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Dragging Us Together: Exploring Media Representations of Drag as Coalition Building and Queer Resistance in We're Here

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DRAGGING US TOGETHER: EXPLORING MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF DRAG AS COALITION BUILDING AND QUEER RESISTANCE IN *WE'RE HERE*

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176 Pages

After decades of being either silenced or portrayed in a villainous perspective, LGBTQ+ individuals are beginning to see more representation on television including shows that feature drag performers. While previous shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Dragula* have been released for several years, *We're Here* offers a new and unique approach to portrayals of drag on television by omitting the competitive aspect of the prior two shows. Analysis reveals that *We're Here* highlights drag as a political tool that can both resist hegemonic standards and create community amongst participants and audience members. A critical lens reveals implications for racialized trauma, anti-queer legislation, and religious influences regarding queer participants on the show of varying backgrounds and intersectional identities.

KEYWORDS: Queer; Drag; LGBTQ+; Resistance; Media; Hegemony; Gender; Community; Coalition Building; Performance

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Throughout my childhood, I always seemed to find an excuse to dress up as a boy. When I was young, all it took was baggy clothes and a strategically placed hat. When I was hurled into puberty, I started experimenting with ace bandages to bind my chest. Twice I used this approach while wearing men's clothes acquired at Goodwill and Walmart, and a third time when my theater coach assigned me a boy's role in our middle school's musical. As a minor, all purchases were at the mercy of my parents, so I took care to emphasize how funny it would be to pull off a realistic Halloween costume or rattle off exaggerated statements on how I needed to really look like a boy to actually pull off my character on stage. While I was lucky in the sense that my mom was willing and financially able to purchase these clothes for me, (and that her love of theater and costuming prevented too much suspicion) research continues to support that continuous barriers to affirming gender presentation for gender nonconforming (GNC) and transgender individuals can increase likelihood of self-harm, suicide attempts, and diagnosis of depression, while decreasing wellbeing, self-esteem, and social support (Erich et al., 2008; Glynn et al., 2016; Hughto et al., 2020; Katz-Wise et al., 2017a, 2017b, Levitt and Ippolito, 2014; Strain and Shuff, 2010).

I had no idea that ace bandages were one of the most harmful binding techniques one can use-- and even if I did, I probably wouldn't have cared; I was thrilled that I could pull off my 'disguise' and shapeshift at will. In the moments where I looked in the mirror and saw myself flat chested for the first time since childhood, I chose affirmation over safety without a doubt in my mind. Now as an adult, I know how to bind safely and take care to do so, but the reality is that transgender and queer individuals are constantly forced to choose between their own physical safety and presenting in ways that affirm them (Bustos et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022;

Peitzmeier, 2017). In addition to documented financial barriers to gender affirming care, many transgender individuals lack trust in healthcare settings because of consistently documented anti queer and transphobic bias that can result in outright denial of not only gender affirming care, but routine mental and physical care (Bradford et al., 2013; Kcomt et al., 2020, 2013; Kenagy, 2005).

It was easy to dispel my fixation on men's clothing as insignificant since I also loved presenting femininely. I spent two hours every morning perfecting my makeup before my 7 a.m. high school classes. I wore a gigantic red ball gown to my senior prom that made me feel dazzling. And yet, dressing femininely felt just as much like a performance as my Wickersham brother costume in *Seussical the Musical Jr*. As a genderqueer individual, I have struggled to locate extensive scholarship on gender queerness, while noticing a trend for a preference for scholarship on trans-ness written by white cisgender scholars; there is a desperate need for more transgender and queer researchers to reduce cisgender straight individuals dominating the narratives of trans and GNC individuals.

My graduate school roommate changed my life when she lent me her copy of *Gender Trouble* (1990) by Judith Butler. Flipping through the pages, I felt like I finally had been granted the key to unlock and understand what gender could mean for me. My exhausting morning ritual started to make sense, as did the dissonance between what I felt and what I wanted others to see. Gender, as I understood it, was a set of man-made rules created to uphold standards that benefited those who created and enforced them; the enforcers then physically and verbally policed transgender and GNC individuals who were deemed not good enough at "doing" their "correct" gender. Butler taught me that gender could be a fluid, dynamic performance, and that I was allowed to perform it in the way I chose to, even if my audience could never fully

understand it. While Butler has been a widely lauded voice in queer studies, and my personal introduction into this area, there are several other scholars who have done and are doing this important research while simultaneously attending to decoloniality and considering the nuances of colonialism's impact on gender in their work. Shinsuke Eguchi, Bernadette Calafell, E. Patrick Johnson, Marquis Bey, and Cathy Cohen, have all played essential roles in expanding my understanding of what gender can mean and the ways it has been curated historically.

Reading these influential works helped me begin to construct what gender meant for me, and how I might occupy space as a gender queer individual. I tried to understand my authentic presentation desires beyond the standardized societal expectations I had been so deeply familiarized with. I would often think back to a memory from undergrad when my professor, unprompted, referred to me in front of the other students using "they/them" pronouns. In a similar fashion to when parents in my fifth-grade class called me a boy, I didn't feel a need to correct him. I wasn't uncomfortable, I was shaken, because during that interaction, I felt affirmed. However, it was confusing to me that this affirmation was felt in multiple scenarios when I was assumed to be multiple different genders. Genderqueerness is both unexpected and misunderstood, with many seeming to think of it as a lack of gender, or a neutral, androgynous (to many: thin and white) presentation. Maybe it was for this reason that 'non-binary' didn't fit me in the way I wanted it to, much like the binder I wore that made it hurt to take a proper breath. I had never truly wished to be *exclusively* referred to as "them". I liked being a girl, I liked being a boy, and I liked being a "them", too. I liked changing my presentation up on a whim, like the drag artists I had come to so deeply admire.

Undertaking a thesis project dedicated to transgender and queer joy and community through drag is close to my heart because of mine and my loved ones' presence in these

communities. After my partner of five years told me he was trans, I wanted to prevent anyone on the outside from tarnishing this revelation that was still new to the world, like a fragile "egg"- a word that, coincidentally, has been used to describe transgender individuals who have not yet come out to themselves (Quest, n.d.) I have always been inspired by my older brother's fearless approach to recreational drag, and we, including my older sister, continue to bond over a shared love for the artform. Through academia, I was able to conduct interviews and surveys with LGBTQ+ individuals and drag performers to better understand concepts like camp and the purposes they serve to the community. Through my network of queers and queens, I know that an attack on gender nonconformity hurts all of us, and that it is essential we stick together and support one another so that we can continue to facilitate queer joy.

Upon receiving my letter of acceptance to serve as a university instructor, I made a promise to myself that I would come out on the first day of every class with my authentic self, not for me, but for any queer students who happened to show up in my classroom (Busch et al., 2022; Cooper, et al., 2019). "This is me, and this is my partner," I said, for three semesters straight. "And this is our cat, Goose, wearing a Blues Jersey." This matter-of-fact approach was my own small attempt to offer my reality as proof to anyone who needed to hear it- *we exist.*

In a culture that demonizes queer individuals, it is essential to push for the normalization and acceptance of queer bodies. Transgender and GNC individuals who possess intersectional identities are at a higher risk of being subjected to physical violence, with Black transgender women being statistically the most likely to be victims of violent or potentially deadly hate crimes compared to other LGBTQ+ identities (Ayhan, 2019; Di Marco et al., 2021; Gortmaker, 2006). It is necessary that we engage in resistance, in both big and small ways, for the citizenship of queer individuals and for the humanization of queer lives. I plan to advocate for drag as a

strategy of resistance in a hegemonic culture in which currently prioritizes dominant group members with white, straight, and cisgender identities.

If the dominant group wishes for queer voices to be silent, out of sight, and out of mind, then uplifting existing queer voices allows the community to not only show support for one another but actively steer us further from the current narrative that queer people don't belong in our society. Queer people are not outliers in a community of 'normal' individuals, but people who have existed throughout history, and will continue to exist into the future (Reid, 2022; Tucker, 2022). Within this thesis, I hope to continue my personal promise to be open and upfront with my own identity to uplift other queer individuals both inside and outside of academia.

To understand the strategies used by queer individuals to navigate life under hegemony, I plan to utilize a critical textual analysis examining the TV production *We're Here,* a series where professional drag queens enter rural American towns and encourage queer participants and their allies to share their stories and perform in a large scale drag show for their local communities. I was compelled to select *We're Here* as my media text due to its distinctive attitude and emphasis on advocacy-oriented style documentary of drag. This approach is unique within mainstream drag-focused television which primarily presents drag as a fashion competition rather than as a self-actualizing event (Campana et al., 2022; Sender, 2023). Because *We're Here* is filmed in a documentary style, it portrays participants in their everyday environments and attempts to show audience members their unique realities. While these portrayals can still be edited and directed by the show's production team, and should not be viewed as entirely accurate, they allow for essential conversations to take place regarding anti-queer discrimination and the impact it has on real participants' lives. In my literature review, I plan to discuss cultural attitudes around queerness in the United States by first introducing the history of drag or drag's genealogy, early

instances of resistance to anti-queer sentiments, locating queerness and transphobia in the United States, and unpacking current categorizations of labels such as transgender and GNC. I also plan to focus on drag as a facilitator of queer joy, community building, and representation. Finally, I will discuss the limitations and strengths of the drag-centered reality television medium as a channel for queer representation.

The episodes I have selected from *We're Here* focus on real life narratives of queer individuals and their journeys of both gender affirmation and self-actualization while simultaneously navigating expectations from their respective traditional communities. The first episode I selected for my analysis focuses on historical racial trauma within Selma, Alabama and its intersection with queerness. This episode is pivotal to understand the intersectional component of queer identity, specifically the lived realities of queer Black individuals in a rural conservative environment. The second episode I have chosen takes place in St. George Utah and showcases the impact of religious culture on perceptions of LGBTQ+ individuals. Choosing to focus on the culture within St. George allows for a discussion on aspects such as social expectations for what families can look like and how white Christian Nationalism impacts queer lives. Finally, I chose to analyze two episodes taking place in Florida which discuss anti-queer and anti-transgender legislation being passed within the state. These episodes were important for me to include as they resist the narrative that LGBTQ+ individuals are dangerous to the public through positive and humanizing representation of these community members. My analysis focuses on drag as a form of connectivity, whether through differing identities in the queer community or connections formed outside of the community, in addition to the power of drag to unite queer individuals with their chosen families. By looking at media representations of drag as a connective tool, I hope to gain a better understanding of how drag can be utilized to bring

communal support to queer individuals while simultaneously serving as a way that they can collectively resist hegemonic standards of gender and sexuality.

While transgender issues are unique and not synonymous with the issues that GNC individuals face, nor synonymous with the issues that drag performers face, as a scholar and genderqueer individual, I understand and acknowledge the nuanced differences between transgender and GNC individuals and drag performers. However, widespread misunderstanding of queerness and its treatment as a monolithic category of 'otherness' in social and political spheres has led me to simultaneously examine the ways in which harm is enacted and resisted on these communities. Furthermore, despite my limited experience dressing in drag, I am a white individual and have never lived as a drag performer nor as an individual who has transitioned. I want to use my role as a scholar to advocate for the queer community, especially individuals with intersectional identities, while also preventing further harm and oppression from being placed upon the communities I aim to advocate for (Alcoff, 1991).

Representations of drag are essential in a social climate that treats traditional, cisgender presentations of gender as normal and standard. Drag is, at its core, an artform that focuses on defying traditional gender expectations and is an inherent form of resistance to hegemonic standards of gendered roles. Additionally, drag is an inclusive artform that has been built upon the efforts of Black and Brown transgender women (Reid, 2022; Tucker, 2022). Representations of queer people of color expressing joy through the artform of drag is one step toward increased representation for intersectional identities in a media landscape that has and continues to prioritize straight, white, cisgender narratives in television and film.

CHAPTER II: A HISTORY OF DRAG

New York Drag at the forefront of 1800s American Culture

Although drag as a practice cannot be pinpointed to one single instance historically, it has been a staple of human culture for centuries (Egner & Maloney, 2016; Hillman, 2011; Robertson, 2018; Rupp & Taylor, 2003). Shakespearean plays, for instance, utilized men dressed as women not only to incorporate women's roles on the stage during a time when women were barred from doing so, but for stage characters to be recognized engaging in drag in their fictional narratives (Robertson, 2018). However, modern American drag and ballroom culture is rooted in the efforts of the Black and Brown queer individuals of New York City. As a drag hotspot in America, Harlem saw a sharp uptick in commotion surrounding drag events occurring during the 1920s and 30s Harlem Renaissance (Chauncey, 1994; Hughes, 1940,).

As a former predominantly white neighborhood, Harlem saw changes in the twentieth century following the Great Migration and the endeavors of real estate agent Philip A. Payton, who swayed tenants and homeowners to move in after countless Black individuals were displaced following the construction of Penn Station (Goodman, 2023). As a result of these factors, "Harlem also became the city's beating heart of Black queer life, drag included" (Goodman, 2023).

Much of the documentation of early balls focuses on events held in Harlem's Hamilton Lodge, which began hosting the annual Masquerade and Civic Ball, now known as the Hamilton Lodge Ball, in 1869 (Abram, 1939; Stabbe, 2016). The "Odd Fellows Ball" was hosted by the Black fraternal organization Grand United Order of Odd Fellows and was labeled by some to be "the most unusual affair to be held in Harlem" (Abram, 1939, p. 16; Goodman, 2023). The primary purpose of this specific ball was to create a space for the Black community to celebrate

and gather, with many Black female and male "impersonators", as they were called at the time, taking center stage (Abram, 1939; Goodman, 2023). At some periods in history, terms like "drag queen" could be used to refer to transgender women, but it was also common for queer cis men and women to participate in dressing in drag (Goodman, 2023).

Balls such as the Hamilton Lodge ball were more publicized and attracted massive crowds of both queer and straight, cis patrons, and allowed for gay, lesbian, transgender, and gender nonconforming individuals to both participate in and view the performances. After performing for the crowd, the costumed competitors would receive rankings on their presentations (Reid, 2022). Performers would be judged by fellow LGBTQ+ community members and would be given a chance to take home a trophy, and along with it, pride and status within the ballroom community.

A Racial Divide Within the Ballroom

Although there has been significant attention paid to the Hamilton Lodge balls, ballroom and queer culture as a whole permeated the district of Harlem. In 1925, the Lodge ball became known as the "Faggots ball" and grew more apparent to the public eye amid the renaissance (Inter-State Tattler, 1925; Stabbe, 2016). Most balls were intentionally organized as underground events since the Black and Latina transgender or gender nonconforming individuals who facilitated them needed to avoid legal intervention and violence (Reid, 2022; Tucker, 2022). As the shows grew in popularity, white patrons began to increase in attendance. The more white patrons attended the balls, the more the cost of the boxes to watch the performances would increase (Mystery Veils, 1936). As a result, the balls would at times become inaccessible for the Black residents of Harlem rather than the white audiences who traveled to attend (Jones, 2017). Furthermore, white judges at the balls inside and beyond Harlem were recorded to favor "white,

Eurocentric features" when it came to selecting winners and it wasn't until 69 years after the first ball that a Black competitor won the top prize at the Lodge (Morgan, 2023).

While Harlem and New York as a whole is considered by many to be the birthplace of drag, drag was also seen gaining popularity in other major American cities such as Chicago, and Baltimore during the late nineteenth century (Chauncey,1994). As Chauncey wrote, drag balls engaged individuals from across the entire United states "by bringing thousands together. In a world that disparaged their culture, it was at the drag balls, more than any place else, that the gay world saw itself, celebrated itself, and affirmed itself" (p. 299). Individuals from all over America traveled to see drag shows and revel with straight and queer audience members alike. However, while Chauncey paints an idealistic view of the drag balls in Harlem, racial prejudices were not left at the ballroom doors, and drag performers across the country faced difficult conditions both inside and outside the performance halls.

Swann's Dive into Becoming the First Queen of Drag

Also beyond the confines of New York, drag history was made through the efforts of William Dorsey Swann. A formerly enslaved housekeeper born in 1860s Hancock Maryland, Swann moved to Washington D.C. as an adult and began working a janitorial position at a local college (Joseph, 2021). By the 1880s, the congenial Swann amassed a sizable group of friends and acquaintances, including other gay Black men, and began to organize a type of private event which he called a "drag"; it is suspected that the term "drag" in this case came from a variation of the term "grand rag", which referred to a masquerade ball (Joseph, 2021, p.1). Swann's guests, several of whom were also formerly enslaved men, engaged in festivities such as participating in a cakewalk dressed in feminine attire. Originating from the pre-civil war plantation dance where slaves mocked the mannerisms of European high society through dance

and dress, Swann engaged in the dance to build camaraderie with other queer Black men who utilized the artform of women's attire for competitive presentation (George-Graves, 2018; Joseph, 2021).

Swann was the first documented individual to be identified by other queer individuals (and himself) as a "queen" of the drag, which many believe to be the origin of the modern term "drag queen" (Joseph, 2021, p. 2). Within the context of Swann's circle, this title signified a respected and an admired position in the queer sphere. Swann reportedly began to host balls at his home annually, as documented by his arrest in 1882 for stealing items such as plates and silverware for his many guests. Swann encountered the police soon after when his drag was raided, and "fought officers at the door, preventing their entry long enough for others to escape through windows" (Joseph, 2021, p.2). This event has since been labeled as the "first known queer resistance organization", soon followed by Swann's 10-month sentence when a judge who wished to punish queer activity falsely charged him with "keeping a disorderly house" (p. 2). Swann demanded a pardon from President Cleveland in 1896, which earned him the additional title of "first-known American activist to take legal action to defend the queer community" (p. 2). Cleveland denied the pardon.

LaBeija's Reign and the Construction of Houses

While the 1800s interracial balls were spaces of recognition and expression, they also fell victim to anti-black sentiments and Eurocentric beauty favoritism. As a result, ballroom events evolved over time, eventually culminating into the development of drag "houses" during the 1970s. (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Baker, 2011; Plaster, 2023). The term "house" referred to groups of chosen family members within the queer community who built their homes from the ground up, selecting a drag mother or drag father who would offer mentorship and support for their drag

family members inside and outside of balls (Reid, 2022, Baker, 2011). Several scholars have suggested that the formation of houses was sparked through a Black transgender woman named Crystal LaBeija (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Baker, 2011; Livingston, 1990; Plaster, 2023). LaBeija, a former participant of the Hamilton Lodge balls, was tired of the racism and favoritism at the balls and co-promoted her own ball with Harlem drag queen Lottie (Baker, 2011). The ball was a success, and in the end, the two formed the iconic group, House of LaBeija, with LaBeija operating as the first ever house mother.

Much of the inspiration for drag houses stemmed from an admiration of fashion houses, as seen by Houses Chanel, Dior, and Lauren (Baker, 2011). However, the houses were more than fashionable visuals, they were safe havens. When LaBeija and Lottie utilized their legendary house of LaBeija to distance themselves from the harmful aspects of more mainstream interracial balls, they intentionally sought to create a space where Black queens could express gender nonconformity in presentations beyond the Eurocentric showgirl archetype. The houses were spaces where Black LGBTQ+ individuals could support and care for one another, often living with one another like a biological family. This social support was, and continues to be, essential as many transgender, GNC, and/or queer individuals of color were cut off from the social support of their families in addition to the risks presented regarding violent hate crimes based on identity (Bailey, 2011; Baker, 2011). Today, transgender and GNC individuals are still more likely to experience being disowned or shunned by blood relatives compared to cisgender individuals (Levin et al., 2020).

DuPree, Ninja, and Xtravanga en Vogue

"We went back to another ball in 1979, where I met Willie [Ninja]. Willie was doing his thing, and I was like, what the fuck are you doing? Why are you flapping your arms? And he was doing

like a fly-swatting thing. It was voguing, and I was like, whatever. But then when I started going to the balls I started understanding it more," Hector Xtravaganza, Grandfather of the House of Xtravaganza (in Baker, 2011, p. 32).

The shockwaves following the creation of the first houses spread throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Willi Ninja's House of Ninja and Hector and Angie Xtravaganza's first ever Latin house, House of Xtravaganza, entered center stage during this period (Livingston, 1990, Baker, 2011). Willi Ninja was a gay Black man from Queens who has been recorded as the "grandfather of vogue" due to his immense talent and practiced skills with the dance (Wilson, 2011, Baker, 2011, Herrara, 2012). Voguing as an artform and type of dance rose to popularity in the 1970s and is suspected to have grown out of the ritual of throwing "shade", or "subtly insulting another queen" (Baker, 2011, p. 5). Concepts such as shade persist in modern LGBTQ+ culture and are influenced by Black linguistic culture, as is much of the vernacular associated with the modern LGBTQ+ community (Johnson, 2018). Voguing as a genre requires talent and immense physical control; it serves as a form of gender subversion while remaining a major aspect of queer Black culture.

While there are many possible origin stories for the creation of voguing, credit must be given to Paris Dupree, drag mother of the house of Dupree, who is said to have coined the term while hosting her annual Paris is Burning Ball (1986) which inspired Jenni Livingston's controversial 1990 film of the same name (Livingston, 1990). A DJ for the vogue community, David DePino, reported: "It all started at an after-hours club called Footsteps on 2nd Avenue and 14th Street, Paris Dupree was there, and a bunch of these black queens were throwing shade at each other. Paris had a Vogue magazine in her bag, and while she was dancing, she took it out, opened it up to a page where a model was posing and then stopped in that pose on the beat. Then

she turned to the next page and stopped in the new pose, again on the beat. The provocation was returned in kind," (Baker, 2011, p.5).

Voguing evolved into a faster, more stylized dance, and began to enter more mainstream white culture in the 1980s and 90s, with a boom in popularity garnered from Madonna's 1990 song "Vogue", which featured members of the house of Xtravaganza in its music video such as Jose and Luis Xtravaganza. When Madonna profited from the voguing scene and hired the Xtravaganzas to "choreograph and assist her" in her 1990 Blond Ambition World Tour, many individuals competing in specific voguing categories in the underground ball scene were once again reduced to a form of spectacle for white audiences (Baker, 2011; Chatzipapatheodoridis, 2017, p. 8; Goodman, 2023; Herrara, 2012; Livingston, 1990). While a few queens were able to break into the mainstream through Madonna's work, scholars believe her actions harmed the queer community by utilizing Black and Latino queer culture as an accessory to put on and take off when convenient and no longer marketable (Baker, 2011; Chatzipapatheodoridis, 2017; Herrara, 2012).

According to Tommy LaBeija, the introduction of voguing had a social impact on the nightclub scene in New York. LaBeija stated in an interview with Chantal Regnault in 2011 that "the voguing and femme queens revived the club scene. Before it was gay clubs and straight clubs. Now we all party together. I think the ballroom community shaped the mainstream today. It was liberating," (Baker, 2011, p. 117). In 2023, contemporary performances of drag often either continue to outright incorporate vogue dance movements or rely heavily on vogue-inspired movements. One show-stopping move for drag performers, now called a death drop, consists of a performer creating the illusion of falling to the floor with one leg extended in a practiced way.

This move however, was originally called a dip and was one of the main components of voguing.

Category Is…

During the 1970s and 1980s, vogue was accompanied by the formation of many additional competition categories within the ball stratosphere; in contrast to the showgirl-esque or homonormative nature of the early Hamilton Lodge Balls, the newer categories created more space for participants of varying gender identities to express themselves (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Baker, 2011; Chatzipapatheodoridis, 2017; Goodman, 2023; Plaster, 2023). Popular examples include categories like “butch queen”, “femme queen”, “butches”, “drag queens”, “butch realness”, or “femme queen realness”. Each category would reflect specific guidelines on how to embody one’s presentation; If one were to compete in a “butch queen realness” category, for instance, they would need to be a gay man would typically be expected to try to “pass” as a straight individual from their assigned gender at birth. Terms such as “butch queen” referred to cis gay men who dressed in drag, whereas a femme queen referred to a transgender woman. “Butch realness”, on the other hand, would refer to a cis butch woman passing as a cisgender man. Prior to 1975, there was no distinguished difference butch and femme queens, and the term “drag queen” was used interchangeably for trans and cis queens (Baker, 2011, p. 60). Crystal LaBeija, for instance, would have, at the time, been referred to as a femme queen rather than a transgender woman. Many of the categories formed during this time can actively be seen in modern house ball culture, with categories inclusive of both cis and transgender/ GNC men and women as well as “OTA” (Open To All) category, in which anyone regardless of gender identity can present (House of Luna, n.d.).

Drag balls, even in the 1800s, strove to be inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ community members, especially queer individuals of color. While drag ball culture has often been appropriated, commodified, and influenced via white audiences, the underground nature of the balls has persevered and created environments for LGBTQ+ individuals living within metropolitan environments to express their gender and sexuality among like-minded audiences. One of the most important aspects that influenced the underground nature of the balls was the fact that drag has been historically criminalized, with modern examples continuing this harmful legacy and continuously targeting transgender and GNC people of color (Boone, 2022; GLAAD, 2023). While drag balls such as the Harlem Lodge balls brought opportunities for community members to come together and compete through pageants, house balls created distinct structures to protect and provide found family for performers who were not born into families that accepted their identities. Without trailblazers in the world of drag such as Swann, LaBeija, DuPree, Ninja, the Xtravaganzas, and countless others, modern conceptions of drag and drag balls would not exist. Drag has been and will continue to be an artform that strives to bring together and create community for LGBTQ+ individuals, because we are and have always been stronger together.

Early Instances of Resistance to Anti-Queer Sentiments

The practice of dressing in clothing separate from one's socially ascribed gender identity has been consistently attacked by "preachers and polemicists" throughout history, from nineteen-year-old Joan of Arc's 1431 death at the stake by the Inquisition of the Catholic church for her refusal to stop wearing men's clothing to the documented punishments of women breaking gendered expectations in Elizabethan era England (Feinberg, 1996; Howard, 1998, p. 418; Robertson, 2018,). In Renaissance England, the enforcement of gender presentation was

enforced by the royal family but also by the social order and expectations at the time (Howard, 1998).

Later, during the Victorian era, theater enthusiasts Thomas Boulton and Frederick Park made headlines after being placed under arrest for "crimes of fashion" following their departure from a public performance in women's clothing. The two men had been scrutinized by police for a period leading up to their arrest and would often attend performances either in full cross-dressed attire or with more subtle components such as men's clothing with makeup and pink gloves. Despite protests from the theater's manager, the men persisted in their practice of breaking gender presentation expectations; the danger they faced was a direct result of failing to fully "pass" as women, although they were recorded to do so several times successfully (Carriger, 2013). Although there was no concrete proof following an extremely invasive test, Boulton and Park were eventually imprisoned for conspiring to engage in sodomy, as it was common in England for individuals to face imprisonment for years or as a life sentence as a result of being exposed as a homosexual (Carriger, 2013; Robertson, 2018). For the court, the "offense" of men wearing women's fashion in public was a direct indication that the men were engaging in homosexual practices.

This legal standard of criminalized homosexuality and gender presentation was further perpetuated in American historic culture. American middle-class culture during the nineteenth and early twentieth century marked a shift where romantic friendships amongst men "began to be stigmatized as homosexual" and "hetero-homosexual binarism" began to emerge in medical discourse (Chauncey, 1994, p. 199-120). Backed by the law, medical professionals, and religious standards, negative attitudes regarding homosexuality and gender nonconformity as such

contributed to the labeling of drag balls as illegal and immoral by straight cisgender America (Stabbe, 2016).

Social Perceptions of Morality Influencing the Law

While balls grew in popularity during twentieth century America, they were very much still illegal and considered religiously and socially immoral by mainstream society. In 1916, a variety of different balls were investigated often by a "moral reform organization" called the Committee of Fourteen (Stabbe, 2016, p. 1) The Committee described the ball scene as filled with "male perverts" dressed in women's clothing, eventually submitting 130 reports ordering that such immoral behavior cease at once (p. 1)

The subversion of traditional gender expectations seen by the queens and kings at the balls garnered outrage from audiences such as the Committee of Fourteen. Keenan and Hot Mess (2020) reference Foucault (1977) in their assertion that "from their inception, institutions within the modern nation-state-- the medical clinic, the courthouse, the asylum, the prison, and the school among them- have established and policed the borders of gender" (Keenan and Hot Mess, 2020, p. 4) The ways in which gender has historically been socially policed is reminiscent of Foucault's work regarding the panopticon, through which individuals are controlled by the ever-present knowledge that their behavior is being watched by those with power. To a marginalized individual like a drag performer, existing in public means being constantly scrutinized; one mistake and they risk being "othered", or excluded from the rest of society (Morley, 1995). When laws targeting drag are held in place, whether by a monarch, President Cleveland, or a police office, they have the power to shape the ways in which society views the ethical implications of gender presentation.

Early Examples of Anti-Drag Rhetoric

As demonstrated through the burning of Joan of Arc, the imprisonment of Boulton and Park, and the call to reform "perverted" drag events, the separation of church and state has rarely come to the rescue of queer, transgender, and gender nonconforming individuals. Instead, the church has used homosexuals and gender nonconformists as an example of immoral and sinful behavior that should be punished (Carriger, 2013; Howard, 1998; Pellegrini and Jakobsen, 2004; Stabbe, 2016). In Foucault's (1978/1990) *The History of Sexuality,* he notes "The Christian pastoral prescribed as a fundamental duty the task of passing everything to do with sex through an endless mill of speech. The forbidding of certain words, the decency of expressions, all the censoring of vocabulary, might have been only secondary devices compared to that great subjugation: ways of rendering it morally acceptable and technically useful (p. 21). In this sense, the church was able to successfully harness their social control to regulate the ways in which sex was discussed and perceived in society. As a result, sex was confined to a heterosexual marriage context, and the church deemed any sexual activity outside of this context to be immoral; with the limited means to discuss sex, it became difficult for individuals to conceptualize sex outside of this controlled view.

Another way in which dominant society maintained the narrative around sexuality and gender was through the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Homosexuality was not removed from the DSM until 1973, the same year in which a new disorder named Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood was added in reference to transgender or gender nonconforming children (Sedgwick, 1992). Labeling homosexuality and gender nonconformity as mental illnesses directly influenced the conversations and attitudes

surrounding these realities, providing more power and opportunities for legislation for mainstream society while pathologizing and dehumanizing LGBTQ+ community members.

The history of gender is rooted in capitalism and white supremacy, two additional methods of obtaining social power and exhibiting control. Bhattacharyya (2018) introduces a term called racial capitalism which demonstrates the mutually establishing relationship between racism and capitalism. She states that "racial capitalism describes a set of techniques and a formation, and in both registers the disciplining and ordering of bodies through gender and sexuality and dis/ability and age," (p. X). This intentional discipline of gender goes against the ideology that gender is inherent and furthers my point that gender is policed and constructed for the benefit of the dominant culture rather than it being something that occurs naturally.

To Be Unseen Is to Be Loved

Because of the punishments for being outed or caught in drag, underground balls were an essential component when it came to achieving a sense of support and self-expression for Black queer individuals. Outside of the balls, queer individuals of color were completely pushed to the margins of society, with intersectional marginalized identities that made their persecution unique from cases such as the wealthy white Boulton and Park. Queer individuals of color experienced and continue to experience a unique reality that operates beyond the reality of a Black individual and the reality of a queer individual; the experience that is unique to those who are from both identity groups (Cho and Crenshaw, 2013; Deas and Mina, 2022).

Keeping the balls hidden from the public was an essential prevention technique as the white majority in major cities had proven repeatedly, such as in the case of Swann's home invasion by police and his subsequent imprisonment, that American leaders and citizens were prepared to fight against a drag-inclusive or queer-inclusive country legally and socially (Bucker,

n.d.; George, 2021; Reid, 2022). Maintaining the secrecy of the balls took great care, especially as the events involved significant crowds and incorporated music and dance. One of the main strategies used to prevent detection from the law was to hold the balls in the early hours of the morning.

As Kevin Ultra Omni, founder of the house of Omni, recounted,

> "I gave my next ball at the Hotel Diplomat, on 43rd Street between 5th and 6th. I knew I was never going uptown to give a ball in Harlem. Not because I didn't appreciate the Harlem Renaissance or my roots, I just didn't like that 4 o'clock, 5 o'clock lifestyle. It almost felt to me like it was as if gay people shouldn't be seen, so let's go out into the wee hours of the morning and play around and do our thing, then run back home before people can see us. I think it was a little safer for some of the drag queens back then, because they liked coming out when it was dark," (Baker, 2011, p. 61).

While it is documented that drag queens during the Harlem renaissance would walk in their attire in public, this does not mean that it was safe for them to do so (Baker, 2011). Despite what the American law had to say, queer individuals risked their personal safety to live authentic lives and share the joy of self-expression with one another. In this sense, keeping their identities secret through the underground balls and choosing to express themselves openly on the streets of the city were both forms of resistance to the law and to the society that labeled them as perverted immortal beings.

CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW

Racial Trauma in the United States: The Othering of the Black Body

Grappling with identity in a society where race is socially constructed means that it is impossible to separate one's racial identity from the assigned meanings and contexts that have been historically perpetuated and reproduced through media and culture. In regard to existing as a Black member of society specifically, an inherent foundation of intergenerational trauma exists as soon as a Black child is born into the world. From childhood onwards, this trauma exponentiates to varying degrees, and the ways in which individuals cope or function with this trauma can differ vastly. In this review of literature, I want to address some of the different perspectives that scholars have toward Black trauma and analyze the similarities and distinctions of the viewpoints regarding the unique realities of Black authors such as Christina Sharpe, (2016) Sheldon George, (2016) George Yancy, (2018) Ersula Ore, (2019) and Armond Towns (2020). Finally, I will apply this scholarship on trauma and race to discuss intersections of queer trauma.

The intergenerational trauma experienced by Black Americans resulting from slavery in the United States is a reality that is often discredited, overlooked, and minimized. In a country where white cisgender men make up the "dominant" group and maintain control regarding political decisions, media, and finances, Black Americans are consistently classified as members of the "out group" while white Americans retain privileged positions as members of the "in group" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 35). The ramifications of building a society from a foundation of oppression, hate, and *jouissance*-- a word Sheldon George uses in his 2016 text to mean deriving pleasure from another individual's suffering-- are seemingly endless. As out-group members, Black individuals are treated with the sense that they are unnatural and separate from

the view of natural or default human beings. This treatment is one result of structures in place known as patriarchy and white supremacy.

White supremacy is the ideology present in our current culture that is based upon the assumption that the ideas and perspectives of white individuals are "normal, normative, and ideal" while all others are deviant from what is correct or natural (Collins, 1999, p.299). Because of the way in which systems of power are structured and have been structured historically, it is predominantly white men who have controlled the ways that these ideals have been constructed and enforced, and it is masculinity that is societally prioritized as the most ideal (Hoch, 1979). White masculinity, specifically Eurocentric masculinity, is based on concepts of being prosperous financially and in charge, while simultaneously distancing oneself from practices traditionally associated with femininity (Asbury, 1987; Hoch, 1979). It is due to concepts of traditional white masculinity from the hegemonic group that actions such as expressing emotions are given a negative connotation for men as they are seen as a sign of weakness. Because the man's traditional role is to be strong, provide, and protect the nuclear family, threats against traditional (straight and cis) gender and sexuality are seen as an attack on masculinity and a deviation from heteronormative standards, or standards that see only heterosexual relationships as ideologically correct and normal (Yep, et al., 2004).

*Patriarchy***,** or the sociopolitical system prioritizing the power of men, masculinity, and heteronormativity and enforcing the subordination of other identities "requires power on a grand scale and control over the nation's institutions" (Smitherman, 1996, p. 105). The patriarchal enforcement of heteronormativity and white supremacy directly contribute to transphobia and anti-queer attitudes in the United States. *Heteronormativity*, in this case, refers to the ideology that the straight body is the most natural one and all other realities are deemed different so that

those who cannot adhere to heterosexual norms face “discrimination and pervasive inequality” (Morris, 2007, p. 135). Research shows that there have been significant threats, both online and in person, stemming from the heteronormative beliefs of straight white men and sometimes overt white supremacists regarding the safety of drag venues and performances (Boone, 2022, GLAAD, 2023). The perpetrators of these threats share beliefs that drag and gender nonconformity are not only immoral, but are dangerous to minors and has often been linked to accusations of “grooming” or endorsing pedophilia. These claims, which have been perpetuated throughout history, label queer relationships or identities as a form of sexual perversion that can negatively influence children (Hext, 2021). Because drag is seen as a threat to masculinity and the nuclear family, it is deemed immoral and impure, and is often shunned from popular media representations.

The dehumanization of Black individuals stems partially from repeated historical tragedies such as slavery but is reinforced on many different levels in society through the law, the media, and even through the feminist movement, but more specifically, white feminism. Modern structures of feminism, or white feminism, are limiting in that they do not include space, in academia or otherwise, for Black women or women with intersectional identities; This lack of representation has resulted in the emergence of Black feminism (Nash, 2019). Black feminism is intentionally explicit when it comes to the focus on society’s treatment of Black women, including Black queer and transgender women. These identities are excluded in traditional feminist spaces and literature, so it is necessary to clarify that in this work, feminism refers to the belief that all women, not just white and cisgender women, are equal to men and are subjected to the effects of both patriarchy and white supremacy. The construction of white feminism is one example of what scholars such as Hartman (2007), Sexton (2010), Sharpe, (2016) and Wilderson

(2020) have described as the modern ramifications of slavery in the critical framework of Afropessimism.

In Wilderson's (2020) book *Afropessimism*, he discusses the ways in which Black individuals are considered sentient beings, but not human. According to Wilderson, "Blackness and slavery are inextricably bound in such a way that whereas slaveness can be disimbraced from Blackness, Blackness cannot exist other than slaveness," (2020, p. 229). In the latter half of Wilderson's text, he describes the antagonism that Black individuals face from the rest of the population and how this antagonism is unique from other forms of discrimination such as homophobia or misogyny. Wilderon is not saying that these other forms of oppression are not tangible or that they cannot intersect with Blackness, but that the Black experience is not comparable to these experiences on their own. Wilderson notes, "If the antagonism was not between the haves and have nots, as Marx had claimed, nor between the man and the woman, or the gay and the straight (...) but if the essential antagonism was, instead, between the Black and all others, then to free the world was to free the world of me, (p. 311). Here, Wilderson notes his reality in which he is crushed under the weight of a world that wants him gone and would feel less restrained without his presence. He identifies the ways in which slavery has irrevocably impacted our current society in ways that normalize white supremacy in a structural fashion, and further traumatizes Black individuals in America by perpetuating the narrative that violence against Black bodies is a relic of the past. Afropessimists believe that the argument of racial progress is used to dismiss the ongoing trauma and anti-Black violence that still perpetuates the United States where the political structures and dominant societal groups allow for the violence and trauma to continue (Craig and Rahko, 2024).

Towns' (2016) argument comes across as foundational for Wilderson's (2020) as he describes the trauma associated with living in a constant state of survival as the unwanted "other" in society. He clarifies that the perception of Black individuals as an Other is more accurately described as "Others of Europe" who are assigned non-white identities born from racial violence (Towns, 2016, p.77). Towns also believes that the idea of Black identity should not be assigned to individuals, but rather, Black individuals should have the ability to choose their own identities based on how they want to identify themselves. Towns' research strikes a positive balance between acknowledging the past influences of identity and social elements while also granting individuals the freedom to create their own unique identification practices for themselves. Towns' stance gives readers flexibility in terms of shaping their own selfhood, whereas scholars such as George (2016) are more strictly defined in terms of what Black identity could exist as and how to deal with systemic and generational trauma.

George's (2016) perspective is more confined regarding identity due to his proposal that Black Americans should distance themselves from the traumatic history of their country by associating a smaller portion of their identities with slavery. George advocates that using slavery as a link to racial identity can "resignify and politically redeploy race" in a detrimental way (p. 36). This perspective seems to imply that the racial trauma Black Americans have faced at the hand of slavery is something that Black citizens have the capacity to distance themselves from. While it is doubtful this was George's intention, this method does seem to put the responsibility onto the survivors of trauma rather than the perpetrators of said trauma, white Americans.

Ore's approach (2019) is less critical of the practices of traumatized Black Americans than that of George (2016), and she is very mindful of the fact that words with strong historical connotations such as "lynching" can carry weight. I believe that Ore (2019) and Sharpe (2016)

would agree that words such as these can re-traumatize Black Americans, and that it is impossible to forget the past when current society is a constant reminder of how Black Americans are treated as second-class citizens. Sharpe (2016) describes the impact on identity that living in the wake of chattel slavery has delivered to Black Americans and unpacks what it means to exist in what she calls the "zone of non-being" (p. 16). This "zone" achieved its name due to the humanity of Black Americans being completely erased during the inhumane era of slavery in the United States.

Socioeconomic disparities that stem from living in the aftermath of slavery affect Black Americans in extremely physical ways in addition to causing psychological pain, distress and anxiety (Sharpe, 2016). Reduced access to healthcare and living with an increased risk of police brutality are just a few of the factors that contribute to the perpetual trauma that continues today due to the weaponization of Black bodies in America. As Sharpe states in her 2016 text, "We live in the knowledge that the wake has positioned us as no-citizen. If we are lucky, the knowledge of this positioning avails us particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world." (p. 36). Sharpe's outlook of living as a no-citizen stems from feeling unprotected and unwelcome in her country. As a result, she has been forced to reconstruct her identity as someone who lives in an oppressive society and develop a new worldview as a means of survival. It seems that Sharpe's outlook suggests that the present reality in the United States is like a tree that has roots firmly planted in our country's racist beginnings, meaning that Black realities are irreversibly tied to the trauma of the past.

Rather than concurring with Sharpe that living in the wake of slavery has forced Black Americans to reimagine the world with an identity grounded in racist trauma, George theorizes that "the conservation of race by African Americans often masks an effort to conserve the trauma

of America's racial history and shore up a personal sense of being fortified by the apparatus of race," (p. 38). George seems to perceive the wake as a concept with more autonomy over the self, a concept that can be altered by Black Americans' self-perceptions. His work suggests an opposition to the core beliefs of Afropessimism and calls for a complete transformation in the way racial trauma is viewed. While his perspective grants more autonomy to the perception of self, it may also place the blame of "conserving trauma" on those who have been forced to endure it. For this reason, I wish to echo the framework of Afropessimism as I move forward in my analysis on racial trauma in the United States.

The Modern-Day Lynching of Black Bodies

While some believe that lynching is a relic of America's past, it is more accurate to say that lynching has evolved and changed its appearance to exist in modern society. Modern day racism is oftentimes more covert, with perpetrators developing a variety of excuses as to why their actions weren't *really* racist. However, a portion of America still identifies as unashamed white supremacists (Clark et al., 2021). There are an overwhelming number of overt, racially motivated acts of violence against Black Americans consistently perpetuated by the United States police force (Johnson and Edgar, 2024). Despite this, a massive number of individuals fervently support the "Blue Lives Matter" countermovement that was created in direct opposition to the "Black Lives Matter" movement (Dynel and Poppi, 2023). The supporters of Blue Lives Matter inherently contribute to the mob culture that surrounds Black bodies and makes them even more vulnerable to violence and discrimination. This mob culture mirrors that of the aggressive mobs of white civilians that historically sought after Black people and either completely ignored their humanity or made-up falsehoods about heinous crimes that the Black victims committed to justify their actions.

Ore (2019) argues that acts of police brutality, such as the police brutality that resulted in Trayvon Martin losing his life, can be defined as "modern-day lynchings" (p.29). The intense fear that Black individuals experience during moments such as being pulled over by law enforcement, is traumatizing. In her (2019) essay, *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity*, Ore provides a vivid narrative of an event that occurred one night while she was driving and pulled over by a white officer. She notes that she found herself questioning, "How would I convince an Arizona judge that I was in the right? That my dissent was just and legitimate- that I feared for my life?? [...] What leverage did I have? What agency did I have? Who did I know? How would I organize?" (p.14). During this traumatic event, Ore was hyperaware of her lack of societal power when it came to the legal action that could be taken against her as a Black driver with no evidence to prove her word over the white officer's.

In modern U.S. culture, situations where Black individuals are killed by police or white civilians are often labeled as self-defense as opposed to racially motivated crimes or lynching, creating a Fanonian conception of self for white individuals that is blameless and innocent (Towns, 2020). The very idea that self-defense is needed to protect oneself against unarmed Black civilians is rooted in the weaponization of Black bodies which has been used to justify lynching historically. Ore (2019) states that in the U.S., the frequency of lynchings has been continuously used as a tool to measure racial tensions in the country. Therefore, if the very definition of lynching is erased or replaced, then the accuracy of this measurement disappears. Once terms such as self-defense are used as a replacement for lynching, the historical significance of these hate crimes is ignored and the actions may be discredited as police *just doing their job*. On the other hand, when the United Nations established that racially motivated police brutality can be considered lynching, they helped to recognize the act for what it was and

in turn, shape the way that this country views racial relations in the U.S. (Ore, 2019). This action helped emphasize the fact that these officers were committing illegal and cruel acts rather than simply "serving and protecting" the community.

Another aspect of modern lynchings that has persevered in the wake of slavery is the modern-day enslavement that takes place within the prison industrial complex (Lane and Ramirez, 2024; Rios, 2017; Sharpe, 2016). As Lane and Ramirez (2024) affirm, crime control is impacted by racial biases and results in real life consequences such as Black communities being overly policed, more Black Americans than white Americans being frisked, and Black individuals being seen as more likely overall to commit crime. As a result, Black bodies are disproportionately imprisoned and subjected to inhumane conditions within these prisons. After leaving these prisons across the United States, Black individuals are often left with little to no resources when they emerge. They are subjected to labor for miniscule, a reflection of modern-day slavery. As Sharpe (2017) states, "Slavery was not singular; it was, rather, a singularity- a weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances. Emancipation did not make free Black life free; it continues to hold us in that singularity. The brutality was not singular; it was the singularity of antiblackness" (p.152). Ongoing issues such as police brutality and the mass incarceration of Black Americans actively contribute to the singularity of slavery, meaning that the trauma of slavery cannot simply be moved past for Black Americans.

The inability to take up space in society without being barred from privileges that are taken for granted by white individuals, such as eating or working at a restaurant without fear of one's life being taken, is one aspect of trauma endured by Black Americans. Ore (2019) describes how one aspect of lynching is "assumed innocence of the lyncher and the aid of law

enforcement in the lynching, either as active members of the mob or through acquiescence of it," (p. 22). Because this is the case, white individuals are not only protected from the dangerous realities and trauma of living as Black in America, but they can perpetrate sickening illegal crimes and face little to no significant consequences. Once white officers are involved, a population much more favored in the eyes of the judicial system than Black Americans, Black realities are much more likely to be silenced and framed in a negative light in the media.

Stripped of Humanity Through Media

When white Americans are asked their thoughts on race in the U.S., one common answer is that the individual "doesn't see race" or doesn't regard race as a significant factor when interacting with other individuals. However, this perspective comes from a place of privilege stemming from a reality where one's white identity does not need to take up mental space during everyday activities. This is because a large portion of the U.S. still considers white individuals as the standard and other races as members of an outgroup. In contrast, when Black Americans are asked this same question, it is unlikely that they would provide this response as being Black in America is an identity that is not afforded these same privileges. As Yancy (2018) states, "Black bodies share the trauma of trying to be in a world in which their existence is already negated, nullified" (p.150). One factor that influences the overall creation of Americans' perceptions of identity, existence and race is through the media.

Civil Rights Activist James Baldwin mentioned in Peck's (2016) documentary *I Am Not Your N-gro* that growing up he had very little representation in movies and TV, and when he did, he felt it was inaccurate. They were in fact inaccurate, as most movies and TV created in the 1920s through the late 1980s when Baldwin was alive, were directed by white men. Unfortunately, even in 2024, white men dominate the media industry and control the roles Black

actors can play. This results in stereotypes such as the Black side-character who makes witty quips for comedic relief, the Black character who must constantly be tough and aggressive (which coincides with the harmful belief that Black bodies are more immune to pain), and the simultaneous over and under sexualization of Black characters. All these caricatures actively take away individuality and humanity of Black individuals, reducing them to an unfavorable and indistinguishable monolith.

Baldwin (as cited in Peck, 2016) mentioned his frustrations regarding the roles of Black actors such as in Uncle Tom's Cabin, where Tom seems to forgive the white individuals around him who have deeply wronged him. This film seems to send a message to Black Americans that they should comply with their current societal standing and not put up a fight against treatment from white Americans. Black Americans were not given the same privilege to openly fight back and be seen as heroic like Baldwin's childhood idol Gary Cooper, who was seen as brave while shooting Native Americans to death in his films. Because Black Americans were not given the ability to be human in the media, they were relegated back to the zone of non-being. Being stripped of one's humanity in the media is a seed of radicalized trauma as it makes one's existence seem unseen, unheard, and misunderstood.

While media has been produced, it has worked in tandem with the sociopolitical factors that have led the formation of race in the United States. As America witnessed early attempts to legally desegregate the country and the extreme backlash from white individuals who viewed Black individuals as inferior, it was clear that instances such as the severe levels of harassment towards Black students did not take place in an echo-chamber. Rather, the treatment was mirrored to Black Americans of all ages throughout the entire country through television.

Immense trauma was created for Black Americans as they lived in fear of violence against their own lives as well as violence perpetrated against their families, loved ones, and friends.

While we are no longer living in the same period as James Baldwin, the radicalized trauma he experienced is not far removed from the experiences of Black Americans today. Radicalized trauma has not stopped for Black Americans, but the racism that perpetuates it has taken on a modern form. As Baldwin said in Peck's film, "there is no difference between the North and South, just how they castrate you."

Intersections of Queer Trauma

Within the context of Black trauma, the topic of intersectionality provides context for the trauma experienced by Black individuals with queer identities. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, (1989) the term intersectionality was utilized due to a lack of scholarship accounting for the multiple-axis framework that must be considered when referring to individuals with multiple marginalized identities simultaneously operating together. Similarly to Bailey's (2021) *Misogynoir*, Crenshaw uses intersectionality to discuss how the experience of being a Black woman is "greater than the sum of racism and sexism", and that "any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). Because of the societal treatment of Black transgender women and Black queer individuals across the United States, it is essential to utilize an intersectional framework with interacting with these topics. In summary, the experience for Black LGBTQ+ individuals are unique from Black trauma and queer trauma, because it is specifically *Black queer trauma*.

Intersectionality is an essential factor to consider when it comes to analyzing realities of LGBTQ+ members because LGBTQ+ identity is layered and involves the interaction of multiple

spheres that simultaneously exist, including social group and race (Nicholas, 2005, Crenshaw, 1991). Patricia Hill Collins states in *Black Feminist Thought* her concept of a Matrix of Domination which identifies how intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and remain in place (Hill Collins, 1990, Deas and Mina, 2022). It is extremely important to incorporate the fact that Black women, queer Black men, etc., experience a unique reality that is not just a Black person and not just a woman, but another identity altogether and that this identity is reconstructed through sociopolitical control. For this reason, Collins' (1990) scholarship on Black feminism has focused on the ways in which gender, sexuality, and race are enforced in the United States, and a framework of Black feminism is essential to consider when it comes to the focus of society's treatment of Black queer and transgender women. These identities are often excluded in white feminist spaces and literature, so it is necessary to clarify that in this study, feminism refers to the belief that all women, not just white and cisgender women, are equal to men and are subjected to the effects of both patriarchy and white supremacy.

If or when LGBTQ+ members decide to come out, they are intentionally admitting themselves into the out-group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Since the out-group identity is inescapable, it can impact behavior and other aspects of personal identity. A study conducted by Chen et al. (2016) concluded that when it came to perceptions of self, certain aspects of identity were seen as causally related. Based on these results, it seems probable that LGBTQ+ individuals may feel that their identity as gay, bisexual, transgender, etc. can impact other aspects of their self-image. If an individual has been socially taught that their identity is shameful, sinful, or unacceptable, they may suffer from negative self-image and low self-esteem from the trauma of being ostracized societally. LGBTQ+ individuals who have witnessed negative implications associated with their identity may even adopt and share these negative beliefs or communicate

their prejudiced beliefs to others (Haaga, 1991, pp. 172). This type of communication can influence other LGBTQ+ individuals' self- perceptions and perpetuate a cycle of trauma that stems from feeling dehumanized because of one's LGBTQ+ identity. As discussed previously, Black Americans are already systemically dehumanized in the United States. Therefore, using an intersectional lens it is evident that the level of dehumanization Black LGBTQ+ individuals face is critical and has devastating consequences in modern society.

In Orbe's (1998) co-cultural theory, he states that within society there exists a specific group in possession of the greatest amount of socio-political power. This group, known as the dominant group, utilizes different forms of communication to maintain status and retain control over all other groups, labeled co-cultures. In our society, the dominant group is made up of white, straight, cisgender men, but it is possible to be aligned with the power of social structures through one aspect of identity while also being a part of a co-cultural group (e.g., being a cisgender white gay man). Individuals who are strictly members of the dominant group are the most likely to utilize media, legislation, and hegemonic power to ensure that their identities and desires are always prioritized (Yep et al., 2004).

Because whiteness influences the United States' power distribution while anchoring patriarchy and heteronormativity, negative sentiments surrounding queerness are ingrained at a deep societal and political level and often result in physical violence directed towards queer individuals (Côté et al., 2023; GLAAD, 2023; Molina et al., 2019; Stone, 2016). The high levels of hate crimes, mass shootings, or threats directed toward LGBTQ+ individuals across the country are accompanied by data showing that a majority of straight individuals feel that queer individuals should be more private and less outspoken about their identities (Meyer, 2012,

Molina et al., 2019). Because homophobia and transphobia have real world, dangerous implications, queer individuals' expression of identity places them at a higher risk.

Individuals who lack dominant group identities (e.g., a queer transgender Black woman) are most likely to experience discrimination, violence, health disparities, and barriers to education and work (Ayhan, 2019; Di Marco et al., 2021; Gortmaker, 2006; Reid, 2022). These issues are not a coincidence, but a direct impact of living within an environment where the dominant group is given the ability to systematically enforce standards for concepts such as purity, goodness, and morality and dehumanize those that are not deemed as acceptable for these categories (Foucault, 1978/1990). These concepts translate into every aspect of culture, with violence against transgender individuals becoming a fear for 72% of trans respondents in a 2023 GLAAD survey. In addition to fear of violence, LGBTQ+ individuals and especially trans women of color are disproportionately more likely to experience poverty in the U.S. (Yarbrough, 2023). A culmination of societal demonization, systemic barriers to healthcare and basic necessities, and risk of violence also culminates in critical levels of mental health adversities for transgender individuals, with statistics from Austin et al. (2020) stating that 82% of transgender individuals had considered suicide at some point in their lives and 40% had made attempts to take their own lives. These studies all reflect an overall social environment in America which prioritizes dominant group identities and dominant gender expectations over human lives.

To receive support and acceptance in the face of trauma and discrimination, Black LGBTQ+ individuals have formed their own sanctuaries such as the underground ballrooms and through the houses discussed in the genealogy. However, as Wilderson (2020) states, "The possibility of Black sanctuary (...) is by definition, an oxymoron," (p. 216). When Black queer citizens are not considered human, they are not protected with the same rights that white

individuals are, nor are they given equal opportunity to live and exist in their own neighborhoods without a constant reminder that they are seen as "lesser than" members of the dominant culture. I plan to continue my unraveling of the impacts of Black queer trauma through the media in the first section of my analysis.

Representations of Queerness: An Inquiry on What Queer Can Be

Queer scholars have made the claim that due to the sociopolitical oppression and violence, there has been a necessity for the term queer not only as an identity encompassing non-cisgender and non-straight identities, but as an alignment of political action that challenges the hegemonic standards of sexuality and gender (Cohen, 1997, Green, 2016). I believe that utilizing the work from previous queer researchers can supplement my overall understanding of what it means to be queer, and how queer identities can be utilized in society to create social change. For example, Cohen (1997, p. 438) utilizes the concept of queer both as a commonly accepted personal identifier and as politic that can "create a space in opposition to dominant norms" while Green conceptualizes the distinction between being transgender and utilizing the term transgender as a political modifier (2016). Likewise, scholars such as Muñoz (2009) have deconstructed the meaning of queerness as a method of reimagining what the future could look like, stating that "queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world," (p. 1). As such, I plan to utilize *queer* to signal not only "bodies, identities, and enactments that challenge and / or reimagine normative gender and sexual arrangements", but also to refer to a theoretical project which combats heteronormativity (LeMaster, 2015, p. 170).

It is with this dual concept of queer as a personal identity label and queer as political modifier that I plan to proceed in my analysis of drag, queerness, and coalition building in order

to foster a better understanding of how queerness can be a facilitator of connection. While queer can serve as a broad label that encompasses LGBTQ+ identities, trans and queer individuals, for instance, are two separate identities in both the personal and political sense. However, these identities can unite under coalitional queer politics to resist rhetoric spread by hegemonic forces that leads to attacks on queer practices such as drag.

Early Representations of Queerness

With my conceptualization of the term queer, I plan to analyze the current media landscape when it comes to portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals in American digital media throughout the past several decades. As Katherine Sender's (2023) film Beyond the Straight and Narrow: Queer and Trans Television in the Age of Streaming points out, "Television tells us powerful stories about who belongs in our national imagination" (1:23). As a result, when portrayals of queer lives change, so too do the perceptions of the very concept of queer individuals. Research documents that prior to the 1970s and 80s, there was very little queer representation; this reflected the views of the dominant society that was still very much hesitant to mention LGBTQ+ individuals at all (Cook, 2018; Di Marco et al., 2021; Sender, 2023). The representation provided during the 70s and 80s had more queer characters than the 60s, but representations provided were still extremely limited in that they categorized queer individuals as victims of violence of evil villains (Sender, 2023, 5:43). This was partially a result of the Hollywood Production Code, a series of censorship regulations and restrictions on films that was heavily enforced starting in 1934 and wasn't removed until 1968. Because of the values of the religious white, straight, cis men who ran The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) who accepted the code, queer content was effectively scrubbed from

American screens except for the aforementioned portrayals of victims and villains (Leff, 2023, Cook, 2018, Di Marco et al., 2021, Ramsey, 1934).

According to Gross, (2012) by portraying the defeat of queer villains, the dominant narrative further enforced that queer bodies were inferior to straight ones and that their lives must be taken away to eliminate a threat to straight families. Narratives still witnessed today on transgender individuals and GNC individuals have early roots in portrayals of queers during the Production Code as predatory child molesters, reflecting the longstanding beliefs of conservatives across the country that continue to permeate transgender and drag related discourse (Boone, 2022; Cook, 2018).

During the 1990s, representation of queer individuals began to change in terms of the villain or victim archetype, however, as Sender (2023) states, "the condition of acceptance was that mostly gay and occasionally lesbians, they had to be saints. So, they were usually white, they were usually affluent, they were not allowed to be political, and they were certainly not allowed to be sexual (5:43). Characters of this criteria emerged during this time such as Ellen Degeneres, who made waves when she explicitly came out as gay as a sustained lead character on her sitcom *Ellen* in 1997. Similarly, network television began to portray queer characters after services such as Showtime, HBO, and ABC began including gay and lesbian characters. One example was Cam and Mitch, the gay couple from Modern Family that began airing in 2009 (Sender, 2023). The fictional couple faced controversy from LGBTQ+ viewers online for falling into the confines of being apolitical and asexual, while also continuing the narrative that all gays are white and rich. Much of the reason that network television kept their queer representation so niche was due to their fear of losing massive amounts of straight viewers, in addition to losing financial sponsorship through the advertising industry's withdrawing backing for the companies.

While Ellen, Cam, and Mitch's portrayals shocked straight audiences and paved the way for future depictions, queer individuals still had a long way to go in terms of representation that was inclusive of multiple perspectives and intersectional perspectives of the queer experience.

Streaming Services' Positive Contribution to Queer Narratives

A fundamental shift occurred in the portrayal of queer characters with the switch from network television to streaming services. Streaming services began introducing their own original content in 2013, and in eleven years, transgender and gender nonconforming representation has grown as a result of the services' freedom in direction and production. She elaborates that queer representation overall has increased, "going from 2% of characters in 1999 to more than 12% [in 2023]. These more plentiful and complex LGBTQ representations are the direct consequence of many years of social, political, and technological transformation" (7:00). Streaming services such as Max, Amazon Prime, and Netflix have capitalized upon the demand from their LGBTQ+ audiences and have fulfilled the desire for a queer media market (6:15). Netflix was reported as gaining 26% more subscribers when they began crafting their own original shows, which meant that broadcast and cable stations were forced to compete with the attention by expanding their own portfolios of LGBTQ+ characters (14:52). Despite growing representations, perceptions outside of streaming platform bubbles continue to remain mixed, which is all the more reason that these shows are necessary for queer individuals to gain acceptance in some form.

The structure of streaming services through a subscription-based model allows for more freedom when it comes to constraints placed by network television such as censorship. Services such as Netflix and Max (formerly known as HBO Max) often show nudity and sexual content in the context of queer relationships in contexts such as Sens8 and Euphoria. What's more, the

subscription model allowed for the profiling of "more diverse and three dimensional queer and trans characters in central roles (Sender, 2023, 11:06). This allowed for a breakaway from the traditional white saint archetype when it comes to queer television, though it is worth noting that expanding forms of representation simultaneously opened the floor for other harmful forms of representation such as fetishization.

Another positive aspect of streaming services would be the fact that they create more opportunities for queer stories. As audiences are given the ability to choose what they want to watch and when as opposed to live television, there isn't as much of a concern for driving away straight audience members in droves. If straight audience members don't like a show on a streaming platform, they have plenty of other options to watch instead. When more queer stories are made, it creates opportunities for more queer directors, producers, and actors. One example of trans representation in modern TV includes *Sens8'*s (2015) storyline regarding a trans character Jamie Clayton who is able to have a flourishing storyline (prior to the untimely cancellation of the show) that focuses on her life as a human being without making everything about her storyline related to being trans. Additionally, Jamie is played by a trans actress and her character serves a purpose in the show's overall storyline that goes beyond serving the cis straight characters around her.

Similarly to *Sens8,* (2015) queer characters have been increasingly played by queer and transgender actors and actresses such as Laverne Cox in Orange is the New Black, (2013) Hunter Schafer in Euphoria, and several actors in *Pose* such as Dominique Jackson, Michaela Jaé Rodriguez, Angelica Ross, Indya Moore, and Jiggly Caliente as Elektra Evangelista, Blanca Rodriguiez, Candy, and Angel, and Veronica respectively. According to GLAAD, only 19% of LGBTQ characters were Black, Asian, or Latin in 2010 compared to modern data showing that

more than 50% of queer and trans roles in television are played by people of color (Sender, 2023). Mainstream shows such as *The Umbrella Academy*, and *The Last of Us* have been produced by Peter Hoar, a gay man who was able to successfully produce storylines with well-rounded queer characters. *Pose* was produced by gay producer Ryan Murphy and eventually culminated in the largest transgender cast for a scripted series (Ferreday, 2022). Additionally, Janet Mock, a transgender woman, broke ground as the first transgender woman of color to write and direct an episode of television after working on the sixth episode of the series (Ferreday, 2022).

Streaming services have allowed television to expand to new directions that queer audiences could have never imagined even thirty years ago. Because of societal changes such as younger audiences' consistent demand for LGBTQ+ inclusion, television series have explored concepts such as non-binary identities, transgender identities, and even intersex characters (Sender, 2023, p. 28:25). However, despite the demand for more LGBTQ+ depictions in media, local and federal politicians in addition to their conservative audiences are actively fighting back when it comes to how much LGBTQ+ representation is allowed. These individuals echo the same sentiments as the MPPDA, which called for protections for children to shelter them from queer corruption to their morality.

Issues Within Modern Depictions

While there is no doubt that representation has made strides since queer media from decades past, it is still far from perfect and still falls victim to several tired tropes. First, modern queer media often utilizes tropes where characters are emotionally and physically intimate in a manner that suggests the possibility of a queer relationship and attracts queer viewership while never following through in defining the relationship as non-platonic. This is known as

queerbaiting. Fans have accused modern TV shows such as *Sherlock* (2010), *Supernatural*, and *Marvel* productions of queerbaiting (Sender, 2023). Stockton (2019) writes,"As has been done historically, queerness is pushed into the shadows, out of sight and out of mind," (p.46). This means that, for many queer individuals, finding oneself in media requires actively "searching the shadows" for representation (p .46-47). Many queer individuals resort to using strategies such as coming up with their own "headcannons" or theories about mainstream characters in media having LGBTQ+ identities or being in scenarios that mimic the lived experiences of queer individuals (Stockton, 2019).

Additionally, when queer relationships are defined, they are often confined to the margins of limited screen time. One of the ways in which screen time is cut short for LGBTQ+ individuals on screen is through the "Bury your gays" trope. The "Bury your gays" trope emerged as a literary trope at the end of the 19th century and described the phenomenon where writers would kill off one partner within a same-gender couple in fictional stories (Hulan, 2017). Originally, the trope emerged as a way for writers to feature queer characters without facing negative backlash for "breaking laws and social mandates against the 'endorsement' of homosexuality (Hulan, 2017, p. 17). However, two centuries later, the trope continues to reappear in modern media on streaming platforms like Netflix that did not place barriers or regulations on queer content such as during the period of the Production code.

Many queer audience members find themselves wondering why queer couples and storylines continue to receive gruesome endings, with several scholars citing the observation that the trope seems to be used for shock value in dramas with the intent to increase ratings (Deshler, 2017; Hulan, 2017).

Another issue with modern queer media is the representation that is produced by straight and cisgender writers, creators, and actors. For example, when the series *Transparent* (2014) was released, many transgender individuals felt uncomfortable that a cisgender man was cast to play the leading trans woman's role (Sender, 2023). The reason behind the criticism was that some transgender women felt this choice reinforced the harmful societal belief that transgender women are not real women but cisgender men in disguise (Sender, 2023, 52:02). Overall, it is more beneficial for the queer and transgender community when queer and transgender writers, actors, and producers utilize their experiences to tell stories. This reduces the likelihood that queer individuals will be typecast into the same roles of villains and victims of the past but have their own distinct narratives that allows for more authentic and sincere representation (Sender, 2023).

Queer Reality Television

After the mainstream implementation of streaming services, the popularity of reality television continued to boom. The production costs behind reality television were low, and it required less overall work than other television show mediums. Popular reality shows featuring transgender individuals included "I am Jazz" featuring the young transgender girl Jazz Jennings , and "I am Cait" featuring the much observed and discussed Caitlyn Jenner. As Sender (2023) states, "Reality television was one of the earliest places where we began to see more complex representations of LGBTQ people, and that has really continued. What's interesting is that into the mix of gay, lesbian, bisexual people on reality TV shows, we're also seeing transgender, and non-binary in shows like *Dancing with the Stars* and *Are You the One*" (24:20). In addition to these shows those specifically centered around queer themes and reoccurring queer leads, such as *Queer Eye, RuPaul's Drag Race,* and *Dragula*.

Queer Eye (2018), formerly known as Queer Eye For the Straight Guy, (2003) was released on Bravo and centers around a cast of four gay men and one non-binary individual (known as the "Fab Five") who use their unique talents with the premise of making over contestants' lives; the new edition of the show focuses on contestants of varying sexualities and genders, while the original title predictably focuses on assisting straight men. The Fab Five consist of Antoni Porowski, a food and wine expert, Bobby Berk, an interior designer, Karamo Brown, a culture expert, Jonathan Van Ness, a hair and makeup expert, and finally Tan France, a fashion expert. The team travels across America and even internationally with the goal of improving the quality of life for their guests by making them more physically attractive while simultaneously unpacking emotional barriers to improve mental health. Karamo often serves as a type of therapist for participants, while each of the other Fab Five offer advice and encouragement during their own respective scenes.

Some of the criticism for *Queer Eye* has faced relates to the homonationalist framing of the show when it comes to their interactions with participants in other countries such as the Queer Eye: We're in Japan! mini season episodes (Eguchi and Kimura, 2020). Homonationalism, a term coined by Jasbir K. Puar, refers to a "form of sexual exceptionalism segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others" by focusing on a primarily American cultural lens when it comes to perceptions of queer equality (Puar, 2007, p. 83). In other words, the Fab Five perpetuate homonationalism in the sense that their perceptions of homophobia are rooted in a nationalist and Western perspective that does not make room for the perspectives within the cultures they visit and work in.

As with most television shows focused on makeovers, Queer Eye focuses on making participants and their living spaces look more conventionally attractive. To do so, the team

utilizes a wide variety of beauty products, home renovation equipment, and expensive clothing. The "before" versions of the participants often involve inexpensive attire and care routines that are then replaced with more expensive ones. These aspects contribute to the capitalist nature of the show and create questions for the audience of whether participants will be able to keep up their new living routines once the Fab Five have left (Eguchi & Kimura, 2020).

Reality Drag Portrayals in *RuPaul's Drag Race*

While Queer Eye focuses on the physical transformations of queer participants, it is not centered specifically on drag performance. The most popular reality television show that includes drag performance is *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a series currently streaming on Hulu, Paramount+, and Amazon Prime. First airing in 2009, the series focuses on a competition-style game show similar to Tyra Banks' America's Next Top Model. The show specifically requires performances from drag queens and has yet to include a drag king. One of the most accredited aspects of the show is its accessibility to a global audience, with versions of the show such as Drag Race Thailand and Drag Race Canada racking in viewers (Sender, 2023). The accessibility of these shows and their ability to intrigue both queer and straight / cisgender viewers has created a multi-million dollar industry which allows for brand sponsorships, lavish prizes for winning queens, and promotional materials. By creating so much global intrigue, the show helps normalize and popularize drag as a medium and is an introduction to the world of drag for many individuals (Campana et al., 2022).

Some of the critique of the show focuses on the narrow-minded approach to gender expression and drag as a medium perpetuated by the show's host, RuPaul Charles. As transgender scholar Loretta LeMaster points out in her (2015) article, drag throughout Drag Race, including its spinoff series DragU, treats queens as men in costumes rather than identifying

the possibility for drag to be a more complex gender expression. Furthermore, RuPaul Charles has been recorded stating his discomfort in the past with the idea of having openly transgender participants on Drag Race as he believed medically transitioning "changes the whole concept of what we're doing [on the show]" (Framke, 2018). However, Drag Race season 15 recently saw its first transgender woman win the season overall, Sasha Colby. This season, in addition to the currently streaming season 16, have taken careful measures to address the legal discrimination the transgender individuals and drag performers face across America. This is perhaps a response to some of the controversial language used in the earlier seasons that can now be perceived as derogatory to transgender individuals.

Positioning *Dragula* as a Counter to ***RuPaul's Drag Race***

Before the reality TV drag competition Dragula aired on Amazon Prime, it started as a YouTube series which aired its first season in 2016. The show, according to Martin, (2022) can be seen as a subversive counterpart to RuPaul's Drag Race as it is seen as less palatable for straight and cisgender audiences (Martin, 2022). The premise of Dragula as a show utilizes a RuPaul-esque competition style while embracing concepts of horror as a part of queerness; the aesthetic overall relies less on traditional Eurocentric standards of beauty and instead embraces the atmosphere of a campy Halloween bash. In creating the atmosphere where everyone is a "drag monster", Dragula can be argued to act in "(re)queering the narrative between monstrosity and queerness to turn the association into something positive, powerful, and often personally transformative" (Martin, 2022, p. 106). In other words, rather than focusing primarily on creating an "illusion" of gender, the goal is to embrace one's otherness and celebrate it (p. 106).

Another aspect of Dragula which sets it apart from RuPaul's Drag Race is its acceptance of drag kings and cisgender women (Martin, 2022). Overall, the show has more gender diversity

than its popular counterpart which focuses solely on the flavor of drag as female impersonation. Dragula seems to have an overall larger appreciation for non-binary and transgender performers as well, compared to the predominantly gay cisgender males who participate in Drag Race. As queer individuals have often been placed in the roles of villains throughout history, Dragula is a space where performers of varying gender identities can embrace this categorization with pride. "On Dragula," Martin states, "Contestants are uncompromising in presenting of drag as a confrontational manifestation of the otherness they experience in their social lives (p. 106). Contestants on the show reflect this idea in their discussions of feeling othered and excluded in their social lives including within their birth families and drag social scenes (Martin, 2022). Overall, the show subverts homonormativity and the enforcement of feminine gender norms that Drag Race touts proudly.

We're Here's Contribution to Queer Reality Television

What sets *We're Here* apart from the previously mentioned queer reality television series and drag specific reality television series is its focus on building queer community for queer individuals in their hometowns. While scholars have noted that much of current queer reality television is make-over focused, capitalist, and competition-based, (Campana et al., 2022; LeMaster, 2015; Martin, 2022) *We're Here* focuses more on the personal narratives of its participants and the stories of place and space regarding their hometowns. Within my analysis, I plan to uncover the ways in which *We're Here* pushes against the hegemonic forces of antiqueerness by analyzing drag as a medium to build intersectional alliances and solidarity across points of cultural difference in the United States. Rather than current drag reality television such as *Dragula* and *RuPaul's Drag Race* which frame drag as a competition, *We're Here* frames drag as a self-actualizing event that allows for participants to see their own

struggles within their coalition. Within *We're Here*, drag events are framed as a communal opportunity to build political bonds and dramatize queer life in a humanizing way in an era which dehumanizes transgender and GNC individuals.

We're Here's more overt political stance is necessary in a climate where transgender and GNC individuals are under attack through current legislation restricting bathroom access for transgender individuals, freedom to partake in sports in schools, and access to gender affirming care which has been shown to decrease suicide rates within the transgender community (Austin et al., 2020; Roehr, 2015).

Drag as Queer Resistance

Within the context of queer media representation, queer resistance has been defined by scholars like Dhaenens (2013) as explicitly articulated sexuality serving as an affront to heteronormativity and the fear it instills in queer individuals. Additionally, drawing upon the work of Halberstam (2005) who describes public environments as "heteronormative spacialities", Dhaenens (2013) describes queer resistance as the deconstruction and reconstruction of such spaces by engaging blatantly in queer expression (Halberstam, 2005, p.6, Dhaenens 2013). Dhaenen draws upon a media example from *Torchwood* in which two men enter a public ballroom and share a dance as well as an intimate kiss. Because of the historically situated heteronormative expectations of this space, as well as all public spaces not explicitly marked as queer, physical queer affection serves as a subversion to the societal expectations that dictate what is appropriate in public. Therefore, I plan to utilize Dhaenen's definition of queer resistance as I explore public drag events and drag representation in media as forms of queer resistance.

When it comes to drag as resistance, scholars such as LeMaster (2015) have discussed the enactment of a "gendered persona" within a performance as resistance. As LeMaster states, "Drag queens resist the demands of oppositional sexism by refusing to enact either a masculine male or a feminine female persona. Rather, the drag queens enact a gendered persona that does not so easily align with an assumed 'biological' sex" (p. 176). Because drag resists dominant gender expectations, it allows for seemingly endless possibilities when it comes to performance. Furthermore, drag does not always need to represent a different gender on stage; Transgender men can perform masculinity on stage as drag kings, and transgender women can perform femininity. Individuals of any gender can perform drag in any gender, despite drag being commonly regarded as a practice of gay men who dress in feminine attire (LeMaster, 2015). However, even when one is acting in alignment to their assigned sex at birth, drag twists the notions of what gender can mean, and its meaning is subjective to the person who is performing it.

Regardless of who is performing drag, the act of drag has socially been constructed to disrupt traditional gender expectations as it focuses on "intensification to act as parody of the naturalized limitations on desire, on bodies and on the dressing of those bodies that occur within society" (Moore, 2013, p. 9). Because of the nature of disruption, those who perform in ways that cross the boundaries of "masculinity, femininity, homosexuality, and heterosexuality" face consequences of being seen as the other and discriminated against societally (Campana et al., 2022, p. 1951; Rupp and Taylor, 2014). As drag performers are perceived as individuals who agitate the borders placed around acceptable heteronormative gender and sexual orientation, they are viewed as a threat to traditional notions of gender, family, and conservative ideals.

Drag performers receive stigma, in addition, since most performers are members of the LGBTQ+ community (Campana et al., 2022; Hudson, 2008; Roulet, 2020). The LGBTQ+ community as a whole has been noted by Goffman (1963) to be "tainted" in the eyes of hegemonic society (p. 11). Therefore, when drag performers engage in behaviors such as non-traditional gender expression, sexual comments, or explicitly stating their identity in a heteronormative spatiality, they are seen as executing "morally reprehensible behaviors," (Roulet, 2020, p. 39). The ways in which drag performers continue to fight for their right to expression despite political and religious cultural backlash is an important aspect of what makes drag as a practice subversive to the hegemon.

Resistance to Transphobia and Drag-Related Political Discrimination

Scholars such as Roehr, (2015), Teetzel (2017), Pinsky and Brenner (2023) and Keenan and Hot Mess (2020) have produced scholarship describing the motivations behind right-wing political ideology as well as its current impact on the LGBTQ+ community. As Kourou (2020) states, Populist right-wing parties have been increasing not just in the United States but worldwide. One strategy that is commonly used when it comes to creating anti-trans and anti-GNC existence is the selection of causes in order to portray cisgender heterosexuals as victims and transgender and GNC individuals as corrupt or impure. Popular concepts within news media have included transgender individuals' rights to engage in sports, transgender individuals' rights to medically transition, and the impact of drag events and LGBTQ+ themed books (Roehr, 2015, Teetzel, 2017, Pinsky and Brenner, 2023, Keenan and Hot Mess, 2020).

"An Unfair Advantage"

In terms of transgender athletes, there has been much political discussion regarding whether or not transgender athletes should be allowed to compete in sports as a result of having a

perceived “unfair advantage” (Teetzel, 2017, p. 165). However, despite significant media backlash and over a decade of research on the subject, researchers have noted that “there is not enough scientific evidence to either confirm or refute that hypothesis” (Teetzel, 2017, p. 164). The reason for the small sample size is, primarily, because the number of transgender athletes is still incredibly small. This is due in part to current legislation that bars transgender athletes from participating, and also because transgender individuals make up less than 2% of all individuals in the United States, with 0.5% of American adults and 1.4% of American youth identifying as transgender (Flores et al., 2022).

MMA fighter and Black transgender woman Fallon Fox is one example of an LGBTQ+ community member who has faced massive backlash online as a result of the social and political climate surrounding transgender athletes (Teetzel, 2017). In addition to social commentary, discriminatory comments stemmed from Fox’s opponents such as Ashlee Evans-Smith who stated she would decline any opportunity to fight with Fox due to what she perceived as Fox’s advantage. Evans-Smith was suspended a few months later for using banned diuretics to shed weight faster (Teetzel, 2017). As an individual with a highly marginalized intersectional identity, Fox faced immense backlash online and dropped out of fighting after competing against cisgender woman Tamikka Brents; Fox broke Brent’s orbital bone before defeating Brents in the first round (Ziegler, 2023). Online news sources and social media accounts were quick to publish regarding a transgender athlete breaking a cis woman’s “skull”, while cisgender women fighters were consistently labeled as breaking the orbital bone specifically (Ziegler, 2023). Public reactions such as Fox’s example showcase the fear and outcry that contribute to events such as the submission of 10,000 complaints on a Minnesota policy that would include transgender student athletes in sports of their gender identity (Teetzel, 2017). While the current political

climate in the United States works to ensure that transgender youth and adults are effectively barred from social activities and normative culture, individuals such as Fox resist these ideals by engaging in sports in heteronormative spacialities in their authentic gender presentations (Halberstam, 2005).

Barriers To Transgender Medical Care

As Teetzel (2017) states, "Whereas intersex people have historically been subjected to sex 'normalizing' hormones and surgeries they have not wanted, transgender people have had a hard time getting the sex-changing hormones and surgeries they have wanted. Both problems arise from a single cause: a heterosexist medical establishment determined to retain control over who gets to be what sex. The idea that transgender bodies must be controlled in order to regain autonomy over gender as a whole is perpetuated in a 920-page document titled "Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise," published by The Heritage Foundation's team of influential Republicans who label gender-affirming surgeries for transgender youth as "a social contagion" which primarily impacts "young girls" wanting to engage in puberty blockers, hormone therapy, and "even surgeries to remove vital body parts (The Heritage Foundation, 2023, p. 346). Director of the Center for Education Policy at the Heritage Foundation, Lindsey M. Burke, further says that gender affirming surgeries, a component of "woke gender ideology" do not reduce suicidality in transgender youth; She concludes by making an unsupported claim that these surgeries may even increase rates of suicide in transgender youth (The Heritage Foundation, 2023, p. 62, 346).

Despite these claims, Roehr, (2015) Teetzel (2017) Hatfield, (2019) Levitt et al. (2020) and Austin et. al (2020) have produced peer-reviewed research that suggest transgender suicide rates are a result of systemic oppression and discrimination that they face in their daily lives, and

that gender-affirming increases levels of mental health for transgender and GNC individuals (Coleman et al., 2012, Glynn et al., 2016). However, it is additionally important to note that LGBTQ+ individuals and especially transgender individuals face barriers to receiving gender-affirming care depending on the medical practitioners in addition to their individual state laws (Levitt et al., 2020). Burke's intentional word choice regarding young girls is a sentiment reflected in anti-queer conservative rhetoric which often victimizes white women and girls and implies that transgender individuals are looking to attack or groom them (Selvaraj, 2023, The Heritage Foundation, 2023). This rhetoric further prevents transgender individuals in need of gender-affirming care for suicide prevention and mental health. However, amidst societal, political, and medical backlash, transgender and GNC individuals continue to undergo gender-affirming treatments in the form of hormone therapy, puberty blockers, and surgery. By undergoing these procedures, transgender and GNC individuals are resisting the narrative that they must accept and exemplify their assigned sex at birth. Furthermore, they engage in resistance according to Dhaenen's (2013) lens by choosing to come out publicly as a transgender athlete.

Calls to Stop Drag Events and Representation

In the past year alone (at the time of writing), the United States has witnessed the actualization of transphobic and anti-queer sentiments into the proposal of anti-trans and anti-drag bills across the country (AZ SB1698, Senate 2023, AZ HB1700, 2023, WY SF0111, AZ SB 1001, OK SB129) with 85 of these bills passed into law (Trans Legislation Tracker, 2023). Additionally, right-wing politicians have amassed significant numbers of voters utilizing campaigns that incorporate anti-trans rhetoric and fuel existing fears surrounding GNC individuals; the advocacy and enforcement of anti-drag bans is a direct affront to the transgender

and GNC communities and has real effects on the treatment of the individuals who exist within these communities (Boone, 2022; Keenan and Hot Mess, 2020). Furthermore, the advocacy and implementation for these bills further strengthens the message sent from the hegemonic groups in power that there is only one 'correct' way to enact one's gender identity.

It is not uncommon for drag shows to receive death threats, protests, or attacks, but it does not mean it is any less shocking when the bars hosting the shows are infiltrated by gunmen who open fire on the crowd (Boone, 2022; Factora, 2022). The Club Q shooting on November 19th and 20th, 2022, as well as the Pulse massacre in 2016 reflect a climate where LGBTQ+ community members and drag performers are never truly safe, even in designated queer spaces. Statistics from GLAAD (2023) show that there were 124 anti-drag threats or attacks in 2022 alone, taking place in 47 U.S. states. Drag, an art form centered around self-expression, requires bravery in the face of a society that has little to no regard for their lives.

Lil Miss Hot Mess, a drag queen, university professor, and children's book author, has fought tirelessly to curate age-appropriate and safe spaces where children can learn about drag and interact with performers. Her popular event, called Drag Queen Story Hour, involves reading children's books inside of a library while wearing drag. In addition to being an energetic, entertaining experience, queer and gender nonconforming individuals are a part of life and it is beneficial for children to be exposed to a variety of cultures to strengthen their understanding of the world. Many members of the public, however, such as the group of men who infiltrated Drag Queen Story Hour to scream homophobic slurs, disagree (Boone, 2022, Keenan and Hot Mess, 2020). Despite most drag shows advertising as either 18+ or family friendly events in the same regard that concerts and plays are, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, was recorded stating that parents who take their children to drag shows should be intercepted by child protective services.

Hot Mess (2020) states that she and many other drag performers involved with the story hour have been "mocked and condemned in popular conservative media," and that "Several story hours have been canceled due to credible threats of violence" (p. 442). Contrary to the beliefs held by the dominant culture, the purpose of drag is not to groom children and brainwash them into becoming queer drag performers; drag bars, like ballrooms, have been used historically to create spaces away from the dominant society where self-expression is prioritized (Bailey, 2011; Bailey, 2013; Reid, 2022).

Drag has been described as "political theater" that strives to meet two goals: giving the performers autonomy and empowerment and providing an accepting environment for LGBTQ+ audiences to exist and interact outside of the hegemonic norm (Taylor & Rupp, 2005). In a similar sense, queer authors have resisted hegemonic ideals by fighting to publish books regarding LGBTQ+ experiences so that queer youth can feel less isolated and othered within their identities. However, many of these books have faced social and legal sanctions, with many titles removed from school libraries due to legislation banning them for perceived sexual content (Pinsky and Brenner, 2023). LGBTQ+ literature is more likely to be deemed as sexual by conservative politicians compared to heterosexual literature which further perpetuates the notion that queer individuals are out to groom children (Selvaraj, 2023).

Queer Resistance to Religious Culture

While the United States is allegedly a country where the political system upholds a 'separation of church and state', the structures at play are a direct result of Christian and Puritanical values. In the United States, there are only four state constitutions that do not explicitly mention God. Those without specific reference to God mention a divine power more broadly (Sandstrom, 2017). Deneen states in his 2018 book, *Why Liberalism Failed,* that "the

president, the speaker of the House and six of the nine Supreme Court justices are Catholic (a seventh was raised Catholic)" (Deneen et al., 2018, p. 24). Because so much of the government and its origins have been influenced by religion, it can be difficult at times to identify whether secular power structures can truly exist. Many of the morals and societal expectations that govern the creation of laws, such as the conceptualization of whiteness as pure and heterosexual marriage as God's plan for Americans, stem from the teachings of the church. For example, interracial marriage in the United States was outlawed under the premise of its condemnation in people's interpretations of certain passages from the Bible (Botham, 2010). While not always the case, the harm that conservative religious beliefs can have when they are applied in legislation at a local or national level should be considered. Therefore, it is important to examine the ways these beliefs impact societal perceptions of groups the church deems sinful.

Something Unholy

With Christian values permeating the United States' laws and attitudes, it is essential to analyze the core beliefs that are spread through religious teachings. Because of Christianity, for example, United States culture values traditional concepts of marriage in society- with white evangelicals most likely to believe that prioritizing marriage and procreation is a necessity for all (Kramer, 2021). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints or Mormon church teaches that a heterosexual marriage is the only way to achieve salvation in the afterlife, and individuals must not deviate in expression from their gender assigned at birth (Schuler et al., 2024). Recently, the Mormon church has taken the stance that it is not homosexual individuals that are the sin, but rather, homosexual actions as sin. While it is true that many LGBTQ+ individuals participate in religion and it is not always detrimental to individual LGBTQ+ individuals, religious doctrine often prevents queer individuals from living authentic lives, especially in terms of romantic and

sexual relationships. Additionally, these policies reinforce perceptions of LGBTQ+ individuals as shameful sinners which contributes to social stigma (Schuler et al., 2024).

As many Christian groups state that the sole purpose of marriage and sexual contact is for procreation, several groups are put at a disadvantage, including many LGBTQ+ individuals. As one gay ex-Mormon participant stated in Schuler et al.'s (2024) study, "At the core of Mormonism is heterosexuality- to be like God is to be straight. So much about the plan of salvation, which is the plan to get back to God, is about becoming a father or mother and procreating and having children. So, how we get back to God and how we become like God is really all focused on sexuality and gender" (p. 1217). In a cyclical relationship, these teachings cause LGBTQ+ community members involved in the church (or outside of it) to feel shame and ostracization regarding their identities and assist in perpetuating the discrimination and prejudice church members hold towards LGBTQ+ members.

These attitudes towards queer, GNC, and transgender individuals from conservative religious culture in the United States have disastrous effects on the LGBTQ+ community, seen by instances such as the Westboro Baptist Church's response to 1998's murderous hate crime of Matthew Shepard (Cobb, 2006). The Church was not protesting the torturing and killing of a student, nor the parading of a scarecrow mocking Shepard's dead body with the words "I am gay" scrawled on its face as it was touted in front of CSU's Pi Kappa Alpha and Alpha Chi Omega's homecoming float. Rather, the now deceased Church leader Fred Phelps led protestors to express outrage at the disbanding of the school's Greek organizations and the conviction of Shepard's killers.

Despite the egregious actions of groups such as the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), it is not beneficial to write them off as extremists-- a common occurrence by fundamentalist and

evangelical groups. Writing off the discrimination of LGBTQ+ individuals through the church as extreme diminishes the harm that has been and continues to be done under the premise of returning society to normalcy and rebuking sin. Rejection of homosexuality under the guise of 'God's will' has promoted financial and political leverage for Christian groups (as well as for Republican politicians) throughout history and today (Barrett-Fox, 2016; Cobb, 2006, p.3).

Religious institutions frequently label LGBTQ+ identities as 'lifestyles' or 'desires' that can be tucked away after a stronger relationship with God is built. In Pellegrini & Jakobsen's (2003) book *Love the Sinner*, they describe that when LGBTQ+ individuals state that we are born this way, it is not always because of our lived realities but also because of the ramifications that can occur when the church spreads the idea that being queer, GNC or trans is mutable. Examples of the church attempting to 'change' individuals' gender or sexuality include conversion therapy, sexual abuse, and propaganda insinuating that these individuals intentionally choose to 'sin' or 'defy God'.

It Just Isn't Natural

Actions such as labeling of LGBQ+ identities as mental illness or as sin allows for straight and cisgender identities to remain tokenized as pure and morally right. One example includes the Westboro Baptist Church's stance that "homosexuals are self-defined by immoral, sinful, criminal sex acts, voluntarily engaged in," (Barret-Fox, 2016, p. 36). These tactics mimic those described in Halberstam's motivations for transgender representation from cisgender individuals: Stabilization, rationalization, and trivialization (as cited in Sanchez & Schlossberg, 2001, p. 14). In stabilization, transgender individuals are framed as strange and different from the cultural norm, then, through rationalization they are given an explanation as to why their behavior is dangerous, and lastly they are trivialized such as with a conclusion that their

existence should have no repercussions on current understandings of gender normativity. These tactics can be used both in fictional portrayals of transgender individuals and in social and political conversations regarding LGBTQ+ rights within the church and on an overall socio-political level.

As conservative religious groups rely heavily on concepts of gender normativity in order to preach their beliefs, gender normativity must be enforced at all times. This normativity contributes to the reaction of a straight individual viewing their gender to be "consistent with his or her sex and the relation between the two to be 'natural' (Sanchez & Schlossberg, 2001, p.14). This belief in the naturalization of heterosexual and cisgender individuals comes from the idea that God created individuals exactly as he intended to be, removing some of the autonomy over individuals to control their own identities for risk of damnation. As a result, when faced with the LGBTQ+ community, many conservative religious individuals "appear to be struggling to make sense of a broader American culture that seems to reject foundational truth, dismiss supernatural authority, and advocate cultural relativism," (Barret-Fox, 2016, p. 178). Because of their views of cisgender heterosexuality as natural, many conservative Christians are against the idea that sexuality is anything other than God-given. These views may have an impact on Evangelical Christians consistently lower scores when it comes to transgender acceptance and compared to their nonreligious counterparts (Kanamori et al., 2017).

This impact can be seen in the media through examples such as the comments of influential conservative religious figures Tucker Carlson and Rod Dreher's comments on college courses focused on gender studies. According to Carlson and Dreher, these kinds of courses perpetuate religious intolerance and are full of "woke" ideas that "lead Americans to hate America and children to reject their parents" (Zerofsky, 2021, p.1). This sentiment likely refers

in part to LGBTQ+ community members who cut connection with their biological families after being shamed and shunned for their queer identities. While it is true that some LGBTQ+ community members have the autonomy to choose their leave, research suggests transgender and GNC individuals are statistically more likely to be shunned or disowned by their biological family of no choice of their own (Levin et al., 2020).

We're Here as a Form of Resistance

We're Here is a media example where a group of queer individuals defy hegemonic discourses and expectations by shedding a spotlight on queer individuals and celebrating their identities. Rather than celebrating individuals in spite of their queerness, queer identities and the difficult process of coming out are honored. In this sense, *We're Here* as a premise can be considered as engaging with Dhaenen's (2013) definition of queer resistance as public expressions of queerness within heteronormative spacialities. *We're Here* is distinct from other drag related shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Dragula* because it lacks the competition-based format regarding drag. Instead, *We're Here* focuses on drag as a self-fulfilling and self-affirming activity. Additionally, within the show, drag is considered an action that provides connection and safety for other queer individuals. Performing mediated drag for the artist's and artist's community's sake rather than being pressured to produce the "best" drag possible returns the autonomy from the audience to the performer and still enables connection. Because of this, I believe that *We're Here* is a more powerful form of resistance than previous drag television.

In addition to resisting tropes seen in previous examples of drag television, *We're Here* actively resists the context in which queer and trans, and drag performers are dehumanized in mainstream media representation. The show's format allows for a variety of queer individuals to be portrayed as human beings who are allowed to be loving, family-oriented, sexual, and

imperfect all at once. *We're Here* tackles real issues in the geographical areas that it covers such as systemic racism, religious bigotry, and heteronormative political discrimination while also taking a case-by-case approach with queer participants. *We're Here* serves as a mindful form of queer and drag representation because of this and utilizes drag to help individuals learn to embrace their identities, a radical act of resistance in a climate that classifies queer identity as other and frequently dehumanizes transgender and GNC individuals. In doing so, participants can share the artform of drag with queer community members and their allies and build a strong coalition.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

Intersections of Trauma and Celebration in Selma, Alabama

Season two, episode four of *We're Here* introduces viewers to the history of one of the country's most pivotal locations for the Civil Rights movement: Selma, Alabama. The season's hosts, a drag queen team consisting of Bob the Drag Queen, Shangela, and Eureka, recognize residents within Selma not only for the immense pain that they have suffered as a result of racial violence but for the monumental triumphs they have achieved within their communities. A major theme of Selma's episode discussed by the queens is the unique reality Black queer individuals experience living in the aftermath of chattel slavery in the South as well as in an anti-queer community. As the hosting queens explain, the continuous oppression and discrimination that persists from Selma's history creates a hostile living environment for Black and LGBTQ+ individuals (LoGreco, 2021, 1:48). One such individual within the episode is AkeeLah Blu, a Black transgender woman who feels highly unsafe in her community due to the blatant transphobic discrimination she has faced in Selma. The audience is also able to meet one of AkeeLah's childhood friends, a Black gay man named Joseph, who has been a lifelong resident of Selma. Joseph reveals similar feelings of a lack of safety and shares the story of how he narrowly escaped losing his life due to his identity. Lastly, the audience is introduced to Deborah, a grieving grandmother who has lived through the murder of her granddaughter Ke'Aira. Deborah, an older Black woman, identifies as an ally to the LGBTQ+ community and expresses her full acceptance of Ke'Aira's lesbian identity as well as her grandson Ilkerious' gay identity. In addition to the main three participants, the queens seek input from civil rights activists who participated in a public march in 1965 for Black voting rights now known as "Bloody Sunday" (Stanford University, 2024). By engaging in discussions and eventually drag

with the primary three participants, the show participants provide insights regarding the need for social change, acceptance, and support for Black LGBTQ+ residents. The queens state that they hope to continue to bring social change to the anti-Black and anti-queer climate in Selma by utilizing drag to promote acceptance and communal support through celebration of its queer Black residents. Through the process of organizing the show and interacting with the community, the queens create a focus on themes such as sites of trauma, violence against Black queer residents, and intersectional coalition building as a means of surviving trauma.

The Edmund Pettus Bridge & Sites of Trauma in Selma

Stemming from Caruth's (1996) conceptualization of trauma as an experience that occurs "when violence cannot be accommodated, happens suddenly, and is re-experienced in unexpected and uncontrolled ways" (p.2) acknowledging the reality that trauma can be embedded into physical spaces is necessary in order to understand the depth of racial trauma within Selma. When locations in which trauma occurred are remembered by the communities impacted by the event, they become "sites of trauma" which often cause individuals to reflect on the "experience of suffering" (Hubbell et al., 2020, p.3). Sites of trauma can include widely recognized events, such as slavery and colonization which are considered to be key factors of cultural memory. They can also include physical locations like public memorials, or locations not formally recognized yet but still remembered by impacted community members (Hubbell et al., 2020). For the purpose of discussing sites of trauma within this analysis, I plan to utilize Hubbel et al.'s (2020) distinction that these sites can include tangible locations as well intangible locations existing within the memories of survivors and their kin, and to clarify that traumatic sites of all varieties cause immense pain for those who carry them.

Before discussing the many physical sites of trauma within Selma, the intangible site of trauma of Jim Crow era segregation in the United States and the historical landscape it created leading up to Selma's Bloody Sunday protest in the 1960s must be addressed. The term "Jim Crow" refers to the series of United States laws enforcing racial segregation and stripping Black Americans from the right to vote. These laws reflected a "formal, codified system of racial apartheid" that defined Southern states from the 1870s until the 1960s, although the laws have been informally upheld for far longer (Jim Crow Museum, 2024, PBS, 2024). Key markers of the segregation laws included signage labeling which facilities or buildings were for "white's only"; areas such as schools, restaurants and modes of transportation were to remain entirely divided (PBS, 2024).

While Jim Crow laws allowed the legal policing of segregation, the concept of exclusively white spaces were also enforced through violent lynchings of Black Americans enacted by white citizens (Ore, 2019; PBS, 2024). As stated by Ore, (2019) the purpose of Jim Crow laws were to ensure that physical and civic spaces continued to exclusively serve white objectives. By declaring a strict difference between the inherent rights of white and Black individuals, white Americans were able to perpetuate the idea of Black individuals being "no-citizens" and therefore justify their treatment as a social "other" no matter how inhumane (Sharpe, 2016). Black Americans' social positioning as "enemies of the social contract" resulted in publicly condoned lynchings that were used to maintain structural social power for white Americans (Ore, 2019, p. 45). This distinct period of American history lasted nearly a century and is a site of trauma that many Black Americans living today experienced firsthand. However, despite the landscape of Jim Crow laws shifting for modern society, the trauma continues to perpetuate within the "new Jim Crow" (Ore, 2019, p. 236).

Lynchings are not relics of the past in America. They continue to be perpetuated through the American police system which disproportionately targets and brutalizes Black Americans (Ore, 2019). While "white's only" signs have been outlawed, the enforcement of "white's only" spaces continues through academic institutions, the United States government, and the prison industrial complex. Structural inequality that occurs today is not a coincidence, but a direct result of the series of traumatic sites that composes Black history in America; before Jim Crow there was the legacy of slavery, and the immeasurable sites of trauma accompanying it. Now, in the "new Jim Crow", the mass incarceration of Black Americans is utilized to maintain a white social hierarchy while drawing from the same racist narratives utilized in the days of slavery and Jim Crow. The trauma of structural racism and the culture of lynching and brutality within it is a site of trauma that continues to evolve into new sites, such as the trauma that occurred on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on "Bloody Sunday".

The Edmund Pettus Bridge is a physical site of trauma representing the uninterrupted racial violence in Selma. As an enormous functional landmark named after a Confederate general and Klu Klux Klan leader who imprisoned Black Americans seeking freedom after the Civil War, the monument not only preserves memories of Black American trauma but seems to celebrate it. According to de Velasco, (2019) confederate monuments have been long documented as sites of memory that not only romanticize white supremacy but suggest that racist historical structures should remain in American society. Not only do these monuments serve as "rhetorical object(s)" for anti-Black violence, but they have also been documented to embolden modern white supremacists and have even served as gathering spots for white supremacist assemblies (de Velasco, 2019). As such, racist monuments like the Edmund Pettus Bridge serve

as sites of trauma due to their commemoration of white supremacist figures and their underlying rhetoric galvanizing modern white supremacists to maintain white social hierarchies.

The rationale behind the Edmund Pettus Bridge as a site of trauma does not end with its namesake. In March 1965, Black protesters working alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. marched across the bridge to Montgomery and were seized and attacked by state troopers and a group of white men sent by the sheriff. The physical violence committed against Black Americans on this day resulted in the date being memorialized as "Bloody Sunday" (Stanford University, 2024). Factors that stoked the social climate and eventually culminated in the march included the intentional barring of Black voters in Selma, the arrests of thousands of nonviolent protestors including Dr. King, and the racially charged murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson by police officers in Marion, Alabama (Stanford University, 2024).

Selma gained historical prevalence as a site of trauma where Black voting rights advocates marched for Civil Rights, but *We're Here*'s introduction to Selma's episode showcases additional reminders of historic sites of racial trauma such as a painted outdoor mural reading, "The attack on marchers: Bloody Sunday began in this area March 7, 1965", (1:13) as well as the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, the Civil Rights Memorial Park, and a graveyard laden with confederate flags and massive gravestones of confederate soldiers (2:01). In the beginning of the episode, Bob, Eureka and Shangela are filmed walking silently around the graveyard wearing vintage style gowns, taking in the memories of the space. Later, Bob states, "My freedom as a Black queer person in America is directly linked to Selma. Directly. I don't think that Selma will ever forget what happened on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and I don't think they should. You know, Selma's story extends beyond Bloody Sunday because the struggle between people of color and queer people, they're not mutually exclusive" (3:55). The camera

cuts to a spray-painted piece of art on a garage door reading “Never Forget, Never Again” while depicting multiple enslaved people in a field with one Black man turned away, his back covered in scars (4:17).

In Selma specifically, the Edmund Pettus Bridge is a physical reminder of the trauma that Black Americans have faced at the hands of white individuals. For such a large landmark to be named after such an explicitly racist historical figure seems to send a message to Selma’s current residents that white lives matter more than Black lives, and that Black trauma is not valid; rather, it seems to be encouraged. Pettus’ legacy “became for Alabama’s white citizens in the decades after the Civil War, a living testament to the power of whites to sculpt a society modeled after slave society,” (Whack, 2015). This further supports the idea that the bridge’s very existence served to showcase white supremacy and assert dominance over Black individuals.

When Black Americans living in Selma are forced to see the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they are not only enduring a re-traumatizing experience by seeing Pettus’ racist legacy commemorated, but they are also forced to be reminded of Bloody Sunday and the brutality enacted by state troopers and other white law enforcers against the protestors who marched toward civil rights in this the United States. Murphy (2008) says that “images travel both spatially and metaphorically, taking on additional meaning, haunted by the events of the past and the dead, and imbued with the desires of those who march in the present” (p. 4). The Edmund Pettus Bridge is a site of traumatic memory for all Black residents of Selma and any Black individual who visits Selma and knows its violent anti-Black history.

While it has been over 50 years since Bloody Sunday and the younger generations in Selma have not experienced this event first-hand, they can still be re-traumatized by the daily physical reminder of the pursuit of white supremacy in addition to the social tensions they feel

around them (Whack, 2015). Murphy (2008) states, “Years pass by. They pile up like pages in a book. Everything goes unpunished. I have to scream, (p. 2, quote from Hoelscher 2008, pp. 207). The white enforcers did not face punishment for their brutalization of the Foot Soldiers, Edmund Pettus was revered for his racist actions, and those who named the bridge were not questioned in any way. In Selma and in America as a whole, racism is considered excusable and is more than often ignored rather than punished, as seen by the fact that the bridge’s name remains the name today despite social backlash.

In the beginning of the episode, Bob mentions how Selma is an 80% Black town that has offered the world much in terms of social progress, while “Selma is having a hard time benefitting from the world” and seems “frozen in time” (3:11), (1:22). Bob describes how much of the town’s economic assets such as shops and major buildings are closed down, and many houses have been abandoned. In addition to enduring reminders of the disenfranchisement of Black individuals, many Black residents of Selma struggle to make enough income because of being pushed to the margins in a society not built with them in mind. The queens mention how difficult it must be to be openly queer in such a small southern city, and Bob recounts his experience at Selma Pride, which he noted only had about ten individuals show up while the rest of the attendees were performers. After conversing with the attendees, he understood that many of the queer residents did not feel comfortable “advertising their pride” in public, and that “people’s queerness is really diminished” (1:48). Shangela exclaims, “They need to see gay people on stage owning their power, even for just one night. Ohh, Selma needs drag. Selma needs drag, honey.” (3:17)

"Celebrate Who You Are": Sharing Trauma Communally as Coalition Building

While the emphasis of episode four is directed toward the three drag children taken under the wings of the hosting queens, the episode also takes a deeper focus into the life of Bob as showcased by the queens' visit to Selma's By the River Center for Humanity. The Center for Humanity is an organization which focuses on promoting local art, performance, and vendors in Selma while facilitating discussions of love and healing for Black Americans. In a discussion facilitated by Miss Afriye the "keeper of culture", Bob, Shangela and Eureka sit down with a group of the original protestors from Bloody Sunday including Lynda Blackmon Lowery, Joyce O'Neal, JoAnne Bland, and Afriyie We-Kandodis (32:22). Lynda is surrounded by the other women as she explains the brutality she experienced at the hands of a sheriff's deputy and a state trooper while walking on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. After recounting being beaten to the point where she needed 35 stitches, she states "I saw all of that hatred that killed all those people and that's going to continue to kill people. Ahmaud Arbery, Eric Garner…" as Bob joins in with her, "George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, everyone" (34:20). In this instance, the interaction between the queens and the women takes on a therapeutic approach, as Lynda is given a chance to verbalize her trauma and share her experiences in a space where she can receive understanding and love. Because she is surrounded by other Black women who witnessed the site of trauma she did, she can obtain a sense of validation and community rather than question her reality of the bridge because of white supremacist rhetoric (Hubbell, 2020).

As Lynda shares the story of her experience with racially motivated police brutality on the bridge, she tells the group "I cry now all the time just telling the story, but y'all don't know what a release it is when it's coming out" (34:20). Later in the interaction, Bob shares his own emotions with the group as he notes that as a member of the Black community he feels "we are

not taught as a community to deal with our trauma. And then we end up with what feels like survivor's remorse because we didn't get hit on the bridge" (34:00). Bob later shares that he grew up in the south and that his grandmother's grandmother was a slave. He breaks down into sobs as he tells the group how difficult it is to process the amount of trauma his ancestors had to endure for him to be able to sit there and speak about it. The women reassure him that he should celebrate his survival. Joyce tells him, "You are the product of some strong-ass people. Celebrate who you are, and it starts with not letting anyone else define you" (35:55). The group members embrace one another, offer empathy, and listen openly throughout the interaction. While the experiences of trauma are not identical for the group members, they share a common understanding as members of the Black community, aside from Eureka. As an intersectional coalition, the queens and Bloody Sunday activists work through shared sites of trauma such as slavery and the aftermath that they are forced to reconcile with on a daily basis (Hubbell, 2020).

By allowing one another to grieve and process this trauma, they validate and release stored emotions that they would not otherwise be able to process (Hubbell, 2020). This aspect is supported by Hubbell's claim that "to cope with the unpredictable nature of trauma, victims have long been encouraged to narrate their experience in a way to restore and control traumatic memory" (p. 2). Because both Bob and the Civil Rights activists are given the opportunity to narrate their personal sites of trauma, they release some of the power that these sites hold over them. When their sites are not only acknowledged but validated, they can process the traumatic event with slightly more ease while resisting the narrative perpetuated by white supremacists that racism is only "in the past" (Hubbell, 2020).

While The Center for Humanity members are not identified as queer, they emphasize their support of the lesbian and gay community and state that showing up as one's authentic self

has the power to change people (LoGreco, 2021). Overall, the group showcases their values of acceptance, love, and support by offering it to one another in addition to the queens. Through their open dialogue, the queens and the Bloody Sunday activists celebrate the existence and life of one another while simultaneously offering a space to grieve and mourn the loss of those who died for them to be present there. In this scene, the presence of those who have passed on is especially apparent, as seen by the immense grief felt by Bob that brings him to sob in front of the group (34:00). Because of the indescribable loss and tragedy of this traumatic location, drag is used in this episode as a way to celebrate the individuals who are still able to speak out, display their identities proudly, and provide beacons of safety for other marginalized individuals. Bob specifically uses his platform as a drag queen to call attention to the efforts of the Bloody Sunday activists, and he ensures that their and story of resistance does not go ignored for the younger generations living in Selma (LoGreco, 2021).

As the queens acknowledge in the episode, the city of Selma's role in resisting white supremacy during the Civil Rights movement sparked countless examples of positive social change for Black individuals as well as LGBTQ+ individuals. Similarly, as the group discusses the impact of sites of trauma such as the bridge, Miss Afriye facilitates a conversation regarding her appreciation of the LGBT community in their efforts to achieve civil rights and equality for citizens in America. As JoAnne states, "I believe social movements are like jigsaw puzzles. Everybody is a piece. If your piece is missing, the picture isn't complete (29:56). This quote by JoAnne illustrates the coalition's "all for one" mentality, which Bob echoes. This acknowledgement of the intersection between Black and Queer rights becomes pivotal as the episode begins to discuss the violence in Selma directed towards its Black queer community members.

Violence Against Black Queer Bodies

Because of the pattern of violence that impacts all three featured participants in Selma's episode, context regarding the physical terrorization of queer Black bodies is needed to grasp the larger picture of the intersection of homophobia and racism. It is established that Black transgender women like AkeeLah are the most likely members of the LGBTQ+ community to experience being injured or killed due to their identities (Ayhan, 2019; Di Marco et al., 2021; Gortmaker, 2006). This stigmatization is the result of historical perceptions of Black transgender women influenced from the intersection of Misogynoir and transphobia (Bailey, 2021). Throughout American history, transgender individuals have been perceived as "counterfeit, and therefore disposable" (Sivels, 2022). This mentality draws from slavery-era perceptions of Black individuals as "inferior, hypersexual tools of labor," perceptions that stemmed from the reinforcement of racial ideals from white supremacist ideology (Sivels, 2022). According to Sivels, one major factor in white supremacist perceptions of Black transgender women was the popularization of minstrel shows in which white men engaged in blackface female-impersonation in the mid 1800s. These racist performances "aimed to assert white masculinity and dominance" while further positioning Black sexuality as inherently unnatural and dangerous (Sivels, 2022). The shows worked to reinforce the extremely harmful and false idea that Black transgender women were not really women, but men in disguise, thus endangering the lives of these women by positioning them as public enemies to white individuals.

The intense stigmatization of Black transgender women made it difficult for them to obtain mainstream employment, and some Black transgender women have been documented turning to sex work in order to survive (Ayhan, 2019; Di Marco et al., 2021; Gortmaker, 2006; Reid, 2022). However, because of the hypersexualization and dehumanization of Black

transgender women, they were often labeled as predatory and eager to "entice" and deceive men who were looking to have sex with cisgender women (Sivels, 2022). Therefore, in addition to data suggesting that Black transgender women experience systemic barriers to healthcare, education, and work, while having higher likelihood of experiencing poverty and police brutality, they also increase their risk of violent hate crimes based on stereotypes dating back to white supremacist minstrelsy (Ayhan, 2019; Di Marco et al., 2021; Gortmaker, 2006; Reid, 2022; Sivels, 2022).

The violence perpetrated against queer Black individuals stems from white supremacist notions that Black individuals are a threat to society combined with the idea that queerness is a threat to heterosexual livelihoods (Ore, 2019, Sivels, 2022). White supremacists utilize the notion that their violence against Black queer bodies is justified because they are defending their country from this perceived threat. They then utilize this logic to justify and perpetuate systemic abuse and mistreatment of marginalized individuals, feeding an endless cycle of violence. Because political systems are rooted in white supremacy, legislation continues to further the marginalization of Black queer individuals and increase their risk of being targets of violent hate crimes (Trans Legislation Tracker, 2023).

AkeeLah Blu: Jouissance and Violence Against Black Transgender Women

AkeeLah has been living as an out transgender woman in Selma for many years, but as she explains to her drag mentor Bob, she does not feel safe in public even when she is with her cis male boyfriend or driving in her car. Because of her intersectional identity, these fears are unfortunately grounded in reality (Sivels, 2022, Reid, 2022, Ayhan, 2019). AkeeLah mentions that the only time she feels safe is when she is at home or leading dance workshops in her studio at the YWCA for other Black girls and women (LoGreco, 2021). Her reasoning is that: "The

only thing here is violence. Here is so dangerous, which is the reason why I hate it so much because I'm more of a target than everybody else because I'm totally different. I'm feeling like if someone was to take me out they literally would not work hard to figure out who did it. Because of what I was, they would say, 'Oh, but it was a demon anyway' because of what they believe," (21:19). As AkeeLah states, Selma is dangerous for Black individuals in general, but by adding another marginalized identity group in the form of a transgender identity, AkeeLah feels constantly threatened. The idea that Selma's white residents, government and justice system would not investigate her death, paired with the violence that Akeelah fears could be equated to the environment that enables modern-day lynchings to occur (Ore, 2019).

In the late 19th century, Dallas County, the county within Alabama where Selma sits, led the U.S. in terms of instances of lynching (Whack, 2015). As Ore (2019) states, lynching culture very much still exists in the United States, even though its modern form may look different from the historical connotations that individuals have of the act. While it is no longer socially acceptance to send postcards detailing lynching to family and friends, the state still sanctions these murders and unknown numbers go unreported. Since transgender women are considered "demon(s)" in Selma, the malicious and evil acts that could potentially be enacted against her could even be considered a form of *jouissance,* a means of achieving pleasure through the suffering of other human beings, for white individuals (George, 2016). In terms of safety, AkeeLah mentioned that before finding her current boyfriend, she did not feel comfortable in the dating world whatsoever. She experienced treatment from the men around her that categorized her as a fetish rather than a human being to be in a relationship. "It's all a game when it comes down to girls like me," AkeeLah stated (LoGreco, 2021). Because these games are potentially deadly, as seen by current research regarding violence against Black transgender women, women

such as AkeeLah may feel hesitant to be their authentic selves in public (Baker, 2011; Lenning et al., 2021). Throughout the episode, AkeeLah reconciles with coming to terms being more "out" in her community, and is partially assisted by her friend Que, a Black transgender man who developed Alabama's only trans-led STD/STI clinic (40:00). For AkeeLah, simply being able to exist in her community without fear is her main priority.

Joseph (Shantelle Rose): Hiding as a Result of Violent Trauma

Another individual in this episode who is terrified to be out in public with his authentic identity is Joseph. Joseph is a gay Black man working as a real estate agent, and he lives in a luxurious household with several expensive cars in his garage. From the outside, Joseph's life looks perfect, but as his drag mentor Shangela spends more time talking to him, the audience discovers that Joseph's fairytale life is clouded by a dark past. Joseph eventually explains that in Selma, he does not feel comfortable being out, and he utilizes different personas when dealing with professional clients in order to hide his gay identity. "Selma's a tough place, if you don't have thick skin, you won't survive here", Joseph explains to Shangela (10:46). He later recounts to Shangela how he and AkeeLah, revealed that, as childhood friends, they would have to physically fight off bullies growing up or risk sustaining serious injuries.

One of the most violent revelations of the episode occurs when Joseph reveals the 13-year relationship he had with his ex. Joseph and his partner were involved in a "DL" (down-low) relationship, or a same sex relationship that must be kept secret from the public in order to maintain one or more partner's appearance as straight (McCune, 2014, p. 9). Upon hearing that Joseph wanted to be appreciated and loved openly rather than hidden, the DL partner pointed a gun to Joseph's head. Joseph barely escaped with his life, telling Shangela that had the bullet not been stopped by hitting the arm he used to protect himself, it would have passed through his head

(13:54). Joseph expresses shame to Shangela, saying that he never should have put himself in the position to be hurt in such a way. His shame continues throughout the episode as he comes to terms with the fact that his mother, reluctant to accept his sexuality, is going to see him perform in drag. One of the components that Shangela emphasizes during her time with Joseph is that it is okay to be proud of his identity as a gay man rather than feeling the need to hide.

Joseph and his partner's relationship, including their perceived need to hide, are reflected in Urminsky and Bartels (2016) scholarship which states that possessing LGBTQ+ identities and their negative social stigmas can result in lower self-image. As a result of being traumatically forced into the role of social "other", it is not uncommon for LGBTQ+ individuals such as Joseph's partner to develop negative biases towards fellow community members (Haaga, 1991). However, this trauma does not excuse violent behaviors enacted against fellow LGBTQ+ individuals in any way. Rather, it demonstrates how a hegemonic concept regarding sexuality can result in varying different presentations of sites of trauma. Because Joseph's partner is unable to accept his own LGBTQ+ identity due to the associations the hegemon has placed on it, he creates a site of trauma for Joseph who fears for his safety being out in public as a result of nearly losing his life.

Deborah: Creating Safety in the Wake of Grief

The last participant showcased in the episode is Deborah, a straight cisgender Black woman. A grandmother with a large family, Deborah is identified by her mentor Eureka as someone who never takes time to focus on herself and would rather give her time and energy to her family and those around her. As Deborah opens up more to Eureka, she tells the story of the murder of her granddaughter Ke'Aira on June 19th, 2020 (WSFA, 2020). Ke'Aira's surviving brother Ilkerious accompanies Deborah and Eureka, telling the audience that as a gay man,

having a sister who identified as a lesbian was a way that the two bonded as siblings. Deborah stated that she "always tried to have a safe haven for them" (12:27) and that "being gay is fine with me, that's just being who you are". Ilkerious explains to Eureka that having Deborah as his grandmother has provided him with a source of unconditional love and support despite the immense amount of grief that has plagued their family on account of a multitude of deaths in such a short amount of time.

Deborah shows off her home to Eureka, divulging that she has a love for glamorous things such as caps, heels, purses, and wigs. She emphasizes throughout the episode that for her, family is everything. She explains that "Ke'Aira was life, she was like a smile. So for me to just sit around and just wallow in my sorrow, she wouldn't want that" (17:49). Ilkerious admits that he wanted Eureka to come work with his grandmother because she has given so much unconditional love to him and deserves to have something nice for herself as well. Deborah receives Eureka with open arms immediately, embracing him in a hug (19:01). Deborah, although not coming from a queer identity, has continuously served as an ally to the LGBTQ+ community by giving her grandchildren a place to celebrate who they are at all times.

Deborah's allyship created a place for her grandson Ilkerious to safely narrate his site of trauma after losing his sister to violence (Hubbell, 2020). Her acts of selflessness and love oppose the hateful and systemically racist environment that has led to Ke'Aira's violent murder. Ke'Aira was shot in her car by a white man without a known motive; it is possible that the violence that ultimately took her life is a direct result of living in the wake of slavery as a queer Black woman (Sharpe, 2016; WSFA, 2020). Because racial tensions in Selma still run high, they contribute to an overall environment in Selma which dehumanizes Black Americans, especially

queer Black Americans, as “no-citizens” (Sharpe, 2016). This positioning attempts to normalize violence against Black bodies, including Ke’Aira’s violent murder.

Sharing Black Trans Joy: AkeeLah’s Advocates in An Anti-Trans Climate

Prior to the drag performance at the end of the episode, AkeeLah is shown providing support and acceptance to other queer individuals in this episode through her interactions with childhood friend Joseph in addition to her unwavering support of Que. As the openly queer community in Selma is small, viewers are given the impression that many of the queer individuals know one another. While AkeeLah’s interactions with Que are brief, their time spent together in the Knights and Orchids clinic provides a chance for them to discuss ways in which they have both utilized their identities to provide support to one another in addition to their community. These efforts are both subversive and impactful as they offer accommodations for transgender individuals who must often fear for their own safety (Yarbrough, 2023).

The success of the clinic is significant because of the lack of societal support for both the Black and queer community, as discussed above, but also because of the specific social climate amidst Selma. The pride flag a proudly waving outside is a beckoning banner that shows all of Selma’s LGBTQ+ residents that there is a safe space waiting for them where their identity will be affirmed and supported without question. As Que states, “This is the second leg of the Civil Rights Movement. If you see that flag and you’re from the community, you know that it’s a safe haven, you know what it is,” (40:00). Que adds that he felt he needed to be open about his trans identity and visible to the public in order to be a role model to other individuals grappling with their own gender identities or sexualities. He states, “We got to this point by helping our people. I needed to be visible here because I didn’t have a role model growing up. I owed it to my city and my people here to be visible,” (39:00). AkeeLah confirms the impact of the clinic being

outwardly queer-friendly, explaining that she was taken aback upon seeing the pride flag in Selma as she was not used to feeling seen.

Through AkeeLah's drag performance at the end of the episode, she receives communal support from Que who cheers her on from the audience. In this moment, the audience sees a twist in the dynamic of the two as Que, the more out and visible of the two watches as the previously reserved AkeeLah shows the audience her authentic self with her name spelled out, dazzling the onlookers in huge lights on stage (53:53). As she dances and sparkles for all to see, other members of her community such as her boyfriend Derrick and Joseph can be seen grinning and applauding her efforts. Bob additionally joins AkeeLah on stage, emphasizing her positive qualities to the crowd while ensuring that he can give her her own individual performance first (55:29). Through the live reception of AkeeLah's performance, the audience is able to identify communal support for AkeeLah in terms of the loved ones that show up for her in the audience. AkeeLah does not have any biological family members present at the performance that we are aware of, but her partner, dance team members, and transgender friend Que show their support. While the audience remains unaware of whether JoAnne and AkeeLah know one another, we can see Joann moved to tears by AkeeLah's show (56:26). Also moved to tears is AkeeLah, as she tearfully thanks Derrick from the stage as well as Bob, embracing her in a tight hug before leaving the stage. Especially in the case of AkeeLah's partner Derrick, AkeeLah's reception is an emphasis on the importance of found family for transgender individuals who lack biological familial support (Roe, 2017).

We're Here's portrayals of Que and AkeeLah are groundbreaking considering how historical and popular media portrayals often vilify and dehumanize transgender individuals (Cook, 2018; Di Marco et al., 2021; Leff, 2023; Ramsey, 1934; Sender, 2023). These positive

portrayals are essential as media is proven to have influence on public perceptions of LGBTQ+ identities (Sender, 2023). Additionally, portrayals such as AkeeLah's and Que's show audiences that it is possible for transgender individuals to be successful and supported as adults. Much of the news regarding transgender individuals focuses on the harm that they endure, which does not provide much in the ways of hopeful narratives or inspirational stories for transgender youth who may already be struggling with accepting their identities (Boone, 2022; Cook, 2018). *We're Here* combats hegemonic portrayals of transgender individuals by providing both vulnerable and triumphant moments for both AkeeLah and Que, even providing visibility for a trans-led sexual health clinic for potential transgender audience members who may require this care (Ayhan, 2019).

Selma Drag as a Basis for Intersectional Alliances and Solidarity

While Joseph mentions his reluctance several times throughout the episode to Eureka regarding being in drag in front of his mother, one plot twist for viewers comes in the form of his reveal that he has invited his mother to the drag show (50:09). However, the caveat of this reveal is that Joseph never included the detail that he would be one of the individuals performing. Before the show begins, Joseph panics as he worries about the reaction of his mother as well as the possibility of being seen as unprofessional by potential clients and damaging his work reputation. Shangela works with Joseph to control his breathing, telling him, "This is about celebrating you being here", and he goes on with the performance as planned.

In the audience, we see two of Joseph's friends, Miss Kiki and Helene, introduced in the episode as two of Joseph's queer friends. Shangela takes the microphone and invites Joseph's mom on stage once his performance concludes (51: 48). His mother walks up and immediately embraces Joseph, smiling. Joseph is brought to tears, telling her, "I am so elated that you're

here" to which she responds, "I'm happy to be here". (52:26). This interaction contradicts Joseph's prior comments regarding his mother seeing him in drag, where he told Shangela, Miss Kiki and Helene, "If she saw [me in drag], she would probably drop dead right there, and Lord, I can't let her see it (23:37). Accompanied by loved ones in his new drag persona, Joseph overcomes his reluctance and anxiety and embraces his mother as an openly queer individual. For Joseph, the performance marks an official end to him ever having to be DL again, as the experience was detrimental to his self-worth (McCune, 2014). While it is difficult for outsiders to discern whether Joseph and his mother's relationship changed after the performance, Joseph's bravery regarding his identity is evident as a man who was forcibly hidden for over a decade. In the end, he is commended in that bravery by Eureka and those closest to him.

In Deborah's example, her form of coalition includes both her living grandson Ilkerious and her deceased granddaughter Ke'Aira. Before Deborah goes on stage to perform a tribute to Ke'Aira, dressed in Ke'Aira's favorite color, yellow, she states, "People shun difference. The queer community, they live from a distance. I'm looking forward to this because I feel like it's going to be an uplift, and Ke'Aira's going to be right here beside me when I do it" (46:50). Alongside a drag-donning Ilkerious, she lip-syncs to an acoustic version of "Lean on Me" while holding a heart-shaped memorial with Ke'Aira's name on it. The two relatives sing to one another, embracing one another and leaning on one another as the lyrics play out (48:11). Eureka then asks the audience to give a round of applause for Ke'Aira and gives Deborah a chance to say a few words to Ke'Aira on stage.

In Deborah's performance, she and Ilkerious take the immense trauma of their loved one's unsolved murder and transform it into a beautiful display of art and unconditional love. Furthermore, the fact that Deborah accompanied Ilkerious in drag without a second thought

showed her support of his interests and her allyship to the LGBTQ+ community members in her family as a straight woman. In addition, Deborah and Ilkerious can spread awareness of the tragic death of Ke'Aira by making her name and cause of death known not only to the audience but to the viewers watching at home.

Selma Drag's Facilitation of Resistance and Development of Political Bonds

AkeeLah's performance is centered around telling the audience exactly who she is as a transgender woman. For this reason, AkeeLah does not take on any sort of alternate persona or drag name, rather, she is a glammed-up woman making her new introduction to Selma, without any more pretending. So much of AkeeLah's story is spent outlining the pure terror she feels as a transgender woman living in a city without transgender acceptance, and how afraid she is of becoming a victim of violence if she is exposed. AkeeLah's fears are unfortunately founded societally at the national level, (Ayhan, 2019; Di Marco et al., 2021; Gortmaker, 2006) but also in the region of Selma as a religious area in which many label her as a "demon" (21:19). Therefore, when her song choice, "I Am Her' by Shea Diamond touts the lyrics, "There's an outcast in everybody's life, and I am her" (53:30) AkeeLah is actively addressing the fact that she has been shunned by her community. The song's impact is emphasized by the fact that artist Shea Diamond is a Black transgender woman from the south. AkeeLah takes her truth and engages in resistance by fighting against expectations placed on her as transgender woman to be ashamed, shunned, and quiet.

AkeeLah's most overt form of resistance comes from the portion of her performance where she tells the crowd, "Say my name. I am AkeeLah" (53:30). This completely overt presentation of AkeeLah's identity is a stark contrast to her behavior at the beginning of the episode where she states, "You have to stay inside a lot, you can't really walk outside in the day

time because here in Selma, people don't really have acceptance so I'm always hiding" (5:18) and mentions that Derrick is the one who often had to prompt her to go out in public (26:00). Much of AkeeLah's life is centered around fear and trauma regarding violence, which is why so much of her resistance is focused around being visible in order to reduce the fear for other transgender individuals who must navigate these same issues. In this way, AkeeLah's celebration of her identity is a resistance to a community of individuals who actively want to harm her or want her dead. AkeeLah finishes out her performance with Mary J. Blidge's "Just Fine", which states, "I wouldn't change my life, my life's just fine".

While Akeelah's resistance is centered around celebration of her authentic self, Joseph's resistance allows him to take on an alternate persona, Shantelle Rose. Earlier in the episode, Joseph tells Shangela that he identifies as out, but has to "turn it on and off" (10:10). This sentiment was reflected in Joseph's romantic relationship in which he had to be completely closeted for years. Despite Joseph's masculine appearance, he admits to Shangela in an embarrassed tone that he has experimented with makeup in the past and shows a great interest in the prospect of being able to have long hair through a large wavy wig (LoGreco, 2021). It is evident that Joseph is not used to expressing interest in hobbies considered feminine, and that he carries a great deal of embarrassment with him regarding this. However, when it comes time for him to perform Kelly Rowland's "Commander", he takes center stage. He first appears completely covered up by a white sheet, in what seems to be a direct reference to the years that he has spent covering up his identity for the world (49:36). With the start of the lyrics, the sheet is ripped away and Shantelle's glittering silver makeup and attire is revealed along with a large voluminous wig. At this moment, Joseph is reborn.

Dancing as Rowland sings the lyrics, “No fear no doubt, I’ll provide the answer”, Joseph, like AkeeLah, pushes past his doubts regarding being open in his identity in order to come out to the audience. With such immense trauma that he has experienced in the past at the hand of his ex, the process of coming out is even more terrifying. However, Joseph becomes the “commander” of his own destiny in this scene, pushing through his anxiety to show the audience he can be whoever *he* wants to be, not who they expect him to be.

While Deborah herself does not come from a queer identity, she resists the hegemonic narrative in Selma and in United States culture overall that treats LGBTQ+ identities as something unnatural from what is morally correct (Martino Kassen and Omercajic, 2020; Orbe, 1998). Deborah, as a consistent source of support for her grandchildren regardless of sexuality, actively resists the conditions that contribute to the hate and violence toward queer people of color. Furthermore, as someone who has been forced to endure years of trauma as a result of losing family members close to her including her granddaughter, Deborah uses her spotlight on the episode to amplify public awareness regarding Ke’Aira’s life and unjust death. This act of amplification through art serves as a resistance to the harmful dominant narrative that violence against Black bodies is acceptable due to the dehumanization of Black individuals. Deborah uses the love she has for Ke’Aira to keep her memory alive in a society that would rather silence her.

In Modern day Selma, racial tensions still run high and Black residents are still treated as less human than white individuals (LoGreco, 2021). Just as the current racist attitudes toward Black Americans in Selma are shaped by the gruesome and traumatizing past, Christina Sharpe (2016) details in her 2016 novel “In The wake: On blackness and being” the many factors that lead to the past and current dehumanization of Black individuals, explaining that being attacked on a systemic, physical, emotional, and spiritual level has forced Black Americans to live in an

existence as “no-citizens”, a so-called “wake” created by the many slave ships that carried Black Americans to this country by force. Sharpe (2016) describes the ways in which the trauma of slavery lives onto in modern day society and how racism constantly retraumatizes Black Americans via instances such as the weaponization of Black bodies and racially targeted police brutality in American society.

The idea of a “no-citizen” seems applicable to the Black residents of Selma who are dehumanized in that they cannot fully express their humanity or even feel safe walking in their city in broad daylight. Throughout Selma’s episode, Bob the Drag Queen, AkeeLah, Joseph, and Deborah highlight ways that living in the wake has impacted their ability to feel safe, accepted, and included citizens in their own country. By the end of the episode, they utilize their own unique strategies to resist the hegemonic standards that have resulted in their and their loved ones’ dehumanization.

Drag as a Way of Healing Trauma Communally: Bob and AkeeLah’s Duo

As a drag mentor, Bob is continuously supportive and uplifting of AkeeLah’s gender identity and trauma while simultaneously treating AkeeLah as a complex human being rather than focusing solely on the fact that she is trans. Bob is a drag queen who dresses in both stereotypically feminine and stereotypically masculine style while out of drag. When first meeting AkeeLah, Bob wears a long black dress paired with a customized denim jacket. This decision seems extremely intentional as the climate in Selma is of course unwelcoming to those who defy gender expectations. One extremely prevalent and moving quote Bob provides in this episode is “Living out loud you are offering safety to somebody else,”(40:48). It almost feels as if Bob’s intention behind the feminine attire was to provide an extra air of safety for AkeeLah, who would no longer have to feel alone in defying gender presentation or showcasing her

stereotypically muted identity in her small town. AkeeLah uses her drag to put her into a vulnerable position both because of her status as a Black individual and as a transgender woman but feels empowered to showcase herself as a result of that very same drag.

Omi & Winant (2015) state that "one of the first things we notice about people (along with their sex) when we meet them is their race. We utilize race to provide clues about who a person is. This fact is made painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize" (p. 59). While AkeeLah and Bob the Drag Queen are both identifiably Black individuals, their gender presentation presents feelings of discomfort for straight cisgender individuals in Selma when it comes to categorization. From a dominant perspective, AkeeLah is an abnormality because she was born into the world, identified as a male at birth, then defied that identification and made the decision to publicly live her true identity as a woman.

Despite the hegemon providing AkeeLah with her categorization, she defies it and instead lives as a woman. This is not to say, whatsoever, that being transgender is a choice, but rather the choice comes from the decision to be perceived in society as transgender and come out publicly. As Bob the Drag Queen, Que, and AkeeLah mention throughout the episode, this can have benefits for other members of marginalized groups because it provides safety and affirms other individuals' muted identities by showing them that they are not alone. As Bob states. "Imagine being in a town and seeing no reflection of yourself. Nowhere. Not a single person. What impact does that have on a community? Sometimes you need to see people loving someone, so you feel like it's okay to love them too. For that reason, the queer community is a beacon of hope here in Selma" (58:26).

Celebration and Trauma Working in Conjunction

One commanding way that hegemonic society exercises power over queer individuals is via othering. When an individual is othered, they are considered inherently different from the dominant group. Towns (2020) questions ideas that Blackness should be an organizing principle for white life and criticizes how many white individuals define Black individuals as the "other" and white individuals as the "self". Rather than defining Black individuals as the other, Towns (2020) suggests that a more accurate term would be "others of Europe" as this reflects how these definitions come from a strictly white Eurocentric approach. Othering of any kind can have detrimental effects to individuals' wellbeing, and it often starts at a young age partially through the education system (Martino et al., 2020). Similarly to how Black history is not taught accurately in schools due to white individuals maintaining most positions of power in the education system, said system often fails to mention queer and transgender individuals in any meaningful way. This means that gender nonconforming and transgender students, a population especially vulnerable for mental health issues and suicide, do not receive much support or information regarding their identities (Martino et al., 2020). For Black transgender individuals, two aspects of their identity are heavily underrepresented and misrepresented which could potentially cause confusion and unnecessary mental health related adversity (Austin et al., 2020; Reid, 2022; Sivels, 2022; Teetzel, 2017; Ziegler, 2023).

LGBTQ+ safe spaces cultivated through drag performances are an irreplaceable asset because they provide a setting where othering is not occurring at such an extreme rate as it does within the public where members of the dominant group's societal structures are more prevalent. Que's participation in the trans-led STI clinic provides safety for LGBTQ+ individuals not only from infections that could impact their physical health (especially since transgender individuals

can experience discrimination from transphobic healthcare providers) but their mental and emotional wellbeing since they can enter an establishment and be treated as equals. While othering may still occur in spaces labeled as LGBTQ+ safe spaces, it is likely that other LGBTQ+ individuals will flock to these environments, which can in turn create community. Being engaged with other members of a co-culture can allow for people to discuss and unpack the distinct trauma that accompanies the experience of existing within the co-culture.

As a result, queer Black co-cultures are a traditionally muted group who experience a unique form of trauma that will never be fully understood by those who are part of the dominant culture. Younger Black queer individuals who did not experience historical trauma firsthand still develop significant trauma when they are forced to witness the aftermath of the older generations and their ancestors. This scene is a clear example of the generation trauma that can be transmitted through members of an oppressed co-culture. Knowing that one's entire life is a result of years of inhumane and evil acts causing human suffering is like a burden to bear even in moments of joy. Because "trauma lives in and is transmitted effectively through bodies", this trauma from past events may never truly go away (p. 47).

Conclusion

Generational trauma, historical erasure in the education system, traumatic memory sites, and simply just living in an American society that was built on the backs of Black slaves are just a few of the factors that Black Americans and Black trans Americans are forced to grapple with on a daily basis. As a result, members of these traditionally muted groups must seek relief from trauma in their own way as a means of survival. Many individuals in *We're Here* who have intersectional identities feel that community support from other co-culture members and safe spaces (even if they cannot be guaranteed as 100% safe), are essential components to living with

trauma. However, for change to occur, members of the dominant group need to recognize the damage that has been done and continues to be done in order to take action in being explicitly anti-racist to make reparations rather than be complacent with current society.

Strutting in the Face of God: Resisting Restrictive Religious Culture in St. George, Utah

In episode three of season three, *We're Here*'s hosts tackle a multitude of religious-centered topics within the culture of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) in St. George, Utah. Our three queens address the ways in which the Church preaches certain ideas of family, anti-Black rhetoric, and other aspects of conservative religious culture which adhere to principles of Christian Nationalism. The episode introduces how these aspects of LDS culture permeate traditionally conservative areas of rural Utah and how they impact the featured LGBTQ+ guests as well as the hosting queens. The episode focuses first on a transgender man named Toni who has come out within the past year and is struggling to feel affirmed in his community as well as within his immediate family (LoGreco, 2021). Family overall is a prominent theme in this episode, as demonstrated by the next guests: Anjanae and her adult daughter, Gaby. Anjanae, as the audience finds out, is more than a supportive mother for her bisexual child; she reveals to Eureka mid-episode that she identifies as bisexual herself. The last guest we meet is 31-year-old nonbinary parent Micah, an out individual who uses any pronouns and has recently undergone top surgery. Throughout the episode, the four participants grapple with their queer identities within the conservative LDS culture of St. George and utilize drag to unpack what authenticity and family mean to them, despite what they have been taught through religious perspectives. Through their use of drag, the participants each engage in their own personal form of resistance, in addition to Dhaenens' (2013) perception, by bringing a public

drag performance to a location where it is labeled as sinful by the public majority. By challenging the conservative religious climate of St. George through drag, participants demonstrate the multiple ways in which they can exercise their freedom of expression in order to combat rigid standards set by Christian Nationalism and Mormonism.

(What is) Christian Nationalism: How to Be a "Real American"

> But we can feel something about the violent religious rhetoric always swirling around the queer. Once we break through the religious imagery, once we break down the Tower of Babel, the reified terror of suffering in a Christian nation, we have something else: a painful babbling, a confusion of tongues that is hardly silent, but a racialized collection of deplorable aesthetic noises, sounds, and eroticisms that speak indirectly a language of "hope." (Cobb, 2006, p. 112-113)

The except above, from Cobb's "God Hates Fags" draws upon religious doctrine by identifying the ways in which it can facilitate a dangerous climate for queer individuals in the United States. However, in order to understand the depth and scope of this impact, an understanding of Christian Nationalism's origin and impact is necessary. Christian Nationalism has been defined by former Christian Nationalist Brad Onishi as the ideology that America is an inherently Christian nation, was established historically as such, and should, as a consequence, permanently remain a Christian nation (Barrón-López & Lane, 2024). As Christian Nationalism is a belief that America and Christianity cannot and should not be separated for any reason, it can cause harm to individuals historically condemned by white Christians, who obtain the most socioeconomic power in the United States (Braunstein, 2021; Perry and Schleifer, 2023; Perry, 2022; Rahko and Craig, 2024). Rhetoric produced by white Christian Nationalism creates a variety of benefits for white Christians, such as creating "myths of American righteousness"

which provide justifications for inhumane deeds enacted by white Christians against “racial or ethnic minorities" (Perry and Schleifer, 2023, p. 1252). These benefits advantageously position white, straight, cisgender Christians as God’s “chosen people” while contributing to the systemic oppression of marginalized individuals across the nation (Rahko and Craig, 2024, p. 6, Gorski and Perry, 2022). Therefore, it is critical to address the impact that white Christian Nationalism has had on racial minorities while examining how it can impact LGBTQ+ individuals, such as those with intersectional identities.

According to previous research by Braunstein (2021) and Perry (2022), it is impossible to separate the impact of American Christianity on racial identity within the country. For instance, the concept of “Manifest Destiny”, formerly understood as the right for Americans to expand their territory but critically understood as a Christian ideology in which white Americans were given the rights by God to engage in actions that caused physical and emotional harm to individuals of different racial and ethnic backgrounds due to the belief that whiteness is fundamental to divinity and righteousness. Based on this belief, white Christians viewed themselves experts in all aspects of life, using the idea that they and “their” country were morally pure and superior to others. This concept of a “superior birthright” was used in order to rationalize historical events including but not limited to, the displacement and murder millions of Native Americans, the violent acquisition of Mexican land in the Spanish-American war, and the justification and perpetuation of chattel slavery (Braunsetin, 2021; Perry, 2022). If white Christians wanted something, they believed that God would support them in obtaining it, regardless of the horrors caused in the process. In many instances, the rationale used during these displays of Christian Nationalism was that violent interventions were necessary to “liberate” individuals from their corrupt governments or their sinful ways of life (Gorski & Perry, 2022, p.

118). Because these actions were framed as liberation from a moral party, they were completely absolved from any accountability for the harm that they caused to humanity.

At its core, white Christian Nationalism is an "ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture" (Whitehead and Perry, 2020). By fusing religious and civic life, this ideology creates a belief system which not only absolves white Christian Americans of accountability for the atrocities that have been committed against people of color and other minorities but continues to enable them on a national and global level (Gorski and Perry, 2022). According to Perry and Schleifer (2023), there is a directly recorded link to prejudice towards racial minority groups and engaging in Christian nationalist beliefs. This phenomenon is due to the ideology's positioning of history, which centers white Christians as vindicated heroes, and all other groups as morally impure and misguided, thus "deserving" of the abuse enacted upon them (Braunstein, 2021; Gorski and Perry, 2022; Perry, 2022,). Gorki and Perry (2022) explain in "The Flag and the Cross" that under White Nationalism, "violence has been used to establish and secure white freedom" both "on the frontier and on the plantation", and that while this violence takes different forms today, it is far from gone (p. 119).

According to survey data, when Americans see Christian and American identities as synonymous, they are more likely to concur that "citizens should support their country even if it is wrong" (Perry and Schleifer, 2023, p. 1249). Additionally, the conviction that Christianity is a marker of being a "real American" is most popular amongst white individuals and "virtually non-existent" for Black and Hispanic individuals (Perry and Schleifer, 2023, p. 1249). Because Christian Nationalism is harmful to marginalized racial groups due to its fusion of historically white and hegemonic Christian beliefs and values with legislation and social perceptions

(Barrón-López and Lane, 2024). As many Christian Nationalists believe that "real Americans" must identify as a Christian and follow Christian beliefs (Barrón-López and Lane, 2024), they condone a belief system that completely discredits the citizenship and freedom of religion of American citizens. By rigidly defining what it means to be "true Christians" or "true Americans", Christian Nationalists create distinct social "others", and justify their continuous oppression by labeling these "others" as sinful as they have done historically (Gorski and Perry, 2022).

Restrictive Religious Culture: Who Does God Want to Have Sex?

Physical violence perpetuated by Christian Nationalists has always been supported by the controlling and passionate social rhetoric produced by its supporters. Previous research supports that restrictive religious culture is one of the largest catalysts behind racial and sexual bias within the United States (Cobb, 2006, Braunstein, 2021, Perry, 2022, Perry and Schleifer, 2023, Gorski and Perry, 2022). Conservative Christian culture has been recorded historically as being inseparable from racist ideologies and teachings which led to real-life oppression and violence in the United States. As noted by Gorski and Perry, (2022) even groups such as the Klu Klux Klan were born from white Christians looking to "defend the supremacy" of white Christians. As time went on, "more genteel" expressions of white Christian Nationalism emerged (p. 120-121). With this evolution of white Christian Nationalism came the repositioning of overt white supremacy to color-blindness, or the idea that racism is "a personal problem" as opposed to a social one and that white individuals should not be expected to confront or address racial issues in their daily lives (Gorski and Perry, 2022, p. 124; Sexton, 2010). This shifting of blame regarding racial issues reflects historical patterns in which white individuals utilize weaponized forgetfulness in order to maintain positive attitudes regarding American history and whiteness. Rather than

positioning white individuals as guilty of perpetuating racism, white Christian Nationalists insist that racism is something long gone. Rather than consider racism to be a sin that one must take accountability for, it is reframed as a means to an end for white individuals (Brooks, 2020). These tactics effectively manipulate victims of racism by telling them the problem they are experiencing in real time does not exist, and that those who point it out or question white Christian logic are irrational or emotional (Gorski and Perry, 2022).

Amidst the evolutions of white Christian Nationalists' conceptualizations of race in the United States was an incisive shift in the perception of sexuality. Drawing from early teachings maintained by New England Puritans and prior, education on sexual sin was an established aspect of Christian Nationalist culture (Gorski and Perry, 2022). Yet, for white Christian Nationalists, the focus of sex and sexuality became all-consuming. Part of the change included the "near exclusive focus on sex as the most dangerous form of sin", which resulted in an established social connection between sexual morality and "Christian morality" (Gorski and Perry, 2022, p.124). This association permanently altered the ways in which Americans conceptualize sex that persevere to this day.

One strategy utilized by restrictive religious cultures is the labeling of homosexuality as something that cannot be biologically determined or established from birth. In other words, if God would not create it out of his own image, then it cannot be natural or healthy. Instead of succumbing to the idea that queer people can be born queer, conservative religious individuals position queer identities and homosexual desires as "just desires- practices, orientations, and tastes, not something inherent and immutable in the individual" (Cobb, 2006, p. 121). By labeling queerness as an unnatural and sinful way for human beings to experience sexuality, it is

easier to convince the public that queer individuals are dangerous, diseased, purposeless, and exist against God's will (Cobb, 2006, p. 121).

As noted by Foucault, (1978/1990) the Christian pastoral-maintained control over language regarding sex, and as a result, shaped society's views regarding heterosexual sex within marriage as moral while categorizing homosexual or queer sexual activity as sinful. Straight, cisgender married couples were expected to have children that would be raised as the new generation of Christians. Homosexual individuals, especially queer individuals of color, were regarded as sexual "others" due to their sexual attraction lying outside of the hegemonic standard and their inability to procreate; this inability was viewed as defiance to God and nature's intention for what the purpose of sex was meant to be. By restricting who was allowed to have sex, and what sex was supposed to be, Christian Nationalists created and popularized rhetoric that encouraged violence and discrimination towards LGBTQ+ individuals. Because Christian Nationalism condoned queer individuals as morally corrupt and even sexual deviants, hurting and even killing them was viewed as akin to conquering inhuman demons sent from Hell (Cobb, 2006).

God Bless American Jesus: Christian Nationalism's Role in Mormon Culture

Just as white Christian Nationalism has evolved through the years, definitions of what constitutes Christianity has advanced and changed throughout the years. While the term "Christianity" originally did not include Mormons, it has since expanded its borders and now includes LDS members (Gorski and Perry, 2022). Therefore, it is essential to discuss Mormonism's unique involvement in the spread of Christian Nationalism and the impact that its unique religious culture has on the queer community, especially the culture of rural Utah. While Salt Lake City has been lauded by some to be one of the queerest cities in the United States,

(Banta and Harkins, 2023) the areas surrounding the global hotspot are typically very conservative and very religious. Within Southern Utah, such as near St. George, most individuals are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Recently, the church has shifted from using the identifying label "Mormon", a term typically used by individuals outside of the church based on their belief in the Book of Mormon. However, for the purposes of this analysis and in order to stay consistent with the terminology used within the episode, I will be using "LDS" and "Mormon" interchangeably.

Historical context is essential in understanding how LDS culture has evolved and influenced countless individuals around the world. First, LDS teachings vouch for a United States-centric view of Christian history, proclaiming that Jesus Christ visited the Americas and that the Garden of Eden was positioned in Jackson County, Missouri. Furthermore, LDS doctrine teaches that around 600 B.C. an Israelite, Lehi, traveled from the Middle East to America. There, his offspring eventually fashioned two separate "tribes", known as Nephites and Lamanites (American Experience, 2024). The Lamanites, who Mormons classify as "the ancestors of Native Americans", constantly battled the Nephites, despite Christ encouraging peace between the two communities (American Experience, 2024). A descendent of the Nephites, a man named Mormon, and his son, Moroni, are said to have eventually written the story of their tribe on gold plates, the original Book of Mormon. Years later, in 1823, Joseph Smith, the white son of a Vermont farmer, received a vision of Moroni, who revealed the gold plates' location which he recovered and translated into English with the help of his wife (American Experience, 2024). The book's popularity in America led to "thousands of Mormons" traveling with second LDS president Brigham Young to create their own religious community known as "Deseret" in the

Salt Lake City area in 1848, after the Mexican American War which claimed the territory now known as Utah (Givens, 2007).

However, Mormons were not the first people to arrive in the are now called Utah; the Paiute people, indigenous to Southern Utah, had been living in the area for a thousand years and were forcibly displaced from their land by the white settlers through a combination of violence and disease (Cutch, 2003). In the ten years following the Mormon's settlement, there were Paiute groups that experienced "more than a 90 percent drop in population" (Cutch, 2003, p. 130). The Mormons had a complex initial relationship with the Paiutes, with Young following Book of Mormon ideology that the Native Americans were simultaneously "a chosen people" and "a cursed people" because of their Lamanite ancestry (Cutch, 2003, p. 135). For Native Americans to receive salvation from God, they were expected to forgo their culture in favor of white Christian Nationalist practices, in this case, White Christian patriarchal family values (Brooks, 2020; Givens, 2007). For the Paiute people to maintain their own spiritual beliefs in favor of LDS beliefs was viewed as completely unacceptable. They were expected to attend white boarding schools and receive the word of the Lord to save their souls in the afterlife.

As seen by interactions attempting to convert the Paiute people, spreading the gospel and beliefs of the LDS is an essential aspect of the religion. This is in part influenced by the LDS belief that leaving the faith, or engaging in apostasy, is an extremely consequential action that bars one from entering the highest heaven, the Celestial Kingdom, and puts them directly into a hellish afterlife in a location known as Outer Darkness (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2017). As an 85% white religion which banned Black individuals from joining the priesthood and engaging in practices such as marrying in the church temple from 1852 to 1978 (Brooks, 2020, p. 23, p.26) the impact of Mormon missionaries and doctrine on people of color

is significant when examining correlations between the LDS and white American Nationalism. Modern LDS teachings still include the belief that Black individuals are descendants from the historical figure Cain, who was given the "punishment" of Black skin from God because of his sins (Brooks, 2020). The story of the Lamanites has been used to perpetuate white supremacy in America, especially through missionary work. LDS members are taught that it is their divine mission to rescue people of color by spreading the word of the Lord or by engaging in charity work in foreign countries. However, missionaries are not taught to recognize "their own role in creating global inequalities and conditions of deprivation" (Brooks, 2020, p. 18). Instead, LDS members, as a primarily white community, are positioned as pure and moral saviors who must rescue disillusioned people of color abroad. This narrative serves to further perpetuate structural racism and mimic Manifest Destiny-era themes which wreak death and destruction on marginalized communities.

By positioning white Americans as keepers of divine knowledge, the LDS allows white Christian Nationalists to absolve themselves from sin and maintain an image of purity. This image is maintained, in part, by the ways in which ideology regarding "sin" is constructed. As Brooks (2020) states, perceptions of sin in American Christianity developed until it was normalized to view sin as "an individual act to be expiated through transaction with the church" (p. 14-15). This definition of sin allowed white American Christians to align themselves with innocence as devout, engaged members of the church. Based on this rationale, pursuing a mission was inherently moral due to its existence being "divinely appointed" by God and the church (p. 14-15). Additionally, using the Book of Mormon gave white Christian Nationalists the ability to change and shape interpretations of the scripture to control concepts of morality that shaped the distribution of power and resources in the community. These interpretations have

prioritized and benefitted white Americans at the expense of people of color as they encourage white Christian Nationalists to look away from past actions and instead toward the Celestial Kingdom (Brooks, 2020).

Because of its involvement in white Christian Nationalism, LDS culture has also had a unique impact on the LGBTQ+ community. As the harmful impact of heteronormativity within LDS teachings will be expanded upon further in the analysis, it is necessary to first establish the correlation between anti-queer LDS teachings of familial expectations and Christian Nationalism. The LDS, like other Christian religions, believe in an origin story in which a man and a woman were created by God to reproduce. As Schuler et al. (2024) posit, these stories teach that "men and women were created by God with exclusive responsibilities and traits" (p. 1205). Since this creation is seen as formed by the divine creator, connections and relationships that deviate outside of the gender and sexual norm are seen as sacrilegious.

The LDS church teaches that the "ultimate purpose of creation" is to find a lifelong marriage partner of the opposite sex (Matthews, 2015; Schuler et al.). While these concepts may be familiar to those versed in other Christian religions, the LDS sets itself apart from different belief systems in that marriage and families are a requirement for reaching the best possible afterlife, the Celestial Kingdom (Matthew, 2015; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2017). LDS teachings state that afterlife consists of three separate forms of heaven (Matthew, 2015) but the only way to surpass the first and second degrees (the Telestial and Terrestrial kingdoms) and reach the Celestial kingdom, one must engage in an official marriage officiated within the temple. This action is known as a sealing between the husband and wife, which ensures that they will arrive in the afterlife together. This teaching, labeled the plan of happiness or the plan of salvation, is completely off limits to same sex or transgender couples

(Brooks, 2020). Because an approved marriage is a required component of completing God's plan, the LDS teaches that straight and cisgender individuals are the only individuals permitted into the Celestial kingdom (Matthew, 2015). This decree positions white American Christian men as the guards of the Celestial Kingdom's gates; not only does the church actively oppose gender affirming care for transgender individuals and gay marriages, but they also oppose the inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in the Celestial Kingdom (Brooks, 2020). By stating that God wills the exclusion of queer identities in the afterlife, white Christian Nationalists are given the opportunity to claim morality over LGBTQ+ individuals and therefore justify discrimination against them during their time on Earth, such as their current stances on gay marriage and gender affirming care (Brooks, 2020).

Christian Nationalists additionally perpetuate the standardization of the straight white nuclear family through curated social portrayals of white Mormon men and fathers as the cultural ideal in America (Brooks, 2020). Starting in 1972, Church officials spent money on a collection of public service announcements for television that displayed white Mormon men as "clean-living, dedicated" eventually reaching 95% of all stations in the United States (Brooks, 2020, p. 189). Similarly, mediums such as magazines associated ideas of white Mormon men with success drawing from "the religiously valued focus on the patriarchal, heterosexual, monogamously married family" (Brooks, 2020, p. 191). Through representation such as the above examples, white Mormon men found a way to position themselves as ideal "family men" in America and therefore defend the idea that white Christian Nationalists are righteous, natural, and should remain as the societal ideal. All the while, the LDS continues "not to invest the force of its moral energies in anti-racism" and resumes investing in "various political campaigns to oppose civil equality for LGBTQ+ people" such as working to ensure that LGBT+ families will

never be considered ideal or morally pure families (Brooks, 2020, p. 345). Positioning LGBTQ+ individuals as sinners who choose to act on their immoral desires makes it easier to associate the existence of these individuals as an attack against the straight, cisgender nuclear family. This allows white Christian Nationalists to defend their own identities as the most holy, their marriages as intended by God, and their families divinely created, therefore excluding LGBTQ+ individuals from being recognized as "true Americans" or "true Christians".

Religious Doctrine as a Background for Queer Shame

Season 3 Episode 3 of *We're Here* begins with Eureka, Shangela, and Bob showing off a stunning display of Utah-themed drag; as the queens have arrived in St. George, the audience gets a glimpse of a tumble-weed themed gown, a crystalline shoulder piece, and spiky cactus inspired couture. While the trio take in the scenery, Sam Smith's song "Unholy" accompanies their entrance (LoGreco, 2021, 1:23). The song choice is no-doubt intentional, providing audience members a nod to the notion that LGBTQ+ individuals are viewed as inherently sinful (Brooks, 2020). The episode begins with a careful examination of the impact on real individuals that being labeled as "unholy" can bring, namely, blame and shame. One tactic addressed within the show is the church's belief that non-heterosexual individuals have the potential to become straight in the afterlife if they live a life of complete celibacy and refuse to act on their so-called homosexual desires. By pairing this belief with the expectation for members of the LDS church to have biological children within their heterosexual marriages, the church effectively isolates and "others" LGBTQ+ community members both as individuals and as members of their own families (Schuler et al., 2024).

Additionally, the LDS church has specific terms that it utilizes when it comes to homosexual individuals within the community; these individuals are typically referred to as

"same sex attracted" (McGraw et al., 2021a; Schuler et al., 2024 p. 1202; Sumerau & Cragun, 2014; Zeeman et al., 2019). Terminology such as this is another way in which queer individuals are pathologized and placed as "others", in addition to the fact that their status as non-heterosexual places them at risk for being excommunicated from the community if they were to engage in any sort of homosexual relationship. Additionally, if the church is aware that an individual is same sex attracted, they could even become barred from "certain religious practices and rites" (Schuler et al., 2024 p. 1206). In this sense, not only do LGBTQ+ members risk ostracization from their religious community members, but they could also face the reality of being entirely kicked out and banned from the church.

The Mormon church, while prioritizing the heterosexual family structure, specifically prioritizes family structures that necessitate paternalistic heteronormativity (Schuler et al., 2024). As this dynamic is seen as the correct and moral family structure, being a gay or trans individual could even be labeled as a trial or sent by God to test an individual's faith. As a result, it is not uncommon for queer members of the Mormon church to feel pressured to ascribe to heteronormativity and enter marriages to save their families and themselves in the afterlife (Sumerau and Cragun, 2014).

Of course, it is extremely difficult for LGBTQ+ individuals to completely suppress their identities for the rest of their lives and research by Austin et al., 2020 has shown the disastrous impact of LGBTQ+ individuals who feel completely unsafe to exist as their authentic identities within the world. As a result, it is possible that members of the church may realize that their same-sex attraction will not go away even after engaging in prayer, and that they will feel immense guilt either for having internal thoughts regarding homosexual interaction or physically engaging in homosexual relationships or engagements. Because Mormon culture is centered

around family, if one's entire family belongs to the church then being excommunicated from the church would essentially mean being cut off from one's biological family. As one previous member of the Mormon church stated in an interview with Schuler et al. (2024), "I just realized that my whole life I'd been thinking I was the problem… That I was inherently bad or something and that I needed to change who I was fundamentally to fit this mold that they wanted me to fit into." (p. 1214). Because the pressure to conform is strong even outside the church due to hegemonic standards of heteronormativity, added pressure from the LDS church can make life as a member of the LGBTQ+ community uniquely difficult and isolating.

God's Plan for the Family: Toni and Micah's Reframing of Family

As the featured individuals on the *We're Here* episode 3 discuss their relationships to their families, the impact of living in a predominantly Mormon and conservative area becomes apparent. As Bob says at the beginning of the episode, "When I hear Utah, I think Mormons, and St. George does not disappoint" (2:05). Similarly, Eureka remarks during the introduction that everyone in public seems to have "like ten kids" (2:05). Directly prior to the first introduction of Toni, Eureka is shown entering a Mormon temple and engaging with a visitor's center worker named Elder Tingey (2:54). Tingey is friendly to Eureka and asks if she would follow him into the Temple to view a film called "God's Plan for the Family." She eventually exists and conveys her shock at the interaction to Bob and Shangela, telling them that "the room had a baby's bed in it" (2:55). With this scene, *We're Here* officially introduces the prominent Mormon culture within St. George, and with it teaches that the heterosexual family structure is of the utmost importance. Throughout the episode, the audience can identify different ways in which this belief has caused the LGBTQ+ community in St. George to feel unsafe, shameful, and unsupported.

As Toni mentions, his grandmother and mother have had a difficult time accepting his transition. His mother specifically mentions that she worries that Toni could potentially be harmed due to his identity within the community, telling him "I prefer you to live a really normal li- safe life, you know? I have some fears, 'cause there are a lot of people out there that are just cruel" (30:44). As further demonstrating the culture where queer identities are beyond the norm in the southern area, Toni describes the issues he has had with getting community members to understand his identity and notes how surprised he was when he found coworkers who accepted him as transgender. Similarly, Toni's mother mentions that her cousin, a therapist, sent several articles to show Toni regarding detransitioners, or individuals who choose to reverse their transitions. While the topic of detransitioning is a common one for conservative figures against gender-affirming care, current research from A study by Irwig (2022) in *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* states that in the very small minority of transgender individuals who detransition, the most common reasons were: "pressure from a parent (36%), transitioning was too hard (33%) too much harassment or discrimination (31%) and trouble getting a job (29%)" (p.1). These reasons for detransitioning compete against the conservative narrative that people who want to transition are likely to change their minds or are transitioning because representation of the practice is increasing on social media (Tietz, 2024).

Similarly, as a conservative establishment that believes the term Christian Nationalism is a "rhetorical tool to smear and silence conservatives", The Heritage Foundation states that woke gender ideologists wish to "subvert the family" and "replace people's natural loves and loyalties with unnatural ones" (Richards, 2023; The Heritage Foundation, 2023, p. 4). This ideology, although likely beyond her awareness, is present in Toni's mother's statement where she mentions how she wishes he could live a normal life with a cisgender identity. This sentiment

circles back to the teachings of the LDS church which emphasize a cisgender heterosexual marriage as God's intended and natural or "normal" union.

Toni's relatives share the LDS ideology that the family is meant to be a heterosexual couple and their cisgender children (Matthews, 2015). While Toni's mom does make an effort to use the correct pronouns with him, she perpetuates the narrative that Toni's identity is abnormal and a hindrance to their family dynamic. According to Toni, his grandmother told him that "gay people have something wrong with their brain" and that she would never see him as Toni, but as his "deadname", the name he was assigned at birth before transitioning (6:56). The idea that Toni's transition is fake or temporary echoes common critiques from the church which claim that identifying as transgender is simply a situation that can be erased once the individual finds strength through God (Pelligrini & Jakobsen, 2003).

Micah shares their own familial struggles in that they are living as an out non-binary individual. They describe how when they first came out to their biological family, the reaction was extremely negative, and they were completely shut out (14:50). They share that their family belongs to the Mormon church and that they were ostracized from their community as a result of being open about their queer identity (14:35). As a previous member of the Mormon church but also as a queer parent and spouse, Micah describes how he wants to feel like a normal family even though "the traditional family in St. George is a husband, wife" and "many kids" (12:29). Because Micah has a young child, he is exposed to the opinions and discrimination of the school systems in St. George and recounts that she and her wife have had to change schools multiple times due to discriminatory actions taken against their daughter Skylar. As an adopted Black child of queer parents, Skylar faces a unique kind of prejudice and discrimination within St. George due to her intersectional identity (Crenshaw, 1991). Micah notes that when they are out

with their family, they often worry about being harassed or victimized in a hate crime, and all that they want is for their family to "go about our business and be safe" (12:31).

Micah shares issues specifically within the Mormon church such as the social climate in which in-person interactions with church members are disarmingly kind and pleasant, despite the glaring issues that "they definitely have claws when it comes to queer issues" (14:35). This statement is affirmed by research by Brooks (2020) on the LDS' opposition to LGBTQ+ causes in addition to information from official LDS sites confirming their beliefs that homosexual actions interfere with God's plan and are not to be normalized or encouraged (Matthews, 2015). Throughout the episode, several different participants on the show remark how the homophobic and transphobic culture in the area is passive aggressive and leads to secretive discrimination coming from behind the scenes. However, the church is more overt in its teachings against queer identities and relationships, and directly impacts the queer experience through the church's members. "They make themselves everything in your life," Micah explains, "Your family is all connected. They are your community. If you leave it, you're going to be ostracized from your community, your neighbors, in my case my family, too" (14:39). These sentiments echo those seen in Schuler et al.'s study, in which participants felt that while they first felt supported by the CJCLDS community, they eventually realized that the support they received from the church was "largely conditional" and "only accessible to those who are heteronormative true believers- or those who act as such," p. 1210). Thus, the climate of friendliness is an extremely precocious one, as queer members of the church will be readily excommunicated and ostracized should they let their identity show too much (Brooks, 2020).

"They Think That's Okay Because That's What the Church Teaches Them": Anjanae and Gaby's Exodus from the LDS Church

As reiterated by participants in Schuler et al., (2024), the splitting of a family can be perceived as the worst thing that can happen to a member of the Mormon church. This impact is seen through the testimonies of Gaby and Anjanae. According to Gaby, her family started out as a fully Mormon family, but after hearing and reading doctrine regarding the sin of homosexuality and the concept that queerness will be taken away in the next life if one refuses to act on homosexual impulses in their current life, she felt she needed to exit the church because of how this doctrine impacted her self worth as a bisexual individual (9:41). After leaving, she states that she faced reactions from the conservative Mormon community in the form of church members showing up on her front porch to inquire why she had been absent from church. This emphasis on family is in part due to the LDS stance on heterosexual marriage as a requirement to enter the Celestial Kingdom. As Gaby mentions, this belief terrified her as a bisexual individual because she felt that she would lose her family in the afterlife (9:50). This notion of biological family and heterosexual marriage as the sole most important factor in one's life is not unique to Mormonism but is also seen in conservative political documents such as the anti-woke anti-queer Project 2025 which states, "The most important community in each of our lives- and the life of the nation- is the family" (The Heritage Foundation, p.4).

Gaby's mother, Anjanae, mentions that she first had "a breakdown" when Gaby told her she wanted to leave the church and explains that she grew up her entire life in the church and had never experienced anything else. Despite this, she explains how she reconciled with her feelings after questioning whether she wanted to follow a religion that told her not to see her daughter because of her sexuality. However, it is meaningful to hear Anjanae's questioning of these teachings considering her background in a religion which suggests that "any challenge or threat

to this heteronormative family is a threat to God's kingdom and will bring down the calamities foretold by prophets," (Schuler et al., 2024). Similarly to Schuler et al.'s (2024) results with queer participants, Gaby and Anjanae both mention feeling better in terms of mental health after leaving the church.

The phenomenon of the LDS church creating a hostile environment while maintaining strong outward ties with the community and a positive public facade is one that has been documented by scholars such as Brooks (2020). Because the church wants to maintain as many members as possible, it creates what Brooks (2020) identifies as a "private-public split" (p. 303). For example, some Mormons may try to recruit or retain LGBTQ+ members by developing a public personality that comes off as inclusive to the community. However, in the privacy of the Church, they may reveal their true stance on homosexuality and transgenderism. Brooks (2020) describes this method as one that emerges when Mormons feel that their beliefs may be scrutinized or attacked. However, it can cause consequences for LGBTQ+ community members both inside and outside of the Church as the split has been utilized "in campaigns to oppose women's rights and LGBTQ+ civil rights" and "is useful as well to the perpetuation of white supremacy" (Brooks, 2020, p. 303). The split has even earned a joking moniker, known as "Lying for the Lord" (Brooks, 2020, p. 3030).

Scenarios such as LDS members appearing at Gaby and Anjanae's porch may seem harmless at first glance, with the visual of a concerned community member checking in on the health and safety of a fellow human being, but it can also be a power tactic employed by Church members. LDS members are highly focused on maintaining family and community, and view LGBTQ+ children coming out as a separation of their sealing to their parents. In order to maintain external visual appearances, the church would likely ask Anjanae and Gaby to live

abstinent lives, and to pursue or maintain a heterosexual marriage in order to avoid being sent to a lower ranking afterlife (Matthew, 2015). Knowing that the LDS threatens extreme consequences for rejecting the faith in the form of having their souls sent to Outer Darkness reiterates how much courage both Gaby and Anjanae possess to embrace their bisexual identities rather than repent for them or pray for them to go away. Additionally, it shows how they were able to resist community pressure to stay within the church in the form of the private-public split.

Racism Justified Through Scripture: Gaby as a Victim of White Christian Nationalism

A major topic Gaby addresses during her time with Eureka is the treatment she received at the hands of her classmates being "the only brown girl in class" in the predominantly white population of St. George (9:30). She explains how despite English being her first language, she was profiled into an English as a Second Language course growing up because of her belonging to a Hispanic household. Gaby explains that one of the factors behind the racial discrimination in St. George is due to LDS rhetoric regarding Lamanites, who Gaby was told were as a group of "a group of people who disobeyed God and then were cursed with dark skin" (10:58). Gaby's recounting of her exposure to Lamanite narratives through her faith reiterate not only the 85% white majority within the LDS (Brooks, 2020) but the prevalence that the Lamanite narrative still carries in modern day Utah.

Gaby tells Eureka that she has been repeatedly labeled as a Lamanite by residents of St. George and describes the toll it has taken on her. Just as has been done historically, the use of Lamanite rhetoric has furthered Gaby's treatment as an "other" due to her skin color. Therefore, she was even more terrified of her community's reaction when she realized she was bisexual and carried multiple marginalized identities. Gaby explains that her community viewed their racist remarks to her as justified as a direct result of the Book of Mormon and expresses that "it

literally is systemically racist and sexist and it has been since the beginning of the church" (10:58). Gaby's comment addresses the white Christian Nationalism that she has been forced to endure since she was a child at the hands of her community.

The fact that Gaby experienced discrimination due to LDS belief systems not only within the Church but at school is an impact of white Christian Nationalists' belief that their religious views should be enforced not only in Church communities but throughout the country. Because of these practices, Gaby suffered being immediately singled out in her predominantly white community. While Mormonism is not the only religion in which people of color are labeled and viewed as sinners punished by God, (Barret-Fox, 2016) it is highly prevalent and continues to this day. Despite scholars establishing that the rhetoric regarding Lamanites has been used to condone the murder of Indigenous Americans, bar Black Americans from entering the Mormon temple, and substantiate white Christian Nationalist's justifications of white and American supremacy, it is still considered moral by the LDS community (Brooks, 2020, Cutch, 2003).

We're Here provides an indispensable platform for Gaby to give an honest recounting of her time spent within Mormon culture as a person of color. Because of the current statistics regarding racial and ethnic background in the LDS, stories such as hers can paint a more accurate description of what Mormon communities are like for individuals with intersectional identities rather than only for straight white individuals. While Gaby and her mother ultimately and justifiably chose to leave the church, they have unique insight as previous members of the church and as people of color. As such, Gaby is able to provide audience members with the testimonial of queer Hispanic ex-Mormon and bring her previously silent suffering of discrimination into a public lens.

Drag as Resistance of Conservative Religious Culture

Drawing from Dhaenen's conceptualization of resistance as an unapologetic queer expression in the face of heteronormative spacialities, I will apply different examples of the episode's deconstruction of conservative religious values in St. George. For one, Gaby specifically mentions in the beginning of the episode that she needs to rediscover her identity after leaving the church. "I have to find out who I am 'cause I couldn't before, I wasn't allowed to." She says, "I've been wondering what it would be like to take up more space, to not be afraid to say things or do things" (10:58). By pushing back against the church's culture which requests that members are obedient and follow their teachings without question, Gaby can explore what she wants rather than what her (former) community wants her to be. Because bisexuality is a major part of her identity, Gaby reconciles with the notion that to live authentically she must disobey and resist the heteronormative expectations of the Mormon church (Dhaenen, 2013).

While Gaby's love for her family throughout the episode is apparent, as seen by her close relationship to her parents and siblings as well as her fear of not seeing them in the afterlife, (9:50) she still resists the church's notion of what makes up a Godly family. In addition to the Mormon church, this notion can be identified in Project 2025 (2023, p. 4) which states "There are six mediating institutions that form a healthy society: Marriage, Family. Work. Church. School. Volunteering". According to these expectations and the expectations of the Mormon church, Gaby is not only resisting the idea that one must go to church in order to lead a healthy life, but she also resists the idea that she must engage in a heterosexual marriage.

Gaby and Anajane further demonstrate their support for one another's identities by doing a joint drag performance, alongside Eureka. Each of the individuals for this number are dressed in their own unique witch inspired apparel. The witch motif is an intentional reference to the idea

that both Gaby and Anjanae have used their voices to speak out against the church and are now viewed as unholy witches akin to the women prosecuted during the Salem witch trials. Their drag directly resists the church's narrative that they are a born sinner as they dance to the lyrics, "There's something wrong with the village, there's nothing wrong with you" while a shining sign behind them states "Love is magic," (54:34). Following this performance, Gaby's drag persona Gabyish is given a solo performance where she sings "Seasons of Love" from *Rent* alongside students from her school. This component of the number is a form of resistance against the local religious and conservative government which rejected Gaby's theater group's decision to put on the show on the basis that it was inappropriate, and the community wasn't ready for its blatant inclusion of queer issues. Anjanae solidifies the notion that she and her daughter refuse to hide under the suppression of the religious and conservative government and climate in the area, stating "There is a Mexican proverb that I live by and it is this: They said they can bury us; they didn't know we were seeds" (54:34).

Similarly, using the six institutions as a basis of religious conservative expectation, Micah's behavior as a queer non-binary parent resists the traditional conceptualization of what marriage and family can be, especially considering that they were disowned by their biological family and religious community. Micah further resists the conservative religious culture in St. George by serving as the executive director in a local pride organization rather than continuing to be a part of the church. Additionally, Micah actively resists conservative religious expectations of what gender can be by getting top surgery, presenting beyond the binary, and using all pronouns. The ramifications for this resistance are seen in moments such as their description of an incident with a local business that resulted in Micah being screamed at by a group of men for

using the women's bathroom, stating that they "were almost dragged out of the bathroom" (15:17).

Micah's drag at the end of the episode addresses this dichotomy between their authentic expression and the expectations placed upon them by the religious culture within St. George (and across the United States). Micah enters the stage appearing as a woman with a baby doll, ironing board, and frying pan, conveying an image of traditional femininity. However, while "Queen's" Break Free plays in the background, Micah turns around to reveal a mustache on his face and rips off their wig and dress to reveal short hair and a yellow Freddie Mercury-inspired outfit (44:53). Accompanied by Bob, who wears a half masculine and half feminine outfit, (split down the middle) Micah ends the number by opening his jacket to show the audience his chest post-top surgery. This scene is impactful as it shows that just because Micah is a parent does not mean they have to be a completely non-sexual being. This is, of course, not to say that Micah revealing his chest is inherently sexual, but due to the backlash surrounding the show and the continuous conservative rhetoric regarding the drag show not being safe or appropriate for children, this move comes off as intentional not only for Micah's self-expression as a gender fluid individual but as a multifaceted human being who can be a responsible parent and also a sexualized performer all at the same time. Micah's performance presents several dichotomies and flips them. Just like Micah's gender presentation, their Mercury performance is an enigmatic concept which is difficult for audience members to define.

As a transgender man in St. George, Toni has had to endure an overall social climate within his biological family which enforces that he is not really transgender and does not need to be affirmed as a man. As such, Toni's drag resists this narrative by presenting him as a king who controls the musicians accompanying him on stage. With a wave of his magic scepter, they stop

and start playing trumpet to Lil Nas X's "Industry Baby". The costuming and decorating also incorporate the art that Toni creates and posts on social media, furthering the encouragement of authenticity despite Toni's drag king persona Tonilicious having an extravagant appearance. The show overall provides a sense of autonomy over Toni's masculine identity in a reality where he is misgendered by his family and the rest of his community.

"If That Was the Case, We'd Be Doing Missions Too.": Resistance at the City Hall

A final example of resistance to an anti-drag community comes in the form of the City Hall meeting that is called for as a response to HBO's filming of the episode. The local government in St. George as well as several citizens are shown as protesting the idea of the drag show and Bob claims they plan to revoke the permits to hold it near a public children's museum and play area, a revelation that is shown to the audience mid episode. As Bob explains, "It's not in your face, baby they are behind your back. We did everything right, we got the permits," (18:18). The outcry primarily comes from the public opinion that drag is always a sexual performance and can lead to the indoctrination (or grooming) of children. These sentiments echo opinions held all over the United States (Selvarej, 2023; The Heritage Foundation, 2023).

"You can't convert anyone to gay," Eureka states, "If that was the case, we'd be doing missions too" (19:03). The three main queens express their disappointment and distress when it comes to the threats being made against them by St. George's online. However, when the City Hall meeting takes place, several LGBTQ+ allies and advocates are shown combating the narrative in the room which is strongly anti-drag (39:59). Speakers are seen rebuking statements made in the room such as the idea that the show is not appropriate for children and involves the grooming of children (39:40). To combat this rhetoric, participants emphasize the ability for drag shows to show queer people that they should not be erased from the city, the concept that no one

can turn someone gay, and that representation can be a positive factor for both children and adults. Furthermore, individuals speak out regarding how the drag show can be the start of an opportunity to create a city where LGBTQ+ can come and feel safe and prevent queer suicide rates (Roehr, 2015, Teetze, 2017, Hatfield, 2019, Levitt et al., 2020, Austin et. al, 2020). "We were all groomed to be straight," a queer costume designer on the show states, "Did it work out?" (42:28).

As a result of the large LGBTQ+ community presence in the City Hall meeting, the show is allowed to resume. As a possibly unintended consequence, the social media backlash from religious conservative government figures and community members resulted in publicity for the drag show. The audience at the St. George's show is around 1,000 people, a much larger turnout than most of the crowds throughout *We're Here's* season. In this sense, the notion of queer individuals taking up the large area within the city serves as an overall form of Dhaenen's (2013) concept of queer resistance by overpowering the hegemonic expectations of the local government.

St. George Drag as Coalition Building

St. George's episode of *We're Here* focuses heavily on the idea that one can find family in spaces beyond one's biological family, such as in Micah and Toni's stories. In Micah's case, they build a life with their wife and daughter after being forced to endure being completely disowned for a period of time by their biological family. Because Micah has experience being shut out and isolated, they hold connection with family, friends, and community extremely dear to their heart. They also serve as a highly influential member of their community in Southern Utah by working with the Pride organization, and work every day to prevent other queer individuals in Utah from experiencing isolation from their community. Micah's drag

performance is supported by many members of the Pride organization, providing a touching moment which shows how the queer community in addition to Micah's chosen family rallies to support them despite their biological family not attending the show.

In Toni's case, he is supported in part by his mother, but he is still working to gain understanding from her regarding his gender. The drag show, which his mother attends, serves as an event where she can see her son embrace his identity and allow his confidence to radiate onstage; this is especially poignant considering his mother's fears that Toni would regret his transition and may even detransition one day. By viewing Toni showcasing his identity in a way that fully embraces who he is, it allows her to enter into his personal sphere and strengthen their relationship as biological family members. Similarly, Tony is allowed to receive an outpour of love and support from his chosen family, his queer best friends.

Anjanae and Gaby showcase through the drag show the power of the connection formed between queer parents and queer children, a concept even more striking considering the narrow definitions of family presented to them throughout their lives in Southern Utah (Brooks, 2020). Because of the political backlash to the show, Anjane and Gaby, in addition to the other guest performers, receive an amount of community outpour that they could not have predicted. In this case, *We're Here* highlights one aspect of the LGBTQ+ which is the phenomenon where the community bands together in the face of adversity such as homophobic political leaders. Throughout the episode, the drag show is portrayed as an event which can bridge alliances and build solidarity across points of cultural difference in Utah. As an example, Toni's mother, who appears hesitant to accept his identity, cheers him on in the crowd. After his performance, she hugs him and tells him she is proud of him. However, Toni's "second family", his queer friend group, can also be seen supporting him during his performance.

Each of the performers build coalitions with their chosen families, and their local community due to their intentional decision to resist traditional heteronormative family expectations through their personal drag performances. As stated by Brooks, (2020) the culture of the LDS can be damaging and isolating for LGBTQ+ members, especially LGBTQ+ members of color. However, even within highly religious communities, LGBTQ+ individuals are present and must find ways to survive even when it seems that their communities want them to cease from existing or to repent before God (Pelligrini & Jakobsen, 2003). In addition to the portrayals of drag by bisexual mother and daughter Gabi, transgender man Toni, and non-binary parent Micah, the crowd offers a means of affirmation and representation by showing the community in St. George that it is a safe space to be openly queer and celebrate their unique identities. As seen in research by Keenan and Hot Mess (2020), this type of coalition noticeably improves the quality of life for LGBTQ+ community members.

Conclusion

The queens and their protégées impact the climate in St. George by rallying against the overpowering concepts of naturalization and heteronormativity perpetuated by the predominantly conservative religious culture in the area. By fighting against white Christian Nationalist doctrine that states heterosexual marriage is the only natural and morally correct path for an individual, they create space for more individuals to embrace their identities and realize that they are not alone despite many LGBTQ+ community members staying closeted in their community. Because of the disruptive nature of drag when it comes to gender expectations, participants who felt dismissed within their identities received a chance to take control over their own expression and question traditional conservative ideals. The varying presentations of what family can be

throughout the episode give viewers the impression that by being out, queer families can also resist these hegemonic standards and create more visibility for other queer families.

Say Gay, Say Trans, Say Drag: Florida Drag as Resistance to Political Backlash

The season finale of *We're Here* season 3 place in a two-part special (episodes 5 and 6) which features a variety of individuals living in central Florida. With the additional screentime, participants' narratives are explored more extensively than in other episodes as the queens take their "drag children" under their wings in one of the most vocally conservative and anti-LGBT+ states in America. The episodes focus specifically on legislation targeting queer and transgender individuals such as HB 1557, known by its popular nomenclature "Don't Say Gay" as well as two bills aimed at gender affirming care for transgender youths, House Bill 1639 and Senate Bill 254. This legislation is one component of a cycle of LGBTQ+ villainization culture which creates a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ individuals who choose to come out publicly in these areas (Trotta, 2023). As the goal of the queens in this episode is to make a statement regarding the current socio-political climate in the area, they feature Jaime, a high school teacher in the public school system, and her young transgender daughter Dempsey. After the mother-daughter duo, the audience is introduced to a couple named Mandy and Lori. Mandy is a transgender woman in her seventies who embraced her identity later in life; as such, Mandy's wife Lori has reconciled with her own sexuality and supported Mandy throughout her transition. Lastly, the episode features Vico, a gay Puerto Rican man who survived the Pulse massacre in Orlando. By focusing on this set of characters, the finale showcases not only the direct legal impact of the bills such as the threat to the participants' health care or self-expression, but the social implications that the acceptance of these bills can create. By focusing on these characters, the

episodes highlight both the cultural trends created by the conservative members of the United States as well as the LGBTQ+ individuals who resist these negative cultural narratives.

How Florida Legislation Draws Upon the Groomer Narrative

House Bill 1557, also known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill was signed into office by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis in March of 2022. Its primary goal, according to DeSantis, was to protect children and restore parental rights in educational spaces (Goldstein, 2022; Migdon, 2023). However, the reality of the bill, which is also referred to as the “Don’t Say Gay" bill, is that it utilized unfounded narratives which demonize and dehumanize transgender minors and adults (Factora, 2022). House Bill 1557 aimed to alter the rights of teachers within Florida classrooms to prevent children from being “indoctrinated” with transgender-inclusive rhetoric (Goldstein, 2022). The bill banned topics of gender identity or sexual orientation in schools and enabled parents to press legal charges against schools deemed providing age-inappropriate content. As seen in recent narratives perpetuated by leading conservative voices, LGBTQ+ individuals are marked as enemies of purity and of conservative families (Caraballo, 2022; Center for Countering Digital Hate and Human Rights Campaign, 2022; Edelman, 2004). By drawing upon the assumption that being transgender is sinful and predatory, politicians promote bills such as HB 1557 as a means for parents to achieve protection from transgender indoctrination in schools, despite the reality than transgender individuals cannot “convert” cisgender individuals into being trans (The Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). This bill sought to prevent LGBTQ+ students from participating in comprehensive sex education courses in addition to isolating queer students who are already at a much higher risk of feeling isolated (Reid, 2022). As LGBTQ+ youth have a higher suicide rate than straight and cisgender students,

having support in school is one aspect that could cause them to feel like ostracized and dehumanized (Austin et al., 2020).

As of March 2024, HB 1557 has been altered after a settlement which expanded rights to discuss LGBTQ+ topics in schools under the caveat that they are not incorporated into course curriculum. However, the impact of the “Don’t Say Gay" bill has not only inspired other political officials across the nation but has provided a justification for rhetoricians like DeSantis, online conservative accounts such as @Libs of TikTok, and even QAnon, the conspiracy group who advocated for Donald Trump to defeat Satanism (The Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). The implications of the Don’t Say Gay Bill’s existence are deep for transgender individuals, drag performers, and all queer individuals across the state. Despite the settlement, LGBTQ+ individuals in Florida are well aware that conservative figures are rallying to dissolve their rights to exist publicly while drawing from an outdated narrative that has been perpetuated by Christians for centuries (Kobes Du Mez, 2020).

Similarly, House Bill 1639, sometimes called “Florida’s Transgender Erasure Bill" places limitations on private insurance groups and prevents transgender individuals from obtaining driver’s licenses and other forms of identification with their preferred names (Equality Florida, 2024). By requiring assigned names at birth, the state of Florida aims to remove the legal existence of transgender individuals and implement a regime where they must “out themselves” in locations like airports and when engaging with police (Equality Florida, 2024). Furthermore, under this bill, Florida health insurance coverage would be required to pay for conversion therapy for transgender individuals. Providing government funds to convince transgender individuals that their identities are a form of mental illness to be “cured” is both an intentional tactic to pathologize gender expression deviating from the

hegemon and a means to justify harmful rhetoric labeling LGBTQ+ individuals as dangerous sexual deviants (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Gabriel, 2022; Sedgwick, 1992). House Bill 1639 not only directly targets the expression of transgender individuals, but intentionally acts to strip transgender individuals from their trans identities and rights to inclusive healthcare, all while drawing from the notion that these harmful decisions are formed with the benefit of innocent children in mind (Edelman, 2004).

Senate Bill 254 created similar repercussions to House Bill 1639 as it targets the autonomy transgender individuals have over their own bodies. The bill suggests that gender-affirming medical treatments for transgender minors are a form of "serious physical harm", and can result in third degree felonies for medical professionals that treat trans minors and misdemeanors for treating trans adults (Health Policy Committee, n.d.; Trotta, 2023). By labeling gender-affirming case as a form of child abuse, this bill also justifies legal repercussions for parents of transgender children, including potential loss of custody of their transgender child (Health Policy Committee, n.d.). This bill introduces disastrous consequences for practitioners looking to assist their patients, parents wanting to support their children, and most of all, transgender children and adults looking to live authentically. By impacting transgender individuals' right to socially and medically transition through criminalizing puberty blockers, hormone replacements and surgeries for minors within the state, Florida has sent a clear message that transgender lives are inconsequential to its right-wing leaders.

In many conservatives' eyes, the increase in publicity for transgender individuals equates to an increase in transgender realities overall (Kobes Du Mez, 2020). However, the reality is that more individuals are gaining language to define their experiences in addition to

having online spaces to share their realities in (Center for Countering Digital Hate and Human Rights Campaign, 2022; Sevor, 2024). The creation of anti-queer and anti-trans bills such as the three listed above harm transgender individuals by revoking their right to their own identities. Research shows that the stigmatization and villainization evoked through these bills has disastrous and deadly implications for the transgender community, resulting in increased suicide rates as well as a severe impact on mental health (Austin et al., 2020). Transgender youths are disproportionately impacted by these social biases as they are forced between two extremes: being removed from a supportive parent household or being forced to comply with an unaccepting parent's wishes. The social isolation caused by these bills compounds upon the intense stigmatization that transgender and GNC individuals already face on a daily basis (Cassino, 2022). By focusing on criminalizing trans and GNC persons as groomers, the bills force them into a category that is viewed as subhuman and deserving of abuse reclassified as "protection" from conservative right leadership (Kobes Du Mez, 2020).

Make Religion Masculine Again: Why Christian Republicans are Anti-Gay

To better understand the context surrounding the implementation of modern laws such as House Bill 1557, House Bill 1639, and Senate Bill 254, context regarding the origins of narratives classifying LGBTQ+ individuals as groomers and pedophiles is needed. First, the phenomenon of labeling queer individuals as threats to children is nothing new. Rather, it is a classification which has been ongoing throughout history and is deeply tied to white masculinity, white supremacy and patriarchal Christian origins. For instance, in 1910s America, white Christian men began to feel uncomfortable with how the religion caused them to embody "womanly virtues", and thus made a social effort to shift the current understanding of masculinity (Kobez Du Mez, 2020, p. 24). Reinstating their masculine identities, therefore,

required asserting white Christian masculinity as something inherently "militant, warlike" and superior to Black individuals, women, and children. These articulations of masculinity within Christianity were intended to allow men to "take back the church" (Kobez Du Mez, 2020, p.24). To white Christian men, this social hierarchy was one ordained by God, and thus not to be questioned.

In the 1940s, these concrete and patriarchal distinctions between women and men's roles were exacerbated by the Cold War and its accompanying social belief that men were the sole protectors of the family while (white) women and children needed to be defended. The notion of white men as biologically driven to protect white women and the white family overall has also been reinforced through media such as the John Wayne cowboy archetype, a famous actor and public figure used to portray heroic white masculinity during a period when white America felt the need to reassert clear distinctions between "good" and "bad guys"; In this case, John Wayne was portrayed as the masculine white hero who utilized violence in order to reassert the notion that villains should look like people of color (often Indigenous Americans). It is undeniable that Wayne, a self-identified white-supremacist and Christian, influenced the attitudes and beliefs of preachers and several influential public figures within the church (Kobes Du Mez, 2020). Wayne's films convinced white America of the myth of the white American cowboy, when in reality, most true cowboys were Hispanic, Native American, or Black. Co-opting the image of the cowboy as a masculine white archetype was just one way that white Christians, especially white Southern Christian men, were able to reassert their beliefs of the white patriarch and his God-given role to protect white families while removing themselves from villainous portrayals (Kobes Du Mez, 2020).

Reactions to the threat to white masculinity and white children did not end in the John Wayne era and can be located through reactions to the Vietnam war, a time when white America struggled to conceptualize itself once again as the hero and "strongest nation" on Earth (Kobez Du Mez, 2020, p. 66). Because of this threat to masculinity, individuals such as white Christian fundamentalist pastor Jack Hyles created guides on how to rear children in the 70s which emphasized extremely rigid gender roles. Hyles' book, "How to Rear Children" stated that boys should be "rugged" enough to protect their sisters and country (Kobes Du Mez, 2020, p. 66). If boys were permitted to play with girls' toys, they were sure to become homosexuals, and lose their desire to fight for their country (and the white family). This extreme fear of raising gay children or "weak" men is directly tied to the ideals created by white Chrisitan masculinity, and its ties to nationalism and white supremacy. Within the eyes of white Christian men such as Hyles, gay men are too weak to defend the country, and the nation must protect white men's ability to be violent for the good of all of America.

These anti-queer sentiments are intertwined with the idea that the human body is a creation from God, and that one's sex at birth is one divinely selected by a higher power. Furthermore, the evangelical worldview posits cis straight couples are God's only condonable pairing. Popular phrases used today such as "It's Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" reflect Christian America's anti-gay history, in which white activists for the religious right such as Jerry Falwell preached that same-sex couples were "ungodly" while straight individuals were the "moral majority" (Kobes Du Mez, 2020, p.116). Examining the influence of white Christianity throughout the decades is significant as it illuminates justifications used to position LGBTQ+ individuals as immoral beings while uplifting straight white Christian men as the group assigned by God to protect children and white women.

They're After Your Children!

The American "groomer" narrative is constructed under the premise that children are inherently innocent and in need of saving by (white) men, while LGBTQ+ individuals are inherently sexually deviant pedophiles (Edelman, 2004; McComisky, 2017; Sevor, 2024; The Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). Despite an increase in recent attacks on LGBTQ+ individuals and an increase in online rhetoric regarding queer individuals as "groomers", researchers have established that this phenomenon is not a novel one (Caraballo, 2022). As noted by Eve Sedgwick, (1992) Western society has always privileged the assumption of binary system between queer and straight individuals, that the system is asymmetrical, and that it positions straight individuals as natural and preferred. Because children are positioned as innocent and queer individuals are positioned as "others", they are automatically seen as an unnatural influence for children. It is much easier to label these "others" as the sole perpetuators of crimes such as pedophilia, rather than address the much larger majority of straight, cisgender, white pedophiles, especially within the Christian church (Carbonaro, 2022).

As Lee Edelman (2004) states, "The child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the phantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention (p. 3). Throughout the American political landscape, children are used as a symbolic representation of America's family values, and their plights are often exploited to gain public favor for the causes of United States politicians. This tactic is the root behind the public uproar regarding drag shows across the United States, but in the state of Florida specifically (Gabriel, 2022). By using the protection of children in Christian conservative political rhetoric, Republicans can not only maintain their image as defenders of America but justify their violent efforts to eradicate transgender individuals from the population (Gabriel, 2022).

One of the most influential ways in which this rhetoric is spread is through online spaces, and evidence from the Center for Countering Digital Hate and Human Rights Campaign (2022) states that the first documented use of the term "Ok groomer" was located on the forum-based website 4chan, which encourages anonymous interaction between profiles. In March of 2020 on the site's "politically incorrect" message board, users encouraged one another to invade LGBTQ+ users' Twitter profiles and comment "ok groomer" under any posts mentioning children. The efforts to rally 4chan users was known as "operation OK groomer" and grew in popularity not only in the United States but across the world, with the phrase being located on a Proud Boy's channel in Portugal (4chan, 2020; Caraballo, 2022; Center for Countering Digital Hate and Human Rights Campaign, 2022). As the phrase entered the global lexicon, conservative influencers took notice and began incorporating the phrase into their own content.

Tucker Carlson, a public right-wing figure on FOX who has contributed to dehumanizing narratives regarding drag queens as sexual predators to children, draws upon a repurposed formation of early heteronormative tactics seen in the reinforcement of the Hollywood Production Code. Despite Carlson and old Hollywood advocating for goals like the preservation of morality and children's safety, the public enemy remains queer people (Boone, 2022; Cook, 2018; Gross, 2012; Nawaz & Hastings, 2022; Sender, 2023). The argument of concerned conservatives is not subtle, with Carlson directly stating, "Let's say you were interested in sexualizing children. And unfortunately, some people are. What would you do? You might have a drag queen story hour at a library or at a school. That's where you would indoctrinate and sexualize children. It's happening across the country" (Nawaz & Hastings, 2022, p.1). In a similar fashion to other conservative political influences like The Heritage Foundation, Tucker

directly addresses drag shows as sites for immorality and as distinct threats to straight individuals.

As Gross (2012) states, when queer individuals are framed as a common enemy or as villains, it allows for heterosexual and cisgender individuals to band together to work on defeating the threat to their families. Because these perceptions of queer individuals have been perpetuated throughout history such as through media, they seem to be narratives of "common sense" and individuals belonging to these groups are resigned to existing without their humanity (Sender, 2023). Reasons such as these are why these beliefs continue to be perpetuated throughout conservative political agendas such as the Heritage Foundation's plan for the next conservative president outlined in Project 2025 (The Heritage Foundation, 2023). By focusing on the safety of heterosexual families throughout the document and emphasizing that this family structure must be protected at all costs, the conservative standard of erasing LGBTQ+ identities from the wholesome family narrative emerges and with it, the development of legislature such as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' passing of the "Don't Say Gay" bill and others like it.

Libs of TikTok's Influence Offline

One main contributor to the modern spread of the term "groomer" after its creation on 4chan was online conservative influencer Chaya Raichik, the owner of a popular X (formerly known as Twitter) account known as Libs of TikTok. Here, Raichik posts content condemning "libs", a term for who she considered to be "liberals", to her 1.4 million followers (Editors, Advocate.com, 2023). Raichik's usage of the term was confirmed as an influence for Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' press secretary Christina Pushaw to adopt the word into her own rhetoric regarding anti-queer legislation (The Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). Pushaw was recorded utilizing the label "anti-grooming bill" for House Bill 1557 and stated that those who

opposed it were pedophiles (The Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). By emboldening conservative voices such as Pushaw's, Raichik's social media page utilized memes to spread anti-queer sentiments to wide audiences while continuing to gain her fame and popularity amongst conservative circles.

The sociopolitical usage of the term groomer and the overall narrative of LGBTQ+ grooming positions LGBTQ+ individuals and any individuals who defy normative gender expressions into a dangerous group which must be scoured and stopped by conservative leaders. Raichik's content has been shown directly labeling drag show performers and attendees as "groomers", as well as queer or LGBTQ+ friendly professionals such as teachers, librarians, medical professionals (Editors, Advocate.com, 2023; Sevor, 2024; Tirrell and Gogarty, 2023). The account has also directly advocated for political legislation to combat transgender individuals' freedoms as well as restrictions on drag performers. Libs of TikTok was even documented celebrating when politicians expressed intent to ban the ability for transgender minors to transition completely (Editors, Adovcate.com, 2023).

The connection between posting anti-transgender rhetoric online and the passage of real life anti-queer legislation has been documented, as is the impact of premeditated attacks on LGBTQ+ individuals as a direct result of the Libs Of TikTok page. Using terminology such as "pedophiles" and "porn" to refer to queer individuals and queer content has resulted in the perceived need for right-wing extremists to organize disruptions at children's hospitals, pride events, and library events involving drag queens (Center for Countering Digital Hate and Human Rights Campaign, 2022; Editors, Advocate.com, 2023; Sevor, 2024). The Libs of TikTok account has also been linked to the appearance of the Proud Boys white supremacist group to appear at several LGBTQ+ focused events (Editors, Advocate.com, 2023; Rogers, 2022).

According to Tirrell & Gogarty (2023), there were at least “38 institutions, events, and individuals who reported threats after being targeted by Libs of TikTok, and 10 who reported harassment - a total of at least 48 instances of threats or harassment”. Similarly, one month after House Bill 1557 was passed, there was “a 406% increase in tweets" associating LGBTQ+ individuals with groomer or pedophile narratives (Sevor, 2024, p. 25). This data suggests far-right politicians have utilized this term as a form of political attack and a means to secure votes from members of the public who support online rhetoric such as Raichik’s (Block, 2022; Caraballo, 2022; Cassino, 2022; Center for Countering Digital Hate and Human Rights Campaign, 2022; Rogers, 2022). Similarly, the public’s online social influence on politicians has been consistently recorded (Editors, Advocate.com 2023; Sevor, 2024; Tirrel & Gogarty, 2023).

Because the very existence of transgender and GNC individuals denies the reality that sex and gender are nuanced and mutable, these individuals cause reactions of discomfort for many Christian conservatives who believe that gender can always be divided into male and female. As a result, “attacking trans people is good politics for Republican politicians trying to secure their base. If the security of a firm, unchanging, binary view is linked to identifying as a Republican, attacking any other gender identity can build support among their partisans” (Cassino, 2022, p.3). The motives and reactions behind individuals behind online hate accounts and politicians are not different. Rather, they are both motivated by fear and hatred. Americans will pay money to keep Republicans in power to protect themselves and their families from transgender and GNC people. In order to do so, they must continue to fear-monger, and spread groomer narratives to protect their own (typically, other rich white straight individuals). This is fostered by centuries of Christian teachings which place God as the only being with a right to choose someone’s gender identity and any being who dares to defy God as immoral and other.

Drag Labeled as a Threat to Children: Dempsey's Story

We're Here's season finale is celebrated by a montage of the different cities that the queens have visited over the course of filming, while Shangela tells the audience, "Girl, the existence of drag is activism," (Ep 5, 0:41). The tone of the episode is set as the queens explain that drag is under attack within social and legislative spheres, including news clips detailing circumstances such as the Don't Say Gay Bill, protests against drag shows and story times, and protests for gender affirming care for transgender minors (Ep 5, 3:15). Driving in elaborately campy cars shaped like purses and elephants, the queens define what drag means to them in a climate which has "become a battleground for LGBTQ+ rights," (Ep 5, 2:36). Eureka explains that to her, drag is "an expression of everything you're not supposed to be that you love about yourself," (1:16). Bob then adds that "drag is visibility. Right now, we have to be seen." (Ep 5, 3:39). The hostile and anti-drag culture is made apparent early in the episode, as a man in his car screams at the queens and honks his horn repeatedly, telling them to get out (Ep 5, 3:57). This introduction sets the tone for an episode which focuses heavily on legislation and social climate such as the "Don't Say Gay" bill which contributes to the oppression of the five participants as well as the three hosting queens.

The queens address early in episode 5 that the narrative labeling drag queens as a threat to children is common, especially in "blood red" central Florida (Ep 5, 20:56). As the episode explains, the Florida government at the time of filming is eager to make it a felony to bring children to drag shows as individuals believe the shows are intended to expose children to sexually explicit content (Ep 5, 32:14, Keenan and Hot Mess, 2020). These episodes confront and combat the groomer narrative through conversations and with transgender nine-year-old Dempsey. The common agreement amongst the queens is that the grooming argument is a fear

mongering tactic which positions children as needing protection from a villainous LGBTQ+ community. As Bob explains, “so much is rooted in fear and they know that people will act on their fear, like scared to the polls,”" but the reality is “there’s not a big agenda to harm children from the gay community… the only thing on the gay agenda is brunch” (Ep 5, 5:00). The tactics that the queens describe can be compared to the tactics used throughout American history, as seen through the Hays Code’s consistent reliance on queer pedophile narratives as well as the influence of the Christian church and its ideals of white masculinity (Cook, 2018; Di Marco et al., 2021; Kobes Du Mez, 2020; Leff, 2023; Ramsey, 1934; Sender, 2023). To dispute this prior expectation of their queer identities, they focus on facilitating discussions with Dempsey.

As a nine-year-old transgender girl, Dempsey lives in an accepting home with her mother Jaime, an LGBTQ+ rights ally. Dempsey attends a public elementary school in Florida and is portrayed as a very social child. Inspired by her mother, Dempsey uses her platform to advocate for transgender rights in spite of the multitude of bills meant to attack her freedom to exist as a transgender minor. As the queens spend time talking to Dempsey, the truth is revealed about Dempsey’s reality in Kissimmee, Florida such as Dempsey’s intense fear of being outed at school. In contrast to the typical format where one queen spends time with a participant at a time, all three queens are present during this conversation. They all get along well with Dempsey and even show a clip of Shangela jumping in a bounce house with her (Ep 5, 27:51). This intentional portrayal of Dempsey and the queens is an intentional political move to combat grooming rhetoric as it shows a positive and humanizing portrayal of the queens rather than a villainizing one. This representation allows for a change in many years of negative portrayals as other mainstream drag shows such as *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and *Dragula* do not feature children whatsoever and are more adult-oriented programs (Campana, Duffy, and Micheli, 2022, Martin,

2022, LeMaster, 2015). While the relationship with Dempsey is a professional one, it shows that the queens are capable of interacting with minors without "pedophilic" motives and that they can empathize with Dempsey throughout her difficult journey in a conservative area.

Because it is such a common occurrence for conservative Christian politicians to lean on the image of the innocent child in order to contrast the villainy of queer individuals, Dempsey's portrayal presents a unique incongruity to anti-transgender rhetoric (Edelman, 2004). Dempsey is both an innocent child, and queer. At nine years old, she is an intelligent and energetic young girl. She is confident and with her transgender identity and has been sure of her identity since she was seven. However, none of these aspects of Dempsey's personality align with narratives of trans children that individuals such as Raichik portray online: confused, easily swayed, and dangerous to cis peers (Editors, Advocate.com, 2023). Dempsey operates like most nine-year-old children, she enjoys spending time with friends and playing outside. She is portrayed as no different from any other kid, and certainly not as a child who wishes to harm other children. Rather, she faces being outed at school by a former classmate who ended their friendship once Dempsey's trans identity was revealed. Throughout the episodes, Dempsey remains steadfast in her identity, and does not mention being influenced into her identity by being adjacent to LGBTQ+ individuals. From the episode's portrayal, there is no evidence that Dempsey has a transgender role model or family member in her life.

We're Here includes portrayals of Dempsey as a resistance to common tropes regarding transgender individuals. First, Dempsey's portrayal resists narratives that all transgender individuals are groomers looking to abuse children. The very existence of a transgender child is one that is typically looked over when dehumanizing transgender individuals. The second narrative Dempsey resists is that she is confused and/ or under the influence of a predatory

LGBTQ+ figure. With two straight, cis, parents, Dempsey is shown coming to the conclusion regarding her identity without any outside help, and at an exceptionally young age. Dempsey's portrayal is stationed as a representation of the real human beings who will be impacted by transphobic legislation in Florida like House Bill 1557, Senate Bill 254, and House Bill 1639.

Contrary to arguments behind House Bill 1639 which imply transgender inclusive healthcare and social transitioning is a threat to children, Dempsey's portrayal showcases the mental and social benefits that transitioning can bring even as a minor. Her interactions with the *We're Here* queens further emphasize that queer individuals are not inherent threats to children or pedophilic sex offenders. *We're Here* focuses on Dempsey in a way that allows her humanity by showing aspects of her everyday life rather than as an exaggerated caricature online. By doing so, the finale presents viewers with an impactful portrayal of the harm Florida's dehumanizing social climate and its subsequent legislation can bring to transgender minors and queer adults who interact with them (Caraballo, 2022; Center for Countering Digital Hate and Human Rights Campaign, 2022; Edelman, 2004). These episodes flip common rhetoric of "protecting children" on its head by showing how important it is to protect trans children with love and support rather than through banning their healthcare and social identities (Gabriel, 2022).

Sitting in Jaime's Classroom: A Parent Who Fights to Say Gay and Trans

Dempsey's mother, Jaime, is a high school history teacher in Florida who makes an effort to be an inclusive LGBTQ+ ally in and outside of the classroom while facing the hostility of Florida's teaching climate. Jaime states that she has always been an ally to the community, but after her daughter came out as trans, she amplified her efforts to secure additional safety for Dempsey. Jaime is a vocal member of her community within Florida despite the tangible threat that this places on her as a teacher and mother. Jaime mentions several times throughout the

episode that she is worried about her and her family's safety as a result of being vocal regarding transgender rights both inside and outside of the school environment. As she states, "I was always an ally to the LGBT community, but I wasn't at parades, because as a schoolteacher in Florida I'll be punished for speaking out" (Ep 5, 7:50). At the time of the finale's recording, one of Jaime's main goals was to speak out against House Bill 1557 and create a space where queer students could feel comfortable at school. Jaime reveals to the audience that one major struggle she faces is being heard by the school board and administrators in central Florida. Jaime's opinion that transgender students should be embraced within the school environment does not match that of most parents or lawmakers, and thus, she experiences social isolation in her community despite being a straight cisgender woman.

Another major struggle that Jaime faces as the parent to a transgender child is the medical treatment that Dempsey is allowed within the state of Florida. Jaime explains that her efforts to change Dempsey's birth certificate were extremely difficult in the area and that she and her husband were called "sick" by a doctor for trying to do so (Ep 5, 27:31). It took a long process of trial and error for Dempsey's parents to find an affirming doctor for her, as Jaime explains that despite some conceptions, Miami is a very conservative area outside of the immediate beach area. However, with Senate Bill 254 creating legal threats against both practitioners and parents who attempt to seek out gender-affirming treatments for children in a medical setting, including things like hormone blockers which are often used on cisgender children, Jaime must grapple with the reality that many doctors are going to refuse treatment for Dempsey, including potentially routine treatments (Health Policy Committee, n.d.). Even though Dempsey is still young, she will eventually get older and may want to medically transition, but this may be impossible in her current area. Jaime states that she does not wish to leave her home state, but

depending on how the legislation impacts Dempsey, she may be forced to for the wellbeing of her daughter.

Even with medical procedures aside, Dempsey is a girl who has already fully transitioned socially by changing her name and wearing traditionally feminine attire. According to House Bill 1639, Dempsey could face legal discrimination when it comes time for her to obtain her driver's license or if anyone were to question her changed birth certificate. According to the bill, her changed certificate could still be seen as invalid. Dempsey is also at risk of the suggested "treatment" of conversion therapy under the very same bill (Equality Florida, 2024). Jaime's goal as Dempsey's mother is to keep her from harm and her actions reflect this, but due to Florida's legislation, these efforts can paint her as a mentally ill criminal or as a "groomer" despite her not being a queer individual (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Gabriel, 2022). The mere fact that Jaime condones LGBTQ+ individuals and does not treat her daughter's transgender identity as a mental illness is enough to "other" her from conservative individuals supportive of popular LGBTQ+ groomer narratives (Sedgwick, 1992).

Jaime's tangible fear of losing her job becomes relevant in the sixth episode as she considers joining the season-concluding drag performance. However, despite her hesitation, she agrees to get on stage accompanied by Dempsey as a show of support for transgender individuals across the state. Jaime states that she and her husband believe that Dempsey will be a target at some point during her life within the school environment of Kissimmee. Research by Keenan and Hot Mess (2020) supports this, as most LGBTQ+ students do not feel safe to express their identities safely due to backlash within the school environment and often utilize other environments to gain acceptance such as drag shows. Jaime's show of support for Dempsey is a testament to her commitment to her activism and her unconditional love as Dempsey's mother.

Doctor Stigma: Medical and Social Barriers to Transitioning

The social and political climate regarding socially transitioning is revealed to impact not only Mandy and Dempsey, but Eureka as well. As a direct result of working with Mandy, Eureka states in episode 5 that she has come to the realization that she is not a non-binary individual as previously mentioned in other episodes, but a transgender woman. She tells the audience as well as the other queens that she originally came out as a trans woman at 18 and lived within the identity until she was 23. She explains that the main reason she decided to detransition and live as nonbinary was due to societal pressure and reactions from her family. “The verbal abuse, it got to a point where I was afraid to go grocery shopping, I only went at night” Eureka tearfully explains, continuing on to explain that she felt everyone in her biological family treated her completely differently after coming out for the first time. Eureka’s motivation to detransition is supported by previous research by Irwig (2020) which states that detransitioning is caused more frequently by abusive and discriminatory societal reactions to transgender identities than an actual regret in one’s transgender identity.

Irwig’s (2020) research and Eureka’s lived reality both combat the conservative argument that transgender individuals are pretending to be another gender and will eventually regret their decisions, a narrative used to discourage gender affirming healthcare and social transitions. Eureka shares that she stayed closer to a gender conforming presentation because of her desire to stay safe, but realized it was taking a large toll on her mentally. Eureka says that she is finally happy now that she is able to present as feminine, and that she was in an extremely “dark place” before pushing herself to live authentically (Episode 6, 15:00).

Fake news such as incorrect narratives regarding detransitioning is a major contributor to social stigma and legislation within conservative states like Florida. Fake news has been defined

by Alcott & Gentzkow (2017) as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers” (p. 211). As an example, previous research suggests that during Donald Trump’s presidency, there was a rapid increase in fake news articles focusing on transgender women attacking cis white women in public bathrooms (McComisky, 2017). This concept can be labeled using McComisky’s (2017) term “post-truth” rhetoric, which “lacks any reference to facts, truths, and realities” (McComisky, 2017, p. 6; Tallis, 2016). In a digital era where fake news can be spread more easily and at a much more rapid pace, post-truth rhetoric labeling transgender and GNC individuals as sexual predators is highly accessible to the public. This enables individuals such as anti-queer followers of Libs of TikTok to organize their harassment, disrupt events, and develop legislation such as Florida’s House Bill 1557 (Hamm & Spaaj, 2017; Nawaz & Hastings, 2022).

When fake news and post-truth rhetoric on media accounts are utilized to “provoke random acts of ideologically motivated violence that are statistically predictable but individually unpredictable” they fall into a category coined by Hamm & Spaaij (2017) as “stochastic terrorism” (Hamm & Spaaij, 2017, p. 12). Because of the increase in attacks and threats on drag events stemming from online post-truth rhetoric, the dangers of fake news must be considered when it comes to the development of a hostile climate for transgender individuals (Nawaz & Hastings, 2022). One major contributor to anti-queer rhetoric in Florida is Fox News frequenter Christopher Rufo (Gabriel, 2022). Rufo, as a conservative activist, has spoken out multiple times about a need for LGBTQ+ restrictions in schools, as well as an open advocate for House Bill 1557 (Gabriel, 2022). Rufo’s multitude of appearances on Fox News have been linked to an increase in support for the bill in Florida, as he continues to utilize the post-truth rhetoric that the

"gay agenda" (a term which encompasses anything LGBTQ+) means sexualizing children (Gabriel, 2022, p. 14).

In addition to appearing on Fox News, Rufo spoke out on Tucker Carlson's mainstream conservative talk show, *Tucker Carlson Tonight.* Carlson himself is an advocate for the cancellation of drag performances across America and has hosted individuals such as Raichik who discussed the importance of protecting children from said shows. At the time of the show's airing, over 141 drag events had been either protested or had received serious threats (Wiggins, 2022). Because of Carlson's large audience through his show, his encouragement of Raichik and Rufo's anti-queer rhetoric is one of the direct causes of violence enacted against LGBTQ+ individuals and the enactment of transphobic medical legislation (Factora, 2022; Tallis, 2016).

Carlson, Rufo, and Raichik are quick to identify transgender individuals as groomers, but due to their cycle of self-serving fake news, they have difficulty providing substantial evidence for this claim. This is because strong supporting evidence doesn't exist (Gabriel, 2022). Most perpetrators of groomer narratives also refuse to elaborate on fact-based evidence which disrupts their claims, such as the fact that youth pastors and members of authority within the Christian church have higher than usual rates of child sexual abuse cases (Carbonaro, 2022; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2021 Annual Report, 2022). It is clear why youth pastors do not receive as much media attention in conservative circles as transgender women. Despite much of anti-trans rhetoric being post-truth rhetoric, such as the belief that transgender people are forcing others to become trans, transgender individuals have always carried the blame because of Christianity's popularity amongst conservatives (Factora, 2022). Christianity, a belief system which has been supported by influential and wealthy white individuals throughout history, has always held power over the historically marginalized concept of queerness (Sedgwick, 1992).

Because of this, and because of transgender and GNC individuals making up a small portion of the United States, these individuals are an easy target for conservative voices seeking audience engagement or votes. This targeting is one of the main pillars that supports disastrous violence within these communities such as targeting transgender identities through the medical system (Boone, 2022).

Barriers To Education on LGBTQ+ Identities

As a historically marginalized community, LGBTQ+ individuals have continuously suffered silencing and discouragement within social environments like schools (Reid, 2022). Because of the normalization of heterosexual couples and identities, LGBTQ+ realities have systematically been treated as an outlier rather than as a resolute component of humanity with an indiscernible historical origin (Sedgwick, 1992). As much of children's worldviews are shaped by their education, political leaders utilized their power to shape school curriculums in favor of certain political attitudes and ensure a level of control over young citizens (Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020). Research suggests that increased education and inclusion of LGBTQ+ students and faculty in schools can result in increased levels of LGBTQ+ acceptance in straight cisgender audiences (Russell et al., 2021). However, the idea of incorporating LGBTQ+ content in any sort of classroom environment clashes with the motivations of Florida government officials behind House Bill 1557. The negative influence of House Bill 1557 for the LGBTQ+ community is undeniable as it hinders their opportunity to live authentically and feel included as members of society rather than as "others" (Carbonaro, 2022). However, the Bill also hurts straight and cisgender individuals as it denies them the opportunity to learn about an indisputable component of reality in modern society. Instead of classrooms facilitating discussions between multiple perspectives or even allowing the discussion of the existence of marginalized identities, students

are forced to live within conservative fantasy worlds where homosexuality and transexuality cease to exist. Even if an individual does not agree with LGBTQ+ identities, they will continue to be a part of global society. Oppressive and harmful tactics have not prevented LGBTQ+ individuals from deviating from heteronormative ideals in the past because queer identities are an indisputable component of human behavior no matter how disliked they may be (Reid, 2022; Tucker, 2022).

House Bill 1557 not only disservices queer individuals by silencing their voices, but it also engages in post-truth rhetoric (McComisky, 2017) by spreading a narrative that transgender and queer individuals were not involved in history, or that the only form of sex people can have is married heterosexual sex. Similarly, House Bill 1557 is a strategy which perpetuates grooming narratives in order to retain and uplift conservative Christian viewpoints in schools. This is not only a violation of freedom of speech but a violation of the separation of church and state. LGBTQ+ realities are part of society, and even if they are deemed impure or immoral by groups attempting to silence them.

Transgender children like Dempsey and teachers like Jaime live most of their lives within school buildings. School is a legally required event in a child's life, with the exception of homeschooling, so schools should be a safe environment in which education can be distributed with as little bias as possible. By eradicating age-appropriate discussions of LGBTQ+ lives, it perpetuates a Christian and white supremacist standard which implies that straight and cisgender couples are the natural default. Instead, schools must teach that there are a variety of ways to exist within society, and transgender individuals are a small minority of individuals overall. Because transgender individuals are a highly targeted portion of the population for discrimination, legislation regarding school environments should reflect this to foster inclusion

and acceptance. Additionally, raising straight children with more compassion and acceptance for individuals different from them creates an overall more compassionate and caring society (Russell et al., 2021).

Mandi and Lori: Internalizing Stigma and Hatred in the Sunshine State

Several participants in both episodes of *We're Here*'s finale describe the social and legal barriers that accompany socially transitioning. They detail the impact of changing their dress, cutting or growing hair, or wearing makeup, and how these actions can provide affirmation without gender-affirming surgeries. When the audience meets transgender woman Mandy, she is dressed in traditionally feminine attire (long hair, a flowy blouse, painted nails). As Mandy and her wife, Lori, browse art at a local outdoor market with Eureka, the reactions of bystanders in the area are apparent; dirty looks are not rare, but seem to be the most common reaction to Mandy's gender presentation. As Mandy mentions, the environment feels unsafe as "a lot of people look at us like they'd kill us. I don't care what they do to me, but I don't want anybody to hurt [Lori]" (19:13). Eureka agrees readily that the environment feels hostile to transgender and GNC identities, noting a car completely covered in Trump decals as she entered the shopping area. This hostile environment is one that has been documented, as societal discrimination against GNC and transgender individuals results in reduced social support and mental health rates. It has been consistently documented that transphobic environments, over time, do not just cause discomfort for transgender individuals, they cause long term effects that can eventually take their lives, either by suicide or by murder (Erich et al., 2008; Glynn et al., 2016; Hughto et al., 2020; Katz-Wise et al., 2017a, 2017b; Levitt and Ippolito, 2014; Strain and Shuff, 2010).

Because of the social stigma surrounding medical gender-affirming-care for transgender individuals, bills like Senate bill 254 are generally accepted in Florida. Once the bills are

enforced, they create the impression that being transgender is a crime, as seen by the punishment enforced on healthcare providers who assist trans patients with gender-affirming care (Health Policy Committee, n.d., Trotta, 2023). This creates an endless struggle for transgender individuals like Mandy in Florida. Lack of medical support for transitioning not only gravely impacts Mandy's health and safety but creates a narrative that she is better off and healthier presenting as her assigned gender at birth. This forces transgender residents in Florida to choose between living an authentic life and living a life in which they are legal in the eyes of the state. Repressing one's transgender identity takes a severe and proven toll on transgender individuals, while being out and open regarding one's identity means risking being a victim of a violent hate crime or being arrested by police (Trotta, 2023).

Bills like SB 254 and House Bill 1639 directly contribute to the hostile environment which cultivates violence against trans women in Florida (Trotta, 2023). By stoking a social climate in which transgender individuals feel unwanted and othered, heartbreaking scenarios such as the one Lori describes in the finale are created. During Lori's interview, she recounts how just a few years ago, prior to Mandy's transition, she found Mandy sitting underneath a tree with a rope in a noose lying beside her (Season 3 Episode 5, 22:02). After the traumatic event, Lori told Mandy that she could not wait any longer to transition, and that she would support her through it. As a result, Mandy's mental health improved drastically. Lori described her mental health as improving so much she seemed like an entirely different person (Episode 5, 22:10). As a 75-year-old woman who is newly into her transition, Mandy expresses her gratitude that she was finally able to live authentically and feel like herself after a lifetime of suppressing her identity. As she states, "the more we can put out there as transgender people and be vocal about who we are, that will help the kids that will follow us (Episode 5, 22:23).

When the state is given power to enforce the gender-presentation of its citizens, it impacts everyone. Transgender individuals take the brunt of the violence as seen by the statistics concerning Black and Brown transgender women (Teetzel, 2017). Additionally, drag performers and any other individuals who defy traditional gendered clothing expectations are targeted by bills like House Bill 1639. As stated by its name, the goal is to eradicate transgender citizens from the state (Equality Florida, 2024). Coming out is already an extremely daunting process for transgender individuals, but adding on an additional layer of being denied one's existence legally can cause individuals like Mandy to feel as if it just isn't worth it to come out.

One of the most severe ways that Florida dehumanizes transgender individuals like Mandy is by pathologizing transgender identities and treating them like an illness that needs to be treated and removed. This is exactly what happens when House Bill 1639 advocates for extremely damaging tactics such as conversion therapy (Gabriel, 2022; Pellegrini & Jakobsen, 2003). Conversion therapy has been proven time and again to be ineffective and harmful for transgender individuals, while reinforcing the idea that transgender identities are unnatural (Pelligrini & Jakobsen, 2003). To reduce social stigma and oppressive medical legislation within conservative states like Florida, transgender identities must be normalized and represented socially. This is one reason why the well-rounded representation on *We're Here* is a positive step in transgender acceptance on the global scale.

A Culture of Violence Regarding Drag

We're Here addresses the physical violence enacted against the queer community and ways in which the groomer narrative has stripped LGBTQ+ individuals of their right to humanity by showcasing Vico, a gay Puerto Rican man and survivor of the Pulse massacre in Orlando. The Pulse shooting, the deadliest mass-shooter event in the United States at the time, transpired in

2016 at the Pulse Nightclub, an LGBTQ+ oriented venue. The shooter ultimately caused 49 deaths and a great deal of injuries, both physical and emotional for the queer patrons that attended that night as well as their loved ones (Zambelich & Hurt, 2016). Although there are mixed accounts on whether or not the shooter was motivated by anti-queer rhetoric in the attack, the end result was that nearly 50 LGBTQ+ individuals were targeted in an LGBTQ+ club (Goldman, 2016). Another key component of context surrounding the massacre was its transpiration during the same year that Donald Trump was elected. Trump's election was a disruptive force across the United States and stoked an increase in LGBTQ+ related violence, especially in the conservative state of Florida (Center for Countering Digital Hate and Humans Rights Campaign, 2022; Kobes Du Mez, 2020; Tirrell and Gogarty, 2023). Additionally, conservative reactions and justifications that formed post-Pulse massacre were a component that exacerbated the already traumatic event for survivors, loved ones, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Jokes were common regarding the deaths of innocent individuals based on their LGBTQ+ identities, and the country seemed to move on with indifference (Goldman, 2016). Grooming rhetoric was utilized to discredit the violence that occurred and, in some cases, even justify it, claiming that it was deserved or a punishment from God (Center for Countering Digital Hate and Human Rights Campaign, 2022). Meanwhile, many LGBTQ+ individuals were left wondering if anywhere else was safe, and if they could be next.

As a survivor of the Pulse massacre and a former drag performer, Vico brings attention to the significant trauma that forms due to queer spaces being infiltrated with violence. Vico explains that since the event, he has been diagnosed with PTSD and prefers to stay away from crowds of any form since the massacre. He states that he had previously utilized participation in public drag performances as "a therapeutic outlet" while simultaneously enjoying the social

aspect with other individuals in the Florida drag scene (Episode 5, 36:55). However, since the shooting, Vico says he has an extremely difficult time going back to queer clubs due to his trauma-induced fears. Vico shares that four of the friends that accompanied him to the club were killed and six were injured by the shooter (Episode 5, 38:29). "After being in the shooting," Vico explains, "being queer out in public scares me because I don't know who else is out there in the world that would feel hatred towards someone like me and at any given moment do something like that, and I don't even know when it could happen," (Episode 5, 38:40). Prior to the shooting, drag in LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces provided refuge from an anti-queer society; after the event, Vico was forced to hide in his home in order to achieve some semblance of safety.

Unfortunately, Vico's fears regarding safety at drag performances are not unfounded and there are a multitude of examples which support the reality that queer people of color like Vico are more likely to be targets of violent hate crimes (Boone, 2022; GLAAD 2023; Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020,). Despite mixed media opinion regarding whether or not the Pulse massacre was an LGBTQ+ hate crime, (Brooks, 2024; Goldman, 2016) the reality is that LGBTQ+ people of color are still being violently targeted on account of their identities and drag shows have been an increasingly popular target for threats of violence (Ayhan, 2019; Boone, 2022; Di Marco et al., 2021; GLAAD, 2023, Gortmaker, 2006; Reid, 2022).

Later in the episode, Shangela pushes Vico to stay present during their time together and try to share joy and laughter with his community. The two also visit the Pulse Memorial together to commemorate the 49 lives taken that day (43:58). The Memorial stands as a testament to the individuals whose lives were cut short due to an act of careless violence. As cited by the Memorial's website, "The Pulse community teaches the public what it is to become. To become is not simply to transform from one to another, but to hold a state of multiple identities together

in tension. The Pulse Memorial signals a sense of radical hope, honoring the victims, survivors and first responders of the Pulse nightclub tragedy." (MASS Design Group, n.d.). The memorial attempts to address the insurmountable tragedy that ended 49 lives and allows for community members to interact with the space by encouraging tributes to be left for the deceased. An area for survivors is also specifically included, in an outdoor area shaded by trees. By showcasing this space to audiences, *We're Here* reflects on what it means to heal as a community after an unspeakable loss has occurred. It not only educates individuals who may not be aware of the massacre's impact but attempts to provide empowerment for those who feel paralyzed in terror after the devastation.

The heartbreaking real-life story of Vico challenges anti-LGBTQ+ narratives in Florida by showcasing queer people of color as targets of violence, rather than as perpetrators as commonly seen in conservative narratives (Sevor, 2024). Furthermore, it demonstrates drag as a healing tool, rather than as another way to victimize straight white cisgender individuals and villainize the LGBTQ+ community. This episode addresses the reality that within a hegemonic society which prioritizes straight cisgender and white identities, queer violence is normalized and encouraged (Center for Countering Digital Hate and Humans Rights Campaign, 2022; Kobes Du Mez, 2020; Tirrell & Gogarty, 2023). As a result, it demonstrates how drag is and has been used to combat feelings of fear by creating a culture-rich community through song, dance, and design. The finale takes an empathetic approach to the ineffable struggle that Vico faced that night in 2016 rather than brushing it off as a freak accident or trying to shift the blame like many news outlets did at the time of the shooting. By showcasing Vico at his job, with his friends, and with the queens, the audience is given a face to associate with the tragedy and are forced to confront the event through his first-person account rather than through the distanced lens of a news story.

“If Everyone Just Got Up and Left, What is That Saying?”

The queens express that while their drag shows have always been a form of activism, they want to make a specific political statement within the Florida performance that it is okay to “Say Gay” as a response to the “Don’t Say Gay” Bill, and that as drag queens they are no less human than the conservative individuals pitted against them. Because of the two-part episode, the show can feature not only longer screen time for the drag show but also a second opportunity for the three main queens to engage in drag prior to the performance. This allows for the queens to develop even more in-depth political messaging and activism than previously enabled. After being invited by Jaime, Eureka, Shangela, and Bob attend a “Say Gay” rally dressed as Disney villains (Ursula, Cruella, and Maleficent) while they march with and support the LGBTQ+ community members in Florida. Prior to marching, they are given the opportunity to hear Jaime and several other community members speak out regarding the harm that the “Don’t Say Gay” Bill inflicts on LGBTQ+ individuals like Dempsey (51:39). As Bob states, there are drawbacks to being openly queer in the world and it can create a level of risk when it comes to mental and physical danger. However, he also states that “there’s also the opportunity to empower when people see you up there being yourself” (Episode 5, 52:04). In this example, the queens utilize their villain-themed drag to reclaim the harmful narrative thrust upon them by the heteronormative socio-political culture and use it to create art which makes a statement on anti-queer legislation (Cook, 2018; Di Marco et al., 2021; Leff, 2023; Ramsey, 1934; Sender, 2023). Aside from the action of public drag working as a form of resistance, the queens take extra steps such as Bob’s embroidered “say gay” on her sleeves or Eureka’s rainbow “say gay” sign in Disney font in order to emphasize the resistive nature of their drag as they are publicizing the specific bill they are protesting through their attire.

Following the rally, the queens and their featured drag children continue to resist the conservative social and legal expectations within central Florida through their drag show at the end of episode 6. Based on Dhaenen's (2013) definition of resistance, each of the participants end up resisting heteronormative specialties in their own distinct ways. In Jaime's performance, the stage is designed to appear as a school graduation ceremony, with a banner on the wall reading "Protect trans kids" (48:26). As Jaime emerges adorned in sparkling academic regalia, she takes on the role of the authority figure of the school while lip synching Katy Perry's "Roar" as her graduation speech. Throughout the performance, Jaime tosses her robe to reveal a dazzling purple gown and the audio track changes to Katy Perry's "Firework". As the performance concludes, Dempsey comes on stage in a long-sleeved purple dress and tosses her graduation cap offstage alongside her mother. Within this performance, Jaime conveys a reality in which she can use her voice in order to have autonomy over her transgender daughter's safety within the public-school environment.

As a spokesperson of LGBTQ+ rights, Jaime utilizes her drag performance to resist the current set of heteronormative beliefs within the education system which cause stress and discomfort for her daughter. By featuring Dempsey briefly at the end of the performance, the duo resists the narrative that transgender children do not belong in schools and enforce the idea that Dempsey deserves to graduate as her authentic self. By featuring these elements in the performance, Jaime and Dempsey create a space where they can resist the reality of the system by publicly portraying a different reality where students can celebrate their transgender identities (Dhaenen, 2013). Jaime's efforts of resistance outside of her drag performance can additionally be seen by the attendance of her queer students who come to support her (53:29). Jaime mentions in episode 5, she does not want to be driven out of her home in Florida because of the political

climate there and would rather publicly take a stand through the drag show and on other platforms so that the legal figures know there is pushback against what they are advocating for. As Jaime asks, “If everyone got up and left, what is that saying?” (27:48).

On With the Show!

Mandy, Lori, and Eureka’s performance emphasizes the milestone of a 50-year queer relationship while simultaneously serving as a symbolic homage to Mandy and Eureka’s transgender journeys. When the audience first sees Mandy, she emerges to “Nothing’s Gonna Stop Us Now” by Starship in a multicolored caterpillar costume alongside Lori, who is dressed as a golden cocoon. Eventually, together, the couple break out of their previous costumes to reveal matching butterfly wings which read “Lori and Mandy 50 years”. As Lori says before the performance, she wants the audience to know that love can defy labels and her love for Mandy is not going to change because of her later in life transition (44:19). Their performance is a fantastical representation of Mandy’s journey from a confused and suicidal individual to a proud transgender woman, with the element of metamorphosis acting as a symbolic representation of the trials Mandy encountered to get to her current state. By expressing their love for one another and celebrating their relationship milestone publicly, Lori and Mandy resist the heteronormative expectation of what kind of relationships can be celebrated in public (Dhaenen, 2013)

The performance simultaneously serves as a recognition of Eureka’s personal transgender journey. As Eureka reveals in a post-credits scene, she originally planned to emerge as a non-binary bee during the show, but had to change her costume idea after her realization mid-episode that she no longer wanted to repress her identity as a transgender woman (24:51). As such, she decides not to wear the non-binary flag on her fuzzy bee striped dress and instead fully embraces her identity as a woman wearing feminine drag. In Eureka’s example, she combats rhetoric

regarding detransitioning as an argument for the removal of gender-affirming care by telling the audience how societal punishment against transgender women caused her to feel safer hiding her identity in a more masculine presenting identity for years (Irwig, 2020). Because she is now finally emboldened by Mandy and Dempsey to live authentically, she shows up during the performance as a queen bee and proudly celebrates her transgender identity in her own way. In this sense, she resists not only notions of what gender can be, but what transitions can look like by celebrating herself, Mandy, and Lori on stage simultaneously (Dhaenen, 2013).

Vico's performance, his first since the Pulse massacre, celebrates his identity as a queer Puerto Rican man by incorporating "Latin flavor dance" (25:53) into his drag. As a previous drag artist, Vico is a highly skilled dancer and dances in a style which Shangela affectionately labels as "Merengay" (25:56). The main purpose of the performance for Vico is to engage in drag despite his significant trauma and put himself back out on the stage again. As Vico states, "I can't be miserable anymore" (Episode 6, 36:04). As he dances alone and alongside Shangela to Camilla Cabello's "Don't Go Yet", his presence on the stage as an out gay Latin man serves as a form of resistance to the culture of fear and violence that surrounds LGBTQ+ spaces and identities. In episode 5, Eureka states, "People in power want to silence queer people, but we are never letting that happen," she continues, "We're here to make a statement" (53:25). In Vico's performance, he makes a statement that he refuses to isolate himself and make himself small despite placing himself in more danger as an out queer individual of color.

"You Always Know You've Got Me in Your Corner"

One of the most prominent forms of coalition building within the final two episodes of season 3 can be seen through the relationship which forms between Eureka and Mandy. After Eureka comes to terms with her gender and tells Shangela and Bob, she meets up with Mandy

and comes out to her while including the fact that Mandy's presence as an out transgender woman caused her to feel comfortable enough to live authentically (Episode 6, 24:55). This revelation causes Mandy to cry tears of happiness and assure Eureka, telling her "you always know you've got me in your corner" (Episode 6, 25:00). In turn, Eureka works to ensure that Mandy's identity as a transgender woman is actualized within her costuming and makeup, resulting in Mandy gleefully expressing, "This is so me!" (Episode 6, 33:23). The interactions between Eureka and Mandy serve as an example of how drag has the capacity to bring two transgender women together, and in this case, even actualizing Eureka's identity through their interpersonal interactions.

For Vico, the role of the audience members including his mother who traveled to come see him play a significant role in his fulfillment from the drag performance. As Vico stated previously in episode 5, the community aspect of drag was one of the biggest aspects of why he stayed with it in the first place (37:01). Despite being nervous that his PTSD would cause him to check out during the performance, Vico tells the audience, "Today I saw every single person [in the audience]. And the look that was given was respect, love, and appreciation" (Episode 6, 54:20). Because of his public performance, Vico was able to receive love from the LGBTQ+ community after intentionally isolating himself due to his validated fears. However, Vico states that after seeing the community support and realizing he has a coalition to appreciate his art, he wants to continue to push himself and be able to live authentically again.

For Jaime and Dempsey, who are often on the receiving end of public scrutiny for their stances on transgender rights, receiving a large outpour of community support was a very emotional moment which reduced both stage-goers to tears while Dempsey's dad watches proudly, donning rhinestones around his eyes to match Dempsey and Jaime (Episode 6, 51:32).

After the performance, Jaime continues to cry, explaining that "it's just so great to see so much support for Dempsey, and it's so overwhelming," (54:07). Because Dempsey as a transgender youth is consistently targeted under social and political scrutiny, having an audience celebrate Dempsey's identity and Jaime's advocacy for LGBTQ+ students is a way in which the duo can feel reassured by their community and continue to try and strengthen coalition with other transgender individuals and allies throughout their battle for equality.

Research regarding drag's capabilities as a community building activity have been discussed by scholars and recognized for their role in bringing community members together who have been othered by the hegemon (Bailey, 2011; Bailey, 2013; Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020; Reid, 2022). It is evident from the portrayals on Season 3's finale that drag not only has the power to resist dominant societal narratives but also has the ability to make LGBTQ+ members feel affirmed and less isolated in their identities. As Bob states, for him, drag is connection (56:03) while for Eureka, drag is a way for her to be herself. Because of drag's abilities to amplify love, connection, and self-actualization, it serves as both a form of resistance to political rhetoric which resulted in the "Don't Say Gay" bills' existence but also to allow LGBTQ+ individuals an opportunity to acknowledge their own existences (34:15).

Conclusion

Despite efforts not only in Florida but across the United States to silence discussions regarding LGBTQ+ identities, assign negative connotations to queer identities via grooming narratives, and strip the rights of transgender individuals to healthcare, LGBTQ+ community members and their allies have persisted in their continuous support for one another. Despite claims made by individuals such as Carlson and DeSantis that drag shows are created to corrupt and hurt the community, these public displays of love and acceptance are a lifeline for many

individuals who lack social support from their communities and families (Narwaz & Hastings, 2022; Trotta, 2023). Drag shows operate not only as sites of communal resistance as drag's existence is seen as an immoral affront to heterosexual families, but also as spaces where community members can feel seen authentically by one another. As seen through Mandy, Dempsey, and Eureka's examples, being out in one's identity may even inspire other individuals to feel confident enough to "come out" publicly. Coalition through drag forms not only a stronger resistance but a stronger sense of authenticity and acceptance within communities.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Implications for Queer Reality Television Representation

We're Here acknowledges the reality that it is a politically charged show with the mission of combatting homophobia and transphobia in order to create social and legislative change across the United States. The messages of queer resistance and coalition building are intended to reach queer and straight audiences to combat hegemonic narratives in which drag performers are framed as social outcasts, groomers, and predators. Because of this mission, the show takes care to portray participants with a humanizing approach while breaking the mold of queer representation as over or under sexualized and avoiding tropes such as villainization. The show additionally breaks away from patterns seen in popular drag reality television programs such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Dragula* by decentering a competitive aspect from drag.

Without discrediting the major impact that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has had on public recognition and widespread representation of drag performers, the constraints it has placed on queer representation by formerly excluding transgender women and portraying drag queens as nothing more than a costume should still be considered (Framke, 2018; LeMaster, 2015). By focusing on the wants of the individual performing drag rather than the aspect of a challenge, *We're Here* allows audiences to witness participants' journey of self-discovery without the pressure of trying to win. Furthermore, *We're Here* boasts a highly varied cast of participants of varying genders, ages, and sexualities which surpasses that of *RuPaul's Drag Race.* This diversity increases the likelihood that queer audience members can see themselves represented and reflected in media while resisting homonormativity displayed in RuPaul's Drag Race (Martin, 2022; Sender, 2023).

We're Here serves as a powerful and unique form of queer representation which can impact the creation of similar advocacy-oriented documentaries. The nature of the series' style offers a platform for queer individuals from conservative areas to portray their realities, including queer individuals with intersectional marginalized identities. Because of its emphasis on drag as a political act and queer coalitions as proponents of political activism, *We're Here* offers hope to queer viewers that perspectives and legislation regarding queer identities have the potential to change over time and that audience members hold some autonomy over their own identities and realities. This offers larger implications for the impact of inclusive and humanizing queer representation on drag television for queer and straight viewers on a global level (Sender, 2023).

Because *We're Here* approaches a wide variety of proponents of LGBTQ+ discrimination, it allows audience members to reflect upon the systemic nature of anti-queer violence (Ayhan, 2019; Di Marco, et al., 2021; Gortmaker, 2006). By addressing legislation by name and portraying queer people speaking out in spaces from courtrooms to classrooms, *We're Here* provides an educational component to audiences that other drag television does not blatantly or thoroughly address (LeMaster, 2015). By providing audience members with education on queer issues, the series creates the potential for coalition building with viewers; if audience members are made away of specific bills or issues in their home state, it could impact how they vote in local elections or influence their personal opinions on LGBTQ+ relatives.

Future Directions & Limitations

While *We're Here* utilizes an approach to drag participants unseen in other mainstream drag-centered shows, it is also inherently limited by the fact that it is a semi-scripted reality television show on a major streaming network. The participants on the show, even if by their

own desires, are being featured at a worldwide level. This opens the possibility of being exposed to even more hatred online. Additionally, by hosting large scale drag shows in conservative areas, the producers risk placing featured participants as targets for homophobic or transphobic hate groups or bigoted individuals within their cities. Furthermore, Max is a monthly paid subscription based streaming service which means it is not an accessible platform for all LGBTQ+ audiences to consume queer media on.

Perhaps the most important future direction for advocacy-oriented style documentary of drag is observing it from a global level rather than from a national one. One major limitation of *We're Here* is that while it offers extensive portrayals of American queerness, it is not structured in a way that allows for international perspectives. This could not only cause international LGBTQ+ community members to feel unrepresented but contributes to a lack of necessary perspective when it comes to queer realities. This gap in perspective is an area for growth that shows such as *We're Here* are currently lacking.

Because *We're Here* is a relatively new series, it is not a popular title yet within queer media scholarship. It is my hope that as new seasons are released, queer scholars analyze the show's potential as a political tool in modern American society. Because of the nature of this critical textual analysis, I was not able to delve into audience member reactions to *We're Here*. However, it would be groundbreaking for future researchers to investigate the implications of this show on both LGBTQ+ community members and straight cisgender individuals of a wide sample size.

Final Thoughts & Inquiry

As a genderqueer individual, understanding the contributions that drag has offered for the LGBTQ+ community has helped me in understanding the deep history of my own community;

several of the works listed here have caused me to re-evaluate and recontextualize my own perceptions of selfhood. By analyzing resistance and coalition building in *We're Here,* I hope to provide future scholars with the tools needed to analyze drag reality television as a political tool and to understand impacts that these representations can have on straight and LGBTQ+ community members. I hope to incite future research by queer scholars on the influence of the presently expanding advocacy-oriented style documentary style of drag television for LGBTQ+ audience members as well as straight and cisgender audience members. Furthermore, I hope to inspire research on advocacy-oriented documentary of drag versus competitive-style documentations of drag in media.

Because we live in a heteropatriarchy, humanizing queer representation in media provides audiences members, including those from new generations, tools to question the political landscape that surrounds the United States and the world. By breaking away from the commonly understood ideology that the only correct way to love, have sex, and live life is in a heterosexual and cisgender identity, audience members may be prompted to question realities in modern society such as the disproportionate violence enacted against the transgender community. In an age where social media and TV content give right-wing extremists and White Christian Nationalists a platform, it is extremely necessary to continue the production of queer-focused and queer-directed media content.

By understanding the power of humanizing representation, I hope to contribute to an influence which promotes more positive and well-rounded portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals in media. With *We're Here* season 4 having premiered during the time of writing, it is my hope that future scholars can continue to analyze the ways in which the show encourages political resistance in addition to the formation of coalitions for queer individuals. On a broader scope, I

believe that media portrayals of drag should be analyzed worldwide in terms of how they portray queer resistance, and the ways they can inspire resistance and coalition building to resist hegemonic standards and create an overall more accepting and inclusive society.

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