

University of Richmond

UR Scholarship Repository

Honors Theses

Student Research

2017

Bleaching: Hierarchy and Commercialization in Contemporary Queer Club Culture

Harry Hoke
University of Richmond

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/honors-theses>



Part of the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hoke, Harry, "Bleaching: Hierarchy and Commercialization in Contemporary Queer Club Culture" (2017).
Honors Theses. 997.

<https://scholarship.richmond.edu/honors-theses/997>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Bleaching:
Hierarchy and Commercialization in Contemporary Queer Club Culture
by
Harry Hoke

Honors Thesis
Submitted to
Department of Theatre and Dance
University of Richmond
Richmond, VA
April 27, 2017
Advisor: Dr. Dorothy Holland

Introduction

As a young scholar taking my first steps into the world of performance theory, this first work on the topic of nightlife culture is as much grounded in personal experience as scholarly discourse. It is as much a move to establish my own footing and thoughts about the culture I have found myself thrown into as it is an attempt to contribute to an ongoing scholarly conversation. I hope to reconcile the narrative that I was taught about queer nightlife: a place of liberation, versus the reality that I found: a place of hierarchy and rigid standards of conformity. In speculating about the potential causes of such a disparity, I hope to lay the foundation for research pathways as I age as a scholar and a queer human. This thesis is by no means an introspective or anecdotal journey, but rather a sketch of a trend that seems to mark the specific time at which I have come of age into the queer nightlife scene. I believe that this the optimal time in my life to embark on such a research journey, because it allows me to contextualize the experience of socialization into the gay nightlife scene and the queer nightlife scene with scholarly discourse. My hope is to lay a groundwork of assertions that I can build upon and push back against as I mature within the gay and queer communities, and eventually examine as a fully matured scholar. It is my hope that my critical documentation and scholarly contextualization of the process of my socialization will eventually be valuable to those wishing to build on this work.

The assertions of this work are rather broad: that there is a trend in a certain segment of queer nightlife towards hierarchy and commercialization, and that this may be a result of absorption of queerness into mainstream societal structures. As a first step in a research series, the purpose of this work is to establish that there is a trend in queer nightlife towards hierarchy and commercialization, and speculate about the potential consequences and manifestations of such a

change. By establishing the presence and potential manifestations/consequences of hierarchy and commercialization within queer club culture, it is my hope that future research questions and methods for examining how such changes are manifest will surface in the process of creating this work alongside my continued maturation within the nightlife scene.

Chapter One places an oral history of the 1990's club scene alongside ethnographic scholarship of NYC's largest clubs of the time period in order to establish a scholarly and anecdotal context for the utopian aspiration of queer nightlife. The first part of this chapter shows narratives surrounding 1990's queer nightlife, indicating a utopian, transcendent aspiration of the scene. The second section of Chapter One uses two performances: *Gay Shame* and *Dragula*, both created as responses to the pressure of contemporary queer nightlife, to explore reactions against contemporary nightlife that are in direct contrast to the scholarship surrounding earlier queer nightlife. By examining an oral history and ethnography of the nightclub scene preceding that of the contemporary era, the presence of hierarchy and commercialization in contemporary queer nightlife will be discussed.

Chapter Two explores a transition in queer aesthetics. It begins with a tracing of scholarship surrounding the definition and manifestation of camp. The chapter then moves into a discussion of the role of camp in drag, and how past scholarly notions of camp are eliminated in *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The chapter asserts that this specifically queer aesthetic is not present on the show to the extent that camp has traditionally been a necessary and important part of drag performance. The chapter closes by examining one performer on the show, Katya, and how her performance on *Drag Race* indicates a loss of camp in drag.

Chapter Three explores the potential consequences of these hierarchies and commercialization entering into nightlife, a place of queer pleasure. It uses the scholarship of

D'Emilio and Muñoz to examine the role of pleasure in allowing a specifically queer critique of social structures. The final chapter asserts that the seeping manner in which mainstream structures have entered into queer politics through pleasure has threatened the unique ability of the queer community to offer broad social critique. As evidence, the chapter uses the scholarship of Warner and Shepard, and their work on queer political protest performance, as indication of a change in the nature of queer social critique.

This work is meant to identify a trend and to speculate about its manifestations and consequences. It is not meant to imply that the assertions found within apply to the queer community in totality, but rather that a growing segment of the queer community has fallen prey to the seeping hierarchies and commercialization of mainstream society. This is meant to imply that there is a danger in the seeping to only a part of the queer community. A division within the community threatens its ability to put forward a single movement agenda or to critique social structures as a block. This seeping sterilization of nightlife may be the beginning of a loss of solidarity in the queer community, which is a threat to the community as a whole. Furthermore, in a claim that “the personal is a political,” a threat to the culture of queer nightlife is a threat to queerness as a means of political resistance.

Chapter 1: From the Disco Ball to the Corner Booth
Oral history, contemporary reactions, and nightlife teleology

Thoughts of queer clubbing in 1990's New York City bring up images of a throbbing mass of dancing club-goers, elaborate costumes, and so many drugs. Why then, is this kind of egalitarian experience that this scene is said to foster not what I discovered on my initial socialization into contemporary queer clubbing? In beginning this project of personal experience and scholarly discourse, it is important to note that my perceptions of club going based on what I knew of this earlier scene in no way prepared me for the cutthroat world in which I now find myself. This chapter represents an attempt to ground this feeling in an objective investigation of scholarship. This chapter will first present an oral history of the 1990's club scene through the lens of a single participant, with contextualization from Fiona Buckland's ethnography of the same club-scene, *Impossible Dance*. These narratives will focus on the transcendental experience of the nightclubs, their spatial organization, and the manner in which they fostered a collective consciousness. After presenting the oral history, this chapter will present reactions against hierarchy and commercialization present in the contemporary nightlife scene in two nightclub performance settings: *Gay Shame* by Duckie and *Dragula*, organized by the Boulet Brothers. The goal of this chapter is to assert that there has been a move towards greater commercialization and hierarchical organization within queer nightlife in recent years. The chapter will first present a narrative of queer nightlife in the 1990's, contextualized with the theory of Buckland. Through contemporary reactions against nightlife culture, the chapter will then assert a change in the nightlife landscape. The exact nature of a new nightlife structure cannot be determined without more intensive ethnographic research, but this chapter aims to point out teleology of

commercialization and increasingly hierarchical organization within queer nightlife over the past decade, culminating in the contemporary nightlife scene.

For this chapter, the narrative of the club scene in New York is from Johann Stegmeir, who moved to the city in 1992 at the age of 27 from Charlotte, North Carolina. He moved to New York with a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts/Theatre Communications Group to work in costume design, and he now works as a professor of costume design at the University of Richmond. He holds an MFA in costume design from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He admits that his clubbing was more sporadic than most, as he frequently travelled to work at theatres in other locales. Before moving to New York, he frequented the clubs of Charlotte, which according to him were “out of the way, skanky, really hidden from view places.” Upon moving to New York, he did not immediately become involved in the club scene, saying that it took more money and connections than one would have upon an immediate move to the city. Over time, he became more involved in the scene.

For the purposes of this chapter, the focus is on the large dance clubs, though Stegmeir lays out two scenes: what he calls the experimental downtown scene, which included shows like Foxy or the Cock, where drag queens or other performers would put on shows for an audience, versus the drug-infused bacchanals of clubs like Twilo, the Limelight (though this venue was smaller), and the Tunnel. In these clubs, one would be following the DJs: DJ Keoke, Junior Vasquez, and others who would spin at the large dance clubs and gather a following of club-goers that would follow them. These clubs often had large cover charges and lines to get in. One could bypass the line if they were on the guest list, and one could bypass security screening if they were VIP. According to Stegmeir, the VIP access was crucial to how the clubs functioned. With the ability to bypass security screening came the ability to insert drugs. Peter Gatién, the owner of many of

these clubs, would receive kickbacks from the drug companies in exchange for a way to sneak drugs into the building, and the infusion of these substances became a crucial part of the scene. The transcendental nature of the nightclub experience is the first factor that this section will explore.

“60% would be on ecstasy and 30% would be on old fashioned cocaine, and the rest of the people would just be drunk, so they were real bacchanals.” Other drugs that he mentions are ketamine (also known as special k, which extends the effects of ecstasy), molly, crystal meth, which he links in the gay community to providing AIDS patients with a feeling of greater energy, and heroin. Stegmeir believes that these drugs were an invaluable part of the large clubs, and gave more meaning especially to the light shows that allowed the club experience to become transcendent, with the light show, music, and drug infused dancing creating a new reality within the club.

Buckland has some input on this part of the experience, specifically relating to the role of music in the experience of clubbing. Just as Stegmeir emphasizes the importance of the DJ in controlling the choice of venue and the experience within, Buckland writes, “When I walk into a club, the elements are the same as every other club, but what orients me is not bricks and mortar, but the beat and the bodies, both fashioned by producers to produce certain effects” (66). The control of the DJ, as well as the effect of drugs on the environment of the club Buckland says contributes to the creation of a specifically queer temporality. In the club experience, time was not measured by the strict measures of the outside, but rather based on experiential factors within the club, a distinctly queer environment. In a sense, this environment queers temporality by rejecting strict time measures of the heterosexual world. She writes that:

Because there were no clocks or windows in clubs that measured the passing of time, the effect of drugs, music, and dance made the body the central reference point of another sense of time. This distorted sense of time was affected by the repetition of the beat, phrases, rhythms, breaks and by the movement. (80)

Both Buckland and Stegmeir discuss an altered conception of time. Buckland frequently references “club time: that temporal space with no clocks, measured by and through the body” (43). She goes on to acknowledge the role of drugs in creating this separate temporality, as they allowed users to stay awake and dancing into the morning and to midday. Stegmeir says that as the night progressed only the hardcore club goers would remain: “The music becomes less lyric, more instrumental, the lights get darker, until sort of the end. Then it becomes a flurry of light and positive sounds. And then you would walk outside and it would be morning and shocking.”

Stegmeir’s account hints at the conception of “club time” as outlined by Buckland. Both point a temporality measured not by clocks but by the body. When Stegmeir describes walking out and being shocked in the morning, he is pointing to an exit from standard temporality, into a new “club time.” Rather than leaving at designated times because they were watching a clock, the time was controlled by the club-going experience. For Stegmeir, he credits the DJ with changing the experience of lights and sounds to push the crowd towards leaving, while Buckland emphasizes along with this the role of the body under the influence of drugs as signaling the end of a club experience (43). Both acknowledge the shock of leaving the next day in light, with a re-entrance into standard temporality.

Buckland elaborates over the course of a chapter the specific ways in which music formed the backbone of the transcendental club experience. For Stegmeir, however, the emphasis seems to be on the drugs. Though he acknowledges at one point in the interview that there was one sober

party in New York (a club called Vinyl), saying that this proved the experience of the club could occur without mind-altering substances, he at many points in the interview outlines the ways in which drugs influenced the place of the club scene in everyday life. He references “suicide Tuesday” as the day on which one came to the deepest ‘low’ after a weekend on ecstasy, due to the physiological effects of the drug on a person’s brain. He goes on to say that the most drug-obsessed members of the club scene would stave off suicide Tuesday by doing Special K, though obviously this method is unsustainable because hallucinogenic drugs cease to work if they are taken too frequently. It could thus be stated that from a drug-use standpoint, that this rejection of outside temporal structures in favor of a new temporality governed by the body extended outside of the club to a larger transcendental experience during the week.

It is worth remembering at this point also that one of the most famous members of the 1990’s New York Club scene, Michael Alig, who Stegmeir mentioned at many points in our conversation, ultimately fell victim to drug use. The murder of Angel Melendez was directly related to the infusion of drugs around which the lives of the Club Kids were centered. Stegmeir states that he could not fully be a part of this scene because he had a career, but that there were always, he believes in any club scene not just that of the 1990s, those that lived for the clubs. He refers to this segment as “the fabulous” people, and categorizes them as younger members of the scene who live to go out, and make their living off of nightlife. The Club Kids, including Michael Alig and James St. James, would have fallen into this segment of people, given a cut of the door or the bar, or even direct payment, to show up for a night at the Limelight. Buckland refers to what she calls, “The Currency of Fabulousness” as one way in which social currency is obtained in the clubs, and as the goal of NYC clubbing in the 1990s (36). However, again she refers to these fabulous people with only brief mentions of drug culture. Stegmeir believes that

the drugs were more present in this part of the community because it was not sustainable for someone like him, with a career, to have an ecstasy low every Tuesday, or to stave off that low with Special K. This, though, is a special case, and for the most part Stegmeir acknowledges to a greater extent than the ethnography of Buckland the importance of drug culture in the creation of the club experience.

Club temporality is crucial to a conception of queer world-making. It signals an exit from a basic structure of standard heteronormative society: time, into a new temporality created from the queer experience. Buckland has presented the effect of the music, and physical tiring of the body, while still acknowledging the presence of drugs, as the essential ground on which the world within clubs was created through the establishment of a new temporality. Both her account and Stegmeir's account suggest a queering of structures of the outside world by creating an experience that blurs time and space into a communal and egalitarian experience based on feeling and pleasure. The experience of "club time" and queer temporality as evidenced in both the analyses of Buckland and Stegmeir is a crucial component of the transcendental experience of nightclubs of the time period, and the construction of a distinctly queer lifeworld through the rejection of time as an essential structure of heterosexual society.

We will now shift from a discussion of the transcendental experience through music and drugs to the spatial layout of clubs. As a point of transition, it is worth noting that these two factors are related. Stegmeir centralizes his drug reflections on the imagery of the disco ball. He says that the most coveted spot on the dance floor was directly under the disco ball. The light bouncing off the disco ball, as well as the electric lights that form a show throughout the night, he says were not only to feed off the experience created by the music, as Buckland refers to it, but also to enhance the effects of hallucinogenic drugs. Both of these factors: music created by

the DJ as well as ecstasy and other drugs, were essential in creating the transcendent experience of queer nightlife.

Moving past the influence of mind-altering substances and music on the experience of the club, another aspect of both Buckland and Stegmeir's account is the organization of a nightclub space. One central point made by Stegmeir is the divisions of patrons by various markers, including sexuality:

Something else at this big club, that heterosexuals and gays were self-segregated ... And the gays were the gay men were separated from the gay women. And there were less gay women in all of this. And always with your female friends of gay men. So groups of gay men always had a couple of straight females with them that would be in that part of the club. And then I would say that the DJs were actually playing for the gay people and that the events were actually created for the gay people and that the heterosexual people were just there as capitalism and a good time. But really separated, segregated, self-segregated.

Stegmeir's observations surrounding the spatial organization of clubs are mostly consistent with the report given by Buckland, but not entirely. Buckland refers to the nightclubs as being distinctly queer spaces. It is true, from Stegmeir's account, that the construction of a queer lifeworld as Buckland outlines it would have occurred in a distinctly queer setting, but it is worth noting that according to the account of Stegmeir, this occurred within the context of a larger moneymaking scheme that depended on the presence of heterosexual clientele. Furthermore, Stegmeir goes on refer to the presence of "bridge and tunnel" people, tourists from New Jersey

who could be recognized because of their differing clothing style and their early bedtime to get back to their homes before morning. This point thus seems worth noting: that the creation of a distinctly queer experience was dependent on self-segregation within the nightclubs from other groups, particularly on the basis of sexuality. In terms of the operation of the club from an economic standpoint, the patronage of non-queer groups in order to allow for the queer experience was essential. Within this larger idea of club economics fits the idea that both Stegmeir and Buckland touch on: that patronage to clubs required either money or connections. Though the atmosphere within the clubs may have existed in a more egalitarian manner, both entrance and the survival of clubs as an entity required money spent by both queer and heterosexual patrons.

Despite these spatial divisions, both Buckland and Stegmeir also discuss the importance of dance and body contact in the creation of a collective experience. Stegmeir states:

If you were in the gay men's section that there was a moment when you would be wearing your pants and shoes and nothing else because you would take all your clothes off. And because another thing that they controlled was, like you know, they would turn the air conditioners on and off so you'd get hot and you'd be dancing dancing dancing dancing and then your shirt comes off and everybody's shirt comes off and everybody is kind of sliming on everybody else because it's packed you know so it's not like you really have your own space.

Clothing indicates status, so despite a statement that "you tried to be cute and wear your little Dolce and Gabbana tank top," Stegmeir's account emphasizes a communal, egalitarian experience free of certain class markers. On the other hand, body revelation opens the door for

body fascism and beauty aristocracy, though from Stegmeir's account one would believe that the transcendental nature of the music, lights, and drugs would lessen this to a degree. It should also be noted that especially at this point, but also throughout his testimony, Stegmeir tends to point to the influence of the DJ or club owner in changing the behavior of the club patrons. He emphasizes the utility of being able to pull off a shirt easily within hot clubs, where the temperature was out of the patron's control. For Stegmeir, temperature is a way for the club owners to further influence the behavior of the patrons, this time in how they dress. He acknowledges that to some extent this egalitarian, collective experience was created by the club owners.

The dancing, 'sliming,' and closeness of bodies all play into the creation of a distinct world and experience through physicality. Buckland writes that,

In a queer lifeworld, participants felt joy and shared in the expression of a public knowledge. It was this experience that was valued. The choreography of participants in a queer dance club produced the effect of a mixed texture between individual and group kinespheres and desires and realities that were not homogenous or uncomplicated, not even open for experimentation all the time.

(110)

Both Buckland and Stegmeir emphasize the importance of the collective consciousness and individual world creation through physicality that the choreography of the dance floor allowed. However, both present a caveat for this group identity: the hierarchies of heteronormative, capitalist society did not disappear in the queer clubs. Rather, the same idea of self-segregation

allowed for these inequalities to be replicated across venues, even as they were negotiated to form a collective queer consciousness within individual clubs.

When asked about divisions within nightclubs, Stegmeir stated that, “The thing in New York is that you would pick what you wanted for your evening and you would go to that place. You know if you were wanting a leather experience you would specifically go to that type of establishment.” Buckland acknowledges that her utopian discussion of nightclubs is problematic because nightclubs did have divisions of class, race, and the patriarchy. She acknowledges that the scene of queer nightlife required the consistent navigation between feelings of alienation or belonging within particular spaces. Buckland offers several examples:

Many [queer clubs] have their own normativity: buff Chelsea boys may feel alienated at the East Village queer club Pyramid; white or black men with the “wrong” bodies may feel alienated at Octagon; bears may feel alienated at Twilo, and so on. (89)

Temporality, drugs, body, pleasure, and communal identity created an aspiration of Utopia despite social divisions. Although the notion of a utopian space was admittedly problematic, it was at least an acknowledged aspiration. In the words of a club kid on Phil Donahue, “This is a fantasy, we are all living our fantasy. This girl here, this is how she feels she should be, and this is how he feels he should be” (The Club Kids on Donahue: Part 1). This utopian aspiration was a hallmark of the queer club scene in the nineties. How has queer club culture changed since the nineties? How might those changes affect the creation of queer lifeworlds?

When asked about the ways in which the nightclubs have changed since his clubbing peak in the late nineties, Stegmeir offers the following observations: first, he points to the

unsustainability of drug use, in that the prolonged dependence on substances was bound to end eventually. Stegmeir also points to the regime of Rudy Giuliani, and the mayor's targeted attempts to shut down gay bars and gay gathering spaces. Indeed, Many scholars blame Giuliani's policies for the demise of queer club culture in New York. However, Stegmeir points out that the closings were targeted mostly at the smaller venues further downtown, where the ticket writing and police raids occurred, and didn't have the funds to pay off the cops. Stegmeir notes that the larger dance clubs were targeted by the federal DEA for drug trafficking or tax evasion, among other reasons. Stegmeir also notes that it is interesting that these larger clubs also catered to heterosexuals. A combination of economic interest and heterosexual patronage may have delayed their closure.

According to Stegmeir, the most important factor in the change of the queer club scene is the advent of "bottle service." He states that:

Bottle service has kind of killed the club scene in New York. That you don't go in and buy drinks, you go in and buy a bottle of liquor for several hundred dollars and it sits on a table and they give you ice and setups or whatever. But what that also does is it means you're not mingling with people, you're not meeting people. That you go in your clique and you stay with these people, and that before you would go with a group of people but it was more free-form so you would interact with other people and now I don't think that you do and it means that you have to have a big wad of cash to go out to have a drink. Yeah and so I don't think it's as fun but I think they earn a lot of money.

For Stegmeir, the central change in the club scene came from a change in the way club owners would structure clubs for their own economic purposes. When asked why the switch to bottle service happened, he offers this simple answer: “greed and elitism.” With bottle service, attending a club became more expensive, with those that could afford it clearly placing themselves at the top of a hierarchy. Additionally, club owners increased their profits. Money, rather than utopia became the new aspiration. Stegmeir continues to discuss the specific changes that bottle service brought:

You had to have a rich person in your group to buy a bottle, (a), first and foremost. And that, when you're in that dynamic that you're beholden to that person. So who's being entertained? And maybe the same thing could be said for who has the bag of cocaine or the bag of pills or whatever but it was all sort of loosey-goosey before. In that you were allowed to run away. And you know go dance with this person or that person or have this conversation or this experience.

There has been little scholarship on the advent of bottle service, but Stegmeir's account shows how it may have changed the structure of clubs in such a way that created a shift to hierarchy from within the community. Gay media is packed with evidence of hierarchy in nightclub culture, and subsequent reactions against the pressure it creates in the community. One need look no further see an illustration of this point than New York City pride. Floats full of Adonic men on corporate-sponsored floats not only emphasize privilege of certain gay men over others: white, monied, beautiful, but the corporate and economic benefit of embracing them.

In response to commercialization and hierarchy, the renowned Boulet Brothers created a different type of party, *Dragula*, which intentionally tries to undermine these trends. The Boulet

Brothers began their nightlife career in the nightclubs of New York City in the nineties before moving to Los Angeles following the closure of venues by Giuliani. The Boulet Brothers state that New York City nightlife “never recovered” from the regime of Giuliani in the 1990s. James St. James goes as far as to say, “What AIDS did in the 80s to creativity, I would honestly go as far as to say Giuliani did to New York in the 90’s” (Panel at DragCon). They have recently begun throwing a party known as *Dragula* that was created in response to this commercialized, highly competitive gay scene that sprang up after the fall of the clubs in the late nineties. “That’s our reaction to West Hollywood and what we experience.. you don’t want to let us in? We don’t want to sit with you anyways” (DragCon). *Dragula* will host themes like the “ugly ball,” where patrons are asked to look their worst, a response to the obsessiveness required to “look right” for a night out at a gay bar. In a drag competition show of the same name, the Boulet Brothers encourage contestants to perform unconventional tasks, and do things that foster discomfort. One challenge had drag queens mud wrestling, while in another a queen presented a look dressed as feces, miming defecation with chocolate syrup (*Dragula* Episode 3). The performances at *Dragula*, both as a nightclub and as a drag competition, demonstrate the reactions that have begun to form against a club scene entrenched with commercialization and hierarchy. When asked why they created *Dragula*, the pair responded:

We got to a point where it was just a business. People want money, when you make money that’s all they think about. And so the clubs start pressuring you, its money its numbers. *Dragula* was like can we just please put a stop on all this shit and just do exactly what we want to do? (DragCon)

They further preface this quote by saying that the reason *Dragula* has remained successful is the “good energy” surrounding the party, implying that the standard, commercialized scene of West Hollywood is surrounded by an energy that is more exuberant and less constrained.

This seems to be the hallmark of a change from an old currency of fabulousness¹ to a new currency based on a hierarchy that is more recognizable to a capitalist, heteronormative society, where body type, class, race, and factors that have been given value in mainstream society seem to have replaced fabulousness as the social currency required for entrance into the largest queer nightlife spaces. For example, the Boulet Brothers, with a reputation for “fabulousness” are kept out of West Hollywood gay clubs, forcing them to create a new party in reaction. Buckland claims that fabulousness fostered a distinctly queer social currency that provides context for the creation of a queer lifeworld (Buckland, 38). If it no longer has value in clubs in neighborhoods like West Hollywood, Chelsea, Soho, the Castro, and other traditionally gay neighborhoods, then this should be a cause for concern.

Another example of this trend is a London performance by Duckie entitled *Gay Shame* that critiques the hypocrisy of contemporary gay Pride, and the hierarchy/commercialization it embodies by offering a series of club nights that require patrons to “purchase” performances using pink currency earned by doing low-paid, menial tasks. Duckie co-creators Stephen Casson and Amy Lamé have stated that *Gay Shame* was meant to critique body fascism, materialism, superficiality, and the commercialization of Pride (Silverstone, 66). Catherine Silverstone goes on to contextualize *Gay Shame* further, stating:

As identities and communities start to solidify, they can be niche marketed, exemplified by the concurrent rise of the phenomenon of niche marketing

¹ Fabulousness can be defined as a mode of comportment that glorifies an ostentatious style of dress, manner of speaking, and behavioral extreme

alongside the emergence of social movements from the mid-1960s... The marketing and associated products in turn work to iterate and the calcify certain conceptions of identity to the necessary exclusion and marginalization of theirs, highlighted by the extent to which gay marketing has focused on what Peñaloza describes as ‘pervasive images of white, upper-middle class, “straight looking” people at the expense of those more distanced from and threatening to the mainstream, such as the poor, ethnic/racial/sexual minorities, drag queens, and butch lesbians. (67)

Silverstone notes that mainstream homosexual community has been influenced so strongly by the market forces of heteronormative capitalist society, and that it has marginalized minorities in the same way as mainstream society. In many ways, this recalls the analysis of Stegmeir and Buckland, who point to the perpetuation of marginalization within nightclubs. However, for Buckland this marginalization is something to be considered within the context of a space within which one can establish a unique identity and lifeworld. From the analysis of Silverstone, it seems as though *Gay Shame* critiques not only the perpetuation of marginalization, but also the privileging of a distinct identity created by niche marketing, and the establishment of a hierarchy based on proximity to that identity.

This shift in identity and increased hierarchy can be traced back to the institution of bottle service, Giuliani, and niche marketing. A landscape that centers on a single person – one that buys the bottle, is more susceptible to a privileging of a smaller group of people than one that allows for a more egalitarian arrangement. Furthermore, the closing of clubs and queer gathering spaces by Giuliani, causing a shift in group identity created not by collective gathering, but by marketing forces that promoted certain conceptions of gay identity while marginalizing others.

This led to a privileging of proximity to that single identity, and the creation of a hierarchy. Thus, the changes created by the institution of bottle service and the policies of the Giuliani administration may have expedited the problems against which *Gay Shame* and *Dragula* reacted.

A change in the aspiration of queer club culture is a change in the nature of queer world making. As hierarchy and commercialization is imposed on nightlife spaces, the freedom to shape queer identity shifts to a more restrictive, repressive environment. A change in nightlife signals a new type of aspiration, towards more heteronormative, capitalist ideals. This shift in aspiration should be a cause for alarm. Rather than aspiring to a world free of heteronormative, capitalist structures, the aspiration is to be allowed to succeed within them. Rather than aspiring for a new society, a shift in queer aspiration looks for acceptance and assimilation. Utopian aspirations are critical to the construction of queer social critiques, and a shift in queer club culture away from them signals a critical change in the construction of queer identity from a freedom to shape ones own world, to a more recognizable, repressive force of conformity.

Chapter 2: Mother Glam *RuPaul and the death of camp*

Esther Newton writes in *Mother Camp* (1972) that, “Drag and camp are the most representative and widely used symbols of homosexuality in the English speaking world” (100). How has hierarchy and commercialization seeped into queer aesthetics? “Camp” is a term whose definition has long been contested within queer scholarship as various writers have attempted to pin down an exact meaning or set of characteristics. So too has the relationship between camp and drag, two terms that tend to travel in the same scholarship surrounding queer cultural studies and queer aesthetics, been debated. This exploration will explore various conceptions of camp, as well as conceptions of the nature of camp in drag. This chapter aims to show how camp scholarship is incompatible with the way in which drag performance has been proliferated to the mainstream. Nowhere is contemporary mainstream drag performance more embodied than *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. The power of the show in introducing popular, mainstream media to drag performance and demystifying drag to mass populations is uncontested. There is value, however, in exploring the manner in which drag and camp, the two critical symbols of homosexuality, have become absorbed and altered by mainstream culture through the show. This chapter hopes to shed light on how mainstream hierarchies and commodification are perpetuated in contemporary queer drag performance, particularly as a result of *Drag Race*. This chapter will begin with a review of the most salient scholarship surrounding “camp” and its meaning in relation to drag performance. Subsequently, the chapter will assert that notions of camp found in this prior scholarship are antithetical to drag as constructed on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, demonstrating a change in notions of camp as drag is proliferated to the mainstream. This theory is backed up through the example of a contemporary celebrity drag queen: Katya. In order to

understand how notions of camp and drag have changed with the advent of the show, it is first important to survey salient notions or past scholarship surrounding camp.

Two scholars, Susan Sontag and Mark Booth, form a backdrop for an understanding of camp and its relation to drag performance. Susan Sontag in *Notes on Camp* (1964) gives an extensive list of characteristics that may be described as “camp.” She writes in the introduction that camp is a “sensitivity.” It is not so much a set of things that form the notion of camp, but rather a taste that allows for a decisive but broad inclusion of characteristics. Although her treatise of 58 characteristics has been criticized for being too broad, she does offer several themes that are particularly useful in the analysis of drag. First, one of her well cited assertions is that camp “sees everything in quotation marks,” that something is not just a lamp, but a “lamp.” In this way camp is a way of viewing objects in such a way that it pokes fun at how society has labeled it, versus what it actually is. Sontag asserts that the negotiation of what something appears to be, versus what it is (a “lamp” has all the characteristics of a lamp, and yet is problematized by quotation marks) is crucial to the camp sensibility.

She secondly points out an inherent darkness within camp. Camp negotiates the realm of the serious versus the humorous, as Sontag puts it, “a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious”(9). She also states that there is never tragedy within camp, but the negotiation of humor and seriousness is a crucial theme to pull from her observations. Third, visually, she asserts that camp removes the “good-bad” axis of artistic judgment (8), saying that it is a new set of standards around the “theatricalization of experience” and a sensibility of “failed seriousness.” Rather than existing along a good-bad axis, Sontag asserts that camp relishes in victory of rejecting this axis in favor of glorifying the aesthetic of that which cannot succeed on it, i.e. the kitsch, and the low culture. These elements

are only a part of Sontag's extensive treatise, but they are most salient in the building of an argument surrounding a change in the nature of traditionally campy environments, such as drag culture. As time has gone on, other scholars have criticized and built upon many of Sontag's notions.

Mark Booth, in *Campe-toi!* (1999) asserts that Sontag's list is excessive to the point that anything can be camp. He draws a distinction between that which is permanently part of the camp canon, and that which constitutes "camp fads" of those that are typically part of the camp-consuming audience. He eventually defines camp as, "presenting oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits" (69). To some extent, this definition encompasses much of what Sontag asserts, but in a much more concise manner.. His definition of camp encompasses not only the idea of kitsch and parody, but also Sontag's notion of rejection of the "good-bad" axis of aesthetic criticism. To be camp is to reject that something is "bad" by glorifying that which has been marginalized to a greater extent than it deserves. Booth builds on Sontag's definition to allow for a concise definition of camp that involves inherent rejection of that which "high art" would deem aesthetically pleasing. In its inherent contradictions, traditional conceptions of the camp aesthetic argue for a glorification of the marginalized. Building upon the work of Sontag and Booth, Esther Newton (1972) and Daniel Halperin (2014) focus on drag in queer club culture, and queer culture more broadly, and point to ways in which the camp aesthetic is embodied in drag performance.

In her drag ethnography, *Mother Camp*, Esther Newton builds on Sontag's conception of camp as created by an "in-group" who understands the importance of this certain mode of taste. Newton states that in order for something to be understood as "campy" it must have three central characteristics: incongruity, theatricality, and humor (Newton, 106). Newton's conception of

camp links these three characteristics to a form of resistance. She writes that to embrace camp as one's aesthetic is to accept and flaunt one's homosexuality, thus undercutting those that will not accept their identity due to stigma (Newton, 108).

As an extension of this embodiment of camp in homosexual men, both Daniel Halperin and Newton note that "camp" is a designation of a type of person. They point to a dynamic within gay male culture in which there are two categories of identity: the beautiful, and "the camp." Newton writes that,

The good party and the good drag show both ideally will feature beautiful young men and campy queens. In neither is it likely that the two virtues will be combined in the same person. The camp, both on and off stage, tends to be a person who is, by group criteria, less sexually attractive, whether by virtue of advancing age or fewer physical charms or, frequently, both. Whatever the camp's "objective" physical appearance, his most successful joke is on himself.
(Newton, cited in Halperin, 202)

Halperin builds on Newton's conception of beauty and camp to speculate about the reasons that this division may occur. He writes that if the beauty is absent, then a gathering of gay men would lose erotic interest. However, if the camp is missing:

The party becomes a relentlessly competitive struggle for the most attractive available partners, an exercise in mutual one-upmanship, an endless display of humorless butch theatrics, which takes place at everyone's expense and produces relentless posturing and suffocating seriousness (Halperin, 203).

When describing camp more broadly, Halperin emphasizes that camp is a reaction to the glorification of beauty within gay male eroticism, and beauty aristocracy in the gay male community. He writes that, “camp is about deflating pretension, dismantling hierarchy, and remembering that all queers are stigmatized and no one deserves the kind of dignity that comes at the expense of someone else’s shame” (207). This is in alignment with the Susan Sontag’s early conception of camp as an aesthetic choice that rejects a “good-bad axis.” Camp rejects this hierarchy by glorifying the bad, and in this way cutting those at the top of the chain down to size. Halperin also points to Booth’s later definition: “giving the marginal more recognition than the marginal deserves.” In other words, Halperin argues that camp forms a resistance to the rule of beauty and eroticism, which is inherently hierarchical, and thus is crucial to the dynamic of gay male community. Without both: the beauty and the camp, Halperin argues that the gay community would be unbearable.

Halperin and Newton’s conception of “camp” as playing a critical role within the gay male community also extends to the drag community. Each asserts that within drag performance the duality of beauty/camp is important to the overall function of the show. Newton makes clear that not all female impersonators fit into the “camp” aesthetic (104), but still ascribes the drag queen an extreme importance in homosexual subculture, saying that to be a drag queen is to embody the stigma of femininity which is placed on homosexual men (105), much in the same way that to embody the camp she calls an act of resistance. Though drag is not necessarily camp for Newton, both camp aesthetic and performance style are resistant to heteronormativity, and the two travel together. Halperin points to the division of the beauty and the camp in drag shows. He writes that after gay liberation, gayness was meant to coalesce into a single identity, but this

division remains seen in drag shows, which pair a campy drag queen with muscle boys (Halperin, 205-206).

The role of camp and drag, according to Halperin and Newton, is very close but not exactly the same. From Newton's perspective, the role of the drag queen and the role of the camp perform a similar function: that of resisting heteronormativity. Drag resists by performing femininity on a male body, while camp represents a taste that resists heteronormative hierarchies. Halperin melds the role of camp as resistance into the role of the Drag queen. He writes that drag is a perfect way to reconcile the poles of beauty and camp into a single figure. "It is through identification with a femininity that is at once glamorous and abject that gay men are able to meld upwardly mobile aesthetic aspiration with the ethical leveling of social distinctions." (Halperin, 211). Halperin's theorization of drag as the combination of these two poles of gay male society encompasses more fully a rationale for the obsession with tragic femininity that pervades cultural icons that make up gay culture, the primary subject of his work. However, in linking this pervasive polarity with drag culture he makes an assertion that is to some extent distinct from Newton's: that the particular performance of drag requires the combination of camp and beauty. Newton makes clear that drag and camp may be separated, though most of the time they are not, and depends on the individual performance. Though setting up these distinctions may seem arduous, they are useful in the next section as we explore how drag has grown to no longer fit within the definitions of both Halperin and Newton. So, keeping these differences in mind, and now having a fuller view of the interconnectedness and distinctions between the roles of camp and drag, we will now move into a discussion of how these definitions apply with the advent of new drag, popularized by RuPaul in *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

It is important to recognize first how iconoclastic the television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* has been in introducing large segments of America to queer culture and queer aesthetics. For the season 8 premiere, over a million viewers tuned in, representing a mix of both gay and straight viewership. The show has thus made great strides in increasing the accessibility of gay culture to populations that may not live in areas or situations that allow them to view drag performance or meet other members of the queer community. The show has demystified drag to the mainstream, allowing for increased tolerance.

Given the huge ratings and the acceptance of drag queens as celebrities within the larger (straight) culture, one might consider RuPaul's Drag Race as a step forward in gay liberation. However, I will assert in this chapter that the proliferation of drag to the mainstream has led to a change in the embodiment of camp in drag in such a way that it loses its resistance to heteronormativity. The celebrity status of queens on the show as well as the structure of the show as a reality competition have led to hierarchy and commercialization within the drag community in a similar manner to the club culture discussed in the last chapter. This chapter will examine how the embodiment of camp in drag has been altered with the creation of a new celebrity drag community and the structure of the show as a reality competition.

First, the conception of a drag queen as true "celebrity" is a new phenomenon. While some queens have retained a status as "icon," such as Divine or Lady Bunny, and Newton writes of more prestigious drag circuits than others, the notion of drag queens as true "celebrities" is a phenomenon only observed after the creation of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. This is true first due to the sheer number of viewers retained by the show. For the season 8 premiere, over a million viewers tuned in, representing a mix of both gay and straight viewership. There exists also a production group in New York and Los Angeles, *Producer Entertainment Group* that represents solely drag

queens that have obtained this kind of notoriety due to RuPaul. Their representation, though not entirely, is vastly made up of queens that gained recognition through success on the show. These queens are able to book international performances at large gay venues like London's *Heaven*, or smaller venues for queens less successful during their tenure on the show.

Anecdotally, while at a small gay bar in Panama City Beach, Florida, I saw a sign advertising a queen that had been eliminated in the one of first rounds of competition of *Drag Race*, Leila McQueen. Though I was informed by friends that she had "made a lot of progress" since the show, I was struck by how much easier it must have been for her to find work, despite being unsuccessful on the show, after gaining the coveted celebrity status given by simply appearing on *Drag Race*. This celebrity status and the subsequent insertion of commercialization relies on a hierarchy placed on drag, beginning with the hierarchy created on *Drag Race*, surrounding the constitution of "good" and "bad" drag performance.

Before discussing the ways in which this value-judgment of "good" versus "bad" drag is enacted on *Drag Race*, it seems important to assert the reasons why this type of judgment is inherently antithetical to the conception of drag as articulated by Newton and Halperin. Both theorizations of drag claim a crucial interconnectedness between Drag and Camp. Though Newton does not claim that camp is essential to drag performance (using the example of glamour female impersonators), she does claim that the two serve a similar function and in many cases occur in tandem. In short, the two are not meant to be kept completely separate. Halperin believes that the two are much more closely connected, asserting that the gay male obsession with the tragic female character, which he believes is encompassed in drag performance, is the manifestation of the two polarities of gay society: the beauty and the camp. For Halperin, the presence of camp as a role performed within gay communal gatherings (i.e. "the camp") is

inherently a part of all drag performance. Thus, both Halperin and Newton emphasize that there is an intense interconnectedness between camp and drag.

Halperin and Newton, as well as aesthetic scholars of camp more broadly (Sontag and Booth), note that camp is a variable that inherently rejects aesthetic judgments on an axis of good vs. bad. Sontag and Booth assert that camp occurs in the glorification of that which is not aesthetically pleasing, while Halperin asserts that the function of camp within gay society is the rejection of “beauty’s aristocracy.” Thus, to assert that there is a way of putting the camp aesthetic on an axis of “good to bad,” (where some campiness is “better” than other campiness) is antithetical to nearly all past scholarly conceptions of the role of camp. Camp as a way of glorifying the marginal and rejecting mainstream aesthetics cannot be held to a hierarchy of aesthetics in the same way that other aesthetic vocabularies can be. If anything, something should be “more campy” if it is “less good,” and as soon as a scale determines it as “good,” in any normative way, it should cease to be campy.

To bring this notion of camp and axes of value back to drag performance, it would seem that, in ranking queens from “good to bad” in the reality show structure of *Drag Race*, one is essentially removing the campiness from their performance. A queen that “succeeds” at drag on RuPaul would be the least campy of queens because she is no longer glorifying a marginalized aesthetic judgment. Whereas, Halperin insists that camp is a necessary function performed by a drag queen and thus impossible to separate. This suggests that in attaching a hierarchical, value based judgment to drag performance, one is doing something entirely antithetical to the performance style. In adding a value-based judgment, one removes the aesthetic rules that are meant to govern this style of performance, substituting them for non-campy, aristocratic notions of beauty. In this way, a “good-bad” hierarchy of drag performance, as enacted on *Drag Race*, is

antithetical to past notions of camp, and it puts the performers at risk of losing the essential function of their performance style, as campy, within the queer community.

How is the good/bad hierarchy constructed on *RuPaul's Drag Race*? A variety of factors are included in a performer's ability to achieve "good" drag. The most important of these is a queen's ability to perform a certain level of femininity. In a criticism of the first season of *Drag Race*, Eir-Anne Edgar argues that contestants on the show are encouraged to enact traditional notions of femininity in a way that removes the subversive nature of drag from the performance. Though she still uses terminology that supports a conception of "good" drag, she makes a clear point about the value of drag in challenging the formation of any single notion of gender, building on conceptions by Jack Halberstram, and his writing on *Drag Kings*. She argues that the kings of Halberstram give a drag performance that shows "layered" genders, without hiding the seams in the construction of the outward signs of a new gender over a differently sexed body.

The attention to 'layering'... exemplifies the performer's queerness: The individual is neither this nor that, but both; this layering collapses the constructedness of the gender binary into a wonderfully queer and messy reality... The performances on *Drag Race* rely upon seamlessness..

Edgar's conception of the importance of femininity in the judgments that occur on *Drag Race* holds traction especially in the first season of the show, the context in which she writes. An interesting facet of the show, as it has progressed, is the relative importance it has proscribed to various signs of femininity over others. Edgar writes about the importance of the "tuck" in *Drag Race*. Over all seasons, this has held true, as contestants who use a "meaty tuck" are penalized

during the judging. Furthermore, the show seems to have proscribed significance to the hourglass figure, the importance of “cinching” one’s waist, as well as adding padding. In *Season 6*, and even more notably in *All-Star’s Season 2*, Adore Delano was consistently penalized for refusing to cinch her waist. Though she eventually continued to the finale episode, she was forced to borrow a cincher from another contestant for the duration of the season in order to avoid harsh critiques from the judges for being “unpolished.” When she came back for *All Stars*, she refused to cinch, and she immediately received the same criticism. Adore ultimately left the show as a result of feeling that she was being held to a standard not consistent with the type of performance she wanted to do. In the reunion episode, when speaking about her exit, she makes a statement that may shed light on the impact of such aesthetic judgments on drag creativity:

I walked in a see how beautiful and statuesque like Detox and Roxxy looked and all just like fuck my outfits I got made for me like don’t even stand up to this man. And I didn’t prepare myself to bring myself back to that whole elimination process, the critiquing process, the goddamn runway (“Reunited”).

If drag is meant to incorporate rejection of aristocratic beauty, this notion is not evident in the reaction of Adore to entering into the environment of *Drag Race* a second time. The first time, after listening to the judges, she was able to create a drag character that fit the “beautiful and statuesque” mold that *Drag Race* requires. However, upon coming back with a character that did not cinch, and moving away from the aristocratic “beauty” that was demanded by other contestants and the standards of the show, she was penalized to the point of leaving, presumably from being held to standards that did not apply to her mode of performance. Her particular

rejection of conventional signifiers of femininity: i.e. refusal to “polish” her wigs and gowns to her utmost ability, or cinch her waist was penalized by the judges. However, *Drag Race* standards appear to encourage other displays of androgyny or gender layering.

Contestants on *Drag Race* frequently remove their wigs during performances, revealing the “layering” of genders that Edgar describes. Furthermore, certain types of “gender-fuck” looks are permitted, as long as they *do not signify masculine*, only androgynous. Sharon Needles, winner of Season 4, was known for creating “gender-fuck” looks. However, in all of her looks, she maintained the essential female form and tuck, and this brought her praise from the judges. Alaska Thunderfuck, winner of the *All Stars Season 2* competition (the season in which Adore walked off the show), is known for creating looks that border on the androgynous. However, due to her thin build, she is able to not cinch and still create looks that do not read as exclusively masculine or feminine, but rather as androgynous. In this way, a “good-bad” axis of drag is enacted on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*: this entails the rewarding of certain ways of non-layering gender signifiers along with the performance of certain non-negotiable signs of femininity, while chastising those drag queens that do not meet the ideal. The final section of this chapter will examine the axis of aesthetic judgment created on *Drag Race* and it will trace the devaluation of campiness through a case study of a single drag queen: Katya Zamlodchikova, who performed on *Drag Race* both in *Season 7* and alongside Alaska and Adore in *All Stars 2*.

Katya employs the persona of a Russian trophy wife, glorifying communism and the Soviet Union. She frequently employs a Russian accent during her performances, though during extended shows she tends to drop it. She finished fifth on Season 7 of *Drag Race*, though she won Miss Congeniality, and she performed through the finale of *All Stars 2*. Katya’s own drag aesthetic incorporated camp alongside the show’s aesthetic ideal. She was routinely criticized for

the former and praised for the latter. When Katya performs drag outside of *Drag Race*, her performances include a fundamental campiness in her aesthetic and in her characters. She embodies what Esther Newton identifies as the three criteria of camp: Incongruity, Theatricality, and Humor. All three are crucial to the way Katya constructs her typical looks. In a look on her webseries “UNHhhh,” Katya wears a baseball hat with a pom-pom, a woolen crop-top with a short-skirt that resembles a cheerleading outfit, and out of her wig extends a small set of plastic doll’s hands. In terms of Newton’s three criterion, this look exhibits incongruity in its placement of unrelated items, those that may symbolize the role of a “cheerleader” and those that do not appear to have a place in the creation of the look, i.e. the baby hands. The theatricality of the look comes from two places: first, the fact that this look is created for the consumption of an audience. The incongruity and stylization of the look has the purpose of eliciting a reaction from the viewer, making it inherently theatrical. (Newton 107). Finally, it is humorous in its treatment and use by Katya as visual gag. At points she uses the hands and points out the incongruity in order to maintain a humorous response from the audience. Thus, the visual aesthetic of such a look fits within Newton’s theorization of camp.

Furthermore, this look reflects Sontag’s conception of camp as “doing everything in quotation marks.” Katya embodies not a cheerleader, but a “cheerleader.” Her look negotiates what society perceives certain signifiers to mean versus what they are meant to actually signify. By performing not just as a woman, but as an additional layer of signification, Katya exemplifies the performance within quotation marks, and the negotiation of what something is versus what it appears to be.

Another characteristic of Sontag exemplified most profoundly in the performance of Katya is the negotiation of the serious/tragic versus the humorous. By creating the background of a

Russian trophy wife, Katya plays on what, to an American audience, is seriousness. Part of the campiness of her character stems from the negotiation of the stolid, Russian character with the off-color and frivolous jokes she tells. Furthermore, Katya pulls a lot of material from her background as a drug addict, negotiating the seriousness of addiction with the frivolity of her performance. The fundamental darkness of both her stoic, serious Russian persona as well as her perpetual use of her background in addiction as a source of humor serve to allow her basic character a serious/light dichotomy that exemplifies one of Sontag's notions of camp. Her personification of the tragic feminine exemplifies Halperin's notion of camp that he claims is exhibited in all of drag.

As to Katya's performance on *Drag Race*, it should be noted that she was mostly successful during of the show as a fundamentally campy persona. However, as was noted earlier, the axis of what constitutes "good drag" on *Drag Race* stems from success in conveying the requisite female signifiers (small waist, hour glass figure, hyper-femininity). What is evident from the case of Katya, however, is her eventual de-emphasis of camp in favor of that of the more aristocratic, hierarchical beauty. The critiques that Katya received on the show primarily focused on her looks being "unpolished." What such a critique ignores is the intended dialogue between an unpolished look and a theatrical, humorous persona. As a primarily campy queen, Katya was put at a disadvantage for her reliance on camp performance as opposed to the exclusive use of glamor looks. With the repeated imposition of the axis of "good-bad" that was used to judge her looks, Katya's use of camp shifted, and she worked to use the "polished" standards of aesthetic ideals provided by the judges.

The devaluation of camp on *Drag Race*, is evident through the changing performances of Katya while on the show as compared to her performance outside the show. Early in Season 7, as

well as online prior to her appearance on the show, Katya often performed in looks that featured uneven tans, denim, communist symbols, and other “trashy” aesthetic choices. In one webseries, “Irregardlessly Trish,” Katya constructs a character named Trish who lives in a dumpster, wears dark blue eye shadow, a denim jacket, and booty shorts, and has a thick Boston accent. Trish is a campy character who plays with seriousness and frivolity: she is 14 days sober except for pot, and exhibits kitschy aesthetic choices: high contrast eye shadow and chunky gold hoops. By contrast, Katya’s looks on *RuPaul* are primarily long gowns, with the appearance of opulence and glamour drag tradition. In her opening statement on Season 7, Katya says that she is “at the intersection of glamour and comedy,” but it appears as though during the show she swings towards glamour, while outside she performs comedy.

What the case study of Katya shows is not that camp has no role in the world of *Drag Race*, but that its role is diminished in relation to “the beauty.” Halperin’s notion of Beauty as aristocratic is critical to asserting that this should be a cause for worry within the gay community more broadly, and may be indicative of broader change within the gay community. If, as Halperin asserts, the gay community maintains a consistent polarity between beauty and camp, in which neither can exist without the other, then a trend in mainstream drag performance towards aesthetic beauty, and a rejection of camp, could be indicative of a change in the gay community more broadly. “Camp” as a distinctly queer aesthetic is lost in the transmission of queer performance to the mainstream. In this paper more broadly, the idea that queer club culture is increasingly exhibiting the hierarchies and commercialization of mainstream American culture from which it was once insulated is exhibited in this new aesthetic hierarchy of *Drag Race*.

By judging based on “polish” and aristocratic standards of beauty (more akin to heteronormative society), *Drag Race* eviscerates the queer aesthetic to gain a mainstream

viewership. Camp, as a rejection of these beauty standards is lost in an attempt to rank drag queens along mainstream aesthetic lines, and thus loses an essential aspect of drag performance in its marketing to and appropriation by the mainstream. Campiness as resistance and campiness as a rejection of hierarchy is lost, and thus the perpetuation of mainstream hierarchies under the guise of queerness is allowed. In terms of commercialization, the success of queens along this hierarchy allows them entrance into a new realm of celebrity status, gives them more gigs and money than would ever have been possible before. But there is a price. This linkage of success along a hierarchy of beauty with potential earnings marks the commercialization of mainstream drag, making it no more resistant or antithetical to capitalism than any other mode of performance. Thus the notion that all drag is resistance, or all drag is queer may be disappearing with this rise of hierarchy and commercialization. Though true camp surely still exists in the fringes, the rise of a new form of drag performance could begin to mark aesthetic divisions between homonormativity absorbed into hierarchical capitalist ideology and queerness at the fringes. *RuPaul's Drag Race* has pulled drag out of the fringes and into the spotlight, and with that spotlight has come the sterilization of traditionally queer modes of expression that we have come to expect with the rise of queer assimilationist and pragmatist ideology.

Chapter 3: Seeping

The threat of hierarchy entering spaces of queer pleasure

The first two chapters have focused on illuminating a trend. From both the 1990's nightlife oral history and the analysis of camp in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, sterilization and hierarchy within queer nightlife as it is absorbed by mainstream society should have become evident. The focus of this chapter is to point to the potential consequences of this trend. Why is queer culture sterilization a critical threat to the queer community more broadly? Scholarship focusing on the absorption of gay community into capitalism has long asserted that acceptance by mainstream society is fleeting, unequally distributed, and results in the loss of longstanding modes of living within the queer community. This chapter will examine the potential results of the sterilization of queer club culture on the agency of the queer community. First, this chapter will point to the loss of gay community as a place from which to critique capitalist society. Second, it will examine the results of its lost critical perspective, which is the loss of distinctly queer modes of community organization and political protest.

In order to discuss this first point of a lost critical perspective, two viewpoints on the unique power of queer community to critique mainstream capitalist society will be discussed. John D'Emilio, in *Capitalism and Gay Identity*, argues that the stigmatization of homosexuality comes from its perception as a threat to the nuclear family, invented in the capitalist narrative as a way to balance out the emotional emptiness of working within the capitalist system. By elevating the traditional nuclear family to extreme ideological importance, the system placed homosexuality and other forms of sexual "deviance" as threats to the nuclear family, elevated above all else. D'Emilio, as well as many of those that cite him, assert that this stigmatization of homosexuality as a threat to the nuclear family places those that engage in homosexuality outside of the larger

capitalist system, in a unique place from which to critique it. Once one has been ousted from a larger narrative that champions a single conception of the nuclear family and acceptable social construction, one is free to think outside of this system in a myriad of ways. Thus, D'Emilio's scholarship suggests that homosexuality presents a unique vantage point from which to critique not only heteronormativity, but social constructions of capitalism more broadly. Because the homosexual community, especially at the time during which D'Emilio wrote (1983), had been presented as a threat to the entirety of capitalism through its perceived threat to the nuclear family, the community was placed at a critical vantage point to examine, critique, and protest the entire social system.

D'Emilio's argument about the critical vantage point of the homosexual community leads him to advocate for a unique, promiscuous, separatist gay community. He argues that because of their stigmatization from all capitalist institutions and the social constraints of such a system, including marriage and monogamy, the gay community was able to create a more egalitarian, communal society. This argument can be seen later in *Cruising Utopia*, in which José Muñoz suggests that the promiscuous, underground sex parties of the gay male community presented a unique opportunity for those that engaged in them to exit the exhausting constraints of heterosexual society. In an analysis of John Giorno's utopian description of an underground sexual experience and its aftermath, Muñoz writes,

After this scene in the Prince Street toilet, Giorno runs out and catches a train in the nick of time: 'I said goodbye and I was out the door in a flash, onto the train going uptown.'" Once on the train he feels himself once again overwhelmed by the crushing presence and always expanding force field that is heteronormativity: 'It

always was a shock entering the straight world of a car full of grim people sitting dumbly with suffering on their faces and in their bodies, and their minds in their prisons.’ This experience of being ‘shocked’ by the prison that is heteronormativity, the straight world, is one that a reader, especially a queer reader, encounters after putting down a queer utopian memory text such as Giorno’s (39).

Muñoz writes of this exit from heterosexual society as the entrance into a fleeting queer utopia, which allows those that participate to envision a future that frees them from the present constraints of society, whether it be heteronormativity, or any other structure causing exhaustion to those that are forced to conform to certain ideologies. Through these glimpses of “utopia” found in the egalitarian performance of homosexual orgies in public restrooms, bathhouses, etc., participants are placed in a unique position to critique their present condition. Muñoz writes that the value of a utopian vision, however fleeting, is that it allows the participants to step outside and critique their present condition. Through this critique, a distinctly queer future can be experienced and used to imagine changes for the present condition. For Muñoz, these fleeting experiences of pleasure give participants a unique place from which to critique the structures that constrain them.

How then would a change in the nature of club culture impact the work of critical homosexuality within society? D’Emilio and Muñoz note that one feature of this distinctly queer form of criticism is *egalitarianism*, and the changes in queer club culture threaten that egalitarianism. For both D’Emilio and Muñoz, the pleasurable world of queer sexual fulfillment creates a place without hierarchical delineations of wealth, race, or other means of

marginalization. Recall that this type of egalitarianism is something that was noted by Stegmeir in his description of the “drug infused bacchanals” of New York City nightlife in the 1990’s. Furthermore, this egalitarian spirit is essential to an anti-hierarchical approach to the camp aesthetic. In embracing an aesthetic choice that glorifies the marginal, the queer community has a long history of rejecting mainstream notions of hierarchical beauty. Stegmeir points to the advent of “bottle service.” He writes that this caused a critical change in the organization and layout of large, queer nightlife spaces. Rather than organization in a communal bacchanal, the focus of individuals was around those with the most money, who could pay for an extravagance like bottle service. This new nightclub organization reflects the entrance of a hierarchy based on monetary capital. Such a hierarchy is in direct opposition to the type of egalitarian experience described by Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, and Buckland’s description of nightclubs in *Impossible Dance*, where the embodiment of queer pleasure creates a horizontal, rather than a vertical structure. How then does a club culture that embraces hierarchy change the vantage point of the queer community?

Changes in the organization of queer nightclubs should be a cause for concern thus because such changes represent a fundamental shift in the embodiment of queer pleasure. Past scholarship on such embodiment has emphasized its egalitarian nature, but from the oral history in part one, it is clear that there is now evidence this may no longer be the case. One might point out at this point that bathhouses and underground sex parties are not nightclubs. Nightclubs existed alongside the sex parties of the past, and sex parties today exist alongside contemporary nightclub culture. At a talkback for a performance I attended in London that delved into contemporary sex party culture, one audience member pointed out the appeal of such parties as a cheaper escape into the gay community than a night out in Soho. He pointed out that a night in

Soho could run a club goer over 100 pounds minimum, saying that these days-long drug and sex binges offered a cheaper alternative. Though there is room for fruitful scholarship on the potential communal benefits/harm of such get-togethers, this objective of this discussion is to assert that while these may represent a certain kind of exit from heterosexual society, the transformation within club culture from an egalitarian landscape to one of hierarchy still represents a critical and threatening transition.

The scholarship of Halperin and the discussion of the second chapter will help elucidate why a transition within queer clubs is critical despite the continued existence of drug-infused, underground sex parties that has driven much scholarship regarding the transcendental experience of homosexual pleasure. Halperin writes in his chapter *The Beauty and the Camp*, which provided much of the groundwork of the second section, of the potential danger of losing campiness within gay community.

“If...no camp is present, the party becomes a relentless competitive struggle for the most attractive available partners, an exercise in mutual one-upmanship, an endless display of humorless butch theatrics, which takes place at everyone’s expense and produces relentless posturing and suffocating seriousness.”

The assertion in Chapter 2 regarding the loss of camp within drag culture, as well as the responses to contemporary club culture analyzed in Chapter 1 seem to point to just such a culture within nightlife. As campiness is lost, and the transcendental, egalitarian experience described by Stegmeir, given theoretical background by Buckland and Muñoz, is replaced by one that is hierarchical and based on aristocratic beauty and capital, the suffocating nature of specific,

though certainly not all, segments of queer nightlife becomes evident. What is important about the development of such a culture is not that it has replaced transcendental experiences. Bathhouses, drug infused orgies, and public sex still exist and are likely to exist indefinitely. Rather, the importance of the establishment of hierarchical clubs comes from the split created between such transcendental experiences and the type of queer nightlife that has come to be accepted by mainstream society.

The establishment of a hierarchy based on money and beauty within nightlife represents the insertion of mainstream lines of marginalization into queer nightlife spaces. Those that are able to succeed in this nightlife circuit most often exist in privileged spaces within mainstream society as well: whether it be due to high-earning jobs, or privilege associated with meeting mainstream beauty standards. The stigma of homosexuality does not outweigh privilege associated with class and beauty. Furthermore, in the age of neoliberalism, it is expected that even if one is homosexual, it is their own deficiency if they are not able to achieve the kind of capital that grants them a higher place in society. Though it is clearly not true that all queer nightlife has been absorbed into hierarchy and neoliberalism, the fact that portions of it have, and that these portions represent those with the greatest concentrations of resources, should be cause for concern. The cause for this concern comes from a division in the size of the community that can be critical of mainstream society.

Allowing for the assimilation of queer pleasure into traditional structures of capitalism eliminates the ability of large portions of the gay community to be critical of those structures. Past scholarship has emphasized that being forced to exit the structures of heterosexual society to obtain pleasure forced criticism. In the exit, participants were able to view society from a new vantage point. Though not all nightlife has suffered the insertion of these structures, the fact that

it is possible to obtain homosexual pleasure within the structures of heterosexual society eliminates the ability of those members of the community to be fully critical of the institutions they live in. This necessarily creates divisions within the gay community and the gay political agenda between assimilation and separation. The presence of heterosexual hierarchies into queer nightlife as has been discussed in this paper is thus critically important because it represents the elimination of a route for criticism of social structures more broadly. Without the ability to critique social structures from such a vantage point, the uniquely queer perspective of gay social movements will suffer. A provocative image of the insertion of hierarchies into places of queer pleasure is that of a seeping liquid. Rather than blatant insertion, hierarchies that take over places of queer pleasure are able to seep into the community unseen. The co-option of places of queer pleasure is a slower, more insidious way of co-opting the critical perspective of the community, and thus the insidious image of hierarchies “seeping” into the community seems to be apt.

The next portion of the chapter will emphasize this theoretical claim by looking at examples of changes within queer political protest. As has been previously stated, the purpose of this paper is to point to a trend in queer nightlife, and speculate about its potential effects. What should be clear at this point is the importance of queer nightlife as a lens for approaching queer social critiques. Because queer pleasure represents a means for criticizing social structures, the seeping of mainstream hierarchies into nightlife represents a danger for queer political critiques on a much broader scale. For the remainder of this section, scholarly speculation on changes within the nature of such social critiques will be examined.

In *Acts of Gaiety*, Sara Werner calls attention to the changes in the focus of queer protest with what she calls the rise of “homoliberalism” and “homonormativity.” Her description of the focus of initial movements of gay liberation and the specific nature of their protests sound similar to

the discussion put forward earlier of D'Emilio and Muñoz's ideas of the nature of specifically homosexual social critique.

Integral to the vision of...gay liberation was the desire to revolutionize sexual interactions and social relationships by developing new forms of intimacy that were sensual, egalitarian, and nonmonogamous; by forging kinship arrangements that were free of sexist attitudes, gender binaries and racist biases; and by eradicating the institutions and ordinances that perpetuate oppressive hierarchies.

(4)

From Warner's description of the nature of initial demands of gay liberation and queer protest, it is clear that the demands were not "pragmatic" or "assimilationist." As suggested by Muñoz and D'Emilio, gay social critique was based on a desire to eliminate all capitalist hierarchies, as opposed to only small changes allowing "civil rights" or inclusions of homosexuals in state institutions. Warner goes on to assert that the nature of contemporary queer political protest, namely "gay pride" has become commercialized. Instead of cutting edge rejection of mainstream social hierarchies through play and pleasure, "the Pride Commission actively solicits donations and subsidies from companies seeking brand integration with a lucrative niche market" (23). The absorption of homosexuality into capitalist, commercialized culture is thus evident through the appropriation of its most famous protest: Pride. Rather than attempting to break down the way in which society has elevated the nuclear family as D'Emilio argues, homosexual political activism has shifted focus to inclusion in just such an ideology through the campaign for marriage equality.

Before moving on to the connection between Warner's claims and the sterilization of nightlife, one more of her warnings of increased pragmatization of queer politics is worth including:

In recent years, *queer* has become increasingly disconnected from both its critical potential and its radical aspirations. The term has come to denote a more narrowly defined sense of sexual identity, one that advances the economic interests of corporate conglomerates and the nation-state through the promotion of cultural hegemony and liberal norms of social inclusion. Today, *queer* and *nationality* no longer strike us paradoxical terms, antithetical propositions, or an ironic and parodic mode of dissent. What we thought thirty years ago was a fluid formula of antinormativity turned out to be, with a few modifications and misapplications, a recipe for the conservative and profoundly antidemocratic assimilationist project of homoliberalism. (26)

What is the purpose of Warner's assertion in the context of nightlife sterilization? The answer seems to come again from the scholarship of Muñoz and D'Emilio. The ability to exit heterosexual society and create holistic, structural political demands comes from the transcendental experiences that have in the past occurred through pleasure. As was asserted earlier, the fact that there now exists a divide in which one can experience gay community and gay pleasure without the necessary exit from heterosexual structures may hint at a change in the political agenda that is pointed to by Warner (and others, including Muñoz). Thus, through the concerns expressed by Warner, the potential effects of the establishment of hierarchy and commercialization in contemporary queer club culture may be speculated. The purpose of this

chapter is only to point to scholarship that has established queer exit from heterosexual structures and the crucial nature of such an exit to the development of a distinctly queer political agenda. Whether or not the sterilization and removal of such exits may be determined to be a principle cause for political pragmatization, or the exact manner in which such sterilization is embodied, is fruitful ground for future scholarship.

A final word on the intrinsic connection between pleasure and the development of a queer political agenda can be said using the work of Benjamin Shepard. In his volume, Shepard asserts that such spaces of unrestrained, egalitarian sexual pleasure were crucial to the development of queer social movements in the eras of early gay liberation through the AIDS epidemic. For Shepard's assertions in *Queer Political Performance and Protest*, included in the encroaching absorption of queer political protest into larger society were notions of puritanical ideals about sex. During the AIDS epidemic, such ideals had an entrée into the queer community, as abstinence was seen as a way to avoid contracting illness. Shepard, however, asserts that the sexual energy that charged the most successful political protests was crucial to their power. Disagreements were not over whether pleasure was important to the movement, but only whether it should be a part of official organizing tactics. He cites one interviewee when writing about NOLAG organization in the 1980's:

The meeting that split around the sex issue...Michael Marrell was getting a blow job in the bathroom while it was happening. There was a lot of pleasure that was going on there. And it was just a question about the role of sex and pleasure in the movement overtly. That was a famous weekend. (62)

It is difficult to imagine such a discussion happening in contemporary queer political protest, centered on marriage equality. The role of pleasure within mainstream queer social movements seems almost completely replaced by “pragmatic ideals,” homonormativity, and investment by commercial enterprises. Future research may examine the split of a queer political agenda from those that wish to challenge stigmatization of sexual deviance more broadly, versus those that wish to embrace puritan conceptions of sexual behavior. The exact nature of a shift in queer political protest is still in discussion, but for the purposes of this chapter, this example of early queer pleasure in social movement organizing will suffice.

This purpose of this chapter is to point to potential effects of sterilization of queer nightlife. Past scholarship has emphasized the importance of pleasure in creating specifically queer social critiques. Examples of Shepard and Warner emphasize that this is not simply theory, early queer social movements were focused on challenging broad structures using embodied pleasure as a tool for organization, while assimilationist aims of contemporary queer political protests, and their separation from pleasurable nightlife, are relatively new. The purpose of this chapter is to establish a correlation between sterilization of spaces of queer pleasure: nightlife, and sterilization of queer politics. Queer pleasure is essential to the development of a queer social critique and queer social organizing. Past protest efforts have depended upon sexual energy and a search for pleasure. Scholarship emphasizes that such pleasurable experiences create transcendental experiences that allow for critique of social structures on a broader scale. The replication of these social structures within places of these transcendental experiences should thus be cause for alarm. By seeping into sites of queer pleasure, mainstream hierarchies and ideals put the community at risk of losing its ability to protest in a distinctly queer way. As this chapter concludes, it is important to remember the mantra of early sexual liberation movements:

“the personal is political.” The sterilization of queer nightlife is cause for alarm within queer politics because it threatens the personal. In seeping into sites of personal pleasure and fulfillment, neoliberalism and capitalism may shape the type of social critiques established by members of the queer community, limiting the ability for the development of radical ideology or change, and perpetuating stigmatization along other lines of deviance

Conclusion

This work has explored the hierarchies of mainstream social structures and commercialization that has begun to enter in a seeping manner into queer nightlife, as well as speculated at its potential consequences for queer political solidarity and social critiques. Through an examination of the club scene of the 1990's and contemporary reactions against it, a documented change in the manifestation of camp in mainstream drag proliferation, and speculation about the impact of sterilizing places of queer pleasure, the presence of seeping social structures should be established. The establishment of such a trend creates fertile ground for future research. New research may involve ethnographic exploration of how hierarchies are laid out within nightclubs, and how those hierarchies align with those found in heterosexual society. It may involve research regarding queer solidarity, and the subsequent political ramifications of a divided community. Studies of the mass proliferation of the type of drag shown in *RuPaul's Drag Race* could impact queer socialization in ways that have yet to be explored. This work is meant to lay a foundation for these research questions and others. By beginning a conversation about the changing queer nightlife scene as it becomes absorbed into the mainstream, and speculating about the broader ramifications of such a change, this work has begun the conversation about new queer and gay socialization. Now that such a change has been established, the nature of socializing into this climate can be examined alongside its consequences. I look forward to contributing to this dialogue as my own socialization and maturation within the queer and gay nightlife scene continues. This is the beginning of a research process working in tandem with my own socialization into a new generation of gay pride and queer resistance.

Works Cited

- Baker, Roger. *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts*. NYU Press, 1994.
- Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community*. Directed by Greta Schiller, Robert Roseburg, First Run Features, 1999.
- Booth, Mark. "Campe-Toi! On the Origins and Definitions of Camp." *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. Ed. Fabio Cleto. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.
- "The Boulet Brothers' DRAGULA." *YouTube*, uploaded by Hey Qween, 31 October 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EK0-nz02P8Y>
- Brecht, Stefan. "Family of the F. P.: Notes on the Theatre of the Ridiculous." *The Drama Review: TDR* 13.1 (1968): 117-41. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Apr. 2016.
- Buckland, Fiona. *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making*. Wesleyan, 2002.
- "Club Kid Panel w/ James St. James, Milk and Boulet Brothers at RuPaul's DragCon 2015." *YouTube*, uploaded by WOWpresents, 2 July 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJTq7AeFohA>
- "Club Kids on Donahue: Part 1." *YouTube*, uploaded by dailyfreakshow, 14 January 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cY0V4O7ErJ0>
- The Cockettes*. Directed by David Weissman, Bill Weber. 2002
- D'Emilio, John. *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture*. Duke University Press, 2002.
- Edgar, Eir-Anne. "Xtravaganza!: Drag Representation and Articulation in RuPaul's Drag Race." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2011, pp. 133 – 146.

- Flesher, Julian. *The Drag Queens of New York*. Berkley Publishing Group, 1996.
- Halperin, David M. *How To Be Gay*. Belknap Press, 2014.
- Isherwood, Christopher. *The World in the Evening*. (1954). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 107 – 111.
- “Irregardlessly Trish – Episode 01 – We Love Katya.” *Youtube*. uploaded by welovekatya. 20 May 2015. www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcYdpJdTtWE
- Jacobsen, Joyce, and Adam Zeller. *Queer Economics: A Reader*. Routledge, 2008.
- Muñoz, José E. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU Press, 2009.
- Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- Norbury, Rosamond, and Bill Richardson. *From Guy to Goddess: An Intimate Look at Drag Queens*. Whitecap Books, 1994.
- Party Monster*. Directed by Fenton Bailey, Randy Barbato, Story by James St. James, Killer Films, Fortissimo Films, World of Wonder, 2003.
- Party Monster – The Shockumentary*. Directed by Fenton Bailey, Randy Barbato, World of Wonder, 1999.
- Peñaloza, Lisa. "We're Here, We're Queer, and We're Going Shopping! A Critical Perspective on the Accommodation of Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Marketplace." *Queer Economics*, edited by Joyce Jacobsen and Adam Zeller, 304 - 329. Routledge. 2008
- “Reunited.” *RuPaul’s Drag Race All-Stars Season 2*. Logo, 27 October, 2016.
- RuPaul, creator. *Rupaul’s Drag Race*. WOWPresents and Logo, 2009.

Rupp, Leila J., and Verta Taylor. *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Schacht, Stephen P., and Lisa Underwood, editors. *The Drag Queen Anthology*. Harrington Park Press, 2004.

Shepard, Benjamin. *Queer Political Performance and Protest*. 2009. Routledge, 2011.

Silverstone, Catherine. "Duckie's Gay Shame: Critiqueing Pride and Selling Shame in Club Performance." *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 22, issue no. 1, 2012, pp. 62 – 78.

Sontag, Susan. *Notes on Camp*. 1964.

Stegmeir, Johann. Personal Interview. 27 January 2017.

"UNHhhh ep 19: 'Religion' w/ Trixie Mattel & Katya." *YouTube*, uploaded by WOWPresents, 19 April 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0nSZLH0zYw

Warner, Sara. *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure*. University of Michigan Press, 2009.