

**Who the fuck can genderfuck: navigating disability and intersectional identities in the  
United States drag scene**

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## Abstract

In this paper, I will aim to answer how disabled drag performers with multiple marginalized identities navigate the drag scene in the United States through data gathered from interviews with drag artists who embody multiple identity intersections. Drawing on disability feminist theory, I will reiterate the importance of including disability as an intersection of analysis in feminist praxis and practice, arguing that incorporating disability deepens, expands, and enriches feminist theories. As disability is rarely a topic of discussion in many fields, my research will add to scholarship (or lack thereof) on the intersections of disability, multiple marginalized identities, sexuality, and gender performance. Framing my research in the theories of genderfucking by June Reich (1993), cruising utopia by José Esteban Muñoz (2009), visibility from Petra Kuppers (2001), and intersectionality by Kimberlee Crenshaw (1989), my research questions include: how do disabled drag performers navigate their intersectionality in the United States drag scene? What constraints and possibilities does this marginalization provide? How do disabled, queer, trans, performers of color create their own spaces within the scene? My methodology includes semi-structured qualitative interviews with current disabled drag artists in California, USA to establish the effects and implications of embodying disability and multiple minority identities in the United States drag scene. The findings suggest that the drag scene in the United States is a space for visibility for individuals who face barriers to equality in society; however, these spaces are not always equitable for full inclusion and participation for artists with intersectional identities. The research finds that navigating disability and multiple intersectional identities has pushed drag artists who identify within these intersections to create their own spaces, or “utopias,” outside of, but within, the mainstream drag scene.

## Key terms

Disability | drag performances | disability studies | feminist studies | intersectionality | disability feminist theory | queer theory

## Declaration

I, Bethany Cox, declare that this thesis contains only original, previously unpublished work, except where acknowledged by bibliographical references.

I further declare the following word counts to be accurate,

Word count (thesis text only, excluding notes and references): **15,133**

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Signed,

Bethany Erin Cox

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my aunt who had Down syndrome, she loved to dance and perform. She changed all of our lives for the better. Forever Our Honey.

Arron Renee Diaz (November 30<sup>th</sup> 1966- April 24<sup>th</sup> 2022)

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## **List of Abbreviations**

DEIA- Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Accessibility

AKA- Also Known As

POC- People of Color

APA- American Psychological Association

ADA- Americans with Disabilities Act

PWD- People with Disabilities

QTPOC- Queer, Trans, Person/People of Color

CDC- Center for Disease Control

UN- United Nations

WHO- World Health Organization

MG- Mama Ganuush

MM- Mondo Millions

MS- Multiple Sclerosis

ASL- American Sign Language

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

To highlight the realities and potentials of disability, I propose analyzing disability in a space that is often seen as a somewhat “queer utopia,” (Muñoz 2009) to observe the implications of being disabled in conjunction with other intersectional identities in the Drag scene in the United States. Drag performances, or the art of performing notions of a gender which one does not necessarily identify with, have been an expressive form of genderfucking on stage since the late 1800s (them.us). This staged mode of genderfucking, a performative deconstruction of heteronormative notions of gender, (Reich 1993), has sought to be inclusive of varying minority gender, sexual, and race identities as it has evolved and developed. Through conversations with three disabled drag artists, the nuances of navigating the drag scene with a disability and other intersectional identities are revealed. While drag has become a place for healing and visibility for some artists, we are exposed to the tension that the drag scene is not always a safe, accessible, or inclusive space for all.

### 1.1- Research Questions

1. How do disabled artists navigate the drag scene with multiple marginalized identities?
2. What constraints and potentials does this intersectional marginalization provide for disabled, Queer, Trans, People of Color (QTPOC) in the drag scene?
3. How does the experience of being a disabled QTPOC drag artist push artists to create their own spaces?

### 1.2- Methodology

The methodology for this project included semi-structured interviews with self-identified disabled drag artists residing in the United States. Interviewees were referred to me by The Disability Drag Collective and selected based on availability and willingness to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted via Zoom on April 11<sup>th</sup>, April 17<sup>th</sup>, and April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2024, with three drag artists in the United States who identify as

disabled. Only two of these interviews ended up being utilized for the thesis material. Informed consent was received, and all participants agreed to be interviewed. Interviews lasted from 20 to 90 minutes, were subsequently transcribed through Dropbox software, and then edited by me to correct transcription software mistakes. The interview transcripts were then coded and organized by theme, and inputted into the thesis material. Utilizing interviews as my methodology has provided me with rich and valuable insight that can only be gained from the first-hand experiences of the communities I intend to research. There is a lack of scholarship surrounding my topic, so a strictly theoretical approach would not have been feasible. To best attain the data for my intended research, qualitative research methods have provided the most valuable avenue for me to gain these insights.

### 1.3- Literature Review

Academic discussions surrounding disability and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) in drag and queer performance arts are limited yet set the foundation for my research and iterate the need for further, deeper discussions on the topics of disability and intersectionality in queer performance spaces. While there is no concrete academic scholarship directly on the topic of disability and intersectionality in drag performances, much has been written about the potentialities of drag as a performance art, some insight into intersectionality in visual arts, as well as the incorporation of disabled identities in various performance arts. Key scholars such as Judith Butler, Petra Kuppers, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Carrie Sandahl contribute to scholarship surrounding topics of drag performances and disability incorporation in performance arts.

In Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler proposes the notion of the performativity of gender and addresses drag as a form of gender performance that exposes the constructed nature of gender identity. According to Butler, drag illustrates that gender is not an inherent or stable essence but rather a set of repeated actions and behaviors. By exaggerating and parodying gender norms, drag performances highlight the fluidity and performativity of gender (Butler 1990). Butler writes, "I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction

between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity,” (Butler 1990, 174). In this influential work, Butler reveals the potential subversiveness of drag and the illegitimacy and incomprehensibility of gender as an identity category. My research will add to this existing scholarship by highlighting the additional subversive potential that incorporating disability representation in drag performance would provide.

Another work supporting the potential subversiveness of drag is the article, “‘It Has No Color, It Has No Gender, It’s Gender Bending’: Gender and Sexuality Fluidity and Subversiveness in Drag Performance” (2016) by Justine Egner and Patricia Maloney in *The Journal of Homosexuality* vol. 63. This work also proposes the idea of gender as performative and addresses the potential effects that drag may have on the audience and performers alike, an aspect which I intend to analyze with my research. Egner and Maloney write, “Gender and sexuality fluidity and subversiveness of performers depend not only on the individual performers’ gender identity and intentions but also on their relationship with and their ‘read’ of the audience, thus furthering our understanding of the reciprocal nature of gender performance and norms of the audience and drag performer” (Egner and Maloney 2016, 876). My research will add to the notion of this reciprocal relationship between the audience and the performer by incorporating disability as another category of analysis in drag performance and its potentiality for the subversion of norms.

Building on their work in *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler further elaborates on drag, performativity, and sexuality in their article, “Critically Queer” (1993). They state, “drag exposes or allegorizes the mundane psychic and performative practices by which heterosexualized genders form themselves through the renunciation of the possibility of homosexuality,” (Butler 1993, 25). Butler asserts that drag denaturalizes hegemonic constructions of heterosexuality and gender, but may not subvert these norms in and of itself. I will add to Butler’s notions by highlighting how disability and other intersectional identities further denaturalize these norms within the drag scene.

The preceding scholarships on drag performances address the potentially subversive nature of drag but fail to address disability and other marginalized identities as an additional intersection of analysis with subversive potentiality. In the book, *New*

*Feminist Theories of Visual Culture* (2006) by Jennifer Doyle and Amelia Jones, the authors iterate the importance of addressing intersectional identities in visual arts and how current theories in the field fail to address the implications of multiple intersectional identities. The authors express how fields within feminist visual art studies fail to address all intersections of identities, “for example, homophobia in feminist film theory, the failure in much scholarship on sexuality to think about race, the racism that structures the dominant gaze in gay cinema and photography, and the asymmetry between the homophobic structures that put pressure on lesbian and gay artists and spectators,” (Doyle and Jones 2006, 607). This scholarship touches on the importance of an intersectional approach when analyzing visual arts in a queer or feminist context, but fails to mention disability as an identity of intersection. My research will build on, and go beyond, these notions of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) in visual arts by encompassing disability as a further intersection of analysis.

Petra Kuppers, a disability culture activist, writer, wheelchair dancer, professor, scholar, and community performance artist (petrakuppers.com) provides valuable insight into the incorporation of disability in performance art. In the introduction to her book, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on the Edge* (2013), Kuppers offers critical wisdom on the importance and subversive potential of incorporating disability representation in performance arts. Kuppers writes, “The disabled performer likewise is a sign of [their] times: a point in modernity when extraordinary bodies have a currency as lifestyle accessories, when any shock or alienation value is eroded by the ubiquity of difference that is consumed and repackaged. Traditional framings that keep life and art apart assert themselves in different form in this post-modern world: as art enters life, its power to hold meaning diminishes, and transmutes in forms that elude concepts such as agency, strategy, political impact and social responsibility,” (Kuppers 2013, 3). Kuppers asserts the transformative potential that including disabled identities in performances may have on performers and audiences alike. While Kuppers' analysis focuses primarily on disabled dancers, my research will broaden her analysis by incorporating drag performances, notions of gender performance, and intersectional identities.

Further, in Petra Kuppers' article, "Deconstructing Images: Performing Disability" (2001) in the *Contemporary Theatre Review* vol. 11, she reveals the positionality of being a disabled performance artist and its personal and cultural significance. Stating, "The disabled performer is marginalised and invisible - relegated to borderlands, far outside the central area of cultural activity, into the discourses of medicine, therapy and victimhood. At the same time, people with physical impairments are also hypervisible, instantly defined in their physicality. The physically impaired performer has therefore to negotiate two areas of cultural meaning: invisibility as an active member in the public sphere, and hypervisibility and instant categorisation." (Kuppers 2001, 25). Kuppers exposes the representational conundrum of being a disabled performer, living in a body deemed both invisible and hypervisible. Kuppers' analysis of the embodiment of being a disabled performer and her concepts of invisibility/hypervisibility is pertinent to my research. I intend to add to this approach by addressing these themes within drag performances while incorporating intersections of gender performance, race, gender identity, and sexuality.

Another prominent scholar in the field of disability and performance is Carrie Sandahl. In her article, "From the Streets to the Stage: Disability and the Performing Arts," (2005) Sandahl addresses the transformative possibilities of highlighting disabled performers in the theater arts and offers the idea that disability is inherently performative. Building on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Sandahl argues that disability disrupts gender performance. She writes, "Disabled people's bodies and movement repertoires force us to reconsider what it means to 'act like a man' or 'act like a woman.' Integrating people with disabilities into theater arts changes not only aesthetic outcomes but also the process of creating theater," (Sandahl 2005, 623). In this piece, Sandahl begins to touch on the intersections of disability and gender identity/performance on stage. My research will add to her conceptualizations by considering drag performances rather than theater, and will directly address the intersections of disability, gender performance, gender identity, race, and sexuality.

Lastly, feminist disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson provides valuable insight into the effects of incorporating disabled performance artists in performance art.

In her article, "Staring Back: Self-Representations of Disabled Performance Artists," (2000) Garland-Thomson states,

Disability performance art is a genre of self-representation, a form of autobiography, that merges the visual with the narrative. As a fusion of both seeing and telling, disability performance art foregrounds the body as an object both to be viewed and to be explained. The disabled body is not only the medium but the content of performance. The disabled body on view is the performance. Rather than only telling the required disability story, then, disability performance acts out that story," (Garland-Thomson 2000, 334).

Garland-Thomson eloquently exposes the representational potential that disabled performance artists enact and how this may be perceived by the audience. My research will build upon this by framing such in the location of drag performances and addressing the additional intersections of gender performance and other marginalized identities on stage.

These scholarly works that I have outlined have paved the foundation for the research I intend to conduct. My research will add to notable scholarship on drag performances by incorporating disability as an intersection of analysis, as well as adding to scholarship on disability and intersectionality in the performance arts by incorporating aspects of drag, gender performativity, and multiple marginalized identities.

#### **1.4- Theoretical Framework**

In order to support my findings, I draw on several theoretical frames from scholars in feminist and queer studies. My primary theoretical frames are intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), genderfucking (Reich 1993), cruising utopia, and queer utopias (Muñoz 2009), hypervisibility/ invisibility (Kuppers 2001), and feminist disability theory (Garland-Thomson 2002). These theories enrich my discussion on how QTPOC disabled drag artists navigate their identities in the United States drag scene.

First coined by Kimberlee Crenshaw in her 1989 article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," Crenshaw proposes the term 'intersectionality'

to challenge conceptual limitations of single-issue analyses. This concept was put forth by Black feminists such as the Combahee River Collective in their statement from April 1977, noting that white feminists do not address or acknowledge the multiple oppressions that Black women face; simultaneous racism and sexism. In a 2017 interview, Crenshaw explains intersectionality to be, “a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things,” (law.columbia.edu).

Intersectionality asserts a framework that addresses all intersecting identities of an individual and how these specific identities result in individual life experiences. In my research, I utilize intersectionality as a theoretical framework and practical application for how these intersections of identity influence the experiences of drag artists that experience multiple simultaneous oppressions, namely; ableism, racism, transphobia, and queerphobia.

The theory of “genderfuck” or “genderfucking” was put forth by June Reich in her 1993 article, “Genderfuck: The Law of the Dildo”. Reich explains her theory of genderfucking by stating it is a theory “which ‘deconstructs’ the psychoanalytic concept of difference without subscribing to any heterosexist or anatomical truths about the relations of sex to gender... [it] structures meaning in a symbol-performance matrix that crosses through sex and gender and destabilizes the boundaries of our recognition of sex, gender, and sexual practice,” (Reich 1993, 113). I apply the theory of genderfuck as a deconstruction of heteronormative structures of gender to the realm of drag performances as a mode of “genderfucking” on stage.

In José Esteban Muñoz’s book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), he proposes the idea of ‘cruising utopia’ in relation to queerness and queer utopias. He asserts that queerness is on the horizon, but we are not yet there. He writes, “the field of utopian possibility is one in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity. Such multiple forms of belonging-in-difference and expansive critiques of social asymmetries are absent in the dominant LGBT leadership community and in many aspects of queer critique,” (Muñoz 2009, 20).

He emphasizes the need for queer collectivity in LGBTQ+ spaces and urges us to look at “queer relational formations within the social” (Muñoz 2009).

I relate this concept of cruising utopia to the experiences that disabled QTPOC drag artists encounter in the United States drag scene. I assert how their queer collectivity and relationality have pushed these artists to create their own “queer utopias” within the mainstream drag scene.

Petra Kuppers’ 2001 article, “Deconstructing Images: Performing Disability,” examines the representational conundrum of disabled performers being both invisible and hypervisible. She states that the disabled performer is marginalized and invisible, “relegated to borderlands, far outside the central area of cultural activity, into the discourses of medicine, therapy and victimhood. At the same time, people with physical impairments are also hypervisible, instantly defined in their physicality,” (Kuppers 2001, 25). I explore this negotiation of invisibility and hypervisibility with notions expressed by disabled drag performers. These performers share how they feel cast out by society because of their disabilities, but performing in drag allows them a space to feel visible and seen.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson expands on the possibilities of incorporating disability as an intersection of analysis in feminist practice and praxis in her article, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” (2002). She asserts that integrating the intersection of disability deepens, expands, and challenges feminist theory, (Garland-Thomson 2002). She exemplifies this by iterating, “feminist issues that are intricately entangled with disability—such as reproductive technology, the place of bodily differences, the particularities of oppression, the ethics of care, the construction of the subject—are discussed without any reference to disability,” (Garland-Thomson 2002, 2). I utilize Garland-Thomson's notions of feminist disability theory by grounding my work within the intersection of disability with other identity categories and concepts commonly addressed in feminist studies such as gender, race, and sexuality. This approach enriches my work by incorporating disability as an additional category of analysis, illuminating how feminist studies should continue to address disability among other identity categories. These preceding theories form the basis for my analysis of



interviews with disabled QTPOC drag artists in order to gather insight into how they navigate the scene with their intersectional identities.

### **1.5- Positionality/ Limitations**

#### Position 1: The privileged white researcher

As a white person with no visible disability, my position as a researcher is complicated. I identify as part of the disability community but did not iterate this to each interviewee, possibly posing myself as an outsider. In addition, I am not part of the Deaf community nor do I have MS, which makes me unable to understand the intricacies of the implications of embodying these specific disabilities. As a white person interviewing two drag artists of color, I will never be able to fully understand the nuances of being a disabled artist of color. This also puts me in a position of power as the white researcher, possibly putting me in an exploitative position. I have taken all of these circumstances into consideration, and have framed my research and interviews in the most intersectional and empathetic way possible. The insight I gained from my interlocutors has undoubtedly made me a better researcher and academic.

#### Position 2: The non-drag artist

As someone who has never performed in a drag show, I am not fully aware of what goes on behind the scenes and what it is like to navigate the drag scene. I was unable to attend any shows in person due to scheduling constraints, therefore putting me in a position where I was unable to directly observe these spaces and delve deeper into the nuances. This hinders me from being able to fully understand the realities that drag artists face on stage, backstage, before stage, and after stage.

#### Position 3: The (somewhat) cis interviewer

As someone who does not identify within the gender binary, but does not identify as trans, I am unable to fully grasp the implications of being trans, inside and outside the drag scene. While I am a strong ally to the trans community, my identity as an outsider poses challenges when understanding the lived experiences of trans, disabled artists. The insight these artists provided me on their trans identities added significant

contributions to this work and provided me with first-hand knowledge of navigating the scene as trans-drag artists.

In the introduction, I have outlined my approach to my research, and the existing literature and theoretical frameworks relevant to the topic of disability and performance. In the following chapters, I will provide an analysis of the interviews and their relation to feminist theories such as intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), genderfucking (Reich 1993), cruising utopia (Muñoz 2009), and visibility (Kuppers 2001). Chapter 2 will discuss the implications of navigating the drag scene as artists with multiple intersecting minority identities, while Chapter 3 will explore how these artists have utilized their intersectionality to urge them to create their own spaces for full inclusion and accessibility. I will conclude by summing up concepts put forth by the disabled drag artists interviewed and reiterate the importance of incorporating disability as an intersection of analysis in the feminist field.

## Chapter 2: Navigating the Scene

This chapter explores how drag artists with disabilities and other intersectional identities navigate the drag scene in the United States. Insightful excerpts from interviews with two drag artists who identify as disabled, queer, trans, people of color unveil the nuances of navigating multiple simultaneous oppressions in the mainstream drag scene.

### 2.1- Navigating Disability

How does disability and multiple marginalized identities embodied by drag artists influence their experiences in the drag scene? This insight can only be gained through the first-hand lived experiences of drag artists who experience several simultaneous oppressions. This chapter delves into navigating the drag scene for artists who identify as disabled, queer, trans, people of color and how this unique experience provides constraints, but also offers great potentials. Mama Ganuush (they/them), a disabled, queer, trans, Palestinian-African drag artist from the Ohlone lands of California (now known as San Francisco), and Mondo Vaden aka Mondo Millions (he/they), a queer, trans, Deaf, Black drag king from the Sacramento area of California, expose how their intersectional identities frame their experiences in the drag scene. Being performers with disabilities, these artists experience phenomena that non-disabled performers will never encounter.

Having multiple sclerosis (MS), an autoimmune disease that affects the nervous system where lesions cover the brain and spinal cord, Mama Ganuush shares how their disability influences aspects of their performance. MS impacts Mama Ganuush's mobility and energy levels which pushes them to be innovative and cautious when performing drag. They vulnerably shared how they navigate these barriers in a space which is commonly inaccessible and how this inaccessibility has pushed them to ensure the events they put on are accessible for all. They bring to light aspects of drag events that can easily be tweaked to make the space more accessible, such as proper shade

at outdoor events for performers and attendees who cannot tolerate the sun due to their disabilities or other confounding factors.

Reflecting on their performances and how they accommodate their disability when doing drag, Mama Ganuush exposes common aspects of mainstream drag performances. They share how they alter these aspects of their performance by incorporating other modes of movement and accommodating attire to ensure their safety,

I can't really do like flips and splits and things that drag queens do at all. I do incorporate some simple choreography, also I incorporate a lot of belly dancing, and belly dancing by itself is actually coordination for the body and it's actually been like recommended to me by people, that's good for MS. So, dancing because you coordinate your body in a specific way. (...)And I have a really good teacher who actually understands how to work with disabled bodies. So, it's more for me, like, actually therapy. And also, like, the other thing is the attire that I have to wear. So, I never wear heels or anything that I can't walk in. And it just kind of pushes me to make my drag unique, it's still stylish, it's still cool, it's still me, it's still entertaining. It's still, I still have my own moves and choreography and dance that's expressed me, but it also expressed my disability (Mama Ganuush 2024).

Here, Mama Ganuush shares how they incorporate other dance styles in their performance such as belly dancing, and how the support of having a teacher who understands disabled bodies has given them an outlet to express their creativity. They share that they have had to make some changes to typical expectations of drag performers, but it allows them the space to express their disability and make their drag unique.

In addition to their disability influencing aspects of their own performance, Mama Ganuush states how not being born with a disability, but developing MS later in life, has allowed them to recognize ableism in the drag scene,

So it took me a minute to understand ableism and it does impact me psychologically because I feel left out or I feel like I work so hard to make my voice

heard that these are my needs and not to be apologetic about it and I feel like for my drag, drag helps me be unapologetic. This drag is like in your face. Like, and San Francisco drag specifically, where I learned my drag is very radical, it's very nonconformative and very genderqueer. So I feel like drag helped me a little bit to empower myself to address my disability needs (Mama Ganuush 2024).

Building on Kuppers' concept of hypervisibility and invisibility (2001), Mama Ganuush shares how their disability allows them to have their voice heard and be empowered in a space which is not built for disabled performers. Additionally, exposing the San Francisco drag scene as "radical," "nonconformative," and "genderqueer," can imply that this drag scene is somewhat of a "queer utopia," however, with the barriers and inaccessibility described by Mama Ganuush, I argue this space to be more "cruising utopia," with a queer utopia being on the horizon, (Muñoz 2009).

For disabled drag artists, ableism and inaccessibility are inescapable in the drag scene. Overt inaccessibility provides hurdles for disabled drag artists that they are forced to overcome. Mama Ganuush further shares how inaccessibility and other oppressive systems in the drag scene make the space less inclusive, despite being dubbed as a somewhat "queer utopia" (Muñoz 2009). They touch on aspects of accessibility in all realms; financial accessibility, physical accessibility, safety, and respect, and bring to light the lived experiences of bodies that do not fit hegemonic standards in the drag scene,

If you have mobility problems, like drag in general, you do it in sometimes small bars, you do it in venues, but I would say a lot of venues that you go to do a drag number doesn't even have space for you to sit. Does it have the right air circulation? I'm somebody with multiple sclerosis, overheating or standing is a problem. So there's no place for you to really just rest and take care of yourself and take care of your body. If you're somebody with any form of neurodivergence, it's extremely overwhelming. There's no space for you to like, feel safe. If you're a drag artist who has neurodivergence, who's impacted by like loud noises and things like that, you really have to step out of the place (Mama Ganuush 2024).

For disabled performers and audience members, having an accessible space is pertinent for inclusion and full access, places to rest or take a break are simple initiatives to be taken to ensure full participation for all members in the scene. Mama Ganuush further elaborates on safety and some consequences they have faced in the scene due to lack of respect and accessibility measures within the crowd,

The other thing also is the crowd. (...) for example, I was lip syncing, and this person started kissing me on my lips, and I swear, and I was like, I completely lost my balance because it was like, not consensual, and I'm somebody who has problems coordinating things because I have MS. So I messed up the whole thing and I, like tripped and almost fell. It was just very unsafe for me. And I feel like maybe we could do a better job informing people like how to respect the artists and also what accessible needs they need. So for example, that person kissed me, I have a mask, I wear masks when I'm not in drag, and when I'm in drag, I'm literally away from people until I finish my number and then I literally leave or I put a mask on again. So if somebody kissed me on my lips and I don't have a mask, it could compromise my health. So what I mean by that is like, this is also a mix of misogyny and ableism and like, I would say like transphobia, all of that stuff together (Mama Ganuush 2024).

Drawing on Egner and Maloney's (2016) emphasis on the reciprocal nature of gender performance, the audience influences Mama Ganuush's performance while Mama Ganuush's performance influences the audience. On the one hand, Mama Ganuush has taken extra steps to make sure they are safe and comfortable with their audience while still performing a radical act of genderfucking (Reich 1993) on stage. On the other hand, the audience seemingly feels entitled to enjoy Mama Ganuush's performance not only visually as an onlooker, but evidently as an additional party on stage; in this case, in the form of a non-consensual sexually charged act. This establishes a reciprocal relationship where Mama Ganuush must navigate their performance as well as the audience's perception of their performance. Drag artists rely on the audience to reciprocate their performance but it is not always done in a safe or accessible manner.

Ensuring performers' safety is tantamount to accessibility in the drag scene. Mama Ganuush shares how this experience specifically indicates multiple simultaneous oppressions for them and other performers in their community. They further elaborate on more avenues for accessibility in the drag scene such as equitable pay, providing transportation, adjusting show times and venues, accommodating spaces to rest, and how they personally deal with these challenges,

It's just uncongenial in general, but I feel like the venue is a problem. The audience sometimes is an issue. And then, the show time and the parties, a lot of them happen to be late. Or going to a drag number, or going out of a drag number, transportation in and out is also a problem, especially for a drag artist. If you need all of these things that nobody thinks about a drag queen who is disabled, like how to bring themselves to the venue, where're they gonna sit, where're they gonna change if they need the bathroom (...) And the last thing is equitable pay. So drag doesn't pay a lot because it depends on tips. I feel like the most, like common form of it is in bars and restaurants and nightclubs and these spaces most of the time are not accessible for the artists and it's a nightmare (Mama Ganuush 2024).

The experience of navigating disability with multiple other minority intersections is highlighted in Mama Ganuush's experiences in the drag scene and further exposed by Mondo Millions with their experience as a queer, trans, Deaf, Black drag king. On being a Deaf performer in the Sacramento drag scene, and the inseparability of their identities in their performance, Mondo shares some of the barriers they face, how they innovate their performance using sign language, and how a support network is essential to their performance,

Because I cannot hear the music in the same way, I'm honestly performing mostly to the beat and my memory of this song. Like, I played the song over and over and over to myself, like you know, I can hear to a degree with my hearing aid, so I can hear a certain amount of sound, enough to be able to enjoy and comprehend music. But, that still doesn't mean that I can hear it in the same way, like I have to carefully time it in my mind. So I'm like, okay, that's the beat where this line starts, especially

if there's like a little instrumental break in there and I also have had to bring in my loved ones and my supporters in the crowd who know that if I'm performing, and they know the song, to sing along because sometimes during those instrumental breaks I will experience what I call losing the music, the music literally just blends with the general crowd noises and I have no idea where I'm at in the song. So I'll have to look over to like my partner or my friends and I'll see them like singing the song and I read their lips and I catch myself back onto where I am in the song, and I've been able to do that pretty well, but it wouldn't be something that would be possible if I didn't have that type of support because sometimes I really just have to play it off and pretend like I totally know what's happening. That's just one part of how my disability impacts my performance (Mondo Millions 2024).

Common aspects of drag performances such as moving to the music, are proven to be difficult for Deaf performers, but Mondo provides insight on how to navigate these barriers with the help of their community. Being a Deaf performer allows Mondo to pioneer their performance and incorporate sign language, representing the subversive potentials of drag (Butler 1999; Butler 1993). Drag performances rely heavily on hearing and moving to the music and vocalizing with verbal language. Being a Deaf performer, Mondo subverts these normative constructions in the drag scene by using sign language rather than vocal language and utilizing visual cues from their community rather than auditory cues to stay on track with the music. Mondo expands on their experience as a Deaf drag king and offers further perspectives on navigating a space that is designed for hearing people while sharing some of the direct ableism they have faced in the scene,

I'm [also] trying to navigate cues with show producers. I remember when I first started, the drag queen, her idea of a cue was basically shoving me onto the stage. Like I had asked her for a cue, and that was part of a major local organization Mr. Gay Sacramento. I would have incidents where, I had asked Mr. Gay Sacramento, it was done virtually, and when I was getting my accommodations for that, I realized it hadn't even occurred to them that other deaf people might want to see me perform. So I was actually having to navigate



creating my own accommodations in that instance. (...) And even if I go to a show, I don't necessarily know what's going on to the same extent as an attendee. And so it's often, requiring me extra difficulty in trying to even have a conversation with the people who I need to talk to in order to get opportunities at all, cause it's very hard even for hearing people to have a conversation club or in a bar, or these sort of nighttime environments and so trying to do that and then trying to get a hold of producers or trying to get a hold of like other people. Navigating these types of things gets that much more complicated (Mondo Millions 2024).

Organizing their own accommodations and creating accessible avenues to find bookings are just a couple of the realities Deaf artists face in the drag scene. Mondo further touches on (in)accessibility issues and complications of how being a disabled, queer, trans, person of color influences aspects of the drag scene, how they personally navigate these barriers, and how making the space accessible is beneficial for both the disabled and non-disabled communities,

So that's where I'm also working on like innovating the performance scene, and also just me sharing that has meant that a lot of people have been asking me how to make these things more accessible because they didn't think about it until I showed up. Like, 'Oh shoot, Mondo's deaf. He's here. What do we do? Oh shoot, we never thought about this. Hey Mondo, can we talk about this? How do we make this a better and more inclusive experience for you?' And so, because of that, my local scene on the whole has slowly become more and more inclusive in that way, because being in the room makes people think about accessibility (...) I can just walk in and ask, and make people start thinking about, 'oh shoot accessibility. Why didn't we think of that before?' (Mondo Millions 2024).

Mondo's notions parallel Petra Kuppers' (2001) theories on the simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility of disabled performers, "[The disabled] performer has therefore to negotiate two areas of cultural meaning: invisibility as an active member in the public sphere, and hypervisibility and instant categorisation." (Kuppers 2001). While people with disabilities are often cast out to be invisible, whether that be from

access barriers, or to avoid compromising their health and safety, they also experience simultaneous hypervisibility, seemingly being put on display for presenting as disabled.

As Mondo points out, “When there is someone visibly disabled in the room, everybody's energy changes. They might stare, they might whisper, like, it's not going to change as long as people continue to be turned off by disability. You know, because they don't see us,” (Mondo Millions 2024). Disabled drag artists continuously negotiate this representational conundrum of being both invisible due to societal constraints, and hypervisible due to the cultural significance of disability.

Navigating disability in the drag scene has proven to be no simple task. Disabled drag artists experience inaccessibility in venues, ableism from producers and attendees, lack of reasonable accommodations, and often have to put in the work for themselves to make these spaces inclusive and equitable. The next section delves into how disabled identities intersecting with other marginalized identities provide additional sources of oppression in the mainstream drag scene.

## **2.2- Navigating Multiple Intersectional Identities, “a mix of –isms”**

Not only do these artists have to negotiate a space not built for disabled performers, but embodying multiple marginalized identities creates further barriers to equity in the drag scene. Mama Ganuush and Mondo Millions both identify as queer, trans, people of color (QTPOC's), contributing additional barriers to navigating the scene. This section expands on how disability, in conjunction with minority race, gender, and sexuality identities further marginalizes drag artists who embody these intersectional identities.

Highlighting the intersections of race, gender, and disability that Mondo encounters, he reflects on an experience where he encountered simultaneous sexism, racism, and ableism at one of their drag performances when an audience member tried to say something in his ear, not realizing Mondo cannot hear. In addition to this act of ableism, what the audience member was trying to relay to Mondo about their

performance prop, a “packer” (a prop some drag kings use to imitate a penis under their garments), was an example of appropriation and objectification regarding their race and gender while also utilizing Mondo’s accessibility tool to enact this circumstance of simultaneous oppression,

I handed them my captioning app and I tried to do my best to communicate and it turned out that what they wanted to say to me, and this is probably more sexual harassment, but she was basically saying that she wished I had worn my bigger packer. Like, I hadn't been able to find my standard performance packer and the one I was using was much more modest and it was just realizing that in this moment, I'm like navigating three different spheres of my intersectionality. I'm being objectified for my race and for my gender and they're using my accessibility tool to do this, so I can't take apart like, you know, my deafness, my blackness, my queerness. It's not an option. It's not an option. I have to navigate stuff like this all the time while I'm trying to tell people, you know, like, I only realized more recently that I've missed so much context in terms of what other people have said about me or about other people simply because I cannot hear. So, you know, things will be happening and I'll have no context and that's gotten me into situations that were not the greatest. Like where people would then like say that something else happened than what it actually was, or they'll try and say that I didn't hear what I definitely heard, and they try and take advantage of me in that way. And so these are like, you know, mix of isms (Mondo Millions 2024).

Exploring the implications of their intersectionality in the drag scene, Mondo is well aware of the multiple oppressions that can occur in an instant. Another instance of this “mix of isms” and their experience of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) outlined by Mondo, took place at another drag show when having to work with one of the DJ’s who was known to be racist, Mondo explains this circumstance and shares how simple acts like interacting with the DJ can provide barriers for artists who fall within these minority intersections,

I had a moment where I was trying to, I was going to perform at a show for Black History Month, and the DJ was a white man, a white gay man who had been

racist towards me in the past. So I show up at this event, and, you know, I'm like prepared to perform. And I previously talked to people involved and they said that they would see what they could do to make sure that this man was not deejaying. I arrived, this man is deejaying and this is where like the deaf aspect comes in. I have to speak with the DJ in order to set up my cue. I have to interact with the DJ. That means I have to have a good relationship with the DJ. I have to feel safe enough to trust that the DJ is going to play the music when he's supposed to, that he's gonna play the right song, 'cause I can't hear. I've performed to the wrong song before because I didn't realize that it wasn't my song because the beat was a little similar. Like, that wasn't a malicious thing when that happened but things like this do happen (Mondo Millions 2024).

Here, Mondo has to navigate both their deafness and their blackness while trying to maintain their safety to be able to perform. This is a circumstance that non-disabled QTPOC performers will never have to encounter, and reflects how intersectional identities are not properly addressed in the drag scene. Mondo elaborates on the implications of this interaction and how their own experiences have allowed them to recognize multiple oppressions and implement intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) in their own work,

But, I cannot ask for my accommodation because I do not feel safe for racial reasons. So it's like all of these different things are why I'm so passionate about intersectionality as a concept, like my day job, I'm a diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility consultant. And a big crux of the work I do is applying intersectionality into these various scenarios and knowing that I have to use my lived experience and like understand through these experiences that, you know, oh, I couldn't say that this happened specifically because I'm deaf, but like it happened because I spoke out about racial transgression. But it's also, you know, tied up with deafness because I need to ask this man for an accommodation (Mondo Millions 2024).

Mondo touches on the conundrum of embodying intersectionality and not being able to identify which marginalized identity the oppression is stemming from. This relates

to Crenshaw's works on intersectionality and shows how different systems of oppression interlock and reinforce each other, (Crenshaw 1989).

In addition to outright ableism and racism in the scene, Mondo further shares their intersectional experience as a disabled, queer, trans, person of color and the barriers outside the drag scene that are put forth by falling into these intersections, highlighting how individuals within these intersections are constantly putting in extra work and still face barriers to get to where they want to be,

It's like, people don't realize that a lot of us who are in these intersections, we're usually highly educated. There's a lot of us, not all, but there's a lot of us who are very highly educated. Not because we really, really love school, but because we keep getting told we're not qualified enough. They don't say it's because of our disability, but we keep racking up these credentials to try and push them to admit that it is our disability. Myself, I have three degrees. I have a Bachelor of Science in Biology. I have an Associate's Degree in Library Science and a Masters of Library and Information Science. But I have had difficulty finding work as a librarian in an institution, specifically because of who I am in these intersections. Right? And so it's like, I'm trying to find employment, and I keep running into this ceiling where I cannot get up where I need to be in order to financially support my art, for instance. So like, this is one of the few things that I do to make money (Mondo Millions 2024).

Mondo exposes how despite their credentials, there is always something blocking them from being granted full access to the spaces they wish to join. They share more about their personal identity and how microaggressions, indirect ableism, and other oppressions influence the work they do and the obstacles they constantly face,

And that's something that I think is a very common experience for other disabled people, especially if they're navigating additional things on top of their disability, you know, I'm navigating my queerness and my blackness simultaneously, I'm navigating racism, I'm navigating queer and transphobia, (...) it's like either way, whatever oppression I am experiencing in the moment, I could not say it's because I'm black, unless they're necessarily saying a racial slur, for instance. I can't

necessarily say that it's because I'm deaf, just because they didn't say, 'oh, you're not allowed to have captions,' or something like that. I can't even say it's because I'm trans, because they didn't like, you know, call me a slur, or tell me to get back in the closet or whatever. You know, it's usually not going to be explicit like that. But at the end of the day, even though it's usually something that's simmering under the surface in terms of treatment, it's there, and it is felt by myself, by other people in the intersection (...) We know this inherently. And it makes it very hard to create. Because you're constantly facing one barrier after the other. And you can't necessarily point fingers and say, 'This is the problem. This is what I need to solve in order for this to be good,' No, we're getting all sides (Mondo Millions 2024).

The importance of addressing the performer as a whole and being inclusive to every aspect of their identity is pertinent for the inclusion of disabled drag artists with multiple minority identity intersections. The inseparability of these identities creates a distinct experience for these drag artists and proves there is a need to make drag spaces and audiences more inclusive for all parties involved. Mama Ganuush shares how we can support artists with several intersectional identities, and emphasizes the importance of allyship for all aspects of a performers' identity,

If somebody wants to show up to me as an ally, I'm a drag disabled artist, but I'm also Palestinian. And I'm also trans. So to show up for me is to educate yourself as an ally, on what does it mean to be Palestinian, trans, disabled and a drag artist. And what does it mean to be accessible, what does it mean to be equitable, and who are the people that are supporting that? I support them, and people who are not supporting them, I try to educate them, ask them questions or take action against them. And I feel like that's what allyship looks like (Mama Ganuush 2024).

As Mama Ganuush points out, educating ourselves on what it means to be an ally and how to best support minority communities makes an impact on making spaces accessible and inclusive. Supporting all aspects of the identities of drag performers in these intersections can aid in the progression towards drag spaces as truly "utopian".

Embodying intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) and negotiating both invisibility and hypervisibility (Kuppers 2001) in the drag scene, shapes how disabled QTPOC drag

artists navigate this space. Mama Ganuush explains their identity to be a disabled, queer, trans, Palestinian-African, putting them in the intersections of multiple oppressions due to their queerness, transness, ability, and race. These identities shape Mama Ganuush's experience in the drag scene by pushing them to be innovative in their performances, create accessible spaces, and use their performance as a platform for their social justice activism. Navigating their intersectional identity has allowed Mama Ganuush to tailor their performance and drag space to accommodate all of their identities.

Similarly, Mondo Millions identifies as a Deaf, Black, queer, and trans performer. Falling into these specific intersections urges Mondo to utilize intersectionality in their performance spaces, as well as in the work they do outside of the scene. Embodying intersectional identities has shaped the experience of these performers in the mainstream drag scene by forcing them to recognize ableism, racism, queerphobia, and transphobia and using their platforms to alleviate some of these constraints. Navigating their intersectionality within the drag scene has shown that the mainstream drag scene in the United States is not an intersectional space. Bodies that experience these interlocking oppressions are not catered to or accepted in the same way that hegemonic bodies are addressed in the scene, perpetuating a need for a space that fits the needs of those excluded in the scene.

Exploring the drag scene as a space for genderfucking (Reich 1993) has shown that it is indeed a space to deconstruct heteronormative notions of gender, but also exposes the scene as a space to be remedied of multiple barriers for artists with intersectional identities. These barriers revise the idea of the mainstream drag scene as a "queer utopia" by shedding light on the complications artists experience when they embody multiple marginalized identities. For these artists, experiencing inaccessibility and systematic oppressions in the drag scene have pushed them to create their own spaces for full inclusion of their identities, as mainstream drag spaces are seemingly tailored to bodies who fall into hegemonic standards. The next section will discuss how embodying intersectional identities has impacted the experiences of disabled QTPOC

drag artists in the scene and how they have taken their own measures to create utopias that address all aspects of their identities.



## Chapter 3: Creating Space

In this chapter, I will outline how disabled QTPOC drag artists have curated their own spaces after facing numerous barriers in the mainstream United States drag scene. José Esteban Muñoz proposes the idea of ‘cruising utopia’ as “a polemic that argues against anti-relationality by insisting on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity,” (Muñoz 2009). This perspective highlights the importance of community, solidarity, and shared experience in the queer context. For these disabled QTPOC drag artists, ‘queer collectivity’ has only been found with others who share multiple marginalized identities. A queer utopia would entail a space that is unequivocally safe and accessible in all realms. In this space, artists with intersectional identities would feel welcomed, supported, seen, and valued. Drawing on Judith Butler’s (1993) emphasis on community and family building, these artists have created their own spaces with their communities in the form of collectives and virtual variety shows to promote the lived experiences of artists and activists navigating these intersections.

### 3.1- “Cruising Utopia”

Mama Ganuush has provided powerful insight into how the drag scene has influenced the need to create a safer, more inclusive space. They began this sentiment by iterating, “This is your audience, but this is not your safe place,” (Mama Gannush 2024). When describing their position as a drag artist with multiple marginalized identities, they gave a powerful description, “Like as a queer person, you are an anomaly, you are radical, because you are always the minority, as a trans person, the minority of a minority, as a trans person, disabled, who's queer, you're also a minority of a minority of a minority,” (Mama Ganuush 2024).

Being the “minority of a minority of a minority” has pushed Mama Ganuush and other artists in these intersections to recognize the faults of the mainstream drag scene and consequently find other avenues to accommodate these intersections. Mama Ganuush emphasizes community and solidarity, drawing historical relations between other marginalized communities creating their own spaces in the past, and how the queer community does this in modern times. With this in mind, Mama Ganuush shares,

But there are safe places that you start making. So you kind of make your own space when you don't find yourself safe in the more common space which is also part of our culture. (...) And that also makes you feel your own coven or your own safe place or your own ghetto, basically, similar to any other minority in the history, like Jewish minorities taking care of themselves in ghettos in Europe, Arab minorities doing the same in Portugal, like this is, think about it in a queer trans perspective, we build our own ghettos or safe places. The places that are now mainstream used to be the safe places for maybe a different generation in the past and it became mainstream. So we build our own. So yeah, I mean, like it is ridiculous, but at the same time, it's not that sad because we got to make something really cool in ours. But I feel bad for like people who don't have access to this or this community, and they want to go to a safe place. And if you're a person of color, if you're disabled, if you're trans, if you're a queer woman, if you're a queer fat person, if you're a trans fat person, that's not a very safe place. Like, so, you know, what I mean is like, I feel like there's a lot of, gay identity and gay understanding that people assume it's queer, but it's not (Mama Ganuush 2024).

It is evident that not all “queer spaces” are safe spaces for all queers. When discussing the need for creating their own space, Mondo recited a quote from James Baldwin during our conversation, “The place in which I'll fit will not exist until I make it”. To create their own space, Mama Ganuush founded the collective, Heritage Activists and Liberation Artists (HALA) to support activist artists who are involved in social justice movements. Mama Ganuush started the collective as a space to prioritize and center trans-disabled artists and provide more access, not only in their events, but also more opportunities for other people who are disabled.

Mondo Millions also created The Black Violet Revue, a virtual variety show for BlackQueerDisabled artists. This project has allowed for a safe, accessible space for any Black, Queer, disabled artists who are interested in performing and sharing their talents. In addition to the Black Violet Revue, Mondo also created the Library of Intersectionality, for those in the intersections to find what they need, and an avenue to

address both his creative and academic side. (Mondo Millions 2024) A queer collectivity (Muñoz 2009) has been facilitated by these artists with their communities in mind. Mondo expands on their inspiration from James Baldwin and the founding of their virtual variety show,

I was inspired by that, you know, as a Black queer man. And, and so that's it, that was like sort of the catalyst. And I went with Black Violet Revue because I just, I love the sound of it. We don't have enough shows that are called 'revues' now. So, that felt like it made sense to me and I just, Black Violets are also just very rare, so to speak. So I have the Black Violet Revue, where we are blossoming, we're getting our flowers, we're performing. And I wanted it to be a variety show because I knew that this is not just happening in drag. This sort of exclusionary thing that happens to Black or disabled people, is not just happening in drag, it's not just happening in theater, it is happening all over the place. (...) If this is my situation here in my city where I'm not planning on moving anywhere else, but it's my life right now, then I need to figure out how I am able to continue to create. How do I keep moving forward and making art and being in a community with other people when my local community was not as supportive as it needed to be in that regard? Regarding my accessibility needs, regarding ableism, not even getting started on the other issues, like being referred to as a lady, even when I'm in drag, that type of thing. (...) There's like, all these different components there. But that's why I started The Black Violet Revue because I wanted to create something that was actually accessible. And because this was also during the middle of COVID, it made even more sense to do this as a virtual show. And I was like learning from these past experiences, the need for the accessibility and the safety as well. In addition to the need for something that was queer. So I needed something that was like, you know, accepting of my race, accepting of my sexuality, accepting of my disability, all of my disabilities. And I was like, I can't find anything like that right now (Mondo Millions 2024).

Mondo emphasizes the point of creating a space that is accepting of all their identities and the need for safety and accessibility in the scene. Founding The Black Violet

Revue has allowed Mondo to create an equitable space that was not achievable in the mainstream drag scene. He shares the symbolism behind his naming of the show and how the drag scene had not met his needs in the past. He further reflects on his intersectionality and the impact of creating this show,

These are things I've personally experienced, like that conflict between survivability and financial accessibility, and my disability, my blackness, my queerness, like all these things being in the intersection, and then realizing that it's okay that we've carved out the space for ourselves. Because we need this, we need space that we can create, where we're like showing people that we value ourselves. They should value us too (Mondo Millions 2024).

Creating one's own space to feel valued is not a new concept for the queer community, but has been an important aspect of being a drag artist as the "minority of a minority of a minority," (Mama Ganuush 2024). Mondo and Mama Ganuush both iterate the fact that it is okay that they have had to carve out these spaces for themselves, as it is a concept that is all too familiar to individuals who experience multiple simultaneous oppressions. With their intersectional identities in mind, these artists have implemented their queer collectivity (Muñoz 2009) to create spaces that address their needs and unique experiences as disabled QTPOC drag artists. The next section discusses how these artists have created their own spaces to ensure full participation and inclusion for performers within these intersections.

### **3.2- Queer Futurity- Creating Utopia**

I propose utilizing Muñoz's concept of "queer futurity" by applying it to the United States drag scene and how we can make queer spaces inclusive, accessible, and equitable, for all participants. Mama Ganuush and Mondo Millions have both provided their perspectives on how to create a space that encompasses an accessible and inclusive environment. Sharing their ideas on creating space, current barriers in the scene, and possible remedies, Mondo states,

You have to create the space in order for people to feel welcome in it. If a space does not have a lot of POC, trying to engage with it, trying to work there, trying to perform there, that's for a reason. People don't have access to it. If no disabled people are showing up, performing, etc. That's for a reason, usually because the space is not accessible. Not to mention, a lot of disabled people aren't able to be in these loud spaces for extended periods of time. So that also means coming up with other options. Like, you know, maybe you have an event at a park, where it's like a little more open air. So the sound escapes instead of echoing, you know, all these different ways that we can make our world a little more accessible. (...) there's a lot of ways that we really could make drag more accessible because it's straight up, not right now. And it should be something where we're able to actually facilitate this inclusion, but it's also, it's very much a financial thing. We don't have the money for interpreters. The most accessible venues are usually the most expensive. Like, it's like, God forbid, like if you're someone who can't have alcohol and you're getting paid in a drink ticket. Little things like that across the board (Mondo Millions 2024).

Efforts towards making spaces inclusive and accessible can be large and small, from booking outdoor venues to providing equitable pay, these steps can urge the drag scene to become more of a “queer utopia” for all. Mondo shares some ideas on measures we can take to ensure accessibility and inclusivity in drag shows such as written components, providing more Deaf-centric events, and hiring individuals that are part of the community to implement a nuanced perspective,

I think adding more written components like would be helpful, as well as actively trying to help more deaf-centric events period, even if it's just this event has an interpreter, you know, like having more events with interpreters and opportunities for queer interpreters specifically, because there's not that many queer interpreters. They have a much more innate understanding of, you know, different signs that the queer community might use, compared to the, like cisgender heterosexual members of the deaf community. We have different language, we have different energies, so to speak. Also, having more visual

cues, more people who are willing to kind of, willing to like facilitate interpreters because interpreters, are expensive and most people do not individually have the funds to do that. It's like this creates this sort of nuance for deaf queer, like performers like myself who are doing drag and we're also still navigating all the things that queer people navigate, we navigate all the things that deaf people navigate, and then mixing that into a scene where we're often very isolated creates this sort of perfect storm where people like me end up having to make something totally different, separate in order to be seen at all (Mondo Millions 2024).

Mondo iterates how falling into these intersections has created barriers to full participation for them and their community. They touch on Kuppers' notions of visibility (2001) and how an inequitable space further makes disabled QTPOC performers invisible in the drag scene. Providing accommodations and centering disabled QTPOC voices are just a couple of avenues to be taken to ensure inclusion and visibility in the scene.

Mama Ganuush further shares how we can make these spaces more inclusive for disabled QTPOC performers, emphasizing education, understanding what disability means, solidarity, and activism as avenues to create equitable safe spaces for artists and audiences,

First up is educating. Education is so important and it just makes it less stressful for us to have to explain it to people. So I feel like self-education and asking questions from the community that you know is important about, like, what does it mean to be, what does it mean to provide equitable access and what does it mean to, what does it mean to be a disabled person? What does disability mean? Because some people don't understand what disability means. They think it's disability, they don't understand neurodivergence for example, and a few other things. And also understand what accessible means. The second one is taking action against places or institutions that do not, like, promote equity or try to change or have their own reasons not to change. That's something like boy coting, divestment and sanction is really specific for like any colonial project,

but also remembering that on a local level, provide an accessibility for drag artists and educating yourself on accessibility, but also on a broader level understanding what does it mean to be equitable not just for the local drag artists and disabled, for everyone else around the world and making sure that this is part of your mission is to make sure that everyone is looked upon as equal and everyone has access to their rights and advocating for places and artists who promote that and asking others who are not promoting the right questions of why they're not promoting and trying to educate them (Mama Ganuush 2024).

While Mama Ganuush shares the potentials of making an equitable space and measures we can take to ensure inclusion and safety in the drag scene, Mondo elaborates on how they have personally taken steps to make an accessible show in the past. They found avenues to make the space accessible without affecting the show's aesthetics. They set up a transcription for the event with captions projected on one of the walls, they offered non-alcoholic drinks, water, multiple kinds of seating, and had masks available for further safety. They share that it was not an easy task but it was worth it in order to create a space where other disabled people felt welcomed. When sharing insight on this event with me, Mondo said,

Like it was possible. It was a lot of work, but it was possible. And people appreciated the work that we put in for making this event. Like if we had more masked events, more disabled people would go. If people want more spaces where disabled people are welcome, they're going to have to mask up, or they're going to have to actively create spaces or situations where people wear masks, they're going to have to create situations where there's sliding scale, so on and so forth. We really have to think about all of these different components. I really do think people should expand how they think about these types of things (Mondo Millions 2024).

This was one instance in which Mondo was able to create an inclusive and equitable in-person space, for the benefit of all attendees and performers. Not only have they taken measures to make in-person shows accessible, they also share how they have

taken steps to personally make The Black Violet Revue easily accessible for all performers,

For The Black Violet Revue, some things that I purposefully and intentionally chose to do to make this different are, one, the application. Like, if you fill this out and get me all this information, that is super critical to me being able to support the performer, if you're willing to participate and put together your piece and send it in, then you are in. I'm not gonna make you jump through unnecessary hoops. Are you able to turn in something? Are you black, queer, and disabled? Simultaneously, all three. But like I make sure they turn the application, they turn in the piece. I have us do a video call, so we can speak face to face at least once, and so they can see who they are actually working with and trusting with this. So I'm building that trust. I'm making that entry process as easy as possible. I work with people in terms of their preferred communication modalities, you know, Instagram versus email versus maybe you don't want to be in a group chat. And then the entire actual show is captioned all the way through. I am working on like applying to grants so that we'll be able to pay for an ASL interpreter, a Black Queer interpreter and hopefully disabled interpreter to be able to ASL interpret the entire show. And all of our past ones as well. And then on top of that, the proceeds, all of the ticket sales, outside of whatever fees the hosting organization takes out, like, we keep all of the proceeds, and those proceeds are split equally and evenly throughout all the performers for that show. And that includes me. I don't take an external cut or anything like that (Mondo Millions 2024).

Mondo shares how making small changes such as creating an application that is not demanding, communicating through preferred avenues, and providing equal pay has made The Black Violet Revue an easily accessible and inclusive space for disabled, Black, queer performers.

Mondo describes The Black Violet Revue as “a Virtual Variety show that showcases BlackQueerDisabled performers. It is accessible for all and can be watched from the comfort of your own home. This show is made independently by



BlackQueerDisabled performers in an activist act to demonstrate what is possible when accessibility and intersectionality are considered,” ([blackvioletrevue.anywhereseat.com](http://blackvioletrevue.anywhereseat.com)). This space allows performers visibility without compromising their unique needs as individuals within the intersections of being Black, queer, and disabled.

Mama Ganuush and Mondo Millions both reveal the potential of queer futurity (Muñoz 2009) in the United States drag scene. While they have created their own spaces due to societal constraints put forth by their intersectional identities, they offer resolutions on making the drag scene inclusive and accessible for all. Founding their own spaces such as HALA, The Black Violet Revue, and The Library of Intersectionality have allowed Mondo Millions and Mama Ganuush to create their own “queer utopias” where they have addressed needs for safety, accessibility, acceptance, and emphasize the need for community and collectivity to make these spaces what they have imagined.

Through watching the Black Violet Revue’s virtual shows, and exploring HALA’s projects, it is evident that these artists have utilized their intersectional identities to create spaces that accommodate and address the needs of their own identities as well their communities’ needs. I argue that the creation of these spaces enriches Muñoz’s concept of queer utopias by proving a utopian space can be made with the support of queer collectivity, but emphasizing the fact that there is always work to be done to maintain this utopia, supporting Muñoz’s point that queerness is still on the horizon.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

In the first chapter, 'Introduction,' I guide the reader through my construction of this project, outlining my research questions, methodology, supporting literature on the topic, and the theoretical frameworks I utilized. Chapter two, 'Navigating the Scene,' exposes the first-hand experiences of two disabled QTPOC drag artists in California, USA and how they navigate the mainstream drag scene in these unique intersections with multiple marginalized identities. In chapter three, 'Creating Space,' I explore how these artists have utilized their intersectionality and how this experience has pushed them to create their own spaces within the mainstream drag scene in order to better support every aspect of their identity.

Drawing on the theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), cruising utopia and queer futurities (Muñoz 2009), invisibility/ hypervisibility (Kuppers 2003), and genderfucking (Reich 1993), conversations with disabled, queer, trans, performers of color expose the complicated nuances that these artists face in the United States drag scene. I apply Crenshaw's theory of embodying multiple marginalized identities and argue that it provides both constraints and potentials for these artists. As disabled performers, they innovate their routines to showcase something new to the audience such as belly-dancing and performing sign language. They share with us how they navigate the representational conundrum of being both invisible in society as disabled individuals, but hypervisible as disabled performers (Kuppers 2001), while highlighting how the drag scene is outright inaccessible. The artists have provided us practical applications on how to make these spaces accessible for disabled and non-disabled performers alike.

Further, these artists iterate the importance of addressing all aspects of a person's identity, as these simultaneous oppressions are inseparable and create distinct life experiences (Crenshaw 1989). They also expose the drag scene to be a place that is "cruising utopia," (Muñoz 2009) and a need for carving out their own spaces to create their own "queer utopia" (Muñoz 2009). With their queer collectivity (Muñoz 2009), these artists were able to build their own safe spaces with their communities in mind. HALA, The Black Violet Revue, and The Library of

Intersectionality have allowed these artists and their communities to form a space that addresses the needs of every aspect of their identity.

Drawing on feminist disability theory (Garland-Thomson 2002), I reiterate the importance of including disability as an intersection of analysis in feminist theory. Incorporating disability as an additional identity intersection has provided a richer, deeper, and more nuanced perspective in discussing performance art through an intersectional feminist lens. Addressing disability has allowed us to reveal how systems of inequality interlock and influence the realities of the United States drag scene. The intersectional identities of these performers have allowed for an enriched perspective on academic discussions regarding disability and intersectionality in queer performance spaces.

This study not only highlights the challenges and innovations brought by disabled QTPOC drag artists but also emphasizes the necessity of inclusive practices in all drag performance spaces. The insights gained from these artists' experiences underscore the critical need for ongoing advocacy and structural change to ensure that all aspects of a person's identity are respected and accommodated. By expanding our understanding through the lenses of feminist disability studies and intersectionality, we move closer to creating a truly inclusive and equitable society where every individual's multifaceted identity is recognized and celebrated. This work contributes to a growing body of literature that challenges traditional narratives and promotes a more inclusive understanding of performance, identity, and community in the contemporary cultural landscape.

This research contributes to the field of feminist scholarship by providing an analysis of the implications of navigating the drag scene in the United States with multiple intersectional identities. This work exposes the intersections of race, gender, ability, and sexuality and how this influences the life experience of drag artists falling into these intersections. Previous scholarships provide analyses of drag performances, and disability representation in performance arts, but there is little written about embodying multiple intersecting identities and how these identities impact navigating the drag scene. I emphasize the importance of highlighting disability as an identity

intersection for analysis, as disabled identities are not often incorporated in feminist analysis, (Garland-Thomson 2002), and educating on disability may aid in inclusion for people with disabilities in spaces where they are deemed invisible, according to the artists interviewed. I hope this project is easily accessible to anyone who is interested in disability and intersectionality in queer performance arts. This piece is intended to be easily understandable to those outside of academia and easily translated into other languages for further semination on this topic. My gratitude goes out to the readers of this piece and my hope is that it will urge academics to utilize disability as an intersection of analysis and intersectionality as a theoretical and practical framework in further scholarships.

## Appendix

### A.1- Interview Questions and Schedule

The interview with Mama Ganuush took place on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April, 2024, at 2:00pm Pacific Standard Time, and lasted one hour and 15 minutes. The interview with Mondo Millions took place on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, 2024, at 2:30pm Pacific Standard Time, and lasted one hour and 30 minutes. The interviews began with informed consent, then I shared information about myself, my project, and how the interview data will be used. I asked the following questions which turned into an open-ended discussion;

1. Can you tell me a little bit about what got you into drag and how long have you been doing it?
2. How does your identity as disabled influence your performance, or does it at all?
3. Do you experience any barriers or ableism in the drag scene?
4. What impact does being a disabled drag artist have on you?
5. How can we, researchers, activists, academics, or the general public, support and promote disabled drag artists?

My original intention was to gather insight into how disability is represented in drag performances, but discussions with these individuals offered numerous other possibilities to explore. Their intersectional identities allowed me to deepen my understanding of the lived realities of embodying intersectionality in queer performance arts, and how multiple systems of oppression intersect and interlock to influence their individual life experiences in the United States drag scene.

## A.2- Artist Biographies

Mondo Vaden aka Mondo Millions (he/they)



*Image description: Mondo is standing partially sideways against a backdrop with illuminated string lights wearing a black blazer with black pants and holding up the “I love you” sign in ASL.*

Mondo Vaden (he/they), known as Mondo Millions, is a multidisciplinary artist residing in the Sacramento area of California, United States. Mondo is a DeafBlackTrans Drag King, producer of the virtual variety show *The Black Violet Revue*, a diversity, equity inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) consultant, and the founding librarian of The Library of Intersectionality. Contacts- Instagram: @mondomillions\_official, Email: [mondomillionsofficial@gmail.com](mailto:mondomillionsofficial@gmail.com), The Black Violet Revue website: <https://blackvioletrevue.anywhereseat.com/channel.php>

Mama Ganuush (they/them)



*Image description: Mama Ganuush stands on stage in orange and gold colored belly dancing regalia. One arm is raised above their head and one arm is down behind their back while they look head on into the audience.*

Mama Ganuush (they/them), is a disabled, queer, trans, Palestinian-African drag artist residing in the Ohlone lands of California, now known as San Francisco. They are an artist and activist dedicated to liberation for their communities. They founded the Heritage Activists and Liberation Artists (HALA), a collective dedicated to building projects that amplify calls for liberation and supports social justice activists. Website: [www.mamaganuush.com](http://www.mamaganuush.com), Instagram: @mamaganuush

### **A.3- Feminist Disability Studies Perspectives**

This section outlines my approach to feminist disability studies to provide information on how to best support the disability community, provide insight into disability as an intersection of analysis, and inform readers unfamiliar with disability studies concepts and terminology. As Feminist Disability Theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) points out, “Integrating disability into feminist theory is generative, broadening our collective inquiries, questioning our assumptions, and contributing to feminism’s intersectionality,” (Garland-Thomson 2002, 4). Common themes in feminist studies such as representation, medicalization, societal norms, and the body can be further analyzed through a disability studies lens by drawing parallels between disabled identities and other identities commonly studied in feminist theory including minority genders, races, and sexualities.

Disability is a universal part of the human experience, yet it is not a common intersection of analysis in feminist studies. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the disability community encompasses up to 27% of the American population ([cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov)) and is the world’s largest minority population, according to the United Nations ([un.org](http://un.org)). By incorporating disability as an intersection of analysis in feminist and gender studies we could deepen and expand feminist theory while shedding light on the lived experiences of a community that is still fighting for marriage equality, equitable access to education and employment, livable wages, and numerous other civil and human rights that have been granted to other minority groups decades ago in the Civil Rights Movements in the United States ([ada.gov](http://ada.gov)).

The working definition of disability that I utilize in this paper is from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability. According to ADA, a person with a disability is someone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a history or record of such impairment, or is perceived by others as having such impairment, ([ada.org](http://ada.org)). Disability is a spectrum that includes but is not limited to, conditions such as autism, down syndrome, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, cancer, diabetes, chronic fatigue, mental illness, learning difficulties, sensory difficulties, and



more. In this definition, major life activities are activities most of us participate in every day such as but not limited to; walking, talking, eating, sleeping, breathing, thinking, concentrating, seeing, hearing, learning, and the internal operation of bodily functions, (ada.org).

In disability studies, the medical model and the social model are used as a lens through which we perceive disability. In the medical model, disability is perceived as purely pathological, and the goal is to remedy disability through a “cure” or other interventions, (apa.org). Conversely, the social model frames disability as one aspect of a person’s identity, such as race or gender, (apa.org). From this perspective, “It is this environment that creates the handicaps and barriers, not the disability, [and] the way to address disability is to change the environment and society, rather than people with disabilities,” (apa.org). From my experience, most members of the disability community and disability rights activists tend to align with the usage of the social model of disability, however; there are circumstances in which the medical model can be useful such as seeking treatment for illnesses and conditions that require medical intervention.

#### Utilizing inclusive language for the disability community:

Two forms of language can be used when addressing someone in the disabled community, person-first language (PFL), and identity-first language (IFL).

#### Person first language:

This form of referring to people with disabilities frames disability as an inherent attribute of a person and commonly aligns with notions of the medical model of disability, e.g. “person with autism,” (Best et al. 2022).

#### Identity first language:

This form asserts that disability is not an innate characteristic of the individual, but rather it is societal structures that disable the individual, aligning with the social model of disability, e.g. “autistic person,” (Best et al. 2022)

I have used both person-first language and identity-first language in this paper. Some people with disabilities prefer to be addressed with person-first language, while

others prefer identity-first language. If you are unsure which language form to use when speaking with someone in the disabled community, just ask!

### Common portrayals/stereotypes of PWD (Barnes 1992):

The following list describes historical and contemporary mainstream depictions of people with disabilities in the media and performance arts. I outline these stereotypes to inform readers that by recognizing these notions, we can avoid complicity in perpetuating these stereotypes.

#### *1. The Disabled Person as Pitiable and Pathetic*

Portrayals that encourage pity for the disabled individual to solicit charity so that the non-disabled public can feel bountiful, e.g. Jerry Lewis's MDA Telethon (Barnes 1992).

#### *2. The Disabled Person as an Object of Violence*

These depictions portray the reality of disabled individuals being subject to violent abuse by non-disabled counterparts, contributing to the mistaken belief that disabled individuals are dependent and helpless, hence perpetuating this violence, e.g. eugenics, infanticide of disabled children (Barnes 1992).

#### *3. The Disabled Person as Sinister and Evil*

These images depict disabled individuals as the villain, or the monster, professing the idea that disabled people are inherently evil, e.g. the Hunchback of Notre Dame, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Barnes 1992).

#### *4. The Disabled Person as Atmosphere or Curio*

Instances where disabled people are included in media representations to enhance a certain atmosphere, or to add character to the visual impact of the production, e.g. Freakshows, "Medical Curiosities" articles, (Barnes 1992).

#### *5. The Disabled Person as Super Cripple*

Depicting the disabled individual as having “super” capabilities and highlighting individuals as “overcoming” their disability with extraordinary accomplishments, e.g. news stories about PWD completing marathons, or winning sports events against non-disabled individuals, (Barnes 1992).

#### 6. *The Disabled Person as an Object of Ridicule*

Mockery of disabled people for entertainment purposes, e.g. comedy shows capturing disability as the brunt of the joke, or disabled children being made fun of in school, (Barnes 1992).

#### 7. *The Disabled Person as Their Own Worst and Only Enemy*

Some media portrays disabled individuals as, “self pitiers who could overcome their difficulties if they would stop feeling sorry for themselves,” (Barnes 1992). E.g. the film *Coming Home* (1978)

#### 8. *The Disabled Person as Burden*

This stereotype iterates the view that disabled people are helpless and must be “cared for” by non-disabled individuals, stemming from the notion that disabled individuals’ needs are vastly different than those that are not disabled and that meeting those needs is an “unacceptable drain of society’s resources,” (Barnes 1992). E.g. 1930s German euthanasia propaganda programmes, (Barnes 1992).

#### 9. *The Disabled Person as Sexually Abnormal*

Common depictions portray disabled individuals as sexually impotent, asexual, “unfuckable,” “undateable,” undesirable, or incapable of forming sexual relationships (Rosewame 2016; Barnes 1992). E.g. Homer’s ‘*Odyssey*’, Marilyn French’s ‘*Bleeding Heart*’, (Barnes 1992).

#### 10. *The Disabled Person as Incapable of Participating Fully in Community Life*

Disabled people are rarely shown as integral or productive members of society, feeding the notion that disabled individuals are inferior and emphasizing the need for

segregation, (Barnes 1992). E.g. In the 2021-2022 season of broadcast television in the United States, only 2.8% of all characters were disabled, (Stoll 2023).

Understanding the working definition of disability in the United States and using appropriate language when communicating with disabled individuals is a step in the right direction for inclusion for the disabled community. Further, with these common stereotypes and depictions outlined in mind, highlighting the realities of disabled performers tears down common notions put forth by mainstream discourses surrounding disability.

## **A.4- Resources**

Disability Justice Centered Shows:

<https://www.instagram.com/blackvioletrevue/>

<https://www.instagram.com/thrive.ds/>

<https://www.instagram.com/disabledcable/>

<https://www.instagram.com/disabledelightdc/>

<https://www.instagram.com/disabiliteasefestival/>

<https://www.instagram.com/grippysockburlesque/>

<https://www.instagram.com/thathandsync/>

Get involved in the disability community:

<https://www.disabilityrightsca.org/>

<https://www.disabilityresources.org/>

<https://nda.ie/participation-in-society>

<https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/>

<https://wid.org/>

<https://worlddisabilityunion.com/>

Intersectionality in practice:

[https://opportunityagenda.org/messaging\\_reports/ten-tips-for-intersectionality/](https://opportunityagenda.org/messaging_reports/ten-tips-for-intersectionality/)

<https://www.womankind.org.uk/intersectionality-101-what-is-it-and-why-is-it-important/>

<https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/blog/what-is-intersectionality-and-why-is-it-important-in-the-workplace/>

QTPOC community support:

<https://case.edu/lgbt/resources/otpocqoc-resources>

<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/diversity/queer-and-trans-people-color-qtpoc-community-resources>

<https://nqttcn.com/en/community-resources-2/>

## **Glossary**

Disability (ADA definition): any condition which substantially limits one or more activities of daily living, (ada.org)

Drag: “a performance art that uses costumes, makeup, and other tools to present exaggerated forms of gender expression to critique gender inequalities and imagine a transformational future where people are truly free in how they express themselves,” (hrc.org)

Feminist Disability Theory: the theory stating that incorporating disability as an intersection of analysis deepens and expands feminist theory, (Garland-Thomson 2002).

Identity first language: the form of language when addressing PWD that puts emphasis on disability as an identity and integral part of the person’s experiences in an inaccessible and ableist society, commonly aligning with the social model of disability, e.g. “disabled person,” (Best et al. 2022).

Intersectionality: the concept of how multiple identities intersect, interlock, and create unique life experiences, (Crenshaw 1989).

Medical Model of Disability: emphasizes disability as a condition in need of a cure, (apa.org)

Person first language: the form of language when addressing PWD that puts emphasis on the person first and disability second, framing disability as simply an attribute of the person, commonly aligning with the medical model of disability, e.g. “person with a disability,” (Best et al. 2022).

Social Model of Disability: emphasizes disability as an identity category through which ableist society and structures disable the individual, (apa.org)

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