

FROM GENDERFUCK TO NONBINARY:  
NEGOTIATING GENDER IN PERFORMANCE

A Thesis

by

KATELYN ELIZABETH ELDER

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Chair of Committee,	Kirsten Pullen
Committee Members,	Donnalee Dox
	Anne Morey
Head of Department,	Donnalee Dox

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## ABSTRACT

Genderfuck is a performative gender critique. It is sometimes playful, sometimes serious, and always political. Genderfuck empowers artists to critique binaried gender through performance. Using four case studies, I suggest that genderfuck is part of a larger drag history, operated as a precursor to contemporary nonbinary gender performance, and continues to be accessed and activated through drag aesthetics. I locate genderfuck as a gender identity in 1970s San Francisco, with artists like gay poet Harmodius in Exile, and his lover and photographer, David Greene. Later, I track RuPaul's early performance work in 1980s Atlanta through a genderfuck framework, aided by his autobiographies and publicity posters. Turning to contemporary examples, I examine the inaugural issue of *Queen* magazine to discover Alaska Thunderfuck's direct citing of genderfuck RuPaul in the issue's cover image, Violet Chachki's queer exploration of French photographer Pierre Molinier in an editorial spread, and Cheddar Gorgeous, a Manchester-based genderfuck queen. I close with a study of Andrea Gibson, a queer poet currently publishing and touring in the US. I suggest their work is queered by their trans\* status, and that Gibson uses genderfuck aesthetics to situate their poetry politically within a feminist paradigm.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

“Harmodius engages the camera with a frank, beguiling, gently smiling face. The poet is androgynous. Harmodius is mid-transformation. He is beautiful. She is beautiful,” details Dominic Johnson.<sup>1</sup> Johnson is writing about a photo entitled *Harmodius, with Burlesque Queen Photo*, taken in 1974 by David Greene, part of his *Shameless* collection. Harmodius was one of many queer artists in San Francisco identifying as “genderfuck” in the early 1970s. I suggest that genderfuck operates as different identities for performers in disparate decades, but Greene importantly locates a “genderfuck culture in San Francisco in 1975.”<sup>2</sup> This is an entire culture of queer artists, occasionally photographed, but otherwise left unrecorded in performance history.

Described by Johnson, “Greene documented glitter queen, trans, and genderfuck characters in San Francisco from 1973 to 1976 and disseminated these images in underground magazines like *Vector*, and exhibitions in artist-run or independent venues in the city.”<sup>3</sup> Greene photographed these genderfuck people but also preserved their performed identities. Genderfuck identity was often performed at the level of the body, an ephemeral embodied queerness that was not otherwise archived or archivable. Genderfuck was a strategy for queer survival; this performed identity purposefully subverted heteronormative hegemony. Many genderfuck people masked themselves with

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<sup>1</sup> Dominic Johnson, “Sitting. With a Candle? Up My Ass!: A Portrait of Harmodius in Exile,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2.4 (November 2015): 695.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 969.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

pseudonyms and stage names in an effort to avoid surveillance by the state. Soliciting the gaze of the public while evading state surveillance suggests that these genderfuck people were interested in performances of self only locally, within their community. Furthermore, it points to a suspicion of police and the state, and an attempt to subvert governmental regulation. These genderfuckers were actively avoiding being tracked, which consequently makes them hard to access as a researcher. Greene's photography represents the only account of some genderfuck people's existence. Greene himself located a playful queerness in his work: "Many have mistaken my photographs for fantasy or theatre. This mistake comes from the false notion that only in the theatre do people surround themselves in splendor and act in a mobile and unrestrained manner. [...] What straights would call performance is, in fact, a joyous way of life."<sup>4</sup> This lifestyle was genderfuck, and genderfuckers were their own community.

Archival data is our only access point to genderfuckers like Harmodius. Greene donated all the extant photos of Harmodius, along with his personal journal and a book of poetry, to the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles in 2013. Greene and Harmodius were lovers for a short time, as detailed in the journal. Harmodius, as one of a handful of San Francisco's genderfuck-identified artists and activists, has been forgotten. Scholars like Johnson and I, however, are able to use "archival research as an access point to concealed or 'minor' histories of lesbian, gay, and transgender life in San Francisco in the 1970s."<sup>5</sup> Until Johnson's article in the November 2015 issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, no one had published

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 695.

anything about Harmodius since Greene's 1974 *Shameless* photography exhibition. I found one online account of Harmodius escaping a robbery in 1979,<sup>6</sup> and Johnson found his obituary in an issue of the *Bay Area Reporter* from 1992.<sup>7</sup> According to Johnson, "Greene stopped showing his work shortly after a solo exhibition (at Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago) received a scathing review in the *New Art Examiner* in October 1978."<sup>8</sup> Even David Greene, the only known person to photograph Harmodius, stopped showing the photos within five years. Harmodius himself was dead within twenty. I am thankful to Greene for preserving Harmodius's genderfuck; Johnson importantly notes, "[i]n his turn away from photography, however, Greene confirmed or consolidated his marginalization by art history."<sup>9</sup> Greene may have marginalized himself, but even so, his photography made the only known attempt to historicize Harmodius and other genderfuck-identified artists like him.

Dominic Johnson's and my projects overlap both in topic and timeline. Johnson's article is part of *TSQ*'s special issue themed "Archives and Archiving," which "investigate[s] practical and theoretical dimensions of archiving transgender phenomena

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<sup>6</sup> Harmodius escaped during a robbery at San Francisco art gallery Fey-Way Studios, during which owner Robert Opel was killed. For more, see <http://antebellumgallery.blogspot.com/2014/03/the-life-death-and-legacy-of-oscar.html?zx=d463c9b787ed6eb8>.

<sup>7</sup> Part of the GLBT Historical Society's online searchable obituary database. For obituary, see [http://obit.glbthistory.org/olo/imagedb/1992/03/12/19920312\\_Rogers\\_Anthony\\_J\\_Harmodius/m19920312\\_0.jpg](http://obit.glbthistory.org/olo/imagedb/1992/03/12/19920312_Rogers_Anthony_J_Harmodius/m19920312_0.jpg).

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, "Sitting.," 699.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*



and [asks] what constitutes ‘trans\* archives’ or ‘trans\* archival practices.’”<sup>10</sup>

Importantly, Johnson and I are both researching trans\*<sup>11</sup> identity performance, and were both drawn not only to the same archive, but to the same set of photos within it. ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives prides itself on being “the largest repository of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) materials in the world.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, in searching the archive for representations of genderfuck, Johnson and I were both drawn to David Greene, the *Shameless* photos, and Harmodius, though we didn’t know of each others’ interest. Johnson specifies, “[h]ere, in the archive, transgender, transsexual, and genderfuck lives emerge into visibility, demanding to be seen.”<sup>13</sup> I suggest that Harmodius emerges as a research site more easily than Greene’s other genderfuckers due to his additional personal effects. Harmodius’s personal journal and *The Poems of Harmodius in Exile*, alongside Greene’s photos, perform a history of Harmodius, but also perform a historicization on Greene’s part. Greene found San Francisco’s genderfuckers worth documenting, but he was forgotten alongside them. Johnson suggests, “[t]oday, his work is primed for ‘rediscovery’ [...]. By uncovering and celebrating [Greene’s] corpus, a series of undisclosed, secret, or sidelined histories can also be reconstituted—including, but not limited to, the life and times of Harmodius in

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<sup>10</sup> “TSQ 2.4 Call for Papers: Archives and Archiving,” *Institute for LGBT Studies*, The University of Arizona, accessed 22 Feb. 2016, <https://lgbt.arizona.edu/content/tsq-24>.

<sup>11</sup> Trans\* is an umbrella term that can be applied to a spectrum of transgender and nonbinary gender identities.

<sup>12</sup> Home page, *The ONE Archives Foundation*, accessed 22 Feb. 2016, <http://www.onearchives.org/>.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, “Sitting,” 695.

Exile.”<sup>14</sup> Johnson and I represent a trend in queer performance scholarship, toward rediscovering, understanding, analyzing, and historicizing genderfuck through archival research. Johnson specifically approaches genderfuck as a gender identity geographically and temporally situated in 1970s San Francisco. I also begin there with Harmodius, but extrapolate genderfuck as a performance to further trace its history as a performance aesthetic in 1980s Atlanta, and as a precursor to contemporary trans\* and nonbinary gender identity performance.

### Situating Genderfuck

June L. Reich describes genderfuck as a subversive, mimetic performance, where “[m]imicry problematizes the real by representing both the presence and absence of a construction.”<sup>15</sup> Stephen Whittle’s definition of genderfuck, “a full-frontal theoretical and practical attack on the dimorphism of gender- and sex-roles,” points to a performed and conscious refusal of normative gender identity.<sup>16</sup> In the 1980s, as an emerging performer and provocateur, RuPaul was a genderfucker.<sup>17</sup> Now, he is most easily identified as a drag queen, and has his own reality television contest, *RuPaul’s Drag*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 699-700.

<sup>15</sup> June L. Reich, “Genderfuck: The Law of the Dildo,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 262; 264.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Whittle, “Gender Fucking or Fucking Gender? Current Cultural Contributions to Theories of Gender Blending,” in *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing*, ed. Richard Ekins and Dave King (London: Routledge, 1996), 202.

<sup>17</sup> Genderfuck is referred to both as *genderfuck* and *gender fuck*. I use *genderfuck*; it’s the term the artists themselves most often.

*Race (RPDR)*. I define genderfuck as a reflexive rebellion against all genders, gender roles, and gender binaries through subversive, spectacular gender identity performance.

My work complicates, interrogates, and builds on performance theory from the social sciences, queer theory, queer identity theory, and queer performance. Genderfuck represents an academically unarticulated combination of identity performance, queer politics, theatre, and gender studies. Genderfuck exists somewhere between queer studies and performance studies, but has thus far been overlooked by both. I suggest that genderfuck offers agency to queer people by providing a liminal, safe space to interrogate, explore, and refuse binaried gender constructions through performances of self. Performance studies provides a unique lens to research genderfuck; in turn, my work opens genderfuck as a new performance studies field site. I analyze, incorporate, and critique previous scholarship, including work by Judith Butler, Jill Dolan, Jack Halberstam, Gordon Brent Ingram, and José Esteban Muñoz, and study genderfuck aesthetics represented in drag, photography, and poetry, along with the use of genderfuck performances as publicity tools. Consequently, I look to blog, newspaper, and magazine articles to examine the reception of artists and their work. My work culminates in a written project and an installation piece, “A Genderfuck Herstory: Historicizing *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.” In the installation, I historicize instances of genderfuck performance on the first seven seasons of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, along with *RuPaul’s All Stars Drag Race*, which aired in 2012 between *RPDR* seasons four and

five.<sup>18</sup> Over time, *RPDR* has evolved to be more inclusive of genderfuck drag queens and genderfuck aesthetics. I examine the frequency of casting for genderfuck queens, and occurrences of genderfuck performances by non-genderfuck queens. Genderfuck queens on *RPDR* often defend their aesthetic choices by situating themselves within an art history timeline rather than a drag timeline; my installation also tracks these instances.

Genderfuck performances are spectacles of identity and performances of self that consciously toy with non-binariied identities. Genderfuck often exaggerates and stylizes camp aesthetics. In her foundational and transformative essay, Susan Sontag explains, “[c]amp taste turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment. Camp doesn’t reverse things. It doesn’t argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different – a supplementary – set of standards.”<sup>19</sup> Though Sontag’s work divorces camp from solely gay aesthetics, she importantly situates camp outside normative rules. These “supplementary standards” also exist outside the gender binary, creating space for genderfuck. Further, Sontag argues that camp views the world as an aesthetic phenomenon, and that camp can never be taken entirely seriously because it is always “too much.”<sup>20</sup> This inherent failure in camp creates its joking nature and encourages overt performances outside of normative social rules. Furthermore, Sontag argues, “[t]he androgyne is certainly one of the great images

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<sup>18</sup> *RPDR* has aired yearly since 2009. *RuPaul’s All Stars Drag Race* included queens originally cast in the first four seasons of *RPDR*.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 61.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 54; 59.

of Camp sensibility.”<sup>21</sup> Androgyny celebrates existence outside the binary by blending gender into a liminal middle ground. Genderfuck takes camp and androgyny one step further to parody the binary by employing multiple extremes at once.

Though genderfuck’s origins are murky, Reich notes definite influences from camp aesthetics, as genderfuck often manifests in playful acts of spectacle. She defines camp as “the triumph of theatricality over substance, it is cynical, ironic, sentimental, pleasure-seeking, naively innocent, and corrupting. More importantly, it accomplishes more than mere inversion and duplicity; it alters traditional sensibilities altogether.”<sup>22</sup> For her, camp provides a playful escape from gender roles by allowing performers to acknowledge their agency in the creation of (a)gendered identity.

At the same time, camp inherently contains a reflexive freedom, an ability to simultaneously acknowledge and subvert normative gender roles. As Sue Ellen Case explains, “[c]amp both articulates the lives of homosexuals through the obtuse tone of irony and inscribes their oppression with the same device. Likewise, it eradicates the ruling powers of heterosexist realist modes.”<sup>23</sup> Camp denies a dominant heteronormative identity by providing space for ironic play. Genderfuck develops in this liminal space; if camp critiques gender, genderfuck destroys it.

Unfortunately, audiences can only compare genderfuck to drag, because both are usually presented in the same setting, and drag queens are relatively mainstream whilst

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>22</sup> Reich, “Genderfuck,” 263.

<sup>23</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 189.

genderfuck remains largely marginalized. Today, genderfuck operates as a niche form of drag; therefore, genderfuck lacks its own performance venues. This had led some genderfuck queens to high-profile arenas like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, in order to perform genderfuck on a mainstream drag stage for a larger audience. A genderfuck queen's appearance most easily sets her apart. Genderfuck queens typically eschew the pillars of traditional drag by not wearing acrylic nails, padded hips, breastplates, or heels, not altering their voices in character, or any combination of these. This is in stark contrast to traditional campy drag, which dominates as a successful mainstream drag aesthetic; the two are always already linked. This immediately sets genderfuck performers up for failure, to be viewed as either over the top or not drag enough. For example, on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, genderfuck contestant Milk's long white wizard beard (see figure 1) paired with bare female breasts and nipples hidden only by suspenders gave her a jarring and discomfoting appearance next to Bianca Del Rio's traditionally campy flower-printed gown (see figure 2), complete with prop drink and sunglasses in season 6, episode 2.<sup>24</sup> The manner in which the two perform is also drastically different. In the same episode, Bianca Del Rio does what we expect from any good campy drag queen: she stomps the runway serving up luau party realness. Milk, on the other hand, seems to float through the space like an ethereal, agendered wizard fairy. The audience (and the judges) must then decide if Milk represents good-drag or bad-drag; the competition leaves no room for not-drag. This example underscores genderfuck's subversive status within the current

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<sup>24</sup> "RuPaul's Big Opening Part 2," *RuPaul's Drag Race*, season 6, episode 2, directed by Nick Murray, aired 3 March 2014 (Logo TV), Television. Bianca Del Rio's traditional drag skill worked to her advantage; she went on to win *RuPaul's Drag Race*, season 6.

drag performance climate. Genderfuck typically operates at the margins of drag as a related genre with a more eccentric aesthetic. For this reason, genderfuck queens and performances on *RPDR* are often judged as strange or extraneous, within the rules of normative drag.



Figure 1. Milk walks the runway topless, with breasts and a beard. Screenshot from “RuPaul’s Big Opening Part 2,” *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, season 6, episode 2. Reprinted from Tharrett.



Figure 2. Bianca Del Rio walks the runway in campy luau attire. Screenshot from “RuPaul’s Big Opening Part 2,” *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, season 6, episode 2. Reprinted from Starke.

## Theorizing Genderfuck

In addition to exploring performance as research in my installation, my work employs discursive analysis as a research method. Studying multiple perspectives across time allows me to interrogate the performing body as a text, performances as texts, texts about performance, and personal essays, informed by queer theory and theories of performativity.

Erving Goffman's social scientific articulations of performance in and as everyday life allow me to explore the genderfuck body as a constructed front. Goffman's model examines the role of the performer, and how the individual constructs a front, or "the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance."<sup>25</sup> He goes on to explain that individuals perform a personal front, made up of appearance and manner placed within a setting. The audience also expects some amount of consistency between setting, appearance, and manner, although contradictions do occur.<sup>26</sup> For genderfuck queens, the setting is typically the same as a drag queen's set: onstage, in a club, or perhaps on TV as part of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The audience has no reason to expect any type of performance other than drag. Variations in drag exist (think comedy queens vs. pageant queens<sup>27</sup>), but there is no delineated room for genderfuck queens.

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<sup>25</sup> Erving Goffman, "Performances," in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1959), 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-25.

<sup>27</sup> Comedy queens are drag queens who are typically more funny than pretty (examples: Jinx Monsoon and Ben DeLaCreme). Pageant queens are drag queens (often from the southern US) who are typically more pretty than funny (examples: Alyssa Edwards and Coco Montrese).



Goffman also argues that the front acts as collective representation. He writes, “[i]n addition to the fact that different routines may employ the same front, it is to be noted that a given social front tends to become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise, and tends to take on a meaning and stability apart from the specific tasks which happen at the time to be performed in its name.”<sup>28</sup> This shows that the front has meaning beyond its surface-level representation. In turn, this potential for collective representation raises the stakes for genderfuck performers working in drag. Contestants on *Drag Race* collectively represent drag’s requisite “charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent.”<sup>29</sup> Each performance, therefore, must either coincide with Goffman’s abstract stereotyped expectations, or subvert them. This catches genderfuck performers, such as Milk, in an unfortunate paradox. Milk uses genderfuck to perform herself. Because genderfuck lacks its own stages and performance venues, genderfuck performers turn to spaces like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as platforms for marginalized performances of gender. As Goffman notes, fronts often become stereotypes; this leaves genderfuck performers two options: to either align themselves with the stereotype or against it. Milk’s performance endangers drag by incorporating genderfuck elements; her genderfuck is conversely threatened by the traditional female-impersonation characteristics of drag. Furthermore, as Milk begins to create a name for herself as a genderfuck performer, her performances become

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>29</sup> “RuPaul’s Drag Race Dictionary,” *RuPaul’s Drag Race Wiki*, Wikia: The Home of Fandom, last modified 3 September 2012, accessed 20 Nov. 2014. [http://logosrupaulsdragrace.wikia.com/wiki/RuPaul's\\_Drag\\_Race\\_Dictionary](http://logosrupaulsdragrace.wikia.com/wiki/RuPaul's_Drag_Race_Dictionary). RuPaul never misses a chance at a good acronym...

stereotyped as representative of all genderfuck, even though the aesthetics intentions of genderfuck are to burst stereotyped performance.

Dean MacCannell sharpens and expands Goffman's notions of front and back by including mystification. He outlines mystification as "the conscious product of an individual effort to manipulate a social appearance, [that] can also be found where there is no conscious individual-level manipulation. Social structure itself is involved in the construction of mystifications that support social reality."<sup>30</sup> Although MacCannell is interested in social structures (and tourists, in this particular piece), his theory is equally relevant to genderfuck. MacCannell gives the social actor agency to manipulate an audience; the performer is reflexively performing the self while managing reception. Genderfuck drag queens mystify gender through queer performances of self. Drag queens perform a consciously created self, and use that performance to solicit audience response. Studying the genderfuck body as a text, I explore where drag and genderfuck overlap, what types of conflicts arise, and what unique performance possibilities exist along the borders.

I theorize genderfuck through drag by specifically considering texts on drag performance. Texts on genderfuck are rare; drag texts, however, are more readily available. Drag and genderfuck are distinctly different modes of performance, but share common ground as queer gender identity performances. Furthermore, some genderfuck performers work on drag stages. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues:

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<sup>30</sup> Dean MacCannell, "Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings," *The American Journal of Sociology* 79.3 (1973): 591.

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. [...] In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.<sup>31</sup>

Drag performances are pre-occupied with the anatomy of the performer (typically male), the gender of the performer (usually male), and the gender of the performance (almost always female). Genderfuck performance, however, problematizes the very existence of the three categories. Milk, for example, is anatomically male (as Dan Donigan), but embodies multiple genders (as Milk), and performs genderfuck by breaking gender rules. Milk strays from drag because she is not imitating gender but rather is performatively disregarding gender structures. Milk fucks with gender by disturbing and rejecting the rules of the binary. *Genderfuck* implies a subversive sidestepping of normative definitions of gender, an aggressive but playful challenge to mainstream codes. Milk's performance therefore troubles the gender and sex aspects of Butler's argument. By performing any/all/no gender, the sex and gender of the performer become less important. The purpose of genderfucking is to dissolve the binaries present in sex and

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<sup>31</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2006), 187.

gender; genderfuck drag performers are not men performing women, they are rather *humans* performing *spectacle*.

I also draw from Gordon Brent Ingram, who locates and combines queer performance potentials, their regulation, and their spaces to posit that “[t]hese cumulative interactions and the associated environmental constraints and opportunities can be called ‘the queerscape.’”<sup>32</sup> The idea of a queerscape is helpful because it locates identity within space. Ingram continues, “[a] queerscape is also an aspect of the landscape, a social overlay, where the interplays between assertion and marginalization of sexualities are in constant flux [...]. [T]he queerscape is a cultural construct that provides a territorial basis for considering [...] options for personal and collective expression.”<sup>33</sup> The queerscape, therefore, is the realm in which queers negotiate regulation, marginalization, and performances of identity. Ingram identifies queerscapes within cities; these may include gay bars, community centers, cafés, public parks, gyms, etc. I find it useful to consider Ingram’s queerscapes as social overlays. The artists I examine activate their audiences as social queerscapes. Trans\* poet Andrea Gibson, for example, uses live poetry performance to mobilize and spatially situate queer people in Houston. *Queen* magazine activates a global queer audience, unified online through *Queen*’s blog and initial crowd-sourced funding.

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<sup>32</sup> Gordon Brent Ingram, “Marginality and the Landscapes of Erotic Alien(n)ations,” in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, & Sites of Resistance*, ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 28-9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

Capitalist operations of power work to regulate the queerscape. Trans\* scholar Jack Halberstam<sup>34</sup> argues, “[c]apitalist logic casts the homosexual as inauthentic and unreal, as incapable of proper love and unable to make the appropriate connections between sociality, relationality, family, sex, desire, and consumption.” In a capitalist society chiefly concerned with production and reproduction, queer people (specifically those without children), are not fueling the system for the next generation. Interestingly, Halberstam continues, “[s]o before queer representation can offer a view of queer culture it must first repudiate the charge of inauthenticity and inappropriateness.”<sup>35</sup> I critique him, here, however, to argue that the queer who is always already failing, may choose instead to embrace that failure as a way to sidestep heteronormative (and capitalist) behavior.

José Esteban Muñoz frames this sidestepping as outright rejection, arguing, “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”<sup>36</sup> This rejection acknowledges an unfair imbalance, and chooses instead to focus on the possibilities of freedom and equality. Queer performances of self, such as RuPaul’s publicity posters, echoed by Alaska Thunderfuck’s image on the cover of *Queen* perform access to this otherworldly queer potentiality. Jill Dolan refers to these potentialities as performative utopias, as

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<sup>34</sup> Jack Halberstam has published as Judith, J. Jack, and Jack Halberstam. Although I cite work published under Judith Halberstam, I refer to him as Jack because he is currently publishing as Jack Halberstam.

<sup>35</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 95.

<sup>36</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

“moments of liminal clarity and communion, fleeting, briefly transcendent bits of profound human feeling and connection [that] imagine[s] a different, putatively better future.”<sup>37</sup> She specifies, “utopian performatives let us embody conditions of which we can otherwise only dream.”<sup>38</sup> These performances reject heteronormativity in favor of a queer utopic vision.

Muñoz argues, “utopia is a stage, not merely a temporal stage, like a phase, but also a spatial one. [...] Utopian performativity suggests another modality of doing and being that is in process, unfinished.”<sup>39</sup> Here, Muñoz suggests utopian performatives operate as an amateur alternative to hegemony. Queer spaces contain latent utopic potentials. Utopian performativity also allows multiple trajectories and multiple alternative futures. Muñoz posits, “utopia is an ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward. Utopia is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema. It is productive to think of utopia as [in] flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a *then* and a *there* that could be and indeed should be.”<sup>40</sup>

Richard Schechner articulates the body’s role in playful subversion. He elaborates, “[people] protest, often by means of farce and parody, against what is oppressive, ridiculous, and outrageous. For one to join the many as a part(ner), is not just a sexy act, it is also a socially and politically generative activity. Festive actions

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<sup>37</sup> Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 168.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>39</sup> Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia*, 99.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

playfully, blasphemously, and obscenely expose to the general eye for approval and/or ridicule the basic (and therefore bodily) facts of human life and death. Such playing challenges official culture's claims to authority, stability, sobriety, immutability, and immortality."<sup>41</sup> I argue that queer bodies activating genderfuck aesthetics create a platform for this utopic carnival to take place.

Ingram situates queer bodies in queer space, arguing, "[w]ith greater visibility, bodies marked as queer create specific forms of space around them. Personal erotic expression and individual resistance to homophobia at the level of 'body space' provide the most basic elements of queer space. Here, there is only queer space because there are queer bodies."<sup>42</sup> Ingram seems to argue that queer bodies are forced to be continually in a mode of resistance, as a strategy for managing homophobia in everyday life. While Ingram situates himself specifically in a spatial context, I argue that the performers in my case studies encourage queer audiences to let their guard down, to embrace queer alternatives, and experiment with utopian performatives in an effort to see and feel *what could be*.

Halberstam and Muñoz both articulate queer experience in the context of failure. Halberstam explains, "in true camp fashion, the queer artist works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness. Indeed the darkness becomes a crucial part of queer aesthetic."<sup>43</sup> For queer people, this campy experimental darkness operates as a performed alternative to heteronormativity. Halberstam continues, "there is something

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Schechner, "The Street is the Stage," in *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 46.

<sup>42</sup> Ingram, "Marginality," 41.

<sup>43</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Art*, 96.

powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing [...]. The concept of practicing failure perhaps prompts us to discover our inner dweeb, to be underachievers, to fall short, [...] to avoid mastery, and, with Walter Benjamin, to recognize that ‘empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers.’”<sup>44</sup> For Halberstam, accessing failure as power gives queers the agency to pursue counterhegemonic queer utopias. Muñoz elaborates, “for those of us whose relationship to popular culture is always marked by aesthetic and sexual antagonism, these stages are our actual utopian rehearsal rooms, where we work on a self that does not conform to the mandates of cultural logics like late capitalism, heteronormativity, or, in some cases, white supremacy.”<sup>45</sup> I argue that queer people, who are typically burdened with hegemony and heteronormativity (and the effects of those), are activated by genderfuck and empowered to sidestep the success/failure binary altogether and instead construct an alternative queer utopia.

In the following two chapters, I track and historicize genderfuck aesthetics through four case studies. I also interrogate nonbinary performance to examine the ways art and artists are gendered, and the ways artists access avenues of gender subversion. I situate nonbinary performance within a historical continuum of queer performance. I begin with Harmodius in Exile, a genderfuck poet active in 1970s San Francisco. For Harmodius, genderfuck operated as an identity that informed his poetry. I specifically analyze his “God is a Black Lesbian Rabbit” and “Supreme Act of Copulation” as humorous critiques of normative gender and sexuality. Following Harmodius, I locate

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 120-21.

<sup>45</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, “Impossible Spaces: Kevin McCarty’s *The Chameleon Club*,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11.3 (2005): 429.



genderfuck in RuPaul's 1980s performance work in Atlanta. RuPaul activated genderfuck as a performance aesthetic early in his career; I examine his autobiographies and a publicity poster as evidence. As a young performer in the 1980s, RuPaul was subversive and radical. He was always already genderfuck as there were limited mainstream articulations of non-binary gender identity. Therefore, RuPaul's genderfuck is an important step in queer performance and an opening of identity. I suggest that RuPaul created a liminal, charged gendered space from which contemporary genderqueer and nonbinary art has emerged. RuPaul and Harmodius in Exile used genderfuck to problematize binaried gender, I argue that their aesthetics inform current performances of nonbinary gender identity. In looking at modern examples, I locate genderfuck elements in *Queen* magazine. *Queen* is the first international drag magazine; I specifically look at three articles in the inaugural issue, published fall 2015. In these pages, Alaska Thunderfuck 5000, Violet Chachki, and Cheddar Gorgeous all echo genderfuck aesthetics to critique binaried gender. I close by examining Andrea Gibson, an award-winning poet and activist. Gibson is originally from Calais, Maine, and now lives in Boulder, Colorado. Their<sup>46</sup> work focuses largely on "war, class, gender, bullying, white privilege, sexuality, love, and spirituality."<sup>47</sup> Their work is informed by genderfuck aesthetics and their nonbinary gender status. Finally, my installation, "A Genderfuck Herstory: Historicizing *RuPaul's Drag Race*," explores genderfuck within

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<sup>46</sup> Andrea Gibson identifies as genderqueer, also goes by Andrew, and uses gender-neutral pronouns they/them.

<sup>47</sup> Andrea Gibson, "Bio," *Andrea Gibson*, accessed 12 April 2015.

the context of *RPDR* to examine the ways queens activate genderfuck to critique gender and traditional drag aesthetics.

## CHAPTER II

### HISTORICAL REPRESENTATIONS:

#### GENDERFUCK AS IDENTITY AND AESTHETIC

Doing drag in a male-dominant culture is an act of treason.  
It's the most punk-rock thing you can do.

-RuPaul<sup>48</sup>

[I]f the gender outlaw who can pass, refuses to pass, then they [...] present as gender fuck. A world in which gender is transgressed, in which representations are resisted, is a world in which the struggle is presented by subjects rather than objects.

-Stephen Whittle<sup>49</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s, genderfuck operated as a performance style for some and an identity for others, but was also subversive and underground. In the early 1970s, The Cockettes<sup>50</sup> “saw themselves as truly free, truly creative, and expressing something more genuine than drag did” by employing genderfuck aesthetics onstage.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, David Greene was photographing people like Delores DeLuce, who used genderfuck to describe their gender identities, for a collection titled *Andy's Donuts, Center of the*

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<sup>48</sup> Mac McClelland, “RuPaul: The King of Queens: How RuPaul Became America’s Sweetheart,” *Rolling Stone*, last modified 4 Oct. 2013, accessed 11 Dec. 2014, <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/rupaul-the-king-of-queens-20131004>.

<sup>49</sup> Whittle, “Gender Fucking,” 212.

<sup>50</sup> The Cockettes were a gay liberation theatre collective in San Francisco. They often used genderfuck aesthetics; for example, the men were known for putting glitter in their beards.

<sup>51</sup> J. Todd Ormsbee, *The Meaning of Gay: Interaction, Publicity, and Community among Homosexual Men in 1960s San Francisco* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 224.

*Universe*.<sup>52</sup> The exhibit was installed in the eponymous shop, “what Greene describ[ed] as ‘the center of genderfuck culture in San Francisco in 1975’ and [the] place to be seen after the bars closed at 2:00 a.m.”<sup>53</sup> Like DeLuce, many of the people featured in his collection were also artists critiquing gender through both stage performance and gender identity. First-hand accounts of genderfuck performance are rare; furthermore, because genderfuck was subversive and countercultural, it seems as though most of it was never recorded. In examining historical instances of genderfuck performance, I analyze drag queen RuPaul and genderfuck poet Harmodius in Exile. RuPaul had a fairly short genderfuck phase early in his career, but has written about it in two autobiographies, making him an accessible site of analysis. I found Harmodius in Exile through archival research in David Greene’s *Shameless* collection. In RuPaul’s case, I posit that he activated genderfuck identity for use as a performance aesthetic in his work on Atlanta drag stages. For Harmodius, I argue that genderfuck operated as a performative gender identity. Harmodius in Exile and RuPaul both use genderfuck aesthetics to performatively critique gender.

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<sup>52</sup> Dolores DeLuce, *My Life, A Four-Letter Word* (Venice, CA: Double Delinquent Press, 2013), 148. Also known as Delores Deluxe and once mentored by Divine, she continues to write and perform in the Los Angeles area. Andy’s Donuts was a 24-hour donut shop in San Francisco known for its nightly queer clientele.

<sup>53</sup> Johnson, “Sitting,” 696.

### Harmodius in Exile: Genderfuck as a Gender Identity

“Harmodius was born Anthony J. Rogers, in Columbus, Ohio, on May 7, 1947,” writes Johnson.<sup>54</sup> Harmodius was a poet and gay activist in San Francisco in the 1970s. He disappeared from traceable records after the late 1970s, until his obituary surfaced in the *Bay Area Reporter* in 1992. Johnson details, “in his final years, Harmodius [...] lived in the Bourgeois Palace, a commune on the northwest corner of Castro and Fourteenth streets [...]. [H]e became progressively more ill during the late 1980s. Harmodius died of an AIDS-related illness in San Francisco on February 17, 1992, at age 44.”<sup>55</sup>

Harmodius’s former partner, David Greene, photographed genderfuck people in San Francisco between February and August 1974 for his collection titled *Shameless*. “The show opened in Berkeley, California in 1974 with more than 200 people attending, most in drag,” writes Michael C. Oliveira.<sup>56</sup> Some of these photos were eventually published with other work in Greene’s *Photographs: Selected 4x5 Negatives in Black and White and Color*; ten of the original fifty are held at the USC archives, including *Harmodius in Exile in his Bedroom with Pipe and Jewelry*, dated June 1974 (see figure 3).

This photo of Harmodius is representative of most of the genderfuck photography in the collection, including photos of Delores DeLuce and Sylvester.<sup>57</sup>

Johnson details, “[a] further, striking photograph shows Harmodius sitting on a bed, pipe

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 698.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 699.

<sup>56</sup> Michael C. Oliveira, “Finding Aid to the David Greene Shameless Photographs, 1974 Coll2013.011,” *Online Archive of California*, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California, last modified 2013, accessed 29 Sept. 2015, [http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8np255c/entire\\_text/](http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8np255c/entire_text/).

<sup>57</sup> Known as “The Queen of Disco” in the late 1970s, Sylvester died of AIDS complications in 1988.

in mouth, with an artificial hibiscus behind the poet's ear, and wearing a facial spray of glitter stars and rhinestones around the eyes and cheekbones. The transformation to total 'genderfuckery' is complete."<sup>58</sup> Johnson locates a chronology in the *Shameless* photos, and attempts to track Harmodius by his appearance, citing makeup and rhinestones as evidence of a completed transition. I disagree with Johnson's impetus to organize a chronology; many of the photos depict various stages of dressing up or getting ready, on what appear to be different days, based on costuming and hairstyle. What is important to note, though, is that Johnson and I both locate genderfuck as a performed identity for an audience. Harmodius carefully applies his rhinestones, and strategically juxtaposes the flower behind his ear with the pipe in his mouth. He has something to say. Moreover, in *Harmodius in Exile in his Bedroom with Pipe and Jewelry*, Harmodius has a drawer full of jewelry and accessories to show off. His bed is littered with clothes in different colors and textures. In this photo, Harmodius isn't merely posing for a photographer. He is documenting himself as a genderfuck artist by revealing the "completed genderfuckery" alongside the means of production. The staging of this photograph suggests that Harmodius understands gender as constructed, and that he finds it important to document the ways in which he builds his own gender identity. We see the identity and its backstory; I suggest that Harmodius and Greene used this photo to show that genderfuck was not only queer, but that it was purposeful and subversive. Johnson interviewed Greene in 2013, who confirmed, "[m]y approach was distinguished from [straight photography] in that I sought an openly collaborative art—one in which the subjects had

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<sup>58</sup> Johnson, "Sitting.," 697.

a strong hand in creating the portraits. This came from both aesthetic and political impulses.”<sup>59</sup> I analyze Harmodius as a genderfuck poet, and his poetry as genderfuck art. I suggest that Harmodius’s genderfuck operates as a performed gender identity, an argument reinforced by Harmodius and Greene’s posing and styling in the *Shameless* photos at the ONE Archive, including *Harmodius in Exile in his Bedroom with Pipe and Jewelry*.



Figure 3. *Harmodius in Exile in his Bedroom with Pipe and Jewelry*, June 1974. Reprinted from *Harmodius* (Tony Rogers).

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

I chose to explore Harmodius further because the archive contained more material about and produced by him, donated in 2013 by David Greene. I found *The Poems of Harmodius in Exile*, a collection of short poetry written on a typewriter, with hand-drawn human figures layered behind the text. The figures are always male and often alone, or in pairs, having sex. I also found the handwritten rough draft of the manuscript, scrawled mostly in pen and illustrated in crayon. With those, I found a composition notebook simply labeled “Property of: Harmodius in Exile/Subject: David Greene.” Inside was a journal chronicling Harmodius’s meeting and almost immediate falling in love with the photographer.<sup>60</sup>

Historicizing Harmodius is a challenge because of naming conventions of the time. I argue that Harmodius identified as genderfuck, based on his willing inclusion in Greene’s genderfuck photography exhibit, *Shameless*. Oliveira describes the collection to say, “[t]he subjects are ‘shameless’ in living as gay men embracing a genderfuck identity.”<sup>61</sup> Oliveira points to both gay and genderfuck as markers of identity. I suggest that for Harmodius, the term “gay” functioned as his sexual identity, whereas “genderfuck” marked his performed gender identity. If Harmodius were alive and writing today, perhaps he may have identified as trans\* or may have used gender-neutral pronouns. In San Francisco in 1974, however, these naming conventions did not yet exist.

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<sup>60</sup> Harmodius in Exile, personal journal, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

<sup>61</sup> Oliveira, “Finding Aid.”



I analyze *The Poems of Harmodius in Exile* as a genderfuck art object. The first page of the book details the Ancient Greek myth of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, from which Harmodius drew his name.<sup>62</sup> He explains the myth and its resonance with his life: “Harmodius and Aristogeiton are only two of millions of Gays [sic] who have formed and changed History. In shedding my ‘slave’ name, Anthony J. Rogers, I chose the name Harmodius as my new title because it seemed to fit the mood of my life as a Gay Revolutionary. When I left my ‘Garden Fairy’ family in Columbus, Ohio, I added the suffix In Exile to my name; thus was hatched Harmodius in Exile.”<sup>63</sup> Not surprisingly, the book of poetry was published by G.A.W.K., the Gay Artist and Writers Kollektive, founded by David Greene.<sup>64</sup> The collection contains twenty-five poems dedicated to love, war, and politics.<sup>65</sup> Johnson describes Harmodius’s poetry as “both a political tool and a technique of whimsy, a gesture of serious play that stages the poet’s commitment to aesthetic, political, and corporeal self-fashioning.”<sup>66</sup> I agree with Johnson, but specify his assertions to identify Harmodius’s poetry as informed by his genderfuck identity, and

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<sup>62</sup> Harmodius and Aristogeiton were gay lovers who killed the tyrant Hipparchus. The two were considered martyrs to Athenian freedom; statues were erected in their honor. Dominic Johnson interviewed poet David Melnick, who “remembers that Harmodius in Exile took his name during a demonstration against President Richard Nixon at the Republican National Convention in Florida, in one of the first demonstrations by gay people at a US political convention.” Melnick also identified a correlating Aristogeiton, writing, “I never met the Aristogeiton who took his drag name at the same time, though years later I was told he visited San Francisco.” (Quoted in Johnson, “Sitting.,” 698.)

<sup>63</sup> Harmodius in Exile, *The Poems of Harmodius in Exile* (San Francisco: G.A.W.K., 1974), ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, ii.

<sup>64</sup> Oliveira, “Finding Aid.”

<sup>65</sup> The poems are only titled in the Table of Contents, not individually throughout. Harmodius dedicates love poems to six different men in the book; David Greene received two.

<sup>66</sup> Johnson, “Sitting.,” 695.

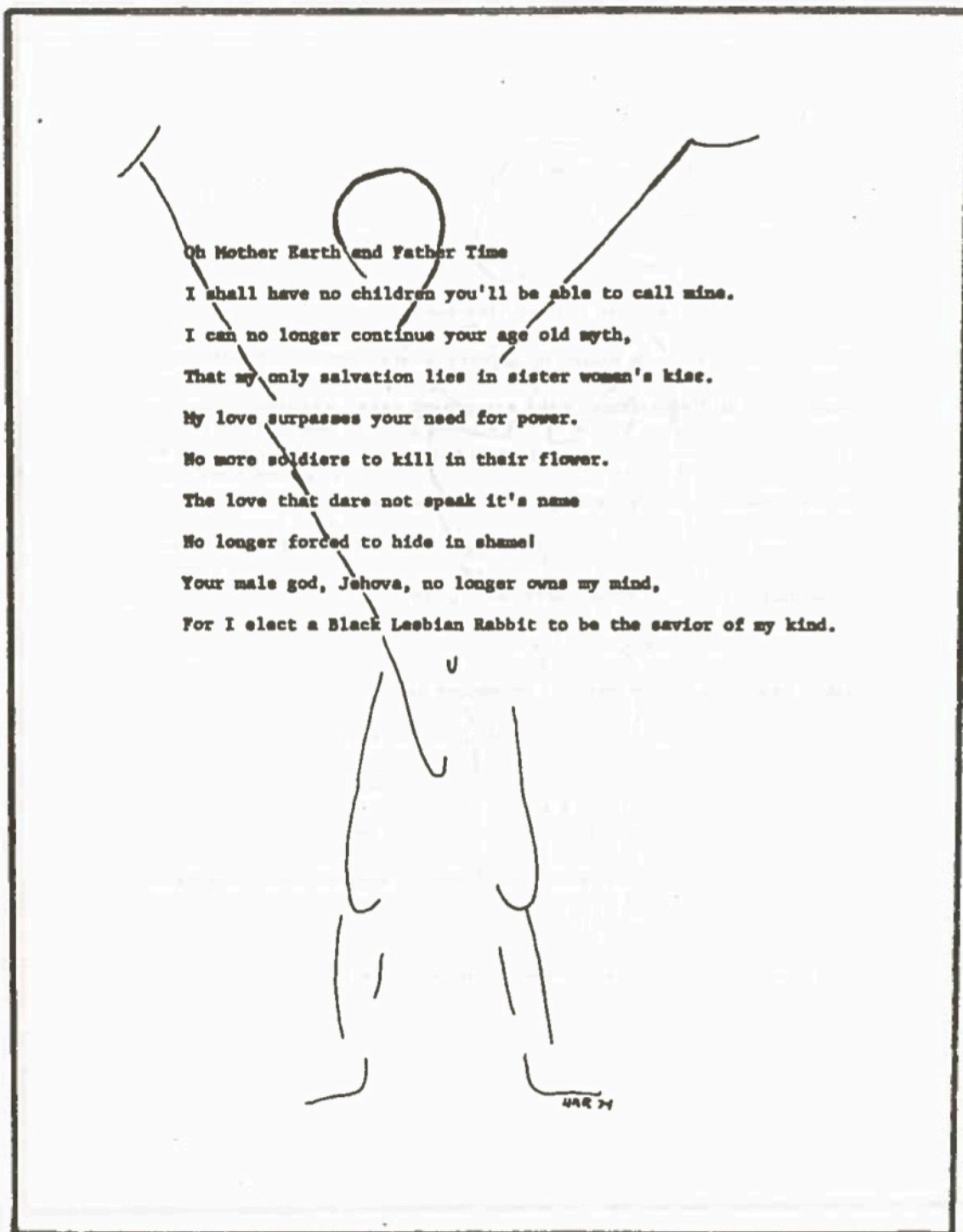
as examples of genderfuck poetry performance. I focus on two pieces I find particularly representative of genderfuck aesthetics, “God is a Black Lesbian Rabbit” and “Supreme Act of Copulation.”

In “God is a Black Lesbian Rabbit” (see figure 4), Harmodius begins by defying Mother Earth and Father Time, writing “I shall have no children you’ll be able to call mine.” Harmodius is denouncing the generational heteronormative family structure and separating himself from it in these opening lines. He then queers himself, situating the salvation in “sister woman’s kiss” within a heteronormative myth. With “My love surpasses your need for power,” Harmodius locates and subverts normative power structures imposed by Mother Earth and Father Time. Queer tension builds as Harmodius reveals his hidden “love that dare not speak it’s [sic] name.” He then separates himself intellectually from “Your male god, Jehova [sic].” It is important to note that here Harmodius denounces a gendered god. Mother Earth and Father Time are not only gendered, but are also named within a heteronormative familial system. Harmodius repeatedly dismisses and distances himself from extant power dynamics. A sketch of a man triumphantly raising his hands above his head punctuates the poem, as if asserting Harmodius’s independence. The poem’s title comes from its last line, “For I elect a Black Lesbian Rabbit to be the savior of my kind.”<sup>67</sup> Importantly, Harmodius uses this line to cite his own agency in his ability to choose his own savior. Moreover, given that choice, Harmodius identifies a queer woman of color in direct opposition to

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<sup>67</sup> I have found no other references to “Black Lesbian Rabbit” in pop culture of the time period, or online. Harmodius often used irregular capitalization, and likely capitalized this phrase for emphasis, rather than to cite a title of something else.

“Your male god, Jehova.” His use of the word “rabbit” may be operating in two ways. Harmodius may be removing saviorhood from humans entirely, or he may be jokingly alluding to the stereotypical promiscuity of rabbits, invoking a queer sex-positive message. As a genderfuck art object, the poem is open to interpretation. I suggest that Harmodius uses the poem and its accompanying illustration to critique binaried gender. Rather than situate himself within the success/failure binary explored by Muñoz and Halbertsam (see previous chapter), Harmodius uses “God is Black Lesbian Rabbit” to propose a subversive queer alternative.



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Figure 4. "God is a Black Lesbian Rabbit" with original illustration in *The Poems of Harmodius in Exile*. Reprinted from *The Poems of Harmodius in Exile*.

In “Supreme Act of Copulation” (see figure 5), Harmodius foregrounds comedy by strategically conflating images of sex and eating. “Taking your flesh and seed inside me” opens the poem by illustrating oral sex, immediately sexualizing and queering the poem and the poet. I suggest that oral sex is a reading guided by the title; if Harmodius had named the piece “Eating an Orange,” the sex metaphors would not have been as effective. Harmodius continues to painstakingly detail what the reader can only hope or assume is graphic sexual imagery over the next two lines. “[T]he white round surface of your head” is overtly sexual, and only barely recalls an orange upon a second read. The oral sex metaphor takes a violent turn in the fourth line with, “The sensation of my teeth as they cut into your flesh.” I suggest that Harmodius uses this line to confuse the reader by abruptly forcing a schism in the sex/eating duality of the early lines, but also to nonchalantly introduce fetishist imagery. The resultant “first spurts of juice” recall your “seed inside me” from the first line. The penultimate line adds specificity to the title; “the supreme act of copulation with nature” importantly locates sexuality within nature and comedically frames the final phrase “Eating an orange” as a sex act. Johnson also writes on “Supreme Act of Copulation:” “The poem parodies our expectation of erotic self-narration and disclosure, while at the same time eroticizing a pedestrian act, namely, the luridly described encounter with the ‘flesh and seed’ of a simple orange.”<sup>68</sup> I locate genderfuck aesthetics in this erotic parody, toying with the reader, presenting a normative scene, and then confusing it with layers of playful queer absurdity.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 699.

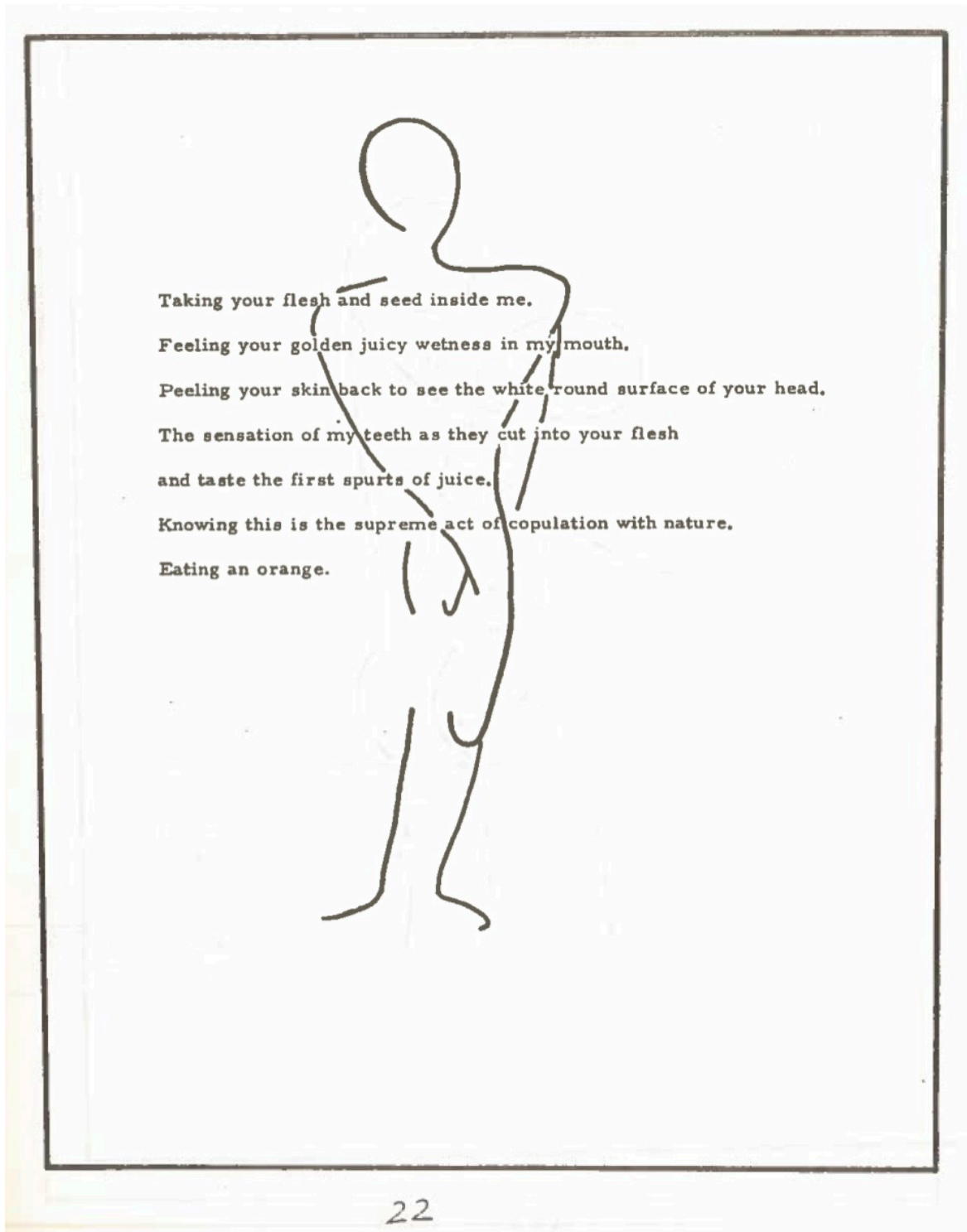


Figure 5. "Supreme Act of Copulation" with original illustration in *The Poems of Harmodius in Exile*. Reprinted from *The Poems of Harmodius in Exile*.

### RuPaul: Genderfuck as a Performance Aesthetic

I examine RuPaul as a drag performer who activated genderfuck identity for use as a performance aesthetic. While no longer incorporating genderfuck in his drag aesthetic, RuPaul has published two autobiographies that discuss his previous genderfuck performances. He began his career as a genderfucker in Atlanta, but has since evolved into the “world’s pre-eminent drag queen.”<sup>69</sup> RuPaul refers to a genderfuck phase in his autobiographies; for most genderfuckers, however, their names and performances were never recorded at all. Interestingly, RuPaul currently uses his reality show *RuPaul’s Drag Race (RPDR)* as a platform to engage and include contemporary drag queens who incorporate genderfuck elements in their drag aesthetic. Vernacular debate continues online about who was the first/best/most genderfuck queen on *RPDR*,<sup>70</sup> and genderfuck queens and genderfuck outfits have gotten more airtime since the show began in 2009. I locate a genderfuck element in Ongina, season one’s bald queen.<sup>71</sup> Raja, who won season three, claims originator credit in an interview for *The Advocate*: “I hope people remember me as being that edgy queen who really introduced the idea of genderfuck to the competition, and I hope that brings more of those types of queens onto the show.”<sup>72</sup> RuPaul claims that the show started acknowledging and promoting genderfuck in season

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<sup>69</sup> McClelland, “RuPaul.”

<sup>70</sup> For example, see

[https://www.reddit.com/r/rupaulsdragrace/comments/22bgts/how\\_far\\_could\\_a\\_t\\_rue\\_genderfk\\_queen\\_go/](https://www.reddit.com/r/rupaulsdragrace/comments/22bgts/how_far_could_a_t_rue_genderfk_queen_go/).

<sup>71</sup> Ongina also described herself as a genderfuck queen in season one, episode nine, “Ru-United,” the season’s reunion special.

<sup>72</sup> Brandon Voss, “Raja, Ooh La La,” *The Advocate*, Here Media Inc., last modified 26 April 2011, accessed 28 Sept. 2015, <http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/television/2011/04/26/raja-ooh-la-la>.

four.<sup>73</sup> Most recently, Milk competed as a self-identified genderfuck performer<sup>74</sup> on season six, and season seven incorporated a genderfuck runway challenge themed “Bearded and Beautiful.”<sup>75</sup> While a perceived tokenism may be starting to develop as genderfuck aspects of *RPDR* become more popular, I argue that RuPaul’s past as a genderfuck performer helped lead to his inclusion of genderfuck on the show.

Importantly, *RPDR* operates as site of historicized genderfuck. Queens like Raja create space for more instances of genderfuck performance on *RPDR*, all of which are recorded and promoted to fans worldwide. Unfortunately, poets like Harmodius have disappeared from genderfuck history outside of archival research. My work reinserts the ephemerality of genderfuck into the narrative of queer performance scholarship.

Genderfuck performances by queens on *RPDR*, however, are accessible on television, recorded and debated online, and open to critique by other drag queens. *RPDR* also creates a queerscape among its viewers; after competing, queens become part of the “Ru Family” and often activate name recognition to book performances worldwide. This genderfuck discourse popularizes genderfuck, and facilitates its growth as a performance aesthetic.

According to his first autobiography, *Lettin [sic] It All Hang Out*, RuPaul was born in 1960 and raised in San Diego, but moved to Atlanta in 1976. He had been kicked

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<sup>73</sup> Stuart Brumfitt, “RuPaul Talks Gender Fuck and Drag Genre,” *i-D Magazine*, Vice, last modified 29 May 2015, accessed 28 Sept. 2015, [https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_gb/article/rupaul-talks-gender-fuck-and-drag-genre](https://i-d.vice.com/en_gb/article/rupaul-talks-gender-fuck-and-drag-genre).

<sup>74</sup> Ali Hoyt, “Season 6 Spotlight: Milk,” *Drag Official*, last modified 23 Jan. 2014, accessed 28 Sept. 2015, <http://www.dragofficial.com/ali/season-6-spotlight-milk>.

<sup>75</sup> “Shakesqueer,” *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, season 7, episode 3, directed by Nick Murray, aired 16 March 2015 (Logo TV), Television.



out of high school for truancy and went to live with his sister Renetta and her husband Laurence; the three soon moved to Atlanta. RuPaul's first public performance was in 1982 on a cable-access television show called *The American Music Show*. His act was a singing trio with two women, called RuPaul and the U-Hauls, they became a fixture on the show after their first appearance. His first performance in drag was also on cable in Atlanta, for a skit in which he played a bridesmaid.<sup>76</sup> Soon after, RuPaul began to experiment with drag: "It wasn't officially drag yet. It was punk or gender fuck drag. I wasn't being fashionable, I was being hooty; bad wigs and thrift store clothes *and* size-ten Candies, with my feet hanging all out the back. In my mind I was hot, so I was hot, and you know what? Men would love it!"<sup>77</sup> RuPaul used homemade posters (see figure 6) to attract attention and promote himself as a genderfuck performer. RuPaul continues, "I took pictures of myself and blew them up by Xeroxing them. [...] Then I would slap on a slogan like 'RuPaul Is Red Hot' or 'RuPaul Is Everything,' make 200 copies, and plaster Midtown armed with a paint brush and a bucket of wheat paste. [...] The posters were a huge success and helped establish me in Atlanta."<sup>78</sup>

In figure 6, RuPaul combines glamorously femme hair and makeup with football pads and an obvious cisgender male bulge for an uncanny distancing effect. Here, RuPaul is not performing 'male' or 'female,' but overtly and fiercely portraying something in between. By placing traditionally gendered objects like wigs and sports equipment in direct opposition on the same body, RuPaul parodies gender norms by

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<sup>76</sup> RuPaul, *Lettin It All Hang Out: An Autobiography* (New York: Hyperion Books, 1996), 15-62.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-6.

genderfucking. RuPaul’s genderfuck aesthetic was radical and subversive, allowing his queer photographed body to function as a promotional tool.

# EVERYTHING



Figure 6. RuPaul in a wig and football gear on a homemade publicity poster, used in Atlanta. Reprinted from Wilde.

After making a name for himself in the punk bars and go-go clubs in Atlanta, RuPaul wrote a revue called “RuPaul is Red Hot,” and travelled to New York to perform at the Pyramid.<sup>79</sup> He writes, “[a]ll the queens were there—Tabboo, Hapi Phace, and Ethyl Eichelberger—and they were doing that same gender fuck thing that we were

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 76. “RuPaul is Red Hot” also costarred Floyd, Lady Bunny, Opal Fox, and Lady Pecan.

doing. It was drag Mecca, and they even had drag queens dancing on the bar. [...] The new drag, or superdrag as I liked to call it, came out of punk and parodied all that was held dear in our society.”<sup>80</sup> After the run of “RuPaul is Red Hot,” the Pyramid hired RuPaul on as a go-go dancer; he bounced between New York and Atlanta for a few years, go-go dancing, singing, and performing. During his early years, RuPaul was sometimes homeless and always poor. He explains that “[e]verything on my back I made myself. I shredded dozens of white plastic Hefty bags into ribbons and attached them to my [football] shoulder pads. The end result was a massive mop come to life. Although I called it gender fuck drag, my friend Nelson was of the opinion that it was terror drag.”<sup>81</sup> Eventually New York became unaffordable and unsustainable and RuPaul was forced to move to LA and live with his sister, Rozy.<sup>82</sup> In January 1989, RuPaul returned to New York, but the drag culture had begun to change and become more professional. RuPaul abandoned genderfuck; he explains, “I learned how to lipsynch [...]. I began buying wigs—I have never done that before—started sewing clothes, wearing tits, shaving my legs. Instead of fright drag, I was going to look hot and sexy as a drag queen.”<sup>83</sup> RuPaul summarized his transition in an interview for *i-D Magazine*, “I started out sort of punk rock irreverent gender fuck drag. [...] And then it evolved because I needed to make more money and the landscape changed for me. [...] And then as I went mainstream and

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 76-7.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 78-83; 104.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 108-9.

got a record deal I knew that I had to appeal to a wider audience, so I changed it to my glamazon drag. And I've stuck with that since I've been famous.”<sup>84</sup>

RuPaul used genderfuck as a performance aesthetic and attention-grabbing tool. Informed by a background in the Atlanta punk scene and go-go dance, RuPaul strategically used genderfuck to negotiate being a nightclub performer in New York. Eventually, the nightclub scene changed and RuPaul adapted, but after first making a name for himself as a genderfuck performer.<sup>85</sup>

Harmodius in Exile and RuPaul both explored gender through genderfuck performance. *The Poems of Harmodius in Exile* operates as a genderfuck art object, created by a genderfuck-identified person, that critiques normative gender and sexuality through poetry and illustration. Conversely, RuPaul engaged genderfuck as a mode of performance. While continuing to identify as a gay cisgender male, RuPaul was able to access genderfuck as an aesthetic to upend heteronormative gender performance. Both approached genderfuck from different angles, but used performance as a tool to critique normative representations of binaried gender.

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<sup>84</sup> Brumfitt, “RuPaul.”

<sup>85</sup> RuPaul, *Workin' It: RuPaul's Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style* (New York: It Books (Now Dey Street Books, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers), 2010), 84.

CHAPTER III  
CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS:  
GENDERFUCK AS A POINT OF DEPARTURE

Josh Stuart and Miles Davis Moody had no idea what they were signing up for when they launched a Kickstarter campaign in June 2015, aiming to raise \$3,750 to fund the debut issue of a new magazine for drag queens. The duo detail in a letter to their first readers, “[t]o our shock and disbelief, we raised nearly five times that amount in just two weeks! At that point, we both realized we had a much larger call of duty. We quit our day jobs and decided to go full steam ahead with producing QUEEN.”<sup>86</sup> Stuart and Moody’s crowdfunding success illustrates a demand for accessible drag discourse. *Queen* was originally intended to be a platform for distributing queer art. Stuart and Moody elaborate, “[w]hen we first conceptualized the idea behind QUEEN magazine, it was to provide a medium that would showcase drag artists of all styles, personalities, and talents from the furthest reaches of the world. By doing so, we hoped to provide exposure to lesser-known queens.”<sup>87</sup> Stuart and Moody were initially searching for drag diversity, however, *Queen*’s premiere issue features three instances of drag queens performing genderfuck. I suggest that given the opportunity to perform diverse drag, these queens leapt at the chance to show off their genderfuck virtuosity.

I further argue that representations of contemporary genderfuck in *Queen* reflect a trend toward historicizing and acknowledging genderfuck as subversive and politically

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<sup>86</sup> Josh Stuart and Miles Davis Moody, “The Adventure Begins,” *Queen*, Fall 2015, 7.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

charged genre. *Queen* highlights and promotes genderfuck through their cover story, editorial, and “Featured Queens” sections. Similarly, trans\* poet Andrea Gibson activates their queer status to performatively critique gender, but through a different medium for a different audience.

I track genderfuck through the work of contemporary drag and nonbinary artists. Genderfuck toys with gender binaries and representation through performance; I argue that contemporary performances can echo this binary-blurring aesthetic. Specifically, *Queen* magazine and poet Andrea Gibson activate genderfuck aesthetics to critique normative gender identity through performance. In this chapter, I examine *Queen*’s inaugural issue and Gibson’s October 2015 Houston performance as case studies. I argue that these performances are representative of and call back to genderfuck aesthetics. *Queen* and Gibson access genderfuck as a point of departure to create performances informed by genderfuck aesthetics. I examine *Queen* magazine as a platform for drag artists creating nonbinary work. I examine Andrea Gibson as a poet whose work is informed by their nonbinary gender status.

### *Queen Magazine*

The first issue of *Queen* was launched internationally in October 2015; it is based in Los Angeles, but ships worldwide. It began as an effort to bring together and promote international drag queens who were finding each other (and Stuart and Moody) on Instagram. Stuart and Moody outline their mission statement in the first issue, creating “the world’s first high-end, high-fashion international gloss magazine dedicated solely to

the art of drag.”<sup>88</sup> Their website elaborates and highlights *Queen*’s inclusivity: “This magazine will be as multifaceted as the world of drag itself. Featuring everything from glamour to avant-garde to gore, we will be showcasing all angles of drag reality: fashion, beauty, storytelling, music, dance, and more. QUEEN is for everyone: from the drag enthusiast to any person that enjoys the artistry of transformation.”<sup>89</sup>

The first issue of *Queen* features drag queens from around the world alongside other related artists, including wig makers and street artists who paint images of drag queens. Three *Queen* articles especially privilege nonbinaried gender performance, including the cover story: “Alaska: Girl, Boy, & Neither;” “Violet on Molinier,” drag queen Violet Chachki’s tribute to French surrealist photographer Pierre Molinier; and Cheddar Gorgeous’s presence in the “Featured Queens” section of the magazine. These three examples represent *Queen*’s curated inclusion of nonbinaried drag on three levels: in the cover story, in an editorial, and in a list of up-and-coming queens. I argue that this careful inclusion both reflects current drag culture and promotes drag as a method of gender subversion.

*Queen* announced their first cover model, Alaska Thunderfuck 5000, on the magazine’s website two weeks before the issue’s release.<sup>90</sup> Alaska first rose to drag fame

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> “About Us,” *Queen*, accessed 13 Nov. 2015, <http://queenmagintl.com/about-us/>.

<sup>90</sup> “COVER GIRL! Issue 01: ALASKA!,” *Queen*, last modified 14 Oct. 2015, accessed 13 Nov. 2015. <http://queenmagintl.com/2015/10/cover-girl-issue-01-alaska-%F0%9F%92%A5%F0%9F%8E%89/>. Originally named for Alaskan Thunderfuck, a strain of marijuana, Alaska refers to herself by variations of her full name, depending on the context and audience. For example, on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, she was credited mononymously as Alaska, but now releases music as Alaska Thunderfuck. She also uses Alaska 5000 in some promotional contexts online.

as a contestant and runner-up on *RuPaul's Drag Race* season five; she has since toured internationally. *Queen* interviews Alaska on her first album *Anus*, released in June 2015.<sup>91</sup> I analyze Alaska's cover photo (see figure 7) and interview as nonbinaried gender identity performances. On the cover of *Queen*, Alaska wears all black, including a studded bra paired with patent leather gloves and boots. Here, Alaska challenges binaried gender by appearing in drag. I argue that she specifically problematizes gender by wearing black under her eyes. Alaska's eye-blacks recall an American football aesthetic; furthermore, the photo cites RuPaul's early genderfuck promotional poster titled, "RuPaul is Everything." In the poster image, RuPaul paired gloves and boots with football pads. Here, Alaska trades pads for a studded bra, and adds the eye-blacks. Both stand facing forward, in poses that juxtapose their femininity and athleticism. RuPaul's poster appeared in black and white, his black body contrasted by a white background. This aesthetic is echoed by a blonde, hyperwhite Alaska dressed in all black on a white background. Lastly, RuPaul's "Everything" has been replaced by the magazine title, *Queen*, in rhinestones and glitter. I argue that Alaska's cover image enacts a nonbinaried aesthetic by combining male and female attributes on one body and by citing RuPaul's previous genderfuck image.

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<sup>91</sup> Alaska had previously released "Ru Girl" as a non-album single in 2013. For the music video, see <https://vimeo.com/82207812>.





Figure 7. Alaska Thunderfuck 5000 in studded bra and fishnets on the cover of *Queen* magazine, Fall 2015. Photo by Magnus Hastings, reprinted from “COVER GIRL! Issue 01: ALASKA!”

While Alaska is known for well-researched looks and intelligent drag, it is important to acknowledge *Queen*'s role in the image. The photo was taken by Magnus Hastings, the magazine's director of photography. Hastings (and Moody) both have backgrounds working with RuPaul and queens from *RPDR*.<sup>92</sup> Alaska citing genderfuck RuPaul is pivotal to *Queen*'s inaugural issue. This photo is their first cover image, which puts extra burden and responsibility on the model, the photographer, and the designers. The image of the premiere cover also operates as a publicity and marketing tool for *Queen*'s upcoming issues. Recalling Goffman, I suggest that Alaska's image on the cover performs the magazine's first constructed front, and also foreshadows the magazine's presumed aesthetic. Furthermore, I suggest that Hastings and *Queen* purposefully situate Alaska to be read as a citing of genderfuck RuPaul. This allows *Queen* credibility as an intelligent and well-researched albeit brand new magazine. Alaska's image reifies her as an informed queen worthy of a magazine cover. I argue that Alaska photographed for *Queen* by Hastings creates a layered image that performs and cites genderfuck, while also marking genderfuck aesthetics as worthy of performance and promotion.

Alaska's binary blurring is echoed in *Queen*'s cover story, which promotes her album, *Anus*, and details Alaska's background as a performer. *Anus* debuted at number 3

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<sup>92</sup> Hastings's online portfolio includes photos of *RPDR* contestants Adore Delano, Bianca Del Rio, Courtney Act, Laganja Estranja, Milk, and Pearl, alongside Alaska. For more, see <http://www.magnushastingsphotography.com/drag>. Miles Davis Moody was actually an *RPDR* cast member in seasons six and seven. Moody was a Pit Crew member, a role that mainly consists of modeling underwear as a form of product placement.

on Billboard's Dance/Electronic charts.<sup>93</sup> Alaska intended the album for a queer in-group audience; she told *The Advocate*, "[i]t's for the people who get it. It's for the people who aren't afraid of swear words and who aren't afraid of poop and dicks. Because these are a part of who we are, you know?"<sup>94</sup> In *Queen*'s "Alaska: Girl, Boy, and Neither," interviewers Tracy Gregory and Breka Blakeslee frame the artist, "[Alaska] encourages audiences across the globe to challenge notions of gender and identity by loving 'hearts not parts.'" When asked about her childhood in Pennsylvania, Alaska details, "I never felt like I belonged. When I was a boy I felt more like a girl, and when I'm in drag sometimes I feel like a man, so it's important to realize that I am both. And I am neither."<sup>95</sup> Simultaneously existing as both and neither points directly to nonbinary gender identity and genderfuck performance aesthetics. Many nonbinary artists use similar phrasing to describe their trans\* status; Alaska, however, continues to identify as cisgender. Alaska interrogates and complicates her cisgender identity through her drag persona and performance. She tells *Queen*, "[d]rag has a way of opening minds and loosening up the strict gender rules our society has in place. As Kate Bornstein says, "hopefully one day gender nonconformity will be less of a struggle and more of a giggle.

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<sup>93</sup> Keith Caulfield, "Major Lazer Beams to No. 1 on Dance/Electronic Albums," *Billboard*, last modified 3 July 2015, accessed 13 Nov. 2015, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/6613313/major-lazer-number-1-dance-electronic-albums>.

<sup>94</sup> Daniel Reynolds, "Why Alaska Thunderfuck Titled Her New Album *Anus*," *The Advocate*, last modified 24 June 2015, accessed 13 Nov. 2015, <http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/music/2015/06/24/why-alaska-thunderfuck-titled-her-new-album-anus>.<http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/music/2015/06/24/why-alaska-thunderfuck-titled-her-new-album-anus>.

<sup>95</sup> Tracy Gregory and Breka Blakeslee, "Alaska: Girl, Boy, and Neither," *Queen*, Fall 2015, 14.

Drag definitely moves things in that direction. [...] Men are wearing heels and it's a beautiful thing."<sup>96</sup> Alaska locates the role of drag in subverting and problematizing binaried gender. By privileging and highlighting Alaska's experience, *Queen* legitimizes nonbinaried drag. By placing Alaska on the cover of the magazine's first issue, *Queen* champions nonbinary performance in a drag context.

Violet Chachki presents her tribute to Pierre Molinier in a *Queen* editorial entitled "Violet on Molinier." Molinier "used art to explore his sexual identity;" I argue that Violet's editorial spread operates both as performed identity exploration and as a reference to Molinier's subversive original.<sup>97</sup> Stuart and Moody introduce the piece in their *Queen* publishers' letter, detailing, "[i]n a more provocative piece, Violet Chachki interprets artist Pierre Molinier—showing boldness, sex appeal, and an entirely different side of drag that undoubtedly contributed to her season 7 *Drag Race* win."<sup>98</sup> The editorial was photographed by Albert Sanchez; Violet is credited with her own hair, makeup, and styling.<sup>99</sup> Violet's eccentricity and previous *Drag Race* fame made her a highly anticipated *Queen* feature; the magazine even promoted the editorial on their website in the weeks leading up to the issue's release.<sup>100</sup> The only text in the editorial itself is a quote from photographer Mark Alice Durant that serves as a brief introduction

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Priscilla Frank, "The Beautiful, Dark And Very Twisted Fantasies Of Surrealist Pierre Molinier," *The Huffington Post*, last modified 12 Oct. 2015, accessed 13 Nov. 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/pierre-molinier-surrealist-photographer\\_55e0c93be4b0c818f617f4b7](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/pierre-molinier-surrealist-photographer_55e0c93be4b0c818f617f4b7). Pierre Molinier (1900-1976) was a gay French surrealist painter and photographer.

<sup>98</sup> Stuart and Moody, "The Adventure Begins," 7.

<sup>99</sup> "Violet on Molinier," *Queen*, Fall 2015, 76.

<sup>100</sup> "Sneak Peek: 'Violet on Molinier,'" *Queen*, last modified 13 Oct. 2015, accessed 13 Nov. 2015, <http://queenmagintl.com/2015/10/sneak-peek-violet-on-molinier/>.

to Molinier's aesthetic, "Molinier achieved a kind of self-shattering fantasy—a travesty of manhood, a hybrid of male and female, animate and inanimate—a new creature of simultaneous genders. Molinier's liminal creature, a twentieth-century chimera, stands erect in his high heels at the threshold leading from subversion to submission."<sup>101</sup>

Priscilla Frank elaborates on Molinier's aesthetic in an article for *The Huffington Post*, "[m]ost of his smallscale, home-developed silver gelatin prints depict Molinier himself, dressed in drag and drenched in shadow. Fishnets, high heels, corsets, doll masks, dildos, guns, bound feet and exposed bodies—such fetishistic objects appeared constantly throughout the work."<sup>102</sup> Molinier's work predates genderfuck, but his photographs foreshadow genderfuck aesthetics. The photo in figure 8 was used in the *Queen* editorial's promotional article online and also as the first two pages of the print editorial itself. Violet pays homage to Molinier's aesthetic with her shoes, corset, and exposed skin. Her makeup is representative of some of Molinier's doll masks, and remains constant throughout the editorial. Throughout the piece, Violet cites Molinier through her use of fishnet facemasks, doll-like poses, nudity, and shadow. In figure 9, Violet directly cites Molinier's *La Rose Noire*, from 1960 (see figure 10). Here, Violet's nudity, mask, and collar are only upstaged by her tribute to *La Rose Noire*, framed and hanging on the wall behind her. Inside the frame, Violet opts not to include the repetition of body limbs (a Molinier signature); however, by incorporating the doll-like face and hair

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<sup>101</sup> "Violet on Molinier," 78.

<sup>102</sup> Frank, "The Beautiful."

encased in fishnet paired with outstretched legs that reveal a penetrative rose, Violet directly cites the original.<sup>103</sup>



Figure 8. Violet Chachki in “Violet on Molinier,” an editorial in *Queen* magazine, Fall 2015. Photo by Albert Sanchez, reprinted in James.

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<sup>103</sup> Outtakes from the photo shoot did explore limb repetition, see Violet’s Instagram for more: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BAhuFcot1zi/>.



Figure 9. Violet Chachki in her editorial “Violet on Molinier,” *Queen* magazine, Fall 2015. Photo by Albert Sanchez, reprinted from author’s personal collection.



Figure 10. *La Rose Noire*, Pierre Molinier, 1960. Reprinted from Korbin.

Citing Molinier, Violet accesses genderfuck aesthetics and presents genderfuck to a contemporary drag audience. By aligning herself with Molinier, she positions genderfuck drag as informed and subversive, and purposefully situates her work within an art history timeline, lending genderfuck a historical foundation and credibility. By including “Violet on Molinier” and allowing Violet her own design choices in hair, makeup, and styling, *Queen* privileges and promotes Violet’s aesthetic. Furthermore, the editorial introduces a new generation of queer performers to Pierre Molinier, complicating the history of drag performance and pointing to a long history of genderfuck.

*Queen* includes a “Featured Queens” section, to “reach to places in countries little traveled in order to showcase the unknown masters of drag.”<sup>104</sup> This section features five queens from North and South America, Europe, and Ukraine. The second of the five is Cheddar Gorgeous, based in Manchester, UK (see figure 11). The feature begins: “Pronounced Gaw-jus, Cheddar Gorgeous always brings what we’re calling post-apocalyptic avant-garde realness to his drag. Moving beyond gender binaries, and even the human form, he uses drag as a method of queer storytelling in order to politicize his role as a drag queen. Cheddar is a good reminder for us drag fanatics that some queens aren’t solely entertainers, but gender-bending activists for equality as well.”<sup>105</sup> By celebrating Cheddar Gorgeous, and highlighting his politically driven, nonbinaried aesthetic, *Queen* creates space for similar artists. By featuring Cheddar Gorgeous as an unknown up-and-comer, *Queen* highlights the importance of his

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<sup>104</sup> Stuart and Moody, “The Adventure Begins,” 7.

<sup>105</sup> “Featured Queens,” *Queen*, Fall 2015, 86.



perspective within drag discourse. *Queen* not only capitalizes on Alaska and Violet as examples of nonbinary performance, but also encourages and asserts the necessity of nonbinary drag by featuring Cheddar Gorgeous.



Figure 11. Cheddar Gorgeous, wearing tree bark, moss, and horns as a “Featured Queen,” *Queen* magazine, Fall 2015. Photo by Lee Baxter, reprinted from author’s personal collection.

## Andrea Gibson

Andrea Gibson is a queer poet who tours worldwide and has also published print collections, albums, and videos of their poetry. I analyze Gibson's work as nonbinary art informed by genderfuck aesthetics. I argue that Gibson's poetry is informed by their embodied queer identity. Andrea Gibson explores, complicates, and negotiates gender through poetry performance, while simultaneously bringing awareness to queer and trans\* issues. I specifically examine one live Gibson performance in Houston, two print poems in their collection, *The Madness Vase*, and an online video of Gibson performing "Pansies." I argue that these representations activate an historical genderfuck aesthetic to explore contemporary performances of nonbinaried gender identity. Gibson's poems critique gender through performance in the same ways genderfuck does.

Andrea Gibson was born in 1975 and resides in Boulder, CO; they've released four albums of recorded poetry and three print collections.<sup>106</sup> In 2008, Gibson competed in and won the first annual Women of the World Poetry Slam in Detroit. I attended a live Gibson poetry performance on Saturday, 17 Oct. 2015 at Fitzgerald's in Houston, TX.<sup>107</sup> The venue is located in an area northwest of downtown Houston called The Heights. The Heights is packed with unique bars, restaurants, and music venues, and has become

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<sup>106</sup> Gibson, "Bio."

<sup>107</sup> Originally a Polish dance hall, the building was purchased and renamed by Sarah Fitzgerald in 1977. The venue has since hosted rock, country, and alternative acts, including ZZ Top, Dresden Dolls, The Misfits, David Allan Coe, Keith Urban, Butthole Surfers, and Iron & Wine. For current lineup, see <http://www.fitzgeraldshouston.com/>.

known as an LGBT area of Houston in recent years.<sup>108</sup> *National Geographic Traveler*'s Adriana Gardella described The Heights as having "a quirky sense of individuality" and "home to the highest concentration of professional artists in the state."<sup>109</sup> Fitzgerald's (also known to locals as Fitz's) opened in 1977 and has two floors, with stages on each. Gibson's performance took place on the lower level, which has a smaller stage and more intimate feel; the dance floor was filled with tables and chairs for Gibson's performance. Kaylen Krebsbach, an indie folk singer from Montana, opened for Gibson. The venue was full, with standing room only. Many audience members marked their various queer identities through clothing and accessories, especially using t-shirts and buttons to performatively announce their queerness to the room. Some wore buttons, bracelets, and socks displaying queer pride flags, others wore humorous and/or feminist slogans like "Reading is sexy!" or "Cats against cat calling!" Several attendees appeared to arrive in couples or small groups of friends. Krebsbach opened with several original songs and a few covers. When Gibson came onstage, the two performed a few pieces together, with Krebsbach on guitar providing melodic undertones for Gibson's poetry. Gibson performed several pieces from their newest bound collection, *Pansy*, which "[b]alanc[es] themes such as feminism, love, gender, sexuality, illness, white privilege, and mental

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<sup>108</sup> The Heights is adjacent to Montrose, Houston's historically LGBT neighborhood; rising property values and a 1991 murder linked to gay-bashing have gradually pushed a large number of LGBT residents and businesses from Montrose to The Heights.

<sup>109</sup> Adriana Gardella, "Houston Heights: Small Town in the Big City," *National Geographic Traveler*, last modified March 2010, accessed 10 Feb. 2016, <http://traveler.nationalgeographic.com/2010/03/on-foot/houston-interactive>.

health.”<sup>110</sup> I examine two poems from Gibson’s Fitzgerald’s performance, locating performed nonbinary gender in each.

Gibson has a loyal fan base that functions as a queer poetry in-group. Gibson’s oeuvre creates a queerscape surrounding their work and their audience. At their Fitzgerald’s performance, audience members came ready with requests, and prepared to recite poems along with Gibson. The fans were excited to hear “A Letter to My Dog Exploring the Human Condition,” in which Gibson uses humor to contrast complications of humanity and the simple life of their dog, Squash. Gibson writes,

I don’t care that you never talk about  
capitalism or patriarchy  
or the heteronormative hegemonic paradigm.  
I know you’re saving the world every time  
you get poo stuck in your butt hair  
and you don’t go looking for someone to blame.<sup>111</sup>

Here, Gibson strategically juxtaposes the seriousness of patriarchy and hegemony with the comedy inherent in Squash’s “butt hair.” Interestingly, Gibson structures a poo joke with a feminist setup. By situating Squash within a human patriarchal context, Gibson brings awareness to feminist and queer issues in a light and humorous way. Furthermore, I argue that their juxtaposition of dark/light and politics/poo is representative of genderfuck aesthetics; Gibson’s poetry reflects the same genderfuck tropes present in Harmodius’s “Black Lesbian Rabbit” and “Supreme Act of Copulation.”

Gibson’s performance began with several lighter poems in this vein that slowly built to some of their more emotionally poignant pieces. Later in the performance,

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<sup>110</sup> Andrea Gibson, *Pansy: A Collection of Poetry* (Austin, TX: Write Bloody Publishing, 2015), back cover.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

Gibson used their piece, “To the Men Catcalling My Girlfriend While I’m Walking Beside Her,” to complicate their own queer identity and to critique heteronormative misogyny. Gibson’s poem begins,

One of the biggest perks to looking the way I do  
is that I virtually never have to listen  
to someone like you  
verbally suck your own dick,  
while telling yourself  
I am what you’re swallowing.<sup>112</sup>

Here, Gibson begins by situating their queer body. Referring to “looking the way I do” cites a privilege in performed queerness. By identifying with a butch queer aesthetic, Gibson is largely shielded from misogynist catcalling on the street, yet they use their position as a poet to bring awareness to misogyny. Gibson continues,

But any feminist who has ever taken  
the high road will tell you  
  
the high road gets backed up, and sometimes  
we need to take a detour straight through  
the belly of uncensored rage.<sup>113</sup>

Gibson uses the piece as a whole to critique misogyny. In these lines specifically, Gibson uses performance to mobilize a feminist audience. Gibson may also be citing Radicalesbians’ 1970 manifesto, *The Woman Identified Woman*, which states, “[a] lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion.”<sup>114</sup> Gibson uses affect to engage the audience; their delivery aesthetics and vocal virtuosity are rooted in their slam poetry past. Their tone is honest and urgent. Their raised yet masculine voice

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory, an Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 48.

and strong, steady vocal cadence perform rage that both champions feminist anger and incites collective action.

In their 2012 book, *The Madness Vase*, Gibson also explores and critiques gender, often through childhood examples. In “The Jewelry Store,” they detail the aftereffects of an occasion where a jewelry store clerk misgendered Gibson and told their mother she had one “adorable little boy.”<sup>115</sup> Gibson details,

That night after dinner  
I dig to the bottom of my fire-red toy box  
‘til I find the doll with the golden hair.  
I cradle her in my arms  
and I wait for my mother to see me.

When she does  
she smiles so big  
I decide love  
is a silent auction  
and I am worth more sold.<sup>116</sup>

In this section, Gibson explores the consequences of nonnormative gender presentation through a childhood story many of their readers can identify with. The poem performs conformity activated as a tool, while maintaining the complexity of gender performance. Not only does Gibson juxtapose their fire-red toy box and their doll with the golden hair, they note the importance of performing gender for their parents. Even as a child, Gibson used normative gender performance as a way to reassure their family, even while mentally distancing themselves from their performed gender. When Gibson writes, “and I wait for my mother to see me,” they are acknowledging that strategically downplaying

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<sup>115</sup> Andrea Gibson, *The Madness Vase: A Collection of Poetry* (Long Beach, CA: Write Bloody Publishing, 2012), 53.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

and camouflaging their trans\* identity placated their mother. Here, Gibson uses poetry to investigate and complicate a mother's love through a queer lens.

Gibson complicates childhood gender and sexuality in their poem, "Andrew." The piece situates their childhood on a trans\* spectrum and complicates the father/child relationship. The poem begins,

When I was a kid I would secretly  
call myself Andrew.  
I would tug at the crotch of my pants  
the way only pubescent boys do.  
Ran around pounding on my bare chest like Tarzan.  
It's not that I thought I'd grow up to be a man.  
I just never thought I'd grow up to be a woman either.

From what I could tell neither  
of those categories fit me.

But believe me  
I knew from a very young age to  
never say, "Dad, this Adam or Eve thing  
isn't really working for me. What about  
all the people in-between?"<sup>117</sup>

In this excerpt, Gibson provides the reader with strong imagery, childlike innocence, and the perspective of a queer child already cognizant of their queerness. With "What about all the people in-between?," a childlike Gibson invokes Muñoz's queer potentialities. Overcoming the compulsion to hide their queerness is a recurring theme in Gibson's poetry about their childhood. Here, "Andrew" both complicates Gibson's own gender identity and critiques binaried identifications as a system.

In addition to live performances and printed poetry, Andrea Gibson uses recorded video performances as promotional material on their website. The site currently

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 58.

hosts four files; three are from live performances across the US, and the fourth is a recorded version of their poem, “Pansies,” performed solo on a beach, laid over original music by Nicole Reynolds.<sup>118</sup> Gibson queers the space wearing an unbuttoned shirt and a mullet (see figure 12), and strolls the beach reciting,

You call me pretty and I don’t flinch.  
I know I can still be your boyfriend  
and tell you, *My grandmother sewed my prom dress  
stitch by stitch with her own hands.  
The finest suit could not have made me  
more proud.*<sup>119</sup>



Figure 12. A screenshot of Andrea Gibson as they walk along a beach performing “Pansies.” Reprinted from “Poems.”

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<sup>118</sup> Andrea Gibson, “Poems,” *Andrea Gibson*, accessed 17 Dec. 2015, <http://www.andreagibson.org/poems/>.

<sup>119</sup> Gibson, *Madness Vase*, 61.



In this piece, Gibson again uses a genderfuck aesthetic to critique gendered topics. They draw attention to binaried gender through the juxtaposition of your boyfriend/my prom dress. Gibson's identification with the word "boyfriend" also signals and performs their embodied queerness. Finally, the video of the performance brings awareness to queer identity, binary critique, and identity as performance. As a marketing tool, Gibson's "Pansies" video performs queer identity commoditized for public consumption. The video operates similarly to the ways musicians use music videos as online publicity tools. In most of Gibson's video, they are shown out of focus and from behind, performing only for the waves and the rocks at the beach. I argue that Gibson uses this technique to blur their gender for the camera, and to perform ambiguity.

Drag artists in *Queen* magazine and Andrea Gibson's poetry both activate genderfuck aesthetics in contemporary performance. Specifically, genderfuck operates as a point of departure for further critique of binaried gender. Alaska Thunderfuck, Violet Chachki, and Cheddar Gorgeous each represent genderfuck aesthetics in dynamic ways, highlighted and promoted by *Queen*'s inclusion of all three in their inaugural issue. Gibson uses poetry performance, both live and recorded, to inform and seek commonality with queer and trans\* fans, while bringing awareness to trans\* issues.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSIONS: “A GENDERFUCK HERSTORY: HISTORICIZING

#### *RUPAUL’S DRAG RACE*”

My installation, “A Genderfuck Herstory: Historicizing *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” tracks genderfuck drag queens on *RPDR* and genderfuck challenges within the narrative of the show. Historicizing genderfuck on *RPDR* is important because it is a growing element of the show that has not been previously mapped. I argue that genderfuck queens and *RPDR* activate genderfuck aesthetics in order to preserve and promote them, and as a mark of historical drag knowledge. Because the queens think genderfuck is important to perform, I think it’s important to record. Each season on *RPDR*, normative drag queens doing genderfuck performances are situating themselves within a drag history, while simultaneously acknowledging genderfuck as historically important. Genderfuck queens seek out *RPDR* as a platform to articulate and promote their unique genderfuck aesthetics as niche drag. Meanwhile, *RPDR* validates these queens and their work by including genderfuck challenges within the structure of the contest. In the years since its premiere in 2009, *RPDR* has included more and more genderfuck queens and challenges, which I suggest represents a positive audience reception to genderfuck and encourages competing queens to be well-versed in genderfuck history and aesthetics. My installation considers queens like Milk and Raja, who identify as genderfuck drag queens, but I also examine instances of genderfuck written into the show’s narrative, like the “Bearded and Beautiful” runway challenge in season seven, episode three.

To begin, I isolate and record each instance of genderfuck performance in the first seven seasons of *RPDR*. Fans have done some of this work on online fandom websites.<sup>120</sup> While the fan sites don't typically delineate which outfits/challenges/queens are genderfuck and which ones are not, they provide current, peer-reviewed data on challenge winners, contestant bios, and judges' critiques. In deciding which queens count as primarily genderfuck, I look to those that self-identify as such in interviews online and in magazines. I track and chart the successes (and failures) of genderfuck challenges and queens using the raw data posted on fan sites like *RuPaul's Drag Race Wiki*. I specifically map queens Ongina, Nina Flowers, Raja, Milk, Max, and Violet Chachki. I also examine season four's "DILFs: Dads I'd Like to Frock" challenge, along with the "Bearded and Beautiful" and "Prancing Queens" episodes of season seven.

I installed my piece in the Liberal Arts and Humanities building on campus at Texas A&M University, in the Humanities Visualization Space (HVS), part of the Initiative for Digital Humanities, Media, and Culture. I created a website prototype that tracked *RPDR*'s genderfuck performances visually, using photos, videos, and text (see figure 13). I installed my website in the HVS on a wall comprised of fifteen computer monitors that operated as one wall-sized screen. I also provided seating, a keyboard, and a mouse, so that visitors could navigate the page on their own. I included a shuffled playlist with house and pop music by *RPDR* queens, including genderfuck queens Raja and Violet Chachki. The installation is an interactive, self-paced exploration of genderfuck on *RPDR* that historicizes genderfuck and genderfuck performances.

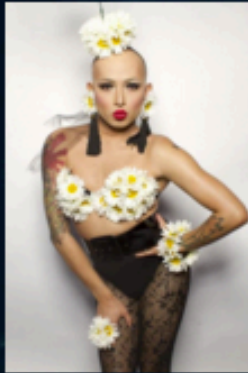
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<sup>120</sup> For more, see [http://logosrupaulsdragrace.wikia.com/wiki/RuPaul's\\_Drag\\_Race\\_Wiki](http://logosrupaulsdragrace.wikia.com/wiki/RuPaul's_Drag_Race_Wiki).

# A Genderfuck Herstory: Historicizing RuPaul's Drag Race

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## Genderfuck Queens



Ongina



Nina Flowers



Raja



Milk



Max

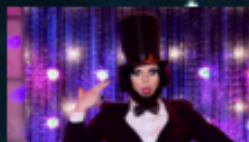


Violet Chachki

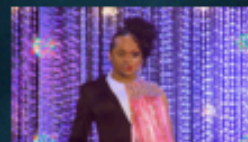
## Gender-Bending Challenges



"DILFs: Dads I'd Like to Frock"



"Bearded and Beautiful"



"Prancing Queens"

Figure 13. Screenshot of my homepage. Author's personal collection.

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*Harmodius (Tony Rogers) in Exile in his Bedroom with Pipe and Jewelry 1974*. [Box-Binder 1]. David Greene *Shameless* photographs, Coll2013-011, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives. USC Libraries. University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

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