, as foregrounding 'shared experiences of difference,' is still present, besides the fact that most disco songs are part of the drag canon because they have been performed numerously.

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<sup>407</sup> It is, however, good to keep in mind that Kaminski and Taylor attributed this choice of music to a *ritual*, which I addressed in the previous chapter.

<sup>408</sup> Kumbier, "One Body, Some Genders," 196. I wondered during the interviews how the drag queens I interviewed would respond if they would have read as much about drag as I currently was doing. Multiple queens commented on the questions during their interview with statements like: "O, I never thought about this," especially when discussing the music. If the participants would have read academic texts like the one Kumbier wrote, or even had some more time to think about their choices concerning the music they lip-sync to, I assume the answers would be different.

<sup>409</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, "We're Not Just Lip-Synching Up Here," 51.

<sup>410</sup> Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 17.

<sup>411</sup> Hubbs, "I Will Survive," 233.

<sup>412</sup> Hubbs, "I Will Survive," 233.

<sup>413</sup> Hubbs, "I Will Survive," 241. See also Charles Hamm, *Putting Popular Music in Its Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Another thought these themes conjures up is the ability of the audience to pick up on these nuances as described above. Therefore, I want to return here to the concept of queerness in order to connect it to queer listening, as put forward by Bonenfant. Queer listening, Bonenfant suggests, is something that requires “a certain virtuosity.”<sup>414</sup> But I wonder: does queer listening happen when being present at a drag show? Or is it a mindset that the audience consciously needs to acquire? Because, in Bonenfant’s words: “queer is doing, not a being. Even if the source of some versions of queerness lies in the existential ground of selfhood, and is thus rooted in biological imperatives, it is through doing queer and being identified and marked as queer that the queer become queer to themselves and to the world. Hence the consequence of the naming of queer, separating queer into ‘other.’”<sup>415</sup> Because queer people have always been (seen as) a minority, taking the queer identity both separates you from the normative society, marking you as other, and places you in the queer narrative. Bonenfant continues by claiming that that “queer listening listens out for, reaches toward, the disoriented or differently oriented other.”<sup>416</sup> Then, queer people, and in my case studies, drag queens, might pick their canon based on that outreach: they consider which artist speaks out about or speaks to a queer identity. Although this was only actively confirmed by one participant, further questioning, in more research, could provide a definitive answer.

Berendsen and Klaassen discussed the degree of queerness in songs, of which gay anthems and songs produced by drag queens are rated high on their queer scale.<sup>417</sup> These songs do not, however, work in all contexts: some songs are cliché in one place, but could work well in another place, with different audiences. Thereby, different contexts will conjure up different connotations by the audience: a drag bar, or queer space, would respond differently to “It’s Raining Men” by the Weather Girls, than a private party in the rural area. The first audience will have the connotation with the meaning and position of the song in queer culture, while the latter audience would probably associate the song with a particular era of music (the 1980’s).<sup>418</sup> Ten Hove offered an insight in a local case; he discussed three bars in Amsterdam that offer regular drag nights, where one is “very dancy, very pop,” one is “a mix between pop and funny, and serious,” and one is “old-fashioned,” in the sense that “you could easily do a Dutch song from the 60’s or 70’s there, like Eurovision songs.”<sup>419</sup> Mostly, however, these bars have these images because they accommodate a certain clientele, and after a few years, certain expectations. Ten Hove concluded his thought by reflecting on the issue of venues by saying: [...] there are some queens who are never booked at one venue because their style doesn’t fit the venue’s style, and that’s fine, because it’s the other way

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<sup>414</sup> Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” 78.

<sup>415</sup> Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” 78. The premise of researching a topic like queerness results in some thoughts that overlap, which is why I return to queerness, but connected to queer listening.

<sup>416</sup> Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” 78.

<sup>417</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>418</sup> Berendsen and Klaassen, interview.

<sup>419</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

around as well [...] Nobody can do everything well, and that's perfect because then everybody gets their chance at their own thing, but you do have to find a venue that fits you with an audience that fits you."<sup>420</sup>

In the previous chapter, I engaged with the physical and symbolic space of the stage in greater depth, but here, I want to mention the ability of a song to capture queerness. Farrier mentions that lip-synching creates "a place outside the immediate temporal world of the act," where, as he quotes Eir-Anne Edgar, "references to historically situated drag icons and practices" are made.<sup>421</sup> Strikingly, Farrier connects this "pastness" to a self-reflecting historiography, one that the community likes to hear repeated. By choosing specific songs by specific pop-diva's, drag queens reassert their importance to the construction of their identity. The space that is created in lip-synching by using the songs of these pop-diva's, and the reference that is made in this space to the audience, in my opinion, creates a queer space.

### *Camp and Irony as Drag Performance*

The meaning of camp, as contextualised by Susan Sontag, has since its first publication undergone quite a process. Therefore, I will first elaborate on the current status of the term and its meaning in relation to drag. Brian M. Peters and Bruce E. Drushel take on new perspectives towards camp in their book *Sontag and the Camp Aesthetic: Advancing New Perspectives*. In the introduction, the authors elaborate on the term,

Sontag, of course, invented neither the term nor the concept it describes; for that we are indebted to the French, whose verb *se camper* means 'to pose in an exaggerated fashion.' [...] Forced to mask their gay identities while in heteronormative places, queers developed a coded language that gave common words a second meaning only they could recognize (Chauncey 1994, 286). The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces camp's currently understood meaning to 1909, where it appears as 'ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to, characteristic of, homosexuals.'<sup>422</sup>

In a way, drag queens still 'mask their gay identities while in heteronormative places,' which, on a stage, they ridicule in exaggerated fashion, while in their day-to-day life, drag queens still face discrimination and become victims of hate crimes.<sup>423</sup> Nonetheless, camp has been avidly incorporated into drag shows since the 1970s, which is why it is, according to Kaminski and Taylor, remarkable that "drag performances have moved into mainstream culture."<sup>424</sup> One of the reasons why drag queens use camp, is

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<sup>420</sup> Ten Hove, interview.

<sup>421</sup> Farrier, "That Lip-Synching Feeling," 196. See also Eir Anne Edgar, "'Xtravaganza!': Drag Representation and Articulation in *RuPaul's Drag Race*," *Studies in Popular Culture* 34, no. 1 (2011): 133–46.

<sup>422</sup> Bruce E. Drushel, and Brian M. Peters, *Sontag and the Camp Aesthetic: Advancing New Perspectives* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2017), vii. See also George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

<sup>423</sup> I read and see on a regular basis social media messages and articles that describe these crimes; from physical violence to rejections by cab drivers. See Ciska Schippers, "Dragqueen Jennifer Hopelezz Opnieuw Geweigerd Door Taxichauffeur," *Het Parool* (blog), July 15, 2019, <https://www.parool.nl/amsterdam/dragqueen-jennifer-hopelezz-opnieuw-geweigerd-door-taxichauffeur~be92eae9/?referer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>.

<sup>424</sup> Kaminski and Taylor, "We're Not Just Lip-Synching Up here," 54, 69.

because it provides them with “the x-ray gaze of the paranoid impulse in camp sees through to an unflashed skeleton of the culture; the paranoid aesthetic on view here is one of minimalist elegance and conceptual economy.”<sup>425</sup> This statement by Sedgwick lays bare what camp is actually doing; camp exposes cultural practices by reflecting back in an over-the-top manner. Or, as Sedgwick mentions the reparative characteristics of camp,

To view camp as, among other things, the communal, historically dense exploration of a variety of reparative practices is to do better justice to many of the defining elements of classic camp performance: [...] the passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternative historiographies; [...] the irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation; the disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture.<sup>426</sup>

I specifically highlighted the characteristics that suit the drag queen, because to me, it is clear how these characteristics could describe a drag show. According to Jarman-Ivens, a scholar whose research engages with the intersection of camp and music, camp is “a distinctly fragile phenomenon, [and as a] style that is extravagant, potentially to the point of excess.”<sup>427</sup> This characteristic of camp is for most audience members probably recognizable when watching a drag show. As Jarman-Ivens continues, “camp” has overcome its status as “apolitical”: by being overtly exaggerated, drag (like camp) “can work like a cultural Trojan horse, slipping in gender subversions beneath the radar.”<sup>428</sup> Her quoted summary by Jack Babuscio proves relevant for my research: “the term *camp* describes those elements in a person, situation, or activity that express, or are created by, a gay sensibility. Camp is never a thing or person *per se*, but rather a relationship between activities, individuals, situations, and *gayness*.”<sup>429</sup>

If I think back on definitions of queer and queerness, there are similarities between queerness and camp, because of the fact that it is connected not to a material thing or person, but to a more abstract labyrinth of social connections and attitudes. In Jarman-Ivens’ own words, “camp is importantly relational, negotiating a response (either in the text itself or in the reception of it) by gayness to the world.”<sup>430</sup> For this project, looking at camp as a gay response to the world is particularly fruitful. The expression of camp by drag queens might be understood as overtly clear, but I argue it says more about the ironic tone with which drag queens question the normative patterns in society. They are not subtle, they do not sugar-coat it, but use extravagant styles and cutthroat humour to break down the patriarchy. Jarman-Ivens connects queer and camp, by saying that “queer is the *dramatization* of incoherencies, while camp is the *parody* of gender norms through humorous means.”<sup>431</sup> In both senses, it is reminiscent of the influence Butler provided, and modelled for queer identities and their conceptualisation. On a more

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<sup>425</sup> Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 149.

<sup>426</sup> Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 149-50.

<sup>427</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 97.

<sup>428</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 97-8.

<sup>429</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 99. See also Jack Babuscio, “Camp and the Gay Sensibility,” in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. by David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 20.

<sup>430</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 99.

<sup>431</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 106.

theoretical note, Farrier delineates as the “theoretical implications” of lip-syncing: “deconstruction, postmodern parody and the ability to challenge reality.”<sup>432</sup> Here, Farrier thus connects parody to lip-syncing, which is a parallel that is touched upon by both drag queens and academics.

Jarman seems to have taken note of semiotics too, which becomes clear when reading her two broad categories for camp possibilities in lip-syncing: first, “the communicative possibilities opened up by using an other’s voice,” by which the author means that another layer of meaning, for example, emotion, can be added to a lip-syncer’s performance.<sup>433</sup> Second, Jarman explains “the challenge presented by the mis-/dis-located voice,” to achieve a “focus on the shock of fakeness, the challenge of the disembodied voice, or the problem of the appropriation of another’s voice.”<sup>434</sup> Both the first and second point connect to drag queens, but I attest that the second point, in a way, turns into the first one: it is obvious for the audience who is going to a drag show that the person in front of them is not a ‘biological’ woman, though the quality of the lip-syncing might let the audience forget they are watching a drag performance. The performative change that happens through the music achieves the extra layer of meaning, as if the alter ego is starting to live a life of her own through the music, projecting emotions that were not able to be reached outside of the music. Here, I argue, a queerness can *become* through music in the space of a song-length performance.

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<sup>432</sup> Farrier, “That Lip-Syncing Feeling,” 195.

<sup>433</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 101.

<sup>434</sup> Jarman, “Watch My Lips,” 101.

## Conclusion

### *Self-reflection; What Researching Drag has Taught Me*

While writing this thesis, conducting the interviews and reading up on academic perspectives, it became clear that the overarching theme I wanted to pursue was the discrepancy between lived experience and theoretical perspectives. Reflecting back on the process, I believe that being part of the academic world, and attending lectures at the academic institution that is the university, made me aware of particular constructions when it came to knowledge production. Additionally, engaging in gender studies, and, maybe even more so, with feminism and activism, I became aware of the ways academics coupled their activism with academia. There were inspiring discussion in class, where fellow students offered critical reflections on this practice, speaking from personal perspectives. In the end, that is what inspired me to write this thesis, regardless of the case study I chose, and what resulted in the choice to not only interview people to gain knowledge of their experience, but to let that knowledge be leading in my arguments.

I want to stress that the discrepancies and parallels I found between lived experiences and academic theories are exemplary for the participants I interviewed, not for the entire Dutch drag scene, or of a particular city in the Netherlands, let alone on a global scale. The sentiments and experiences expressed by the participants of my research are themselves subject to change, which makes this thesis merely a snapshot of opinions. It is, however, exciting to research a subject in the midst of its popularity, seeing drag queens I engaged with during my research gaining more fame, acknowledgements, and even screen time on national television. Throughout the process, I kept being surprised by the answers provided by the drag queens, and the way it coincided or clashed with academia. The participants proved not only to be a vital part of my research, but creative and knowledgeable people who were not afraid to dive into the questions I constructed.

I now go through all respective chapters, summarizing the ways in which the lived experiences of the interviewed drag queens lined up with the thoughts of the academic writers I chose. By measuring each subject to lived experience, I am able to analyse the ways in which academia falls short in capturing real life experiences of real life people. In general, as is the greater aim of my thesis, I hope to contribute to bridging the gap between theory and practice, breaking down some ivory towers on the way. And even if I fail to do so, this thesis contributes to a new way of thinking about knowledge production, self-reflectivity and situated knowledge.<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>435</sup> Haraway, "Situated Knowledges."

## *Findings*

As I began denoting in my introduction, critiques and self-reflection within queer studies have been essential parts of the development of the discipline. Self-identified queer authors, like Butler, are good authors to use here, because they write both from their own, personal perspectives, but also have an entry into academia. I would say that Butler, for example, did went through a process of clarification, maybe not so much of her academic work per se, but of using the critiques and fusing them with her own experience to create new work. Other theorisations by queer authors were easier to use in supporting the lived experiences of the interviewed drag queens. This is partly due to the fact that I chose current literature, which couples better to the sentiments expressed by the participants.

My first chapter, on queerness, went surprisingly smooth, with which I mean that fusing the interviews with the academic theories seemed an almost natural process. Looking back on all three chapters, I now see that the choice in literature contributed a great deal to the parallels I found in the literature. For example, I used many queer authors, but even more importantly, I used authors who were critical on their position as writers about lived experience. Therefore, the tensions that the participants of my research described, were also felt by the literary voices of the chapter. One of the things that came to the fore, was the way in which 'queer' as a term was less feasible as a concept, than it was useful as a lens through which a person can look at the world. Authors like Ahmed, Sedgwick and Morris showed in their works that adding a queer perspective, enriched their academic endeavours.

It is notable that queerness is connected mostly to gender identity and sexual preference, both by the participants, as is put out by the academic writers. Furthermore, statements about queerness, and particularly, fitting a 'box', were put out by the participants, and recognized within the academic literature. Another parallel is found in the way both perspectives add to the image of drag queens: instead of simply identifying drag queens as men who want to be women, drag moves away from the rigid gender binary, and creates a whole other category: drag queens. The development drag went through, and the critiques it posed on the way, are recognised and celebrated by both the participants, as the academic writers I engaged with in this thesis. Where the academics wrote about the nuancing of gender identities, the participants focused on the fact that drag, to them, created something that was not even able to be described by gender conforming terms. Even when some of the participants talked about stereotypical femininity as part of their drag, they were still very much aware of the queer potential it had, simply due to the fact that they were men, doing drag.

The subjects of my research live out their queerness in drag, more so than in their day-to-day lives. Where they were slightly hesitant in appropriating a queer identity, they all agreed there was queerness to be found in their drag. Some participants found their connection to queerness by referring to their queer/LGBTQI+ communities, which was affirmed by multiple academic articles and book chapters. It even went as far as the more abstract construction of heritability, which might not be conscious for the interviewed drag queens, but was an interesting parallel to find.



The goal of this chapter was to put out the thoughts of the participants of my research on an equal level with the academic literature. As a note, most answers were intertwined, which actually is one of the premises of queerness, but the focus of the next two chapters will provide a clear division in the research.

The second chapter proved to be less harmonious when I was choosing the academic voices to support the answers put out by the drag queens. As it is the case, much literature on drag focuses on the historical background; where does drag come from? However, the drag queens I spoke to in these past few months, considering they all come from different directions in drag, emphasised more their sentiments expressed to their current drag practice. Furthermore, although both the academics, and the drag queens discussed the audience extensively, the level of participation and consideration of the audience by drag queens is much more emphasised.

However, theorisations of misogyny and the way it is described by the interviewed drag queens does seem to coincide. Academics give reasons for using irony, which fits the recollection of the drag queens when speaking about acting in a way in drag that would not be accepted out of drag. Another aspect of my research where the two perspectives coincided was the practice of ‘reading,’ and the language connected to that. The drag queens experiences were complemented by the theorisations of the same practices, showing nuanced perspectives on both sides.

The biggest discrepancy was found in the embodied experience of drag. I was prepared by the academic text to delve into a philosophical discussion of being, within the confined space of a drag performance, but the drag queens proposed answer much more directed to the literal bodily sensations they experienced. The only parallel I could find is the way in which the drag queens described their heightened sense of confidence when in drag, which most participants connected to their drag look.

The music chapter turned out to be a little more difficult to merge the participants’ voices with the academic ones. Where the first chapter had a very organic feel and structure, the questions that I posed on music and lip-syncing sometimes felt too obvious. However, the drag queens did come up with more nuanced answers towards the end of answering these questions, which is, luckily, a premise of interviewing.

One apparent discrepancy was between academic authors who analysed lip-syncing performances through the decision-making process of the drag queens when it comes to musical numbers. However, most participants did not respond in the same way. One reason for this was the lack of specificity on my part, although the question “on what basis do you choose the music for a lip-sync performance, and what value does it have,” seems to be quite clear. However, the value the participants placed on music was obvious: everyone argued for the importance of having the right music to lip-sync to. Another reason for the discrepancy could lie in the time the articles were written compared to the interviews that were conducted this year. Drag as a profession, and as a form of entertainment has exploded in the past few years. With a rise of drag queens and performances, it would seem harder to be original, as pointed out by

Berendsen and Klaassen. The heightened visibility might also be a reason why drag queens make different choices in music now, than three or four years ago, which is when the academic texts I used on lip-syncing were written. Furthermore, I cannot help but reflect back on the musicological discipline, where these more forward subjects are always caught up a little later than in other disciplines of the humanities. This is, however, an assumption.

Contrarily, there were some parallels between the experience of lip-syncing by the drag queens, and as described by academic authors. Although the participants might not have the same jargon to describe their experiences, they spoke similarly about physical and symbolic expressions of their lip-sync performances. To continue on canonization; I approached this topic differently in the interviews. Instead of asking if the drag queens thought there existed such a thing as a drag canon, I asked them about their music choices, and if they thought there was music that particularly suited lip-sync performances. Therefore, the answer provided by the participants deviated, once again, from the academic literature, but in some ways amplified each other at the same time. The different perspectives, namely, enabled the drag queens to reflect on their song choice. However, if the participants had the academic background that provided them with a nuanced language to describe those choices, the results could have been much more in sync. As a final note, although the participants did not use the word 'camp' specifically, they did describe some sentiments connected to lip-syncing, which is theorised in academia.

In general, it became clear that because of the nature of my topic, many sub topics connected and were intertwined with others. So reading and writing about audiences, queerness, and music, resulted in a puzzling amount of thoughts to place together in an order that made sense to the reader. With my research, I hope to contribute to a different outlook on knowledge production, and I am looking forward to extending the outcomes into further research.

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**Appendix**

*Transcribed Interviews*

April – May 2019



## Interview Franklin Bernabela – Tres Latraj

April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019      Groningen

1) How did you get started with drag?

At first, I was going out here in the gay scene, and especially in Amsterdam, people like to dress up. They like to be a little bit more flamboyant: make-up, wigs, outfits, and I was really interested in what they were doing, so I wanted to do something like that, and eventually it went further and further and it became drag. Very much inspired by drag queens.

My inspiration now can come from anything. I'm very much inspired by everything I see, other artists, but also just nature, things like that.

2) What does drag mean in your (day to day) life?

In my day to day life I think [drag] is entertainment, its kind of what makes me happy, to see other drag queens. It's also fun to think about ideas that you want to do. What drag means to me personally is my way of expressing my creativity, I guess. Because I like to make things, to try out different types of make-up, try out different types of wigs. So a lot of my drag is made by myself and that's the main thing I enjoy in drag, that is making things. My drag is an expression of my creativity.

3) Many academic texts that discuss drag and lip-syncing talk about a queer identity, which leads me to believe that there is a connection between drag and queerness. Would you describe yourself as queer or as having a queer identity?

I think when it comes to my gender, or my personal gender, I feel strongly that I'm cis-gender, but in some ways you, as a drag queen, the lines are very blurry. I would consider myself cis-gender, but I feel a lot of the times, that I spend a lot of time thinking about the cliché ideas what women would think of: I look at women's clothes, I look at make-up, things like that. But, if you think in gender roles, then yes, as a drag queen, you tend to be in the middle sometimes. In overall, I do think that drag queens are maybe, they spend a lot of time with both genders, not only on stage but in life, also. I think it's different for everybody, and I think some people, are, if it was two points, and one is male, one is female, then drag queens would be in the middle, and some people lean more to the left, some people more to the right, some people are right in the middle. When it comes to myself, I would consider myself more cis-gender, but at the same time, not completely.

It's very different sometimes. For example, on stage I want them to call them by my drag name, if I'm on stage. Let's say, I'm at a party, dressed in drag, maybe hosting or just walking around, I don't mind people calling me by my normal name, because at the end of the day, that's what I respond to the most. If they call me 'he', just in conversation or refer to 'him', I don't mind at all. But if somebody explicitly calls me a man or lets me know that "O, you're a man", if I go to the bar, and they say "Sir, can I help you," when they *see* that I'm in drag, and they see that I'm trying to, you're expressing yourself in a female for, and they explicitly refer to you in a male pronoun, I find that a little bit aggressive, and it's meant to hurt you in some kind of way. But most of the time, I don't really care, I don't really mind.

4) What's your definition of "queer"? In what ways does queerness find expression in your identity?

(What does queerness mean to you?)

I feel, in my personal identity, or in my drag identity? [Doesn't really matter, but going off of what you were saying earlier, I would say drag identity?] My drag identity is especially, it's not female, it's definitely not male, sometimes it's not even human. So I would say my drag identity is kind of, especially, emphasizing the fact that gender is kind of changeable. It's not only what you know, you can do anything

with it as you please. It can change, it can stay, it can be a specific that you already know, but you can also do whatever you want with it. And in my drag especially, not the norm, I want it to be something that's, not something that you would recognize, sometimes it would be an exaggeration of something that you already know, or something totally different. I think, I especially love queer culture and the gay, LGBT culture that we have. Sometimes I love to play, to be a part of it, or kind of use things that have been, historical, or kind of emphasize the culture and the history sometimes, in my drag, in my shows, things like that.

- 5) Does your queer identity come to an expression in your drag? In what ways does this happen during your show?

It definitely does that, especially I like to pay homage to the drag culture, the queer culture. For example, a big inspiration for me was the vogue scene, the balls. The first time, I remember, I saw somebody voguing, and I already knew what voguing was, but I saw it on TV, they were voguing, and I looked up the crew, and I saw they were battling against other groups and I thought: "what is this battle?" After that I came across *Paris is Burning*, so all those things you realize that what you're doing right now, not only has it been done, but it comes from a great work that people have done in the past. It's important to pay homage to where you're from, and to kind of respect it also. And it's also fun to sometimes, kind of, not only pay homage, but to kind of make fun, not only to make fun, but to laugh about what's happened and your history and the queer's history.

- 6) In what ways do you interpret your drag identity? Is she a funny queen/fishy/non-binary?

I call myself a look-queen. It's all about the look, but I don't wanna look beautiful—okay I always think I'm beautiful—but I want to make an outfit, to make a head piece, to do my hair, and think about the whole look. To do something extravagant when it comes to my fashion, to my hair, to my make-up, so my drag is highly focused on the way I look on the outside, so to speak. I do a lot of other things, but I personally find my strong points are in my looks. So nobody can say: "O, I know what she's going to be wearing this Friday, because they honestly do not know what I'm going to do. And they have no idea, nobody can say, I find it fun to kind of surprise people with my looks. And sometimes, lot of times, especially when I'm busy, I don't have time to like, to do a lot of stuff, but I do my best to *try* to do something different, when it comes to my looks.

- 7) I noticed that drag queens, when they post videos on their social media platforms, they specifically show their lip-sync performances more than other parts of the show. Why do you think this is?

I think that a lot of the times the chance that we get to do something at a drag show, a lot of the drag shows are lip-syncs. The drag shows consist out of lip-syncing. So, a lot of the times when a vide is made, it's made of you lip-syncing. But, for example, if you're a singer, and you sing live, you post videos of yourself singing. But a lot of times, especially what we get, is then lip-syncing, so we can kind of only have that.

- 8) What contributes to your queer identity during lip-syncing performances?

I think a lip-sync has a lot to do about, you have to express yourself, but also express the song, for example if you're doing a song that is by a woman, and you consider yourself a cis-gender man, you have to step into a whole different role, mentally and physically. You have to kind of embody somebody or something else that you're not AS comfortable with, or you don't normally do. So I think that kind of has to do with another identity. Especially, I find as gay man, we have kind of an idea of the way we want to express ourselves, that we find funny or nice, or belonging to a certain song, so you want to kind of

invoke that personality at that moment. I mean, different songs have different kind of movements, and things like that, so it depends on the songs I guess what comes out eventually.

- 9) What role does music play during a lip-sync performance? On what basis do you choose the music for a lip-sync performance, and what value does it have?

I think the choice in music, it depends, first for me, if I like the song or if I don't like the song. So, I kind of think about what, because I'm so focused on looks, I kind of think like: "O, what kind of music would go with this look?" So, that's how I kinda start. But with me, it's mostly songs that I already know, or songs that I hear, and that immediately I think: I wanted to do this look, and this song goes with this look. That's number one. And then, it depends on if you get the chance to lip-sync, it's mostly at a drag night, at a bar or club or something, it depends on the venue. Because if you lip-sync in a club that is big, and the stage is big, the song will sound different than to a song that you lip-sync to in a smaller bar on a smaller stage. And also it depends on the audience. If you're in a small bar, the audience's reception is way different than in a bigger place. It depends on, the choice really makes the difference when it comes to the venue. And it also makes a difference when it's the time of the night, because, if you're lip-syncing at 11 at night, for example, but the show ends at 3, the people that are still there at 3 are not as receptive anymore, not paying attention anymore, they're ready to go home, or they just want to see the end of the show. Or they're *drunk*, so it's kind of important, I find it personally important that if you're lip-syncing to a song that is slow, do not do it at the end of the night, because the reception is than very poor. So do it at the beginning of the night, and do something more up-beat, or something that captures the attention faster later at night. That's also a reason. I think if you're maybe a dancer, and you would like to dance, you would also choose something that is more danceable. If you're not solid at dance, I wouldn't recommend something that is too up beat or something like that.

- 10) How do you feel in your body when in drag? Do you feel different in your body during a lip-sync performance? For example, what does the voice you're lip-syncing on do to your embodied experience?

I think a lot of people, they call their drag their "alter ego", because they kind of feel that the drag is somebody else, and they completely change. Some people use it as an excuse to misbehave, or to do other, not misbehave in a bad way, but you kind of get a chance to say what you want, to make fun of people, or have fun with people which you would normally not do. I personally feel very more comfortable not in drag, not only mentally but physically of course, because you don't have as much clothes on, corsets, a wig that is very hot, things like that, but I do really realize that in drag, you kind of can get away with a lot more. You can say anything you want, kind of tease people, everybody thinks it's funny. When it comes to lip-syncing, you're on stage, you kind of really have to show a little bit, to be more reassured of yourself, to not be too scared, too timid. Because the audience really sees that and reacts to it in reacts to it in a kind of way. So you have to be confident, it doesn't matter what you do, but it really has to, you have to evoke the power that you have at that moment. A good lip-sync has always to do, whatever you're doing, you have to really go for it, a 100 percent.

- 11) What music, in your opinion, is 'good' music for a lip-sync performance? Does the audience's reaction/opinion play any role in choosing the music for a lip-sync performance?

It all depends on the venue, and the, for example, if you know you're going to be in a crowd that has children for example, you're not going to chose something that's inappropriate, because it will rub people the wrong way. When it comes to a bar or a bigger stage, then you kind of have to look at what you do. But, there is not really one type of music that is better than the other, it really depends on the performers.

Because you can do something that is maybe, for example, very danceable, clubby number, but if you do something that is like, classical music, but your performance fits in with the venue, with the stage, with the audience, then it is also good. It all depends on your performances, and if it's appropriate for the setting.

12) Does music contribute to your experience of queerness during a lip-sync performance? If so, in what ways?

I think yes, we have, in the queer culture, we have our own stars, so to speak, and music that goes with it. It's kind of weird to say, but we have "our own music", so to speak, so things that we know we like, that everybody knows. That you know like, if we do this song, for example, everybody knows it, people will be singing along, so that might, at times, influence your choice in music, so to speak. But if you do something by RuPaul for example, everybody who comes to a drag show, already know who RuPaul is, so everybody immediately has more fun with the song, things like that kind of happen.

[Is drag really something that happens on the stage? Does it need the physical space of the stage?]

For me, it does make a difference. If you're talking about performing. Because I do think that, when you're on stage, there is a lot more that comes with it that you don't get when you lip-sync at home. There is kind of a pressure to perform, you feel kind of nervous, and that maybe helps. But also, the stage lights, the audience, people looking at you. There is a lot more pressure that, for me, kind of helps the performance. And also, if the audience is participating, and is liking your performance, it also makes you feel better, and you feel more confident in your performance. That is something that you wouldn't get if you're just at home practicing your lip-syncs.

## Interview Tom ten Hove – Miss Dolly Wood

April 10th, 2019

Groningen

1) How did you get started with drag?

Well, if you go way back to the beginning, it started in church choir in Colorado, where I lived when I was 17 for a year, because I did a high school year exchange there, which was really fun. My modern steps into drag are more about theatre, and musical theatre particularly, so I love being on stage, and performing, and just theatre in general. And, I started singing in that church choir, not because I'm religious, but because it was a small town and I liked singing, so, why not? So then I joined the musical theatre society at the high school I was at, and we did *Oklahoma*, the musical. Very corny, very cheesy, but it was fun. I played the second lead, male role. So I had my solo, and I was like: I love singing! So, with that little group we went to New York for a week, or like a weekend, I don't really remember, and we wanted to see a Broadway show, because we were all musical theatre kids. So, we tried to find, you have a lot of these last minute ticket shops for Broadway shows in New York, so we went to a few to see where we could find the cheapest tickets. We couldn't care less which show we went to, we just wanted to find the cheapest ones, and it turned out that the cheapest ones we could find were for the musical *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, which is fabulous. And I'd never seen the movie, I knew nothing about it, so I was: okay, it sounds a bit weird, but whatever, we'll go see it. And we went there, and I absolutely loved it. [...] So I saw these drag queens perform on stage, on Broadway, and I was like: o my god, this is so fabulous, I want to try this some time. So I moved back to Groningen, and just, dabbled a little here and there in drag, and, it didn't really get started full-fledged until I moved to Utrecht, close to Amsterdam, so there was a lot more going on. So I started going to drag shows, working on my make-up, seeing performances, and so I started to, not that seriously eight years ago. So officially, I've been at it for eight years, but it got more serious when I moved to Utrecht. I've been performing basically at least once every month, twice every month, for the past four or five years. It just grew into a bigger thing, especially when I started asking money for it, then it became fun. Even more fun. [...] Well, for me it's a side job, but uhm. Well, it's an overgrown hobby, basically. I was lucky when I first started, I needed to get some make-up, and the Saphora stores, the V&D department stores, they were going bankrupt. So they had all their make-up on sale. So I got 500 euros worth of make-up for like, 60 euros, or something. So that was my basic starters kit. Yeah, I was like: "I'm going to take advantage of this." I bought all this make-up and started playing with it, and practicing, and that's how it got started. And it just snow-balled into this bigger thing. And it helps that I sing life. I do lip-sync as well, but I do both. It helps a lot with bookings, because I've gotten so many bookings, *just* because I sing life. And I had a birthday party were like, "o you sing life? We think that would be *extra* fun, over "just" a lip-syncing drag queen." Best of both worlds.

2) What does drag mean in your (day to day) life?

It doesn't necessarily mean much in my day to day life, especially because it's not my main job. I think if it is your main job, you're always looking to improve yourself, looking for new performances, new clothing, basically new inspiration overall, I would say. Because for me, it's not my main job, I do it on the side, there's plenty of weeks where I don't even think about drag in that sense. Of course, it pops into your head, but I'm not actively involved with it. But if I know I have a show coming up, I start thinking about: what is the context of this show? What type of theme, what type of audience, what type of shows would be fun for the audience, so in my broader/general/everyday life I get involved with it when I have a show coming up or any type of booking, but in my everyday life, it doesn't control me as much as it would if I were a full time drag performer. Because I know a few, and their life just simply revolve around drag, because it's their main source of income so they have to stay relevant, whereas I, like, there are weeks that go by where I don't post anything on Instagram. I don't think I posted anything from the last three bookings, because I'm really bad with Social Media, so I need a PR-manager (laughs). If I were to do this. [...]

- 3) Many academic texts that discuss drag and lip-syncing talk about a queer identity, which leads me to believe that there is a connection between drag and queerness. Would you describe yourself as queer or as having a queer identity?

No. But, I have been thinking more about it lately, because.. I had a funny situation like two weeks ago, where my sister, she lives in Berlin, and Berlin is a very queer city. And my sister is straight, well, she's bi-curious, she has been "involved" in one way or another with women, as supposed to man, but she found out that she wasn't bi, she just enjoyed experimenting but not necessarily being bi-sexual. Or it didn't fit for her, anyway. But I had a conversation with her two weeks ago where she asked me: Tom, I found this thing, I always thought I knew what 'queer' meant, but now I'm reading something and I'm not sure what they mean, and what does queer actually mean? Because I don't wanna sound stupid if I talk about this with someone else. And I sort of had to explain to her what queer meant, which is very difficult to define, which is paradoxical because it's not supposed to be defined either. Because, to me, a queer identity is, well if I had to guess a straight definition, it's mostly moving away from traditional perceptions of identity in general. Not necessarily masculine or feminine or gender-based identity, but more so, like, any type of normative identity. So you don't have to be just prom, core, emo, or hetero, basic, straight, white bitch, you know? Whatever you want to do! Queer, is like, to me, queerness is very linked to intersectionality. When you look at life in a broader sense, you don't live outside of the box, because there is no box. So it's very vague, and very broad. I do identify as gay, that is a box that fits me pretty well, and drag is another box, of course. And the drag box conjures up all different kinds of connotations, immediately. Even though there are so many different sub-levels within drag, and sub-divisions, and sub-scenes, and everything. But it's very exhausting, it has become very exhausting for me to *think* in all those types of boxes, like: there is just drag, and there is a different type of drag here, and a different type of drag there, but that doesn't mean they are mutually exclusive or incompatible. So to me, queerness or queer identity is letting go of everything you think that defines you, and just being you, rather than being anything people think you are. Does that make sense? [...] It's about unboxing things. [...] Being queer is a political act in and of itself. [...] [do you fall into queerness more than you anticipated on, before you explained it to your sister?] Well, I'm still thinking about it so I'm not sure. Right now, I would label myself both gay and queer, because it doesn't matter. I think queer is more of a perception of life, as well, of yourself as well. Where 'gay' to me, denotes clearly my box of my sexual preference, or romantic preference or however you want to call it. And I think queerness more so describes my perception of life and perception of people, rather than my perception of myself, which is gay. And I love the gay box, it's a very glittery box, not as glittery as the drag box though, but it includes feathers.

- 4) In what ways does queerness find expression in your identity?

I think that it expresses in my identity most, not in the way I dress, because I'm very "masc presenting" if you want to call it like that, umm, because it's just what I feel comfortable with, but it expresses it mostly in the way I interact with other people, because I'm not very judgemental, at all. Less so than I might seem as a basic white bitch (laughs) who can be, stereotypically seen as very judgemental. I think it expresses, my queerness in that sense would express itself in the fact that I'm not very judgemental towards people, in general, and I try to keep an open mind. It's not easy, because, evolutionarily, biologically speaking, you have to judge, based on fear and danger and whatever. And anything that looks different automatically seems weird because you're wired to find it weird. So it's hard to step over that, sometimes, but just being conscious of it, and like: why do I have these feelings of like, ooh I don't like this, but *why* don't I like this, automatically, do I really have an objective reason for it, or? So, I think that is the biggest expression, just in my perception of other people.

- 5) Does your queer identity come to an expression in your drag? In what ways does this happen during your show?

Well, it has to. [It's interesting to think about, even if it doesn't work, that's a fine conclusion as well.] I think drag *has* to be queer, it cannot *not* be queer, because you're automatically diffusing the lines between stereotypical gender-expressions. Because, well, you are a man, but you're trying to be female? But, I never describe myself as a female impersonator, because I'm not trying to be a woman, I'm trying to be a drag queen, which to me, is a whole different box. Because in New York in the 1990's, there were already people, like, famous drag queens, who would be like: I'm not a drag queen, I'm a female impersonator, I'm like: uuugggh. Which, now has become a really funny term, because you're not trying to impersonate a woman, you're making a caricature of a woman. Very traditionally, people tried to pass. Also because, it used to be drag and trans identities, used to be much closer together. Where, a lot of drag queens were "secretly", if you want to call it that, transgender, where it was perhaps financially impossible, or medically impossible at the time, or whatever. But since the drag and trans identity did grow apart more recently, it has, drag has become more stand alone, in that sense. Though, there is of course, also a lot of criticism on drag, that it is misogynistic, which I think is a really funny criticism, like: no? (laughs) In drag I hate everyone, not just women, I'm not misogynistic, o I am, and racist and xenophobic and whatever. Because it's part of, sometimes people don't see that it's subversive rather than, it's ironic. You comment on things, with your performances, with your acts, with your looks, with what you say, you comment on all those boxes that people are trying to keep together. But people don't understand that it's subversive see it as very superficial, even though, it is the opposite. But if you don't know what the opposite is, you can't recognize it. So drag is always, to me, it's always queer. But if you don't see why it's queer, you won't understand it.

6) In what ways do you interpret your drag identity? Is she a funny queen/fishy/non-binary?

Well, I sing live, which is a discerning factor. I love hosting, having to host and being funny. I wouldn't say I was fishy, I don't care about being fishy. A lot of people say I look a lot older in drag than I do as myself, which is probably true, but I don't care because I don't need to look like an amazing beautiful woman. I wanna look like a good-looking drag queen, which doesn't have to necessarily be pretty. So I would say, live-singing, funny queen. Which is a very superficial way of describing it. I'm a friendly bitch, basically. A singing, funny, friendly bitch, that's how I would call her.

7) I noticed that drag queens, when they post videos on their social media platforms, they specifically show their lip-sync performances more than other parts of the show. Why do you think this is?

If you're talking about international queens, I would say it is also a commercial reason, because: you don't want to broadcast all your jokes, because then you won't be able to use them in your next show! (laughs) And of course you have to have the same show over and over again, so of course these jokes are not the first time you tell them. So that's one commercial reason for it, and even for local queens the same; if you're gonna broadcast all of your shows, and you're going to perform in another bar in the city, and like: "we saw this one online." And I think there's a lot of pressure on being able to lip-sync, well, because that's the quintessential part of drag, is lip-syncing, even though you could say it's performing, but, if you think about it, queen performing = lip-syncing, naturally. So I think they want to broadcast that, because that's what people are getting when they book you. Sometimes it's a look-queen, or whatever, but, if you're booked for a show, you're expected to lip-sync. That's what people understand of drag queens, like: if I book you, you lip-sync. Except when you advocate, or, like, you advertise yourself differently, but, generally: you get a queen, you get a lip-syncer. So you want to advertise your skills, so people think: "O she's good, I want to book her," so it's part of the expectation of what you're supposed to, that's why it's focused on it mostly.

I think it [lip-syncing] is more a factor now, than it used to be. It's hard, because I'm not sure. Well, drag grew out of the ball scene, which was more looking a certain way than performing. Well, your look was your performance, it was performance art basically. I'm not really sure where lip-syncing came from. I know it was a big thing in the 90's and the late 80's, it became bigger, you had acutally lip-sync *shows*. Like,

wig stock, a drag festival in New York, in a park, by Lady Bunny, she used to host it. A whole week of performances with lip-sync, all different kind of shows and performers, some sing live, some lip-sync, so that was the early 90's.

8) What contributes to your queer identity during lip-syncing performances?

I think it's a co-construction between the performer and the audience, because, well because I sing live, I find lip-syncing more awkward than it used to be. Because I feel like I'm just pretending, and you are, but I do myself enjoy a good lip-sync show. I know it's fake, but you opt into the willing suspense of disbelief, like, you opt into this idea that there is a person singing, but there is no-one singing, it's a recording. What I always found fascinating, and really funny, is when (laughs), especially this happens in Queers bar in Amsterdam, where they have drag shows every Friday night, but they're closing down soon, so you better hurry, um, [...Queers is closing, Tom explains to me] what I find really funny and fascinating, whenever the end note, like, the big belt note at the end of the song, people start clapping. But like: she's not singing this, this queen is not singing this, and in the end it is like (claps) "oooo wow big note", but I'm like: she's not singing this! Why are you..? That's the recording right there. People get really into it. But at the same time, if you do a really bad job, and the audience doesn't believe it, the construction falls apart and the performance is bad. And not just bad because it's a bad lip-sync, but because the fantasy is broken.

It doesn't necessarily [helps to construct a queer identity] do that, specifically by itself, but because it's a co-construction, it's part of the queer space, more so than a queer identity, I think. Because lip-syncing in itself is not a "queerish" act, I think. [I talk about the female voice] You're blending the visuals, like: "O I know it's a man, but it sounds like a woman, and it looks like a woman," so again, lip-syncing... When I sing, as you can hear (talks in lowest register) I don't really have a high voice, um, but I don't talk higher in drag, or sing. I'm a bass and a counter tenor, I used to sing in classical choirs as well, so I can go really low and like exceptionally high, like A5, like really weird high. And sometimes I sing classical music in drag, like Ave Maria, it's one of my go to songs, which everybody hates, and I love it because everybody hates it, like: O no no not that one. I do it for one minute, and then it moves into a gospel, up-beat song. But some queens don't like singing live, even though they're really good at it, because the lower voice breaks the illusion. And it's a performance, so, again, I think for me it's less of an issue, because I don't try to be a woman, I try to be a drag queen, and a drag queen can have a low voice, because I'm a man. (laughs) Secretly. Not that secretly. I know this one queen, she can sing really well, she's like: I don't like singing live, because it breaks the illusion. Like, well: that Adams-apple breaks the illusion too girl, so, (laughs) I don't think if the voice is going to do worse than that. So for me, the lip-syncing by itself doesn't necessarily add much to the whole queerness of the thing, because I sing live, and it has more of an impact on my perception of drag as it might seem.

9) What role does music play during a lip-sync performance? On what basis do you choose the music for a lip-sync performance, and what value does it have?

That's a really good question, because there's always a really big tension between what do you wanna do, as a performer, what do you like to do, and why are you doing it? What is your function? Your function is to entertain, so you have to entertain the audience. So you have to find a balance between what you like to do, what do you really enjoy to do, and what does the audience enjoy to see? Because you have to entertain the audience, but at the same time, you don't want to do a song, like: I can't dance, I can move, a bit, but I'm not a dancer. But I know in Amsterdam there are some bars where there are Latin queens, and Black queens, and they do Beyoncé and they sing and they swirl, well, they don't sing, they *swing* and they swirl and kick their legs up in the air, and it's wild. And it literally bores me, I don't really care about that. Not just because I can't do it, but I think it's interaction. I see why other people like it, but I don't enjoy it myself. So there's a balance. [...] I'd rather, if you do something that you enjoy, and people see that, they automatically enjoy the fact that you like it, but there's a tension there. You can take it too far, because if you take it too far, because if you do something completely weird, and they don't get it... If you can't cross the bridge of: I don't get it but I like it, if you don't get to the part: but I like it, than the whole construct breaks down as well. So, the music is really important, and, I love musical theatre, so I love



musical theatre songs, but not just only those, because that's boring. But like the one with the Ave Maria, and the classical and the gospel combined. I love funny things. So when I sing live, I don't only sing songs that suit my voice, and I don't concern with funny things, I don't make it a comic show, [...] but than if I do lip-sync, I try to make it a funny one. I try to add like a gimmick in there, because it makes it more fun for me, just standing there and lip-sync, I find it really boring. So the music is, a big part of it, because you have to entertain the audience with the music, and the performance. But you can make really stupid music funny, by performing it in a fun way. So in a sense the music is most important, but it's a collaboration, it's an interaction between the music and the performance.

There is one of my favourite performances ever, and I think it's an interesting performance for your research as well, is Miss Yogi. She now lives in Spain, but she used to live in Amsterdam, and she's hilarious. And, she went on stage, with a little pink radio, and she pulled out the antenna, and it said 'my trans sister radio'. And then she first wanted to say something, so she grabbed the mic, "alright ladies and gentlemen, as you know, as I am sure you know this, I am the best lip-sync performer in this country, ever, no doubt about it. Everyone knows this." And she's hilarious, so, it sounds arrogant, but she's so funny. (continues as Yogi) "So, what I've decided to do, is give myself a challenge today. I'm not just gonna lip-sync one song, but I've chosen fifteen of the most difficult songs to lip-sync to, *ever*. I've mixed them together, and I'd like to show you my skills there." And then she puts down the microphone, and the DJ started the music, she, like, lifted up the radio, put it somewhere else, there was like a creak of the antenna. And then there were fifteen songs, *only* with 'la la la's'. And it was *so* funny, she lifted out only the little parts of the different songs that had 'lalala' or 'nanana.' It was *so* funny, because she hyped it out, like, 'it's gonna be so difficult.' And the music was shit, it just had 'lalala's' and shrieking and creaking in between the songs, but it was hilarious, and everyone loved it. It was more so about the performance, because the performance made the music fun. She does another one where she does, she has a little bee outfit, and she has all these plastic fly squatters, and she hands them out to the audience, so everyone has a plastic fly squatter, and then she sings 'Maya the Bij,' it's like a stupid children's song, intermixed with a violin version of 'Flight of the Bumblebee.' And then everyone in the audience is slapping each other. The music supports the performance, and sometimes there are queens who are *just* about the music, or just about the dancing, or lip-syncing. But I really like playing with, stupid music, make it funny, it's a good show, it's what I like. So the music can be supportive, but it can also be the goal of the show, should be good music. But I enjoy using the music as a way of making it funny.

10) How do you feel in your body when in drag? Do you feel different in your body during a lip-sync performance? For example, what does the voice you're lip-syncing on do to your embodied experience?

Well, the funny thing is, my toes never hurt, when I perform. When I step on stage, the adrenaline kicks in, and I never feel my feet. Like, I can dance, well, I can't dance well, but I can move around, do steps, and not feel my toes, and I step off the stage I'm like; o my god, my feet hurt. So, I think that's more part of a general adrenaline rush. Well, the funny thing is, heels do make a huge difference. Cause I can be in full drag without heels and I can feel really clumsy, like a block, then the heels come on and you're a woman. It changes your whole posture, so, it's all the little things combined. Like, without lashes, your make-up looks stupid, you put a lash on: o my god it's good. It's the finishing touches, it's all the little things combined that make a queen. I'm sure you've seen *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and there are some queens like Detox, who like, move their mouth in a little weird way [...] So, I can appreciate a queen who is very natural at lip-syncing, it looks real, and you lose yourself in the...construct of the...it looks real, it's not fake, so that's really fun. But since I personally enjoy more comedy shows, I'm more exaggerated in my lip-sync performances, so I feel my face. I'm aware of what my face does, not just my lip-syncing, but my whole expression. Rather than just: I'm moving my mouth, my lips to the word, there's like a whole expression that changes depending on what type of song it is, or what I like the song to look like, sound like. [Is that different than when you sing (live)?] Yes, very different. Because when I sing, I'm singing, and it sounds superficial but it's...[are you not singing when you lip-sync?] Sometimes, but I get out of breath really easily. I sometimes do that, not always, but it feels more authentic when I do that, it feels like I'm more on the beat with the rhythm as well. I think it's not necessarily different from any other type of

performance, you're just aware of your body, you should be aware of your body, and what it looks like with what you're doing. Because I'm not a dancer, I'm not the best in touch with how I move and feel, but if I look at videos of myself performing I'm generally happy, like: o this is what I wanted to do. So, because I focused less on the lip-syncing part itself, "I'm a queen so I'm a lip-syncer", it means less to me in terms of embodiment.

11) What music, in your opinion, is 'good' music for a lip-sync performance? Does the audience's reaction/opinion play any role in choosing the music for a lip-sync performance?

Yes and no (audience's reaction). Again, you have to look at the goal, what is the goal: you have to entertain. Does that mean you have to entertain people with their specific tastes? Do you hand out a questionnaire before the show with the attendees saying: what is the music you like, then I'll do that. Or: do you adapt your own strengths, what you know about yourself: what can I do well? How can I fit that into a performance? What type of music would enhance that performance? So in a sense, yes, you do have to appreciate the audience's taste, because if you go...let's say you have a booking at a senior citizen centre, Nikki Minaj is probably not gonna cut it. So, you sort of have to be aware of your audience. But it might, it might work if you do it in a way that they could enjoy, which is hard because you don't always know why they might or might not enjoy something. So you have to take your audience into account, but I think it's more important to take yourself into account in relation to the audience. So, I know that... I've done my Ave Maria performance at the club where I'm gonna perform next Saturday as well, and it's not typically a crowd that appreciates live classical music, I would say. But I sang it live, and I sang it as a counter tenor, so really high. Like soprano high, and I exaggerated all the r's, because I sing it in German, like [gives a rolling r note]; I make it funny at the same time. Like really classical, but subversive, so then people laugh, and that's the point, because I hope it was pretty. But the goal of it was not to be pretty, of course if you start screeching, people will be annoyed and walk away, but if you do it, I did it prettily and funny, my goal would...even though those people would not have, if they could have requested songs at the DJ, they would have never requested Schubert's *Ave Maria*, but they appreciate the performance because I turn the performance into something they could enjoy. But I don't want to do it for the full five minutes, so I do it for one minute, then I put the microphone away, rip off the nun outfit, have the glitter other dress and it turns into black gospel. So, you take the religious experience of music, and really find it two different supposedly two different ends of the spectrum, like black gospel and classical music, which is not necessarily ends of the spectrum, but you know what I mean. Two very different disciplines and I put them into one performance, and people love it. So: I wanted to do classical music, the audience not necessarily, but you find a way to bridge the gap between you and the audience.

(Do you think there is a type of music that 'works'?)

It really differs on the bar, because there are two bars right next to each other in Amsterdam, one is called Queers, the other is called Amstel 54. Amstel 54 is very dancy, very pop as well, same as Taboo, Taboo is even more so pop, so it is sort of a mix between pop and funny, and serious, Queers is more old-fashioned. So you could easily do a Dutch song from the 60's or 70's there, like Eurovision songs. It really depends on the venue, and Taboo is pop. If I did a really classical song at Taboo, I wouldn't be asked back, because the audience is mostly tourists and they enjoy pop music so that's what they want to hear. And you could still turn it, I was booked there one time and I did all the newest pop songs. I had been dating this guy from Manchester, and he was really into pop music, and England is always a few week ahead of the Netherlands, so they had the latest pop music there. There was one that I really liked, not necessarily for my performance, but I knew my performance was at Taboo, so I took it to the manager, and the manager came up to me, like, "o, that's a great song, I haven't heard it yet." And I was like, "yeah, it's from England." And it went really well, they really loved it, but I had less fun myself doing the song. Because, even though it went fine, it wasn't my passion. (In that sense, the better music means also the music that fits the drag queen better) Yeah, because of that, there are some queens who are never booked at one venue because their style doesn't fit the venue's style, and that's fine, because it's the other way around as well... Nobody can do everything well, and that's perfect because then everybody gets their chance at their own thing, but you do have to find a venue that fits you with an audience that fits you. But

you do have to make accommodations for the audience as well, or like the yogi queen did: take a really stupid song and make it funny. Everybody loves funny things, if it's generally funny, nearly everyone will enjoy it. So, is there a specific type of music? Well, especially with the younger audience: pop music; Nikki Minaj, Lady Gaga, etc, those work well. But I find it too simplistic, to just do a song. "Okay, you wiggled your hips and you lip-synced a song, good for you, but where is the added value?" I enjoy that more, which doesn't fit into every bar, but that's fine. There are plenty of others.

I understand the question, but no, there is no specific successful music for drag, because drag is not homogenous either, so the music for drags is not homogenous either.

12) Does music contribute to your experience of queerness during a lip-sync performance? If so, in what ways?

Yes, and again, not necessarily for my personal identity, because I don't sit around the house listening to *I will survive* (Gloria Gaynor, red.) all day, but if you do that song in a bar, and the whole bar enjoys it – it's again the co-construct with the audience: you create a queer space with drag. And drag in his/herself is already queer, a queer act, but it is yet again the construct between the audience and the performer that creates the queer space.

Yeah, because if you have a shared experience of queer music, and you experience that together with the audience, you create a queer space, including the music, and the music adds to the queer space. It does have a great influence on how everybody experiences their identity at that moment. For example, I did a song I really love, it's from a TV show in America, the song is called 'The Loophole.' And it's a song about a really religious girl, who is not allowed to have sex with her boyfriend, because she's really Christian and religious. So they do it anally, because that's not sex. So, you take this really, this idea from like, anti-LGBT religiousness, plus, anal sex, which is considered like the hallmark, basically, of queer sex. And you fuse them together. The chorus goes: "fuck me in the ass 'cause I love Jesus." Which is very...it's out there, in terms of...But, because you're in a queer space, where everybody understands those two references, like the religious anti-LGBT religiousness, and, well, anal sex. If you combine those references in that queer space, the music adds to the embodiment of the queer space. [...] All the queer people in the audience have a shared perception of the stereotypical straight, white girl. So when you make a joke like that, it's a shared joke, and that's why it's funny. Because if you make a joke that nobody gets, [...] it sounds really superficial, [...] but you have to have a shared experience. It's funny that such a large group of people have that at the same time, because that shows that it really is a community, and very obscure references are understood by a large group of people at the same time, which to a straight audience, would be very obscure.

## Interview Tom Haegens – The Countess

April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019     Rotterdam

1) How did you get started with drag?

I got started with drag, I live in Middelburg, Zeeland, and where I come from, it's a pretty conservative place, so when I went to high school and middle school, people didn't necessarily get where I was coming from, or why I was acting the way I was, or why I was looking the way I did. Because I was always thinking about fashion, about my appearance, since I was 8 years old, I always wore hats, and full suits, and prints and everything. So, I had to find my outlet, because people didn't necessarily get me, so I was picked on *a lot*. So I was like: 'what am I gonna do to fit in?' So I was trying everything, from sports to hanging with the guys, trying to act straight, and I knew that it wasn't the way I was personally. And, my parents are really open, so that's really nice, and they helped me to find an outlet. At one point, when I was around 8 or 9, my sister always had the Glamour magazine, and then there was this one picture of a black and white Thierry Mugler suit that I just *loved*. I ripped the page out, pinned it on my wall and I was always manifesting: 'that's what I want.' And recently, a few weeks ago, I found that exact same suit, so that was like a full circle moment. So that started the whole fashion obsession, I was always making clothes and dresses out of toilet paper for my sister's barbies, because she was not using them, she was always playing with the boys (laughs), so I was always pretty much interested in fashion, after I saw that picture. And I draw a lot, so I was always drawing a certain type of woman. So I was always getting inspiration, always looking at women, always looking at fashion, and I was like: I want this too. But where I come from in Zeeland it's just not an option to be as different as I felt that I am. So I had to find an outlet, and I always watched my mom do her make-up, and I always drooled on it, I *loved* it, so at one point, I just started doing my own make-up. Just trying looks, printing pictures, finding pictures in magazines, trying it on me, and at first I wanted it to do like really boy-ish, and then I thought: why not do what I really like? And it started to become more feminine, and more feminine, but what I do, I don't necessarily consider as drag, because I like playing with make-up and transforming. But for me it's not always with the typical drag queen with the nails, with the pads, with the boobs, with the big hair. I just like to be somewhat more realistic, but look sort of like a drawing of a woman, because... also not necessarily a woman, just like what at the time, for me is the perfect image of a human being, so I always adjust to that. So I can get inspired everywhere. I can see a show, I can see magazines, I can see flowers and I'm like: O yes, that's what I want to look like, that's what I want to do. And I always incorporate different things and in my mind it all molds together as one, and that's where I draw my inspiration from, so basically how I started with drag is to find an outlet, and let my creative mind let loose.

2) What does drag mean in your (day to day) life?

Uhm, well, now I look pretty manly for my doing, because nine days out of ten I wear make-up, I wear lipstick, I wear eyelashes, I always curl my hair, blow-dry my hair, just wear nice outfits. I wear a lot of my drag clothes in my day to day life, and I am always just thinking about it: what is my next look going to be? What is it I wanna do? What gets me inspired? And I wear a lot of vintage clothes, and I design a lot, and, yeah, it always, yeah... It means everything basically, I am always, always thinking about it, basically what gets me up in the morning, what makes me motivated, what makes me do things, what makes me go out of my way, out of my comfort zone, just drives me to work harder, push more, just to get what I want.

3) Many academic texts that discuss drag and lip-syncing talk about a queer identity, which leads me to believe that there is a connection between drag and queerness. Would you describe yourself as queer or as having a queer identity?

For sure, for sure, it's always when I go out the door, I always have a look from head to toe, I'm always just like floating in the middle, people are always looking twice. I work in a restaurant in Middelburg and, which is nice, it's fun, but people there are very, *very* narrow-minded. So when I wear just a little bit of highlighter or something, or blow-dry my hair, people are always like: "*what* is that?" Yeah, uhm..

- 4) What's your definition of "queer"? In what ways does queerness find expression in your identity?

(What does queerness mean to you?)

My definition...it is difficult. I think it's some kind of safe word, to make yourself, to explain yourself to people who don't necessarily know what queer culture is about. But mostly I spend time with people who are in the same community, so they understand, we understand each other, what we do, what we stand for, how we feel about it, so we never discuss being queer as a topic. It's just when someone asks about it, I say: queer. Just to cover all the basis. For me it's a very broad concept, I think of everything not straight by the book, or not gay by the book, not a drag queen by the book, just anything in between.

I'm not necessarily putting my identity together with queer in my mind, I just go as I want to, or go as I feel like, or do whatever motivates me. I'm not thinking about it that much, I just do as I want to, or do what makes me happy.

- 5) Does your queer identity come to an expression in your drag? In what ways does this happen during your show?

For sure, I think what I do is very gender bending, very...for me, there are no rules, or no stigmatism, or no eras, no music styles, no whatever I just stick to. I just take everything around me that I like and put it into one and that I think forms an identity. For now I feel like I'm very at the beginning of my career now, so I'm still trying to figure out what way I'm going, but I think the best way to do that is to just experience and let everything come over me. So I think identity changes and forms itself during the road.

- 6) In what ways do you interpret your drag identity? Is she a funny queen/fishy/non-binary?

Well, I started with ballroom, so I would say I'm a ballroom queen, I always walked face or the runways. Performing never really like interested me in the beginning. I just wanted to do what made *me* feel happy, whether it was sitting at home, playing with make-up, outfits, whatever, whether it was transforming my friends, giving make-up tips, giving fashion tips, and it kind of evolved...because drag it's very...when you say that you do drag, people assume immediately that you just perform in make-up and hair, but what I do, I host parties at hotels, I host viewing parties for art galleries, I do fashion shows, I do photo shoots, I promote and basically whenever I get a booking, it's mostly for me just being there, and being pretty, and do what I do best: socialize and talk to people. But the performing came later, I didn't do it as much as I would want to, because of the limit that I live in Zeeland, but it kind of happens. Because always when I'm walking, when I'm biking, when I'm doing anything, I'm always in my ears with music, I went to many, many dance classes, because I'm as stiff as a brick, so there is no flexibility or movement whatsoever, so I had to train a lot to even learn to walk in heels fiercely, just to move more elegantly or more gracefully. When I had my music in, I was always thinking about my looks, thinking about how I wanted to present myself but also low-key dancing, or lip-syncing to it, and then I was like: o this is actually kind of cool. Or creating concepts, or having a certain type of story in a song which I'm like: I can do that with this look, I can create this vibe for this certain (song?), I want people to see what at that moment is my perfect vision of a living being. I want to share as much as possible what's going on in my mind, because I think it's *lit*.

- 7) I noticed that drag queens, when they post videos on their social media platforms, they specifically show their lip-sync performances more than other parts of the show. Why do you think this is?

I think, because Instagram is your business card, barely anyone is walking around with a paper one, and you just have to show what you do for bars to book you, for clubs to book you. They have to see what you deliver, what you do, what you stand for. So I think that's why most drag queens post the most about the performing. [Interestingly that Tom seems to have one term for everything a queen does on stage that is besides the things of the look, performing] Also for many queens, performing is what drag is about. So many people have so many different rules, but if you do drag by the book, performing is what it is about. You get ready, you do your show, and then you go and take everything off and that's your night. And for me, what I like to do, is to socialize, be around people, to be seen and see. And I think performing is fun, really, but it's for me only this much of what drag means to me. (shows fingers, space)

- 8) What contributes to your queer identity during lip-syncing performances?

The way I feel, the way I look, the way I see people enjoy, the way I see people be mesmerized, be confused, be happy, be weird. It just gives me energy to see people's reaction, because it is not a day to day thing that you see drag queens walking around the streets, so whenever someone sees one who isn't one or hasn't been around many, it's always, they're always so mesmerized, and I feel like when I'm in drag, and people approach me, they're all so complementary, and so shocked. And just by talking to them, and just kind of explaining what I do, it makes them happy, which makes me happy, which ..yeah...I think that just seeing people's reactions in a positive way, because where I come from in Zeeland, people are *very* negative, it's crazy. If I would walk around in Zeeland in drag, I would get a brick against my head, it's crazy. People would run around me with burning pitch forks and everything, it's crazy. So whenever I'm in a safe environment and I'm in drag, and everybody around me is happy, that gives me the energy, and is what forms my identity.

- 9) What role does music play during a lip-sync performance? On what basis do you choose the music for a lip-sync performance, and what value does it have?

Everything; it decides what vibe you're going for, it decides how you want to grab the audience's attention. For me, it decides the way I feel, always when I perform to a song, I *live* in that 3 or 4 minutes. I always have a little, I always want people to look at me and think: "o it's like a movie, it's like a short film." When I perform I have everything organised, I have a whole storyline based on a song, a whole vibe, a whole outfit, the whole look, I just want people to be drawn to it, to be sucked into it, with me, because I'm always so living and so involved in the music. I always really...the music I perform to I really get, or it really gets me, so I want people to see what's going on between my ears.

[I ask the second part of the question] My music taste differentiates every day. I listen to classical music, I played classical piano for over 10 years, sometimes I perform on a heavily classical song and do a really slow strip tease in full drag, or full latex, or bondage or whatever. I just really like contrast, but I also really like the complete feel, or era, of a certain type of song, by example, there is this one show by Chanel, 2016 Cosmopolite couture collection, and that's *the most beautiful* fashion show I have ever seen. And the music is *so* good. So everytime I perform multiple songs on one night, there is always one of those songs of that show, because the clothes, the total vibe, the way the runway is, the people that are there, it makes me feel so good. So whenever I get that chance, I really want people to feel that type of way that I did watching that show. But also I can perform on rap, I can perform on basically everything, but it really depends on my mood, on my outfits, if there's something I really want to wear, or if there's one song that I really, really like. It just happens in my vision, a whole performance, like listening to a song once, and then I'm like: "okay, I'm going to do this," and then I really listen to the song, and adjusting everything 12 million

times. It's always different, there's no schtick that I have, there's always elements of different things combined, or there's different things separated from each other. Music is for me *the* most important part of the short film that I want to present to an audience.

- 10) How do you feel in your body when in drag? Do you feel different in your body during a lip-sync performance? For example, what does the voice you're lip-syncing on do to your embodied experience?

I do, I do, both physically and mentally. I wear really, really tight corsets. I've been training for over 3 years, and I can get my waist down to 40 centimetres, from 65 to 40, so it's like really, really... You see a lot of latex and the dominatrix in my drag, so I kind of like pain. So the corsets really make me feel good, it reminds me to keep up my posture, it's a reminder that I'm in drag, so that I don't slouch, or forget that I'm in drag, because sometimes when I don't wear really tight corsets or really high heels, because I also *love* to wear the highest heels as possible, with no platforms, like your foot is straight there, your arch is bending over your toes. I like to walk on the 'sitting shoes'. It's like a constant reminder to present myself in the best way possible, it's also that I'm trying to ... just that I want the audience to see or feel the way I do, because when you *see* such a tiny corset, or when you see such high heels, you're like: "ah that must hurt so much," so they kind of live in, they kind of get you. Or people are like: "How are you doing that?", or "why are you doing that?" It really excites me to push it a little extra sometimes, so much, my body feels, for me, there is no better feeling than being in drag in an outfit or a look that I really stand behind, or that I really believe in. I don't drink or do anything when I'm in drag, just all the energy that I need I get from just looking at myself in the window, in somebody's phone, in the reflection of whatever. That gives me that high, that excitement, that makes it so worthy for me.

[Do you also get this feeling when you're lip-syncing?] Yes, whenever I'm in drag, but when I'm performing it's always a bit more... before I go on stage I pull my corset a little tighter that it just hurts a little too much, and my heels too, and my wig, I always put it really tight. I wear face-lift tapes that my face is all the way to the back. When I'm performing, I'm so into it, I'm really living, so head to toe is in the moment, in the music. It just feels very good.

- 11) What music, in your opinion, is 'good' music for a lip-sync performance? Does the audience's reaction/opinion play any role in choosing the music for a lip-sync performance?

Personally, I like spoken words or accents, male voices that are really low. It depends on where you're performing; are you in a club where people are hyped, where people are dancing, you don't want to do a really slow number. Or at the end of the night, for example, you do some Mariah Carey or Whitney Houston, that everybody knows, because it's the end of the night, it's nice. But when you're in a club you want to do something with more beat. When I'm performing or hosting a gallery opening I do really slow numbers, with lots of interacting with the people, walking around. Just everything combined together with the music, the music finishes what I do. Usually it's the starting point and the finishing point.

For sure, for sure, as I said; in a club you do more upbeat, when I go to a chique hotel, I'll do like a little 50's number, like old Hollywood, and just interact with people. Especially in situations where I'm performing in hotels or things like that. People don't see it as much, [as opposed to] people that go to the gay bar, especially here in the Netherlands, they expect to see drag queens. But when international people come to hotel parties, they expect a party there, nothing special, but when there's a drag queen, it elevates the whole mood. So for me, interaction with the audience, especially on those kind of occasions, are part of my show, are part of my performance. Because I'm always trying to interact. Just one night, that's really stupid, I want people to see me from real close, so they see how much attention to detail I pay.

12) Does music contribute to your experience of queerness during a lip-sync performance? If so, in what ways?

Of course. There are queens from *RuPaul's Drag Race* for example that make music which are filled with the gay or the queer slang, you know the “yass” the “work” the whatever, just that gets to people, that connects to people. So I also perform to a lot of runway show [numbers] where you hear “pose” and “work” and “walk” so many times, and “vogue” and things like that. That’s just for also people who don’t know the queer community, it’s good, they connect to those words. Everybody knows what “vogue” is, and when they hear that, they are like: “O I know that, I know that,” and they just pay more attention. Also, songs that are really big world-wide, like anything Beyoncé, I personally do not perform to Beyoncé, but things like that, people know it, so they are more interacting, dancing with the music, lip-syncing themselves, while watching you do it. I think music and queer identity is basically one.

[Do you want to add something?] My Instagram is Secret Project Revolution, feel free.



## Interview Pieter Roberts – Patty Pam Pam

20<sup>th</sup> of May, 2019      Amsterdam

1) How did you get started with drag?

A friend of mine, which was also my ballet teacher, asked me to participate in a show ballet *as* a woman. And I was really not into drag at all, and then she asked me, and I was like: “okay, let’s try this,” so I had to do some research online for “what is drag? And how can I be a drag queen?” And then I did the first performance, and it was really nice, and I was like: “okay, let’s try this more often.” And so it started, just like an ‘accident’, I think. I mean, I was really not in to drag, even against drag, I had some strange feelings about drag queens in my early twenties.

[Because, how old were you when she asked you?]

Twenty-five, I think. Yeah. But then I was like, first, it was a really small thing. And a year after, I tried it for the first time in public just for my own pleasure, then I started to do it more often.

[And then you started performing in your parents’ bar?]

Yes, also, because that was a safe place for me, and also a bit scary, because all the people I knew, clients/costumers, I know. It is really scary to perform for people I know, it’s more easy to perform for a crowd you don’t know.

2) What does drag mean in your (day to day) life?

Everything right now, because it’s my main job, and I also got a studio; I design costumes for a lot of queens in this country, and city, so it’s a daily job. Drag is always on my mind.

[Where are you looking for inspiration?]

O everywhere, everything I see might be an inspiration for my drag. And it’s because I design my own costumes every time, everything I’m wearing as Patty Pam Pam is self-made. So everything I see, or every event I have to visit, is an inspiration for a new thing. Just, a few weeks ago, I counted my costumes, and it came up to 89 different costumes, and that was a few weeks ago, so maybe now it’s 95 or something. And, for example, tomorrow, there is an event that I have to go [to], and this morning I went to the market and I found some new fabric, so I will be making, I’m going to make a new costume for tomorrow. Not that I don’t have anything, because I have almost 100 costumes, but it’s like, I want to show up with something new, and I think: “if this is a good costume, I will wear it more often,” of course. And mostly, the latest costumes are my favourite ones, but it keeps on [evolving].

[Where did you learn to sew? Just curious]

At home. My mom taught me something, because she made my costumes for ‘carnaval,’ in my other life. She did a good job, of course, but it was never the thing I really, really wanted. So at one point she said: okay, let’s do it yourself, try it, and that’s it. She was like: “why don’t you do this by yourself? You can do it, why not?” And I did, and it, well, worked out.

3) Many academic texts that discuss drag and lip-syncing talk about a queer identity, which leads me to believe that there is a connection between drag and queerness. Would you describe yourself as queer or as having a queer identity?

Yeah, uhm, basically, or, you know, I am gay, I am a drag performer, then I’m queer, I think, you know? So it, yeah, but I don’t like to put myself in to one of those, categories/boxes. I am who I am, and I do what I do, what I like.

- 4) What's your definition of "queer"? In what ways does queerness find expression in your identity?

(What does queerness mean to you?)

Is it everything that is not...uhm...that is out of the box? But what is the box, the regular...? Is that queer? I don't know. [...] And is it always LGBTQI+ people? Is this whole thing queer? Then, of course, I'm queer.

Maybe, of course, when I'm on stage, I am a freak, for a lot of people: I'm dressed like a woman, I have full glam make-up. Then I think it's, of course, queer. A queer person. But, in my daily life, I like to [think about how I] dress, but, this is, a bit boring, but every day is a different look for me. Sometimes it's more queer than others.

- 5) Does your queer identity come to an expression in your drag? In what ways does this happen during your show?

Of course. Queer identity... it's a difficult thing, because what is a queer identity? I am a different...I'm a drag queen so I think that every drag queen is a queer. So, every drag queen has a queer identity. And on stage, that's the best thing to show your drag and show your identity. And how do I express that, well, that depends on where I am performing, I think. In a hotel, *chique* (fancy)...in a club, you have to express yourself in a different way than in a, for example, a hotel, or a society lunch thing. So it's a different ways of expressions, of expressing yourself. But always, an it's in a way, a queer identity [that] is important, I think.

- 6) In what ways do you interpret your drag identity? Is she a funny queen/fishy/non-binary?

Classy, young...classy...classy...I...well, I like to be a comedian, you know? I can be whoever I want to, because I create my own things, I can be in a club, I can be everywhere, I can show up and perfectly fit in to the crowd. But also, always I want to be classy, and want to be young. Fashion, young, classy, that's the thing. But also, I can do a funny act on stage, and I can dress like a clown, and still be that fashionable Patty Pam Pam...for me, it is a brand.

[Do you first think of a look that goes with the act, or first think of the act, and then of the look]

That depends, every Friday, I'm performing at *Queers*, where I'm hosting my own show, and I have to perform six acts in six different looks. Well then, sometimes, I come up with a song, or an act, and I think about what I'm going to wear with the act. Also, when I pack my case in the morning, I want to choose which outfits I didn't wear last week, or the week before, because I want to be different every [week]. And then I'm going to think: "Okay, which song is possible with this outfit?" So it depends on my day, on my Friday, on whatever I got booked [for]. But when I'm performing on Friday, and then have an event on Saturday, I won't wear the same outfit. So I have to come up with a new act, or: the same act but then a different look. To keep it also nice for me, and for the crowd, also.

- 7) I noticed that drag queens, when they post videos on their social media platforms, they specifically show their lip-sync performances more than other parts of the show. Why do you think this is?

I think...well, depends if you're a lip-syncer or a live singer, you know? But that's the *act*. It shows my way of performances, it will be...it would expose you. I think, maybe, I can get new bookings out of it, so that's commercial. I think that's the...I can be very nice looking on the picture, after some Facetune or Photoshop, through filters, but beauty is not everything. You have to show what's in your...what you can

do on stage. People want to have you on the stage, not because you're only beautiful, so that's why I sometimes post an act, a video, so that people can see what I am able to, and then they can book me.

8) What contributes to your queer identity during lip-syncing performances?

I think it's also the songs, which I'm choosing to perform. Because I'm mostly performing for a queer/gay crowd, and then you have to choose other songs. If I'm performing for a straight crowd, I choose songs they/the crowd likes. I want to be, I want the crowd to be entertained. So, if it's a queer crowd, I'm performing other songs than if I were performing for a straight crowd. So that's...yeah...

Also (pick songs that the queer audience knows), but also, what is typical queer, you know? Songs, like, you can do Aretha Franklin or Gloria Gaynor, the classics, everyone knows, it's always good. Also, new performers, there are people...if you go online and check out the gay hit charts, or something, everything a woman does, a female performer sings, you can pick and everyone knows. And that's the easiest way to get your songs. And musical songs, also are, for more dramatic performances, or crazy, campy things. A lot of gay people are into musical, so they might know the songs. It's easier to perform a song everyone knows than a song no one knows, because, you have to get the attention as well. And if people in the crowd are familiar with the song you're performing, they're paying more attention.

9) What role does music play during a lip-sync performance? On what basis do you choose the music for a lip-sync performance, and what value does it have?

Music is the most important for a lip-sync performance, of course, because without the music, I can't lip-sync. Sometime...because, I choose the songs I think people might know, or might be familiar with, to get more attention. But also, I try to find different versions of it, or covers, because I never do impersonations. So a Whitney Houston, there are some queens performing as Whitney Houston, I never dress up like Whitney Houston, I make my own show of it. But, everyone knows, Whitney Houston's voice. So I prefer to choose, or to find a nice version sang by another singer, so I can perform/lip-sync on that song, because people *know* that song, they are paying attention, it sounds new, because they don't know the voice, and I'm performing so it won't be an impersonation.

10) How do you feel in your body when in drag? Do you feel different in your body during a lip-sync performance? For example, what does the voice you're lip-syncing on do to your embodied experience?

I think that, of course I feel different when I'm in drag. Well, that's a difficult question, because there is a different feeling, but I can't describe it I think. Just that I know I look fabulous in drag, so it makes me more confident on stage, and I like to perform, so I like to...I feel, on stage I feel more confident when I'm performing than when I'm hosting. I'm not that confident about my voice, so on stage, it's easier, I like to perform, because I know I'm good in what I do and like to show it off. And that gives me a confident feeling. Sometimes I get the question: "do you feel feminine?", "do you feel like a woman?". No I don't, I feel fabulous. So that's the difference, it's more about confidence than about feeling like a woman.

Lip-syncing...I like to perform, whatever it is. Lip-sync is the thing I do most, because I'm not a singer. But even though I'm not a singer, I sing live sometimes as well, I got my own songs, which I can sing live, but I only do it as Patty Pam Pam, I never go on stage and sing live as Pieter, because I'm not a singer, I don't have that great voice. And I'm aware of it, so in drag, I can do so much more than out of drag.

11) What music, in your opinion, is 'good' music for a lip-sync performance? Does the audience's reaction/opinion play any role in choosing the music for a lip-sync performance?

Yes, of course. Good music is music, depends on where I am, on where I get booked. On Friday night, I have to choose other things than I can do on a Sunday, for example. Sunday, people are going out and it's the end of the weekend, everyone has to work again, so I can do a dramatic ballad. On Friday it has to be like: everybody is ready for the weekend, they want to party, to have nice and energetic things to see, so that's...it depends. And it also depends on where I'm performing: in Amsterdam, there are a lot of tourists, I never do a Dutch song, because they won't understand, so I don't do it. If I get booked at a private party, and I know there are a lot of Dutch people there, then I can do a Dutch song. And that works, that's good. So there's no bad or good. I've got a very nice cover of a Dutch female singer singing Andre Hazes, which for a straight crowd, that's a very good song, because everybody knows. It's Dutch, a straight crowd, everybody knows it, everyone sings along.

12) Does music contribute to your experience of queerness during a lip-sync performance? If so, in what ways?

Uhm, I never think about, like, it's a difficult question. The female voice is for me important. I like male songs, sang by male songs, sang by males, but if I like to perform it, I would like to find a version sang by a female singer. [So always female voice?] Not always, not always, sometimes I can't find a better version, there's one that I know from now, that I performed yesterday, is by Jimmy James, it is a drag queen. So he is/has a man voice, he is a drag queen. So I can perform...so the drag songs is basically sang by a male, are more accepted to perform than Andre Hazes for example. Sometimes it's crazy, but ...a bit weird, but that how it works I think.

## Interview Bjorn Berendsen & Maarten Klaassen

May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Utrecht

- 1) How did you get started with drag?

V: Well, that's your story. A: uhm, it was about 3,5 years ago, almost 4 I think. I already started watching *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and I was a big fan. We started watching together, and then a few of the *RuPaul's Drag Race* queens were going to the Melkweg in Amsterdam, and I was like: Okay, is it fun to go there and go see the show? And Bjorn thought that was a good idea, and then it was also my idea to do that in drag, just to see how people react when you are in drag, because you're somebody else, and how it makes me feel being a drag queen, or a woman, but... a drag queen. And Bjorn didn't really like that idea. V: No, I was actually quite firm, I said: no, I'm not going to do that, at all. End of discussion. A: And then a few days later... V: A few days later I said well maybe I have to try to, indeed, make sure that I don't like it. You have to try things before you can have an opinion. So, then we went. [laughs] A: we did buy some wigs on AliExpress and two dresses...and it was...we start trying to do make-up, we've never done make-up on our face, so that was a new experience. V: And it looked terrible. A: It really looked terrible. V: We didn't realize it back then. A: Welllll... V: The first time is always... I think almost every drag queen when they look back, it's always like: O my god! Is that me? Not so much; how far have I come, but more like: did I really go on the streets like that? A: But the reactions on the street and at the Melkweg, they were really, really positive, and really good reactions. And it felt good going out as a drag queen, so that was really, a really nice experience. And then, I think two months later there was a competition, drag competition at a bar in Nijmegen, and then we thought, we'll just go, also to get to know more drag queens, and to have a nice experience there. And that was really nice. Of course, we didn't win. V: But that didn't matter, since then it's an addiction, more or less, and it's getting worse and worse every year, actually. A: yeah, it is. V: Every year, we're like: O, it's getting really busy, and the next year we're even more busy. [Because it's not your full-time jobs right?] V: No, not at all, we have full-time jobs on the side, well, actually, the other way around [A laughs] so for us, this is really a hobby. There is only a few people in the Netherlands who have this as a job, and they can barely / A: make a living off it / V: make a living. So, no, for us, we both have high educations, good jobs, and this is an additional 40 hours a week. A: it's so true. V: But it's fun. A: When we would stop having fun, we would stop doing drag. It should be fun, because that's the reason why we do it.

- 2) What does drag mean in your (day to day) life?

A: Well, it has a big impact, because besides our full-time jobs, we spent, I think sometimes 40 hours a week to drag. Because we make our own costumes, we make, sometimes we make our own lip-sync mixes, you create a look. It all takes a lot of time. Also... V: I think for us...we both have jobs that do not ask for us to use our creative talents. So drag is one way to channel this creativity in creating something, in creating looks, but also, a person. So I think it really nicely adds to our jobs in what we like to do. Besides that, it's also...there is a big social part to it. You get to meet a lot of people. A: we made some friends. V: going to parties is really easy, you're never alone in the room. So it's a whole social life. Also, what is important, maybe not the most important, but that it gives you the opportunity to contribute to society in some way. Like, you are on stage, you have the mic, you can say anything, especially on big stages, when you're not only among queer people. It's also a possibility to go out and give a message, and to tell people how you think the world works and what is wrong with it. So by doing drag, that gives you access to those stages and those possibilities, which is also important to me, and I think to you (Amy) as well. A: yeah, yeah, and I also think, even when you're not on a stage, you still contribute, because you walk on the street in drag, and people will see you, and it helps for the visibility of drag queens, but also LGBT community. V: It helps, yeah, it helps to colour the world and to show that different is there/ A: that difference yeah/ V: that difference exists. We hope to show that people can be different, that it's okay to do that. A: you don't have to be ashamed of it. [talking about Superball] A: that you should stop thinking in boxes, yeah. Giving people labels. V: So, indeed, Superball was for us a possibility, not only to be in Paradiso on stage and perform, but also to give a message. Also, to be honest, we know that we are a very traditional drag house, traditional styles, which is usually /A: compared to the other houses/ V: yeah, compared to what is common at Superball. You've seen, it's way over the top; it's sometimes fetish, it's really, sometimes being

strange, in a good way. So to stand out, we knew we had to do more than just showing our drag, so that was an extra reason to tell the story, to do what we did. A: yeah.

- 3) Many academic texts that discuss drag and lip-syncing talk about a queer identity, which leads me to believe that there is a connection between drag and queerness. Would you describe yourself as queer or as having a queer identity?

[Posed question four here]

V: It depends a bit on the definition of ‘queer’, is there a definition of ‘queer’? [It can be *your* definition of queer] I consider queer to be something broad as well, I mean, queer has to do with, for me, on one side with gender, on the other hand with your sexual preference. And many people feel, or think, that they are on one side or the other side of the scale; male/female, gay/straight, but also many people feel they are not at 100 percent, maybe at ten percent or 50 or 60. I think that people that identify themselves with 100 percent the one or the other could be assigned as being queer. It doesn’t mean that they necessarily that they identify themselves on society that way. So, indeed very broad. I don’t really see the relation with lip-syncing, because it doesn’t have to be connected to queer, but...But lip-syncing, didn’t you do that do that as well, when you were a kid, in school, there’s lip-syncing competitions. We didn’t call that lip-syncing, but they are lip-syncing shows. We had the *Mini Playback Show*, and there is no one in the world who had considered Henny Huisman’s *Mini Playback Show* related with queer. And also, there’s this American TV show, I don’t know what it’s called but it’s with those celebrities, that go on stage, and they lip-sync. [Isn’t it called *Lip-sync battle*?] A: Yes it is, yeah. V: So, no one, okay, it has maybe a bit of a gay sauce on top of it/A: sometimes/V: because it’s really over the top, and it’s really sassy, but it’s not necessarily connected.

A: Yeah, but you also have drag kings, and then it’s the other way around, when they lip-sync to a male voice. And also sometimes there are drag queens when there’s a, a male song, sang by a male, then they also do that part and they lip-sync, and it’s all very...it’s all possible, there’s no...when you’re a drag queen you have to do a female song. V: no, no, no, and that’s the nice thing, there are no rules to it, and lip-syncing by itself is not the important thing, it’s about transferring some emotion, and the way you lip-sync helps in getting that emotion across. So by doing those little things; moving your mouth, or making it a little crazy, or really small, or huge and big, you can show different types of emotion. Like, you can do ballads, which are really difficult to do by the way, so the lip-sync and the way you do that, it’s not what it is about, it’s about getting the emotion to your audience, so it’s a way of doing that. Being you only succeed if you get the emotion across, is extremely, really difficult. A: yeah, because then people believe that it’s actually you singing and...you hoped/V: But not necessarily, it depends, in some cases you want people to believe that you’re actually singing, but that it’s not necessarily the thing you want to do, sometimes you really want it to be really funny, or you’re using different voices in a mixed song, and you’re pretending to be multiple people for instance. So, it’s not necessarily, it’s sometimes nice if people are: is she, is it her? Or is this a tape? It happens sometimes...I don’t know if people think that of me, I don’t think so, but I have seen someone perform, and I was like: I’m not sure if you’re actually singing/A: if you’re using your own voice/V: well, I can’t sing, so for me it’s obvious, well, it turned out in the end that she *could* sing [the earlier referred to drag queen] but I’m still not sure if she was lip-syncing or not, but, it’s just trying to play with your audience, and it’s, you do not want them necessarily believe that you are singing, especially if you’re doing the regular songs, let’s say the Whitney Houstons’, Lady Gaga’s, we all know. [me telling about microphones] V: it’s underestimated using the mic. There are a lot of drag queens, who are like, “okay, give me the mic, so I can hold it before my mouth and feel more confident,” but what happens many times with the unexperienced people, or who ask last minute for the mic: they are singing, they are moving the mic away, but the song continues. And you have to know the song perfectly to know what the timing is to get the mic back to your mouth, and sing it. Or you have to stand like this (holding an imaginary microphone in front of his mouth) all the time, but it’s quite difficult.

- 4) What’s your definition of “queer”? In what ways does queerness find expression in your identity?  
(What does queerness mean to you?)

[Posed question three here]

V: In the definition that I just gave, I think I fit that definition/ A: yeah/ V: yeah./A: But I don't really identify as queer. I see myself as LGBT, and I think LGBT is part of queer, queer community, but I don't see myself as a queer person. That's just how I see it. V: Yeah, but it also because we never use that word, it's not so common to use it for ourselves.

- 5) Does your queer identity come to an expression in your drag? In what ways does this happen during your show?

[The answers comprise of a mixture with the answers to the end of question three]

There is a difference between day-to-day life and drag experience, of course. In the day-to-day life we're much more in a professional setting, in which being queer or not is not so important, at least in my work place, it's not important at all, so I don't really identify myself as being queer there, or I don't think I act different compared to colleagues, but of course, once you're in drag, everything is magnified. Everything you do, and on the one hand it's deliberately, and on the other, things just happen, because you feel free and confident and you are more or less not yourself, so you are/ A: you feel free to say more than you would/ V: because you cannot be held responsible, because Victoria is not a person, so like/ A: and people don't know who is behind it, the make-up and the wig/ V: yeah, no one will come to you and hold you responsible for something you said/ A: well sometimes/ V: you are a bit more, your movements are a bit more exaggerated, so queerness comes more to an expression in drag than in daily life/ A: yeah, and for me it's the same within my work environment, but I also wouldn't...the company I work with, they have a LGBT community. We gather round, like, once a year, something like that, we have some drinks together, and just to, to have contact with other LGBT's within the company. I think that it's important to know that you're not the only LGBT within the company, and that you show to other people that you can be free to be who you are. Because I know that there are people who don't feel free to be LGBT within our company, and by going, by being part of that community, I want to show that you should be free to be, feel and to be who you want to be, also at work. So for me, LGBT and queer, still, also in the professional environment/ V: the interesting thing is that this LGBT community that you have at your work, this more or less internal organization, we don't have that in Wageningen, and I think that is because people in Wageningen, they are very, well, the left side of the political spectrum. And I think most people there are like, we don't need that, because here, it's not an issue, at all. And people know it's not an issue, because it's in Wageningen. And if I talk about it with managers, they're like, it's not a problem here, on the University campus./ A: yeah, but it's also, here, at the head quarters in Utrecht, it's not a problem at all, but I know there are also local departments of the company, in, say, which are in the bible belt, let's just use the term. And I know that there are people within that local department that cannot be who they want to be, and who they are, at work, because they don't feel the freedom to be who they are./ V: do those people go to these annual meetings? / A: I know a few of them are, yeah./ V: Because colleagues will know, probably.

[How does queerness comes to an expression in your drag?]

I feel more feminine when I am in drag, and that is a transformation that you go through when you are...I'm going from Maarten to Amy, you can notice that, some things are changing, because when I'm doing my make-up, you told this also (to Bjorn) last night, there's a moment when I go to the mirror and I'm like (striking a pose, pretending to look at himself), and I don't do that in my normal... yes it's true. V: Imagine: we have this room and those mirrors next to each other, and we sit like this (points to how they're sitting next to each other then), I guess, maybe a little bit further apart, and I'm doing a little thing like this (pretending to put on make-up), and he's very concentrated, and maybe after one hour, maybe two/ A: no, two/ V: this (pose) moves to (mimicking what Amy just showed): okay, there she is! / A: she's back! V: something happens in the transition, and then at once, you're the, you're that person. A: even without the wig/ V: as I was saying, your limitations, your *remmingen* / A: boundaries/ V: not so much boundaries, but...they can be...it gets more sharp, and the things you say, it's also what people

expect from drag queens, that they are only edge on what is still acceptable, or what is not, or if you go over the edge, maybe it's just funny, and if I would do that as myself, people find it offensive / A: or rude/ V: or rude, yes, so that's...that what happens by itself, by the transformation.

[In what ways does this come to an expression in your show?]

Well, it's already mentioned, I feel my movements are a little bit more feminine, female-like. So that happens, and...uhm... / V: I think it mainly, it's not one point in your show or during an assignment that you feel more queer than the other, but one song is more queer than the other/ A: yes, that also/ V: if you're lip-syncing, that would happen. And if you're hosting, presenting, talking, than sometimes, we usually do that together, so sometimes something builds up and it becomes, well, interesting, sometimes like a bitch-fight almost. Not that...not that... / A: not really like a bitch-fight, but we can, when we're in drag, we're a little bit on the edge to each other/ V: yeah, and I think people like that, because we're hosting together, so they like it if we're a bit more...shady to each other. Sometimes that just happens, but it's not so much planned, like: okay we're going to make this joke or that joke, it just happens. / A: yeah. / V: And one evening it happens more often than the other, it's just like; what's the energy in the room, what's our energy level. / A: did we just have a fight when...? / V: And furthermore, queerness depends really on the song. Like, there are songs, like ballads, which are usually very...well, not moving much at all. / A: they're a little bit smaller, with the movements. / V: we're not the type of drag queens that if they do a ballad, emotional ballad, we go like *wawawawa* (makes quicker movements), we're more like: okay, we want to pretend that we're the actual artists, and they will not move very extravagantly, we just be there, try to get the emotion across, and that's it. / A: yeah / V: sometimes, if the songs get more up-tempo, movements are different, of course. So it really depends on the songs that you're doing. Also on the outfit you're wearing. Some outfits are better to express your "queerness" than others.

6) In what ways do you interpret your drag identity? Is she a funny queen/fishy/non-binary?

A: I think we're both a little bit more classic. Classic drag. Now you have the club kids type of drag queens that...where the line between boy and girl is more vague, and we're really a little bit more old-fashioned/ V: traditional/ A: old-fashioned, traditional is a better word, yeah./ V: yeah, so we're really going for the feminine look/ A: yeah/ V: Where the club kids are now, well it's very popular to not have breasts, just use your male chest, we won't do that, I guess. Well, you never know, but for now we're really going for the female shape and.../ A: and also, that works for me, when, to feel like a drag queen, are those, those shapes, the feminine shapes, like the big hips, and the big...bigger breasts, and the small waste./ V: if we're not wearing the breasts, we feel very broad, in the shoulders, and it's a different feeling. I think we, even though we're a bit traditional, we're trying to experiment a little / A: yeah we do/ V: for more edgy sides, but I think that the feminine shape/ A: female shape/ V: I guess that will remain, for us, because that's more or less our identity, which is traditional. Where we started off / A: the classic/ V: with the classic wig shapes, that's starting to change a little. Also the use of colours is...sometimes starting to change. / A: And also, I'm a little bit more colourful than in the beginning, and you were more with the natural colour hair, more natural colour make-up, and I was with the red and purple wigs/ V: the interesting thing is that you started out with almost red always red hair, while I/ A: as a trade mark, I tried to be/ V: always with natural colours, and we see that's now blending / A: it's moving towards each other, yeah/ V: So, two years ago, if you were in our room, you could just say: that wig is for Victoria, that one's for Amy, Amy's, Victoria's, now/ A: it's changing/ V: not so much anymore, things are changing. Why? No one knows, it just happens, we both like to try new things every now and then/ A: yeah, I think it's a good thing, because/ V: you have to keep on evolving/ A: yeah/ V: but still, we fit into the traditional drag category/ A: I think we do.

7) I noticed that drag queens, when they post videos on their social media platforms, they specifically show their lip-sync performances more than other parts of the show. Why do you think this is?



V: This is because people make more videos when you're lip-syncing. That's just the (laughs) that's just.../A: yeah/ V: and that's also what people enjoy most. People consider a drag queen show as lip-sync performances, connected by a speech, or talk, or just some fun, in between. So, the hosting is just a connection between the performances. And once you say: "And here's Amy Astoria, with this song," then the phones go up and they start recording, so it's usually just because of that. Even though there are drag queens that are very good at speeches. A few of them, and then you see if they make statements that people also record that, we don't do it that often, but I did one speech in Arnhem, last Christmas, which was recorded, and then I find it really important to post that as well, cause that's something to share the message even with a broader public than only on this stage. But in my whole career I think I did maybe three or four speeches, and a hundred lip-syncs. So that's reflected on my socials. Lip-syncing is what drag queens do./ A: most of them. You also have some drag queens that are, that post a lot of video's about how they do their make-up, and they are more the make-up queens. The look-queens./ V: we don't really have those in the Netherlands, do we?/ A: Galore/ V: No, Galore always do performances./ A: yeah, but she also posts a lot of videos of doing her make-up./ V: yeah, true, on Facebook. But I would not consider Galore as a look-queen. She's a...she's a full, whole spectrum queen. Galore has great looks, and she can perform, and she can host./ A: yeah. V: I don't think that's the case for us [focus on the look], the look for us is not the goal, but it's the means of doing, of getting the stage, of doing that performance, of being visible, of giving the message. So the looks for us are means to a way to get where we want to be. A very important part, because if your looks are not good, then...well.../A: and the look should fit with the performance. So, when you're in a long gown you would never do an up-tempo song, because you can't move the way you want to move. / V: but the look is not the goal for us. It's not like we spend four hours to do a look, make a picture, and then undress and clean up/ A: no/ V: it's not what we usually do. Sometimes, for photoshoots, but.../ A: that's more rare than perform.

8) What contributes to your queer identity during lip-syncing performances?

V: Well, the way a lip-sync comes across, and how you express yourself, depends on a few things. One, is the song you've chosen; second, is the act you build around your song, sometimes it's not just a lip-sync, but this whole act with reveals, clothing changes, those kind of things, or you have props. So that adds to how queer you would rate it. But also the energy in the room, sometimes the energy is really low, which makes it hard to, well.../A: you have to work extra hard/ V: but it's difficult, sometimes you just feel, like, a bit numb on stage, like: okay, I'm trying so hard, and people are...people are not here for me/ A: you're not getting the response you would like to have/ V: which I do understand as well. But sometimes the energy is really high, and usually then, the queerness will probably be more...because you get the energy from the audience, and you will move different, you will give more energy back. So I think those are the factors that contribute to the queerness of your performance of your lip-sync./ A: When I think of a lip-sync, I don't really think in a...how...How queer this performance is. I don't rate it like that. / V: Well, not at the time, but if you now look back at performances you have given, then you can probably rate them on some sort of, queerness scale./ A: Yeah, I think the drag songs are also more .../ V: Like, you've got a few songs, but I think that's mainly about the song that fits very high on the queerness scale, and very low on the queerness scale. Like, if you do *Fashionista*, this is a more / A: more traditional songs are less queer, I guess, than the more drag songs, or the fashion songs, then you get more queer movements and acting more queer, that's true. So the song really helps to feel more queer, or act more queer like, more feminine, queer.

9) What role does music play during a lip-sync performance? On what basis do you choose the music for a lip-sync performance, and what value does it have?

V: which is really difficult, I think that is somewhat underrated, picking the songs, because it's *really* important to think about what song am I going to perform for what audience?/ A: and how can you make a little bit more with the song? How can you act with the song, what can you do with it? / V: But that's the second thing/ A: Yeah, that's true./ V: The first thing you do, you have your list of songs, your portfolio, how do you call it. Let's assume this is a fixed set of songs, then for each event you have to

select 3 to 5 songs to perform. Most important is to estimate what type of audience you have. You don't always know that, but if you do, then it's important to pick the songs which you think will fit/ A: with the audience/ V: with the audience, in the place you're doing it, for the event you're doing it. What time is it? Is it in the afternoon? Is it late night? / A: In the evening/ V: Did the people have a drink, didn't they? Those kind of things. What do I wanna get across? Is a ballad suitable for the audience, or do I have to pick all up-tempo songs? / A: and is there a good variation between the different songs? Because if you're doing/ A: how is the build-up of the evening, because it's really important to do that/ A: if you're doing like ten ballads, then the audience will think after 3 ballads: O my god, not another one! So you have to have a good mix of different types of songs to get a different energy./ V: true, true, true/ A: And you have to have a good build-up, because if you start with a few up-tempo songs, and then you would do a ballad, the energy in the room would go down, and you don't want that/ V: So it's really important to think about what songs you are doing/ A: yeah, and that's really underestimated/ V: it's really underestimated, yeah. Of course, you have to...also an important factor is that you don't want to do the same song every single time. So if people are posting, you are posting, you want to post something new. So you have to, sometimes, pick some old songs, pick some new songs. Well, if you're in the same bar regularly, sometimes you can double a song, but it feels like you shouldn't do that. So next to your fit set of songs, you will have to think of new ones, which is *really* difficult. Sometimes you just hear one on the radio, or you pick something up from television, like: okay, I can do that! Usually, you hear a short fragment and you listen to it, and you're like: O no, it's not suitable. But it's *really* difficult. So every now and then, we're going through Spotify, or whatever, just searching for songs. And also trying to find things to do with the songs. So, how are you...it can be a nice song, but if you can't think of how to perform it, or you cannot think of something to add to the whole performance, by which it would become a regular lip-sync, then maybe, you don't want to do it. Because, in your whole set off songs, you need some regular lip-syncs, but you need some acts as well. Really acts, performances, that something is happening/ A: that will give something extra to the audience/ V: Indeed! With props or with the changes of your clothes, or whatever. But you need something, because you want to show variation on an evening. And it's really difficult, because everything is done, (BOTH) already, somewhere, so to come up with something new is difficult, it's difficult. And maybe we put a bit too much pressure on that, sometimes, for ourselves. At least for myself, I think I do, because people like it anyways. Sounds a bit strange, but if I'm on stage, and I'm like: okay, it was not so good, people are like: yayyy (cheering), and I'm like: it was not so good guys! But you just note that when you do something extra, usually they will appreciate it. Like; since a month we have a song together, and we're not much of dancers, but we put a lot of effort in a dancing, well, routine, choreography. And if we do that song, and we're finished, people are really applauding and yelling and (mimics enthusiast audience), so they notice that we put a lot of effort in it. And, there's not a lot of drag queens that perform with two, with a couple, and we're lucky to be able to do that. So it's something different, with the choreo, people see it's something different, so they appreciate that. But it's a challenge to come up with new things every single time. Sometimes it gives a lot of pressure as well. [The craft of lip-syncing takes already a lot of effort] A: And some people are really good at learning the lyrics, and they know exactly when there's a little breathing moment that you hear in the song that you have to do, or, and I have to listen to a song 100 times before I know the words correctly, and I know the little things that you need to know to make the lip-sync good, or very good. So that's really different, that for some people, they don't have to put effort in it. But I think it's really important/ V: but people can tell, people can tell/ A: yeah/ V: without any judgement, there's a lot of difference between the performers. Like one just goes on stage and gives a lot of energy, but the words are completely rubbish. Some people see that, but others don't, and they just see the great energy of this person. The other one knows the words but doesn't have any energy at all, that's probably worst I guess, even though we feel, we also are sometimes judges in contests, we feel as drag queens that you should know the words./ A: yeah, it's a basic rule/ V: this is one of the first things: you should know the rules. If you don't; the whole illusion fades. I make mistakes as well/ A: that's funny, because songs that I've done for like 50 times already, and I still make mistakes, even [if] I didn't do that the times before, but you just forgotten, it's so stupid and crazy that even though you've done that song 50 times you still make a mistake. / V: yeah, but usually the mistakes are small and people won't notice it/ A: yeah, exactly/ V: like we mis whole sentences/ A: no, no, no, that's true. For myself it's like: I made one little mistake and it's so stupid. [But the show must go on right? If you make a mistake, you just play over it] A: fake it till you make it/ V: or you make fun of it, I can make fun of it as well, and, and, and, stress it out, like: I made a mistake, but whatever, we continue. [Anecdote about Trixie's show] V: but that's typical for her, because she's a comedy queen, and she's like: okay, I missed

the words, fuck it, I'm not a lip-syncing queen, I'm a comedy queen, so, pfff, I don't care. She can do that, and she knows she can do that. But words is one, but emotion, what we talked about earlier, is important as well. Maybe even more difficult. Because the words you can study, study, study, but getting the emotion across, is...one time it happens and another it doesn't. So it's.../A: and also to have the correct emotion/ V: understand what the song is about, indeed. Because we've seen people singing a very dramatic song, like this (pulls a happy face), with a happy face/ A: it doesn't match/ V: I think you're singing about something that is very sad, and very...someone is dying actually, so it's very important to feel the song and try to live it on stage. And the biggest compliment you can get is when someone says: I got goose bumps, or: I really felt it, what you were telling. And then you've succeeded. But it doesn't happen often actually. But that's the greatest compliment you can get, that's what you're aiming for. [Example drag bingo at Café Bonaparte] V: by making it small, doing all the small gestures right, and the breathing correctly, and the words correctly [you just get sucked into it] yeah, and then you're looking like: I know you're not singing it, but...[in my memory she did] indeed, indeed. But then you've got a good performance.

- 10) How do you feel in your body when in drag? Do you feel different in your body during a lip-sync performance? For example, what does the voice you're lip-syncing on do to your embodied experience?

First of all, it feels very uncomfortable. Wearing all the pads, and the corsets, and/ A: the breastplate/ V: the breastplate, and the panty hose, well, especially the panty hoses are uncomfortable [me: yeah?] well, it's five of them on top of each other./ A: well, and also the corset/ V: to cover your pads, so that's a lot. SO it's tight, and it's pulling your toes. So, it's not all comfortable, and the corsets: we are traditional drags so we wear corsets./ A: I think we're the only two drag queens in the Netherlands that wear corsets./ V: Yeah, but you can see that from the nice shape./ A: true/ V: well, sometimes I don't do it, because I know I have to sit a lot, or I want to be able to move, or there's a lot...it's going to be a long day, so I won't wear that...one corset, but than a less tight one. /A: when you have to think of the outfit you will be wearing/ V: But I, at least, can see it. It feels different. So does it feel different? It probably does; I'm more aware of my body, because of the movements, and really, I don't have those feminine movements automatically. I really have to think about that. You don't have that (to Amy)/ A: Well, I still feel that it's the same body, with some extra's attached to it, like some hips, and the breastplate, but it doesn't feel like a new body for me. But I know that other people see it like that. Because sometimes, when I wear...uh.../V: Yeah but people don't always realize that you're wearing hip pads, and they're very surprised, and I'm like: "Okay, I'm a guy, have you seen my hips?" / A: So I know that other people don't see that it's all fake, and they think that it's my real breasts and my real hips, I'm like: "no, I'm just wearing hip pads, and five panties, and a breast plate and a corset, so it's not real. I know that they don't see it, so in my act and in my lip-sync, I work with that. So when you touch your hips or your body, because you know that they will think that it's your own body. But I don't feel that it's my body, so it doesn't change that much for me. It's just part of the illusion./ V: But does it feel as if it's not your body? Because it's just my body. If I'm in drag, it's still me./ A: yes, that's what I mean, it is still me, but the drag body that you have is not mine, because it's just a breast plate and foam hips./ V: yeah, but I do not always experience or realize that I'm wearing those in drag. It's not like I constantly go like: "O I'm wearing a breast plate and I have hip pads," I know that people see me differently./ A: But I don't feel differently, like I have a new body. /V: no/ A: Like those breasts are my own./ V: no, no, but you do realize you're wearing them, yeah. / A: other people don't, but I do. So...

[Does your body feel different during a lip-sync, compared to, for example, hosting?]

V: not so much./ A: maybe you...when you're hosting, you're just *standing* there, and when you're performing, you're *moving* more./ V: You also feel the limitations/ A: No, yeah, that's also true, but you use your body shape more than when you're hosting, because when I'm in a lip-sync, I can stand more, you can put your hip to the side to get a nice, feminine shape./ V: Maybe we should do that more during hosting as well, being more aware of our bodies, and use it a bit more, that's only something I realize now.

But you also feel the limitations in your movements. / A: especially in the corset/ V: you wear a corset so, it's...and sometimes, we make a lot of outfits are self, you're limited in how far you can raise your arms, because of how tight it is./ A: and also my breastplate is.../ V: you're limited in the way you can move...in some outfits/ A: yeah, it was really funny, because we, during Superball, we did a dance routine, and when we practised at home, we didn't have a dress on, or the breasts, or anything. So we had a few movements that we would go from this, to this/ V: from here to here (move both hands from throat to stomach, with elbows out)/ A: yeah, and (mimics how the hand couldn't pass the breasts)/ V: indeed, but that only happened when we practiced/ A: but when we were practicing at home the last time with our clothes on, we were like: okay, this is a problem, this doesn't feel right. / V: so the first time we did it, really the day before with breasts, we were like: (stops at breast height) o shit, so we really had to adjust that movement/ A: really had to do it more like this (shows smoother movement, following the female shapes)/ V: To be able to do that. Yeah, it was really funny.

11) What music, in your opinion, is 'good' music for a lip-sync performance? Does the audience's reaction/opinion play any role in choosing the music for a lip-sync performance?

A: If I had the answer to that... [If the audience has any influence on that] V: yes, of course, that's the most important, or, well, maybe not the...yeah, maybe one of the most important things. You *want* to give them a good evening, a good night./ A: you're an entertainer (both)./ V: So you pick your songs in two ways: one, a song that you know the public is going to love, or a song which you can get a message across, I find it important to do that every now and then as well. Which is maybe not always what the audience is expecting, or hoping for, but maybe they appreciate it as well, at least part of the audience. So yeah, that's something you think about when you try to pick your songs. And which are the best songs? If I knew, then I would have them in my list, all of them. / A: but also,/ V: all of them could work/A: it depends on different queens, because there are a few songs, maybe, for instance, Patty Pam Pam can do really good, because she is a good performer, and she can move very good, and other queens, they are very good at a ballad lip-sync, so they would choose other songs than Patty will. So, it really depends on the queen. / V: yeah, you have to pick the songs that fit the queen/ A: with you/ V: some songs would fit me better than you (pointing to Amy) and the other way around/ A: for sure/ V: like, things you're very good at, are for instance the talking bits, the timing, so if there's talking bits in that, she can do that, because she has a lot of (both) attitude, for me, that's more difficult. So, I would not pick those songs. Songs that work very well are the traditional songs, but we don't want to do them too often because people have seen those/ A: yeah, but sometimes also the traditional songs don't work anymore, because they are done *so* many times, and it really depends on the place where you go. Like, we have a show in Amersfoort; they really like the more traditional songs, and when we go to, for example, Amsterdam, they've seen it like 1000 times, and they will be like: "O, another time"./ V: If you do *I will Survive* in Amsterdam, people will be like: "O no, not again". You have to think about.../ A: So it really depends on the place where you'll go, where you perform. / V: And the same things with the really queer songs, like RuPaul, or the RuPaul queens, they have their own songs, they (the songs) work in Amsterdam, because people know them. But if you go to, well, some rural area, to a party or something, you can do that but people have no idea what you're actually doing./ A: yeah, because they don't know, most of the time, they don't know drag, they don't know *RuPaul's Drag Race* /V: so if you go there, you do the traditional songs, and they're like: "ah yeah, 70s, 80s, yay, that's nice." So it really, really depends on the audience, on where you're going, on what the event is. / A: so you have to have a big variation within your playlist and the songs that you do, because you have to pick songs for several, for different events. / V: And sometimes it's nice to just get a song from the current top 40, but they usually don't last that long, so you can do them as long as they're top 10, or something, and once they start dropping in the charts, you have to drop them as well. So they're not very long lasting, but sometimes nice to do. / A: and also for me, it works some times to make a mix of several songs, because sometimes you have a song that has a specific part that you like, but the whole song is too long for the same, or you don't like several parts of it, and then just pick that specific part and then you mix it with another song that you, a part that you like, just to mix it, and that also works./ V: but that's a lot of work. Because you have to have a few of those in your portfolio.

12) Does music contribute to your experience of queerness during a lip-sync performance? If so, in what ways?

A: I think it does help, because sometimes a song is, because of the lyrics, or because of the person who sings it, is more queer, or the subject is more queer, so you start to make it more queer by yourself. And the more traditional songs are usually not that queer, so you, I will make it more traditional lip-sync. When I'm doing Whitney Houston, for instance, I don't make it that queer, because Whitney Houston is not that queer, but when I'm doing/ V: I think people consider Whitney Houston quite queer./ A: yeah? You think so?/ V: Yeah, I think so/ A: I don't, so/ V: yeah, that's fine, that's fine/ A: But when I'm doing a RuPaul song, then that's more queer, over the top, etcetera. So it really depends on the song that how I feel, and the feeling that I want to give to the audience. /V: so again, it's very much what fits the song and the act, and/ A: the audience, and.

[Do you want to add anything?]

V: It's interesting to think about music that way. I think that we're already quite picky, we think about what songs we do, and what songs we don't do. So that's, that's...good. Also because we need a lot of time to learn the songs. We have to be picky, some people just listen to a song three times, and they think at least that they can do it. Some people really can, but some people think they can do it, but they can't/ A: but they don't/ V: I know I have to listen to it a hundred times, so I have to be picky. I cannot just decide on a Friday what song I'm going to do on a Saturday, if I want to do something new. Interesting thing is that when you've learned the lyrics, they will stick forever. So if I do a song, I did a year ago, I have to listen to it twice, and then I'm good again. That's...you have the same thing, don't you/ A: yeah, but also, I know a lot more lyrics than you do/ V: yeah, that's true/ A: from songs from the nineties and 2000s, so usually learn lyrics more easy than you, but that's just because some songs, I already know them. But when it's a new song for me, I also have to listen to it a hundred times, as you said (laughs).

[Does your personal preference play a role in any way?]

Both: yeah of course, of course/ V: if you don't like the song, you will not do it/ A: yeah, because you have to *feel* it, and when you don't like it, then you, it's really hard to show that you like the song if you don't, so/ V: there's one exception/ A: people will see that/ V: and that is in the rare occasion that people ask for a specific song, which I only had once, when they asked a specific song for that night, and I was like: "Okay, if you pay me, I will learn it." And that's what I did. And then I learned it, and they were like: "Okay you can do this song, and after two minutes, we will turn it away and start the music of the evening." And I was like: "No, you're not." / A: "I spend hours on this song!"/ V: I learned the lyrics from the first second to the last, we're going to run it all through and *then* you'll start the music of the evening/ A: okay/ V: okay (laughs) But usually, of course, you have your personal taste, and you try to, you have to feel it and not be on stage like: O, o my god, this song.