The Gentrification of Drag

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The Gentrification of Drag

How drag refuses to lose its edge in mainstream entertainment
By Kyle Kucharski

Drag culture is blowing up the mainstream. What has historically been a queer subculture relegated to the nightlife world is now an emerging arena of entertainment on primetime television.

Reality TV shows like “RuPaul’s Drag Race” have changed the drag landscape forever, bringing it into the center of the cultural conversation, where it can be made into family-friendly, PG-13 programming. An ever-growing thirst for more drag content means more opportunities for performers to make careers, more money for those performers and more varied and dynamic art. But what is the cost of the commercial monetization of an audacious, queer form of performance born on the margins of society and fueled by the underground?

In response to this, a growing community of performers—many of them quite new to drag—have created a space for their own type of art, one that attempts to keep drag underground. Their work suggests that if the value of drag lies in its power to shock and to provide a dissenting critique on heterosexual, cisgender culture, its power as a subversive form of art is lost when its mass-produced and inevitably sanitized.

To understand this moment in drag, it’s important to understand the history of the practice. For LGBTQ and non-gender-conforming people, gender expression can be an all-encompassing burden or blessing. So the mere experience of seeing something so personal and internal being expressed by others who think like you do is liberating.

Additionally, drag traditionally existed in bars and clubs that were safe havens of self-expression for queer people who couldn’t act like themselves in the real world. Inside these bastions of freedom, new identities can be created, gender can be explored and people can reveal their souls, even if only temporarily.

Cross-dressing in the world of performance and theater has roots that go way back across multiple cultures. As stated in Corinne Blackmer’s 1995 book En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion and Opera, in Ancient Greece, the Kabuki theater of Japan and the theaters of Shakespeare’s era, all actors were men, so female characters were played by men in drag.
The practice continued into the 20th century, but over time, as acting and performance opened up to different genders, men still performed in drag but the practice began to create a path of its own. Instead of being out of necessity, dressing in drag became a distinct branch of performance art.

In the 1940s and 50s, a troupe of queer performers called the Jewel Box Revue travelled around post-war America performing in drag, even receiving a standing ovation at New York’s Apollo Theater.

French playwright Jean Poiret’s 1973 La Cage aux Folles (later remade multiple times as “The Birdcage” starring Robin Williams) was one of the more significant mainstream theater performances to feature characters in drag and an earnest look at gay culture.

Today, the world of drag exists as its own cultural phenomenon with its own history, players and culture. It is both an art and a subculture (really, a subculture of a subculture), as the community of drag performers who treat it as a serious form of expression is inhabited largely by individuals who also exist in the queer, LGBT and non-gender conforming communities. The modern era of drag from the 20th century onward is where we can see two distinct formats of drag-as-performance-art develop.

When looking at drag from a critical standpoint, two distinct formats of the art form emerge. The first and more traditional is theatrical drag, existing solely within the confines or a production or film. The second, newer format I’ll call “subversive drag”: the art form that allows performers to create their own “drag identities” and is an end in itself.

Going back to the theatrical form of drag, we can see it as something closer to its roots in ancient theater and as such much more historically represented in mainstream culture. Theatrical drag can be characterized simply as playing a character of the opposite sex by cross-dressing. Unlike in ancient theater, where female characters played by men were out of necessity and the illusion was intended to be convincing, the modern interpretation of this format of drag does not strive to be exceptionally convincing, instead drawing its comedy from exactly how unconvincing it is.

This format of drag is relegated to on-stage performance and the female characters being depicted almost always exist in part of a larger narrative. Robin Williams’ “Mrs. Doubtfire” and Dustin Hoffman’s “Tootsie” for example are characters within characters
and both are personas created by men in order to achieve something. Men playing female characters in this format are often presented as spectacle and over the top in their depictions. It’s almost exclusively for comedic effect and the underlying theme beneath the performance is often simply the absurdity of “a man in a dress.”

Mainstream TV historically depicted this format of theatrical drag almost exclusively. From “Saturday Night Live”’s iconic “Gap Girls” sketches with Adam Sandler, Steve Farley and David Spade in drag to Martin Lawrence’s Shaneneh, these characters are walking, talking personifications of female stereotypes blown up to absurd heights for comedic effect. But they are characters that exist on a set. Their performance is precise, scripted, and they cease to exist when the cameras are off.

There is a major exception to this list of characters however, and it is perhaps the most famous drag queen in the world: RuPaul. She performs not in theatrical drag as a character on a show, but in subversive drag as someone who started from the bottom up in clubs in New York’s Lower East Side in the 1990s. RuPaul is different because she gained fame as a drag queen, not a man impersonating a character. Additionally, her identity as a black drag queen adds further complexity to her position in the mainstream eye.

Specifically with regards to black television and film, there is a cultural heritage of African-American men performing drag with great mainstream success.

As far back as the early 1970s, black comedian Flip Wilson performed on his variety program The Flip Wilson Show as Geraldine Jones, a feisty Southern woman who popularized phrases like “What you see is what you get!” and “When you’re hot, you’re hot. When you’re not, you’re not.” Audiences couldn’t get enough of Gerladine, making her one of the most famous of Wilson’s recurring characters. The list of African-American men dressing as women goes on, with Jamie Foxx’s Wanda on In Living Color in the 1990s, the aforementioned Martin Lawrence’s Sheneneh Jenkins on the popular sitcom Martin, Tyler Perry’s Madea, and The Wayans Brothers’ “White Chicks.”

In her 1992 book “Black Looks: Race and Representation,” American feminist author bell hooks discusses drag among black men in a critique of the film “Paris Is Burning.” For a man to choose to appear as a female, she says, is a loss, a choice “worthy only of ridicule.” She explains that within the white patriarchal society, the stereotype of black men as hypersexualized and overtly masculine allowed them to appear in drag easier
than white men could, crossing the gender boundary without fear of their heterosexuality or manhood coming into question.

Impersonating a woman solely for comedic effect, specifically a black woman, is an “easy in” for a male comedian, as the female image as an object of ridicule has its roots in one of the most base and accessible forms of comedy in a world ruled by men.

In turn, this voluntary surrender of power by the stereotypically potentially dangerous black man is palatable to mainstream, white audiences that would be completely immunized against any qualities perceived as “threatening.” This helps explain why hooks says that this trend is neither subversive nor empowering: This form of drag is instrumental for the man to create characters that propel their own name, but it comes at the expense of the woman.

Is the mainstream more ready to accept a black drag queen because of a subconscious racial bias? RuPaul’s success suggests the possibility, and it it demonstrates how significant the shift into the mainstream is for subversive drag performers.

The male actors who impersonate women in television shows and movies are in a different category from from the serious or “subversive” performers who treat drag not simply as comedic performance, but as an end in itself. In this sphere, drag exists largely (but not entirely) out of the mainstream eye, and it is rooted in queer culture. Subversive drag is an end in itself like all performance, the difference being that drag specifically uses the concept of gender as a brush in which to paint an illusion.

Although drag most commonly depicts men impersonating women, it encompasses all genders and transcends sexual orientation, class and race. This includes women performing as men (drag kings), trans men/women as either/any gender, women performing as women (bio queens) and anywhere in between.

Drag is a revolt against gender roles, but at the same time a celebration of them. Historically, we exist as a society relegated to a binary gender system, with each sex mapped to its corresponding system of gender norms. But in the wake of a more enlightened and complex understanding of gender and sex, drag assumes a role as a sort of pressure-release valve for individuals to express their gender in a glorified, personal way, with no rules.

This explosive gender performance is the opposite of gender betrayal: for to truly express oneself in drag is to reveal new, previously unearthed terrain of one’s soul that
would otherwise be completely hidden. In this way, drag is necessarily a creative endeavor of celebration and growth.

For this very reason, drag has historically walked the line of mainstream acceptability. With its ancestral home rooted in gay bars and clubs, and in the largely black and Latin ballroom culture, drag has historically traversed in themes that range from risqué to obscene. Existing underground and outside the eye of conventional critique has both allowed subversive drag to develop freely and fueled its sense of purpose.

Despite existing primarily in the realm of subculture, subversive drag performers have been depicted in mainstream media and film for much of the 20th century. As early as 1933, the German film *Victor and Victoria* depicted drag performers and was a major hit, being remade multiple times, including in French as *George and Georgette*.

It wasn’t until the 1990s when depictions of performers in drag began to make the crossover from underground cult productions to more visible formats in a significant number. And perhaps one of the greatest catalysts to bring subversive drag into the mainstream eye was none other than the self-proclaimed Supermodel of the World, RuPaul Charles.

RuPaul was the first drag performer to make a mainstream career out of her in-drag persona. She was not just a male comedian playing one of a myriad of characters that existed on set only, the drag persona was the celebrity, not the man out of drag. Making a name for herself in New York’s drag scene in the early 1990s, RuPaul released *Supermodel of the World*, a dance/house album with the track “Supermodel (You Better Work)” that landed at number 45 on the Billboard Top 100 in 1993. She later hosted her own talk show on VH1, performing sketches and interviewing A-list celebrities like Diana Ross, Cher and Cyndi Lauper.

RuPaul utilized accessible formats to market herself and her identity, bringing drag to popular music and primetime television. Her trailblazing path to success was aided by the fact that her identity was fluid and uncomplicated for viewers who didn’t even know what drag was, with the man and the persona sharing the same name (RuPaul is his actual birth name). It also helped that RuPaul is an excellent conversationalist and charismatic personality. Drag for her was not a crutch, but an extension. Even if drag was not in the picture, he still could have hosted a hit talk show by his own accord.
These projects increased the visibility of a single drag queen, but the world of drag still remained largely underground throughout the 1990s, with RuPaul as the ambassador. The success of her career touched her as a performer and celebrity, but it was still just her career.

That changed when she created “RuPaul’s Drag Race,” a reality show that first aired in 2009 and pitted nine drag queens against each other in a competition to see who would emerge with the title of “America’s next drag superstar” and a $100,000 cash prize. The contestants were all seasoned drag queens who had been working as performers primarily in gay bars and clubs and thrown into sewing competitions, runway walks, creation and design challenges photoshoots and a myriad of talent performances.

The show is brilliant because it allows viewers to be behind the scenes and witness the previously mysterious drag transformation from start to finish. And it comes pre-packaged with a double layer of performance: both directly, from the contestants’ song and dance numbers and runway challenges, and indirectly in the interaction between the contestants themselves and all the delicious reality-TV backstage drama.

“Drag Race” started off receiving mostly positive reception in its first few seasons, but from a relatively limited audience on the LGBTQ-oriented Logo channel. As the show went on year after year, however, viewership steadily increased, becoming the highest-rated show on the network.

Beginning with Season 9 in 2017, RuPaul’s show returned to her old stomping grounds on VH1, and began to reach a much wider, more diverse audience just as RuPaul was awarded her second Emmy for Outstanding Host for a Reality or Reality-Competition Program.

Spawning two spin-off shows (one short-lived, another almost as heavily watched as the original) and airing internationally, Drag Race continues to draw in new viewers while increasing the show’s production polish, length and budget. RuPaul has also gone on to win a third consecutive Emmy, and in 2018 the show earned its first Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Reality-Competition Program. The caliber of celebrity guest judges that appeared on the show also increased with the last two seasons, with major stars like Lady Gaga and Christina Aguilera.

In addition to marketing and product tie-ins on the show, the first ever annual RuPaul’s Drag Con was held in Los Angeles in 2015. DragCon hosts live performances, product booths, meet-and-greets, endless merch sales and gives contestants of the show the
opportunity to market themselves face to face with their fans, many of which show up in drag themselves.

In 2017, DragCon expanded to New York as well, becoming even bigger. This sort of public, concentrated gathering of hundreds of drag performers all in one space (and in the daytime no less!) is unprecedented.

“Drag Race” placed the drag experience in front of people who might otherwise never get a chance to see a live drag show. From rural viewers, to underage viewers and even kids in elementary school, the drag show experience has been moved from the underground to the living room. And it shouldn’t be overlooked that children are indeed actively involved in the “Drag Race” franchise.

The event website explicitly lists kids 10 and under as being admitted to Drag Race free of charge with an adult, and they do show up en masse. The event has a specific “Kid Zone” with coloring books, face painting, story hour and other kid-specific events.

Drag is even beginning to be performed by kids professionally. 11-year-old Desmond Is Amazing was featured in Drag Race’s Season 5 winner Jinkx Monsoon’s music video for her song “The Bacon Shake” and has since been projected on his own career path with endorsements, event appearances and performances.

“It’s always been a family affair,” Randy Barbato, the Co-Founder of Drag Race’s production company told NBC News in 2017. “It just seemed to make sense to have a place for the youngest kids to play, so the whole family could come.”

These words are noteworthy, given the fact that even ten years ago, drag was not seen as something accessible to a “family friendly” audience, not to mention children. This rapid shift is alarming to some, because many in the community see it coming down to a single voice (and a profit-seeking company behind that voice) that is dictating the direction of the entire drag community.

What is lost when drag becomes sanitized and packaged for children? When just fifty years ago, men in drag could be arrested—or worse—during a routine police raid of the venues in which they worked, is there an aspect of drag that is erased when it is pushed into a marketable format for maximum cultural penetration? Should the violence and discrimination drag performers once lived through day-to-day be glossed over to sell t-shirts to kids?
Critique from the trans and gay communities has begun to accelerate on this topic and in light of some recent comments made by RuPaul. In an interview with The Guardian in March of 2018, he said that one of the contestants on Season 9 of the show, Peppermint, who is a trans woman, was allowed on the show only because she did not have her breast implants done yet therefore was essentially still “a man.”

In the same interview, he said that “Drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it’s not men doing it, because at its core it’s a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture.”

RuPaul’s statement of drag being “owned” by men, coinciding with its explosion onto the mainstream stage was seen as a red flag by some in the community. To imply that trans women (who have been entwined with drag culture since its beginning) could not effectively participate in drag to the same degree as a man further supported suspicions that RuPaul and the show’s creators had a narrow-minded perception of who successful drag performers could be.

These comments sparked backlash against RuPaul himself as well as the show, prompting previous contestants and trans activists in the community alike to speak up in opposition of this idea that could have dangerous consequences.

“Drag Race” now is airing its 11th season in 2019 and the world will certainly be watching to see how the show casts its next set of queens. For many in the drag community however, the conversation is more or less over: drag has been gentrified. It has become co-opted as a stage in which to make money, sell products and further the careers of the queens who fit the mainstream description of a Drag Race-ready contestant: pretty, glamorous and played by “real” men.

Out of this turmoil though, emerges new opportunities for performers and artists who are eager to shatter the mainstream drag aesthetic. In a media landscape saturated with content, simply performing as a woman or man is no longer necessarily subversive. Occupying the no-man’s-land between genders, remixing or rejecting gender altogether however opens up new avenues for creative expression that can propel “alternative drag” artists further.

This conceptual, high-art take on drag is not brand new, with artists like Leigh Bowery, the Tranimal and Club Kid movements historically occupying the position on the fringes of drag culture. Now, however, with drag reaching unprecedented numbers of people, creative interpretations are increasingly complex and varied.
There are even opportunities for televising alternative formats of drag, as evidenced by Los Angeles-based performers The Boulet Brothers have shown with their show Dragula. Streaming on Amazon Video and now in its third season, Dragula is the dark and twisted version of RuPaul’s Drag Race. Essentially the same format (and distributed by the same parent company, World of Wonder) Dragula is a reality-TV competition that puts contestants through challenges to see who will emerge victorious as the next “World’s Next Drag Supermonster.” However, the similarities with DragRace end there. The queens on Dragula are subjected to potentially dangerous and shocking competitions like eating pig brains, paintball fights, combat in a complete post-apocalyptic Thunderdome, and seeing who can get the most body parts pierced in one sitting.

This kind of drag is often called “alternative” because of it being less concerned with beauty and more concerned with shock value, never-been-seen-before looks and pushing boundaries. The show’s contestants are all selected for their “alt drag” aesthetic, sporting bubbling sores, facial prosthetics, bizarre and frightening makeup, warped and alien silhouettes and gothic, horror and punk-rock inspired looks. As explicitly stated by Dracmorda Boulet at the beginning of the first episode, “nothing about the show is safe,” in both a literal and symbolic sense. No one type of drag should be necessarily valued over another, but the kind of drag that is aggressively exhibited on Dragula is an important counterweight to an increasingly sterilized drag culture.

Alternative drag exists specifically to trade in this capacity for outrageousness that all drag once possessed. With the increased visibility that drag enjoys in the mainstream eye comes less capacity for shock value, and as such, the corrosion of its potency as an artform. In this view, for drag to remain special, it has to retain its position as a subversive form of art, and to do that it must continue to explore the discord between the queer world and the mainstream.

It’s not just on television that artists are participating in this brand of provocative alternative drag. In bars and clubs where drag is performed both across the United States and the world, new forms of drag are being taken up by an unprecedented number of people from all walks of life and genders. Amidst a sociopolitical climate obsessed with identity politics, people interested in drag - especially young people - are empowered to explore gender and drag performance in new ways that are energetically divergent from the touchstones that make up drag’s cultural inventory.
Alternative drag is also a political statement, gaining energy and momentum under an administration that is actively crusading against LGBTQ rights. It’s no surprise that many drag performers see no reason to compromise their aesthetic vision in order to increase the accessibility of their art.

There are still working drag performers who want to remain dangerous, un-family friendly and queer in their art because despite drag’s new place in mainstream media, being gay is still a criminal offense in at least 37 nations, and trans women—particularly of color—are being murdered at alarming rates, the connections that queer, trans and non-gender conforming people have to a “mainstream” culture that wants to erase them are often tenuous.

The gentrification of drag is the appropriation of a sacred corner of queer culture by mainstream audiences who want a sample of something thrilling, while remaining complicit in the furthering of social policies that directly harm those very drag performers. The performers who actively resist the mainstreaming of their art represent a liberated front of the drag community who see no choice, for their own reasons, other than remain true to their art.

But RuPaul’s “Drag Race” isn’t and shouldn’t be thought of as a monolithic bummer. There are direct benefits for the performers who appear on the show. There is a sense of prestige for starters, as being chosen to appear on the show—no matter for how long or short—is a chance to propel your name and image to the entire world.

As the biggest and loudest voice in the field, RuPaul also has the most money, access and connections. The show is nothing if not a launching-off point for queens to jumpstart their own careers, and it is this indirect effect that RuPaul perhaps had in mind when she put drag squarely in the mainstream consciousness.

All-Stars Season 3 Winner Trixie Mattel and Season 7 contestant Katya now host their own show on Viceland. Season 6 winner Bianca del Rio has starred in multiple films and an international stand-up comedy tour. Season 5/All-Stars contestant Alyssa Edwards has a well-received docu-series on Netflix called “Dancing Queen.” Other contestants pursue their own careers in modeling, cosmetics and their own extensive cross-country performance circuits.

Where drag performance was once a fleeting experience, suspended in time and cloaked in the blanket of night, drag performers now can market their own image on social media, specifically on Instagram, where most content is uploaded and consumed.
In the drag world, Instagram acts as a resume, business card and digital agent for any performer’s brand. Looks and drag aesthetic can be displayed, video of performances can be archived and catalogued, and interaction with fans and followers can be instantaneous. This medium, combined with international visibility of a show like “Drag Race” can be the catalyst a performer needs to put themselves on the map and make a profitable career out of drag. Instagram also plays a role in circulating content from live performances, something previously not possible. This sustained, always-on accessibility is like turning on the TV and simply switching to the “drag channel.”

This is the double-edged sword of going mainstream: it is now an entertainment industry in which careers—and money—can be made. But at what cost? Being infinitely consumable, it belongs in an ever-widening cultural arts and entertainment conversation and it is now exposed to (and respected by) a growing scope of people all across the world. Queer subculture can now be made family-friendly and the voguing of Harlem’s ball culture has been exported to these kids in Russia (who slay, by the way).

But there is a price, and it is the fact that there will inevitably be something lost in translation. Drag will never go away, but the details of the raw experience are things that can’t be shared on social media. The danger of being in drag when it is illegal to do so, the communal experience of witnessing a deathdrop in a gritty club basement, the smell of powder and cigarettes, are all details that are tied to the artform as a subculture. All art changes over time, but drag has a unique history, full of courageous figures that should not be upstaged by the lights of a million dollar set.

“Drag Race” alum and well-known New York conceptual queen Milk summed up drag’s transitional stage in an interview with Paper Magazine in July 2017: “It’s fascinating, these kids that will sit outside and wait for us to get to a club that they are still seven years away from getting into. In a way, drag has lost a bit of its rebellious nature. Just getting in drag is still a political act, but it's much more accepted now. With acceptance comes this lack of grit and grime.”

“But the young fandom can't see us at a club, so it's important for them to see queens who really talk about aggressive issues, because our fans are the ones that are listening, that want to be educated. They're the ones that are going to vote.”

Now that drag has breached the mainstream, there is no turning back. Going forward, it will be the responsibility of performers and fans to remain true to their art while utilizing
their platform for good, when possible. With legions of young fans watching, perhaps the drag community can act as a catalyst for positive change in the culture where the increasingly polarized establishment has failed them.