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### The House of Indigo

*Drag performance, beauty pageantry, and cosmopolitan femininity in Johannesburg*

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# THE HOUSE OF INDIGO:

Pageantry, and  
Cosmopolitan  
Femininity in  
Johannesburg

**KATLEGO DISEMELO**



# **The House of Indigo: Drag Performance, Beauty Pageantry, and Cosmopolitan Femininity in Johannesburg**

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aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam  
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prof. dr. ir. K.I.J. Maex

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The House of Indigo: Drag Performance, Beauty Pageantry, and Cosmopolitan Femininity in Johannesburg

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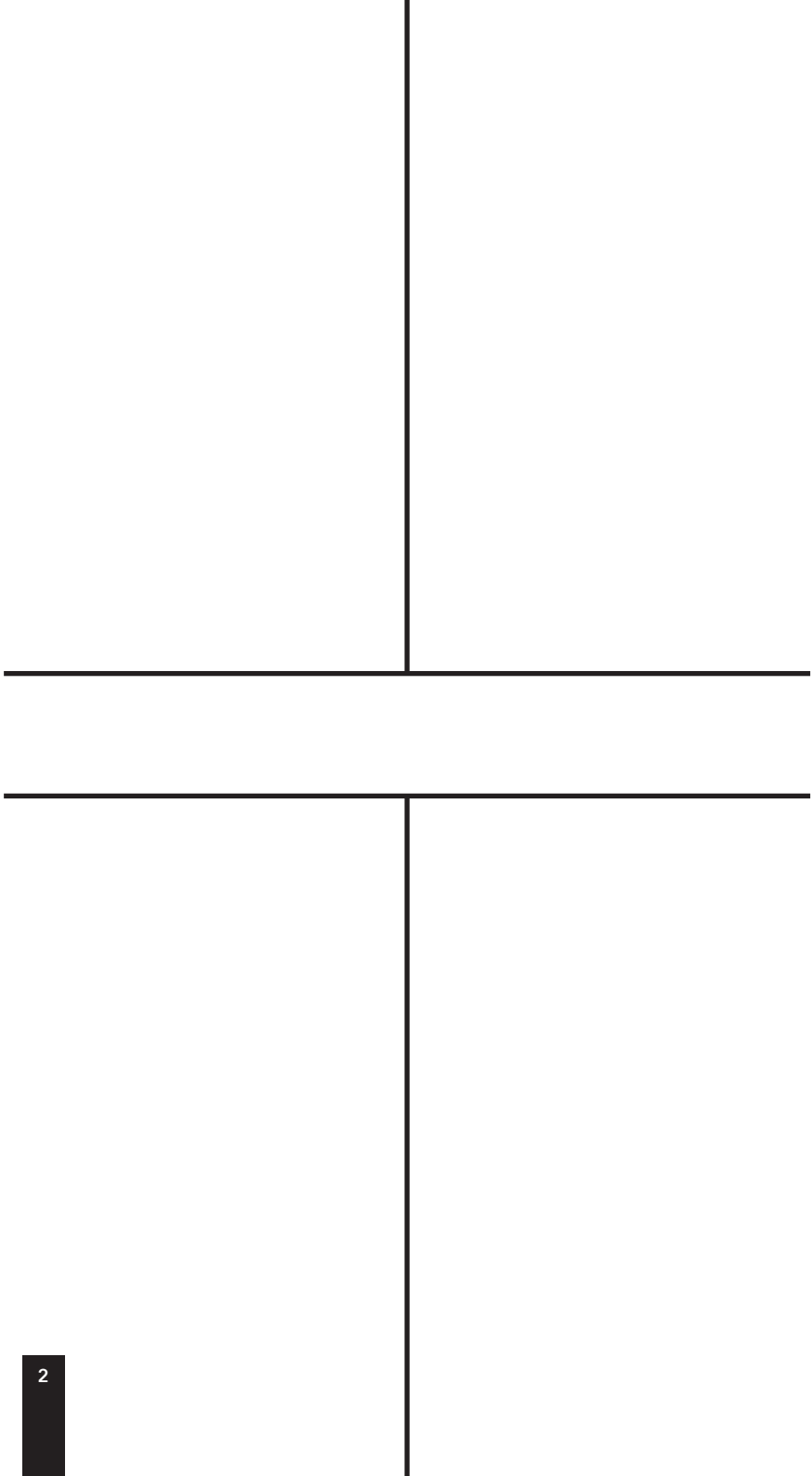


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## Abstract

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This study explores the world of drag performance and beauty pageantry at one of Johannesburg's landmark gay nightclubs – Club Indigo. It examines how the participants' consumer identities, material culture, and systems of kinship were constructed within and beyond the House of Indigo. This study investigates how this subcultural community, located at the longest-running queer institution of its kind, was shaped by the contemporary politics and realities of race, class, queerness, and gender identity. This mixed qualitative study incorporates various research materials such as interview and archival data, ethnographic field notes, as well as digital and online social media content. By providing critical discourse and social semiotic analyses, this study argues that these performances of consumption were both liberating and constraining for the various subcultural members. The empirical chapters provided herein critically analyze the different ways in which queer kinship, beauty pageantry, drag performance, and self-stylization simultaneously empowered and limited claims towards belonging and queer citizenship by various members. This interdisciplinary study contributes to the scholarship on drag and beauty pageantry by paying attention to the members' practices of consumption and the collective construction of material cultures within this subcultural context. This ethnographic study interrogates how the politics of race, class, gender, and queerness were performed through the world-making practices of drag and beauty pageantry. It provides an ethnographic snapshot into one of Johannesburg's most premier queer subcultural communities. It also demonstrates how this landmark institution contributed to the city's queer entertainment landscape. Moreover, it shows how this particular subcultural community enabled its members to make claims about public visibility, upward mobility, and queer citizenship in Johannesburg.

**Key words:** Drag, beauty, performance, performativity, consumption, aspiration, queer, identity, visibility, self-stylization, cosmopolitanism, hyper-femininity

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## **CHAPTER 1**

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# **INTRODUCTION**

*The crowd erupts in sheer joy when the saxophone crescendo blasts from the gigantic speakers. Arms wave high to the jazzy lyrics weaving into the up-tempo house music beat. Glasses clink beneath the neon green, yellow, and blue lights pouring from the ceiling onto the checkered dance floor. The clock has just passed midnight. Not a single announcement had been made regarding tonight's beauty pageant. Then suddenly the music stops. The gyrating bodies come to a complete halt. The smoke machines start to billow beneath the DJ booth. The neon lights stop spinning, and the houselights cover the entire nightclub in a deep, velvet red. An elusive figure slowly emerges from the far-left corner of the narrow stage. The crowd goes banshee-wild. They are clearly in love with her. The tall vixen with curled, auburn tresses sashays to the middle of the stage holding a microphone. She moves behind a thick pall of smoke. I still cannot see her properly. The crowd continues to roar. She stops and faces the crowd. She does not say a word. She only smiles - basking in their adulation. The smoke begins to clear, and I can vaguely see her face. After thirty seconds of her decidedly long pause, she lifts the mic towards her rouged lips. She looks across the small club filled with her adoring, pious supplicants. She is the omnipotent shepherdess, and we are her besotted lambs. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Zelda Chanel-Diamond. And welcome to Miss Club Indigo 2017." By this time, the crowd has become savage with rapture.*

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## 1.1 *Background to the Study*

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When I walked into Club Indigo for the first time earlier that evening, I did not anticipate that I had entered a completely new world. As I pulled back the gold beaded curtain at the entrance, I was struck by the sight of a tall woman leaning across the pool table. She wore six-inch heels and an ivory evening gown. The gown did not disturb her as she aimed her cue at the ball. Unaffected by the cacophony of laughter and chatter around her, she was singularly focused on the game. Three younger women danced and sashayed to the music in front of the mirror directly behind the pool table. They happily showed off their strut with each beat of the house song. Another group of elegant women in evening gowns sat cross-legged at the bar directly opposite the pool table sipping spirit coolers. Two male bartenders speedily took drinks orders and moved on to the next customer. Another group of youngsters lounged on the red and white leather couches near the mirrored wall towards the far-right corner of the club. A motley crowd of young, old, flamboyant, effeminate, and butch revellers pulled out their best moves on the dance floor. It felt as though I had leapt out of my own body by osmosis. It seemed as though I had entered an ethereal world of absolute glamour and fashionable style.

It was then what I perceived to a queer space. More importantly, it was a space that catered to Black and Coloured queer people. The racial dynamics of this combination of queer sociality and glamour were significant in the light of events that had occurred at the Johannesburg Pride march in the previous year. On 6 October 2012, several members of the One in Nine Campaign activist group disrupted the pride parade as it snaked its way through the affluent suburb of Rosebank. In efforts to conscientise and “re-politicize” the event, the One in Nine Campaign members staged a political act which they later described as a “die-in.” They strategically laid their bodies on the tarmac road in remembrance of the countless Black and Coloured victims of homo- and transphobic hate-crimes throughout South Africa. The disruption of the pride parade precipitated a physically and emotionally violent altercation between the predominantly white gay male organisers of the event, the mostly Black lesbian One In Nine campaigners. Racist slurs were hurled at the campaigners, the white pride marchers shouting: “Go back to your townships! This is my parade. This is

my route.” Unsurprisingly, the police were called, and even more violence was inflicted upon the campaigners.

This event was a watershed in Southern African lesbian and gay pride politics. The first lesbian and gay pride march on the African continent had been organised in Johannesburg in 1990, but the day of the One in Nine protest was the last time that the LGBTQIA+ “community” marched together. Since then LGBTQIA+ pride marches have been splintered into several race- and class-specific events throughout the city. With little to no state or commercial funding, these smaller pride marches have mushroomed in various townships of the city. Soweto Pride, KwaThema Pride, Ekurhuleni Pride, and Vaal Pride are some of the grassroots pride marches organised by various non-governmental organisations and community outreach programmes.

Exactly one year after the One in Nine protest, an organising committee of about thirty individuals from LGBTQIA+ and feminist activist groups joined forces to host the Johannesburg People’s Pride March. In sharp contrast to the white-owned Jo’burg Pride parade, these activists vehemently stressed that theirs was a political *march* – and not just a parade for the entertainment of a privileged few. They stressed the political and civic dimensions of making queer bodies visible and desirable by marching through the streets of downtown Johannesburg. Equally important were their vociferous demands for erotic justice; freedom from all forms of sexual violence and discrimination; equitable redistribution of land; and universal, quality education for all citizens (Hengeveld & Tallie, 2012).

I took part in the Johannesburg People’s Pride march that year, 2013. With our placards held high and rainbow flags tied like capes on our backs, we sang and marched in the sweltering spring Johannesburg heat. We made a circular loop from Constitution Hill (the highest court in the nation), through the noisy streets of Hillbrow, through the student and business district of Braamfontein, and then back to Constitution Hill. This specific route was significant for two reasons. First, this was the route taken by that first ever pride march on the African continent in 1990. Second, and more importantly, it was specifically mapped in order to reclaim the city as our own. We shouted and sang even louder as we entered Simon Nkoli Street – named after the late anti-apartheid and gay rights activist. Passersby scurried to and from the shops in the midday heat. We were publicly and proudly visible in the fullness of our intersecting identities and abilities as citizens as well as human beings. Some onlookers in the city sneered in visible contempt while others smiled and cheered along with us. Intrepidly, we marched forward clapping and singing apartheid struggle songs.

After the march, my friends and I discussed the best place to go to celebrate what had been a hugely successful march. Perched on the topmost tower at Constitution Hill, we watched the sun set over the northern, leafy-green suburbs of Houghton and Parktown. We bounced around a few ideas. None of us wanted to settle on the rather predictable and nearby Kitchener's – the oldest and most popular bar-cum-nightclub in Johannesburg. We all wanted to be in a space that was loudly, proudly, and comfortably queer. "Why don't we go to Club Indigo," a friend asked. "They are hosting Miss Club Indigo tonight, so it's gonna be very fun." The suggestion was genius and no one objected. Although I had heard about it, I had never been to Club Indigo before. I did not anticipate that my friend's humble suggestion would culminate in my discovery of a subcultural community which was to become so fundamental to the research objectives of this study.

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### ***Club Indigo: A Long-Standing Institution of LGBTQIA+ Nightlife***

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Club Indigo opened in 2003 and eventually closed in October 2018: It was one of the longest-running queer clubs in the modern history of Johannesburg. Indeed, bars and nightclubs catering specifically to LGBTQIA+ clientele often close within a few years of opening. Over the last decade in particular, there has been a global wave of historically LGBTQIA+ spaces of entertainment closing down for good (Shiriatmadari, 2019). So, the longevity of Club Indigo remains a significant feat given the fleeting and palimpsestic nature of Johannesburg's queer nightlife and entertainment landscape (Khan, 2018).

The demographic landscape of LGBTQIA+ entertainment in South Africa has been well-documented in cities such as Cape Town, Bloemfontein, and Johannesburg (Gevisser, 1995; Livermon, 2014; Matebeni, 2011; Reid, 2010; Tucker, 2009; Visser, 2001; 2003). But Club Indigo stands as an historic institution of queer entertainment, sociality, and visibility in post-apartheid Johannesburg. Another significant fact about its historical trajectory is that the nightclub changed locations in the inner city no less than four times. Moving from the northeastern De Korte Street, down to the northwestern Juta Street in Braamfontein, the owners eventually settled on a cheaper venue in industrial area on the periphery of Johannesburg's city centre. During fieldwork for this study, the nightclub moved one last time to a more spacious dance venue next door. However, this study, rather than being about the geographical movements of a nightclub, is more an ethnography about the identities, desires, and

practices of the people who moved along *with* it over the course of its tenure. It explores the lives and world-making practices of the variously-identified people who constructed the distinctly subcultural context of Club Indigo.

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## **1.2 Research Aims and Research Questions**

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Apart from questions about its longevity and peculiar movements through various parts of the inner city, I was particularly interested in the intersections between class, race, sexuality, and gender at Club Indigo. I was interested in finding out how various subjects' positionalities coalesced between these nexus points and thus became configured in such a way as to create a subcultural context. At a perfunctory level, it was clear that Club Indigo had its own distinctive character in that it stood apart from other queer entertainment spaces in Johannesburg's northern suburban enclaves. This was a distinction marked by more than the drag beauty pageants and performances which were hosted on a regular basis at the nightclub. There have been countless drag beauty pageants for lesbian, gay, and trans-identifying contestants (since the mid-1990s) in different parts of the city and its surrounding townships (Reid, 2010). What set Club Indigo apart was how the drag pageants and performances it hosted threw into relief the racial and class dynamics of queer spatiality in post-apartheid Johannesburg.

The mutually reinforcing striations of race and class also made Club Indigo a noteworthy field site for ethnographic research. This is because it was a patently working and lower-middle class space within which various individuals had different stakes. As such, one of the key areas for investigation was the ways in which queer people of colour constructed a subcultural context that foregrounded different articulations of gender non-conformity through the consumer practices of drag and beauty pageantry. Moreover, I was also interested in the questions of consumer citizenship and public visibility among these gender non-conforming subjects. Of particular concern here were the interrelationships between the politics of queer visibility in post-apartheid South Africa, self-representation, and my interlocutors' constructions of their respective drag personae. I sought to interrogate how my Black and Coloured interlocutors

negotiated and *reclaimed* broader public visibility for themselves beyond walls of Club Indigo. In light of this, the study aimed to analyse how Club Indigo clientele used different social media platforms to construct publicly visible gender-non-conforming consumer identities and drag personae.

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## **Research Questions**

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1. The drag beauty pageants and performances at Club Indigo gave the nightclub its distinctive subcultural character in Johannesburg's queer entertainment and consumer landscape. How, then, do these subcultural practices relate to the broader LGBTQIA+ politics of gender non-conformity and consumer citizenship in post-apartheid Johannesburg?
2. Johannesburg continues to be a highly fragmented city within which racial and class-specific stratifications influence queer spatiality and public visibility. How are the practices, identities, and social hierarchies at Club Indigo constructed in relation to various race, class, sexuality, and gender identities?
3. Drag artistry has developed into a mainstream, commodified, and highly lucrative cultural phenomenon in various Global North contexts. What are the transnational interconnections between these Global North representations of drag and those which are constructed within Club Indigo?

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## **Overview of Chapters**

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This introductory chapter maps the landscape of scholarly examinations and debates pertaining to LGBTQIA+ consumer identities and popular cultures. As an entry point, it outlines a brief history of the city Johannesburg as an inherently consumerist space of sociality and subjectivation. In so doing, it provides historical context underlying Johannesburg's contemporary landscape of LGBTQIA+ consumer cultures and nightlife. A key purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to draw the reader's attention to the significance of drag and beauty pageantry as embodied performances of consumption and aspiration, as well as ways of claiming public visibility and agency.

Chapter 2 segues into an exploration of the key theoretical and conceptual



models that frame the arguments made throughout this study. It situates the study within the related fields of critical feminist and queer of colour critiques, as well as critical performance and ethnographic studies. This chapter offers a discussion of how each of these debates overlap in the study. Moreover, it pays keen attention to the significance of queer social actors' embodied performances of intersecting identities – race, class, sex, gender, geopolitical citizenship – through drag and beauty pageantry.

In Chapter 3, I provide a critical reflection on the ethnographic methods of data collection that I used for the study. Situating reflexivity and decolonial criticality as key methodological tools, I discuss my positionality as an ethnographer “at home.” By describing the complexities of gaining access to my field sites, I demonstrate how and why ethnographic “deep hanging out” was the most appropriate method of data collection. I also show how queer ethnographic methods lend themselves to exploring the vicissitudes of queer subcultural sociality, consumer identities, and space in post-apartheid Johannesburg.

Chapter 4 introduces my key research participants, hereafter referred to as interlocutors (see Chapter 3), and outlines the subcultural structures and hierarchies of power that became evident as fieldwork progressed. I analyse these structures as systems of kinship framed in relation to the broader hegemonic society outside of the ‘House of Indigo.

Chapter 5, demonstrates how and why kinship is best understood as embodied performances of collective values, identities, and aspirations. More importantly, I show that queer kinship systems – as with all others – are performed through the consumption of objects and material culture. This, I believe, reinvigorates the study of objects in drag and beauty pageant cultures. Therefore, I show how such objects have social lives, trajectories, and abiding significance in terms of how human subjects view themselves and others.

Dovetailing from this focus on material culture, Chapter 6 pays critical attention to the ways in which gender was performed and policed at Club Indigo. A key technology in the structuring and policing of a specific iteration of gender at the nightclub (what I theorise as cosmopolitan and aspirational femininity) was the performance of drag and beauty pageantry. The ethnographic material provided

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**1** In Chapter 2, I discuss the significance of “houses” among transnational queer subcultures. In light of this, the distinction between the House of Indigo and Club Indigo will be outlined therein.

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in this chapter demonstrates how this form of gender policing occurred both on and off stage at the House of Indigo. Another critical purpose of this chapter is to show how this system of gender policing both rewarded and penalised various subcultural members' performances of this idealised, aspirational, and cosmopolitan femininity.

Chapter 7 foregrounds the significance of drag performance as an aspirational thoroughfare through which subcultural members were able both to imagine and embody a queer and utopic futurity. However, the performances of drag and beauty had real-world implications and incentives for the drag divas at the House of Indigo. This chapter therefore eschews any assumptions about drag and pageantry as frivolous merry-making. Instead, it highlights the extent to which the performance of drag enabled subcultural members to simultaneously imagine "a better life" for themselves while aesthetically branding themselves as openly queer, empowered, aspirational, and upwardly mobile consumer-citizens. I argue that social media platforms provided the drag divas with the relevant technologies to construct their idealised drag personae as brands, and (more importantly), to commodify and monetise these.

Chapter 8 highlights the concept of "fabulousness" as both a human right and an agentive reclaiming of space and public visibility, and highlights the importance of paying critical attention to the heterogeneity of queer identities in post-apartheid South Africa. It concludes by outlining the theoretical and ethnographic contributions and limitations of this study.

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### **1.3 *Drag and Beauty Pageants in the City of Gold: Interrogating Johannesburg's LGBTQIA+ Consumer Landscape and Drag Subcultures***

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This section focuses on the interrelationship between sexuality and urban space in the articulation of identities. By de-centring essentialist notions of "global gay identity", I highlight the significance of analysing gendered and sexual subjectivity in context. Through providing a brief outline of the emergence of contemporary Johannesburg, I describe the role the city plays in how LGBTQIA+ identities are negotiated in the city.

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## **Exploring LGBTQIA+ Spatiality and “Community” in Post-Apartheid Johannesburg**

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Johannesburg’s built environment makes it difficult to pinpoint a spatially bounded, and therefore identifiable, LGBTQIA+ “community.” The different spaces of residence, work, and leisurely consumption in the city are highly fragmented, and thus structured according to the dynamics of economic privilege and racialised exclusion (Murray, 2011). In fact, the notion of an LGBTQIA+ “community” in this city is further complicated by the wide dispersion of social identities and practices which have historically been segmented along the fault lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality. These socio-economic boundaries – so deeply entrenched and enforced by the state and inhabitants alike – are not unique to a dynamic and aspirational city like Johannesburg.

Martin IV Manalansan (2006) foregrounded “the fissures of race and other forms of difference that shape the contours of gay spaces in New York City” (p.64). In so doing, he attempted to map the desires, practices, and imaginations of diasporic gay Filipino men within the complexities of a global city such as New York. Similarly, Valentine (2007) observed that “rather than a pre-existing community, there are a variety of dispersed places [practices and identities] which are brought together by ‘transgender’ into an idea of community” in New York (p.72). Samuel Delany (1999) also highlighted the ways in which the identity categories of race and class coalesced with the sexual and gender identifications of his New York research participants, and how this contributed to their access to and/or exclusion from different spaces in the city. Marlon M. Bailey’s (2013) ethnographic study investigated the subcultural drag balls and houses created and maintained by marginalised Black and Latinx youth in Detroit. He observed that “Black LGBT people stand apart from their White counterparts socially, politically, and in many cases, economically” (p.14). These scholars have aptly complicated popular cultural histories that rely on homogenising narratives about gay “ghettos” or communities in urban cities. More significantly, they have highlighted the intersections of racial, class, gender, and sexual identification in their discussions of queer spatiality and visibility in urban public and/or subcultural spaces.

The intersection between space and sexuality warrants a discussion about who, exactly, is allowed access to certain places and who is not. Sarah Ahmed (2006) reminds us that spaces are oriented towards certain bodies. A corollary to this assertion is that bodies become “sexualized through *how* they inhabit space”

(p.67, emphasis my own). Several scholars have critiqued the ways in which advertising and broadcast media representations have historically been centred around the lives, practices, and desires of cisgender gay white men (Binnie & Valentine, 1995; Blair, 2017; Han, 2007; Rushbrook, 2002; Snorton, 2017). They argue for the importance of paying critical attention to the ways in which sexual and gender identity politics are always imbricated within the constitution and demarcation of social space (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Gregson & Rose, 2000; Johnson, 2005). In a deeply divided city such as Johannesburg, the boundaries between access and exclusion are still clearly demarcated along the lines of race and class. These divisions, however, are not eternally fixed. By paying close attention to sexuality and gender, it is possible to reveal the complexities and common ideas about belonging or the exclusion of different bodies in different places. This may, ultimately, assist in more nuanced analyses of ideas around various LGBTQIA+ identities, spaces of safety and visibility, as well as consumer culture.

This study neither presumes nor posits uniformity between Johannesburg and world-class cities like New York. Likewise, it would be naïve to assume that the politics of LGBTQIA+ identity and public visibility are the same throughout various transnational and geopolitical contexts. Following Dennis Altman (1997), scholars have argued that not only is the notion of a “global gay identity” an unhelpful essentialism, but that it is also a Westocentric one (Benedicto, 2014; Jackson, 2000; Oswin, 2007). Others, however, have critically riled against the academic tendency of treating non-Western sexual identities, practices, and cultural phenomena merely as empirical data which serve to reify theoretical models and categories from the global north (Clark, 2013; Deumert & Mabandla, 2017; Ekine & Abbas, 2013; Epprecht, 2004; Grewal and Kaplan, 2001; Hoad, 2007; Milani & Lazar, 2017; Nyanzi, 2014).

It seems, therefore, that the locally-specific configurations of race, class, sexuality, and gender should be the starting point for investigating LGBTQIA+ politics and identities in global south contexts. Equally important is the focus on the complexities of language, ethnicity, regional and inter-cultural politics, and generational disparities in locally-specific conceptions of gender and sexuality, as well as citizenship (Tamale, 2011, p.12). In light of this, it is very difficult to ignore those specific and contextual historical processes and structures which give discussions about sexuality and gender on the African continent their specific register and semiotic import. Matebeni, Monro & Reddy (2018) similarly emphasised the heterogeneity and complexity of sex and gender identity categories on the African continent, as well as the specific socio-political milieux

within which they accrue meaning (p.2). Paying critical attention to these different historical, economic, political, and cultural dynamics allows a better understanding of the fragmented nature of LGBTQIA+ visibility and consumer culture in contemporary Johannesburg; far more so than some homogenising concept of an LGBTQIA+ “community” – which has never really existed in the first place (Oswin, 2007).

Some interesting similarities can be (cautiously) delineated between Johannesburg and New York – especially in terms of their built forms. From the first, Johannesburg’s urban landscape was intended to echo the modern ideals and imperial visions of the British colonial settlers who formally established it as a city in 1886. This was reflected in the Victorian and Edwardian architecture of its buildings and its city planning policies, as well as in the monuments erected in honour of the colonial triumphalist ideals upon which the city was founded (Murray, 2011). From the late nineteenth century, Johannesburg was built and marketed as a future-oriented and modern megalopolis whose skyscrapers were imagined to rival those in developed metropolises in the northern hemisphere. This mimetic heterotopia was, therefore, historically developed as a beacon of Western modernity on the African continent (Murray, 2011, p.31). During the inter-war year, economic changes in real estate capitalism and city planners’ aesthetic orientations meant that Johannesburg’s cityscape was modelled on – or flagrantly plagiarised from – the verticality of the New York, Chicago, and London skylines (Matshikiza, 2008; Murray 2011). Mbembe (2004) posits that no other modern African city has demonstrated this capacity for mimesis (of Western modernity), to the extent that it has bestowed on the city an “aura of its own, its uniqueness” (p.376, emphasis in original).

Some parallels can be drawn between LGBTQIA+ spatiality, consumption, and public visibility in New York and Johannesburg. In *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*, Martin IV Manalansan (2006) showed the ways in which race and class played an important role in determining which spaces of consumption and leisure Filipino men frequented in New York City. These identity categories played a vital role in forging relationships of diasporic solidarity and support among Filipino gay men in the city. Malanansan (2006) painted a picture of a global, dynamic, cosmopolitan city in which LGBTQIA+ spaces were highly fragmented according to the fault-lines of race, class, sexual orientation, and other vectors of identity. LGBTQIA+ spaces in Johannesburg are divided along the coeval structures of race, class, sexuality, and ability (Livermon, 2014; 2020; Matebeni, 2011). As such, race and class are still the primary factors in determining the spaces of leisurely consumption and the relationships of

political solidarity, kinship, or intimacy forged among its variously identifying LGBTQIA+ residents. One need only refer to the previously mentioned Jo'burg 2012 Pride Parade and the precipitant emotional and physical violence by way of evidence.

In what follows I provide a brief exegesis of Johannesburg's emergence and metropolitanism, what Nuttall and Mbembe (2008) have described as its modern African *city-ness* (p.15). This account also serves as the contextual and historicised basis upon which I discuss LGBTQIA+ consumption and spatiality in the "City of Gold," as Johannesburg is colloquially known.

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### ***Queer Spatiality and Consumption in the Aspirational City of Gold***

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Johannesburg is a migrant city that was founded upon get-rich-quick entrepreneurialism and the pursuit of material wealth (Nuttall & Mbembe, 2008). From its very humble beginnings as a ramshackle collection of mining camps, Johannesburg has always been characterised by its precarity and palimpsestic discontinuities. Nothing and no one was meant to last for a long time in this city – not even its own built form (Simone, 2008). In under three decades, the entire city was completely razed to the ground and rebuilt no less than five times (Mitshikiza, 2008; Murray, 2011; Nuttall & Mbembe, 2008) for various reasons related to population control and public health policies.

The city was established right in the heart of an inland plateau (known as the *highveld*), after two English prospectors, George Harrison and George Walker, literally stumbled upon a rock formation containing gold on Langalaagte Farm in 1886 (Brodie, 2014). Harrison quickly secured a prospector's license and sold his discoverer's claim for ten pounds. Within a matter of weeks, more gold was discovered on the surrounding farms of Turffontein and Doornfontein (Murray, 2011, p.38). The subsequent rush for gold on the highveld reef (rock) laid the groundwork for the transformation of a small patchwork of mining camps into a booming colonial town (Mbembe, 2004; Murray, 2011). The exact origins of the city's name are not known. Some commentators (Brodie, 2014; Murray, 2011) have suggested that the surveyors-general, Christiaan Johannes Joubert and Johann Rissik, could possibly have given their names to the city. It is also fairly likely that the emergent city was named after the president of the country, the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek, Stephanus Johannes Paulus Kruger – now commonly known as Paul Kruger (Brodie, 2014).

John Matshikiza (2008) put forward the claim that "there must have been

something ... where Johannesburg stands, before the gold rush" (p.221). In fact, it would be anachronistic to suggest that the city's history *proper* begins with the discovery of gold by a few European colonial settler white men. Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the indigenous Iron Age community of Mapungubwe – located between the borders of present-day South Africa and Zimbabwe (in the Limpopo Province) – mined and traded gold with Islamic and Chinese merchants (Huffman, 2000; Miller et al., 2000). This epicentre of gold mining and trade generated enormous wealth, and has thus been understood as the precursor to the civilisation of Great Zimbabwe. The materiality of gold, therefore, suggests its indexicality as a metaphor for aspiration, consumer capitalism, wealth, and upward mobility in Johannesburg. The centrality of this commodity, in terms of the city's history and common imaginaries about it, thus lends credence to its nickname: *eGoli* – The City of Gold.

Any discussion about Johannesburg necessitates the consideration of its significance as a space of capitalist accumulation and consumption (Bogatsu, 2002; Iqani, 2012; 2016; Iqani & Kenny, 2015; Mbembe, 2004; Nuttal, 2009). While popular cultural and scholarly commentaries about the city have aptly framed it as a highly racialised city, it is important to consider how other markers and categories of identity determine *who* gets to consume *what*.

Beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Western European logics of capitalism, commodity culture, and consumerism were vital ingredients in bolstering the trans-Atlantic slave trade as well as the various colonial projects in sub-Saharan Africa (Magubane, 2004; McClintock, 1995; wa Thiong'o, 1987). An historical effect of this has been the mutually reinforcing modernist projects of racialisation and consumer culture as we understand them today (Taylor, 2004; 2016; Wynter, 1979; 2003). Deborah Posel's (2010) notion of racialised consumption is thus helpful at this point: It enables me to theorise how "the dynamics of race are as thoroughly insinuated into local and global histories of consumption as those of class, status and gender" (p.162). The critical point here is that inasmuch as social spaces are configured according to the categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality, these identity markers are integral to the historical and contemporary articulations of consumer capitalism.

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## ***LGBTQIA+ Consumer Culture, Citizenship, and the Racialisation of Urban Space***

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The outline of Johannesburg's emergence and development in the preceding section provides necessary historical context for a discussion about LGBTQIA+ consumption and public visibility within the city. However, it is important, first, to discuss the overarching debates about the intersections between LGBTQIA+ consumption and citizenship in the city. In the following discussion I therefore merge these two bodies of scholarship and, in so doing, account for the significance of examining the politics of LGBTQIA+ consumer identities, desires, and practices from a specific global south context. By indexing LGBTQIA+ beauty pageants as a particular kind of subaltern consumerist social practice, this discussion highlights their significance in relation to Johannesburg's consumer cultural landscape.

Since the mid-1990s, LGBTQIA+ consumption has been critiqued for constituting a particular kind of market segmentation. The media constructions of the lucrative LGBTQIA+ consumer market have been described as both dubious and elitist (Bell & Binnie, 2000; Binnie, 1995; Chasin, 2000; Cruz-Malavé & Manalansan, 2002; Gluckman & Reed, 1997; Hennessy, 2000; Kates, 2002; Pallegriani, 2002; Penñaloza, 1996; Sender, 2003). A broad, scholarly consensus is that the highly glamourised Double-Income-NO-Kids (DINKS) market sector is nothing more than a collusive construction by marketing and public relations, and advertising companies. The bottom line is to attract advertising and consumer revenue. A corollary of these marketing constructions is the nebulous idea of a "Pink Economy." This is a specific kind of marketing ploy that is primarily aimed at affluent, cisgender, white, gay males, who supposedly wield the financial wherewithal to buy and consume any commodity at will (Bell & Binnie, 2000; Han, 2007; Manalansan, 2005; Roy, 2012; Teunis, 2007). These media constructions have elided the fact that "sexuality is cross-cut by class, race and gender in complex ways, which the prevailing myths of the affluent gay consumer in the pink economy invisibilize" (Bell & Binnie, 2000, p.100). In effect, these constructions have resulted in the propagation of a neoliberal ideology of hyper-consumerism which, ultimately, serves the homonormative and homonationalist agendas of various transnational corporations and nation-states (Agathangelou et al. 2008; Bérubé 2001; Brown 2009; David 2017; Duggan 2003; LeMaster 2015; Oswin 2007; Puar 2006; 2007; Ritchie 2015).

LGBTQIA+ consumer identities and practices are undeniable in their



expressive claims to citizenship and empowerment. If it is the case that empowerment can be embodied through consumption (Iqani, 2012), then the pink economy legitimates a specific kind of assimilative citizenship. Ann Pallegri (2002) alerted us to “the relationship between legal and social rights, on the one hand, and economic recognition and [consumer] opportunities, on the other” (p.135). It is, therefore, important to be attentive to the claims of basic human rights and citizenship which undergird the tenuous domain of LGBTQIA+ consumer culture (Hennessy, 2000). This is because the entire discursive terrain of consumer culture expresses a wide range of claims regarding social identity, class, status, distinction, taste, and so forth (Bourdieu, 1984; Miller, 1987; 2012; Sender, 2001). Human rights claims and citizenship are thus important dimensions within the discursive realm of consumption (Cancalini, 2001; Couldry, 2004; Duggan, 1995; 2003; Iqani, 2016).

Kates (2002) highlighted how the “expressiveness in consuming confronts, and to some extent, seeks to transform dominant macro cultural meanings and gain a degree of social legitimacy” (p.387). Moreover, as Lynda Johnson (2005) aptly reminds us, the urge to be out, proud, and visible is as much of a political move towards social enfranchisement as it is enmeshed within “neoliberal forms of sexual citizenship” (p.14). I am, however, not entirely convinced about this because of the neoliberal and pro-capitalist “tendency to reduce the social and political significance of queer sexualities and cultures to a commodity exchangeable in the marketplace” (Cruz-Malavé & Manalansan, 2002, p.2). In the context of transnational capitalist consumerism, consumption by certain LGBTQIA+ subjects is inherently tied to various claims about sexual citizenship, social legitimacy, and public visibility (Bell & Binnie 2000; Milani 2012; Johnson 2005; Puar 2007). This, then, reiterates Rosemary Hennessey’s (2002) assertion about the importance of continually and critically questioning “how the achievement of gay and lesbian visibility by some rests on the invisible labor of others” (p.69). It seems important to caution against overstating the emancipatory potential embedded in such claims and enactments of consumption. While they are clearly linked to the discourses of citizenship and empowerment, it still remains to be seen *who* they actually benefit.

According to the latest Statistics South Africa 2020 report, the majority of the country’s Black population lives in varying degrees of poverty. This means that 49,2% of the country’s adult population lives below the bread line - with women experiencing higher levels of poverty than citizens who identify as “men.” What does consumer-citizenship mean for the majority of the Black population who are systemically denied basic necessities such as food, water, proper sanitation,

proper housing, adequate education? Although the idea of a lucrative pink economy may have gained steadfast media traction, it does not logically hold water as it relates to millions of South African LGBTQIA+ consumers. While human rights regarding homo- and transphobic discrimination are legally protected under the constitution, millions of LGBTQIA+ non-white citizens in South Africa do not enjoy the human right to basic services. The theoretical conflation between consumption and citizenship therefore needs to be given serious and careful consideration in relation to LGBTQIA+ politics, consumption, and visibility in contemporary South Africa. Tucker's (2009) ethnography of LGBTQIA+ identities and visibilities in Cape Town demonstrated that race and class were significant factors influencing consumer patterns among his research participants. He showed how whiteness and economic privilege were directly proportional to freedom of consumption, access, and movement in affluent spaces. My study also investigated how a specific cohort of young Black and Coloured LGBTQIA+ people created a subcultural space of consumption and kinship in downtown Johannesburg, and the ways in which the House of Indigo fostered dynamic forms of consumption for them - specifically through drag and beauty pageantry.

My study contributes to the afore-mentioned scholarship on LGBTQIA+ consumption in two significant ways. First, it provides an ethnographic account of how consumer identities, desires, and practices were constructed in the subcultural context of Club Indigo. The body of scholarship discussed above is focused predominantly on media, marketing, and advertising texts. It therefore it provides (much-needed) textual and discourse analyses of the construction of the pink economy, and this allows me to put forward an argument about how global south LGBTQIA+ consumer-citizens created and shared various meanings about their identities and practices of consumption through drag and beauty pageantry.

Second, this study gives an ethnographic account of LGBTQIA+ consumer identities and practices from a distinctly global south perspective. The mainstream constructions of the pink economy and LGBTQIA+ market segmentation have focused predominantly on media, practices, and consumers from the global north - specifically Western cities such as New York, San Francisco, Montreal, London, Amsterdam, Melbourne, and so on. This study departs from this tendency by showing how Black and Coloured LGBTQIA+ consumers created a meaningful subcultural space of visibility and kinship *on the margins* of this pink economy in Johannesburg. This is not to suggest that there were no affluent, upwardly-mobile LGBTQIA+ consumers in the city who "bought

into" the idea of the pink economy. Neither am I suggesting that those who did were all white, gay, cisgender males. Part of my contribution is, rather, to paint ethnographic portraits of the aspirations of subcultural participants who did not have privileged access to this economy.

As discussed above, the segmentation of a "queer market" is no more than a marketing gimmick constructed in order to attract streams of revenue from advertisers and consumers alike. Second, "the West" is not a term that actually signifies any geo-political *place*. It can be better understood as an agglomeration of self-aggrandising discourses, economic processes, and structures of economic exploitation (Fanon, 1963; Glissant, 1996; Loomba, 2015; Mbembe, 2015; Said, 1979; Spivak, 1988). Therefore, while Johannesburg was historically modelled in strict accordance with the ideals of Western modernity, it cannot be considered a "Western city." Instead, it can better be described a highly *westernised* modern African city.

There are very few spaces designated and marketed specifically for LGBTQIA+ consumption and public visibility in Johannesburg. Whether this is a good or a bad thing remains an open-ended question. Unlike the city of Cape Town, Johannesburg has never been marketed as "Africa's gay Mecca" for international tourists and local consumers (Elder, 2005; Tucker, 2009; Visser, 2001; 2003;). It does not boast any gentrified areas for leisurely shopping or up-market residential enclaves - such as De Waterkant in Cape Town. So, despite its unassailable mimesis of Western modernity, attempting to map or locate a distinctive "gay village" in contemporary Johannesburg is a rather futile exercise.

It is difficult to disaggregate spaces and practices of LGBTQIA+ consumption (from the hegemonic mainstream) in a city such as Johannesburg. This makes its LGBTQIA+ consumer market both fragmented and precarious. LGBTQIA+ consumer spaces, trends, practices, and the people who create them, are constantly fleeting. Similar to its built form, its inhabitants are always caught in states of urban flux and aspirational fluidity (Simone 2008). Johannesburg's entertainment and consumer landscape is structured in such a way that venues specifically targeting LGBTQIA+ consumers are widely dispersed, and generally integrated within the heteronormative mainstream. Numerous gay bars and clubs exist in small, seemingly self-contained, pockets around the city, and most of them are located in affluent suburbs outside the city centre. Much like the racial and class-specific inflections of consumer culture that are so endemic in the city, these bars and nightclubs generally attract a class-based and racially homogenous clientele.

The city's queer consumer cultural and entertainment landscape, however, is

not without its historical precedents. With the global export of gold and iron ore in the mid-20th century came an exponential boom in South Africa's apartheid economy in the interim years between the World Wars. This resulted in an enormous rise in the living standards and expendable household incomes of the white minority population. In effect, the leisure industries also underwent exponential growth, and thus "clubbing, always costlier than nipping off to the pub for a drink, became the vogue" (Gevisser, 1995, p.38). From the late 1960s, the inner-city became home to scores of different nightclubs, bars, cabarets, and bookstores catering to a (not-so-clandestine) LGBTQIA+ consumer market. In fact, the main streets of Hillbrow – a former suburb for European immigrants on the eastern perimeter of the city – were littered with many such entertainment venues. Some examples of these were the Skyline Bar, the Dungeon nightclub, and Mrs. Henderson's Restaurant and Cabaret Lounge. With the country's transition to democracy, during the early 1990s, came the subsequent corporate and residential "white flight" to the northern suburbs. During these early years, many of the entertainment venues catering to a distinctly LGBTQIA+ clientele either shut down or petered out into the surrounding suburbs.

In the early 2000s, monthly or bi-annual, commercially-sponsored parties targeting an upwardly-mobile, cisgender, gay, male clientele gained popularity throughout the city, but they fizzled out as soon as this rather fickle market lost interest in them. This short life-span of gay bars and nightclubs in Johannesburg became evident very early in my fieldwork. Upon my arrival back in Johannesburg in September 2016, I noticed posters announcing the grand opening of a new gay club named Industry. The opening was welcomed with much fanfare when it was featured in the entertainment and lifestyle website, *Mambaonline.com*. Industry was an enormous, refurbished warehouse located in the gentrified Maboneng Precinct. Despite its policy of openness and inclusivity for all LGBTQIA+ patrons, it shut down less than seven months later. One of the owners of the Club Indigo stated in a *Mambaonline.com* article: "People don't seem to be so into gay spaces anymore ... The Born Frees [Youth born in the post-apartheid years after 1994] are demanding their space in the heterosexual community and are not so interested in their own space" (Iqbal, 2007). His observation highlights the generational difference in terms of the desires and tastes of Johannesburg's middle- and upper-class LGBTQIA+ consumers. Similarly, it attests to the changing conceptions of consumer practices, aspirations, and the public visibility of this particular market sector.

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## 1.4 Studying Beauty Pageants: Contesting Race, Nationality and Gender

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This study investigates the drag beauty pageants hosted at Club Indigo as a set of ritualised subcultural performances. It is, therefore, important to contextualise contemporary representations of beauty contestants and pageants as well as academic scholarship about these kinds of ritual performances. Beauty contestants occupy a space of ambivalence within our modern popular cultural lexicon. Their ubiquity has turned them into mundane, easily recognizable, figures in our everyday lives. However, beauty contestants are complex figures insofar as they are constructed as simultaneously exceptional yet ordinary. Mainstream media have which have bolstered this paradoxical image of the exceptional beauty queen or king who stands out *in spite* of their quotidian characteristics. It is, therefore, difficult to dismiss beauty contestants outright as figures who uphold the values of an archaic, sexist, and heteropatriarchal order.

Take, for example, an article in the *Princeton Alumni Review* about the academic achievements of one Cara McCollum – a Miss America beauty contestant and Princeton undergraduate student – whose life’s passion was distributing books to children on their birthdays (Friedman, 2017). This media narrative paints a picture of this blond and blue-eyed woman as the loveable princess with the proverbial “heart of gold.” Another newspaper article (Suhay 2015) describes the “grace,” “dignity,” and “kindness” of Miss Philippines, Pia Wurtzbach, at the Miss Universe 2015 beauty pageant when the competition’s host mistakenly announced Miss Colombia as the winner. Wurtzbach is described as having displayed exceptional humility, as she later embraced the Colombian runner-up.

In a similar attempt to humanise beauty contestants, a *New Statesman* article (Woolf, 2014) went to great lengths to describe the political ambitions of numerous American beauty pageant contestants and winners who have blazed their trails from the pageant stage to congress and senate houses. Another media example describes a Miss America contestant, Madeline Collins, whose response during a question-and-answer section was that “Donald Trump is the biggest issue our country faces,” and that “he has caused a lot of division in [the USA]” (Reliford 2018). She even continued to tell the judges that National Football League players have the right to kneel during the national anthem in

protest against police brutality in the USA. More recently, several contestants at the Miss Universe 2021 pageant made bold political statements in the national costume competition, wearing costumes adorned with statements such as “Depose Duterte” (Miss Philippines), “Stop Asian Hate,” (Miss Singapore), and “Pray for Myanmar” (Miss Myanmar). These media representations are evidence that the modern beauty queen should also embody the values of an ideal citizen who is both morally upstanding and politically “savvy.”

The modern beauty queen has thus been constructed as more than just physically attractive (King-O’Rain, 2008, p.74). Her personal characteristics, moral rectitude, and (more sensationally) her failures, are also held up for public scrutiny. Debates about her role as a symbol for proper nationhood circulate in ways that construct her public image into a metonym for idealised citizenship. Moreover, her embodiment and performance of a specific type of (hyper)femininity serves to reify culturally-legitimated concepts of gender identity throughout different transnational contexts. Marcia Ochoa (2014) posited that “a national beauty queen is only conceivable as the nation coheres and begins to see itself as needing a representative” (p.24). This suggests that the modern beauty queen functions as a national representative whose physicality and supposed moral compass embody various discourses about race, gender, sexuality, and “proper” citizenship (Ballerino-Cohen et al., 1995; Barnes, 1994; 1996; Balogun, 2012; Edmondson, 2003; Hoad, 2004; 2010; Leeds, 2002).

When Vanessa Williams won the crown as the first African-American “Miss America” in 1983, she solidified her place in late modern US history. But she did more than this. She stood as a sign for the imagined ideals of democratic and racially inclusive progressiveness – not unrelated to the constructions of the neoliberal capitalist American Dream. However, her crown and title were rescinded soon after her nude photographs for a *Playboy* shoot were leaked to several different tabloid publications. Her scandalised fall from grace served to highlight the spectacular ways in which the American nation (in particular) chooses to represent its collective memory through performance of a specific kind of “proper” and acceptable femininity. Moreover, the case of Vanessa Williams exemplifies the extent to which the bodies of beauty queens serve as sites upon which the politics, tensions, and contestations about “proper” gendered subjectivity are negotiated (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

Since the earliest decades of the 20th century, the Western model of the competitive beauty pageant has permeated through different transnational contexts (Ballerino-Cohen et al., 1996; Latham, 1995). However, this model has

frequently been altered to reflect the local culture in different geo-political contexts (Crawford, 2008; Johnson, 1996; Schackt, 2005; Thomas, 2006). Take, for example, the recent “Mr and Ms Albinism East Africa” pageant which was organised by the Albinism Society of Kenya. The pageant aimed to “demystify the condition of people living with albinism and affirm their inherent dignity while challenging myths, misconceptions and negative beliefs around the disorder” (Tato, 2018). While the pageant followed the usual stylised pattern of modelling and beautification, its ideological impetus was altered to raise public awareness about the killings of people living with albinism in different parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

When Jacqui Mofokeng was crowned the first Black “Miss South Africa” in 1993, this moment was about more than the performance and evaluation of a Black woman’s physical beauty. This historic moment also heralded the apotheosis of “Rainbow Nation” idealism. This was a particular kind of narrative which the South African national body politic chose to construct for itself and the world in the capricious moments leading up to the first democratic elections. Ballerino Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje (1996) point out that:

beauty contests are not just about femininity, or beauty, or even competition. They evoke passionate interest and engagement with political issues central to the lives of beauty contestants, sponsors, organizers and audiences – issues that frequently have nothing obvious to do with the competition itself. (p. 2 – 3)

Beauty pageants thus provide rich semiotic texts for examining how different communities and nation-states imagine themselves in relation to the ideas of modernity, development, and cosmopolitanism (Crawford, 2008; Faria, 2013; Manalansan, 2006). As events, they highlight the hegemonic ideologies that are legitimated and/or contested at both the state level and among grassroots communities. Similarly, these glamorous spectacles dramatise the quotidian ideals and norms by which different groups make sense of their own realities in different national and even diasporic contexts (Bloul, 2013; Hoad, 2010; Ochoa, 2014). By dramatising the dialectics between quotidian and exceptional social imaginaries, beauty pageants highlight the arbitrariness of the ideals by which social actors make sense of the world.

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## ***Beauty Pageants as Spectacles***

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The beauty pageant can also be conceived as a kind of spectacle in the

Barthesian sense (1991 [1957]). Much like the spectacular drama of wrestling in Barthes' famous essay, *The World of Wrestling*, the beauty pageant follows a specific and predictable script. Its discursive import lies in its spectacularism, its propensity for exaggerated glamour, and its grandiloquence. Barthes (1991) posits that:

It is obvious that at such a pitch, it no longer matters whether the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is the image of the passion, not the passion itself. There is no more a problem of truth in wrestling than in the theatre. (p.16)

Similarly, the scripted predictability of the beauty pageant is of little consequence to the audience, contestants, organisers, and sponsors. In the final analysis, what is of chief importance is the image and/or performance of a particular set of ideals and values. For example, the contestants' actual concern about the alleviation of world hunger is of less significance than the competent performance and display of such a concern.

It is almost impossible to divorce contemporary beauty pageants from their capitalist, and consumerist imperatives. Seen from this perspective, they can be analysed as performances of neoliberal aspiration and consumerism. Even those pageants which are organised among local, subaltern, or subcultural groups, shore up the multiple ways in which they are inflected by ideas and aspirations towards globality and cosmopolitanism (Besnier, 2002). Local, community-based, or subcultural beauty pageants highlight the ways in which global capitalist media, commodities, and practices become incorporated into the everyday lives of human actors outside of the global North (Bloul, 2012; Hoad, 2010; Jha, 2016). My study firmly situates Club Indigo's beauty pageants within the latter category of subcultural pageants. This is because they evidenced the dynamic coalescence of discourses of consumption, aspiration, and cosmopolitanism in the global south.

A number of feminist scholars from various ideological camps have critiqued the commodification of women's bodies in beauty pageants (hooks, 1992; Wolf, 2002). They problematise the ownership, organisation, and control of these events as processes which further the interest of the heteropatriarchal status quo. Alternatively, there are some scholars who interrogate some forms of beauty pageantry as countercultural performances around which different communities adhere and find solidarity (Lavenda, 1996; Leeds-Craig, 2002). This latter strand of scholarship views beauty pageants as sites of political organising by marginalised communities in response to state-sanctioned racist exclusion and discrimination. From this perspective, beauty pageants are posited as having



transformative potential. They are analysed in the ways they embody contestations around beauty, identity, gender, and sexuality beyond hegemonic, western norms (Ribane, 2006).

This study demonstrates how beauty pageants are inflected by an assemblage of mediated images and transnational imaginaries which permeate geo-political borders beyond global north-south binaries. I show how the Club Indigo pageants were connected to multiple, transnational contexts and representations through practices of consumer culture and performances of beauty ideals. The following section provides a critical overview of the current scholarship on beauty pageants as a specific kind of subcultural performance and negotiation of LGBTQIA+ identities, and situates this study firmly within this body of scholarship.

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## **1.5 LGBTQIA+ Beauty Pageants: Glamorizing Subcultural Counterpublics**

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Beauty pageants across various LGBTQIA+ subcultural contexts constitute performances of what Michael Warner (2002) has theorised as a counterpublic. Warner posits that “a counterpublic maintains, at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status” (p.423 - 424). Beauty pageants created and marketed to LGBTQIA+ communities are often premised upon discourses of civil and human rights, empowerment, and public visibility for gender non-conforming subjects. However, this does not make them any less spectacular in their scripted predictability. Much like other subaltern or subcultural beauty pageants, they rely upon the glamorisation and performance of group-sanctioned discourses, values, and ideals.

Insofar as they instantiate a counterpublic discourse outside of the (globalised) heteronormative ideals of beauty, LGBTQIA+ pageants are similarly commodified practices of consumption. Take, for instance, the Mr Gay World and Mr Gay Europe pageants that enjoy enormously lucrative sponsorship from transnational corporations such as the Andrew Christian underwear brand and the NH Collection hotel chain. These events have garnered significant attention on the global stage, and have even included entrants from Macau, Ethiopia, Namibia, and South Africa. While they may not overtly embody hegemonic

ideals, they are still susceptible to commodification and assimilationist homonormativity – with the interest of global neoliberal capital starkly in the foreground.

In the case of South Africa, beauty pageants for variously identified LGBTQIA+ groups have a long and rich history, dating back to the mid-1950s. Dhiannaraj Chetty's (1995)<sup>2</sup> study provides an historical account of the elaborate drag beauty pageants housed at the famous Madame Costello's in District Six, Cape Town. Later examples within this body of research include Matthew Bettar's (2012) analysis of the media representations of the "Mr Gay SA" beauty pageant. He argues that "both the [Mr Gay SA] pageant and the surrounding media content are symbolic of an assimilationist approach to LGBTI issues, ultimately perpetuating a Westernised, homonormative, monolithic identity" (p.61). Arguing from an antithetical perspective, Jennifer Spruill (2004) claimed that "some drag is pointedly political" (p. 95). In a similar vein, Olivia Bronson (2013) theorised the Miss Gay Western Cape pageant as "both archive and an act of resistance, in which participants enact a fragmented freedom and declare their existence in South Africa" (p.75). Bryce Lease (2017) saw the Miss Gay Western Cape pageant as a spatially-bounded performance which offered participants, organisers, and audiences "an alternative mode of living" (p.139). These varying perspectives notwithstanding, it is evident that LGBTQIA+ beauty pageants constitute a particular (mainstream or subcultural) counterpublic to the extent that "a hierarchy of stigma is the assumed background of practice" (Warner, 2002, p. 424). An overarching tendency within this scholarship on LGBTQIA+ beauty pageants is the critical focus on cisgender males and drag contestants. Indeed, besides Zethu Matebeni's (2016) insightful contribution, there seem to be few investigations about lesbian identities and sexualities with regards to beauty pageants in South Africa.

Another important observation to make about these studies of local LGBTQIA+ beauty pageants is the general presumption of stable sexual identity categories. The above-mentioned scholars have (rightly) focused on the human and sexual rights politics which undergird these spectacular and glamorous

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**2** *District Six inner city area of Cape Town which was established in 1867. It was occupied by working class people – most of whom worked at the nearby docks – many of whom were of mixed-race ancestry (McEarchen, 1998). It is memorialized as a place of racial, economic, as well as cultural heterogeneity and integration. Its vibrancy, cultural mixture, and communal sense of belonging is also well documented (Hart 1988; Jeppie & Soudien 1990; Rive 1986). Under the apartheid government's Group Areas legislation, District Six was completely destroyed, and its occupants forcibly removed to what are now colloquially known as the "Cape Flats."*

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practices. However, critiques about the constructions and performativity of sexual and gender identities have tended to recede into the background of their analyses. In his ethnographic study of the Miss Gay Queenstown pageant, Graeme Reid (2003) observed that:

Small town gay beauty pageants are public expressions of gay identity where men present images of feminine fashion, both traditional and cosmopolitan. The organisers of these pageants often talk about the shows as a way of educating the local community about gay life (p. 9).

This empirical approach examining beauty pageants as having a sociological function in relation to education and community-building seems plausible. However, the identity categories of “gay” and “men” are asserted as a priori. The above-mentioned studies correctly examine these beauty pageants as having specific semiotic as well as political significance in terms of LGBTQIA+ public visibility. Building on this, the present study contributes to this scholarship by problematising the discourses of sexual and gender identity categories. I demonstrate how these categories were constructed, negotiated, and performed, and thus given a specific set of subcultural meanings within and outside of Club Indigo. Furthermore, as I show in Chapter 3, bonds of kinship were created and maintained within this subcultural context through the fluid interplay between consumption and sexual identity.

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### ***Drag Artistry: Histories, Contestations and the Politics of Gender Non-Conformity***

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This section maps out both the historical and current scholarship on drag. By highlighting its definitional open-endedness, I show how drag can be interpreted as a significant postmodern discourse which eschews interpretive fixity. I also outline the trajectory of cross-dressing and drag subcultures in South Africa, thus placing them in historical and geo-political context, and critically examine the intersections between drag cultures and racial identities. The discussions in this section suggest that the performance of drag delineates more than glamourised transgressions or parodies of gender and sexuality. I conclude by examining drag as a highly mediated discourse within contemporary popular culture, outlining the current debates around drag performance and its contemporary assimilation within neoliberal consumer and popular cultures.

Due to the circulation of transnational media representations, contemporary ideas around drag performance and artistry are changing. From as early as the

European medieval ages until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, public discourses about drag queens framed them as clownish freaks and/or moral aberrations. Their contemporary incarnations in late capitalist modernity, however, are becoming ever more mediated and commodified, and the drag queen is fast becoming an iconoclastic figure in popular cultural imaginaries throughout the globe.

In terms of a definitional exegesis, the term “drag” is contentious because of the varying perspectives from which it has been approached. As far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Elizabethan period, “drag” has commonly been understood as English dramaturgical shorthand for “dressed as a girl.” Some commentators have posited that “by the 1800s, it was in common use, referring to the swish or ‘drag’ of a woman’s dress on the ground” (David & Richardson, 1995; Richardson in Chermayeff). Taylor and Rupp (220) posited that “drag queens...are gay men who dress and perform as, but do not want to be, women or have women’s bodies” (p.115). However, it is important to distinguish the drag queen from the female impersonator. Roger Baker (1994) suggested that a female impersonator is “an all-embracing term describing any male who entertains by dressing as a woman” (p.17). Using a number of etymonic and dictionary explanations, Baker reserved the term “drag” for full-time, professional male theatrical or stage entertainers who dress in women’s clothes. This distinction is important because, as I show in Chapter 4, it is malleable and contextual. Throughout this study, it functions primarily as a conceptual fissure by which my interlocutors’ own self-conceptions and world-views were negotiated. Esther Newtown (1972), however, prioritised the term “female impersonator” in her ethnographic and definitional accounts. From these and other points of view (e.g., Bishop et al., 2014), it would seem that the drag queen or female impersonator are biological males who entertain audiences dressed (specifically) as women, and thus perform, parody, reify and/or contest the latter gender role.

Critical interventions have been made to divest analyses and theories of drag from their latter androcentric orientations (Halberstam, 1997). Scholarly examinations of drag kings have centred on male, female, transgender, butch, or femme individuals who make a pointed performance of masculinity. This turns the original definition of drag on its head in that it broadens the discursive terrain for a wide variety of bodies and performances which may constitute drag artistry. Borrowing from Halberstam’s (1993) seminal theory of *female masculinity*, as an agentive and performative challenge to normative masculinity, other scholars have analysed drag king performances as transgressive subcultural practices (Ayoub & Podmore, 2003; Hubman, 2003; Noble, 2003; Pauliny, 2003; Taylor,

Rupp & Shapiro, 2010). These studies have made important contributions within the study of drag by destabilising the naturalised categories of masculinity. They have also made the warranted contribution of introducing lesbian and transgender identities, performances, and politics within the cultural lexicon of drag.

Schacht (2002; 2003) was loath to fix drag artistry to a specific set of definitions, performance typologies, or aesthetic norms. He conjectured that “defining who and what a drag king is, is probably a far more complicated enterprise than just the simple terms ‘he’ and ‘she’ suggest.” Devitt (2006, p.30) decried as counterintuitive the tendency to pin down the definition of drag to a particular binary because it is the intention of drag to explode and open up, rather than fix, these rigid gender boundaries. This definitional open-endedness demonstrates that drag is a social practice that melds together a wide variety of discourses regarding sexual and gender performativity. Therefore, there seems to be more to drag artistry and performance than just the act of cross-dressing. Be that as it may, cross-dressing has been theorised as a particularly subversive act against state and social regulation. As such, a brief discussion of the literature on the history and sociocultural meanings which it instantiates is warranted. The following section thus outlines some important scholarly contributions about cross-dressing and transgression.

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### ***Cross Dressing: Transgressing Social Hierarchies and Disrupting the Social Order***

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Clothing and fashion have historically been regimes of social control and regulation. Medieval and early modern Western European social and political elites were especially concerned with various codes of dress among the populace. These codes were highly regulated and structured according to strict social hierarchies. Nationality, citizenship, sex, and gender categories, and (especially) social rank, were heavily policed because they were constructed as legible through fashion and dress (Howard, 1988). Clothing was a way of blurring these social boundaries and making one’s social rank illegible – and therefore of disrupting the established social order (Miller, 2009). Crossing these clearly demarcated boundaries of social rank constituted what feminist historians such as Marjorie Garber (1992) and Ann McClintock (1995) theorised as “cross-dressing,” a social act that transgresses social mores which were (and still are) thought to be providentially ordained. Dressing above or below one’s

station in this society was to commit an act of reprehensible sartorial impunity. The aforementioned scholars have shown how the social practice of crossdressing has historically been a function of transgressing presumably self-evident social categories, boundaries, and hierarchies.

Given the prohibition of women from the Elizabethan theatrical stage by the state and the church, the practice of young male actors' cross-dressing was not at all remarkable (Baker, 1994; Howard, 1988). Neither was such gender and social transgression uncommon among 18th Century French and English aristocracy, as well as within the Roman Catholic papacy (Richardson in Chermayeff, David & Richardson, 1995). From this historical perspective, the drag queen appears as but one typological instantiation of cross-dressing. Just like the street-walking harlot, or the lowly fop masquerading as a dandy, the culturally historical figure of the drag queen is only one of many kinds of cross-dressers who disrupt strict social codes through fashion and dress.

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### ***Debating the Politics of Drag Performance: Gender Transgression, Stereotypes, and Stigmatisation***

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The social construction of gender and the ways it is mapped onto and experienced within the material body have been theorised from various critical perspectives. The deconstruction of these gendering processes has taken many forms in various historical and cultural contexts. As demonstrated above, one form of transgressing or destabilising the social category of gender is through cross-dressing and the performance of drag. The performance of drag is a discursive practice whose historical trajectory has engendered diverse analyses and theoretical debates. In this section I discuss overarching debates about drag as a gendering, ergo politicising, discourse, debates that concern the tension between its subversion or reification of hegemonic and culturally accepted gender binaries and norms.

Sociologists, ethnographers, and critical feminist philosophers alike, have theorised drag as a subversive and disruptive instance of countercultural performance. Some have suggested that drag performance destabilises supposedly fixed gender and sexual categories. Others have argued that drag artistry and performance can be viewed as a critique and possible disruption of the heteronormative female/male binary gender system (Balfour & Crawl, 2012; Rupp & Shapiro, 2010; Taylor, 2012). Still others have claimed that drag artists conscientiously challenge the sex/gender binary by pointedly making ironic, humorous and/or over-the-top references to their biological sex while parodying

the gender role they are playing (Sullivan-Blum, 2004). Berkowitz, Belgrave, and Halberstein (2007) suggested that, in the context of gender-bending, drag artistry not only reveals, but also takes the sex/gender binary system to its discursive extreme. These scholars have taken Judith Butler's (1990; 1993) notion of performativity as a theoretical starting point (I offer my exegesis of Butler's theory of performativity later in the following chapter.) Simply put, they have relied on Butler's premise that drag performance disrupts the sex/gender binary system by showing that the gender identities are performed within a specific set of discursive constraints and regimes. In light of this, they have used Butler's model as a conceptual basis for their insistence that drag is inherently subversive, transgressive, and thus an emancipatory social practice (Halberstam, 1997; Mann, 2011; Taylor & Rupp, 2004; 2005). As I show later in this chapter, these scholars have relied too heavily on their collective insistence that drag is, a priori, a subversive genre of performance. I carefully outline Butler's (1993) elucidation about drag performance in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* in order to suggest that drag performance constitutes a complex assemblage of social semiotics as well as contextual interpretations.

Other commentators have critiqued the transgressive or "subversive" potential of drag performances. These scholars have pointed out what they perceive to be the problematic foundations of drag performance. They have highlighted its reification of sexed and gendered stereotypes in the perpetuation of hetero- and homonormative gender binaries (Anderberg, 2006; Bronson, 2013; Nixon, 2009; Schacht, 2002; 2003; 2004), and have problematised the sexist dimensions of drag performance, arguing that not only do drag queens uphold unrealistic and exaggerated ideals of "femininity," but also that they perform drag from their socially-privileged positions as men. From this perspective, drag is seen as an age-old practice in which men continue to dominate women (read patriarchy) by deciding what is feminine and what is not. Drag kings, however, do not feature much within these critiques *against* drag performance. An overriding majority of the scholarship on drag kings has relied on Halberstam's (1993) famous concept of *female masculinity* insofar as it is "a queer subject position that can successfully challenge models of gender conformity" (p.9). In effect, studies on drag king performances have tended to reify assumptions about the subversive potential of drag as a discursive instantiation of gender-bending.

A number of commentators have constructed the drag king or queen as a stigmatised and/or marginalised figure in popular and countercultural discourse. The most famous of these analyses is evidenced in Esther Newton's (1972) seminal *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* in which she observes

that female impersonators “are consistently placed on the low end of the continuum of stigmatization” (p. 25). This is because, in the context of state and sociocultural repression against gender “deviance,” female impersonators were considered too obvious in their gender non-conformity. Some contemporary scholars still follow this line of thinking by positioning the drag king or queen as a marginalised, almost freakish, figure within various LGBTQIA+ communities (Bishop, 2014; Baker, 1994; Tewksbury, 1993).

More recently, the drag queen story hour phenomenon (where drag queens read storybooks aloud to children in public libraries) has come under legislative fire from conservative right-wing Christian groups and lawmakers in the United States. While legal ordinances have been passed to legislate drag queen story hour in different cities including Houston, San Francisco, and even Lafayette Louisiana, the fact that these cases had to be brought before the law in the first place adds some weight to the notion that the drag queen or king is still somewhat constructed as a stigmatised figure. However, a cautionary caveat is necessary when it comes to the issue of “stigmatisation,” not least because not all societies or communities have perceived the drag queen to be a freak or an aberration. For example, scholars have provided cogent historical accounts of the ways in which drag queens and social gatherings known as “drags” formed an integral part of the District Six Coloured community during the 1950s in Cape Town (Chetty, 1995; Jeppie & Soudien, 1990; Pacey, 2014). Famous “moffies” (as they were commonly known then) such Yvonne De Carlo often led the annual Kaapse Klopse carnival around the city of Cape Town in glamorous women’s garb and in full view of the revelling general public. Brett Pacey (2014) puts forward the claim that “moffies were accepted as a fact of life in the community, if not approved of, in the same way as the presence of gangsters was as an unavoidable fact of life in the community” (p.114). Popular gender non-conforming moffies such as Madame Costello and Kewpie Doll still feature as significant figures in the collective memories and reminiscences of the socio-cultural milieu of District Six.

At the farthest extreme of critiques against drag performance are those which liken the genre to a kind of blackface or minstrelsy. Kelly Kleiman (2000) was adamant that drag performance and blackface minstrelsy function in the same way insofar as they both aim to “ease the minds of an audience threatened by change...by presenting the agents of that change as ridiculous rather than frightening” (p.673). Similarly, Zine Magubane (2002, p.235) has described famous Black men in drag, such as Dennis Rodman and RuPaul, as “white [men] in a black mask” championing minstrelsy in Hollywood through the simultaneous



demarcation and blurring of racial boundaries. Similarly, filmmaker and poet, Marlon Riggs (1991) saw the mainstream media (Hollywood) renditions of drag and/or female impersonation by cisgender male actors as inherently disempowering. This observation led him to make the following conjecture: “For Black Gay Men, this burden of (mis)representation is compounded. We are saddled by historic caricatures of the Black Male, now fused with newer versions of the Negro Faggot. The resultant dehumanization is multilayered, and profound” (p.391 - 392).

Whether they are interpreted as harsh or apposite, these critiques highlight the contestations around drag as a genre of performance that encompasses more than the performance of sexual and gendered discourses. These critiques, then, shore up the variously imbricated performances of racial and classed identity categories that are embodied through drag.

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### ***Drag, Race, Class and Intersections of Identity Categories***

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If drag is to be conceptualised as a particular kind of consumer practice, then it begs the question as to what kinds of consumer discourses and identities it thereby engenders. Ragan Rhyne (2004) posited that “the performance of gender is also the performance of racialized codes of gender, and, indeed, of race itself” (p184). The comparisons between drag and blackface or minstrelsy mentioned above point directly to the performative dimensions of drag as a racialised discourse. In this light, drag performance can be understood as a particular kind of subcultural and racialised form of consumption. In this study I therefore place special emphasis on the importance of space, place, and race, in the meaning-making discourses which undergird the consumer practices of drag and beauty pageantry at my field site, Club Indigo. There, race, class, sexuality, and gender were interpreted as interrelated nodes of identity which melded together in various drag performances both on and offstage.

Jeffrey McCune (2008) asked a fecund question: “How does race inform drag performances” (p.185). The complexity of this question lies in the various assumptions and essentialisms it appears to disrupt. Moreman and McIntosh (2010) observed that “drag queens are always performing the race of their chosen diva” (p.122). Whether these performances can be taken as a form of subversion, homage, parody, or stereotype, race and class appear to be unassailable components in the performance of drag. Scholars of drag have pointed to its reproduction of whiteness and North American universalism

(McIntyre & Riggs, 2017; Swarr, 2004). In her vitriolic reading of the cult film classic documentary, *Paris is Burning*, bell hooks (1992) argued that “within the world of black gay drag ball culture...the idea of womanness and femininity is totally personified by [upperclass] whiteness” (p. 148). Similarly, Bruce (2016, p.169) argued that the symbolic use of drag figures and female impersonators in mainstream American cinema centred on white cisgender heteropatriarchy. Such analyses foreground the often-overlooked elements of drag performance as the simultaneous effect and conduit of postmodern racialising discourses.

Halberstam (1997) and Matebeni (2016) proffered redemptive readings of Black lesbian drag king performances. They foregrounded the subversive potential of these performances in that they exemplified and celebrated the performance of female masculinity. Moreover, according to both scholars, Black lesbian drag performances fostered a sense of pride, in-group camaraderie, public visibility, and kinship among Black lesbians and transgendered men – whose bodies and lives were often negotiated under the constant threat of psychic, emotional, mental and physical violence. Such performances of female masculinity through Black drag king performances shore up the ever-important questions about agency among marginalised groups. Kobena Mercer (1994) put it thusly:

The contestation of marginalization in black, gay and feminist cultural politics...brings the issue of authorship back into play, not as the centered origin that determines or guarantees the aesthetic and political value of a text, but as a vital question about agency in cultural struggles to ‘find a voice’ and ‘give voice’ to subordinate experiences, identities and subjectivities. (p.194)

The dynamics of agency, authorship, and voice are significant for this study – particularly within the representational matrix by which drag performances and subcultures are constructed.

In the case of South Africa, Matebeni (2016, p.24) correctly noted that drag beauty pageants have a longer historical trajectory in Cape Town than they do in Johannesburg. The research I undertook at the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA) archives attests to this. A huge number of colour photographs, memorabilia, hand-written notes, judges’ questions, score sheets, and video footage was made freely available to me in order to document the lesbian and gay beauty pageants which took place at the famous Dungeon nightclub and the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) in downtown Johannesburg during the mid-1990s (see Chapter 2). These beauty contests were highly gendered and racialised: the Dungeon pageants catered to mostly

white contestants and a predominantly white audience, while the HUMCC pageants were organised for Black LGBTQIA+ members (Reid, 2010).

In this study I provide thick ethnographic descriptions about *how* exactly sex/gender identities and consumer desires and aspirations were constructed and contested within the subcultural context of the House of Indigo. Moreover, I deconstruct current assumptions about LGBTQIA+ community, cosmopolitanism, and marginality by drawing attention to the subcultural meanings and values imbued through drag performance and beauty pageantry. In so doing, I provide a vivid, ethnographic snapshot of the sociocultural significance of drag and beauty pageantry in contemporary post-apartheid Johannesburg. Through my descriptions and analyses of the constructions of identities, desires, aspirations, and subcultural mores, my hope is that this study will contribute to the scholarship on LGBTQIA+ drag beauty contests from a specific global south perspective. It builds on ethnographic studies about LGBTQIA+ identities, beauty contests, public visibilities, and empowerment (Bettar, 2012; Lease, 2017; Matebeni, 2011; Reid, 2003; 2013; Tucker, 2009) and demonstrates how the performances of drag and normative beauty ideals within this subcultural community were inflected by the discourses of race and class in post-apartheid Johannesburg.

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### ***The Mediated Constructions of Drag Performance in Mainstream Popular Culture***

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Drag artistry has now been solidified as a lucrative domain within mainstream popular culture and transnational media representations. This is the result of the variegated processes of assimilation and the commodification of drag, as well as of the gender non-conforming practices it foregrounds. The sections above have referred to the mainstream media representations of drag artistry and performances in the press as well as in cinematic media. These mainstream media representations, and the discussions which they elicit, suggest that drag is not such a stigmatised art form as some of the scholars have argued. Ken Gelder (2007) argued that drag performance has become a prominent feature in mainstream popular culture such as television and cinema. In what follows, I provide a critical discussion about mainstream media representations of drag, as well as their significance within the political economy of transnational media markets, and offer an account of the implications of these mainstream media representations for this study in particular.

Famous drag queens such as Divine, Julian Eltinge, and Dame Edna Everage have garnered considerable fame and material success through their performances of drag in the Western cinematic and televisual industries (Chermayeff, David & Richardson, 1995). From a local point of view, the famous female impersonator and satirist, Pieter Dirk Uys, has gained international success, countless awards, as well as honorary doctoral degrees for the performance his drag stage persona, Evita Bezuidenhout. Evita has featured prominently on numerous television programs syndicated on the national broadcaster, and has thus become a household name. I demonstrate that mainstream media representations and commodification of drag performance have served to ameliorate its stigmatisation and/or marginality within hegemonic public discourse.

In what he described as the “great drag queen hype” during the early 1990s, Balzar (2005) posited that mainstream media representations of drag queens have bolstered the transnational visibility of gender non-conforming performances in the public sphere. During the 1970s, drag artistry was largely relegated to punk, glam rock, and disco subcultures. The emergence and success of MTV and drag festivals such as Wigstock in the 1980s later resulted in the international media hype surrounding the art form (Balzar, 2005). In the 1990s, drag queens and camp aesthetics were frequently featured in music videos and television programmes (Riggs, 1991), and Hollywood began maximising on their lucrative potential through films such as “The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert” (Elliot, 1994) and “To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! – Julie Newmar” (Kidron, 1995). Similarly, drag artists and female impersonators (of varying sexual orientations and gender identities) featured in mainstream films as supportive driving forces who focalised different semiotic viewpoints (Bruce, 2016). It should be noted that the political and sociocultural processes that led to the great drag queen hype of the 1990s was based upon assimilationist imperatives which were fostered by a corporatised media landscape. In the final analysis, the great drag queen media hype was “achieved by the neoliberal privatization of the affective as well as economic and public life” (Duggan, 2003, p.66).

Any discussion about media representations of drag performance and pageantry would be incomplete without referring to the cult documentary classic, *Paris Burning* (Livingston, 1991). This is because of the film’s enormous, transnational success as a referential media text in (mostly) Western drag subcultural contexts. The assimilation of different drag subcultural styles, aesthetics, and vernacular codes into mainstream popular culture have mostly

arisen from the representations in the film (Collins, 2017). Besides using *Paris is Burning* as a textual basis upon which to extrapolate her famous theory of performativity, Butler (1993) posited that “such films are functional in providing a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness,” thus suggesting that heteronormative discourse becomes legitimated and normalised through the delineation of that which it is not (p.135). By providing an ethnographic, white gaze into the subcultural world of drag balls and houses in 1980s New York, Livingston’s (1991) film provided a scopophilic glimpse into the practices, desires, and aspirations of Black and Latinx LGBTQIA+ people who were marginalised from the heteronormative and hegemonic mainstream. Harper (1994) argued that the film’s “objective is to render intelligible in the larger social sphere discursive practices that do not partake of its terms in normative modes” (p.98). These seem to be Foucauldian analyses insofar as they describe what he has famously theorised as an “incitement to discourse.” From the 18th Century, various Western discourses about power, sex, and gender functioned as ideological apparatuses “for producing an even greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effects in its very economy” (Foucault, 1978, p.23). All this points to the fact that *Paris is Burning* has become canonised in the history of western drag cultures through its incitement of a particular viewpoint of drag ball cultures into hegemonic public discourse. This argument can also be extended to the film’s canonisation in terms of subcultural styles, dissident gender systems, and representations of LGBTQIA+ performativity.

That *Paris is Burning* is now a totemic reference point in a variety of transnational drag subcultural contexts is an undeniable fact of its success. A case in point is the extent to which Madonna appropriated the dance style of voguing in her hit-song “Vogue.” Another point worth mentioning is the pop star’s exploitation of the dancers in the music video – some of whom were participants in the New York drag balls and subculture featured in *Paris is Burning* (Zwaan & Gould, 2016). The exploitation of poor, working-class LGBTQIA+ Black and Latinx bodies, aesthetics, and identities for the material gain of a white cisgender female pop star is not an anomaly in the context of white supremacy and heteropatriarchal capitalism. But the appropriation and commodification of the vogue dance attests to the film’s complexity as a mediating technique of power. In Foucauldian terms, it is a mediating regime of power whose chief aim is an incitement to discourse. In the light of the foregoing assertions, it is difficult to ignore that “the film’s politics of race, gender and class are played out in ways that are both progressive and reactionary” (hooks, 1992, p.149).

No other public figure embodies the commercialisation of drag more than RuPaul. The self-proclaimed “super-model of the world” is undoubtedly the most popular and successful living drag queen of our times. The television show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race (RPDR)*, has made an indelible mark on the entire representational landscape of drag artistry. The Emmy Award-winning show has upturned the political economy of drag artistry, transforming this discursive field from its hitherto marginal status into an easily recognisable media form in mainstream global popular culture (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017). Its groundbreaking success is not only a function of its popular reception among different audiences, but is also attributable to its worldwide circulation as a media product. Joshua Gamson (1998) argued that drag queens were constructed as ingredients in a pre-packaged stew of freakdom which made up daytime talk shows during the 1990s. During what has heretofore been described as the “great drag queen hype” (Balzar, 2005), drag queens were paraded on talk show stages alongside other social misfits and sexual dissidents in order to “provoke distress and desire, fascination and censure” (Gamson, 1998, p.143). This argument seems to build on the drag-queens-as-stigmatised school of thought outlined above but, in the context of postmodern neoliberal free-market capitalism, most images are up for sale - including those of subcultures. In this context, the identities and aesthetic styles of drag performers who had previously been relegated to the margins of society have now become easily commodifiable.

André RuPaul Charles and his show, *RPDR*, have maximised on this strategy of commercialisation by hypervisibilising and exploiting drag on their own terms and for their own material gains. Of particular significance for this discussion is the show’s ability to captivate the attention of critics, scholars, audiences, and (more importantly) advertisers. When this pageant-style reality show premiered on February 2, 2009, it aired on LOGO which was (and still is) a somewhat niche cable television network targeting LGBTQIA+ viewers. The show has now been acquired by the ViacomCBS conglomerate, and, recently, by the MTV network. This is an enormous and lucrative television network catering to an even larger audience. Entertainment writer, Kevin O’Keefe (2017) observed that the move “not only gives it a bigger platform, but it keeps the show safe if LOGO disappears.” Another unsurprising aspect of the show’s success is its several Emmy Award wins. These prestigious awards are evidence of a veritable nod from Hollywood’s top brass as well as international audiences.

The assimilation of *RPDR* into mainstream popular culture and capitalist media markets is not without its critics. Eir- Anne Edgar (2011) suggested that it

“arguably produces a more normalizing view of drag performance” (p.136). This critique aligns with what Lisa Duggan (2003, p.50) has famously described as the homonormative shift away from radical political LGBTQIA+ activism and praxis, towards a depoliticised neoliberal ideology anchored in the discourses of individualism and hyper-consumerism. LeMaster (2015) problematised the show’s uninhibited promotion of neoliberal ideologies – such as competitive individualism – arguing that what RuPaul and the show’s contestants ultimately seek is assimilation into the heteronormative mainstream. If this is the case, then *RPDR* has succeeded exponentially in its efforts toward mainstream media assimilation. Its commodification as a media product – one that can be traded and acquired according to the dictates of the highest broadcast bidder and its advertisers – makes it a groundbreaking example of the neoliberal, capitalist ideologies of privatisation and individual profit maximisation.

One may argue that *RPDR* advances an insidiously post-feminist ideological viewpoint. In her analyses of post-feminist media cultures, Rosalind Gill (2007) suggested that these are characterised by “the almost total evacuation of politics and cultural influence,” and that “every aspect of life is refracted through the ideas of personal choice and self-determination” (p.11). True to form, *RPDR* promotes (through various practices of self-styling and consumption) the transformation of each neophyte drag contestant into possibly winning the coveted crown as “America’s Next Drag Superstar” (Yudelman, 2017). The trope of transformation through various techniques and strategies of consumption is a general thematic which gives *RPDR* its neoliberal impetus. It is, therefore, quite difficult to ascertain whether this show is really about the celebration of drag cultures, the advancement of various individuals’ material gain, or both (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017, p.5). What is clear, however, is the show’s unabashed promotion of the RuPaul brand (Brennan, 2017, p.30).

The dynamics of class, race, ethnicity, and nationality have been explored in relation to *RPDR*, highlighting the problematic ways in which various contestants have been represented (Goldmark, 2015; Jenkins, 2017; McIntyre & Riggs, 2017). Overall, the scholarship seems to suggest that there need not be any fixed either/or conclusions about *RPDR* as media text, just as there are no fixed definitions and interpretations about drag artistry and performance. Stuart Hall (1994) posited that “popular culture is one of the sites where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged” (p.466). A mainstream and popular cultural text like *RPDR* thus draws our attention to the coalescence between the discourses of power, the politics of neoliberal consumer culture, and the subversive potentiality of sexuality and gender performativity.

The foregoing debates around stereotype/subversion, assimilation/marginality, stigmatisation/legitimation, mainstream/subculture are all part-and-parcel of the discursive struggles engendered through the performances and representations of drag. These need not be easily settled, and nor should they entice the researcher into comfortable assumptions regarding the identities, desires, and aspirations of both performers and audiences of drag. Arjun Appadurai (1996) asserts that “where there is consumption, there is pleasure, and where there is pleasure, there is *agency*” (p.7, emphasis my own).

This study is, in part, concerned with both the discursive empiricism of drag in popular, mainstream media and the consumption of commodities by drag performers (see Chapter 4). The empirical chapters that follow are concerned with the twin notions of pleasure and agency as foundational elements in the performance and consumption of drag at Club Indigo. The ethnographic material and interpretations detailed in the pages that follow are specifically aimed at eschewing fixed definitions regarding drag subcultures and performance. What is at stake here is not some hard-and-fast (ergo positivist) interpretation of subcultural identities and performances of consumption through drag and beauty pageantry. Rather, this study provides a glimpse into a range of queer identities, value systems, and practices regarding drag and beauty pageantry which were fomented, and thus given contextual meaning, within the subculture.





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**CHAPTER 2**

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**THEORETICAL  
AND CONCEPTUAL  
FRAMEWORK**

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This chapter outlines the theoretical frameworks and concepts which are used in this study, setting out a clear map of the theoretical points of view that I take up. This chapter outlines the definitions of specific theoretical concepts, and my motivation for deploying them in the empirical chapters and analyses that follow.

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## 2.1 “Disturbing the Order of Things”: Queer Theory, African Perspectives, and Utopic Futurity

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Queer theory outlines a conceptual landscape of varying and vexed ideological perspectives. While some scholars have berated its academic and alabaster white, middle-class elitism (Barnard, 2004; Cohen, 2005; Johnson, 2001; Dudley, 2013), others have been quick to presage its premature death before it can take hold as a critical theory of identity (Nyong’o, 2005; Ruffolo, 2009). Much ink has been spilt about queer theory’s anti-normative ideological stance with regards to sexual desire, practices, gender categories, modes of identification, and embodiment (Ferguson, 2000; LeMaster, 2015; Taylor, 2010; Tucker, 2009; Walcott 2005). Its vehement refutation of normative identity categories, and its lack of any fixed identitarian and analytical referent, have also been well documented (Brown, 2009; Dille, 1999; Milani, 2013). Its anti-normative stance has thus resulted in its critical allure as well as its political efficacy (Berlant & Freeman, 1992). Using it as a model of theoretical enquiry, queer theorists have eschewed (either wholesale or partially) claims about the immanence, stability, or naturalness of identity categories. Borrowing from post-structural and deconstructionist social theories – such as those advanced by Foucault (1978), Kosofsky-Sedgwick (1990), and Butler (1990) – scholars within this highly contested field have taken up an overall postmodern, social-constructionist position regarding the interrelationship between human subjectivity, sexuality, and power. Generally, they have advanced a model of human subjectivation and identity as always-already in continual flux. An overwhelming consensus within this scholarly field has been that “normalizing the queer, would be, after all, its sad finish” (Butler, 1994, p.24). In turn, the ambiguity, definitional open-endedness, and multidimensionality of queer theory, have rendered it a model of critical social theory enquiry that is itself fluid and flexible (Samuels, 1999; Silverchanz, 2009).

For nearly three decades since its activist and academic inauguration, queer theory has been understood as a counterpoint to heteronormativity. Berlant and Warner (1998) defined heteronormativity as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged” (p.548). In his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993), Warner puts forward the

following claim:

Because the logic of the [heteronormative] sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in most standard accounts of the world, queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts. (p.xiii)

It is quite difficult dispute the veracity of Warner's statement. This radical conceptualisation challenges not only the extant heteronormative institutions, but also the concomitant regimes of knowledge and power by which they have been normalised and legitimised. However, the above polemic – as well as other such queer theoretical and activist claims – tend to elide the multifaceted and intersectional modalities by which heteronormative discourses and institutions take hegemonic form. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) famously stated that “an intersectional analysis argues that racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing” (p.1283) Broadening this framework, I posit that the contemporary embodiments of class, ethnicity, ability, nationality, citizenship, and migratory (refugee) status are equally integral to such intersectional analyses of heteronormative domination and subordination (Hill-Collins, 1998; Puar, 2007). Single-struggle or myopic conceptions of heteronormativity are as unhelpful as they are counterintuitive (Lorde, 1984, p.102). An intersectional queer political praxis and theory, therefore, must be keenly aware of the fact that “heteronormativity is not simply articulated through inert-gender relations but also through the racialized [and classed] body” (Ferguson, 2000, p.420). This intersectional approach to queer praxis, theory, and analysis is thus helpful because it remains cognizant to other modes of difference and subordination that are often systemically constituted to work in tandem with sexuality and gender (Eng, Halberstam & Muñoz, 2005). Following Cathy Cohen's (2005) and David Ruffolo's (2009) suggestions, this study problematises the simplistic binary opposition between the supposedly queer and the heteronormative.

In the *Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam (2011) posited that “failure is something queer do and have always done exceptionally well” (p.3). Queer failure, she suggests, can have both stylistic and redemptive qualities for individual subjects and groups who do not fit neatly into the heteronormative codes by which society is organised. Such queer failure can be seen as a refusal and, more especially, a form of utopian critique against the heteronormative imperatives and constraints of a society that is so thoroughly saturated by the transnational logics of neoliberal, capitalist heteropatriarchy (Dean, 2009; Eng, 2010).

In theoretically constructive ways, the utopic and critical potentialities of the queer failure map onto Halberstam's (2005; 2011) earlier notion of "queer time." She argued that queer time conjectures towards a subcultural temporality that allows for marginalised individuals and groups to either imagine or construct meaning beyond the constrictive limitations and exclusions of late modern and bourgeois heteronormativity. In light of Halberstam's conceptions of queer failure and temporality, I suggest that queer theoretical models are analytically useful insofar as they delineate a utopian futurity that is not yet quite here. The "queer," therefore, suggests of a possibility of existence and subjectivity beyond the neoliberal capitalist and heteropatriarchal, white supremacist present. Similarly, I concur with Muñoz's (2009) model of thinking about the queer as "a manifestation of a 'doing' that is in the horizon," or "a mode of possibility" (p. 99) that may exist beyond our everyday assumptions about that which is constructed as normative.

To suggest the utopic and future potentiality of queerness is to imply, therefore, an orientation extending beyond that which exists in the present. Sarah Ahmed (2006) posited that "the queer orientation might not simply be directed toward the 'same sex,' but would be seen as not following the straight line" (p.70) This orientation away from (hetero)normalising lines suggests alternative potentialities, and thus "makes new futures possible" (Ahmed, 2006, p.21). Such alternative futurity may lead to new modes of capitalism beyond the strictures of compulsory heterosexuality, and the heteronormative matrix of intelligibility by which subjects are governed and discursively constituted in late capitalist modernity (Butler, 1990; Rich, 1980).

These conjectures about utopic and queer orientations suggest conscientious and agentive enactments of future possibilities beyond those which are available in the heteronormative present. In other words, queer political and cultural praxis is oriented toward a utopian futurity wherein aspirations, desires, and imagination transcend the boundaries of heteropatriarchal and capitalist imperatives. I posit that one such subcultural space wherein these enactments of queer, utopic possibilities are imagined, constructed, and continually negotiated is Club Indigo. This study examines Club Indigo as a subcultural site wherein alternative possibilities, beyond the classed and racialised strictures of hetero- and homonormative exclusion, are imagined and enacted through the spectacular rituals of drag and beauty pageantry. The empirical chapters that follow examine the extent to which "queerness" took shape within the House of Indigo. They also demonstrate the ways in which such embodied imaginings and practices of utopic futurity were constructed, policed, and negotiated through

collective reformulations of subcultural queer kinship.

One of the organising themes in this study is how a subcultural space that is distinctly characterised and marketed as queer can be permeated by assimilationist, hetero- or homonormative discourses (see Chapter 4). Reddy, Munro, and Matebeni (2018) posited that “local non-heterosexual and/or gender-variant identities can themselves be contested and under debate” (p.1). In this regard, I build on emergent, critical queer African critiques that take local, historical, and political economic specificity into account when theorising African sexualities, desires, and practices (Abbas & Ekine, 2013; Currier & Migraine-George, 2016; Tamale, 2011). This study, therefore, unsettles any easy assumptions regarding the application of theoretical models from the global north – such as “queer” (Nyanzi, 2014). I am not suggesting that queer theory should be rejected outright because it is not autochthonous to African ontological conceptions of subjectivity, sexualities, and modes of identification. In fact, there are numerous historical instantiations and archival evidence of non-heterosexual relations between peoples which may suggest a “queer” ontology (Clarke, 2013; Epprecht, 2004; Hoad, 2007). My aim, rather, is to show that LGBTQIA+ subjectivities, people, practices, and their desires, do not always map onto theoretical assumptions about that which is “queer.” In the empirical chapters that follow I explore how such practices and desires may sometimes evidence the reification of hetero and/or homonormative discourses. The point here is *not* to dismiss queer theory tout court because of its westocentric preoccupations, but to inflect this body of scholarship with African (and other global south) perspectives in ways that will develop transnational linkages and the “cross-fertilization” of theoretical frameworks (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001; Milani & Lazar, 2017).

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## **2.2 Queer Subcultures**

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This section provides a conceptual account of the term “subculture” and outlines the bases for conceptualising Club Indigo as a specific, global south, and queer subcultural site. In so doing, I demonstrate what distinguishes this field site from other LGBTQIA+ spaces of leisure and consumption in post-apartheid Johannesburg.

Cultural studies scholars have generally tended to emphasise the distinction between dominant or “parent” culture and subcultures. Hall and Ferguson (1976) highlighted the distinctiveness of post-war British youth subcultures from their “parent” cultures – the wider, sociocultural and class-specific groupings from which they derived their marked difference. According to these scholars, youth subcultural difference exists in dialectical interrelationship with the social mores, material conditions, and class structure of both the “parent” culture and the broader dominant culture. While “subcultures...take shape around distinctive activities and ‘focal concerns’” (Hall & Ferguson, 1976, p.14), they are still linked to the “parent” and dominant cultures through biological kinship ties, socio-geographical proximity, as well as their socioeconomic status. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige (1979) extended this conceptual model by focusing on the material symbols and signs of British youth subcultures, and how these stylistic objects structured relations between sub- and parent cultures. Hebdige (1979) also paid attention to media representations and how they tend to assimilate and commodify youth subcultures. He argued that “much of what finds itself encoded in subculture has already been subjected to a certain amount of prior handling by the media (Hebdige, 1979, p.85). What is clear from both these perspectives on subcultures is that, despite their deviance and resistance, youth subcultures do not exist entirely apart from the sociocultural and economic conditions of their “parent” and dominant cultures.

Over and above their spectacularism, Ken Gelder (2007, p.14) suggested that subcultures are well-structured sociological formations with their idiosyncratic organisational hierarchies, rules, and protocols. Furthermore, he suggested that queer subcultures can be conceived and analysed as utopian sites of queer self-fashioning and world-making. Although queer subcultures tend to “offer other-worldly environments in which to escape” (Thornton, 1995, p.21), they are neither self-contained nor autonomous from the dominant sociocultural milieu within which they occur. Muñoz (2009) aptly reminded us of “the way queer and punk subcultures have been informing and haunting the world of mainstream fashion for quite a while” (p.103). In light of this, it is important to highlight that the utopian potentialities of queer subcultural sites and performances do not foreclose them from the sociopolitical and economic structures of dominant, heteronormative, mainstream (or parent) cultures.

Halberstam (2006) put forward the claim that “queer subcultures oppose not only the hegemony of dominant culture but also the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian culture” (p.10). However, I take this claim to be more of an ideal



presupposition than an empirical fact. First, such a claim reifies the queer/heteronormative binary which has already been theoretically dispensed with (Cohen, 1995; Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 1990; Nyong'o, 2008), and thus does not bear repeating here. Second, I concur with Ahmed's (2006) contention that "it is important that we do not idealise queer worlds or simply place them in an alternative space" (p.106). While queer spaces, cultures, and politics may be analysed as being oriented towards utopic futurity, this seems a theoretical idealism at best. The lived and embodied reality of subcultural practices in the global south may not be so conveniently mapped onto such purely theoretical claims. It stands to reason therefore, that a global south subcultural space like Club Indigo can provide insightful empirical material against which to analyse these assumptions about the utopic and/or subversive potentiality of queer subcultural praxis.

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### ***Analysing Queer Subcultures: Disidentification and Ballroom/ Drag Houses***

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One lens through which to investigate queer subcultural praxis is José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) analytical concept of disidentification. Muñoz (1999) posited that: "Disidentification is [a way] of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (p.12). This is an analytical model which neither idealises the utopic and/or subversive potential of queer subcultures nor rejects such a possibility outright.

This study emphasises the significance of queer space in shaping LGBTQIA+ politics and visibility in contemporary Johannesburg. By extension, I concur with Matebeni (2011) and Milani's (2012) arguments that the lives, desires, aspirations, and social practices of LGBTQIA+ sexual minorities in Johannesburg are intimately connected to the spaces that they inhabit as well as to those from which they are systemically excluded. Queer subcultural spaces, therefore, are integral in shaping their participants' imagination and aspirations towards a utopian, anti-homo and transphobic futurity. Similarly, queer subcultural spaces can delimit the socioeconomic and conceptual boundaries of such utopic imaginings. In the same way that "queer" is not a necessary nor sufficient conceptual antithesis to that which is "normative," queer subcultural spaces do not always constitute a complete rejection or subversive challenge to hetero- or homonormative discourses. In other words, insofar as queer subcultural spaces

and practices are closely imbricated in the construction of subjectivity, it stands to reason that queer practices do not always stand in clear opposition to dominant, hetero- and homonormative ideologies. It is, therefore, perfectly plausible that these domains of sexuality and subjectivation can be interlinked in highly complex and befuddling ways.

The analytical concept of disidentification allows the researcher to glean the dynamic ways in which subcultural participants and groups are able to co-construct and negotiate “strategies of resistance within the flux of discourses and power” (Muñoz, 1999, p.19). The model of disidentification starts from the Foucauldian (1976) premise that the discourses of sexuality (and power, more generally) are widely dispersed and thus generative of various ideological effects. Foucault (1994, p.212) reminded us that discourses of power, while not exactly repressive, are distributed “along a scale, around a norm, [and] hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate” them. Queer subcultural discourses are disidentificatory insofar as they simultaneously work *within and against* the discourses of power in late modern neoliberal capitalist heteropatriarchy. Therefore, a space like Club Indigo provides a key ethnographic site to investigate and critique such disidentificatory practices and subcultural world-making.

Johannesburg is a highly classist, unequal, racially compartmentalised, and blatantly heteronormative city. In this study, these fault lines along racial and class-specific exclusions are further complicated by the examination of gender and sexuality within the social semiotics and hierarchies of this urban social landscape. Muñoz’s (1999) concept of disidentification, therefore, engenders a critically engaged account of the subcultural space and practices within Club Indigo. Furthermore, the model of disidentification allows us to analyse how Black and Coloured working class drag and beauty queens have forged a subcultural space that prioritises their embodied and material conditions and aspirations, but is, at the same time, one that is not exactly self-contained. Using the concept of disidentification, In the chapters that follow, I analyze how these variously identified LGBTQIA+ individuals constructed a subcultural community that existed in relation (and not opposition) to the broader heteronormative society beyond the walls of the nightclub.

E. Patrick Johnson (2001) built upon the concept of disidentification by proclaiming that “queer theory has often failed to address the material realities of gays and lesbians of color” (p.5). While acknowledging queer theory’s poststructuralist deconstruction of sexual identity categories, Johnson decried its abstractions, elitism, and classist exclusions. In critical response to these,

Johnson (2001) formulated a conceptual model which he described as “quare” theory (p9), thus performing a linguistic homage to his grandmother’s southern African-American drawl when enunciating of the word “queer.” Quare theory, according to Johnson (2001), is rooted in social theories about the materiality of the racialised flesh. It pays critical attention queer bodies of colour – their movements, performances, and the various ways in which these are mediated in popular culture and the academy. A quare theoretical lens decentres the primacy of white bodies and epistemologies by (purposely) re-orienting its focus upon the racialised body and its performances. Moreover, this quare lens gives analytical credence to the material and historical social forces, structures, and processes of racialisation – in specific relation to queer flesh. In the light of this, a quare perspective is specifically focused upon the disidentificatory performances of racialised bodies, and the extent to which the processes, styles, and performances of subjectivation are materialized through the flesh. Arguing from a performance studies point of view, Johnson (2001) eschewed the ivory tower elitism of queer theory by focusing on the racialised queer body and the consequences of that racialisation in the context of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Johnson’s disidentificatory model of “quare” theory is echoed in Roderick Ferguson’s (2004) formulation of queer of colour critique. Both these critical perspectives are unabashed in their challenge to the prioritisation of white queer bodies and epistemologies in media representations, consumer landscapes, and political praxis. Borrowing from Historical Materialism and Woman of Colour Feminisms, a queer of colour critique delimits various aporia within liberal theory, and thereby highlights how it “occludes the intersecting saliency of race, gender, sexuality, and class in forming social practice” (Ferguson, 2004, p. 4). Queer of colour analyses, therefore, engage in strategic disidentificatory manoeuvres, highlighting the blindspots within queer studies, in order to develop their poststructural and liberal agenda. The frameworks of disidentification and queer of colour analyses aptly remind us that “critical hermeneutics and political projects that are not sufficiently intersectional are grossly inadequate to the project of mapping and analyzing the social” (Muñoz, 1999, p.167).

I build upon these conceptual frameworks in the following analyses of the drag performances and beauty pageants hosted at Club Indigo. In the light of this, I borrow from these concepts in order to analyse the hierarchies, peer-group solidarities, and kinship systems that are formed within the subcultural context of Club Indigo. I also engage in disidentificatory analyses by borrowing from these North American theories and perspectives on queerness, while preserving a

distinctly global south orientation in my ethnographic interpretations. Such analytical performances, I hope, will engender more theoretically sound “cross-fertilizations” (Milani and Lazar, 2017) as well as transnational linkages (2001) between global south and north queer studies.

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### ***Drag and Ballroom Houses: Some Conceptual Distinctions Between Space and Subcultural Practice***

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The analysis of contemporary drag subcultures requires contextual historicising. In light of this, it seems appropriate to distinguish the drag and ballroom houses – as subcultural practices and kinship systems – from the physical spaces in which they are forged. Properly speaking, ballroom and/or drag houses are diasporic, subcultural, queer communities. They often take sociological shape as family-like kinship structures. Historically, these subcultures can be traced back to the Harlem Renaissance (1920 - 1935) and the emergence of what is now dubbed “The Jazz Age” (Garber, 1989). It would be anachronistic, however, to claim that ballroom culture and houses began during this era. Garber (1989) claimed that the emergence of Black gender non-conforming collectivities and subcultures took sporadic, clandestine form during that time. Ballroom houses and subcultural performances became popular (particularly in New York City) in the late 1970s when event organisers began hosting beauty pageants and performances among femme drag queens and transgender women. A key aspect of these subcultural practices and kinship structures was the coalescence of racial identity (read Black and Latinx), class, sexuality, and gender bending. From their earliest stages, ballroom culture and houses were patently created by and for Black and Latinx LGBTQIA+ individuals. They did this in efforts to forge queer spaces and communities of colour that stood apart from the predominantly racist and/or heteronormative hegemonic mainstream (Livingston, 1990). Moreover, the structures of kinship that characterised ballroom houses were created through cross-generational, social (as opposed to biological) relationships (Jackson, 2002). The latter assertion does not suggest, however, that these queer kinship systems or families were any less real than reproductive, heteronormative, biological families (Walcott 2016).

Marlon Bailey (2013) observed that ballroom houses do not necessarily signify a physical brick-and-mortar building, but “represent the ways in which [their] members, who mostly live in various locations, interact with each other as a family unit” (p.5) The discussion about drag and ballroom houses is pertinent to this

study for two reasons. First is the importation of the diasporic concept of the subcultural “house.” That the members of the House of Indigo would call it as such is unremarkable, since there are several vogue and drag performance “houses” throughout different cities in South Africa. Such a phenomenon can be attributed to the transnational circulation of mainstream media, popular trends, and consumer cultures. The interesting point here is that very few of these “houses” were located in a centralised venue such as a nightclub. This is precisely what made Club Indigo such an historically significant space of queer sociality, performance, and consumption. It became distinguished as a queer subcultural institution because it was a physical location (or home) within which ritualised, subcultural practices of drag performance and pageantry could take place. Second, it is important to outline the conceptual distinction between the actual nightclub (Club Indigo) and the subculture (the House of Indigo). In this study, “Club Indigo” denotes the physical space or nightclub wherein primary fieldwork was conducted. The House of Indigo, however, signifies the subcultural, family-like structure (as well as its related social practices) under investigation.

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### **2.3 Performativity and Performance: Clarifying Analytical Distinctions**

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The concept of performativity is often used in theorising gendered subjectivities, as well as in different studies of drag artistry. Following suit, this section provides an account of how and why this theoretical concept is useful for my study. I also discuss how the study contributes to theories of performativity – from a specifically global south perspective, and the significance of performance as an ethnographic mode of enquiry.

In so doing, Judith Butler’s (1990; 1993) concept of performativity has often been used within critical scholarship on drag artistry. More generally, it has been one of the foundational frameworks within poststructural, critical feminist, and queer studies. This model of performativity has generally been extolled for its deconstruction of gender and sex as discursive categories by which subjects are simultaneously legitimated and interpellated within the broader networks of power. Butler (1990, p.25) famously argued that gender is neither an immanent nor fixed category of subjectivity, but a constant *doing*. This simple, yet explosive, thesis disentangles common assumptions regarding ahistorical and “natural”

assumptions about gender and sex categories, simultaneously placing them within a poststructural and social constructionist lens through which human subjectivity can be interrogated. In explaining the doing of gender, Butler (1990) put it thus: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 33).

This understanding of gender deconstructs gender/sex categories, allowing us to view them as a set of discursive practices, processes, and systems as opposed to stable and/or “natural” identity categories. In order for them to be legitimated as intelligible within the heteronormative matrices of power, gender/sex categories have to be continually and repeatedly practiced and expressed in culturally sanctioned ways. This, however, does not mean that subjects perform their gender in a theatrical sense, as though they were actors “putting on” their characters. Rather, gender and sexual categories – and the discourses of power by which they are rendered intelligible – become normalised through latent, quotidian enactments rather than theatrical performances. To claim that these categories are *performative* is to place them within discursive frameworks of enculturation that are both citational and reiterative (Lloyd, 1999, p.197).

Butler (1990; 1993) used drag as an example to demonstrate the stylised and imitative dimensions of gender performativity. She argued that drag is, in fact, a parodic send up of the originary pretensions of gender categories. By imitating gender categories, drag can potentially expose them for the fictitious social constructions that they are. Such a theoretical move is premised upon the idea that, inasmuch as drag to be viewed as a “copy” of some or other gender identity, this performative act of mimesis demonstrates the simulacral aspects of gender as *copies of other copies*. Therefore, drag imitates “the myth of originality itself” (Butler, 1990, p.138). This formulation of drag as a parody has been appropriated by some scholars of drag who have aimed to posit the subversive underpinnings of drag artistry and performance (Balfour & Evans, 2012; Belgrave, 2010; Berkowitz & Pauliny, 2003; Rupp et al., 2010; Taylor 2010; Taylor & Rupp 2004). However, Butler (1990) clearly stated that: “Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and articulated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (p. 139). In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993) stressed that “there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion” (p.125), and that drag can also be coopted in the service of reifying heterosexist and patriarchal stereotypes and normative

iterations of gender binaries. She argued that it is important to interrogate drag performance not as a set of radically subversive social practices, but as an unstable and nuanced negotiation between the insurrectional reformulation of established sex/gender norms and their contextual reification.

Taking Butler's (1990; 1993) important caveat as a starting point, I do not presume that drag artistry is an inherently subversive cultural phenomenon. I argue that to assume drag always transgresses or subverts the normative binaries of male/female gendered categories is a conceptual sleight of hand which further reifies the fixity (or naturalness) of those categories. The assumption that drag is inherently subversive is a theoretical contradiction in that it aims to disprove the stability of the male/female gender binary – which it takes for granted in the first place. Social geographers have highlighted the significance of space, place, and context in the reiterative performativity of gender (Gregson & Rose, 2000; Nelson, 1999). Building on these developments, I posit that the concept of performativity is helpful only insofar as it is analysed in relation to local and contextual specificity. The ways in which bodies inhabit space are inextricably connected to the discourses and structures of gendering, sexualization, and racialisation (Ahmed 2006). The performativity of gender occurs in actual, lived space, and not in some autonomous domain of disembodied discursivity. In light of this, it is important to pay critical attention to sociocultural and geopolitically-specific iterations of gender and sexual categories (Tamale, 2011). Only then can one operationalise performativity as a theoretically and methodologically fruitful concept. African and other "Third World" radical feminists of colour have long dispensed with the idea that gendered categories are universal (Amadiume, 1987; Anzaldúa, 1987; Mohanty, 2003; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Oyêwùmí, 1997; 1999). Therefore, if gender does not designate a universal category, then gender performativity cannot be taken as a universal concept either.

Researchers of sexuality and gender from the global south cannot afford to uncritically appropriate Butler's theory of gender performativity from the Euro-American academic context within which it was originally formulated. This is because such clearly forced attempts at theoretical application tend to blatantly ignore the extent to which the colonial and post-colonial "subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous" (Spivak, 1988, p.284). The attempt to universalise this theoretical model in different social, cultural, economic, and political contexts, is therefore to homogenise a wide range of interpretations and articulations of sexuality and gender. Furthermore, such uni-directional impositions of western theoretical models upon global south sociocultural

phenomena inevitably reinforce the asymmetrical and colonial power relations within which western or global north knowledge systems continue to occupy the imperialist and epistemological centre (Commaroff & Commaroff, 2012; Mignolo, 2014; Said, 2003).

Before critiquing the concept of gender performativity, it is necessary first to provide an account of the specific spatio-temporal contexts within which gender performances differ from the normalized western male/female binary logic. If the social category of gender – as well as its performative embodiments – can take on myriad interpretations in different sociocultural contexts, then it is equally possible to analyse the transgression of those categorical boundaries in conceptually alternative ways. While taking Butler’s (1990; 1993) theory of performativity very seriously, I also use empirical material gathered during my fieldwork to “test” the salience and applicability of this theoretical framework. In light of this, I concur with Currier and Migraine-George’s (2016) suggestion that “queer African subjects require new modes of reading and interpretation” (p.291).

This position neither elides nor underestimates the deconstructionist import of Butler’s (1990; 1993) theory of performativity. Unlike some of the scholarly interpretations of drag pageantry advanced in the global north (as outlined above), I aim to move away from the assumptions regarding analytical universalism commonly attributed to this particular formulation of gender performativity. In so doing, I aim to foster plurifocal analyses of gender and sexual subjectivity, embodiment, variance, and possible transgression in ways that “speak back’ to global discourses in *locally sensitive ways*.” (Milani & Lazar, 2017, p.311 – 312, emphasis my own).

“Performance” is a highly contested term, as well as an interdisciplinary body of scholarship. In this study I specifically locate the performance act as both a textual utterance or act and a method of ethnographic enquiry (Conquergood, 1992, p. 82). I thus distinguish between the sociolinguistic and critical feminist analytical concept of the “performative” and the interdisciplinary “performance.” I have highlighted above the extent to which western gender binaries can be analysed in terms of their performativity. In what follows, I draw the reader’s attention to embodied performance as a paradigm of social world-making praxis, as well as a mode of enquiry (Madison, 2005). As contested and wide-ranging as the term may be, performance studies incorporate a plethora of quotidian and staged enactments: “from plays and operas to circus acts, carnivals, religious services, poetry reading, weddings, funerals, graduations, concerts, toasts, jokes, and storytelling” (Madison, 2005, p.170). In conceiving of



it as a border, or even marginal discipline, Dwight Conquergood averred that (1995) “performance privileges threshold-crossings, shape-shifting, and boundary-violating figures...who value the carnivalesque over the canonical, the transformative over the normative, the mobile over the monumental” (p. 136 - 137). Seen from this critical perspective, then, performance is helpful in its coeval adherence to theory and practice.

Using Victor Turner’s (1982) dramaturgical model, anthropologists and other social scientists of religion have theorised ritual as a particular kind of performance. By contextualising and historicising it *in situ*, scholars have generally agreed that “social life...even at its apparently quietest moments is characteristically ‘pregnant’ with social dramas.” (Turner, 1982, p.11). The emphasis on the temporal dimension of performance, therefore, has enabled social scientists from various disciplines to move away from structural and positivist analyses towards a focus on performances *as process* and *praxis* (Conquergood, 1995; Drewal, 1991). In this regard, performance does not index some autonomous domain of social life, but constitutes part of the myriad epistemic ingredients by which social actors come to know themselves and the world. In her seminal ethnography of traditional Yoruba dance ritual, Margaret Drewal (1992) emphasises the processual and improvisational dimensions of performance. She also reminds us that “the relationships between spectators and spectacle are unstable,” and that “one [is] always collapsing into the other” (Drewal, 1992, p.15). This temporally plural, dialogic, and multi-dimensional conception of performance highlights its intertextuality in that it is a social text or utterance which always already refers to others. Drewal (1999) elsewhere argued that: “To the extent that a text is ‘an utterance’ or ‘a species of social action’ situated in time and place, it is already by definition a performance” (p.12). In light of these conceptions, throughout this study I emphasise the textual as well as ethnographically incisive potential of drag and beauty pageantry.

The latter discussion maps rather neatly onto the concept disidentification in its “focus on embodied performance as critical praxis” (Johnson, 2001, p.6). This highlights not only compatibility of performance and disidentification in terms of the object of analysis, but also in terms of method. Muñoz (1999) conjectured that: “For the critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field” (p.25). By eschewing any positivist claims about the production of knowledge and/or “the Other,” this conception of performance is thus helpful on two significant levels.

First, at the semiotic level, performance simultaneously encapsulates and disseminates the symbolic meanings by which individuals and groups come to

understand themselves and the world. After all, symbolic meaning is “generated by embodied action that produces a heightened moment of communication” (Madison, 2005, p.170). The conception of performance as processual and innovative text, utterance, or even gesture, is particularly illuminating within ethnographic fields of enquiry because human cultures are themselves mobile and highly intertextual (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p.10).

Second, the study of performance can enliven those aspects of human culture and sociality which surpass text-based interpretations. Social praxis is far more complicated and “messier” than the normative categories (like sex or gender) used to describe them. Following Zora Neale-Hurston (1981) and Edouard Glissant (1989), I suggest that there are, indeed, some elements of human expression that cannot bear the essentialist containment within normative categories or even the written word. Conquergood (1992, p.90) reminded us that “performance is the key to interpretive decodings of oppositional practices enacted even in the teeth of power.” Elsewhere, he described performance not just as a marginal discipline, but as a subjugated knowledge by which subaltern groups are able to reaffirm, express, and re-centre their own epistemologies and metaphysics (Conquergood, 2002). With performances embodied through orality, movement, dance, and even protest, non-elite groups are thus given a critical “voice” despite the textual bias and westocentric, middle-class elitism that pervades academic discourse.

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## ***2.4 Performing Race and Class in Post-apartheid Johannesburg***

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This section provides an account of the significance of specific racial terms and class categories I use in this study. I discuss the categorical terms “Black” and “Coloured” as racial markers for the various individuals involved in this study. In keeping with a poststructural and deconstructionist orientation in the examination of identity and power, the section reasserts the truism that race is a social and discursive social category, and constitutes a discussion of the local and historical significance of specific racial categories. While emphasising the significance of theorising beauty pageantry, drag, and related concepts of queerness from an intersectional point of view, I focus here on race as phenomenological concept that has sociological effects.

This intersectional perspective is significant because of the national and geopolitical context of this study – especially with regards to the contemporary politics of race and class in post-apartheid South Africa. Due to the related histories of colonialism and apartheid, race and race-thinking remain highly contentious sites of struggle in contemporary South Africa. The discourses of identity, citizenship, and empowerment continue to be framed within the hierarchies of racial categorisation. A corollary to this is the reality of various systems by which citizens continue to be racialised. Economic freedom and empowerment are thus direct functions of the historical processes of racialising discourses and hierarchies.

The “post-” prefix in post-apartheid South Africa appears, in many ways, to be more of a conjectural and nationalist ideal insofar as it does not reflect legitimate socioeconomic enfranchisement and/or empowerment for the majority of the population. Significant political and constitutional gains have been made in terms of proffering the democratic voting rights to those populations who are categorised as “Black,” “Coloured,” “Khoisan,” and “Indian.” These racial categories – indeed the entire systemic architecture of colonialism and apartheid – continue, however, to undergird various population groups’ access to economic freedom. I hence use scare quotes throughout this study to signal the debates about the obviously unjustifiable and unearned privileges of racialised whiteness. That those groups which were previously racialised – and continue to think of themselves, as “White” – still reap the socioeconomic benefits of colonial and apartheid exploitation, collusion, and corruption, is an incontrovertible fact in contemporary South Africa. It thus falls beyond the analytical and theoretical scope of this study to rehearse such obvious facts. Of particular interest for my purpose here is to interrogate how the Black and Coloured racial categories circulated within the subcultural world-making discourses at the House of Indigo. This study pays critical attention to how the subcultural discourses of drag artistry and beauty pageantry are inflected by the present-day realities of racialised subjectivity and race-thinking in contemporary South Africa.

It is important, first, to provide an exegesis of the discursive efficacy of race as a technology of power. I do this from the perspective of critical race theory. Social and cultural theorists (Hall, 2017; Mills, 1998; Wynter, 2003) have agreed that race is one of the primary organising categories in modern history. As with gender, sexuality, class, and physical ability, the social categories of race still have an abiding significance in our everyday realities and experiences. Although the essentialist and biological claims upon which they were invented have been disproven, human subjects still continue to think of themselves, and the world

around them, in racial terms. This is what Paul C. Taylor (2004) refers to as “race-thinking.” He avers that “to talk about race, then, is to talk about events, conditions, and experiences” that are inflected by racialised interpretations of peoples’ physiognomic and biological make up (Taylor, 2004, p.7). Race-thinking calls upon those epistemological, metaphysical, and affective dimensions of human existence which are given meaning in terms of racial discourses. While “‘race-thinking’ is a way of assigning generic meaning to human bodies and bloodlines,” (Taylor, 2004, p.15) it extends far beyond the cognitive level of individual subjects. Race and race-thinking have been integral to the structuring of modernity and colonialism in various parts of the world, and they are still fundamental structuring forces underpinning human actions and struggles today (Wynter, 2003, p.260). Moreover, race and race-thinking still function as the systemic frameworks in the transnational permutations of capital, natural resources, and human bodies in the context of late modern neoliberal heteropatriarchy (hooks 1992; Klein 2007). Despite the social sciences having thoroughly problematised them – not least because of the dubious, pseudo-scientific claims upon which they were based – racial categories continue to operate in the quotidian lives and actions of those who have borne the historical and brute force of such oppressive regimes of knowledge production (Erasmus, 2017; Mills, 1998).

Racial discourses are impossible to extricate from the transnational projects of modern western colonialism. Homi K. Bhabha (2004) posited that “the construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of the forms of [racial] difference” (p.96). Within the context of colonial violence, the construction of racial categories resulted in their simultaneous crystallisation and legitimation, “and thus had an authenticating and reiterating function” (Mbembe, 2015, p.25). This perspective on colonial violence and subjectivity, therefore, suggests that racial discourses are as productive as they are performative (Tate, 2009). The intelligibility of racial categories (much like those of sexuality and gender) depends upon social and systemic conditions which are reiterated over time such that they become crystallised and appear to be self-evident or natural. In this study, I give them analytical centrality in order to examine how they were negotiated and/or performed alongside other vectors of identity.

According to Franz Fanon (1952), these discursive reiterations eventually take on the appearance of fixity around a racial category such as, for example, Blackness. These normalising discourses, Fanon (1952) argued, take on an overdetermining role in terms of seeing, apprehending, and representing

Blackness. He averred: "I am overdetermined from without. I am slave not of the 'idea' which others have of me but of my own appearance [sic]" (Fanon, 1952, p.87). The normative gaze upon and representations of non-white bodies were spectacularly important for the discursive machinery of apartheid and its categorisation of racial categories. While these categories were directly inherited from late 19th Century colonial discourses, they took on an especially significant role in propelling the apartheid project into a systemic architecture of racialised legislations, moral doctrines, and militaristic actions. In turn, these discourses were targeted at the socio-geographic containment and economic exploitation of non-white bodies. To this end, apartheid fixed a vast and complex array of bodies, groups, identities, and inter-cultural assemblages into a not-so-neat system of racial categories. One of the lasting effects of this taxonomic system is the contested racial category designating "Colouredness."

I use the racial term, "Coloured," throughout this study for a number of reasons which I shall explain shortly. First, however, the categorical usage of the term warrants critical explication. "Coloured," in South Africa, is a racial classification that is intended to denote a person of mixed racial ancestry (Adhikari, 2009). The etymological genealogy of this colonial racial category is as vexed as it is vague. However, it is attributable to the often-contradictory historical accounts from colonialist sailors, merchants, zoologists, and anthropologists. The term dates back to the period of Dutch colonialism in the Cape colony (Adhikari, 2009, p.xi). In its most reductive sense, it was invented to denote the progeny of western European (German, Dutch, English, and Portuguese) sailors and settlers, and indigenous African women (Wicomb, 1998). The category included both formerly enslaved indigenous sub-groups such as the San, Khoi, Khoekhoen, and Griqua peoples. Added to the categorical *mélange*, were migrant groups of indentured labourers and their descendants, namely those of Malaysian, Javanese (Indonesian), and East African heritage (Baderoon, 2014; Gqola, 2010). Subsequently, the taxonomic imperatives of apartheid classification "flattened South Africa's complex entanglement with Indian and South Atlantic Ocean histories" into this particularly hybridised racial category (Erasmus, 2017, p.6).

A significant aspect in the invention, historical trajectories, and continuing import of this term are its hybridity and resistance to categorical fixity. The colonial and apartheid states sought to restrict human subjects within specific geographical and culturally homogenous locations. They also sought to fix intercultural as well as interracial configurations into fixed categories, contexts, and spaces. According to Zimitri Erasmus (2017, p.20), the categorical designation of "Colouredness" served a mainly administrative function.

Elsewhere, Erasmus (2001) wrote that “being Coloured [meant] being the privileged Black and the ‘not quite white’ person” (p.14). This political, economic, and sociocultural position of in-betweenness constitutes what Mohamed Adhikari (2009, p.14) has described as an intermediary social status. Arguing from a social-constructionist point of view, he put forward the claim that “The marginality of coloured people, their intermediate status in the racial hierarchy, negative racial stereotyping and assimilationist aspirations together with a range of other factors have shaped their identity and influenced their social experience and political consciousness.” Erasmus (2001; 2017), however, suggested that while this racial category continues to serve various ideological as well as administrative functions, it is best conceived in terms of creolisation. This latter perspective lends historical dynamism and creativity to conceptions of Colouredness, thus eschewing the correlative associations with shame (from miscegenation and rape), dispossession, and exclusion. Erasmus (2001) is of the view that while “Coloured identities were constructed out of fragmented cultural material available in the context of slavery, colonialism and cultural dispossession” (p.23), they continue to be “produced and re-produced in the place of the margin.”

Building on this latter conception of creolised hybridity, I do not take the racial category that designates Colouredness as fixed or self-evident in this study. Of particular concern to me are the performative dimensions of Coloured identity as it has been – and still is – negotiated and embodied in post-apartheid contexts. I am interested in the way Colouredness coalesces with, or rubs up against, other identity categories such as gender, sexuality, and class within the context of House of Indigo. I use the term first to designate various interlocutors’ racial self-identification, and second, to indicate the historical marginality of that racial category. The House of Indigo provided a space to perform Colouredness (both on and off stage) in ways that centralised and celebrated this historically contentious racial category.

In the empirical chapters that follow I interrogate how the racialised and working-class categories of Blackness and Colouredness were performed within this particular subcultural space. By focusing an ethnographic and theoretical purview upon these racialised and class LGBTQIA+ subjectivities and practices, I seek to move away from perpetuating the myth of whiteness and Eurocentricity from scholarly investigations and critiques of queerness. This is not to render the processes of racialised “whiteness” and its concomitant privileges invisible, but to decentre the primacy of white bodies and interests in the academic investigation of queer world-making projects.

Stuart Hall (2017) argued that race “operates like a language, like a sliding signifier” (p.45). In order to make “sense,” racial categories gather meaning within specific regulatory systems and codes. These meanings cohere through everyday discursive practices that are both social and institutional (Erasmus, 2017). Such meanings do not operate in the same ways, nor do they have the same effects in all places at all times. For example, I provided an account of the colonial invention of the Coloured racial category in order to emphasise its historical trajectory and contextual specificity in South Africa, but the term “Coloured” designates various social practices of racialisation across the globe. Its histories, meanings, and socio-political implications are not the same in different contexts in the United States, the Caribbean, or Sub-Saharan, for example. Racial categories are thus not phenomena “out there” to be discovered, analysed, or objectified; they are performatively constructed in obviously different ways by social actors and institutions.

To the same extent that Coloured racial categories resist discursive fixity so, too, does the subject position of Blackness. Steven Biko (2004: 31) famously described Black Consciousness as an “inward-looking process” through which exploited and dispossessed colonised Black people could regain a sense of pride and dignity necessary for their political and economic emancipation. He further stated that “Black Consciousness makes the black man *see himself* as a being, entire in himself” (Biko, 2004, p.74, emphasis my own). This political and ontological standpoint is a clear antithesis to Fanon’s (1958) colonising white gaze. While the latter is characterised by ways of looking and a system of power relations that are external to the racialised Black subject, Black Consciousness delineates the importance of self-definition and self-determination. More importantly, it is a critical analysis and response to the condition of Black subjectivity under colonial and apartheid exploitation. While the historical facticity of such exploitation cannot reasonably be denied, the racial category of Blackness should not be taken for granted.

Setting aside, for the moment, the obviously masculinist bias in Biko’s polemic, it seems important to highlight “the politics of location and the politics of identity” (Gilroy, 1991, p.18) in various conceptions of Blackness. The analytical model of Black Consciousness shores up the political and economic content of this particular social category (Ratele, 1998; 2003), and the cultural and political contestations indexed by Black identity point to its performative dimensions. One cannot make simple reference to Blackness as though it denotes a fixed set of biological and/or physiognomic determinants. Blackness or, rather, Black identity, constitutes an assemblage of performative referents with varying

political, economic, as well as aesthetic implications (Tate, 2009; Taylor, 2016). Johnson (2003) posited that “racial performativity informs the process by which we invest bodies with social meaning” (p.9). I argue that such meanings are not fixed, but are socio-historically contingent. These meanings accrue political and economic significance insofar as they are crystallised around particular bodies and discursive practices. In order to be rendered intelligible, racial categories require specific sets of discursive sign systems and citational performatives. For instance, the utterances, “Black is beautiful,” or “I am Black and I am proud,” operate as a set of linguistic performatives which denote specifically cultural and political interpretations of Black subjectivity, but also highlight the very *doing* of that particular racial category.

The organising category of race has another analytical dimension in this study: The performativity of Black and Coloured racial categories are significant because of the racialised political economy of queer consumer landscapes in post-apartheid South Africa. Tucker (2009) aptly problematised the racialisation and classist hierarchies in Cape Town’s De Waterkant gay district. In so doing, he highlighted the exclusion of poor and working-class Black and Coloured LGBTQIA+ bodies within this supposedly “queer space.” Gustav Visser (2003) contended that the “historically defined processes [of apartheid geopolitics] have placed leisure facilities, and even more so gay leisure facilities, at considerable distance from different non-White neighbourhoods” (p.131). These contemporary forms of exclusion from elitist, “white” spaces have thus resulted in subcultural expressions of identity by Black and Coloured LGBTQIA+ groups who have foregrounded their distinctive racialised and class-specific aesthetics. Marlon Bailey (2013, p.13) noted the elitist whiteness of queer social space in Detroit, observing that many of his Black interlocutors were made to feel unwelcome. Earlier, Charles Klein (1999, p. 20) had highlighted the racial and class hierarchies in the gay ghetto of Porto Alegre, Brazil. This does not mean that race and class categories are uniformly configured by the same oppressive systems of anti-Blackness across the globe. But, taken together, these ethnographic observations highlight the significance of paying attention to these inextricable hierarchies of race and class in scholarly investigations of LGBTQIA+ spaces and consumer culture.

Deborah Posel’s (2010) concept of racialised consumption is helpful here. She argued that, under apartheid, “blackness became an official judgement about being unworthy of certain modes and orders of consumption” (Posel, 2010, p.168). Race is a concept that continues to mark various practices and spaces of consumer culture in post-apartheid South Africa. Practices and communities of



mainstream consumer culture are indexed by racial and class categories. Similarly, racial categories undergird (and often determine) the proximity to consumer access and privilege. While certain Black and Coloured communities were historically denied the wherewithal to consume at will, the intra-racial dynamics of class complicate notions about which individuals gained access to spaces of consumption, consumer goods, and upward mobility. Within a post-apartheid neoliberal capitalist political economy, the complexities of class privilege (which cut across all racial groups) have furthered such forms of consumer access and exclusion.

Iqani (2013) argued that “neoliberal structures of post-colonial societies continue to cut out possibilities for equal participation and economic mobility” (p.9). In the case of post-apartheid Johannesburg, the imbrications between race and class have had the socioeconomic effects of demarcating clearly-defined differences of and boundaries to consumption. Moreover, these race and class-specific boundaries are evident in the geopolitics of LGBTQIA+ consumer space in this city (Tucker, 2009). The young and upwardly mobile LGBTQIA+ tend to consume and socialise in racially homogenous spaces in the northern suburbs. Poor or working-class Black and Coloured LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities are still excluded from such spaces by the systemic impoverishment that is inherited directly from colonial and apartheid systems. The point I would like to stress here is that consumer spaces along the lines of Club Indigo (and the social practices housed therein) exist in order to cater specifically to LGBTQIA+ individuals and groups who cannot afford to travel and consume in the gay clubs located in the northern suburbs of Sandton, Illovo, or Melville.

The empirical chapters in this study provide critical analyses of these intersectional dynamics of race, class, sexuality, and gender within this subcultural space. As I demonstrate throughout, race and class functioned as salient categories by which gendered cosmopolitanism was heavily policed – even *within* the subcultural context of Club Indigo. In so doing, I provide an ethnographic account of how subcultural performances of Black and Coloured queer identity were constructed beyond the tree-lined barriers of suburban privilege in post-apartheid Johannesburg.

## 2.5 Performing Queer Kinship in the African Context

This section focuses on my interlocutors' practices of kinship within the House of Indigo as well as their birth families. I also discuss the significance of queer kinship bonds in relation to African concepts of the extended family

In *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (1991), Kath Weston posed what was then a groundbreaking case for the inclusion of queer subjectivities, practices, and aspirations in scholarship about kinship. The scholarly, medical, and policy debates about queer kinship have advanced greatly since Weston's publication, and the general consensus within this body of scholarship has been the dissociation of the concept of "family" from its former association with biological facticity (Carsten, 2004; Freeman 2007; Lubbe-de Beer, 2013; Morrison, Lynch & Reddy, 2019). Advancing this body of theory even further, scholars including Janet Carsten (2004) have dispensed with the idea that queer, chosen, and/or adoptive kin are any less "real" than birth families. Against such familial biologism, Carsten posited that "kinship is gradually created rather than originating in a single moment of sexual procreation" (p. 140). The analyses offered in this section pertains to the gradual creation of kinship among my interlocutors – both within and outside the nightclub.

At this juncture, it is important to emphasise that kinship is processual and performative (Ahmed, 2006; Eng, 2010; Freeman, 2007; Lewis, 2019). The enactments of kinship "do not reflect a prior [biological] structure" (Butler, 2004, p.124), but are a continual process of co-construction among various social actors in multiple sociocultural contexts. The concept of "family" is not merely about a biological affinity but is constituted by performative and sociocultural practices. Following from this conjecture, my study demonstrates how my interlocutors' respective *doing* of family were constructed and thus mediated by various practices of consumption (see Chapter 5).

The sociocultural practice – or performative doing – of family are as complex as the societies within which they are studied (Carsten, 2004; Morrison, Lynch & Reddy, 2019). The structural practices and institutions by which they are given meaning are just as varied. Therefore, the notion of "family," and its related practices, cannot mean the same thing in all places and in all times. This is why

the performative doing of family has to be investigated in contextual specificity, foregrounding the local knowledges, institutional practices, and systems which infuse them with their specific sociocultural meanings. African feminist scholars have argued that the nuclear family is a westocentric and colonial institution (Amadiume, 1987; 2005, Oyèwùmí, 1997; 2000; 2005). While it is true that “the African family does not exist as a spatially bounded entity” (Oyèwùmí, 2000, p.1097), it is also important to note the changing dynamics and influences by which it is constituted.

From a historical perspective, the extended family has been a defining feature of traditional African society and personhood. This extended family includes, but is not limited to, unmarried siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, adoptees, orphans, and other members of both maternal and paternal kin (Lesajane, 2006, p.175). The nuclear family and household in South Africa – with the heterosexual, procreative couple as its legislative focal point – became an effect of colonial land dispossession, migrant labour, and religious and legislative policies from the early 20th century onward (Hunter 2010; Mkhize 2006; Ramphele & Richter 2006). The heterosexual couple and biological kinship, therefore, took precedence in colonial and apartheid legislation as representative of the modern South African family. These representations and discursive techniques of governmentality did not, however, necessarily reflect people’s own understandings and local practices of family.

Mark Hunter (2010) aptly reminds us that “we must approach tradition and modernity as dynamic concepts rather than static opposites” (p.36). While the early 20th century occurrence of the nuclear heteronormative household became the mainstay in legislative government policies, this particular kinship structure did not obfuscate the significance of the other indigenous African formations and practices of kinship. In fact, these various forms of kinship existed in tandem with one another – as they continue to do. Moreover, the present-day effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic have resulted in countless single parent-, grandparent-, and child headed households throughout South Africa. In addition, the legalisation of same-sex marriage and adoption have also expanded our quotidian understandings of what the post-apartheid family looks like, and who belongs therein (Lubbe-De Beer & Marnell, 2013; Morrison & Reddy, 2013).

It stands to reason, therefore, that the idea of family is irreducible to biological and/or heteronormative nuclear households in the post-apartheid context. Morrison, Lynch & Reddy (2019) averred that “the ‘ideal’ heterosexual norm is less the norm than is often widely assumed or portrayed” (p.x). The extended

family is still very significant in the lives of the majority of post-apartheid South African citizens despite the prevalence of nuclear, heteronormative couplings and kinship formations (Amaoteng, 2007; Mkhize, 2006). This is because the post-apartheid family continues to be constructed through various kinship bonds that extend beyond the boundaries of biological (heteronormative) affiliation and the nuclear household.

Following Weston's (1991) thesis about chosen family, Carsten (2004) argued against the notion of fictive kin. She dismissed the assumption that chosen families among queer people were any less "authentic" than those formed through heteronormative, biological procreation. She also stressed the importance of paying close attention to informants' explicit ideologies of kinship (Carsten, 2004, p.146). In the analyses that follow I demonstrate how my own interlocutors' descriptions and practices of kinship were undergirded by a sense of acceptance and belonging among both their birth families and their chosen queer families.



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## **CHAPTER 3**

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# **RE-ENTERING CLUB INDIGO: METHODS, QUEER POSITIONALITY, AND RESEARCH ETHICS**

*I step out of the silver-grey Toyota Corolla sedan and thank the driver. Maybe a few deep breathes might help calm my nerves. A post-apocalyptic silence hangs in the air. A naked bulb from inside the palisade gate spills fluorescent light out onto the pavement. The street is completely empty. My cellphone clock reads 20:54. This is ridiculously early by Club Indigo standards. Now that the Uber car has driven off, I am alone on the street. Undoubtedly, this makes me a sitting duck for a possible mugging. I cannot risk that inconvenience. The maroon gate is slightly open. I enter the large outdoor courtyard and parking lot.*

*A family-sized Isuzu SUV stands alone under a protective awning made of corrugated iron. Three black iron pillars hold up the awning, making a ramshackle car port that can fit a maximum of four average-sized sedans. Three rain-catching gutters, painted pine green, run along the length of the pillars. The courtyard is empty except for the cars. The lead-heavy bass of house music throbs inside the club. A filthy, raggedy, red-brown carpet runs ahead of me toward the large, blue iron doors. Two velvet ropes wobble lazily in the autumn breeze on either side of the carpet. The words "Club" and "Indigo" are stencilled horizontally in gold on each door - one of which stands wide open. The house music bangs louder as I near the doors.*

*I walk into the dark, cavernous hallway leading to the reception area. It is*

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*more of a counter-top and a standing table, really. The large bouncer is barely visible in the feeble light radiating from the lamp on the counter behind him. Its column is sprayed gold and carved into two naked masculine figures, standing back-to-back, holding up the bulb without a shade. A hand-sized rainbow flag stands propped against the lamp. The bouncer does not smile or say anything. He only sizes me up and down, barely moving his head. He doesn't bother frisking me. He looks bored and completely uninterested in everything around him - including my presence. He stands with one elbow on the counter table, next to a cash register and a hand-held card machine, oozing a cool mix of authority and disdain.*

*"How much is the entrance fee?" I ask him in isiZulu. The safest bet is to address strangers in isiZulu when in Johannesburg. It is commonly assumed to be the most widely-spoken language among locals.*

*"Fifty." his stern visage does not flicker.*

*I pull out a R100 note and hand it to him. He gives me the change and looks away. He carries on with the arduous task of doing nothing. I thank him without expecting a response. I pull back the shimmering gold string curtain, and step into the dimly lit nightclub. I have returned to this familiar space. But for different reasons this time.*



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This chapter describes the mixed qualitative research methods I used in the study. The first section is devoted to a detailed account of my ethnographic fieldwork, and the data collection methods I used, discussed in relation to the motivations which led to these choices. It covers when, where, and with whom the research material was collected, and introduces the reader to the key research participants from Club Indigo. It also elucidates on the study's position as an interdisciplinary queer media ethnography. The second section describes how I gained access to the field, and why I re-entered the nightclub as an academic researcher. In so doing, I provide a discussion of my own reflexivity and insider-outsider positionality as the ethnographer "at home" in and around Johannesburg. I then move on to a discussion about the ethical implications of conducting such research, and how my own experiences and resources during fieldwork led to these mixed methods of data collection. The third and final section describes the analytical methods used throughout this study.

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### **3.1 Data Collection: Participant Observation, Semi-Structured Interviews, Collaborative Research Methods, and Archival Research**

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#### ***Participant Observation***

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One of the key methods of data collection used in this study was participation observation. This entailed visiting Club Indigo for an extended period of time – what Geertz (1998) famously described as “deep hanging out.” When I first visited the nightclub, I felt as though I was seen as an infrequent patron who enjoyed the edgy, queer space on the periphery of the city centre. When I returned as an ethnographer, I was given permission by the owners of the nightclub, Lawrence and Darryl, to observe the performances and ordinary goings on inside the club, and to take field notes. This led to nine months of deep hanging out, from September 2016 to June 2017. Lawrence and Darryl also introduced me to the main drag performer, Zelda. These three individuals became key participants in this study.

The initial phase of participant observation required that I maintain a critical yet approachable distance, which I did by sitting at the bar taking notes. These were initially handwritten in a notebook. On the first day of fieldwork, described in the vignette above, I went to sit at what became my habitual place at the bar, and watched the two young men working behind the bar exchange befuddled looks as they shared a hookah pipe. They did not exactly admonish me for taking notes; they were more confused than perturbed by this unusual behaviour in an otherwise convivial space. One of them asked me whether I was a journalist. I sheepishly answered that I was a doctoral candidate who had come to conduct research on the drag subculture at Club Indigo. He teased me about being “one of the smart ones,” and continued with his hookah smoking.

Sarah Thornton (1995) averred that “clubbing is the kind of activity that shuns official, parental, constabulary or even ‘square’ observation” (p. 87). As an academic researcher, my note-taking served to signal my outsider status to everyone at the club. This made *me* more visible to *them* than they were to me. Although I did not experience any negative interactions during the course of participant observation at the nightclub, I found that my hypervisibility as a researcher resulted in a disproportionate amount of attention on my presence at

the nightclub. My blatant note-taking soon led to several people's discussions and curious questions directed towards me. Siobhan Brooks (2012), in her study of strip clubs in New York, remarked that "taking notes is different from asking direct questions pertaining to club operations" (p. 33). While her method of writing down field notes in a notebook may have been fruitful, it did not prove to be efficacious for my own research project. Niels Teunis (2001) noted that "every fieldwork project requires its own unique fieldwork methods" (p. 176), and this was true in my own case. I found that it was necessary to alter my strategies of data collection to fit the different spaces and situations which I navigated throughout fieldwork. When carrying a notebook seemed odd or worrisome to patrons and staff at the nightclub, I typed my observations into a smart phone.

As time went on, this strategy proved less cumbersome and invasive than carrying a notebook in a nightclub, and soon I started recording casual conversations and digitally storing them on my phone. All the members of the House of Indigo subculture were made aware of my role as a doctoral researcher – indeed, the Mistress of Ceremonies, Zelda, would often tell the audience how special Club Indigo was as it was visited by an academic researcher such as myself.

I also took notes throughout Johannesburg as I traversed the city either alone or with my research participants. These experiences and impressions, along with my handwritten and short-hand cellphone field notes, were subsequently expanded twice a week into more detailed, narrative texts, and stored on my laptop and external hard drive. This study draws on a total of fifty-five extended field note texts.

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### ***Semi-Structured, Recorded Interviews***

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After two consecutive weekends of participant observation, I approached several beauty queens for interviews. The first was Phoenix, the reigning Miss Black Pride 2016 at the time. "Of course," she beamed with a wide smile, "who wouldn't want to be included in research about drag queens?" After reading the information sheet, we conducted the first of our interviews in the queens' tiny changing room, backstage. The blasting music was very disturbing to both of us, however, so we scheduled another day for the interview. We agreed that I would visit her home in Evaton<sup>3</sup>.

Recorded interviews with the beauty queens (or the "divas," as they affably referred to each other) were also vital to this study. This is because it was

important to hear their perspectives about what it meant to be a part of the House of Indigo. This also required the careful negotiation of a high level of rapport and trust. Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) stressed a methodological framework that prioritises the presence and voices of research participants (p. 5). Merely observing and taking field notes is not enough. In order to avoid the clearly colonial-era strategy of sitting back and watching “native” informants’ behaviours (Geertz, 2005; Malinowski, 1929; Turner, 1969), I strove to ensure my participants, and their views and priorities, shaped to this study. In light of this, the term “interlocutor” hereafter takes precedence over “participant” as it denotes the dialogic orientation of the methods chosen in this study (Allen, 2011).

The representation of human subjects in this study, therefore, relies on giving their voices agency and primacy (Rosaldo, 1986). Generalisations and assumptions about observed phenomena in the field could only be disturbed by asking questions – no matter how astute or naïve these were. This was how I strove to gain a deeper understanding of each individual’s viewpoints in the context of their participation in the House of Indigo drag and pageant subculture. This methodological choice was also motivated by the imperative to test Gelder’s (2007) assertion that the nightclub is central to drag queens’ subcultures, and that this space is actually where they get to “become” queer. The individual semi-structured interviews enabled me to listen to each of my interlocutors’ life stories. I was also able to understand how drag and beauty pageantry fit into their world views and aspirations. The guiding questions for these interviews were generally drafted around the topics of drag, style, beauty, music and performance, but our discussions often veered into extremely intimate conversations about aspiration, sexuality, and the quotidian navigating of subjectivity in contemporary Johannesburg.

This method of conducting interviews highlighted Madison’s (2005) assertion that the interviewer and interviewee are both involved in a collaborative social performance wherein they both create meaning and memory (p. 67 – 68). While the interview topics may have begun with or alluded to drag artistry and pageantry, our discussions often swayed between the topics that were most salient to my interlocutors’ perspectives. It was, therefore, incumbent upon me to set aside some of my guiding questions, and to be cognisant of my interlocutors

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**3** *Established in 1904, the township of Evaton is situated 47 kilometers away from Johannesburg’s inner city. It belongs to a different region under the Emfuleni Local Municipality. “Emfuleni” is a Nguni word which, when correctly translated, by or on the river.*

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position (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). I chose to conduct individual interviews in order to hear each individual's story, and thereby try to do justice to them in my later analyses and in the writing process.

Because of the uncomfortably noisy situation in Club Indigo, described above, I interviewed some of my interlocutors on more than one occasion. All interviews were semi-structured and questions were open-ended. This approach left room for conversational rapport, allowing my interlocutors to clarify matters from their specific perspectives. A total of 24 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the owners of the nightclub as well as the pageant contestants and drag performers. Eighteen of these were conducted at Club Indigo in the divas' changing rooms. Four were conducted at their homes – away from the din and disturbance of the nightclub happenings. These latter interviews were more intimate and conversational, and took much more time to organise and conduct. One interview was conducted at a hair salon where the diva (A'Deva) worked as a receptionist, and one, with a beauty contestant called Precious, was conducted at a restaurant near her home in Soweto.

Sometimes interviews proved difficult to schedule because of clashes with members' work or university study timetables. At other times, some of my interlocutors failed to arrive at scheduled interviews because of clashes with other odd jobs – as was the case with the bouncer described in the vignette above. In such cases, casual conversations were elicited with interlocutors and recorded in the digital field notes.

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### ***Collaborative Research Methods, the Ethnographic Gaze, and Reflexivity***

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The Miss Black Pride beauty pageant was set to take place at the nightclub on October 1, 2016. After roughly two months of participant observation and a few sporadic interviews, I had developed a considerable level of rapport with the owners and the divas. While sitting with Darryl at the bar discussing his plans for the upcoming pageant, he lamented that hiring a professional photographer for the event would be too expensive. I told him that I had a digital camera at my disposal. He was very pleased when I offered to bring it along to the upcoming pageant.

This suggestion yielded significant benefits in terms of developing collaborative research strategies during fieldwork. Volunteering as the in-house photographer enabled me to gather a wealth of visual material. I also gained

backstage access to the diva's tiny, stuffy changing rooms (a store room, really). There, we engaged in rich conversations, shared jokes and life stories, arranged interview dates and venues, or to just sat and chatted while we got to know each other. The divas did not mind me hanging out backstage with them. They often chuckled while being photographed out of drag. They said that they did not want the world to see them out of drag, complaining that they looked like boys, but their protestations were usually made in jest.

The divas were not the only people who revelled in being in front of the camera. Most of the regular patrons enjoyed having their photos taken while they danced and socialised. Soon, a routine developed: I would spend each Saturday taking photographs, and send them to Darryl on Sunday mornings. He would then upload them to Club Indigo's Facebook page or forward them to the gay lifestyle blog, *Mambaonline*. He did this to promote the club as well as to inform people about previous and upcoming events. The divas and other patrons would insist on having their photos taken in the full awareness that their best poses and memories would be uploaded and archived on these public platforms on the World Wide Web. Thereafter, they could save the images themselves, and use them in whichever way they pleased. In the interests of safeguarding the identities and dignity of all my research interlocutors, I have not included these images in this study.

Having access to a sophisticated DSLR camera was also helpful in securing interviews with some of the divas at their homes. For example, Phoenix and A'Deva wanted to develop their image portfolios for upcoming beauty pageants and possible modelling opportunities. They agreed to the interviews on the condition that I would take photographs for their portfolios. During these interviews at their homes, they would painstakingly apply their make-up, and change into different evening gowns and cocktail outfits. In effect, these interviews turned into amateur photoshoots which were mutually beneficial to all parties concerned. In this way, visual data collection culminated in collaborative methods and strategies which strengthened our relationships.

Rappaport (2008) emphasised that collaborative research methods revitalise traditional participant observation, while simultaneously extending the research endeavour (and material) beyond the confines of academic enquiry. In the context of my study, the mini-photoshoots with Phoenix and A'Deva, for example, became collaborative research projects. They directed me as to which images and poses they preferred, and they were free to use the visual material in order to build their modelling portfolios at no financial cost to themselves. In this way, the visual material gathered during fieldwork extended beyond the specific aims

of this research project. I was able to converse with them as we worked, and as we walked around their respective neighbourhoods, getting to know about their childhoods, their aspirations, and their everyday lives. These informal photoshoots, therefore, gave the visual data collection aspect of this study a collaborative bent (Lassiter 2005).

Sarah Pink (2003) stressed that ethnography is only one “*aspect* of research and representation” (p.6, emphasis in original). It may draw from a number of varying research practices and methods, such as the historical, statistical, archival, and the visual. As such, visual research methods can augment collaborative and interdisciplinary projects (Pink, 2003, p. 179). I gained a significant level of access and trust during fieldwork precisely because of the decision to include visual research methods. At the same time, research participants were able to document the social experiences at the nightclub and/or potentially monetise their own images. A total of 2,077 photographs were taken and digitally stored during the course of fieldwork.

Initially, I had intended to use visual data collection to document the various stages and developments in research during fieldwork. This method of data collection, however, eventually culminated in “a heightened reflexivity” (Banks, 2007, p. 73) on my own part. The co-production and distribution of digital photographs (between myself and various interlocutors) changed the discursive field under ethnographic investigation. While my field notebook, as I described above, made my presence and intentions hypervisible, the research camera generated enormously privileged access in the field.

On the special pageant nights, the patrons, and even the barmen, would strike suave or comical poses as I walked around the nightclub with the camera strapped around my neck. At other times, the divas would tap me on my shoulder and automatically strike fabulous poses when they saw me skulking around the dance floor with the camera. It soon became apparent that these individuals both enjoyed and toyed with my ethnographic gaze. Inasmuch as my privileged researcher’s gaze was made manifest vis-à-vis the digital camera, the divas and other patrons enjoyed manipulating it for their own advantage. By posing in ways which they desired, they re-appropriated a considerable amount of power and participatory agency for themselves. They had the freedom (and ethical right) to choose how and when they were photographed – and how to use the resulting images. In other words, although I wielded incontrovertible power through my ethnographic gaze, it was contested and challenged through the participants’ stylistic and curatorial interventions.

I did not have to verbally elicit interlocutors’ participation in the production

and collection of these visual images. Their participation and collaboration was voluntary and consensual to the extent that they initiated the taking of these photographs. They would also insist on appraising their images on the camera's small LCD monitor, scoffing at the ones they did not like. Some would even instruct me to delete the ones they didn't like, thus showing them in what they felt to be their best light. During one of the pageant rehearsals (discussed in Chapter 4), Darryl also instructed the beauty contestants not to forget to smile for the camera while they were on stage. Therefore, I had to be cognizant of the photographs and the digital camera as both commodities and social objects (Barthes, 1980; 1986; Frosh, 2015; Iqani & Schroeder, 2016; Schroeder, 2002; Sontag, 1977). The use and distribution of the images gave them lives and histories of their own – the effects of which had not been anticipated during the research design phase of this study.

More visual data were collected from three of the divas' Instagram and Facebook pages. These were Kiara, Ella, and Phoenix. This was done for two specific reasons: First, of all the divas, these three were the most active on social media. It became evident during participant observation that they each loved taking selfies and posing for different shots, which they would then edit using the different filters available on Instagram, caption, and upload. Their frequent activity on the social networking sites garnered a huge following for each of them, and thus created wider public visibility for their respective drag and beauty contestant personae (see Chapter 6). Second, each of these divas stressed the importance of digital platforms in their lives beyond the nightclub. Apart from documenting their social experiences and accomplishments at the club, they used Instagram and Facebook as ways of branding their businesses as models, make-up artists, and beauty contestants.

The interrelationship between the divas' offline and online self-representations bore complex ethnographic implications for the present study. The research approach became multi-sited as material was collected from both spheres. The online and offline data were thus given equal credence because of "how the virtual and the actual 'point' at each other in social practice" (Boellstorff, 2012, p. 40). The inclusion of online and offline research material was important in this study because of the co-constitutive sociality within both these domains (Horst & Miller, 2012; Lindolf & Shatzer, 1998). Instagram posts were thus collected in order to help generate an account of the queens' everyday mediated social practices of consumption and self-representation. In total, I collected and digitally stored 88 Instagram and Facebook posts. Although Instagram and Facebook are different digital applications with different



functionalities, the visual social media material was collected and analyzed intertextually. This is because each diva would first upload their desired photograph on Instagram, and then use the “share on Facebook” option, thus enabling greater engagement with the image among a wider audience. For the sake of concision and clarity, two posts from each diva’s social media pages were included for analysis.

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## **Archival Research**

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I undertook auxiliary research at the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA) archives in Johannesburg during the earliest stages of fieldwork for this study. This took approximately 10 working days during 2016 when the archives were open to researchers, students, and other members of the public.

Upon arrival at GALA, I was summarily furnished with a mammoth corpus of archival material from various nightclubs and beauty pageants that had been active in the early to mid 1990s. I discovered that LGBTQIA+ spaces like The Dungeon nightclub and the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) in Johannesburg had hosted annual beauty pageants before Club Indigo opened its doors in 2003. I also had access to archival material ranging from printed colour photographs, flyers, posters, typed programmes, pageant application forms, judges’ notes, score sheets, and even field notes from Graeme Reid’s (1999) brilliant ethnographic research about the HUMMC.

The GALA archives also housed a huge amount of material from Club Indigo’s early days, when it was still located in Braamfontein, central Johannesburg (2003 – 2009). Printed colour photographs of a younger Darryl and Lawrence, and other drag queens, filled two medium-sized boxes through which I sifted to find contextual background about the nightclub’s history and trajectory. The archives also housed a plethora of visual material such as old flyers and posters advertising various parties hosted at the nightclub. I also had access to digitised photographs and videos from previous pageants and random evenings at the nightclub. These digitised files comprised 338 photographs from the Miss Black Pride 2010 pageant, 58 photographs from the Miss Club Indigo 2010 pageant, and 92 video clips from the Miss Gay Jozi 2013 pageant. I was also given access to the *Jozi Queens* (de Barros, 2016) documentary featuring interviews with the owners of nightclub as well as the various beauty contestants who competed in the Miss Gay Jozi 2014 pageant, which had received considerable mainstream media coverage from the local and national press at the time. Three magazine

articles featuring that year's reigning queen, Miss T Menu, were also collected.

Archival research at GALA proved efficacious insofar as it gave me the historical context about the vibrant gay club culture that Lawrence and Darryl often reminisced about in our casual conversations. Indeed, it is important to stress that archival research was ancillary to this research project, and was undertaken in order to contextualise the nightclub and its drag subculture within a larger history of LGBTQIA+ spaces and subcultural practices in Johannesburg.

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### ***Timeframe, Activities and Changes in the Field***

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Change, flux, and dynamism provide any ethnographic project with rich opportunities for nuanced analyses (Conquergood, 1992, p. 83). This proved to be true for this study. I had to review, remix, and sometimes totally discard some research approaches because of the rapidly changing events in the field. When the field site changed – as Club Indigo moved from the original venue to the larger one next door – I had to reconfigure my own conceptions of space and social practice. When the club eventually closed for good (after over 15 years of operation), I had to reimagine the rendering of themes and ethnographic data such that they related to the aims and scope of this study. These changes not only required ethnographic, critical distance, but they demanded my own reflexive orientation to queer time and queer spatiality (Ahmed, 2006; Halberstam, 2006).

I spent approximately 9 months, between September 2016 and June 2017, conducting ethnographic fieldwork around Johannesburg. This timeframe was specifically chosen to coincide with the three major beauty pageants organised and hosted by the Club Indigo's owners: "Miss Black Pride," "Miss Club Indigo," and "Miss Gay Jozi." Although, they were in the same nightclub, these pageants were different in terms of the entry criteria, their processual structures, and the final prizes bestowed upon the respective title-holders (see Chapter 4 for descriptions of these pageants). It was important to conduct participant observation and visual data collection at these three pageants because, first, they were the highlights of the nightclub's annual calendar; and second, most of my interlocutors (the divas and organizers alike) expressed the significance of these pageants in relation to their aspirations and motivations as human subjects: An enormous amount of time, physical and emotional labour, as well as money, went into their production.

I also conducted fieldwork at the events leading up to each of these pageants. These included mid-week auditions and rehearsals, which took place at Club

Indigo. I was also present on the days and hours just before each pageant as the divas, organisers, and staff ran around the nightclub in a frenzy. Tensions were high and nerves were shot on these days as everyone was determined to showcase the best they had to offer. I also thought it prudent to offer to help with setting up the stage, cleaning, carrying the bar supplies, and so on, but Lawrence vehemently declined my offers to help in this way. He insisted that I was a “special” guest at the nightclub, and that he paid his staff to do this work. I therefore ended up sitting at the bar, taking field notes, and this gave me the chance to watch the rehearsal proceedings very closely, and also to chat with some of the contestants about their hopes for winning the crown.

Apart from these major pageant events, participant observation was also conducted every Saturday night at the nightclub. I would arrive roughly at around 21h00 and stay until the club eventually closed at 6am on Sunday mornings. There was much less foot traffic in terms of patronage on these “ordinary” nights, but the regulars were always in attendance to chat about their families, their latest love interests, or petty squabbles at the work place. Although these weekends were seemingly “ordinary” in comparison to the pageant nights, there was always a set programme for drag performances. Regardless of how full (or empty) the nightclub was, drag performances by the various divas were an integral mainstay every Saturday night. The preparation and execution of these performances were a cause for intense drama, tensions, and hierarchical policing and solidarities among the different subcultural members at the House of Indigo. As such, the drag performances provided a huge amount of ethnographic material by way of participant observation and visual data collection (see Chapters 3 and 4).

More ethnographic and visual material was collected while following Zelda during her drag performances in various spaces around Johannesburg. For example, on Sunday December 4, Madame Zelda was invited to take part in a theatrical production written and directed by a postgraduate Drama student from a local university. Daylin, Lawrence, Darryl, and I attended the performance to show our support. Partly improvisational and partly oratory, Zelda was chosen to “play” her stage persona and help to educate the audience about the lived experiences of being a transgender drag queen. Part of this performance entailed randomly selecting a cisgender male audience member for an improvisational date with her. In keeping with her usual flair and natural command of the stage, Zelda enthralled the intimate audience in the theatre at the university. Zelda was also invited for a special Valentine’s Day cabaret performance at the D6 District Six Eatery. Lawrence, Darryl, Kelly, and I also

attended this event. Yet again, Zelda captivated the small, intimate audience with her lip-synch performances to songs by two of her favourite musical icons – Shirley Bassie and Gladys Knight.

An ethnography about drag artistry and beauty pageantry would be deficient if it did not pay critical attention to the intersecting dimensions of camp aesthetics and staged performance. As such, the drag performances inside and beyond Club Indigo were integral for data collection and analysis in this study. Indeed, “performance,” in the aesthetic and/or artistic sense of the term, was an important thematic concern from the earliest conceptualisation and research design phases of this study, and the research material collected on drag performance opened up a space for creative methods of data collection, thus providing this study with its interdisciplinary orientation (Conquergood, 1992; Drewal, 1992; Madison, 2005; Elliot & Culhane, 2017; Johnson, 2003; 2016).

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## **3.2 Data Analysis: Triangulation, Thick Descriptions, Critical Discourse Analysis**

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### ***Triangulation***

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The research materials generated by the mixed qualitative research methods discussed above were organised and stored using the NVivo coding software programme, and then triangulated and coded thematically. Triangulation was chosen as the most apposite method because, in keeping with the interdisciplinary orientation of this study, it provided comprehensive evidence from the various research materials (Salkind, 2010) and the development of a coding system based on different themes gleaned from the data. The themes which emerged as most salient (and reoccurring) were: “Beauty,” “Consumption,” “Aspiration,” “Empowerment,” “Queerness,” “Kinship,” “Drag Performance,” “Pageantry,” “Cosmopolitanism,” and “Branding.” Sometimes, the research materials fell into one of these themes, and sometimes across several at the same time. In light of this, the research materials were read and analysed intertextually. This process of organising, coding, and thematising took about two months (June and July 2017).

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## ***Thick Descriptions***

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The observations and experiences gathered during fieldwork are herein partly rendered using the classic ethnographic style of thick description (Geertz, 1977). Ethnographic vignettes are included in order to provide contextual details gleaned from the research field notes. Furthermore, these thick descriptions are used to provide an evidentiary and analytical basis for the theoretical arguments made in the empirical chapters that follow. I offer these thick descriptions and analyses in full awareness of my own partiality and reflexivity as an embodied subject and researcher, and of my positionality in their production (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Crapanzano, 1986; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2003) aptly reminds us that “the shadow of the researcher is always cast across that which is researched” (p. 122). My own positionality and embodied subjectivity are thus entangled within my methodological choices as well as in the representation of the research material. In eschewing any fallacious claims to objectivity, I emphasise the interpretative and partial nature of the ethnographic representations included in this study.

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## ***Intertextuality and Critical Discourse Analysis***

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Following the processes of triangulation and thematic coding, the research material was analysed intertextually. The field notes, transcribed interviews, and visual material were all analysed as semiotic texts which bore a multiplicity of interrelated meanings. Iqani (2012) averred that “texts exist in the plural and hold many relationships with one another.” (p. 49). Taken together, these ethnographic materials – spoken, written, visual, performed – were analysed as signifying practices (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Hall, 1997) and, as meaning-making texts, they threw into relief the nexus points between language, representation, identity, and power. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was chosen as the key analytical method in this study, as it “sets out to make visible through analysis, and to criticize, connections between properties of texts and social processes and relations (ideologies, power relations)” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 131). CDA thus provided the analytical tools for interrogating the ideological underpinnings as well as the broader structures and relations of power as mediated through the research material.

The textuality of the research materials evidenced their multimodality as forms of discourse. The analytical framework of CDA thus facilitated a thorough

understanding of the research materials as mediating (and as being produced by) the ever-changing relations of power and social practice (Fairclough, 2012, p. 457). The special emphasis that CDA places on sociocultural context as being semiotically and discursively constructed (Kress & Hodge, 1988; Lazar, 2007; Wodak, 2008) was also of fundamental importance to this study. The research materials (re)presented in this study are not analysed as self-evident, innocuous, “objective” facts of history. Rather, they are critiqued in their imbrications within the power structures, social hierarchies, and processes of subjectification that are a function of transnational, neoliberal, capitalist hegemony. In light of this, a CDA framework was chosen to analyse the intersections of power, representation, and the subcultural constructions of identity and social practice at Club Indigo.

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### ***3.3 Access and Trust, Queer Positionality, and Research Ethics***

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The ethnographic vignette opening this chapter evidences many personal anxieties I felt upon returning to Club Indigo for research. Gaining physical access into the nightclub was not difficult – particularly as I could afford to pay the ten US dollar entrance fee as I had done before. Similarly, navigating the city was not a problem as I was born and raised in Johannesburg. On the days when I visited my interviewees’ homes, I would request general directions to the townships where they lived. On such days, I would travel in the 15-seater mini-bus taxis so ubiquitous around the city. At an average of one US dollar for a 3-km trip, these mini-bus taxis were an economically viable option during the day. Johannesburg’s public transport system, however, is very poorly subsidised and mismanaged by the municipality and local government, and there were no buses or trains past 8 pm, and even fewer taxis were available around the city past this hour. The only options at night were either to use a private car, hire an expensive metered taxi, or use app-based taxi services such as Uber or Taxify. Furthermore, walking to and from the designated spots where the few mini-bus taxis might be available was risky because of the high level of crime throughout the city. This made travelling by mini-bus taxi at night both dangerous and inconvenient. Since I did not have my own a car, I opted for the safer and frankly more convenient option of using the app-based Uber taxi service in order to get to and from Club Indigo during the late-night hours of fieldwork.

Although I had patronised the nightclub twice before, gaining access as an ethnographic researcher bore several challenges. In the earliest stages of fieldwork, the bouncer, Jabu, was not familiar with me or my intentions at the nightclub. Unshakeably stern (and somewhat forlorn), he would stand at his booth and demand I pay the entrance fee just like any other regular customer was expected to do. He was neither hostile nor affable. Like any other bouncer, he was simply doing his job by eliciting payment for entrance and maintaining peaceful social relations inside the nightclub. It was only after the first month of fieldwork - after I had visited the club for four consecutive Saturdays - that he began to warm to me. On the night of the Miss Club Indigo pageant, he loosened the muscles on his well-chiseled face as I walked in, and manoeuvred his lips into what I anticipated would be a smile when he recognised me with my camera in hand. I was reaching for my wallet when he casually shook his head and said: "No, no. Don't worry. It's OK. Lawrence and Darryl already told me that you'll be taking photos tonight. They said you're our guest. So, you don't have to pay." From then on, I did not have to pay for entrance to the nightclub.

I was thus quickly able to gain access to the nightclub and its drag pageant subculture, but to establish rapport and trust with the various members took some time. As with any dynamic of human interaction, trust had to be earned over an extended period of time. Similarly, establishing respect with my interlocutors required constant negotiation. The friendly rapport which I had established with the people I met at Club Indigo was based on mutual respect and, more importantly, the African philosophy and ethical code of *Ubuntu*. This is an ontological as well as moral imperative that enjoins the human subject to treat others with dignity, tolerance, and respect. *Ubuntu* is an African humanism. A philosophical worldview based on the idea that human subjectivity is characterised by perpetual motion, change (*becoming* rather than being), and existential interdependence with other human subjects and groups (Ramose, 1999; 2018). Moreover, *Ubuntu* is a worldview based on the ethical imperative to "affirm one's [own] humanity by recognizing the humanity of others, and, on that basis, establish human relations with them" (Ramose, 2002: 272).

I thus sought to earn the trust of my interlocutors by first acknowledging their humanity. They were not merely objects of academic research. I had to continually respect their humanity and dignity by building and reinforcing coeval relationships built on the ethical code of *Ubuntu*, and demonstrating a conscientious effort to prioritise their voices and their agency. The trust which I gained and maintained throughout fieldwork was facilitated by relationships built on humility and mutual respect.

Madison (2005) posited that critical ethnography “takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions.” (p. 5). Before doing fieldwork, I had taken my self-identification as an open, cisgender, Black, gay man as a given state of affairs. Where and how I occupied various spaces were a direct result of my racialised class privilege. My political leanings, as a critical feminist and queer scholar, was highly influential in the research design and methodological choices I made in this study. They also shaped how I negotiated trust during fieldwork as well as my analytical approach to the research data. Madison (2005) further averred that “doing fieldwork is a personal experience” (p.9) This was true in my own case. When I began doing the fieldwork proper, I had to *first* problematise those taken-for-granted assumptions about my subjectivity. I had to reexamine the intersecting identity categories which I claimed as constitutive of my own subjectivity in relation to how I occupied various spaces. The levels of trust I was proffered were thus related to my positionality as a Black, queer, academic researcher.

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### **3.4 Insider/Outsider Status: Positionality, Reflexivity, and Doing Ethnography at Home**

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Conducting ethnographic fieldwork at home requires a critical examination of the ethnographer’s “insider” or “native” status. Kirin Narayan (1993) argued, insightfully, that we carry shifting identities as we move between various social and geo-political contexts. Moreover, the vexed identity of the “native ethnographer” is overdetermined by racist and colonial assumptions which underpinned early ethnographers’ understandings of themselves and their relations to the “Other” (Narayan, 1993, p.678). In light of this, I could not take my “insider” status for granted precisely because my own positionality was read differently by different people in the field. My sexual orientation, gender, and racial identity did not automatically guarantee that I would gain trust among a subcultural community of queer, working-class, Black and Coloured drag artists and beauty queens.



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## **Positionality, Access, and Reflexivity**

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My upwardly-mobile class position, including my role as an academic researcher, initially placed me outside the inner circle of kinship at the House of Indigo (further discussed in Chapter 4). However, I was not a total stranger who had come to investigate some exotic group of people about whom I knew nothing. My intimate knowledge of the city, my familiarity with the nightclub, and my friendly rapport with the owners provided a modicum of insider status. This required me to reflect critically on the ethics of doing ethnographic fieldwork at “home” (Onyango-Ouma, 2006).

I thus occupied the liminal position of an insider/outsider in the field. Being in one category did not preclude being in the other. Setting up a binary opposition between them would have been untenable because “we can experience multiple identities depending on how we position ourselves and how the people we study position us” (Onyango-Ouma, 2006, p. 259). The confluence between insider/outside status was not a cause for tension. Rather, it generated a productive ambiguity in that I could “stand on both shores at once” (Anzaldúa 1987: 78). Moreover, it allowed space for a plurality of viewpoints, methodological flexibility, and critical distance from the object of study.

Johnson (2001) argued that “a critic cannot ethically and responsibly speak from a privileged place...and not own up that privilege” (p.9). I was later able to gain my interlocutors’ trust by openly acknowledging (and discussing) my power and access to various socioeconomic and material resources. The openness about the research aims for this study further augmented the relationships with my interlocutors – which were built on the philosophical ethos of *Ubuntu* and mutual respect.

My self-identification as a Black, openly gay cisgender man enabled me to gain a significant level of privileged access and trust during fieldwork. Similarly, these intersecting identity categories made me privy to information, observations, and vernacular discourses to which I otherwise would not have had access. However, such access was not without its challenges and limitations. Much like other patrons at Club Indigo, I was initially welcomed as an avid fan of drag performance and beauty pageantry. Upon hearing about my research aims and methods various interlocutors became interested in this study. They were equally interested my personal and intellectual investments for engaging in academic enquiry about drag performance and beauty pageantry. Such an idea was simultaneously ambitious and preposterous to them – and they made sure to tell

me as much. The mere notion of undertaking an extended academic study of their subcultural community and practices appeared to be more of a frivolous past-time than actual “work.” In a society wherein 55.75% of the youth are mired in unemployment and economic dispossession, deep hanging out at a nightclub might appear to be more of a privileged hobby than a mode of critical, scholarly enquiry. This latter motivation had to be made explicit to various interlocutors during the earlier stages of fieldwork.

Growing up in a South African township throughout my childhood proved to be advantageous for several reasons. An unspoken affinity between myself and most of my interlocutors grew organically because of our shared racial and class backgrounds. This affinity opened several pathways to the gradual development of trust. I did not have to ask what certain modes of behaviour or tones in speech meant since I had a significant insider status as a queer-identifying man. However, I had to take a critical stance in my analyses of their discursive import for the purpose of this academic thesis. To the extent that I was an outsider (being neither a drag artist nor a beauty contestant), I had to be curious about and attentive to a plethora of subcultural practices, codes, and subcultural references about which I previously had had no clue.

At the linguistic level, I understood my interlocutors’ slang, syntactic tonality, and onomatopoeic inflections without needing to have these explained to me in any explicit way. Because of our shared vernacular and indigenous languages (seSotho, SeTswana, isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Xitsonga<sup>4</sup>), I was able to converse openly with most of my interlocutors – with the exception of those who were Afrikaans speakers. Being able to exchange ideas, knowledge, advice, and personal stories with my interlocutors in their respective languages was equally fruitful. I was thereby able to ask critical questions in vernacular ways that were both respectful and critically engaged. My knowledge of these local languages added much-needed complexity and criticality to my observations and interview questions, as well as to the subsequent interpretation of my interlocutors’ responses. Similarly, my familiarity with queer cultural references and signs allowed me to code switch between various casual conversations so as to make my interlocutors comfortable with me both as a person and as a scholarly researcher.

Soyini D. Madison (2012) described reflexivity as a mode of intellectual labour whereby the researcher contemplates how they interpret events, responses, and

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<sup>4</sup> These are five of South Africa’s 11 official languages. I am a native speaker of all five.

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behaviour in the field. This implies critical (and careful) attention to the knowledge systems, conceptual frameworks, and vocabularies undertaken in the researcher's interpretations and analyses. While the empirical research material presented in this study is infused with a significant amount of insider knowledge, the interpretation of such material remains embedded within indigenous knowledge systems, contextual specificity, and critical social theory. The empirical chapters that follow are thus framed within this reflexive and methodological paradigm. It stands to reason that such a reflexive approach in analytical methods would follow from the collaborative and de-colonial methods of data collection based on social justice, equity, and *Ubuntu*.

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### **3.5 The Ethics of Decolonial Representation and Anonymity**

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In the sections above, I have elucidated the tensions, challenges, and creative strategies undertaken during fieldwork. I have sought to explain my own reflexivity within and beyond the primary ethnographic field site of Club Indigo, and I have aimed to provide a critical discussion about the ethnographic and visual representations of my interlocutors, as well as the ethical implications thereof. These ethical concerns are not only grounded in theoretical concerns about representations of the "Other," but are also inherently political. Stuart Hall's (1994: 236) conception of "identity as constituted not outside but within representation" is helpful here. How we presume to conceive, view, and/or know the "Other" is an epistemological consideration that is beset by power differentials. These are, in no small part, complicated—and thus given meaning—within the discursive terrain of postcolonial political and representational praxis. Homi K. Bhabha (2004) suggested that "the study of world might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness'" (p. 17). I argue, therefore, that the projections and representations of "Otherness" undergird any ethnographer's self-conception, far more so than their own research aims. Likewise, own ethnographic gaze was informed by the scholarly interventions of decolonial scholarship (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo, 2009; wa Thiong'o, 1981).

It is important to note the interpretive and partial nature of the analyses I offer in the following chapters. The now well-established “reflexive turn” within various fields of ethnographic enquiry has long dispensed with the positivist, objectivist, and clearly androcentric ideals of any reality that is “out there” (Abu-Lughord, 1990; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Conquergood, 1992; Crapanzano, 1986; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughord & Larkin, 2002; Madison, 2005; Rabinow, 1986; Smith, 1999). Therefore, the ethnographic observations, interpretations, and analyses in the chapters that follow are admittedly provisional since they are advanced by a researcher with his own set of situated and contextual ideological perspectives (Crang, 2008).

Lila Abu-Lughord (1990) outlined a set of critical questions regarding the ethical potential of a feminist ethnographic approach. She also suggested that this approach compels the researcher to: “write in a non-dominating way...to write about individuals bound up in relationships with others...to write with care and attachment rather than distance, to participate rather than remove [themselves].” (Abu-Lughord, 1990, p. 22). I am fully convinced of the ethical potential of feminist ethnographic methods, and my own fieldwork posed many challenges in this regard. While I have outlined the ethical and epistemological implications about representations of the “Other” in the previous section, the broader (and rather vexed) tensions regarding ethnographic representation and anonymity require further exegesis. Abu-Lughord’s statement highlights the importance of thick ethnographic descriptions; ones that eschew all pretensions and claims about the researcher’s “objectivity.” Her statement also highlights the significance of ethnographic participatory and collaborative research methods which continually strive to ameliorate the power imbalances inherently attendant to any ethnographic endeavour. It must be remembered that no ethnographic project can legitimately make any claims as to the equality between the researcher and the researched. After all, ethnographic methods of enquiry are historically imbricated within western European, white supremacist, imperialist, and colonialist asymmetrical processes and structures (Abu-Lughord, 1990; Amadiume, 1987; Said, 1979; Said, 1979; Turner, 1977).

In this study, the concept of anonymity, in particular, became vexed insofar as questions of ethnographic detail (thick descriptions) and visual representation were concerned. How does the ethnographic researcher give ethical credence, voice, authority, and authenticity to research collaborators while still anonymising their identities in subsequent reports? How can the researcher avoid distancing themselves from their interlocutors if they hold fast to the ethnographic principle of anonymity? How are the relationships and rapport so steadfastly built between me and my interlocutors complicated by the ethical imperative to anonymise their identities?

These questions are not easily resolved, and any clear consensus on the subject of anonymity among scholars doing qualitative research is hard to come by. On the one hand, some scholars advocate for the ethnographic principle of anonymising the identities of research participants (Boellstorff, 2012; de Laine, 1997; Wiles, et al. 2008), and safeguarding their confidentiality as best as possible. On the other hand, some scholars view issues of confidentiality and anonymity as a research ideal that is – in practice – impossible to achieve (Stein, 2010; van den Hoonaard, 2003;). I am, however, drawn to the Godwin et al.'s (2003) notion of “situational ethics” (p.573). They demonstrate that the researcher’s multiple identities are always already entangled within the ethnographic situation. They argue that ethical dilemmas are best resolved by the intricate balance between the researcher’s moral compass as well as the contingency of the research situation itself (Godwin et al, 2003, p.575). It is therefore clear that there is no one-size-fits-all rule that is applicable to the ethics of representation and anonymity and, since the situational ethics of the ethnographic experience are as varied (and ever-changing) as the cultures within which they occur, the twin issues of confidentiality and anonymity remain ideal goals. While these ideals may not be completely attainable, it is still important to approach these ethical issues with as much candour as possible – if only to safeguard the participants’ rights to privacy, respect, and dignity during fieldwork and the subsequent analysis and reporting.

These tensions and complexities influenced my decision to completely anonymise all the names and identities of my interlocutors. This included anonymising the name of the nightclub that was my primary field site. This decision was also made in a concerted effort to safeguard (and to honour) the relationships between myself and my research collaborators, who entrusted me with their stories and life histories. These interpersonal connections were further solidified through the ethical process of gaining informed consent from every individual I met at the nightclub.

As I demonstrate in the following chapter, my interlocutors did not view themselves as marginal subjects. In fact, they saw themselves as carrying an incredible amount of creativity, intelligence, and resourcefulness. However, the very real dangers of hate-crimes are still part and parcel of their strategies of navigating a complex and violent city like Johannesburg. Their gender non-conforming identities as well as class positions rendered them vulnerable to a wide range of emotional and physical hate-crimes. My positionality as a researcher, therefore, behoves me to protect their safety and right to privacy as best I can.

All of these considerations were further complicated by the fact that many of my interlocutors were hypervisible as drag and beauty queens on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. Several of them have made appearances on national and cable television programmes, or on sexual health advocacy panels, and have been written about in newspaper articles – advocating for the importance of drag beauty contests as well as the protection of human rights for gender non-conforming people. Their hypervisibility across various media platforms does not render them any less vulnerable to emotional and physical risk, however. Moreover, the personal stories that they shared with me, about themselves, their families, and each other, were shared with the understanding that I assured their confidentiality. In the light of this, I have used pseudonyms throughout this study.



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**CHAPTER 4**

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**THE HOUSE  
OF INDIGO:  
SUBCULTURAL  
HIERARCHIES, NETWORKS  
OF SORORITY, AND THE  
GENDER DIVIDE**



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*Darryl, Eric, and I are sitting along the right-hand corner of the bar cracking bawdy jokes. Eric is one of the regulars at the club. He often volunteers as an impromptu judge for the pageants. It's almost 9pm now - which means it is quite early by Club Indigo standards. We are biding our time, waiting for more people to stream into the club. Zelda soon steals our attention as she glides out of the dressing room. She walks straight towards us, making sure that everyone can see her. Blanketed in a cloud of black and white feathers, she swings her hips from side to side with each exaggerated step. She clutches the feathered cloak, hiding her outfit beneath. As soon as she is close enough, she flings the cloak wide open, revealing a sequined black evening gown, with a thigh-high slit. She obviously knows how beautiful she looks and wants everyone to know it too.*

*Smiling, Darryl leans in close to me: "You know how long it took me to make that cloak? One bloody week."*

*"No ways," I respond, incredulous. The entire outfit looks far too elaborate for one week's worth of work. I shoot him a flashing glance and dart my eyes back to Zelda. "How did you get all those feathers on there?"*

*"By hand," he says proudly. "But I sewed the dress with my machine. You know I make all of her gowns and dresses myself." He then walks away to attend to some task behind the bar. Zelda also saunters away to "work the room" - welcoming the few guests in attendance.*

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This chapter introduces some of the key participants in the House of Indigo. It outlines the social hierarchies and kinship system that shaped the subcultural dynamics at the House of Indigo. I discuss this hierarchical structure in relation to the overlapping forms of sociality and kinship which I observed at the nightclub, outlining the subcultural members' respective roles and interrelationships. I show that these bonds of kinship echoed the extended family structure found in many African homes, and that these social and familial roles were not reducible to the characteristics of a normative western nuclear family.

I also demonstrate that the structures of kinship at the House of Indigo were not autonomous from those which the various members had with their birth families. The coalescence of kinship networks between birth and subcultural families resulted in what I describe as complementary forms of kinship (see Chapter 5). They shaped the members' life trajectories, opportunities, aspirations, and personhoods. I also argue that the bonds of complementary kinship fostered at the House of Indigo were constructed through performative actions such as the gifting and circulation of commodities and material goods (see Chapter 6). The subcultural hierarchies and interpersonal relationships I observed thus raised the need for reconceptualizing debates regarding chosen families and queer kinship.

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## **4.1 The Mother and Father of the House of Indigo: The Labour of Gay Parenting**

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As the founders and owners of the House of Indigo, Darryl and Lawrence were situated at the apex of its subcultural hierarchy. They both wielded a considerable amount of power in their respective ways. Not only did they co-own the nightclub, but they occupied the most senior roles as founders and parents of the House of Indigo. This is not to suggest that they acted as substitute or “surrogate” parents to the divas at the nightclub. In fact, the divas all enjoyed healthy relationships with their birth families outside of the House of Indigo. They came from homes headed by one or two parents, grandparents, or other members of their extended birth families. However, Lawrence and Darryl both played significant roles in terms of shaping the aspirations and worldviews of all these young trans and femme gay members of the House. The following two sections outline their roles as the parents within this community. I discuss the research material presented here in relation to scholarly conceptions of queer kinship, local understandings of extended family structures, and the performative *doing* of kinship.

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### ***Introducing the Mother of the House: Darryl Adams***

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Darryl was the indomitable maternal figure at the House of Indigo. All the Indigo Divas, including his life partner, Lawrence, referred to him as “ma” or “mommy.” They also used the personal pronouns “he/his” and “she/her” interchangeably when referring to him. Neither the maternal or masculine pronouns were in conceptual conflict with his cisgender identity as an openly gay man, and he did not mind the interchangeable use of them. Only the heterosexual cisgender male staff (Jabu, Daylin, and Senzo) referred to him using either his first name or masculine pronouns. This did not, however, diminish the significance and extent of his role as the mother of the House of Indigo.

The linguistic and conceptual disjuncture between Darryl’s gay male identity and maternal performativity demonstrates how being a “mother” is not a biological fact, but a social category (Amadiume, 1987; Bailey, 2013; Guidio,

2009; Oyewùmí, 2000; 2005). This provides the basis for one of the central arguments expounded later in this chapter: that “family” is not simply a fact of genetic and/or biological history, but is also constructed through performative acts of kinship.

Throughout modern capitalist history, the private and domestic sphere of the home has often been associated with feminine and/or maternal labour (Davis, 1981; de Beauvoir, 1949; hooks, 1982; Hill-Collins, 2000; McClintock, 1995). The emotional and physical labour, supposedly demonstrative of domesticity and care, has generally been relegated to individuals identified as “female” at birth. The social category of heteronormative motherhood—and the domestic labour in connotes—has become subsumed within a biological and gendered sign system which functions along the female/woman axis (Cohen, 2005; Hennessy, 2000; Oyewùmí, 1997; Rich, 1980). However, in many queer subcultural communities the category of motherhood is not the sole purview of females or women. Men or males can also take up the role of motherhood – however they may self-identify along the sex/gender spectrum (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Jackson, 2002). These male-bodied individuals are often described as mothers by their adoptive children, life partners, and other members of their queer communities. As such, they can lay claim to the social category of motherhood by engaging in various domestic tasks and behaviours associated with it (Gaudio, 2009; Livingston, 1991; Valentine, 2007). In such communities, “motherhood” indexes a wide range of practices and identifications which have no relation to biological sex.

Darryl’s role within the House of Indigo was a case in point. The seamlessness between his sexual/gender identity and his role as a mother was evidenced through his performance of various forms of labour and care. The opening vignette to this chapter demonstrates how much effort and time Darryl took in his various tasks as a mother. His glee at seeing Zelda wearing the elaborate, feathered cloak and evening gown – which Darryl had made himself – highlights the pride he took in his role as the nurturing mother of the House of Indigo. His maternal labours and care were not just reserved for Zelda: he extended them to all the divas at Club Indigo. He was extremely hands-on when it came to ensuring that they looked beautiful and were impeccably dressed at all times. I often heard him softly reproaching a queen for having a smudge of makeup on their white pageant sashes, for example. When he was not in a particularly good mood, he would scold them for not wearing their tiaras – the ultimate symbols of their status and prestige in the nightclub. The range of Darryl’s maternal tasks revealed the immense level of intimacy that he enjoyed with the divas. “I even help them with their tucking,” he told me during a casual conversation. “On pageant nights,

I usually have a roll of Sellotape tape. I sit in the changing room, and line them up, on-by-one, to tuck their dicks away.”

No one at the nightclub questioned or challenged his authority. When I first arrived at Club Indigo to conduct fieldwork, he was quite welcoming, albeit taciturn. I knew instantly that I would have to work hard to gain his trust. I later discovered that he preferred to rule the House of Indigo as the reserved, self-effacing matriarch, but I also came to learn that he was as generous and he was stringent. With an unflinching hawk’s eye, he supervised every detail of the running of the nightclub. He oversaw the transactions at the cash registers with the same amount of scrutiny with which he instructed the girls how to walk properly on stage. “You ladies must mince, mince, mince,” he would say during pageant rehearsals, sashaying his short, stocky frame towards the stage (Field notes, MGJ Auditions). By this he meant that the girls should add a touch of campy flourish to their catwalk across the stage through the act of “mincing” (Mulligan, 2018, p.28).

Running Club Indigo was Darryl’s life’s work. Whether handing out advice or stern admonishment, he was always available to proffer maternal affection to every member of the House of Indigo and its patrons. Darryl was also devoted to creating a space for artistic, glamorous self-expression, as well a sense of freedom for each of the divas. In the *Jozi Queens* (deBarros, 2017) documentary, he stated:

For a lot of girls, especially for the drag queens in the community – the Black and Coloured communities – they cannot dress [in drag] there. But we allow them, here at Indigo, to be on stage and to be whatever they want to be. Club Indigo is a place where drag queens can find themselves and be themselves.

However, despite Darryl’s ideals, the divas could not be whomever and “whatever they want to be” at Club Indigo. As evidenced by his continual admonishments, Darryl’s maternal role was also characterised by the vigilant policing of the drag queens’ deportment and self-presentation<sup>5</sup>. This policing occurred outside the physical space of the nightclub as well.

On Valentine’s Day 2017, Darryl, Lawrence, and Miss Club Indigo 2017, Kelly, and I attended a cabaret performance by Zelda at the quaint D6 restaurant in the northwestern suburb of Emmarentia. We went in order to show Zelda support at

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<sup>5</sup> *The subcultural systems of gender policing are further explored in Chapters 6 and 7.*

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the event – to which she had been especially invited by the owner of the family restaurant. This also provided a unique opportunity to witness how an audience outside the context of Club Indigo received her performance. Just before we entered the D6 Eatery, Darryl pulled Kelly aside, straightening her Miss Club Indigo 2017 sash, priming her wig, and making sure that her tiara was pinned to it properly. Zelda enthralled the intimate audience with renditions of her favourite Shirley Bassey songs. The audience was also captivated by Kelly sitting demurely and quietly at our table – with her legs crossed and her hands clasped on her lap. During dinner, one woman walked up to our table to take a closer look at her sash, asking her about her pageant title. Smiling, Darryl answered: “This is our current queen at Club Indigo. She is here to represent us at the club and to show support to Zelda.”

While the cabaret performance was certainly well received by everyone in attendance, Kelly, too, basked in the admiration and compliments she received. The majority of the audience, it seemed, had not been in such close proximity to a drag queen before. Kelly’s posture and graceful, poised demeanor highlighted the seriousness of her ambassadorial role as the reigning beauty queen. Similarly, Darryl’s words and his fastidious attention to Kelly’s (and other divas’) appearance and deportment demonstrated the extent of his authority as the mother of the House of Indigo.

Bailey (2013) described the “labour of care” which he saw was attendant to the work of mothering and heading a drag and ballroom house. He observed that a “fetishistic femininity” (p. 80) was also attached to the various forms of maternal care, regardless of the gender identity or sexual orientation of the person who took on this role in the club subculture. Critical African feminist scholars continue urging us to think about gender, sexuality, and power in very localized and contextual ways (Amadiume, 1987; Bakare-Yusuf, 2003; Gqola, 2001; Lewis, 2001; 2008; Oyěwùmí, 1997; 2000; 2005; Tamale, 2011). Of equal importance is the imperative to draw linkages relating to desire, sexual and gendered practices, and identities in various transnational contexts (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001; Milani & Lazar 2017). In light of this, Bailey’s (2013) observation seems convincing to the extent that the dominant social script of mothering is the blueprint through which housemothers in queer subcultural communities operate (p. 108).

Darryl’s maternal role was clearly evidenced through his labours of care. This role was simultaneously self-imposed and projected onto him by everyone at the House of Indigo, and a fetishistic femininity enveloped his performance of the role through the strict policing of the drag queens’ feminine deportment and self-presentation. Because of this, it became clear to me that although Darryl

worked hard at his continual attempts to create a queer space that allowed the drag queens to “be whatever they want to be,” his words and actions were not easily reconciled with his ideals.

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### ***Father of the House: Lawrence Arendse***

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Lawrence Arendse’s role at the House of Indigo was that of a father figure. His role, and the authority which resulted therefrom, was neither questioned nor challenged; indeed, it was projected onto him by others who mostly referred to him using his first name and masculine pronouns. When he was formally introduced by the Mistress of Ceremonies at the annual beauty pageants, he was referred to as “father.” Otherwise, he did not seem to mind being called by his first name.

Lawrence was co-founder and co-owner of the nightclub, and had been Darryl’s life partner for more than 20 years. He generally oversaw the business side of the club. While his involvement in the club’s maintenance was largely financial, he was also very passionate about the well-being of the divas (his “girls,” as he referred them). He revelled in his capacity to offer them gifts such as evening gowns, shoes, makeup, and cosmetic care products. This was, seemingly, his way of demonstrating his paternal affection towards them. During the earliest stages of fieldwork, he said to me: “I want my girls to look their best. I want them to stand out from the other pageant queens in Jo’burg. We go out of our way to give them something special.”

His role as the father of the House of Indigo was not limited to offering material gifts to the divas. He frequently provided cash for public transport to divas who travelled to the nightclub from distant township locations such as KwaThema and Carletonville. He frequently balanced his paternal authority with his jovial equanimity. Always smiling, he commanded a high level of respect from everyone at the nightclub – the divas, the staff, and the patrons alike. His affable demeanour was evident as he walked around the nightclub, shaking hands and chatting with the patrons. Upon closer observation, it seemed that his paternal role within the House of Indigo could also be conceived as his own (unstated) form of drag. His performative role as the father of the House of Indigo did not imply that it was unreal, or fictitious in any way. Rather, it demonstrated the possibility of dissociating the concepts and practices associated with “fatherhood” from biological determinism.

Lawrence’s performance of his paternal role was neither clearly defined nor

easily categorizable. This is because he did not perform the role of a “typical” South African father in any hegemonic sense of the term. Rather, his paternal role – and its related fetishistic display of masculinity – exemplified a key dynamic of gender performativity. It highlighted the extent to which the category of fatherhood constitutes repetitive acts and modes of identification that become normalised over time (Butler, 1990; 1993). These performative acts and discourses, as I demonstrate, are not inherent to cisgender, heterosexual male identities or bodies. Lawrence’s embodiment of a slightly effeminate gay male subjectivity demonstrated the social dimensions of the role of fatherhood.

Lawrence’s managerial endeavours came at an emotional cost to him. This was because the nightclub was no longer a profitable business. And the fact that he and Daryl kept the nightclub running for a nearly 15 years was solely based on their respective financial as well as emotional efforts. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer people came to the nightclub on Saturdays. On several such quiet, rather dreary Saturday nights at the club, he spoke to me at length about the challenges he faced running the place. He would rub his bald head, lamenting the lack of support from Johannesburg’s class and racially stratified LGBTQIA+ consumers. He lamented the difficulty of trying to attract customers from such a fractured and widely-dispersed “community” – as he referred to them. He would segue into complaints about how queer rights’ organisations and activists looked down on him (as the sole financier, ergo metonym for the nightclub) and all his efforts to provide a space of acceptance, freedom, self-expression, and entertainment. He was equally disgruntled at the City of Johannesburg municipality’s reluctance to support the annual Miss Gay Jozi pageant.

Lawrence was proud of his steadfast efforts to make Club Indigo an institution within Johannesburg’s queer nightlife and entertainment landscape. He told me about the amount of time, money, and effort it took to keep a nightclub open for 16 years. His desire to create a space of freedom for people of colour was in response to the racially fragmented spatiality of queer consumer cultures and spaces in Johannesburg: Although democracy granted access to movement and consumption for formally oppressed racial and ethnic groups, the city was still (and remains) highly demarcated along race and class lines. Contestations regarding upward mobility and consumption practices among formally marginalised groups is, however, not easily resolved (Iqani, 2017; Posel, 2010). In his efforts to maintain and keep the nightclub open, this is precisely what Lawrence struggled with.

Lawrence’s primary concerns at the time of fieldwork were largely financial. In his role as father at the House of Indigo he was also its chief financier. An



undisclosed portion of his salary – as manager at a logistics company – was poured into maintaining the nightclub. The financial strain of keeping the doors opened on a weekly basis caused him a lot of stress, especially because so few people attended the weekly drag shows. This was also the case with some of the annual beauty pageants. For example, at the Miss Black Pride 2016 pageant the nightclub had been virtually empty, except for a handful of some of the contestants’ supporters, the regular patrons, and the staff. Lawrence had sat at the bar looking forlorn.

His unending lamentations about the nightclub’s dire financial straits signalled some of the main challenges faced by many men who assume the role of fatherhood in post-apartheid South Africa. Indeed, the ability to provide financially for the family is a common concern (Mkhize, 2006; Richter & Morrell, 2006), and being a “good” provider is an important component of many fathers’ sense of masculinity and successful fatherhood (Mkhize, 2006; Clowes, Ratele & Shefer, 2013; Ratele, 2016).

Lawrence’s preoccupation with the success (or shortcomings) of the business therefore indicated an important dimension of his role as the father of the House of Indigo. Although he never stated this explicitly, his (in)ability to provide for his girls and the rest of the House of Indigo family (by running it as a profitable and sustainable business) resulted in an enormous amount of strain to his own sense of successful fatherhood. The forlornness he felt at not getting support and patronage from the gay community highlighted the psychological and emotional costs which came with his paternal role.

A substantial body of research has disentangled the performance of fatherhood from biological determinism, and critically examined it as a composite of social, cultural, and economic factors (see, for example, Khunou, 2006; Padi et al., 2014; Ratele, 2016). Fatherhood encompasses more than just being a “good” financial provider and/or breadwinner. The significance of psycho-spiritual nurturance, emotional openness, sensitivity, and accessibility are also important factors in how men understand successful fatherhood and progressive masculinity (Clowes, Ratele & Shefer, 2013; Khunou, 2006; Mkhize, 2006). It is important to note that “there are many ways of interpreting fatherhood” (Morrell 2006, 23) and that, as with any other social category, is better understood as socio-historically and materially contingent.

Since the category of fatherhood has been divorced from the nexus between contraception and biology, the significance of gay fathers has become illuminating. Gay fathers – be they adoptive, social, or biological – enable us to broaden the definitions of fatherhood and masculinity, as well as the gendered

performances thereof (Benson et al., 2005; Schacher et al., 2005). Lawrence's case exemplifies the structural and ideological constraints of traditional definitions of fatherhood because his performance of it was partly shaped by the ideological construction of a fetishised masculinity (Bailey, 2013) that fixes the performance of successful masculinity to a father's ability to provide financially. At the same time, his identity as an openly gay social father added complexity to these categories. Although he was chiefly concerned with the successful running of the nightclub as a business, he was also invested in the emotional, psychic, and aesthetic welfare of "his girls." His desire to give them gifts and have them stand out from other drag and beauty queens demonstrated the multifaceted dimensions of his sense of fatherhood. Likewise, his pride and earnest investment in their aesthetic beauty and overall safety highlighted the emotional aspects of his role as an emotionally accessible father at the House of Indigo.

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## ***4.2 Drag Mentors and Divas: Madame Zelda and LaBelle A'deva***

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### ***Introducing Madame Zelda***

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Madame Zelda Chanel-Diamond was undoubtedly the most senior drag and beauty queen at Club Indigo. Her prominent career within South Africa's drag and pageant industry is well-established. As the foremost ambassador of the House of Indigo subculture, Zelda often gave interviews for mainstream daily newspapers and broadcast television news broadcasters. In many ways, her wide-spread publicity extended beyond drag and pageantry in her advocacy of LGBTQIA+ human rights and visibility in post-apartheid South Africa. As the winner of the national "Miss Gay RSA 2017" title, Zelda was, at the time of my research, the leading beauty pageant title holder at the House Indigo. Like Lawrence and Darryl, she enjoyed and wielded a significant amount of authority amongst the various divas at the nightclub. She took great pride in being an older sister and mentor to the younger divas. They looked up to her for guidance and advice regarding their own drag and pageant performances. She was the sole choreographer of the contestant's group dance and their catwalks at the

beauty pageants. On these special occasions, her fans would wait in line just to take a picture with her.

Her prestige as the chief ambassador for the nightclub extended beyond its walls. She often appeared on news programmes and lifestyle blogs as the spokesperson and organiser of the Miss Gay beauty pageant (10&5 interview). She was renowned as a premier drag artist around Johannesburg and was invited to perform at the “Queer Art Nights” hosted at Industry, another queer nightclub<sup>6</sup>. Zelda was the Mistress of Ceremonies for most of the beauty pageants at the Club Indigo, and excelled at keeping the audience in fits of laughter during the intervals. Her talents and ingenuity were not just limited to female impersonation and beauty pageantry, however. At the time of my fieldwork, she worked for the Anova Health Institute as an HIV/AIDS counsellor. In 2019 she came publicly out as a transgender woman and started an NGO focusing on transgender women’s primary and sexual health, public safety, and well-being.

Zelda’s introduction to the art of female impersonation and beauty pageantry was serendipitous. Although her training in the performing arts and her involvement in several different dance academies influenced her trajectory as an artist, her childhood impromptu shows for her younger siblings carved out her drag destiny. During our record interview in 2017, she explained:

I always knew that I was an entertainer from young because when my mom was away I had to entertain my siblings. That time my mother and I were the same size so I would put on one of her dresses and shoes. There was a wig involved some way or the other... It was drama deluxe and they would laugh. They would sit on the bed and I would do these entertainment scenes, but it was all from my mind. It was my fantasy, let me put it that way. I would just speak, and say a line, and sing a song. They loved it and that’s how I entertained them.

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**6** *Industry was situated in the gentrified inner-city area of Maboneng. It opened on September 4, 2016 with much fan-fare and heavy publicity as Johannesburg’s newest space of queer inclusivity and diversity. Unfortunately, the nightclub was closed after only one year due to lack of community support and patronage. Industry’s untimely closure also added weight to Lawrence’s anxieties about running a successful queer nightclub in Johannesburg. In an interview with the gay lifestyle blog, [MambaOnline.com](http://MambaOnline.com), he attributed this lack of patronage to young people’s desire for assimilation within heteronormative spaces and their predilection for online dating sites. He said: “People don’t want to meet in clubs anymore, now they meet online; on Facebook and Grindr” ([MambaOnline](http://MambaOnline.com), 2017).*

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Zelda's debut in drag began with a gold, lamé dress. She had neither dressed in drag nor entered a beauty pageant before she went to Club Indigo for the first time in 2008. She decided to perform in drag for a group of close friends at a pre-Pride party. She did not possess what she described as "drag-related" clothing at the time, so borrowed a hand-sewn dress from her sister-in-law for her performance: "It was just for fun," she told me, pulling out the metallic gold lamé dress she had worn. Again, during one of our initial interviews, she stated: "My makeup wasn't even on point because I didn't know about foundation and layering and x, y, and z like I do now."

After this close-knit gathering, Zelda and her friends decided to continue the lesbian and gay Pride festivities at Club Indigo: "The first time I went to the club was when it was still in the city centre," she reminisced. "I was brought up in a reserved home so I had never been to the club before." Upon arrival, her friends urged her to enter the Miss Black Pride pageant which was taking place that night. Despite being unseasoned, she won second place. She recalled being affably welcomed and guided backstage on that evening by Darryl, Brooke Logan, and Madame La Rochelle<sup>7</sup>. She told me how these three individuals had played a foundational role in launching her career as a drag artist and beauty queen, but added "I had to teach myself by looking [at] my drag sisters [La Rochelle and Brooke]. But I never had a drag mother. I can't even say Darryl is my drag mother. Darryl is like my gay mother."

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### **Introducing LaBelle A'Deva**

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LaBelle A'deva, known affectionally as A'deva, was another prominent drag artist at Club Indigo. She was the winner of the Miss Club Indigo 2010 pageant title, and enjoyed significant prestige at the club. She was also older sister and

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<sup>7</sup> *Although I had never met her, Madame La Rochelle proved to be a poignant absent-presence within the Club Indigo family. She was a popular and much-loved hostess at Club Indigo, what in the nightclub world jokingly (albeit misogynistically) referred to as the "door whore." Stories about her ridiculous antics and her sharp tongue littered Lawrence, Darryl, and Zelda's conversations about the club's history, as well as those of their many over-the-top friends (many of whom have since moved away from Johannesburg or died). Madame La Rochelle died in 2009 from AIDS-related illnesses, but her absent presence was keenly felt not only through the narratives about her personality, but also in the gold framed photograph which hung above the hostess' booth at the entrance. Moreover, traces of her flamboyant personality remained in a glistening, orange evening gown which Zelda inherited.*

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mentor to the younger divas. She often took to the stage as the Mistress of Ceremonies. Her acclaim as a dancer and lip-synch performer was highlighted on the special Saturday evenings dedicated solely to her as the headlining act. She also choreographed some of the main dance sequences for the Miss Black Pride pageant.

It was hard to miss her despite her short, slim figure. Her outspoken, exuberant personality complemented her captivating performances. She was the founder of a small dance company which she had hoped would go mainstream in the entertainment industry. She also hoped to become a choreographer for back-up dancers in pop music videos. She was a proud graduate of the AFDA motion film and live performance academy. Her induction into the world of drag also began with dresses and women's clothing. Her process of coming out was multifaceted in that she first came out as a gay man, and later came out as a femme gay man. Although she enjoyed wearing women's clothing offstage in her everyday life, her definition of drag was strictly limited to her performances on stage. Although her family was supportive of her sexual orientation, her father was initially uncomfortable with seeing her wearing women's clothing. She related the following story at the hair salon where she worked as a receptionist:

When I started entering the beauty pageants at the club, I literally bought dresses and I had to hide them. Lawrence can tell you that story. I remember calling Lawrence saying: "I'm going to come to the club as a boy. I'm only going to dress up there and I will change after the pageant." Lawrence said it was okay. For a full year while I was first princess, that was my life. I would wash my clothes at home but I would always lie. It's so weird I would lie to my parents and say: "I'm choreographing a dance piece, and the clothes you see on the line are for my dancers. It was a lie, they were mine." That was not the best year of my life but when 2010 came and I became Miss Club Indigo, I was like: "You know what? It's time for me to come out." But I had to deal with myself first because I realised that the enemy is not the people, the enemy is you because nobody ever said you don't have to be or do this. You pre-empt it and that's why you always feel like the world is against you.

Although A'Deva had previously won a pageant title, she later saw herself as more of a drag performer. She explained: "I'm done with pageants. I'm not a girl who likes to be seen in an evening gown. If you give me a gown and a sash, within five minutes it will be on the floor, and I'll be dancing. That long dress will become a 'freakum dress' [sexy mini-skirt]." A'Deva's words do not reflect a sense of disdain for beauty pageantry, however. Indeed, she was still very involved in

the pageants as a choreographer and lead performer for the drag trio “The Blue Belles.” She felt, however, that her talents were better expressed through performance and female impersonation on stage: “When I stepped into the drag world, all I knew were pageants,” she said in her husky voice, “not knowing that you can just be a performer, there’s so much to do. So, within my ten years [at the club], I realised that I was not a pageant queen. I was born to be a performer.”

A’Deva pushed the subcultural boundaries of “proper” deportment as a successful ambassador for the House of Indigo. She was sassy and boisterous. Her performance of cosmopolitan femininity did not, however, stray far from the subcultural valued forms of gender performance (see Chapter 6). She had earned the privilege to do away with the responsibilities and symbols associated with the Miss Club Indigo title. Unlike the younger drag contestants and performers, she did not wear a tiara or sash. Her deportment on and off stage was fierce. She commanded the stage with a distinctive authority and a sense of defiance. While the younger, inexperienced drag performers were often demure in their stage presence, A’Deva appeared to be very seasoned and self-assured.

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### ***4.3 The Younger Divas of Club Indigo: Sorority and Friendship Networks***

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This section introduces some of the younger beauty contestants and aspirant drag performers at The House of Indigo. It also outlines their various sorority networks from which they gained support and solidarity, and highlights the inevitable competition among these younger divas.

The Indigo divas’ pathways into the world of drag and beauty pageantry were established through strong ties of kinship with their peers. Few of the divas ever came to the club alone, or of their own accord. Their kinship bonds were so close-knit that they mostly referred to each other as sisters, rather than just as friends. While they treated both Zelda and A’Deva as established and experienced mentors, they also referred to them as sisters. These intimate, platonic relationships between the budding divas were largely built on mutual respect and trust.

Their respective bonds of friendship and sorority were primarily based on their shared interests and aspirations, particularly their passion and love for drag

performance and beauty pageantry. The divas often associated in pairs or groups of three or four individuals, sharing material resources, knowledge and skills, as well as giving each other emotional support. These smaller friendship groups were thus intimate nodes in a network of sorority among the collective cohort of younger divas. In many instances, the relationships between them were either established or further developed outside the nightclub. Participation in the drag and beauty subculture at the nightclub, however, facilitated the development of these relationships.

The boundaries of these sisterly nodes – and the larger network in which they operated – were porous. They were shaped by the ever-changing dynamics of solidarity, support, and material constraints, and the social drama of quotidian human interaction. While some of the younger divas were constantly present at the club, others were only there during the pageant evenings and/or the events leading up to them. The porosity of this network of younger divas afforded young, aspirant beauty contestants or drag artists from various parts of the city the space to come in and out the House of Indigo. For example, some were only seen once a year at the Miss Gay Jozi or Miss Club Indigo auditions. If they were unsuccessful, they would not be seen at the club until the following year's auditions. Some would not return at all. Their intermittent presence, however, did not hinder their participation and significance within this subculture context.

One intimate sisterly pair was Rosé Monét (Miss Club Indigo 2013) and Portia (Miss Club Indigo 2015). Their friendship began in their home township in the south of Johannesburg where they had both grown up and still lived with their families. Unlike Portia, Rosé Monét did not visit the club every weekend. However, when she did attend the special events and pageants, the two were inseparable. They often sat on the plush red leather couches, at the farthest right-hand corner of the bar, gossiping in their evening gowns, their sparkling tiaras pinned firmly to the top of their wigs. They also got ready together in the dressing room, working close to each other as they shared makeup, clothes, and accessories. Although they were both pageant title-holders, these two did not perform as headlining acts. However, they often performed as opening acts for Zelda and A'Deva, who they tended to look up to as mentors for guidance on their drag styles and performances. On stage, Rosé Monét and Portia enjoyed lip-synching to ballads as a duet.

Tracy, Olivia, and Phoenix were another group of close friends. They had met backstage at the Miss Gay Valentine 2013 pageant in Daveyton, a township in the far east of Johannesburg. They became friends, and eventually decided to form a drag performance trio named T.O.P. Divas (the first letters of their respective

pseudonyms). They usually performed on pageant evenings and other special events at the nightclub. On one occasion during the course of my fieldwork they were the headlining act. Their set began at 2 am, and they charmed the audience with their solo and group lip-synching performances.

Phoenix lived with her mother and younger brother in the township of Evaton, some 46 km outside Johannesburg. Tracy and Olivia had known each other for much longer, and they both lived with their respective families 132 km outside of Johannesburg. Tracy won the Miss Black Pride 2014 title, and Phoenix won the same title the following year. Although Olivia had not yet won a beauty pageant at the time of my fieldwork, she still hoped to – and thus continued to enter the different pageants at Club Indigo – and she was still a very significant member of the trio.

The trio did not rehearse in the same venue together because of the distances they would have had to travel to each other's homes. Travelling to the club by public transport would have proved arduous, costly, and inconvenient due to their work and college schedules during the week. During our recorded interview, she explained that they devised a plan to combat these challenges:

We share our ideas on our Whatsapp group. We also share videos and voice notes about our choreographed steps for the group performances. We also use it to discuss our group outfits for each set. We then prepare our own solo performances and send each other song ideas.

Foxy and Precious were 21-year-old friends from Soweto. They shared similar stories of coming out as trans women. Their trajectories of self-identification were not exactly the same, but their stages of coming out bore important similarities. Although they had both initially identified as effeminate gay teenagers, their journeys of coming out as transgender girls became more difficult as they neared the end of their high school careers. Precious recounted how Foxy had come out as transgender first. She remembered the devastation she felt at seeing her close friend being turned away from the school gates for wearing feminine accessories with her school uniform. She was also taken aside by the school authorities during exam periods and threatened for sporting a girl's hairstyle. Witnessing this institutional discrimination meted against her friend caused Precious to fear coming out as transgender. While we sat for a light lunch and an interview at a local restaurant near her home in Soweto, she revealed: "Although I knew in my heart that I was a girl, I decided to hide that side of myself until I left high school."



Foxy introduced Precious to Club Indigo where they both competed for the Miss Gay Jozi 2013 crown. This was Precious' first introduction to the pageant world. Their involvement in the several pageants at Club Indigo also resulted in their respective journeys of self-acceptance as young trans women. Precious went on to compete in other drag beauty pageants around Johannesburg, such as the Miss Gay Valentine and the Miss Gay Queen of Queens. After several ardent attempts, Foxy eventually won the Miss Gay Jozi 2016 title – thus elevating her subcultural status as a public ambassador for the House of Indigo. Precious continued to enter other beauty pageants without much success. Undeterred, she pressed on until she eventually won the Miss Black Pride 2018 crown.

One pair of divas who actually did meet at Club Indigo were Kelly (24) and Leila (25). They both entered the Miss Club Indigo 2016 pageant. That was the first beauty pageant Leila had ever entered. She was nervous when I extended my hand to shake hers at the bar. She told me her name, and pointed to her five cousins and friends who had come to support her. This was also Kelly's first time entering a beauty pageant at Club Indigo. I later discovered that she had won three beauty pageant titles before. Although she had not come with any of her friends or family from home, she had numerous supporters in the audience. Her exuberance and sassy command of the stage set her apart from her competitors, and many people in the audience predicted that she would take the crown.

Kelly and Leila became very close in the three weeks leading up to the final crowning night. One would have not guessed that they were actually competing in the same pageant at which they had only just recently met. Kelly eventually won the crown, and their sister-friendship continued to blossom in the following months. They often sat gossiping and laughing at the hostess's counter – which was reserved for the Miss Club Indigo ambassador for welcoming the guests. One night I sat with Kelly at her hostess' counter before Leila arrived. As we slowly sipped our ciders at the bar, she had this to say about her friend: "I just love that girl. She's become like such a sister to me. She even visits me at home sometimes. She drives all the way to my house on the opposite end of the city. We cook, relax, watch music videos, and gossip."

An important dynamic in the interrelationships between this network of Indigo divas was respect. At the very least, an outward *display* of respect was demanded of them. This was evidenced through the general cordiality and solidarity which they displayed towards one another – even if they were not necessarily close. The divas often lent each other items of clothing, and there was rarely any discernible antagonism between the competing individuals. During pageant rehearsals,

contestants helped their sisters or members of other groups with their individual catwalks and choreography for the group dances. In this way, a network of sorority and solidarity was established and encouraged among the broader collective of the younger Indigo Divas.

It was also clear that the younger divas held both Zelda and A'Deva in very high regard. They were never disrespectful or rude to the more established divas. This was partly because it was Zelda who decided which of the younger queens would perform on stage on Saturday evenings. She also decided if and/or when a younger diva's drag performance was ready enough for them to be considered an established performer at the House of Indigo. As she was in charge of the evening's programme every Saturday, all protocols and proceedings had to be run by her – including the DJ's music set during intermissions. Most of the younger divas therefore deferred to her and treated her with the utmost respect. On one occasion, a younger diva asked Darryl for permission to perform her favourite song on stage. "Go ask Zelda," said the mother, "you know that she is in charge of the programme. Both Darryl and Lawrence demanded that the younger divas show a high level of respect both to the older mentors and to themselves as parents. The word "respect" was also frequently repeated by Darryl and Zelda as they instructed the girls on how to walk the ramp and face the judges.

Competition was tough on pageant evenings as each contestant vied for the title and crown. One of the contestants at the Miss Black Pride 2016 told me that even though she loves her sisters, it was important for her to look out for herself first and foremost. She recalled that her evening dress had gone missing at the Miss Gay Daveyton<sup>8</sup> beauty pageant the previous year. The devastation and trauma she had felt continued to haunt her despite the fact that the pageant had been organised and attended by different people in another part of the city. Although the moral ethos of respect and solidarity was encouraged among the divas, the possibility of theft and/or sabotage still loomed over the pageant evenings at the nightclub. In efforts to curb this, Darryl said the following to the hopeful contestants at the Miss Gay Jozi 2016 auditions: "It's very important for you girls to help each other. It's a sisterhood, so there should be none of that jealousy and stealing stuff. You must have fun with each other."

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**8** *Daveyton is a township approximately 50 kilometers east of Johannesburg's city center. It was established in 1952, and named after the municipal mayor, William Albert Davey.*

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Although pageant contestants generally helped and supported each other, the possibilities of theft or sabotage remained quite real. Although the ethos of sisterhood and respect was expressed by both parents of the House of Indigo, it was sometimes transgressed. In efforts to curb this threat, there was a zero-tolerance policy when it came to theft at the club. One of the contestants at the Miss Black Pride 2016 pageant was shocked when she discovered that her cellphone was missing. Tears welled in her eyes as she related the trouble she had gone through to buy it. The ensuing drama resulted in a frantic search for the missing phone backstage – much to Darryl and Lawrence’s irritation and disappointment. The phone was eventually found inside another queen’s duffle bag. The latter individual was already a suspect because of her rumoured history of theft. This was the final straw for Darryl and Lawrence. They asked her to go backstage for a private discussion, and we later found out that they had summarily stripped her of her pageant title and had told her never to return to the club again.

Apart from the incident recounted above, there were a few other anecdotes of theft and/or competitive sabotage that my interlocutors told me about, but I did not directly witness any of them. For example, Precious was navigating through a complex array of emotions during the week before the final crowning event for the Miss Gay Jozi pageant. She admitted to me that she was both confident and nervous about the upcoming evening. She had recently transformed an evening gown which she had worn at a previous pageant into a stylish cocktail dress, and this made her feel more at ease about the whole affair. I asked her about the relationships between the contestants, and if she witnessed any cattiness. With a casual shrug of her shoulders, she seemed to be neither bothered by my question nor the possibility of her belongings possibly missing:

**Precious:** Even when people steal my things, I will become sad for just a short while, and then I will move on.

**Katlego:** Doesn’t that discourage you from entering other pageants?

**Precious:** Not really. I know that it’s part of the pageant world.

Precious’ words evidence the tensions between the subcultural tenets of solidarity and the element of competition. This was evident among the competing beauty contestants, when the apparent solidarities between the pairs and smaller groups of the divas were simultaneously complicated by jealousy and competition between them.

This tension, however, did not undermine the overall significance of the bonds of sorority, which existed in tandem with the divas’ competitiveness – and it lent

dynamism to my critical examination of these subcultural hierarchies and bonds of kinship. Other ethnographers of beauty pageants have demonstrated how scandal and jealousy are part and parcel of the competition (Barnes, 1994; Cohen, Wilk & Stoeltje, 1996; Balogun, 2012; Faria, 2013; Lieu, 2013; Ochoa, 2014). Similarly, scholars and documentary filmmakers have shown how the occurrences of theft, jealousy, and sabotage among queer subcultural group members have complicated the interpersonal dynamics within these communities (deFay, 2003; 2017; Kulick, 1998; Livingstone, 1991; Reid, 2013). The anecdotes I have highlighted in the context of Club Indigo illustrate the tough sense of competition and jealousy among beauty contestants, and they also problematise Lawrence, Darryl, and Zelda's claims about Club Indigo being such a "safe space" of freedom and empowerment.

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## **4.4 Masculinities and the Gender Divide at Club Indigo**

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This section underlines the performances of different masculinities within the House of Indigo. I also further discuss the gendered divisions and hierarchies, and how these were reified by sexual attraction and/or fetishisation between the different members of the House. I show that the performances and boundaries of cisgender masculinity were both affirmed and sometimes fetishised, and how these masculinities occupied a marginal position in the subcultural hierarchy.

Lawrence continually reiterated that Club Indigo was more than just a nightclub for drag queens. He stated this several times during our casual conversations. He would rest his elbow on the bar counter, take the occasional puff from his cigarette, and say, for example: "You know, in our communities there is a lot of homophobia and people look down on gays – especially drag queens. So, when people come here, they feel comfortable and free. It's a welcoming space."

His utterances (often repeated using different words) emphasised the everyday experiences of many Black and Coloured queer people in South African townships. The constant threats of emotional, psychological, and physical violence continue to haunt millions of LGBTQIA+ citizens of colour – especially those who live in poor, working class township communities (Bennett & Reddy,

2015; Matebeni, 2011; Msibi, 2011; Makhubu, 2012; Judge, 2017; Tucker 2009). Lawrence's pronouncements about the prevalence of homo- and transphobia in poor township communities thus enabled him to position Club Indigo as a space that was "welcoming," "comfortable," and "safe." These spatial attributes, he frequently emphasised, were extended to anyone who wanted to experience them – whether or not they were available to them within broader hegemonic society. Lawrence's particular conceptions of freedom, comfort, and inclusivity therefore fell within the realm of possibility for any potential patron – including those who were cisgender and/or heterosexual.

It was not uncommon to see cisgender men and women enjoying themselves at the club. Their hetero-, bi-, or pansexuality was presumed on the basis of their objects of desire, and their flirtatious or romantic behaviour towards individuals of the opposite sex. Many of them visited the club on the pageant evenings – often to support contestants who they knew. They sometimes came to the club when it was not very busy. I was particularly interested in the cisgender men who either patronized the club regularly or worked there on a weekly basis. The latter group included two barmen, the disk jockey, and the bouncer, whom I introduced in the previous chapter.

Eric, in his early 40s at the time of my fieldwork, was a cisgender and openly gay man who had been coming to the club ever since it opened in 2003. He and his boyfriend at the time were also cisgender men who were key interlocutors for this study. These six men were important members of the House of Indigo, and their respective performances of masculinity were significant features in the structuring of gender and sexual dynamics at the club. Eric continued visiting the club throughout its trek to different venues in the inner city. This made him privy to the vicissitudes of the clientele and the interpersonal dynamics among different members of the House. He had a wealth of knowledge about the various divas, regulars, and staff – both present and former. He had witnessed a lot of revelry and countless changes over the years, and he had also seen a lot of drama unfold. He was himself sometimes at the centre of dramatic episodes that usually involved back-biting, unrequited love, or infidelity – but one would never have guessed this giving his unassuming and reticent demeanour. Every weekend, he sat at the farthest left-hand corner of the bar, sipping on his glass of rum and coke. I did not observe anyone else occupying his seat throughout my fieldwork.

Eric's long-standing patronage and loyalty made him a beloved member of the House of Indigo. He was held in high esteem by the parents, divas, and staff alike. He often sat as a judge for the beauty pageants, and knew exactly what it took to

win a crown. He had forgotten the exact number of times he had judged these contests. Although slightly effeminate, his overall masculine self-presentation, and his reserved and mature comportment, commanded deferential treatment from the younger divas.

Eric told me that he preferred to date “straight-acting” men. His sexual preference therefore made him both unavailable and unattracted to the younger effeminate divas. During one of our conversations at the bar he said: “I usually don’t date guys from the club. I don’t want any stress and drama. And my last serious boyfriend cheated on me, so I don’t want to go through all of that again. That’s why I mind my own business. This statement about not dating guys from the club was confirmed, however, by the fact that he visited the club with his then boyfriend on weekly basis – whom he had met at the club. They usually sat next to each other while nursing their drinks, laughing, and gossiping. It was very rare to see either one of them on the dance floor or sitting with anyone else. It appeared to me that their very close intimacy may have also been due to the hurt that Eric felt at being cheated on by his previous boyfriend.

Unlike the other masculine guys (the staff members) at the club, Eric was not positioned marginally within the House of Indigo subculture. His long-standing patronage and experience afforded a high status and authority within the subcultural hierarchy. Similarly, his open self-identification as gay brought him within the central fold of filial and romantic intimacy within this kinship structure. Together, the assemblage between his gay sexuality, experience, and consumer loyalty thus positioned him as an older and highly respected brother to the younger divas and guys.

The four staff members were treated as men by the Lawrence, Darryl, and the divas alike. Everyone referred to them as “the guys” – which, linguistically, further reified their masculinity. This was also evidenced by how they performed traditionally masculine roles such as lifting heavy supplies or occasionally repairing broken fixtures around the club. The gendered performances of their work duties resulted in them socialising mostly with one other. Much like the nodal sister-friend groups, they mostly hung around in their small group. They sat next to each other on the plush white leather couches chatting, laughing, and sharing a hookah pipe. They often had very little work to do during the quiet, monotonous Saturday nights. Besides serving the occasional drink or changing the playlist at the DJ booth, they busied themselves by playing digital games or scrolling through social media networks on their cellphones. I did not assume that they were heterosexual: each volunteered this information about themselves at different stages during my fieldwork. One of them emphasised his belief that

because he had fathered children his heterosexuality (and/or masculinity) could not be questioned.

Apart from these unsolicited proclamations, the “guys” gendered identities were never called into question. They seemed to assert a division between their own masculinities and the hyperfeminine identities of the divas. They clearly enjoyed each other’s company and they related to each other on the basis of their masculine performances. The guys always treated the divas with a high level of respect and cordiality, and were always on hand to help beauty contestants carry their bags filled with makeup and clothes. They sometimes engaged in playful flirtation with the divas; and sometimes they would blush shyly if a diva or other patron gave them a compliment. However, they made sure that their heterosexual masculinities were clearly understood – through their behaviour as well as their explicit statements about themselves. However, the divas sometimes crossed this boundary. One of the divas once sidled up next to me while I was sitting at the bar, and whispered that she had heard that one of the guys was bisexual. The other party with whom I was sitting chimed in to support this claim, but neither had any evidence to corroborate it. This piece of gossip was not particularly surprising since speculation about “straight” men’s sexual fluidity often circulated with rapidity at the club. The truth about this staff member’s sexuality remained a subject of much debate, but his masculine identity was not questioned or challenged (most certainly not his face).

The most salient aspect of this piece of gossip affirmed an important dynamic in this masculine/feminine division between the divas and the guys. It suggested that while the guys’ sexualities were debatable (behind their backs, of course), their masculinities remained intact. The divas’ sexualities and their sexual orientation, however, were up for debate. It was clearly understood that the divas were attracted to cisgendered men who identified anywhere along the LGBTQIA+ scale. This much was clear in their salacious tales about their sexual escapades and their desire. In many instances, the divas stated that they preferred to date or have sex with masculine men (whether straight, bisexual, or gay). Although there were no clearly stated rules forbidding any sexual or romantic intimacy between the guys and the divas, I did not observe any relationships. The rapport between the guys and the divas remained extremely cordial, and I only ever observed fleeting instances of playful flirtation. Even though one of the guys’ sexual orientation was called into question through gossip among the divas, the perception of his (and the other guys’) masculinity always remained intact.

Ethnographers of queer subcultural communities in different parts of

Sub-Saharan Africa have observed that their gender hierarchies and dynamics often reflect those of the broader hegemonic society (Guidio, 2009; Livermon, 2014; Reid, 2013; Teunis, 2001; Tucker, 2009). This was also true in my study. The clear gender division between the guys and the divas at Club Indigo was clearly delineated, policed, and reified by all parties concerned, and was reified through the division of work duties, styles of dress, and comportment – as well as in the gendered labour of pageantry. An important finding in my research was that the possibility of sexual fluidity fell disproportionately upon the cisgendered guys, thus placing them within realm of desirability (and availability) for the divas. As such, the guys’ cisgender masculinities transformed them into objects for the divas’ erotic gaze. In addition to this, the hypersexualisation of the guys’ masculinities rendered them even more marginal in this context. Xavier Livermon (2012) develops the concept of cultural labour to describe forms of creative and vernacular expression by queer people of colour in order to create spaces of visibility and belonging (p.304). In the following chapter, I argue that the beauty pageants and drag performances at the House of Indigo can be seen as forms of cultural labour. The divas were more prominent in these forms of cultural labour – more so than the guys. They were at the *centre* of both the literal and figurative stage, while the guys were positioned at the margins as their servers and/or objects of sexualised desire.

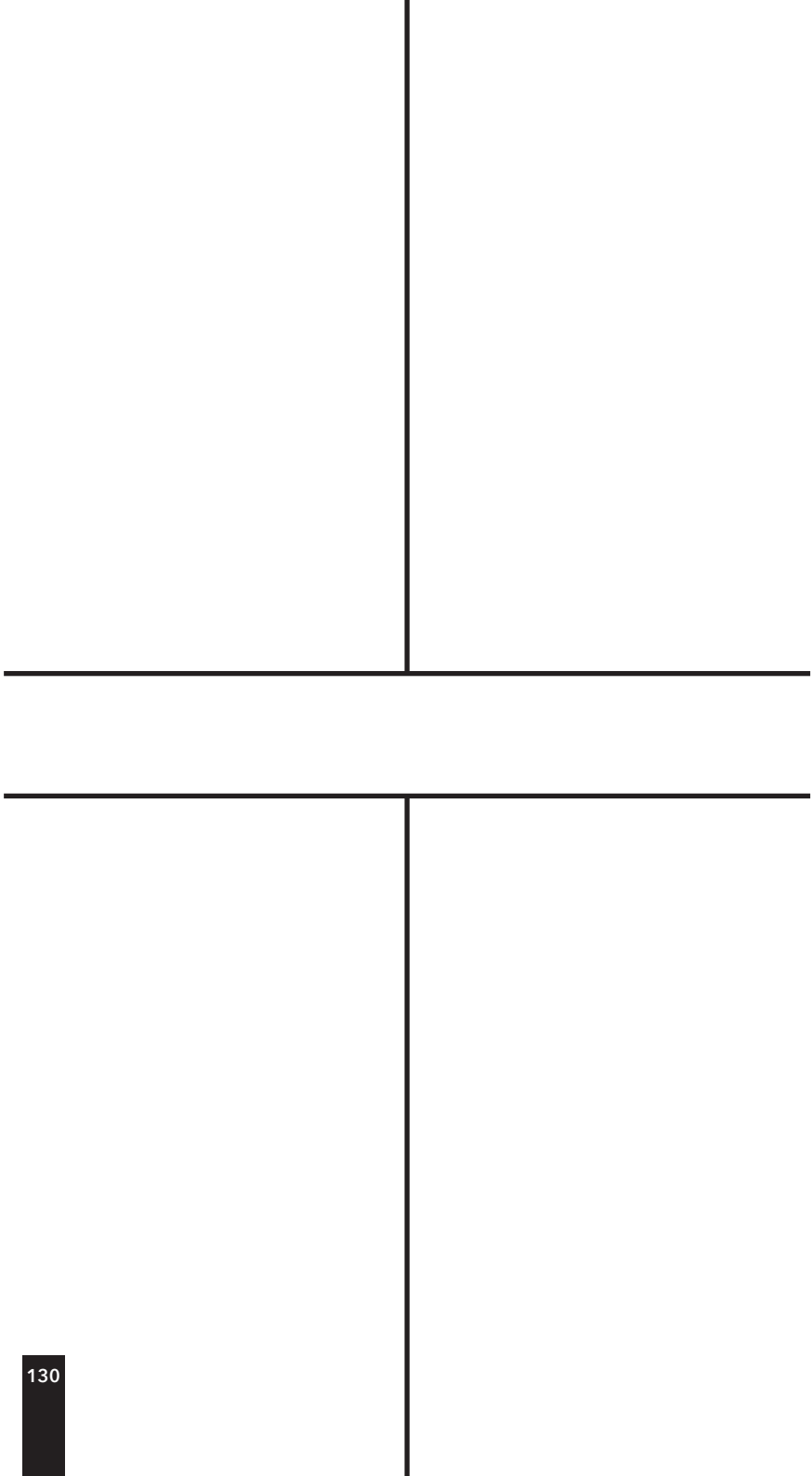
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## Conclusion

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This chapter introduced some of the key members at House of Indigo. Paying close attention to different bonds of subcultural kinship, the chapter outlined the hierarchical structure which governed the House of Indigo. I discussed the various interpersonal relationships within the House, as well as the power dynamics upon which they were based. I showed how different networks of friendship and sorority were constructed among the younger members of the House, as well as the tensions and nuances of competitiveness that were evident. I also outlined the performances of cisgender masculinities among some of the men who frequented and worked at the club, and demonstrated how these masculinities were simultaneously fetishised and marginal within this hierarchical structure.





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**CHAPTER 5**

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**DOING FAMILY:  
MATERIAL CULTURE AND  
QUEER BELONGING  
IN THE HOUSE OF INDIGO**

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This chapter outlines the kinship structure forged at the House of Indigo, situating the hierarchies and networks of kinship within the broader sociocultural meanings of family in contemporary South Africa. As a point of departure, I take a social constructionist view of kinship as performative, and highlight the practices of sociality by which the various members of the House of Indigo came to conceive of themselves as part of a family structure. In particular, I focus on the use and distribution of material objects such as clothing, makeup, and accessories, arguing that the materiality of objects is deeply significant to the cultural practice, or doing, of kinship. I also draw attention to the significance of the divas' birth and subcultural families as networks of emotional and material support, analysing the sociocultural meanings of consumption within both contexts. I suggest that both networks of kinship (birth and subcultural families) functioned in tandem within a system that I call complementary kinship.

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## 5.1 Kinship as Social Practice

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The term “family” recurred in different ways throughout my fieldwork. At the linguistic level, the notion of family (and its related concepts) featured prominently in my interlocutors’ interview and conversational responses. They constructed the House of Indigo and its kinship structures explicitly as a particular kind of family. They also described how they felt a keen sense of belonging within this family. Imani, for example, was a novice beauty contestant at the club. Although she had participated in a few smaller pageants in her hometown of Venda (in the Limpopo province), Miss Gay Jozi 2017 was the first time she had entered a regional pageant. Imani identified as a transgender woman, and was one of two hearing-impaired contestants who entered the pageant that year (the other was her friend, Ella). During one of the long breaks in the pageant rehearsals, we conducted a recorded interview with the help of her sign language interpreter. During our 2017 interview, she described her first experience at a Club Indigo in the following manner:

They made me feel accommodated even though I was deaf. They treated me as part of the family and helped me with everything, even my comfort. They also helped us [herself and Ella] with socialising with different personalities and advice. They helped us with the rules of the steps and how they do it. That’s how they made us better when it came to the competition.

This excerpt indicates that Imani’s conception of “family” extended beyond the biological domain. Her perception of the ways in which she was welcomed into the House of Indigo, shows that she disentangled notions of kinship and family from heteronormative, biological and/or reproductive determinism. The subcultural hierarchies and social bonds sketched out in her response evidence “alternative kin practices that redefine home and family” (Bailey, 2013, p. 89). That she was accommodated, given help and advice, and treated as part of the House of Indigo was not especially remarkable: such demonstrations of solidarity tend to occur in quotidian friendship, romantic, and/or family relations between human subjects. However, Imani’s framing of these affectionate practices as contributing to her betterment as a beauty contestant separated the concepts of

family and kinship from the “fictions of ‘bloodline’” (Butler, 2004, p. 103). Her recollections demonstrate that she felt part of the House of Indigo family not because she was born into it, but because she was welcomed and accommodated through various members’ kindness towards her. Butler (2004) suggested that kinship variations which depart from the heterosexually based family structure are commonly construed as dangerous and disruptive to the “natural and cultural laws said to sustain human intelligibility” (p. 104). Imani’s perspective was that the practices of family she observed at the House of Indigo were neither dangerous nor disruptive, but instead provided the foundational basis for her improvement as one of its members.

Several of my interlocutors also described the House of Indigo as a “home.” They highlighted the interrelationships between the members’ shared life histories, material aspirations, and world views. These relationships were actively and consciously built and reproduced by agentive individuals. Each member at the House of Indigo had significant (although not the same) affective and material investments in the bonds of kinship forged therein. The metaphor of “home” also indexed how these relationships were mediated through the consumption and distribution of various material commodities, such as makeup, evening gowns, shoes, tiaras, jewellery, and so on, as I discuss in the following section.

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## **5.2 Material Support, Solidarity, and Belonging**

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The Indigo divas’ bonds with their respective birth families demonstrated that the practice of kinship was demonstrated in support and solidarity. The purpose of this section is to show how these practices were made visible through material commodities, affection, acceptance, and a keen sense of belonging.

Precious (Miss Black Pride 2017) described her relationship with her birth mother as follows:

My mother is very supportive of me, and what I do at the pageants. When she goes shopping without me, she even buys me clothes. Like, for this year’s [Miss Gay Jozi 2017] pageant, we didn’t have enough money to buy a new gown, so she helped me transform my cocktail

dress from the last pageant [Miss Club Indigo 2016] into a new gown.

Similarly, Kelly (Miss Club Indigo 2016) recalled how protective her father was of her. Smiling and bobbing her head slightly sideways during our interview, she asserted:

My father is very fond of me, he even still calls me his little girl. Sometimes he gives me money to buy dresses and makeup for the beauty pageants. At first, he was scared of seeing me in girls' clothes. He would ask me why I didn't act like his brother – who is also gay, but butch. But he got used to it over time. Now, he supports me all the way.

Precious and Kelly's responses clearly demonstrate the support and affection which they received from their birth parents – such as the purchase or tailoring of clothing for the beauty pageants. These performative acts of parental affection echo David L. Eng's (2010) conjecture that "family is not just whom you choose but on whom you choose to spend your money" (p. 30). More importantly, these performative enactments of support highlight "the values of care and effort that go into the creation of kin ties" (Carsten, 2004, p.150). The support, care, and consumption which Precious and Kelly describe thus fed into in a dynamic assemblage of complementary kinship from which they gleaned a keen sense of acceptance and belonging.

My interlocutors' participation as family members of the House of Indigo was complementary to their biological family bonds. Moreover, the familial terms and metaphors they used in their descriptions of various queer members of the subculture fit with local understandings and constructions of the extended family. Indeed, their perception of the House of Indigo as a family reflected how extended families are structured throughout South Africa – particularly in how they play a significant role in the construction of personhood for the majority of post-apartheid citizens<sup>9</sup>. The negotiation of different kinship bonds – with their birth families as well as their queer family at the House of Indigo – informed the

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<sup>9</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) argued that the postcolonial African subject is simultaneously traditional and modern, and so can have numerous mothers, fathers, siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles. More importantly, they suggested that these extended family bonds need not be based in any biological ties. The personhood of this African subject exists "in relation and with reference to, even as part of, a wide array of significant others" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012, p.53). These significant others are often incorporated into the African subject's conceptions and doings of family. My own theoretical analysis of family in this study builds upon the above conceptions of personhood and subjectivity in the African context. The indigenous African philosophy of *Ubuntu* (discussed in chapter 4) – one based upon an ethics of shared community, personhood, and belonging – thus proves an apt analytical concept in relation to my discussions of family in this study.

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Indigo divas' collective sense of empowerment. At the same time, these different familial domains were not mutually exclusive; they were complementary and reinforcing, and were mediated by the dynamics of agency and belonging.

I saw poignant evidence of this overlapping sense of belonging on my visit to Phoenix's home for a recorded interview. Upon arrival, I stood at the doorway to the small living room for a few seconds, looking for a convenient spot to place my equipment. The rug, with kaleidoscopic swirled patterns, was immaculately clean. Not wanting to dirty it with marks from my sneakers, I found a clear spot behind the brown leather couch and offloaded the bag. Two trophies behind the glass doors of a display cabinet immediately captured my attention. A dazzling tiara beamed in front of each trophy. Seeing my gaze, Phoenix told me that she had won the trophies and tiaras after coming second and third at the Miss Gay Khathorus and Miss Gay Valentine's pageants respectively. The display cabinet was a resplendent memorial to her outstanding achievements at both beauty pageants.

These pageant accoutrements were imbued with social meaning, and thus served a specific communicative function within the home (Appadurai, 1986; Dosekun & Iqani, 2018; Lury, 2011; Miller, 2001; 2013), representing Phoenix's family's pride in her achievements. They also signalled her future achievements as a pageant winner in that they were simultaneously decorative and aspirational (Clarke, 2001). Their placement in that specific place in the living room invigorated them with a specialness and sentimentality reserved for only a few other such objects, such as her younger brother's athletics bronze medals. Not only did this signal Phoenix' stellar achievement in the subcultural world of drag pageantry, but it also brought that world into the home within which she was raised as a child.

Desiree Lewis (2019) averred that:

Queer subjects whose biological families participate in their communities on their terms - for example by attending and enjoying gay pageants - can experience not only the reward of "being accepted" through assimilation, but the far greater pleasure of being recognized as different. (p. 35)

By situating these objects in a highly significant place in the home, Phoenix's family simultaneously recognised and celebrated her queer difference. Their strategic placement amongst other significant objects not only communicated the high esteem with which her birth family regarded her glamorous achievements but also blurred the boundaries between her drag and birth

families – while simultaneously rendering them mutually reinforcing. They highlighted Phoenix’s belonging and empowerment within these different family contexts.

Some ethnographic inquiries into queer communities and subcultures have tended to emphasise their subjects’ marginality from their birth families and wider hegemonic society (Bailey, 2013; Boellstorf, 2005; Berkowitz & Belgrave, 2010; McCune, 2004; Newtown, 1972; Teunis, 2001; Weston, 1991; Valentine, 2007), arguing that queer families and subcultural production – such as drag pageants and vogue competitions – are spaces of refuge from homo- and transphobic social environments. Other ethnographic studies, however, have shown that queer communities and subcultures are neither completely marginal nor assimilated within their wider, heteronormative societies (Deumert & Mabandla, 2017; Guidio, 2009; Kulick, 1997; Livermon, 2012; 2014; Matebeni, 2011; Tucker, 2009; Reid, 2003; 2013). My intention is to build on the latter body of scholarship, positing the idea of complementary kinship in order to describe how my interlocutors negotiated the different family bonds between a queer context of the House of Indigo subculture as well as the broader hegemonic society. As Butler (2004) observed, kinship is not a privatised, sociocultural formation that is autonomous from the wider, hegemonic community and forms of friendship (p. 103). In the light thereof, the following analyses will demonstrate how my interlocutors’ complementary kinship bonds were key suturing elements between their queer family in the subculture and the wider, heteronormative society.

Having empirically established that different forms of birth and queer kinship are consciously and strategically chosen and negotiated, and that these bonds are not formed as substitutive or compensatory forms of kinship, I now draw on Freeman (2008), agreeing with her assertion that “kinship is a social and not a biological fact, a matter of culture rather than nature” (p. 299). As such, I interpret the hierarchies, practices, and sense of belonging within and outside of the House of Indigo as forms of complementary kinship, and argue that these articulations of queer kinship are neither derivative nor subsidiary to my interlocutors’ biological family ties. They are bonds of complementary kinship that are simultaneously authentic and legitimate.

Clothing, accessories, and other methods of styling the body are very important within various drag subcultures throughout the world. It is surprising, however, that there is a distinct paucity of analytical as well as theoretical attention paid to these specific material objects within studies of drag and beauty pageantry. Material objects such as gowns, dresses, shoes, makeup, and



accessories signify different meanings in the different spatio-temporal and geo-political contexts (Miller, 2010; Mitchell & Smith, 2012; Msibi, 2012). Clothing and clothing styles symbolise and mediate between different kinds of relationships, structures, hierarchies, and networks of sociality in these different contexts. During fieldwork it became apparent that the ways in which my interlocutors related to each other – their bonds of kinship as well as their antipathies – were facilitated by the various associative meanings attendant to clothing, accessories, and bodily adornment. Clothing and accessories functioned as the suturing symbols or signs of kinship among the different social actors within and outside of Club Indigo. As evidenced by Precious and Kelly's interview responses, various items of clothing had similar performative functions within their birth kinship systems at home. The semiotics and materiality of clothing (and other methods of bodily adornment) brought the Indigo divas' birth and subcultural families together in a system of complementary kinship. The performative doing of kinship in both these contexts was mediated through the consumption, displays, and contestations related to these material commodities.

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### **5.3 The Materiality of Clothing: Queer Bodies and the Paradox of Public Visibility**

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The previous section emphasised the significance of material objects in bringing together different identities, bodies, and systems of complementary kinship within the House of Indigo and beyond. Material goods were imbued with social meanings and value that transcended the subcultural boundaries of the House of Indigo. The system of complementary kinship enabled my interlocutors to conjoin their chosen subcultural and birth families through the acquisition, competition, possession, and display of these goods. In what follows, I examine the social materiality which undergirded the consumption of these commodities.

As a starting point, Douglas and Isherwood's (1996) assertion that material commodities "make and maintain social relationships" (p. 39), seems apposite. Sartorial items – clothes, accessories, makeup – are significant in the construction of subcultural relationships and identities. This is because they afford participants

various degrees of membership and status within different subcultures. Contemporary examples of such bonds catalysed and facilitated by the consumption of sartorial commodities are Les Sapeur (Democratic Republic of Congo), Izikhothane (South Africa), and the Death Metal Cowboys (Botswana). The acquisition and flamboyant display of clothing enables participants to distinguish themselves from mainstream or dominant cultures (Gelder, 2007; Hebdige, 1979; Miller, 2009; Thomas, 2007). Clothing and other related fashion items can therefore be both functional and communicative, allowing subcultural participants to express their identities and consumer aspirations, while simultaneously practicing various modes of resistance and kinship. Clothing and other sartorial commodities are not merely consumed for their use/exchange value, but are also consumed within a semiotic matrix of sociocultural sign systems (Barthes, 1990; Featherstone, 2007, p. 82).

I call this duality between the functional and expressive dimensions of sartorial commodities (such as clothing, shoes, and accessories) “materiality.” Building on Daniel Miller’s (2010) conception, this term is helpful because it invokes the tactile and quotidian intimacy of material objects and commodities (p. 41). Furthermore, it is apposite for the present discussion as it pushes the argument beyond a simplistic binary analysis of clothing as either functional or communicative, thus enabling me to examine how clothing mediates between the social relationships and systems of complementary kinship outlined in the previous sections.

Most of the Indigo divas preferred casual and trendy streetwear when they were not performing or modelling in the beauty contests. During those occasions when they were not performing, they wore clothing that was modern and up to par with the ever-changing transnational, cosmopolitan fashion trends. When asked where they bought their day-to-day streetwear, local and fairly affordable, local, retail chain stores such as Mr. Price, Truworths, Foschini, and Edgars were mentioned most frequently. These retail stores sell fashionable yet cheaply-made clothing from Chinese, Indonesia, and Pakistani sweatshops. They are popular throughout all regions of southern Africa, stocking a wide variety of (globally popular) fashion styles for young consumers. They also accommodate the different body sizes, styles, and price ranges of their clientele, catering to the average yet fashion-conscious (cosmopolitan, global, and trendy) consumer market among South African youth of all class categories and gender identifications. They offer a wide range of styles in both smart and casual clothing items – such as jeans, printed T-shirts, blouses, jerseys and cardigans, skirts and dresses, as well as a plethora of shoes and accessories.

The Indigo divas expressed their cosmopolitanism and trendiness by wearing these kinds of clothes and accessories. In keeping with the spatial context of a nightclub, these young transgender women and femme gay men expressed their class mobility and cosmopolitan aspirations through their sartorial choices. Wearing these kinds of clothes also meant fitting in and thus belonging within this subcultural space. Being “stylish” was accompanied by the imperative to display clothes in keeping with the latest fashion styles among their peers and possible suiters at the nightclub. These different modes of sartorial consumption (acquisition, possession, display) created a subcultural environment within which their queer and class identities could be expressed and contested in different ways. The Indigo divas usually wore stylish and trendy clothes as they walked to and from the nightclub, and often stressed an aesthetic affinity for such clothing styles. Similarly, these styles of dress enabled them to fit into the broader public in such a way as to “pass” as cisgender women. Much scholarly ink has been expended on the politics of passing for queer and gender non-conforming individuals (Allen, 2011; McCune, 2014; Muñoz, 1999). Without belabouring the point about the subversive and/or transgressive potential of public gender bending through clothing styles, it is nonetheless important to contextualise the sociocultural implications.

The aesthetic values of fashionable trendiness, upward class mobility, and cosmopolitanism are the lifeblood of youth and popular cultures in contemporary Johannesburg. Popular, urban trends and developments are often expressed through various forms of self-styling and dress. Similarly, the vicissitudes of upward class mobility and aspiration take material form through the consumption and display of different fashion items and styles – from international luxury brands to second-hand items from local thrift stores of street markets. Fashion commodities and styles thus mediate between the embodied self and an individual’s ideas about their place in a transnational, cosmopolitan, post-apartheid context such as Johannesburg (Nuttall, 2009). In such a context, fashionable self-styling and popular cultural trends form integral aspects of “the various ways in which political ideas were and continue to be constructed by young people” (Mokoena, 2014, p.120). Moreover, in a postcolonial setting such as Johannesburg, fashion and style are as much about race, sexuality, and gender as they are about class mobility (Livermon, 2020). The politics of “passing” do not only imply passing in public for another gender or sexuality, but are also inextricably linked to passing as upwardly mobile, cosmopolitan, and fashion-forward.

The Indigo divas’ feminine self-styling often aided them to pass as cisgender

women in public. This enabled them to go unnoticed in the Johannesburg streets as they strolled to the nightclub at dusk, or at dawn after a long night of dancing and sashaying on stage. However, passing as a woman was not always guaranteed. When I asked Tracy how safe she felt using public transport while dressed in feminine clothing, she answered that she sometimes felt some apprehension about her physical safety. She said that the girls ran the risk of ridicule and/or physical violence if they were perceived as visibly transgender or femme in public spaces.

"Some of girls are even forced to take their wigs off by the taxi drivers, and people laugh at them," she lamented during a casual conversation.

Their feminine self-styling and adornment enabled the Indigo divas to create a space of safety, shared subcultural values, and community within the physical space of Club Indigo, although this sense of safety did not always permeate the walls of the nightclub. The divas also devised strategies protect themselves from possible homo- and transphobic violence when they were out in public spaces. Phoenix provided an account of these strategies during our interview (2017):

**Phoenix:** We change once we leave Club Indigo into denims or whatever.

**Katlego:** To look less feminine?

**Phoenix:** Not really. We never remove the makeup or change the hair, we just cover up our legs, not to invite unnecessary whatever. We can avoid comments by wearing something a bit longer.

**Katlego:** So, would you still say that you have to protect yourself?

**Phoenix:** Exactly! You have to protect yourself. I mean, I say: "yes I'm gay and no one will do anything to me." You have to be considerate of yourself and think: "If I'm a little dressed, of course something is bound to happen." So, you have to dress up normally.

**Katlego:** Besides the taxis drivers, are people in your township community still closed minded?

**Phoenix:** I wouldn't say I'm friends with the guys but I know them and we get along but I'm comfortable with them and they're comfortable with me. There is respect, not just from them for me but from me for them too.

As evidenced by Tracy and Phoenix's statements above, the spectres of emotional and physical violence were ever-present threats to their sense of safety, citizenship, and belonging. Despite (or because of) their individual

choices in style and/or dress, the Indigo divas constantly teetered on a fraught tightrope of either being outed and ridiculed or passing, unharmed, in public spaces. The fact that the divas had to cover their legs by wearing less revealing clothing highlights the ephemerality of the sense of safety and freedom which they felt so keenly inside the nightclub. However, the unfortunate imperative of having to change or “tone down” their feminine appearance and style in public space also indexes the limitations to this freedom. Similarly, the divas’ functionalist use of denim jeans to protect their bodies and emotional/psychic wellbeing in public spaces attests to the materiality of these fashion commodities in relation to their kinship bonds.

Matebeni (2011) described the paradoxical implications of walking through Johannesburg as a visibly queer person of colour. In what she theorises as “walking abOUT the city,” Matebeni (2011, p. 54) highlighted the extent to which queer individuals and communities were simultaneously exoticised and desired within broader public spaces. I would, however, caution against an over-reliance on the analytical binary between the concepts of exoticism and desire – especially as it relates to openly queer and gender non-conforming bodies in public spaces. Although public acceptance of gender non-conforming bodies and identities does indeed exist, it is contingent. This is clear from Kelly’s response to one of the interview questions. Describing how people reacted to seeing her around the township where she grew up, she said:

I don’t think they’re used to gays because I’m the only gay in that section [of the township]. I get criticism and people swearing at me, but I don’t care. There are three houses in my area where people love me. I would be coming from an interview or coming from town in heels, they would come outside and call each other asking me for photos and stuff.

Public acceptance of queer visibility is not readily available to all gender non-conforming individuals in all places at all times. However, Kelly’s response demonstrates that it is inaccurate to claim that the wider public’s acceptance of queer bodies and identities does not exist *in toto*. While South Africa’s anti-discriminatory laws are enshrined in the constitution, they are mostly articulated as legislative and political ideals at best. Tracy’s lamentations show that homo- and transphobia still exist as ideological effects of a society that is pervaded by heteropatriarchy, gender-based violence, and racialised sexism. Furthermore, the Manichean racialised class inequalities afford some queer individuals with moderate to exponential privilege a relative level of safety from threats of hate crimes and/or violence (Livermon, 2012; Matebeni, 2011, p. 50). It became clear in my fieldwork that there were also instances and spaces where

public queer visibility was both accepted and celebrated – as is evidenced in Kelly’s account of her neighbours’ fascination with her when she appeared in public dressed in her high heels.

None of my interlocutors explicitly expressed the desire to pass as a cisgender woman in public. In fact, many of them revelled in strangers’ complements about their beauty and stylishness when they were out in public. It seemed that the ideal for which they aimed was, in fact, to pass as cosmopolitan and trendy feminine consumer subjects. Succeeding at being read publicly as cisgender women was, on the whole, merely circumstantial. In her ethnographic encounters with street youth in Dar es Salaam, Eileen Moyer (2003) observed the significance of clothes in the wearers’ quotidian efforts to pass as ordinary members of the city’s populace. This capacity to be seen as “respectable” has important implications for claims to citizen rights as well as access to public space.

Although my interlocutors were sometimes able to pass as trendy, beautiful, and cosmopolitan consumer subjects, they were not always able to pass in public spaces as cisgender women, and they sometimes paid a heavy price for this because of the heteropatriarchal social conditions described above. Pumla Gqola (2015) dubbed these conditions the “female fear factory,” whereby most women are subjected to the daily threat of violence (verbal, emotional, and physical) should they not meet the patriarchal standards of the heterosexist gaze. For example, there have been numerous recorded instances in which predominantly Black and other women of colour have been ridiculed and even physically and sexuality assaulted for not wearing clothing that is deemed “acceptable” in public (Gqola, 2015; Lewis, 2012). These examples illustrate how women’s choices in fashion and style are regulated by the discourses of “acceptability” and assimilation. Moreover, they demonstrate the significance of clothing when it comes to the policing and control of women’s bodies within the state-sanctioned discourses of respectability (Bakare-Yusef, 2011; Ligaga, 2014; Tamale, 2011).

Although my trans and femme interlocutors did not conscientiously set out to transgress, through dress, the gendered and sexualised boundaries attendant to women’s bodies, they nonetheless did so when they were perceived or outed as being visibly queer. Their sartorial and stylistic choices in public were, therefore, multi-layered and polysemous. According to Kopano Ratele (2016), “clothing, especially fashionable clothing, is imbued with meaning, tied to identities and subjectivities and thought by subjects to be liberating...even though it can also be oppressive” (p. 27). I am not suggesting that the Indigo divas faced violence at every turn in public spaces. In fact, I often accompanied them in public spaces

without witnessing any provocation or harassment from the people around us. However, their safety from public ridicule (through pointed fingers, invasive stares, and comments) was not necessarily guaranteed. For them (and myself), being visibly queer and/or gender non-conforming was sometimes caused palpable discomfort in public space. This much was made clear when Phoenix and I casually walked into a clothing store, and overheard the two shop assistants scornfully sniggering as we window shopped.

The foregoing discussion highlights the ways in which both oppressive and liberal discourses regarding queer identities and bodies existed in dialectic (and irresolvable) tension in contemporary Johannesburg. Moreover, it provides a contextualised account of the ways in which the functional and expressive materiality of fashion commodities was intimately linked to hegemonic discourses about queer bodies and identities, as well as the politics of their public visibility. The Indigo divas expressed a collective sense of empowerment and kinship through their choices of stylish dress. Their bonds of complementary kinship were facilitated through the consumption of clothing. Moreover, being perceived as fashion-forward, stylish, and trendy remained aspirational ideals that were signified through their clothing as they travelled to and from the nightclub. In the following section, I discuss how the materiality of clothing fostered a wide range of kinship bonds among the divas, and how this materiality engendered a complex array of social relationships in broader public spaces outside the nightclub.

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## **5.4 Home, Belonging, and Complimentary Kinship**

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Many divas described Club Indigo as a home away from home. The conceptual import of this familial metaphor was augmented by the extent to which they felt welcomed. Regarding her earliest introduction to the House of Indigo, Kelly stated: “I was welcomed with open arms. I wasn’t judged and people around here feel free, they are always free when they come to Indigo. That’s what made me feel at home.” Zelda expressed similar feelings of being welcomed and feeling a sense of belonging at the nightclub: “Club Indigo is like a home for me. I feel so free when I go there. I have been going there for many years now, and that’s where I feel like I can be myself. It’s where I belong.”

In what follows, I argue that the divas felt at home at the House of Indigo not only because of the welcome they received but also because of the distribution of material goods as gifts. These goods were integral to the divas' progress and success as drag queens and beauty contestants. Through being given material gifts and emotional support (from their peers, mentors, and parents), the divas were able to gain a keen sense of belonging and develop their skills as drag performers and beauty contestants at the house of Indigo. Bailey (2013) argues that members participate in queer subcultures and houses "not only to survive but to enhance the quality of their lives" (p. 6). In the case of my own interlocutors, I observed that motivations for their membership within the House of Indigo. The sense of belonging they felt was fundamental to their participation within this subculture and queer community, and it acted as a catalyst for articulations of queer freedom – however limited and/or conditional this may have been.

Upon arrival at the club, the Indigo divas would change from the "street" fashions into their very best, elegant attire: sequined and bejeweled gowns, elaborately sculpted cocktail dresses, and very high stiletto heels. These glamorous items of clothing, however, are harder to source or buy for the average working-class woman than is the "street" fashion. They are mainly sold in high-end boutiques in the affluent eastern and northern suburbs of Johannesburg, which cater to a middle- and upper-class clientele, and they are mostly custom-made for formal, black-tie events. This made them exorbitantly expensive for many of the Indigo divas. Many of the divas therefore opted to have their dresses sewn by local dressmakers, seamstresses, family members, or even just to do the job themselves. For example, during our recorded interview, I asked Phoenix who made her dresses. She laughingly answered in a cavalier tone: "I make them myself, of course. I can't buy those dresses at the shops. They're way too expensive." Phoenix explained that she had learned to sew her gowns by hand because of her limited funds. "A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do," she smiled as she reminisced about her early days in the beauty pageant scene. Her makeup business was still in its infancy in those days, and what little pocket money she received from her single mother was used to buy material and a sewing kit to make her own dresses. Phoenix was not the only diva who, with limited funds but a wealth of ingenuity and creativity, made her own dresses for the drag shows and beauty pageants. Many of the diva often transformed an evening gown worn at one beauty pageant into a shorter, more casual, cocktail dress for the next pageant. Failing this, they wore the same dress or bikini for as many pageants as it took to win the crown.



Darryl and Lawrence went to great lengths to either make or buy dresses and shoes for their girls. For example, each pageant winner received a custom-made evening gown and pair of high-heeled shoes to go with her crown. The runners up were also given makeup kits, and other cosmetic beauty products. All of the pageant contestants received some item of clothing, jewellery or makeup in return for their participation in the events. Lawrence displayed immense pride in his ability to give these gifts to his girls. Although he often lamented the overwhelming financial strain he felt in keeping the nightclub open, this ability to give such gifts was a source of great satisfaction for him. He went to great lengths and expense to source the gifts which the winning beauty queen would receive: an elegant evening gown that his sister had sent from New York; Betsy Johnson branded high-heeled shoes; an enormous Bobbi Brown makeup kit; and a cash prize of approximately 300 US dollars. While Lawrence spoke at length about these gifts he was not just bragging: From his perspective, his ability to proffer these gifts was key to his performance of successful fatherhood. Providing the best gifts and prizes for all his girls also bolstered a fetishised and traditional masculinity within himself, which could be seen as being “shaped by the notions of fatherhood and masculinity in the outside world” (Bailey, 2013, p.110). I elaborate on this in the following chapter. For now, I wish to focus on the performative enactments of fatherhood through these material objects.

The provision of these gifts and prizes was not just instrumental in that that their distribution would result in a successful beauty pageant that year. As Lury (2011) argued, “material goods are not only used to do things, but they also have meaning, and act as meaningful markers of social relations.” (p. 14). Their distribution clearly illustrated the performative doing of kinship through the tactile materiality of clothing and accessories. The giving of these gifts was therefore an expressive act of Lawrence’s idealised paternal role as the successful head of the House of Indigo.

While the divas were extremely grateful for the gifts, and coveted the winning prizes, it is important to stress that they did not *need* them: they were neither destitute nor abject individuals. They had their birth families to rely on, as is evidenced by the fact that they were often present to cheer them on and show them support before, during, and after the beauty pageants. For example, Miss Toni’s (Miss Gay Jozi 2015) birth mother was always present at all the pageants to help sew the contestant’s hems or mend a damaged garment. She also made some of the contestant’s gowns, selling them at discounted prices. This shows that the kinship bonds and hierarchies within the House of Indigo were never absolutely autonomous from those in the outside world. Rather, these queer

kinship bonds existed in cohesive relation to those which the divas enjoyed with their respective birth families. During fieldwork, it became apparent that both domains of kinship (subcultural and birth families) were not mutually exclusive. Instead, they provided mutually reinforcing environments and/or systems of support such that the divas could rely on their birth and subcultural families for material as well as affective support. The materiality of clothing and other sartorial commodities mediated between these family contexts and culminated in systems of complementary kinship for each of the divas.

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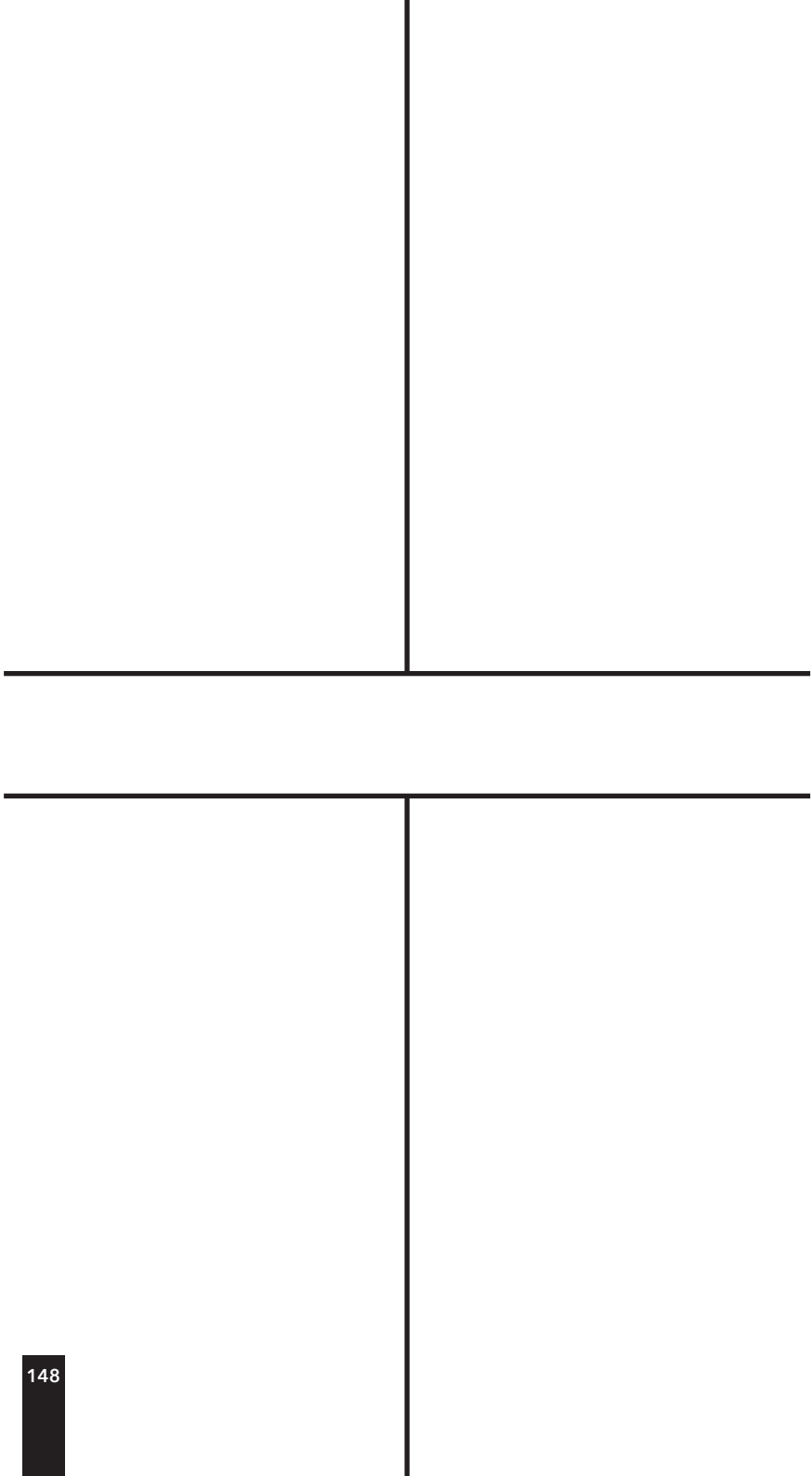
## Conclusion

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Social formations such as families are enacted over time within historical, material, and political economic contingencies. The “family” is more than a self-evident or biological fact. It is constituted by the continual reiteration of actions, ethics, and culturally-specific values. The doing of family is about bringing together different bodies and desires and therefore suggests the domestication and containment of these differences. The doing of the House of Indigo family brought together variously identified queer subjectivities and bodies, and these enactments of queer kinship existed in complementary relation with bonds of kinship outside that space.

In what I conceive as a system of complementary kinship, the family bonds forged within the House of Indigo were strengthened by those from outside the subcultural domain. In many ways I agree with Janet Carsten’s (2003: 140) observation that “local practices...do not appear to privilege biological kinship.” The argument I have put forward in this chapter is that biological and chosen kinship bonds can become melded together when viewed through a contextual lens. The notion of complementary kinship provides a localised basis upon which one can interpret the interrelationships between queer/chosen and biological kinship systems – within and outside of the House of Indigo. These complementary systems of kinship allowed the Indigo divas to gain support, affirmation, and empowerment.

The following chapter examines the ways in which gender performances were policed and controlled within the House of Indigo. In light of this, I highlight the complexities of how queer consumer cultures, practices, and kinship systems are fraught with contestations and interpersonal entanglements.



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**CHAPTER 6**

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**POLICING GENDER:  
*PAGEANTRY AND  
THE PERFORMANCE OF  
IDEAL FEMININITY  
AT CLUB INDIGO***

*The small heaters fixed onto the ceiling above the bar counter are no match for the biting mid-May cold. Excitement and anticipation permeate the club. The Miss Gay Jozi 2017 beauty pageant is only two weeks away, and the weather has not deterred the contestants from attending the early morning rehearsals at the nightclub. Some are huddled in small groups on the white leather couches, chatting and giggling. Others sit in pairs at the bar, paging through laminated photo albums of the club's beauty queens from previous years. Still others practice their catwalks, strutting to and from the full-length mirrors which are fixed onto two pillars at the club's main entrance. Their high-heels stiletto shoes click loudly on the cold cement floor. A pair of competing friends run giddily between the toilet and the changing room in their casual sweatpants and jerseys.*

*"OK. The soup is almost ready," Darryl announces as he walks out of the kitchen behind the bar. "I hope there's enough for everyone to have breakfast." We are all waiting for Lawrence and Zelda to arrive with bread rolls. Darryl busies himself by searching for styrofoam cups in which to pour the soup for everyone, but he soon abandons this task for some reason.*

*"OK, come girls! Let's gather at the front here," he commands. They all obey him immediately. He has summoned them to do their warm ups in order to keep them busy. They will be rehearsing their catwalks on the stage. They have to learn how to walk in perfect sync with the music while smiling at the audience and the judges. This impromptu session gives Darryl a chance to make sure that the ramp is sturdy enough for the girls to walk on. He starts by taking roll call. All but one of the 16 contestants are present.*

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This chapter provides an exegesis of the standards of beauty and their gendered performances in the context of the respective pageants at Club Indigo. I trace how the intersecting ideals of beauty and cosmopolitan femininity circulated within the House of Indigo, and examine how these gendered performances took shape, and how they were policed and controlled both on and off stage. I argue that the pageants embodied the spectacular enactment of discourses that were about more than physical attractiveness.

Performances of femininity and standards of beauty at the House of Indigo were, as I demonstrate, both normative and transgressive. They reflected the hegemonic discourses of sexuality and gender performativity in post-apartheid South African society. The practices of drag and beauty pageantry were performed by clearly gender non-conforming bodies, and occurred within a context that simultaneously policed and disciplined them. Similarly these disciplinary hierarchies and regimes reified normative iterations of gender performativity and beauty ideals. This disciplining of normative gender ideals occurred within a space which was intended to be empowering, inclusive, safe, and/or “queer.” It constituted a subcultural system that was simultaneously transgressive and assimilationist. The chapter contributes to Butler’s (1990; 1993) theory of performativity by showing that the embodiment of sex/gender difference must be analysed in geo-local context, and that the transgression and/or reification of gender norms needs to be examined in specific relation to the sociocultural and economic milieux within which they occur.

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## 6.1 *Becoming a Star: The Journey From a Beauty Contestant to an Indigo Diva*

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This section focuses on what it takes to become one of the divas at the House of Indigo. The idea of *becoming* is helpful in examining the divas' respective journeys from novice beauty contestants to prominent drag queens at the club. I show that becoming an Indigo diva did not have a teleological end-point, but was a processual and collective endeavour among like-minded peers as well as experienced mentors. I outline the most important milestones that each Indigo diva had to reach in order to gain such a status.

The beauty contestants entered the pageants at Club Indigo as either transgender women or femme gay men. Their gender identification and sexual orientation did not foreclose their opportunities to enter the various pageants, however, as contestants who identified in either of these gender and sexual categories could enter any pageant. The open calls for the annual Miss Black Pride, Miss Gay Jozi, and Miss Club Indigo pageants were sent out on the club's Facebook page. Any contestant, from any part of the country, was allowed to enter. There were no restrictions regarding contestants' racial or class backgrounds. Neither were there any restrictions in terms of their body shapes and sizes. The auditions were open to any interested contestant. All they had to do was send a WhatsApp text to Darryl for details about the venue, date, and time of the auditions.

Contestants were allowed to enter any number of pageants hosted at the club – or anywhere else around the country. For example, a contestant could enter the Miss Black Pride, Miss Club Indigo, or the Miss Gay Jozi pageants any number of times she wished. The contestants were also allowed to enter other local beauty pageants – but this was highly frowned upon by the parents of the house. This was because Daryl and Lawrence's overwhelming sense of protection over the divas. It appeared that they were unwilling to forego reveling in the divas' potential success – especially because of they had both invested an enormous amount of time, energy, and resources into grooming them. The only firm rule was that no winning beauty queen could hold more than one pageant title *within* the House of Indigo. If a beauty queen won a title, they were no longer allowed to enter another pageant at the nightclub.

Any transgender or femme gay individual was allowed to enter the beauty pageants, and although some contestants were more experienced in the rituals of pageantry than others, none arrived “ready-made” as an Indigo diva. The achievement of this status required much time and labour on the part of Indigo’s gay parents and mentoring sister. Becoming an Indigo diva was therefore not an individual achievement, but a collective endeavour undertaken by various stakeholders within the subculture. The system of grooming was very important for learning the ropes of performing drag and beauty pageantry. Winning a pageant title was only one of the initial stages in the course to becoming an Indigo diva.

The status within the House of Indigo subculture afforded to the winning beauty queen gave her the freedom to enter other pageants in other cities around the country, such as the Miss Gay Northern Cape, Miss Gay RSA (in the Nelspruit Province), or Miss Gay Western Cape (Cape Town). Lawrence and Darryl encouraged the winning queens to enter other provincial and national pageants so that they could advance their skills and prominence at a national level. Special drag and party events were sometimes held at the club in order to raise funds for a queen’s pageant entrance fees, travel costs, and other related material needs. Lawrence, Darryl, and the other title holders also accompanied the queens to other cities for these national pageants. The winning beauty queens were expected to attend these regional and national pageants impeccably dressed in their gowns, sashes, and crowns as official ambassadors of the House of Indigo.

Becoming an Indigo diva encompassed more than looking beautiful and attending pageants, however. The ability to deliver an impressive lip-synching performance was another important step along this journey. The divas’ stage performances at the nightclub were as stringently cultivated (and policed) as their sartorial choices at the beauty pageants. In fact, the pageant winners were expected to perform on a regular basis. So important was this expectation that it was integrated into the criteria by the judges who chose the winner of the annual Miss Club Indigo pageants. The ability to perform well on stage and excite awe in an audience was not an innate talent for all contestants and winners, so the divas were encouraged to deliver lip-synching performances once or twice in front of a live audience in efforts to build their confidence and eliminate any nervousness. An “open mic” policy had been instituted at the club just prior to the commencement of my fieldwork. On these open mic nights, the younger divas were given the opportunity to perform a lip-synch to any song of their choosing. Zelda took charge of the programming for these events, compiling a



list of the divas who wanted to perform on stage. The responsibility for grooming the younger divas fell primarily to Zelda and A'Deva. It was a responsibility that both took very seriously. Becoming an Indigo diva was, therefore, a processual affair that took a considerable amount of time and effort, and achieving status – such as winning a pageant crown – was only the start of the journey.

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## **6.2 “My Girls are Real Girls”: Naturalness, Ideal Femininity, and the Politics of Passing**

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The opening vignette to this chapter gives an account of the style of beauty pageantry I observed at Club Indigo. It highlights the various elements that constitute it as a specific kind of gendered and aspirational performance of beauty. Nervous anticipation, beautification, repetitive stylised practice, and thematic choreography are all integral aspects of this spectacle. The twin elements of discursive reproduction and sociocultural assimilation are sutured into the gamut of ritualised practices, glamor, and beauty work which give this genre of performance its distinctive specificity. While the participants and audience may be well aware of the codes, styles, and themes specific to this genre—and these may be as predictable as they are enthralling – it is still important to pay attention to “the complex ways that beauty contests connect to issues and struggles going on in arenas outside of the immediate purview of the contest” (Cohen, Wilk & Stoeltje, 1996, p. 8). Beyond the staged grandiloquence lay an assemblage of sociocultural, economic, and moral values that were legitimated through the enactment of this ritual. The repetitive practices of cat-walking (or sashaying), smiling, and grooming all culminated in forms of aesthetic labour specifically intended to reify and police a particular form of femininity. Likewise, the ideological constructions of race, sexuality, gender, class, citizenship, and ability were normalised within this spectacular combination of competition and reward.

Beauty pageants are discursive fields upon which debates about cultural ideals and values are mediated (Crawford et al., 2008; Hoad, 2010; Tice, 2012). More often than not, these are never easily resolved. Drag and other LGBTQIA+ beauty pageants further complicate these contestations insofar as the bodies and identities that are often stigmatised in many societies take centre stage (Bettar,

2012; Bronson, 2013; Lease, 2017; Matebeni, 2016; Reid, 2003). Drag beauty pageants mediate contestations about sexual difference and gender non-conformity at local, national, and global levels. In turn, these mediations of queer subjectivity are recognisable through the lexicon of spectacle, glamour, and competition. They are popular and commercially lucrative because they commodify gender non-conforming bodies and sexual difference (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017, p. 17).

Their popularity does not, however, presuppose that they are inherently transgressive or empowering representations. Their global commodification and pervasiveness pivot upon their reproduction of capitalist and neoliberal consumerism. Similarly, they shore up the hegemonising imperatives of gendered ideals of beauty (Ochoa, 2014, p. 39). The social practice of pageantry is framed along the intersecting vectors of postmodern, neoliberal, consumer capitalism and subjectivity. As such, the beauty contestant's complicity and assimilation within a system of normative capitalist consumption and representation proves to be analytically complex. While the pageants at Club Indigo were intended to empower, uplift, and celebrate their participants, they still functioned within a strict system of gender policing and conformity. The following excerpt is from my field notes on Darryl's advice to the Miss Gay Jozi contestants. It demonstrates a critical yet illuminating contradiction that is analytically pertinent to this chapters' central argument. It highlights a nexus point between normative standards of beauty and gender performativity at an event which purportedly aimed to celebrate gender and sexual non-normativity:

This pageant is about the art of transformation. I mean, think about the Cape Town girls. They pad a lot. It's actually just *too much*. They exaggerate their makeup, and add heavy hips, and all that. They focus on doing drag. *We focus on being beautiful. We focus on naturalness.*

Lawrence and Zelda walked into the club just before Darryl finished his lecture. They were carrying plastic bags filled with saris and jewellery for the girls. Each contestant would wear her own sari during the traditional South Indian *bharathanatyam* for the opening act of the pageant. This particular dance sequence was usually performed by one woman only, but Zelda had especially modified it into a group performance. After offloading the plastic bags, she went straight to teaching the girls the dance moves, meticulously showing them where to place their hands, fingers, and feet. All the contestants obeyed her instructions to sway their hips coquettishly this way and that. She made sure to place each girl at a specific spot on the stage depending on her height, and instructed the strongest contenders to help Ella and Imani (who were both hearing-impaired) when she could not.

While the atmosphere was exciting, I was particularly interested in Darryl's advice about beauty and "naturalness." For him, beauty and the performance of ideal femininity were embodied through the subtle use of makeup and hip pads, which should never be "too much." His words: "they focus on doing drag. We focus on *being beautiful*," are also illuminating, indicating, as they did, that there were different standards of drag and beauty in different geographical locations. From his perspective, the Cape Town girls were "too much" in their exaggeration of feminine traits.

This differentiation between Darryl's perception of the Capetonian style of "doing drag" and simply "being beautiful" is also noteworthy. One was a style of female impersonation emphasised through the over-use of makeup and hip pads which, according to Darryl, was just "too much." His view suggests the artifice "within which gender traits are exaggerated for theatrical and often comical effect" (Halberstam, 1997, p. 116). The style at the House of Indigo was more toned down, according to Darryl. It was not campy or "too much." It was a style characterised by a focus on conventional, mainstream, western beauty standards. In order for a contestant to be eligible, she was supposed to eschew camp, just *be beautiful*, and focus on "naturalness."

The concept of "naturalness" is also analytically significant because of Darryl's conflation of being beautiful and being natural. According to Darryl, "naturalness" or the ability to appear authentically feminine, stood at an ideological remove from doing drag. He equated the ability to display "naturalness" with an idealised interpretation of feminine beauty. Being beautiful thus forestalled any artifice or exaggeration. This perspective regarding naturalness and beauty was not idiosyncratic to Daryl alone, but constituted the foundational aesthetic framework within the House of Indigo subculture as a whole. Within this discursive rubric, there is a marked distinction between beauty and artifice. Similarly, there is an inference that beauty is equated with the display of naturalness and/or feminine authenticity.

During our interview, Zelda also distinguished between a drag queen and a female impersonator:

Drag queens are your over accentuated highlighted eyebrows, colourful, and glitter on the lips. Those for me are your "drag queens." You know, your *Pricilla: Queen of the Desert*: everything is accentuated – high hair, hairstyles. That's a "drag queen." When you look at us, especially the girls of Club Indigo, we are more female impersonators because our makeup is very aligned with the way a woman would do her makeup. We do our makeup like a woman would do her face.

Because of our jawlines and 5 o'clock shadows, there are extra layers of makeup that has to be used [sic]. That's a female impersonator for me. I impersonate a female.

Zelda's notion of female impersonation approximates Darryl's notion of performing "naturalness." According to Zelda, female impersonation is in aesthetic opposition to the accentuated flamboyance of a "drag queen." The female impersonator's subtlety is diametrically opposed to the drag queen's extra pomp. In this conception, "natural" beauty is collapsed into a normative idea and representation of feminine authenticity. Therefore, in order for a Club Indigo girl to be natural and beautiful, she had to impersonate a woman by using various (yet specific) techniques of beautification and bodily comportment.

Conceptual tensions become highly evident to me, as my fieldwork progressed, in these ideas of "naturalness" and female impersonation. A person who is wearing makeup and styling themselves through beautification is not "natural." They are embodying a wide range of discourses related to self-presentation and beauty. That which is considered to be natural is a product of historical, material, and ideological constructions; it is culturally produced (van de Port, 2012: 866). Although the members of the subculture were distinctly aware of the distinction between naturalness and artifice, they all worked to construct and *perform* natural beauty from their various hierarchical positions. Their respective performances thus reified the artifice of what was collectively idealized as a natural form of beauty. A queer and feminist perspective holds that gender identities are never "real" or "natural." They are made to appear as such for a variety of ideological and often oppressive ends. The focus on natural gender identity in a beauty competition targeted at gender non-conforming individuals is, therefore, a paradox.

The contestants were expected to perform naturalness while wearing makeup and other technologies of beautification – they were expected to be as glamorous (artificially contrived) as possible in order to win. They had to wear very high stiletto heels, elaborate evening gowns, skimpy swimsuits, and tuck their penises tightly beneath their perineae – yet their "natural" appearance was judged by the senior members of the House of Indigo.

Another related dilemma inheres in Zelda's concept of female impersonation. Her view framed feminine beauty (and the subtle performances thereof) as something that was inherently cisgender. Her statement that "...our makeup is very aligned with the way a woman would do her makeup" evidences this. From this point of view, a woman is someone who has a subtle style of makeup and self-presentation and who is therefore to be impersonated. But this idealised

subject is not just any kind of woman. She is female and presumably appears to be “natural.” Zelda’s conflation of the sexual and gender categories of woman and female points to the general naturalisation of one form of beauty.

The ideal, “natural” woman, according to Zelda, was someone whose beauty and style was worthy of being impersonated and performed through various forms of beautification. This perception completely disregarded the fact that most of the contestants at Club Indigo identified as transgender women. The idea that they had to impersonate an idealised femininity that was natural (ergo cisgender), presupposed that they did not possess this embodied femininity themselves. Both Zelda and Darryl’s framing of “naturalness” as femininity *par excellence* seemed to me to undermine their political project of empowerment and visibility for these young women.

These standards of idealised feminine beauty and “naturalness” were taken very seriously within the House of Indigo. They were beauty standards that both parents and mentoring sisters at the House took extreme pride in maintaining. This is precisely why they were clearly outlined so early during the pageant rehearsals, and why they were heavily policed by those at the top of the hierarchy. This highlights how idealisations of beauty and “femininity can be very restricting” (Matebeni, 2016. p. 29).

There was another important dimension with regard to the policing of beauty and femininity at the club. Their proper display (both on and off stage) meant significant financial, material, and affective reward for contestants, who would move on to the semi-finals and final rounds of a pageant if they met and upheld the standards. The beauty pageant crown and “Miss Gay Jozi” title were the highest rewards for keeping to these standards. The latter came with a prize of 400 US dollars, as well as a brand-new evening dress, pair of shoes, and makeup kit. There were other non-material rewards, too, including subcultural approval and status: a participant who consistently performed idealised feminine beauty and naturalness was ultimately elevated from being a beauty contestant to an Indigo diva.

This standard of “natural” feminine beauty was made apparent to me on several occasions. One occurred during the earliest stages of fieldwork at the first Club Indigo venue. A “Men in Skirts versus Men in Shorts” themed party had taken place at the club the night before. Although there were drag performances that night, this party was not a competition or pageant per se. It was a carnivalesque frenzy of house music and gyrating, sweaty bodies. Mostly cisgender Black gay men from different townships around the city attended. The Miss Black Pride 2016 pageant the following evening seemed, in comparison,

subdued. A somewhat orderly, formal atmosphere filled the club. A mixed audience milled about drinking and chatting as they anticipated the proceedings, which were lorded over by Lawrence in his button-down red-and-black paisley shirt. He sat at the bar with his usual concoction of whiskey, water, and ice. I sat across from him, and asked a few general questions about the club's pageants. He responded:

I groom my girls to look and behave like *real* girls. The figure must be like a true woman's. I want my girls to walk through town, and not have anyone ask if she is a real girl or not.

This concept of "true" or "real" femininity served several discursive functions within the House of Indigo. As I have argued, it was an aspirational ideal towards which all subcultural participants strove. They put a considerable amount of time and effort into this idealised representation of "real" femininity. This ideal can be understood as a simulacrum of what was considered to be most beautiful, attractive, and/or culturally valuable (Bialystock, 2016; Crawford et al., 2008; Banet-Weiser, 1999).

While the contestants may have been beautiful and glamorous, the femininity which they displayed at the various pageants was in no way "real" or "natural." It was a normative and highly stylised form of feminine beauty. Nakedi Ribane (2006: 12) suggested that "since beauty pageants are a Western import and have their origins in a White value system, it stands to reason that contestants would be judged by Western standards" (p. 12). It is difficult to discount the fact that the ideals of femininity to which the contestants aspired had their foundations in western conceptions of beauty. This is not to suggest a simplistic notion of western mimicry, but rather to highlight that this beauty ideal is, itself, a contingent and historical construction. Furthermore, femininity (like all staged or quotidian iterations of gender performance) is an aspirational ideal. There can be no "real" or "natural" femininity – which the gendered subject may or may not achieve – since the very terms of those gendered ideals are citational practices and sociocultural norms (Butler, 1990; 1993; 2004). Thus, any claim to "natural" femininity (or masculinity) is an example of gender performativity that gestures or aspires towards a citational ideal.

These gestures and performative aspirations towards ideal femininity have real, social impacts within the context of transnational consumer capitalism. Their representations are simultaneously an effect and catalyst of the global, capitalist beauty industrial complex. As such, there are significant material as well as affective rewards in performing and/or displaying ideal femininity and beauty (Craig, 2002; Jha, 2016). This was true for many of the contestants who

participated in the Club Indigo beauty pageants. Most were petite and quite thin in terms of their physical stature. They often stood on stage, one behind the other, accentuating the uniformity of this specific body type and beauty ideal. They all clearly met Lawrence and Darryl's requirements for slimness and the disregard for exaggeration through padding. While entry into these events was seemingly open to any contestant who was interested, there seemed to be clearly defined criteria regarding body shape, size, and ideal feminine embodiment.

The conformity to the subcultural imperative for slimness echoes what some scholars have critiqued as an unattainable ideal of beauty. It is one which perpetuates the heteropatriarchal gaze and its control of women's bodies (Banet-Wiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006; Cohen, Wilk & Stoeltje, 1996; Jha, 2016; Wolf, 1991). Furthermore, this gaze is a discursive technology that valorises and commodifies certain ideals of racialised femininity while denouncing others (Craig 2002). This idealised femininity does not correspond with the diverse forms of women's beauty and body types on the African continent – or anywhere else for that matter. Yet slim-figured feminine beauty was the idealised image that was heavily policed and rewarded under Lawrence and Darryl's male gazes.

Lawrence stated that he wanted his girls "to walk through town, and not have anyone ask if [they are] a real girl or not." His words highlighted the pervasive politics of "queer passing," (passing as a cisgender woman in public) survival, and gender performativity in Johannesburg's public spaces and presented an ideological quandary. First, he assumed that a gender non-conforming individual's capacity to pass as cisgender in public spaces guaranteed them protection from invasive questions. He assumed, in other words, that gender conformity provided some modicum of protection from emotional and physical harm within a society that is fundamentally heteropatriarchal, heterosexist, homo- and transphobic. But the fact of the matter is that the spectre of violence threatens all women in South Africa – whether they are transgender, queer, lesbian, or cisgender – in both public and private domains, and the hierarchies of race, class, and sexuality place a disproportionate number of women of colour within closer proximity to these forms of violence (Gqola, 2015; Judge, 2018; Lewis 2001; Makhubu, 2012). Therefore, passing as a "real" or "natural" woman would not necessarily guarantee any of the Indigo divas' protection from such invasive forms of gender policing.

Second, the idea that Lawrence and Darryl's girls had to be groomed into performing "real" femininity relies on an ideological sleight of hand that reinforces the historically phallogocentric ways in which male organisers and

owners of beauty pageants have defined ideal and authentic feminine beauty (Banet-Weser, 1999; Clowes, 2001; Craig, 2002; Thomas, 2006). That these contestants had to be groomed (by two middle-aged and middle-class gay men) into becoming “real” girls presupposes that they not “real” in the first place. This presupposition relies on the historically patriarchal episteme within which definitions and categories of authentic womanhood have been defined by men (Gqola, 2010; hooks, 1981; Rich, 1980).

Many of the contestants who participated in the Club Indigo pageants identified as transgender, or simply referred to themselves as girls. Others identified as femme gay men, or chose not to disclose their gender identities. Lawrence and Darryl’s definitional scope of realness or naturalness foreclosed gender non-conforming identities in that all contestants were made to strive towards this performative gendered ideal. As other studies have shown, the politics and categories of womanhood, femininity, and/or transfeminisms are fraught and highly contested (Garner, 2017; Stryker, 2006; 2016). Lori Watson (2016) posits that it is of critical importance to paying empathetic heed of people’s own modes of self-identification (p. 247). As such, they argue that it is incumbent upon any individual, state, institution, queer political project, and subcultural families to recognise transgender women as *women*. The imperative of grooming (i.e., policing) the beauty contestants into performing an idealised (un)real and (un)natural femininity reified a gendered norm and, intentionally or not, undermined the very sense of queer freedom and empowerment that the pageants sought to promulgate.

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### **6.3 “She’s so Ratchet”: Policing Femininity, Rewards, and Agency**

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The regulations of gender policing among the Indigo divas and beauty contestants also fuelled interpersonal antipathy among some of the divas. In this section I focus on how the divas navigated different forms of gender policing by employing agentic strategies of resistance and negotiation, and discuss the broader implications of power dynamics within the Club Indigo hierarchy.

The house rules and gender policing were not just enforced by both parents and mentoring sisters at the House of Indigo. The strict regulation of femininity



was also palpable among the divas and beauty contestants, and permeated deep into the networks of the different friendship groups and their counterparts. Although the friendships among the younger participants were generally founded upon unwavering sorority, some rivalries were clearly discernible. This created a complex assemblage of solidarity, antipathy, competition, and reward among the various participants. Some people fought one another (verbally), passive aggressive hostilities abounded, and bitter rivalries lay dormant only to be later expressed through vicious backbiting. However, most of these antagonistic dynamics were later resolved through dialogue, negotiation, and forgiveness. Some of the divas who detested one another one week would become friendly the next. This formed a system of interpersonal interactions that were dynamic and ever-changing.

The policing of feminine deportment and self-presentation was a technique which made the members of the House of Indigo fall in line with the core values and norms of the house. Just as siblings tend to codify and police behaviour among each other within birth (or biological) families so, too, was this evident within the House of Indigo. A clear example of this was when the newly-crowned Miss Black Pride 2016 was scheduled to give a lip-sync performance at the club. This was set to be her inaugural performance as one of the new ambassadors for the club. It was also meant to lay the groundwork for her journey to becoming a bona-fide Indigo diva. A week after she won the title and the evening gown prize, she shuffled nervously onto the stage. One of the cardinal rules in the House of Indigo was that the reigning queen must always wear her crown, but hers was not pinned properly and sat unsteadily on top of her wig. Zelda came to stand next to me at the bar. She gave me a wry smile as we waited for the DJ to play the ballad. Barely looking at the audience, the performer took a deep breath.

"She didn't pin her crown down," Zelda said with a knowing chuckle. On stage, Miss Black Pride began shyly to mime the lyrics to the ballad.

"She's drunk," Zelda spat. She shook her head in undisguised disapproval. Clearly, Zelda was not impressed that the new title-holder had the gall to perform in an inebriated state. She looked towards the dance floor and pointed at another young contestant. The youngster was wearing a white evening gown flowing to her ankles. One of its spaghetti straps hung off the shoulder. She was not wearing any shoes. "You would never see me dead wearing such a beautiful gown with no heels," Zelda scoffed. "That's so ratchet [unsophisticated]. She hasn't even tucked properly," she added, horrified at the sight of the conspicuous bulge beneath the new queen's mini-skirt.

The aforementioned Miss Black Pride had clearly fallen out of line with the rules of the House. She had not pinned her crown on properly, and had not tucked per penis adequately. She had dared to walk onto the stage in an inebriated state. Zelda perceived these transgressions to be unbecoming behaviour from a pageant winner. Although she did not directly express her disapproval to the transgressor, her observations to me highlighted the extent to which she was invested in the regulatory system of body and gender policing. Her response also highlighted how the femininity that was idealised at the club extended beyond being slim-figured and winning a crown: it required “proper” lady-like, and sophisticated self-presentation. Being drunk or ill-dressed was seen as “ratchet” and was unacceptable.

Elias, Gill, and Scharff (2017) posited that “beauty is a form of disciplinary power” (p. 8). It is regulated within a system of values and norms that are seen as indicative of the subject’s interiority. It is, therefore, “interpreted as a manifestation of [a person’s] inner moral qualities” (Craig, 2002, p. 49). Although the new Miss Black Pride had won an important pageant title just a week before, her drunken deportment placed her at a disadvantage. There was a clear disjuncture between her pageant title and her self-presentation, and a discordance between her outer beauty and what Zelda perceived as her unrefined interiority. As her outer beauty (for which she was rewarded with the pageant title and crown) was not reflected in her behaviour, Zelda saw fit to dismiss her outright. Had the new Miss Black Pride presented herself in a way that Zelda deemed worthy or fitting, she might have been rewarded with a compliment and thus have gained greater status to help her on her journey to becoming an Indigo diva. However, the exact opposite was the case. And, in this regard, Zelda’s dismissal amounted to a form of gender policing.

There were two more correlates within the subculture’s framework of gender policing. The dynamics of competition and reward appeared to be inexorably linked to this regulatory system. At a perfunctory level, the pageants were staged competitions in which every contestant had high stakes. Another aspect of competitiveness lay behind the staged spectacle of these pageants, however, where the younger beauty contestants competed for the affection and regard of both parents of the House. Parental regard was shown through gifts such as evening gowns, shoes, and even cash. One of the more established Indigo divas, Roseline stated:

There can be a lot of drama and jealousy in the House. The girls are always battling for attention and gifts from mommy and daddy. I’ve also been sabotaged a couple of times. But, I guess that’s how the cookie crumbles. And I guess a queen has to get used to the rules of the game.

The apportioning of such material gifts and parental attention was maintained by the subcultural hierarchies outlined in Chapter 4. The maintenance of these power relations served to ensure that the policing of ideal femininity remained under the parents' strict control and surveillance. This resulted, inevitably, in unequal power relations between the younger beauty contestants and the older gay men (Lawrence and Darryl), who were at the apex of this subculture's hierarchy. The distribution or withholding of gifts and/or attention created a highly-controlled system of gender policing at the nightclub that was hardly ever questioned or defied by the younger beauty queens. Their conformity was rewarded by significant material as well as non-material rewards – and was thus shaped by distributions of intergenerational power, access to material resources, and coerciveness.

The competition among these younger divas and queens attested to their complicity within the system – as was evidenced by their aspirational desire for approval from the older mentor and parents in the House of Indigo family. The gifts they received as signs of approval were used strategically as coercive techniques in the negotiation of power between the older (and well-resourced) parents and the younger participants at the House of Indigo. As stated in the excerpt from my interview with Roseline, the queens had to “get used to the rules of the game” in order to succeed, and thus gain subcultural status.

However, the younger participants were neither completely powerless nor downtrodden within this system of gender policing. They demonstrated moderate (albeit limited) levels of ingenuity and agency, evidenced by the fact that most of them chose to enter the different pageants year after year, with the hope of winning a pageant title and crown. For example, Ella, one of the two hearing-impaired contestants, entered the Miss Gay Jozi pageant three times between 2015 and 2017. She gave stellar performances during all the rehearsals. With help and guidance from the girls who could hear the music, she managed to pick up on the choreography with impressive speed and stylistic flare, and her self-assuredness and stage presence made her stand out from her competitors. Her interview responses revealed her enthusiasm for the pageants:

What keeps me coming back is that I want to win this crown because it's always been my dream to get this crown on my head. I want to show everyone that anything is possible if you put your mind to it. If you're proud of who you are, give yourself some time and you will win.

Ella's response reflected a keen sense of resilience in her willingness to continually return to the annual Miss Gay Jozi pageants. Moreover, it revealed a certain level of agency and complicity regarding her participation. By carefully

considered extension, I suggest that this moderate level of complicity can be attributed to the other divas and beauty queens within the House. Many of the hopeful beauty contestants echoed Ella's sentiments regarding their participation in these pageants. A number of them responded that they felt empowered and that their participation gave them confidence. Although the stylisation and performance of this idealised (slim-figured) feminine beauty was quite rigid, these younger beauty contestants willingly complied with it. They thus consented to this form of gender policing through their eagerness to repeatedly participate in these pageants on an annual basis. Moreover, they went to great lengths to ensure that they received both material and non-material rewards for their efforts.

Darryl and Lawrence exercised an incredible amount of control over the girls by either proffering or withholding these rewards. This also ensured that the regulation of a singular, idealised femininity was kept firmly intact. However, these systems of power were dynamic and multi-faceted, and not merely a top-down form of dominance by two well-resourced, middle-class men over younger, vulnerable beauty contestants. The girls exerted agency through their compliance as well as through their competitiveness. This became especially apparent when it came to the gifts.

Gifts have different meanings in different societies, and are given in different contexts – all of which have varying implications. Marcel Mauss (1950) famously asserted, in the context of the specific Maori society he was studying (p. 30), that gifts presuppose three obligations: giving, receiving, and reciprocity. This model may seem self-evident at first since it clearly distinguishes gifts from commodity exchange or donations. However, because of their diversity and the plethora of expectations to which they give rise, gifts can be seen as ambiguous. They can be “at once free and constraining, self-interested and disinterested, and are motivated by both generosity and calculation or expectation of return” (Yan, 2005, p. 258). The distribution of gifts to the queens at the House of Indigo was not without the expectation of returns. In order to receive these gifts, the younger queens had to perform and constantly display the kind of femininity which was sanctioned and policed within the house. The system of policing functioned both vertically and horizontally. Along the vertical axis, the younger queens who conformed properly received gifts, attention, and approval from the senior members of the House. Along the horizontal axis, they received approval and prestige from their contemporaries when they did well in the pageants or when they comported themselves well around the club.

Scholarly as well as popular rhetoric have framed the relationships between

well-to-do older men and younger women as dangerous and/or morally abhorrent. In South Africa, the older men in these relationships have been colloquially dubbed “blessers” or “sugar daddies,” while the younger women have been named “blessees” or “sugar babies.” Scholarly analyses of these relationships have tended to overemphasise the interrelated threats of HIV infection, pregnancy, socioeconomic and sexual exploitation, and the inevitable comeuppance for young women (Gobind & du Plessis, 2015; Thobejane, Molaudzi & Zitha, 2017; Varjavandi, 2017). Moreover, they have largely taken it for granted that the young women are exploited and then stigmatised.

Other commentators, however, have stressed the importance of examining transactional sex, blesser/blessee relationships – or any other similar relationship – as both contextual and contingent. Seen in this light, these intergenerational and class-disparate relationships are seemingly shaped by a wide variety of socioeconomic determinants. Similarly, there are a wide variety of factors, needs, and motivations which give them their impetus and complexity (Hoss & Blockland, 2017; Ligaga, 2014; Musvawure et al., 2015; Selikow & Mbulaheni, 2013; Shefer & Strebel, 2012). Mark Hunter (2010) aptly noted the interconnection between love, sex, intimacy, and kinship in young South African women’s access to monetary resources and consumer goods (p. 182). From this perspective, he suggested that “we must conceive of relationships as characterized not by a narrow commodification of sex but by reciprocal bonds based on exchange and affection” (Hunter, 2010, p. 197).

Without making too hasty a generalisation, I wish to offer an important analytical caveat: At no time during fieldwork did I observe, encounter, or hear about any sexual exchange between the Lawrence, Darryl and the younger women at the House of Indigo. Nonetheless, important parallels can be drawn with the body of scholarship on blesser/blessee culture and intergenerational relationships. There is no escaping how the process of gifting and rewarding the younger divas and queens was an enactment of power of Lawrence and Darryl’s part. They exercised their parental and upper middle-class privilege through rewarding younger divas with money and expensive commodities. Because of this, there were implicit as well as explicit expectations of reciprocity from the queens regarding their proper behaviour. This is a clear illustration of how the offering of any gift encompasses the enmeshment of ambiguous and complex interpersonal dynamics between social actors (Yan, 2005, p. 249).

Darryl and Lawrence derived an enormous sense of authority, pride, and prestige from dolling out or withholding gifts from the young women. Similarly, (as evidenced by Ella’s statement), the young divas and queens also garnered

empowerment and pleasure by performing their femininity in such a way as to make them eligible to receive these gifts and rewards. From this viewpoint, there was clearly an unequal and seemingly coercive exchange of commodities, power, and agency at the House Indigo. The cumulative effects of this regulatory gender framework kept this subcultural milieu intact for well over a decade, however – a milieu in which everyone from Lawrence and Darryl to the younger beauty contestants, queens, and more established divas, had lucrative stakes.

According to Muñoz (1999):

Disidentification is not always an adequate strategy of resistance and survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of colour and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. But for some, *disidentification is a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously.* (p. 5, Emphasis my own)

It is clear that the Indigo Divas and queens willingly consented to and performed the regulatory discourses of feminine beauty. Such discourses were often constructed and legitimated within a hegemonic and mainstream public sphere (*vis-à-vis* popular culture). A critical research finding, however, was the extent to which these discourses and ideals permeated through the subcultural boundaries of the House and structured the parameters of gender performativity. The House members engaged in disidentificatory performances of idealised, cosmopolitan femininity in that they were both within and against the hegemonic and dominant scripts of feminine beauty. Indeed, they transgressed heteronormative gender binaries through their transgender and femme gay identities. At the same time, their tactical performances of ideal, “natural,” feminine beauty reified the restrictive scripts that supervene and regulate gender norms in the public sphere. Moreover, these gendered performances opened up broader questions regarding the breadth and sociological import of their agency within this subcultural context.

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## 6.4 *Cosmopolitan Femininity and Aspirational Beauty*

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Beauty pageants entail the performance of various intersecting discourses in spectacular form (Ballerino-Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje, 1996, p. 8). They articulate the values and ideals that are held in high esteem within a specific spatio-temporal context. The earliest mass mediated forms of pageantry amongst the Black population in southern Africa can be traced back to as early as the 1930s, in the *Bantu World* newspaper. Lynn Thomas (2006) states that “*Bantu World* was the first newspaper targeting Black South Africans to offer women’s pages, and to feature representations and discussion of the modern girl” (p. 465). Later, *Drum* magazine’s “Miss and Mr Africa” beauty pageant, established in 1952, also became hugely popular among urban male and female entrants and readers (Clowes, 2001). As a textual bastion for urban Black dwellers – both elite and otherwise – in 1950s South Africa, *Drum* magazine actively sought to represent the capriciousness and inevitable challenges of urban city life for the South African Black population<sup>10</sup>. The representations of urbanised modernity and cosmopolitanism espoused within the pages of *Bantu World* and *Drum* magazine were also gendered in very specific ways (Clowes, 2001: 5). Both the textual and visual materials foregrounded the representations of a gendered binary within which urbanised Black men, on the one hand, were constructed as industrious migrant labourers, and, on the other hand, Black women were represented as modern, respectable, and dependable wives who governed the domestic domain.

Both these media titles offered Black city dwellers mass mediated platforms to perform modern cosmopolitan identity through pageantry, through giving both women and men the chance to submit photographs of themselves and others whom they deemed modern, cosmopolitan, and beautiful. The editors and readers of these titles would then judge these photographic entries against westernised standards of “modernity” that eschewed more traditional African norms and standards of beauty. These textually mediated beauty pageants constituted performances of race, gender, and the contextual discourses of

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<sup>10</sup> *Drum* magazine later opened international offices in cities as far afield as Nairobi and Accra (Clowes, 2001).

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modernity and beauty. They are also evidence that ideas of cosmopolitanism are ever-changing, contingent, and aspirational.

I mention the *Bantu World* and *Drum* Black beauty pageants in order to demonstrate that localised understandings of cosmopolitan identity have long constitute an integral aspect of beauty pageantry. Niko Besnier (2002) observed that “in many contexts, locality is defined in opposition to modernity, hybridity, cosmopolitanism, and migration” (p. 536). In other instances, local formations have been understood as inherently cosmopolitan, modern and/or “stylish” (Barber, 2018; Iqani & Dosekun, 2020; Livermon, 2020; Mbembe & Nuttal, 2008). It is therefore important to analyse ideas and practices of cosmopolitanism with a critical awareness of the political, historical, and economic particularities of place. During the earliest stages of fieldwork in 2016, Lawrence stated:

“We are a very cosmopolitan club, we cater for everybody. Even some of the girls tell me that this is the only place where they feel safe in drag. That’s why they make such an effort to get dressed up when they come here.”

Lawrence’s description conflates the ideas of cosmopolitanism with open-mindedness. His statement that “we cater for everybody” places his description within the sphere of queer, liberal thinking. The space and the subcultural practices housed therein, according to Lawrence, are cosmopolitan because they are open to everyone – regardless of gender and/or sexuality. His claim shores up a specific set of meanings related to his ideas of beauty, style, and fashion. He often insisted that the Indigo girls were on par with cisgender women who entered the Miss South Africa pageant: “My girls are the best of the best. They can even give those Miss South Africa contestants a run for their money.” To him and Darryl, the Miss South African beauty contestants represented the ideal of cosmopolitan glamour and sophistication. Their insistence that the contestants at the Club Indigo beauty pageants were on par with the Miss South Africa contestants highlighted their aspiration towards this latter form of femininity, and placed an incredible amount of pressure on their contestants to display this form of beauty. However, their claim of being “the best of the best” drag beauty pageant also reflected a sense of antagonism and disdain for other pageant organisers – particularly those in Cape Town.

Unlike the Miss Gay Western Cape and Miss Gay RSA pageants, the Club Indigo pageants were not sponsored by any corporations or brands, and this fuelled Lawrence and Darryl’s resentment for the Capetonian pageants. While nursing his usual glass of Jameson whiskey on the rocks at the bar, Lawrence pronounced: “The Cape Town girls try way too hard with the makeup and the



padding, they almost look clownish.” In this context, “trying too hard” was clearly undesirable, and the effect was that the girls ended up looking “clownish.” Lawrence considered this representation of femininity to be unacceptable because it was unsophisticated and therefore not cosmopolitan. The twin ideas of sophistication and cosmopolitanism thus functioned as the benchmarks for the kind of femininity most idealised at Club Indigo, and it was the only iteration of femininity that was rewarded. Any girls who did not live up to this standard was therefore ineligible for receiving material rewards, affection, and greater status within the subculture.

Zelda lamented the fact that some of the girls at Club Indigo appeared to be ungrateful and that they behaved badly. She bemoaned their unwillingness to learn and be groomed into developing the right kind of cosmopolitan femininity. The following is an excerpt from our interview (2017):

**Zelda:** Don't take for granted what has been given to you on your lap and expect your plate to constantly be full because, if I look at these girls, they see a silver platter in front of them and they see that it's been handed to them.

**Katlego:** Just in life generally? Or specifically to the club, like a title for example?

**Zelda:** Life in general, but also specifically to the club, like a title. I'm talking about things that come with the title. I'm talking about things that were given to them during their reign, after their reign - those kinds of benefits.

**Katlego:** Like what?

**Zelda:** Dresses, shoes, wigs, free alcohol, free entrance – and then to still bite the hand that feeds you in terms of arrogance, attitude, bad mouthing – is heart-sore. I think it would be for any parent, biological or spiritually or socially. When you do something for somebody you expect them to be grateful.

Zelda's words clearly illustrate the material and affective rewards that came with proper behaviour and compliance with the values of the House of Indigo. She herself had clearly achieved high subcultural status by complying with the values of cosmopolitan femininity.

## Conclusion

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The values of naturalness and cosmopolitan femininity functioned together as the performative ideals at the House of Indigo. They determined whether or not the younger divas excelled, and whether or not they received material rewards at the club. Proper compliance with this singular iteration of femininity resulted in various material benefits: dresses, shoes, wigs, free alcohol, and free entrance. This singular, aspirational femininity was, however, restrictive in several ways, and belied Lawrence and Darryl's claims about Club Indigo being space for queer freedom. It also complicated my initial assumptions about it as a space of radical queer sociality.

This chapter demonstrated how an ideal, cosmopolitan femininity was naturalised by the parents and mentors within the House of Indigo to the extent that it was promulgated and performed by all parties, and was heavily policed through a variety of explicit and implicit (both vertical and horizontal) ways. I argued that these beauty pageants – as well as the subcultural values underpinning them – constituted interlocking systems of gender policing. I have therefore suggested that the naturalisation and strict policing of this form gender contradicted the owners' claims about Club Indigo being a space for queer freedom and acceptance. I have also shown that the beauty contestants demonstrated and retained strategic (though limited) forms of agency in their respective performances of this specific femininity. Inasmuch as they chose to conform to this clearly normative femininity, they chose to participate in it – and with a considerable amount of pleasure. In the following chapter I describe how the Indigo divas performed this particular femininity in ways that benefited them in significant ways, both within and outside of the club.



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**CHAPTER 7**

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**DRAG  
PERFORMANCE,  
EMPOWERMENT  
AND SELF-  
BRANDING**

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*No one knew exactly why Zelda and A'Deva had been keeping a cool distance from one another lately. Neither of them said anything terrible about the other, but a palpable tension had arisen between them. One could hazard a guess that their broil had something to do with the latest object of Zelda's affections. She had recently become besotted with an eligible, handsome, young man who had been frequenting the club lately. It so happened that he was A'Deva's close friend, and owned the hair salon where she worked as a receptionist. Despite the connection being platonic and professional, Zelda had apparently felt uncomfortable with A'Deva's proximity to this young man. This was not the first time the two divas had disagreed over a potential lover. Their relationship had always been marked by a series of stinging antipathies, so we all stayed out of the matter, assuming that they would resolve it themselves – as they had done many times before. Whatever the origins of their clashes, the two divas had always agreed to remain cordial towards one another.*

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Both of them had committed to a duet lip-synching performance, and were determined to stick to it. They had chosen the live version of *Proud Mary* by two of their idols, Tina Turner and Beyoncé. This song was a perfect fit as it reflected their individual personalities and styles. Zelda would lip-synch to Turner's lyrics while A'Deva gravitated towards Beyoncé's parts of the song. This would be the first time they performed on stage together. As the most prominent divas at Club Indigo, they took their upcoming performance very seriously. Numerous posts announcing the performance were posted on the Club's Facebook and Instagram pages. It seemed that they put aside their personal differences during the rehearsals. They both arrived in full makeup and drag on the Saturday before the scheduled event. Chase, the DJ, sat silently at his booth. He obeyed every one of their commands to stop or start the song as they practiced their choreography countless times. They shared notes about which poses to strike to the beat, they guided each other's movements, and seemingly enjoyed the occasional laugh when they made a mistake. When Zelda made a slight misstep during the song's bridge, they started the choreography from the beginning: "Oh, sorry angel. Let's take it from the top," Zelda said, wiping her brow with a tissue. "OK. Sure," A'Deva agreed, as she walked back to her initial position on stage. The classic electric guitar riff to the song began yet again, and the two divas began swinging their hips left to right in perfect synch. Zelda began miming to Tina Turner's sultry voice as it boomed through the speakers behind her: "Every now and then, we like to do things nice and easy."

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## **7.1 Drag, Empowerment and Utopic Pleasure**

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The importance of lip-synching cannot be understated in any discussion about drag subcultures. At the House of Indigo, the art was not only a means of entertainment, it was a rite of passage. So significant was it as a social and aesthetic practice, that it greatly impacted on aspiring divas' horizons for gaining status, rewards, and adulation within the subculture.

The previous chapter detailed the various stages and factors which determined how one became an Indigo diva, highlighting the fact that in order for an aspirant beauty queen to be elevated along the hierarchical ranks, they had to master the art of lip-synching performance. This mastery was one of the determining factors for winning a pageant title and crown. It was also a criterion by which the display of idealised hyperfemininity was policed and/or rewarded. The purpose of this section is to analyse lip-synching as an integral aspect of gender performance, and as a mediated performance of transnational consumer and popular culture. Following this, I discuss drag performance as identity work and aesthetic labour.

It is, however, important to outline what I mean by "aesthetic labour." According to Elias et al. (2017, p. 26), normative beauty standards and pressures have expanded into the realm of subjectivity within the current context of transnational, neoliberal, consumer capitalist context. This imperative towards normative beauty ideals has taken both affective as well as material forms. In turn, they have been reproduced through various practices of consumption, new forms of media, technologies, and aesthetics of self-representation. Borrowing from this critical framework, I conceive of aesthetic labour as being constituted through the consumption and distribution of various commodities, technologies, forms of beautification, and self-styling. Not only is aesthetic labour embodied through various modes of self-styling and beautification, but it also takes material form through the display of commodities as well as the performance of consumer identities. For our purposes here, aesthetic labour was exemplified through techniques of self-stylization, practices of consumption, as well as the acquisition and display of various aesthetic commodities. Drag and lip-synching (as well as beauty pageantry), therefore, encompassed a wide range of aesthetic labour which culminated in their glamourized display on stage.

Lip-synching and drag performance provided an avenue for creative expression for the aspirant as well as more established queens at Club Indigo. Many of them stated that they felt empowered when they performed on stage. For example, Princess was a prominent beauty contestant and drag performer at the House. After several attempts at acquiring different Indigo pageant titles, she moved on to organise the “Miss Gay Valentine” pageant in Daveyton on the eastern outskirts of Johannesburg. Although she was no longer an “official” member of the House of Indigo, she was always welcomed as a performer and a highly regarded judge at the pageants.

Princess was featured in Luis de Barros’ 2017 film, *Jozi Queens*. The film was commissioned by the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action Archives (GALA) in Johannesburg, and included a 15-minute history of Club Indigo, featuring several of my key interlocutors. In it, Princess described her love the stage in the following terms:

With so much hate that we experience in the outside world as the LGBTI community, when you are on stage, the kind of love you receive from the audience is totally amazing. It tells you that, you know what, I am doing something right. There are people that actually appreciate me. It takes literally everything, all the negativity, away.

Princess’ sentiment that being on stage “literally takes everything, all the negativity, away” emphasises the gravitas with which drag performance was regarded at the club. For many of the divas, performing drag – through lip-synching and dancing – was a form of respite from the discriminatory antagonism of the heteronormative world.

Black and Coloured poor, working class queer citizens still face disproportionate levels of homo- and transphobic violence to white and affluent LGBTQIA+ people at institutional as well as grassroots levels in post-apartheid South Africa. While I do not want to collapse the discourses homo- and transphobic violence into essentialist notions of race and class, it is important to point out that, particularly at the statistical levels, hate crimes are often mediated and debated as a “poor township” problem, and are thus associated with Black and Coloured queer identities (Judge, 2018; Livermon, 2012; Matebeni, 2013).

Coupled with these multiple and intersecting forms of systemic violence is the discursive erasure of their heterogenous experiences as queer people of colour (Imma, 2017). Across mainstream media, Black and Coloured queer people have, historically, been misrepresented within stereotypical, homogenising frameworks (Talmor, 2013). Queer characters on soap operas as well as



upwardly-mobile (particularly cisgender gay male) celebrities have become instantly recognisable across all media platforms. However, the fact that these public images exist as part of consumers' media diet does not necessarily mean that they are progressive. Grant Andrews (2018) highlighted the liminality of queer media in South Africa (p. 55). While queer media representations certainly abound in this context, an overwhelming majority of these essentialize homo- and transphobic hate crimes (and gender-based violence in general) as a Black and Coloured social problem. Contemporary struggles around queer representation and public visibility are fraught and remain unresolved in post-apartheid South Africa (Andrews, 2018; Kiguwa & Siswana, 2018). Princess' statements therefore attest to the multilayered intricacies of affect and empowerment as relates to Black and Coloured queer citizens' public visibility.

According to Princess, drag performance empowered the Indigo divas in that it allowed them to feel that they were "doing something right" with their lives. Drag performance and beauty pageantry were the discursive thoroughfares along which they could negotiate their ways towards enjoying "livable lives" (Butler, 2004; Livermon, 2012). Phoenix, too, highlighted this sense of empowerment and peacefulness: "Anything that's got to do with stage performance, I adore. So, I know that when I go to Club Indigo and get on stage, *I'm going to be at peace*. It is my alter ego there, but a part of the real me is there too."

Phoenix's feelings of peace at the club are analytically significant in relation to the ever-present dangers of discriminatory violence and hostility beyond the nightclub's boundaries. These and similar feelings of safety and peacefulness (however ephemeral) were echoed by other divas at the nightclub, too. Collectively, the Indigo divas' feeling of empowerment was also accompanied by a sense of belonging, engendered in part by the adulation which they received from their peers and from the audience. The love and appreciation which they received while they were on stage thus proved to be a significant motivating factor for their performances of drag as well as the aesthetic labour required to participate in the subculture.

As with A'Deva and Zelda's case in the opening vignette to this chapter, drag performance and professional self-presentation on stage were of paramount importance to the divas. Admirable stage presence and performance took precedence above all else – including negative interpersonal relations. The divas were expected to give and *show* the very best of themselves while they were on stage. To this end, they had to set aside any feelings of enmity that might impact on them delivering performances that were entertaining to their audiences and

to the more senior members of the house. Likewise, the homo- and transphobic negativity from the outside world had to be excised (or at least momentarily bracketed) while they were on stage. The performance of drag was, therefore, integral to the divas' artistic and psychic development. During those relatively brief moments when they were on stage, they could reimagine themselves as the ideal performers that they wanted to be. Rather than being merely escapist frivolity, drag performance enabled the divas to reshape and embody new selves. These practices of world-making enabled them to reconstruct their identities in ways that were simultaneously liberating and quite possibly utopian.

Muñoz (2009) suggested that "the field of utopian possibility is one in which the multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity" (p. 20). One such utopian field of possibility opened up once the divas hit the stage. The performance of drag enabled the Indigo divas to reconfigure their identities in such a way as to gain a sense of belonging, empowerment and affirmation (from the subculture's members and audiences alike). Phoenix explained this best as we prepared for her mini photoshoot at her home. She looked into the mirror of her mother's varnished dressing table while lathering shaving cream across her chin and neck. She wanted to remove all traces of stubble before she applied any makeup. She said:

Drag is having to dress up in something and do the things you don't normally do on a daily basis. You're basically channelling your alter ego.... It's a way of socialising, a way of being out there and being with other people – people that are regarded as different by the society. I felt like being with such people, my people, would empower me to be a better me at the end of the day.

While clearly positioning drag performance as entertainment, Phoenix's response also indexed the intra-communal sense of belonging that it engendered. According to her, the art form of drag encompassed more than just "dressing up." My fieldwork made it clear that drag is a social and political praxis that constantly redevelops and reconstructs an idealised alter-ego. As such, it provides a critical mode for interpersonal connection with other human subjects and communities. These aesthetic practices and labours attendant to drag are political insofar as they bring together queer bodies and identities that may otherwise be marginalised because of their sexual, gender, and class differences.

Phoenix's perspective supports my belief that drag performance at the House of Indigo can be analysed as an aesthetic and utopian project of world-making. Drag was a social practice that appeared to be simultaneously political and pleasurable because it was co-constructed by the performers, their audiences,

and the House of Indigo members. It was an aesthetic praxis that gestured towards a utopian field of empowerment and pleasurable possibility with regards to the members' shared values and their sense of belonging within this subcultural community. Therefore, it laid out a utopian field wherein the divas' personae were continually reshaped in efforts to embody their most prized and empowered selves.

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## ***7.2 Intersecting Performances of Gender: Drag, Pageantry, and Cosmopolitan Femininity***

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In this section I discuss drag performance at the House of Indigo as a form of gender policing. I came to this analytical position through my observations of the subcultural mores and values which shaped drag performance at the Club. For instance, the hopeful pageant contestants were expected to demonstrate some competence with regards to the performance of drag. Few contestants entered the beauty pageants at Club Indigo with the sole intention of winning a title and the attendant material rewards that came with it.

Some constants had other aspirations regarding their subcultural status and upward social mobility within the house. A superseding dynamic of affective motivation for their participation was to secure a sense of queer belonging and acceptance within a community of like-minded drag performers. In order to bring the aspiration to fruition, they had to develop their stage personae not only as beauty contestants, but as drag performers as well.

The young transgender women and femme gay men who were a part of Club Indigo undertook various forms of aesthetic labour in order to transform themselves from novice beauty contestants to well-established drag performers. It must be emphasised that this was no small feat. It required tutelage, support, and stringent mentorship from the parents and older sisters of the house. It is, therefore, important to highlight the inextricable linkages between drag and pageantry at Club Indigo. So intrinsically significant was one to the other, that they functioned as mutually reinforcing components that governed the subcultural performances of gender and other social hierarchies at the club.

In order to gain the love and appreciation of the audience, judges, and other

subcultural members, the performer had to display or emphasise specific aspects of their alter-egos—what I henceforth refer to as their drag personae. The successful performance of a well-curated persona was rewarded, as shown earlier, with a composite of material and non-material gifts. It was an unstated, unwritten expectation that any beauty queen who won a title and crown at the club would develop her a talent as a lip-synching performance artist during her tenure – and throughout the subsequent years. Being beautiful was a clear advantage for the hopeful beauty queen. Displaying an idealised, “natural” femininity at pageants also gave her the upper hand. However, the ability to deliver a flawless lip-synching performance on stage gave her an extra boost above and beyond her competitors. Indeed, the art of lip-synching was held in such high regard that it was classified as one of the fundamental categories of assessment in the Miss Black Pride and Miss Club Indigo pageants. For example, the Miss Club Indigo pageant ran over by three weeks. Each week the contestants participated in different rounds – or “heats,” as the organisers called them – in which they showed off various aspects of their feminine beauty in terms of sartorial style and aesthetic accoutrements. In this way, the pageant contestants literally performed an idealised femininity on stage, and the best were rewarded by entry into the next phase or the next heat of the pageant in the following week.

In the first two heats, the contestants were judged according to categories such as “casual and cocktail wear,” “evening gown,” “lingerie and swimsuit,” “accessories and grooming,” “interviews and elocution,” and “poise and coordination.” They were scored up to 10 points for each of these categories. The points were carried over each week and were tallied on the final crowning night. A third and final category was added in the third and final heat: the “lip-synching” category. Each finalist had to perform a song of her choice for which she would be judged and scored according to her creativity and stage presence. As with the other categories, 10 points was the maximum score.

This system of scoring 10 points in the lip-synching category reveals two important dynamics. The first is that it was held in equally high regard to the other categories of style and feminine self-presentation: the ability to deliver a stellar lip-synching performance was thus an integral measure of each beauty contestants’ potential as an ideal ambassador for the nightclub. Second, the intersplicing of performance among other aesthetic and sartorial categories demonstrated its significance as a criterion by which idealised femininity (“naturalness,” as discussed in the previous chapter) was both policed and rewarded. Lip-synching was by no means mere entertainment for the judges and audiences; it was a definitive yard-stick which had critical implications for the contestants’ success and status at the club.

On the night of the third heat of the Miss Club Indigo 2016 pageant, Portia was called onto the stage for the segment of the programme dedicated to speeches of encouragement from crowned queens. It would be followed by lip-synching performances by the contestants. As the previous year's winner, this was Portia's opportunity to impart her wisdom to the contestants standing in single file on the stage. Her crown gleamed on her perfectly coiffured wig as she spoke into the microphone, alternating her gaze between the audience and the smiling contestants:

"Ladies," she began lilting in her soft-spoken tone, "this competition is not just your beauty and your looks. It's not just about your dresses and make-up. It's also about class and etiquette. It's about your passion and character. You must believe in yourself no matter what. You must show the people that you are confident in yourself. This is your final opportunity to clinch that crown, so give your performance everything you got."

Portia's words of wisdom were evidence that beauty pageants encompass the polysemous constructions of multiple discourses and aesthetic labour. Bialystok (2016) observed that "beauty queens are rewarded [not only] for approximating an ideal female body, but for grooming, decorating, and presenting that body in conformity with standards of femininity, along with other elements of their behavior" (p. 623) This was illustrated not only in the inclusion of the lip-synching category at the Miss Club Indigo pageant, but also in its significance as one of the fundamental criteria by which the standards of ideal femininity were appraised. The combination of class, etiquette, passion, and confidence was thus constituted as being equally important to ideals of beauty and other modes of self-adornment. More importantly, however, was the explicit imperative to display this assemblage of beauty, confidence, and proper etiquette through stage performance.

Later that evening, Portia and I chatted briefly. She lamented the fact that some of the younger contestants or novices did not have much respect for the rules of deportment and stage presence. She was also unimpressed by the levels of intoxication that the girls had presented while they were on stage:

It's quite hard to make it in this [drag and pageant] industry. And you have to be careful about how you carry yourself. For example, you can't drink anything if you know you are going to perform on stage. It's just a bad look, you know what I mean?

Portia's words here echoed her earlier directive to the hopeful contestants about etiquette and class. According to her, in order to succeed in the drag and

pageant industries, one had to display the appropriate level of etiquette and sophistication. One could not perform their femininity as they so pleased.

It was clear that the two divas who had really succeeded within the subculture were A'Deva and Zelda. These senior divas had been given the license to present their respective femininities in their own respective ways. But this "freedom" was neither absolute nor without its requisite efforts. Over time, it appeared that their seniority was hard-won and, as such, materialised through their ability to navigate the space of the Club with relative self-assuredness. Darryl and Lawrence hardly ever engaged with these two in the same way that they did with the younger divas. For instance, Darryl never admonished them about not wearing their tiaras or sashes in the appropriate manner, and Lawrence calmly rolled his eyes, dismissing their infrequent fits of anger as egotistical tantrums. Such kid-glove treatment allowed these two senior divas the space to display their femininity with more agency (both on and off stage) than their younger mentees. They were no longer as self-conscious about their deportment or winning the approval from the parents of the house. They had won pageant titles and had developed their répertoires to the extent that they could be confident in their self-presentation.

Although A'Deva and Zelda enjoyed high status within Club Indigo, their performances of drag (and gender more broadly), still operated within the matrix of idealised femininity. This ideal, so crystallised and sacrosanct within this subcultural domain, was the rubric upon which they based their drag personae. As the mentoring divas, this was an ideal which they both upheld and vigilantly monitored among the younger divas (Zelda more so than A'Deva).

In elucidating her famous thesis of drag as metaphor for gender performativity, Butler (1993; 2004) stated that it is not necessarily always subversive. Minority subjects who form drag communities create enclaves of subcultural production as responses to and modes of survival within often hostile environments bent on making them invisible through physical, sexual, and systemic violence (Butler, 2004, p. 216). In such conditions of existence, drag communities and performance may assimilate into and reify the categories of gender and sexual subjectivity as a necessary strategy to lead liveable lives. At the same time, their existence, counter-public vernaculars, and social practices are significant insofar as they call into question the binaries of hegemonic and mainstream society.

Through drag pageantry and performance, the Indigo divas complicated the established norms of gender and sexuality within hegemonic, post-apartheid South African society. In so doing, they clearly resisted these norms by framing

their performances within narrative discourses of visibility, empowerment, and queer subjectivity. However, they also cast light upon the restrictive boundaries of gender without necessarily subverting them. In fact, the gender policing that went into maintaining them made them all the more susceptible to analytical scrutiny. This required significant courage, financial effort, and creative ingenuity from the various members of the House. As Zelda joked in her opening statement at the Miss Black Pride 2016 pageant: “It takes a lot of balls for us to get on stage, and do what we ladies do.”

By using aesthetic techniques and drag performance, they highlighted the heteronormative frameworks within which queer people of colour are still regulated in contemporary South African society. E. Patrick Johnson (2001, p. 3–4) averred that the aesthetic and cultural production undertaken by Black queer bodies is always already engaged in critical, political praxis. He argued that it is a “discursive process of mediated identification and subjectivity in a political praxis that speaks to the material existence of [such racialized] bodies” (Johnson, 2001, p. 10).

While the Indigo divas complicated the hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality, they did not subvert or transform these in any radical way. Their conformity to ideals of “natural,” cosmopolitan femininity was a practice of self-fashioning within a heteropatriarchal society that was not always accepting of their bodies and practices. At the same time, these performances of ideal femininity were also survival strategies and ways of creating utopic freedom, excess, and pleasure (however limited) within a subcultural context that engendered queer belonging and acceptance. Muñoz’s (1999) conceptual model of queer disidentification is analytically useful here. Framing it explicitly as a practice of survival for queer people of colour, Muñoz (1999) wrote: “Disidentification is [one of the many ways] of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (p.12) This does not suggest that the Indigo divas were politically confrontational towards heteropatriarchal society in their performances on stage. Nor does it suggest that they intended to dismantle or challenge these specifically through drag performance. In fact, public visibility and acceptance for femme gay men and transgender women were the most salient themes that occurred whenever the divas actually spoke on stage, and allowed their own voices to be heard over the microphone. However, the performance and display of a singular, heavily policed iteration of femininity pointed to the boundaries of gendered subjectivity and valorized beauty within a broader societal framework.

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## **The Bluebelles and T.O.P. Divas**

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The most favoured and thus highly-endorsed aspect of drag performance at Club Indigo was lip-synching. While a performer's rhythmic dance moves could certainly enthral the crowd (as was often the case with A'Deva), the art of lip-synching took precedence over all forms of stage performance. With the exception of Zelda, who had an outstanding singing voice, none of the other Indigo divas ever sang live, and none were encouraged or compelled to do so. They were free to choose any musical genre or artist for their lips-synching performances. As such, a wide variety of local and transnational musical genres abounded during the performances. It was possible to witness a lip-synch performance to a Kwaito hit record by local stars, then Boom Shaka, followed by an RnB ballad by Mariah Carey. Some divas preferred solo performances, while others gravitated mostly to performing duets or in trios. Others chose to include solo as well as group performances in their repertoire. Neither of these choices were given precedence or preference: there were no restrictions governing group and/or solo performances.

The two well-established performance trios were the T.O.P. Divas and the Bluebelles (introduced in Chapter 4). These two groups were usually scheduled to perform during intervals at the beauty pageants. The Bluebelles had a characteristic style of self-adornment and musical taste. They styled themselves after 1960s Black girl groups such as The Supremes, The Emotions, and Love Unlimited. They donned matching sleeveless cyan mermaid evening gowns for most of their performances, and each wore white elbow-length gloves. Alternatively, they showed off their well-toned legs in black sequined mini-dresses. Their matching blond and auburn wigs were usually sculpted vertically into 1960s coiffures and beehive hairstyles. After watching several of their performances, it became evident that their general style was also influenced by the 2006 blockbuster musical drama *Dreamgirls*, starring Beyoncé and Jennifer Hudson. They also lip-synched to songs and performance styles by icons such as Miriam Makeba and the 1980s vocal group sensation, Joy.

I recall a T.O.P. Divas performance in the early stages of fieldwork in October 2016:

*The T.O.P. Divas trio also drew upon transnational influences in terms of their performance styles. The trio were scheduled as headlining acts for the Jo'burg Pride Afterparty. This special event was widely publicised on the Club's Facebook and Instagram pages for almost three weeks. It was*



set to place a week prior to the Miss Black Pride 2016 pageant. So, this was effectively Phoenix's last performance as the reigning titleholder. Although they were all nervous, they were also excited to show off their latest choreography and matching outfits. Their performance set was composed of five different performances. The first and last acts were group performances. The three acts in between were allotted to their solo performances. In this way, each diva could display her distinctive finesse as an individual performer and group member. In matching white chiffon mini-dresses, they opened the act with the famous Abba ballad, *Fernando*. The audience, however, seemed nonplussed and slightly uninterested in the performance. They responded with a tepid of clap of their hands, barely whistling or shouting their characteristic cheer, "YAASSSS GIRL," as they usually did. But they were enthralled when it was time came for the final song. I looked at the time on my cell phone. It was 02h30 am, and there were still several acts to follow.

I looked up from my phone and saw the trio walking out of the dressing room and onto the stage. They had changed their outfits, each wearing domestic workers' uniforms with matching aprons and *doeks*<sup>11</sup>. These were of the local variety, decorated in geometric, brightly coloured, ethnic prints. They began with a rendition of Mama' Themba's *Wedding Song* by jazz and pop legend, Margaret Mncingana. Their flat

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**11** The word *doek* is a South African colloquialism which may be approximated to the English terms, headcloth or headwrap. The *doek*, however, is not without its contemporary politics and debates. Although seemingly insignificant, this accessory opens up a range of political discussions regarding Black women's labour and self-stylisation. Within the local quotidian and popular cultural lexicon, the *doek's* wearer is often imagined as a heterosexual Black woman who has come of age. The act of wearing this item of clothing indexes two interwoven representational paradigms that have become highly charged topics of discussion in the popular press. From a historical perspective, the *doek* is a feminized sartorial object that serves two functions within the broader Black populace. First, it is meant to protect the wearer's crown from the natural elements while locking in the natural oils to protect the hair follicles and stimulate hair growth. Second, within ritualised ceremonies and institutions such as funerals and church, women are expected to wear the *doek* as sign of respectability and maturation. As such, these variegated meanings have become, in part, associated with Black women's domesticity and their labours therein (see Ntombela, 2012). However, the *doek* has also become appropriated within local fashion industries as a sign of "Afrocentric" cosmopolitanism and stylistic flare. This assemblage of historical function and discursive representations have become a heated point of debate. Younger Black women have recently staged protests demanding the right to wear *doeks* (as well as their natural hair) in corporate spaces in order to style and represent themselves in any way they choose. Samanga (2016) also discussed the contemporary aesthetic and political implications of reclaiming the *doek* with regards to Black women's agency, self-determination, and aspirational upward-mobility.

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*tennis shoes were well-suited for up-tempo choreography for the song. The audience whopped and clapped as the divas descended from the stage. Spinning in lightning-fast roundabout turns, they almost touched the cheering crowd. Suddenly, the music stopped. Then a slow, acoustic melody started playing from the speakers. This song was Emotions by the mega-star girl group, Destiny's Child. Then the divas began stripping out of their uniforms. Underneath, they each wore tight-fitting mini-dresses which they began accessorising with necklaces and wigs. The divas continued lip-synching to the adlibs and lyrics throughout the entire performance. As they neared the end of the four-minute ballad, the divas had completely changed into new cocktail outfits. The audience cheered loudly as they had literally witnessed a drag transformation on stage.*

My observations demonstrate the localised ways in which the Indigo divas simultaneously consumed and performed celebrity as well as popular cultural texts and images. Witnessing this transformation from one style of drag to another was entertaining and analytically complex. Observing the performance enabled me to gain insights into the general range of styles of performance that were highly regarded at the House of Indigo.

The directive towards ideal femininity was also inflected within the performance I described. The T.O.P. Divas' literal transformation on stage foregrounded the performance of cosmopolitan, aspirational, fashionable femininity. This form of femininity took precedence over all others. Wittingly or not, their performance was overlaid with historical as well as political implications, as they divested themselves of the sartorial significations of working-class, localised femininity. In taking off their maids' uniforms (however colourful and eye-catching these were), they removed themselves from any aesthetic associations with racialised, working-class, domesticity and/or servitude.

From a historical perspective, the institutionalised role of domestic servitude has long been associated with Black subjects, especially Black women (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 72-73). In post-apartheid South Africa, the role of the racialised and gendered (read Black woman) domestic worker continues to be marginalised, exploited, and regarded as inferior because of the domestic worker's assumed low educational level and class background. Sithabile Ntombela (2012) argued that domestic workers' uniforms are part of the discursive technologies that signify the wearer's marginalised and exploitable socioeconomic status (p. 143). To me, the T.O.P. Diva's drag transformation

suggested an aspirational and ideological shift away from these historical associations with servitude and marginality.

The T.O.P. Divas' specifically chose and choreographed their own songs (as did all the other performers at Club Indigo). Their choice of music bore significance in relation to the mediation of transnational popular cultural texts, and was thus agentic in that it reflected the group's taste, style, and how the divas wanted to represent themselves on stage. Taylor (2012) wrote that the "musicality of drag performance is often ignored." (p. 85). I argue that the sonic and aesthetic codes of drag are as significant as the gendered (re)constructions which they foreground. Jeffery McCune (2008) astutely positioned drag as an art form with multiple variances and interpretations (p. 152). Despite the polysemous trajectories of drag in different parts of the world, it remains important to examine its many forms in their contextual and aesthetic specificity. The T.O.P. Divas' collective decision to incorporate local as well as international songs in their performance, therefore, had semiotic implications which warrant further explication.

The T.O.P. Divas began their act by lip-synching and dancing to a famous song from a 1970s musical play – *Iphi Ntombi* (Godfrey 1974). This song is widely famous within the popular cultural lexicon of the Southern African region, and is thus an easily recognisable text. Moreover, *Mama Themba's Wedding Song* has become extraordinarily commodified as a mainstay on countless local television and radio advertisements. It is also included in compilation albums found in many tourist curio shops and international airports. Despite (or maybe because of) its kitsch parochialism, this song has come to signify quintessential "South African-ness" within local media markets, as well as international tourist imaginaries. Dated and stereotypical as it may be, it features prominently as a recognisable jingle about post-apartheid cultural inclusivity and multi-ethnic nationhood.

In their decision to lip-synch and dance to this particular song, the T.O.P. Divas were simultaneously performing localised (albeit stereotypical) femininity and nationhood. In light of the foregoing, I borrow from Malanansan's (2003) observations about cultural citizenship. He averred that "it is constituted by unofficial and vernacular scripts that promote seemingly disparate views of membership within a political and cultural body or community" (Malanansan, 2003, p. 14). My own suggestion here is that the T.O.P. Divas were queering, or remixing, their own notions of cultural citizenship through the drag performance of *Mama Themba's Wedding Song*. To the extent that they chose to lip-synch to this song, they were rewriting their script about their own senses of cultural and

national belonging. This segment of the performance exemplified how queer subjects often utilise performance and remix popular cultural texts in order to “assert visibility in terms that defy mainstream conventions and expectations” (Lewis, 2020, p. 40). Although it was coded through the stereotypical representation of feminized domestic labour, their performance indexed intersecting discourses about race, class, queerness, and nationhood as relates to post-apartheid subjectivity.

By taking off the vestments of domestic servitude, the T.O.P. Divas made a rhetorical movement towards feminine cosmopolitanism. They did this through their specific choice of dress and music. The abrupt switch from a high tempo, campy song to a slow US-American RnB ballad, changed the discursive playing field upon which they expressed their queerness. Although it seemed to be incongruous and sonically mismatched, this musical transition was a symbolic remixing of local and global discourses through sartorial and musical codes. This musical transition, therefore, was not so much a displacement or an elision of local, vernacular femininity. Rather, it was an articulation of transnational cosmopolitanism. Contrariwise, this performance was “partly in a *dialectical relationship* with the global north and its expansive capitalist imperium” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2010, p. 27, emphasis my own).

This particular performance highlighted the conceptual basis of my encounters with all other forms of drag performance and pageantry at the nightclub. I came to understand this style of drag as mediated bricolage that incorporated both local and the global media forms in order to make something new. These performances, moreover, were a mode of self-stylisation. They were performances of self-fashioning that signalled an aspirational, cosmopolitan femininity.

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### ***A Mix of Local and the Global Influences***

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As young, digitally-connected media consumers, the Indigo divas were attuned to the latest popular and consumer cultural trends. This pertained to their musical tastes as well as the visual images they gravitated towards on social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This was reflected in their stage performances as well. They spoke passionately about being stage performers, and they often detailed how long they rehearsed their performances. To them, this passion and dedication had to be parallel by an awareness of the latest songs and music videos from their favourite stars. Their

biographical narratives about their childhoods usually included donning their mothers' wigs, clutching hair combs and brushes, and singing along to their pop idols in front of the TV screen. Phoenix echoed this experience, recounting her early days as performer on stage:

**Phoenix:** I love anything that's got to do with stage. I watched musical shows, musical game shows, and *Idols: South Africa* to begin with. I love music, so it wasn't much of a dilemma to begin with. But it took time to prepare for my debut performances. I watched a few girls from Club Indigo, so I knew what was expected of me.

**Katlego:** So, growing up as a "little girl" who was your ultimate star? Who did you wake up and want to be or be like?

**Phoenix:** Rihanna. I've always loved her music since I knew her. That was probably in Grade 4. I love her music and she has been a role model to many people and I don't know what drew me to her, but I just love her to this day.

Like millions of popular media and music consumers, Phoenix also idolised Beyonce:

My ultimate diva is Beyoncé, definitely. Her presence on stage. There's no way you wouldn't feel her. She gives it her best in all her performances. I've watched her performance fails [hiccups] on YouTube, and she didn't allow any of them to sabotage her performances. She still managed to live it. At one point she actually tore her ear with an earring, and she carried on with the dance. She gives it her all – the choreography, the preparations. She literally gives it her all. So, kudos to that, I love her.

Inasmuch as she was a dedicated fan of these two pop music icons, Phoenix described her own performances as versatile:

You cannot predict what I might perform because I've done from Afro-pop to RnB, to pop, to the classics. I've even done a Tina Turner song, something a lot of people weren't expecting. I'm mostly familiar with heartbreak songs, heartfelt songs – so people were thinking: "oh, Phoenix is much more comfortable in this kind of music and that's what's expected from her." I think it is important to be a versatile performer because as much as it is about us, we're not only entertaining ourselves but the crowd as well.

The divas usually drew upon various media texts, influences, styles, and musical genres as inspiration for their respective performances. Their creative agency in musical choice and style was encouraged in this aspect. The Indigo

divas also had an affinity towards local genres. As outlined above, Precious' choice to perform a local gospel song by local gospel superstar Lebo Sekgobela for the last heat of the Miss Club Indigo pageant was both strategic and well-received. Her awe-inspiring performance was followed (almost immediately) by a standing ovation from the audience. Although she did not win the pageant that evening, Precious was still reeling from the applause and adulation she received from different people after the performance.

**Katlego:** Tell me, who are your idols, the divas that you look up to?

**Precious:** I don't watch *Idols*. I'm not a fan. (giggles)

**Katlego:** Sorry. I mean, who are the big music superstars you admire the most?

**Precious:** For now, I'll say I love Amandla Black [local singer]. I love the way she represents herself. The way she sings just shows that she's a true African.

**Katlego:** So, what kind of style of performing do you like most?

**Precious:** I love gospel. I think you saw for yourself after my performance at the Miss Club Indigo pageant, a lot of people were talking about it. Others said they felt so blessed. I love blessing people, and making them feel closer to the Holy Spirit. I come from a very Christian background, so I listen to a lot of Mahalia Jackson. I love her voice, all her music.

Sitting outside the hair salon where she works, A'Deva recounted her most memorable moment on stage:

That is an experience I will never forget. It was the 31st of December 2008 – at five past twelve to be exact. I remember the song I performed. I was still learning how to tuck. I remember Lawrence shouting at me because I was backstage tucking and my name had already been called. I could not even get into my outfit so I took a gold jacket from my mom with only underwear underneath. I performed Brenda Fassie's *Vul'indlela*. In the back audience, I saw Somizi [an acclaimed South African choreographer and television personality]. I've always looked up to him, so I couldn't believe it when I saw him and I performed until I cried. I remember afterwards Somizi saying to me: "You are the next Brenda Fassie." Ever since then, I never looked back from performing.

A'Deva also cited the late pop superstar, Lebo Mathosa, as one of her most influential icons.

She still lives in me. She's not gone. People will tell you that when I'm backstage getting ready for a show, I'll be listening to Lebo Mathosa. I listen to her and I know that I'll kill the performance. That's what I do every single time I perform.

This mix of local and global influences reveals the interlocking meanings regarding fashion and transnational popular media consumption. These drag performances were inflected by the contextual reinterpretations of global consumer and celebrity culture. Although there was room for creative agency and improvisation, the Indigo divas' collective performances of drag reified a very specific and idealised form of aspirational, cosmopolitan femininity.

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### **7.3 Interpreting Performances at Club Indigo: *Drag and Cosmopolitan Femininity***

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Over the course of fieldwork, it gradually became evident that the performance of drag at Club Indigo was structured along stringent axes of power and gender regimentation. Although drag performance has proliferated into myriad different styles, there was only one form that was celebrated and rewarded at the House of Indigo. This was a style of drag more conventionally associated with the female impersonation of glamorous, popular cultural icons – particularly musicians. Esther Newtown (1972) noticed that glamorous drag was the most favourable style of performance among her participants. She observed:

Glamour drag and serious drag are synonymous in terms of female impersonators. No serious attempt is made to present any female image other than that of a "star" or a female nightclub performer (singer or dancer). Any deviation from that image is treated as incompetence, bad taste, or comic effect (p. 49).

In the foregoing sections I demonstrated the seriousness with which glamorous female impersonation was regarded at Club Indigo. I also showed how a very specific iteration of ideal, cosmopolitan femininity was inflected within the performance of drag as a form of gender policing. A diva's incompetence or failure to perform this glamorous form of drag was often met with sneering derision or quick admonishment from the senior members of the House.

Conversely, one's capacity to perform glamorous drag was met with material as well as affective rewards from the parents, mentors, and audiences.

Framing the drag performances at Club Indigo as being camp would be inaccurate. Indeed, any performance perceived as camp would have been derided by all members of the House as incompetent, comical, and in bad taste. Furthermore, the analytical framing of these artistic performances as being camp would undermined their gravitas and dynamism as political praxis. Camp artworks, performances, and aesthetics have typically been understood within the purview of western gay male aesthetic style sensibility. Susan Sontag (2001 [1964]: 276) famously described camp as "a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous." She posited that that which is camp has a penchant for irony, exaggeration, and artifice. In its aversion to the natural and fixed, she observed, the camp sensibility is thus a depoliticised and disengaged mode of aesthetic stylisation.

Following suit, some analyses have framed drag performance as a quintessentially camp aesthetic sensibility characteristic of queer performance (Meyer, 1994; Taylor, 2012; Reich, 1992). Mattijs van de Port (2012) aptly cautioned against an uncritical transposition of the western analytical concept of camp within social contexts and milieux wherein it may not necessarily make sense (p. 870). In his analyses of a Brazilian drag artist, van de Port (2012) suggested that some queer performances can be seen as "genuinely made up" (866). They are enlivened by their transgressive and radical potential in their "cultural production of the real." What happens, however, when drag is performed by queer individuals but continues to reify and police the heteronormative idealisations of gender and self-stylisation? How can we analytically account for a queer aesthetic praxis that recapitulates the normative standards of gender, beauty, and cosmopolitanism? From this perspective, to what extent could the drag performances (and pageants) at Club Indigo lay claim to "queerness" if they were founded upon (hetero)normative dictates of beauty and idealised femininity?

My aim is not to prescribe or delimit which aesthetic cultural performances count as "queer" and which ones do not. In my view, queer identities, performance, cultural practices, and politics are open to conceptual and analytical revision. Much like Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), I am interested in the contradictions and ambiguities that lie *between* the analytical categories by which we aim to make sense of the world (79). Such criticality and radical conceptual analyses lie in the "middle zones and hybrid formations" beyond the binaries related to sexual and identity politics (Butler, 2004, p. 108). Therefore, in



an attempt to retain the subversive dynamism of a queer analytical critique, I wish to highlight the discursive tensions which undergirded drag performance at Club Indigo.

Although my interlocutors identified variously as femme gay men or transgender women, they were all perceived as drag queens once they performed on stage. As with the beauty pageants, no gender or sexual identification took precedence over another. The Indigo divas styled and branded themselves openly as drag queens through their various labours of beautification and gendered performances. While they were encouraged to express and display their uniqueness, these performances were policed – and were founded upon an idealised, cosmopolitan hyperfemininity within which deportment and beauty were central. I argue, therefore, that the drag performances were simultaneously assimilationist and subversive, and that this discursive tension added analytical complexity to the Indigo divas' aesthetic labour of queer self-fashioning and identity work.

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### ***Performing Aspirational Stardom and Stylistic Reinterpretation***

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In addition to the imperative to perform a specific, idealised kind of femininity, the Indigo divas also performed aspirational stardom. Their respective drag performances provided a platform to simultaneously develop and experiment with their own distinctive drag personae. The subcultural drag vernacular preferred by the Indigo divas was innovation: an exact imitation of a musical icon's style would not suffice, and all the divas excelled in the art of stylistic improvisation – although their respective styles were clearly indebted to those of iconic musical superstars such as Whitney Houston, Patti Labelle, Gladys Knight, Shirley Bassey, Brenda Fassie, Lebo Mathosa, Adele, and Rihanna. They were always encouraged to add their own stylistic flare in rendering lip-synch performances, and the overall effect was that they used their favourite icons' music and performance styles as a blueprint upon which they could overlay their own distinctive repertoire.

Examining Yoruba performance rituals, Drewal (1992) argued that individual bodily and stylistic techniques are used as "resources for negotiation that are deployed in performance by knowledgeable agents" (p. 10). Dynamism, creativity, and improvisation are therefore key elements within this performance schematic. Zora Neale-Hurston (1981) famously described "impromptu ceremony" and "dynamic suggestion" as characteristic elements in Black people's aesthetic

cultural forms and practices (p. 49 – 68). Likewise, my own analysis here highlights the concept of improvisation, rather than imitation or mimicry. The improvisational style of drag foregrounded at Club Indigo was always poised for idiosyncratic flare – but this improvisational agency did not make the Indigo divas’ performances any less serious or professional. This is why positioning the drag performances at Club Indigo as camp is conceptually inadequate.

If a camp aesthetic sensibility were so disavowed at the House, then what kinds of drag performances were rewarded? It was evident that a modern, cosmopolitan performance of femininity was favoured and thusly rewarded. In order to account for this alternative (more serious, earnest, and “natural”) style of drag, I borrow from Milani and Lazar’s (2017) notion of a “plurifocal way of seeing” (309), and reading queer subjectivity and identities – especially those emerging in Global South contexts. This southern, perspective, they argue, enables us to interpret non-western queer practices and identities in locally specific and sensitive ways without exoticising them. This plurifocal lens, moreover, does not aim to provincialise southern perspectives. It is enlivened precisely by its attention to contextual difference as it traverses between and across conceptual and geopolitical borders (Lazar & Milani, 2017). This plurifocal perspective is particularly pertinent for the present discussion because it constitutes “a motley assemblage of ideas, concepts, and ideas” (Lazar and Milani, 2017: 309). This queer analytical orientation, therefore, broadens the conceptual and analytical landscape within which to map the drag styles and gendered performances at the House of Indigo.

Simidele Dosekun’s (2015; 2016; 2017) ethnographic research on the beauty practices of wealthy, upwardly-mobile, and clearly cosmopolitan Nigerian women is particularly illuminating. She framed their practices of consumption and beautification as “spectacularly new femininities” (Dosekun 2016: 962). These women displayed aesthetic techniques of self-adornment such as long, painted nails, imported Brazilian and/or Peruvian weaves, and high-end fashion brands, and strove after international travel. An important component in their spectacular and highly-visible performances of cosmopolitan femininity was the ideological imperative towards novelty, modernity, and contemporaneousness. Central to these women’s unequivocal claims of modern African identity was being up to date with consumer practices, identities, and trends from multiple elsewhere – particularly those in the Global North. I borrow from Dosekun’s concept of spectacular femininities in my analysis of the drag performance at Club Indigo as it is helpful for accounting for the content and form of these performances of femininity.

The divas' respective performances of femininity and drag reflected a spectacularly feminine style and sensibility. Such spectacularism was evidenced through aesthetic form rather than content. Without necessarily being outrageous, the Indigo divas performed a style of femininity that was at once connected with global trends yet distinctively local. Much like Dosekun's (2016; 2017) interlocutors, the Indigo divas were oriented towards spectacular, hyperfeminine modes of self-stylisation and deportment. This was made clear in their consumer choices vis-à-vis fashion, shoes, makeup, accessories, long wigs, and hair extensions. A key difference to Dosekun's interlocutors was the obvious vector of class difference. The Indigo divas were certainly not wealthy and/or elite consuming subjects. They were predominantly college students who earned extra money by working as hairstylists, makeup artists, and pageant tutors for younger girls in their township communities. Others who could not make ends meet in this way, often struggled in the mires of unemployment. Most (if not all) the divas came from working class backgrounds, and lived with their parents, grandparents, siblings, and other members of their extended birth families. Few had left the Gauteng province for any form of leisure travel, and very few had ever boarded a plane for local – let alone international – travel<sup>12</sup>. However, their drag performances comprised a spectacular admixture of global and cosmopolitan – as well as unabashedly local – aesthetics.

In Chapter 3 I discussed some of the creative ways most of the Indigo divas sourced, made, and repurposed their outfits for the pageants and drag shows. In Chapter 4 I highlighted the analytical significance of the movements and materiality of the gifts which they received in their participation within this subcultural community. I suggested, moreover, that their participation in this microcosmic world of drag and pageantry was motivated by the desire for these material goods in exchange for their appropriate performance of ideal femininity. Just because they did not have easy access to the accoutrements signifying "the good life" did not mean, however, that their performance of ideal, cosmopolitan femininity was any less spectacular. Whereas Dosekun's (2016; 2017) interlocutors had access to consumer goods and services that signified their spectacular femininities, the Indigo divas did not. However, they evidenced a clear desire and aspiration towards these material objects and resources. Rather than lacking agency, they demonstrated an incredible level of

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**12** *Only Zelda had travelled to a foreign country. During the formative years of her performance career, she was recruited as a male dancer for a dance company, and spent three weeks between Beijing and Shanghai in 2007.*

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resourcefulness and creativity in spite (or maybe because) of the structural and socioeconomic conditions within which they manoeuvred their lives, relative freedoms, and desires.

The Indigo divas' performances of spectacular femininity were, as I have stressed, undergirded by the affective blueprints of cosmopolitanism, consumer desire, and aspiration. The nexus point between empowerment, aspiration, and the performance of consumer identities is analytically instructive here. It is important to remember how consumer identities and aspirations are constructed in relation to the "longing for a better life, which takes on extremely political overtones when considered in the context of inequality" (Iqani, 2016, p. 47). In this light, it is possible to see that the Indigo divas' spectacular femininities were constructed and duly performed in accordance with their consumer aspirations for material and social goods – particularly as socioeconomically marginalised Black and Coloured queer individuals. Their drag performances and personae were neither ironic nor parodic. They were not characterised by a depoliticised aesthetic queer sensibility (Meyer, 1994; Taylor, 2012) but were, instead, highly inflected by the socioeconomic, civic, and political realities that structured their existences and desires for the good life.

Drag performance was a very serious business within the House of Indigo. The proper execution of a good (or excellent) performance determined a member's subcultural status, their access to material goods, and (as Portia pointed out) whether they could "make it" in the business. The adequacy of their performance of spectacular cosmopolitan femininity determined their progress and longevity as an Indigo diva. As is evidenced by Zelda and Label'z seniority, it determined whether one could move up the hierarchical ladder or not.

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## **7.4 Online Self-Branding: Indigo Divas on Social Media Platforms**

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During the time I spent at Club Indigo, I became accustomed to waiting for long periods of time: Waiting for the pageants to properly begin as the clock teetered past 11 pm; waiting (and hoping) for a few patrons to arrive at the nightclub to cheer and sing along to the Diva's performance; waiting for the afterparty to end as the sunlight crept through the cracks in the doorways inside

the still dimly-lit nightclub; waiting for one of the divas to arrive for the drag shows and pageants; or waiting for them to finish the last sips of their drinks so that we could share an Uber ride home after the evening's revelries. Waiting had become a significant component of my time spent doing fieldwork. As frustrating as they sometimes were, the times spent waiting at the club were sometimes ethnographically fruitful.

Such times of waiting – often three to four hours at a time – revealed one key research finding: Club Indigo was no longer as popular as it had once been, and was therefore under serious financial strain. Its glory days had long gone, and its star as one of the central queer leisure spaces in Johannesburg was fading. Sometimes, fewer than ten new patrons visited the club on a Saturday evening. The lacklustre patronage and consumer enthusiasm became even sadder after the club moved next door to the more spacious venue. In fact, the relaunch of the new, bigger venue attracted the largest number of people the club had seen for some time, and even then Lawrence and Darryl complained that they had expected more people.

With less consumer interest and frankly unremarkable publicity (a few Facebook announcements here and there), the club was clearly suffering. This seemed to dampen Lawrence's spirits considerably. He was still generally affable and forthcoming during our conversations at the bar, but his sighs were deeper and more drawn out. He was clearly forlorn and worried about the nightclub's future prospects. He and Darryl seemed to be giving in to the imminent reality that the nightclub they had kept running for 16 years was set to close (which it eventually did in October 2018). During these heavy nights of waiting filled with ennui, the Indigo divas continued to perform on stage. With fewer than 10 people in the audience, the divas delivered their drag performances to the best of their respective abilities. While they performed in this empty, somber theatre, it occurred to me that their identities as drag artists had greater reach beyond these limitations. I began questioning how the Indigo divas made sense of having to give their best drag performances to a barely-present audience. What sense of empowerment and utopic freedom did they gain as they performed their spectacular femininities in an empty theatre? Did the very opportunity to continue performing on stage give them some kind of respite from their everyday lives? Or did the continuation of these performance provide them with some kind of hope for a better future and "the good life" (whatever shape this took)? Simply put, how and why did they continue in their enthusiastic and dedicated participation within this subcultural community whose brick-and-mortar foundations were slowly waning?

The opening vignette to this chapter highlighted the level of professionalism required of an Indigo diva. I have also demonstrated that drag performances at the House constituted forms of empowerment, utopic pleasure, and cosmopolitan self-styling. For the divas, drag was not a comedic parody of sexual and gender identity, but a rather serious social practice of self-fashioning and identity construction. They saw drag performance as form more than just trifling entertainment; a form of aesthetic labour. This observation is evidenced in Zelda's interview for the *Jozi Queens* documentary film (de Barros, 2017). Fully dressed as her persona, she said: *"For me, drag is not about mock. It's – It's like your job, you know? And that's why I believe that we are artistes in our own right"* (Zelda in *Jozi Queens*, 2017).

In the remainder of this chapter, I demonstrate how the Indigo divas extended their performances beyond the walls of Club Indigo. I suggest that their performances as drag artists were not just confined to the physical space of the nightclub. Their representations on various media platforms provided a wider (digital) audience for whom they could perform their drag personae in very strategic ways. These representations and digitally-mediated performances constituted actual, creative work for them, which often resulted in opportunities for economic advancement and upward social mobility. It also enabled them to brand their respective drag personae, and thereby transcend the physical space of the nightclub whose eventual end was drawing nearer.

These digital media representations can also be seen as performances by the Indigo divas. scholars have agreed that given the right context any act or social practice can be understood as performance (Goffman, 1956; Schechner, 2002). From this perspective, it is possible to think about performance as a multilayered, intertextual continuum, rather than being culturally specific or geographically situated (Conquergood, 1992; 2002; Drewal, 1992; Madison, 2005). If this is the case, then drag can take place in various forms, places, and spaces. A corollary to this is that drag can be performed on different kinds of stages – on physically built or digital media platforms.

It was common practice for the various divas to request the digital photographs I had taken of them while they were on stage. While some were more demanding than others, I duly complied and sent the images to whomsoever made the request. I made it very clear that they could freely select and alter the images in whatever way they pleased. Many of the divas chose still photographs depicting their solo or group performances. Darryl also uploaded the digital still or video images which I captured at the performances and festive events. Although less fastidious, he made sure that the images were timeously

uploaded onto the Club's Facebook page. He was less concerned with his own image than the execution of the Club's main digital marketing strategy.

The Indigo divas, however, were far more meticulous when choosing and uploading their images on social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram. They augmented these images by using digital filter technologies, and captioned them by adding their idiosyncratic witticisms or political slogans about queer freedom and visibility. In this way, they used social media to brand their respective drag personae and market their brands as drag performers, musicians, and dancers. As other studies have noted, social networking sites such as Instagram are important platforms for personal styling and self-branding among social actors (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; Liu & Suh, 2017), and have become essential for social influencer marketing, entrepreneurs, bloggers, and micro-celebrities. Similarly, by posting their photographs regularly, the Indigo divas increased their public visibility while advertising themselves as pageant queens and drag performers. They also posted political messages against racism, femicide, and trans- and homophobia.

After winning the Miss Gay Jozi 2017 pageant, one of the youngest Indigo divas, Bo went on her official media tour around Johannesburg. She was interviewed at several media institutions such as the *Destiny Magazine* offices, the Cliff Central, and Talk Radio 702 stations. Her tour was well documented on her Instagram page. As the newly-crowned ambassador for the House of Indigo, she made sure to thank the club for the coveted title and crown. She used both the social and broadcasting media platforms to publicise her budding career as singer and songwriter. A post on her Instagram feed shows a selfie photograph of her closely-cropped face. Her makeup is impeccable as she smiles directly into the camera's lens. The luxurious tresses of her long, black, lace-front wig fall onto her shoulders. Superimposed across the left side of the image are the words: "BONNY TAKES OVER 702 TALK FM, SUNDAY 31/01/2016 21H00 TALK @9." The caption reads: "Catch my interview on @Talkradio702 this coming Sunday and get a chance to hear my featured track @dezamrkzn feat Bonny My Everything 21h00pm... Tune in."

Foxy (Miss Gay Jozi 2015) also used Instagram to expand her career as an aspiring radio and television presenter, model, and actress. The hashtags beneath all her selfies and portraits clearly identify her title as an aspiring media broadcaster. She also openly advertised her gender non-conforming identity by using hashtags such as #Drag, #Transmodel, and #TransWoman. Most of the posts on her Instagram were still digital images, but there was one short video. In this clip, Foxy stands in what appears to be her bedroom, and faces the camera

directly. She wears slim-fitting jeans and a floral crop top. This casual outfit is complemented by her long, curly weave that falls across her shoulders and décolletage. Her posture is confident and inviting. She greets her audience, and invites them to her prospective programme *Chit-Chat with Me* on the Mojalove digital satellite television channel. This is clearly an audition video clip, one that is intended to grab a producer's attention. She is using the digital media platform to market her talent as a presenter.

Other divas also used social networking sites to market their businesses, thus widening their digital audience and cliental. A good example is Kiara, who won the Miss Club Indigo 2014 pageant. She quickly established herself as a prominent celebrity makeup artist in the wealthy, elite circles around Johannesburg. While her trajectory towards mainstream popularity and celebrity status was exceptional among the Indigo divas, it constitutes a good example of the efficacy of online self-branding and public visibility. Her linked Twitter and Instagram accounts promoted her business as a makeup artist, and she then also used them to promote a prime-time television show she started on the Moja Love satellite television channel, focusing on fashion makeovers and cosmetics. She also had a YouTube page, on which she hosted a lifestyle talk show called *On the Real*. Her Instagram was (and still is at the time of writing) awash with well-curated and highly-stylised images of herself, her clients, and the cosmetic products and services she promotes. Some of posts were sponsored by multinational corporations such as MAC Cosmetics and the Steve Madden shoe and accessory company. In 2018, she was appointed as the spokesperson for a brand of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), Kiara also used her social media to post information about LGBTQIA+ sexual health care.

Although Kiara's media and entrepreneurial careers skyrocketed, she still paid homage to her beginnings as a member of the House of Indigo. For example, she posted a photograph which I had sent to her after the Miss Black Pride 2016 pageant. In the image, she stands on a catwalk ramp attached to the stage at the old Club Indigo venue. She is mid-performance, holding a microphone in her hands. She stands alone on stage, staring directly at the audience – which has been cropped out. Incandescent light falls on to her tall body which occupies the visual centre of the image. Her long, toned, athletic legs are clean shaven and shimmer in the neon overhead. A disco ball gleams just above her, and purple strings of fairy lights cascade on the white wall behind her. The image is less stylised and technologically modified in comparison to the general look and mood of her Instagram feed, and this visual sparseness gives it a slightly older, nostalgic aura when it is juxtaposed with the more professional photos. The caption to the image reads:



I miss the stage... I left most of my heart on this stage, I belted out ballads covering all my scars & pain lyrically! I grew up on this stage and I got to tell many stories of Great Icons. #PiecesOfMe #ScarsAllOverMe #DragArtist #Performer #Queerdom #ClubIndigo

In this post, Kiara walks her digital audience down memory lane. She does this both visually and textually. Couched in terms of reminiscence, pain, and eventual healing, she documents her journey from the House of Indigo into mainstream celebrity status. She also uploaded a video performance of a lip-sync on her *On the Real* Youtube channel, and the accompanying description detailed how much she missed lip-synching, and how important it was to her as a drag artist.

Much like Kiara, Phoenix demonstrated virtuosity when it came to self-branding on social media. As an electric engineering student, Phoenix did not have disposable income. Like most of the Indigo divas, she came from a working-class background. Her mother was a single parent with two children, so she could not easily buy the kinds of wigs, dresses, and accessories Phoenix desired. There were other financial priorities to be attended to on a monthly basis, such as her daily transport fees to and from campus. Phoenix started a makeup business to supplant her monthly allowance. She found most of her clients through word-of-mouth referrals and social media. She posted images of her clients' beautified faces, price lists, and events packages on her Instagram and Facebook pages. She also posted images of herself in and out of drag. She said to me during our interview in 2017:

As a lover of pictures, I believe that Instagram gives Phoenix that platform of not only creating memories, but sharing them as well. I manage to get criticism, both negative and positive, which I then use to grow the brand I want Phoenix to be. I want to get the message across that drag is art and can be expressed by anyone – myself included. I feel that people think it's a lifestyle – which it isn't. It's a job and feeds a lot of mouths.

Not all the divas had the resources or ingenuity to use social media platforms to perform and/or construct ideal drag identities. Not all could use their talents and contacts to propel them out of the marginal economic living conditions they endured. However, some could, and they exemplify the ingenuity and resourcefulness it took to brand and style themselves as digitally-savvy and publicly visible drag queens.

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## Conclusion

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Although these online constructions of ideal, cosmopolitan femininity did not challenge heteropatriarchal neoliberal capitalism, they gave the divas the opportunity to improve their material circumstances somewhat. Their strategic, creative, and agentive use of various social media platforms enabled them to make themselves publicly visible as proudly queer citizens. As I have stressed, many of their social media posts called for acceptance of queer people within a society that was still largely homo- and transphobic.

The social media stages allowed the divas to brand themselves and, for some, to monetise their respective drag personae. They provided the space for the divas to write their own digital narratives of beauty and agency by using the creative resources available to them. They used these strategies of self-branding to empower themselves and thus improve their living conditions. The global mainstreaming and commodification of drag performance and subcultures thus warrants the analysis of these digital online strategies of self-fashioning and branding. Indeed, examining how drag queens from the Global South use social media enables us to document transnational development and permutations in the art of drag. More importantly, the attention to queer digital self-representation styling allows a critical examination of the global developments of drag performance while being attentive to local specificity and context.

This chapter foregrounded drag performance as a form of serious, professional, aesthetic labour on the part of my interlocutors. I interrogated the gendered and classed nuances that characterised the style of drag I observed at the House of Indigo. Analysing the global and local mix of influences, I discussed this style of drag in terms of its mediated content as well as its aesthetic forms. I also demonstrated that drag was a lucrative endeavour for some of the Indigo divas, who drew upon their creative resources and individual talents. Through various strategies of self-styling and branding, they digitally constructed their drag personae in order to create opportunities for social awareness and empowerment.



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## **CHAPTER 8**

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**"THE RIGHT  
TO BE  
FABULOUS:  
CONCLUDING  
THOUGHTS**

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*The clock slowly trudges towards midnight. A small group of friends lounges on the red leather couches just to the left of the ramp. They sip on their spirit coolers, gesticulating passionately as they share jokes and gossip. The club is rather empty tonight. A pity, considering that the second heat of the Miss Club Indigo pageant is about to start in a few minutes. The 10 contestants are crammed in the tiny dressing room behind the stage. They were all strangely calm and affable when I popped in to greet them earlier. The judges are seated at their decorated table. Each one gives their complementary drinks order to Darryl. He nods and scurries to the barmen. Zelda is attending her brother's wedding, so someone else has to be the MC tonight. Lawrence and Darryl decide that Kiara is the best fit for the job. She soon arrives with A'Deva and happily agrees to MC this evening. Not much preparation is needed for a professional TV presenter. Darryl hands her a makeshift programme and a few cue cards. She skims through them, grabs a microphone, and struts onto the stage. She greets the small crowd, introduces herself, and welcomes us to the pageant. She reminds us that it is International Human Rights Day.*

*"Many people don't know what it takes to get on this stage," she says. "They don't know the strength and hard work it takes for us to be here." The audience claps, nods, and clinks glasses in agreement. "We must remember that LGBTQ rights are human rights. So, it is also my right to be fabulous!"*

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## **"The Right to be Fabulous": Concluding Thoughts**

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This study explored the significance of Club Indigo as a space of post-apartheid queer consumption, entertainment, and freedom. As a starting point, I investigated the different meanings and social practices that Black and Coloured queer drag artists created within this subcultural space. The study positioned Club Indigo as an historical site of identity formation and self-styling among some of South Africa's most marginalised sexual minorities. The House of Indigo was not just a nightclub, it was a subcultural queer community – formed by young drag performers and beauty contestants, as well as their elder mentors – that celebrated queer identity and sexual difference. Both its founders disagreed with the popular assertion that Club Indigo was a drag club for drag queens. They vehemently insisted that it was a queer space – where all people were welcome – which celebrated and promoted drag performance and beauty pageantry. Motivated by their views, I investigated the different consumer practices and modes of self-fashioning that were made possible within this queer space of freedom. The analytical complexities of queer pleasure, beauty, glamour, and agency thus propelled the different themes I explored in this study.

Kiara's statements in the opening vignette to this concluding chapter reflect the aims of this study as well as the ethnographic material analysed herein. That drag and beauty pageantry constituted multiple vectors of queer identity became clear to me immediately upon entering the research site. Throughout this study, I have demonstrated what it takes for a community of (mostly) young queer people to get onto a small stage, and perform beauty and glamour. Underlying the analyses and arguments put forward in this study, is a critical interest in "the right to be fabulous." The research findings I present demonstrate what it took for my interlocutors to construct, perform, and navigate their fabulousness. I have also shown that these performances intersected with their gender, sexual, racial, and class identities in very complex ways.

In the current climate of neoliberal consumer capitalism, human rights and citizenship are often framed within discourses of consumption (Cruz-Malavé & Malanasan, 2002; Hennesy, 2000; Iqani, 2016). The right to consume as one wishes is ideologically constructed as a private, individual affair. This privatisation

of civic rights and citizenship has become crystallised within the neoliberal discourse of winners and losers; the haves and the have-nots. In a society with staggering levels of racialised impoverishment and historical disenfranchisement, access to public and consumer goods has been similarly reduced to a matter of individual, human will. South African poor, working class Black and Coloured LGBTQIA+ citizens face disproportionate levels of homo- and transphobic violence and hate crimes on a daily basis. Within this socioeconomic context, queer people's public visibility, empowerment, and human freedom are fundamentally connected to their consumer identities. The right to consume and to be fabulous is therefore inextricably connected human freedom, agency, and visibility.

This study has demonstrated how the queer subcultural space of Club Indigo enabled participants to perform beauty and aspirational femininity in a community of like-minded peers and mentors. My interlocutors' perceptions of this community as a family is a key theme running through the thesis: Early in my research, their descriptions of various participants as father, mother, and sisters suggested to me the key elements of belonging and meaning-making in practices of kinship. I have shown, too, how these practices intersected with kinship structures among their respective birth families, and argued that my interlocutors relied on various kinship structures – their subcultural and birth families – for affective and material support in a system complementary kinship.

The concept of complementary kinship allowed me to contextualise how young, South African people find affection, encouragement, and material support within their different families. These kinship structures are neither opposed nor autonomous from one another. They function in tandem and in a complementary manner. This notion reflects African systems of kinship wherein familial relationality is not determined by biology, and highlights local African understandings of kinship systems whereby the subject can simultaneously have numerous family members (mothers, fathers, siblings, aunts, and so on) without necessarily having any biological ties to them. I have shown that this system of complementary kinship was deeply meaningful to many of my interlocutors. It guided them in building interpersonal relationships as well as navigating and exploring their queer identities. It also helped them to create a sense of belonging within their birth and subcultural homes.

Taking the notion of kinship as a set of symbolic practices, I argued for the significance of material objects in the doing of family. Central to the use and/or consumption of material objects are the meanings they communicate among social actors. The material things we consume communicate how we construct

our identities, and how we see the world around us. Likewise, the consumption of and aspiration for material objects bring social actors together in a variety of ways. This study has therefore foregrounded the consumption of material objects (both mediated and tactile) as central to the performance of drag artistry and beauty pageantry. I have demonstrated how material objects such as wigs, evening gowns, makeup, shoes, bedazzled tiaras, and even tape (for tucking) mediated different relationships within the House of Indigo. Access to these objects, and aspiring to have them, mediated the hierarchies and power structures I observed among my interlocutors. In light of this, this study has reinvigorated the materiality of objects in the study of drag performance and beauty pageantry.

Identity construction and world-making are central aspects of performance. Queer performances are simultaneously political practices of self-styling, communication, and social critique (Johnson, 2001, p. 6). This study conceptualised drag performance and beauty pageantry as social practices of consumption. From a poststructural perspective, they can also be conceptualised as spectacular performances of consumption – and this is a critical observation in this study: The drag and beauty pageants at Club Indigo were spectacular and aspirational performances of a specific iteration of femininity. These gendered performances were at once restrictive and empowering for my interlocutors.

Ahmed (2006) averred: "It is important that we do not idealize queer worlds or simply place them in an alternative space" (p. 16). The latter observation is both poignant and thus relevant to this study for two specific reasons. First, upon returning to Club Indigo to conduct fieldwork in 2016, it became clear that the space was not as radically queer as I had previously thought it to be. Upon closer inspection, the various queer identities, drag styles, and performances which had initially enthralled me were, in fact, extremely regimented and assimilationist. I observed only one type of femininity during my fieldwork, and it was stringently policed by members of the subculture who wielded considerable power and privilege – including the performers. It was restrictive in terms of its normative conformity to hegemonic ideals of feminine style and beauty. Moreover, the values inherent in this feminine beauty are a function of global consumer capitalist heteropatriarchy. These beauty ideals are disseminated through media platforms including, but not limited to, popular music videos, magazines, internet blogs, and social networking sites. A key finding in this study was that this restrictive ideal of feminine beauty and style was reified through drag performance and beauty pageantry. Moreover, it was naturalised (both explicitly and implicitly) as an ideal model of gender to which the younger participants should aspire.



However, my interlocutors were not hapless victims of transnational consumer capitalist ideology. They expressed feelings of pleasure and empowerment when discussing their motivations for participating in the subculture. Chief among their motivations was the desire and passion for performance. They also spoke of the sense of belonging they felt from receiving admiration and respect from their peers, mentors, and the audience. Their collective sense of belonging was accompanied by feelings of acceptance and understanding of their queer identities. Although they were supported and accepted within both their birth and House of Indigo families, this was not necessarily the case in the broader, hegemonic communities: South Africa remains a sexist and heteropatriarchal society. Despite the egalitarian tenets of human rights enshrined in the Equality Clause of the Constitution, many LGBTQIA+ citizens still face intersecting oppressions, including institutional and symbolic violence, daily micro-aggressions, sexual assault, and heinous murders. Moreover, these systemic forms of violence are often coupled with multiple forms of racialised and class-based disenfranchisement – especially poverty and unemployment, as well as the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Performing on stage and participating in the pageants provided my interlocutors with agency and a visibility that was not readily available to them in the public sphere outside their networks of complementary kinship.

Many of my interlocutors stated that they did not feel accepted, respected, and/or even desired in predominantly white gay clubs. They also stated that they did not feel welcome in the suburban nightclubs that catered for a middle-class, upwardly-mobile and even elite clientele. Being openly transgender and/or femme made them feel marginalised – even within affluent, purportedly queer-friendly spaces. Performing within this subculture that created a sense of belonging was therefore important to them. They felt seen and accepted within a community of like-minded performers and mentors. Moreover, they were able to develop their respective skills as beauty contestants and drag artists in order to create more lucrative opportunities themselves as cultural producers.

An important research finding was my interlocutors' creativity and ingenuity as digital natives or "netizens." They used social media and other digital platforms to brand their drag queen personae in highly strategic and lucrative ways. This observation has global implications regarding the highly mediated and commoditised images of drag queens. This is fast becoming a trend in global north contexts, and drag queens are becoming global superstars. Across various mediascapes, drag queens' images are steadily shifting from their previously marginal status. The drag performer has become a highly mediated mainstay

within mainstream popular consumer culture. This study, however, problematises assumptions about the unidirectional flow of ideas, images, and consumer commodities from the global north to the south. As aspirational as my interlocutors' performances of cosmopolitanism may be, they demonstrated a cool disdain towards superstar drag queens such as RuPaul. As I showed in my empirical analyses, these forms of drag were regarded as too camp and outlandish, and therefore denounced within the House of Indigo.

While this study is interdisciplinary in its orientation, it is not a history project in the strictest academic sense of the term. Neither does it fit neatly within the fields of ethnography, performance, and subcultural studies. Therein lies its queerness: Its fluidity and its refusal of scholastic containment in any specific field. The dynamism and glamorousness of the research objects lent themselves to the diverse methods, research materials, and analyses I used. As a queer media and cultural studies scholar, I was particularly interested in the social semiotics of drag and beauty pageantry. I was specifically interested in these subcultural practices as modalities of popular consumer cultures in post-apartheid South Africa. Furthermore, I was concerned with how this community of Black and Coloured gender non-conforming individuals constructed a subculture wherein they could exercise their right to be fabulous as embodied through drag performance and beauty pageantry. My interest did not, however, end at these performances as text. At the same time, my decolonial, critical feminist scholarship required ethnographic engagement with my interlocutors. I had to learn about who they were, where they come from, and every step it took for them to arrive on the stage at Club Indigo. My investigation of the consumer practices and identities of the Indigo Divas required extended periods with my interlocutors, asking questions, walking and shopping with them, waiting for them in the wee hours of the morning, and conversing with them in various parts of Johannesburg. It is precisely through this interdisciplinary combination of methods and material that I came to understand how and why, exactly, they claimed their right to be fabulous.

Club Indigo eventually closed in 2019 due to lack of patronage and financial constraints. This unfortunate turn of events resulted in the fracturing of the subcultural kinship systems and hierarchies analysed I have presented in the empirical chapters of this thesis. This study nevertheless serves to highlight the significance of queer subcultural practices and identities in relation to queer youth cultures. Furthermore, it provides a critical avenue for the exploration of popular cultures as they are forged by Black and Coloured queer youth in South Africa.

In the face of exclusionary economic systems, the ways in which historically disenfranchised queer people of colour create spaces of community remain ethnographically relevant. Although Black and Coloured queer communities continue to be systemically excluded from various spaces and practices within mainstream consumer culture, the spaces in which they forge their own chosen families and subcultures are critical sites of scholarly exploration. Their subcultural practices, values, and performances of gender add much-warranted complexity to the heterosexist and patriarchal foundations of South African society. That this small community forged spaces and practices of queer visibility (with the support of their birth families) attests to the significance of LGBTQIA+ civil rights politics in post-apartheid South Africa.

Perhaps it was the constant movements, changes, and realignments over more than a decade that made the House of Indigo an historic site of queer political struggle. Yet, many other queer nightclubs and institutions have closed down throughout many parts of the world. How then do we document the histories of these spaces as well as the lives of the people who frequented them? What sort of historical archives can be generated from these bygone institutions? As with *Madame Castello's* in mid-1950s Cape Town, for example, how do we provide historical accounts and archives for these subcultural spaces of queer freedom, consumption, and sociality?

This study enables an exploration of new popular youth subcultures as they continually emerge, move, and change. It engenders me (the researcher) to wonder which queer subcultural practices continue to emerge in rural and/or peri-urban communities outside of the economic hubs such as Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town. Furthermore, this study challenges how the notion of queer subcultural kinship has been hitherto theorised from a global north perspective. The notion of complementary kinship, as I have demonstrated provides a critical thoroughfare towards understanding how queer subcultural communities are constructed, maintained, and navigated in spite of pervading systems of gender, economic, and racial marginalisation.





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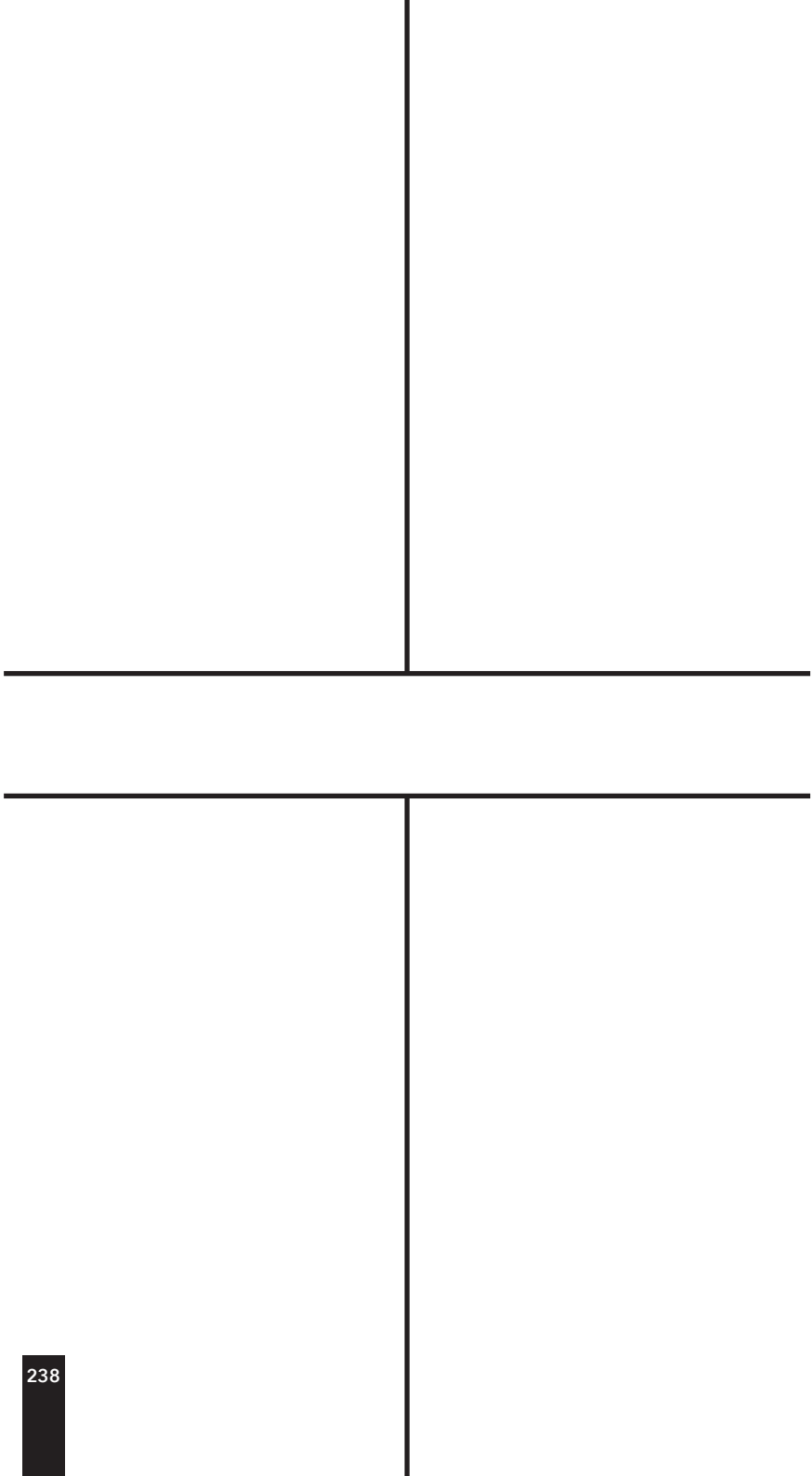
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# ***SUMMARY***

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## Summary

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Drag performance and beauty pageantry are inherently political. They reveal how society values different forms of cosmopolitanism as well neoliberal beauty standards. Subcultures and youth cultures highlight the ways capitalist consumption have structured significant aspects of social reality. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other communities have been similarly integrated within the workings of intricacies of neoliberal capitalism. This ethnographic study advances the latter claims as key analytical claims. It argues that materiality and consumption are integral aspects when exploring queer subcultures. This study explores drag and beauty pageantry at Johannesburg's longest-running queer night club. The nightclub, known as the House of Indigo, was one of the city's most premier nightclubs – bringing together mostly queer people of colour from different parts of the city. More importantly, the House of Indigo was one of the few in the global south that was housed in its own nightclub (Club Indigo). The qualitative methods approach undertaken in this study therefore combines various approaches, and thus presents a rich account of this seminal subculture and its institution.

This ethnography explores the performance of drag pageantry at Johannesburg's longest-running queer nightclubs. It has introduced the drag subculture known as the House of Indigo. The members of this subculture each had a particular stake therein, and thus belonged to well-structured hierarchy. A critical dimension to this subcultural hierarchy was that its members referred to it as a family. The various mentoring members and sibling groups of the subculture were introduced in turn. The subcultures' father, mother, siblings, and mentoring sisters were introduced and discussed in turn. Moreover, the position which the masculine members held within the subculture was explored. The various positions within this hierarchy were all discussed and analyzed in the chapter.

The following analytical chapter begins from the theoretical position that family is a set of social practices. By framing the previous analysis from a consumer and material culture point of view, this study further pushes the argument that family is a performance and therefore a doing. In this regard, this analytical chapter focused on specific material objects and commodities. I show how they were distributed and shared among members of the subculture. The

consumption of these commodities simultaneously facilitated and complicated the members' relationships in various ways. The members each found systems of support and solidarity through the materiality and consumption of these objects. At the same time, the members found the same forms of solidarity and support within their birth families. Clothing and accessories also appeared to be integral to the younger members' public visibility outside the nightclub. As publicly visible and gender-nonconforming queer people, the members were able to pass in public spaces. By expressing themselves through fashionable though not always fashionable clothing, the Indigo divas, were able to pass as cisgender women in wider public spaces. However, women (in their various identities) often face harsh conditions in the different spaces throughout the city, they often were targets of homo- and transphobic violence. To this extent, fashion and styling both empowered and endangered the younger Indigo divas outside the night club.

Apart from being structured as a hierarchy, many of the subculture's members described it as home away from home. The House of Indigo often proved to be a space of safety and empowerment for young drag and beauty queens. They described the subculture and the nightclub as a space where they had the potential to improve their lives as young, Black, queer people. Similarly, practices of gender policing from senior members of the subculture were clearly discernible. All beauty pageants are a form of gender policing. Likewise, drag performance is a form of gendered entertainment. However, these rituals were serious business at the House of Indigo. So stringent were the owners of the club about these forms of stage performance, that they often withheld rewards and affection from the Indigo divas that did not perform to their satisfaction. Similarly, the mentoring sisters frowned upon the Indigo Divas who behaved in ways which were not sanctioned by the seniors. The senior members often rewarded those Indigo divas who adequately performed the most idealized form of cosmopolitan femininity. This was done by showering them with material goods, compliments, and even money. This latter observation demonstrated that cosmopolitan femininity was the most idealized form of femininity at the House of Indigo.







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# ***SAMENVATTING***

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## Samenvatting

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Drag performances en schoonheidsoptredens zijn per definitie politieke gebeurtenissen. Ze laten zien hoe de samenleving verschillende vormen van kosmopolitisme en neoliberale schoonheidsnormen waardeert. Subculturen en jeugdculturen belichten de manieren waarop kapitalistische consumptie belangrijke aspecten van de sociale werkelijkheid heeft gestructureerd. Lesbische, homoseksuele, biseksuele, transgender, queer en andere gemeenschappen zijn op vergelijkbare wijze geïntegreerd binnen de kapitalistische consumptie. In deze etnografische studie worden deze laatste beweringen in analytische argumenten naar voren gebracht. Het stelt dat materialiteit en consumptie integrale aspecten zijn van het onderzoek naar queer subculturen. Deze studie onderzoekt de drag- en schoonheidsoptredens in de langstlopende queer nachtclub van Johannesburg. De nachtclub, bekend onder de naam House of Indigo, was een van de meest vooraanstaande nachtclubs van de stad – waar voornamelijk gekleurde queer mensen uit verschillende delen van de stad samenkwamen. Belangrijker nog, de House of Indigo was een van de weinige binnen het mondiale Zuiden die gehuisvest was in een eigen nachtclub (Club Indigo). De kwalitatieve methoden die in deze studie werden toegepast, combineren daarom verschillende benaderingen, en geven zo een rijk verslag van deze seminale subcultuur en haar instituut.

Deze etnografie onderzoekt het optreden van travestieten in Johannesburgs langstlopende queer nachtclubs. Het introduceert de drag-subcultuur die bekend staat als het Huis van Indigo. De leden van deze subcultuur hadden elk een specifiek belang daarin, en behoorden dus tot een goed gestructureerde hiërarchie. Een kritieke dimensie van deze subculturele hiërarchie was dat de leden een familie werden genoemd. De verschillende mentorleden en broers en zussen van de subcultuur werden achtereenvolgens voorgesteld. De vader, moeder, broers, zussen en mentorzussen van de subcultuur werden beurtelings voorgesteld en besproken. Bovendien werden de lagere posities van de mannelijke leden van de subcultuur onderzocht. De verschillende posities binnen deze hiërarchie werden allemaal besproken en geanalyseerd in de studie.

De analytische hoofdstukken beginnen vanuit de theoretische positie dat het gezin een geheel van sociale praktijken is. Door de voorgaande analyse te

kaderen vanuit het oogpunt van de consumptie- en materiële cultuur, wordt in deze studie het argument dat het gezin een prestatie en dus een doen is, verder ontwikkeld. In dit verband hebben de analytische hoofdstukken zich gericht op specifieke materiële objecten en goederen. Ik laat zien hoe deze werden verdeeld en gedeeld onder de leden van de subcultuur. De consumptie van deze goederen vergemakkelijkte en bemoeilijkte tegelijkertijd de relaties tussen de leden op verschillende manieren. De leden vonden elk een systeem van steun en solidariteit via de materialiteit en de consumptie van deze voorwerpen. Tegelijkertijd vonden de leden dezelfde vormen van solidariteit en steun binnen hun geboortegezinnen. Kleding en accessoires bleken ook een integraal onderdeel te zijn van de publieke zichtbaarheid van de jongere leden buiten de nachtclub. Als publiekelijk zichtbare en genderneonconforme queer personen konden de leden zich in de openbare ruimte laten zien. Door zich uit te drukken in modieuze, maar niet altijd modieuze kleding, konden de Indigo-diva's in de openbare ruimte doorgaan voor cisgendervrouwen. Vrouwen (in hun verschillende identiteiten) worden echter vaak geconfronteerd met harde omstandigheden in de verschillende ruimtes in de stad, ze zijn vaak het doelwit van homo- en transfoob geweld. In die zin maakten mode en styling de jongere Indigo-diva's buiten de nachtclub zowel sterker als gevaarlijker.

Behalve als een hiërarchie, beschreven veel leden van de subcultuur het als een thuis weg van huis. De House of Indigo bleek vaak een ruimte van veiligheid en empowerment te zijn voor jonge drag- en schoonheidskoninginnen. Ze beschreven de subcultuur en de nachtclub als een ruimte waar ze de mogelijkheid hadden om hun leven als jonge, zwarte, queer mensen te verbeteren. Ook de praktijken van gender policing door oudere leden van de subcultuur waren duidelijk waarneembaar. Alle schoonheidswedstrijden zijn een vorm van gender policing. Ook travestieten zijn een vorm van gendervermaak. Maar deze rituelen waren een serieuze zaak in het Huis van Indigo. De eigenaars van de club waren zo streng over deze vormen van podiumperformance, dat ze vaak beloningen en affectie onthielden aan de Indigo diva's die niet naar hun tevredenheid presteerden. Ook de mentorzusters fronsten hun wenkbrauwen bij de Indigo diva's die zich gedroegen op een manier die niet door de senioren werd goedgekeurd. De oudere leden beloonden vaak de Indigo diva's die de meest geïdealiseerde vorm van kosmopolitische vrouwelijkheid op een adequate manier vertoonden. Dit werd gedaan door hen te overladen met materiële goederen, complimenten, en zelfs geld. Deze laatste observatie toonde aan dat kosmopolitische vrouwelijkheid de meest geïdealiseerde vorm van vrouwelijkheid was in het Huis van Indigo.

Drag en schoonheidsoptredens zijn voorstellingen die politiek van aard zijn. Deze rituele voorstellingen kruisten elkaar binnen het Huis van Indigo op zeer complexe en versterkende manieren. De verschillende leden van de subcultuur uitten gelijktijdig gevoelens van empowerment. Het meest ideale binnen de subcultuur en de ruimte was kosmopolitische vrouwelijkheid. Dit specifieke ideaal vormde de duidelijke grenzen waarlangs de leden van het Huis van Indigo werden beloond of gepolst. Veel van de Indigo Diva's verwerkten dit ideaal ook in hun strategieën van zelf-branding op sociale media – met name Instagram. In dit opzicht hebben hun voorstellingen van ideale vrouwelijkheid ook vele vormen aangenomen, zowel online als offline. Hoewel de Club Indigo haar deuren definitief heeft gesloten, zijn er in de stad nog maar weinig ruimtes die specifiek gewijd zijn aan queer mensen van kleur. De House of Indigo leeft echter nog steeds voort via de verschillende consumptiepraktijken en voorstellingen van vrouwelijke idealen van haar leden.







