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Struggles Over Queer Space: Drag Kings' Appropriations of Performance Events In Prague

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I declare that I have created the thesis by myself. All sources and literature used have been duly cited. The work was not used to obtain another or the same title. This declaration and consent will be signed by handwritten signature.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the performances of drag kings that remain under-examined in gender and queer studies as well as their struggles over performance spaces in the context of increasing commercialization of drag performances. The research is interested in tracing the radical potential for destabilizing hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality, and informed by queer theory and Indigenous feminisms and Two-Spirit critiques. Empirically, the study draws on participant observation in the Prague drag scene and a questionnaire that I distributed among performers and audience members. The analysis shows that while navigating "gender feelings" and the exploration of one's gender identity is a primary motivation for drag kings, many find it difficult to express the ambiguity of their gender. Gender binary-coded performances and humour are the generic conventions that dominate over more ambiguous presentations. I also examine instances of "policing" in queer spaces. While drag kings are gaining more representation, they view opportunities to perform as limited and competitive, and consider audiences unable or unwilling to read more ambiguous performances. Given the prevailing power of the consumer, many revert to utilizing camp aesthetics and conventions similar to drag queens. With respect to the obstacles and potentials of solidarity, I show that space-based solidarities provide greater potential for organizing politically than identarian alliances. While the consumer spaces currently being used by drag kings in Prague present unique challenges and limitations, the use of collective spaces present greater opportunities for cross-organizational alliances and to engage in "busted" and ambiguous performances that challenge audiences and performers to work against hegemonic formations and attend to global and local alliances and resistance.

Key Words

drag, drag kings, queer space, queer representation, discrimination, exploration of queer bodies within space, situated identities, decolonisation, coloniality of gender, trans identities

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Introduction

Drag kinging is a practice adjacent to drag queening, though it possesses its own forms of expression as well as unique webs of meaning. While there is much cultural overlap between kinging, queening, and queer performance more broadly, drag kinging remains a lesser-known genre. It is through my own experiences with "genderfucking" (Wilton, 1995) that I came into contact with drag kings in Prague. This practice of bending gender through, in my case, doing makeup mimicking "male" facial hair, and more radically in the performances of drag artists, is not always intentionally political, though it transgresses patriarchal power. As Tamsin Wilton writes in *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda:*

> "Gender-fuck can only be radical if it is recognised that gender, like apartheid, is a binary around which a power differential is organised, a power differential by which men oppress women" (Wilton, 1995, p. 107).

This power differential is all-encompassing in most Western societies, and people therefore often read drag performances as a radical stance against heteropatriarchal power. This can result in violence, as is evident in the current anti-trans and anti-drag movement in the United States. This is particularly manifest in legal bans on gender-affirming care, the banning of drag performances, and physical violence against trans people, and not only in the USA. Last year's attack on the gay bar *Teplarna*, in Bratislava, Slovakia, suggests that genderfucking in all its forms, and manifest potently in drag, represents a threat to hegemonic powers across the globe.

After joining a drag king performance collective, called The Eggplant Emoji Group, I had the opportunity to examine more closely what exactly it is drag kings do and how. Although there were many performers across the gender spectrum engaging in this practice of kinging within Prague, I wanted to explore how its political potential was being realized in particular

performances and spaces. I felt that all the hate directed towards the queer community demanded a strong response and that queer people had and have a responsibility, as do all of us, to orient our performances and the theorizing of our projects towards narratives and enactments that challenge regimes of white, patriarchal violence and domination. Drag is "*mostly* entertainment" wrote one of my research participants in response to a questionnaire that I distributed digitally. But what lies beyond that "mostly"? Drag has been an integral (and frequently dangerous for its performers) part of queer liberation. Marsha P. Johnson, a drag queen and a well-known activist and participant in the 1969 Stonewall riot, was likely a victim of homicide as well. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, advocates for safe sex and protesting against homophobia during the HIV/AIDS crisis during the 1980s were recently honoured at the Dodgers' stadium in Los Angeles for a "Pride Night" with the Community Hero Award, despite the fact that thousands of homophobes protested outside. Although crossdressing has appeared in the Czech Republic in theatrical contexts such as *travesti* (Attardo and Bayless, 2014, pp. 774-776), the Western forms of drag and its political impetus are newer to the Czech Republic. The Czech branch of Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a drag collective using Catholic imagery which was established in San Fransisco, California, but now has a global reach, seems to have first participated in Prague Pride in 2013, two years after the establishment of the festival (České Sestry Věčné Radosti, z.s., Facebook, 2023). In this light, I suggest that drag is not merely a performance art, but a form of activism, dissent, and revolution that participates in the establishment of queer rights. However, like many revolutionary practices, much of it has been co-opted by the patriarchal and capitalist corporations, illustrated in the settler-colonial co-option of *RuPaul's Drag Race,* and its reinforcement of racial stereotypes, upper-class aesthetic, and erasure of Native dissent (Upadhyay, 2019). With this historical backdrop, this thesis will examine performances in Prague and issues such as the disenfranchisement of some queer members (particularly gender non-conforming) from queer spaces. In doing so, I am also interested in exploring the obstacles and potentials of forming cross-organizational, horizontal alliances that might contribute to drag kinging in Prague taking a more explicit political stance. I examine drag kinging through the lens of gender ad queer scholarship as well as Indigenous theories of solidarity, and inquire how space-making and the maintenance of particular places is done in practice. Here I argue that the expansion of drag kings into non-explicitly-queer spaces presents an interesting zone of friction

in which novel relationships are being born that might shift approaches towards trans and non-binary drag performers and how their inclusion is negotiated, as well as work towards queer rights and social justice. In doing so, I hope to shed some light on the concerns of drag kings as well as celebrate the practices which they take up in response to heteropatriarchal violence.

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter I presents a review of the available literature on the practice of drag kinging where I trace the development of drag theory from its conception by Judith Butler (1990) as a form of challenging hegemonic, binary gender formations, to postmodern forms of "anti-gender" drag (Farrier and Cherryman, 2020) and their queer temporalities conceptualized by Lee Edelman (2005) and Hil Malatino (2022). I further discuss theories of queer spacemaking and their subjection to "pinkwashing" and heterosexual audiences, as well as their role in the identity formation of queer performers, paying attention to blurring of boundaries between fictive and non-fictive spaces. Finally, I introduce Indigenous theories of feminism and Two-Spirit critiques as a basis for challenging settler forms of queer theory, and for orienting drag towards more revolutionary and equitable modes of being.

Chapter II lays out my research design and methodology. The research largely draws on participant-observation as well as a short questionnaire which I herein describe. I then contextualise the places of the research within the theories of queer spaces by Jon Binnie and David Bell (2004), as well as reflect on the ethical implications and the research's limitations, particularly my positionality and closeness to the performers I analyse.

Chapter III presents my analysis of fieldnotes and questionnaire responses in light of the literature discussed in Chapter I, focusing on space, inclusion/representation, and solidarity within the practice of drag kinging. Salient themes include gender identity and forms of representation and embodiment, and how these manifest across spaces. Here I examine differences in the "discovery" of alternatively gendered experiences as expressed by drag kings and audience members and how the drag kings imagine representation and exclusion. I then suggest that differences in the organization of spaces and the expectations of audiences may affect the way that political messaging is produced, and that consumer spaces present some limitations for solidarity-making.

Finally, in my conclusion, I briefly summarize the main findings. I then briefly outline areas wherein future solidarity-making in queer spaces lies and might be expanded. I do so in order to amplify and to preserve drag's legacy as a revolutionary art form, and the relations that act as a salve to the fracturing and in-fighting that can prevent drag kinging from presenting a bolder political face.

Chapter I: Gender and Drag Kinging, Spacemaking, and Practices of Queer Solidarity: A Literature Review

1.1. Introduction

In this literature review, I examine how drag has been researched and conceptualized within gender and queer studies. Beginning with its initial conceptualization as a useful critique of essentialist gender constructions, I conclude with later theories of monstrous and trans drag and the necessity of understanding drag performance as political praxis. I will draw on Indigenous and queer scholarship that argues for organizing based on the local and space rather than gender or performance categories, and methods of solidarity-making that have radical potential beyond the local. Additionally, the marginalization of Indigenous voices from queer theorizing, according to Driskill "colludes with […] colonial projects" (2010, p. 71). Therefore, in this literature review, I examine several approaches to drag but emphasize the necessity for considering drag, not merely as performance art, but as "a space that focuses on intersecting experiences of oppression and resistance" (Driskill, 2010, p. 75).

Beginning with Judith Butler's theory of gender performance, as well as Jack Halberstam's history of female masculinities, I open section 1.2. with these early conceptualizations of queer theory and drag. While these works laid the grounds for the first conceptualizations of gender identity, gender performance, and the genre of drag, they do not fully address the effect of drag performance on the performers' subjectivities. While they also touch on drag's "anti-establishment" potential and its relationship to hegemonic gender as both foundational and subversive, methods of solidarity-making remain under-examined. In section 1.3. I examine the generic convention of *earnestness* in drag kinging, as well as how queer bodies are formulated by governmental regimes, medical operations, and by cities. Section 1.4. and 1.5. examines queer temporalities through Hil Malatino (2022) and Lee Edelman (2004), as well as how the movement through "fictive" and "real" spaces also participates in the creation of queer bodies. In section 1.6. I discuss the creation of gay urban spaces and neoliberal moves to both privatize and monetize queerness, through Duggan's

(2002) *homonormativity,* Bell and Binnie's (2004) discussion of globalization and sexual citizens, both wanted and unwanted, and Horowitz's (2020) discussion of place-based solidarities. Section 2.7. is focused on Indigenous theorists and the complicity of radical queer thinking in the erasure of Native voices (Driskill, 2010), and emphasizes that queer practices of resistance need to ally themselves and listen to Indigenous decolonial movements.

1.2. [Early] Conceptualizations of Gender Performances

Two important scholars who proposed the performative nature of gender are Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam. In *Gender Trouble,* Butler (1989) distinguished between assigned sex, gender performance, gender identity, and the heterosexual matrix, revealing gender identity as a product of gender performance rather than inherent. This performance is not only the linguistic division between male and female, but also a gendered division of acts; men perform masculinity and women perform femininity in culturally coded ways, and thus gender is assumed to be naturally binary. However, Butler theorized that this performativity was responsible for the creation and maintenance of gender rather than sex or any other biological marker. These supposed inherent identities are "*fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (1989, p 136).

Drawing on Esther Newton's ethnography of drag queens in America, they posited drag as a key strategy for revealing the myth of a "unified" gender-sexual experience: for "[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself- as well as its contingency" (Butler, 1989, p. 137). As Butler describes it, drag is a formation of signs which express a gender alter to the performer's own gender identity. This discontinuity between identity and expression shows how gender as we read it does not require any biological or essential base.

Drag queens were far more recognizable and prominent in the queer scene of the 1980s than kings (a trend which continues into modern-day), and these are the only subjects of Newton's work. Butler raises the issue of drag, as a form of parody, having the potential

to either challenge cultural hegemony or become one of its instruments. Butler opens and concludes their work by discussing the limitations of the category of "women" within feminist theory, as well as the place from which to disrupt the processes of signification that hold cultural hegemony in place. Butler argues that since this process of repetition demands us to answer to a multiplicity of contradictory codes, this "coexistence or convergence of such discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment" (1989, p. 145). Butler additionally argues that orienting our politic away from identities would create a "new configuration of politics" (1989, p. 149), which could lead to the destruction of the gender binary and an exploration of new modes of gender expression.

Drag kinging, however, appears to differ somewhat from the parodic performances which Butler mentions in their theorizing. Implicit humour and camp elements of drag are more difficult to decode in drag kinging, which Katie Horowitz (2020) describes as a performance in *earnestness* rather than camp*,* and which Halberstam describes as, "a reluctant and withholding kind of performance" (1998, p. 239). Performers of non-normative masculinity, therefore, have been subject to more confusion and misunderstanding than drag queens onstage. The *readability* of feminine codes exceeds those of masculinity, specifically with respect to the audience's willingness to read femininity as humorous or extravagant. The artifice of masculinity appears to be more difficult to reveal, relying more on the performer's physicality. Halberstam (1998) has theorized *female masculinities* and their role in upholding hegemonic masculinity. Halberstam describes how female masculinity in its various permutations (defiantly hairy feminists and femme lesbians, butches, trans men, and drag kings, as well as historical categories such as tribades) have always posed a threat to hegemonic masculinity even as their relation to masculinity regulates it and gives it form. Halberstam parses sexuality from female masculinity, focusing on how *gender performance* and *gender identity* are confounded by these players (Halberstam, 1998, pp. 1-43). This is much like Butler's comments on the double inversion in drag; the muddling of significations works to destabilize essentialized gender.

Halberstam points out generic differences between drag queening and drag kinging, calling "female" drag performantive, and "male" drag non-performative. He claims that it is

more difficult for drag kings to utilize camp, as hegemonic masculinity has always appeared neutral and non-performative, the standard on which variant modalities of gender aspire to. Performers of masculinity, Halberstam proposes, perform in the opposite direction than drag queens; queens dress up, while kings dress down (Halberstam, 1998, pp. 258-265). While outlandish costumes, wigs, and makeup become the female parody of queens, female masculine *bodies*, according to Halberstam, are the signifying feature of drag kings. Moving like men, having passable features and muscular bodies, are praised over camp performances because of the "non-performative" appearance of masculinity. Halberstam outlines some forms of drag king performance as he observed them in beauty pageants. Some kings engaged in ironic or humorous representations, while others relied on "butch realness" or "passing" as a real man by successfully concealing any features or behaviours coded as feminine.

While early theorists drew attention to the imitative or performative quality of gender, and Butler does draw the distinction between *gender identity* and *gender performance,* they do not address in-depth the effect drag has on the performer's subjectivity, gender expression, and bodily experience. Halberstam begins to touch on this in his interviews with New York kings in the 1990s, such as one Retro, who describes drag kinging as a "safe space for gender experimentation" (1998, p. 264) even while remarking on the lack of transgender representation at the time. Halberstam also distinguished different female masculinities at the time of the book's publication; in the 1990s, terms such as butch, femme, bull dyke, and stud were popular categories of both *gender identity* and *gender performance.* Gender identity was already being recognized as fluid by drag kings, using terms such as "changer" or "androgynous" to describe themselves (Halberstam, 1998, pp. 263-264). Yet research is just beginning to address trans and gender non-conforming performers increasing in drag spaces. Therefore, I believe that these seeds of questions concerning gender identity, its origin, and its performative forms, have evolved into something far different, demanding new ways of thinking about bodies, spaces, and the colonial and anti-colonial implications of gender performance.

1.3. Bodies And Earnestness

Based on her research in Cleveland at the *Bounce Nightclub,* Horowitz draws some distinctions between drag kings and drag queens, particularly concerning gesture and embodiment. Whereas both styles of drag perform a mockery of hegemonic gender, drag queens' performances are more easily accepted since mainstream society already sees femininity as "trivial" (Horowitz, 2020, p. 78). Horowitz situates cultures and bodies as *effects* of relations, constructed both on and off the drag stage. The web of relations around drag kinging and drag queening are therefore quite distinct. Kings perform masculinity as an understatement; rather than overperforming, they often focus on embodying masculine traits, drawing on their individual relationships to masculinity, similar to Halberstam's (1998) emphasis on "dressing down". Their repertoire of performance subjects is more diverse, often drawing on working-class masculinities, whereas drag queens prevailingly imitate middle-to-upper-class femininity.

This aforementioned earnestness is a necessary product of the "non-performativity" of masculinity. Whereas drag queens rely on *gimmick,* mocking femininity through parody and elaborate constructions (of costumes, wigs, voice changes, and exaggerated dancing/gestures), drag kings are often performing earnestness (Horowitz, 2020, pp. 56-59). They often rely on a presentation of their masculinity, and this earnestness can often confuse audience's responses. In this way, the performer's body is always implicated in the performance; the disguise of one's masculinity would be detrimental to the drag king persona. This earnestness is also clear in the almost non-existent boundary between drag king performances and successful passing. Whereas femininity is already trivialized, as aforementioned, female masculinity, such as that presented by butch lesbians, is viewed as "inauthentic" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 240). While working-class and other male identities already viewed as performative can provide some forms for drag kings to perform, Halberstam rejects that masculinity belongs only to the male body. He states that butch lesbianism is not "an appropriation of male dominance" but "[…] they embody masculinity"

(Halberstam, 1998, p. 241). Therefore, one's presentation in drag kinging can be emotionally authentic without a prescribed "male" body.

In this way, the word "earnestness" becomes troubling when one considers that there is no way to define an individual's femininity or masculinity except in relation to one's body and others, space, and social constructions of gender. Attention to trans inclusion in drag can therefore illuminate possibilities for a different politic. As Horowitz recounts in her ethnography of the Cleveland Kings and Girls (henceforth abbreviated to CKG), personal grievances and transphobia were partially to blame for the eventual demise of the drag king collective, with the owners of the *Bounce Nightclub* and a gentrified neighbourhood putting pressure on the performers (Horowitz, 2020, pp. 95-97). The trans kings found themselves disillusioned by the unwillingness of the other performers, particularly white queens, to stand up for them in the face of transphobia perpetrated by the club, and even found that the queens themselves actively misgendered the kings. Therefore, "earnestness" was not enough even for other queer performers to appreciate the kings' performances and to accept non-essentialist notions of gender.

These imbalances of power in queer spaces have real, and often detrimental, effects. However, their causes are less clear. One might point to David Bell and Jon Binnie's discussion of the creation of "sexual citizens" within emergent global cities. This "sexual citizen" is made asexual, clean, and safe, a commodity to be consumed primarily by straight women, and to become an exoticized tourist attraction (Bell and Binnie, 2004, p. 1815). While many white cisgender gay men are also more likely to have economic and social capital in these spaces (Binnie, 2004, p. 55), all of these sexual citizens are in danger of being relegated to "[…] domesticity and consumption" (Duggan, 2002, p. 179). According to this theory, queer spaces are necessarily hostile to those who do not conform to binary gender norms enforced by settler-colonial, capitalist politics. This can pose a threat to trans and "female masculine" bodies; to those bodies which cannot be sufficiently domesticated. Bodies that can better assume the "privileged" forms in a white settler society present less of a threat. White and middle-class trans bodies receive more praise, especially if they transition "correctly" (as the slim, white, post-op Youtube trans community researched by

Hil Malatino [2022, p. 24]). Those who do not desire to transition acceptably, and other marginal bodies, trouble this idea of earnestness in drag king performance.

1.4. Bodies and Time

As already pointed out by Butler (1990), who focused on gender discontinuity, the idea of authentic gender is problematic in its static and complete assumption. Therefore, to call drag kings "inauthentic" versions of masculinity runs counter to notions of earnestness, with masculinity being something that can be embodied regardless of gender or sex. Malatino addresses this assumption of "complete" transness through *hormone time*; a "straight" temporality of progress towards a desired goal that will yield one's most "authentic" self. Caterina Nirta also draws attention to ideas of authenticity, rejecting the homogeneous ideal of an "authentic" being as one "demands the suppression of originality, or we could say creativity, in favour of a simulation of the original" (Nirta, 2022, p. 343). Rather, Nirta quotes Agrado:

> "'Aside from being pleasant, I am also very authentic', says Agrado in Pedro Almodóvar's *All about My Mother* before going on to list the countless surgical operations she has undergone in order to become authentic. Her monstrosity, the implants, the alterations, removals and enlargement of body parts, mark her authenticity: they de-monstrate (de-monster, Latin *de-monstràre*, to expose, to demonstrate beyond doubt, to affirm), expose her inner self. We may look at Agrado's authenticity as the individual exhibition of a general idea that, far from remaining anonymous, moves, oscillates, discovers its singularity, and becomes an exemplar, rather than a simulation, of that general idea which exists but which can never befulfilled *a priori* (Agamben 2009)" (2022, p. 343).

Ashley Baker's study of drag kings in South Carolina, USA, *Live like a king y'all: Gender negotiation and the performance of masculinity among Southern drag kings,* as well as Horowitz's study of the drag king collective CKG both focus on a similar act of de-

monstration that they particularly observe in the studies of drag kings, subjects who often learn to articulate or affirm their gender through performing. Such influences on performing subjectivity are not limited to drag kings (MacIntyre, 2018, pp. 21-23), and seem to be a crucial element of drag. In the case of the Southern kings, Baker notices the absence of literacy around queer issues, as well as transphobia and homophobia in the performer's daily life while moving through non-queer spaces, that pushes some to perform and to use drag kinging as a space of de-monstration.

1.5. Fictive Spaces and Reproductive Futurity

Drag kinging often becomes an accessible outlet for exploring elements of one's gender identity without judgment, and especially for transgender individuals to "test out" possible gender expressions that they might desire to embody beyond the stage (Baker, 2016, pp. 56-58). Alec MacIntyre also touches on this in their study of Moon Baby, a performer that assumes various characters in their performances in and outside of the Blue Moon bar. MacIntyre describes the effect of the bar where Moon Baby works, and where all of the identities assumed by Moon Baby and the other patrons are always understood as real, eschewing the narrative of drag as a "fictive" space. With this treatment of all identities as equally real, the outside world of legal documents and institutions which insist upon a binary gender structure, and a complete and static gender identity, becomes the fictive space where fluidly gendered beings must compress themselves into these artificial definitions of gender. MacIntyre concludes by deeming spaces such as Blue Moon a place where all who enter are invited "to become themselves and be recognized as themselves" (2018, p. 23). Halberstam also discusses spaces as subject to government control and policing of gender, stating that apparatuses such as body scanners at airports reinforce binary modes of gender, as well as relegating the ambiguous body to one of a "fictive" space, which has no way of being properly understood in a settler-colonial mode of relations (Mackereth, K., Drage, E., and Halberstam, J., 2021). This is also present in the writing of Lisa Duggan on the neoliberal state's relationship to homosexuality, citing 1980's No Pro Homo referenda and other political moves toward the invisibilizing of queerness in the public eye (Castronovo, Nelson,

and Duggan, 2002, p. 181). With the resurgence of Don't Say Gay bills across the USA in 2023, the continued relegation of queerness to fictive spaces remains an insidious rhetoric.

Rather than Baker's assumption that the stage is a fictive one and the gender of the performer only becomes "real" in their personal lives, MacIntyre shows how neither bodies nor places define gender; it is not static but constantly being produced. Here, as mentioned in the paragraph on embodiment, we can again see bodies as effects of their environments, shifting fluidly to accommodate medico-legal regimes, queer spaces, and multiple characters, on and off stage, and throughout transition. None of these genders are posited as more or less authentic, though some are certainly more strategic (i/e the genders presented in airports, at family dinners with homophobes, or under state security).

Returning to Malatino and the previously discussed *hormone time*, some queer and trans people still move teleologically, directed towards a final, and inevitable, conclusion of their transition in which dysphoria has been transformed into euphoria, and their body more closely matches the gender stereotype of male (chest hair, breastless, fit but still thin, white, attractive, clean-cut), in the case of transmen. It is difficult to conceptualize queerness outside of heterosexual modes of knowledge, although work such as Malatino's as well as Nick Cherryman's analysis of "tranimals" (2020) are questioning this hegemonic thinking being applied to, and distorting, queer modes of being. As Nirta writes, in this monstrous mode of queer embodiment: "Embodiment, then, far from being a linear journey from one step to the other (as envisioned by medicine), from one level of femininity to the next, becomes a movement: irrational, unpredictable, monstrous" (Nirta, 2022). As I will present later through the voices of the Indigenous scholars, this form of embodiment cannot be realized from within a settler-colonial regime, but only by engaging in world-creation and organizing political action through the use of more expansive ontologies.

Tranimals are not so much concerned with time as with bodies as a queer space upon which gender is always read. Cherryman argues that the posthuman, sometimes distressing, aesthetic of "tranimals" (drag that distorts body parts and has no readable gender, is often made of the most available materials, and does not try to achieve a harmonious aesthetic) is a different form of contestation than drag's more conventional forms. Cherryman argues that this form of drag is still gendered since audiences habitually seek gender signifiers from any

animate being; for instance, a drag performer Cherryman interviews, Jer Ber Jones, states that they can perform drag with only a single painted nail (2020, p.148). This reduces drag to its simplest form, which is the application of something gendered to a body alternatively gendered, whether it's a painted nail, a dress, a deep voice, a beard, or a six-pack. Cherryman also states that the liminality of these non-gendered and undefined characters Butler's rejection of the innateness of gender identity, as well as reveal gender as a set of relations. It also challenges the ossification of new genders within drag.

Tranimals, unlike kings and queens, defy gendered readability, impossible of appropriation by the fact that they are purposefully unintelligible. We may argue that these *ephemeral* forms have radical potential as a challenge to hegemonic understandings of space and bodies. In the allowance of ugliness and dejection, in transgression as a form of liberation, we may expand our understanding of human and non-human forms, and thus form a political basis for the expansion of civil rights. I will return to this point in Chapter 4, when reviewing Indigenous modes of thinking concerning gender, and turn now to Edelman's argument against queer futurity.

Edelman describes an alternative method of contesting straight temporalities. He first describes the hegemonic culture of the Child, a future wholly absorbed in and oriented by reproduction, which requires a grown-up generation to relinquish their socially unacceptable practices in order to maintain a pure world in which the Child can be nurtured into maximum profitability, termed *reproductive futurity*. According to Edelman, the true threat of queerness is that it preys not only on the Child but on the entire social world which creates it. The threat of a non-existent child, physically because of the lack of reproduction, and socially in a generation concerned with and confronted by their own desires, has the potential to destabilize settler-colonial modes of being, particularly heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism (Edelman 2004, pp. 33-66). This kind of world, without a future, is one far more radical, as Edelman proposes, and our only solution to contesting this construction of meaning that always pushes our decisions – a confrontation of ecological disaster, our own self-betterment, our desires, into an unreachable future. As Munoz writes in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity, "*Thus, utopia has a positive valence, that of a projection forward, and a negative function, which is the work of critique" (2009, p. 125).

This projection forward, Edelman would have it, requires not only a critique, but a full absconsion, a revelling in the "dejection" and the attitudes of the "queer unwanted" of Bell and Binnie (2004).

1.6. Space, Sexual Citizens, and Neoliberalism

These queer unwanted are exemplified in the practice of cruising, wherein gay men would use public areas for picking up men for sex. These spaces, predominately public parks, as well as other quasi-public spaces, were gradually deemed by governments as unsafe, scrubbed in the name of public health of this unsavoury practice, and transformed into spaces of consumption for families. As Bell and Binnie describe in *Authenticating Queer Spaces,* these "queer unwanted" are also pushed out of queer spaces, increasingly sanitized for the influx of heterosexual audiences into previously exclusive spaces (2004, pp. 1815-1816). Duggan describes these movements within the queer community in the USA as *new homonormativity*; wherein those who are willing to assimilate to the ideals of the heterosexual marriage and neoliberal society, primarily white gay men, become the unified voice of queer political desires, while others are labelled as "divisive" and excluded (Castronovo, Nelson, and Duggan, 2002, p. 183). These voices are often Black, Indigenous, and trans, whose experiences under the neoliberal state are marked by greater inequalities, and whose demands are intersectional, and thus more threatening to a state which keeps its power through identarian in-fighting and the suppression of class interests.

These interests, after all, often prioritize community care as opposed to rugged individualism, and reject the neoliberal values of profit and privatization. In the neoliberal framework, that which does not contribute to the futurity of state power has no place in the global cities of Bell and Binnie, wherein "What is being promoted is a very safe form of 'exotic difference' in order to attract mobile capital, most particularly in the form of international tourism" (2004, p. 1816). However, I believe Bell and Binnie's work indicates an important economic shift towards global markets, which has certainly altered the state's interest in sexual politics.

Therefore, I would like to argue that the powerful leverage of certain groups over space still limit the efficacy of Edelman's theory, and that its radical potential seems to end before Indigenous desires begin. However, before I discuss the necessity of Indigenous theories in queer future-making, I would like to briefly lay out a few points on the relationship of spaces to queer bodies. This promotion of "exotic difference" is a strategy in the authentication of queer spaces, with straight audiences increasingly seeking a form of "authentic cultural experiences" in the queer bars that are then altered, sometimes unfavourably in the eyes of its queer patrons, by their influence. This authenticity requires the trappings of queer communities deemed acceptable by the hegemonic culture. White, middle-class, gay male bodies become those whose interests are catered to and drag queens who don't stray too far from the glittery, upper-class femininity of *Rupaul's Drag Race* and have global appeal dominate drag spaces. They also draw attention to the networks of power surrounding these queer spaces, increasingly deemed profitable and desirable as a major feature of big cities. This is seen in the gentrification wave in which white gay males typically play a large part (Horowitz, 2020, pp. 90-94; Bell and Binnie, 2004, pp. 1815-1816), as well as in gay villages as a touristic feature. Corporate presence in queer spaces and pride events is also increasing, demanding that events such as Sydney Mardi Gras cater to a heterosexual and family crowd. The effect of this, as described concerning the gay villages, is, "[…] the production of a desexualised consumption space where an asexual non-threatening (especially to women) gay identity can be enacted" (Bell and Binnie, 2004, p. 1816). Thus, if white, gay male bodies seem to be those privileged in these spaces, it is because they are the bodies selected as non-threatening by corporations and cities.

What Bell and Binnie describe is a struggle over the creation and maintenance of space. New queer spaces are being formed in such a way that heterosexual audiences are let in, while the "queer unwanted" or "inappropriate" members of the queer community, are pushed out (2004, 1810-1811). Horowitz argues that this problematizes community or solidarity-building on notions of shared identity since, "to shift places is to shift the entire set of relations that encompasses one's body" (Horowitz, 2020, p. 99).

If, as these theorists say, space, including mental space and the formation of identities, as well as bodies, are knit up in networks of relations, then a queer praxis will have to

account for these shifting places and formulate solidarities based on "shared relations to power, shared precarity" (Horowitz, 2020, p. 99). And these shared relations to power surely implicate us in the settler-colonial structures of hegemonic power responsible for these contestations over queer bodies and spaces. These implication demand that we listen to and apply Indigenous theories if there is to be any hope of a truly queer future.

1.7. Indigenous Theories Of Solidarity-Making

Based on this theorization of space and bodies as places of meaning-making, we can understand that the complex identities of queer and trans people are not easily transcribable onto other places and bodies and that drag can only be understood within its specific and local relations. Noah Zazanis mentions this particularity of trans experiences in *On Hating Men (and Becoming One Anyway)*, writing that "trans men's relationship to gender cannot be understood by adding the privilege of maleness to the oppression of transness; the interaction between these axes substantively transforms both such that it generates an experience qualitatively different from either alone" (Zazanis in Malatino, 2022, p. 88).

Therefore with these theories – Edelman's no-future embrace of the ugly and dejected, prefigurative "opting-out" of assimilative politics, tranimal and other posthuman art forms which trouble conventional notions of readability in drag – how do we formulate a politic that runs counter to hegemony by accounting for Indigenous voices? What is troubling is that these theories fail to account for the extensive power of the state to assimilate and sterilize revolutionary practices, such as the participation of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in reproducing hegemonic constructions of femininity and settler forms of appropriation. Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill quote Sherman Alexie in *Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections Between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy,* stating that "'[...]all of the white people will be Indians and all of the Indians will be ghosts'" (2013, p. 12). This is potently illustrated in an episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race,* season 3, when the elimination of a Lumbee (Native) contestant without enough racialized "personality" coincides with the performance of the multi-ethnic, "cosmopolitan" drag queen Raja in oversexualized Native drag. Raja's offensive headdress and sexualized "Indian" costume

ultimately aid in her victory of the season, while the Indigenous contestant is critiqued for their low-class appearance and character, and disappeared (Upadhyay, 2019). This particularity of queer experiences simply cannot be understood in a settler society built on binary and exploitative modes of knowledge, which claims to be "postcolonial" while the violence against Indigenous people continues. As Qwo-Li Driskill writes (2010), queer theory is incomplete if it "un-sees" Indigenous oppression.

> "Queer of colour critique is an important means to disrupt discourses of empire, hold nationalist agendas accountable, and build theories and practices that understand racism, queerphobias, and gender oppressions as always entwined. Two-Spirit critiques push queer of colour critique to pay attention to the unique situations and politics of Native Two-Spirit/GLBTQ people living under U.S. and Canadian colonialism" (80).

That the Czech Republic is postsocialist rather than postcolonial does not mean it is exempt from discourses of empire; Manuela Boatča explains how the "coloniality of gender" extends to postsocialist European countries as well, and how the positionality of those engaging in feminism (or queer studies), should be aware of their historic and current proximity to Whiteness (Koobak *et al.,* 2021, pp. 190-191). The creation of a "white", European Czech European relies on this same oppression of Native people, and the racializing of some bodies as Other. Therefore, in my analysis, I do not expect drag kings in the Czech Republic to have the same obligations or same political strategies as those living in the U.S. or Canada; however, I do seek to analyse how solidarities in Prague can ultimately expand queer resistance to counter the colonial constructions of gender and race that systematically deny humanity to women, Roma, non-"white" Czechs, and immigrants, among others.

Edelman's lack of futurity shirks this responsibility towards oppression and its acknowledgment, as well as the inevitability of continued and ongoing oppression. The activist Ismatu Gwendolyn, speaking of reproductive justice for the poor, emphasizes the *inevitability* of children (Gwendolyn, 2023), and this point is no less salient for queer studies and rights. The more that we deconstruct sexual/gendered binaries, the more likely it

becomes that a future is ensured, by other modes of reproduction and well as generations raised in a context of acceptance of multiple modes of being, euphoria in their bodies and with others. This deconstruction would manifest in responsibility to treat one another with more care and understanding. If this care doesn't extend to the future, we miss an opportunity for drag to be a site of radical transformation for broader society, and not only within queer circles.

This appeared to be the primary difference, in my readings, between Western scholars and Indigenous scholars. The Indigenous scholars emphasize temporalities that extend beyond and before ourselves, which position us as ancestors of our future community. As Huanani Kay-Trask, a prominent scholar and activist of Hawaiian nationalism, writes: "We do not need, nor do we want to be 'liberated' from our past because it is the source of our understanding of the cosmos and of our *mana*" (1991, p. 164).

Unlike heteropaternal constructions of authority as naturally embodied in the fatherly figure administering justice to inferior bodies, Indigenous theorists demand that we consider the land, first, as kin, as well as a source of knowledge and an obligation. Since all of us co-habiting this earth are potential ancestors, we are a repository and future source of knowledge, as Povinelli shows in the case of a *guman* (manifestation) which demands our attention and interpretation. When *durglmö* (sea monster fossils) manifest to Gracie Binbin and Betty Bilawag, displaced to the Belyuen community, as "a mode of showing care" and to affirm their belonging now to this place to which they have been displaced (2016, pp. 57-91). Although dispossessed of their original land, their ancestors affirm their relationship to a new land; those in the Czech Republic can also learn to seek out the voices of ancestors, to examine their place in historical violence, and to seek out restoration and modes of care particular to their locality.

Indigenous scholars are clear that settler-colonial regimes of the past century have instituted the particular forms of heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism that we have inherited, and which inform our notions of binary gender and sex. Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill (2013) demonstrate how Indigenous theories propose "complementarian" notions of gender that is different from the troublesome complementarianism of fundamentalist Christianity and other gender essentialist ideologies in that gender is not based on any essential

characteristics and that it allows for this degree of fluidity, or ephemerality previously discussed (Arvin, Tuck and Morrill, 2013, pp. 22-23). Most importantly, this idea of gender is not considered universal, and varies across localities. Finding local strategies that actively contest settler-colonial notions of gender is essential, and cannot be achieved through cooperation with settler politics. As Kim Tallbear (2018) writes in her essay *Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family*, heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism were used to enact genocide against Indigenous people in both present-day US and Canada, to turn them into property, to divest them of access to a relationship with land, of relationships with one another through forced sterilization and boarding schools (2018, 145-148). Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill write in relation to radical queer theory's ignorance of Indigenous critiques that:

> "in Edelman's case, because he fails to acknowledge or consider the ways that having children is a privilege that has been historically denied to many non-white and non-affluent people. Given the pervasive violence perpetuated on Indigenous peoples through campaigns focused on managing Indigenous reproduction and childrearing (from boarding schools to eugenics and forced sterilization), proposing to invest in 'no future' seems not only irrelevant to Indigenous peoples, but a rehashing of previous settler colonial tactics" (Smith, 2010, p. 48, in Arvin, Tuck and Morrill, 2013, p. 24).

Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill therefore suggest that we should consider the ways in which drag performances and queer politics, without an understanding of Indigenous theories, will continue to "rehash" settler-colonial tactics into eternity. I propose that these emphases on transgression by Western scholars such as Edelman and McQueen, with their monsters, tranimals, and perverts, don't provide a strong enough ethical basis for the challenging of settler logic, and thus remain complicit in genocidal paradigms, whereas an Indigenous theory might be better termed one of subversion, a theory that undermines settler logic rather than existing on its outskirts. While some might argue that these transgressive theories are aligned with Indigenous ontologies, without the commitment to Land Back and Indigenous autonomy, these theories are stunted, incomplete, and ultimately complicit. What this might

look like in the Czech Republic and other postsocialist countries, can only be imagined through solidarities that will address the historic constructions of gendered and racial power, and fight to disrupt these oppressive taxonomies. I propose that the Czech Republic, with its particular geographical and historical construction, will require a solidarity crafted with Roma voices at its centre, as the "coloniality of gender" as well as the racialized Other as built on Native stereotypes is evident in the way that European governments, such as the Czech Republic's, have dehumanized and fought to eradicate Roma from public life.

As Driskill writes, the term Two-Spirit was, at least in part, invented as a critique of settler conversations around gender and "It claims Native traditions as precedents for understanding gender and sexuality, and asserts that Two-Spirit people are vital to our tribal communities" (2010, p. 73). According to Driskill, there cannot be a truly radical queer studies if it doesn't understand our current conceptions of gender and sexuality as historical, and built on a foundation of suppression of Indigenous gender formations.

Driskill proposes a form of engagement with queer studies using the rhetorical device of "doubleweaving" to articulate this proposed engagement (2010, pp. 73-74). They state that this critique extends beyond intersectional politics, but allows for an understanding of queer and Indigenous histories as "a story much more complex and durable than its original and isolated splints, a story both unique and rooted in an ancient and enduring form" (2010, p. 74). Although Driskill emphasizes the importance of intersectional, queer of colour critique, especially for its ability to critique the formation of nation-states and nationalism, no queer criticism of nation-building is complete if it ignores Indigenous histories and land claims. At best, Driskill believes such as a critique would be insufficient, since settler-colonial constructions of race, gender, and sexuality cannot be understood without its suppression of Indigenous forms, and, at worst

> "these critiques risk colluding with master narratives both inside and outside the academy that, as Powell describes, *un-see* Native people: "Material Indian 'bodies' are simply not seen so that the mutilations, rapes, and murders that characterized[...] first-wave genocide also simply are not seen" (2010, p. 75).

Driskill also claims their and other Two-Spirit critiques are "productive, if not central, to nationalist, decolonial agendas" (2010, p. 77). If drag is to be part of the decolonial agenda, then it needs to contest the erasure of Indigenous narratives from queer scholarship. In addition to its centrality to and challenging of nationalist struggles, Driskill also points out that Two-Spirit critiques utilize art and activism, and consider theory and praxis to be intertwined. "Theory is not just about interpreting genres: these genres *are* theory" (2010, p. 82). These critiques are distinct from other queer of colour critiques, as they are tribe-specific but also linked to the broader story of Indigenous sovereignty. Thus, Driskill states that moves for legal recognition within their nations is not assimilationist, since the right to expand their rights and return Two-Spirit individuals to the story and cultural life of their tribes is a move of sovereignty. They also propose the *erotic* as central to Two-Spirit critiques (2010, p. 85). They further point out that, in Two-Spirit lives, medicine and spirituality are intertwined with gender, and that this often runs counter to other queer movements' rejection of spirituality and even appropriation of Indigenous spirituality (2010, p. 86). Another fundamental difference is that "[…] while radical non-Native queer movements formulate queerness as oppositional and anti-normative, Two-Spirit critiques locate Two-Spirit and queer Native identities as integrated into larger Indigenous worldviews and practices" (2010, p. 86). This positioning of queer activism as *restorative* rather than disruptive honours the historicity of queer identities. Driskill concludes that the alliance of Two-Spirit and non-Native queer critiques can create tools for the dismantling of colonial projects, and that we must continue to pay attention to the ongoing colonial occupation of Indigenous lands (2010, p. 87). Therefore, in order to engage in meaningful queer decolonial praxis, attention must be paid to these *dissent lines* that Driskill mentions, a term first used by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2007), which have the ability to lead us towards decolonizing action.

1.8. Conclusion

Concluding my literature review, I would like to propose the key concepts which I will draw from in my analysis. While analysing gender identity, I draw upon Kelly and Baker's

(2016) study of drag kings and the effect of drag kinging on their gender identities. I also draw on Caterina Nirta (2022) for the concept of 'monstrosity' as a tool for analysing trans and non-binary desire as resistance against hegemonic norms for bodies within performance.

In examining the maintenance of space and spacemaking, I draw from Bell and Binnie's (2004) construction of "sexual citizens" and the effects of urban spaces and increasing globalization as shifting power within consumer spaces, and how queer members of a city are allowed or disallowed to participate in public life. I also draw from Duggan's (2002) *new homonormativity* to hypothesize why certain queer members are excluded from particular spaces. I also found MacIntyre's (2018) description of "policing" space useful in understanding how humour is used to communicate norms of behaviour and to exclude unwelcome voyeurs, and I also expand on issues of exclusion using Bell and Binnie's (2004) discussion of cities' moves towards selling "exotic difference" for increasingly cosmopolitan audiences. And finally, in discussing political articulations, I draw from Horowitz's (2020) call for "place-based solidarities", as well as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2007) call to pay attention to *dissent lines* and hegemonic modes of exclusion and distance, and Doreen Massey's (1994) call for a "politic of mobility and access".

Chapter II: Methodology

2.1. Research Questions and Positionality

What are my own *dissent lines* that have brought me to this thesis? As a descendant of colonizers on Kizh land, a part of present-day Southern California, I was deeply disturbed to learn of the complete omission of genocidal violence from my education and from the public consciousness of the settler population on Turtle Island (North America). The first people of the land I was born on were enslaved in Spanish missions and often forcibly converted to Christianity and condemned to lives of hard labour and separation from the land and people they had grown up alongside. California's Historic Mission Trail comprises 21 of these "historic landmarks" that remain popular tourist destinations. My other dissent lines are my own coming-out as queer in a fundamentalist Christian family, my time studying under the auspices of the International Workers of the World as they helped my workplace organize a union, and my time spent living in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Australia, witnessing Maori and Aboriginal Australian struggles against settler violence and for Indigenous sovereignty. Informed by Driskill (2010) and Tuhiwai-Smith (2007), I seek to employ a methodology which is attentive to the historicity of queer identities, and mindful of any forms of "homonormativity" and extractivism that are complicit in the disappearing of Indigenous stories globally. However, Driskill (2010) emphasized the need for tribe-specific action, and Horowitz's call for political queer organization around locality and proximity rather than identity, provided me with an interest in the spaces that create and are created by queer participants. However, the binary of queer spaces/heterosexual spaces which I intuitively applied at the beginning of my research, turned out not only to be inadequate, but is also a settler-colonial conceptualization. With the global conquest of spaces and knowledge by colonial powers, the work of dissent can still be engaged in, by being attentive to the cross-sections of social and colonial histories, and complicity as well as active participation in the reproduction of colonial epistemologies (Koobak, *et al.*, 2021). As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2007) writes of methodological individualism,

> “One of the concepts through which the Western ideas about the individual and community, about time and space, knowledge and research, imperialism and colonialism can be drawn together is the notion of distance. The individual can be distanced, or separated, from the physical environment, the community” (55).

To be queer and in a space is an act of creating queer space, and the complex negotiations which take place between audience, performer, bar, stage, the USA, the Czech Republic, the expat community, colonial regimes, the postsocialist bloc, queer theory, and Indigenous theory, become places of embodiment and practices which can be further oriented towards decolonization, even in countries without an immediately apparent colonial history.

Therefore, my guiding research question is: How is gender identity being negotiated in the spaces in which the drag kings of Prague perform? Which practices do drag kings use to maintain their spaces, and who is engaged in these practices, and who is excluded by them? Where do potentials lie for future solidarities that can lead to dissent, within the spaces the drag kings inhabit? And finally, what are the obstacles and potentials for cross-organizational, horizontal practices of restoration?

2.2. Research Design and Methods

These questions are best addressed by a qualitative research design, given the local and specific needs of communities. Given my own involvement in and access to the drag king community in Prague, I decided to conduct participant-observations. Undertaken between 10/11/22 and 12/03/23, my fieldwork followed the members of the Eggplant Emoji Group, a drag king collective, to the venues in which its members performed. This included my own performances in various venues. As the drag king collective had recently launched a boycott against one of their performance venues, I also followed their search for a new venue at collective meetings and in the group chat organized by and for the performers. I used Robertson M. Emerson's suggestions for ethnographic notes to catalogue that which appeared, not only significant to myself but "what those in the setting experience and react to as 'significant' or 'important'" (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011, p. 25) Some of these shows were billed as drag shows and featured predominately drag performers, while others were variety shows advertised as "queer" and featuring queer performance artists in various genres, one of the popular ones being drag performance.

I then performed thematic analysis of my fieldnotes. Since "space" had already presented itself as a contested subject with the boycott of *Patra* and a search for a new, acceptable venue for drag shows, that became a central theme of my fieldwork. Bodies and sexuality were frequent subjects of drag shows and audience conversation, and I began to notice recurrent themes around bodies. Finally, while these two aforementioned themes were more inductive, I took a deductive approach to analyse themes of politicization, in order to identify what kind of politic the performers and audience members favor.

I then collected the statements or actions which fell under these three themes, and began to identify which terms/actions were hegemonic, counter to the hegemonic attitude, however paying attention to the "circularity" of hegemonic power (Hall, 1997, p. 262). Since queer activists have long pushed for representation, I found Stuart Hall's theories of representation essential to understanding how white queer thinking fails to move beyond a binary structure, and to analyse if the drag kings in Prague are utilizing his counter-strategy towards negative representation, that which "locates itself *within* the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself, and tries to *contest it from within*" (1997, p. 274-275).

This corresponds with Driskill's assertion of *the erotic* as a foundational tool of Two-Spirit critique (2010, p. 85). Although this use of the erotic is specific to Two-Spirit groups and the ways in which colonial regimes have used sexualization and de-sexualization as tactics against Indigenous groups, this strategy of *countering from within* could be an important way of identifying those strategies in drag which run counter to binary modes of thinking.

I manually coded my fieldnotes from Scorpio Sessions, a queer, astrologically-themed variety show, and *Slaaayvák*, a drag show with a watery aesthetic. I also used Atlas.ti to code these two fieldworks as well as my questionnaire responses. "Humour" and "Performance" were the two main codes which emerged, however the questionnaire emphasized "Gender Identity" and "Self-Expression". As these are all major facets of drag king performances, I was eager to see how these would interact with the spaces utilized by the drag kings.

2.3. Research Limitations

This research design is situated and inevitably has several limitations. First, My venues were limited by those in which former members of the Eggplant Emoji Group frequent; however, as I was unable to find advertisements for other drag kings in performances in Prague, I believe they represent a significant number of the drag king population in Prague that are actively performing. While I had access to most of the shows taking place during my period of observation, my observation was limited to those shows at which I was invited to perform and, importantly, those which I could afford; a more expansive/funded study could have focused more attention to the queer karaoke every Sunday, where most performers meet, organize shows, and introduce new prospective performers. Second, My proximity to and involvement in the Eggplant Emoji Group allowed me to establish a friendly and semi-open relationship with several performers, and to participate intimately in the backstage environment and to observe the conversations between performers. The split in Eggplant Emoji Group led to Rudy Daddy and Chad Clitt's

abrupt departure, providing a case of intra-community tensions highly topical for participant observation, as I was able to analyse those factors which put pressure on community relationships and how conflicts evolved and were managed. However, their severance of contact with the rest of the group also meant that they withdrew their consent to participate in my questionnaire. Lastly, my own participation in the drag king scene allowed me to present my own voice and several performers as they navigated the challenges of drag kinging in a way that makes evident some of the burdens on the local performers to establish and maintain a drag kinging career as an under-represented group, in academia and onstage. There are many new performers constantly entering the scene, and the community appears to fluctuate frequently, meaning that by the time of publication this paper will most certainly at best only represent a tiny fraction of the drag king community at a singular point of time/space.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

For the purposes of this thesis, and with permission of the research participants, I have kept original the names of the drag performers, whose names and personas are public on Instagram. Members of the audience and others without a public persona, I have anonymized through changing their names and personal details to protect their stories and identities. I have striven to include only that information which was offered to me publicly, and not to divulge anything told to me in confidence. My questionnaire respondents were anonymous, and the Google form included a statement of informed consent and an offer to redact, at any time, names or information which the respondent wished not to be disclosed in this thesis. I was open in the field that I was conducting research. Most of the participants/performers that I came into contact with and especially members of the Eggplant Emoji Group, and those I spoke to through my drag persona's Instagram were aware that one of the motivations for my involvement in drag was the collection of data for

my thesis. I am aware that queer people are subject to violence, and only hope that I have done my best to protect the personal identities of those that have contributed to my research.

Chapter III: Kings Without a Gay Bar: Negotiations of Identity, Space, and Power Within the Prague Drag Scene

3.1. Introduction

"Are you interested in doing drag?" The question came from Chad Clitt, peeling off a false moustache over the sink in Cafe *V lese*. The cafe was crowded with ex-patrons and staff of the queer bar *Patra*, which had just closed early due to a walkout of queer, underpaid, and enraged staff. Among them was Chad Clitt, a drag king who had been hosting a karaoke event at the gay bar before Henry, the trans bartender, loudly announced that he had been fired while on the shift and closed the bar and led the patrons across the street for angry drinking. Earlier in the evening, Chad, adorned in a shaggy blonde mullet wig, cargo shorts, a blouse and tie with a Euro design, and sandals with socks making up his Czech ensemble befitting a seedy politician had performed a lip-sync of *You Spin Me Round (Like a Record)*. As Chad wrote on his Instagram describing the outfit: "Vote Chad: promising public beer fountains, moving of Croatian beaches closer to the Czech border & destruction of capitalism" (Chad Clitt, Instagram, 2022).

I read his references to beer and Croatian beaches as a wink to Czech stereotypes, but the destruction of capitalism I read as Chad's personal belief, as it doesn't mesh with the rest of his persona. This insistence from Chad illustrates that his politics out-of-character remain essential to the character and that his drag king persona is not entirely fictive. In any case, I was unfamiliar with most of his characterization at the time, having only seen this singular performance, cut short by Henry's mid-shift firing. Now we were at V lese, and he was asking me if I would consider joining a loose coalition of drag kings in Prague, The Eggplant Emoji Group. This was due to the facial hair I had drawn on as part of my makeup look, something I had been experimenting with for the last couple of months. I consented, and he promised to add me to the group chat before I left and he continued to de-drag in the restroom. I returned to my group of friends, and, after we stepped outside, we were joined by Henry, who explained that he

had been fired for asking for the wages unlawfully withheld from him by the bar's manager. Outside, he drunkenly berated the *Patra* owners for taking advantage of their queer staff, refusing to pay them properly, and thereby taking advantage of the queer community at large. There was a sense of injury in the air, and a boycott against *Patra* was announced on social media less than 24hrs later (Fieldnotes, 2022).

From the closing of *Patra* in September 2022, until April 2023 when I concluded my fieldwork, my exploration of drag struggled to find a home, as was the case for many in the community. While the Eggplant Emoji Group seemed a way for drag kings to share opportunities to perform, especially with newer members of the queer scene in Prague, it abruptly broke apart in February 2023. This first conflict at *Patra*, which coincided with the beginning of my fieldwork, brought to my attention the importance of space for queer communities and their need to be safe for its members by proactively prohibiting homophobic guests and actions. However, even when a safe space is found or created, the performers don't all consider themselves sharing the space in an equal way. This can be seen in the eventual breaking-up of The Eggplant Emoji Group. Some performers were accused of "stealing new performers" (Fieldnotes, 2023) from other members of the collective, removing them from existing queer spaces and groups to perform at events seen as more prestigious.

In this chapter, I analyse these compositions and decompositions of queer spaces and bodies from September 2022-April 2023 to discover how gender identity and representation are negotiated within the venues where the various queer events I studied took place, as well as how space was negotiated in regards to safety and its implications on the kinds of political actions that can emerge.

3.2. Gender Feelings, Performativity, and Trans Kings

How is gender identity being negotiated in the spaces in which the drag kings of Prague perform? One respondent stated that "The difference is that drag comes off at the end of the night, unlike transness. You can be out of drag but you can't take off your trans identity. Transness is deeper than drag" (Questionnaire #2, 2022).

On November 18th, 2022, *Slaaayvák*, advertised by Queer Spaces Network as "a new drag and interactive performance evening extravaganza[…] the theme is all things wet and aquatic" (Queer Spaces Network, Instagram, 2022) took place at *RADOSTFX*, a lounge bar and club. On a smoke break huddled outside in the snow, Metaxa, a transwoman and drag queen told me that drag performance gave her the chance to "be the little girl she didn't get to be growing up" (Fieldwork, 2022). I expressed similar feelings I had experienced while experimenting with a more masculine presentation. Metaxa was not the only one to express negative "gender feelings" as involved in her decision to perform. Feelings of frustration, jealousy, and confusion percolate through positive affirmations of gender as fluid, experimental, and feelings of correctness (in the right body). One of the questionnaire respondents mentioned being so struck by a performance that they needed to leave midshow and feeling jealous of others' gender experiences.

> "It's like, they were flaunting what my body could be at me. (Which is not the case). It felt strange. I am still unable to explain what it did to me to watch this boy on stage, beeing powerful and full of rage. I could not hear any sound anymore. I was just, weirdly jealous ? Amazed to an extraordinary extent ? I don't fucking know. I felt so bad I left the venue earlier and went home to process" (Questionnaire #3, 2022).

Even Metaxa's statement indicates regretting the absence of experiences in her youth she was denied. At one of the meetings of the Eggplant Emoji Group, a king voiced how "intense dysphoria" had been causing them to bind excessively (normally he would only bind for shows with duct tape, which can damage the skin, but he had begun to bind daily). While there is intended social and political value in these gender performances, the feelings expressed were far more personal and ambivalent, and indicated that many drag kings began performing for the purpose of navigating these "gender feelings" (Fieldwork, 2022-2023).

> "[Leila] Rupp et al.(2010) echo this by suggesting that unlike drag queens, who often question their gender identity at a young age and prior to entering drag, kings often reconsider their own gender identity as a result of performing drag" (Baker and Kelly, 2016, p. 49).

An interesting distinction between Baker and Kelly's research in the American South and my fieldwork is that, while the performers I spoke to mentioned drag kinging as a method for exploring their gender identity and its attendant emotions, none of my drag king respondents mentioned performing as a *starting point* for a journey of gender discovery. Rather, most had already come out or were questioning their assigned gender at birth *before* joining a drag kinging troupe. One questionnaire respondent mentioned that two drag performances had a strong impact on their understanding of their gender, and though many of the drag kings in the Eggplant Emoji Group expressed how drag had allowed them to "play with" or "discover more" about their gender, most had previously already had some kind of coming out as trans/gnc (Fieldwork, 2022) (Questionnaire, 2022).

As Baker and Kelly stated, due to the relative invisibility of female masculinities globally, drag kinging communities develop in unique and local ways (Baker and Kelly, 2016, p. 47), and that appears to be marked in the case of Prague by a large number of non-binary and trans performers who have already discovered their gender divergence before engaging in drag kinging. Rather than for purposes of discovery, my respondents use kinging as a method of relieving some tensions of these negative "gender feelings", as well as for further, playful exploration. Performers and aspiring performers mentioned various resources that had exposed them to gender discourse and drag prior to beginning drag kinging in Prague. Gender expression remains a large reason why drag kings in Prague choose to perform, like the Southern kings of Baker and Kelly's study (2016, p. 53); as one trans king mentioned, drag kinging allows him to relieve some dysphoria (Fieldwork, 2022).

I was curious to see how these gender feelings were communicated and negotiated within drag kinging communities and spaces. Gender identity was brought up at the first meeting I attended with the Eggplant Emoji Group, where participants were encouraged to share their pronouns and briefly explain their gender experience and/or sexuality; of the eight gathered at the first meeting (myself included), only two cis lesbians had no feelings of discomfort with their assigned gender at birth to share. At the *Slaaayvák* show, pronoun bracelets were offered at the door, in three options: HE/HIM, SHE/HER, and THEY/THEM. At the four shows in which I performed between November 2022 and March 2023, either the host or the stage kitten (the

unpaid, informal stage manager) asked each performer which pronouns they preferred that their act/drag persona to be identified by. Thus, in these instances, gender identity was being communicated in an affirming way in some queer spaces, though imperfectly. One questionnaire respondent mentioned their frustration with being misgendered in queer spaces as "ten times more frustrating" than in non-queer spaces (Questionnaire #2, 2022). The same respondent mentioned finding their gender identity more affirmed in online, global communities rather than the local drag scene, as they had "encountered too much transphobia, racism and SA [sexual assault] in local circles" (Questionnaire #2, 2022). This incongruity between the affirming attitudes towards transness conveyed to me and the encounters with transphobia and misgendering expressed by other queer members is striking. At least in one performance, I experienced the audience engaging positively with themes of ambiguous gender performance.

Chad Clitt performed a solo routine at *Slaaayvák*. As the tune of "Handy" by Al Yankovic started to play, he came lumbering through the audience, a toolbox in hand and dressed in Hornbach overalls and a blazer emblazoned with CHAD in gemstones. He took the stage and removed several items from the toolbox before wielding a plunger, using several of his tools as phallic pieces for innuendo-laden dance moves. Unlike the queens that each interacted with the audience and appeared to improvise at least some of their movements, Chad had a tightly coordinated routine as I had seen him perform it, down to the same fumble over a roll of duct tape, at the *Queeriety: Baby Queers* show in November of 2022. During the song, he also stripped from the blazers and unclipped his overalls. Just as the song ended, he ripped open his white t-shirt, revealing black pasties on his breasts, and jumped up and down, giving the audience two thumbs up before exiting.

As Chad Clitt had told me backstage at *Baby Queers*, "Some men have boobs" (Fieldnotes, 2022). This performance was meant to be interpreted, according to Chad Clitt, as a statement on trans and non-binary bodies, and to embrace their elements of disjuncture from hegemonic representations. This can correspond with Hall's theory of contestation from within; "[…] this strategy makes elaborate play with 'looking', hoping by its very attention, to 'make it strange'- that is, to de-familiarize it […]" (Hall, 1997, p. 274). By adding the physical characteristics associated with hegemonic representations of women, this performance troubles categories of realness and passing, using both forms of humour and earnestness. Although

Halberstam observed *earnestness* performed, at least in part, through the body, and stated that striptease is more difficult to interpret from drag kings (as Halberstam writes, striptease is troubling for drag kings because it often elicits a reaction of *relief* from the audience ["Oh good, a girl!"] and reveals the "deception") (1998, pp. 262-263), Chad did not engage in this kind of revealing striptease. Rather, he retained the male character of the sleazy plumber. Exiting the stage with the same lumbering, pelvis-forward gait characteristic of self-satisfied males, I read Chad Clitt's performance as he had intended, not as revealing a deception, but as a reminder that bodies are arbitrary and that it is how we choose to rearrange and present it. As Nirta writes of monstrosity: "The transgression of the monster is precisely in the desire to make possible the emergence of something irreducibly different (Kazarian 1998)" (2022, p. 346).

In Nirta's case, even to have a trans body is monstrous in that we must subject something outside of our control to certain physical restrictions, and those restrictions are interpreted, in some measure, to be representative. The same is true of tranimals (Farrier and Cherryman, 2020), cyborgs (Haraway, 2018), or drag kings with breasts. They, firstly, reject the "original" or "natural" body as whole and complete, showing its constructed nature and how easily it can be disassembled. Secondly, they produce something not-quite and more-than, something transgressive, which is not only deconstructive but also creative. Transgression exists as a creative force; as Chad Clitt is a non-binary performer, they may not appear grotesque when "passing" as a woman, but their performance at *Slaaayvák* illustrated a desire to make possible the emergence of something different, to be read crosswise of gendered codes. Perhaps in this desire to communicate to the audience their disjuncture with their assigned gender at birth, they also meant to express frustration with the "coloniality of gender", and the fact that to reveal breasts is to immediately be subsumed by innumerable gendered codes. Chad Clitt had also expressed to me their discomfort backstage at *Slaaayvák,* where the bar's staff area had become the changing room for performers. Chad had mentioned how the (presumed non-queer) staff had used their access to this space to stare at and sexualize the performers whilst changing. (Fieldnotes, 2022) Even in costumes that challenge strict gender norms and forms of bodies and desire, these ambiguous performances didn't seem to challenge the non-queer staff to think outside of hegemonic structures of desire, as they appeared to fetishize these ambiguous or Other bodies, rather than engaging in the deconstruction of binary modes of thinking.

> “This intrinsic and interdependent relation of the situated body that shows itself to the world, the inevitability of being there, is precisely what creates tension and further increases the distance between the monster and others, and has to do with the lurking possibility that monsters can both upset a constituted order and unveil their same monstrousness in us” (Nirta, 2021, p. 347).

Queer respondents do seem more eager and able to engage with forms of drag that incorporate themes of ambiguously coded bodies and monstrosity (in the sense of something which ignores the arbitrary nature of bodies, including their sex characteristics, as a form of de-monstration). As one respondent wrote in response to “Are there aspects of drag performance that you wish were different?”

> “As I said, I feel like especially in drag kings i get to see the same character 1000times. And I do want to see a wider range of drag. A drag that is not purely on the binary, i wish to see things that are more « surrealist » that is more inspired by creatures than genders (and i’ll bring that to the table 😵‍💫)” (Questionnaire #3, 2022).

However, as long as sentiments of transphobia are still being reported from within the queer community, it will be difficult for audiences, queer and non-queer, to engage meaningfully with drag which is coded ambiguously or monstrously. The kinds of characters generally performed by the trans and non-binary kings or that inspired their characters included: David Bowie, vampires, cowboys, plumbers, leather daddies, “nice guys”, Eminem, Guns ‘N Roses, 80s glam rock, pornstars, Satan, and Jesus. These characters that generally either provided the performers a chance to embody the kinds of masculinity they felt “gender envy” for or those characters which could provide campy entertainment comprised the majority of performances. Even Chad Clitt’s statement on trans bodies was transmitted through the use of a humourous plumber pornstar character. While my research indicated that drag kings prefer to use their performances for personal reasons, mostly for those reasons previously discussed of gender identity actualization, and to express their political views through other means (to be discussed in

the following sections), the desires expressed by several audience members and even performers for drag not based on binary presentations (Fieldnotes, 2022) indicates a discrepancy between the kinds of drag kinging used for gender identity "exploration", the kind which is profitable and safe to display onstage at queer events, and the kind which performs outside of binaries.

3.3. Drag Kinging Representation, Freedom and Limitations

With more than 2/3rds of the Eggplant Emoji Group made up of trans and non-binary performers, I was curious to discover how the collective conceptualized the representation of drag kings as well as gender diversity.

A prominent theme in terms of representation was a sense of "limited opportunities". Many kings voiced frustrations with Prague's drag shows, which usually booked multiple queens to perform and, at most, one king. As Chad Clitt mentioned to me, Tonic Garbáge was one of the queens in Prague making an effort to incorporate more kings in their shows, but issues of power surrounding opportunities were evident. In the groupchat for our collective, members occasionally posted job opportunities (such as pageants or photoshoots), usually accompanied by a jab about how it was so "generous" of the (usually white, male) host/organizer to invite one king to perform. Even within the collective, some kings were booked regularly, and the group eventually split over issues of "stealing" performers, which could be interpreted more accurately as stealing and hoarding opportunities. Several drag kings voices feelings of scarcity around shows, and issues of representation usually focused on if drag kings were being represented at all, rather than how drag kings were being represented. In terms of representation, the drag kings' did not express issues over modes of representation, though perhaps these desires could be voiced more if they were receiving enough opportunities to sustain and expand their community.

The mode of representation that drag kings desire; namely, to be "booked" by drag queens/hosts in consumer spaces to perform as a member of the ensemble, is subject to several pressures. The host, typically a drag queen, has creative control over the performances. Although the performers also have relative freedom – I never observed a queen rejecting or criticizing a performance in their show – the hosts have control over who is booked and paid. Most of the booking also happens through personal connections; Trdi Sýr Dick, a macho drag king with an

act as cheesy (and delicious) as his name, described one of the performers at the *Queer as Folklore* event which took place at *Klub 007 Strahov* on 11/03/2023 under the organization of *Criminal Queers*. This performer had previously sung at an open mic which took place at *Electric Sheep Book Bar*, as well as attended multiple Queer Karaoke events at *Backdoors Bar*. Dick described how they had gradually worked up the courage through these free events to participate in the paid show, with the encouragement of Dick and his other performer friends. As most of the networking takes place at paid events, it is worth considering that representation is most easily offered to those who can participate in the queer scene frequently.

Bell and Binnie write that "'Freedom' and 'power' are thus increasingly (even exclusively) articulated through the market[…]" (2004, p. 1809). This conception of power was not evident in my fieldwork. Both performers and audience members mentioned queer desires for an expansion of "rights". As Miss Petty announced at *Slaaayvák*: "We're here, we're queer, and we're not going anywhere!" (Fieldwork, 2022). The understanding of the precarity of queer rights is certainly felt; when I asked questionnaire respondents how they envisioned the future of trans rights and drag performers, they all expressed sentiments of hope for a future expansion of queer rights, as well as doubt and fear concerning the state of queer rights in the US as well as increasing, global violence and legal restrictions. The freedoms one drag performer felt were restricted was, surprisingly, creative freedom on *RuPaul's Drag Race,* however, most respondents mentioned legal and civil rights, the difficulty with obtaining hormones, as well as bans on drag performances in public spaces (Fieldnotes, 2002, Questionnaire #2, Questionnaire #3, 2022). As aforementioned, some also felt unsafe in queer spaces, mentioning "transphobia, racism, and SA [sexual assault]" (Questionnaire #2, 2023) within queer spaces. While I wouldn't describe drag kings as feeling powerless, the sentiments expressed to me at shows were often resigned; Chad Clitt's frustration with being ogled by the presumed straight staff without the ability to remove them from the space, discussions of the power balance within shows (performers expressing feeling snubbed or disrespected by the hosts of queer shows [Questionnaire #2, 2023, and Fieldnotes, 2022]). Overall, drag kings in Prague did not seem to view their performance as having global, political potential. Rather, the emphasis was on self-expression and, similarly to Baker and Kelly, used to actualize individualistic goals, such as "relieving dysphoria" or for the pleasure of performing (2016, p. 53) (Fieldwork, 2022).

Although some drag kings mentioned "anticapitalist" politics or expressed distaste for the economic side of drag kinging, money was certainly very deeply tied to representation. Tensions with not being "booked" and, even when being booked, being "underpaid" were expressed. Chad Clitt and Rudy Daddy both mentioned how expensive costuming is for drag kings. Another performer expressed frustration with the kinds of drag normally seen at shows, stating that the experimental performance they wanted to pursue "isn't profitable" (Fieldnotes, 2022). Unfortunately, self-expression alone doesn't necessarily sell tickets, and the creation of a kinging performance which can match the level of spectacle or glamour of queens' performances seems particularly challenging, especially when the genre of performance that attracts audience members does not align with the kinds of gender performance that are more important to the kings' self-expression and exploration.

3.4. Generic Conventions and Audience Expectations

Turning to Horowitz's description of the "poetics of earnestness" (2020, pp. 56-59), she mentions some of the unease and tension that can be created when drag kings perform "emotional authenticity". This misunderstanding of drag kinging as lacking in performance seems hard to counter. Although it would appear that certain audience members are seeking emotional authenticity in performances, when I observed the audience at the shows I attended, I found that the audience predominately praised spectacle.

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The other loner and I eyed one another from opposite corners of the cramped smoking garden outside of GRID. We were wedged in opposite corners between two large groups of young adults, mostly American. While I smoked, one audience member excitedly recounted a drag show she had seen elsewhere, where the performer had used a stapling gun to staple into their ass.

"They even let my friend staple their bum," they said. They also mentioned a second show, where the performer had sprayed the audience with a water gun.

"We were so wet *at the end," they said, and the group giggled at the innuendo.*

I would catch the loner outside of the bar later in the evening and ask him what had drawn him to the show, Scorpio Sessions, a relatively small and disjointed affair that had nevertheless attracted enough of an audience to feel cosy.

"I just wanted to try something different," he said.

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"Something different" and these performances which surprised the audience with some kind of spectacle were thus among the desires of the audience members. One of my starkest memories of a drag show remains a drag queen in New Zealand who, horrifically, stuck birthday candles in her arms and lit them while bleeding. I do not believe drag kings are incapable of providing spectacle to audiences, but my fieldwork suggests that the desires of drag kings (to actualize their desired gender, of self-expression) do not align with audience expectations. This is not to completely dismiss spectacle. As Bell and Binnie write,

> "Spectacles are too easily dismissed as providing only inauthentic and commodified encounters with difference, but this oversimplifies the uses and meanings of 'spectacle' and any discussion of 'spectacular' events has to explore in more detail the production and consumption of spectacle alongside the effects of that production and consumption, especially in relation to the inclusion and exclusion of forms of otherness" (2004, p. 1813).

While these "spectacular" performances certainly have their place in the repertoire of gay performance, I believe their easier commodification compared to emotionally authentic/earnest performances which may not resonate with audiences who have never personally experienced "gender feelings" complicate the genre of drag kinging, as my fieldwork indicates that drag kinging is increasingly turning towards camp. If this is an imitative action, in response to the global success of drag queening, perhaps we will lose the specific genre of drag kinging which brought attention to female masculinities...or perhaps new generic conventions will arise. I would be very interested to see how drag kinging evolves generically in the coming years.

3.5. Consumer Spaces, Safety, and Imaginaries

In looking at spacemaking and maintenance, the choice for drag kings to move from queer spaces into lounge bars and "straight" clubs presented an interesting case for analysis. If drag kings are increasingly attempting to articulate themselves through the market, one of the important ways this takes place is through the choice of spaces in which to perform. As aforementioned, the drag kings began to move into spaces not marketed as queer, and as Bell and Binnie mention of Duggan's "new homonormativity" (2002), the creation of acceptable (consumptible) queer identities "works to exclude 'undesirable' forms of sexual expression, including their expression in space—for example, by reducing the 'gay public sphere' to consumption spaces and gentrified neighbourhoods only" (2004, p. 1811). As one questionnaire respondent mentioned, queer karaoke was fundamental for their integration into the drag kinging scene in Prague: "Well, like a lot of us I go to the queer karaoke. Which leads me to other events and yada yada" (Questionnaire, 2022).

However, the bar in which queer karaoke eventually found its home is not the most accessible. Finding its home at *Backdoors Bar*, I spoke to one of its organizers about the reasons for choosing *Backdoors Bar*. Trdi Sýr Dick first mentioned the choice of *Klub 007 Strahov* as a venue for one of the other shows that he co-runs, *Criminal Queers*. He claimed one of the major features of the bar was that its bar staff "won't serve neo-Nazis" (Fieldwork, 2023), and *Backdoors Bar* also turns people away. When my friend expressed that queer spaces would be safer, Trdi Sýr Dick said, "Well, what could [queer spaces] do differently?" (Fieldwork, 2023).

Bouncers can discriminate against obvious skinheads or tourists, who might be more likely to bring racism and homophobia into queer spaces, but that doesn't provide any way for dealing with these issues within the queer community. The themes of transphobia and misgendering that were present in my work were expressed towards the queer community from within and were similar to those mentioned by Horowitz (2021, pp. 95-96). These "queer undesirables" end up being pushed out of these spaces for reasons I have previously discussed, as well as due to class. As my friends and I observed after one show, the audience was mainly expatriates with careers, approximately 20-40 years old. The absence of young students can only

be conjectured, but the prices at *Backdoors Bar* (average signature cocktail in 195kc, plus a suggested donation for the queer karaoke) could be considered prohibitive for those without established careers.

Returning to the reason for the migration to *Backdoors*, Horowitz emphasized the need for place-based solidarities (2020, p. 97). Yet, the feelings of space-based mourning and nostalgia she describes that the CKG troupe felt in response to their loss of the *Bounce Nightclub*, the loss "of a specific relationship between those people and the space they once inhabited together" (2021, p. 97) was not recorded in my fieldwork by the group of performers that experienced a similar loss of the queer bar, *Patra*. Although similar frustrations were raised of those who chose to return to the bar under boycott, "white gay men" (Fieldwork, 2022), *Patra* as a specific relationship was not mourned. The community of *Patra*, however, was not able to simply shift venues. One drag king relayed to me how some of those had responded "too dramatically" to the *Patra* situation, while others had dismissed it quickly, causing tensions (Fieldnotes, 2023). If Horowitz's theorization of place-based solidarities is true, this disruption of space likely created even more fragmentation than could be observed on the surface and within my brief study.

I additionally observed that many of the Eggplant Emoji Group performers often shared several venues and that those I spoke with mentioned "community" "networking" and "socializing" as benefits of spaces. The space itself seemed irrelevant, as long as it fulfilled the technological requirements of a drag show. Trdi Syr Dick's only complaint with *Klub 007 Strahov* was its too-low ceiling for drag queens, not the fact that it is not a queer-owned, for-queers venue.

Concerning Duggan's theorizing of privatization and its effects on queer spaces, Duggan states that the *new homonormativity* embraces liberalism and confines queerness within those orientations which can fit into a mould of private, for-profit interests and families focused on reproduction (Duggan, 2002, and Edelman, 2005). In this world of privatization, queer spaces are under no obligation to provide safe spaces for queer patrons, but rather to maximize profit which, according to Bell and Binnie, involves catering to straight audiences and seeking global, touristic recognition (2004, 1812-1814). By the standards of my questionnaire respondents, none of the places in Prague are necessarily safe. In response to "How would you define a queer space?" one respondent answered:

> "Any event, institution or establishment that prioritises the wellbeing of ALL queer people, regardless of their gender, social status, race or disabilities. I only respect queer spaces that are as inclusive and intersectional as possible" (Questionnaire #2, 2022) while my other respondents answered: "[A] place where people can be free to express themselves, not fear and be safe and supported" (Questionnaire #1, 2022) and "A place that is made for and by queer people. Not necessarily exclusionary or cishet people but basically 'targeted' at us" (Questionnaire #3, 2023).

Yet these places, according to Bell and Binnie, must struggle to exist in an increasingly global, private world, and the idealistic responses of the questionnaire respondents do not correspond with the places they go. Themes of accessibility were also strongly represented in my fieldwork; some of the friends with whom I attended shows mentioned the prices, both of the drinks at the bar and the price of tickets as prohibitive to young queers. One bar in particular, *GRID Center*, had no sign and was very difficult to find for those not familiar with the space. *Klub 007 Strahov* is "too far" from the city for many potential audience members, according to Trdi Sýr Dick (Fieldwork, 2023). These places, however, appear to be the most accessible to those who organize the events. As one host mentioned, most queer places were already "taken" by other queens/kings/shows. Thus, some of the drag kings and the queer karaoke, also hosted by kings and queens, moved into non-queer spaces, thereby creating new tensions. While the staff of *Backdoors Bar,* according to Tyrdi Syr Dick, can "throw people out", there is no clear recourse for those who experience negative treatment within these spaces. Staff members unfamiliar with the cultural code of behaviour in queer circles present themselves as "voyeurs" backstage, while the organizers of shows and their queer audiences don't have the final decision on removals from the bar, and the owners of the bar ultimately set codes of conduct.

Although the drag kings can simply pack up and move to a new venue, this first move of the Eggplant Emoji Group was time-consuming and appeared to contribute to its eventual split, as performers were divided between different venues. As Horowitz theorizes an important development in solidarity-making as one focused on place (2020, p. 99), perhaps the group was not able to survive the change of venue because they could not form a strong solidarity beyond

their shared locality. These difficulties of solidarity-building are only exacerbated by capital; as Doreen Massey writes in her theorization of space-time compression in the global world and the need for a "politics of mobility and access" (Massey, 1994, p. 150),

> "For it does seem that mobility, and control over mobility, both reflects and reinforces power. It is not simply a question of unequal distribution, that some people move more than others, and that some have more control than others. It is that the mobility and control of some groups can actively weaken other people" (Massey, 1994, p. 150).

According to both Massey and Horowitz, place is best imagined in terms of these social relations.

> "Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent" (Massey, 1994, p. 155).

I think paying attention to this process of fragmentation can yield potentials for solidarity-making. The drag kings' expectations for a place wherein everyone can fully articulate their gender identity and all queer members can interact without any form of oppression appears to shatter when the queer patrons come into contact with consumer spaces, queer and non-queer. Expectations are not met, hateful things are said, or the performers are not able to realize their performances (i/e stages not tall enough for drag queens, hosts yelling at performers, uncooperative sound systems), thus the drag kings seek out new venues and splinter apart to perform in their respective shows. Conflicts between the shows and the performers result in a break-up of the collective, and a chance to form solidarities which can fight for and actualize these spaces of inclusivity and intersectionality are broken. I believe further studies would be extremely useful to examine how place-based solidarities can be created in the face of unequal

power and capital distribution, and how a "politics of mobility and access" can also empower the local and the global to harmonize. So, although audience members and performers alike praised the small queer community in Prague, and often shared the same circles, I would argue that a loosely defined "queer community" simply does not answer to the major challenges that drag kings, and other queer performers by extension, will increasingly face in a liberalizing world wherein those "queer unwanted" with the least amount of economic and social capital are unable to feel welcome in queer spaces or to make other spaces queer enough for them to inhabit safely.

3.6. Political Articulations

"No shooting up in the bathroom, either drugs or guns," said Brittany, one of the pair of hosts for Scorpio Sessions. "I'm American, so I would prefer not either of those." She was accompanied by Alina, also American, onstage. The two hosts had led the audience through the event's "ground rules" via an improvised cabaret song, and they were now taking a brief interlude to direct some quips at American politics.

"Oh, who else had their rights taken away this week?" Alina asked the audience. "I tried to vote this week in the midterms— did anyone else vote? Yeah, I tried to vote by mail and I asked the ballot worker if my vote was going to be delivered, and she was like, 'maybe.' They were like, 'a woman of colour? Nah, we don't want that vote.'"

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In terms of political articulations, my goal was to determine where there is radical potential within drag kinging in Prague, and wherein the obstacles and potentials lay for organizing stronger alliances, not just of drag kings, but of queer engagement with issues of ongoing colonization and hegemony.

Scorpio Sessions was an astrology-themed queer variety show in which two drag artists performed, Tonic Garbáge, a British drag queen and host of *Queeriety*, along with Rudy Daddy, one of the Eggplant Emoji Group's Czech kings. I had met an American burlesque performer outside, a friend of Brittany's, and we had been discussing American politics outside of the bar.

As both the hosts and a significant portion of the audience appeared to be American, they made several comments on the state of American politics, but also mentioned increasing rent prices in Prague, the fact that everyone in 2022 should be gay by now, and sarcastically said, "okay, straightie-whities" when some audience members responded to a question if anyone was not queer (Fieldwork, 2022).

I believe the latter comment corresponds with the incident in *Drag Becomes Them: Voices and Identities Beyond the Stage* (MacIntyre, 2018, pp. 10-13), wherein Moon Baby's drag character, Ann Teak, defends her queer space from tourists by becoming "unintelligible" to them. As MacIntyre writes, Moon Baby's characters can provide multi-layered social critique precisely because of the space they inhabit, the Blue Moon, described as "a safe haven for *all* members of the queer community, especially trans and other gender non-conforming people" (2018, p. 5).

In a similar way, the venue *GRID Center* and its diversely queer audience allowed for this critique of settler-colonial "voting" and an act of "policing" or keeping those in check who might be intruders ("straightie-whities"). *GRID Center* was the least outwardly accessible venue I visited as well, without signage and located at the end of a tunnel off the main streets, and tourists cannot simply walk in. One must be familiar with the venue or have seen information online to find the space; I believe this also contributed to *GRID Center*'s safety, at least from tourists...and its eventual closure due to raising rent prices and lack of revenue. *GRID*'s collective atmosphere – owned by four individuals who "never made a profit" from the space (GoGetFunding, 2023) – was a cultural centre/D.I.Y. space open to "artists of all backgrounds" that rejected settler notions of individualism and competition. I believe such spaces could have allowed for much more exploration of "trashy, ugly, silly, messy" drag (MacIntyre, 2018, p. 6) like that featured at Blue Moon, because the aesthetic of *GRID Center* was also "busted", a term used by MacIntyre that could also be applied to tranimals, to Lumbee performers unable to compete with cosmopolitan drag, and to the misunderstood performances of kings. According to Bell and Binnie, these "busted" performances would struggle to find a home in a city where cosmopolitanism carries high social currency. This creation of "exotic difference" (Bell and Binnie, 2004, p. 1816) in the form of queer performance relies on codes of queerness readable by a broader, non-queer audience, such as the easily accessible, glamorous drag popularized by

RuPaul's Drag Race. This will result in increasing exclusion, and a homogenizing of the kinds of queer performance available in these spaces:

> "Moreover, the requirement to perform for customers— familiar to all interactive service encounters but perhaps especially hyped-up in gay commercial spaces—places emphasis on appropriate bodies, clothes and behaviour, bringing yet more possibilities for exclusion" (Bell and Binnie, 2004, p. 1814).

In analysing the political themes I could gather from my fieldwork, I found that political statements were communicated very differently in different spaces. In the case of *Scorpio Sessions*, humour was utilized as a method of translating the political values of the space. Political values were less explicitly communicated at *Slaaayvák* and other *Queeriety* shows. Although Miss Petty told the audience, "Let's queer this place up!" (Fieldwork, 2022), the humour used during this show was focused on fake jealousy, camp, aesthetics, and other values aligned with those used on *RuPaul's Drag Race* to judge performance (Fieldwork, 2022). Humour was not utilized by Miss Petty or other performers at this venue, the lounge club *RADOST FX*, for explicit, political statements. At the first *Queeriety* show in which I performed, Tonic Garbáge hosted the show in green makeup and a wig made of a wilted cabbage, meant to represent the head of lettuce which had outlasted Liz Truss' term as British Prime Minister (Fieldwork, 2022). This performance was also hosted at *GRID Center;* although I performed again with Tonic at an *ARTNur* event at *Gabriel Loci*, a multi-functional event space home mainly to techno parties and art exhibitions, they made no similar political comments with their costuming or act.

It appears this move into consumer spaces may put pressure on performers and discourage more decolonial moves. Given the fact that explicit political commentary was only observed at *GRID Center*, it leads me to speculate that the communitarian venue and its rather "busted" aesthetic leant itself to easier political expressions and imaginings. Whereas, in more upscale venues such as *Backdoors Bar, RADOST FX*, and *Gabriel Loci*, the presence of walk-in heterosexual audiences and non-queer staff could have an impact on the kinds of performances and political messaging that drag kings feel comfortable expressing. However, the statements

previously mentioned were made by the hosts. Since the drag kings' primary focus in kinging is self-expression, this is reflected in the less-explicit political content of their performances. That is not to say that the drag kings are apolitical, but rather that I observed that they preferred to articulate their political desires through the choice of shows that they performed in, allowing the hosts or venues to represent the values of the kings (such as *Klub 007 Strahov*'s leftist history), or in Instagram captions (such as Chad Clitt's "Vote Chad" post, where anticapitalism was listed as one of his values). Returning to Tuhiwai Smith's notions of distance and colonial space. As she writes:

> "The 'outside' is important because
> it positioned territory and people in an appositional relation to the
> colonial centre; for indigenous Australians to be in an 'empty space' was
> to 'not exist'" (2007, p. 53).

With queer communities moving into these consumer spaces, who is left outside? Those who have decolonial desires do not appear "inside" my fieldwork. Even though American performers in Prague may acknowledge the violence of their country in some way (as the hosts of *Scorpio Sessions* used humour to critique gun violence and racism in voting), is it possible that Americans use this settler notion of "distance" to extricate themselves from the messy history of the USA and the obligations that come with having been born on stolen land? I write this now as an expat as well, wondering what the implications are of settlers staying and going, of how a "politics of mobility and access" (Massey, 1994, p. 150) is practised when various Indigenous groups remain on their land to pick up the pieces of settler destruction, while the white settlers use their capital to flee to lands that don't demand their responsibility.

Ultimately, I believe these questions can only be answered in conversation with others engaged in listening and restoration. The potential for these kinds of solidarities appears to be disrupted by the use of consumer spaces, and by the issues that attend them, though kings can also represent their political values through the selection of spaces where they spend their money (or boycott). Collective spaces provide more potential for freedom of expression, as well as the chance to network with like-minded artists; however, for this to take place, an understanding of

space rather than identity as a fertile ground for organizing and as integral to the creation and sustaining of queer identities will become necessary.

Conclusion

In this thesis, utilizing participant-observation, I found that drag kings in Prague performed primarily to explore and experiment with their gender identities. Many come to drag kinging having already realized they are not cisgender, but use drag kinging as a mode of relieving "dysphoria", exploring their gender identity, or communicating to audiences statements of affirmation or ambiguity with and through trans bodies. Although the drag kings and those organizing queer events are making an effort to be inclusive of those across the gender spectrum, respondents are still faced with misgendering and transphobia. Additionally, there are some attempts to perform gender ambiguously within performances, issues such as transphobia within the queer community, as well as globalization, audience expectations, and the pressures of consumer spaces make ambiguous performances less readable for audiences and more difficult to execute.

Drag kings in Prague expressed feelings of frustration in regard to representation and, while aware of and frequently making references to power disparities *within* the queer community, they were often unable to elevate their political convictions into action. Their marginalization in comparison to drag queens seems to follow a global trend of drag queening that is considered economically viable in the creation of queer urban spaces in order to attract tourist attention. This lead me to speculate how this growing disparity between the global attraction of drag queening and the more marginalized practice of drag kinging may lead to new generic conventions as well as, perhaps, more opportunities for subversive performances. I then analysed political statements expressed at various drag shows, which suggested, as argued by Binnie and Bell (2004), the limitations of consumer spaces as places of radical performances. Here I noted that the use of collective spaces, such as *GRID Center*, allowed for different expressions of political sentiment. I also discussed how drag kings conceptualize "ideal" performance spaces, how they try to "police" spaces to ensure the safety of queer performers and audience members, and hopes for future freedoms.

From my very limited study, I see the projection of drag kings into collective spaces of diverse artists as fruitful for expressing more explicit political desires, which might lead to

further imaginings. If the American drag kings, especially, can continue to confront the settler history of the USA, it might be possible for them to examine their access to mobility. Returning to drag kinging as a genre, I observed its impact on gender identity on drag kings, its use for forms of self-expression, and as a commodity. As a genre of *emotional authenticity*, increasingly performed by trans and non-binary performers, that emerges from ambiguity and de-monstration as a form of becoming, may have the ability to challenge the falsely authentic "exotic experiences" being pushed by city and corporate interests through consumer spaces onto queer communities. However, without an explicitly decolonial politic that doesn't "un-see" Native voices (Driskill, 2010, p. 75), drag kigning in Prague risks losing its radical potential and contributing to colonial taxonomies (Driskill, 2010, p. 83). I hope that further research will examine the potentials of these kinds of performances and spaces; my research was extremely limited, and there are certainly many elements of successful organizing that I am unaware of and have not had the opportunity to observe. As drag kinging is such a locally diverse practice, those interested in orienting drag kinging politically will have to attend to local power dynamics, institutions, and communities to find strategies particular to each case. Although I am optimistic about collective spaces and organizing, my research does not examine how it is possible to create and maintain such spaces in an ever-increasing consumer culture, and thus these spaces may have little relevance in the future if cities render them obsolete.

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extravaganza by @queerspacesnetwork, @misspetty_p & @radost_fx - the theme is all things wet and aquatic 🏳🌈🏳⚧ cz *Radost FX zve, do svého znovuotevřeného Horního Patra, Queer Spaces Network ve spolupráci S miss petty. V tento Večer Vás čeká hned několik drag a interaktivních vystoupení V duchu vodních elementů. ★ entry ★ the doors open at 20:30 with the first show at 21:00. tickets are cash only - 200CZK Dveře Otevřeme ve 20:30 a na první vystoupení se můžete těšit již ve 21:00. Vstupenky Pouze na dveřích a V hotovosti - 200 KČ ★ performances by ★ @creativeswine: @autotune.simon.autotune: @chad.clitt: @mxminniemilk: @tonic.garbage: @may_day_off: @misspetty_p and more! event link is in the BIO ⬆ concept: @motherofthenetwork logo: @autotune.simon.autotune photography: @samuel_alex__'*, *Instagram*. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CkyWaFDrfz6/ (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

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