SINGING IS A DRAG: GENDER, VOICE, AND BODY IN DRAG PERFORMANCE

by

Alec MacIntyre

BA, University of Maryland, 2008

MM, University of Texas, 2012

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

The Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2017

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

THE KENNETH P. DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

Alec MacIntyre

It was defended on

May 16, 2017

and approved by

James P. Cassaro, Professor, Music Department

Gavin Steingo, Assistant Professor, Music Department, Princeton University

Susan McClary, Professor, Head of Musicology, Case Western Reserve University

Dissertation Advisor: Adriana Helbig, Associate Professor, Music Department

SINGING IS A DRAG: GENDER, VOICE, AND BODY IN DRAG PERFORMANCE

Alec MacIntyre, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2017

This dissertation brings together voice and gender theories to describe voice/gender/body relationships among drag performers in the U.S. as a means to address gaps in both areas of scholarship. Contemporary gender theory often cites Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which is based on analysis of speech-acts without acknowledging the sounding voice. Conversely, recent work in sound studies and philosophy by Douglas Kahn, Mladen Dolar, Bernard Stiegler, and Jonathan Sterne explicitly deals with the sounding voice and the body while ignoring gender. Both these gaps are significant areas for new scholarship because genders are sounded, heard, and policed through the voice.

Using evidence gathered from multi-site ethnographic research with drag performers, as well as virtual ethnography and media studies, I link queer and feminist iterations of performativity theory with voice and sound studies to theorize how body and gender are sounded and heard through the voice. I have chosen to examine voice/body/gender relationships in queer communities because the atypical configurations of anatomy, gender identity, and gender expressions in queer spaces highlight naturalized codes for expressing and reading gender on and through the body, including assumptions about the location and embodiment of voice. Looking at cases that break with social codes for embodying and vocalizing gender makes the codes themselves visible: failure and/or refusal to obey naturalized rules draws attention to the artificiality of the rule system as a whole and exposes the gendered body and voice as social constructions.

My work builds on existing studies of gender performance and performativity, drawing from feminist scholarship, queer theory, and their applications in music studies. I also engage work on mind/body ontology and the location of voice, including ontological critiques of some feminist theories of embodiment and more speculative theories locating voice outside the body and subjectivity. I use these theoretical tools with my ethnographic work to argue that voices perform identity in relation to naturalized rules specific to locations, times, and cultural/sub-cultural groups.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEGMENTS

1.0   INTRODUCTION

This dissertation brings together voice and gender theories to describe voice/gender/body relationships among drag performers in the U.S. as a means to address gaps in both areas of scholarship. Contemporary gender theory often cites Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which is based on analysis of speech-acts without acknowledging the sounding voice.[1] Conversely, recent work in sound studies and philosophy by Douglas Kahn, Mladen Dolar, Bernard Stiegler, and Jonathan Sterne explicitly deals with the sounding voice and the body while ignoring gender. Both these gaps are significant areas for new scholarship because genders are sounded, heard, and policed through the voice. (Consider, for example, recent debates in feminist circles about the use of "up-speak" and vocal fry in the workplace: both speech patterns are associated with stereotypes about femininity and, consequently, are seen as undesirable in female-identified professionals. Even *GQ* has picked up on the trend, condemning male "up-speak" as a de-masculinizing/feminizing vocal tic that undermines a man's credibility.)[2]

I have chosen to examine voice/body/gender relationships in queer communities because the atypical configurations of anatomy, gender identity, and gender expressions in queer spaces

---

[1] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[2] Laura Beck, "Your Annoying Voice is Yet Another Reason People Don't Like You," *Jezebel*, http://jezebel.com/your-annoying-voice-is-yet-another-reason-people-dont-1305067259. Renee Dale, "When Did We All Start Talking Like Valley Guys?," *GQ*, http://www.gq.com/story/valley-guys-male-upspeak.

highlight naturalized codes for expressing and reading gender on and through the body, including assumptions about the location and embodiment of voice. Beyond this basic, implicit critique of gender norms enacted by the existence of queer people, the performance art form known as drag aggressively and explicitly challenges expectations of relationships between bodies, sounds, and genders. Considering cases that break with social codes for embodying and vocalizing gender makes the codes themselves visible: failure and/or refusal to obey naturalized rules draws attention to the artificiality of the rule system as a whole and exposes the gendered body and voice as social constructions.[3] Using critiques of naturalized gender systems from multi-site ethnographic research with drag performers, I link vernacular and academic queer theories with philosophies of voice drawn from sound studies literature and conversations with performers.

My work builds on existing studies of gender performance and performativity, drawing from feminist scholarship, queer theory, and their applications in music studies. I also engage work on mind/body ontology and the location of voice, including ontological critiques of some feminist theories of embodiment and more speculative theories locating voice outside the body and subjectivity. I use these theoretical tools with my ethnographic and archival work to argue that the voice performs gender in relation to naturalized rules that are specific to locations, times, and cultural/sub-cultural groups.

In the following pages, I give background information on what drag is, as well as a description of standard performance practices at my field sites. I then review relevant literature on gender and voice as theoretical context for my ethnographic work, showing how my work fits into feminist, queer, and sound studies scholarship. This is followed by a short discussion of methodology, in which I detail my reasons for choosing specific field sites, as well as the role of

---

[3] Butler, *Gender Trouble*. See also: Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

broadcast and social media in my project. In the last section, I summarize themes and arguments in the chapters. Each summary includes a description of the ethnographic and theoretical content, including which of my field sites are relevant to particular themes.

1.1   BACKGROUND: WHAT IS DRAG?

As the term is typically used today, "drag" is a type of theatrical entertainment centered on gender performance. In many discussions of drag, emphasis is placed on the performer's on-stage gender being different to their off-stage gender: for example a male-assigned performer embodying a female persona on stage (known as a drag queen) or a female-assigned person performing as a man (drag king). While use of the term "drag" to denote a specific kind of gender play is relatively recent, the general concept of gender play is not.[4] Non-binary gender identities and gender expressions that defy social norms and stereotypes have existed for centuries, if not millennia. Historically, non-binary gender identities and cross-gender expressions have been a part of mainstream social functions and not specifically identified with "gay" or "queer" communities, though exhibiting gender-variant identities and/or expressions outside sanctioned spaces was not socially acceptable.[5]

In the United States—where all the fieldwork for this dissertation took place—Vaudeville and its antecedents were spaces in which gender play was sanctioned and considered a socially

---

[4] See: Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

[5] See (e.g.): Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Anna Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Hélène Iswolsky, translator (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Robert Hurley, translator (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

acceptable part of mainstream, popular entertainment.[6] In the early twentieth century, however, shifts in gender norms and entertainment tastes changed perceptions of Vaudevillian gender play from acceptable, mainstream entertainment to deviant, subversive acts associated with homosexuality (often understood as gender inversion by social theorists at the time).[7] As a result, theatrical gender play moved from the popular theater circuit into secret gay clubs, where it became a subversive critique of gender and sexuality norms.[8]

In his account of the "pansy" craze in Prohibition-Era American pop culture, George Chauncey describes the processes by which particular types of theatrical gender expressions came to signify male homosexuality.[9] He also discusses why some gender expressions associated with gay male identity (e.g.: the "pansy" character in 1920s-30s films) were considered appropriate in mainstream entertainment after the shift in social gender norms circa 1920. He describes the mass appeal of theatrical gender play in Vaudeville and its antecedents, noting that social norms before 1920 allowed for gender-variant behavior as a part of popular theater.[10] Chauncey locates a shift in gendered social regulatory codes around 1920, which is also when he marks the emergence of the "pansy" and the movement of Vaudevillian female impersonators into venues and performance contexts strictly associated with gay men.[11] This shift in the social status of female impersonators and the marking of their acts as subversive and deviant led to the

---

[6] Chauncey, *Gay New York*.

[7] Chauncey, *Gay New York*. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

[8] Chauncey, *Gay New York*. Newton, *Mother Camp*.

[9] Readers familiar with American homophobic slurs from the era of the closet may recognize "pansy" from this lexicon. Chauncey's text does some work to explain how "pansy" became such a slur: the Prohibition-era pansy was a man who dressed flamboyantly, used effeminate mannerisms, and was presumed to be homosexual. In contrast to the female impersonator, however, the pansy is always represented as a man, even in his effeminate stage persona. (Chauncey, "Pansies on Parade.")

[10] George Chauncey, "Pansies On Parade," in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994). This information is corroborated by archival materials in Hillman Library Special Collections.

[11] Chauncey, "Pansies on Parade."

development of drag as socially critical queer gender play. Because female impersonator acts were taking place in underground gay clubs—in which the vast majority of people present had an interest in maintaining secrecy about what happened in the space—performers became able to make bolder social commentary, including commentary that expressed politics specific to the gay community in the Era of the Closet.

Esther Newton's ethnographic work with female impersonators in the late 1960s describes how gender performance during the Civil Rights Movement simultaneously worked to express gay male identity and parody social norms conflating gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality.[12] Newton's work is important because it describes gay male subjectivities at a time when homosexuality was illegal and marked as mental illness.[13] She is also careful to show that her interlocutors' choices about how to perform femininity are conscious and calculated, aiming for a particular kind of entertainment value that mixes glamour and socially critical parody to simultaneously celebrate female pop culture icons and express queer subjectivity in a culture that does not allow for it.[14]

Chauncey and Newton's characterizations of pre-Stonewall gender play as carnivalesque queer resistance to heteronormative hegemony still hold true for some kinds of contemporary gender performance in LGBTQ-associated venues, though mass media has allowed for certain styles to move out of queer venues to become somewhat mainstream. The reality series *RuPaul's*

---

[12] Esther Newton, "Role Models," in Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject, Fabio Cleto, ed. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999). "Role Models" is a chapter from Newton's ethnography, Mother Camp, originally published in the 1970s. Newton uses "female impersonators" to describe her interlocutors. When she was writing *Mother Camp*, the term "drag queen" was just beginning to be used within queer communities, though it was probably unintelligible to outsiders. "Female impersonators," on the other hand, would have been a recognizable term.

[13] Homosexuality appeared in the DSM list of mental disorders until 1973 and was only completely removed as a diagnosis in 1986. (Gregory M. Herek, "Facts About Homosexuality and Mental Health," http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/faculty_sites/rainbow/html/facts_mental_health.html)

[14] Newton, "Role Models."

Drag Race (2009-present) is the most recent example of this phenomenon,[15] and its acceptance by non-LGBTQ viewers, as well as its role in changing aesthetic standards for drag performance have triggered debates about what drag is and how it does or does not still relate to queer politics.[16]

While *Drag Race* has been praised for making drag visible and available to LGBTQ communities outside large metropolitan centers, critics of the series have cited its policing of queer bodies and subjectivities through aesthetic valuation of glamorous drag over socially critical performances as a move to make drag comfortable for straight audiences.[17] A significant part of the criticism of *Drag Race* is also rooted in the way the series defines drag. While RuPaul him/herself sometimes takes the view that all gender is a performance,[18] other *Drag Race* judges (notably Michelle Visage) are insistent that a performance only qualifies as drag if the character's gender is different to the performer's. Scholars and drag artists critiquing *Drag Race* note that this rigid definition of drag as a cross-gender performance assumes anatomically-based binary gender—thus excluding trans and non-binary people— and de-centers the socially critical and parodic aspects of drag.[19] At a larger level, these aesthetic-political tensions around drag are part of broader ideological conflicts in the American LGBTQ rights movement, and some kinds of contemporary drag are understood as commentary on these conflicts.

Because of current debates about what kinds of gender performance do and do not qualify as drag, as well as questions of how queer politics and social commentary play into those

---

[15] Previous examples of queer entertainment becoming somewhat mainstream include *The Birdcage, Priscilla Queen of the Desert, To Wong Foo*, and the films of John Waters.

[16] Jim Daems, ed. *The Makeup of* RuPaul's Drag Race*: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014).

[17] Ibid.

[18] Consider, for example, "You're born naked and the rest is drag," which was RuPaul's catchphrase in the early seasons of *Drag Race*.

[19] Daems, ed. *The Makeup of* RuPaul's Drag Race.

definitions, I have adopted a relatively expansive definition of drag based on the writings of Kate

Bornstein and Susan Sontag. I have chosen these authors because they are queer people writing

about queer resistance to heteronormative and patriarchal social structures. In addition, neither

Bornstein nor Sontag restricts drag to a gender performance based around opposite poles of a

binary (e.g.: a person assigned male performing as a female character). Instead, both Bornstein

and Sontag locate the important features of drag in its ability to parody binary gender by

exaggerating it, regardless of a performer's on- and off-stage genders. It is worth noting that this

definition is also consistent with the definitions of drag given by performers and queer audience

members in the venues chosen for my fieldwork. Several people I asked about definitions of drag

even referenced Bornstein in our conversations.

In differentiating drag performance from other modes of gender expression, Kate

Bornstein emphasizes that drag is campy and overdone, though the gender expressed by a drag

artist on stage need not differ from the artist's off-stage gender identity.[20] The concept of camp is

important in the larger history of drag as resistance to heteronormative ideologies and in the

function of some contemporary drag as more localized forms of social commentary. Bornstein

and Susan Sontag both define camp as a kind of humor that pokes fun at extremely serious

issues, subverting established social norms to make critiques that would be dangerous to voice

outside of sanctioned performance spaces.[21] In this respect, the camp aspects of drag are

carnivalesque:[22] campy drag is deliberate, pointed humor that makes privilege the object of its

jokes. Often, this is accomplished through exaggerated, theatrical performances of masculinity

---

[20] Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
[21] Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing
Subject, Fabio Cleto, ed. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999).
[22] Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, Hélène Iswolsky, translator (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
1984).

and femininity by actors who identify as genders different to the characters they portray on stage. However, this is not always the case, nor is a cross-gender element necessary for drag.[23] Instead, it is the overdoing of gender in drag that constitutes camp and allows for social commentary: exaggerating characteristics associated with masculinity and/or femininity draws attention to the arbitrary social constructions around gender, sexuality, behavior, and bodies.[24]

Understanding drag as a parodic over-acting of gendered physical and social mannerisms aligns with many drag artists' characterizations of their performances and allows performers' on- and off-stage gender identities and expressions to exist outside a male/female or masculine/feminine binary. This last is important because it reflects the larger political critique performed by drag in its role as a queer art form. Assumptions related to anatomically binary gender perpetuate patriarchy and stigmatize LGBTQ identities by creating implicit behavioral and physical expectations for bodies based on external anatomy at birth.[25] By creating performance art in which gender is not a binary and in which bodies can move easily between gendered physical and social expressions, the acts I characterize as "drag" critique the existing system of binary gender and present an alternative to that system. In contrast, a view of drag as simply a performer whose on-stage gender is at the opposite end of the binary from their off-stage gender maintains the status quo around gendered social hierarchies and misses the richness and possibility of queer social critique.

---

[23] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, preface to the 1990 edition.
[24] Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*. This concept will be revisited later.
[25] Butler, *Gender Trouble*. Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*.

1.2   SO MANY SPEECH-ACTS, SO LITTLE SPEECH: GENDER

PERFORMATIVITY IN THE HUMANITIES

The emergence of gender performativity theory in the humanities is a convergence of feminist theory, critical history (à la Foucault), and speech-act theory.[26] Judith Butler is typically credited with coining the term "gender performativity" in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, though hints at gender as something made, not innate, are present in earlier works of feminist scholarship— notably in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Butler's contribution to understandings of gender as a social construct is her addition of biological/medical discourse to feminist analyses of making gender, as well as her adoption of vocabulary from speech-act theory to describe the processes by which subjects become gendered.[27] The addition of the body as a site for making (and imposing) gender is an especially important part of Butler's work: though feminists before Butler acknowledged that gender roles are socially constructed, they (for the most part) still treated the category of "Woman" as a monolithic universal tied to anatomy and/or the ability to bear children.[28] This mapping of gender onto anatomy is problematic for analyses of drag because it does not allow for the body to be used as a site for creating and critiquing gender norms—something that Butler's performativity explicitly does account for.

The advent of "second wave" feminism after the Second World War also marks the emergence of explicitly feminist scholarship in the humanities. Simone de Beauvoir's *The*

---

[26] Rosalind C. Morris, "All Made Up: Performance Theory and the New Anthropology of Sex and Gender," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 567-592. Morris includes practice theory (e.g. Bourdieu) in her history of performativity as a theoretical device in anthropology. However, since I specify gender performativity, I have left out Bourdieu, as he does not deal with gender.

[27] Performativity theory as a whole is by no means limited to gendered subjectivities. Butler and other scholars (e.g. Gayatri Spivak, Aaron Fox, Steven Feld, Anthony Seeger, Gary Tomlinson) have written on the role of speech-acts in constituting *all* subjectivities.

[28] E.g. Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?", in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974).

Second Sex is something of a watershed text for this second wave of feminism, at least on the academic side of the movement.[29] De Beauvoir's book poses and investigates several questions that have become central to subsequent feminist scholarship, questions that link feminist politics to academic research topics. Unlike "first wave" activists whose primary concerns were the immediately and materially practical matters of suffrage and basic human rights for women—taking the category of "women" for granted—de Beauvoir asks what it means to be "a woman." Drawing from psychoanalysis, philosophy, literature, mythology, history, and personal experience, de Beauvoir posits that "Woman" is a sort of eternal Other for a universalized "Man" and observes that this gendered "One" and "Other" relationship is more naturalized than the making of racialized, ethnic, and other Others.[30] In noting the above-average naturalization of Woman-as-Other and by engaging with multiple disciplines in the humanities and social/behavioral sciences, de Beauvoir moves toward explanations of how Woman becomes the Other to Man and how the process of making Woman-as-Other is naturalized. This questioning of naturalized social categories—"what is woman?" for example—coupled with a deconstruction of processes for making and naturalizing social hierarchies, is central to feminist scholarship after de Beauvoir, though not all later scholars are as exhaustive as she is in their use of academic disciplines as avenues of inquiry.

---

[29] "Popular press" texts like *The Feminine Mystique* (Betty Friedan, 1963) might be said to hold a similar status to *The Second Sex* outside of academia. Though I have not included *The Feminine Mystique* in this document, it is important because of its relationship to the political and social side of "second wave" feminism and because it was heavily critiqued by other feminists after its publication. (See: bell hooks, "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory," in *Words of Fire*, Sheftall, ed.)

[30] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Constance Borde and Sheila Maloveny-Chevallier, translators (New York: Vintage Books, 2011 [1949]). De Beauvoir's choice of "naturalized order," as opposed to "natural order" is important here because she wishes to question masculine domination as natural order. Her point (and the point of most feminist scholarship) is that gender roles requiring one class of people to be dominant over others are distinctly unnatural, despite the cross-cultural appearance of gendered social hierarchies.

Of particular interest in *The Second Sex* is de Beauvoir's critique of Sigmund Freud's writings on gender and sexuality, as the content of this critique recurs later in both feminist and queer theories. In "The Psychoanalytical Point of View" (the second chapter of *The Second Sex*), de Beauvoir first summarizes Freud's theories of female sexuality and then rejects them because they are incomplete and treat feminine sexuality as subordinate to and derivative of the male libido. Instead, de Beauvoir pushes for a study of female sexuality in itself and independent from phallocentric notions of desire, virility, and sexual fulfillment. In addition to her dissatisfaction with the incompleteness of Freud's theories of female sexuality as a problem in itself, de Beauvoir reads the gaps in Freud's knowledge as positioning women to be perpetual sexual objects and never subjects. Thus, she also rejects Freud's theory because it conflicts with her large-scale goal of allowing a feminine subject without simply having women take on traits of masculine subjectivity.[31]

De Beauvoir's work on the making of "Woman" as a cross-cultural Other for "Man" precipitated feminist scholarship in anthropology, musicology, and ethnomusicology. *Woman, Culture and Society* (1974) applies de Beauvoir's principles to anthropology, examining and documenting instantiations of the Woman-as-Other phenomenon.[32] Sherry Ortner's essay in this volume makes the most explicit link between 1960s-70s feminist ethnography and de Beauvoir's writings, though the entire collection has undercurrents of *The Second Sex*. This style of writing and analysis also appears in Ellen Koskoff's edited collection *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (1987), with Koskoff explicitly citing Ortner as an influence on her choices

---

[31] De Beauvoir, The Second Sex, pp. 49-61.

[32] Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974).

11

regarding the volume.[33] Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings* (1990) also picks up on some of de Beauvoir's ideas, applying them to the Western Art Canon. Like Ortner and Koskoff, McClary writes on the Woman-as-Other phenomenon ("Sexual Politics in Classical Music" is a good example), but unlike Ortner and Koskoff, McClary explicitly addresses sexuality and desire in the Western Canon. In a move similar to de Beauvoir's critique of Freud, McClary describes the narrative arc of (non-dramatized) Western Art Music as a parallel for male sexual desire, tension, and release. This structure, she argues, silences female composers by forcing them to take on masculine sexualities in order to be intelligible within the existing system and also reduces the presence of women in art music to caricatures drawn by men.[34]

While feminist scholars in the 1970s and 80s were successful in demonstrating instantiations of De Beauvoir's arguments about the cross-cultural oppression of women and the repression of female sexualities, second wave scholarship largely ignores De Beauvoir's assertion that the category of "Woman" is *made*, not born.[35] Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) is a post-structural critique of second-wave feminism that directly addresses the making of "Woman" as a category. Butler is dissatisfied with what she reads as gender essentialism and reifications of culturally constructed binary gender categories in second wave feminist thought. She argues that second wave feminists made "male" and "female" monolithic by creating a grand narrative of "The Feminine Subject" in opposition to existing grand narratives of Man or The Masculine Subject.[36] Thus, there are multiple issues at play in Butler's critique: (1) Butler reads the slippage between "Woman," "women's bodies," and "The Female/Feminine Subject" in

---

[33] Ellen Koskoff, ed., *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Urbana and Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987): 1-24.

[34] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990): 112-132.

[35] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

[36] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), Kindle Edition.

second wave feminist work as problematic because it discursively locates gender in and on the body, despite second wave theorists' assertions that gender roles are socially constructed; (2) Butler contends that the binary designations of "male" and "female" based on superficial anatomy at birth are an imposition of hierarchal social categories onto bodies by forced naturalization of constructed "biological" difference;[37] (3) Butler is opposed to the construction of a "Feminine Subject" in opposition to the default Masculine Subject because both constructions take subjectivity for granted, while Butler argues that subjectivity does not exist in itself and, rather, is constantly performed through speech-acts.[38]

The term "speech-act" and the context in which Butler uses it are taken from J.L. Austin and John Searle. The latter contends that spoken language is a "rule-governed form of behavior" and, as such, speakers of a given language must follow the rules of that language in order to be intelligible, for their speech to have meaning.[39] According to Searle, meaningful speech also constitutes action—hence the term "speech-act"—and certain kinds of linguistic constructions do things beyond simple communicative or expressive functions. Based on Searle's definitions, speech has the power to constitute identity and subjectivity, provided the speaker uses an intelligible speech-act with the appropriate function.

Butler's answer to her dissatisfaction with second wave feminist theories of gender is her theory of gender performativity. This model holds that all identity is enacted into being: identity categories only exist through behaviors that are comprehensible within a given system and social

---

[37] Ibid. Butler also deals with this issue in more depth in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), going into great detail about the processes by which material, bodily difference becomes naturalized as "sex" through the discursive application of socio-cultural gender categories. This latter text is in dialogue with biological literature, as well as the feminist and other philosophical texts Butler cites in *Gender Trouble*. [Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).]

[38] Butler, *Gender Trouble*. See also: John Searle, *Speech-Acts: An Essay In the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

[39] Searle, *Speech-Acts*, 22.

divisions like race, class, and gender are not present *a priori*.[40] In describing her theory of gender as performative, Butler calls the system in which gendered behaviors are understood the "heterosexual matrix."[41] She chooses to name it a "heterosexual" matrix because she locates the social impetus for coercively assigned binary gender in compulsory heterosexuality. She reads gendered social codes as feeding into heterosexual privilege and the erasure of non-normative sexualities.[42] Butler's heterosexual matrix is an analysis of how behaviors are coded as "male" and "female" in contemporary (circa 1990) Western cultures, as well as a study of normative expectations for gendered behaviors based on the superficial anatomy of a newborn child. Butler also explores the consequences of gendered behaviors outside the norms defined by the heterosexual matrix. In cases where an actor is unaware of the system in which gendered behaviors operate, the anti-normative behavior is discouraged through negative social consequences and, thus, often encultured out. Cases where an actor is aware of the system of gendered behaviors and chooses to operate against the norms are termed "parody" by Butler.[43]

Strictly adhering to Butler's definition, gender performativity is mostly unconscious; humans perform themselves as sexed and gendered subjects through the repetition of speech-acts that signify bodily and social attributes associated with sex and gender. Because the heterosexual

---

[40] It is worth noting that Butler's "performativity" is similar to de Beauvoir's assertion that one "becomes" woman, rather than being born woman—though Butler would, likely, never openly admit to this. (Butler is rather harsh in her citation and critique of de Beauvoir in *Gender Trouble*.) This reading of de Beauvoir's "becoming" intensifies if one follows Gilles Deleuze's reading of the concept in his *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.

[41] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Kindle Edition.

[42] In 1990, this was a plausible and defensible argument for Butler to make: heterosexuality was legally privileged and gender norms were structured around being attractive to the "opposite sex." In the 25 years since Butler published, however, homosexuality has become markedly less stigmatized in the US, though compulsory, coercively assigned binary gender has retained its social footing. (Consider: the Supreme Court decisions in *Lawrence v. Texas* and *Obergefell v. Hodges;* various "bathroom bills" intended to keep trans people out of spaces aligned with their gender presentations, recently introduced in Florida and Wisconsin, among other states.) Kate Bornstein also emphasizes compulsory binary gender over compulsory heterosexuality in her analysis of gender norms. (Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*.)

[43] Ibid.

matrix is encultured and naturalized from an extremely early age, there is very little possibility for agency—in the sense of conscious intentionality in gendered behavior—in Butler's model of performativity. However, a significant number of the authors and texts listed below are concerned with either conscious, intentional, theatrical *performances* of gender or with conscious, intentional deviations from established gender norms outside theatrical contexts. Though Butler does allow for a bit of this sort of conscious deconstruction of the heterosexual matrix in her concept of parody, her allowances for agency are not compatible with the degree of intentionality in deliberate gender performances like drag. Based on this tension between performance and performativity, it seems appropriate to ask what kinds of consciousness and intentionality are involved in theatrical gender performance and how much agency actors might have in terms of pushing back against the heterosexual matrix. It is also productive to question whether and how Butler's distinction between performativity and performance holds up in non-theoretical case studies.

Andrew Parker and Eve K. Sedgwick's 1995 publication *Performativity and Performance*, compiled from the proceedings of a 1993 conference, uses Derrida's critique of J.L. Austin's speech-act theory to argue that performativity and performance are not antithetical—as Austin claims they are.[44] Instead, Parker and Sedgwick contend, following Derrida, that theatrical "exceptions" to Austin's speech-act theory should not be exceptions. They suggest that Austin maintains a split between the "theatrical" and the "real" to serve an ideological—rather than ontological—purpose and follow this suggestion with a claim that allowing theatrical speech-acts to be performative queers the real/fictive binary and allows for

---

[44] Andrew Parker and Eve K. Sedgwick, eds., *Performativity and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 1-16.

subversive and queer acts on other ideological and identity-related fronts.[45] Parker and Sedgwick also posit the theater as a carnivalesque space, meaning that subversive identities marked for death in the "real" world are somehow less threatening (and, therefore, semi-sanctioned) in theatrical spaces.[46]

Adopting Parker and Sedgwick's framing of performativity in performance is also generative for music studies: excepting the most conservative (and, likely, imaginary) historical musicologist—who would insist that "the music" exists only in some "original" version of a composer's manuscript score—music scholars deal with performance, meaning that Austin's and Butler's definitions of performativity are of limited utility because they mostly exclude performance (albeit for somewhat different reasons).[47] The reframing of performativity in Parker and Sedgwick's introduction to *Performativity and Performance*, though aimed at Austin and his insistence on boundaries between real and fictive worlds, is a helpful rejoinder to the limited allowances for consciousness, intentionality, and agency in Butler. Keeping this expanded definition of performativity in mind allows for generous and generative readings of music (and other) studies engaging with performativity theory *and* theatrical performance.[48]

Despite their heavy engagement with speech-acts as the means by which humans gender themselves, Butler, Parker, and Sedgwick do not address speech as sound. This is problematic especially in Butler's case because of her assertions about presenting and representing gender on and through the body. Though voice and body are not isomorphic, the sounding voice is an

---

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid. See also: Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Hélène Iswolsky, translator (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

[47] Parker and Sedgwick, *Performativity and Performance*.

[48] As a corollary to this statement, Parker and Sedgwick's expanded definition of performativity does no harm to analyses of conditions that more closely replicate Butler and/or Austin's definitions of the term.

16

attribute that is used in speaking (or singing) and hearing gender through the body.[49] Music scholars engaging with Butler's performativity theory attempt to fill this gap somewhat: contributors to *En Travesti* (1995), *Queering the Pitch* (1994), and *Audible Traces* (1999) acknowledge the role of voice as a space for gender performativity, but they do not adequately describe the processes by which sounds are attached to genders (and used to gender bodies).[50] Instead, several authors fall back on second-wave conflations of gender identity with anatomy, thus skating over one of Butler's most important points.[51]

1.3 VOICE AND BODY ARE NOT ISOMORPHIC: TOWARD A NEW THEORY OF VOICE

Texts on gender and the voice are not the only instances of scholarship to equate the sounding voice with the body and/or subjectivity. In a short essay in *Image, Music, Text*, Roland Barthes discusses voice as distinct from language, characterizing song (as *lied* or *mélodie*) as the meeting of language and voice.[52] Barthes goes on to discuss vocal timbre in great detail, associating particular types of sounds with parts of the vocal tract, and placing the sounding voice in a one-

---

[49] Amy Cimini, "Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music: Toward a New Practice of Theorizing Musical Bodies," Ph.D. Diss., New York University, 2011.

[50] Citations of Parker and Sedgwick's collaborative volume are conspicuously absent in studies of musical performance, which may account for some of the strange ways music scholars attempt to get around Butler's performativity/performance distinction.

[51] E.g.: Suzanne G. Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex," in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, eds. (Zürich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999): 25-49. See also: Joke Dame, "Unveiled Voices: Sexual Difference and the Castrato," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology,* Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[52] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text*, Stephen Heath, translator (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977): 179-189.

to-one relationship with the body, but not with subjectivity.[53] He writes, "The voice is not personal: it expresses nothing of the cantor, of his soul; it is not original, and at the same time it is individual: it has us hear a body which has no civil identity, no 'personality,' but which is nevertheless a separate body."[54] In the text surrounding this passage, Barthes distinguishes further between body and subjectivity, voice and language. Ontologically, then, the voice is the body for Barthes, while claims on subjectivity still reside with language. Following this logic, Barthes' naming of song as the meeting of language and voice also makes song the meeting of body and subjectivity. In the remainder of the essay, Barthes advances an aesthetic theory valorizing song performance in which the singer's body and bodily labor are audible ("the grain of the voice"). Barthes makes distinctions in the relative value of particular audible body parts, emphasizing the nose and throat over the lungs.[55] It is worth noting that the stance taken up by Barthes is a thinly veiled move to claim the French language as superior to German for musical performance and, thus, French-speaking subjects as superior to German-speaking subjects.

Though she does not cite Barthes, Suzanne Cusick's "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex" (in *Audible Traces*) engages directly with the ontology proposed in "The Grain of the Voice." In her article, Cusick proposes a theory of voice and subjectivity based on Judith Butler's definition of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*.[56] While the first, more theoretical half of Cusick's text closely follows Butler's ontology of body and *logos* participating together in speech-acts to constitute the gendered subject, Cusick's case studies in the second half of the article fall back into an ontology that conflates voice and body

---

[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid, 182.
[55] Ibid, 183-189.
[56] Suzanne Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex," in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, eds. (Zürich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999): 25-49.

18

without *logos*.[57] In the case studies for "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex," Cusick equates particular ways of using the voice with the mind/body and nature/culture binaries. She claims that Eddie Vedder's audible strain at the high end of his modal register is a sign for mind and/or culture subjugating the body and nature and, thus, an embodiment of conventional male subjectivity. Meanwhile, she reads the Indigo Girls' aesthetic of clear vocal sounds and close, consonant harmonies as an embrace of the body and nature and, thus, as an oppositional feminine subjectivity. In this way, Cusick's case studies collapse voice, body, and gendered subjectivities onto each other, which is at once an affirmation of and a departure from Barthes. Both Cusick's models of gendered vocality place the voice in a one-to-one relationship with the body, as Barthes' model does. Though the body sounds and is heard differently when enacting different genders, Cusick is still mapping it directly onto the voice. She diverges from Barthes, however, in mapping subjectivity onto voice and body. Barthes is fairly adamant in "The Grain of the Voice" that, while the voice sounds the body, subjectivity is only enacted through language. Cusick's analysis uncouples subjectivity from *logos* and, instead, links it to the manner in which voice and body sonically enact gender.

Treating the voice as a practical (rather than philosophical) entity, Alexandros Constantis troubles Barthes' and Cusick's mapping of voice onto body in "The Changing Female-to-Male (FTM) Voice." In the article, published in *Radical Musicology,* Constantis is concerned with the physical/biological realities of voice changes for transgender men.[58] His article engages with the

---

[57] Ibid. See also: Cusick 1994. In philosophy of language, *logos* (literally "word" in Greek) is the word by which subjects speak themselves into existence as thinking subjects inhabiting bodies. This is tightly bound with Cartesian mind/body dualism, which I briefly examine later in this text. There will be a fuller unpacking of this concept throughout the dissertation. *Logos*, as Cusick understands it, is conflated with the mind in the mind/body binary. This is a fairly common way of theorizing mind, body, and *logos* in second-wave feminist thought and is also the tradition Butler explicitly writes *against*.

[58] Alexandros Constantis, "The Changing Female-to-Male (FTM) Voice," *Radical Musicology* 3: 32 pars, 12 October 2014, http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk.

medical establishment and (at the time) common practice regarding hormonal transition for trans men, which, he argues, emphasizes visual virilization to the detriment of a "convincing" voice change.[59] Constantis does not state it outright, but the problems he presents regarding medical assumptions about trans men and voice changes are telling case studies in what happens when the voice and the body are assumed to be in a simple, one-to-one relationship. Constantis' article is also important in considering the relationship between voice and identity because, for many transgender people, there is a disjunction between gender identity and the gendered sound of the pre-transition (and sometimes post-transition) voice.[60]

Amy Cimini's doctoral dissertation "Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music" directly challenges the ontology underpinning "embodied musicology" as practiced by Cusick and other New Musicologists. As an alternative to the mind/body split of Cartesian ontology—which is the basis for Western patriarchal and colonial concepts of subjectivity, as well as feminist and post-colonial critiques—Cimini proposes an ontology in which mind and body are one substance, based on the work of Baruch Spinoza.[61] While Cimini does not directly deal with the voice, her ontology has implications for the relationship between voice, body, mind, and subjectivity. Using Cimini's ontology of body and mind as a single, expressive substance removes the split between body and subjectivity that is overtly present in Barthes and present as a sort of specter in Cusick.[62] Further, subjectivity as conceptualized by Descartes and other Euro-American philosophers becomes something of a moot point after Cimini's intervention. The sounding voice, too, must then be radically reconceptualized to fit a Spinozist ontological frame.

---

[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Amy Cimini, "Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music: Toward a New Practice of Theorizing Musical Bodies," Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2011.
[62] Ibid.

Also presenting challenges to Barthes' ontology of voice-as-body are sound studies texts by Jonathan Sterne and Stefan Helmreich. Though neither poses a philosophical critique along the lines of Cimini, their work on sound recording, transduction, and embodiment breaks or at least complicates Barthes' model of voice and body as isomorphic. Sterne's project in *The Audible Past* is an archaeology of "sound" as a concept in Western thought to frame his cultural history of sound reproduction technology.[63] In doing this archaeological project, Sterne connects the history of sound to ways of thinking about human perception. He questions theorists and theories of sound operating on the assumption that there is an ontological separation of recorded sound "from a 'source' that exists prior to and outside its affiliation with the technology."[64] Thus, Sterne troubles theories of sound reproduction using the language of disorder and pathology to describe the recorded voice as disembodied. Instead, Sterne emphasizes the development of phonographic technology as a means of *preserving* voices and speech, along the same lines as the development of embalming and food preservation technologies in the mid-nineteenth century.[65] Sterne's troubling of notions of "disembodied" recorded voices, coupled with his association of sound recording with other techniques of preservation, poses problems for an ontology that simply maps voice onto body: a voice that can be detached from the body and preserved through phonographic means cannot be in a one-to-one relationship with the body.

Stefan Helmreich's ethnography "An Anthropologist Underwater," included in Sterne's *Sound Studies Reader*, picks up similar issues to those Sterne raises in *The Audible Past*. Helmreich conducted the ethnography for the essay on a submarine and writes on the effects of underwater sound transduction. The part of his work posing the greatest challenge to ontologies

---

[63] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
[64] Ibid, 21.
[65] Ibid, 1-20.

of voice-as-body is his description of the submarine crewmembers' voices while breathing the helium-laced atmosphere in the vessel. (The helium was present to prevent decompression/recompression sickness from prolonged deep-sea life.) The helium caused the crew's voices to sound at higher pitches and with a different timbre than they would while breathing air on the surface.[66] This example poses problems for Barthes' ontology of voice as the sound of the body because of the way Helmreich frames transduction throughout the chapter.

Though "transduction" implies translation and could have easily been implemented in a way that reifies Barthes—framing the submarine's atmosphere as a masking agent for the crewmembers' "real" bodies and voices—Helmreich takes a different approach that instead challenges human/technology boundaries, as well as assumptions that voice and body are isomorphic. Helmreich frames transduction as an inevitable part of human existence and sensory perception.[67] Just as a voice is transduced by sounding through helium on the submarine or sounding through a phonograph, a voice is transduced by sounding through the atmosphere and being heard by an ear on the surface. Thus, hearing a voice (or any sound, for that matter) always involves an element of transduction and there is no "pure" or "unaltered" sound of the body in the sense used by Barthes.[68]

In his discussion of voices and transduction, Helmreich also notes that hearing one's own voice is a special form of transduction because of the bodily resonances that only result from the sounding of one's own voice and not from vibrations originating outside the body.[69] His distinction between the sound of one's own voice and the bodily resonances causing transduction

---

[66] Stefan Helmreich, "An Anthropologist Underwater," in *The Sound Studies Reader*, Jonathan Sterne, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012): 168-185.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Bernard Stiegler makes similar claims in *Technics and Time* (1998), which will be discussed in the following pages.
[69] Stefan Helmreich, "An Anthropologist Underwater."

in hearing one's own voice also point to an ontology in which voice and body are not isomorphic. This distinction between the sound of one's own voice through the body and the sound of others' (or phonographic) voices also comes up in Douglas Kahn's *Noise Water Meat* (1999). Kahn discusses the phenomenon of hearing one's own recorded voice for the first time, describing the experience as hearing a "deboned" version of the voice because sound playback does not resonate through the body in the same way as the voice sounded through the larynx.[70]

Kahn's recorded, "deboned" voice and Helmreich's (and Sterne's) concept of sound transduction raise important questions about the location of the voice, since it cannot be directly mapped onto the body. Bernard Stiegler and Mladen Dolar present two theories of voice that move away from ontologies collapsing voice, body, and/or subjectivity onto each other and into more speculative philosophical territory. Stiegler grounds his work in Ancient Greek debates about memory, speech, and the use of technology as prosthesis, which also places him in dialogue with some of Sterne's work on sound reproduction technology as a means of preserving the voices of the dead. Dolar also situates his work historically, recounting several nineteenth century attempts to technologically recreate human speech before theorizing (through Lacan) the location of the voice and its relationship to language and thought.

Stiegler's *Technics and Time* (1998) is concerned with the ontology of technology and prosthesis, focused on where the "human" ends and the "technological" begins. Stiegler cites debates about the role of "technics" (including "techniques" and "technology") going back to Antiquity, noting the consistent distrust of technics in relation to any sort of knowledge production and retention.[71] He locates this distrust in ontological distinctions between human reason, knowledge, and memory and techniques or devices meant to aid in producing or retaining

---

[70] Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999): 7.
[71] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

knowledge. Ancient Greek debates about writing and its relationship to knowledge and memory are central to the history of Western philosophy's distrust of technics. However, Stiegler troubles this ontology with his assertion that culture itself (and, thus, language) might be seen as technics or prostheses because they are not, strictly speaking, of the body; they are man-made, to use the phrasing from his Aristotle quote.[72] Following this logic, the voice, too, is a prosthesis: it is a tool for externalizing language and disseminating knowledge and, though vocal sounds originate in the body, the voice becomes a man-made object when used as a channel for *logos* or to externalize non-linguistic thought.[73]

In *A Voice and Nothing More,* Mladen Dolar is concerned with what he calls the "object voice," which he distinguishes from the voice as a tool for externalizing language and the voice as an object of aesthetic pleasure.[74] In differentiating this "object voice" from the linguistic and aesthetic voices, Dolar cites historical attempts to replicate speech and thought with machines, focusing in particular on Wolfgang von Kempelen's speaking machine and chess-playing automaton.[75] As Dolar frames it, the pairing of the two machines in Kempelen's European demonstration tours highlights the "object voice" and its relationship to language, thought, and aesthetic pleasure. Kempelen would demonstrate the speaking machine first, in a manner that made no attempt to mask its mechanical workings and, thus, emphasized its non-humanity. The automaton, on the other hand, appeared to be a similarly transparent device, but it relied on a trick to simulate mechanized thinking.[76] In contrasting these two presentations, Dolar points out the uncanny peculiarities of the speaking machine. Though Kempelen used the machine (which

---

[72] Ibid, 1.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.

was operated by hand) to produce meaningful phrases in French and Latin, he did not disguise its workings and, thus, made clear that the machine was not thinking.[77] Dolar reads this mechanical sound-without-thought as placing and producing the voice "in excess of speech and meaning," approaching his concept of the "object voice."[78] He then cites Lacan and Agamben to define the "object voice" as that which exceeds language and meaning, as a remainder.[79]

Dolar's "object voice" and Stiegler's voice-as-prosthesis are especially helpful in theorizing performance styles in drag. Standard performance practice in drag involves a lip-sync to a commercially recorded musical track, with the pre-recorded voice acting as a vocal prosthesis for the performer. Though this is a more literal understanding of prosthesis than what Stiegler proposes, it serves to highlight his point, much as the overdone gender of drag serves to highlight socially constructed gender norms.[80] Recorded voices used for lip-syncs also become object voices, in a sense, because using them for drag performance removes them from their typical networks of meaning. Unlike Dolar's object voice, however, voices used in drag lip-syncs are inserted into new networks of meaning, thus highlighting perceptions that recorded voices are somehow disembodied and made into objects.

---

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid, 10. Though he describes Kempelen's speaking machine as producing potentially meaningful phrases in French and Latin, Dolar also notes that the mechanical speech was only marginally intelligible, thus obscuring linguistic meaning and bringing the uncanny sonic qualities of a mechanical voice to the forefront. Dolar also notes that the phrases uttered by Kempelen's hands through the speaking machine were phrases expressing devotion to a beloved (an Other) or to a ruler. Thus, by Dolar's reading, the inhuman speaking machine expressed human subjectivity through its utterance of subject-making linguistic expressions of love and supplication.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Drag queens who sing, manipulating the timbre of their voices to play with codes for hearing gender, align more closely with Stiegler's definition of voice as prosthesis, though a singing drag queen is also knowingly exaggerating the qualities that make *all* voices prostheses in order to make social commentary.

1.4   METHODOLOGY

Because of my subject matter, I blend traditional ethnography, virtual ethnography (through social media), and media studies in the methodology for this dissertation. Most of the material is rooted in traditional ethnography—being physically present in a place and talking to people— supplemented by virtual conversations at times. But media studies also plays a significant role in that drag constantly references television, film, popular music, politics, and celebrity gossip. In addition to this direct influence, television has indirectly shaped the ethnographic material because I chose my field sites based on regional drag styles shown on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. My choice of the Blue Moon in Pittsburgh as a primary ethnographic field site was based on what I perceived as the novelty of Sharon Needles' drag on Season 4 of *Drag Race*. Sharon used cheap materials, referenced horror movies, and explicitly stood up for transgender people during her time on *Drag Race*. The combination of all these atypical (for *Drag Race* contestants) behaviors, as well as Sharon's references to a home bar and group of queens like her, led me to believe that something significant—and something critical of the prevailing aesthetic on *Drag Race*—was happening with drag in Pittsburgh. That Sharon specifically spoke in opposition to body-essentialist binary gender, articulating trans-inclusive queer politics, especially piqued my interest because *Drag Race* policy until the current season (Season 9) has excluded trans women.[81]

After choosing the Blue Moon as a primary field site and realizing that I would be writing a good deal about aesthetics and politics set explicitly in opposition to *Drag Race*, I reasoned

---

[81] Laurie Norris, "Of Fish and Feminists: Homonormative Misogyny and the Trans* Queen," in *The Makeup of* RuPaul's Drag Race*: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows*, Jim Daems, ed. (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2014), pp. 13-30.

that I should have a second field site where performances adhere to RuPaul's preferred aesthetic. After talking to some friends in the Washington, DC gay community, I decided to make DC my secondary field site because Tatianna (*Drag Race* Season 2) regularly performs at a bar there, and her style of drag is one of the preferred local aesthetics. I also grew up in the DC area, which meant I had to do somewhat less background research on geography, audience demographics, and localized behavioral norms in gay bars than I would have needed had I chosen an entirely unfamiliar field site as my secondary.

Washington, DC also proved to be an apt choice as a second field site because of differences in performer and audience demographics between venues there and venues in Pittsburgh. Where Pittsburgh's drag performers and audiences are overwhelmingly white, DC venues often feature artists of color performing for white audiences. In addition to these racial dynamics, a significant portion of audience members in DC are straight women who come into drag venues for single events and do not return, while audiences at the Blue Moon tend to be queer people and regular patrons of the bar. These demographic differences contribute to aesthetic and political differences between venues and also influence how performers contextualize their work during shows.

In addition to my primary and secondary field sites, I have done some minor ethnographic work at gay bars in Pittsburgh that cater to different demographics and expectations of drag aesthetics than does the Blue Moon. This has allowed me to situate the Blue Moon's aesthetics and politics not only in relation to *Drag Race*-influenced national trends, but also within Pittsburgh. To this end, I have also done some preliminary ethnographic work with drag performers in Cleveland because one of my dissertation committee members suggested that aesthetic and political themes at the Blue Moon are also present in some Cleveland venues.

Though my work in Cleveland is still in the preliminary stages (see Conclusion), it does appear that there are connections between drag at Cocktails in Cleveland and the Blue Moon in Pittsburgh. Whether these connections are based on shared identities and aesthetic considerations across the two venues or are a result of contact between the Pittsburgh and Cleveland scenes is a matter for further research.

When I met performers at my field sites, I was often encouraged to follow them through social media. As a show of support and to facilitate further conversation, I did this, and some of the conversations that informed my writing happened over social media because it is easier to ask and answer questions in a virtual space without the pressure of setting up for a show or shouting over a loud, crowded bar. In addition, social media platforms like Facebook are virtual spaces where performers interact with each other, both in and out of their stage personas. Event pages for drag shows and performers' profiles often have conversations that show alliances and fault lines in a given community's aesthetic and political consciousness. Seeing these conversations play out in virtual space allowed me to be more informed when I entered the actual space of the drag show. If there had been an issue, I would know and avoid inflaming any tensions between performers and/or fans.

Social media platforms themselves also play a role in the politics of my ethnographic work. Though Facebook has somewhat relaxed on the policy of late, the platform's "real name" rule was being used to target drag queens and trans people a great deal between 2013 and 2015. Several Blue Moon performers were caught up in Facebook's enforcement of the "real name" policy during that time, and they chronicled their interactions with Facebook administrators through their status updates, even as they were outed and forced to change the names on their profiles.

According to people who dealt with Facebook administrators first-hand, the enforcement of the "real name" policy is based on administration receiving a report of a "fake" name and individually tracking down the person who has violated the policy. While the rule was designed to discourage anonymous cyber-bullying through the use of fictitious Facebook accounts, there was someone going through Facebook and specifically targeting drag queens and trans women in several major US cities, including Pittsburgh, for at least two years. As a result, a number of performers were outed and forced to use their legal names on profiles that had formerly been dedicated to their drag personas. This was damaging to their promotional apparatus, as a drag name is a brand and performers are typically not known by their legal names except to friends. In addition, Facebook administration's insistence on enforcing this policy against the queer community, while allowing other fictitious personas to continue using "fake" names, was potentially dangerous for people who were not out either as drag performers or as transgender to family, colleagues, or other acquaintances.[82]

Whether they were directly affected by the enforcement of the "real name" policy or not, people in the Facebook queer community were conscious of the threat posed by Facebook's enforcement of the "real name" rule and mobilized in protest of Facebook's actions. As part of these protests, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in San Francisco traveled to Facebook's main office to discuss the impact of the "real name" policy on queer people and others for whom privacy is a life-or-death concern (e.g. people avoiding abusers and other stalkers). The protests seem to have had some effect in that Facebook is being more reasonable when drag queens and trans people ask to keep names that are not their legal names on their Facebook profiles. Within the last six months, a few Blue Moon performers who were forced to use their legal names on

---

[82] I have a few friends who are not drag artists and use pseudonyms on Facebook to avoid unwanted communication from estranged family members, stalkers, abusers, and the like. Their profiles were not reported for "fake" names.

their drag profiles have changed back to their drag names without incident, though the tone of discussions around this relaxation of the "real name" policy still carries deep distrust of Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg.[83]

Because I am aware of the damage that can be done by outing a queer person and because I wish to support and promote the drag artists who appear in my dissertation, I have adopted a "drag names only" policy for performers in this document. When I began the project in 2012, I was leaning toward such a policy as the safest and most ethical way to write about drag. Facebook's actions surrounding their "real name" policy and the impact of those actions on the American queer community strengthened my resolve to use only drag names as a matter of both safety and respect for queer identities and naming practices. Drag performers' stage names and trans people's chosen names are real names—even if not recognized as such by the State—and for Facebook (or any other party) to insinuate otherwise is an act of ideological violence against queer people.[84] In order to combat this ideological violence and to affirm queer identities, I refer to performers and other people in and around drag shows with only their chosen names. The only exception to this "drag names only" policy for performers is Lady J Martinez O'Neal/Jeremiah Davenport. In addition to being a well regarded performer in the Cleveland drag scene, Jeremiah/Lady J is a scholar and historian of drag. I name her in his off-stage identity so that she might be recognized as both an academic and a performer.[85]

In addition to respecting queer naming practices in the ethnographic portions of the text, a significant portion of the theoretical support for the ethnography is drawn from queer authors

---

[83] When reports began to surface of drag queens and trans women being specifically targeted and impacted by the "real name" policy, Zuckerberg spoke in defense of Facebook's rule and completely dismissed the concerns of people who had been outed and put in danger by his policy. The queer community, at least in Pittsburgh, has not forgotten this.

[84] Butler, *Excitable Speech*.

[85] At Jeremiah's request, I am deliberately mixing his gender pronouns to reflect her fluid identity.

writing on the fringes and borders of academic discourse. I have done this deliberately, even when more conventional academic sources exist, in order to cite sources that will be accessible to the people cited in the ethnographic episodes of the dissertation, as well as to de-privilege institutionalized, academic queer theory and favor public intellectuals, journalists, and activists writing theories drawn directly from contemporary queer expression. Online sources like Sara Ahmed's *Feminist Killjoys* blog and the *Everyday Feminism* blog, with their stated missions of creating accessible, socially critical, intellectual discourse that includes citations, have contributed a great deal to my theories of queer solidarity, nurturance culture, and emotional presence. Using online sources instead of traditionally published academic texts also allows for an immediacy on par with the social media sources that have supplemented my traditional ethnography: because blogs like *Feminist Killjoys* and *Everyday Feminism* bypass some of the processes of academic publishing, they can respond much more quickly than *Ethnomusicology* (e.g.) to current events and emerging forms of queer expression. This immediacy is helpful in theorizing drag artists' responses to current events because Sara Ahmed and *Everyday Feminism*'s contributing authors often post their analyses of social issues at about the same time Blue Moon artists reference the same issues in a show.

1.5   A NOTE ON MUSICAL EXAMPLES

I have deliberately avoided using Western musical notation in this dissertation for two major reasons: firstly, the sonic properties I am concerned with in this text are mostly confined to vocal register, timbre, and diction. Western musical notation in its current form does not provide a means to notate vocal register and timbre, and practices for notating diction are not standardized.

Thus, I have chosen not to transcribe with conventional notation. Instead, I include spectrograph images to show timbre and register where relevant, supplementing text-based descriptions of musical events. The second reason I have avoided notation is one of accessibility and audience. I am a music scholar, and my musical training informs the work I do here. However, I recognize that many of the people for whom this work will be relevant come from academic fields outside music or from outside academia all together. Because Western notation is not necessary to my argument in this dissertation and because I wish to be inclusive of all potential readers, I have elected not to use notation in my examples.

1.6   CHAPTER SUMMARIES

In "Be Nice or Get Out," I use Steve Goodman's "affective tone" and ideas about empathy and nurturance culture from the *Feminist Killjoys* and *Everyday Feminism* blogs to discuss the creation and maintenance of the Blue Moon Bar in Pittsburgh as a queer space, especially as compared to other, more homonormative gay bars in Pittsburgh. In this chapter, I also write about my experiences as a trans person doing ethnography with queer performance artists, including feelings of safety or danger in being out as trans in different venues and with different groups of performers.

"Who Is Singing?," shows how drag performances at all my field sites are critiques of existing theories of voice. I then suggest new theories by seriously considering drag artists' assertions that drag is transformative and queens can become the characters they portray on stage while also being themselves. The ethnographic examples in this chapter are supported by

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's interpretation of Deleuzian "becoming," which closely parallels several artists' accounts of drag as a transformative process.

"Where is the Voice?," plays on ideas of presence through sounding voices and focuses on voices of the dead used in drag performances either as campy tributes to recently deceased celebrities or as respectful citations of well known foundational figures in drag. In all cases, performers are knowingly playing on audience knowledge that the voice sounding through the speakers is that of a deceased person who cannot be physically present. In this chapter, I show how drag performances both critique and conditionally support theories of the sounding voice as presence, depending on the content of the act.

"Drag Becomes Them" focuses on the work of two Pittsburgh drag artists who use drag performance to become themselves, rather than the more typical gesture of becoming a celebrity or a fictional character while in drag. This chapter revisits many of the ideas first advanced in "Who is Singing?" and "Where is the Voice?" while altering them slightly, thus making a theory of voice-as-becoming applicable outside of drag venues. This turn shows how a theory of voice based on drag can be more inclusive and work in more contexts than theories of voice based on gender- and sexuality-normative expressions.

1.7   SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

This project participates in growing bodies of research on queer identities and voice in ethnomusicology and sound studies, respectively. My work is especially significant in that it brings these themes together: while queer and feminist scholarship is often concerned with speech-acts, the sounding voice is mostly absent from discussions of gender performativity and

performance. Likewise, sound studies work on voice and embodiment does not consider or account for gender, often assuming a generic, non-gendered (or default-male) body. In bringing together theories of gender and theories of voice, my work will provide models for describing how genders are sounded and heard through the voice without resorting the body-essentialist language that has characterized previous scholarship on voice and gender. My work also highlights the importance of considering gender in sound studies scholarship: leaving gender out (or, really, leaving out any source of social inequality) silences the experiences of marginalized people and tacitly invalidates non-normative sonic expression. By combining sound studies theories with gender theories and applying them to drag performance, I show what sound studies stands to gain by including gender and sexuality studies.

2.0   "BE NICE OR GET OUT": SONICALLY CREATING AND ENFORCING THE BOUNDARIES OF QUEER SPACE IN PITTSBURGH

"Be Nice or Get Out." So proclaims a sign next to the front door of the Blue Moon bar in Pittsburgh. This directive encapsulates the rules for belonging in the space and is enforced by the bar's staff, drag performers, and regulars through their influences on the venue's soundscape. The Blue Moon is an inclusively queer space, a safe haven for trans and gender non-conforming people often marginalized even within the LGBT community, and, thus, its insiders are particularly invested in maintaining the bar's "niceness." In this context, being "nice" is a rejection of cis- and heteronormative pressures to "pass" or assimilate, instead prioritizing the rights of queer people to exist as they identify.[86] Sonically, this manifests as an eclectic mix of musical, conversational, and ambient sounds reflecting who is in the bar at a given time. If, however, an outsider tries to impose cis- or heteronormative values on the space, insiders often respond by using musical sound to passively reject the offender, drawing attention to their non-membership in the space and encouraging them to be nice or get out.

---

[86] See: Sara Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare," *Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy As a World Making Project* (blog), posted 25 August 2014, https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/. See also: Kate Bornstein, *Hello Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks, and Other Outlaws* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006). Nora Samaran, "Why We Need the Opposite of Rape Culture—Nurturance Culture," *Everyday Feminism*, published 15 March 2016, http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/03/nurturance-culture/. Sara Ahmed, "Clumsiness," *Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy as a World Making Project* (blog), posted 4 September 2013, https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/04/clumsiness/.

The first night I went to the Blue Moon, I was expecting a normative, mainstream drag venue. Because I knew that Sharon Needles—a *Drag Race* winner—was a Blue Moon queen, I imagined that the clientele would be flamboyantly dressed and visibly effeminate in keeping with what I had seen at venues outside of Pittsburgh.[87] Thus, in order to blend in with what I assumed would be the aesthetic norms, I dressed for the outing in the flamboyant smart casual style I associated with urban, gay masculinity. This included a smoking jacket, which would not have been out of place in a DC or Austin gay bar, but at the Blue Moon, it attracted a great deal of attention.[88]

I thought it would be necessary to pass as a young, cisgender, urban, gay man when going to the Blue Moon for the first time because of my appearance and relationship to queer masculinities in early 2013. When I began research for this project, I was two and a half years into the medical part of a female-to-male gender transition and was not yet passing as a cisgender man my age. Because I knew this and wished to avoid being mistaken for a butch lesbian, I decided to adopt signifiers of a specific kind of flamboyant and slightly effeminate gay masculinity, in order to be read as male and as belonging to the space. Because I was unaware of the nuances of gay masculinities in Pittsburgh in general and at the Blue Moon specifically, I did not realize that in doing something I thought would blend in, I would actually be drawing somewhat unwanted attention to myself.

As I found out through repeated visits to the Blue Moon and to other drag venues (usually also gay male spaces) in Pittsburgh, gender expression at the Blue Moon is not read the same way as it is in Austin or Washington, DC. Because the Blue Moon is a neighborhood bar in a

---

[87] I realize that this is a problematic conflation of gender and sexuality on my part. In my defense, previous experience had led me to believe that there is a correlation between effeminate gender expression and enjoyment of drag shows, especially *Drag Race*.
[88] Before living in Pittsburgh, I lived in Austin and in the Washington, DC area.

formerly working-class area of Pittsburgh (now overrun by hipsters), its clientele does not typically wear things like smoking jackets for a night out.[89] Boots and flannel—stereotypical signifiers of "butch," working-class masculinity—are much more of a norm for the Blue Moon than bright, "preppy" colors and other signifiers of a less "butch," affluent masculinity.[90] This is more a reflection of the Blue Moon's geographic location and class identification within Pittsburgh than it is a question of gender regulation in the LGBTQ community. Where my smoking jacket would have been within the range of gender expressions typically seen at Cruze in Pittsburgh's Strip District (for example), it was very much out of place at the Blue Moon, and learning this on my first night there was a reminder that I was new both to Pittsburgh and to queer masculinity.

This newness to the locale and to the variety in expressions of queer masculinities has shaped my relationship to the Blue Moon as a field site, as well as to drag in general. While this project is by no means about me, I was present at the Blue Moon and interacting with performers, bar staff, and audiences as a selectively out trans man beginning to learn and negotiate queer masculinity. These aspects of my identity shaped my conversations with people in the field, especially at the Blue Moon. Because there is a large trans presence at the Blue Moon, including people in many stages of transition, my trans identity ended up being more of an asset than the gay identity I assumed I needed to take on to be legible in the space. Revealing my trans history in conversation with people at the Blue Moon allowed me to have deeper conversations about gender, body, and artistic expression than would have happened were I a gay

---

[89] There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. *Some* Blue Moon regulars do wear suits, ties, and other semi-formal to formal clothing on a regular basis.
[90] The association of working-class identity with "butch" hyper masculinity is problematic, as is the similar association of affluence with failed masculinity. Both of these stereotypes are part of larger structures that police class, race, gender, and sexuality together. (Todd Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction*. See also: Kate Bornstein, *My Gender Workbook*.)

cisgender man. On multiple separate occasions, my trans identity and resultant ability to understand and name transphobic social structures has come up as a reason why Blue Moon community members want to share stories and details with me. Especially for some of the people who were earlier in medical transition or were looking to begin one, my experience navigating the medical and legal systems governing gender and transitions facilitated conversations; I was able to give useful information about medical and legal issues at the same time that I was asking about their artistic and everyday gender identities and expressions. This exchange, I think, created a level of safety and comfort in keeping with the Blue Moon's larger tone and made me a part of the space in a way that would have been inaccessible to my initial assumed identity of affluent, flamboyant, effeminate, cisgender, young, gay, white man.[91]

The attention I attracted through my initial misstep with the smoking jacket at the Blue Moon, as well as the knowledge I gained about how to be a queer man without appropriating signifiers of affluent, white gayness, also influenced my approach to gender expression at my secondary field sites. Learning how to be out and feel safe at the Blue Moon made me more conscious of my sense of potential danger in other venues, especially where my medical history is concerned. In the same vein, I also became more aware of venues that were implicitly transphobic and/or misogynist while claiming to cater to "the LGBT community," even if I was able to pass unnoticed through those venues. This awareness made me more careful about revealing my trans identity at my secondary field sites because I suspected they might not be as

---

[91] The centrality of my trans identity here is not to eclipse the privileges afforded by my whiteness, education, and affluent upbringing. Those privileges are very visible parts of my identity, more so because the experience of being trans and interacting with the state or the medical establishment tends to temporarily negate most of that privilege— which is what makes it visible as privilege.

safe or welcoming as the Blue Moon and that coming out as trans might shut down conversations, rather than opening them.[92]

2.1   GEOGRAPHY AND INTERIOR DESIGN

The Blue Moon is located in Pittsburgh's Lawrenceville neighborhood, near the intersection of Butler Street and Stanton Avenue. It is a small space, several times longer than it is wide, and is divided into front and back rooms by a narrow hallway housing spent beer kegs (from the bar) and a cigarette vending machine. The stage is in the front room and would be visible from the street, save for the Bear and Leather Pride flags blocking the windows. Only recently has the owner mandated that patrons must smoke in the back room of the bar; in the past, smoking was allowed in the front room as well, and the space still smells like years of accumulated cigarette smoke, despite the visibly clearer air. The walls of the front room are painted a saturated, medium blue, with black accents, making the bright, multi-colored stage lighting more striking. Near the ceiling, around the perimeter of the room are professional photographs of regular performers: Bebe Beretta, Bambi Deerest, Tootsie Snyder, Alora Chateaux, Cherri Baum, Moon Baby, Cindy Crochford, Amy Vodkahaus, Sharon Needles, Alaska Thunderfuck, and Veruca la Piranha.[93]

The Blue Moon's location in Lawrenceville is significant because of the neighborhood's history. In the past, Lawrenceville was Pittsburgh's Irish neighborhood (as Polish Hill was the Polish neighborhood and Bloomfield is still "Little Italy") and was generally understood to be

---

[92] See Ch. 3.

[93] This is the cast of characters to be introduced in the following chapters. Please see Appendix A for a list of performers included throughout the dissertation, accompanied by short descriptions of their personas.

working-class. After the decline of the steel industry, the neighborhood fell apart: people left, businesses closed, and buildings were abandoned.[94] As part of Pittsburgh's rebuilding and gentrification process in the late 1990s and early 2000s, artists—"code for gay people," according to one of my interlocutors—were invited to settle in gentrifying areas.[95] This led to the conversion of the Blue Moon from neighborhood bar to gay bar and, eventually, to the queer space it is now. In many senses, though, the Blue Moon still is a neighborhood bar, and this is evident in the way staff, performers, and regulars interact: bartenders, performers, and patrons are friendly in their interactions, greeting with hugs and good-naturedly ribbing each other about shared experiences. But, rather than having the Blue Moon's "neighborhood" be geographically based, the current community is held together by its commitment to keeping the space safe for queer people, especially when straight outsiders attempt to impose their expectations for queer bodies on the space.

This chapter describes both aspects of the Blue Moon's soundscape: the use of sound in the Blue Moon's drag aesthetic to create queer space, as well as the use of sound to neutralize threats to "niceness." In my analysis, I adapt Steve Goodman's concepts of affective tone and weaponized sound to model the politics of creating and defining the boundaries of the Blue-Moon-as-space through its soundscape.[96] This adaptation of Goodman is primarily done via queer and feminist writings on self care, nurturance culture, and humor as queer weaponry.[97] Sara Ahmed and Kate Bornstein, as well as Blue Moon performers themselves, are important in my discussions of "niceness" at the Blue Moon and in re-orienting Goodman's focus on sound

---

[94] Francis R. Albright. Personal interview with the author. February 2013.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*
[97] Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare." See also: Ahmed, "Clumsiness." Samaran, "Why We Need the Opposite of Rape Culture." Bornstein, *Hello Cruel World*, pp. 130-131. See also: Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routlege, 1994), pp. 87-92.

and fear as tools of Power. Ultimately, I argue that staff, performers, and patrons at the Blue Moon repurpose the tools of oppression, including sound, to create and maintain a queer space in which they can safely identify and exist as *any* gender or sexuality, not just the binary ones.

In order to contextualize the Blue Moon's radical queer politics, I supplement ethnographic anecdotes from there with discussions of aesthetics on *RuPaul's Drag Race* and larger cultures of privatized mobile listening. These latter examples are included to contextualize the parody and queering of Blue Moon drag, especially in relation to sound. Wherever possible, I illustrate points in these discussions with examples from televised episodes of *Drag Race* and/or my fieldwork at the Blue Moon.

2.2 SOUND AND SPACE

Performers, staff, and patrons continuously create the Blue Moon as a queer space through relationships to live and recorded sounds. This is primarily visible in the aesthetics of live drag shows at the Blue Moon, especially as compared to expectations set up through *Drag Race* and the widespread and normalized use of private mobile listening technologies, including audio-only and audiovisual technologies. Blue Moon drag plays on expected relationships to recorded sounds established by both dominant representations of drag in the media and dominant listening culture. This queers relationships to recorded sound in drag and in everyday life, thus helping to establish the Blue Moon as a space where normative expectations are actively questioned and subverted. But, in order to understand the parody, it is necessary to understand its referent.

Relationships to recorded sounds in the aesthetics of *Drag Race* and other mainstream drag are based on modes of listening encultured through uses of private mobile listening and

41

other sound playback technologies. Private and semi-private listening technologies create virtual spaces in which the listener and the pre-recorded sound are present, while the outside world takes on a dreamlike quality shaped by the sound in the virtual space.[98] In a sense, then, a sound recording is a prosthesis, a means of extending the sonic presence of a voice into spaces where the vocalist's body is absent.[99] Drag, in many instances, plays on the creation of presence and virtual space through the playback of recorded sound.[100] By lip-syncing to a sound recording while visually costumed and made-up to resemble the recorded artist, drag performers create a virtual live performance. In this sense, then, a lip-syncing drag artist makes the virtual space of the sound playback into an actual space, provided the lip-sync is accurate.[101]

When Bambi Deerest, Cindy Crochford, Tootsie Snyder, Dixie Surewood, and Alora Chateaux performed the Spice Girls' "Wannabe" at Spice Night 2016, each performer was costumed and made-up to resemble a specific Spice Girl.[102] Bambi was Posh Spice (Victoria Beckham), Cindy was Baby Spice (Emma Bunton), Tootsie was Sporty Spice (Melanie Chisholm), Dixie was Ginger Spice (Geri Halliwell), and Alora was Scary Spice (Melanie Brown). In addition to the visual resemblance, the queens had carefully choreographed

---

[98] Shuhei Hosokawa, "The Walkman Effect," *Popular Music 4* (1984): 165-180. See also: Michael Bull, "No Dead Air! The iPod and the Culture of Mobile Listening." *Leisure Studies* 24/4 (2005): 343-355. Michael Bull, "Soundscapes of the Car: A Critical Study of Automobile Habitation," *The Auditory Culture Reader*, Michael Bull and Les Black, eds. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), pp. 357-374.

[99] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 1-30. See also: Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus,* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[100] N.B.: Not all drag performances operate in this way. Regional drag styles in some parts of the United States (e.g. New York) rarely include the RuPaul-favored lip-sync performance model, if they include it at all. However, because of the aesthetic and economic influence of *Drag Race*, a lot of drag performances around the U.S. are using or playing on the RuPaul model. Outside of my field sites for this project, I have heard and seen through social media that the lip-sync model for drag performances is quite prevalent in major cities with drag scenes large and competitive enough to potentially supply a *Drag Race* contestant. It is also worth noting that the *Drag Race* aesthetic has made its way into drag king performances. When I lived in Austin, the local drag king troupe—the now-defunct Kings 'N' Things—also structured performances around lip-syncing. (See also: Jim Daems, ed., *The Makeup of* RuPaul's Drag Race*: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows,* Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2014.)

[101] The implications of virtual space becoming actual space are discussed in Chapter 2.

[102] The Spice Girls show is an annual tradition that has taken place at the Blue Moon every September since 2014.

synchronized dance moves based on the content of the Spice Girls' music video—though they were limited somewhat by the small dimensions of the Blue Moon's stage—and they had also rehearsed their lip-syncing such that song lines sung by Sporty, Ginger, Scary, and Baby Spice (Posh Spice does not take a turn on lead vocals in "Wannabe") were lip-synced by the appropriate drag artist, with completely correct words and timing. This precision was even more impressive during the group sections of the song and the rap segment at the end, in which Scary and Ginger trade lines very quickly and sometimes mid-sentence. All of the queens knew the words and timing for their parts and could accurately execute the lip-sync while dancing. This accuracy with costuming, choreography, and lip-syncing allowed the virtual space created by the recording to merge with the actual space in the bar.

The playback of the Spice Girls' 1996 recording created a virtual space for audience members familiar with the track and, because of targeted Facebook advertising for the show and larger trends in Lawrenceville's demographics, that included most people present that night. (Some audience members wore Spice Girls merchandise from the 90s, while others had found other ways to display their appreciation—pins, homemade t-shirts, and the like.) When "Wannabe" played over the Blue Moon's speakers, it created a virtual space in which the Spice Girls and the Blue Moon's audience were present, and the addition of live performers who visually resembled the group allowed their sonic presence to extend into the visual realm and the actual space of the Blue Moon's stage. Had the lip-syncing, the costumes, or the dance moves been inaccurate or poorly rehearsed, the merging of virtual and actual spaces and the extension of sonic presence into the visual realm would not have worked.

Figure 1: Blue Moon Spice Night 2016

2.3   AESTHETICS, MEDIA, AND POLITICS OF VIRTUAL SPACE

The aesthetic of a drag show in which virtual space created by playing back a sound recording merges with actual space in the venue values a specific kind of precision and preparation on the part of the drag artist. This preparation requires knowledge of a text—the sound recording and its associated music video if there is one—as well as the time necessary for creating the costume and rehearsing the lip-sync and choreography. On *Drag Race*, the time, financial resources, and knowledge of pop culture necessary to produce this kind of performance have become hallmarks of "professional" queens, and this language is also increasingly being used to describe drag outside of television.[103] Tatianna and Riley Knoxx of Town Danceboutique in Washington, DC, whose performances are described in detail in the next chapter, are queens praised for their "professionalism" or for "serving up realness" because their costuming, wigs, and makeup let them pass for the cisgender women whose songs they are recreating through precise lip-syncing and choreography.[104] Meanwhile, performers whose work operates on aesthetic values other than precise knowledge and recreation of pop culture texts are often marginalized and called "unprofessional" or "busted."

This seemingly aesthetic debate between styles of drag that value different relationships to and knowledge of pop culture texts is highly politicized because of implicit class and gender

---

[103] This language is especially prevalent in seasons 2, 3, and 4 of *Drag Race*, and it also comes up in season 5. The aesthetic and social conflict between Sharon Needles and Phi Phi O'Hara in season 4 and the accompanying *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked* episodes gives especially telling insight into the aesthetics and politics of "professionalism" per *Drag Race*. See also: Laurie Norris, "Of Fish and Feminists: Homonormative Misogyny and the Trans* Queen," in *The Makeup of* RuPaul's Drag Race*: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows*, Jim Daems, ed. (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2014).
[104] According Cleveland drag artist and drag historian Lady J Martinez O'Neal (Jeremiah Davenport), the term "realness" originally meant simply passing as a cisgender woman while in drag. Usage and meanings for "realness" have changed, however, partly because of *Drag Race*. Though neither of us is entirely sure what "realness" means when RuPaul and other *Drag Race* personalities use it, Lady J and I agreed that it means something more than just passing as a cisgender woman when describing the *Drag Race* aesthetic. (Jeremiah Davenport/Lady J Martinez O'Neal, personal communication with the author, 7 February 2017.)

politics in "professional" drag according to *Drag Race*. The class politics of "professional" drag are embedded in the expectation of accurate costuming: for a drag artist to visually resemble a cisgender female pop singer requires clothing, makeup, shoes, a wig, and (often) body padding. This is a significant financial investment that grows with each performer and recording a drag artist adds to their repertoire. The gender politics of "professional" drag are less readily visible. In theory, *Drag Race* drag (and any other drag adhering to its aesthetic) operates on RuPaul's axiom that one is "born naked and the rest is drag," meaning that gender is constructed in the ways one presents one's body to society, independent of anatomy.[105] In practice, however, "professional" drag carries an implied expectation that a drag queen identifies as a cisgender man and is seeking to pass as a cisgender woman while on stage in a drag venue.

This implicit mandate that drag artists construct their acts based on moving from one end of the gender binary to the other is evident in the responses of *Drag Race* judges to Alaska Thunderfuck's male drag during Episode 3 of *Drag Race* Season 5 ("Draggle Rock"). During the episode's main challenge of creating a children's television show, Alaska chose to lampoon rural, working class masculinity and was harshly critiqued by Michelle Visage and other judges during and after the challenge. The judges' critiques of Alaska's male drag were not based on the content of her act, but, rather, on her choice to do male drag at all. This aversion to male drag on the part of the *Drag Race* judges also appeared in other episodes and other seasons, notably in reference to Milk on Season 6. Setting this aesthetic precedent with televised drag shapes live drag in that artists hoping to be legible to *Drag Race* audiences, whether or not they intend to compete on the show, must adhere not only to the definition of "professional" drag advanced by

---

[105] RuPaul often said, "You're born naked and the rest is drag," during the early seasons of *Drag Race*, though that particular catchphrase has fallen out of favor in recent years. N.B.: this statement from RuPaul is very similar to Judith Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble*.

the series, but also to the definition of drag as moving from one end of binary gender to the other.[106]

2.4   REJECTING RUPAULITICS

When Episode 3 of *Drag Race* Season 5 was shown at the Blue Moon, almost the entire bar erupted with indignation at Michelle Visage's criticism of Alaska for doing male drag. And, though I had not yet begun my fieldwork at the Blue Moon during the broadcast of *Drag Race* Season 4, retrospective accounts from Blue Moon regulars lead me to believe that Phi Phi O'Hara's criticism of Sharon Needles' low-budget drag caused a similar uproar. This is partly because Sharon and Alaska are Blue Moon queens, and Blue Moon audiences support their performers. The second reason for the general indignation at Michelle Visage and RuPaul's treatment of Alaska, as well as Phi Phi's treatment of Sharon, was that the *Drag Race*-approved definition of drag participates in class and gender politics that marginalize many of the performers, staff, and patrons at the Blue Moon.

I had the opportunity to speak to Alaska the night "Draggle Rock" was shown—during that season, she and Sharon would often come into the Blue Moon after the *Drag Race* episode had aired—and I specifically mentioned that I appreciated the male drag because it appropriately balanced the silliness of a children's show with a breakdown of toxic masculinity. I also made a point to say that I thought it was unfair of Michelle Visage (a straight woman) to tell Alaska (a queer person) that male drag is not drag. This sparked a brief conversation about queer art, in

---

[106] Daems, ed., *The Makeup of* RuPaul's Drag Race.

which Alaska spoke against binary gender and for an expansive definition of drag as a form of play with gender signifiers that comments on and breaks down oppressive ideas about gender, sexuality, and anatomy. While I tried to steer the conversation toward commentary about Michelle Visage as a representative example of ways that straight people impose their aesthetic preferences on queer spaces and queer art forms, Alaska chose to sidestep direct criticism of *Drag Race* judges.[107] Instead, she elaborated more on the problems of binary gender and praised the Blue Moon as a space that consistently supports queer art and queer people.

Alaska's praise of the Blue Moon was an indirect commentary on the aesthetics and target audience of *Drag Race*, as well as the Blue Moon's relationship to them. Since I began my fieldwork there—appropriately enough, at the premiere of *Drag Race* Season 5—I have seen drag at the Blue Moon consistently question and challenge the aesthetic and political values put forth by RuPaul and *Drag Race*. These direct challenges to the hegemony of *Drag Race* appear primarily on nights when live shows are held after *Drag Race* viewing parties. The live shows are usually in dialogue with some aspect of the theme on *Drag Race* that week, though queens are free to interpret the theme as they choose. Partly because they often conceive and rehearse their acts before the episode airs, their interpretations of weekly *Drag Race* themes typically respond more to general characteristics of the television series than to specific events from a weekly episode.[108]

---

[107] See: Miz Cracker, "Beware the Bachelorette! A Report From the Straight Lady Invasion of Gay Bars," *Slate*, published 13 August 2015,
http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2015/08/13/should_straight_women_go_to_gay_bars_a_drag_queen_reports_on_the_lady_invasion.html.

[108] As of spring 2015, even a passing reference to individual *Drag Race* episodes was rare at post-TV broadcast live shows. As several queens and one regular spectator put it to me, the Blue Moon is "over *Drag Race*" because of its transphobic language and policies, as well as its rigid aesthetics and increasing concessions to neoliberal consumerist branding and product placement. As a result, few performers watch the episodes, though the bar has continued to hold viewing parties for them. It is significant, however, that the crowd for these viewing parties has changed dramatically since I started doing my fieldwork in 2013 from a crowd mostly composed of queer Blue

Among Blue Moon queens, Moon Baby is especially critical of *Drag Race* in post-viewing party live shows, and she will often introduce her performances with an explanation of what she is doing and why.[109] After one of the early episodes of *Drag Race* Season 6 (2014), Moon Baby came on stage in a torn, ill-fitting dress, a cheap wig, smeared makeup, and shoes held together with tape. She took the microphone and introduced her number by saying that she was going to sing live, explaining that her performance was a response to Courtney Act's recent (at the time) iTunes single release of a song protesting homophobic legislation in Russia ("To Russia With Love").[110] Moon Baby applauded Courtney's gesture of protest somewhat sarcastically, noting that the track was a protest song in words only; no proceeds from sales went to actions or organizations committed to improving conditions for queer people in Russia. After condemning Courtney for profiting from a "protest" song while taking no real action against homophobia in Russia, Moon Baby proceeded to sing over "To Russia With Love," mocking Courtney Act for the duration of the performance. While Moon Baby's performance also did very little to directly ameliorate conditions for marginalized people in Russia—she was mostly focused on condemning what she saw as inappropriate profiteering and self-promotion by Courtney Act—Moon Baby does regularly donate her tips to and organize benefit events for Pittsburgh organizations serving the queer community.

Moon Baby's roast of Courtney Act actively rejects the aesthetics of *Drag Race* and, in doing so, also rejects its politics. In wearing cheap, deliberately amateurish drag, Moon Baby challenges definitions of drag that prioritize a move from one binary gender to the other. Instead,

---

Moon regulars to one composed of straight hipsters who come in only for *Drag Race* and only because the bar next door is full. This will be discussed further in the following pages.

[109] Moon Baby is a regular performer at the Blue Moon and is the subject of the first section of Chapter 3 and a significant portion of Chapter 5. More information about her appears there and in Appendix A.

[110] Courtney Act was a competitor on *Drag Race* Season 6 and is also known for appearing on *Australian Idol*.

Moon Baby's presentation mixes external gender signifiers for many genders, including but not limited to "man" and "woman." This refusal of the aesthetics of binary gender stands in direct opposition to Courtney Act's aesthetic and the preferred aesthetic on *Drag Race*. When "To Russia With Love" was released, Courtney Act was identifying as a cisgender man when out of drag and was known on *Drag Race* and *Australian Idol* for fulfilling RuPaul's standards of "professional" drag by being indistinguishable from a cisgender woman on stage. The visual portion of Moon Baby's roast of Courtney Act, then, is a direct subversion of the aesthetics and politics of binary gender.

Moon Baby's choice to sing live instead of lip-syncing, while commonplace in the Blue Moon, is also a subversion of larger aesthetic norms associated with mainstream drag and *Drag Race*. By singing live over the playback of a recorded song while paying no mind to the words or timing of the recording, Moon Baby breaks the virtual space created by the playback. Instead of Courtney Act being sonically present (through her recorded voice) in a virtual space with Blue Moon listeners and visually represented by a drag artist who has precisely replicated her looks, Moon Baby's voice, singing live and drowning out Courtney Act's recorded vocals, asserts Moon Baby's presence in the actual space of the Blue Moon and prevents the recording from creating a virtual one. Under different political circumstances—if, for example, Moon Baby were a straight cisgender man asserting Vladimir Putin's views on homophobic Russian laws—Moon Baby singing over Courtney Act, preventing her from being heard, could be an act of silencing and ideological violence. As it stands, however, Moon Baby's treatment of "To Russia With Love" is a reaction to the ideological violence enacted by *Drag Race* aesthetics and an assertion of the boundaries of queer space, rather than an act of violence in itself.

2.5   CREATING QUEER SPACE

Rejecting the aesthetics and politics of *Drag Race* is not, on its own, enough to create queer space, and Blue Moon drag artists are conscious of this. In addition to explicitly rejecting politics and performance models from *Drag Race*, Blue Moon performers construct an alternative aesthetic that favors queer politics and creates queer space. (This is what Alaska referred to when praising the Blue Moon for its support of queer art and queer artists.) Blue Moon drag articulates queer politics and creates queer space through its expansive definition of drag, inclusive class and gender politics, and plays on actual and virtual space through recorded sound. These elements combine to create an affective tone of safety for queer people by disrupting the exclusionary aesthetics and politics of *Drag Race* and replacing them with a drag aesthetic that embraces low-budget performances and gender-fluid identities and takes an irreverent approach to the sound recordings that act as popular music texts in mainstream drag.[111]

In practice, Bambi Deerest and Bebe Beretta often use sound prominently in their construction of aesthetically and politically queer drag. Both performers create their own audio mixes for drag performance, often incorporating pieces of pop songs interspersed with sound clips from television and other pop culture sources. These homemade mixes, in themselves, break the virtual space created by playing back a recorded pop song because the sound of the song is physically disrupted by different audio content introducing a specific interpretation of the song's meaning—a meaning that may clash with the one created by individual listeners inhabiting a virtual space with the pop song by itself.[112] These interpretations are made more

---

[111] Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).
[112] See: Hosokawa, "The Walkman Effect." Bull, "No Dead Air!" See also: Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 11-30.

explicit by what Bambi and Bebe do while the sounds are playing back. Neither Bebe nor Bambi chooses wardrobe, hair, or makeup to deliberately resemble a vocalist in their sound mixes.[113] Instead, both artists favor looks inspired by grunge and punk rock—leather jackets, t-shirts emblazoned with band names and slogans, combat boots, and tight jeans—often paired with pale foundation, dark hair, and dark lipstick. While Bambi usually chooses to lip-sync to her homemade mixes, using words to comment on current events and oppressive social structures, Bebe's acts use the words in her mixes as points of dialogue with the visual portions of her act, also commenting on the restrictions of binary gender and heteronormativity.[114] Both of these ways of relating staged drag acts to recorded sound cite and exhibit continuity with veteran Blue Moon artists like Cherri Baum, Sharon Needles, Alaska, and Veruca LaPiranha. These latter four performers are the original members of the Haus of Haunt, Blue Moon's house drag troupe, and their approach to drag has set the aesthetic for subsequent Blue Moon queens.

When I began my fieldwork in January of 2013, most of the original four Haus of Haunt members were no longer regular performers at the Blue Moon. Veruca LaPiranha moved out of Pittsburgh some time before 2013, though she still returns to the Blue Moon for one or two shows each year. After their appearances on *Drag Race,* Sharon and Alaska also stopped performing regularly. Sharon still occasionally signs on to do a show at the Blue Moon, but she has been booked at P-Town and other Pittsburgh drag venues more frequently than at the Blue Moon since 2014.[115] Alaska, meanwhile, moved to Los Angeles in 2014 and is now a persona on

[113] There are notable exceptions to this. In Bambi's case, the Spice Girls show is a case where she takes on the appearance of a celebrity in an approximation of normative drag. Bebe has also been known to take on the appearance of Ariana Grande, though her soundtrack for this visual is a viral video of an amateur singer doing a less than perfect cover of an Ariana Grande song.
[114] One of these acts—Bebe's contribution to a fundraiser show for Pulse shooting victims—will be discussed in detail in the following pages.
[115] In recent years, when Sharon commits to a show at the Blue Moon, it has often been at the last minute, and she demands a higher booking fee than most other Blue Moon queens. As a result, I have witnessed show hosts having

several World of Wonder shows. Though she returned to Pittsburgh for a show in late 2016, it was not at the Blue Moon. This leaves Cherri Baum as the only remaining original member of the Haus of Haunt to still be a regular Blue Moon performer and, while the influences of Veruca, Sharon, and Alaska are present in Bebe and Bambi's drag, Cherri has been the most consistent presence as a mentor and an influence.

While there is no single unifying aesthetic element between Cherri, Bebe, and Bambi's drag, their performances break with the binary gender politics and rigid adherence to sound-recording-as-text that exist in mainstream, *Drag Race*-approved drag. All three performers engage with normative standards of feminine beauty—the standards upheld by *Drag Race* judges—but they do so in ways that subvert the importance of those visual criteria by the way their drag looks interact with their soundtracks. Cherri does this through unexpected pairings of sounds with visuals, usually going for a conceptual theme across the whole of her act, rather than a recreation of a music video. Bebe and Bambi also do high-concept drag, more a visual dialogue with their soundtracks than representations of singers, but they often choose to feature masculine voices in their soundtracks, while Cherri favors female-identified singers. These uses of sound as part of a larger concept for queer audiovisual performance art disrupt the creation of virtual spaces through the playback of audio recordings because the visual does not match the sound in ways encultured by private mobile listening, music videos, and mainstream drag.[116] This, in turn, allows Cherri, Bebe, and Bambi to attach new meanings to sounds through their performance art.

---

to explain to performers that, because Sharon signed on at the last minute to do one number (when everyone else does at least two), they will all be paid less. Blue Moon drag artists are generally kind to each other in actions if not always in words, so the performers who end up making less when Sharon books herself usually do not blame the show's host. There is a significant amount of grumbling about Sharon, however.

[116] Hosokawa, "The Walkman Effect." Bull, "No Dead Air!" See also: Sara Ahmed, "A Sinking Feeling," *Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy as a World Making Project* (blog), posted 3 February 2014, https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/02/03/a-sinking-feeling/.

The combination of disrupting established ways of relating to recorded sound and attaching new meanings to those sounds helps to make the Blue Moon a queer space.[117]

2.6   IT'S BASICALLY A FART JOKE: CHERRI BAUM'S USE OF HUMOR AS QUEER WEAPONRY

At a Thursday night drag show in June 2015, part of Bebe Beretta's "Tuck it! Let's Party!" series, Cherri Baum plugged in her iPad to play an audio track for her drag number. She took the stage dressed in a close-fitting, green leopard print gown, a red wig, and her typical version of drag makeup. She sat down on a bar stool that had been placed on the stage for her and nodded to Bebe to start her audio track. As the introduction to the Cranberries' "Linger" played, Cherri struck a pose and made eye contact with the sparse audience.[118] As expectation built for what she would do when the vocal line entered—Cherri makes a point of rarely knowing the words to the songs she uses for drag acts, which allows her to do other things with the sound—a non-vocal sound came through the Blue Moon's speakers where the vocal line should have been. At first, it sounded like the track was distorted, but as the sound continued, I realized that Cherri had deliberately overdubbed Dolores O'Riordan's vocals with the sounds of flatulence.

As "Linger" farted along, Cherri wore a pained expression and shifted in her seat, as though she were relieving intestinal distress by breaking wind. This continued until the iconic

---

[117] Ahmed, "A Sinking Feeling."

[118] The relatively low attendance at Bebe's "Tuck It! Let's Party!" show series seems to have been a product of its timing. Shows were usually after 10PM on Thursdays and were not paired with any television events, which most likely hampered their ability to draw the same size crowd as the Monday night *Drag Race* viewing parties. It is also worth noting that, in the last two years, a significant portion of the audience in the Blue Moon for *Drag Race* has been leaving before the live show afterwards.

line in the chorus, "Do you have to let it linger?" Here, and only here, Cherri left Dolores

O'Riordan's singing untouched. The rest of the song proceeded in this fashion, with the addition

of Cherri spraying something from under one of the sleeves of her dress. This turned out to be

some sort of sulfur-based scent, clearly meant to approximate the olfactory effects of the sounds

playing behind Cherri. This multi-sensory experience—with smell now added to the expected

audio and visual elements of drag—is an example of how humor might be a tool of queer

politics.

In *Gender Outlaw,* Kate Bornstein champions humor as a necessary response to the

violence of binary gender, homophobia, misogyny, and transphobia.[119] She returns to this

sentiment in *Hello Cruel World*, arguing for the ability of queer comedy and art to be a means of

self care, a defense against despair brought on by pressure to conform to binary gender,

heteronormativity, and other forms of social oppression.[120] While Cherri's rendition of "Linger"

does not explicitly engage with Bornstein, it enacts the latter's theories in its use of a childish

joke to poke fun at mainstream drag and normative femininity.[121] The butt of Cherri's fart joke is

not Dolores O'Riordan and the Cranberries, but, rather, expectations for what drag performances

look and sound like.

By taking the stage in a carefully assembled full drag look based on normative standards

of feminine beauty—a look that was up to *Drag Race* standards, in other words—Cherri set up

an expectation for what kinds of sounds her performance would be paired with and how she

---

[119] Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, pp. 87-92.

[120] Kate Bornstein, *Hello Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks, and Other Outlaws* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006.), pp. 130-131.

[121] When Cherri and I discussed her performance of "Linger," she admitted to me that she thought the joke might have been childish. I use the term here not to deride or diminish Cherri's sense of humor, but to suggest that there is something valuable in a kind of humor that openly laughs at flatulence, ignoring expectations of what it means to be "classy" or "a grown-up."

would interact with those sounds.[122] She subverted this expectation in her choice of musical material, her alterations to that musical material, and in the way her stage act interacted with the recorded sounds. While not entirely unheard of, the Cranberries are a somewhat unusual choice for a drag performance, especially when paired with a glamorous, normatively feminine look like the one Cherri used that night. Had Bebe or Bambi, with their grunge- and punk-inspired looks, chosen the Cranberries, the sound would have seemed more congruent with the visual. But this disjunction between look and sound is what Cherri was going for, especially with her alterations to the song text.

By creating dissonance between the visual and sonic components of her drag act, Cherri broke the virtual space created by playing back recorded sounds. Breaking the virtual space simultaneously comments on mainstream drag's relationship to sound recordings as authoritative texts (and to normative femininity as an authoritative standard of beauty) and opens a new space to create new meanings by pairing a staged drag act with the playback of pre-recorded sounds. By refusing to treat "Linger" as an authoritative text by lip-syncing the words and dressing as Dolores O'Riordan, Cherri diminished the recording's authority as a text and, instead, treated it simply as another component in the whole of her act. Diminishing the recording's authority in this way allowed her to play with the meanings attached to it and use the recorded sounds—with some alterations—to make a different statement to the one she would have made by dressing as Dolores O'Riordan and lip-syncing the words.

Turning "Linger" into a four-minute fart joke played on behavioral expectations attached to the look Cherri adopted for that number. By pairing a normatively feminine, ladylike look

---

[122] Because this was taking place in the Blue Moon, where most of the regulars are familiar with Cherri and her subversion of drag performance tropes, there was at least some knowledge that the visual aspect of Cherri's act was not a sign that a *Drag Race*-style performance was coming. But there was still a sense of anticipation based on devices Cherri had used to subvert mainstream drag in the past.

with a crass joke, Cherri made a wordless comment on behavioral norms attached to feminine-presenting people. Using drag to make implicit and explicit feminist commentary is something Cherri does fairly often, and she is vocal about feminism being beneficial to people of all genders when questioned about it. Though she is critical of oppressive threads in the larger tapestry of feminist identities—notably those that exclude trans women from womanhood—Cherri is committed to inclusive feminist values and to expressing those values through her on- and off-stage performances. Because of her status as Blue Moon veteran, Cherri's feminist commentary sets a tone for the space: it rejects misogyny in all forms and explicitly welcomes trans women.[123] Setting this tone through humor is also a queer and feminist act in that it refuses to fight the violence of patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia with more violence, instead using laughter to make its point.

---

[123] Goodman, *Sonic Warfare.*

Figure 2: Cherri Baum in one of her signature looks

2.7   DEFENDING QUEER SPACE

After Sharon Needles and Alaska Thunderfuck competed on consecutive seasons of *Drag Race*, the Blue Moon became something of a tourist attraction. Since I began doing fieldwork there in January 2013, I and other regulars have noticed a marked increase in the number of straight women holding bachelorette parties at the Blue Moon, as well as more generic encroachment by straight hipsters moving into the neighborhood. This is significant because straight people have typically not been socialized in queer spaces and, as a result, are unaware of the rules governing interaction in them. As I have witnessed at the Blue Moon, at Cavo in Pittsburgh, and at Town in DC, straight women entering drag venues (with bachelorette parties and otherwise) often encourage each other to objectify gay male bodies, and this objectification manifests in highly problematic ways in a queer space like the Blue Moon—where it is not safe to assume that masculine-presenting bodies and drag performers identify as gay men.[124]

Because the Blue Moon is such a small space, the audience is in very close proximity to performers during shows. When bachelorette parties happen during drag shows, this proximity to the stage facilitates interactions with performers' bodies that violate the norms of the space. Parties of straight women mark themselves as Blue Moon outsiders by attempting to touch performers without permission and by misgendering queens who identify as trans women, objectifying their bodies as gay and male. This is not a deliberate act of violence on the part of straight women; they are simply enacting the types of relationships with drag queens that heteronormative media portrays as appropriate, including references to queens' gender

---

[124] See also: Miz Cracker, "Beware the Bachelorette!," *Slate*.

identities.[125] Despite this lack of malicious intent, however, misgendering trans people and attempting to touch performers are both acts that exert ownership over the space and the bodies in it. This makes the Blue Moon less safe for queer people when bachelorette parties are present and sometimes provokes regulars to sonically (and otherwise) enforce insider/outsider boundaries.

In one particularly memorable instance, Alaska used the Blue Moon's jukebox to set Miley Cyrus' "Can't Stop Won't Stop" to play approximately 20 times in a row, in an effort to clear out the overcrowded bar after a drag show attended by a particularly raucous bachelorette party. (The party in question misgendered trans people on and off stage, attempted to touch performers, and took up table space close to the stage that is unofficially reserved for close friends and family of performers.) After the song had repeated a few times, people did start to leave the bar. Only those who had some connection to Alaska and knowledge of the strategy stayed.[126] In this way, Alaska's use of musical sound to annoy outsiders reclaimed the space for a core group of patrons invested in and respectful of the Blue Moon's status as queer space. It is worth noting, too, that the bar staff allowed Alaska to do this without intervening or overriding her jukebox selections because Alaska is a known regular enforcing the established politics of the space. Had an outsider attempted to monopolize the jukebox in this way, especially in a manner irritating to regulars, the staff would have either intervened or simply turned off the jukebox and played music from a device behind the bar.

Alaska's use of "Can't Stop Won't Stop" in this instance weaponized a sound that would have otherwise been a relatively normal sonic backdrop in the Blue Moon on a Saturday night.[127]

---

[125] Norris, "Of Fish and Feminists."

[126] For context, most Blue Moon regulars know Alaska at least well enough make small talk with her.

[127] Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*.

The first few times it played, "Can't Stop Won't Stop" attracted very little attention; the bar was crowded, conversations were loud, and no one was paying much mind to the jukebox (except Alaska, of course). But, after a few times through the song, people started to pay attention and the sound changed from bland background music to intrusive and annoying noise. Employing sound as a weapon in this way avoided a direct and possibly heated or violent confrontation between Alaska the the outsiders making the Blue Moon unsafe for queer people. Instead, Alaska simply made the Blue Moon an uncomfortable space to occupy—for everyone, insiders and outsiders alike—but only the insiders had the context necessary to interpret the gesture for what it was: a defense of queer space.

2.8   RECLAIMING SAFETY IN THE WAKE OF VIOLENCE

In October of 2013, there was an incident of homophobic violence outside the Blue Moon. A gay couple walked out of Remedy, the bar next to Blue Moon, and was assaulted in the street because they were openly gay and openly showing affection to each other.[128] Though I was relatively new to the Blue Moon—I had been doing fieldwork there for less than a year—I was still connected to enough of the social network around the bar to see and hear the Facebook and in-person conversations around this event. Both victims, whose names I am leaving out to protect their privacy, were and still are regulars at the Blue Moon. [129]

---

[128] James Nichols, "[Name Redacted], Pittsburgh Gay Man, Attacked in Alleged Hate Crime," *Huffington Post Queer Voices,* published 8 October 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/08/pittsburgh-anti-gay-hate-crime-_n_4063670.html.
[129] News articles on this incident in multiple publications name the victims, which seems unwise to me, especially since these articles were published before an arrest was made and were accompanied by photographs of one of the

The assault shook the Blue Moon as a community. I was at the Blue Moon the night the assault took place, and I left the bar about fifteen minutes before it happened. I remember seeing links to the news articles about the incident on Facebook the next day and staring at my computer screen in stunned disbelief, instant messaging my then-partner about how it could have just as easily been me. The Pittsburgh police arrested a single suspect within a week or two of the assault taking place, but both victims and multiple witnesses were consistent in their testimony that the crime was perpetrated by a group, not a single person.[130] And, despite the arrest, fear of violence persisted. The next time I went to the Blue Moon, a few days later, much of the regulars' conversation expressed the same sentiments I had voiced in my instant messages to my partner: they were in the Blue Moon that night and it could have just as easily been them. Though no one said it out loud, the undercurrent of the mood seemed to be a question: where do we go from here?

Amid all the milling around after the homophobic assault outside the Blue Moon, a performer's voice rose to prominence, presenting at least a short-term plan of action. Janet Granite, known to me then as a queen who built her own sets, made her own props, and was vocally supportive of local queer political organizations, led a street protest outside the Blue Moon. The protest demanded more attention to incidents of homophobic and transphobic violence in Pittsburgh, including verbal and physical assaults, and queer people in attendance were invited to share works of art, prepared statements, or off-the-cuff words about their feelings of vulnerability in Pittsburgh.

---

victims. In light of my "drag names only" policy for protecting the privacy of queer people appearing in this dissertation, I am electing not to name the victims of this assault.

[130] Nichols, "[Name Redacted], Pittsburgh Gay Man…"

The protest received televised and printed news coverage and, though it did not directly lead to arrests of perpetrators of the original assault, Janet's effort in organizing the event created a space for queer people to have their voices heard and recognized when they spoke about feeling unsafe in their home city and home neighborhoods. This, more than any police action, began the process of the community healing from the trauma of the assault because it was a space where queer experiences and queer feelings were valued and heard. In combination with the safe space provided by the Blue Moon, this venue for expression helped to create a culture of nurturance for the Pittsburgh queer community, or at least the part of it that frequents the Blue Moon.[131] This nurturance involves queer people being emotionally present for each other as a means to support community solidarity and resist oppression from the outside world.[132]

Queer people were emotionally present for each other at the Blue Moon again after the shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando in June 2016.[133] One week after the shooting, Moon Baby organized and hosted a fundraiser for victims at the Blue Moon, in which performers donated their time and their tips to a fund for victims in Orlando.[134] Moon Baby introduced the show by explaining that she would be singing tracks from her forthcoming album and that all proceeds from the show that night, including performers' tips, would be going directly to the fund for victims. She also described her feelings of fear and grief upon hearing about the Pulse massacre and finding out that a safe space, a queer space, a space in many ways like the Blue Moon, could

---

[131] Samaran, "Why We Need the Opposite of Rape Culture—Nurturance Culture."

[132] Ibid. See also: Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare."

[133] Tribute shows after the deaths of Robin Williams, David Bowie, and Prince are also manifestations of queer nurturance culture at the Blue Moon, but these shows operate slightly differently to the Blue Moon's responses to homophobic violence. Consequently, I have given them their own chapter, the third in this dissertation: "Where Is the Voice?"

[134] For an alternate account of this event, see: Alec MacIntyre, "'I love the Blue Moon and I love each and every one of you': Safety and Queer Space in the Wake of Violence," *Sounding Board/Ethnomusicology Review* Special Issue: *After Pulse*, posted 10 November 2016, http://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/content/special-issue-pulse-nightclub-macintyre.

63

become the scene of homophobic and transphobic violence. As she openly shed tears on stage, she described the importance of safe spaces for her and reminded all present that the Blue Moon is safe because its people work to make it so. She thanked us for keeping the place safe and asked us to continue our work to that end as a means to care for ourselves and each other in the wake of a traumatic event like the Pulse shooting.[135]

Where Moon Baby expressed fear and grief in her response to the Pulse massacre, Bebe Beretta's performance at the fundraiser for Pulse victims embodied rage. Bebe came on stage in an outfit reminiscent of her extremely low-budget early drag looks: fishnet hose, briefs, dilapidated high heels, a bra stained with sweat and stage blood, no wig (her hair was long at the time), a pale face, and dark lipstick. She had also written homophobic slurs on herself in black body paint, and the soundtrack to her act was one of her homemade mixes. The track started with distorted, rhythmic, low-register guitar power chords, punctuated by heavy drums, with growling, low-register vocals in a masculine-coded range and timbre.[136] These aggressive musical sounds were interspersed with pieces of politicians' speeches against gun control and LGBTQ rights. Instead of lip-syncing, Bebe writhed on stage, smearing her body paint, angrily gesturing at the politicians' words coming through the Blue Moon's speakers. Later in the act, the stage blood came out, and Bebe smeared this on herself, over her smeared body paint. Though she neither spoke nor sang nor lip-synced a word in her performance, her message was clear: existing policies on guns and LGBTQ rights are killing queer people.

Moon Baby and Bebe's differing approaches at the Pulse fundraiser provided different kinds of emotional support to queer people in the Blue Moon, as well as financial support and

---

[135] Sara Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare."

[136] I am deliberately not assuming the singer of this track identifies as a man, only stating that their vocals in this instance are in a range and have a tone quality typically associated with masculinity in rock music.

solidarity with Pulse victims. This show of emotional and financial support made the material and affective wellbeing of queer people the central focus of the event, and this is especially striking in light of the criticism Moon Baby leveled at Courtney Act roughly two years before the Pulse fundraiser. While there was some self-promotion included in Moon Baby's performances at the fundraiser—the album from which she sang songs has nothing to do with Pulse—there was greater focus on maintaining the Blue Moon as a safe, queer space and on providing material assistance to Pulse victims by donating funds. This focus on the welfare of queer people is an act of queer resistance because, as Bebe noted in her act, existing political policies and systems are designed to devalue and extinguish the lives of those they oppress, including queer people. Taking a positive interest in the wellbeing of queer people, as the Blue Moon community does, opposes the oppressive forces of normative society and creates a space where queer lives and queer art are valued.[137]

---

[137] Sara Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare."

Figure 3: Bebe Beretta at the Pulse Tribute Show

2.9   QUEER POLITICS AND QUEER SPACE

The omnipresence of queer aesthetics and politics in Blue Moon drag is an integral part of constantly creating the Blue Moon as a queer space. By consistently supporting and promoting drag artists and drag shows that disrupt the performance and gender norms of mainstream drag, Blue Moon management, staff, and patrons claim physical and social space for queer people. The safety of queer spaces like the Blue Moon is important not only because it provides an alternative to the increasing dominance of straight people in the aesthetics of mainstream drag, but because it provides a culture of nurturance in which queer lives and queer expressions are valued.[138]

As Moon Baby stated in her introduction to the Pulse fundraiser, and as shown by Alaska's weaponization of "Can't Stop Won't Stop," queer spaces are constantly made, maintained, and remade by those who occupy and need them. The Blue Moon's embrace of drag that challenges the aesthetic and political norms of *Drag Race*, regardless of how that challenge might manifest, allows for experimentation with relationships between drag performances, live voices, recorded voices, and identities that could not exist within the strictures of RuPaul's narrow definition of drag as a concept.[139] In the following chapters, I give more detailed descriptions of a number of Blue Moon drag acts, using those performances to critique existing theories of voice and generate new ones. In some cases, I also apply theories based on Blue Moon drag to performances at my Washington, DC field site, in an attempt to provide a queer

---

[138] Miz Cracker, "Beware the Bachelorette!" Samaran, "Why We Need the Opposite of Rape Culture—Nurturance Culture."

[139] The only restrictions on Blue Moon stage acts are those dictated by the bar's licensing: no fire and no full nudity. As Janet Granite often said in her days of hosting an open stage night, "Pasties and a g-string, people. And don't set anything on fire."

and more charitable reading of mainstream drag than that given by Blue Moon performers and academic authors critical of the aesthetics and politics of *Drag Race*.[140]

---

[140] See: Jim Daems, ed. *The Makeup of* RuPaul's Drag Race.

3.0   WHO IS SINGING?: BECOMING THROUGH THE SOUNDING VOICE

On a Monday night in March 2014, I made my weekly trip to the Blue Moon to watch *RuPaul's Drag Race* in the company of the bartenders, performers, and other regulars. Though many of us could watch *Drag Race* at home or online, we gather at the bar to share commentary on the episodes and to see the live drag shows put on by a rotating cast of performers after the broadcast. This particular week, Moon Baby was set to perform after *Drag Race*, and she was also the guest bartender during the episode, in both instances as her invented character Ann Teak.
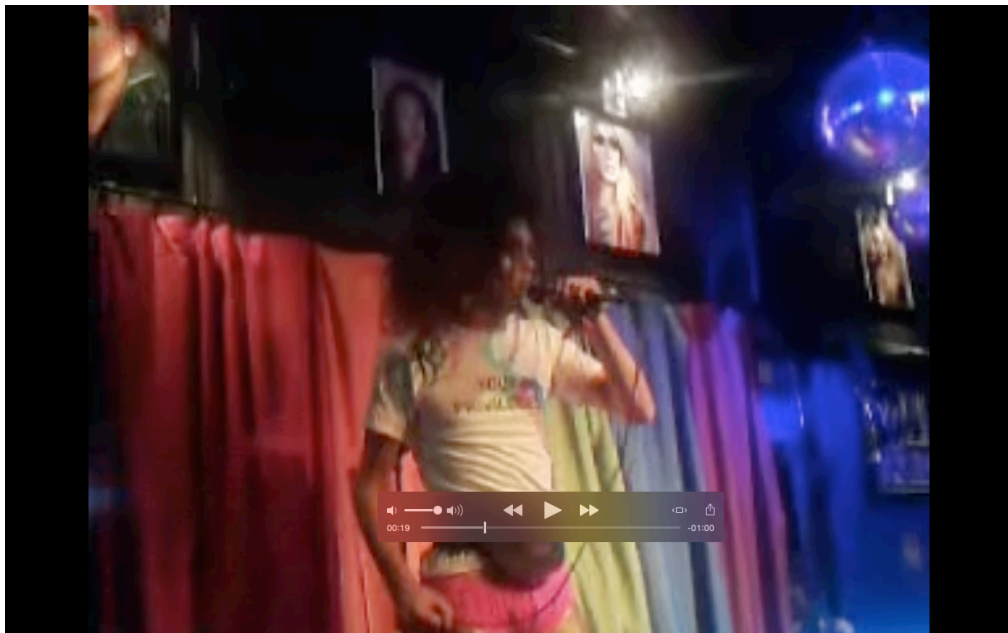
Figure 4: Moon Baby

Figure 5: Ann Teak

Ann Teak, as I have found out from seeing performances and asking Moon Baby, is a middle-aged woman from Pittsburgh's South Hills. She has a Ph.D. in Early American History and teaches at Point Park University, but the only subject that ever comes up in her classes is ghost stories. She wears oversized, mismatched clothing in bold colors and patterns, with big hair—at least compared to Moon Baby's primary drag character—and "Urkel" glasses with thick lenses. She drinks a *lot* of white wine. (Moon Baby drinks PBR and Yuengling.) But the most striking feature of the Ann Teak character is her voice. The first time I heard Ann Teak, the night she was guest bartending, my hearing was that Moon Baby was doing an impression of drunk Carol Channing. While this first impression was partially correct—there *is* some Carol Channing in Ann Teak's voice, and Ann Teak *is* drunk most of the time—my first hearing missed that this is all filtered through a strong Pittsburgh accent, flattening vowels and resonating words through the nose. Combined with the drunken slurring of words, malapropisms, and mispronunciation of consonants (à la Carol Channing), this Pittsburgh accent renders Ann Teak's speech mostly unrecognizable as English.

On the night in question, Ann Teak's butchery of language was especially apparent during her performance in the post-*Drag Race* live show. She sang a version of RuPaul's "Can I Get an Amen?" over the commercial recording, drowning out the existing vocal parts with her own interpretation of text and melody, sometimes attempting to sing along with RuPaul and sometimes speaking back to the recording as though it could respond. Throughout the performance, she would latch onto single words in RuPaul's lyrics, using those words as starting points for digressions. In the first line of the song, for example, RuPaul sings, "Giving all you

could to the relationship/ Like a full-time job."[141] Ann Teak sang, "RELATIONSHIP! …Full-time job! …You have to work…at your job…nine to five!"[142] She proceeded through the first chorus and second verse in this manner, occasionally syncing up with the recording for a word or two. During the second chorus, Ann Teak began to speak back to RuPaul's words, answering the titular "Can I get an Amen?" line with, "No!…I'm not typically religious." My immediate response to this was laughter. It is funny, silly even. But, true to the tradition of camp drag, it also raises very serious questions with its silliness: who is singing? And where is the voice?

At first, "who is singing?" seems a silly question. The body on stage is producing the sounds we hear. But whose body is on stage? Roland Barthes might tell us that the sonic component of Ann Teak's singing—the "voice" as he calls it—is sounding a singular, unique body without a name or cultural context, while the linguistic component is sounding a subjectivity, Ann Teak's mind inside a nameless body.[143] This model presents a problem in that Ann Teak is a character created by Moon Baby and only exists when Moon Baby allows her to. So is it really Ann Teak's subjectivity being sounded here? Or is it Moon Baby's? If it *is* Moon Baby's subjectivity being sounded through Ann Teak, what are we to make of the several different voices Moon Baby uses when playing herself in drag, herself out of drag, or any of her other characters? Where is subjectivity? *Who* is singing?

Suzanne Cusick's theory of gendered voices—her contribution to *Audible Traces*—is equally unsatisfying when applied to Ann Teak's performance. In her chapter for *Audible Traces*, Cusick understands the singing voice—with or without language—as directly sounding a

---

[141] RuPaul Charles and Lucian Piane, "Can I Get an Amen?(feat. Martha Wash)," on *Born Naked*, RuCo, Inc., released 24 February 2014.
[142] This was, of course, filtered through Ann Teak's drunken Pittsburgh accent, making it nearly indecipherable in real time. Fortunately, a video recording of the performance exists, and this has enabled me to transcribe Ann Teak's words after the fact.
[143] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text*, Stephen Heath, translator (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

gendered subjectivity. Cusick's view of gender in this piece is, in name, shaped by Judith

Butler's model of gender as performative, but, in practice, simply reiterates and reifies

patriarchal tropes that collapse the masculine/feminine, culture/nature, and mind/body binaries

onto each other.[144] Despite Butler's arguments against doing so, Cusick links gender directly to

the body and, with no irony whatsoever, describes masculine singing as using the voice in

"unnatural" ways to embody masculinist "mind over matter" philosophy, while feminine singing

embraces the "natural" sound of the voice.[145] So, if Cusick were to experience Ann Teak's

performance, she might tell us that Ann Teak's singing enacts a masculine subjectivity because

the body sounding Ann Teak was assigned male at birth and is rejecting "natural" male vocal

sounds. But that reduces Moon Baby to her anatomy, collapses gender identity onto the body,

ignores gender expression, and does not tell me who is singing. Who is singing?

Judith Butler might answer with "who indeed?" She would understand Ann Teak as a

fictional character—which she is—but Butler would understand Moon Baby the same way, and

this poses more of a problem. For Butler, subjectivity is a constant performance, enacted through

repetitions of speech-acts governed by rules of intelligibility.[146] Thus, Ann Teak performs herself

into being, but so does Moon Baby. Neither is more "real" than the other because both are

constructed claims on some sort of social position that happen around a (somewhat incidental)

---

[144] Cusick's analysis here is carried over from the theory advanced in her 1994 article, "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem," in which she argues that a feminist musicology must embrace the stereotype that women are closer to their bodies and to nature. The language of her critique in the 1994 and 1999 pieces echoes language used by Sherry Ortner in "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture," (in *Woman Culture and Society*, Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974). But Cusick's use of the mind/body and nature/culture binaries in connection with feminist theory does not share Ortner's somewhat barbed criticism of the woman-as-closer-to-nature trope. Ortner's observations show equations of female-assigned bodies with nature to be tropes invented to perpetuate masculine domination. Thus, it is curious that Cusick would want to preserve these tropes as a supposed service to feminist theory.
[145] Suzanne G. Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex," in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, eds. (Zürich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999).
[146] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). See also: Butler, *Excitable Speech*; Butler and Gayatri Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*.

73

body. While Butler's theory is helpful in understanding how identities take shape in social contexts, her insistence on looking at social constructions *around* bodies sidesteps the materiality of the body on stage producing sounds that I hear. So Butler is very interested in how the "who" happens, but not so much in the singing.

Barthes, Cusick, and Butler fail to provide a satisfying explanation of who is singing in Moon Baby's Ann Teak act because they either reduce the voice to the body or ignore the body completely. The former model does not account for the complex networks of social meanings surrounding the voice, while the latter focuses too closely on the social and loses the material. A theory of voice that works for Ann Teak's performance must account for the materiality of sound and how it fits into constructed networks of meaning. Bernard Stiegler's theory of voice as prosthesis (in *Technics and Time*) does this. If Stiegler were to see and hear Ann Teak perform, he might tell us that her voice is simultaneously of the body and man-made.[147] The body shapes the material qualities of the voice: Ann Teak sounds like Ann Teak because of the physical properties of the body producing and resonating the sounds. But those sounds are not a "voice" until they are understood as such through the act of being heard—by the body making them or by another body. In this respect, "voice" is man-made. So how does this help us to answer the question of who is singing?

Stiegler's theory of voice is based in Deleuzian ontology and does not differentiate between mind and body, nature and culture. This is important because Barthes, Cusick, and Butler use versions of Cartesian ontology, in which there is a mind/body split and subjectivity exists in the mind. Removing the mind/body binary, as Stiegler does, removes the question of subjectivity. Because mind and body are one substance, thought, affect, and sensory experience

---

[147] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

are also one. So, instead of subjectivity, being is bodily experience without being reducible to the body, and it is constantly in flux because experience is cumulative.[148] So, though Stiegler understands the "who" in "who is singing?" differently than most of us have been taught to understand it, his answer can tell us more about what Ann Teak's voice does than could Barthes, Cusick, or Butler.

Using Stiegler to listen more closely to Ann Teak, we can say that her body shapes the material qualities of the sounds she makes, and her choices about how to use her body to shape the sound—and our unconscious categorization of the sound when we hear her—are filtered through the cultural apparatus in our brains. And the brain is part of the body.[149] This means that Moon Baby's knowledge of cultural codes surrounding body, gender and voice—the codes that inform how Ann Teak looks and sounds—does not just exist in her mind. (That is not possible in Deleuzian ontology.) This knowledge exists in her body and allows the construction of all her identities, including Ann Teak.[150] But this knowledge also exists in the brains, eyes, and ears of her audience, allowing them to read the humor and social commentary in the ways she uses her body as Ann Teak. So, when Ann Teak sings, we are hearing detailed knowledge of cultural codes around body, voice, and gender manifesting as a silly character for the purpose of social commentary. Knowing this, we can begin to ask questions about how Ann Teak and her audiences share the knowledge necessary to create and understand the humor in the character, and this has to do with what the Blue Moon is as a space.

---

[148] This is "becoming." (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature,* Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975. See also: Amy Cimini, "Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music"; Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.) Cartesian subjectivity is fixed, and "becoming" (or "process" for Whitehead) is not. This lack of fixity is what is important and is where Spinozist ontology intersects with Butler's critique of subjectivity.

[149] This, I think, is the key point separating Stiegler from Butler.

[150] Amy Cimini, "Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music: Toward a New Practice of Theorizing Musical Bodies," PhD diss., New York University, 2011. See also: Stiegler, *Technics and Time*; Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

3.1   QUEER SPACE, BUSTED AESTHETICS, AND INTELLIGIBILITY OF SIGNS

If we were to take Ann Teak and place her in any other drag venue in Pittsburgh, the humor and social commentary in her performance would not be as intelligible as they are in the Blue Moon because of what the Blue Moon is. The Blue Moon is not a "gay bar," at least not in the commonly understood sense of the term. There *are* a lot of gay men who frequent the Blue Moon, but the bar does not define itself as a gay space. Andy, the owner, works very hard to make the Blue Moon a safe haven for *all* members of the queer community, especially trans and other gender non-conforming people. Because of this inclusive definition of queerness at the Blue Moon, the clientele is far more diverse—and far more queer—than at other "gay bars" in the city.[151]

The inclusion of all varieties of queerness in the Blue Moon's clientele means that many of the people in the bar on a given day are well-versed in the practical applications of gender theory because they need it to explain their identities to people in everyday life.[152] This base of knowledge, in turn, allows drag at the Blue Moon to make pointed social commentary that references critical theory. Ann Teak's version of "Can I Get an Amen?" is part of this socially critical drag. In mangling RuPaul's melody and lyrics while speaking back to RuPaul's recorded voice, Ann Teak challenges RuPaul's iconic status and the hegemony of aesthetic and gender norms put forward by *Drag Race*. But this critique is only intelligible because it takes place in

---

[151] Despite the diversity of queer identities in the Blue Moon, its population of performers and patrons is overwhelmingly white. However, there is ethnic diversity within the whiteness, which is important in the larger historical and geographical context of Pittsburgh's ethnic neighborhoods. (See Chapter 1.) Blue Moon performers are also aware of their own whiteness and will occasionally make it the butt of a joke in their stage acts.

[152] Gender non-conforming people experience a near-constant stream of micro- and macro-aggressions aimed at invalidating their identities. Survival and sanity depend on learning how to talk and think about gender in ways that are affirming.

the Blue Moon, in front of an audience with the cultural apparatus to understand all the levels of the joke.

The cultural literacy required to understand Ann Teak exists within the larger context of Blue Moon drag articulating a queer politics in opposition to homonormativity.[153] This manifests through a deliberately "busted" aesthetic: Blue Moon performers reject the beauty norms of mainstream drag, embracing looks and sounds associated with amateurish inexperience. This aesthetic of cultivated "busted" drag changes with performers and show themes, but Blue Moon queens (and their audiences) harbor a fairly consistent level of disdain for "boring" drag focused on the transformation from "handsome" man to "pretty" woman.[154] Rather than reproducing the gender binary and normative standards of beauty, Blue Moon drag is trashy, ugly, silly, messy, and it makes use of voices in ways that break with both conventional drag and conventional ways of understanding how voices attach to genders and bodies. Moon Baby is but one node in the network of Blue Moon performers whose art demands new ways of thinking about voice. For context, it is necessary to consider other artists and their approaches to sound.

Though she is no longer a regular performer, Amy Vodkahaus is an important figure for the Blue Moon's aesthetic, especially as it relates to voice. In opposition to contemporary drag performance practice—especially to the performance practices put forward on *Drag Race*—Amy often sings live when on stage. Because she was classically trained as a countertenor, her singing maintains clear separation between modal register and falsetto, and the different ranges and their associated timbres create multiple gender expressions within a single performance. When Amy

---

[153] For a definition of this term, see: Laura Kacere, "Homonormativity 101: What It Is and How It's Hurting Our Movement," *Everyday Feminism*, published 24 January 2015. The larger question of performance aesthetics articulating queer politics is discussed fully in the previous chapter, in relation to the concept of affective tone. (Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear,* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010.)
[154] Laurie Norris, "Of Fish and Feminists: Homonormative Misogyny and the Trans* Queen," in *The Makeup of* RuPaul's Drag Race*: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows*, Jim Daems, ed. (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2014).

sings, she usually starts the song in falsetto, a conscious vocal caricature of stereotypical femininity that sounds like exactly what it is: a cartoonish distortion of vocal gender norms. Within a few lines, though, she drops into her modal register, controlling the timbre very tightly so that the octave drop in pitch sounds like a husky-voiced cabaret singer rather than a macho baritone. Throughout the rest of a performance, she alternates between falsetto and modal register, switching octaves to add non-linguistic emphasis to particular lines of text. By using her voice in this way, Amy is playing on assumptions about how gender attaches to pitch ranges and bodies—assumptions that are quite familiar to the gender non-conforming audiences in the Blue Moon.

Cherri Baum is also an important figure in understanding the aesthetics of Blue Moon drag because of the way politics intersect with her art. Cherri's drag frequently incorporates elements of surreal performance art, fitting with the general rejection of beauty norms at the Blue Moon, and, when she is not doing high-concept drag, her performances take an overtly feminist tone. On several occasions, Cherri has dressed as Gloria Steinem and lip-synced to songs poking fun at misogynist double standards around professional behavior and sexuality. In both types of performance, Cherri is enacting serious commentary that retains the excess of camp drag while taking a darker approach to its humor. This darker, more serious drag stems from Cherri's relationship to gender on- and off-stage. Unlike typical drag queens (especially those on *Drag Race*), who have male gender identities in everyday life and play female characters on stage, Cherri identifies as a woman all the time. Thus, the distinction between Cherri the person and Cherri the character is in the surreal qualities of her high-concept drag and in taking on the appearance of a feminist icon for overtly political pieces. Cherri's use of pre-recorded voices in her stage act is, at once, a decision with an immediately practical justification—Cherri is not

78

confident in her singing abilities—and a way of playing on the drag trope of separation between one's "inner self" and the character on stage. By taking on the appearance of Gloria Steinem and lip-syncing to a voice that is neither hers nor Gloria Steinem's, Cherri enacts an overly literal parody of normative drag that is only legible as parody because the audience knows her as a person and a performer.[155]
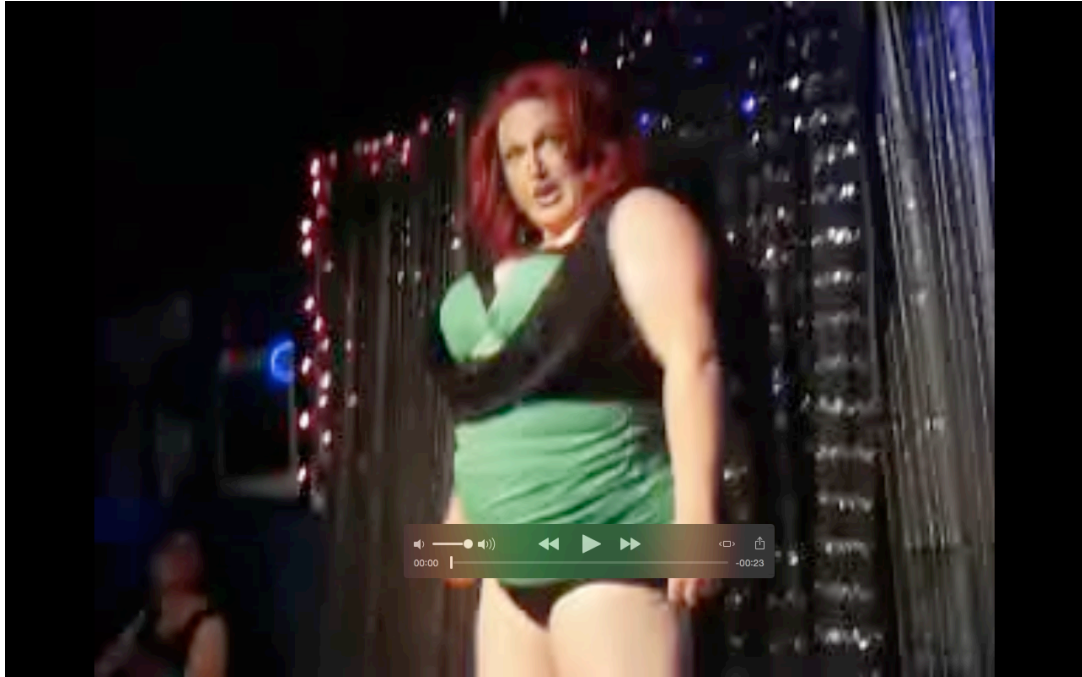
Figure 6: Cherri Baum in another of her signature looks

With the context of Cherri and Amy, we can return again to Moon Baby and Ann Teak as challenges to aesthetic and gender norms in drag and in society at large. Like Cherri, Moon Baby is more than a character; she exists on- and off-stage. And, like Amy, Moon Baby often sings live in performance, sounding her gender fluidity with deliberate choices in register and timbre. Ann Teak is one of these choices: her drunken slurring and butchery of language are instances of the Blue Moon's "busted" aesthetic that pokes fun at fixed, binary gender and mainstream drag.

---

[155] For a full analysis of this performance, see Chapter 5.

Though Ann Teak is binary-identified—a self-professed biological woman—Moon Baby is not, and it is a masterpiece of queer social commentary that Moon Baby's binary-identified character cannot speak or sing intelligible words.[156]

In addition to breaking language, Ann Teak's vocalizations break theories of voice and how it relates to body and gender, a quality shared by Amy's singing, Moon Baby's singing, and Cherri's lip-syncing. While Stiegler's theory of voice as prosthesis works fairly well for Ann Teak and works on some levels for Amy, Moon Baby, and Cherri, it does not provide a full explanation of what voices are doing—in terms of sounding identities, subverting social norms, and engaging with affect—in Blue Moon drag.[157] This is partly because Stiegler does not directly deal with gender and partly because uses of voice at the Blue Moon are so diverse that a single theory cannot account for all of them. Blue Moon drag demands new theories of voice that account for the materiality of sounds and bodies while also accounting for the social experiences—sense, affect, thought—of bodies interacting with sounds.

The remainder of this chapter theorizes uses of voice as prostheses, objects donned to allow a drag artist to become a character, in the *Drag Race*-style drag at Town Danceboutique in Washington, DC. I have chosen to use this more normative, less "busted" drag aesthetic as the basis for a theory of voice in order to provide a place from which to show how Blue Moon drag diverges from norms in the next chapter, as well as to provide a more charitable reading of *Drag Race*-style drag than the designation of "boring" it receives at Blue Moon. In doing this, I also contrast the audiences at Blue Moon and Town Danceboutique, noting how a primarily queer

---

[156] This is a meta-level subjectivity joke. Usually, queer subjectivities are the unintelligible ones, (Butler, *Gender Trouble*.) but, by having Ann Teak destroy language, Moon Baby is making the normative subjectivity incomprehensible. (Subjectivity is displayed through language as evidence of thought/interiority.)

[157] Stiegler provides a satisfying explanation of Ann Teak because she is a binary-identified, fictional character and, in those respects, is relatively uncomplicated. However, Ann Teak's relationship to Moon Baby and to Moon Baby's other characters is less easily theorized and will be described fully in Chapter 5.

clientele (at the Blue Moon) creates different aesthetics to those of a primarily gay male and straight female audience (at Town).

3.2   VOICES AS PROSTHESES IN DC DRAG

If we understand Ann Teak's voice to be a prosthesis in the sense that it is both of the body and man-made, voices employed by drag performers at Washington DC's Town Danceboutique are prostheses in the more conventional sense: like the queens' wigs, padding, costumes, and make-up, the recorded voices they choose for their stage acts are things they put on in order to become a character.[158] But this becoming, thanks to the voice, is more than a surface-level resemblance. The production quality of Town performances, including audiovisual stage technology and performer preparation, allows queens to take on pre-recorded voices as if those voices were their own, bringing their external characters inside their bodies through sound and gesture. This is best exemplified by Riley Knoxx's Beyoncé and, to a slightly lesser extent, by Tatianna's Rihanna. Neither performer employs the overtly parodic camp humor visible in the vast majority of Blue Moon performances and in the work of Shiqueeta Lee, Sasha Adams, Ba'Naka, and Lena Lett in the DC scene. Instead, Tatianna and Riley Knoxx play Rihanna and Beyoncé straight (in the comedy sense—where the non-comic character is the "straight man"). They replicate the singers' looks, hairstyles, costumes, and gestures while lip-syncing to studio recordings of their voices. Both hold or wear microphones during the act and, though the microphones are neither switched

---

[158] Since Ann Teak is Moon Baby's creation, I could also argue that Ann Teak's voice is a prosthesis donned by Moon Baby, and that would be true in a sense, but it would also be an incomplete analysis because of Ann Teak's relationship to Moon Baby. (See Chapter 5.) And, as I will show in the following pages, regarding the pre-recorded voices employed by DC drag performers simply as parts of the costume is also an incomplete analysis of what voices do in those performances.

on nor connected to the sound system, the use of the technology aids in the perception that the voice coming through the speakers belongs to the body moving on stage. In this sense, the bodies of Riley Knoxx and Tatianna substitute for the bodies of Beyoncé and Rihanna on Town's stage; the drag artists become the singers by taking on their looks, mannerisms, and (most importantly) voices.

This act of becoming through the taking on of physical characteristics is both a radical queer defiance of gender norms and an assimilationist reduction of drag to normative gender categories, depending on who is reading it. Though the Blue Moon's queer audiences might find Riley Knoxx and Tatianna to be "boring" drag because of their adherence to conventional standards of beauty and their rejection of overt camp, there would still be an acknowledgment that a cisgender man passing as a cisgender woman subverts theories of "biological sex" as an immutable bodily component of gender. On the other hand, the homonormative audiences that usually populate Town read the same act as reifying theories of "biological sex." Rather than reading the becoming in the radical, transformative sense and taking seriously the queens' claims to femininity and womanhood while on stage, homonormative audiences focus on their knowledge that, outside this performance space, drag artists identify as cisgender men. (At least as far as we know.) They understand drag only as performance, partly because *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its focus on drag as a visual transformation have taught them to do so, and partly because reducing drag to an "illusion" is safe for heteronormative gender ideologies. (Even "progressive" heteronormative gender ideologies that allow for gay relationships do not allow for gender fluidity; men are men and women are women and the body dictates which is which.)

For purposes of clarity, the term "homonormative" indicates a specific type of assimilationist gay respectability politics usually associated with affluence and white

82

privilege.[159] These politics and their associated narratives are highly visible on *Drag Race,* especially in specific judges' insistence on anatomy-based binary gender, RuPaul's refusal to allow trans women on the show, and on the drag-as-illusion narrative emphasized by the show's format and visual editing.[160] The illusion narrative is of particular interest in this section because it combines the biopolitics of anatomically binary gender with respectability politics surrounding acceptable gender identities and expressions.

As an example, consider Tatianna, who competed on Season 2 of *Drag Race* and is a regular performer at Town, the venue on which the rest of this section is focused. The *Drag Race* illusion narrative holds that, outside of drag, Tatianna identifies as a man and expresses that masculine identity in at least somewhat traditional ways. In drag, however, Tatianna transforms herself with makeup, wigs, padding, and costumes so that she can "pass" as a woman, but her fundamental male identity is not altered. In short, drag is a surface-level transformation for entertainment, the drag queen's body becoming a spectacle in a carnivalesque space of sanctioned gender play. At Town, the audience for this carnivalesque gender play consists of mostly white, young (approximately 18-24) gay men who are regulars at the bar and slightly older straight women (approximately 25-35), also mostly white, who come in with large parties for single events and generally do not return. This is significant because the straight women visiting for one-time events are consuming gay gender play as tourist entertainment and because the gay men in the audience have come of age and come out of the closet in the world of *Drag Race*. In both cases, drag is understood to be more spectacle than social commentary, which

---

[159] Laura Kacere, "Homonormativity 101: What It Is and How It's Hurting Our Movement," *Everyday Feminism*, published 24 January 2015, http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/homonormativity-101/.
[160] Michelle Visage is particularly rigid on this, but other judges have also participated. See also: Norris, "Of Fish and Feminists."

allows racial, class, and gender privileges to remain intact and unquestioned while consuming the labor of gender-variant bodies on stage.[161]

3.3   PERFORMERS AND AUDIENCES

In contrast to the Blue Moon, where performers are part of the community of regulars at the bar and will be present in the space to socialize when not booked for a show, Town Danceboutique maintains fairly strict separation between performers and audience members. This distance between entertainers and spectators at Town is created partly through physical means and partly through differences in identity between performers and the majority of the crowd in attendance. While the physical means of separating drag artists and audience members are fairly standard for large, professional performance venues, the differences in identity between people on- and off-stage at Town are intimately related to the histories of race, class, and gentrification in the DC area and to tensions around race and class in the LGBTQ community.

In order to maintain performers' privacy, Town Danceboutique has a backstage area open only to performers and crew. (Presumably, performers' personal guests are also permitted backstage.) This backstage area appears to have its own entrance and exit, allowing entertainers to bypass the bouncers and ticket windows at Town's front doors and to make a private exit post-show, should they wish to do so. Because of these features, the only close interactions artists must have with spectators occur during performances in the form of collecting tips. The volume

---

[161] In addition to the power dynamics of gender-normative audiences consuming gender variance as a spectacle, it is important to note that Town's audience is predominantly white, while a majority of the performers are of color. Race is not often addressed overtly during drag shows at Town, but performers are conscious of it. Some, like Sasha Adams and Shiqueeta Lee, use this consciousness to poke fun at whiteness in ways that go over the heads of audience members, while others, like Riley Knoxx and Tatianna, avoid the subject entirely.

of musical sound during shows and the speed with which performers must move in order to complete their choreography and collect all tips offered prohibits any form of conversation during these exchanges.

In addition to these means of physical separation between entertainers and audiences at Town, there are important differences in identity between drag artists and people watching their shows. While audiences are mostly white and affluent, the majority of Town's performers are of color and do not display the same signs of wealth—even out of drag—as do the consumers of their stage acts.[162] The economic disparities between people on and off stage at Town are complicated by the racialized history of gentrification in Washington, DC. Because of "urban renewal" projects in the last twenty to thirty years, the cost of living in DC has risen a great deal and rising costs have pushed out the communities of color that formerly lived in the city.[163] In their place, young, affluent, white professionals have moved in, and this is the demographic that makes up Town's primary audiences.[164] Performers, on the other hand, mostly live outside the city in areas with slightly lower costs of living. This inequality, combined with the physical separation of drag artists from spectators, has consequences for the content of drag shows at Town.

Entertainers at Town, with the exception of emcees, do not speak to the audience or describe their acts during a show, nor do performances contain overt, obvious political

---

[162] It is possible to make an argument that performers' resources are visible in the quality of their drag materials, and such a statement would not be entirely untrue. However, many of Town's regular performers sew their own clothes to use in drag acts, as well as finding various other means to reduce the cost of performing.

[163] Natalie Hopkinson, "Go-Go's Cyber Mixtape: An Analysis of Washington D.C.'s Popular Black Music Audience on Internet Radio," (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Washington, DC, 10-13 November, 2016).

[164] As a native of the DC area, I have witnessed many of the same trends addressed by Dr. Hopkinson in her SEM 2016 paper. When I was an undergraduate at the University of Maryland (2004-2008), I played at jazz clubs in the neighborhoods around what is now Town. At the time, those areas were still in the process of gentrifying and were not nearly as white, nor as affluent, as they are now.

commentary as, for example, Bebe's act at the Pulse tribute show did. Instead, the queer commentary in Town's drag shows is hidden in the language of "illusion" and "female impersonation," as these words are recognizable to the venue's target audience and also protect performers from questions about how their identities off-stage relate to their jobs as entertainers who do drag. Protecting drag artists' privacy is important because entertainers at Town are there in the capacity of professionals doing a job and, while some them may identify as cisgender men, trans women, non-binary, or gender fluid off-stage, these identities are not necessarily relevant to their work on stage.

The economic inequalities between performers and spectators at Town contribute to the creation and maintenance of a very different kind of dynamic than the one that exists at the Blue Moon. Where Blue Moon performers are part of the bar's community and, thus, closely attached to the space, its people, and its politics, performers at Town are not attached to that venue in the same way.[165] This professional distance between Town performers and the bar's clientele demands that any queer political commentary made in a drag show be hidden. However, carefully hiding queer commentary from an audience that may not appreciate it does not negate its presence.[166]

3.4   ATMOSPHERE

When I first visited Town in July 2014, I had been going to drag shows at the Blue Moon for a year and, in that time, had grown accustomed to the safety of the Blue Moon, as well as its

---

[165] Sasha Adams, public Facebook posts, August 2015-present.
[166] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World.*

mostly queer audiences and friendly performers. As soon as I arrived at Town to see my first show there, I knew it would be a different kind of venue. When I reached the street address I had programmed into my phone's navigation, I saw a line outside a set of double doors. This confused me, as I had assumed I was just going to a bar, and the bars I frequent generally do not have lines out the door. I also knew from Town's advertising that a Bear happy hour preceded the drag show that night, which lent credence to my assumption that I could just walk in between the end of happy hour and the start of the show.[167] Instead, I found a line and a closed entrance, which made me suspect that I was in for more of a "club" than a "bar" experience.

A glance at the line surrounding me confirmed my suspicions, as most of the men standing with me seemed to be in their late teens and early twenties, their distinctly "young DC gay" appearances consistent with my previous experiences at clubs and inconsistent with the crowd at the Blue Moon.[168] (The Blue Moon will not admit anyone under 21, while Town admits anyone over 18 on Friday nights.) I also noticed that, in addition to the young men in line with me, there were several large groups of women who appeared to be in their late twenties or early thirties—closer to my age—and conspicuously holding, wearing, or carrying penis-shaped bachelorette party favors. This, too, was in stark contrast to the Blue Moon, both in terms of the volume of people and the presence of multiple bachelorette parties; the Blue Moon's small size does not allow for large crowds or more than one bachelorette party. Town, on the other hand, has the space to accommodate large groups and seems to welcome straight women celebrating bachelorette or birthday parties—whereas the Blue Moon merely tolerates such things.

---

[167] In American gay slang, a "Bear" is a large and/or muscular man with a lot of body hair.
[168] I grew up and went to college in the DC area and several of my close friends were (and still are) gay men. Though dress and grooming standards have changed slightly with the times, my proximity to DC gay nightlife through the years has allowed me to identify clothing- and grooming-related signifiers of gay identity with a reasonable degree of accuracy. (The slang term for this is "gaydar.")

Once happy hour ended, the doors opened and the line began to move. I made my way inside with the rest of the crowd, a bit taken aback at the well-lit indoor reception area with two bouncers and a separate ticket window for paying cover charges. Moving past the ticket window and into the bar, I was again surprised by my surroundings. While the Blue Moon is a narrow neighborhood bar with a raised 4x6 platform (the "stage") and a temperamental sound system, Town is a very large space, with a proper stage and dance floor, club-style seating with reserved tables around the performance space, a fully enclosed DJ booth controlling the audiovisual portions of the show, and massive speakers on either side of the stage. There were also several video screens, projecting the visual portion of a music video playlist curated by the DJ in the booth. Seeing this and noting the audience, I expected that the production quality and prevailing aesthetic at Town would more closely mirror *Drag Race* than the Blue Moon. With this in mind, I reasoned that it would be very important for me to see what queens were doing with their bodies, especially their mouths, during lip-sync performances and chose a spot accordingly.

Finally, the lights dimmed, and I heard an amplified, disembodied voice over the sound system. It was Lena Lett announcing the beginning of the show from back stage. She came out from behind the curtain and I read shades of Divine in her makeup and the cut of her dress, causing me to reflect on the drag icon's omnipresence in my life. (Divine was from Baltimore, which is closer than DC to the suburb where I grew up. Blue Moon drag also owes a great deal to Divine.) When she came on stage, Lena asked the room, "Who is at their first drag show?" I was amused when most of the women in the bachelorette parties raised their hands and cheered, prompting Lena to respond, "Right, all the straight women." Though this was not a malicious jab, it was clearly a comment on the presence of straight women in a space created for gay men,

and Lena continued to make fun of the bachelorette parties for the rest of the night, though they seemed not to notice.

3.5   AESTHETICS

Aside from Lena Lett's forays into insult comedy at the expense of the bachelorette parties, humor was not a part of Town's drag show that night. Instead of campy social commentary, performers at Town impersonated the singers whose voices provided their backing tracks with a degree of realism that allowed their bodies to stand in for Rihanna, Beyoncé, and Dolly Parton. Though I knew I was seeing drag queens on Town's stage, the performers' attention to detail with hair, makeup, and costuming, as well as their well-rehearsed lip-syncing, created the illusion that the voice coming through the speakers had originated in their bodies. Unlike the Blue Moon, where performers' music choices are often deliberately chosen backing tracks in dialogue with the act's larger message, music at Town is absolutely central to the act. Sound dictates what performers wear, how they move, and how they interact with the audience when accepting tips.

When Riley Knoxx (known as Epiphany B. Lee at the time) performs a Beyoncé number, she becomes Beyoncé. In addition to replicating an outfit and hairstyle associated with the song, Riley moves like Beyoncé and sings along with the recording into a non-functional microphone. (At first, I thought she was just lip-syncing, but during a second visit to Town, I was close enough to hear that she actually is singing along with the backing track.) In the language of Town drag, she is an "illusionist" impersonating Beyoncé and this is true to a certain extent. Audience members around me applauded and exclaimed over the "accuracy" of the "illusion" in

89

Riley's performance and, from my own perspective, it did seem as though I had wandered into a music video. My knowledge that I was watching a drag queen impersonate Beyoncé was temporarily suspended; sensory experience made me believe that the voice coming through the speakers originated from the body in front of me. And, because the voice was Beyoncé's, the body must also be hers.

Though I did not have deep conversations with Town regulars about their perceptions of voices and bodies that night, (It was too loud and I was concerned that the combination of my outsider status and academic vocabulary would put people off.) I did catch some bits of conversation that confirmed my experience of the show as in line with at least some of the locals' readings of it. Between performers and after the show, much was said about the drag queens' skills as "illusionists," in this context referring to a presumably male artist's perceived ability to change their appearance and movement to embody a feminine personality on stage. (Since I do not know Tatianna or Riley Knoxx on a personal level, I can make no comments about their gender identities or expressions—especially movement—out of drag. I do concede, however, that their appearance changes a great deal from their everyday, non-show presentation to their various celebrity impersonations.) While, for Town's regular audience, the emphasis on "illusion" comes from a knowledge of drag based on *Drag Race* and its preoccupation with the visual, I argue that the performance of visual gender transformation with the addition of the song actually entails a change in the drag queen's body. Since the entire act is built around the choice of musical material, I propose that it is the recorded, singing voice that causes these bodily changes in drag performers at Town. Before exploring this, though, I think it is important to understand the "illusion" that is central to locals' understanding and the *Drag Race* narrative of

90

Tatianna and Riley's drag and how it plays on existing assumptions and theories of voice and body.

3.6   ILLUSION, MASQUERADE, AND URSULA THE SEA WITCH

Central to the "illusion" of Town drag is the assumption that the singing voice sounds the essence of a person, including bodily properties and some conception of the soul or self. This assumption is especially prevalent in Barthes' theory of voice and also shows up as subtext in Cusick's, as I have detailed in the introduction to this chapter. Though these theories are problematic for the reasons outlined above, I return to them now because their conflations of voice, body, and self are integral to perceptions of Town and *Drag Race* drag as "illusions" in which queens use the disembodied, objectified voices of pop stars as part of an elaborate gender masquerade.

This perception of the lip-sync as putting on a pop singer's voice like a costume, as a sort of theft of the singer's identity, was made into something of a running joke at the Blue Moon. During a Disney-themed show, Cindy Crochford dressed as Ursula the Sea Witch (from *The Little Mermaid*) and, for her backing track, mixed audio from scenes in which Ursula takes Ariel's voice as payment for making her human—she orders Ariel to sing and captures the mermaid's singing voice in a shell—as well as scenes in which Ursula uses Ariel's voice to court Prince Eric.[169] This is significant in the film because the prince was originally attracted by Ariel's singing voice when she prevented him from drowning. To have Ursula capture and use

---

[169] This if of particular interest because, according to drag queen folklore, Ursula's voice and appearance in the Disney film were based on Divine. Cindy is known for impersonating Divine with great vocal and visual accuracy. (See Chapter 4.)

91

Ariel's voice to attract the prince is, then, a sort of theft; the sea witch has stolen a part of the mermaid and used it in a nefarious masquerade. As Cindy Crochford referenced these plot points in *The Little Mermaid*, while lip-syncing Ursula's lines, multiple people around me—including the show's MC—commented that the content of Cindy's act played on tropes around lip-syncing in drag, especially at venues outside the Blue Moon.

The Blue Moon's "busted" aesthetic usually produces lip-sync performances in which queens do not know linguistic content or correct timing for words in their backing tracks and, instead, choose and assemble the sonic portions of their acts as a complement to or dialogue with their visual choices (as Ann Teak did with "Can I Get an Amen?"). Thus, the Blue Moon lip-sync is less an appropriation of voice than a dialogue with a person who is only sonically present.[170] Lip-sync performances at Town, on the other hand, fit the model referenced by Cindy in her *Little Mermaid* act; the emphasis on accurate lip-syncing and celebrity impersonation at Town makes the use of recorded voices an appropriation. While *The Little Mermaid* represents this as a nefarious act, it need not always be. Stripping away the fantastic elements of the Disney story and the villainous intentions behind Ursula's specific appropriation of Ariel's voice, Tatianna and Riley Knoxx are doing what Ursula did in the film: they use Rihanna and Beyoncé's voices to aid in a high-production-value masquerade, at least if we take a view of drag as illusion for entertainment, in line with Town's primary audience.

In Town drag, the recorded voices of Beyoncé and Rihanna allow Riley Knoxx and Tatianna to temporarily appear as the singers, though understanding of this act as elaborate "illusion" implies knowledge that there is fakery going on. In this case, not only are the claims that the performer is Rihanna or Beyoncé understood to be fake; their claims on womanhood and

---

[170] Adherence and exceptions to this will be discussed in the next chapter, "Where Is the Voice?"

femininity are understood the same way. In short, the framing of Tatianna and Riley's drag as "illusion" is a sophisticated re-branding of the Vaudeville (and possibly older) man-in-a-dress gag.[171] It dismisses gender play as a joke because to take it seriously is threatening to heteronormativity and body-essentialist binary gender. However, gender play is allowed within the space of the drag show because it is understood as a gag in the same way that Carnival humor in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* is understood: a performance presents a challenge to established social order, but that challenge is not taken seriously because of the space in which it happens—a space of "illusion." Furthermore, were a similar performance to happen outside the space of illusion—the drag show or Carnival celebrations—it would be violently suppressed because of the challenge it presents to the status quo.[172] One need only Google "recent murders of transgender women" or read the numerous "bathroom bills" brought up by state legislatures for proof of this. (Trans women and drag queens are different identities, but they are often conflated in public discourse because they present similar challenges to existing gender norms.)

3.7   AESTHETICS AND POLITICS

The political dimension of branding Tatianna and Riley Knoxx's drag as "illusion" is deeply tied to Town's audience and is one of the more important reasons why I felt out of place as a trans

---

[171] Sasha Adams, a regular performer at multiple DC drag venues, has jokingly described herself in drag as "a man in a dress." But this self-deprecating comment came in the context of a larger conversation about aesthetic norms in DC drag venues, in which Sasha claimed her humor as a greater asset than her ability to pass as a cisgender woman while in drag. This dry humor and awareness of aesthetic norms around gender performance is a telling piece of commentary: while the immediate context for Sasha's reference to the man-in-a-dress gag was a self-deprecating jab at local aesthetic expectations, she was also speaking to the reality of how some audiences see *all* drag queens and trans women, regardless of gender identity.

[172] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* Hélène Iswolsky, translator (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

person there, even after multiple visits accompanied by an insider. Dismissing drag's gender play as an "illusion" or a "joke" fixes performers into the expectations attached to their birth-assigned genders and fixes gender to anatomy, which is contrary to the underlying goal of drag, even drag according to RuPaul. (The catchphrase for *Drag Race,* at least in the early seasons, was "You're born naked and the rest is drag," meaning that gender is socially constructed and not dependent on anatomy.)

While it would be convenient to blame the large numbers of straight women in Town's audience for this homonormative interpretation of their drag show, the bar's gay male clientele is equally, if not more, responsible for the reading of drag in the space. According to the friend who told me about Town's drag show and accompanied me on all visits to the bar after my first, there is a sizable contingent of gay men who could be considered regulars for Town's Friday night drag show. In contrast, my friend pointed out that the groups of straight women in the bar for bachelorette or birthday parties are not regulars and, instead, tend to come in once to celebrate a single event and not return. In combination with the branding of Town's drag as "illusion," this information is telling. While performers do play to straight women during the show by spending a lot of time moving through the large party groups, it would seem that the larger drag aesthetic promoted at Town—because it is quite consistent—is geared toward the gay men in the audience and that their perspective simply happens to align with the attributes sought in drag shows by bachelorette parties.

This is not happenstance, though. Recently, several articles discussing the concept of homonormatvity have been published in spaces ranging from scholarly journals and edited

collections to social justice-oriented feminist blogs aimed at general audiences.[173] Between these various publications, the common thread in articles on homonormativity is understanding the term as a descriptor for a gay rights movement based in assimilationist politics and affluent white (often male) privilege. In practical terms, then, homonormative politics are aimed at representing homosexuality as being equivalent to heterosexuality—gay people are just as "normal" as straight people—save for the gender of one's partner. This includes aspirations to normative relationships (i.e. marriage) and beauty standards, as well as investment in body-essentialist binary gender and neo-liberal capitalist consumerism.[174] Understanding this abstract concept of homonormativity and the performer/audience dynamics at Town, a picture starts to emerge that explains why Town drag is framed as "illusion," despite being targeted at a gay audience that would presumably be receptive to serious gender play (because of its history within the community as part of the Stonewall riots, etc.).

3.8   THE POLITICS OF GENDER PLAY IN QUEER HISTORY

Despite the abbreviation LGBT(Q), the sexuality- and gender-variant community is not unified. Dating the "fracturing" of the community is difficult because some would argue that it has never been a united front—witness Sylvia Rivera's speeches to/at gay activist demonstrations in the 70s-80s—but the centering of gay activism on the fight for marriage rights is often cited as a

---

[173] E.g.: Scott Morgensen, "Settler Homonationalism: Theorizing Settler Colonialism within Queer Modernities," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16/1-2 (2010): 105-131. Jim Daems, ed. *The Makeup of* RuPaul's Drag Race*: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2014)*. Laura Kacere, "Homonormativity 101: What It Is and How It's Hurting Our Movement," *Everyday Feminism*, published 24 January 2015.
[174] Kacere, "Homonormativity 101."

major point of rupture between the "LG" and (at least) the "T."[175] This is in part because the development of gay respectability politics is deeply tied to the marriage narrative and in part because the rhetoric of the Human Rights Campaign (who spearheaded the marriage equality movement) explicitly excluded trans people while implicitly excluding people of color, poor people, non-citizens, and anyone else who tarnishes the image of a respectable, normative, married couple that just happens to be gay. This latter category includes gender-variant people across the trans spectrum because normative gender expressions are respectable and intelligible, while gender variance—e.g.: drag—is not.[176] Though staged drag shows are still very much a part of "gay culture" as represented by mainstream media (including LOGO and other networks aimed at gay audiences), drag performers themselves are not part of mainstream gay politics unless they already fit or can be made to fit the drag-as-illusion narrative.

Drag is a highly visible spectacle and, as such, is a profitable cultural product that can be identified with the gay community because of its roots in the Era of the Closet.[177] But drag is also potentially dangerous to gay respectability politics because it destabilizes body-essentialist binary gender. Thus, the illusion narrative: if drag's gender play is dismissed as an "illusion" or a "joke," its challenges to the status quo are minimized. This is good for people who fit or aspire to fit "respectable" images of gayness and incredibly damaging to people who fall outside those narratives. As a trans person, I am an outsider, and I very much feel that every time I set foot in Town.

---

[175] Ibid. See also: Daems, *The Makeup of* RuPaul's Drag Race; Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008.)

[176] Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

[177] George Chauncey, "Pansies on Parade," in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940 (*New York: Basic Books, 1994).

3.9   TRANSFORMATION AND BECOMING

Having established why Town's primary audience is so invested in the illusion narrative for drag, I can circle back to Riley Knoxx and Tatianna's very serious celebrity impersonations and what voices do for these performances. To do this, I am deliberately reading Riley and Tatianna's drag in a manner inconsistent with the prevailing interpretation among their primary audience. This is mostly for political reasons: I reject the illusion narrative because of its roots in assimilationist politics that reify values of the neo-liberal, white supremacist, colonialist, cis-hetero patriarchy. Instead, I opt for a queer interpretive frame, in which I take Riley Knoxx and Tatianna's claims to womanhood seriously, at least within the space of the drag show. For the duration of the act, I understand both performers as having become women and, depending on the content of the number, as having become the celebrities whose appearance they take on.[178] The recorded voice is instrumental in this process of becoming, as the act of lip-syncing makes the voice appear to have originated within the drag artist's body, simultaneously disrupting conventional theories of acousmatic voices and bringing the changes in the body's gendered appearance from the outside to the inside. This plays on understandings of gender as anatomy and voice as interiority.[179] As such, it is the campy element in Tatianna and Riley's otherwise serious drag. Through the act of becoming women and becoming celebrities for the drag show, the artists demonstrate that linking gender and voice directly to the body is highly problematic.

---

[178] My interpretation of the Deleuzian concept of "becoming" (in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*) is based on the writings of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. In his work with indigenous South Americans, Viveiros de Castro takes seriously claims that, for example, putting on the skin of a jaguar allows a hunter to become a jaguar and, thus, take on a jaguar's perspective. ("Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4/3: 469-488.) Instead of the Euro-centric, "culturally relative" anthropologist cop-out of stating that indigenous people simply "believe" they become jaguars by donning the jaguar skin, Viveiros de Castro takes the claims seriously as a critique of Cartesian and otherwise Euro-centric and colonialist beliefs in fixed identity.

[179] See: Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice"; Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex."

My political choice to take Riley Knoxx and Tatianna's drag seriously (and thereby understand how they enact camp) does not entirely conflict with their primary audience's understanding of how they are using voices. The illusion narrative and my interpretation of Town drag as a form of becoming both understand recorded voices to be something that a drag artist puts on as part of a costume.[180] The approaches diverge in my suggestion that putting on Beyoncé's recorded voice and dance moves, in addition to a wig, makeup, and gold leotard, allows Riley Knoxx to become Beyoncé for the duration of the act. If I were to voice this out loud at Town, people would probably assume I have had some sort of break with reality because notions of becoming (in the Deleuze/Viveiros de Castro sense) conflict so strongly with Western constructions of fixed identity that is tied to the body. It is the fluidity of becoming, as well as its uncoupling of identity from anatomy, that is disruptive to hegemonic ideologies that create fixity as reality and fluidity as madness.

But the "madness" of a serious belief in becoming can be generative and is not entirely foreign to the world of drag. Lady J Martinez O'Neal, a drag artist from Cleveland, puts it this way:

> *Drag is so much more than the act of crossing genders. Becoming a woman is probably the last thing I think about when doing drag. I like the idea that you can become any noun, really. You can transform the body by padding and constricting your own, you can layer on art forms on art forms on art forms by being a queen who does ballet, eats fire, and plays live music. You can come onstage as a pile of garbage and transform into a psycho clown slut and actually move people to feel something by playing out your Divine meets Pierrot story and then turn around to see the most inspiring performer staple gunning Donald Trump's picture to someone's arm. I guess what I'm saying is, drag is the best art form ever.[181]*

Though drag at Town centers on crossing genders and becoming woman, rather than becoming "any noun, really," Lady J's testament to the transformative power of drag is still relevant. The

---

180 Deleuze, *Kafka*; Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism."
181 Jeremiah Davenport/Lady J Martinez O'Neal, Facebook (public post), 19 September 2016.

drag show is a space in which identity is fluid, and this fluidity is more than comic, carnivalesque reversals; as Lady J says, the transformative power of drag can "actually move people to feel something" if it is taken seriously.

So what happens if we take Town drag seriously? How does letting Tatianna and Riley Knoxx become Rihanna and Beyoncé change how voices and identities work in relation to bodies? Understanding how Rihanna and Beyoncé's recorded voices work for drag queens at Town requires an understanding of how those recorded voices work as cultural objects on a larger scale, especially in relation to the singers' identities. Here, Stiegler becomes useful again, as does Jonathan Sterne.[182] In the introduction to *The Audible Past*, Jonathan Sterne deconstructs discourses that treat recorded voices as "disembodied," as though the recording and playback apparatus has somehow stolen the voice from its person/body in order for the technology to masquerade as a human.[183] Instead, Sterne notes that recorded voices exist in a negotiated relationship with technology, in which the person whose voice is recorded is vocalizing specifically for that purpose. The mechanical reproduction of the voice is consensual; there is no theft. Thus, the recording and playback apparatus might be better seen as extensions of the vocalist's body or persona, rather than machines masquerading as human by stealing a voice.[184] The recorded voice, then, is not functionally different from a voice heard live, but this still does

---

[182] Stiegler, *Technics and Time*. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

[183] It is important to note the similarities between the discourses Sterne deconstructs—discourses that position recorded voices as "disembodied"—and Ursula the Sea Witch's appropriation of voice in *The Little Mermaid*, referenced earlier in this chapter. In this case, however, it is not one living being masquerading as another by stealing a voice, but a machine masquerading as human. The theme of theft is quite prevalent in discourses on recording and playback of voices. (Sterne, *The Audible Past*.)

[184] Sterne, *The Audible Past*. See also: Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999). Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). Stiegler, *Technics and Time*.

not answer the question of what a voice is sounding. When Beyoncé and Rihanna record songs, who is singing?

3.10 RECORDED VOICES AND IDENTITY

As it did when I posed the question in the chapter introduction, asking "who is singing?" in reference to a Beyoncé or Rihanna track seems a bit silly. Of course Beyoncé and Rihanna provide the vocals on their own songs. After the Milli Vanilli scandal, this should not be in question. But who are Beyoncé and Rihanna as we know them? The singers' public personas are filtered through several layers of media advisers, stylists, publicists, and other professionals; what we see and hear in their music videos and radio singles, or even on stage at a concert, is not who they are in their personal lives.[185] Instead, a pop singer's public persona—a Beyoncé or a Rihanna—is a projection, a careful negotiation of expectations surrounding body, movement, hairstyle, makeup, costuming, vocal sounds, and musical genres, among other things.

This projection of pop singer identity is very much like a drag character: it involves exaggerated, theatrical gender expression based on cultivated knowledge of social norms and expectations. Admittedly, the campy elements of drag are usually lacking from pop singers' performances, especially singers of the "diva" category to which Beyoncé and Rihanna belong, but the sheer spectacle of their acts shares characteristics with drag.[186] In short, the public personas of Beyoncé and Rihanna play with a highly glamorized and exaggerated femininity

---

[185] David Brackett, "The Electro-Acoustic Mirror: Voices in American Pop," *Critical Quarterly* 37/2: 11-27.
[186] N.B.: The spectacle of the solo female pop "diva"—even before that word came into use—was what a lot of drag looked and sounded like in the Era of the Closet and still looks like now. (See: Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.) RuPaul still does a "Snatch Game"—in which queens are required to impersonate celebrities—for every season of *Drag Race*.

while taking themselves seriously. The voice is a part of this. Following Sterne and Stiegler, the recorded voices of Beyoncé and Rihanna exist in a consensual relationship with technology, in which a mechanical apparatus allows the voice to sound without the presence of the singer's body.[187] Beyond this, the actual sounds of their voices are shaped by their relationships with expectations for women of color of their ages in the English-speaking pop/R&B music world.[188] So to say that Beyoncé or Rihanna is singing on a particular recording is to actually make quite a complicated declaration about the interaction of a carefully cultivated persona with technology controlled by a powerful industry, as well as how the persona and the technology are heard by a fairly heterogeneous audience. Yes, Beyoncé and Rihanna's voices sound bodies, but neither the sounds nor the bodies exist in a vacuum. The social dynamics that shape them are just as important as their physical characteristics, and the social dynamics sometimes dictate the physical characteristics.[189]

So what does this mean for Tatianna and Riley Knoxx when they become Rihanna and Beyoncé? The recorded voices that play through Town's speakers during their shows already, in some sense, stand in for the singers' bodies and all of the socio-cultural baggage attached to them through careful branding and PR—and these personas are projections for the benefit of an audience. By pairing an act that visually channels a singer's public persona with the same singer's recorded voice, Tatianna and Riley Knoxx take on the identities of Rihanna and Beyoncé.[190] They temporarily become the physical manifestations of the identity projected through the recorded voice and, in doing so, they break norms surrounding gender, voice, and body. This is because Cartesian ideologies that separate mind and body while insisting that

[187] Sterne, *The Audible Past.*
[188] Stiegler, *Technics and Time.*
[189] Stiegler, *Technics and Time.* Butler, *Gender Trouble.*
[190] Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism."

identity is fixed permeate everything, including conceptions of what gender and voice are on an ontological level. The same questions that arise with Ann Teak's voice also come up when Tatianna and Riley Knoxx borrow pop singers' voices, as well as when the pop singers vocalize for recordings or concerts. But the answers to those questions are not the same for Ann Teak, Riley Knoxx, and Beyoncé.

3.11   BECOMING AS A THEORY OF VOICE

As discussed in the chapter introduction and earlier in this section, Ann Teak, Rihanna, and Beyoncé's voices are both of the body and man-made.[191] They reflect the physical characteristics of the bodies producing them, as well as the cultural norms that shape how those bodies have learned to produce sounds in particular contexts. But when Beyoncé and Rihanna's recorded voices come to Riley Knoxx and Tatianna, they become another kind of object. While the recordings retain the properties of the Stiegler prosthesis in that the sounds are shaped by the singer's body and by the cultural forces allowing that body to produce sound, this is not the only meaning attached to them when they are used in a drag show. In addition to sounding the things they sound for Beyoncé and Rihanna, their recorded voices become conventional prostheses for drag queens, objects that Tatianna and Riley Knoxx put on with an outfit, wig, makeup, and body padding. And, for the illusion narrative of Town's primary audience, the status of the voice stops there: it is at once a Stiegler prosthesis for Rihanna and Beyoncé and a conventional prosthesis for Tatianna and Riley Knoxx. But, if we seriously consider drag as an act of becoming, the

---

[191] Stiegler, *Technics and Time*.

voice becomes more than an object.[192] It becomes a means by which one body is temporarily transformed into another; it makes the drag queens' act of becoming possible because of our encultured associations of voices with bodies.

This is where we revisit Barthes, Cusick, and Ursula the Sea Witch. Despite the problems with their mappings of voice directly onto body and/or subjectivity, their models are—for better or worse—the "common sense" understanding of how voices work. Because of this, hearing Rihanna and Beyoncé's recorded voices creates a sort of spectral presence of their bodies and their subjectivities as projected through media; we hear an imprint of the person we see in tabloids, interviews, music videos, and concerts, even though the physical body is not visible to us. To have an actual body on stage, one that visually resembles the spectral body created by the playback of the recorded voice, allows the voice to then inhabit this new body; the body on stage becomes the body on the recording.[193] This would not work quite so well if the bodies on stage got the gestures or the hair or the mouth movements (lip-sync) wrong, so accuracy is important, and part of Tatianna and Riley's professionalism is their studied, accurate adoption of particular singers' gestures and other movements. But this, in turn, would be pointless without the musical backing track. Just as with the donning of a prosthetic limb, Beyoncé and Rihanna's recorded voices become parts of Riley Knoxx and Tatianna's bodies and, as this happens, the gestures and the lip-sync fall into place, allowing the drag queens to become the singers, at least until the song ends.

---

[192] Deleuze, *Kafka*.
[193] Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism."

4.0   WHERE IS THE VOICE?: DEATH AND PRESENCE IN LIVE AND RECORDED VOCAL SOUNDS

In August 2014, shortly after news of Robin Williams' death hit media outlets, an invitation to a Blue Moon event came up in my Facebook feed. The event was titled "Night of 1000 Doubtfires," a reference Williams' appearance as the title character in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), and was scheduled to be co-hosted by Kitty Klottsalot and Bambi Deerest. For the most part, the event description was typical of Blue Moon show advertisements: it listed the date and time of the event, along with a list of performers. But, in addition to the usual details, "Night of 1000 Doubtfires" had a brief description of the night's theme, penned by Bambi, describing the significance of *Mrs. Doubtfire* to her own self-realization and coming out process. Though the film is not particularly kind to the LGBT community, trading in stereotypes of gay men and openly mocking trans women in several scenes—something which was acknowledged on stage at the show—the presence of a well-known actor in drag in a mainstream film made Bambi realize that gender variance, whether through part-time expressions like drag or full-time expressions like a transition, was a real, possible way to exist in the world. For this reason, Bambi felt a personal attachment to Robin Williams, especially in *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and organized a tribute show as a way to grieve collectively with other queer people after he died.

Though Bambi, Kitty, Bebe Beretta, and the rest of the show's cast performed touching and appropriately irreverent tributes to Williams and the Mrs. Doubtfire character, Alora

Chateaux's performance used voice in the most memorable way and in a manner more consistent with the high production value, highly rehearsed lip-sync performances at Town in DC than with the irreverent, "busted" aesthetic more typical of the Blue Moon. Because of Alora's attention to detail in her lip-sync, makeup, body prosthetics, wig, and costuming that night, the effect of the performance was uncanny.[194] After stepping onto the stage in a long, high-waisted tartan skirt, high-necked white blouse with a brooch at the collar, stockings, and gray wig fastened in a bun, Alora faced the audience while setting up a music stand and a stuffed toy bird in a toy cage. When she faced us, we could see that she was made up to look like an old woman, but not in the overdone, campy way such makeup typically appears in Blue Moon shows. Instead, this appeared realistic and, combined with the costume, made her strongly resemble the benevolent yet firm, grandmotherly presence of the filmic Mrs. Doubtfire. When the sonic portion of her act started, it explained the presence of the bird in the cage. Alora lip-synced the opening scene of *Mrs. Doubtfire*, in which Robin Williams (as Daniel Hillard, not as the title character) provides the voices for a *Looney Tunes*-like cartoon in a studio.[195] One of the characters voiced by Williams is a bird, while the other is a cat, thus explaining Alora's choice of props in her act.

The scene—and Alora's tribute to it—began with Williams (as Hillard, performing as the cartoon bird) singing "Largo al Factotum" from *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and, whether Alora

---

[194] I use the term "uncanny" here to indicate something that is simultaneously familiar and slightly unsettling, as well as in a sense that is directly related to the voice. This latter meaning is borrowed from Mladen Dolar's discussion of the object voice in *A Voice and Nothing More*. Dolar's object voice is a remainder, that which is left when linguistic meaning and aesthetic values are stripped away from a vocal utterance. This remainder, the object voice, has the potential to be uncanny (in the Lacanian sense, as well as the Freudian) because it is stripped of meaning. (Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.)

[195] As with Moon Baby and Ann Teak, Mrs. Doubtfire is a creation of Daniel Hillard, so it is not entirely accurate to separate the two characters as I have done. However, at this point in the film's plot, Mrs. Doubtfire does not yet exist, and Williams is not yet dressed in drag, though he is performing as an identity other than his primary character in voicing the cartoon characters in a studio. These complications of identity in the film mirror some of the complexities of performance for Blue Moon drag artists and, as such, are highly fitting for a drag tribute, despite Williams not being *en femme* in this scene.

learned the Italian text or simply approximated it using lip-syncing tricks, she made it appear that Williams' voice was coming from her body. Her mouth movements and other bodily gestures closely mimicked Williams' performance in the film and afforded the voice a physical presence that triggered my own affective attachments to *Mrs. Doubtfire*.[196] Even as the opening aria ended and the soundtrack changed to Williams speaking as the cartoon bird and cat, Alora's lip-sync and other gestures kept up. As Williams did in the film, her facial and bodily expressions shifted between the bird's high, small voice and the cat's deeper, smoother drawl. This studied, well rehearsed performance was doubly uncanny in that Alora's resemblance to the film character, combined with Williams' voice, brought the film to life, and this extremely life-like representation was dissonant with my knowledge of the actor's recent death. This cognitive dissonance and sense of the uncanny at hearing the recorded voices of the dead is an affective response that has been documented since the early days of the phonograph, and Blue Moon tributes to deceased celebrities capitalize on it.[197] Watching Bambi in the DJ booth next to the stage, I could see that she, too, was affected by the performance; the plays on sonic and bodily presence in Alora's act simultaneously made Williams' death more real and gave him some kind of earthly existence after bodily death.

Like Tatianna and Riley Knoxx becoming Rihanna and Beyonce, celebrity tributes at the Blue Moon play on hearings of the voice as expressing the soul or essence of a person, mechanically preserved through recording and playback apparatus.[198] But Blue Moon tribute

---

[196] Because I am affectively attached to the film for reasons entirely unrelated to my queer identity, I am leaving personal details out of the narrative here. While it is important that I was able to empathize with performers' emotional state after the death of Robin Williams, the reasons for my ability to empathize would be a distraction to the discussion of queer media icons and posthumous representation in this chapter.

[197] Erika Brady, *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999), pp. 11-26. See also: Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past*.

[198] Sterne, *The Audible Past*.

shows do not allow the same sort of becoming that happens at Town because the celebrities being honored are deceased. Instead, the Blue Moon tribute show is an incomplete becoming, rendered so by cognitive dissonance at hearing presence through the voices of the dead. It is, at once, an expression of grief for a public figure who has been a positive force in the life of performers and audiences and a means of perpetuating that influence, of vanquishing death by preserving the voice.[199] These plays on presence raise slightly different questions to the acts in the previous chapter. Where it is possible for performers at Town to become living celebrities by donning recorded voices that match visual representations, thus affording Beyoncé and Rihanna (for example) a plausible form of sonic and bodily presence, Blue Moon performers' use of the voices of the dead creates a different kind of presence, one that I argue is not fully here. And, if that is the case, where is the voice?

4.1   SCHIZOPHONIA AND BECOMING

Answering questions about the location of voice at a Blue Moon tribute show is at once dead simple and extremely complicated. As with performers temporarily becoming living celebrities at Town, the "owner" of the recorded voice used in a Blue Moon tribute show was, at some moment, singing and/or speaking. The recording of Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire* is an impression—in the literal sense that, in the beginning, sound recordings were pressed into wax—

---

[199] As I write this, I realize that its similarities to J.K. Rowling's concept of Horcruxes in the *Harry Potter* universe are quite striking. In Rowling's work, the Horcrux is an artifact of Dark Magic, in which a magical person has concealed a piece of their soul so that they cannot die, even if their physical body is destroyed. (J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, New York: Scholastic, 2005.) But, where Rowling pathologizes the splitting of the soul—creating a Horcrux requires a magical person to commit murder—and the concealment of the soul fragment in an object, sound recording need not be so violent an act. (Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 1-30. C.f. Brady, *A Spiral Way*.)

of a point in time when Williams' voice was sounding through the characters he played in the film.[200] Playing the recording, allowing the voice to sound again, constitutes a kind of spectral presence that is channelled and made (at least somewhat) material by Alora's physical presence in costume as Mrs. Doubtfire. This much corresponds with what Tatianna does at Town: a celebrity sang into recording equipment and the sound is played back while a drag queen lip-syncs the words, using the recorded voice to allow their physical body to recall the presence of the singer. But Blue Moon tributes diverge from the form of becoming enacted at Town in the relationships between recorded voice, performer, and audience, meaning that the voice is something different at the Blue Moon than it is at Town.

Where recorded voices allow Town performers to fully inhabit the personas of celebrity vocalists, voices in Blue Moon tribute shows are understood as still belonging to the dead, even as they interact with living bodies on stage. By putting on Beyoncé's voice and becoming Beyoncé during a show at Town, Riley Knoxx assumes temporary ownership of the recorded voice. During a Blue Moon tribute, even one like Alora's that adopts the lifelike accuracy and high production value of Town's (and televised drag's) aesthetics, the performer deliberately rejects claims to ownership of the recorded voice. However, the cases of Riley Knoxx and Tatianna becoming Beyoncé and Rihanna through the playback of recorded vocal sounds share a reliance on schizophonia with Blue Moon tribute shows. The difference between the two venues and their approaches to recorded celebrity voices is how performers choose to play on that schizophonia, and this is what ultimately makes the location of voice in a Blue Moon tribute show different to the location of voice in a weekly show at Town.

---

[200] Erika Brady, *A Spiral Way*, pp. 11-26.

Though the concept of schizophonia has been explicitly debunked by Jonathan Sterne in *The Audible Past* and in a somewhat roundabout way by Bernard Stiegler's concept of the prosthesis,[201] the idea that a recorded sound is pathologically separated from its source is one that circulates widely in popular understandings of voice.[202] The example of Ursula the Sea Witch and the similarities of *The Little Mermaid*'s plot to the "illusion" narrative around Town drag are representative examples of the circulation of schizophonia as a concept, even if R. Murray Schafer's term is omitted from the discourse.

At Town, Riley Knoxx and Tatianna play on their audiences' assumptions of schizophonia and drag as "illusion" by taking on the stage personas of the voices they lip-sync to. By becoming Beyoncé and Rihanna, the queens challenge notions of recorded sound as pathologically separated from a sounding body. In effect, their acts of becoming negate the perceived separation of recorded sound from sounding body, provided we take becoming seriously. But this is not the case during a Blue Moon tribute show. While other performance contexts at Blue Moon involve a serious belief in the form of becoming described by Lady J Martinez O'Neal and practiced at Town, the tribute show is a special case precisely because it relies on the voices of the dead.[203]

Because the Blue Moon tribute show is a tribute, performers draw attention to the separation of the recorded voice from the body that produced it, emphasizing a sense of schizophonia and the uncanny. Even Alora's tribute to *Mrs. Doubtfire*, which had potential to

---

[201] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). Stiegler's definition of the voice as a prosthesis—something of the body and man-made—is equally applicable to voices played back by recording technology. The mechanical reproduction of the voice simply adds another layer to the prosthesis by allowing sound to continue without the bodily presence of the vocalist.

[202] Sterne, *The Audible Past*. See also: R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994). Steven Feld, "Pygmy Pop: A Genealogy of Schizophonic Mimesis," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 28 (1996), pp. 1-35.

[203] See previous chapter for quote on becoming. Interpretations of becoming at the Blue Moon are discussed in the next chapter.

enact the becoming practiced at Town, did not completely allow Robin Williams' voice to inhabit Alora's body. This was partly through the cognitive dissonance of knowing that Williams had died a few days before the show and partly through Alora's choice to appear in feminine drag while using sounds Williams produced as a masculine character. Had Alora chosen another of the film's well known scenes, one featuring Williams' voice as the Mrs. Doubtfire character, the act could have been an instance of becoming on a similar order to Tatianna's work at Town. But that form of becoming would be inappropriate to a tribute show designed as an expression of collective grief and a means of honoring the deceased. Thus, Alora chose a sound example that was slightly mismatched with the rest of her act, drawing attention to the gap between Robin Williams' body at the moment the sound was recorded and her own body on stage at the Blue Moon.

4.2   LIP-SYNCING, DISSONANCE, AND PRESENCE

Alora's emphasis on Robin Williams' physical absence during her *Mrs. Doubtfire* act is representative of larger aesthetics in Blue Moon tribute shows. During the Night of 1000 Doubtfires, other cast members used similar tactics to acknowledge and memorialize Robin Williams without using his voice to fully become (as would happen at Town) the characters he portrayed in his films. This strategy reappeared at subsequent Blue Moon tribute shows in 2016, notably those for David Bowie and Prince.[204] In both instances, the visual portion of acts

---

[204] Bowie and Prince were chosen for tribute shows because they made sound recordings—music is central to live drag performance—and because they were public figures who visibly experimented with gender during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s—years when many Blue Moon drag artists were coming of age and beginning to pay attention to pop culture.

referenced the celebrity being honored without directly taking on their appearance, leaving direct representation to the sonic portion of the act. This disjunction between the sonic and the visual plays on perceptions of presence through the combination of the recorded voice and a drag artist's stage act. The more complete acts of becoming in drag at Town also play on presence through the playback of a recorded voice, but they do so in a less overt way because the visual and the audio are congruent. This speaks to larger ideas about sounding voices, time, and space that are adjacent to philosophies relating voices, bodies, subjectivities, and technology, though hearings of presence and immediacy through the voice do not always cleanly map onto hearings of bodies and subjectivities.[205]

Tributes to David Bowie at the Blue Moon in January of 2016 emphasize this play on presence through the combination of phonographic technology and drag better than the example of Night of 1000 Doubtfires. The latter was a tribute to a specific, fictional character played and voiced by Robin Williams, a character who could never be fully present in the way that the actor could, and this presents a problem for theorizing bodies, voice, and presence, regardless of the posthumous timing of the tribute to Williams.[206] For this reason, I will begin this theory of presence with the relatively simpler example of the Blue Moon's tribute to David Bowie shortly after his death.

---

[205] Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound In the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 6-10. See also: Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

[206] There is some precedent in literary criticism for granting fictional characters a form of existence in the non-fictional world, but even the most liberal authors on the subject stop short of granting a literary or filmic character the same kind of presence as a non-fictional being. (See: Pierre Bayard, *Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong: Reopening the Case of the Hound of the Baskervilles*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, New York: Bloomsbury, 2010, pp. 103-146.) Thus, while I am comfortable allowing that Riley Knoxx becomes Beyoncé through the interaction of her drag with the singer's recorded voice, the way in which Alora Chateaux (or even Robin Williams) can become the fictional Mrs. Doubtfire is of a different order. Even if we return to Viveiros de Castro's interpretation of becoming or to his source material in Deleuze's *Kafka*, there are still boundaries between real and fictive worlds, even if those boundaries are fluid and porous. For the reader unsatisfied with my explanation here, I will return to fictional characters and their relation to the non-fictional world in Ch. 5.

At the first "Bowie Ball," hastily planned to replace a differently themed show when news broke of Bowie's death, Bambi Deerest hosted and performed several songs in multiple costumes, referencing Bowie's personas and musical sounds from the late 1960s through the 80s. In itself, this was not entirely out of the ordinary; when Bambi hosts shows, she typically performs several numbers, with matching costume changes. Though she often knows all the words to the songs she chooses for lip-syncing, the other visual elements of her performances tend to irreverently parody or otherwise comment on the content of the musical number, in keeping with the Blue Moon's queer and "busted" aesthetic.[207] But the Bowie tribute was different. While Bambi's usual crass irreverence was present, it was muted and, rather than being directed at its usual targets of audience members and performers not in the room, this time it was aimed at heteronormativity and binary gender, accompanied by occasional jabs at the family who withdrew their support because of her identity.

To introduce the show, Bambi described Bowie's importance as a visibly out queer figure and especially one who experimented with gender expressions in his artistic work. She spoke about her family's hostility toward LGBT-identified people and how the visibility of queer celebrities, as well as the community and safety provided by the Blue Moon, allowed her to declare and embrace her queer identities. She thanked everyone in the bar—performers, staff, and audience—that night for coming out on a cold evening in January to celebrate Bowie's life and contributions to pop culture with her, saving special thanks for those who had taken the time to dress up or make themselves up as David Bowie or one of his stage personas.

After this preamble, Bambi launched into a performance of "Ziggy Stardust," replicating aspects of Bowie's costume and makeup from the 1972 film and tour, but with a gender

---

[207] See previous chapters.

112

expression on the feminine side of androgyny (as compared to Bowie's more masculine version).[208] She duplicated Bowie's choppy, yet helmet-like, red hairstyle from the *Ziggy Stardust* album, film, and tour and left off body padding to keep her shape androgynous. She also wore a white outfit with billowing sleeves that closely approximated one of Bowie's outfits from the original film. But her makeup choices were more slanted toward feminine gender expressions than Bowie's metallic lipstick and forehead paint of the 1972 tour. Instead, Bambi accompanied her Ziggy Stardust wig and outfit with a version of her typical feminine drag face. Though Bambi's facial structure is such that her usual drag makeup is very light as compared to other performers, she still uses makeup to soften some of her features and accentuate others to pass as a cisgender human woman, which stands in contrast to Bowie's use of makeup to bring alien (as in non-human) features to Ziggy Stardust.

---

[208] As with *Mrs. Doubtfire* and Robin Williams, Ziggy Stardust is a fictional character created by Bowie and, thus, would present the same complications as the Night of 1000 Doubtfires if the object of the show's tribute were just Ziggy Stardust, instead of David Bowie. Since the show in January 2016 was a tribute to Bowie, not any specific one of his characters, it sidesteps these complications.

Figure 7: Bambi as Ziggy Stardust at Bowie Ball 2016

Bambi's visual homage to Bowie via Ziggy Stardust was accompanied by the studio recording of the song and, unlike her decision later in the show to sing "Rebel Rebel" over the recording, she chose to lip-sync "Ziggy Stardust" and let Bowie's voice carry the performance.[209] As with Alora's *Mrs. Doubtfire* number, the combination of a familiar voice with a visual element that deviated from the original performance intensified the sense that the vocalist on the recording was simultaneously present through sound and, yet, completely elsewhere. This deliberate emphasis on dissonance between the visual and the sonic disrupts hearings of presence through sound and makes the familiar recorded voice into something slightly unfamiliar and uncanny.

4.3   VIRTUAL SPACE, SOUND, AND PRESENCE

At the advent of recording and playback technology, this sense of the uncanny accompanied a great deal of human encounters with phonographs.[210] Now that sound playback technology—especially private, mobile listening technology—is so integrated into the fabric of human life, the experience of listening to a sound recording creates a virtual, imagined space in which performer and the listener are both fully present, while the world outside the sound recording takes on

---

[209] It is not out of the ordinary for Bambi to sing instead of lip-syncing, though she usually chooses to lip-sync at a tribute show. In this particular instance, Bambi's affective attachment to "Rebel Rebel" and the number's position as the show's finale, complete with crowd singing, probably influenced her decision to sing in that moment. Bambi may have also made this decision because her costume, hair, makeup, and general presentation for "Rebel Rebel" was much closer to Bowie's 1974 promotional video for the song, so the addition of his (recorded) voice would have been too uncanny for a show so soon after his death. Using her own voice, which is quite different to Bowie's in timbre, was a way of making the song her own, simultaneously acknowledging and mourning Bowie while also letting his influence live on. Live singing in celebrity tribute acts at the Blue Moon will be further theorized later in this chapter.

[210] Brady, *A Spiral Way*.

dream-like qualities.[211] In short, the omnipresence of listening technology has made the presence of a sounding voice without the bodily presence of a vocalist something that is commonplace; there is no reason for it to feel uncanny because it is so familiar. Drag plays on this, though the manner in which it does so depends heavily on the audience and the venue.

As discussed in previous chapters, the playback of a recorded voice creates a virtual space in which the vocalist, though absent in body, is fully present for the listener through sound.[212] Drag at Town and on the *Drag Race* tour circuit seeks to bolster these perceptions through a drag artist's visual resemblance to the singer whose voice is played back, a strategy that allows for performers like Tatianna and Riley Knoxx to become the celebrities whose voices they take on. In contrast, Blue Moon drag consistently plays with perceptions of sonic presence and virtual spaces created by playing back sound recordings. In most shows, this disruption of virtual space and virtual presence enacts queer social critique targeted at body-essentialist binary gender, heteronormativity, homonormativity, and drag artists who are beholden to the neoliberal pop culture industry. In a tribute show, the disruption of virtual space surrounding the playback of recorded voices has a much more immediate goal: recreating the sense of the uncanny documented in early accounts of the phonograph in order to emphasize the bodily absence of the celebrity whose voice is coming through the bar's speakers.

Emphasizing the bodily absence of David Bowie at the Bowie Ball and of Robin Williams (as Mrs. Doubtfire) at the Night of 1000 Doubtfires is a reflection on the deaths of

---

[211] Shuhei Hosokawa, "The Walkman Effect," *Popular Music 4* (1984): 165-180. See also: Michael Bull, "No Dead Air! The iPod and the Culture of Mobile Listening." *Leisure Studies* 24/4 (2005): 343-355. This is also similar to the "suturing" effect described by Claudia Gorbman in her work on film music, though Gorbman limits the power of music to hold a listener in a universe to fictions and timelines created through film. (Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987: 55.) Hosokawa and Bull allow the effect to work in the non-fictional world, though they both also posit that a person using a private listening technology experiences the world in a manner shaped by the sounds they hear.

[212] Hosokawa, "The Walkman Effect." Bull, "No Dead Air!" See also: Kahn, *Noise Water Meat*, pp. 6-10.

Bowie and Williams that creates a space for collective mourning. But this is not all it does. The bodily presence of a drag artist on the Blue Moon's stage, acknowledging the influence of a dead celebrity while the celebrity's recorded voice plays back, allows some part of the deceased to live on—literally in the sound recording and figuratively in the work of the drag artist. The performance is simultaneously a jarring reminder of death and a celebration of life, and this also allows the voice to simultaneously be present on at least two planes.

Because the sound recordings used in drag shows were made with full knowledge and consent of the artist whose voice was recorded, they are, in effect, a preservation of the artist's full sonic and bodily presence.[213] And, since this presence is preserved through technology, the bodily death of the artist is practically not much different to the sonic presence and bodily absence that occurs when a recording of a living artist's voice is played back. The sound recording is a prosthetic extension of presence through sound, allowing a vocalist to sonically inhabit and move through a space without their body being in it. Thus, playing "Ziggy Stardust" over the Blue Moon's sound system allows Bowie to be sonically present in the bar. But, in addition to being sonically present in the Blue Moon, Bowie's recorded voice is completely elsewhere because of the spatial and temporal displacement involved in playing back a recorded sound.

Bowie recorded "Ziggy Stardust" forty years ago in a space that was not the Blue Moon. While the sounds are able to be played back at any time, they are a preservation of Bowie's voice, songwriting consciousness, and performance style in a recording studio circa 1972. Likewise, any sound recording is an impression of the time and physical space in which it was produced. Drag at Town hides this displacement by presenting a visual spectacle aligned with the

---

[213] Sterne, *The Audible Past.* This is also discussed in the previous chapters.

physical presentation of the artist whose voice is being played back; Tatianna and Riley Knoxx carefully construct their acts to match Rihanna and Beyoncé's performances at the time the recordings were made.[214] In contrast, drag at the Blue Moon draws attention to the temporal and spatial displacement of recorded sounds by having its visual elements be slightly out of sync with the audio. At all Blue Moon shows, this serves to queer relationships to listening and, at the tribute show, it also serves to memorialize a recently deceased celebrity by acknowledging their death.

Acknowledging the death—and, therefore—bodily absence of a celebrity, even as their recorded voice is playing back over the Blue Moon's speakers, allows the voice to exist in multiple spaces at once and, in fact, capitalizes on highlighting the paradox of the recorded voice simultaneously indicating presence and absence. This functions as a tribute in two ways: the sound of Bowie's recorded voice still constitutes a form of presence, and Bambi's visual drag— though slightly out of sync with the sound and highlighting Bowie's bodily absence—shows Bowie's continued presence as an influence on people who know his work. Thus, the Bowie of "Ziggy Stardust" in 1972 is present during Bambi's tribute; his voice is preserved through the audio recording, allowing him to be in the Blue Moon even without his body. And, at the same time, Bowie—as the sum of his various public personas and artistic works—is present in Bambi's memory and in the memories of all the other performers (and, likely, most of the audience) at the Bowie Ball. This presence is different to that constituted by the sound recording because, where a recording captures a single moment and a literal, sounding voice, presence in

---

[214] While the idea of hiding carries negative connotations and is associated with the "illusion" narrative around Town drag, I have chosen this word deliberately because of the temporal and spatial work done by the relationship between the visual and sonic components of drag at Town. But this work could just as easily be done by Rihanna or Beyoncé lip-syncing their own songs or recreating music video aesthetics in a live show, treating the recorded version of a song as the authoritative text and seeking to recreate the time and space it preserves. Thus, I am not endorsing the illusion narrative in my claim that Town drag hides the temporal and spatial displacement inherent in playing back sound recordings; I am simply acknowledging a particular relationship to recorded audio materials.

memory and through influence is a figurative voice—that can be a sounding voice, though this is not necessary—across many moments.

4.4   LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE VOICES

The multiple kinds of presence constituted by interactions between recorded sounds and drag performers at Blue Moon tribute shows are not functionally different to other pairings of recorded sound with drag. Beyoncé's sonic presence at Town, allowed by playing a recording of her voice, is accompanied by another form of presence, a figurative voice of memory and influence, in Riley Knoxx's drag. At Town, these two kinds of presence—and the literal and figurative voices—merge when Riley Knoxx takes on Beyoncé's voice as her own and becomes Beyoncé for the duration of the song. This allows for a hyper-real, over-saturated presence of Beyoncé in Riley's drag, heightening the experience of the sound recording.

At the Blue Moon, on the other hand, performers take care not to let literal and figurative voices merge, allowing the literal, sounding, recorded voice to be sonic presence, while the presence constituted by memory and influence of the recorded vocalist is much less direct than at Town. In a regular Blue Moon show, this is accomplished through visual dissonance with the sonic backdrop and a deliberately imperfect lip-sync, refusing to allow the recorded voice to fully inhabit the drag artist's body. But at a tribute show, where lip-syncing is usually better prepared and rehearsed than at weekly shows, drag artists highlight the bodily absence of recorded singers primarily through visual dissonance. As with other Blue Moon shows, this is a refusal to allow a recorded voice to fully inhabit a drag artist's body and, at the same time, a jarring reminder that this particular recorded voice no longer inhabits any body.

119

Blue Moon drag artists' use of visual dissonance as a reminder of a celebrity's bodily death during a tribute show would seem to rely on the ability of recorded sound to constitute a form of sonic presence for the recorded vocalist. And, in most instances, this is true: performers at tribute shows lip-sync to recordings of recently deceased celebrities while the visual elements of their drag are slightly out of sync with the sonic component. Without the recorded sound of David Bowie's voice singing "Ziggy Stardust," Bambi's act would be recognizable as related to Bowie—because of the visual borrowing—but it would not include the same uncanny presence that the recorded voice allows.

In some special cases, though, a recorded voice is not necessary for a sense of the uncanny and a drag artist can sing live while creating the same simultaneous sense of presence and absence accomplished through the playback of recordings at other tribute shows. Cindy Crochford's tribute to Divine does this. Like other Blue Moon tributes, Cindy chooses her visual drag to be slightly dissonant with her soundtrack, but, instead of relying on the recorded voice to constitute Divine's presence, she sometimes sings live. Under other circumstances—like that of Bambi singing "Rebel Rebel"—singing live in a tribute show would disrupt the presence afforded by playing back a recorded voice because the timbre and other characteristics of the drag artist's voice may not necessarily match the recorded voice playing behind the live one. Cindy is a special case, however, because Cindy's study of Divine has included the latter's vocal performances in speech and song to such an extent that Cindy's voice can be indistinguishable from Divine's in a show.

This vocal resemblance to Divine allows Cindy's live voice to take on the same uncanny attributes taken on by Robin Williams' and David Bowie's voices in other Blue Moon tribute shows. Cindy's live voice sounds the presence of Divine, despite Divine having been dead for

nearly 30 years, in much the same way that playing a recording of "Ziggy Stardust" allows Bowie to be sonically present after his bodily death. Meanwhile, Divine is also present as an influence and a memory in the visual components of Cindy's drag during that specific number, as well as more generally across the majority of drag acts at the Blue Moon.[215] Thus, Cindy uses both literal and figurative voices in paying tribute to Divine, but her choice to sing live makes the location of voice in her tribute slightly more complicated than the recorded voices in the Robin Williams, David Bowie, and Prince tributes at the Blue Moon.

4.5   "WALK LIKE A MAN"

When Cindy pays tribute to Divine, she almost always sings or lip-syncs the latter's 1985 rendition of "Walk Like a Man," which shares its melody and basic narrative with the better-known Four Seasons single, while the backing track consists of heavily synthesized bass, drums, and voices. Where the Four Seasons' "Walk Like a Man" is very much a product of the early 1960s with its falsetto lead and doo-wop inspired backing vocals, Divine's cover uses so many signifiers of 1980s dance and pop music—pulsing synthesizers, electronic drums, and heavily processed vocals—that it almost seems to be a parody of the dance music sound world of 1985. It is these electronic sounds that begin Cindy's tributes to Divine, while Cindy either waits in the dressing room to make a dramatic entrance (when lip-syncing) or stands on stage with a microphone, her back to the audience until the lead vocals enter.

---

[215] Among current and former regular performers at the Blue Moon—Bambi Deerest, Bebe Beretta, Moon Baby, Sharon Needles, Alaska Thunderfuck, Amy Vodkahaus, Alora Chateaux, Cherri Baum—Divine is often cited as an influence on their decision to do drag, if not as an overt presence in the aesthetics of their work.

Divine sings the verses to "Walk Like a Man" in a raspy, nasal, strained modal register on the line between speech and song. The vocal sounds are pitched, but barely; the verse melody is mostly discernible from the rhythm of the delivery, the backing track, and lyrical content. At the refrain, Divine makes somewhat more of a concession to song, with more clearly pitched sounds and a passable delivery of the iconic melodic/lyrical line. However, unlike Frankie Valli, Divine does not take the refrain up an octave and sing falsetto.[216] Cindy has clearly studied this performance in detail and replicates it exactly when she chooses to sing live over Divine's recorded voice. The sonic resemblance is so close that the vocals sound double tracked when Cindy sings with Divine, as though the recording's lead vocal line has simply been layered on top of itself.

Though Cindy uses the sound of Divine's "Walk Like a Man" for her tribute performances, the visual elements reference Divine's film performances in *Pink Flamingoes* (1972) and *Female Trouble* (1974). In the "Walk Like a Man" video, Divine is costumed in a tight, red skirt and bustier, echoing barroom madams and saloon dancers in old Hollywood westerns and fitting with the larger visual theme of the video (which appears to be unrelated to the song's narrative). Also in keeping with the Western theme, Divine's make-up in "Walk Like a Man" is somewhat subdued and understated as compared to her film appearances, especially in *Pink Flamingoes*.[217] Divine does, however, sport his trademark big, teased, unkempt hair for "Walk Like a Man." In contrast, Cindy's Divine look at Blue Moon shows tends to reference the

---

[216] Divine's choices of vocal register and timbre are important because of the way sounding voices are gendered and classed. This will be discussed in relation to Moon Baby in the next chapter.

[217] If I had to name a single, iconic look for Divine, it would probably be *Pink Flamingoes*, a judgment which is supported by the token John Waters episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Season 7) and by tributes to Divine outside the Blue Moon. The *Pink Flamingoes* costume, hair, and makeup are the look most likely to show up when Lena Lett nods to Divine, and that look was popular among queens involved in the *Drag Race* tribute to John Waters. My pronoun-switching for Divine started as an unintentional inconsistency, but I have decided to leave it as-is in order to underscore the actor's subversion of anatomy-based binary gender.

heavy make-up and body-hugging dresses of *Pink Flamingoes*-era Divine, along with the actor's trademark big hair. This is not because Cindy lacks the wardrobe to reproduce Divine's look from the video; though she may not be able to match the color, Cindy has used outfits with similar silhouettes to Divine's music video drag on several occasions. Instead, the reference to Divine's 1970s film career in Cindy's impersonation seems to be a concession to the iconic status of the *Pink Flamingoes* look, as well as an introduction of a visual dissonance with the sonic component of the drag act. Because her act is a tribute and not the full act of becoming enacted by Town drag, it is important that Cindy maintain this visual dissonance.

Cindy's uncanny vocal resemblance to Divine, coupled with her strong physical resemblance to the actor—including intentional elements of hair, movement, and make-up, as well as unintentional similarities of body and face shape—creates a sense of continuity between Divine's work in the 1970s and 80s and Cindy's Blue Moon act. If Cindy were to accompany her "Walk Like a Man" cover with visual drag matching Divine's video, her tribute would move into the realm of becoming, in the same way that Riley Knoxx becomes Beyoncé. By singing live, playing up her vocal resemblance to Divine, Cindy is taking on Divine's voice as her own. But by disrupting this ownership of sonic presence with a slightly mismatched visual, she asserts and reinforces distance between Divine and herself, clearly marking the show as a tribute. Still, the location of voice and of presence here is slightly different to Bambi and Alora's tribute acts discussed above.

4.6   SINGING LIVE WITH SOMEONE ELSE'S VOICE

When Cindy sings as Divine, she is using a different vocal timbre and style to other live singing in her repertoire. Though she only sings in drag when paying tribute to Divine, she will sing live out of drag at the Blue Moon's weekly karaoke nights. The voice Cindy uses for karaoke is less harsh and has a wider pitch range than the one she uses in drag, signaling that the particular vocal attributes she uses as a tribute to Divine are conscious additions to her everyday vocal patterns. This is not to say, though, that Cindy singing as Divine is not Cindy's voice. When she pays tribute to Divine, Cindy uses her own voice to give the deceased drag artist space to be sonically present, making her tribute, in a way, more intense and more intimate than Bambi's tribute to David Bowie or Alora's to Robin Williams. This is because the location of Divine's sonic presence in Cindy's tribute is different to the location of Williams' or Bowie's sonic presence in the other acts.

In themed tribute shows, like the Night of 1000 Doubtfires or the Bowie Ball, performers use the recorded voice of a recently deceased celebrity to have the sonic presence of the deceased be external to their bodies. By refusing to take on the recorded voice as their own, Blue Moon artists are creating and highlighting distance between themselves and the object of their tribute, even as they mourn the loss and acknowledge influence. Indeed, it is the distance between deceased celebrity and live drag performer that allows for collective mourning: in that space, the material loss of a human being—the human being whose recorded voice is sounding and whose influence is present in the live show—can be felt. In this respect, themed tribute shows are not personal, as the emphasis is on shared attachment to the celebrity being memorialized. While performers may share personal stories of Robin Williams' or David Bowie's influence on their artistic work and relationships to queer identity, these narratives are pointing to something

beyond the personal; the individual performer-mourner is not a singularity, but, rather, a representative voice for collective feelings of loss.

In contrast, Cindy's tributes to Divine are personal. Rather than being spaces for collective mourning, they are an individualized claim on a relationship to queer history and the continuation of that history into the present. In literally taking on Divine's voice as her own through live singing, Cindy internalizes Divine's sonic presence in a gesture similar to those enacted with recorded voices by Tatianna and Riley Knoxx at Town. With different choices in costuming, this could allow Cindy to become Divine during her act, but these are not choices Cindy makes because she wishes to acknowledge Divine's influence on her own drag in a way that goes beyond simply recreating things Divine did in past decades.

In our conversations about the relationship between Divine's work and her own drag, Cindy does not identify as a Divine impersonator. Instead, she claims Divine as a strong influence on her aesthetics and personality while in drag, acknowledging the actor's contributions to queer history and to drag as an art form. But, while she wishes to embody many of the attributes identified with Divine's brand of drag, she is also clear about her work building on what Divine did in the 1970s and 80s. She takes visual, vocal, and personality cues from Divine's solo drag work and roles in John Waters' films, and she incorporates these elements into her own conception of a "trashy," "low-class," and sometimes "redneck" drag identity. Her tributes to Divine, then, are a public acknowledgment of influence, but without the collective emphasis and space for mourning afforded by themed Blue Moon tribute shows.

This personal, singular relationship to an important figure in queer history is different to what is expressed in Bambi's "Ziggy Stardust" performance, and Cindy's approach to voice is a fitting manifestation of this difference. In taking on Divine's voice through her own body, Cindy

125

is internalizing Divine's sonic presence, but without fully becoming Divine in the way that performers at Town become the pop divas whose voices they take on. This is because Cindy's tribute act, though its soundtrack is a single moment in Divine's artistic output, is an acknowledgment and memory of Divine's whole career as a source of influence—much like other Blue Moon performers' gestures at dedicated tribute shows. And Cindy's voice when she covers Divine's "Walk Like a Man" is part of this influence in the sense that she has absorbed Divine's performance style so well that it enters her body and shapes the sound of her voice.[218]

Internalizing Divine's influence as a personal connection to queer history lets Cindy singlehandedly perform the task made collective at other tribute shows: remembering and memorializing the artistic contributions of an important figure in queer expression. In personally taking on this responsibility, Cindy asserts a different kind of connection to queer history than that enacted by the Bowie Ball or Night of 1000 Doubtfires. The collective mourning and memory encouraged by dedicated tribute shows to David Bowie and Robin Williams is facilitated by drag performances that externalize the sonic presence of the deceased and internalize presence through memory and influence through the body of the drag artist as a representative example. Cindy's act internalizes both Divine's sonic presence and presence in memory, shifting the emphasis of her tribute from collective mourning to personal expression and appreciation of a queer icon. While audiences familiar with Divine's importance to Cindy and to drag at the Blue Moon may experience Cindy's performance as a moment for collective remembrance, the location of the literal, sounding voice in Cindy's performance makes that collective experience not the focus. Because Cindy allows Divine to be sonically present through

---

[218] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). Stiegler's definition of the voice as simultaneously of the body and man-made is relevant here because Cindy is consciously shaping her voice to sound like Divine. That voice is of her body and man-made in that she uses her vocal tract to shape the sound based on wanting to sound like an important figure in queer history.

her own body, she makes her body the epicenter of affective memory in her performances, whereas the distance between the sounding voice and the drag artist's body in other tribute shows makes that distance, that absence, the epicenter of collective memory there.[219]

4.7 AFFECT, TIMING, AND EMOTIONAL LABOR

By centering affective memory of Divine in her own body through the sounding voice, Cindy performs a different kind of tribute than that of the Bowie Ball and Night of 1000 Doubtfires, one that is somewhat removed from the immediate sensation of grief. Unlike Bambi's "Ziggy Stardust" and Alora's scene from *Mrs. Doubtfire*, there is no push to mourn Divine in Cindy's tribute. The Bowie and *Mrs. Doubtfire* shows lamented a recent loss, externalizing fresh grief because of its immediacy and intensity. Affect at the Bowie Ball and Night of 1000 Doubtfires was centered on the bodily absence of Bowie and Robin Williams in order to create space for collectively processing feelings of loss. This encouragement of collective mourning is also a strategic act of self-care: experiencing feelings of grief and loss with others creates a support system in which affect is distributed across multiple bodies. People in the Blue Moon celebrating David Bowie or Robin Williams can be emotionally present for each other and can help each other to process the loss with the additional aid of the tribute performances.

The location of voice in a dedicated tribute show sets the tone for collectively processing a recent loss. In refusing to take the recorded voice into their bodies and become David Bowie or

---

[219] David Brackett, "The Electro-Acoustic Mirror: Voices in American Pop," *Critical Quarterly* 37/2 (June 1995), pp. 11-27. Brackett's analysis is helpful here because he also locates affect in the space between a recorded performer's voice and a listener. However, in Brackett's work, listeners collapse the recorded voice onto the singer's body, which is deliberately prevented from happening in Blue Moon tribute shows. But this, too, is significant because the affect existing in the space between sounding voice and listener is related to absence and loss.

Prince or Mrs. Doubtfire, performers refuse to internalize the loss, instead choosing to share it with others and thereby seek support from the Blue Moon community in processing affect. Bambi's descriptions of tribute shows on stage and on Facebook are evidence of this. For both the Bowie Ball and Night of 1000 Doubtfires, Bambi specifically characterized the show as an opportunity to celebrate and acknowledge Robin Williams' and David Bowie's significance to queer expression, sharing her personal connections to their work as a means to solicit similar stories from others. Sharing emotional labor in this way is a form of mutual support between Blue Moon performers and spectators, ensuring that the burden of remembering and memorializing the deceased does not rest on a single person. Letting the recorded voice of the deceased sound and be present without inhabiting the body of the drag artist creates a space to mourn the loss and begin to negotiate the ways in which the deceased's figurative voice will continue to sound in queer expressions.

In Cindy's tributes to Divine, the loss and grief are less immediate, and this allows her to internalize affect and memory. Where dedicated, immediately post-humous tribute shows are something of a question—where do we go from here?—Cindy's tributes are an answer. Cindy has processed the loss of Divine enough that she is able to internalize Divine's sonic presence by allowing it to shape her own voice, and the act of singing simultaneously allows her to externalize this presence as a manifestation of Divine's figurative voice. So, instead of asking "where do we go from here?" Cindy is showing how to move on from loss, how to safely internalize the absence of a queer icon so that their influence lives on without their body.

Cindy is able to do this with Divine because the loss is not recent. Divine died in 1988, before the majority of current Blue Moon performers and patrons would be able to understand the significance of his work and his death, and this allows a sort of removal from the sense of

loss that pervades tributes for the recently deceased.[220] This distance from the shock and disorientation of an immediate loss gives space to process Divine's death and post-humous influence without a sudden, public outpouring of grief and need for collective emotional support. Thus, Cindy is able to internalize and merge Divine's literal and figurative voices in ways that would be inappropriate to an immediately post-humous tribute. Cindy can sing with Divine's voice because the time that has passed since Divine's death has allowed the queer community as a whole to make sense of his artistic output and has allowed individual queer artists to define their relationships to it.[221]

4.8   AESTHETICS, POLITICS, AND MORE VOICES

Blue Moon artists' tributes to celebrities play with the location of voice in order to process and express affect surrounding the deaths of public figures whose work has had an impact on their lives. These tribute performances also participate in the larger aesthetics and politics of Blue Moon drag and its relationship to homonormative narratives around mainstream drag. Though its end result is to amplify feelings of the uncanny at hearing the voices of the dead, the disjunction between audio and visual components of Blue Moon drag in a celebrity tribute is aligned with the larger trend toward "busted" aesthetics in the bar. These aesthetics are a political choice to reject and avoid the realist aesthetics and "illusion" narrative of mainstream drag because of the

---

[220] Most of the current Blue Moon community is under 30, so even if they existed in 1988, they would have been too young to yet appreciate Divine. While some regular Blue Moon patrons do remember the Era of the Closet and the impact of Divine's work in the 1970s and 80s, this seems to be an increasingly small percentage of people in the bar.
[221] E.g.: The John Waters-themed episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Though Waters was the focus in that he directed the films referenced in the episode, it was very much a tribute to Divine as well. All the films included in the tribute starred Divine, and queens were encouraged to channel the actor in some way.

homonormative and transphobic ideological violence enacted by such narratives. While primarily focused on allowing performers and audiences to process the loss of a valued public figure—in itself an act of radical queer politics—Blue Moon celebrity tributes still adhere to the bar's prevailing aesthetic and political norms of queer drag that questions and breaks down binary gender and gay respectability politics.[222]

Performers' decisions about how to perform a celebrity tribute, including hair, makeup, movement, costuming, and sound accompaniment, reflect the Blue Moon artists' larger commitment to drag that disrupts the "illusion" narrative surrounding mainstream and *Drag Race* drag. In addition to its primary purpose of distancing the performer's body from the recorded voice of a deceased celebrity, the visual disjunction with the sonic in tribute acts rejects the hyper-real aesthetic of becoming as exhibited in Tatianna's drag at Town. In the context of the tribute show, distance between the performer's body and the voice of the deceased is necessary for the sense of the uncanny that highlights the loss and creates space for collective grief. This rejection of becoming has a secondary importance in that distance between the sounding body on the recording and the moving body on stage prevents an overly uncanny performance. For Bambi to fully become David Bowie in the way that Riley Knoxx becomes Beyoncé, just days after Bowie's death was announced, would not serve the tribute's purpose of being a means to collectively grieve. Fully becoming Bowie during the Bowie Ball would also not have aided Bambi or the show's audience in beginning to negotiate the perpetuation of Bowie's influence through their own bodies and participation in queer art and politics. Acknowledging the loss by highlighting Bowie's bodily absence allows for both of these things. Thus, the rejection of becoming in the tribute show has a highly practical and immediate significance. It is also a

---

[222] Sara Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare," *Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy as a World Making Project*, posted 25 August 2014, https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/.

manifestation of larger Blue Moon aesthetic norms that replace the high-budget, detailed, and expertly studied performances in which mainstream drag artists become celebrities with low-budget, seemingly amateurish acts that refuse conformation to straight- and cisgender-centered demands for drag as a hyper-real "illusion" of normative cisgender femininity from male-assigned bodies.

As noted in previous chapters, the politics of the Blue Moon's cultivation of this "busted" aesthetic are an active project to value and promote an approach to queer identity that is inclusive of people marginalized by homonormative gay respectability politics. Both the surface-level aesthetics and the content of Blue Moon drag support this project, and the tribute show is no exception. Like other Blue Moon acts, the aesthetics of the tribute show are a rejection of mainstream drag's adherence to heteronormative and cissexist beauty norms. The content of tribute acts, too, is a rejection of the gendered value systems informing mainstream drag. Mainstream drag supports body-essentialist binary gender by having cisgender men become cisgender women, especially when celebrities are the subject of drag performances. Blue Moon tribute acts queer this. By having people who identify as gender-fluid, as cisgender men, or as gender queer perform tributes to cisgender men who were known for subverting gender norms, Blue Moon drag artists disrupt the expected gender dynamics of drag and, in doing so, comment on the artifice of binary gender and gendered social hierarchies.

Where mainstream drag tends to concentrate on cisgender female celebrities with normative gender expressions, the subjects of Blue Moon tribute acts tend to be men who subverted gender norms. But, instead of performing their tributes as masculine drag—as drag kings, in other words—Blue Moon performers elaborately layer gender signifiers in their tributes to obscure and de-naturalize the genders assigned to their own bodies and to the artists and

characters being memorialized. This is evident in Alora's use of the Mrs. Doubtfire character with Robin Williams' voicing of male cartoon animals (from *Mrs. Doubtfire*), as well as in Bambi's femme version of David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust persona. But a more obvious example would be Dixie Surewood's performance of "Magic Dance" as Jareth the Goblin King (Bowie's role in *Labyrinth*) at the 2016 Bowie Ball.

In *Labyrinth* (1986), Jareth is a male character whose gender expression resembles the masculinity of popular musicians of the time, notably "glam" or "hair" metal of the 1980s. He wears skin-tight trousers with a prominent bulge, a loose, flowing white shirt, has long, teased hair, and wears eyeliner. With this appearance, Bowie would have looked at home in a music video for Def Leppard, Poison, Whitesnake, Mötley Crüe, or Guns 'N' Roses. Dixie Surewood's gender presentation in her tribute to *Labyrinth* used the basic elements of Bowie's costume, but they were exaggerated and layered on top of Dixie's drag queen persona. Her movements, too, were exaggerated versions of Bowie's performance in the film, mixed with 80s glam metal gestures and material from other dance routines that Dixie typically performs while *en femme*. This campy exaggeration of the masculine features of Bowie's Jareth costume—especially the bulge, as is visible in the image—combined with the mixture of gender signifiers in Dixie's movement, served to create the dissonance with the soundtrack necessary to feel loss at a tribute show, as well as to disrupt the expected (per *Drag Race*) gender dynamics of drag.

Figure 8: Dixie Surewood as the Goblin King

133

Dixie's layering of gender signifiers in her tribute to Bowie's role in *Labyrinth*, along with Bambi's femme interpretations of Ziggy Stardust and the "Rebel Rebel" promotional video, continue Bowie's work of challenging gender norms while also allowing the queens' own voices to come through. This was literally the case when Bambi sang "Rebel Rebel" as the Bowie Ball's finale and was, figuratively, the case with Dixie's interpretation of "Magic Dance" and with Alora's lip-sync of "Largo al Factotum" at the Night of 1000 Doubtfires. In Cindy's cover of Divine's "Walk Like a Man," the line between literal and figurative blurs a bit, as does the line between Cindy's voice and Divine's, but some distance is there; the act is still Cindy's interpretation of Divine's influence, not Divine performing from beyond the grave.[223] Thus, in addition to a deceased celebrity's literal and figurative voices being present (though in different ways) during a tribute show, individual drag artists' voices are also present. Depending on how recently deceased the celebrity, Blue Moon performers blend their voices with the likes of Bowie, Prince, Robin Williams, and Divine in different ways, but adhering to a unified queer, "busted" aesthetic that incorporates and perpetuates the gender subversion that made these celebrities significant to the Blue Moon community.

---

[223] To be fair, Divine performing from beyond the grave is something that would happen at the Blue Moon, if it were possible. Given some of the things she said on *Drag Race*, Sharon Needles is a likely candidate to attempt such a thing, perhaps with the assistance of Veruca LaPiranha.

5.0   DRAG BECOMES THEM: VOICES AND IDENTITIES BEYOND THE STAGE[224]

Becoming celebrities, whether in the complete form practiced at Town or the incomplete form practiced at Blue Moon tribute shows, is a way of playing with voices and identities to make some kind of queer commentary. Becoming in these forms involves temporarily inhabiting an identity that is not one's own, often to absorb and process the influence of a public figure significant to the queer community. After leaving the stage, drag artists literally shed their borrowed identities by removing wigs, makeup, and costuming. This is the case both at Town and in the Blue Moon tribute show. But, in other Blue Moon show contexts, Cherri Baum and Moon Baby practice a different sort of becoming, adopting identities that they do not take off when they leave the stage. In this sense, both performers blur the line between staged drag acts and everyday life, between real and fictive worlds, between actual and virtual space.[225] Neither Cherri nor Moon Baby completely sheds their artistic identity when they leave the stage, even if

---

[224] This is a play on the title of a YouTube series by *Drag Race* Season 5 winner Jinxx Monsoon, "Drag Becomes Him," which is, in turn, a play on the title of the 1992 film *Death Becomes Her* (starring Meryl Streep and Goldie Hawn). "Becoming" in this context refers to an object that flatters the wearer, and I use it here in both that context and as a descriptor of the transformative power of drag. The two definitions complement each other, and the reference seemed appropriate to my subject matter.

[225] See: Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, translators (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). See also: Pierre Bayard, *Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong: Reopening the Case of the Hound of the Baskervilles*, Charlotte Mandell, translator (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008).

they remove superficial material associated with specific acts. In this sense, both use drag to become and to declare themselves within the safe, queer space of the Blue Moon.[226]

In this chapter, I discuss the how Cherri and Moon Baby declare themselves through performances at the Blue Moon, using their art to complicate notions of identity as singular and fixed. Much of this work is done through their relationships to live and recorded voices. Consequently, I return to questions around voice and identity—who is vocalizing—in the following pages, and I suggest new ways of thinking about and describing identities that allow for the fluidity and plurality of queer existence. I also return the role of the Blue Moon in creating a queer space where Cherri and Moon Baby can negotiate fluid, plural identities and declare themselves through their art. I argue that, in addition to being a safe, queer space, the Blue Moon is a *polis,* a space of equality without sameness, in which people declare themselves to each other by vocalizing, either with live or recorded voices.[227]

In declaring themselves through their art at the Blue Moon, Cherri and Moon Baby challenge constructions of identity as singular and fixed, either to the body or in time. Instead, they model an understanding of identity as fluid and plural, a series of behaviors through which they claim and refuse cultural categorization.[228] In some cases, these behaviors are shaped by the physical limits of their bodies. In most cases, however, the categories Cherri and Moon Baby

---

[226] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature (*Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4/3: 469-488. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

[227] Arendt, *The Human Condition*. N.B.: Arendt's *polis* depends on the labor of women and slaves, meaning that even in a society where men of a certain social standing are equal to each other, there is a presumed inequality that allows the *polis* to exist. In accordance with Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak, I am troubled by the notion that political equality for some relies on social inequality for everyone else. I see the truth in such a diagnosis, especially as applied to current conditions, but I dispute whether such a hierarchy is truly necessary for political equality to exist. See also: Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging* (New York: Seagull Books, 2007).

[228] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

wish to claim and refuse shape the ways their bodies are perceived, as well as the physical properties of their bodies.[229] In addition to presenting new ways of thinking about identity in a broad sense, Cherri and Moon Baby specifically challenge constructions of gender that are fixed in time and fixed to the body. Cherri does this through her use of recorded voices in overtly feminist drag, while Moon Baby uses live speaking and singing to subvert gendered assumptions about how adult voices and vocal registers behave.[230] I respond to these challenges by suggesting new theories of voice and gender that account for Cherri and Moon Baby and, by extension, for other people (queer-identified or not) who do similar things.

5.1   CHERRI'S INCLUSIVE FEMINIST DRAG

At a Blue Moon open stage night in the summer of 2014, Cherri Baum lip-synced Lily Allen's "Hard Out Here [For a Bitch]." Unlike most of her performances, in which text is secondary to larger concepts in the drag act, Cherri knew the words and lip-synced them perfectly. This was an odd concession to the aesthetics of *Drag Race*-style drag, but I understood why Cherri made the choice to lip-sync when I listened to the song's lyrics. Allen's "Hard Out Here [For a Bitch]" is a riff on "Hard Out Here for a Pimp," and it openly condemns fat-shaming, slut-shaming, and misogyny in the pop music and pop culture industries. For Cherri to learn Allen's words and lip-sync "Hard Out Here," given that Cherri typically refuses to learn words or lip-sync, is a powerful gesture and one with clear political implications, especially considering the visual

---

[229] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). See also: Amy Cimini, "Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music: Toward a New Practice of Theorizing Musical Bodies," PhD Diss., New York University, 2011.

[230] See: Suzanne Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex," in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, eds. (Zürich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999).

137

component of the act. Instead of recreating Lily Allen's costume and movement from the music video for "Hard Out Here," which Cherri could have done, she took the stage in dark dress slacks, a white blouse, ballet flats, and a cardigan. She also wore a shoulder-length wig, large glasses with black plastic frames, and minimal makeup that gave her a rather severe appearance. When she moved during her lip-sync, it was to make accusatory and admonishing gestures at the mostly male crowd, punctuating the sentiments in Lily Allen's lyrics. It took asking Cherri about this choice of makeup and costuming for me to see the resemblance, but when she told me she was dressed as Gloria Steinem, the audio/visual pairing of the act made sense, as did the choice to lip-sync.

By dressing as Gloria Steinem and lip-syncing to Lily Allen, Cherri created a narrative about feminist issues that includes Steinem, Allen, and herself as principal characters. This is especially significant because of Cherri's relationship to gender and feminist activism off-stage and how those experiences shape the commentary in her drag. After Cherri explained her audio/visual pairings in "Hard Out Here," I asked about the significance of that pairing: why associate a feminist icon from the 1960s and 70s with contemporary critiques of sexism in the entertainment industry? Cherri's response was a combination of nuanced queer feminist critique and self-aware explanation of the thought behind her drag. She told me that making feminist critiques in the public (or mostly public) space of a drag show is important to her because feminist activism is concerned with issues that affect her on a daily basis. She also explained that she appreciates Gloria Steinem's work as an activist and felt that connecting the history of feminism with contemporary feminist acts in pop culture was an appropriate gesture. She added that she would have liked to hand out copies of Steinem's books during the act, but practicality prevented that.

This conversation about the aesthetics of Cherri's act precipitated a more serious conversation about feminism more generally. I had known that Cherri considers herself a feminist and engages with feminist thought, but I was curious about her choices to engage with second wave feminism via Steinem because my understanding of the second wave was that it generally tends to collapse experiences of womanhood onto the possession of particular anatomical features. This emphasis on anatomy as an indicator of womanhood problematically excludes trans women from women's spaces while including trans men, as well as glossing over issues of race, class, sexuality, nationality, and religion.[231] Cherri answered by describing her own experiences as a trans woman in online and in-person feminist communities. She referenced encounters with particular transphobic fringe groups known as "Trans-exclusive [or exclusionary] Radical Feminists" (TERFs). Cherri described some online interactions with TERFs, in which their refusal to acknowledge her gender was the least of the insults. Having had similar interactions with so-called feminists at academic conferences, I asked Cherri what it means for her—for either of us—be a feminist, given that the term is also claimed by people who would prefer we did not exist.

Cherri's response was a great deal more measured than her sometimes flippant public persona might lead one to expect. She condemned misogyny and transphobia and expressed again that the feminism she subscribes to seeks to improve life for people of all genders. Reflecting on this exchange later, it occurred to me that claiming "feminist" over the objections of TERFs is an act of radical queer defiance in itself, one that carries over into life outside the

---

[231] See: Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Ronnie Ritchie, "'Women-Only' Spaces That Exclude Trans Women Lead Us Down This Awful Path," *Everyday Feminism*, published 16 March 2015, http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/03/cis-women-only-spaces-wrong/. See also: bell hooks, "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, Beverley Guy-Sheftall, ed. (New York: The New Press, 1995).

Blue Moon. Cherri is very vocal, especially on Facebook, against transphobia, misogyny, and gendered body-essentialism. She accomplishes this not through the social media trope of posting clickbait articles on trendy subjects, but through the way she narrates significant moments of her life in status updates. As a trans woman, Cherri's gender is under much closer social scrutiny than that of cisgender men, cisgender women, or trans men because of the ways misogynist and transphobic body policing converge on the bodies of trans women.[232] I know Cherri experiences this body policing because she is not silent about it. In addition to posting about it on Facebook, she will also occasionally do a Blue Moon performance in which she reads mean tweets about herself, many of which are transphobic, misogynist, body-shaming, or all three. By publicly narrating her experiences with transmisogynist body policing and calling out the anti-feminist elements of it, Cherri enacts a practical, trans-inclusive feminism.

5.2   ACTIVIST VOICES AND PROSTHETIC VOICES

Despite the strength of Cherri's activist voice on social media, she chooses to use pre-recorded voices in the majority of her Blue Moon acts. This is not because she fears public speaking. She has read mean tweets about herself and made fun of Grindr profiles in her performances, and she hosts shows regularly; she is not averse to speaking as part of a drag performance. Instead, her uses of recorded voices are strategic decisions in service of a larger point. Since her drag acts often center concepts over texts, her choices of sound recordings to accompany her drag acts treat those recordings as part of her costume, as sound objects. Even the Lily Allen recording, for

---

[232] Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*.

which Cherri knew the words and lip-synced, was a sound object with a larger purpose in Cherri's act, rather than the reference text it would have been for a mainstream drag artist. By transforming recorded sounds in this way, Cherri fashions a prosthetic voice for herself, one that does not always sound in expected ways.

Cherri's prosthetic voice, created through her transformation of pre-recorded vocal sounds into non-linguistic sound-objects, is simultaneously a conventional prosthesis and a prosthesis under Stiegler's definition.[233] It is a conventional prosthesis in that it is an object she puts on as part of a costume, much as Tatianna and Riley Knoxx put on Rihanna and Beyoncé's voices to become the singers. Cherri uses recorded sounds so that she does not have to speak or sing words in her drag performances, but the way she curates and transforms recorded sound makes the recordings something more than a part of her costume. By refusing to treat recorded sounds as authoritative texts governing the other content of her drag acts, Cherri exerts her own authority and her own (figurative) voice. This voice, though it is not always linguistically intelligible and does not always sound like speech or song—in one instance, it sounded like loud flatulence—is an extension of Cherri's activist persona.[234] In this sense, it falls under Stiegler's definition of prosthesis.

Cherri's activist voice is of her body. This is true in the sense that her activism is primarily based in demanding human rights denied to her because she is a woman and a trans person. (Misogyny and transphobia are both oppressions based in the perception that some bodies are more deserving of rights than others.) Her activist voice is also of her body in the sense that the thoughts and feelings driving it are bodily sensations, per Stiegler's Deleuzian

---

[233] Stiegler, *Technics and Time*.
[234] See section 2.6.

ontology.[235] But this voice is man-made, as well. Cherri developed her activist social media persona and feminist drag aesthetic in response to cultural conditions that both question her womanhood and oppress her for being feminine.[236] Without these cultural conditions, Cherri's performance art would, likely, look and sound very different.

5.3   DECLARING HERSELF

Cherri constructing her activist stage voice in response to cultural conditions that deny her basic human rights is a way of declaring herself, of claiming her gender and her humanity through performance.[237] Her rejection of the aesthetics of mainstream drag, as in the rendition of "Linger" described in Chapter 2, is a rejection of misogynist beauty and behavioral norms, homonormativity, and transphobia. Paired with the assertive, inclusive feminism articulated through "Hard Out Here" and her social media posts—which she acknowledges are another form of performance—Cherri is telling her audiences a great deal about herself, as well as blurring the boundaries between performance and everyday life.

Cherri claims femininity through her gender expression on- and off-stage and womanhood through (e.g.) her choice to lip-sync "Hard Out Here." In the context of her general refusal to learn words and lip-sync on stage, Cherri's adoption of Lily Allen's words, narrating first-person experiences of misogyny, is a claim of solidarity with Allen's gender identity. As a woman, Cherri experiences misogyny in the ways described by Allen's lyrics, and Cherri's

---

[235] Stiegler, *Technics and Time*. See also: Amy Cimini, "Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music."
[236] Laura Kacere, "Transmisogyny 101: What It Is and What We Can Do About It," *Everyday Feminism*, published 27 January 2014, http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/01/transmisogyny/. See also: Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*.
[237] Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

choice to learn and lip-sync those lyrics is a declaration of her womanhood through that shared experience. Using Gloria Steinem's likeness to link "Hard Out Here" to larger histories of feminist theory and resistance is a declaration of what kind of woman Cherri is. The knowledge of feminist history displayed by Cherri's allusion to Gloria Steinem is a claim on a kind of womanhood that resists oppression and devaluation by patriarchal forces through intellectual and civil action. That Cherri is an openly trans woman making these claims is a further declaration about the place of trans women in feminist movements. By placing herself in a feminist narrative with Gloria Steinem and Lily Allen, Cherri is claiming feminist space, but, significantly, she is not making this claim in women's space. She is making this claim at the Blue Moon, in queer space.

By claiming femininity, womanhood, and membership in feminist spaces within the queer space of the Blue Moon, Cherri makes a larger point about gender, feminism, solidarity, and space. That Cherri chooses to reveal herself to others at the Blue Moon and not in a dedicated women's space is a comment on the merits of a queer space, in which all genders are welcomed and embraced, versus a women's space, which is single-gender and sometimes problematically so.[238] When Cherri positions herself as part of feminist movements through her stage performances at the Blue Moon, she also makes the Blue Moon a feminist space. Her critiques of misogyny, transphobia, and mainstream drag are calls to action, statements about what she expects from the space and the people who inhabit it. She can make these demands because she has an established history of contributing to the safety of the Blue Moon as a queer space. By revealing herself in stage performances and by being present in the bar when not on stage, Cherri helps to create the Blue Moon as a safe, supportive environment for queer people.

---

[238] See: Ritchie, "'Women-Only' Spaces…" See also: Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*.

Performing in a queer space also allows Cherri to construct her prosthetic voice—through which she makes demands that the Blue Moon be a feminist space—in the way that she does. The Blue Moon's history of hosting and supporting drag acts that challenge *Drag Race*-derived aesthetics and politics creates an audience that will understand what Cherri is doing when she reads mean tweets about herself, overdubs the Cranberries with flatulence, or lip-syncs Lily Allen's feminist pop anthem. Because women's spaces are not necessarily queer spaces in which the language of drag is intelligible, Cherri's critiques of homonormativity, transphobia, and misogyny may not be as legible in those spaces as they are in the Blue Moon. The queer space, then, is a space in which both socially critical feminist discourse and the satirical language of drag are practiced and understood, creating conditions in which performance art can generate new possibilities for identity. Cherri shaped this space by being a founding member of the Haus of Haunt, and she continues to shape it by performing her inclusively feminist drag on the Blue Moon's stage. Her presence off-stage as a mentor to newer performers and symbol of the Blue Moon's relationship to the aesthetics and politics of mainstream drag is equally important. This presence has been formative for (and explicitly acknowledged by) several other Blue Moon artists, including Bebe Beretta, Bambi Deerest, and Moon Baby. All three of these newer performers take an active role in maintaining the Blue Moon as a safe, inclusive queer space, but it is Moon Baby I want to discuss now because her articulations of voices and identities pose the greatest challenge to constructions of identity as singular and fixed.

5.4   MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES

Moon Baby's stage acts are focused on embracing and becoming all parts of herself, even when she takes on the personas of Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock. This is because Moon Baby (the primary artistic identity), Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock are ways of playing with social identity categories through distinct visual and vocal presentations that are or have been part of the artist known as Moon Baby. Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock, while nominally fictional characters, are representations of real people as Moon Baby experiences them. By inhabiting multiple identities, especially through the voice, Moon Baby provides a radical queer commentary on existing constructions of identity and on how identities are spoken and sung into being.

Moon Baby has created Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock, in addition to her primary artistic identity, to explore and give voice to all parts of herself, meaning that Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock are not entirely distinct from Moon Baby, though all three personas look and sound different. Moon Baby voices herself, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock in different registers and with different speech patterns, inflections, and accents. The three personalities also have distinct musical tastes: they sing different songs and relate to musical sounds in their own ways. These different vocal and sound worlds, corresponding to each of Moon Baby's personalities, show how each personality perceives and moves through the world, as well as how each personality represents itself to the world. In addition to this, Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock—the secondary personalities—show how Moon Baby perceives and represents the people they are based on. In other words, Moon Baby uses Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock to make sense of parts of herself that might otherwise be difficult to reconcile. Ann Teak is based on Moon Baby's mother, while Becky Punkrock is based on teenaged Moon Baby. Moon Baby as the primary

identity is a queer, gender fluid alien, an aspirational figure for the human artist embodying all these personalities, while Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock are relationships she is working through.[239] The latter two personalities are part of Moon Baby, but the Moon Baby identity is the most comfortable one for the artist.[240]

The different voices for each of Moon Baby's identities are also telling case studies supporting Stiegler's argument that voice is a prosthesis.[241] Though Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock exist in a single body, the sounds each respective identity makes through that body are not the same. The differences in each character's vocal personality help to perform age, gender, education level, location, and mental state, as well as being a form of campy, satirical commentary on the ways voices are heard to perform identity more generally. In other words, Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock are detailed studies in how identities are made legible within the existing cultural framework for interpreting visual and auditory signs. As with other forms of drag, these studies of identity in practice are presented in a way that is simultaneously serious and comical. Moon Baby's performances are funny because she manages to present absurd combinations of words, sounds, gestures, and images in ways that seem to logically fit with the identities of each character she performs. But the same elements are also serious critiques of the way identity functions in the current social climate, and this is done through Moon Baby's intimate knowledge and strategic mobilization of visual and vocal shorthand for particular physical and social characteristics.

That Moon Baby makes this satiric commentary specifically through adopting the identities of people with personal importance to her is also an act of self care and, therefore,

---

[239] Moon Baby, personal communications with the author, April 2015-November 2016.
[240] Ibid.
[241] Stiegler, *Technics and Time*.

radical queer politics.[242] Ann Teak, Becky Punkrock, and Moon Baby are entertaining personalities that make pointed commentary about gender, body, voice, and identity as constructed through hegemonic norms and philosophies. Ann Teak, Becky Punkrock, and Moon Baby are also negotiations of very personal attachments and conflicts, a way for a queer person to make sense of important figures in her life. At the same time that this is very personal for Moon Baby, the experiences that shaped her performance personalities are common experiences among Blue Moon audiences and staff. As is evident from Bambi's introductions to celebrity tribute shows, the Blue Moon's queer occupants often have strained relationships with family, so to see Moon Baby negotiate her own family dynamics through funny stage acts can be another way for queer people to be emotionally present for one another in the Blue Moon.

Moon Baby's embodiment of Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock involves more than superficial changes. During shows featuring Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock, Moon Baby becomes those personalities, fully inhabiting them and letting them shape how she uses her body.[243] Like Tatianna and Riley Knoxx becoming Rihanna and Beyoncé, Moon Baby's outward appearance changes when she becomes Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock, as does her voice. And, like Tatianna and Riley Knoxx taking on the recorded voices of celebrities, taking on Ann Teak or Becky Punkrock's voice is transformative for Moon Baby. She moves, speaks, sings, dresses, and engages with social media differently when inhabiting each of her personalities, and performing from each of these different perspectives allows her to make social commentary that would be inaccessible if she were to only perform as Moon Baby. Becoming Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock lets Moon Baby temporarily experience the world through those identities,

---

[242] Sara Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare," *Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy as a World-Making Project*, published 25 August 2014, https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/.
[243] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4/3: 469-488.

absorbing what she can from them, even as she critiques some of their aesthetic and political values.

5.5   ANN TEAK'S DRAG SHOW

As discussed in Chapter 3 and above, Ann Teak is a middle-aged woman based on Moon Baby's mother, and Moon Baby has given her a very elaborate backstory. Ann Teak lives in a very specific location in Pittsburgh and has a very specific profession. She lives in the South Hills and teaches Early American History at Point Park University so that she can pursue her passion for ghost stories. But this backstory, while entertaining to locals who understand the significance of the South Hills and Point Park, is not the most important nor the most satiric part of Ann Teak. It is the way Ann Teak speaks and sings, especially when surrounded by queer people, that really shows Moon Baby negotiating ideas about voices, bodies, and identities.

Ann Teak hosts a semi-regular event at the Blue Moon, a clothing auction called Ann Teak's Drag Show. (This is, of course, a play on the television series *Antiques Roadshow*.) During these auctions, Ann Teak sells clothing brought in by volunteers (who model their own clothes) or from Moon Baby's surplus wardrobe, with proceeds often going to LGBTQ support organizations. As an auction, the format is relatively simple: a model comes out of the dressing room wearing the item up for sale and Ann Teak takes bids on it. But Ann Teak has developed her own language for narrating and taking bids at these auctions, a language that confuses outsiders wandering into the Blue Moon as tourists, especially because Ann Teak's language has been picked up by queer Blue Moon regulars.

In addition to layering a thick Pittsburgh accent on top of mispronounced consonants in the style of Pandora Boxx's Carol Channing (*Drag Race* Season 2, Episode 4), Ann Teak's style of auctioneering involves a great deal of drunken slurring and replacing the word "dollar" with one of several words she has made up. Which word she will choose as a monetary unit at a given moment is not governed by any sort of logical system; she seems to say "douche-douche," "dar-nar," "flar-dar," and "douche-dar" with approximately equal frequency. After she announces the start of bidding on an item, Blue Moon regulars simply adopt her most recent choice of word to bid on that item, and this process seems to confuse outsiders. At the most recent Ann Teak's drag show, I was seated next to a table of women who were obviously in the Blue Moon as tourists; they had to ask directions to the restroom and they came in with bachelorette party favors. During the auction, while regulars were shouting out bids in the full range of Ann Teak's words for money, this table of women tried to participate in the same way, but they only picked up on "douche-douche." After two or three rounds of this, Ann Teak rebuked the women for making fun of her speech impediment and refused to recognize any more of their bids. The women seemed affronted and muttered amongst themselves for several minutes, while Ann Teak kept auctioning clothes, now using the table of tourists as fodder for jokes. The tourists, however, could not understand the jokes because Moon Baby exaggerated Ann Teak's "speech impediment" for the rest of the evening so that she was only intelligible to regulars.

Ann Teak's defense of queer space in this moment was particularly pointed commentary about Moon Baby's mother. While I know relatively few biographical details about Moon Baby's mother—and, therefore, cannot comment on how closely that biography matches Ann Teak's—the impression I get of her personality (from Moon Baby) is that she would not understand the need for creating specifically queer spaces, nor the need to defend them. And,

aside from this incident of policing the boundaries of queer space, the language Ann Teak uses around queer people and queer entertainment is a caricature of a well meaning middle aged person trying to accept LGBTQ people and keep up with queer language, but succeeding only in being tokenizing and condescending.[244] Thus, Ann Teak's calling out of intruders in queer space seems like a step out of character, but, reflecting on my conversations with Moon Baby about her relationship to Ann Teak, it makes sense that the latter would defend queer space in that particular way.

5.6   ANN TEAK AND QUEER SPACE

Moon Baby describes Ann Teak not just as a personality based on her mother, but as a way of making peace with her relationship to her mother.[245] This is why it makes sense that Ann Teak would police the boundaries of queer space in the way that she did. For Moon Baby to base a personality on her mother, who would not understand the importance of dedicated queer spaces, and then use that personality to defend queer space is a reparative gesture: Ann Teak's rebuke of the tourists in the Blue Moon is not something Moon Baby's mother would necessarily have done, from what I understand of Moon Baby's mother. Having Ann Teak do it, then, is a way for Moon Baby to process feelings about her mother's ambivalence toward queer space.[246]

That Ann Teak defended queer space by telling the tourists to stop making fun of her speech impediment is also pointed commentary about marginality, language, and belonging. Ann

---

[244] See: Jamie Utt, "Intent Vs. Impact: Why Your Intentions Don't Really Matter," *Everyday Feminism*, published 30 July 2013, http://everydayfeminism.com/2013/07/intentions-dont-really-matter/.
[245] Moon Baby, personal communications with the author, April 2015-November 2016.
[246] Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare."

Teak's "speech impediment," as she called it in this moment, is one of her defining features and not usually considered an impairment. As evidenced by queer Blue Moon regulars' adoption of Ann Teak's speech patterns, her particular way of relating to language has been somewhat normalized within the Blue Moon. It has become a form of queer code-switching for audiences familiar with Ann Teak as a personality and as a sonic presence in the bar.[247] A queer Blue Moon regular speaking like Ann Teak is not making fun of an "impediment," but signaling belonging to the space and the community. In contrast, the tourists who tried to adopt Ann Teak's speech patterns were appropriating queer code-switching, and Ann Teak's request that they stop making fun of her "speech impediment" drew attention to this without a lengthy discussion of queer space and cultural appropriation. This was strategic. It stopped the offensive behavior with minimal disruption to the queer social event that is a Blue Moon show. Focusing on the queer social event in queer space and refusing to devote time and attention to encroaching tourists closed the space to interlopers without centering their identities through direct confrontation.[248]

5.7   ANN TEAK SINGS

Refusing to stop and explain queer space and cultural appropriation allowed Ann Teak to perform all of her planned entertainments without disruption. While she was waiting for the models to dress in between auctioning items of clothing, she sang and danced for the audience.

---

[247] For other examples of queer code-switching, see: Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). The documentary films *Paris Is Burning* (1990) and *The Aggressives* (2005) also contain examples of queer code-switching, as does the occasional episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, though the latter seems to be making an effort to translate queer codes for straight audiences.

[248] See: Sara Ahmed, "Clumsiness," *Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy As a World-Making Project*, published 4 September 2013, https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/04/clumsiness/.

Her backing tracks that night were eight-bit synthesizer renditions of pop songs from the last twenty years and, as she sang over the recorded synthesizers, the songs were only recognizable by the rhythm of Ann Teak's vocal sounds and the melodic hooks in the accompaniment. As with her performance of "Can I Get an Amen?," very few words were intelligible in Ann Teak's singing, and her interpretation of melodies was more or less monotone, with occasional inflection to imply punctuation. Relating to musical material in this way breaks the virtual space created by playing back recordings, in keeping with the larger aesthetic of Blue Moon drag, but in Ann Teak's case, the breaking of virtual space is less interesting than how the breakage is accomplished.

As I will describe below, Moon Baby is a highly capable singer, but she does not carry this capability into the voice she uses for Ann Teak. Ann Teak's inability to carry a tune and form intelligible words is a commentary on how Moon Baby relates to her. Ann Teak represents a normative subjectivity: a straight, cisgender, "biological woman." When Moon Baby inhabits this position to become Ann Teak, she is musically and linguistically limited to monotone melodies and barely intelligible words. These constraints on pitch and language are plays on existing ideas about virtuosic singing, intelligible words, and identities.[249] Moon Baby displays her knowledge of these codes in the ways she voices Ann Teak. By making Ann Teak, her normative personality, unable to speak or sing intelligibly, Moon Baby makes normative subject positions unintelligible. This queer reversal reflects both the larger critique of normativity in Blue Moon drag aesthetics and creates new opportunities for resistive queer code-switching in Blue Moon regulars' adoption of Ann Teak's speech patterns.

---

[249] See: Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice." Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex."

5.8   BECKY PUNKROCK'S TEEN ANGST

Becky Punkrock is a teenaged girl. She lives in Pittsburgh with her mother and occasionally leaves the city to visit a farm owned by her mother's "hot boyfriend Brian." Becky has a lot of rage for "the establishment," though she is not always sure what "the establishment" is.[250] Her YouTube show, sponsored by Dragaholic, features Becky speaking directly to the camera from her mother's house (primarily the roof and the bedroom) about what is and is not "punk rock."[251] Becky's obsession with punk rock comes from her mother's boyfriend Brian, who is in a punk band, and Becky seems to grasp the rage and protest at the center of classic punk rock (e.g.: The New York Dolls, The Ramones, The Clash, and The Sex Pistols); it resonates with her teen angst and desire to set herself apart from the mainstream. But Becky's "punk rock" protests often end up feeding into the commodified forms of rebellion sold to teenagers via stores like Hot Topic and, thus, fall short of the full-scale rejections of normativity embedded in early punk rock.[252] This contradiction is intentional, even though Becky herself is not aware of it. In creating and developing Becky Punkrock as a character, Moon Baby references herself as a teenager, including her expression of angst through commodified protest. (In fairness, she did not know at the time that it was commodified.)[253] Bringing this angst, along with an adult's awareness of the irony embedded in the consumption of rebellion, to Becky's YouTube show and Blue Moon

---

[250] Moon Baby, personal communications with the author, April 2015-November 2016.

[251] See: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7RTXGOTVmkScy_hLJh533A. This is the Tender Farms production YouTube channel with the first two seasons of *PNKT (with Becky Punkrock)*.

[252] Ironically, the Sex Pistols voiced some of the most blatant and vulgar critiques of economic, political, and cultural establishments in classic punk rock despite being a band that was assembled strictly for economic gain. (Dave Laing, "The Sex Pistols," *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, online, 17 October 2016.) In this sense, the Sex Pistols were the forerunners of current forms of commodified protest.

[253] Moon Baby, personal communication with the author, April 2015-November 2016.

performances allows Moon Baby to voice multi-layered social critiques that simultaneously validate and poke fun at angst and rebellion.

Moon Baby accomplishes this complex form of social critique through her portrayal of Becky Punkrock, including clothing, makeup, accessories, hair, movement, and voice. Becky wears short skirts, combat boots, denim jackets, and plaid, a caricature of Avril Lavigne and a Hot Topic model. Her makeup is minimal, designed to appear as though she is not wearing any, a look Moon Baby accomplishes with neutral-tinted lipstick and very little contouring. Becky's hair is big and messy, a product of stacking several tangled, dirty wigs on top of each other in order to convey Becky's disdain for normative standards of feminine beauty. Becky also has her own, distinctive way of speaking and singing, reflecting her age and her desire to rebel against social norms. Her vocal inflection is simultaneously flat and emphatic; Becky is trying to sound nonchalant, even when she cares very deeply about the subjects she is discussing.

To convey her simultaneous apathy and interest, Becky's inflection consists mostly of variations in volume. In terms of pitch, her speech is close to monotone, but in a different way to Ann Teak's singing. Where Ann Teak's singing is an unintentional monotone—she thinks she is matching the song's melody—Becky's speech is an intentional one. She is tightly, audibly controlling the pitch of her voice to keep it low in her register, near the back of her throat, and unwavering in pitch. Instead of pitch-based inflections to indicate punctuation, Becky simply trails off at the ends of sentences, fading into a harsh vocal fry. This consistency of pitch holds even when Becky is animated about a discussion topic. Rather than inflecting with pitch changes, she simply gets louder and her words run together a bit.

When Becky sings, she stays at the low end of her register and, though she is not monotone like Ann Teak, her pitch range is limited; she approximates melodies rather than

154

reproducing them note for note. At a Blue Moon show dubbed "Becky Request Live," during which Becky Punkrock sang audience requests, Becky covered a wide range of material from American popular music of the last twenty years. While the request-based format of the show resulted in relatively little stylistic continuity across Becky's repertoire, her singing voice was a unifying sound across all the songs she performed. Becky sings in a low growl, nearly eating the microphone, so that the sound distorts when it comes through the Blue Moon's overtaxed speakers. This technological distortion, rather than any vocal device Becky uses, makes her somewhat unintelligible when she sings.

Becky Punkrock's singing and speaking voices sound Moon Baby's relationship to herself as a teenager and provide a sonic outlet for anti-establishment angst. While Becky does not always know exactly what "the establishment" is, Moon Baby does. Giving Becky Punkrock a voice allows Moon Baby to harness Becky's rage to make larger points about hegemonic establishments, rebellion, and commodification. By becoming Becky Punkrock and (in the YouTube series) explaining what is and is not "punk rock" from the perspective of a middle class teenager, Moon Baby is able to satirize the commodification of specific types of rebellion for adults while seemingly making fun of Becky's naiveté.

5.9   SERIOUS CRITIQUE MASKED IN SATIRE

In a particularly entertaining episode of the second season of *PNKT (With Becky Punkrock)*, Becky celebrates Gwyneth Paltrow for being "punk rock." She insists that Paltrow is "punk

rock" because "she cares so much about poor people, she only ate limes for a week!"[254] (This is

in reference to Paltrow's *Goop* newsletter about her participation in the "food stamp challenge,"

in which people who receive no governmental assistance attempt to survive on a food budget

equal to what is provided through food stamp programs.) Becky goes on to prove more of

Paltrow's "punk rock" credentials:

> *Gwyneth Paltrow taught me that I'm not straight-edge enough. You know what would be more straight-edge than no drugs or alcohol? No medication! Her and Tom Cruise must be conspiring because you know what I want? Influenza! I'm not gonna get a shot to prevent that! Because you know what? Gwyneth Paltrow told me, in her blog, that that's unnecessary. And she seems fine. She writes books about what to eat with your quinoa!*[255]

Including and in addition to what I have quoted, this short episode—the video runs

approximately three minutes—is rich in satiric content because it takes on so many issues in so

little time, none of which are related to Becky's age or gender, though a superficial analysis

might lead to that conclusion. The target of the satire here is not teenage girls, but, rather,

consumers of media like *Goop* and their lack of awareness around their own privilege. In other

words, Becky Punkrock does satirize a certain kind of naiveté, but it is one related to class

privilege, not to age or gender.[256] This is further evidenced by the fact that Becky demonstrates

real, non-satiric insight near the end of the video. Her last reason for why Gwyneth Paltrow is

"punk rock" is the actress's gender-bending role in *Shakespeare In Love*. Though Becky

inaccurately states that *Shakespeare In Love* was the "first" film to include gender fluidity and

[254] *PNKT (With Becky Punkrock)*, Season 2 Episode 2: "Gwyneth Paltrow,"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hU6ve9QSdOo.
[255] Ibid.
[256] I would like to make the argument that Becky Punkrock is satirizing white privilege with middle class privilege, which would seem to be supported by the subtext of her explanations of "punk rock" fashion, art, and behavior. But Becky never specifically mentions race, which could also be part of the satire: Becky's white privilege allows her to not see race, either through the dangerous trope of "colorblindness" or through literally never seeing a person of color.

queerness, her larger point that gender fluidity is "punk rock"—i.e. anti-establishment—is an instance of serious, in-earnest social critique embedded in a highly satiric format.[257]

Becky's adoption of "punk rock" as shorthand for "subversive" or "anti-establishment" is another instance of serious social critique embedded in the satire of her YouTube show. While early punk bands like the New York Dolls, the Sex Pistols, and the Clash engaged with a range of anti-establishment political sentiments and sounded their protests through music, punk has since become a canonized and commodified symbol of musical and social rebellion.[258] The pop-punk of the 1990s and early 2000s (e.g.: Blink-182, Simple Plan, and pre-*American Idiot* Green Day) centers middle class teen angst more than pointed political protest. This makes the combination of Becky Punkrock's age, musical tastes, and developing politics highly ironic. Becky is an angsty, middle class teenager trying to be anti-establishment and identifying punk rock as a means to do so. She also seems to have a problematic misunderstanding of where the establishment is, but this is part of the "punk rock" joke: the satire is not Becky's misunderstanding of "punk rock" politics, but the ways in which the narrative of punk rock's subversion has been changed from one of serious political dissent to middle class teen angst. Replacing the gender-bending of the New York Dolls, the nihilism of the Sex Pistols, and the proletarian critique of the Clash with middle class teen angst in the punk rock narrative does two things: it equates anti-establishment politics with teen angst and, in doing so, trivializes both. Becoming Becky Punkrock allows Moon Baby to critique the trivialization of teen angst—in this case, her own teen angst—while also commenting on hegemonic establishments around binary

---

[257] *PNKT (With Becky Punkrock)*, Season 2 Episode 2: "Gwyneth Paltrow,"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hU6ve9QSdOo. See also: Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Hélène Iswolsky, translator (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
[258] Allan F. Moore, "Punk rock," *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed March 5, 2017, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/subscriber/article/grove/music/46257.

gender, medical care, social welfare programs, and cults of personality around celebrities (to name just a few of Becky's targets). This is radical queer self-care in that Moon Baby's teenaged self is being heard, as well as highly nuanced, satiric, queer entertainment.[259]

5.10   SOUNDING ALIEN WITH THE MOON BABY

When performing under her primary artistic identity, Moon Baby is not of this planet, and this is reflected in the way she looks, moves, and sounds. When I asked how to introduce her at a performance in 2015, she instructed me to call her a celestial deity. Fitting with this extra-terrestrial origin, Moon Baby's looks and sounds have changed since she started performing, moving from an extremely "busted" presentation—perhaps imitating an extraterrestrial who has recently fallen to Earth and is unsure how clothing works—to something that could be an alien's interpretation of the Earth Diva aesthetic that has been a part of drag since at least the 1960s.[260] This gradual move toward a more comprehensible negotiation of gender and artistic norms seems to reflect Moon Baby's process of learning about Earth and negotiating ways to make herself intelligible to Earthlings without compromising the most important aspects of her identity.

Visually, this has involved a transition from a highly "unprofessional" or "busted" drag look—tangled plastic wigs, broken shoes, and ripped t-shirts—to a more "polished" look with higher quality gear. Now, Moon Baby wears non-plastic wigs (still often styled to appear messy

---

[259] Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare."
[260] Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators In America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 97-111.

158

and tangled, if fuller than previous models) with non-broken shoes and a full wardrobe of jackets, dresses, skirts, blouses, leggings, and other feminine-marked clothing. Sonically, the transition has been more subtle. Moon Baby has consistently used a resonant, powerful head voice when singing at least since early 2013 when I first heard her sing. This registral choice is distinctive because the timbre is different from falsetto and because a head voice allows for more intelligible diction than does a falsetto. Moon Baby's head voice is full and round, and she has a great deal of control over it. She also makes great use of this register's other advantage over falsetto: a smoother and more gradual transition to the lower parts of the modal register, without the sudden change in timbre that happens when a singer shifts from falsetto to chest voice. But the most perceptible change in Moon Baby's singing over the last three years has been her gradual embrace of Euro-American tuning and scalar norms.

The first few times I heard Moon Baby sing, she intentionally detuned some notes, a feat which takes a high degree of vocal control and an excellent ear, but which goes unnoticed as virtuosity because it simply sounds "wrong" to most people who have been exposed to Euro-American musical sounds. (At the time, myself included.) After a few months of performing songs in this way and being met with confusion, if not open hostility, from audiences, Moon Baby stopped detuning melodic lines and, instead, focused on other ways of queering the norms of vocal performance. She does this by playing with register, timbre, voice leading, and regulations of musical time.

Moon Baby's consistent use of a clear, round head voice is a rejection of gendered narratives of vocal development for adult bodies. In their pieces on voice, body, and gender, both Suzanne Cusick and Alexandros Constantis reference the narrative of the male voice change and disallow the possibility of a male-assigned body continuing to train and use a head voice during

and after this change.[261] For Cusick, such a rejection of the pubertal voice change—though its sound would be close to what she identifies as "feminine singing"—would simply reinforce a male-assigned body's male subjectivity because the singer is refusing to embrace "natural" changes to their body in a "mind over matter" gesture. Constantis simply does not allow that head voices exist in adult, male-assigned bodies; there is either chest voice or falsetto and nothing in between.[262]

For my part, I find that both these explanations do an injustice to Moon Baby. Cusick's theory that Moon Baby's use of head voice is a masculine gesture—despite Moon Baby not identifying as male—is misgendering, an act of ideological violence often employed by cisgender women keep trans feminine people out of women's spaces.[263] Constantis' theory is a troubling concession to the puberty narrative of anatomically binary gender. In addition to excluding Moon Baby, his theory of post-pubertal, male-assigned voices as consisting only of chest and falsetto registers also ignores adult, male-assigned tenors' habitual use of head voice to reach high notes. Instead of adopting these analyses, then, I propose a different one: Moon Baby's use of head voice is a rejection of the male voice change narrative associated with anatomically binary gender, and her choice of a timbre that differs greatly from tenors' head voices is a rejection of male identity.

---

[261] See: Suzanne Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex," in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, eds. (Zürich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999), pp. 25-49. Alexandros Constantis, "The Changing Female-to-Male (FTM) Voice," *Radical Musicology* 3 (2008): 32 pars. 12 October 2014. http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk.

[262] I fear this might be a bit uncharitable to Constantis, despite it being a direct paraphrase of what he writes in his article. While discussing gender and vocal registers with Stephan Pennington recently, Stephan posited that what is often referred to as "falsetto" in adult male voices is, in fact, head voice and that there seems to be widespread confusion of the registers specifically in male voices. It could be, then, that Constantis is including head voice in the range he is calling "falsetto." In my own experiments with singing, I find that my falsetto is the region of my voice that was called "whistle register" before my transition and that I also have a head voice and a chest voice that are closer to each other in timbre than they are to falsetto. But this is for another project.

[263] See: Ritchie, "'Women-Only' Spaces…"

In addition to being a rejection of male identity, Moon Baby's singing sounds her gender fluidity. Cultivating a head voice after puberty, while not completely disallowed for male-assigned singers, is done in very limited contexts and within the gendered stereotypes attached to tenor voices. For Moon Baby to train a head voice that rejects those stereotypes, then, is to refuse maleness, but this rejection of her assigned end of the gender binary is not what makes Moon Baby's singing gender fluid. While the timbre of Moon Baby's head voice does not adhere to expectations for tenors, it also does not fully adhere to aesthetic standards for female-assigned voices. The range and tessitura of Moon Baby's head voice most closely fits the current classification of a mezzo-soprano, but she sings with a timbre that makes her sound otherworldly and alien. Moon Baby's head voice, except when she uses voiceless fricatives ("s" and soft "c") or a voiceless stop ("t"), contains mostly the lower partials above the fundamental, even on vowel sounds that typically have distinctive formant regions.[264] This density of overtones makes gendering Moon Baby's voice extremely difficult; the tone quality is over-saturated with clues that might be used to align the voice with encultured norms for male-assigned or female-assigned bodies singing in that range. By cultivating a vocal timbre and range that cannot be gendered with existing, encultured tools for associating voices with bodies, Moon Baby sounds gender fluidity.

Though not specifically related to gender, Moon Baby also uses voice leading and musical time to subvert expectations in her performances. Many of her recorded songs feature multiple vocal tracks, all of which she sings on overdubs. Rather than having specific parts that stay within limited ranges and have dedicated harmonic functions, Moon Baby's vocal parts are

---

[264] See Appendix B for spectrographs of Moon Baby's head voice, compared with an alto and a countertenor. (I.e.: Moon Baby's voice compared to a cisgender woman and a cisgender man singing in the same range with conventionally gendered vocal techniques.)

all in the same range and her melodic lines weave in and out of each other, crossing multiple times and mostly ignoring harmonic function. This is deliberate. Moon Baby has an extensive knowledge of pop culture and understands how pop music is "supposed" to work in terms of voice parts and harmony; she simply chooses not to do that. Likewise, her approach to meter and rhythmic organization plays with existing norms. Many of her songs have drums and percussion in the backing track, but the vocals do not always align with the metric organization provided by the drums. In other cases, drums and percussion are so sparse that meter is difficult to hear. As with Moon Baby's approach to harmony, this is not due to ignorance or lack of training in the norms of pop music; these are deliberate choices based on the aesthetic values of Moon Baby as a celestial deity. Because Moon Baby is often billed and contextualized as a drag performer, these aesthetic choices are also political: Moon Baby is making queer art-pop (pop-art?) by rejecting the norms of mainstream, homonormative drag and mainstream pop music in favor of the sound aesthetics of a gender fluid alien.[265]

5.11   REAL AND FICTIVE SPACES

While Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock are stage personalities and, to some degree, expressly for entertainment, all three also live off-stage through various social media and video publishing platforms. In this sense, Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock relate to other people in many of the same ways as Moon Baby's non-theatrical identity. Moon Baby posts from

---

[265] N.B.: If this narrative sounds a bit like David Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust* period, that, too, is intentional. During the Bowie Ball 2016, Moon Baby gave a lengthy, off-the-cuff tribute to Bowie and his many stage personas, describing how his commitment to becoming his characters had inspired her. At the same time, Moon Baby is adamant that she, as a queer, gender fluid alien, is not directly related to Bowie's concept of a gender-less (androgynous) alien for the *Ziggy Stardust* album.

all four accounts—her legal name and all three stage personas—regularly, and each personality carries its own voice into the typed social media realm. Ann Teak's typing reflects her unintelligible speech and Becky Punkrock is extremely angsty. Moon Baby and the account under Moon Baby's legal name are more difficult to differentiate, which is consistent with Moon Baby's statement that this primary stage identity is generally comfortable for her on- and off-stage. Moon Baby is, in many ways, the everyday identity, even when posting from the profile under her legal name. Given this social media presence, it seems appropriate to ask where the supposedly fictional personalities end.

Moon Baby is able to move fluidly between herself, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock, inhabiting a specific personality in order to make specific kinds of queer commentary. And, though Moon Baby's primary identity is the most comfortable for her, Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock are still important parts of her.[266] It would seem, then, that Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock are not fictional at all, but, instead parts of a fluidly gendered queer person trying to negotiate a world that does not allow for fluidity. In a sense, then, Moon Baby is not becoming a character when she speaks or sings as Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock; she is revealing her full self.[267] Similarly, Cherri Baum's existence as Cherri Baum on stage, off stage, and on social media demands new ways of thinking about "real" and "fictive" spaces and identities.

In the section on Town Danceboutique in Chapter 2, I described that venue as a carnivalesque space, in which the subversion of drag is allowed because it is understood as a joke and a fiction that does not extend past the physical boundaries of the bar. Town, then, is a space of fiction, where drag cannot be taken seriously because to do so would threaten the

---

[266] Moon baby, personal communication with the author, April 2015-November 2016.
[267] See: Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

worldview of its homo- and heteronormative clientele.[268] The Blue Moon is a different kind of space, in which the subversion of drag is taken as serious queer commentary and the identities adopted by performers, staff, and patrons—regardless of whether medico-legal establishments recognize them—are assumed to be real. Because the Blue Moon is this type of queer space, it provides a safe environment for queer people to reveal themselves to each other in ways that would not be recognized as "real" or legitimate outside the walls of the bar. In this sense, the "real" world outside the Blue Moon becomes a space of fiction, in which queer people are often forced to hide the identities that make them most comfortable so that they can fit social norms and avoid physical and ideological violence.

Moon Baby and Cherri, among others at the Blue Moon, choose to reveal themselves outside the bar, as well, but when they do this, the identities they reveal are treated as fictional by entities with power. Cherri's gender is denied by the TERFs in feminist communities, only Moon Baby's legal name and birth-assigned gender are recognized as a legitimate identity by the state, and several Blue Moon queens (including Bebe, Bambi, and Alora Chateaux) were forced to use their legal names on Facebook profiles for their drag identities because they were reported for violating Facebook's "real name" policy. These acts of ideological violence treat trans and fluid queer identities as fictions because of the threats they pose to fixed, body-essentialist binary gender.

Queer spaces like the Blue Moon combat this ideological violence by affirming and nurturing queer people in the identities that are most comfortable for them, their real identities.[269]

---

[268] Despite this, "Who is Singing?" is an exploration of what would happen if one did take Town drag seriously.
[269] I hesitate to say "chosen identities" when referring to expressions that make queer people comfortable because it seems reckless to even accidentally employ the discourse of "lifestyle choice" at this political moment. While it is true that queer people have choices in how to be comfortable with their self-expressions, the feelings of discomfort with heteronormativity and binary gender that give rise to queer self-expression are not choices. In other words,

The safety of the Blue Moon provides a space in which queer people, performers or not, can play with outward signifiers of gender and sexuality in the ways that work best for them on any given day. Having this space to experiment with expressions of identity in the presence of other queer people allows Blue Moon performers, staff, and patrons to become themselves and be recognized as themselves in ways that would be more difficult, if not denied outright, outside of queer space.[270]

queer people often feel at odds with hegemonic narratives of gender, anatomy, and sexuality and they have a choice of how much to express these feelings in their outward presentations. Choices about presentation are often influenced by environment and the safety of wearing or doing certain things in particular spaces. This is why queer spaces like the Blue Moon are important. (See: Sara Ahmed, "Clumsiness," *Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy as a World Making Project*, published 4 September 2013, https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/04/clumsiness/.)

[270] See: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 24-28. Intelligibility figures heavily in both Butler and Spivak's analyses of non-normative identities. To summarize both, being unintelligible means being a non-person. This is why recognition is important to identity formation.

6.0 CONCLUSION: DRAG BECOMES US

The title of this chapter references Chapter 4, as well as Jinxx Monsoon's YouTube series, "Drag Becomes Him." Drag is certainly becoming for performers, in many senses of the word, but it is also becoming for us if we choose to adopt the fluidity of identity and expression offered by drag and queer politics. Drag's ability to make serious comments on established political and aesthetic norms without taking itself too seriously can provide a way to resist oppression without using the tools of violence and domination associated with cis- and heteronormative patriarchy. The childish humor in Cherri Baum's "Linger," the dry satire in Becky Punkrock's YouTube series, and other Blue Moon acts model ways to disrupt hegemonic aesthetic and political forces and create new aesthetics through non-violent means. Drag at Town, too, offers an alternative aesthetics and politics to cis- and heteronormative concepts of identity, though its potential is not fully realized by its audience. In becoming Beyoncé and Rihanna, Riley Knoxx and Tatianna offer a way to appreciate the work of pop culture figures while also engaging in a critique of biologically essentialist binary gender and the pop culture industry.

Taking drag seriously provides new ways of thinking and speaking about bodies, genders, and voices that include more people and more forms of expression than do theories based on cisgender vocalists. This politics of inclusion can benefit discussions of body and gender in music scholarship because it accounts for fluidity and for lived experiences of bodies instead of reducing identity and voice to superficial anatomy. Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock

are especially instructive here. Becoming these three personalities allows Moon Baby to experience her body and her voice in different ways, all of which inform the ways she experiences her body and the world in her primary identity.

Theorizing these uses of voice as becoming and as ways of experiencing and presenting a body based on existing cultural codes for gender, sexuality, age, and class treats Moon Baby's fluid identity as intelligible and real.[271] This is important for music scholarship because both historical musicology and ethnomusicology have long histories of marginalizing non-normative identities, including those belonging to queer people. Even with the advent of gay and lesbian music scholarship in the 1990s, identities on the trans spectrum are still marginalized in music studies because existing theories of gender are still tied to the biologically essentialist binary.[272] This is beginning to change, however, and studies of voice based on trans people are starting to be published by music scholars. Many of these emerging studies center the experiences of trans masculine people, making the trans masculine visible in ways that it has not been before.[273] This is good and necessary work. At the same time, scholarship must not neglect the trans feminine, and that is why I have centered Cherri Baum and Moon Baby in this dissertation.

Taking drag seriously also provides important additions to sound studies theories of live and recorded voices. While sound studies scholars often describe relationships between bodies

---

[271] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975). Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4/3: 469-488. Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[272] See: Suzanne Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex," in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*. Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, eds. (Zürich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999), pp. 25-49. Joke Dame, "Unveiled Voices: Sexual Difference and the Castrato," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology, 2nd Edition*. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 139-154. Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

[273] Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 244-245. See also: Alexandros Constantis, "The Changing Female-to-Male (FTM) Voice," *Radical Musicology* 3 (2008): 32 pars., 12 October 2014, http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk. Elías Krell, "Contours through Covers: Voice and Affect in the Music of Lucas Silveira," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 25/4 (2013), pp. 476-503.

and voices, both live and recorded, the bodies are either not given social identities or are explicitly white, male, and cisgender. Adding drag to sound studies shows how discussions of gender enrich analyses of presence and embodiment in recorded sound. The gender play and gender politics in Blue Moon tribute shows and in the becoming practiced by Riley Knoxx and Tatianna adds depth to studies of bodies and recorded sounds because drag plays on encultured modes of listening[274] that attach recorded voices to the bodily presence of a specific vocalist. When recorded voices inhabit the bodies of drag performers, it allows the sense of the uncanny documented in reception histories of early phonograph recordings to return, despite the normalization of privatized mobile listening in the second half of the twentieth century.[275] Calling attention to and breaking the virtual spaces created by playing back sound recordings performs a pointed critique of encultured listening habits and of expected visual and sonic gender expressions in the pop culture industry, especially for women. Adding this gender critique is important for sound studies because it allows sound studies to include more people and more experiences, thus contributing to the depth and breadth of knowledge in the field.

6.1   NEW MATERIAL AND OLD MESSAGES

In the preceding chapters, I have used recent drag performances to critique and revise theories from music and sound studies relating to voices, bodies, genders, recorded sounds, presence, and

---

[274] See: Shuhei Hosokawa, "The Walkman Effect," *Popular Music 4* (1984): 165-180. Michael Bull, "No Dead Air! The iPod and the Culture of Mobile Listening." *Leisure Studies* 24/4 (2005): 343-355. Michael Bull, "Soundscapes of the Car: A Critical Study of Automobile Habitation," *The Auditory Culture Reader*, Michael Bull and Les Black, eds. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), pp. 357-374. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
[275] Erika Brady, *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999), pp. 11-26.

space. In many cases, though, my revisions of these theories return to feminist ideas that pre-date both New Musicology and sound studies (from which many of my source theories are borrowed): the personal is political; biology is not destiny; patriarchy oppresses everyone. This is not an accident. In the first chapter, I alluded to beginning fieldwork at the Blue Moon at the same time that I was learning how to be a queer man. Part of this process included listening to the experiences of other queer men at the Blue Moon, many of whom championed feminist causes, even if they did not attach the word "feminist" to them. Conversations with Cherri Baum about her explicitly feminist drag and what it means to be a trans person and a feminist were also strong influences on my thought process in revising existing theories in music and sound studies.

My conversations with Cherri about her feminist drag and experiences with feminist communities outside the Blue Moon highlighted the need for intersectional, trans-inclusive feminism in music and sound studies, as well as in the world more generally. Cherri's approach to drag shows the importance of feminist critique in shaping queer spaces that welcome and are safe for feminine-presenting people of all gender identities. Cherri's position as an original member of the Haus of Haunt gives her authority in the Blue Moon, meaning that her critiques of transphobia, misogyny, and toxic masculinity become part of the fabric of the space; the power of the activist voice she has constructed through recorded sounds and social media influences other Blue Moon drag performers and the affective tone in the Blue Moon as a whole.[276] By helping to make the Blue Moon a inclusive feminist space, Cherri creates a safe environment for queer and trans people who identify with feminist critiques and politics, and she also points to work still to be done outside the Blue Moon. When she reads misogynist, transphobic, and body-shaming mean tweets about herself on stage, she is both reclaiming her ownership of her body

---

[276] Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

and expressing dismay at the state of the world, implicitly demanding that people do better. With this gesture, her demands for safe, inclusive feminist spaces extend beyond the boundaries of the Blue Moon, into the virtual spaces of social media and the actual spaces of the outside world.

Where Cherri's feminist drag highlights what feminism can contribute to queer spaces, Blue Moon drag more generally shows what queer people and queer theories of voice can contribute to conversations about feminism. Moon Baby's use of her singing voice to reject gendered vocal pedagogy and break the gender binary echoes second wave critiques of biological essentialism, and her negotiations of her own family dynamics with Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock show the political dimensions of personal relationships.[277] But Moon Baby is not simply reiterating second wave feminist points. She is using those points in service of a broader idea of gendered social justice, one in which there are more options for gender than "woman" and "man." Whereas second wave (and even third wave) feminism is concerned with basic human rights for women through the deconstruction of patriarchy—taking "man" and "woman" for granted—Moon Baby's queer gender equality is concerned with eliminating patriarchy and establishing basic human rights for all people through the deconstruction of binary gender.

Queer perspectives on gender equality, based in the deconstruction of binary gender, benefit feminist praxis by providing a robust, if difficult, way to eliminate the social structures that make patriarchy possible. A feminist praxis that assumes binary gender and seeks to eliminate patriarchy runs the risk of simply reproducing the class system it seeks to deconstruct. The TERFs who exclude Cherri and other trans women from feminist spaces are an example of

---

[277] E.g.: Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?," in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974). Carol Hanisch, "The Personal Is Political," *Notes From the Second Year: Women's Liberation*, 1970.

this. In seeking to police who qualifies as a woman, they create class systems that privilege cisgender women and marginalize queer and trans people of all genders. This class system is based on anatomy, much like the biologically essentialist binary system that creates and perpetuates patriarchy.

In contrast, a feminist praxis that seeks to dismantle binary gender and biological essentialism removes many of the conditions of possibility that allow patriarchy to preserve itself. As Kate Bornstein puts it, "The continued oppression of women proves only that in any binary there's going to be one up and one down. The struggle for equal rights must include the struggle to dismantle the binary."[278] Bornstein published *Gender Outlaw,* from which this quote is taken, in 1994, well before Cherri and Moon Baby started performing their feminist and gender fluid drag. That queer people must still call for the elimination of the gender binary over twenty years after Bornstein published her book is a commentary on the entrenchment of the biologically essentialist binary gender system. Despite the system's entrenchment in the world as a whole, aesthetics and politics inside the Blue Moon operate mostly without binary gender, especially when performers and queer regulars enforce the queerness of the space by shutting down homonormativity, transphobia, misogyny, and toxic masculinity.

Voice is an important location for deconstructing biologically essentialist binary gender in music and sound studies, and this is where queer sound art can contribute to feminist conversations. As noted repeatedly in the previous chapters, theories of voice and gender in music studies equate voice with anatomy in extremely problematic ways. Adopting a theory of voice based on the idea that cultural codes around identity shape the ways people use their bodies to produce sound—as I have done with my theory around Moon Baby's singing—circumvents

---

[278] Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw,* p. 106.

171

this biological essentialism. As an alternative, it posits the body as something mutable, shaped by cultural codes and also by a performer's choices in negotiating those codes to find a comfortable expression of identity. In short, I argue that biology is not destiny.

6.2   SPACES, SPECTATORS, AND THE POLITICS OF BECOMING

This project has shown me the importance of queer space to the aesthetic and political critiques in Blue Moon drag. Because the Blue Moon is a safe space that is primarily occupied by queer people, its drag can speak to that population and make direct critiques of mainstream drag, heteronormative politics, and binary gender that would not be possible in a different kind of space and with different spectators. Blue Moon performers recognize this, and artists who perform at venues outside the Blue Moon will often save experimental or especially subversive acts for the Blue Moon's stage. Blue Moon artists are also quick to comment on how grateful they are to have a safe space that embraces and supports them in and out of drag.

The ability to perform in front of an audience primarily composed of queer people at the Blue Moon also allows performers to be very direct about the socially critical content of their stage acts. The Blue Moon's small size and consistent group of regular patrons fosters a sense of familiarity between drag artists and spectators, and this facilitates the direct political commentary often enacted on the Blue Moon's stage. Bebe Beretta was able to perform her angry, jarring number with stage blood and homophobic slurs at the fundraiser for Pulse victims because she knew who her audience would be and that they would understand her critique. Likewise, Cherri Baum's overdubbing of "Linger" with flatulence was a calculated move based on her knowledge of Blue Moon regulars and what they expect from her.

172

In contrast to the familiarity and direct commentary at the Blue Moon, performers at Town say very little about the social or political implications of their stage shows. Instead, their focus is on drag as entertainment for audiences of affluent, white, straight women and gay men. This is not to say that drag at Town is void of social commentary; the commentary is there for those with the tools to read it, but performers prioritize their jobs as entertainers over direct social critique.

This difference in performers' priorities between Town and the Blue Moon is a result of the differences in political tone at the two venues. At the Blue Moon, it is the audience as much as the performers who make the space safe for all queer identities. Town's audience, on the other hand, is indifferent to queer commentary at best, and drag there is marketed as entertainment. The performers are billed as "illusionists," fitting with the homonormative narrative of drag as a carnivalesque gender masquerade, and the venue fills with affluent, white audiences seeking spectacle, not social commentary, every Friday and Saturday night.

The view of drag as primarily a source of entertainment is a function of Town's location and differences between performer and audience demographics that are not as pronounced at the Blue Moon, if they are present at all. The Washington, DC neighborhood that is now home to Town, as well as the surrounding neighborhoods, have gentrified rapidly in the last ten years, bringing in the young, affluent, white professionals who make up Town's drag show audience.[279] These young, affluent, white professionals seeking the spectacle of a *Drag Race*-style show consume entertainment provided primarily by drag artists of color. These drag artists often live outside the city, or at least outside the neighborhoods where drag venues are located, and

---

[279] Natalie Hopkinson, "Go-Go's Cyber Mixtape: An Analysis of Washington D.C.'s Popular Black Music Audience on Internet Radio," (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Washington, DC, 10-13 November, 2016).

commute to multiple venues in different places in and around the city for shows each week. In contrast, most of the Blue Moon's performers and patrons live in Pittsburgh, relatively close to the bar, and the Blue Moon is a space where drag artists can be seen socializing, even when they are not scheduled to perform. In other words, the Blue Moon's performers are part of its audience, while performers at Town are distinct from their audience because of differences in race and class.

The differences between performer and audience demographics at Town result in performers there being less familiar with their audiences than Blue Moon performers are with theirs. When added to considerations performers of color must undertake in order to stay safe among predominantly white audiences, this absence of familiarity means that performers at Town say very little about any political commentary in their acts.[280] Instead, only emcees at Town speak during shows and only to introduce performers and engage in banter with the audience. This banter often pokes fun at the audience, but not in a way that is directly identifiable as social or political critique. When Lena Lett made fun of the bachelorette parties during my first visit to Town, the subtext was that straight women invade gay space and objectify gay bodies, but that was not immediately evident from the words she used.[281]

This use of subtext to critique the audience is mirrored by the implicit gender politics of Tatianna and Riley Knoxx's drag. Becoming Rihanna and Beyoncé by taking on the singers' voices and appearances is a highly subversive rejection of biologically essentialist binary gender, but, because neither performer explains the act, the homonormative audience is spared the task of

---

[280] Peggy McIntosh, "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom Magazine* July/August 1989, pp. 10-12.
[281] See: Miz Cracker, "Beware the Bachelorette! A Report From the Straight Lady Invasion of Gay Bars," *Slate*, published 13 August 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2015/08/13/should_straight_women_go_to_gay_bars_a_drag_queen_reports_on_the_lady_invasion.html.

thinking about it and being forced to confront their privilege.[282] Instead, the queer act of becoming is framed as "illusion" so that the audience might be entertained. While this framing does not diminish the queer content of Tatianna and Riley Knoxx's drag for those with the tools to read it, it does make me conscious of the safety of the Blue Moon and the work that goes into maintaining such a space.

6.3   RUST BELT DRAG?

The Blue Moon's status as a queer space and a neighborhood bar is not entirely unique. Drag venues in the Lakewood area of Cleveland are also neighborhood bars that provide safe, queer spaces. While my fieldwork in Cleveland has not been as extensive as my work in Pittsburgh or Washington, DC, my preliminary observations are that the drag aesthetics in Cleveland include some common elements with Blue Moon drag while, for the most part, being less confrontationally queer. As Bebe and Bambi do at the Blue Moon, some drag artists in Cleveland use homemade mixes for their stage performances, but the uses I saw of homemade mixes in Cleveland tended more toward a campy dialogue between two sound sources than the overt political commentary of Blue Moon drag.

At a show in July 2016, Ginger Breadhaus performed to a homemade mix at Cocktails, a bar in Lakewood. In the act, Ginger mixed segments of the disco classic "Le Freak" with excerpts from *Mommie Dearest*, including a puppet co-star for the film segments. The cuts

---

[282] N.B.: This is not a value judgment about Tatianna or Riley Knoxx. They are queer people of color performing in a venue full of homonormative white people. Adopting explicitly queer politics might compromise their safety and/or ability to make a living, and choosing safety and survival in such a situation is also a queer act. (See: Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare.")

between source materials alleviated the tension of the film scenes, in which Faye Dunaway (as Joan Crawford) verbally berates her daughter, by interjecting the song text, "Freak out!" after one of Crawford's outbursts. While both elements in this homemade mix referenced pop culture objects important to queer history—disco in general and *Mommie Dearest*— and created a campy counternarrative to the film, Ginger's number did not make overt social commentary in the ways that Bebe or Bambi might have done at the Blue Moon. In this sense, Ginger's use of a homemade mix to reference queer history mirrors elements of Blue Moon tribute shows in that it shows appreciation for queer icons while also extending the influence of those icons into the present by playing with expectations around sound recordings.

Because this fieldwork is still in its early stages, I am unable to say whether the aesthetic commonalities between Cleveland and Blue Moon drag are a result of performers working in both cities or a larger regional aesthetic. Several Blue Moon performers, including Alora Chateaux and her protege Phoenix Fatale, occasionally take trips to Cleveland to perform. Likewise, the Blue Moon has welcomed drag artists from Cleveland on several occasions. Because of this and because Pittsburgh drag venues other than the Blue Moon do not share the Blue Moon's aesthetic, I am inclined to hypothesize—for the time being, at least—that the sharing of performers between the Blue Moon and Lakewood drag venues is at least partially responsible for the aesthetic commonalities.

Despite the aesthetic similarities between the Blue Moon and drag venues in Lakewood, Cleveland's drag scene differs from Pittsburgh's in that it is more racially diverse. In Pittsburgh, there are very few performers of color, especially at the Blue Moon, and drag audiences are predominantly white. During my limited fieldwork in Cleveland, at least half the performers and a significant portion of the audiences were people of color. These differences in racial

176

demographics suggest research questions for my continuing fieldwork in both Cleveland and Pittsburgh. Future research will explore intersections of race and definitions of queerness in both cities as a means to account for the whiteness of Pittsburgh's drag scene.

6.4   MOVING FORWARD: DECOLONIZING VOCAL PEDAGOGY

Writing about Moon Baby's fluidly gendered singing for this project has made me see a need to decolonize vocal pedagogy on a larger scale. The biologically essentialist, gendered norms of vocal pedagogy that train female- and male-assigned singers to use different registers based solely on their anatomy are only one instance of Eurocentric cultural norms permeating vocal theory and praxis in American primary, secondary, and higher education. Ideas about "healthy" voices and singing techniques, outside of gendered voice types, also privilege a particular set of aesthetics based on European art music.

The privileging of European vocal aesthetics and techniques as "healthy" marginalizes and pathologizes vocal traditions that operate on different aesthetic systems and encode gender and other social identities differently to European art music. It is no accident that many of the vocal traditions marginalized by the centering of European vocal pedagogy are those of racialized and religious Others, as well as traditions that break with gender norms established by the European operatic voice classification system. This system of privilege and marginality and its associated policing of vocal sounds and techniques goes largely unnoticed because it is hidden in the language of "health."

Music scholarship in the last thirty years has done a lot of work to de-privilege European art music as a subject of study and as a set of aesthetic norms for musical analysis. Scholars

177

including Guthrie Ramsey, Ingrid Monson, Portia Maultsby, Eileen Hayes, Susan McClary, Robert Walser, and Veit Erlmann have published work that offers alternatives to the aesthetic value systems of European art music and centers musical genres and traditions that have been marginalized by the dominance of European art music and the imposition of its aesthetics. In addition to these foundational scholars, new work in historical musicology and ethnomusicology continues to challenge the primacy of European art music as a topic of scholarly research and art music aesthetics as the norm for musical analysis and judgments of taste. But, despite the existence of this large body of scholarship that centers alternative aesthetic systems and suggests progressive musical values, institutionalized vocal pedagogy—including primary and secondary music education—remains firmly rooted in the imperialist European tradition.

This disjunction between the state of scholarship and the state of vocal pedagogy is a project for scholarship and one that I hope to participate in as this research moves forward. Challenging the imperialist and biologically essentialist underpinnings of vocal pedagogy's discourse of "healthy" vocal technique will require not a single new theory of voice, but a proliferation of new theories. Queer modes of vocalizing that reject binary gender will be important, as will theories of voice accounting for race, religion, class, and intersections thereof. Decolonizing vocal pedagogy with these tools will allow more vocalists to find and, perhaps, move between comfortable sonic identities without being subject to biologically essentialist policing of their techniques and sounds as incorrect or unhealthy. From a queer and trans studies perspective, this will allow young vocalists who do not identify with their assigned genders to find vocal expressions and techniques that work for them, even if those techniques are not the ones prescribed for their bodies. Being allowed to find their voices in this way will allow queer

178

and trans vocalists to be included, rather than marginalized, which is an important step for larger

LGBTQ political movements.

APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY OF PERFORMERS

A.1   PITTSBURGH/BLUE MOON

Alaska Thunderfuck (a.k.a. Alaska, Alaska Thunderfuck 5000, Alaska 5000): former Blue Moon performer (now based in Los Angeles); runner-up on Drag Race Season 5; former partner of Sharon Needles; original member of the Haus of Haunt, Blue Moon's drag troupe.

Alora Chateaux: regular performer and show organizer at the Blue Moon; occasionally performs bearded drag; does ballet (on pointe) while in drag; hosts T&A Thursdays with Tootsie Snyder.

Amy Vodkahaus: formerly a regular performer and show organizer at the Blue Moon; member of the Haus of Haunt; operatic countertenor; writes her own songs and makes her own mixes for drag performances; Bosnian.

Bambi Deerest (a.k.a. Bambi Bulimic): regular performer and show organizer at the Blue Moon; had her Blue Moon debut in spring 2013; often organizes tribute shows for recently deceased celebrities; makes her own mixes for drag performances; occasionally sings live.

Bebe Beretta: regular performer and show organizer at the Blue Moon; had her Blue Moon debut in spring 2013; often addresses contemporary social and political issues through drag performances; makes her own mixes; sings live, but only out of drag.

Cherri Baum: veteran performer and show organizer at the Blue Moon; original member of the Haus of Haunt; out as a trans woman; makes her own audio mixes; takes drag in the direction of surreal performance art and/or overt feminist commentary.

Cindy Crochford: regular Blue Moon performer; bartends at the Blue Moon when out of drag; Miss Pennsylvania Trash 2014-2016; performs drag numbers that include elements of burlesque stripping; often pays tribute to Divine; sings live as Divine while in drag, otherwise only sings out of drag.

Dixie Surewood: regular Blue Moon performer; tap dances while in drag; often performs Broadway material; known for campy, comic drag; often sings live (out of drag) at karaoke nights.

Janet Granite: regular Blue Moon performer and show organizer; builds her own sets and props; installed lighting, disco balls, and a new sound system at the Blue Moon; Ms. Trans Pride Pittsburgh 2014; trans* activist; led protests after an incident of homophobic violence outside Blue Moon in 2013.

Kitty Klottsalot: regular Blue Moon performer and show organizer; known for elaborate costumes; organizes tributes to recently deceased celebrities; competes in the comedy queen contest circuit.

Mahogany LaPiranha: former Blue Moon performer and show organizer; part of Veruca La Piranha's drag family, but not the Haus of Haunt; continues to occasionally perform as a drag artist in Pittsburgh; opened for Kesha at Pride in the Street 2016.

Moon Baby: regular Blue Moon performer; a gender-fluid alien from outer space; writes her own songs and performs them live, in drag; singing voice is a clear, cultivated head voice; known for multiple drag personas and voices (see below).

> Ann Teak: one of Moon Baby's personas; a middle-aged woman from Pittsburgh's South Hills; speaks and sings with a heavy Pittsburgh accent; hosts Ann Teak's Drag Show, a used clothing auction with proceeds going to queer charities and aid organizations.

> Becky Punkrock: one of Moon Baby's personas; a teenage girl from one of Pittsburgh's more affluent suburbs; has a YouTube show, Punkt (with Becky Punkrock), in which she instructs her audience in things that are or are not "punk rock"; speaks with considerable amounts of up-speak and vocal fry; singing voice is a low-register scream.

Qarma Kazee: regular Blue Moon performer and show organizer; known for bearded drag, including the glitter beard; helped to organize the Quick and Shameless Comedy Hour at the Blue Moon for several months; occasionally sings live, usually as part of a comedy act; organized the first Blue Moon Spice Night (2014).

Sharon Needles: occasional Blue Moon performer; winner of Drag Race Season 4; former partner of Alaska Thunderfuck; original member of the Haus of Haunt.

Tootsie Snyder: regular Blue Moon performer and show host; won the Miss Blue Moon 2016 title; hosts T&A Thursdays with Alora Chateaux.

Veruca LaPiranha: occasional Blue Moon performer; original member of the Haus of Haunt.

A.2 WASHINGTON, DC/TOWN DANCEBOUTIQUE

Ba'Naka: part of Town's rotating cast of performers; known for comedy and high-energy stage performances; co-hosts drag bingo at Nellie's Sports Bar with Sasha Adams.

Lena Lett: part of Town's rotating cast of performers; often acts as emcee for Town shows and pokes fun at straight women in the audience; visual drag style resembles Divine; performs high-energy, athletic numbers during shows.

Riley Knoxx (a.k.a. Epiphany B. Lee): regular performer at Town; known for highly accurate and realistic recreations of celebrity performances.

Sasha Adams: part of Town's rotating cast of performers; hosted shows at Ziegfield's before it closed; competes on the Miss Gay U.S. of A. circuit; known for comedy and pageant-ready performances; co-hosts drag bingo at Nellie's Sports Bar with Ba'Naka.

Shiqueeta Lee: part of Town's rotating cast of performers; known for comedy and for singing live, a cappella; often emcees at Town and pokes fun at straight women in the audience.

Tatianna: regular performer at Town; competed on *Drag Race* Season 2; known for highly accurate and realistic recreations of celebrity performances.

APPENDIX B

SPECTROGRAPHS

The images below are spectrographs of excerpts from three recordings: one of Moon Baby, one of Amy Vodkahaus (a classically trained countertenor), and one of a cisgender woman with an alto voice. All three examples fall within the same pitch range and also have distinct timbres as shown in the overtone content on the spectrographs. In all images, vocal lines are the sustained marks in red and yellow in the mezzo-soprano/alto register (see the keyboard on the vertical axis). Each example also has a single accompaniment instrument visible as less intense red areas in the tenor and bass registers on the graph.

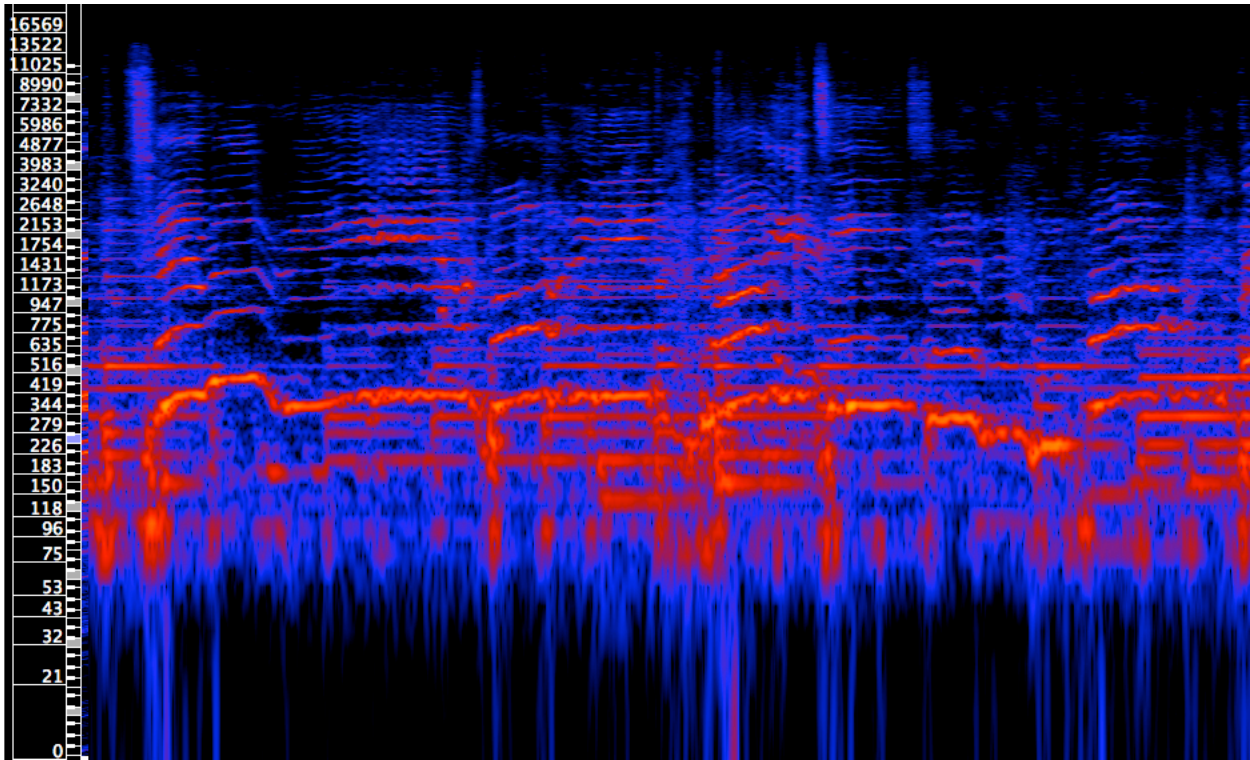**Figure 9: Excerpt of Moon Baby's vocal line in "Oops I'm Ded Again." Note the density of lower partials and absence of defined vowel formants.**
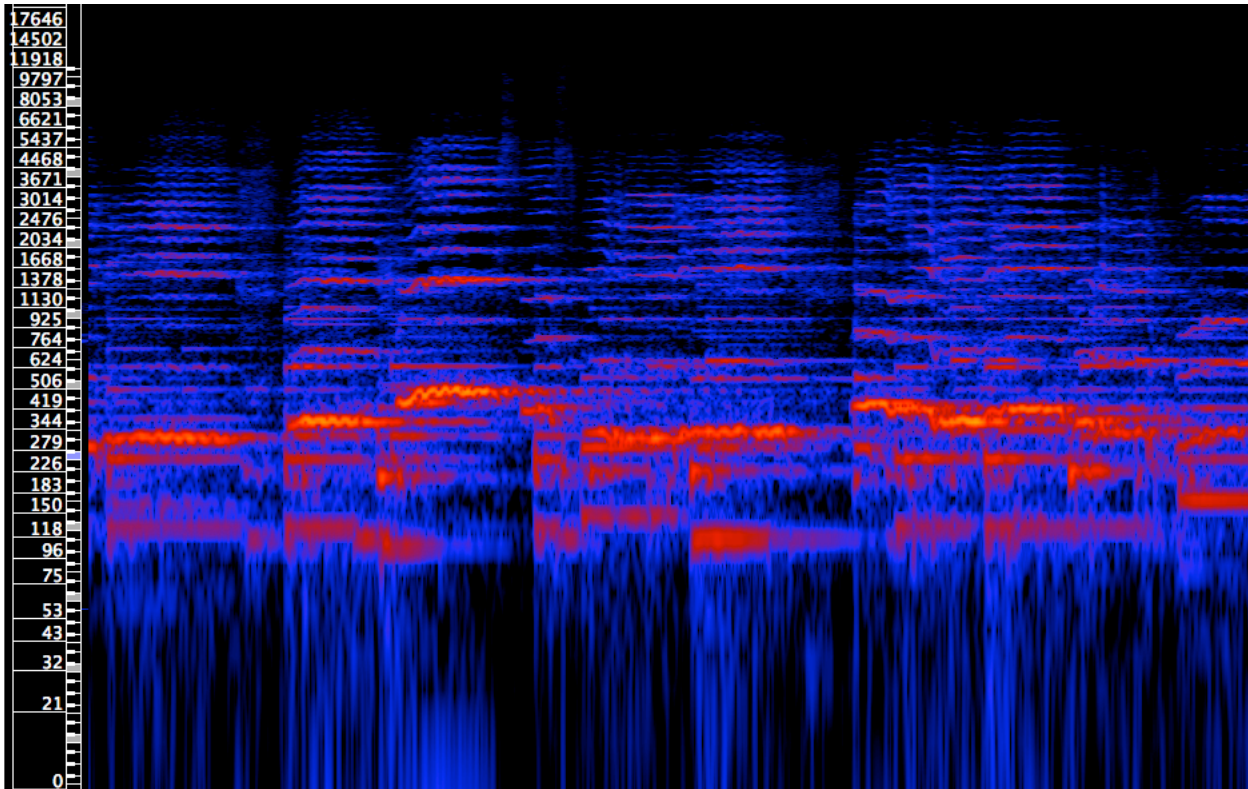
Figure 10: Excerpt of an Amy Vodkahaus recording. Note the presence of vowel formants and that the overtone profile is different to both Moon Baby and the alto in section B.3.
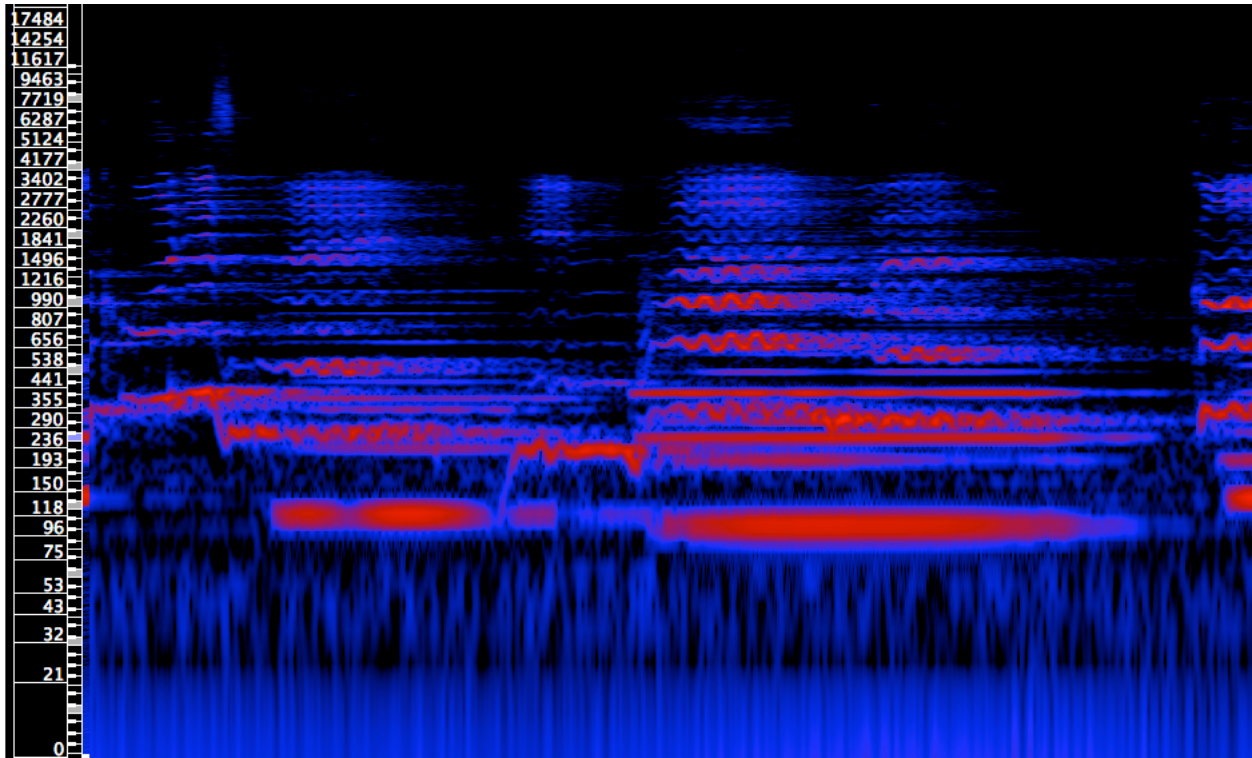
B.3   ALTO

Figure 11: Excerpt of a recording of a cisgender woman with an alto voice. Note the distinct vowel formants and the overtone profile different to both Moon Baby and Amy Vodkahaus.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ahmed, Sara. *Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy as a World-Making Project* (blog). http://feministkilljoys.com/.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Michael Holquist, ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Hélène Iswolsky, translator. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Barkin, Elaine and Lydia Hamessley, eds. *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*. Zürich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999. (selections)

Barthes, Roland. "The Grain of the Voice." In *Image, Music, Text*. Stephen Heath, trans. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. Pp. 179-189.

Bayard, Pierre. *Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong: Reopening the Case of the Hound of the Baskervilles*. Charlotte Mandell, translator. New York: Bloomsbury, 2008.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Constance Borde and Sheila Maloveny-Chevallier, translators. New York: Vintage Books, 2011.

Blackmer, Corinne, E. and Patricia Juliana Smith, eds. *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw: On Men Women, and the Rest of Us*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Brett, Philip, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, eds. *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology, 2nd Edition*. New York: Routledge, 2006. (selections)

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993.

Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Butler, Judith, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Who Sings the Nation-state?: Language, Politics, Belonging*. London: Seagull Books, 2007.

Cavarero, Adriana. *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Chauncey, George. "Pansies on Parade." In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*. George Chauncey. New York: BasicBooks, 1994.

Cimini, Amy. "Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music: Toward a New Practice of Theorizing Musical Bodies." Ph.D. Diss., New York University, 2011.

Cleto, Fabio, ed. *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject.* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999. (selections)

Cusick, Suzanne G. "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem," *Perspectives of New Music* 32/1 (Winter 1994): 8-27.

Daems, Jim, ed. *The Makeup of RuPaul's Drag Race: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image.* Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, translators. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature.* Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975.

Dolar, Mladen. *A Voice And Nothing More*. Cambride, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

Dunn, Leslie C. and Nancy A. Jones. *Embodied Voices*: *Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Feld, Steven. *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Robert Hurley, translator. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Fox, Aaron. *Real Country: Music and Language in Working Class Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

Goodman, Steve. *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010.

Helmreich, Stefan. "An Anthropologist Underwater." In *The Sound Studies Reader*. Jonathan Sterne, ed. New York: Routledge, 2012. Pp. 168-185.

Herndon, Marcia. "Biology and Culture: Music, Gender, Power, and Ambiguity." In *Music, Gender, and Culture*. Marcia Herndon and Susanne Ziegler, eds. Wilhelmshaven: Florian Noetzel Verlag, 1990. Pp 11-26.

Kacere, Laura. "Homonormativity 101: What It Is and How It's Hurting Our Movement." *Everyday Feminism.* Published 24 January 2015. http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/homonormativity-101/.

Kacere, Laura. "Transmisogyny 101: What It Is and What We Can Do About It." *Everyday Feminism.* Published 27 January 2014. http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/01/transmisogyny/.

Kahn, Douglas. *Noise Water Meat*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.

Koskoff, Ellen, ed. *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

Morris, Rosalind C. "All Made Up: Performance Theory and the New Anthropology of Sex and Gender." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 567-592.

McClary, Susan. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators In America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

Parker, Andrew and Eve K. Sedgwick, eds. *Performativity and Performance*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Ritchie, Ronnie. "'Women-Only' Spaces That Exclude Trans Women Lead Us Down This Awful Path." *Everyday Feminism.* Published 16 March 2015. http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/03/cis-women-only-spaces-wrong/.

Rodger, Gillian. "Drag, Camp, and Gender Subversion in the Music Videos of Annie Lennox." *Popular Music* 23 (January 2004): 17-29.

Rosaldo, Michelle Z. and Louise Lamphere, eds. *Woman, Culture, and Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974.

Samaran, Nora. "Why We Need the Opposite of Rape Culture—Nurturance Culture." *Everyday Feminism.* Published 15 March 2016. http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/03/nurturance-culture/.

Schafer, R. Murray. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. New York: Knopf, 1977.

Searle, John R. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

Sedgwick, Eve K. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.

Seeger, Anthony. *Why Suyá Sing: A Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Sheftall, Beverly G., ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. New York: The New Press, 1995.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, eds. New York: Routledge, 1995. Pp. 24-28.

Sterne, Jonathan. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Stiegler, Bernard. *Technics And Time: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2009.

Sugarman, Jane. *Engendering Song: Singing and Subjectivity at Prespa Albanian Weddings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Utt, Jamie. "Intent Vs. Impact: Why Your Intentions Don't Really Matter." *Everyday Feminism.* Published 30 July 2013. http://everydayfeminism.com/2013/07/intentions-dont-really-matter/.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4/3: 469-488.