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Celebration, Resistance, and Change: Queer Gender Performers of Color as Public Pedagogues

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CELEBRATION, RESISTANCE, AND CHANGE: QUEER GENDER PERFORMERS
OF COLOR AS PUBLIC PEDAGOGUES

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Philosophy

by

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June 2014

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Abstract

This research project expands academic understandings of queer of color subjectivity through the critical investigation of queer gender performance and its pedagogical potential for queer communities. With queer theories of color, critical communication pedagogy, and public pedagogy theories providing support, I utilize qualitative interviews fore-fronting poetic transcription of personal narratives in order to explore how queer gender performers of color engage in intersectional queer negotiations of identities and provide new possibilities for the everyday performance of queer identities. I call upon existing scholarship in queer gender performance in order to prove the centrality of such performances to queer social life, as well as the potential of queer gender performers to co-construct critical consciousness with audiences around intersecting categories of identity like race. Ultimately, I build on previously published work in Communication in order to build a case for how queer gender performance serves as a form of public pedagogy through which audiences and performers theorize and embody queer subjectivities. This proposed study is fundamentally *critical*, intended to expose and transform social inequalities in queer communities and to expand academic conversations around queerness and social justice. Ultimately, I contend that each queer gender performer of color I interviewed espouses a deeply personal form of public pedagogy that works to disrupt the whiteness that governs queer performance spaces and empowers

audiences to do the same in their everyday lives. Onstage and off, queer gender performers of color engage in *celebration* of racialized queer identities, encouraging one another to honor difficult paths toward performance and the legacies they will leave. These performers practice active *resistance* to the glorification of whiteness in queer gender performance culture, their brown bodies living testaments to the contrary. At last, together, these performers have become agents of *change* through performance, intent on speaking to audiences in ways that illuminate their collective struggles and unstoppable, collective strength. This study is but one forum through which academics and activists alike can begin to unpack the collective potential of queer gender performers of color not only speak back to silence and erasure, but to disrupt privilege, transform existing spaces, and empower audiences and one another to accept no less than absolute creative and political agency.

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This dissertation is for my father, Rao Pattisapu. I live my life to make you proud.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction: Why Queer Gender Performers of Color.....	1
Queer Gender Performance and Race.....	21
Queer Gender Performance as a Communicative Phenomenon.....	23
Interventions across Race.....	29
Queer Gender Performance as Public Pedagogy.....	35
Project Rationale.....	37
Chapter Two: Queer Theories of Color and Critical Communication Pedagogy.....	42
Queer Theory and Communication.....	44
Interventions across Race.....	49
Critical Communication Pedagogy and Queer People of Color.....	53
Bridging Queer Theories of Color and Critical Communication Pedagogy: Toward Queer Public Pedagogy.....	61
Chapter Three: Interviewing, Personal Narrative, and Poetic Transcription.....	75
Personal Narrative.....	77
Interviewing and Personal Narrative.....	85
Poetic Inquiry and Transcription.....	98
Research Procedures.....	103
Chapter Four: Conversations with Queer Gender Performers of Color.....	109
Wanderlust and the Pedagogy of Self-Acceptance.....	119
Edward Scissors and the Pedagogy of “Boldness”.....	132
Vinzie Rey and the Pedagogy of Passing.....	146
Reese and the Pedagogy of Community Accountability.....	158
Miz.Mojita and the Pedagogy of Praxis.....	168
P-Cock and the Pedagogy of Ambiguity.....	178
Concluding Thoughts: On Public Pedagogy and Activism.....	192
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications.....	200
Contributions to Communication.....	206
Limitations and Future Directions.....	213
Concluding Thoughts.....	217
Epilogue: Drag Queen Bingo.....	221
Works Cited.....	226
Appendices.....	247
Appendix A: Informed Consent.....	247
Appendix B: Interview Solicitation.....	249
Appendix C: Interview Questions.....	250
Appendix D: Notes.....	252

Appendix E: A Song for Many Movements by Audre Lorde..... 253

Chapter One: Introduction: Why Queer Gender Performers of Color

In viewing drag—good or bad—I often engage it as a pedagogical moment. It is a moment in which questions of what to teach and how to teach it are asked. It is a moment where questions of what to know and why one needs to know it are addressed, a moment when questions of utility and positionality are answered— if for no other reason than how it relates to the desire of the viewer (the reader, the student and the curious onlooker). I like those moments when the spectator has no doubt about the seeming incongruity between sexed body, socialized gender performance and political intentionality. I like those moments when drag performers, for good or bad, remove portions of their pastiched images and reveal not their true self, but the performative nature of drag and hence the performative nature of gender itself. (Alexander “Querying Queer Theory” 351)

I. Tonight, I incarnate for the first time as a drag performer. My name is Oscar Mayer, and my trusty drag king partner, Jimmy Dean, and I are “The Sausage Boyz,” poised to offer a (hopefully) sidesplitting rendition of “Dick in a Box,” a popular song parody from the sketch comedy series, *Saturday Night Live*. Although I perform regularly in academic and community spaces, I have never before taken to the stage in attire of the masculine persuasion: eyeliner-drawn mustache and goatee adorning my plump, brown face, fat gold chains dripping down my thrift-store blazer. I agreed to try it tonight for the sake of this benefit drag show that the local queer community has thrown for the only LGBTQIA youth drop-in center in the town, Rainbow Haven. Although my button-up shirt itches against my sweaty, Saran-wrapped D-cups, and I can hardly resist the urge to pull the wad of socks from between my panties and jeans, there is remarkable liberation

in this moment. I know that I will likely be terrible, my performance of masculinity humorously unconvincing. But I can't wait to set to the stage, a bearer of lessons I do not even know I have to teach.

The audience is a mixed bag: local bar-dwelling queers, ordinarily antisocial philanthropists and members of Rainbow Haven's Board of Directors, and the occasional professor or student from the university where I am earning my master's degree. Despite the diversity represented here along age, socioeconomic, and gender identity and presentation spectrums, most folks have something in common: they are white. In this small, Midwestern city, over 80 percent of the population is white. That percentage decreases slightly when students from larger cities in the state travel here to attend college. However, on summer nights like this when most students of color have returned home to the cities, crowds become mostly pale faces staring intensely at any brown or black body that graces the stage. The youth we serve at Rainbow Haven reflect these demographics: of the 10-12 youth who come to the drop-in center regularly, only one identifies as a person of color. Although it is often quite difficult for me to be a person of color in this town – let alone an extremely out, queer person of color – I volunteer for Rainbow Haven because I know just how painful it can be for queer youth of color to find no community or solidarity with other queer people of color. I have felt that void acutely for the past twenty-three years growing up here, and I want to do what I can to help ease that sense of alienation for our queer youth of color.

And so I am here tonight, waiting for the music to start, waiting for the moment to release Oscar Mayer onto this makeshift stage. I am here because I care so deeply for our

queer youth and I want to help raise money for them. I am here because I believe so strongly that my brown body should be here tonight, to represent for our queer youth of color the inclusivity that I only daydreamed about as a younger queer. I am here because even though I do not know what I am doing or how embarrassing the result could be, my queer brown body has stories to tell that I know will not be heard here in this bar, in this town, unless I cast aside my inhibitions and speak loudly enough for this crowd to hear. And although the youth I serve at Rainbow Haven will (thankfully) never know about this performance, I am doing it for them, and for the historicity our queer brown bodies share.

By the time the music starts, sweat pools in the cleavage between my bound breasts. I wiggle my hips in order to thrust the wrapped gift box that is secured to my waist by my belt loops, collecting spare change and dollar bills from the audience as though I harbor the world's most inappropriate piggy bank. The experience is terrifying, but in that moment I know that drag performance will be one of the ways I will make a mark on my small world. Through drag performance, I will render visible my queer body of color, dispelling this community's myth that drag kinging is a white phenomenon, and pave the way for other queer brown bodies to engage in artistic, political action. I do not yet know each incarnation my drag persona will take in time, but I am ready to explore each of the possibilities with strength, humility, and impeccable fierceness.

II. Just over a year later, I become a doctoral student at a prestigious private university in the western United States. As a first-generation, low-income college student, I rely on the generous financial package offered to me in exchange for my services as a

graduate teaching instructor (GTI) of Communication. I cannot believe that from my working-class roots, I have made it all the way here (Dews and Law). Accompanying the feelings of anxiety and fraudulence that many teachers-in-training feel (Overall), I obsess over the prospect of how I can and should perform my queer femininity in this pedagogical space. As Samek and Donofrio note, I eternally reconcile the privilege and invisibility associated with my feminine queer identity in the academy:

As such, my passing performance in classrooms and other professional settings may afford some comfort from the threat of transgression and difference associated with queerness. At the same time, however, in those moments where I want my queerness to be intelligible or ‘read,’ it requires other forms of disclosure and/or performance. These dual limitations of hegemonic femininity should not be surprising given the reciprocal reinforcement of sexism and heteronormativity. (Samek and Donofrio 34)

I have spent the previous two years adapting my feminine queer body into an academic environment that, although not entirely liberated from the “violence of heteronormativity” (Yep), does welcome radical queer projects and bodies. After having learned to negotiate that academic space – to both render myself visible *and* to confront the privileges my normative performance of gender affords me – I have been thrust out of it, forced to start anew. People behave differently here. Most students here complete homework assignments, earn high grades, and rarely wear pajamas to class. Here, students seem to possess a greater sense of entitlement to quality education in which instructors are fully available and present. In a similar vein, GTIs here dress differently. Unlike at my former institution, they do not wear jeans paired with respectable blouses. Here, it is all blazers and business frocks, shiny loafers and high heels. Graduate students do not drink together on nights and weekend and socialize, and many earn multiple

publications before graduating. I learn quickly that women-identified GTIs tend to take these rules more seriously (Overall). I need to buy new clothes. I need to adopt new behaviors. I need to remake myself within the constraints of this department's social norms. Although there are a greater number of brown bodies represented here than in my previous department, these new-to-me standards of professionalism reproduce a different climate of whiteness I must learn to navigate.

Samek and Donofrio note that graduate school is the primary source of professionalization for aspiring scholars. Between the walls of the graduate classroom, students learn what it means to be a professional scholar – to embody the norms of gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability that will earn one cultural capital in the discipline and later, in the job market (30). Through graduate schooling, we learn not only on the theoretical level; we are trained to become convincing actors on the academic stage, donning professionalism like a heavy costume (31). Furthermore, queer graduate students learn to perform in what Morris (cited in Samek and Donofrio) terms “academic drag,” or the compulsory embodiment of heteronormativity and gender normativity in the academic realm. We learn that although we can choose to engage in queer projects or to be open about our queer identities, we risk sacrificing the professionalism that is such an important tool for us in our journey (47).

At my new university, I dress “professionally,” in ways that stand in sharp contrast to my preferred performances of femininity. As a young GTI and graduate student, I feel I must use expensive clothing to appear more credible with my students, peers, and professors. I wear all black, high heels, and subdued makeup. I carry a smart

briefcase, try not to smile, and talk less frequently about my partner and my community activist work. I come to fit in fairly well. Through observations of the people around me, I have detected the lessons of professional decorum that brown and white bodies embody and teach, but about which no one will speak directly. I am dressed for success, but I am dressed as someone else.

III. Since moving to this new city, the only drag I have performed is of the academic persuasion. It has been almost seven months since I set to the barroom stage as a “Backstreet Boi” for another of Rainbow Haven’s fundraisers. Although I miss the exhilarating feeling of being seen onstage, breasts bound, long hair slicked back, what I miss more is the freedom to perform femininity in the way I prefer, beyond the constraints of white, heteronormative, academic professionalism (Samek and Donofrio). The first three months in my department have molded my embodiments of femininity and queerness, my attitudes about professionalism, and my wardrobe into entities that I do not recognize. On a daily basis, I feel even more hidden than the first time I did as Oscar Mayer, and it is not a liberating containment of my identity. The choices I have made to adapt myself have gained me the respect and acceptance I desire, but they have estranged me from myself.

One evening, my partner stumbles across the social networking page for *Rise Above*, a local drag king and burlesque troupe. As queers from a small Midwestern town, the notion of an entire group of drag kings and queer burlesque performers is highly appealing; in our previous city, we were some of the only drag performers who were not biologically male gay men who perform as women. We have heard about *Rise Above*, but

have been too shy to attend a show, much less to audition to perform with the troupe. However, feeling lonely and alienated from a queer community in our new town, we decide to reach out to the troupe. They agree to let us share the stage with them, and, in the process of dreaming up our first performance, Patti LaFemme is born.

As Patti LaFemme, I am a so-called “faux queen,” or a self-identified woman who dresses and performs as a woman onstage. My motivations for inventing and embodying Patti are twofold. First, by performing femininity in highly exaggerated ways, I call attention to the social-constructedness of a gender performance that is deemed natural when it emanates from my body. Like queer Cubana performance artist Carmelita Tropicana, I use camp or *burla* – a representation strategy typically associated with gay male culture – to parody my femininity in ways that illuminate its construction in relation to my racialized queer body (Muñoz 119-120). Through performance, I highlight the complicated and interconnected relationship between my gender, racial, and sexual identities. As Muñoz notes:

Lesbians of color have complicated reductionist and antiracist understandings of what lesbian identity might be. Carmelita [Tropicana], who is a cultural production herself, always appearing in character, defies notions of a fixed subjectivity. Her queer and *cubana* body is unstable and fragmented; it registers on its surface the intermingling of the identity bits that make up her performances and persona, because she appears and participates in various forms of media... always within character, undermining notions of authenticity and realness in favor of queer self-making practices. (139)

Through Patti LaFemme, I re-appropriate queer gender performance in ways that resist the conflation of my racialized body with stereotypes of about Indian femininity and heterosexuality. I remake femininity through comedic lenses as a means of

destabilizing its perceived naturalness and accounting for the ways in which racialized experiences nuance gender (Butler “Bodies that Matter”; Halberstam “Mackdaddy”; Troyano).

Performing as Patti also allows me to embody femininity in the ways academia and traditional drag performance communities reject. Patti is the pink high-heeled, butch-and-genderqueer-loving, false eyelash-wearing, sexually uninhibited debutante that my queer, brown, working-class academic body has never had the freedom to be, lest I sacrifice the cultural capital that comes with performing femininity in compliance with whiteness, academic professionalism, and heteronormativity (Calafell “When Will We All Matter”; Samek and Donofrio). In my performances, I distance (queer) femininity from assumptions of fragility, whiteness, sexual propriety, and reliance on butch-femme aesthetics for survival (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri; Keeling). Patti LaFemme is the loud, strong, brown, sexually promiscuous woman who lives inside of me as I navigate heterosexist, racist, and fat phobic cultural spheres. When I let her out to play, she causes trouble.

Like other drag performers, I sought a stage name that both represents my given name and signifies physical or personality characteristics I claim (Bradford 16). A derivation of my surname combined with a nod to Patti LaBelle, the celebrated black American songstress who asserts outspoken, confident femininity in her musical performances, Patti LaFemme is my chosen drag identity. In the act of naming my feminine performances of gender and in signifying my reverence for a strong woman of color, I disrupt dialogues about the boundaries of drag performance and to challenge the

whiteness that circulates through so many drag communities (Troka, LeBesco & Noble 8).

While I know that my normative gender identity and performance were formed “in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny,” (Muñoz 5), femininity has always felt more or less *comfortable* to me. Unlike many gender variant or transgender individuals with whom I perform, my physical characteristics have never disconnected me from the gender I *feel* emotionally and psychologically (Feinberg 67). When my female friends from grade school went through their tomboy phases, I wore ornate, ruffled dresses and black patent Mary Janes to school each day with pride. My conservative, Indian immigrant father insisted that I perform the role of a proper Indian girl by adorning myself with hair bows and thick basket-weave necklaces made from real gold that tangled with the hair at the nape of my neck. In reflecting on these earliest memories of performing femininity, I see my gender and racial identities as inextricably linked. Tate explains that whiteness and heterosexuality have long defined norms of feminism and femininity. Therefore, queer and racialized bodies are always marked as performing femininity incorrectly (Tate 2). In my lived experiences, I feel the effects of the standardization of white femininity. Like Margaret Cho, I am claustrophobic, constrained by the limited ways in which my female body of color is allowed and expected to behave (Pelle 23). In my biracial body, I performed compulsory femininity, but never entirely *correctly*, not like the white girls in their bike shorts and bright flowered T-shirts.

My contentious relationship with femininity has followed me into my adult life. Many lesbians and gay men with whom I have socialized since I came out have chastised me for failing to “get in touch” with my lesbianness. Translation: you are not butch enough. “Real” queer women are not feminine. Whereas my early performances as a drag king garnered mostly positive responses from audiences and fellow performers, my transition into the role of Patti LaFemme encouraged an onslaught of confusion, suspicion, and even condemnation from the same communities. Surkan notes that in drag performance communities, those who perform butchness or gender non-conformity offstage are often believed to be more “authentic” in their staged performances of gender (172). She notes:

The more masculine the performer’s everyday gender presentation, the more theoretically transgressive the performance is understood to be, since the cultural anxiety surrounding gender deviance is not allayed by a return to femininity; the drag is never entirely removed. These elements of drag king performance are further complicated by issues of race, in the sense that butch/femme identities have different valences in different cultural contexts. (Surkan 169)

I have been accused of “slumming it,” of jeopardizing the craft of drag, and of making performance spaces unsafe for “real” drag performers. Others who approve of my femininity objectify me. They regard me as a hypersexualized *L Word* lesbian – the unassuming and nonthreatening object of male desire. In their eyes, I become the passive, silent queer woman who can be seen only in opposition to masculine-of-center queer bodies (Keeling 42; Shoemaker “Pink Tornadoes” 323). I have discovered that I cannot simply exist comfortably in my preferred gender expression without enduring these questions of authenticity and hypersexualized assumptions. In so many ways, I have

come to regard my identity as *impossible*, as a fictitious object of my desire. Femininity (in the way I want to perform it) behaves like the toxin to my body that I can neither expel nor reclaim in any meaningful way. Although I know that I have important lessons to teach as Patti LaFemme, my audiences and fellow performers, most of whom are queer, white, and masculine-of-center, seem unwilling to audience the wisdom I have gained through lived experiences this queer, feminine, brown body. As Kumbier notes, “Even though I was a woman performing femininity, the femininity I was performing was not my daily version; it was an excessive, sexy femininity I appropriated and bent to my will” (195).

At the crux of these assumptions about and attitudes toward my brown, queer, feminine body, I have relied a great deal on my partner, Jimmy – to help carve a space for me within queer gender performance communities. As a white drag king, Jimmy leverages the cultural capital he has with drag queens and kings to advocate for me, for my right to enter and perform in the space. With love and care, Jimmy uses the privilege he has in those spaces to speak against the stereotypes and myths that precede my body. In arguing my case, Jimmy has never attempted to speak for me. Rather, he asks his fellow drag kings to consider the possibility that I could be more than an interloper or a frilly accessory. Jimmy believes in the radical, transformative politics I stand for, and advocates for me even at the risk of losing his own credibility.

On our first night performing together with *Rise Above*, Jimmy and I take nervously to the small wood laminate stage in the queer dive bar at the edge our new city. In these earliest moments, I ponder the possibility of engaging my queer body of color in

resistant performances of femininity that challenge the reproduction of whiteness and gender norms in queer spaces. A dearth of conversations in my everyday life and in the interdisciplinary literature (Troka, Lebesco & Noble 4) has significantly limited my perceptions of what a drag performer could look like and what she could stand for. I struggle to envision how, like Whitney, I can portray femininity radically (199), in ways that grant my queer body of color voice in drag performances and in my everyday embodied negotiations of gender, race, and sexuality. I grapple towards acceptance and celebration of my body and encourage my fellow performers and audience to partake of the journey with me, unsure of what we will learn together.

In queer communities, gay and lesbian clubs are primary social spaces in which individuals seek refuge from the heteronormativity and homophobic attitudes that circulate through culture (Corey, “Performing Sexualities” 147). They are sites where queer identities are negotiated, affirmed, and celebrated, and within which queer community building occurs. Familiar to these clubs are *queer gender performers* – the drag kings and queens, burlesque dancers, and in-between personae who provide both entertainment and opportunities to (re)imagine queer identities and expressions of queerness on and off the stage. Queer gender performers are comic relief, sharp critics of gender and sexuality, and heartfelt, uplifting spiritual guides. Adorned with glitter, high-heeled shoes, chest binders, facial hair, and false lashes, queer gender performers are living canvases upon which queer subjectivities are painted, blotted out, and repainted.

Using queer theories, Communication scholars have attested to the potential of queer performance to critique gender and sexuality, re-conceptualize identities, and

establish collective agency between performers and audiences (Bennett and West 301; Evans 200; Moreman and McIntosh 118). Often oriented explicitly toward social justice, queer gender performance exposes the social constructedness of identity categories, encouraging audiences and performers alike to engage in the radical (re)imagining and (re)making of those categories (Halberstam 108). Just as queer theories function in the academic literature to push back against the confines of identity, queer gender performers expose for public audiences the fluidity of identities and the potential of queer bodies to resist interpellation into heteronormativity (Butler “Bodies that Matter” 109). Queer gender performance is a tangible example of the revolutionary aims that queer theories assert on the page, thereby making such theories *matter* for queer bodies in the world.

Although gay and lesbian clubs and the queer gender performances that occur within can serve as catalysts for liberation, they often affirm and replicate many of the forms of marginalization that permeate mainstream society (Johnson, “SNAP!” 123; Moreman and McIntosh 118). Racism, ableism, transphobia, and sexism continue to circulate in queer communities, often through the very spaces to which individuals flock in effort to escape persecution around queer identities. Incidentally, the queer gender performances that occur within these clubs are not immune to the forms of oppression that are present; many queer gender performances reinforce privileges like whiteness and able-bodiedness and thereby exclude and contribute to the oppression of many members of the queer communities that attend productions.

Scholars root critiques of queer gender performance in queer theories of color, which assert that for racially marginalized members of queer communities, public

negotiations of queer identities involve increased risks and challenges associated with membership to multiple marginalized groups (Anzaldúa, “To(o) Queer the Writer”; Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies”; Lorde; Muñoz). For this project, I adopt Slagle’s definition of queer theory as a tool through which scholars critique and dismantle *heteronormativity*, or the normalization of heterosexuality as the only viable option for sexual orientation (313). Butler notes that heteronormativity is accomplished through ritualistic performances of normative gender and sexuality that are made natural through repetition (“Bodies that Matter”). Queer theorists disavow assimilation into heteronormativity as an ultimate goal of political action, and advocate instead for the explosion and transformation of sexual and gender identity categories (Slagle 314). I conceptualize queerness as the radical reimagining of sexual and gender subjectivities and agency. Drawn from theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw 141), queer theories of color contend that in addition to negotiating ideological struggles with heteronormativity and homophobia, queer bodies of color must confront material manifestations of racism and white privilege in the larger society *and* in predominantly white queer communities. Traditionally, queer theories have failed to account for these complexities. As Johnson notes:

In order for queer theory to be true to its identified mission, it must truly be inclusive without delimiting. It must re-map the terrain of gender identity without removing the fences that make good neighbors or the hills and valleys that shape desire. (“‘Quare’ Studies” 352)

Similarly, because queer people of color have had less access to queer gender performance venues throughout history, queer gender performance culture itself continues to be a relatively white phenomenon wherein white privilege and the continued

silencing of queer bodies of color continues (Lock Swarr 76). Scholars who deploy queer theories of color in order to examine queer gender performance foreground goals of inclusion, diversification of the literature, and increased understanding of intersectional queer identity negotiations (Brookey and Westerfelhaus; Brushwood Rose and Camilleri; Evans; Halberstam “Mackdaddy”; Keeling; Muñoz).

Because queer gender performance is such a significant part of queer social life, it is important for academic communities to understand how such performances can perpetuate or challenge the racism, sexism, transphobia, and other forms of privilege that mark gay and lesbian communities. Furthermore, because queer gender performance is one of the most visible components of queer culture, scholars of gender and sexuality must begin to inquire about how the art that queer gender performers create works to challenge or strengthen privileged identities within queer communities. More specifically, using queer theories of color (Alexander “Embracing”; Alexander and Warren; Anzaldúa “To(o) Queer the Writer”; Johnson “‘Quare’ Studies”; Muñoz), Communication scholars must examine how queer gender performance functions as a tool of critical public pedagogy around intersectional queer identities, working to reify or resist systems of power and privilege for audiences. In addition to fleshing out the literature in queer theory, such investigations can promote critical consciousness among non-academic queer communities.

Well-suited to accompany queer theories in the examination of queer gender performance are theories of critical communication pedagogy and public pedagogy, which explore the potential of communicative acts to disrupt or perpetuate power and

privilege in informal educational contexts (Fassett and Warren 2; Giroux “Responsibility” 60). I advocate for the extension of those theories to the gay or lesbian club in order to examine the pedagogical potential of queer gender performance. This combination of theories is important for one main reason: although queer theories of color advocate for consideration of the materiality of queer of color subjectivity, much of the literature is still highly abstract and decontextualized. Through critical communication pedagogy and public pedagogy, we can anchor queer theories of color in conversations about materiality in order to explore how they resonate with queer gender performance communities.

As a queer woman of color who has performed regularly for three years as a faux queen and occasional drag king, I have experienced firsthand the ways in which whiteness, or the all-encompassing, unspoken standardization of white bodies, behaviors, and cultural values (Warren “Doing Whiteness”), mutes the voices of queer gender performers of color and renders brown bodies invisible in queer gender performance communities. From the racial identities of the musicians whom performers choose to imitate, to the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among audiences, whiteness seeps into every crack of the queer gender performance experience. Additionally, as a student of critical intercultural communication, critical communication pedagogy, and queer studies, I have confronted a dearth of social justice-oriented research around queer people of color in the Communication literature. These interrelated experiences have illuminated for me the need for critical Communication scholarship that addresses the resourceful ways in which queer people of color struggle toward visibility and transformation from

inside exclusive and sometimes hostile climates. With a focus on queer gender performance as a vehicle toward these political and pedagogical aims, critical scholarship can liberate queer bodies of color from the margins of queer communities and academic theorizations alike.

Social justice scholarship is a debated and evolving concept in Communication, with some theorists arguing that it is an occasional methodological and theoretical approach to research with underserved communities (Dempsey et. al; Frey) and others conceptualizing it as a paradigmatic commitment that should inform everyday actions and research agendas alike (Conquergood “Rethinking Ethnography”; Flores). Despite the differences in opinions about what social justice scholarship does, there are a few general consensuses about the conditions necessary for conducting such work: social justice scholarship refuses the assumption that academic research is apolitical and it cannot ignore the pain and suffering that occurs in marginalized communities (Conquergood “Rethinking Ethnography”; Dempsey et. al; Flores; Frey; Madison “Critical Ethnography”). Through conversations about how Communication scholarship can promote inclusivity in the academic canon, how it implicates researchers, and how it can help effect material social change for marginalized communities, scholars have established several major tenets that frame the current debate.

First, the examination of academic privilege is a frequent topic in conversations around social justice scholarship. Flores asserts that in our privileged roles of academics, we have a remarkably large “sphere of influence” that enables us to not only draw attention to social injustices, but to help ameliorate them through our research, pedagogy,

and service on and off campus (646-647). Academics can exercise our responsibility to promote inclusivity and social justice by engaging in micro acts of resistance in the everyday, like scrutinizing recruitment procedures and redesigning curricula to include marginalized voices, to larger-scale uses of our privileges like publishing scholarship that calls attention to an academic climate of exclusion (Flores 648). These actions should not be taken sparingly, but should be deployed dutifully and with a sense of urgency (Dempsey et. al 266-267).

Second, social justice scholarship is not an “intervention” into social injustices, but a necessary human response to pain and suffering that is informed by academic ways of knowing (Conquergood “Rethinking Ethnography”; Dempsey et al.; Frey; Madison “Critical Ethnography”). Social justice scholarship is about figuring out how we can use our advanced, specialized academic knowledge to draw attention to and there is inequity, underrepresentation, or human suffering (Dempsey et al. 264). Put simply, theorists of social justice scholarship regard academic interventions into oppression as pieces of a larger puzzle, rather than as salvation (Dempsey et. al; Madison “Critical Ethnography”). Failure to regard social justice scholarship in this way furthers centuries of academic research that centers elite perspectives and further marginalizes underrepresented or disenfranchised communities (Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith; Toyosaki). Social justice scholars accept that their roles in promoting social change are important and highly influential, but they are not the only players in the game; communities must have majority ownership of their own pursuits of social justice (Dempsey et al.; Frey; Madison “Critical Ethnography”).

Finally, social justice scholarship is a vehicle toward multiple forms of transformation. In addition to helping effect material social change for struggling marginalized groups who are the subjects of study, social justice scholarship can help to transform academia itself. As an approach to scholarship that typically earns scholars fewer accolades than highly theoretical, social scientific research, social justice scholarship serves a higher purpose of connecting academics and the communities they research on a human level (Conquergood “Rethinking Ethnography”; Dempsey et. al; Madison “Critical Ethnography”). Those who participate in social justice research, pedagogy, and service do so with the knowledge that such endeavors may not “pay off” professionally, and thereby radically reinterpret what it means to do *important* scholarship. Scholars must do social justice scholarship for reasons that transcend the achievement of lines on a curriculum vita, but rather contribute a small piece to the overall wellbeing of humanity. In the words of Frey, social justice research “... involves attempting to make a difference *through* research rather than *from* research” (Dempsey et. al 262, emphasis mine).

In my research with queer gender performers of color, I join in these conversations and hone my own understanding of social justice scholarship and pedagogy. I align myself closely with Goodall, whose definition of social justice scholarship is as follows:

I don’t define myself as a “social justice scholar” but instead as a communication scholar interested in social justice. For me, the two concepts – communication and social justice – are joined by theoretical and practical concerns that are organized by an ethic of care and fairness; habits of minds that value civil dialogue and alternative ways of knowing and being in the world; and a commitment to the use of communication in

all of its forms to help coconstruct a better – and more just – world.
(Dempsey et. al 257)

For me, this research about how queer gender performers of color confront whiteness through performance is not an academic intervention into a marginalized community; it is about considering how I can best utilize my intersecting and equally important roles as performer, community activist, and social justice academic to interrogate whiteness and racism. I approach social justice scholarship with the strong conviction that Communication theories and methods have the potential to make visible the forces of power, privilege, and identity negotiation present in culture (Dempsey et. al; Flores). As a critical academic who is a queer gender performer of color, I feel I have a responsibility to put Communication to work to expose the injustices in my community. Of equal importance is my belief in voices from marginalized communities to expand academic knowledge and make it more inclusive (Flores). These dual allegiances have led me toward a social justice approach to scholarship that requires my constant self-reflexivity about how I am privileged in some ways and marginalized in others, and about how my decision to engage queer gender performers of color in conversation carries with it as many risks as it does potential benefits.

I assume the risk that academic audiences may greet this research with suspicions that it lacks rigor (Dempsey et. al 267). Similarly, I risk that members of the queer gender performance community whose stories I excavate and expose may struggle to reconcile my dual “insider-outsider” roles (Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith). For me, doing social justice scholarship means understanding and assuming these risks and using my body as a bridge between academic and my marginalized communities in efforts to dismantle

distrust of academics and the treatment of social justice scholarship as less influential or rigorous than empirical research or other forms of qualitative research. Like Toyosaki, through my research I honor the inarguable fact I bring all of my privileged and marginalized identities to the academic and community realms and that each piece of me is important to my scholarship and activism (77).

Queer Gender Performance and Race

Queer gender performance is a cultural phenomenon illuminative of queer resistance to dominant ideologies. An umbrella term, I define queer gender performance here as any embodiment of identity intended or perceived to challenge heteronormative constructs of gender and sexuality. As Halberstam notes, queer gender performance carries the potential to highlight what has previously been invisible and to expose the social constructedness of identity categories that are ripe for transformation (“Female Masculinity”). Although earlier academic work regards queer gender performance as acts that are always staged for audiences, newer scholarship considers the potential of individuals to engage in queer performances of gender and sexuality through everyday embodiment (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri; Johnson “SNAP!”; Perez and Brouwer; Samek and Donofrio). The inclusion of this vein of thought has diversified theorizations about queer gender performance, thereby enabling scholars to gauge more fully the implications of such performances for how individuals negotiate identity categories.

Joining the influx of scholarship around queer gender performance is increased attention to how race intersects with queer performances of identity. Long absent from the interdisciplinary literature, considerations of race prompt scholars to rethink whether

existing theories about queer gender performance encompass fully *intersectional* queer identities. Scholars who advocate for intersectional considerations of queer gender performance contend that the unique cultural, historical, and political locations of queer gender performers of color necessitate more contextualized academic projects that account for the lived, material realities of queer bodies of color (Halberstam “Female Masculinity”; Kumashiro; Piepzna-Samarinha; Shoemaker “Queer Punk Macha Femme”). Although these projects do not negate previous theorizations about queer gender performance, they do urge scholars to consider how existing projects promote whiteness and fail to account for the tangible racial variations across the queer gender performance spectrum.

Central to both racially conscious and colorblind theorizations about queer gender performance is the assertion that such performances have the potential to effect real change for queer communities (Bennett and West). Queer gender performance serves as a megaphone through which historically silenced queer communities can voice political, cultural, and social concerns (Kumashiro). Queer gender performance has the potential to highlight the social constructedness of identities, thereby pointing toward possibilities for transformation (Halberstam “Female Masculinity”). Additionally, through queer gender performance, queer bodies seek refuge from harsh social realities, cultivating solidarity and imagining utopian co-cultural spaces (Muñoz). From everyday micro-acts of gendered resistance to decadent staged performances, queer gender performance is a vehicle toward social change for queer communities.

Queer Gender Performance as a Communicative Phenomenon

In exploring queer gender performance as a communicative phenomenon, scholars have focused on two primary dimensions: the *intentions* behind queer gender performance and the ways in which audiences *interpret* queer gender performance. Although intentions and interpretations are sometimes disparate, the dialogic aim of queer gender performance itself charts new territory within which queer relationality can form (Evans). By theorizing multiple aspects of encoding and decoding queer gender performance, scholars have exposed how such performances facilitate connections within queer communities and beyond, thereby fostering intercultural and intracultural solidarity. Scholarship around queer gender performance thus far has generated three major veins of inquiry: queer gender performance as a tool for exploding identity categories; queer gender performance as a means toward material social change, and queer gender performance as deeply influenced by context (Brookey and Westerfelhaus; Brushwood Rose and Camilleri; Evans; Halberstam “Mackdaddy”; Kumbier; Samek and Donofrio; Shugart; Surkan).

Perhaps the most passionate assertion scholars make around queer gender performance is that more often than not, it transcends the realm of purely aesthetic and strives toward social justice goals. Although often framed in popular culture as acts of frivolity, queer gender performance can transform stereotypes depicted in popular media and help audiences to (re)imagine restrictive notions of identity (Evans; Kumbier; Surkan). Because characters and story lines depicted in popular culture reach widespread and diverse demographics, they carry the potential to dismantle oppressive binaries,

untangle gender from sex and sexuality, and challenge more conventionally “recognizable” performances of queerness (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri, Shugart). For example, through the performance of *ambiguity*, comedian Ellen DeGeneres floated between identities, thereby failing to make her body recognizable through mainstream notions of queerness *or* heterosexuality. As Shugart notes, “Albeit illogically, sexuality as culturally defined is inextricably linked with gender; that is, feminine women and masculine men are assumed to be ‘normal’ and thus ‘normally’ heterosexual” (31-32).

As queer bodies gain increased access to representation in the media, audiences receive even more opportunities to read and (re)imagine queer subjectivities. Films and other popular media featuring gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and queer (GLBTQ) characters grant additional space through which queer gender performers can either affirm or contradict what audiences may anticipate, in effect expanding restrictive notions of queerness (Brookey and Westerfelhaus). However, critical media scholars Brookey and Westerfelhaus warn that despite the transgressive potential of such characterizations, increased access to representation comes at a price. GLBTQ characters and public figures are often expected to be “on their best behavior,” having no faults of which to speak (114). These policing practices, scholars argue, contribute to the continued dehumanization of queerness; representations are forever at the mercy of the heteronormativity that circulates through all social arenas (Brookey and Westerfelhaus; Evans). Ultimately, in order for queer gender performance in popular culture to impact how audiences conceptualize queer subjectivity, such performances must be persistent, aggressive, and proceed in chorus (Brookey and Westerfelhaus; Evans).

Halberstam argues for the potential of individual bodies to effect similar change in their personal relationships and communities (“Mackdaddy”). By embodying gender queerly in the workplace, in relationships, and in community and social environments, individuals can engage in the transformation of restrictive notions of gender at the micro-level. Butler (“Gender Trouble”) and Halberstam (“Female Masculinity”) have explored at length the potential for butch or masculine-presenting female bodies to do this disruptive work. Through disavowing the confines of femininity, butch lesbians both challenge and rewrite gendered scripts (Butler “Gender Trouble”; Halberstam “Female Masculinity”). Fewer scholars, however, have suggested the potential of queer or lesbian bodies to occupy femininity *queerly*, thereby transforming identity categories from the inside out. Brushwood Rose and Camilleri, Piepzna-Samarinha, Samek and Donofrio, and Shoemaker (“Pink Tornadoes”) attest to the potential of feminine queer bodies to threaten normative categories of gender and sexuality and expose “fatal illusions” that prescribe performances of femaleness and femininity. As Brushwood Rose and Camilleri assert:

... femme might be described as ‘femininity gone wrong’... femme is the trappings of femininity gone awry, gone to town, gone to the dogs. Femininity is a demand placed on female bodies and femme is the danger of a body read female or inappropriately feminine. We are not good girls – perhaps we are not girls at all. (13)

Similarly, according to Shoemaker, femme lesbians’ agency comes from the constant game of hide-and-seek in which they are involved. “The femme’s agency operates like the eye of the storm, only visible in glimpses as the source of power inside a spinning and dyslexic desire” (Shoemaker “Pink Tornadoes” 319).

People of color who embody femininity queerly have the potential to expand femininity even further by divorcing it from its assumed relationship to whiteness in addition to heterosexuality (Muñoz). The very existence of queer feminine bodies of color stands in direct opposition to the normative foundations of femininity, and thereby signals possibilities for alternative queer realities that do not rely on heterosexuality *or* whiteness for survival (Keeling; Muñoz; Troyano). Whereas masculine queer female bodies of color must sometimes reproduce hegemonic masculinity in order to be recognizable in culture, feminine queer bodies of color can survive by maneuvering coyly, just beyond the grasp of conventional understandings of gender, race, and sexuality (Keeling 42). Although in order to be recognized queer feminine bodies of color must declare queerness through actions or words, the radical work of reinvention begins after such declarations occur, in the ways in which queer bodies of color defy the cultural “truths” associated with femininity (Keeling 41; Muñoz 139).

In addition to expanding *ideological* constructions of gender and sexuality, queer gender performance has the potential to effect deeply felt, material social change for marginalized queer communities. Motivated by struggles to achieve visibility, queer gender performers – both in the every day and on the stage – bring visibility, as well as monetary resources, to their home communities (Bennett and West; Perez and Brouwer). By co-constructing activist consciousness within relationships or with audiences, individuals who engage in queer gender performance have the potential to confront interpellation into heteronormativity (Perez and Brouwer), as well as the acceptance of social injustices (Bennett and West). Through comedic, parodic, and sometimes

emotionally challenging performances, queer gender performers gesture toward “utopic place[s]” through which individuals can heal from and repair the wounds of erasure, heteronormativity, and social imbalances (Bennett and West 311). Regardless of how small or large such transgressions and community-building practices might be, they engage individuals in a process of queer relationality through which significant structural change can eventually become possible (Bennett and West; Perez and Brouwer).

However, not all queer gender performances in popular media and everyday life are necessarily oriented toward social justice. For example, comparative analyses of several community-based performance troupes revealed that while some performers regard their roles as public figures as a form of responsibility to heal social ills, others understand queer gender performance simply as a means of entertainment, art, competition, and self-expression (Hakken; Halberstam “Mackdaddy”; Rupp, Taylor and Shapiro). Although queer gender performances from queer people of color, drag *kings*, and other marginalized groups within queer gender performance communities frequently attend to social inequities, performances from more privileged queer gender performers – like white performers and the much more visible drag *queen* community, tend to cater toward aesthetics (Halberstam “Mackdaddy”; Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro; Surkan). Although some queer gender performers privilege social activism more overtly than others, both types of queer gender performance can effect social change (Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro). In their comparison of a drag king troupe with a drag queen troupe, Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro argue:

Both troupes use entertainment as a means of education, both create solidarity among queer audience members. And both allow us to see the

ways that consciously performed gender has the potential to change both the performers and their audiences, perhaps even to dismantle rigid and binary gender and sexual categories and subvert heteronormativity. (290)

For these scholars, the transformative potential of queer gender performance does not stop at the level of ideology. Queer gender performance has the potential to raise awareness and cultivate agency in ways that are keenly felt by marginalized communities in need of visibility, healing, and celebration.

In a similar vein, in order to understand fully the impetuses and aims of such performances, we must be able to account for the complex ways in which context and history shape gender, race, and sexuality. More than just the backdrop against which queer gender performance takes place, context and history influence every piece of the phenomenon from who performs to whom audiences those performances (Corey “Performing Sexualities”). Knowledge of the political histories of queer communities is imperative to understanding the landscape of contemporary queer gender performance (Bennett and West 311). For example, because affluent gay white men were the first members of queer communities to gain access to representation and performance spaces, they have had more time and more resources with which to cultivate queer gender performance communities, and therefore, are more visible today than any other queer gender performance demographic (Bennett and West 311; Lock Swarr). Similarly, because queer theorists have lauded butch lesbians as the “true” advocates of feminism and gender transgression, femme lesbians continue to experience marginalization within queer communities, often facing accusations of performing heterosexuality and of complying with heterosexist and heteronormative regimes (Brushwood Rose and

Camilleri). According to Bennett and West, audiences of queer gender performance should acknowledge that through queer gender performance, performers are “always speaking a historicity” that has cultivated current bodily and ideological experiences (Bennett and West 311). Furthermore, the very spaces within which queer gender performances occur play a role in the cultivation and acceptance of such performances. As spaces in which the negotiation of non-normative sexual and gender identities is encouraged, gay and lesbian bars not only facilitate, but *possibilize* queer performances of identity both on and off the stage (Corey “Performing Sexualities”).

Interventions across Race

External factors like context, history, and relationships affect the development, delivery, and interpretation of queer gender performances (Corey “Performing Sexualities”; Halberstam “Female Masculinity”; Kumashiro; Muñoz). However, until recently, sparse attention has been paid to the ways in which race as an intersecting category of identity influences the motivations, modes, and outcomes of queer gender performance. Pioneering work on race and queer gender performance has stressed the inadequacy of scholarship that does not account for race; to produce scholarship that is colorblind is to erase intersectional experiences and to deny the complexities of queer gender performers’ lives (Halberstam “Female Masculinity”; Kumashiro; Muñoz). Although minimal, the work around queer gender performance and race attends to three main phenomena: white queer gender performers enjoying visibility at the expense of queer gender performers of color; the potential of queer gender performers of color to

challenge multiple forms of marginalization simultaneously; and the erasure of the history of queer gender performers of color.

Queer people of color are marginalized multiply, forced to negotiate both racism and heterosexism. As one consequence of this multiple marginalization, when queer communities attain political visibility, queer bodies of color are often forced into silence as the more privileged white bodies enjoy social advances (Brookey and Westerfelhaus; Lock Swarr). The success of some members of marginalized groups is often directly contingent upon the continued subordination of multiply marginalized bodies within those groups (Evans; Lock Swarr). More specifically, Evans and Lock Swarr argue that although queer gender performance carries with it extreme transformative potential, this success is often directly related to the continued subordination of marginalized groups within queer communities. As Evans notes, "... under the cover of drag's new transgressive status, some very old-fashioned notions about race and gender are being smuggled back into popular culture..." (Evans 199-200). In other words, although queer gender performances are gaining access to representation, such progress depends upon the continued marginalization of other groups, namely queer people of color and queer women.

One way in which queer people of color experience this continued marginalization is through underrepresentation in popular culture and social movements. Although queer gender performance has made possible increased access to representation across multiple arenas, queer people of color struggle to catch glimpses of themselves, with many representations often directly contradicting their identities and experiences of

queerness (Piepzna-Samrainha). In representations of white, cisgenderⁱ, and affluent queer experiences, queer people of color, transgender folks, and anyone else living on the margins of the margins continue to revel in silence, finding themselves in very few mainstream notions of how queer looks and feels in their lives (Halberstam “Female Masculinity”; Brushwood Rose and Camilleri).

In short, the histories and lived experiences of queer communities of color have been and continue to be subjugated and covered over by whitewashed interpretations of queerness. This legacy of subjugation is the root of current inequalities in the queer gender performance community (Ferguson; Halberstam “Mackdaddy”; Muñoz).

Ferguson and Halberstam (“Mackdaddy”) encourage scholarly excavations of these subjugated histories in efforts to uncover the hidden stories that can yield insights into the origins of modern oppressions. Through these excavations, scholarship can dispel myths that circulate about queer/communities of color, thereby extending the canon of queer theory to encompass more bodies (Ferguson). More specifically, such excavations can shed light on the historical tendencies of queer communities of color to strive toward solidarity, rather than to replicate the spirit of competition and exclusivity that has pervaded white queer communities traditionally (Ferguson; Halberstam “Mackdaddy”; Lorde).

Such excavations must be made accessible to and done in conjunction with community activists and queer gender performers of color; strictly academic explorations replicate the same systems of exclusion that have silenced queer communities of color for decades. (Anzaldúa and Moraga; Kumashiro; Troka, LeBesco, and Noble). By sharing

this liberatory task with public intellectuals and figures like queer gender performers, queer theorists can counter the tradition of “academic ‘experts’ speaking for performers,” thereby returning to queer communities of color the agency that is rightly theirs (Troka, LeBesco, and Noble xi). Recently published volumes like *The Drag King Anthology* promote such efforts, allowing personal voices to speak louder than elite voices. It is important to note, however, that queer gender performers have been engaging in processes of collective healing through storytelling for quite some time; queer women of color (Anzaldúa and Moraga), queer Muslim women (Zukic), and queer Asian-Pacific American activists (Kumashiro) began excavating and reconstructing subjugated histories long before academics deemed such endeavors important.

Despite such powerful and persistent efforts to infiltrate the academic canon, queer people of color continue to experience erasure. Citing the whiteness implicit in queer and feminist communities and academic research, Chicana feminists Anzaldúa and Moraga encourage women of color to establish our own scholar-activist communities that center queer bodies and bodies of color (173-174) Similarly, as a “sister outsider,” Lorde calls into question how even the most radical communities of color and queer communities can fail to create space for bodies that are multiply marginalized. Given these painful legacies of exclusion, Anzaldúa and Moraga and Lorde advocate for the radical self-distancing of queer bodies, bodies of color, and queer bodies of color from mainstream queer and feminist communities in exchange for queer and feminist approaches that are more intersectional and inclusive.

In Performance Studies, Muñoz takes up these queer black and Chicana feminists' calls for scholarship that centers queer bodies of color. His theory of *disidentifications* encourages queer people of color to speak back to the standardization of whiteness in queer communities. Citing the unlikelihood that regimes of power will shift significantly enough to center queer bodies of color, Muñoz and other scholars assert that queer gender performers of color can claim much more agency by intentionally coloring outside of the lines (Alexander "Querying Queer Theory"; Halberstam "Mackdaddy"). Ultimately, these scholars assert that although mainstream representations of queer gender performance may parade as liberatory, cultural critics must be willing to peer beneath for racist, misogynistic, and otherwise subordinating messages, lest we cage some bodies by freeing others.

Through radical *disidentification* (Muñoz), queer gender performers have the potential to disrupt normative constructions of identities by challenging multiple forms of oppression simultaneously. Because queer gender performers of color are uniquely positioned at along the imbrications of marginalized identities, any effort to critique one category of identity through performance inevitably reverberates to other categories (Halberstam "Female Masculinity"). This act, though often unintentional, is unavoidable, as intersectional identities are tightly bound (Halberstam "Mackdaddy"; Kumashiro). Where white queer gender performers embody racial identities that operate invisibly, queer gender performers of color occupy the space of the excess, the unruly, and the grotesque (Pelle; Shoemaker "Queer Punk Macha Femme"). Queer gender performers of color like comedian Margaret Cho and Leslie Mah of *Tribe 8* expel notions of docility,

civility, and femininity often placed on queer female bodies of color, thereby stretching and even reinventing the potential of queer gender performance to explode identity categories (Pelle; Shoemaker “Queer Punk Macha Femme”). For queer gender performers of color whom occupy intersectional and often ambiguous, uncharted spaces, “... carve out space for resistant voices within mass culture, envision social change, and enact a performative and political critique of oppressive social norms” (Shoemaker, “Queer Punk Macha Femme” 295).

Although many white queer gender performers have the *desire* to critique race through performance, that task is often more difficult for white bodies, as whiteness relies on invisibility for reproduction (Halberstam “Mackdaddy”). Parodying “invisible” whiteness, Halberstam argues, is much more difficult than parodying blackness, which remains “fully available for repetition, impersonation, and appropriation” (“Mackdaddy” 117). Though black masculinity remains ripe for interpretation through queer gender performance, the politics of which queer gender performers can and should approach the task are muddled. Of this dilemma, Halberstam writes:

Cross-ethnic performances raise obvious concerns about the meaning of the performance and the ability of the drag king to pull it off in a convincing way. It is also obvious that the performance of Whiteness by a Black king and the performance of Blackness by a White king have very different meanings and resonances. (“Mackdaddy” 125)

Therefore, although white queer gender performers can, with tact and responsibility, critique race in conjunction with gender and sexuality, queer gender performers of color have additional license through which to re-imagine restrictive notions of identity.

Through bodies that are multiply marginalized by heterosexism, racism, Orientalism, U.S. American imperialism, and a variety of other forces, queer gender performers of color "... cannot ignore the ironic ways in which stories that challenge one form of oppression simultaneously contribute to others" (Kumashiro xxii). Latina drag queens (Moreman and McIntosh), queer Asian-Pacific American activists (Kumashiro), and U.S. American drag kings (Halberstam "Mackdaddy") continually engage in the task of incorporating culturally-specific, experiential knowledge into staged queer gender performance in effort to bring visibility to that which has been consumed by a culture of whiteness. These performers not only bring visibility to underrepresented experiences, but also bring a sense of pride to the silenced communities to which they claim membership (Moreman and McIntosh).

Queer Gender Performance as Public Pedagogy

Existing work around queer gender performance speaks in many ways to the potential of such performances to function as dialogic, pedagogical exchanges with audiences. Scholars illuminate the capacity of queer gender performance to explode restrictive identity categories, to situate bodies deeply within context, and to effect material social change for marginalized communities. Additionally, queer gender performance scholars who highlight the interplay of race with gender and sexuality attend to the intricacies of queer of color lives, asserting that queer gender performers of color have the unique capacity to challenge multiple forms of marginalization at once, rewrite subjugated histories, and advocate for equity within queer communities (Halberstam "Mackdaddy"; Kumashiro; Muñoz).

However, in Communication, very few scholars have articulated the pedagogical functions of queer gender performance (Alexander “Querying Queer Theory”). Specifically, a disciplinary conversation about the ways in which queer gender performance facilitates the public co-construction of intersectional queer identities has not yet emerged. An exception is Alexander (“Querying Queer Theory”), who, in critiquing queer theories for occluding differences like race, states the following:

In viewing drag—good or bad—I often engage it as a pedagogical moment. It is a moment in which questions of what to teach and how to teach it are asked. It is a moment where questions of what to know and why one needs to know it are addressed, a moment when questions of utility and positionality are answered— if for no other reason than how it relates to the desire of the viewer (the reader, the student and the curious onlooker). I like those moments when the spectator has no doubt about the seeming incongruity between sexed body, socialized gender performance and political intentionality. I like those moments when drag performers, for good or bad, remove portions of their pastiched images and reveal not their true self, but the performative nature of drag and hence the performative nature of gender itself. (351)

Whether staged or in the everyday, queer gender performance carries with it the potential to disrupt commonplace ways of doing and thinking about queer identities (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri). Furthermore, when queer gender performers account for race along with gender and sexuality, queer gender performance becomes a multifaceted tool for critique (Halberstam “Female Masculinity”).

In this project, I build a case for why scholars of Communication should consider queer gender performance a form of public pedagogy through which intersectional queer identities are co-constructed between performers and audiences. For the purposes of this research, I define public pedagogy as the reciprocal exchange of knowledge and identity co-construction that occurs between performers and audiences in a public setting. I adapt

this definition from the work of critical communication pedagogues and public pedagogues, who contend that through careful analysis of the ways in which we engage in teaching and learning – particularly beyond the academy – we can gain helpful insights about the ways in which marginalized communities resist and transgress regimes of power (Fassett and Warren; Giroux “Public Pedagogy”, McLaren “This Fist Called My Heart”; Sandlin, Shultz, and Burdick; Slattery; Williams). Particularly, I push these bodies of literature to account for the ways in which as a communicative process, queer gender performance has the potential to disrupt systems of power and privilege in community spaces, as well as to inform the process of identity co-construction between performers and audiences. I contend that queer gender performance is a rich source of public pedagogy for queer communities for three main reasons: queer social life revolves around clubs the queer gender performance that occurs within; the relationships that evolve between performers and audiences are intimate and context specific; and queer gender performance is a form of vernacular knowledge that does not rely on academic theories. In the chapter that follows, I build a case for why using these disparate theoretical approaches in conjunction is conducive to a multifaceted investigation of queer gender performance and its widespread implications for queer communities, particularly around issues of race.

Project Rationale

This research project expands academic understandings of queer of color subjectivity through the critical investigation of queer gender performance and its pedagogical potential for queer communities. With queer theories of color, critical

communication pedagogy, and public pedagogy theories providing support, I will utilize qualitative interviews fore-fronting poetic transcription of personal narratives in order to explore how queer gender performers of color engage in intersectional queer negotiations of identities and provide new possibilities for the everyday performance of queer identities. I call upon existing scholarship in queer gender performance in order to prove the centrality of such performances to queer social life, as well as the potential of queer gender performers to co-construct critical consciousness with audiences around intersecting categories of identity like race. Ultimately, I build on previously published work in Communication in order to build a case for how queer gender performance serves as a form of public pedagogy through which audiences and performers theorize and embody queer subjectivities. This proposed study is fundamentally *critical*, intended to expose and transform social inequalities in queer communities and to expand academic conversations around queerness and social justice. The central research questions that will guide my study are as follows:

RQ1: How do queer gender performers of color negotiate race, racism, and whiteness in queer gender performance communities?

RQ2: How do queer gender performers of color make sense of their intersectional identities in queer gender performance communities?

RQ3: What are the public pedagogies offered by the performers?

In the chapters that follow, I elaborate upon my theoretical and methodological underpinnings, arguing for the appropriateness of those foundations for my study.

Additionally, I provide a review of the existing literature around queer gender

performance in order to advocate for the importance of examining the phenomena through a lens of public pedagogy. Through a project that privileges the voices of practicing queer gender performers and audiences above strictly academic voices (Troka, LeBesco, and Noble xi) while still noting the potential for such voices to overlap and intertwine, I hope to gain a better understanding of the liberatory and pedagogical potential of queer gender performance. As a queer gender performer and queer woman of color academic with political and personal stakes in this research, I emphasize deep and constant self-reflexivity as a moral code. Ultimately, I seek to center the sequined, mustachioed, fearless, and constantly shifting bodies of queer gender performers of color as a radical move toward expanding academic theories and making them work in the service of social justice.

Chapter two features my development of the theoretical frameworks upon which I rely in order to advocate for an understanding of queer gender performers of color as public pedagogues. I synthesize the central tenets of the contemporary literature on queer theory, turning then toward intersectional interventions in queer theories, particularly around race. I then advocate for the unconventional pairing of queer theories of color with theories from the burgeoning field of critical communication pedagogy, namely for its ability to place abstract queer theories of color into context so that they can be applied to the materiality of queer bodies of color as they perform gender, race, and sexuality queerly. I rely especially on critical communication pedagogy theories of public pedagogy, or theories about learning that takes place beyond the constraints of the conventional classroom.

In chapter three, I articulate an interdependent and complimentary methodological framework comprised of interviewing, personal narrative, and poetic transcription as a way to engage dialogically with other queer gender performers of color as an activist-scholar who also identifies as a queer gender performer of color. In this section, I stress the importance of critical self-reflexivity in undertaking a project which so deeply implicates my (inter)subjectivity with the individuals whose stories I seek out. I advocate for the use of each of these methodologies separately and in conjunction with one another as a novel way to harvest and engage fully with the powerful narratives my participants offer, and to do my part to expand approaches qualitative work the field of Communication. This myriad of methods is more powerful than singular, particularly considering my unique topic, marginalized research population, and personal stakes in the research.

Chapter four contains poetic transcriptions of the interviews I conducted with six queer gender performers of color, as well as my interpretation of those personal narratives through the theoretical and contextual frames I delineate in earlier chapters. I organize the results of my interviews into themes, which detail the unique struggles and triumphs of each participant, weaving them together with and distinguishing them from my own experiences as a performer. Here, I identify the ways in which my research project supports, challenges, and extends current theorizations of queerness, gender, race, pedagogy, and communication, articulating the unique contribution my study will make to the field of Communication.

Finally, in chapter five, I articulate the implications of my study and directions for future research around gender, race, sexuality, critical communication pedagogy, and performance. I identify gaps that remain after my intervention and articulate goals I have both for myself as a growing researcher, and for the field of Communication as we struggle toward creating more intersectional and inclusive research. Most importantly, I discuss the potential and perceived impact of this research on the queer gender performance community of color to which I belong, troubling the tense, historical divisions between academic and activist communities in the pursuit of social justice.

Chapter Two: Queer Theories of Color and Critical Communication Pedagogy

Quare studies would reinstate the subject and the identity around which the subject circulates that queer theory so easily dismisses. By refocusing our attention on the racialized bodies, experiences, and knowledges of transgendered people, lesbians, gays, and bisexuals of color, quare studies grounds the discursive process of mediated identification and subjectivity in a political praxis that speaks to the material existence of “colored” bodies. While strategically galvanized around identity, quare studies should be committed to interrogating identity claims that exclude rather than include. I am thinking here of black nationalist claims of “black authenticity” that exclude, categorically, homosexual identities. Blind allegiance to “isms” of any kind is one of the fears of queer theorists who critique identity politics. Cognizant of that risk, quare studies must not deploy a totalizing and homogeneous formulation of identity. Rather, it must foster contingent, fragile coalitions as it struggles against common oppressive forms. (Johnson “‘Quare’ Studies” 10)

Intersectionality, the idea that each of our identities pushes up against the others in order to shape our lived experiences, has gained traction across disciplines in recent years (Crenshaw 140). In Communication, scholars regard intersectionality as an important conceptual tool for analyzing individuals’ communicative interactions and identity negotiations across contexts (Calafell, “When Will We All Matter” 345; Lovaas and Jenkins 2). Founding mother of intersectionality Kimberle Crenshaw argues that one-dimensional examinations of identity are inadequate, and that in order to gauge experiences fully, we must consider how interlocking categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality, among others, shape our daily lives (141). This theoretical revolution has shed light on queer people of color, a population about whom academics have written

little. Across all divisions of Communication, queer people of color and our intersectional negotiations of identities have taken center stage.

Performance studies (Alexander, “Performing Culture in the Classroom”; Johnson, “Quare Studies”), intercultural communication (Corey, “Performing Sexualities”; Gopinath) and critical communication pedagogy (Alexander, “Embracing the Teachable Moment”; Warren; Warren and Davis) are the primary sites for conversations about queer people of color. Scholars writing in these areas have attended to issues of how queer people of color negotiate multiply marginalized identities (Alexander “Embracing the Teachable Moment”), combat climates of invisibility and silence (Gopinath), and work toward social justice and transformation (Kumashiro). These advances in scholarship signal not only a desire to engage marginalized perspectives, but also to foster academic work that has tangible benefits for disenfranchised populations. This follows an interdisciplinary trend in academic research that is geared toward praxis, particularly when marginalized populations are involved. Furthermore, this vein of research incorporates liberally theories of performance, performativity, and pedagogy, which examine the embodied, shifting, and continuous negotiation of identities and their ideological and material implications for the bodies that (co)produce identities.

In this chapter, I trace the development of theorizations about queer people of color in Communication scholarship. First, I delineate the evolution of queer theory in Communication and scholars’ interventions across race. Second, I survey literature from

critical communication pedagogy that attends to queer of color identities. Finally, I build a case for how these two bodies of literature can be used in conjunction to explore intersectional queer performances of race across contexts. I position myself in relation to these two bodies of literature as a queer woman of color academic with strong commitments to social justice and transformation. Ultimately, I explain how blending queer theories of color with critical communication pedagogy theories can provide insights into how queer people of color negotiate intersectional marginalized identities within public pedagogical contexts in efforts to articulate experiences with marginalization and to expand notions of queerness rooted in whiteness.

Queer Theory and Communication

Queer theory emerged as an interdisciplinary response to a proliferation of academic work that regards gender and sexual identities as stable, fixed, and always situated within heterosexist or heteronormative frameworks. Discontent with the ways in which traditional academic theories support heteronormativity, scholars like Judith Butler, Judith “Jack” Halberstam, and Esther Newton initiated a field of scholarship that challenged heterosexist assumptions and pushed back against notions of identities as stable and fixed. From studies that expose how individuals living outside of the gender binary – like transgender individuals and drag performers – challenge dominant conceptualizations of gender and sexuality (Halberstam, “Mackdaddy” 25; Newton 32), to nuanced investigations of how gender and sexual identities are “made” through repetitive, daily micro-practices like speech and the use of space (Butler, “Bodies that

Matter” 43), these scholars began to chip away at the long-observed heterosexist foundations of academic theory.

In Communication, queer theory builds upon and exists in tension with more traditional lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) scholarship that examines – and often champions – the adaptation of non-heterosexual individuals to existing social and cultural contexts (Slagle 317). Slagle describes the relationship between LGBT studies and queer theory as a “contested terrain” upon which scholars argue the ultimate goals of scholarship around sexuality in the discipline. Fundamentally, where LGBT scholars promote assimilation and the downplaying of sexuality as a stigmatized identity, queer theorists radicalize sexuality and imagine the transformation of heteronormative social and cultural contexts (318). As Slagle notes, a major aim of queer theorists is to move past the “tolerance” that LGBT scholars seek toward the destabilization of sexuality and gender as identity categories (327).

Furthermore, queer theory refutes the idea that gender and sexual identities are tied to biology. Butler asserts that gender is an everyday performance that is maintained through *performativity*, or adherence to gendered scripts throughout multiple facets of our lives (“Bodies that Matter” 43). Butler illuminates how everything we do, including the way we dress, the activities in which we participate, and the people with whom we partner romantically and sexually, sustains our overall performance of gender that is subject to change. These performances of gender identity are situated within social, cultural, and political contexts, and the options that are available to us may differ across

the intersectional identities we claim (Halberstam, “Female Masculinity” 110).

Additionally, Newton illuminated the options for gender performance, as well as the interconnectedness of gender and sexuality. In her research with drag queens, she found that by dancing across lines of gender and sexuality, and sometimes claiming multiple genders and sexualities simultaneously, drag queens highlight the arbitrariness of gender and sexuality and exemplify the possibility that gender and sexual identities can shift when the performance of either varies (90). Speaking through a yet-unnamed queer theory, Newton challenged the idea that scholars can and should separate discussions of gender from sexuality.

Woven throughout much of the seminal work in queer theory is the basic idea that through transgressions, individuals have the capacity to challenge normative constructions of gender and sexuality (Butler, “Gender Trouble” 71; Halberstam “Female Masculinity” 68; Newton 22). These transgressions can range from small to large, and have the potential to reveal how gender and sexuality as identity categories depend on bodies for reproduction (Butler, “Bodies that Matter” 16). When we fail to replicate gender and sexuality in conventional ways, we in fact *queer* those categories and open up new possibilities for identification (Halberstam, “Female Masculinity” 95). Therefore, our bodies truly *matter* in that gender and sexuality depend upon our performances for survival (Butler, “Bodies that Matter” 72).

The work of these queer theory pioneers has quickly translated into interdisciplinary conversations, with scholars from various fields eager to contribute to

queer theory through theoretical lenses unique to their disciplines, as well as to critique its shortcomings and offer suggestions for future development. Across disciplines, two common criticisms of early queer theory pertain to the virtual absence of considerations of race, class, and other identities in relation to gender and sexuality. Scholars like Johnson (“‘Quare’ Studies”) and Halberstam (“Mackdaddy”) have critiqued early queer theory for its treatment of whiteness, maleness, masculinity, and affluence as the invisible foundations upon which much of queer theory was developed. Anzaldúa famously criticized queer theory as a field that “homogenizes, erases our differences” in exchange for postmodern, utopian conceptualizations of gender and sexuality (“To(o) Queer the Writer” 205). These oversights, scholars argue, have done a disservice to queer theory by failing to account for how queerness is negotiated across contexts and intersecting identities.

Yep, Lovaas, and Elia contest outdated scholarship in Communication that regards gay and lesbian as “singular and stable” identities that are not contingent upon context or inherently fluid (3). They contend that scholars in Communication have been eager to expand this limited field of scholarship that “participates in, contributes to, and affirms the normalization of hegemonic heterosexuality as invisible, natural, given, and taken for granted” (2). The essays included in their anthology initiated a disciplinary discussion about how gender and sexual identities are constructed through communication in relation to overarching social structures. Ultimately, the editors and contributing authors believe in the potential of Communication scholarship to expand

what we know about how gender and sexuality are made, unmade, and remade (Yep, Lovaas, and Elia 5).

Alongside the success of Yep, Lovaas, and Elia's anthology, queer theory scholarship has found a niche in Communication. Scholars across concentration areas have attended to how communicative acts support the performance and negotiation of queer gender and sexual identities. Scholars in media communication have explored the construction of queer identities in film and popular culture (Gomez; Keeling). Additionally, scholars of intercultural communication have attended to the ways in which contextual factors create both barriers and possibilities for the negotiation of queer identities (Corey, "Performing Sexualities" 144; Corey and Nakayama 155). Although virtually no corner of Communication has gone untouched by queer theory, Communication scholars are just beginning to recognize fully the potential of queer theory for transforming how we understand human communication (Yep, Lovaas, and Elia 2). Yep argues for the possibility of queer theory to liberate Communication from the "violence" of heteronormativity and to become a more progressive discipline that accommodates marginalized perspectives (55).

In addition to fleshing out the theoretical foundations of queer theory, Communication scholars Corey and Nakayama and Johnson ("Queer Epistemologies") have taken up queer theory as a point of departure for the development of new modes of doing research. In their essay "Sextext," Corey and Nakayama write the queer male body into the research process, highlighting the potential of queer theory to showcase the co-

construction of queer identities in research and relationships (162). Additionally, Johnson argues that for queer scholars, conducting research from a personal perspective and writing performatively are forms of “queer epistemology” that allow queer researchers to truly engage with audiences, thereby illuminating the queer subjectivities beneath academic arguments (“Queer Epistemologies” 440). Just as queer theory makes transparent the resources from which gender and sexuality are made, these authors seek to make transparent the processes of (co)constructing queer identities through research and authorship.

Interventions across Race

In the interest of producing inclusive and heuristic research, Communication scholars have attempted to suture the gaps evident in the original iterations of queer theory (Lovaas and Jenkins; Muñoz). In response to accusations that canonical queer theory has ignored the intersections of gender and sexuality with race, Communication scholars have developed queer theory of color research that falls within three primary areas: considerations of visibility for queer people of color; a recognition of the centrality of context in the lives of queer people of color; and radical self-distancing of queer people of color from mainstream queer theory.

Because most existing conceptualizations of queerness – both academic and popular – operate within the realm of whiteness, it is often more difficult for queer people of color to stake claims to queerness (Muñoz). Through the concept of intersectionality, scholars have begun to contest the conflation of queerness with whiteness in hopes of

making it easier for people of color to identify both personally and publicly as queer (Kumashiro, Muñoz). Intersectional explorations of the ways in which race, class, ability status, and other factors influence public claims to queerness acknowledge queer identities as “fluid, paradoxical, political, and multiple” as individuals negotiate them communicatively across contexts (Lovaas and Jenkins 8). Through intersectionality, scholars untangle queerness from whiteness, and instead explore how racialized experiences shape the identities of queer people of color (Lovaas and Jenkins; Muñoz).

The conflation of whiteness with queerness (and the subsequent erasure of queer people of color) can be traced to the origins of social justice movements (Anzaldúa and Moraga; Lorde; Tate). Because the success of liberation movements for marginalized racial groups depended significantly upon the exclusion of most multiply marked members of those communities – namely queer people – queer bodies have been relegated to the outskirts of communities of color (Johnson and Henderson; Kumashiro). Similar dynamics guided early efforts toward queer liberation, with the relegation of multiply marginalized queer bodies to the margins of activist communities (Johnson and Henderson; Tate). Lack of attention to multiply marked bodies within both marginalized racial and queer communities has trickled into academic research conducted on those marginalized communities; therefore, academics have replicated the same types of exclusion and invisibility that permeate society-at-large (Anzaldúa, “To(o) Queer the Writer”; Johnson and Henderson).

Guided by queer black and Chicana feminists' early interventions into queer theory (Anzaldúa and Moraga; Lorde), scholars across disciplines have attempted to suture gaps by emphasizing intersectional analyses of the lived experiences of queer people of color (Calafell "To Ricky with Love"; Holland; Kumashiro; Moreman "Rethinking Conquergood"). For example, the groundbreaking anthology *Black Queer Studies* (Johnson and Henderson) contains some of the first academic efforts to "interanimate both Black studies and queer studies" and to work against the ways in which black and queer theorists and have silenced and excluded the perspectives queer black people (Holland xi). Kevin Kumashiro has pioneered personal narrative research that centers the endeavors of queer Asian-Pacific American activists whose intersectional negotiations of identity confront notions of silence and docility in Asian cultures. Additionally, Calafell ("To Ricky with Love") and Moreman ("Rethinking Conquergood") have intervened in Latina/o studies to open up spaces for dialogue around queer of color performances of racial and sexual ambiguity outside of a black/white binary and to advocate for situating analyses of queer gender performances within the deeply layered cultural contexts in which they occur. For these authors, failure to account for the ways in which intersectional identities push up against queerness makes for an irresponsible and incomplete analysis.

Queer theorists concerned with the experiences of queer people of color have emphasized strongly the role of context in shaping queer of color experiences (Gopinath; Johnson "'Quare Studies'; Muñoz). Because queer people of color must balance dual

marginalized identities simultaneously across communities, they must always be aware of the material and psychological implications of outwardly identifying as queer and of color. Such implications include but are not limited to threats of physical violence, alienation from communities and opportunities, and interpellation into individualistic notions of queer culture often not recognized or valued in communities of color (Johnson “‘Quare’ Studies”; Muñoz). As Johnson notes, “Because much of queer theory critically interrogates notions of selfhood, agency, and experience, it is often unable to accommodate the issues faced by gays and lesbians of color who come from ‘raced’ communities” (“Quare Studies” 3). For authors who emphasize the centrality of context to the lives of queer people of color, until scholarship moves beyond the abstract to locate theory on the body and to observe how queer bodies of color negotiate constraints and possibilities, queer theories are lacking (Gopinath; Johnson “‘Quare’ Studies”). A context-specific approach to queer theory legitimizes subjugated perspectives and acknowledges that not all queer bodies have equal access to representation across communities and across the globe.

Disenchanted by the prolonged absence of representation in both academia and in the marginalized communities to which they belong, many queer people of color have pursued a radical self-distancing from the canon of queer theory and queer popular culture. Working against the grain to claim agency, radical queer scholars of color turn toward *disidentificatory* practices, or strategies by which queer people of color acknowledge that mainstream notions of queerness simply cannot speak to the

complexities of the lives of queer people of color (Gopinath; Halberstam “Mackdaddy”; Kumashiro; Muñoz). Radical queer scholars of color suggest that the most useful academic theorizations and staged performative acts are those that emphasize intersectional, embodied, and contextual considerations of queerness in which race does not exist solely as an addendum to the aims of queer theory and community activism. According to these scholars, traditional queer theory and popular culture have failed to speak in ways that do not erase queer bodies of color. Therefore, queer people of color must find a new language through which to speak (Halberstam “Mackdaddy”; Muñoz).

Critical Communication Pedagogy and Queer People of Color

Fassett and Warren founded critical communication pedagogy as a hybrid theory and method that combines instructional communication, communication education, and critical pedagogy in order to explore the role of communication in maintaining and disrupting power and privilege in educational contexts (2). Although each of these approaches yields valuable insights on its own, a combination of the three makes visible the complex relationships between privilege, power, and communication in pedagogy (2). With the primary assertion that culture and identities are central – not additive – to our pedagogical experiences, Fassett and Warren initiated a dialogue about the “centrality of communication to both oppression and liberation” in educational contexts (56).

A major vein of research in critical communication pedagogy attends to the experiences of marginalized bodies in pedagogical contexts. Bodies of color (Hao “Rethinking Critical Pedagogy”; Delgado), female bodies (Cooks; Owens Patton

“Reflections of a Black Woman Professor”), and queer bodies (Gust and Warren; Warren and Davis), among others, confront power and privilege through different roles in the academy. The main themes that have emerged in scholarship that examines the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in the post-secondary classroom include: the politics of relationality with students and colleagues; the difficulty of negotiating academic and disciplinary obstacles as a marginalized individual; and the utility of personal narrative and self-disclosure for countering silence and demonization. I include in this review of scholarship that addresses the interplay of sexuality with all racial identities – including white – in effort to name white as a racial category worthy of examination due to the insights about power and privilege it can yield.

As a practice that is both risky and extremely productive, *queer relationality* has been of significant interest to critical communication pedagogy scholars. Queer scholars and scholars of color have discussed queer relationality mainly through the concept of alliances forged both inside and outside the classroom (Alexander and Warren; Gust and Warren; Johnson and Bhatt; Moreman and Non Grata; Pattisapu and Calafell). Because in the classroom instructors often face persecution from students around their marginalized identities, they must often rely on one another for support. By speaking from their positions of power in the academy, instructors can strive toward intersectional feminist alliances. For example, as a white queer woman and a heterosexual woman of color, Johnson and Bhatt teach intercultural communication together frequently, advocating for one another when the other’s credibility is challenged or their claims to the importance of

examining marginalization are dismissed (223). Similarly, Moreman and Non Grata trace the intersectional and ethical dimensions of engaging in a mentoring relationship as a queer Latino faculty member and an undocumented Latina graduate student (305). Central to these pedagogical alliances is the notion of reciprocity, or the idea that all parties involved in intersectional alliances benefit from the connection. The authors cite the reciprocity of mentoring relationships in sustaining their emotional strength as they navigate structural and ideological barriers in the academy (Johnson and Bhatt; Moreman and Non Grata; Pattisapu and Calafell).

A second major theme around which much critical communication pedagogy work converges regards the negotiation of whitewashed institutional and disciplinary codes by queer people of color. In order for their contributions to be considered worthy of publication, academics that belong to marginalized groups are often forced into “translating their work through the canon” (Calafell and Moreman 129). In this translation, many of the material, cultural specificities of queer/of color lives are lost, thereby leaving intact the codes of whiteness that circulate through academia (Calafell and Moreman; Johnson “Quare Studies”). Because white, affluent heterosexuals often serve as the imagined audience for which academic scholarship is produced, queer academics/of color are forced to cater to a readership that cannot relate to the particularities of their lives (Calafell and Moreman 124). Like the publication process, navigating other institutional structures such as teaching, administrative functions, and communication norms presents additional challenges to queer people of color (Calafell

“When Will We All Matter”; Owens Patton “Reflections of a Black Woman Professor”). For example, every decision Calafell makes within academia – from interpreting teaching evaluations to deciding whether to “out” herself to her students – has political implications for her queer body of color (“When Will We All Matter” 348). Warren and Davis note that although queer bodies/of color often attempt to navigate and even *transform* pedagogical and institutional structures, such navigations and transformations are sometimes *impossible* given the relative inflexibility of academic institutions and ideologies (13).

In navigating rigid, exclusionary institutional structures, critical communication pedagogy scholars emphasize the necessity of performative writing and teaching as modes of healing, community building, and social justice (Alexander “Embracing the Teachable Moment”; Alexander and Warren; Gust and Warren). Performative writing engages readers and writers in evocative storytelling experiences that can excavate subjugated histories (Corey “The Personal”; Pollock; Spry). By treating the body as a site of knowledge, performative writing can help facilitate affective connections between teacher-scholars and audiences (Pollock 75). As Spry notes, through performative writing scholars can “stain the page” with their personal truths, thereby inspiring others to share their stories (101). More specifically, performative personal narrative writing and teaching enables queer scholars and scholars of color to heal from instances of trauma in academia (Alexander “Embracing the Teachable Moment”). For scholars like Alexander,

the classroom should serve as “a space in which the personal is magnified, not diminished” (“Embracing the Teachable Moment” 4).

A discipline in its own right, the idea of pedagogy as *performative* influences much work in critical communication pedagogy. A critical theory developed to examine the power dynamics embedded in pedagogical practices and perpetuated through repetitive behaviors, performative pedagogy refutes the notion that teaching and learning are passive acts that implicate individuals solely on the intellectual level. On the contrary, performative pedagogy contends that education is a highly embodied cultural practice that evokes historicities of power, privilege, and ideology, and carries with it the potential to disrupt ritualistic perpetuations of social inequities (Conquergood 338; McLaren 3). Unlike mainstream understandings of education as the apolitical, unidirectional transmission of knowledge from teacher to student, performative pedagogy critiques educational practices as performative, ritualistic embodiments of ideology into which citizens are interpellated (McLaren li). As Conquergood states, “A performance theory of pedagogy privileges challenge, struggle, innovation, movement, and openness” (338).

Theorists of performative pedagogy argue that in order to foster a citizenry that is critically conscious and self-reflexive about power and privilege, instructors must resist adopting authoritarian stances, choosing instead to pursue relational, dialogic relationships with students that are not based in hierarchy (Conquergood 341). By “resist[ing] the authoritarian ethos of the school,” students and teachers can explore collaborative approaches to learning that implicate bodies and expose the myth of a

Cartesian mind/body split (McLaren li). As a mode of critical praxis, performative approaches to pedagogy assist teachers and students in transcending the limits of identification and cultural practices that dominant ideology has established as standards, thereby engendering engaged, transformational collectivities through education (McLaren lii). As McLaren writes:

[The critical pedagogy of performance] is necessarily counter-hegemonic, and seeks to unpack the ideological mechanisms by which the cultural is insinuated and sustained by larger economies of power and privilege that are historically determined by productive labor practices. (McLaren lvii)

A performative approach to pedagogy posits that rituals have the power to “symbolically transmit societal and cultural ideologies” through schooling (McLaren 3).

In other words, through the performance of rituals in the classroom, bodies work to reproduce social hierarchies that operate as invisible, natural, and normalized.

Performative pedagogues contend that although the oppressive ritualistic performance *can* be disrupted through radical performances of alterity, though such performances are often difficult and carry great risks (Giroux and Shannon 2). However, the responsibility to disrupt ritualistic performances of dominant ideology inevitably lies with teachers, who occupy positions of power in the classroom. Only teachers can initiate and sanction the disruption of schooling as a “ritual of self-perpetuation,” and turn the classroom toward a performative pedagogy that “calls us back into our flesh” (McLaren 291).

The potential for performative pedagogy to disrupt the reproduction of dominant ideologies through schooling holds great promise for teachers and students who wish to name and disrupt regimes of Whiteness in the classroom. A first step in exposing for

students the performative reproduction of race is to call attention to the fact that bodies, in conjunction with minds, constitute educational experiences. As Hamera notes, through ritualistic pedagogical practices, students and teachers have become “big heads on tiny bodies,” the implications bodies have for pedagogical experiences altogether disregarded (70). Students come to understand their academic achievement as a result of their intellectual abilities rather than a combination of aptitude *and* the material facts of raced, classed, and gendered bodies. In order to begin conversations about race and Whiteness, teachers must help cure their students of the “body amnesia” they have suffered throughout schooling, turning their gazes instead toward the very real ways in which our marked bodies shape pedagogical realities (Hamera 70-71).

Drawing attention toward bodies through performative pedagogical practices inevitably results in feelings of discomfort in students and teachers alike. Because students have come to understand bodies as “the excess baggage of pedagogy,” attempts to shift attention back towards the body threaten the perceived sterility of academic environments (McWilliams 133). Only through this route, however, can students and teachers engage in substantial conversations about how, by blinding individuals to corporeal realities, ideological apparatuses can manufacture complicit citizens through education (Giroux and Shannon 2). More specifically, by exposing the ways in which bodies of color have been framed repetitively as hyper-visible, dirty, and excessive, teachers can assist students in identifying Whiteness as a pedagogical norm (Hamera 64; Warren “Bodily Excess” 84-85). By centering Whiteness, educators can seek to make

White students uncomfortable, thereby implicating White bodies in the disruption of oppressive, ritualistic performances in schooling (Conquergood 343).

In asking students and academic audiences alike to develop personal, deeply felt connections, teacher-scholars gain opportunities to performatively “fuck” with conventional notions of identity, culture, and lived experience (Gust and Warren 116; Taylor). Personal, performative investigations of pedagogical experiences, as Jones and Calafell note, necessitate “intersectional reflexivity,” or deep and sustained considerations upon the impact of personal stories (977). Although self-disclosure and personal narrative are risky moves, they are well worth the personal healing and potential for transformation they provide (Alexander and Warren; Johnson and Bhatt; Warren and Davis). Warren and Davis and Alexander and Warren blur the lines of authorship, thereby performing solidarity and coalitions through text. In the classroom, these scholars put their differently raced, gendered, sexed, and sexualized bodies on the line as performative demonstrations of resilient marginalized bodies (Alexander “Embracing the Teachable Moment”; Johnson and Bhatt). These performances keep critical communication pedagogues and their students committed to interrogating daily, lived experiences in the classroom and to supporting one another through institutionalized racism and heterosexism (Alexander and Warren 328).

Bridging Queer Theories of Color and Critical Communication Pedagogy: Toward Queer Public Pedagogy

Seeking refuge from heteronormative culture, queer patrons flock to clubs in order to build community, assert pride, and engage in ongoing processes of identity co-construction (Griffin; Moreman and McIntosh). As fixtures of these clubs, queer gender performers grace the stage spectacularly, occupying a variety of genders and sexualities and prompting audiences to imagine, at least for the moment, new possibilities for identification. Although these possibilities may be fleeting, queer gender performers transfer to audiences a sense of freedom to embody queer gender and sexuality more viscerally than in any other space (Shoemaker “Queer Punk Macha Femme”).

By audiencing the risky, revolutionary queer gender performances that occur onstage, patrons can feel empowered to engage in micro-acts of resistance through queer gender performances in their everyday lives (Shoemaker “Pink Tornadoes”; Pelle). This dialogic, contagious relationship signals the process of public pedagogy in which queer gender performers engage audiences. Without the examples queer gender performers set for challenging social structures and re-imagining identities, audiences have fewer resources through which to construct resistive queer identities in their own lives. As Griffin notes, mainstream advertisers, aware of the integral role gay clubs play in queer lives, utilize advertising media throughout the club to teach patrons how to perform normative queer identities through the consumption of products and services. Queer

gender performance, therefore, can serve as pedagogical tools around ways of doing queerness that do not necessarily parallel commercial norms.

However, audiences must continue to turn a critical eye toward the queer gender performances they audience (Brookey and Westerfelhaus; Evans). Although on the surface such performances may appear to dismantle gender binaries, audiences should attempt to detect reliance on racism and other forms of oppression used to accomplish that deconstruction (Brookey and Westerfelhaus; Evans). The presence of queer gender performers of color in the club creates possibilities for more inclusive public pedagogy around queerness, although such performances are often highly segregated (Halberstam “Female Masculinity”).

Although both queer theories of color and critical communication pedagogy theories provide valuable insights into how queer people of color negotiate intersectional queer identities across contexts, the foundations of these two bodies of literature are seemingly disparate. On one hand, in effort to fill in the gaps left by traditional queer theory, queer theorists of color write race into the queer theory canon. These scholars affirm queer theory’s assertions that identities are fluid, dynamic, and performative, all the while acknowledging that race intersects in impactful ways with gender and sexuality – a fact that scholars cannot ignore when theorizing queerness (Johnson “‘Quare’ Studies”). On the other hand, theories of critical communication pedagogy challenge us to consider what our schooling experiences teach us about identity. They argue that in the classroom, marginalized bodies are marked and situated within historical, political, and

cultural contexts (Alexander and Warren; Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies” 1; Gust and Warren). Critical communication pedagogues offer suggestions for how we can speak back to the regimes of power that silence marginalized voices in the classroom, all the while acknowledging that these efforts toward transformation are incomplete without intersectional alliances across power and privilege (Johnson and Bhatt; Warren and Davis).

Because most critical communication pedagogy scholarship is situated neatly within formal educational contexts (the classroom in particular and academia in general), it is somewhat difficult to think about how we might utilize theories of critical communication pedagogy in order to examine the pedagogical impact of queer gender performers of color, whose performances occur within the public realm of queer subculture. For this reason, I lean on the body of work in education called public pedagogy, through which scholars turn the lens toward the pedagogical processes in which individuals engage beyond the confines of traditional schooling (Sandlin, Shultz, and Burdick). Public pedagogy scholars argue that for members of marginalized groups in particular, significant pedagogical exchanges occur beyond the classroom; members of these groups engage in pedagogical negotiations of identity for which they are not provided space in traditional academic environments (Sandlin, Shultz, and Burdick 2). Through modalities like hip hop (Williams), art installations (Slattery), and self-publishing (Moore), individuals engage in public pedagogy that is both “... a mode of cultural production and a type of cultural criticism that is essential for questioning the

conditions under which knowledge is produced, values affirmed, affective investments engaged, and subject positions put into place, negotiated, taken up, or refused” (Giroux 63). In other words, in the public realm, members of marginalized groups can access the space and media necessary through which to negotiate and perform identities.

McLaren argues that the same rigorous theories and methods used to explore teaching and learning in traditional contexts ought to be applied to the learning that happens outside of school. In calling for the renewal of critical pedagogy, he asserts that critical pedagogy “... can no longer remain as a bundle of classroom methodologies removed from a larger politics of social struggle...” (475). In other words, because our pedagogical experiences in the classroom are irrevocably linked to our cultural experiences and identities beyond the classroom, it makes no sense to ignore the learning in which we engage in other contexts that are irrevocably tied to our cultural experiences and identities. If we, as scholars of Communication, culture, and pedagogy, see ourselves as agents of social change, we cannot ignore the struggles toward understanding of identity and culture that occur outside of the confines of the classroom. As Sandlin, Shultz, and Burdick write:

These are public pedagogies – spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning that exist outside of the walls of the institution of schools... however, they are just as crucial – if not more so – to our understanding of the developments of identities and social formations as the teaching that goes on within the classroom. (1)

In moving critical communication pedagogy theories to the public realm, I empower myself to examine the communicative practices embedded in queer gender

performances. As editors of a premier anthology on public pedagogy, Sandlin, Shultz, and Burdick urge scholars to "... reconsider their foundational understanding of what *counts* as pedagogy, of the potentially hidden pedagogies that are at play in their practices, and of how and where the process of education occurs" (4). As a site of public pedagogy that has been severely understudied, queer gender performance promises to yield amazing insights about what queer gender performers of color learn and teach, and the clever ways in which we engage in those teachable moments. In his autoethnographic work, Slattery argues that public performances can illuminate the subconscious or invisible cultural forces that are always present in the moment – pedagogical or not. Through his public pedagogical performances, Slattery has worked to illuminate for audiences the "hidden curriculum" of the body that has guided his negotiation of formal pedagogical spaces (42).

Queer gender performance is an ideal site to examine through public pedagogy and critical communication pedagogy because bodies there constantly contest social norms of gender, sexuality, physical attractiveness, and race, among others. The intersectional queer identity negotiations that occur within these spaces take place before public audiences, for whom such negotiations carry meaningful and lasting negotiations. Just as scholars of critical pedagogy prefer to treat education as a dialogic space, with teachers and students engaged in reciprocal struggles toward understanding, the queer gender performance realm is a dialogic space between performer and audience in which meaning is co-constructed. Embedded in these dialogic exchanges are communicative

negotiations of power, privilege, and identity worth exploring through lenses of critical communication pedagogy and public pedagogy.

Used together, theories of critical communication pedagogy, public pedagogy, and queer theories of color can allow scholars to explore, in nuanced ways, how queer bodies of color navigate and challenge oppression beyond the confines of formal educational spaces. By anchoring queer theories of color solidly in the materiality of bodies, critical communication pedagogy can provide us new ways of understanding intersectional queer identities and their negotiation in subcultural public spaces. Furthermore, theories of public pedagogy can usher critical communication pedagogy theories out of the classroom and into queer subcultural spaces, so that they can continue to explore the communicative practices embedded in educational practices. On their own, each of these theoretical frameworks provides access to just a sliver of the multifaceted identity negotiations in which queer people of color engage on a daily basis. Taken together, these lenses allow us to peer beneath the surface to understand better how identity negotiations occur along a matrix of performance and pedagogy.

Using these multiple theories, we can shift academic attention toward the margins of society, wherein lie clever strategies for inspiring collective action and working outside of heteronormative identity categories. The vernacular knowledge, intimate relationships, and shared investments in political causes that originate in and through queer gender performance are undoubtedly generative of theories that existing academic frames cannot encompass. As Muñoz writes, queer gender performers of color have

sought refuge in lives “rewritten through disidentificatory desire” (23). In order to produce a body of public pedagogy scholarship that accounts for multiply marginalized queer bodies, we must continue to excavate these processes of rewriting through which queer gender performers of color re-imagine possibilities for existence.

Ultimately, I advocate for the potential of Communication scholars to flesh out the intricacies of queer gender performance through theories of public pedagogy, which account for the deeply communal, activist roots and intentions of queer gender performance. As Rhyne notes, critical scholars cannot be content with the scholarship that has been produced around queer gender performance, but must instead continue to poke and prod at the whiteness that continues to circulate within queer gender performance communities. In this project, I intend to prove that public pedagogy research around queer gender performance can support a growing body of intersectionality scholarship in Communication by accentuating the heavily interwoven and layered negotiations of race, gender, and sexuality in which queer gender performers engage for public audiences.

The radical re-imaginings that occur onstage through queer gender performers’ bodies have the public pedagogical potential to send reverberations into the audience, thereby prompting similar re-imaginings in society-at-large. In queer communities, no other setting has such a strong influence on the ways in which individuals perceive of and embody identities. Additionally, the gay club is the single-most influential site for encouraging social activism around queer issues (Bennett and West). For these reasons,

we must explore just how deeply this powerful, public pedagogical relationship influences queer subjectivities, particularly when multiply marginalized queer bodies are involved.

Consequently, because queer gender performers often belong to the queer communities in which they perform, they share frequently with audiences rich, regional queer histories, knowledge of contextual restraints, romantic and familial relationships, and investments in community goals (Bennett and West). Because of these deep and complex bonds, the relationships that form between queer gender performers and audiences are often intimate and situated in localized cultural knowledge. By merit of these shared realities, queer gender performers and audience members invest in one another as community members, thereby facilitating public pedagogical relationships that are substantial and deeply historicized (Halberstam “Female Masculinity”).

Through critical communication pedagogy with a focus on the public sphere, we can begin to explore how these intimate relationships affect public pedagogical relationships between queer gender performers and audiences. The shared investments, in which all parties are engaged, signal dialogue and reciprocity – key components of critical communication pedagogy (Fassett and Warren). Therefore, these reciprocal, dialogic relationships are teeming with opportunities to expand critical communication pedagogy theories to the public realm. Furthermore, where intersectional queer alliances form between queer gender performers and audiences, we can explore how performers

and audiences make sense of their shared and separate struggles with racism, heterosexism, and other forms of marginalization.

In theorizing queer gender performance as a form of public pedagogy around intersectional queer identities, we can consider the history of queer gender performance as a vernacular way of understanding gender, sexuality, and intersecting identities. Due to the exclusion of queer history from scholarly texts, as well as the distrust many queers feel toward academics, queer communities have cultivated intellectual understandings of gender and sexuality through queer gender performance (Muñoz, 1999). As Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro note, “Although none of them [drag kings and drag queens] have read Judith Butler, they, too, get across to audiences the performativity of gender and the fluidity of sexuality, race, and ethnicity” (289). In other words, marginalized queer communities have turned to queer gender performance as a way of cultivating understanding and engaging in critique.

Furthermore, an exploration of how queer people of color have utilized queer gender performance as a way to speak back against the erasure and misrepresentation of racialized queer identities could yield valuable results. Muñoz asserts that in resisting mainstream cultural texts, queer people of color must invent clever ways in which to disseminate vernacular knowledge and inspire collective agency. We should examine more closely the tactics queer gender performers of color use, as well as the effects they have on the negotiation of public pedagogical relationships between performers and audiences.

Through deliberate, staged performances and everyday disruptive actions alike, queer gender performers engage in the radical destabilization of gender, sexuality, and race, among other categories of identity. As both a product and method of vernacular knowledge construction, queer gender performance empowers audiences and performers to advocate for social change through public pedagogical exchanges that warrant academic attention. I have reviewed existing scholarship around queer gender performance in order to highlight the centrality of such performances to queer life, as well as to accentuate the dialogic and socially transformative potential of such performances. Additionally, I have called attention to racially-conscious interventions in scholarship about queer gender performance in order to highlight the potential of such performance to encourage the radical co-construction of intersectional queer identities.

Johnson (“‘Quare’ Studies”), Gopinath, and Muñoz advocate for the translation of the queer theory canon into scholarship that accounts for queer bodies of color and emphasize the essential turn toward locating queer theory on the body. By shifting queer theorizations away from the strictly conceptual toward the corporeal, scholars can validate the experiences of those queer bodies of color that do not always enjoy the luxuries of fluidity and ambiguity due to other markers of difference (Johnson “‘Quare’ Studies” 3). As Johnson (“‘Quare’ Studies”) notes, scholars should “‘quare’ ‘queer’ such that ways of knowing are viewed both as discursively mediated and as historically conditioned and situated” (4). Without this important turn toward the material body in queer theory, scholars will continue to replicate the same prescriptive and homogenizing

practices upon which queer theory has depended since its inception (Johnson “‘Quare’ Studies”).

We can counter this fear perpetuating queer theory’s tendency toward homogenization by encouraging queer scholars of color to theorize queerly and quarely from the pedagogical contexts in which they are situated by turning our attention toward the pedagogical exchanges that occur in the public realm. Alexander and Warren, Alexander (“Embracing the Teachable Moment”), and Calafell (“When Will We All Matter”) have already taken up this call by situating their queer, raced bodies intricately within the *specific* contexts in which they find themselves as academics. Explicit attention to the ways in which their queer bodies of color interact with the environments in which they are situated allows these scholars to deploy queer theories of color in ways that defy generalization. Intersectionality scholars have initiated the important work of avoiding overgeneralization by sharing personal narratives that do not purport to speak for others (Crenshaw 143). Although scholars such as Johnson have lain a solid foundation of quare studies upon which these scholars can begin to speak from their queer of color positionalities, these scholars continue to lay bricks upon that foundation with each theorization they contribute from their unique locations.

Johnson calls for quare theorists to turn attention toward even more significantly undertheorized populations like queer individuals involved in interracial relationships and “out” and “closeted” queer people of color (“‘Quare’ Studies” 19). Although numerous voices have entered the dialogue around queer bodies of color in pedagogical contexts,

many stories have yet to be told. Erasure and invisibility are particularly common for those queer people of color whom exist on society's furthest margins, such as transgender people of color and queer people of color with disabilities (Johnson "'Quare' Studies" 20). This is a trend that critical communication pedagogy scholars utilizing queer theories of color must continue to combat, lest we contribute to the continued silencing of other marginalized groups within our communities. The foundations that Johnson and Muñoz have laid can only become stronger with the inclusion of more bricks, more stories. At its heart, critical communication pedagogy is deeply concerned with context, and queer theories of color can only benefit from translation into languages that privilege corporeal experiences within contexts.

In addition to emphasizing deeply contextual analyses of queer bodies of color, future research in queer theory should help to advance academic theories into praxis. If scholars fail to make queer theories accessible to non-academic audiences, they risk replicating the same high-theory, decontextualized queer theory that have excluded marginalized voices from conversations for decades (Anzaldúa "To(o) Queer the Writer"; Johnson "'Quare' Studies"). As Johnson writes, "This dialogical/dialectical relationship between theory and practice, the lettered and unlettered, ivory tower and porch is crucial to a joint and sustained critique of hegemonic systems of oppression" ("'Quare' Studies" 19). An emerging body of critical communication pedagogy research around queer students and teachers of color foregrounds social justice aims and encourages the cultivation of empowerment and radical advocacy across lines of difference between

colleagues and in mentoring relationships (Alexander “Performing Culture”; Moreman and Non Grata). For these scholars, academic theorizations of race, gender, and sexuality are not enough. We must be willing to engage in community activism and radical alliances across identities in order to effect true change.

Communication scholars can and should continue to answer the call of queer theorists of color to produce academic work that fosters social change for communities beyond academia. As Johnson writes:

If social change is to occur, gays, bisexuals, transgendered people, and lesbians of color cannot afford to be armchair theorists. Some of us need to be in the streets, in the trenches, enacting the queer theories that we construct in the ‘safety’ of the academy. (“‘Quare’ Studies” 19)

In other words, queer theorists of color articulate the agency of queer bodies of color, and critical communication pedagogues can truly write queer bodies of color into action.

As a queer woman of color in academia, I have sought refuge in queer theories of color that have helped me to articulate, for the first time, the ways in which my embodied experiences with marginalization both parallel and contradict the teachings of early queer theory. The authors in whose work I have sought reference, like Anzaldúa (“To(o) Queer the Writer”) Johnson (“‘Quare’ Studies”), and Muñoz honor the foundations of queer theory while acknowledging that there is more to the story when we engage with it from within our racialized, historicized bodies. Although their words resonate with me deeply, I have longed for more specific, contextualized accounts – examples and stories of how queer identities of color are negotiated in daily life. I have found that brand of specificity and deep corporeality in the works of critical communication pedagogy scholars, whose

writings not only evoke the raced, sexed, sexualized, and gendered body, but which project queer bodies of color toward liberation and transformation.

I have theorized the commonalities, differences, and potential connections between queer theories of color, critical communication pedagogy, and public pedagogy, I have asserted that while these bodies of literature stand strong alone, together they can help us to delve even more deeply into how queer bodies of color negotiate identities within oppressive contexts. Queer theories of color provide a rich vocabulary through which queer people of color can voice experiences with marginalization, and critical communication pedagogy is an ideal vehicle through which we can apply that vocabulary and explore how queer people of color negotiate identities in public contexts. By keeping scholars committed to privileging context and reaching toward social justice and transformation, critical communication pedagogy is a method and a theory that allows us to mobilize queer theories of color to their fullest potential. In the following chapter, I delineate a plural methodological approach that allows for the multifaceted investigation of these theories through interviews with queer gender performers of color.

Chapter Three: Interviewing, Personal Narrative, and Poetic Transcription

Research projects intended to cultivate understandings of and increase visibility for marginalized groups must begin with methodological frameworks that are oriented toward social justice, provide opportunities for researcher self-reflexivity, and which foreground critical, historically situated analyses of social injustices. These imperatives follow centuries of academic work that has utilized colonizing methodologies in order to explore indigenous and marginalized cultures from the outside in, thereby reducing humans to mere specimens evidentiary of cultural trends and rituals (Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith). Such practices have contributed to a legacy of distrust of academic researchers among members of marginalized groups, whom have grown protective of the communities to which they belong (Alexander “Standing in the Wake”; Anzaldúa “Speaking in Tongues”). This effect has been harmful not only to members of marginalized groups whose private lives academic researchers have invaded, but also to the scholarly community itself. These legacies of colonization continue to haunt all academics, even those researchers who wish to bring political visibility to marginalized groups through scholarship (Toyosaki). Uniquely affected by this legacy are academic researchers who claim membership within the marginalized communities they research. This deep skepticism of academics has worked to exclude even those scholars who hold the conflicting identities of group member and academic researcher and wish only to shed

light on the underrepresented populations to which they belong (Anzaldúa “Speaking in Tongues”).

In recent decades, scholars have pioneered research methodologies intended in part to alleviate the suspicion members of marginalized groups feel around academic research. Methods like performative writing (Pollock), personal narrative (Corey “The Personal”; Langellier “Perspectives”; Peterson and Langellier “The Politics of Personal Narrative”), critical ethnography (Conquergood “Rethinking Ethnography”; Madison “Critical Ethnography”), and autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner; Holman Jones) are intimate and visceral at heart, account for the positionalities of academic researchers, and are often guided by critical theories that underline the imperative for scholars to promote social justice in their work. Although these methods have not yet succeeded fully in breaking through the negative legacies left by the earliest researchers of social science, they work in small and powerful ways to empower and liberate researchers from these legacies bit by bit, regaining trust, building community, and allowing researchers to place their bodies on the line with research participants (Carrillo Rowe “Locating”; Madison “The Labor of Reflexivity”). By troubling the dichotomy of these roles, critical, reflexive methods offer up researchers’ bodies as evidence that can yield important insights, encourage reciprocal vulnerability between researchers and researched, and make research more personal, accessible, and impactful for the communities we research (Madison “Dangerous Ethnography”).

In my research with fellow queer gender performers of color, I explore the ways in which interviewing with a focus on a personal narrative perspective – can further decolonize academic research and create more dialogic relationships between researchers and researched. In this chapter, I explicate the central aspects of these methodological perspectives and the benefits of using them jointly in my research with queer gender performers of color. Next, I theorize the implications and ethics of researcher positionality as a researcher who is embedded in the community I am researching. I then consider the politics of conducting research as a member of the historically marginalized community I study. Additionally, I outline the central components of poetic transcription and its utility for my critical personal narrative work with queer gender performers of color. Finally, I propose a plan for data collection and analysis using these methodologies.

Personal Narrative

Traditionally, knowledge derived from academic research has been relayed to audiences through elite forms of publication that have limited circulation and prohibit meaningful conversations between disciplines, as well as between academics and the populations we research. Furthermore, the voice through which scholars relay academic knowledge is frequently impersonal, uses inaccessible language, and does not emphasize the lived, material dimensions of the human experiences under study (Langellier “Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity”). Traditional academic writing has discouraged strongly the inclusion of personal refrains, with critics citing such practices

as non-rigorous and trivial (Anzaldúa “Speaking in Tongues”). Together, these tendencies have worked to exclude non-elite voices from the co-construction of academic knowledge, thereby reproducing the systems of power and privilege that many academics allege to challenge through research (Ono).

Noting the problems inherent in these tendencies, the critical, scholarly community has worked to liberate academic scholarship from its elite and impersonal roots by encouraging the use of auto-methodologies like personal narrative and performative writing that facilitate accessibility for larger audiences, more performative, engaging writing, and, above all else, the inclusion of researchers’ and participants’ voices in qualitative research. The personal voice ventures to make heard the yet-unacknowledged aspects of the research experience by allowing scholars to write themselves and their participants into the scene, disregarding myths of objectivity and staking personal claims in their research (Langellier “Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity”; Peterson and Langellier “The Politics of Personal Narrative”). Utilized predominantly by critical scholars whom disavow the notion of a “hygienic” split between the intellectual and the corporeal, personal narrative allows researchers to privilege experiential knowledge as we advocate for deepened understandings of human identity and behavior (Peterson and Langellier “The Performance Turn”).

As one such auto-methodology, personal narrative originated with dissatisfaction at lack of positive representations of marginalized groups in literature (Corey “The Personal”). In attempts to make research more accessible and to grant voices to unheard

populations, personal narrative is a deeply vulnerable methodology that requires not only the sharing of personal stories, but the complex interweaving of personal experiences with academic theories and methods in order to produce knowledge that challenges conventional understandings of subjectivity (Corey “The Personal”; Spry). In its pursuit to foster revolutionary academic work, personal narrative strives to uphold three main commitments: to promote increased accessibility of academic knowledge, to excavate subjugated knowledges, and to engage the bodily aspects of experiences through the performative.

Langellier (“Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity”) argues that personal narrative is a fundamentally human methodology with the profound capacity to strike a chord with readers more than any other mode of writing up research (133). The deep connections personal narrative fosters are due in part to the method’s reduced reliance on translating human experiences through academic jargon in order to legitimize them as knowledge. For scholars who utilize a personal narrative perspective, mundane stories from everyday life yield insights that are just as valuable as results derived from controlled, data-driven research projects (Peterson and Langellier “The Performance Turn”). Peterson and Langellier assert that personal narratives are not extraneous pieces of the research process. Personal narratives are, in and of themselves, texts worthy of scholarly examination (“The Politics of Personal Narrative”140). They note, “Personal narrative is a textualizing of experience; personal narrative research needs to be a contextualizing movement that reflects and critiques the politics of knowledge and

identity in which it unavoidably participates (Peterson and Langellier “The Politics of Personal Narrative” 141).

Although personal narrative research does not read like much of the academic work that precedes it, the stories the method brings to the table can only enhance understandings of human communication and relationships. In the same way that individuals share personal narratives for strategic purposes, researchers can interrogate personal narratives in strategic ways in order to expose the cultural politics at work in our lived experiences (Peterson and Langellier “The Politics of Personal Narrative” 142).

Personal narrative’s focus on the most mundane aspects of life through storytelling makes it largely accessible to non-academic audiences. Langellier (“Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity”) argues that because most individuals can relate to others easily through storytelling, personal narrative fosters instant connections between readers and populations under study. “Studying the communication and performance of ordinary people,” Langellier argues, “invites researchers to listen on the margins of discourse and to give voice to muted groups in our society” (243). Where distanced, jargon-laden academic work has failed to garner interest from audiences beyond the elite academic realm, personal narrative has the potential to make research *matter* to larger audiences.

Because personal narrative research that focuses on the voice of the researcher relies heavily on individual stories, the method has faced accusations of narcissism and of being less rigorous than other forms of social research (Spry). Opponents have expressed

skepticism around personal narratives' legitimacy due to their unapologetic partiality. However, scholars have argued that as long as personal narratives are positioned against the backdrop of overarching social structures, they have the potential to illuminate at least some valuable aspect of how those structures affect individuals' lives. According to Corey, personal narrative "... transcends self-indulgence when placed against the backdrop of the master narrative" ("The Personal" 250). Additionally, Spry asserts that without seeking support from critical theories, personal narrative runs the risk of falling into self-indulgent, purely aesthetic territory, which is not in itself generative of social change (108).

In defending the rigor and utility of personal narrative, Ono asks the poignant question, "What voice could be more important than the one I use to speak to my mother?" (120). In this sense, scholars of personal narrative feel that unless academic research has the capacity to scale the walls of academia in order to reach larger audiences, its utility is limited significantly. Therefore, in order to adhere to the highest code of ethics in research, we must write in a way that implicates and effects change for all bodies (Ono).

A second aspiration of the study of personal narratives is to rescue and rearticulate subjugated knowledge, or ways of knowing that have been relegated to the margins of history. For example, Corey ("The Personal") recalls how, as a young gay man, he struggled to locate reflections of his experiences in the literature. Because he was constantly bombarded with master narratives that foregrounded heterosexuality, Corey

came to feel highly invisible and disregarded. However, through personal narrative writing, Corey discovered a way to articulate his experiences with silence and erasure and to place his experiences with marginalization within the context of larger social structures. As Corey writes, “The narrative, I discovered, is a literary form ideal for lives governed by silence” (“The Personal” 249). For Corey, personal narrative is a healing methodology.

Although personal narrative writing often relies on the excavation of *individual* stories from the margins, scholars argue that localized analyses can yield insights about larger cultural trends and systems of power (Langellier “Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity”; Spry). Such narratives can, in fact, awaken audiences for the first time to the presence of injustice and encourage advocacy for social change. As Langellier writes, personal narratives have the potential to “disrupt our unreflexive participation in institutional modes for telling stories and in culturally given, sedimented narratives” (“Personal Narratives: Perspectives” 269). Therefore, the insights that one personal narrative yields can engender social change for entire marginalized populations.

Personal narrative has the potential to illuminate the co-constructed and performative dimensions of human identities and communication. For this reason, scholars have encouraged a “performative turn” in personal narrative research, whereby scholars should embrace the performative dimensions of human storytelling in their writing-up of personal narrative research. In noting that some personal narratives cannot be “fully transcribed and analyzed,” Peterson and Langellier advocate for the production

of personal narrative texts that bring stories to life through performative writing (“The Politics of Personal Narrative” 136). Specifically, these scholars advocate for personal narrative scholarship that utilizes visceral language and evokes the body in the process of storytelling. For these scholars, emphasizing the performative in the sharing of personal narratives “highlights the interdependence between the telling and the experience” (Langellier “Perspectives” 128).

Additionally, personal narrative research affords individuals the opportunity to re-imagine social and cultural identities. As Corey argues, “... the personal narrative is one way of disturbing the master narrative, and through the performative dimensions of the personal narrative, the individual is able to disrupt, and dare I say, *rewrite* – the master narrative” (“The Personal” 250, emphasis original). Performance centered scholars of personal narrative argue the study of personal narrative not only assists individuals in exposing the nuts and bolts of identity co-construction, but also acts as a mode of identity construction (Corey “The Personal”; Peterson and Langellier “The Politics of Personal Narrative”; Spry). In other words, in theorizing subjectivities through personal narrative, we have the potential to (re)construct subjectivities. As Spry writes:

Our task in [personal narrative] is to make writing perform, to make writing represent the complexity of the body’s critical expression of interacting with others in the frames social norms and expectations, and then to write the body’s transformation of those norms. (101)

Similarly, Langellier argues that personal narrative is not just a way in which individuals recount lived experiences. She conceptualizes personal narrative as a mode of being and becoming, an act which “... *constitutes* identities and experience, producing

and reproducing that to which it refers” (128). Therefore, in sharing our stories, we not only document our lives; we engage in ongoing processes of identity negotiation and sense making.

Peterson and Langellier caution against personal narrative research that fails to account, deeply, for the context in which the narrative is situated, as well as the social locations that researchers and their participants occupy. Unlike some research in Performance Studies that treats personal narratives like aesthetic artifacts of lived experience, personal narrative research must be understood as a participant’s performance of everyday life, which is laden with signifiers of cultural politics (Peterson and Langellier “The Politics of Personal Narrative”147). In this respect, researchers should regard personal narrative “... as a site where experience and identity are naturalized, aestheticized, exploited by self, or commodified for others” (“The Politics of Personal Narrative”147). In other words, when conducting personal narrative research, we must never fail to account for the larger cultural, political, and historical frameworks within which we perform our identities and where all scholarly conversations take place.

The central tenets and theoretical conversations surrounding personal narrative nurture a methodology that is constantly making and remaking itself, committed to transforming scholarship from the inside out. Scholars of personal narrative are discontent with approaches to research that obscure subjectivity, arguing instead for the personal as an alternative route to knowledge about culture and communication. Through personal narrative, Communication scholars not only make academic knowledge more

relatable to wider audiences; they work to transform antiquated, academic theories by giving marginalized voices space to speak. As Anzaldúa notes, “I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you” (quoted in Langellier “Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity” 169).

By combining my own personal narratives with personal narrative accounts from other queer gender performers of color, I engage in a process of deep-self reflexivity through which I reflect on shared and divergent experiences across dimensions of identity and privilege within our community. This methodological approach not only allows me to access deep human connections with the queer gender performers of color with whom I speak; it allows us to engage in collaborative sense making and identity construction across our shared and dissonant experiences with race, gender, sexuality, and positionality. With my own personal narratives serving as an undercurrent, I seek to discover the connections and disconnections of our queer brown bodies in the politicized landscape of queer gender performance.

Interviewing and Personal Narrative

In interviewing, I discover a methodology that allows for the collaborative integration of the voices of other queer gender performers of color with my own. As a method that emphasizes the centralization of participants’ voices and the establishment of trusting, empathetic relationships between researchers and interviewees, interviewing takes to heart critical and social justice tenets, including self-reflexivity on behalf of researchers (Lindlof Taylor; Seidman; Johnson “From Page to Stage”). Although

researchers who deploy interviewing critically do not posit that the method makes possible any level of objectivity, they do argue that interviewing is an inherently dialogic method that works to neutralize power imbalances in the relationship between researcher and researched (Lindlof and Taylor; Seidman). Transformed from its evaluative, quantitative roots into a tool meant to promote genuine connections between researchers and participants and to excavate subjugated knowledge, interviewing promotes the meaningful translation of participants' voices to scholarly audiences (Madison "Story, History, and Performance"). Furthermore, interviewing provides for the blending of researchers' and interviewees' personal narratives of lived experiences, thereby creating scholarship around shared histories of struggle (Johnson "From Page to Stage").

For decades, scholars in Communication and related fields have recognized the potential of such interviews to diversify the academic literature and to create space for marginalized perspectives in history. Fewer scholars, however, have explored interviewing as a tool capable of establishing empathy and intersubjectivity between researchers and interviewees who share marginalized identities (Seidman 24). The vein of interviewing best suited for my research with queer gender performers of color is one that carries an explicit focus on granting representation to personal narratives and placing researchers in direct dialogue with participants. Lindlof and Taylor understand interviewing as a method that seeks to tell participants' experiences "in relation to cultural discourses of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other politicized identities" (180-181). In my research with queer gender performers of color, I aim to strengthen the

argument in favor of interviewing as a mode of relationality between members of marginalized groups within research relationships.

Although researchers can utilize interviewing in a variety of ways through diverse recruitment techniques and lines of questioning across many contexts, most theories about the method share some basic assumptions. First, more than any other methodology, qualitative interviewing enables a focus on the ways in which individuals construct through language their identities, cultures, and communities. As “socially situated actors” (Lindlof and Taylor 172), interview participants draw from a variety of storytelling techniques in order to reconstruct for interviewers their experiential worlds. Second, theorists assert that qualitative interviewing is an inherently dialogic and relational methodology, which encourages substantial and caring relationships between interviewers and participants. Unlike other methodologies, which utilize observation or distanced critique, interviewing necessitates the establishment and maintenance of sincere interpersonal relationships built on trust and mutual investments. Third, interviewing is often used as a tool that promotes social equality through the collection and dispersing of marginalized experiential knowledge. When researchers conduct interviews with members of marginalized communities, the risks are great. However, the result of such engagements can lead to deeper academic and public understandings of underrepresented truths.

Personal narrative and storytelling are important modes of identity construction and community building for members of many marginalized groups (Anzaldúa “Speaking

in Tongues”; Johnson “From Page to Stage”; Madison “Story, History, and Performance”). For example, in many black communities, oral history and storytelling help to preserve cultural memories that have been stripped away by legacies of colonialism and slavery (Madison, “Story, History, and Performance”). Whereas other methods of inquiry gloss over the ways in which marginalized communities utilize language – both spoken and written – as a mode of identity construction and meaning making, interviewing places language at the center of analysis. For interviewers, close attention to how individuals utilize language “... enables us to understand the sensemaking that animates communicative performances” (Lindlof and Taylor 172). In other words, for interviewers, cultural realities do not exist outside of the linguistic negotiations in which individuals engage (Seidman 8).

Equally as important as the words participants use to construct their stories is the way in which they speak, or *perform*, those stories for others (Madison “That Was My Occupation”). We do not come to understand our identities through spoken word alone; it is in the movement of bodies and the embodied articulation of lived experience that we truly construct our realities and present them for others (Langellier and Peterson 9). In deploying interviewing as a research method, researchers must be accountable to linguistic and corporeal ways of knowing and the ways in which participants deploy both in their articulations of self (Langellier and Peterson 9-10). Through performance methodologies like personal narrative and storytelling, academics of color can help move “specialized knowledge” away from strictly textual academic traditions to the realm of

the flesh where such knowledge and lived experiences originated (Madison “That Was My Occupation” 215-216). It is particularly important to invest in performance ideologies when collecting the narratives of people from marginalized groups, as the performance paradigm is attentive to the performative dimensions of vernacular knowledge construction and how bodies and narratives are situated historically (Madison “Story, History, and Performance” 62-63).

In addition to offering insights into how individuals (re)construct lived experiences through language and storytelling, interviewing allows interviewers to gain an understanding of larger cultural patterns of language use. Interviews can help to illuminate the complexity and musicality of human language. Furthermore, because these linguistic characteristics are often difficult to convey to audiences through the written word, researchers turn to alternative forms of scholarship, like performance, in order to convey research findings (Johnson “From Page to Stage”). Although researchers cannot and should not expect individuals’ stories to represent the cultural groups to which they belong, interviews can provide an increased understanding into how individual bodies negotiate identity within those groups from particular vantage points (Seidman 9). Ultimately, in the collection of personal narratives through interviewing, scholars should reverse the potential of language to paint unique portraits of individuals’ lived experiences.

A focus on interviewing as a methodology that fosters relational, dialogic connections between researchers and the individuals they interview is a second major

theme in the literature. Because interviewing requires deep intimacy between researchers and participants, including trust and physical proximity, personal relationships tend to form more easily within research projects that utilize qualitative interviewing (Lindlof and Taylor 170). Although cultivating trust and genuine connections within research relationships can be difficult, particularly within marginalized communities that tend to regard academics as suspect, the “relative privacy” qualitative interviewing affords serves as a catalyst for such connections (Lindlof and Taylor 170). Additionally, as Medved and Taylor note, researchers’ willingness to be vulnerable is often directly related to how willing their participants are to be vulnerable (109). The cultivation of trust depends upon sincere interest on behalf of the researcher – a demonstration of sincere interest in the stories participants share (Seidman 9).

Establishing trust with interviewees, however, should not be the ultimate goal of interviewing. Critical researchers, particularly those whom share investments with or belong to the marginalized communities they research, must bear the responsibility that comes with witnessing others’ stories (Johnson “From Page to Stage”; Madison “Story, History, and Performance”). As privileged academics whom have come to know others’ subjugated histories, researchers have the responsibility to convey those stories to audiences in ethical, compassionate ways that work toward social change (Madison, “Story, History, and Performance”; Willink). For this reason, researchers’ personal investment in storytelling and personal narrative as modes of inquiry and knowledge construction is imperative. If as researchers we cannot articulate for ourselves the power

of personal storytelling, we are less likely to invest in the stories others share with us (Madison “Story, History, and Performance”). In my project, I seek to bridge my stories with my interviewees’ stories as a way of cultivating such genuine connections.

Despite the potential for interviewing to promote dialogue and relationships, it does not neutralize the power imbalances inherent in research with marginalized communities. Even within interview sessions that are relatively unstructured and within which interviewees speak candidly, researchers have the power to determine topics, lines of questioning, and the outcomes of the research (Lindlof and Taylor 171). While researchers can take certain measures to balance power differentials within these relationships – such as allowing interviewees to choose the interview location and to review research findings before publication – such imbalances inevitably exist (Seidman 13). Researchers with lived experiences similar to the experiences of their interviewees may have an easier time balancing this wire, though ethical tensions will always exist (Seidman 104). As Seidman notes, although as qualitative researchers we are not capable of eliminating power and privilege in interviewing relationships, it is our responsibility to be cognizant of those tensions and the ways in which they may affect our relationships with participants, as well as the scholarship we produce (124). Furthermore, in a research project that centers my own stories as well as others’ stories, I must be aware of how loudly my voice speaks in relation to my participants’ voices.

A third strand of scholarship attends to the ways in which researchers can deploy interviewing as tool of resistance and subversion against dominant ideologies and master

narratives. As Johnson notes, collecting oral histories through interviewing helps social justice researchers to compile an “archive of life stories heretofore undocumented” (“From Page to Stage” 248). In research with communities whom have fostered little [critical] attention from academics, researchers have unique opportunities to utilize their privilege strategically in order to preserve oral histories. In addition to serving as a means of archiving subjugated knowledge, interviews with members of marginalized groups also creates access to lived experiences that have long been invalidated and swept aside. The best kind of interviewing does not only benefit the researcher and expand the academic canon. Rather, good interviewing assists in the amelioration of unjust social conditions for the marginalized groups with whom researchers conduct interviews (Madison, “Story, History, and Performance” 54; Seidman 109). Seidman argues that in deploying interviewing, striving for equity and social justice is not only a methodological imperative, but an ethical one (110).

The most effective way in which researchers can promote change for marginalized groups is by situating personal narratives within larger social, political, and cultural frameworks (Seidman; Willink). Personal stories, scholars argue, are not only glimpses into individuals’ lives; they are indicative of the ways in which larger structures of power and privilege bear down on bodies (Corey “The Personal”; Seidman 7). In witnessing individuals’ stories, we can gain a deeper understanding of how to speak back against social inequities – often through collective storytelling. In Critical Race Theory, scholars term this approach *counterstorytelling*, or a methodological approach to

speaking back against the erasure of bodies in institutional contexts (Solorzano and Yosso). As a method that is used to “unearth hidden truths,” counterstorytelling names the inaccuracies, erasures, and injuries done to marginalized groups and allows individuals to rewrite histories, both personally and collectively (Solorzano and Yosso 37).

Most importantly, when it deployed ethically, interviewing should grant agency to those individuals willing to share their stories. Although researchers *witness* personal narratives through the interviews we conduct, they should never attempt to claim *ownership* of those narratives (Johnson “From Page to Stage”). After prolonged silences around their lived experiences, members of marginalized groups may be quite eager to engage in personal narrative and counterstorytelling as a means of identity negotiation and collective healing (Madison, “Story, History, and Performance” 60). Researchers must devote the utmost respect to the urgency with which many participants share their subjugated personal narratives, and do our best to deliver those stories to audiences with efficiency, accuracy, and compassion (Madison, “Story, History, and Performance” 63). In efforts to allow participants’ voices to shine through clearly, researchers should attempt to foreground participants’ voices while downplaying – but not denying – the impact of their own voices (Medved and Turner 109). Lindlof and Taylor assert that qualitative researchers are charged with the task of revolutionizing interviewing so that it becomes a methodology that empowers rather than disregards, and amplifies rather than silences marginalized voices (184).

Despite the liberatory potential of interviewing, it carries the potential for several common pitfalls. First, because in interviews participants are granted complete freedom through which to craft through language accounts of their lived experiences, some scholars doubt the complete accuracy of such stories. As a method that encourages the visceral renderings of fleshly knowledge, interviewees may utilize artistic license, thereby telling stories that may not represent actual events (Lindlof and Taylor 173). Similar risks include participants' misremembering of events, relationships, and timelines (Lindlof and Taylor 173). Similarly, because interviewing frequently relies on relatively few interviews, researchers risk gaining information from interviewees whom are either privileged or multiply marginalized within their communities. The stories these informants share could therefore paint an inaccurate representation of the culture or cultures to which they belong. However, Madison argues against these potential pitfalls, claiming that in the collection of personal narratives, researchers should not expect individuals to speak for any experiences beyond their own ("Story, History, and Performance").

A second methodological debate concerns the potential exploitation or endangerment of interviewees whose marginalized positionalities may make them more vulnerable than privileged members of society. Although bringing political visibility to underrepresented groups in society is a goal of much critical research, the effects of such exposure are not always entirely beneficial (Lindlof and Taylor 184). The unearthing of subjugated knowledges can in fact strip away the protective layers that marginalized

communities have built for protection, thereby making them vulnerable to continued oppression (Lindlof and Taylor 184; Madison, “Story, History, and Performance” 45). Interviewees with marginalized identities may also try to protect *themselves* from the risks associated with academic research by hesitating to disclose too much information and being skeptical of what researchers will do with the stories they collect (Madison, “Story, History, and Performance” 48). In order to offset these risks, researchers must be keenly aware of the disruptive or damaging potential of interviewing and always hold interviewees’ best interests before the goals of the research (Seidman 109).

A third concern surrounding interviewing involves the nuances of researcher self-reflexivity. Interviewing provides opportunities for researchers to write themselves into dialogue with interviewees and to reflect on the tensions of power and privilege that emerge during the research process (Medved and Taylor 109). Although this opportunity is revolutionary and quite often liberatory, scholars sometimes deploy self-reflexivity sloppily, or “...misinterpreted and maligned as an opportunity for self-aggrandizing, unbridled confessions or sensational self-disclosures” (109). The researcher’s voice, therefore, overpowers the voices of the interviewees with whom the researcher purports to engage in dialogue (110). Additionally, researchers who work within the communities to which they belong often do not consider how engaging in interviewing relationships with previous acquaintances and friends will affect those relationships. As Seidman notes, engaging in qualitative interviews can shift personal relationships dramatically

(98). For this reason, researchers must consider what they are willing to sacrifice in the name of qualitative research (Seidman 99).

More than just a *component* of interviewing, self-reflexivity is a “labor” that should guide every aspect of qualitative research from the inception of the project, to interaction with participants, to interpretation and presentation of conclusions (Madison “The Labor of Reflexivity”). In other words, self-reflexivity is not one stop on the qualitative research road; it should be the vehicle that drives our work from start to finish. Failure to engage in deep and constant self-reflexivity throughout the research process poses significant threats to the integrity of the research project and the safety of participants. As Berry and Clair note:

We are, at our core, ethnographic selves uniquely crafting stories about culture, a creative process intrinsically connected to the multidimensional call of ethnographic reflexivity. We are storied selves entangled with others’ stories (those of our participants, characters, and fellow ethnographers), our understandings of their stories, and their understandings of ours. (95)

If researchers do not reflect continually on how our own identities and histories shape our relationship to the research context and to our participants, we risk forcing our own understandings of culture onto audiences, in effect speaking “for” rather than “with” our participants (Alcoff). Although we can never liberate our research entirely from the subjective views we have of culture, we can use self-reflexivity as a tool that at least accounts for our bodies and the ways in which our interpretations might color our academic work (Seidman 98).

The “labor” of self-reflexivity differs dramatically when taken up by researchers who themselves occupy spaces of marginalization (Calafell “(I)dentities”; Madison “The Labor of Reflexivity”). In accounting for how she is simultaneously privileged as an academic and disadvantaged as a queer Chicana, Calafell notes that the process of critical reflexivity not only benefits participants, but the researcher as well (7). Through “intersectional reflexivity,” researchers can work to account for the ways in which bodies can occupy spaces of marginalization and privilege simultaneously (Calafell “(I)dentities” 9). Berry notes that ethnographic research can “negatively impact ourselves and others” if we do not pay close attention to the intersectional and context-specific relationships that occur in research (174). Reflexivity holds us accountable to be keenly aware of these tensions, and enables us to “change our course of action as needed” when our methods threaten our safety or the safety of our participants (Berry 174). Near the end of this chapter, I explicate my own approach to intersectional reflexivity.

A potentially liberatory methodology for both researchers and participants, interviewing holds many promises. However, unless deployed according to the highest ethical standards, qualitative interviewing, like other forms of academic research, can damage and further colonize marginalized communities (Madison “Story, History, and Performance”). When researchers structure interviews around an ethics of care and genuine interest in building community and sharing stories, the methodology can assist in achieving significant social change (Johnson “From Page to Stage”; Willink). Lindlof and Taylor note that often, scholars can gain the most insight into a communicative

phenomenon by simply *asking*; observation, analysis, and other forms of qualitative research cannot garner as much cultural knowledge (173). Interviewing, therefore, is an extremely useful methodology for gaining insights into experiential knowledge (Lindlof and Taylor 173).

As the research tool I rely upon in order to access the personal narratives of other queer gender performers of color, I invest a great deal of care to designing an approach that is fundamentally dialogic, situated in historical, political, and cultural contexts, and which account for the power dynamics present in my relationships with my interviewees. In utilizing interviewing as a methodology, I strive for an approach that does not colonize performers' stories, utilizing them for my own gain as a researcher. Instead, I orient myself toward an interviewing methodology that focuses on the collective sense making of our identities and lived experiences through dialogue and the sharing of personal narrative (Langellier "Perspectives").

Poetic Inquiry and Transcription

An innovative way to convey qualitative research to audiences, *poetic inquiry* is a performative, aesthetic, and frequently critical set of methodologies intended to transcend the limitations of traditional academic writing. Scholars who utilize poetic inquiry contend that because human speech and experiences are more poetic than prosaic, and more performative than static, writers require methodologies that allow research processes and results to come to life on the page (Faulkner "Poetry as Method"; Thomas). Poetic inquiry is an umbrella term that stands for multiple uses of poetry in research,

including poetry written during the research process, interviews transcribed in poetic form, fictional or found poems, field notes taken in poetic form, and poems written about methodologies and theories (Prendergrast xx). As Madison notes, transcription of interviews in poetic form helps researchers to account for the fact that "words are alive with sounds that condition their meanings" ("That Was My Occupation" 216). Although used alone as a method for conducting qualitative research, poetic inquiry is often combined with other methodologies like personal narrative, autoethnography, ethnography, and interviewing as a way to enliven participants' and researchers' voices (Faulkner, Calafell and Grimes; Pollock; Washington).

In addition to mirroring the spoken word more accurately than prose, poetic inquiry can provide for deeper engagements between researchers and audiences. Because poetics are much more visceral than prose, they mirror the natural human inclination toward storytelling and the communion of lived experiences (Brady xv). Poetic inquiry can help researchers, participants, and readers alike to feel jointly engaged and implicated in the research, thereby helping to establish collective agency (Galvin and Todres 309). Furthermore, poetry's common utilization of metaphors and similes allow readers, researchers, and participants to find resonance with even the most unfamiliar experiences, and to (re)imagine their own lived experiences through the aesthetic and performative (Edghill 278). As Edghill notes, poetic inquiry provides "... the opportunity to see the familiar in new ways" (287). Where traditional academic writing can close off

opportunities for dialogue, poetic inquiry creates new spaces for engagement (Sameshima and Vandermause 276).

Additionally, poetic inquiry can illuminate researchers' positionality and the complexity of their relationships with participants. Although many qualitative methods provide spaces for researcher self-disclosure and self-reflexivity, poetic inquiry helps researchers to negotiate *performatively* for audiences the tensions of power, privilege, and positionality that situate them within their scholarship and research relationships (Faulkner "Poetry as Method"; Piirto). By making the nuances of their relationships with participants more visible, researchers can begin to write not *about* but *with* and *in relation to* others (Brady xiv). Prendergrast argues that poetic inquiry "reveal[s] researchers and participants both as masked and unmasked, costumed and bared, liars and truth-tellers, actors and audience, offstage and onstage in the creation of research" (xxiii). In other words, poetic inquiry carries with it the potential to illuminate the collaborative nature of qualitative research often shrouded in traditional academic form (Leggo 167; Prendergrast xxiii). Although some disagreement exists about whether researchers should be formally trained as poets before utilizing poetic inquiry (Faulkner, "Poetry as Method" 14), most scholars agree that if deployed thoughtfully and with craft, poetic inquiry can assist researchers in naming their own stakes in scholarship and research relationships, thereby promoting scholarship that is more self-reflexive and critical overall (Piirto 98; Prendergrast xxv).

In my research with queer gender performers of color, I invest in Brady's claim that "A plurality of methods can cast a wider net, catch more, put us in the web of a truly productive artful-science – into a core of thinking that promotes robust discourse from ivy-covered halls to the hinterlands of humans *being*" (xv-xvi). More specifically, to my toolkit of personal narrative and interviewing, I add poetic transcription in an attempt to further humanize my dialogic interactions with fellow queer gender performers of color. Through poetic transcription of interview data, I seek to liberate my scholarship from the constraints of traditional academic writing, allowing my body and my participants' bodies to perform on the page. If personal narratives are living, breathing, self-constituting entities rather than simply archives of our lived experiences, I must rely on poetic transcription of interview data to usher to life the performative, sense making moments in which my participants and I engage.

I follow the vein of poetic transcription that appears in the work of D. Soyini Madison, which textualizes fragments of interviews as living poetry through the use of intentional line breaks, italicization, and aesthetic spacing. These tactics are intended not only to mirror human speech, but to recreate the aesthetic properties of dialogic engagement that ordinary, written scholarship cannot capture. For example, following her oral history project with Ms. Alma Kapper, Madison transcribed data poetically to evoke the emotional, embodied connection she experienced during the interview process:

Not jus' in the souf
they was all doin' it
every which-a-way
'cause they didn' have nothin'

the colored people I mean”
they didn’ have nothin’
they couldn’ live off the grass.
(Madison “That Was My Occupation” 222)

By transcribing Ms. Alma Kapper’s interview poetically, Madison recreates for audiences the musical qualities of the Black Vernacular English that characterized the storytelling moment. Without poetic transcription, Madison would not have captured the deeply seated historical context and identity work performed through personal narrative. In this sense, poetic transcription allows researchers to remain committed to sharing personal narratives as ongoing, constantly evolving texts that implicate our own bodies, as well as the bodies of those we interview.

Although I share many identities with the population I wish to study, I also bring into research process intersecting privileged and marginalized identities. As a queer woman of color with a strong stake in queer gender performance communities, I see myself as a “complete member” of the population I study (Toyosaki). I share experiences, identities, and social justice goals with the individuals I research. However, as a queer woman *of color* who is also an academic investigating a predominantly white, non-academic queer gender performance community, I bring to the equation two intersecting identities that complicate my “native” affiliation. In order to reflect fully on the complexities of researching with predominantly white queer gender performance communities as a queer woman of color academic, I require the unique spaces for self-reflexivity and performative expression that these multiple methodologies provide. Although my own personal narratives can grant some insight into how queer gender

performers of color negotiate whiteness, they can only tell a fraction of the story. By combining my personal narratives with those of my participants and allowing our words to behave poetically on the page, I provide space for other voices to speak while still granting myself space to engage in self-reflexivity.

Research Procedures

Now that I have explicated the central components of personal narrative, interviewing, and poetic transcription and built a case for deploying them jointly in my research with queer gender performers of color, I explicate the data collection plan I utilized in my study. The population with whom I conducted my project is a selection of six self-identified queer gender performers of color who work, reside, and perform in the Denver Metro Area. As a formal member of an established drag and burlesque troupe from December 2010 through January 2013, I have built considerable rapport with various queer gender performers of color, including drag kings, drag queens, faux queens and faux kings, queer burlesque performers, and queer boylesque performers.ⁱⁱ I have built these relationships through regular and sustained contact during performances, in queer social settings, and in friendship circles. My relationships with most of the individuals I interviewed originated with my involvement in the drag troupe, though I am connected to others through my roles as a doctoral student and volunteer for queer community organizations.

Strong rapport is imperative when conducting academic research with marginalized and therefore vulnerable populations (Conquergood “Rethinking

Ethnography”; Madison “Dangerous Ethnography”; Toyosaki; Willink). My immersion in the Denver queer gender performance community as a performer, occasional producer of shows, and frequent audience member has allowed me to build intimate human connections with the individuals whose voices I seek to engage in dialogue through this project. Although my membership to this community does not entirely counter my suspect identity as an academic researcher peering inward toward a marginalized group, it helps to shorten the power distance (Madison “The Dialogic Performative”).

It is important to note that my decision to interview only self-identified queer gender performers *of color* is strategic. Although I strongly believe that many white queer gender performers confront racism and other forms of oppression in queer communities (Halberstam “Mackdaddy”), I seek in this project to *center* the too-often unheard voices of queer gender performers of color. Although newer scholarship around queerness, identity, and performance has charted the evolution of drag performance as a communicative phenomenon, most studies continue to feature white bodies performing in predominantly white spaces (Troka, LeBesco, and Noble; Surkan). From our vantage points at the crux of marginalized identities, queer gender performers of color have the unique ability to see (and therefore be critical of) the interplay of racism, sexism, transphobia, ableism, and other forms of oppression that circulate through queer gender performance communities. Queer gender performers of color embody subjectivity in our daily lives and onstage in varied ways. However, the similar historicization of our raced

bodies positions us as a collective whose junctures and disjunctures are worthy of critical examination.

I have witnessed consistent manifestations of white privilege during my time performing in Denver. My status as the sole self-identified person of color in the troupe to which I belonged for two years has spurred my interest in applying queer theories of color to my experiences, as well as to connecting my lived negotiations of whiteness with stories from other queer gender performers of color in the area. The central aim of this project extends beyond promoting visibility for queer gender performers of color toward creating spaces for dialogue and community between queer gender performers of color who perform in predominantly white communities. Like Faulkner, Calafell, and Grimes, I believe that it is in the process of speaking our experiences with marginalization that we can begin to heal from them, collectively (206).

Within this performance community, queer gender performers of color occupy a complicated space between invisibility and hyper-visibility (Halberstam “Female Masculinity”; “Mackdaddy”). Through the labor of linking the stories of queer gender performers of color, I gain a heightened understanding of strategies through which performers resist whiteness and exemplify for audiences resistive ways of performing identities at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. As Langellier argues, our personal stories are never singular, but deeply interwoven and indicative of larger, shared experiences of reality (“Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity”). Through this project, I access stories that are similar to mine, yet which differ in powerful ways,

hereby helping to establish academic and activist conversations around privilege and marginalization in queer gender performance communities.

Using interviewing as my primary form of data collection, I asked a series of questions intended to foster the sharing of personal narratives about how queer gender performers of color experience race, racism, and whiteness within queer gender performance communities (please see Appendix B). Other questions helped me to ascertain how negotiations of race, racism, and whiteness affect queer gender performers of color and how they make sense of it. Finally, I turned to a series of questions designed to help me understand what ideologies or public pedagogies queer gender performers of color offer to audiences through staged performance. I conducted one-time, audio-recorded interviews with each of my six participants, with each interview lasting between one and two-and-a-half hours.

Through performative personal narrative refrains, I reflect on my own experiences with negotiating and transforming race, racism, and whiteness in the queer gender performance community. This approach affords me many advantages, including the opportunity to bring my experiences to life on the page, to be transparent and reflexive as a critical researcher, and to compare and contrast my experiences with the stories I collect from the performers I interview. Naming my relationship to my participants and to the research context through the sharing of personal narratives is imperative to my continued self-reflexivity as a researcher and activist-scholar. As Calafell notes, “Our positionalities, whether we are explicit in naming them or not, have bearing and in some

cases consequences for our work, and those who are implicated by it” (“(I)dentities” 9). Just as I encouraged my participants to be vulnerable during the interview process, I make myself vulnerable on the page (Berry and Clair 95). I construct these personal narratives throughout my research process, focusing on critical incidents that characterize my experience as a queer gender performer of color. Additionally, I use poetic transcription to relay the personal narratives I collect through interviews. In transcribing interviews poetically, I will not use creative license. Rather, I will replicate my participants’ actual spoken words in poetic form on the page in order to mirror the musicality of language (Madison “That Was My Occupation”). Ultimately, I place my own experiences in dialogue with my participants’ personal narratives in order to determine similarities, differences, and tensions in our experiences as queer gender performers, and to hold myself accountable to the spirit of dialogic performance (Madison “The Labor of Reflexivity”). Through this study, I challenge myself to answer the question, “Who are we to ourselves and others, who do we become, as narrators of culture through the ethnographic practices that we do?” (Berry and Clair 96).

I recruited participants in July 2013 following Internal Review Board approval. Because I am personally familiar and involved in friendships with all of the people I interviewed, I recruited them using a standard solicitation email that foregrounded the completely voluntary nature of my study. All interviews took place between July and September 2013 at locations of the participants’ choosing. We met at coffee shops, participants’ homes, and my home. I reviewed the paperwork on informed consent with

each of my interviewees, and obtained their permission to audio-record our interviews. Additionally, I informed my participants of their right to withdraw from my research project at any time.

In writing up my research, I made every effort to foreground the perspectives of my co-participants rather than speaking solely from my own perspective. Although as a member of the community I research I cannot simply function as a conveyor of knowledge – my findings will always be imbued with my positionality – I can take special measures to make sure that my participants’ voices speak at least as loudly as my own (Toyosaki). I admire critical research projects that include verbatim portions of interviews, feature photographs or documents that have been analyzed, and offer other opportunities for readers to engage with the process of meaning making. Like Madison (“The Labor of Reflexivity”), I believe that it is my responsibility as a critical researcher to draw sound conclusions from my observations while also leaving room for my audiences and co-participants to engage in meaning making with me. Finally, I uphold the highest degree of integrity in working with a vulnerable, underrepresented population, and to convey the results of my research utilizing the strictest ethical code.

Chapter Four: Conversations with Queer Gender Performers of Color

Vinzie Rey is the first drag king of color with whom I have ever shared a performance space. I will not perform *with* him, but *alongside* him, tonight in this benefit show for a Colorado queer nonprofit organization. Vinzie appears from behind the black stage curtain wearing a child-size *Transformers* mask – a unique take on tonight’s “Heroes versus Villains” theme. His small, muscular body pops in and out of dance moves as he mouths the lyrics to “Booty Work” by T-Pain.

Left cheek, right cheek, left cheek, right cheek.

The audience loses control for Vinzie. While most performers tonight have failed to rouse spectators from their overstuffed couches, Vinzie summons droves of women to the foot of the stage. Black women press their derrieres into him and grind there for a moment, feeling the music, feeling him. White women wiggle dollar bills in the air, sending smoke signals to Vinzie as he approaches them, hoses them off with his cool smirk. Butch lesbians, genderqueers, boys and bois reach deep into their pockets for crumpled bills, eager for the moment they will lock eyes with Vinzie, when he will sync those smooth lyrics just for them. Vinzie receives more applause than any other performer. He is tonight’s most popular drag king, unequivocally.

As much as I covet this unique opportunity to perform with another person of color, I can’t help but wonder *what* – aside from Vinzie’s good looks and killer moves – incites such interest in him, what makes him this evening’s hottest commodity. “He

makes me tingly in my bikini areas,” a friend of mine in the audience remarks as Vinzie takes the stage. I cannot help but wonder if is this tokenism working under the radar, infiltrating this predominantly white drag performer community. Since I moved to Denver over a year ago, Vinzie is the only black drag king I have seen performing regularly. Without fail, he produces this kind of reaction each time. But for what purpose and at what cost?

When I catch a glimpse of Vinzie in the dressing room, I am hoping for a moment of connection. I want him to scan the white bodies stepping in and out of binders and corsets and settle on *my* body – this brown body that longs so much for connection with other queer bodies of color – butch bodies, femme bodies, any bodies. But Vinzie shuffles right past me, through the obstacle course of costumes folks have shed on the red tile floor. He does not even *see* me. But I certainly see him. Tonight, he is almost all I can see. I am obsessed with him, with others’ obsessions of him. Most performers hang out in the dressing room during breaks, offering support for makeup, costumes, or choreography. Vinzie disappears. Moments before the show, the frantic emcee asks if anyone has seen him. She singles me out, asks *me* if I have seen him, as though our bodies of color keep tabs on one another. *I saw him once*, I said. *Just for a minute*.

My usual pre-show anxiety gives way to a deep curiosity about where Vinzie goes as the rest of us scramble for mirror space, as white bodies stand close together, naked, in this repurposed prep kitchen. I want to be where Vinzie is. I want to know if he is with other people of color, sipping a cocktail at the downstairs bar, queer women and the

occasional gay man leaning into him as they laugh, hoping to steal one kiss. Is he alone, collecting his thoughts in someplace private where whiteness does not engulf his body like it engulfs mine? Does the whiteness of this space make him as uncomfortable as it makes me? It is only when I think about Vinzie, about the possibility of being near Vinzie, of being *like* Vinzie that I realize I am drowning, subsumed, entirely invisible. I am lost, struggling toward community, comfort, and visibility. Maybe Vinzie is out back taking the last drags of a cigarette, watching the Light Rail roll in across the street. Wherever he is, our emcee needs him here now. The show is about to start. I need him here now.

The crowd cheers loudest for Vinzie during curtain call. He is standing near me on the tiny stage so I lean over to him, our shoulders brushing. *You did an amazing job*, I tell him, hoping to find some glimmer of recognition in his eye. He issues a hurried thank you in response. He is not rude or brash, but I get the feeling he is itching to slink offstage, to collect his tip share and retreat to his secret post-show locale, away from us, away from me. I will stay here with the white kings and queens as the cleaning crew sweeps confetti from the stage, as the spotlights cool down and props find their ways back into drag bags. I will dance to pop music, watch intoxicated white couples press against walls, and miss Vinzie's presence. I will wish I knew where he goes, how I can get there, if he would let me in. More than all the fans eager to press crisp dollar bills into his boxer shorts, I want to *matter* to Vinzie. I want to believe – I want *him* to believe – in

our collective potential to transform these white spaces, to speak and perform in queer of color solidarity. But from wherever Vinzie is, he cannot even see me.

The personal narrative above comes from a journal entry I wrote after performing as a faux drag queen and drag king in Denver for a little over a year with the drag king and burlesque troupe, *Rise Above*. Early in my career as a performer, I found few bodies of color appearing onstage or in audiences. On rare occasions when I crossed paths with performers of color like Vinzie Rey, I closed up, too shy to approach them. Although I craved a queer community of color fiercely, I feared rejection so much that I remained silent and retreated to my usual, white performance circle. Several white members of my performance troupe – including my partner, Jimmy – were strong allies for me across race, but I had no people of color in my life with whom I could reflect on the whiteness and racism I experienced in the queer gender performance community. I began to feel as though I was destined to negotiate my experiences in isolation, with no one to truly understand my experiences. Slowly, I had grown so accustomed to whiteness and the rhetoric of colorblindness in those spaces that I became numb to my own isolation and pain (Allen, Orbe, and Olivas; Owens Patton “Civility”).

Over the course of nearly three years, the queer gender performers of color whose narratives I include in this study have become my community, my queer gender performance family, and ultimately, my salvation. In queer subcultural spaces that uphold the characteristics of whiteness in almost every way, I have longed for their brown bodies, for the chance that we could negotiate the moments of tokenism, exoticism,

racism, and blatant dismissal of our bodies *together*. I have found these performers in a variety of places: standing in front of an old dive bar, partnered with a white troupe member, and occupying the office just down the hall on campus. We connected on an almost spiritual level, experiencing for the first time relationships in which we need not educate others about our intersectional difference and could instead engage in celebration (Hao “Finding Spirituality”). The bonds we formed were immediate and deep, a result perhaps of our long-unmet needs for a type of connection we thought might never come.

These relationships have provided me with opportunities to explore my intersectional queer identity with people to whom I can relate by merit of our shared lived experiences. The solidarity we have built in and through performance has helped us to dialogue about instances of marginalization, erasure, and deep pain that many of us had never had the opportunity to discuss at length. In our interviews, several performers remarked that they had never encountered a forum through which they could discuss their racialized experiences in the queer gender performance community with someone who is not white. I found it heartbreaking that so few of us had had the chance to dialogue with one another around our experiences. The intimacy that our friendships had afforded us prior to the study allowed us to be vulnerable with one another in the disclosure of feelings of pain, frustration, and alienation. We offered heartfelt explications of our individual and collective paths toward representation, community, and belonging. Together, we engaged issues of activism, intersectionality, and public pedagogy in ways that linked our queer brown bodies together in the pursuit of dialogue and understanding.

Ultimately, I learned that all of the performers I interviewed have developed unique ways of empowering themselves and their communities through performance. They are public *pedagogues* – prominent figures in queer subcultural spaces who feel the responsibility to teach audiences about the radical possibilities of identification, and advocate for social change for the marginalized communities to which they belong (Giroux “Responsibility”). As prominent figures in queer communities, they use their power to espouse the values they hold dear and, in doing so, encourage audiences to discover their own agency. In a society where learning happens more frequently outside of formal schooling contexts than within them, queer gender performers play significant roles in shaping public perceptions (Sandlin, Shultz, and Burdick). Minorities in queer subcultural spaces, queer gender performers of color are situated uniquely in the spotlight. Television writer and actor Mindy Kaling, who is herself a powerful public pedagogue as the first woman of color ever to create and star in her own television show, *The Mindy Project*, discusses tensions she experiences in her highly influential role:

There are little Indian girls out there who look up to me, and I never want to belittle the honor of being an inspiration to them. But while I’m talking about why I’m so different, white male show runners get to talk about their art. (“Mindy Kaling Talks”)

With all eyes on us, queer gender performers of color have an important – if sometimes involuntary – responsibility to educate the queer public about gendered, racialized, and sexual agency. Whether we like it or not, every move we make and every word we speak take place within the public gaze. Independently and collectively, we have learned how to transform these moments of scrutiny into opportunities for

articulating our lived experiences and speaking back to the marginalization we feel (Corey “The Personal”; Pollock; Spry). The stories we share through our performances teach audiences where we have come from, how we have arrived here, and where we intend to go (Langellier “Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity”).

The lessons we teach audiences are by no means identical: in fact, some of our lessons stand in direct opposition to one another. For example, while Vinzie Rey teaches audiences about the power that comes with passing as male in predominantly white queer gender performance culture, P-Cock, Reese, and Wanderlust advocate for ambiguity and movement between gender and racial identities as modes of agency. Our paths toward becoming public pedagogues are also distinct: Miz.Mojita began performing as a sophomore in high school and Wanderlust did not set to the stage as a drag king until she was nearly forty. In fact, the only thing that *all* performers have in common is that we identify as people of color. Therefore, despite our diverse paths toward performance, we must all operate within the constraints of a predominantly white queer subculture. We make different decisions about how to perform queer identities of color in these spaces, finding agency and fulfillment in contrasting performative choices. Our differences show the multiplicity of experiences that queer gender performers of color can have. In articulating our differences, we prove the inaccuracy of stereotypes that assume our stories are similar purely on the basis of our racial identities.

The similarities we do have, on the other hand, reveal opportunities for queer of color relationality and cultural visibility. For example, both Edward Scissors and Vinzie

Rey believe that rendering their spiritual identities visible is important in the construction of queer masculinity onstage. Their religious and queer identities exist at an intersection populated by the historical context of fundamentalist religious exclusion, but which yields powerful opportunities for queer reclamation (Johnson “Feeling the Spirit”). Similarly, Reese and Miz.Mojita have built their queer gender performance identities upon a foundation of community advocacy and mentorship. They measure their success by their ability to empower younger generations through their philanthropic and pedagogical efforts. Alexander and Warren note that the weaving together of narratives, “serves as a juxtaposition of the location of our materially situated bodies,” and is therefore a “communicative approach of influence and cooperation... and resides at the core of collaborative research” (329). In witnessing these performers’ personal narratives, I have had the unique opportunity to draw connections between what drives our individual work and the collective agency that exists in the areas where we overlap.

In this chapter, I draw upon the in-depth conversations I had with six self-identified queer gender performers of color in order to theorize the types of public pedagogies they offer through their staged performances. It is important to note that in this analysis, I do not seek to generalize across performers’ experiences or to rely solely upon the characteristics we share in order to construct my arguments. Rather, I contend that each performer I interviewed offers a unique type of public pedagogy that is specific to his or her lived experiences, intersectional identities, and personal and political goals. Drawing upon critical communication pedagogy and public pedagogy theories, I assert

that the performers I interviewed embody public pedagogies of *self-acceptance, boldness, passing, community accountability, praxis, and ambiguity*. While considerations of how performers' narratives intertwine are important, I have chosen to foreground close examinations of each performer's pedagogical aims in effort to avoid unfairly conflating these performers' identities and experiences. Like Madison, I believe that close attention to individual stories yields insights about the larger cultural contexts in which bodies are situated ("That Was My Occupation"). When appropriate, I draw parallels between performers' narratives.

I include my own personal narratives throughout this chapter in order to identify the ways in which my experiences converge with or diverge from the narratives the performers offered. These interjections hold me accountable to an ethics of intersectional reflexivity that acknowledges the unavoidable centrality of my body and perspective in this research project (Jones "Intersectional Reflexivity"). By bringing my voice into the conversation, I strive to textualize the dialogic performances in which my fellow performers and I engaged (Conquergood "Rethinking Ethnography"). Additionally, I reflect on the nuances of conducting research with a marginalized community to which I belong as a queer woman of color with academic privilege.

Additionally, as a way to accentuate how performers' narratives speak to similar themes of self-expression, political voice, and social activism, I integrate throughout this chapter verses from a poem by Audre Lorde entitled, "A Song for Many Movements." In this poem, Lorde engages the issue of solidarity in social movements. Through the use of

the refrain “and our labor has become more important than our silence” (274), she writes about the strength that is born when groups of disenfranchised people raise our voices, refusing to remain silent in the face of injustice. I argue that although each performer I interviewed has different inspirations and goals for their performances, we engage in pedagogical labor together in efforts to increase visibility for queer people of color and to raise our collective voice. Lorde’s poem calls this collective strength into the light where it can shine.

The performers I interviewed claim a variety of racial and ethnic identities including Latina/o, Chicana/o, Southeast Asian, and black, represent several different types of queer gender performance, including queer burlesque, faux queens, faux kings, drag kings, gender-fluid performance, and drag queens, identify with a range of gender identitiesⁱⁱⁱ, and are between the ages of 26 and 43. Because I knew all performers as friends for at least six months prior to the start of my study, we had already built the rapport necessary to engage in deep, often emotional conversations about our experiences. Our prior relationships, however, did not prevent me from experiencing the tensions of my dual membership to academic and queer gender performance communities. At times, I even experienced the surprising sting of my academic privilege.

Moreman notes that interviewing “... provides [his] participants a forum to organically discuss their lived experience” (“Qualitative Interviews”199). In my study, this method allows me to resist colonizing methods that establish an *us-versus-them* dichotomy between interviewees and researchers. I encouraged each performer to

consider our interview as a conversation rather than a set of questions meant to help me glean understanding. This act helped me stay committed to the spirit of dialogue that I believe is central to building community around our marginalized identities. Interviews frequently turned emotional, with performers disclosing details that went above and beyond the questions I asked. I believe that the tendencies of these performers to go above and beyond the call of the research to share their stories with me speaks both to the closeness we have built in our relationships, as well as to the overwhelming need we feel for a space in which to discuss long-muted conversations about queer gender performance and race. With these considerations in mind, I turn now toward my analyses of performers' narratives and my theorizations about their roles as public pedagogues.

*Nobody wants to die on the way
caught between ghosts of whiteness
and the real water
none of us wanted to leave
our bones
on the way to salvation*

Wanderlust and the Pedagogy of Self-Acceptance

I found a quote the other day that said, "Be who you are, truly who you are, and if the people around you don't understand you, it's because they're your wrong tribe." So, for me, burlesque, I kept, I didn't quite fit, I couldn't be Dita Von Teese. I couldn't be a hot stripper,

I couldn't be classic.
I couldn't be those things, so I kept trying to get them to come over
to my side after I gave up on their side, and I just felt like at some point
you're just standing there being a girl with her top off
looking for acceptance
(Wanderlust. Personal interview. 26 July 2013)

The first time I met Wanderlust, she was standing on the sidewalk outside of a dive bar during the intermission of her self-produced burlesque and variety show, *Sucia*. She flicked ashes from her cigarette with a fierce grace as she adjusted the yellow beehive wig atop her head. It is impossible not to recognize Wanderlust immediately for the powerhouse performer and producer she is. At nearly six-feet tall, her broad yet elegant shoulders, long arms, and vibrant tattoos command attention. Now in her early forties, she has led a successful career as a professional wrestler, completed years of formal burlesque training, and performed as a drag king and faux queen in Denver for over three years. Wanderlust travels this world with such diverse experiences etched into her skin.

I knock on Wanderlust's screen door and she answers wearing black sweatpants and a black T-shirt with skulls. Her curly auburn hair is wild, and she dons a tired, post-workweek smile. I rarely have the opportunity to see her like this, outside of full makeup and colorful wigs, leaving a trail of glitter wherever she goes. She jokes that glitter coats all surfaces in her home like cat hair would – the residue of drag and burlesque crafting. Wanderlust makes all her own costumes, many from repurposed household materials. She tells me that her main goal as a performer is to make ugly *beautiful*, to shove aside

conventional notions of attractiveness in order to make space for the grotesque and the abject. Rarely have I seen beauty as captivating as Wanderlust's.

She leads me through her empty nest, past the life-size statues of Frankenstein and his bride, a shrine of family photos, and a cage full of ferrets toward her dining room. A thin layer of glitter rests beneath my audio recorders and sheet of interview questions. I cannot think of a more appropriate place for us to have this conversation, here in the space where her artistic visions come to life. Even though I am nervous to begin the first interview for my dissertation, Wanderlust puts me at ease. In the two years or so that we have known each other, she has come to feel like home, like my chosen family. I find reassurance and inspiration in all that she does onstage and off. Without her presence in my life, I would not be such a confident performer, or a person who finds quite as much beauty and strength in myself. If I think about my queer gender performance community as a nontraditional academic space where I engage in learning, then Wanderlust is without a doubt my "academic family of choice" who supports me as I navigate this tricky, politicized landscape (Pattisapu and Calafell). I refer to her affectionately as my *Fairy Dragmother*, who guides me through the twists and turns of this strange profession.

As I anticipated, Wanderlust's straight identity emerges early on in our conversation as a salient point. She is the only straight-identified performer I chose to interview for this study. I learned of Wanderlust's straight identity only after meeting her husband and her daughter backstage at a drag show. Although she is married to a cisgender man, has adult children, and does not claim queer as a personal identity, her

sustained involvement in the queer gender performance community, her familial ties, and her extensive philanthropy make her much more than just an ally. For Wanderlust, ally is more like a *verb* than a noun. She practices queerness as a political identity by centering oddness and abjection in her performance work. Onstage, she performs lesbian desire, female masculinity, and transgressions against the gender binary. Most of the shows she performs in and produces, including *Sucia*, are housed in gay and lesbian bars. All of these choices remove Wanderlust's straight body from the safety of assumed heterosexuality. She is not concerned with making verbal or performative distinctions between her straight body and the queer bodies she performs alongside; to be part of the queer gender performance community means being fully immersed without leaving spaces to escape into her privilege. Wanderlust knows that she puts her privileged body at risk in making these choices, but sees her decision to do so as a way to practice political solidarity with her queer family. When the going gets tough, Wanderlust does not allow the responsibility to fall to her queer family, but instead remembers "the importance of vulnerability and humility in creating bonds between people differently positioned on power hierarchies" (Johnson and Bhatt 241).

Despite her all-or-nothing approach to performing queer-of-color solidarity, Wanderlust has faced opposition from members of the queer gender performance community who feel protective of the spaces they have worked so hard to establish within the constraints of a heteronormative society. Fellow performers and audiences alike have asked Wanderlust to justify her desire to perform in queer spaces when her

body could enter mainstream, heterosexual spaces with relative ease. They accuse her of taking valuable time and space from queer performers, whom cannot move in and out of mainstream spaces so easily. Wanderlust understands that these concerns and criticisms are rooted in a necessary skepticism about straight colonization of queer spaces:

And finding acceptance in a group that doesn't overly want to give that acceptance because they've worked so hard to get what they have, I totally understand that. But to make room for somebody who just wants to play in the world, and wants nothing out of it except to just be a part of this...
There is a difference between being out there and saying "I support you, I support you." But being in it and being like "I'll stand up right next to you, it doesn't matter"
(Wanderlust. Personal interview. 26 July 2013)

Although she is highly sensitive to the reasons that she gets identified as a colonizer in queer gender performance spaces, Wanderlust believes that her desire to be "in it" and to "stand up right next to you" proves not only her positive intentions, but also her willingness to put her body on the line. She does not want to perform in queer spaces in order to exert her privilege within them, but for the opportunity to lend her voice to the struggle for queer liberation. She contributes her voice not to take space from or overshadow queer performers, but for the opportunity to engage in artistic collectives that have the potential to transform culture.

I learn that Wanderlust's inspiration for practicing queer-straight solidarity is deeply personal. Her gay uncle, Roger, has been a tremendous inspiration for her career as a queer burlesque and drag performer. From a young age, she knew that her uncle was gay, but her conservative, first-generation Mexican-American family discouraged open

conversations about his sexuality. Having witnessed the pain and silencing her uncle experienced throughout his decades in the closet, Wanderlust strives to honor him through her performances. In 2012, she ran for and won the crown in the drag pageant sponsored by Latina/os in Loving Alliance Colorado (LILAC), an organization that supports gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Latina/os in the state of Colorado through drag performance-based fundraising initiatives. As Miss LILAC, Wanderlust raised over \$3,000 for the Angie Zapata Scholarship Fund, which honors the transgender woman of the same name who was beaten to death in 2008 in Greeley, Colorado. For LILAC and for Wanderlust, queer gender performance is a means through which to pay homage to queer ancestors and those who have fallen:

I wanted to be the open gay man that my uncle never got to be, so I ran for LILAC for the entire year. I kept telling everybody “by the way, this is for Roger. This is my uncle’s reign.” He’s the one who did this because for me, he is still... unfortunately, to my family he is still in the closet
(Wanderlust. Personal interview. 26 July 2013)

Wanderlust devoted her entire reign to building alliances between the queer Latina/o community and straight communities. She viewed straight patrons as untapped resources that could help increase the amount of money collected for the scholarship. Her alliance-building strategies worked; she raised more money for LILAC than any other contemporary title-holder. Through this act, Wanderlust held herself accountable to the heterosexual privilege that grants her so much power in mainstream society. She utilized the same privilege that prompted initial skepticism from the queer gender performance community to raise a substantial amount of money for LILAC. Each and every day,

Wanderlust makes her body into a bridge that spans the gap between straight and queer communities. At the same time, she pays homage to the struggles her uncle faced in articulating his queer identity and finding community.

Wanderlust's straight identity is not the only factor that has kept her from finding acceptance in the queer gender performance community. As a straight woman who sometimes performs heightened femininity onstage as a burlesque queen and faux queen, Wanderlust is compelled to defend her gender performance choices. Because queer gender performance culture values cross-gender performance above all else (Surkan), Wanderlust must work hard to convince audiences and fellow performers that performance should be a space of liberation for anyone who feels constrained by heteronormative, patriarchal performances of gender and sexuality in daily life. She sees the stage as a space where she can perform the indulgent, camped-up femininity that is devalued in her job in the male-dominated information technology field. She sees no reason why she cannot seek refuge from the rigid rules of gender in the same way that drag queens do. She recalls the early shows she performed in right after leaving the world of traditional burlesque for queer burlesque and drag performance:

I had, you know, an entire cast
when I first started drag, they didn't talk to me.
Nobody talked to me, except for the person who booked me.
And I'm sitting there in the dressing room
full of like fourteen drag queens, all having conversations
talking, talking, talking
and I'm just sitting in the corner. And they're just like,
they just walk past me, like they didn't understand.
Until I hit the stage, and they watch me perform, they didn't understand
what my point was. They're like, oh, ok, and then it still

took a little while for some of them to fully understand
why I did what I did
(Wanderlust. Personal interview. July 2013)

Usually, it is not until drag kings and queens see Wanderlust perform that they understand what she is trying to accomplish onstage. Until they come to understand her as yet another person who is attempting to exist outside of rigid gender norms, other performers tend not to respect her choices. Ironically, the straight, cisgender privilege Wanderlust carries requires her to wait for approval before she gains full access into queer gender performance communities. She remembers searching for this kind of approval from a young age. She tells me that she has always regarded herself as a “drag queen trapped inside a woman’s body,” incited by the glamour of drag and burlesque performance and the empowered femininities they promoted.

Wanderlust’s right to claim drag queen as an identity and to enter into queer gender performance spaces has always been subject to the approval of gay, often cisgender men like her uncle. The question of who grants access into queer gender performance spaces illuminates an important tension around the intersectionality of Wanderlust’s identities. On the one hand, her privileged straight and cisgender identities compel her to defend her desire to enter queer gender performance spaces as an outsider. Wanderlust sees this as an understandable and necessary reaction to protect queer spaces from straight colonization. However, it is cisgender gay men who ultimately get to decide whether or not she, as a woman, is allowed to enter those spaces. This is not a question about who carries more privilege in these spaces, but rather how privileged and

marginalized identities push up against one another in Wanderlust's struggle to cultivate queer-straight solidarity. Holding herself accountable to an ethics of solidarity is never enough; in this context, Wanderlust must always defend her identities and performative choices to someone.

Being straight and cisgender are not the only factors that have alienated Wanderlust from queer gender performance culture. When she does gain access to queer gender performance communities, Wanderlust encounters new tensions related to the politics of beauty and belonging. As a biracial woman of size, she disidentifies both with the pinup aesthetic of burlesque performance and the implicit standards of thinness and whiteness that pervade both burlesque and drag queen performance. In describing her struggles with finding acceptance in the burlesque world as a performer who was formally trained, Wanderlust turns time and time again to disidentification with the notion of "classic" beauty, in particular. She recalls the time she spent performing at Downtown Cabaret, an exclusive burlesque venue in Denver:

I was at Downtown for I think probably three years. I was never this skinny – if you've ever gone to Downtown, they're all, they kind of look the same, every single one of them. They're beautiful. They're very classic. They all look kind of the same, you know. You just have blond hair, dark hair, you know, they're kind of cookie cutter.
And then there was me.
I was the weird one, the odd one
(Wanderlust. Personal interview. 26 July 2013)

Wanderlust's larger, brown body could not mimic the thinness and whiteness of the burlesque performers with whom she shared the stage at Downtown Cabaret. She spent over three years performing at the venue, her body always an exception to the rule

and never the standard. Her marginalized identities positioned her as “weird” and “odd” in the space – a phenomenon that Wanderlust eventually tired of. Around six years ago, she and a burlesque queen friend stopped performing at Downtown Cabaret and began *Sucia*. Wanderlust refers to *Sucia* affectionately as a one-stop shop for burlesque queens, drag performers, and a variety of other performers including jugglers, magicians, acrobats, and musicians who have faced rejection from mainstream performance venues. Like Allen, Orbe, and Olivas, Wanderlust felt compelled to create a space within which performative “dialogues” about experiences with marginalization could occur (407). While discouraged from having such dialogues elsewhere, queer gender performers like Wanderlust and I have found a space of liberation in *Sucia*, able to explore the “complexity of our tears” for the first time (Allen, Orbe, and Olivas).

In this alternative performance forum, Wanderlust has capitalized on her oddness by allowing her artistic genius to thrive on the stage. In her quest to make the unconventional *beautiful*, Wanderlust repurposes household materials like trash bags, electrical tape, and hula-hoops to construct elaborate and whimsical costumes that tell her stories. She encourages her audiences to find beauty in the grotesque and wounded:

I think that everybody has this idea
of what attractive should be and taking that at turning it and being like
so you take something like a trash bag or a gas mask
or baby powder and a body bag and you change it and all of the sudden
it becomes less threatening, it becomes less weird, it becomes
something intriguing and something that I like
much more. Like I said, it's easy
to wear a rhinestone dress and be pretty
(Wanderlust. Personal interview. 26 July 2013)

Wanderlust believes that the classic beauty associated with whiteness and thinness is easy to construct and digest. Her performances push audiences to grapple with their own perceptions of beauty by sharing her own ideas of attractiveness with them during the moments of performance. Wanderlust argues that *Sucia* has attracted audiences and performers who think outside of the box, and has therefore functioned as a site of resistance within which performers whom for whatever reason exist beyond the norms of thinness and whiteness can find support and acceptance. She is critical of queer spaces that breathe life into the same beauty stereotypes that govern mainstream culture. Wanderlust utilizes her power as a producer of shows to smother those stereotypes and to nurture new communities of inclusion and acceptance. Although for the time being Wanderlust is taking a hiatus from producing *Sucia*, it remains a highly influential alternative performance outlet in Denver.

As Wanderlust speaks her stories, I think about the process of shopping for new clothes to wear during a performance as Patti LaFemme. As my manicured hands rustle through sale and clearance racks, checking for price, size, and type of material, I never have to worry that I might be told I am in the “wrong” section of the store. My feminine, cisgender body gets to move with stealth through those spaces, ogling handbags and sparkly accessories without fear of being found out. I spend hours brainstorming colors, patterns, and thinking about what will *pop* onstage. Drag queens who perform masculinities or unpassable femininities in everyday life cannot access the luxury of carefree afternoons like these, which I enjoy all the time. Knowing that I have the

privilege to perform femininity in the everyday makes me question my right to step onto the stage with bodies that can only feel free to embrace femininity in those spaces. At the same time, I know that there is strength in the femininity I embody, and that through performing it I can challenge oppressive ideas about women and female bodies. I have the chance to prove that feminine is not fragile or incomplete without masculinity (Shoemaker “Pink Tornadoes”). In the stories Wanderlust shares, I acquire a language through which to articulate my struggles in claiming a faux queen identity. She reminds me that with our bodies, we can help reclaim femininity from its heteronormative and patriarchal origins (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri).

Wanderlust teaches her audiences and fellow performers about the power of alliances across sexuality to promote social change. Her physical body and her performance work are testaments to the complexity of queer of color relationality and the responsibility of straight allies to engage in public education through performance activism. In supporting and paying homage to her queer family, both living and fallen, Wanderlust teaches her audiences that social change must be a collective process undertaken by impassioned people from all paths of life. By not just supporting LILAC, but assuming a prominent role in the organization, Wanderlust puts her straight, biracial body on the line in efforts to raise public awareness around the violence that queer and transgender Latina/os face every day. Although audiences may not know that she identifies as straight, she is a constant source of empowerment and reassurance to queer gender performers of color like me who engage in performance activism alongside her.

In searching for her “tribe,” Wanderlust has created her own public performance outlet and continues to perform in queer spaces across the city. She refuses to accept whiteness and thinness as standards against which she must measure her body, her desirability, and her agency. Through *Sucia* and her performances in other venues, Wanderlust subverts whiteness and heteronormativity, directing audiences toward the grotesque and abject as sources of beauty and empowerment. She promotes the disruption of false binaries that separate queer and straight bodies, beautiful bodies and ugly bodies, and encourages audiences to come to their own understandings of beauty. Wanderlust’s pedagogy of acceptance encourages audiences to question why certain bodies are centered in burlesque and drag performance while others exist on the periphery, struggling to be made intelligible.

If you don’t like something about yourself
then change it. Change it. Paint it different.
Pad it. Unpad it. Cinch it. Do whatever it is that you have to do
but the key point is to make sure
you’re accepting it within yourself. Because
nobody, nobody, nobody
will ever offer you the acceptance that you need
(Wanderlust. Personal interview. 26 July 2013)

three planets to the left

a century of light years ago

our spices are separate and particular

but our skins sing in complimentary keys

Edward Scissors and the Pedagogy of “Boldness”

I think no matter if I want to or not, I represent a lot of things. I represent people of color, and I represent women, even if I may not always identify as a woman, I represent women or what people think that women are. I represent brown women, and if you know me at all, I represent Christian women. So, I think just being me and just not, and trying not to... I know sometimes it does get difficult, but just trying not to let go of any of that at any time. Cuz, I also, oh, I don't, when I'm Eddie, I don't let go of my femininity, I don't. Like I, (laughter) I will (laughter) be like “Oh, Girl,” like you know. So, I'm not that kind of drag king that is like I have to be 200% macho and I can't be feminine (said in a deep voice). No, no, no, no, no.
(Edward Scissors. Personal interview. 3 September 2013)

I met Edward Scissors after he appeared as a guest performer in one of *Rise Above's* monthly shows. His thick Chicano/a body takes up space in a way that makes no apologies, seemingly unfazed by the palpable whiteness in which both of our bodies are situated. Each time I see him perform, I stand in amazement of the ease with which he moves from the feminine-of-center presentation of his everyday life into his self-proclaimed “thuggish,” rough-to-the-core performance persona. Most of my mental images of Eddie come from his performances of his signature number “What's Your Fantasy?” by Ludacris. Usually clad in bandanas, baggy jeans, and hoodies onstage, Eddie exudes suaveness. His queer masculinity is truly magnetic.

Like Jimmy and me, Eddie loves to perform to hip-hop – a musical genre that receives too little representation in the predominantly white drag king culture (Halberstam “Mackdaddy”). The way that Eddie's queer brown body embodies and radically reinterprets hip-hop masculinity makes me swoon. Somehow, Eddie translates

the violent, sometimes misogynistic lyrics of hip-hop songs through his body in order to make them his own. I cannot explain how he accomplishes this task, except to say that his material body queers hip-hop lyrics and masculinity and translates the genre into a space that allows him to center his queer, brown body rather than disguise it. The former partner of a member of *Rise Above*, Eddie was a longtime drag king and campus activist searching for a new performance venue, and he decided to give *Rise Above* a try. After his guest performance, I could not bear the thought of never sharing a performance space with him again, so Jimmy and I asked if Eddie would like to perform with us in the future. Several performances later, the three of us are responsible for introducing hip-hop as a mainstay in the predominantly white queer venues where we perform.

Eddie comes over to my house for our interview. Over the past few months, we have spent time getting to know each other better outside of the drag context, beyond our over-the-top personae. I turn on the tape recorder and we continue our new tradition of drinking cup after cup of tea with honey, recounting our struggles as queer people of color both in and outside of the queer gender performance world. Mostly, we talk about how challenging it is for us to negotiate our intersectional queer identities from within and outside of queer gender performance culture. As brown, queer, first-generation college students, we share academic activist identities that give us a language through which to articulate our lived experiences. In our writing and performance, we do all that we can to pay homage to Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Lorde – the queer women of color whose entanglements of theory and lived experience inspire us to voice our struggles

through writing and performance. Like Anzaldúa, Eddie and I spend a lot of time pondering the implications of our queer, brown bodies on the stage. One way we seek to honor these women through our writing and performance is by asking ourselves, “How am I going to present and represent myself to them and who, besides myself, am I going to speak to and for?” (Anzaldúa “Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar, or Island” 144). We contemplate what is at stake as a result of our hyper-visibility in predominantly white queer spaces, what kinds of agency we can grant our audiences or take from them by speaking from our privileged positions as performers.

Eddie identifies strongly as a Chicana/o feminist, both on the page as a published writer and on the stage as a public figure. An individual who claims membership to so many marginalized groups, Eddie feels pressure to serve as a representative for all of those groups when he writes and performs, “No matter if I want to or not.” This hyper-visibility is at the heart of Eddie’s negotiation of queer gender performance culture. In this context, he struggles to find ways to inhabit and represent all of the identities he claims fully and comfortably. Like Wanderlust, who performs as a drag king and faux queen – Eddie is comfortable with, and even prefers, border crossings in his performances. He does not wish to banish feminine characteristics from his embodiments of masculinity onstage. He finds power in bringing masculinity and femininity together in order to help constitute a performance persona that is playful, inclusive, and resists being confined to normative gender roles. He fundamentally disagrees with the existence of

gender policing within drag performance communities. For Eddie, performance is a space for expression that should not be subject to surveillance or sanction.

Eddie is the only performer I interviewed who does not identify as a man or a woman in everyday life. He is genderqueer, which means that he identifies outside of a gender binary that does not allow for fluidity or nonconformity. In his daily life, he has never felt comfortable aligning himself fully within the confines of masculinity or femininity – there are aspects of each that make Eddie feel whole. For Eddie, *queer* is a series of performative choices that work to center rather than assimilate his genderqueer body (Slagle). For example, Eddie tells me that throughout his life, he has moved in and between masculine and feminine gender presentations. At times, he has embraced more of an androgynous or butch aesthetic while at others, he has found joy in femininity. He refuses permanency or rigidity in his everyday expression of gender, finding comfort in change and fluidity (Anzaldúa “Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar, or Island” 144). Eddie brings his genderqueer identity and personal history of gender fluidity to the stage with him by modeling for audiences the idea that bodies should be allowed to negotiate gender in multifaceted ways. By performing masculinity that is tinged with femininity, Eddie centers his queer body that does not seek assimilation into normative gender categories. Although he identifies firmly as a drag king, he performs in ways that queer that label even further and that leave spaces for transgressions against established roles. He makes performative choices that, even if audiences do not perceive right away, guide these transgressions:

I think people would think that Eddie's straight,
but Eddie's not. No. I think that like the gangster persona
or when men are giving Eddie dollars, and I'm like
what's up? Eddie likes women, but Eddie's not straight.
There's some gay boy. There's probably 70% gay boy
in Eddie. Probably because, I really, like people think
I say this jokingly, but I really have always felt
that there's a gay boy inside of me,
and that comes out in Eddie sometimes.

(Edward Scissors. Personal interview. 3 September 2013)

Just as Wanderlust considers herself “a drag queen trapped inside a woman's body,” the gay boy inside of Eddie has led him to see himself as an individual who experiences his identity in ways that defy gendered and sexual binaries. Even when the performance choices he makes are not obvious or easily detectable – like crafting a male persona who identifies as gay – they liberate Eddie from the pressure of needing to perform masculinity and sexuality in particular ways onstage. In queer gender performance venues, Eddie encounters freedom through which to transgress gender and sexual categories in relative safety, which he does not always find in daily life. Through these subtle “micro practices,” Eddie challenges audiences to read between the lines his body writes (Warren and Davis 3). Eddie's approach to centering queerness in his performances is often subtle, yet powerful.

Despite the ways in which Eddie has worked to center his queer body through performance, he still feels pressure to inhabit his raced drag king body in specific ways. He tells me that although he enjoys crafting his hip-hop persona, he sometimes longs for spaces where he could transcend the expectations that others place on his brown body:

And there are some songs I've wanted to do

that are country, like I've recently gotten into country
a lot. And I like find myself, then I frustrate myself cuz
I find myself staying away from them
cuz I feel like I don't represent
what that singer would look like... I don't know.
Cuz I'm not one to like obsess about what people think
but at the same time like when I think about numbers
I'm like yeah, I can make a kick-ass Ludacris,
yeah, I can make a kick ass like you know
I think of all these rappers or if I want to do Tupac
or whatever. And then I'm like if I wanted
to stand up there and do Garth Brooks...
not that I want to be taken seriously all the time,
but I mean, you've seen some of the numbers that I do,
but I would feel like maybe people wouldn't take it seriously
because they would be like what are you doing doing country?
(Edward Scissors. Personal interview. 3 September 2013)

Eddie feels pressure to perform only hip-hop and rap – genres that satisfy white audiences' expectations about brown bodies (Halberstam "Mackdaddy"). Although Eddie does enjoy performing songs from these genres, he craves opportunities to perform queerness onstage in ways that do not always cater to audiences' expectations. However, Eddie is hesitant to do so because he knows that there is danger in such a move. He fears that he will confuse audiences, and that his brown body will be unrecognizable outside of the tired racial tropes with which audiences are familiar. Eddie fears that audiences would not "take him seriously" should he eschew their expectations and perform a country song. Eddie would need to blaze a path through country music – a genre that has not always been welcoming of brown bodies like his. He fears that in making this move, he will face threats to his credibility and prompt the audience to question him rather than to simply enjoy his performance. Eddie's concerns echo those of many queer scholars and scholars

of color, who fear ostracism as they enter into elite academic spaces (Alexander “Embracing”; Calafell “When Will We All Matter”; Owens Patton “Reflections”). Eddie believes that great satisfaction awaits him on the other side of such a transgression, yet the racial stereotypes that govern queer gender performance contexts discourage him from making the move.

Ironically, the fact that Eddie is a Chicana/o who does not speak Spanish alienates him in his daily life from the very brownness that constrains him in queer gender performance culture:

I had a co-worker who, we were talking about performing, actually, and I was talking about wanting to sing, and I had said something about if I sing a Taylor Swift song, I was like I’ll be the first brown country singer, maybe I’ll make it big. And she told me I wasn’t brown. And I was like, excuse me! She’s like you don’t speak Spanish and I’m like... So, just like when people, either, I mean it’s worse when they tell you what you are, but when you can tell they want to prescribe you to something. It’s like, oh, you’re not brown. Oh well, thanks for, you know, telling me what I am. And I got kind of defensive actually. I mean, it’s like, you don’t get to decide that. So, I think we’re constantly trying to like figure out people, and like figure it out for them
(Edward Scissors. Personal interview. 3 September 2013)

Because he claims multiple marginalized identities, each of which is situated differently across contexts, Eddie finds that the same identity that prompts some people to stereotype him prompts others to label him as an imposter. Like Calafell, Eddie is forced to defend his racial, gender, and sexual identities in pedagogical encounters with co-workers, friends, and strangers who take it upon themselves to determine his

authenticity (“When Will We All Matter?”) Eddie’s intersectional, queer body defies most people’s ideas about how to measure queerness, gender performance, and race. Although he struggles to respond to these accusations of inauthenticity in his daily life, Eddie responds onstage by wearing his multiplicity proudly. Through performance, he rejects the measures of authenticity that others use to classify him. By showcasing his multiplicity, Eddie invites audiences to find empowerment in the centering of multiple forms of difference through queer performance. Like Slagle, Eddie believes that the efficacy of his queer performance lies with his refusal to assimilate or shroud his identities within heteronormativity and whiteness (323).

The opportunities that Eddie finds to embrace his intersectional identities onstage leave him feeling confused in his everyday life, where he has less access to such opportunities. At work and in other contexts, Eddie still finds it incredibly difficult to escape the confines of prescriptive identities that do not fit him well. While he has felt safe to explore his intersectional queer identities in performance contexts, he has discovered that he is less safe elsewhere:

I went to a bar in drag, not to perform, but just to be in drag, and I actually had a really scary experience outside of a gay bar where I was the victim of a hate crime because of the way I looked. And that really made my mom scared, because I told her what happened, and it was really scary, and police involvement and all that stuff, and they were caught and all that stuff. I think just that experience kind of like, you know it scared me obviously like when anything like that happens, but it didn’t make me want to stop dressing up (Edward Scissors. Personal interview. 3 September 2013)

Although queer gender performance culture does not necessarily understand or embrace everything that Eddie stands for, it nonetheless provides a safe context within which he can embody whichever identities he chooses. However, in attempting to embody gender differently outside of the performance context, Eddie was the victim of a hate crime. He tells me that his experience outside of that gay bar, however devastating, “didn’t make me want to stop dressing up.” Although his brush with physical violence scarred him emotionally, Eddie continues to perform as a drag king because he believes that performance can help to confront the ideological and cultural sources of the violence he endured. He sees the stage as a space where he and his audience can heal from their collective encounters with racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression.

Eddie’s Christian identity further complicates his membership to the queer gender performance world. As identities that share a tense, and often violent, historical context, *queer* and *Christian* are often assumed to be fundamentally at odds with one another. Eddie’s body signals the historical struggle of queer people of color to claim spaces in the church, where homosexuality is a sin of the flesh not easily forgiven (Johnson “Feeling the Spirit”). Johnson argues that despite the heterosexist roots and homophobic culture of the church, black gay men seek it out at a space where “gay men can build community, exercise their creativity and leadership, and express their spirituality and sexuality” (“Church Sissies” 185). Though Eddie attends a progressive Christian church where he finds validation around his marginalized identities, he feels pressure to justify his decision to belong to a religious organization that has historically persecuted bodies like

his. Eddie tells me that the scrutiny he experiences in each of his communities has forced him to articulate his intersectional queer identity for multiple audiences:

My faith is huge. It's everything to me. And it goes everywhere with me. I don't just leave it anywhere. So, I think that kind of plays into even when I was having a hard time with certain words in the songs or sometimes I have to like check myself, because like people will perform songs that, cuz I'm always like, when I'm performing I'm like who am I going to offend, am I going to offend somebody? You're always going to offend somebody, and it took me a while to learn that. Like if I talk about, you know, lovin' on your mother, I'm going to offend somebody, so I try to check myself when I'm watching the performances, because I'm eeeee, cuz a lot of, like in the queer community, well, this is always a thing, there's a lot of Christian bashing and in the Christian community there's a lot of queer bashing. And sometimes I even almost find it sad to say worse the other way. That there's a lot of Christian bashing with queers. So, when those things are going on with performances, I keep telling myself like it's a performance. Like I don't really want to love your mother, like I'm performing, you know what I mean. So, I just try to check myself. And yes, that's a part of me and a part of my heart and I bring my faith everywhere, but like, I'm not going to like, like I'm going to realize that that's your performance
(Edward Scissors. Personal interview. 3 September 2013)

Religious identity presents yet another set of struggles for Eddie in his pursuit of acceptance around his multiply marginalized identities. When the songs he or others perform contain curse words or reference sexual acts, Eddie struggles to remind himself that those choices are meant to enliven performances, and do not directly implicate his spiritual values and beliefs. He counters the discomfort he feels by reminding himself that his own performances could potentially offend someone in the audience, regardless of his intentions. When he witnesses “queer bashing” in Christian spaces, Eddie must work even harder to promote an approach to Christianity that is inclusive and accepting of

bodies like his. Because the identities he claims exist at a deeply historicized intersection, Eddie must engage in the emotional labor of caring for himself when he struggles to find validation and respect from others. He must also engage in the pedagogical labor of explaining himself to others who perceive his identities as contradictory to one another. Eddie pushes almost everyone he meets to expand their personal ideas of what it looks like to be queer, brown, and Christian. His intersectional queer body exists so far beyond mainstream representations of queerness, brownness, and Christianity that he must do the constant work of defending his very existence. Being Eddie is hard work.

Eddie's mission to reclaim Christianity from its heterosexist and racist roots evokes the work of queer Chicana artist Alma Lopez, whose lesbian feminist reclamations of prominent Latina/o Christian figures like the *Guadalupe* rearticulate a Christianity that is free from the heterosexual, white, male grasp. In her work, Lopez radically shifts Christianity to empower the bodies that organized religion has excluded (Lopez 90). Eddie knows that while not everyone will acknowledge his efforts to recoup Christianity, the connections he makes with other queer people and allies is worth the effort. Eddie feels no loyalty toward religious histories and rituals that systemically exclude queer bodies and bodies of color. Instead, he follows Anzaldúa's lead by constructing a religious identity in which he feels safe, validated, and supported:

So, don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures – white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of

my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making my new culture – *una cultura mestiza* – with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (Anzaldúa “Borderlands” 22)

Mainstream Christianity has left little space for queer people of color like Eddie to find a sense of home and belonging. Therefore, Eddie takes matters into his own hands, refusing to allow the borders that stand between his body and his religious identity to constrain him. As Leon notes, borders “have never been able *fully* to contain human desire and will” (568 emphasis original). Eddie’s spirit is stronger than the mandates that organized religion places upon his body. He transcends borders, and in doing so, inspires others to articulate their own spiritual identities.

Because of his unique location in the world, Eddie struggles to find unconditional support and recognition. However, the only source of support and approval Eddie requires comes from his mother and sisters, with whom he is very close. Although they identify as straight Latinas, Eddie’s mother and sisters exist in a tight and unrelenting alliance with him. They support him as he seeks to center all of his intersectional queer body in daily life, never asking him to check his queerness, brownness, or Christian identity at the door. Eddie’s mother and sister have expressed concern for Eddie’s safety at times (particularly following his experience with violence), yet they go above and beyond to show him the love and support he needs. Much like Wanderlust, Eddie’s mother and sisters do the hard work of performing ally, even when the stakes are high. Eddie tells me a story about his older sister, Ramona, who puts her straight, brown body on the line for Eddie in remarkable ways:

And my sister even performed with me...
she performed with me for [a show]. For the Ludacris song
where there's female vocals. She totally was the female.
She got up there and we were dancing
and she's like singing the female part. So, that's like a whole
'nother step. She came and supported,
and she got on stage and did a female part
(Edward Scissors. Personal interview. 3 September 2013)

Beyond providing moral support for Eddie, Ramona took “a whole ‘nother step” by gracing the stage alongside him. Much like Wanderlust, Ramona put herself in a situation where audiences might assume she identifies as queer and worked from within her privilege to create a more welcoming space for Eddie (Moreman and Non Grata). She practiced pedagogical solidarity with Eddie, helping him to represent intersectional queer identities for the audience. Eddie’s mother provides similar support by attending his shows from time to time, and therefore helping to celebrate his hard work. Eddie tells me how grateful he feels to find unconditional love, support, and recognition in his family. His mother and sisters heal the wounds that other queer people, Christians, and brown people have inflicted on Eddie by choosing not to acknowledge or validate his multifaceted identity.

Eddie reminds me to feel grateful for the support and understanding I have found in my own mother. She attends any show she can when Jimmy and I perform, never afraid to sit in the front row. I think about the still moments that preceded one of our performances. I looked out into the crowd to find my mother’s smiling face washed in bright lights. Even though laughter and conversation filled the barroom and loud music shook the floor below our feet, I found so much peace in her presence. In these sources of

support Eddie and I find the strength to continue our difficult work, even during the times when we experience the most challenges. Family is a central component of the queer gender performance experience for Eddie, Wanderlust, and me alike.

When I ask Eddie what he hopes to accomplish through his performances, he tells me that he wants to teach his audiences to be “bold.” For Eddie, boldness means having the courage to disregard the essentialisms of gender, sexuality, and race that are placed on our bodies, and to craft new identities that feel authentic and powerful to us. For Eddie, the power of intersectional identities lies in their messiness, and in their resistance to clear-cut classification or constraint. I hear Muñoz’s theory of disidentifications echoing in Eddie’s stories, telling me that there is power in the “enacting of self at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit” (6). Through his performances, Eddie embodies the aspects of Christianity that affirm his intersectional queer body and discards the others. He inhabits aspects of multiple gender identities that appeal to him while never pressuring himself to adopt characteristics that feel uncomfortable. Eddie performs Chicana/o identity unapologetically and refuses to accept other’s measures of authenticity. For Eddie, boldness means standing in opposition to the constraints placed on queer bodies, bodies of color, female bodies, and Christian bodies. Eddie believes that in order to feel most fulfilled and happy, new queer gender performers of color should strive to be bold in all they do:

As hard as it is, my advice would be to not care
what people think. Like to not care if you dance girly
and you’re a king. Or to not care if you want to wear
a blond wig and be Garth Brooks, like it’s whatever

you want. It's not what people expect. So just do
what you want, I would say
(Edward Scissors. Personal interview. 3 September 2013)

at a quarter to eight mean time
we were telling the same stories
over and over.

Broken down gods survive
in the crevasses and mudpots
of every beleaguered city
where it is obvious
there are too many bodies
to cart to the ovens
or gallows
and our uses have become
more important than our silence

Vinzie Rey and the Pedagogy of Passing

We all have these pawns who are queens
but we do have the knight that is different,
that's not too big but it's still there, it's still a big piece
of the game. And you need a game-changer
sometimes. There's always queens... but sometimes
you just need to switch it up a little bit.
And to have a male impersonator come out
and perform a hip-hop song as a guy
it's nice to have a male song instead of a show

that is made up of female music... and so
I feel like that's kind of the role I play
in the drag community, and also just to show
that like, little old me, I can still impersonate a guy
and have a good time doing it and do it well.
And it took a lot of work to get where I am.
I still I have a lot to work on, you know, but...
I think it shows that you know, I know it's not as hard
to be a king as it is to be a queen, but we still
go through a lot of steps to get where we're at
(Vinzie Rey. Personal interview. 26 August 2013)

Vinzie Rey is, without a doubt, one of the most popular drag kings performing in the greater Denver area. In fact, he is the *only* drag king on the cast of the weekly drag revue at *Wayne's*, one of the city's most popular gay and lesbian bars. Unlike Wanderlust, Vinzie has claimed a space in a mainstream gay bar where few brown bodies are present. He collapses into the plush chair I have saved for him at the coffee shop near his house and pushes up his sleeves to reveal arms full of dark ink. I cannot deny that I am nervous to interview Vinzie. We are less familiar with each other than I am with the other performers I interviewed. We have known each other for a while, but we rarely cross paths in the vast Denver performance community. Although we are both performers of color, we live in completely different worlds.

Vinzie came to drag performance over eight years ago through immersion in male impersonation culture and pageantry. Distinctly different than the political, gender-bending performance culture where I exist with the other performers I interviewed, male impersonation culture values female performances of masculinity that are *convincing*, or successful in emulating normative masculinity. In this world, every performance choice a

drag king makes – from clothing, to facial hair, to song choice – must signal an allegiance to masculine norms. Drag kings in the male impersonation culture judge a performance’s effectiveness by how well they are able to “pass” as men for their audiences. As Maltz explains:

Passing is a question of public (and sometimes private) legibility and requires a spectator in order to legitimate the pass. Passing is performative in the sense that it relies on a spectator for validity and requires the construction of a visible, intelligible appropriation inscribed on the body counter to the predetermined racialized or the biologically sexed body of the subject. (277-278).

Unlike Wanderlust and Eddie, who judge the efficacy of their performances based on the political or personal messages they hope to convey, male impersonators like Vinzie judge themselves based on how well they can convince audiences of their maleness. Early in our conversation, Vinzie makes it clear that his number one commitment as a performer is to represent “authentic” masculinity, or to appear as a “true guy.” He tells me that he looks most forward to the opportunity to thrill his audiences with his convincing performances. Over the years, Vinzie has constructed his drag king identity around the values of male impersonation culture. He has come to judge his and others’ performances against these standards:

Honestly, this is going to sound rude. I hope it doesn’t.
But I’ve seen so many kings throughout the years that you can see like their hips, or you can tell they’re female still, or you can see, like they’ll do something like here and they’re draw it on [a mustache] and sometimes if your draw line is too thin it just doesn’t look credible. And so it’s like do you want to be believable as a male impersonator, or do you want to look like a girl that’s trying to dress up like a guy kind of thing?
So, I don’t ever want to look like I don’t know what I’m doing

or that I'm not like a true guy. So that's why I started using my real hair on my face and started taping my breasts like full under the shirt, not wrapping it but fully pulling it apart the way I can unzip it and there's no boobs there. I just wanna look like the real deal. I don't want there to be a reason for anyone to doubt me or anything or be like that's a girl, I guess (Vinzie Rey. Personal interview. 26 August 2013)

Vinzie takes to heart the values of male impersonation culture with every performance choice he makes, seeing any oversight as a shortcoming of his performance. Where Wanderlust and Eddie find liberation in performative choices that challenge binary constructions of gender, Vinzie feels most accomplished when he can reproduce masculinity seamlessly. He feels proud when audiences notice the hard work he does to perform masculinity convincingly from within his small female body. In many ways, Vinzie's perspective locates him in opposition to a queer politics of performance, which values the centering of difference rather than assimilation into existing categories. Vinzie is fearful that his female body might bleed through his male aesthetic and ruin his performance – a concern that someone from a more radical queer performance background would not have.

Similarly, performers like Wanderlust or Eddie might view a performer's poorly drawn moustache or unbound breasts as an opportunity to trouble gender categories. However, Vinzie sees such moves as a disgrace to the craft of drag kinging. In fact, he goes to great lengths in order to avoid making any move he would consider disrespectful to the art of male impersonation. He tapes his breasts so that he can create the illusion of

a bare male chest – a feat that is not easily accomplished. To attain these results, he is even willing to put himself through pain:

I've lost a lot of skin
from duct tape. I know I don't have to
do that, but I just want to impress the audience
that bad, where I'm like, I don't mind...
but I used Gorilla Tape and that was bad
(Vinzie Rey. Personal interview. 26 August 2013)

Vinzie spares no expense – financial or emotional – to perform convincing maleness for his audiences. He views performers who do not share these values as inferior in their unwillingness to do what it takes to disappear into performances of masculinity.

Vinzie's strict adherence to the "rules" of male impersonation culture grants him access into some of Denver's most elite drag performance spaces. In these spaces, where female impersonators and traditional drag queens reign, female-bodied performers earn respect and stage time only when they prove their diligence and dedication to the craft of emulating masculinity. As Rupp, Taylor and Shapiro note, drag queens and female impersonators often do not legitimize the work of female-bodied performers, arguing that it is less politically necessary and requires less effort than performing femininity (290). Because drag queens and female impersonators have had more access to performances historically, they continue to control mainstream performance spaces and therefore determine what types of performances can occur there (Rhyne). Vinzie feels proud when drag queens and female impersonators invite him into their performance spaces and compliment his efforts. This level of access separates Vinzie from performers like

Wanderlust, Eddie, Jimmy, and myself, whose hard work drag queens and female impersonators often do not acknowledge as drag performance.

Vinzie's intersecting identity as a working class twenty-something comes to the forefront during this part of our conversation. At times, Vinzie has chosen not to perform or compete in pageants when financial barriers have prevented him from purchasing the props and costumes necessary to cooperate fully with these standards. We talk about how performing drag is a financially straining activity, which requires constant investment in clothing and accessories, funds for travel, and sometimes individual financial contributions to the promotion of events. Regardless of how expensive it may be, Vinzie is willing to devote most of his disposable income to drag kinging. No matter how big the sacrifice, performing convincing maleness is of utmost importance to Vinzie, and he will take dramatic steps to achieve that goal. He is driven by his desire to make audiences feel enjoyment as a result of the hard work he does to construct the illusion of maleness. When he is unable to perform maleness to the fullest extent, Vinzie would rather not perform at all. He experiences considerable anxiety about being read as an imposter, a result perhaps of the pressure he feels to conform to norms of his environment.

In his life offstage, Vinzie does not adhere to these strict rules of male impersonation. Rather, he perceives himself as leaning toward the feminine end of the spectrum. He wears tight shirts and pants that highlight rather than downplay his female figure and even makeup, occasionally. He tells me that he has two separate closets at home – one for his daily performance of identity and one for his onstage persona. This

incongruence is one part of what makes performing as a male impersonator so exhilarating and rewarding for Vinzie. He feels that he has done his job well when he is able to make audiences question again and again whether they he is a drag king or a “real” man. Access into mainstream drag performance culture has come at a significant cost for Vinzie, but he seems to believe that every bit of the investment has been worth it.

Although he is one of few drag kings that has found a place with the Denver performance elite, Vinzie experiences moments of exclusion and restriction because of his racial identity. He is one of very few black performers – drag kings and queens included – in the Denver drag performance scene. As we talk, we struggle to list five black drag queens we know who perform regularly. I am surprised to discover that in our vastly different performance worlds, Vinzie and I have very similar racialized experiences. He tells me about the pressure he feels to perform certain types of music as black drag king:

When I first started doing drag, it was just...
I wanted to do rock. But because I was black in Nebraska
they told me I couldn't do rock because I'm black.
So, I do like a hip-hop persona.
Yeah, like I wanted to be Kenny Trinity
because I have this trinity tattoo and they're like no,
that's not a cool name. My first ever drag song was
“Sorry” by Buckcherry (sings “Sorry”) and that did not
go well at all. Cuz the crowd didn't get it, they were like
why is this black king doing a Buckcherry song?
(Vinzie Rey. Personal interview. 26 August 2013)

Like Eddie, Vinzie must confront tired racial stereotypes each time he selects a song to perform. In two very different performance contexts, Vinzie and Eddie are unable

to express their authentic selves through music without first considering the racial politics of genre. As a genre, country music does not line up with the authentic black masculinity Vinzie sets out to perform. Performing country music would not only challenge essentialist racial categories; it would threaten the credibility of Vinzie's performance of black masculinity. The stakes of such a transgression are incredibly high, especially considering how difficult it has been for Vinzie to claim space within mainstream performance contexts. As he has risen to fame, Vinzie has felt freer to confront these fears and perform country songs. He says that although audiences seem to enjoy his country performances, they respond more positively to his hip-hop persona. Though he has found some rare wiggle room, he feels that racialized expectations will always await him on the other side of the door.

Vinzie rose to fame as a result of his hard work and the support of his drag queen role model, Honey. A famous black drag queen in the area who hosts her own high-profile show, Honey mentored Vinzie and helped open doors to spaces that he would not have been able to access on his own. As a drag queen, she helped him to mold himself into a performer who would wow audiences and fellow performers alike, and who could also confront the racism he would inevitably experience in performance contexts. Apart from Honey, Vinzie's interactions with other performers of color – especially black performers – is relatively limited. On rare occasions when Vinzie encounters other male impersonators or drag kings of color, he often does not find the type of community he longs for. He recounts his embattled relationship with an unnamed black drag king:

I don't know if I should say it. There's a king, there's a drag king, another black drag king, that I don't know, I know that he doesn't like me very much, and I don't know if it's because I'm good too or what it is but he is never typically nice to me. I'll say hi or what's up or whatever. Like one time we were getting ready for [a show] at Jenny's, and he uses a guitar as a prop and I play guitar obviously, and it wasn't tuned so I was like "Aww, I'll tune it, you know." (Laughs) And he was like, "Put that down!" And the entire dressing room went quiet. I was like I'm not gonna break your guitar, I play guitar. My guitar at home costs like \$500 more than this one... it was like a Wal-Mart guitar. Later I apologized because I didn't do anything wrong, but every time I am out or performing, it's just like really weird and that's one of the main things I hate because I'm such a nice person. I talk to everyone. I don't want to have any enemies. I don't get why he doesn't like me very much. It's so frustrating for me because we're just performers, it's just drag... I'm the only other black king in the city, so I think it might be the competition. But I don't do Wig City, I've done it one time as a rap duet. And that was it. And I could never have my own number. I think it's because he works at the Warehouse
(Vinzie Rey. Personal interview. 26 August 2013)

Because Vinzie must confront racism and whiteness within the drag community, he craves a strong community of color that can support him and empathize with him. However, the one black drag king who could offer the kind of support he is looking for has become a source of competition for him rather than community. The commodification of bodies of color in the mainstream drag performance world has forced him to compete rather than collaborate with the one potential ally he has found. As drag kings of color, Vinzie and the person he chooses not to name must compete for limited spaces where white bodies are plentiful. Vinzie sees no opportunity to perform his own number at the *Warehouse* – which is arguably the most popular drag performance space in the area – simply because his drag king rival has already claimed it as his own. There

is only room for *one* black drag king in this community, where black and brown bodies are tokens that support democratic ideals (Alexander and Warren).

During the last bit of our conversation, I talk with Vinzie about spirituality and how it shapes his experience as a drag king. Vinzie is a devout Christian who was born into a family of pastors. Just like Eddie, most people are shocked when Vinzie tells them about his faith, having assumed incorrectly that drag performers cannot also be Christians. Vinzie's spiritual beliefs are literally written all over his body in the form of tattoos that run down his arms and across his chest. Although Vinzie's foremost goal is to entertain audiences as a male impersonator, his religious convictions are a visible facet of who he is as a performer and as a person in the world. In subtle ways, Vinzie chooses to showcase rather than downplay his faith:

I show my tattoos on purpose
when I perform... rarely do I have everything [my sleeves]
down. Because I want people to see that I can do
all things through Christ. I got this here [on my chest] because
when I do open my shirt, I want people to see
that I can like, be an evangelist through drag
even though I'm not even doing Christian songs
like you can still see that I like have this Bible verse
here, I have this Bible verse here. Like, I'm not trying
to do that, but nonchalantly... I'm just like, I'm not
thinking like hey, read my tattoos, but I'm just
a walking testament to like what I've been through
and, like my dad's a pastor and coming out to my dad
when I was thirteen like I grew up just really depressed
and stuff, so like for me all my tattoos signify
something that happened from where I went
to where I am now. Like if I, if somebody can see
that and be like oh, I like that verse, or oh,
I can't believe this drag king has these tattoos...
you might think it's just some street tattoos,

but it has that meaning. A lot of people don't know
and I'll tell you this, that, like half my tattoos
I have are to cover up scars from when I was
in high school. I used to cut a lot. And so I got half
my sleeves just to cover up... like a new start
kind of thing. And so I like to show, you know,
that I've gotten past that
(Vinzie Rey. Personal interview. 26 August 2013)

Although his lesbian identity has always been stigmatized in the black church, Vinzie has nonetheless built a home there. Like the black gay men that Johnson interviewed, Vinzie's love of music and performance began in the church and has followed him into his life as a drag performer ("Church Sissies"). Vinzie's roots may be tense and riddled with contradictions, but they are his roots nonetheless. He wears his religious identity proudly and displays it prominently in his performances. Tattooed across his chest in large, cursive letters is the phrase *Philippians 2:12*, which references the Bible verse that reads, "It is not that I have already obtained this or that I am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ has made me his own." By marking his body and his performances with his religious identity, Vinzie gives himself permission to embrace multiple identities. He stands as a living testament to the ongoing cultivation of dynamic identities within queer subcultural spaces where bodies of color are constrained, but which he works to transform through his performances.

All in all, Vinzie tells the story of struggling to belong while celebrating all of his identities. Although Vinzie strives to perform masculinity in ways that affirm cultural norms and appear "authentic," his relationship to his religious and racial identities complicates his membership to the drag performance community. The choices he makes

to step beyond racial stereotypes by performing country music and to wear his religious identity proudly on his body prompt others to question his credibility. However, by embracing his intersectional, masculine public presence, Vinzie inspires audiences to take pride in their full selves. Vinzie teaches his audiences that brown bodies can perform the types of masculinity that are privileged in male impersonation culture, and that he can do so while also highlighting his spiritual identity. For Vinzie, passing is not a *passive* act – it is bursting with agency that can inspire others to embrace their full selves.

Still, I cannot help but to reflect on what Vinzie’s story means for me and the other performers I interviewed. The strategies Vinzie uses to find belonging in mainstream drag performance culture depend on the devaluing of performances that uproot and transform gender and sexuality. Mainstream performance culture regards performers like Wanderlust – who engage in resistance and subversion – as less rigorous than performances that parrot normative masculinity and femininity. Therefore, in accessing and claiming membership to these spaces, Vinzie casts judgment on performers with different personal and political goals. In this reflection, I note an important rift that exists between performers of color. This rift prevents us from establishing the kind of solidarity that could help us to confront the racism and whiteness that implicates all of our bodies of color, no matter which performance tradition we support. I leave my conversation with Vinzie pondering questions of liberation and at whose cost it comes.

after the fall

too many empty cases

of blood to bury or burn

there will be no body left

to listen

Reese and the Pedagogy of Community Accountability

Like I said before, a lot of what we do is educate the public on why we're doing what we're doing, and how it began. You know 40 years ago, when the Circle began, there were no organizations out there looking out for the gay, bi, lesbian – certainly not the transgender or questioning community – so that's why the Circle began, and they raised money for, geez, back then it was just for anybody that needed it. A lot of people that were suffering from HIV or AIDS. There was nobody out there looking out for them. So that's how it began and it's grown and grown and grown (Reese. Personal interview. 31 July 2013)

I travel a long way from my home to meet with Reese at a coffee shop in a Denver suburb, just down the street from the adult bookstore where he works. At times, it is difficult for us to hear each other over the Mexican pop music rattling the speakers overhead. Although I have known Reese for a much shorter time than the other performers I interviewed, his warm smile and affinity for hugging make me feel like we are lifelong friends. Reese came into my life last year when my partner and I were performing in one of Wanderlust's productions of *Sucia*. He is an extended queer gender

performance family member turned friend who is willing to share his experiences with me, for which I am grateful.

Reese is a tall, thin, Latino man in his late thirties. He is pleasant looking and does not call much attention to himself in daily life. However, when he sets foot on the stage, he comes alive and commands the audience's attention. Unlike most cisgender men who perform in drag, he prefers to grace the stage wearing clothing that features his chest hair instead of elaborate headdresses and sequins. He is one of the few faux *kings* I have seen performing in the Denver area. The first time I saw him perform, I knew he would be a member of my "tribe," as Wanderlust would say. Reese embraces and celebrates his gay masculinity in ways that reject the traditional gendered divisions of queer gender performance communities. With his dark beard and flat chest, Reese feels most comfortable speaking to audiences in queer spaces through the body he uses to move through daily life.

A self-proclaimed "80s Kid," Reese owns multiple pairs of acid washed jeans, vintage band T-shirts, and button-downs embellished with flames. Reese often wears the same clothing in everyday life as he does onstage. Like Vinzie, he cites the high cost of costuming for drag performances as one reason for this choice. However, he tells me that his everyday self and his performance persona are so similar that it makes sense that they share a wardrobe. Where Vinzie is committed to cultivating a drag persona that is distinctly different from his everyday self, Reese welcomes a blending of the two. For Reese, the effectiveness of drag performance lies with its ability to entertain and engage

audiences rather than convince them of his authenticity. In fact, when I encounter Reese in a social setting, I cannot tell by looking at his clothes whether or not he will perform that night. He moves in and out of his drag persona so effortlessly, never concerned with drawing the curtain all the way.

When I tell Reese that one of the main goals of my research is to increase visibility for queer gender performers of color, his face lights up. Even before I start recording our conversation, we talk excitedly about what we can do to hold ourselves accountable to serving our community. Although he is a relatively new performer, Reese has immersed himself fully in supporting his community through organizing and participating in philanthropic performances and other events. Alongside his best friend, Wanderlust, Reese is an influential advocate for the queer Latina/o community in Denver. Currently, he holds two pageant titles, Mr. LILAC and Duke of the Majestic Circle – an organization very similar to LILAC. In both of these roles, it is Reese's job to raise money for predominantly queer Latina/o communities. While these titles appear glamorous to outsiders, I learn quickly that Reese did not pursue them with fame or recognition in mind. In his dual titleholder role, he is deeply committed to serving his community by addressing the very real needs of its members, like access to education and medical assistance. Where Vinzie and Eddie perform mostly for the purpose of self-expression, Wanderlust and Reese use performance as a vehicle to support their communities financially.

Being accountable to his community through service in these roles is something that is quite difficult for Reese in a number of emotional and physical ways. The *labor* he puts into fulfilling the expectations of his dual royalty positions show how incredibly committed he is. Reese talks to me about the demands of holding two royal titles concurrently:

I have taken on several different roles. One with the Board,
so I'm the corporate secretary, I'm the webmaster,
I'm the chair to the membership
committee, as well as the Duke.
So, it seems like I am constantly forever busy.
And the weekends come and go so quickly
because there's four shows we need to go to or whatever
or maybe performing in two of them,
and we're reaching out to other organizations.
Two Saturdays ago, I was in dual roles
because I served food as Mr. LILAC
and then I went in and watched the show as Duke
(Reese. Personal interview. 31 July 2013)

Reese tells me that on an average week, he spends most evenings completing tasks that are related to one or both of his reigns. In the queer gender pageantry world, performance is just part of the equation: Reese must produce shows, organize mixers, advertise fundraising initiatives, and even serve food at other organizations' events in effort to increase visibility and raise money for LILAC. On nights like the one he describes above when he must represent both organizations, he feels as though he is having an identity crisis of sorts, unsure of which organization's goals and which parts of himself he should foreground. Reese receives calls from individuals and organizations all over the city asking him to make appearances at their events. Reese is called upon to be

“exemplary” in multiple spaces, always prepared to serve as the public face of this cause or that (Taylor). It does not surprise me that a normatively attractive, cisgender man like Reese has been called to occupy positions of power in his community. However, it is clear to me that despite his privileged identities, Reese is committed to cultivating solidarity between all members of his community, privileged and not.

In addition to the commands the pageantry system places on his time and energy, Reese engages in a great deal of pedagogical labor around educating audiences about the political goals of LILAC and the Majestic Circle. Because the larger queer and allied community that attends drag shows is sometimes completely unfamiliar with the unique history and experiences of the queer communities of color Reese represents, he must do the labor of contextualizing and explaining the work that LILAC and the Majestic Circle do:

You know everybody knows about it and what we're doing and everything, and then outside of that people don't know. They're like, who's Angie Zapata, what's this, what's that? You have to educate them. Which is amusing because that's a huge portion of what we do. While raising money, it's, we're constantly educating people into what we do, why we do it, where the money goes (Reese. Personal interview. 31 July 2013)

The burden of educating predominantly white queer and allied audiences about the experiences queer people of color have with violence and other forms of oppression falls to Reese, who occupies a position of power in his community as a titleholder. Moreman and Non Grata argue that these strategic moves from within positions of power can work to radically transform institutional spaces (317). In his prominent roles, Reese

is a powerful Latino figure who works against institutional barriers to help render visible the forgotten bodies and experiences of queer people of color like Angie Zapata. He speaks to audiences about inequities in access to higher education and promotes the scholarship LILAC provides as a means of speaking back to those inequities. In the shows Reese produces and emcees, he often pauses between performances to speak passionately about the importance of contributing to the scholarship fund. Reese holds himself accountable to educating audiences about queer of color histories and the issues his community faces currently. He answers the call Moreman and Non Grata issue to “...create mentoring relationships, mentoring communities, and mentoring techniques knowing that we are often having to do the work that no one else wants to do and that no one else understands” (317).

Despite the privileges that Reese enjoys as a cisgender man, audiences and fellow performers sometimes question his right to serve as Mr. LILAC as a white-appearing man with a name that many do not identify as Latina/o:

It’s amusing, because my last name is totally different than a Latin name. It’s not a very Latin name, so it’s interesting when people look at me and think “How is that possible? How are you Mr. LILAC?” And then I have to give a little history lesson of my family heritage, and then they go, “Ok, I understand!”
(Reese. Personal interview. 31 July 2013)

Like Calafell and Moreman, Reese feels pressure to defend his claims to Latino identity (“Iterative Hesitancies”). He has grown accustomed to giving “recitations” of his ethnic, racial, and familial histories in order to soothe the anxieties people have because

he does not satisfy their expectations about Latina/o identity (Calafell and Moreman “Iterative Hesitancies” 409). Although he knows that the ways in which his body is marked afford him “the power of passing” in some contexts (Warren and Davis 2), Reese grows tired of holding his Latino body “accountable to the intersections of [his] embodied experiences” for anyone who inquires (Calafell and Moreman “Iterative Hesitancies” 414). Reese’s body is situated squarely at crux of “history, power, and cultural memory” – a location that requires him to engage in constant identity labor (414). Reese knows that because his whiteness does not satisfy some folks’ expectations of what it means to be Latina/o, he will always have to engage in this labor.

Reese experiences similar accusations of inauthenticity around his onstage performances of masculinity. Although the spaces where Reese performs are accepting of transgressions against the drag king and drag king dichotomy, he finds that audiences and fellow performers still question his decisions to perform as a faux king. They ask why, as a gay man, he would not want to indulge in femininity within affirming spaces. In order to confront such questions, Reese has experimented with performances across gender. He has left those performances “imperfect” as a way to show that performances of masculinity are central to his articulation of self, even in feminine drag:

And, yes, I did a huge favor for a friend.
She put me in a dress and put make up on me,
first time ever, made me do Cher, and it was hilarious.
Oh, it was really funny, because I walked up to people
and I did not shave, okay, so I’m very distinctive-looking.
I walked up to people with the wig on
and they did not know it was me. They just...
I guess I was the bearded lady

(Reese. Personal interview. 31 July 2013)

By letting his seams show in this campy performance of femininity, Reese disidentifies with mainstream ideas of what it means to be a drag queen (Maltz; Muñoz). He divorced drag from the goal of passing, opening it up instead to new possibilities of resistance. Like Muñoz, Reese believes in the potential of unpassable performances of gender to disrupt social hierarchies in ways traditional performance cannot. As Muñoz writes, “Comedic disidentification accomplishes important cultural critique while at the same time providing cover from, and enabling the avoidance of, scenarios of direct confrontation with phobic and reactionary ideologies” (106).

In refusing to shave his beard for his performance of Cher, Reese used comedy to disidentify with expectations of what a drag queen should be. He allowed his comedic performance to do the labor of confronting questions and accusations. Through moves like this, Reese proves that he need not separate femininity from masculinity in order to entertain and motivate his audiences. Where Vinzie takes pride in replicating available representations of masculinity, Reese feels most empowered by crafting his performance persona from an array of gendered choices. For Reese, performance is all liberating himself and his audiences from the gendered categories that constrain us onstage and off.

Even though almost every aspect of his membership to the queer gender performance community places demands on Reese, he does not complain. Rather, he meets the challenges placed before him with great pride and considers them as opportunities to connect with his community and fight against inequities. Ironically,

despite all of the hard work he does, Reese tells me that the money he raises in his dual royalty capacities is an “accidental” result of having fun and engaging with his community:

I want them [audiences] to have fun.
That’s how LILAC started, that’s how the Majestic Circle started. They were having fun and they were accidentally making money. And that’s what we’re supposed to be doing, is having fun, having a good time, and accidentally making money at the same time
(Reese, Personal interview, 31 July 2013)

Reese’s enthusiasm indicates just how deeply he is committed to holding himself accountable to his community as a public figure. Even following weeks and weekends that are packed with pageantry-related tasks and appearances, he remains focused on the ultimate goal of creating a more deeply connected and empowered queer community of color. It is a labor Reese engages in with great enthusiasm, because he feels like that is what he has been called to do. A major effect of Reese’s hard work is the way in which he has prompted audiences that are not familiar with queer of color histories and experiences to feel implicated in our struggles by donating money and showing solidarity across intersectional queer identities. Although the venues where Reese performs often draw smallish audiences, the intimate connections he is able to make help to cultivate alliances across race and sexuality that can hopefully transcend queer vernacular spaces.

Reese cites his queer ancestors as a major point of inspiration for remaining involved with the queer gender performance community. The organizations he represents began as sources of support for community members who could not afford access to

treatment for HIV and AIDS. The extremely disenfranchised queer community of color depended on grassroots, performance-based organizations like the Majestic Circle and LILAC for resources when private and governmental organizations failed them. These organizations have evolved over time, always keeping a finger on the community's pulse in order to determine which forms of philanthropy would be most beneficial. He is, as Johnson might say, "... in the streets, in the trenches, enacting the 'quare' theories that we construct in the safety of the academy" ("Quare' Studies" 18).

Reese says that despite the amazing work these organizations have done over the years, their first obligation has always been to creating spaces of fun and celebration for queer communities of color. Bringing communities of color together during times of need, as well as times of prosperity, has always been the foremost priority. In everything he does, Reese embodies this legacy of celebration and accountability. He is a tremendous public pedagogue who urges audiences to feel implicated in his community's struggles so deeply that they take action alongside him and carry on the legacy of community accountability.

Things have changed a lot in 40 years,
and we have progressed, which is a wonderful thing.
But trying to educate the young people of today
that this is where we are today didn't just happen
overnight. People, several worked at it,
worked at it, worked at it
(Reese. Personal interview. 31 July 2013)

Toward the end of our interview, Reese tells me that he considers himself a jack-of-all-trades, always searching for new ways to empower himself and others. He has been

a writer, an airplane pilot, an electrician, and an undergraduate Psychology teacher. Delighted to discover that we share a profession, I ask Reese excitedly, “You taught undergraduate classes? What is your degree in? Psychology?”

Coyly, Reese responds, “I don’t have a degree. My degree is from the School of Hard Knocks.” I feel waves of shame rush over me, drowning me in my own academic privilege. I feel as though I exit my body for a moment, unable to believe that I assumed Reese has a college education. My brown cheeks flushed pink, I apologize to Reese, tell him I never meant to assume things about him. He takes my hand and assures me all is fine – that I have not offended him. Reese is a gracious reminder that in my cushioned academic world, I forget sometimes that formal education is not the only path to knowledge and achievement. He reminds me of the reason I sought out this project in the first place – to explore the power in pedagogies that transcend the desks and chairs that sit in ivory towers and empower queer people of color. I could not be more grateful for Reese’s gentle lesson.

and our labor

has become more important

than our silence.

Miz.Mojita and the Pedagogy of Praxis

Having conversations with folks who have, you know, gone through the rings of academia around drag culture have been very different than, you know, talking to people who haven’t. Even at Pride Row, we have tried to integrate

some, you know, some of that critical gender theory stuff into conversations with our youth and them taking to it and be like yeah, this is awesome, and it makes me feel good that like, this can exist outside academia, and does exist, and is easy to learn... (Miz.Mojita. Personal interview. 18 September 2013)

Miz.Mojita's name is a nod to her bubbly and vivacious personality. It is indeed fitting; even after a long day at her job in youth outreach, she is enthusiastic and ready to share her stories with me. Her thin frame is draped in stylish men's clothing that has a soft, androgynous flare. At age 26, Miz.Mojita is not only the youngest performer I interviewed – she has also been active in the queer gender performer community the longest. She tells me that she first discovered her drag queen self when she was a sophomore in high school and has been engaged in activist drag performances and collaborative community efforts ever since. She even made the decision to attend her high school graduation in drag as a means of promoting visibility for queer, gender nonconforming, and trans² bodies. I cannot help but feel that I am in the presence of a living legend, with strength and stories to tell beyond her years.

I “knew” Miz.Mojita before I ever met her. For several years, she served as a public face of a prominent queer resource center in the Denver area. As one of the only brown people in leadership roles at that organization, I felt connected to her before we had ever even spoken. Miz.Mojita and Vinzie are prominent figures that have represented for me the possibility that we could be included in predominantly white queer community spaces. Miz.Mojita was also an undergraduate student at the university where I am earning my doctorate. Although we never took classes together, I caught glimpses of her

brown body in the hallways sometimes. With each sighting of Miz.Mojita, I felt a little less alone in our predominantly white, elite institution of higher learning. In that space, we shared queer, brown, academic identities that position us uniquely in the queer gender performance communities to which we belong.

We devote a great deal of our interview to talking about our shared queer, brown, academic identities. When we discuss the whiteness that pervades queer gender performance culture, we reference McIntosh's foundational article, "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." We joke that many of the white performers we encounter in our communities need to "unpack the invisible drag bag," or think about the ways in which their white bodies afford them both subtle and significant privileges within performance spaces and in everyday life. She talks about how whiteness has manifested around her in subtle ways that remind her that her brown body is abject in queer gender performance spaces:

I think that's truly a blessing that I haven't had to come directly against that (racism) or see its ugly face. And yeah, but I feel like I know it's there and I, you know, I've, and you know in small ways too. Like when I apply my makeup too light or too dark, the comments that come around that like in what people say. You know, things that are like, is that really necessary?

Like, you can critique my makeup, but you don't have to make it about my race. If you think I could use a lighter foundation, just say that!

Like it doesn't have to be about my race!

(Miz.Mojita. Personal interview. 18 September 2013)

The dressing room is the true nucleus of drag culture, where performance personae come to life and queens engage in both conflict and community building. However, comments like the one Miz.Mojita details above have prevented her from

bringing her full self to these interactions. Any misstep she takes puts her brown body at risk of scrutiny beyond that which a white performer might experience. This is racism and whiteness moving subtly through the queer gender performance world, we agree. Even while sharing this difficult memory with me, Miz.Mojita and I joke with one another and laugh, finding a healing recognition and community in spaces of pain. I cannot help but think that few others could appreciate this humor in the way Miz.Mojita could. We are queer of color academics with shared lived experiences and a critical, cultural language through which to dialogue about those experiences. I am grateful for an opportunity to share this story with her. I can feel my racialized anxieties escaping a little bit with each chuckle. Our laughter and our tears are therapeutic (Allen, Orbe, and Olivas).

Miz.Mojita tells me how grateful she feels for the opportunities she has had to cultivate her academic consciousness. The theories and methods she has learned in academic spaces, as well as her embodied pedagogical experiences, have changed the way she understands and relates to queer gender performance communities. She finds herself much more critical of the practices she encounters than before earning her bachelor's degree in Cultural and Critical Studies. She talks about this intellectual growth affectionately, while also reflecting on the challenges she faced as a multiple minority in higher education:

I think it's really given me new skills, but also provided the tools to actually critically think about what I'm doing onstage. Like what is the intent of my performance, is it just to like be pretty onstage and just feel good about that? Or is it to like challenge gender

stereotypes and gender norms, and you know, you like, some of those conversations were happening you know, amongst different groups and stuff like that, whereas academically, the classes I took just really helped give me a framework for that, but I think at the same time, sort of the other end of that, we would have, once again, one of the only out people on campus, like there was a good handful of us, but always being the one to like speak to queer issues in class, especially being like the liberal arts and humanities and things of that sort, it was always sort of like, things were often defaulted to me, or those awkward moments when things come up and everyone just stares at me as if I'm like...
(Miz.Mojita. Personal interview. 18 September 2013)

As one of the only openly queer students on campus who was also an active and visible member of the campus's Queer Student Alliance, Miz.Mojita felt an incredible obligation to educate others, even as a *student* in a higher education context. Classmates and professors would call on her to explain issues related to gender, race, and sexuality. She felt like a token that was compelled to speak for all members of the groups to which she claims membership. Additionally, when she witnessed instances of racism, sexism, homophobia, or other types of discrimination, Miz.Mojita found that she almost always felt obliged to intervene. Like Alexander, Miz.Mojita feels that her identity as a queer person of color positions her uniquely to intervene in instances of oppression. Through her body, she can "embrace the teachable moment," or open up spaces for dialogue around marginalization that did not exist before (Alexander "Embracing"). Despite noticing the tremendous potential we have as queer gender performers and academics of color to disrupt racism and whiteness, Miz.Mojita and I sigh. We commiserate about the incredible weight of this duty, how heavy it is in our hands. Still, our sighs fade into the recognition that if we do not do this difficult work, perhaps no one else will.

Miz.Mojita's academic identity and experiences follow her into the other areas of her life. For several years, she served as manager for *Pride Row*, a drop-in center for queer youth that is affiliated with the largest queer nonprofit organization in the state. In this role, Miz.Mojita served as a mentor to the countless youth who walked through *Pride Row*'s doors. In addition to talking with youth about their struggles, triumphs, and goals, Miz.Mojita organized and implemented an experimental drag performance workshop series called *Kings and Queens Academy*. Throughout the workshop series, Miz.Mojita led youth in discussions on a wide range of performance related topics, from facial hair and makeup to choreography and song choice. In addition to these practical components, the *Academy* also included opportunities for critical and theoretical conversations about drag performance and its impact on culture. Miz.Mojita brought many of the academic theories and methods with which she had become familiar into this space, in effect engaging praxis – or the practice of putting theory in action – with youth at *Pride Row*. She believes the power of academic theories lies in their ability to translate to contexts in which people experiencing oppression can draw strength from them. She reconciles the academic privilege she has by putting academic theories to work for the youth she served. This is a tension Miz.Mojita and I feel we must attend to. While we by no means feel shame towards our academic identities, we know we must hold ourselves accountable to making our privilege serve our communities. We feel the worth in our academic efforts only when we slink out of our ivory towers and back into our homeplaces (hooks).

The most rewarding relationships Miz.Mojita established throughout the *Academy* and the rest of her time as manager were with queer youth of color, whom had had few interactions with queer role models of color before meeting her:

The majority of the youth I spent time with there were youth of color. And it was probably one of the most rewarding pieces I got to do in like, it was clear that not a lot of those youth have, in that space, had ever felt validated in being able to talk about both identities and what that had been like, and I definitely found a lot like, moments of solidarity, and like, things that I didn't think about to notice, like one time the Deputy Executive Director walked by and overheard a conversation I was having with a couple of Latino youth around just sort of like how we identify ourselves and what kind of jokes we make and what does that mean and how do people react. And you know, I was like, yeah, we need to think about this, and like what ever, and the Executive Deputy Director was like that was amazing, like she has a social work background and she was like, oh my gosh, you did such a good job with that, like so I feel like, I didn't even notice...

(Miz.Mojita. Personal interview 18 September 2013)

As a queer public pedagogue of color, Miz.Mojita was able to engage with queer youth of color at *Pride Row* on a level that white staff could not. Her firsthand experiences of negotiating the world as a queer youth of color allowed the youth to engage with the lessons Miz.Mojita taught about drag performance in ways that were more relevant to their embodied experiences at the intersections of racism and homophobia. In the same way Honey helped Vinzie to develop an understanding of queer subcultural spaces, Miz.Mojita helped youth to explore ways in which they could come to understand their racialized bodies and experiences through performance. Although the youth with whom she formed relationships had never taken college level courses, Miz.Mojita helped them engage with theories of the flesh.

Miz.Mojita brings her pedagogy around race and drag performance into unconventional spaces, like Denver's annual *LGBTQIA Youth Convention*. Several years ago, she performed before the entire convention. Each choice she made about her performance served a pedagogical function. For example, she selected an unpopular song for a very strategic purpose:

I did M.I.A.'s "Bad Girls" cuz it's a badass song!
Cuz I love her and she's so fierce and she's so amazing.
And for a lot of the youth there, they were like,
"Who's that? I don't even know!" and I was like,
you should get into her! I'm like, get into it.
Um, and just really thinking about how like even though
it is challenging for folks to get into, wait, why is this happening
or what is the significance of this? It really is worth it
at the end of the day to make it happen because there'd be nothing
happening like that otherwise. Right, like who's doing M.I.A.
or like the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and like I even did Eryka Badu
(Miz.Mojita. Personal interview. 18 September 2013)

By choosing to perform songs by artists of color with political voices like M.I.A. and Eryka Badu, Miz.Mojita promotes activist ideologies to her young audiences. She provides opportunities for youth to understand drag performance as a phenomenon that is not inherently white. Miz.Mojita's song choices help her to teach audiences that people of color have powerful voices that are important to listen to, even when they are not as visible in mainstream culture as white performers or performers without political messages. The songs Miz.Mojita chooses are like her public curriculum, and she holds herself accountable to the most inclusive public pedagogy. Her citations are highly intentional (Calafell and Moreman "Latina/o Performativities").

Because Miz.Mojita holds an activist perspective of queer gender performance, she has difficulty finding a home in mainstream drag culture, where critical conversations about gender, race, and sexuality are uncommon. She butts heads with performers whose more traditional views of drag performance uphold rather than disrupt oppressive gender binaries and stereotypes. Although many gatekeepers to the city's most prominent performance spaces have taken note of Miz.Mojita's talents, they continue to exclude her because of the political voice she brings to her performances. She insists that performances can be well-crafted, rehearsed, and executed while still carrying messages of transgression and liberation. Miz.Mojita's number one goal as a performer is to find opportunities to establish collective consciousness around the historical context of drag culture and its significance for contemporary queer communities:

Being a drag queen can look so many different ways, and being a political drag queen is a thing. Like, we exist! Doing political drag happens. And it's not all that you see on RuPaul's Drag Race or you know, in a lot of the really publicized documentaries. It's, it can be whatever you want it to be. You can be a feisty political activist, a drag performer, and still be a hell of a performer, and serve great face and killer body, um, but at the end of the day still have a message. And know that it is okay to think about things critically. Cuz I feel like so much in terms of drag queen culture gets lost, like you just have to be pretty, like be pretty. So, really just try to show political drag queenness and remind people that that's part of our history. You know a lot of drag performance specifically came out of like political angst and dealing with oppression and finding a way to fight back, and that's a history that I hope, it's given me a lot of strength in being able to fight, to be a political queen. It's provided me that support, but at the same time, caring about, carrying that legacy on and making sure that other people know that too. Really reminding people, like, this is our drag ancestors. And have political intention behind this.
(Miz.Mojita. Personal interview. 18 September 2013)

Like Reese, Miz.Mojita wants her community to know our history and to be aware of how our queer ancestors paved the way for us to organize and perform in the ways we do today. She is disappointed that much of drag culture today is focused on vanity, and that political history “gets lost” in the emphasis on aesthetics. While she feels proud that RuPaul, a strong black performer, is the nation’s most recognizable drag queen, Miz.Mojita critiques *RuPaul’s Drag Race* for using its monopoly on public perceptions of drag culture to promote vanity and competition rather than historical roots and community-building. Although RuPaul has helped to remove drag performance from the grasp of whiteness, she has kept it firmly planted in exclusion and reinforcement of the gender binary. Miz.Mojita emphasizes the need to reclaim our culture and rearticulate what political drag means to us. Wanderlust and Miz.Mojita have both encountered queer gender performance spaces where they were add odds with dominant ideas about beauty and inclusion. Miz.Mojita tells me that she finds opportunities for dialogue around the historical significance more often with drag kings, whom Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro suggest are often more open than their drag queen counterparts to critical examinations of the impetuses and effects of drag performance (277). Miz.Mojita has high hopes that in the long run, she will help to reclaim mainstream drag from the realm of the purely aesthetic. In the interim, she finds activist drag communities where she can.

As a public pedagogue, Miz.Mojita aspires to empower youth, fellow performers, and audiences to explore the historical, political roots of queer gender performance. Her academic background has helped shape her into a public figure that advocates for praxis

as a means of engaging critically and with academic theories and lived experiences alike in order to create inclusive, transformative queer gender performance communities. She disidentifies in fundamental ways with dominant cultural narratives around drag performance, and makes it her personal mission to dismantle the myths implicit in those narratives. She concentrates most of her time to working with and performing for youth, whose voices she believes can be the most transformative in political struggles. By empowering younger generations to think about drag performance as an avenue through which to critique and radically reinterpret gender, race, and sexuality, Miz.Mojita continues her powerful legacy.

Our labor has become

more important

than our silence.

P-Cock and the Pedagogy of Ambiguity

I think that parody erases the pain of having to pass. And so when you're doing drag – either gender or racial drag – I think that parody works really well, because it erases that pain, that very pain of I'm not Western enough, I'm not masculine enough or feminine enough, and so by throwing the comedic lens on it, by throwing the campy lens on it, I think it just kind of says yes, but let's put that aside, and let's focus on what's fun and generative about this moment, rather than all the things you could pick apart for not being appropriate. So I think comedy, parody, drag, camp, have such great potential for subverting those types of disciplinary tactics that already exist.

I don't seek authenticity in life.
I love things to be charade. I love things
to be smoke and mirrors
(P-Cock. Personal interview. 14 August 2013)

P-Cock struts on her brown legs and white espadrilles into the coffee shop where we have decided to meet. Although we could have gathered in one of the many spaces available on campus, we both desire a chance to step away from our work for a moment and enjoy one another's company, even if the purpose of our meeting is an interview for my dissertation. In my academic roles, colleagues and professors have frequently invalidated my involvement in the queer gender performance community – my queer, brown, academic body everywhere abject. Because many academics eschew queer gender performance in favor of the “high” performance art of intellectual circles, I have learned to conceal my inner performer in order to avoid scrutiny. But P-Cock has always made me feel safe enough to discuss my dual allegiances to academia and the queer gender performance community.

A fellow academic and performer, P-Cock believes that queer gender performance takes on many forms, each of which can provide different possibilities for cultural transformation. P-Cock came to my shows and engaged my performances, talked with me about my performances, legitimated them, and never turned her nose up at me. Although she stages most of her performances for strictly academic audiences, P-Cock does not support a false dichotomy between academic and activist performances. As a colleague and confidant, P-Cock has shown me the possibility of finding acceptance of my queer gender performer self in academic spaces. P-Cock has empowered me to never

separate my intersectional, academic activist identity despite the pushback I receive. She has taught me how to be a bold intellectual performance artist in the academy and on the stage. I am giddy at the opportunity to witness her stories, to let her genius trickle down and saturate my work.

Unlike the other performers I interviewed, P-Cock does not perform in local bars or nightclubs. Although she has frequented these types of venues in the past, she now performs almost exclusively in academic venues, such as conferences and symposiums. Therefore, I have never seen P-Cock grace the stage or performed alongside her. I cannot help but wonder how this lack of reference will manifest for me as I write about P-Cock as a performer. Because I cannot write about the experience of seeing her onstage, I must rely on the frequent and extensive talks we have about performance and the performative scholarship we create. I can say without hesitation that P-Cock's public pedagogy is distinctly different than the one I share with the other performers I interviewed. I asked P-Cock to share her stories with me because I knew that she could provide unique insights as a queer woman of color performer and academic who pushes up against constraints in an entirely different context.

Right away, P-Cock tells me that her overarching goal as a queer gender performer of color is to create and engage audiences in performances that separate gender, race, and sexuality from neat binaries by moving identities to the realm of the fluid and ambiguous. The performances in which P-Cock engage showcase the fluidity that exists between masculinity and femininity, the contextual and historicized conditions

of race and ethnicity, and the flexibility of queerness as a mode of identification – none of which are easily charted or isolated from one another. Although these performances are tricky to create and often even more difficult to convey to audiences, P-Cock believes they are the most powerful vehicles through which to engage critical, intersectional identities and experiences for audiences. By performing racial, gender, and sexual ambiguity, she entices audiences away from the easily identifiable. Like Gust and Warren, P-Cock invites audiences to dwell for a moment in the discomfort ambiguity brings:

I call out to them to occupy a position of discomfort, to live in the moment of discomfort, to be uncomfortable in the reading of my body, a body that (I hope) makes easy readings hard. I don't want them to know, for sure, me—even if the answer is just as messy; I want them to dwell in that space of wondering. Ambiguity is my craft. It is so, because I am so. (Gust and Warren 119)

P-Cock refuses to stake a claim to any particular identity location, moving instead between genders, races, and sexualities. She conveys gender ambiguity onstage by dressing androgynously. Whether she is performing a monologue or in a Vaudevillian style, P-Cock typically wears the same attire: a black button-up shirt, black slacks, a bowler hat, and her black hair slicked back into a ponytail with pomade. These subtle costume choices prompt audiences to question the ways in which we construct gender through performance. Her gender ambiguity is a point of departure for conversations about essentialism and contestation. Similarly, she conveys racial ambiguity by adopting the personae of individuals aspiring to perform racial identities different from their own. Each of these moves highlights for audiences P-Cock's commitment to queering race,

gender, and sexuality on the stage. Rather than supporting or reaffirming existing categories, she draws power from this space of possibility.

Calafell theorizes ambiguity as a tool of resistance in her exploration of pop-star Ricky Martin's rise to fame. As a Latino who embodies racial and sexual identities ambiguously, Martin makes himself into a "chameleon" whose unclassifiable body "serves as a point of identification for both Anglo-Americans and Latina/os" (Calafell "To Ricky With Love" 93). It is in Martin's resistance to categorization that he is able to queer racial and sexual boundaries, locating his own body betwixt and between cultural and historical contexts. Calafell argues that Martin's performance of ambiguity is transformative because it prompts audiences to question their own embodiments of ambiguity:

Perhaps Martin's ambiguity is so disturbing to Latina/o critics because it forces us to recognize the many ambiguities in ourselves. There are no *true* racial essences upon which to base our identities, and Ricky Martin reminds us of that. (Calafell "To Ricky With Love" 96).

Performances of ambiguity unsettle audiences by forcing them to confront the fact that all identities are unstable and easily de/constructed. Ambiguity strips away the essentialisms that have guided our understandings of identity categories. Public figures like Martin have performative bodies that entice us and encourage us to think beyond the representations that are easily available to us. They teach us to look beyond binaries and boxes toward more fruitful possibilities for identity.

P-Cock can trace her comfort with ambiguity back to her childhood in India. When she was a girl, her father encouraged her to take on male characters in school

plays. Her parents did not hold her accountable to the rigid gender roles that governed many of her classmates' lives, which allowed her to explore how facets of masculinity did not have to be at odds with her performances of femininity. Unlike other children, who were taught to avoid and fear transgressions against gender at any cost, P-Cock learned to embrace the possibilities of boundary crossings. This understanding would, in turn, come to frame her entire understanding of herself offstage as an intersectional, historicized, contextualized subject, and onstage as someone who uses performance to expose the performative aspects of identities and the ability to queer categories through performance.

P-Cock remembers a time during her adolescence when her mother consulted a numerologist, who evaluated P-Cock and determined that she is a unique combination of masculine and feminine energy. She tells me that this early memory has structured the way she understands herself as a gendered being:

And I'm a firm believer that things like astrology, numerology, and all of those artistic sciences are actually forms of therapy. And this became very clear to me after this one particular experience. I was in India and [my mom] had this numerologist come and measure my head and kind of draw a chart based on kind of birth and star alignments and the shape and circumference of my head, and I don't really understand all this going on, but his reading really freaked me out. Cuz he was like um, something's wrong here, or something's different. He didn't say wrong, but he's like this is not a typical chart. She's reading as a man in the chart. And he says well that's obviously not the case, I can see you're a girl. And I must have ben, like, I was in college, so I was about 20 at the time, 21 maybe. And he's like no, she's reading very much as a boy. Like this looks like a man's chart, and so he looks at my mom and he goes, do you have a son, and she says

no, she's the only daughter, my only child. And he says well, no something's not right. There has to be something else. And he says did you have a son that died. And my mom says no. And he's like no, no, no, and he kept pushing and pushing and pushing and finally my mom admitted that she had had an abortion before me, and he says okay, that's what it is, because that child would have been a boy, and because he was not fully realized, that masculine energy stayed in circulation in your body and got transferred onto your other child, your daughter. And so she's reading as a man, even though she's biologically female, and you will expect this child to be, to live her life as a man... the fact that he said that allowed my parents to actually come to terms with the fact that I was going to live my life very differently than what they had envisioned. And it made me feel like wow, I'm not a freak. And I'm validated in my choice to not be typical like the hegemonic version of femininity (P-Cock. Personal interview. 14 August 2013)

From an early age, P-Cock's relationship to gender and sexuality was uniquely situated within this spiritual and familial context. The numerologist granted her permission to embrace duality in her daily life in ways that were not commensurate with hegemonic Indian femininity. It was this early understanding of gender fluidity and the possibilities that exist beyond the binary that led P-Cock toward the construction of her uniquely gendered and raced performance persona:

In Hinduism, there is Ardhanarishwara, which is an incarnation of Shiva who is half man half woman, and that's how the statue is kind of presented. So it's very beautiful and feminine and soft on one side, and then split down the middle and strong and masculine on the other. I think it [my drag persona] is kind of a perfect embodiment of this duality that I feel constantly in life. And that I don't feel comfortable identifying as a girl or a woman alone. And those aspects which are usually invisible come out on stage, and it's a chance for me to kind of

embody, and experience, and enjoy
that aspect of myself. And it's also not a clear split
between this is my feminine persona and this
is my masculine persona. There is a lot of fluidity
between the two, so that's why un/passable drag
as well. I don't try and pass as a man
(P-Cock, Personal interview, 14 August 2013)

The tales P-Cock shares with me make me question how and why I have become so attached to performances of femininity, both onstage and off. I think about my short-lived participation in beauty pageants when I was a child. I sat in corners backstage, pouting, surrounded on all sides by ruffles and taffeta, expectations about how femininity should look for little girls. Even then I knew that I could never mold my queer body of color into the form of someone who was convincing, someone who could pass. My mother encouraged me to compete as a way of fitting in with other girls – white girls whose level I could never truly rise to. This personal history of gendered and racialized performance has followed me into my adult life, where I still struggle to belong. Even though I believe that I have reclaimed my relationship to femininity in radical, queer ways, I cannot help but wonder what my attitudes about gender might be today had my parents allowed me to embrace ambiguity as fully as P-Cocks parents allowed her.

One of the grandest gestures P-Cock has taken to develop her commitment to creating ambiguous and fluid performances came with the selection of her stage name. P-Cock's name symbolizes two identities for her. First, as the national bird of India, the peacock communicates pride in her country of origin and racial identity within a US American context. As an Indian woman with dark skin who speaks English with an

accent, P-Cock joins Eddie in asserting that she bears the burden of representation in queer subcultural spaces. Therefore, she has chosen to name herself in a way that calls attention to and queers her material body, rather than rejecting its existence. Second, as a species of bird in which males are more colorful and flamboyant than females, the peacock symbolizes the capability for bodies to queer gender through transgressions from the masculine to the feminine. P-Cock's name signifies how, through her performances, she attempts to inhabit and move between genders, races, and sexualities fluidly, never afraid to present herself in ways that challenge audiences to question the perceived naturalness of identity categories. In naming her sexual and sexualized body cleverly, P-Cock critically engages the "invisible" in subtle ways (Gust and Warren).

In effort to highlight her queer subjectivity and aspiration to embrace facets of masculinity through her brown, female body, P-Cock inserted a hyphen and encourages emcees and presenters to emphasize *Cock* when introducing her in order to draw attention to the queer female masculinity it implies. Her name, which originated during her college years with her involvement in an evangelical Christian a cappella group, signifies her racialized, nationalized body *and* her desire to claim subjectivity beyond gender, sexual, and racial binaries. It is important to note that for the purposes of this study, P-Cock elected not to use a pseudonym for fear that doing so would dilute the intersectional subjectivity her name represents. As a symbol of her queered, raced, and sexualized subjectivity, the name P-Cock is irreplaceable.

P-Cock tells me that she understands her mission to celebrate ambiguity and the fluidity of identities as the art of “unpassable drag,” or the desire to convey to audiences the idea that there is political agency in ambiguity. By never attempting to inhabit masculinity or femininity fully, but instead moving between and through those categories, P-Cock advocates against the construction of gender categories as natural or authentic. However, despite all of the important lessons P-Cock teaches about gender and sexuality through her performances, she tells me that she sees herself first and foremost as a performer of *racial* drag. She often adopts specific personae for her performances, one of which is Kal Khan, an Anglo-Indian pop star from the 1960s who performed what P-Cock calls “aspirational identities,” or the attempt to pass as white from within a brown body that could never fully claim whiteness. By staging this aspirational identity for audiences, P-Cock shows audiences the pain that comes with wanting to attain an identity, but never being able to:

What I’m more interested in than gender crossings...
I’m interested in racial crossings. And of course, they’re intersectional and cannot be divorced from each other.
So, as an Indian woman performing an Indian man who’s trying to perform a white man, I felt like that continuity troubled this artifact, that has been around since the 60s that people just read as pure comedy that I was trying to position as sort of an escape from the pain of identifying or realizing that I might be a little queer when I was growing up in India...
My drag is not going to be about Kal Khan; it’s going to be about me performing an aspirational identity of being read as queer while performing Kal Khan who was attempting to be read as white, who was also attempting to be read as a white man performing Indian-ness. So, I just kept seeing this vision of passing being refracted over and over and over like that infinity mirror
(P-Cock. Personal interview. 14 August 2013)

P-Cock's performance of Kal Khan is reminiscent of an act from black performance artist Vaginal Crème Davis, whom Muñoz argues uses "unpassable" drag in order to disidentify with whiteness, which is always unattainable to her. Of Davis's performance, Muñoz writes:

This performance is so obviously not about passing inasmuch as the white face makeup that the artist uses looks nothing like real white skin... Rather, this disidentification works as an *interiorized passing*. The interior pass is a disidentification and tactical misrecognition of self. (Muñoz 106)

Davis performs in whiteface not as a means of convincing audiences of her authenticity, but as a way to portray aspirational identities that she will never achieve. Like Davis, P-Cock (as Kal Khan) uses performance to get in touch with the pain of never being able to pass as white from inside a body of color. Knowing that she will never truly be read as an Indian man performing a white man performing Indianness, P-Cock relies on parody and excess through which to convey the idea of "unpassable" drag to audiences. P-Cock knows that audiences cannot ignore the material facts of her body. She takes on the personae of individuals like Kal Khan as a way to draw attention to the fact that although identities are constituted through language, bodies of color cannot claim or resist identities as easily as white bodies, for whom identity options are plentiful and easily attained. Through parody, P-Cock liberates her own body from the constraints of gender, race, nationality, and sexuality while simultaneously highlighting for audiences the difficulties of divorcing marked bodies from such constraints. In doing so, she hopes to inspire audiences to rethink notions of agency and identification, and the potential of performance to create spaces for resistance. I hear Calafell's voice echoed in

P-Cock's narrative: "My performance continues to invite, offering glimpses of what might be if you are willing to engage her" (Calafell "A Love Affair" 3).

P-Cock and I spend a long time talking about the countless responsibilities that fall to the bodies of queer gender performers of color, who, in predominantly white spaces, are often regarded as representatives for all queer people of color. She tells me that in trying to carve her own resistive space through performance, she finds that audiences expect her to carry the burden of accounting for and addressing her racialized identity – a process in which white performers do not have to engage:

The way that people are looking at you is extremely heightened, because they're like well, this person is representative of all people of color, queer people of color who are performers, and so maybe that's not what they think but that is the danger. Because it's easier for I think white performers doing burlesque or doing drag, to get that quotient of oh, yeah, well of course, I get it, because that's sexy or that's so transgressive. But as people of color, we have this added layer of well, the baggage of what our racial identity means, and so to help people negotiate that, it is a kind act I think
(P-Cock. Personal interview. 14 August 2013)

Because white performers' bodies are standard in queer subcultural spaces, they do not carry the burden of addressing the baggage of the racial identities they bring into the space. However, performers of color like P-Cock must be prepared to account for their brown bodies in the space. She tells me that audiences' expectations for her to embody the stereotypical, exoticized roles associated with Indian femininity and masculinity in her performances predate her appearance onstage, and therefore condition

the ways in which they read her performances – a pedagogical challenge that women academics cite (Cooks; Faulkner, Calafell, and Grimes; Overall; Owens Patton “Reflections”). When she does attempt to perform Indian masculinity or femininity in ways that attempt to reclaim it from these exoticized standards, P-Cock finds that white audiences often wrongly perceive her attempts as comedic reifications of antiquated racial stereotypes. For example, her adoption of an exaggerated Indian accent has prompted white members of her audiences to thank her for soothing their anxieties by giving them permission not to be politically correct, or to appropriate and make fun of Indianness.

P-Cock’s use of parody and excess are not unlike strategies used by performance artist Alina Troyano, a Cuban-American lesbian who re/inhabits racial and ethnic stereotypes in order to drain them of their efficacy. Of Troyano, Muñoz writes:

Troyano’s strategic use of camp allows her film and its characters to reinhabit these stereotypes, both calling attention to the inaccuracy of these representations and “fixing” such representations from the inside by filling these representational husks with complicated, anti-essentialist, emotionally compelling characters. (Muñoz 127)

P-Cock and Troyano rely on excess and parody as tools for healing themselves and their communities from the pain of social inequality and oppression. Through comedy, they reclaim racial, gender, and ethnic stereotypes from the mouths of the oppressor and imbue them with their own meanings and political goals. Because these performers do not live in a world where stereotypes about identity do not exist, they find clever and powerful ways to reclaim them.

Although P-Cock attempts to convey that her brown body gives her the license to engage in performances that white bodies cannot, she feels that her intentions are sometimes lost. In order to ensure that her audiences read her performances as campy, critical attempts to dismantle binaries and not as reifications of racial and ethnic stereotypes, P-Cock must engage in extensive, contextualizing work. When she performs in academic spaces, she has ample time to introduce her work and situate it within larger bodies of scholarship. However, when she has performed in bar and nightclub settings in the past, she discovered that she needed to condense the contextualizing work for fast-paced and less attentive audiences. For example, before one performance at a cabaret, P-Cock asked the emcee to introduce her performance as “a tale of racial confusion” in order to underscore her work as critical rather than comedic. These introductions, however short, help to ensure that audiences do not read her performances as uncritical affirmations of racial stereotypes. P-Cock perceives this contextualizing work as a “kind act” in which she engages for predominantly white audiences who stand to gain the most from her performances, but on whom such messages are easily lost. Such acts of kindness exist at the heart of compassionate pedagogy, and require a great deal of labor and patience (McLaren “This Fist Called My Heart”). As a teacher, P-Cock knows she must introduce lessons to her audiences so that they interpret them in the way she had intended. Performers who choose not to contextualize their performances care less about whether audiences receive the message they had intended. These performers believe that each audience member should interpret their art differently (Halberstam “Mackdaddy”).

P-Cock acknowledges that sometimes, her attempts at un/passable drag are lost on audiences regardless of the contextualizing work in which she engages. She attributes this “failure” to the fact that her performances are so layered and contextual that they may not translate perfectly to the stage. Like Eddie, she believes that even through the subtlest choices, she can carve small spaces for resistance. She tells me that she has a “private hope” that her attempts to queer race, gender, and sexuality through her performances will reach audiences, even when she does not make her intentions explicit, and even if her impact is small. She believes that the material fact of her queer, brown, Indian, queerly-gendered body alters spaces significantly enough to account for ambiguity and to value fluidity as a process of identification:

How I define performance pedagogy
and what a performance can do,
it's taken a long time, and I don't think it's ever quite clear
at any point. But you can hope for these small moments
like when your theory and your practice
kind of can exist side by side. And even if
that's only for you, I think that's important,
because you are kind of developing
a critical awareness of where you are
in your own performative life
(P-Cock. Personal interview. 14 August 2013)

Concluding Thoughts: On Public Pedagogy and Activism

At the end of each interview, I asked performers whether or not they considered what they do onstage to be a form of activism. This question proved difficult to ask let alone answer, as definitions of activism varied from performer to performer. It became clear that we were not speaking the same language. For some, performance art is in itself

a form of activism. Others believe performance is only activism when it has measurable implications for social change. Interestingly, only half of the performers feel that they can call themselves activists. Wanderlust feels that she engages in activism by embodying feminist ideologies. She believes that through her performances, she empowers women to reject the constraints that push down upon their bodies and to be whatever they want to be, even drag queens. Eddie tells me that the simple fact that his body exists in queer performance spaces is in itself a form of activism. For Eddie, refusing to identify within the gender binary in daily life is a form of activism, and onstage, the impact of that activism is amplified. Miz.Mojita sees herself as engaging in activism around queer political histories that can empower audiences to honor those legacies and fight for contemporary visibility.

On the contrary, Reese, P-Cock, and Vinzie are reluctant to lay claim to an activist identity. Reese tells me that although his performance work sometimes has an *impact* that falls in line with his ideas of what activism is – raising political visibility and money – activism does not exist at the heart of his performances. For Reese, performance is first and foremost about having fun. If those performances happen to instill in audiences an activist ideology, so be it. P-Cock tells me that while she would *like* to call what she does activism, she does not engage in it consistently enough or in the right contexts to consider it as such. Performance for P-Cock is a somewhat self-indulgent act in which she engages to relieve herself from the pain of passing. While she does believe that personal narratives and performances can be forms of activism, she does not believe

her performances fall into that category. Similarly, Vinzie sees performance as an excellent source of therapy for himself and entertainment for others, but not much more. He tells me that activism has never crossed his mind when he thinks of his performances.

These disparate views have taught me that activism and public pedagogy are *not* the same. Each of these performers seeks to teach audiences important lessons, but not all of those lessons are necessarily rooted in performers' intentions to promote social change. Although I would argue that all of these performers have had an activist *effect* on queer gender performance communities, it is important for me to listen closely to how they define themselves. In communication, our intentions and effects are often inconsistent with one another. The queer gender performers I interviewed proved that they are no exception to this rule. I would argue that all of these performers empower audiences. However, it appears that they often do so by accident, simply because their brown bodies exist in queer subcultural spaces.

In this chapter, I theorized that each of the performers I interviewed offers a distinct type of public pedagogy that is based on his or her personal and political values. They teach lessons about *self-acceptance, multiplicity, passing, community accountability, praxis, and ambiguity* in order to call out and speak back to the whiteness, gender policing, and latent and overt racism that govern queer gender performance communities. Each performer has honed his or her public pedagogy from a lifetime of experiences as multiple minorities in queer subcultural spaces, where they have been forced to negotiate and account for the intersections of their gender, sexual, and racial

identities. For example, Reese identified the need for the public pedagogy of community accountability due to the years he spent watching his queer Latina/o community struggle to find educational and medical resources. Similarly, Vinzie's quest to claim a space in prominent queer venues, where white drag kings rule, has led him toward a public pedagogy of passing. Performers offer their public pedagogies as a means of paying tribute to the challenges they have surpassed, and to empower others experiencing such challenges to soldier on. Theirs are voices of wisdom and inspiration.

Through their public pedagogies, each performer speaks back to instances of racism they have experienced within and outside of the queer gender performance world. Wanderlust and Miz.Mojita have created new spaces and surrounded themselves with loving, supportive people so that racism is less likely to rear its ugly head. Reese raises money for queer Latina/os, whom have suffered the institutional racism through lack of access to healthcare and education. P-Cock challenges her audiences to find comfort in ambiguity, which encourages us to liberate our queer and brown bodies from pursuing the unattainable standards of gender, race, and sexuality. And instead of recoiling after he experienced violence, Eddie brings his strength and resilience to the stage in order to empower his audiences. These performers teach their audiences that racism is still alive and deeply felt, but can be survived and spoken back to through radical performance.

Additionally, these performers taught audiences about the power of embracing our intersectional identities, even when those identities exist in tension with one another. Eddie and Vinzie wear Christianity proudly and bring it into their performances in order

to show that faith need not exist at odds with queerness. They have shown that there is strength in refusing to check one identity at the door in order to fully inhabit and find acceptance in another. Wanderlust expresses her discontent that many burlesque communities embrace an aesthetic of “classic” beauty that excludes people of size and brown people. Miz.Mojita puts her academic identity to work in queer spaces by proving that theories and methods can matter for the queer, brown bodies in her communities. She asserts pride in her academic background while challenging herself to integrate it meaningfully with activist and performance communities. Miz.Mojita and P-Cock believe that critical, transformative performances can take place in a variety of spaces, and that they can have a large impact regardless of where they happen. Like Jones, Miz.Mojita and P-Cock are committed to finding ways to “... connect theory and activism in ways that will have positive, material effects for marginalized people, and ultimately lead to social change” (“Intersectional Reflexivity” 22). Each of the performers I interviewed believes in bringing each of their identities to the stage with them in order to empower those with whom they can connect at the intersections.

In addition to theorizing the *public* pedagogies they offer, I reflected on the *personal* lessons each of these performers has taught me along my own development as a performer and public pedagogue. I reflected on how Wanderlust has helped me to negotiate the concurrent privilege and liberation that come with my performance of faux queen Patti LaFemme in spaces where my feminine, cisgender queer body is often normative. Eddie has helped me to recognize and appreciate how central familial support

and acceptance has been in my journey as a performer. Miz.Mojita shared personal stories about negotiating whiteness and racism, and, in doing so, empowered me to get in touch with the racial traumas that drive my performances. Finally, by sharing her personal history of gendered performances with me, P-Cock helped me to name the childhood experiences that conditioned my relationship to femininity, and that to this day inform my embodiment of Patti LaFemme. Each of these performers has been a critical, giving, and compassionate teacher to me, always reminding me where we come from and why our work is meaningful. By sharing my personal narratives throughout, I held myself accountable to the ways in which my privileged identities merge with and diverge with all voices present in my research (Jones “Intersectional Reflexivity”).

Poetic transcriptions of our interviews helped bring the narratives to life in ways that signal the performative dimensions of identity construction. I invest in claims that poetic transcription allows readers to engage with academic writing on a conversational level that traditional prose denies (Faulkner “Poetry as Method”; Madison “That Was My Occupation”). At times, I chose to break lines where performers paused in order to communicate their cadence through my writing. Other times, I broke lines in order to draw attention to parts of our interviews that stood out or to highlight themes that emerged in our conversations. Ultimately, I believe that this methodological choice helped me to portray my fellow performers in a way that represents our authentic, caring relationships to one another. Poetic transcription also allowed me to pay homage to the

fact that these performers are artists who work hard to resist confinement to particular genres. Poetic transcription is a respectful and human methodological choice.

I intertwined theories from critical communication pedagogy and public pedagogy throughout performers' narratives in order to demonstrate the applicability of those theories beyond formal academic spaces. As I anticipated, the narratives that performers offered fell in line with many of the central tenets of critical communication pedagogy, including the centrality of mentorship (Calafell "Mentoring and Love"; Pattisapu and Calafell; Warren and Davis), alliances and coalitions as a means of survival (Johnson and Bhatt; Moreman and Non Grata), the potential for queer bodies and bodies of color to teach lessons from spaces of lived experience (Alexander "Embracing"; Calafell "When Will We All Matter?"; Taylor), and the therapeutic power of dialogue (Allen, Orbe, and Olivas; Gust and Warren). These performers do not stand at the front of classrooms, but they are *public* pedagogues whose negotiations of intersecting identities within predominantly white environments put them in contact with challenges similar to those faced by teachers in traditional spaces. Just like the teacher-scholars of Communication whose scholarship I referenced, these performers develop effective ways of speaking back to the institutions and historical contexts where their bodies are situated, empowering their audiences – or "students" – along the way.

In Chapter 5, I reflect on the major similarities and differences that emerged between performers as a result of this study. I draw from those similarities and differences in order to theorize possibilities for future research in critical communication

pedagogy, where queer people of color are still underrepresented. Although I do not seek in this study to conflate the identities and experiences of queer gender performers of color, I believe it is important to reflect on the ways in which their narratives weave together and diverge, as those commonalities and differences can support current theories of critical communication pedagogy and push them further to encompass experiences that are not reflected in the current literature. By continuing to center the voices of the queer gender performers of color who shared their narratives with me, I hold myself accountable to producing an academic project that is truly invested in marginalized communities.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications

There was this bigger girl [in the audience] and she sent me a card, and I still kept the card to this day, it was her business card, and she said on the back thank you for all that you do. And I'm like how weird, so she bought me a drink and sent it backstage, so I walk out to go talk to her, and she starts balling, she's just crying. And she said "I have never seen anybody my size be sexy." And I go how unfortunate is it that you have never felt like there was somebody you could relate to that was attractive. So, she has flown to different places to see me perform in New York and different places just because it's her validation point. And for me, that is fantastic. It's fantastic to let people be who they want to be as weird or as odd or as whatever
(Wanderlust. Personal interview. 26 July 2013)

The audiences that show up is such a wide array. It's male, it's female, it's transgender, it's gay it's bi, it's straight, it doesn't... I think a lot of the times, these people just want to be entertained. And sometimes they have the idea of what drag is or what entertainment is, and then they come to a show and they walk away with a whole new perspective of you know what, that was so much fun, that was just somebody up there lip-synching, that was somebody being goofy. They made us laugh, they made us think, they creeped us out... whatever it may be.... you think you know what, it's not just boys in wigs, it's girls in beards
(Reese. Personal interview. 30 July 2013)

For the past four years, the queer gender performance community has served as a space in which I have felt free to negotiate my intersectional queer identities in the face of pervasive heterosexism, sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression that exist in culture at large. Onstage, I have performed gender, race, and sexuality in ways that challenge my own understanding of the stability of those categories, and of queer gender

performers' collective potential to transform them through performance. The performances in which I have engaged with my partner and others have allowed me to step outside of the constraints of professionalized femininity that I feel I must embody in academia (Samek and Donofrio), as well as the gender binary of drag queens and drag kings that continue to structure queer gender performance communities (Surkan). Through performance, I have bridged my academic and activist identities. I have found community with other performers who believe in the potential of queer performances to function as transformative education. Dissatisfied with the "truths" about race, gender, and sexuality previously available to me, I have become a public pedagogue who works adamantly to transform my communities through performance.

Along the way I have crossed paths with an inspiring group of queer gender performers of color – some who call themselves activists and some who do not – whose artistic genius, courage, and resilience have instilled in me a sense of commitment to cultivating queer of color solidarity within a queer subcultural climate that does not always welcome or validate our bodies. We teach one another that we do not need to accept whiteness as a governing principle in our community, but rather, that we can transform spaces simply by entering them. We have taught one another that through performance, we cannot only struggle toward *belonging*, but rather toward *transformation* of our community. We refuse to embody racial stereotypes or to accept tokenism. In such refusals, we grant ourselves the agency to center our brown bodies. In this radical center, we reinterpret for audiences the potential of queer bodies of color to

celebrate our roots, resist interpellation into social hierarchies that marginalize our bodies, and make efforts to change the conflation of queerness with whiteness.

I began this study seeking to discover how queer gender performers of color make sense of their intersectional queer identities in queer subcultural climates where whiteness and racism are prevalent. In conceptualizing gay and lesbian bars as sites of public learning, I wanted to know what kinds of lessons performers sought to teach their audiences through their public performances. In our conversations, performers and I cultivated answers to the following questions:

RQ1: How do queer gender performers of color negotiate race, racism, and whiteness in queer gender performance communities?

RQ2: How do queer gender performers of color make sense of their intersectional identities in queer gender performance communities?

RQ3: What are the public pedagogies offered by the performers?

I learned that performers of color find their racial identities to be particularly salient in the predominantly white queer gender performance communities where we perform. For many of us, this feeling of otherness is not uncommon. We have grown accustomed to constant identification and scrutiny of our raced bodies. We know the feeling of being asked to speak for racial and ethnic communities. We know the pain of daily micro aggressions that are cloaked in neoliberal racism. Although we have rarely witnessed overt racist statements or actions in the queer gender performance community, we feel whiteness prodding at our brown skin in acute ways. Under the shroud of

whiteness, white performers have scrutinized Miz.Mojita and Wanderlust on the basis of their makeup shades and the sizes and shapes of their bodies without considering how such comments signal historical tensions around brownness and beauty. Because of whiteness and its tendency to essentialize brown bodies, Vinzie and Eddie feel constrained to particular genres of music and styles of dress when they make their performance choices. Whiteness forces P-Cock to justify her decisions to perform racial drag and subvert ethnic stereotypes, where white performers would not endure such scrutiny. Reese must engage in constant public education around queer Latina/o histories because whiteness has rendered them invisible by centering queer white histories. For most white members of queer gender performance communities, whiteness operates under the radar and bestows the benefit of standardization on their white bodies (Warren “Doing Whiteness”). On the contrary, whiteness is hyper-visible for performers of color, who must feel and attempt to deflect its strength with every move we make.

As performers of color, we struggle to bring our full selves to the stages where we perform, as our bodies are often recognized only for their brownness. Vinzie and Eddie must think of clever ways to render their religious identities visible in contexts where queerness and Christianity are assumed to be at odds with one another. A cisgender man who appears white, Reese works hard to stake a claim to his Latino identity and to convince audiences that his performances of masculinity onstage are as empowering and transformative as performances across gender. Wanderlust has felt compelled to create new spaces wherein people will accept her voluptuousness in addition to her brownness.

P-Cock and Miz.Mojita are forever in search of queer performance spaces where their academic voices and commitments to transformation through performance are recognized and validated. Whether onstage or in our daily lives, we want people to accept us as the complex, queer intersectional beings that we are. We are discontent with checking any aspect of our material, spiritual, or political identities at the door.

Our shared experiences with negotiating whiteness and racism and struggling to articulate our intersectional identities have compelled us to develop diverse approaches to public pedagogy. The performers I interviewed want to teach their audiences and co-performers how rewarding it can be to embrace intersectional queer identities and to forefront our racial identities within climates of whiteness. Wanderlust embodies the pedagogy of *self-acceptance*, through which she emphasizes how powerful it can be to make no apologies for the ways in which our bodies resist the standards set before us. Like powerhouse queer Korean-American comedian Margaret Cho, Wanderlust believes that feeling beautiful is a political act:

I think it's very important to feel beautiful. I think it's very political to feel beautiful, especially if you're Queer, because if you're Queer you have to take on the world every single day of your life, so you have to feel beautiful to survive. (Beautiful Tour, 2009)

Wanderlust is a public pedagogue who acknowledges how difficult it is for brown bodies, queer bodies, and bodies of size to find acceptance in societal norms. She teaches her audiences and fellow performers to abandon those standards and to begin a beauty revolution all our own. Eddie preaches the similar pedagogy of *boldness*. By having the courage to reject the constraints that are placed on his queer Chicano body, Eddie shows

audiences that it is possible to bring our full selves into each context, despite the historical and political struggles we might evoke. He rejects the notion that in order to claim a place in one community he must be willing to denounce his affiliations with others. Boldness means accepting who we are and not allowing ourselves to feel disempowered when others critique what we bring to the table.

Vinzie's pedagogy of *passing* is fundamentally about proving that performers of color can thrive in contexts governed by whiteness. He inspires his audiences to push through barriers in order to prove that they can make an impact in spaces where the talents and accomplishments of women and people of color are often erased. Vinzie proves that bodies of color can push through and make such spaces their own, not *in spite* of but *because* of the unique racialized perspectives we bring. On the contrary, Reese's pedagogy of *community accountability* places more emphasis on the larger cultural impact of queer gender performance on queer communities of color. He pays less attention to each performative choice than Vinzie does, focused instead on how the performative work in which he engages can effect material change for the communities he serves. Vinzie and Reese teach audiences about queer of color agency, but in different ways and for very different purposes.

Miz.Mojita shows her audiences that we need not separate our intellectual and social justice-oriented goals from our performance goals. In doing so, she engages in the pedagogy of *praxis*. Miz.Mojita proves that political drag has the unique capacity to combine the glamour of mainstream drag performance with the historical roots of queer

political struggle out of which drag performance was born. Similarly, P-Cock believes in power of putting theories of gender, race, and sexuality to work in her pedagogy of *ambiguity*. For P-Cock, ambiguity is a space bursting with potential to transform how we think about identity inside and outside of academic communities. Together, Miz.Mojita and P-Cock stake a claim to a politicized, intellectual approach to queer gender performance.

Although diverse, these public pedagogies are reactions to the similar pressure performers feel to keep our intersectional queer experiences private. During our interviews, many of my fellow performers and I engaged in conversations about our racialized experiences for the *first time*, awakened to the potential of our collective counter-storytelling to disrupt the tales that white queer culture tells about us and to author our own stories in community with one another (Solorzano and Yosso). We discovered that although our ways of relating to audiences are different, we work together to dismantle whiteness from the inside out. Each of us has traveled long and rigorous paths toward the public spaces we occupy. Now, as we stand before audiences and one another, each of us feels a considerable responsibility to tell our stories through performance. We seek to empower our audiences to raise their voices and reject the standardization of whiteness and inferential racism in queer communities.

Contributions to Communication

In bearing witness to the stories performers shared, I have not only deepened my personal connection to my queer gender performance community of color – I have

enriched the Communication literature by contributing nuanced examinations of queer of color subjectivity and relationality, the transformative potential of performance, and the ability of Communication theories to translate to subcultural contexts within which public pedagogy occurs. Although there are certainly exceptions to the rule, most Communication research concerning queer communities treats whiteness as an invisible standard against which all queer experiences are measured. When queer people of color do appear in the literature, we arrive as additions to the conversations, our bodies never truly centered. I follow the lead of scholars like Alexander, Anzaldúa, Calafell, Ferguson, Gopinath, Halberstam, Johnson, Kumashiro, Lorde, Moreman, and Muñoz, who center queer bodies of color in their writing. Like these scholars, I focus on the powerful narratives that come from years spent struggling to assert our intersectional queer identities where we have been erased in the literature (Crenshaw).

In addition to joining forces with the extant scholars in Communication, I have blazed new paths through the discipline of critical communication pedagogy by translating its central tenets to the education that occurs beyond contexts of formal learning. I have theorized the queer subcultural spaces where queer people of color perform as sites of public pedagogy within which we seek to empower audiences and one another to assert our agency and work toward social justice and transformation. Translating critical communication pedagogy theories to the context of queer gender performance is important for two main reasons. First, in making this move I acknowledge that because queer people of color experience marginalization within traditional sites of

learning, we exercise our agency by engaging in learning outside of formal settings. By attending to the communicative practices that occur within nontraditional contexts like queer gender performance, I pay respect to the rich communities and traditions queer people of color have established in light of the legacies of oppression we carry.

Second, I work to repair the centuries-old rift that separates marginalized and academic communities (Flores; Frey; Lincoln, Denzin, and Smith). By acknowledging that the processes of identity negotiation and pedagogical resistance in which queer gender performers of color engage, I use academic research to celebrate rather than discredit queer vernacular and embodied knowledge. As an individual whose body bridges performer and academic-activist subjectivities, I feel deeply invested in the task of putting community activism and activist scholarship in dialogue. Like Muñoz, I contend that queer gender performers are public revolutionaries who engage in sharp, clever critiques that quite frequently predicate and surpass the deconstructive work in which scholars engage. In other words, I hope to radically reinterpret queer gender performance as a phenomenon that can enhance academic theories rather than simply benefit *from* such theories (Muñoz).

I discovered that the queer gender performers of color I interviewed both confirm and challenge the critical communication pedagogy theories I used to frame this project. I heard theories blossom on performers' tongues. For example, Vinzie and Reese attest to how central relationships within and across marginalized identities have been in confronting oppressive institutional norms. Like Alexander and Warren, Gust and

Warren; Johnson and Bhatt, Moreman and Non Grata, and Pattisapu and Calafell, Vinzie and Reese have relied upon the queer people of color who have come before them, as well as the white queer allies they have found, to navigate the obstacles they encounter. Vinzie has relied upon his black drag queen mentor, Honey, to open doors to exclusive performance locales. Honey has advocated for Vinzie throughout his career in the Denver area, helping to carve out space for his black body where spaces did not exist before. Reese performs in order to cultivate relationships with other queer Latina/os and to contribute financial resources to his queer community of color. In contexts that center whiteness, Vinzie and Reese have relied on their queer mentors and communities of color to support them.

Miz.Mojita and Wanderlust echo scholars of critical communication pedagogy by arguing that their multiply marginalized bodies bump up against institutional norms that do not validate them and which pressure them to perform their identities in ways that do not feel comfortable (Calafell “When Will We All Matter?”; Calafell and Moreman “Latina/o Performativities”; Johnson “‘Quare’ Studies”; Owens Patton “Reflections”; Warren and Davis). Miz.Mojita argues that because the mainstream drag queen community discourages political or social justice oriented conversations, she struggles to find a space in those communities as a self-proclaimed political drag queen. Similarly, as a brown woman of size, Wanderlust finds that she experiences exclusion from mainstream burlesque venues on the basis of her racial identity and body size. Ultimately, it is about the struggle to create space within queer gender performance communities:

Miz.Mojita struggles to carve out a place for her political voice and Wanderlust recognizes the inability of mainstream contexts to accommodate her.

All performers emphasized the sharing of personal stories as central to their experiences onstage and in their communities (Alexander “Embracing”; Corey “The Personal”; Pollock; Spry). Through the songs they lip sync, the outfits they wear, and the stage names they choose, they craft semi-autobiographical performances that tell their stories of struggle and accomplishment. Vinzie’s tattoos prove his resilience over adolescent traumas while simultaneously representing his faith for audiences. Wanderlust brings abstract and “ugly” performance choices in order to transform her painful memories into cathartic art. In her performances, P-Cock addresses and reclaims the assumptions about nationality, race, sexuality, and gender that audiences push onto her body. Each of these performers writes and embodies their own stories onstage, and in the meanwhile, find incredible agency in authorship.

Performers’ narratives also *extend* queer theories and theories of critical communication pedagogy that frame this study. Unlike critical communication pedagogy scholars, who write about the strategies they must use to adapt their bodies to whitewashed institutional contexts (Calafell “When Will We All Matter”; Calafell and Moreman “Latina/o Performativities”; Owens Patton “Reflections”; Warren and Davis), several performers have eschewed white performance contexts completely. In exchange, they have cultivated their own performance scenes in which their brown bodies are centered, no longer forced to negotiate whiteness so laboriously. For instance, Reese feels

lucky to perform for audiences who are predominantly Latina/o. Although he does sometimes need to engage in public pedagogy around his Latina/o identities for the white members of his audiences, he feels less pressure in the LILAC and Majestic Circle communities to defend or justify his brownness. Over the years, the LILAC and Majestic Circle communities have separated from predominantly white queer performance circles for the purpose of cultivating queer communities of color. Similarly, when she can, Miz.Mojita chooses to perform only in circles where she can be with other political drag performers. She removes herself from contexts where she knows she will not find understanding, thus relieving herself of the responsibility of public pedagogy around her brownness and political ideas. Miz.Mojita elects to perform only in spaces where others will not expect her to mute her political voice for the purpose of maintaining the status quo.

By separating themselves from contexts where whiteness governs their bodies, Reese and Miz.Mojita engage in what Spivak calls strategic essentialism, or the process by which members of marginalized groups purposefully engage in acts of exclusion and segregation in efforts to counter perceived threats to cultural identity (Mendoza, Halualani, & Drzewiecka). Strategic essentialism is an unavoidable response to binary oppositions wherein individuals discursively construct identity according to an either/or dichotomy, classifying others according to the characteristics of the group to which they are designated (Spivak). Realizing that mainstream queer gender performance communities expect them to adhere to codes of whiteness, thinness, and uncritical

performances, Reese, Wanderlust, and Miz.Mojita have made strategic choices to claim their own spaces. Although they do not shut themselves off completely to cross-racial alliances with white performers and still make appearances in predominantly white performance spaces, they understand the strength in forging brown collectivities and exercise their power to do so.

The strategic essentialism in which these performers engage encourages us to think differently about how queer people of color can navigate institutional structures. Although in traditional institutions of education such modes of seclusion are not feasible, there are ways in which queer people of color can create pedagogical spaces in which they do not have to engage in public education around brownness and other, intersecting marginalized identities – if only momentarily. Muñoz has explored this phenomenon in similar ways through his theory of disidentifications. He posits that queer people of color do not and cannot adapt our bodies to mainstream performance contexts, and must therefore find ways to craft our own queer subjectivities beyond the confines of mainstream queerness. Together, performers’ narratives that detail strategic essentialism and Muñoz’s theory of disidentifications can push us to think about how queer pedagogues of color can distance ourselves from academic codes and structures in order to claim our own agency. Calafell and Moreman have begun this conversation by arguing the politics of citationality. By evoking the voices of our queer/of color ancestors and contemporaries in our research and pedagogy, we can begin to reclaim our bodies from the grasp of institutional whiteness (Calafell and Moreman “Latina/o Performativities”). I

believe that the narratives performers shared with me prompt us to continue investigating these possibilities in formal and informal educational contexts alike.

Ultimately, in conceptualizing those narratives through a lens of public pedagogy, my fellow performers and I engaged in a radical transformation of theory. We articulated our lived experiences in ways that moved existing theories to the public realm so that we could examine the very real implications they have for us and for the audiences who witness our performances. Together, we discovered that we are transformative public intellectuals whose courageous onstage negotiations of our intersectional identities are intended to empower audiences to rethink common constructions of queerness, and to pay attention to the ways in which race intersects with queer identity.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the contributions this project makes to Communication, it is helpful to consider how several factors complicate and potentially limit its impact. First, I believe that the diversity amongst the performers I recruited is a strength. In collecting narratives from people who perform in different spaces and bring different identities and perspectives to their performance work, I came to understand queer gender performance as a vast and complex web of connections and disconnections. This approach allowed me to attend to performers' particularities, intricacies, and intersectionalities without needing to conflate them with one another (Alaoui et al.). As cisgender performers, Reese and Wanderlust show that there is power in translating heightened versions of their everyday genders to the stage. P-Cock finds that spaces of ambiguity empower her most.

Conversely, Eddie and Vinzie grace the stage as cross-gender drag kings and Miz.Mojita identifies as a political drag queen. This is a project that foregrounds intersections above similarities. However, had I recruited a group of performers who identify exclusively as drag kings of color, the insights this study could yield very different insights. By focusing on one type of queer gender performer of color, I could have nudged myself deeper into understanding the cultural norms that are specific to that culture. This dilemma evokes a fundamental question about the impact of scope, selection, and their effects for qualitative research (Seidman). I envision this project as the first of many in a personal research agenda that examines intersectional queer identities. In future studies, I will make research design choices that allow me to zero in on different populations and phenomena within queer gender performance communities of color. These projects will converge to provide multiple perspectives of this context, and to diversify my theorizations about queer gender performers of color as public pedagogues.

Second, my decision not to include the voices of white queer and trans^{*iv} allies is strategic. Exclusionary moves like these are strategic, so that the voices of queer people of color can claim a space in ongoing academic conversations about communication pedagogy and performance that continue to privilege white perspectives. By including the voices of white queer gender performers in my future work, I can use scholarship from critical communication pedagogy to theorize the impact and efficacy of cross-racial queer gender performance alliances (Johnson and Bhatt). Although many of us engage in moves toward strategic essentialism, we also work and perform alongside queer white

allies who are invested in confronting whiteness and racism alongside us. They are our friends, our partners, our emcees, our makeup artists, and our family. In many cases, they put their white bodies on the line for us, using their privilege strategically to create spaces of acceptance and understanding (Pattisapu and Calafell). My choice not to include their voices in these pages does not change the fact that they support us and advocate for us in ways that only they can (Carrillo Rowe “Be Longing”; Johnson and Bhatt). In future studies, I will pay homage to the labor in which they engage on our behalf every day, onstage and off.

As I continue to develop this body of work, I must attempt to gauge how audiences engage with the work of queer gender performers of color. Scholars of performance studies argue that we must understand performance as a reciprocal act in which we are involved with audiences (Pelias and Shaffer; Shoemaker “Pink Tornadoes”). Similarly, scholars of critical communication pedagogy argue that critical pedagogy is a communal act, which requires teachers and students to invest in pursuing embodied knowledge together (Fassett and Warren). My fellow performers and I articulated what we *hope* to teach our audiences through our performances. However, as P-Cock notes, it is impossible to know how much of what we intend to do onstage translates to the bodies that watch us. If we are to truly understand the impact we have in the world as queer gender performers of color, we must discover how audiences perceive us and what they do with the lessons we teach them.

Next, I think that a study that puts queer gender performers of color in dialogue with one another about their experiences negotiating whiteness and racism in performance communities could generate some valuable insights. Through focus groups, I could create a forum in which performers freely exchange stories. Scholars of critical communication pedagogy attest to the power of collective storytelling as a mode of healing, and as way to achieve political visibility (Alaoui, Moreira, Pattisapu, Shukri, and Calafell; Allen, Orbe, and Olivas). While I strived to create moments of dialogue between performers by noting the intersections and divergences in their narratives, they did not have the opportunity to embody those dialogues and share their stories with one another. By placing performers in dialogue with one another, I could help to foster generative discussions about public pedagogy and queer of color relationality that are not limited to my own ability to recognize connections.

On a final note, it is crucial to note the role of my academic privilege in shaping this project. All of the narratives I collected from fellow performers are subject to my interpretation and scrutiny as an academic, who has access to educational support that makes this project possible. While I did all that I could to allow performers' voices to speak louder than my own, the words on these pages are subject to my readings. Because I am the author of this document, I inevitably made choices about which parts of performers' stories to include and where. I am but one observer of the vast and incredible world of queer gender performance. My academic privilege makes it so that I am given permission to interpret and critique what I see, then granted credibility based on the

arguments I make. Although my academic privilege does not erase my membership to the queer gender performance community or lessen my relationships with fellow performers, it certainly colors the ways in which I audience their stories. Out of utmost respect for the friends and family who shared their secrets and stories with me, I must acknowledge the complexity of my positionality and the considerable responsibility I bear.

Concluding Thoughts

In the first chapter of this study, I contextualized queer gender performance as a subcultural refuge from heterosexist cultural ideologies within which queer identity negotiations are possible. The literature I reviewed explores how these performances, although liberatory for the most privileged queer bodies, work to constrain queer bodies that must confront the material realities of race, gender, ability, and class. Research in Communication thus far has focused primarily on the potential of queer gender performances to effect material social change for queer communities by inspiring collective activist movements in which audiences and performers alike are involved. Furthermore, Communication scholars contend that queer gender performance is a tool for exploding identity categories. Finally, Communication research emphasizes the strong influence of context on queer gender performances. I discussed the few meaningful, scholarly interventions across race in the queer gender performance literature and argued for the need to proliferate academic work that forefronts intersectionality.

I situated this research squarely within a social justice paradigm, which emphasizes constant self-reflexivity around academic privilege in scholarship with

marginalized communities, as well as the potential for such work to transform academia itself. As a queer woman of color academic and queer gender performer, I am uniquely situated at the crux of the two realms I seek to bridge through this research. This approach, although undoubtedly important and fruitful, has required me to confront my academic privilege in ways I could never have anticipated. I offered personal narratives about my own journey toward locating queer gender performance as a site within which I could queer and racialize femininity through the embodiment of Patti LaFemme, my faux queen and drag king persona. Additionally, I reflected on my negotiation of the research process and my relationships with each of the performers I interviewed. This heightened level of self-reflexivity and self-disclosure kept me accountable to the politics of dialogic engagement that serves as the foundation of my project. Although this approach to research cannot eliminate power hierarchies entirely, it did allow me to engage with my interviewees on a more personal, equitable level, and kept my project true to the heart of social justice scholarship.

In the second chapter, I reviewed literature from queer studies and Communication that accounts for the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality. I asserted a strong commitment to centering these queer theories of color in this project in effort to ground my scholarly work in the legacies of queer people and people of color, many of whom cannot claim membership to the academic canon. Next, I discussed the central tenets of critical communication pedagogy scholarship, calling attention to discussions of pedagogy as performative and transformative. Finally, I advocated for the

unconventional bridging of queer theories of color and critical communication pedagogy theories as a means through which to theorize queer gender performers of color as public pedagogues who work to transform the conflation of queerness with whiteness, and advocate for intersectional understandings of queer identity. I called upon theories of public pedagogy in order to move critical communication pedagogy theories to the public realm, where I believe their central tenets of alliances, mentorship, and transformation hold true.

The third chapter included justifications for using interviewing, personal narrative, and poetic transcription jointly in this research. I discussed the care with which I approached this research given a legacy of academic research that colonizes marginalized communities and unfairly centers the voice and perspectives of the academic elite. While no research methodology can completely dismantle academic elitism, I contended that qualitative interviews would allow my participants' voices speak as loudly as mine so that we could engage in a dialogic performance about our identities and experiences with marginalization. With this dialogic imperative in mind, I included my own personal narratives throughout the chapter in order to place myself in conversation with the performers I interviewed. Finally, because I believe that the ways in which people articulate, or *perform*, lived experiences is just as important as the words they use, I utilized poetic transcription. This method allowed me to resurrect my interviewee's storied experiences on the page for readers. Through poetic transcription, I

recreated embodied experiences through which readers could engage with the performers' unique ways of articulating themselves.

The fourth chapter featured poetic transcriptions and my analyses of the interviews I conducted with performers. Not wanting to gloss over the unique identity and experiences of each performer, I argued that each performer embodies his or her own brand of public pedagogy for audiences. I drew connections between performers' narratives and theories from critical communication pedagogy in order to demonstrate how they bring such theories to bear on public stages, as well as how they challenge and extend such theories through their intersectional queer performances.

In this final chapter, I identified what I believe are the major contributions of this research to the field of Communication and its implications for performers, activists, and the communities to which we belong. I contended that this project joins the ranks of academic scholarship and community-based initiatives that encourage people to think about culture, identity, and communication in intersectional and context-specific ways. Additionally, I addressed the limitations of this research and directions for future studies that can continue to work toward academic representations of intersectional queer identities. Ultimately, I argued that performers' narratives have come together to support, strengthen, and challenge existing queer theories and theories of communication pedagogy in ways that beg further exploration.

My fellow performers and I have joined together in *celebration* of our racialized queer identities both onstage and off, encouraging one another to honor our difficult paths

toward performance and the legacies we will leave. We have practiced active *resistance* to the glorification of whiteness in queer gender performance culture, our brown bodies living testaments to the contrary. At last, together, we have become agents of *change* through performance, intent on speaking to our audiences in ways that illuminate our collective struggles and our unstoppable, collective strength. This study is but one forum through which academics and activists alike can begin to unpack the collective potential of queer gender performers of color not only speak back to silence and erasure, but to disrupt privilege, transform existing spaces, and empower audiences and one another to accept no less than absolute creative and political agency.

Epilogue: Drag Queen Bingo

Jimmy and I watch as a beautiful white drag queen named Alexis turns the bingo cage. Tonight we are out on the town, “out” of drag, our everyday selves just enjoying cheeseburgers at *Jenny’s*, a popular gay bar and grill. My eyes flash between familiar faces, the several bingo sheets strewn out in front of me, and the coordinates that are highlighted on the jumbo screen. Several games in, Jimmy and I are having no luck. But being here tonight, together, with our queer community is all the fun we could hope to have.

Alexis is a funny and entertaining presence, her jokes always campy and bordering on impropriety. Although she speaks in jest, her words tend to hit hard. She pulls each audience member who shouts *bingo* onto the stage – the next target of her scathing banter. Jimmy and I listen to Alexis’s comments about winner’s name or

physical appearance. When an audience member who has an androgynous style wins, Alexis asks impolite and intrusive questions about the person's gender identity. In a culture that privileges cisgender male performances of drag queenness, this audience member's body is abject and ripe for questioning. Noticeably embarrassed, the audience member flees the stage and disappears in the crowd. The next winner, a dark-skinned Latina, sways uncomfortably as Alexis speaks Spanish to her, her words facetiously mispronounced. Jimmy and I squirm on our barstools, afraid for the moment that we might strike bingo, his white genderqueer body and my brown cisgender body subject to Alexis's scrutiny. *At least it is not me* I think as I shove a handful of French fries into my mouth and search for numbers on my sheet.

The next winner is a youngish white woman whose forehead is marked with the green ink from a bingo dauber. As she climbs onto the stage, Alexis notices the ink blot and aims her jokes there. She issues a public service announcement of sorts, urging audience members not to mark one another's foreheads with the daubers, unless we want to "wake up working at a Seven Eleven" the next morning.

For several moments, I can notice nothing but the silence. As my heart cascades into my stomach, I scan the dining room to find almost every audience member visibly shocked, appalled, and quiet. The audience does not find humor in Alexis's racist, classist, Hinduphobic joke. Even the white woman, whose marked forehead spurred the joke, stands silent next to Alexis, her ears still anticipating laughter. My appetite is gone. I shove my plate to the edge of the bar as Jimmy flags down the waiter for our check.

Alexis's voice pushes down on my chest like a thick sheet of glass and I cannot breathe. I have to get out of here. This space is no longer safe for me, for us.

As Jimmy and I speed walk to our car, heat escapes from my ears and my brown cheeks flush pink with rage. What began as a relaxing date has evolved into yet another scuffle with the whiteness and racism that plagues the queer gender performance community. Yet another performer, who occupies multiple positions of privilege, has subjected my body to racialized pain. As we scramble through the cool night, I ask myself why it took *that* comment to set me on fire. Why did I feel compelled to storm out of the bar only after Alexis made statements that implicated my own biracial, Indian-American body? Why did I wait until she had already implicated gender fluid and Latina bodies to take such offense? These angry moments are tinged with self-reflexivity that reminds me in mainstream drag culture, no one who performs queerness beyond the confines of white, affluent, able-bodied cisgender maleness is completely safe. The stage is not accessible to people in wheelchairs. The food and drink items one must purchase to remain in the bar are pricy. The cast is comprised solely of white drag queens. Should I be surprised that this has happened? Can I not just accept that bodies like mine – different bodies – may never escape oppression in these spaces?

Jimmy tells me that as a white person, he knows he cannot understand exactly how Alexis's comments made me feel, but he stands in solidarity with me regardless. We see our intersectional queer bodies as forever in community, helping one another to fight the battles we do not want to fight alone. When we get home, Jimmy helps me to draft a

letter to the management team at Jenny's detailing my experiences and calling for an intervention:

Good evening! I'd like to issue a customer complaint. Tonight my partner and I visited Jenny's for Drag Queen Bingo. We were having a nice time until the drag queen in charge made an incredibly racist comment regarding bingo daubers and Hindu Indian-Americans. She said (and I am paraphrasing) that the audience should be careful not to make our neighbors "Hindi" with bingo daubers, or else they'd wake up working at a Seven Eleven. As an Indian American queer woman, I found this comment extremely offensive. It made the restaurant feel like a very uncomfortable space for me, and my partner and I decided to leave. Not only did these comments violate basic human respect -- they made us decide to leave when we likely would have remained at the bar for the duration of the event and purchased drinks. I would very much appreciate it if the staff of Drag Queen Bingo could be made aware of this complaint and work to make sure that similar instances do not occur in the future.

Thank you for your care. – Krishna

The management team at Jenny's never responds to my letter, but the outpouring of support I receive from my queer community is tremendous. Queer and allied white people and queer and allied people of color alike share in my anger and disappointment. Some even vow never to attend the event at Jenny's again. They tell me that this kind of

racist humor is unacceptable to them and unwanted in our communities. They believe that performers can be entertaining without relying on racist, classist, and transphobic language. Several months later, Dionne, a prominent drag queen and former host of Drag Queen Bingo at Jenny's, approaches Jimmy and me to say she is sorry this happened, and to tell me that she stands in solidarity with me. Like the audience members who refused to laugh at Alexis's joke that night, my queer community actively resists racism as a mainstay of queer gender performance culture. This reaction replaces the sense of defeat I felt that night with the hope that together, people from all corners of my queer community can respond to racism and whiteness with collective strength. My community is tired of instances like these, and we know that we can work together to speak back to them. Queer gender performers of color know that we hold the power to challenge and transform attitudes toward race, racism, and whiteness. Each of us uses our power strategically, in the service of creating new communities of celebration, resistance, and change.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT

Dissertation Research: Celebration, Resistance, and Change:
Queer Gender Performers of Color as Public Pedagogues

I would like to invite you to participate in a study I am conducting intended to collect personal narratives of your experiences as a queer gender performer (or drag performer) of color. The primary aims of this research are to increase visibility for queer people of color in academic literature and to begin dialogues about promoting social change in queer communities. I, Krishna Pattisapu, am the primary researcher for this project. I will use the personal narratives I gain through my interview with you to complete my dissertation project. I can be reached at 618-231-2341, or by email at kpattisa@du.edu. My professor and dissertation adviser, Dr. Bernadette Marie Calafell, can be reached at 303-871-4322 or via email at Bernadette.Calafell@du.edu.

The interview will last approximately one hour. I will ask questions that cover a variety of topics related to your experiences as a queer gender performer of color. Your participation in this study is strictly confidential and voluntary. During the interview, I will never ask you to identify yourself by name. In my dissertation, I will assign a pseudonym intended to protect your confidentiality. Additionally, only I will have access to the interview data. As one caveat, should you reveal in your interview any information concerning child abuse, homicide, or suicide, I am required by law to share your information with the proper authorities. Additionally, should you be involved in a court order or subpoena, I may not be able to avoid sharing your information with law enforcement officials.

If you experience feelings of discomfort at any point during or after the interview, you have the right to withdraw from the study. You can choose not to answer questions that make you uncomfortable. Although this study will enhance academic knowledge, I anticipate that you will also experience benefits from this research, including but not limited to: gaining a deeper understanding of your intersecting identities as a queer person and a person of color, and shared experiences among queer gender performers of color. Because I will protect your confidentiality, I do not anticipate the risks of this research will be great.

If you require additional information about this study or wish to issue a complaint associated with this research, please contact Susan Sadler, Chair of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-3454. You can also contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 303-871-4052. You can also

send a written letter to the University of Denver's Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 2199 S. University Boulevard, Denver, CO 80208-2121.

Please retain this page for your records. If you agree to participate in this study, sign the next page. Feel free to ask the researcher any remaining questions.

Appendix B: Interview Solicitation

Dear _____.

I'm writing to ask a favor of you. As I near the end of my Ph.D. program at the University of Denver, I am in the beginning stages of writing my dissertation. Because I am writing about the educational and social activist roles of drag and other types of queer performers of color in queer communities, I'd like to request an interview with you. I have always loved working with you and I admire you as a performer who does so much for our community. Hearing your story would be such a privilege. Your voice would make my research extremely powerful as I strive to promote more academic and mainstream representations for queer and allied people of color.

Although the immediate goal of this project is to help me fulfill requirements for my academic degree, I intend to transform my research into a book that will be accessible to the community-at-large.

Although we know each other, I am sending this formal request for your participation so that you can take time to consider whether you would like to participate. There is absolutely no pressure to participate in this study.

Should you agree to be part of the research study, I will ask you to participate in a roughly one-hour long, audio-recorded interview that consists of a series of open-ended questions. Your total participation time is estimated at one-to-two hours. I will use pseudonyms in my research, so you will not be identifiable. We can meet at the time and place of your choosing, and I will be responsible for all travel and other expenses (coffee, etc.).

If you would like to participate, please see the attached calendars that detail all of my available times from now through September. I am really looking forward to the possibility of working with you. I hope that you will consider my request. Have a fantastic day!

Sincerely,

Krishna Pattisapu
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Communication Studies
The University of Denver

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview Questions for Research Study *Celebration, Resistance, and Change: Queer Gender Performers of Color as Public Pedagogues*

Demographics

1. Explain your drag performances and drag persona. What do you do?

Prodding Questions:

1. Where do you perform?
2. How long have you been performing?
3. How and why did you start performing?
4. How old are you?
5. What is your drag name? How did you come up with it?
6. How would you explain your style as a performer?

Race and Intersectionality

2. Do you think that your social identities (race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity) inform your drag performances and/or your presence in the community?

Prodding Questions:

1. How does your drag persona relate to you?
2. What kinds of performances do you choose to do and why?
3. Have you faced any challenges in your drag performance community?
4. Do you perform with others? Who are they?

Activism

3. What kind of impact do you think your performances have on your audience and your community?

Prodding Questions:

1. Who is in your audience?
2. What do you want to make your audience feel?
3. What kinds of relationships have you established through your performances?
4. What do you want to teach your audience?

Reflexivity

4. What do you hope to accomplish through your drag performances?

Prodding Questions:

1. Do you see what you do as a form of activism?
2. What is your role in the drag community as a whole?
3. What is most rewarding for you about performing?
4. If you could change anything about the community, what would you change?
5. What advice would you give to other performers of color?

Appendix D: Notes

ⁱ Cisgender is a term that refers to individuals who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.

ⁱⁱ A variety of onstage and offstage gender expressions comprise the queer gender performance community. Some performers clearly present themselves “across” gender, as in the case of drag queens, whom are biologically male and perform as female onstage and drag kings, whom are biologically female and perform as male onstage (Richmond and Patisapu). Others perform gender onstage in ways that more closely resemble the genders they perform in everyday life, as with faux queens, who are biologically female and perform as female onstage, and faux kings, who are biologically male and perform as male onstage (Surkan). Queer burlesque performers are biologically female and embody femininity and sexuality queerly onstage, while queer boylesque performers are biologically male and embody masculinity and sexuality queerly onstage. These distinctions, although helpful for audiences who may be unfamiliar with the different types of queer gender performance I reference in this study, threaten to essentialize queer gender performance and those performers who wish to move freely between categories. As Surkan notes, the “new wave” of queer gender performance welcomes fluidity in both onstage and offstage personae, and invites performers to pursue various avenues to self-expression and artistic activism (182).

ⁱⁱⁱ In their daily lives, the performers I interviewed embody a range of gender identities including man, woman, and genderqueer. Some use the same pronouns (*he, she, they*) when they perform as they do in everyday life, while some adopt different pronouns and others move between them. For the purposes of this study, I have elected to refer to my interviewees with the pronouns they use during their performances. In doing this, I do not seek to deny the complexity of gender identities that each of the interviewees embodies in and out of performance venues; I make this choice purely to improve readability for audiences who may be confused if I move between pronouns within a single narrative.

^{iv} Here, I use trans* as an umbrella term to refer to anyone who does not identify within the gender binary as man or woman. Trans* is often depicted with an asterisk in order to connote that it does not attempt to constrain any body by labeling it as such (Killerman).

Appendix E: A Song for Many Movements by Audre Lorde

Nobody wants to die on the way
caught between ghosts of whiteness
and the real water
none of us wanted to leave
our bones
on the way to salvation

three planets to the left
a century of light years ago
our spices are separate and particular
but our skins sing in complimentary keys

at a quarter to eight mean time
we were telling the same stories
over and over.

Broken down gods survive
in the crevasses and mudpots
of every beleaguered city
where it is obvious
there are too many bodies
to cart to the ovens
or gallows
and our uses have become
more important than our silence
after the fall
too many empty cases
of blood to bury or burn
there will be no body left
to listen
And our labor has become
more important
than our silence.

Our labor has become
more important
than our silence.