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IT'S A CIS-GENDERED MAN'S WORLD:
HOW DRAG KINGS DEFINE GOOD DRAG IN THEIR FIGHT TO BE SEEN AS THE BEST
PERFORMERS

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology
The University of Mississippi

by
MADDIE SHAPPLEY

May 2020

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ABSTRACT

This research is based on field observations in Ridgeville, a Southern city, at an LGBTQ bar, that I call Rainbow Bar and on in-depth interviews with Rainbow Bar drag performers. Through my study at Rainbow, I set out to answer: 1) What do drag kings consider to be “good drag” for themselves and for other kings?; and 2) Who is considered to have the best drag? And who determines what the best drag is? I found that Ridgeville drag kings felt as though they had to work harder than Ridgeville queens in their drag. To have good drag, Ridgeville kings put tremendous effort into their physical appearance through make-up and costuming, their physical performance (e.g., dance routines) and work ambition. These patterns suggest that trans drag kings and AFAB (assigned female at birth) queens are performing in a system that prioritizes and privileges cis-gendered performers. As a result, kings and AFAB queens must redefine what it means for them to have good drag in order to provide legitimacy and recognition to their drag.

DEDICATION

First, I'd like to dedicate this thesis to my dear friend, Lindsay Pritchard. If it were not for your persistent encouragement I would not have applied for graduate school. Thank you for your support and believing that I had important ideas and words to share.

Secondly, I'd like to dedicate my thesis to my amazing partner, Kayla Patterson. You helped me believe I was capable of higher education. You have been there during the ups and downs of my thesis proposal, data collection, thesis writing, and defense.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	vii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	8
CHAPTER 2: METHODS.....	14
RIDGEVILLE.....	15
FIELD OBSERVATIONS.....	16
DYNAMITE LOUNGE.....	16
RAINBOW BAR.....	17
EXPERIENCES IN THE FIELD.....	21
INTERVIEWS.....	23
DATA ANALYSIS.....	28
CHAPTER 3: WHAT MAKES GOOD DRAG?.....	31
“DON’T BE A LESBIAN ON STAGE”: THE IMPORTANCE OF MAKE-UP AND COSTUMING FOR CREATING THE GENDERED ILLUSION.....	31
GIVE ME YOUR TIME AND MONEY: THE TRUE COST OF GOOD DRAG.....	34

GIVE ME YOUR TIME AND MONEY: THE TRUE COST OF GOOD DRAG.....	34
EFFORT PAVES THE WAY FOR EQUALITY: COMPETING AGAINST QUEENS FOR EQUALITY	37
GRIND AND WORK ON IT: BOOTSTRAPPING IDEOLOGY AMONGST KINGS.....	40
CHAPTER 4: WHO CAN DO THE BEST DRAG?.....	44
“IT’S A CIS-MAN’S WORLD”: WHICH BODY HAS THE BEST DRAG?.....	44
GENDERED BODIES, SEXUALIZATION, AND COMEDY IN DRAG.....	47
“YOU’RE JUST A MAN IN MAKE-UP”: CRITICISMS OF TRANS, NON-BINARY AND CIS-GENDERED BODIES IN DRAG.....	57
AN ENTERTAINER IS AN ENTERTAINER” TRANS AND NON-BINARY KINGS’ GENDER BLIND RHETORIC.....	65
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....	69
REFERENCES.....	73
APPENDIX A.....	78
APPENDIX B.....	80

LIST OF TABLES

1.	Interview Participants.....	27
2.	Use of Bodies for Sex Appeal or Comedic Effect.....	57
3.	The Organization of Bodies in USofA Drag.....	63

I. INTRODUCTION

Sir. Ving Looks has been a part of the drag scene in a large U.S. Southern city since the 1990s. He has starred and co-hosted a popular drag show at local bars in a town called Ridgeville. Sir. Ving Looks has competed in and won local, regional, and national drag pageant titles. He is also a father of a drag family with several current kings in Ridgeville. Even with all this success, if you ask somebody on the street who Sir. Ving Looks is, you will more than likely get a blank stare, and the question: “drag *king*”?

Drag has become a popular form of entertainment in our pop culture due to *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, a show that features drag *queens*. In my interview with Sir. Ving Looks, I asked why so many people don’t know about drag kings but do know about RuPaul’s drag queens. He sighed and responded,

Mainstream culture now is so heteronormative. Now that they (straight people) know about drag queens, it’s cool to do ‘gayisms’, it’s cool to be friends with queens, it’s cool to be at the bars and this, that, and the other. They don’t understand the full aspect of the world that they have opened themselves up to. Nor do they respect. They don’t and they don’t care to. They know what they know. They know what RuPaul taught them and that’s not the full aspect of everything that goes along with drag.

RuPaul’s Drag Race (RDR) is a reality competition centered around drag queens and finding the “world’s next drag superstar.” The cable show allows drag queens the opportunity to be nationally and even globally recognized. Since its release in 2009, RDR has become the most-streamed show on LogoTV’s website (*PR Newswire* 2010). The show has twelve seasons and has produced three more shows within the franchise, *Untucked* (2010-present), *Drag U* (2010-

2012), and *All-Stars* (2012-present). Each season of RDR begins with the entrance of fifteen drag queens who have auditioned for the show and are picked by RuPaul to compete. Each episode the contestants compete in a mini challenge, a main challenge, and a runway look. Depending on how contestants do through the main challenge and their runway look, the two lowest-scoring contestants are sent to “lip-synch for their lives.” During this lip-synch, RuPaul decides the queen who stays and the queen who “sashays away.” The queen who wins at the end of the season receives a grand prize, a booked tour, and the title “drag superstar.”

RuPaul’s Drag Race is recognized nationally and has changed the culture of drag. The show emphasizes what Sir. Ving Looks described as “glamour drag.” RuPaul’s contestants are valued for their ability to be a “larger-than-life, idealized illusion of femininity” (Sandoval, 2018:101). Comedy queens, queens with bigger bodies, and character queens usually do not make it far in the competition. Recent scholars have begun to criticize *RuPaul’s Drag Race* for upholding and valuing heteronormative gender binaries (Sandoval, 2018; Brennan and Gudelunas, 2017; González and Cavazos, 2016; Edgar, 2011). Throughout the mini challenges of the show, queens are judged by their ability to create the illusion of a hyper-feminine woman, through the use of hip padding and breastplates (González and Cavazos, 2016). To test how well the queens have done, Ru sets challenges such as a wet t-shirt contest to see if the queens have successfully transformed their male body into a suitable female body with breasts that look real (González and Cavazos, 2016). The queens that succeed are rewarded with prizes that have great economic value, like high-end make-up or wigs, and they gain immunity during that week’s runway challenge. RuPaul’s reach has continued the gender binary by praising drag queens who can transform themselves to fit the stereotyped ‘female’ body and criticizing queens who do not

(Edgar, 2011). As a result, drag bars and drag queens across the country have started to value and mimic drag that emulates and constructs hyper-feminine personas in efforts to remain popular and relevant.

Drag was not always about the narrowly defined feminine glamour that RuPaul projects, in fact, it has gone through many changes. The art of drag can be dated back to the sixteenth-century theater and continued through the early nineteenth hundreds (Rosario, 2018). Men and women would dress like the opposite gender for different acting roles (Rosario, 2018). They appeared in variety shows, music halls, and even burlesque shows as special acts for the public until the passing of the 1933 Hollywood Motion Picture Production Code (Rosario, 2018; Halberstam, 1997). The Hollywood Motion Picture Production Code was created to help censor movie content such as profanity with religious implications, suggestive nudity, miscegenation, or drug trafficking (Lewis, 2002). The code also “banned all performances of so-called sexual perversion” which included dressing like the opposite gender and opposite gender impersonation (Lewis, 2002; Halberstam, 1997:113).

Even though gender impersonation on the stage faded, drag found its way into the ball scene. Drag balls began to appear in cities like New York and Baltimore allowing for LGBTQ individuals to socialize and develop a different type of drag culture (Shapiro, 2007). A drag ball is

A combination of a fashion show, Olympics, and party, and [they] are highly charged with competitive energy and creative artistry. These events, at which the Ball subculture creates (and breaks) its own rules, occur in YMCA basketball courts, one-room dance clubs, hotel ballrooms, and other large open spaces. A ballroom layout is like that of a fashion show with a long T-shaped runway that stretches out into the center of the room ... People usually walk (compete) as a representative of a House, entering the runway area from the crowd and moving towards the judges' panel (Susman, 2000:118).

Participants compete in drag for different categories in a runway-like fashion performing to a panel of judges. Categories can include Bizarre, where participants are judged on their ability to catwalk, usually with a specific outfit, Fem Queen/Butch Queen in drag female figure performance, where the participants give a performance that may include lip synching of famous women, and Hand Performance, which is a voguing performance using only hands (*The Black Youth Project*, 2017).

By the late twentieth century, LGBTQ bars became a popular way for queer people to socialize and build community (Brown, 2016; Bown, 2001; Paulson and Simpson, 1996). Bars facilitated a safe space for LGBTQ individuals who were often policed and harassed in the streets (Paulson and Simpson, 1996). In these bars, drag queens began developing a culture of drag centered around camp. Camp or campiness refers to “a style ... that favours’ “exaggeration”, “artifice” and “extremity” ... [it] exists in tension with popular culture, commercial culture or consumerist culture” (Bergman, 1993:5). Drag queens began to dress and act in an exaggerated feminine way through the use of theatrics and humor. In doing so, queens developed a drag culture that centered around performances by gay men. Drag queens would perform in the bars for patrons usually lip-synching to a song, or as comedic entertainment.

Drag kings have a similar beginning to drag queens. Drag kings’ origins are often linked to “trouser roles” that emerged in the seventeenth century. Trousers roles refer to females who performed male roles in a production (Rosario, 2018). At first, women could only perform roles made for boys however, the roles grew in popularity allowing for more women to begin performing male roles on stage. Throughout the nineteenth century, trouser roles expanded out of the theater and into “music halls, variety shows, burlesque, minstrelsy, and vaudeville” (Rosario,

2018). Performers such as Annie Hindle, Ella Wesner, and Vesta Tilley performed male characters for variety shows and used their performances to highlight different masculine personas (Rosario, 2018). As with drag queens, drag kings' history shifts once the 1933 Hollywood Motion Picture Production Code was enacted (Halberstam, 1997).

Spaces for the performance or construction of masculine identities developed off the stage in the 1980s. Women-only workshops began to appear in urban cities “in response to the introduction of gender studies in academia” (Powers, 2009:227). These workshops allowed women to experiment with masculinity and try to pass as a man in public (Power, 2009). In these spaces, some women “appropriated masculinity as a site for performance” (Power, 2009). This type of performance asks the performer to do gender for themselves and others. Doing gender refers to the individuals enacting, or performing, their gender as opposed to gender being innate (West and Zimmerman, 1987). These performances are enacted and maintained through interaction with people and institutions (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Women only workshops served as a space to perform the masculine gender. These masculine performances continued into drag acts that became the hallmark of the “drag king” in the 90s (Power, 2009:227). Because gender is “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” drag king performances began to resemble the rigid masculine gender for the stage (Butler, 1999:43). These performances are used holistically to show the audience and other performers that everyone does gender rather than an individual act like women who have enacted masculinity during war time (Nuwer, 2014).

While queens were developing camp, drag kings were creating their own culture of drag. The camp system, “disempower [s] the ‘king’ role” because it is centered around the stereotypes

of gay men” (Newton, 1996:173). Gay men were stereotyped to be flamboyant and womanly. The camp system allowed for gay men to embrace those stereotypes for comedic effect. To account for this, drag kings use “different styles of humor and different circuits of performance and theater ... to make the king role interesting” (Halberstam, 1997:117). One-way kings performed was through maleness competitions (Maltz, 1998). In these competitions creating the gendered illusion of a man on stage is highly valued. Women would “present a male character/caricature on stage” to a crowd for cash prizes (Maltz, 1998:282). To determine the winner, “the crowd would cheer at the most ridiculous or the most believable performances” (Maltz, 1998:282). Maltz describes one of the contestants she saw at a New York bar.

Then there was the most promising contestant of all, a sinewy muscular black drag king in basketball clothes. She took the stage with a cocky coolness and I was struck by how truly masculine she was; how she passed as male so that I wanted to strain my eyes to see beyond her facade. (Maltz, 1998:282)

During the 90s, drag king culture rewarded the ability to impersonate masculinity. As a result, kings often want to create the illusion that a man is onstage.

A recent scholar, Baker Rogers, studied the different drag culture of southern drag kings, finding a particular connection to trans identities. Participants described how drag was used as a safe space to experiment with gender expression and to explore their own trans identity (Rogers, 2018). Trans and non-binary individuals used drag to help build a queer community in their rather conservative towns (Rogers, 2018). These communities allowed for trans individuals to socialize with other LGBTQ people and share resources regarding identity and transitioning (Rogers, 2018; Rogers, 2019).

Scholarly literature on drag tends to focus on asking if drag reconstructs or deconstructs the gendered binary (Rogers, 2018; Levitt et al., 2018; Shikjee and Stroud, 2017; Rupp et al.,

2010; Shapiro, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2002; Maltz, 1998). Maltz (1998) argues that drag kings reconstruct gender binaries by parodying “maleness without having an integral relationship to masculinity” (274). Some kings “adopt an aggressively hetero male sexuality, as when performers flirt lasciviously with femmes in the audience or interact onstage with drag queens” in efforts to portray a man on stage (Rosenfeld, 2002:205). Others will perform to songs that objectify women in highly sexual ways to portray themselves as stereotypical heterosexual men (Shikjee and Stroud, 2017). Consequently, these performances can reinforce stereotypical ideas about race through the depiction of different types of masculinity. For example, white kings perform hip hop music and dress in a way that is stereotypically associated with this genre of music such as baggy jeans, chains, and a backward hat (Rosenfeld, 2002).

Others argue that drag can deconstruct the gender binary (Rogers, 2018; Levitt et al., 2018; Rupp et al., 2010; Shapiro, 2007). Drag can be “an opportunity for the performer and audience to see gender as a social construction and performance” (Rogers, 2018:891). Performers can deconstruct what it means to be a man and a woman by what is shown on stage (Levitt et al., 2018). In doing so, the gender and sex binaries become blurred for performers and audience members. For example, a drag queen can deconstruct what it means to be a man or what masculinity looks like. There is a feminine persona being portrayed on stage but the performer “underneath the drag” identifies as a man.

Levitt (2018) specifically found that drag performances can be dependent on the interactions from audience members. Some drag performers change their performances depending on if the audience is predominately LGBTQ or heterosexual (Levitt et al., 2018). A “gay male audience understands [the] message of drag performance as about freedom and

enchantment versus seeing it as misogynist or reducing it down in a costume” (Levitt et al., 2018:377). Comparatively, with a heterosexual audience drag performers “learn to negotiate the difficult experiences of routinely feeling objectified, sexualized or misunderstood” (Levitt et al., 2018:377).

Theoretical Framework

Throughout my study, I will be referring to several sociological concepts and theoretical frameworks to analyze my findings. Throughout my data, hegemonic masculinity appears as an influence on my participants. Connell (1995) argues that there is a system of gender power where hegemonic masculinity is valued more highly than femininity. Women are subordinated in the gender binary of men and women, leaving men to receive a patriarchal dividend in “honor, prestige and material reward from the subordination of women” (Schilt, 2010:7). Hegemonic masculinity is “the type of gender practice that, in a given space and time, supports gender inequality” (Pascoe, 2012:7). “While this pattern of practice might bolster male dominance, it does not necessarily represent the most common form of masculinity. Instead, most men and women come to revere and accept it as an ideal of manhood” (Morris, 2012:10).

But this system of gender power is more complex than all men dominating all women. In this power structure between genders, there is an internal hierarchy of masculinity, based on an individual’s social identity and its relation to systems of power including race, sexuality, religion, nationality, and ability. These social positions are categorized and ranked against hegemonic masculinity. Connell (1995) formulated a model of “multiple masculinities” which allows for an analysis of the hierarchies between masculinities: complicit masculinity, subordinated masculinity, and marginalized masculinity. As it suggests, men who do not overtly

enact hegemonic masculinity but still benefit from it are complicit because they receive the embedded power associated with masculinity in our culture. A “subordinated masculinity describes men who are oppressed by definitions of hegemonic masculinity,” which Connell states are gay men and “marginalized masculinity describes men who may be positioned powerfully in terms of gender but not in terms of class or race” (Pascoe, 2012:7).

We can further understand this intersectional power through Patricia Hill Collins’ (2000) work. She argues that depending on an individual’s race and gender, among other identities, the level of power and level of oppression they have in society can be represented in a matrix of domination (Collins, 200). According to Collins, “domination encompasses structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power. These domains constitute specific sites where oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation mutually construct one another” (Collins 2000:218). The matrix of domination highlights the different varying combinations of social identity an individual could have and their ability to be dominated or privileged. For example, a black, lower-class woman would be less privileged than a white, upper-class, man. Privilege, however, is not absolute. A white man could be upper-class but lose his wealth. The fall to the lower-class would lower his overall class privilege. Different aspects of social identity can lead to different privileges. If the same woman in the previous example identified as heterosexual and the man identified as gay, the woman would receive heterosexual privilege in relation to this aspect of structural power.

When talking about social identity and privilege it is necessary to account for the difference in values. In the example I listed above, the white man would have more status than the black woman even if he lost his wealth and identified as gay. Whiteness in our society is

highly valued and comes with many privileges. The man could get a job faster due to his gender and race regardless of his sexuality. The man might even climb back up the ladder in the workplace and become a CEO whereas a racial minority is more likely to be positioned in middle or lower tier jobs (Wingfield and Alston, 2013). It is important when looking at gender and sexuality to account for the privilege of race.

Throughout my study, participants are affected by hegemonic masculinity in a complicated matrix of domination. Many kings are transgender and therefore are not privileged in a system of hegemonic masculinity. The women in my study also do not fit the definition of enhanced femininity valued most highly in a system of hegemonic masculinity. In general, both trans men and women are devalued in a system of hegemonic masculinity. But context matters in the definition of gender and sexual inequalities. Women and transmen performing as drag kings are also subjected to the dominance of the cis-gay men who are drag queens at the Rainbow Bar and whose popularity and value is reinforced by the current emphasis on RuPaul drag culture. Throughout my analysis, I will explore how drag kings are affected by hegemonic masculinity at a societal level and in the context of a specific drag bar culture at the Rainbow Bar.

Trans kings in my study are also affected by cis-gender performers and audience members who cisgender the reality of drag and of Rainbow Bar. Cisgender refers to someone who exclusively identifies as their sex assigned at birth (*Trans Student Educational Resources*). Through social authorities like family, religion, politics, and science, cis-gender individuals cisgender their reality (Sumerau et. al, 2018). The reality states that sex and gender are equal and “define cisgender people as the only legitimate gendered beings in existence” (Mathers, 2017:297). The cisgendering of reality creates a cis-normative society, where there is only male

and female, man, and woman. In this reality, transgender people are “deviant, impossible, and unworthy of respect from others” (Mathers, 2017:297). Sumerau, Mathers, and Cragun explore how cis-gendering reality happens in religion and social institutions. Religions can do this by distributing religious duties by gender. However, the genders remain binary and cis, meaning that only men and women can be in existence (Sumerau et. al, 2018). The social institution of science can also be cis-gendered. This can be done by only giving credibility to organisms that are male and female. By doing so, religions and social institutions can revoke the possible existence of trans or non-binary individuals (Sumerau et. al, 2018). At Rainbow Bar, cis gendering occurs through the bar’s hired drag performers, Rainbow Girlsⁱ. The only staffed drag performers of the bar are cis-gendered men who perform as drag queens. The decision cis-genders reality by subconsciously defining drag queens as cis-men and therefore kings as cis-women. Even though drag can blur the gender binaries, the cis gendering of reality by the bar, drag performers, and audience members can affect their transgender colleagues.

We may gain some further insights into the way “good drag” is defined and who is considered to be doing the best drag by examining theoretical frameworks that pay attention to gender, sexuality, and workplace dynamics. The gendered organizations' approach can help focus our attention on the bar and drag performances in them as spaces segregated by gender. Gendered organization theory begins by eliminating the idea that the workplace is gender-neutral (Acker, 1990). Instead, the workplace assigns value to the work of a man and organizes an entire company or business to the features of men. Kanter (1975) describes this as the masculine ethic. To uphold the masculine ethic the worker must have “a tough-minded approach to problems; analytic abilities to abstract and plan; a capacity to set aside personal, emotional considerations

in the interests of task accomplishment; [and] a cognitive superiority in problem-solving and decision making” (Kanter, 1975:43). The masculine ethic is used to design and determine that the ideal worker for the workplace is a man. By doing so, the workplace through its “organizational hierarchies, job descriptions, and informal workplace practices all contain deeply embedded assumptions about the gender and gendered characteristics of workers” (Williams, 1995:9). The inherent beliefs about gender and workplace practices “limit women’s opportunities while enhancing men’s occupational success” (Williams, 1995:9). As a result, men are benefiting from the gendered organization that has “built-in advantages for men that are often unnoticed” (Williams, 1995:9).

Gender is not the only way that employees benefit in the workplace. White workers are advantaged over workers of color through “employer preferences, structural discrimination, job queues, [and] differential access to social networks” (Wingfield and Alston, 2013:47). White employees, regardless of their gender, are more likely to hold higher positions in a workplace while people of color are distributed throughout the middle and bottom tier positions (Wingfield and Alston, 2013). Wingfield and Alston (2013) explain how the workplace assigns racial tasks to working minorities to keep the organizational hierarchy. They define racial tasks as “the work minorities do that is associated with their positions in the organizational hierarchy and that reinforces whites’ position of power within the workplace” (Wingfield and Alston, 2013:49). The work can either be ideological, interactional, or physical. At any level, Wingfield and Alston indicate that regardless of gender, white employees benefit more in the workplace than employees of color (Wingfield and Alston, 2013).

A gendered workplace framework in combination with the scholarship that focuses on

cis-gendering of reality centers the dominance of cis-gendered men over cis-gendered women in the workplace. At Rainbow Bar, cis-gendered men are dominant over cis-gendered women. The dominance of cis-gendered gay men allows for drag kings to be considered inferior to drag queens and critiques transmen who perform as drag kings. My study shines a light on drag kings who, although they are working in what would be considered a gay-friendly workplace, are still affected by a cis-gendered workplace that devalues their work. In the following chapters, I attempt to answer the questions: 1) What do drag kings consider to be “good drag” for themselves and for other kings?; and 2) Who is considered to have the best drag? And who determines what the best drag is? I begin by discussing my methods. In this chapter, I explain how I conducted my research through participant observations and in-depth interviews and discuss my data analysis. In chapter three, I describe how drag kings define “good drag” with examples of what “good drag” looks like. In chapter four, I discuss what drag is considered to be the best and how kings are affected by it. I conclude with a final chapter that discusses the implications of my findings.

II. METHODS

This study aims to understand what drag kings consider to be “good drag” for themselves and other kings, who is considered to have the best drag, and who determines what the best drag is? I seek to understand kings’ perspectives of drag through participant observation at two LGBTQ bars, Rainbow Bar and Dynamite Lounge, and through in-depth interviews with drag performers. Before I begin my methods chapter, I would like to define common terms that I refer to throughout my thesis. Firstly, I define drag, drag queen, and drag king through Rogers' (2016) definition. Drag refers to a performance of femininity or masculinity in the context of a drag show or contest (Rogers, 2016). A drag queen refers to any person who performs femininity within the context of a drag show or contest (Rogers, 2016). A drag king refers to any person who performs masculinity within the context of a drag show or contest (Rogers, 2016). I chose to use Rogers’ definition because most of my interview participants are transgender and I wanted to have a definition that was inclusive.

To define gender identities such as cisgender and transgender, I use definitions from the Trans Student Educational Resources website. As previously discussed, when I say someone is cisgender, I am describing someone who “exclusively identifies as their sex assigned at birth. The term cisgender is not indicative of gender expression, sexual orientation, hormonal makeup, physical anatomy, or how one is perceived in daily life” (Trans Student Educational Resources). The definition is similar to other sociological definitions like Sumerau, Mathers, and Cragun who state cisgender as “an umbrella term referring to people who conform to the gender binary

by interpreting their gender identity as congruent with the sex they were assigned by society” (Sumerau et. al., 2018:427). When I use the term transgender I am referring to “an encompassing term for many gender identities who do not identify or exclusively identify with their sex assigned at birth. The term transgender is not indicative of gender expression, sexual orientation, hormonal makeup, physical anatomy, or how one is perceived in daily life” (Trans Student Educational Resources). Lastly, I frequently use the acronym AFAB, which refers to being assigned female at birth (TransWhat?.org). I use the acronym when I am describing my interview participants who are drag queens that are assigned female at birth and identify their gender as a woman.

Ridgeville

Ridgeville is a southern city in Tennessee nestled between the Great Smoky Mountains and the Mississippi River. The city attracts a large number of tourists due to its influential music scene. It is also home to a nationally recognized gay bar with a notable reputation for hosting drag shows, Rainbow Bar. For this study of drag, I selected Ridgeville as a purposive case based on four criteria. First, the city has seven bars that regularly host drag performances. Second, as previously mentioned, Ridgeville is home to Rainbow Bar, which hosts drag kings weekly and has nationwide notability in the drag world. Third, the city has been part of previous research on drag kings in the South (Rogers 2016, Rogers 2018). Lastly, Ridgeville is thirty-six miles away from my family’s home, which made it easier for me to access the drag king shows for this study.

Field Observations

When I started participant observations in the summer of 2019, I set out to study two

different bars: Rainbow Bar and Dynamite Lounge. I wanted to know whether good drag might be defined differently depending on the audience and popularity of the bars where the drag was performed. I found this to be important because Dynamite Lounge is advertised as a lesbian bar and is owned by two cis-gendered lesbian twins. While Rainbow Bar is advertised as a gay bar owned by two cis-gendered gay men. I expected Dynamite to have more of a young to middle-aged queer woman audience because the owners are two middle-aged lesbian women and Rainbow to have more young gay men in the audience because they advertise to younger LGBTQ people.

Over the summer of 2019, I conducted a total of sixteen hours in participant observations (N=16) at drag shows, but most of my time was spent at Rainbow Bar (N=10 hours). My participant observations allowed me to see “the ‘natural’ settings in which social life takes place and to observe what people ‘really’ do in those settings” (Esterberg, 2009:58). I was able to see, hear, and participate in the space that my interviewees reference and talk about in their interviews (Esterberg, 2002:59). To accurately describe each bar and the timeline of events, the following section on field sites is divided into two parts.

Dynamite Lounge

I began field observations at Dynamite Lounge on July 5th, 2019. Dynamite Lounge is a big green and purple house renovated into a bar. The bar looks as though it could be part of the surrounding neighborhood due to its two-story frame and back deck that faces the small parking lot. Inside, the bar is narrow, resembling a long hallway rather than a house. On busy nights, like the nights of the drag show, the square tables that line the walls to the back of the room are full of patrons. Unfortunately, this leaves audience members limited space to stand and watch the

show in small pockets throughout the bar. The bar often becomes quite cramped; bar patrons must squeeze past one another to get from one side of the room to the other. Drag performers strut out of the kitchen after getting ready in an upstairs room. They are tasked with lip-synching through the packed crowd to reach the stage.

Dynamite Lounge hosts a drag show on the first Friday of every month. Every show I attended had drag queens and no kings. I conducted a total of two observations of drag shows at the Dynamite Lounge. Each show lasted an hour, beginning at 10 PM and featured five queens who performed two times each (totaling 10 songs performed in a night). For both of my visits, I arrived at the bar approximately one hour before the show to take note of the bar space, attendance, and interactions. Dynamite Lounge's clientele appeared to be predominately white lesbian and gay middle-aged individuals. I did not encounter anyone that I would assume was gender non-conforming. Many of the audience members gathered in medium-sized groups, five to seven people. Additionally, if the group was made up of middle-aged patrons, the group would more than likely be at a table, however, if the group was made up of younger-aged patrons twenty-one to thirty, the group would be standing.

Rainbow Bar

Rainbow Bar is a gay dance bar located on the street adjacent to downtown Ridgeville. Due to the proximity to downtown, tourists often visit the Rainbow Bar. The clientele is primarily individuals ranging in age from eighteen to late twenties. Most patrons are white, young adults, and a mix of women and men. I have also noted in my field notes both the verbal acknowledgment of trans individuals at the bar. For example,

DeVine states that Liquor Good has something to announce. When Liquor gets on stage,

he talks about how there is someone special in the audience tonight. At first I thought maybe this would be a girlfriend or boyfriend of Liquor but instead, he points to a man in the audience sitting at a first-row table. Liquor pulls the man on stage and I notice he looks around my age. Liquor says that the man's name is Max and is the first transgender black rap artist who has his music on every platform.

Additionally, one night I noticed verbal acknowledgement of individuals who broke gender norms with their clothing,

A white presumably gay man is standing in a group close to the bar. DeVine points him out and says, "You with the romper." At this everyone looks and notices that the man is wearing a white paint splattered romper. DeVine says "I love your romper! It's so cute. DJ can we get a light on this man?" At this, the man has a spotlight on him and begins to catwalk back and forth for everyone in the bar to see.

In this observation, the drag performers, like DeVine, and bar patrons are pointing out and celebrating someone's outfit. The outfit is a romper that is associated with women's clothing; however, a man is wearing it. The praise from DeVine and the audience, as well as the man's catwalk, suggests that Rainbow Bar is a safe space where gender non-conformity is celebrated. Throughout my time at each bar, I only noticed Rainbow Bar doing this kind of celebration of gender nonconformity.

Rainbow Bar is located in a large building that is separated into three rooms. The entrance of the building looks as though it could be a hotel due to its modern, sleek interior. Every night I attended, a young woman in her early twenties with a half-shaved head would greet me with a smile and cheerful, light-hearted 'hey'. She checks IDs and takes the cover charge. She motions to the right, past the front desk, where a narrow hallway leads into an open room with a bar in the back and a stage at the front. It is a big room which could easily fit two-hundred

and fifty people. The stage at the front of the room has three walkways — one on either side at the back of the stage and one at the front like a catwalk. Twenty tables surround the catwalk stage for seating, ten on each side. There are booths that are on either side of the stage past the tables. The booths look like balcony seating and appear as two rows, a bottom, and a top row. The entrance to the booths can be accessed on the floor of the bar by stairs. Throughout my time at Rainbow Bar, I noticed that the booths are usually reserved for big groups or parties. At the back of the room was the high-top bar. Patrons would stand in front of the counter because there would be no stools. However, there are five high top tables with bar stools to the left of the bar top that lines the wall for people to use. Past the bar is a second hallway that leads to a dance floor on the left, bathrooms on the right, and an outdoor patio straight ahead.

I discuss in my literature review how RuPaul has changed the drag scene and because RuPaul has changed drag nationally, the drag at Rainbow Bar has changed locally. Rainbow Bar is known to be a hotspot for drag. Four queens from Rainbow Bar have appeared on RuPaul's Drag Race. The bar also hosts headliner shows, usually on Friday nights, with past contestants from RuPaul's Drag Race. Due to Rainbow Bar's connection with RuPaul, the bar has gained national recognition for its drag queen shows. Later in my analysis, I will go more in-depth about how this connection has affected the drag kings in my study.

Rainbow Bar offers a drag show five nights out of the week, every week. However, my observations occurred on the Thursday night show, Ladies' Night. I chose to attend Ladies' Night because it is the only show that has drag kings. Throughout the night, kings and queens alternate performances. My Thursday night observations started at the end of June 2019 and continued until August 2019. I attended four shows at Rainbow that lasted an average of two

hours each, totaling eight hours of participant observation. These drag shows began at 11 PM and featured fifteen performers, both kings, and queens, who each performed twice during the show (totaling 30 songs performed in a single night). However, the first show I attended at Rainbow was even larger. This show was the Thursday before Ridgeville Pride, which resulted in twenty-one performances and a larger crowd than the shows that followed. I believe this to be a result of LGBTQ individuals either from Ridgeville or who were in town wanting to begin Pride early.

Oftentimes, bachelorette parties, girls' trips as well as birthday parties would be at the shows. This is likely due to the large number of tourists that go to Rainbow Bar. Rainbow Bar appears on Google searches for bachelorette ideas and girls' trips. Additionally, if someone searches a bar in Ridgeville with a dance floor, Rainbow Bar appears. Throughout my field observations, I made a note of the groups I thought were heterosexual women that appeared to be at the bar for a bachelorette party, girls' trip, or a birthday party. I found that my assumptions about these women were correct when drag hosts would point out the groups and engage them in efforts to figure out what they were doing in the bar. The only field observation in which I did not note a group of straight women present was the show before Pride weekend.

I took field jottings on my smartphone using the Notes app, but, on two occasions, I used a notepad. In the first two observations at Rainbow Bar, I sat in a location where I could write hand notes without being noticeable to bar patrons and without disrupting the usual flow of events in the bar. However, as my observations progressed, I was unable to secure a position in a busy bar where I could write my notes without being seen. Additionally, I found my handwritten notes harder to transcribe because the notes were taken quickly and were harder to read than

those made on my phone. From then on out, I started taking notes at the scene, during the short break after each performance, and afterward in my car before leaving the parking lot. In my field notes, I focused on drag performance, the hosts' commentary, audience engagement, and tipping behavior. Tipping behavior included, which performer was getting the most tips, what type of performer they were, king or queen, as well as how audience members and performers behaved when a tip was given. Throughout these observations, I did not stand up front near the stage or tip the performers. Instead, I usually found a table or place to stand toward the side of the stage and sang along, clapped, and danced. The full observation template can be found in Appendix A.

During the drag performances, I took note of each drag performance in relation to the performer. I noted if they were a king or queen, the song choice, physical attributes including clothes, dancing styles, and interactions with the audience members. I also carefully documented how the host engaged the audience before, during, and after the show. I noted that drag hosts, which usually consisted of one king and one queen, often made jokes or comments about gender and sexuality. They also addressed and teased specific audience members from the stage. The following excerpt from my field notes captures the usual banter between host and audience at Rainbow Bar:

At one point, a local, who I have seen tip many times, a white younger-looking gay man, hands DeVine, and Ryder Long a drink on stage. When they ask what is in the drink, the man states: "you'll find out bitch." DeVine notes how she did not particularly want to take the drink to which Ryder responded, "If you don't drink it, bitch, you're weak." DeVine mentions how she said she didn't want to, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to. She then makes a joke about that's how her sex life is and how she has contracted, "mono, syphilis," and several other illnesses. After this, Ryder makes a joke about her sex life being "Fear factor gay edition," to which everyone in the crowd laughs.

Experiences in the Field

During my observations, I experienced sexually charged interactions with audience members at Dynamite Lounge, which made that bar a more challenging and unwelcoming place to conduct my study. After having a conversation about this with my mentors, I decided to discontinue participant observations at Dynamite but kept going to Rainbow Bar. My experience with the crowd at Dynamite Lounge reflected patterns found in the literature. Feminist scholarship has explored the unique challenges women experience in the field (Hanson and Richards, 2017). Due to several factors, patterns of sexual harassment are predominately higher for women whose research includes field observations (Hanson and Richards, 2017). Women tend to feel the need to be on good terms with participants and gatekeepers, meaning they are reluctant to say or do anything that might keep them from possible information or access to a community. This practice may lead to sexual harassment and the thought that sexual harassment is part of the job and something the researcher must deal with (Hanson and Richards, 2017). Additionally, the scholarship has found that the lack of conversation about possible sexual harassment in the field by academics results in a lack of reporting (Hanson and Richards, 2017). The lack of conversations reinforces the narrative that as a woman researcher, sexual harassment may be part of the job to get valuable data (Hanson and Richards, 2017).

While at the Dynamite Lounge, I found myself dealing with these patterns. I experienced sexual advances, which caused a significant discomfort at Dynamite Lounge. I believe the age differences in clients between Rainbow Bar and Dynamite Lounge reflect the different bar space purpose. My generation, late millennials, and early gen Z has access to technology, such as smartphones which allow for social interaction online through apps, romantic interaction through

apps, and visibility of other LGBTQ people on social media. Through smartphones and the internet, a social connection can be made without a physical space, especially regarding sexual advances. In contrast, the generation before me used bars as a space to connect and pursue sexual or romantic partners. While at Dynamite Lounge, I was complimented on my physical appearance by bar patrons. I was also subject to having a woman touch my arm and pull me close to her while trying to share with me her thoughts on the show. Due to my own positionally as a twenty-three-year-old queer woman with short hair and masculine expression, and the atmosphere of Dynamite Lounge as a place for many to pursue romantic and sexual partners, I decided to stop my observations at the bar. As a result, I chose to focus on my participant observations at Rainbow Bar as well as pursue in-depth interviews with the performers at Rainbow Bar. This decision was also because Rainbow has more shows and features more drag kings.

Interviews

Due to the frequency of shows and drag king representation at Rainbow Bar, as well as my discomfort at Dynamite Lounge, I began reaching out to performers who I watched perform at Rainbow Bar for in-depth interviews. At the beginning of my project, my research revolved around observations and a survey with audience members. However, because of the sexually charged atmosphere at Dynamite Lounge, and the surprising observations at Rainbow Bar, in-depth interviews became the focus of my methods. The recruitment process started at the end of September 2019 and continued into January of 2020. I recruited interviewees by first messaging drag kings and queens via Facebook Messenger. In my recruitment message, I introduced myself as a graduate student at The University of Mississippi who is doing a master's thesis on drag. I

then mention I was originally from Ridgeville and have been going to drag shows at Rainbow all summer. I informed them that I was interested in hearing their perspective and experience of being a drag performer in Ridgeville and gave a short synopsis of the topics that I planned to raise in the interview. I also mentioned that this study is IRB approved and that anything said in the interview would be kept anonymous and confidential to try to counter any hesitation and to follow guidelines that protect human subjects. I use pseudonyms for the drag performers. It is common for kings to have names that have political meaning and sound like a sexual pun. This may cause concern or discomfort when I refer to a king with a highly sexualized name. However, because a drag name holds a lot of meaning and possible credibility I felt as though it was important to stay true to the underlying theme of their names.

The first person to respond to my message was a drag king, B. J. Max. B. J. responded shortly after the message was sent and immediately agreed to participate. They expressed their gratitude for my interest in drag kinging and regular attendance to shows. After an interview time was set up, B. J. offered up seven names for me to contact, which is how I reached out to other performers. Throughout my recruitment period, drag kings were eager to respond, participate, and offered their gratitude for my interest in their perspectives. I found it easy to get a response from the kings I had seen at Rainbow, as well as to get recommendations from them for other potential people to interview. Cis-gendered men who perform as drag queens proved to be harder to get in contact with, and I was not able to get in contact with any cis drag queen despite multiple messages on multiple platforms including Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, I was only able to get three AFAB queens to respond. In total, I reached out to sixteen performers and got eleven to respond. Out of the eleven, I have interviewed nine. One king agreed but

unfortunately had a family emergency and was unable to take the time out to be interviewed while another king could not fit the interview into their schedule.

One of the names B. J. had mentioned included Sir. Ving Looks, who I discussed in chapter one. Sir. Ving Looks was one of the first kings to perform as a drag king in Ridgeville and happened to be a drag father to many of the current Rainbow kings, meaning he is the head of one “drag family.” A “drag family” is commonly understood in the LGBTQ community to mean the people that are selected to inform the look or performance of another’s drag and be a support system for a performer. How these families work resembles a biological family relationship — for example, Sir. Ving Looks is the head of one family, the “drag father.” He gave me names of his drag children, which are the performers that Sir. Ving Looks has helped mold and shape in the drag world. Sir. Ving Looks’ drag children can have children of their own, which would then be Sir. Ving Looks “drag grandchildren.” Due to timing, and availability Sir. Ving Looks was the first performer I interviewed. His interview was conducted in person at a coffee shop and recorded using an audio recorder.

As a result, when I asked for possible performers that would be interested in participating in this study, I was given names from his drag family. Sir. Ving Looks’ recommended performers’ contacts proved to have many strengths, which I uncovered through the process of my interviews. First, because I started with the head of a drag family, I was given entrance into the family, which made recruiting performers easier. Those who I reached out to who are a part of Sir. Ving Looks’ family were eager to talk to me because they already knew Sir. Ving Looks had given me his approval through the interview process. Second, due to Sir. Ving Looks’ presence in Ridgeville and his drag family, I found that the participants were more likely to share

in-depth information about their experiences due to trust already established because I had interviewed Sir. Ving Looks. Lastly, because I had access to several generations of a drag family, I was able to document comprehensive experiences of drag kings through several years of Rainbow Bar's Ladies' Night. Overall, I believe having a majority of one drag family in my sample enhanced my findings.

Though I found interviewing one drag family beneficial, my study does have limitations because of it. All my interview participants are either currently performing at Rainbow Bar or have in the past. This means that I am receiving a limited perspective of the drag scene in Ridgeville. Moreover, all the drag kings I interviewed, learned drag in similar ways. Since Sir. Ving Looks was a prominent figure at the start of Rainbow Bar's Ladies' night and is a drag father, kings that I interviewed looked up to him and modeled their drag after him. As a result, the drag kings I've interviewed have very similar drag aesthetics.

In total, I have conducted nine interviews, six with drag kings, and three with AFAB queens. Five of the kings identified as transgender men or non-binary while one identified as a cis-gendered woman. On average, each interview lasted an hour and thirty minutes. Three of the interviews were conducted in-person, four were by video call, and two took place via a phone call. Five interviews were scheduled and then rescheduled due to the performers' time conflict. A majority of my participants work two jobs and are working late nights, which causes them to have limited time during the day for an interview. Additionally, during the fall semester, I live approximately four hours away from Ridgeville. Because of this, I conducted six interviews over FaceTime or by phone. Though my FaceTime interviews have resulted in great interviews, technology has proven to limit participation. Ultimately, I found that the face-to-face interviews

were more likely to be rich in data in comparison to phone calls or FaceTime because I was able to read body language and engage in conversation without having technical glitches. All interviews, however, were audio-recorded with participant permission. All participant information can be found in Table 1. I transcribed interviews in a word document on my laptop and stored on an external hard drive.

Table 1: Interview Participants

	Type of Performer	Gender Identity	Race	Type of Interview	Where the Interview Took Place
Sir. Ving Looks	King	Trans-Man	Black	In-Person	Coffee Shop
MiMi Larue	AFAB Queen	Woman	Black	Phone Call	Participant was in their car; Interviewer was in their office
B. J. Max	King	Woman	White	Video Call	Participant was in their home; Interviewer was in their office
Ryder Long	King	Trans-Man	White	In-Person	Coffee Shop
Willy Nill	King	non-binary	White	In-Person	Coffee Shop
Liquor Good	King	Trans-Man	White	Video Call	Participant was in their car; Interviewer was in their office
Al Johnson	AFAB Queen	Woman	Black	Phone Call	Participant was in their home; Interviewer was in a secluded room
Mason Daniels	King	Trans-Man	White	Video Call	Participant was in their car; Interviewer was in their office
Lezzy McGuire	AFAB Queen	Woman	White	Video Call	Participants was in their home

My interview template is semi-structured, which means it is designed to allow for an organic conversation about drag in the participant's own words; however, the guide also ensures that I cover specific topics that help me understand what participants think makes drag "good" (Esterberg, 2002). My interview guide has three sections. The first section asks the participant to share how they got interested in drag, when they started performing drag, how they learned to do drag, and how they developed their drag personas. The second section asks about performance, especially what the performers think constitutes a good performance or good drag. The last section focuses on the drag community and the LGBTQ community in Ridgeville and at Rainbow Bar more specifically. The full interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

Data Analysis

Before coding interviews with drag performers, I found several themes through my participant observations that informed the creation of my interview guide. The themes that were added after observations include, status as a performer at Rainbow Bar, the large community of kings, and investment from the crowd toward drag king performances. Additionally, codes such as gender, sexuality, and tipping appeared in my observations. The codes found in my participant observations will be used to compare themes in the interviews. For example, in my observations, I noticed kings frequently tipped other kings. However, I did not notice queens tipping kings a lot. I coded these interactions as "tipping" and then created an interview question centered around it.

Interviews were transcribed during November 2019 and January 2020. The transcription process began by typing the audio-recorded interviews into a word document. Later, I used Trint.com to help more quickly transcribe the interviews. Trint is a paid transcription website.

Each hour of audio costs fifteen dollars for a computer operating system to transcribe. The interviews were submitted with pseudonym names, transcribed through the app, and edited to make sure there were no mistakes. I began open coding the interviews in November 2019 and the work ended in February 2020. Through open coding, I examined themes and categories that emerged from the data (Esterberg, 2002). The open code process began by printing hard copies of the interview transcripts and making physical notes and highlights on the copies to indicate different analytic themes (Emmerson et al.,1995). I then compiled the themes in a list, with descriptive procedural memos which allowed me to remember how I created my codes, what categories I created, and how I constructed the categories (Esterberg, 2002). Several codes overlapped with my field observations such as gender, sexuality, money, and Rainbow Bar's prestige. However, I found new codes such as the use of male artists for a drag king's song choice, issues in the Ridgeville drag community, drag family, and the mentioning of Mason Daniels, the king who started the Ladies' night at Rainbow Bar.

After open coding, I revisited the interview transcripts to begin expanding on the codes I found. I would put the code in a word document and copy and paste quotes from each interview that related to that code. At the end of the quote, I would write down the page number of the interview and the reasons why I wrote the quote down. For example, a code I began with was "creative." I created a word document entitled creative and pasted quotes into it from each interview. The following entry is from Sir. Ving Looks' and Mason Daniels' interview:

I don't think a lot of people in drag have that power. People are beautiful and give great performances but when people really suck you into it and you forget where you are and they transport you somewhere else on a simple stage I think that's very powerful. pg. 5 of transcription (creative = someone who can enthrall someone? Take someone to a different world?)
You can see the influence of me, you can see the influences of Sir. Ving Looks

and influences of Landon Cider. You can see all these different influences on B. J. because that's what he's found a king should be. Today I think a lot of them do what they think a king should be. pg. 5 (finding your own version of a king=creativity?)

Other codes included, references to sexuality, RuPaul, assumed level of effort, and drag family. Compiling my codes in this way allowed me to have only one document to look at and gave me the information needed for a follow-up analysis in the interview itself.

After the code document was created, I would read through the entire document to begin the analysis of common patterns found in the quotes. For example, with the code "effort," I found that drag kings would talk about putting effort into their drag as a way of having good drag. I would then select the most compelling quotes that illuminated the pattern. After these quotes were selected, I would begin writing an analysis of the quotes and how it described the pattern. I would then describe how phenomena would operate at the individual level with drag kings and the structural level with Rainbow Bar.

Through participant observations and in-depth interviews, I was able to explore the perspectives of drag kings in Ridgeville. Rainbow Bar proved to be a significant setting with its connection to *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its Ladies' night that hosted drag kings. While answering my research questions, participant observations and in-depth interviews proved to be the best fit. Participant observations allowed for me to be a witness to the physical world and phenomena that my interviewees describe and discuss. In-depth interviews allowed me to have the drag kings make their own meaning of their world and the chance to ask about the things I saw during my observations. The following chapter will begin a discussion of what kings consider 'good' drag for themselves and other kings.

III. WHAT MAKES GOOD DRAG?

To be considered “good” at drag, kings feel they have to put in a lot more work than queens. For kings, this means working hard to create a masculine appearance through costuming and make-up and making an effort to get booked on stage. In the following chapter, I show how drag kings talk about stage appearance and body transformation and the money, time, and work that is required to have “good” drag.

“Don’t be a Lesbian on Stage”: The Importance of Make-up and Costuming for Creating the Gendered Illusion

When describing what makes a drag king good at what they do, interviewees stress a performer’s make-up and its effectiveness in creating the illusion of a man. For a king to prove that they are putting in the effort, they must spend time on their make-up and learn how to contour the correct looking gendered features such as distinct jawlines, chiseled cheeks, squared foreheads, and thicker eyebrows. During my observations, I find that several kings darken the center of their cheeks to contour sharp lines on the face. These specific lines give the illusion of manly cheekbones and jawline. Most kings use a dark contour around their temples to create the illusion of a broader forehead and eyebrows are recreated and enlarged with a dark-colored make-up pencil. Moreover, kings often use make-up or costuming hair to create the illusion of facial hair. To sharpen their masculine contour, most kings also don a thin beard lining the bottom of their jaw that is made of cosmetics, costume hair, or their own facial hair.

The drag kings I interviewed expressed the importance of make-up because it helps solidify the gender illusion on stage. Mason Daniels, a trans king who launched Ladies' Night at Rainbow Bar, has been in the Ridgeville drag scene since the 90s. When I asked him, "what makes a drag king good?", Mason said that drag kings need to be more than just "lesbians on stage" who aren't "impersonating anything." For Mason, impersonation can only be done by reconstructing a performer's face with make-up that helps a performer attain the physical appearance of a man. Mason suggests that if a king does not have the physical features that are associated with men, like a distinct jawline and bushy eyebrows, then they are just a "lesbian on stage."

To be considered good at drag in the Ridgeville scene, kings must be good make-up artists. Al Johnson, an AFAB (assigned female at birth) queen describes Landon Cider, a famous king who just recently won a reality competition on the TV show *Dragula*. "I mean, he's good. But again, he uses makeup and his craft is similar to drag queens because he does a face-up and he makes different faces." Al suggests that if a king puts time into their make-up, like Landon does, they are able to be compared to queens. When Ridgeville kings are compared to queens, they might be able to book more shows, get more tips from audience members and be seen as equal performers. The reality star Landon is compared to queens because he won season three of *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula*, a competition similar to *RuPaul's Drag Race* that emphasizes filth, horror, and glamour. Landon was the first king on the show and competed against nine drag queens and one AFAB queen. Al in her quote is attributing Landon's success to his effort taken in make-up and underlines the use of make-up as a standard for drag kings because it is what drag queens do.

To be considered good at drag, a king must also create a flat chest to help build the illusion of a man on stage. Some kings bind their chests with binders. Willy Nill, explained, “I actually wear three or two binders and I wear a body binder. I have a regular binder that goes down and then I have a slimmer that goes from my ankles up to my chest because I’m a hippy woman.” The number of binders and amount of effort Willy uses to create the illusion of a flat chest helps for him to have good drag. He is able to have good drag because he has achieved the expectation of a flat chest that a king should have to appear as a man on stage.

Through my interviews, I learned that a king’s effort in their costume is just as important as their make-up and chest. Mason stresses, “please for God’s sake wear a costume.” Interviewees clarified that a king could have good drag if their costume is well made, creative and if they have spent time making it. A good costume requires the performer to take time to plan it out. Interviewees described “street clothes,” what you would wear out on the street, are not considered a costume due, in part, to the fact that there are no alterations made to it.

Kings are expected to create an outfit that is deemed above what you would normally wear. Liquor Good, a Ridgeville drag king, described his costuming process to me. First, he must decide the base of the outfit:

So, like if I want to wear a vest, a t-shirt, a button-up, a tank top, pants, shorts, a suit whatever it is... I try to think of a color scheme that I haven't done a lot of or I've never done... I think about if I want to use paint, sequins, rhinestones, fabric, ribbon or whatever it is, then I kind of just sit there and lay it all out.

Liquor states several components that kings list as part of costuming including fabric, ribbon, rhinestones, sequins, and paint. Adding touches of detail with extra materials helps elevate a king’s costume. Through my observations, I found that kings would hot glue different patterned fabrics to different parts of an outfit. For example, one night I saw Liquor in a long-sleeve

button-up shirt with a pocket and collar. On the left side, there was a patterned fabric sewn on top of the original fabric of the shirt. The right side was not altered except for the pocket located on the chest. Liquor sewed the same patterned fabric on the pocket. This is often one way for kings to turn what would be deemed a “street” shirt into a costume shirt. Other ways include gluing rhinestones to an article of clothing so that the rhinestones catch the light when the performer is on stage. Liquor says he has sat at another king’s house “watching him stone, learning new stone patterns and watching him paint” for hours.

When designing costumes, some performers recreate a tv, movie, or pop culture character. For example, B. J. Max created Woody’s costume from *Toy Story*. He acquired light denim pants, similar to Woody’s, brown cowboy boots, and a yellow long sleeve collared shirt with red lines to recreate the flannel pattern. B. J. also had a gun holster around his waist, a cow print vest, a red bandana, and a brown cowboy hat. In his last touch of time and creativity, B. J. used a string and medium-sized hoop to recreate the drawstring that is attached to Woody’s back. B. J. finds pride in his recreation of the character's costumes. He shared that he has also recreated Mr. Clean, Lumiere from *Beauty and The Beast*, and the genie from *Aladdin*. B. J. 's attention to detail in replicating these costumes displays the time he spends and his ability to transform regular clothes through different materials.

Give me Your Time and Money: The True Cost of Good Drag

Creating costumes and buying make-up inherently equates a performer’s ability to have good drag with the ability to spend money. Kings spend money on creating a costume and make-up but rarely make the money back. Ryder Long, a drag king who hosts Ladies’ Night, explained,

I learned a long time ago that if you're in this for money, you're never going to get back what you put into drag. Because this shit is expensive. Between traveling, make-up, hair stuff, costumes, rhinestones, shoes, luggage, everything. By the time you get through all that- I may have made 20% of what I spent in the last ten years in money

Many kings do not make back the amount of money they spend on their drag. However, in order to be seen as good at drag, the kings who perform at Rainbow Bar feel pressured to wear make-up and make fancy expensive costumes.

Willy explains what kings are expected to do at Rainbow:
We actually take pictures of our costumes every show. So, we wear four costumes and take pictures of each costume, every show so that the next week we don't wear the same costume. We're not supposed to wear the same costume within the same month for two months. We have to make new costumes once a month, twice a month, depending. So that's every two weeks, two costumes. But when you have a full-time job and kids and fifty other things going on, it can be hard.

Willy highlights the conflicts that come with costuming when you have a full-time job or family responsibility on top of drag. For many performers, they do not have the time to go shopping for outfits and materials. Additionally, performers often do not have the money to get materials for their costume every two weeks. The drag kings in my study either hold a full-time job or two jobs and have families but are still expected to costume for the Thursday night show. The kings perceive their drag as good because they are committing a lot of money and time after work to make them. Performers are expected to 1. Make the costume and 2. To make the costume in the hours they have off.

My data suggests that queens at Rainbow Bar also have a difficult time purchasing the materials they need for a costume. The amount of money for costuming takes its toll on queens who are attempting to recreate the drag that Rainbow Bar and RuPaul praise. Lezzy McGuire, an AFAB queen at Rainbow Bar, expresses how the expectation of costuming, especially made from RuPaul drag queens, affects her drag:

They [the audience] see all these RuPaul girls that have won and that have thousands of dollars to spend on their drag. It's really unfair. It's an unfair thing to live up to when you're a broke twenty-year-old trying to do drag with the leftover fifty bucks that you've been saving to make something vs. a Rainbow Girl who don't make a lot of their stuff and their hair is made for them and they spend a thousand dollars on a look.

Lezzy specifically highlights two different types of drag queens she is being compared to. First, she describes drag queens who have been on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. According to this reality show, the winning drag queen receives \$100,000 in a grand prize and a one-year supply of Anastasia Beverly Hills makeup, as well as opportunities to win high-end jewelry, wigs, or clothing. Queens throughout the season have the opportunity to win one of those prizes and book performances at bars with high paid booking fees simply due to the exposure given with the show. As Lezzy points out, this is a huge inequality for those who do not have the money like RuPaul's queens do.

Secondly, Lezzy discusses the differences between her and the Rainbow Girls at the bar she is working at. Rainbow Girls are drag queens who are employed by the bar. These queens host and perform in drag shows and brunches as well as other activities, such as bingo, at the other two locations Rainbow Bar owns. This means they are in drag and performing six days a week for the bar. Interviewees have disclosed that the Rainbow Girls are put on Rainbow Bar's payroll and paid hourly. Other performers, such as kings and AFAB queens that are not a part of Rainbow Girls are paid a booking fee for the night they perform as well as whatever tips they earn throughout the night. The difference in employee status continues the gender wage gap wherein women's and trans men's work is devalued and compensated less than that of cis-gendered men.

In the above quote, Lezzy perceives the issues she has when costuming because of

audience members' expectations of drag. Audience members see the queens who have the money to buy higher quality make-up, wigs, costumes, like RuPaul queens and Rainbow Girls, and then decide that is good drag. When a performer comes on stage who, as Lezzy states is, “trying to do drag with the left-over fifty bucks” they have, the audience does not deem their drag as good. This, in turn, lowers the performer's chances of making up the money it took to make their costume in the first place.

Throughout my interviews, drag performers talk about the financial expectation put on them. Liquor states, “You spend a lot of money, spend a lot of time making the costume. It's a lot of that. Then you're on stage in it for like three minutes and it's like I spent a hundred dollars on this outfit for three minutes.” Later, Liquor states, “I spend more money on drag than anything else in my life. I spend more money on drag than I do my fiancé and that's terrible.” Liquor describes that creating good drag can be expensive. However expensive, Ridgeville drag kings consider costuming as a part of good drag. One interviewee shared that, “If my costume is better than yours then obviously, you're doing something wrong.” Ridgeville kings and AFAB queens believe their time and money spent on make-up and costuming determines if they have good drag. By having good drag, kings and AFAB queens are able to book more shows to help them pay the costs of drag.

Effort Paves the Way: Competing Against Queens for Equality

Kings frequently expressed the importance of make-up and costumes because it helped cis-gendered drag queens see drag kings as good performers. Mason, describes what it was like at the beginning of his drag career:

They [drag queens] did not go, “oh yay.” They were very much like; we are trotting on their territory or that we were a joke. I think a lot of that came from the

lack of effort a lot of them [drag kings] put into it, with the jeans and the T-shirts. You can't expect a queen to come out with a giant headdress and stoned from head to toe and then you come out in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt looking the same way you do any other day and expect to get their respect. I think for me that was a big drive to do the costuming and try to figure out the make-up because I wanted their respect. I want to be an equal to them.

Mason highlights a standard set by drag queens that to do drag you must put on make-up and create the illusion of the opposite gender. He puts efforts into his costume through alterations, and he does not come out looking like he does on a regular day. Mason also points out the importance of recognition from the higher valued performer, a drag queen, by saying "I want to be an equal to them." If kings like Mason can put time and money into their appearance with make-up and costumes, they can begin to align themselves with the same status that drag queens have. Being equal to queens is important to Ridgeville kings because the equivalent status can bring economic and social advantages. Kings like Mason can perform more with a higher booking fee and can be more recognizable in Ridgeville.

Kings must impress audience members through their make-up, costuming, and physical performance to be considered good drag. At Rainbow Bar, before a king steps out on stage, they feel they must have on make-up and a costume to be considered up to par with the queens. However, kings discussed how they felt only drag kings were expected to enhance their physical performance to receive the same amount of attention from audience members as they give the queens. Liquor explained how he has to do more when he gets on stage,

Drag queens could literally go walk on stage and walk around and make bank because of TV, social media and society. I have to work my butt off when I go on stage. I have to dance more than I've ever danced in my life and I might get not even a third of the reaction as a drag queen.

Liquor highlights the discrepancy in performance value from audience members. Ridgeville kings perceive audience members as already determining drag queens to have good drag. Kings,

like Liquor, must go the extra mile to get a reaction from the audience.

Ryder revealed his excitement when he receives appreciation from the audience, specifically from the cis-gender gay men in the audience:

I always get excited if I am doing a show and the gay men come in and they tip me. I'm like, "wow job well done, job well done". That's how I am going to gauge, because they are hard to impress. They are hard to impress. They are the good old fashion American gay men. They are hard to impress. I'm like bitch I'm doing every dance up here, what do you want?

Ryder wants to impress "the good old fashion American gay men" that are hard to impress. In the above quote, Ryder is referring to the men who consider the cis men who perform as drag queens as the better drag performer. He implies that these men always react, and tip drag queens and rarely react or tip him. These men would probably be the audience members that Liquor describes who make the drag queens "make bank" with little work. When Ryder says, "I always get excited if I am doing a show and the gay men come in and they tip me. I'm like, 'wow job well done,'" he is indicating that his efforts of putting in the time and money to wear make-up and a costume are what the gay men in the audience are applauding.

Oftentimes, drag kings will be creative by creating characters like the ones B. J. Max replicates to wow an audience. A king who performs characters is often defined throughout my interviews as a creative king who is assumed to have good drag. A creative king has to take the time to create their character. This gives a creative king the ability to achieve greater recognition from audience members. Creative kings are dubbed as being able to do anything with their drag. A common example given by participants was Landon Cider. Landon does characters often while he is performing. One interviewee mentions a time when Landon judged a USofA pageant costumed as Jesus,

He had the crown of thorns, he had a beard, he even had on Jesus flip-flops. I

remember when they called my name, I turned around and he stood above the table with his arms raised. He was like I've always wanted a judge as Jesus.

Another mentions how during one drag show Landon performed as Peter Pan then came back on stage and performed as the Grandfather from *The Munster*. The creativity in these examples comes down to the characters he chose. These characters are not common and showcase Landon's ability to do anything. B. J. Max describes Landon as "a chameleon... You can toss something at him, and he'd be able to do it. There's not anything he can't do."

Grind and Work on It: Bootstrapping Ideology Amongst Kings

Throughout the interviews, kings express the amount of time and energy they have to invest in order to create their opportunities and to be considered having good drag. Even though drag is a hot commodity in Ridgeville, drag kings are less likely to get booked than queens. Al Johnson describes calling clubs, passing out flyers, and talking about drag kings to convince bar owners to book them on their stage,

I've been asked, "Al, you're always booking the kings and the divas (AFAB Queen)". Like, yeah, cause the drag queens can go anywhere. If you decided today to be a drag queen, you could get booked somewhere in this town immediately. Immediately. It's going to take a king or diva awhile to get a spot. You could even be a bad drag queen and probably get you a spot.

Mason remembers working for free at a bar and eventually conducting a walkout with other kings due to the lack of pay and recognition.

The owners there would not pay us. They wouldn't want to pay us anything. We worked for free and we worked for tips and that was it. They all [other kings at the bar] came to me as their show director, [and said] on principle, we don't care if it's five dollars we just want to be recognized. We're bringing in a crowd and we're doing our job and we want to be appreciated for that.

Mason and Al describe the difficulties of getting booked and paid. Ridgeville kings feel as though they are forced to have a strong work ambition to get booked and paid because a queen,

even if they are bad, can get booked immediately.

The process to get booked at a bar can take a king many years. Ryder told me about how he finally booked a Friday night at Rainbow Bar:

It took me seven years to get a Friday night booking at Rainbow. Seven years, while working on three different casts. I got a bunch of Wednesday night bookings, college night, but like Friday and Saturday, cream of the crop, those are the bookings you really want. I have had more opportunities lately, but I spent four years never saying no.

In order to keep his weekly booking at Rainbow Bar's Ladies' night Ryder travels from two states away three weeks out of the month. When I asked him why he does this, Ryder responded,

The owners of Rainbow are such good guys. Oh my god they're such good guys! I've been one of their kings. I've been on all their cast except for Rainbow Girls of course, because I'm not a Rainbow girl. But they have given me tons of opportunity, I make that drive for them.

Even though Ryder discusses his seven-year struggle to get a Friday night booking at Rainbow Bar, he still praises the bar owners because they give him other performance jobs, like a Wednesday night booking.

Ryder's comment suggests that to get the "cream of the crop" Friday night booking, it is his responsibility to make it happen. The importance of a Friday night booking is due to the financial benefit and social benefit. In Ridgeville, the likelihood of someone going to a bar on Wednesday night is very slim, especially to see a drag performance. Due to the night being college night, the targeted audience would be students from college campuses located throughout the city. The low attendance would result in Ryder not getting a high booking fee and not making a lot of tips. On a Friday and Saturday night, people are more likely to go out to Rainbow Bar and spend money on the performers. Additionally, due to Ridgeville's tourism those who perform on Friday and Saturday are more likely to have a bigger audience due to the tourists that have

arrived for the weekend. For Ryder, it is not the bar owner's responsibility to give him a Friday nightspot. Ryder suggests that it is a king's responsibility to work hard and not say no as a way to eventually get a good booking night.

Kings express the expectation of work ambition when they talk about their frustrations with new kings performing in Ridgeville. Veteran drag kings are frustrated with new kings due to their lack of ambition because as Mason states, "we have to hold ourselves even higher to be able to be considered equal." Even though Rainbow Bar has a show regularly with drag kings on it, opportunities are still limited. Recall that several kings mentioned they believe that drag queens, even those who do "bad drag," can get booked more easily than kings. As a result, kings like Mason and Ryder feel as though they have to put in more effort than queens to find work which causes the time and struggle to be valued and accepted as the standard.

New drag kings are assumed to not "have the same hunger" because they do not feel like they have to work hard for opportunities. The expectation that kings must have a strong work ethic can be seen through Ryder's statement here:

I'm so sick of hearing people bitch that they're not getting opportunities when they can have those opportunities. They just have to put their nose down and fucking grind. Grind and work on it. There are too many people pointing the finger about why they don't have opportunities. Make your opportunities.

Kings like Ryder value their drag based on their ability to make opportunities. Even though new kings may be seeing the inequalities and flawed system at Rainbow Bar, like only queens being employees or feeling as though they have to work harder than queens to get booked for a regular night, complaining about it is not going to make the king's drag considered as good as queens. It is suggested that seasoned kings like Ryder and Mason understand that they cannot attack the organization of drag and must define their ability to do drag well based on the time and energy

they spend creating opportunities for themselves.

Kings in Ridgeville do not have the same success as queens, and this shapes the way they define good drag for themselves and other kings. If a king puts time and money into their make-up and costuming their drag is good. If a king puts effort into their physical performance on stage their drag is good. And lastly, if a king puts time and struggles into getting themselves booked and seen, their drag is good. Ridgeville drag kings feel as though emphasizing make-up, costuming, and work ethic helps them gain a similar status of Ridgeville queens. If kings received the same status, they could have similar opportunities to earn money and gain a larger social status. Kings feel that they are viewed by audience members and bar owners as inferior to queens unless they put in the effort with their make-up, costumes, physical performance, and work ethic.

IV. WHO CAN HAVE THE BEST DRAG?

In Ridgeville, the best drag performers are decided by bar owners and audience members through a performer's physical body underneath the drag. Drag kings are not considered to have the best drag because they are women or transgender men underneath their drag. In this chapter, I examine how the best drag is determined by drag performers, audience members and bar owners, the criticisms that trans drag kings and AFAB (assigned female at birth) queens receive because of their bodies, how drag queens benefit from the gendered hierarchy through their sexual performances and comedic jokes, and trans drag kings efforts to combat the hierarchy. At the end of this chapter I find that drag kings, and AFAB queens are not able to be considered the best drag because their bodies are not highly valued in the cis-normative gender hierarchy that Rainbow Bar produces.

It's a Cis-Man's World: Which Body Has the Best Drag?

On a national level, *RuPaul's Drag Race* makes and secures a platform for cis-gay men to be seen and recognized. RuPaul, a cis-gay man, only casts cis-gay men who are drag queens on his show. There have been a couple of performers who have come out as trans while on the show, or after, however, none of them have made it to the finale. One of the ways RuPaul reflects and acknowledges its cis-gendered gay man audience is through the 'pit-crew'. The 'pit-crew' is a group of usually five men who bring out props for RuPaul when there are challenges

and act as stagehands on the show. Sometimes members of the ‘pit-crew’ are used as props themselves, in acting or modeling challenges. The ‘pit-crew’ is made up of men who all have shredded muscles, including a six-pack and very low body fat. To accentuate this, the members of the ‘pit-crew’ often only wear banana hammock underwear. Typically, when the ‘pit-crew’ comes out, contestants sexualize these men by making suggestive sounds and flirtatious one-liners. RuPaul is creating a cis-gendered space for gay men on and off the show, by casting cis-gay men who are drag queens performing femininity and casting the ‘pit-crew’ as masculine.

At the local level, at Rainbow Bar, the owners and managers are cis-gendered gay men, the drag performers employed by the bar are cis-gendered gay men, and the primary target audience is cis-gendered gay men because of it. The cis-gay men who own the bar and who are in the audience help maintain the national drag culture, set by RuPaul. Jack and Ted are the owners of Rainbow bar and are two cis-gay men. Lezzy, an AFAB queen, describes Jack and Ted as “pillars in the community. Jack and Ted [the owners], they're affiliated with the private board, and they're affiliated with the Ridgeville government. They're at the tipity top because they're fucking rich white dudes.” They own two other bars that are known for their drag performances; however, Rainbow Bar is the only place that allows drag kings on stage regularly. Despite this, drag queens seem to be most highly valued.

An example of this is how the bar promotes “Rainbow Girls.” The bar hangs framed pictures of each Rainbow Girl on the walls at the bar’s entrance including Rainbow Girls who have been on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. These Rainbow Girls help the bar get national recognition and allow the bar to frequently book other drag queens who have been on RuPaul for prime Friday and Saturday night bookings. Rainbow Bar as Lezzy puts it “has become the Disney

World of drag.” Lezzy is referring to the number of people who come to see drag at Rainbow Bar and the number of drag shows Rainbow Bar has. Rainbow Bar has a drag show six nights a week throughout their three different locations. Aside from Ladies’ night, the only drag performers audience members will see are the Rainbow Girls. Jack and Ted own bars that employ cis-gendered gay men as drag queens to entertain the cis-gay men in the audience who, in turn, reward the drag queens and the bar owners by tipping and spending money at the bar. The cis-gendered men seem to place higher value on a man’s body and a man’s work, and as a result, the gender hierarchy continues. As a result, queens who are cis men are seen as doing the best drag.

In my study, performers believe that audience members also help create and maintain a gendered hierarchy when they tip drag queens more than kings, and when they cheer louder for queens. One of my interviewees Ryder Long, a drag king who performs at Rainbow Bar, sums it up best by stating, “our whole community, LGBTQ, all of that, is ruled by the white queer man.” Al Johnson, echoes Ryder by saying, “well, they’re men. So, they want drag queens.” Emotionless she continued, “we hate that it’s that way, but we know it is that way.” Al and Ryder suggest cis-gay men are tipping queens more than kings. In his interview, Liquor Good echoed Ryder and Al’s suggestion, “Drag queens could literally go walk on stage and walk around and make bank.” The suggestion is corroborated throughout my fieldnotes. On nights of the drag show I noticed more queens than kings receiving more tips from cis-gendered gay men.

Cis-gay men could be giving drag queens more money because cis-gay men have more access to wealth than cis-gendered lesbians. Financially, cis-gendered men are paid more, are more likely to have higher positions in a job and are more likely to continue working regardless

of family responsibilities (Hultin and Szulkin, 2003). Solomon, Ronthblum, and Balsam (2005) found in the state of Vermont, gay men in and out of civil unions made on average making \$145,014 dollars per year compared to the \$110,251 dollars per year that lesbians in and out of civil unions make (Solomon et. al, 2005:566-569).

Queens could be making bank because of the preference cis-gay men in the audience may demonstrate towards other cis-gay men. Cis-gay men might be able to identify with the assumed cis-gay men underneath the drag and are more likely to tip the queens as a result, regardless of what the queens do. In this way, queens benefit and remain superior due to their assumed gendered body matching with cis-gendered gay men in the audience, which in turn leads to higher tips and more money to invest in their drag.

It is in these complicated ways that Rainbow Bar operates as a cis-gendered hierarchy that seems to situate cis-gay men in a superior position as performers and workers. Drag queens may be seen as having the best drag because they are men underneath the drag, while kings are read as inferior because they are assumed to be women. Mason Daniels, a trans king, expressed with frustration, “it’s a big picture as the whole men to women. The same way a woman gets paid less to do the same fucking job. A drag king will not be as good because he’s a ‘woman’.”

Gendered Bodies, Sexualization and Comedy in Drag

Drag queens can sexualize and make fun of their gendered drag body, a woman, and the physical body, a man, underneath when they do drag. Throughout my observations, queens would perform to sexual songs in revealing clothes to accentuate their alluded woman body. Additionally, queens often make references to their penises which causes the audience to laugh. For example, I witnessed DeVine dangling a microphone between her legs to imitate her penis

size which got a big laugh from the audience. However, when I would witness kings referencing their breasts or flat chest the audience did not laugh as hard. My findings suggest that drag queens who are cis-gendered men have a greater ability to sexualize both their physical body underneath the drag and their alluded physical body on stage.

During my field observations, I found that cis-gendered men who perform as drag queens receive praise and tips from the audience, especially when sexualizing their drag body. Queens wear costumes to show off long legs, a cinched waist, and a smooth pelvis. The costumes brought the audience's attention to the alluded feminine figure in a sexualized way. For example, one night I watched DeVine as she performed,

The moment she stepped out there was a loud roar from the crowd. I saw Hudson Mac [a local king] wolf whistle as DeVine started to perform. DeVine had on a black lace corset over a matching black leotard which created a small waist. The costume was paired with leather high heeled boots and a long blonde wig. DeVine received a lot of tips from people throughout her performance. I noticed Hudson put a dollar on the flat bill of his hat and watched DeVine pick it up with her teeth while the crowd screamed in response.

DeVine sexualizes the drag body of a woman by accentuating a cis-normative "womanly" figure. She does this by wearing a leotard which shows off a smooth groin to allude to having a vagina which is achieved by tuckingⁱⁱ. The leotard and heels accentuate her legs and thighs. Lastly, the corset DeVine uses helps create an hour-glass figure. Throughout my observations, I noticed a lot of performers wearing corsets. Corsets help push the breastplateⁱⁱⁱ upward to create the illusion of having big breasts. DeVine emphasizes the sexualized physical body associated with cis-gendered women throughout her performance. The crowd's reaction and Hudson's reaction signal to DeVine that the sexualization of a woman's body was praised and good.

Queens use music to sexualize the body. My observations show cis-gendered men who perform as queens choosing songs that discuss women's sexuality and desire for men. The

choice of the song helps create the heteronormative image of the sexy straight woman on stage. During my time at Rainbow Bar, I watched queens perform to songs like Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda," Christina Aguilera's "Candy Man," and Natalia Kills' "Problem." The songs themselves discuss heteronormative sexual relationships. For example, "Problem" has the lyric, "My hips rocking, as we keep lip-locking, got the neighbors screaming even louder," while "Candy Man" says, "He's a one-stop-shop, makes my cherry pop," and finally "Anaconda" states, "This dude named Michael used to ride motorcycles, dick bigger than a tower, I aint' talking about Eiffels."

Queens who use sexual songs in their performance are praised by audience members through cheers and compliments. DeVine throughout my observations would choose sexual songs and outfits to perform to. One night, I watched as she performed a cover of "Wicked Games" by Chris Isaak. The cover was slowed down and had a female vocalist that gave it a seducing sound. DeVine appeared on stage and the audience cheered. She was wearing a mesh, see-through leotard with flashy sequins all over it. Sequins covered her pelvis area, up the sides of her stomach and over her breastplate. DeVine's leotard, however, had a strip of see-through material that trailed up the middle of her stomach into her cleavage which enhanced her feminine performance. When DeVine began to catwalk down the stage, the woman next to me said, "God damn." Jokingly, I asked if the woman had a crush on her, to which she responded, "Yes, she's gorgeous." Throughout the performance, DeVine would position herself on the back wall of the stage with her arms above her head and one leg hiked up on the wall spread open. Posing this way showed off DeVine's figure to the crowd. The woman noted at the end of DeVine's performance that she was in love with her.

During this performance, DeVine is benefiting from the sexualization of a woman's body and her physical performance. DeVine is using a rendition of a song that creates a hazy and sultry performance through its heavy base and female vocals. DeVine's costume is one that shows off the figure of a sexualized woman's body. Moreover, DeVine uses her physical performance to enhance the sexualized body by posing and dancing against the wall. The posing puts her drag body, which is associated with women, on display to be looked at and sexualized by the audience. The sexualization of DeVine's performance of a woman's body is praised by audience members through cheering, clapping, or comments such as "God damn," "She's gorgeous," and "I think I'm in love." The woman who made the comments is placing value on DeVine's drag body and affirming to DeVine that her drag is the best. The woman highlights that the value of queens goes beyond their physical body underneath the drag and is also placed on queens' performance of femininity portrayed on stage and their ability to look sexy.

Kings are able to sexualize their drag bodies in performances as well. In step with queens, many kings choose songs with sexual undertones such as, "Wiggle" by Jason Derulo, Bruno Mars's "Versace on the Floor," and "DJ Got Us Falling in Love" by Usher. One night, Mr. Troy John Max, picked sexual songs that enhanced their sexualized physical performance of masculinity.

Mr. Troy John Max stepped out on stage as Chris Brown's "Fuck You Back to Sleep" began to play. As the song implies, Troy was way more sexual in his performance than other kings. Throughout his performance, he grinded his hips in the air and thrust them to the beat as much as he could. I noticed however that this made the women in the audience cheer and seem more interested in his performance. At one point, before Troy accepts a tip, he lays on his stomach on the stage and grinds his hips to imitate grinding on someone.

In Troy's performance, he sexualizes the cis-gendered body of a man by choosing a song that describes a heterosexual relationship. Troy also sexualizes his body through his physical

performance. Dance moves such as grinding, or thrusting is a common way for kings to sexualize their performance. Audience members cheer for these displays of physical sexualization of men's bodies. Kings who sexualize their drag bodies are praised by audience members through tips and cheering.

Similarly, AFAB queens sexualize their drag bodies throughout their performance. One night, Lezzy McGuire strutted out on stage to Billy Elish's "Bad Guy." The crowd cheered for the song and Lezzy began to lip-synch. While performing, I watched as Lezzy started to receive tips from audience members. I remembered seeing her perform at previous shows but noticed that this performance was more sexual than the others. At one point during the song, Lezzy accepted a tip and rubbed the dollar on her clit. The audience screamed and cheered for her as she cat-walked back down the stage. In this performance, Lezzy was sexualizing her drag body, a woman, on stage through her physical actions. The crowd cheered as Lezzy used the dollar bill to rub her clit. Lezzy's sexual action reflects to the audience the sexualized gender she is portraying on stage. Lezzy is sexualizing a body part associated with cis-gendered women. Calling attention to the clit, gets a cheer from the crowd because Lezzy is sexualizing the correct gendered body on stage.

While kings and queens are able to sexualize their drag bodies, only cis-gendered men who perform as drag queens are able to use song choice, costume and performance to make fun of women's sexuality. Ivy Mist, a new queen to Rainbow Bar, began her performance to the song "MILF (Mom I'd Like to Fuck) \$." She appeared in a tattered robe and a white tank top that said, "world's best mom." Ivy seemed to be wearing a fake pregnancy belly underneath the top to appear as though she is a pregnant mother. She had a fake cigarette in her mouth that she

appeared to be smoking as she stepped out on stage. Audience members laughed at the juxtaposition of Ivy's shirt and her appearance. Halfway through, Ivy walked to the right side of the stage to collect a tip, but she looked as though she was suffering. After a few exaggerated facial expressions, which got a laugh from the crowd, Ivy got on her knees and "gave birth." She pulled out from her fake pregnant stomach four baby dolls that were attached by strings to somewhere inside her costume. The crowd laughed and cheered as Ivy finished her performance while holding all four babies.

Fergie, writer of "M.I.L.F. \$" has gone on record stating that the purpose of the song, and music video was to empower women. "M.I.L.F. \$" highlights the empowerment of women's sexuality as a sexual being, as well as their ability to be a mother, or a woman with a career. For example, in the music video for "M.I.L.F. \$", there are overt sexual innuendos like a dominatrix schoolteacher. In this scene, the class is made up of only men who are wearing letterman jackets, indicating they are on a sports team. In Fergie's argument, the dominatrix schoolteacher is empowered by wielding her sexuality through the over sexualization of the hot teacher fantasy, and by covertly being a working mother who can be sexy. Fergie is still abiding by heteronormative society by showcasing a narrative that her importance is based on her ability to be sexualized by the male gaze. As a result, empowerment comes from taking ownership over *how* the woman will be objectified, rather than *if* she will be objectified. The message and image of "M.I.L.F. \$" is still reliant on men finding women sexually attractive based on physical features regardless of its empowerment.

The imagery of Ivy's performance uses women's sexuality and levels of attraction for comedic effect, not empowerment. Ivy depicts an unattractive woman through the depiction of a

disheveled pregnant woman. The drag performance seems to un-do the intentional empowerment message of the song by implying that having a pregnant body is not attractive. Ivy accomplishes this by using props, like a cigarette and a tattered robe, to imply the imagery of lower-class women. The tattered robe implies that the woman does not have money to fix or buy a new robe. The cigarette in the mouth implies a narrative that the woman does not care about the baby/babies' health or her own. Oftentimes this imagery is used when depicting a white lower/working class woman. The crowd could be laughing at Ivy for multiple reasons. The crowd could be laughing because the mother Ivy is portraying is not what people typically think of when they picture a mother. The cigarette and tattered robe imply that the woman accidentally got pregnant rather than wanting to get pregnant. The audience could be laughing at the "World's Best Mom" shirt and Ivy's less than motherly character. Lastly, the audience could be laughing because they understand that Ivy is showing how funny a pregnant body can be.

Ivy is showing the audience that only certain types of women are attractive. Women who are wealthy, in shape, and are not pregnant are the most attractive. Ivy's performance suggests that women who become pregnant, even if they are the most attractive women, are not attractive anymore. Only when women work out after pregnancy to lose weight can they become attractive again. Through Ivy's performance, the cis-gendered man underneath the drag is showing and telling the audience that the woman's body is not attractive unless it is sexually attractive as well as showing how "trashy" it is to be a working-class mom and have a pregnant body. My data suggest that queens who sexualize their bodies to create the illusion of a sexy woman on stage are the best drag performers because the woman's body in society is sexualized.

My observations also suggest that cis-gendered men who perform as drag queens are

praised for making fun of their anatomical body underneath in a sexual way. Throughout my time at Rainbow Bar, drag queens often referred to their own body parts that are associated with men or features like a lower voice for comedic effect while in drag. DeVine used this tactic frequently while hosting on stage.

After DeVine's first performance, she came back out on stage with a microphone. The DJ noted that DeVine would be the host tonight. DeVine began by saying into the microphone "Sup" in a very deep voice, which made myself and the audience laugh. Later in the bit, DeVine asked "Who's here celebrating some bullshit?". A man cheers at a table in front of the stage which DeVine noticed. She then looks at him and to says "Sup" five times to get the man's attention. However, each time she says "Sup" her voice gets an octave deeper. She then says deeply says, "Sup bro. Are you celebrating a birthday, circumcision?" To this the bar laughs.

In this excerpt from my field notes, DeVine is using a gendered feature to get the audience to laugh. On stage DeVine is dressed and looks to have the body associated with a woman, therefore when DeVine speaks in a deeper voice that is associated with a man whatever is said automatically becomes comical. This is because the gender illusion is broken. DeVine makes the audience laugh because she seemingly appears to be a woman on stage but uses a feature of her body, her voice, that is associated with a man. The deep voice reminds the audience that the body underneath the drag does not align with the gendered body being performed.

Queens who reference parts of their physical body often get a bigger laugh than kings who refer to their own physical body. For example, in another hosting performance, DeVine is with B. J. Max, a cis woman drag king. The pair address a group that B. J. assumes is a bachelorette party. The group noted that they were in fact, not a bachelorette party. B. J. replies, "I should have known because there's not a giant penis around." Quickly, DeVine says, "Honey, there is a penis around." The audience laughs at DeVine's joke. After this comment, B. J. banter, "There's probably balls around too." B. J.'s joke gets a few chuckles from the audience.

DeVine shifts the conversation and states how she collects her tips with her balls. B. J. tries to follow by saying, “The difference between a king and queen is mine’s tucked behind my armpits,” referring to taping his breasts under his armpits to get a flat chest. The crowd stayed quiet, until DeVine said, “I just let mine hang” and proceeded to sing “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” in a deep voice. DeVine uses B. J. 's comment about a giant penis to highlight her anatomical body underneath the drag. She does so by letting everyone know there is a penis around, it’s just on the stage. The comment, “Honey, there is a penis around” is coded to remind B. J. and everyone in the audience that DeVine has a penis underneath the drag. DeVine’s joke works because there is a shared assumption that a drag queen is a cis-gendered man underneath and therefore has a penis. The joke lands with the audience which then sets up the rest of the conversation to 1. Allow DeVine to have the best drag, 2. Reinforce the notion that drag queens are cis-gendered men and kings are cis-gendered women and 3. To remind everyone that a penis is better than a vagina.

The rest of the conversation between B. J. and DeVine revolves around DeVine’s anatomical body. B. J. keeps up the banter by saying, “there’s probably balls around too” which doesn’t get too much noise from the audience. However, DeVine’s second joke, “that she catches her tips with her balls,” gets a huge laugh. The joke is humorous because according to DeVine’s physical drag performance, DeVine is a woman, and should not have balls. The joke reminds everyone that men have penises and balls while women have breasts and vaginas. In this image, it is alluded that while DeVine is getting tipped and valued for her womanly performance, she enacts manliness by catching the tips with her balls. Later, DeVine finishes her jokes by stating that she, “just lets hers hang,” insinuating that when in drag, DeVine does not tuck her penis to

create the illusion of a vagina. The joke is elevated when DeVine sings in a deep voice “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” because it is understood that DeVine is actually a man underneath the drag who has a large penis which is funny but also seen as valuable—a feature any “real man” would want to have.. The joke is especially funny if the penis is swinging low between her legs while performing as a woman on stage. DeVine comes out of the conversation with the most laughs which signals to B. J. that she has the better drag.

Kings are unable to sexualize their physical body underneath the drag for comedic effect. Throughout the conversation, B. J. makes comments in an effort to keep up with DeVine’s jokes with little to no reaction from the crowd. In my observation, I note how B. J. states, “there’s probably balls around too” to match DeVine’s comment, “Honey, there is a penis around.” However, B. J. does not get the same amount of crowd response as DeVine does. Later B. J. tries to keep up with DeVine’s jokes by describing his anatomical body, woman’s body, in the same way DeVine does, “The difference between a king and queen is mine’s tucked behind my armpits” referring to taping his breasts under his armpit. However, remarking on the anatomical body of a woman underneath the drag does not get as big a laugh as DeVine’s remarks do. The fight for comedic effect with DeVine suggests that having anatomically body parts associated with a woman, such as breasts, are not as funny or as valuable as a penis.

The banter between B. J. and DeVine indicates that kings must have the anatomical body associated with a cis-gendered woman, while a queen must have the anatomical body associated with a cis-gendered man. B. J. states, “the difference between a king and queen is mine’s tucked behind my armpit.” B. J. is referring to the expected female body of a king by referring to tucking their breasts. DeVine comments after, “I just let mine hang,” referring to her penis that is

expected underneath the drag. Due to the jokes, B. J. and DeVine make about the bodies underneath the drag, it is also suggested that only cis-gendered women who perform as kings and cis-gendered men who perform as queens can effectively make jokes about their bodies. In the table below, I summarized each performer's ability to use their bodies for sex appeal or comedic effect. Drag queens who are cis-gendered men can use their drag body and anatomical body for sex appeal and comedic effect. AFAB queens can use their drag body and anatomical body only for sex appeal. Drag kings who are cis-gendered women and trans men can only use their drag body for sex appeal.

Table 2: Use of Bodies for Sex Appeal of Comedic Effect

	Drag Queen		Drag King	
Drag Body	Woman	Woman	Man	Man
Used for Sex Appeal	X	X	X	X
Used for Comedic Effect	X			
Anatomical Body	Cis-Gendered Man	Cis-Gendered Woman	Cis-Gendered Woman	Trans Man
Used for Sex Appeal	X	X		
Used for Comedic Effect	X			

*Trans queens are not accounted for because my sample does not have any Trans queens.

At Rainbow Bar, drag queens who are cis men are considered to have the best drag because they can sexualize both their drag body and their physical body. Mason Daniels, a trans king, stated, “You automatically lose points because you used to be a girl or you’re just a girl. We don’t get the same respect; the whole answer is because we either are or used to be women.” As a result, drag queens who are cis-gendered men receive praise from the audience and are considered to have the best drag. It is important to address that my data do not include any

transgender women who are drag queens. I am thus unable to account for their experience.

However, throughout my interviews, trans women who perform drag were never brought up. The lack of conversation around trans women who are drag queens may indicate that they are at the bottom of this hierarchy.

“You’re Just a Man in Make-up”: Criticisms of Trans, Non-Binary and Cis-gendered Bodies in Drag

Trans kings and AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth) queens are often criticized and questioned about their bodies underneath the drag by other drag performers, audience members, and bar owners. Ultimately, the gendered hierarchy of drag affects trans drag kings as well as the performances of AFAB queens and their ability to be considered a part of the best drag due to their physical bodies.

Ryder, a trans man, expresses his frustration with cis-gay men on stage either in drag or in the drag audience who criticize his ability to be a drag king based on his transition. He explained,

Since I have been in transition, and especially since top surgery I have gotten a lot of harsh feedback on ‘well you’re not a drag king, you’re just a man in make-up’. There’s no difference now. There’s no illusion.

Ryder addresses how the physical change of his body is what caused the criticism. Before transitioning Ryder had the assumed gendered body associated with drag kings, the physical body affiliated with a woman, even if his gender identity did not align with it. After top surgery, Ryder no longer has the assumed gendered body associated with drag kings because he physically altered his chest to resemble the physical chest of an assumed man. This change in the physical body causes critiques because the appropriate and assumed the physical body of a drag king is associated with the assumed body of a cis-gendered woman. Ryder does not have to use

makeup or a binder to create the illusion of a flat chest, which causes audience members and sometimes other drag performers to think of him as just “a man in make-up.”

B. J., a cis-gendered woman, who performs as a king at Rainbow Bar appears to be one of Ryder’s critics. B. J. reflected to me how Ridgeville drag culture has changed,

We were big when we first started out with just drag kings, in general, when we had the Ladies’ Night at Rainbow. There were two other bars before Rainbow Bar that had them [kings]. Then it’s like the transgender wave of drag kings also took off here. I mean my cast currently right now-- For a long time, I was the only one [who was cis-gender] and usually [there are] only two of us that are not transgender that are drag kings.

B. J. specifies the “transgender wave of drag kings” as an important shift in the timeline of Ridgeville drag. She appears to do this in a nostalgic way in which one time period was better than the other. The times when an individual could assume that a drag king’s physical body underneath the drag is that of a cis-gendered woman.

Later in the interview B. J. stated,

It’s just that a lot of the drag in Ridgeville has gone to being trans men doing drag and the original-- not the original way, that’s a bad way to say it, the old, the actual transformation, the male illusion that is part of it, has very few of us that are still [doing it].

B. J. differentiates herself from transgender kings by discussing male illusion. According to B. J., male illusion is the goal of being a drag king. If the assumed gendered body underneath the drag is associated with the body of a cis-woman half of the job is done. The best way to do drag as a king, for B. J., is the act of transforming the performer’s cis-gendered woman body into the illusion of a cis-gendered man’s body. Even though B. J. catches herself, by saying “the original—not the original way, that’s a bad way to say it,” she still alludes to there being two different ways to be a drag king, deeming one of them more authentic than the other.

B. J. and Ryder both highlight an important area of the body, the chest, that is highly

gendered and sexualized and thus used as an indicator for determining the best kind of drag performer. For B. J., the chest becomes central in male illusion when she says, “Ridgeville has gone to being trans men doing drag ... the male illusion that is part of it, has very few of us that are still [doing it].” For Ryder, the chest is mentioned when he discusses getting top surgery which resulted in criticisms like, “you are just a man in make-up.” Though the chest is brought up in two different ways, both of these kings make the chest a prime indicator of the cis-gendered woman body that is assumed to be under the drag of a king.

It is suggested by both B. J. and Ryder that breasts determine whether your drag is the best and thus valued as a king. Breasts are highly gendered, sexualized, and associated with women because of our cis-normative culture that conflates sex and gender. The anatomical reproductive genitalia and secondary sex characteristics, that are deemed the female sex— a vagina, and breasts—are used to determine gender. The heteronormative logic would mean that if a person has the anatomy of the female sex, then the person has the gender of a woman. As a result, drag performers often focus on the chest and genitals to signal to the audience what gender they are performing on stage.

A drag king can be subject to critique when the king does not have the assumed woman’s body underneath their drag because they do not have to hide their chest. Kings who have a gendered body that is associated with their drag, cis-gendered woman, use make-up and different techniques to create the image of a flat chest. A cis-gendered woman will use a binder and make-up as a way to hide their breasts and create a chest that is associated with the chest of a cis-gendered man’s. A trans drag king who already has a flat chest is critiqued because they are seen by cis-gendered kings as not creating a male illusion. For example, Ryder does not have breasts

due to his gender confirmation surgery and has a chest that is associated with a man's body.

Ryder does not have to create the illusion of a flat chest for his drag, as a result, he is critiqued and is thought as not doing drag "the original way."

Trans kings are not the only performers subject to critique based on differences from their assumed gendered bodies. Lezzy McGuire, an AFAB queen in my study, frequently highlighted the criticism she receives as a cis-gendered drag queen. She expressed frustration as she recalled a time in which the owner of the bar questioned her drag.

The owner of the bar, I'm still working with, which is a whole other story, told me in a meeting that he just couldn't, he just couldn't fathom how I could be a drag queen. Just couldn't. He was so sincere about it. Looked me dead in the eyes and said I just don't see how you can be a drag queen.

One of the owners of Rainbow Bar, Jack, a cis-gendered gay man, discusses how he does not understand how Lezzy can be a drag queen. Jack's confusion is due to his belief that only cis-gendered men can be authentic drag queens. Jack is exhibiting the idea that in order to be a queen or a king, the performer must have a certain assumed gendered body underneath the drag. In this case, Lezzy has a gendered body associated with a woman, which is the same gender she performs on stage. For Jack, this causes confusion because he is determining authentic drag performers through the assumed gendered body underneath the drag. According to Jack, for Lezzy to be a true drag queen, Lezzy must be a cis-gendered man because a cis-gendered man has to transform the body to look like the assumed body of a woman.

Despite this critique, Lezzy described how she does transform herself when performing.

Lezzy described her drag,

When I started drag, I wanted to really be retro-y, vintage classic lady, which I still very much like, not as much as I used to, but I pull it out and it always goes over well. It's like one of the like genres of drag I can usually nail is the vintage classic look.

As a result, Lezzy always pays a lot of attention to her eye make-up. She usually has thick black winged eyeliner that goes across each of her eyelids. She also covers her eyebrows to redraw them to perfection. Her drag mother, DeVine who is on the cast as a Rainbow Girl with the bar, taught her how to look in drag. Lezzy shared with me that at first, she became “a mini DeVine.” Lezzy leaned on her theater degree and YouTube tutorials to begin constructing her own drag persona, while DeVine helped to teach her about drag at Rainbow Bar. Even though Lezzy became the same type of drag queen as DeVine, for onlookers like Jack, DeVine is valued more higher and is seen as doing authentic drag because DeVine has the body of a cis-gendered man while Lezzy is a cis-gendered woman.

Moreover, Lezzy described how her drag is moved into a different category than a drag queen in drag pageants.

I mean I don't think that AFAB queens get a fair shake of things. And that's not because they're not talented or not capable... When I competed for Exodus and again, not to boast. This is not to boast, it's just to say about the numbers. I competed for Exodus, I scored sixty points higher than the high scoring contestants. Which was the winning queen. Why wasn't I able to compete with that person? Because obviously, based on their scores, I was there. Same categories, across the board, just different divisions. I don't think that it's fair. I don't want to say it's fair. I don't think it preaches the story of acceptance and diversity that we all as an LGBTQ+ community demand from everyone else in the world. We demand equality and respect and yet we're in our community we're too busy dividing each other up based on fucking assigned genitalia. Like, really?

Before describing what Lezzy addresses in this quote, it is beneficial to discuss the importance of pageants for AFAB performers and drag kings. A drag pageant allows a performer to gain a title to associate with their drag. For example, a king could win the title “Mr. Ridgeville” meaning they have won “drag king of the year” in the city. For trans kings and AFAB queens, pageants can give the performer a level of legitimacy and recognition that their drag is authentic. Pageants can have titles that are city-sanctioned, state-sanctioned, or regionally sanctioned. Depending on

the pageant and sanction, a performer could obtain various levels of prestige for their drag. Lezzy explained that because a pageant can give a performer a high volume of prestige, some will “couch surf” without a place to live but still pay to be a part of a pageant.

Table 3: The Organization of Bodies in USofA Drag

Pageant Title	Anatomical Body Associated with the Title
Drag Queen	
Miss Gay USofA	Biological Male
USofA Diva	Biological Female
Drag King	
Mister Gay USofA	Biological Female
Mr. USofA	Biological Male

Most pageants are created with similar categories to the USofA pageant. In the USofA pageantry system, there are nine competitions or divisions a drag performer can enter. Four of the categories are entitled “Miss Gay USofA.” The category “Miss Gay USofA” describes the participants as biological males. These categories would be for drag queens who have the physical body associated with a man under their drag. Two categories are entitled “Mister USofA” which are described for biological females. These categories would account for drag kings who have the physical body of a woman under their drag. Two categories are called “Mr. USofA” which is for biological males, cis-gendered men performing as drag kings. Lastly, the USofA pageant has one category entitled “USofA Diva” which describes the performers as biological females. Table three describes the category title and who can be a part of that category. Lezzy would receive the title of “diva” instead of a drag queen.

In the pageantry system, AFAB queens are more likely to be in a separate category away from cis-gendered men who perform the same type of drag. Trans kings do not have to be separated in the competition regardless of their gender identity or body. The category that trans

men would be designated to would be Mister USofA because they were assigned female at birth even if the kings have gone through gender confirmation surgery. Similarly to Lezzy, cis-gendered men who perform as drag kings would be separated into the category of Mr. USofA, where they cannot compete with other kings. In most pageantry systems, performers who are cis-gender and who are performing drag of that gender are separated from their fellow kings and queens.

In the above quote, Lezzy notes that she was not able to compete with cis-gendered men who perform as drag queens based on her genitalia. Instead, Lezzy can only compete with drag queens who are like her. However, in her division, Lezzy scored higher than the winner of the drag queen division. Regardless of the scores, Lezzy is not able to compete with the drag queen division, because the categories designate her to a diva, not a drag queen category. In this way, the pageant world is also operating on the assumption that to be an authentic drag queen you must have the gendered body associated with a man. Performers who do not have the appropriate body cannot be labeled or compete as a queen. Even though Lezzy identifies as a drag queen, she is unable to compete with other drag queens due to her body underneath her drag.

Additionally, earlier in the interview Lezzy states that for a long time, “the only option that you had as an AFAB artist in Ridgeville was to go and do a pageant and succeed. That gave you some clout.” If Lezzy could have competed with the winner of the drag queen division, Lezzy could have won the overall title associated with her drag. The title would have allowed for Lezzy to have a cash prize, as well as future bookings as the titleholder. However, because Lezzy was only able to compete in a diva category, she is only given a title that distinguishes her from other drag queens based on her genitalia. Even though Lezzy scored “sixty points higher” than

the winning drag queen, she is not able to compete with them. Lezzy, an AFAB queen, is separated and kept from being the best drag performer. Lezzy's experience with the pageantry system suggests that the best drag queens are cis-gendered men.

An Entertainer is an Entertainer: Trans and Non-Binary Kings' Gender-Blind Rhetoric

Throughout my interviews, trans and non-binary drag kings describe themselves as entertainers and state that the purpose of drag is to entertain. Sir. Ving Looks told me, "At the end of the day no matter what you put on or what you put on stage, it should be entertaining on some level." For Sir. Ving Looks, "It's all about entertaining the people that come to see you, because [if not], then what are you doing?" Trans and non-binary kings in my study are able to deflect the criticisms of their drag by designating their drag purpose to be an entertainer instead of a male illusionist. In doing so, trans and non-binary kings seem to separate themselves from the gendered hierarchy by defining themselves as drag entertainers instead of drag kings.

During my interviews, trans kings shared that the audience is important in maintaining the king's purpose and determining the king's success. Ryder, in his interview, describes the audience and why he should be entertaining.

You're [the performer] coming to a bar to do a job, where you're entertaining somebody who's had a really hard day, or they had a great day, or they have whatever day. But when they walk through that door and they pay their money at the door they're coming in to see a show.

Ryder implies that as a drag king, your job is to entertain the people who have paid to come and see the show. The audience is then used to determine if 1.) Audience members had a good time and 2.) If the king was entertaining. Later he clarified with me that if the crowd was clapping and dancing, then he knows they enjoyed it. Mason Daniels echoes the point by saying,

If they seem like they're enjoying it then no matter if I hate it, I feel like I did my job because my job is to entertain at the end of the day. So, if I feel like they are

entertained then I've done what I needed to do.

Mason describes that kings who entertain the crowd have done a good job whether they like the performance or not. If the crowd is entertained, trans kings like Mason and Ryder do not have to worry about audience members thinking they are the best drag performer because they aren't drag performers, they are entertainers. The emphasis on entertaining the crowd could be for financial benefit. Even though kings like Ryder say, "I could give a fuck less if you tip me," the crowd is more likely to tip if they find a performer entertaining. Kings who develop a reputation as a great entertainer are more likely to get booked at bars. Even if this is true, for trans kings like Mason and Ryder, if the crowd is entertained, they do not have to worry about being the best drag performer because they perceive the best drag performers as being entertainers.

According to trans and non-binary kings, if a performer is worried about their title or label, then they are not being a proper entertainer. Willy, a non-binary king brassily told me:

Part of the issue that I think some people have is you're worried more about the labels than you are about what you're doing as an entertainer. Kings on the other hand, we're kings or boys and we're fine with that. We're cool with what we're being called because we don't care.

Willy discusses how it doesn't matter what kings are called. Ultimately, they are entertainers. However, Willy only refers to two categories, kings and boys. For trans kings or non-binary kings, there is no negative consequence for being referred to as a king or boy. If a drag king is referred to as a king, the performer is validated for their drag. If a king is referred to as a boy, the king is also validated for their drag because they have successfully created a male illusion. Moreover, if the king is called a boy and is a trans man, the king is then validated in their gender identity. Willy is not worried about what label they are called because the label that is associated with their drag is either a king or a boy. The kings are "cool with that" because no matter the

name, their drag, or gender identity is validated. Willy assigns negative attributes to performers that are worried about what they are called. These performers are not focused on being entertaining, which according to Willy should be their priority.

Ryder illuminates why trans and non-binary kings may get upset with performers that worry about what they are called. In his interview with me he shared his frustrations:

What is drag really? [people say] Oh, well it's an impersonation. Yeah, it started that way but what is it now? It's great costumes, great music and your ability to perform that song. That's all it should be about. It's too fucking political. It's fucking drag... It's just drag, why are you upset? Put your outfit on, go on stage, go do your song.

For Ryder, other drag performers and audience members who view and label drag as impersonation belittles the drag he does. Ryder is a trans man who performs on stage as a man. There is no impersonation of gender because Ryder is a man. How a drag performer labels themselves becomes a point of contention for trans kings. For Ryder, drag is “an entertainer on stage wearing a costume lip-synching to a song.” Through this definition, Ryder can overlook the critique against his gendered body and place value on having a great costume, great music, and an ability to perform.

In the quote above, Ryder also assigns negative attributes to performers who cannot overlook what people label them. Following Ryder's “too political” statement he says “why are you upset? Put your outfit on, go on stage, go do your song.” It is suggested that Ryder is describing a specific performer that is “too political.” Before they discuss labels, Willy and Ryder describe AFAB queens. Both quotes suggest that AFAB queens who care about what they are labeled have worse drag than them. The AFAB queen's drag is worse because to Willy and Ryder they are more worried about their title than their performance. If the AFAB queen is not worried about their performance then the AFAB queen is not being entertaining, which for trans

and non-binary kings is the whole point of drag. Willy states that being worried about your label is bad and Ryder seems to underline that performers who are worried about labels are “too political” which is also bad. Willy and Ryder do not care about their label and are therefore better than AFAB queens because as Ryder puts it, “an entertainer is an entertainer is an entertainer.”

Ryder and Willy neglect to acknowledge that the three AFAB drag queens in my study do not have the freedom to be called a queen. The majority of kings at Rainbow Bar are trans men, who are labeled by other drag performers, audience members, and the bar owners as drag kings. However, the majority of drag queens at Rainbow Bar are cis-men who are recognized by other drag performers, audience members, and the bar owners as drag queens. AFAB queens like Lezzy McGuire, MiMi Larue, and Al Johnson are referred to by some drag performers and audience members as either a diva or AFAB queen which distinguishes and separates them from a drag queen. As a result of the separation, AFAB queens are seen to have worse drag than drag queens who are cis-gendered men. As we saw earlier with Lezzy’s experience, one of the owners of Rainbow Bar could not “fathom” how she could be a drag queen. The separation of labels negatively impacts AFAB queens’ drag. If an AFAB queen can be called a drag queen, their status as a drag performer may be elevated because of the label.

Trans and non-binary kings in my study seem to use the language of an entertainer as a way to ignore the audience’s and other kings’ and queens’ judgment of their drag. The king refers to himself as an entertainer so that if at the end of their performance the crowd was entertained, then his drag is valued. The king’s drag is judged based on his entertainment value, not by the gendered body underneath. The label of the entertainer allows for the trans king to ignore the

gendered hierarchy that states cis-gendered performers are good, and queens who are cis-gendered as queens are the best. Trans and non-binary kings can say that their drag is the best because they are the best entertainers.

V. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Throughout the last ten years, drag has become a popular form of entertainment. *RuPaul's Drag Race* has pushed drag to the forefront of popular culture and out of the shared LGBTQ social scene. Queens like Aurora Sexton, Trixie Mattel, and Bianca Del Rio are known throughout the nation due to their success on the show. However, no one knows the name Landon Cider, a drag king who won a similar drag reality competition.

The art of drag has had a long and unique history, however, drag queens have always been in the forefront. In my study, I set out to explore the experience of drag kings because I wondered why kings were not given the same type of recognition and value as queens. In Ridgeville, I began going to drag shows to watch kings perform and observe how they did their drag and how audience members interacted with them. Wanting to know more, I set up interviews with the kings I had seen and began hearing their stories.

Drag kings in Ridgeville are operating under a cis-normative system of drag. In this system, queens are performing a heightened femininity that values beauty and is assumed to be a cis-gendered man underneath the drag. Kings are performing sexualized masculinity to relate to and compete with the queens. For kings, the assumed body underneath the drag is a cis-gendered woman. My findings suggest that drag performers who are cis-gendered are considered to be the most legitimate drag performers. And a cis-gendered man who performs as a queen is seen as doing the best drag. The other performers, trans and non-binary kings, and AFAB queens are considered inferior. Trans kings and AFAB (assigned female at birth) queens are criticized by

other drag performers, audience members, and bar owners due to their lack of gender illusion that is expected to be there.

As a result, drag kings put in significant time, money, and skill into their make-up and costumes for the stage. They often transform “street clothes” with rhinestones, patterned fabric, or paint to elevate the clothes to compete with drag queens. The amount of time put into this process allows the king to be taken more seriously on stage by audience members and other performers. Kings also put time and effort into the king's performance on stage. The king must work hard to dance and interact with the crowd in order to get tips and validation. Lastly, Ridgeville kings spoke about work ambition as a way to have good drag and be seen as equal to queens.

Previous research finds that drag can reconstruct gender binaries and heteronormativity, however, Ridgeville drag tells a different story (Rogers, 2018; Levitt et al., 2018; Shikjee and Stroud, 2017; Rupp et al., 2010; Shapiro, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2002; Maltz, 1998). Though my study has its limitations, Ridgeville drag allows for on-lookers and performers to question the way drag is organized and valued in bars. I was only able to interview six drag kings and three AFAB queens. However, all participants described the inequality between kings and queens, criticisms of performers’ bodies in relation to their drag, and the amount of effort it took for a performer to achieve good drag. What these kings disclosed suggest that Rainbow Bar is a gendered organization that cisgenders reality. The queens are expected to be men performing as glamorous women on stage and these men are considered to have the best drag because they are men underneath the drag. Kings are expected to be women, which makes them inferior to queens. For kings and queens who do not represent these cis-normative standards, they are left to

put in more time, more money, more ambition to become as good as a cis-gendered queens. Moreover, my findings indicate that an LGBTQ workplace can be cis-gendered. The cis-gendering of reality in the workplace creates similar hiring practices, and workplace environments to Acker's gendered organization. Due to Rainbow Bar's cis-gendered reality, transgender performers and individuals are valued less than their cis-gendered counterparts. My study on drag illuminates the assumption that bar owners, audience members and even drag performers have about the physical body underneath the drag. Broadly this study helps push those who read it to think about identities that are taken for granted and assumed. What my interviewees shared and showed is that more conversation needs to be had about inequalities and oppression, even in a marginalized group like the LGBTQ community.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

Observation Template

Name of City Location:

Name of City Bar:

Time of Arrival and Departure:

Demographic Profile of Participants:

Physical Setting:

- What is the lay out of the bar?
- How big is the space between where the audience sits and where the stage is?
- What does the stage look like? Are there any props set up? Are the lights already on?
- What does the audience look like? What are the demographics?
- What does the audience look like before the show and after the show?
- Are there more people intermingling or is it sectioned off?

Drag King Performance:

- What clothing is the performer wearing?
- Are they using make-up?
- What song are they performing to? What is its genre?
- Is there a perceived type of masculinity they are performing? (Celebrity, Country, Rap/thug, Rocker ect.)
- Does the performer take up a lot of space on stage? Do they grab their crotch? Do they flex their muscles? Do they wink at audience members?
- Is the performer standing up right or slouching?
- Does the performer have props?
- Are they staying on the stage or leaving the stage to interact with audience members?
- Are they going to close audience members or making their way around the space?
- Are they only going up to audience members that have tips?
- Are they touching audience members in a sexual way before taking the tips?
- What are the specific ways that the performer interacts with audience members? Do they differ based off gender and race?

Audience engagement:

- Does the audience cheer when the performer is introduced?
- How much of the audience is paying attention to the performer?
- Are audience members smiling during the performance? Are they hollering and cheering the performer on?
- Are audience members not cheering?
- Are the audience members talking during the performance?

- Are there certain actions the performer does that makes the audience cheer?
- How many audience members are handing the performer tips?
- Are the audience members interacting with the performer through touch or sexual ways?
- How does audience members respond when a king interacts with them by touching or sexual ways?

Closing Notes:

- What was most surprising/puzzling about what I observed? Explain.
- If given the chance to ask audience members what would I ask them? What stood out to me that I would need more explanation for?
- What specific actions did I see that would be categorized as valuing the performer and performance or devaluing?

Appendix B

Introductory Script:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. This is a study that aims to look at what makes good drag. This interview is expected to take about one hour of your time and will be a conversation about how you got into drag, what you think makes drag good, and what you think about the drag community in Ridgeville. Just a reminder, your participation in this study is not mandatory, and you may withdraw from participating at any time. You are not required to answer any question(s) that you do not want to. There are no foreseeable risks or benefits to you that are associated with this study. I will be using fake names to keep your anonymity and other identifying information obtained during this interview confidential. If I publish research on this project, I will use fake names for both the bar and the individuals who have agreed to participate in the study. You are welcome to suggest your preferred fake name.

Are you 18 years of age or older?

Do I have your consent to be interviewed?

Do I have your consent to record this interview?

Drag History

1. Can you tell me a little about how you found out about drag and how you got into drag?
2. Can you tell me how you developed your drag persona?
 - Were there any performers you looked up to or people that influenced you?
 - Who or what influenced you to start drag?
 - Did you have a drag mentor? Can you tell me about that
 - What was learned about how to do drag well?
 - What did you learn to do and not to do?
3. Tell me about a drag queen performance that you really enjoyed? What was it like?
4. Tell me about a drag king performance that you really enjoyed? What was it like?
5. How are drag king and drag queen performances similar to you?
 - How are they different?
6. What advice might you give someone who is thinking about getting into drag kinging?

Performance at Rainbow

7. Can you tell me a little about your experience when performing at the Rainbow Bar? What does a typical night look like when you are performing?
8. When your set is over, what makes you feel like you gave a good show?
 - Are there specific cues you look for from the audience?
9. In your experience, what has been one of the best performances that you've had? Why do these performances stick out to you?
 - What has been the worst?

10. What kinds of criticism or feedback have you received about your drag?
Who did it come from and how did it make you feel?

11. Who are your favorite performers at Rainbow Bar (or elsewhere)? What do you like about their performances? What makes them “good”?

Ridgeville Drag Community

12. What’s been your experience with the drag community in Ridgeville?

13. At The Rainbow Bar, it seems kings and queens tip each other. Do you think my observations are right? Does this happen in other places you perform?

14. Recently, I was watching videos from RuPaul’s drag-con and noticed drag kings are rarely if ever, talked about. However, when I come to Ridgeville it seems like drag kings are really involved. Can you tell me more about the LGBTQ community here in Ridgeville and its relationship to drag kings specifically?

15. Why do you think there are so many people who don’t know that drag kings exist?

16. I notice a lot at the shows when the hosts come out and interact with the audience, there is an emphasis on groups, mostly women, that appear straight.

Is there any conversation backstage about who’s in the audience each night? If so, how do kings and queens talk about that? Plan to interact with the audience depending on who is there?

Can you tell me your experience with being a king in Ridgeville and whether tourism affects it?

17. Is there anything else you would like to add or you would like to say about something that I did not already ask you?

Closing Script: Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Your responses will be helpful for me as I continue to work on this research project. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about this interview or my research, please share these with me.

VITA

I am Maddie Shappley. I completed my Bachelor of Arts in Sociology at The University of Mississippi in May 2018. I will be receiving my Master of Arts in Sociology at The University of Mississippi in May 2020. My research interests include gender, LGBTQ+ identities, and popular culture.

ⁱ Rainbow Girls are drag queens who work for Rainbow Bar. They are given a wage from the bar for their drag because they perform drag for the bar six days out of the week.

ⁱⁱ Tucking is the act of putting a performer's penis between or behind their legs. The process gives the illusion that the performer does not have a penis.

ⁱⁱⁱ A breastplate is a silicone vest that has fake silicone breasts attached to it. The plate goes over a drag queen's chest to create the illusion of having breasts.