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Screening Drag: The Legacy Ignited by *Paris is Burning* in Selected American TV shows.

Thea Eppie Miller

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

York St John University

School of Humanities

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Abstract

This thesis positions *Paris Is Burning* (Livingston, J. 1990) as a seminal text which has had a huge impact on the representation of drag, gender, and sexuality identity in contemporary American TV. The film engendered much of the prominent queer theory of the early 1990s, scholars such as Judith Butler, bell hooks, Peggy Phelan and Jackie Goldsby all engaged in analysis of this film as a means of exploring their varying studies and considered the film within their important critical works on gender, sexuality, race, queerness, and intersectionality. Through an analysis of TV and other selected texts, I will show the documentary's resonance as an ur-text within current socio-political and media landscapes and how it continues to inform readings of queer culture in public, media and academic discourses. It will focus on how contemporary texts such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-Present), *Pose* (2018-2021) and *We're Here* (2020-Present) remain a part of the ongoing discourse surrounding *Paris is Burning*. Using qualitative research methods such as the close textual analysis of selected case studies, the synthesising of critical writings and other sources such as published interviews and articles and their connection with formative and evolving theory within the disciplines of screen and queer studies, this thesis explores how certain pivotal texts shape our understanding of culture and sub-cultural intersectionality and prove to be a rich source of inspiration for creators and commentators to this day.

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Abbreviations

ACLU	American Civil Liberties Movement
ACT UP	AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power
AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
AZT	Azidothymidine
CNN	Cable News Network
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DCD	Center for Disease Control and Prevention
Drag Race	RuPaul’s Drag Race
EEOC	Equal Employment Opportunity Council
EJAF	Elton John AIDS Foundation
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FDA	Federal Drug Administration
GAC	Gender Affirming Care
GLAAD	Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation
GMHC	Gay Men’s Health Crisis
HBO	Home Box Office
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
LGBTQ+	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer
MTV	Music Television
PACT	People Acting with Compassion and Tolerance
TGNG	Transgender and Gender Nonconforming

Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2023, *The Human Rights Campaign*, the United States' largest LGBTQ+ civil rights organisation, documented that state legislatures across the country introduced a record number of over 520 anti LGBTQ+ bills (Peele, C. 2023). The result of such legislation strips away dozens of legal protections and rights for LGBTQ+ individuals, with just some of the legislation passed effecting medical access for trans youths and the banning of drag performances and bathroom bills (Peele, C. 2023). *CNN* reported that the number of bills passed in 2023 was nearly three times the number passed in 2022, as healthcare and education related policy reached unprecedented levels (Choi, A. 2024). According to *CNN*, lawmakers filed new anti-LGBTQ+ bills almost daily in 2023, and by the end of the year, they had signed 84 into law. Yet, even more concerning is the severity of the legislation, as Gillian Branstetter, communications strategist for the *ACLU* (American Civil Liberties Union), explained to *CNN*, ‘It’s not just the total number that has gotten worse, but the extremity of the bills’ (Choi, A. 2024). She further explains some of the proposed legislation:

> Florida’s bill that opponents labelled “Don’t Say Gay”, restricts in-school discussions about sexual orientation or gender identity… Several joined Tennessee in proposing bills that would ban drag performances. (Choi, A. 2024).

Since beginning this study, the past decade has also seen an influx of queer-themed content in contemporary American television which has helped to create an unprecedented cultural impact on the representation and visibility of LGBTQ+ people and communities. The current cultural moment of queer media saturation coincides not only with an important progressive

shift in popular culture that broadens the lens of gender and sexual identity, but also in reaction to a rapidly changing political landscape that aims to legally halt such progression, as I shall discuss. The current American dichotomy is reminiscent of America in the mid-to-late 1980s, where LGBTQ+ visibility was growing in the media with prime-time, mainstream texts such as *An Early Frost* (1985) emerging in a climate of homophobia and governmental, conservative anti-gay polemics, epitomised by groups and individuals such as *Moral Majority* and Jerry Falwell (Kowaleski, M, R. 1990).

Situating *Paris is Burning*

Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning* is a canonical text within the New Queer Cinema movement of the early 1990s. It presented the underground world of Harlem ballroom drag culture and the multitude of queer identities that are a part of it. The drag balls examined the subculture and competitive aspect of drag through categories, where a member from each competing 'house' would walk and be judged. 'Houses', the familial structuring of the participants, 'Voguing' a specific ballroom dance style, and phrases such as 'shade' to insult someone. 'Realness' to embody the truest version of something, and 'werk' to display effort, were introduced to the world by the film. Since then, they have become commonplace within contemporary depictions of drag and have entered the popular lexicon. The film explores the complexities and nuances of queer identity and the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. Not unlike queer theoretical discourse of the time, the film focuses not only on homosexuals but also on Black and Latinx transgender and gender fluid people and their experiences of living outside of the hetero-normative state. New Queer Cinema was an independent film movement that emerged in the early 1990s, films within the movement may have little in common in terms of narrative, style, aesthetics or technique, however they shared a common attitude that sought to subvert and challenge preconceived notions of

gender, sexuality, identity, family, race and society. Film critic B. Ruby Rich coined the term *New Queer Cinema* in 1992 in an article for *Sound and Sight* within which she wrote, 'there, suddenly, was a flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image.' (Rich, B, R. 2017).

Paris is Burning, and New Queer Cinema, were emerging against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis, a time in which institutional prejudice, violence and homophobic rhetoric towards LGBTQ+ people was exacerbated. The film is pioneering in its representation of queer people and the queer community in America, whose existence larger society had long condemned and oppressed, and mainstream media had misrepresented and ignored. According to Vito Russo, mainstream media often portrayed queer characters only in terms of their queerness. Writing in 1981, he states:

> Any story dealing, however seriously, with homosexual love is taken to be a story about homosexuality, while stories dealing with heterosexual love are seen as stories about the individual people they portray. This is as much a problem today for American filmmakers who cannot conceive of the presence of gay characters in a film unless the specific subject of the film is homosexuality. Lesbians and gay men are thereby classified as purely sexual creatures, people defined solely by their sexual urges. (Russo, V. 1981).

Although Russo articulated this argument over 40 years ago, the same problems still occur in contemporary queer representations, the 2020 documentary *Disclosure* (Feder, S. 2020) investigates Hollywood's representations of trans people and the often-damaging effects it has on the trans community and this film has influenced some of this thesis.

Paris is Burning's documentary mode, further aided its ability to present queer communities and their experiences with agency, as it included real people telling and portraying their real life. Without the fictional trappings typically associated with celluloid, their stories were told in an arguably unfettered manner (although this is a contentious issue, as we shall see). Although New Queer Cinema sought to tell stories of queer life from every aspect, no matter how bleak, *Paris is Burning* still stands out as it offers audiences a genuine look at how difficult queer existence could be. Daniel T Contreras attests to this, in *New Queer Cinema: Spectacle, Race, Utopia*, he explains how the film was unique even within the movement because it functioned as a critique of the euphoria around queer representation and instead 'offered a more sobering and artistically complicated vision of queer urban life' (Aaron, M. 2004. P. 120).

The documentary is a vital text within the New Queer Cinema movement and, as such, inspired much of the queer theory surrounding it. In *New Queer Cinema: An Introduction*, Michele Aaron recognises that the film acted as a lightning rod which galvanised a good deal of the academic discourse that would inform queer theory, and which we now see filtered into popular culture and public discourse. She writes:

> As a theoretically lucrative 'oppositional stance', and the latest trajectory of gender theory, queer gained in academic currency throughout the 1990s, fuelled by the cultural marketplace. Indeed, *Paris is Burning* was a prime example in Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (a work central to the academic ascendancy of queer) (Aaron, M. 2004. P.5).

Why TV?

Beginning in the early part of the twentieth century, screen studies, or as it is more commonly known film studies, is an academic discipline that is concerned with studying cinema, its history and language as a specific art form. However, arguably, television is an essential aspect of screen studies. Yet, as John Hartley maintains, the field has never viewed television as holding as much significance as cinema. He reasons that the low repute of TV and indeed TV studies, stems from them being judged on their poorest performances. Consequently, researchers think that TV influences and even causes morally reprehensible behaviour. By reducing TV to negative associations, they have limited its potential within academic fields, and it has struggled to gain the same high research status. Hartley contends that the contemporary convergence of TV and internet have meant its popularity and outreach can both influence and reflect life across the social, political, economic and cultural spectrum (Hartley, J. 2008, p.1).

> Certainly those who are interested in how truth is made to count, made "commanding" in popular culture and public life, ought to take account of the media and mechanisms through which everyone in language-community can participate in its establishment. (Hartley, J. 2008, p.4).

It may seem incongruous to state that a documentary feature film is one of the most prominent ur-texts which informs the representation of queer identity in American TV. However, it is worth noting that the cultural 'value' of TV has risen rapidly in the 21st century, and this has included a migration of talent that would usually find themselves vying for space in the film industry, find a home in the contemporary landscape of TV. As Bakare, et el have stated;

> TV has traditionally been seen as one of the poorer arts. The line between film and TV has completely blurred […] The small screen is the most accessible and creative area of the arts at the moment (Bakare, L, David, H, Moses, T. 2021)

Additionally, and as will be discussed at some length, many of the creative forces behind the case studies I will explore directly cite Livingston's film as an influence, and it often appears as an intertextual point of reference within these case studies. Therefore, in terms of this study, it is imperative to acknowledge that television and its multi-modal extensions play a powerful role in affecting socio-political ideologies and in assigning symbolic and cultural value to the people and communities it features. The convergence of queer theory and New Queer Cinema highlighted the value for academic discourse and theoretical understandings of socio-political issues and this study argues that this has continued through television's screening of queer culture, gender, and sexuality. The inclusion of *Paris is Burning* in not only the New Queer Cinema movement but also the documentary boom of the 1980s, has allowed contemporary media landscapes, such as reality TV, to carry on its themes and concepts. Annett Hill recognises that many of the "world" spaces of reality TV can be traced back to early forms of factual entertainment. She continues by explaining that series set in real-world spaces are often referred to as 'fly on the wall', 'Docusoap', or 'reality soap'. She notes that the reason for this is to signal the combination of observational-style documentary and soap opera elements within this style of reality television (Hill, A. 2014, p.9).

Including the shows selected proves that queer representation in contemporary TV now spans multiple genres from long-form fiction, reality, and non-scripted documentary-reality. The industrial factors of TV, such as its sheer scope of content and reach of vast demographics, cheaper production, commodity and franchising, means that the TV industry can create and distribute a vast amount of content quicker and easier than film or cinema. Additionally, this

means that TV content can respond timely to socio-political issues, highlighting the convergence of anti-LGBTQ+ US political rhetoric and recent TV shows focused on progressive LGBTQ+ visibility and representation. Queer themed TV has become an increasingly popular fixture within mainstream media in the past decade with shows such as *Queer Eye* (2018-present) *Transparen*t (2014-2019) and *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019). However, this study will not discuss the popularity of these shows, as its focus is on TV content that continues the legacy of *Paris is Burning* through its presentation of drag culture.

The Case Studies

Since its debut in 2009, no other show has resonated more with contemporary readings of drag than *RuPaul's Drag Race*. In the years since its inception, *Drag Race* has become not only a global franchise, but also a cultural phenomenon. As such, its inclusion within in this thesis is imperative. The show's trajectory into the mainstream has seen it become influential within pop-culture's understanding of drag. It challenges fixed notions of gender binaries and empowers those who are often marginalised. Its relevance to my study is to not only investigate how it brought drag to the forefront of popular culture, but to question whether subversive art forms, such as drag, suffer ideologically and subversively when they become part of mainstream media. It further questions whether the success of *Drag Race* involved it to move away from revolutionary subversion and into the commodification and commercialisation of the reality TV genre. Through an intersection of feminist/queer/cultural studies approach and a theoretical investigation into the functions and practices of reality TV, I will analyse how *Drag Race* arguably loses its subversive edge and becomes aligned with post-feminist, neo-liberal, capitalism often associated with reality TV. The purpose of *Pose* in this study is to show directly the continued legacy of *Paris is Burning.* As a fictional re-

telling, *Pose* places trans, black, Hispanic and queer culture at the forefront of its narrative and challenges the gender binary and inverts power and relationship dynamics. I will analyse the format of long-form fictional TV and its relevance within the pop-culture landscape to assess how the format helped bridge the gaps in representation that *Paris Is Burning* arguably failed to do. The show will highlight an urgency felt from the arts to respond to the rapidly changing and oppressive political American climate, just as its predecessor had in the 1980s. *We're Here*, described by *HBO* as their first non-scripted show, means it is void of professional actors and scriptwriters, instead it follows and depicts the real lives of the people it features, employing techniques and styles closely associated with both documentary and reality TV. Presenting the style of drag first seen in *Paris Is Burning* and featuring *Drag Race* alumni, *We're Here* is evidence of the continuing relevance and the continuing demand for queer stories to occupy a place on screen. The show deals with location politics, crisis of identity, the marginalisation of queer people within hetero-normative, religious small-town societies, but furthermore it also provides a hopeful and positive exploration into the power of drag and the communities that are forged through it.

The shows selected engage with my major theoretical strands as they are concerned with understanding how drag and queer culture, first displayed in *Paris Is Burning*, continues to be represented through a multitude of aspects within contemporary TV. First, all three shows feature and consider the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) first theorised the intersection of identities, which was further developed by bell hooks. Crenshaw's theory is central in understanding how a multitude of oppressions and marginalisation compound experience and each of the shows discussed within this study continue to highlight the significance and continued relevance of her work. Seminal theory derived in the early 1990s will also be prominent throughout this thesis, as Butler's canonical text's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) are central to the academic

ascendency and continued relevance of queer theory and therefore to the content of the shows. Contemporary theoretical and political discourse will also apply to the shows featured, as they inform the dichotomy of the current cultural and political landscape. Additionally, regionality is a key consideration of my work, particularly in regard to *HBO's We're Here*, within which location is a central theme. The analysis will focus on how the convergence of regionality, politics, and sexuality can affect the formation of identity.

Each show represents a different genre format within the television industry. First, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is situated within the genre of reality TV. The show features competition indicative of both game shows and reality format. *Drag Race* serves as an example of how queer culture can not only become part of the reality genre but also how it can elevate it to mainstream success. *Drag Race's* engagement with both seminal and present theoretical discourse allows this study to explore its relation to historical perceptions of drag, queer culture and gendered identities first featured in *Paris Is Burning* and utilise them to inform current audiences and mediated representations. In its examination of drag, gender, and sexual identity within current pop-culture screenings, *Pose* will provide further evidence of *Paris Is Burning's* resonance. *Pose* is presented through the format of long-form fiction, which has become increasingly popular in recent years, thanks in part, to the innovation of streaming services and the extensions of multi-modal media. Michelle Donnelly confirms this as she claims, 'narratively complex shows engendered viewer loyalty and the Internet provided a forum for increased audience participation and discussions about these narratives' (Donnelly, M. 2015). *Pose* provides a sentimental nod to the influence of ballroom drag in *Paris Is Burning.* Set amongst the backdrop of a nostalgic 80s aesthetic it presents audiences with a piece of important queer history but from a distinctly progressive angle, written by and featuring people from within the queer community. The show acts as an artistic response to current oppressive legislation that is restricting the rights of LGBTQ+ people across America.

The importance of regionality will be presented through an analysis of *We're Here.* As the show moves away from traditional television studios and outside of the typical queer setting of metropolitan locations into rural middle American towns. It presents a nuanced exploration into how such locations inform queer identity but also how queer people form their own sense of community within them. Through this exploration, the show employs certain techniques from political theatre, specifically political theatre of the 1980s and its use as theatrical intervention during the AIDS crisis through the efficacy of performance as a means of social change, that have been developed for the reality TV mode/format. Furthermore, through the style of ballroom drag, that has become synonymous with *Paris Is Burning*, the show displays how subversive and resistant the art of drag can be, particularly to those who are not readily accepted by their heteronormative, religious or conservative locations. The inclusion of each show aids my study in demonstrating how contemporary media, informed by the legacy of *Paris Is Burning* continues to challenge normative notions of gender and sexual identity. In addition, by engaging analytically with current anti-LGBTQ+ political discourse this study highlights the importance of progressive visibility and representation within mainstream media. What follows is a brief synopsis of the interconnecting chapters that are central to this investigation and form the core of my thesis.

Overview

The first chapter of this thesis will engage with the canonical text *Paris is Burning*, as well as the academic discourse, pop-culture and contemporary media it has influenced. To provide context to the film's impact and continuing relevance, the chapter will begin by outlining the socio-political and cultural landscape of the United States at the time of both *Paris Is Burning's* filming and release. Filmed during the mid-to-late 1980s the film sits amongst the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic, consumer capitalism, New Queer Cinema movement and the

emerging academic discourse of queer theory, therefore an analysis of the film's relationship to them is required in understanding its enduring legacy. The chapter will then provide an in-depth analysis of the seminal theory that engaged heavily with the film's subject matter, cultural impact, and representation. It specifically engages with Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity (1990), the effect of reiterated acting, and how it applies to the reading and presentation of the type of drag featured in the film, and importantly, how it presents the theory of performativity in action. bell hooks' text *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) provides a critical lens through which to assess the representation of race and gender in *Paris Is Burning*. Most prominently, hooks' theory criticises the framing of the film, arguing that Jennie Livingston, a white middle-class woman, positions its marginalised subjects in adulation of white privilege and places hegemonic normativity as their socio-cultural idealisation. In her chapter, *"The Golden Apple: Jennie Livingston's Paris Is Burning,"* (1993) Peggy Phelan analyses how drag ball culture subverts the notion of family and familial structures. Her analysis is integral to the understanding of capitalist structures that impact the familial set up and its relation to normative feminine and masculine ideals. Phelan's study of *Paris is Burning* also reveals the importance and impact the ethnographic documentary style employed by Livingston had on the filmmaker's relationship with her subjects. Her analysis into the notion of 'real', the idea of being able to pass in the wider world, outside of the balls, is imperative in understanding the continuing relevance of ballroom-style drag within contemporary depictions of drag. Jackie Goldsby's study *Queens of Language: Paris Is Burning* (1993), details the structuring of ballroom drag as a subculture. She provides a contextual articulation of the house structures and kinship displayed in the film and the necessity for them in relation to the homophobia and objectification of AIDS. Furthermore, her study offers insight into how the mainstream appropriated ballroom culture. Goldsby specifically details how Madonna appropriated the

dance style specific to ballroom Vogueing for her own acclaim, which led to it becoming a cultural phenomenon that lacked context pertaining to its origins. Leading on from Goldsby's analysis of ballroom culture's trajectory into the mainstream, I end the chapter by articulating the relevance of *Paris Is Burning* in contemporary mainstream entertainment. To demonstrate this, I examine Beyonce's 2022 album Renaissance and 2023 world tour, both of which were heavily influenced by ballroom culture and pay homage to the queer and black communities for their enduring influence on music and the arts. Set amongst the backdrop of a rapidly changing political landscape, that is legislatively restricting the rights of LGBTQ+ people at an unprecedented rate, I argue that contemporary and mainstream influences, such as Beyonce, are imperative in understanding the continuing relevance of *Paris Is Burning.*

In the second chapter of this thesis, I analyse *RuPaul's Drag Race* to examine how the key themes and concepts of *Paris Is Burning* and ballroom drag apply to mainstream commercial media. Using feminist theory, I examine how the mainstream success of *Drag Race* has limited ballroom drag's subversive potential and how the show's depiction of drag through competition and game show format, have aligned it with notions of post-feminism and neo-liberal commercialisation and commodification. As a product of the reality television genre, I use Erving Goffman's theory of 'Dramaturgy' as argued in his canonical text *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) to reveal the artifice and commercialisation of reality TV. I will include contemporary theory from both Annette Hill (2015) and June Deery (2015) in my articulation of the popularity and prominence of reality TV in the modern day. Their work contributes to understandings and explorations of identity politics, with a particular emphasis on the representation of gender and sexuality on screen and the commercialisation of that representation. The chapter utilises Butler's and hooks' work to compare and critique *Paris Is Burning* and *Drag Race*, highlighting the reclamation of the specific style of drag portrayed in *Paris Is Burning* to educate modern audiences. More specifically, Butler's theory on

gender performativity and hooks critique of the adulation of white femininity will be applied to *Drag Race* in order to establish if the presentation and representation of gender suffers ideological and subversive loss as a result of mainstreams success. Contemporary analysis by theorist such as Michael Lovelock (2019) and Rosalind Gill (2017) provides a detailed critical response to *Drag Race's* alignment with neo-liberal capitalism and hegemonic notions of gender, particularly in its perceived adoration of hetero-normative beauty standards. Lovelock's work supports my argument that through the application of competition, the show's most successful queens are those who become flexible to the requirements asked of them, arguing that the show aligns itself with the political and economic system of contemporary neo-liberalism. Rosalind Gill's study similarly addresses the effects of neo-liberalism in *Drag Race*, but she also provides a symbiosis of neo-liberalism with a theoretical analysis of post-feminism. Her work applies to my studies' investigation into the representation of femininity, most notably its re-idealisation of hegemonic standards of beauty, which Gill argues indicates post-feminist media culture. This chapter addresses the backlash RuPaul, and the show, received, in reaction to his its stance on transgender participation. Therefore, I provide an investigation into the representation of trans identity within the reality TV genre, using a case study of the show *There's Something About Miriam* (2004) which was the first to feature a trans woman as the lead, I will address the controversies and legal issues surrounding the show and will use it as a reference in which to analyse how, and if, the genre, with a particular focus on *Drag Race*, has become more progressive in its trans representation. Finally, within this chapter, I include a theoretical analysis of the lexicon used within ballroom drag culture. In applying Jackie Goldsby and Julia P Stanley's (1978) work on the language of gay and queer communities, I highlight how the language used in *Paris Is Burning*, has subsequently entered the popular lexicon and continues to have a significant cultural impact that informs contemporary notions of drag.

The third chapter critically engages with the long-form fictional TV drama *Pose* focusing on how its contemporary retelling of *Paris Is Burning* highlights the significance and enduring relevance of the documentary within popular culture. Through qualitative research I will demonstrate how the show ideologically and thematically borrowed from *Paris Is Burning* in response to socio-political issues and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in the wake of Donald Trump's presidency. By comparing *Paris Is Burning* to the political landscape in which it was made, this chapter conducts a critical analysis of a history of queer representation on screen and establishes the urgency for contemporary queer themed shows. It will examine the political discourse and fierce activism during the release of *Paris Is Burning* that demanded visibility and representation of queer people, and how it directly influenced the portrayal of queer identity on screen. I will engage in discussions regarding New Queer Cinema's impact on mediated representation of queer identity and queer experience, noting how it had an enduring impact, but also how its popularity went beyond independent cinema and led to a panoply of queer representation in mainstream American media. By reconsidering the responses of Butler and hooks to the reading of *Pose* I will determine how contemporary texts inform new audiences of queer experience, furthermore I will show how that representation applies not only to what it shows on screen but also, who informs that screening. Butler and hooks' analysis of *Paris Is Burning* provide a critique of how Jennie Livingston framed her subjects, her own social standing and the lack of subversion in favour of the (re)idealisation of hetero-normative and white ideals. I argue in this chapter that although *Pose* works as a fictional retelling of *Paris Is Burning*, it evades the same persecution as Livingston by giving agency to those with lived experience through fiction. This chapter argues that the show's all trans cast, trans writers, and producers have been able to share their own personal experiences and the reality of queer existence, making it an

imperative aspect in the depiction of queer life in contemporary screenings. Alexandra Pollard's *Independent* article attests to the importance of the trans cast and writers:

> The cast brought their life experiences to the script, as did Janet Mock, who is a writer, director and producer on the show, and the first trans woman of colour hired as a writer for a TV series in history. It is perhaps for this reason that the show avoids broad strokes, instead exploring the nuances of LGBT+ identities: trans people's differing ability (or desire) to pass as cisgender; transphobia from within the gay community ("gay, straight, it doesn't matter, they all think we got psychological issues"), and the complicated development of gender-affirming surgery (Pollard, A. 2019).

Moreover, the chapter explores the format of long-form fiction to address whether the concept of fiction itself allows *Pose* to fill the gaps is representation that Livingston arguably failed to do.

The final chapter in the main body of this thesis explores the American un-scripted TV show *We're Here* to establish how geo-social and location politics are integral in understanding how queer people form identity and experience life from a marginalised position within small towns across the United States. The show follows three drag queens, all past participants of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, as they tour small, rural towns selecting 'drag children' to take part in a one night only drag show. This chapter engages with present political discourse, and in-keeping with the themes of the show, which highlights the current political climate, both symbolically and directly, I analyse how the show addresses and challenges the ongoing political rhetoric and legal restrictions levelled at LGBTQ+ people. I will discuss the political climate in which *Paris is Burning* was made, along with analysing contemporary perspectives from June Deery, and Annett Hill. Through this analysis, I will illustrate how the socio-

historical understanding influences current portrayals of queer experiences within an oppressive political landscape. To critically respond to the issues and themes raised in the show, this chapter will engage in current discourse by trans and LGBTQ+ activist Samantha Allen who provides a critical analysis of how current political restrictions, proliferated under the Trump administration, has had a repressive impact of LGBTQ+ rights, particularly in areas of the United States that are considered 'red' or conservative states. Three sections make up the structure of this chapter. First, I summarise the show using textual analysis to ascertain why the show's creators and producers felt the need to highlight queer existence within rural America and, further, why they sought to do so through the art of drag. The show's intrigue and relevance, which are central to this chapter, are specifically based on its locations. *We're Here* challenges and subverts the traditional queer narrative space by deliberately placing it far from any metropolis or queer cosmopolitism. To show this argument, I will provide two case studies each analysing a show participant focusing specifically on how their location and the specific ideologies of that location led them to take part in both the show and the climatic drag performance. The first case study details show participant Chris, a straight, thirty-something year old father and focuses on his struggles with mental health because of toxic masculinity and rural masculine ideals he felt forced upon him throughout his upbringing. I will reference Judith Butler's work in *Bodies that Matter* (1994) and *Undoing Gender* (2004) to demonstrate how the binary thinking of gender and sex subjects bodies to damaging effects and othering, particularly for those who fall outside the hetero-normative, binary-gendered system. Furthermore, I will include analytical and social studies by Sociologist R W Connell, as she argues that there is not one masculinity, but the concept comprises several masculinities, each associated with different positions of power determining that the most socially dominant of which is 'hegemonic masculinity'. The show focuses on three people per episode that are dealing with individual

issues, however they act as a representation of larger socio-political problems. The reason for including Chris's narrative in this chapter is to present the damaging effects of hyper/toxic masculinity and how regionality, specifically rural locations, has a distinct and long historical attachment to these notions of masculinity. Using current studies, I will show how location-politics affects the formation of identity, and specifically with Chris, I will provide a socio-historical investigation into how rural masculinities became so prevalent and often damaging to ideas of masculinity. Using John Ibson's work, within which he details a history of male relationships, I argue that the formation of masculinity is specific to time and place and how the popularity of the Western film genre and its intersection with the myth and symbol approach to American studies helped shape geo-specific notions of masculinity and a national American identity. This will aid my analysis of Chris and his narrative within the show, as although he is not part of the queer community, the show demonstrates how queer spaces and art forms, specifically drag, can subvert traditional expectations and ideologies of gender.

Through an analysis of regional American masculinities, specifically its presentation in the Western film gender, I will show how the queering of popular culture involves a range of reading and writing practices that are political because they expose how sexuality is textually constituted in relation to dominant notions of gender. Queer theorist Nikki Sullivan explains that in doing so, queer theory is cultural because it concerns itself with the way texts inform our understanding and experience of sexuality and subjectivity. Therefore, in order to queer popular culture, one must critically engage with cultural artefacts in order to 'explore how meaning and identity are (inter) textually (re) produced' (Sullivan, N. 2003, p.190). Using Sullivan's theory, I argue that Chris' participation in the show, and specifically his drag performance, exposes how engrained cultural understandings and texts have informed his own understanding of masculinity and how his drag performance queers and subverts this understanding. I will use textual analysis to aid this understanding, demonstrating how

popular culture and engrained American ideologies can be queered and subverted by using the film *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, A. 2005) as an example. The film is situated within the genre of the Western as it includes themes, settings and ideologies associated with not only genre but also understandings of American masculinity informed by the genre. Therefore, by analysing the film through a queer lens, I wish to establish that the queer themes presented in *Brokeback Mountain* outraged some American audiences because in doing so, it queered America's historical attachment to its frontier past which played a fundamental role in shaping America's national identity, ideologies of masculinity and therefore acts as a subversive text to these preconceived notions. The film's subversion of these preconceived notions is central to including Chris in *We're Here*, as I argue he acts as an archetype for this specific type of masculinity precisely because of the location he grew up in and the ideologies associated with rural masculinity. Therefore, like *Brokeback Mountain* the show queers and subverts these notions, this time through the act of drag.

The second case study features Tanner, a young homosexual man who has struggled to accept the dichotomy of his traditional Christian and homosexual identities, which he found particularly polarising throughout his adolescence in his religious, conservative hometown of Branson, Missouri. The episode begins with Tanner renouncing his homosexual identity in order to become 'a better Christian' and although Tanner's decision is extreme, I will reference Patrick Allitt's work *Religion in America Since 1945: A History* to provide a contextual analysis detailing America's history of religious-conservative ideological alignment in order to better understand how Tanner's decision is one that many LGBTQ+ people feel necessary when they are living on the peripheries of a community. Furthermore, I will provide contextual analysis exploring how the alignment of religiosity and politics in America has had a devastating impact on women's right, particularly surrounding abortion

laws and how the same political tactics, that sees republican politicians weaponise religion, are being employed in the current culture war to restrict LGBTQ+ rights.

The analysis of these case studies will form the basis for my thesis, and there will be cross-pollinating ideas which will be considered in light of each. Central to this is the notion that as inter-textual exchange informs the creative decisions and development of new texts in the media ecosystem, and that the critical discourse that responds to such texts is, by nature, a rich and robust part of this ecology.

Chapter 2

Paris Is Burning

The main body of this thesis uses *Paris is Burning (1990)* as an ur-text with a continuing cultural significance within contemporary televisual texts that depict drag culture as a queer art form. Its inclusion within in my thesis is to inform modern representations of drag and queer, from contemporary popular shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* to Beyonce's 2023 world tour. The film informed understandings of not only queer identity, but it also intersects major aspects of identity such as race, class and gender which has become an important area of consideration within modern representation. This chapter analyses the background of *Paris is Burning* and where it sits within existing and modern debates surrounding queer culture and identity, therefore the chapter covers a wide range of topics, including, race, gender, and the intersectionality of queer culture, the role of documentary filmmakers, the applicability of gender theory to modern representations of drag and its influence of celebrity culture. The analysis of these topics and their relation to the film is central in informing the rest of my thesis, as it is concerned with how the themes first presented by *Paris is Burning* have continued relevance within modern representations of queer.

The film was made by gay, white, Ivy League-educated director Jennie Livingston who, in the mid-1980s was living, studying and working in New York City. There, she began filming men practicing their 'voguing' and 'walking', or dancing and strutting as if they were on a catwalk. In an interview for *Films for the Feminist Classroom,* Livingston recalls:

> I met three guys who were clustering around a tree in the park, and they were dancing and were saying things like "Saks Fifth Avenue mannequins" and "butch queen in drag!" and sort of doing these poses, and I had no idea what they were doing. But I said, "Can I photograph you?" and they said yes. I asked them what they were doing,

> and they said they were "vogueing." I hadn't heard of that; I didn't know what that was. I was like "What is that?" "Well, if you really want to see vogueing you should come to a ball!" (Seidel, D. 2009).

She explains how they invited her to witness the underground Harlem drag ballroom culture, and from the first ball she was hooked and continued going to them and staking still images on her camera before filming video footage which eventually led to the creation of the canonical film. Her approach to the film through the style of ethnographic filmmaking means her presence on screen is absent, importantly her subsequent absence drew a lot of contention and ignited serious academic debate surrounding cultural appropriation, racial, gender and sexual representation. The most notable academic discourse concerned with the film's themes of queer identity came from Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* (1990) and bell hooks *Black Looks* (1992). Their respective canonical works provide and in-depth reading of *Paris Is Burning* which additionally continues to inform contemporary understanding and screenings of queer culture, therefore their work will be used throughout this thesis.

The seminal work of theorists Judith Butler and bell hooks will be central to my analysis as it acts as a historical foundation of gender theory that has become essential to the reading of *Paris is Burning,* furthermore their work respectively became essential in terms of the academic ascendency of queer theory that continues today. Butler's 1990 work on gender performativity, which understands gender as the effect of reiterated acting, has had a profound influence on feminist and queer scholarship. Her work on gender performativity is key to understanding the subjects of the text as well as the cultural importance of drag during the time in which the film was made. Equally, hooks' work has become a foundation text for theory surrounding the intersectionality of race, gender and class systems all of which are fundamental to understanding the importance and relevance of *Paris is Burning.* Much of hooks' argument is rooted in racial representation which is an integral aspect in the reading of

Paris is Burning, as all of the subjects of the film and indeed of the ball world are not only queer but people of colour, predominantly Black and Latinx. The themes and narratives presented question not only sexual but also racial hegemonic notions of normativity. Ball culture, as represented in *Paris is Burning,* offers a space in which Black and Latinx queers can express their identity and explore potentialities of identity which was prohibited by the standards of normative hegemonic society. It is important to note that within the understanding of the intersectionality of race and sexuality, it was not only hegemonic society their queerness interrogates but also their own individual ethnic backgrounds as many have been rejected from their own communities.

Paris is Burning was released in 1990 but was filmed in late 1980s. Bill Nichols articulates ‘the current golden age of documentaries began in the 1990s’ he states that the genre of documentary, since this time, has gone on to become ‘the flagship for a cinema of social engagement and distinctive vision’. (Nichols, B. 2017. p.1). Initial documentary filmmaking grew out of actuality and as such many early documentaries saw filmmakers simply filming real life events and people around them. The term documentary was attributed to Scottish filmmaker John Grierson in an article for the *New York Sun* in 1926. Grierson's principles of documentary were that cinema's potential for observing life could be exploited in a new art form he called ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ (Nichols, B. 2017. p.5). The basic understanding of documentary differs from what had gone before, in that it presents facts and shows events that really happened or are happening; whereas fictional films often work as allegories, documentary films present us with something we know to be true. *Paris is Burning* was shot as a documentary and as such employs ethnographic and *Direct Cinema* techniques in order to convey realistic expectations and values of people within the subculture it presents whilst attempting to remove the visibility of filmmaker from the view of the audience. This style of documentary filmmaking and indeed the genre of documentary

as a whole, poses a number of questions surrounding ethics and representation and specifically it questions who is responsible for what happens on screen, the one documenting or the one being documented? Nichol's attests that ethical considerations are made in order to minimise harmful effects to the subjects being presented on screen. Yet inevitably filmmakers who seek to (re)present groups of people and cultures of which they do not belong run the risk of exploiting them, an accusation levelled at Livingston continuously since the release of *Paris Is Burning,* and this is particularly relevant in *Direct Cinema* and *Ethnographic Film* (Nichols, B. 2017. p36). It is understood that filmmakers act as representatives to those they film rather than as a community member however, Nichols recognises that tensions often occur between the filmmaker's desire to make a compelling film and the individuals desire to have his or her social rights and dignity respected (Nichols, B. 2017. p.36).

Due to its exposure of queer culture and the intersectionality of that culture with other important aspects of identity such as race, class and gender, as well as its cult classic status in the years following its release, *Paris is Burning* has been central to academic conversations concerning New Queer Cinema, drag culture and queer identity. Varying analysis covers the film's impact on gender and sexuality as well as racial and linguistic representation within seminal academic texts, such as *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Black Looks* (1992), *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) and *Queens of Language* (1993). At this moment in time, queer discourse was dominated by texts within the New Queer Cinema movement. The term *New Queer Cinema,* first coined by B. Ruby Rich in her 1992 'Sight and Sound' article. While they may have shared little in common in terms of style, narrative or aesthetics, films and indeed film makers within the movement shared a common attitude towards film making, one that sought to foreground queerness and queer narratives and in doing so aimed to subvert the expectations of queer content and characters on screen. Within the article, Rich

highlights the thematic differences and ultimate ideological commonality as a significant factor within the moment, she writes:

> New queer films and videos aren't all the same, and don't share a single aesthetic vocabulary or strategy or concern. Yet they are nonetheless united by a common style. Call it 'Homo Porno': there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitively breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist, and excessive (Rich, B. R. 2017).

The term 'queer theory' was coined in 1990, by Italian feminist and film theorist Teresa de Lauretis. Queer theory's aim was to apply a critical lens through which to analyse pre-existing social norms and perceptions of queer culture identity and examine how and why they came to be. Historically, the dominance of heterosexuality as the basis of many societal structures and frameworks led to it becoming the normative sexuality recognised by modern societies, particularly those whose religions determined the permitted and managed and dictated the relations between genders. In reaction to this, queer theory concerned itself with understanding and defining identities that fall outside of the heteronormative state. Furthermore, while traditional interpretations and analysis of gay studies tended to focus on and associate with gay, lesbian and bisexual subjects, the emergence of queer theory in the 1990s and its contemporary extensions have concerned its analytical and theoretical framework to include transgenderism, gender non-conforming identities and bodies, as well as gender and sexual fluidity.

AIDS

New Queen Cinema and queer theory both additionally came to prominence during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemics, when the full force of its devastation was being felt across the United States. The interdependence of queer theory and New Queer Cinema helped reconfigure both the screening and the social perception of queerness, gender and sexuality in a socio-political climate that sparked a sense of urgency for enlightened and progressive representation of queer culture and communities. Quoting Jose Arroyo, Monic B Peal asserts the necessity of New Queer Cinema to react to the AIDS crisis she writes:

> In his analysis of the status and origins of Queer Cinema, he asserts that AIDS gave rise to what we call New Queer Cinema. If, as Arroyo argued, 'AIDS has affected what amounts to an epistemic shift in gay culture', then New Queer Cinema is the result of that shift… - it is a form and expression that emerges from the cataclysm of AIDS in the Western world. (Aaron, M. 2004. p.24-25)

By presenting and representing queer perspectives, filmmakers and artists of all kinds could create opportunities to undermine the normative and often binary thinking of gender and sexual identity.

Although HIV/AIDS is not an explicit feature within *Paris Is Burning,* it is a persisting importance within queer experience and queer history that continues today. The subject of AIDS is broached and referenced by the subjects in the film with regards to how people refer to their sexuality within the context of the AIDS crisis. In one scene Venus Xtravaganza a transgender woman is discussing the sex work she and others have engaged in and the dangers surrounding that line of work in the context of the AIDS crisis she explains: “He said you fucking faggot, you’re a freak, you’re a victim of AIDS and you’re trying to give me AIDS. You’re a homo I should kill you” (1991).

Wolfgang Iser's notion of *phenomenology* is applicable here, as he states that the reading of a text should concern not only the actual text but also the actions involved in responding to the text (Iser, W. 1972. p.279). Iser explains that in this sense a literary work has two poles, the artistic and the aesthetic: 'the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realisation accomplished by the reader' (Iser, W. 1972. p.279). He continues by acknowledging that from this polarity, the work is more than the text, for the text only take on life when it has been responded to by the reader. While not a primary consideration of this thesis, the AIDS epidemic and its lasting impact on the queer community cannot be ignored. The fact that a contemporary audience would no doubt be aware of the lasting impact of AIDS on the queer community, although not explicitly expressed, it is emphasised by the films end as four names are listed in memoriam, and within three years of release five of the nine cast members had died due to AIDS-related complications (Balmont, J. 2020). It is important to acknowledge that *Paris Is Burning* was filmed in the late 1980s and so the impact and devastation HIV/AIDS was having in the United States and particularly on communities such as those featured in the film cannot be underestimated. The inclusion of HIV/AIDS within the film briefly touches upon how the community and culture was impacted by it yet, the totality of that devastation was felt long after Livingston called cut, with many of the subjects dying from complications in the years following the film's release.

In his contribution to 1993's *Queer Looks*, *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous,* Gregg Bordowitz utilises Raymond Williams notion of queer structures of feelings to explain certain countercultural strategies belong specifically to queers as they shape cultural work produced by queers (Bordowitz, G. 1993. p.211). He recognises that queer structures of feeling have two factors, first being the way in which 'heterosexist oppression attempts to contain queer sexualities, and how queers fight oppression by forming communities' (Bordowitz, G. 1993. p.211). His understanding can be applied to the subjects of *Paris Is Burning,* ballrooms

culture, and the house structures forged through a rejection by such heterosexist oppression. He continues his analysis with explanations that further sustain the importance of house structures and the communal bonds presented in the film, he details that queer structures of feeling are enforced as a strategy of survival by queers, with the presence of HIV/AIDS precipitating a crisis that literally threatened the existence of many within the queer community. In response to the devastating impact of the AIDS epidemic, Bordowitz acknowledges that many queer artists took ideas current in the art world such as appropriation and institutional critique and applied them to the efforts to seize control of public discussion on AIDS from right-wing homophobic and racist rhetoric. In an article for *The Conversation* visual media Lecturer Joao Florencio examines the continued damaging impact this rhetoric has on people's views towards HIV/AIDS, he writes 'marked by a fear, on the part of the Thatcher and Reagan governments, that speaking directly to homosexuals could be seen as endorsing "deviant" homosexual behaviour, the often moralistic- and publicly funded- health campaigns released during the peak of the Western AIDS crisis ignored the specific realities of those most affect by the epidemic' (Florencio, J. 2018). Bordowitz further contends that AIDS media activists stole methods from dominant culture, similarly to how the subjects of film apply practices of dominant culture to their own in the form of house structures and kinship to forged communities found amongst the balls. These activists employed methods of dominant culture in order to make work that was meaningful to the communities effected by AIDS. (Bordowitz, G. 1993. p.212). Most prominent was the work of *GMHC Gay Men's Health Crisis* and *Act Up* both of whom were founded by playwright Larry Kramer whose AIDS-related work extended beyond his activism and into the arts. Perhaps his most notable work with regard to the AIDS epidemic was his largely autobiographical play *The Normal Heart* (1985), which details the rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic told through the eye of Ned as he speaks out about the indifference show to those afflicted with the disease.

Documentary

Released in 1991, *Paris Is Burning* sits firmly within the pioneering years of the 'golden age' of documentary filmmaking (Nichols, B. 2017. p.1). Bill Nichols contends that this time saw an abundance of documentaries that were injecting new life into an existing form, the films being made at this time were challenging assumptions and altering perceptions, and in doing so, raised serious thought about how to define this type of filmmaking (ibid. 2017). What separated documentary from other film narrative or stories was that their stories came from a collective conscious, or as Bill Nichols puts it 'they stem from a world we all share' (ibid. 2017). Rather than continuing to reproduce the same subject matter in the same formula as film, he attests that independent documentary film told stories from a 'new perspective allowing them to broaden horizons and awaken new possibilities' (ibid. 2017). Jennie Livingston certainly managed to broaden horizons by revealing a sub-culture that would challenge preconceived notions of gender and sexuality and of the people who identified with those genders and sexual identities. In a 2019 article for *The New York Times* Livingston discusses her intention to document ballroom culture she states:

> Their self-invention was such a complex cultural commentary. It questioned what America is and proved the political power of creating identity. It was a story that touched me, and that I felt people should know. I wanted to give people in the world of ballroom the opportunity to speak in the medium of film. My intentions were to tell a story, to tell it well and to have other people recognize [sic] the complexity, brilliance, usefulness, and beauty of this world (Gorge, C. 2019).

Regarding this statement by Livingston, it is important to note that, through her own words Livingston was concerned with providing the subjects of her film a platform in which to tell their stories and this division between filmmaker and subject is in keeping with the style of

ethnographic film, in which the filmmaker observes and films without interference. Nichols provides a historic overview of some of the most influential documentary films that came out of this revolutionary era beginning in the mid-80s such as *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), *Radio Bikini* (1987), and *Eyes on the Prize* (1987). He articulates that the reason they have had such lasting appeal on documentary today is thanks in large part to the 'spoken voices of filmmakers' (ibid. 2017). As such their voice reminds audiences that they maintain their distance from the authoritative tone of the corporate media, instead they speak to power rather than embrace it, 'Their stylistic daring – the urge to stand in intimate relation to a historical moment and those who populate it- confounds the omniscient commentary of conventional documentary and the detached coolness of television news' (ibid. 2017). He concludes by comparing this type of filmmaking, one that finds a voice in which to speak about subjects that concern them, to great historic orators as 'both speak from the heart in ways that both fit the occasion and issue from it' (ibid. 2017). Livingston is, of course, absent from *Paris Is Burning* opting instead for an ethnographic approach. In that sense, her filmmaking style does not necessarily conform with the style of documentary Nichols describes, in which filmmakers have inserted themselves in, almost as a 'character' in their own right, whether they are an unseen narrator or an actual presence on screen. By positioning Livingston outside of this type of documentary filmmaking, one which 'speaks to power rather than embracing it', it is arguable that she missed an opportunity to humanise this community and thus speak to the power of legislators and society at large. Moreover, her status as a non-member of the ballroom community as well as her removal from screen, further distances her from Nichols's assertion that filmmakers positioned themselves within historic moments with those who populate them. Despite this, I demonstrate throughout this thesis that her film created a legacy that still resonates throughout mediated representations of queer culture today perhaps because she does not insert herself into the subculture she films

and allows the audience to make their own critical determinations about the subculture. In fact, the film would eventually, in 2016, be added to the Library of Congress. This recognition demonstrates not only its resonance but its longevity, and as K Ifeanyi suggests, the marginalised ballroom community gained 'visibility and recognition for an art form that significantly influenced culture as a whole and that shows no signs of fading today' (Ifeanyi, K. 2019).

Subcultures

Paris Is Burning documents the 1980s New York City drag ballroom subculture as a fundamental aspect of African American, Latino, gay and transgender experience. The type of drag displayed in the film aligns with ideological concepts of 'genderfuck', which mixes masculine and feminine gender codes in a way that subverts the gender binaries (Cleto, F. 1999. p. 255). And for the subjects of the film 'genderfuck' is used as a form of escapism, a way for them to be whatever they want, both inside and outside the balls, Jackie Goldsby solidifies this by writing, *'Paris Is Burning* bursts open another closet door… where gender-fuck is not just a theoretical concept but is, first and foremost, a way of life' (Goldsby, J. 1993. p.108).

The current cultural significance of *Paris is Burning* is in part thanks to its transcendence from academia and documentary format into mainstream media and its inclusion within the linguistic zeitgeist. The film introduced the world to "voguing", "reading", "shade", "house structures", as well as providing an exploration into the lives of the drag queens, trans women, and queer street kids all of whom gave the film its intrigue. Livingston recalls: 'I stepped into a community where people were geniuses at becoming themselves, geniuses at using words and far beyond brilliant at using dance forms to express themselves.' (George C. 2019). Her articulation of the subjects of her film reveals the physicality to the performance of gender, it is not just passive, or static based on surface looks it is layered and nuanced and

this notion has been central to the films influence in shows such as *Drag Race* (2009) *and We're Here* (2020). The 'house structures' present in *Paris Is Burning* provide an interesting exploration into a type of kinship that serves as an alternative to the prevailing norms of the nuclear American family. Within this articulation Goldsby recognises that the hierarchical structuring of the houses not simply implicated in the raising and nurturing of one another but as a way to groom themselves to become 'legends' of the balls and leads Goldsby to claim 'In the world of *Paris Is Burning* a house is not a home; the film reconstitutes what that fabled term means' (Goldsby, J. 1993. p.109). The family and house names are taken either from these legendary mothers – Pepper Labeija, Angie Xtravaganza, Willie Ninja –and also from famous fashion brands – Chanel, St Laurent, Armani.

Peggy Phelan articulates that in co-opting the name of expensive fashion designers' members of the house both appropriate and mock the intentional "exclusiveness" of these labels. This is a subversive statement that coincides with capitalist notions of 1980s America, it is a distinct recognition by the subjects of a world in which they do not belong. In adopting the name of the mother, the families assign value to femininity which is emulated in the balls themselves (Phelan, P. 1993. p.95). Furthermore, this displays a clear opposition and subversion from the traditional nuclear family and patriarchal structure in which the family name typically comes from the father. What Phelan finds most interesting about the latter, however, is that the 'architecture of that femininity is thoroughly masculine, and it thoroughly reflects the psychic-political structure of capitalism' (Phelan, P. 1993. p.95), whose driving force, she argues, is its insistence of a 'have not' condition intended to motivate a desire to acquire commodities (Phelan, P. 1993. p.95). Phelan's statement reveals the inevitable permeations of capitalism within the counterculture, however the subjects within the film are all too aware that they do not fit within the typical categories, yet in co-oping that which they are excluded from subverts the very basis of the brands 'luxury' and

'exclusive' status. One of the films more senior queen's Dorian Cory confirms this by stating, "if you have on a label, it means you've got wealth, well it doesn't really because any shoplifter can get a label." (Livingston, J. 1991).

Butler specifies that for something to be subversive of heterosexual hegemony, 'it has to both mime and displace its conventions' but concludes that 'not all mining is displacing.' (Kotz, L. 1992). Butler critiques the way in which director Jennie Livingston places emphasis on 'miming gender assumptions that actually reinvest the gender ideals and reconsolidates their hegemonic status' (ibid. 1992). For Butler, the act of imitating patriarchal hegemonic depictions of femininity is not enough to destabilise and subvert them, instead, it exemplifies how drag can be seen to exist in symbiosis with such social discourse. 'It is not enough to expose an ideal as uninhabitable. Ideals have to be altered dissolved and rearticulated; there has to be a thorough rethinking of the violence of the gender ideal' (ibid. 1992). However, in contemplation of the type of kinship displayed in *Paris is Burning*, Butler agrees that an element of subversion is present, through the visibility of house structures that involve mothers and children. Butlers' notion of subversion is realised through this type of kinship because it 'mimes' traditional nuclear-family kinship but also displaces them' (ibid. 1992). Ultimately the house structures presented in *Paris is Burning* denaturalise the heteronormative significance of reproductive families which politically uphold the standard norms of social organisation and for Butler, this is far more subversive than the actual drag scenes (ibid. 1992). Butler's critical theory surrounding the subversion of kinship will be further explored in chapter three in which I provide an in-depth analysis surrounding the subversive power of *RuPaul's Drag Race.*

With consideration to the time period in which *Paris Is Burning* was made, the socio-economic and political climate of 1980s America cannot be ignored, as capitalism's permeation into ball culture is constantly present throughout the film. Much of the criticism Livingston received centres around her own social standing as a middle-class white woman yet more than this, she was accused of presenting the subjects of her film as full of adulation towards white hegemonic capitalism by using a kind of ethnographic documentary form Goldsby recognises that, although the subjects of the film are framed in such a way, testimony from the films most experienced queers provide a counter argument to the criticisms Livingston faced. She references both Pepper Labeija and Dorian Corey, who explain that during their early years on scene during the 1960s, the balls praised emulations of the Las Vegas showgirl, whilst during the 1970s the balls were enamoured with movie stars. Reagan era eighties was in full swing by the time the film was made and so Goldsby notes how the balls began 'appropriating the symbols and personae of the nouveaux riches as well as their plebeian underside' (Goldsby, J. 1993.p.111). Given the context of the political climate in which they exist, the children's adulation for such lifestyles is for Goldsby, wholly logical in the scheme of consumer capitalism, precisely because they are of colour, poor and queer living in one of the most class-conscious cities in the world, 'they want out of their reality' (ibid. 1993. p.111). As contemporary balls expanded their categories Goldsby claims, its critique of identity politics and consumer culture deepened, through which the children conclude identity is nothing so much as commodity fetish. To demonstrate this understanding Goldsby references the juxtaposition of categories such *Town and Country* with *Bangee* – "you know, the ones who tried to rob you on your way to the ball" (Livingston, J. 1991). She notes that this contrast exposes the system that defines these as socially meaningful categories and therefore disrupts the 'economy of desire and difference the identification of the self with objects meant to represent self that fuels consumerism (ibid. 1993. p.111). In

service to the capitalist ideals of consumer culture the subjects of the balls partake in cosmetic surgery and "mopping" (stealing) of garments in order to affect their look and through this action they turn traditional ideas of labour around, rather than being disaffected from some form of true self the children find meaning and freedom through such actions (ibid. 1993. p.111). Goldsby concludes her argument by referencing Brook Xtravaganza's "transsexualism" operation which upon completion allows Brook to declare her freedom "free as the wind on this beach" (Livingston, J. 1991) a statement Goldsby insists 'calls the material and ideological bases of identity into question' (ibid, 1993. p.111).

Filming Subcultures

Jackie Goldsby details both the advantages and disadvantages of the cinematic techniques employed in *Paris is Burning*. Firstly, she discusses how, although the subjects of the film love the camera and love to play to it, Livingston's style also allows them to relax around it and shed their façade, which according to Goldsby is testament to the trust Livingston gained over the years of filming (ibid, 1993. p.110). She further credits the 'exposition of the political critique implied in the social practices of the ball world' to both Livingston and Jonathan Oppenheim for their directing and editing alike (ibid, 1993. p.110). Additionally, however Goldsby also concedes the problematic relationship between film maker and content. Although she notes that the film helped open the ball world to public view, she also believes it betrayed its subjects in doing so as the format of documentary is, for Goldsby, 'inimical to the participants desire for glamour and mass fame' (ibid, 1993. p.114), using one of the films subjects Octavia St. Laurent and her dreams of becoming a star and supermodel as an example. Goldsby explains that 'simply by representing Octavia St. Laurent the film exposes the fiction informing her 'realness' she'll never become the supermodel she hopes to be (ibid, 1993. p.114) and unsurprisingly it is the more butch subject of Willi Ninja who is able to cross over into music videos (Malcom McLaren *Deep in Vogue* 1998) and *Village*

Voice articles (ibid, 1993. p.114). Decisively for Goldsby herein lies the dilemma, that although she finds the format somewhat detrimental to the subjects of the film, she also recognises that documentary is probably the only genre that will recognise the 'ball world as it is: coloured and queer' (ibid, 1993. p.114).

Goldsby draws a comparison between the queens displayed in *Paris is Burning* to the ones presented in Marlon Rigg's experimental documentary about the experience of black gay men, *Tongues Untied* (1989) which she describes as silenced by the subjectivity of Rigg's narrative "I" (Goldsby, J. 1993. p.114). Whilst Bill Nichols explains how the autobiographical note addresses the intense personal stakes involved in black gay identity (Nichols, B. 2017. p.150). Through her comparison Goldsby questions, 'if the din of voices heard throughout *Paris is Burning* leads us to ask why Riggs quiets his queens we can – and should- ask what it means for Livingston a white woman, to give the members of the ball world a public voice (Goldsby, J. 1993. p.114-115). Her analysis concludes by noting how Livingston dismissed such discussions by reiterating the acceptance and trust she earned from the film's subjects. A 2019 article in *The New York Times* asked Livingston about the criticism she received to which she responded:

> I guess the core of these criticisms is: "Jennie went on to be a filmmaker, while the people in the film stayed where they were." I think yes, there's a class system, and we live in it. But filmmakers don't change that class system; we comment on it. It's up to other people to change it (George, C. 2019).

Whilst this may be true, Goldsby argues the point remains, she can tell this story because her identity is not implicated in it, in the same way it is for Riggs, as *Tongues Untied* is not only made by Riggs it also features him as he gives a voice to the black gay experience, which is his reality. Nichols confirms this contrast by explaining that the voice of Riggs present in

Tongues Untied is not the standard voice of authority. Not only is it not the standard, but it also presents ethnic identity and colloquial idiosyncrasy in place of the dominant norm of standard white nonregional English, and this use of inflection, rhythm and style make the film, for Nichols, a prototype of the performative mode of documentary (Nichols, 2017. p.47). Although, linguistic peculiarity is present and even a main feature of *Paris is Burning* through the subjects of its narrative, Livingston's position as outsider looking in plays a key role as to how the film is viewed. Goldsby acknowledges this as she writes 'this is not to say… that a "black" film necessarily would have been different. It is to suggest that the cultural and social privilege of the filmmaker is inscribed into the film however unobtrusive she strives to be' (Goldsby, J. 1993. p.115). The relationship between Livingston and the films subjects' racial and ethical backgrounds is something hooks is critical of in her chapter *Is Paris Burning?* (hooks, b.1992). She begins her chapter by documenting historic portrayals of black homosexuality and drag, she writes 'televised images of black men in drag were never subversive, they helped sustain sexism and racism' (hooks, b, 1992, p.148). Like Goldsby, hooks' articulates the problematic nature of Livingston's absence from the film, claiming it portrays itself as a politically neutral documentary that provides a candid celebratory look a black drag (hooks, b. 1992. p.150). However, hooks' argues that this is not the case, instead she claims Livingston approaches her subjects as an outsider looking in and since her presence as a white female lesbian is not present it makes it easy for the audience to imagine they are watching an ethnographic film about black gay life. hooks' contends that this results in the viewer's failure to recognise that they are watching something that has been shaped and formed specifically by the perspective of Livingston (hooks, b. 1992. p.151). Similarly, to Goldsby's analysis in which she states Livingston can tell this story because she is not part of the culture she is documenting, hooks critiques Livingston further and calls her cinematic style in-keeping with hegemonic standards as she states, 'Livingston does not

oppose the way hegemonic whiteness "represents" blackness, but rather assumes an imperial overseeing position' (hook, b. 1993. p.151).

The complex relationship between Livingston and her subjects has been a continued source of critical discourse surrounding the film and its lasting legacy and when the discourse of gender and queer theory address the subjects of *Paris is Burning* in relation to Livingston a signifier of privilege is questioned. In her chapter *The Golden Apple: Jennie Livingston's Paris is Burning* Peggy Phelan introduces the film by claiming it to be 'one of the most difficult and complex performance texts' (Phelan, P. 1993, p.93). She briefly details how the balls in the film depict Latino and African American gay men, transexuals and transvestitism who compete for adoration and trophies before discussing the complex and paradoxical nature of the ball world and real world experiences the subjects endure. Primarily, she notes that the balls reveal the performers longing to be made unremarkable or to pass as normative outside of the balls rather than be seen as "other" and due to them being excessively marked as "other" on the outside 'the walkers employ hyper-visibility on the runway to secure the power and freedom of invisibility outside the hall' (ibid, 1993. p.93). Phelan continues by commenting on how Livingston's style of film reveals a further set of reversals around the politics of visibility by the performers themselves. Noting how Livingston presents the subjects within the strict genre coding of ethnographic documentary, Phelan argues that the ability of the subjects to remain somewhat impervious to the laws of ethnographic documentary allows them to retain some of their subversive power 'the power of the un-surveyable' (ibid. 1993. p.94). Additionally, Phelan notes how Livingston's employment of ethnographic devices and focus on cross-dressing are used as a means of investigating the politics of culture, knowledge and power. The ethnographic methods used in *Paris is Burning* to display community are detailed by Phelan as the inclusion of inter-titles which describe the lexicon to the viewer, confessional interviews with subjects, change within the community,

the consciousness of AIDS and voice overs marking the consequences of change. According to Phelan this allows Livingston to present her subjects as 'both unique and comprehensible' (ibid, 1993. p. 94) which results in the implicit fetishization of the films subjects. For Phelan this fetishization stems from Livingston's transforming of the subjects from the '" unknown" (and potentially anxiety inducing "other") into the "known" (the reassuring familiar)' (ibid, 1993. p.94). Once the subjects become fetishized Phelan argues another displacement occurs from the performance to the film she writes, '*Paris is Burning* itself becomes the reassuring familiar, the fetish object' (ibid, 1993. p.94). The notion of transforming the unknown to the known and reassuring familiar is something hooks discusses in her critique of racial representation. hooks explains how whiteness accepts blackness and black culture when they are satisfied with the images and habits being represented (hooks, b. 1992. p.154). Additionally, she interrogates Livingston's position as an outsider looking in, which turns the black drag balls into a spectacle, for the entertainment of those on the outside, in this interpretation hooks states that the 'outsider position is primarily located in the experience of whiteness' (ibid, 1992. p.152). As such hooks argues that Livingston's ability to assume such a position without rigorous interrogation of intent is rooted in the politics of race and racism (ibid, 1992. p.153). Furthermore, she questions Livingston's position as benefactor, due to the way the film explicitly frames the subjects to desire stardom and fame, therefore she is able to offer them a way to realise this dream by featuring in her film. hooks concludes that this makes it possible for blackness to be commodified by allowing 'white audiences to applaud representation of black culture *if* they are satisfied with the images and habits being represented' (ibid, 1992. p.154).

With regards to the ethnographic techniques used by Livingston most notably her absence from screen, Judith Butler discusses the role of the camera as assuming the place of the phallus 'as that which controls the field of signification' (Butler, J. 1993 p.136). Butler

explains that Livingston's absence allows the camera to trade on the masculine privilege of the 'disembodied gaze', 'the gaze that has the ability to produce bodies, but which is itself no body' (ibid, 1993. p.136). To articulate this Butler uses the one instance where Livingston might appear allegorically on camera. As Octavia St Laurent is modelling and moving around for the camera the audience can hear a voice, presumed to be Livingston, telling her she is terrific. Butler argues that this sudden intrusion of the camera suggests the camera's desire, the desire that motivates the camera, 'in which a white lesbian, phallically organised by the camera… eroticises a black male to female transexual' (ibid, 1993. p.135). For Butler, Livingston's visual absence provides her power over the subjects the camera is filming, questioning whether this shows a production of the black transexual for an eroticising white gaze or even 'the transsexualization of lesbian desire' (ibid, 1993. p.135). In this sense Butler argues that Livingston incites Octavia to become a woman for Livingston's own camera, which therefore assumes Livingston the power of '" having the phallus" i.e., the ability to confer that femininity to anoint Octavia as model woman' (ibid, 1993. p.135). Butler concludes by asserting that the camera also acts as surgical instrument and operation 'the vehicle through which transubstantiation occurs' meaning Livingston assumes the power to turn men into women which Butler claims that in doing so, the subjects then depend upon the power of her gaze to become and remain women (ibid, 1993. p.135). Through this understanding we can reason that as the operator of the apparatus that controls the gaze, Livingston has the power to grant the subjects their greatest desires, which in the case of Octavia is to be a woman. Through this analysis, Butler reaffirms hooks' opinion that Livingston acts as benefactor to her subjects, she is providing her subjects what they most deeply desire, and she is doing it through her mediation of them.

The theoretical criticism levelled at Livingston for her style of filmmaking is imperative to understanding and analysing the inclusion of intersectionality in the film. The term

Intersectionality was first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in order to explain the oppression of African American women in her 1989 essay, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.* Intersectionality can also be more broadly defined, as a way of understanding social relations by examining intersecting forms of discrimination. Crenshaw's intended meaning is to explain that social systems are complex and therefore many different forms of oppression are interlinked. Historic approaches to understanding and working towards equality, tended to focus on one type of discrimination at any one time for example sexism, racism, or homophobia, yet Crenshaw applied the understanding of intersectionality to recognise and address all potential obstructions to an individual or group of people. This is done in recognition of combined discriminatory practices as these combinations often compound and transform the experience of oppression.

Theoretical readings of *Paris Is Burning* particularly engage with the intersectionality of race and sexual identity and as such provide a ground-breaking portrayal of the difficulty of exploring various identities while living under the scrutiny of white patriarchal society. Socio-historically, American gay lives have often been coded as white, causing the forces that shape the lives of gay people of colour to be ignored as gay identity is swept up into whiteness. Whilst simultaneously African American masculinity is almost never synonymous with homosexual identity, instead black men are symbolically considered to embody and present a strong hyper-masculine identity. In her book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity,* hooks' argues the prevailing image of black masculinity is constructed by white patriarchy and in doing so the image of the black male is considered a 'brute - untamed, uncivilised, unthinking, and unfeeling' (hooks, b. 2004. p.81). She notes that this social perception begins to form in early childhood as a result of patriarchal socialisation that, according to hooks, encourages black boys to repress emotions. Furthermore, she

acknowledges that this is prevalent in black childhood because of the long history of black oppression she writes, ‘the image of emasculated and castrated black males is so embedded in the cultural imagination that many black parents feel it crucial to train their boys to be tough’ (hooks, b, 2004. P.81).

Many comparisons have been drawn between *Paris Is Burning* and *Tongues Untied* specifically the way in which each delt with the intersectionality of race and homosexuality, with the latter being regarded as much more political in its approach, whilst *Paris Is Burning* has been criticised for being more exploitative than political. Although *Paris is Burning* provides its subjects the opportunity to discuss candidly their experiences of homophobia, ostracization, homelessness and forged kinship, it also repeatedly presents their desires to acquire more capitalistic, white-dominated hegemonic lifestyles. *Tongues Untied* politically utilises experimental film techniques such as narrative accounts, clips of stand-up routines, historical events and fictional imagery in order to link the struggles of black gay men with an historical legacy of resistance. Alternatively, Livingston, as previously stated, was criticised for her absence on screen, which according to hooks allows viewers to imagine they are watching an ethnographical film instead of recognising that the film is shaped and informed by the specific perspective of Livingston (hooks, b. 1992). Riggs, however, directly approaches black gay men’s oppression under the weight of white supremacy by illustrating instances of fierce opposition through the power of black gay men’s voices, which is the intention of the film’s title. In his analysis regarding ethical issues of documentary filmmaking, Nichols suggests that there is a compelling degree of intimacy when a documentary speaks about an “us” that includes the filmmakers themselves. Of the first-person voice approach in *Tongues Untied,* Nichols asserts that Riggs is able to speak about the intersectionality of gay black men in a ‘subtle fusion of both “I speak about us to you”

and “I speak about myself to you” formulations that stresses the linkages between personal and collective experience’ (Nichols, B. 2017. p.42).

In *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* Stella Bruzzi discusses the problems attributed to Livingston’s style of ethnographic filmmaking or what is also known as *Direct Cinema* or *Cinema Verite,* that is documentaries that focus entirely on observation and the illusion of the void of filmmaker’s influence. She notes how this style has proven to be a crucial historical factor in terms of limiting documentary’s potential and frame of reference (Bruzzi, S. 2006. p. 8). Quoting American documentary filmmaker Errol Morris, Bruzzi’s writes.

> *Cinema Verité* set back documentary filmmaking by twenty or thirty years… there is no reason why documentaries can’t be as personal as fiction filmmaking and hear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn’t guaranteed by style or expression. It isn’t guaranteed by anything. (Bruzzi, S. 2006. p. 8).

Livingston is by no means the first director who sought to explore and document a culture outside of her own, yet her exploration of such a culture called into question the adequacy of her representation. In the years following the film’s release one persistent question asked of Livingston is if she acted as cultural appropriator considering her subjects did not have agency over their own representation. Whilst Riggs has been lauded for centrally positioning black gay men and their experiences in *Tongues Untied,* Livingston has been accused of capitalising on the experiences and hardships of a marginalised community, with many of the film’s subjects falling back into relative obscurity post-film highlighting the reality of their sexual, racial and socioeconomic marginalisation. The film won the Grand Jury prize at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival and later went on to be a commercial success after being picked up for distribution by Miramax. The success and publicity of the film in the years following its release left the subjects of the film themselves questioning if they had been exploited. A

2015 *Guardian* article noted how several of the film's subjects had wished to sue for a share of the film's profits, however it reports that 'all dropped their claims after their attorneys confirmed that they had signed standard release forms' (Clarke, A. 2015). A stark contrast one can draw from comparing *Tongues Untied* and *Paris Is Burning* is how the intersectionality of being both black and gay in 1980s America is addressed throughout the films respectively. Riggs' not only centrally positioned black gay men he also provided context to the history of oppression faced by black gay men, something Livingston has been accused of evading. The style of *Tongues Untied* presents a linear narrative that has a clear beginning and a hopeful end, whereas *Paris Is Burning* is far more fragmented with no clear linear narrative for its subjects which results in the totality of experiences of gay men of colour going unaddressed. hooks' contends that Livingston's avoidance of historical context allows for a fixation and adulation of whiteness. She explains that the film acts as a graphic portrait of the ways in which colonialised black people idolise the throne of whiteness (hooks, b, 1992. p.149). For hooks, this is damaging to the image of black gay men and people of colour as a whole. She concludes that such sentiment, demands people of colour live in perpetual self-hate that seduces them away from themselves. She writes 'it negates that there is any beauty to be found in any form of blackness that is not imitation whiteness' (ibid, 1992. p.149). A further contention hooks addresses is the way in which black culture is removed and ignored, for hooks this lack of context allows the audience to view the balls as a spectacle for white audiences rather than a ritual that involves a socio-history of black culture. By presenting itself as politically neutral hooks believes that the film becomes celebratory and the ability to present the balls as radical expressions of subversive imitation that challenges and undermines the status-quo becomes lost because the ceremonial act that carries meaning and significance, instead becomes a spectacle. Because the significance of ritual is informed by historic cultural understandings of black culture, the evasion of such

context by Livingston lead hooks to assert that, for those who didn't grow up in a segregated black setting it is easy for audiences to depict black ritual as spectacle and so to assume the perspective of Livingston, a white outsider looking in (ibid, 1992. p.150). The perceptual shift from ritual to spectacle due to a lack of historical context is, for hooks, the reason black and white audiences view the film differently. She explains that while white viewers expressed their outspoken pleasure, black audiences remained publicly muted in their displeasure. In explaining such reactions, hooks references Patricia Williams and her work on the white assumption of the 'neutral gaze' in which, she describes a walking tour of white tourists visiting Harlem's gospel churches on Easter Sunday. In her analysis, Williams notes how if the roles were reversed, and a group of black tourists wandered into a synagogue during Passover, at the very least the reaction would be that of disrespect. What Williams finds most striking however, was the impression that for them (the tourists) no one existed that could not be governed by their intentions, no one had asked the people in the church if they wanted to be stared at like a living museum (ibid, 1992. p.153). Whilst Williams acknowledges that the tourists intended no malice in their behaviour she writes:

> I can't help thinking that is it a liability as much as a luxury to live without interaction. To live so completely impervious to one's own impact on others is a fragile privilege, which over time relies not simply on the willingness but on the inability of others- in this case blacks- to make their displeasure heard. (ibid, 1992. p.153).

By using this example adjacently to her reading of *Paris Is Burning,* hooks argues that it is possible for blackness to be commodified in unprecedented ways, a notion that for hooks became a trend indicative of 1980s America, which produced colourful ethnicities for white consumer appetites and one that further allowed whites to appropriate black culture without interrogating whiteness or show any concern for the displeasure of black people (ibid, 1992

p.154). hooks, begins her chapter on *Paris Is Burning* by reminiscing on a time when she would dress up as a male and go out into the world, describing it as 'a form of ritual, of play. It was also about power' (hooks, b. 1992. p.145). Through her own understanding and experiences of drag, it is arguable that hooks contradicts herself as she describes 'symbolically crossing from the world or powerlessness into a world of privilege' (ibid, 1992. p.145). Given that this is how she describes her personal experience of drag she is quick to criticise the queens in the film for emulating white privilege or in other words in their pursuing a world of privilege. Furthermore, her distinction between ritual and spectacle are presented as a dichotomy of perception and so too is her understanding of reality and fantasy. Within this understanding hooks criticises Livingston for treating black gay culture as a spectacle and calls into question her reliance on fantasy as a means for escape, she writes, '…the point is not to give us fantasy, but to recognize its limitations… one must distinguish the place of fantasy in ritualized play from the use of fantasy as a means of escape' (ibid, 1992. p. 156). While hooks notes that her experiences of dressing as a male and going out into the world gave her a sense of power as she considered it 'the ultimate, intimate, voyeuristic gesture' (ibid, 1992. p. 145) she argues that within the dominant heterosexist gaze the experience of men dressing as women is a 'sign that one is symbolically crossing from a realm of power into a realm of powerlessness' (ibid, 1992. p.146). However, by applying this understanding detrimentally to all subjects that appear in *Paris Is Burning,* hooks fails to recognise and consider the transgender and gender nonconforming subjects who live outside the gender binary both inside and outside of the balls, and so for them it is not necessarily a matter of fantasy or escapism but a matter of survival in a hegemonic patriarchal world that does not readily accept their sexual or gendered identity. Furthermore, just like the white audiences' of both the film and Williams' analogy, Livingston also represents notions of privileged invisibility. Applying this understanding to Phelan's previous argument in which

she discussed the paradoxical nature of the films subject in both their longing to remain unremarkable and pass as normative outside the balls, whilst at the same time seeking hyper visibility within them precisely because they remain invisible to the hegemonic norm. Then it is arguable that Livingston's privileged position of being both able to remain invisible within the film, and hyper-visible in terms of its success, is for the subjects of the film the idealised dream - the ability to attain the visible and invisible white privilege.

Within her analysis of *Paris Is Burning,* hooks argues that some productions of gay male drag featured in the film are misogynistic and that drag as whole is often rooted in the mockery and degradation of womanhood. Butler argues that to limit drag as such is to ignore that identification is always an ambivalent process. Butler continues by saying that in 'identifying gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realisable' (Burlet, J. 1990. p.126). Within this understanding, Butler articulates that being a man and being a woman are internally and inherently unstable and ambivalent because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identification. A permanent and fixed identification is something Butler refutes, instead for Butler identity is fluid and everchanging and not solidified within the rigid norms of a gender binary, 'a forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, re-signify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely (ibid, 1990. p.126). Although Butler critiques hooks' interpretation of drag, they both question whether the drag presented in *Paris Is Burning,* and indeed drag more generally can be considered subversive. Butler begins by stating that there is no solidifying relationship between drag and subversion but that drag can be used in service of both the denaturalisation and re-idealisation of heterosexual gender norms and therefore, at best drag can be considered ambivalent because it is implicated in regimes of power by which one is constituted and hence at the same time means it is implicated in the power regimes one opposes (ibid, 1990

p.125). To explain this Butler reasons that for all gender to be like drag, then central to heterosexuality and gender binaries is imitation, therefore drag is not a secondary imitation to these normative practices but rather hegemonic heterosexuality itself also repeatedly imitates its own idealisations. Through such constant repetition, Butler believes that heterosexual performativity is beset by an anxiety it can never fully overcome because it is constantly 'challenged by a domain of sexual possibility that must be excluded for hypersexualised gender to produce itself' (ibid, 1990. p.125). Butler therefore concludes that 'in this sense, then, drag is subversive to the extent it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality' (ibid, 1990. p.125). Butler concludes that drag has the ability to reveal that heterosexuality is a perpetual performance that is threatened by alternative possibilities of sexual and gendered difference. Therefore, in regard to drag and queerness it can be argued that gender is destabilised and denaturalised and *Paris Is Burning* both appropriates and subverts conventional norms of oppression simultaneously. Phelan also argues that the balls and the film itself are adjacent in their admiration and repulsion of the *real.* She articulates that historically, cinema rejects the real because it must remain a celluloid shadow of it, whilst simultaneously cinema loves the real because in framing it, it gains power and definition (Phelan, P. 1993. p. 103). Likewise, Phelan understands that the subjects of the film both perpetuate the aspiration to be real, whilst at the same time reveal the artifice that makes it impossible for them to be real. Livingston's juxtaposition of frames that track out of the balls and on to the streets of Manhattan, which are occupied by affluent white people and heterosexual couples are interpreted by Phelan as the subject's idealisation of the real, something to imitate and define themselves against. However, Phelan argues that these people appear to be more 'unreal than the walkers because they remain unaware of the artifice that the walkers have made hyper-visible' (ibid, 1993. p.103). Therefore, similarly to

Butler, Phelan also concludes that the subversive power of the films subject's is their ability to reveal how 'falsely narrow the white heterosexual 'real' is' (ibid, 1993. p. 104).

Realness

In terms of achieving the 'real', considered the aesthetic imperative defining drag ball culture that has since extended beyond *Paris Is Burning,* with its 'achievement' becoming a key element in *RuPaul's Drag Race.* The balls are attended by African American and Latino men, who compete in various categories some of which follow normative social conventions – the executive or the Ivy League student, yet within the ball world the categories reveal the subversive nature of drag as they are intentionally mocking and caricaturing positions of power. As Dorian Cory explains the intention of these categories claiming:

> "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 to, I could be one. The fact that you are not an executive is merely because of the social standing of life, that is just a pure thing, black people have a hard time getting anywhere. And those that do are usually straight." (Livingston, J. 1991).

Additionally, there are other categories that are 'taken straight from black masculine street culture' (Butler, J. 1990. p.127) such as "Bangie" the archetype of which refers to urban toughness and swagger. Therefore, not all categories are taken from white culture, some are replicants of heterosexuality that is not white. Butler explains that what determines the effect of realness is the ability to 'compel belief, to produce the naturalised effect, aimed at some impersonation and idealisation and so, for those viewing the film the performance is obvious in its artifice yet one that nevertheless achieves realness' (ibid, 1990. p.127). Considering these arguments however, it is still possible to the question: does this subvert norms, or does

it re-establish perpetual ideals which can only oppress? These contradictions are revealed through the subject of Venus Xtravaganza, a preoperative transexual sex worker who is able to pass as a light-skinned woman but who is ultimately violently murdered by a client. Butler provides a comparison between Venus and Willi Ninja, noting that while Venus is able to pass as white, she is limited in her ability to pass completely as woman and because of this she is vulnerable to homophobic violence. However, Ninja is able to pass as straight, which for Butler illustrates 'there is passing and then there is passing, it is no 'accident' that Ninja ascends, and Venus is killed' (ibid, 1990. p.130). Although it could now be considered an outdated concept, given progressive conversations and representations of trans identity, Butler deduces that Venus' attempts to choose another gender or become a 'real woman' in order to 'constitute the site of phantasmatic promise of a rescue from poverty, homophobia and racist delegitimation' (ibid, 1990. p.130). A reading of the drag balls reveals the mastery of the subject's repeated performances which both 'legitimates and delegitimates the realness norms by which it is produced' (ibid, 1990. p.130). For Butler the balls become symbolic of a fantasy that can never quite be achieved without dis-identification and Venus' murder is a reminder of the limits of fantasy. Furthermore, Butler explains that Venus misread 'the social map of power', because, similarly to Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, sexual difference is interlinked with race and class to create radically informed conceptions of sex and so if Venus wants to become a woman but cannot overcome being Latina then Butler concludes she is treated precisely the way in which women of colour are treated (ibid, 1990. p.131). Venus' desire to conform to the norms of heterosexuality reveal the tragic irony of her death as she ultimately becomes a victim of such hegemony, Butler concludes that the film succeeds in bringing Venus back to visibility. However, despite her ability to cross gender, sexuality and race performativity, Venus falls victim to what Butler describes as the 'hegemony that reinscribes the privileges of normative femininity and whiteness wields the

final power to *re-naturalise* Venus's body' (ibid, 1990. p.131). Venus ultimately demonstrates how the film presents the paradox of drag's ability to both denaturalise and at the same time re-idolise hegemonic heterosexuality. Yet, it is also plausible to argue that the subjects of the film seek a more nuanced renegotiation of gender normativity and don't merely wish to parody an idealised version of it. Moreover, it is also possible that certain acts of drag remove gender as a concept all together, as gender theorist and queer activist Kate Bornstein writes:

> Not all drag is about gender. We do drag to climb up from under the crushing oppression of race, age, class, religions, sexuality, looks, disability, mental health, family and reproductive status, language, habitat, citizenship, political ideology and humanity. We do drag to be the best within any of these spaces of regulation – or as close as we can get to being the best. Or we do drag so that those who are the best in those spaces will like us. Or we do drag so we don't stand out as the freak we think we are. (Bornstein, K. 2013).

Additionally, whilst many subjects of the film discuss their desires, they vary extensively in their aspirations. For example, Venus discusses her desire for genital reassignment surgery in the same way another queen desires an expensive garment, the framing of these desires calls into question Livingston's portrayal of gender reassignment surgery that equates it to being as trivial as wanting new clothes. Although there are obvious variations in their desires and even in their privileges, given the hierarchical order of house structures, all subjects of the film are unified in their exclusion from heteronormative society. And so, the categories that are carefully crafted within the balls reflect the unification of the varying spectrum of identities that make up this subculture and arguably reveal the film's subversive power. Whilst Phelan praises the film for its subversive ability to reveal how 'falsely narrow the white heterosexual 'real' is' (Phelan, P. 1993. p. 104), she also critiques the constant use of shots that feature

white affluence and white heterosexual couples. She argues that it reduces the film to a commercial, selling the commodity of white heterosexual and economic privilege that perpetuates the distance between the subjects *real* and outside *real* which rejects them. For Phelan it is through this reading she argues that the film fails, and more specifically that Livingston fails her subject's, she writes, 'The films failure, is the failure… to examine the incredible allure of being unseen when visibility has meant and continues to mean, violence, imprisonment and death' (ibid, 1993 p.104) with Venus acting as a harsh reminder of this reality. Livingston's failure to examine the forces which lead people to become part of this subculture and indeed allured them to enact ideals associated with normative hegemony are also the reason hooks finds further problems in the film. As previously discussed, Livingston's avoidance of the socio-cultural history associated with black and gay oppression serves as a fundamental aspect of hooks critique. As such it will be addressed later in my thesis, particularly in chapter four which analyses how the TV show *Pose* (2018) narratively borrows from *Paris Is Burning* to provide a contemporary landscape in which to re-tell the origins of the drag ballroom scene, whilst simultaneously attempting to fill the gaps in representation that *Paris Is Burning* arguably failed to do.

Vogue

Jennie Livingston was not alone in being accused of cultural appropriation, Madonna also received backlash for utilising the 'voguing' dance style of the balls in her 1990 music video *Vogue,* with many in the LGBTQ+ community feeling that Madonna, a straight white woman, commercialised and commodified their culture. This argument and condemnation is a persistent issue within celebrity culture as the famous Kardashian-Jenner family has faced numerous instances of public backlash for their appropriation of black culture and 'blackfishing'. In her *Time Magazine* article Candy Lang discusses the controversies.

> *Blackfishin* (a portmanteau of *Black* and *catfishing* describes a step beyond cultural appropriation, when people alter their appearance with makeup, cosmetic surgery, filters or digital editing to appear Black) Wanna Thompson, the journalist who coined the term while elaborating on the phenomenon in a viral Twitter thread of “white girls cosplaying as Black women” that featured endless Kardashian-Jenner simulacrum, says that the sisters, who have been criticized for acts like claiming that they “started wigs” to wearing grills, have played a significant role in normalizing or even popularizing Blackfishing with images of themselves projecting racial ambiguity. (Lang, C. 2021).

Similar to the way in which Patricia Williams contends how, white tourists visiting Harlem gospel churches banked on the inability of black people to make their displeasure heard, Jackie Goldsby also argues that Madonna relied on the ball community’s limitations to claim vogueing as their own. She writes, ‘it means that Madonna can convert voguing into excess… into a cultural cash crop, banking on the ball world’s invisibility and its inability to publicly claim voguing’ (Goldsby, J. 1993. p.113). Goldsby further argues that the reason Madonna can take the ‘cultural goods’ from the ball and benefit from them stems from the social divide that impedes the ball world’s ability to rebut her move. To articulate this further she references W. E. B. DuBois’ concept of the ‘veil’ which symbolised the problematic nature of ‘the colour line’ in the twentieth century (ibid, 1993.p.113). *In The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) DuBois recognises that black people were viewed behind a metaphorical ‘veil’ that placed the skin as an indication of African Americans difference, a lack of capacity from white people to see African Americans as Americans and a lack of capacity for black people to see themselves as anything outside of labels assigned to them by white America, he writes, ‘I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil’ (DuBois, W, E, B. 1903). It is through this understanding that

Goldsby suggests that a revision of African Americans' theories of cultural alienation and economic disenfranchisement are needed, as she suggests that the latter half of the twentieth century saw a conversion of the veil into commodity, 'how else to explain the growing media attention to racially motivated police brutality and public enthusiasm for "crossover" rap?' (Goldsby, J. 1993. p.113). Although DuBois proposed his theory of the 'veil' more than a century ago and Goldsby applied it to her own analysis thirty years ago, I argue that given the recent #Blacklivesmatter activism and continuing acts of police brutality, his work continues to be as relevant today. Furthermore, part of *Paris is Burning's* legacy and continued influence is in large part to do with its investigation and representation of the intersection of black gay identity. In the context of such current Black activism and repression of LGBTQ+ rights, the intersection of these identities still demands attention and visibility within current mediated concepts of queerness which, throughout this study I demonstrate *Drag Race, Pose and We're Here* continue to do.

A reading of Madonna's 1990 MTV awards performance of *Vogue* provides an insight into Goldsby's argument. Whilst the original video for *Vogue*, directed by David Fincher, shot entirely in black and white, shows Madonna appearing reminiscent of a 1950s Marilyn Monroe, dressed in a white silk halter dress, hair in tight curls and statement earrings, her performance for the awards took on a decidedly new vision. The theme of the performance was eighteenth century French court fashion, with Madonna front and centre bewigged and adorned in a corseted gown previously worn by Michele Phifer in the film *Dangerous Liaisons* (Frears, S. 1989) which is set in pre-revolutionary France. Goldsby analyses this performance and infers that Madonna's appropriation of ball culture converts it into excess. She writes 'the poseurs are arranged as if in a tableau vivant… In consuming a representation of Paris, a dying Paris' Goldsby questions 'if Madonna is (figuratively) burning it? Is Paris burning? Reasoning through the logic of her performance leads us to revise the title of the

film which is named after the most important ball of the season' (Goldsby, J. 1993. p.113). Goldsby uses this questioning and what she believes reveals, 'the social divide that privileges Madonna to enter the ball world and leave with its cultural goods in tow', in order to refer back to her earlier articulation of the 'veil', noting that in the world of the balls, a reworking of concepts of community and culture that are sacred to African American discourse can play out, and therefore the children are able to re-envisage the meaning of the veil into one that allows for self-expression and self-fulfilment (ibid, 1993. p.113). Goldsby's analysis of this performance is important as in the years since *Vogue's* release, Madonna has gone on to be hailed the 'Queen' of pop and her influence on other artists and the music industry more generally has been exponential. Her argument still resonates in current examples of celebrities appropriating other cultures for monetary gain, in 2021 British singer Jesy Nelson revived backlash for 'blackfishing' in the video for her debut solo single. Like, Madonna and the afore mentioned Kardashian-Jenner's, journalist Laura Hampson notes that Nelson's appropriation of black culture is not only problematic but offensive because the act relies on white celebrities 'cherry picking aesthetics stereotypically associated with black women' and indeed black culture and allows them to capitalise on these stereotypes often with lucrative sponsorships and deals 'that women of colour may otherwise not have access to'. (Hampson, L. 2021). Additionally, the depiction of trans identity by cis gendered actors/actresses has received attention in recent years for their often-damaging portrayals. The documentary *Disclosure* (Feder, S. 2020), produced by trans actress Lavern Cox provides an expose of how important mediated images and representations of trans people are, detailing that '80% of Americans don't personally know a transgender person' (Feder, S. 2020). Therefore, most Americans get their knowledge of trans identity through the media's representation of it which has often times been degrading and damaging. I will explore this further in chapter three within my discussion of trans representation and agency within the media.

The song *Vogue* came out just months before *Paris Is Burning's* release and her documentary *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (1991), which chronicles her controversial *Blonde Ambition* world tour, was released the following year. For eleven years the film held the title for highest-earning documentary of all time. In doing so it revolutionised the popular and artistic perception of what a concert film could be. In their book *The Music Documentary: Acid Rock to Electropop,* Robert Edgar, Kirsty Fairclough-Isaacs, and Benjamin Halligan detail how the film 'very visibly shifted the landscape of the music documentary' (Edgar, Fairclough-Isaacs, Halligan. 2013, p. 17). The film didn't just merely show performances from the tour, it showed the backstage reality of what it takes to put an international tour together and what part each person plays in that intricate cog - warts and all. The film is decidedly different to how a 'candid' look into a celebrity's private life would be now, given the current exposure of celebrities 'outside' of their field and in their everyday lives thanks to access by social media. It is important to stress that in the 1990s access into a celebrity's private life was seldom. The documentary was filmed by Harvard-schooled music video director Alek Keshishian, who was more interested in what was going on in the stars private and backstage life than her stage performance. The film is mostly shot in black and white with only the musical performances being displayed in colour. The decision to shoot the film in black and white is in ode to the stylistic techniques of *cinema verité*. Additionally it ties to the stylistic techniques displayed in the *Vogue* music video, which had gained huge popularity during the time of the tour. The film was revered for its no holds barred portrait of the superstar and revolutionised the music documentary, *Guardian* journalist Guy Lodge comments that it instead presents Madonna as rude, raucous and hard to pin down and in doing so she, on the one hand, becomes real yet on the other she is nothing like us, leaving Lodge to conclude that this makes the film feel genuinely revealing and even subversive (Lodge, G. 2021). The theme of the tour was sexual liberation and freedom of sexual expression, concepts that were

not always as freely received and accepted as Madonna and her team would have liked. In one instance she is informed by a member of her staff that the Toronto police are in attendance ready to arrest her if she simulates masturbation on stage. The film explicitly addressed the controversy and backlash that her vision of expressionism garnered, a memorable scene shows Madonna giving a speech to the press after the Vatican threatened to cancel some of her Italian shows, she states:

> I'm an Italian American and proud of it, I'm proud of being American because it is the country I grew up in, it gave me the opportunities to be who am I today. A country that believes in freedom of speech and artistic expression. My show is a theatrical presentation of my music and like theatre it asks questions, provokes thoughts and takes you on an emotional journey of good and bad, light and dark, joy and sorrow, redemption and salvation. I do not endorse a way of life but describe one and the audience is left to make their own decision and judgments. This is what I consider freedom of speech, freedom of expression and freedom of thought." (Keshishian, A. 1991).

Madonna received critical praise for breaking boundaries in the film and on the tour respectively, particularly surrounding conversations about sexuality and sexual liberation and most notably her backstage interaction with her queer dancers and performers, some of whom came from the ballroom scene. Of the film, critic Roger Ebert wrote, 'unlike most rock documentaries, the real heart of this film is backstage, and the onstage musical segments, while effectively produced, seem obligatory - they're not the reason she wanted to make this film' (Ebert, R. 1991). Lodge refers to the dancers in his articulation of the film's subversive powers and in his acknowledgement of its ground-breaking feat during the time in which it was made, noting how it was a cinematic queer milestone through its normalising of out and proud gay performers. Additionally, he claims that it did so without fetishising or exoticising

their sexuality, he writes, '*Truth or Dare* was rare at the time in its everyday depiction of queer performers at work and at play, hanging out, gossiping or mingling around a New York Pride parade: Madonna is the freak of nature in their midst, not the other way round' (Lodge, G. 2021). However, though this maybe the case, Madonna's defensive speech to the press comes with retrospective issues to address, most notably her praise and admiration of Americas perceived acceptance of sexual and artistic freedom. Given the political climate of the United States during the time of the film's release along with the devastation HIV/AIDS had on the queer community, it is hard not to acknowledge how the lack of government interest into the epidemic coupled with homophobic public rhetoric had had destructive consequences, articulated in Bordowitz's work, he writes, 'the struggle to wrest control of the public discussion on AIDS away from right-wing fanatics who proposed homophobic and racist policies like quarantine' (Bordowitz, G. 1993, p.212). Additionally, the United States contemporary socio-political climate has seen many anti-trans and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation passed under the Trump administration that has had a devastating and lasting impact, including anti-drag legislation that passed laws in Tennessee, Texas and Montana banning drag artists from performing in certain public spaces. Legislation such as this is the latest in the 'conservative culture war that has seen books banned from schools and libraries around the US and rights stripped from the LGBTQ+ community' (Gabbatt, A. 2023). It is important to acknowledge the films praise for 'American acceptance' in order to analyse how, even though the urgency of HIV/AIDS may not be as it was, more than three decades later many in the queer community are still fighting for equality and in particular social and political acceptance of their sexual and artist expression, something I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter five as I examine how location-politics informs the way in which people form identity.

Moreover, in acknowledging the progressive power and inclusion of diverse identity and sexuality, the film also has its problematic moments. An article for the *Financial Times* details how Madonna had a historic connection to the balls prior to the release of *Vogue* and the tour noting how 'she found a surrogate family in the queer dance scene when she dropped out of college to move to New York in 1978' (Brown, H. 2022). Referring back to Goldsby's previous argument in which she claims Madonna was able to appropriate ball culture or at the very least its queerness, questions must be asked of her inclusion of queer dancers and performers. The film includes a scene that shows the drama and bitchiness of the queer dancers towards the only straight dancer on the tour, it frames them as a jealous and nasty clique in need of reprimanding by Madonna herself, who asks that they go easy on their target as he does not have a thick skin like them. In the next scene Madonna and her dancers are huddled in a circle saying a prayer before going on stage, included in the prayer Madonna says:

> I want to say a prayer about the way people have been behaving. I don't care what you did with your life before you came on this tour, I don't care what you do with your lives afterwards. While you work with me you will treat each other with kindness and respect… I beg you let me and everybody in this room rise above and go out there and give the best performance of our lives. (Keshishian, A. 1991).

Whilst Madonna is shown mediating the arguments and demands that her team respect one another, her comments make it possible to question her intentions. She asks that they put their difference aside not necessarily because it is the right thing to do but because she wants her performance to go well. In stating that she does not care what the dancers did before and what they do after working for her makes it possible to question if she is once again converting queer culture and, in this case, queer exposure into excess and into a 'cultural cash crop' (Goldsby, J. 1993. p.113) In a counterargument, an alternative understanding of her statement

posits that the stage acts as a unifying space, just as the ballroom is for the subjects of *Paris Is Burning*. Additionally, scenes that depict Madonna demanding the dancers undress for her and even expose themselves in front of her and indeed the camera feel, at best, uncomfortable in a post #metoo viewing, as the power and status she has over her dancers positions them as her subordinates powerless to oppose her requests. This scene brings attention to recent accusations faced by singer Lizzo in which her dancers accused her of sexual harassment and for filming and featuring them in her music documentary *Love, Lizzo* (Pray, D. 2022) without their consent (Snapes, L. 2023). Examples such as these ask if, like earlier arguments surrounding her appropriation of voguing, Madonna and indeed Lizzo bank on the inability of those deemed less powerful than themselves to express their displeasure. Furthermore, Madonna establishes a clear hierarchy within her performances. Similarly, to the hierarchical structures of the 'houses' Madonna positions herself as 'mother' over her performers, likewise she embodies the role of 'Queen' in her MTV performance, as she is dressed like French royalty whilst her dancers, or as Goldsby puts it her 'tableau vivant' (Goldsby, J. 1993. p. 113) act as her servants. This notion of 'mother' to performers has also transcended into fandoms over recent years with singer Lady Gaga referring to herself as 'mother monster' while her fanbase refer to themselves as 'monsters'.

In her introduction to her analysis of Madonna's intrusion into ball culture, Goldsby identifies that ball culture itself recycles commodity culture, comparative to the ways in which rap music samples from other varying forms of music she questions 'when is borrowing not appropriation and/or when does appropriation become co-operation? (Goldsby, J, 1993. p.112). This understanding leads one to question if all forms of popular culture recycle themselves? In his article detailing the legacy of *Truth or Dare* on its 30th anniversary, Lodge draws a comparison between contemporary singer Billie Eilish and Madonna, observing the

way in which Eilish discussed the issue of body positivity whilst rebranding herself in the fashionable image reminiscent of a 1990s Madonna (Lodge, G. 2021).

Contemporary Pop Culture

In contemplation of this, another contemporary comparison I feel cannot go unrecognised is Beyonce, more specifically her 2023 *Renaissance* world tour and album, which pays homage to queer culture and the trailblazers behind it, most notably her late uncle Jonny who died of AIDS-related complications. Like Madonna, Beyonce also made a documentary of her *Renaissance* world tour which again has been praised for not only including footage from her show but also a look into her private and family life. The adulation towards the 'candid' nature of these documentaries is an important aspect to outline as I go on to demonstrate throughout this thesis, that a large part of the emerging discourse and aesthetics of contemporary of drag culture that audiences have become aware of are informed by these types of documentaries. The revolutionary aspects of these documentaries is in the 'reality' of the events and relationships portrayed, and the behind-the-scenes moments and I argue that documentaries such as these have also gone on to inform the notions of reality television, within which new presentations of drag a queer culture are being articulated. Although not quite the revolutionary move it was in the 1990s, given that in recent years; 'a whole new culture has been created where almost no knowledge about a celebrity's private life is off limits and where scandal appears as normalized and even expected aspect of celebrity narratives' (Edgar, Fairclough-Isaacs, Halligan. 2013, p. 16). Beyonce's film and the tour that inspired it, has been lauded for its predominant themes of queer culture, in particular queer black culture and its enduring influence on music and art. The song *Alien Superstar* (2022) presents a distinct nod to drag ball culture, echoing ball MC's pre walk announcement 'category is', Beyonce rap-sings as ball MC throughout with lyrics such as "category is - sexy bitch", highlighting categories that fall under the umbrella of the refrain "unique" which is in

homage to the world-famous category “bizarre”. In *Heated* (2022) Beyonce referenced walking the ballroom runway and attaining a perfect score, she sings “tip tip tip across the hardwood floors – tens tens tens across the board”. In an article for *The Independent* Josh Marcus details the impact the album and the tour has had culturally as well as explaining the historical content of the queer culture that influenced it. Marcus articulates the dichotomy of the socio-political climate, one in which Beyonce can, on the world stage, honour and represent queer culture, whilst at the same time US politicians were restricting rights and liberties in almost every facet of LGBTQ+ life. He writes that whilst Beyonce was touring, ‘Texas, Louisiana, and Missouri all advanced or passed bans on gender-affirming healthcare for minors, the latest attempt by America’s Republicans to weaponise anti-LGBTQ+ hate and paranoia’ (Marcus, J. 2023). He acknowledges that scholars and critics alike recognise that current political powers are seeking to ‘tear LGBTQ+ people out of the national fabric’ as such it is precisely this tension that makes Beyonce’s *Renaissance* so crucial and timely (Marcus, J. 2023). Given the criticism Livingston and Madonna received for their intrusion into ball culture, Marcus notes that Beyonce’s endeavour is not without complications as it too sparks questions surrounding ‘authenticity, cultural appropriation and how much art can do to really change the world around it’ (Marcus, J. 2023). Is it arguable to assume that Beyonce can avoid at least some of the criticism levelled at Livingston and Madonna. Her family were directly involved in the ballroom scene, her late uncle Jonny exposed her to a lot of the music and culture (Marcus, J. 2023) furthermore her family members were part of the queer community, and his AIDS-related death reveals how she has a personal understanding of the culture she is representing. Additionally, unlike Madonna and Livingston, Beyonce is a black woman and so doesn’t represent the oppressing ideologies associated with white privilege, on the contrary *Renaissance* has been praised for bringing awareness to black femininity, Southern African American culture and black culture as a whole. Marcus

discusses this, and touching on Crenshaw's theory of *Intersectionality,* quotes Ricky Tucker, author of *And the Category Is : Inside New York's Vogue, House, and Ballroom Community,* who claims the album is important for what it says within the black community at large. He states "Often, folks in the Black community have only queer people to oppress… We're excommunicated from churches. [With] her messaging, Beyoncé was speaking directly to us." (Marcus, J. 2023). Tucker further praises Beyonce for extending this embrace on her live tour noting how she features young vogue dancers from within the community and provides 'gender neutral bathrooms for fans' (Marcus, J. 2023). Tucker's praise of Beyonce reveals how the discourse invoked by *Paris Is Burning* is still acutely relevant within current content that informs people of queer culture.

Arguably, there will always be questions of cultural appropriation surrounding the inclusion of ball culture into mainstream entertainment. However, in light of the current socio-political zeitgeist, it seems imperative for artists with such influence like Beyonce to bring attention to these communities and recognise their continued cultural influence that also comes with a history of erasure and oppression. The music industry has a long history of using celebrity status to bring attention to socio-political issues with 1985s *Live Aid* perhaps being the most influential example. Describing it as 'era defining' Edgar, Fairclough-Isaacs, and Halligan note how *Live Aid:*

> Established popular music as a proactive force of good: proceeds of the record, and this event, were not swelling the bank accounts of hedonistic rock stars, their dealers, managers, and groupies, but represented, selflessly, financial aid to those most in need. (Edgar, Fairclough-Isaacs, Halligan. 2013, p.5).

Similarly, the notions of celebrity were an important factor in AIDS awareness, the queer nature of Madonna's MTV performance and the themes and queer people featured in her

documentary become a part of this celebrity activism. Additionally, Elton John is another key figure that uses his celebrity status to raise awareness. *The Elton John AIDS Foundation* (EJAF) continues to provide funding for programs on a global scale that provide relief for people living with HVI/AIDS and those at risk of contracting the disease. Moreover, with regards to the comparison of both Madonna and Beyonce and in consideration of Goldsby's notion of recycled commodity culture, is it arguable that all culture is recyclable, it is its reframing and (re)presenting that is important. Just as the music world has recognised and revered the importance and urgency of representing queer and ball culture so too has the television industry, and this thesis will provide an in-depth analysis into how television, in recent years, has been informed and influenced by the enduring legacy of *Paris Is Burning,* queer and drag ball culture.

Given the decades of discourse surrounding the themes, criticism, intersectionality of queer culture, racial, gender and sexualities that has been produced by *Paris is Burning,* my thesis investigates how the legacy of the documentary still informs popular cultures understanding of queer culture. Furthermore, my work will demonstrate the continued importance of representation and visibilities with popular media culture, specifically focusing on how TV has been the leading medium in terms of presenting new and progressive screenings of LGTBQ+ people and the intersection of queer people of colour. The study will also symbiotically analyse the current anti-LGBTQ+ political landscape in order to provide an understanding as to why mediated representation of queer culture and experience is as urgent now as it was in the 1980s.

Chapter 3

RuPaul's Drag Race

In much of Western popular culture, the name RuPaul and indeed *RuPaul's Drag Race (2009- present)* has become synonymous with contemporary notions of drag. Although not exclusively, as straight and cis-gendered individuals have participated, *Drag Race* was one of the first reality television shows to focus on and feature queer-identified individuals such as gay men, gender nonconforming and the intersectionality of race and homosexuality. Michael Lovelock defines the show as a format that deals specifically with a traditionally non-normative articulation of sexuality and gender (Lovelock, M. 2019, p.161). Furthermore, he concludes *Drag Race* offers a space in which to interrogate ideas about what constitutes acceptable or legitimate forms of non-heteronormative identity. 'Specifically, it prompts a thinking of how forms of queer existence historically forged in the contexts of marginalisation and exclusion from hegemonic social and economic structures are pulled into, unstitched and reconfigured in the neoliberal context of reality TV' (Lovelock, M. 2019, p.161). *Drag Race* debuted in 2009, initially appearing on the channel *Logo*, the largest exclusively LGBTQ network on American television. The show has since become a cultural phenomenon and global franchise that has solidified itself as part of mainstream consciousness, as such, since 2017 it was picked up by *VH1* as well as being broadcast on *Logo*.

Although praise for the show can't go unnoticed, *Drag Race* has been involved in polemical discourses concerning identity and representation, particularly at the cost of mainstream success. My intention for this chapter is two-fold. First, it will provide a critical feminist analysis examining how RuPaul's *Drag Race* can be seen to uphold hegemonic ideologies associated with the intersection of gender and racial identity, particularly those of white

femininity. By doing so the chapter will explore how *Drag Race* arguably fails to present drag as wholly subversive instead, I argue that it reaffirms a stable gender binary through contestants' performance of specific notions of femininity. Second, I will provide an in-depth analysis to explore how *Drag Race* further fails to challenge dominant heteronormative values due to the ideological cost of the show's mainstream success. In doing so I will highlight *Drag Race's* dependence on neoliberal principles surrounding self-commodification and the body as capital. I argue that *Drag Race* commodifies the body through performances of drag that attempt to subvert, yet ultimately end up solidifying and even capitalising on hegemonic expressions of white, ruling-class femininity and beauty standards. This chapter will engage with and apply contemporary theory involved in the analysis of reality television, mainstream media (Annett Hill. 2015, June Deery 2015), and identity politics. Furthermore, it will draw upon the continued relevance of both Judith Butler's and bell hooks' theoretical understanding of both the performative nature of drag and non-normative identity. Both Butler and hooks' theory remains largely in the academic and organised LGBTQ environment however, recently their work has become a highly politicised and increasingly prominent part of the culture war discourse. Additionally, I will refer to Rosalind Gill's theory surrounding the convergence of post-feminism and neoliberalism, a relationship she describes as a 'sensibility', characterised by narratives of empowerment, self-surveillance, sexualisation and consumerism (Gill, R. 2007, p. 149). Her work will also help aid a critical analysis of reality television and an understanding of neoliberalism, particularly the way in which it commodifies and capitalises on participants of the show. Additionally, *Drag Race* has become a global franchise and due to this it is impossible to provide an analysis of all series and formats of the show therefore, for the purpose of this thesis I will focus solely on the original American broadcast and provide examples from a variety of seasons in order to provide a more in-depth and overarching analysis. I will though, take into account the fact

that this has grown into a transmedia and transnational phenomenon where appropriate. In recent years *Drag Race* has gained extensive academic attention, most of which focuses on representation and issues surrounding gender and identity politics (Gudelunas, D, Brennan, N. 2017 and Bryde, L. Mayberry, T. 2022) as such I will draw on this previous analysis to further explore how *Drag Race* commodifies queer bodies and capitalist hegemonic ideologies of the hyper-feminine. Lastly, I wish to disclose that throughout this chapter I will refer to RuPaul using him/his pronouns and the contestants using she/her in conjunction with the pronouns used on the show, as this is how both the contestants and RuPaul wish to be identified.

***Drag Race* and Reality TV**

Drag Race is a reality show that includes gameshow competition and incorporates elements of *Big Brother* (2000)*, America's Next Top Model* (2003) and *Project Runway* (2004) as competitors compete in a series of different challenges from sewing to lip-syncing. In keeping with reality show tradition, all competitors are removed from their everyday lives and locations and spend the entirety of the show's run housed together in private locations and television studios which acts as a space specifically created for narrative. This practice has become synonymous with reality TV and is incorporated to emphasize the dramaturgical elements of character and plot and in particular the idea that all individuals perform their characters for an audience in their day-to-day lives (Goffman.1973). Goffman contends that much like actors in a theatre, individuals actively perform for an audience in their day-today lives and so experience both front stage and backstage processes, he referred to this as dramaturgy:

> Thus, when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for [them] to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others, which it is in [their] interest to convey (Goffman, E. 1973, p. 4).

The individual therefore acts according to an impression other people might have of them, by picking up on cues during social interaction and performing a version of themselves that will be considered socially appropriate or acceptable as it relates to the situation they find themselves in. Goffman's understanding is symbiotic of Butler's notion of performativity (1990) as both theories centre around the way identity is performed in social interactions and how that performance relates to a sense of reality through means of social constructs (Gater, B, J. B, MacDonald. 2015 p.3). With regard to reality TV, the artificial settings and housing of contestants during their time on any given show has become a staple convention within the genre and arguably has allowed participants of reality TV shows to implement their interpretation of both dramaturgy and performativity in order to act accordingly with regards to both producer and audience expectation.

> They are unlikely to have performance training, but they are expected to perform for the directors/producers (who structure the reality for TV) and the doting (and often highly critical) audiences. There is probably no better representation of a performative culture than the one that exists in Reality TV (Gater, B, J. B, MacDonald. 2015 p.3).

The show borrows directly from the drag and ballroom style competition first featured in *Paris is Burning* (1990). In keeping with the themes of *Paris is Burning, Drag Race* engages heavily with the intersectionality of gender identity, sexuality, race, class, ethnicity, and body size, focusing specifically on how these intersections impact the participants' lives but also how they impact queer life more broadly. Like *Paris is Burning, Drag Race* has received acclaim for providing conversations around the discourse of queer identity particularly the

show's potential to break down barriers surrounding gender expression and sexuality as well as its seemingly positive messaging of self-love and acceptance, with RuPaul closing every show with the line "If you can't love yourself, how the hell you gonna love somebody else?" (2009). Furthermore, the representation and celebration of peoples of colour is a recurring theme of the show and the aversity and prejudice that people experience from the intersection of race and homosexuality is something that is frequently discussed and given agency on the show. During an interview for *The Guardian* RuPaul explains; "Anyone who's been on the outside of mainstream society has a different perspective… People who have lived on the outside understand that what's inside the box is a hoax, actually a big illusion." (Rodgers, K. 2014). The show has also been lauded for its racial diversity, with over half of the winners being people of colour and many of the contestants being from and representing, a multitude of ethnicities. However, with this being said the show has also being criticised for encouraging racial stereotyping for the benefit of reality TV, or what Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood (2012, p. 136) have called the pedagogical invitation of reality television (of which they are critical for its disciplining of lower-class culture) extends in an unfortunate camp reversal to what is ultimately racist stereotyping (Hermes, J. Kardolus, M. 2019).

Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model of communication (1980) is dissected into four parts: production, circulation, use, and reproduction. The production sees the 'encoding' of messaging as the creator builds meaning into content, circulation is how the message is received. The use stage is when the decoding of the message occurs, the receiver interprets the message by placing meaning upon it, in this sense the audience is active participants in the media they receive rather than passive viewers. The reproduction stage is the result of how audiences react and interpret or decode the message. In terms of Hall's theory, the potential of *Drag Race* to affect social change and attitudes towards queer people and culture

not only relies on the creators' encoding but more importantly, on the decoding (or use) of the show, particularly the way in which audiences view and interact with its content.

Daniel Marshall's *Reading Queer Television* explores how queer TV shows and their characters are interpreted by audiences. Marshall notes how the audience is less focused on what one might say about queer TV content but rather on what one might do with it. Reflecting on how mass-produced queer television is framed within politics and culture, Marshall establishes that queer representation in contemporary TV, not only produces critical thinking about contemporary queer identity but also about the history of queer identity and representation (Marshal, D. 2016. p.85). The show uses existing concepts of ballroom drag sub-culture and tele-visualises them, whilst simultaneously employing techniques of gamification in order to create enduring and continual audience engagement that the genre of reality TV relies so heavily on. Although the sub-culture of ballroom drag incorporates competitive elements already, winning categories, competing against other houses as well as trophies being given to winners, *Drag Race* ups the element of competition in order to create tension, drama and entertainment for audiences, although the show's competitors compete to become the "Next Drag Superstar", competitions are held continually throughout, be it head-to-head or team challenges. The notion of gamification has become a staple in reality TV, in which the genre takes existing concepts and practices, sometimes even routine daily activities such as baking, sewing, ballroom dancing, painting and employs competitive and gamification elements which has become its own sub-genre within the reality TV genre. The show's ballroom-inspired drag coupled with progressive messaging about identity catapulted it into the mainstream thanks to its hugely loyal fan base and paratextual spaces which extend far beyond its one-hour slot on TV and take full advantage of transmedia and multi modal spaces. David Gudelunas explains that in terms of what is traditionally taken into consideration for a show to be regarded as a 'hit', *Drag Race* can't necessarily be considered

a hit show. In terms of viewing figures, he notes how other reality TV content that features competition elements like *America's Got Talent* regularly draws in 12 million viewers. While less popular shows such as *Big Brother* still get around 6 million. At the time of Gudelunas' analysis *Drag Race's* highest-rated episodes were just under one million viewers (Gudelunas, D, Brennan, N. 2017, p.231). These viewing figures are significantly lower than the competition and Gudelunas suggests that a possibility for these low figures is that *LOGO TV*, the US broadcaster for *Drag Race* for its first eight seasons, was only available to 41 per cent of US television households, meaning more people didn't have access to it than those who did. Additionally, he notes how the show never attracted multinational advertisers, instead product placement within the show remained niche with foam breast and small underwear brands (ibid, 2017. p.231.). Although it is not possible to access data that could provide useful analysis as to who did or did not have access to the channel, *LOGO TV* itself recognised the seismic shift in culture and changed its programming to reflect this change. Beginning with the push for marriage equality to the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell", the channel recognised that queer characters are becoming a common fixture on television and that the majority of queer people define themselves as more than just their sexual orientation. Recognising this, in 2012 *LOGO TV* entered into a partnership to produce programs that focused less on LGBTQ+ specific interests and more on general cultural and lifestyle subjects. Executive Vice President Lisa Sherman explains that a study conducted by *LOGO TV* with Starcom Mediavest Group indicated that 53 per cent of LGBTQ+ audiences didn't see showcasing their orientation as a priority, furthermore only 30 per cent preferred living and socialising in exclusively queer communities. As a result of this research, Sherman explains:

> Gay people are living far more integrated lives than before…Being gay is an important part of their lives but it's not what they lead with. So, if we're going to keep

> to that idea of displaying their lives, we need to reflect that new reality (Ciriaco, M. 2012).

Despite traditional evaluations of what makes a show a 'hit', Gudelunas acknowledges that *Drag Race* has cultural resonance beyond viewing figures. Terminology has entered the popular lexicon, contestants have gone on to have national careers, and most importantly, thanks to its fanbase, the show has transcended the medium of television and embraced digital extensions, including various social media platforms, streaming services, and multiple broadcasters. Gudelunas concludes by explaining how the show, 'embraced digital extensions across various platforms including social media, elaborate experiential events that brought the casts of various seasons to multiple cities and other sustained brand experiences that made *RPDR* about far more than just an hour-long reality television programme' (Gudelunas, D, Brennan, N. 2017, p.231).

One way to determine the multiple readings a text holds is by analysing its paratextual spaces. Jonathan Gray describes paratexts as, going beyond the thing itself in order to frame expectations and offer ways to structure a sense of what the text is actually about. (Gray, J. 2017. p.199-200). He describes media practice as a triumvirate that includes text, audience, and industry, paratexts therefore, fill the space between them, diversely negotiating or determining interaction among the three. Paratexts are created by industry and audience, yet audiences consume a vast amount of paratexts (Gray, J. 2017 p.23). Gray's understanding of paratexts is something the *Drag Race* franchise has utilised very successfully. Due to the changing media landscape, the show has been able to flourish with extensions of the show ranging from fan interaction via social media, online programming such as *Untucked* (2010), and *What's the T* podcast (2014) to fan commentary on YouTube and Twitter (X) and *Drag Race* inspired events and conventions. All of these extensions of the original programming

have become as important as the core programming in creating what Gray describes as applying sense and meaning to what the text is actually about (Gray, J. 2017 p.23). In short *Drag Race* has redefined what constitutes a 'hit' television show in the new media environment (Gudelunas, D, Brennan, N. 2017, p.231).

In terms of understanding *Drag Race* as a multi-modal text, it is important to understand audiences and fan bases as playing a pivotal role in this phenomenon. Similar to Hall's theory of encoding and decoding, Henry Jenkins's theory regarding media convergence is concerned with analysing 'where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unprecedented ways' (Jenkins, H. 2006. p.2). The use of the word convergence in this sense, is less concerned with a technological process bringing together multiple media functions, instead 'convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections amongst dispersed media content' (Jenkins, H. 2006. p..3). In this regard, although *Drag Race* has transcended the medium of television, Jenkins argues that the most important aspect of convergence occurs within the minds of consumers and via their social interaction with others. Many constantly discuss the media they consume, symbiotically increasing the value of content by the media industry which leads to consumption becoming a collective process. (Jenkins, H. 2006. p.4) Furthermore, *Drag Races'* ability to engage audiences and advertisers in platforms that fall far outside of traditional television, have helped ensure the show's longevity and success despite low viewing figures (Gudelunas, Brennan 2017, p.232). Gudelunas sums up the *Drag Race* phenomenon by explaining that the show hasn't just leveraged social media, but it has allowed audiences to become immersed in the culture of drag.

> With various digital extensions like "Dragulator", which allowed audience members to turn themselves into virtual drag queens. Ustream video chat with contestants,

> crowd-sourced comic caption contests, and numerous other devices, intended to engage audiences and solidify a fan base. (Gudelunas, Brennan 2017, p.234).

Therefore, using both Gudelunas and Jenkins's analysis we can conclude that *Drag Race* has benefitted from its huge fanbase which uses multi-media platforms in order to discuss and debate content from the show. The notion of utilising and engaging heavily with fan-bases, paratextual and multi-modal spaces is not a new phenomenon, *Drag Race* can learn from the success of other franchises that extend far beyond their original screening such as *Star Trek* (1973- present) *and Harry Potter (2001-2011).*

Reality TV and Human Capital

Similar to neo capitalist ideology, reality TV understands its subjects as a form of human capital. Gill consolidates the relationship between the ideal neoliberal subject and the ideal postfeminist subject, most notably how the individual is 'constituted as an entrepreneurial actor' (Gill, R. 2007, p. 163). Additionally, Deery argues how reality TV has demonstrated that 'all mediation has the potential to commodify experience' she claims reality shows 'create the reality it sells by allowing participants to capitalise on their being mediated' (Deery, J. 2014. p.88). In terms of *Drag Race,* what Butler refers to as 'the denaturalisation of the norm' (Butler, J. 1993. p.88) works to facilitate a perpetual re-idealisation of not only the norm but of the body as a commodity, as RuPaul's celebrity image embodies the hourglass 'all American' blonde bombshell. Moreover, not only is this displayed through RuPaul but likewise many of the contestants also epitomise the understanding of the body as capital and commodity. From its inception judges have praised contestants who most accurately represent hegemonic standards of femininity, Season one contestant and winner, BeBe Zahara Benet is lauded for her hourglass figure, immaculate make-up, and straightened wig. Her outward appearance allows her to acquire the comment 'career girl on the go'. This

statement ’career girl on the go’ holds distinct neo-liberal connotations which emphasises the value of free market competition and so the statement suggests that self-identity and capital are associated not just with work or a job but a career, which holds further connotations of educations, aspirational culture and competition. Karen Wilkes articulates the problematic relationship between neo-liberalism and feminism she writes:

> Feminism and neo-liberalism appear to have merged, so that presently a ‘range of feminist ideas’ are incorporated into apparently neutral neo-liberal notions of choice and agency and are entangled in discourses of individualistic pursuits of hyper-consumption (Wilkes, K. 2015. p.21).

She concludes that neo-liberal ideologies surrounding feminism have come to shape and frame displays of white femininity as having it all, encouraging the idea that the advantages felt and gained by affluent and privileged women are a positive development for all women (Wilkes, K. 2015. p.21). Therefore, this sentiment from the judges epitomizes the characterisation of the neo-liberal feminist subject, in which an individual is invested in her own well-being and self-care. Contestants such as Zahara, are symbolic of hooks’ understanding that drag is ‘radically altered when informed by a racialized fictional construction of the “feminine”, that is dependent on the embodiment of capitalist market values and whiteness as its foundation’ (hooks, b. 1992 p.147). Since Zahara’s nationality is Cameroonian her praise from RuPaul leaves *Drag Race* to become symbiotic of the criticism levelled at Livingston by hooks in which she states, ‘what viewers witness is not black men longing to impersonate or even to become like ‘real’ black women but their obsession with an idealised fetishized vision of femininity that is white’ (hooks, b. 1992, p.148). For hooks, this understanding makes the drag in question less subversive because it makes the representation of whiteness crucial to the experience of female impersonations of gender. Furthermore, by

doing so it removes black males' ability to oppose a heterosexist representation of black manhood, 'gender bending or blending on the part of black males has always been a critique of phallocentric masculinity in traditional black experience (hooks, b. 1992, p.147). Since winning the first season of the show, BeBe Zahara Benet released her own documentary *Being BeBe* (Branham, E. 2021), that details her journey from Cameroon to Minneapolis, Minesota. The documentary reveals how Zahara found purpose through drag as well as detailing and celebrating Zahara's African roots and shines a light on the discrimination many queer people face in Cameroon.

The Aesthetics of Drag

Historic understandings of drag can be articulated as accentuating various traits and features of gender identity, it provides a space in which gender expression is simultaneously celebrated, parodied, and subverted. Often incorrectly conflated with cross-dressing, the defining aspect of drag is its performative nature which attempts to break down traditional cultural assumptions of gender binaries and expectations through parody and humour. Mundy and White articulate that the humour associated with drag stems from drag's ability to contradict the supposed essentialism of gender. Furthermore, they note how drag offers a 'carnivalesque' expectation of the norms of gender performance but one which is ambivalent and ultimately returns to the status quo. (Mundy, White. 2012, p.174). Mikhail Bakhtin's first articulation of *Carnival and Carnivalesque* centres around the events of the carnival, which throughout European history, was a popular form of celebration. Bakhtin begins by noting that the carnival is not a performance, nor does it differentiate between spectator from the performer, but rather all people who take part in the carnival live it. However, it is not an extension of the real world but rather, as Bakhtin puts it, 'the world standing on its head' (Lachmann, R, Eshelman, R, Davis M, 1989). In his analysis Renate Lachmann

understanding that Bakhtin used the term Carnivalesque to characterise writing that depicts the de-stabilisation of power structures, albeit temporarily. The carnival is an event in which all rules that determine the course of everyday life are suspended, especially all forms of hierarchy in society. Bakhtin asserts that carnivalesque imagery is dualistic and ambivalent, meaning that the carnival unites binaries, change and crisis, birth and death, stupidity and wisdom and this dualistic imagery is characteristic of the carnival's contractions, in which things in the carnival are reversed for example in the carnival the clown is king. Bakhtin was living and writing during both the euphoria of the Russian revolution which saw de-hierarchisation and the Stalinist purges and Soviet era isolation and re-hierarchisation. It was precisely these experiences of the plurality of worlds that determined his approach to Rabelais and the idea of Carnivalesque. A central argument made by Bakhtin is that medieval people lived a double life, on the one hand they lived everyday lives which were subordinated to strict hierarchic order and full of terror and dogmatism (ibid. 1989. p.116). On the other, there were the carnivalesque lives which were free and unbounded, filled with ambivalent laughter, sacrilegious and the defilement of anything sacred, humiliations and familiar contact with everyone and everything. Both these life forms were legitimate, but they were separated by harsh temporal borders, according to Bakhtin this duality is the key to understanding medieval cultural consciousness (ibid, 1989. p.117).

During her *Ted Talk*, Drag Queen and *Drag Race* UK contestant Cheddar Gorgeous, explains how duality and its ability to blur the rigid concepts of binaries is an important aspect of drag culture, specifically how it allows the audience just close enough "to see the cracks" (2020). She continues by claiming the most powerful aspect of drag is its artifice, its ability to let the audience in on the joke and to use parody and humour to connect and resonate. (2020). Mundy and White concur with Gorgeous' interpretation as they claim, that drag performances may elicit numerous responses but for it to be considered outright comedic it

appears essential that the performance is less, rather than more, convincing (Mundy, White, 2012.p.174). Whilst contemporary perceptions of drag often follow these traditional understandings they are also becoming more varied and shifting in their performance. Gorgeous describes her personal experience of drag and how it goes beyond the 'traditional' styles of drag. Explaining how her fascination with drag stemmed from the power she felt in doing it as a child, she recalls being beguiled by monsters and aliens from fantasy and science fiction, creatures she felt held immense power and an ability to change their worlds. And so, for Gorgeous, drag is "less about butt pads or fake breasts and female impersonation and more about being seen, being otherworldly, and being powerful" (2020). Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp* (1964) discusses the artifice surrounding the camp aesthetic she states that 'all camp objects and persons contain a large element of artifice, nothing in nature can be campy' (Sontag, S. 1964. p.3). Similarly, to Gorgeous' comment that the power of drag comes from its artifice as well as Mundy and White's analysis that drag elicits numerous responses. Sontag explains that camp tastes rely on an unacknowledgeable truth of taste. That is to say, refined forms of sexual attraction and sexual pleasure involve going against the grain of one's sex, 'what is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine and what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine' (Sontag, S. 1964. p.4). Sontag's definition reveals the attraction and intrigue of the artifice that can be found within a drag performance, it blurs hegemonic gender and sexual binaries in a way that is equal parts obvious and ambivalent. She writes 'camp is the triumph of the epicene style. (The convertibility of "man" and "woman" and "person" and "thing"). But all style that is artifice is ultimately epicene. Life is not stylish. Neither is nature' (Sontag, S. 1964. p.4). Gorgeous' understanding of drag aligns with Sontag's understanding of camp, as she explains that when audiences come to see her perform in drag, they know that there is a duality to who she is on stage versus off stage. Furthermore, she knows that this is the same for the audience as no

one is simply one dimensional, there are social roles being performed all the time. She concludes by saying that the audience's knowledge that, when the drag outfit comes off, she returns to the ordinary reveals the true artifice of drag, however for Gorgeous 'artifice is power' (2020). Gorgeous' notion of both the artifice and duality of a drag performance coupled with her understanding of the audience 'being in on the joke' is relative to *Drag Race's* format of performance and the 'behind the scenes' confessionals and 'getting ready' sequences as they serve to highlight the duality and artifice of people and performances in a way that is reflective of Goffman's theory of dramaturgy. Although there is some knowledge by the audience that a performer has an identity specific to as well as separate to a performance, they are also aware that this is true of everyday interaction in which one is required to act in accordance with social expectations as Goffman writes:

> As human beings we are presumably creatures of variable impulse with moods and energies that change from one moment to the next. As characters put on for an audience, however, we must not be subjects to ups or downs. A certain bureaucratization of the spirit is expected so that we can be relied upon to give a perfectly homogenous performance at every appointed time (Goffman, E. 1956).

Drag Race portrays drag as a queer art form moulded into a gameshow format, that sees competitors transform into their drag persona, typically this means performing hyper-femininity (drag queens). Western thinking of gender and bodies has historically linked gender with sex and considered gender to be an essential part of being a man or a woman. This thinking began to shift at the end of the 20th century most notably with the publication of Butler's seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler questions the rigid dichotomies of gender, contending alternatively that gender is performative and not inherent or voluntary. Arguing that gender is a repetition of subjectivising norms that cannot be removed by will

and allows for resistance, subversion and displacement to be forged. (Butler, J. 1993. p.17-32). In discussing the subversive power drag has on such rigid thinking about gender, Butler defines that for something to be subversive of heterosexual hegemony, 'it has to both mime and displace its conventions' but concludes that 'not all mining is displacing.' (Kotz, L. 1992).

Paris is Burning* and *Drag Race

Butler uses *Paris is Burning* to provide context to this analysis, firstly by critiquing the way in which director Jennie Livingston places emphasis on 'miming gender assumptions that actually reinvest the gender ideals and reconsolidates their hegemonic status' (Kotz, L. 1992). For Butler the act of imitating patriarchal hegemonic depictions of femininity is not enough to destabilise and subvert them, instead, it exemplifies how drag can be seen to exist in symbiosis with such social discourse. 'It is not enough to expose an ideal as uninhabitable. Ideals have to be altered dissolved and rearticulated; there has to be a thorough rethinking of the violence of the gender ideal' (Kotz, L. 1992). Yet in contemplation of the type of kinship displayed in *Paris is Burning*, Butler agrees that an element of subversion is present, as drag families are formed with house structures that involve mothers and children. Butlers' notion of subversion is realised through this type of kinship because it 'mimes' traditional nuclear-family kinship but also displaces them' (Kotz, L. 1992). Ultimately the house structures presented in *Paris is Burning* denaturalise the heteronormative significance of reproductive families which politically uphold the standard norms of social organisation and for Butler, this is far more affirmable than the actual drag scenes (Kotz, L. 1992). Hegemony, as it relates to gender ideals, is arguably reaffirmed in Butler's reading of *Paris is Burning*, through the accentuation and idealisation (miming) of the hyper-feminine which doesn't seem to then be displaced. It is instead symbolic of what hooks describes as the 'reification of

wealth and luxury that is central to fetishized representations of ruling-class white femininity' (hooks, b. p.147. 1992).

This reading of *Paris is Burning* can be extended to readings of *Drag Race* to help deconstruct arguments surrounding its subversive value, particularly regarding ideological loss since it gained mainstream status. While drag often parodies imitations of gender that originate in hegemonic ideals, they can become subversive in the recontextualization of such ideals that denaturalise the assumption of what is natural. Mundy and White discuss the humour that stems from the parody of drag, noting that drag performances challenge audiences as to what the correct reaction to the mixed signals of men performing as women and women performing as men should be (Mundy, White, 2012. p.174). They note the historic and enduring symbiotic relationship between comedy and queerness and quoting Alexander Doty they write, 'as a genre comedy is fundamentally queer since it encourages rule-breaking, risk-taking, inversions and perversions in the face of straight patriarchal norms' (ibid, p.174). In terms of how effective comedy or comedic acts are Mundy and White further articulate that 'comedy raises issues around the politics of representation, about power, control and freedom of speech' (ibid, p.207). Quoting Shannon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, they explain this is because 'humour is only possible because certain boundaries, rules and taboos exists in the first place' (ibid, p.207). Within this understanding drag is able to reveal patriarchal societies' obsession with gender and sexuality, specifically the idea that the two should easily fit with a rigid binary that already exists within heterosexual hegemony. Drag therefore is also able to problematise and question the supposed certainties about masculinity and femininity (ibid, p.175), by blurring the binaries of masculine and feminine. Problems occur however in cases of repetition in imitation as the parodic edge can become lost. The reason for this loss is due to it becoming too common and too familiar and as a result it falls short of what Butler refers to as 'displacement'. 'Heterosexuality can augment

its hegemony through its denaturalisation, as when we see denaturalising parodies that idealise heterosexual norms without calling them into question.' (Kotz, L. 1992). In other words, subversion only upholds if it can find ways to parody normative assumptions of gender binaries and apply them to non-hegemonic frameworks. Subversive acts are arguably only comprehensible if they engage initially with normative terms and ideals. Problems arise however if the proliferation of normative ideals is not met with an equal proliferation of critical responses to such ideals. Therefore, in keeping with Butler's understanding, that in order to be subversive, drag has the capacity to expose hegemonic constructions of gender as fiction and invite audiences to think critically about hegemonic/heteronormative concepts.

Complexities of Queer Identities.

In terms of *Drag Race*, it is imperative to think about the type of drag that is put on display for audiences. In particular, we must question the ways in which *Drag Race* informs ideologies surrounding femininity. Although 2021 *All Stars* contestant Kylie Sonique Love, became the first trans winner, in terms of gender representation on *Drag Race*, trans indemnity and gender ambiguity has been a contentious subject since its inception, arguably it has not been wholly accepted by either RuPaul or many of the contestants. Most notably RuPaul has come under fire due to his stance on transgender performers, yet in 2017 (season 9) *Drag Race* was lauded for featuring its first openly trans contestant Peppermint.

In an interview with *The Guardian,* Decca Aitkenhead asked RuPaul about the 'contradiction between his playfully elastic sensibility and the militant earnestness of the transgender movement', suggesting that the two couldn't be further apart. (Aitkenhead, D. 2018) Noting that RuPaul chose his next words carefully, he replies that he 'probably wouldn't have admitted a transgender woman like Peppermint if she had already started gender-affirming surgery' (ibid. 2018). Aikenhead doubles down on her questioning asking 'Would RuPaul

allow a biological woman to compete on the show?' Evading a direct binary answer RuPaul explains how he feels a sense of danger and irony would be lost in that scenario because drag is a 'big f-you' to male-dominated culture because it is a real rejection of masculinity (ibid. 2018). This statement is arguably problematic as RuPaul is acting as a gatekeeper within the queer community by deciding who qualifies as a drag queen and given that *Drag Race* is the most widely known and broadcast show depicting contemporary concepts of drag, it holds a lot of weight in terms of what audiences have come to understand and interpret as the art of drag. Therefore, limiting and excluding who can participate based purely on the competitive rather than the expressive, opens criticism surrounding the commodification of individuals and their bodies, particularly on reality TV. Alternatively, RuPaul is gatekeeping his own personal image and brand, which has led him to huge cultural and monetary success. In keeping with reality TV's conventional 'big reveal', this argument is evident in the climactic ending of each episode in which the critique of the contestants is always based on the attainment of a 'professional look' within the drag performance. This 'professional look' is almost always based on the standard set by RuPaul himself and therefore the focus of critique is on the technique of the body and how well it aligns with his standards. In this sense, like Deery's statement that 'all mediation has the potential to commodify experience' (Deery, J. 2015. p.88), the epitome of Reality TV tropes (the big reveal) is rooted in the corporate and commercial expression, neo-liberal, self-making practices, meaning the focus and outcome of each episode remain on valuing self-commodification over self-expressionism. Michael Lovelock attests that this is the fundamental basis of the show, he writes, 'In *Drag Race*… a 'successful' queen is one who turns drag into lucrative, remunerative labour.' (Lovelock, M. 2019. p.159). He continues by explaining how the neoliberal, invested interest in the show, coaches' contestants on their ability to produce a drag queen persona that is marketable and multifaceted enough to be able to tap into multiple commercial contexts (ibid. p.159). Similar

to the relationship Gill articulates between post-feminism and neo-liberalism, most notably how the individual is constituted as an entrepreneurial actor (Gill, R. 2007, p. 163). What Lovelock finds particularly striking about *Drag Race* is the extent to which the 'ideal' queen aligns with broader conceptions of the ideal labourer under the political and economic system of contemporary neo-liberalism (ibid. p.159). In summary of this symbiosis, Lovelock explains how successful queens are constantly praised for their ability to adapt and be flexible to whatever the task or competition requires. Comparatively, he broadly defines neoliberalism as a mode of politics and economics that seek to minimise the role of state in public life… expand free markets and enable the permeation of market logics into every aspect of social life.' (ibid. p.160). Moreover, he concludes his summation by stating, that neoliberalism requires workers who are perpetually flexible to the need of capital, a person who is resilient and self-reliant, to provide their own needs and service their own ambitions. The labour of drag featured in *Drag Race* fits these criteria almost completely and the concept of reality TV is the quintessential neoliberal media form (ibid. p.160), Guy Redden, supports Lovelock's argument and notes how reality TV is often described as neoliberal in its logic and that this link can been seen through its presentation of participants as 'self-responsible enterprising authors of their own lives in ways consistent with the valorisation of market relations by neoliberal theorists' (Redden, G. 2018. p.1). Additionally, he explains how within the reality TV genre "ordinary people" feature in order to perform 'competitive entrepreneurial subjectivity without expectation of fair recompense, but in the hopes of attaining extortionary rewards' (Redden, G. 2018. p.1). Therefore, irrespective of RuPaul's agenda for his perceived gatekeeping the priority remains capitalist consumerism.

In addition, RuPaul's claim that drag is a 'big f-you' to male-dominated culture, not only appears to exclude women from drag but also simultaneously ignore the struggles women routinely face in patriarchal-dominated society and remove the influence feminism has had

on marginalised queer communities. RuPaul continues by explaining that Peppermint didn't get breast implants until after the show and that therefore 'hadn't really transitioned'. Then asked if he would accept a contestant who had transitioned, he said, 'Probably not, you can identify as a woman and say you're transitioning, but it changes once you start changing your body' (Aitkenhead, D. 2018). He concludes by explaining how past contestants have had face and 'butt injections' (implying body augmentations) 'but they haven't transitioned' (Aitkenhead. 2018). Again, this statement is problematic because it not only attempts to define what makes a woman a woman based on the aesthetic appeal of the body, but it concurrently presents a double standard on what is considered tolerable when it comes to augmentations of the body and how the owner of that body identifies. The emphasis RuPaul places on the aesthetic appeal of the body and his implication that Peppermint became a woman post breast implant, adheres to Gill's understanding that, in postfeminist media culture 'the body is a defining feature of womanhood' (Gill, R. 2017. p.616). Furthermore, his comments regarding what cosmetic procedures constitute trans identity are indicative of how historically the cinematic gaze spectacularised trans bodies in reductive ways. Koch-Reina et al contend that 'these stories relied heavily on the now widely criticised 'wrong body' tropes of storytelling that reduced trans to transition' (Koch-Reina, Yekaniband, E, H, Verlinden, J, J. 2020, p.2). Not only does this type of representation reduce trans people to transition additionally, by spectacularising trans bodies in reductive ways through media representation further creates a negative impact on how trans people are accepted socially. The cinematic gaze spectacularised trans bodies in repeatedly reductive ways, a prime example being the reveals of the naked body, Koch-Reina et al explain how this historic representation can affect and shape current public discourse and politics as the political climate is reflective of the simultaneity of more trans visibility as well as regressive legislative attempts to police public spaces. 'Media representation is central to both the sex-

segregating fearmongering of 'bathroom panic' and to trans counter strategies, which illustrates that visibility cannot simply be equated with social acceptance' (Koch-Reina, Yekaniband, E, H, Verlinden, J, J. 2020. P.3).

With regards to RuPaul's reaction to trans-queens participating in the show, Alexis Brown argues that importance is placed on the bodily form itself, particularly breasts and genitalia, over self-identification or performance. She contests that RuPaul's concept of drag hinges on the 'foundation of a masculine body, without a masculine body as a starting point, there can be no rejection of masculinity' (Brown, A. 2019, p.64). Brown discusses that although RuPaul acknowledges that several contestants have undergone various forms of plastic surgery that accentuate the face or buttocks the impetus is on the retainment of masculine genitalia. Brown claims that RuPaul's understanding is one that is shared by gender-critical feminists who argue that a binary, immutable conception of the biological body is what determines a person as a man or woman (ibid. p.62). Brown explains that both understandings 'exclude transwomen from the categories they consider themselves fit to adjudicate' (ibid. p.64). Describing both debates as opposite sides of the same coin, she continues by claiming 'gender critical feminists reject transwomen for not being born in female bodies, RuPaul rejects them for having approximated the body of a cis-gender woman too much' (ibid. p.64). These paradoxical arguments come at a cost to many in the transgender community as both sides of the argument and indeed rigid thinking about gender leave trans people, predominantly trans women, on the peripheries. Koch-Reina et al discussions on the 'bathroom panic' is symbolic of the notion that trans and gender non-conforming individuals exists in the peripheries when it comes to public spaces. In their research they include how social media has become an effective realm in protesting the supposedly straightforward legislation of the category "sex" by complicating it via the visual

representation of the realities of lived gender expression (Koch-Reina, Yekaniband, E, H, Verlinden, J, J. 2020, p.3).

RuPaul's comments that only a masculine body can reject masculinity received backlash within the drag community, with the consensus being that *Drag Race* and RuPaul himself is not keeping pace when it comes to the growing number of young people who identify as trans or nonconforming. Media representation is vital with regards to the social acceptance of non-binary identified individuals and whilst positive non-binary representations are increasing, Koch-Reina et al argues that despite this increase trans visibility remains deeply and conflictingly gendered in binary. They continue by explaining that 'this binary has long been characterised by a disproportionate, sensationalised visibility of (certain kinds of) trans femininities and a comparative lack of media attention to trans masculinities' (ibid. 2020. p.4). Season 13 contestant Gottmik was the first and, so far, only trans man to compete on *Drag Race,* regarding the lack of representation towards trans masculinities they quote Jameson Green who writes '[T]here is still a mysterious fog obscuring transsexual and transgender men from public view.' (ibid. 2000. p.4). Green attests that the reason for this is a coupling of both passive privilege and the way masculinity is the subject rather than subjected to the objectifying gaze of media attention. Arguably this is reflected in the type of drag that is on display in *Drag Race*. In 2022 *Drag Race France* featured three guest drag kings in an episode, this was the first time in the franchise's history that a drag king has been represented. Koch-Reina et al argue that this type of invisibility to media sensationalism brings with it negative effects of a lack of representation and access to a supposedly shared humanity. They conclude by stating, 'the recent expansion of trans representations has begun to shift but has not broken these binary patterns' (ibid. 2000. p.4). Brown also includes condemnation of RuPaul's comments by quoting Amrou Al-Kadhi a non-binary drag performer who stated, 'the idea that the social critique of male patriarchy can only really

work when it is enacted by men is nonsensical and offensive' (Brown, A. p.65). Further opposition to RuPaul's comments came from, drag artist Hollow Eve who claims 'Drag can be more risky, creative and entertaining when it's not limited to men. The subversive, wild, politically interesting thought-provoking art that is happening in San Francisco and in so many cities across the country … that's what I want to watch.' (Levin, S. 2018). Additionally, advocating for more diverse drag performances, Dottie Lux states that RuPaul's restrictions 'boil down to body parts and for me that is so unnecessary… why must you know what my genitals look like at this moment?' (Levin, S. 2018). RuPaul backtracked on his views in the days following the criticism and issued an apology on Twitter which read 'I understand and regret the hurt I have caused the trans community they are heroes of our shared LGBTQ movement. You are my teachers.' (Brown, A. 2019. p.65).

RuPaul's own personal beliefs and reasons for not being as open to trans-participants as audiences would like him to be is arguably his prerogative. After all, it is his name on the show and therefore it has been predetermined that the show follows his personal understanding of drag culture and who he believes should participate in it. In saying this, it is important to note here the sheer vastness of the show and its shift into a distinctly capitalist notion, global francisation. The show's many geographical spinoffs are not always hosted primarily by RuPaul himself and because of this the overall brand of *Drag Race* might have a determining role on the show's boundaries of gender and sex than just RuPaul as an individual. Due to the cultural phenomenon that the show has produced, problems occur in terms of representation and identity as well as inclusivity. If we consider RuPaul's comments about bodily form, coupled with his view that breasts and genitalia not self-identification constitute what makes a woman a woman, then we must consider how progressive contemporary mainstream TV is in terms of representing its trans identified participants.

There's Something About Miriam

Since its pop-culture boom at the turn of the twenty-first century, the genre of reality TV has gone on to affect almost every walk of life from celebrity, dating, music, fashion, beauty, family life, and even politics. Guy Redden claims that reality TV came to define the pop cultural landscape of this time and the reasons for this is linked with other transformations such as media coverage, celebrity culture and the international trade in formats (Redden, G. 2018. p.1). In his analysis Redden raises interesting questions surrounding the ethics of reality TV, namely that reality is in some sense "neoliberal" he argues that 'neoliberalism should be considered a key element of the broader formative socio-historical context in which reality TV has gained such rapid cultural currency' (ibid. 2018. p.2). He continues by explaining that this raises important political questions regarding the links between 'public policies and regressive social trends' most notably in the return of rising inequality. Therefore, he questions whether neoliberalism has societal consequences and furthermore whether neoliberal cultural forms such as reality TV play a role in its legitimation (ibid. 2018. p.2).

Reality TV is often shorthand for what people think is wrong with modern culture – time wasting, low grade, rubbish. (Hill, A. 2015, p.3). The nadir of reality TV's pop culture boom was perhaps 2004's reality dating show *There's Something About Miriam* which aired on SKY. *There's Something About Miriam's* inclusion in this chapter is to provide analytical discourse into the ethics, screening, and representation of not only trans identity but its symbiosis with hegemonic notions of heterosexuality. The premise of the show followed formulaic reality dating tropes, as six men spent three weeks in Ibiza competing for 21-year-old Miriam's heart, along with a luxury cruise and ten thousand pounds. The climax of the show saw contestant Tom Rooke crowned the winner and simultaneously the 'big' twist is

revealed, Miriam is in fact a trans woman. During this period, known in the industry as the 'Wild West era' (BBS Sounds, Radio 4. 2022), reality TV shows were in abundance, and this meant production companies were pushing the boundaries regarding content, in search of what they considered original viewing. In the early stages of *There's Something About Miriam*, producer Dom Bowles recalls being invited by production company *Brighter Pictures* to come to London to discuss the show's concept, in attendance were the show's executive producers Remy Blumenfeld and Gavin Hay. During the meeting, Bowles recalls being shown a screen test video of a then 21-year-old Miriam, after watching the footage he recounts there was nothing unusual or new in comparison to other screen tests he has seen throughout his career. Bowles says he then looked over at Blumenfeld who explained; "Well the thing is she's got a cock". This was the pitch for the show, this was the concept that was going to push the genre forward by excavating the profound depths of male sexuality (ibid. 2022), whilst simultaneously using a trans woman as collateral damage. Redden discusses need for critical evaluation of reality TV, quoting Mark Andrejevic (2004) he writes, 'reality shows submit participants and audiences to processes of surveillance through which media corporations benefit economically from their personal consumption and labour' (Redden, G. 2018. p. 2). Furthermore, he notes how other critics claim 'reality television reinforces social distinctions by representing many ordinary people unfavourably relative to gendered or middle-class norms' (ibid. 2018. p. 2). An argument one can conclude from researching the *There's Something About Miriam* retrospectively, including analysing the legal and ethical controversies that followed is that, as Redden identifies, gendered norms and the expectation of the audience to adhere to hegemonic notions of gender norms and binaries were fundamental to the show's success. As the show features group of heterosexual men were duped into having a physical and sexual relationship with a woman, they didn't know was trans, which arguably resulted in a violation of their masculinity, their heterosexuality and

arguably their ego. Additionally, despite what the creators of the show say their intention to create it was, there is a distinct heteronormative and even transphobic gaze to *There's something about Miriam.* The intersectionality of Miriam's race and gender-identity draws attention to objectification and spectacularising of gender and sexual identity additionally there are cultural-symbolic processes of racialisation and the production of 'otherness'. The show is set in Ibiza Spain but is British produced and other than Miriam, who is Mexican, features an all-British cast and so notion of Britishness culture are presented as the norm and subconsciously central therefore to the in-jokes and laddish culture present in the show. Whilst the men spend almost all of their time together, sharing a bedroom, eating together hanging out together, all the while unambiguous in their masculine gender which ultimately further serves to symbolically reinforce Miriam's position as 'other'. In terms of the legal ethics surrounding the show, there is a lot of debate surrounding when a trans person should or should not disclose and the British law, which is applicable in the case of *There's Something About Miriam,* surrounding disclosure is also fairly convoluted. The laws surrounding the disclosure of trans identity refers mainly to that of a criminal investigation and in such cases, there can be access to a person's sex as recorded on their birth certificate. On the British Governments official website, under the category titled *The Gender Recognition Act,* there is no mention of when a trans person should or should not disclose their trans identity with regards to a sexual relationship, the information surrounding disclosure is as follows.

> The Gender Recognition Act enables people to change their legally recognised sex by obtaining a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC), which entitles the holder to be treated for legal purposes in line with their acquired sex. Section 22 of the act creates a criminal offence of disclosing protected information acquired in an official capacity. 'Protected information' is information about a person's sex as recorded on their birth

> certificate before an application for a GRC was made, or information about their application for a GRC. There are exemptions to the offence, such as where disclosure is for the purpose of preventing or investigating crime, or where the person agrees to the disclosure of the information. Section 22(5) of the act gives the Secretary of State the power to make provision prescribing circumstances in which the disclosure of protected information is not to constitute an offence under the section (British Government Website. 2023).

Throughout the show's run Miriam's trans identity was kept secret from the male contestants. However, the audience is made aware of it from the start as Miriam states, "I try to be honest in everything I say, but there is a secret that the guys don't know, my big secret is that I'm not a real woman, I wasn't born as a girl I was born as a man, I'm a transexual" (2004). Firstly, the producer's decision to let the audience in on the 'secret' provides a particularly voyeuristic lens in terms of viewing the show, as every sexual interaction between Miriam and the contestants builds upon the tension of the audience's knowledge, which will ultimately intensify the entertainment value once Miriam's 'secret' is revealed. From the very first episode viewers know what the outcome of the show will be; they know Miriam will ultimately have to reveal her trans identity to the men on national television and therefore the central viewing point to the show is to see the men's reaction. This is additionally problematic because the content becomes almost inconsequential. To this end the show ideologically loses any potential social progression or conversation about trans experiences, to put it simply, the audience knows all they need to about Miriam – she is trans – now how will the men react. This creates the notion that Miriam (the representation of many trans women) is a vapid character who offers nothing outside of her trans body and so as once again reduces trans people to transition (Koch-Reina, Yekaniband, E, H, Verlinden, J, J. 2020. P.3). Therefore, not only does the show miss the opportunity to provide a discourse

surrounding trans experience, whilst also allowing audiences to disregard the fact that a young trans-woman, one of the first representations of a trans-woman on primetime television, is being exploited by a global television network. Moreover, there is further disregard towards a group of young men who are also being deceived and exploited, arguably in order to reveal an inherent trans-phobic rhetoric, and one that producers hope will amass great ratings for the network. The positioning of Miriam as a trans woman in the show lends itself to the argument that media visibility isn't the key to social acceptance, but rather social acceptance relies heavily on media representation. Therefore, similarly to Redden's understanding that reality TV can have an effect on public policies and regressive social trends, such representation has the potential to both positively and negatively influence social discourse surrounding trans identity. And so, when trans people are being presented in a way that upholds the hegemonic and transphobic stereotypes surrounding them, then visibility simply isn't enough. Referring back to Butler, this type of visibility doesn't subvert, instead it re-affirms because it only mimes it does not displace (1992). *In Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility,* Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton provide a discussion on the dichotomy of representation and visibility trans people are exposed to by the media and conclude:

> We are living in a time of trans visibility. Yet we are also living in a time of anti-trans violence… this is the trap of the visual: it offers – or, more accurately, it is frequently offered to us as – the primary path through which trans people might have access to liveable lives (Koch-Reina, Yekaniband, E, H, Verlinden, J, J. 2020. p.3).

In terms of Western culture's more progressive and accepting attitudes towards trans people today, Miriam's own terminology, that she is not a 'real' woman is further problematic as biologically sexed bodies are not necessarily integral in determining a person's gendered

identity. Brown contends that gender critical feminists rest their understanding on what makes a woman a woman based on a fixed binary that is an absolute conception of the biological body. In opposition to this Brown articulates that ‘many (though not all) trans activists rest their claim to identity in an idea of the intrinsic self, an a priori identity developed irrespective of the gender assigned at birth (Brown, A. 2029. p.63). The decoding of Miriam’s terminology, coupled with Brown’s research may serve to provide reason and justification for the hostility and condemnation RuPaul has previously received by *Drag Race* viewers regarding his comments towards trans contestant Peppermint. Whilst it is not clear whether the statement made by Miriam was her personal view or if it had been scripted by producers, her male origins and genitalia are nonetheless the focus of the show and are continually referenced in the content of the show. Throughout the show there is a fascination with Miriam’s genitals with producers repeatedly airing a clip of her pulling down her bikini bottoms just enough to appear suggestive and as if to lean into the viewer's preeminent fascination with trans bodies. This repeated imagery tapped into the wider context of the 1990s and early 2000s film and TV, within which trans women were routinely depicted as figures of abjection and disgust, they were also increasingly portrayed as predatory and deceitful, constantly harbouring a secret. The show’s title, *There’s Something About Miriam,* also delivers a double entendre with the implication being that the *something* is in reference to Miriam’s trans identity, additionally it provides an intertextual reference to the 1998 film *There’s Something About Mary* which features ‘gross out’ humour and abject imagery. Mundy and White describe gross-out comedy as a sub-genre of comedy ‘that deliberately confronts the acceptable standards of taste within society (Mundy, White. 2012. p.218). These ‘standards of taste’ according to Mundy and White promote the suppression and standardisation of the body and its functions as well as supressing certain genders and sexualities (ibid. 2012. p.221). They continue by noting that this understanding applies to

patriarchy and the established order as well as the standards it sets and for those who fall outside of it or are not yet assimilated within it are challenged and threatened (ibid. 2012. p.222).

Miriam's opening statement is representative of these preconceived notions of trans-women and the suppression of the body and those who fall outside the established patriarchal order, as her biological identity is further confirmed by Doctor Alex Lavarie who states, "I have been a qualified doctor in Spain for two years now I have done a medical examination to Miriam, and I can confirm she has male genitalia" (2004). Dr. Lavarie's confirmation helped amplify the notion that trans people are deceitful, as it is simply not enough to have a trans person confirm their trans identity it must be verified by a medical practitioner. The inclusion of Dr. Lavarie's confirmation highlights a tragic irony in the show's concept, in which the trans-woman is presented as the deceitful person that is harbouring some big secret, whilst simultaneously juxtaposing it with the producer's decision to dupe and deceit heterosexual men into signing up to participate on the show. Furthermore, Dr Lavarie's inclusion serves to highlight the cultural conflation surrounding identity as it relates to sex and gender being that medical discourse that involves 'sex' and the cultural discourse of identity which relates to 'gender'. By claiming Miriam's 'real' identity is male based on her sexual reproductive organs, removes the ideology held by many in the queer community that genitalia are not a determining factor in how one identifies. As previously stated, Western thinking historically linked sex with gender and placed gender as an essential aspect of being man or woman. From a Foucauldian perspective some might argue that Dr Lavarie's inclusion in the show is indicative of what Michel Foucault (1976) termed *Biopower* or the medicalisation of sexuality, which describes a transformation from surveillance into control over sexuality as doctors place patients into a biomedical paradigm. Sujatha Raman and Richard Tutton contend that Foucault argued that biopower was a new form of power that emerged at the

threshold of modernity, which he contrasted with the classical form of sovereign power as he stated, 'one might say that the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by the power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death'. They summarise this quote by affirming that biopower was thus less concerned with decisions over a person's right to live and more with power over the unfolding and administration of life (Raman, S, Tutton, R. 2010. p. 714).

It is almost impossible in today's TV landscape that appears so concerned with ethical standards of practice as well as the duty of care towards its participants that show like *There's Something About Miriam* would ever get made, let alone be able to deceive the majority of its cast. In an interview with BBC Sounds show winner Tom recalls the deceit he felt by the producers and by Miriam herself, he says, 'I felt it was cheap, it was deceitful, it was non-consensual… the whole thing was wrong ethically and morally' (2022). Trans actress Trace Lysette narrated a Podcast for Wondery titled *Harsh Reality: The Story of Miriam Rivera*, which details the life of Miriam from her time on the New York drag ball scene to her death from an apparent suicide in 2019. Lysette provides an in-depth insight into how the show *There's Something About Miriam* impacted all of those involved and an interview with Tom reveals how he felt the producers managed to deceive the men into signing up for the show. He details how the men were asked to come to London to audition for a show they were told was called, *Find Me a Man* and where the winner would receive a cash prize of ten thousand pounds. In the Podcast, the men recall in retrospect how uncomfortable and degrading the audition process felt towards women. They explain how they were asked to rate a catwalk of women on different scales from "one-night stand material" to "marriage material" (2022). Additionally, they recount being asked very personal information about their sexuality and sexual experience, according to show producer Gavin Hay the intention of this was to find men who would be open to exploring their sexuality. However, given that we know how the show played out it is plausible to argue that the audition appeared to weed out prospective

contestants that were not going to give the reaction the producers wanted when it came to the big reveal. Tom recalls meeting the other contestants at Gatwick airport where a member of the TV crew handed Tom a stack of papers and said, "Oh crikey we forgot this contract would you mind just signing it quickly" (2022). Knowing that he wouldn't have time to read it all he claims he signed the contract under the guise that "you're one of the biggest production companies in the world you're not going to screw me" (2022). The contents of the contracts have never been disclosed but arguably despite what it may or may not have contained the situation in which the men signed them does not appear ethical. Furthermore, the entire premise of the show was to keep Miriam's 'secret' for as long as possible, which was made evident when one contestant questioned Miriam's birth-assigned biological sex and was subsequently removed from the show (2022). After the show had finished filming the male contestants sued *SKY* and the legal case was built on a number of different claims including defamation, breach of contract, and personal injury. Yet the most sensational claim was that the TV company had tried to trick them into a courtship with a transgender woman, something the lawyers termed a 'conspiracy to commit sexual assault' (2022). Under British Law a trans person is not required to disclose that they are trans however, if you have said anything that can be deemed to be an act of deception you can get into legal trouble, this was the basis on which the lawyers made their claim (2022). The lawsuit reached an out-of-court settlement with the men being paid an undisclosed sum of money by the production company and the show aired a year later.

The true intention of the show is arguably revealed in the shows finale as producers doubled down on not only the stereotype that transwomen are deceitful but also on historic trans-phobic stereotypes. The final minutes of the show feature one-on-one interviews with each contestant in order to get their reaction to Miriam's 'big reveal'. Somewhat predictably contestant after contestant provides derogatory and degrading remarks about Miriam's trans

identity, ranging from making her a laughingstock to all-out transphobic sentiment. Tom notes how in hindsight the show had let down everyone involved including Miriam he explains, “All the trans people I know are proud and open about who they are, and they have all had to go through the struggles and journey that everyone does to get there. You don’t then go and hide it and manipulate it and have non-consensual relationships with people (2022). Producer Gavin Hay defends the decision to make and ultimately air *There’s Something About Miriam* even after the lawsuit. In defence of the show, he explains that as gay men he and Remy Blumenfeld looked at the world from a different perspective, “We were quite brave and out of kilter with the rest of society”. Hay concludes by noting how gay, trans, and drag were “lumped together, we were trying to get mainstream shows to bring up new subject matter to deal with in a different way”. He continues by saying “It was a genuine thing to find out and expose other people’s reactions and why it seemed straight men were so constrained in their vision of heterosexuality” (2022). This statement of defence fails to prove any genuine interest in representing or providing agency to trans identity and experience. His own terminology regarding why straight men are so constrained in their heterosexuality is paradoxical, as how can a show that dupe’s men into believing they are romantically involved with a cis woman, expose or progressively change such so-called rigid thinking? Furthermore, despite wanting to appear progressive towards trans people, the show ultimately disposed of Miriam as collateral damage in aid of a salacious narrative that would attract higher viewership.

Queer Language

On reflection of *There’s Something About Miriam, Drag Race* appears more progressive in its representation as it purports to represent and somewhat reflect the many different and complex identities. However, the language used in *Drag Race* has incited a certain amount of

controversy, which illuminated the importance of discourse, identity politics and representation. Although much of the show's terminology was first utilised in *Paris is Burning* and has since entered the popular lexicon in recent years, certain phrases have not always been tolerated and can be decoded as problematic and discriminatory to certain audiences and groups of people. Phrases such as "ladyboy" and "she-mail" (a play on the word she-male) have routinely been used derogatorily towards the trans and gender non-conforming community, 'The "shemale" slur is regarded as degrading by the trans community because it denies the gender identity of trans women… it refers to trans women with male genitals and female secondary sex characteristics' (Braidwood, E. 2018). Yet they are continuously used by RuPaul on the show. However, in 2021 the show changed RuPaul's iconic catchphrase "Gentlemen start your engines, may the best woman win" to "Racers starts your engines, may the best drag queen win". The gendered catchphrase was adjusted to coincide with the first transmasculine contestant Gottmik. *Drag Race* has featured several transgender contestants at different points in their journeys and while several contestants came out as trans during or after filming, Peppermint was announced as the first trans identified competitor in season 9. The re-branding of RuPaul's famous catchphrase is a clear reflection of both contestant and audience's demand for better representation of identity, specifically with regards to trans and gender non-conforming participation however, this has not been wholly unproblematic.

In terms of representing a multitude of identities, journalist Joe Parslow wrote an article detailing the response to the show's decision to cast its first straight, cis male queen, Maddy Morphosis, in season 14. Parslow highlights that although drag should include a variety of people from different backgrounds but the fact that Maddy Morphosis' inclusion overshadowed the inclusion of two trans-female contestants that same season Kerri Colby and Kornbread "The Snack" Jete, not only feels like a 'kick in the teeth to those communities

and performers but more than that, the outrage was also exactly what the producers wanted, they are casting to cause controversy and to sensationalise' (Parslow, J. 2021). Parslow articulates here that controversy equates to commodity as the sensationalism created, only further fuelled interest in the show. This understanding also relates to Hill's description that reality TV is 'the ultimate spectacle of the real where capitalism and consumption rule' (Hill, A. 2015 p.122). It is conceivable therefore, that RuPaul's comments and the producer's action to create debate and controversy around the politics of identity all work symbiotically to aid the consumption of the show, irrespective of who might be offended or marginalised in the process. In regard to gender identity, this type of publicity facilitates a discourse in which, specific identities are pitted against one another in terms of who holds more or less value when it comes to social values and norms, specifically when such debates impact the marketability of a show. Deery argues that this is indicative of reality TV as 'producers simply exaggerate gender distinctions if and when this generates eye-catching contrasts and conflicts – it is a commercial motive' (Deery, J. 2015, p.104/5). Furthermore, in reference to phrases such as "ladyboy" and "she-mail," although no longer used on *Drag Race* due to producer influence, RuPaul at the time maintained that he personally would not have dropped the lines from the show, in an interview for *The Guardian* he explained "I would not have changed it, but that's their choice" (Nicholson, R. 2015). Using Butler's understanding of 'miming and displacing' for something to be subversive of heterosexual hegemony, 'it has to both mime and displace its conventions' (Kotz, L. 1992). I argue that the use of such terminology fails to engage politically with the re-signification of language in same the way the term 'queer' for example has been re-claimed and re-signified as an umbrella term for those who identify outside of heteronormativity. Therefore, I would argue that rather than displacing and re-claiming or re-signifying the term's original derogatory connotations,

RuPaul and *Drag Race* are miming and reconsolidating this intention towards a community that the show claims to represent.

The show has not only been criticised for language that appears to offend and derogatorily refer to trans and gender non-conforming subjects, but it also further uses phrases and terms that may be seen as sexist and misogynistic The term ‘fishy’ is routinely used to refer to the legitimacy of a drag queens ‘female’ presentation, Brennan and Gudelunas comment on how this phrase can ‘without doubt, also be read pejoratively to refer to the odour of female genitalia’ (Brennan, Gudelunas. 2017, p.4). Additionally, they call out the misogynist connotations of RuPaul’s often-stated system by which he judges contestants which is codified as ‘Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent. An acronym, without the need of articulation’ (Brennan, Gudelunas, 2017, p.4). Through such sexist or misogynistic language, *Drag Race* arguably demonstrates what Gill explains as the ‘entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas ‘(Gill, 2007, p. 161). Similarly, again to Butler’s miming and displacing, the show purports to uplift and call for confidence through femininity however, it ultimately re-affirms hegemony and heteronormativity through its use of language. This is especially evident when RuPaul states: ‘It’s that time of the competition when your Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent could use some fresh meat’ (Chetwynd, P. 2020, p.27). Although arguably the phrase is used in a somewhat tongue and cheek way, the insinuation that the acronym refers to female genitalia and the word ‘meat’ is used to represent male genitalia, not only connotes sexist language towards women but further re-affirms hegemonic and heteronormative sexual relations. Whilst the term ‘fishy’ holds pejorative connotations towards female genitalia, it is also used by the judges to refer to how successful a queen is in her presentation of the feminine aesthetic. However, this also raises questions concerning what type of femineity is deemed not only acceptable but also successful in regard to competition by RuPaul and his judging panel. Too often contestants whose appearance

doesn't meet these standards have been eliminated or told that they need to present as more 'feminine' or, more 'fishy'. In season 10, The Vixen, an African American performer from Chicago, is criticised for not wearing a waist cincher: 'Imagine that thing just sucked all the way in' (Chetwynd, P. 2020, p.27). The idealised standard of femininity on the show is well aligned with Western hegemonic notions of beauty standards, comments such as these, reveal how the show is focused on idealising slim and normatively attractive femininity or what hooks refers to as 'fetishized representations of ruling-class white femininity' (hooks, b, 1992, p.147). This understanding of femininity relies heavily on the preoccupation of the body and less on the psychological, Gill articulates that this is indicative of postfeminist media culture, in which a 'sexy body' is presented as a woman's key source of identity whilst simultaneously being a woman's key source of power (Gill, R. 2007. p.5). This idealisation, often present in the show, again leads *Drag Race* to not only fall short of being subversive but also acting accordingly to the normative notions of gender and beauty standards. Gill notes women's bodies are under constant surveillance constituting the largest type of media content across all platforms and this scrutinization always comes at the risk of women's bodies failing. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard writes:

> For women, beauty has become an absolute, religious imperative. Being beautiful is no longer an effect of nature or a supplement to moral qualities. It is the basic, imperative quality of those who take the same care of their faces and figures as they do of their souls. Alongside beauty, sexuality everywhere orientates the 'rediscovery' and consumption of the body today. (Baudrillard, J. 2004. p.129).

Although *Drag Race* is a competition in which participants are judged for their 'look', those who fall outside of the idealised feminine standard often find themselves harshly criticised and further advised on how to fall back in line according to such standards. This standard of practice adheres to the neo-liberal sentiment of beauty and self-promotion, made most

evident in the 21st century by the unprecedented phenomenon of social media influencers. As Gill states, in this 'hyper-visible landscape the body is recognised as the object of women's labour… her gateway to freedom and empowerment in the neoliberal market economy' (Gill, R. 2017. p.616). *Drag Race's* standards as well as its comments towards its competitors are always based on the achievement of the professional look or the 'Glamour Fish Drag', which symbolises the re-affirmation of hegemonic beauty standards that are rooted in binary concepts of gender. When the contestants are given guidance on how to improve self-esteem and self-love, the messaging is codified in ways that actually give advice on how to better fit the normative beauty standard. This is clear in the critique of The Vixen when she decides not to wear a waist cincher ('imagine that thing sucked all the way in'). Rather than celebrating or empowering oneself or feeling confident about her more natural figure, this comment simply tells The Vixen how to attain a more hegemonic idealised feminine physique, which results in her alignment with the 'professional' look the judges have asked for. Alison Winch terms this behaviour the 'Girlfriend Gaze' which she describes as 'a modality of looking, in which girls and women police each other's appearance and behaviour through a homosocial gaze, characterized simultaneously by affection and 'normative cruelties' (Winch, A. 2010. p.10).

In her analysis, Winch references the work of Terri Apter and Ruthellen Josselson who examined the psychological impact of friendship in the lives and identity formations of adolescent girls in both the UK and the US. Their findings note how codes of acceptable femininity are different in each generation and that female values are massively impacted by their friends, and in *Drag Race* we see a televisual facsimile of notions of friendship and intimacy through mentors and 'sisterhood' for the purpose of the genre (Winch, A. 2010. p.10). In terms of defining 'normative cruelties' Winch states that the phrase neatly encapsulates the affective power dynamics of friendship groups. Additionally, she references

research conducted by Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold that found girls tend to employ cruelty in order to discipline feminine identities and they identify that these forms of control are linked to regulating sexuality (Winch, A. 2010. p.10). Winch notes that what is striking about Ringrose and Renold's findings is that the school in which they conducted their research didn't perceive this behaviour to be bullying, the reason being that bullying is often pathologized as transgressing normative gendered behaviours, rather than imposing them. Therefore, she determines that girls can be read as controlling one another through shame and humiliation centred around the body and sexuality and that this is institutionally acceptable; girls both channel normative feminine discourse and police them (Winch, A. 2010. p.11).

The policing of other women or the employment by women of the 'Girlfriend gaze' on other women's bodies has led to the false assumption that a woman's bodily appearance is equal to her value as a human being. It has also fed into the neoliberal capitalist interest by selling strategies of body management and self-promotion, two notions that are constantly present in *Drag Race*. However, in terms of 'linguistic cruelties' and the terminology used on the show that can and has been deemed sexist and controversial, there is a larger historic context to this queer language. Julia P Stanley's investigation into the language of America's gay community (1974), begins by asserting that during the gay liberation movement, many gay men had come to the realisation that the most prevalent use of gay slang could be seen as a form of self-oppression, specifically terms that worked to perpetuate the marginalisation of gay people. She continues by explaining how gay slang reflects the dichotomy of gay lives, which on the one hand rebels against the lives that larger society would have them live and on the other it embodies certain values held by heterosexuals that require one to blend into larger society (Stanley, J, P. 1974. p.368). Relating to the discussion regarding *Drag Race's* normative and linguistic cruelties, Stanley proclaims gay slang can be read as sexist. Most notably, she explains that in gay slang, sexist language relates to the gendered sexual roles of

gay male relationships she gives the examples ‘Butch’ and 'Femme’. Butch connotes positive traits of masculinity whilst Femme evokes patterns of negative behaviour usually reserved for women such as being passive, weak or emotional (ibid. 1974. p.387). Stanley calls this ‘sex-role stereotyping’ in which gays accept the gender binary as it relates to behaviour, she writes ‘There is behaviour appropriate to “masculine” and there is behaviour appropriate to “feminine” people’ (ibid.1974. p.387). She concludes her discussion of Butch and Femme by noting that because society rewards behaviours assigned to the male sex, gays also place a high value on masculine behaviour and therefore ‘to be a Butch is always somehow better than being a Femme’ (ibid. 1974. p.387). Perhaps her most problematic finding relating to the sexism inherent in gay linguistics is that gay self-indictors re-present destructive definitions of women held by hegemonic society. An example of this Stanley explains, is when gays draw comparisons of themselves to women and refer to themselves as ‘dizzy bitches, vicious cunts or pieces of ass’. Furthermore, she concludes an ‘extreme identification with the roles of women is manifested by the wearing of women's clothing, which is called drag’ (ibid. 1974. p.387).

It is imperative to understand the context of *Drag Race* as a reality TV show and therefore much of the bitchiness and insults directed at contestants and by contestants play into the dramatic tension or ‘confrontainment’ indicative of reality TV (2022). In an article for the *Independent*, Adam Bloodworth discusses how this conflict is nothing new in reality TV, but he also states that in, the context of *Drag Race*, highlighting such scenes becomes problematic as it 'perpetuates negative stereotypes about queer people to suggest that all they can do is argue and fight with one another’ (Bloodworth, A. 2019). Secondly, it is important to understand that in queer culture, bitchy comments or ‘shade’ primarily stems from hegemonic societies' systemic marginalisation and homophobic rhetoric towards the queer

community. Furthermore, as well as a defence mechanism, linguistic practices such as bitching, and insulting have become symbolic of drag culture.

Paris is Burning's Dorian Corey explains the origins of some of drags now popular lexicon. First, he claims that 'reading' is the original art form of insult, he explains that reading is about finding a flaw in someone and exaggerating it for comedic value. However, Corey notes that when reading transcends the gay community and involves both gay and straight people it becomes a vicious slur, yet this interaction again becomes key in terms of developing a sense of how to read during the drag balls (1991). Whilst reading provides a verbal defence for the queer community against homophobic acts, the term 'realness' intends a physical defence. Realness or 'femme real queens' as Corey explains, are those who can pass undetected to the outside straight world and therefore leave the balls and make it home without harassment or violence. In her chapter *Queens of Language: Paris is Burning* Jackie Goldsby articulates that realness is the aesthetic imperative defining drag ball culture (Gever, M, Greyson, J, Parmar, P 1993. P.110). She continues by explaining that the point of the balls is not just entertainment and competition but to erase the signs of difference, to become an ultrafeminine most importantly through the re-presentation of self and to reform a cultural ideal. Realness according to Goldsby, 'derives its charge from the gesture of erasure precisely because the markers of race, class and sexuality limn these images indelibly and cannot be suppressed' (ibid. 1993. p.110). And yet the improbability of the synthesis that is drag reframes just what is liminal in the ball world, therefore for Goldsby displacing the binaries of male/female, coloured/white is central to the psyche of ball culture, its logic unfolds in subversive splendour (ibid. 1993. p.110). Goldsby concludes that the relationship between terminology and imagery in *Paris is Burning* is what underwrites the film and gives it its narrative drive. She notes that this is a reflection on the individuals that Livingston chose to film, she writes 'Livingston couldn't have happened upon a more wittily critical, verbally

dexterous group of folk if she'd tired' (ibid. 1993. p.110). For Goldsby the link between the participants and the spectacle of competition is language, coupled with the notion of performance structures both the ball world and the film and because of this 'the film unfolds conceptually, initiating visual understandings of the culture through its linguistic signifiers' (ibid. 1993. p.110). Referencing Raymond William's *Historiography of Language* which attributes languages slippery fix on meaning to its subjection to political contexts, Goldsby argues that *Paris is Burning* evokes a similar critique. She writes, 'Specifying the body as both subject to and the instrument of re-vision because of its (dis)engagement with commodity culture' (ibid. 1993. p.111). Adversely, it is arguable that *Drag Race* uses terminology, such as puts downs and bitchy comments, indicative of queer and drag culture without significantly displacing gender binaries. Instead, this type of language often used in *Drag Race,* arguably upholds hegemonic binaries and expectations specifically as they relate to women and the beauty standards they are held to. Therefore, unlike Goldsby's conclusion that *Paris is Burning* 'unfolds in subversive splendour' the use of certain language in *Drag Race* leads it to once again miss the opportunity of subversion in favour of re-idealising normative practices and the commodification of individuals.

Primacy of the Self.

Although drag can be interpreted as an exaggerated performance of both femininity and masculinity, the result of judging personas of hyper-feminine behaviours and appearances aligns with socio-political hegemonic expectations of femininity. The notion of self-love and self-care that underpins the concept of the show is something that Gill notes has been intensified by 'self-help culture', which has additionally become an increasingly lucrative industry, Gill states it 'calls on women to recognise that they are being held back not by patriarchal capitalism or institutionalised sexism but by their own lack of confidence. (Gill,

R. 2017. p.618). She continues by explaining how this is presented as an entirely individual issue, unconnected to cultural forces and so the solution offered is to work on the self. Crucially by working on the self, rather than social injustice, it is not disruptive to capitalism, neo-liberalism or patriarchy (ibid. 2017. p.618). More than being none disruptive, in some instances self-help culture directly benefits neoliberal capitalism. Kim Allen and Anna Bull (2016) formulate self-help as a 'turn to character' in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Gill further attests that media messages targeted at women increasingly foreground not simply the individual but also the psychological: self-esteem, body positivity, and confidence (Gill, R. 2017. p.618). Baudrillard validates this understanding as he notes how the body is a representation of both capital and fetish, writing 'buy - and you will be at ease with your body' (Baudrillard, J. 2004. P.134). In his analyses of an article in *Elle* magazine, that promises to help readers 'unlock the secret to your body', he notes how the article, exclusively aimed at women, culminates in stating that 'if you don't make your bodily devotions, if you sin by omission, you will be punished. Everything that ails you comes from being culpably irresponsible towards yourself (your own salvation) (Baudrillard, J. 2004. P.129).

As well as adhering to the contention surrounding queer linguists, this understanding is made further evident through the representation of overweight contestants. Plus-size contestants are routinely portrayed as being burdened by self-hatred, as opposed to slimmer contestants who better fit the beauty standard and are somehow liberated and empowered because of it. Season 9 contestant and season 10 runner-up (she left season 9 due to injury) and *We're Here* star, Eureka O'Hara explains her experiences of fat shaming and the dichotomy of life as a 'fat' gay man. She notes that within the gay community plus size gay men either exist within the 'Bear' community or none at all (Jung, A. 2017). Similarly, to Stanley's analysis of Butch and Femme bear is a slang term used to describe a heavy-set gay man. Like Butch, bear

typically refers to a large gay man who projects as very masculine, in comparison to Stanley's articulation of Butch, because society places a higher value on masculinity those larger homosexuals that don't conform to such gender-specific roles find themselves on the peripheries. Eureka explains her personal experience of this stating, "I'm a giant lady. Even when I'm a boy, I'm very feminine and I don't consider myself a bear". She continues by noting how this decision to not conform can have negative consequences "in the gay-male population, we're very big on body dysmorphia – you have to be a certain type of weight or have a certain look to be attractive in the gay-male eye" (Jung, A. 2017). In correlation with the show's theme of self-love and self-esteem, Eureka then discusses that because of her size, other smaller-framed gay men and contestants of the show question her self-esteem. She remarks, 'Sometimes smaller and prettier girls are like, "You're not supposed to be that confident," or "You're not supposed to be that self-assured." But I am very that person' (Jung, A. 2017). Since the framing of the show indicates that overweight contestants suffer from lower self-esteem and considering the closing line of every show is "If you can't love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love someone else" then similar to the devaluation of trans identity, the show also deems overweight contestants as less valuable. This understanding leaves the show to fall short of its intersectional possibilities that have compounded the issue of problematic exclusionary discourses the show has been criticised for. Likewise, to the framing of bitchiness, the treatment of 'fat' contestants by their peers often results in dramatic scenes for the show as they cause tension in competition, which further fuels stereotypes that associate fatness with that of greed and indolence.

Arguably, ideologies concerning the idealisation of femininity and womanhood as it relates to neoliberal capitalism are not a contemporary issue but in fact historic. The evolution of capitalism's permeation with regard to social constructs of femininity and womanhood may have become more subtle but nevertheless rely heavily on the exploitation of female anxieties

in which they are pressured to adhere to social norms. Similarly, the beauty industry in the 21st century, particularly in the wake of social media, has shown women and girls how to best fit the hegemonic beauty standards. In her *Guardian* article Gabby Hinsliff discusses the correlation between the influence of social media and the 'cult' of self-care, self-love and narcissism she writes, 'from the cult of "self-care" (taking time out to cosset yourself) to compulsive posting of selfies' (Hinsliff, G. 2018). She references psychologists Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell who suggest, 'social media along with other factors, from indulgent parenting to a highly individualistic culture, risks creating a generation excessively wrapped up in itself (Hinsliff, G. 2018). Arguably some scenes in *Drag Race* that supposedly offer advice on how to practice self-love can been seen to diminish the progressive and subversive potential of the show, instead it implores contestants to be confident in who they are without challenging the socio-cultural norms that lead to insecurity. Rather, the show provides critique and advice that ultimately encourages contestants to abide by social norms reserved for women that are firmly situated within the gender binary. Furthermore, because the show has a competitive element, not only are these hegemonic notions being reinforced, but they are also being celebrated and rewarded.

Drag Race is a competitive game show, therefore it incorporates rules which are symbolic of gamification. These rules draw on a pre-existing set of established beauty conventions that have supposedly been re-purposed as queer yet, without any of the substantial transgressive, deviant, or polemical potential that 'queering' can offer. Whilst there is no single or clear way to queer a work of popular culture it requires one to act, meaning that it requires something other than passive reception. Therefore, as Foucault claims, we are always implicated in the production of meaning and identity and so are both agents and effects of systems of power and knowledge (Sullivan, N. 2003. p.189). Nikki Sullivan theorises that the queering of popular culture involves a range of reading and writing practices that are political because

they expose the means by which sexuality is textually constituted in relation to dominant notions of gender. She continues by claiming that queer theory is cultural because it concerns itself with the way texts inform our understanding and experience of sexuality and subjectivity and in order to queer popular culture one must critically engage with cultural artefacts in order to ‘explore the ways in which meaning, and identity is (inter)textually (re)produced’ (Sullivan, N. 2003. p.190). An example where the queering of popular culture has had a subversive effect is Ang Lee’s 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain* within which he queered American pop-cultural notions of the Western in regard to both the American Myth and the film genre. This example of queering popular culture will be analysed in part in chapter five, when I discuss rural and toxic masculinity in relation to location and identity politics.

More Than a Makeover?

But one should be reticent to judge the values of *Drag Race* too harshly. It does uphold hegemonic beauty standards and may be less subversive than initial viewings would suggest, but these are also features and values which are held by reality TV more broadly. Makeover shows such as *The Swan* (2004) encapsulate this ideology, in which the main theme is to transform the way [mostly] women look and feel about themselves by moulding them to fit hegemonic ideals. The premise of *The Swan*, for instance, was to take ‘average’ looking women and move them away from their homes and loved ones for three months to undergo surgery, ‘tough love’ and strict diets in order to transform them from an ’ugly duckling’ into a ‘swan’, as per the nineteenth-century Hans Christian Anderson fairytale. Not only were the women isolated from friends and family in a similar fashion to other reality TV programmes mentioned in this chapter, but they were also forbidden from seeing themselves during the three-month period, meaning they weren’t allowed to see the results of what was sometimes,

multiple surgeries. The climax of the show was not the visual result of the surgeries, but rather a 'Swan' pageant at the end of the series. Each episode featured two women undergoing therapy, surgery, exercise and diet and one woman per episode would advance to the pageant, what this meant was that the women were competing against each other on the basis of how well they recovered from surgery and how dedicated they were to their strict diets. The show's premise can be understood as valuing a person based solely on aesthetics and those who didn't conform were berated and eliminated. The rise of cosmetic surgery coincided with Western notions of capitalism and neoliberalism. In her book *Transforming Bodies: Makeovers and Monstrosities in American Culture*, Heike Steinhoff quotes Anthony Elliott who argues that there were three main factors that contributed to the rise in cosmetic surgery culture:

> The influence of celebrity culture and a related focus on appearance, contemporary consumer culture and its emphasis on buying a 'better self' and 'successful life,' and the 'new' global economy that demands flexibility and adaptability, thus further fostering the 'reinvention craze (Steinhoff, H. 2015. p.46).

Elliott's understanding of 'flexibility and adaptability' required to prevail in the new global economy is analogous to what Michael Lovelock finds particularly striking about *Drag Race*, explaining that in the show the ideal queen and the one that holds the highest value is the one who best aligns with the ideal labourer under the political and economic system of contemporary neo-liberalism (Lovelock, M, 2019. p.159).

Despite the *Drag Race's* controversial foundations, it existed alongside dozens of make-over shows (*10 Years Younger, How to Look Good Naked*) that laid the groundwork for the relentless quest for self-optimisation that prevails in modern society. Of *The Swan*, feminist media critic Jennifer L. Pozner described the show as 'the most sadistic reality series'

(Pozner, J, L. 2010). For Pozner, the worst of the show's grievances came from the filmed therapy sessions as she explains, 'The real depths of exploitation were in that psychological element, and that [Ianni] wasn't even licensed by an accredited institution' (Pozner, J, L. 2010). The fallacious attempts to engage with the psychological issues raised in the programme and the reinforcing misogynistic beauty standards is what Pozner fiercely objects to. This notion is problematic in two ways, firstly it insinuates that something traumatic has led to the women's neglect of performative and societally-sanctioned self-care and the attainment of normative beauty standards. Secondly, it falsely proclaims that past trauma can be overcome or 'fixed' by plastic surgery and an overall makeover. The makeover genre in general advocates that altering one's physical appearance creates a happier individual whilst in actuality it is creating more normalised subjects. This is symptomatic of the arguments against the mediated idolisation of hegemonic beauty standards put forth by both Gill and Baudrillard, in which they claim respectively, that in a postfeminist media culture a 'sexy body' is the key source to a woman's identity (Gill, 2007. p.5). Additionally, beauty is no longer a result of nature, rather it becomes 'an imperative quality and taking care and maintaining it is the equivalent of taking care of one's soul' (Baudrillard, J. 2004. p.129).

Although *Drag Race* doesn't recommend surgery as a solution, the judge's comments regarding how to improve self-esteem and acquire self-love are often centred around the same notion of outward appearance as those seen in *The Swan* and other makeover competition shows. In her book, Steinhoff provides a critical analysis of *The Swan*; she begins the chapter by discussing a book titled *My Beautiful Mommy* (2008) which was written by a board-certified Florida based cosmetic surgeon and was aimed at children whose mothers were undergoing cosmetic procedures. The book details a mother undergoing a rhinoplasty and tummy tuck and is told from the point of view of the child. Heike notes that the book draws on generic conventions children's literature and fairy tales, she writes, 'My

Beautiful Mommy constructs cosmetic surgery as a form of magical-biological transformation. The book abounds with signifiers and connotations of Disney fairy tales and female beauty pageants' (Steinhoff, H. 2015. p.41). Steinhoff notes that at the books end, the transformed white middle-class mother is emblematic of a princess and that her makeover is presented as a wonderful magical act, which for Steinhoff becomes, 'highly gendered as it resorts to conventional and stereotypical signifiers of femininity… it (re)produces a certain discursive interrelation of femininity, class, ethnicity, and beauty' (ibid. 2015. p.41-42). For Steinhoff the most striking feature of *The Swan* lies in its exclusive casting of women, she explains that because of this the show reproduces apparently highly conventional and stereotypical images of gender, that reproduce an association of the body, bodily imperfections, insecurities and objectification with regards to the female sex and 'represents the transformation of these imperfect bodies into images of conventional heteronormative beauty as a process of feminisation, effected by a group of experts' (ibid. 2015. p.52). *Drag Race* arguably draws on the conventions discussed by Steinhoff and place's RuPaul as godlike figure who has the power to pass judgment on the contestants, who in turn become the objects of both RuPaul's and the audience's critical gaze.

Analysing *Drag Race* as a cultural phenomenon that incorporates minority communities allows us to see the extent to which mainstream success has allowed the permeation of cultural hegemony, post feminism, capitalism, and neoliberalism to dilute its initial impressions of ideological subversion. *Drag Race* provides an intersection of codes, codification and rules which have their own historical significance and are derived from other texts within the reality TV genre. The show exists within the mainstream, and I argue that it accepts and features only those identities that can be incorporated, however obliquely, within the hegemonic standards that appease neoliberal interests. In doing so however, it positions trans-gender and gender nonconforming subjects less valuable. Through a feminist lens and

post-feminist analysis it can be argued that, despite purporting to represent marginalised identities, *Drag Race* in fact re-presents its subjects through a rigid gender binary. Notably, how it refers to the idealised and normatively accepted notions of femininity with particular focus on the body as a form of capital. This serves to uphold and ensure the survival of a neoliberal society, where self-commodification and self-help culture thrives, and notions of institutionalised sexism and patriarchal capitalism ought not to be challenged.

Chapter 4

Pose

The 2018 show, *Pose* places black, Hispanic and queer culture at the centre of its narrative challenging the gender binaries and hetero-normative state first considered and presented in *Paris is Burning*. Through the format of long-form fiction, *Pose* highlights the continued urgency felt by the arts to respond to rapidly changing and repressive political legislation, just as *Paris is Burning* did in the 1980s. This chapter will engage with notions of identity and the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality that inform it.

Pose is a period piece, set in the same time and space as *Paris is Burning* and follows similar character narratives struggling to navigate life amid the height of the AIDS crisis. One difference, however, is unlike Jennie Livingston, Ryan Murphy and his co-creators Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals provide much deeper character studies. The legacy of *Paris is Burning* undoubtedly inspired Murphy as he understands that drag culture is an important aspect of the queer experience and his creation of *Pose* enabled the re-telling of these important and intriguing aspects of ballroom culture through a fictionalised lens. Whilst Livingston provided a non-fictional, product of its time, investigation into the subculture, she did so in a short run time of seventy-eight minutes. Due to this she does not provide an in-depth analysis of her subjects and the situations that led them to this counterculture. By using the format of long form television, Murphy was able to evade some criticisms Livingston faced by providing an in-depth character study through an understanding and presentation of intersectionality, whilst also tackling the important impact of the AIDS crisis. By using the

long-form format, *Pose* explores how characters came to be part of a counterculture, part of a new family, their ostracization from society, and how living through an epidemic impacted their queer experience.

Queer culture has saturated pop culture in recent years and yet, despite its saturation, fictional shows that focus their narrative on its cultural origins, still prove as relevant and necessary today as they did in their seminal texts. Compared to the paucity of queer visibility in American popular culture, distinctly outlined by Vito Russo in his seminal text, *The Celluloid Closet* (1981) there has been a been a recent expansion in representation. In 2019 the BBC, reported that 'Over the last decade, representation of the LGBTQ+ community in popular culture has increased exponentially' (Staples, L. 2019). This increase can be seen in seminal and popular shows such as *Queer Eye* (2003-present) in reality TV and *The L Word* (2004-2009) in fictional drama.

A key part of this movement towards visibility is the reclamation of queer histories. *Pinknews*, the online LGBTQ+ newspaper, recognises that LGBTQ+ figures and issues have historically been erased from history books and sometimes completely forgotten. They note that in recent decades, film, TV shows, and even audio dramas have brought queer historical icons back to life, finally giving their legacies the recognition, they deserve (Anon, 2020). Through its use of cinematic techniques of fairy tale-esque melodrama and brash late-night realism, *Pose* effectively contributes to the reclamation of queer history for a large audience. Embracing its origins, the show provides a sense of the lived experience as documented in *Paris is Burning* (Livingston. 1991), whilst delving into 'aspects of magic realism inspired by *Angels in America'* (Satterwhite, J. 2019). This thesis includes *Pose* to signify that history repeats itself, and, as previously argued, popular culture also repeats itself. The characters, narrative, time-period, and themes of *Pose* are directly influenced by *Paris is Burning*. The

show's fictional re-imagining provides an example of how pop culture impacts larger issues in society, further solidifying *Paris is Burning* as an Ur-text. *Pose* is situated within a TV landscape that Ta'les Love insists is 'increasing (re) production of nostalgia programmes set in the 80s and 90s as a strategy for creating and maintaining a particular form of nostalgia intended for Black consumption' (Love, T. 2023. p.3). I argue that, as well as this TV in recent years, has also concerned itself with the reproduction of queer narratives to inform contemporary audiences of queer nostalgia and a history of queer experience.

Artistic Responses to AIDS

Falling under the genre of queer and LGBTQ+ content, *Pose* positions itself within a contemporary TV landscape that continues the legacy of New Queer Cinema. The word queer in its simplest term describes various forms of non-straight sexual identity resisting the 'normal' codes of gender and sexual expression; it also refers to a mode of cultural analysis derived from the works of queer and feminist theorist such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Lauren Berlant. No screen genre or movement has resonated so deeply with queer sensibility than New Queer Cinema. Whilst New Queer Cinema gained an underground and indie following, queer studies within the academic sector simultaneously became prominent. Although separate, New Queer Cinema's simultaneous emergence with radical think about queer identity recognises that queer theory and queer cinema were interlinked projects, reflective of 1980/90s socio-political climate. Sociolinguist and Professor Miriam Meyerhoff identified that Judith Butler's work on gender performativity came at a critical period in the history of sociolinguists as it, and likewise New Queer Cinema, coincided with a 're-burgeoning of the creative connections between sociolinguistics and anthropology' (Meyerhoff, M. 2014). In her paper *Gender Performativity*, Meyerhoff articulated that this in turn created an area in which researchers and theorist began to explore social categories as

'emergent and multifaceted - identities were analysed as being socially and historically contingent.' (Meyerhoff, M. 2014). Butler's understanding of gender engaged well with an ongoing shift in how linguists had begun to examine the relationship between language and social categories, such as gender. (Meyerhoff, M. 2014).

The collective need to understand queer identity and bring its experience to the forefront was because of the cataclysm AIDS was having in the Western world. AIDS disrupted the lives of individuals with death and disease, but it was devastating small communities of individuals like no other illness ever had. It disproportionally affected gay men, which led to misinformation, segregation, and stigma. It was also unlike any other illness by the way in which it infected the body and therefore became disruptive to the way in which those affected thought about themselves and their identity. Monica B Pearl recognises the link between New Queer Cinema and AIDS writing:

> New Queer Cinema is AIDS cinema: not only because the films…emerge out of the time of and the preoccupations with Aids, but because their narratives and their formal discontinuities and disruptions, are AIDS-related (Aaron, M 2004 p.23).

Michele Aaron explains that 'HIV is a postmodern virus, it makes the body unable to differentiate between itself and what is external… it takes on the virus like a friend and then battles with itself' (Aaron, M. 2004, p.24). Aaron likens that the lack of coherent narrative to the subversive and experimental storytelling indicative of New Queer Cinema stating 'the films that constitute New Queer Cinema represent these many levels of disruption. (Michele, A.2004. p.24).

Prior to the New Queer Cinema movement, filmmakers represented queer communities in various ways throughout the history of cinema. However, when discussing historical

representations of queer culture on screen, B. Ruby Rich explains that "people's fantasies were being fed but their identities hadn't really begun to form" (Ades, L, Klainberg, L. 2006). Therefore, the problem with traditional cinematic representations is that the queer community did not have agency over their own portrayal, resulting in tired tropes and stereotypes. Vito Russo's seminal book, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1981) explores the disturbing evolution of movie homosexuals and their refusal to portray lesbians and gay with any authenticity, he writes:

> Hollywood's admittedly causal relationship with the truth protected the American dream from a host of unwanted realities and niggling intrusions. And while lesbians and gay men were often among the architects of that dream, they were never a part of it. (Russo, V. 1981).

The most influential change, in terms of raising queer communities to a wider consciousness whilst presenting more inclusive representation, came about during the late eighties and early nineties, in part due to the New Queer Cinema movement. Instead of being a planned movement with anticipated influence and legacy within the cinematic world, the potential of the movements was unforeseen. It emerged as an artistic response and a social commentary on the socio-political climate of that era. The movement produced a steady stream of successful queer-themed films; *Poison* (1991), *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and *Swoon* (1992) and their director's sensibilities were born out of frustration and anxiety towards the AIDS crisis and the indifference from the government. During an interview at the Academy event in 2016, Gus Van Sant revealed that he had originally planned for the main characters in *My Own Private Idaho* to be heterosexual in the screenplay. However, due to the cast and crew's close association with ACT UP, they changed the sexuality of the protagonist to homosexual to better reflect the time in which the film was made. The interest generated by

these films simultaneous releases and their success at the Sundance film festival led Rich to coin the term 'New Queer Cinema', of which she hoped would create a transformative 'new queer historiography' that even had the potential to define 90s cinema.

> "I want to see all kinds of movies about people living lives that I led, lives that I didn't lead, lives that I saw but didn't see on screen and lives that I hadn't imagined that I want to discover on screen". (Ades, L, Klainberg, L. 2006).

Arguably, these films didn't just come to define 90s cinema, but as this thesis reveals, they have come to define much of the contemporary mediated representations of queer culture and identity.

Throughout cinema history, filmmakers have established three stylistic categories - classical, realist, and formalist - and for many, these styles shape the story (Nichols, B. 2010). To give context, the classical style of film making saw filmmakers tendency to juxtapose a happy heterosexual life with a homosexual life suffering from external pressures or internal vices such as AIDS, hate crimes, drug abuse and suicide, that depicted the plight of the queer experience. This clarified that heterosexuality was the upheld ideal identity and that intern Hollywood's codes would position queer characters as 'other'. New Queer Cinema, however, often employed divergent techniques. In order to subvert these existing codes and outwardly address them through a self-conscious lens via artifice so New Queer Cinema's image is not misconstrued as reality yet, as presented in Gregg Araki's 1993 film *Totally Fucked Up*, is designed to purposely question previous foundations and reclaim its coding, narrative and inter-textual conversation so that they are not defined by a heterosexual understanding.

While seeking innovative ways to depict the lives and struggles faced by the queer community, New Queer Cinema deliberately presented not only positive depictions but also

the reality of prejudice, self-hate, and struggle that troubled queer identity. Films within the movement were inventive, metaphorical, daring independent productions that shared an interest in changing stereotypical and preconceived attitudes toward the queer communities. As such, these films sought a variety of different ways to represent the narrative of the queer experience that the wider industry had previously ignored and, at times, dangerously misrepresented. In doing so, films fell under the umbrella term 'Queer Cinema' instead of gay or lesbian cinema, a change that has continued with today's mediated representations being labelled as either 'queer content' or 'LGBTQ+ content'. The movement was thoroughly involved with the social and political crisis of the AIDS epidemic. As an artistic response, it presented characters and events in a way that was representative of real social and political issues but was often fragmented with multiple narratives. This variation of narrative is also evident through some of the most influential films of the movement. For example, Todd Haynes' *Safe* (1995) depicts the life of Carol White, a suburban housewife whose life abruptly changes when she becomes ill due to a mysterious environmental disease. The film sees Carol become isolated from her community and family, who begin to act indifferently towards her after she falls ill. Portraying themes of disease, immunity, and isolation acts as a metaphor to symbolise and explore the attitude and experiences of people living with AIDS during that period. Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) explored the lives of male hustlers through the formula of a road movie, it follows lead protagonist Mikey Waters (River Phoenix) navigating life and struggling to survive as a male prostitute suffering from narcolepsy, a disease that is symptomatic of AIDS because it does not follow a traditional trajectory and effects those suffering in various ways.

The storytelling is loose, wandering between rambunctious scenes with Van Sant's version of Falstaff and artificial asides that comment on masculinity, sexuality and love. Take the

moment, for example, when Mike and Scott address each other from the covers of porno magazines or the spellbinding "time-lapse" photography sex scenes (Lightle, M. 2021).

New Queer Cinema emerged from indifference, death, disease, and political and sociocultural repression, and its impact on contemporary queer representation, as well as its resonance with queer sensibilities, should not be underestimated. Its reaction to the governmental negligence of HIV/AIDS, sociocultural stigmatisation and repressive political legislation continue to influence mediated representations of queer culture that, as I argue throughout, are still urgently needed with light of the current political landscape. Throughout his eight years in office, from 1981 to 1989, President Ronald Reagan and his administration devised policies and sought advice from Christian, politically right leaning factions that stigmatised those inflicted with AIDS. Regarding the crisis, Former White House Communications Director Pat Buchanan claimed, 'The poor homosexuals — they have declared war upon nature, and now nature is extracting an awful retribution.' (Anon, 1987). The impact caused by government negligence and propaganda contributed to the spread of HIV/AIDS, with stigma-related violence preventing people from getting tested and/or returning for their results. During his presidency, Reagan barely utter the word AIDS publicly and only officially addressed the crisis towards the end of his second term in 1987, almost six years into the crisis and after almost thirty thousand Americans had been exposed to the disease. The lack of government response led to a rise in activism. In 1987 ACT UP – (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was founded out of the existing group GMHC – (Gay Men's Health Crisis) to protest the government's handling of the AIDS crisis. Founding member and playwright Larry Kramer delivered an impassioned speech during one of its early meetings stating that many people suffering from the disease would be dead in a matter of months if they did not demand action, leading to the group's motto Silence = Death. As a result of ACT UP's relentless efforts and demonstrations, they urged the FDA to shorten the drug approval process and demanded the

inclusion of people from all infected populations in clinical trials, which subsequently led to the drug AZT being released at record speed. AZT continues to help people with HIV/AIDS to this day. Rich claims that 'ever since, ACT UP has been used as a model for how to act politically to gain empowerment in the face of overwhelming repression' (Rich, B, R. 2013). Ongoing global #Blacklivesmatter protests are replicating the influence of ACT UP and demanding government attitude changes towards the treatment and disenfranchisement of black people. (Signorile, M. 2016).

Later, the artistic response to AIDS would be recorded and memorialised as a part of a wider LGBQT+ movement that seeks to bear witness to those who perished. Edmund White published a collection of essays titled *Loss Within Loss: Artists in the Age of AIDS*; the collection remembers over twenty creative artists lost to AIDS in the twenty years following the epidemic. In her essay *Through the Looking Glass*, Sarah Schulman discusses the remembrance of those who succumbed to the virus and in particular 'the paradigms we've created about AIDS, that the dead are genius'. (White, E. 2001, p.13). She undercuts the remark by claiming that, of course, many who died were not great artists, they were just people and sometimes they weren't even nice people. She claims some tried their best, and some ran away from their problems and blamed those closest to them, and some were nasty and lousy. (White, E. 2001, p.13). Schulman discusses her friend and writer Stan Leventhal and the achievements he accomplished without recognition, the kind of friend he was, his generosity, his dignity in death. She states that these things alone are what made him exceptional. She concludes by writing, 'his death is just as horrible even though he never wrote any great books and possibly never would have.' (White, E. 2001, p.14). Her recognition of him as a human being is all the recognition anyone requires, the acknowledgement of an everyday person with friends and family, interests, and passions. The idea of sensibility is not to hail great works of genius but to remember that people existed,

they had been somebody, they had been somebody to somebody and that they are more than just another number on a growing list of deaths. Schulman's understanding is precisely the reason there continues to be a platform for ordinary queer people's infliction with AIDS and queer people's stories in general to be told and why there has been a renaissance of queer narrative within contemporary long-form television.

In the early days of the AIDS epidemic, most social stigma began because very little was known about the disease. The mainstream media was at times responsible for spreading misinformation by creating terrifying adverts featuring gay men, promiscuity and intravenous drug use that resulted in mass fear and panic that continues to inform people's understanding of queer existence. Of these types of adverts, Joao Florencio writes,

> If we take into account, the highly homophobic social context in which news of the condition first started circulating… these campaigns still refused to address homosexuals directly and communicate clearly to them ways in which homosexual sex could be made safer. Instead, they preferred to deal in visual metaphors and allusions aimed at an abstract general public. (Florencio, J. 2018).

Advertising campaigns played a huge role in informing and implementing homophobic fear and rhetoric. One shocking example that first aired in Australia in 1987, depicted the Grim Reaper bowling, except instead of bowling pins, he hits people. In the ominous advert, a voice over declares, “At first only gays and IV drug users were being killed by AIDS, but now we know every one of us could be devastated by it”. The advertisement implies that the Grim Reaper is represented by gay men and intravenous drug users, indicating that they pose a threat and have the potential to infect and kill 'normal' straight individuals. The 2023 documentary miniseries *Never Let Him Go* (Dupre, J, Hickey, J. 2023) portrays an American man's decades-long search for justice after his brother was killed in a homophobic-motivated

murder in Australia in 1988. The series reference this advert because a crucial piece of evidence in the case was a tattoo of the Grim Reaper, which, explained in the series had become a type of 'ritual tattoo' for homophobic 'gay basher' groups in 1980s Australia (Dupre, J, Hickey, J. 2023). American media also presented damaging representations of AIDS and its association with gay men, yet perhaps more problematic was its ignorance. Charles Kaiser reports the important reason for this uneven coverage, concluding that, 'misleading information provided by doctors and resistance from some gay leaders, who feared too much publicity could send homosexuals to concentration camps' (Kaiser, C. 2023). His article provides an investigation into *The New York Times* decades-long debate over why the institution failed to provide coverage of the AIDS crisis, concluding that 'assigning editors were influenced by the homophobia of its top editor, Abe Rosenthal' (Kaiser, C. 2023). Indifference of this type was commonplace amidst the crisis and, on reflection of this, I argue it is crucial to remember the role media culture plays in shaping our understanding of the virus and the queer communities affected by it either directly or inadvertently. Because in acknowledging its impact, we can also assume that it works the other way around, therefore presenting progressive representations of queer existence on screen can in turn have an impact on the way wider society views it. Shows such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019) and *Transparent* (2014-2019) are evidence that American long-form television can provide a platform for further expansion and exploration of narratives and characters first introduced during the New Queer Cinema movement. *Pose* was developed by *FX*, a network that has increasingly taken up the mantel of quality television and has been lauded for its production of original long-form series that had been pioneered by *HBO*. Its success in part can be attributed to its collaboration with Ryan Murphy, who helped create successful shows such as *American Horror Story* (2011) *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* (2018) and recently in *Feud: Capote vs The Swans* (2024). *Pose* draws inspiration from *Paris*

is Burning to create a fictional drama series documenting the New York ballroom scene. But more than this it explores real experiences of trans women and gay men as they navigated life during the height of the AIDS crisis, a part of the collective experiences of Queer people only touched upon in Livingston's documentary. In an article for *TV Guide*, Murphy said that 'not only did *Paris is Burning* help inform the show but also their identities when they first saw it'. (Veneble, M. 2018). Similarly, actor Billy Porter, who features in the show, stated that "It was like my Wizard of OZ, a lot of gay men have this connection to The Wizard of Oz, The Wizard of Oz didn't mean anything to me… but when I saw *Paris is Burning*, I said, now I have found Dorothy" (Ades, L, Klainberg, L. 2006).

Paris is Burning had a profound impact on the queer community at the time of its release. It was one of the first times the community was seeing itself being represented on screen, and its celebration at the Sundance Film Festival etc. was also notable. It was also made during a period in which the sense of looming threat and death is an important aspect that is carried through into *Pose*. Subsequently, *Pose* has a distinct 80s aesthetic that offers the audience a sense of nostalgia presented through the costuming, soundtrack, and the divisions in class within 1980s America, resulting in an accurate historical timeline that allows the audience to chronical the 1980s New York queer experience along with the characters. So, although *Pose* is a recently produced show, it is in many ways adjacent to *Paris is Burning*, using fiction as a mode to flesh out and dramatise the world and characters which Livingston's documentary depicts. They are tethered by an inter-textual dialogue which is not simply a postmodern flourish, but a continuum of the struggle for LGBQT+ rights and cultural recognition.

The three decades between *Paris is Burning* and *Pose* experienced monumental change and progression particularly the legislation of gay marriage, and a quelling of the moral panic associated with HIV and AIDS, partly as a result of the development of anti-viral medication

(Saag, M, S. 2021). However, the Presidential term of Donald Trump and the rise in so called 'Trumpism' has proven just how fragile this progressive change can be, and it is this fragility that inspired Murphy to re-tell this narrative. In an interview Murphy discussed how the show initially intended to feature Donald Trump but he decided against it reasoning, 'Nobody wants to see that fuckhead' (Desta, Y. 2018). Instead, the show features an emblematic coked-up Trump Organization executive, played by James Van Der Beek. In regard to the ground breaking trans cast and crew, Murphy stated that he is giving his profits from the show to causes that benefit the trans communities, claiming. 'It's television as advocacy. I want to put my money where my mouth is (Desta, Y. 2018).

Political Landscapes

Throughout his presidential term, Trump and his administration's indifference for truth and infliction of grave political destruction has left the United States divided on almost all social issues, from race to environmental regulation. His anti-LGBTQ+ agenda has meant that LGBTQ+ rights have suffered unprecedentedly. Throughout the history of American politics, no presidential administration has done more to try to reverse the rights and hard-won legislation of LGBTQ+ communities and his influence has continued past his term as President. Such influence has attacked LGBTQ+ rights in healthcare, employment, housing, education, commerce, the military, prisons, and sports. Sam Levin states:

> Since taking office, the Trump administration has sought to reverse healthcare protections for trans people, moved to ban trans people from serving in the military, eliminated rules protecting trans students and pushed to allow businesses to turn away gay and trans customers if they seek a religious exemption. (Levin, S. 2019)

On his first day in office, Trump made his anti-LGBTQ+ agenda apparent by removing all traces of LGBTQ+ content from the White House and Department of State website, an act that set the tone for his presidency and its enduring effects. Trump's regressive stance on social issues such as race and LGBTQ+ rights has refuelled and inspired a sentiment which has influenced many new hate groups, including anti-LGBTQ+ groups, to feel empowered and even presidentially backed. Banning transgender people from serving in the military, appointing Supreme Court judges who threaten equal marriage laws, fighting to deny US citizenship to children of same-sex parents, pledging to cut funding to colleges that block anti-LGBT+ religious groups and reversing trans healthcare provisions on the anniversary of the Pulse shootings (Levin, S. 2019). Levin discusses the legal debate and concludes:

> LGBT people are covered by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the federal government has agreed. But the Department of Justice is now arguing that sexual orientation and gender identity are excluded under Title VII because "sex" narrowly refers to whether people are "biologically male or female". The definition not only seeks to invalidate trans people but also altogether erases intersex people, who are born with a mix of what are typically considered male and female sex characteristics and make up 1.7% of the population. (Levin, S. 2019).

Trump's influence over populism and polemic rhetoric has helped facilitate a climate for hatred and division. There are undeniable parallels to be drawn from the Reagan and Trump administrations regarding their neglect of people in the LGBTQ+ community. Reagan and Trump's presidential handling of public health crises, AIDS and COVID-19, respectively, will undoubtedly reflect their reputation. In an article for the *Observer Magazine* trans activist and Hollywood actress, Laverne Cox articulates the damage and division caused by Trump's presidency. Cox begins by describing feeling optimistic that Obama's election gave

hope that racism was diminishing throughout the United States. However, she quickly asserts that throughout Trump's term, it seems to be quite the opposite. In referencing Trump's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, she sates, 'I think about trauma. There's collective trauma around the pandemic, there's collective trauma around the gaslighting, the lies. There's a lot of healing to happen on a psychological level' (Wiseman, E. 2021). However, more concerning is Cox's recognition that social divisions proliferated under Trump's presidency are not solely caused by those in power, but rather that their actions and ideologies are reciprocated and reflected by society, meaning there has to be an established public platform for such ideologies to come to fruition. She asserts,

> It is important to remember 45 (Trump) is the symptom, not the cause. There was an environment created for someone like 45 to come along… to assume that just because this president has left the office, all the reasons why he became the president in the first place left with him. (Wiseman, E. 2021).

Her prediction has come to fruition as *CNN* recently reported that a record number of anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced to state legislatures across the United states in 2023 (Choi, A. 2024) with such a regressive anti-LGBTQ+ political landscape, re-telling historic socio-political issues and representation of marginalised communities for contemporary audiences seem as urgent today as it did in the 1980s. Jacob Satterwhite claims that the reimagining of *Paris is Burning* through *Pose* is because the topics remain extremely compelling and necessary. Furthermore, he recognises that *Pose's* format provides an 'educational utility in the way it employs the cinematic language of fairy tale, Twin Peaks-level melodrama, and brash late-night realism for the masses' (Satterwhite, J. 2019).

Performing Gender

Pose engages with the notion of gender performativity in the same way *Paris is Burning*, provided textual evidence of it. The performance of drag reveals the parodic nature of gender and unravels the conception that gender and sex are fixed binaries and instead presents them as the social constructs. Michel Foucault first articulated this in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) and Judith Butler took influence of this in her seminal work. Although gender construction can be influenced by biological factors, socio-cultural understandings and influence, as well as a person's own self-identification as male or female, have more recently come to define it. Butler argues how traditional expectations of gender that limit gender as binary are damaging stating, 'The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it.' (Butler, J. 1990, p. 32). Alternatively, Butler argues that social context and interaction play a pivotal role in constructing individual gender. She differentiates between gender being performed and gender being performative, explaining that to say gender is performed suggests putting on an act, while saying gender is performative implies it produces a series of effects, meaning the way we walk, talk and act constitutes the impression of a certain gender, and we act as if this is an internal reality or something inherently true about us. 'A set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.' (Butler, J. 1990. p.33). Butler's work builds on the ideas first expressed in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, in which he questions how sex had come to be seen as defining aspect of identity. His work reveals that this has to do with the relationship between sex and power and knowledge and, rather than power being simply repressive, he claims that power is multifaceted. Therefore, sexuality isn't repressed by power but rather works as a conduit of power with Foucault identifying that the deployment of sexuality through four mains points; children, men, women

and the sexually 'perverse' allows the power of sexuality to spread into the family and throughout society. He developed the concept of bio-power to refute the repressive hypothesis, to argue that there was an increase in sexualities which was caused by a power that developed around the concept of the 'body' and 'population'. 'One might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death' (Raman, Tutton. 2010, p.713)

As a performance text, *Paris is Burning* explores the notion of gender performance through its subjects. The film shows the walkers competing in a variety of different categories which ultimately determines which walker has the ability to 'pass' and perform 'realness', meaning that they are able to be read and viewed as the social ideal instead of their anxiety inducing 'other'. Dorian Corey states that "If you can pass the untrained eye or even the trained eye and not give away that you're gay, that is realness" (1991). Passing and realness are the most important aspects of ball culture as it takes the binary of seen and unseen and uses one to question the other and, because binary structures work as opposites, negation usually defines one by subverting the social norm. According to Gever et al., they state:

> The improbability of the synthesis that is drag reframes just what is liminal in the terms of the ball world. Dislocating the oppositions of male/female, coloured/white, power/disenfranchisement…becomes a path into the psyche of ball culture; its logic unfolds in subversive splendour. (Gever, M, Greyson, J, Parmar, P. 1993. p.110).

It is important to note that the participants of the ball are aware of their lack of belonging to mainstream culture, and as a result, the balls become a space where they can transform drag into a spectacle of celebration despite their economic and social hardship. The balls therefore provide an underground, non-commercial space in which subjects are safe not only to be themselves but also to embody someone else, someone they would otherwise never get to be.

The subjects of the ball can escape their reality and act out their deepest hopes and dreams, of acceptance, invisibility and belonging in the gender they feel they are, which draws on Susan Sontag's notion of artifice in her essay *Notes on Camp* in which she reasons nothing is naturally camp, camp is only revealed through artifice through the performance or imitations of something natural. (Sontag, S. 1965). Their desire to be rich or white does not necessarily stem from their acceptance or advocation for patriarchal or hetero-normative norms but rather it is a form of escapism, a way of experiencing that which they can never acquire and importantly as a means of survival.

As a viewer we are never invited to critique the performers' realness or ability to pass. Livingston films the documentary in a way that the audience becomes witness to the physical transformation into drag. On multiple occasions, we see the drag queens preparing and dressing in drag whilst having one-to-one interview with the subjects about their understanding of drag and what the balls mean to them, allowing *Paris is Burning* to make a particularly subversive commentary. The ability to see the man become the woman reveals the subversive and performative nature of gender itself (Phelan, P. 1993. P. 85). In almost all cases, the walkers mimic gestures of people considered to be heterosexual and socially normative, and because of this, the performance of the drag queens acts as a parody of what society has excluded them from. In her critical analysis of *Paris is Burning*, *Gender is Burning* (1993) Butler questions whether parodying dominant social norms is enough to displace them. For Butler, while drag appears to subvert racist, misogynist and homophobic forms of oppression, it also appropriates them because it presents a re-idealisation of the oppressive conduct. Such is the case for Venus Xtravaganza one of the trans subjects in the film. Butler argues that drag can be interpreted as subversive because it 'disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality' (Butler, J. 1993. p.85). Therefore, Venus' subversion stems from her ability to present herself as female, thus denaturalising

gender and sexuality. However, Xtravaganza explains that her desire to be a 'real woman' means she wants a house and husband to take care of her. She wants to be a white housewife. Through her own understanding of being a 'real woman', Butler argues Xtravaganza does not challenge the hegemonic framework, but instead upholds traditional, hegemonic understandings of white femininity. Some feminists argue the differences surrounding essentialist and constructivist gender, in which essentialism typically views the difference between masculinity and femininity as intrinsic and therefore their difference is unchangeable. On the other hand, gender constructivists sustain social gender-based biases that see ideals of femininity defined by a patriarchal society that wish to suppress them, as such, Xtravaganza's perception of what it means to be a real woman seems rooted in constructivist beliefs.

Both *Paris is Burning* and *Pose* depict the significant presence of capitalist consumerism in ball culture and 1980s America. As previously mentioned, Murphy intended to feature Donald Trump as one of its characters, instead he created Trump organisation executive, Matt Bromley (James Van Der Beek) who is idolised by his junior colleague Stan Bowes (Evan Peters). Both characters represent the era's idealism rooted in consumer capitalism. Bromley lies, schemes and bullies his way to the top, behaviours that have since become all too synonymous with rampant capitalist systems and have even proven to take you all the way to the White House. Bowes acquires the American dream through suburban life and consumerism. The character of Bowes is important to the show's narrative due to his relationship with Indya Moore's, Angel, a trans woman of colour. The importance of their romance highlights the parallels between their existence. Angel is a transgender sex worker while Stan appears to have acquired the America dream, perfect job and suburban family life but is trading off his persona and dignity in order to survive in a 1980s corporate culture. After a tumultuous love affair, Angel ends things at the end of season one and Peters didn't

reprise his role in season two. In an interview for *TV Line* co-creator Steve Canals explains that the importance of Angel ending the relationship was to provide her character with agency, specifically a trans woman of colour with agency. He further explains that to have her run back to him in the next season would diminish the agency afforded to her and 'to do so would feel like a cheat to us' (Nementz, D. 2019). By providing the trans woman of colour agency in the relationship, *Pose* avoids the criticisms faced by *Paris is Burning* that claimed the subjects within the counterculture uphold and emulate whiteness as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. Even when Angel appears to have acquired the luxuries of white patriarchal consumer capitalism, she rejects it and instead chooses the life and family she acquired through rejection and the 'real' relationships she has forged through the ballrooms. Here, Angel defies Butlers' earlier reading of Venus Xtravaganza, because, unlike Xtravaganza, Angel challenges and resit hegemonic frameworks and understandings of white femininity. In a pivotal scene, Angel asks why a man of Stan's social standing would want to be with someone like her? He says:

> "I'm no one. I want what I'm supposed to want. I wear what I'm supposed to wear, and I work where I'm supposed to work. I stand for nothing. I've never fought in a war, and I probably won't ever have to because the next one's going to kill us all. I can buy things I can't afford, which means they're never really mine. I don't live. I don't believe I accumulate. I'm a brand - a middle-class white guy. But you're who you are, even though the price you pay for it is being dis-invited from the rest of the world. I'm the one playing dress up. Is wrong to want to be with one a few people in the world who isn't?"

Stan's monologue reveals a profound statement on the 'idealised' world of capitalist patriarchy and allows the writers and creators to avoid attracting similar criticism to that

faced by Livingston, in which hooks' claims *Paris is Burning*, implied that people of marginalised groups in society aspire to be rich and white. Instead, they provide a scathing criticism of that 'idealised' world and present it as one which is forced upon people in order for them to be accepted by the dominant social norms of society. Implying that in doing so, individuals lose what makes them individual, Stan's statement further upholds Butler's understand of performativity as he performs repeated acts, he knows will allow him to fit in to his social surroundings enough that he produces the appearance of substance that this is his natural state. (Butler, J. 1990. p.33). Furthermore, by presenting Angel, a trans woman of colour, the 'real' person in this scenario inverts the powder dynamics you would expect to see between a show's leading romantic couple and further subverts hegemonic, patriarchal frameworks. By juxtaposing images of the drag ball with the power dressing 'above ground' straight New Yorkers, Livingston invites the audience to consider the notion that such straight, hetero-normative posturing is artifice and performance. *Pose*, though, due to its mode, is able to flesh this out and to narrativize it as a plot point. This demonstrates the difference between documentary and scripted drama.

As stated, *Pose* acts as a contemporary re-telling of *Paris is Burning*. Through its fictional adaptations, it presents the urgency of the documentaries themes to react to current political legislation. The notion of adaptation allows for the idea that although there may not be a sense of urgency to react to a particular social or political issue, telling real events or history in retrospect means being able to thoroughly inform new audiences. Alfred L. Martin Jr. states that, 'the show can mediate the lives and tribulations of Black, queer, and trans people for an audience largely foreign to the concepts and plotlines it engages, while […] dual casting to 'grab' stray LGBTQ audience members. (Martin Jr. A, L. 2020, p. 71).

Contemporary Adaptations

Pose is by no means the first TV series to adapt narratives from historic content nor to use seminal texts that centre around the 1980s Western AIDS crisis, *The Guardian* journalist Ryan Gilbey acknowledges 'in the four decades since, the cultural response to Aids has spanned every art form' (Gilbey, R. 2021). Two of the most influential performance texts to come out of the AIDS crisis were *The Normal Heart* (1985) and *Angels in America* (1991), plays written by Larry Kramer and Tony Kushner respectively, that were central to the artistic response to the AIDS crisis. *HBO* adapted both plays for TV, starting with *Angels in America*, which became a TV miniseries in 2003 and was directed by Mike Nichols. Later, *The Normal Heart* was adapted into a made-for-TV movie in 2014 and directed by *Pose* creator, Ryan Murphy. Each play presents the effectiveness of performance for social change and, whilst they were part of the same cultural, historic moment, both take a decidedly different approach to AIDS. Of the two different approaches actor Joe Mantello claims 'Larry had to get the facts down, whereas Tony, all those years later, could filter it through this theatricality, and that's why I think it's a great work of art' (Gilbey, R. 2021). The Normal Heart is autobiographical and an overtly political text that presents a furious sense of urgency to respond to the HIV/AIDS crisis. The play chronicles Kramer's real-life experiences of co-founding GMHC (1982) (Gay Men's Health Crisis), a volunteer HIV/AIDS service organisation. Just one year later, the organisation ousted Kramer because they deemed his methods of communication too militant.

Angels in America applied elements of magical realism to tell a metaphorical and symbolic examination of HIV/AIDS and homosexuality in the 1980s America through several

intertwined characters and the blurring of reality and fantasy. Tanner J Underwood discusses the magical elements of the playwriting:

> Despite the gritty realist backdrop, angels burst through ceilings and ghosts harass AIDS victims. Characters blend together in parallel conversations or gain insight through conversation in dream with other characters (Underwood, T, J. 2019. P. 112).

These magic moments are in no way indicated to be any more or less real that other parts. A large part of the dominance of these plays, in terms of queer representation and conversations surround the AIDS crisis, was their timely creation. The narrative of *Angels in America* involves the devastating impact of AIDS, but also used the period of crisis to engage with national themes through unusual and far-reaching remnants of American history. It blended both fictitious characters and real people, using individuals and events from America's collective past, such as Ethel Rosenburg, who, along with her husband Julius Rosenburg, were executed for alleged espionage for the Soviet Union during the McCarthy era. In the play, her ghost haunts Roy Cohn, whom she blames for her conviction. Cohn was also a real person, a closeted homosexual lawyer who was a member of Joseph McCarthy's staff, and aided Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign. As well as being a lawyer, Cohn also became a notorious figure within New York real estate, where he became a friend and mentor to Donald Trump. Director Matt Tyrnauer claims the connection between the two was so profound he believes it influenced Trump's decision to run for president and inspired his film *Where's My Roy Cohn?* (2019).

> I think Roy Cohn created a president from beyond the grave. So, I thought it was really an urgent matter to make the film, to connect the dots, to show how one of the

> darkest figures in our modern history created the worst president and most dangerous president in American history (Bruney, G. 2020).

Through the employment of real prominent figures within American history, the play and its subsequent adaptations are able to queer history through a combination of narrative, reality and magical realism as a way of moving beyond historic limitations.

By the time both plays got to the stage, there was an eight-year difference. Interestingly, actor Russell Tovey, who performed in the 2017 stage revival of *Angels in America* and Mantello note the how the timing of the plays debuts created a distinct difference between the themes of the plays, starting with *Angels in America* they conclude, "the characters are in hopeless situations," say Tovey "[a] nd yet there is so much hopefulness there." Mantello agrees: "The beauty of the writing allowed people to access sorrow but also hope, which was a potent combination. *The Normal Heart* felt more about terror – it was a horror story. (Gilbey, R. 2021, p,). Richard Zoglin discusses the adaptation of *The Normal Heart* for TV, which he says allows Kramer's play to continue its evolution from 'heated diatribe to historical document' (Zoglin, R. 2014). He further explains that the 'opening up' of the play for TV is a good thing, even though the techniques are not subtle and many TV-movie cliches are evident, such as its horror elements. Yet, Zoglin concludes that as a text adapted for new audiences, it presented the complicated political struggle faced by the community, through passion and pleasing complexity. And given that the original text was written nearly four decades ago, Zoglin asserts, that political debate too seems like ancient history. *The Normal Heart's* triumph, on TV even more than on the stage, is to make it urgent once again (Zoglin, R. 2014). The format of a TV miniseries was deemed the only fitting way to adapt Kushner's two-part play that ran for over seven hours in total, the adaptation into miniseries would mean that nothing would have to be cut out and furthermore there would be no unexpected

cancellations that would leave an unfinished story. More industry-specific factors also played a role as the pitch to have it made into an expensive cinematic epic was considered too risky and expensive and furthermore, it solidified the reputation for the TV miniseries.

Queer Agency

Through the format of TV adaptation, there is an opportunity to address criticism directed at the original text and topics that might not have aged well. This is particularly relevant in terms of (re)presenting real life through a fictional lens. Given the criticism Jennie Livingston faced in reaction to *Paris is Burning*, as discussed in chapter one, it is evident that the creators and writers of *Pose* were able to side set some of the most problematic aspects of Livingston's film, the most obvious being the agency given to trans and queer experience presented through its record-breaking trans cast, writers and executive producer Janet Mock, who, when asked why she felt the need to (re) tell this story for contemporary audiences she stated:

> When you look to the past, you can learn a lot about your present. For me I saw that HIV/AIDS, poverty, harassment and violence are things that they were dealing with the '87 as well as today. And so, knowing that 26 trans people were murdered in the United States last year, almost all of them women of colour. I thought it was important that we memorialise the people who we've learnt so much from, who've contributed so much to our movement' (Feder, S. 2020).

A further element of *Pose* that significantly influences its effectiveness is the intersection of agency with race. Despite critics and audiences alike lauding Kushner's play and *HBO's* adaptation, it has faced criticism for the characterisation of Belize (Jeffrey Wright), an

African American nurse. Belize's participation in both the play and the TV adaptation has been accused of being in service of the white characters. Steven Thrasher articulated his anger towards the character of Belize stating, 'It makes me angry, that he is not given a life except in service of the white characters, while they have these rich lives' (Gilbey, R. 2021). In the same article whilst not completely disagreeing with Thrasher, Nathan Stewart-Jarrett, who played Belize in the 2017 production notes how race becomes a discussion because it is addressed with every encounter Belize has, he explains 'Like many people of colour, he is in a constant state of emergency, and hasn't really got time to dwell. His agency comes out in the way he barters to get what he wants' (Gilbey, R. 2021). This contention echoes hooks' criticism of *Paris Is Burning*, regarding the politics of racial representation in queer related material.

Pose's transgender cast and writers grant agency to the characters, while also portraying a queer community that, to a great extent, lacks agency over their own experience and image within larger society. Similarly, to Stewart-Jarrett's understanding of Belize, I argue agency is reflected through being able to negotiate and barter for what the characters want and indeed need. Season one follows the relationship of Angel, a transgender woman of colour and Stan, a married, white, cis gendered father who works for the Trump organisation. Their relationship begins when Stan picks Angel up at the piers, where she is hustling as a sex worker. After the two become intimate, Stan and Angel begin a secret relationship behind his wife's back. When Angel shows up at Stan's work to see him, he quickly becomes uncomfortable and tells her to go away. Stan goes to Angel's place of work, where she performs at a peep show. Stan walks down the row of booths to get to Angel, as he does, he sees men masturbating as they watch the women behind the glass screens dance, appropriately and subtly sound tracking the scene is Brian Ferry's *Slave to Love* (1985). Once inside the booth, the scene unfolds with Stan questioning Angel as to why she works there,

insisting “I get jealous so many men get to see you like this.” Angel unashamedly states, “I make $125 dollars a night and no one gets to touch me” Stan’s jealousy is noted by Angel, who exploits it in the next scene to get what she wants, which is to be a ‘kept woman’. However, the rules of Angel’s status as a ‘kept woman’ are completely negotiated by her, subverting the power dynamics in which audiences have traditionally been conditioned. The next scene shows Stan and Angel sitting in a diner with Angel negotiating her terms, she begins by telling Stan that she likes her life so in order for her to be part of his he must promise to significantly improve it, by a stipulation that he must provide an apartment for her with a year’s rent paid upfront, as this will seriously improve her chance of survival. Eva Pensis criticises the show stating that, ‘Pose aestheticizes the practices of survival sex work by trans women and street queens, [which] subsequently makes Black and trans life presentable and non-threatening to a global audience’ (Pensis, E. 2019, p. 16). Pensis’ criticism is an important observation when it comes to the threat of violence faced by the trans community. Furthermore, Pensis’ claim that the show aestheticizes sex work is an important aspect to her criticism as historically, mediated portrays of transgender sex work often reduced it to comedic values or as a way to demean and demoralise trans characters. The 2020 trans advocacy documentary *Disclosure* (Feder, S. 2020) addresses the damaging convergence of transgenderism and sex work on screen and includes a study conducted by GLAAD that looked at 134 episodes of television where a transgender person was brought on just to be a guest star character and found that the most common profession shown for a transgender character was sex worker (2020). GLAAD’s director of trans media and representation, Nick Adams, explains the danger of this perpetual representation. Firstly, he notes that in the real world many trans women are pushed into sex work because of the employment discrimination face by transgender people. Adams point out, ‘The unemployment rate for transgender people is three times the national average and four times

the national average for a trans person of colour' (2020). He asserts that although there are contextual and social reasons that explain why some trans women engage in sex work, damaging associations and stereotypes occur when the screening of trans women engaging in sex work fails to include this explanation, and instead implies 'it's what trans women do' (2020).

Although Pensis' criticism is extremely valid and important, a counter argument presents the understanding that rather than 'aestheticizing' sex work, through Angel's unashamed unphased reaction, *Pose* presents an unapologetic depiction of the reality of existence as a trans woman of colour in the 1980s. Allowing a trans woman of colour to utilise sex work in order to manipulate a white, successful man proves particularly subversive and in keeping with readings of Belize, because not only has Angel bartered in order to get what she wants, she uses the very thing, sex work, that has historically been symbolised as undesirable, demeaning work that is disproportionally associated with transgender women, in order to acquire a better life for herself so that she will no longer need to risk her safety in order to survive. Additionally, unlike the narratives discussed by Adams, *Pose* does not lack context when it comes to the comprehension of trans women's engagement in sex work, nor of the dangers associated with it. *Pose* drew inspiration from the death of *Paris is Burning's* Venus Extravaganza, who was found dead in a hotel room suspected to be murdered by a client (although her death was never solved). The writers of *Pose* feature a storyline in which the character of Candy, played by Angelica Ross, suffers the same fate. The reason for this narrative was to explicitly recognise the dangers of real trans experiences. Candy's death acts as a reminder that trans women's lives always have been and continue to be in danger for the sin of simply being themselves. In an interview with *Bustle*, Ross discusses the effect her character's death had on her, a trans woman of colour. She explains, 'I felt the responsibility with that and immediately said I would take it on. Even still, filming that and having trans

women dying every week that we are filming has been totally taxing' (Gooden, T. 2019). The responsibility of representing trans women of colour and the realities that face them is a subject that *Pose* creators felt was imperative to their narrative. According to the *Human Rights Campaign,* in the year the show came out, there were 51 known cases of fatal violence against trans people, the majority of whom are women of colour under 35 and at least 10 of them were sex workers. (Gooden, T. 2019). The writers and creators of the show were cautious of including such a storyline, given that so many mainstream narratives already portray trans people as victims, the decision to include it was a political choice. In his article about Candy's storyline, Justin Agrelo articulates the importance of the narrative as a way of highlighting the reality of the trans experience within the current political landscape in America. Quoting Steven Canals, co-creator, director, and writer on *Pose*, Agrelo writes:

> We all talked about how the current life expectancy for a trans woman of colour, particularly Black, and Latin, is 35 years old. There's been this continual wave of trans women of colour being killed in this country with little to no media coverage. And so, it was really important for us to highlight that experience for our audience, but also, just for the greater culture at large (Agrelo. J. 2019).

The storyline of Candy's death, inspired by Xtravaganza, arguably both legitimises this representation and de-sensationalises it when considered in context through its semi-autobiographical link to *Paris is Burning*. Shelby Chestnut, director of policy and programs at the *Transgender Law Centre*, contends that *Pose* is imperative in today's political landscape as it highlights the violence against trans women of colour. Chestnut concludes:

> The sad thing about watching some of these episodes is that they're very translatable to present day, While the show is set in a very specific time, we're unfortunately

> living that present-day reality where the death and murders of trans women continue to be at an all-time high (Agrelo. J. 2019).

Additionally, Janet Mock also noted that Candy's death symbolises not only the time in which the show is set but also the urgency to address the violence directed at trans people, which is just as critical in today's society. Instead of anchoring the death of a main character to the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the time, Mock states, 'Instead, we wanted to really concentrate on the epidemic of violence that trans women are facing, not just back then but today. (Sonoma, S. 2019). Candy's death is indicative of tired Hollywood tropes which see transgender characters portrayed as victims, specifically victims of homicide. Adam's notes that Hollywood and American TV shows have spent many years cultivating the narrative of trans victims, explicitly mentioning that trans characters are only portrayed as victims of murder and are not given any other storyline. Furthermore, the motive for their murder always stems from their trans-ness. Sender contends this as she states, 'they would be simply a body or as a character that's killed off and it becomes about solving that crime' (Agrelo. J. 2019). Adam's also details another specific TV trope within medical drama where a trans person falls victim to the hormones they are taking for their transition or that they develop a cancer that is affiliated with their birth sex (Feder, S. 2020). Sender said that there began to be a shift in the representation of trans characters where they would be more included in storylines however, she argues the reason for this was not to present them with more agency or proper character arc but rather 'their function was to improve the moral character of the cisgender, heterosexual people' (Agrelo. J. 2019).

The Oscar award-winning biopic film *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) presents a good example of Sender's articulation. The character of Rayon, played by Jared Leto, was a fictional character within a real-life story whose storyline was to facilitate the growth of the main character, Ron

Woodroof, played by Matthew McConaughey, a straight white heterosexual man who has AIDS. As Rayon guides Ron's moral development, the trajectories of each character's storyline run parallel, with Ron ultimately finding redemption and becoming the story's hero, while Rayon's drug relapse causes her illness and eventual demise. Steve Friess explains how the character of Rayon and equally Leto's Oscar win, is a misrepresentation and misjudgement by liberal Hollywood that reveals how little they understand about the lives of the minority they think they are honouring. About the character of Rayon he writes, 'Leto's award-winning performance as the sassy, tragic-yet-silly Rayon will belong in the dishonourable pantheon along with McDaniel's Mammy' (Friess, S. 2014).

Although *Pose* kills off Candy, her death can be read as a well-considered departure from the tropes that align with the resilient narrative trajectory of the tragic trans character. Sender articulates that this is due to several factors. First, Candy is a show regular, present from the beginning, she wasn't included simply to be the victim of a hate and transphobic crime. Second, the show doesn't just deal with her death, the show also deals with her what came before it and through her death, the show unravels her emotional nuanced relationship with her biological family. Sender concludes that unlike traditional tropes, Candy does not simply die and everyone around her gets on with their lives, her death has a ripple effect on the characters she leaves behind. In discussing the funeral scene, she sates, 'she gets to reconcile with people from her past, including her parents that she had not been able to reconcile with while she was alive' (Agrelo. J. 2019). Candy's funeral explores the real-life threat of violence faced by trans women when participating in dangerous work to ensure their survival. Throughout the episode, Candy's ghost guides and engages with each of her mourners, invoking the lived experiences of the community we see documented in *Paris is Burning* and utilising the artistic style of magical realism displayed in *Angels in America*. This scene shows how *Pose* blends the two canonical texts together. The narrative of Candy's death

draws from the real-life death of Venus Xtravaganza at the same time the magical realism of her funeral scene is reminiscent of the magical realism displayed throughout *Angels in America* in which ghosts and angels are a constant fixture and where there is no narrative issue with the real and the unreal in this sense. With regard to the of the application of magic realism in *Angels in America*, Tanner J Underwood explains the concept as:

> Magical realism challenges a reader's unique, normalised view of reality, suggesting that the "rational" may not be as rational as it seems and, generally employs the supernatural or the fantastic as a foil against a materialistic, post enlightenment view of the world (Underwood, T, J. 2019. P.111).

By evading the predictable stereotypes and tropes often reserved for transgender characters, Sender claims that *Pose* successfully diverges from TV's history of treating trans characters as disposable contrivances rather than human beings (Agrelo. J. 2019). Additionally, through the employment of magical realism it, also reveals a queer TV aesthetic of which Ryan Murphy has become a central figure, evident in shows such as *American Horror Story* (2012-present) and *Freud* (2017-present).

Addressing Criticism for New Audiences

bell hooks' criticised *Paris is Burning* claiming that the film fails to 'interrogate whiteness' (hooks, b. 2014. p.149) and portrays a sanitised version of poor black life in which everyone aspires to be rich and white. However, although the film fails to explore the hardship and circumstances that lead the subjects to the ballrooms, one can argue against hooks' analysis of upholding whiteness. For transgender women, especially trans women of colour, emulating heterosexual and hyper feminine whiteness is a matter of safety and often survival, rather than desire. Regarding Livingston's portrayal of poor black life as one which is full of self-

hate, stealing and hunger all in the pursuit of whiteness. hooks argues that the exploration into why these people sought out ball culture is lacking and as such doesn't inform the viewer of the damaging effect colonialised whiteness has on black communities (hooks, b. 2014. p.149). On viewing the film, she implies that those who already have an understanding of class consciousness recognise that this is a community forged through the hardship of living in a white patriarchal society. The subjects in the film forge familial bonds out of necessity because they have been exiled from their own families and communities. This may resonate with black and gay audiences who are familiar with the terminology used to describe these relationships; 'Houses and house mother' suggesting that they have a frame of reference in which they understand this oppression in a way that white audiences do not (hooks, b. 2014. p.149). This frame of reference is, in fact, a reframing of a hetero-normative pillar of the nuclear family (maternity, domesticity), and herein lies its diversion of received language and hierarchies; in short, this can be read as deviation rather than a weakened plea for assimilation.

In re-telling this narrative and indeed this historical time in American life, the opening scene of *Pose* immediately makes the audience aware of the ostracisation faced by black gay men. It begins with the character Damon being beaten by his father for being gay and subsequently being kicked out of the family home by his mother for not being able to hide his sexuality. Within this opening scene, the writers include a line indicative of the political and religious climate and attitudes towards gay men during the 1980s, as Damon's mother says to him, "God is going to punish you by giving you that disease". This line refers to the infamous rhetoric of the time, specifically by right-wing religious conservative, Jerry Falwell, who infamously stated, "AIDS is a lethal judgment of God on the sin of homosexuality" (Kowalewski, M. 1990). As a rebuke to sentiments such as these and in recognising how damaging the societal consequences can be, Susan Sontag writes. 'Nothing is more punitive

than to give a disease a meaning - that meaning being invariably a moralistic one (Sontag, S. 1988). The audience then follows Damon on his journey to New York City where he is taken in by house mother Blanca (MJ Rodriguez) who encourages him to pursue his passion for dance through education. The opening to *Pose* does however uphold hooks' understanding regarding the childhood experiences of black boys, in which she states, 'patriarchal socialisation that insists boys should not express emotions or have emotional caretaking is most viciously and ruthlessly implicated in the early childhood socialisation of black boys' (hooks, b. 2004. p. 81). However, it also appears to evade the criticism she has of *Paris is Burning*, which she claims diminishes the hardships faced by black gay men (hooks, b. 2014. p.149) because from its very inception, the audience is notified of such hardships. In addition to this, the introduction of Blanca makes the viewer aware of the immediate threat HIV/AIDS had on this community. The audience is first introduced to Blanca in a hospital waiting room, where she is then informed that she is HIV positive. After Blanca gets her results, a scene between her and Pray Tell (Billy Porter) reveals the reluctance many had towards getting tested. He says, "I do not understand for the life of me why you would have got that test". The mortality and threat that looms over the characters in *Pose* is an important part of its narrative. Although the show aired in 2018 a time when advancements in medicine no longer equated HIV/AIDs with a death sentence (in the West) and therefore does not pervade modern queer life in the same way it did during at the height of the epidemic, it is imperative to include the effects it had on the queer community as it is part of their collective history and experience. Billy Porter discusses the relevance AIDS has in queer culture today. In an interview for *Vulture*, he explains how its inclusion in the show helped reopen a dialogue among people who lived through the crisis and who found it difficult to deal with in later life. He says:

> I've lived long enough to see this transition in our culture to be able to tell this story. I'm re-bonding with a lot of people who I haven't seen or spoken to in a really long time. One friend actually said *Pose* helped him to move past the survivor's guilt he's been holding on to for decades. He said, "I don't feel guilty anymore," and thanked me for that. (McHenry, J. 2018)

As stated, HIV/AIDS is not an urgent threat in the Western world in that same way it was in the 80/90s, however, its inclusion in *Pose* is still significant, specifically its intersection with trans queer people of colour. Gilbey's article details a problematic relationship between AIDS and the plays, and later TV adaptations, of *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* in that they perpetuated a white stranglehold on the portrayal of AIDS. The problem with this is that it is not representative of the disproportionate effect the disease has on queer people of colour, Gilbey writes:

> In 2016, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) made a shocking prediction: that half of all gay and bisexual African American men will at some point contract HIV. In this light, the white bias seems not only unjust but disproportionate (Gilbey, R. 2021).

Porter's understanding of AIDS as sensibility, coupled with Gilbey's recognition that it disproportionally affects people of colour, is a subject Elwin Wu distinguishes as a particularly poignant aspect of *Pose*. Wu is a professor at the Columbia School of Social Work and co-director of the Social Intervention Group and the HIV Intervention Science Training Program for Underrepresented New Investigators. In his article for World AIDS Day 2021, Wu notes how the United States government has adopted the theme "Ending the HIV Epidemic: Equitable Access, Everyone's Voice." (Wu, E. 2021). However, he recognises that historically, not everyone's voice has been heard, particularly the voices of

trans and gender non-conforming people of colour and furthermore how that continues to have an effect. Like Gilbey, Wu recognises that trans and gender non-conforming people of colour have historically been disproportionately affected by being left behind in early HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment efforts. His article centres around how the dramatization of ballroom culture in the midst of the AIDS crisis within *Pose*, has finally given a long-awaited voice to those who carry this disproportionate burden. He also recognises how it's re-telling is important in terms of informing new audiences of queer history and at the same time it is an act of sensibility for those who experienced it. To articulate this, Wu explains how, in watching certain scenes in which young gay men were learning of their HIV/AIDS status in hospital waiting rooms, brought back feelings of panic and dread he'd experienced in those early uncertain times. 'The inescapable thoughts of "No one really gets past this" and "Am I next?" Even now, words fail me in trying to capture the harrowing prospect of dying as an untouchable' (Wu, E. 2021). Like Porter's experience of suffering from the continued effects of that time in later life, Wu also explains that just because the urgency of the crisis gradually faded as antiretroviral treatments progressed in their effectiveness the effects and the reality of those early years never fully leaves a person, he writes:

> It has been at least 15 years since I had those feelings, but they still sneak up on you. Fifteen years of freedom from the spectre of a horrible and misery-inducing plague, in my younger years as a queer man, so heavy and prominent as to feel inexorable (Wu, E. 2021).

Significantly, Wu explains how he watched *Pose* with someone who was born in the mid-90s and therefore didn't have the same lived experience as he did. Instead, he recalls that his viewing partner found the sights and scenes moving and meaningful but that they nevertheless viewed them as drama and entertainment. However, the generations detached

from the terror of recollection shows 'the cumulative achievements in the fight against HIV/AIDS (Wu, E. 2021). A primary focus of Wu's research is the emphasis on social justice in an attempt to address health disparities and the disproportionate burden faced by trans and queer people of colour, by targeting structural and systemic racism, hetero centrism and homophobia. Therefore, Wu recognises that *Pose* gives a voice and platform to the intersection of the identities and their relationship to AIDS, which enables both new audiences and those who have lived experience to be informed and reminded 'that so many of the advances in HIV/AIDS have been borne from the commitment and grace of Black and brown queer and TGNC folks' (Wu, E. 2021). Considered in this light, *Pose* is not simply a melancholic and nostalgic text which gives a voice to those who lost their loved ones and lives to an epidemic; taking aspiration from *Paris is Burning* as an ur-text which can be fleshed out due to the televisual form, it is, also, a vital and important part of the contemporary struggles of queer people, and a means of addressing those facing up to the traumas of the fact. *Pose* invokes and reclaims the past through the process of re-presentation as representation, therefore it is simultaneously a contemporary and historical drama.

Subverting the Heteronormative

A key aim within the New Queer Cinema movement was to challenge prevailing narrative screen conventions and to reconfigure and scrutinise hetero-normative ideals of the traditional nuclear family, social structure and what the British Filmmaker and Artist Derek Jarman named 'hetero-soc' (Turner, M. 2024). The house structures featured in *Paris is Burning* are forged from ostracisation, social stigma and homophobia, and are, in this sense, havens. They are ordered according to who is regarded as having legendary status within the ballroom, with the most revered becoming 'Mother' of the house and the rest are referred to as her 'children'. While the exploration of familial structures presented in *Paris is Burning*

presents subversion from traditional understandings because, as Butler contends, it both 'mimes and displaces them' (Kotz, L. 1992), then drag families are able to denaturalise the significance of reproductive families. The notion of 'Mother' is explored in *Pose's* first season, in an episode titled '*Mother's Day'*, which addresses the death of the lead character, Blanca's biological mother. However, the episode also examines the queer/maternal relationships that are not biological but are instead established through ball culture. During a flashback, Blanca participates in the category 'femme queen virgin runways' and faces criticism for her inability to pass within this category. The MC and judges chastise her look, from her wig, dress, makeup, to her walk. During their critique, they ask, 'whose child is this, where is your mother'. Blanca replies explaining that she doesn't have a mother or a father, meaning she isn't part of a 'house', the MC responds by stating "we can all see that baby, ain't no mother would send her daughter out there with that cheap 'shake-n-go' wig" (2018). The statement exposes the power dynamics of drag families and their connection to hetero-normative notions. It highlights how drag mothers are expected to fulfil the same caring and nurturing role as mothers in a hetero-normative society. By inferring that, if Blanca was part of a family, her 'mother' would have saved her from public humiliation and, more than that, she would have guided her and advised her to prevent her humiliation. The next scene shows Blanca being harassed by other trans women from the balls, who attack her inability to pass, when legendary mother Electra Abundance comes to her defence and takes her to a diner to eat. Electra asks Blanca, "what possessed you tonight?" To which Blanca replies,

> I wanted to be pretty; I wanted to be seen, to belong, I guess… I don't think I'll ever be as real as you, no one questions you or looks at you like they do me, not that I give a fuck what anyone else thinks, but I do want to be seen and respected as a woman, it's who I see myself to be (2018).

This scene ends with Elektra telling Blanca she is coming home with her and that “I am your mother now”. Whilst *Paris is Burning* revealed the importance of passing in the ball world and the necessity to pass outside of the balls, as a matter of safety, Blanca’s ridicule at the ball and her monologue in the diner allows *Pose* to present an important understanding, that by being seen to pass within the balls means that participants have a better chance of being accepted by wider society. This highlight Phelan’s point regarding the paradoxical nature of queer and trans people who wish to remain unremarkable to the world outside the balls in order to pass as normative, whilst longing to be hyper visible inside them because they are excluded and invisible to normative society (Phelan, P.1993, p. 111). Yet, *Pose* can push this further, revealing that how trans and queer people feel about themselves and how one self-identifies is more important than the act of being seen or the ability to pass or be seen a certain way. Issues and rights surrounding trans identity have become a central argument within the culture wars in the United States in recent years. NBC reported that:

> Republicans in primaries across the country have made attacking transgender rights central to their paid media campaigns and stump speeches — focusing on issues of education, gender transitioning and sports (Caputo, M. 2022).

Most attacks on trans rights target aspects that directly affect young transgender people with legislation aimed at limiting gender-affirming healthcare for transgender children and teenagers. In 2023, *CNN* reported that it was a record-shattering year for anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. The report further states that Republicans are not just focused on restrictions on gender-affirming healthcare but that some states have enacted laws that can punish healthcare professionals who provide gender-affirming treatment to minors with prison time (Choi, A. 2023). Laws such as these are arguably affiliated with recent US state abortion laws, such as Texas’s SB8 law, which, prior to the overturning of *Roe v Wade* in June 2022, made it illegal

to obtain an abortion after five weeks of pregnancy. Furthermore, even after *Roe v Wade* was overturned, Texas kept part of the legislation allowing any private citizen to sue anyone who "aids or abets" in an abortion as well as making it illegal for anyone to perform an abortion, and if found guilty could face life in prison (Klibanoff, E. 2022). The culture of fear inspired by legislation such as this is damaging in several ways. Firstly it not only limits and restricts the rights of LGBTQ+ people and women, but it also helps perpetuate social divides by appealing to partisan divisions. Secondly, by strategically attacking the rights of younger generations and simultaneously limiting LGBTQ+ discourse in education, there is a risk that the culture wars will continue with future generations. Considered in the context of this climate in the U.S, Blanca's statement that "it's who I see myself to be" sees *Pose* engage in a nuanced understanding of gender identity, first presented in *Paris is Burning* and reconfigured in reaction to current social and political debates.

Pose further pushes against hetero-normative notions of family and the idea of a fixed understanding of kinship, when later in the '*Mother's Day'* episode, Blanca goes to visit her house mother Electra in the hospital. It is evident that the two have tension, yet Blanca, after the death of her biological mother, wishes to put it behind them and congratulate Electra on her gender reassignment surgery. Balance says to Elektra, "the world may have destroyed the version of you who saved me that night outside the ball and took me under your wing, but you're the only mother I have left" (2018). This statement subverts the biological configurations of family by demonstrating that one has the ability to choose who they consider family, suggesting that familial identity, like gender, is not fixed. Ta'Les Love attests that this scene expands the definition of motherhood and invited audiences to think beyond anatomy as 'motherhood is an action and a choice to lead, guide and nurture those in your community' (Love, T. 2023, p.13). *Pose's* inclusion of family structures not only confronts and subverts traditional understanding for the elevation of queer and trans

representations, but they also account for the intersectionality of these identities with racial identity. Whilst Crenshaw's articulation of intersectionality recognises that the intersection of black and queer identity compounds the experience of oppression, *Pose* further considers the intersectional struggles of biracial experiences and expands the boundaries of 'blackness'. Love discusses that including characters Blanca and Angel, portrayed by actresses MJ Rodriguez and Indya Moore respectively, elevates Afro-Latinx narratives, simultaneously reconfiguring traditional understandings of both black identity and family. In her analysis, Love references the aforementioned scene in which Blanca attends the funeral for her birth mother, noting that when members of her biological family attend, they are noticeably of Latino and Afro-Latino descent. Although *Paris is Burning* presented the involvement of both the black and Latinx community as being central to the ball world, *Pose* recognises the intersection within these ethnicities, resulting in what Love describes as:

> Pushing the boundaries of blackness in that it illustrates that Black identity is not fixed. Even within the Black community, Black identity is diverse and spans multiple cultures which is significant to see on screen (Love, T. 2023, p.13).

Paris is Burning displayed that, through ostracisation and homophobia, members of the ball community forged their own families. Similarly, *Pose* displays the same type of kinship, yet what Love finds more profound about the family structures displayed in *Pose* is that they push against the traditional concepts of family, which has historically seen black families as fragmented due to slavery and discrimination yet are still expected simultaneously to aspire to traditional understandings of family (Ibid, 2023, p.13). Therefore, through a combination of demonstrating family is not fixed and by subtly increasing representation of Afro-Latinx identity and expanding understandings of family *Pose* reveal the nuances of family and its

intersection with race and identity which challenges hetero-normative understandings of the nuclear family.

Intersectionality

The ground-breaking aspect of *Pose* is that it has the largest cast of trans actors/actresses playing trans characters in the history of television. Furthermore, this representation of trans-ness intersects with race. Love further acknowledges that *Pose* addresses the intersectionality and the nuances of identity. She particularly analyses how the show destabilises the boundaries of blackness by intersecting it with various Latino and Afro-Latino identities (Love, T. 2023, p.12). Referencing the work of Yelaine Rodriguez, who explains that 'the stories of Afro-Latino people are underrepresented and are often unrecognised by Latin American culture and Black American cultures alike' (ibid, 2023, p.12). Understanding the significance of this requires analysing the history of trans representation and visibility on screen, as well as how that representation intersects with race. The documentary *Disclosure* (Feder, S. 2020) presents an analysis of Hollywood's historic portrayal of trans representation, or more accurately, its transphobic rhetoric. The documentary opens with a synopsis of the screening of trans representation, observing how trans people in America are still being murdered disproportionately, specifically trans women of colour, whilst the increasing mediated representations present a paradox in that "the more we are seen the more violated we are" (2020). The influence of trans people's visibility and representation on screen is the reason behind its impact on larger society's understanding of trans identity.

> GLAAD conducted a study that found '80% of American's don't personally know someone who is transgender and therefore 'most of the information that American's

> get about who transgender people are, what our lives are and are about comes from media' (2020).

In consideration of this statement, trans people themselves also rely on the media to form a large part of their self-perception, as they are not often exposed to other trans people. The documentary is also concerned with the intersection of race and trans identity. An investigation into the history of African American male oppression affirms that 'the historic context is that black men are hyper masculine… predatory to white womanhood' (2020). Trans actress and activist Lavern Cox explains that this originates from a history of emasculating black men in America. This emasculation was enforced through slavery and then by Jim Crow. Cox references the literal castration that black men were subjected to when they were lynched, as they would often have their genitals cut off (2020). hooks contends this in her work she notes. 'In the American cultural imagination, the image of the castrated and emasculated Black man is so ingrained' (hooks, b 2004. P.81). Furthermore, she also recognises the influence the media has on imparting these stereotypes. Of the historic oppression faced by black males, she writes:

> Most black males are bombarded in early childhood with the message that they are inhabiting an all-powerful universe that not only does not want them to succeed but wants to ensure their demise. These messages come to black males via mass media (hooks, b 2004. P.81).

These compounded forms of oppression have led to an internalised understanding of emasculation within African American males. *Disclosure* details how these understandings manifest over time, reducing African American trans representation to humour and humiliation. hooks' critique of *Paris is Burning* remarked that the experience of men dressing as women is equated to symbolically crossing into a realm of powerlessness (hooks, b. 1992.

p.146). Cox further claims that a lot of these experiences of black men comes from the paradoxical trauma of being seen as both emasculated and a hyper-masculine threat, and so many black actors and comics use drag as a 'rite of passage… oh we can laugh now' (2020). What she means by this is that by dressing a black man in a drag, these threats are eliminated. The act of participating in drag symbolically castrates oneself, removing the threat of emasculation or castration. Additionally, by doing so, the individual is no longer perceived as hyper-masculine, eliminating the threat to womanhood.

Pose incorporates the American cultural imagination that views the emasculation of black men, into its narrative. The final episode of season two, '*Walk in My Heels'*, features a role reversal where the men of the ballroom, including resident MC Pray Tell, played by Billy Porter, walk the runway while the women score them, deviating from the typical practice of men adjudicating the categories. However, when it comes to Pray Tell dressing in women's clothing, his reaction reflects these historic traumas, as he states:

> My father used to tell everybody, 'That boy is too soft.' He hated my sissy ass. He would walk past me and push me to the ground. The pushes became slaps, and the slaps became punches…He was determined he was going to beat the man into me. (2018).

According to hooks, black boys are conditioned from a young age to enact hyper-masculinity in reaction to patriarchal socialisation that encourages them to repress their emotions (hooks, b. 2004, p.81). His recollection of trauma aligns with this perspective. Whilst further reenforcing the ideological understanding that black males have been conditioned to present hyper-masculinity because of the historic oppressions associated with slavery and Jim Crow. Encouraged by his boyfriend Ricky, Pray does walk the ball category '*Butch Queen First Time at a Ball'* (which is also a nod to a real category) dressed in a distinctive Diana Ross

inspired ensemble. In doing so and by removing the comedic element of his transition into drag and instead presenting the historic trauma attached to it he, and indeed the show, symbolically sheds the historic assumptions and stereotypes placed upon black masculinity and allows Pray to embrace the feminine aspects of his identity. In a conversation with *TV Guide*, Porter explores the resonance of the scene with his own life experiences, in which he was subjected to the weaponization of masculine ideals. In discussing the impact of growing up in an abusive environment had on him, he explains he learnt how to repress anything associated with femininity. He also recalls an appearance on *The Rosie O'Donnell Show* where he was told by his record label executive to not speak, for fear he would come off 'too gay' (Venable, M. 2019) he states, "It's trauma that we carry with us for the rest of our lives, instilled in us. We're supposed to hate ourselves." (Venable, M. 2019). In a profound example of life imitating art, Porter recalls his time playing the role of drag queen Lola in Broadway's *Kinky Boots*, "that got Billy Porter to where he is now. Listening to naysayers wasn't what got me here. It was being myself," (Venable, M. 2019). The scenes and narratives in *Pose* play a crucial role in acknowledging a collective history of trauma associated with the intersection of race, gender, and queerness. They draw inspiration from real-life experiences, reinforcing the significance of *Pose's* casting and potentially signalling a change in the mode of production within queer screen culture.

Hollywood and Trans Representation

When it comes to the visibility of transgender representation on screen, Hollywood has had a contentious history of casting cis male and female actors to play trans-gendered characters. Some high-profile examples are Jared Leto in *Dallas Buyers' Club* (2013) Eddie Redmayne in *The Danish Girl,* (2015) and Hilary Swank in *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), all of which received Academy Award nominations of their performances, with Leto and Swank winning,

respectively. In 2000 Hilary Swank won the best actress Oscar for her portrayal of the real-life trans-male Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry*. The film portrays the tragic death of Teena at the age of 21 when John Lotter and Tom Nissen gang raped and murdered him, as well as murdering two others, after revealing his transgender identity. The cast of *Disclosure*, which includes many LGBTQ+ actors and writers, discusses the film's legacy regarding trans representation but critiques it for its removal of the intersection of black trans identity. Although the film purports to be biographical, it completely removes the inclusion of one of the murder victims, Phillip DeVine, who was a black male friend of Teena's, leading trans writer Tiq Milan to assert that:

> It's the erasure of black people. You can't have queer, trans people and black people in the same space at the same time, so what does that say about my trans queer black ass? Again, this is taking away representation. I can't exist in my blackness, trans-ness and queerness (2020).

Although the intersection of queerness, trans-ness and blackness in this case doesn't intersect within one person, the removal of the black narrative altogether is revealing because even within the context of friendship and ally ship, this intersection is not one that gets representation in mainstream film. Furthermore, in relation to Hollywood's representation and visibility of these intersections, this erasure raises questions about what sacrifices they deem worthy when constructing idealised depictions of black, queer, and transgender narratives to appeal to a mass audience.

Hillary Swank's Oscar win also had a notable impact on Hollywood that led to a further influx of straight actors playing the part of queer characters. Although this was not a recent phenomenon (notably, for example in Sydney Lumet's film *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), questions were asked whether this was done to establish a greater platform for queer

narratives or because it seemed a mainline for awards season nominations. In an interview for *Fabulous: The Story of Queer Cinema* (2006) writer/director John Waters claims, "all straight actors want to play gay, because it's Oscar time." He continues by noting that it is brave for gay people to play gay characters because they are afraid to play gay parts due to fear of being typecast. (Ades, L, Klainberg, L. 2006). Later in the documentary director Todd Haynes further explains that the result of this led to a commodifiable transition of New Queer Cinema as a market that people began to invest in, which resulted in characters being put into "more reliable forms of narrative" (ibid. 2006) Looking at it with more optimism, *Pose* actor Billy Porter also features in the documentary and leading on from Haynes' statement, claims "I was very conscious of the transition into lighter things because for a decade we had lived in death… I think it was all about the idea of reintroducing hope, into an entire culture of people" (ibid. 2006). As this chapter highlights, trans representation on screen is important because it drives social change and shapes the perception of trans people within larger society. Invisibility, stereotypical representations, and assimilation of transgender people in the media can contribute to the public's lack of understanding or acceptance of this population, potentially fomenting transphobia and discrimination (Capuzza and Spencer 2017, p. 215).

In a discussion regarding cis actors playing trans characters, trans actress Jen Richards articulates that there is a link between this trend and the homophobia and violence trans women are subjected to. She explains men that act violently towards trans women do so out of fear that other men will find out that they have been sexually involved with her, and the source of that fear is homophobic anxiety. This occurs because, as Richards explains, "the men whose judgment they are in fear of, only know trans women from media and the people who are playing those trans women are the men that they know" (Feder, S. 2020). When cis men portray trans women in media, the association of being with a trans woman becomes

synonymous with being with a man and therefore engaging in homosexuality. She argues in response that this association is eliminated when a trans actress portrays a trans female character because it eliminates the misconception that trans women are men in disguise (Feder, S. 2020). Aryeh Conrad attests to this and further argues that through the illusion of trans-ness as merely costuming means 'position [ing] trans-ness as a costume that cisgender people can put on and take off at their discretion, and as something that can be mimicked without any meaningful engagement with the trans community' (Conrad, A. 2015. p. 5). Although it is tempting to argue that the job of an actor/actress is to portray a convincing performance of someone they are not, by limiting trans visibility and representation to *only* being portrayed by cis people, means risking the erasure of trans bodies altogether and furthermore it limits the opportunity to presents trans characters as more than just their trans-ness. Richards explains that when trans women play trans female characters, they 'don't have to play the trans-ness of it' (2020). Therefore, just as cis men don't have to portray the aspect of being male because it is assumed to be innate then, similarly, when trans people play trans roles, they can depict the character as a whole, not just focusing on the performance of being trans. Richards concludes this understanding by noting that when cis male actors play trans roles 'they reduce that person…to a performance of trans-ness, to a performance of femininity, rather than of a whole person, of whom, trans-ness is just one aspect' (Feder, S. 2020). Therefore, whilst trans identity has and continues to be visible on screen, in order for that visibility to resonate with audiences in a way that effects social change, the representation of trans-ness must extend beyond that one aspect of identity and inform audiences of the whole human experience.

Hollywood's historic failure to present a realistic representation of trans identity on screen means that there is little agency afforded to trans people. Additionally, it infers that mass audiences are only receptive to trans narratives when they are told from the comfortable

position of recognisable cis, and often straight, actors or actresses. In an interview with MTV, *Pose* actresses MJ Rodriguez and Indya Moore address this as well as the double standard of cis actors playing trans roles, Moore states, “we are more than capable of not only telling our own stories but telling stories in general.” (MTV News. 2019). Rodriguez articulates this further by claiming there is a double standard in which, if playing trans roles is a way for actors to challenge themselves artistically or professionally, then it is only equal that trans actors get to do the same and play cis roles. Rodrigues claims:

> I have played cis roles, but I haven’t played them to a demographic that is higher up or a demographic that is widespread. I haven’t got the chance to do that and if someone can do that and play our role, then I think we should be allotted to play roles we’re more comfortable with as well (MTV News. 2019).

Like Jen Richards' argument, Moore understands that the practice of allowing cis actors/actresses to portray trans characters while limiting trans actors/actresses to *only* playing trans roles leads to trans characters being consistently depicted and defined solely by their trans identity, rather than exploring the complexity of their humanity through thorough character development. Moore articulates that the collective conceptualisation of playing a cis role means, to play a character that tells a story in which gender is not being dissected. “We want to tell stories that aren’t always specifically about our experience as trans people, we want to tell stories about what it means to be a human being and have those human experiences.” (MTV News. 2019). The shows racialised trans-inclusive casting allows ‘trans women that consume television and film […] to join the rest of [the audience] by seeing themselves reflected on the screen’ (Reitz .2017, p. 6). It affirms the identity and humanity of people who have historically been erased from popular cultural and our cultural narratives, and it is doing so in unprecedented ways in a time of fervent political oppression.

Chapter 5

We're Here

This study demonstrates that an influx of queer content in twenty-first century American popular culture, specifically those focused on the intersection of drag, gender, sexuality and race, has been informed by the legacy of *Paris is Burning*. Of the film's enduring relevance Jennie Livingston states:

> It was a really deep and resonant expression of how and why we create identity in this country, including gender, including race, including class, including what we don't allow people to have and what people insist on taking for themselves anyway... There was an intensity to the time, of the '80s—and it's the same now. There was such inequity between rich people and poor people, and such a celebration of greed. I just felt like intuitively and viscerally that the ball world was a really clear and intense expression of how and why we create identity in this country. (Ifeanyi, K, C. 2019).

Livingston's articulation surrounding the continued impact of *Paris is Burning* reveals the significance the documentary still has regarding effecting social change. The current US political landscape's impact on LGBTQ+ communities is having an effect not only socio-politically but also personally. In 2023 *The Trevor Project* (1998) an American non-profit organization, focused on suicide prevention efforts among LGBTQ+ youth, conducted studies to evaluate how, the prolific anti-LGBTQ+ legislation was having damaging consequences on queer youths in America. Some of the organisations most significant findings conclude that:

> 86% of transgender and nonbinary youths say recent debates around anti-trans bills have negatively impacted their mental health; as a result of these policies and debates in the last year, 45% of trans youth experienced cyberbullying, and nearly 1 in 3 reported not feeling safe to go to the doctor or hospital when they were sick or injured (Sylvester, E. 2023).

These alarmingly high figures highlight the significant psychological damage caused by anti-LGBTQ+ socio-political agendas. Likewise, they uphold Livingston's understanding that, the intensity to provide a platform for the very communities these legislations oppose, is as relevant now as it was in the 1980s and *HBO's We're Here* is one of the prominent shows to emphasize this urgent need for representation.

This chapter is split into three sections in order to present an analytical discourse surrounding key topics featured in the show's first season which aired in 2020. First, I will provide an overview of the show's themes and formatting, focusing specifically on how it has been influenced by the legacy of *Paris is Burning* by employing documentary techniques within the contemporary modes of the reality TV genre. I will also analyse how concepts of political theatre resonate through the show's locational choices, especially its cultural intervention that attempts to influence social change within these locations. I will demonstrate how this focus on social change surrounding LGBTQ+ rights, acts as a direct response to the current culture wars in the United States as well as how unprecedented anti-LGBTQ+ legislation impacts people's formation and sense of identity in specific regions of the United States. The next section will then be split into two case studies that analyse two show participants, Chris and Tanner. Although *We're Here* features many different people, identities, and locations my inclusion of these specific case studies is because the issues they face resonate so profoundly with American sensibilities. Chris struggles with his identity because of the rural masculine ideals he was brought up with, while Tanner struggles to reconcile the duality of being both

gay and a practicing Christian. Additionally, the issues faced by both men are compounded by their location, the conservative, religious, rural small-town of Branson, Missouri.

The first case study will focus on Chris, concentrating explicitly on the impact of location politics and how it informed his ideas of masculinity. Theoretical analysis will be presented to ascertain how location has an impact on how people form identity. Recognizing that, by living in service to traditional social codes, specifically those engrained in rural American ideology, can have damaging consequences on masculine identity and furthermore it highlights how screened representation has a profound effect on the development of personal and collective identity. To articulate this, I will provide a historic evaluation of both rural masculinity and the Western film genre to reveal how they work symbiotically to create American masculine ideals and how they can subsequently be queered within popular culture. Furthermore, I will explore the notion of drag culture and performance in order to determine how it liberated Chris from his restrictive perception of identity. This chapter will conclude with a second case study, which will provide a theoretical and historical overview highlighting the dichotomy of queer identity and religious commitment, which many people in the United States struggle to reconcile. I will use *We're Here* participant Tanner and his internal conflict surrounding his homosexuality and Christian faith to provide an exploration into how his participation in drag allowed him breakdown the locational and socio-political ideologies that led to his crisis of identity. I will use academic theory and current publications to provide an in-depth analysis exposing how religious belief and commitment has been weaponised by right-wing Republican politics. First, I will demonstrate how the weaponization of religion was utilised to effect and overturn the legalisation of abortion and second, how the same principals and political tactics are being applied to the culture wars in an attempt to dismantle LGBTQ+ rights.

Overview

We're Here debuted in 2020, in the midst of not only a global pandemic but also the end of Donald Trump's first term as president, a time which facilitated unprecedented legal restrictions aimed at queer communities. The premise of the show follows three drag queens, all of whom are *Drag Race* alumni, Bob the Drag Queen, Eurkea O'Hara and Shangela, as they journey across small-town America, to increase awareness of the often-under-represented issues of queer life outside of urban surroundings, which is frequently depicted as New York, Los Angeles and San-Francisco, by putting on and participating in one-night-only drag shows. Within each town the queens each recruit a 'drag daughter' who will perform alongside them in the show which will be watched by their families and community, whilst they simultaneously face opposition from the larger community and even anti-LGBTQ+ legislation laws. The show is a strong example of emotionally charged storytelling that features an array of identities from gay, lesbian, transgender, African American, Indigenous, straight and gender nonconforming people to inform audiences of the diversity of demographics that populate the more socio-politically conservative parts of the United States. The predominant themes of the show are acceptance and community which is presented through a multitude of stories that are a combination of the joyous, infuriating, celebratory and heart-wrenching, all of which culminate in an empowering drag performance. I argue that the fundamental intrigue and influence of *We're Here* is rooted in its locations. The small American towns in which participants are found, act as narrative characters themselves. This convergence of identity and location politics reveals a deeper truth about small-town America that are often presented through a reductive lens particularly in reality TV. Popular shows such as *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012) and *Duck Dynasty* (2012) position rural life in reductive manner, and they raised questions surrounding the spectacle and entertainment of reality TV. Critics asked that while millions of Americans live below

the poverty line are 'audiences supposed to laugh at these people, pity them or relate to them and more importantly how far would reality TV go in terms of mining poor rural Americans for show ideas?' (Broderick, R. 2014). Contrary to this, by visiting different locations *We're Here* investigates how rural, religious, conservative, and masculine rhetoric impacts how queer and straight people coexist by presenting the nuances of identity and diversity within small-town America. It is important to note that by moving from location to location, the show incorporates themes present in the, distinctly American, road movie genre, in which the narrative typically revolves around a literal and personal journey of discovery.

> The road trip is not merely the means but the actual manifestation of an authentic American experience. Deemed a democratic undertaking, it both directs and projects an experience of Americanness. Connecting American travellers to family and country, the road trip enacts a reassertion of subjectivity across different scales. Most importantly, it reasserts the American as a mobile subject (Bringham, A. 2015, p.3)

The shows co-creator Stephen Warren recalls that *HBO* was immediately interested in the concept, claiming, 'Everyone knew that it had the imprint of *HBO*. They knew they had to deliver something that was different than anything anyone's seen before.' (White, B. 2020). He explains that by having *HBO* involved from the outset the show would immediately be elevated, it had to become more than a reality show as he claims, '*HBO* epitomizes excellence' (White, B. 2020). Warren's adulation for *HBO* stems from the network's longstanding reputation for high quality TV production and its history of increasing queer visibility, included in this are the networks adaptations of *Angel in America* and *The Normal Heart.* Which, as theatrical productions, both provided examples of how performance can influence social and political change.

The *HBO* Effect

Home Box Office (*HBO*) is an American subscription-based television channel. The company was founded by Charles Dolan and launched its first cable operation in 1972 but it soon became a subsidiary to what is now *Warner Media Studios*. *HBO* is the oldest continually operating television subscription services and was the pioneer in a changing ecology of television that would become inhabited by the likes of Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime. Being a subscription service meant the network did not have to rely on traditional forms of advertising and so could broadcast without fear of having to curtail to the sensitivities of advertisers. In *The Essential HBO Reader,* Gary R Edgerton discusses the benefits *HBO* had by operating without the limitations of advertisers and states:

> *HBO* is positioned to pursue innovations in a way that the broadcast networks are not… *HBO's* remarkably durable team of executives have tended to look for new opportunities in the social and technological changes that broadcasters face with apprehension. (Edgerton, G, R. 2008. P. 31).

Edgerton's chronological evaluation of *HBO* notes the ways in which it managed to stay innovative and relevant, starting with how it first distinguished itself from commercial television by broadcasting advertisement free, uncut, feature films and special events. He goes on to state how this strategy had prevailed up until the widespread accessibly of the VCR which led to the company producing original programming, beginning with feature film. *HBO's* decision to produce original content arguably allowed it to become the critically acclaimed innovative network it is today. The company branched out further from made for TV movies and began to produce longform dramas and miniseries 'that would never have appeared in theatres or other networks.' (Edgerton, G, R. 2008. p. 31). Edgerton mentions two works in particular, *And the Band Played On* (Spottiswoode, R. 1993) which documents

the early years of the AIDS epidemic and *The Corner* (Dutton, C, S. 2000) which tells the story of devastatingly poor African American family living in Baltimore. These shows were the first indication that *HBO* would be at the forefront of inclusive storytelling on TV, and this inclusive representation continued in shows such as, *The Wire* (2002-2008)*, Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) and *True Blood* (2008-2014). By the early 2000s *HBO* had almost doubled its 19 million subscribers and became known for creating some of the most inclusive and innovative original series on television. The networks remarkable soar in popularity was thanks in large to the commercial and critical success of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) which by its third season was opening to viewer numbers of 11 million. This success facilitated a viewership of 4.8 million for the premier of *Six Feet Under*. (Edgerton, G, R. 2008. P. 316). The series begins with the death of the show's patriarch and from the outset centres around the Fisher family picking themselves back up and carrying on the family business, a funeral home. The main focus of *Six Feet Under* was how-to carry-on without patriarchal guidance which subsequently permitted the show to subvert notions of the hetero-normative tradition family. This subversion presented 'sexual politics and relationships that were viewed from a decidedly queer perspective offering an affirmative but alternative image of non-traditional families and couples' a theme that was dominant in *Paris is Burning* and has continued through contemporary concepts inspired by the documentary such as those outlines in this study (Edgerton, G, R. 2008. P.76).

Drag queen and one of the stars of the show, Shangela expresses the progressive queer inclusivity of *HBO*, acknowledging how her, and her fellow queens, Bob the Drag Queen and Eureka O'Hara were given consulting producer credits on the show. Moreover, her admiration for the network grew when producers of the show ensured the set would be heavily populated by LGBTQ+ camera operators, glam squads, stylists, and choreographers. Shangela recalls 'watching people come out of their shells to realize how beautiful it can be

when we all break down the barriers between us all' (Carley, B. 2020). Of course, the rise in popularity for queer themed content and its marketability since the mainstream and economic success of shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Queer Eye,* helped influence *HBO's* decision to create content surrounding queer and drag culture. However, with consideration to *HBO's* long standing and highly regarded precedent for inclusive storytelling as well as providing the LGBTQ+ community agency within *We're Here*, collectively demonstrates how the network continues to uphold its intention of inclusive story telling.

The Influence of Documentary

Each episode of the show features different participants from a different town. I argue that this continual move not only provides an exploration into location politics it also situates the series within the distinct style of both documentary and political theatre. *HBO* categorises the show as 'unscripted reality' and while the show seems reminiscent of a reality TV makeover show (not least, the hugely popular *Queer Eye*), its socio-political statements and emotionally charged storytelling also adhere to the modes of documentary. Director and executive producer Peter LoGreco has a background in documentary, having worked on such productions *as Kids Behind Bars: Life on* Parole (2019) which helped inform his decision to be a part of the project. LoGreco discusses how his vision for the show was immediately fixed in the location, as he states, 'I went in very strongly advocating for a show that was much more rooted in a sense of place and these emotional stories' (White, B. 2020).
For *We're Here*, LoGreco wanted to push the boundaries of the representation of drag further within mainstream entertainment, he claims his intention for the show was to 'find that deeper, higher purpose to the drag performance. (White, B. 2020). Drag has been used as a political and social statement since its inception as its subversion of identity through performance and artifice reveals the fragility of binary assumptions surrounding gender, sexuality and identity. LoGreco knew the potential drag could have on effecting social and

political attitudes surrounding LGBTQ+ identity, explaining that his inspiration for the show came directly from *Paris is Burning.* He acknowledges that the documentary cements a 'piece of exceptionally important film making that wasn't afraid to be dark and gritty and show the reality of queer drag experiences' (White, B. 2020). *We're Here* became LoGreco's 2020 iteration of the seminal documentary. He wanted to show the reality of queer experiences in real time, as it was happening. (White, B. 2020). In a further interview for *The Credits,* LoGreco states that for the show to have a sense of authenticity, it needed to break the conventional mould. He insists that the casting process had to differ from that of normal TV and reality TV shows, particularly noting how, no *one* person would be the lead or stand out of the show as inclusivity is a leading theme. He explains, that when casting a TV show one of the hardest criteria is not casting someone who *wants* to be on TV, claiming that when participants start out reticent often their journey becomes much more meaningful. Due to this, the show spent significant time in the locations in which the episodes take place, conducting extensive research 'in order to grasp a particular small-town culture and community. Eventually, they find their way to the people who truly could use a visit from Bob, Eureka, or Shangela' (Thorpe, D. 2021). LoGreco explains that there is no substitute for actually going to the show's locations and meeting the community, stating that once the communities realise a production team is willing and interested in the community they begin to open up (Thorpe, D. 2021). Additionally, once people started to open up, these small towns revealed an abundance of intersecting identities that are often overlooked by mainstream media, which the show has utilised in its presentation of geo-specific identity.

The three-drag queens in *We're Here* clearly act as the knowledgeable insight into drag and ball culture, yet they also reflect LoGreco's articulation that no one person was positioned as the lead of the show, all three share the screen equally, as do their drag daughters, and the show removes the tropes of salacious 'confrontainment' often found in a reality TV series.

Instead, it provides an equal exploration into the lives and backgrounds of each participant and their experiences within the small towns they live in. Furthermore, the inspiration of *Paris is Burning* that transcended into LoGreco's decision to show the reality of queer experiences as they were happening allows the show to be situated within specific conventions of documentary film.

Bill Nichols' understanding of documentary describes the genre as one that speaks about actual situations, whilst fiction invents dialogue, scenes, and events 'documentary images present people and events that belong to the world we share rather than invent characters and action to tell a story that refers to our world obliquely or allegorically.' (Nichols, B. 2017. P.5). Although *We're Here* provides entertainment via the final drag performance, it is through the exploration of real people, their experiences and stories that reveal the show's main themes of inclusion. This exploration is also a leading theme within documentary, as Nichols explains that documentaries are about 'real people', meaning they feature people who do not play a role in the same way actors do, instead they play themselves (Nichols, B. 2017. P.6). He claims that the power of documentary comes from storytelling and the representation of the lived experience, that is, that they inform audiences about how things change, through narrative. (ibid 2017.p.7). *We're Here's* narrative structure reveals the backstory of each participant to the audience, building to a drag performance informed by these experiences. Similarly, Nichols claims that documentaries tell audiences about the world by commenting on situations with the tools of engagement forged by storytelling and rhetoric. Basic questions are asked of documentary according to Nichols, including, 'is the story the filmmaker's or the subjects? Does it clearly derive from the events and people involved?' (ibid. 2017. P.7). For Nichols, documentary storytelling reveals a plausible representation of something that happened rather than an imaginative interpretation and although it will be told from the perspective of the film maker in terms of style it will

nonetheless correspond to known facts and actual events (ibid. 2017. p.7). This understanding of documentary can be applied to the style of storytelling displayed in *We're Here* as the exploration into the subject's lives reveals a representation of the reality of their small-town experiences.

The people and stories featured in the series present a celebration of diversity in places that are often seen to embody rigid parameters of identity informed by ideological constraints. Some examples of this diversity include an exploration of gender non-conforming indigenous peoples as they carve out their own individual identity in Farmington, New Mexico, a young gay, Muslim man who moved to Evansville, Indiana after he was granted asylum from persecution in Tunisia for his sexual orientation, a black lesbian tattoo artist who is finding her place in a white male dominated business in South Carolina and an African American straight man who wants to show support to the LGBTQ+ community as an ally due to his experiences of racial oppression and marginalisation. The end of each episode culminates in a drag performance and the significance of these performances is that they seek to reflect these diverse stories, journeys, and identities. Each drag mother spends substantial time with their drag daughters as well as their family and friends to help inform this final performance, which in turn means that it is presented as far more than a spectacle for entertainment. The style of drag presented in *We're Here* differs from the style displayed in both *Paris is Burning* and *RuPaul's Drag Race* because it removes the competitive element. The performers are not told a specific category in which to walk, they are not competing against other walkers or drag daughters for an adjudicating panel, nor do they belong to a drag family per se. However, although they are not part of families, each of the drag queens brings with them their own team of stylists, choreographers, makeup artists and designers that become fully immersed in the drag daughter's experience, each spend time with the participants explaining the nuances and technicalities of the behind-the-scenes element of a drag

performance. Each queen and her team set up their own 'camp' where they base themselves during their time in each location, which, like the house structures displayed in *Paris is Buring,* act as havens (although whether they leave at the end of each day is not revealed on camera). The queens then spend time becoming acquainted with the locals of these small towns, visiting cafés and public spaces, handing out flyers for the show and meeting with venue holders about putting on their drag show. The location then becomes an important aspect of the performance as not only are the drag daughters from these specific locations the audience are too and by incorporating their community means there is a better chance that the cultural significance of their messaging will resonate with the audience. The style of drag displayed in *We're Here* as well as the locations and the show's decision to move from town to town aligns with the functions and practices of political theatre, specifically its theatrical intervention and social commentary that was prominent during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Political Theatre

Prior to AIDS intervention, German dramatist, Erwin Piscator, was considered one of the most influential people within 20th century political theatre. He began acting during the First World War, but after becoming disillusioned by what he'd seen during his time on the Western Front, he set out to create a theatre that had a clear place and function in a world that was reeling from conflict. His early interaction with theatre saw him become part of the *Dada* movement, an avant-garde European art movement that was formed in neutral Switzerland in the early 20th century. Piscator realised that more overt political theatre was needed and that it should be aligned to the political struggle of the proletariat. The proletariat theatre was comprised of both professional and amateur actors, writers and directors that put-on performance across various workers' halls. They implemented free admission which

separated the theatre from the bourgeois status and where he began to experiment and pushed his innovation to create a new overt political theatrical experience.

> In *Konjunctur* ("Conjunction"; 1928) The play dealt with oil speculation, and the setting was a series of oil derricks. As the play progressed, the number and size of the derricks grew. The setting became part of the action and an environment for it, and the growth of the setting became a comment on the action of the play (Barker, Izenour. 2024).

Throughout his life Piscator was exiled from his home country of Germany and after finding temporary sanctuary in the Soviet Union he was warned not to return during Stalin's *Great Purge* in the mid to late 1930s, and so he fled to the United States for refuge. Whilst in America, Alvin Johnson invited Piscator to teach at *The New School for Social Research* within which *The University in Exile* was founded by Piscator and fellow German and Austrian intellectuals who had also sought refuge from Hitler and the Nazi party. Piscator began to run the school's theatre department and founded *The Dramatic Workshop,* where he taught his idea of a politically engaged and socially relevant theatre. It was a school that became a theatre.

> The theatre was no longer trying to appeal to the audience's emotions alone, was no longer speculating on their emotional responsiveness it consciously appealed to their intellect. No longer mere elan, enthusiasm, rapture, but enlightenment, knowledge and clarity were to be put across (Boeser-Knut, V, A. 1986. P. 49)

AIDS resistance groups borrowed from this understanding of political theatre in order to impart cultural intervention during the AIDS crisis. George Piggford analyses political theatre's impact on effecting social change during the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s. His study begins by detailing how AIDS became the subject of a number of textual

practices mainly as: signifier, metaphor and pathology. While writers of creative texts responded not only to the public discourse that shaped the epidemic but also to individual narrative experiences with AIDS, these literary discourses attempted to read AIDS but also highlighted the private sphere. He writes, 'In short, theoretical writing about AIDS has focused on language, and literary responses have used language as a means to attempt to inscribe the body-with-AIDS' (Piggford, G. 2000 p. 169). Piggford recognises that medical discourse is privileged in discussions about AIDS, mainly because from the outset the medical establishment has been expected to find a cure. Douglas Crimp articulated that AIDS went beyond medical discourse and indeed the social and political.

> AIDS has precipitated a crisis that is not primarily medical, or even social and political; AIDS has precipitated a crisis of signification. The 'meaning' of AIDS is hotly contested in all of the discourses that conceptualize it and seek to respond to it (Crimp, D. 1988. P.4).

Piggford analyses the theatrical response to AIDS through *Angels in America* and reveals how the play ultimately rejects a discourse of AIDS that is focused on the threshold of death. He notes that this is done though the character of Prior and his acceptance of the 'divine gift of AZT' and therefore, Piggford states that he places his trust in the 'teleological view of history' and so focusing on the purpose rather than the cause. He states:

> It is at this point in the play that Kushner turns from Walter Benjamin's notion of history as catastrophe and instead "rushes headlong into a fairy tale of progress" Kushner uses humour to undercut the seriousness of the overdetermined nature of the significations of AIDS (ibid, p,188).

Additionally, Richard Goldstein evaluates Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart* specifically its overtly political themes in response to the negligence of government regarding

the AIDS crisis, recognising the play as ‘a call to arms and to sexual continence. Throughout his work, devotion is the ideal poised against the twin realities of promiscuity and hostility from the world at large’ (Goldstein, R. 1990. P. 308). Moreover, Goldstein notes that although the play was written by and for the gay community, its commercial success suggests that audiences, for works about this epidemic, is broader and more empathetic than ever before (Goldstein, R. 1990. P. 296). I argue that *We're Here* employs techniques that are utilised within these two plays, which are considered seminal texts within political theatre, in terms of their cultural intervention and efforts to effect social change as well as their commercial and critical success.

The power of political theatre lies in its ability to present issues through theatricality in a way that resonates and impacts personal opinion, it is therefore an artistic response to specific issues that intersect on a personal, social and political level. Audience members watch a performance as an individual but through their shared experience of dramaturgy (that is, a clear consideration of the spectator's point of view and potential reaction which dominates the conception, construction and staging of a piece of art), performances become a collective consciousness, that every member of the audience becomes a part of. Within this understanding, performance is able to inform people of serious subject matters viscerally and directly, but that doesn't mean to say it can't also be entertaining. *The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America,* both of which incorporate the seriousness of AIDS alongside humour and entertainment, similarly *We're Here* informs audiences of serious and urgent issues but rather than presenting them through intense lecturing, sombre acts or even by being overtly political, they are presented through the entertainment of drag and the dynamics of reality TV. The subtle undertones that address the seriousness of socio-political issues are displayed through a celebration of being one's true self and sharing that version of themselves with the community that show up to witness and celebrate with them which reveals the political power

of drag. The drag shows are undeniably entertaining, fully adorned with dance routines, lip syncing, sequins, hair, makeup, and comedy. At first glance these performances don't obviously scream 'political theatre', yet I argue their underlying messages are inherently politicised because each performance is thoroughly informed by socio-political issues that have personally impacted those performing. However, because viewers often actively choose the information they consume, it is reasonable to question whether political theatre simply reinforces ideologies and views one already associates with. Yet, by embedding socio-political messaging indicative of political theatre within contemporary entertainment, the show is able to impart its cultural intervention to viewers who might otherwise not engage with the shows efforts to effect social change.

Reality TV Format

In his interview, LoGreco explains that the show's casting strategy differed from the norms of reality TV. By deviating from tradition casting protocol and by conducting significant research on location, LoGreco insists that the show was elevated beyond the realm of reality TV entertainment. He states:

> Trying to find people who represented queer identity front and centre but also had another significant facet of their identity was an important part of how we could show their journeys are not monolithic. That's been a gratifying part of deepening the storytelling (Thorpe, D. 2021).

Annett Hill states that reality TV has become 'shorthand for what people think is wrong with modern culture - time wasting. low grade, rubbish', in saying that, however, she also recognises the genre as being 'the most commercially successful format in the most dominant marketing medium in history' (Hill, A. 2015. p.3). The paradox of these statements reveals just how influential the genre is in term of its socio-cultural impact. She notes that the ambiguity of audience's reactions to reality TV is further reflect by the television industry

itself noting, ‘the relatively low ambiguous statues of reality series is evidence by the fact that there is only one Primetime Emmy given to reality as a genre’ (Hill, A.2017, p.3). Despite this, Hill acknowledges that not all reality TV is regarded as bad, there are shows that garner critical acclaim as well as economic success, usually these are the ones that highlight human talent and achievement such as *Master Chef* (2001-present). Her analysis attempts to define the genre of reality TV with great difficulty as she contends that reality TV is, a ‘moving target’ and differing discourses mean that as a genre, reality TV resist single identity:

> Reality TV is a container for a range of diverse programmes, series, formats, and events in which elements of documentary, talent shows, gameshows, talk shows, soap operas, melodramas and sports mix together to produce sub-genres. (Hill, A. 2015, p.9).

Although defined by *HBO* as an example of the subgenre of the ‘un-scripted series’, which refers to programming that does not require a formatted script, *We’re Here* is positioned within Hill’s understanding of reality TV in which she describes the genre as being a stand in for a wider set of enquiries about a cultural formation, constantly on the move, as well as a meta genre that ‘raises questions about the status of representation and reality in contemporary societies’ (ibid. 2015. p. 14). Combining research on the phenomenon of reality TV, she further expresses that the genre blurs the lines between reality and fiction to create ‘trans-reality’, a term used to describe reality as something that is constructed within media and society (ibid, 2015, p.14). *We’re Here’s* resonance with political theatre and its approach to social commentary through performance, means it also aligns with Hill’s analysis that claims reality TV is a constantly evolving and migrating genre ‘where there is a complex interplay among the meanings of nation, gender, class, celebrity, and globalism on the terrain marked out by reality television (ibid. 2015.p.14-15). She explains that within this understanding reality TV ‘becomes a carrier for theories, ideas, and values that shift across a

global mediascape' (ibid. 2015, p.15). Expanding upon this, research also recognises that reality TV acts as a marker for major change. Using *The Apprentice UK* (2005-present) as an example, Hill explains that the notion of the celebrity entrepreneur is situated in a 'wider matrix of media discourses through which people acquire ideas and knowledge about society more generally' (ibid. 2015, p.15). *We're Here* is situated within these particular readings of reality TV because although it can be defined as reality content, it also questions the social order and subverts hetero-normative society, particularly surrounding the marginalisation of the queer experience in specific American locations. Therefore, the show, as Hill articulates, can be signified as a carrier of ideologies and messages that inform audiences of queer experience, oppression and marginalisation as an act of cultural intervention via the means of popular entertainment.

Social Commentary.

We're here presents its messaging and ideological standpoints not only through politicised drag performances but also through subtle symbolism and iconography. The first season debuted during the United Sates 2020 election year. Although President Trump lost the contentious election to President-Elect Joe Biden, the show was filmed during the campaign trails. Trump's presidency had and continues to have damaging consequences for the LGBTQ+ community and people of colour, particularly in small-town America, where right-wing conservative politics are often predominant. The concern for queer and people of colour living in these spaces is represented through cut aways to 'Trump 2020' campaign posters and flags as well as white supremist symbolism such as Confederate flags. Similar to the way *Paris is Burning* does not overtly or directly reference AIDS, *We're Here* doesn't explicitly state what these flags and posters represent to the people featured in the show. Instead, they are juxtaposed with scenes that show the queens being harassed or being questioned about

their presence, displaying the subtle nuances of their symbolism. Imagery and cuts such as these further uphold Wolfgang Iser's notion of *Phenomenology.* Iser contends that a reader (and in the context of this thesis, the viewer) brings to a text, their own pre-disposition. In this context, the viewer is a participant in the text, and can make connections and 'read' the text as participants, without having 'meaning' inscribed or dictated to them. Iser writes:

> We have the experience of a world, not understood as a system of relations which wholly determine each event, but as the open totality the synthesis of which is inexhaustible. . . From the moment that experience - that is, the opening on to our de facto world - the beginning of knowledge, there is no longer any way of distinguishing a level of a priori truths and one of factual ones, way necessarily be and what it actually is. (Merleau-Ponty, M, 1962. p, 220.)

These scenes seek to highlight the show's stance regarding the current culture wars in the United States, of which *ABC News* identifies:

> Identity – including race, sexual orientation, gender – have become lightning rod subjects of hundreds of bills in state legislatures across the country as Americans across the political spectrum seek to define the nation's values (Alfonseca, K. 2023).

This is a leading narrative by conservative politicians and although culture wars are not a new phenomenon, the recent debates surrounding identity and LGBTQ+ issue and rights are at an unprecedented level. The show's discussed throughout this thesis act as an important indication that popular culture can effect social change, just as *Paris is Burning* facilitated an important academic and social debate surrounding identity, gender and sexuality, shows such as *We're Here* continue to highlight the importance of on-screen representation. The show therefore upholds Hill's understanding that reality TV can 'raise questions about the status of

representation and reality in contemporary societies' (Hill, A. 2015. p.14), as United States politicians ramp up their 'anti-trans movement, which coincides with restrictions on what children can learn in school that targeted race, sexual orientation and gender identity' (Alfonseca, K. 2023). *We're Here* undermines the longstanding assumption that small-town America shares this political ideology. Alternatively, the show reveals the multitude of identities that inhabit them, who no longer wish to remain invisible or marginalised. Therefore, it challenges the dominant structures of power within society and community by providing a platform for queer and racial identity.

Despite the increased representation of queerness and queer people in American popular culture there remains a discord between symbolic cultural progression and the reality of queer lives that continue to live with the threat of violence, discrimination, and oppression. *The Centre for American Progress* released a report detailing the damaging effects of Trump's term in office, specifying how he launched a barrage of attacks that infringe the rights of LGBTQ+ people. The discriminatory policies created barriers to accessing critical government services and exacerbated the existing inequalities between 'LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ people in the realms of health, employment, the justice system and law enforcement interactions, education, housing, and immigration' (Medina, C, Gruberg, S, Mahowald, L, Santos, T. 2021). This report again highlights the continued urgency for inclusive and progressive mediated representation. It has become increasingly more evident, that the fight to preserve the rights of LGBTQ+ communities are even tougher in rural areas where some hold deeply conservative and Christian values. The heteronormative white patriarchal discourse, often found in the rural small towns that feature in *We're Here*, has been agitated under the Trump administration and have also increasingly been reflected in society. After Trump's election, the *Southern Poverty Law Centre* counted 201 incidents of election-related harassment and intimidation across the country, including incidents targeting

the LGBTQ+ community and people of colour. (Hauck, G. 2019). The 2019 FBI statistics also reported that 1 in 5 hate crimes that are reported are motivated by anti-LGBTQ+ bias. The LGBTQ+ community makes up 4.5 percent of the U.S. population, yet according to the FBI's report, they comprise 18.5 percent of hate crime victims. (Fitzsimons, T. 2019). Perhaps more problematic is that these statistics do not represent the full extent of hate crimes, as many people choose not to report hate crimes for fear of outing themselves and the repercussions of doing so. The report noted:

> To the extent that we don't have universal protections from discrimination on the basis of employment, housing, and public accommodations, if someone comes forward to report a hate crime, they could also be officially outing themselves as LGBTQ+. In a smaller or rural community, that outing could result in an eviction or loss of a job. (Hauck, G. 2019).

These continuing socio-political issues are reflected in *We're Here*. In episode three Charles, a homosexual resident of Branson, Missouri discusses his reason for remaining closeted in his workplace, where he works as a theatre performer. He explains, "certain theatres in town will not hire gay people… if they found out you were gay, I think you would be let go." (2020). He concludes that because of discrimination and the staunch religious beliefs in Branson, a lot of queer people also remain closeted. Under the Obama Administration, the rise in crime records resulted in the government implementing legislation to prevent employment discrimination, such as EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Council). In 2009, the *Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr Hate Crimes Prevention Act* was passed. The act expanded on the 1969 United States federal hate-crime law to include crimes motivated by a victim's actual or perceived gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability. The act was written into legislation in response to two hate crimes that took place in the same year (1998), in Laramie, Wyoming and Jasper, Texas. James Byrd Jr, an African American man,

was murdered by three white supremacists in Jasper, after they tied him to the back of a truck and dragged him three miles until he was decapitated. Matthew Shepard, an openly gay man, was tortured and murdered by two men in Laramie. The murder of Shepard was motivated by anti-gay sentiment and during the trial the defence team unsuccessfully employed a *Gay Panic Defence,* which is a legal strategy used to defend actions of violence towards homosexuals as 'uncontrolled' anger. Shepard's funeral became a media spectacle when religious anti-gay protesters, led by minister and pastor of Westboro Baptist Church, Fred Phelps, gathered outside shouting homophobic epithets such as "God hates fags" (Reed, C. 2003). In an interview for *The Observer,* he told reporters, 'This poor little pervert was trawling for sex in a cowboy bar at midnight in Wyoming, and he gets himself killed. He's not a hero but an idiot' (Reed, C. 2003). In response to Shepard's murder, B. Ruby Rich indicates that, 'His cruel fate for the simple sin of homosexuality was a horrific reminder of exactly how provisional and geographically specific contemporary tolerance remains.' (Rich, B, R. 2005).

The recognition of geographically specific homophobia became central to Samantha Allen's research. In 2017 Allen, a transgender woman from Utah, traveled through America's red states (a term often used to describe states that predominantly vote for or support the Republican party) in order to understand how queer communities existed in these locations and how they have been impacted by Trump's presidency and politics. She writes:

> There is a vitality to queerness where you least expect it. A refusal to be complacent. A warmth to being bonded together by the omnipresent atmospheric pressure of bigoted politics and legislative threats. Because we are still climbing up from the bottom, we still need each other (Allen, S. 2019).

Allen continually articulates the need for LGBTQ+ communities to come together to fight oppressive legislation, particularly because she notes that even when queer rights are afforded

there is an instant need for anti-LGBTQ+ politicians and hate groups to turn their focus to the next 'issue'. When same sex marriage became legal nationwide in 2015 Allen notes that anti-LGBTQ+ hate groups needed a new scapegoat in which to stay relevant, with the most predominant 'issue' currently focusing on identity and trans rights this came in the form of SB 3. SB 3, also known as the Bathroom Bill, requires transgender people to use the bathroom that coincides with the gender marker on their identification. She details the impact the Trump administration has had on LGBTQ+ rights in places that are considered 'red' states, writing, 'it is no coincidence that there were over double the number of anti-transgender bills filed in state legislation in 2016 as there were in 2015' (Allen, S. 2019). Whilst arguably red states still lack certain freedoms that those in areas such as New York and California are afforded, there remains a strong and persistent queer presence and sense of community who continue to fight tooth and nail to preserve it, and this is precisely the point of *We're Here.* When Allen states, 'Because we are still climbing up from the bottom, we still need each other' (Allen, S. 2019), she emphasizes the vitality of representation, and in this context, it is worth drawing attention to the title of the show *We're Here*, which embodies the para-social importance of popular culture.

Case Study: Chris

> I was born in a small town, I came out in a small town, I know these hardships and challenges, but I also know the joy of being in a small town. – Shangela Laquifa. (White, B. 2020).

The last episode of *We're Here's* first season directly addresses growing up queer in the red states of America. After being cut short because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the last episode differs from others. Whilst quarantining in their individual homes, the queens discuss their childhoods and upbringing in confessional style interviews. Coming from rural towns

respectively (Paris, Texas, Johnson City, Tennessee and Columbus, Georgia) Bob, Eureka and Shangela discuss the personal apprehension they felt towards visiting the show's locations. Each of them begins by detailing the various ways they tried to hide their homosexuality during their upbringing, fearing how their communities would treat them or even ostracise them. To avoid being laughed at, Shangela chose to present herself as the class clown, while Eureka explains how she concealed her homosexuality by conforming to hetero-normative stereotypes, such as being on the football team, before tragically attempting suicide after finally coming out. Bob alternatively turned to religion and tried to "pray the gay away" (2020). During a revealing statement, he explains, "all I have to do is pretend to be straight until the day I die, and I'll be fine" (2020). Their childhood stories reveal the impact of living in service to traditional social standards, living with a same sex preference and living in rural, red state America. It is interesting to note that all three queens state that they only felt happy and accepted for who they are once they had left their hometowns and made connections with queer communities in more accepting places, such as New York and Los Angeles. In contemplation, however, and upon visiting the small town in the series, they acknowledge that some people don't have the luxury of leaving and, more importantly, some people don't want to. And for those people, what the show achieves is a powerful portrayal of how painful and isolating it can be to experience life from a marginalised position, when identity doesn't fit inside the categories of location one finds themself in.

Including Chris's narrative in the show reveals an interesting divergent view from the queer people and stories featured because he is heterosexual, yet he also feels his identity does not fit within the categories of his location. In the third episode of *We're Here's* first season, the filming took place in Branson, Missouri, and Chris's narrative was used to bring attention to the repressive nature of prevailing masculine ideologies within rural America. Chris, a straight white father, has struggled to live up to the hyper-masculinity projected on to him by

his grandfather, who raised him. The consequences of this led him to repress his emotions after being taught "real men don't cry" (2020). Because of this repression, he explains how he has struggled to come to terms with his young daughter's illness. His inability to process his feelings and emotions stopped him from being able to connect to and help his daughter and his ex-wife. His emotional detachment also took a toll on his marriage and mental health, which eventually led to a divorce and a suicide attempt. Whilst researching the impact of toxic masculinity, Y Joel Wong found that men who conformed to traditional masculine norms had higher rates of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and stress. (Weir, K. 2017).

Chris's upbringing shows the damage white American patriarchal culture has on the white working-class men these strictures are supposed to privilege. Chris's deterioration of mental health in later life is said to have stemmed from his need to conform to traditional modes of toxic masculinity and his need for repression. Sociologist R W Connell refers to this as Hegemonic Masculinity. She recognises that hegemonic masculinity is the stereotypic depiction of masculinity which informs young males of what they should aspire to be in order to be recognised as a 'real man' (Connell, R, W. 1987). Connell argues that there is not one masculinity, but rather the concept comprises several masculinities, each associated with different positions of power. Hegemonic masculinity, in Connell's terms, has come to constitute the most socially dominant and aspired form of masculinity available to men. She argues that an important feature of hegemonic masculinity is the use of 'toxic' practices, often associated with the term toxic masculinity, such as violence, competition and aggression, which serve to reinforce social dominance (Connell, R, W. 1987). Individuals learn and reproduce social codes of behaviour through imitation and social interaction, which form conceptions of masculinity. John Beynon recognises that, 'masculinity is always interpolated by cultural, historical and geographical location (Beynon, J. 2001. p1). In his

work, he explores how the socio-historical and cultural formation of masculinity is anchored in time and space. Similarly, Benshoff and Griffin articulate that,

> In these realms, boys and men learn how to embody traditional images of masculinity through both conscious and unconscious study and imitation…homosocial spaces work not only to instil a sense of masculinity but also as a space for men to grapple with their own doubts and abilities to succeed as a man. (Benshoff, H, M, Griffin, S. 2009. p 373)

Benshoff and Griffin's assessment of rural masculinity upholds Beynon's understanding that location is an influential factor in determining how men constitute and present the idea of masculinity. Their work also upholds Judith Butler's (1990) notions of gender performativity, which argues that gender is socially constructed and involves subconscious and repetitive imitation. The fundamental aspect of rural hyper-masculinity also relies on repression and detachment from both emotion and other men.

John Ibson's research reveals that this type of masculine rhetoric has afflicted both men with same-sex attractions and those whose affection towards one another has no sexual dimension. In his analysis, he investigates the notion that American attitudes and expectations surrounding masculine ideals have led to a national loss of male intimacy. His work includes a systemic scrutiny of thousands of everyday photographs taken from the inception of photography until the 1950s. Recognising that the way men posed with each other changed markedly over the period surveyed, showing drastic changes in the quality of male relationships over a century of men's emotional history (Ibson, J. 2007. p191). One particular image shows two men posing, dressed in suits, with one sitting on the other's lap. Ibson claims the image is a typical representation of a portrait depicting male friendship, taken around the turn of the century. What is of interest for Ibson isn't the photo itself but rather,

how modern men react to it. He discusses how many observers of the image are confident that they see evidence of a romance or sexual relationship, but Ibson concludes that this observation reveals more about the observer than the subjects. His examination reveals how male intimacy during the turn of the twentieth century was so normalised that the subjects felt no need to reassure themselves or anyone observing the images that nothing culturally scorned was being displayed. (Ibson, J. 2007. p192). His chronological observation of male intimacy throughout the century cements the idea that masculine ideology is shaped by culture, time, and space. Ibson's study draws parallels to the evolution of men's intimacy on screen documented in Vito Russo's seminal text, *The Celluloid Closet* (1981). Inspired by the Russo's text, the documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (1995) discusses a time in cinematic history when men were free to express tenderness towards one another, "but as the world grew more aware of homosexuality, male to male affection would be seen as an incriminating act. The kiss would become assault" (Epstein, R, Freidman, J. 1995).

For many living in rural or small-town America, the persisting archetype and American myth of masculinity has long been defined by the strong and silent "Marlborough Man", a cowboy symbol that featured on the tobacco advertisements:

> The original Marlboro Men were excessive in their masculine virility. The models ranged from rough cowboys and sailors…its message – that of intrigue and masculinity – remained vibrant in the Marlboro Men of the decades to follow (Stanford. 2023).

America's historical attachment to the cowboy, or 'Marlboro Man', has led to a generational and geo-specific ideal of how men should conduct themselves and their masculinity. Therefore, deviating from these traditional ideologies is almost never synonymous with what Americans have conceptualised as the archetype for masculinity. Christopher Sharrett writes:

> The American ideal of the strong and silent male depends on the acceptance and even idealisation of repression, of concealing the deepest need behind a façade of denial (which is the stony-faced visage of the archetypal cowboy.) (Sharrett, C. 2013. p161).

The Western and American Identity

There is perhaps no genre that resonates so deeply with American sensibilities than the Western. Although many of the fundamental themes that make up its narratives- good vs bad, revenge, tragic hero and winning the affection of the heroine – all of which the Western helped define, can be attributed to many other film genres, it is the location of the Western that makes it a uniquely American form. In his articulation of the Western genre, Christopher Sharrett claims it is the most endemically American genre, that tells deeply utopian conservative stories about civilian expansion and conquering the American continent for patriarchal capital interest and at the heart of these stories is the strong and silent cowboy. (Sharrett, C. 2012. P. 165). Matthew Carter reasons that traditional understandings surrounding the frontier are to now be revised to included marginalised groups (some contemporary examples include *The Power of the Dog* (2021) and *Hostiles* (2017)). Therefore, Carter argues that the established history of the frontier has become wholly mythic. However, he finds it imperative to acknowledge the impact that the Western has had on America's collective memory. He writes:

> The source of this mythology was a political discourse informed by notions of Anglo-American racial superiority and American exceptionalism… The principal medium whereby frontier mythology was popularised in the twentieth century was, of course, the cinema. (Carter, M. 2014. P.1)

Carter identifies a significant link between, the Western as a cinematic phenomenon and, a national American ideology. Studying the Western has become a common source of

inspiration for scholars who are interested in analysing how mediated representations can influence national ideologies and help to reflect common attitudes surrounding masculinity and the politics of location and identity.

Serious theoretical analysis of the Western film began to occur during the 1950s and coincided with the emerging field of American Studies that focused on understanding the history, culture and society of the United States in order to establish an American national identity. During this time influential scholar, Henry Nash Smith (1950) recognised one of the first methodologies to American Studies known as the 'Myth and Symbol' approach. Bruce Kulick establishes that Smith's work inspired a series of books to adopt this approach in an attempt to relate consciousness to society in the United States, and for many it came to define American Studies (Kulick, B. 1972). Henry Nash Smith's ground-breaking study *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (1950)* suggests that American Studies and critical attention to the popular Western were symbiotic (Kulick, B. 1972). The vast landscape depicted in Westerns represents the American frontier, with its iconography used to symbolise early settlers' belief in Manifest Destiny. Fredrick Jackson Turner's essay titled *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), recognises that American values such as democracy, individualism and nationalism had not been afforded by European traditions but rather generated by the frontier. (McVeigh, S. 2007. P.2). Turner's work also became influential to American historians as it cemented America's historic attachment to the Western landscape. In doing so the iconography present in Westerns is not solely used to present an authentic location, but it also serves to uphold values that underpin American identity, and central to both the Western film and the national identity was the symbolic masculine image of the cowboy.

***Brokeback Mountain* Queered the Genre**

> 'Every once in a while, a film comes along that changes our perceptions so much that cinema history thereafter has to arrange itself around it.' (Rich, R. 2005).

Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) is a tale of forbidden love and the true cost of one's masculinity. The film centres around two young ranchers living in the rural west in the 1960s, who find work wrangling sheep for a season on Brokeback Mountain, when forced intimacy leads to sexual desire, Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist must navigate their feeling towards each other and societies enforced masculinity. The film explores the intersection of masculinity and homosexuality and asks questions about living in service to traditional social standards, living on the frontier and living with a same sex preference. *Brokeback Mountain* found itself in the centre of the social, political, and cultural arena due to the homosexual content and its inclusion within the Western genre.

The pinnacle of masculinity has long been attributed to the aforementioned American cowboy, and indeed, the characters in *Brokeback Mountain* are continually and deeply affected by this repressive and prevailing notion of masculinity. Ennis' repressed state, like Chris from *We're Here*, can be attributed to specific notions of masculinity that were imposed on him during his childhood. Because of this Ennis has an internalised homophobic concept of masculinity that he learned from his father, during a particular scene Ennis remember when his father took him to see the corpse of a rancher who was beaten to death for the relationship, he had with a man he lived with. The scene suggests that Ennis' father played a role in the murder, thus utilising the Freudian theory of 'Castration Anxiety' (1927) which sees sons imitate their fathers. Ennis' homosexuality defies the masculine norms under which he had been raised and so to prevent a similar threat, he adopts the actions and prejudice displayed by his father, which acts as the catalyst for his repression. Consequently, when Jack

suggests that they leave and simply live together in peace, Ennis is reminded of this childhood trauma and warns Jack that if their feelings were ever to “grab on to us again in the wrong place, at the wrong time, we’ll be dead” (Lee, A. 2005). John Ibson explains ‘for two American males of Jack and Ennis’ era and upbringing, it was difficult enough to even bring that desire to consciousness left alone realise it. (Ibson, J. 2007. p.191). Ibson’s analysis employs time and space to provide reasons why young men living in the 1960s rural west would see repression as the only solution to the dilemma of homosexuality and provides and understanding as to why generational homophobia in specific locations persists.

As discussed already within this thesis, a key social pattern of American society is the traditional nuclear family. The characters in the film use family life to present their deep internal conflicts between their desire and need to live within the social norm. In his essay Jim Stacey asserts that both the Del Mar and Twist family are clearly situated within ‘the Americana’, concluding that Ennis is willing to accept the male chauvinism of the era whilst Jack fights his father-in-law for the position of a dominant male in the household. (Stacy, J. 2007. p.39-40). A central debate among critics was an understanding that the character of Jack is much more accepting of his homosexual desires than that of Ennis and repression is the reason Ennis refuses to relocate. However, as Ennis points out, their economic difference also plays a role. Ennis’s refusal to meet with Jack more regularly is not only to hide his homosexual desires but also because he has to work to provide for his family. Jack, however, has married into money and has a well-paid job in advertising. Because of this, economics and place also circumscribe what identities are available to each character. Through his marriage and stronger economic foothold, Jack is afforded greater mobility and through it adopts an ‘identity closer to what contemporary spectators, especially urban gay men, recognise’ (Perez, H, 2007, p.81). Ennis, however, does not conform to any prevailing expectations of how gay men should behave and appear. His attachment to his lifestyle defies

the stereotype, causing the mountain to become his metaphorical closet. Ibson further states that gay men who resemble the gay stereotype and remain in the place in which culture has consigned them, don't tend to disturb the general population as they have grown accustomed to and increasingly comfortable with this understanding. Therefore, because *Brokeback Mountain* broadens the cultural notion of what gay men might be like, where they might live, and work allows the film's characters and themes to become culturally subversive. (Ibson, J. 2007, p.195-196).

Gary Needham raises the question of whether *Brokeback Mountain* should be classified as a Western. He claims that in order to answer this question, would mean implicating the viewer into either rejecting or accepting that the much-cherished genre has an established queer history. Needham notes that homophobic responses to *Brokeback Mountain* resist viewing the film as a Western all together (Needham, G. 2010. p.33). Whether audiences reject or accept *Brokeback Mountain* within the Western genre both prove problematic. First, when associated and categorised within the Western genre, problems arise with people ignoring any genuine comparisons and insight into the genre. Instead, choosing to associate it only in mockery of its gay cowboy leads and therefore, failing to view it as a queer Western Needham recognises a missed opportunity to write homosexuality into its narrative history. Alternatively, he points out the problem with denying the film a place in the genre 'discounts the ways in which the film reworks the Western formula through a specific set of political concerns that relates the troubled history of homosexuality and desire through national mythology and genre.' (Needham, G. 2010. p.34). Ibson concludes it is not the gay characters within the film that outraged the American public, but rather that those gay characters do not resemble the stereotype in which American's have become accustomed, they have broken free from the place in which culture has consigned them. Similarly, the inclusion of gay characters did not ignite a homophobic backlash, but rather the fact that they were included in

a film with predominant Western themes and narratives did. The idea of queering the Western caused outrange because it subverts the fundamental myths and ideologies Americans have come to associate with the genre and the frontier, offering a particular insight into the social programming of rural American communities over a vast period of time and one that continues today.

A Queer History of the Western

Whilst Needham considered whether *Brokeback Mountain* is to be considered a western at all, perhaps, his more important question is, if the Western is typically seen as a 'straight' genre, then why do we feel the need to defend it? (Needham, G. 2010. P.31). Needham cites author Chris Packard, who provides a recent historic corrective that assesses the all-male culture of the American West and writes:

> If there is something national about the cowboy and the frontier and if there is something homoerotic about the partnership, he forms in the wilderness, then there is something homoerotic about American national identity as the literary West conceives it. (Needham, G. 2010. P.34).

Steve Neale further establishes that repressed homosexual voyeurism is the foundation of masculine film genres (Neale, S. 1983). In terms of the Western genre, the hetero-normative and patriarchal ideals embedded in them means that the male body is never to be presented as the object of another man's gaze. This is also true of other genres, such as crime films. Therefore, filmmakers must repress the erotic content displayed within Westerns and present it in more codified ways that adhere to socially normative forms such as intimate fight scenes, phallic iconography, and the expulsion of female characters. Although *Brokeback Mountain* offers its audience overt depictions of homosexual intimacy, it also follows this

understanding by Neale as it shows the complex relationship between homosexual desire and masculine ideals by presenting homosexual intimacy as a sometimes violent and an emotionally complex subject that the characters struggle to navigate.

In his analysis of 'buddy films', including the Western *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), Russo articulates that, films which feature male homosocial relationships depend upon the problematic exclusion of women and other men that rival this idealised pairing, concluding that these male leads can always be read with homoerotic undertones. However, he states that this reading depends on a 'gay sensibility' that can be present even if there is no sigh of homosexuality, 'this gay sensibility then is largely a product of oppression, the necessity to hide so well for so long' (Russo, V. 1987). As such, because homosexuality is never synonymous with what Americans have come to understand as the frontier myth or American masculinity, the hyper-masculine and hetero-normative tendencies of the genre must therefore disguise queer desire. Thomas Schatz provides a significant study of film genres that further identifies that 'the Western represents American culture, explaining its present in terms of its past and virtually redefining the past to accommodate the present.' (Schatz, T. 1981). If, as Schatz suggests, the Western represents American culture by presenting the present through its history, then *Brokeback Mountain* is to be considered a Western as it integrates traditional Western motifs and iconography, whilst simultaneously introducing new concepts that blend the Western with melodrama, creating the notion of a contemporary Western. Consequently, to consider *Brokeback Mountain* a Western implies that homosexuality has always been part of the Western narrative because it also follows both the classic and contemporary way in which Westerns display their homoerotic content.

> *Brokeback Mountain*, as a contemporary Western, helped shape a retrospective reading of older Westerns that have either struggled to disavow their homoerotic

underpinnings or have made obvious a range of queer possibilities. (Needham, G. 2010. P.59).

Towards the end of the 1960s, a new take on the Western was emerging, one that Needham claims 'was rooted in gay cultural production' (Needham, G. 2010. P.67). He states that, the fact they were independent from Hollywood, located in two areas; New York underground cinema and the Los Angeles based mail order physique culture, is important as they 'confirm an alternative history of the Western that makes no apologies for the homoerotic fascination that it stirs.' (Needham, G. 2010. P.67). Most notable of these underground films was Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968) which provides a comical and definitively queer take on the Western. Even though it is a queer parody of the Hollywood Western, the film can still be classified as a legitimate Western. Needham's reading of the film states that *Lonesome Cowboys* is still typical of the Western genre because it reproduces a binary opposition between the outlaw cowboys and the good townsfolk, whilst also presenting an uneasy opposition between heterosexual and homosexual masculinities. (Needham, G. 2010. P. 71). On discussing the impact and inspiration of *Lonesome Cowboys*, Rich concludes that Warhol had noticed the appeal of the hunky cowboys for the gay imagination and had tapped into the counterculture that was taking over the mainstream. She states that 'morality was up for grabs, and Warhol's hip version of aberrance was wildly appealing.' (Rich, B, R. 2005).

Midnight Cowboy (1969) premiered a year later, telling the story of an all-American cowboy who leaves the frontier behind to become a prostitute in New York City. Rich articulates the link between the two films claiming that *Midnight Cowboy* 'presents an urban vision that explicitly followed Warhol's lead in ascribing queerness to cowboy's duds and physique and enduring male friendships.' (Rich, B, R. 2005). Although the film is often not classified within the Western genre, it undeniably presents audiences with typical iconography

associated with the Western cowboy. In a discussion about the cowboy iconography, Russo quotes a monologue from the film in which Ratso criticises Joe's Western outfit and states "that stuff is strictly for faggots" to which Joe replies "John Wayne, you're gonna tell me John Wayne's a fag?" Within this exchange Russo concludes that, if there is no real difference between the cowboy hero and the faggot on forty-second street, then what remains of American masculinity? (Russo, V. 1987, p.81). Furthermore, he notes that this scene comes closest to saying that the costume is only an image, as much a lie as all the other ways in which we force the movies to serve our dreams of an America that never really existed. (Russo, V. 1987, p.81). Russo's analysis here upholds the notion that the Western film is so revered in American culture because it serves to uphold a mythologised version of its past. Regardless of the fact that *Midnight Cowboy* obviously queered the cowboy and cemented the cowboy hustler motif, it never garnered criticism on the same level as *Brokeback Mountain* and a main reason for this is because of its location. Perez (2007) argues that the reason *Midnight Cowboy* did not receive criticism on the same level as *Brokeback Mountain* is because the film is set far from the frontier, presenting an urban landscape that affords a more accepting rationalisation of the gay cowboy. This is in line with the metanarrative for the modern gay identity, which is largely founded on migration to metropolitan locales such as New York and a certain gay cosmopolitanism. Through providing a re-view of classic Westerns, it is conclusive to note that films such as *Brokeback Mountain* and *Lonesome Cowboys* merely confirm that the Western already contains yet suppresses the notion of homoeroticism and same sex desire. Furthermore, the queer themes presented in *Brokeback Mountain* outraged American audiences because, in doing so, queered America's historical attachment to its frontier past, which played a fundamental role in shaping America's national identity.

Subverting Masculinity

Chris's inclusion in *We're Here* highlights the significant notion of conflict between an external persona and an internal self. Similar to the characters examined in *Brokeback Mountain* and the enduring influence of Westerns on American ideas of masculinity, society's views and labels have also shaped Chris. In response to this communal perception, he presents a socially accepted façade of masculinity. On first meeting, Chris immediately explains, "I used to sweep everything under the rug. I went years just not knowing I have anxiety and depression. That was something I never knew how to process" (2020). He explains how his participation in drag had helped him to realise the issues he was having. He recognised how the positivity and inclusiveness of drag affected him, allowing him to shed the veneer of masculinity he had always hidden behind. Instead, he could present himself in a way that felt most innate to him, subverting his understanding and exceptions of masculinity and instead allowed him to see that there are many ways to be a man and in particular better ways to be a father. In his essay on the empowerment of drag, Steven J. Hopkins articulates not only Chris's positive experiences but also the genuine psychological benefits that come with the liberation of drag performances. He notes that female impersonation often brings significant benefits, as many people who participate in drag experience a sense of empowerment, gain contextual status, and wield considerable power in their own communities, ultimately becoming more well-adjusted individuals (Hopkins, S, J. 2004, p.137). He claims:

> Moreover, the journey undertaken to become a female impersonator reveals rather common patterns of behaviour and that the activity is contextually normal, not deviant. The actual contextual experience of doing female impersonation is quite often positive, powerful and normal. (Hopkins, S, J. 2004. p.137).

The notion of toxic masculinity experienced by Chris during his upbringing and surroundings was first coined in the Mythopoetic Men's Movement during the 1980s and 90s and came into popular lexicon around the same time. The movement involved a variety of self-help and therapy workshops for men and opposed social pressures placed on men to be violent and competitive in favour of more deep and real connections (Ferber, A. 2000, p. 35). During this period, many academics and writers identified a crisis of masculinity. They noted how contemporary identity politics had affected traditional notions of white masculinity, specifically how feminist movements were challenging traditional male authority. Toxic masculinity mostly defines itself in opposition to anything culturally associated with women or femininity, which is why it is driven by an overwhelming fear of emasculation. To avoid such emasculation, some men revert to a particular set of harmful actions and cultural practices, yet none of those behaviours are inherent or biological traits of men, rather, it is something they portray. To comprehend Chris's realisation of gender stereotypes through the act of drag means recognising that gender as a concept, functions as a repetitively and subconsciously performance of the gender assigned to sex. As such, we make it appear as though it is a naturally occurring reality. Only by consciously engaging with gender and the body - through politicised drag - can we challenge the fiction of gender binaries.

> Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts…bodily gestures, movements and styles…constitute the illusion of an abiding gestured self. (Butler, J. 1990).

In *Bodies that Matter* (1996), Judith Butler extends her theory of binary sex and gender to argue that binary thinking causes damage by subjecting bodies to exclusion or 'othering' those who do not fit within the hetero-normative, binary-gendered system. Butler demonstrates how the power of heterosexual hegemony forms the 'matter' of bodies, sex and gender,

stating that power operates to constrain sex from the start and define what counts as a viable sex, and therefore epitomising the bodies that don't 'matter' are intersexed bodies. Intersexed bodies are a concept Michel Foucault discussed through the memoir of Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth century hermaphrodite who committed suicide after being raised female but in adulthood was forced to live as a man after medical examinations determined her to be 'more properly' male. Butler discussed the similar case of David Riemer in *Undoing Gender* (2004), known anonymously in medical circles as the John/Joan case. After a botched circumcision in infancy, Psychologist John Money advised Riemer's parents to raise him as a girl, using a combination of hormone therapy, encouragement of appropriate gender role behaviour and sexological therapy with Money. During adolescence, Reimer suffered from depression and refused to continue therapy sessions, which resulted in his father telling him the truth about his past. Considering this information, Reimer decided to reverse his reassignment and live as a male. However, his depression continued, and he committed suicide at 38. Both Barbin and Reimer expose the fatal consequences that come with the pressure to conform to both a medical and social, gendered norm additionally, they highlight the political importance of both Butler and Foucault's work on identity.

Geneticist Steve Jones discusses inter-sexed bodies and determines that people with unusual patterns of development are not especially rare, but in fact one in every three thousand babies has one of several errors that can modify reproductive organs. According to Jones, a web of hormones, enzymes, and controls within the cell can be altered in many ways, thus determining that sex is not an absolute. Nevertheless, due to the pressure of social norms and expectations, he accepts that mindless medical interference led to tragedy for those whose mental and physical worlds did not overlap. (Jones, S. 2002. p.67). The damage caused to people with intersexed bodies is rarely the result of ambiguous genitals, but similar to the

experience of Chris, the decision to raise them within a ridged gender binary and ideology caused significant damage to their identity later in life.

> For some, boy babies with a penis less than a centimetre and a half were operated upon to remove any evidence of maleness… although they might have managed quite well in their original state… often the need for certainty led to disaster. More than half of those who undergo such operations return for further adjustment, and some suffer lifelong trauma. (Jones, S. 2002. p.69).

Jones concludes that the insight into the complex path from gene to sex and gender to identity has now forced medicine and, indeed, society to become more tolerant, leaving the fixed idea of two distinct forms of humankind to begin to disappear. Whilst the previous examples may seem extreme, they highlight how the forced social and gender norms placed on both gender and bodies have overwhelmingly devastating consequences. Drag involves dismantling conventional notions of gender and gendered bodies', therefore drag provides Chris a space in which he can self-consciously subvert traditional and social conceptions of both his body and gender to allow a temporary escape from the masculine pressures place on him and his identity. As Chris prepares for his drag performance, Chris's drag mother Eureka reminds him to forget all that society has taught him about masculinity and to look past society's labels. Because as Eureka explains, "Men are constantly told they're not allowed to break out from these labels…fuck the stereotype, it doesn't make you less of a man; it makes you perfectly you" (2020). This statement by Eureka thoroughly articulates the art of drag and indeed the power of *We're Here*, for living in service to a social standard only diminishes the power of who people are as individuals and for Chris that 'service' almost cost him his life.

> We're showing how powerful drag can be, but more so how powerful accepting yourself and being open, to exposing yourself without fear [can be] ... That's what drag does for people. We help pull them out of that dark corner that they try to live in. (White, B. 2020).

An analysis of Chris reveals how both rural expectations of masculinity can have long-term damaging effects on men's mental health, and how his inclusion in *We're Here* demonstrates the empowerment and inclusivity of drag. Although Chris, a straight white male, on the surface represents the highest considered western social standing, the expectation to conform to and attain the ideals associated with white patriarchal masculinity caused him server mental health problems, yet through drag he managed to shed these expectations and the external persona he created in order to adhere to them to reflect the inner self he had repressed. What is particularly evident is how drag can help both the participant and the audience to rethink social expectations of gender binaries and question fixed notions of identity and location politics.

Case Study: Tanner

In the same episode featuring Chris, the show introduces audiences to a young man named Tanner, another Branson, Missouri native who is struggling to come to terms with his identity. Tanner is torn between his homosexuality and his Christian faith; he expresses incredulity that both identifying parts of him can coexist, which accumulates in him renouncing his homosexuality in favour of being a 'good Christian' (2020). He states, "My job is to speak God's truth and homosexuality is a sin" (2020). Tanner's family stands out for their supportiveness compared to others in the show. He came out to his mother Melissa years earlier, and she additionally takes part in the drag performance with her son. Melissa explains she has three sons, two of which are gay, and it was in fact her who contacted the show whilst

at a separate drag performance. Melissa claims the reason she wanted her son to be a part of the show was because she fears that because of his Christian beliefs Tanner won't get to experience love, and more concerning to her was that he had become ashamed and guilt-ridden about that aspect of his identity (White B. 2020). She also expresses guilt, as she believes that her decision to raise a family in a Christian community has had a profound impact on Tanner's self-acceptance. Both the cast and production team recount the reluctance and confusion Tanner felt when first approached about the show. Casting producer Jeffry Marx states:

> It's really hard to talk to a young gentleman that is definitely gay, as seen in this ep, but his life-view is so opposite of mine personally, let alone tons of people who will be watching the show… you could see him trying to make sense of all his answers as he was speaking. (White B. 2020).

When first introduced to Tanner and his supportive mother Melissa, one is left questioning how his religious surroundings can make him want to disown his sexuality and how he can willingly accept a life without romantic affection in order to conform to the ideal of a 'good Christian' and to feel accepted by his Christian community. This understanding pertains to Foucault's belief that religion was used as a form of power and control over the masses, and he recognised that:

> Penance was seen not as an act but as a status given to those who sought to avoid expulsion from their community, one requirement of that status was that the patient publicly tell the truth about him/herself and his/her sins (Holland, N, J. 2003, p. 82).

It is quickly established in the episode that the struggle between organised religious attitudes and one's own sense of sexual and gendered identity is a common experience for many homosexual Americans. Once he is paired up with his drag mother Bob, it becomes clear that

he had also undergone a similar experience dealing with the conflict between homosexuality and religiosity. When Bob was growing up, his own mother had struggled with her Christian faith when she came out as lesbian and ultimately identified as solely Christian. During the interview, Bob draws a connection between his own experience and Tanner's, stating that he grew up in a Baptist family and that he and his family members encountered comparable struggles. (White B. 2020).

Tanner explains to Bob that he briefly left his hometown of Branson and moved to Springfield, Missouri, in order to live more freely as a homosexual, but he instead found himself caught up in a life of drugs and alcohol. It is not explicitly stated, but rather suggested, that his struggle with drugs and alcohol was linked to the influence of other homosexuals while he was trying to embrace that aspect of his identity. This is problematic as it implies a connection between homosexuality and a destructive lifestyle, when in reality it is much more likely that he used drugs and alcohol as a way to cope due to his internal struggles and shame. Tanner explains that his lifestyle in Springfield ultimately drove him back to Branson to fully embrace Christianity and renounce his homosexuality, as he felt it had only caused him pain and harm.

Springfield, itself also has a controversial past when it comes to LGBTQ+ acceptance. In November 1989, the theatre department at Southwest Missouri State University staged a production of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, which details the protagonists struggle to raise awareness of the subjugation of gay people, which received national attention. In response to the play being performed in Springfield, a group calling itself 'citizens demanding standards' took out a full-page ad in the local paper, arguing that the play should be cancelled, it read:

> A. PROMOTES HOMOSEXUAL LIFE-STYLE AS NORMAL B. ADVOCATES A MILITANT HOMOSEXUAL POLITICAL AGENDA C. DEMONSTRATES IGNORANCE AS TO CAUSE AND PREVENTION OF A DEADLY VIRUS. D. USES UNNECESSARY PROFANITY. The ad continues, presenting "facts" about homosexuality and AIDS, and asks readers to write their representatives to let them know they object to the play and the use of their tax dollars to "promote homosexual, anti-family lifestyle. (Kristenburg, C. J. 1992).

Although the performance sold out, protests on both sides erupted. State representative Jean Dixon organised a petition that consisted of 5,000 signatures demanding the production be stopped, whilst at the same time a rally in favour of the performance was being held by PACT (people acting with compassion and tolerance). The president of PACT, Brad Evans, attended a vigil prior to the opening night's performance, whilst in attendance, his house was set on fire, destroying it and killing his two cats. When Dixon was asked about the fire, she said that Evans had probably set the fire himself and described him as a Satan worshiper. She later denied these statements. (Kristenburg, C. J. 1992).

The negative reaction aimed towards performances centred around LGBTQ+ expression still resonates with contemporary attitudes towards queer artistic expression in today's popular culture. Sam Smith's 2023 Grammy performance, which depicted stylised, camp, hellish imagery, received dozens of complaints to the FCC and was personally condemned by senator Ted Cruz and representative Marjory Taylor-Greene as they branded the performance 'evil and demonic'. In an article for *Billboard* Stephen Daw observes how the 'satanic panic' of the 1980s, which comprised satanic conspiracies within pop culture and what many thought to be an antiquated witch hunt are once again dominating internet discussions causing a moral panic, especially when it comes to LGBTQ+ artists (Daw, S. 2023). Dr

Joseph Uscinski argues that ‘as queer and trans people become a political topic, outrageous accusations follow (Daw, S. 2023).’ The satanic panic never went away, instead he argues, they just weren’t salient anymore to the national conversation and whilst it seems as though it is coming back out of nowhere, it is largely being driven by politicians, pastors and pundits (Daw, S. 2023). Paul Corupe also draws comparisons between the accusation of satanic worship levelled against artists in the 1980s and currently, most notably those accused play around with traditional notions of gender and sexuality. ‘Whether it be glam-rock stars in the 80s or pop artists today, there is a definite link in the ways in which both experiment with non-typical gender representation. (Daw, S. 2023). In light of this newly resurfaced moral panic, Solcyre Burga argues that the drag show has become the latest target of conservative criticism as the United States introduces anti-drag bills in at least 15 states (Burga, S. 2023). She notes that the bills ‘prohibits “adult cabaret performances” in public places where minors could watch. In Tennessee’s bill, “adult cabaret” is defined as “adult-oriented performances” that include “male or female impersonation” Although she notes that Tennessee’s law doesn’t make all drag shows illegal, she stresses that advocates still worry about the broader effects of the bills. Quoting the ACLU she writes:

> We are concerned that government officials could easily abuse this law to censor people based on their own subjective viewpoints of what they deem appropriate, chilling protected free speech & sending a message to LGBTQ Tennesseans that they are not welcome in our state. (Burga, S. 2023).

Missouri is a deeply religious state and, as Melissa articulates, has had a profound impact on her son’s identity growing up. Studies that present the religious makeup of the state provide contextual evidence as to how religion had a profound effect on Tanner. In terms of the religious composition of Missouri, *Pew Research Centre* published that Christians made up

77% of all religious people in the state, with Evangelicals made up 36% and Catholics 16%. The study surveyed the 'belief in God among Missouri adults', concluding that of the people surveyed, '70% were absolutely certain in their belief in God (Pew. 2024). Pew had previously conducted a study in 2003 which outlined a link between religiosity and homosexual opposition, determining that religiosity was an obvious factor in opposition to gay marriage (Pew. 2003). Therefore, Tanner's inclusion in this episode of *We're Here* and indeed this case study is to explore the socio-political factors that can provide answers as to why people struggle to reconcile religious and homosexuality identity.

As previously articulated, although the Western world is no longer in the depths of the AIDS epidemic thanks to huge scientific strides, AIDS nevertheless continues to cast a shadow on how discourse surrounding sexuality, religion, public health, and the lived experience is framed. The introduction of the term 'homosexual' during the late 19th and early 20th century has always carried with it certain negative connotations. According to Foucault, social control has subjected homosexuals to disciplining, marginalising, and subordinating effects ever since the classification of homosexuality (Foucault, M. 1976). He analyses how the emphasis in the case of the 19th century homosexual was not on actions but on the 'scientifically' determined condition of the individual. By defining and placing homosexuality within the discourse of science, Foucault claims:

> Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. And the homosexual was seen as being totally suffused with sexuality - It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions. (Spargo, T. 1999).

Foucault believes that the obsessions to classify sexuality and sexual fantasy began with religious obligation and confession, to confess ones 'sins' out of religious guilt and commitment. In *Howison Lectures* (1980), given by Foucault, a key point of his argument was what he considered a close articulation between political power and what he termed 'pastorship' through the institutions of law and necessity to confess. He claimed:

> To declare aloud and intelligibly the truth about oneself – I mean to confess – has in the Western world been considered for a long time either a condition for redemption for one's sins or an essential item in the condemnation of the guilty. (Holland, N, J. 2003, p. 80)

In the *Tanner Lecture* (1979), Foucault also linked religion with political power and influence, stating that the purpose of the lecture was to establish 'how this pastorship happened to combine with its opposite, the State. (Holland, N, J. 2003, p. 84). He notes how the Christian tradition further enhances the power of the pastor in summary of the lecture Nancy Holland concludes that for Foucault, the insidious destructive power of the modern Western world can be traced back to the configuration of the self, knowledge and power, all of which stemmed from aligning early Christian practices with political power (Holland, N, J. 2003, p. 86). I argue that Foucault's understanding of religion and state power has proliferated within American politics, and it is having devastating effects on current LGBTQ+ and women's rights.

The United States is historically a deeply religious country. Christianity was first introduced to the country during the period of European colonialization and continues as the United States has the largest Christian population in the world (Fieldstadt. E. 2017). Although saying anything definitively about long-term religious trends and beliefs is difficult, as quality surveys didn't begin until the mid-twentieth-century, historical studies of local communities

suggest that American society has been characterised by relatively high levels of religiosity since its inception (Chaves, M. 2017). Religion is not only a personal belief of the American public at large, it has affected almost all aspects of American life, from politics to views on sexuality, family values, feminism and larger theological topics such as human secularisation.

In America, professing Christian belief has become an informal test for nearly every political office. In 2017, *The Guardian* included a study conducted by Will Gervais, which showed that people perceive individuals without faith as more capable of immoral actions. Gervais conducted his research after discovering that US voters are less willing to elect an atheist candidate compared to any other category. According to Freedland (2017), Gervais believes that for voters, the belief in God is essential for morality, thus labelling atheists as "moral wildcards" lacking restraint. Gervais recognises that US political operatives have relied on this assumption as he states, ‘no openly non-believing candidate has ever won the presidential nomination of either major party’ (Freedland, J. 2017). Gervais articulates the paradox of this continuing political trend and strategy by explaining that even figures whose personal morality is notably questionable assert their affinity to God:

> Despite leading a life dedicated to the worship of mammon, Donald Trump was embraced by white evangelical voters, who accepted his declarations of devotion and saw him as preferable to church-going Clinton. It suggests that, while Americans expect their politicians to profess faith in God, they hardly demand consistency. (Freedland, J. 2017).

Mark Chaves analyses the trend between religion and politics, specifically conservative politics, in the United States. Observing that actively religious Americans are far more politically and socially conservative than less religious Americans. He articulates that this connection has existed since at least the 1970s and, in many cases, has grown stronger. With

actively religious participants supporting more restrictions on legal abortion, voting Republican and endorsing more traditional gender roles and as a result, he recognises that this has changed the place of religion in American culture and politics. (Chaves, M. 2017. P. 101). One trend that is analysed is the increasingly strong correlation between religious attendance and social conservatism. The three social aspects of his study specify are: the change in social attitudes towards premarital sex, abortion (in cases of rape) and homosexuality from 1972 to 2014. The results show that the correlation between frequent service attendees and social conservative views tightened significantly. In 2010 Chaves' data shows that 45 per cent of weekly attendees opposed legal abortion in cases of rape compared with 15 per cent of infrequent attendees (Chaves, M. 2017. P. 105). With homosexuality, his data again shows that the disapproval of premarital sex and homosexuality became more tightly connected to religious service attendees. However, he documents a difference in dynamics to sexuality trends, noting that in the 1970s, 85 per cent of weekly attendees said homosexuality is always wrong compared to 67 per cent of infrequent attendees. Yet in 2010 the comparable numbers were 74 and 33 respectively, concluding that 'while both have liberalised on homosexuality, it is the less religious group that has done so at a much faster rate' (Chaves, M. 2017. P. 107). Studies such as this are key to identifying how religion has influenced both American society and politics. It is also imperative to understand how Tanner's upbringing in a deeply religious and conservative community led him to renounce his homosexuality in order to feel like a valued member of society.

Most research that focuses on the impact religion has had on American socio-political ideologies recognise a significant change in the 1970s, particularly the influence of the religious right groups and the growing evangelical stance on pro-family in opposition to human secularisation, changing views on sexuality and feminism. Leading up to this, researchers documented male and female sexual behaviour, in *The Kinsey Reports* (1948),

which, although criticised for their accuracy and data, were considered pioneering works in sex research proving that homosexuality in all sexes and across all social classes was more common than first thought. In the 1950s, historians such as John D'Emilio (1983) recognised that a gay subculture grew throughout American cities, leading to the homophile movement, in which gay men and lesbians formed groups to fight for their rights in the United States. The gay community hit a turning point in 1969 after the New York Stonewall Riots, which saw police riots on gay bars, met with activism and resistance. The gay liberation movement of the 1970s, a social and political movement that urged gay men and lesbians to demand and engage with radical direct action, followed the riots, claiming they were a victimised minority whose human and civil rights were being violated by the majority. Patrick Allitt examines America's social ideologies towards queer communities around this time. He writes:

> Although American psychologists abandoned their old claim that homosexuality was a form of pathology in the early 70s, many citizens continued to believe that it was a sickness from which the patient might recover. Others, in the Freudian tradition, argued that homosexuality was just a phrase that individuals pass through on their way to a mature heterosexuality (Allitt, P. 2003. P.232.).

This societal stigmatisation sought to undermine homosexuality's legitimacy, which gay men and women were arguing was innate to them and not something they should be ashamed of and certainly not something that could or should be 'cured'. In many areas of the United States, this battle for equality and acceptance is still hard fought and, for reasons articulated in Chaves' research data, is particularly difficult in religious locations. We can understand this by analysing the relationship between religiosity and socio-politics that began in the late 1970s.

American Religion and Conservatism

Jimmy Carter, a former governor of Georgia, Sunday school teacher, preacher, and self-proclaimed born-again Christian, won the presidential election of the United States in 1976. Carter was a surprising winner not only because he had no experience with Washington politics but also because the concept of the born-again Christian was an obscure term to many Americans at the time. During his presidency, he put liberal aspects of his Baptist traditions at the forefront, prioritising human rights in America's foreign policy, appealing for changes in racial inequality and economic disparity. All of which alienated his white co-religionists and a new movement of white evangelicalism emerged, led by a group of charismatic preachers and through the medium of television had an extensive reach on the American population (Allitt, P. 2003, p. 151). Billy Graham was among the first evangelicals to break through to mainstream television in the 1950s and his popularity made other evangelicals realise that they too could achieve outstanding success by targeting large audiences through modern media, leading to the so-called era of 'televangelism'. Although the phenomenon of 'televangelism' took off in the 1950s, by the 1970s, the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) permitted all religious groups to bid for airtime. 'Such by 1980, 90 per cent of religious broadcasting was by evangelical and fundamentalist ministers, who paid for it by issuing fundraising appeals on air.' (Allitt, P. 2003, p. 151).

Evangelicalism forms a subset of protestant Christianity that emphasises a born-again experience, which refers to an emotional conversion experience in which a person accepts Jesus as their saviour. The born-again experience is so integral to evangelicalism that historian Thomas Kidd refers to evangelicalism as 'the religion of the born again' (Miller, E, C. 2020). Evangelicals also believe that their religious life is a personal relationship with

Jesus and God that prompts them to live a righteous life and emphasise proselytising to encourage others so that they can have their own born-again experiences. Another integral distinction of evangelicalism is biblicism, an adherence to the letter of the Bible and that the Bible is without error.

Towards the end of Carter’s first term in office, much of the American population was beginning to turn their backs on ‘liberalist’ politics, as they felt it had failed to deliver. The war in Vietnam had ended in disgrace, the Soviet Union was slowly gaining global power, the Watergate scandal had forced Richard Nixon out of the Whitehouse, violent crime had reached record levels and high unemployment rates were crippling the national economy. The compounding of these national issues led to a rise in neo-conservatism, simultaneously evangelicals argued that the decline of American society was symptomatic of a ruling class that had abandoned biblical values in favour of secular humanism, leading to a rise in the alignment of evangelical conservatism (Allitt, P. 2003. P. 151). Kidd identifies the politicisation of evangelicalism, claiming that, ‘evangelicalism has been politicised within the last 50 years or so, especially since 1976, when Jimmy Carter’s candidacy prompted the first polling about the term “evangelical.” (Miller, E, C. 2020)

The Moral Majority and The New Christian Right formed in the late 70s, consisting of conservative ministers and lobbyists. Jerry Falwell led the Moral Majority, and its members were dismayed by what they saw as a tide of immorality sweeping across the nation. This 'immorality' consisted of the sexual revolution, legalized abortion, feminism, homosexual rights, and church and state separation among others, and they believed Carter had done little to oppose these issues. (Allitt, P. 2003. P. 151). Falwell had been born again as a teenager and was a Baptist minister from Virginia. After graduating from Bible Baptist College, he set up his own Baptist congregation. He began his own radio ministry, television ministry, and

set up an all-white Christian high school and college (Liberty Baptist). (Allitt, P. 2003. P. 151). Throughout this chapter and study, it has been argued that TV holds significant influence over public discourse and ideology. Falwell's television ministry, *Old-Time Gospel Hour,* gained immense popularity, with over four million Americans estimated to be reached by 1980 (Allitt, p. 2003.p. 151). Similarly, Baptist pastor Pat Robertson's show *The 700 Club* holds the title of being the oldest show on Christian Broadcasting Network and continues to air today. It reaches a global audience, being broadcasted in 39 languages and across 138 countries (Allitt, p. 2003.p. 151). The influence and range evangelical fundamentalists had by the 1980s was unprecedented and when Ronald Reagan became president in 1980, they turned their influence towards government politics and central to their alignment was abortion.

The Polarising issue of Abortion

In 1973, the American Supreme Court made a decision on *Roe v Wade* that changed the nation. Justices defined abortion as a privacy right that effectively made abortion in the first trimester legal in all fifty states. In 1992, the Supreme Court reaffirmed a woman's right to obtain an abortion in the landmark case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* but struck down the previously established trimester framework in favour of a foetal viability standard, typically 24 weeks into pregnancy. Almost fifty years on from the original landmark ruling, the issue of abortion was still a large contributing factor to partisan divisions in the United States, affecting politics, religion and society. Abortion, however, was not always such a partisan issue, similar to the current issues over identity within the culture wars, the issue of abortion was weaponised in American politics, particularly by the Republican party.

Today it is virtually a prerequisite for Democrats to take a decidedly pro-choice stance on abortion while Republicans are pro-life, but this divide began as a socio-cultural issue that

did not initially involve politics or political strategy. In the early years that followed *Roe v Wade*, Allitt recognises that most opposition to legalised abortion came from Catholic housewives (Allitt, P. 2003, p. 162). Sociologist Kristin Luker studied activism on both sides of the debate, articulating that much of the opposing ideas stemmed from definitions of motherhood, but central to opposition was the role of religion. Luker's studies detailed how pro-life women defined motherhood as their primary role in life, in contrast pro-choice women claimed motherhood was just one role they might fulfil but that if becoming pregnant interrupted their ambitions, then it was their right to an abortion. In addition, the study found that three quarters of pro-choice women surveyed never went to church unlike 69% of pro-life women, who said religion was an important aspect of their life and that they attended church at least once a week (Allitt, P. 2003. P.162). Whilst Catholic opposition to legalised abortion was prevalent from the beginning, the most extreme anti-abortion rhetoric came from evangelicals. *Operation Rescue*, mostly made up of evangelical Christians, became the most well know and aggressive anti-abortion group in the United States during the 80s and 90s. Evangelical preacher Randal Terry founded the group in 1986, and *Operation Rescue* initially used sit-in demonstrations at abortion clinics to obstruct the entrances.

One of the most infamous demonstrations became known as the *Summer of Mercy*, which took place in Wichita, Kansas in 1991, when thousands of *Operation Rescue* members demonstrated for six weeks with the intention of closing the city's three abortion clinics. During the *Summer of Mercy* federal marshals had to escort patients through crowds of demonstrators trying to 'council' them out of their choice to abort their pregnancies. These 'sidewalk councillors' recited biblical scripture, prayers and songs in an attempt to reverse the women's decisions to have an abortion. The *Summer of Mercy* culminated in a rally that filled Cessna Stadium, featuring an impassioned anti-abortion speech by *The 700 Club* televangelist Pat Robertson. Anti-abortionists specifically targeted the George Tiller

Women's Healthcare Clinic during the six-week occupation of Wichita, due to its performance of late-term abortions, and Tiller himself became a longstanding personal target. Tiller remained a symbol in America's partisan ideology towards abortion and in 2009, anti-abortion extremist Scott Roeder fatally shot him in the head, whilst attending a Sunday service. The 2018 documentary *Reversing Roe* details the murder and shows that during a court hearing, the authorities questioned Roeder about his religious beliefs and if they played a role in his actions against Tiller.

> "Did there come a point in time when your religious beliefs changed?" Roeder "Yes, I had been watching the 700 Club regularly. I was alone in my living room and that day I kneeled down, and I did accept Christ as my saviour." (Sunberg, A, Stern, R. 2018).

Anti-abortion groups such as *Operation Rescue* provided inflammatory rhetoric about Tiller, but so too had the national media. Prior to Tiller's murder, former Fox News anchor Bill O'Reilly discussed Tiller on numerous episodes of *Fox News* talk show *The O'Reilly Factor* (1996-2017), and he referred to Tiller as 'Tiller the baby killer', a nickname that Republican congressional representative Robert Dornan had also used in the House of Representatives. After Tiller's death, *Rolling Stone* published an article analysing how O'Reilly's anti-abortion rhetoric and personal condemnation of Tiller had contributed to the abuse and hate Tiller received from other anti-abortion supporters. The article details how O'Reilly repeatedly referred to Tiller as "Tiller the Baby Killer" as well as a slew of other epithets, such as equating him with Nazis and al-Qaida. O'Reilly also likened Tiller's medical actions to "operating a death mill" in which he was "executing babies about to be born" (Cohen, D, S. 2017). The article explains how O'Reilly 'equated his profession with the actions of Mao, Hitler, and Stalin. In perhaps the most direct attack on Tiller, O'Reilly came close to saying that he personally would be violent toward Tiller if he could get away with it' (Cohen,

D, S. 2017). O'Reilly's language towards a medical practitioner who was simply doing their job reveals the abhorrent attitudes people have towards not only abortion rights but also the personal sentiment they feel towards those who provide them. This type of incendiary rhetoric can be broadcast to millions of viewers, which is perhaps the most problematic aspect. The anti-abortion rhetoric that plays out in the national media serves to uphold the notion that abortion is a polarising socio-political issue that divides and influences political agendas and voting. Furthermore it supports the argument that television and media play a significant role within this influence.

According to *The Guardian*, ‘Although an estimated 85% of Americans support legal abortion under certain circumstances, partisan manipulation of electoral districts has insulated Republican leaders from popular opinion’ (Glenza, J, Pengelly, M, Levin, S. 2022). The damaging result leads to a self-fulfilling cycle of misinformation. America’s social dichotomy of abortion became a political issue in the early 1980s with the presidential campaign of Ronald Reagan. Years of cultivation from top Republican, religious and pro-family strategists, such as Paul Weyrich and Phyllis Schlafly (Stewart, K. 2022), the latter of which wrote a book persuading American conservatives to vote for Donald Trump, *The Conservative Case for Trump* (2016). Republicans positioned abortion as a central socio-cultural issue in politics, whilst at the same time, Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority were seeing evangelicals as the basis for a political movement, who until that point had not been particularly politically active (Stewart, K. 2022). Falwell recognised Reagan as the perfect political candidate to push his socially conservative agenda and abortion would be the populist issue that would appeal to both evangelical voters and a conservative government, respectively. Randall Balmer confirms the link between religious Americans and the Republican party as he notes it wasn’t until Republican strategists sought to deflect attention away from the real narrative, which Balmer argues was racial integration, and to advocate on

behalf of the foetus, that largely apolitical evangelical Christians and Catholics would be united within the Republican party. He notes how Republican operations began to test abortion as a vessel for the collective anxieties of evangelical Christians, and *Roe* as a shorthand for government intrusion into the family after the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

> It wasn't until 1979 – a full six years after *Roe* – that evangelical leaders, at the behest of conservative activist Paul Weyrich, seized on abortion not for moral reasons, but as a rallying-cry to deny President Jimmy Carter a second term. Why? Because the anti-abortion crusade was more palatable than the religious right's real motive: protecting segregated schools (Stewart, K. 2022).

Prior to the 2022 landmark reversal of Roe v Wade, since the legalisation of abortion in 1973 no state had successfully prohibited abortion this was because under existing law states cannot ban abortion outright prior to foetal viability which is around the 24-week mark of a pregnancy. The 2021 Mississippi's Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organisation case was significant to the future of Roe v Wade, and it caused major concern for pro-choice groups who recognised not only the immediate damaging effects but also the potential it would have to effect further legislative rights.

The America dichotomy over abortion ultimately boils down to the understanding that the government should have the right to control women's decisions about reproduction, that leaves women with restricted bodily autonomy, a basic democratic right. The fundamental argument of the pro-choice movement and feminist groups alike, is that the actions of anti-abortion activists, politicians and state legislators that incessantly advocated for the erosion of *Roe*, do so in order to control women's status in society through controlling women's behaviour and the limits of that behaviour. This understanding reflects the current issue of LGBTQ+ rights, specifically those pertaining to bodily autonomy within trans-rights. Rules

on gender affirming care ban the use of state money for care and place restrictions on adults seeking treatment. Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis championed a Florida law that restricts the teaching of sexual orientation and gender identity in public schools (DeMillo, A. 2023). Furthermore, Florida expanded that prohibition to all schools' grades, whilst a further seventeen states enacted laws restricting or banning gender affirming care to minors (DeMillo, A. 2023). The continuous strategy to shame and threaten those who perform or seek abortions was designed to control when, if, and also how many children women should have and in doing so, this strategy then becomes an absolute demonstration of hegemonic patriarchy. Strategic moves such as these are now being enforced on medical professionals who treat transgender patients. Some of the shocking new laws include:

> In Idaho, a physician providing GAC (gender-affirming care) to a minor could face up to 10 years in prison. In Missouri, a new law makes it easier for patients who change their minds after consenting to GAC to sue doctors and to win up to $1.5 million in damages. In Florida, parents who allow gender-affirming medical care can lose custody of their child (DeMillo, A. 2023).

This repetitive cycle of strategic intervention is obvious given that, similarly to abortion, transgender people will always seek medical and professional help with their transitioning. Therefore, by targeting and limiting those who can assist in gender-affirming care means that there will be less availability for those who require it and so an erosion of bodily autonomy for transgender people. It also gives rise to many questions and conflicts surrounding political and religious alignment regarding notions of gender, sexuality, and identity, particularly for individuals who are not deemed to conform to traditional notions of the family.

Impact on LGBTQ+ Rights

Although this chapter and indeed this study as a whole is centred around notions of American regionality, gender, sexuality and identity, the five-decade long debate surrounding *Roe v Wade* exemplifies how religious and political alignment has had an impact on human rights. It shows how legislation designed to safeguard basic human and civil rights in America can be dismantled and overturned. There was a great fear amongst constitutional scholars and lawmakers as they awaited a ruling on *Dobbs V Jackson*, in which the court held that the Constitution of the United States does not confer a right to abortion. Therefore, the outcome of the case meant that *Roe* could be overturned and if that were to happen the impact could be widespread, calling into question gay rights, same-sex marriage and even interracial marriage. Sam Spital states that if *Roe*, which has a double precedent value, can be overturned simply because the composition of the Supreme Court has changed, 'then there is no way we can have confidence in any of those proceedings going forward' (Whitehurst, L. 2021).

Opposing opinions sought to validate the repeal of *Roe v Wade*, arguing that it wouldn't affect other rulings that also fall under 'The Right to Privacy Act'. Mississippi's Solicitor General Scott Stewart said 'the Roe decision allows for "the purposeful termination of a human life, nowhere else does this court recognise the right to end a human life (Whitehurst, L. 2021). However, Alison Gash argues *Roe* rests on the same legal precedent as *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which made same-sex marriage legal and *Lawrence v. Texas* which overturned the criminalisation of intimate same-sex relationships. She continues by expressing.

> Literally, the logic that allows for a woman to argue that she has a right to choose to have an abortion is the same logic that is used to argue that gay couples have the right to choose and marry the partner of their choice. (Whitehurst, L. 2021).

The Guardian published an article outlining the Supreme Court's understanding and legitimisation of the 'Right to Privacy'. Referencing the court transcript, the article reports that some lawmakers, such as Justice Clarence Thomas, were sceptical there is a right to privacy, reasoning that there is a lack of an explicit reference to the right in the constitution, a concept known as "textualism".

> "If we were talking about the second amendment, I know exactly what we're talking about," said Thomas. "If we're talking about the fourth amendment, I know what we're talking about because it's written. It's there." (Glenza, J. 2021).

The Guardian quotes Mississippi solicitor general Scott Stewart as he claims, 'the right to an abortion is not grounded in the history or tradition of the country.' (Glenza, J. 2021). Instead, Stewart claims 'it's grounded on abstract concepts that this court has rejected in other contexts as supplying a substantive right' (Glenza, J. 2021), this 'abstract concept' Stewart refers to underlies the right to privacy and is known as 'substantive due process'. Law professor Mary Ziegler explains the two general answers given regarding where the rights of the United States constitution come from. First, she states there are those written in the constitution's text. Second, 'there's other rights, like the right to marry and the right to parent that are not in the constitution's text' (Glenza, J. 2021). Substantive due process established those rights. Melissa Murray, further explains:

> Gay rights, contraceptives, certain fertility treatments and even interracial marriage are imperilled because they're all rooted in that right to privacy…All of this has been

> implied because they're understood to be core, basic human rights. You don't need the state to recognise them because they are vested in you by virtue of being a human. (Glenza, J. 2021)

Murray's principal argument and concern was that, if *Roe* was to be overturned, 'it will be on the grounds that it was a right that was untethered from constitutional text.' She continues by explaining if this view prevails on the court, all these other cases rooted in substantive due process could be implemented, since they would also become released from constitutional text and historically were not available in the U.S. (Glenza, J. 2021).

In 2022, the conservative religious campaign successfully reached its final outcome to dismantle *Roe v Wade*, and the Supreme Court overturned abortion rights and upended the precedent that had been written into U.S. law almost 50 years ago. President Joe Biden expressed his concern that the decision could take America down an 'extreme and dangerous path' (Glenza, J, Pengelly, M, Levin, S. 2022). Furthermore, *The Guardian* reported that the president also shared concerns regarding other key rights that fall under the same legislative right as abortion:

> Biden said key rights including same-sex marriage and access to contraception could now be targeted by the right-wing court. He said: "Justice Thomas said as much today. He explicitly called to reconsider the right of marriage equality. The right of couples to make their choices on contraception (Glenza, J, Pengelly, M, Levin, S. 2022).

The article published the courts summary of their decision, which states that, 'The constitution makes no reference to abortion, and no such right is implicitly protected by any constitutional provision' (ibid. 2022). The three liberal justices stated that the majority ruling

has meant 'that from the moment of fertilisation, a woman has no rights to speak of' (ibid. 2022). Expanding on this, they expressed their concern that under the new state restrictions, 'a woman will have to bear her rapist's child or a young girl her father's – no matter if doing so will destroy her life' (ibid. 2022). Overturning *Roe v Wade* will undoubtedly have a profound, damaging, immediate and draw out effect on millions of women across the United States and those who will be most affected are already the most disenfranchised such as poor, young women of colour. The consequences could also affect many other demographics and play out over years and even generations to come.

Significant to this study is recognising, how this landmark decision could cause further restrictions on LGBTQ+ rights and how the political strategies used to overturn *Roe v Wade,* will be implemented to do so. As Biden highlighted, this could lead to restrictions in other areas of private life. According to the article supreme Justice Thomas 'explicitly encouraged fellow justices to "reconsider all of this court's" cases that establish rights to contraception and gay marriage and sex' (Glenza, J, Pengelly, M, Levin, S. 2022). The alignment of religious conservatism and politics is precisely what led to this outcome. For almost five decades Republican politicians weaponised abortion to affect partisan divisions that would ensure the party voters and now that they have been successful in their outcome, as Samantha Allen's study observed 'politicians and hate groups turn their focus to the next 'issue'' (Allen, S. 2019) and central to the current culture wars is the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, focusing particularly on identity and so the significance of this study is to recognise how mediated presentations of queer identity can have a profound and positive effect on how they are viewed and recognised socially and politically.

Religion and AIDS

The association of HIV/AIDS with homosexuality and gay men during the epidemic played a huge part in fuelling the long regarded negative assumptions about homosexuality. Various media outlets at the time, such as the *New York Post* and *The New York Times*, referred to the virus as a “gay cancer” or “gay plague” allowing problematic associations and ideologies to form. The link between disease and homosexuality however is not limited to AIDS, some consider homosexuality in itself to be a disease and particularly prevalent in the United States is a perceived answer and “cure” that is Faith based conversion therapy, which believes that homosexuality can be ‘cured’ by turning to religion, renouncing homosexual temptations and seeking guidance in God.

Allitt articulates how the AIDS epidemic had made religious groups aware, sometimes uncomfortably aware, that homosexuals were a part of their own congregations. He establishes that the question posed was ‘should scripture, tradition, church orthodoxy, doctrines of universal love or current social opinion guide their decision?’ (Allitt, P. 2003, p. 231). Allitt discusses the dichotomy of religious practice and homosexual identity, two things he claims do in fact have more in common than people would like to think. Referring to the similarities between the experience of coming out and being born again, he described how both experiences parallel one another as ‘suddenly they recognised what they were really like for the first time, having lived until then in a shadowy world full of deception and disappointment’ (Allitt, P. 2003. P.233). He continues by quoting two gay Christian men recounting their experiences of both.

> When I was born again, it was a real experience. And the second time I was born again was when I came out at thirty-two and it was a very similar experience. Another claimed, I can almost see it [coming out] as connected with the experience the

> disciples might have had by becoming disciples of Christ; that to follow a path that you believe has most integrity for yourself sometimes puts you very much at odds with prevailing society (Allitt, P. 2003. P.233).

This connection, however, might be best described as an internal reckoning rather than a lived reality. As Allitt explains how some people, in contrast to Tanner, rejected religion as incurably homophobic. The homophobic anxiety amongst religious Americans was made evidently clear during the height of the AIDS crisis. Christian organisations such as Moral Majority blamed people with AIDS for contracting it and defined AIDS as God's punishment for moral failings. As one editorial wrote, 'Serious Christians are reminded by the AIDS phenomenon that God is not mocked' (Kowalewski, M, R. 1990). Mark R Kowalewski analysed the dual religious response to AIDS, both as sinners and as sick people. Within it, he notes three types of responses: blaming the victim, embracing the exile, and lastly helping the victim. In terms of blaming the victim Kowalewski quotes Jerry Falwell who said:

> AIDS is the lethal judgement of God on the sin of homosexuality, and it is the judgement of God on America for endorsing this vulgar, perverted and reprobate lifestyle …We simply cannot allow our leaders to pass law protecting the homosexual lifestyle… [I] f we don't do something with our wholehearted vigour and earnestness we are going to watch our nation die. (Kowalewski, M, R. 1990).

Kowalewski notes how Falwell eluded that by curbing the freedom of alleged guilty gays this would protect 'innocent' people from dying and Falwell's rhetoric here implies that homosexuality is in fact a public health threat. He further explains that religious responses such as these insinuate that homosexual activity in itself causes the disease and while excluding all discussion of AIDS as a viral infection not only stigmatised gays, but it also hinders care and education for minorities and others effected (Kowalewski, M, R. 1990).

Within his discussion Kowalewski explains how religious denominations attempted to help those affected by AIDS. He quotes a Roman Catholic Bishop who urged Catholics to follows the church's teaching to anoint the sick and while illness is related to sin, it should not be considered a punishment for sin (ibid. 1990). However, he also argues that while this response promotes compassion towards persons with AIDS, the use of language within religious groups references to AIDS, such a 'leper' or 'outcast' seeks to 'other' persons with AIDS from the religious community and larger society as a whole – 'they should be cared for but not considered as integral members of society' (ibid. 1990). Determining that from this perspective, it is impossible to both take part in the faith community and be actively part of the gay community (ibid. 1990). Kowalewski's study concludes by assessing preventative action to help curb or stop the spread of AIDS. He notes how religious groups alike were reluctant to advocate for safe sex practices as it would appear to condone sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage, which re-identifies AIDS with illicit sexual behaviour and so the focus must be on caring for the 'causalities of the AIDS crisis rather than preventing further spread of the virus' (ibid. 1990). Both Allitt and Kowalewski's work affirms why both historically and currently, some religious queer people feel as though there is a dichotomy between these aspects of their identity. AIDS has had a lasting impact on queer identity and because of this its relevance surrounding contemporary queer culture and identity is imperative and one persistent form of artistic resistance is drag.

Drag and Reality TV Conventions

In the 1980 election, Reagan had the support of two-thirds of white evangelical voters, whilst in the 2016 election Trump won 80 per cent of white evangelical voters who turned out on election day (Haberman, C. 2018). In an article for *The New York Times* Clyde Haberman compares Reagan's presidency and support of white evangelical voters with Trump's,

particularly highlighting how Trump's 'us-versus-them' rhetoric aligns with evangelical ideology and their fear of the moral disintegration of the country they know. This fear is fuelled by the legalisation of same-sex marriage, acceptance of gay and transgender rights, and the rise of religious and radical minorities. (Haberman, C. 2018). Ella Greenhalgh analyses the impact drag has had on queer culture politically, socially and culturally in the wake of Trump's presidency. Observing that the impact of Trump's toxic masculinity has facilitated a context in which drag is more obviously defiant. (Greenhalgh, E. 2018). This sentiment is evident in most episodes of *We're Here*. Although never directly addressing Trump's presidency, the show subtly yet consistently reiterates the message that people who live outside hetero-normative frameworks are made to feel marginalised in certain locations of the United States where the rhetoric of Trumpism and conservative religious ideology are upheld, using iconography such as Trump 2020 posters. Therefore, the show's focus is to use drag to provide a political, artistic resistance to this ostracism.

Tanner's drag performance at the end of the episode powerfully and provocatively highlights the complexities and contradictions surrounding his acceptance of his identity. However, it also arguably aligns with predictable, formulaic conventions of reality TV. Part of the theatricality of the reality TV format is the 'big reveal' or 'climatic ending' of an episode, which is the culmination of all the build-up. Penzhorn and Pitout recognise four pivotal characteristics of reality TV that attract viewers' interest; 'the tendency to focus on ordinary people, the voyeuristic element involved, the encouragement of audience participation and, the attempt to simulate real life' (Penzhorn, H, Pitout, M. 2022, p. 86). 'Real' people have appeared on television for decades on programming such as talk shows, game shows and documentaries, yet reality TV displays 'real' or ordinary people differently. Reality TV places ordinary people in unusual and often extreme situations to win prizes or for audiences to observe their behaviour and interaction. Producers deliberately construct these situations to

create conflict and drama, indicating that reality itself is not good enough and that they need to present heightened reality (Kavka, M. 2003). Critics argue that many reality shows fetishize the struggles and suffering of their participants, particularly noting how they immortalise the low points of people's lives on national television for the purpose of entertainment. Serena Smith writes that this has become an engrained part of reality TV, recognising how cruelty has become part of the format of reality TV and it being one of the main reasons audiences tune in. She articulates that although prioritising the welfare of participants is undoubtedly the right thing to do ‘going “cruelty-free” is essentially tasking producers with squaring a circle’ (Smith, S. 2023). Smith’s understanding is evident in a range of reality TV programming; make-over shows ridicule and judge physical appearances, talent shows exploit past trauma, and dating shows historically mock gendered and sexual identities. Additionally, reality TV repeatedly features mental and physical health on platforms like *My 600lb Life* (2012-present) and *Hoarders* (2009-present), portraying those suffering as something to be looked down on and ridiculed, which only further entrenches an attitude of intolerance and superiority.

We’re Here presents a different approach to the ‘struggle’. From the outset of each episode, it is clear that the subjects involved are struggling with their identity, sexuality, and position within their community. By revealing this from the start, the show doesn’t break its subjects down throughout in order to build them back up for the purpose of a climatic ending or big reveal. Instead, the show frames the narratives of its subjects within more communal moments that emphasise shared and universally held emotions and, as such, provides a humanist approach that evades positioning the audience as superior and removes intolerant attitudes that are commonly held towards reality TV. The queens/drag mothers have their own camps (their set) that provides realisation for the subjects that they already have a sense of community. By simply introducing the subjects to one another makes them aware that

there are others in their own town who are going through similar experiences and struggles which consolidates the titular statement and main message of the show that we are here.

Deery discusses what she claims are the three major development phases in reality TV's relation to real life. According to Deery, the third and most recent phase involves producers reaching out into the actual world to transform it, rather than constructing a set. She concludes that while the other phases are concerned with surveillance, this phase focuses on making over what is being surveilled. Explaining the appeal, she notes how the audience's deep attraction of the makeover format is the 'primeval ordering of chaos, the transformation of ugliness into beauty, the emotional satisfaction of unmistakable improvement. (Deery, J. 2015). Although *We're Here* doesn't play out like some typical makeover shows (i.e., permanent physical changes seen in hetero-normative reality TV shows such as *The Swan)*, the processes the participant goes through throughout the show still builds up to a final big reveal and the unveiling of the 'unmistakable improvement' displayed in the final drag performance. Although Tanner's final performance, as I will analyse further in the discussion, provides a socio-political dialogue concerned with identity and acceptance, because of the predictable convention of reality TV's big reveal, the weight of socio-political messaging can too often get diluted. Deery articulates that in this sense 'unlike the self-effacement of documentary and fictional programming, which succeed when the fact of mediation is hidden or forgotten, this transformative programming displays the benign power of TV to affect material and psychological reality.' (Deery, J. 2015). In presenting the 'real' Deery further discusses how there has recently been a noticeable evolution towards self-reflexivity, she writes 'there is today more internal acknowledgement that participants are on a TV show, that they know they have roles to play, businesses to promote and viewer responses to consider. (Deery, J. 2015). Although self-reflexivity is becoming more apparent to audiences and participants alike, Deery still argues that the most important thing about

reality TV is that it is not fictional and because it is not, it entertains and impacts our culture in a different way than fiction. (Deery, J. 2015).

Excluding celebrities, people consider reality show participants as ordinary or real because they are not professional actors and they do not perform scripted roles. However, Ervin Goffman recognises that in everyday life, instead of adopting an assigned role, we (social performers) perform and present ourselves in a way that is appropriate to certain social interactions. He writes:

> The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited (Goffman, E, 1959).

Similarly, referring to reality TV, Laura Grindstaff suggests participants are performing performance, in that they dramatize and sensationalise how one performs in real life. Describing this as self-service television, Grindstaff expresses that this enables ordinary people to serve themselves with celebrity status without extensive training or even much in the way of talent. She concludes that this is possible because ‘performances are already strongly shaped by underlying cultural assumptions about particular character types and by carefully assembled frameworks of action. (Grindstaff, L. 2014). Regarding Tanner and *We're Here* more generally, although it is impossible to deny that self-reflexivity is apparent in that members of the show, whether that be the professional drag queens or participants, know that they are being filmed for a reality series and furthermore, through the drag performance, the show presents a performance within a performance. I argue, however, that *We're Here* can evade some criticism regarding traditional reality TV formatting. The show does not represent nor promote any type of business, and *HBO* produces it without any

sponsorship from companies or advertisements. Furthermore, none of the participants have (thus far) achieved any form of celebrity status outside of the show. In terms of Deery's understanding that roles have to be played and or participants consider viewer response, the participants of the show already experience daily rejection and criticism for being who they are and as such already perform a version of themselves that is considered socially acceptable, which again adheres to the notions of performativity first articulated by Butler (1990) in their analysis of *Paris is Burning*. The show, therefore, rejects concepts that are not only associated with reality TV but also displayed in everyday life and instead promotes the concept of self-acceptance and contentment with one's true identity, whether or not it fulfils social norms. The show conclusively and deliberately ironically achieves this through drag which reveals the subversive nature of performance and gendered identity itself as Butler writes, 'there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender…identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results.' (Butler, J. 1990).

The Power of Drag

Tanner's drag performance begins with a voiceover, suggesting the thoughts in his head, implying that he is going to go to hell because of his lifestyle, a life of homosexual sin, and that he should come home and turn to religion. He falls to his knees while Bob appears on stage as a preacher, lip syncing to the gospel song *Encourage Yourself* by Sheri Jones-Moffett (2009), which features lyrics such as 'Speak over yourself, encourage yourself in the Lord'. The song, which reflects Tanners' religious commitment, quickly gets cut off and they throw the robes they are wearing to the floor, revealing a glittery jumpsuit and platform shoes. Lady GaGa's *Born This Way* (2011) begins to play with both Tanner and his Mother Mellissa lip syncing along. The song choice serves to highlight the difficulties and paradoxes

of identity, which in this case is Tanner's. Known as the unofficial LGBTQ+ anthem *Born This Way* entered the cultural consciousness over a decade ago and its message of inclusivity and freedom of expression has never failed to resonate. The drag show in this sense becomes more than just a grand finale or spectacle for audience entertainment, it is a consciously constructed political performance. A deliberate artistic response to what society and religion say Tanner should or shouldn't be, how he should exist within his community if he is to be accepted. Big reveals while typical and formulaic can also have a sincere impact on audiences, Annette Hill discusses this notion, claiming that reality TV is a genre that plays with passions, writing:

> Dramatic construction of strong storylines that pack an emotional punch works alongside moments of real human experience… reality participants in these kinds of formats have dramatic narratives and incite strong emotional responses (Hill, A. 2015).

This applies to Tanner's narrative, in which the dramatic conclusion (drag show) creates an emotional reaction because it is reflective of his human experience and struggle throughout the episode. Hill concludes her analyses by explaining 'the construction of emotions in reality TV involves the cultural practices of producers, participants and audiences working together. We can say this is a co-production of emotional performances (Hill, A. 2015). Furthermore, Tanner's performance accurately demonstrates Deery's argument, that the most important thing about reality TV is that it is not fictional that, as seen in Tanner's performance:

> It presents real experiences in the sense of physical challenges or emotional stresses that produce tangible physiological responses such as blushes or tears, indexes that are read as evidence of genuine feeling (Deery, J. 2015).

This understanding adheres with the contemporary theory know as post-truth, whose definition poses that, facts no longer establish position, rather the new criteria are emotion and opinion. In 2016 the term saw a spike in frequency in the context of the EU referendum and the presidential election in the United States because when people become resentful over their inability to control their lives, emotions rise to the surface and dominate, and this has been perpetuated by the global reach and accessibility of social media. The origins or post-truth can be found in post-modernism and relativism in which both approaches teach that there is no such thing as objective truth but rather everything is relative. The prefix 'post' is not intended to mean that we are past truth in a temporal sense, but that truth has become irrelevant, and that emotion holds a higher value. The 2008 global financial crisis aided the post-truth phenomenon, not least because it reinforced a wider collapse in public confidence in major institutions in both the public and private sectors. One of the most powerful cultural frameworks that shapes our ideologies in the western world is the Hollywood film and television industry, in which a familiar cultural pattern is followed; a beginning, middle and end, good vs evil, drama and resolution told through the medium of human beings. This Hollywoodization of the way human society ought to work and operate affected the way people viewed the financial crisis, they wanted people and individuals to blame, and they wanted resolution. Therefore, the realisation that it wasn't just one or two individuals who were to blame but rather it was a systemic problem is much harder for the general public to grasp and come to terms with because it fails to follow the cultural pattern of narrative that has become so engrained in our cultural belief system. Furthermore, a key feature of post truth is that while faith in large institutions such as politics and institution has been declining, the trust in the views of families and friends who are perceived to have more authenticity and validity is growing and again this notion has been proliferated through the digital revolution and the changing ways many of us access and consume information. (Hammond, A. 2018).

Read within the discourse of post-truth theory, Tanner's narrative coupled with this final performance resonates more profoundly within the context of reality TV because as Deery claims, it evokes an emotional reaction, and these emotions and personal experiences/beliefs hold more weight in terms of shaping public opinion towards queer identity. However, post-truth and the concept of looking past fact and evidence in the format of reality TV highlights the paradox regarding the theatricality of reality TV, in which the theory of *Theatricality* and *Uses and Gratification* affirm that most reality TV formats subtly follow the same production process associated with theatre and scripted television, in other words what audiences consider 'real' within the genre is in fact often mediated for marketability as discussed previously.

Drag is often used to experiment with gender norms and free oneself from the confines of what society tells you, you can or can't be. It is also one of the most powerful forms of self-exploration, expression, and political action. It provides a space and stage for people to explore and create their own identity away from the constraints of hetero-normative, patriarchal society. Additionally, individuals become part of a community through drag and for someone like Tanner who feels isolated and ostracised from the community he lives in, this is vital. RuPaul articulates the importance and power that drag has both personally and politically. He describes that the strength and humanity it creates to do drag and maintain yourself create different layers of consciousness and that is where the humanity comes from (Aikenhead, D. 2018). When asked if he thought his show (*Drag Race*) had a political message about humanity, he discusses how he believes *Drag Race* has a political agenda that can be traced back to the Stonewall Riots, ACT UP and continued by contemporary LGBQT+ activism. But most importantly he says *Drag Race* has a position on identity which according to RuPaul is the most political you can get. He explains this by claiming the show has politics at its core because it explicitly deals with how one sees themself, regardless of

where socio-cultural ideologies place you. Whilst *Drag Race* and *We're Here* are different shows with different formatting purposes (competitive game show as opposed to none-scripted, confessional drama) the queens on *We're Here* achieved their fame and influence by first appearing on *Drag Race*. Yet more importantly, both shows exist in a similar symbiosis on the ecology of 21st century entertainment and reality TV that takes its inspiration from *Paris is Burning*, and particularly in terms of LGBTQ+ representation and identity politics.

Chelsea Daggett notes how *RuPaul's Drag Race* poses the question 'can reality TV encourage thinking about identity politics by affectively engaging audiences in both authentic and parodic ways?' (Brennan, N, Gudelunas, D. 2017). *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *We're Here* both attempt to establish that the answer to this question is yes, and they do so by engaging audiences through the art of drag. Following on from the legacy of *Paris is Burning* both *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *We're Here* employ the same style of drag as the documentary, underground ballroom, drag, culture of the 1980s/90s. Daggett asserts that in doing so, 'these performances undermine the norms of a variety of identity categories, including race, gender, sexuality and class… the political potential lies in the destabilisation of these identity categories. (Brennan, N, Gudelunas, D. 2017). All shows discussed in this thesis, exist in the zeitgeist of Trumpist America, within which, the rhetoric and political agenda has been to undermine and weaken the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. Due to all the shows co-existing within such an unpredictable socio-political time for the LGBTQ+ community and one that is currently seeing anti-drag legislation being written into law. They each play a vital role in educating and encouraging their large viewership to contemplate identity politics through the subversive lens of drag, the entertainment of competition and the humanist narrative of reality TV.

This understanding determines that drags political power stems from the fact that it is always personal, because it refuses to uphold conventional social ideologies and allows individuals, even for a moment, to remove all social and gendered expectations as well as highly socio-politicised understandings of what makes an individual. Tanner's narrative proves this through his drag performance, however, the realisation that his participation could provide beneficial results is not instant. Throughout the episode, Tanner is hesitant to fully embrace the experience. This creates the dramatic tension the show needs to conform to genre conventions. Move overtly however, most of the tension and drama of the episode comes from the reaction of the Branson natives who oppose the show and its queer themes. In terms of filming and location, Deery states that 'reality TV locations are generally selected or constructed to produce high physical or psychological stress' (Deery, J. 2015). The location choices for *We're Here* are placed outside of the industry's typical practices, they fit Deery's understanding of reality TV locations, meaning, producers have deliberately chosen highly conservative states, within which are small rural towns with religious-conservative occupants, whose reaction to a group of drag queens turning up and putting on drag shows with other locals is intended to create high levels of controversy and drama. However, as previously discussed in this chapter, the location also functions as the shows fundamental intrigue. It is precisely because of who lives there that gives the show its subversive power and to challenge pre-existing ideologies found in such locations. The locations also highlight the daily hostility some individuals face in relation to their queer identity. *We're Here* consistently portrays the theme of hostility as the queen's face rejection from public spaces like shops and performance venues. The queens are often perceived as unwanted outsiders, leading to frequent calls to the police. In one episode, a group of locals congregates outside the drag show venue, praying during the performances, further highlighting the prevailing hostility from organised religious groups. As well as adhering to conventional reality TV

formulas in which drama and suspense is created, these hostilities and often blatant queer-phobic rhetoric serves to highlight the intended discourse of the show, that is queer people have and continue to exist in these locations. Yet many have to hide or modify their true identities because their community doesn't consider them tolerable or acceptable. Reading these negative reactions from the point of view of Tanner, it can be determined that his religious community coupled with their intolerance and chastisement of his homosexuality have left him feeling as though he has to conform to their understanding of what a 'good' Christian should be.

Director and dramaturg Oskar Eustis discusses how location plays an important role in terms of who has access to art and culture. He explains that by looking at the red and blue electoral map of the United States, the blue states designate all the major non-profit cultural institutions. He explains that this is problematic, stating, "we in the culture have done what the economy, the educational system and what technology has done which is turn our backs on a large part of the country' (YouTube. 2018). Eustis raises the point that if it appears that certain demographics are boycotting the arts because we assume they have a preconceived notion and response to what is being shown, then we need to ask ourselves: "are they able to access it in the first place? Are they boycotting us or are we boycotting them?" (YouTube. 2018). Similarly, to the initial intention of Piscator and political theatre, Eustis articulates the damaging effect of lacking means and access to certain art and culture, emphasising that it prevents the ability to change or challenge negative and damaging ideologies and rhetoric. The power of *We're Here* lies in its ability to address the problem directly at the source. It achieves this by going to queer-phobic locations and inviting locals to participate in or watch a drag show. The decision by the production team to go to these locations rather than insisting participants travel to studios or queer accepted metropolises further highlights that

queer existence can be found in all different locations and more importantly that they don't have to leave their homes or communities in order for their true selves to be accepted.

The profound personal and political influential of drag is evident and as such, there is a current need for Republican politicians to impose new legislation aimed to restrict access to and the performance of drag. *The Guardian* reports that legislators in at least eight US states are introducing legislation to restrict or censor drag shows. A total of 14 bills have been introduced in Arizona, Arkansas, Missouri, Nebraska, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia. Other bills are also being drafted in other states, including in Montana and Idaho (Helmore, E. 2023). Some of the proposed legislation would introduce fines up to $5000 for any school or library or employee of such institutions who is found to be in violation of a prohibition on minors attending drag shows. Others such as a bill proposed in Arizona want to make it illegal to hold a drag performance within a quarter mile of a school or public playground. In Nebraska, the legal age to attend a drag performance would be nineteen. Whilst four bills are being proposed in Texas that would classify venues that host drag shows in the same category as strip clubs and adult movie theatres and South Carolina have proposed a 'defence of children's innocent act' which would make it a felony to allow a minor to view a drag performance (Helmore, E. 2023). As discussed earlier in this chapter, Chris, who takes part in the show, does so to connect with his daughter, who he feels has missed out on having a present and supportive father because of his toxic masculinity. Because of these past issues, Chris and Eureka find it imperative that Chris's daughter December joins him on stage, so that she can experience and see for herself his ability to be venerable and to let go of socio-political associations often associated with straight cis gendered males. The new anti-drag legislation being proposed would, in fact, make this moment of love and understanding between father and daughter an illegal offence. The article concludes that, according to *Pen America*, anti-drag legislation is trying to classify drag

shows as ‘adult or sexualised in nature’ when in their view ‘drag shows are an exercise of artistic and creative expression that should be free from government expression’ (Helmore, E. 2023). Recent action in Tennessee saw state lawmakers vote 77-16 to move the legislation to the desk of Republican Gov. Bill Lee to sign into law. In response, producer and star of *We’re Here* Eureka O’Hara called the bill ‘blatantly unconstitutional, she concludes by stating:

> The consequences [could involve] being charged as a felon. As we know, the felony badge of honour restricts lives of an overwhelming population of oppressed individuals, including race, sex, and now gender expression! It's all disheartening and targeted towards minorities who aren't 'normalised' by society (Nolfi, J. 2023).

The main concern surrounding the proposed anti-drag legislation, is that it will impact freedom of speech and it will disproportionally affect the LBGTQ+ community and influence the culture of free expression in the United States. Proposed legislation such as this proves unequivocally the importance and power drag can have not only personally but socially and politically, because if it didn’t, there would not be a need to restrict and sensor not only the messages of drag but also who gets to experience it.

Conclusion

The demand for TV shows that mine the phenomena of ballroom culture as a prominent theme remains robust, as evidenced by *HBO's* recent reality TV show, *Legendary* (2020-present). The show combines elements of *Paris is Burning* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*, as drag houses compete against each other in a series of voguing challenges. The title, *Legendary* also acts as an intertextual reference to the stars of *Paris is Burning* and the drag ballroom scene who become known within the community as legends. In this competitive format, modern drag ballroom culture is showcased as eight 'houses' compete against each other in dance, performance, lip-syncing, and fashion challenges for trophies and a cash prize of $100,000. The show sets a ballroom theme for each episode and assigns related challenges for the houses to compete in. As an example, during Vogue week, the house members choreograph a dance to perform on the runway in front of the judges. Following this, the two lowest scoring teams engage in a head-to-head dance off, resulting in the elimination of one house from the show. The show resonates with the complex understanding of reality TV as outlined by Annett Hill, in which she claims:

> Reality television is a container for a range of diverse programmes, series, formats and events in which elements of documentary, talent shows, game shows, talk shows, soap operas, melodrama and sports mix together to produce sub-genres (Hill, A. 2015.p.5).

Legendary, optimises Hill's description of reality TV as it incorporates most of the elements mentioned. First, it blends elements of documentary, represented through its subject interviews that give contextual analysis about how the performers became part of their drag families and frequent answers stem from being marginalised by larger society through oppression and indifference. The employment of documentary techniques emphasises a further contemporary link to *Paris is Burning* and the importance of highlighting queer visibility and the reality of queer experiences. Judge Leiomy Maldonado concurs that this is an important aspect to the show as it focuses on the contestants' personal journey to ballroom, stating:

> I think the most important thing about the show or how the show has portrayed ballroom and has brought it into the spotlight is the fact that you get to see the actual stories. You get to hear why these people were inspired to be a part of these houses, why this is so important to each individual, what it takes to even have the courage to get out there and have the confidence to even compete (Rico, K. 2020).

Given the contextual analysis of this thesis and the shows previously discussed, I argue that *Legendary* isn't, in fact, revolutionary in its approach to highlighting queer experiences nor has it brought it into the spotlight. However, regarding the current political legislation and social debates surround queer identity, I think that, nonetheless, queer culture's inclusion in the show, whilst not revolutionary, is important as it is an urgent ongoing issue. Although the show presents as a gameshow in essence, its inclusion of queer themes and culture as well as its very presence, is political in the current climate and in conjunction with the other shows discussed *Legendary* works as part of this collective resistance. The behind-the-scenes look into the competitors' real-life outside of the competition resonates with earlier discussions about the intrigue of documentary. Specifically, investigations into celebrities' "real-life" are

often more appealing to audiences than presentations of their talents or what they are famous for. As I have demonstrated earlier in this thesis, *Legendary* further confirms that documentaries have played a significant role in shaping the discourse and aesthetics of contemporary drag culture that audiences are now familiar with. They have also influenced the concept of reality television. The show employs methods of both talent shows and game shows, as the houses compete for a cash prize by showing their talents as dancers for an adjudicating panel. The dancers in their houses compete together, which can also be seen as teams, thereby establishing a connection to both game shows and elements of sporting competitions. However, the houses in which the participants compete in are not merely 'teams' they are indicative of the house structures first displayed in *Paris is Burning* They are the surrogate and chosen families of the participants rather than being formed specifically for the purpose of the show. Maldonado also argues that this elevates the show in terms of representation and authenticity as it reflects the real-life queer ballroom experience. She explains:

> Some of us, some of the people in our own community, they don't have that. They don't have a family. They don't have somebody that they can call for support or for acceptance or for anything. And this show shows that, and that's the most important thing about ballroom (Rico, K. 2020).

In their interview with *Variety*, judge Leiomy Maldonado, MC Dashaun Wesley, both of whom have a background hailing from ballroom and queer culture, and the shows executive producers Jack Mizrahi, Rob Eric and David Collins discuss the importance of authenticity when presenting queer and ballroom culture on television. Wesley, in particular, notes the contentious history of outsider appropriation of ballroom culture as he claims that many people have stepped foot into the culture without giving their full respect or, by proxy, due

recognition of those involved in it (Rico, K. 2020). His comments regarding 'outsider' appropriation of ball culture are indicative of those levelled at both Jennie Livingston and Madonna, and so for Wesley it is imperative to include members of the ballroom community within representations of it. However, drawing on the comments made by Josh Marcus in which he addresses Beyonce's *Renaissance* album and tour and complications surrounding 'authenticity (Marcus, J. 2023), the show has faced similar accusations. In their interview, the stars and producers of the show address the inclusion of judges Jameela Jamil and Megan Thee Stallion, neither of whom have a background in ballroom culture, thereby consider to lack authenticity in terms of queer experience in their role as judges. In defence of the casting decisions, Maldonado claims,

> You don't come into this world knowing everything, so the fact that we see the judges being educated throughout the episodes and not just them coming in like, 'Oh yeah, I know everything.' I feel like that's better…People are seeing them learn. And that gives inspiration to people who don't know (Rico, K. 2020).

An article for *Esquire*, Justin Kirkland discusses the controversy and backlash the show received from the public, particularly surrounding the inclusion of Jamil, detailing how members of the LGBTQ+ community believed Jamil to be straight-identified and therefore not a 'proper' representative of ballroom culture. The article acknowledges that the main issue at hand for members of the community centres on whether Jamil has the legitimacy or right to participate in a show about ballroom culture (Kirkland, J. 2020). Many of those who expressed their condemnation reported feeling enraged that Jamil acquired the judging role over Trace Lysette, a transgender actress and house mother with the New York ballroom scene. Kirkland confirms that Lysette claimed she had auditioned for the same role as Jamil. However, Jamil responded, noting that she and Lysette had auditioned for different roles

(Kirkland, J. 2020). Following the Twitter storm, Jamil publicly came out as queer, acknowledging however that the moniker does not make her an expert in ballroom. What she hoped for however was that she would be able to leverage her platform and fame to shine a light on the community explaining that 'Sometimes it takes those with more power to help a show get off the ground so we can elevate marginalised stars that deserve the limelight and give them a chance' (Kirkland, J. 2020). Her statement was seen as insensitive by the LGBTQ+ community and they further accused Jamil of missing the point and even questioned the authenticity of her queerness, as she is publicly known to be dating musician James Black since 2015. Her statement and the controversy surrounding her inclusion in the show, together with the accusations of appropriation levelled at Livingston and Madonna among others, reveals the paradox of ballroom drag culture and mainstream recognition. It further highlights the argument presented in chapter two, which questioned whether the mainstream success for *RuPaul's Drag Race* had come at an ideological and subversive cost.

As arguably ill-timed as her coming out was, with many referring to it as a justification rather than a coming out (Kirkland, J. 2020) it is interesting to point out that Megan Thee Stallion, a black female rapper, who also identifies as straight and has no affiliation to ballroom culture did not receive the same level of backlash as Jamil. Jamil, a Pakistani British actress, expressed in her coming out Tweet 'how difficult it is for a lot of South Asian people to come out'. The intersection of her racial and bisexual identity reveals an ongoing deeper struggle within the LGBTQ+ community concerning how the collective treats certain subgroups within the evolving acronym (Kirkland, J. 2020). Sonali Patel's research discusses how Western LGBTQ+ communities racially exclude South Asian women, particularly noting how this rhetoric pushes queer South Asian women further into the margins of queer discourse. Regarding Kimberle Crenshaw's study of intersectionality, Patel highlights how Crenshaw argues that feminist theory or anti-racist discourse fails to fully understand black

women because it does not adequately account for the intersection of their identities within a single analytical framework. Similarly, Patel argues that dominant conceptions of queerness do not reflect South Asian experiences, making it difficult to understand queer South Asian women through independent South Asian or queer frameworks. She additionally employs an intersectional model of LGBTQ+ microaggressions (Vaccaro, A. & Koob, R. M. 2018).

Using both theories, she argues that the in-group's perpetuation of microaggression invalidates the intersectional realities of queer people of colour. She writes:

> The possibility of being both queer and South Asian is invalidated through micro aggressive attitudes, behaviours, and ideologies perpetrated by dominant members within the LGBTQ community (Patel, S. 2019. p.411).

Likewise, *Esquire* also references the erasure of Asians from the queer narrative within the article, as they present an embedded link to a 2018 article that addresses a zero-tolerance policy issued by gay dating app Grindr's head of communications Landen Zumwalt. The new implemented policy stated it was aiming to crack down on abusive, transphobic, racist, ageist, sizeism and other discriminations within the LGBTQ+ dating app, stating:

> Any language that is intended to openly discriminate against characters and traits, like infamously, 'No fats, no femmes, no Asians'...that isn't going to be tolerated any more (Elks, S. 2018).

Zumwalt further explains that as the leading gay dating app, Grindr has an enormous influence and responsibility over mass audiences and therefore has the ability to affect real awareness surrounding these topics and issues (Elks, S. 2018).

Kirkland argues that the inclusion of Jamil in the show could prove beneficial as he claims, if the ballroom community can find an ally in Jamil, 'then the programme could achieve further visibility by using her star power to leverage an important series' (Kirkland, J. 2020). Although this is a genuine and positive possibility, given the context of this thesis and the importance of visibility, representation and intersectionality within queer culture, specifically ballroom drag culture. I contend that the importance of Jamil's inclusion in the series is not just to utilise her fame to attract higher viewing figures, but rather as a way to further elevate the visibility of intersecting identities within mediated representations of queer and ballroom culture. The debate surrounding Jamil's inclusion in *Legendary* is reminiscent of Jackie Goldsby's analysis of Livingston and Madonna's apparition of ball culture in which she questioned, 'When is borrowing not appropriation and/or when does appropriation become co-optation? Or, in other words, what does it mean if the ball never ends?' (Grever, M, Greyson, J, Parmar, P. 1993. P.112). Goldsby's questioning was in regard to one of the first mediated depictions of ballroom drag, *Paris is Burning*, and it appears that over three decades later it is still resonant. 'There's been a long-standing tension between queer subcultures and 'the mainstream', which is often viewed as a force of depoliticisation and heteronormativity' (Staples, L. 2019). Therefore, it is still important to question whether a subculture loses authenticity when it becomes part of the popular culture.

Despite the controversy surrounding *Legendary*, the show confirms that a continued demand for contemporary shows that represent, and feature queer culture and queer visibility is of crucial and timely importance, specifically given the symbiosis of this demand with the current socio-political climate, in which US politicians are restricting rights and liberties in almost every facet of LGTQ+ life. This study demonstrates that the regressive socio-political ideology and rhetoric, which aims to erase queerness from the national identity of America, can also be recycled, similar to Goldsby's understanding of recycled commodity culture

(Grever, M, Greyson, J, Parmar, P. 1993). And so, it is in its reframing and (re) presenting that is important. Television, has been at the forefront of this process in recent years, informed and influenced by the enduring legacy of *Paris Is Burning*, queer and drag ball culture.

This thesis places *Paris is Burning* as an ur-text in which subsequent mediated contemporary conceptions of drag, gender and sexual identity draw upon, in doing so my study has demonstrated the continued relevance of the documentary regarding not only its themes but also its social commentary. By engaging with the documentary's influence within the New Queer Cinema movement and queer discourse towards the end of the 1980s and early 1990s. I have positioned *Paris is Burning* as not only an important visual text within screen studies but also highlighted its important influence on academic discourse surrounding ideas about identity. Such discourse continues to be relevant within the current American culture wars, which has placed notions of identity as its central argument which has exacerbated the partisan divisions across the United States. I have shown *Paris is Burning's* resonance withing current socio-political and media landscapes as it continues to inform readings of queer culture in both media and academic discourse.

The study has placed television and its multi-modal extensions as having an influential effect on socio-political ideologies and its role in assigning symbolic and cultural value to the identities it features and represents. Throughout my study, I have demonstrated how television continues to screen queer, culture, gender, and sexual identities. This screening has been thoroughly informed by the convergence of New Queer Cinema and queer theory, which first highlighted the value of including it within academic discourse and theoretical understandings of queer experience. The shows selected for analysis, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *Pose* and *We're Here* provide evidence that queer representation within contemporary

television has expanded across multiple genres and formats such as reality TV, long-form fiction and reality/documentary unscripted reality. Allowing its ability to respond to current anti-LGBTQ+ socio-political debates and legislation to have a greater impact on audiences across a vast, multi modal media landscape. These shows use drag and queer culture, first presented in *Paris is Burning*, to engage with the major theoretical strands concerned with understanding and presenting how they continue to find a platform through a multitude of aspects within contemporary television. All three shows have demonstrated a continuation for the consideration of intersectionality within mediated depictions of drag and queer culture that were first articulated by Kimberle Crenshaw and were further developed by bell hook's critical analysis of *Paris is Burning*. Throughout this study, Judith Butler's seminal texts *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) emphasise the continued relevance of queer theory within the content and context of these shows. Furthermore, Butler's work contributed to the ascendency of queer theory and therefore has inspired much of the contemporary academic discourse that now situates itself alongside aggressive anti-LGBTQ+ rights political agendas in the United States.

Each show draws direct influence from *Paris is Burning* for its themes. I have demonstrated how *RuPaul's Drag Race* has engaged with both seminal and contemporary theoretical discourse. *Drag Race* has utilised that to inform its own understanding and presentation of drag queer culture, gender, and sexual identity, which was first articulated by *Paris is Burning,* for contemporary audiences. I outline that the format of long-form fiction has become an increasingly popular format within the contemporary TV landscape thanks to the success for streaming and subscription services. Through this format, *Pose* presents a re-telling of *Paris is Burning*, that is thoroughly informed by documentary's themes and concepts of intersectionality within queer and racial identity and queer sensibility during the height of the AIDS and presents a fictional dramatised version for contemporary audiences.

People from within the queer community write and feature in the show, which not only gives it a distinctly progressive edge and authenticity but also positions it to act as an artistic response to the current regressive political stance on LGBTQ+ identity. *We're Here* has presented the significance of regionality and its informing of identity by investigating the nuances of queerness and location. By moving away from typical metropolitan queer settings and TV studios, the show explores the coexistence of straight and queer identity within small towns across America often those considered to be 'red' states with deeply engrained religious, conservative ideologies, however the show reveals a variety of identities that cohabit in these areas and a significance to highlight this multitude of demographics. The show employs the style of drag performance that has become synonymous with *Paris is Burning* and presents it as a subversive art form that allows the subjects of the show to embrace all aspects of their identity and therefore the drag shows act as resistant performance to socio-location politics that often makes the subjects feel marginalised in their community. Furthermore, by incorporating elements of political theatre and documentary filmmaking, the show empowers its cultural intervention in its efforts to affect social change. This allows the show to reflect and represent each subject's personal journey to drag, while also incorporating various aspects such as location, family, community, and work that work symbiotically to create personal identity.

The inclusion of each show is imperative to my study as, an analytical discourse of each provides an example of how contemporary media, informed by the legacy of *Paris Is Burning*, continues to challenge normative notions of gender and sexual identity. In addition, my study's analytical engagement with current anti-LGBTQ+ political discourse has proven how important progressive visibility and representation is within mainstream media, and how the urgent and timely response of television, to continue this type of representation, remains.

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