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## **“Have Wigs- Will Travel”: An Exploration into the Culture and Evolution of Drag, Trans Identities, and Gender Nonconformity in the United States, 1952-2009**

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“Have Wigs- Will Travel”:

An Exploration into the Culture and Evolution of Drag, Trans Identities,  
and Gender Nonconformity in the United States, 1952-2009

Carmen Harris

Honors Thesis

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University of Vermont

Advisor: Prof. Paul Deslandes

## Introduction

Drag, individuals we might identify as trans, and gender non-conformity have evolved dramatically from the mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. The gender non-conforming community transitioned from a distinct, marginalized subculture to a popular culture phenomenon in the period between 1952 and 2009 in the United States. This thesis discusses the development of this community from a position of outright illegality and discrimination into a lively form of entertainment and self-expression during this time period. Additionally, this thesis attributes the transformative nature of gender non-conformity during the twentieth and twenty-first century to three distinct places in American culture; the media, popular culture, and queer resistance. Gender variant communities also played an essential role in the formation of a queer liberation movement and the increased public awareness, and subsequent acceptance, of gender non-conformity. In defying popular conceptions of gender in the twentieth century, gender non-conformity represented “a symbolic incursion into territory that [crossed] gender boundaries.”<sup>1</sup> Popular culture, public opinion, and queer resistance allowed gender non-conforming individuals to gain unprecedented visibility and acceptance from both queer and heterosexual audiences. Each of these factors allowed gender variance to be increasingly well-known outside of queer spaces, whether this be through film or radical activism.

This thesis brings together scholarship on drag, trans lives, and gender non-conformity as these identities were inextricably connected during the period from 1952 to 2009. Many queer individuals during this time simultaneously identified with several of these identities. It was also common for individuals to identify with one group, such as drag queens, at one point in their

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<sup>1</sup> Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Crossdressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), vii.

lives and then come to identify as trans later on, which highlighted a common thread between various gender non-conforming identities. Drag queens, the trans community, and gender non-conforming individuals interacted closely during this time period despite identifying differently. The above identities experienced internal divisions and conflict, but as the twentieth century progressed, various gender non-conforming individuals increasingly identified with one another as a distinct community despite the marginalization they experienced. My research differs from that of previous scholars because it focuses on the combined experiences of these communities, while also using the lenses of popular culture, public opinion, and resistance to articulate the transformation of gender non-conformity between the mid-twentieth to early twenty-first centuries. In studying the history of drag, trans lives, and other forms of gender non-conformity, this thesis explores range of identities and human experiences during this time period.

It is important to note that my research focuses on the experiences of a fairly limited group within gender non-conforming spaces during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Individuals assigned female at birth and other gender non-conforming individuals played an invaluable role in the formation of queer liberation and a broader trans movement, but were not the central focus of my research. The sources I examined in my research focused on the experiences of those assigned male at birth within the broader identities of drag, trans communities, and gender non-conformity. I focus on these specific individuals because of the sources that were most available and applicable to my course of study. Individuals assigned male at birth were often more present in popular culture and the media during this time, but those assigned female at birth, as well as other gender non-conforming individuals, had a significant impact on queer history.

Additionally, this thesis builds off of an incredibly long history of gender non-conformity. Various forms of gender variance during this time operated under a variety of labels, from

crossdressing to transsexualism to transvestitism to drag. Drag and other expressions of gender variance have been seen across a myriad of cultures, including Ancient Greece and Elizabethan England. As a result, “crossdressing has been ubiquitous” throughout history in its many forms.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, trans people have been present across history, but were not widely included in records and scholarship until the modern era. In the United States, most forms of crossdressing became illegal during the nineteenth century and gender presentation outside of the binary was criminalized. Anti-crossdressing laws appeared all over the United States and “starting in the 1850s, it became ‘illegal for people to appear in public in clothes not belonging to his or her sex.’”<sup>3</sup> Anyone engaging in cross-dressing, including drag queens, individuals we might identify as trans, and gender non-conforming individuals, experienced humiliation, violence, and arrest at the hands of the police. Anti-crossdressing laws during the twentieth century meant that “drag, unless performed on a stage by an allegedly straight entertainer, remained in the shadows through the first half of the twentieth century.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite this repression and marginalization, drag flourished as a queer subculture and the trans community continued to exist, largely in queer spaces. Gender non-conforming individuals continued with their lives and thus represented “a long tradition of resistance and challenge to the dominant order.”<sup>5</sup> While gender non-conformity inherently defied social norms, the mid to late twentieth century represented a new era of queer history. Twentieth century conceptions of gender, trans lives, and gender non-conformity built off of broader feminist movements and

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<sup>2</sup> Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Crossdressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017), 46.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Doonan, *Drag: The Complete Story*, (London: Laurence King Press, 2019), 208.

<sup>5</sup> Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor. *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 179.

scholarship during this time. Feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler engaged in newfound research and changed the course of trans history by redefining conceptions of gender and sex in their studies. Drag, trans lives, and gender non-conformity began to evolve and became increasingly visible to heterosexual, as well as queer, audiences via popular culture, the media, and political resistance. Queer and gender non-conforming subcultures began to “surface as the popular culture showed a new interest in publicizing the sexual fringe.”<sup>6</sup> Gender variance and gender non-conformity were being represented to a wide variety of audiences as a direct result of the influx of representations in film and television. Additionally, drag queens and trans activists became increasingly involved in political activism that made headlines, including the Stonewall Riot in 1969 and HIV/AIDS activism in the 1980s and 1990s. As the twentieth century progressed, many popular audiences began to react to gender non-conformity with increased understanding, empathy, and acceptance. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, gender non-conformity even came to be celebrated by individuals in queer communities and the heterosexual mainstream, while others reacted to gender variance with hate and disdain. Reactions to gender non-conformity were incredibly ambivalent during this time and ranged from wholehearted support to moral condemnation.

This thesis relies on both primary and secondary research in order to construct the above argument. I use a variety of primary sources, from newspaper articles, to magazines, to memoirs, to examples from film and television. Many of the primary sources I consulted revolve around the media and popular reactions to gender non-conformity. I include many examples of the representation of gender non-conformity as these examples were plentiful and greatly impacted

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<sup>6</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 194.

public opinion. Ciara Cremin, in her book *Man-Made Woman*, highlighted the importance of popular culture in stating, “unlike the high art we contemplate in galleries, popular culture, to recall the metaphor, is like the air we breathe: everywhere around us, invisible and in our lungs...but sometimes that air is rancid.”<sup>7</sup> Some of the primary sources I used include; articles from *DRAG* magazine in 1971, an interview with Marsha P. Johnson in 1989, Christine Jorgenson’s personal memoir, film and television reviews in popular newspapers, and episodes of television shows ranging from *All in the Family* in 1975 to *Pose* in 2019. This primary source research allowed me to study the transformation of representations of gender non-conformity in the media and the changing attitudes towards gender variance. Additionally, I also use a basis of secondary sources from a variety of historians that specialize in drag, the trans community, and gender non-conformity. In conducting research for my thesis, I first examined the above source material and searched for themes that were present throughout the time period. As I continued with this research, I was able to choose a distinct time period and also pin-point several moments of queer history that contributed to the transformative nature of gender non-conformity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In conducting my research, I used a wide range of scholarship and primary sources to encapsulate the diversity of gender non-conforming experiences between the 1950s and 2000s.

One of the most comprehensive works in the field is titled *Crossdressing, Sex, and Gender* by Vern and Bonnie Bullough.<sup>8</sup> Bullough and Bullough trace the history of drag, delving into the continuities and the evolution of gender performance during a several thousand-year time period.

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<sup>7</sup> Ciara Cremin, *Man-Made Woman: The Dialectics of Cross-Dressing*. (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 125.

<sup>8</sup> Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Crossdressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

Bullough and Bullough's comprehensive history of gender performance allowed me to understand the complex nature of gender nonconformity itself and also provided me with a glimpse into the tumultuous relationship between gender and societal expectations. Another significant source on the topic of gender non-conformity is *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* by Susan Stryker.<sup>9</sup> This book delves into the history of the transgender movement for the past two centuries, but mostly focuses on the twentieth century. Stryker touches on the formation of a transgender community in the United States, the medicalization of these identities throughout history, and the somewhat recent development of transgender activism. Her work has a distinctly political edge, as she delves into early forms of transgender mobilization that is often overlooked by scholars and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* by Joanne Meyerowitz is another significant piece of secondary literature that was integral for my research.<sup>10</sup> This source also traces the history of trans identities during a similar time period, but includes research on drag queens and other member of the gender non-conforming community. Meyerowitz engages with a variety of sources and discusses the complicated nature of "transsexualism" in the United States, which proved to be essential for my research.

A journal article titled "'The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in': Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972," by Betty Luther Hillman carries a similar political edge.<sup>11</sup> This article

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Betty Luther Hillman, "'The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in': Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (January 2011).

focuses on the Gay Liberation Movement within San Francisco during a specific eight-year time period. The radical political approach in this article allows Hillman to express the complicated nature of queer liberation and also to delve into the specific context of the time. Each of these scholars focus on a specific identity or time period in the study of gender non-conformity in order to create a cohesive historical argument and thus played a role in characterizing the history of gender non-conformity in the United States. The above scholars provided me with essential background on the history of gender non-conformity in the United States through a variety of perspectives.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will define a few terms on gender non-conformity that are used throughout my research. It is important to note that terminology to describe queer spaces and gender non-conformity have changed dramatically from the mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. Additionally, terms that were used in the twentieth century can be seen as archaic or harmful today. It is important to note that certain terms that are commonly used today, such as “transgender” and “non-binary,” simply did not exist for much of the twentieth century. As a result, gender non-conforming people at the time simply embraced the language that was available to them at the time. For the purposes of this historical study, I will sometimes use terms that are no longer used to describe gender non-conformity in the present day. When using these terms, I will either quote a source, write “in the language of the time,” or refer to an individual as “self-identified” if they referred to themselves with a term that is no longer used today.

Drag was often defined simply as a man wearing women’s clothing, typically with some form of performance or entertainment involved. Drag typically refers to the art form itself, in which an individual embodies gender ambiguity for the purpose of entertainment. Performances

most often took place in gay bars or clubs in the twentieth century, but were increasingly available to a wider range of audiences. Terms like drag queen/king, female impersonator, crossdresser, and more were used interchangeably to describe a person that defies gender norms by going from one binary to another for the purposes of a performance or a form of entertainment.

The term “transsexual” was the most common term used until the late twentieth century to describe a person who identified as a different gender than the one they were assigned at birth. During the twentieth century, a self-identified transsexual individual often went through some degree of a physical transition from one gender to another, via hormones or gender confirmation surgery. In the twenty-first century, the term transgender replaced the term transsexual.

Transgender individuals often identified with a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth, but a transgender individual does not have to “transition” in order to identify as transgender. The term trans exists as an umbrella term for the above terms and encapsulates a variety of gender identities and presentations. The term gender non-conformity will be used constantly in this thesis, as it includes drag, trans identities, and other forms of gender variance all under one general term. This term is recent, but is a helpful way to articulate the complexities and fluidity of gender and gender identities within queer spaces. Gender variance will also be used to describe gender that goes beyond the constraints of the binary, similar to the term gender non-conformity. The term queer will be used as well. This term refers to the entire LGBTQIA+ community and often includes gender non-conforming individuals. It is important to note that there is no perfect terminology to encapsulate the complexities, the fluidity, and the ever-changing nature of gender non-conformity in the twentieth to twenty first century, but the

combination of the above terms will be used in an attempt to articulate this ambiguity and the diversity of queer experiences.

In order to express the complex transformation of gender non-conformity from the mid-twentieth to early twenty-first century, this thesis is divided into four chapters. Each chapter encapsulates a thematic historical “moment” in the history of drag, trans lives, and gender non-conformity. Additionally, each thematic period both begins and ends with an important event that characterizes the period and that brought immense change to the queer landscape. I chose to study the period between 1952 and 2009 because it shows an incredible amount of change in the representation and public opinion of drag, trans lives, and gender non-conformity. Additionally, this period gave me the unique ability to trace this evolution of gender non-conformity through popular media, public opinion, and political resistance.

The first chapter delves into the period between December 1, 1952 and June 28, 1969. December 1, 1952 represents the first new coverage of Christine Jorgenson via an article titled, “Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty” by the *New York Daily News*. The publication of this article and the subsequent media coverage greatly impacted the ways in which people would talk about self-identified transsexual people for years to the come. As one of the first trans celebrities, conversations around Jorgenson soon centered on her physical body and her ability to pass as a woman. The subsequent conversations on trans people began to focus on the medicalization of trans bodies and medical practitioners increasingly described trans people as mentally ill. Additionally, this time period also saw several examples of gender non-conformity in the media, including the critically acclaimed film *The Queen*. The sense of queer community during the 1950s and much of the 1960s was incredibly powerful and allowed many to live their lives as

honestly as possible. At the same time, queer communities and those engaging in cross-dressing were increasingly targeted by the police in both nightclubs and on the street.

Chapter 2 focuses on the period between June 28, 1969 to July 3, 1981. The famous Stonewall Riot incited radical public organizing on June 28, 1969, which eventually led to the emergence of gay liberation. The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) formed shortly after the Stonewall Riot and advocated for the gay community against police brutality and marginalization. This organization represented a pivotal moment in queer history, but the movement itself failed to advocate for drag queens, the trans community, and gender non-conformity as a whole. In many ways, anyone expressing gender variance was alienated from the movement and the queer community in itself, despite the essential role of trans women of color in political activism. This led to divisions in the queer community and the creation of movements for the gender non-conforming community, including Street Transvestites Action Front (STAR) and the Queens' Liberation Front (QLF). These movements advocated for drag queens and the trans community, while attempting to combat important issues such as homelessness and unemployment. Additionally, there was increasing gender non-conformity in the media in the 1970s, as gender bending and gender variance became more mainstream. Several figures in the 1970s, such as Sylvester and David Bowie, embraced gender ambiguity and attracted a wide range of audiences, while many drag artists also adopted a similar approach.

The third chapter begins with the emergence of HIV/AIDS in the United States and covers the period from 1981 to 1990. The chapter begins with the article published by the *New York Times* on July 3, 1981 titled "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals," which marked the first cases of HIV/AIDS in the United States. The emergence of HIV/AIDS and the subsequent government inaction led to grief, anger, and political activism by queer communities who were

adversely impacted by the disease. Drag queens and trans individuals played an important role in queer organizing around the epidemic as well. The 1980s saw the increased politicization of drag as a result, because drag was increasingly used as social commentary. Feminist critiques of drag and trans women, as well as gender theory, also emerged during this time period. The feminist critiques were often blatantly transphobic, as some women hoped to exclude trans women from feminist circles. Gender theory also began to emerge during this period from scholars such as Judith Butler. Gender theorists often identified the performative and constructed nature of gender, and thus subtly supported trans identities and gender non-conformity. Another important element of this time period was the continuance of trans sensationalism. This sensationalism towards trans individuals now often occurred on television and highlighted both feelings of fascination and disdain towards trans people from the heterosexual mainstream.

The final chapter begins with *Paris is Burning* in 1990 (which was officially released in the U.S. in 1991) and ends with the airing of the first episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* on February 2, 2009. The release of *Paris is Burning* provided unprecedented attention and recognition of ballroom culture and the lives of trans people of color. During this same time, the media began to embrace more gender non-conforming celebrities, but also began to commodify trans women in the same manner it commodified cis female celebrities. Drag, trans lives, and gender non-conformity were increasingly included in film and television, with many gender variant characters being played by cis male actors dressed in drag. As more trans celebrities emerged during this time, it became evident that many of these individuals faced both acceptance and resistance from the heterosexual mainstream. Additionally, gender non-conforming people in the United States faced disproportionate levels of violence and abuse throughout their daily lives. The emergence of drag celebrities such as Lipsynka and RuPaul indicated the changing attitudes

towards gender non-conformity at the time, but those who did not experience fame faced mixed reactions from the public. The chapter ends with an exploration of the unprecedented television representation of drag and trans lives via *RuPaul's Drag Race*, combined with scholarly efforts of the time. Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor's ethnographic study *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* and Bill Richardson's *Guy to Goddess* stood out as spectacular studies of drag at the turn of the century. *RuPaul's Drag Race* was hosted by a gay, black drag queen and allowed drag queens from all over the country to tell their stories to a large audience via the reality television format. This television example, as well as other examples of visibility for gender non-conforming communities in the media and in scholarship, highlighted the "deep but hard-to-define shifts...in how our culture understands gender and is coming to accept transgender phenomena as part of everyday reality."<sup>12</sup> This period represented a time of increased visibility, but the gender non-conforming community still faced marginalization and violence.

Representations of drag, the trans community, and gender non-conformity have rapidly changed between 1952 to 2009, from distinct subcultures to worldwide popular culture phenomena in the course of sixty years. Aside from playing a significant part in queer liberation, drag and other forms of gender nonconformity are revolutionary and political because they outwardly reject the hegemonic gender norms of society. Drag goes beyond the binary and reveals gender to be both artificial and performative. For this very reason, drag and other forms of gender variance have received significant criticism and backlash. My thesis delves into the complexities of drag, trans identities, and gender non-conformity in this fifty year period and brings scholarship forward to 2009 in order to articulate this complexity. Media, public

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017), 195-196.

perceptions, and activism all allowed gender non-conformity to attain an unprecedented level of visibility by the early twenty-first century. Ultimately, the transformative nature of representations of gender non-conformity in the United States from 1952 to 2009 was largely due to the influence of popular culture, public opinion, and political resistance. As a result of this representation, queer youth were increasingly able to identify with the images they saw in film and television, and thus feel a sense of camaraderie and community. As gender non-conformity became increasingly acknowledged during this time, popular attitudes began to adapt and allow gender non-conforming individuals to advocate for themselves and the future of the queer community.

## *Chapter 1: December 1, 1952- June 28, 1969*

In the first half of the twentieth century, drag and other forms of gender nonconformity existed as distinct subcultures, largely removed from the heterosexual mainstream. Drag queens, as well as self-identified transsexuals, flocked to urban areas, often looking for queer communities which were likely to be more accepting than the conservative heterosexual norm. On December 1, 1952, there was an explosion of trans representation in the media, which would continue throughout the twentieth century. The period of 1952 to 1969 was characterized by the public fascination with transsexuality and gender non-conformity by the heterosexual mainstream. Additionally, there was a conflict between the focus on conformity to the binary for trans individuals at the time and the desire of many queer individuals to account for diverse gender expression. Queer communities formed during this time period as well, but also faced extreme political marginalization and police brutality despite the popular representations of gender non-conformity. Additionally, the early Homophile movement was characterized by the desire for equal rights on behalf of homosexual men, but this movement was divisive and exclusionary at best. The period of time between 1952 and 1969 was a time characterized by increased media fascination towards gender non-conformity, political marginalization of queer communities, and increasing resentment towards police brutality.

### *“Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty”*

On December 1, 1952, the *New York Daily News* published front-page story with the dramatic headline, “Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty: Operations Transform Bronx Youth.”<sup>13</sup> This famous article described the transition of a military veteran, Christine Jorgenson, after seeking

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<sup>13</sup> Ben White, “Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty: Operations Transform Bronx Youth,” *New York Daily News*, December 1, 1952.

gender confirmation surgery, or a “sex-change,” from doctors in Europe. In the article published in the *New York Daily News* in late 1952, journalist Ben White stated that, “a Bronx youth, who served two years in the Army during the war and was honorably discharged, has been transformed by the wizardry of medical science into a happy, beautiful young woman.”<sup>14</sup> Prior to this article, there had been news coverage of various self-identified transsexuals in the early twentieth century, including famous individuals like Lili Elbe, but the intensity of media coverage on Jorgenson’s transition was unprecedented and led to increased media coverage of other trans people throughout the rest of the twentieth century.

Jorgenson’s return to the United States after her transition was met with a media frenzy and intense public fascination concerning the details of her transition. Within two weeks of the first article published about Jorgenson’s transition, reporters had sent out fifty thousand words on her through news wire services.<sup>15</sup> The press coverage on Jorgenson’s transition made “‘sex change’ a household word in the 1950s.”<sup>16</sup> Almost every individual in the United States was aware of Christine’s transition and thus learned about gender non-conformity as a result. Historian Joanne Meyerowitz describes this media frenzy in saying, “in 1952 the press discovered Christine Jorgenson and inaugurated a new era of comprehensive, even obsessive, coverage.”<sup>17</sup> Jorgenson’s newfound fame led to increased public fascination with the details of medical transitions for trans individuals and defined the way in which trans people would be treated by the media for decades to come. Jorgenson unwittingly created a sexual revolution in

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<sup>14</sup> White, “Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty: Operations Transform Bronx Youth,” December 1, 1952.

<sup>15</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, “Sex Change and the Popular Press: Historical Notes on Transsexuality in the United States, 1930-1955,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1998: 159.

<sup>16</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, 49.

<sup>17</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 49.

1952, which would come to define what transsexuality looked like for a generation of people in the United States.

As a result of the intensive press coverage of Jorgenson, she became an instant celebrity and was sought after by the press for several years. The press coverage around Jorgenson often remarked on her beauty, leading scholars to partially attribute her newfound celebrity to her beauty and tactful ability to handle the media.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the news coverage also addressed the science behind Jorgenson's transition. Initially, "journalists key concern in the beginning is whether she looked and sounded like a woman."<sup>19</sup> She was able to "pass" as a conventionally beautiful woman, which can explain why Jorgenson was embraced by the media to such an extent. Additionally, Jorgenson was often asked about the medical details of her transition. The media and the mainstream public were obsessed with these details and even interviewed the doctors who helped Jorgenson with her transition. She was largely accepted by mainstream society and was able to start a career in show business as a result. Jorgenson was eventually moved to write an autobiography entitled, *Christine Jorgenson: A Personal Autobiography* in 1967. This memoir was followed by a film version of her life, *The Christine Jorgenson Story*, in 1970, in which Jorgenson was played by a cis male actor.<sup>20</sup> The fervent media coverage on Jorgenson not only solidified her newfound fame, but also impacted how trans stories would be represented in the media for the subsequent decades.

Though Jorgenson capitalized on her celebrity and had a long career, she often explained that she felt ambivalent about the extensive media coverage she inspired. Jorgenson was not

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<sup>18</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 50.

<sup>19</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Lee G. Brewster, Kay Gybbons, and Laura McAllister, eds. "John Hansen as Christine: Screen Newcomer Meets Dual Challenge." *Drag Queens: A Magazine about the Transvestite*, Vol 1:1, 1971.

looking for fame when she transitioned and was often surprised that people were interested in her life. When Jorgenson returned back to the United States and was greeted by a frenzy of reporters, she said, “ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but I think this is really too much.”<sup>21</sup> Jorgenson received mixed reactions to her public presence, ranging from cries of admiration to jokes about her gender to hostility and death threats. She addressed her ambivalent reception by the public in saying:

“I’d been courted, derided, admired, made the subject of off-color jokes, and clothed in the light of half-truths and controversy. Apparently, there would be no attitudes in between complete hostility and total approval. I was going to be like eggplant—one either liked it very much, or not at all.”<sup>22</sup>

In the years following “Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty,” Jorgenson received thousands of letters from people all over the world, with many seeking advice regarding their gender dysphoria. Jorgenson explained that, “even though I was ill equipped to advise anybody, I tried to answer some of these poignant pleas.”<sup>23</sup> While many letters were filled with compassion, Jorgenson also received criticism and hostility. At one point, Jorgenson received a letter from a homosexual man that contained a razor blade and told her to “finish the job that doctor started.”<sup>24</sup> This example highlighted the fact that Jorgenson was met with cruelty and transphobia, and also indicated that homosexual men could be transphobic and violent towards trans women.

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<sup>21</sup> Christine Jorgenson, “Christine Jorgenson: A Personal Autobiography,” in *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs*, ed. Jonathan Ames. (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 58.

<sup>22</sup> Jorgenson, “Christine Jorgenson: A Personal Autobiography,” in *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs*, ed. Jonathan Ames, 75.

<sup>23</sup> Jorgenson, “Christine Jorgenson: A Personal Autobiography,” in *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs*, ed. Jonathan Ames, 63.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Stryker, in *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*. Directed by Sam Feder. Field of Dreams Production, 2020.

Jorgenson's unprecedented celebrity was met with varying ambivalent reactions, as some people embraced her, while others abhorred her. She addressed her groundbreaking celebrity in stating, "I truly did think the attention I was receiving was out of proportion to my importance to the world in general, and that the Christine Jorgenson story had already been magnified to a point of hysteria."<sup>25</sup> Despite Jorgenson's ambivalence towards her fame, she became an important figure in the popular press, as well as in trans and gender non-conforming communities. Historian Susan Stryker referred to Jorgenson as the "first transgender person to receive significant media attention."<sup>26</sup> Though she was met with transphobia in some cases, Jorgenson's role as one of the first trans celebrities allowed for newfound transgender representation in the media, which in turn allowed many closeted gender non-conforming individuals to imagine a different future for themselves.

The cultural and scholarly background of the 1950s also played an essential role of how Jorgenson was perceived by the public when she came out. Jorgenson's transition and the subsequent questioning of gender by a wide range of audiences built off of a larger history of feminism and gender theory produced just years before Jorgenson's public transition in 1952. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir published her groundbreaking work *The Second Sex*, which became incredibly important in terms of feminist theory and public perceptions of gender in the 1950s. In this work, de Beauvoir made an famous statement declaring that, "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman."<sup>27</sup> Additionally, de Beauvoir explained that, "no biological, psychic or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as

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<sup>25</sup> Jorgenson, "Christine Jorgenson: A Personal Autobiography," in *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs*, ed. Jonathan Ames, 58.

<sup>26</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017), 66.

<sup>27</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (New York, Random House Inc., 1949), 330.

a whole that elaborates this intermediary product that is male and the eunuch that is called feminine.”<sup>28</sup> Throughout *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir asserted that womanhood was contingent on cultural definitions gender, rather than an individual’s biological sex. This statement itself had a profound impact on the larger feminist movement of the time and on popular understandings of gender. Additionally, de Beauvoir’s statement validated trans identities in highlighting the importance of the cultural production of womanhood in determining the validity of one’s gender identity rather than physical attributes. Jorgenson’s gender identity was validated in this text as according to de Beauvoir “became” a woman by ascribing to cultural definitions of womanhood. Jorgenson’s ability to come out and live her life as an out trans woman in the 1950s was largely impacted by the presence of feminist and gender theory produced by scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir. de Beauvoir’s ideas, as well as the broader feminist movement of the 1940s and 1950s, impacted public perceptions of gender and allowed Jorgenson to take up cultural space as a trans celebrity.

Jorgenson was not the first “transsexual” during the twentieth century, but her transition was the first to be publicized on a global scale. Meyerowitz explained that the media attention on Jorgenson allowed many to “learn through the mass media of new possibilities for medical intervention.”<sup>29</sup> Part of Jorgenson’s power lied in the fact that she was the first transsexual person that many people could see and read about. As a result of the constant news coverage, Jorgenson unintentionally “enabled a public reinscription of what counted as masculine and what counted as feminine.”<sup>30</sup> When telling her story, she stated that she had always been a woman and

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<sup>28</sup> de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (New York, Random House Inc., 1949), 330.

<sup>29</sup> Meyerowitz, “Sex Change and the Popular Press: Historical Notes on Transsexuality in the United States, 1930-1955,” 163.

<sup>30</sup> Meyerowitz, “Sex Change and the Popular Press: Historical Notes on Transsexuality in the United States, 1930-1955,” 173.

wanted her body to match her true gender. While this explanation of trans identities was true for many people, this singular depiction of transness emphasized conformity to the binary and came to define what transsexuality meant for many, while in reality there were a myriad of different trans experiences in the 1950s and 1960s. Susan Stryker addressed Jorgenson’s celebrity in stating that though Jorgenson was not the first person to have gender confirmation surgery or to take hormones, but she “was the image of transgender for a generation of people.”<sup>31</sup> Jorgenson’s celebrity allowed for increased representation of trans identities and gender non-conformity in general, but the sole media focus on Jorgenson’s story instead of other trans people provided a singular story that was then believed to encapsulate all other gender non-conforming individuals.

Additionally, Jorgenson had a large impact on queer communities and trans lives. Before the news coverage on Jorgenson, many people, even those who would later identify as trans, were unaware of transsexuality, thus the publicity surrounding Jorgenson “allowed nonintersexed readers to envision sex change as a real possibility for themselves.”<sup>32</sup> Learning about Jorgenson allowed many gender dysphoric individuals to glimpse into a possible future for themselves. R.E.I. Masters described learning about Jorgenson from the media in saying:

“The Jorgenson case appeared in all the newspapers and changed my life...Suddenly, like a revelation, I knew WHO and WHAT I was—and something COULD BE DONE ABOUT IT! Christ only knows how much time I spent pouring over every last item about Christine I could lay my hands on. Not Christ but Christ-ine, I thought, was my Savior! Now everything about me made perfect sense, I knew what had to be done, and I had

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<sup>31</sup> Susan Stryker, in *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*. Directed by Sam Feder. Field of Dreams Production, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Meyerowitz, “Sex Change and the Popular Press: Historical Notes on Transsexuality in the United States, 1930-1955,” 160.

some real HOPE of being able to live a normal life *as a woman!* Talk about your shock of recognition! Man, this was IT!”<sup>33</sup>

Jorgenson undeniably impacted many lives, both trans and cisgender, through her public transition. She served as a singular representation of trans people in the 1950s and allowed the public to understand what transsexuality was. Additionally, Jorgenson “set the ways in which the conversation around trans identity was being had.”<sup>34</sup> While many looked up to Jorgenson, some trans people did not agree with the way she represented transness.

In the decades following Jorgenson’s celebrity, some queer individuals snubbed the conservative standard for trans people set by Jorgenson as she was mild-mannered and did not defy many cultural norms. In the 1960s, “a younger generation rejected the model offered by Christine Jorgensen, in which transsexuals proved their respectability by keeping their sex lives private and their appearance conventional.”<sup>35</sup> Jorgenson was very much a different generation than those in the 1960s, who were increasingly going against the gender binary and societal norms. In her novel *How Sex Changed*, Meyerowitz quoted a trans woman named Jane Fry who said that Jorgenson “had to be super middle-class conservative... she had to convince the majority of people that she was all right... She could have never walked the road that I am walking, which is the freak life.”<sup>36</sup> Jorgenson represented a momentous point in the history of trans and gender non-conforming people, but despite her fame, her story provided only a singular look into trans lives during the 1950s and 1960s. As a result, the definition of transness created

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<sup>33</sup> R.E.I. Masters, *Sex Driven People: An Autobiographical Approach of the Problem of the Sex-Dominated Personality* (Los Angeles, Sherbourne, 1966), 230.

<sup>34</sup> Laverne Cox, in *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*. Directed by Sam Feder. Field of Dreams Production, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 196.

<sup>36</sup> Jane Fry, in Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 196-197.

in part by the media coverage on Jorgenson excluded trans people who existed outside of this stark binary and who were unable to “pass.”

Jorgenson provided the trans and gender non-conforming community with unprecedented representation and would remain a pivotal figure in transgender history. Her fame, “brought an unprecedented level of public awareness to transgender issues, and it helped define the terms that would structure identity politics in the decades ahead.”<sup>37</sup> December 1, 1952 was a pivotal moment in the history of gender non-conformity, as Jorgenson was the first trans person to receive extensive media attention about her transition. This widespread press coverage allowed Jorgenson to tell her story, which helped people all over the world understand what it meant to be a trans woman in the 1950s. Jorgenson was met with mixed reactions, ranging from gratitude to transphobia. Jorgenson started a sexual revolution by coming out in 1952 and thus defined what it meant to be a transsexual woman for an entire generation.

### **Medicalization of Trans Bodies and The Politics of “Passing”**

Jorgenson defined what it means to be trans for a generation of Americans and the surrounding press coverage also came to define the ways in which cis people discussed and thought about trans people for decades. Much of the news surrounding Jorgenson’s transition revolved around discussions of her physical body, her femininity, and the medical procedures she underwent. Transgender activist Laverne Cox explained that, “this focus on surgery became the ways in which trans people have really been talked about for 60 years.”<sup>38</sup> A medical transition could be an important part of a trans person’s life, but the 1960s began to show that transness was not one size fits all. For many transsexuals, “the demand for surgery represented

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<sup>37</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, 68.

<sup>38</sup> Cox, in *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*. Directed by Sam Feder. Field of Dreams Production, 2020.

the quest to express outwardly what they described as their inner, true, or authentic selves.”<sup>39</sup>

The focus on surgery became problematic as the popular press, and thus a heterosexual audience, only viewed trans people as valid if they closely followed the medical model and physically transitioned from one gender binary to another. Meyerowitz explained that during the 1960s, “the more militant transsexuals rejected the medical model that cast transsexualism as a disease or a disorder.”<sup>40</sup> Still, medical transition, in the form of medical operations or hormones, and the tendency to pathologize transness were both a definite part of transsexual lives for much of the latter half of the twentieth century.

In 1966, Dr. Harry Benjamin published his book *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, which later became known as a standard of medical care for the trans community. Benjamin was an American endocrinologist and sexologist. He published this book as a medical textbook and included his knowledge after working with hundreds of trans patients. *The Transsexual Phenomenon* served as an example of the medicalization of transsexual individuals, in the language of the time, in the 1950s and 1960s. Additionally, Benjamin became very well known in his field and was even credited with the wide use of the term “transsexual” within medicine. His book defined transsexualism, the lives of both male and female trans individuals, the details of gender confirmation surgeries, and even autobiographies of self-identified transsexual people.

Benjamin had a wide knowledge of trans experiences during the 1950s and 1960s, as he had hundreds of patients during this time. *The Transsexual Phenomenon* focused on the lives of self-identified transsexual individuals and what transitioning was like for many of them.

Benjamin defined the term “transsexual” within the context of the 1960s and stated, “the

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<sup>39</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 228.

<sup>40</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 228.

transsexual (TS) male or female is deeply unhappy as a member of the sex (or gender) to which he or she was assigned by the anatomical structure of the body, particularly the genitals.”<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, he also differentiated transsexual individuals from transvestites in stating, “true transsexuals feel that they *belong* to the other sex, they want to *be* and *function* as members of the opposite sex, not only to appear as such.”<sup>42</sup> Benjamin defines the term “transsexual” with a medicalized approach. He also referred to transsexualism as a problem that could be fixed with psychotherapy or medical intervention. This approach is evident throughout Benjamin’s texts and also influenced the dialogue around transness during the 1950s and 1960s.

Additionally, Benjamin included excerpts and autobiographies from many of his transsexual patients during his decades practicing medicine. He delved into a wide variety of trans experiences and also remarked on varying degrees of success in various medical interventions. Benjamin explained that in order to undergo gender confirmation procedures, or “sex change operations” in the language of the time, patients first needed to undergo psychological evaluations to ensure that they were in the right state of mind. When interviewing one patient, Benjamin asked the person about whether they wanted to undergo surgery. The forty-one-year-old patient replied enthusiastically and explained, “I will feel free for the first time in my life.”<sup>43</sup> Benjamin also included the autobiographies of several patients in his book. In one example, Ava described her upbringing as she went in and out of foster care and also highlighted the gender dysphoria she experienced from a young age. Ava explained how she felt when she tried on a dress for the first time on a child, which she had been dreaming of for years. She wrote:

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<sup>41</sup> Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, (New York: Julian Press, 1966), 13.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, (New York: Julian Press, 1966), 13.

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, (New York: Julian Press, 1966), 114.

“A frightened, depressed, moody, unhappy child suddenly was transformed into a glowing, radiant personality: a personality that had been forced to lie dormant in a deformed, crippled body. A ‘*feminine* personality,’ that had been trying to grasp at a chance to come into being. I just stood there in that dusty attic, a supposed boy-child wearing an old, tattered dress, but feeling in my heart and soul that I was as much a girl as any other girl in the world.”<sup>44</sup>

In this description, Ava explained that she was aware of her gender identity from a young age. When she was able to express herself as she wanted, she experienced joy and happiness. Benjamin described a similar experience of one of his trans patients.

Before transitioning, John was depressed and struggled in life. After transitioning and changing her name to Joanna, Joanna thrived and was able to get married and live a fulfilling life. Benjamin described Joanna’s transition in stating:

“to compare the Johnny I knew with Joanna of today is like comparing a dreary day of rain and mist with a beautiful spring morning or a funeral march with a victory song. The old life in the original (male) sex is all but forgotten and is actually unpleasant to be recalled.”<sup>45</sup>

The above stories existed as beacons of hope for many transsexual individuals across the country, as they showed that trans individuals could live happy and fulfilling lives if they conformed to the medical model in the 1960s. Benjamin’s *The Transsexual Phenomenon* contributed to the increased medicalization and pathologization of trans bodies. Benjamin also provided an outlet to tell many diverse trans stories during the time. In this book, Benjamin

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<sup>44</sup> Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, (New York: Julian Press, 1966), 194.

<sup>45</sup> Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, (New York: Julian Press, 1966), 126.

relied on the concept of “passing” and other cisnormative terms as well, as he believed that a self-identified transsexual person needed to transition from one physical gender/ sex to another. He also relied on harmful narratives that would eventually be stereotypes for trans individuals in the late twentieth and early twentieth century. One of these narratives entailed trans people being born in the wrong body, which many trans activists find harmful today.

Benjamin’s *The Transsexual Phenomenon* was one of the first medical books published on transsexualism and represented popular medical conceptions of transness during the mid-twentieth century. *The Transsexual Phenomenon* serves as an example of the tangible impacts of the medicalization of trans bodies and also set the stage for future conversations around transness. Additionally, Benjamin and his colleagues subsequently organized the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA), which “became the main organization for medical, legal, psychotherapeutic professionals who worked with transgender populations.”<sup>46</sup> Benjamin helped establish the precedent for how trans individuals would be treated and discussed in the medical community and the world at large.

Trans activists and theorists during the 1950s and 1960s began to rebuff the pathologization of trans and gender non-conforming identities under the psychological term, “Gender Identity Disorder” or GID, coined by the American Psychiatric Association. In many cases, trans people were diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder and needed to go through intensive counselling before being allowed to take hormones or receive surgeries in the United States, which was described by Benjamin. A trans person’s body was completely at the liberty of medical professionals, which thus denied trans people of self-determination and the ability to self-identify. Additionally, the tendency to pathologize trans people also meant that trans people

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<sup>46</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, 139.

were viewed as mentally ill for decades to come. In the 1950s and 1960s, trans and gender non-conforming activists began to reject the medical model and the pathologization of all gender non-conforming people under Gender Identity Disorder. The focus on trans people bodies via the popular press objectified trans people and invaded their privacy, while also enforcing a singular definition of transness as the physical transition from one sex and gender to another.

Additionally, the pathologization of trans people as mentally ill, while also using paternalistic ideals in order to decide which trans people could actually get surgery and hormones, held back trans people in countless ways.

Consistent with the medical model, the 1950s and 1960s placed a huge emphasis for trans people on their ability to “pass” as a male or female as a part of their gender presentation. For these reason, classically beautiful trans women like Christine Jorgenson were praised for their ability to pass, while others were made fun of or victimized for their inability to pass. An individual’s medical transition played a significant role in this respect. Additionally, a person’s ability to pass was extremely significant in the 1950s and 1960s because those who did not pass were subject to arrest or violence. Gender non-conforming individuals, especially trans people and drag queens, “all [shared] certain risks on the street, especially if any of them are perceived as prostitutes.”<sup>47</sup> Gender non-conforming people faced certain risks in public, from both police and transphobic individuals, if they failed to outwardly conform to the gender binary. While passing as a specific gender was a gender affirming practice for many, it was also undeniably a matter of life and death for gender non-conforming people. Ciara Cremin addressed the long-standing “politics of passing” in stating:

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<sup>47</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 94.

“There’s a politics of passing or rather there’s a politics of not passing. To be able to pass as a woman without stirring any ‘suspicion’ that your sex is biologically defined as male is protection. It also plays to rigid categories of what it means to be and look like a woman, or a man.”<sup>48</sup>

The ability to pass became a highly valued characteristic in the trans and gender non-conforming community, but this inevitably also further limited diverse expressions of transness. The “politics of passing” that Cremin discussed remained a standard of the trans community for decades and also were a significant part of the public conversation around trans people during this time. Both the medicalization of trans bodies and the emphasis on passing allowed little room for non-binary expressions of gender in the 1950s and 1960s. The physical aspects of gender presentation monopolized much of the discussion around gender non-conforming identities in the 1950s and 1960s, both by the mainstream media and within queer communities.

### ***Gender Nonconformity in the Media and in Queer Spaces***

The culture of drag performance, which encapsulated a myriad of gender identities, was thriving as a distinct subculture in the 1950s and 1960s. Drag during this time period mostly consisted of homosexual men participating in the art of female impersonation in a performance setting, but people of differing identities also participated in drag. People were drawn to the art of drag for a variety of reasons, from seeing drag as a viable career to using drag as a way to play with gender. An unnamed queen explained the reasons she was interested in drag in stating:

“A lot of the queens I know come from small towns where there weren’t many options.

After a lifetime of being repressed, it’s easy to understand the appeal of drag. You’ve got

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<sup>48</sup> Ciara Cremin, *Man-Made Woman: The Dialectics of Cross-Dressing*, (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 9.

a costume, you've got a stage, you've got an audience. You've got options. You can be anything you want. You can be a star."<sup>49</sup>

Drag performance in the 1950s and 1960s appealed to a wide audience, but drag queens still remained politically marginalized for much of the twentieth century. The 1950s and 1960s saw increased public acknowledgement and representation of gender non-conformity, but drag queens and trans people still faced police brutality and violence at an exceptionally high rate.

Though specific examples of drag and gender non-conformity were acknowledged by the media in the 1950s and 1960s, drag remained a distinct queer subculture. Drag queens specifically engaged in performances while dressed as the opposite sex for a variety of audiences. Many drag performances during this time period included lip syncing to various popular songs and the performer often embodied femininity, or even a female celebrity. In the premier issue of *Female Mimics*, a magazine showcasing female impersonators across the globe, the editors delved into the diversity of drag and female impersonation in 1963. In one feature, the magazine interviewed self-proclaimed female impersonator T.C. Jones about his experiences with female impersonation. The magazine described his comedic style of drag performances in stating, "his hilarious imitations of actresses—Bette Davis, Katherine Hepburn, Tallulah [Bankhead]—have won him international acclaim not only from the critics but even from the women whose roles he satirizes."<sup>50</sup> T.C Jones specialized in performing songs and comedy at the Jewel Box Revue and even gained celebrity recognition for his roles. Additionally, the magazine explicitly stated that T.C Jones simply performed as a female impersonator, but like other successful "female mimics" according to the magazine "off-stage, in real life, they are normal,

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<sup>49</sup> Unnamed Drag Queen, quoted in Bill Richardson, *Guy to Goddess: An Intimate Look at Drag Queens*, (Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>50</sup> J. King, L. Crane, ed. "Clown in a Gown: T.C. Jones." *Female Mimics*, Vol 1:1, 1963, 26.

well-adjusted males.”<sup>51</sup> The depiction of drag performance and female impersonation in *Female Mimics* emphasized the diversity of drag and the increasing recognition of this art form in the 1950s and 1960s.

Drag and female impersonation came hand in hand during this time period, as the terms were often used interchangeably. Both drag and female impersonation grew to be heavily associated with the gay community, but not every person dressing in drag identified as homosexual.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, drag at this time also became associated with transsexuality. It was not uncommon for those who once identified as drag queens to later identify as transsexual women or for a person to work in drag as their career and identify as a trans women in their daily life. People even went as far to say that “drag queens were all ‘transsexuals in denial.’”<sup>53</sup> Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, who wrote a study on drag entitled *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, stated that:

“The other development in the 1950s that changed the nature and perception of drag shows was the increasing viability and public awareness of transsexuality. The possibility of men actually changing into women cast drag in a new and more deviant light, and some drag queens did in fact take the step to changing sex.”<sup>54</sup>

Figures like Jorgenson allowed for increased visibility of transsexuality and more trans people realized that a physical transition was possible. During this time period, once a former drag

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<sup>51</sup> J. King, L. Crane, ed. “Clown in a Gown: T.C. Jones.” *Female Mimics*, Vol 1:1, 1963, 28.

<sup>52</sup> Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Crossdressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 237.

<sup>53</sup> Betty Luther Hillman, “‘The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in’: Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972,” (*Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 1, January 2011): 159.

<sup>54</sup> Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 184.

queen began to identify as transsexual, she often dismissed the label of drag queen. There was a definite “stigma attached to drag queens” during the 1950s and 1960s, and some transsexual women saw transitioning as a way to escape this stigma and the nightlife industry.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to the increased media attention Jorgenson received during the 1950s and 1960s, drag was also highlighted in unprecedented ways. During the 1960s, “the underground circles of crossdressers, female impersonators, drag queens, and butch-femme lesbians occasionally came up to surface as the popular culture showed a new interest in publicizing the sexual fringe.”<sup>56</sup> A documentary film called *The Queen* was released in 1968 and gave viewers a behind-the-scenes view of a national drag queen contest in New York City. The film followed the drag queen Sabrina and showed behind the scenes conversations about draft boards, homosexuality, transsexuality, and more. One of the most significant aspects of this film was in the fact that it humanized drag queens and brought the art of drag and female impersonation to completely new audiences.

The film itself had many memorable and impactful moments. In one example, Sabrina discussed a conversation she had with another queen. Sabrina repeated this conversation in stating, “I go up to this queen and I say, ‘What’s your name?’ The Queen says ‘Monique’ and I say, ‘That’s marvelous darling, but what was your name before?’ And the queen will look at you straight in the eye and say ‘There was no before.’”<sup>57</sup> This statement stood out in the film because it emphasized the importance of drag for many people and showed the drag could be tied to a person’s gender identity or presentation. The above interaction also indicated that drag could provide an individual with hope, a livelihood, and an affirming identity. Later in the film, one of

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<sup>55</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 194.

<sup>56</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 194.

<sup>57</sup> *The Queen*. Directed by Frank Simon. MDH/ Si Litvinoff Film Production/ Vineyard, 1968.

the drag queens stated, “all drag queens want is love and they try to get that love by being sexy and beautiful.”<sup>58</sup> This statement in itself highlighted the humanity of drag queens and female impersonators on an unprecedented platform. It also indicated a level of understanding and commonality between queens and the audience watching the film.

Ultimately, this 1968 film was a landmark piece in terms of the representation of gay men and drag queens in the media. While gay and gender non-conforming characters have been in television and film since their origins, *The Queen* gave the queer communities the ability to share their own stories in a candid manner. Ronald Forsythe, a writer for the *New York Times*, wrote an article called “Why Can’t ‘We’ Live Happily Ever After, Too?” and discussed the lack of adequate representation of gay men in film and television. He described 1968 as a momentous year for queer representation as films such as *The Queen* “dealt compassionately with the homosexual as a human being.”<sup>59</sup> Previous representations of gay and gender non-binary people were filled with crude stereotypes and characters were almost always played by cisgender heterosexual men. The 1968 film was extraordinary for giving drag queens agency and the opportunity to tell their own stories. *The Queen* was viewed by a wide array of audiences and was renowned for its ability to humanize the men involved in the drag competition. In a review for the film, *New York Times* writer Renata Adler praised the film and stated, “one grows fond of them all.”<sup>60</sup>

Though *The Queen* was well received by many, there were also conservative criticisms of the film’s release and the increased visibility of gender non-conformity in the media. In a letter

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<sup>58</sup> *The Queen*. Directed by Frank Simon. MDH/ Si Litvinoff Film Production/ Vineyard, 1968.

<sup>59</sup> Ronald Forsythe, "Why can't 'we' Live Happily Ever After, Too?" *New York Times*, Feb 23, 1969.

<sup>60</sup> Renata Adler, “Screen: ‘Queen’ of Drag Is Crowned: Documentary Depicts a Camp Beauty,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1968.

to the editor of the *New York Times* in 1968, one reader wrote to the newspaper to express his indignation and anger towards Renata's positive review of the film. In response to her statement "one grows fond of them all," David Morris responded by stating that gender non-conforming people are mentally ill and should not be praised.<sup>61</sup> Morris wrote:

"The transvestite is an emotionally disturbed individual by any psychiatric criteria. To display his illness publicly under the guise of entertainment is like presenting the bearded lady or the two-headed man in a side-show. These people are sick and to be pitied. It is wrong to use such a theme for levity as it is to laugh when a blind man stumbles."<sup>62</sup>

In this dramatic statement, Morris shared the opinions of many conservative individuals in 1968. He was quick to denounce and invalidate the drag queens and trans women in the film, while even comparing them to mentally ill people or circus performers. These opinions were not uncommon and many people viewed gender non-conforming identities with fascination or disgust instead of tolerance or acceptance in the 1950s and 1960s. Morris's review highlighted the conservative pushback against gender non-conformity that emerged as this community gained small levels of visibility in popular culture and the media. Despite negative pushback from conservative audiences, *The Queen* stood out as a singular media representation of gender non-conformity in the 1960s that allowed queer people to tell their own stories. The media explosion of representations in terms of gender non-conformity allowed for cis people to learn about this community, however, the queer community faced intense political marginalization at this time. Drag allowed people to express gender non-conformity in a unique way, and also gave queer people a much-needed sense of community.

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<sup>61</sup> Adler, "Screen: 'Queen' of Drag Is Crowned: Documentary Depicts a Camp Beauty," *New York Times*, June 19, 1968.

<sup>62</sup> David Morris, "Colorful Or Sick?" *New York Times*, July 28, 1968.

One of the most appealing parts of drag for many people was the sense of camaraderie and community with other queens. Many queer people moved to urban areas and searched for community, and thus were introduced to the world of drag and female impersonation. In many cases during the 1950s and 1960s, queer people were not accepted by their own families, so the groups of queer people around them became their chosen family. Meyerowitz explained that there was “a sense of unspoken unity in the community” and a certain power in numbers.<sup>63</sup> Community building was incredibly important for queer people during the latter half of the twentieth century, as the search for community “became an organized movement, albeit a small one, for social change.”<sup>64</sup> The formation of queer communities contributed to later movements for drag queens and transsexuals in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Many drag queens and trans people considered themselves a part of the early gay movement, which was first called the Homophile movement. The Homophile movement began in the early 1950s and officially lasted until the early 1970s, when the movement combined with Gay Liberation. The movement aimed to combat homophobia and sexuality based discrimination. The leaders of this movement were largely white homosexual men who were college educated and had professional jobs. The movement appealed to white heterosexual audiences in order to prove that gay men were respectable and should not be discriminated against. Hillman explained that while the homophile movement was very impactful for homosexual men at the time, it was also very gender normative.<sup>65</sup> Those involved with the early Homophile movement were known to exclude lesbians, transsexuals, and drag queens from their

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<sup>63</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 190.

<sup>64</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 228.

<sup>65</sup> Hillman, “The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in’: Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972,” 154.

movement, largely in an attempt to better appeal to the heterosexual mainstream. Additionally, homosexual men were known to look down upon gender non-conforming people. Regine Elizabeth McQuade described entering a gay bar in the late 1960s in order to find a community, only to find that the gay men she met were “anti anything different.”<sup>66</sup> Though community was essential for queer people during the 1950s and 1960s, there were definite divisions between cisgender homosexual men and gender non-conforming individuals. Though each of these groups faced political marginalization, the Homophile movement largely failed to embrace lesbians, trans people, and drag queens despite these shared experiences.

### **1952-1969 Conclusion**

Queer people in the 1950s and 1960s, and through much of the twentieth century, faced violence and marginalization from the police. Trans people and drag queens experienced brutality and discrimination at an especially high rate. During the nineteenth and twentieth century, gender non-conforming people risked arrest if they went against the gender binary in public. Specific laws emerged, including laws in which, people had to wear several gender-appropriate pieces of clothing. These laws mostly targeted queer people, as “few heterosexuals [were] aware” of them.<sup>67</sup> Drag queens and trans people were often arrested as a result of these laws. Judith Butler addressed the policing of gender in saying that the fact that the culture “readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated.”<sup>68</sup> In some ways,

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<sup>66</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 191.

<sup>67</sup> Aleshia Brevard, “The Woman I Was Not Born to Be,” in *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs*, ed. Jonathan Ames. (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 234.

<sup>68</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 528.

the enforcement of anti-crossdressing laws acknowledged that gender is both constructed and performed. If a person stepped outside the gender binary, they faced harsh punishments and rejection from the mainstream.

Trans people and drag queens had many interactions with the police during this period, commonly in the form of raids of queer spaces. In police raids, queer people could be arrested for a variety of reasons, including crossdressing, prostitution, and more. Senelick explained that in police raids in the 1960s, “an early warning system was to turn up the lights: dancers would run to chairs... eyelashes and wigs would be ripped off and thrown aside; those who could not so easily cast off their finery fled.”<sup>69</sup> Gender non-conforming people risked arrest every day and faced violence at every turn. In response to this marginalization, a group called Vanguard formed in San Francisco in 1966. Vanguard was created by street youth in the Tenderloin district and also included gender non-conforming people. In 1966, the police raided the Compton Cafeteria in the Tenderloin, a setting which “attracted the impoverished youth of the district and also gay hustlers, hair fairies, street queens, and MTF prostitutes, some of whom were saving their money for surgery.”<sup>70</sup> The police often raided this restaurant to arrest crossdressers, but in August 1966 the trans customers fought back. This example of resistance against police brutality by the queer and gender non-conforming community foreshadowed a similar rebellion in 1969 at the Stonewall in.

By the late 1960s, the queer and gender non-conforming community began to stand up against homophobia and police brutality and a Gay Liberation movement began to form. The media frenzy about Jorgenson in 1952 started a long period of public fascination with gender

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<sup>69</sup> Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 384.

<sup>70</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 229.

non-conformity through the media. The ways in which the media discussed Jorgenson impacted the way trans people would be talked about for decades and Jorgenson became the image of transsexuality for an entire generation. Queer communities faced political marginalization during the 1950s and 1960s through the press, legislation, and the police. The frustration with continued police brutality combined with queer community building set the stage for the Stonewall Riot in 1969 and the subsequent emergence of Gay Liberation.

## Chapter 2: June 28, 1969- July 3, 1981

June 28, 1969 marked the emergence of the Gay Liberation movement with a riot in Greenwich Village, New York City. Outraged at the police brutality they faced on a daily basis, queer activists established the Gay Liberation Front as a result of this riot. The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) participated in powerful activism, but alienated many gender non-conforming people from its ranks. As a result, new organizations that advocated for gender non-conforming people, such as Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (STAR) and the Queens' Liberation Front (QLF), began to emerge and allow for greater community for drag queens and trans people. These movements politicized gender non-conformity in itself and challenged notions of the gender binary at the time. The twentieth century "explicitly placed drag queens at the heart of gay liberation" because these queens "epitomized the rebellion that gay liberation hoped to achieve in challenging gender roles and notions of masculinity."<sup>71</sup> In addition to the new age of militant activism in the 1970s, this era also saw the emergence of glam rock and gender bending in popular culture, with figures like The Cockettes, Wayne County, and David Bowie. Despite the increased visibility of gender non-conformity, drag queens and trans people faced disproportionate levels of violence and discrimination. The period from 1969 to 1981 is characterized by protests against police brutality, the politicization of drag, increased visibility of gender non-conformity, and the emergence of Gay Liberation. This period ultimately serves as a decisive decade of strife, growth, and joy for the queer community and gender non-conforming individuals.

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<sup>71</sup> Betty Luther Hillman, "'The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in': Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (January 2011), 172.

### *The Stonewall Riot and the Emergence of Gay Liberation*

The events of June 28, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn in New York City became a significant part of queer history, but the police brutality and blatant transphobia in these events was not uncommon for most queer people in 1969. Even though anti-crossdressing laws were being abolished in some cities in the United States, queer people faced violence from the police throughout their daily lives. The police targeted all queer people, but often focused specifically on “street queens.” Historian Susan Stryker explained that, “the police could be especially vicious to ‘street queens,’ whom they considered bottom-of-the-barrel sex workers and who were the least able to complain about mistreatment.”<sup>72</sup> Street queens and other gender non-conforming people were subject to violence and police brutality whenever they left their homes, but were deeply marginalized and largely unable to speak up against this violence. The police, specifically in urban areas, were known for raiding gay bars and other queer spaces for much of the twentieth century. These raids were often violent and occurred constantly. Queer people were known for fighting back at events such as these, but the Stonewall Riot in 1969 stood out as the beginning of the Gay Liberation movement. It led to a massive queer movement all over the country as gay men and gender non-conforming people fought against the discrimination they faced. Drag queens and other gender non-conforming people were often left out of this movement as conservative gay men tried to appeal to the heterosexual mainstream, but they played a central role in queer organizing in the twentieth century.

On June 28, 1969, the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich, New York City was raided by the police. This bar was frequently filled with drag queens and gay men and was often the target of police

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<sup>72</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, 89.

raids. Marsha P. Johnson, drag queen and trans activist present at Stonewall, described the patrons of the Stonewall Inn and the constant police presence prior to the riots. She stated:

“Well at first it was just a gay men’s bar. And they didn’t allow no women in. And then they started allowing women in. And then they let the drag queens in. I was one of the first drag queens to go to that place. Cuz’ when we first heard about this... and then they had these drag queens working there. They didn’t never arrested anybody at the Stonewall. All they did was line us up and tell us to get out.”<sup>73</sup>

On June 28, 1969, the police raided the Stonewall Inn once again and forced all the patrons out of the bar as usual, described by Johnson above. This raid seemed like any other, until the queens began gathering in front of the Stonewall Inn instead of leaving and an outraged crowd began to form. As the police pushed the spectators around and tried to arrest them, violence began to break out as those at the Stonewall Inn began to defend themselves, while shouting slogans like “Gay Power.” Two members of the crowd, Lucian Truscott and Howard Smith, explained that on this night, “suddenly the paddywagon arrived and the mood of the crowd changed...three more blatant queens—in full drag—were loaded inside, along with the bartender and doorman, to a chorus of catcalls and boos from the crowd.”<sup>74</sup> Truscott and Smith described the feeling of the crowd in stating, it sounded “like a powerful rage bent on vendetta.”<sup>75</sup>

The riot in itself was the product of queer people of color, as “African American and Puerto Rican members of the crowd- many of them street queens, feminine gay men, transgender women, or gender-nonconforming youth—grew increasingly angry as they watched their

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<sup>73</sup> Marsha P. Johnson and Randy Wicker, “Interview with Randy Wicker and Marsha Johnson,” Interview by Eric Marcus, *Making Gay History*, January 24, 1989.

<sup>74</sup> Donn Teal, *The Gay Militants*, (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1971), 2.

<sup>75</sup> Teal, *The Gay Militants*, 3.

‘sisters’ being arrested.”<sup>76</sup> Two trans women of color, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, were said to have thrown the first bricks at Stonewall, thus beginning the riot that birthed Gay Liberation. Johnson described her presence at Stonewall on June 28, 1969 in stating, “‘cause when I got downtown, the place was already on fire and it was a raid already...the riots had already started, and they said the police went in there and set the place on fire.”<sup>77</sup> She explained that as the crowd began to gather, the patrons of the Stonewall Inn began to shout at police officers and would shout “no more police brutality.”<sup>78</sup> Johnson also highlighted the widespread violence at the Stonewall Inn. When referring to those injured during the riots, Johnson explained, “they weren’t hurt at the Stonewall...they were hurt on the streets outside of the Stonewall ‘cause people were throwing bottles and the police were out there with those clubs and things and their helmets on, the riot helmets.”<sup>79</sup> Johnson articulated the brutality and violence the patrons of Stonewall faced at the hands of the police. Despite this immense violence and risk, Johnson and others decided that enough was enough and that they needed to fight back against the police.

Johnson, as well as her close friend Rivera, both played essential roles in the Stonewall Riot and the subsequent radical organizing. Despite their pivotal roles in this riot, Johnson and Rivera were not recognized for their participation until decades later. The violence and discrimination that queer people of color felt at the hands of the police erupted at the Stonewall Riot. Many other riots had occurred throughout the 1950s and 1960s, but the Stonewall Riot was

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<sup>76</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, 89.

<sup>77</sup> Johnson and Wicker, “Interview with Randy Wicker and Marsha Johnson,” Interview by Eric Marcus, *Making Gay History*, January 24, 1989.

<sup>78</sup> Johnson and Wicker, “Interview with Randy Wicker and Marsha Johnson,” Interview by Eric Marcus, *Making Gay History*, January 24, 1989.

<sup>79</sup> Johnson and Wicker, “Interview with Randy Wicker and Marsha Johnson,” Interview by Eric Marcus, *Making Gay History*, January 24, 1989.

commemorated and memorialized as the origin of Gay Liberation. The fact that drag queens of color started this riot was lost on the early Gay Liberation movement, but it is very telling as this community faced discrimination at a disproportionate rate than other queer people and faced discrimination from queer people as well.

Once the first brick was thrown at Stonewall, the queer people present at the Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969 fought back against the police brutality they had faced throughout their lives. The crowd gathered and fought back against the police who had targeted their community for decades. After the riot ended, many people at the Stonewall Inn that night were arrested, while others were able to flee. Lee Brewster, a drag queen and an editor of DRAG Magazine, stated:

“For the first time in history the homosexual stood up and said, ‘Hands off!’ It was the effeminate or drag queen who stood up first and the loudest. It was their place! The so-called ‘straight’ looking, manly homosexual stood back and watched the police hammer the effeminate boys... finally, they joined in. Gay Pride was founded.”<sup>80</sup>

Street queens led this riot in 1969 and allowed for the emergence of the Gay Liberation movement, which ironically ignored their essential role in this riot and the subsequent organizing. In the days after the riot, news circulated widely within queer spaces in New York City, with flyers and graffiti everywhere the next day, saying things like “they invaded our rights,” “support gay power,” “Drag Power.”<sup>81</sup> Queer people all over the country could relate to the injustices at Stonewall and New York city residents were quick to commemorate this event.

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<sup>80</sup> Lee Brewster, Kay Gybbons, and Laura McAllister, eds. “Drag Queens Demonstrate,” *DRAG: A Magazine about the Transvestite*, Vol 1:1, 1971.

<sup>81</sup> Teal, *The Gay Militants*, 5.

The Stonewall Riot was extensively covered and drag queens all over the country heard of the action that took place. The *New York Times* summarized the events of June 28 and the subsequent protests in stating:

“The crowd had gathered in the evening across the street from the Stonewall Inn at 53 Christopher Street, where the police staged a raid early Saturday. The police were denounced by last night’s crowd for allegedly harassing homosexuals. Graffiti on the boarded up windows of the inn included ‘Support gay power’ and ‘legalize gay bars.’”<sup>82</sup>

The news of the Stonewall Riot, as well as subsequent protests and activism, reached both queer and heterosexual audiences in New York City and across the United States. Most importantly, the riot itself inspired gay men to establish the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), which is largely described as the organization that started the Gay Liberation movement in the United States. The commemoration of this movement was extremely significant, but “something still only vaguely comprehended had begun [on that] Friday night.”<sup>83</sup>

Though the Stonewall Riot was not the only example of queer people standing up against the police in the 1950s and 1960s, this movement was seen as the beginning of Gay Liberation because it provided the spark that led to the creation of the Gay Liberation Front and subsequent radical activism. The Gay Liberation movement itself was marked with internal divisions and strife, but played a large role in the early consciousness raising when it came to queer communities. Though drag queens and gender non-conforming people were part of this movement and played a role in the subsequent commemoration via activism and gay pride parades, they were largely marginalized from this movement despite their pivotal role. A drag

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<sup>82</sup> "Police Again Rout 'Village' Youths: Outbreak by 400 Follows a Near-riot Over Raid." *New York Times*, June 30, 1969.

<sup>83</sup> Teal, *The Gay Militants*, 5.

queen named Adrien in Bill Richardson's *Guy to Goddess* explained that, "a lot of fags look down on drag queens... they should remember that it was mostly drag queens who fought at Stonewall... if it wasn't for them, where would any of us be?"<sup>84</sup>

The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was formed in New York City in 1969, as a direct result of the injustices highlighted by the Stonewall Riot. Discussions about the discrimination gay men faced led to the formation of this organization. The early Homophile movement set the stage for Gay Liberation in numerous ways, but the goals of the GLF differed. The Gay Liberation Front saw its "mission as revolutionary and set its sights on a complete transformation of society," while the Homophile movement was known for being assimilationist and exclusionary.<sup>85</sup> Both movements advocated for the equality of homosexual men and women, however, the GLF used militant activism in order to achieve these goals. One of the first actions of the GLF in New York was to organize a march to keep the momentum and emotion that were triggered by Stonewall. The members of the GLF also organized numerous radical protests as well.

The GLF itself was impacted by the broader feminist movement of the time and other forms of radical activism during the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this time, feminist organizing was widespread and advocated for the total equality of women, as well as sexual liberation. Feminism was incredibly influential for various activist groups during this time and the GLF itself was impacted by the theories, ideologies, and practices of feminist groups. In her article titled "The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in': Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972," Betty Luther Hillman explained that the GLF borrowed "from radical feminist analysis of the

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<sup>84</sup> Bill Richardson, *Guy to Goddess: An Intimate Look at Drag Queens*. (Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1994), 19.

<sup>85</sup> Geoffrey Bateman, "Gay Liberation Front," *GLBTQ Encyclopedia* (2004), 1.

social construction of gender roles as the cause of women's oppression.”<sup>86</sup> Members of the GLF fought back against stereotypes of gay men and thus used feminist ideas about gender roles as a part of their activism. Those involved with the Gay Liberation Front explained that the oppression that gay men experienced was due to their gender and sexuality, as evidenced by feminist theory of the time. Feminism had a dramatic impact on various forms of activism during this time as feminists used several tactics to articulate the gender oppression they experienced.

Additionally, Hillman stated:

“In order to combat society's disapproval of homosexuality, gays needed to challenge social constructions of masculinity, which were just as harmful to men as were constructions of femininity for women. By appropriating the feminist rhetoric of gender oppression, gay liberationists hoped to create alliances with feminists as well as to illustrate how gender oppression and sexual oppression were inextricably connected.”<sup>87</sup>

In challenging and redefining masculinity in their activism, the GLF was able to build off of the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s and also ally with feminist organizations through their descriptions of gender and sexual oppression within its activism. Feminist organizations during this time were very influential on queer movements via the GLF, but some feminists also allied with members of the GLF. Additionally, the GLF and feminist groups shared many common goals and protest tactics, as evidenced by feminism inspiring the GLF’s mission.

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<sup>86</sup> Betty Luther Hillman, “‘The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in’: Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (January 2011): 171.

<sup>87</sup> Hillman, “‘The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in’: Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (January 2011): 171.

Soon after the GLF emerged in New York, new branches of the Gay Liberation Front emerged across the United States and in other countries, such as the U.K. and Australia. Meyerowitz explained that these “radicalizing trends accompanied the emerging sexual liberation movements in other cities as well.”<sup>88</sup> The emergence of the Gay Liberation Front as a result of Stonewall in 1969 “ushered in a new gay militancy” and an era of queer activism.<sup>89</sup> The GLF, and the Stonewall Riot, left a legacy of queer activism that differed from the past assimilationist policies via the Homophile movement. Queer people would no longer quietly tolerate discrimination and abuse from the heterosexual mainstream. Michael Brown of the Gay Liberation Front stated, “we’re probably the most harassed, persecuted minority group in history, but we’ll never have the freedom and civil rights we deserve as human beings unless we stop hiding in closets and in the shelter of anonymity.”<sup>90</sup> The GLF was significant in encouraging queer people to come out of the closet and have pride in their queer identities despite the political marginalization they faced. The Gay Liberation Front was an incredibly powerful organization that allowed for increased queer organizing and consciousness raising. Despite these early successes in the movement, it also dealt with internal divisions and exclusionary tactics.

### **Divisions within the Gay Liberation Movement**

The Gay Liberation Front emerged as a much more inclusive movement than the past Homophile movement. At the same time, drag queens and trans people played a significant role in the Stonewall Riot and the subsequent organizing that led to the GLF in New York, but these groups still faced marginalization within the movement itself. Drag queens and trans people

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<sup>88</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 235.

<sup>89</sup> Bateman, “Gay Liberation Front,” *GLBTQ Encyclopedia* (2004), 1.

<sup>90</sup> Lee G. Brewster, Kay Gybbons, and Laura McAllister, eds. “Editorial,” *Drag Queens: A Magazine about the Transvestite*, (Vol 1:1, 1971), 4.

played an important role specifically in the “more confrontational wing of the movement.”<sup>91</sup> As one of the most politically marginalized groups in the United States for much of the twentieth century, drag queens and trans people of color were often the first to fight back and advocate for radical activism, but were not given a strong voice within the movement. Sylvia Rivera expressed indignation at a group of gay men booing her off the stage at a Gay Pride March in 1973:

“I will no longer put up with this shit. I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment. For gay liberation. And you all treat me this way?”<sup>92</sup>

Despite playing an essential part in Gay Liberation, Rivera was treated with transphobia and alienated from the movement that she helped create as a trans woman of color. Additionally, Rivera faced violence, homelessness, and more due to her commitment to gay liberation. Rivera, and her close friend Johnson, faced racism, transphobia, and homophobia in all aspects of their lives. Trans women, drag queens, and gender non-conforming individuals were alienated from the queer community and the heterosexual mainstream, despite their bravery and activism.

The inclusion of drag queens, trans people, and gender non-conforming people in Gay Liberation “became a source of contestation among gay activists.”<sup>93</sup> Even though the GLF was a radical movement in opposition to many of the ideals of the conservative Homophile movement, there was little acceptance and tolerance of gender non-conformity within the movement in the

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<sup>91</sup> Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 185.

<sup>92</sup> Sylvia Rivera at a Gay Pride March in 1973, quoted in *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*. Directed by Sam Feder. Field of Dreams Production, 2020.

<sup>93</sup> Betty Luther Hillman, “‘The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in’: Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (January 2011): 155.

early 1970s. One of the original members of the Gay Activist Alliance, a comparable organization to the GLF, described his initial intolerance of gender non-conformity within the broad gay liberation movement. Randy Wicker said:

“I was horrified. I mean, the last thing to me that, I thought at the time they we’re setting back the gay liberation movement 20 years. Because, I mean, all these TV shows and all this work that we had done to try to establish legitimacy of the gay movement, that we were nice middle-class people like everybody else and, you know, adjusted and all that. And suddenly there was all this, what I considered, riffraff.”<sup>94</sup>

Wicker described a feeling that many shared towards gender non-conforming individuals and the ultimate desire to remove their radical politics from the gay liberation movement. Additionally, many gay men looked down upon drag queens and trans women for embodying a femininity that defied the strict masculinity that many gay men ascribed to. This commitment to uphold a masculine ideal revealed the internalized homophobia of many gay men, as well as a general sense of aversion to any form of gender variance at the time. Individuals like Wicker saw the gender non-conforming community as a potential barrier to gay liberation and acceptance from the heterosexual mainstream, and thus wanted to exclude them from the movement. Gay men and gender non-conforming queer people had many common interests, but the Gay Liberation movement failed to embrace and include those most politically marginalized and at risk within queer communities. In an editorial for *The Transvestite Magazine* in 1976, Marie Helen Hargraves explained that “the heterosexual transvestite is often scoffed by both gays and

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<sup>94</sup> Johnson and Wicker, “Interview with Randy Wicker and Marsha Johnson,” Interview by Eric Marcus, *Making Gay History*, January 24, 1989.

straight society.”<sup>95</sup> Gender non-conforming people within the queer community faced marginalization from the heterosexual mainstream and from the queer community itself.

In 1979, a sociologist named Esther Newton published a book called *Mother Camp* that gave audiences an insight into the lives of drag queens and self-identified transsexuals. Her study connected closely with the problems that the Gay Liberation movement faced and acknowledged the ambivalent role of drag queens in society in the 1970s. In her book, she delved into the complexities of female impersonation and also addressed the unique stigma that they faced within the queer community. Newton’s research is incredibly significant in the study of drag in the 1970s and was one of the first studies conducted specifically into this subculture. As an outsider from the community herself, Newton gave readers a detailed look into this subculture and the issues that queens faced, from police brutality to prostitution to discrimination. In her book, Newton explained that “female impersonators are an integral part of the homosexual subculture, and yet collectively they are a separate group within it.”<sup>96</sup> Female impersonators, and other gender non-conforming individuals, faced marginalization in numerous ways as they deviated from both the heterosexual and homosexual mainstream.

While they were a part of the queer community and entertained in queer spaces, drag queens were not truly embraced by the Gay Liberation movement in the 1970s. In an interview with one of the drag queens in Newton’s study, the queen stated, “it isn’t a nice way of life, simply because of the fact that it isn’t an acceptable way of life.”<sup>97</sup> This candid statement explains that drag queens felt alienated from every possible direction, including from their

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<sup>95</sup> Marie Helen Hargraves, “Freaking Out City Hall,” *The Transvestite Magazine*, (No. 43, 1976), 27.

<sup>96</sup> Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 20.

<sup>97</sup> Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, 131.

homosexual peers. Newton explained the alienation drag queens faced in stating, “the drag queen symbolizes all that homosexuals say they fear the most in themselves, all that they feel guilty about; he symbolizes, in fact, *the stigma*.”<sup>98</sup> Drag queens and female impersonators embraced the femininity that queer men were taught to suppress throughout their lives. Many homosexual men feared being associated with the stigma that surrounded female impersonation, which led to exclusionary tactics with the Gay Liberation movement.

Newton addressed what the stigma against female impersonation and gender transgression indicated for the future of the GLF. Through her numerous interviews and observations from her two-year study of female impersonation, Newton concluded that, “the drag queen is definitely a marked man in the subculture.”<sup>99</sup> Within the queer community that many thought would act as a safe space, drag queens and trans women were marginalized. The stigma against drag queens impacted the Gay Liberation movement, as gender non-conforming individuals were alienated as the movement centered on the white, gay man, even though trans people of color faced the most intense discrimination and violence out of the community.

Gay Liberation formed as a radical movement for the queer community in 1969, but failed to advocate for the most marginalized groups in the subculture. Newton explains this marginalization in her landmark study in stating, “although one can discern the beginnings of a homosexual movement, the fragmenting differences between homosexuals still outweigh any potential solidarity.”<sup>100</sup> Newton’s study of female impersonation in the 1970s was incredibly meaningful and provided insight into the inner workings of this subculture. Newton’s nuanced study included many first-person experiences and also highlighted common problems queens

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<sup>98</sup> Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, 103.

<sup>99</sup> Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, 105.

<sup>100</sup> Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, 22.

faced, including alienation from the queer community. She showed that drag queens and trans women had an ambivalent role within Gay Liberation as the inciters of riots and founders of Gay Liberation, but also faced marginalization from the radical movement they helped create.

Shortly after the formation of the GLF, gay liberationists found themselves divided for numerous reasons despite their initial successes in community building and consciousness raising. The movement was “struggling to include drag queens in their fight against gender, class, and racial oppression but also seeking to appease New Left ideals of manhood, feminist critiques of sexism, and their own movement goals of shedding cultural stereotypes about male homosexuality.”<sup>101</sup> Despite the problems all queer people faced, the internal divisions within the Gay Liberation movement limited its scope and power. Leaders in the movement wanted to move away from the stigma that all gay men were innately feminine, but thus alienated drag queens and trans women from the movement. The internal divisions in the Gay Liberation Front, as well as the alienation of certain groups from their political activism, led to the creation of more specific groups to combat the problems queer people faced at the time. Meyerowitz explained that this “shift from umbrella coalitions under gay liberation to separate organizations reflected the process of self-sorting on the sexual margins.”<sup>102</sup> Groups created by gender non-conforming people began to form, with each group having a different goal and audience. This self-sorting allowed marginalized groups to advocate for themselves, but some activists argued that this division limited the effectiveness of queer activism in the 1970s.

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<sup>101</sup> Betty Luther Hillman, “‘The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in’: Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972,” 177.

<sup>102</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 235.

### *Doing it for Themselves: Movements for Gender Non-Conformity*

The divisions within the Gay Liberation movement pushed gender non-conforming individuals towards coalitions specific to their identities and political concerns. Drag was included in pride parades and certain parts of the Gay Liberation movement, but the inclusion of gender non-conformity was a constant source of contention, as some activists believed these groups should be included in Gay Liberation, while others disagreed. Some members of these groups argued that, “drag queens - individuals who lived their daily lives in gender-nonconformist dress and presentation, many of whom were poor and lacked the social and political resources to defend their own rights - were excluded from both the political advocacy and social scene of gay groups.”<sup>103</sup> As a result, trans women and drag queens began to form their own unique groups to advocate for issues that impacted the community. Additionally, it was incredibly meaningful for groups of trans women and drag queens to come together as a community in order to make relevant change.

In 1970, two heroes of the Stonewall Riot, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, founded an organization called Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (STAR). This movement was initially created to gain more recognition for trans people and to advocate for housing for homeless gay youth and street queens. Rivera and Johnson themselves, along with many other gender non-conforming people in New York City, often faced homelessness. Trans people specifically faced employment based discrimination during this time, which led to many gender non-conforming people being involved with sex work as one of the few opportunities for employment. Additionally, trans people and queer people faced housing discrimination, leaving

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<sup>103</sup> Betty Luther Hillman, “‘The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in’: Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972,” 179.

many queer youths homeless. Rivera and Johnson, along with other members of STAR, worked to provide queer youths with housing.

Rivera explained the inclusive approach of STAR in stating, “come see the people at STAR House...the people trying to do something for all of us, not [just] men and women that belong to a white, middle-class club.”<sup>104</sup> This radical political collective was groundbreaking for queer liberation, as it was created by and for gender non-conforming people of all races. Rivera’s statement indicated that STAR was one of the few organizations that accepted a wide variety of individuals and advocated for the acceptance of all. STAR was one of the first organizations for gender non-conforming individuals and its radical activism would be mimicked for years to come. This movement defied popular notions of gender and welcomed a wide range of individuals into its ranks. Rupp and Taylor in the *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* explained that STAR, “challenged gender conformity within the movement...but such gender revolutionaries fought an uphill battle with gay liberationists and radical feminists who dismissed drag as politically incorrect.”<sup>105</sup>

STAR faced many challenges, such as acceptance within the queer community. As STAR progressed as an organization, members began to seek trans recognition within the Gay Liberation movement and society as whole. In 1973 at the Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade, the queens present at the parade were asked to stay at the back of the march and off the stage. As a result, Rivera and Lee Brewster, a drag queen and activist, went on stage to protest this mistreatment and the intended erasure of gender non-conformity from a parade that was meant to celebrate the queer community. This moment indicated the internal divisions between

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<sup>104</sup> Sylvia Rivera at a Gay Pride March in 1973, quoted in Susan Stryker’s *Transgender History*.

<sup>105</sup> Rupp and Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, 186.

queer people in queer communities and the erasure and transphobia that gender non-conforming people faced by their supposed allies. Rivera pinpoints this moment in 1973 as the end of STAR in saying:

“We died in 1973, the fourth anniversary of Stonewall. That’s when we were told we were a threat and an embarrassment to women because lesbians felt offended by our attire, us wearing makeup. It came down to a brutal battle on the stage that year at Washington Square Park, between me and people I considered my comrades and friends.”<sup>106</sup>

Despite the successes of STAR, the Gay Liberation movement failed to recognize and advocate for gender non-conforming people, and in some cases tried to erase them from the queer community. STAR, as well as its founders, left an incredible legacy of advocacy and trans community-building during the 1970s. STAR eventually reformed in 2001. STAR made a large impact on queer youth in New York City and even collaborated with a number of other groups that advocated for gender non-conformity. Other groups that advocated for gender non-conforming people also emerged out of Stonewall.

Drag queens Lee Brewster and Bunny Eisenhower founded the Queens’ Liberation Front (QLF) in late 1969 as an organization for drag queens who felt estranged from the Gay Liberation Front. Members of the QLF often collaborated with STAR, as both groups were known for radical political organizing for gender non-conforming individuals. Members of the QLF participated in many marches, protests, and even lobbied in drag in New York City. The queens involved advocated for rights to congregate, to dress as they pleased, and were successful

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<sup>106</sup> Sylvia Rivera, “Queens in Exile, the Forgotten Ones,” In *GenderQueer: Voices Beyond the Sexual Binary*, eds. Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and Riki Wilchins, (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2002), 82.

in combatting certain laws against crossdressing. This organization was significant in itself as a safe space for drag queens and other gender non-conforming individuals. The founders, Brewster and Eisenhower, aimed to show gender non-conforming people that they were not alone and to foster a sense of connection and community. Despite the positive impacts the movement made, members faced alienation from the Gay Liberation movement. Stryker explained that “the QLF formed in part to resist the erasure of drag and trans visibility in the first Christopher Street Liberation Day march, which commemorated the Stonewall Riots.”<sup>107</sup> Despite their essential role in the Stonewall Riots and the formation of a Gay Liberation movement, drag queens and trans people faced marginalization from the very movement they helped create.

One of the most significant contributions of the QLF outside of their political organization was the publication of *Drag Queens: A Magazine About the Transvestite* (later titled *DRAG*), which helped to connect drag queens with each other and report on stories that impacted the gender non-conforming community. The magazine touched on the stigma that queens faced from the queer community in saying:

“I see the enemy of all drag queens... the genuine gay, as those maze-yentas, the up-tight professional, epigone-homosexual, and their loot-organizations who make a point in all the media to say that they are not swish, faggoty mad screaming, drag queens.”<sup>108</sup>

Gay and lesbian activists often looked down on drag queens and gender non-conformity as embarrassing and did not want these individuals to be included in the Gay Liberation movement. Though they faced marginalization from their supposed allies, the fact that members of the QLF were able to create a community and safe place for gender non-conforming individuals was

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<sup>107</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, 111.

<sup>108</sup> Lee G. Brewster, Kay Gybbons, and Laura McAllister, eds. “Letters to the Editor.” *Drag Queens: A Magazine about the Transvestite*, (Vol 1:1, 1971), 30.

incredibly meaningful in itself. Aside from their activism, the QLF also made a long-lasting contribution to the queer community through the publication of *DRAG* magazine.

*DRAG* magazine published its first issue in 1971 and claimed a readership of 3,500 by 1972.<sup>109</sup> Drag queens felt alienated from the gay community, and thus created a magazine to advocate for issues impacting gender non-conforming people. Lee Brewster, one of the founders of the QLF, was one of the editors of this magazine. Stryker explained that *DRAG* magazine “had the best coverage of transgender news and politics in the United States.”<sup>110</sup> Each issue of the magazine contained editorials, news issues, opinion pieces, photographs, and classified ads for gender non-conforming people to find one another. This magazine was pivotal in connecting queer people with each other and providing the trans community with news from all over the country. Brewster used the magazine as a message of hope to gender non-conforming people and provided glimpses into the lives of trans people all over the United States. In an editorial, Brewster wrote:

“Each day, as I’m propagandizing the plight of the drag queen, I run into the attitude that drag or as the heterosexual transvestites call it, dressing, will never be legalized, here in the United States. Even the transvestite and drag queen, himself feels that way. What they don’t realize is, that this was the exact attitude towards the legalization of homosexuality, 15 years ago.”<sup>111</sup>

Brewster’s editorial in 1971 provided gender non-conforming people with a hope of the decriminalization of crossdressing, but also highlighted the politicization and propagandizing of

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<sup>109</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 235.

<sup>110</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, 111.

<sup>111</sup> Lee G. Brewster, Kay Gybbons, and Laura McAllister, eds. “Editorial” *Drag Queens: A Magazine about the Transvestite*, (Vol 1:1, 1971), 4.

drag that organizations like the QLF were working towards. Drag in itself became a political emblem in the 1970s, as drag queens and trans people faced discrimination on numerous levels. The act of crossdressing subjected gender non-conforming people to violence and marginalization, but figures like Rivera and Brewster used gender non-conformity as a form of protest. Drag was no longer simply a form of entertainment, but a protest in itself. In an editorial, Brewster wrote, “WE WANT OUR RIGHTS GIVEN TO US AS CITIZENS OF THESE UNITED STATES AND REFUSE TO BE MADE CRIMINALS ANY LONGER!”<sup>112</sup> The above quotation highlights the political radicalism of the QLF and the fact that gender non-conforming people were fed up with the discrimination and injustices they faced every day. The magazine helped mobilize gender non-conforming people towards a common political goal. Additionally, it was essential in providing hope and connection for the community.

*DRAG* itself included a wide range of opinions, even those contrary to the self-proclaimed goals of the QLF. In an opinion piece titled “Viewpoint: Drag Queen Vs. Transvestite,” the writer stated:

“We feel that if the drag queen toned down this offensive personality, the homosexual, the straight transvestite, and the drag queen would be able to work together more effectively as they haven’t been able to do in the past.”<sup>113</sup>

This statement written by a self-identified transvestite defied many of the goals of the QLF, but emphasized the internalized stigma many people felt within the community. This writer aimed to separate drag queens and transvestites, but the two groups had much in common. Drag queens,

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<sup>112</sup> Lee G. Brewster, Kay Gybbons, and Laura McAllister, eds. “Editorial” *Drag Queens: A Magazine about the Transvestite*, (Vol 1:1, 1971), 4.

<sup>113</sup> Lee G. Brewster, Kay Gybbons, and Laura McAllister, eds. “Viewpoint: Drag Queen Vs. Transvestite” *Drag Queens: A Magazine about the Transvestite*, (Vol 1:1, 1971), 11.

transvestites, and transsexuals often collaborated in the 1970s, as each group was closely connected, with many individuals identifying with several of these labels at the same time. Though DRAG magazine was specifically made for drag queens, it also included transsexuals in many articles and columns. Meyerowitz explained that “DRAG published a number of columns on and by transsexuals who saw themselves as a part of the movement.”<sup>114</sup> Additionally, the editors of the magazine did not alienate trans readers due to the close relationship between drag queens and the trans community. Trans people made up many of the classified ads in each issue of the magazine and several articles highlighted the important relationship between trans people, drag queens, and other forms of gender non-conformity. In a news article about a political demonstration, the editors emphasized this feeling of unity in gender non-conformity. They wrote, “the most satisfying thing about the demonstration was that a drag queen and a heterosexual T.V., for the first time marched under the same banner...both proclaimed their desire to be treated as full-fledged American citizens.”<sup>115</sup> While gender non-conforming people faced marginalization and alienation from many involved with the Gay Liberation movement, organizations like the QLF and STAR made room for everyone and formed a distinct community. DRAG magazine helped to vocalize and disseminate important information for this community as well. The magazine highlighted a variety of opinions, which showed the complexities of the movement and allowed for greater trans visibility during the time.

Other organizations similar to STAR and the QLF formed all over the United States in the 1970s, such as Transvestite/Transsexual Action Foundation (TAO). The creation of organizations outside the GLF and the Gay Liberation movement allowed gender non-

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<sup>114</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 236.

<sup>115</sup> Lee G. Brewster, Kay Gybbons, and Laura McAllister, eds. “Drag Queens Demonstrate,” *Drag Queens: A Magazine about the Transvestite*, (Vol 1:1, 1971), 7.

conforming people to advocate for the issues most important to them. At the same time, this created greater divisions between queer people instead of creating one massive movement for political change. Meyerowitz explained that there was an attempt by activists to “unite transsexuals, drag queens, gay liberationists into a single more powerful movement.”<sup>116</sup> Some queer activists believed that creating a single movement could allow for a greater impact and could force the heterosexual mainstream to take notice. The divisions within the Gay Liberation movement also allowed gender non-conforming people to create a distinct community and advocate for the most pressing issues that impacted them. Despite the stigma that drag queens and trans people faced from their gay counterparts, “they also stood out as a beacon of light for some MTFs.”<sup>117</sup> The recognition of trans people and the formation of organizations for gender non-conformity gave many people hope during this time period, despite the alienation they faced from the Gay Liberation Movement. The increased visibility of trans and gender non-conforming people was evident through the creation of groups such as STAR and the QLF, but also extended into the heterosexual mainstream and pop culture.

### **Gender Non-conformity in the 1970's Media**

In the 1970s, gender non-conformity became popularized in the media and pop culture through several “glam rock” and disco artists. Some scholars attributed the radical change in pop culture from the 1960s and the 1970s to the impact of the counterculture. In the 1970s, gender non-conformity was highlighted in the media in several ways, both by heterosexual and homosexual figures. Stryker explained that the 1970s experienced “the sudden proliferation of gender styles that broke free from the more rigid codes still in place in the early 1960s.”<sup>118</sup> More

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<sup>116</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 235.

<sup>117</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 191.

<sup>118</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, 115.

than ever, rock stars began to don gender non-conforming clothing and advocate for deviation from the gender binary. “Glam rock” began to emerge in the late 1960s and 1970s and soon came to a mainstream audience.

The Cockettes, “a genderbending hippie theatrical group,” began to perform drag musicals in late 1969.<sup>119</sup> The Cockettes were well known for performing in drag, but appealed mostly to the cultural fringe instead of mainstream media. The performances of the Cockettes were thought to have inspired “glam rock” and other gender bending performers such as David Bowie. Sylvester was also a well-known gender-bending disco performer in the 1970s who advocated for gender non-conformity and queer love. Additionally, the New York Dolls and Wayne County were known for their gender transgressive performances. Wayne County experimented with many different gender presentations throughout his career. Laurence Senelick described Wayne County’s gender non-conformity in his performances in stating:

“In the days of glitter drag and the Theatre of the Ridiculous, he would go out in full makeup and painted nails, sometimes wearing a beard and women’s clothes, sometimes, Garbo-like, in a man’s suit and hat: the aim was to bewilder and disorient the observer. By the early 1970s, at 82 Club, he moved to total drag with an oversized blond wig, a blond fall, and gold lame bathing suit.”<sup>120</sup>

The gender bending styles of Wayne County and others on the cultural fringe inspired the “glam rock” movement, which was then transformed to appeal to a mainstream audience. Stryker explained that the styles of the above artists “inspired the better known gender bending styles of

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<sup>119</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 233.

<sup>120</sup> Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 394.

glam rocker David Bowie and the filmmaker John Waters's cult movie star Divine."<sup>121</sup> Bowie's outfits for performances were often gender bending, and he thus brought gender non-conformity to a mainstream audience. The band The Kinks also brought discussions of drag and transsexuality to the heterosexual public with their song "Lola" in 1970s. The song described a man falling in love with a drag queen named Lola and included gender binary defying lyrics like "girls will be boys and boys will be girls."<sup>122</sup> Gender non-conformity was presented to the heterosexual mainstream via pop culture in the 1970s, thus increasing the public awareness of gender non-conformity. At the same time, many people still knew little about this community despite being more aware of deviations from the traditional gender binary.

During the 1970s, gender non-conformity was presented in the media in numerous ways and many people noticed changing attitudes towards the queer community at this time. Gender non-conforming people were also impacted by the increasing media attention and visibility of this community. Since the fascination about Christine Jorgenson by the press in 1952, there had been countless media stories about trans people and their lives. This public fascination persisted into the 1970s, with more and more people learning about the trans experience. Journalist Betty Liddick explained that "there [was] an awesome curiosity about transsexuals."<sup>123</sup> Heterosexual audiences learned how to discuss trans lives with Jorgenson in 1952, which led to this immense fascination and the focus on the medicalization of trans people. In 1976, Marie Helen Hargraves described coming out as a trans woman in her job at a City Hall and stated:

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<sup>121</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, 115.

<sup>122</sup> The Kinks. "Lola." Recorded in 1970, RCA Records.

<sup>123</sup> Betty Liddick, "Transsexuals: Fitting Physique to Psyche," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Sep 30, 1976.

“I became an instant celebrity and liked it at first, but later felt like a freak in a show, and I quit the job not because of the pressures they put on me, but simply because I wanted to find an environment where everyone did not know about me. I wanted to be accepted as a woman first, not a transsexual.”<sup>124</sup>

Though the increased visibility of trans people and gender non-conformity in the media had many positive impacts, individuals like Hargrieves disliked the intense fascination and scrutiny they faced. Hargrieves simply wanted to blend in, but instead was given extra attention in her workplace that made her uncomfortable. She was evidently lucky to be an out trans woman in her career, but the public fascination with trans people taught the heterosexual mainstream that trans people are fundamentally different than cis people, even though Hargrieves wished to blend in.

In a letter to the *Chicago Tribune*, one reader explained that they just wanted to be seen as normal instead of deviant from the mainstream. the reader stated:

“There are many more transvestites than most people realize. We are not homosexuals, child molesters, or perverts. We are friends, neighbors, relatives, responsible members of the community. We aren’t interested in recruiting others to transvestism. We want only acceptance and understanding from those we love, and the freedom to indulge in our favorite pastime in the privacy of our homes without fear of embarrassment.”<sup>125</sup>

Much like Hargrieves dilemma, the above reader just wanted to be accepted by the mainstream and treated as any other person.

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<sup>124</sup> Marie Helen Hargrieves, “Freaking Out City Hall,” *The Transvestite Magazine*, (No. 43, 1976), 29.

<sup>125</sup> Abigail Van Buren, "Tempo Dialog: Dear Abby to Transvestite, the Good Life is Wearing." *Chicago Tribune*, May 31, 1979.

The visibility that gender non-conformity was given in the 1970s had many positive impacts, especially in inspiring queer youth. These representations showed young queer people that they were not alone and that they could come out and thrive. In a letter to the editor of *The Transvestite Magazine* in 1976, one reader stated, “for years I had to make do with odds and ends I would scrounge until I found a copy of ‘Drag’ I could hardly restrain myself; I wanted to rush right over to meet Miss Brewster.”<sup>126</sup> The reader explained how important drag magazine was for them to discover their identity and feel a sense of camaraderie with other gender non-conforming individuals. The increased media representations and resources for trans and gender non-conforming people in the 1970s made a large impact on queer youth. While there was increased media representation in the 1970s, movements for public acceptance of gender non-conformity hit several roadblocks.

Additionally, gender non-conformity was present in television in the 1970s. One example of this occurred in a 1975 episode of the hit sit-com *All in the Family*. This television series depicted the stories of the working-class Bunker family in the 1970s. In a 1975 episode of the show called “Archie the Hero,” the character Archie saved a woman named Beverly while driving his cab. Beverly then came to the family home to thank Archie. While speaking to the character Edith, Beverly revealed that she identified as a woman, and even took off her wig to prove her point. Beverly told Edith, “I’m afraid you don’t understand, Mrs. Bunker. I’m a transvestite.”<sup>127</sup> The episode contained many off-color jokes about trans women and even included homophobic remarks.

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<sup>126</sup> ‘Cathy’ Charles Slavik, “Letters to Cathy,” *The Transvestite Magazine*, (No. 43, 1976), 4.

<sup>127</sup> *All in the Family*, “Archie the Hero.” S6, E4. Directed by Paul Bogart. Written by Norman Lear, Lou Derman, Bill Davenport, and Johnny Speight. CBS, September 29, 1975.

For the heterosexual audience watching, the character of Beverly was likely one of the first examples of gender non-conformity they saw on mainstream television. For this very reason, Beverly's character in *All in the Family* provided a significant example of representation and trans visibility during the 1970s. It is also important to note that the transphobic and homophobic remarks made about Beverly in the show also impacted heterosexual audiences and how they would treat the trans community as a result. The off-color jokes about the validity of trans identities, as well as the focus on a trans character's anatomy, taught heterosexual audiences that it was okay to ask these invasive questions to actual gender non-conforming people. The example from *All in the Family* showed that television informed popular perceptions of gender non-conformity and was one of the few ways for a heterosexual audience to learn about gender variance during this time. Gender non-conformity was present in television in many instances in the 1970s and the example from *All in the Family* showed that not all media representations were positive, but they did provide a certain degree of visibility for the gender non-conforming community.

During the 1970s, gender non-conforming individuals received unprecedented amounts of recognition, but faced challenges in several areas of society. Gender non-conforming individuals struggles to receive political recognition and struggles against the blatant discrimination in society. During this time period, gender non-conforming people still faced violence and discrimination at every turn. *DRAG* magazine explained this fear in saying, "first there is the natural fear of being arrested, but beyond that is a fear of being ridiculed by unsympathetic citizens and subjected to their verbal and perhaps physical assaults."<sup>128</sup> Gender

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<sup>128</sup> Lee G. Brewster, Kay Gybbons, and Laura McAllister, eds. "Viewpoint: Drag Queen Vs. Transvestite." *Drag Queens: A Magazine about the Transvestite*, (Vol 1:1, 1971), 12.

non-conforming people faced both arrest and violence, but also faced cruelty and discrimination from people on the street.

Trans people and drag queens defied the gender binary in numerous ways, but even with the increase of gender non-conformity in pop culture, the community still faced marginalization and daily abuse. A self-identified transsexual said in an anonymous interview with journalist Betty Liddick, “I’m happier than I was before [my transition], but I won’t really be happy until social pressures stop, until people start to realize transsexuals are human beings.”<sup>129</sup> The amount of media representation of drag and gender non-conformity increased in the 1970s, but this visibility did not extend to all gender non-conforming people who still faced marginalization and discrimination. Many members of this community wanted recognition and equality within society. This visibility in the 1970s impacted queer communities in positive ways, but gender non-conforming people still fought for acceptance and tolerance from mainstream society and the queer community itself.

### **1969-1981 Conclusion**

The Stonewall Riot on June 28, 1969 welcomed in a new period of Gay Liberation and queer community-building that came to characterize queer life in the 1970s. The Stonewall Riot brought tensions to light, as queer people began to fight back against the police brutality and blatant discrimination they faced throughout the twentieth century. The events of 1969 inspired queer political activism to reach new and radical heights with the formation of the Gay Liberation Front. Though this movement marked a new era of gay militancy, many gay activists in this movement proved to be exclusive and even transphobic. Trans and gender non-

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<sup>129</sup> Betty Liddick, "Transsexuals: Fitting Physique to Psyche," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Sep 30, 1976.

conforming people were quickly pushed out of the movement despite the significant role they played in the creation of the Gay Liberation movement. Sushi, a drag queen interviewed in *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, stated, “it was my people who got the movement started... so don’t forget about drag queens.”<sup>130</sup> Drag queens and trans people were alienated from the movement they helped create, but continued to be activists and build communities.

The creation of STAR and the QLF highlighted the resilience of gender non-conforming people and the move to politicize drag. Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp emphasized this politicization of drag in stating:

“That, of course, is what the drag queens hope: that they help to make the world a better place. Drag has a long history within gay life and the gay movement, and despite criticisms that it demeans women or embarrasses men or reveals the seamy side of gay life or undermines the notion that ‘we’re just like you,’ drag has the potential to serve as an effective political strategy.”<sup>131</sup>

Drag and other forms of gender non-conformity pushed boundaries and defied the gender binary, thus garnering criticism from heterosexual and queer communities. While Gay Liberation and the subsequent gender non-conforming organizations participated in activism in the 1970s, gender bending was popularized in the media through disco and glam rock. Despite this increased visibility, queer communities still faced stigma and discrimination. Gender non-conforming people faced homelessness, violence, and cruelty at every turn while activists advocated for equality. The period from 1969 to 1981 was characterized by the radical politicization and propagandizing of gender non-conformity and the formation of queer

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<sup>130</sup> Rupp and Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, 143.

<sup>131</sup> Rupp and Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, 207.

liberation. Gender non-conformity was explicitly political prior to the 1970s, but the period between 1969 to 1981 represented a more radical approach to activism and gender non-conformity. July 3, 1981 represented a turning point in terms of queer and gender non-conforming activism. On this date, the *New York Times* published an article about the first few cases of what would be known as HIV/ AIDS in New York City. As the HIV/AIDS epidemic devastated queer communities in the 1980s and 1990s, Gay Liberation turned towards AIDS advocacy, as the United States government failed to support the queer community during this epidemic.

### *Chapter 3: July 3, 1981- 1990*

July 3, 1981 ushered in a new era of drag and gender non-conformity in the United States. The 1980s were defined by a new politicization of drag and the turn towards political activism, including drag as social commentary. In 1981, the HIV/AIDS epidemic started and began to devastate queer communities all over the United States. Drag queens became increasingly involved in political activism and fundraising in order to advocate for their marginalized community. The new politicization of drag echoed AIDS activism and also commented upon new conceptions of gender during this time. There was increased political conservatism in the 1980s as well, but new forms of radical and gender bending drag became prevalent as well. While feminist critiques condemned drag as anti-feminist, new works in the field of gender theory evaluated the relationship between drag and gender performativity. Drag and gender non-conformity were increasingly acknowledged by popular culture, specifically through television. This resulted in both public fascination with gender non-conformity and increased representation for the queer community, even though these representations were not always flattering. The period from 1981 to 1990 saw a new form of politicization of drag, more scholarship against and in support of gender non-conformity, and increased media representation of gender non-conformity. Drag, trans lives, and gender non-conformity were increasingly acknowledged by the heterosexual mainstream during this time period, but the 1980s began with tragedy within queer communities.

#### *“Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals”*

On July 3, 1981, the *New York Times* published an article titled “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals.” The article explained that a rare form of cancer, originally called Kaposi's Sarcoma, was seen in 41 homosexual men in New York and California, eight of whom died less

than 24 months after the diagnosis was made.<sup>132</sup> Dr. Alvin E. Friedman-Kien of New York University Medical Center described the disease as “rather devastating” in a letter to other physicians.<sup>133</sup> This rare cancer was seen in both older and younger homosexual men, ranging from 26 to 51 years old. Dr. James Curran said, “the best evidence against contagion is that no cases have been reported to date outside the homosexual community or in women.”<sup>134</sup> Non-homosexuals had no obvious danger of contagion as a result. Kaposi’s Sarcoma as described above would eventually be known as HIV/AIDS and would have a devastating impact on queer communities throughout the United States. The article “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals” was one of the first articles about the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States. Public health officials and physicians evidently knew very little about this disease in the early 1980s, but knew that it would most severely impact homosexual men.

HIV/AIDS devastated queer communities at a disproportionate level when compared to the heterosexual population. In the early parts of the epidemic, homosexual men and gender non-conforming people knew very little about the disease, but many people grew ill and died as a result. Public health officials and physicians also knew very little about how the disease spread or how to treat patients. In the first few years of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s, queer people begged the government to help as entire queer communities were dying. The early years of the AIDS epidemic were terrifying for queer communities because they had no idea how the disease spread and received very little help or acknowledgement from the government or health officials. Queer people simply had to watch as their entire communities were devastated. After physicians began to understand how HIV/AIDS spread, queer people were made out to be

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<sup>132</sup> Lawrence K. Altman, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1981.

<sup>133</sup> Altman, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1981.

<sup>134</sup> Altman, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1981.

deviants and deserving of the disease that plagued them, according to conservatives. Despite the devastation and cruelty queer communities faced during the 1980s and 1990s, they formed radical political activist groups in order to address this disease.

ACT UP was formed in 1987 as a direct result of the lack of government action and acknowledgement of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and how it was devastating to queer communities. ACT UP engaged in radical AIDS activism in the 1980s and 1990s in order to get the U.S. government and other agencies such as the FDA to research this disease and help queer communities. While queer people were dying, the United States government failed to help these communities and failed to even acknowledge the AIDS epidemic. Ronald Reagan was the President of the United States for the first decade of the AIDS crisis from 1981 to 1989, but did not even utter the word “AIDS” in public until the end of his presidency.<sup>135</sup> ACT UP branches began to emerge in every major city in the United States and queer people began to turn their grief into anger towards the U.S. government. Deborah Gould, a scholar on the HIV/AIDS epidemic, articulated this feeling in her research. She wrote:

“Whereas earlier gay rhetoric had frequently blamed gay male sexuality for AIDS, militant AIDS activists laid the blame squarely on the homophobic government and other institutions of society, including regimes of normalization that categorized sexual “deviants” and made them expendable. Along with the reclaiming of the “deviant” label as a source of pride, militant AIDS activists repeatedly offered an interpretation of AIDS that shifted attention from death by virus to murder by government neglect.”<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Steven Gambardella, “Absent Bodies: The AIDS Memorial Quilt as Social Melancholia,” *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2011, 217.

<sup>136</sup> Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS*, (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 320-321.

HIV/AIDS activists in organizations such as ACT UP turned their grief into activism through powerful demonstrations like the Ashes Action and the AIDS Memorial Quilt by the NAMES Project. AIDS activism was militant, powerful, and brought the queer community together during a time of grief and anger.

The AIDS epidemic was devastating to queer communities and the lack of government action for these communities showed activists that the government was inherently homophobic.

HIV/AIDS activist Mark Fisher highlighted the ambivalent emotions of both grief and anger in a letter he wrote to be read at his funeral in 1992, titled “Bury Me Furiously.” Fisher wrote:

“We are not just spiraling statistics. We are people who have lives, who have purpose, who have lovers, fiends and families. And we are dying of a disease maintained by a degree of criminal neglect so enormous that it amounts to genocide. I want my death to be as strong a statement as my life continues to be. I want my own funeral to be fierce and defiant, to make the public statement that my death from AIDS is a form of political assassination.”<sup>137</sup>

In this devastating statement, Fisher humanized the AIDS epidemic and explained that the queer people dying from this disease were normal people with loved ones and aspirations. He also stated that government neglect amounted to genocide, as the United States government ignored the AIDS epidemic for much of the 1980s and 1990s because this epidemic impacted those considered deviant by the government. Between 1980 and 2000, nearly half a million-people died as a result of HIV/AIDS. This disease devastated queer communities and highlighted the homophobia of the United States government. The publication of “Rare Cancer Seen in 41

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<sup>137</sup> Mark Fisher, “Bury Me Furiously,” Statement for his funeral procession on November 2, 1992, in ACT UP Historical Archives, <https://actupny.org/diva/polfunsyn.html>.

Homosexuals” in 1981 stood out as the beginning of the epidemic, but queer people continued to die from AIDS even in the twenty-first century. HIV/AIDS largely impacted queer people and people of color. Organizing for the AIDS epidemic became very well-known with organizations such as ACT UP, but drag queens and gender non-conforming people were also well known for political organizing during this time.

### **Queer Organizing for HIV/AIDS and Drag as Social Commentary**

Drag queens, trans people, and gender non-conforming people were evidently impacted by the AIDS epidemic in similar ways to homosexual men. White homosexual activists were often presented by the media and organizations such as ACT UP as the main organizers when it came to the AIDS epidemic. These activists were incredibly significant for organization during the epidemic, but gender non-conforming people were also members of these organizations and even did their own political organizing. Drag queens and other gender non-conforming people from mid twentieth to twenty-first century were known for, “their artistry and inventiveness, their courage and tenacity; [and] their involvement in gay community causes, the tireless fund-raising, most particularly for AIDS support services.”<sup>138</sup> Drag queens and other gender non-conforming entertainers became known for their political organizing as well, often in the form of fund-raising for AIDS. This activism by drag queens continued into the 1990s and 2000s.

A drag queen named RV in Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor’s *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* explained that, “when the AIDS epidemic came up, it was the drag queens who got together to start raising money and all that for causes.”<sup>139</sup> Drag queens and trans women were

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<sup>138</sup> Bill Richardson, *Guy to Goddess: An Intimate Look at Drag Queens*. (Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1994), 2-4.

<sup>139</sup> Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 65.

starkly impacted by the AIDS epidemic just as homosexual men were. Additionally, trans people and people of color were most dramatically impacted by HIV/AIDS. Drag queens often performed in shows and donated the proceeds to help people with HIV/AIDS in their community, in addition to joining in on political demonstrations with groups like ACT UP. Additionally, the funding raised for HIV/AIDS “became an important mechanism for bringing needed social and financial resources to trans communities.”<sup>140</sup> Ultimately, the AIDS epidemic dramatically impacted queer communities in the 1980s and 1990s. Drag queens and other gender non-conforming performers played a significant role in fundraising for AIDS related causes and contributed to the activism at the time. The HIV/AIDS epidemic also led gender non-conforming individuals to connect and ally themselves with homosexual movements out of solidarity and power in numbers. Susan Stryker explained that:

“To adequately respond to the AIDS epidemic demanded a new kind of alliance politics in which specific communities came together across the dividing lines of race and gender, class and nationality, citizenship and sexual orientation. It also required gay liberation politics and feminist public health activism to take transgender issues far more seriously than they did in the past.”<sup>141</sup>

The AIDS epidemic led a wide variety of groups to ally together, including gay activists and the gender non-conforming community under the term “queer.”<sup>142</sup> The HIV/AIDS epidemic was devastating and many queer people turned to activism to express their political discontent.

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<sup>140</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017), 164.

<sup>141</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, 166.

<sup>142</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, 166.

During the 1980s, drag continued to be politicized, largely due to the AIDS epidemic and the increasing gender ambiguity that was popularized in the 1970s. In many ways, drag has always existed as a social commentary, and even commented on the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Milla, a drag queen at the 801 Cabaret in Key West, was known for dedicating a performance of “Bohemian Rhapsody” by Queen to her best friend who died of AIDS. One evening, she told the audience, “I like to end our evening, I always like to do a number that is the heart of our people, ourselves, each and every one.”<sup>143</sup> Drag queens often made explicitly political statements, as Milla did above, but ultimately drag in itself served as social and political commentary.

In the mid to late twentieth century, drag typically constituted a man embodying feminine characteristics in order to perform and to entertain an audience. As a result, drag was often seen as deviant and was even demonized in the early to mid-twentieth century. The very act of embodying femininity as a man in the twentieth century was political in itself. Drag and crossdressing were illegal for much of the twentieth century and gender non-conforming people also faced stigmatization and violence. Drag challenged conventional notions of the gender binary and caused the audience to rethink everything they knew about gender. Drag highlighted the fact that gender was constructed and performative through the act of embodying another gender through the use of makeup, wigs, and costumes. By adorning oneself with clothes, makeup, and heels, drag queens challenged the gender binary. Drag existed as a radical queer subculture for much of the twentieth century, but it was increasingly brought into the mainstream.

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<sup>143</sup> Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 143.

The 1980s brought an interesting moment in the history of gender non-conformity as drag was increasingly publicized and presented to the heterosexual mainstream. Several mainstream figures, such as pop icon Prince, made careers off of embracing gender non-conformity and femininity in their acts. The 1980s brought a period of political conservatism in the United States and increasing gender ambiguity as well. The conservatism of the time meant that many people pushed back against gender non-conformity. A new form of drag began to emerge in the 1980s that consisted of the “politicization of cross dressing through what has been called gender-bending, or ‘gender fuck.’”<sup>144</sup> Gender-fuck or gender-bending drag differed from previous constructions of drag. Instead of defying the gender binary by using costumes and makeup to transform from one binary gender to another, gender-bending drag threw the binary away altogether. This form of drag focused on embodying both feminine and masculine characteristics to challenge the gender norm and cause a reaction when people saw this type of drag. RuPaul, one of the world’s most famous drag queens, spoke of his gender-bending drag in the 1980s in saying, “It was social commentary... I was wearing ratty wigs and combat boots and big old water balloon falsies and saying, ‘*Look at me, I’m just as freaky as any Reaganomic Tipper Gore nightmare.*’”<sup>145</sup> RuPaul explains that gender-bending drag defied social norms, made people rethink gender, and thus served as social commentary by going outside of the binary completely. Additionally, this drag was even explicitly political and commented on the politics of the time. For gender non-conforming people who felt trapped by the binary throughout their lives, this new style of drag was exciting and refreshing.

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<sup>144</sup> Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Crossdressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 246.

<sup>145</sup> David Keeps, "How RuPaul Ups the Ante for Drag: POP VIEW," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Jul 11, 1993.

In the 1980s, drag continued to defy the binary in new ways and reflected a turn towards gender non-conformity within queer communities and popular culture. Drag served as a catalyst for changing ideas during this time and thus was inherently political. Drag always existed as a political act, but the turn to throwing out the binary altogether by some was incredibly significant during this time. Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor describe gender-bending drag performances in saying:

“What ties together a wide variety of performances is a persistent if sometimes subtle questioning of the meaning of gender and sexuality as we normally understand them. It is in that sense that drag queens ‘perform protest.’ Their performances fall into three categories: some (but hardly any) embrace traditional images of femininity and heterosexuality; some explicitly reject those images; and others transform femininity and heterosexuality into something else, what we have been calling “drag-queenness.”<sup>146</sup>

Rupp and Taylor explained that drag queens performed protest during the 1980s. This has always been true of drag, but drag radically subverted gender and made a mockery of the binary in the 1980s. Rupp and Taylor also stated that drag performances could embody traditional femininity, reject these images, or be something else completely. Many forms of drag began to move away from simple female-impersonation in the 1970s and 1980s and began to subvert gender identities. Drag queens began to use their platforms as performers for political activism as well.

The 1980's saw increased political conservatism in the United States. This decade, however, also saw an increase in the questioning of the gender binary by drag queens, gender non-conforming individuals, and liberals. Drag played a significant role as it represented gender as something that is both constructed and performed through clothes, makeup, and behavior.

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<sup>146</sup> Rupp and Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, 116-117.

Rupp and Taylor stated that drag should “be understood not only as a commercial performance but as a political event in which identity is used to contest conventional thinking about gender and sexuality.”<sup>147</sup> While some drag in the 1980s continued to exist as female impersonation, drag became increasingly politicized during this time as it openly defied the gender binary in new and unique ways. The 1980s saw a period of political conservatism in the United States, but AIDS activism and gender-fuck drag highlighted the important role that queer communities played in connection to the larger heterosexual mainstream through popular media and scholarship.

### **Feminist Critiques and Gender Theory in the 1980s**

In the 1980s, scholars increasingly studied gender, sexuality, and gender non-conformity. As drag became increasingly well-known by the heterosexual mainstream, feminist critiques began to develop against gender non-conforming identities. Feminism was widespread during this time and queer movements even took inspiration from feminist organizing. In the 1970s and 1980s, second wave feminist activists used the rhetoric of ‘the personal is political’ in order to advocate for sexual liberation and anti-conservative beliefs. Feminists and queer individuals interacted through activism, with trans women even belonging to feminist collectives as well. As trans and gender non-conforming people became closely involved with feminist circles, many feminists pushed back against their presence and even cited transphobic explanations for this. Feminist critiques of drag and gender non-conformity occurred from within and outside of queer communities. Drag had always existed as a controversial art form that often tried to elicit guttural responses from audiences. Drag and other forms of cross-gender dress began to be viewed as anti-feminist by various feminist scholars and queer people. Critics often explained that drag

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<sup>147</sup> Rupp and Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, 2.

made a mockery of femininity and several even went as far as to invalidate the existence of trans women as well. Betty Luther Hillman described the ambivalent role of feminist critics in stating:

“While some liberationists appropriated drag as a symbolic statement against gender norms, others saw drag as exacerbating stereotypes of "effeminate" homosexuality. Still others aligned with radical feminists who saw female impersonation and drag as an affront to women, reinforcing cultural stereotypes of femininity. These debates coalesced into contradictory stances on the political and cultural meanings of drag and drag queens as constituents of gay liberation.”<sup>148</sup>

Feminists and queer people were evidently divided on the positions of gender non-conforming people in the public sphere. Feminist critics of drag criticized the use of feminine stereotypes by many drag acts. Many people viewed the reclamation of these stereotypes by gay men in drag as playing with gender and thus revealed gender as a performative, but many feminist critics disagreed. These critics believed that drag made a mockery of women and enforced offensive stereotypes, but they failed to note that drag came out of queer communities and existed as a reclamation of stereotypes of effeminate queer men. Though many drag queens donned beautiful gowns and high heeled shoes, feminist critics failed to realize that drag queens were people defying the gender binary instead of reinforcing it.

Additionally, feminist critics also sometimes expressed transphobic views and invalidated the experiences of trans women. In a gay and lesbian magazine in San Francisco entitled *Coming Up!* in 1986, a lesbian and feminist critic of drag wrote to the magazine to articulate her indignation about drag queens and even trans women. She wrote:

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<sup>148</sup> Betty Luther Hillman, ““The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in’: Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (January 2011): 158.

“One cannot change one’s gender. What occurs is a cleverly manipulated exterior: what has been done is mutation... When an estrogenated man with breasts loves women, that is not lesbianism, that is mutilated perversion. [Such an individual] is not a threat to the lesbian community, he is an outrage to us. He is not a lesbian, he is a mutant man, a self-made freak, a deformity, an insult. He deserves a slap in the face. After that, he deserves to have his body and his mind made well again.”<sup>149</sup>

It is quite shocking that such a radical and blatantly transphobic view came from a member of the queer community. In this letter to the editor of *Coming Up!* magazine, the author denied the validity of trans women and also indicated that she viewed trans women as an outrage to the lesbian community. The author of this passage also emphasized the medicalization and physical transition above all else, but also stated that trans people were mentally ill. This example highlighted a strong reaction of feminist and lesbian communities towards gender non-conformity. Many lesbian and feminist critics believed that drag queens and trans women were appropriating femininity and embodying sexist stereotypes through their supposed “performances” of womanhood. Hillman explained that “feminists thus criticized female impersonation as a cultural affront to women, not only mocking and stereotyping womanhood but also reinscribing normative gender roles onto them.”<sup>150</sup> These critics valued both their womanhood and the feminist community very highly. This transphobia in feminist spaces was not uncommon during this time, as cis women valued the exclusivity of feminist spaces. As a result, lesbian and feminist theorists such as the author above saw drag queens and trans women

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<sup>149</sup> Mikuteit, Debbie. “Letter to the Editor.” *Coming Up!* (San Francisco), February 1986, 3-4.

<sup>150</sup> Hillman, ““The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in’: Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (January 2011): 173.

as encroaching on their “woman-only spaces” in feminist and lesbian communities.<sup>151</sup>

Individuals, like the author above, reacted vehemently to the existence of gender variance and trans women, as they only believed that cis women were valid.

One of the most common feminist critiques of drag queens and trans women is that they were anti-feminist because they used traditionally feminist characteristics and thus reinforced sexist views of women. Feminist critiques of trans women and drag queens in the 1980s were often shocking and overtly transphobic through the refusal to accept trans individuals. The transphobia coming from within the queer communities was fairly common, as trans people faced marginalization from the heterosexual mainstream and their own community. These critiques often stated that since gender non-conforming people often adopted stereotypical feminist characteristics, they were anti-feminist. Gender theorists during the 1980s, such as Judith Butler, disagreed with this statement and instead explained that by embodying stereotypes, drag presented gender as constructed and performative.

Judith Butler was a gender theorist and feminist scholar who became well known for her ideas on gender performativity and gender construction. She published popular works in the 1980s and continues to write about feminist, gender theory, and philosophy today. Butler served as an example of the progressive gender theory that was emerging in the 1980s. She looked at gender in a unique way in order to present it as both false and constructed. Butler published one of her most well-known essays, titled “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” in 1988. This work delved into the social construction of gender and what it meant to be a woman according to her statements on gender performativity. First, Butler defined gender in stating:

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<sup>151</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, 132.

“Gender is no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.”<sup>152</sup>

Butler’s above definition of gender as the “stylized repetition of acts” highlighted the idea that gender was constructed through behavior and one’s gender performance. She also stated that in performing one’s gender, an individual created the illusion that they conformed to the gender binary, even though that binary itself was constructed. Additionally, Butler stated that, “gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed.”<sup>153</sup> The above statements were radical for the time because Butler constructed gender as something that was not real, but was performed by the repetition of behavior. She also stated that, “genders, then, can be neither true or false, neither real nor apparent...and yet, one is compelled to live in a world in which genders constitute univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable.”<sup>154</sup> Butler explained that despite the fact that gender was false, one had to live in a world where gender meant everything and was constantly enforced. Gender was stabilized by societal conventions; thus, most people believed in gender and the gender binary wholeheartedly.

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<sup>152</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.

<sup>153</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 527.

<sup>154</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 528.

In this essay, Butler also responded to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which was published in 1949. In this groundbreaking book, de Beauvoir famously made that statement that one is not born, but becomes a woman. Butler responded to de Beauvoir to say:

“To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delineated possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project.”<sup>155</sup>

Butler stated that according to de Beauvoir, one becomes a woman by conforming to the popular conception of what it meant to be a woman, likely through stylized behavior and physical appearance. This definition of what it meant to be a woman in society seemed to validate trans identities as one was not born a specific gender and one's gender was performed. Though Butler did not specifically address trans people, her statement allowed for the existence of trans people as gender was constructed and was not defined by physical characteristics. Susan Stryker discussed the impact of Butler's gender theory on the trans community in stating:

“Rather than being an objective quality of the body (defined by sex), gender is constituted by all the innumerable acts of performing it: how we dress, move, speak, touch, look. Gender is like a language we use to communicate ourselves to others and to understand ourselves. The implication of this argument is that transgender genders are as real as any others, and they can be achieved in the same fundamental way.”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 522.

<sup>156</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, 163.

Stryker's statement exemplified the fact that Butler subtly advocated for the validity of trans identities in her text. She explained that gender was performed through an individual's behavior and had little to nothing to do with one's biological sex. In her writing, Butler validated trans identities and provided a scholarly basis for diverse forms of gender expression. Butler used this 1988 essay to state that gender was constructed and performed through stylized behavior, but gender was also reinforced by the world itself. This essay was significant in itself because it highlighted the new gender theory emerging in the 1980s and encouraged people to look at gender as they knew it with a critical lense, while also affirming trans identities. Butler's discourse also highlighted the increasing turn towards gender-bending and the refusal to accept gender norms by queer communities and some heterosexual audiences in the 1980s.

Additionally, Butler also addressed the topic of drag and whether or not it proved gender to be real or constructed. Butler wrote her book *Gender Trouble* in the 1980s and it was published in 1990. *Gender Trouble* was one of her most well-known works and reflected many of the new gender theories developed in the 1980s. In this book, Butler articulated similar statements as in "Performative Acts of Gender Constitution" such as stating that gender was constructed and performed through repeated acts. In this book, Butler also delved into what drag meant in the realm of gender theory and asked the question, "is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established?"<sup>157</sup> Butler used a section of her book to respond to Esther Newton's *Mother Camp*, which was published in 1979. One of Newton's most famous statements in her text was, "by focusing on the outward appearance of role, drag implies that sex role and, by extension, role in general is something

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<sup>157</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), viii.

superficial, which can be manipulated, put on or off again at will.”<sup>158</sup> Butler connected to this idea in Newton’s work by stating that drag often serves as a gender parody. Butler wrote:

“The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities. Within feminist theory, such parodic identities have been understood to be either degrading to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality, especially in the case of butch/femme lesbian identities.”<sup>159</sup>

Butler mentioned that within some feminist theory, these feminists saw the parody that drag creates as degrading or as appropriating gender-based stereotypes. These feminist theorists do not seem to understand that drag was parodying gender by presenting gender as both oppressive and false through their blatant gender performance. Drag queens may not always have been conscious of the fact that they were proving gender to be constructed and performed, but drag was innately political and always parodied gender, whether this was purposeful or not. Butler addressed drag as a man emulating femininity in her text and explains that the drag performance played on the distinction between the performer’s anatomy and the gender they are performing.<sup>160</sup> Drag was innately political in itself as it proved gender to be constructed and performed.

The fact that drag queens in the 1980s were often men assuming female characteristics indicated that drag was a parody of gender and revealed it to be false. Butler also explained that,

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<sup>158</sup> Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 109.

<sup>159</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137.

<sup>160</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137.

“as much as drag creates a unified picture of ‘woman’ (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence.”<sup>161</sup> She highlighted the fact that drag highlighted femininity and what it meant to be a woman, but it also revealed gender to be “falsely naturalized” and also showed the diversity of the female experience. Through her use of gender theory, Butler showed that drag was much more than it seems at first glance. When people saw drag queens, it may initially seem like they were reinforcing feminine stereotypes that many seem harmful and anti-feminist. When one looks beneath the surface, drag was revealed to be a parody of gender and an explicitly political act.

The act of putting on drag and explicitly performing gender as a form of entertainment inherently defied social norms and revealed gender to be both performed and constructed. By reinforcing feminine stereotypes, drag queens highlighted that fact that anyone could be a woman through embodying simple physical characteristics and mannerisms, such as beautiful costumes and makeup. Many drag queens in the 1980s identified as men, but were able to create the illusion of being feminine women through their performances, whether their performances embodied stereotypes or made a mockery of the gender binary. Drag queens put on outrageous and obvious performances of gender that thus subverted gender roles and proved gender to be easily constructed and performative. Butler states that, “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.”<sup>162</sup> Drag dramatically mimicked gender and thus proved to audiences that all gender was constructed and performed.

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<sup>161</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137.

<sup>162</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137.

These performances also reached heterosexual audiences and highlighted the fact that everyone performed their gender constantly, but most people performed in subtler ways.

Butler's *Gender Trouble* was fascinating in its time because it defied popular conceptions of gender and also addressed the feminist critiques of drag in the 1980s. Butler contributed greatly to the field of gender theory and became a very well-known scholar when she published the two above works. Butler revealed gender to be constructed and performative in her texts, which defied norms at the time and allowed for a new age of gender theory and gender ambiguity from the academic and the popular sphere. She also contradicted feminist theorists by explaining that drag revealed gender to be false and performative. Butler's work was read widely during the 1980s and 1990s and greatly impacted feminist and gender theorists. Through the work of scholars and through the popular media, drag and trans identities were increasingly acknowledged by the public in the 1980s and became common household terms. While the average American likely did not read Judith Butler, American citizens saw gender theory played out through popular culture and television.

### **Donahue and Trans Sensationalism**

A sense of public fascination with trans and gender non-conforming identities had existed since Christine Jorgenson's coming out in 1952. In the 1980s, this sense of public fascination was coupled with sensationalism in television and popular culture. People were evidently interested in transness and what it meant to be a self-identified "transsexual" at the time. In the memoir *Diary of a Drag Queen*, Daniel Harris described being a drag queen in the late 1980s to early 2000s. Harris stated, "for my partners in turn, [drag] is a way of exploring one of the most common *straight* obsessions, the heterosexual fascination with the hermaphrodite, the exotic she-male, who is at once alluring and forbidden, a creature that inspires lust and repulsion, fusing

desire with that most potent of aphrodisiacs, transgression.”<sup>163</sup> Harris highlighted the public fascination with drag and gender non-conformity that he experienced in his dating life. This public fascination also applied to drag shows and television. Heterosexual people would attend drag shows to get a glimpse of gay life. Additionally, heterosexual audiences could learn about gender non-conformity and crossdressing through their television screens.

A distinct talk show culture in which ordinary gender non-conforming people were represented on television allowed for unprecedented visibility during the 1980s. Talk shows became important features of the newfound television culture of the 1960s and 1970s and evolved dramatically in the late twentieth century. A multitude of talk shows became mainstays of television during this time. In her book *How Sex Changed*, Joanne Meyerowitz explained that “from the 1960s on, radio and television talk shows occasionally used transsexuals, especially Jorgenson, to bring in listeners and viewers.”<sup>164</sup> These talk shows used fascination towards gender non-conformity and sensationalism to appease a wide variety of audiences and engage viewers. Additionally, when gender non-conforming individuals appeared on these talked shows, there was often a dramatic confessional moment as well. Meyerowitz highlighted how these talk shows evolved as decades passed. She explained:

“In the 1980s and 1990s the tabloid television genre descended the cultural ladder with new shows geared towards younger, rowdier, less-educated audiences. The new shows showed less concern for middle-class properties and more interest in the outrageous.”<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Daniel Harris, *Diary of a Drag Queen*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2005), vii.

<sup>164</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 278.

<sup>165</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 278-279.

Talk shows that aired segments on gender non-conforming individuals relied on sensationalism and the fascination towards trans people in order to engage audiences. The gender non-conforming people on these shows typically wanted to share their stories and appeal to queer audiences who could be positively impacted by this representation.

*The Phil Donahue Show*, which was also known simply as *Donahue*, served as an important example of talk show culture in the late twentieth century. The show was broadcast across the United States for twenty-six years between 1970 and 1996. The host, Phil Donahue, invited a wide range of guests on his show and also had a live audience who would listen, laugh, and ask questions during the shows. *Donahue* was also well-known for inviting gender non-conforming people on the show in front of the live audience. Between 1990 and 1992, *Donahue* had at least sixteen programs on cross-dressing and trans identities.<sup>166</sup> *Donahue* relied on sensationalism, controversy, and confessional moments to engage audiences. In the 1980s, Donahue had many gender non-conforming people on his show with mixed results. In a segment of the show in May 1987, Donahue spoke to a few female impersonators about being celebrity look likes. He spoke to a female impersonator named Jimmy James who was well-known for impersonating Marilyn Monroe. The audience was visibly shocked when James walked out on the stage and several audience members stated that he looked exactly like Marilyn Monroe. When asked about his identity, James stated, “I know exactly who I am. I am a little boy with a certain bone structure who wanted to be a makeup artist and I just kinda went into this and developed an act.”<sup>167</sup>

James did not mention being a drag queen or identifying as a member of the queer community, but simply stated that impersonating Marilyn Monroe was his job. Donahue in turn

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<sup>166</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing & Cultural Anxiety*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 5.

<sup>167</sup> *Donahue*. “Celebrity Look Alikes.” Directed by Ryan Weiner. WBBM-TV, May 1987.

addressed the backlash that gender non-conforming people received on his show. He stated, “we’ve discussed cross-dressing on this program before, as some of our viewers will tell you, not with a lot of enthusiasm. Some of them think that the world’s going to hell and you’re leading it there and I’m helping you.”<sup>168</sup> Donahue explained that many viewers and audience members did not agree with the gender non-conforming that was shown on the show. At the same time, *Donahue* continued to include many programs on gender non-conforming people, thus there was evidently enough viewership and interest in these programs. The many examples of cross-dressing on the show were met with both fascination and disgust by the heterosexual mainstream.

In an episode of the show in 1984, Donahue invited a group of self-identified crossdressers into the show to discuss their lives and experiences. The crossdressers were able to speak for themselves, but were also asked questions by the audience. Each individual had a different experience with crossdressing in their lives and represented these diverse experiences in this segment. One of the queens described coming out and feeling happy, in stating, “I spent the first 32 years of my life feeling guilty and I’m glad now that for the last three, three and a half years, I feel much better about it.”<sup>169</sup> Many of the queens described the struggles of being in the closet and in facing marginalization from society. One of the guests stated, “you gotta realize we are the exceptions to the rule of the crossdresser. We are here in public, we are in front of the media. Most crossdressers are in the closet or in private groups where they cross dress only in the privacy of their home or in these protected groups.”<sup>170</sup> One extremely common theme in this interview was the desire to pass and not be seen by most gender non-conforming people. The

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<sup>168</sup> *Donahue*. “Celebrity Look Alikes.” Directed by Ryan Weiner. WBBM-TV, May 1987.

<sup>169</sup> *Donahue*, “Male Crossdressers,” Directed by Ryan Weiner, WBBM-TV, 1984.

<sup>170</sup> *Donahue*, “Male Crossdressers,” Directed by Ryan Weiner, WBBM-TV, 1984.

crossdressers on this episode of *Donahue* were evidently an exception to the rule because they were all out of the closet and talked about their identities on broadcasted television. The reality was that many gender non-conforming people during the 1980s stayed in the closet out of fear of marginalization and even violence.

Additionally, one of the queens also addressed how gender non-conforming people had been represented in the media. A self-identified transvestite on the show explained:

“Hollywood has two themes of the transvestite: they’re either schizophrenic people who when they dress up go out and blast people away because that makes them loony or they’re some kind of professional hitman and this is how they can sneak up on people unaware. We’re the most peaceful, unobtrusive, mild-mannered people you can imagine.”<sup>171</sup>

Through this television appearance, it was evident that the crossdressers were trying to advocate for their identities and show that they were normal and likeable people. Those in the heterosexual mainstream learned everything they knew about gender non-conformity from the media, thus the above statement highlighted how important representation was. Being on *Donahue*, a beloved television show in the United States, meant that children watching the show would learn about gender non-conformity and queer children could also see people like themselves on television.

While being on the show was a statement in itself, *Donahue* represented the individuals in this segment as mentally ill and immoral. When *Donahue* allowed the audience to ask questions, one audience member simply stated, “as far as these men go, I think they should all grow up and dress as men.”<sup>172</sup> This statement emphasized that many audience members did not

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<sup>171</sup> *Donahue*, “Male Crossdressers,” Directed by Ryan Weiner, WBBM-TV, 1984.

<sup>172</sup> *Donahue*, “Male Crossdressers,” Directed by Ryan Weiner, WBBM-TV, 1984.

see the guests as valid and believed that crossdressing was wrong. Another audience member also said, “I just want to let the men on that stage know that they are actually living a lie and as long as they are living a lie, they can have no fellowship with God. They need the love of Jesus in their life.”<sup>173</sup> This dramatic statement showed that some people in the heterosexual mainstream saw crossdressing as abhorrent, immoral, and even anti-Christian. The audience member believed that crossdressing was immoral and sinful and even referenced religion to explain why they believed crossdressing was wrong. This use of religion and Christianity to attack gender non-conformity was common in tabloid television culture and conservative rhetoric. In this specific example, there was evidently very little attempt by the audience to understand the lives of the individuals on stage and there was little attempt by Donahue to defend his guests from being berated.

Additionally, Donahue invited a therapist for the segment, who proceeded to pathologize crossdressing. She stated, “very often the crossdressing begins with an erotic sexual attachment and then as these women age that becomes less necessary.”<sup>174</sup> Instead of attempting to validate their identities, the therapist pathologized crossdressing and gender non-conformity as a sexual fetish. This segment highlights the fact that Donahue invited gender non-conforming people onto his show in order to engage the audience with sensational stories, instead of attempting to understand or represent these identities. Donahue included these guests on the show because of the public fascination with transness and gender non-conformity. Having gender non-conforming people on the show created an uproar and engaged audiences in debates about the validity of gender non-conforming identities.

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<sup>173</sup> *Donahue*, “Male Crossdressers,” Directed by Ryan Weiner, WBBM-TV, 1984.

<sup>174</sup> *Donahue*, “Male Crossdressers,” Directed by Ryan Weiner, WBBM-TV, 1984.

*Donahue* provided many media representations of gender non-conformity, but the show often made a mockery of its guests and used gender non-conforming people as props to engage viewers. Gender non-conforming individuals were exploited on television shows such as *Donahue*, but the presence of queer individuals on television provided a sense of representation and camaraderie for queer youth. Joanne Meyerowitz explained the impact of this ambivalent representation in stating:

“[Talk shows] elevated ‘personal experience’ and gave transsexuals ‘a chance to break the monopoly on truth’ held by scientific authorities. Within the limits of an orchestrated program, transsexuals could speak in their own voices. They were experts on themselves. They spoke on national television and they had at least a passing chance at bringing their own stories, for a minute or two, to the millions of viewers who watched them.”<sup>175</sup>

Meyerowitz highlighted the fact that trans and gender non-conforming individuals were given visibility and representation due to talk show culture in the 1980s. This was somewhat unprecedented and trans people were able to represent themselves as they pleased within the limited talk show format. Often, this representation was clumsy and flawed, but was inevitably impactful. The 1980s saw an increase in the representations of gender non-conformity in the media for both queer and heterosexual audiences. Often this portrayal existed through a heterosexual lense and failed to represent the diversity and reality of queer stories.

### **1981-1990 Conclusion**

The period from 1981 to 1990 was characterized by the new politicization of drag, new scholarly thought, and the sensationalizing of gender non-conformity by the media. July 3, 1981 signified the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and a new era of radical political activism

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<sup>175</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 279.

from queer communities as well. Activists turned their grief and anger into militant activism against the United States government for years of neglect. Queer organizing began to emerge as well and drag queens played a central role in supporting those afflicted with HIV/AIDS. Additionally, gender bending drag began to be popularized amongst queer youth. This form of drag focused on deviation from the gender binary and from social conformity. Drag was inherently political and many drag queens considered their role as a form of social commentary. This new politicization of drag built off of activism of the 1960s and 1970s, but also embraced AIDS activism and deviation from the gender binary.

While unconventional drag was flourishing, there was also a feminist backlash. Many feminist critiques emerged from within and outside of queer communities that stated drag and trans people were anti-feminist because they made a mockery of femininity. Gender theorists such as Judith Butler explained that drag made a parody of gender and revealed gender to be both false and constructed. With the new gender theory developing in the 1980s, Butler also delved into the world of drag with a critical lense and determined drag to be the ultimate gender performance. Additionally, as drag became more mainstream in the 1980s, there was an increased public fascination and trans sensationalism on television with shows like *Donahue*. The 1980s represented an interesting period of time characterized by political conservatism and innovations in the world of drag and gender non-conformity. By the 1990s, drag was increasingly spoken about in popular culture and drag even began to be considered mainstream through drag artists such as Lady Bunny and RuPaul. The 1990s built off the gender theory and popular culture moments of the 1980s and highlighted changing attitude towards drag in the late twentieth century.

#### **Chapter 4: 1990- February 2, 2009**

The 1990s and 2000s represented a unique era in terms of the representation of gender non-conformity in the media and television. Drag and other forms of gender variance received unprecedented acknowledgement and representation during this period. Film and television culture was incredibly influential during this time and impacted every aspect of American life. Almost every American consumed film and television in their daily lives, thus were impacted by the increased amount of gender variance in film and television during the 1990s and 2000s. Gender non-conforming people were represented in television and film in a variety of ways. Ultimately, not all representation was positive, as some news sources exploited and invaded the privacy of burgeoning trans celebrities. The flaws in representation ranged from offensive and off-color jokes to representing gender non-conformity from a solely cisgender lense. While these representations were not perfect, there was an increasing level of empathy and a desire to relate to gender non-conforming individuals. Media representations taught audiences how they should treat gender non-conforming individuals and thus impacted the public conversations around this community at the time. Additionally, gender non-conforming people were also present in documentaries and film. In these cases, gender non-conforming individuals were allowed to present themselves authentically as a community, but often through a cis and heterosexual lense. The massive influx of representations of gender variance represented progress from earlier in the twentieth century and indicated a new era of queer visibility in the media.

#### ***Paris is Burning and Popular Perceptions of Gender Non-Conformity***

The critically acclaimed film *Paris is Burning* was released in 1990, but was not officially released in the United States until 1991. The film followed 1980s ballroom culture and

delved into the complexities of life in Harlem, New York City for queer people of color. The film became very well-known around the United States and introduced many new audiences to the world of ballroom culture. The director, Jennie Livingston, gave viewers a glimpse into the struggles of black queer people in the 1980s and showed the incredible sense of community queer people of color created for themselves despite the marginalization they faced. Ballroom culture had largely been a distinct subculture for much of the twentieth century and remained hidden from the heterosexual mainstream. The release of *Paris is Burning* allowed for unprecedented representation of queer people of color and ballroom culture to a wide audience. *Paris is Burning* soon became a cultural phenomenon and taught the world about what it meant to be a queer person of color in the United States.

Drag balls and ballroom had been an important part of drag culture for much of the twentieth century and allowed for a strong sense of community within the distinct queer subculture. The Harlem drag culture of *Paris is Burning* consisted of queer people of color with a wide range of identities. Some of those who participated in balls identified as gender non-conforming, as trans, as drag queens, or as gay. Those involved in ball culture often belonged to a “house,” such as the House of LaBeija or the House of Xtravaganza. In balls themselves, queer people would walk in categories such as high fashion evening wear, luscious body, and more. Participants would be judged on how well they walked and by the looks they presented to the judges. Susan Stryker explained the concept of “houses” within ball culture and stated, “the ‘house’ subcultures of many urban African American, Latino/a, and Asian American communities (such as the ones represented in Jennie Livingston’s film *Paris is Burning*) have large balls in which participants ‘walk the categories,’ competing for the best enactment of a

multitude of highly stylized gender designations, such as ‘butch queen up in pumps.’”<sup>176</sup>

Additionally, people walked in categories that included dancing created by ballroom culture such as voguing. Voguing, as seen in the ballroom, later inspired pop artist Madonna and became a popular culture craze. By walking in categories or voguing, ballroom participants could be legendary and bring a good reputation to their house.

Houses served as a smaller community and family for queer people of color, who in many cases had been rejected by their biological family. In the film, Dorian Corey described houses in ball culture in saying, “They’re families... but this a new meaning of family... it’s a question of a group of human beings in a mutual bond.”<sup>177</sup> Houses provided queer youth with families when they were rejected from their own for being queer or gender non-conforming. Pepper LaBeija explained that this familial rejection caused queer youth to look for a sense of community, which many of them found in ballroom culture. LaBeija stated:

“When someone has rejection from their mother and father, their family, when they get out in the world, they search. They search for someone to fill that void. I know this for experience, because I’ve had kids come to me and latch hold to me like I’m their mother or like I’m their father.”<sup>178</sup>

As LaBeija explained, houses often mimicked a nuclear family structure and even had “mothers” as the head of the house. Ballroom culture facilitated a distinct familial identity and community culture that queer people of color could not find anywhere else in society. One of the members of the House of Xtravaganza explained that their house mother Angie Xtravaganza was more of a

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<sup>176</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017), 34-35.

<sup>177</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Off White Productions, 1990.

<sup>178</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Off White Productions, 1990.

mother to them than their own biological mother. Angie even sent them birthday cards every year.<sup>179</sup>

Ballroom culture, as shown to a wide audience in *Paris is Burning* in 1990, gave queer people of color a distinct community and a feeling of acceptance from a world in which they were marginalized. Dorian Corey explained the feeling of entering ballroom culture from the outside world in stating, “it’s like crossing into the looking glass in wonderland...you go in there, and you feel—you feel 100% right—as of being gay... that’s not what it’s like in the world.”<sup>180</sup> Ballroom culture provided queer people of color with a refuge and a safe place away from white heterosexual society that discriminated against them for their gender, sexuality, social status, and race. Drag balls and ballroom culture allowed participants to live the lives they wanted and to exist in a microcosm of the world where they were protected from discrimination. Ball culture also allowed many people to live out their dreams of being in the entertainment and fashion industries. Octavia St. Laurent stated in the film, “I wanna be somebody. I mean I am somebody, but I wanna be a rich somebody.”<sup>181</sup> As a member of a marginalized population, it would be almost impossible for Octavia to gain enormous wealth and stardom. Ball culture allowed her to represent herself as she pleased, but she would largely be excluded from the entertainment industry and would be prevented from holding jobs that would allow her to attain the kind of wealth she aspired to.

One of the most compelling aspects of *Paris is Burning* was that the film highlighted the extreme marginalization that queer people of color faced in the late 1980s. Vern and Bonnie Bullough explain that in *Paris is Burning*, “having bought into the American dream, they

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<sup>179</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Off White Productions, 1990.

<sup>180</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Off White Productions, 1990.

<sup>181</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Off White Productions, 1990.

successfully imitate the power structure that excludes them; at the balls, they are given the opportunity to achieve their dreams of fame, success, and beauty.”<sup>182</sup> Success within the heterosexual mainstream was impossible for those involved in ball culture, thus many turned their attention to achieving their dreams within ballroom itself. Ballroom largely formed as a result of the distinct marginalization queer people faced from the heterosexual mainstream. It was difficult to find jobs, housing, and success as a queer person of color in the United States in the twentieth century. Ballroom culture allowed queer people to exist in a safe community and to be themselves. Dorian Corey explains this sentiment when stating:

“In a ballroom you can be anything you want. You’re not really an executive but you’re looking like an executive. And therefore you are showing the straight world that I can be an executive. If I had the opportunity, I could be one. In real life, you can’t get a job as an executive unless you have the educational background and the opportunity. Now the fact that you are not an executive is merely because of the social standing of life...black people have a hard time getting anywhere. And those that do are usually straight.”<sup>183</sup>

Corey highlighted the implications of the category “executive realness,” as the queer youth participating in balls could pretend that they existed in a world where they were not discriminated against and marginalized for being queer people of color. People of color faced distinct marginalization during the late 1980s and 1990s, but being queer as well also meant that many ball participants were kicked out of their homes at a young age and did not have access to education, and thus would not be hired for high-paying jobs. The category of “executive realness” highlighted that fact that queer people of color faced discrimination and inequalities at

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<sup>182</sup> Bullough Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Crossdressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 247.

<sup>183</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Off White Productions, 1990.

every turn. The only way they could be executives was to walk in the “executive realness” category in the ballroom. In this category as well, participants emulated the “great white way of living” that they saw in media and television on shows such as *Dynasty*.<sup>184</sup>

Race, as well as gender and sexual identities, played a large role in the marginalization of this community. Another ball participant in the film also stated, “the balls to us is as close to reality as we’re gonna get to all of that fame and fortune and stardom and spotlights.”<sup>185</sup> Pepper LaBeija also discussed the lack of opportunity for queer people of color, as well as the poverty and homelessness they faced. She stated, “You know a lot of those kids that are in the balls, they don’t have two of nothing. Some of them don’t even eat. They come to balls starving. And they sleep in the Under Twenty-Ones, or they sleep under the piers. They don’t have a home to go to.”<sup>186</sup> The category of “executive realness” highlighted the lack of opportunity queer people of color faced in the United States in the late 1980s and 1990s. Ballroom culture gave them a unique sense of community and safety that they could not find anywhere else.

*Paris is Burning* also touched on the concepts of “realness” and “passing” within ball culture. Many participants in balls identified as trans or dressed in drag. A person was considered “real” if they were able to blend and to “pass the untrained eye or even the trained eye and not give away the fact that [they are] gay.”<sup>187</sup> Realness focused on appearing as a straight cisgender woman or man. If someone looked “real” when they were walking a category, the crowd would applaud and compliment the participant on their ability to pass. During the late 1980s and the 1990s, it was still very necessary for those in drag or for trans people to pass for to meet aesthetic

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<sup>184</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Off White Productions, 1990.

<sup>185</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Off White Productions, 1990.

<sup>186</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Off White Productions, 1990.

<sup>187</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Off White Productions, 1990.

norms from the community and to be safe. Dorian Corey highlighted the phenomena of realness and passing in stating:

“When they’re undetectable, when they can walk out of that ballroom and into the sunlight and onto the subway and get home and still have all their clothes and have no blood running down their bodies—those are the femme realness queens.”<sup>188</sup>

Corey explained that violence was the consequence for not passing or appearing “real” in the outside world. Within ball culture, “realness” was highlighted as a category to walk and something to aspire to, but in the outside world, an inability to pass could have dire consequences due to the transphobia and homophobia rampant in society.

The story of Venus Xtravaganza in the film was one of the most compelling and tragic elements of the film. Venus was interviewed constantly throughout the film and shared her perspective on ball culture and what it meant to be a trans woman at the time. She discussed her desire to have gender confirmation surgery to feel more comfortable in her body. Venus had dreams to live a normal life after being kicked out by her biological family in her early teens. She also explained that, “most of the drag queens that are involved in the balls, say 90% of them—are hustlers. I guess that’s how they make their money to go to the balls and to make whatever they need.”<sup>189</sup> She alluded to the fact that many drag queens and trans women at the time turned to sex work. These groups specifically turned to sex work because they faced employment and housing discrimination due to their race and gender identities. Venus herself engaged in this industry from time to time to make money.

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<sup>188</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Off White Productions, 1990.

<sup>189</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Off White Productions, 1990.

In 1988, Venus was found dead in a hotel room. Her friends and her house mother Angie Xtravaganza explained that they think Venus was killed during sex work and her body was left for days before she was found. Earlier in the film, Venus told the story of one experience she had while engaging in sex work, where a man physically abused her when he discovered that she was a trans woman and she quickly escaped. Angie and others believe that Venus likely faced a similar situation in 1988. Venus was one of many trans women who were killed in the sex industry and her death showed that violence against trans women was widespread and endemic. *Paris is Burning* highlighted Venus's tragic murder and showed the violence that trans and gender non-conforming people faced constantly. The film showed many important issues for gender non-conforming people of color that had rarely been introduced to heterosexual audiences. The director, Jennie Livingston, gave people a glimpse into the lives of queer people of color. Those interviewed in the film were incredibly honest and revealed many problems that this subculture faced.

Additionally, ballroom culture, as shown in *Paris is Burning*, played with gender and played out gender theory in real life. In an interview with Susan Stryker, Miss Major described what the drag ball scene was like in her youth. She explained:

“We had the balls then, where we could go and dress up. You had to keep your eyes open, had to watch your back, but you learned to deal with that, and how to relax into it, and how to have a good time. It was a pleasure, a wonder—even with the confusion. We didn't know at the time that we were questioning our gender. We just knew this felt right. There wasn't all this terminology, all the labeling—you know what I mean?”<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Miss Major, “Interview with Miss Major,” Interview by Susan Stryker, on deposit at GLBT Historical Society, January 29, 1998.

In this interview, Miss Major described the omnipresent questioning of gender that has been inherent in ball culture for decades. This same questioning of gender was present in the ball culture of the 1980s and 1990s. In many ways, ball culture also played out gender theory from scholars like Judith Butler in real life. By performing gender and gender-bending in different ballroom categories, participants in ball culture thus lived out many of Butler's ideas of gender throughout her work. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler stated that "if the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true or false, but are only produced as the true effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity."<sup>191</sup> In ballroom culture, ball participants embodied Butler's concept of gender performativity and thus proved gender to be neither true nor false.

Additionally, Butler touched upon gender parody, which is present in a ballroom setting, in stating, "although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization."<sup>192</sup> In ballroom culture, participants took gender and turned it on its head. Through this parody and through diverse representations of gender present in ballroom, participants revealed gender to be performative. In many ways, ballroom culture lived out Butler's gender theories in profound ways by promoting gender variance and forgoing the gender binary, while also playing with the concept of gender. Though not all ballroom participants were directly familiar with Butler and gender performativity, ballroom itself embodied gender theory in real life.

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<sup>191</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 136.

<sup>192</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 138.

*Paris is Burning* received a massive critical response and brought the ballroom subculture to new audiences. The film itself broke box office records and went to the Cannes Film Festival. People all over the world praised the film for its unique and unprecedented representation of ballroom culture. The film gave white heterosexual audiences insight into a subculture that had existed and thrived for decades within the queer community. A review article stated, “the timing was right...audiences who might have been appalled five years earlier were enthralled.”<sup>193</sup> The author highlighted the changing attitudes towards queer people of color by the 1990s. If the film were released earlier, it would not have achieved the same level of critical acclaim and acceptance from the heterosexual mainstream. The review article also compared *Paris is Burning* to *The Queen*, which was released in 1968. The review stated that *The Queen* provided the first look at the subculture of drag and served as a “dress rehearsal” for the release of *Paris is Burning*.<sup>194</sup> Both films gave heterosexual audiences insight into queer subcultures and provided insight onto the issues queer community faced in each respective film. The review article also stated, “Mainstream America didn’t know it, but the nation had a flourishing drag subculture, and not just in the major cities.”<sup>195</sup>

*Paris is Burning* combined human stories about struggle and queer joy with insight into ballroom culture that was dominated by queer people of color. This community was marginalized and faced many different types of oppression. Ballroom culture allowed them to exist in their own realities and define success in safe community, as they had been marginalized

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<sup>193</sup> William Grimes, "The Queen' on the Runway Again: A Drag Culture Long before 'Paris is Burning.'" *New York Times*, March 27, 1993.

<sup>194</sup> Grimes, "The Queen' on the Runway Again: A Drag Culture Long before 'Paris is Burning.'" *New York Times*, March 27, 1993.

<sup>195</sup> Grimes, "The Queen' on the Runway Again: A Drag Culture Long before 'Paris is Burning.'" *New York Times*, March 27, 1993.

from white, cisgender heterosexual society. Vern and Bonnie responded to the release of *Paris is Burning* in stating, “the movie was not about men attempting to look like women but about the efforts of a despised double minority—both ethnic and sexual—to live out their dreams in a world of their own creation.”<sup>196</sup> *Paris is Burning* highlighted the joy and strife that queer people of color experienced and showed how ballroom culture helped them cope with the inequalities they faced from the heterosexual mainstream.

Despite the massive critical and popular response to *Paris is Burning* when it was released in 1990, it also faced extensive backlash. The director of the film, Jennie Livingston, was a white lesbian who was not involved with the ballroom community prior to filming. She was criticized for enabling cultural appropriation and exploiting her film subjects. She received criticism for creating a film about a community she was not a part of and was critiqued for her attempts to make the film palatable to the heterosexual mainstream. Additionally, many of the participants in the film criticized Livingston and stated that they were not given recognition or financial compensation for their roles in the film, despite its success. *Paris is Burning* represented a massive cultural breakthrough for gender non-conforming people of color, “but the kids didn’t get any recognition.”<sup>197</sup> In 2013, several of the film subjects were involved in a film titled *Paris is Burning: The Dark Side* and critiqued Livingston for exploiting the community in order to gain commercial success. In this film, Octavia St. Laurent stated, “people know nothing about our community and *Paris is Burning* is nothing but gay entertainment for them.”<sup>198</sup> Octavia felt that the film did not accurately portray ballroom culture. Additionally, Octavia

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<sup>196</sup> Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Crossdressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 247.

<sup>197</sup> *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*. Directed by Sam Feder. Field of Dreams Production, 2020.

<sup>198</sup> Octavia St. Laurent in *Paris is Burning: The Dark Side*, 2013.

herself successfully sued Livingston because she did not receive adequate financial compensation for her role in the film. Despite the commercial success of *Paris is Burning*, Livingston evidently exploited film participants and did provide those involved with an outlet to tell their own stories. The film itself provided queer people of color with more visibility and representation than ever before, but it evidently had negative impacts. *Paris is Burning* introduced ballroom culture to a new audience and represented this community, but it failed to truly advocate and improve the lives of the marginalized film subjects it claimed to represent.

### **Media, Celebrity, and the Commodification of Trans Identities and Drag**

In the 1990s and 2000s, drag and gender non-conformity were transitioning from distinct subcultures to mainstream cultural phenomena. Drag assumed many roles during this time period and was increasingly shown to a wider audience due to the impacts of film, television, and music. Drag queens were increasingly hired for new roles, while many cis men dressed in drag to depict drag queens in film as well. Cross-dressing in many ways became closely tied to comedy, as a masculine man dressed in drag was used to illicit laughs from an audience. At the same time, drag queens themselves appeared in film, music, and television, including increasingly famous drag queens like RuPaul and Lipsynka. In an article for the *Chicago Tribune* in 1993, journalist Matthew Gilbert delved into the cultural phenomena of drag queens in film and television in his article titled, "What a Drag: Men Dolled Up as Women and Women Clothed as Men: Is Cross-Dressing Crossing Over to the Mainstream?" He highlighted the increased representation of drag during this period in stating, "as if to punctuate the end of the socially stagnant Reagan era, a parade of drag images is now crossing screens big and small, mostly men bedecked in wigs,

lipstick and scarves to hide their protruding Adam's apples."<sup>199</sup> The 1990s represented a liberal divergence from the conservative political climate of the 1980s. This dramatic change was evident in the politics in the United States, but also extended into popular culture.

Representations of drag became commonplace in film and television and mainstream audiences became increasingly exposed to cross-dressing and drag queens. Gilbert also mentioned, "along with symbolizing self-empowerment, cross-dressers also can remind us that sex roles and costumes are fictional."<sup>200</sup> Drag queens explicitly defied gender norms and encouraged audiences to question gender. Despite this political stance, or perhaps due to this stance, drag was becoming increasingly accepted by the mainstream.

In his 1993 article, Gilbert described the new era of representation in the media in writing, "Hollywood is about to go on its own gender bender."<sup>201</sup> Drag was everywhere in the 1990s, in music, in pop culture, and in film and television. It was almost impossible for anyone in the United States in the 1990s to miss the constant references and representations of cross-dressing and drag in the media. Bill Richardson, author of *Guy to Goddess: An Intimate Look at Drag Queens*, also explained this cultural phenomenon in stating, "films like *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and *Orlando*, and *The Crying Game*, the popular successes of performers like RuPaul; and the ongoing smudging of gender roles have all moved drag away from the margins and a little more into the mainstream."<sup>202</sup> While drag was everywhere in popular culture in the 1990s, it was often

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<sup>199</sup> Matthew Gilbert, "What a Drag: Men Dolled Up as Women and Women Clothed as Men: Is Cross-Dressing Crossing Over to the Mainstream?" *Chicago Tribune*, June 30, 1993.

<sup>200</sup> Gilbert, "What a Drag: Men Dolled Up as Women and Women Clothed as Men: Is Cross-Dressing Crossing Over to the Mainstream?" *Chicago Tribune*, June 30, 1993.

<sup>201</sup> Gilbert, "What a Drag: Men Dolled Up as Women and Women Clothed as Men: Is Cross-Dressing Crossing Over to the Mainstream?" *Chicago Tribune*, June 30, 1993.

<sup>202</sup> Bill Richardson, *Guy to Goddess: An Intimate Look at Drag Queens* (Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1994), 4.

used in a comedic manner instead of as an explicitly political statement. Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* in 1996 highlighted the popularity of cisgender actors in gender non-conforming roles for the sake of comedy. He wrote, “if you’re a star who is dying to explore the cross-dressed land of ‘Tootsie,’ ‘To Wong Fu’ and ‘Mrs. Doubtfire,’ you had better choose an amusing character of the opposite sex to play.”<sup>203</sup> When cis actors, such as Robin Williams, Wesley Snipes, or Patrick Swayze, dressed in drag for film and television, they were typically attempting to engage a heterosexual audience instead of making a political statement. These roles were often explicitly comedic as well. When drag celebrities such as RuPaul appeared in the film and television and were catapulted to celebrity status, their existence as drag queens in the media was in itself a political statement. These performances explicitly defied gender and societal norms and brought a distinct queer subculture to light.

In 1995, a blockbuster film about three drag queens called *To Wong Foo Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar* was released. The drag queens were played by famous actors Wesley Snipes, Patrick Swayze, and John Leguizamo, and their characters travelled across the United States to compete in the Drag Queen of America Pageant in Hollywood. As the three drag queens made their way across the country, they met many different kinds of people and teach small-town individuals about what being a drag queen means. The queens faced bigotry in their travels, but they ultimately were met with compassion and understanding from people who previously did not understand drag. The film itself had many remarkable quotes, including when Snipes’s character Noxeema stated, “when a gay man has way too much fashion sense for one

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<sup>203</sup> Stephen Holden, "Whoopi Goldberg's Turn to Try a Gender Bender," *New York Times*, October 25, 1996.

gender, he is a drag queen.”<sup>204</sup> While the film made light of drag culture, it provided understanding for heterosexual audiences and representation in the media for drag queens. Noxeema was also well known for being unapologetic about her identity in the film, and told naysayers, “your approval is neither desired nor required.”<sup>205</sup>

Part of the film’s success was inevitably due to the fact that viewers could see their favorite actors presenting as feminine in the film. While the film did not use drag queens for the roles, it still provided representation and taught mainstream audiences about what it means to be a drag queen. The film also touched on the struggles gender non-conforming people faced, as well as tolerance and acceptance. A small-town character Carol Ann told one of the queens at the end, “I know, that I am very fortunate to have a lady friend who just happens to have an Adam’s Apple.”<sup>206</sup> This was meaningful for the film, as past Hollywood representations of gender non-conforming often ended in tragedy. In *To Wong Foo*, the three drag queens traveled around the country and experienced love and acceptance from a small town. This comedic and heartwarming story highlighted the humanity of the drag queen characters and welcomed audiences in on the joke.

The film was watched by a wide variety of audiences in the United States and was thus reviewed by many. In a review in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1995, journalist Michael Wilmington described his “surprising” reaction to the film. He wrote, “A mix of drag comedy and inspirational road movie ‘Wong Foo’ is surprisingly, sometimes exhilaratingly, good. And so are

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<sup>204</sup> *To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, Directed by Beeban Kidron, Universal Pictures, 1995.

<sup>205</sup> *To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, Directed by Beeban Kidron, Universal Pictures, 1995.

<sup>206</sup> *To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, Directed by Beeban Kidron, Universal Pictures, 1995.

its three stars.”<sup>207</sup> In his review, Wilmington highlighted the comedic nature of the film, the inherent drag elements, and the successes of the actors in portraying gender non-conforming roles. Additionally, he stated, “...it’s clearly a movie written from a gay perspective, yet pitched deliberately toward a mainstream audience.”<sup>208</sup> Despite his “surprisingly” positive reaction to the film, Wilmington expressed the queer slant of the film and also the marketing of the film to a heterosexual audience via the superstar actors and comedy in the film. Another article in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1995 expressed a similar statement about the portrayal of drag and queer lives in the film, despite the film being marketed towards a heterosexual audience. The author emphasized the comedy in the film, then stated, “parents should be prepared to answer a lot of delicate questions about this alternative lifestyle...at least, Kidron’s movie raises the issues in a warm, funny manner that could get across to middle American viewers.”<sup>209</sup> Both authors emphasized the queer content in the film as a possible concern or deterrent for audiences. There was a definite ambivalence in these reviews, but ultimately the articles both discussed the fact that *To Wong Foo* reached many viewers and even brought gender non-conformity to middle America.

*To Wong Foo* was able to engage a wide range of audiences and show gender non-conformity to viewers all over the United States. The representation of drag and gender non-conformity in the film was flawed in several ways. The film used gender non-conformity, via characters played by cis men in drag, for their comedic value, instead of as genuine expressions

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<sup>207</sup> Michael Wilmington, "Movies 'Girl's' Night Out: 'Wong Foo' a Surprisingly Good Mix of Drag Comedy, Road Movie," *Chicago Tribune*, Sep 08, 1995.

<sup>208</sup> Wilmington, "Movies 'Girl's' Night Out: 'Wong Foo' a Surprisingly Good Mix of Drag Comedy, Road Movie," *Chicago Tribune*, Sep 08, 1995.

<sup>209</sup> "Gay Issues: Seeing Stars in Drag in 'to Wong Foo,' may Raise some Questions." *Chicago Tribune*, Sep 21, 1995.

of identity. Additionally, the film also was written by cis people and for cis people, thus failing to exhibit actual queer voices and stories. The film was designed to be humorous and palatable to the mainstream, which was evident in the above factors. While the film did not provide flawless depictions of gender non-conformity, *To Wong Foo* showed audiences that gender non-conforming people could be loved, accepted, and admired. A similar film was released in 1994, called *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, and depicted the journey of two drag queens and a trans woman in Australia. Movies about drag queens were becoming increasingly widespread and embraced by the mainstream during the 1990s, as shown by the above films. Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor describe this phenomena in their book, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, in stating, “at the turn of the twentieth century, it seemed as if everywhere one turned in the world of popular culture, men were donning women’s clothes.”<sup>210</sup>

While the representation of drag and gender non-conformity in the media during the 1990s and early 2000s was often depicted with heterosexual actors and created for a heterosexual audience, it still provided an important sense of representation for queer youth. Most heterosexual people in the United States did not know actual trans or gender non-conforming people, thus everything they knew about gender non-conformity came from the media. In the film *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*, actress and trans activist Jen Richards articulated the importance of the media representation of her youth in asking, “would I even know I’m trans if I had never seen any kind of depiction of gender variance on screen?”<sup>211</sup> Though there were evidently flawed media representations of gender variance in the 1990s and 2000s, the fact that

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<sup>210</sup> Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>211</sup> *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*. Directed by Sam Feder. Field of Dreams Production, 2020.

there was representation for queer and gender non-conforming youth was meaningful in itself. Young people could relate to the queer and gender non-conforming images they saw on their screens and even see themselves in these images. Trans author Ciara Cremin also touched on the importance of popular culture and media representation in stating:

“Whether it’s Prince, Bowie, Boy George, or even Frank Ocean, *Some Like it Hot* or *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, pop culture is sometimes the antidote to convention. It gives us strength and courage. It helps normalize what was once considered pathological.”<sup>212</sup>

Increased media representation gave queer youth hope and a sense of camaraderie with the images they saw on television. As journalist Bruce Bawer stated in the *New York Times* in 1996, “Hollywood, we are told, ‘taught straight people what to think about gay people and gay people what to think about themselves.’”<sup>213</sup> The same concept applied to gender non-conforming representation, as examples in film and television taught straight communities how to treat queer communities and queer communities how to see themselves. When gender variance was depicted in a positive light, this had a dramatic impact on both queer and heterosexual audiences. Queer people could see themselves in characters on screen, while heterosexual people could develop empathy and understanding for real gender non-conforming people.

### **Trans Stories of Acceptance, Violence, and Resistance**

In the 1990s and 2000s, a distinct transgender movement was beginning to develop with goals of political activism and societal acceptance. The trans community faced many challenges

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<sup>212</sup> Ciara Cremin, *Man-Made Woman: The Dialectics of Cross-Dressing*, (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 124-125.

<sup>213</sup> Bruce Bawer, "Why Can't Hollywood Get Gay Life Right?: Why does Hollywood Continue to Get Gay Life so Wrong? as the American Movie Industry Stumbles, Foreign Films are Treating Homosexuality Gracefully." *New York Times*, March 10, 1996.

during this period, from fighting for healthcare, to facing persistent transphobia, to struggling to find voices within the queer community itself. Trans people faced marginalization from many different places in society and from the queer community as well. There was increasing representation of trans identities in the 1990s, but trans people still faced oppression and violence within their daily lives. Additionally, newfound trans celebrities still dealt with transphobia, the medicalization of their bodies, and invasions of privacy.

Model and actress Caroline “Tula” Cossey proved to be a good example of how the media treated trans people in the 1990s. Cossey was a successful British model and was well-known for her role in a James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only* and as a Playboy model in the United States in the 1980s. In her book *My Story*, which was published in 1991, Cossey told the story of how she was forced to come out years prior and then described the reactions she was met with in her professional and personal relationships. Cossey was outed by an article published by *News of the World* titled “James Bond Girl was a Boy.” She explained that “the headline hit [her] like a slap in the face.”<sup>214</sup> When Cossey later on questioned the newspaper about their decision to share her medical history, they replied with “the people have a right to know.”<sup>215</sup> Cossey explained that her public outing hurt her career and she additionally faced blatant transphobia as a result. For the rest of Cossey’s career, she was inundated with questions about her medical transition and her gender, even though she did not want to talk about being a trans woman. Cossey articulated her anger and indignation at being publicly outed without her consent in saying, “it should have been my choice to discuss my sexuality when and if I felt ready to do

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<sup>214</sup> Caroline Cossey, “My Story in *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs*, ed. Jonathan Ames, (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 149.

<sup>215</sup> Cossey, “My Story in *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs*, ed. Jonathan Ames, (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 150.

so...*The News of the World* had taken that choice away from me.”<sup>216</sup> Cossey began to face the press again when she published *My Story* in 1991, which she described as being thrown to the lions as she continued to face blatant transphobia and further invasions of privacy.<sup>217</sup>

As Cossey explained in her book, she did not want to talk about being trans, but the media focused on the excruciating and private details of her transition. Cossey went on *The Phil Donahue Show* in 1990 after being outed in previous years. Scholar Joanne Meyerowitz discussed this element of tabloid culture in stating, “the rise of tabloid talk shows, with audience interaction, changed both the quantity and the quality of transsexuals’ television appearances.”<sup>218</sup> Cossey’s appearance on *Donahue* was an example of trans sensationalism on television in order to be engage a wide audience. Donahue described Cossey as “one of the most talked about transsexual profiles in years” and spent much of the inquiry questioning Cossey about her transition.<sup>219</sup> He asked her about the specific surgeries she received and the dates of these, during which Cossey was visibly uncomfortable. In the interview, Cossey described the way the media discussed her public outing and explained, “they used to say I used to be a ‘man’ which used to irritate me because I was never a man.”<sup>220</sup> Cossey was earnest and well-spoken in her interview, but Donahue and the audience put her in a position in which she had to constantly defend her identity and her existence.

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<sup>216</sup> Cossey, “My Story in *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs*, ed. Jonathan Ames, (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 151.

<sup>217</sup> Cossey, “My Story in *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs*, ed. Jonathan Ames, (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 151.

<sup>218</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 278.

<sup>219</sup> *The Phil Donahue Show*. “Caroline “Tula” Cossey.” Directed by Ryan Weiner. WBBM-TV, 1990.

<sup>220</sup> *The Phil Donahue Show*. “Caroline “Tula” Cossey.” Directed by Ryan Weiner. WBBM-TV, 1990.

The audience asked Cossey several intrusive questions and also made transphobic remarks. One audience member told her that he didn't mean to offend, "but [he] would not buy that Playboy magazine, much less even glance at it...she's not a girl."<sup>221</sup> After this rude and transphobic remark, the audience clapped in agreement. Cossey quickly and eloquently responded, "I don't have to prove to anyone that I'm a woman, I am a woman."<sup>222</sup> While Cossey was well-spoken and defended herself, she faced extreme transphobia from the media during the 1990s. When Cossey was publicly outed, she lost jobs and she experienced transphobia from people in her life who were previously supportive. Cossey eventually published *My Story* and entered the media circuit once again, but was met with intrusive questions about her transition and transphobia once again. The story of Cossey and her resilience despite cruelty from the media emphasized how the media treated trans people in the 1990s. Cossey was viewed as a spectacle of sorts and people asked her intrusive and inappropriate questions. She constantly had to defend her identity and her existence while facing transphobia from the media. At the same time, Cossey was an inspiration figure for trans youth despite the cruel circumstances she faced.

Trans people in the 1990s and 2000s also faced transphobia from the government and the queer community itself. Trans people experienced violence and cruelty from the outside world, but also struggled to find a voice within the queer community. The 1990s served as a pivotal turning point, as the trans community began to come together to form a unique trans movement. In an article for *The Advocate* in 1994 called "For Transsexuals 1994 is 1969," writer John Gallager interviewed many trans activists to explain the challenges that trans people faced in

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<sup>221</sup> *The Phil Donahue Show*. "Caroline "Tula" Cossey." Directed by Ryan Weiner. WBBM-TV, 1990.

<sup>222</sup> *The Phil Donahue Show*. "Caroline "Tula" Cossey." Directed by Ryan Weiner. WBBM-TV, 1990.

1994. 1969 was a profound turning point in queer history, as queer people came together to advocate for their rights. Gallagher explained that 1994 represented a similar turning point for trans people. Up until this time, there was no cohesive movement for trans people and this community faced marginalization from many outlets, including the queer community itself. Ann Northrop, a lesbian activist in New York City, told Gallagher, “conservatives want a homogenous image and are afraid to embrace the transgender community because they think that’s going to screw up our ability to gain civil rights.”<sup>223</sup> This theme was prevalent since the Stonewall Riots and subsequent Gay Liberation movement of 1969, but at this point trans people were increasingly eager to stand up and resist these transphobic tendencies of the queer community.

The transphobia in queer spaces led some trans people and allies to fight for trans issues from outside of the queer movement. The queer community was not giving enough of a platform to the trans community, which led to this dramatic move. Phyllis Randolph Frye the executive director of the International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy in Houston, told Gallagher:

“I consider myself a lesbian, but these people were saying that transgendered had nothing to do with the [gay] movement. It was really ugly and very hurtful. I’ve pretty much become a transgendered activist only, which is sad. I’m having to fight with my natural allies.”<sup>224</sup>

Frye explained that because some queer people believed that trans people did not belong in the movement, she had to turn away from the queer movement in order to be an ally for trans people. The work of trans people and allies such as Frye focused on issues that dramatically impacted

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<sup>223</sup> John Gallagher, “For Transsexuals 1994 is 1969,” *The Advocate*, Aug 23, 1994, 60.

<sup>224</sup> Gallagher, “For Transsexuals 1994 is 1969,” *The Advocate*, Aug 23, 1994, 62.

trans lives and worked to bring the trans community together in activism. The transgender movement in itself often included “not only transsexuals but also individuals who dress in drag or cross-dress,” as these groups were often alienated from gay activism as well.<sup>225</sup> The political emergence of trans activism in the 1990s was incredibly important for the community as whole, but activists also faced an uphill battle towards equality and equal rights.

Activists in the article also emphasized new ideas about what it meant to be trans in the 1990s. Many people began to focus less on a person’s ability to pass as one binary gender or another and began to embrace a wider representation of gender as a whole. Being able to pass protected trans people from violence in many instances, but also served as a barrier to alternative expressions of transness and gender. Riki Anne Wilchins stated:

“The idea of passing is essentially a way of saying, ‘I am not OK. I have to fool you.’ Every transsexual does not have to get surgery. Transsexual women sometimes have penises, which are entirely appropriate genitals. Some have vaginas, and those are equally appropriate. Neither one is any less female.”<sup>226</sup>

This broader approach to transness was becoming more widespread and any activists such as Wilchins hoped to embrace a wider definition of transness in their activism. Though trans activism in the 1990s emerged as a result of marginalization and oppression, there was hope for the future of trans people within the movement at the same time. Frye explained this feeling of hope in stating, “five years ago I was pretty disillusioned...now so many leaders and activists are coming up, I see nothing but progress ahead.”<sup>227</sup> Trans people were undeniably marginalized in the 1990s as they faced discrimination from the United States government and the queer

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<sup>225</sup> Gallagher, “For Transsexuals 1994 is 1969,” *The Advocate*, Aug 23, 1994, 60.

<sup>226</sup> Gallagher, “For Transsexuals 1994 is 1969,” *The Advocate*, Aug 23, 1994, 63.

<sup>227</sup> Gallagher, “For Transsexuals 1994 is 1969,” *The Advocate*, Aug 23, 1994, 63.

community, while also facing disproportionate levels of unemployment, homelessness, and violence. Frye alluded to a newfound sense of hope in the 1990s that accompanied the development of a unique trans movement. The trans community united together and advocated for tangible change during this time and experienced increasing recognition and success. The lives of trans people in the 1990s were very complex, as they faced sensationalism and representation from one side and transphobia and cruelty from another. The media was simultaneously interested in trans people and their bodies, but also refused to represent trans individuals as people. The 1990s saw an ambivalent reaction to increasing trans visibility, but the trans community saw more hope and the possibility of progress with newfound activism.

### ***RuPaul's Drag Race and the Mainstream Embrace of Gender Non-conformity***

The 1990s and 2000s represent a unique era in the public representations of gender non-conformity. More than ever before, drag, trans lives, and gender variance were embraced by the mainstream in several mediums. Gender non-conforming celebrities rose to prominence and were celebrated by a wide audience. During this time period, the world was changing dramatically and queer people created a seat at the table for themselves. The 1990s and 2000s represented a massive change from the political conservatism of the 1980s. Drag, the trans community, and gender non-conformity had previously existed as a distinct subculture, but the 1990s saw an increased public embrace and celebration of drag and gender non-conformity. While a few gender variant celebrities were elevated during this time period, it is also essential to note that the average gender non-conforming person still faced political marginalization, violence, and abuse.

In the 1990s and 2000s, drag and gender non-conformity took many different forms and was viewed by a wide range of audiences. Gender variance became present in the media, in film

and television, in scholarship, and in people's everyday lives. In many ways, drag was publicly embraced during the 1990s and 2000s. Gender non-conforming people still faced intense marginalization, but the community was constantly mentioned in scholarship and popular culture. Drag took many forms during this time, from lip sync performances at gay bars to being present in film and television to radical music performances. Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor described the diversity of drag during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in stating:

“Drag at the turn of the twenty-first century has taken on a wide variety of forms, but all of them are foreshadowed in drag history. There are talented artists who impersonate female icons or create their own personae; there are street queens who live a marginal life; there are professional and amateur drag queens who lip-sync and adopt a range of styles, from female impersonation to campy drag to voguing; there are movement activists who adopt drag for explicitly political purposes; there are mainstream celebrities such as RuPaul and Lady Chablis, who began their careers like other drag queens it made it big-time.”<sup>228</sup>

Some elements of drag performance still remained alien to the heterosexual population, as straight audiences typically only saw drag through celebrities in the mainstream such as RuPaul. Some drag performances stayed in gay bars and existed for a queer audience, while others appealed to a heterosexual audience. Drag came to encapsulate a wide range of performance in the 1990s and 2000s, ranging from lip-sync performances to acting to dance to film and television. During this time gender bending drag still existed, but more traditional forms of drag, by embodying femininity, were much more common and mainstream. Even if performances

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<sup>228</sup> Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 186-187.

were not explicitly political, drag maintained a political edge even as it became more mainstream and recognized.

Despite the public embrace of drag, drag was undeniably bold and took courage. In his exploration of drag in the late 1990s and 2000s, Bill Richardson stated,

“It requires a particular singularity of purpose for a man to build his life on a foundation of paints, gowns, wigs, and accessories. This is not a society that applauds those who thumb their noses at conformity; nor is outward diversity celebrated. What I mean is, drag takes guts.”<sup>229</sup>

Drag performers inherently defied cultural norms and proved gender to be constructed. Going against the binary in such a public way was profoundly political. Rupp and Taylor stated that drag shows, derived “their political edge, in part, from the subtle critique of hegemonic masculinity and mainstream heterosexuality staged in the performances.”<sup>230</sup> Drag inherently embodied gender ambiguity and the questioning of gender and elicited a similar response in all audiences. In the 1990s and 2000s, drag increasingly appealed to heterosexual audiences, while also continuing to engage with queer communities. Rupp and Taylor explained that in their case study of the drag queens at the 801 Cabaret in Key West, Florida, the queens’ “performances both create solidarity among gay audience members and draw straight viewers into a world they

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<sup>229</sup> Bill Richardson, *Guy to Goddess: An Intimate Look at Drag Queens*, (Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>230</sup> Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, “Crossing Boundaries in Participatory Action Research: Performing Protest with Drag Queens,” from *Rhyming Hope and History: Activists, Academics, and Social Movement Scholarship*, ed. David Croteau, William Hoynes, Charlotte Ryan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005: 239.

seldom experience.”<sup>231</sup> Both homosexual and heterosexual audiences flocked to drag performances and were enthralled with the embrace of gender variance in popular culture.

The 1990s represent a unique time in the representation of gender variance. In the mid-twentieth century, drag performers and gender non-conforming people faced social ostracism and marginalization from the mainstream. By the 1990s, gender variance was not only accepted but embraced by the mainstream. In his book *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre*, Laurence Senelick explained that, “what had once been considered shameful or shabby was reclaimed and rehabilitated as a defiant emblem of selfhood.”<sup>232</sup> During the mid to late twentieth century, drag transformed from a subculture to a pop culture sensation in the matter of decade. This transformation was shocking and unprecedented, but gender non-conforming people on the margins of society still dealt with strife and discrimination as gender variant celebrities simultaneously rose to prominence.

RuPaul became known as one of the world’s first drag queen celebrities and rose to prominence through music, film, and television. From the release of RuPaul’s first song to his talk show to the creation of RuPaul’s Drag Race, RuPaul had been a pop culture phenomenon since the early 1990s. RuPaul was embraced by *Entertainment Weekly*, the *Arsenio Hall Show*, and more during the 1990s. Despite his massive success, he was only getting started. Simply put, “there is no drag queen bigger than RuPaul.”<sup>233</sup> Since the 1990s, RuPaul had been marketed to a mainstream audience and he made a career out of the public fascination with gender variance. Senelick described the new drag celebrities such as RuPaul and Lady Bunny in saying, “drag

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<sup>231</sup> Rupp and Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 186-187.

<sup>232</sup> Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 469.

<sup>233</sup> Jeff Yarbrough, “RuPaul: The Man Behind the Mask.” *The Advocate*, Aug 23, 1994, 66.

queen' for them was a badge of honor and, more crucially, a conduit to stardom... they have read all the feminist and queer theory, boned up on the hagiography, and behave in a postmodern manner with quotations marks around their drag."<sup>234</sup> Senelick described why gender variant figures, especially RuPaul, gained fame and notoriety. RuPaul himself had a good sense of queer history and the importance of drag as a political statement in itself. He discussed the power of drag in stating, "with my drag, I encompass both male and female. I become a microcosm of the whole universe, the yin and the yang, and people pick up on that and are enthralled by the power."<sup>235</sup> As a black queer man, RuPaul was making a dramatic statement in the entertainment industry. He challenged norms of gender, sexuality, and race, all while entertaining the masses. At the same time, RuPaul experienced racism and homophobia in his career. In an interview with *The Advocate* in 1994, RuPaul explained, "I think I've experienced racism—and every other ism—from every angle: from gays, from lesbians, from blacks, from women."<sup>236</sup> RuPaul used his identity as a black, queer drag queen to provide representation for queer youth and to uplift others who faced similar challenges.

The first episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* aired on February 2, 2009. The show, hosted by RuPaul, invited nine drag queens to compete for the title of "America's Next Drag Superstar." The show asked contestants to compete in a series of challenges, from sewing to acting to performing. Ultimately, the show allowed contestants to showcase their talents and share their stories on an unprecedented platform. As a reality television series, the show allowed the queens to represent themselves authentically and to share their lives as honestly as they pleased. The

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<sup>234</sup> Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 434.

<sup>235</sup> Gilbert, "What a Drag: Men Dolled Up as Women and Women Clothed as Men: Is Cross-Dressing Crossing Over to the Mainstream?" *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, Jun 30, 1993.

<sup>236</sup> Yarbrough, "RuPaul: The Man Behind the Mask." *The Advocate*, Aug 23, 1994, 67.

show was full of comedy and entertainment, but also full of heart. Contestants told stories about being rejected from their families, experiencing racism, and the struggles they faced as gay men in the United States in the early 2000s. One contestant, Ongina, also famously came out as HIV positive on the show in 2009 and existed as a beacon of light for others in the same situation. In the show, RuPaul “deploys her long and successful history as a drag performer in order to position herself as the quintessential drag spokesperson.”<sup>237</sup> Throughout the show, RuPaul created a unique brand and marketed herself, while also teaching contestants to do the same.

Though RuPaul was already famous prior to the show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* solidified his position as the most famous drag queen in the world, while also using this platform to help the careers of other drag queens. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* allowed for a wide variety of queer storytelling and thus allowed for unprecedented and unmatched gender variant representation. In its decade long tenure on television, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* touched on almost every possible issue that queer people have dealt with in the twentieth century, from gay conversion therapy to coming to terms with doing drag as a trans person. RuPaul used his tremendous platform to catapult the careers of other drag queens while also allowing each contestant to tell their unique story. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has been airing for over a decade and now has many spinoff series in countries all over the world. The television show continues to break boundaries and showcase drag and the queer community in an exceedingly diverse light. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has proved that “drag queens and kings are adored images of power and individuality” and exists as one of

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<sup>237</sup>Eir-Anne Edgar, “Xtravaganza!”: Drag Representation and Articulation in “RuPaul’s Drag Race.” *Studies in Popular Culture* 34, no.1 (Fall 2011): 135.

the most diverse forms of representation for gender variance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>238</sup>

### **1990-2009 Conclusion**

The 1990s and 2000s ushered in a new era of representation and gender non-conforming community that had never been seen before. Representations of gender non-conformity were widespread, but were often flawed as these representations often existed under a cisgender and heterosexual lense. All of these acknowledgements provided queer youth with a sense of camaraderie and hope during this time. From the release of *Paris is Burning* in 1990 to the airing of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in 2009, this era saw unsurpassed representation and visibility of gender variance. Gender variant stories in the media and television were increasingly diverse as gender non-conforming people increasingly began to speak for themselves. Heterosexual audiences became eager to learn more about gender non-conforming and increasingly attended drag performances and supported the community more than ever before. The 1990s and 2000s saw the dramatic transformation of drag into a mainstream cultural movement that transcended societal differences in numerous ways. Queer and gender non-conforming people still faced varying levels of marginalization at this time, but the increased visibility of gender variance provided the community and queer youth with hope.

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<sup>238</sup> Gilbert, "What a Drag: Men Dolled Up as Women and Women Clothed as Men: Is Cross-Dressing Crossing Over to the Mainstream?" *Chicago Tribune* (1963-1996), Jun 30, 1993.

## Conclusion

In the period from 1952 to 2009, representations of and attitudes towards drag, trans lives, and gender non-conformity transformed dramatically due to the impact of the media, public opinion, and political resistance. In the 1950s, gender non-conformity existed as a queer subculture and was not typically acknowledged by the heterosexual mainstream. Additionally, queer people faced police brutality and extreme political marginalization as well. During the time from 1952 to 2009, gender non-conformity began to evolve dramatically, largely due to queer political advocacy and increased popular culture representations. By 2009, *RuPaul's Drag Race* gave drag performers and diverse gender non-conforming identities a worldwide and unprecedented platform. The television show itself evolved dramatically during its tenure. Initially, the program only included cis male drag queens, but increasingly embraced trans and non-binary contestants who performed in drag. The most recent example of this representation occurred with drag artist Gottmik, the show's first trans-masculine contestant, in the thirteenth season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* airing in 2021. Television shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* highlighted the fact that drag and other forms of gender non-conformity in the twenty-first century became increasingly celebrated and acknowledged by the heterosexual mainstream.

More trans and gender non-conforming celebrities also began to emerge during the early twenty-first century, with many of these public figures acknowledging the impacts of previous gender non-conforming trailblazers as role models for the community. Trans celebrities and artists continued to advocate for the trans and gender non-conforming communities and provided trans youth with unprecedented and diverse representations of transness. These film and television representations ranged from *Transparent* to *Disclosure* to *Pose*. Susan Stryker touched

upon the development of trans art and joy in the twenty-first century in her book, *Transgender History: The Root's of Today's Revolution*. She stated:

“When trans and gender-nonconforming lives are lived joyously and unapologetically in plain sight or their truths and dangers are spoken out loud, when the knowledge that comes from living those lives is channeled into music and dance, written about and written from, played with and fantasized over, when their beauty and weirdness, their sharp edges and dark recesses are creatively explored and collectively experienced, that is equally as important as heavy political activism.”<sup>239</sup>

Trans and gender non-conforming joy is increasingly present in popular culture for all audiences to witness and learn from. Additionally, further representations of diversity in gender non-conformity have been more prominent, including representations of non-binary and gender fluid communities. There has been increasing attention to defying the gender binary and also proving gender to be constructed. As the twenty-first century progresses, there are also wider definitions of transness that exist outside of the simple binary and defy the stereotype that trans people must simply transition from one gender to another. Judith Butler touched upon the paradox of living in a world that is defined by the gender binary when gender itself is proven to be constructed.

Butler stated,

“Genders, then, can be neither true or false, neither real nor apparent. And yet, one is compelled to live in a world in which genders constitute univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable.”<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017), 211.

<sup>240</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 528.

Butler expressed the complicated nature of living in a world that relies heavily on gender and the gender binary. This phenomenon is extremely difficult for trans and gender non-conforming individuals, but there has been progress in this regard. Specifically, the increased use of they/them and other diverse pronouns has indicated that in current times, many people are more comfortable expressing gender variance. The future of drag, trans lives, and gender non-conformity all exist outside of the binary and outside of popular perceptions of these identities. As the twenty-first century progresses, more people are eager to express their gender in a variety of ways. Subsequently, many more people with a wide range of identities now participate in the art of drag, instead of only cis gay men. Additionally, this shift towards gender non-conforming and non-binary identities is being increasingly represented in the media, public opinion, and popular resistance.

There have been countless examples of diverse representations of gender non-conformity on film and television since 2009. The television show *Pose*, which began airing in 2018, serves as one of the best examples of the future of gender non-conformity in the media. The show centers on New York City's LGBTQIA+ and gender non-conforming ballroom scene in the 1980s and 1990s. *Pose* delves into the lives of fictional queer and gender non-conforming people during this time period and uses storytelling to share messages on a wide variety of issues the LGBTQIA+ faced during this time, from marginalization to HIV/AIDS to employment discrimination. The show itself also included a diverse cast and specifically ensured that trans actors played trans characters. Additionally, the show itself has many trans writers and producers, including trans activist Janet Mock. M.J. Rodriguez, the actress who plays Blanca in the show, discussed the release of the show in stating, "when *Pose* happened, I never thought in a

million years that our stories would be placed on a platform that had mainstream on top of it.”<sup>241</sup> *Pose* not only provided audiences with unprecedented and diverse stories about trans and gender non-conformity in the 1980s and 1990s, but also empowered trans actors and producers outside of the show itself. *Pose* in many ways represents a positive future for gender non-conformity in the media.

While the continued increase of representations of gender non-conformity in the media brings hope to many, it is also important to note that the increased visibility of trans and gender non-conforming celebrities and television shows does not overshadow the problems that this community continues to face. Laverne Cox, trans actress and activist, stated, “we always have to be really skeptical when a few people are elevated and the majority of people are still struggling.”<sup>242</sup> The reality of being trans or gender non-conforming in the United States differs starkly from the incredible increase in trans visibility in the media. Many trans and gender non-conforming individuals still experience marginalization in the United States in numerous ways, from unemployment, to housing discrimination, to healthcare barriers, to blatant transphobia and discrimination. The increased visibility of the gender non-conforming community is encouraging, but advocating for politically marginalized members of queer communities must continue to be a priority.

Representations and public opinions of drag, trans identities, and gender non-conformity as a whole have changed dramatically from 1952 to 2009. The gender non-conforming community as a whole emerged from a place of blatant marginalization to a place of celebration

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<sup>241</sup> *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*, Directed by Sam Feder, Field of Dreams Production, 2020.

<sup>242</sup> *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*, Directed by Sam Feder, Field of Dreams Production, 2020.

and acknowledgement from heterosexual and queer audiences alike. Gender non-conformity, as well as popular perceptions of it, are constantly evolving. The study of the history of drag, trans lives, and gender non-conformity allows scholars and all audiences to understand how this community has transformed and allows them to appreciate the challenges the community has overcome. In studying the history of gender non-conformity, we can learn from the strife, marginalization, and joy these communities experienced from the twentieth to twenty-first centuries. Through the study of gender non-conformity, we can better advocate for gender variance in the present day and learn from the mistakes of past activism, such as exclusionary tactics and internal divisions.

The increased media representations, public awareness, and political organizing for the gender non-conforming community brings hope that this community can overcome marginalization and empower queer youth to live authentic lives. Additionally, the increased acceptance of gender non-conformity from the heterosexual mainstream provides hope that attitudes are changing and that cis people can help advocate for the trans community, drag, and gender non-conformity. Drag, the trans community, and gender non-conformity have allowed people to form queer communities, form bonds, and express themselves. There is innate power in self-exploration and self-expression, especially through gender variance. RuPaul expresses this unique power in stating, “when you become the image of your own imagination, it’s the most powerful thing you could ever do.”<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> RuPaul Charles, Quoted in Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre*, 435.

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