

Cameron Crookston

University of Toronto

Passing the Torch Song: Drag Mothers in Canada

In this paper I'd like to talk about drag mothers and how drag has used a kinship system to maintain its existence. I've interviewed five drag performers from Toronto, Halifax and Vancouver. But before I talk about five modern day queens, I'd like to talk a bit about the past.

As queer scholars such as Heather Love, Scott Bravmann, Jose Estaban Munoz and Ann Cvetkovich have noted, queer culture tends to have a problematic relationship to the past and to history. Love notes that a negative association with the past is so prevalent that it has become a central feature of the queer cultural experience, "[t]he longing for community across time is a crucial feature of queer historical experience, one produced by the historical isolation of individual queers" (37). As these theorists explore in their work, there are a myriad of reasons why queers retain a negative connection to history. Rather than spending this paper providing that particular literature review I'm going to focus on one particular cause of this "historic isolation": kinship.

Early gay liberationists in the US intentionally modeled the emergent "gay community" of the 1970s after an ethnic community (Licata 80). However unlike an actual racial, ethnic or religious community queers do not give birth to the next generation. For the most part we are raised by straight people, people who are not members of the queer subculture. So unlike ethnic communities, which use kinship networks and biological lineage to pass down cultural memory and tradition, queers don't learn about their culture from the people that raise them.

Since homosexuality entered public consciousness in the eighteenth century it has been associated with the performing arts, particularly “female impersonation” or drag, which incidentally emerged as a distinct performance form at roughly the same point in history¹. As George Chauncey notes, gender presentation and gender “deviance”, as opposed to the contemporary concept of sexual object choice, were the primary factors for defining homosexuality until the 1940’s. Because of the long standing tradition of “cross dressing” the performing arts, theatre often provided a loop hole for skirting gender dress code laws making it an attractive option for anyone looking for a “safer” way to perform a queer identity. Similar laws permitted licensed festivals and masquerades to operate despite laws about public dress and appearing in disguise. As such, by the turn of the Twentieth Century, drag balls had become central symbols and rallying points of early queer culture (Chauncey 291). Drag balls were both performative and theatrical but they did not necessarily require a professional ambition to be a performer or appeal exclusively to the artistically inclined. As Chauncey describes elsewhere, participation in the drag balls was analogous to participating in cultural celebrations.

Because to participate in drag culture, whether on the vaudeville circuit, a club stage or by walking a ball, required specific artistic skills and knowledge about a formal system of organization and conduct, it became necessary for young queers to seek out guidance and training about how to participate in this world. At the same time, for the majority of queer youth for most of the twentieth century, and for many still today, to come out as queer means to cut ties

¹ Arguing for a specific origin point for drag as an artistic practice is always interesting given the long spanning history of men playing female roles in most cultures. Personally I agree with Peter Acroyd’s starting date of the late 1700s , a date that is backed up by academics like Laurence Sennelic who acknowledges the birth of female impersonation as its own attraction, rather than stage conventions that necessitate men by virtue of banning women

with your birth family. This is particularly true for drag queens and trans people² who, historically, have come from the most marginalized subcultures of the gay community. As Chauncey, Sennelick and Susan Stryker each note, that prior to Stonewall, the public presentation of homosexuality (including drag) was represented predominantly by racialized and/or working class queers. A middle or upper class queer could afford to express any gender variant desires in private spaces. On the one hand it's important to note that drag queens were among the most marginalized groups within queer culture. Another way to look at this, however, is that queers who had lost everything were the most likely to defy middle hegemonic values and openly express their queer gender identities. Thus drag mothers emerge in a community that is especially vulnerable to isolation.

The problematic relationship between queers and “the family”, both personally and politically, has been explored by Kath Weston in *The Families We Choose*. As Weston explains, “[f]or years, and in an amazing variety of contexts, claiming a lesbian or gay identity has been portrayed as a rejection of ‘the family’ and a departure from kinship” (Weston 22). On a very literal level this was a reflection of the fact that queer youth were frequently disowned upon coming out, so the choice between living an authentic queer life and continuing to be a member of one’s birth family becomes a question of one or the other. Perhaps in reaction to this trend, early gay liberationists rejected the “nuclear family” as an inherently oppressive.

². While contemporary identity politics tend to place trans women and drag queens as mutually exclusive identities, prior to the mid 1990s these identities were much less defined with considerably less overlap. Many historic trans activists and public figures self-identified specifically as drag queens: Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, Miss Major, Candy Darling, Venus Extravaganza.

Weston also notes that “It is but a short step from positioning lesbians and gay men somewhere beyond ‘the family’ [...] to portray them as a menace to family and society. A person or group must first be outside and other in order to invade, endanger, and threaten” (23). Thus, in addition to the common personal trauma of being disowned by one’s family, both queer youth and adults must live in a community which defines their identity in opposition to the very philosophical and political idea of “the family”. Anti-gay organizations and legislation have capitalized on this idea that queers, just by existing endanger families with slogans and titles like “saving the family” or “protecting children”. Public displays of affection or visible queerness are often objected to under the proviso that “this is a family place”. Yet the idea of chosen family, as well as kinship based rhetoric (referring to peers as queer brothers and sisters, for example) has continuously been used within queer subcultures. Drag mothers and drag families thus could be seen existing within the tradition of the queer chosen family.

What makes drag families distinct from other queer chosen families is drag’s status as an art form. One of the many things that queer culture and theatre share is the problem of how to document the ephemeral. Ann Cvetkovich explains that:

Gay and lesbian cultures often leave ephemeral and unusual traces. In the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource, and ephemeral and personal collections of objects stand alongside the documents of the dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge’ (8).

Queer theatre, which, at the risk of generalizing, tends to reject more traditional text based forms of performance, thus faces double erasure as both outside the normative cultural narratives and outside the normal grasp of text based performance documentation. While drag

has many aspects, the concept of nostalgia and a parodic reverence for the past and thus in taking a drag daughter under their wing, a drag mother connects their daughter to cultural artifacts from the art form's history. I don't wish to overstate drag's ties to cultural memory. Drag performances about Stonewall³ or Marsha P. Johnson are rare, and learning the lyrics to "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" is a hardly a complete history lesson on the LGBTQ+ community. Yet none the less, drag, by its very nature, allows its audience access to the cultural practices of previous generations. This concludes the history portion of the paper, I'll now move on to my conversations with contemporary Canadian drag mothers and daughters

For this paper I interviewed five drag queens who identify as either a drag mother, a drag daughter, and in many cases both. I spoke with Lucy Flawless, Dmanda Tension and Farah N. Height of Toronto, Ray Sunshine in Vancouver and Elle Noire in Halifax.

All the queens I interviewed described their impetus for connecting with a drag mother as a desire to learn about some aspect technical or professional aspect of drag. Both Height and Sunshine had already begun performing drag in night clubs before they met their mothers. Their previous careers as a professional dancer and actor respectively helped them bridge knowledge gaps in performance, makeup and costumes. Both queens noted that while being self-taught had served them well initially, "higher standards" and internal politics in the pageant system necessitated guidance about a specific cultural tradition.

Dmanda and Elle, on the other hand, identified the first queens to put them in drag as their drag mothers. Lucy, who comes from a theatre conservatory background, learned the makeup techniques from youtube and performed largely at local theatre fundraisers in the city.

³ The Yes Men, a Toronto based drag king group did perform a theatrical lip- of the Stonewall riot at World Pride in 2014. This is so far the only drag performance inspired by Stonewall that I've seen.

The past spring Lucy participated in “Project Drag Queen”, a sort of emerging artist workshop which Lucy thought would help her integrate into the local professional drag scene. In our interview Lucy referred to the mentors who ran project drag queen as her “foster drag parents”.

One trend is that while all Queens sought out- or accepted the invitation of- their drag mothers for professional reasons, there is none the less a familial element to the dynamic that hinges on the idea of a mother/daughter relationship. All of my queens noted that despite the power dynamic between the new and old queen, for the most part, mentoring took the form of suggestions and the sharing of stories or techniques, as opposed to coaching or instructing which tend to involve more strict directives. Farah, who currently has five drag daughters that make up the Heights family, stressed that being a drag mother was not about imposing her own aesthetics of artistic vision on someone to create tiny versions of herself. Farah explains that she often approaches aspiring queens when she recognizes a similar artistic spirit- members of the house of Heights tend to come from a dance background and, generally, tend to affect a glamorous aesthetic- so that rather than trying to impose her artistic aims on a young queen, she instead looks for queens who might naturally wish to engage with the same aspects of drag as she does. However, as Farah emphasized, beyond that spark of recognition, she encourages her queens to explore and express their own sense of self through drag, offering advice and guidance rather than strict directives.

The idea that drag is autobiographical is often overlooked in contemporary drag scholarship which tends to focus exclusively on drag as a form of “gender parody”. Yet despite the outside perspective that drag is defined by parodying the “other”, the queens I interviewed, both for this paper, and my research over the past few years, have identified their initial attraction to drag as a way of expressing their selves. Ray Sunshine explains that he began

playing with drag as a teenager as way to escape reality through fantasy. Lucy Flawless began playing with drag after graduating from York University's acting conservatory.

As other drag and trans performers such as Cassandra Moore and Nina Arsenault have similarly noted, Flawless explains that despite the generally liberal atmosphere of university theatre departments, conservatory training remains a heteronormative experience. In the name of producing professionalized and "castable" graduates, students are taught to embrace a normative identity based on how they present, and any form of gender variance is strongly discouraged. Vocal training, Arsenault outlines, tend to reinforce binary gender affects as "natural". Flawless recalled that he was constantly told that he was an "every man" and was trained to play average, inoffensive, masculine male roles. Flawless explained that drag is more autobiographical art form but "straight theatre acting" was more about playing dress up and pretending to be other people, which was still fun. We chuckled a bit over the irony of this reflection.

However the term mother is more than just a metaphoric term for a feminine mentor. In addition to the practical mentoring drag mothers and families do tend to function as actual families. All my participants talked about the fact that their drag family's activities extended beyond their work as drag queens and into their personal lives. Drag families frequently celebrate holidays as well as commemorate personal milestones like anniversaries and birthdays. Heights explained that one of her drag daughter's long-time partner has been incorporated into the family as her "drag son", despite having never performed or appeared in drag.

Drag mothers also frequently offer guidance on life issues that tend to parallel their chosen artistic practice. For example, Heights and Noire are both trans women who began transitioning after they began performing as drag queens. Heights explained that her drag mother, who she met at pageant in the US, also identified as trans and was thus also able to offer

her guidance and support as she began to transition. Noire notes that as an out trans woman of colour and a drag queen many of her drag daughters approach her because of a shared investment in that intersectionality.

I want to close by talking about how drag has changed in Canada over the past decade and the effect of drag's mainstream success on drag families. The most conspicuous influence on drag's recent surge in popularity has been *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which in addition turning drag into a mainstream entertainment form, has led to a "drag baby boom" of young aspiring drag queens. However, *Drag Race* and its sleeper hit popularity ride on the shoulders of some subtler influences. Despite being predicated as on its last legs by its own community throughout the 1970s and 80s, the 1990s saw mainstream culture began taking an interest in drag such as with such films *Pricilla Queen of the Desert*, *The Bird Cage* and *To Wong Fu, Thanks for Everything*, *Julie Newmar*, and as well as the enduring popularity of the documentary *Paris is Burning*. Soon after drag went from being a dirty little secret to a mainstream novelty, social media granted access and the possibility of documentation to a previously underground ephemeral art form. Trade secrets like creating the illusion of "feminine features" with contours or the practical question of where to buy a size 14 heel had previously been passed by word of mouth between daughters and mothers were now available to anyone with an internet connection.

Many queens were invigorated by the explosion of interest in drag and saw it as an exciting time to be practicing the art form. A few did voice some concerns over some the effect on the community. Dmanada, who began performing just before the boom hit notes that there's been a drastic shift in the expectations of audiences and managers in Toronto. "A queen used to be able to show up and do four numbers. Now everyone is expected to do twenty". She referred

to this as “marathon drag”. Heights also voiced concern that Drag Race’s power influence projects a more processed version of drag which disconnects the “reality” show from the actual art form.

Going into the interviews I had a pessimistic theory that recent explosion of “all access drag” would start to erode the figure of the drag mother. I’m happy to report that, as far as my five queens are concerned, this doesn’t seem to be the case. The overall trend in drag communities in Canada seems to remain that, despite a sharp increase in online access to practical training, young queens still seek out drag mothers. At this point in my research it’s a little early for me to be drawing exact conclusions so instead I’ll offer a few thoughts that might suggest why a kinship systems endures in drag.

First, while homosexuality and gender play may be far more accepted today than they were twenty years ago, queer youth, particularly those who’s gender expression is outside the hegemonic norm, continue to face high levels of rejection from their biological families and the broader queer community. It is possible that more than being a system for perpetuating the survival of the art form, family and connection are part of what attracts young queens to the art form.

Secondly, drag mothers are part of the culture they perpetuate and are often represented in mainstream representations of drag. From *Paris is Burning*’s Dorian Corey to Mother Ru herself, the image of the wise/sass drag mother is a celebrated and exotified symbol in queer culture. Aspiring queens who want the full drag experience may seek out drag mothers in order to complete the image of drag presented to them in the media.

Lastly, drag itself is an art form predicated on the past. Whether with a nostalgic glow or biting satire- or, as is frequent, both at the same time- drag is an art form based on queering and recoding generally outdated pieces of heterosexual media and claiming it as queer culture. From old Hollywood to John Waters, drag queens possess an encyclopedic knowledge of popular culture from passed eras. It is perhaps this reverence for the past that continues to secure the drag mother, as a symbol of that nostalgic connection to the past, within her community.

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