

10 Tip the Queens! *Black Girl Magic* and Streaming Queer Pleasures

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In the popular imagination, gay nightlife venues have long been spaces for queer people to explore their identities and pursue pleasurable activities in relative safety. The sociologist Jason Orne (2017) argues that gayborhoods and their entertainment institutions don't simply celebrate differences—they create them. In claiming space beyond mainstream bounds, gay places are rich sites on which alternative queer cultures can grow and flourish. But what happens when these crowded dance floors, intimate bars, and dark back rooms are unavailable? If going out is no longer possible, how might queer nightlife traditions like the drag show, dance party, and fundraiser play out online?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, live streamed instantiations of queer nightlife have become ubiquitous, offering what Marko Djurdjić (2020) describes as a reprieve from the isolation of quarantine that allows attendees “to re-interpret and recreate the spaces that we can't live without.” The digital nightlife event series *Club Quarantine* has received a good deal of mainstream press coverage for its near-daily convening of young queer folks streaming themselves on Zoom from bedrooms, living rooms, and basements (Colyar 2020; Goldfine 2020). Queer influencers and content creators have taken to hosting fundraisers and charity entertainment events through live streaming platforms, funneling tips and donations to community groups and direct mutual aid funds. Drag artists have pivoted to mixing preproduced music videos with live lip-syncing on Twitch, taking advantage of audiovisual and monetization affordances on the site to support themselves. In many ways, the rapid uptake of different live streaming formats for queer nightlife purposes is unsurprising, given the long history of queer people being early adopters of internet technologies to connect with one another and build community on a global scale (Gross 2003;

McGlotten 2013; Campbell 2014). In what follows, I present a case study of *Black Girl Magic*, a live streamed nightlife event series, through which I examine the mediated coconstruction of queer nightlife by performers and audiences, Black drag as social criticism, and the role of pleasure in queer community-building practices.

Black Girl Magic is a monthly show starring an all-Black cast of drag artists, which ordinarily took place in person at Roscoe's Tavern in Chicago. The show's host and cofounder, The Vixen, is an alum of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and a mainstay of Chicago queer nightlife. At the beginning of the pandemic, the organizers quickly pivoted to producing a live streamed version of *Black Girl Magic* on Twitch.tv and later distributing the recordings through the Open Television (OTV) intersectional distribution platform (Christian 2018; OTV Team 2020). Drag performers in the *Black Girl Magic* series, united by their shared membership among the global Black diaspora, use a variety of costume, musical, and visual styles that reference and celebrate Black women entertainers, artists, celebrities, and historical figures. Event organizers took advantage of internet distribution to showcase a variety of national and international drag performers that they otherwise wouldn't have been able to bring together in person in Chicago.

Throughout this chapter, I examine the nine monthly shows in the *Black Girl Magic* series that were live streamed on Twitch.tv in 2020. I discovered the *Black Girl Magic* live streamed events through my personal connections in the Chicago drag community and took it up as a supplementary part of my digital ethnographic work on Twitch drag (Persaud and Perks 2022). I was able to catch five of the nine shows live on Twitch and watched the other four as recorded events on OTV. For me, a scholar of queer media and cultural production, *Black Girl Magic* was a window into the changing terrain of queer nightlife toward live streamed events during the COVID-19 pandemic given that, as drag queen Vinegar Strokes put it before beginning her musical theater set on the April 2020 show, "everywhere is closed, Broadway is closed, West End is closed, and my legs are unfortunately closed as well!" Moving between thematic and textual analysis of real-time observation, recorded video productions, and social media posts, I explore how entertainers and audiences coproduce the mediated queer nightlife experience of the *Black Girl Magic* drag performance series.

Reading and Viewing Drag Live Streaming

Queer Media Studies and Live Streaming

Entertainment media are part of what the communication scholar Larry Gross (2001) calls the “electronic nervous system” of contemporary society, where communication and media technologies are increasingly the dominant means through which we come to know the world beyond ourselves. Film, television, music, and more recently, the internet, social media, and new media like live streaming enable audiences, communities, and relationships with creators to develop that otherwise might never have. These mediated avenues of information, education, and pleasure are the media by which people come to understand experiences that they might never personally live. Queer media studies scholars have long been interested in topics like media representation, audience interpretation and reception, subcultures, and creative cultural production by and for queer people (e.g., Russo 1987; Sender 2005; Benschhoff and Griffin 2006; Ruberg and Shaw 2017; Shaw and Persaud 2020). This case study builds on this body of literature by examining live streamed queer nightlife as a text of queer cultural production to be read and as a site of contested queer community.

There is an emergent body of scholarship on live streaming, as the edited collection in which this chapter is located exemplifies, which focuses on popular culture and social life. While T. L. Taylor’s *Watch Me Play* (2018) is perhaps the best-known example with lay readers, I am also in conversation with culturally engaged research on live streaming and questions of race, gender, and sexuality (Gray 2017; Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019; Ruberg and Lark 2020). Moreover, this work connects with literature on internet microcelebrity that centers the interdependence of content creators and audiences, as well as the intimate labor that sustains their fluctuating relationships (Senft 2008; Marwick 2013; Abidin 2015; Baym 2018).

Situating Drag in Queer Nightlife

Drag has long been an integral part of queer nightlife, but beyond showcasing gender fuckery, camp aesthetics, and distinctly queer points of view in the here-and-now (Muñoz 2009), it is also a means to commune with queer pasts. While much attention has been paid to drag as explicit gender performativity (Newton 1979; Butler 1990), it has also been framed as a performance practice that draws on nostalgia and queer affect to collapse

historical distance in service of queer materiality (Crookston 2021). In particular, lip-synching, which the vast majority of *Black Girl Magic* performers do during their sets, is a dramaturgical tool that connects contemporary local LGBTQ communities with their historical antecedents (Farrier 2016). In this way, queer nightlife centered around drag is a means to build and refract community across time and space.

Many drag performers and artists in the digital age have become adept at appropriating networked communication technologies to their own performance and self-representation ends, contributing to what Lingel and Golub (2015) call “technological seamfulness.” Showcasing a mix of real-time and prerecorded drag performances and leveraging distribution platforms like Twitch and OTV to put on a digital version of *Black Girl Magic* constitute yet another example of this practice. While some performers in the *Black Girl Magic* series have been on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (or even won it), as I argue later in this chapter, the mediated live streamed space of the series resists postracial politics, overt commercialization and cooption by established culture industries, as well as the idea that there is a singular notion of what drag should be and do.

In a post-*RuPaul’s Drag Race* world, where the Emmy-winning international reality television empire propels drag artists to fame and fortune, scholars have examined how the mainstream representation, reception, and transformation of drag have shaped popular culture and modern queer nightlife alike. As Eir-Anne Edgar (2011) has written, the *RuPaul’s Drag Race* series constructs a particular vision of “successful” drag that leverages feminine stereotypes, queer historical references, and gender performance that ultimately forecloses more critical and complex cultural negotiations with gender and sexuality. To that end, Alyxandra Vesey (2017) has argued that *Drag Race* contestants are thrust into a complicated position fraught with neoliberal and postracial politics as they navigate reality television and recording industry expectations. Both of these pieces of scholarship demonstrate how *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has platformed drag and queer nightlife aesthetics in a way that strips them of their subversive and radical queer politics, while simultaneously creating an avenue through which some drag performers might ascend to mainstream pop stardom and celebrity status.

To that end, while Feldman and Hakim (2020) have noted that the mainstreaming of drag has been largely beneficial for traditional culture industries like television and music, there is little evidence that drag’s ascent in

popular culture has platformed the transgressive politics in which the queer art form has historically been immersed. From a sociological standpoint, McCormack and Wignall (2021) examine the perspectives and experiences of British drag performers, suggesting that drag has become a legitimate mainstream creative career in the popular imagination even as the reality of its precarity, financialization, and labor difficulties is obscured. At the same time, the mainstreaming of drag has introduced new avenues for drag performers to explore activist interests and explicitly political aesthetics in front of much larger audiences than those to which they have historically had access. Renee Middlemost (2019, 2020) explicates how Bob the Drag Queen and Sasha Velour (recent winners of the American *RuPaul's Drag Race* show) have leveraged their newfound mainstream celebrity and digital media savvy as drag activists, adapting a long history of employing drag performance and persona in support of LGBTQ causes. Following this, the uptake of drag in popular culture has the potential to platform some drag performers who are interested in making activism and celebrity advocacy a central part of their personal brand.

With these studies in mind, I would argue that drag has become a contested object for both scholars of queer media and cultural production and sexuality studies, where mainstream visibility and access to the financial and social capital of legacy media have complicated what was once an underground subversive queer cultural touchstone. To be clear, queer nightlife is neither inherently utopian in its roles in LGBTQ community construction, nor is it entirely disconnected from the disciplining forces that govern representations of queerness in everyday life (Adeyemi, Khubchandani, and Rivera-Servera 2021). Yet drag (and many aspects of queer nightlife generally) requires audiences and performers alike to step into a temporary zone of creative bricolage and fabulousness that foregrounds queer political possibility (Moore 2018).

“Coming to You from Her Living Room, Honey . . .”

Drag performances in *Black Girl Magic* are set in a variety of backgrounds, including softly lit living rooms, colorful light projections on unplaceable blank walls, fully realized indoor and outdoor narrative short films, frenetic mélanges of popular media and queer underground art, and frequently some combination of all the aforementioned. These diverse stages are

fundamentally constitutive of and contribute to the political commentary, aesthetic viewpoints, and semiotic dimensions of drag performances in the live streamed series.

Throughout the show, The Vixen's interludes connect with viewers (figure 10.1), both those watching live on Twitch and those who will watch the recordings at a later date, describing how much labor goes into producing a digital drag show, the talent and creative vision of performers, and the broader significance of creating a digital space for queer nightlife when the opportunity to occupy physical space is foreclosed. Given the creative control over audiovisual presentation that the live streamed drag show affords, many drag artists opt for highly produced music video productions where they are performer, audio engineer, and video editor alike. Drag artists in *Black Girl Magic* engage in a wide variety of entertainment practices including lip-syncing, comedic acting, dramatic monologues, poetry readings, a cappella vocal medleys, and esoteric performance art. Next, I outline three broad themes from the live streamed *Black Girl Magic 2020* shows and offer an exemplary illustrative vignette for each to give a sense of the kinds of performances that audiences experienced. Notably, each of these themes highlights the underlying social criticism that permeates *Black Girl Magic* concerning intersectionality, racial justice, and Black cultural production.



Figure 10.1

Streamer and drag performer The Vixen addressing viewers from her living room.

The first theme concerns historical homage to Black women civil rights movement icons, artists, and organizers like Fannie Lou Hamer, Maya Angelou, and Josephine Baker. As *The Vixen* regularly reminds the audience, the live streamed drag show is intended to celebrate the life and legacy of Black women across time and space. To this end, many performers develop elaborate set designs, costumes, and sonic environments that place their drag in conversation with a particular iconic Black woman in history. One such example from the April 2020 show is the Chicago drag queen Miss Toto's fantastical interpretation of Harriet Tubman, filmed in a sparsely furnished apartment and an outdoor woodland location (figure 10.2). The set opens with a supercut of film and documentary representations of her life before cutting to Miss Toto in a green-and-white housemaid-style outfit cleaning, sewing, and doing other domestic labor while Britney Spears's "I'm A Slave 4 U" plays in the background. After a short bit of sexy choreography, the shot changes to show her typing a message on an iPhone to "BLACK PEOPLE," telling them to meet her down by the river signed "xo, Harriet Tubman." The next scene shows Miss Toto running around an open field barefoot with a red lantern, while "C'mon 'N Ride It (The Train)" by Quad City DJs starts playing loudly, clearly a reference to the famed Underground Railroad. The latter portion of the set depicts an emotional



Figure 10.2

Miss Toto dancing in a field as Harriet Tubman during *Black Girl Magic*.

lip-sync performance to Carly Rae Jepsen’s “Run Away with Me” as Miss Toto splashes through a creek, soaking the hem of her dress.

Pan-African, Black Power, and Afrofuturist aesthetics are common reference points for drag performers in *Black Girl Magic*, which follows their popularity in contemporary Black cultural production more generally. This second theme attends to creative representations of a global Black diasporic identity that pull inspiration from twentieth-century Black American arts and culture movements. One example of this genre is Amber St. James’s performance during the June 2020 show, where the bearded queen begins her set with a heartfelt lip-sync in kente cloth and rainbow makeup with a matching headwrap (figure 10.3). The African American actress Jenifer Lewis’s protest song “Take Your Knee off My Neck” plays loudly, notably penned in summer 2020 in response to George Floyd’s murder at the hands of a police officer in Minnesota. St. James’s performance then moves to another evocative post-George Floyd song, “I Just Wanna Live” by Keedron Bryant, whose sudden social media virality propelled the Black thirteen-year-old boy into a record deal with Warner Music. Throughout these transitions, as her set finishes with a medley of upbeat gospel music, St. James deftly uses rainbow props and colorful African prints.

Referencing contemporary Black women entertainers like Beyoncé, Missy Elliott and Janelle Monáe was a common audiovisual foundation for drag



Figure 10.3

Amber St. James performs gospel and protest songs in kente cloth.

performers in the live streamed version of the show. This third theme is particularly distinct, as these performances were the most likely to leverage popular culture references, Black queer culture memes, and Black femme aesthetics. Halfway through the July 2020 show, The Vixen introduces the nonbinary drag artist Maxi Glamour by discussing their work as a community organizer in St. Louis. Maxi Glamour's set then opens with a medium shot of them dancing and posing as Janet Jackson's "Rhythm Nation" steadily plays (figure 10.4). Jackson has described the song as a piece of consciousness-raising social criticism, commenting that "I know a song or an album can't change the world. But there's nothing wrong with doing what we're doing to help spread the message. . . . If personal freedom has political implications and if pleasure must be part of any meaningful solution—and it really must—there's nothing wrong with it at all" (DeCurtis 1990). Maxi Glamour's energetic performance visually traces this social justice narrative as the scene glitches between their color-blocked dancer outfit, an Afrofuturist cyborg, and footage of recent unnamed protest before displaying with "DEFUND THE POLICE" as outro text.

While some fans and performers of live drag in nightclubs and elsewhere have framed "digital drag" as a lesser way to experience the art form, others have praised it as a way to elevate the medium into a full-fledged



Figure 10.4

Maxi Glamour pairs music and dance in a digital performance emphasizing social justice.

audiovisual production (Framke 2020). The digital drag performances showcased in *Black Girl Magic* are largely prerecorded, and individual performers were free to represent their sets through a wide spectrum of production and form. Some chose to foreground the webcam aesthetic of watching a drag show framed in a horizontal or vertical shot that focused on the performer's body, while others took advantage of the prerecorded format to produce a fully realized short film that had a distinct point of view. *Black Girl Magic* did not seem to impose any particular production guidelines for performers, which afforded performers a great deal of creative agency. In this way, the pandemic-accelerated explosion of digital drag combines the subversive gender-fuckery of the drag performance tradition with the networked affordances of the live streaming platform to create a distinct kind of referential new media art and queer nightlife experience.

"Venmo, PayPal, Whatever, Tip the Queens!"

A running refrain from *Black Girl Magic's* host The Vixen throughout all the shows was the importance of supporting the Black drag queens, transgender men and women, and nonbinary artists that make up its cast. Given the historical (and ongoing) intersectional marginalization of Black queer and trans people within LGBTQ and mainstream entertainment spaces, being an audience member with the means to offer financial support to *Black Girl Magic* performers was framed as a potentially reparative act. The overlay effects of the live streamed entertainment production on Twitch allowed performers to display their digital payment addresses (PayPal and Venmo primarily) while their clips were playing. In addition to Twitch's paid subscription and bits features, viewers were encouraged between sets to donate to individual performers or to a collective account to be distributed to the entire cast.

Certainly, some drag queens who have participated in *RuPaul's Drag Race* have been able to convert their television spotlight into steady streams of performance and creative production income, but the vast majority of drag artists do not make a living solely from their entertainment work (Kravitz 2018). To that end, The Vixen's steady reminders about the importance of paying for drag surface how being a queer public figure doesn't necessarily convert visibility into income. During all nine shows, viewers were prompted between each set by The Vixen and the Twitch chat moderators to monetarily

support performers or relevant charity causes through tipping, purchasing merchandise, and donating to fundraisers. As an example of the show's commitment to community care, Shangela (another *RuPaul's Drag Race* alum) appeared toward the end of the June 2020 show to promote Feed the Queens, her partnership with the Actors Fund to raise money to distribute for food assistance to drag queens who are out of work due to the COVID-19 pandemic shuttering nightlife venues all over the US (Bonner 2020).

At the same time, The Vixen often acknowledges that the audience, presumably mostly queer and trans people, were likely to be disproportionately affected by the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Posting about the live show on social media, encouraging loved ones to check out future shows, and supporting local Black drag artists are presented as fine alternatives if providing monetary support to *Black Girl Magic* was not possible. Taken together, I would argue that these moments also highlighted the ambivalent relationship toward being a spokesperson that many queer internet microcelebrities experience, compounded by the reality that they are not generally compensated for this affective and activist labor until they have a very large platform with a mainstream audience (Abidin and Cover 2019; Duguay 2019; Persaud and Perks 2022).

Alongside this narrative that encourages viewers to financially support the Black drag artists providing entertainment, many of the performances across the nine shows engage in explicit and implicit messaging around Black empowerment, racial solidarity, and social critiques. In particular, the June and July 2020 events repeatedly referenced the summer racial justice, Black Lives Matter, and antipolice brutality protests that happened across the US (and internationally) in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and its entry into a long line of mediated "black witnessing" practices (Sharpe 2016; Richardson 2020). During a break in the June 2020 show, The Vixen momentarily put aside her upbeat host persona, noting that she was inspired by the diverse coalition of queer people around the country protesting and organizing for Black lives. The Twitch chat and social media commentators expressed their support for these efforts, highlighting the ways in which audience members were clearly engaged with the social justice ethos of the show. Later shows in August 2020 and beyond opened with a highlight reel including a scene where Black drag queens marched through Chicago with messages like "SIGN A FUCKING PETITION, DONATE TO BAIL FUNDS, AMPLIFY BLACK VOICES" flashing across the bottom of the screen.

The proliferation of digital drag shows like *Black Girl Magic* has made clear the ways in which the monetization tools of live streaming, web video, and social media generally can be leveraged to encourage audiences to financially support LGBTQ nonprofit organizations, mutual aid initiatives, and performers directly. While I anticipate that digital drag will not supplant in-person drag performances in contexts where physical gatherings are possible, it is a salient example of the ways that digital communication technologies can be put to work to materially support queer communities.

“This Ain’t No Regular Drag Show—If You’re in My House, You Show Love!”

In addition to celebrating Black cultural production, furnishing social criticism, and underscoring the importance of paying drag artists for their performance labor, *Black Girl Magic* cultivates a community of care that centers pleasure. Moderators in the Twitch chat and The Vixen herself on-screen regularly reminded the audience that they should refrain from being toxic or otherwise disparaging about the drag performers, given the drag fandom’s known issues with disparaging Black drag artists who don’t conform to their expectations. Reminders to engage in self-care and community care are recurring commentary from the Vixen, in the context of the protests, policy dialogues, and other activities (especially those opposing anti-Black racism and racial violence) in the US following the events of summer 2020. For the audience, the performers in *Black Girl Magic* occasionally use their sets to comment on how the digital drag show was a way to connect with queer community that had been largely inaccessible due to the pandemic. Many drag artists (and recent research) acknowledge that isolation and separation due to COVID-19 have been especially hard for some queer people who rely on queer nightlife and leisure spaces to socialize with each other and physically embody their ideal selves (Anderson and Knee 2021).

As The Vixen repeats again and again, the drag series was inseparable from the radical notion that Black women, Black artists, and Black people deserve to be materially supported and honored for their contributions to popular culture. There is no *Black Girl Magic* without the political vision of the Black Panthers and the Combahee River Collective, the visual aesthetics of Afrofuturism and the global Black diaspora, and the musical genius of Beyoncé, Janet Jackson, and Aretha Franklin. These dimensions also contribute to reading

Black Girl Magic as an example of what André Brock (2020) defines as Black cyberculture, or “speculative cyborg Blackness mediated by the digital” (17). While the digital drag show era is unlikely to replace in-person drag nightlife entertainment, *Black Girl Magic* exemplifies the central role of drag performers, their distinct political positions, and their cultivation of audiences that have a shared sense of queer community beyond any singular physical space. Taken together, mediated queer nightlife events are crucial avenues through which queer people might experience pleasure and community care when their physical options are foreclosed or otherwise out of reach.

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Live Streaming Culture

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