

Transforming Identities: A Historical Genealogy of Drag Culture in Puerto Rico

Nathaniel Pabón Cruz

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of:

Master of Arts/English Literature

May 29, 2024

**Department of English
College of Humanities
University of Puerto Rico**

Approved by:

Dr. Katherine Miranda, PhD

Dr. Roque Salas Rivera, PhD

Dr. Maritza Stanchich, PhD
Thesis Director

Introduction	5
Drag and It's History	7
El Cotorrito	8
Characters in Puerto Rican Television	12
La Comay	14
Violence Against De LGTBQIA+ Community	19
Drag As A Gateway To Transness	22
Butler And Drag	27
Conclusion	30
Work Cited	33

List of Images:

Image of Drag Queens in El Cotorrito p. 9

Image of Baby Martellp. 11

On August 15th, 2023, a new religious conservative party in Puerto Rico, Proyecto Dignidad proposed in P. de La C. 1821 to add an article to the penal code of Puerto Rico.

The following states:

“The State has a compelling interest in protecting the right of our children to grow up in a healthy and appropriate world where the highest human values prevail without exposing them to obscene content and exposures in public and private events.” (p.1)

When talking about people performing drag in public or private spaces, Lisie Burgos Muñiz, a Proyecto Dignidad spokesperson, proposed legislation to outlaw "obscene exposure in front of minors" of creative forms such as drag shows. This reactionary move by a lawmaker for a new political party on the right in Puerto Rico copies similar laws proposed in the US that demonize drag culture. Like the case of a bill submitted in Tennessee Senate Bill 3 restricting drag performances in public spaces (AN ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 7, Chapter 51, Part 14, relative to adult-oriented performances). Such truly obscene hate-mongering aims to oppress all forms of non-heteronormative ways of being and obscure a prevalent rich tradition. It begs the question: What is drag? Drag is the art of clothing and performing as another gender (different from the one assigned at birth) exaggeratedly for entertainment purposes such as comedy, singing, dancing, lip-syncing, or all the above. Drag is a form of self-expression that allows individuals to explore and challenge societal norms and expectations surrounding gender. It often involves elaborate costumes, extravagant makeup, and larger-than-life personas to create captivating performances. Drag performers may also use their platform to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and raise

awareness about social issues. It has existed for centuries; for example, in the theater of ancient Greece, the men played the part of women in their plays, as with the kabuki tradition in Japan. Yet other examples from the early 1880s until the early 1930s in the US include vaudeville and burlesque. These historical examples highlight the long-standing tradition of gender-bending performances and artistic expression. Banning creative forms like drag shows under the pretext of protecting minors from "obscene exposure" fails to acknowledge gender-bending performances' rich cultural and historical significance. What Proyecto Dignidad also fails to acknowledge is that drag has in fact been televised and disseminated to the Puerto Rican masses for years with characters such as *La Comay* with her show *SuperXclusivo*, and Raymond Arrieta with his myriad characters, including those in which people have painted themselves in blackface. Where is the line crossed? When is drag 'art' and when is it 'inappropriate for children'? How could this conservative state legislator pretend to ban drag and in so doing attempt to erase its history in Puerto Rico? Isn't drag in fact an indelible part of Puerto Rican popular culture and mass media? What are the historical and cultural roots of drag performance, and how has it evolved over time?

Drag is a broad term encompassing a variety of behaviors and artistic expressions in which people present themselves in a highly stylized or exaggerated way to entertain or express themselves. Including elements such as extravagant costumes, makeup, and performances that challenge traditional gender norms. It is a form of self-expression that allows individuals to explore different facets of their identity and creativity. Drag is a creative and adaptable art form that keeps changing with time, adding new viewpoints, influences, and styles. It has a long history rooted in LGBTQ+ culture and has become

more mainstream in recent years thanks to popular television shows like RuPaul's Drag Race. It serves as a platform for individuals to push boundaries, challenge societal norms, and celebrate diversity and inclusivity. The show has successfully mainstreamed drag culture by showcasing the skill, originality, and artistry of drag queens to viewers worldwide. The program has promoted a better understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ groups while also demystifying drag. By featuring a diverse group of contestants with unique backgrounds and stories, "*RuPaul's Drag Race*" has helped break down stereotypes and celebrate individuality within the LGBTQ+ community. The show's impact extends beyond entertainment, serving as a platform for important conversations about gender identity, self-expression, and acceptance.

In Greek theater, audiences were predominantly male and were amused by male casts. There have been many instances of cross-dressing throughout theater history. Cross-dressing was used as a comedic device to add humor and complexity to the performances, not so different from what is seen today. Even in Elizabethan England, women were not allowed to perform on stage. Shakespeare's plays therefore included young male actors playing female characters, many of whom were accomplished and versatile performers. During the Baroque period, it was customary to place male singers, known as "castrati," in female roles in opera. Male singers who underwent castration prior to puberty to maintain their high vocal range were known as castrati. With the development of female opera singers in the 18th and 19th centuries, this tradition began to fade. Female opera singers were finally able to take on the roles originally reserved for castrati, showcasing their vocal talents, and bringing a new level of authenticity to the performances. The decline of castrati in opera marked a significant shift in the industry

towards more gender-inclusive casting practices. Men have consistently been allowed to portray the Other in theater. On vaudeville stages, female impersonators were often entertainers who mocked women and imposed expectations on how they should behave and look. These perpetuated harmful stereotypes and reinforced gender norms in society. It wasn't until later in history that women were able to challenge these portrayals and create more authentic representations of themselves on stage. History has demonstrated that if a cisgender heterosexual male, it is acceptable to portray a woman.



A queer movement began in 1968 when the word “transformistas” (drag queens) was used in a local journal promoting a San Juan drag club called “El Cotorrito.” The club became an urban phenomenon in Santurce, attracting largely heterosexual patrons and officials such as Governor Luis Muñoz Marin and the capital city's mayor, Felisa Rincón de Gautier (Laureano). But outside of the bars and in public spaces,

people would often be arrested for not wearing clothes that are “appropriate” for their

gender assigned at birth. When television first became prominent in Puerto Rico, some of the most popular characters were straight males presenting as women, such as the characters "Cuquita Sabrosura and Serafin Sin Fin" (J. Laureano, p. 34), portraying an "effeminate" gay character as a comic element. To maintain their masculinity, their performances are centered on mocking femininity. These portrayals reinforced societal norms and expectations of gender, perpetuating the idea that femininity in men is something to be ridiculed. This further marginalized and stigmatized the LGBTQ+ community, creating a hostile environment for those who did not conform to traditional gender roles.

Javier Laureano asserts in his book *San Juan Gay*: "Since the late 50's and in the 60's, as part of the opening of gay spaces in the cities, drag shows began to become popular on the island. This decade witnessed the appropriation by gay men of a space hitherto reserved for heterosexuals to dress as women to create a drag show." (p. 35)

Although 'El Cotorrito' was the most well-known drag club, it was not a club exclusively for queer people. The circuit and queer spaces started to expand afterward, particularly in the drag scene, which became one of the primary nightly attractions of nightclubs and circuit bars. It is vital to distinguish between El Cotorrito, a drag bar where the act is mainly for the heterosexual gaze, and the establishment of clubs where a homosexual man gets to occupy the stage. In this sense, El Cotorrito is one of the important locations in the drag scene, and old San Juan is the stage where the acts occur. The front of the club had a sign advertising "El Cotorrito, a gay place for gay people."

The viewers that attended El Cotorrito wore expressions ranging from curiosity to disdain. The Popular Democratic Party (*Partido Popular Democrático*) hymn was written by Johnny Rodriguez, Tito Rodriguez's brother, the owner of El Cotorrito and a drag queen. They began doing performances in a Bar called 'El San Cristobal.' (Laureano, p.76). One of the earliest drag bars in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Like many other related places in the world, it was shut down by the authorities after being raided by police. During that time, you could get arrested simply for being inside a bar that was classified as a homosexual bar.



One of the first drag queens in the local scene during the 50's was called Baby Martell. Her act consisted of dancing and doing a striptease, while her face was covered,

because, in the end, she would reveal her gender by taking off the mask, surprising the audience. After some time, Baby Martell would be part of Tito Puentes's act where she was displayed as she danced and played the maracas (Laureano, p.75). She eventually transitioned to become a woman.

There were many “firsts” in the queer scene in Puerto Rico who have been recorded in history, archived, and documented. Especially, by Javier Laureano and others with a passion for queer history. Queer history, especially in Puerto Rico, is also oral history. Talking to the elders gives insight as to where society was and how the archipelago has evolved. Drag queens used to be called by the prefix “Mister” until Gilo Rosa decided to use a more gender-fluid name, Cocó. They were excluding the Mister title from the scene and revolutionizing drag performances. Gender non-conformity in drag is not uncommon today and hasn't been historically. One of the most famously recognized drag queens in the archipelago is Freddie Mercado, which in their drag they simply transgress gender.

In the 50s, Puerto Rican drag queens used to sing professionally, instead of what is seen today, in which drag performances are mostly lip synced. The act of drag performance has evolved with time. In the 60's, Antonio Pantojas took drag to the television set. Instead of the usual satirical figures that were used to mock, he took an artistic approach to drag.

The media has thrived on heterosexuality and deviations from the norm. As a result, biases were perpetuated by several characters throughout the history of Puerto Rican television. This kind of control and monitoring of binary genders was and is being practiced by the mainstream media. A climate of social prejudice against LGBTQIA+

individuals has been and continues to be generated by local depictions of homosexuality. In actuality, the degree of discrimination against the LGBT community in Puerto Rico has contributed to some of its members fleeing to other parts of the world that might be more accepting of their queerness.

Cuquita Sabrosura, Ramonita Cienfuegos de la O, Ruperta "La Caimana," Minga and Petrarca, Plinia, Solitaria, Mary Jane, and Cuca Gómez are only a handful of the dozens of roles performed by men since the formation of Puerto Rican television. To some degree, these characters were some of the earliest references to drag in the country's popular culture. These are references to drag because of the key elements of drag that include characterization, costuming, and makeup as well as performing as a different gender. Although there are drag queens and kings that play the role as their gender, but an exaggerated performance of it. The vast and successful acceptance of these personalities by Puerto Rican audiences is simply another indication that drag has been an important element of the culture. In an article from *El Nuevo Día* detailing the 70 years drag has been on television, Lawrence La Fountain Stokes affirms:

What happened is that when Antonio Pantojas began to appear on television in the 70s, that was a big change in television in the 70s. So, it's not just cisgender heterosexual men who are dressing up as women as part of a comedy, but they are openly gay people who present themselves in a feminine manner as part of a gay aesthetic, a gay art project, a gay performance project. So right now, both coexist in television and in Puerto Rican theater. (Ramos Rosado)

Drag has long been a source of ridicule or comedy in Puerto Rican television since its inception in the early 1950s. Not to mention festivals and events like the Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol in Loiza, where there is also drag; it includes “a folkloric character of the *loca* (a crazy woman or effeminate man) participating in a popular Afro-Caribbean religious celebration”. (La Fountain-Stokes, p. 7). One of the first examples of drag in Puerto Rican television was the character of Floripondia portrayed by Cuban actor Americo Castellano in the 1950²s. As previously indicated, Floripondia's case is not unique in Puerto Rican television history. Conversely, since the 1950s, it has been a recurring topic. Most popular comedians have made parodies in which they dress like ladies, if not entirely, like Raymond Arieta, La Comay, Serafin Sin fin, Floripondia, and more. In Puerto Rican television there’s also the recurring theme of gossip. Madame Chenchá was the first gossip character in Puerto Rican television (Laureano, p.66). And she contributed to the persecution of people who do not follow cis-heterosexual norms.

The character of Madame Chenchá became a kind of ghost that haunted them and marked them as homosexuals or transgender. While watching the program with their families, they expected that at any moment their name would be added to the new list of homosexuals that formed part of the catalog of "degenerates" that Chenchá pointed out from the television set for Puerto Rico and New York. (La Fountain-Stokes, p. 66)

SuperXclusivo is a TeleOnce-aired Puerto Rican gossip show that has lasted more than two decades on and off the air. On January 24, 2000, the show debuted on WAPA-TV as *SuperXclusivo*. Kobbo Santarrosa (a cisgender heterosexual man and right-wing Cuban exile) designed, voiced, and puppeteered the puppet gossiper La Comay. Because

of its concept and the performance of Kobbo Santarrosa as La Comay, the show immediately garnered popularity among Puerto Rican audiences. The show's contentious gossip made it a must-see for many viewers, stirring dialogues and arguments across the island. Despite its popularity, many people have called for it to be canceled, citing its dangers and the verbal and psychological violence it promotes. This hatred is primarily focused on groups who face higher social and economic risk and marginalization. One of the instances in which the show lost its sponsorship was after the 2012 murder of Jose Enrique Gomez Saladin, a publicist whom (La Comay) said the victim's murder was his fault because of his sexuality.

La Comay's expressions on this case were as follows: My question is what was Jose Enrique Gomez Saladin doing in Padiel Street, in Caguas, where it is a focus of homosexuality, prostitution and everything there is... the question is, did this Mr. Jose Enrique Gomez Saladin look for this?
(Figueroa Lopez, p. 8)

Activists launched a social media campaign aimed at the show's sponsors linking such rhetoric to hate crimes against the LGBTQ community. This controversy ended a twelve-year run as the unquestioned number-one program on Puerto Rican television. The television character "La Comay" has become a cultural icon. Expressions from the show such as: *He dicho nombre yo?*, *aparente y alegadamente*, *tiralolo al medio Comay*, etc., are part of our daily jargon. The character, portrayed by puppeteer Kobbo Santarrosa, gained immense popularity for her ability to address controversial topics. Despite facing criticism for her offensive remarks, La Comay has remained a beloved figure in Puerto Rican pop culture. In her role as a gossip, she takes on the roles of

counselor, advocates for the “common good,” and even “prophet.” In several instances, she may be seen making suggestions during personal confrontations. In her memoir “*Detrás de La Comay*” (*Behind La Comay*), she justifies herself as a social prosecutor. She argues that her role as a social prosecutor allows her to shed light on important issues and hold individuals accountable for their actions. La Comay believes that by addressing controversial topics, she can spark meaningful discussions and bring about positive change in Puerto Rican society. However, critics argue that her offensive remarks often overshadow any potential good she may be trying to achieve, leading to a polarized public opinion of her. Numerous people have called for the discontinuation of this program, citing its negative effects.

To consider “La Comay” as culture we must understand the depth and implications of what we understand as culture. Culture is a complex system of beliefs, values, and practices that shape a society. Encyclopedia Britannica defines culture with these characteristics, “Culture includes language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, and ceremonies, among other elements.” Among those “other elements” of course, are ideologies, biases and prejudices. Without individuality, culture would not exist. This concept emphasizes the importance of individual thoughts, emotions, and beliefs in shaping societal norms and values. It also highlights the role of human creativity and imagination in creating cultural expressions. It is important to critically analyze how media representations like “La Comay” contribute to the construction and reinforcement of cultural norms and identities. It’s interesting how when many individuals speak about a puppet (La Comay) they gender her correctly and call her, “her” but when they talk about trans women, they misgender them, using the pronoun “him” or “his”. La Comay is known for her grotesque

homophobic, racist, misogynistic, and transphobic remarks that reflect commonly expressed Puerto Rican values and vocabulary. At the same time, her controversial comments have sparked outrage and calls for boycotts from various communities. Despite this, she remains a popular figure in Puerto Rican media. Historian Luis Figueroa Lopez affirms:

Francisco Ortiz Santini in his article *El Relajo de la Comay*, published in the cybernetic magazine *El Filo de la Moneda*, quoting radio commentator Luis Davila Colon about this character, says: "It is also a poem? that speaks tons about our people, our culture and our times." If so, we should ask ourselves with committed curiosity what this cultural text tells us about our Puerto Rican people. (Luis Figueroa Lopez, p. 28)

This show has garnered the biggest viewership in Puerto Rico for over twelve years. One of the first characters Kobbo Santa Rosa portrayed on television was *La Chachara del Bochinche*, then changed to another character called *La Condesa Del Bochinche*, through which Kobbo introduces a menacing and blatantly impudent attitude to the way that celebrities' private lives are reported through the figure of La Contesa. "According to Santarrosa, after journalist Pedro Zervigón interviewed with her, [...] La Condesa called his sentimental partner a Bugarrón "(Luis Figueroa Lopez, p. 37). When this news reached the president of Telemundo, Kobbo Santarosa was fired from the channel. But then he was rehired as a new character: La Comay, inspired by a notorious "bochinchera" neighbor. Since then, *SuperXclusivo* has been broadcast nonstop for more than a decade, igniting strong debate and moral debates among prominent figures in the country. A story around this character has taken on a life of its own due to its immense influence on Puerto Rican culture. Kobbo Santa Rosa has created an alter ego, and what is drag if not that, to create a persona or an alter ego that bends gender.

La Comay is a consumer product, it purportedly meets a market demand for the insatiable eagerness of Puerto Rican society to snoop around in the private lives of celebrities which have been suddenly brought to light by scandal. The show thrives on sensationalism and drama, often exaggerating or distorting facts to keep viewers hooked. Despite criticism for its exploitative nature, La Comay attracts a large audience due to the public's fascination with scandal and gossip. All that passes through *SuperXclusivo* is a perfect example of how frail we are. The overwhelming support for La Comay may also be seen as a response to the reality of a nation that faces deprivation of socio-political power from all angles, as well as demoralization and oppression from political structures, all of which undermine our collective dignity. In this sense, people may have seen La Comay as a source of national representation and validation. Additionally, the character of La Comay might provide a sense of escapism from the harsh realities of everyday life in Puerto Rico. Her bold and unfiltered persona perhaps offers a form of entertainment and distraction from the struggles faced by many in the country.

“Fernando Pico will propose the dynamic of the ‘relajo’ as a weapon of the disadvantaged classes to ridicule those who exercise power over them.” (Luis Figueroa Lopez, p. 52) The Comay maintains that it is the defender of morals and decorum, defending both its methodology and existence. She claims that she has stopped many people in the entertainment industry from acting inappropriately and uncontrollably. But when conduct is used as a defense, people's reputations are damaged, false information is spread through blatantly manipulative means, and people and their disputes are commercialized. "In an interview with Kobbo about the problems that this character was beginning to provoke, Santarrosa expressed that this type of character is an alter ego of the Puerto Rican society that depends so much on television for its development" (Luis Figueroa Lopez, p. 40).

Because of its expressive capacity, television is regarded as one of the most significant inventions of the 20th century and one of the most influential forms of communication. Television has revolutionized the way information and entertainment are disseminated to audiences worldwide. Its ability to reach millions of viewers simultaneously has made it a powerful tool for shaping public opinion and influencing cultural trends. *SuperXclusivo* fosters an intimate atmosphere that gives rise to a broadcast discussion that transforms the living room into a simulated court of law, empowering viewers to form opinions about the topics discussed there. But this verdict has been tampered with. It frequently rests on data that we are unable to verify, which skews what may be true. The reality is that people should be careful with what they believe in the media. For example, one of the most infamous trans murders that happened in Puerto Rico was the murder of Alexa Luciano Cintron in 2020. Before her death, there was a Twitter storm announcing there was a “man dressed as a woman” peeping in the women's bathrooms of a McDonalds. This gossip led to her murder.

The local representation of queer people in these types of social media flurries and other mass media representations has fostered and continues to foster a climate of intolerance towards LGBTQIA+ people. Part of the migrations of queer people in Puerto Rico have occurred due to the intensity of persecution of people of the community in different social contexts. Also known as *sexile*, Lawrence La Fountain Stokes studies this phenomenon. Sexual exile and migration are significant concerns that have an impact on many lives. La Fountain states:

Sexile can be the result of implicit family rejection that leads to personal anxiety and unhappiness, or individual and collective (family, church,

government) aggressions that entail outright physical and emotional abuse, censorship, punishment, public harassment, job discrimination, and violence. Some sexiled people leave because of their perceptions and intuitions, while others are quite literally expelled from their communities or countries of origin. (La Fountain-Stokes, p. 3)

This is a reality queer people face within the archipelago, especially with the rise of political parties such as Proyecto Dignidad, and its followers. Puerto Rico, a US colony, shares many laws and social norms with the US while still maintaining numerous notable distinctions. Queer people from Puerto Rico and the United States have long traveled back and forth between the island and the mainland due to Puerto Rico's territorial status, which permits both multidirectional and circular movement. But the reality is that the danger of being queer in Puerto Rico is not addressed or notified when advertised as a tourist attraction. The tourism group Discover Puerto Rico promotes Puerto Rico as “one of the most LGBTQ-friendly islands in the Caribbean” when there were a total of 235 Trans murders in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2023. The Caribbean has remained the region with one of the highest numbers of reported trans murders in 2023. The year 2023 was the deadliest for Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming folks, with 320 murders. A report from *Forbes* includes deaths between October 1, 2022, and September 30, 2023, with 73% of these murders in Latin America and the Caribbean alone, with the epicenter of the problem being in Brazil, where nearly one-third (31%) occurred. The Caribbean attracts tourists from many major cities in the world who are looking for “exotic” and exciting sexual experiences at affordable, sometimes outrageously cheap prices. Still, the same Caribbean countries are also seeing a large-scale, usually forced

migration of their sexual minorities because of the strict institutional, moral, and legal definitions of sexuality that are based on a heteronormative paradigm, regarded by many among the most homophobic regions of the Americas. This stark contrast between the tourism industry catering to sexual desires and the harsh reality faced by sexual minorities highlights the complex social issues present in the Caribbean region. Despite its reputation as a tropical paradise, many individuals are marginalized and forced to flee their homes due to discrimination.

Trans people, specifically Black Trans Women face higher rates of violence within the LGTBQIA+ community in Puerto Rico. And there is barely any representation of the Queer, Trans Puerto Rican community in media except for a renowned 2014 documentary called *Mala Mala* (Antonio Santini, Dan Sickles, 2014). This documentary is exceptional since it portrays civil rights action, overcoming prejudice and stigma, and the notable gains in LGBT visibility. “Filmed between 2012 and 2013, the pioneering bilingual film directed by Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles secured the support of leading queer film producers Christine Vachon and Pamela Koffler from Killer Films, who signed on as executive producers; the two have been instrumental to New Queer Cinema in the United States for over two decades” (La Fountain-Stokes, p. 4). Numerous scholars have studied this film and highlighted this history. In *Mala Mala*, Puerto Rico comes across as a vibrant, bilingual area where many people speak Spanish, English or *Spanglish*. Although the documentary accurately represents the many realities of the Trans community in Puerto Rico, it leaves a gap for the people who are not represented. One of the most frequent images you see in the film is of the protagonist doing their makeup in front of a mirror. A hyperfeminized image of transness accompanies stories

about trans women with pictures of them putting on makeup, dresses, and high-heeled shoes. This narrow portrayal perpetuates harmful stereotypes and ignores the diverse experiences and identities within the trans community. This also applies to the images shown of trans women doing sex work in the streets of Santurce, an image often used by the media to hypersexualize trans women by creating the impression that most trans women are sex workers. The primary focus of *Mala Mala* is on transgender women and cisgender queer men that do drag. However, chef Paxx Caraballo Moll talks about his experiences as a transgender person, or genderqueer, a term used to describe someone who identifies as neither a man nor a woman. However, he is still regarded as a trans man in the film. Not all the history of drag or the transgender experience in Puerto Rico or its diaspora is covered in *Mala Mala*. This “is a film that focuses on a limited number of people that the directors were able to film during their five trips to Puerto Rico in 2012-13 and that represent different aspects of the drag and transgender Puerto Rican experience. The representation is complex, diverse, and multifaceted, and presents an interesting cultural and political scene, full of nuances.” (La Fountain-Stokes, p. 22)

It’s important to highlight the similarities between Transness and Drag and how in many ways drag is a bridge to question gender. In *Mala Mala*, many of the drag performers even admit to thinking about transitioning. Eve Shapiro, from the University of San Francisco, asserts:

In more recent work, Rupp and Taylor (2003) assert that drag queens pose a politicized challenge to beliefs about gender and sexuality in their performances. In studies of transsexual individuals (Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey 1997; Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005), as well as in

ethnographies of drag performances, drag show audiences, and drag communities (Newton 1972; Piontek 2002; Rupp and Taylor 2003; Schacht 1998), scholars have examined the meaning of public performances of gender and debated whether drag destabilizes or reinscribes gender and sexuality hierarchies (Dolan 1985; Lorber 1999). What none of this research has examined, however, is the effect of these gender performances on performers themselves. (p. 251)

Drag shows need to be seen as a gendered process where the performance itself frequently changes the performer's politics and gender identification. By pushing boundaries and challenging societal norms, drag shows provide a platform for self-exploration and expression. Through their performances, drag artists can explore different facets of their identity and challenge traditional notions of gender. Drag is more than simply a vehicle for performers to express themselves; drag communities may also be a place of identity transformation and consciousness-raising.

Furthermore, drag was employed by Judith Butler (1990) to support their claim that, like gender, sex is a social construction. Butler argued that sex is not a fixed biological category, but rather a performance that is culturally constructed and maintained through repeated acts. This challenges the idea that sex is solely determined by biology and highlights the role of societal norms and expectations in shaping our understanding of gender and sexuality. Gender theory has explored the connection between identity and performance, advocating that gender is actively acted through daily interactions. This perspective challenges traditional notions of gender as a fixed, binary concept, emphasizing the fluidity and complexity of gender expression. It highlights the

importance of recognizing and validating diverse gender identities and experiences. Gender constructionist views contend that social, cultural, and historical processes shape gender rather than it being innate or biologically predetermined. From this angle, drag shows demonstrate the fluidity and diversity of gender roles and expressions by illuminating how gender is presented and enacted through actions, attire, and gestures. By challenging traditional norms and expectations surrounding gender, drag shows highlight the performative nature of gender and how individuals can actively shape their own identities. This perspective emphasizes the importance of recognizing and celebrating the multiplicity of gender expressions beyond binary categories. Additionally, Butler's theory of gender performativity posits that gender is not something one is, but something one does through repetitive acts and behaviors. They are well-known for their research on gender performativity. These performances are not spontaneous expressions of an inner self but are constructed through social norms, expectations, and cultural scripts. Their views on gender and drag have influenced queer and feminist thought. Butler's work challenges traditional notions of identity and sexuality, emphasizing the fluidity and constructed nature of gender. Their ideas have sparked important conversations about the intersection of gender, power, and society. Power's influence on the formation and management of gender norms is a point of emphasis in Butler's theory of gender performativity. Gender performances are intricately linked to social structures, power relationships, and disciplinary procedures; they are not only personal manifestations. Butler's theory challenges the idea that gender is a fixed, inherent trait, instead suggesting that it is a social construct that is constantly being performed and reinforced. By examining how power dynamics shape these performances, Butler highlights the ways in

which individuals can resist and subvert traditional gender norms. Butler's theories have sparked a lot of discussion and controversy. Their emphasis on performativity, according to some detractors, ignores oppressive experiences and material realities, especially for marginalized people who might not have the same freedom to express their gender as others. Some argue that their ideas can be unduly esoteric and difficult for people outside of academia to understand. However, others praise Butler for challenging traditional notions of gender and sexuality and opening new possibilities for self-expression. Despite the criticisms, Butler's work continues to influence feminist and queer theory.

When relating Butler to characters like La Comay it's interesting to consider power and performativity. Using Butler's performativity lens to study "La Comay" is one perspective. "La Comay"'s persona exhibits a certain kind of exaggerated, sometimes stereotyped femininity. This performance helps to maintain some preconceptions by reinforcing gender-related societal norms and expectations. Furthermore, Butler's views of the power dynamics at play in gender performance may help clarify the significance of media portrayals such as "La Comay." These representations actively contribute to the creation and upholding of established standards in addition to reflecting them. One may argue that the way the program presents gossip and controversy objectifies people and reduces them to their sensationalized stories reinforcing patriarchal norms. The program feeds off of sensationalism, frequently showcasing stunning disclosures, celebrity strife, and scandalous rumors. The audience is drawn in and remains interested by this sensationalistic style, eagerly awaiting the next controversy or discovery.

Moreover, drag queens and kings subvert gender norms by purposefully exaggerating and parodying them, exposing gender as a collection of imitation behaviors

rather than anything natural or necessary. Drag performers draw attention to the performative aspect of all gender identities by dressing in unconventional ways. Drag and transgender philosophy have intricate relationships since both deal with the investigation and expression of gender identities that defy social standards. Drag shows can allow transgender people the chance to experiment with identity, explore gender expression, and develop supportive communities—even though drag performers may not identify as transgender. Eve Shapiro's study focuses specifically on a drag house in California called 'the Disposable Boy Toys' (DBT) and how this space has helped individuals explore their gender. Many performers indicated that their gender identities altered because of participating in DBT when asked how the practice affected them. Members talked at length about how being a part of DBT enabled them to examine their gender identity, regardless of the gender identification they held before joining. "As T. Drake, who was one of the founders of DBT and transgender-identified, explained, 'doing drag gave me a way to open the door on gender discussions with myself and with others. DBT hugely opened the door because drag was the closest thing to what I was feeling and what I was wanting to live'" (Shapiro, p. 257). Because gender norms are so deeply embedded in society, many people lack access to gender questioning and are unaware that there is an alternative. This lack of awareness can lead to individuals feeling isolated and struggling to understand their own identity. Queer social movements need to continue challenging traditional gender norms and promoting inclusivity for all individuals. Members of the DBT troupe who were not affiliated with academia but were exposed to academic theory were able to comprehend gender as a construct that is constantly affirmed and challenged. Drag performance was an embodiment of performative ideas for those who knew about

queer philosophy. For those who are not familiar with scholarly theories of gender, performativity, and drag performance, conversations within DBT provide a new vocabulary for discussing and understanding gender identity as socially created and malleable. By engaging in these discussions, individuals can expand their understanding of gender beyond traditional norms and explore the complexities of identity expression. This inclusive approach allows for a more nuanced and diverse perspective on gender that goes beyond binary classifications.

In addition, gender is far more complicated than being either butch or femme, man or woman, transgender or not. Gender is a spectrum that encompasses a wide range of identities beyond traditional binary categories. It is important to recognize and respect the diversity of experiences and expressions within the realm of gender identity. The mechanisms supporting identity shifts in this drag troupe included the creative idea of gender as malleable and flexible, provided resources and information educating members about gender identities and services, and offered chances to enact a range of masculinities and femininities, with social support for members' chosen genders. Regardless of whether they kept their current gender identities, adopted new, more fluid identities, or came out as transgender, these processes had an impact on each member of the drag group to a different extent. It illustrates how dominant gender, sex, and sexuality may be undermined by drag. Participants' identities may be changed by actively performing new identities, as shown by the communal processes outlined in Shapiro's study. Participants' gender identities were fundamentally and variably transformed by performing gender in this political, feminist setting, indicating the importance of oppositional groups as a site for identity work. This process highlights the fluidity and complexity of identity

construction, challenging traditional notions of fixed identities. It also underscores the power of collective action in shaping individual identities within social movements.

Balls, where Black and Latino, trans, and queer individuals could openly express themselves and find acceptance within a marginalized group, helped to create a vibrant subculture in the early 1970s, in the US. This is when drag pageantry began to take shape, giving rise to competitions in many other categories. These competitions provided a platform for participants to showcase their creativity, talent, and unique identities in a supportive community. As the popularity of ballroom culture grew, it also became a powerful tool for social activism and empowerment within the LGBTQ+ community. “Harlem’s Hamilton Lodge No. 710 hosted regular drag balls during the post-Civil War era. Attendees varied in race, gender, and sex—with some women taking part by wearing men’s clothes— but the main attractions were female impersonators who showed off their gowns and bodies to a panel of judges in typical pageant fashion.” (History.com) These balls gained popularity and notoriety over the decades they were held. Drag balls were seen as forbidden and unlawful by the outside world in the early 1900s. That forced the tournaments underground, which certainly increased their attractiveness. The secrecy and exclusivity surrounding drag balls only added to their allure, drawing in larger crowds of participants and spectators alike. Despite the risks involved, many individuals were willing to defy societal norms to experience the excitement and freedom of these underground events. Ballroom houses provided Black and Latinx queer, gay, and trans individuals with protection from the beginning. These homes evolved into more like families than teams, with "mothers" or "fathers" in charge of raising and preparing their "children" for the outside world. The ballroom scene also served as a platform for self-

expression and creativity, allowing members to showcase their talents in various categories such as voguing and runway. It became a safe space where marginalized individuals could find acceptance and support within their chosen families. Ballroom houses provide the main framework around which the scene is constructed. It offers the fundamental kinship structure and offers many interpretations of what kinship could entail—shedding this dependence on one's biological family and adding complexity to the concept of a chosen family. We can see clear examples of how houses and ballroom work in the 2018 series, Ryan Murphy's 'Pose, where the protagonist, Blanca (played by M.J Rodriguez) forms a 'house' that provides support to LGBTQ youth who have been rejected by their birth families. Examples from Puerto Rico include "El Club de Lxs Perrxs", "La Casa de las Rolas, "Haus of Martell" among others.

Drag offers a stage for people to creatively express themselves via costumes, makeup, acting, and character depiction. It gives artists the chance to investigate and honor many facets of creativity, gender expression, and identity. It subverts and blurs boundaries, challenging stereotypes about gender. To provide alternate representations that broaden our knowledge of gender identity and expression, drag artists frequently experiment with gender preconceptions. With origins in nightlife, performance art, and LGBTQ+ groups, drag has a long and diverse cultural past. Drag culture has a colorful and diversified history, partly due to its evolution over time, which has included influences from theater, fashion, music, and activism. Drag may be an empowering experience for many people, giving them a platform to celebrate and accept facets of themselves that they would not find easily accepted in other social contexts, by promoting self-expression, self-acceptance, and self-confidence. Drag and transness have

a complex relationship that differs according to the person, the community, and the cultural setting. Although drag and transgender identity are separate entities, there are important ways in which they might overlap. For some individuals, drag may be a form of gender expression or exploration, while for others it may simply be a performance. It is important to recognize and respect the diversity within both the drag and transgender communities. As asserted in this thesis and in Shapiro's study, drag gives some transgender people a platform to explore and express many facets of their gender identification. Drag shows give people a safe, encouraging space to play around with appearance, attire, and cosmetics, which can help them come to terms with and validate their gender identity. For transgender people, drag groups frequently offer a sense of acceptance, camaraderie, and support as well as chances for companionship, connection, and mentoring. In drag, where their gender identity is validated and celebrated, transgender people may find friendship and support. Not all transgender people participate in drag, and not all drag performers identify as transgender, and this must be acknowledged. Furthermore, transgender people who participate in drag have a wide range of experiences and reasons, which should be understood in the context of their identities and lived experiences. In the end, each person's connection with transness and drag is unique, intricate, and multidimensional. It is important to respect and validate everyone's personal journey and the complexities of their identity.

Puerto Rico's drag scene is rich and lively, with a strong cultural and queer foundation. Puerto Rico has a rich tradition of drag pageantry and competitions, with events like Miss Gay Puerto Rico and Miss Continental Elite Puerto Rico showcasing the talent and glamour of local drag queens. These pageants often attract participants from

across the island, competing for titles, recognition, and prizes. Puerto Rico's LGBTQ+ nightlife culture, especially in places like San Juan and Ponce, is dominated by drag shows. Drag shows and events with local queens and guest performers are held in bars, clubs, and other venues. These events attract a wide range of people who come to enjoy the theater, dance, and music. The drag scene in Puerto Rico is known for its vibrant and inclusive atmosphere, welcoming both locals and tourists. Many of the performers are highly talented and have gained recognition beyond the island. In Puerto Rico's drag culture, drag queens predominate, but there's also a developing movement of drag kings and performers exploring gender diversity and non-binary expressions. Through their performances, more gender identities and expressions are represented in Puerto Rico's drag scene, fostering inclusivity and diversity. Audiences are drawn to the creativity and boldness of the performances, as well as the sense of community and acceptance that permeates the scene. The evolving landscape of Puerto Rico's drag culture reflects a growing acceptance and celebration of diverse identities within the LGBTQ+ community. Drag culture in Puerto Rico has its roots in several cultural influences, such as LGBTQ+ subcultures, African performance traditions, and Spanish theater traditions. Gender-bending and cross-dressing acts have long been a feature of carnival celebrations, theater, and culture in Puerto Rico.

It's important to know and recognize our history, especially our queer history, and acknowledge stories that have been untold or the knowledge that is really limited. Important people such as Christina Hayworth are now being acknowledged for their work within the community. Hayworth was the person who led the first Pride parade in San Juan during the 1990's, as well as being a Puerto Rican Stonewall veteran. The Stonewall

Riots happened in June 1969 in New York City, where police raided the Stonewall Inn, but this raid sparked a riot among bar patrons and neighborhood residents leading to six days of protests and violent clashes with law enforcement outside the bar on Christopher Street. The Stonewall Riots served as a catalyst for the gay rights movement in the United States and around the world. History ensures that the accomplishments, customs, and tales of earlier generations are not lost or forgotten. By remembering and honoring this past we pay tribute to the contributions made by those who came before us and impart important knowledge to coming generations by keeping our heritage intact. By inspiring social change and highlighting the struggles, achievements, and movements that have shaped our world, as well as studying the successes and failures of past movements for justice and equality, we can better understand how to advocate for positive change in our own time. In general, understanding our past is critical to social cohesiveness, personal development, and creating a society that is more inclusive and just. We can better handle the difficulties of the present and create a better future for ourselves and future generations if we are aware of our history.

This is why it's so vitally important to note the violence imparted against free expression when Lisie Burgos decided to legislate this project against drag performances without acknowledging the rich history of drag in Puerto Rico. The impact of drag should be recognized, no matter where it comes from. Drag artists frequently design complex, eye-catching costumes that perfectly capture their persona, sense of style, and performance theme. Drag can be a vehicle for political action, satire, and social commentary on topics including gender, sexuality, identity, and power relations. Similar to the examples given with DBT, performers can question stereotypes, challenge society's

standards, and spark conversation by utilizing comedy, irony, and parody. Through their performances, drag queens and kings can provide a platform for marginalized voices to be heard and create a sense of community and empowerment among LGBTQ+ individuals. By subverting traditional norms and expectations, drag challenges the status quo and encourages audiences to think critically about issues of representation and inclusivity.

While La Comay is not a traditional drag persona, some aspects of her character could be interpreted as embodying elements of drag performance. Drag often involves the exaggeration and parody of gender roles and stereotypes, and La Comay does present an exaggerated and stylized version of femininity through her appearance, mannerisms, and dialogue. La Comay is comparable to a drag show in that the puppeteer adopts the role of a flamboyant, opinionated woman for amusement and societal criticism. In any case, La Comay has had a big impact on Puerto Rican pop culture and television, igniting conversations and debates about media ethics, free expression, and the social impact of entertainment. The character has faced controversy for her inflammatory statements and the influence she holds over public opinion in Puerto Rico. Despite the criticisms, La Comay remains a prominent figure in Puerto Rican media and continues to spark discussions about the boundaries of entertainment and journalism.

The history of drag in Puerto Rico is an important part of the larger tale of LGBTQ+ identity, community, and resiliency on the island, not just a story of performance and entertainment. Drag has developed into a cultural force beyond a simple spectacle over time, providing a forum for individual expression, emancipation, and societal transformation. Drag has always been a part of Puerto Rican history, even when

it comes to people that do not identify as queer; drag extends farther than the queer community. Drag performances are a long-standing tradition during traditional festivals and carnivals like the Carnaval de Ponce or the Fiestas de Santiago Apostol in Loíza. Performers dress elaborately in costumes and makeup to entertain and interact with the crowd. These performances, which highlight the inventiveness and vitality of Puerto Rican culture, frequently function as a means of celebration, storytelling, and creative expression. Furthermore, drag has been a part of Puerto Rican popular culture for a long time thanks to artists from a variety of backgrounds, who have embraced drag as a form of expression and amusement in media. Drag, regardless of one's sexual orientation or gender identity, has been accepted and celebrated in Puerto Rican society with mainstream depictions of it. Drag in Puerto Rico, to put it simply, is a vast tapestry of social, cultural, and artistic elements that defies conventional definitions and limitations. It is evidence of the adaptability and inventiveness of human expression across all identities and represents the variety and vibrancy of Puerto Rican society.

Work Cited

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990

Discover Puerto Rico. "LGBTQ Travel." *Discover Puerto Rico*, Discover Puerto Rico , www.discoverpuertorico.com/things-to-do/lgbtq-travel. Accessed Apr. 2024.

Dolan, Jill. 1985. "Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining The Mirror of

Gender Roles?" *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*. 2:5-11

Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico, Cámara de representantes P. de La C. 1821. 2023.

Figuerola Lopez, Luis. *¿He Dicho Nombre Yo?* 2020. Amazon

Harris, Max. "Masking the Site: The Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol in Loíza, Puerto Rico." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 114, no. 453, 2001, pp. 358–69. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/542027>. Accessed Nov. 2023.

History.com. "How 19th-Century Drag Balls Evolved Into House Balls, Birthplace of Voguing." History.Com, A&E Television Networks, www.history.com/news/drag-balls-house-ballroom-voguing. Accessed Apr. 2024.

History.com. "1969 Stonewall Riots - Origins, Timeline & Leaders." *History.Com*, A&E Television Networks, www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/the-stonewall-riots. Accessed May 2024.

Jackson, Jhoni. "Behind the Parties & Drag Shows That LGBTQIA Latines Call Home." 5 Drag Houses Providing Sanctuary For Queer Latines, Refinery29, www.refinery29.com/en-us/2022/10/11103647/queer-latine-drag-houses-parties-community. Accessed May 2024.

Johnson and Todd. "An Act To Amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 7, Chapter 51, Part 14, Relative To Adult-Oriented Performances." General Assembly Of the State of Tennessee. 2023 chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/<https://www.capitol.tn.gov/Bills/113/Bill/SB0003.pdf>. Accessed May 2024

Laureano, Javier E. *San Juan Gay: Conquista de Un Espacio Urbano de 1948 a 1991*. Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 2016.

La Fountain-Stokes, Lawrence, M. *Translocas: the Politics of Puerto Rican Drag and Trans Performance*. 2021. Press?

La Fountain-Stokes, Lawrence. "Being Mala Mala: Documentary Film and the Cultural Politics of Puerto Rican Drag and Trans Identities." *Caribbean Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2018, pp. 3–30. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26743847>.

La Fountain-Stokes, Lawrence. "Queer Diasporas, Boricua Lives: A Meditation On Sexile." *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, vol. 41, no. 2, Nov. 2008, pp. 294–301, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08905760802404259>.

Martin, Emily. "The Early History of Modern Drag, from Police Raids to Pop Culture." *History*, *National Geographic*, 2 June 2023, www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/drag-queen-drag-balls-early-history-pop-culture.

Santarrosa, Antulio. *Detrás de La Comay: Biografía Semi-Autorizada*. 2003.

Vega, Tanzina. "Commenting on a Death Gets a Puppet in Trouble." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 16 Dec. 2012,

www.nytimes.com/2012/12/17/business/media/la-comay-of-superxclusivo-stirs-anger-over-comments-on-mans-death.html.

Wareham, Jamie. "Beaten, Stabbed and Shot: 320 Trans People Killed in 2023 - New Monitoring Report." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 20 Feb. 2024, www.forbes.com/sites/jamiewareham/2023/11/13/beaten-stabbed-and-shot-320-trans-people-murdered-in-2023/?sh=5a65e28f1646.

Dedication:

To my father, Luis Heriberto Pabón Batlle, because without him I wouldn't be the person that I am today. Te quiero, te adoro, te compro un inodoro.

To the women in my life, Soraya Ferri Sanchez, y Zoé Rubí Rivera Silva, mi luz, no matter how dark it may seem, the sun will always come out thanks to them.

And all the trans people that have been a part of my life and my growth.

Acknowledgements:

I extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Maritza Stanchich, for her unwavering support and insightful critiques throughout my research journey. Her deep commitment to academic excellence and meticulous attention to detail have significantly shaped this dissertation. I am equally thankful to the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Roque Salas Rivera and Dr. Katherine Miranda, for their constructive feedback and essential suggestions that enhanced the quality of my work.

This thesis reflects the unwavering support and boundless love I received from my family and friends during this challenging academic pursuit. I owe an immense debt of gratitude to my father, who nurtured my curiosity and supported my educational endeavors from the very beginning.

I am also thankful for my friends, who provided both distractions when needed and encouragement when it seemed impossible to continue.

Abstract:

This thesis explores the complex history of drag culture in Puerto Rico over the past century, revealing its development, importance, and interaction with social dynamics. In Puerto Rican society, drag performance—which is distinguished by its skill, transgression, and celebration of gender diversity—has played a complicated role that is entwined with matters of politics, identity, and cultural expression. Additionally, the thesis looks at how drag has helped oppressed populations express themselves and become more powerful, subverting hegemonic conventions, and promoting LGBTQ+ unity. This thesis attempts to offer a thorough overview of the history of drag in Puerto Rico, highlighting its relevance as a form of creativity, resistance, and cultural expression through archival research provided by Javier Laureano's San Juan Gay and cultural analysis. The research sheds light on Puerto Rican society's complex and varied fabric and its continuous pursuit of social justice and equality by examining the connections between drag and politics, identity, and culture.

Biographical Information:

Raised on the streets of Bayamón, Nathaniel Pabón Cruz was born on the 26th of September 1997. My parents were Nadja Cruz Emmanuelli and Luis H. Pabón Batlle. My early childhood consisted of living in a very religious household and going to catholic school. Living as an only child, my parents divorced when I was very young. When I was about two years old, I began to question my gender, and asked questions like “When am I going to be a boy?” By my sophomore year in high school, I had already begun to call myself “non-binary” and began to use he/him pronouns around my friends. When I was 19, I began hormones, thanks to the support of my father, since my mother was no longer in the picture. I started studying at the University of Puerto Rico a year prior. Graduating in 2020 and then continuing my studies towards a master’s degree in 2021. I’ve worked as a teacher for quite a few years, but now I’m still looking for the right job and thinking about my future as a professor, just like my father.