Running Title: Finding the Unicorn Within: Re-imagining LGBTQ Safe Spaces for Youth through Drag

Finding the Unicorn Within:

Re-imagining LGBTQ Safe Space for Youth through Drag

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Introduction and Purpose of the Study

With no windows, the rich velvet walls flood the room. A twisted sculpture of antlers hangs from the ceiling. The first act of the night is about to begin. Two performers arrive on stage donning white shirt cuffs but no shirts, shirt collars but no bowties and black pants. Patrick Swayze’s voice echoes through the speakers: a recording from a Saturday Night Live sketch, which parodies an audition for Chippendale’s, the erotic male dance troupe. The scene is rife with conventional markers of masculinity - Patrick Swayze as the standard Hollywood heartthrob, Chippendale’s dancers, Adonis-like in their stature. However, the two performers standing in front of me do not fit this image. The performers are drag kings, and though they employ traditional gender representations, the essential meanings of these representations shift; they become less sturdy when filtered through the performers’ bodies.

I was captivated by this space where audience members and performers embodied queer identities with a playful wink and a critical eye. I thought about the stark difference I felt between this space and the safe spaces that I construct with my students, which are highly curated, inundated with participation guidelines and safe zone stickers. The drag performance felt like an organic way for performers to express and celebrate who they are while they continue to explore who their identities. This is the kind of space I would like to see for my students and this notion sparked my interest to examine how drag communities cultivate a safe space in order to gain insight into how schools can better craft safe spaces. The drag space and the school space are obviously not completely analogous; drag performances occur in bars, where alcohol is served and performances may contain nudity that is not always suitable for younger audiences. However, the fundamentals of the space are similar— a host, like a teacher, moderates the space, behavioral guidelines such as those around tipping, like classroom rules, dictate how participants
act, and a captive audience, much like students, receive content delivered by an expert in the field. One of the participants in this study is a former preschool teacher who asserted that he approached drag performances the same way he approached his classrooms. A further justification of the comparison between the two spaces relates to the rhetoric of “It Gets Better,” governs the conversation regarding Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer (LGBTQ) safe spaces for youth where LGBTQ students are encouraged to imagine a future after they leave middle or high school when they can access LGBTQ friendly spaces, like drag performances. This rhetoric encourages students to be optimistic about the future but I argue that LGBTQ students deserve more than a hypothetical future. I posit that aspects of these LGBTQ spaces, like those of drag performances, can be integrated into middle or high school to improve the present circumstances of LGBTQ youth.

**Purpose of Study and Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to reimagine how LGBTQ safe spaces form within middle schools and high schools by examining how drag performance communities create safe spaces. This case study utilizes direct observations and interviews to answer the three central questions 1) How do the participants in drag performance communities understand and experience a safe space? 2) What role does drag performance play in the exploration of gender identity and the cultivation of community? 3) How can this exploration of community offer insight into the community that high schools construct for LGBTQ students?

To answer these questions, I began with the performance collective that I described in the introduction, which first sparked this study. I sent a standard recruitment email and asked for recommendations for additional participants at the end of each interview. I interviewed 13 participants in total: three audience members and ten performers. Five performers were also
producers, whose duties include booking performers, curating shows, and managing the logistics of the venue. Four of the performers were producers as well as hosts of the shows. Each semi-structured interview lasted between one and two hours. Interviews were conducted at locations that were convenient for participants. Prior to the interview, participants signed a consent form outlining the purpose of the study and the process of the interview. Participants were sent interview transcripts and transcripts were redacted at the request of participants. I used the snowballing method of recruitment and asked participants for recommendations for other participants. To maintain confidentiality, all names have been changed. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and stored in secured-password protected document on my computer.

To triangulate this data, I conducted field observations and observed 25 hours of performances at three venues. I took field notes during these observations and kept these notes in a secured document. After collecting this data, I distilled the findings into four major themes: defining a safe space, making a safe space, the role of community in making a safe space, and the role of drag in exploring identity. I applied codes to these themes using Atlas Ti 7. Under the theme of defining safe space, I created the codes of establishing community norms, pushing boundaries, and embracing vulnerability. The theme of maintaining safe space included the codes of enacting rituals, calling out negative behaviors, and encouraging positive behaviors. The role of community in making safe spaces included the codes of the venue, host, the relationship between performers, and the relationship between performers and the audience. The theme of the role of drag in exploring identity was further categorized into the codes of reclaiming mainstream narratives, and reclaiming experiences of trauma.

Significance of Study and Limitations

This study is significant to the field of sociology of education because it examines a
space outside of the school environment. Most research regarding school communities is centralized in the classroom or the entire school as the site of the research. This research further hopes to add to the field by spotlighting gender identity development as a subject of study. Prominent research within the field focuses on race, class, and a binary understanding of gender i.e., girls achievement gap in math and science. This work seeks to expand this understanding gender and produce knowledge that includes elements of gender identity and expression.

As a graduate thesis, this work is additionally limited by time and accessibility. I sought to interview participants with a diverse perspective and experiences as well attend as many performances as I could during this time period. This research offers a snapshot into the drag performance community and produced insights that can be used as a foundation for further study.

_A Note about Language_

In this discussion, I use queer as an umbrella term that encompasses any individual that falls within the LGBTQ spectrum. I acknowledge that this term has a fraught history, where it has been, and continues to be used a slur. In its present iteration, the term queer has been reclaimed as term of empowerment by the LGBTQ community and a majority of the participants in this study used the term to describe themselves or their communities.

I use the phrase drag performance space to describe the space where performances occur, which includes both the physical venue and the metaphysical space of the acts themselves. Drag performance communities refer to the performance collectives or the groups of performers that worked together for a given show. For the purpose of this paper, drag performance space also includes burlesque performance. Drag and burlesque are different art forms stemming from separate lineages but overlap in their focus on gender. The colloquial definition of drag refers to individuals who have been assigned male at birth who dress as women utilizing exaggerated
feminine characteristics and vice versa for those who have been assigned female at birth. In this paper, the definition of gender and drag is much more nuanced. An individual’s biological sex may or may not influence how they portray themselves as a drag performer. Burlesque performance is also rooted in gender where performers incorporate theatrical and glamorous elements into a dance or musical routine. I use the term drag performance to encompass both drag and burlesque because almost all of the performances I attended included both drag and burlesque. Participants themselves referred to burlesque as a gendered performance, similar to drag, that worked to highlight aspects of masculinity and femininity.

To provide a synopsis of my conclusions, I found that the drag performance communities follow a different rhetoric from middle school and high school communities regarding safe spaces. The drag performance communities did not strive to create a space that was free of oppression but rather strove to create an environment where queer identities were considered to be norm and participants felt comfortable exploring their own identities. The medium of drag is centralized in the body where performers lip sync, dance, and apply makeup to create their characters. As a result, performers are able to assert their own narratives about their bodies and reclaim these narratives from the mainstream lens. The participants in this study centered their definition of safety on building a community that values queerness as the norm rather than the exception. Participants felt their space was safe when they could freely express their identities and experiences in ways that were not dictated by the values of a mainstream, heteronormative society. Each member of the community played an active role in creating this community and maintaining its safety. The drag space offered an opportunity to celebrate queer identities and intentionally build a community that challenged as well as supported each other. In this paper, I first outline the theoretical and literary frameworks that guide this research before diving into a
discussion of the findings of drag performance and concluding with suggestions for these
findings connect to schools. Contrary to schools, the safe space that drag communities created
did not focus on the absence of harm but rather celebrated the opportunity to explore queer
identities in all of their complexity, with beauty, affirmation, and of course, glitter.
**Theoretical Framework**

*Epistemological and Social constructivist*

An epistemological philosophical belief and a social constructivist-interpretive framework guide this research. These frameworks illustrate how individuals prescribe meaning to their experiences by considering the impact of historical and cultural norms, as well as the influence of interactions with other individuals in the process of analysis. According to the qualitative researcher, John Creswell, epistemological beliefs describe a research process where “knowledge is known through the subjective experiences of people” (Creswell, 2013). This research relies on quotes as evidence and spent in the field with participants to understand how they justify knowledge of their experiences. This philosophical belief will be linked to a social constructivist interpretive framework, which “defines the subjective meanings toward objects or ideas that individuals employ to describe their experience” (Creswell, 2013). These frameworks support this study, which relies on understanding the ways in which participants justify their own experiences.

*Queer Theory and Poststructuralism*

This research draws on queer theory to frame participants’ identities in a way that moves beyond binary categories of gender and sexuality. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, queer theory scholars, discuss the emergence of queer theory and argue against reducing to a singular definition in *What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?* (1995). “The danger of the label queer theory is that it makes its queer and non-queer audiences forget these differences and imagine a context (theory) in which queer has a stable referential content and pragmatic force” (Berlant and Warner, 1995). For Berlant and Warner, queer theory departs from traditional academic disciplines because it should not be characterized by its ability to provide solutions to
particular problems. The authors suggest that queer theory is constantly evolving to embody multiple contexts and populations “that can comprehend their own differences of privilege and struggle; publics whose abstract spaces can also be lived in, remembered, hoped for” (Berlant and Warner, 1995). Queer theory, according to the authors, is not a static concept i.e. an umbrella term for non-heterosexual identities but rather is a concept that can accommodate multiple identities that may change at different times. The role of queer theory then is to offer a reconceptualization, an alternative to the norms and practices that govern everyday life.

In the United States, queer theory often relies on a poststructural approach, rooted in the work of Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, who challenged the assumption that identity is an essential quality of an individual. In Volume 1 of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1976), he examines the mechanisms that perpetuate predominant notions of gender and sexuality identities arguing that these identities are socially constructed, situationally contingent and always connected to power relations. Foucault argues that sexuality is not inherent to an individual but instead is created to encourage order and regulation over individuals’ bodies. Foucault posits that order is not maintained through mandates but instead, is distributed around a norm and institutionalized. “The law operates more and more as a norm, and that the judicial institution is increasingly incorporated into a continuum of apparatuses (medical, administrative, and so on)...” (Foucault, 1976). Foucault highlights the lateral nature of power where individuals police each other’s behaviors rather than relying on dictates received from sovereign powers. Judith Butler, an American philosopher, and gender theorist, builds on Foucault’s understanding of identity to highlight the performativity of gender emphasizing gender as a learned act based on culturally defined expectations about what it means to be feminine or masculine. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler posits that gender is “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid
regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1993). Gender does not occur naturally but rather is produced by the way that individuals perform feminine or masculine acts and these categories of gender are constituted through this process. Individuals continually act in reference to an essential norm that does not exist and to understand gender we must understand how these categories are created.

Queer theory, with its emphasis on poststructural thought, informs this research that seeks to understand how participants make sense of their identities and what influences their knowledge of their own identities. These frameworks delineate the specific role that drag performance plays in navigating identity development.
Literature Review

This literature review establishes several core components of the research questions: defining a safe space, understanding LGBTQ safe spaces in schools and identifying the value of reimagining these spaces. In my thesis, I will continue to discuss the role that I see this study playing in reimagining safe spaces. This discussion will incorporate literature from the “It Gets Better Campaign,” that highlights the idea of queer world-making and the importance of fostering hope for the future in LGBTQ youth (West, I., Frischerz, M. et al. 2013). I will then connect these themes to literature about drag performance and why I believe drag performance has the potential to reimagine LGBTQ spaces for youth.

Definition of Safe Space

The term, safe space has a history in social movements, specifically the Second Wave of the women’s movement, and refers to a site that provides an opportunity for vulnerable groups to grapple with the negative consequences of marginalization. Safe spaces may also serve as a centralizing location for community organizing or activism by providing a site of political resistance. Safe spaces can be in a physical location like a halfway house or a discursive space like a classroom. The Roestone Collective (2014), which consists of geographers Heather Rosenfeld and Elsa Noterman, in Safe Space: A Reconceptualization, argues that safe spaces function to create sentiments of solidarity while offering opportunities to negotiate difference.

Safe spaces strive to ensure that participants feel empowered and are included in ways that they do not experience in society at large. Despite this noble goal, safe spaces frequently result in participants feeling isolated, which necessitates that these spaces engage in the “ongoing work of negotiating and foregrounding differences to be successful” (The Roestone Collective, 2014). The authors of the Roestone Collective posit that the separatist feminist communities that
arose in the 1970s as safe spaces exemplify the paradox that inclusive safe spaces might be exclusive to some. The 1970s separatist communities were created to provide women with safe spaces away from patriarchal pressures and male violence. However, women of color did not feel welcome in a space constructed by and for white women and the inherent whiteness of these communities contributed to a general absence of racial diversity (The Roestone Collective, 2014). The tensions that arose from these conflicts exemplify how these spaces can become transformative. Rather than ignoring differences, participants interpret and engage with conflict in the hopes of creating a space that fulfills their vision.

Safe spaces do not aspire to an abstract sense of equality but instead foster tangible opportunities to contend with the realistic implications of injustices. “The work of producing safe space entails continually facing, negotiating, and embracing paradoxical binaries: safety/danger, inclusivity/exclusivity, public/private…” (The Roestone Collective, 2014). Solidarity and community building are more likely to occur if these paradoxes are acknowledged and understood. The authors encourage participants of safe spaces to be reflective, to welcome uncertainty, to respond to challenges and to foster commonalities.

**LGBTQ Safe Spaces and Schools**

In schools, safe spaces are most commonly associated with LGBTQ students because of the high rates of bullying and harassment these students experience. (Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. et al., 2014) Students who identify as LGBTQ, or are perceived as LGBTQ, encounter significant amounts of verbal and physical harassment on a daily basis. According to the 2013 School Climate survey, produced by Gay Lesbian and Straight education Network (GLSEN), LGBTQ school climate survey, 85% of student reports hearing derogatory remarks like “dyke” or “fag.” These experiences of harassment have a notable impact on students from mental health to
academic achievement. Students, who experience harassment are more likely to miss days of schools, receive lower grade point averages than their peers and have lesser future aspirations (Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. et al., 2014). Furthermore, students who identify as LGBTQ also face increased stigmatization making them reluctant to seek out help, which compounds feelings of isolation and fear. Safe spaces within schools typically exist as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA), which are clubs within the schools created with the purpose of providing a haven for LGBTQ students.

According to the GSA network, GSAs began in 1998 with 40 clubs in the San Francisco area. “A GSA club is a student-run club in a high school or middle school that brings together LGBTQ and straight students to support each other, provide a safe place to socialize and create a platform to fight for racial, gender, LGBTQ, and economic justice” (Fetner, Elafros, et al, 2010). Though the term Gay-Straight alliance connotes a binary understanding of sexuality, GSAs have expanded their definitions to include individuals across the LGBTQ spectrum. In their case study of 57 Canadian and American high school students involved in GSAs, sociologists Tina Fetner, Athena Elafros, et al. explore how GSAs operate and critically approach the concept of safe space asking: safe from what, safe from whom, and safe to do what activities? Fetner, Elafros, et al. found that GSAs guarded LGBTQ students from various forms of harassment such as name-calling and threats from other students. GSAs also provided students with a reprieve from the pressures of family, friends, and administrators. The amount of acceptance that students experienced depended on the amount of support they received from the administration. “The safe space of a gay-straight alliance student club is bounded by the structure of school regulations, the policy decisions of school authorities, and the cultural climates” (Fetner, Elafros, et al, 2010). GSAs constituted a site of collaboration where straight students and LGBTQ students came
together to build community. The paradox that The Roestone Collective described was evident in this case study. Students of color, as well as transgender students, felt more marginalized in the space where lesbian, gay, and straight students were the majority; however, respondents stated these challenges also brought greater attention to these issues and provided opportunities for growth.

GSAs provided a space for LGBTQ community building where students engaged in a number of activities, like a pride prom, or an AIDS walk, that raised awareness about LGBTQ issues and educated others. Students were able to design programming and gain support from administration through the popularity of these activities. However, students reported that these activities did not change the overall culture of the school or result in meaningful policy change. The authors concluded that GSAs, though an important space for students, made only a marginal difference because they did not confront the pervasiveness of homophobia and heterosexism.

Reimagining Safe Spaces

Kim Hackford-Peer (2010), associate director of Gender Studies at the University of Utah, addresses the homophobic and heterosexist school climates that enable LGBTQ student harassment in The Name of Safety: Discursive Positionings of Queer Youth. Hackford-Peer provides a framework that could allow GSAs and school communities to become empowering space that combat the larger systemic issues.

Hackford-Peer characterizes the barriers to creating safer school community through the use of dichotomy-innocent victim/activist educator dichotomy. She suggests that this dichotomy dominates the conversation about LGBTQ safe spaces and hinders progress. The innocent victim/activist educator dichotomy describes situations where LGBTQ youth are depicted as both innocent victims who need protection from homophobia and activist educators who need to
educate others as well as provide solutions. Hackford-Peer demonstrates that this narrative reflects an adult’s understanding of youth limiting possibilities that queer youth have to actively take ownership of their situation. “Many adults block access to queer spaces of imagination and realization because they position youth within the discourse of innocence” (HackFord-Peer, 2010). Hackford-Peer concludes with a call to action for LGBTQ safe spaces to be reimagined where youth are empowered to explore opportunities that challenge the status quo.

The It Gets Better Campaign and Queer World-making

The core concepts of safe spaces suggest they offer an escape from the pressures of society and promote community building that embraces difference rather than evades it. These spaces have the potential to become powerful sites of resistance that do not rely on the dominant models of gender and sexuality. In “Queer World-making and the It Gets Better Campaign,” the authors explore these possibilities in a textual analysis of user generated content associated with the “it gets better campaign, (IGB). IGB is a popular video campaign designed by Dan Savage, media pundit and LGBT activist, in response to a surge queer youth suicides as a means to speak directly to queer youth to offer hope for the future through the production of YouTube videos, which consists of older LGBTQ adults telling their stories to an assumed audience of LGBTQ youth. The authors engaged in a textual analysis of the videos and dissected each section of the slogan asking such questions like what does “it” refer to – bullying? Life in general? Does “gets” correlate to an eventuality or passivity, and does “better” mean through activism or predetermined fulfillment? The authors identified themes and evidence regarding the efficacy of the campaign and engaged with critics who argued that the participants in the campaign only represented a narrow view of LGBTQ life.

The authors suggest the power of IGB is through its depiction of queer world-making,
which produces a counter-narrative to the world of heterosexism. The authors use Berlant and Warner’s idea of queer world-making, which refers to a set of practices and relationships that contest the logics of compulsory heteronormativities. Queer world-making that defines the “creation of spaces without a map, the invention the expansion of individual freedom and collective possibilities without the constraints of suffocating identities and restrictive membership” (West, I., Frischerz, M., et al. 2013). The authors conclude that the narratives found in IGB demonstrate supportive kinship networks, collective activities and other ways to defeat the idea of isolation and loneliness that might characterize an LGBT youth’s life, though its success in preventing suicides cannot be definitively stated. The narratives of the campaign invite youth into a world that includes a hopeful queer future of supportive communities and the potential freedom to exist without harassment. LGBTQ adults are able to forge a connection with a potential youth audience to assert that there is a community and a space that is waiting to welcome them even if they have difficulty envisioning that community through the narratives. Though these promises are vague, the narratives encourage students to look outside of their lives and provide an alternative to their current reality. The “It Gets Better” campaign encourages LGBTQ youth to anticipate a more positive future but does not provide students with a solution for their current situation.

Discussion of Findings

Re-imagining LGBTQ Safe Spaces through Drag Performance

Safety is a necessary foundation on which students can learn and is particularly important for queer students who experience disproportionate instances of discrimination. However, as Michael Sadowski asserts in Safe Space is Not Enough safety is essential but it should not be the only goal for supporting queer students. Sadowski, a sociologist and educator,
argues that the rhetoric of safety emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s when the cultural sentiment toward queer individuals was more hostile. The initiatives that emerged from this era, like comprehensive anti-bullying measures, designated safe zones, and gay-straight alliances all contributed to creating safer environments for queer students. Since these initiatives have been introduced, there has been rapid cultural progress for the queer community and Sadowski posits that we can demand more for queer students. He raises the following questions about the common discourse of safe spaces: “If a certain place in the school is designated as a safe space, what does that say about the rest of the building? Is safety the only thing to which queer students are entitled at school?” (Sadowski, 2016). The findings from this study speak to the sentiments that are at the core of these sentiments and looks to drag communities as a means of expanding the traditional approach to safe spaces for queer students.

The Definition of Safety

Participants describe drag performances as warm, secure, welcome, comfortable, a place that encouraged risk and embraced vulnerability. One participant even characterizes drag as her church where the community comes to “worship queer bodies.” These portrayals nod to a commonly understood definition of safety; however, participants hesitated to define drag performances as safe spaces when I asked them directly. Chloe, who is a burlesque performer, host, and producer, addresses this tension arguing that queer communities can never feel truly safe because they are at a higher risk to experience discrimination and violence.

There is value in having a space that feels safe to you but there is bigger value in daring to ask [for a safe space] in the first place. It’s a radical act of fierceness to ask to be safe. You can have nightclub like Pulse that is safe until it’s not...We’re all at risk all the time and that’s just a reality of being queer but asking for it is a radical act in my mind.

Chloe asserts that asking for a safe space is a radical act because queer individuals have
historically and continue to be marginalized by mainstream society. To exemplify this perspective, Chloe references the recent shooting at Pulse Night Club, an LGBTQ bar in Orlando, Florida that many perceived as a safe space until the attack. She suggests that creating safe spaces that completely shield LGBTQ people from harm is impossible because it does not accurately take into account the lived experiences of LGBTQ people. Chloe instead frames the goal of safe spaces as a means to counter the pressure and impact of a mainstream heteronormative. Women and queer individuals predominantly manage drag performances and queer bodies are the focal point of the entertainment. By centering the voices of woman and queer individuals, drag cultivates an environment that has the potential to combat the negative influences of heteronormative culture because it alters conventional power dynamics. Celeste, a burlesque and performers, speaks to the notion that power dynamics are flipped when queerness is the established norm. “I think the air of queerness is so dominant that it keeps people in check. I’ve seen people, particular straight men when they are a minority and they are self-aware and that’s cool. Its cool to see people are humble especially straight men, especially straight white men.” Chloe utilizes bachelorette parties to exemplify how these dynamics shift given the norms and expectations if the space. Bachelorette parties consist of predominantly straight women, and these parties are known to unintentionally and intentionally cross the boundaries understood in the space - e.g. inappropriately touching a performer, yelling inappropriately. Chloe asserts that the community norms built within drag performance counters the potential disruption cause by bachelorette parties.

If a bachelorette party walks in that’s fine because we’ve already done our work creating the space in the first place where a bachelorette party would even be the odd factor, where it wouldn’t the normative thing in that space. So you roll with the punches of live entertainment. A bachelorette party shows up, if they are too drunk you kick them out, if they are respectful great, if they need a little talking
the host is on the mic, the rest of us will be her heavies if she needs us.

The bachelorette party can be labeled as the “odd factor” because the community has constructed a space that prioritizes queer identities. If the bachelorette does not respect this space, Chloe notes that the community has the power to decide what to do in the space - they can kick them out or call the behavior out publicly. This position helps to mitigate conflicts that pose a danger to the community as depicted through a story by Regina, who is a host, performer, producer, and self-described femme. She recounts an incident when a particularly drunk, straight presenting, couple was making loud inappropriate comments to the performers culminating in the male partner touching a performer. From the microphone, Regina stopped the show and addressed the situation. She asserted that she did not remember what she said but, whatever it was, not only shut down the couple but triggered the audience to participate as well. Thomas, a drag king who was present for the incident, states that “it made everyone [the audience, performers] feel safer to have it said out loud, like this happened, it was bad, we don't like condone it. We will take care of it. That reinforced how safe they [the producers] intended on making the space.” Directly confronting behaviors that violate norms demonstrates that the space will cater to the needs of the queer and non-heteronormative community. Each member of the community is accountable for the maintenance of the space. Chloe illustrates the different stakeholders of the drag performance community through the image of concentric circles:

There are concentric circles of community. There’s the community of people you work with, the performers, who you maybe share ideas with or maybe you have long discussions with before the show about what you are trying to achieve on that night or maybe it’s just people in passing whose work you really admire that speaks to you so you want to be part of the experiences. Then there are the regulars who know what to expect so you don’t have to do too much explaining but they are going to help you bring other people in the space on board. They are going to invite people who haven’t seen you perform but might like it. Then there
are people who are only going to be your community for a night and you hope they leave with something whether it’s something positive or whatever the worst thing would be for them to leave with nothing and all of those communities are important in a different way.

The first circle of community is the relationship that performers have with the other performers. This relationship is built at rehearsals and during shows or after shows. This circle models the behavior for space setting the tone and introducing the conversation through their performances. The next circle contains the regulars, who consistently attend performances but might also bring new people to the space. This circle helps to maintain the norms of the space because they understand what the performers are trying to convey and what the space should feel like for an optimal performance environment. Then there is the circle of people who only come for one night and Chloe hope that the experiences impacts them in some way, whether it is positive or negative. The image of the concentric circles demonstrates how each member of the community is distinct but interacts to create the drag performance community; a community that encourages it’s participants to celebrate their identities and own their experiences.

Making a Safe Space: The Venue

The image of concentric circles offers a framework to understand the interactions that occur between the various members of the community. However, these circles do not exist in a vacuum and the physical venue where these performances happen also plays a role in building community. Most drag performances happen in a bar, which in part is due to necessity but also has historical context. The venue and the producer of the performance need alcohol sales to make a profit and historically, bars were the only spaces where queer individuals could express their desires. Bars that cater to queer communities are part of a lineage that offers a respite from the struggles of everyday life. The bars where the drag performances were held accentuated this
feeling of respite through decor that made them feel like an alternate reality. One bar had a western theme where miner’s lamps hung from the walls and another bar featured saint statues that peaked over the shelves of alcohol. The ambiance and structure of the bar contributed to understanding the space inside the bar, which was meant to be distinct from the outside world, a space dominated by queer values.

The venue contributed to creating a community that valued queer identities not only by widening the divide between the bar and society-at-large but also in the way they supported performers. This includes promoting safety and boundaries by providing spaces for the performers that are separate from the audience. These spaces, similar to a green room, provide performers with a reprieve where they can put on their makeup and costumes. This space is not only a courtesy to the performer but protects performers from potentially dangerous situations that can occur before and after performances. Several performers cited venues that did not have these separate spaces as unsafe while others enjoyed the time they get to spend with other performers. Sadie is a drag king, movement artist, host, and teacher, who emphasizes the importance of having space with a sufficient green room where he can gather himself before and after a performance. Sadie indicated how difficult it was to perform when venues did not have a proper space for performers to get ready. This caused concern for performers to even physically arrive at the venue; performers would have to make a choice to come in full make-up and risk violence on the street or arrive at the venue, get ready in full view of an audience who might invade the personal space of the performers, or spend money on cab fare they did not have. In addition, audience members tend to take more liberties with boundaries as the night goes on so having a separate for performers ensured that they felt comfortable performing. Audience members invading the personal space of performers is a particular concern for many of the
performers who state that audience members expect performers to enact their personas off stage or they use the time between sets to ask performer's personal questions about their gender or sexuality that might not be appropriate. Sadie further discussed how he appreciates a space with a legitimate stage and staff who are responsible for picking up clothes and other props after each act. These are elements that the venue can address to create a space, in which performers feel comfortable and safe performing.

Making a Safe Space: Relationships between Performers

The time before a show can be crucial time to connect because it provides the opportunity for performers to sync about their upcoming performances i.e. what they are hoping to portray and generally facilitates bonding amongst performers. Performers can be involved in multiple shows per week so these relationships are vital to a successful show. Several performers noted that they strive to attend each performance early in order to mingle with other performers. They consider this time to be just as meaningful as the performance themselves. Participants cited the relationship they have with performers as essential to building a community that values queer identities because how the performers work with each other sets the standard for the audience.

The relationship that performers have with each other reflects the kind of relationship they seek to create with the audience. These relationships are supportive and encourage performers to explore their art and their identities. Regina discusses the support she received from another host when performing at her show. She was hesitant to perform because her act touched on personal experiences highlighting the influences of street harassment and objectification. She asserted that the host persistently encouraged her to perform even when she tried to withdraw from the show. Similarly, Jay, who is a drag king and producer, discusses the support that he received from the community when he began performing. He at first came to
watch his friends' shows but soon took the stage to perform. For Jay, this notion of giving back and supporting the community is vital because the community has played such a role in his own development. Even if he was unable to produce any other shows, Jay asserts that he would continue to offer a drag performance night with an open format so members of the community could continue to have the opportunity to perform or try drag for the first time. There was a palpable and fierce sense of loyalty to the community, even if that community is not consistent night over night. Billy, who is a drag king and producer, states that the performers who participate in his shows know that he will support them unconditionally. "In my squad, I’m yours until you tell me to leave.”

Making a Safe Space: The Host

The host is the liaison between audience and performer and models the behavior the audience should show moderating the space as necessary. The hosts that I observed relied on humor to convey a welcoming energy to call participants into the community but also a firm ability to call out negative behaviors. Regina strives to ensure that everyone's needs are met but does so with warmth and humor.

A good host knows what every person needs to feel invited. Looking at this audience, everyone is different and everyone needs something a little different. You also want to be entertaining, to be funny but also warm at the same time. I like to be sarcastic but it needs to always feel warm and never feel unsafe. I think part of it may be that I have a spent a ton of time in nightlife - in attending nightlife events. I have experienced hosts who have made feel a whole lot of different ways, sometimes really badly. The host says something really offensive or a host tries to have a persona that's bitchy or something. We have all been through so much and we need a little tenderness on that stage.

Regina began hosting after being embedded in the community as an audience member at drag performance shows. She approaches her hosting duties with a reverent and genuine love for the
performances and the way in which she regulates space reflects this.

I was just in awe of everything they were doing. I loved drag kings. I loved how what they were doing was really ironic and it was like this critique of masculinity and whiteness heteronormativity. Many of them were masculine identified transmasculine identified, genderqueer so they were also celebrating their own masculinity. It walks this line of celebrating queer masculine bodies that have been told they are unattractive or rejected and reframing that through a boyband narrative when suddenly they are taking on this super desirable location with their bodies but they are also critiquing it so I was a super fan.

Regina values the drag performance space as an important opportunity for queer performers to own their experiences. When she calls out the negative behavior of an audience member or tells a joke to shift the mood, she does so to ensure that the performers “feel like the rockstars they are” on stage. Chloe describes process of reading the room as a “spidey sense” that developed over time and can help figure out what audiences need. Thomas mirrors these sentiments asserting that maintaining the space as a host derives from a genuine love for the audience and the performance.

It's not my little tag line when I say I love you guys. It's because I really do love you guys. It's actually wildly genuine and that's probably key because people can sense disingenuousness from a mile away. I do think that having [theater] training and being comfortable on stage is something that is pretty useful.

While the hosts emphasize the importance of being genuine when they facilitate the performances, they also explicitly rely on explicit guidelines. Billy does a call and response with his audience, which creates a connection with the audience and begins to encourage the feeling that they are a community. Regina introduces shows with an explanation of how to show support to the performers through tips and through applause or making noise. The tip demonstration was born out of a need both to increase tips for performers and to welcome people into the space. The tips allow the audience members to know how they can interact with the performers and the ways in which they are encouraged to show their support. The audience members, therefore,
become active participants, along with the host in creating the space.

**Making a Safe Space: The Relationship between Audience and Performers**

Drag performance necessitates an interaction between audiences and performers, which further builds community. Performers incorporate the audience into their acts i.e. folding props and audience members can provide the feedback and validation to performers immediately. They can tip, cheer, and yell, which enables a performer to be vulnerable and authentic on stage. This validation does not only serve to encourage the performer as they go through their acts but also serves to validate the performer’s identities because drag is focused on the body through lip synching, clothing reveals, make up, etc. Chloe asserts that “you put on your makeup looking in the mirror and feel really alone or you do it in a room full of people and get the feedback that your experience is valid and you still deserve to be in a room full of people.” Victor, a drag king and a producer, suggests that tipping emphasizes the importance of consent and autonomy for performers and audience members. Audience members are empowered to show their appreciation through tipping; they can wave a dollar to show their appreciation and performers will come over and dictate where they are able to put the dollar i.e. leaning over or pointing to a body part. To ensure both performers and audience members feel comfortable in the space, Victor asserts that there must be consent regarding tipping or any other physical contact. Quincy, a burlesque performer, exemplifies that the audience can play a significant role in ensuring the space remains safe for performers. She is part of a performance troupe whose regular audience members call themselves “agents.” She describes the role of agents as follows:

They are super fans. Most of the performers are agents so I’m an agent. They also have audience members who are like an army. They roll into every show for the most part but they will shut somebody down. The first time I performed there, this guy kind of got in my face and no one knew him ... and I shut him down. I don’t remember what I said and he pushed me. Before I turned to grab someone, two
agents who I never met had already grabbed him by the shoulders and he was gone. I turned around to look for the producers because they didn’t have bouncers for the shows so I couldn’t go to a bouncer and I was like who’s in charge but it didn’t matter...[sic]

Quincy describes an experience where an audience member had behaved inappropriately toward her after show and the “agents” intervened when there was no other staff to alleviate the situation. This experience demonstrates the responsibility that audience members feel to ensuring that the community norms are maintained and that the expectations of the space are met.

The audience ensures the physical aspects of the space are met but they are also a witness to the performer's experience, recognizing their identity as something worthy of observation. The performances are often rooted in the personal experiences of the performers so this validation can be particularly powerful, especially for queer individuals who might not receive this affirmation elsewhere. Chloe speaks to the power that kind of performance holds:

Some art happens alone in a room. Mine does not. Drag does not. Even if art does happen alone in a room, it’s not created in a vacuum. Performance art of any kind when it’s good, when it’s well crafted, it takes into consideration the needs of an audience. I don’t get on stage just for myself. I get on stage to share an experience with people in an audience so everyone in the room matters. If they agree with me, if they are my friend if they are someone who likes my work, they matter. If they don’t agree with me and they don’t like my work and they are my enemy, they still matter because we are sharing an experience.

The power of the performance lies in the shared experience that happens between performer and the audience, Chloe considers her audience when she creates her work but is not concerned with whether or not the audience likes her work and the impact of a shared experience takes precedent. The drag performance space provides the opportunity for authentic interaction with an audience, though the nature of this interaction can be surprising. Josie discusses an experience
she had performing at a biker festival in North Dakota. She had been worried about their reaction but was surprised by how open they were.

My life experience mirrors nothing about these folks, or my perception of what their lives might be, my chemistry as a Jewish person and my relationship to the queer community. I was really worried about that and it ended up being one of the most joyful magical transformative performance experiences of my life. If I am only performing to people who I know are going to agree with me and accept me - I need those people to always come to shows, I love them - but my goals are to get out of that a little bit in some of what I do and talk to the people who would not otherwise associate with me.

Josie speaks to the value of performing in front of people who might not otherwise be exposed to her because she can push boundaries but set the parameters for this occurs. She exemplifies through an experience she had performing for “tech bros.” At first she was concerned that this audience would not accept her but she was surprised by their positive reactions. “These people who would not look at me on the train. They would swipe no on tinder if they saw me. These are people who otherwise would have no reason to talk to me whatsoever. They are understanding what I do and enjoying themselves in some way.” Josie highlights the ability of burlesque to provide an authentic interaction between audience and performance. This interaction allows both parties to see the other in a new light, a deeper perspective on their experiences and humanity.

The authentic interaction that Josie speaks to the kind of safe space that drag creates, which includes moving beyond one’s comfort zone. Billy posits that drag’s pushes boundaries in a way that does not endanger participants; an aspect that is particularly important for queer people who must have “thick skin and the ability to say I feel uncomfortable without saying I feel unsafe.” Billy grew up in the Bible belt and had difficult experiences of bullying and harassment. He uses drag as means to explore feelings of isolation as well as for it to be entertaining. For example, in one act he is a preacher pouring whiskey on himself and in anothe:
he is a pink unicorn. Performance and the drag community allowed Billy to explore complexity of his experiences, both those that are painful and those that are joyful.

**Reclaiming Mainstream Narratives**

The safe space that the drag performance builds enables members of the community to speak for themselves, or in this case lip sync, and creates an environment where queer individuals can reclaim narratives that are rendered invisible by mainstream society. Lana is a drag queen, host, and producer. She begins her show valiantly, breaking through the darkness of the stage, her dress lit from end to end with light bulbs and takes the microphone, she declares:

What drag does is, it takes the normative narratives, the songs that we hear around us everyday, the imagery, the characters that we surround ourselves with and it squeezes our fabulous little queer bodies into it. The future of drag needs to be more than a wink or a nudge that the culture here is wrong. It needs to radically imagine new types of beauty - radically re-evaluating the world around us and writing new stories - fresh stories that put queer people right at the forefront, put our values of beauty and safety and home and love right up there at top

This opening monologue eloquently asserts that drag, as a medium, has the potential to be transformative because it reinterprets mainstream narratives that largely ignore queer communities. Lana provides insightful comments on the merits of drag performance but also contextualizes the performance that the audience is about to see. She frames the performance as not only providing entertainment but also as a means to be subversive. Drag performers use popular songs, movie scenes, and characters to create their acts interpreting them through a queer lens. By reinterpreting these narratives, performers challenge commonly held beliefs about gender and posit a new understanding of the gendered self.

At its core, drag portrays a heightened form of masculinity and femininity and pulls apart the mechanisms on which gender is based. Thomas comments on this idea:
The main thing that makes it [the performance] drag is that it plays with gender. For a lot of people, it's playing to the fascinating lie - if I were a man, if I were woman, what I would want to think what would I want to wear but it's also an outlet to explore idea of masculinity and femininity that are problematic, that are divisive...

Thomas describes two possibilities for why drag performers are drawn to drag as a medium to explore gender; the first speaks to the desire to experience the world as a different gender while the second addresses a desire to investigate specific aspects gender. The transformation into a performer's drag persona embodies the ways in which they utilize drag to interact with gender. Personas can be close to a performer's personal self, a complete departure from their personalities, or even celebrity personality that they have always admired. Sadie also hosts workshops to teach aspiring drag kings the tricks of the trade, from contouring to facial hair and how to strut on stage and has insight into the transformation process. Sadie explains the ways in which individuals internalize their transformation into their drag personas.

People conceptualize the transformation into a drag persona very differently. Some people feel there is this character or other person within them that is just dying to bust out. For other people, they are always pretty much themselves but then they transform into their drag persona and they are a more amped up fabulous version of themselves.

The transformation into the drag persona includes both external and internal changes. Sadie posits that putting on makeup and getting into costumes creates almost a ritual where the person becomes their persona. The motivation for choosing a persona differentiates between individuals who see their drag personas as a means to inspect new aspects of their personalities and those who see it as a new way to channel aspects of their personality they already understood. Sadie describes his drag persona as a more fabulous version of himself. In one act, Sadie starts as a Victorian gentleman but then transforms into a unicorn. This transformation to a more
flamboyant creature underneath demonstrates that everyone has the ability to undergo such a change if they feel that “finding their unicorn within” would not be a detriment or a harm to them. Quincy speaks to the notion that the physical transformation into her persona allowed her to be more confident on and off stage. “I like to say she is the extreme version of me. She indulges in the things that anyone has ever shamed me for or has made me feel bad about myself. She’s done it all.” Similarly, Jay asserts that his persona has allowed him to be less shy and examine different versions of masculinity that were not informed by dominant stereotypes. He is shy in his everyday life and has been able to become more confident in his performance.

“Anytime I made a leap or step forward with [my persona], I took my real self with it. Still behind it but a little more out of my shell, the more I can do on stage the more I can do in real life anytime I get bolder with my drag persona.” Jay describes becoming more comfortable experimenting with his costumes using materials deemed more feminine like mesh and pleather rather than solely utilizing traditionally masculine styles like cut off t-shirts and jeans.

Drag allowed me to see different aspects of masculinity that weren’t misogynist or sexist that were not about getting the lady. It also allowed me to explore feminine aspects myself which I never felt comfortable doing even at the beginning of my drag career. It allowed me to play with both masculinity and femininity and find more of a mix and find a level of comfortability with both of those things and not just be a hard ass about masculinity. [sic] The trans role models out there weren’t the greatest when I started so having a mix of people assigned female at birth who were female identity and trans men in the group from the beginning allowed there to be a gender fluidity for everyone in the group.

As a performance art, drag encourages the exploration of identity because performers choose how they appear but Jay describes an aspect of drag that moves beyond these performance elements. He asserts that the community he found within the drag provided him role models that represented the vast number of ways one can experience gender.

Drag communities influence the ways in which the performers internalize and experience
their performances. Community members, including audience members, play a significant role in how performers conceptualize their personas and the art that they seek to make. Thomas describes the evolution of his conception regarding his persona:

My initial desire as a king was to be a kind of swashbuckler hero dreamboat and fulfill those fantasies for me. Pretty quickly I realized that I just felt a little wicked in drag. I had some personal interactions and experiences where I was feeling really bad about myself as an individual... I had this feeling like if everyone thinks I'm a monster I'm going to go out and do it. From that moment, a majority of my acts the only thing that links them is that I am the villain. Some kind of a cad or a naughty person because people fucking love a villain because they really want to feel safe in their sinfulness with somebody.

Thomas channeled a conflict that he was having in his personal life through his drag persona. He initially was fascinated with the villains but then understood that his character could be an outlet for how he was feeling. He was able to develop his character both through his own understanding of his feelings and how his audiences perceived him. Thomas drew from an archetype and popular icon - the Disney Villain - and re-imagined this villain in his own stories. Drag kings are necessarily attempting to replicate these icons but rather take these icons and examine them through a queer lens. He argues that even if drag kings re-enact a Justin Bieber or a Rick James performance move-for-move they are still being subversive. He notes that at the root of it all, you are saying Rick James is a performance. Justin Bieber is a performance. If I can perform Justin Bieber, if I can perform Rick James, that probably means that Justin Bieber is performing Justin Bieber and Rick James is performing Rick James. It takes that superiority out of what they are doing because they are all just fucking peacocking. That's where I want to explore masculinity because it's about power most of the time so if you really do it imitate it has.

When drag performers interpret, popular icons, they challenge existing power dynamics associated with gender. Justin Bieber is thought of as a symbol of masculinity and all that is
associated with it such as swagger and charm. These mechanisms are often taken for granted when we experience them in our daily lives. However, when a drag king performs, these mechanisms are picked apart and laid bare for examination.

Drag performers illuminate what makes gender tick and challenge audiences to push their boundaries around their understanding of what gender means for their identities. Celeste, a drag and burlesque performer, discusses how performing enabled her to explore the construction of gender, particularly in conjunction with other aspects of her identity.

I wanted to be the child of Sophia Loren and Elizabeth Taylor but drag and Latina as fuck and trashy. I grew up in Muslim family. They are very loving and very accepting of me but I struggled with being a woman. My parents were very accepting of me but that level of modesty just felt stifling. I always had this sort of resentment toward the way men and women were treated even as a kid. I wanted to find a way to embrace that femininity and that’s how I got around to D because she is so fierce, she is so femme, that she is questionably maybe not woman.

Performance opened a path for Celeste to claim her femininity in a way that was not dictated by her family, religion, or anyone else. She examines what it meant to be a woman on her own terms and this has resulted in an almost hyper-feminine presentation that speaks to the aesthetic of drag queens. Celeste takes traditional markers of femininity and reconstructs them. For example, she will take a tampon out on stage, squeeze it into a champagne glass and drink it in front of the audience. These acts dictate to a message to the audience: “if you want to idealize me, you have to idealize all of me.” These acts encourage the audience to look beyond what they would initially perceive or think her as a woman.

I want to be a woman and do something on stage where people are losing sight of my body. With burlesque, you learn to reveal. You can be any shape or size and if you are good at what you are doing you can make people eat out of your fucking hand. I wanted to take that to a different level. I wanted to reveal without having it
be about my body anymore.

Celeste describes how she is able to control what the audience sees and when they see it. She refers to the "reveal" of burlesque, a term that refers the performer’s process of taking off their clothes i.e. the direction, the order. She wanted to use the method of the reveal in order to shift the audience’s expectations of who she is as a woman. The reveal speaks to the way in which the drag communicates messages about gender and identity because it is centralized in the body.

Drag Performers lip sync rather than speak so the audience must focus on their movements, the songs, their costumes, and props. Chloe suggests that there is a power in controlling how you are presented when performing, particularly because queer individuals are often deprived of this in everyday life. Part of Chloe’s act is performing with a snake and she suggests that this performance reframes how the audience sees her.

For me, as a five foot tall mostly femme presenting person, though not so much currently, there’s something pretty wonderful and empowering about being the snake lady. You’re sexy and you’re compelling. People are scared of you and that’s nice. For me personally that’s what the experience has been, to get to be the most powerful person in the room.

The performance afforded Chloe the opportunity to claim her identity and assert it on her own terms. Josie builds upon Chloe’s sentiments and discusses how the stage allows her to control how she was to be seen. Josie used the notion of the concept of a visual diet to explain that individuals become more accepting of a variety of body sizes when they see more of them.

Burlesque offers a mechanism for individuals to expand their visual diet and inherently paves a path to promote acceptance of a variety of body types. Josie even asserts that she has considered burlesque to be a “survival tactic.” As a teenager, she described growing up fat and not wanting her body to be visible but performing burlesque makes the body hyper visible and serves to
counter these messages. Josie states that she has not “created an act that’s like I used to not love my body and this is me loving my body” because the audience can see that from her performance. Even if they make assumptions about her body when she first hits the stage, these assumptions shifts as she performs. “The glamour that is coming off in layers leaving me with nothing at the end is so healing and is a continued recognition of my existence.” The “continued recognition” that Josie describes does not only reflect her individual experience of performing but stems from the shared experience that she has with an audience.

I think the big lie about burlesque is that it’s meant to empower performers. When in reality I think it’s meant to empower audience participants, people who are watching it. When it’s done at it’s very best, it’s this conversation that happens between performer and audience and it’s done with, what I have decided to call a radical vulnerability.

The conversation between audience and performer requires active participation from both parties. The performer is vulnerable and shares their experience while the audience actively participates, accepting and affirming the performer in their vulnerability. This interaction happens in real time and is crucial to creating a community where queer lives and experiences can be fully realized in a way that might not be possible outside of the space.

Reclaiming Experiences of Trauma

Drag empowers both audience members and performers to own their experiences and reclaim their stories from a mainstream narrative. While some of these experiences are celebratory, many of them involve trauma and assault because the queer community is more susceptible to violence and discrimination. Given this reality, drag performance is an important space for healing and a necessary act of survival.

The ability to portray negative experiences on stage allows performers to address the hurt these experiences cause with the support of their community. Celeste asserts, “getting onstage
for the first time was freeing, that sense I was able to reclaim my body and make acts about really horrible experiences.” She describes an act where she comes out dressed in raw meat, with a grilling knife and a silver platter. She strips out of the dress to reveal that she is covered in raw meat. She carves the meat off her body with the grill knife, “so it’s bloody, it’s gory it’s not vegan but it was really powerful.” Though the audience might be horrified, this reaction is important because calls attention to the feeling that she associates with the consumption of her body. While the topic is serious, it is still meant to be entertaining and gives a nod to the common trope that women are pieces of meat. Similarly, Chloe describes the process of creating an act that is both meant to entertain and speak to a harmful experience. She outlines an act where she is explicitly addressing street harassment and the infantilization of women. In this act, she wears a pink dress but when the dress comes off she has a diaper, a pacifier and underneath the diaper is a “vagina dentate costume.” As an audience member, this reveal feels surreal and a bit a jarring. This act is meant to reclaim the moments where she is called sweetie and baby on the street without her consent, when she is left “wishing that I could take back those moments and wishing that the people doing that could see the rage and violation of these moments.” The harassment that Chloe articulates occurs in public and by performing this act in public, she is at once utilizing the support of a community to heal while also presenting a call attention to stop being a bystander to this harassment.

Drag performances through music, costumes, and dance powerfully conveys the complex associated with the negative situations that the performers experiences. Josie describes how she uses the music to translate these experiences:

My rarest booked act is one that about intimate partner violence, which is this classic showgirl act. I have my arm in a sling and black eye and it’s just the process of getting through the strip tease but because my arm is in a sling my costume is
coming off into upsetting ways. The song ends and I’m not done with my strip tease so I do the rest in silence. I’ve looked out at the audience and have seen people crying. I’ve cried during the act. I’ve had conversations with people after the show. It’s something that I’ve experienced, a lot of people experience it and we are socialized not to talk about it. It’s painful and we are punished for it.

The silence of the act had an incredible impact on the audience and reflected the pressure placed on individuals who have experienced trauma to stay silent. There are not many opportunities to speak about trauma in public and drag performance offers an essential opportunity to share these experiences, authentically, in front of a supportive community. The aspects of performance, like costuming, music, etc. enables the performer to dictate a portrayal that is true to their experiences. Regina speaks to this notion,

I had been experiencing a lot of depression and going through some really hard times re-living traumatic thing that happened to me several years ago. I’d do this act I was dressed in these really heavy chains from home depot. I felt like I was living in this moment of trauma and healing and I took off the bricks - what didn't really end up being impactful from stage was that the dress underneath had been made of tiny little bricks. It was a brick pattern so I was trying to communicate that I was taking off these weights but it was still really a part of who I’m so the tiny brick fabric was meant to communicate the way that pain and grief are woven into the fabric of who I am. It was also heavily rhinestoned so it was definitely supposed to be an anaesthetization of grief and trauma: campy, high glam, glittery grief on display.

The heavy chains and the brick fabric were integral parts to Regina’s performance and her ability to portray the feelings she associated with her trauma. She did not separate the experience from the performance but rather asserted these feelings through the visual aspects of the performance itself. The grief was “glittery and campy” because Regina aligned the elements of her performance to illustrate this. The audience does not need to know exactly what happened nor do they need to identify with Regina’s exact concept to understand these feelings.

The performer has the agency to choose what aspect of their experience they put on
display and what elements of the performance they choose to emphasize. This ability to choose is crucial for the performance space to remain a space where performers can heal from their traumatic experience. Josie tells of an experience she had with a performance art piece where the public could interact with her freely and she would refrain from movement or speech. During this time, a member of the public assaulted her. Josie describes how difficult this experience was, both emotionally and artistically. She set the parameters of the piece and felt obligated to continue with the performance but was in pain. Josie reflects on this experience and asserts that it was an important opportunity to learn about setting boundaries and she ultimately feels stronger in her conviction as a performer, though she prefers to have learned this message through a different avenue. She states that the ability to choose how, when, and what she performs is empowering and a necessary part of affirming her identity.

I’m on stage and I am still choosing. It's still done with my creative output at the very center of it. I am driving the wagon. I am not being dragged by the wagon. That has been a fork in the road for me artistically both for my feelings of safety as a performer and my decision to do work and what I want that work to look like.

Drag performance is not a utopia for the queer community and performers engage with the realities of their lived experiences. However, drag performances provide the unique opportunity for individuals to control how their story is told and who gets to hear it. For marginalized communities, this type of empowerment cannot be understated or overlooked because it is so often unavailable. Safety, as a monolithic concept, is unattainable even for communities that deeply understand its value. Drag does not propose a false promise of safety but it does offer a space where individuals can be affirmed for who they are and how they want to perceived.
Conclusion: How Do We Re-imagine LGBTQ Safe Space in schools?

Drag performance creates a safe space for queer individuals to narrate their own their experiences and a community that seeks to affirm these experiences. Each act creates its own world in which the performer controls how they move and how they are seen. Performers, and by proxy audience members, can celebrate who they are and discover new elements of their identities. They can wear a feather boa, or douse themselves from head to toe in sparkles - they can live out their boy band fantasy or face the monsters from their nightmares. Despite these wonderful, fantastical occurrences, drag performance roots itself in reality and acknowledges the full extent of what it means to queer. As Regina articulates,

Through the act of the lip sync, to re-embody a lyric and change what it means, changing the site of the body that the discourse is emerging from. That fantasy is really powerful. We are definitely creating this fantasy that we aren't marginalized since we aren't marginalized in that space or we hope that we feel less marginalized. Glamour, glitter, grit whatever it is, everything doesn't have to be covered in sequins, if that's not what the act is communicating but I think there is something really powerful about glamour as a form of self love in which you are creating a space where you are beautiful and important

Drag performance offers a safe space for participants but this safe space does not exist in a vacuum. The drag performance space operates under the assumption that negative experiences, many of which stem from systematic oppression will happen. This space does not exist to provide complete protection from these experiences but instead provides the participants with the opportunity to directly interact with this reality. This approach to safe spaces contradicts the discourse that informs queer safe spaces in schools where policies and initiatives strive to form spaces that shield students from negative experiences. Queer students deserve safe spaces that acknowledge their full humanity and they deserve spaces that both acknowledge the difficulties of their queer identity while simultaneously celebrating what is beautiful.
Drag performances establish a framework to understand how queer safe spaces in schools can move beyond the current paradigm of safety. These communities constructed spaces that elevated queer identities and worked to acknowledge the ways in which queer identities intersected with identities of race, ethnicity, class, etc. Participants echoed the Roestone Collective assertions, which state that safe spaces must actively work to be intersectional and specifically to decenter whiteness. The producers I spoke with asserted that they consistently aim to ensure their shows represent a diversity of body types, ethnicities, gender presentations and that they are not classist and ableist. Billy stated that producers should not even call their spaces queer if they are not intersectional. The nature of drag is conducive to portraying the ways in which identities intersect because it allows performers to portray their own narratives and how they experience these identities. Celeste discusses how performing allowed her to understand how her identities existed together. “You’re not Latina enough. You’re a white Indian. You’re too light. You’re not American enough. Performing is the one place I can really be. All of those things that aren’t enough, are more than enough, are fuel to my fire on stage.” Performing enabled Celeste to be comfortable with all the different aspects of herself and she asserted that this gave her the confidence to be comfortable when she was not performing. She recounted a story about how performing encourages her to have an honest conversation with her parents about her identity, which ultimately brought them closer. Drag provided the opportunity for Celeste to explore her identity in a way that was authentic. While it may not be realistic to bring drag performances to schools, there are other mediums that could provide queer students with similar opportunities to explore their identities - theater, writing, art - even claiming that a space is open for students to explore all of their identities rather solely focusing on their queer identity, like a GSA does, could have a transformative impact. In addition, drag performances
paid homage to their history and demonstrating to queer students that they have a similar lineage to other queer people can encourage them to see their identity in a larger context. Teaching about queer history can occur within spaces like GSAs or they can be integrated into classrooms or conducted as a separate class.

Drag performances establish an understanding for how queer safe spaces in schools can move beyond the current paradigm of safety and can foster an environment where students thrive. One of my concluding interview questions to each of the participants was, if a younger self could see you now, what do you think they would say? Most participants flipped the question and told me what they would tell a younger self. However, participants largely wanted their younger selves to know that spaces like drag performances existed and in these spaces, their queer identity cannot only be tolerated but can thrive. They further wanted their younger selves to know that they could have the confidence to exist within these spaces. Some of the participants came from small towns that were not accepting of their identities and they wanted younger selves to stand up for themselves and to have the confidence to be who they were sooner. Others came from accepting communities but felt burdened by the pressure to come out and be activists. They wanted a younger self to know that it was okay to ask for help. Several participants suggested that they would not have even have been able to imagine that the drag or burlesque existed but it was something that they had been searching for innately. Sadie sums up the power of drag simply, “there is this idea that playing around with gender and exploring it is a good thing and if that was just brought to society, in general the world would be such a better place.
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