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“IF YOU CAN’T LOVE YOURSELF”: IDENTITY, PERSONA, AND ADVOCACY IN  
DRAG QUEENS OF COLOR

By

Robbie Monet Luten

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Counseling Psychology

The University of Memphis

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to the drag queens who have helped me to learn how to be authentically me. Thank you for teaching how to create spaces for myself.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my thanks to my family who have provided emotional support and encouragement through phone calls, texts, and visits. I would also like to express my appreciation for my cohort members as we have gone through this process together. I have enjoyed getting to know all of you and even learning about myself from the ways that you are all authentically you. I can't imagine this process without your support. Here's to The Cool Kids!

I would also like to express my thanks to Dr. Bridges who has advised, supported, and encouraged me throughout the majority of my Ph.D. program. I would also like to thank the members of my committee: Dr. Kade Hiestand, Dr. Susan Nordstrom, Dr. Rosie Davis, and Dr. Elin Ovrebo for their support along the way.

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## **Abstract**

Drag queens of color represent a unique perspective as marginalized advocates within the LGBTQ+ community. To understand both their experiences and also their advocacy needs, this study utilized a narrative inquiry approach to address the following research questions: RQ1: What inspires drag queens of color to pursue drag?, RQ2: What influences the development of their identities and personas?, and RQ3: In what ways do drag queens of color use their personas to advocate for and defend the right to express various genders and sexual orientations? The findings of this study are represented through a composite character based on the life experiences and identities of the two participants and was depicted in a fictional composite narrative constructed from the data gathered to illustrate the way participants understand of their experiences, develop their identities, and engage in advocacy work. The study found that the participants developed their drag personas based on their experiences with drag and with developing their identities as LGBTQ+ individuals. Findings also indicated that the participants experienced discrimination such as threats of physical and verbal violence. Finally, the study found that participants also hoped to advocate for the LGBTQ+ community. Connections to previous literature, limitations, and recommendations for future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** drag queens, advocacy, identity, persona, LGBTQ+

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## **“If You Can’t Love Yourself:”**

### **Identity, Persona, and Advocacy in Drag Queens of Color**

#### **Introduction**

In the last several decades, Western culture has experienced an increase in the visibility of drag performers through the release of movies and television shows (Berkowitz and Belgrave, 2010; Butler, 1990; Schact & Underwood, 2004). Although awareness of this population has been growing, drag performers and people in the LGBTQ+ community still face discrimination based on their identities (Berkowitz et al., 2007; Bishop et al., 2014; Moncrieff and Lienard, 2017; Schact & Underwood, 2004). As a result, drag queens of color must learn to navigate a world that marginalizes them through discrimination, threats of violence, and stigmatization (Moncrieff and Lienard, 2017). Learning about the perspectives of drag queens of color and understanding ways that they make meaning from their experiences may highlight drag queens’ methods of advocacy and the ways in which they may be able to use drag as advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to conduct a narrative inquiry of how drag queens of color develop their identities and personas based on their lived experiences and how they may engage in advocacy efforts for the LGBTQ+ community.

Because of the history of advocacy within the development of the modern understanding of drag queens (Jenkins, 2019), there is reason to seek to understand the engagement of drag queens of color in intentional and unintentional advocacy. Advocacy is important to the community and to society as a whole as it can lead to decreases in mental health concerns (Ranghelli, 2009). Related to advocacy, drag queens of color may demonstrate different ways of being in the world and that it can be possible to live outside of social boundaries and expectations. Because of this, it is important to understand the nature of advocacy within drag queens, including the social, environmental, and personal aspects that encourages a person to

develop a drag persona. This article will provide information about the narrative inquiry that was used to understand the experiences of drag queens of color as they relate to the development of their drag identities and to the ways that these identities may be used for advocacy work within the LGBTQ+ community. This article will also present information that facilitates a better understanding of what encourages drag queens to become drag queens and advocates for the sexual and gender minority community. Similarly, this article will provide information about the narrative inquiry approach which was used to address the research questions and explain how the data was gathered using life story interviews and analyzed through thematic narrative analysis and structural analysis. Finally, this article will discuss the creation of the composite narrative which was used to represent the data, to discuss the findings, and to review the limitations and future directions of the study.

## **Literature Review**

### ***History of Drag***

Drag originated in theater, the term originally used term to describe men in nineteenth century Britain who wore women's clothing to play the parts of female characters (Hoenig, 2020). This practice also dates back to the Elizabethan playhouse era in the 1600s of men or young boys playing the parts of women as women were not allowed to participate in theater or other public events (Schact & Underwood, 2009). The earliest recorded mentions of drag queens in America occurred in masquerade balls in New York City during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chauncey, 1994). Drag continued to develop in America and in the 1960s drag performers became visible during violent oppositions against the police within the gay community (Arriola, 1995; Hillman, 2011). Drag queens can now be found in LGBTQ+ communities throughout Western societies. The definition of modern drag is that drag queens may be cisgender men or



women, genderqueer, or transwomen or transmen who wear clothes, makeup, and accessories that are an exaggerated gender expression of femininity specifically for the purpose of performing for an audience for entertainment (Carretta et al., 2019; Holcomb, 2007; Hopkins, 2004; Tewksbury, 1993). Drag performers present extreme versions of gender for an audience (Egner and Maloney, 2016) and do not always identify as transgender although it has been historically assumed to be a fact that those who perform drag identify as trans people (Hopkins, 2004; Vidal-Ortiz, 2008). While there is a dearth of literature on drag queens especially those who identify as people of color, this definition may provide some foundation for delving into a deeper understanding of ways that a drag identity is developed for drag queens as a whole.

### ***Drag Identity Development***

Carretta et al. (2019) described the concept of “drag identity salience”, which states that a person’s identity or persona as a drag performer is a key part of their overall concept of self. With this understanding, creating a drag persona may involve more than a cosmetic transformation and costumes and may be more rooted in identity. Previous research suggests that there may be some themes that contribute to a drag queen identity including that drag queens identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community (Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro, 2010). Further possible reasons that a person becomes a drag queen may be to raise their social status, to become more involved in the LGBTQ+ community, and to begin a career in entertainment (Hopkins, 2004; Taylor & Rupp, 2004; Tewksbury, 1993, 1994).

While the reasons for embracing drag may differ, Knutson et al. (2018) found that drag allows performers to connect with different aspects of their internal sense of gender. Understanding their own identity may be an important aspect in developing a drag identity and personas as many drag queens may also experience an internal change in their sense of gender

while performing (Levitt et al., 2018). Personas may be a way that drag queens are able to pull on internal aspects of themselves that they do not feel are as available to them in everyday life. These personas can often reveal aspects of the performer's everyday identity that they may not feel comfortable expressing in their daily life, which makes their drag persona a useful outlet for personal expression (Hopkins, 2004). Additionally, drag can also be a way of coping with the negative emotions that come with discrimination and fostering a positive identity (Knutson et al., 2018). Drag may be cathartic as the performers are able to experience aspects of themselves that they are normally encouraged to hide from the world such as emotion and identity. As such, those who find that drag is an essential part of their identity may associate their self-esteem to their perceptions of their performances (Carretta, 2019).

### ***Experiences of Discrimination***

At the time this article was written, there were 26 bills in 14 states that were intended to restrict or ban drag in public spaces (Zoledziowski, 2023). As Burga (2023) stated, drag queens were considered to be “adult cabaret entertainers”, and many states were considering implementing restrictions and bans on drag queen story hours under the belief that none of the drag shows were suitable for children. Dougherty (2017) states that drag can be viewed as a celebration of the LGBTQ+ community but sometimes the celebration can become disrupted by discrimination. This discrimination can appear in multiple forms which can include using heterosexist or transphobic language, endorsing hetero or gender normative behaviors by expecting a person to behave heterosexually, and expressing discomfort with or disapproval of experiences of LGBTQ+ people (Nadal, 2013). These discriminatory experiences can cause sexual and gender minority populations to internalize homophobia, to expect to be rejected because of their identities, and to try to hide them from others (Meyer, 2003).

Discrimination within the LGBTQ+ community may also be experienced as sexual and gender minority people of color may be excluded from community events or establishments or may have their concerns minimized in favor of supporting the social advocacy needs of White LGBTQ+ individuals (Balsam et al., 2011). Previous research also states that drag queens may experience verbal and physical threats of violence as a result of their marginalized identities (Moncrieff and Lienard, 2017). Racial microaggressions can include invalidations such as assuming that people of color are criminals, believing that race is not a barrier for opportunities for success, assuming that cultures apart from White culture have no value, and treating people of color as inferior (Torres-Harding et al., 2012).

Meyer (2003) describes the theory of minority stress, in which sexual and gender minority populations experience prejudice, internalized homophobia, and expectations of rejection because of their identities, and subsequently make attempts to hide and conceal aspects of their identity which in turn causes stress and mental health concerns in the community. Minority stress can lead to an increased likelihood that people who identify as LGBTQ+ have mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and substance use (Knutson et al., 2013; Meyer, 2003) because of the hostile and stressful environment in which they live. Contributing to the stressful environment in the LGBTQ+ community is the historical marginalization of the community as demonstrated in the 1960s, while sexual and gender minority communities were being established (Harry and DeVall, 1978). Sexual and gender minority people were still despised and experienced harassment, job loss, arrest, and were forced to conform to heterosexist norms (Loftin, 2007). Additionally, Knutson et al, (2018) found that drag queens can experience negative emotions as a result of their identities and drag queens and members of the LGBTQ+

community. The various kinds of discrimination that drag queens of color can face may lead to the development of activism and advocacy in drag queens.

### *Advocacy*

Despite the discrimination that drag queens can face, researchers have found that while in drag, performers can don a larger-than-life persona that is difficult for others to challenge, especially for drag queens who are successful in establishing themselves socially as a pillar to the community (Schact and Underwood, 2009). Drag queens may accomplish this success by building fame and a reputation within their communities through performing at bars and nightclubs (Moncrieff and Lienard, 2017; Hopkins, 2004; Taylor and Rupp, 2004; Tewksbury, 1993, 1994). Additionally, the authors pointed out that drag queens may also be able to earn respect and become role models for aspiring drag queens (Berkowitz et al., 2007; Hopkins, 2004). Drag performers can create support systems, communities, and families in which older members are parents who are looked to for support and mentoring (Levitt et al, 2018). Therefore, drag queens create social supports which are important within communities because rejection and social isolation may contribute to mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Knutson and Koch, 2019; Knutson et al., 2018). These support systems may contribute to the advocacy work of drag queens as they foster communities within a system that marginalizes them.

The American Psychological Association defines advocacy as “speaking or acting on behalf of an individual or group to uphold their rights or explain their point of view” (American Psychological Association, n.d.). This definition provides some context to the understanding that drag queens may have the ability to act as advocates for and within the LGBTQ+ community. The power that drag queens can acquire can be related to the activism of Marsha P. Johnson and

Sylvia Rivera during the Stonewall Riots which has given drag queens an identity beyond performance as advocates (Jenkins, 2019). Drag queens of color may be able to learn from the meanings that they make from their experiences to encourage others to engage in advocacy efforts for the LGBTQ+ community and for individuals within it. It is possible that drag may be a style of advocacy that allows performers to use their power and personas to speak out on social issues. Because advocacy styles are personal and therefore individualized (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001), it may be that drag queens choose an advocacy style that fits with their personas to advocate for social change. As Toporek, Lewis, and Crethar (2009) state, advocacy efforts can include community collaboration, systems advocacy, public information, and social/political advocacy. These styles may be inherent to developing a drag identity because drag queens can earn respect, can become role models within the community, and can assume an identity as an advocate. As Szymańska (2020) states, drag queens can protest violence towards the LGBTQ+ community, advocate for the rights of the community, and fight against LGBTQ+ discrimination.

### ***Performative Gender***

Queer theory served as the framework for identifying the advocacy and identity development in drag queens of color in this study. Queer theory is a theory that “challenges the normative social ordering of identities and subjectivities along the heterosexual/homosexual binary as well as the privileging of heterosexuality as ‘natural’ and homosexuality as its deviant and abhorrent ‘other’” (Nash & Browne, 2010). Drag queens of color may be able to push societal boundaries and constructs in order to make space for those in the LGBTQ+ community to be themselves. Queer theory can be used to present narratives that are excluded from the dominant narratives in society and help to destabilize the foundations of the dominant logics by revealing different possibilities and create space for more inclusive realities (Butler, 1998). This theory

may clarify the impact of drag on the understanding of gender and how this may contribute to advocacy for those within the LGBTQ+ community.

Queer theory emerged as a critique of the essentialist views that sexual and gender identities and their characteristics are predetermined by biology and to behave otherwise is unnatural (Butler, 1990). The main ideas of queer theory are that it is anti-essentialist; identities are performative and are established and maintained through repetition; nonconformity can be used to make the invisible visible; and finally, it provides criticism of acts that may be considered to be normal (Taylor, 2013). Queer theory can be used to explain the impact of drag on the social construct of the gender binary. Drag queens may be able to demonstrate the performativity of gender in ways that invite close examination and disrupt the hegemonic binary gender structure (Berkowitz & Belgrave, 2010; Levitt et al, 2008). By drawing attention to various aspects of gender that exist simultaneously within themselves, drag queens may create and demonstrate new understandings of gender and identities through a performance that can be put on and taken off (Taylor & Rupp, 2004). Demonstrating new understandings of gender may help others to better understand their own genders and identities by being challenged or affirmed through the performances of drag queens.

Queer theory describes gender as performance that we present to the world through gender expression. Individuals each develop their own ways of expressing their gender in ways that are similar to a drag queen's development of their persona. It is important to note that while this theory may be applicable to some, it may not be applicable to everyone, especially some who identify as transgender due to the assumption that gender is performative or performance rather than a core aspect of their identity (Gerdes, 2014). Drag queens, however, may appear to demonstrate different layers of gender identity through identifying as cisgender men, transgender

men or women, non-binary, or as cisgender women while performing under a persona that depicts a highly exaggerated and theatrical representation of the female gender role. According to queer theory, drag may be seen as a way of subverting the current gender norms and the heteronormative system that seeks to marginalize women, the LGBTQ+ community, and those who do not identify as White. Drag queens may use the social power that they gain through their visibility in demonstrating the performance of gender and in constructing their own social categorizations to demonstrate different ways of authentic being and act as advocates for gender and sexual inclusion.

### ***Rationale***

This study intended to understand ways that drag queens of color develop their personas based on their lived experiences of discrimination, how these personas are used for advocacy work, and how they are used to influence society in order to make it a more inclusive place for the LGBTQ+ community. People experience discrimination that creates a need for advocacy and people of color who identify as LGBTQ+ experience multiple degrees of discrimination because of their layered marginalized identities. This inspires a need for self-advocacy and advocacy within the sexual and gender minority community. Thus, drag queens of color may have a lifetime of experiences acquired that make them effective as advocates for the LGBTQ+ community. Drag queens may use their social power and status to act as advocates for gender and sexual inclusion. By examining the advocacy work of drag queens, the results of this study may be used to identify the aspects of the identity and persona development that encourage drag queens of color to disrupt social norms and to subvert the gender binary structure.

## **Methodology**

This study was conducted using a theoretical background in queer theory and the qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry. Life story interviews were used in order to collect the data of personal stories as they may relate to a particular aspect of life such as drag, identity development, and advocacy. Therefore, I used life story interviews as a guide to assist participants in telling me about their experiences. Life stories are defined by Chase (2003) as narratives about some life experience that is of deep and lasting interest to the interviewee. Chase (2003) states that life stories should be gathered during in-depth interviews because of the belief that people understand and communicate understanding through narration. Life stories are appropriate for understanding life experiences and experiences with drag and performance that contribute to identity development and advocacy efforts because life stories are more concerned with the particular aspects of a person's life such as drag (Riessman, 2008). In order to understand the data, I used thematic narrative analysis which allowed me to identify themes and patterns within the information provided by the participants and structural narrative analysis to organize the data into a storyline.

### ***Narrative Inquiry***

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology that focuses on storytelling and understands that narratives and stories represent a person's life experiences (Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiry is also defined as a method of seeking to understand the ways that the world influences the human experience (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990) and can be used to understand the different aspects of life including culture, social structure and meanings, and the actions that people take (Leavy, 2009). For the current study, narrative inquiry was used to seek to answer the research questions as this allowed participants to define their own realities and



understandings of gender and sexuality in their own words and how these have contributed to advocacy and identity development in drag queens of color. Using narrative inquiry for this study gave drag queens of color an opportunity to describe their experiences without being silenced by the agenda of a dominant culture. Narrative inquiry in this study was able to delve deeper into the stories that drag queens of color tell to identify how social structures have facilitated their development as well as how they in turn influence society. This narrative inquiry intended to depict the reality of past events as experienced by the participants and the meanings that they derive from these experiences and what both reveal about society as a whole.

The life story approach was suitable for the current study because of the emphasis on allowing the participant to describe their life story and reveal meaningful moments that have influenced their development. Life story is also useful in understanding the relationship between individuals and society and can provide readers with new perspectives that promote empathy and the appreciation of differences in others (Kim, 2016; Lee and Madden, 2016; Clandinin, et. al., 2009). The interview process is a way of constructing reality through a relational and cultural perspective (Gemignani, 2014). As Brinkman (2013) states, interviews also include informed consents and confidentiality for all participants. These aspects help to ensure the participants' safety and inform them of all of the potential positive and negative consequences of the study. For my participants, I provided them with or asked them to create pseudonyms in order to assure confidentiality as there is a relatively small community of drag queens and an even smaller community of drag queens of color. This helped to protect aspects of the participants' identities as well as their safety.

Using Atkinson's (1998) suggestions for creating a life story interview as a guide, I developed a series of questions (see Appendix A) that I used to help participants tell me about

the experiences that are essential to their sense of being and the ways that they make meaning. Atkinson (1998) suggests selecting 30 to 50 questions for use only when needed to move the interview along. The two participants were asked 39 questions in one semi-structured interview that lasted 45 minutes. These questions focused on the identities of drag queens of color, their development, and their understanding of drag. I also prepared some follow up questions in order to acquire more information and to facilitate understanding of the narrative being told. The interviews were then transcribed and were analyzed in two rounds of coding which will be further explained in the analysis section.

### ***Procedure***

Narrative studies can consist of interviews of at least two participants (Subedi, 2021; Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, Ponterotto, 2017; Creswell, 2015; Guetterman, 2015). Therefore, two participants were interviewed for this study. The first participant identified as a Black, gay man in his 30s. The second participant identified as a Black transwoman in her 30s. Both participants lived in the South. Participation in this study was optional and voluntary. Participants were invited to participate through emails, social media posts, in person, private messages on social media or were approached after shows in-person regarding their interest in participation. Participants were also recruited through established relationships with local LGBTQ community centers and approached during events hosted by local gender and sexuality resource centers.

Recruitment efforts were made in local establishments where drag is performed and local community organizations. Recruitment efforts were also made via social media including Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr. Participants were recruited from anywhere in the U.S. and were given an informed consent prior to participating in the study which stated the efforts to

ensure confidentiality and the responsibilities and rights of the participants. It was important for care to be taken within the community during the recruitment process because of mistrust of researchers within the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, it was important for relationships to be relational rather than transactional within the community to avoid exploitation of the LGBTQ+ community. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, videoconferencing via Zoom was used to interview the participants. The following steps were taken to ensure that the videoconferencing platform was secure: a new meeting ID was created for each meeting, strong passwords were developed for each meeting and not shared publicly, participants were muted on arrival, and private chat was disabled (Born, 2020). In order to qualify for this study, participants met these criteria:

- 1) Self-identify as a drag queen
- 2) Identify as a person of color
- 3) Be at least 18 years of age
- 4) Have performed drag for at least one year
- 5) Live in the United States

### ***Positionality & Ethics***

It is important in my study to consider both my positionality in relation to the topic as well as the ethics involved throughout the research process. In my own identity development and exploration, I have looked to drag queens of color as a symbol of freedom and as an example of what it means to live authentically. Because of my understanding of drag queens as activists who represent authentic ways of gender expression and subvert the concept of binary gender, I may have been primed to seek out information to confirm this understanding. In order to avoid paying special attention to aspects that confirm this belief, it was important for me to focus on letting the participant talk about their experiences with as little input or interruption from me as possible.

As a demi-pansexual, Black, cisgender woman, I have some identities that provide me with some insight into aspects of the participants experiences. As a person of color, I am aware of the kinds of microaggressions and discrimination that the participants may have experienced. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I am aware of the difficulty that may come with having a queer identity and that discrimination that can come with this identity. Along with the considerations of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its approval, it was important for me to consider the implications of this study beyond the standards of the IRB in order to ensure that the risk of harm to participants was minimal. In relational methods of inquiry such as narrative inquiry, it was important to consider the ethics of attempting to maintain a relationship of researcher and participant as opposed to a friendship (Kim, 2016).

Ethics in queer theory is indicative of a moral obligation to the community of the participants and to portraying their worldviews as legitimate (Denzin, 2003). As a researcher, I needed to understand my own power in the relationship and the identities of the participants that may have impacted the participant's feeling of autonomy (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2014). With the population of Black drag queens, member checking gave the participants a chance to clear up misunderstandings or misinterpretations. With member-checking, the participants were given the opportunity to read the depiction of their narratives and determine if they are consistent with their own understanding of their experiences which helped ensure that the data accurately represented their lived experiences. This also provided them with the chance to engage in research that can hopefully be used to help them and their community. Therefore, it was important for this research to build relationships with the participants so that it honored the humanity of the participants rather than engage in research that is transactional. The participants

shared positive feedback of the narrative and were given the opportunity to change anything that they felt needed to be changed in the narrative.

### *Analysis*

Thematic narrative analysis was used in the current study to identify themes and categories within the data. Thematic narrative analysis focuses on the “what” of the story and events and content rather than on the structure and allows the researchers to identify the common elements in the narratives in order to develop a theory and helps the researchers put the data into smaller sections to identify the differences and similarities (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Riessman, 2008). With the research questions in mind, I began analysis with a thematic approach to identify themes that would be used as references for the later analysis and the representation of the data. For this analysis, the data was analyzed with In Vivo coding which uses the participants’ own words to identify the main parts of the interview answers. In Vivo coding was used because it is useful in studies that seek to honor and prioritize the participant’s voice (Saldaña, 2013). Therefore, In Vivo coding was used and the transcripts were coded with attention to participants’ words or phrases that appeared to call for emphasis or bolding such as “impacting nouns, action-oriented verbs, evocative word choices, clever or ironic phrases, and similes and metaphors (Saldaña, 2013).

The two themes that were identified from the data included Learning From Experiences and Inspiring Others. The theme of Learning From Experiences can be described as the importance of having meaningful experiences that taught important lessons. This theme can also be related to the first and second research questions: RQ1: What encourages drag queens of color to pursue drag and RQ2: What influences the development of their identities and personas? The theme of Inspiring Others is highlighted by the need of participants to encourage others to love

themselves and to advocate for the LGBTQ+ community and personal expression of self and related to the third and final research question: RQ3: In what ways do drag queens of color use their personas to advocate for and defend the right to express different genders and sexual orientations?.

Following the thematic narrative analysis, structural narrative analysis was used to organize the interviews into an overarching storyline. Structural narrative analysis gave the researcher a means to analyze the narrative, identify what the participant intends to communicate, and provided an organizational structure to the narrative. Structural analysis allowed the researcher to identify the elements within the narratives of drag queens of color and compile them into a story that is organized from the beginning of their narrative and back to the present moment (Riessman, 2008). This produced a storyline compiled from the shared characteristics within the narratives and organized in a way that results in an overarching narrative.

In the current study, the interviews were coded based on the Labovian model to determine the structures within the narrative (Saldaña, 2013; Riessman, 2008). The researcher was able to code the interviews based on words that represented aspects of the structure of the story. The main characters and the settings were coded as orientation and the main events were coded as complicating action. Then the main character's reflections and feelings of those events were coded as evaluation. Finally, and the ends of the story being told were coded as resolutions. These codes were then placed in an order based on the Labovian model to produce a narrative that follows from the beginning of their story and back to the present moment. The codes identified from the thematic analysis were compared to the codes identified in structural

analysis and were placed in order from the beginning of the participants' experienced to the end in order to define a structure to the narrative.

### ***Representing the Study***

In representing the study, a composite narrative was used which was more suitable with queer theory and narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008). It was important to use methods of data representation that cultivate narrative imagination in a chronological fashion in which a reader seeks to understand what it would be like to be another person and to understand the emotions that are being experienced (Kim, 2016). In order to tell the stories of the participants, I organized the participants' life stories into a composite narrative which combined the various elements of their narratives into the story of one individual. This allowed me to anonymize the stories told by the participants (Willis, 2019). The composite narrative was created from the codes that were identified in the participants' interviews through thematic narrative analysis which was the first round of coding. They were then organized into a chronological story based on the codes developed through structural narrative analysis. The narrative was then written as if it was told from the perspectives of the character within the composite narrative and represented the perspective of the participants. The narrative was read multiple times with attention to language, context, content, and main ideas within the story. Participants were also given the opportunity to review the composite narrative and provide feedback in order to increase trustworthiness of the data.

### **Findings**

In this section, I will discuss the results of the analyses of the interviews. It is important to note that as a nature of both queer theory and narrative inquiry, these findings cannot be generalized to the population and are not intended to be generalized beyond the experiences of

the participants. The key findings comprised of two main themes that arose from the thematic analysis of the transcripts. Using In Vivo coding, the researcher identified two main themes according to research question which I used to construct the storyline. One character was also constructed, based in the data that was disclosed about the participants. The similarities were combined and special attention was paid to the differences in order to fit with the main themes found within the data. The character represented the two participants and was represented in the storyline that was organized chronologically with parts of the transcripts that would provide context or clarify the stories or characters. The data from the interviews was then added in order to provide further context to the stories and reflections of the participants or the main character.

### **Fierce's Story**

This composite story depicts Fierce's journey from childhood to adulthood and describes experiences throughout his life. This was based on the experiences of two participants, a Black cisgender gay man and a Black transwoman. The composite character is cisgender in order to avoid assumptions that drag and transgender are the same identity. Fierce is a 6'1" Black cisgender man who performs drag with a dark skin color and a round face. In drag, he uses she/her pronouns. She wears full makeup with high cheekbones, round brown eyes, and a beautiful smile. Some faint lines around eyes and from mouth from smiling often, she sits casually but with good posture, her legs crossed. She has a plump frame and she has her hair braided in rows underneath an afro wig that is placed diagonally on her head to allow both styles to show. She wore a black sequined gown, silver jeweled earrings and black open-toed heels that appeared to be six inches tall.

### ***Learning From Experiences***

**RQ1: What encourages drag queens of color to pursue drag?**



## **RQ2: What influences the development of their identities and personas?**

Growing up I was generally quiet in public but energetic around loved ones. I struggled with my weight and when I came out as gay, I struggled with my identity. There were expectations that I was expected to fulfill within my family in order to be accepted which came with several difficulties. I lived in my parents' shadows. I had low self-esteem from being expected to be this person and this person instead of being me. I wasn't happy being who everyone saw me as. My father was a Christian preacher and I feel like my dad was homophobic. My mother was also Christian and an activist but also very loving. She moved past the homophobia to see me for who I am. My grandmother always believed in me and my grandfather would always tell me to make sure I'm happy and to live my truth. It was my grandfather who influenced my life the most. He told me to live happy for me and if people don't like it, then forget them. He helped to give me the boost of confidence to later become who I am.

My biological family had financial difficulties that led to them losing their home so when I was 12, I was adopted by the Johnsons. The Johnsons were White and they have always been very supportive. They taught me all about manners, morals, values, and life. They were great providers and made sure that my needs were met. They encouraged me to pursue dance and theater and pushed me to be better and always encouraged me to go further in life. My adoptive mother recommended books about queer life and about growing up as a gay black man that she had heard of in order to help me develop my identity. The Johnsons taught me not to give up and to reach for the stars.

When I was eighteen, I had my first relationship. I was young and dumb and didn't realize it was a toxic and unhealthy relationship. I moved out of state to escape that relationship and for a moment, I felt free. I was out of my parents' house, there were no rules and I could stay

out as late as I wanted but I soon found myself homeless. I didn't have anywhere to go so for two months I slept on patios and in community centers. During this time, I was beaten with guns, robbed, gay-bashed, and harassed on buses. Eventually someone gave me a job offer at a local store and helped me to get back on my feet. Then I met my best friend Jamari who helped me to find my way to the local gay and lesbian community center that helped provide me with resources. Those resources and Jamari helped me to experience drag for the first time.

Jamari and I went to the club to see a show and I instantly felt a sense of energy and excitement. There was music playing and I started dancing and all I could think was "I would love it here!" I was dancing and apparently a few drag performers were impressed with my moves. Jamari snuck over to them and negotiated getting me into a show where I met my drag mother. My drag mother was a big name in the community and she said, "if you're serious about wanting to do this, I can teach you some things and we can start working on it." Before I knew it, I was a backup dancer for my drag mother and I wore a leopard print dress, ugly boots, and this crazy wig and I thought I was the hottest thing on Earth. That moment shaped my future. It was the happiness that I was missing. Drag changed my life and helped build confidence. It changed my world.

Eventually, I developed my own drag persona. She is sweet and spicy. Classy and bougie. She is a hint of Mariah Carey, a bit of Beyonce, a twist of Rihanna, and just a tiny bit of Miley Cyrus. She's also influenced by Chaka Khan. I get a little bit from everybody. It's cocktail dresses and high slits. Custom-made outfits, and 5 ½ inch open-toed heels. In drag I feel like I'm on top of the world. Unstoppable. When I go out on the stage and come out of the curtain, I'm just a whole new person. When I'm onstage, doing a ballad and I'm releasing all of my tears, it

gives me power. It's like I'm shedding skin and I'm growing thicker skin so everything that I've been through, that I've cried out on stage builds me up as those tears dry.

### *Inspiring Others*

#### **RQ3: In what ways do drag queens of color use their personas to advocate for and defend the right to express different genders and sexual orientations?**

Drag also gives me a voice to inspire others to take a stand. I can inspire other people to get that confidence and be more self-loving. All of those things that I've overcome made me stronger today and made me able to speak out to people who are going through the same thing. I always feel like an open book. Sharing my story with other people helps me to let people know that it's possible to become who you are meant to be. It helps me to give back to the community. My biggest thing as a performer is that I use my platform for good. The community needs to be heard and I have a microphone and a platform to say it to get it noticed more. I can help to bring more people together and definitely show that we're all just human. I can also raise money for organizations and charities. I would also say that advocacy is an important part of being a drag performer. Some people base their drag life off of history and fighting for what we believe in and then you have some that base their lives off of watching *RuPaul's Drag Race* and they just want to go out and have fun. My drag is based off history and helping to further the community in meaningful ways. Without community then you don't really have that backbone or that stepping stone to help get through life. As a Black drag queen it's sometimes difficult to get the same amount of bookings as our White peers. I've seen people get bookings with only two routines whereas I will have four or five and still struggle to get booked for a show. We must be able to do more to be able to get the same bookings as White drag queens. So, when someone hears of a show with openings, they will let us know.

Now I look at the new generation when they come in and I'm like "I'm definitely gonna mentor you. I've got to help you find your way through life as much as I can." Most of my peers call me "Blanca" from *Pose*. I'm one of those people that if you don't have any money or anywhere to go, I will give you my couch to sleep on. I will give you a meal and help you find work. That's what I do for the new kids. I help them with old outfits that I have, just to give them something to start with. My drag kids are one of my greatest accomplishments. Being part of history is another accomplishment. Looking back at Marsha P. Johnson who was the first Black transwoman to throw the brick during the Stonewall Riots and at the same time I'm a Black drag performer who is in the history books for establishing our local pageant. It's like I'm making double the history.

I still have challenges. I worry about getting approval from other people, making sure they will be ok being around me. Getting the public stares and those small little glares in the streets is also challenging. Because I'm already 6'1" and all my heels are 5 ½ inches and up so I get pretty tall. I also have to decide between being a regular performer or a pageant performer. Some people get too lost when they're going for crowns and I have seen pageants tear people apart to the point where they become vicious and they forget that the people that they're competing with are their peers and their friends. It helps to remind myself of all of the things that I've overcome and the lessons that I learned from them. Learning to be happy. Learning to be strong. Learning to allow myself to feel beautiful. Because growing up I had low self-esteem issues from being expected to be this person, and this person, and this person instead of being me. Like you can't allow people to take your power away from you because then you'll forever be in the shadows. Sometimes you have to look at yourself and say you are strong, you are beautiful, you're worthy of love and happiness. People can lie, they can steal but I learned that

some people just aren't willing to change. There are some snakes in the grass. I had to let go of friends of many years that I loved but weren't good for me.

The biggest lesson that I want to leave with people is to always believe in yourself. Do everything with an open heart, fight for what you believe in. Help others fight for what they believe in. Keep sending letters to your politicians, to your council members, to the judges, to the lawyers and just keep wearing them down. Follow your own path and never live in anyone's shadow. You can always visit in the shadows and take what you learn from it but don't dwell there and create your own identity.

### **Discussion**

For the participants, by engaging with members of society through performances or living in drag, they may actively attempt to disrupt societal norms about sex and gender. As such, the notion of gender acceptability may be disrupted through the possibility that there are more than two valid genders. The composite narrative is about Fierce and follows her experiences from childhood to the present day. This narrative demonstrates that importance of these experiences to Fierce, the meaning that she makes from them, and the ways that these learnings impact her today. Fierce shares that she is an important figure in her community, uses her persona to engage in advocacy work, and demonstrates the fluidity of identity. This section will relate the composite narrative back to the previous studies described in the literature review.

#### ***Drag Identity Development***

Carretta et al. (2019) introduced the idea of "drag identity salience", which describes the importance of a person's persona or identity as a drag performer to their general sense of self. As such, creating drag person may involve a transformation that is not solely cosmetic but may more rooted in identity. For Fierce this may be evidenced by following quote about performing in drag

for the first time: “That moment shaped my future. It was the happiness that I was missing. Drag changed my life and helped build confidence. It changed my world.” Performing in drag for the first time may have helped Fierce to find parts of herself that she may not have been aware of or that she may not have been able to access outside of drag. The importance of this moment may be that it helped drag to become a part of the participants’ identity.

Fierce also expressed that drag and performance acted as therapy for her by allowing her an opportunity to experience emotional release through crying while performing ballads and reflecting on their experiences. “When I go out on the stage and come out of the curtain, I’m just a whole new person. When I’m onstage, doing a ballad and I’m releasing all of my tears, it gives me power.” Previous research supports the finding that performers feel power and confidence in drag that is empowering for performers, giving them the chance to rise in status, acquire power, and improve their social skills, indicating the strength and positivity of performance (Hopkins, 2004). For Fierce, her drag identity was developed over time based on her experiences with drag and with the ways that drag offered a way of coping with emotions. Drag was also a way for Fierce to cope with experiences of discrimination.

### ***Experiences of Discrimination***

While drag has been considered by previous researchers as having the capacity to be viewed as a celebratory act in honor of LGBTQ+ identities, this celebration may be complicated by the discrimination that LGBTQ+ people can face (Dougherty, 2017). This discrimination includes heterosexism and the endorsement of heteronormativity. Previous research states that discrimination can take many different forms, such as the use of terminology that is heterosexist or transphobic, encouraging hetero or gender normative behaviors by expecting someone to act in a heterosexual manner, and discomfort with or disapproval of LGBTQ+ people's experiences

(Nadal, 2013). Discrimination is evidenced in the composite narrative from the main character's family of origin as supported by the following quote: "when I came out as gay, I struggled with my identity. There were expectations that I was expected to fulfill within my family in order to be accepted." Additionally, Fierce reported that they had experienced violence in addition to other discrimination as a result of her identity. "I've been robbed, gay-bashed, and harassed on buses." Researchers also found that people of color who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender encounter racial and heterosexist microaggressions within the community of sexual and gender minorities (Balsam, et.al., 2011). The current study found that at least one of the participants may have found it difficult to get the same number of shows or bookings as their White counterparts.

Fierce also found that she was excluded from the same opportunities as White drag queens. Studies have shown that racial microaggressions that people can face include treating people of color as inferior, assuming that cultures that are not a part of White culture have no value and the belief that race is not a barrier for success (Torres-Harding et al., 2012). For Fierce, microaggressions appeared in the form of not receiving the same number of opportunities as her White peers. "As a Black drag queen it's sometimes difficult to get the same amount of bookings as our White peers. I've seen people get bookings with only two routines whereas I will have four or five and still struggle to get booked for a show. We must be able to do more to be able to get the same bookings as White drag queens." While it may be that both White drag queens and drag queens of color may be part of the sexual and gender minority community, the participants may experience challenges related to race that their White peers do not.

## *Advocacy*

Drag queens may have a distinct identity that extends beyond their performance as activists thanks to Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera's advocacy during the Stonewall Riots (Jenkins, 2019). As evidenced in the composite narrative, Fierce stated, "I would say that advocacy is an important part of being a drag performer." Fierce found that she was able to "inspire other people to get that confidence and be more self-loving. All of those things that I've overcome made me stronger today and made me able to speak out to people who are going through the same thing." This demonstrates Fierce's own advocacy style as she contributes to her community and her own support networks.

Drag queens, according to Szymanska (2020), can speak out against aggression against the LGBTQ+ community, promote the community's rights, and combat prejudice. For Fierce it was important to keep encouraging others to continue to engage in these activities as evidenced by the following quote from the composite narrative:

"The biggest lesson that I want to leave with people is to always believe in yourself. Do everything with an open heart, fight for what you believe in. Help others fight for what they believe in. Keep sending letters to your politicians, to your council members, to the judges, to the lawyers and just keep wearing them down."

Encouraging others to promote the community's rights was a means of advocacy for Fierce.

Drag performers can also create support systems, communities, and families in which older members are parents who are looked to for support and mentoring (Levitt et al, 2018). Social supports are important within communities as rejection and social isolation may contribute to mental health concerns such as depression and suicidality (Knutson & Koch, 2019).



After being influenced by her own drag mother, Fierce has become a drag mother herself and is an important figure in her community. Fierce shared, “I’m one of those people that if you don’t have any money or anywhere to go, I will give you my couch to sleep on. I will give you a meal and help you find work. That’s what I do for the new kids.”

### ***Gender***

Researchers have recognized that gender is a situational construct that is enacted and created by people and is influenced by those who participate in its production (Egner and Maloney, 2016). This is evidenced by the process of developing a persona. Participants have often been influenced by several different people or concepts to establish a sense of who they are as performers and the kind of performer that they wish to be. Throughout this process they decide their clothing, their influences, their styles of dance, and the ways that they perform both gender and the ways that they dance, act, and entertain.

The experience of at least one of the participants demonstrates that gender can be experienced and expressed in various ways other than the societally prescribed gender that corresponds with someone’s biological sex. For Fierce pronouns shifted depending upon whether or not they were in or out of drag. When they were in drag, she/her pronouns were used and outside of drag Fierce used he/him pronouns. The change in pronouns provides support that gender is fluid and is not dictated by the biological sex of an individual but rather depends upon the gender being enacted.

### ***Limitations and Future Directions***

These findings should be considered in the contexts of the limitations of the study. Firstly, there is a dearth of research on drag queens of color and Black drag queens specifically, with many studies focusing on drag queens as a whole rather than on the various intersecting

racial or gender identities that may also contribute to a drag identity. Secondly, while these findings may be useful, they only include the perspectives of Black drag queens from the Southern United States. Drag queens of different racial identities may provide more insight into the experiences of drag queens of color. There may also be differences based on geographic regions. Finally, these findings cannot be generalized to the population of Black drag queens or drag queens of color as a whole due to the nature of qualitative research.

Future studies may be able to learn more about the various kinds of experiences that drag queens of color experience by having a broader sample of racial identities. It would also be helpful to conduct future studies on the impact of drag families on queer communities as well. The participants reported having multiple drag children of their own and as a result, these children could be potential extensions of the impact of their drag mothers while also adding their own narratives to the impact on the community. Future directions could also include research on the current legislative efforts to ban drag in public spaces and the impact that this has had on drag queens and the queer community as a whole. Research could also focus on the difference in performance type and performers who choose to honor and contribute to the history of the community and those who are more interested in growing their careers to compete on *RuPaul's Drag Race* or have fun.

### ***Conclusion***

Black drag queens who identify as LGBTQ+ have minority identities that lead to experiences of discrimination which creates a need for advocacy. Thus, Black drag queens may have a lifetime of experiences that make them effective at using their social power to act as advocates for the LGBTQ+ community. By examining the intentional and unintentional advocacy work of drag queens and the creation of their personas as a response to the current

structure of society, the results of this study could be used to identify the advocacy needs of Black drag queens and inform the work of social justice advocates regarding the needs of drag queens and Black people within the LGBTQ+ community. Information about the experiences of Black drag queens and their own efforts for advocacy work can inform best practices for providing mental health services and in identifying ways for advocates to effectively work alongside people within the LGBTQ+ community in order to establish a sense of equity.

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## Appendix A

### Life Story Interview Guide:

RQ1: What influences the development of the identities and personas of drag queens of color?

1. How would you describe yourself as a child? (What were some significant or meaningful events that happened during your childhood?)
  - a. What were some of your struggles as a child?
2. How would you describe your parents and their ethnic/cultural background?
  - a. What are some of the best and worst things about them?
3. What special people have you known in your life? Can you tell me about them?
4. Can you describe who shaped and influenced your life the most? What did they do?
5. Tell me about the heroes and heroines, guides, and helpers in your life?
6. Who most helped you develop your current understanding of yourself? What did they do they help you?
7. What social pressures have you experienced as an adult? How do you deal with them?
8. How do you use your leisure time?
9. What relationships in your life have been the most significant? Can you describe them for me?
10. Can you tell me about a special person that has changed your life?
11. What were the crucial decisions in your life? Can you describe them?
12. What has been the most important learning experience in your life?
  - a. What did it teach you?
13. Have there been any mistakes in your life?
14. How have you overcome or learned from your difficulties? What did you learn?
15. Describe the ways in which you handle disappointment.

16. What was the most important thing you have had to learn by yourself?

17. How do you feel about yourself at the age you are now?

RQ2: What encourages drag queens of color to pursue drag?

18. What was your first experience with drag?

a. What was that like for you?

19. How did you end up doing drag?

a. How did you create your drag persona?

20. Has performing as a drag queen been satisfying to you, or has it been something you had to put your time into?

21. What is important to you in your work as a drag queen?

22. What comes the easiest in your work as a drag queen?

23. What is most difficult about being a drag queen?

24. What do you like about drag? What inspires you to keep doing drag?

25. What one sentiment or emotion makes you feel most deeply alive?

RQ3: In what ways do drag queens of color use their personas to fight for and defend the right to express different genders and sexual orientations?

26. What have been your greatest accomplishments?

27. What has been the greatest challenge of your life so far?

28. What has been the most awe-inspiring experience you ever had?

29. What has been the greatest challenge of your drag career so far?

30. Is a sense of community important to you? How?

31. What is different or unique about your community?

32. How does your role as a drag queen contribute to the life of your community?

33. What have drag queens contributed to the history of your community?

34. Do you think that advocacy is an important part of a drag identity?

a. How so?

35. What advocacy needs do you have for yourself?

#### CLOSURE

36. Is there anything that we've left out of your life story?

37. Do you feel you have given a fair picture of yourself?

38. What are your feelings about this interview and all that we have covered?

Appendix B  
Informed Consent



Institutional Review Board  
215 Administration Bldg.  
Memphis, TN 38152-3370  
Office: 901.678.2705  
Fax: 901.678.2219

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**Informed Consent for Research Participation**

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<b>Title</b>	PRO-FY2021-324: “If You Can’t Love Yourself”: Identity, Persona, and Advocacy in Drag Queens of Color
<b>Researcher(s)</b>	Robbie Luten, M.S., University of Memphis Sara Bridges, Ph.D., University of Memphis
<b>Researchers Contact Information</b>	(901) 290-8254, rmluten@memphis.edu

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You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information for you to consider when deciding if you want to participate. More detailed information is provided below the box. Please ask the researcher(s) any questions about the study before you make your decision. If you volunteer, you will be one of about 6-12 people to do so.

**Key Information for You to Consider**

**Voluntary Consent:** You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the perspectives of the life experiences that contribute to the development of the identities, personas, and advocacy efforts and needs of drag queens of color and the LGBTQ+ community.

**Duration:** It is expected that your participation will last 60 to 90 minutes.

**Procedures and Activities:** You will be asked to participate in a recorded interview via Zoom to answer a series of questions about your life experiences that have contributed to your development as a drag queen and on the advocacy needs of drag queens of color. You will not be asked to provide your name, address, or any contact information.

**Risk:** Some of the foreseeable risk or discomforts of your participation include distress caused by discussing potentially anxiety-provoking topics and well as a fear of being outed.

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits of participation in the study.

**Alternatives:** Participation is voluntary, and the only alternative is to not participate.

### **Who is conducting this research?**

Robbie Luten, M.S. of the University of Memphis, Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, and Research is in charge of the study. She is being guided by Sara Bridges, PhD. There may be other research team members assisting during the study.

No members of the research team have a significant financial interest, and/or a conflict of interest related to the research.

### **Why is this research being done?**

The purpose is to learn more about the advocacy needs and life experiences of drag queens of color. You are being invited to participate because you meet the requirements for participation and are 18 years or older, identify as a drag queen/performer and as a person of color, live in the United States, and have performed drag for at least one year.

### **How long will I be in this research?**

The research will be conducted online via Zoom. It should take about 60 to 90 minutes of your time.

### **What happens if I agree to participate in this Research?**

If you agree you will be asked to answer a series of questions about your life experiences that have contributed to your development as a drag queen/performer and on the advocacy needs of drag queens/performers of color. You will not be asked to provide your name, address, or any contact information. You can skip any question that makes you uncomfortable and you can stop any time. The interview will take place on Zoom and will be audio recorded.

### **Examples of questions in the study:**

- What was your first experience with drag?
- What do you like about drag? What inspires you to keep doing drag?
- Who most helped you develop your current understanding of yourself? What did they do to help you?
- How does your role as a drag queen/performer contribute to the life of your community?

You may be contacted following the interview to review or clarify any quotes or follow-up questions.

### **What happens to the information collected for this research?**

Information collected for this research will be used in a published report and may be used for conference presentations. Your name and other identifying information will be kept confidential. Identifiers for identifiable private information will be removed.

## **How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?**

We promise to protect your privacy and security of your personal information as best we can. Although you need to know about some limits to this promise.

We will make every effort to keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be personally identified with any of the responses. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will not have access to your confidential information; therefore, there is no risk of your information being published or communicated to others.

Paper records, computer records, and portable storage devices will remain secure by the lead investigator and research team. We will keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. Although unlikely that we will have your contact information, in the case of imminent risk to yourself or someone else, we will make attempts to ensure safety is maintained. Data will be stored in OneDrive which is HIPAA and FERPA compliant. The data will be stored in this platform for approximately 4 years following the completion of the study after which the data will be deleted.

All personally identifying information collected about you will be destroyed once it is no longer needed for the study. Any personal information that could identify you will be removed or changed before files are shared with other researchers or results are made public. For the purposes of data analysis, interviews may be shared with other researchers who are trained in qualitative data analysis and are approved by the investigator and her advisor. Interview material may be used for multiple studies on the life experiences of drag queens of color, persona development, performance, discrimination, and identity development.

To make sure that your information is secure and confidential, only the researcher and her advisor will have access to all completed documentation. Also, no names will be documented. Instead, each interview will be provided with a pseudonym. For the purposes of data analysis, deidentified interviews may be shared with other researchers who are trained in qualitative data analysis and are approved by the investigator and her advisor.

Individuals and organization that monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect the research records. This monitoring may include access to your private information. These individuals and organization include the Institutional Review Board.

## **What other choices do I have beside participating in this research?**

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

## **What if I want to stop participating in this research?**

It is up to you to decide whether you want to volunteer for this study. It is also ok to decide to end your participation at any time. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decided to withdraw your participation. Your decision about participating will not affect your relationship with the researcher(s) or the University of Memphis.

**Will it cost me money to take part in this research?**

There are no costs associated with participation in this research study.

**Will I receive any compensation for participating in this research?**

You will not be compensated for taking part in this research.

**Who can answer my question about this research?**

Before you decide to volunteer for this study, please ask any questions that might come to mind. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Robbie Lutten at [rmluten@memphis.edu](mailto:rmluten@memphis.edu) or the faculty advisor, Sara Bridges at [sbridges@memphis.edu](mailto:sbridges@memphis.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705 or email [irb@memphis.edu](mailto:irb@memphis.edu). We will give you a signed copy of this consent to take with you.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have had the opportunity to consider the information in this document. I have asked any questions needed for me to decide about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions through the study.

By signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been given a copy of this consent document. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, my legal representative or I may be asked to consent again prior to my continued participation

As described above, you will be audio recorded while performing the activities described above. Audio recording will be used for transcription and data analysis. Initial the space below if you consent to the use of audio recording as described

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to the use of audio recording

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<b>Name of Adult Participant</b>	<b>Signature of Adult Participant</b>	<b>Date</b>
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**Researcher Signature (To be completed at the time of Informed Consent)**



I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understand the information described in this consent and freely consent to participate.

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<b>Name of Research Team Member</b>	<b>Signature of Research Team Member</b>	<b>Date</b>
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## Appendix C

The following examples are excerpts from memos I made during initial coding to highlight subjectivities and various aspects of my personal process over time:

P: I was very quiet and brainy but I was also, growing up, one of those kids that didn't like watching others get picked on, so I would defend them.

**I: Were there any significant or meaningful moments that happened during your childhood that you can remember?**

P: Realizing that I wasn't happy being who everyone saw me as and knowing that there was something different about me.

**I: I imagine that was a struggle for you**

P: It was cause I lived in my parents' shadows most of my life and lived under the expectations of if I'm gonna follow in their footsteps or be known as their son at the time.

**I: So how would you describe your parents and their background culturally and also their expectations?**

P: Well, my appearance has and always will be a woman and their expectations and shadow expectations of me was pretty much me being a boy and having a family and not being who I was.

**I: So, what would you say are some of the best and that worst things about growing up and about your parents?**

P: The best things right now is they still love me regardless of my decisions. And I would probably say the worst things is like the feeling of knowing that you have to hide yourself from the people that you love because it hurts them, and it just kills you inside because you know you can't be happy at the same time unless you break away from it.

## Appendix D

Identified codes and themes quoted from interviews, grouped by researching question.

### **What encourages drag queens of color to pursue drag?**

### **What influences the development of their identities and personas?**

#### Learning from experiences

- "You will not get to live life regular being afraid"
- "You can't allow people to take your power away from you"
- "Finding who I am and surviving all the stuff that I've been through"
- "Accepting people for their face value"
- "Some people just aren't willing to change just move forward"
- "You can't trust everyone"
- "There's some snakes in the grass"
- "I had to let go of friends of many years that I loved but wasn't good for me"
- "You have to stop being blind and tell yourself you cannot keep going on this way"
- "You can't keep saving this person and making excuses"
- "My eyes they opened up to the world"
- "Being young and dumb not realizing it was a toxic and unhealthy relationship"
- "helped me along the way to find bits and pieces of me"
- "I've got to help you find your way through life as much as I can"
- "most of my peers now call me Blanca from pose"
- "my drag mother she introduced me to drag"
- "she was like you know I can teach you some of the things that I know"
- "I have a few drag kids of my own"
- "I lived in my parents' shadows most of my life"
- "I wasn't happy being who everyone saw me as"
- "they still love me regardless of my decisions"
- "she sees me for who I am but it just is still taking her time to adjust"
- "She pretty much believed in me and she knew about how I am"
- "I stand up for what I believe in because of her"
- "the last thing he told me is live happy for me and if people don't like it then forget them"
- "let me know I can do whatever I want if I can put my mind to it"
- "pushed me to be better"
- "she's just always been in my corner no matter what"
- "my immediate family have always been a great a great support system"
- "she was like you should definitely read this book"
- "they taught me everything I know"
- "they told me to always reach for the stars"
- "she pretty much helped me find my way and guide me"
- "I couldn't have gotten through it without my friends"

- “they are actually now real family to me”
- “my friend snuck over there and negotiated getting me into a show”
- “friends in college who have like stuck by my side and always been a part of my life”
- “my best friend we met in college and we just stuck with each other for life”
- “dancing was what I did and acting”
- “I’ve been a dancer since I was 10”
- “I am forever dancing”
- “I do voguing um I learned jazz contemporary tap hip hop lyrical I’ve done African performances before”
- “with choreography and making sure dance moves are crisp”
- “she’s sweet but spicy but she’s also classy and bougie so I guess you can say she is a hint of Mariah Carey a bit of Beyoncé A twist of Rihanna and just a tiny bit of Miley Cyrus”
- “it all depends on like the road you take”
- “A classy bitch”
- “cocktail dresses high slits but it’s beautiful gowns it’s just classy”
- “Chaka Khan Janet Jackson Beyoncé Whitney Houston Teena Marie”
- “gave me the boost of confidence to fight and become the person I am today”
- “make sure I’m happy and to live my truth”
- “learning to be happy. Learning to be strong”
- “learning to allow myself to feel beautiful”
- “all of those things that I’ve overcome made me stronger today”
- “I will not allow myself to be the victim anymore”
- “I’ve gotten so comfortable in myself now”
- “Accepting me for who I am”
- “I am 98% confident in who I am now”
- “thought I was the hottest thing on earth”
- “and I never knew that it was the happiness that I was missing”
- “has shaped my future”
- “one of the biggest names in the community that’s looked up to”
- “doing like a ballad and I’m releasing all my tears it gives me power”
- “it’s like I’m shedding skin and I’m growing thicker skin”
- “so everything that I’ve been through that I’ve cried out on stage builds me up as those tears dry”
- “it was always there”
- “a little fun experiment ended up blossoming into this whole life changing thing”
- “drag helped build confidence”
- “it definitely changed my world”
- “I’m just a whole new person like I it’s like I changed just that quickly”
- “I’m a completely different person”

**In what ways do drag queens of color use their personas advocate for and defend the right to express different genders and sexual orientations?**

Inspiring others

- “Inspiring others to use their voice and speak up”
- “Having a voice in inspiring others to take a stand”
- “Inspiring others and my stage is my therapy”
- “Always believe in yourself take accountability for the things that you do”
- “Stand together as one and keep on making differences”
- “Keep sending letters to your politicians too your council members to the judges to the lawyers send them wherever you can and just keep wearing them down”
- “Follow your own path and never live in anyone shadow you can always live in the shadow and take what you learn from it but don’t dwell there and create your own identity”
- “Make people have fun”
- “I’m so all about express yourself”
- “Helping others gain that confidence”
- “Help educate people and get people to learn”
- “Live life and have fun”
- “A good community it brings knowledge to the people who don't know”
- “Bring more people together and definitely show that we're all just human”
- “Community charities like my biggest thing is as a performer”
- “Without community then you don’t really have that backbone or that stepping stone to help get through life”
- “Nothing will get done or voices won’t be heard if you don’t use your platform for good”
- “We all stuck together we all helped each other out”
- “People of color that do drag we get we have to be able to do more and bring more to the table”
- “There wouldn’t be any drag shows if it wasn’t for drag Queens”
- “I’m making double the history right now”
- “I’m now in the history books”
- “I’m a black transwoman and a drag performer and Marsha P was the first black trans woman to throw the brick during the Stonewall riots”
- “Being a part of making moments and advocacy for the LGBT community”

## Appendix E

The following examples are provided to illuminate the evolution of my data analysis.

Key:

Participant #1

Participant #2

Researcher voice

In Vivo Coding Example:

I feel much better about myself. Like I'm now at the point like I see what the older Queens and stuff feel when we first came. And so now I look at the new generation when they come in and I'm just like "I'm definitely gonna mentor you. I've got to help you find your way through life as much as I can" And it has gave me a lot of perspective on things. Because now like we'll have new people that don't have anywhere to go or don't have the money to get things. And it kind of is funny because most of my peers now call me 'Blanca' from *Pose* because I'm one of those people if you don't have anywhere to go, I will give you my couch to sleep on and I will give you a meal and help you find work and stuff like that. And like that's what I do for the new kids. I help them with old outfits that I have that I can't fit or that I never wear anymore to give them something to start off with.

Structural Coding Example:

Key:

AB = Abstract OR = Orientation CA = Complicating action EV = Evaluation RE = Resolution

So, um my drag mom was a performer in Texas and she was like "Hey, you know you should come to a show." And I was like "I gotta ask my parents." Cause at the time I was seventeen. So, I asked my mom "hey, can I go to this drag show in downtown Dallas at this club?" "No. You're too young no." So, I snuck out. It was a Saturday night and went to this club and I was like "Oh my gosh! I can do this! This is so much fun! I would love it here!" And my drag mom was like "Hey you know if you're serious about wanting to do this, you know I can teach you some of the things that I know and we can start working on it." So, the first time I performed it was in March of 2010 and I was- we were doing a Destiny's Child number and I was one of her little backup singers and dancers and it just slowly grew from there.

Transcript data compiled into a 'storyline':

Without community then you don't really have that backbone or that stepping stone to help get through life. And people in communities sometimes don't wanna ask for help because they're

afraid of what others will think about them but it's very important for communities to stick together no matter how scared you are or of what will happen or if you need help. When my community comes together, they really come together. We all stick together we all help each other out with gigs and booking shows A good community brings knowledge to the people who don't know. It helps educate people. It gets people to come to shows and see that we're all just people. When people don't know they fear, they judge, they criticize. So having that community space of saying "hey this is part of our community as well you know and they're just as loving as anyone in our community." It makes things so much easier and better.

Story with researcher voice added (in black), based in contextual/actual data:

Purple – Participant 1

Blue – Participant 2

Black – Researcher

Growing up I was generally quiet in public but energetic around loved ones. I struggled with my weight and when I came out as gay, I struggled with my identity. There were expectations that I was expected to fulfill within my family in order to be accepted which came with several difficulties. I lived in my parents' shadows. I had low self-esteem from being expected to be this person and this person instead of being me. I wasn't happy being who everyone saw me as. My father was a Christian preacher and I feel like my dad was homophobic. My mother was also Christian and an activist but also very loving. She moved past the homophobia to see me for who I am.

## Appendix F

Example of composite character sketch.

Key:

Participant #1

Participant #2

Fierce:

*Appearance:* Fierce is a 6'1" Black cisgender man who performs drag with a dark skin color and a round face. In drag, she wears full makeup with high cheekbones, round brown eyes, and a beautiful smile. Some faint lines around eyes and from mouth from smiling often, she sits casually but with good posture, her legs crossed. She has a plump frame and she has her hair braided in rows underneath an afro wig that is placed diagonally on her head to allow both styles to show. She wore a black sequined gown, silver jeweled earrings and black open-toed heels that appeared to be six inches tall.

*Identity:* Assigned male at birth. Identified as a Black gay male who used he/him pronouns and she/her pronouns in drag. Later transitioned and identified as a Black transwoman.

*Spirituality:* She was raised conservative Christian, but had affirming spiritual grandparents. She still identifies as Christian.